

**The Black Tigers: Through A Mirror Darkly
Book 3**

Those Who Break the Unity

Chapter One

Fist and Fang

Another mission, The powers have called me away. Another time; to carry the colors again. My motivation, an oath I've sworn to defend. To win the honor of coming back home again.

Disturbed; Midlife Crisis

Pirate Point; Zebebelgenubi

Terran Hegemony

01 March, 2781

Justine Sinclair relished the return of gravity as the *Dictator* class DropShip *Sledge Hammer* let go another burn. Two months of light nausea coupled with a few hours of relief were at an end. It was one of the ironies of the interstellar age that although travel between stars was instantaneous; long distance travel still took weeks as the JumpShips had to pause to recharge their massive batteries between each jump. Even the advanced Lithium Fusion batteries on the *Monolith* class *Joshua Harrington* and the rest of the flotilla attached to the 90th Heavy Assault Regiment did little to mitigate this problem.

Despite the predictions of science fiction authors uncountable neither warp drive nor antigravity had yet appeared. To add insult to injury keeping ships under ether rotation or burn for the duration of the voyage was prohibitive in terms of fuel costs. The Star League Defense Forces used a combination of drugs and regular schedules of exercise to combat the inevitable muscle and bone loss associated with long periods of zero-G.

The marriage of man and space was never pretty, but humans adapt and overcome.

Now if we could just overcome our need to one up the Joneses so to speak. Justine thought.

It was funny when you boiled the current dilemma down to such simple terms the whole history of Human warfare and political strife took a whole new meaning. The need to be better than “Those people over there” had kept the entire race down for longer than recorded history. Writers, philosophers and religious figures throughout history had proclaimed the need for the end of war.

Somehow though we never quite get it right. She thought looking out at the bright spark of the *Cat's Eye* some kilometers distant. The Major's thoughts were interrupted by an all hands warning.

“All hands this is the Captain we have an unidentified WarShip on bearing 253 mark 8, set Condition One throughout the fleet, repeat...”

As Lieutenant Fortuna, the *Hammer's* commander repeated her warning Justine felt a thrill of the old fear run through her.

Who the hell has a WarShip here?

I watched the sensor displays on my comlink's boom monitor. The red wedge of the approaching WarShip loomed just shy of ID range. What little we knew about her was that she was big; battlecruiser at least and she'd deployed fighters. The blue wedges of the *Kimagure* class cruiser *Tiger Claw* and her *Essex* class escorts *Warspite* and *Normandie* were burning to intercept. With a practiced eye I followed the vectors of the four ships. Our combat air patrol was a small arrow head in front of the capital ships.

They wouldn't be able to do more than blunt the incoming formation but the swarm of *Hammerheads* with their Arrow VII ship killer missiles would even the odds. David Martin the lieutenant in charge of the *Cat's Eye* glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. When I'd put together the Black Cats as an independent unit I'd been pleasantly surprised when my request to have the *Cat's Eye* attached as our transport. The *Union* class dropper had gone into the yards at Kathil a heavily damaged stock model *Union*.

Instead of scrapping her; the FedSuns naval architects had gone to town. As a result she had a lot under the hood.

Dave and I had seen a lot together over the years, he'd been the one who'd explained this whole ship fighting thing to me back when he'd been the fire control officer. I knew what he was thinking. A ship as big as that battlecruiser *could* get in among the transports. Our escorts could and would kill her but the cost would be high.

And still the question remained, they hadn't responded to our hails, why?

Who the hell are these guys?

Jake Melendez felt the familiar thrust of G-forces as his *Rapier* space superiority fighter was hurled out of the *Reprisal*'s launch bay. The twenty four *Rapiers* of the Black Tigers' Red and Gold squadrons pulled into escort formation with Black and Silver squadrons' *Hammerheads*'. The *Zeros* and *Ahabs* of the *Tiger Claw*'s own Naval Air squadrons met up with Jake's own 1171st Royal TFW, over eighty fighters arrowed towards the contact still invisible in the black.

"Two minutes to target so look alive people, Red and Gold you know the drill, if this guy's hostile we keep the strikers clear."

"Gotcha boss, we have done this before you know."

Smiling to himself Jake checked his scanners once again. Estimated mass one million tons, burning in at two and a half gees. *Big ass bitch*. Jake thought. *Meglodon, maybe*. Jake had thought all the Amaris battlecruisers had been destroyed in the last brouhaha in Earth orbit, but military intelligence could have been wrong.

The TACCNET crackled with an incoming transmission. A heavy Germanic accent came over the airwaves.

...to all Terran vessels this is the LCS Donegal Pride under SLDF orders...

Lyrans? What the hell.

On the ground...

The Lyran Lieutenant General Colin Bueller chuckled again.

"In the end Colonel Winter I'm not surprised, with all the chaos orders get misrouted, or lost."

He shrugged, smoke trailing from his pipe.

"Frankly we were wondering when we would get relieved or at least some help."

Sam nodded and took a puff of his cigar.

"Well General, we'll get this mess sorted out soon enough, but I am interested in what's been going on here." He fixed the Lyran officer with a sharp gaze. "These Rim Worlders..."

"Ja they're a real pain in the ass, they hit and run, picking off isolated patrols, raiding the mining camps in the mountains. With the dust storm season in full force our satellites can't track them."

"Well I've got some of the best trackers in the Hegemony here so we'll give it a go."

Colin Bueller smiled and extended his hand.

"Consider the Twenty Sixth Lyran Guards at your disposal Colonel Winter, my boys and girls would love some payback."

The bar was dark and seedy, a miner's joint on the outskirts of Pelham Bay. Unlike the upscale places the tall blond haired man was used to, the place did nothing to combat the omnipresent dust that seemed to be everywhere on this godforsaken world. Drinking a swallow of the native brew, which was, the man thought, not too bad he snorted.

Of all the worlds in the Hegemony, why did the Camerons put a high level research facility on this Godforsaken dust ball?

His contact slipped in, greeting several regulars, and then slipped back to the table in the corner.

The blond man smiled and ordered a second beer. After the waitress left he turned back to his new companion.

"This new crew means business Zeke."

Zeke Perkins formerly the c/o of the 129th Rim Worlds Regulars grinned.

"C'mon Ellis, who the hell's got you in such a bundle, some new Star League puppies?"

Ellis shook his head, annoyed slightly by the man's off hand manner.

"Zeke these guys are the 90th Heavy Assault Regiment, you know, the Black Tigers."

Zeke's head jerked up, eyes wide. A wicked smile lit the Rim Worlds commander's face and Ellis thought that the man looked more than a little crazy.

"Kerensky's Sledgehammers huh, always wanted a shot at real Terrans."

"Looks like you're going to get it my friend", Ellis said grimly, "but the jig is up the boss wants me to tell you, play with these kitty kats as much as you want but be ready to bug out soon."

Nodding, Zeke got up to pass his new orders on to his men. Ellis placed a quick call to his boss. On the small cell phone the face of Lieutenant General Colin Bueller looked back at him.

"It's done sir." Ellis said.

"Gut, Zeke can play with these Terrans for a while, maybe they will wipe each other out."

Ellis chuckled.

"Save us the trouble of paying Zeke and his bandits' sir."

The Lyran General smiled and puffed on his pipe.

“That was the plan *Hauptmann*, are the surprises in place?”

“Yes sir and I don’t think our new friends will like them.”

Laughing the General signed off and Hauptmann Ellis Stimson called for his tab.

And once this world declares for the Archon, I can get the hell off this rock. He thought.

Aleksandr Kerensky looked over the assembled Terrans. The Voice was silent but he could feel its presence ever mocking. Ian Sinclair was angry, the SLDF’s commander knew, but he was hiding it well. Amanda Cameron looked grimly determined, a look Aleks was getting used to seeing.

I told you they would betray you Al.

Keeping his face impassive, Aleks brought up the file on Zebebelgenubi. Looking back at Amanda Cameron; he ordered his thoughts.

“The order to badge the 26th Lyran Guards came shortly after Zebebelgenubi’s liberation. The survey teams, and you yourself know this Ian, found the University and research facilities looted. Of course I knew Robert would use his “help” here to wring concessions from us, but there was little risk of them recovering anything of value.”

Amanda Cameron nodded calmly, her eyes narrowed though.

“Why is it that we’re just now finding out about this, General? For what? Seven years the Lyrans have been sitting on the remains of a Hegemony research facility while letting Rim Worlds Troops run rampant. It took a freighter carrying tales of bandits raiding the mining community and foreign troops searching the University grounds.”

She shook her head in disbelief.

She didn’t hear about it, because you forgot, didn’t you Al? The voice’s smug confidence ate away at Aleks’ mood.

“So much was going on Amanda, you know that, a report *was* filed but in the chaos...” He spread his hands. An issue Aleks had been concerned about since the Council Lords abortive attempt to strip the Hegemony of its military might.

“Amanda the 90th though, of all the units to use, you couldn’t use a Royal command?”

“The Black Tigers are a Terran unit Aleksandr, covered under HAF-1 that makes them mine.” Her gaze hardened in a way Aleks had never expected to be turned on him.

“The 90th will deal with the threshers on Alpha Librae,” Amanda used the alternate name for the tongue twisting Arabic name that meant southern claw. “And if Steiner’s Boots get in the way, Ian what was that term Vassily used to use, you know the one.”

Ian’s eyes widened for a moment as he remembered the ex-mafia enforcer who’d been part of Katyusha Kerensky’s resistance cell.

“Zamochitt.”

Aleksandr knew the word; it was a type of punishment used by the Russian mob to show absolute dominance over an enemy. It involved breaking every bone in the victim’s body. It chilled him to hear the word uttered by an officer under his command.

Oooh, daddy like. You know Al I can see what your boy Ian likes so much, hell if I’d known the little minx was so vicious I’d have married her to one of my sons. The lecherous tone of the Voice broke Aleks’ concentration at last and he winced. A touch on his arm made him look up.

A look of concern on her heart shaped face, Amanda had risen and knelt by his side. Ian’s hand rested on her shoulder. Despite the differences Aleks had had with him over the past few months the younger man’s concern was evident.

<“Uncle are you alright?”> Amanda’s Russian was pure Moscow, where she’d learned it during the occupation.

“Da, Amanda, just a headache, blame Marik, Steiner and Kurita.”

Smiling gently, Amanda nodded in sympathy, thinking how old the General looked.

<“You should go home for a while, see Katya and your sons, and don’t worry dear Uncle, we can handle things here.”>

Aleks found himself nodding, yes that would be nice. As he allowed Amanda to usher him out he missed the look of worry the pair exchanged.

Catching up to him in the corridor his deputy, Aaron DeChevalier caught up with him.

“Something tells me that didn’t go well?” Aleks’ best friend said with a wry grin.

Giving Aaron a sour look, Aleks shook his head.

“Aaron, that child is determined to start a war, and Ian is so blinded by her, he’s just going to go along with it.”

“Aleks, I don’t think...”

Holding up his hand to forestall his friend’s protest Aleks went on.

“Contact Major General N’go of the 92nd Jump Infantry Division...What?”

“Aleks, the 92nd were destroyed on Lyons.”

Closing his eyes, Aleks took a moment.

“Okay who do we have in the area around Zebebelgenubi then.”

“A mixed brigade from the 129th Mechanized can get there in three weeks, they’re on Glengarry.”

“Do it, have them be prepared to face Rim Worlds guerillas and Aaron...”

“Yes?”

“Tell the 129th’s commander he may have to disarm Terran troops...”

At Aaron’s shocked look Kerensky began to explain, all the while trying to ignore the laughter sounding in his head.

Sarah met Gladys and Joshua at Dempsey’s on the Sound to say good bye. As the Star League Council went on matters at home were coming to a head as news about the Chesterton accord had leaked out. The Federated Suns needed a Davion at the helm. Word from her soon to be lost fiefdom said the Chesterton Liberation Front had stepped up its activities until a message from Barbara Liao had stopped them dead in their tracks.

Sarah smiled at that. Already known as the “Are you stupid” speech, the Chancellor had taken the revolutionaries to task in her own admittedly self important style. Of course that had raised the hackles of the Davion loyalists led by Lady Green. All of this gave the Kurita led obstructionists more ammunition.

“Sarah, no politics at the dinner table dear.” Gladys Maribeth Davion said smiling.

Her aunt knew well the pressures Sarah was under and had taken upon herself to moderate her niece’s stress, to the point of getting Dr. Matsu, the Order of Five Pillars doctor who had been seeing Amanda Cameron regularly. Despite the political situation, as far as the good doctor was concerned a patient was a patient and his combination of diet, holistic medicine and just traditional common sense had a great effect.

Both CIB and TerraSec were understandably nervous about a Combine doctor caring for the Director-General and her chief diplomatic aide. Sarah however knew something they didn’t; Dr. Matsu would never do anything to harm a patient under his care, nor would Minoru Kurita order it.

Such things were beneath him.

Bringing herself back to the present she smiled as Joshua arrived. Her dashing cousin slouched in the chair after kissing both women on the cheek. After they ordered Joshua looked around sadly.

“Gonna miss this place, Josh?” Sarah asked already knowing the answer.

“This world, yes...The politics, no.” He grimaced. “Not that it’ll be any different back home, Lady Deirdre is no Duke Adam.” Referring to the Green family whose service to the Star League as the State Administrators of the Federated Suns had brought them honor and respect in both realms. Lady Deirdre was spending much of that built up political capital resisting John Davion’s initiative to the Capellan Confederation.

“But yeah Sarah, I do love it here, I’ll miss it.”

“You’ll be back”, Sarah said, “to visit the kids.”

Joshua raised his eyebrows at Sarah’s remark, Gladys just nodded.

“You’ve made your decision then, you’re staying.”

Sarah nodded, she’d given it a lot of thought but the answer, to her anyway, was clear.

“Sarah from New York is who I am now,” She said thoughtfully, “I’ve made a life for myself here that’s all my own, Bruce, my career, the baby it’s all coming together.”

Joshua nodded, smiling at the passion in Sarah’s voice.

“Terra’s gain is New Avalon’s loss, but Sarah, I’m happy for you, truly.” He looked up at Gladys who’d been silent through the whole exchange.

“Aunt Gladys?”

Sarah’s aunt took her hand out from under the table where it had been hidden. The gleam from a good sized diamond shone there. In unison Sarah and Joshua looked from the ring to Gladys to the ring again. Laughing at the younger Davions’ wide eyed stares Gladys spoke softly.

“After all these years Jack finally asked the right question. I wanted you two to be the first to know.”

“But...Aunt Gladys!” Joshua sputtered.

“Now Joshua, I’ve given the Federated Suns the best years of my life, it’s time for me to live my life now”, she shrugged, “besides Jack has the most darling place just outside Toronto.”

“What about dad? I mean what will he think?”

“John Davion will think what I tell the man to think, same as always.”

Her aunt spoke with such authority that Sarah knew her Uncle wouldn't pose much of a threat. When Gladys Maribeth Davion set her mind not even the First Prince of the Federated Suns could get in her way.

As the server came over with platters of clams and planks of wild salmon, Paul McHugh the proprietor came over to say his goodbyes to Joshua. At the news of Gladys engagement the man who'd kept the place running throughout the Amaris occupation decided it was news worth of a party. As a result it was Sarah who was the one to get her elders back to the Davion quarter.

Later, after reading Sinthya a story and tucking her into bed way later than she'd planned, and going over the day's emails she found herself rereading Bruce's last letter. She knew he hated being away, even though her pregnancy was barely started. His greatest fear was that he'd miss the birth of their baby.

Sarah realized then one of the things that made her decision to stay so much easier.

Anger.

Who the hell did Robert Steiner, Kenyon Marik and even though she personally liked the man, Minoru Kurita think they were. Wrapping her comforter around her, Sarah ran through an exercise Dr. Matsu had taught her about dealing with strong emotions during her pregnancy. Examining her anger, getting to know it, she realized what had been bothering her since the reports of Lyrans troops on Zebebelgenubi.

Robert was up to something. That damn merchant's little games were getting to her. What was different now was her husband was involved.

Robert Steiner, if your bullshit harms so much as a hair on my love's head, I swear to God there won't be a corner in hell where you can hide.

17 March, 2781

Budapest, Eastern European Administrative District

Terra, Terran Hegemony

So we've just settled in, the boss is keeping a mixed battalion in the capital at Pelham while the rest of us rotate up into the mountains. Man, be glad you're on Terra; it sucks here, even the air smells bad. The locals don't like us either, Robert's goons have been doing a number on the populace and I half expect to see that stupid gauntlet of theirs flying over the capital.

They don't all hate us, the mining communities in the hills tell us a different story. Apparently if you don't sell to the Elsie the Lyrans Gourds don't come when you call. Nice racket, huh? There is a militia out here too, not too shabby either, while a MinerMech can't stand up to a BattleMech it sure as hell can screw up PBIs.

Got enough guys and gals to form two provisional companies, to give the Cats back up while we're on patrol. Anyway gotta run were going out to check on some movement to the northeast, I'll write to you guys later, give my love to Liz, and thanks for keeping in touch with Sarah.

Bruce

“You wish you were there, don't you?” Elizabeth Hazen said as she placed a light kiss on Scott's shoulder. Turning away from his pocketcomp, Scott propped up the pillows in their small bedroom. Sitting up he shook his head with a smile.

“Part of me does, but hell, you know how it is.”

Liz did, he knew. She just cuddled closer and let him think. The pair's trip through a Europe as devastated by Stefan Amaris as it had been by Adolph Hitler during the Second World War had brought them closer than either of the two had expected. Although the pay was minimal, the two veterans never lacked for food or shelter and both had become involved with the reconstruction efforts in addition to teaching classes on English at the local university. It was a happy time for both, the Star League Council meetings in Unity City were troubling though. That plus the coverage of the investigation into the recent murder of the entire Windsor-Small clan on Mars painted some grim signs on the wall for anyone who cared to read.

Friends they'd made in the SLDF base at Heidelberg had alerted the couple that elements of the 129th Mechanized Infantry Division were enroute to Zebebelgenubi, with orders to disarm all parties and end the Rim Worlds threat. What Scott didn't understand was why the Defense Force didn't just “debadge” the Lyrans and give the operation over to the 90th. Shaking his head he said as much.

Liz thought about it for a minute her eyes widened slightly.

“It's almost as if the General wants a confrontation.” Liz didn't need to explain who the General was, the overall commander of the Star League Defense Force, Aleksandr Kerensky.

“But why? The 90th are League troops.”

“They’re Terran, should have gotten the Royal designation decades ago, but...”

“But we do the Star League’s dirty work, so that would never happen.”

Liz nodded against his chest.

“More importantly you’re one of Lady Amanda’s handpicked units, that makes you high profile, so if you want to make a point, you couldn’t choose a better unit.”

“I’d say you couldn’t choose a worse one. You’re forgetting something, Liz, HAF-1A, General Kerensky isn’t in our chain of command anymore. If the 129th tries to disarm a Terran unit in the Hegemony, well it won’t be pretty.”

Liz sat up abruptly.

“Scott, you can’t seriously think, I mean the Tigers wouldn’t... they wouldn’t fire on Star League troops would they?”

Looking her in the eyes, Scott shook his head.

“We wouldn’t shoot first, but if *they* do.” He didn’t finish the statement.

Liz got out of the bed and began rooting around her clothes.

“Liz... What?”

Turning to Scott she smiled sadly.

“Somebody’s got to talk to the General, he’ll listen to me.”

Without another word Scott got dressed and began to pack.

Daniel St. Croix sneezed for the thousandth time. The dust on this godforsaken rock got everywhere. *Join the Star League Defense Force; see the galaxy, one dust ball at a time.* Shaking his head he heard Arthur Kowalski chuckle. Looking back at the other ‘MechJock and Louie Chavez the scout from the 504th Mechanized Infantry who’d come out with them for a look around the town of Trail’s End he grimaced.

The trio was off duty and headed to the town’s sole bar a prefab block like every other structure. It was Louie who saw it first. Something was not quite right. Trail’s end was small a main street, some shops and a few houses. The red brown expanse of mountains and gnarled trees was almost picturesque, but the storm season was up. The dust kicked up filled the air with a scent like burning hair.

Now however out in the dust dark giants moved. A rhythmic thunder accompanied their arrival.

“Ohh shit.” Art said.

The snap crack of heavy lasers was lost in the thunder of missile strikes. Out of the gloom smaller forms darted with sinister purpose. As the Tigers began to react, one of the forms tossed a small object at them.

“Grenade!” Louie screamed as they leapt for cover. The crack of the grenade stunned the Tigers for an instant and a cry of pain caused Daniel to look around wildly.

Drawing his Stoner 10mm, Daniel found Art clutching a bloody right arm. Of Louie there was no sign. Grimacing in pain Art shouted something but Daniel couldn’t hear him with the ringing in his ears. The enemy troops had moved on followed by the massive form of a *Shark* medium ‘Mech.

“Can you see Louie?” Art’s voice finally penetrated.

“No damn it, we’ve got to go.” Daniel tried to get through to the TACNET but one of the smaller ‘Mechs in the gloom must have been a 4R model *Vampire* light ‘Mech equipped as an electronic warfare platform. Only static answered him.

Escape and evade, Daniel thought wildly, *Get out of the ECM net and scream for help.*

The thought of leaving another Tiger behind grated on the young ‘MechWarrior, but with Art wounded they had little choice. Seeing a lull in the attack the pair set off into the gloom.

Daniel needn’t have worried. The man who called himself Louie Chavez had been hoping for a reason to separate himself from the ‘MechJocks once the attack began. In one corner of his compartmentalized mind Louie hoped the two kids got out alright. For decadent, spoiled Terrans they were okay. Louie however had another mission.

As the RimJobs (Now there was an apt description if he’d ever heard one.) spread out to hit the general store and the bank with its ore depository. Louie knew that the choice of today for the attack meant an inside job. The raiders knew the ore depository was full and due to be emptied by the bank factors from Pelham.

Skulking between alleys and hiding behind cars, Louie moved like a ghost. A group of Threshers passed him by with a nervous looking man in tow. The man’s suit was covered in dust from the storm and sweat mixed with the grit to form muck on his balding head. Smiling grimly Louie decided to follow.

Using a pair of goggles used by local miners to pierce the dust and gloom Louie saw what he was looking for. Through the chaos a single figure walked almost casually. As the squad arrived the lone figure leaned over and put his hand on the balding man's shoulder. He recognized the fear the RimJobs and their "guest" felt for this man.

A Mako, interesting, I'll bet you have quite a tale to tell you bishonen bastard.

Checking the sonic stunner he'd concealed in the cargo pocket of his fatigue jacket Louie took aim.

Gerard Voorhees groaned inwardly at the mark's whining. Paul Zeitlin had been useful enough in the initial stages of Colonel Perkins' plan to bring Zebebelgenubi under the Elsie banner while padding everybody's pockets. But now the nervous little mouse knew something was up. The arrival of the Tigers of Terra had brought everyone up short.

An accountant by trade, Zeitlin knew the value of cutting your losses. Having no spine however he was panicking.

Oh well, all good things and all of that. With that thought Voorhees pulled out his service pistol and drilled a neat hole in his cat's paw's head. As his victim fell the Mako captain chuckled.

To the sergeant in charge of the squad he said; "If he'd just shut up he'd have been a rich man and on his way off world."

The Sergeant said nothing awaiting orders.

"Kill his family, no witnesses, you have the address."

Acknowledging his orders the squad slipped off into the gloom.

As he turned and strolled down the street, a motion caught his eye. Before he could turn a high pitched whine drowned out the wind, the tread of BattleMechs and finally his consciousness.

Voorhees woke to a stinging pain under his right arm. When he tried to move he found his hands and ankles tied securely. Focusing his eyes he found a young darkly handsome Latino male wearing the off duty fatigues of a Star League infantry man staring back at him.

The black and blue feline insignia on the man's shoulder patch sent a chill through his spine.

"Ahh good you're awake Captain. I was beginning to worry I'd used too big a stun charge."

"You know who I am, you know you'll get nothing from me, corporal."

"Indeed, you Makos must go through counter-interrogation training, No?" The man's pleasant manner put Voorhees off guard. "No Gerard, I trust I can call you Gerard, if I were some Terran grunt I would know you were a Mako by that stupid shark tattoo under your arm, but I wouldn't have the means to break you. But then I'm not some stupid grunt. They won't find you by the way, I took the liberty of removing your tracking chip, stings a bit, no?"

