

The Black Tigers: A Gathering Storm
Book One
A Distant Thunder
A novel by blacktigeractual

Chapter One: Departures

As we walk into this restaurant strung out from the road, you can feel the eyes upon you as you're shaking off the cold. You pretend it doesn't bother you, but you just want to explode...and you always feel outnumbered, you don't dare take a stand.

Metallica covering Bob Seger; Turn the Page

**Alaska, North American Administrative District, Terra
Terran Hegemony
03 May, 2784**

On the Tri-D a battered Union class dropper was boosting from its pad. As the grey-white sphere lifted, it rotated revealing a crude feline eye painted in green.

The rapidly pretty blonde in the foreground waved back at the pillar of fire two miles behind her.

"And that's it, with the launch of the Cat's Eye; the 90th Heavy Assault Regiment leaves New York for the last time. Rumors are rampant with extremists on both the left and the right calling for their arrest on charges of desertion. The lack of comment from the Office of the Director-General has been puzzling at least. Opinions here in New York mostly blame those same politicians, one man I spoke to here at JFK held the opinion that the O-DOG should make a note of those whose voices spoke out loudest against the Black Tigers actions during the fall and sick the Committee for DeAmarisification on them..."

Cut to a tall dignified man in a business suit standing in the Virgin Spacelines lounge. The caption read Colin Miller, J.P. Morgan Financial Services...

"No matter how you look at it Earth and the Hegemony stand alone now, the Tigers, God bless them are one thing even the House Lords fear. As ill advised as the August Revolt was they at least tried to hold things together unlike the opportunists now vilifying them. The fact that these poor souls are heroes is something not even the Warhawks and the Reunificationists can change...Just proves the old adage; some people will sell their grandmothers for a damn vote."

The camera cuts back to the newsroom and the anchor nods thoughtfully.

Thank you Melinda definitely food for thought. In related news Konrad Toyama; aide to Department of Communications head Jerome Blake answered allegations that he is tied to the Sword of Gaia, the militant arm of Earth First...

Henry Jones JR; heir to a dead dynasty, former general of the armies of the Amaris Empire and head mechanic at Derry and Sons, Alaska shook his head, kissing his wife Kailey on the top of her tousled blonde head. She looked up at him worried.

“Have you heard from Bruce?” She asked. Kailey who’d by now guessed his secret and didn’t care knew the main reason the two men kept in touch.

“Yeah, he’s okay with it, sort of. I mean look at what he’s moving to.” Henry glanced down at the woman who’d caught his heart and gave a lopsided grin.

“A big old castle on Chesterton, a Duchess for a wife...not bad for an army brat from Queens.” She nodded into his chest. He knew she and Sarah Davion texted each other sometimes after the night the couples spent together just after the Star League Officer’s wedding. Henry’s brothers in law Kevin and Martin burst in then. Grins on their faces said it all. The pair were drunk.

“Well, we did it!” Kevin said staggering.

“Yes we did!” Martin laughed as their father Solomon came out of the kitchen to see what the ruckus was.

Arching an eyebrow Kailey fixed the pair with a stern glare.

“And what precisely did you two braniacs do?” She asked coolly as Solomon leaned against the door jamb.

The brothers’ smiles faltered a bit but Martin plowed ahead.

“We joined up, sis we’re in the Army now.”

As chaos broke out in the Derry household, Solomon gave Henry a look. Knowing the question, Henry nodded. In the morning he’d look up some contacts Sonny had set up. Sourly he sat back thinking; *Great, just what I need, to be back in the military, Dad must be laughing in his grave.*

Deirdre Green sat on Chesterton’s Ducal Seat, literally. In the chair. It was for anyone who knew how the Davion nobility worked; Just Not Done. She didn’t care. In a month’s time she would have every right to this august chair. The legal issues surrounding a noble’s abandonment of his or her duties were clear under the laws of the Federated Suns’ Peerage.

John Davion, First Prince and Deirdre’s liege lord had been blocking her attempts to bring the region under her control. With the fall of the Star League however, the Davion Lord had too many things on his plate.

She smiled sensually stretching out on the throne’s plush cushions.

Thirty days, little Sarah, Chesterton will belong to the Greens and you my poor soiled little girl can run back to New Avalon and live off of your Uncle’s sufferance.

Turning her mind back to business she signed a document for the seizure of the McRae ranch north of here. Using the pretext of collusion with the Chesterton Liberation Front she would have the lucrative Cattle ranch under the control of one of her supporters in due time.

That the CLF was active if ineffectual was just icing on the cake. In the end Deirdre would use the revolutionaries, mostly pathetic upper class college students looking for a cause to make their hollow lives more meaningful, to solidify her hold on the region.

It was in short a beautiful irony.

IDS Cat's Eye, two weeks out from Chesterton, two weeks later...

"...our cover's holding so far." David Martin said as I went over our mission brief with him in the Cat's Eye's ward room. The officers of my ad hoc battalion waited expectantly. 'Rat, Gracie, Erica and Nerva led the 'Mechs, Didi, Tranh and Josh Harding the infantry.

"Joshua Davion and Mr. Lee gave us the good deal with the IFF codes and registry documents to get us past Chesterton Port Control." I said referring to John Davion's brother and the elderly Capellan trader who handed off the codes and forms that now said the Cat's Eye was really the Davion registered Free Trader Beowulf. Likewise her sister ships had similar covers.

I looked over my assembled team. Good people, the best you could ask for. Just hope nobody would die. I met Scott 'MechRat Mackenzie's eyes and he gave a wan smile. Liz's decision to stay with that quisling Kerensky hadn't gone over well. He'd keep his mind on the job tho', he always did.

"Alrighty then...everybody here knows the op, but we've got some new information." Again thanks to Mr. Lee. "The lovely Lady Green has hired a mixed bag of mercs to secure her position on Chesterton. 'Bout a battalion of troops, mostly infantry, but enough 'Mechs to cause a real problem..."

"But Uncle John wants us to keep the bloodshed to a minimum." Dido Moran grinned from her seat. Inwardly I groaned at Didi's use of the Prince John's nickname among the Tigers. Sarah assured me that the First Prince had had a good laugh when she'd told him about it.

"Pretty much," I answered her, "Mr. Lee's people have given us detailed intel on the OpFor's disposition and I think we can put them down quick, Didi?" I gestured to the former SAS trooper.

As Didi began to detail her plan, I saw the others begin to grin.

=====

Sichuan Xue, biology teacher at the Landing Preparatory School was walking home from a late dinner with friends. Despite the *say baht poh* in the Ducal Palace (Mdme. Sichuan chastised herself for the curse in her native Cantonese, but it was true after all!) the area around the Palace was safe for an elderly woman to walk home at night. It was a beautiful night too. Chesterton's three moons arranged in what some

superstitious folk in the country thought a lucky pattern.

It was only a triangle formed by Whitehall at the top, Rosebud and Ebon forming the bottom. Pretty enough but only a natural formation after all. A blur of motion caught her eye. When she looked at the line of parked cars under the row of *Lam* trees there was noth... *Wait there!*

Almost two meters tall the shadowy form crouched almost on top of her. For a moment she almost screamed at the demonic form but then it did the strangest thing. Holding a finger up to the painted Tigers visage on the *Helmet*, a man in armor not a demon.

“Shhh. Don’t worry Grandmother, none of us will hurt you, so just hurry home now.”

Despite the computer modulation of the man’s helmet Xue heard the kindness in his voice. She hurried away as more forms, some armored, some in clothes that distorted their forms and shifted colors to match the background. One paused and smiled at her, a flash of red hair and green eyes. A face she knew, from the Tri-D... *Lady Sarah!*

And then they were gone.

