

Ghosts of the Dead A Shattered Dawn AU story

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For your amusement. After reading Living Legends again, and groaning at the poor execution I thought to myself what would happen if The Warriors of Kerensky met Cameron's Sledgehammers.

Ghosts of the Dead

A Shattered Dawn AU story

By Blacktigeractual

Chapter One: An unlikely series of events.

Discontinuity...

My first thought was that this jump had taken way too long. My second was that the stars were totally wrong.

"Status report." Emily Hayes barked on the bridge of the SLS *Tiger Claw*. Bridge crew staggered around us as sparks shot from various consoles.

Dieter Malin the *Tiger Claw's* XO staggered to his feet and ran through a dozen pages of his holographic console.

"Captain we have emerged from Jump in good order, IFF's are reporting all ships accounted for..."

The twenty seven year veteran of the Star League Navy gasped suddenly.

"Dieter what?" Emily croaked through a voice raspy from smoke and ozone.

"Captain, star charts indicate we are at a pirate point in the Tamar system."

"What?" I wasn't sure if it was Emily or I who spoke but that put us way off course.

Dieter looked up at a loss for words. My limited knowledge of Naval systems backed him up though and the world glowing dime sized on the main screen confirmed it.

"Captain we have multiple unknown contacts heading for the planet! Unknown vessel types. Fighters matching known Lyran designs are engaging."

Samuel Winters, Colonel of the 90th Heavy Assault climbed in through the hatchway woozy from our apparent misjump he looked over at me.

"We're in the Tamar system boss, don't know how or why, but it looks like someone's hitting the Lyran's."

As I spoke the *Tiger Claw's* comm officer called out.

"We have communications from both sides."

"Let's hear it." Captain Hayes ordered.

The speakers crackled with a Russian accented female voice.

“Defenders of Tamar know you that Clan Wolf claims your world, what forces contest our claim.”

Huh? I thought who the fuck is Clan Wolf?

“Approaching vessels you are encroaching on the Territory of the Federated Commonwealth, heave to and prepare to be boarded or you will be fired upon.” Came the voice of the Tamar Planetary Control.

Before I could ask who the hell was the Federated Commonwealth the Russian chick came back on.

“Honey we’re gonna do a hell of a lot more than encroach so you had better do better than that.”

Ballsy bitch I thought.

Sam was more on the ball than I was even at that point and he turned to Captain Hayes.

“Em these idiots are invading Star League turf, can we get in their way?”

“Sam half my systems are out of wack, so’s half the fleet; the best we can do is launch fighters and get your kids planetside.” She answered.

“Do it. B get everybody together for a hot drop.” Sam ordered.

“Gotcha Boss.” As I raced along the hand holds for the Cat’s Eye calling out orders over the TACNET I thought to myself; Don’t know who the guys are but they’re going to learn what happens when wolves fuck with tigers.

Wolf Clan DropShip *Lair*
Inbound Tamar, Tamar Pact
Federated Commonwealth
07 November, 3051

Natasha Kerensky grinned at the Lyran command’s banal reply to her challenge. The forces on world, the 26th Lyran Guards RCT and the Duke’s collection of household troops and cadets would be a fine match for her Golden Keshik and the Wolves Alpha Galaxy. Stretching she relished the fight to come.

Warden or not there is something about violence that is good for the soul.

“My Khan, the Lair’s sensor operator called out, “We have unknown contacts bearing two eight six mark five we are receiving IFF transponder signals now.” As the Wolf Clan Khan looked at the sensor tech the woman stiffened and gasped.

“What is it?” Kerensky barked.

“My Khan this is impossible, sensors read ships as the SLS *Tiger Claw* Kingure Class Heavy Cruiser, SLDS *Cat’s Eye* Union Class DropShip, SLDS *Sledge Hammer* Dictator Class....” The technician’s voice rattled off an impossible list of names which repeated themselves in the Holotank in the center of the Lair’s bridge.