Voorhees' captor took a syringe out of a small kit next to him and filled it out of a dark vial. When he cleared the air from the syringe the Mako caught a sweetish scent that was familiar. His captor smiled pleasantly as he saw the sudden fear spring to life in Rim Worlds operative. There was only one agency in the Inner Sphere that used *that* particular type of truth serum.

This serum would eat away at his nervous system slowly and painfully, but only at the end. Initially it made the victim highly suggestible. There was no antidote for a dose as large as the one being prepared by the smiling young man.

"Starting to sweat I see, no doubt you recognize this vile concoction." The man leaned in to whisper in Gerard Voorhees' ear as he pricked the man's vein injecting the drug.

"Lord Kurita sends his regards."

Fool's Paradise
Zebebelgenubi, Terra Hegemony
22 March, 2781

Strapped into *Hussy's* linear frame I let her sensors reach out into the gloom. I'd been afraid of getting rusty with all the ceremonial duties in Unity City, but *Hussy's* gait was fluid and almost too graceful. I chalked it up to a combination of the top notch care she'd gotten during our stint in the capital and maybe (A little selfishly.) I was better at this than I'd remembered. Hunting the RimJobs was welcome work, it took my mind off being here.

The Swift Claws and the Hungry Tigers had immediately gone to work prowling the mountains around Pelham in concert with the Lyran Gourds...sorry Guards. I didn't think much of them. Few had seen real combat, although their training overall was high. And okay the 90th may be a brute force regiment in makeup but we operate

by maneuver, subterfuge and with full combined arms support. The Lyrans umm didn't. A dozen *Atlas* and *Banshee* class machines can't take an objective send a dozen more.

Erica von Manstien had told me that the Twenty Sixth were one of the better units, lacking the social general syndrome so prevalent in the Lyran Commonwealth Armed Forces. That same syndrome was the reason why, after serving in the SLDF, Erica had decided to stay on rather than return to the LCAF. If these guys were considered "better" I'd hate to see what was considered a lousy unit. They'd already blown one ambush two days back that should have netted us a full company of Rim Worlders.

Even the fucking RimJobs and our erstwhile allies didn't piss me off as much as the attitude we got in Pelham. As I'd told 'Rat the Elsie's had been doing a really heavy job of selling the Lyran Commonwealth. Clothes, food, entertainment all imported from the Commonwealth and sold at cut rate prices. The local media played along, even covering our arrival as being too little too late.

One of the local radio shows had even brought up the old and tired rag about New Vandenburg.

The night before the Cats had shipped out I'd had some time to scout around Pelham and had ended up in a pretty nice looking middle class bar in what had been the university district. Dressed in a dust repellent cloak over my leather and jeans looked like any number of locals although the eye patch and my scar did get some looks. I paid in cash not wanting to advertise who I was and tipped well so after a couple of beers I was chatting up Elise; the pretty blonde behind the bar.

I could hear the conversations around me and there was a lot on us, none of it good. One blowhard was going on about how "that little wench on Terra had sent a bunch of criminals to clean up her mess, while Archon Robert had sent one of his finest regiments." I noticed a couple of Elsie's in the mix, the boot insignia of the Twenty Sixth on their shoulder flashes.

One, a *Hauptmann* of infantry by his rank insignia spoke up; "I would not call them criminals, Thomas, they seemed professional enough, but their reputation is somewhat unsavory." I turned away so they wouldn't see my grimace.

As the place was somewhat empty Elise had sat back on a stool to read a battered paperback. I caught the cover and groaned inwardly. *Golden Lions* by Christina Steiner, what were the odds? Two things happened at that point. Dog-eared the page she was on, Elise happened to look at the lurid cover, and well it *is* a good likeness. Her head snapped up, eyes big. I gave her what Sarah calls my villain smile.

Then the blowhard jostled me as he sidled up to the bar. My dust cloak fell away from my leather jacket which had the same insignias and pins as my uniform, from my major's bars to the crossed pistols of my gunslingers pins. His eyes focused on me and right then I knew I was going to have some fun.

My grin got wider.

I slid out of my chair and ambled over to their table with a friendly smile. The *Hauptmann* had frozen with his brew half way to his face. I saw the moment he registered that yes that was an infantryman's bar over the BattleMech pilot's pin. The color drained from his face at the Blackheart opposite the Gunslinger's pin.

"Unsavory? I'm shocked *Hauptmann* to hear that from an officer in your own regiment. After all Steiner's Boots should understand the virtue of loyalty to one's liege lord." Before he could answer I went on.

"And you sir," I pointed to the blowhard. "Do you know Amanda Cameron? Have you met the woman? I have, and I assure you she is no wench." For a moment the man had the good grace to look away, but then alcohol and bravado won the day.

"Big bad ass 'MechJock, what the hell took you so goddamn long, first the Star League troops don't even finish the job liberating us, so Archon Robert has to send troops to help us out, then Terra forgets about us for two fucking years after the liberation, so where the hell were you!" He was in my face at this point, spit and beer breath and all. The Elsie's stepped back and away, the *Hauptmann* starting to say something but I cut him off my voice cold with fury.

"Well now sorry to hear that, but you see first I had to fight my way across the whole Terran Hegemony, till we got to Earth. Then when we got there we had to spend the next two years kicking Stefan Amaris' butt boys off *my* home. Now after all that was said and done I spent a few months in a coma, so you see I was kinda busy. I can't tell you why the Star League didn't send a closer unit, those decisions are a bit above my pay grade. But we are here now and we'll fix your RimJob problem. "

Stepping up to him I grinned.

"That is if you don't mind being rescued by a bunch of criminals."

That was the point he hit me, or tried to anyway.

As we crested the rise and began to head into the Alrisa valley I smiled. It bothered me a bit that I had pretty much provoked the fight, but damn it that idiot had it coming. A flashing red icon on my HUD said we had our quarry. Across the valley Gracie led Duce Lance to cut off the RimJobs and Nerva Ramos led Trey lance right down the middle tracking them with her *Mongoose's* sensors. The Lyrans were supposed to be sealing off the valley but there was no sign of them yet.

"Strong contacts boss, ten, no twelve, what the hell...boss thirty odd, it's a whole damned battalion."

Nerva's voice was tense, I couldn't blame her, we'd been tracking a single lance. Now a whole battalion was dropped in our laps.

"Fuck me, Erica get central on the horn get us air support." Spurring *Hussy* into a run I lead Ace Lance into range of our guns. Scans read colonial tech machines for the most part, but the numbers, how to balance the numbers.

"Gracie keep 'em at range, Nerva start cutting at the light stuff, don't let them close."

"Major, Silver Squadron is ten minutes out and loaded for bear." Erica reported.

"All right people let's get to work."

Major Lal Simms throttled his *Atlas* to its unimpressive fifty six kilometers per hour. 3rd Battalion of the 129th Rim Worlds Regulars, Simms command had set a trap for the Terran company hunting them. They hadn't expected the Terrans to be equipped with royal machines however. Gauss and particle fire began to lash into his troops well before they could return fire.

A 70 ton *Archer* exploded as the caress of charged particles exploited a chink in its torso armor. Likewise a *Catapult* class fire support platform slammed to the ground as a gauss slug shattered its hip assembly. Major Simms cursed as another slug cracked the housing on his ride's fusion reactor. He'd heard, of course of the Terrans' Royal Commands but knowing your opponents technology and being under fire from it are two different things.

Double strength heat sinks, called freezers, effectively doubled the Terran machines fire rates, ferro-fibrous armor and advanced construction materials and extra light engines increased the weapon and armor load outs way beyond what the Rim Worlds designs could carry.

As his exec's *Grasshopper* slammed to the ground missing its head, Lal got the gold rimmed crosshairs of a lock for his long range missiles. *Finally*, he thought pulling on his triggers. Twenty missiles arced downrange to spatter their payloads across the narrow form of a black and red *Marauder*. The Terran machine staggered but replied with a full salvo from its heavy arsenal.

Alarms screamed in Lal's *Atlas* as lightning whips lashed its torso. Before he could compensate a gauss slug slammed his machine to a stop. On his secondary monitor the Rim Worlds major could see the left most recon lance he'd posted to give warning of flankers wink out one after another. The grim realization dawned on Simms that a third Terran force lurked just over the ridge.

The lighter striker company in Simms' command was reaching the Terran Lance in the middle of the valley. The increased firepower his troops could bring to bear did them little good. The *Phoenix Hawk* of Joey Elliot staggering from a particle hit strayed too close to the *Mad* Lal had pegged as the Terran commander.

The massive raptor shaped machine moved with a lethal grace Lal Simms had never seen in his twenty six years as a 'MechWarrior. The Terran's massive right vambrace slammed into Elliot's *Hawk* crushing its much abused chest. Staggering back Joey managed to return fire with his 8cm heavy laser. The eye searing pulse carved a slice from the *Marauder's* arm.

In reply the black monster of a 'Mech unleashed both particle cannons and the matched set of pulse lasers in its arms. A flight of thirty semi guided 60mm missiles swarmed like angry wasps across Lal's chest, two ringing off the assault machine's skull like head. Knocked around in his cockpit like a striker in a bell, Lal missed the detonation of Joey's 'mech.

When he regained control he saw the black *Marauder* stride through the cloud of smoke and debris like a vengeful demon. It was then Lal Simms knew he was going to die. Triggering the rapid fire 100mm cannon at the approaching machine, a calm sense of peace washed over him. Oddly enough his thoughts went back to his high school sweetheart, who'd begged his to stay on Apollo and work in his father's furniture business.

But I knew better, no middle class life for me, I'm sorry Sue Ellen, you were right.

He never saw the particle whip that decapitated his 'Mech.

Chapter Two Prey and Predator

*Oh mamma I've been years on the lamb
And had a high price on my head
Lawman said get him dead or alive
Now it's for sure he'll see me dead*

Styx: Renegade

**John F Kennedy International Spaceport
North American Administrative District
Terra, Terran Hegemony
17 March, 2781**

Erica Dalton looked up into the cool clear sky letting the star that had warmed humanity for millennia caress her face. Her fellow fugitives had come to Terra on separate transports, they'd meet up tonight at a safe house run by Earth First. Erica didn't really trust the Hegemony centric activist group (okay Terrorists.) but they had been invaluable providing aid and support, including the false id's that had enabled the Rigel Kentarans to get off Mars. But for the moment, waiting in the Virgin Terra Spacelines lounge for her contact she just sipped at her latte and relaxed.

"Jill?" A voice asked.

Looking up she smiled at a tall black woman with an artfully arranged mass of braids and a warm bright smile. Gesturing to the other woman to sit she looked around for the waiter. They fell in a prearranged code as they spoke.

"Melissa, I'm glad you could make it, I was getting a little bored."

Got off Mars okay, nobody picked up on me here.

"Well, I know the mess with Dan had you in a bind but we've got plenty of room."

The investigation hasn't got off Mars yet and the rest of your team got away okay.

She smiled again true relief showing.

The pair spent a half hour chatting about the Star League Council, still deadlocked, the deployment of Terran troops to Zebebelgenubi and the general run of events important to New Yorkers. What surprised Erica was the unease even "Melissa" felt at the local unit, the 90th Heavy Assault being deployed off world. When asked her contact laughed.

"We're still kinda jumpy around here, Jill, I mean the Tigers liberated the city well in advance of the rest of the Star League, and they kept us safe." She smiled. "We kinda think of them as ours, even if half of them are Dracs."

Thinking about that she thought about the nanny Joey had killed in the Windsor-Small estate. The news she'd caught before the group had fled Mars had made much of the grief of the Soldano family and the girl's sister was a member of the 90th. In fact the media, she'd learned was given advice (read orders) from the Hegemony government, from the "Little Girl" herself to spend more time on the murders of the workers and staff who had been killed than on the Windsor-Small and their RimJob guards.

Erica still had nightmares, but what was done was done.

"Come on; let's get you to your new home." Melissa said.

Nicole Osis and Leo Devalis sat in NYPD police commissioner Melinda Hamlin's office, listening as the regional TerraSec director Li Taek Sang went over their next assignment. With the oh so slow transfer of the Terran capitol's transfer to the city, the NYPD was becoming far more involved with the Hegemony wide agency than many police were comfortable with. The current situation was just one more of the changes the force and the city herself were faced with.

"The Director-General has ordered an interagency task force to investigate the Mars incident," The fiftyish Korean man explained in an easy voice, "top people from TerraSec, the CIB and local authorities are being brought to bear. Since at least three of those involved were tracked to New York that means the NYPD."

With his paternal smile and pleasant voice Nicole could see how Director Li inspired confidence from his people even when he was giving them bad news. News which Leo had already guessed as the man had paused outside the detectives' cubicle. Commissioner Hamlin went on, her displeasure evident in her cool voice.

“That means you two, Nikki, Leo; you’re the best I’ve got, so you’ll be point for us on this, hand off your cases to Mickey and Tara.”

“Ma’am we were close on that Hell’s Kitchen thing...”

The commissioner held up her hand forestalling Nicole’s protest.

“This comes directly from the Office of the Director General, Nikki, as of now you two are under Federal authority, may god have mercy on your souls.”

Ignoring the sour look from Director Li, Nicole and Leo’s boss ushered them out of her office and into their new assignment.

In the news Chief Aide to the Director General Sarah Davion-Gilmour announced the formation of a multi agency task force to hunt down the perpetrators of the now infamous Mars Massacre. In a press conference today Lady Sarah had this to say;

{Cut to Sarah Davion behind a podium in the Press Room in Unity.}

“Those of us who lived on occupied worlds within the Hegemony had to do many unpleasant things just to survive. Some we know openly collaborated with the enemy; others did just what they needed to do just to keep their jobs, homes and food in their children’s mouths. It is the job of the Hegemony Judicial to make the determination which was which.

The tragedy of this matter is this; Reginald Windsor-Small and eight members of his family would have been arrested on War Crimes charges two days after the Massacre. Those guilty would have paid the price for their treachery. And people like Su Li Tamara a thirty year old mother of three whose only crime was cooking for the Windsor-Small and Tina Soldano a medical student and part time nanny wouldn’t have died. Nor would Jena Hall; a twelve year old girl with her whole life ahead of her.

I know the need for revenge that burns in the hearts of all of you, it burns in mine as well. If we give in to this need indiscriminately we are no better than Amaris himself. If we lash out blindly we risk destroying the very thing our soldiers and the resistance struggled so long to restore.

{Cut to the INN news desk.}

“Lady Sarah went on to reiterate the Director-General’s plea for calm and rational action in the “Amaris” problem. Later in this broadcast we will have an exclusive interview with Cadet Eleanor Soldano sister to one of the murdered staff at the Windsor-Small estate.

INN Broadcast 19 March, 2781

Jon Case signed off the com with his wife. Dawn McCormick had gotten reservations at a seafood place they both loved in the Vancouver district of Unity City. Being married to the commander of the Sinclair Fusiliers could be hard on a guy, he reflected. His marriage was however one thing Jon would never regret. He sighed as the news, finishing with Sarah’s press conference went on to speculate on the deadlock in the Star League council. Barbara Liao’s increasingly self absorbed statements had reversed much of the gains the Loyalists had made in the past months and John Davion was becoming increasingly exasperated.

The Davion lord’s efforts to get General Kerensky’s support were also running into what were, in the former bush pilot’s opinion, idiotic difficulties. Aleksandr Kerensky enjoyed massive support among a broad swath of the Star League’s populace from the military to common people in every house. His refusal to take sides had however stripped some of that support away.

While Ian Sinclair was using some of that to drum up support for the oh so slowly reconstituted Hegemony Armed Forces, the fact remained that just one word from Kerensky could settle the whole issue. Even the House Lords were wary of tangling with the Star League Defense Force.

And now this Steiner mess, Jon thought, another fly in the ointment.

Amanda had told him Kerensky had secluded himself with several top officers, becoming unavailable even to Elizabeth Hazen, who was one of his close supporters and friends. Hazen and her man Scott had arrived in the capitol early yesterday only to find Kerensky had shipped out for the SLDF’s offworld headquarters. The pair had tried to get a flight out but interstellar traffic was still a mess.

Sarah had agreed to look into getting them transport, but with the Mars Massacre and the Council, there was just no time.

And that little redhead needs to concentrate on her health a bit more. Jon thought. Amanda too, politics will put them both in an early grave.

He shook his head at the thought.

Guess I’ll just have to let things sort themselves out and hope for the best.

That thought drew a snort followed by a wry grin.

Like that'll happen.

With that thought he opened his pocketcomp's contact list and found what he was looking for. A slightly shady man with a good ship always came in handy. He placed the call and when the man's image came up, Jon Case put on his best smile.

"Matt, got a job for you."

**Star League Defense Force Temporary Headquarters
Conseco Military Reservation, New Earth
Terran Hegemony
24 March, 2781**

Elizabeth Hazen paced fuming in the anteroom to General Kerensky's office. Since coming in on the *SS Numidia* a tramp freighter with ties to Director-General Cameron's protector Jon Case, she'd been given the runaround. Pulling at the collar of her class-A uniform with its Royal Black Watch insignia and colonel's rank tabs she glanced over at Scott Mackenzie. Slouching in the chair with his eyes closed he looked asleep. Liz knew him well enough that she could tell from his breathing he wasn't.

"How can you be so calm?" She asked.

Raising his head to look in her eyes, Scott smiled.

"Well short of storming into the big man's office, there isn't much I can do right now but wait." He lowered his voice slightly with a smile, "besides I don't know if I could take his secretary, she looks pretty tough."

The woman in question a delicate five-two at most smiled back at him. Liz had had her pretty well flustered earlier, as the poor girl's excuses on her boss's behalf had worn thin. Especially when given to Elizabeth Hazen, the war hero and personal friend to the General. Scott had eased the tension with his casual offhand manner for which Liz was grateful.

Blowing out a resigned sigh Liz collapsed next to him, pulling out her pocketcomp and tuning into the latest INN reports. In the five days it had taken them to reach New Earth little had changed.

The council deadlocked; check, Mars Massacre gang still being sought; check, moving the Capitol from Geneva and Unity City to New York behind schedule; check, oh look Gracie's little actor friend misses her, how sweet.

"Colonel Hazen? The General will see you now." The receptionist spoke from her desk.

Looking in askance at Scott, she rose. As he moved to join her the girl spoke up again.

"Lieutenant Mackenzie, I'm afraid only Colonel Hazen may enter."

Liz looked like she was about to protest, but Scott placed a hand lightly on her arm and smiled.

"S'okay all this is way above my pay grade anyway, hon can you tell me where the officers club is?" The last bit to the secretary as Liz entered the General's office. As the secretary gave Scott directions, he looked back at the closed door.

Nothing to worry about, Liz'll straighten things out, she's good at that.

Still as he walked over to the base officer's club he couldn't shake a sense of unease.

The room was dark, shades drawn. Only a single light behind the desk lit the room. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust. The big man himself sat behind the desk shadowed by the light on one side blue light from the terminal on the other lent a ghoulish cast to his face.

God, he looks like shit. Liz thought hoping her thoughts didn't show on her face.

"I'm old Elizabeth, it happens." Aleksandr Kerensky said.

Chuckling at her dismay the overall commander of the SLDF gestured to the plush chairs in front of the desk.

"Pour yourself a drink Liz and sit, you look flustered."

Liz did as she was bid pouring herself a neat scotch.

"So you're here about the mess with your boyfriend's unit?" Kerensky cut straight to the point.

"Yes sir; the Tigers are no longer Star League troops sending our troops to a Terran world to confront a Terran command...sir what message does that send?"

"A necessary one, one that we are in charge. Liz, Amanda Cameron has used HAF-1A to resurrect the Hegemony armed forces, there are a hundred reasons why this is a problem."

Liz could only see one or five if you want to take things literally.

"The only problem I can see is the House Lords, sir and since when do we bow to their wishes?"

The general laughed.

“Since when? Liz how about the last fifteen or so years? Under Simon we were at our strongest, god the man was a saint.” The general shook his head sadly. “But the son, maybe if I’d spent more time with him, maybe if I’d *had* more time with the boy...” He trailed off.

Looking back at her grimly he went on.

“Now, between those idiot council lords and even dear sweet Amanda and her paramour everything is falling apart. We have to make a point here.” Liz was surprised to see he was truly angry.

“A point, sir what point, sorry Terra you can’t have the means to defend yourselves ‘cause it’ll make the House Lords angry?”

“The Defense Force will defend Terra once this nonsense with HAF-1A is over with, if I had thought Ian would use this as a chance to form an independent army from the Royals,” he shook his head.

Liz felt bile rise in her throat, The Defense Force? Yeah cause that worked *so* well the last time.

At the general’s shocked look Liz realized she’d spoken aloud.

“Sir you know that my loyalties lie with you and the Star League, but we have to face up to the fact that we failed *our* people. The people of the Hegemony deserve more.”

She could see the walls close around Kerensky’s eyes then. Anguish made her look away.

“I know, Elizabeth, I know; you just have to trust me this will all work out in the end.” Kerensky’s voice was sad, tired.

“I do, sir and I will; but the 90th and the matter on Zebebelgenubi...”

He smiled then and Liz suppressed a chill, in the light Kerensky’s grin was that of a skull.

“Colonel, I’ll send orders to the 129th Mechanized to work *with* the Terrans instead of intervening.”

Liz nodded and smiled with what she hoped was sincerity.

“Thank you sir.”

“Dismissed.”

Alone in the darkness Aleks was alone with the memories of the dead. Their forms ghostly in the blackness. One strode forward, sauntered strutted more like it. The stout bodied apparition of Stefan Amaris sat on the edge of Aleks’ desk and gazed at the legions of the dead. The dead tyrant glanced back at Aleks several times grinning.

“What Stefan?” Aleks knew the dead man wouldn’t leave him alone unless he’d said his peace.

Amaris shrugged, not looking back at Aleks.

“What is it with you AI? All these chicks, man that Hazen’s quite the MILF.” Amaris chuckled, looking back with a wicked grin. Aleks sighed in resignation.

“Stefan, get your mind out of the damn gutter, you *nekultourny* bastard. And get to the point.”

Amaris shook his head and mirrored Aleks’ sigh.

“Yet another one who will betray you AI and you putter along like everything is fine.” His voice changed from its Rim Worlds drawl to Aleks’ faintly accented English. “I know, Elizabeth, I know; you just have to trust me this will all work out in the end. He mimicked. “Bullshit, you don’t believe it and neither does she.”

“Elizabeth Hazen is more loyal...Bah what the hell do you know, you’re dead.”

Having said his piece Stefan Amaris faded into the blackness his grin, like the Cheshire Cat’s fading last.

Ahh; Al so are you, trouble is you don’t know it yet.

Aleksandr Kerensky buried his head in his hands and sat like that for a while. When he finally got himself together and set about addressing the day’s business all thoughts of accommodation with the Terrans were gone. After all a point had to be made. Didn’t it?

**Kellon Heights Forest, Zebebelgenubi
Terran Hegemony
24 March, 2781**

Didi Moran sighted down the scope of her Barrett Mk XII 12mm Rifle. The RimJobs downrange had no clue to her team’s presence. They had sentries out in good order and Dido could see that their equipment was well maintained. They didn’t look like men reduced to banditry.

I suppose that’s what’s rubbing me wrong, I mean with a Lyran Battlecruiser in orbit where the fuck are these bozos selling their swag? And hell after seven or so years of occupation how the hell are they so well supplied?

There was a commotion in the Rimmers’ camp as one of the senior troopers dragged a girl out of one of the tents. The other soldiers laughed as the man threw the girl down. Apparently there was some confusion as to who

got her next. One of the men objected. Predictably a fight broke out. As the RimJobs attention was drawn inward; Didi grinned wolfishly.

Now that's more like it She thought.

Medea Norton cowered on the ground as Master Sergeant Holland watched Booby Jo and Mitch go at it. Medea had been a dancer at a strip joint since after the occupation ended. The Elsie's tipped well and most were gentlemen. Then the RimJobs, who the Lyrans were supposed to be keeping in check showed up. In one night of fire and terror they'd slaughtered most of the town of Brady, keeping only a few women for "recreational" purposes.

She didn't know how long she'd been a captive, but Holland had grown tired of her. Medea knew Bobby Jo and Mitch were two of the worst. Bobby Jo had killed little Danni last week because she'd messed up his coffee. And Mitch, she shuddered.

The fight ended as quickly as it began. Bobby Jo threw up his hands suddenly.

"Shit this ain't worth it, Mitch you want the Zebe whore so bad, take her."

Oh God. Medea shuddered.

Mitch smiled and walked over to claim his prize. He stopped suddenly a surprised look on his face as most of his chest exploded.