Sichuan Xue stared after them for a bit. Then looked back at the moons. Then she hurried home, to open a small box long kept locked away. Arranging the small figurines and the candles she said a small prayer to her ancestors. Her hands shook as she lit the candles.

Maybe the moons are lucky after all.

All through the night strange noises rumbled in the Capitol. Strange shapes were glimpsed moving about the palace and the Lansdowne Barracks. The police switchboards were deluged with calls or would have been if Mr. Lee’s people hadn’t gotten to them first.

Jimmy Kam, whose family had lost everything to Lady Green’s cronies; had been a natural recruit for the Chesterton Liberation Front, he’d taken to his new cause with a fanatic zeal and had been chosen for a special mission. Crouched in front of a delivery truck parked off the main palace gate he mentally prepared himself, subconsciously rotating his shoulders to ease the chafing of the suicide vest he wore.

Jimmy didn’t really think he’d get anywhere near Lady Green but somebody had to do something. In the back of his mind he wondered at the pounding of his heart. Rhythmic; like a heartbeat. But why was it getting louder? Suddenly Jimmy felt a presence behind him.

Turning his eyes upwards he reeled back in shock. Looming above him, masked by the city’s ambient noise and his own concentration, stood the raptor like form of a BattleMech. On one shin of its back canted hoofed leg the image of a buxom brunette in archaic military garb had been painted. It looked like she was winking at him.

His attention focused on the metal monster he never saw the stunner wielding form step out of an alleyway and put a pulse of concentrated sound into his head. The first form was met by six more and one pulled open Jimmy's coat.

"Jesu Christos Loot; this moron was gonna blow hisself up!"

The lean young man with a movie star's face and the dull grey insignia of a Terran lieutenant cursed softly and he called for two of his men to disarm and take charge of their prisoner. Across the street the Palace's main gate swung open and the Lieutenant watched as the black forms of a battalion of 'Mechs marched into the Palace grounds.

Lieutenant Josh Harding signaled the rest of his men and with no further words a full heavy infantry company trooped in after the 'Mechs.

"Time to wakey wakey honey!"

Deirdre Green woke with a start pulling her covers up over her nightgown clad body. A massive form in black armor stood over her. Four other forms their outlines obscured by color shifting fatigues that gave her stomach a twist.

"GUARDS!!!!" Lady Green screamed.

"Whooooeee, hell of a pair of lungs on her hey Mike?" The armored form laughed harshly. One of the others stepped out of the shadows the color shifting effect fading to reveal black combat armor and a heavy stunner-lasgun combo.

"Lady Green, your guards won't be coming, now if you will kindly come with us?" The man, she was sure it was a man held out a silk robe to her. Calmly she took the robe from him, ignoring the others. Men she could handle all it took was one to notice her.

Whatever is going on here, all it will take is one...

Damn me, combat armor is no place for a hard on. Mike Kelso thought. But she is a hell of a looker, problem is she knows it. Waiting until she looked away he adjusted his armor over every male trooper's favorite plaything. Didi's armored form cocked her helmeted head at him and he shrugged. As the capture team walked their captive through the short walk to the throne room, the Lady Green glanced back at Mike with a smile that promised a hell of a lot.

Inwardly Mike sighed, in some ways these nobles acted like high school brats. This so called Lady Greene reminded him of the captain of the cheerleading team back home in Galveston. *God what a bimbo she was.*

Green stopped dead as they entered the throne room with its massive gothic arches

and cathedral like windows. It wasn't the platoon of heavily armed troopers in mimetic camouflaged armor, or the throng of her cronies clustered fearfully in the center of the room. Nor was it the BattleMechs visible through the cathedral styled windows.

It was the small group of people gathered on the raised platform bearing the Ducal Seat of the Chesterton Worlds. Bruce, standing next to the throne glowering down at the noblewoman dressed casually in jeans and his battered motorcycle jacket, looked as usual more like a pirate than one of the SLDF's most decorated warriors. The enigmatic Mr. Lee, in an expensive New Avalon suit, beamed benignly at the assembly. But more importantly seated in the Seat, a seven foot snowy white Devil Cat purring contentedly at her feet, Sarah Davion in a black and red gown that echoed the Black Tiger's dress uniform stared down regally at her rival.

"Sarah." Deirdre Greene managed at last.

"Deirdre, it may have been a while, but I have returned...." Sarah's eyes narrowed and she stood.

"...And I am not pleased."

It wasn't until her son Sebastian stepped out from behind the Seat that Lady Deirdre Green fainted.

Mike was close enough to group that his armor's augmented hearing picked up Bruce's dry comment;

"Well that was anticlimactic."

SLDF Convoy 312 Uninhabited System near the Hegemony Combine Border 15 June, 2784

Lisa Buhalin poured a shot of Jim Beam Black for Liz. The pair clinked their glasses and downed the alcohol. Shaking her head as the slug of hard liquor burned warmly in her belly she returned to the matter at hand.

"That's not the point, Lee I'm beginning to think Scott was right..." Shaking her head she thought of their last harsh words.

Lisa sighed and to a swig of her beer. Fixing her oldest friend with a glare she said simply... "Then why are you still here? You don't believe in what we're doing, yet you're still here, you've mucked up things with Scott...I mean what the *****? Do you even know what the hell your doing?"

Liz opened her mouth with a snarl and then closed it with a snap. *Truth was she didn't; leave it to Lee to see that. To top it off the General doesn't trust me anymore, Lee won't*

say it but its true...too many secrets kept. Damn I gotta talk to Aaron...

She rose a little too quickly and took a moment to clear her head. Lisa looked at her; puzzled. Liz reached down and hugged her friend then smiled sadly.

“Good-bye Lisa.”

“Yeah...I’ll see you later...Ohh.” Lisa nodded understanding.

“Yeah.”

An hour later a shuttle left the Star League convoy and headed for a Combine registered freighter departing for Terran space.

“You just let her go, you sentimental old fool!”

Nicolas Kerensky rounded on Aaron DeChevalier in fury. Aaron’s face didn’t change as the younger man continued his tirade. Truth he barely glanced at him, his attention focused on Aleksandr.

“Aleks, she was kept out of the loop she knows next to nothing.”

“You don’t know that...she should have been silenced just in case!” Nicolas was like a terrier with a rat in its teeth, he just wouldn’t let it go.

An hour of this is enough...

“SHE KNEW NOTHING!” Aaron thundered startling both Nicolas and Lisa Buhalin who’d brought the report. “I was planning Operational Security procedures when you were still in diapers...boy.” He stared at the younger Kerensky until the other man backed down.

Aleksandr Kerensky impassive till now spoke up then;

“It doesn’t matter now, Nicolas, what Elizabeth knows or doesn’t know matters little...Amanda doesn’t care where we go and Minoru won’t interfere even if he did know what we planned.”

He looked up at his officers and said, resignation in his voice;

“If Hazen wants to stay and burn with the rest of the Star League, so be it.”

Four Days Later, SS Beulah Wood bound for Dieron...

Liz Hazen floated into the Tramp class JumpShip's lounge thankful the majority of the Combine passengers had disembarked as the merchant vessel made its way towards the Hegemony. Kurita pop music was...bad. There was no other way to describe it. Shaking her head ruefully she sat at the counter.

A short stocky blond haired man was sitting next to her and as she ordered he looked up from the data feed on the console built into each place setting. *Max Warner?* Before she could say anything two others caught her eye. Samantha Reis and Jorge Carrera, all Blackhearts.