Information scrolled across her screens none of it helpful. The SLS *Tiger Claw* listed as destroyed in the big furball above Terra three hundred years ago while escorting the doomed attempt by the SLDF to rescue thirty hostages of noble blood held by Stefan Amaris in New York City. The North American SDS had shot the hell out of the Star League troops and their escorts in orbit. None had made it to the planet.

What the hell, did Com Star salvage her? On the main screen the proud WarShip gave lie to her computer's data glowing brightly in Star League colors. Suddenly around both the WarShip and the lesser vessels around her dozens of bright lights flared in what Natasha recognized as fighter launches.

"Inbound fighters unknown types, my Khan they read like Star League craft, but something is not right."

"Show me!" Natasha snapped.

The image of a swept wing fighter appeared in the holotank its designation read RPR-10T Rapier. Where normally a tech readout would have been displayed there was only the legend "So sorry you can't see this puppy dog." Followed by a symbol familiar to all Clan warriors. A wolverine's head and claws.

"Straavag! The Not Named Clan here?" Star Colonel Marco Hall's voice came over the TACCNET.

"I do not think so Marco, look at the insignia. You know they screwed with the database before they left. Those are not Wolverines, they're Terrans"

Before Hall could respond to the wonder in his Khan's voice a strong male voice came over the comm channels.

"Unidentified vessels this is Colonel Samuel Winters of the 90th Heavy Assault Regiment, you are invading the sovereign territory of a Star League member state power down or be destroyed."

Advanced Clan computers matched the Colonel's voiceprint and displayed a picture of a strong Afro American male in his early fifties dressed in a SLDF uniform. A service record and bio were available. Neither of these caught Natasha's attention so much as the computer's probability of an accurate match based on vocal patterns and nuances of speech.

99.8976%

"Fuck me." Natasha hadn't realized she had spoken until her crew stared at her, shocked by her profanity.

At a loss for words the saKhan of the Wolf Clan was struck by a sudden thought that ripped a feral laugh from her.

The Black Tigers, Terror of New Vandenburg, Kerensky's Sledgehammers. Well 'Tasha you wanted interesting, it don't get better than this.

Jake Melendez cut thrust to his Rapier's port engine to spin the big fighter around to bear on the cruciform fighter trying to get on his six. Getting the buzzing tone of a weapons lock he cut loose with all his nose mounted weapons. Lightning spat to rake the fuselage of the other fighter. As it spun into an evasive maneuver the Wolf clan vessel ran straight into a gauss slug followed by a salvo of Phoenix long range missiles.

As the stricken craft spun out of control, Jake rolled in on another larger craft settling in on Peggy Galloway's six. The large fighter with a pair of forward canards spat a fusillade of laser fire at his wingman's ship. The flare of drive plasma showed evidence of major engine damage. Before the predatory craft could fire again Jake's particle cannon converged on the machine's cockpit.

As the dead fighter arrowed on in a straight line for outer space; Jake ordered Peggy to head for the barn. Before she could a bolt of lightning cut her ship in half. Another of the cruciform ships flew through the wreckage and performed a victory roll. Snarling in rage Jake pulled his craft in pursuit. Giving a wolf cry in victory; Carew whipped his Visigoth into a victory roll. These interlopers; flying machines out of legend; were way tougher than the Federated Commonwealth and Free Rasalhague Republic flyers that the Wolves had fought before. They also fought in greater numbers than standard spheroid formations.

It doesn't hurt them that their ships are almost as good as ours.

Snapping his head around he caught sight of a big fighter that looked nothing like a Star League Rapier settling in on his six o'clock. Particle fire snapped into his port wing. Knowing what was coming next Carew spun his craft into a gut wrenching series of twists and turns.

I do not think so my friend. He thought as the other craft's gauss fire slashed a few meters from his cockpit.