"Sniper!" Master Sergeant Holland screamed out just before his head exploded. Medea curled up in a ball shivering with terror as the flat cracks of large caliber rifle fire sounded out. All around her the Rimmers ran for cover but most died before they could make it.

Through a gap between her arms she saw ghostly figures appear from out of the tree line. As they reached the camp Bobby Jo who had ducked into the ground rose his hands up.

"I surrender don't shoot, PLEASE!"

A short woman; faceless in her visored combat helmet looked at Medea then back at Bobby Jo. Coming to a decision she nodded. As Bobby Jo sagged in relief another of the wraith like soldiers stepped up behind him and fired a 10mm round into the back of his head.

When the female who lead her saviors came up to Medea she found her giggling madly. The woman laid a hand on her shoulder her words were lost in Medea's laughter.

Didi left the clean up to her squad. The woman's hysterical laughter had unnerved her even after all the horrors she had seen. Wandering off she'd come to stand of trees and stripped off her helmet. The trees filtered out most of the dust and gave off a clean, freshly mown grass scent that soothed her.

So lost in her thoughts she didn't sense the intruder's presence until it was too late.

"Senorita Moran, please don't turn around, I'd hate to have to stun you at this range, the effects would be quite nasty."

Tensing up she listened to the ambient sounds around her waiting for her moment. Her voice calm she asked; "What do you want?"

"Only to deliver a message to your commander; Major Gilmour." An object thumped next to her.

"The pocketcomp at your feet contains an interview I recently had with a Mako, you are familiar with them Si?"

"Yeah, I know who they are."

"What that particular villain had to say was quite...enlightening I guess you could say."

"Who the hell are you?" Inwardly she grimaced at the newbie green question, but the man just chuckled.

"Let's just say my employer and yours have a common interest. In fact, "another chuckle, "My employer thinks most highly of your major." A sigh then, "Senorita, I regret to say I must be going, so please stay where you are, as well you know the drill."

Didi grunted and nodded. After a few minutes she sensed he was gone and looked down at her feet. A stock SLDF pocketcomp lay there. Something in her ambusher's manner assured her there was no danger and she picked the compact unit up.

You're good, I'll give you that, buddy but you'd better not ever try that again.

Grumbling to herself she went to round up her troops.

**Kurita Quarter, Unity City
Terra, Terran Hegemony
26 March, 2781**

Minoru Kurita sipped at his scotch as he read the HPG message that had come in the morning's diplomatic pouch.

Got some good Riesling and fresh shark the other night, recommended the place to your little brother. Should be some fun times ahead wish you were here to see it.
Diego Garcia

Chuckling at his operative's choice of words, Minoru allowed himself a moment's satisfaction at the way events were unfolding. The Terrans would eat the Lyrans alive for this and if Kerensky tried to intervene... well as his operative had said; fun times.

Bruce's face went through some interesting shades of pale to red and back to that white he gets when he was pissed, Didi Moran thought as she watched her commander digest the "interview" between the Mako Captain and Didi's mysterious visitor. When he looked back at her his eye gleamed like an emerald hard and cold.

"And you never caught sight of this guy?" He asked.

Didi shook her head angrily.

"No boss, sorry."

Closing his eye for a minute the Black Cats' commander breathed a sigh. The record shut off towards the end imparting only the meat of the interrogation, not the small talk. There was no way of telling who performed the deed or who his employer was.

"C'mon lets go see the Colonel."

"We've got a detour to make first." Didi said.

Samuel Winter watched the whole recording twice. His eyes were tight with anger and he puffed on his Havana a moment before looking at his two officers. Finally he spoke in a cold voice.

"Didi, you find the body?"

"Right where he left it, Doc Wynndham is doing the autopsy now."

"He had the Mako tat and the busted chip was wrapped up next to him." Bruce explained.

Tapping out his ashes, Sam took another puff. When he looked up he came to a decision.

"Bruce, I need you to do a sneak and peek, get me proof and fast." The Tigers' C/O stabbed his cigar at his officers. "Time is running out, Ed Gennaro the 91st HAR's commander sent me a message yesterday the 129th Mechanized's Third Brigade is on its way here with orders to deal with the Thresher problem and disarm all combatants including us."

The shock on the pairs' faces mirrored his own. Not wanting to compromise the other Colonel's discretion he'd tried to log on to the SLDF's secure database only to find his access restricted to that of a badged House officers. Someone was pulling some shit and Sam was afraid he knew who. The question was why?

Which of course was the first question out of Bruce's mouth; his voice angry and more than a little hurt.

"Don't have a clue, son, but we're gonna get to the bottom of this, I promise you."

That sentiment made there was little else left to say and Bruce and Didi left. Sam sat back a moment took another puff of his cigar the paged Isokoru, Justine, Christian and his son.

Joey Elliot walked down Lefferts Boulevard crossing the street where it bridged over the Long Island Railroad. Kew Gardens was a mid to upper class neighborhood that served both workers in Manhattan and flight crews and personnel at JFK International Spaceport. The area along Lefferts was popular with the latter crowd as was the bar Joey was heading to.

He and Erica were stashed away in a safe house just off Lefferts and though he really liked the girl, she was having her own set of issues. The Earth First noobs didn't help either. Joey knew the group's cell structure meant the Rigel Kentarans were isolated from the real hardcore members.

The safe house crew were fairly smart and earnest in their beliefs but while a few had set off bombs or engaged in information attacks against the Star League, none had killed. Especially the gruesome close quarters violence of the bit on Mars. That degree of separation meant every so often one would talk tough or make assumptions they had no clue about.

As a result both Rigel Kentarans were isolated with only each other for company. And as a result they argued from time to time. *Stupid shit mostly,* Joey reflected, *but it does grate on my nerves.* Erica had been the leader, planning everything then getting her hands dirty, but like Joey himself she had no training or preparation for the act they'd committed.

After all it's not like we're DEST or SAS, for God's sake I was an accountant.

Slipping into the venerable Austin Ale House he sat at the bar and nodded to Ray the bartender. Soon he was lost in conversation about the scandal over Mets pitcher Kenny North and his addiction to Kray-Z and the ever present deadlock in the Star League Council. After a few pints the inevitable happened. Stepping back to the bathroom line he stood behind a short wiry man who when he turned to greet a dusky skinned woman with the physique of a bodybuilder turned out to have the greenest eyes Joey had ever seen.

As the man took his turn in the can then came out he caught Joey's gaze and raised his eyebrows with a grin.

"Ahh relief..." the man said.

Chuckling to himself Joey went into the men's room.

Watching Joey Eliot head into the Men's room, Nicole Osis nodded to Leo Devalis. He nodded but waved his hand slightly at waist height.

It's him alright. And Wait him out here see where he's going. Entering the ladies room she went to a stall and pulled out her cell. Placing a call she told the young CIB agent who answered;

"Sergei, we've got him get ready to follow him home, maybe he'll lead us to momma."

**Royal Eagle Hotel, Marik Quarter, Unity City
Terra, Terran Hegemony
28 March, 2781**

Finishing his review of the Marik's home away from home here on good old Earth, Kenyon Marik sighed. The fervor over his lineage had died down at last. For whatever it lacked in the intelligence gathering arena, no one could fault SAFE's ability to spin events to their master's liking.

If only they could do that here on Terra, who the hell would have thought Barbie doll would have been bought so easily. He snickered nastily. *But then Barbie dear you always were cheap...*

The thought brought a sudden frown to his face then as the memory of a slapped cheek and a teary eyed woman came to mind. In a rare moment of self doubt Kenyon wondered; *if I'd handled that differently...*

The Captain-General of the Free Worlds League snorted then. It had been a different time, and after his dismissal from the Star League Defense Force Kenyon had been on thin ice with his father. Old Ewan had in a moment of sobriety been in a towering rage at the embarrassment Kenyon had caused him. Their argument had almost led to Kenyon being disowned.

Who the hell would have thought that Barbie doll would be in that club escaping from Warex Liao for a night. Hell, I didn't even know who she was or that she was seventeen. Thank God Ewan went on another bender that night.

Barbara had hated him from the next morning on; Kenyon had returned the sentiment with interest over the years. And now they were deciding the fate of the grand ball of dung that made up the Star League.

Funny the things life tosses your way.

Funny, like how tossing Kerensky out on his sanctimonious arse seemed at the time. Funny, like how he ended up locked in an alliance with that loser Bobby Steiner and oh so mighty Minoru. Well no, not really funny, but Kerensky wanted that Terran witch in charge, so it was enough to deny him that. It was enough to deny the Terrans peace and push them hard enough. Kenyon was sure they'd crumble. After all what had Anton said the other day?

It's hard to believe any one could bounce back after Amaris.

Swallowing a shot of whisky, Kenyon's eyes narrowed.

They won't get the chance Anton, I won't give them that.

Dr. Rikkard Kimbri, chief physician to Archon Robert Steiner wished he'd had the time to savor the night. A good meal among some colleagues in the Unity City's medical community, followed by some equally good conversation, was a welcome respite. But the one sentence message from home dashed his good mood.

Some people just don't know when to retire.

The Department of Communications appended an apology to what seemed to be just a message fragment. A glitch in the buffers somewhere along the hundreds of light years the message had travelled had corrupted it. Or at least that is what *they* thought. Truth was that one sentence *was* the message and it was the one the good Doctor had dreaded.

Heimdall had existed as a check on House Steiner for decades but in all that time the order to kill an Archon had only been enacted a handful of times. Political pressure, subtle economic shifts and manipulation of the

Lyran Commonwealth's still somewhat free media had usually been enough. Robert Steiner however had too many people scared. Not just worried but outright scared. His stupidity was costing big economic concerns billions of *kroner*, and the unrest was costing the lives of civilians.

That had been the deciding factor.

Robert Steiner was to end his days this night.

As the light changed he stepped across the street to where his car was parked.

Joanne Betancourt shook her head in resignation as she pulled her SUV onto the main avenue. Jordan and Herb were arguing as usual, about what Joanne couldn't fathom. But then the boys interests were incomprehensible as were their arguments. Fads and fashions changed so rapidly in the post Amaris Hegemony that a parent couldn't keep up.

As she approached McKenna Avenue a media player whizzed past her ear. It went out the window to disappear on the street. She recognized it as one of the ones she and Daniel had bought the kids this past Christmas.

That does it.

Without another thought she turned to give the boys a piece of her mind. Herbs eyes grew wide as she caught sight of him over the passengers head rest.

"Mom, look out!" He screamed.

Joanne had time to spin her head back and meet the eyes of a distinguished looking man just before he went flying up over the hood of her SUV to turn the windshield into a red clouded mass of shattered safety glass.

Dr. Rikkard Kimbri stared at the sky beyond the steel and concrete fingers of Unity City and was surprised at the lack of pain. He knew he was dying as the paramedics worked frantically. Rikkard wanted to tell them not to bother but he couldn't form the words. In the background he could hear the sobs of the woman who'd hit him.

Surprisingly he wasn't angry with her. Annoyed at the circumstances, yes, but not in the end angry.

His last thought was that at least Lucas was still in place. Perhaps the mess could be salvaged.

Then he died.

Lucas Kelswa looked down at the body, twisted and broken of the doctor. With Robert in close consultation with Minoru Kurita, Lucas had been the one to come identify the body. The police had told him the story behind Rikkard Kimbri's demise and had been relieved when told the Commonwealth would not make an issue out of the affair. It had been an accident and the cause was a young mother of two who had to be sedated over her guilt.

That woman will suffer enough on her own, she won't need our help.

Turning away from the coroner to answer his cell phone he saw a text from the good, dead doctor had finally worked its way through the Lyran network on Terra. The message chilled him and he stood silent and motionless for a while. Turning back to the coroner he deleted the dead man's last words. They vanished as it they'd never existed.

Chapter 3: The Cost of Chaos

Well I was there and I saw what you did. Saw it with my own two eyes. So you can wipe off that grin, I know where you've been. It's all been a pack of lies.

**Veirville, Zebebelgenubi
Terran Hegemony
30 March, 2781**

It took us very little time to track the Lyran connection with the RimJobs down. The files encoded in the pocketcomp were quickly decrypted by Tommy Lindon. That and the "interview" gave us a time and a place so it was a simple matter of getting the right assets in place.

SAS Team Dido moved around me in the night along with a lance of EXT-4R *Exterminators* loaned to us by the Fusiliers. I was dubious about their value, the null signature technology was too new and the machines were in my opinion too big and bulky a medium machine would have done the same things far more efficiently. The -4R model replaced the internal structure with the same advanced composites as *Hussy's* frame. It also mounted an extended range particle cannon in place of the long range missile system. They were still under armed pieces of shit, but anything else would be seen by the *Vampire* in the clearing below us.

It must have been part of their arrangement but both sides had brought two 'Mechs. A pair of *Commando* light 'Mechs in Lyran blue faced outward to the perimeter as did a *Vampire* and a *Phoenix* sporting the shark of House Amaris. On the ground the Lyrans and their cohorts were yapping away like old friends. I guess after seven years they were.

Tommy held the high resolution video camera used by the SAS steady on the exchange. Heavily shielded by the best Terran stealth tech it wouldn't be picked up by the *Vamp*'s Beagle active electronic probes. This needed to be done by the book, documented and with prisoners.

Just have to remember to take some. I smiled ruefully. *Takeo Amaris is one thing, these assholes though.*

Didi slipped up next to me. The Nighthawk suits we wore were stealthy despite their weight. Using sign language she let me know we were ready. She also told me to stay the hell out of the way. Just like on Terra an eternity ago.

I gave her the finger. She'd signed off on our plan and we were gonna follow it. From her body language I knew she was laughing.

Ellis Donnelly shared a smoke with Captain Poul Deevers his counterpart in the 129th Rim Worlds. The two officers had little to do while the exchange of looted minerals and supplies went on. Deevers was in a foul mood, the loss of the Rim Worlders' 3rd Battalion had been sudden and swift. Ellis himself had been shocked at the swift calculating annihilation of over thirty veteran 'MechWarriors by only twelve Terrans.

They didn't even need the air support mustered.

Then there was that captain from the bar. Ellis had done his research, at least what was on the SLDF public database. Hero of the liberation, a noble of the Davion royal line (By marriage but still.) and that blackheart pin on his jacket for some reason it gave him chills. Rumor was only the finest assassins in the SAS had them.

Poul turned to him then exhaling smoke.

"So we'll be out of here soon?"

Ellis forced himself to smile.

"Probably within a week Poul, we'll have you safe on Tamar and in the LCAF if that's what you want."

Deevers chuckled ruefully.

"I never thought I'd say this but becoming a damned Elsie would sound good. Damn it tho' Ellie I'm tired of being a bandit, it's not what I signed on for."

Ellis had never thought of that, these Rimmers were good at being bad as is mother would say. Before he could say anything a flat bang sounded from behind him. The *Vampire* was toppling, a gaping hole in the side of its cockpit.

The thunderclap of a particle beam was deafening out of the confines of his *BattleMaster's* cockpit. The detonation of one of his *Commandos* was even louder. In the flash he saw a sight out of a nightmare.

A misshapen form over two meters tall landed in front of the two officers. Myomer fibers and armor plate gave a demonic cast to the black painted form. Someone had painted the face of a feral tiger over its faceplate but instead of claws a Browning 30cal machinegun rose to point at Ellis' face. A cold metallic but oddly familiar voice sounded from hidden speakers.

"Why Hauptmann, I do believe you've pissed yourself."

Colin Bueller sighed as he signed off from his conversation with the Terran Colonel. The man might be good at his job but he had no clue in the arena Bueller operated in. Shaking his head he pressed a button on his console. The Terran made computer built into his teak desk brought up the faces of his subordinates and *Kaptain* David Holland on the *Donegal Pride*.

"They know, it's time, activate the Trojans, remember none of the Terrans can survive this."

The secrets of the SDS are here, and the Archon wants them. The Archon's will be done.

Now things might have gone worse for the Tigers had certain things gone more the Lyran way. Had the big city folk not been quite so taken in by the Lyran propaganda, making the Tigers suspicious for example. Had Colonel Winter bought the line General Bueller tried to sell him then the Lyrans' surprise would have been complete. The information brought by the man who's name wasn't Louie Chavez could have gotten lost. But for the Lyrans none of these things went their way.

It was still bad enough.

Having advanced notice of the Terrans' arrival the Elsies and their RimJob allies had placed traps in the SLDF base. The first of which was a small explosives package under the ammo dump. The resulting explosion could be seen from orbit. The thirty two men and women of the Second and Fourth Assault Companies of the

Bloody Paws Battalion had no chance. Neither did over a hundred and fifty technicians, infantry and other support personnel.

Colonel Winter had gotten the word out however and the mixed combat command of the 26th Lyran Guard that came in to complete the clean up ran into the remaining two assault companies of the Bloody Paws. Christian Traumintieri and his troopers were in an understandably pissed off mood. The fighting spilled out into the star port and the city of Pelham.

Guards strike teams spread out to hit Tiger positions all across the city, the chaos in Pelham caused some of the strikers to get stuck in traffic jams or mobs of people fleeing the battle. Others ran into prepared and enraged Terran troops causing firefights to break out throughout the city. Others however succeeded in their strikes decimating John Zazula's 2005th Royal Support Group and taking out a flight of Hammerheads from the 1171st Tactical Fighter Wing in for maintenance.

The battle for Zebebelgenubi was not limited to the planet however. In orbit the *Donegal Pride* launched a strike package of *Chippewa* heavy fighters from the *Leopard CV* DropShips the big battlecruiser carried. Covered by the *Lucifer* medium fighters of the *Pride's* own wing the Lyran fliers overwhelmed the combat air patrol put up by the Terran WarShips.

The destroyer *Warspite* took severe damage as a Lyran missile strike blew a ten meter wide hole in her drive section. The Lyran wing quickly fell prey to the *Zero* fighters carried by the two *Essex* class Destroyers. The primary target of the strike however; the cruiser *Tiger Claw* was not with the destroyers. The *Tiger Claw*; one the fastest WarShips in existence was orbiting the planet at a full four gees of thrust.

Captain Emily Hayes surveyed her bridge from the center seat of the *SLS Tiger Claw*, the weight of four gravities pressing her into the plush leather. The holographic plot showed the *Donegal Pride* just beginning to react to the appearance of the Terran cruiser on its aft quarter. Hayes smiled wolfishly the sheer power of her ship gave her the initiative.

Alright you fat bastard, let's see what you've got.

The range counted down to her main batteries maximum. Shielded by the bulk of the planet Hayes and her crew had been able to use both the speed of their ship and the constant updates from the newly repaired comsats they'd deployed over the past week to fake out the massive Lyran ship. Now coming in fast and furious the *Tiger Claw* closed into range of her massive particle cannons, while the *Donegal Pride* was caught at her most vulnerable.

"Mr. Singh, that Elsie cow is in our way, please remove it. Full forward salvo as we come to bear."

"Aye, Aye Captain, coming into optimum range now, all forward batteries firing."

The *Tiger Claw's* bridge lights dimmed and flickered as the cruiser's main armament spoke in a devastating salvo. The caress of her heavy naval particle cannon but deep into the Lyran ship's drive section and one of her massive thrusters belched a plume of drive plasma before sputtering out.

Switching comm channels, Captain Hayes called up her Commander Air Group or CAG.

"CAG this is Claw Actual, we've got time for one more salvo before we pass, start your run when we shoot."

"Claw Actual, CAG; roger thanks for the cover."

"Mains have cycled Captain." Lieutenant Singh reported.

"Fire at will."

Before the Lieutenant could reply, Commander Evan Lorimer called out.

"Incoming fire, Captain..." The impact of several smaller caliber particle cannons and mega joules of laser energy slammed into the *Tiger Claw's* bow. Several panels blew out in a shower of sparks and Emily Hayes heard a choked off scream behind her. Bad enough but the Lyrans, perhaps shaken by the damage dealt by the *Tiger Claw* were spotty on their return fire. The worst was yet to come as the abused frontal armor of the Terran WarShip took repeated hammer blows from the massive naval autocannons on the *Donegal Pride's* aft quarters.

A blossom of fire came from the *Tiger Claw's* port access way and a sudden impact slammed into Hayes tossing her around her command chair. She felt several ribs break as her five point restraints protected her from worse injury. An insane thought came to her as Lieutenant Singh confirmed the firing of the *Claw's* second shot.

Damn it we just got the bridge repainted. It's gonna be hell to clean this mess up.

As the *Tiger Claw* fired its second salvo, Lieutenant Commander Li Enlai cursed in his native Mandarin. The *Pride's* salvo ripped great rents in the *Tiger Claw's* armor belt and the CAG could see fires burning in her fore section. As the wing of *Ahab* Heavy Strike Fighters and their *Zero* escorts separated from the *Tiger Claw's* sensor shadow he had other things to worry about.

Almost immediately he got tone on the six Arrow VII anti ship missiles mounted on his plane. As signal came in that the rest of the wing had a lock on the Lyran battlewagon, Enlai snarled out the command.

“Headhunters, this is Icepick, fire at will.”

From each of the eighteen *Ahab*'s six of the deadly missiles dropped free and lit up their engines. Guided by a seeker head with the intelligence of a rat a hundred and eight missiles homed in on the Lyran ship. Following the massive energies of the *Claw*'s main guns the Arrow VII's ripped deeper into the shattered drives of the *Donegal Pride*.

The result was dramatic. A fireball the size of an *Overlord* class DropShip flared from the Lyran vessel's aft. The bright golden color told Enlai that one of the *Pride*'s fusion reactors had just devoured itself. Lights all over the battlecruiser flickered and died.

“CAG to Claw Actual, the *Pride* is combat ineffective, repeat...”

A weary voice came over the TACNET.

“CAG, this is the XO, roger your last transmission, the Captain is down. Your orders are to keep the *Elsie* fighters from causing any mischief; we've got our hands full here.”

With a sad acknowledgement, Li Enlai led his wing to help clean up the remaining *Elsies* most of whom were already burning for the planet. Concern for his long time friend Emily Hayes clouded the normal exhilaration of a kill, especially one as big as a battlecruiser. But then again down was not dead.

“Target, Kommandant with the data pad, twelve o'clock low range six hundred.”

Bruce's voice echoed in Didi's ear as the major called out their first target. The Lyran artillery position below the pair had been holding up Justine Sinclair's Hungry Tigers for the past day and a half, the dust storms high in Zebebelgenubi's atmosphere preventing the *Normandie* the one undamaged WarShip remaining to the Terrans from obliterating it with an orbital strike.

Likewise the attentions of the Lyran aerospace elements strengthened by the naval air wing that had escaped the orbital battle, kept the Rakshasas too busy maintaining air superiority to set up an air strike. With the Tigers own arty shot to hell in the opening moments of the fight, it fell to the Black Cats, sans their 'Mechs to take the position down.

B's adjusting well to being 'Mechless, Didi thought, but then we've done this whole shindig before.

The Black Cats' BattleMech assets were caught in Pelham when the hammer went down. Rumor was the Lyrans had captured almost a full battalion's worth of Terran machines. With the exception of the loaner *Exterminators*, which had broken down just after the first engagement, the Cats were now an infantry unit.

Spotting the target Bruce was talking about she downed him with a single fifty caliber round. All around the Lyran position the gun crews and their security detachment hit the ground. Didi suspected that most had never been in the ten ring before. Unlike the Tigers, where even most of the technicians had raised a rifle a few times, Steiner's Boots were getting a baptism in fire.

“Target, sergeant with the squad at two o'clock range five eighty behind the jeep, looks like a senior man. He'll stick his head out any moment now.”

Sure enough a balding grey haired infantryman popped his head up and signaled behind him. Before he could stand, Didi turned his head to red mist and chips of bone. The squad of infantry that had risen from concealment ducked right back down. A double click sounded in the receiver under her mastoid. Kei and Yuri, done planting explosives in the ammo carriers.

Didi grinned; the two former DEST shooters knew their stuff. Sneaking away the pair paused only to send the detonation command. The explosion of the 155mm shells in the Lyrans ammo supply shook the ground. Sharing a savage grin the Black Cats slipped into the dusty hills.

Down the ruins of Liberty Boulevard Christian Traumintieri led his command lance against a probe from the 26th Lyran Guards. Fire from an *Atlas* spattered missiles across *Harbinger*, but the hundred ton *Pillager* shrugged them off. Pulling on his triggers he sent a pair of argent streaks down range. The impacts shattered armor and sent the other assault machine back a step. Kimberly Reiss' Highlander sent another gauss slug and a swarm of anti armor missiles to add insult to injury.