"Hello Liz." Max, who'd dropped into the area around Unity City to be the first of Terra's liberators to make contact with Hazen's Ghosts the resistance group she'd led against the Usurper. "Kinda surprised to find you here, thought you were running away with the rest of Kerensky's little cult." His smile didn't reach his eyes.

Keeping her voice calm she sipped her coffee.

"I changed my mind, Max I'm going home. What about you? Job?"

Max grinned and toyed with the stirrer in his own cup.

"Yeah, something like that."

SLS Nueva Seville, Exodus Fleet

"Report!" Captain Kevin Brendon shouted over the blaring klaxon as he strode onto the bridge. His exec looked at a loss.

"Sir, we have a emergency evac warnings from the *Venturer, Lake Michigan and Princeton Heights!*"

"Evac, what the hell?" Brendon turned as Lieutenant Josiah Collingswood; master of the *Venturer* stepped out of the access way. "Jo talk to me!"

"Unity! Sir we've got to jettison the droppers, the 'mechs and fighters are...they've been sabotaged!"

"Sabotage..." Brendon knew and trusted his DropShip commanders well and turned back to the launch ops station. "Devi do it emergency protocol one eleven..."

The dark slender woman was already typing frantic commands into the system controlling the docking collars. Automated systems opened the clamps and engaged the DropShips' thrusters boosting them away from the fragile needle that was the *Nueva Seville*.

"Sir every fusion powered vehicle from the 18th Royal Battle went into a fusion

overload...the technicians couldn't stop..." A flash of golden light came from the view port. That wasn't one of our droppers, that came from the *Sacramento*!

Leo Maltin his executive officer looked up from the sensors horror on his face.

"Sir...the *Sacramento*...she's gone, just gone."

It was then the detonation of the *Nueva Seville*'s own DropShips shook his crew around like ball bearings in a washing machine.

SLS James McKenna...

"The death toll?" Aleksandr Kerensky asked wearily.

"Over seven thousand." Aaron DeChevalier said quietly.

"How?" Aleks looked up anger cutting through fatigue and the laughter only he could hear.

"A computer virus...very complex, piggybacking on our routine comms traffic it spread to every Royal command in the fleet. I wasn't sure who at first but then an inquiry I'd made a week ago bore fruit too late." He paused, his discovery on the heels of the mayhem the virus had unleashed was so damning he almost lied, so tempting to point Aleks at Minoru Kurita, but...

"Out with it." Aleks' eye's were hooded.

"The Blackhearts...they're all gone."

If Aaron could have heard it, the dead tyrant's laughter would have had an ironic note.

"They're all gone and this was their going away gift." Aaron finished.

Chapter Two: Working the System

Ricky was a young boy, He had a heart of stone.

Lived 9 to 5 and worked his fingers to the bone.

Just barely got out of school, came from the edge of town.

Fought like a switchblade so no one could take him down.

He had no money, oooh no good at home.

He walked the streets a soldier and he fought the world alone

18 and Life; Skid Row

The DeepDowns, Landing

Chesterton, Terran Hegemony

04 July, 2784

Sammie's place was one of those dive bars you find all over the DeepDowns; Landing's poorest district. On any Friday night the place was packed with local gangsters, slumming college kids and blue collar workers from the Wrench; the capitol's industrial district. Sammie a retired Tong enforcer knew that his patrons were a volatile mix so while he didn't discourage the occasional fight or two, weapons were not allowed, checked at the door with a pretty coat check girl backed up by two no necks with no sense of humor about such things.

And God help you if you waited outside on the street to hammer somebody after they left, the last guy who did was rumored to have ended up in Eda Mame's dumplings... The slender young rake in the oversized leather jacket thought with a small smile.

Ricky Lo pulled a deep drag on his cigarette, glancing with overdone nonchalance at the dye job redhead sitting in the booth across from the pool table. He knew Paula McDonnell liked him, but he didn't like his odds of navigating the gauntlet of her friends.

Have to get her alone later, he thought, at least she likes my flash, referring to the purple lock of hair that dangled down his forehead. That same lock of hair marked him as *Jengali*, in Chesterton-Capellan usage the word meant street scum. Paula and her half friends were from families that could trace their ancestry to the Capellan *Barduc* or Sword-Nobility that had ruled Chesterton when it had been a jewel in the crown of the Confederation(Although Ricky didn't think the Confederation had a King but whatever.).

Still Paula and her friends slumped in the DeepDowns far away from their college dorms in the Heights for one simple reason; here the other half of their friends, mostly middle class Davy kids who went to similar schools could mingle and relax without creating a scandal. The political concerns made Ricky's head spin.

"Hey Ricky, gimme some fire; *Tuan?*" Norrie Cassias, Rick's best friend and their gang's second story man grinned at him.

After Ricky obliged him, Norrie slipped a slim packet into Rick's leather jacket. Ricky nodded coolly, his cut from last night's job, after the tong took its cut of course, should be...

"Seventeen for each of us, not bad for four hours work, hey?" Norrie's grin was infectious and Rick seeing Paula catch it decided not to play it off, he winked. She blushed prettily and her friends as one glared daggers at him and turned to chatter their opinions. None of them good Ricky knew. He'd been dry too long; the Terrans brought in by the new Davy girl had cracked down hard on both the Tong and the old bitch's cronies.

Nobody knew where they got their info but the District Attorney was making his shit stick. Seventeen hundred in D-bills (Not as good as dollars but less easy to track.) meant debts paid and maybe even a bit of pretty for Paula...if he could get past her friends. He was so caught up in his good fortune that he missed the entry of a dozen or so of those same Terrans.

Oh Shit... Ricky thought.

He didn't see how the fight started, Vince and Su-Lin were both hot heads and they always hung out together near the front of Sammie's. They were however his crew so with a look at Norrie the pair dived into the brawl. In the back of his mind he saw Sammie taking bets. The Terrans looked tough as hell, all of them wearing that Tiger chop somewhere on their persons, but they were outnumbered severely and well in any bar fight the out of towners were always singled out for a pounding.

Ricky and Norrie were holding their own back to back when a roughly handsome Asian man snapped Ricky's hand out of the air and flipped him on his back. Looking up he saw the man wink at...*Paula!* Red filled his vision and he leapt up to charge at the man. He never saw the punch that put him back on the ground.

"Jeez Mr. T, you know he's gonna feel that through to next week." Someone laughed.

"Bite me Lieutenant 'Rat.'" Ricky heard the other man say in badly accented Anglic just before he passed out.

Nine or so hours later he woke to Sammie placing a steaming mug of tea on the table next to the cot Ricky was lying on. He was in the bar's back room, on an all too familiar cot. Sammie as usual had looked out for him. Steeling himself for the usual lecture about getting out of "The Life" Ricky was surprised when the big man handed him a small card that damn Tiger stared back at him.

"What's this?" He asked sipping on his tea.

"A way out, Kid, you impressed somebody last night." Sammie replied. He gave the younger man a telling look.

"Is this where you tell me this is my ticket out of the DeepDowns?"

"Damn straight, boy, you'd be a fool not to. These Kitty Kats ain't that Green bitch, even you can see that."

As he left Sammie paused and looked over his shoulder saying;

"You think about it Ricky, and when you're done get your tools, we've got some carpentry to do."

Nodding and thinking about the earlier mayhem in the bar he readied himself for a full day's work ahead.

Maybe, he's right... Ricky thought as he rose to wash up.

Lansdowne Barracks later that day.

I chuckled as 'Rat cradled his head. He glowered at me but then began to laugh.