"Carew, those Hammerheads are carrying anti-ship missiles!" His wingman Martin called out as a wave of long range missiles snapped around him. As Carew watched in horror almost fifty heavy warheads began to hammer the DropShips of the 328th Assault Cluster splitting the Overlord Class *Daniel Express* like an overripe fruit. A brilliant flash shattered the Union Class *Lion's Heart* taking with it the Golden Lion's command staff.

"Cowards!" Spat Star Commander Gunars Ch'in of the 328th's Bravo Fighter Star.

No not cowards, Carew thought with a chill as he spun his Visigoth in yet another series of evasive maneuvers to shake his pursuer, that was a textbook Star League anti-shiping strike.

One of Ch'in's comrades in a Jagatai dove at the black and red arrow that was causing Carew so much grief. Coming in on the enemy's blind spot, Carew was surprised to see the Terran craft spin on its axis and spit a gauss slug and pair of particle bolts at the Jag.

How by Kerensky did he... Pushing his fighter into a tight curve designed to get on the other's tail, Carew remembered the virtual cockpit the Terran Royal's were rumored to have. The Clans' own craft had no access to the technology; pre-Exodus sabotage had destroyed both data on the virtual control systems and the equipment itself. Likewise the "Black Magic" control systems used by some Royal BattleMechs also had been lost.

Royal collaboration had been a sore point for much of the Exodus. Carew thought as one of his own particle cannons spiked the Rapier's wing. Pushing such thoughts into the back of his mind he concentrated on taking down this very unique very tough prey.

Clans losing the Star League advanced tech?

There is no mention of the advanced flight control system being used on any Clan fighters, in any CBT novel, likewise with the Black Magic system which is my own invention (Remember my misuse of the term Linear Frame?) given the tumult of the times it is possible that Terran Loyalists would strike out of revenge or political motivations.

The TGR-1-T-H Tiger rumbled to life around Elizabeth Hazen. The new design was only now being placed in production and the cockpit with its linear frame control system still had that "new car" smell. Tied into the Cat's Eye's comm net she was still trying to make sense of what she was hearing. The Lyrans on the ground were as confused as the Tigers were.

The only reason the troops of this "Federated Commonwealth" weren't firing on the Tigers was the space battle currently going on. Meanwhile the Tigers were getting confused orders and requests from the ground. The issue of who was in charge seemed up in the air. The Duke of Tamar Selvin Kelswa (Never mind the name didn't match the database.) was issuing grandiose proclamations demanding the 90th wipe out these foul invaders.

Saner requests came from Marshal Joy Corelli of the 26th Lyran Guards so that was what the Terrans were listening to. And then there was ComStar. The "Robes" as everyone was calling them had tried to contact them multiple times. After the first abortive conversation with the guys running (So they said) interstellar communications the Tiger commtechs had put them on hold.

And then there is me, just had to run off with your boy toy on a milk run mission, didn't you Liz.

At least Scott's company commander had offered her use of one of the Tiger's spares on the trip. So once again Liz Hazen was going into battle in a 'Mech. And once again her life had taken a strange twist.

"Liz we're hitting the face in ten minutes, you up?" Major Gilmour's voice crackled over the TACNET.

"Gotcha B, ready when you are." Feeling the power of her new machine around her, Liz grinned savagely.

It's been too long.

Colonel Sam Winter felt the change in the vibrations rocking the *Sledge Hammer* as she descended into Tamar's atmosphere. The Wolves, stymied by the space battle had drawn back under the cover of a massive *Sovetskii Soyuz* heavy cruiser. As the huge ship maneuvered for the planet, the Tiger's own fleet had fallen back to defend the stricken *Tiger Claw*. The *Claw's* Essex class escorts were also damaged although still battle worthy, but until repairs could be made to the *Claw*, they simply didn't have the firepower to challenge the Wolves.