The *Atlas* already mauled from the near constant action fell backward fires blazing in its internal structure. An *Awesome* slashed cyan fire across the broad lane littered with crushed cars and shattered masonry. Two connected with Wally Kasparov's *Devastator*; *Bruiser*. The Terran machine staggered but Wally shot back with his full complement of weapons.

“Boss they're pressing I've got a full battalion with armor and infantry support off the northeast side of Miller street, we're holding but not for long.”

Eddie Martinez's voice was far from panicked, but Chris picked up on the commander of the 4th Assault Company's tension. Unfortunately he had no one left to send. Calling to John Zazula's ragged and tattered artillery group he got only promises, even with the Stalking Tigers running interference the red legs were shooting and scooting far too much to be effective.

Shifting in his linear frame, Christian rolled with a spurt of charged particles sent his way by the *Awesome*. The skull faced *Atlas* may have been the bigger 'Mech but the triple PPC combo on the *Awesome* were being handled by someone with *real* skill. A heat spike following the last hit told Christian that some of the last hit had found a chink in his armor to crack *Harbinger*'s reactor shielding.

"Viking, this is Sin, we're inbound on your position, where do you want us?"

Grinning with relief, Christian circled Eddie's position on his tacmap and replied to Justine Sinclair's call.

"Welcome to the party, Sin, if it wouldn't be too much trouble could you guys give Steady Eddie a hand?"

"Not a problem, Viking, sorry we're late, had some problems with Elsie arty."

"Don't give it a thought, Sin, just glad you're here."

Justine grinned at Christian's reply and spurred *Wendigo* to her full sixty five kph. Opening her Battalion wide channel she called on her troops.

"Okay boys and girls, the Bloody Paws are swamped with Elsies, Bruiser your gang around through Vincent Lane and hammer these morons, the rest of you on me!"

With a roar of support the forty heavy 'Mechs of the Hungry Tigers tore into the much abused city of Pelham. Lew "Bruiser" Rosenthal and the rest of the 12th Strike Company peeled off to head down the parallel lane just to the southwest.

Engaged with Steady Eddie's 4th Assault Company the Lyrans only began to react to the Tigers when their armor support began to explode. Leaping *Wendigo* over a broken Demolisher Assault Tank Justine spat particle fire into a blue painted *Banshee* knocking the ninety five ton 'Mech aside. As it stumbled the fire from one of Fast Eddie's *Devastators* cracked the centerline armor on the Lyran's chest.

The big blocky machine shuddered and went still as the rest of the Hungry Tigers arrived. Tiger infantry infiltrated in the buildings around the Bloody Paws position called down indirect fire from the sixteen *Bombardiers* in Justine's unit. The direct fire units, *Marauders* and *Black Knights* began to work on the masses of Lyran troops constricted in the rubble strewn streets.

The Lyrans were game however and stuck in the fight giving out as good as they could. Jerry "Fitz" Fitzmartin staggered back dead before he could hit the ground his cockpit breached by an errant long ranged missile, his *Black Knight* falling to the earth with a crash. The *Archer* that had done the deed soon followed exploding under the lash of at least eight particle cannon. Riding high on his heat Lucy Pinder's *Bombardier Fire Dancer* was hit by a swarm of inferno rounds. The liberation veteran ejected as her machine detonated despite the cellular ammunition storage units built in its ammo bins. As her chute drifted back towards the Terran lines a volley of machine gun fire intersected her flight.

Enraged by the murder of her pilot; Justine scanned for the source of the lethal fire spotting a team of Lyran infantry hiding in the shadow of a damaged wall. Sending a gauss slug down range she collapsed the wall on top of them. In the small tightly armored compartment of her mind she wept for Lucy, her two year old son and her husband; a police officer with the NYPD. The bulk of her mind however tracked the battle, the patterns and motions that told her where and when to use her Hungry Tigers to their most lethal effect.

"Sin, Bruiser, we've got 'em from behind their reserves are breaking."

"Gotcha Bruiser, okay my hungry ones it's time to feast, take them."

Despite the array of sensors every BattleMech has; including a compressed 360 degree strip that gives an all around view; it is easy to get sight locked on the action in front of you. Even veteran troops can fall prey to this and the appearance of fresh machines *behind* them can cause even the best to lose their nerve. The appearance of a pack of heavy machines mauling their reserves was a blow the 26th Lyran Guards couldn't recover from.

The difference between the two units became quickly evident. The Lyrans' troops were well trained and led but the Terrans had on average five years of constant combat under their belts. While the old adage of quantity having a quality all its own had some truth to it but when faced with both the Royal equipment fielded by the Tigers and their skill and teamwork turned the Battle for Pelham into a meat grinder whose output was blue painted steel wrecks.

The arrival of the Hungry Tigers' fresh machines and pilots knocked the Guards out of Pelham entirely and the Lyrans would later count the dead at eighteen 'MechWarriors and almost seven hundred infantry and armor crews.

Christian Traumintieri breathed a sigh of relief as he stood over the shattered *Awesome*. The damn pilot had been pretty good for a colonist and an Elsie to boot. Not SLDF good, mind you but then that is a whole different *kind* of good. Beneath him the blackened and twisted 'Mech didn't look survivable but the escape hatch in the back of the head popped open and a figure clad trunks and a cooling vest emerged to look up at the massive black *Pillager*.

Switching on his external speakers, Christian called out to the woman who looked to be all of sixteen.

"Battle's over for you, sweetie, consider yourself a prisoner of the Terran Hegemony Armed Forces."

Zooming in on her face he caught the name on her vest *Lestrade*. Recognizing the name as one belonging to a proud noble family in the Commonwealth and seeing the proud defiance on her face he added;

"Don't be so down honey, you did your ancestors proud."

As troops from the New York National Guard unit that had provided the Tigers infantry support for six hundred years arrived and took charge of their prisoner, Christian turned away and began to tally up the butcher's bill. They'd done well here, but most of his machines had heavy damage and with the destruction of most of the units support chain at the start of the whole fucking mess the Tigers, unlike the Lyran Guards couldn't get any repairs. The damnable high altitude dust storms that were unique to this ugly smelly butthole of a world also meant no orbital fire support and as the Lyrans held the HPG; no calls for help until one of the transports could jump out system.

And then there were the RimJobs up in the hills, no doubt just waiting to pounce. Grimacing Christian thought;

This thing needs to end soon, before we get ground down to dust.

Over two hundred kilometers above; Emily Hayes' thoughts mirrored the Tigers' assault commander. The bridge around her still smelled of ozone and burnt flesh. Her ribs, taped up tight ached and the compound fracture of her left arm added to the symphony of pain with a dull throb. Despite the protests of her Chief Medical Officer she was on duty directing repairs as the *Tiger Claw* hung above the mud brown world that was the source of so much trouble.

Looking battered and weary; Lieutenant Commander Li "Icepick" Enlai came onto the deck. The CAG leaned against the deck railing above and just behind her. The engagement had cost the little fleet's fighter squadrons' six fighters, a light loss but the *Tiger Claw* would need a full rebuild in a naval yard before she'd be considered combat ready as did the *Warspite*. The material damage was bad enough but the human losses of the orbital battle were as always heart breaking. One hundred and seventeen men and women would never see home again. Most like the crew of the number four particle cannon turret were spacers who'd been with her for years.

It was small consolation that the Lyrans had fared worse. Only four life boats had been rescued and they were only half full. While the battle would go down in some naval history book as a great victory one top of the line battlecruiser scrapped with no capital ship losses, the history books never told the human toll.

Maybe that's why we keep fighting wars, we always forget the cost.

"Li, I want to send a mixed wing down to support Colonel Winter, we know he managed to keep air fields at Durant and Collingswood, now we can't send planes down into the mess of that dust storm over the northern continent but look here."

Bringing up a global map she used her finger to draw a holographic circle around an island chain outside the big tropospheric storm.

"The Du Lac Islands, there's a drop port there, supporting the undersea mining operations. Orbital scans say there's nobody home."

Her CAG nodded and did the math in his head.

"Okay we can stage there, make the flight to Collingswood."

Emily nodded and laid out her plan.

"I want to land a company of marines just to be sure, and we'll send some of those spares and supplies we have in the hold on a couple of shuttles."

Before he could reply Ensign Olsen called from his sensor station.

"Emergence wave, big one at the L-5 pirate point. Target designated Delta Five at least eight hundred thousand tons."

"Do we have an ID?" Emily asked keeping the tension from her voice with effort. The distance from the L-5 point was enough that light took twenty minutes to reach the Terran fleet. The target, a WarShip, it had to be, could be burning hot and straight for them even now."

"Hold one, sir, emergence wave clearing receiving IFF..." Olsen's already pale face went white.

"Ensign?" Emily prompted.

“R-rename target Delta Five as LCS *Invincible*, *Tharkad* class battlecruiser.”

A knot of fear tightened in Emily’s stomach.

Damn it this ain’t fair. She thought bitterly.

“Captain, we’ve received a broad band transmission from the *Invincible*.”

“Let’s hear it.” Emily said.

A woman’s voice with a light Germanic accent came over the speakers.

...repeat. This is the Lyran Commonwealth Ship Invincible carrying Special Diplomatic Envoy Christina Steiner to all Lyran and Terran forces; by order of Margrave Jennifer Steiner we request a cessation of hostilities from the Terran commander. Regardless all Lyran troops are ordered to stand down...

...pending an investigation of your illegal actions, failure to comply will result in the offending units being declared renegade...

In the ‘Mech bay Leutnant General Colin Bueller listened icily as the medic pulled a sheet over the burned form of MechWarrior Dieter Prentz. The young *Commando* pilot had volunteered to try to take out one of the captured Terran machines. The computer techs swore they’d cleared the Terran security systems, but when the big *Marauder* named *Hussy* had entered the start up sequence a power surge had run through the neuro interface circuits and fried poor Dieter.

The message on the big black monster’s secondary screens had read;

FUCK YOU BITCHES!!!!

Colin had almost ordered the ‘Mech destroyed, but resolved to dismember it after this mess was over. Now he wouldn’t get a chance. He remembered thinking the Terran colonel had no experience in the political field, something as deadly serious as any other battlefield. Well the Archon and Colin himself, when he’d accepted the assignment had gambled and lost.

Still there was one last thing he could do. Steiner’s Boots were loyal to the end.

After giving the order to stand down, the Leutnant General went to his office and ordered his aide not to disturb him. Ignoring the man’s quizzical look he closed the door behind him.

A little while later a single shot rang out.

**Unity City, North American Administrative District
Terra, Terran Hegemony
April 10, 2781**

“In closing I find it hard to believe, my fellow lords and lady that the 26th Lyran Guards could do anything without the express knowledge of their liege lord; Archon Robert Steiner. Perhaps for a few weeks even a month, but seven years? No my colleagues not for seven years. Because of this I am forced to call for his immediate censure from this council until such time as an investigation may be undertaken.”

Amanda Cameron surveyed the respective lords her eyes narrowed. John Davion looked thoughtful and concerned, Barbara Liao amused as she toyed with her hair idly. Kenyon Marik had a small smile on his face as he watched his rivals for any advantage. Minoru Kurita watched the proceedings with heavy lidded eyes while Robert stared back at her sourly.

With the resumption of HPG communications with Zebebelgenubi, Colonel Winter had forwarded the information his troopers had uncovered. Amanda had been livid, even the normally calm Ian Sinclair had not been able to hide his anger. Only Sarah had counseled patience, for which Amanda had been grateful, but in the end had decided to ignore.

The only high point was that the Tigers had dealt with the bulk of the Threshers. Even this had been bittersweet. The loss of forty six MechWarriors and almost five hundred other men and women from the Tigers’ infantry, artillery and support arms, not to mention the crippling of two WarShips and the loss of life involved made this battle as bloody as any in the Liberation.

Amanda didn’t even want to think about the civilian cost.

“Lady Amanda, I’m sure there must be some misunderstanding here, this incident was regrettable but I assure you I knew nothing of this. And while I am still not convinced of the evidence provided by your troops is of any relevance at all I will authorize an immediate investigation in to the matter.”

Amanda raised her eyebrow letting her annoyance show.

“Relevance, I’m afraid I don’t understand, the evidence was fairly clear to me.”

“Confessions of a bandit from a broken nation, indeed a member of the Rim’s secret police known for their lies. Confessions of a man from a nation known to hate the Lyran Commonwealth extracted under torture.”

Robert smiled benignly before continuing.

“Honestly Amanda, torture, I didn’t know you had come so far, congratulations.’

Two years ago Amanda would have turned red and stammered or raged with nova bright fury now she smiled sadly before replying.

“While I can’t take credit for the interrogation methods, Robert I’m glad to see you realize how much you don’t know,” Her smile turned deadly then, “there is after all so much. And your troops have paid the price for your lack of knowledge.”

John Davion rose with the dignity only an elder statesman could achieve. Amanda nodded relinquishing the floor.

“Robert as the old saying goes if you have nothing to hide, then you have nothing to fear, I for one would be extremely interested in getting to the bottom of this. My Lady Amanda I second your motion.”

The Archon glared daggers at the First Prince but remained silent. Minoru Kurita however did not. Shaking his head in amusement the Combine leader stood.

“Clever John, very clever, but I am afraid the Draconis Combine does not need to be involved in a dispute between the Terran Hegemony and the Lyran Commonwealth.”

Minoru grinned, his blue eyes flashing.

“However, I need Robert here voting against you, we can’t have you becoming First Lord now can we?”

Kenyon chuckled and glanced over at Robert.

“You get a free pass here Bob.”

Amanda’s eyes narrowed at Marik’s comment. Before she could speak, Barbara Liao stretched languidly.

“*Bored now*”, she said, “I mean can we just cut to the chase here people.”

Five sets of eyes pinned the Capellan leader. She smiled radiantly and gestured to the assembled lords.

“John, Amanda and I will vote to censure Robert, Kenyon Minoru and Robert will vote against us, does that sound about right?”

Amanda looked at her erstwhile ally in shock. If you could have turned Kenyon and Robert to stone the pair couldn’t have stiffened more. John actually looked oddly disappointed. Out of the corner of her eye she caught Minoru covering his mouth as if hiding a smile. Barbara Liao turned to Amanda then shaking her head and muttering something under her breath.

“Amanda, darling, please use my vote in this matter as you see fit, my husband and I have tickets to the opera and I don’t want to be late.”

With that the Chancellor of the Capellan Confederation swept out of the council chamber leaving chaos in her wake.

Amanda sat speechlessly as Kenyon Marik mouthed some inane insults after the woman. The Captain-General was so abusive that something happened that Amanda had never in a million years expected. First Prince John Davion snapped.

“Oh do shut up, you poncey bastard!”

Even Minoru Kurita looked shocked.

Back on the Zebe...

I stopped by the hospital we were using to handle our wounded to check on some of the gang. Karen Wells and Marissa Baker were both on shift, but the pair who we’d rescued from George Donner in New York were too busy to say more than a quick hello. Daniel St. Croix and Arty Maldonado were both out of harm’s way and recovering from injuries during our stint as commandos. We chatted for a while until alarms sprang up from the adjacent room.

I saw Samantha Wynnham rush by followed closely by Alex Winter. Excusing myself I slipped into the hallway. Al who I hadn’t seen since just after planet fall looked haggard, his shoulders slumped and his normal mahogany skin sickly pale. I guess I didn’t look much better ‘cause when he looked at me his eyes widened.

“B.” He greeted me.

“Al?” I replied a question in my voice.

“It’s Pauly.” He said simply.

“Gods.” Was all I could say.

Pauly D'Amato who'd driven his *Firestarter* incendiary 'Mech through the worst fighting in the entire Amaris crisis and come through with nothing worse than a hangnail. Like many of us he had no living kin, his family back on Earth dead. The Regiment was his family. Sounds like a bad holoflick I know but that doesn't make it any less true.

I could hear Samantha's voice giving urgent orders. Karen Wells brushed past me without a word. I felt the tension in AI and knew it was mirrored in me. We were helpless to do anything but pray to our respective gods. I know I come across like were some kind of iron men sometimes. The invincible Tigers of Terra, the baddest motherfuckers in the whole of human space.

Fact is we're as fragile as the rest of you. We bleed, scream and more often than not we die. We cover it up with a rough humor and a casual smile. But it fucking hurts all the same. If it were not for the reasons we do what we do, for the people we protect I think we'd all go insane. We beat the odds time and time again but we lose a piece of our selves each time.

I heard that damned heart rate monitor beep out a last frenzied pulse, then a single solid tone. I knew we'd lost Pauly. Samantha, as much a warrior as any of us albeit in a different arena, fought hard trying to breathe life into him, but in the end it was no good.

Marissa came out of the room blood all over her scrubs her eyes helpless. When she looked at me I just put my arms around her as she broke down. She and Pauly had had a thing during the days after the Liberation. I knew he'd done a lot to help get her out of her shell. The relationship hadn't worked out, but the friendship had.

The war's over and we're still dying. I thought. *Athena let me see how to make it stop.*

Isokoru Satoh was having similar thoughts as he chased down the Rim Worlders' command company. The Tigers could have left the problem to the Star League "Peacekeepers" who were even now burning for the world. Honor however demanded their death. The Ryukaze hadn't escaped the carnage losing three of the original unit and two more recruited during the march across North America.

A pale beam from a heavy laser burned across Captain Holly Mitchell's *Shadow Hawk* the former Benjamin Regular spat particle fire back at the ducking *Shark* slicing into its right arm. On top of a low ridge the *Shark's* comrades had formed up for their final stand. The lead machine one of the ubiquitous *Hecatonchieres* raised its laser assembly arm. At the same time the TACNET crackled in Isokoru's ear.

"Alright you Drac bastard I you've got us, we give up."

"To whom am I speaking?"

"Zeke Perkins boss of this mob."

"Thank you Colonel Perkins, but I am only here to verify your death, not to take your surrender."

In the stunned silence that followed the Swift Claws opened fire and the last remnants of a dead empire died.

New York

Erica Dalton's heart pounded as she passed the NYPD patrol car. The officers inside hadn't spared her a glance but the past four days had been hell. The task force assigned to catch her and her cohorts had busted in on the Earth First safe house while she's been out walking. The TerraSec SWAT team had rounded up her entire crew, plus their allies in an operation so slick she almost walked right into it.

Her hair darkened, likewise her skin tanned by a melanin enhancer and the clean lines of her face broken up by an artfully applied beauty spot she managed to evade detection but it had been close. She'd watched Joey loaded into an ambulance by paramedics and felt angry she'd left him pissed at her. They'd been friends too long.

She still had options though, contacts she'd made during the years of the resistance. One of those was in the one place no one would think to hide. Not the CIB, not TerraSec, not even the Black Tigers. She dialed a number on the disposable pocketcomp she'd bought at a nearby convenience store.

"C.J. how're ya doin' hon." She said when the voice at the other end answered.

The one place no one would think to look.

The Tiger's Lair.

Chapter 4: Homeward Bound

Do you bury me when I'm gone? Do you teach me while I'm here? Just as soon as I belong, then it's time I disappear.

Metallica; I Disappear

Pelham, Zebebelgenubi
Terran Hegemony
May 03, 2781

Christina Steiner; Grafina von Arcturus and Ambassador at Large for the Lyran Commonwealth stepped off the ramp of the DropShip that had brought her to the surface. Pausing dramatically she smiled at the assembled Terran officers. They didn't smile back.

This is not good, she thought, Jeni told me that they might be a bit annoyed...but...I'm cute.

Undaunted, she stepped forward and extended her hand to the Terran Colonel.

"Colonel Winter, I am Christina Steiner, my cousin has requested that I negotiate a peace here on Zebebelgenubi and should the situation warrant it escort your Lyran prisoners back to the Commonwealth for trial."

A low growl rose from the assembled Terrans in their grim black and red uniforms.

"Very well Lady Christina, I thank you for ending this farce before even more lives were lost." Colonel Samuel Winter replied. The weariness in his voice brought in her a wave of pity for this man. He gestured behind him indicating the cluster of officers accompanying him.

"This is my son and executive officer Major Alex Winter." The tall young man with the dreadlocks and the same fine features as his father gave a crisp formal bow, but his eyes remained tight with anger. Turning to the darkly beautiful woman next to his son he introduced Christina to Major Justine Sinclair.

"Grafina Steiner, welcome to the Terran Hegemony," Sinclair said with a warm smile. Christina admired her poise. *Okay this one I can work with.* She thought. Thanking her she turned to the final officer who appraised her with the cold gaze of a predator. Granted a one eyed predator.

"Lord Major Gilmour, I need no introduction to." She extended her hand to the Regimental Gunslinger of the 90th Heavy Assault. The dark haired young officer, a few years older than her own twenty two years, bent over to kiss her hand. She smiled as he rose.

"After all I did base a character in my book on him."

My first thought when I saw Christina Steiner was; *"Are you fucking kidding me?"* Followed quickly by: *Great, the Lyrans sent us a cheerleader.* Petite blonde haired blue eyed with a perky nose and a bright smile, the Lyran ambassador looked me over with appraising eyes. Using what Isokoru and Sarah had taught me I saw she had more under the hood than met the eye so to speak. Still...

As we followed Sam off the tarmac she stepped up next to me and slipped her arm through mine. At my glance she flashed that smile again. Out of the corner of my eye I caught Al giving me a grin, that at least was good, he'd been too grim lately, all doom and gloom.

Maybe it was being away from C.J., that I could understand. The warmth of a woman by side brought out thoughts of Sarah. I must have had a look on my face.

"Baron Gilmour, you look a thousand miles away."

"Wha...oh sorry, just thinking of my wife."

"The Lady Sarah? She is lovely, I must admit to following the gossip sheets."

As we got into the waiting armored limo and sat down I shrugged.

"She's pregnant", I spread my arms, "And I'm here."

Steiner grinned at me and tuned to Colonel Winter.

"Well I promise to keep you here only a little longer, but you Colonel it is important that you and your troops be out of here before the 129th Mechanized gets here."

I was wondering about that, we'd received orders from Terra to engage the SLDF only if fired upon but their DropShips had been ominously silent and we already knew through the rumor mill that they were here to disarm us.

Like they could.

Even with our losses and their relatively higher tech any attempt by the Star League troops to contain us would be bloody and futile.

And who among us would die, Al, the Old Man, Gracie?

Samuel Winter pinned the young noblewoman with his stare.

"And what would you suggest Grafina Steiner?"

Christina Steiner grinned impishly, looking even more like a teenage girl sneaking one past her elders.

"If you trust me, Herr Colonel, my cousin Jennifer has a plan."

As she unveiled the plan my eyes widened, it should work, but damn it why the hell does it have to be me.

Mars

Eleanor Soldano finished packing. Her mother stood in the doorway watching. As she looked up, Maritza Soldano smiled wanly.

“So I lose both my daughters now.”

“Mama I can’t stay here anymore, I have to do...” She stopped as her mother came over and wrapped her in a warm embrace.

“I know my baby girl, I know, you’re so much like your father but I can’t help it.”

They were silent for a while. Then mother looked at daughter and smiled again.

“These wars never stop so I will always worry, but it looks like you hooked up with a good bunch. That Major of yours, in his holo vid he seemed too nice for a noble.”

“Major Gilmour’s nice and he knows his stuff, but he’s no noble, his wife is, and yeah the Tigers are a good bunch.”

“And Artie will be there, you know he has a thing for you.”

Eleanor jerked her head up eyes wide.

“Mother!”

“Nonsense he’s a sweet boy despite being an Earther and all.”

Shaking her head she shouldered her bag and gave her mother one last hug.

“Tina’s killers will be found Mama, you know that right?”

Looking at her daughter solemnly Maritza Soldano nodded.

“I know my dear, after all Lady Amanda said so herself.”

Three days later on the Zebe...

Christina scratched idly at the bandage on her shoulder just underneath the pink tank top she wore. She stopped at my raised eyebrow.

“If you keep scratching it you’ll get an infection. Go put some lotion on.”

“You could help...”

“Stop.”

She rose and went to the bar’s ladies room returning my grin. The Lyran noble and I had a couple of days to kill so we kind of wandered around Pelham. The Militia had the 26th Lyrans under lock and key and there was little for either of us to do. Christina turned out to be a lot of fun although she could be a little much at times. On a lark (A mildly tipsy lark.) we’d gotten tattoos, her a rose wrapped around the Steiner Fist, me a stylized version of the Tiger insignia.

The flirting though bugged the hell out of me. I guess that’s why she did it. Elise just shook her head as she poured me another Hoegarten.

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d say that little girl has designs on you.”

I laughed.

“She does, but they’re political not sexual.”

She looked at me puzzled then shrugged.

“Whatever; shot?”

I looked at my watch as Christina returned.