"Ahh geez; boss don't make me laugh; I'm getting to old for this shit."

Mind you Scott Mackenzie's only a couple years older than me which by Terran standards isn't old at all, I remember a story from the twentieth or twenty-first century that described people in their forties and fifties as being middle aged, blew my mind, Terran medical technology being what it is a person could live a full and active life for over a hundred years or so, hell even Isokoru Satoh who used to be a Drac only looked about forty five or so and he was going on sixty!

If my eldest daughter's biological father hadn't been such an idiot...well some scientists were predicting by 2800 or so the average lifespan of someone in the Hegemony would have been upwards of twice what they are today. Instead it was dropping. Anyway back to the matter at hand. One of the most glaring problems in Landing and other cities on Chesterton had been crime spurred on by Lady Green's mismanagement. Gang violence was considered more than a nuisance for the first time in over a century.

In Landing it was way worse. Granted these guys were nowhere near as bad as say some areas on Earth, where the gangs were fueled by people hardened by the Amaris occupation or say the Combine; where the Police don't actually really investigate anything. Hell they didn't even have guns for the most part. Still the Colonel suggested we look into it.

The SLDF and by former association the Tigers have a system, older than spaceflight for dealing with such things. It didn't really have a name, but you get the troops out to meet the locals, curl their hair with tales from the war. Provoke the gangbangers, especially here where they ain't armed with automatic weapons and rocket launchers.

Basically you show them what should be self evident...just how low they are on the food chain. With kid gloves of course, you don't want them either terrified (too much, any way.) or despising you as a bunch of bullies. Just enough to get their attention, and get them thinking.

Mr. Lee's contacts were proving very useful here. Granted, my gut said he was either Maskirovka (The Cabbies state security agency.) or affiliated with the Tongs, or most likely; both. But Hell, you use the tools you got on hand.

Besides, I kinda liked the old pirate...

"There have been a shitload of complaints from civilians in the DeepDowns and the Low End, Colonel." The tall heavy set man in the oh so stereotypical trench coat and cheap suit of a detective was saying as I walked in. I stifled a chuckle; this guy should meet Leo Devalis sometime.

“Well Magistrate O’Connor if you have questions about how the Training Battalion is being run; here is the man in charge.” Sam Winters pointed me out. The Chief of Police for Landing turned to look at me with appraising but tired eyes. Before I could speak he chuckled.

“So you’re the one who’s got the pipers playing at all hours of the morning, picking fights with every gangbanger they can find?” He asked a hint of a grin on his face. “Been a while since I’ve seen System D in action.”

I chuckled myself; if he knew the term...

“What unit?” I asked.

“The 83rd Infantry Division, a long, long time ago.”

“So how’s the crime rate in the Downs?” I asked.

“Oh, hell you wouldn’t have asked if you didn’t all ready know.” He shrugged. “Way the hell down, son your merry little elves are sweeping the streets clean...but you’re makin’ some folks nervous.”

“I’ll see what I can do about the pipers, but System D in general?” I paused and he grinned nodding.

“That’s all I ask, Major.” O’Connor turned to Sam and nodded his leave.

The man himself looked up at me and grinned.

“Well...?”

“It’s working, boss, and try Training Regiment, mostly infantry but I’ve got some good prospects for the ‘Mech’s, in three months they’ll be ready for some low intensity field work.” I smiled with pride, Truk, Johnny Zazula and Scott were working them like little bitches and despite that the dropout rate was damned low.

“How are you fixed for equipment?” Alex asked from his seat in the office’s lone couch.

I shrugged. “Not so bad but not so good either. Plenty of basic infantry gear but little in the way of heavy weapons, mostly fifty year old Davvy hand me downs, comm systems are good though; AFFS standards...transport and a few AFV’s from the Chesterton Dragoons, they think we’re cute.” I growled that last, but I was getting tired of General Makepeace’s condescending attitude towards my collection of riff raff, pirates and Capellan scum; as he put it.

I looked up then with a smile; “The First Prince sent us two bonuses though...didn’t expect either. It seems he’s routing some of the SLDF troopers he’s been recruiting to

me, some kind of special project..." My mind drifted back to the conversation I'd had with our new liege during our trip.... I didn't like keeping things from Sam and Alex, but my orders were for the Baron Gilmour, not the Major Gilmour if OPERATION CRUCIS were to bear fruit it had to be kept quiet.

"B?" Al looked at me curiously. I shook myself and grinned sheepishly. "Sorry guys playing fast and loose with the photon budget."

Sam snorted; "I know that feeling, welcome to the club...so what was the second thing?"

"A battalion of medium and light 'Mechs mostly Phoenix Hawk-D's, Shad's and Wasps all old school but still, better than what the Dragoons handed off on us." I'd said it off hand, but the look of shock on their faces was comical.

"How many from the Force?" Sam asked carefully as I poured myself a cup of coffee.

"Nineteen 'Mech jocks, and almost two hundred techs, armor crews and infantry troopers, more importantly a large percentage of them are experienced noncoms."

Sam smiled sadly then... "So when are you leaving the Tigers?"

I sputtered out the mouthful of hot java, burning my tongue.

Huh? Years later Sam and I would chuckle about this day, as Sarah said I really am clueless.

Quck and dirty TOE

Chesterton Training Battalion (Regiment)

15 July 2784

Note All ranks are given as AFFS most officers are Terran or exSLDF

Headquarters Section

Major Bruce Gilmour Elite MAD-3SLRG Marauder

Captain Xu Li Cheng Veteran SHD-2H Shadow Hawk

Arthur Kowalski Veteran MAD-3SLRG Marauder

Eleanor Soldano Regular BMB-12SLRG Bombardier

Major Pete Callahan Elite Command Van

Leftenant Mike Kelso Elite SAS Team

4xRipper VTOL

1xMASH unit

Various trucks and other prime movers

Artillery Section

Captain Ming Lee Regular 18xThumper

6xSniper

Scout Section

Captain Truk Tranh Elite Foot Infantry (Varies) Platoon
4xRipper VTOL
Captain Nerva Ramos Elite MON-66b Mongoose
Leftenant Erika D'anzio Regular PXH-1D Phoenix Hawk
Daniel St.Croix Veteran TLN-8Z Talon
Vincent Delgado Veteran TLN-8Z Talon
Leftenant Joshua Poulson 6x Pegasus Light Hover Tank

1st Battalion ('Mech)

Battalion Command Lance
Captain Gracie Liu Elite MAD-3SLRG Marauder
Leftenant George DePalma Elite PXH-1D Phoenix Hawk
1st Company (Attack) Green
Leftenant Samuel Muy Regular CN-9A Centurion
5xCN-9A Centurion, 6xTBT-5N Trebuchet
2nd Company (Strike) Regular
Leftenant Jerry King Elite PXH-1D Phoenix Hawk
5xPXH-1D Phoenix Hawk, 6xWSP-1D Wasp
3rd Company (Strike) Green
Leftenant Tracy Hillary Veteran PXH-1D Phoenix Hawk
5xPXH-1D Phoenix Hawk, 6xWSP-1D Wasp
4th Company (Attack) Regular
Captain Scott Mackenzie Elite BMB-12SLRG Bombardier
Leftenant Jenna Thompson Veteran SHD-2H Shadow Hawk
11x SHD-2H Shadow Hawk

2nd Battalion (Infantry) Mechanized

Captain Rachel Vinson Veteran Foot Infantry Platoon (Rifle)
4xWheeled APC
5th Company (Mechanized) Regular
Leftenant Kevin Llewellyn Veteran Foot Infantry Platoon (SRM)
3xFoot Infantry Platoon (MG), 16xWheeled APC, 4x Mortar Carriers