The invaders would come, and the Tigers would resist them. But the question of who they were lay still open. The Wolves' commander had contacted Marshal Corelli politely enough. In an almost businesslike manner this Khan Natasha Kerensky had announced her intention to add Tamar to the possessions of Clan Wolf. The opposing commander had then asked if the Black Tigers of New Vandenburg would be

joining the party.

When Marshal Corelli had, having already spoken with Sam, told her yes the Khan had laughed. "Fine, I will look forward to testing the mettle of Terra's finest." Sam didn't know if the woman was insane or merely stupid, but she'd gone on to give Corelli a full list of her forces.

It's almost like a game to them. Sam thought. And the order of battle, the names of the units. Sam still couldn't believe it was coincidence. The 328th Assault Cluster, the "Lion Hearted", sounded like the Royal BattleMech Division of the same name.

And then there is the date...3051? What the hell have we gotten ourselves into?

"They're grounding now." Scott said over the TACNET. "Boss, I..."

"Yeah 'Rat, I know, I heard." I answered hoping he couldn't hear the nervousness in my voice.

3051, are you fucking kidding me? I didn't want to think about it, but my mind kept returning to what I saw and heard around me. If it was true...Gods damn it...Sarah, Syn.

Shaking my head to clear it I gave the order to move out. Around me the Black Cats' 'Mechs began to rumble forward. We had orders to anchor the Tiger right where we met up with a combat command of the 26th Lyrans Guard. Our air support was busy carving up theirs, for whatever reason that big fucking cruiser was staying out of it. Ever one to take small favors, Jake Melendez and his crew were working with the Lyrans to keep air superiority in our hands.

If these puppies had 'Mechs anything like their fighters we were in for a tough fight. According to Geoff Winger; the Guards Hauptmann commanding the mixed company on my right they did, and some kind of super power armor to boot. No armor though so the combined arms nature of both us and the 26th should balance that out.

The crash and thunder of battle sounded from up ahead. The Lyrans...FedCom positions (Whatever) were well sited and dialed in to our frequencies. A wave of Copperhead shells ripped across the sky with a tearing sound. I said a prayer to Athena to keep Didi and our Nighthawk teams safe as they TAGged and bagged the Wolves.

Fire support calls were coming in fast and hot now as both our Long Tom and Chaparral batteries along with those of the Lyrans spoke thunder. My secondary screens showed the unfamiliar Clan designs and their squat battle armor flowing forward under murderous fire. This Kerensky was going for the gusto hoping to overwhelm us. The Lyrans were not having it, good troops although I felt an odd twinge when I thought of them.

Like we'd met before and it hadn't been pretty.

Hauptmann Geoff Winger came over the open channel then, reporting a breach with calm urgency.

"Boot Four Six, this is Cat Six were on the way."

"Roger; Cat Six glad for the help."

Suddenly Hussy threw herself to her left as a pair blinding cyan laser bolts flashed by. The other 'Mech, the ones everyone called a MadCat, looking like a Catapult with a Marauder's arms bolted on tried to track me and I threw him a gauss slug for his troubles. I couldn't waste time wondering why Hussy seemed to move with such fluid grace as the MadCat sent a wave of anti armor missiles my way.

Waiting for the gauss rifle to cycle I spat two streams of charged particles at the Clan machine. One found a flaw in the Wolf 'Mech's armor where the gauss slug had hit and his heat spiked. Undaunted the Clan warrior struck back with his full complement of energy weapons. Red telltales began to show as a heat sink blew out.

"Boss these guys are serious", Gracie shouted, "Tina's down, those power suits crippled her before we could shoot 'em off."

Okay asshole, this ends now. Ducking to the right I stopped suddenly. Bracing I sent Hussy's full complement of firepower downrange. The MadCat caught in the middle of overshooting her angle of attack took everything I had right in what had to be the engine casing. Golden fire spat out the hole for a brief moment. Then the 'Mech crashed to the ground.

The Clanner must have been knocked out because she didn't eject. I spotted Didi's team nearby and made a snap decision.