“Yeah, got some time yet.”

Elise poured three shots, Jager for Christina, El Diablo the local Tequila, which should be a major import, for the two of us.

“*Salud*” I said as we tossed down the shots. The door opened and a tall blonde woman in SLDF fatigues walked in. She had the crossed pins of a Gunslinger on her lapel. *Showtime*. I thought.

“Major Gilmour, I am Captain Johanna Kepler of the 129th Mechanized.” She saluted.

I rose and returned the salute.

“Well met Captain, shall we get this out of the way.” She nodded.

“Major, my orders are to disarm all Lyran Rim Worlds and Terran troops not native to Zebebelgenubi.”

Very good Captain.

“Captain Kepler, all Lyran and Rim troops have been accounted for. The remnants of the 26th Lyrans are being held by the Zebe Militia in Garret Field, that sports stadium north of the city.” Kepler nodded “And well, I am

the only Terran soldier on world.” Gesturing to Christina I added. “Grafina Steiner is here as an official diplomatic envoy of the Lyran Commonwealth.”

I stood up and unstrapped my holster from my belt and handed it and the Stoner 10mm it contained over to Captain Kepler. Like I’d give over my Colt, yeah right! She didn’t ask about the Rim Worlds troops. A pair of infantrymen had followed her in and she handed the weapon over.

“So now that that’s over, join us for a drink?”

Kepler nodded a dismissal to her troops and sat down at the bar with us. I grinned at a sudden thought.
Round of drinks with some new friends...24 dollars. Saving the universe yet again...Priceless.

Two days later I was out bound on the *LCS Invincible* enroute to Earth. I just wanted to get home, to Sarah and Sinthya, take a few days off and forget about politics, war and everything but family and friends. This however was not to be.

I was sitting in my cabin watching the latest news feed off of INN. A growing sense of unease had formed a knot in my stomach. While we’d been away I had expected some damn progress from the House Lords. What the hell were they doing, getting drunk and jacking off? Gods above what a bunch of whiny little bitches. Even John Davion and Minoru Kurita who I respected were both getting so butt headed that any chance of rapprochement was getting slimmer by the day.

Sarah had sent me several letters and holos while I’d been on deployment at the Zebe. It was these I retreated to when the depression hit. It was a depression Johanna Kepler had been all too familiar with. The 129th Mechanized Division’s top Gunslinger and I had talked long into the night. Her story and mine were so similar it was like talking to an old friend who’d been with us from day one.

Christina had sat wide eyed and mesmerized at the conversation; I secretly believed she was filing away information for a new book. She seemed surprised at the derision we had for the House Lords in general, but understood our exasperation with Robert Steiner. At some point after a few too many shots I’d shaken my head and reiterated an old comment.

“The guns of the Defense Force have put down one tyrant, another three or four shouldn’t matter.”

Johanna nodded to me and raised her glass. It was then we realized just what we’d said. The fact that we’d said it in front of a full blood Steiner who sat there in shock with eyes wide changed the mood. When Christina said good night it had been in the hurt voice of a small child.

The next day she’d been as perky and lively as she’d been when I’d met her at the DropPort.

A knock at the door jerked me out of my reverie. At my hurried hail, Christina Steiner floated through. Her trademark smile brightened my mood, as she crossed her legs and sat mid air in front of me.

“I hope you’re hungry *Kommandant* Gilmour. The *Invincible* has one of the best chefs in the Commonwealth on board and *Kommodore* DeGrassey has arranged for a dinner party in the mess tonight.”

I wasn’t really in the mood, but I knew I’d be on this ship for a few weeks. It wouldn’t do to alienate them so I agreed.

“*Gut*, pick me up at twenty hundred hours and wear you dress uniform.”

As she flounced out (Yes; apparently you can flounce in zero g.) I shook my head.

How the hell do keep getting myself in these messes.

Dinner was interesting to say the least, the food topped several good German places I knew on Earth and they were liberal with both portions and the fine wine from Tamar. *Kommodore* Simon DeGrassey proved an engaging conversationalist, regaling us with tales of his ship’s proud history. Christina Steiner was charming and adept at drawing the crew and officers attending into the conversation. One fly was stuck in the ointment however.

A dark haired young *Leutnant* glowered at me throughout the meal. Her cold green eyed gaze was a reminder I didn’t need that not a week ago we both would have done our best to kill each other. We’d been introduced, Donatella Lestrade niece to the Duke of Tamar.

Christian had told me about her, the *Awesome* pilot who’d taken down two of our own ‘Mechs. She sat sullenly and answered questions in as few words as possible. I tried talking to her a couple of times but finally gave up.

She’d learn, she would have to, as part of the deal struck with Jennifer Steiner she would have to do a tour with the HAF. At least she wouldn’t be *my* problem. Christian had a place all ready for her in his command lance.

Besides you never know, as Erica said, she might think she looks good in black.

“So what’s with the face, Major?” Christina asked.

“Just thinking about all the work we’ll have to do to rebuild after this mess.”

“Now Major, no business at the dinner table, look here’s dessert.”

Dessert did however take my mind off of pretty much everything else. Black Forest Cake, pretty much my favorite food type thing in the world. Christina said at the sight of the cake my face lit up like a six year old. So after much sweet stuff and really good coffee I escorted Christina back to the quarters.

She turned to me at her door and gave me a warm, slightly tipsy smile and ran her finger over my chest.

“Wanna come in for a nightcap?”

Oh boy.

“Ahh Grafina Steiner, I don’t think that would be wise.”

As she shook her head she touched my hand lightly. She sighed.

“Bruce, are you a man or a mouse?”

I raised my hand and waggled the white gold band there.

“I’m married, Chrissy.”

At that I walked away.

Christina watched him walk away. She smiled a little sadly and her mouth made a little pout.

Ohh, pooh.

Amanda Cameron sat in her day office toying with a lock of her hair. Sarah stood up, wincing at a sudden pain in her back. Amanda had tried to get Sarah to take maternity leave, but got a “Nonsense, my mother worked right up to the day of my birth.” Secretly she thought the older woman couldn’t stand the thought of sitting around doing nothing all day.

Amanda rose and went to her friend’s side. At the touch of Amanda’s hand on her arm Sarah straightened and gave her a smile.

“You should go home, Sarah, call Justine and Didi and go have a girl’s night in.”

“We still have to go over the statement you’ll be making about Jennifer Steiner’s initiative on the Zebe.”

“I can handle it, go be with the gang, I’ll stop by later.”

“But the Council meeting on Monday...”

“Honestly, Sarah, do you think anything will change, what’s the term? SSDD.”

Sarah nodded chuckling.

“Same shit different day, but still...”

“Sarah, do I need to get Lieutenant MacRae to escort you home.” Amanda raised an eyebrow.

Sarah’s eyes narrowed.

“You wouldn’t.”

Amanda just smiled sweetly.

The threat of being placed under the care of the overly talkative and smothering Lieutenant Maria MacRae cowed the older woman.

“Have you heard from Bruce?”

Sarah’s glum face surprised Amanda, who was used to seeing her friend perk up at her husband’s many video messages.

“Okay, Sarah spill it.’ When her friend looked to duck the question.

“It’s nothing...just he spends all his time with that little blonde minx, dinner parties, working out, in the *Invincible’s* gym...” Tears were forming in Sarah’s eyes. “I mean have you seen that Lyran bimbo, she looks like some perky little movie star, and I...” She paused.

“I look like this.” Sarah spread her arms.

Shaking her head, Amanda smiled.

“Sarah, you’re beautiful, honey, and I know he just want’s to get back to you as soon as possible.”

“But what if he, I...I mean with her...”

“Bullshit.”

At the blatant profanity got Sarah’s attention. Amanda grinned.

“Sarah, that man loves you with all his heart. He’s not going to cheat on you...”

Hugging Sarah, she giggled.

“And if I’m wrong, I can always have him shot.”

Her giggles turned to laughter at Sarah’s horrified stare. Sarah tried to reply but ended up just joining her friend’s merriment.

**SeaTac International Spaceport
North American Administrative District
Terra, Terran Hegemony
15 July, 2781**

Jon Case watched the party from Zebebelgenubi leave the Lyran shuttle. Major Gilmour shared a comment with the Lyran noblewoman walking beside him that set them both laughing. He felt Sarah Davion stiffen at his side.

I forget just how young she is. Jon thought.

A darkly beautiful young woman followed behind the Major sullenly and Jon heard Christian Traumintieri chuckle next to him. Jon wished him luck with his new recruit. When she looked up at the welcoming committee her eyes blazed with fire.

Bruce had rushed ahead upon seeing his wife, a big goofy grin on his face and he caught her up in a gentle hug. When she stiffened and didn't return the hug he drew back puzzled. A gleam of realization dawned on him and he turned and quickly introduced his companions.

Nope, that's not why she's mad, I also forget just you clueless Cyclops is.

Major Gilmour made the introductions and Jon watched the interplay between Sarah and the Steiner girl. Both were all smiles and polite courtesy. Christina Steiner inquired after Sarah's pregnancy, and the Davion girl replied with seeming pleasure. Sarah thanked her for ending the conflict on the Zebe and asked about her trip home.

What Jon heard underneath however was Growl, growl, hiss, hiss. A glance shared with Christian showed the other man had caught it too. Bruce however looked confused and hurt.

Jon leaned over to the younger man as they came over to the waiting limo.

"B why don't you head over to Dempsey's and we'll hook up with you there?"

The Tiger's puzzlement was almost laughable.

"I was hoping to spend time with my wife, Jon, I've been away way too long."

Sarah fixed him with a cool gaze.

"I'll be far too busy, tonight." She said sharply.

At that Bruce's face went from hurt, to a sudden realization, to a quickly shut off cold fury.

"Oh...really?" He said in an icy voice. "Fine, Grafina Steiner it has been a pleasure, Lieutenant Lestrade, guys I will see you later." With military precision he clicked his heels gave a short bow and glided off.

Jon looked over at Sarah and Grafina Steiner and caught the glare the little blonde gave Sarah behind her back. Sarah was oblivious however, a cold angry Bruce was obviously not what she'd expected.

Jon looked over at Christian, who looked amused.

"He can crash with me tonight." Christian said earning himself a venomous stare from Sarah, to which he smiled back angelically and with a nod to the rest of the group sauntered off with the Lestrade girl in tow.

As Jon got in the Limo after the two girls the silence weighed heavily. So he just leaned back and closed his eyes.

Just what I need, more drama in my life.

Chapter Five: Did you hear the one about the MechJock who needed an actuator wrench?

Of all the things I'd thought about on the way home, my wife being jealous of Christina Steiner was not one of them. Then again neither was the deadlock in the League council, or for that matter Arnold Collins' proposal.

None of these things worked out as planned, but the last at least helped spread the seed that would become the Republic.

Gracie Liu watched her commander as he sat in a dark corner in the back of Dempsey's. He'd been there for little over an hour, his companion; General Arnold Collins had arrived fifteen minutes ago. Bruce definitely wasn't pleased by the man's appearance at his table. Gracie knew Bruce pretty much wanted to get really, really drunk, part of the reason she, Kei and Yuri were hovering not too far off.

The General however had other plans. While the music prevented her from hearing the specifics, she did notice Bruce's face went from that flat emotionless "I'm only listening to you because I've gotta"; to a thoughtful consideration. The two officers talked for just over an hour until Collins rose and shook Bruce's hand.

After a couple of moments the Major noticed Gracie and company sitting at their table. Nodding to them he got up and paid his tab and strode out.

"Wonder what that was about?" Yuri thought out loud. Gracie shrugged, signaling the waitress to settle their own tab.

“We going somewhere boss?” Kei asked. Gracie nodded.
“Yeah we’re gonna invade House Davion.”
Yuri looked puzzled but Kei just smiled and said; “Cool.”

Al let me in to his quarters. His father was sitting on the couch a can of beer in his hand. Al grabbed another for me as I joined them.

“General Collins came to see you.” Sam said, a statement not a question.

“Yeah, you too huh?”

Sam nodded his eyes showing his inner conflict.

“Looks like the House Lords are going to screw the pooch royally, Collins knows this, although the Director-General and Sinclair still seem to have hope.”

“And his nibs?” I asked.

“General Kerensky is not the man he used to be...” My commanding officer, the man who’d been like a father to me since the coup looked like a man lost as he took a swig of his beer. “The problem is most of the SLDF thinks of him as a god.”

“So he’s going to sit back and do nothing, what about the other division and corps commanders, Hell, sir what about General DeChevalier?”

Al broke in at this point. “We think we might sway the Royals, most of ‘em anyway, but the others, y’know the deal, after the shit we’ve already been through going into another war won’t be popular.”

I nodded, using a swallow of my beer to give me time to think.

“They may not have to, if we have enough support here, John Davion will likely support us and he’s got pull with Liao now. If the read I got from Chrissy is right then Jennifer Steiner will likely use this as an excuse to depose Robert. So we most likely will only have to deal with Marik and Kurita...” I trailed off my thoughts reeling at the magnitude of it all.

“Chrissy?” Al said with a smile, before I could say anything his father put a hand on his son’s arm.

“We have all the support we need here”, Sam spoke his voice heavy, “Most of the Terran garrison will remain neutral as will the Sinclair Fusiliers as long as the Last Cameron is not threatened.”

“Plus we have the support of the 42nd CAAN.” Alex added. “Colonel Holliston has assured us of support.”

I leaned back in the comfort of the sofa and closed my eyes.

“How long has this been planned?” Given what Collins had told me it had to be a massive...well conspiracy is the only word that came to mind. Sam answered my question.

“Ever since the last phases of the campaign against Amaris, Kerensky refused to even discuss it, and when the Last Cameron was found there seemed to be no need, now however.”

When I opened my eyes I found father and son looking at me. They were waiting for something. I knew what. In any SLDF or Royal command the Gunslinger is considered to carry the unit’s honor, its’ soul if you would. Like it or not my opinion held more weight than I wanted.

“Alright, as long as the Last Cameron isn’t harmed, I’m in.”

And may the Gods have mercy on our souls.

Sarah walked in to the apartment worn out but thoughtful, the Terrible Two and Gracie had ambushed her after work and spent the past two hours reasoning out the whole Bruce situation. As much as it pained her the other women knew her husband way better than she did in some ways. It was the combinations of her job stress, the pregnancy and the recent insanity on Zebebelgenubi that had sent her over the edge. Aunt Gladys had said as much too, but Sarah hadn’t wanted to listen.

That and a certain blonde little minx.

As she passed Sinthya’s room she heard their daughter talking on the phone. Gladys intercepted her with a finger raised in front of her lips.

“She’s talking to her father.” Her aunt raised an admonishing eyebrow.

“Where is he?”

“Where else does he go to think?”

Sarah nodded, *Hussy* of course. She turned around and grabbed her bag.

“Sarah, where are you going?”

Looking back over her shoulder Sarah Davion smiled.

“To fix this mess, Aunt Gladys.”

I've found that surrounding yourself in familiar, mundane things helps when you're hurting. Cradled in *Hussy's* linear frame I paged through Gracie's report on the proposed "new" *Tiger* heavy BattleMech. A refit of the Rim Worlder's *Hecks* that was designed to make use of the sheer numbers of captured 'Mechs that fell into the SLDF's hands.

We had enough *Hecatonchieres*, *Great Whites*, *Sharks* and *Vampires* to outfit whole divisions. Some political pundits wanted all things RimJob destroyed and personally I don't blame them. The brass however was smarter than that.

With tons of spare parts and several thousand chassis the captured war materiel should bolster Terra's ability to defend herself until proper Terran machines could be produced. The problem was that despite respecting the 'Mechs as war machines, few self respecting Terrans wanted to pilot them. So a cosmetic fix, different weapons load outs and whammo a whole new *Terran* machine is born, just don't look too closely folks.

Both Gracie Liu and Scott Mackenzie had piloted the enemy heavy during the war had been drafted in at various times. Gracie was looking at a job as General Motors' chief test jock after she mustered out, while Scott before he'd gone on vacation with Liz had been adapting the *Heck's* universal hard points into a prototype *Mercury*.

Hussy was filling the 'Mech bay with strains of 22nd century jazz, not normally my cup of tea, but it suited my mood. I was so caught up reading and making some notes, Gracie had asked for I totally missed the low servomotor whine as the cherry picker rose level with the cockpit.

I expected to see Mischa Vinson our Master Technician or Alex but the flash of fox red hair took me by surprise.

"Sarah, what...?"

Leaning in over the railing my wife smiled hesitantly.

"Help me in there."

Carefully I bundled Sarah up and over the railing into *Hussy's* jump seat. She sat their staring at me for a few seconds.

"I'm an idiot." She said finally.

"Yup." I replied eloquently.

Her eyes widened and she made to get up. I stood and put both my hands on her shoulders.

"I love *you*, Sarah, no one else, do you get that?"

"Yes, I just..." Sarah looked at me, for once at a loss for words.

"I know, honey, it's like the old joke about the MechWarrior who needs an actuator wrench."

Puzzled, my wife just looked at me.

"He gets so worked up that the Chef Technician of his unit won't lend him the tool that when he gets to the supply depot he steps up to the tech yells "I don't need the damned wrench anyway!" I shrugged. "It's a bad joke anyway."

Sarah reached up and stroked my cheek and nodded.

"Very bad but, yeah, it was something like that." She looked away blushing.

"Let's not do this again, okay?" I said pulling her close.

Burying her face into my shoulder she said firmly; "Just don't expect me to be friends with that Steiner bimbo."

"Yes dear." I said kissing her firmly.

There isn't much room in the cockpit of a *Marauder*, especially with a wife several months pregnant. If you're determined however...

Well, you figure it out.

**Unity City, North American Administrative District
Terra, Terran Hegemony
August 5, 2781**

John Davion closed his eyes for a moment as Kenyon Marik droned on. More of the same old same old. Joshua had sent him a message stating the situation on Chesterton had petered out finally. It had taken his son landing at the head of the 5th Davion Guards to shut Lady Green up. The confrontation between Captain Sebastian Green and his mother had already taken on the stuff of legend.

What I would have given to be a fly on the wall for that battle. A chuckle escaped him earning the First Prince a glare from Robert Steiner.

The weariness of a late night talk with Barbara Liao lay over the aging Davion leader like a lead cloak. Masking an exasperated grimace by drinking from the water glass set before him, John looked over at the Capellan leader. Barbara looked bored as she had throughout most of the council meetings over the past few months.

Damn it all she's right, God above we've failed.

Though amiable, their discussion had unearthed no new solutions, no last minute saving grace.

This is it, the Star League is dead, and its people just don't know it yet.

The thought chilled him to the core and he looked up at Sarah, sitting next to Amanda Cameron. She looked happy despite the grim debates going on around her. Amanda looked up then and met his gaze. She smiled sadly. In the coming years, on many a sleepless night John Davion would be haunted by that smile.

She knows it too, dear girl, you are far wiser than your years.

As the meeting broke up, finally blissfully, John felt like he was suddenly a thousand years old.

John Davion might have been surprised but Jinjiro Kurita's thoughts ran along similar lines, but where John's thoughts were full of remorse, the Kurita heir was almost happy. As close to happy as he could possibly get anyway.

Finally, all this talking ends, finally the Dragon can act.

Years of inaction had threatened to blunt the claws of the mighty Kurita serpent, but those years were over now. In his mind Jinjiro saw the thrust of the blow that would bring down that old fool John Davion and the butchery that would end the mercantile fools of the Lyran Commonwealth.

And then ah yes, the Hegemony, and dear sweet Amanda, you will be quite the prize. Who knows, I might even have to marry you. After a suitable breaking in period of course.

He smiled thinly as he walked out of the main entrance beside his father. The mob of media dogs pointed holocams at the Council Lords and shouted questions that went unanswered. Jinjiro amused himself by imagining them all lying in pools of their own clotting blood.

Soon enough, my friends. Maybe then when the last of you is dead I will have peace.

As the Kurita delegation paused to await their limo Jinjiro noticed a small child who had ducked under the ropes separating the press from the Council Lords. The boy was speaking to a big Terran officer with a lion's mane of blonde hair. One of the dammed Tigers, Christian something or other.

"Did they fix the League mister? Is Lady Amanda First Lord?" The girl asked.

"Not yet kiddo, but don't worry, we won't let them do anything dumb." The Tiger smiled down at the child, then his eyes met Jinjiro's and the all the man's warmth fled, his smile turned predatory. A smile Jinjiro was all too familiar with. A smile he returned, and though the Terran met his gaze without flinching, in Jinjiro's eyes he seemed diminished.

Ohh you'll try Major, you'll fail, and it will be glorious. Walking away Jinjiro Kurita whistled a jaunty tune, earning a puzzled look from his father.

Glorious indeed.

Chapter 6: A Cold, Dark Place

*You better take a good look 'cause I'm full of shit
With every bit of my heart I have tried to believe in it
You can dress it all up, you can try to pretend
But you can't change anything, you can't change anything in the end*
Nine Inch Nails; You Know What You Are?

**Unity City, North American Administrative District
Terra, Terran Hegemony
August 12, 2781**

Sarah Davion would always remember the day her hopes died. Looking in the mirror she adjusted her suit jacket and watched Bruce in the mirror. He was kneeling in front of Sinthya speaking quietly. His pocketcomp buzzed and he stepped away. Satisfied with her preparation she stepped out of the bedroom and heard Scott's voice over her husband's device.

"Scott just do it, I need Trey Lance and Dido's team at the Council chamber entrance by ten hundred, full kit."

Scott's words were unintelligible from the doorway but from the tension in Bruce's shoulders she knew he was both angry and worried. Shaking his head he growled out.

"No under no circumstances should you tell Liz, your orders will be downloaded to *Boom-Boom's* computer when you're on line." Listening to his friend's reply Sarah saw the tension drain from her husband as he chuckled.

"Trust me old friend, it'll all work out in the end."

As he signed off he saw Sarah standing there and smiled a bit sheepishly.

"What's up?" Sarah asked pulling her husband close.

"Nada, 'Rat doesn't like his assignment today."

Sensing something wrong, Sarah gave him the fish eye. Bruce kissed her hard then, and for a moment she found herself hoping the world would go away for a few hours more. Then hoping her makeup manufacturer's claim of "A thousand kisses guaranteed" was more than just blowing smoke.

When he came up for air, Bruce stroked an errant strand of hair off her face and said;

"Just trust me baby, if everything goes south today we'll be on hand to make it right."

He would say no more on the subject, but later during Amanda's briefing she had a sudden memory of a place and time that seemed a million years ago.

Whoever Terra supports, both the Lyrans and Prince John should back as well," Sarah nodded.

"Now you've got the Capellans, the Combine and the League."

Alex nodded, "And the Liao's hate Kenyon Marik."

Bruce raised four fingers.

"That's four either directly supporting the First Lord, or at least neutral, now add in us."

"Huh, wait a minute Gracie chimed in, us?"

"The SLDF, Kei answered her, neither Kenyon nor the Coordinator would risk a war with the largest most battle hardened military force the human race has ever seen."

She leaned over to Gracie and patted her knee.

"Y'know us."

Misha spoke quietly; "The guns of the Tigers are gonna put down a tyrant."

He looked up; "It's not unthinkable those guns will hold the Star League together."

As they all looked up at Hussy, Bruce spoke up;

"And there it is."

A cold hand gripped her heart then. But as the briefing went on the dismal tone kept her from voicing her suspicions.

God baby, I hope you know what you're doing, for all our sakes.

The Court of the Star League was a hive of activity in the early morning hours of Wednesday August Twelfth. The Council Lords, masters of Humanity, and their hordes of functionaries arrived passed through the

media cordon and without ceremony began to argue just as they had done every day for the past several months. Court staff hustled about like worker bees around a hive. Just another day in the life after the Fat Man.

While most of the activity was perfectly legitimate several things going on would have concerned, or rather scared the living shit out of those who held the fate of the Star League in their hands. Then again General Kerensky, Aaron DeChevalier and numerous other luminaries would have crapped kittens if they knew the real purpose behind these moves.

The Black Tigers having been rewarded for their rather pyrrhic victory on the Zebe with the “easy” duty of providing security for the Court, caused little notice. But when the entirety of 504th New York National Guard showed up in battle dress a few eyebrows were raised. The presence of Alex Winter’s Stalking Tigers reinforced by the BattleMechs of the Black Cats caused some to comment, but a shrugged “orders” and “I think it’s some damned exercise” satisfied most.