6th Company (Mechanized) Green

Leftenant Amy McGillis Veteran Foot Infantry Platoon (SRM)
3xFoot Infantry Platoon (MG), 16xWheeled APC, 4x Mortar Carriers

7th Company (Mechanized) Regular

Captain Mark Vanderhoven Veteran Foot Infantry Platoon (SRM)
3xFoot Infantry Platoon (MG), 16xWheeled APC, 4x Mortar Carriers

8th Company (Armor) Regular

Leftenant Evan Rosenberg Elite Vedette Light Tank
11x Vedette Light Tank

3rd Battalion (Infantry) Mechanized
Captain Rod Singh Elite Foot Infantry Platoon (Rifle)
4xWheeled APC
9th Company (Mechanized) Regular
Leftenant Dana Munoz Veteran Foot Infantry Platoon (SRM)
3xFoot Infantry Platoon (MG), 16xWheeled APC, 4x Mortar Carriers

10th Company (Mechanized) Green
Leftenant Jenny Nakagama Veteran Foot Infantry Platoon (SRM)
3xFoot Infantry Platoon (MG), 16xWheeled APC, 4x Mortar Carriers

11th Company (Mechanized) Green
Captain Mark Vanderhoven Veteran Foot Infantry Platoon (SRM)
3xFoot Infantry Platoon (MG), 16xWheeled APC, 4x Mortar Carriers

12th Company (Armor) Regular
Leftenant Kenneth Deville Elite Vedette Light Tank
11x Vedette Light Tank

4th Battalion (Infantry/Support)
Major John Zazula Elite Combat Engineer Platoon
Captain Nathan Coe Regular Combat Engineer Platoon
8xWheeled APC, 8xEngineer Vehicles 8xBridging Vehicles

13th Company (SAS) Regular
Captain Didi Moran Elite SAS team
1xRipper VTOL
3xJump Infantry Platoons (Varies), 1xFoot Infantry Platoon (Varies)
13xKarnov VTOL

15th Company (Gunship) Green
Leftenant Kelly Burnham Veteran Longbow VTOL (Use Warrior replace all weapons
with LRM-15+3 Tons ammo)

Lansdowne Barracks, Landing
Chesterton, Federated Suns
11 November, 2784

Alex Winter looked up as Bruce collapsed in the seat next to him. The pair was among the first of the 90th's command staff to arrive in the main conference room. Sipping at their coffee they waited quietly for Alex's father and the rest of the command staff to arrive.

B looks exhausted, CJ said Sarah's worried, he's pushing real hard.

“Heard you handed the Dragoons a rough ride.” Alex said.

Bruce shrugged and grunted.

“They got arrogant, still think we’re some gang of street toughs,” He laughed, “Of course we are sort of...” the Gunslinger trailed off. “Well not anymore, we’ve rocked the Dragoons two out of five, their troops talk to us now, not so much the staff officers, but the line troops...I think we’re having an effect.”

“Hopefully it will be enough.” said the short dark man in the doorway. His suit was an Armani retro influenced by the 1940’s currently the height of style in the Hegemony. He stepped over to the side table and poured a cup of coffee.

“Hmm good stuff, you must be Samuel’s boys; he’s very proud of you.” His accent was pure New York with a slight Spanish accent. Dominican maybe Alex thought.

“And you are?” Bruce asked amused.

“Dr. Alberto Suarez, at your service,” Suarez gave a seated bow, “Planetologist and political scientist, Department of Communications.”

“Hey ‘Berto how goes it?” Sam asked as he entered taking his seat at the head of the table. Christian, Justine and John Zazula filed in followed by a tall willowy blonde woman with emerald green eyes in the uniform of an AFFS officer.

“Erika?” Bruce looked surprised.

“Major.” The woman nodded cordially.

“Major Gilmour of course you know Lieutenant D’anzio or rather Special Agent Erica Tomlinson; CIB.” Dr. Suarez drawled sharing a grin with Sam.

Bruce’s eyes narrowed. “Terra planted a spook in my unit.” He stated flatly. “As the recruit most likely to command my scout ‘Mechs, *lovely*.”

Every Tiger in the room stiffened at Bruce’s tone, the Gunslinger was most dangerous when he was calm and cool. Erika obviously knew that because she blanched.

“*Easy*, Bruce.” Sam said. There was no force to his voice, just a quiet tone of command. Like a switch was thrown the slender Major leaned back and smiled.

“Agent Tomlinson was placed here to monitor our mission,” Dr. Suarez recovered smoothly. “As you might have guessed she is an exceptional ‘Mech pilot and scout which puts her in a great place to observe and report.” He fixed Bruce with a hawkish glare. “Things are beginning to get real Major Gilmour and you need to be on the ball.”

Suarez rose and brought up a holo screen.

"In short people we may be looking at the end of civilization."

Chapter 3: The Weight of Reality

*Feels like the weight of the world,
Like God in heaven gave me a turn.
Don't cling to me; I swear I can't fix you.
Still in the dark, can you fix me?*

Evanescence, Weight of the World

Well the man certainly knows how to get your attention. I thought. Sam looked like he expected the statement and oddly neither did Erika. I looked at the projections hanging in mid air as an uproar broke out. My own training as both a scout and an interest in history that every one of my mentors has encouraged over the years led me to look for patterns. Flows of cause and effect if you will that stand out.

And there they were. In the worst possible places.

"With the dissolution of the Star League, naturally everyone is expecting at least some conflict." Dr. Suarez was explaining. "What not even the most pessimistic of viewpoints realizes just how bad it is going to get. Or how soon, General Kerensky's desertion has acted like an accelerant, CIB's best estimate is that within three to five years the Inner Sphere will be locked in a war that will make all previous wars look like schoolyard spats."

"Most likely we will see either the Draconis Combine or the Free Worlds League as the flashpoint as both Kenyon Marik and Minoru Kurita have been increasingly aggressive with their neighbors. From there it will spread like wildfire. Both nations seem to be operating under a very dangerous fallacy."

As he paused, Suarez manipulated the console in front of him. A map of known human space appeared.

"The false assumption they are working under is that total victory is possible." On the screen the red of the Combine flowed out to envelope the whole of Human Space. "The reasons Total Victory is impossible are many but the most glaring fault is this no one state has the resources to conquer then occupy another while at the same time defending against its neighbors." On the screen the Combine attempted the same conquest once again only to have Terra, the Federated Suns and the Lyran Commonwealth hammer them back. At the same time the Capellans and the Free Worlds League launched their own attacks, preventing any one state from gaining supremacy.

"While some worlds will naturally change hands and be kept imagine the case of an industrial world like Chesterton or Kathil, hundreds of millions if not billions of people to indoctrinate, police, to rule. The entirety of the AFFS for example would barely be able to take and hold Luthien or Sian for the length of time necessary to turn either world into a nominally loyal

possession.”

Sipping at his coffee for a moment the short swarthy man shook his head.

“No my friends, they will tell themselves that fueled by the riches of the newly conquered territories they will be able to sustain their wars. Again we come to another flaw. Those conquered territories will take years to become productive again. Based on both CIB and DMI estimates at the very least initially both Combine and Capellan strategies also include the destruction of enemy war materials factories, ship yards and so forth.”

And of course we will retaliate in kind, and...

“These strategies will rapidly spiral out of control as the wars continue and the definition of War Materials is expanded to include the opposition’s entire infrastructure as has happened time and time again. Use of weapons of mass destruction will most likely be employed against heavily defended worlds and the destruction unleashed will render most of the important worlds little more than pyrrhic trophies.”