"Didi, get me that pilot if she's still alive."

'Tasha sent a wave of laser fire at the Pillager facing her. Rearing back the black and red 'Mech spat gauss slugs back at her. The Wolf Khan was getting the worst of the engagement having already fought through the storm of artillery fire the defenders of Tamar had greeted her Wolves with. Instead of pushing through the defenders on a wide sweeping front the two forces were now grinding each other in a war of attrition.

One that no longer favors us. She thought. Her 279th Battle Cluster had managed a breach with its Trinary First, but no word had come after the initial call from the Whirlwinds. Engaging the full scale Star League assault battalion in front of her she hadn't time to check on them but when Star Commander Lonna's battered Adder staggered out of the woods she knew what had happened.

A black and red Marauder stalked out of the woods and pointed a claw at Lonna's Adder. Slashing a whip of charged particles across the Adder's flank the Marauder sent Lonna's 'Mech down. Lara Ward spun her Warhawk to send four particle streams back at the Terran machine.

The Marauder dodged.

Before Natasha could get over her astonishment a second machine, unfamiliar to both her and her warbook program stepped up next to the first machine and loosed a volley of missile fire and laser bolts at the Wolf assault machine. More heavy 'Mechs arrived, a mix of Marauders and Bombardiers volleying wave after wave of fire.

Spitting more laser fire at the Pillager she crowed inwardly as it fell backward. It was then the ground split open around her. A roar of fighter engines thundered past and she saw a squadron of

Hammerheads vanish into the clouds. One was slashed down by a wave of missiles, but the others were no doubt heading back to rearm.

Time to try something else; this definitely isn't going to work.

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Star Captain Katya Kerensky woke with a jerk. Looking around she saw she was in a mobile field hospital. It was the symbol on the uniforms of both the doctors and many of the wounded that told her she'd lost. The Cameron Star. A lean form rose from the side of one of the wounded. Through a drug hazed fog she noticed the crossed pistols on his lapel. The warrior's single good eye narrowed as he saw her.

"Doc, my guest is up!" He called. Katya realized this had been the man who had defeated her. As the haze from the pain killers deepened she smiled wryly at the only thought to pop in her head.

If I had to be shot out of my 'Mech by some saavishri sphereoid, at least it was a Gunslinger.

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Chapter Two; Plans, plots and Robes

Joy Corelli, Marshal in the service of the Armed Forces of the Federated Commonwealth, shook her head in disgust. Nothing she had done had gotten Selvin Kelswa to even acknowledge her presence let alone come out of his impenetrable fortress. It had taken the arrival of an honest to God Star League Defense Force unit to pry the intractable bastard out of his city.

Then again if that doesn't get your attention, nothing will. She thought in amazement.

Along one wall of her command hut the command staff of the 90th Heavy Assault stood in combat fatigues or in the case of their Gunslinger an advanced MechWarrior combat suit. Almost as unbelievable as their presence was the slim woman with white blonde hair and icy blue eyes; dressed in a SLDF jumpsuit.

The woman was a Wolf Clan officer. Despite sparse intelligence to the contrary and the appearance of the infamous Black Widow; Natasha Kerensky among the invaders; theories still abounded that they were aliens. Well the Tigers' prisoner belied that. The woman stayed close to Major Gilmour, not out of fear so much as self preservation. Around her wrist was a bracelet braided out of what appeared to be three different colored rubber bands.

The report she received from her new allies said the Clans called captured warriors bondsmen. If they showed promise doing the tasks their new masters set for them they would eventually be accepted into the Clan. Joy didn't know if she believed it or not, but the woman's captor had for some reason decided to honor the Wolf Clan custom.

When the Duke had swept in he'd tried to seize the woman, but her captor had gotten right in the Duke's face and to Joy's surprise backed the man down. She had to hide her smile as she thought of Major Gilmour's response. "You want one, your Grace; go get your own."