At the Court’s DropPort the ‘Mechs, armored fighting vehicles and infantry of the 42nd Royal CAAN formed up and took up guard positions reliving the elements of the Sinclair Fusiliers on duty. This too attracted some notice but again there were plausible explanations. Nothing sinister, after all these were the troops who liberated the Court itself, good Terrans all. Well okay maybe not the ex-Kuritans in Isokoru Satoh’s Swift Claws, but hell they went against their own governments orders to come give Terra a hand.

Dana Pirelli; aka Avalon; who after being the highest placed mole in the Amaris occupation and almost losing her life in the bargain; settled down to the same executive assistant job she’d had before the Liberation, sat down across from her husband. Jolie Pirelli, native of Apollo and former medic of the Amaris Household Guards, now a pharmacist in the Court seemed nervous.

“Jo-Jo what’s wrong?”

Pale despite his olive complexion, Jolie looked up at Dana and looked around.

“Something’s going to happen today, something bad hon, just look around.”

Dana nodded despite herself, but the morning briefing had been unsettling in the least. Amanda Cameron seemed distracted; Sarah Davion looked like she was ready to pull her hair out in frustration. Ian Sinclair and Jon Case were noticeably absent. In some ways it was who was there, Tiger infantry faceless in ceramic armor, bearing Mauser 960 assault rifles stationed out of sight, but waiting for something. Delia Pommeranz who handled comm traffic for the DropPort on Vancouver Island had told her that the marines of the 42nd CAAN had done pretty much the same thing.

“D, just be careful today honey.” Jo-Jo said his eyes full of worry.

The Council chambers seemed claustrophobic to Amanda Cameron. The past week had been as fruitless. Kenyon Marik and Barbara Liao the easiest for her to read were pictures of boredom. Minoru Kurita was as inscrutable as ever, greeting Amanda politely when they’d met briefly in the hallway, but Jinjiro, his son and heir was practically bouncing.

Robert Steiner looked pale and drawn; the pressure of the past few months had taken its toll on the Lyran Archon. In a deep dark part of her mind, the one that had been born during a childhood in the Moscow resistance she wished him Dead.

No that’s unworthy of you, this has gone on far too long, and you’re starting to think like them.

But it would be easier, wouldn’t it.

Jennifer Steiner had failed in getting enough support for a vote of no confidence that would have tipped the balance in the Council chambers. Like so many other things that had happened over the past ten months, you would need both fingers and toes count the “if only this had happened” events. If only Robert Steiner had died, if only General Kerensky had thrown his support behind John Davion, if only...

She realized her fellow lords were silent. Looking around she saw a mix of resignation and sullen silence. General Kerensky watched the proceeding or lack thereof with a slight shaking of his hands. His face so resolute when he’d walked in fell into despair as he took in the faces of the council.

“This is pointless.” Minoru Kurita stood up suddenly. If said the same thing six months ago, or even three there would have been shock and outrage. Now however Robert Steiner smiled wanly and nodded.

“We have been at this for ten months; we could be at this for ten years and not reach a solution.” The Coordinator of the Draconis Combine went on. In her mind Amanda felt like a scared little child. It was a feeling she knew far too well, that she was on a edge of a dark precipice. And there was nothing she could do to keep from falling off.

Kenyon Marik stood and put his fists against the table in front of him.

“I propose, my Lords and Ladies, that the Star League is no longer a viable entity and it is time to disband this council. I for one am ready to go home, so could someone please just second me?”

General Kerensky silently rose and left as Minoru Kurita seconded Marik's motion.

Outside the man once known as Louie Chavez stood out on a balcony overlooking the court. Inhaling the smoke from his cigarette he reflected on how hard it was going to be to quit the damned things. Unfortunately both of his cover ids over the past three years smoked and it never occurred to him to quit. Back in the suite behind him a dozen members of the Draconis Elite Strike Teams checked and rechecked their weapons.

Someone, read SLDF military intelligence had hacked the Combine's diplomatic ciphers, it was unknown how long ago, but they *knew* what was going to happen today. The Coordinator and Director Indrahara had Louie (May as well call him that, it's how *he* thought of himself after all.) and his little playmates on hand against any surprises.

Watching the arrival of the Tiger infantry from the 504th he saw people he knew and liked, Louie hoped the Terrans wouldn't do anything stupid. It wasn't fear of dying, Louie already considered himself dead. It was just well...

He liked these guys, if he had to kill any of them, he'd feel bad about it later.

John Davion fought the sinking feeling in his stomach as the vote was taken. He and Amanda were last and he looked at her as each vote came and killed the greatest endeavor ever undertaken by mankind. The girl shuddered at every "Aye" until it came to him.

I tried, my dear girl, tried and failed.

"Well John, don't keep us waiting." That idiot Kenyon's voice grated at John's nerves.

Be glad the Hegemony lies between me and your pitiful excuse for a state you sorry ass bastard.

"Aye."

John didn't even realize he'd spoken until he saw Amanda shudder. Her face came up then cold and hard.

"Well, if we're putting the nail into the coffin as it were it may as well be unanimous." She looked at each of them then spat out; "Aye."

They sat there for a moment in silence until Minoru Kurita spoke up;

"We should have a statement."

John looked at him and said with surprising mildness;

"I'll do it."

Ian Sinclair growled at the traffic on the Court's main access way. Next to him Jon Case toyed with his cigar. Over the radio the voice of Melissa Ito, the INN reporter covering the Council meeting took on a sudden urgency.

"Wait a minute the doors to the Council Chambers have opened, they've only been in there for two hours."

Over the shouted questions of the other members of the press Ito went on.

"John Davion is coming over now; My Lord has a decision been reached, what...the Davion First Prince just handed me a note it says. Oh my God..." The reporter collected herself with an obvious effort, Jon Case had his pocketcomp on and its holographic screen showed the young woman pale and wide eyed.

"It says: After long months of intense negotiation, we have reached an impasse on who should be the next leader of the Star League. It is our opinion that the inability to find a new First Lord makes any further decision making impossible. Therefore we officially dissolve the High Council on this day August 12th in the year 2781."

On the screen the Council Lords began to sweep out of the hall, but a commotion off camera stopped them. It was then the screen and the radio went dark. Looking at Jon, Ian opened his door in the stopped traffic and darted out into the street. Cursing Jon followed as Ian began to run up the on ramp. Arriving at the top of the ramp he saw the reason for the delay; Star League infantry had a roadblock set up with Fury tanks backing them up. A crowd stood milling around, Court functionaries, tourists, and support staff all confused and as word spread of the end of the Star League, scared.

A familiar flash of red hair caught his eye. Elizabeth Hazen was arguing with one of the troopers; a marine from the 42nd.

"LIZ!" Ian shouted. Giving a glare at the marine trooper she turned and caught sight of the pair. As they caught up she asked; "General, sir, what's going on they're not passing anybody..."

"I don't know Liz, I've been kept out of the loop, deliberately I think, somebody faked orders that put the Fusiliers out on exercises north of Vancouver, General McCormick is livid."

Turning to the marine behind the barricade he did what Amanda called "getting his General on."

"Son do you know who I am," The marine private couldn't be more than seventeen.

"Yessir...umm...General Sinclair sir!"

“Very good son, now you are going to let us pass.” The boy looked around nervously and tilted his head in to whisper; “I’m sorry sir I can’t do that, my orders...”

“What are those orders private?”

“To isolate Unity City, Sir.” He looked around nervously and then declared; “We’re going to save the Star League sir.”

“General Sinclair, Colonel Hazen, Mr. Case perhaps I may be of some assistance?”

Looking up Ian saw a marine major had strode out of the crowd behind the barricade.

“That would be welcome Major...”

“Hill sir, 3rd of the 42nd if you will come with me I will conduct you to the Court.”

As the trio was ushered through the security cordon a squad of infantry joined them and Ian began to wonder if he’d just been made prisoner.

Minoru Kurita stopped dead in his tracks as he caught sight of row upon row of Star League soldiers stood blocking the way. In the lead was a man in the uniform of a Star League General. Arnold Collins he recognized, something of a League fanatic. At his side was a familiar form. The Coordinator smiled and nodded to Major Gilmour.

So now it begins, and you had no clue did you my dear Amanda.

The Director-General’s protests were heartfelt as a squad of Nighthawk clad SAS separated both her and Sarah Davion from the press. Behind him, Minoru could hear the confusion from the press as they realized that their broadcasts were going nowhere.

“What is the meaning of this shit?! Get the fuck out of my way!” Kenyon Marik shouted stepping up to Major Gilmour. Minoru felt the tension in both his Otomo guards and his son and he made a subtle gesture; *Wait.*

Bruce shoved the Captain-General back hard, ignoring his guards’ raised weapons.

“The meaning of this?” he laughed. “You’re not done yet asshole, now get back in there and do your fucking job.” Stepping up to the Marik he growled. “You are supposed to be looking out for your people and all you’ve done over the past ten months is play power grabs and get people killed. If that’s all you got then maybe it’s you that’s become obsolete not the Star League.”

His words took all the Lords to task and Minoru heard Barbara Liao’s hiss of outrage behind him.

“What the Major means my Lords and Ladies is that if you cannot decide on the First Lord, then it is time the Star League Defense Force did it for you.” General Collins interjected.

Minoru snuck a look at John Davion and saw shock fading into a mix of horror and just a little bit of hope.

Would it be so bad? I wonder to have things go back to normal. He thought looking up through the windowed atrium at the suite where his extraction team was ready. He found himself signaling them to stand down.

Gods of my ancestors I am so tired.

When he looked back everything changed.

Arnold Collins had turned to his aide to begin securing the House Lords, John Davion’s tacit nod of support had heartened him, the conversation they’d had some months past made the General confident of the First Prince’s support. The Capellan Chancellor had such a calculating look on her face that Collins knew she was already calculating the revenues of the Chesterton worlds. Robert Steiner was sitting on the steps up to the Council room, his face ashen and his guards already disarmed.

Maybe he’ll have a heart attack and get the hell out of our misery.

Kenyon Marik was shouting threats at his guards, the SAS, and whoever else would listen. When he saw Arnold smiling at him he quieted down, not liking what he saw in the General’s face.

Maybe he should have an accident, the man’s too smart and too unpredictable to leave around. He made a mental note to have the Marik sequestered until he could decide. Turning back to the crowd he noticed Jinjiro Kurita, the man was way too close and he had those damn swords...

Ohh Shit!

Jinjiro seemed to blur as he drew his *katana* in a bright steel arc. Time seemed to slow down as Arnold saw his troopers reacting far too late.

I’m going to die, just when we had everything under control.

CLAANG!!!

A slender black clad form had jumped in between them and had his own steel out.

Minoru Kurita watched as Major Gilmour blocked his son's speed draw with his dress saber. The Terran's cavalry saber was no toy decoration, but a fighting weapon made of crystal aligned steel and sparks flung out as the blades connected. His *Otomo* tensed and Minoru waved them back once again.

My son will live or die on his own merits today.

Louie watched through magnifiers built into his sunglasses as something he hadn't thought to see in his lifetime happened. *A swordfight in this day and age? Damn, and the boss want's us to stay out of it, now I've seen it all.*

Amanda Cameron watched the flashing blades as Star League troopers tried to get a clear shot. General Collins waved them back and in that instant the fight ended. Jinjiro overextended a slash at Bruce's head and took a kick in the groin in return. As his two handed grip was broken the Gunslinger slashed once. Both *katana* and hand went flying.

PAIN, pain like nothing he'd ever felt slammed through Jinjiro Kurita's body starting at his wrist. When his knees hit the ground the shock almost sent him into unconsciousness. A sharp steel point hovered at his throat. "Medic!" he heard the demon who'd taken his hand call. As a rush of motion surrounded him and the hiss of a painkiller filled his veins with icy bliss he met Terran's good eye.

Someday, I will take everything from you, your joy, your love, and finally your life.

Consciousness faded then thankfully and Jinjiro dreamed of fire and terror and death.

I rose from over Jinjiro Kurita, unsettled by his smile and looked over at Minoru. Damn me if the snake didn't look upset. He just bowed slightly and went off with his son and his guards along with a squad of SAS. As one of the medics picked up Jinjiro's hand and packed it off in ice from the council chambers, I turned toward Amanda Cameron.

Arnold Collins came up beside me and put his hand on my shoulder.

"Thanks." He said a smile of relief on his face.

He addressed the Amanda then.

"My Lady Cameron, the Star League is yours, but unless we act now all will be lost."

"I would say all is already lost." A tired voice interrupted from a darkened doorway.

The laughter in his mind was almost maddening as Aleksandr Kerensky watched the drama unfold in the hall. Stefan Amaris leaned against the doorway shaking his head and laughing so hard he doubled over. The dead man actually had lost weight, Aleks noticed and had muscled up more than a little.

I'm dead Al, I can look like anything I want.

Amaris looked back at him and grinned. Turning back he sighed.

I knew this was going to happen I even warned you, but did the great Aleksandr Kerensky listen? Heelll Nooo! All you had to do was to throw the weight of the Defense Force behind that little cutie pie and none of this would have happened. Instead you're gonna have your Star League built on the same blood as always.

Jinjiro's scream brought Aleks' attention back to the matter at hand. He watched that damned Tiger give a practiced flick of his wrist sending Kurita blood sliding off his cavalry saber to spatter the floor while fixing Kenyon Marik with a stare. The look of unease on the Eagle's face tore a faint chuckle from Aleks' throat that was quickly silenced.

I don't know why you hate those kitty cats so much Al old buddy, they're just so cute and cuddly. Perfect symbols of your sacred Star League.

That tore it.

Arnold Collins stiffened next to me at Aleksandr Kerensky's voice. To those of you who in the future will wonder how the man had such a god like effect on the men and women around him you had to see the man to truly understand. Even aging, bitter from disappointment and as we would learn later crazy as a loon, he had this presence that was almost magnetic.

I don't blame him like it has become fashionable to do for Richard and the Fat Man, for not stopping the machinations of the House Lords. I hate him for what he did after the Liberation.

Something inside of me; maybe the thing made Synthia and I connect like we did made me stifle a growl deep in my throat there was something else there...

"Is it General? We let them go; we're right back to the Age of War all over again." Collins spat.

“Maybe, maybe not Arnold, but if you do this you destroy everything we stand for, everything we fought so hard to protect.” Kerensky looked around. “All of you must know that, for the Star League to mean anything it must not...”

He stopped .

“Be held together by force?” Kenyon asked, Kerensky glared at him expecting a snide remark. But Kenyon just smiled sadly and left with his squad of minders in tow.

“Our job is to defend the Star League against any enemy foreign or domestic and the League isn’t made up of the great lords or their nobles, it is the common people we do this for.” I hadn’t realized I’d spoken till Amanda looked at me. “There will be war no matter what we do, My Lady, but far more will die if we don’t take charge, in the end it’s a numbers game.” I looked from Amanda to General Kerensky. “Not how many we have to kill but how many can we give a future to.”

Sarah closed her eyes and looked away; I knew she looked at what I was saying another way, a way that Kerensky verbalized.

“So the end justifies the means, Major?”

“That’s not what I’m saying at all...” I smiled sadly. “What’s that old saying, all that evil needs to win is for good men do nothing? Guess what, we’re doing something.” My New York came out at that last and I just shook my head. Me and my big fucking mouth.

Collins started to say something but Amanda cut him off.

“No.”

“My lady?” Collins cocked his head in puzzlement.

“We will not be the ones to start a war to subjugate humanity.”

I don’t think General Collins ever considered Amanda saying no. He stood there stunned; poor guy. John Davion, who’d been the only one of the Lords not to be guarded, spoke up then.

“Amanda, the First Lordship is your birthright, here and now you can secure it, Barbara Liao and I will support you under the terms of our agreement and you know Robert Steiner is on borrowed time.” The First Prince’s voice held a fervor I’d never heard before. I felt nervous listening to him repeat my own argument from so long ago in that tone.

“How long do you think the Combine and the Free Worlds League can hold out against all of us?”

“About as long as the Taurians, John probably longer.” Kerensky answered him. Thoughts of the casualties the SLDF had taken in the Periphery Uprising took even General Collins aback. John looked ready to answer him but once again Amanda, who’d shared weighty glances with my wife, spoke up.

“I said no John, my birthright you said? No birthright is worth *that* cost, General Collins please disperse your troops.”

Arnold Collins, veteran of the fight against Amaris looked at her with dismay. But he did what she asked. Ian Sinclair entered the hall when Collins’ order freed him. I could see him strain not to rush over to Amanda, those two needed to get their feelings straight already. Shaking my head I walked over to my wife and caught her in a careful embrace.

Sinclair, Jon Case and Liz Hazen who’d followed Ian in all were sending me megajoules worth of glares and Sarah looked up at me with worry.

“Yeah I know dear, I’m in trouble.” I quipped.

Sarah hugged me back then and just said;

“Shut up Bruce.”

Well I spent six days in the Unity City military pen while they decided what to do with me, ‘Rat was down the hall, I could hear Liz and him yelling at each other. I grinned; mad as she was she kept coming back. I’d reminded Scott of that when he started to get down. Liz started to storm out giving me her standard issue glare. I waved cheerfully. She glared at me harder.

Okaay.

The door opened down the hall and I knew by the sound of her heels clicking on the floor Amanda Cameron had come to call. She gave small smile at Liz and gestured for privacy as the guard opened the door. Despite a short protest the guards left when Amanda dismissed them and she entered the cell.

“I’d offer you a beer but sadly my butler forgot to stock the fridge.”

A wry smile answered me. “Hard to get good help these days.” The smile died. “I know the feeling.”

I leaned back on the bed and shrugged.

“Depends upon how you wanna look at it, if it’d worked, we’d have fought for a few years, but in the end it’d be worth it.”

“You really believe that don’t you?” Amanda’s voice held a note of wonder. I looked up at her and shrugged again. “Point’s moot Amanda, it’s the future all of us have to prepare for, a return to the Age of War.”

“Your actions may have hastened that trip.” She looked away.

“So take my life.” She looked up startled. “Mine and Collins, he drove the plan forward, I handled the forces on the ground, you could lay the blame on us, save some trouble in the long run.” I met her eyes then. “You could pardon our men.”

“And have Sarah hate me forever. No there’s no need, Minoru said to tell you he understands, I think Barbara found the whole thing amusing.” A chuckle escaped her. “Both Kenyon and dear darling Bobbie got the hell out of Dodge so to speak.”

She glowered at me. “Damn you, what the hell am I going to do with you.”

It felt good to be home, or as much a home as the bachelor officer’s quarters at Unity could be. Scott didn’t know what had gone on between his commander and the Director-General but an hour after her visit they were released. Liz had picked him up and read him the riot act all the way home.

Well like Bruce said she’s still here. Scott thought. *That’s something anyway.*

Liz had finally stopped yelling and she sat there staring back at him. Scott rose from his couch and walked over to the fridge. Pouring himself a glass of juice he raised a second glass looking at Liz. She sighed and nodded. When he turned back to her, Liz had gone over to the cupboard and gotten the bottle of vodka she kept there.

Sitting back on the couch Scott watched as she drained half the glass of orange juice and filled the rest out of her bottle. This time when she sat it was on the couch with him, leaning against him and resting her head on his shoulder. As she took a strong swallow Scott looped his arm around her shoulder.

“If you ever do anything like this without telling me; Scott Mackenzie; I will kick your ass.”

He smiled then.

“Deal.”

Christina Steiner watched as Bruce hugged his wife fiercely at the DropPort’s entrance then walked over to say good bye. Robert was already on board with Lucas Kelswa. Elliot Kell waited for her by the access hatch.

Pretty cute and a decent brain to boot, I’ll have to get to know him better.

She smiled then as the Terran Gunslinger came up to her.

“Cutting out, kiddo?” He said.

“Ja, not much work for me here.” Her smile slipped then. “Gods; B; I just can’t believe it, the Star League; I mean how stupid are they.” Tears formed in her eyes.

“Ask Bob the Slob, you’ll have plenty of time.”

She gave me a sad look and smiled.

“Trust me B, that *wichser* won’t last much longer.”

The ten minute call came over the speakers then and Christina nodded to Elliot Kell. Turning back to Bruce she hugged him fiercely, catching Sarah’s eyes when they narrowed she sent her own look back that said; *Really?* Then she whispered in Bruce’s ear; “Take care of yourself you big dummy. You have to give me material for my next book.” He laughed at that.

“You take it easy Chrissy; I’ll keep in touch.”

With that she turned away, trying not to think about the two ampoules of extremely virulent pneumonia she had stored away in her cabin. Or what she had to do with them.

Bob the Slob, just the name alone tells me why you can’t be allowed to rule much longer.

Minoru sat in his suite on the DropShip *House of Duty* on his way back to the *Nagato*. Jinjiro was still recovering from the surgery to reattach his hand. His son was in such a state of rage that Minoru had sent a communiqué to the head of their order commending them for their service under extreme duress.

Pulling up a file from his personal computer he looked an old war plan. Sending several regiments worth of raiders to hit targets along the Lyran Commonwealth’s Periphery borders should cause them to shift troops to deal with the situation. Of course it couldn’t happen immediately, not with the SLDF still in place. But an opportunity would present itself, and the Combine; the Dragon knew how to take advantage of opportunities.

Safely aboard the *Agamemnon* Kenyon Marik watched Terra shrink in the distance. Neither immune to the beauty of Humanity’s home, nor a strange feeling of loss, the Captain-General ignored both. It was the future that concerned him. Anton Bucilu brooded over a glass of *ouzo* on the couch. Kenyon had never realized just how great a supporter of the now defunct Star League his best friend was. He’d need time.

The quiet suited Kenyon. Untold opportunities awaited the Free Worlds League, opportunities for expansion and for revenge. His favorite little ladies would learn that soon enough and so would that fool Robbie Steiner. Taking a shot to settle his nerves Kenyon began to plan in earnest.

Robert Steiner slept in the *Tharkad's* medbay under the care of the WarShip's chief medical officer. Both men were unaware that the Archon's already fragile health was under attack.

Chapter 7: The Calm Before The Storm

*'Cos I remember all the times I tried so hard
And you laughed in my face 'cos you held all the cards.
I don't care anymore.
And I really ain't bothered what you think of me
'Cos all I want of you is just a let me be.
I don't care anymore D'you hear? I don't care no more*
Phil Collins; I Don't Care Anymore

**Upper East Side, New York City
North American Administrative District, Terra
Terran Hegemony
24 December, 2781**

"Tracy, can you get a couple of beers from the fridge?" C.J.'s voice startled Erica out of her reverie. Turning to the refrigerator she dutifully grabbed a couple of ice cold ones. *It was, she reflected, easy to get distracted when there was an entire room of people next door who if they knew who I was would kill me without even a second chance.*

Going into the living room of the apartment C.J. shared with Major Alex Winter, Erica handed C.J. a beer and set another one down in front of Major Isokoru Satoh. The tall ex Kuritan smiled at her in thanks. Next to him on the couch Lady Sarah Sarah sipped her wine and described the past night with the newborn twins Paul John and Rhiannon Amanda Sarah Gilmour.

Both mother and father looked exhausted but happy. *My aren't we just the happy family.* She forced herself to smile and nod at the appropriate intervals. Her own bitterness at choices made and opportunities lost welled up and she shoved them back down in a deep dark hole in her mind.

The Tigers had resettled back in New York, fallout from the events of August twelfth; likewise the 42nd Royal CAAN had taken up station in Australia. The Tigers grumbling about the loss of such a prestigious assignment was replaced by a blessed feeling of normalcy. Sarah Sarah herself had been placed in charge of the transfer of the Terran government to New York City or at least would be once her maternity leave was up.

Erica herself had with C.J.'s help gotten a job in a local bar. Alex Winter's fiancée had been faced with a choice help Erica or have it known she was herself was a member of Earth First. She traded smiles with the woman and mouthed a quick *I'm gonna go.*

Making a quick round of goodbyes she left, glad to be away from the pall that still hung over the group. The fall of the Star League left a bitter taste in everyone's mouth, a feeling of loss. Erica didn't care, she just wanted to be out, to go back to a normal life.

The need for revenge had ruled her life, but now, now there was just a hole. Leaving the apartment she hailed a cab. Never noticing the short man with the emerald green eyes who watched her from across the street.

Leo Devalis watched the dark haired young woman get into the taxi. Nodding to himself the thought; *Of course, she would find a way to hide in plain sight.* But to get this close to the Tigers Erica Dalton needed to have had inside help. *Finding out who will be the next step, could grab her and sweat her.* He smiled then. *Nah, too easy. Let her do the work.* Calling Nicole who was still at the Task Force's command center he spoke to her for a few minutes. After hanging up he crossed the street whistling a jaunty tune. *After all I have a party to go to.*

"Sergeant Eleanor Soldano reporting as ordered sir." I looked up and smiled at the darkly pretty young woman. I'd not seen her since.