Across the map major industrial worlds died in all six of the major powers. Just as importantly lines of trade between worlds flickered out.

“As the conflict continues we come to the final death blow. Trade dies. Ask yourselves what is the mortar that keeps any civilization together? Education, close, community not a bad answer, but what make all these things possible?”

We all nodded like school children the amusement at the sight fading quickly.

“As trade dies, so do we. As losses to naval shipping mount, the merchant fleets will be pressed into service. This will mean less consumer goods, food, and medicine to get to the civilian populations. Replacement parts for water purification plants and terraforming plants will be delayed or never arrive. Famine, disease and social collapse will soon follow.”

“And there you have it.” Sam said.

Late that night when I returned home the first thing I did was look in on my children.

Paul and Rhiannon not even four were deep asleep. When I reached out to stroke a hair out Rhi’s face she reached out and gently clasped my finger. A quiet motion caught my attention and I turned slightly. Synthia stood in the doorway, her luminous eyes gleaming in the dark. At the foot of the bed Xiang, Sarah’s Devil Cat raised its great furry head briefly then went back to sleep, purring contentedly.

My adopted daughter, all of eleven years old gave me a look that said; “*What’s wrong?*” Adjusting her oversized “Property of West Point” T-shirt she came over.

My answering look said simply; *The usual, what else...*

But thoughts of New Home, when the Rim Worlds Republic Navy had gained a brief

window of space superiority ran through my head. Fire had rained from the skies. Thousands had died.

This was going to be worse? And Syn's serious about becoming a 'MechJock in three years she'll be an apprentice.

Syn came over and hugged me whispering; "It'll be okay daddy."

That was how Sarah found us a little while later.

*HAF Base Fort Lewis
North American Administrative District
Terra, Terran Hegemony
10 January, 2785*

Kailey, my love;

Well your brothers have graduated and are now 'MechWarriors, no doubt they have written you with tales of the glory they'll reap. Don't worry; I've managed to get myself posted to their unit. My prior service has awarded me the rank of Captain and the position of Battalion XO. Our unit is being shipped out to fill out a newly forming unit on the Free Worlds border.

That's the bad news, Baby; it's a hell of a long way away. We talked about this, but so did Sol and I. We are scheduled to ship out on February seventh; we should know our final destination before then.

I've got to go now, loads of paperwork to do, but if you need me just post on Yelp or text me. God I miss you.

Love;

Hank

Hank leaned back in his chair. Looking around his sparse office he exhaled sharply. A week of sixteen hour days getting the 312th Provisional Battalion together with no end in sight, you took what time you could to write your wife. He'd have preferred to call but the 312th was under operational silence, and Hank knew his mail was being vetted by Hegemony or Republic Military Intelligence.

New name, and Terrans ain't the same old crew, we did that, Hank thought, all for the Glory of a dead House.

Hank was sure the five other Houses didn't understand the change that had come over the Terran state and its people. They were harder now, and Hank almost felt sorry for the morons who based on Terran intel were only a couple of years away from testing

that new resolve.

Almost.

Still they were going to try. Kenyon Marik was becoming increasingly more aggressive. Barbara Liao's Capellan Confederation while not being aggressive had undergone a massive build up of men and machines. And while the Lyrans and the Federated Suns were still friendly the Dragon was...quiet. That last bit disturbed Hank the most.

A storm was coming, and Hank knew he'd be in the middle of it.

...naturally you will retain your Terran rank, but I think it prudent for you to accept a commission in the AFFS. The Chesterton Training Regiment will be entered into the lists of Front Line Formations in mid February as the 4th Crucis Lancers and having a mercenary officer in charge...

Yada, Yada, Yada...okay Uncle John I get it already. I thought as I brought the attached documents up in the air in front of me and signed on the bottom line with a flourish. John Davion had cc the message to Sarah, Sam Winters and General Makepeace and both had sent replies to me. Oddly enough General Makepeace's had been pleasant for once.

John was right, in the Chesterton Dragoons' commander's objections to us was based on my status as a mercenary not any real problem with me personally.

I sighed; just like that I was no longer a Tiger. Well not really, unbeknownst to the good General I still held a commission in the Terran...Republic (Amanda's reorganization of the Terran State had taken everyone by surprise.) as a Major. But to all intents and purposes...I turned to the uniforms on their hangers in my office's small closet. Sarah had sent them to me that morning.

I took the duty uniform with the rank tabs of an AFFS Colonel off its hanger and changed.

Scott Mackenzie did a double take as his superior officer and friend walked into the conference room. It took a minute for his mind to grasp what he was seeing.

"So do the Davion's celebrate Halloween early or is this a joke." He quipped.

"Neither, Scott Sam saw this coming, and I've got a question for you *Major*." Bruce held out a PADD.

"Major? But I've only got the one..." Scott stopped.

"You'll have the makings of two more companies soon a mix of *Ostsofs* and *Griffins*." Scott hesitated looking over the document on the PADD. *Citizenship in the Federated*

Suns, AFFS commission as a Major...Title of Landed Knight?!

A chuckle made him look up. Scott's puzzlement must have been evident.

"Yeah, John's been pretty generous...but that brings us to what's really going on." His friend's eye twinkled. "But I can only tell you if you're in..."

Sound's great but...well...I thought we'd be going home. Scott shook his head as if to clear it. *Then again I thought Liz and I would make a life together.*

"You don't have to tell me now..." Bruce started. With a quick scrawl Scott signed and hit submit on the PADD and handed it back. "...Okaaay." Flipping his braid over his back he stood and extended his hand.

As Scott shook it Bruce smiled; "Welcome to the 4th Crucis Lancers Major Mackenzie."

Sam looked at his son with a wry expression on his face.

"So how many did Bruce poach?" He asked.

"Most of his company, Gracie's gonna have her hands full..."

"Gracie's staying?" Alex nodded to answer his dad's question.

"Bruce passed his recommendation that she succeed him as Regimental Gunslinger."

Sam nodded, "Done, we'll have to have the ceremony." Alex grinned. There would be a night to remember.

"I'll set it up; Truk's gone too, as well as Didi's team..." Sam looked up in surprise. 'Yeah, it shocked the hell out of me to, but y'know how tight they are. Anyway Josh Harding's completed his training and he works well with his team, but John Zazula's pretty annoyed, Captain Singh and most of his company accepted the Davvy terms."

"And you?"

"He didn't ask." Sam heard a tone in his son's voice.

"I know, I asked him not to..." Alex looked up in surprise. "He told me he didn't think you'd bite but he was going to ask you anyway."

"But then why?" Alex asked puzzled.

"I'm not getting any younger, Al somebody's going to have to run the Tigers and that's you. Oh Chris or Justine could do it, but neither of them wants the job and Isokoru is

looking to retire soon too, say five or six years, looks like he's going to run our training operations here." He stared off into space while Alex digested the information.

"Our and John Davion's anyway. But that's the mission."

"Davvy intel's on our case about the 'Kaze and their dependents again. I thought Prince John had put a stop to that." Alex said annoyance flashing across his face.

"I spoke to Sarah about that, one of Lady Green's former lovers is making trouble, she's going to get him reassigned. They've settled in well though."

The Tiger's Combine expats had formed a unique community that had infected the regiment as a whole. With a death toll on Earth topping a billion, Sam's troopers had returned to a bittersweet homecoming. As a result, family had an importance that was almost religious.