Cheese warning, I am not above cheezyness for the sake of humor.

Selvin Kelswa's voice snarled out another series of questions. The Blonde Clanswoman ignored him and

stared stoically ahead. The Duke swallowed his anger and turned to the Star League MechWarrior.

"Major, would you kindly instruct you charge to answer my questions." The long haired young officer gave a slight bow. Turning to his charge he spoke in low tones.

"Aff, Major, I will answer, and my name is Katya Kerensky not Kitty Kat." The woman answered.

She turned to the assemblage and began to speak.

"In answer to your question, Duke Selvin; who are we? We are the Star League Defense Force."

After the shocked gasps and angry denials had died down under Marshal Corelli's orders, Katya Kerensky told the tale reciting from a poem she called the Remembrance. She told the tale of the SLDF's flight from the Inner Sphere, the settling of a series of poor worlds far from the strife of the Succession Wars. Then she told of the war that followed, when the SLDF tore itself apart. In the end it all came out.

"So you're here to restore the Star League then." Kelswa said in wonder.

"Aff Duke Selvin, which ever Clan reaches Terra shall be declared the ilClan and will rule over a re-born Star League."

The meeting went downhill from there Joy thought later. What convinced her to end the meeting was the Duke accusing the Tigers of being Clan collaborators. Major Gilmour had to be restrained from decking the noble. Surprisingly his "Bondswoman", if she was to be believed the direct blood descendant of Aleksandr Kerensky had jumped in front of him and called upon his honor.

Afterwards she sat down with Colonel Winter over a cup of really good coffee the man had brought with him, something called Jamaican Blue Mountain.

"Hell of a day," The man said.

Joy nodded then unable to resist. "So you're really who you say you are?"

Chuckling the Terran Colonel nodded saying; "I know, I've had some of my intelligence guys going over the records you sent, plus what little we've gotten from the Wolves."

"You were supposed to have died over Terra." Joy said carefully.

"But we didn't, we liberated New York and chased Amaris' boys all over North America. Then when it was all over we served as part of Amanda Cameron's guard unit."

"Here Amanda died on Terra, there was no Last Cameron." At least that we know of. Joy thought.

"So not only did we mis-jump in time and space, but I don't think were in Kansas anymore."

Joy chuckled; "If you call me Toto, I'll slap you in the stockade."

Smiling wryly Sam sipped his coffee. Looking up his smile vanished.

"You have to understand our dilemma, Marshal, it doesn't matter when or where we ended up," He fixed her with a despairing gaze, "I know the basics of a mis-jump, or at least the theory, we were in hyperspace way too long so we ended up here. But you can only go forwards, not back."

"You can't go home." Joy stated flatly, barely able to comprehend the magnitude of that simple statement.

"So we'll fight for you against these Clan barbarians, and we'll figure out the rest." Sam said grimly.

"Then we have a battle to plan...oh by the way, your Major Gilmour, he's not Bruce Nicolas Gilmour is he?"

"Yes why?" Sam asked puzzled.

"He had mentioned his wife; her name wasn't Sarah was it?" Joy smiled warmly.

"Yes; Sarah Elisabeth Davion." Sam answered.

"One of you did survive and was captured, and after the liberation of Terra did marry...here." She handed Sam a data disk. "This might give him some closure."

Sam, glancing over the title on the disk, looked back up eyes wide.

"So he has descendants in this world?" He asked.

"In a manner of speaking..." Joy said rising. "And they want to meet him."

SLS Tiger Claw....

Dieter Malin noticed a change in the big Wolf cruiser's aspect.

"Boss, the fuzzies have changed bearing and are on an intercept vector."

Emily Hayes cursed, then her eyes snapped open a vicious smile flashing on her face.

"Coms, transmit prefix code inquiry, authorization HAF-N-1."

The communications officer, John Rayes looked startled for a moment, then as he carried out the order; understanding blossomed on his face.

Wolf Clan Ship Dire Wolf...