"C'mon in and take a load off Ellie. How have you been holding up."

"Better now, y'know they caught most of them."

"Yeah, just the ring leader, this Dalton woman."

She nodded and smiled then; "I hear congratulations are in order sir."

I'm sure my grin looked goofy as hell but I really didn't care.

"Yeah twins, Paul and Rhiannon." I took out my pocketcomp and brought up the holos. We spent a little while looking at them; Eleanor made all those noises women do when they see a baby. "Careful sergeant you may end up volunteering for babysitting duty." My smile died when I realized what I'd said. *Gods I am such a butthead.*

But Ellie just smiled back and said; "You can count on me."

Looking at me closely she asked; "What will you do now sir?" Mirroring a discussion I'd had with Sarah the night before. Our actions at what was already being called "The Fall" had far reaching consequences. In secret sessions of the Hegemony congress some politicians and more than a few of the general staff were calling for the arrest of the command staff of all the units involved. Some dozen regiments and three divisions had acted to preserve the Star League from the folly of its leaders and the main thing keeping everything cool and calm was what the disbandment of so many units, many of them famed and storied ones, would do to both the Star League Defense Force and the new HAF.

On top of this; footage of our little rebellion had leaked out onto the internet. People knew what we had done and even the talking heads in the media stayed away from talking bad about us. Too much was happening both inside the Hegemony and outside. Based on what we heard from neighboring realms some political theorists were even speculating a spontaneous "rebirth" of the League powered by the will of the common man.

Wishful thinking. The truth was the neo feudalism that marks governments to day was so pervasive that even the fury of the populace in more liberal realms like the Federated Suns or the Lyran Commonwealth would not harm the status quo too much.

The repercussions came in other forms. Sam Winters for example should have been promoted to General by now. Alex's career in TerraGov was pretty much a pipe dream although he had a good chance in the local level here in New York. As for me; while Sarah held pretty much the same job she'd had at the BSLA; I had had a heated conversation with Ian Sinclair. Well it had started out heated anyway. My job on his staff? Bye-bye. Teaching at West Point? Not likely. I would probably be a Major until I retired if I stayed in the service.

Venting on my sorry ass had calmed him down and after a few drinks I knew he sort of envied what we'd tried. Still I was bound for the Big Apple the next day. I'd initially planned an aggressive series of training maneuvers for my company, but when I'd registered for use of the HAF/SLDF Regional Training Center in the Midwest we'd been denied, likewise for the undersea operations training area just off the Jersey shore. Even our virtual sims were restricted.

Ammunition, pay and other supplies were also being misdirected. Tommy Lindon had found out who was behind it. Seems a certain Captain James Cromwell had wormed his way into the HAF quartermasters' department. That particular annoyance ended when Tommy "deleted" the gallant captain. His service record, bank accounts, all evidence of his existence. Aaron DeChevalier arrived a week later...

**Fort Hamilton; North American Administrative District
Terra, Terran Hegemony
05 January, 2782**

From the back seat of the SLDF sedan Aaron DeChevalier could see the walls of Fort Hamilton. Something seemed wrong and it took a moment for the General to wrap his mind around it. First and most obvious was the pair of Royal model *Black Knights* standing guard at the main entrance tracking his car with their right arms. At his driver's muttered curse Aaron chuckled.

"Easy Brian, If they were serious those particle cannon would be charged."

Brian Henson grinned sheepishly in the rearview mirror. The veteran of New Vandenburg and DeChevalier's aide sighed and shook his head as he pulled up to the main gate and the faceless troopers standing behind the 'Mechs. As a patrol of black and red heavy 'Mechs crossed the road behind their vehicle, Aaron saw Brian stiffen. Following his gaze to the flag pole visible above the wall what was missing struck him just as much as the position of the ancient standard flying proudly in the heavy breeze.

The flag at top mast had a blazing golden sun surrounded by nine planets, the third picked out in vibrant blue and green. The flag of the Terran Hegemony; normally seen flying beneath the Cameron Star of the Star League flew in its glory. Missing was the flag of the Star League.

Looking around he noticed that the soldiers themselves were for the most part also missing the eight pointed star, those that wore it bore the symbol edged in black. The surreal quality surrounding the fall of the Star League meant that a vast majority of people still didn't believe it was really over.

For the record count me in as one of those people.

As the Tiger infantryman checked his identification and waved them on to the headquarters building, Aaron noticed one more thing. Upon seeing the Cameron Star on his sedan, many of the Tigers glowered; those that knew him from the march across North America quickly lost the glower and often wore a rueful grin. Aaron acknowledged those with a cheerful wave and a nod.

After telling Brian the way to the officers' club Aaron strode up the steps and past the guards at the doorway answering their salutes with his own. Inside he found the missing flag. It was mounted in a glass case behind the front desk. Underneath the case was a bronze plaque. The inscription read; *To all those who fell in pursuit of an ideal, know you that we were loyal to the end.*

A cough from his left broke Aaron out of his reverie. He looked down at the young corporal clerk standing nervously by him. When his throat cleared he smiled and apologized.

"They're waiting for you in the conference room, sir."

"Thank you corporal, I know the way."

Sam greeted Aaron cordially enough. The Tigers' entire command staff sat arrayed around the oblong oak table, steaming coffee and the aroma of rolls fresh from the oven met the Star League General. As he sat down at the opposite end of the table an aide brought him a plate with rolls, cheese and butter and a cup of coffee with fresh cream and two sugars.

"So what brings you to our neck of the woods, General?" Sam asked a smile playing over his face. Aaron reached out and shut off the recorder built into the center of the table.

"I realize that what Captain Cromwell did was reprehensible, but Sam, honestly your people's reaction was a little extreme."

A snort from Dido Moran near the middle of the table brought Aaron's head around.

"We didn't kill him did we?" She asked in response to his glance.

"And I would thank you for that if it was anyone else, but Cromwell..." The Captain's actions during the early days of the Periphery Uprising were to the public; at least; the stuff of legends. The truth was far less noble. The man's arrogance led to the loss of almost his entire battalion to win a strategically unimportant objective.

The smiles on the faces of the Tiger officers said they knew the truth. Aaron smiled back, at least that bit wouldn't get in the way. Still Tommy Lindon had broken about a dozen League and Hegemony laws not to mention the Universal Code of Military Justice both entities shared.

Justine Sinclair spoke up then, Aaron found himself mesmerized as usual by the woman's poise. The fact she remained both a top flight battle commander and a polished diplomat even after her ordeal at the hands of Amaris' thugs spoke to her strength of character.

"General, Captain Cromwell should never have been allowed to join the HAF. His actions caused damage to our battle readiness and were in fact illegal." She smiled dazzlingly. "In light of recent information that has come into our possession the best thing for both parties would be his dismissal from service..." Her voice trailed off.

Aaron shook his head sadly. "Cromwell would make a big stink and if evidence of his true nature came out...well do we really need to shatter one more illusion?"

“Meaning the Defense Force doesn’t want any more hits to its credibility.” Major Gilmour said from his place at Colonel Winters’ left hand. The Tigers’ Regimental Gunslinger had remained quiet beyond a quick greeting in the conference room’s doorway. Aaron gave him a sour glance and got back a wry grin in reply.

“We are after all the only thing standing between Humanity and all out war. Bruce you know damn well what would happen if we lose the respect of the populace.” Aaron hoped the younger man would see, despite what Kerensky thought of the rakish officer, he hoped to be able to recruit Bruce into the Defense Force’s plans for the future.

“Okay so take his punk ass back. Case closed.” Aaron groaned inwardly. *Subtle as a sledgehammer aren’t you Bruce?*

Alex Winter stood and stretched like his unit’s namesake before fixing Aaron with a cool stare.

“Cromwell is only part of the problem, sir. While you may not agree with our actions back in August; Lady Cameron has absolved us of all wrong doing. We will *not* be hazed, insulted or punished by the Defense Force or its allies within the Hegemony.” Alex Winters voice stayed level but his anger showed in the tightness of his muscles.

Before Aaron could compose a reply Sam leaned forward.

“General, we understand and wholly agree with the need for the Defense Force to remain a stabilizing influence in the former Star League, likewise you as a Terran yourself, should understand the need for the Hegemony to regain its former strength...”

What the Colonel left unsaid was a fear that Aaron had held deep in his heart. Without the SLDF and with Terra weakened; the first target of the House Lords would be the Hegemony. With its treasure trove of rich worlds and advanced technology the Terran state would be irresistible.

Coming to a decision, Aaron took a bite from his roll and washed it down with a swallow of dark rich coffee.

“I think we can come to a compromise here, any trouble from the Defense Force will end. As for Cromwell...Sam can I borrow your Gunslinger?”

Sam grinned at the tone in Aaron’s voice. While the Gunslinger in question shook his head and said simply; “More Coffee, General?”

A couple of hours later and a few miles away...

James Cromwell stepped off the elevator and strode purposefully to his office and grimaced as he always did. The recruiting poster in the hallway always annoyed him despite the fact he looked quite dashing in it. The former SLDF Captain was looking forward to a short stint in the Hegemony Armed Forces, “in the rear with the gear” as it were, followed by a suitably padded life in the private sector. Already he had feelers from a major Hollywood production house for his life story and invites to social events he could only have dreamed about.

Then last week his entire life was wiped out. Everything, his public and private records, bank accounts credit cards, even the hidden accounts he’d set up over the years from profits earned from less savory endeavors. It all pointed to those damned maniacs in the 90th Heavy Assault Regiment. Their current disfavor opened them up to all kinds of mischief.

Maybe I should have done a little more research on them before I got in on the feeding frenzy, but my sources seemed so sure...

Conservative elements in both the SLDF and the Hegemony had wanted the unit made an example of for that mess back at the final Star League council. The Tigers were supposed to sit there and take their medicine wrapped up in bureaucratic red tape. It hadn’t worked out that way.

Then again I never thought it would boil down to this. All he'd ever wanted was a glorious career in the Defense Force, followed by either a high post in the service or a cushy corporate job. But Kerensky had screwed that up. He'd done the right thing at Camp Somerset. *Jealous damn it, all of them...*

Shaking his head Cromwell pulled himself out of his self pity, even he recognized it. Wrapped up in his thoughts he barely acknowledged his aide, failing to notice the leggy blonde's discomfort. Entering his office he stopped dead.

A slender young man in jeans, t-shirt and a leather motorcycle jacket was sitting in his chair, boots up on his glass desk. Exhaling a stream of smoke the intruder tapped his ashes into Cromwell's coffee cup. As Cromwell worked up a helping of righteous indignation the other man turned his head to regard the Captain. One emerald eye stared coldly at him, the other covered by an eye patch.

"Hello Jimmy, I trust you're well?" The man's voice was cold, yet Cromwell detected amusement underneath.

"Major Gilmour, I'm sure you know the ban on smoking in all Hegemony office spaces..." Wincing inwardly; Cromwell wished he could have come up with something better... anything.

Dropping the unfinished smoke in the already sullied cup of coffee, the other man uncoiled catlike from behind Cromwell's desk and the Captain caught the glint of light from the Colt autopistol on the man's hip.

"Sir" The major said.

"W-What?" Unnerved by the Tiger's gaze Cromwell was taken aback.

"In all Hegemony office spaces *sir*, I also seem to have missed your salute *Captain*."

Opening and closing his mouth for a moment, Cromwell recovered his composure and came to attention, giving a crisp salute which the younger officer returned.

"Good, now Captain you and I have a problem, you see diverting supplies to a unit of the Hegemony Armed Forces for profit is a felony offense under the Uniform Code of Justice isn't it."

"Sir I'm sure I don't..."

"Yes or no will suffice Captain."

The door opened behind him and General Aaron DeChevalier stepped in with his aide Henson and two Defense Force troopers. Seeing the writing on the wall was never a problem for James Cromwell and he could see where this was going.

"Yes...Sir." Cromwell said grudgingly.

"Good, I'm glad we cleared that up Jimmy, now my problem is this; you tried to screw my regiment over royally, now you may have some amount of pull because of your actions at Camp Somerset but I assure you if we decide to take this up with the Judge Advocate General none of that will help you."

"You wouldn't..." Cromwell trailed off at the Major's raised eyebrow.

"Dare? Captain you have no idea what I would or would not dare." Gilmour paused looking Cromwell up and down like a piece of dung suddenly appearing in front of him. "So here is my solution to our little problem; you will accept voluntary transfer back to your old unit and be off my world by week's end."

Cromwell attempted to protest but Major Gilmour cut him off in a coolly silky voice.

“You may think you can fight this and should you manage to remain in Terran service I can assure you; you will be given the worst assignments known to man.” The Gunslinger paused again smiling. “None of them combat assignments; in fact I hear the Pluto research station needs a commander for its security detail.”

Cromwell’s mind whirled in shock, a combat assignment might bring further fame, he was after all not a coward, a bureaucratic assignment would bring power, but what that damned pretty boy was holding over him was obscurity. *That* was something James Cromwell could not endure. Looking over at General DeChevalier he asked the obvious.

“Can I assume that it is the Lionhearts or nothing then, sir?”

DeChevalier nodded once. James Cromwell turned and took the data pad Gilmour handed him and scrawled his signature on it. As he handed it back he noticed something that had escaped him before. Both Major Gilmour and General DeChevalier had a small Cameron Star with a black heart in the center pinned to their collars. It was then he knew for certain he had lost.

Mustering his dignity he snapped a salute at both men, then met Major Gilmour’s stare evenly.

“Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven, sir.”

Returning the salute Major Gilmour smiled grimly and said simply;

“Indeed, Captain. Dismissed.”

After Cromwell had left with his two minders Aaron looked down at his watch.

“Well Bruce, I’m officially declaring us off duty, so dinner?”

Nodding, Bruce looked over at Captain Henson, considered things for a moment and said; “Let me call Sarah and if you and Captain Henson agree why don’t you guys come over to my place.”

Aaron smiled and asked innocently; “Are you cooking or is Sarah?”

Giving the General the fish eye; Major Gilmour said dead pan; “I am why?”

Exiting the office with the two younger men in tow Aaron just chuckled and replied; “I adore your wife, Bruce but she can’t cook worth a damn.”

Bruce grumbled a little, but he couldn’t argue, Sarah could actually *burn* water.

Chapter 8: The Writing on the Wall

The outright desertion of the Ninety First Heavy Assault Regiment was perhaps the first wholesale indicator of the collapse of the Star League Defense Force. It was perhaps inevitable that the Great Houses would have vast resources at their disposal to dismember that once great institution, but House Davion had one thing that Colonel Edwin Gennaro and his men found irresistible. Legitimacy. Lord Davion's legal position as chosen Regent of the Star League gave the officers and troopers of the Fighting Armadillos a sense of purpose. This seems to be something sorely lacking in the Defense Force today.

While all six Houses continue to support the SLDF units within their realm, the trickle of men and material hemorrhaging from the organization threatens to turn into a flood. What this means for the fate of Humanity could be as critical as any talk of restoring the league. As of this writing despite their status as deserters, no legal action has been taken against either the Ninety First or the Federated Suns...

Excerpt from Chinks in the armor; New York Times October 10th 2783

**John F Kennedy International Spaceport
North American Administrative Region, Terra
Terran Hegemony
01 February, 2784**

“Rob!”

At the familiar voice Colonel Robert Fitzgerald Gilmour, 806th Tactical Fighter Regiment, Star League Defense Force turned and smiled. Bouncing up and down his cousin Bruce waved from the crowd at JFK's passenger departure terminal. Waving back the tall blonde officer grinned and shouldered his duffle bag, walking over to his cousin.

Dropping the bag Robert caught Bruce up in a bear hug which the younger man returned. Breaking the hug he held his cousin out at arm's length and looked him over. Slightly shorter and slimmer of build his cousin had filled out in the eight years since they'd last met. The pair was a study in opposites as Rob was heavily muscled, his call sign of Atlas a double entendre. Bruce meanwhile had a dancer or gymnast's build, his chestnut hair long and caught in an unruly ponytail while Rob's was ash blonde and cropped short.

“Look at you coz, you look like a damn rock star not some dumb ground pounder!” Rob laughed.

“Hey at least they don't have to build me a custom cockpit because I can't fit in my fighter!” Bruce grinned back.

“Bah! So you wanna introduce me to these lovely young women?” Rob gestured to the petite redhead who'd joined them holding the hand of a dark haired Asian girl of eleven or twelve.

“Rob this is my wife Sarah, she's definitely my better half and the little cutie with her is my daughter Sinthya.”

“Rob, Bruce and I have been looking forward to your visit; I hope you'll stay with us.”

“Well I was going to stay at the BOQ at Fort Hamilton...”

“Nonsense, we've got the room, even with the twins.” Bruce interjected.

“If you can stand the noise.” Sinthya said with the haughty air only a young girl could achieve.

“Sin...” Sarah admonished.

“Humph... Ria and PJ make more noise than a battalion of Lyrans at a tea party, Aunt Sin said so.” Sinthya said with conviction.

Rob laughed sharing a look with his cousin.

“I’d be pleased to stay with you and your family, Lady Sarah.” He said with a warm smile.

“It’s just Sarah; Robert you are family after all.”

“So how long are you in town, Rob?” Bruce asked.

“I’ve got about a week and a half in New York before the Big Man’s little party, are the Tiger’s going?” Rob answered. Bruce nodded before adding he’d been surprised when Colonel Winters received his invitation to what was being called “Kerensky’s Big Secret”.

The cousins shared a look that spoke volumes. More than a hundred division commanders and almost as many lesser command officers from both the Star League Defense Force and the Hegemony Armed Forces had been summoned to Terra. The rumor mill was rampant; the top rumor was that the SLDF was (finally!) going to restore the Star League. Bruce himself was pessimistic, and Robert while having knowledge of the troubles surrounding the Tigers over the past few years couldn’t fathom the apathy with which the younger man regarded the Great general.

Right now however was not the time for *that* conversation. Too few of their family had survived the Coup and the Liberation. The only thing Robert wanted was to renew ties with his cousin and meet his family. To know some good had come out of the events of the past few years.

The same time in Times Square...

Nicole Osis looked over at Sergei Cherenkov as he fiddled with the gain on the high definition camera trained on Erika Dalton. The woman had turned into a gold mine for the CIB and TerraSec. Allowing her to roam free had led the team to vital networks of the Earth First and likeminded organizations. Following the intelligence gained the Terran Judiciary had broken up at least three major plots against everything from supposed “collaborators” to Amanda Cameron herself.

In addition TerraSec was able to clean up a series of arm and drug rings that had been earning profits for the radical groups. As with many such groups Earth First was resembling a criminal organization more and more as it’s ideals began to fade. Throw in the lucrative arms market in the post Star League world and the continuing need for humans to screw up their lives with illicit pharmaceuticals, greed won out over ideals every time.

Now however it was nearing the time to close out this particular case. Time to bring closure to those who’d lost their lives on Mars. There was just one last piece of the puzzle. A particularly thorny piece.

“It’s on; Leo; bring C.J. in for questioning.” Nicole told Leo Devalis over the ‘net.”

“Gotcha Nikki, just hope that girls as smart as she seems, if she doesn’t take the deal.”

“She will; she loves Major Winters too much to ever hurt him.” Nicole answered hoping she was right.

An abandoned warehouse in Vancouver;

I met Colonel Winter outside Kerensky’s meeting place. It was damn cold and not for the first time I wished the General had used the command facilities in Unity. I couldn’t dwell on it too much though. If I did I would have to wonder about the nature of the meeting. Part of me wanted to hope the rumors were true; a massive show of force to keep the House Lords in line. Kind of a big version of a rolled up newspaper.

Rob went off to say hello to a couple of old acquaintances as we caught up with Ezra Bradley. The overall boss of the Eridani Light Horse had just gotten in the night before and looked suitably jet lagged. As we entered the building we came to a long row of tables with coffee, tea and an array of light breakfast items. The crowd before the podium was growing quickly and after grabbing some coffee we edged our way closer.

As we did I returned the gaze of several officers. Some glared daggers at us, others smiled and nodded, I felt good that there were far more of the latter than the former. A knot of younger officers formed up near us including an old friend.

“Pete good to see you.” I said to Major Peter Altman who’d been a captain when he’d served under me at the last great battle of the Liberation. Pete grinned back at me and we chatted for a while.

He turned serious after a few minutes though; “Bruce listen, a lot of us respected what you guys tried to do, but man; kidnapping the House Lords; really ..?”

I just shrugged. “Something had to be done Pete, look at the very least maybe we might have woken up the big man there...”

Speak of the devil the big man himself came up to the podium and without preamble began to speak. And with a growing sense of horror I listened.

Samuel Winter felt his blood grow cold at Alexander Kerensky’s words. To abandon humanity to the tender mercies of the House Lords when they had the chance to stop the madness before it began, it was insane. What was worse was the faces of many of the commanders here at the meeting. Were they so blind?

Sam glanced over at Arnold Collins and saw the fury on the man’s face like something set in stone. His old friend Ezra had his eyes closed in pain. Kerensky’s words must have cut Bradley deep, after losing his son during the campaign against Amaris the plans to just toss everything in the trash, must have been like a slap in the face. Turning away he looked over to where Bruce had been standing to find his place taken by a Naval staff officer.

Maybe he just when to the can. Sam thought hopefully, but he knew his Gunslinger all too well. When a strong voice rang out from behind the General his fears were confirmed.

“General Aleksandr Kerensky under article twelve of the Star League Defense Force Code of Martial Conduct I hereby relieve you of duty on the grounds you are unfit for command.”

The silence following the major’s words soon turned to shouts of both outrage and support. Looking over at Ezra, Sam spread his hands helplessly and strode through the stunned crowd.

Bruce; I love you like a son but sometimes you can be such an idiot.

As I looked around I saw no help coming, even Aaron looked caught up in that nutcase’s fervor. I looked over at Sam and saw he was shaking, muscles taut. Arnold Collins caught my eye then. He nodded. Behind him Dawn McCormack the Fusilier’s commander looked from Collins to me. Sudden realization came over her and she shook her head. Looking back at me she nodded as well.

Slipping casually behind the podium, no one stopped me. Weather from shock or warped by the “Great General’s” charisma didn’t matter. I was just grateful for small favors. Only Aaron noticed when I drew my Colt.

Aleks looked calmly at the young major as the uproar swept around them. Part of him wanted the man to pull the trigger. At least then it would be over.

In the back of his mind he heard Amaris chuckle with satisfaction. The dead man appeared next to Gilmour and slapped him on the back. When his hand went through the Gunslinger’s body, Stefan shook his head and sighed. Stepping back Amaris stood between Elizabeth Hazen, who’d been in Kerensky’s party and Major Gilmour. When Liz pulled her side arm and shouted for Gilmour to drop his weapon her arm and pistol sprouted from the dead tyrant’s chest.

Well this is awkward, Amaris chuckled.

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."

Elizabeth Hazen strode from the conference room leaving Amanda Cameron to breath out a sigh. Ian rested his hand on Amanda's shoulder and smiled down at her gently. The pair had a quandary; word of the showdown had filtered through the word of mouth network. Surprisingly no one would talk about the reason for Kerensky's grand meeting.

Amanda knew that something was up, but all Aleksandr would say was; "We'll talk soon." Hazen however had brought a request for the transfer of the 90th Heavy Assault to the SLDF for "Disciplinary Measures." Amanda's blunt refusal had not gone over well. The fact remained that the Black Tigers were becoming a political landmine. One the pair didn't need right now.

"So what do you want to do?" Ian asked.

"Sarah and I came up with something, I think you'll approve." From her desk Amanda took out a small book entitled "Armed Forces of The Federated Suns Mercenary Contract Law." Ian looked at her puzzled.

"Mercenaries, Amanda? I don't see how ..." He said, his voice trailed off as he saw where she was going with this.

"Mercenaries in public only, Ian, in reality call them advisors. Didn't you advise me on the woeful state of our staunchest allies, not two months ago?"

Ian's mind was already considering the possibilities.

Outside Fort Hamilton...

Erika Dalton waved goodbye to Mrs. Leung as she exited the farmers' market outside the Fort. For the first time in a long while she felt content. Shouldering the canvas shopping bag full of produce she headed for the main gate. David would be by later and she had promised to cook him dinner.

Smiling to herself she missed the green eyed man who passed her by. Give it a few years she was sure she could blend in here. If word around the base was true the 90th would be moving along to a new duty assignment. Some other Terran unit would be moving in.