Now drop in several dozen families whose fortunes great or small had been wiped out at the stroke of a pen. They formed a core around which other newer families clung to. Combine traditions of courtesy, honor and community, mixed with both Terran ones and the multicultural whorl of Chesterton.

Something new was developing that Sam couldn't quantify, except for a general feeling of strength, and vibrant life. Alex and C.J. had already entrenched themselves firmly in this new culture. Sam and Samantha...the thought of the Regiment's Chief Medical Officer brought him up short.

"At any rate, Bruce has a strong core of Terran troops for his little experiment, and we're not any weaker, the Regent has sent us a contingent of recruits looking for some adventure."

Alex gave his father a sour grimace. *Adventure...yeah right.* Sam stood up then and checked his uniform in the polish of his desk.

"I've got dinner with Samantha in a few so...?"

"Have fun Dad...and don't stay out to late." Alex grinned at his father's glower.

Changes had come to the Tigers, some military in nature...some not.

"Oh by the way," Sam said with an evil smile, "Speaking of the Regent; the FedSuns' Diplomatic service just contacted me They're coming here."

"Who?" Alex asked.

"Ian and Amanda Sinclair and their entourage and a battalion of Fusiliers."

“What!” Alex sat back down in his chair like a shot.

“Along with John Davion and a like group, some diplomatic conference, plus Amanda wants to see her little buddy the Duchess. You’ll need to set up the security arrangements and liaise with General McCormack when she arrives with the advance detail.”

“Shouldn’t Bruce’s gang be...”

Sam snorted, “Not likely, they’re way to rough and the Duchess wants us with the Dragoons running exercises across the other worlds in our little empire here, we’ve got priority.”

“Great.” Alex said glumly.

“Suck it up Alex it’s all part of the job.”

**Lansdowne Barracks, Landing
Chesterton, Federated Suns
13 January, 2785**

As I shook his hand Bruce smiled; “Welcome to the 4th Crucis Lancers Major Mackenzie.”

Once Bruce left I sat there alone in the conference room, pondering what I had just done. Looking at the orders that were just transferred to my PADD I couldn’t shake the feeling that I had just sold my soul to the devil. I shoved that thought aside. I trusted B, if he believed it was the right choice, then it was. It would all work out in the end; of that I tried to convince myself. More immediately, I was a damned Major now. Hell, I was just getting used to being a Captain. *Was it really just 5 years ago that I was sitting in that Hong Kong hotel holding my brand-new Lieutenant’s bar and missing Liz half a world away?* That provoked a sore subject. Liz. *I wonder where she is now? To hell with her; she made her choice in leaving me and deserting Terra and I’ve got a job to do here.*

The fact that I was now nobility – a Landed Knight of the Realm – bothered me. Just like B to spread the joy now that he was a Duke. Like most Terrans, I could care less about nobility; that was for the Colonials to worry about. More to the point, I was just a common, ordinary soldier. Well, maybe not “ordinary”, but I was certainly a commoner in the eyes of the status-conscious peerage of the Federated Suns. In their eyes I would never be their equal. Hell, Sarah Davion, niece of Prince John Davion, Duchess of Chesterton, and the wife of my best friend was just “Sarah” to me. Then I wondered where my new “lands” were and who was living there. Except for commanding those under me, I had no idea how to rule people. *Hopefully Sarah could give me a few pointers, ‘cause I’m sure Bruce has no idea.*

I headed back to my makeshift office to get started on my new job. It would take time to go through my “recruits” to find the ones suitable for Company and Lance command. One of the first things I had to do was submit the paperwork to get Jenna Thompson, my current XO and

fellow Tiger, transferred and promoted to Captain. She'd been my rock-solid second-in-command ever since I became a Lieutenant and there was no way I was going to give her up. Then there were the 'Mechs. I know "Uncle" John was being generous, but having worked with Royal models for so many years, it was hard to adjust to the low-tech Colonial 'Mechs assigned to my new unit. *ShadowHawks, Griffins, and Ostsols, oh my!* I chuckled at that thought. At least *Boom-Boom* would be able to keep up with them. I'd have to remember to ask B how we're going to get replacement parts for her.

The basics completed, I headed over to the 'Mech bays. I needed some "alone time" to get a grasp on all that just happened. *Boom-Boom's* cockpit was as much a home as anywhere else and the place I felt most comfortable. Passing through the common area of the base, I saw Dido Moran coming my way. Her face held a confused expression that I was certain mirrored my own.

When she was close enough, she called out, "Hey, Rat. Good day for a stroll, huh?"

I smiled and said, "That's *Major* Rat to you, DiDi."

The realization of what I had said took a moment to filter through her mind. She replied with, "You too? Good. I was certain B wouldn't leave you out."

"When did he talk to you?"

"A few minutes ago." She shook her head gently. "I'm still trying to get a grip on what just happened."

I laughed softly. "Yeah, me too. Kinda feel like you've sold your soul and abandoned family?"

"Something like that."

"Well," I said, looking her in the eyes, "B's never led us wrong before. We have to trust that he's making the right call on this one too."

A wan smile formed on DiDi's face. "I hear ya."

We each went our separate ways and soon I was standing in front of my most prized possession, my beloved *Bombardier, Boom-Boom*. My eyes lingered over the art I had painted on her lower left leg. When I first received the *Bombardier* back in '78 after the Battle of Chicago, I painted a buxom blonde in tight-fitting fatigues holding a missile pack on each shoulder. Shortly after I had met Liz Hazen I had re-painted it to look like a slightly less buxom redhead with slightly looser clothing. I told myself that way it would always seem like she was there with me. Nobody in the unit believed me, except for Liz. *Damn, why do my thoughts always turn to her! She's gone – for good - and I've gotta come to terms with it. I should probably re-paint the leg art soon. Maybe I'll go with black hair this time.*

I jumped into the lift and habitually did a visual survey of my 'Mech. The flat black paint with red claw marks on the shoulders still looked mint. A sadness passed over me when I realized that

new colors were coming soon. I hoped that B would let me keep the leg art. I climbed into the cockpit and sat in the jump seat behind the linear frame that controlled the 'Mech. The linear frame, while ideal for maneuvering the 'Mech, was not well-suited for comfortably relaxing. Then again, neither is the jump seat but at least there I'm sitting down. I powered up *Boom-Boom*'s systems to idle and enjoyed the quiet. I must have sat there for a couple of hours, reminiscing over all that had happened since I joined the Tigers back in '72. My thoughts came to an end when I realized that I wasn't heading back home to Terra anytime soon. *I'm no longer part of the SLDF, no longer a Tiger, but I am a soldier and soldiers adapt and move on. Chesterton is my home now and I'll make the most of it while I'm here.*

I felt strength and a sense of purpose come back into me as I said to myself, "The 4th Crucis Lancers may not be the Tigers, but when I'm done, my Battalion is certainly going to be just like them. Davvy propriety be damned."

The Cell, Maskirovka Compound, Forbidden City
Sian
Capellan Confederation
19 January, 2785

Gregory Varnay looked up from his computer terminal as his liege lord swept in. Barbara Liao pinned him with a raw almost feral stare.

"So it's true, Kerensky's gone." She said coolly.

"So it appears, Celestial Wisdom. We have few assets in Combine space, but as far as we can tell the Star League Defense Force armada has left known space. This concurs with the Statement provided us by the Draco ambassador"

The Chancellor nodded digesting the information; "Have you gotten a chance to review CASE CHERRY BOMB?"