Deep in the bowels of the massive cruiser computer systems whirled and beeped. The operating system ignored the activity, sending a brief warning to the electronic warfare officer's panel in the ship's Combat Information Center. The BIOS however, unchanged for the past three hundred years....listened.

Before the human crew onboard the Dire Wolf could react the Wolves found out the Hard Way just why Stefan Amaris' Navy was so ineffective against Terran WarShips.

Star Admiral Mitchell Leroux snarled in anger as the Dire Wolf shuddered and began to drift off course.

"Report!" He growled at the cowering technician at the engineering console.

"Star Admiral; we have lost helm control and weapons, the Terran warship transmitted something at us. Crews in the computer core reported it having no effect on our systems, then every system went haywire."

"How is this possible?!" Leroux sat back in his command chair searching the lower caste engineer's face for signs of deception, but now delivering his report the man straightened and his demeanor spoke of nothing but competence.

"Unknown Star Admiral, but it almost cost us the ship; whatever the Terrans were able to activate in our systems tried to open all hatches interior and exterior." The technician paused as Leroux's eyes widened in realization.

Snapping out of his shock he caught what the technician left unsaid.

"Your team was able to stop this from occurring." A statement not a question.

"Aff, Star Admiral."

"Hold one, we must discuss this...Sensors what are the Terrans doing?"

"Holding position sir, they have taken no offensive action."

"Hmmp...so much for taking an aggressive posture." The idea had been for the Dire Wolf to test the Terrans' response and prevent any orbital support, be it in the form of bombardment or air support from the WarShip's air wings.

Turning back to the engineer he smiled.

"You have done well here, get us our drives back, find out what the Terrans' hit us with and I will see you have a place in the next trial of position."

Leroux could sense the man's pride as he acknowledged the order and went to work.

Katya Kerensky waited as Hussy's cockpit hatch opened, Major Gilmour handed her his combat neurohelmet as he unstrapped the five point restraints. While the neurohelmet was familiar, nothing else in the Royal machine was. Instead of a command couch with joysticks and throttles the Marauder had a cradle that supported the pilot's rump, back, neck and head.

Legs and arms strapped into a linear frame much like an exoskeleton. The Terran MechWarriors didn't so much pilot their machines so much as wear them. Joysticks and pedals tipped the frame members and a holographic hands on throttle and stick set up completed the arrangement. Almost as an afterthought a folding jump seat was just aft of the linear frame.

"Yeah, I know it's a lot different than what you're used to. You sure you've got nothing like this?" Bruce said a wry smile on his face.

"Neg we do not, and there are no records of anything like this." The question in her voice was obvious. As the cherry picker lowered itself down to the ground, Bruce stretched and looked at the battle damage scarring the seventy-five tonner.

"No I don't have a clue why your friends don't have proper Terra tech, maybe the Royals sabotaged the records, or maybe here in this timeline it was never invented."

"Timeline?" Katya was puzzled, she was a warrior not a scientist after all.

"Yeah, too many things here don't add up, we've talked about that."

She nodded, she sometimes wondered why Bruce didn't talk about this with his own people. Then again sometimes the Tigers acted like they were made of broken glass. There was pain there that Katya was ill equipped to deal with.

Bruce was looking at a series of holos on his pocketcomp. A beautiful red haired woman appeared in most of them along with a little Eurasian girl. His wife and adopted daughter; Katya knew. She understood the theory of marriage of course and the lower castes still practiced "natural" child birth, but she had no frame of reference as the warrior who'd shot her out of her 'Mech and stood against the finest warriors of Clan Wolf shuddered and stifled a sob.

Katya had for some reason put her hand on his shoulder, a gesture of comradely support. He'd looked up at her then and smiled sadly, a single tear rolling down his cheek. A Clan warrior should have scoffed at his weakness, but something in Katya responded with sympathy. Some battles just cannot be won .