I could stay here. The fervor was already dying down. A recent string of breaks by the anti-terrorist task force had actually lessened the pressure on her. Given the cell nature of the organization few of the Earth First people knew who she was, and the lack of attention meant she could spend more time in her cover identity.

As she made the turn onto the pedestrian footpath she stopped dead. A face familiar from the evening news stood in the path before her.

"Hello Erika." Agent Jack O'Bannon said with a grim smile. Erika's pre planned denials died in her throat as the man gestured to a black sedan parked on the curb behind her. The sight of the artfully made up young woman getting out of the back made her throat go dry and tight.

Without looking at C.J. she got in the back seat of a car.

C.J. closed her eyes as the last of the Rigel Kentares terrorists was apprehended. Looking at the big CIB agent with dull eyes she said; "We're done then?"

O'Bannon nodded. "As advertised, Miss, you keep your mouth shut and your nose clean and so will we."

"But the trial...what if she..." C.J. couldn't put her fears in words. *Oh...Alex, I'm so sorry.*

Sergei Cherenkov came up beside her then, other agents having driven their prey off.

"There won't be a trial." He said quietly. "No one will ever know."

**Star League Defense Force Temporary Headquarters
Conseco Military Reservation, New Earth
Terran Hegemony
04 March, 2784**

"All participating commands are reporting their readiness to move. In cases where our units are the only ones on station the acquisition of supplies and equipment has gone off without a hitch." Aaron DeChevalier read off from the report. Aleksandr Kerensky looked up sharply.

"From your tone things haven't gone off smoothly elsewhere." He said simply.

"Where we share duty stations with Terran loyalists we have been denied access to supplies and equipment...there have been incidents."

Kerensky closed his eyes.

"Damn them Aaron, can't they see what we are trying to do?"

"No old friend, they only see what we are leaving behind. What we spent ten years trying to liberate."

Aleks smiled. "You sound like you agree with them old friend."

“No, Aleks I’m as committed to our plan as you are, but the fact remains you want to take everything. The Terrans have a nation to defend; they’re not simply going to bend over backwards for you.” Aaron shook his head.

“There is another matter, Case Ronald.” Aleks said quietly. Aaron’s face darkened and he turned away.

“I won’t have anything to do with that and you know it.” Aaron growled.

“You know it needs to be done, those monsters need to be destroyed.” A shiver ran through Aaron at the fury in Kerensky’s voice.

“They aren’t monsters Aleks and neither are their creators.” Aaron didn’t trust himself to look at his oldest friend.

“I’m sorry old friend, but there is one last mess to clean up. There is one Caspar still alive. Or at least the brain core is still out there.” He handed Aaron a datapad.

Aaron looked down and gasped. The Tigers, how else had Tommy Lindon and that RimJob Sonny Cobb pulled off a full scale interstellar information war? Both were highly talented, geniuses even, but with an AI on their side?

“Our Blackhearts are already on it.”

If you only knew my real reason for going with you old friend, to get you and your followers the hell out of here. There is something wrong with you Aleks and there is nothing anyone else can do about it. Aaron thought grimly.

Fort Hamilton, HAF base...

Carl Icaza stepped off the transport truck and signaled to his men. Looking up at the closed gate and the pair of *Marauders* standing sentry on either side his eyes narrowed. Nowhere in evidence was the Cameron Star. The gate swung open on smooth rails and a tall blonde woman with captain’s tabs on her shoulders stepped up to him.

“Your orders. Captain Benno, is it?” A slight Germanic accent flavored her voice and her green eyes held an appraising look. Carl handed over a data pad.

“Equipment and personnel replacements, Captain, the balance owed the 90th after the recent unpleasantness.”

“Very good Captain Benno, I’ll notify reple-dep of arrival, just follow the signs.” Using the term for the base’s resupply and replacement depot she handed him back the datapad.

As Icaza got back in the cab and the Terran Captain waved him on, he smiled and nodded back to her.

“Looks like they bought it, sir.” Subidash Ling, his second in command said from the driver’s seat.

“Yeah,” He grunted, “but for how long, I hope the intel’s right this Lindon fellow moves around a lot and we only get one shot at this.”

Ling nodded quietly as they drove off. Kerensky’s orders were not the type of thing he was comfortable with normally, but Ling and Icaza both understood the necessity. And if it meant having the Terrans unable to build a Reagan Space Defense System, well that was just too damn bad.

Erika von Manstien, newly assigned commander of the 6th Assault Company, 2nd Battalion, 90th Heavy Assault Regiment watched the supply convoy enter the fort. Walking back to the guard post she called central command.

“Colonel Winter the chickens have entered the coop.”

“Very well, Erika maintain your station on the main gate, they won’t strike immediately.”

Acknowledging the order she turned to the duty sergeant;

“Evan, to all troops; maintain condition yellow until further notice.”

Hopefully it won’t come to a fight, those are SAS in there, Cobb’s intel was right. Damn it could get bloody, and damn you Aleksandr Kerensky. The Star League Defense Force and Kerensky had made their choices.

Now the Tigers had made theirs.

A half hour later...

Didi looked over at Josh Harding the Lieutenant commanding the squad of NYNG Rangers. The twenty four year olds’ face was set in an emotionless mask. She gave him a reassuring grin as he shouldered the Ceres Arms CrowdBuster. A tone sounded in the mastoid implant in the base of her skull.

“Didi the bozos are almost in the box.” Master Sergeant Truk Tranh’s voice came over the TACNET. *“Ten seconds.”*

Hmm, his English’s gotten way better. Vinh did some good work. She thought.

“Okay people, they’re in the box...on my signal.” Didi subvocalized.

“Clear,” Subidash Ling whispered as the team approached the Computer Lab. Their slicer Deane Calloway had bypassed the base’s security network and Carl knew the Tiger’s guards were looking at a virtual loop of the computer lab.

With Carl’s order Deane hit the override on the security lock, also bypassed. As the team swept in Carl had a nagging feeling, as if he was missing something. Dismissing it with a grunt he swept into the room. A man looked up in surprise, Tommy Lindon. Carl shot him with his suppressed Stoner 10mm. The man slumped down with an almost comic look of shock. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Subidash do the same to a man Carl knew to be Sonny Cobb.

Good riddance you RimJob bastard.

Ignoring the bodies for now Carl Icaza stepped up to the box on the main computer work table. The standardized Star League fragile items case. The id stencil had been crudely spray painted over with the word “Sweetie”. Opening the box a holoimage sprang out startling Icaza. He idly noticed the door slamming shut behind his team. The bodies of the dead men shimmered revealing a pair of department store holo mannequins.

“Good afternoon Mr. Benno, cute; you using your real name like that. I’d love to chat but you simply don’t have time. Ohh and Deane if you’re there, when are you gonna learn your Kung Fu is no match for mine.”

Tommy Lindon’s face faded out his smile remaining in the air for some seconds like the proverbial Cheshire Cat. The hiss of Kicker-13 crowd control gas coming from the air vents left a nasty sulfurous taste in his throat. As his consciousness faded gas masked forms swept in one paused over him and chuckled.

“Man you are well and truly fucked.”

*90th Heavy Assault headquarters building;
Fort Hamilton, New York City...*

The life sized image of Amanda Cameron looked at Sam from in front of his desk. She looked like she couldn't decide whether to be angry or bust out laughing.

“We're going to return them of course, why what did you think we were going to do?” He said in answer to her question.

*“Let me rephrase that; Sam **how** are you going to return them?”*

“Bruce and I will take the *Cat's Eye* to New Earth and drop them off, no tricks Director.”

“Your word on it, Colonel, no tricks.”

“Yes Director Cameron, you have my word.” She smiled warmly at that then signed off.

Bruce looked up from where he sat on the couch behind the holoprojector. A wry smile played over his face.

“No comments from the peanut gallery, Major.” Sam said.

Chapter Nine: Exile

April of '84 was the last time I set foot on Earth. I didn't realize it at the time. Damn it didn't I spend most of my adult life trying to get here? Ahh Hell, I know the truth now, still don't know if I can forgive or forget. I have a new home now, but it still hurts.

General Bruce Gilmour; AFFS archives

**Conseco Military Reservation, New Earth
Terran Hegemony
28 March, 2784**

...Icaza's seriously overdue." Liz Hazen was saying as General Kerensky's aide buzzed. The General answered the page.

"General, Colonel Winter and Major Gilmour to see you, sir."

Liz hid her surprise, noting that while Aaron was puzzled, Kerensky wasn't. Like so much else lately he was hiding things. His right of course but...

"Send them in Michelle." He turned to Aaron with a small smile. "Well Aaron let's see what your friends want."

Sam Winter and Bruce Gilmour entered. The men saluted crisply, Liz noticed Bruce smile warmly at Aaron, sharing a nod. His gaze swept over Kerensky with a faint air of disgust. Looking at her he nodded cautiously.

"Well Colonel what brings you to our neck of the woods?" Aleks' voice was deceptively mild.

"We came across some of your property, General Kerensky, just wanted to make sure you didn't leave anything behind."

"I'm sure I don't know what you're referring to..." Major Gilmour shook his head with a wry smile and tossed a 10TB fingernail drive on the table.

Looking at it without comment Kerensky looked back at the Terran officers with a raised eyebrow.

"Carl Icaza, or Benno, whatever and the rest of his team raided our base on the sixth of March. Don't worry they're alive; they told an interesting tale under chemical interrogation. Now personally I was going to leave them in their underwear in the middle of Times Square at noon, but the boss said just to return the dogs to their master."

Aaron snorted at that earning a glare from Kerensky. Before he could speak Sam Winter spoke up his voice cold.

"General with respect to who you *used* to be don't try this again, if you do..." The man smiled savagely. "The next time we'll play by New York rules."

"What the hell does that mean Sam?" Liz burst out angrily.

Bruce answered; the Gunslinger's voice was low and deadly.

"It means Liz, that the next bunch of RimJob wannabes you send our way you'll have to search every hot dog vendor in New York to find them."

"And that, as they say is that," Sam finished. "We'll see ourselves out."

As they left Bruce turned and tossed another chip at Liz.

“You give Scott a call, Liz, soon.”

Liz stood staring at the chip in her hand. She didn't even hear Kerensky and DeChevalier arguing in the background.

Aleks collapsed back in his chair with a groan. Colonel Hazen had left in a daze, something about her love life or some such.

You're worried maybe she doesn't love you so much these days. Steve Amaris chuckled from beside Aaron.

Now when did he become Steve?! Aleks thought with surprise. The dead man in his head had been looking younger and stronger of late. He looked like he did forty years ago. Black hair down below his shoulders, long mustaches and a well muscled chest and arms replaced his portly sixtyish frame. Amaris had taken to dressing differently, like...well Major Gilmour, down to the leather jacket and jeans; the shark of the Makos replacing the Blackstar pin.

Hell Al, I always told you to call me Steve, besides you're used to me.

The problem was the dead man was right. He'd gone from the Voice to Steve in the matter of a few years. Shaking his head he responded to Aaron's question.

“What do we do? Nothing, Aaron, this matter is done.” *We have more important concerns.* Aaron stared at him for a minute then shrugged. In the back of his mind Aleks could hear Steve Amaris chuckle darkly.

After all what could be more important than fucking over the Human Race, right Al?

Carl Benno woke to a sharp pain in his breast pocket. Looking around he saw nothing but blackness. When he tried to move he found himself boxed in. Now mind you Carl wasn't anymore claustrophobic than the next man, but the fear of being buried alive is hard wired into pretty much everyone.

What the hell did those bastards do? He thought biting down on the panic welling up inside. Muffled voices came from outside and before he could call out a woman's voice said; “Shit, medical stasis chambers, you're kidding me right?”

A hiss of escaping pressure and the sudden influx of light signaled Carl's release and he shied away from the brightness.

“Easy now buddy, we'll get you out of there.” A woman in the uniform of a port cargo master said a concerned look on her face.

“W-where...” Carl stammered.

“Conseco, you're on New Earth...” While he processed that, Carl dug into his breast pocket and stuck his finger on something sharp. Pulling the sharp piece of wood out he looked at it, a flat wedge of bluish green wood with something stenciled on the side.

I.O.U?

The cargo master stifled a curse. Carl looked over at the woman a question plain on his face.

“I was with the 331st on Elbar mister, and man you must have pissed somebody off royally to earn an Elbar Toothpick.”

Carl knew the term born in the horrors of war and atrocity on the planet now synonymous with the word. So what does an Elbar Toothpick mean you ask?

One promise; Impalement on a wooden stake.

As each of his men was retrieved they all produced one.

When Aleksandr Kerensky was informed of this minor detail the Voice of Amaris, now known as Steve chucked and remarked.

Y'know Al, these Tigers really know how to send a message.

31 March, 2784, HPG exchange Kowloon to New Earth...

On the screen, Aaron DeChevalier didn't look nearly as impressive as he would have in person-especially over the long distance between the world he stood on, and Kowloon.

"What in the hell is the meaning of giving out these?" he demanded, holding up a bluish, wooden toothpick.

Tranh Truk Ngo shrugged, "A little closer to the cameras, I can't make it out." he said.

The SLDF General pushed the wooden bit into the cameras.

"oh. That. I think it means that when you go, you should NOT consider coming back." Ngo said brightly.

"Come again?" DeChevalier was still unhappy.

"Exodus. What you're holding there, it was from Benno...that would be Icaza's people, right? the ones that tried to put a hit on someone in the Ninetieth?" Ngo inquired.

"Maybe." the SLDF general replied. "Why?"

"Because I still have people with them, General, and I still get briefed on what's going on down there, I know about what Kerensky did, and what you're planning, and I know about the operation your people bungled. You're holding an engraved invitation to not-come-back when you leave, or some of my 'former' people might take matters in a decidedly drastic tone." He licked his lips, "Some of MY folks were pretty put-out when they found out your boss was planning to stab us in the back, and even MORE put out when he called for preparations to loot the worlds they bled to save, and run off in to the deep black. I can only hold them back so far at this distance, and you know, my health's failing and all that..." here he managed a smile, while the smell of oranges started invading-warnings of what was coming soon. "I'd say s-ss-some of mmmmy f-f-f-folk-k-k.."

The wracking pain was not the worst part. The worst part, was feeling his bowels and bladder let go, his muscles go hard, contracting with hysterical strength, his joints straining at and beyond their limits, the helplessness. The pain, of course, was still intense enough to raise a strangled howl of despair before even that much control was gone.

Dimly, he felt the impact with the floor, the smooth tile cold against his burning agony-not soothing, the difference simply made it worse.

The Medicine didn't work as well as it used to.

It wouldn't be long before the madness took him, before he would be nothing more than a throbbing, raw nerve of agony, screaming until his voice gave out, incoherent and insane and unable to do anything about it, even now, unconsciousness offered no escape.

On the screen, unseen by Tranh Truk Ngo, but witnessed by the Ministry of Communications operator, Aaron DeChevalier watched with a mixture of pity, sadness, and horror.

**Nadir Jump Point,
Terra, Terran Hegemony
01 April 2784**

Emergence...

You'd think I'd be used to it by now, but ripping a hole in space time and travelling thirty light years instantaneously is something the human body never gets used to. MechJocks feel it worse; contrary to what most people think not everybody can drive seventy tons of anthropomorphic metal. It takes a certain something...call it empathy. Now it's not a rare gift, a large percentage of the human population has it, but those who do see something when you jump.

It's almost as if your mind becomes one with the universe, and at that moment you understand everything. Then in an instant it's gone...just gone. Some spacers I knew were addicted to it, that feeling. All I could remember was having a long conversation with my old friend and lover Rachel Miller and her trying to warn me of something.

Rae's been dead for eleven years.

Needless to say I knew we were in trouble. So when the McKenna class BattleShip *Missouri* confronted us with the message we were to follow her in I wasn't surprised. What did surprise me was how calm Sam was.

"You know more than you're telling me Sam...spill it." I said bluntly as we sat alone in the *Cat's Eye's* mess hall.

"No rank in the mess has its limits B." Sam smiled at me wearily. I fixed him with a level stare. It bothered and amused me that I could make Samuel "The Old Man" Winter fidget with my glare. Finally he spoke;

"Look B let's just say you're going to get to Chesterton a lot sooner than you think."

He didn't say more and I didn't press.

**Antarctica National Training Center
Terra, Terran Hegemony
06 April, 2784**

Justine Sinclair accepted a steaming hot mug of coffee from Christian Traumintieri. The two Majors sat in his quarters in the Hegemony's Extreme Environment Training Center (Arctic) and went over the final preparations for the Regiment's departure.

"The last of the National Guard detachment has gone on with the Black Cats to JFK, but I still don't get it, why are we being given two weeks "departure" leave and why the hell is our equipment being kept on the transports?" She blew steam off of the top of her cocoa in irritation.

Departure Leave, that's only given when a unit is being shipped off world to a new duty station, usually outside the Hegemony.

Chris shook his head. The big man looped an arm around her shoulders and nuzzled the top of her head before saying;

"And where the hell did our WarShip support go? Emily Hayes just said they'd been reassigned pending new orders, whatever the fuck that means." His eyes were worried, but he shook it off.

"Ah hell, the boss'll be back in a few days and we'll figure it out." Justine nodded then looked up at him with a thoughtful expression.

"Chris?" She asked.

"Hmm?" He answered through a mouthful of cocoa.

"Wanna get married?" Justine waited for him to sputter out his last sip. Instead he fished out a black velvet box just about the right size.

"Here." He said simply.

Opening it she almost dropped the box and the ring it contained.

"Cool." Was all she said with a satisfied smile.

He's such a romantic. She thought.

Office of the Director-General, New York City, Same day...

"Here's the last of the paperwork Amanda." Sarah said, sadness in her voice. Amanda who'd known this day was coming for months found herself biting back tears. She tried to say thanks but all that came out was a little sob.

Sarah smiled through her own tears and reached out to embrace her friend.

"I'll miss you Amanda, but don't worry Chesterton isn't *that* far." She said into the other woman's chestnut hair.

"I know, but damn it to hell...you're my best friend." *It wasn't fair.* Politics again and this time it was robbing her of people she considered family.

"And I always will be, Amanda," Sarah laughed then, "hey look you never know this mess could all blow over, and you could be vacationing with us on Chesterton before you know it..."

Drawing herself up, Amanda Cameron smiled even though both women knew what was coming right now they both needed this illusion.

"I'll hold you to that Sarah Beth." She said hoping the sadness she felt wasn't in her voice.

CIB Headquarters, Langley, Virginia, Next day...

"Booting up now." Sonny Cobb said from the work bench.

"Gotcha." Tommy Lindon replied from the portable mainframe across the room.

In the air between them a killer whale swam in a holographic projection, from the speakers at Tommy's station an impatient little girl's voice sounded out.

"Where is she, I wanna see her."

Tommy laughed; "In a second Sweetie... right about now."

A second orca appeared in mid air and the two swam around one another humming and squeaking with joy.

"Hi, I'm Two!" The new projection said brightly with a slightly different pitch to her voice.

“Hi, Two, I’m One, but you can call me Sweetie!” In the background the two slicers shook hands with satisfaction.

“Gonna miss ya bro.” Tommy said.

“I think we’ll be in touch soon enough.” Sonny said with a grin.

“No doubt.” The other man said with a sigh.

**HAF registered hanger, John F. Kennedy International Space Port
North American Administrative District, Terra, Terran Hegemony
10 April, 2784**

Sarah looked out at the sea of (mostly) familiar faces in front of her. They were all here, all the Tigers. From old friends like the Terrible Two, to newcomers like Eleanor Soldano, Truk Tranh and Daniel St.Croix. Enough people to make up a good sized town.

So many, I never realized how big a ‘Mech unit is....

Sam Winter gestured for quiet.

“Okay people, you’ve all heard the rumors, that we have caused too big a stink as a unit. That Big K is screaming for our disbandment. That Amanda is under pressure from the Congress to serve us up on a plate to placate him.”

He paused and surveyed the crowd before continuing, his voice rising like a roadside preacher’s.

“Well those rumors are true! We stopped the house lords from raping the Zebe; we stopped Kerensky from raping the Hegemony and we almost stopped the fall of the Star League. We are a symbol they can’t ignore, we’re too powerful, and too many know the truth.” His eyes narrowing he went on.

“War is coming, war that will make the liberation look like a tea party. Vultures like Kenyon Marik and Minoru Kurita can’t help themselves and the Star League Defense Force is paralyzed under the command of a insane old man who is willing to sacrifice billions on the altar of his ideals!”

The massed Tigers growled, then howls of outrage coming from six thousand throats.

“Then why don’t we take them out! Fuck Kerensky, cut out the disease and let’s be done with it.” Gracie Liu stood her fist in the air a defiant predator screaming to be unchained.

The crowd roared in assent.

Kill him, KILL THEM ALL, kill.... Even Sarah, who had sworn her life to diplomacy over violence found herself caught up in the raw emotion.

This is the critical moment. She thought.

Bruce stepped forward, no signs of the hangover that had to be pounding in his head. The crowd quieted as the chosen holder of their Honor spoke.

“You want blood, kith and kin of mine, so do I, but we wouldn’t win.” Growls from the crowd sounded scarcely human but fell silent at his glare. “Oh we would make it to New Earth, sure as death, and I don’t doubt we could fight through the Patton Division, through our former comrades. And we would kill that festering sore that killed our dreams, but what then?” He spread his arms.

“What then my kin, the Hegemony couldn’t shelter us, wouldn’t after what we will have wrought.” Bruce shook his head sadly at the calls of denial. “The entirety of the Defense Force would come down on our heads, all of them ‘cause we did for their beloved leader. And there would be no safe haven for us, not in the Inner Sphere; the Great Lords of Humanity would hunt us down. Not even on New Vandenberg in the far of Periphery where they still remember how we ended the bloodshed. Not Even Here! Our home.”

Every eye upon him Bruce lowered his head for a moment. His head still down he spoke softly, the directional microphones in the podium picking up his voice but making all fall silent and strain to hear.

“There is another option, for those of you who want to stick together. There is one other Lord who tried to keep the Star League together, who holds to the ideals we fought for.” Bruce’s voice rose and he gazed out at his companions. “One nation offering us the strength of the Unity when all else tries to shatter it. We can’t stay here that is plain we are just too dangerous for Amanda to have around right now. But John Davion has offered us a place by his side and I say we take it.”

“As what; troops under the AFFS? As mercenaries?” Scott Mackenzie called out disbelieving.

“Mercenaries; Scott, but not part of the AFFS. John Davion has offered us a contract *himself*. We take orders from the First Prince of the Federated Suns! No one else.” Nods and cheers began to come from the crowd, Sarah could see the idea hit home in their smiles as Bruce went on. “That’s how much he values us. So we ride out the storm in the Suns and one day, the day Terra needs us we will come home!” He extended his hand to Sarah who walked over and took it.

“So what say you Black Tigers of New Vandenberg? Do we crumble my kin, let Kerensky win, or do we fight the future and make the House Lords rue the day they let the Star League Fall?!!” A word sounded from the crowd hard to make out but swelling in volume, a name it was and it filled the hanger like thunder.

“Davion, Davion, DAVION, DAVION!!!!!!”

And so it began; in the far off Combine; Francine Kurita watched proudly as her 3rd Proserpina Hussars flow through their exercises flawlessly under Minoru Kurita’s eyes. The might of the Dragon ready to strike at the throat of its prey.

On icy Tharkad, Jennifer Steiner smiled at her cousin Christina as she ascended the throne of the Archon, fears quelled for now, thoughts of sorrows and regrets shelved for tomorrow.

At his retreat on windswept Marik, Kenyon Marik read the latest details from the Capellan and Terran borders and smiled at thoughts of glory.

Barbara Liao stretched languidly on the Celestial Throne on decadent Sian and hatched a web of plots, her eyes narrowing at the image of the Chesterton worlds. A smile forms on her face. Soon, very soon.

Likewise visiting New Syrtis, John Davion begins to outline a plan to crush the Capellan Confederation. Every so often though his generals strutting like peacocks sure of their strength catch him staring sadly at the barely visible spark in the night sky that is Terra.

On New Earth Aleksandr Kerensky turns off the light in his office and looks once at the smiling image of a dead tyrant. Shaking his head he shuts the door on the room and on all of human space.

And on Chesterton, Lady Deirdre Green watches as her household troops round up a wave of natives protesting yet another rise in mortgage rates. Yet more foreclosures of businesses and households old before the Capellan Confederation was born and ancient when the Federated Suns took the world. She didn’t know that Sarah Davion was enroute with the Black Tigers at her back.

But then that is a story for another time.

Thus Ends Through a Mirror Darkly, the story will continue...