"I have indeed, with the League troops gone, I would recommend using either the Turin Light Cavalry or your husband's own Highlanders to handle this operation, given the information supplied by or assets on Chesterton, the Tigers will be off world on training exercises with both the Chesterton Dragoons and the 5th Davion Guards after the Terran Regent's conference. The only opposition will be this Chesterton Training Battalion and the local Militia. Our troops under the guise of pirates should be able to overwhelm the local forces and leave behind a substantial core of operatives to set up CHERRY BOMB."

"Set it up, John has been agitating for some action anyway, have we any more information on the CTB?"

"No Highness, their commander still has them isolated from the general population, but

unless they are getting far more support then we can see, their makeup is mostly mechanized infantry with about a battalion of BattleMechs."

Liao nodded a pensive look on her face.

"Still, their commander is a sneaky bastard, have him terminated as the Highlanders jump in. John can handle him but I'd rather not take chances."

"By your command."

Varnay sent out a pre planned command to go in under diplomatic cyphers to his operatives on the Davion possession.

Ducal Palace, Landing, Chesterton...

The scene was all too familiar, Sarah, dressed impeccably as usual straightened the collar of my dress uniform, and adjusted the gold sunburst vest that hung like an armored breastplate across the left side of my chest. She chuckled at the look on my face. I hate these things, at least the 90th's Dress uniforms had been comfortable. Still it's not every day the Regent of the Terran Republic, the Last Cameron and the First Prince came to call on little old Chesterton.

"You have done this before you know..." she said grinning up at me.

"Never like this, hon, I mean we're not their equals but this is our world."

Sarah reached up and stroked my cheek.

"Just be yourself."

At the same time, inbound...

Amanda Sinclair looked over at Ian as her husband fidgeted with his dress uniform. Shaking her head she smiled.

"Relax you look fine." She said.

"It's not that, these damn collars are too tight." He grinned ruefully. Captain Maria MacRae chuckled in the back ground as she prepared the couple's honor guard.

"It's only for a little while, Ian." A rumbling from the access way ended as the hatch opened on a corridor to the spaceport. At the other end stood an honor guard from the 90th Heavy Assault Regiment, led by Lieutenant Colonel Alex Winter. Amanda grinned as she saw Sarah behind them. After the short walk down the gangway the pair found themselves in a boarding lounge full of reporters.

Smiling and waving at the throng she checked her surprise as she took in Major no Colonel

Gilmour in the dress uniform of an AFFS officer. It seemed wrong somehow. The posing for a photo op was blissfully brief and the group filled into a waiting limo. BattleMechs and armored cars from both the Sinclair Fusiliers and Black Tigers paced the limo as they drove the short distance to Ducal Palace.

Both Ian and Bruce reached up almost in unison and opened the collars of their dress jackets. Grinning at the younger man, Ian nodded at the Sunburst vest.

“That thing heavy, my Lord?” He asked. Bruce looked down at his uniform and shrugged.

“Not so much, and please Ian, my Lord? Really?”

Chuckling Ian grinned raising his hands, “Hey didn’t want to cause an international incident here...” He paused. “You look worn out, thought t’was the life of a country Baron for you...”

Alex laughed from his position by the door. He’d seen Sarah’s grimace.

“His Devil Cats don’t give him much rest.”

“You’re still letting him play soldier, Sarah?” Amanda laughed.

“Blame Uncle John,” Sarah said, “If I had my way...” She smiled teasingly at her husband. Ian had leaned forward interested in how the new unit was shaping up and Bruce obliged him.

“Some supply problems, and I have more MechJocks then ‘Mechs, but our conventional support is pretty good, no transport or aerospace assets yet...” Sarah shook her head as she and Amanda traded looks.

We’ll let the boys talk shop. Amanda’s look said.

“So, is your tour going as planned?” Sarah asked Amanda, the idea the Director-General had and Sarah herself had worked out some of the details of was now in full swing.

“Minoru pretends to listen, but he won’t deal, Kenyon’s reply was to offer to garrison the Hegemony for us...” Sarah snorted, like that would ever happen. “But Jenny...Jennifer Steiner and I have gotten the ground work laid out, as have John and surprisingly Barbara Liao.”

“Her Divine Celestialness deigned to reply?” Sarah was surprised.

“Oh I’m sure if the Republic looks weak, then then our dear friend Barbie will think nothing of...” Amanda searched for the right words.

“Taking Terran worlds under the benign protection of herself.”

“Exactly.”

“...So TRAS?” Amanda heard Bruce say. “Should have gone with RAF.”

“It’s TRAS.” Ian said. “Terran Republic Armed Services.”

“Just sayin’.”

“Nope.”

“Okay.”

Sarah and Amanda shared a look that said simply; *Boys.*

Off the south coast of Cavanaugh, Chesterton’s only continent, two continental plates which had been pressing against each other with unimaginable force suddenly slipped into a new alignment. The earth shook. Such things were rare but when they happened on a world with so much ocean... The tidal wave when it hit land would be massive. Under Lady Greene’s regime the sonar and radar net that had been set up to warn of such danger had suffered. Sarah had instituted a plan to reconstruct the net, but progress was slow. Too slow.

Chapter 4: Trials

Life is chaos, we try to impose a little order on things and for the most part manage to get by. But every so often usually at the most inopportune moments the universe reminds us just how little control we have.

Colonel Bruce Gilmour, Personal Journals AFFS Archives

A nice quiet dinner among friends was just what we needed, Ian reflected. The veranda outside the Ducal Palace was pleasant, the air with just a touch of chill in the air. Sipping on a local plum wine he made a mental note to have a case brought home with him. Sam Winters and Samantha Wynndham were chatting idly with Amanda and Ian took a moment to admire the match the pair made.

It’s good to see Sam happy, he’s ready to retire and with the deal John Davion gave the Tigers Chesterton makes a hell of a home.

Iuchi Kei in Davvy standard fatigues strode out on the veranda. Bowing respectfully to Amanda and Sarah the ex DEST operative leaned over and whispered into Bruce’s ear. Dropping his serving fork he turned to Sarah, shock on his face.

“Babe, a tidal wave just hit Port Baxter and New Nova Scotia.” Looking at Kei he nodded. She turned and addressed the gathering.

“At 2100 hours a tidal wave six meters high when it made land fall swept into Port Baxter without warning, swamping the resort community. No casualty estimates yet but given the time of year they are likely to be high. A local news reporter at the Hilton which due to its

construction survived intact is the only news source from inside the area.

New Nova Scotia took far less damage, the local emergency services along with the Militia have the situation in hand for now, but they too will need support.”

While Kei was explaining, Bruce was on his pocket comp talking to Erika von Manstien the watch officer. Ian caught the tail end of it.

“...have Puma Company loaded up in *Planetlifters* with the marines; they’ll be on scene at least a couple of hours before we can get there, use the disaster relief pods liberally, those we’ve got enough of at least. Oh, yeah listen, have Chief Sung put *Hussy’s* DI in my relief *P-Hawk*, yeah I know, but that *Hawk’s* gonna be a hell of a lot better than..” He nodded absently to Erika’s question. “Yeah we’ve trained for this, so let’s go do it....no I’ll go in with Kzin Company, Jake’s on leave so he can take over when he gets in...ok lets roll!”

B and Gracie explain the SLDF policy on alcohol.

Star League Defense force rules prohibit the production of alcoholic beverages (But not the drinking of...). Shut up Gracie..where was I? Ohh yeah on or with Star League property...

While there is no prohibition against drinking on duty....shut up Gracie. (I didn't say anything B!)...you were going to. Anywhoo there is a strong prohibition against being unfit for duty. (You mean like that time on Elbar....)

Gracie.

Yeah B

Who taught you everything you know...

Gulp!

[grin]