Bruce had after a moment motioned to her to sit down. He'd shared a little of his life with her then. Pictures and movies of blessed Terra seen just after the Liberation. Unity City, New York, Tahiti places out of myth and legend all seen by someone who'd lived there.

It had been the pictures of his wedding that had affected her the most, the chestnut haired girl with the heart shaped face who was Sarah Davion's Maid of Honor. Amanda Cameron, daughter of Richard. The alien feel to the history the images and video represented, from a living Cameron heir to a "back yard Fourth of July party" with Aaron DeChevalier in an apron emblazoned with the words "Kiss the Cook" to Elizabeth Hazen sharing a kiss with Lieutenant Mackenzie were a shock.

A shock that the most revered figures in Clan history were as Bruce had put it; "Just Folks."

Still they remained hideously effective against her former Clan. After two weeks the battle was stalemated. Although both sides had taken severe losses, the Battle for Tamar had turned into a war of attrition and the defenders had far deeper reserves than the Wolf Clan.

Something had to give soon. And strangely she hoped it wouldn't be the Terrans. Looking down at the Cameron Star on her shoulder, knowing what it represented, Katya felt strangely at home. And then there was her bond holder; honorable, strong, skilful, yet broken at the same time.

Perhaps in time she could fix him. Looking down at the two bond cords remaining on her wrist and at her own Timber Wolf sitting repaired in the gantry across the way. He'd promised her a place on the next raid. Katya wasn't sure how she felt about that.

Trepidation warred with an urge to be recognized as a full warrior again.

Soon you will have to make choices, Katya, important ones.

"Okay, we're off duty, Misha's told me you're doing well... so the gang's rigged up a clubhouse of some sort." He paused, thought for a moment. "Umm...you guys do drink don't you?"

"Aff...we do and I could use a drink, thank you." As they walked past Elizabeth Hazen speaking softly with her technician at the foot of the Tiger heavy BattleMech she piloted, the red haired woman glared harshly at Katya but held her tongue.

Stravag Falcon. She thought meeting the woman's glare with her own clear blue gaze. After the pair had left the hanger Katya chuckled. But then she's no Falcon, or at least this one isn't.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Bruce asked.

"Nothing important, major..." She considered him for a moment. "Bruce Gilmour after we have that drink would you like to couple with me?"

Bruce stopped dead and stared at her. Later thinking about his reaction; which was a polite and cautious negative; she would grin...After all his reaction was priceless.

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The Triad, Tharkad

Federated Commonwealth

17 November, 3051

General Nondi Steiner knocked on the door to the Archon's personal office. At the Archon's bidding she entered. Melissa Steiner looked up from her desk and smiled warmly. The younger woman's eyes looked tired. They all were. The enormity of the situation threatening the Federated Commonwealth was like nothing anyone could have expected.

"We have the latest reports from Tamar, Mel." Nondi said.

"From your tone, I take it's actually good news." Melissa looked hopeful.

"The battle's stalemated, not won but we've done better there than anywhere else, looks like a full; what the Clans call a Galaxy; roughly analogous to a reinforced regiment has been bogged down there. The 90th Heavy Assault has taken prisoners and we are getting reams of information back..." Nondi's face took on a grimace then.

"What Aunt Nondi? I know that look."

"These so called Star League troops won't let us interrogate their prisoners, the LIC agents assigned to Tamar have been allowed to interview the captured Wolves, in some detail, I'll admit but the 90th is retaining custody...something about having honored the Wolves custom of becoming bondsmen." She

looked up at Melissa then.

"Some of them, like this Katya Kerensky have even been allowed to fight against their former comrades."

Melissa's look of shock mirrored Nondi's when she'd first read the news.

"So they fight their own?" Melissa shook her head. "Can the Star League Defense Force really have changed so much? They're so...Alien."

Nondi got a cup of coffee from the side board and at Melissa's nod poured her another.

"Marshal Corelli has said the 90th have pretty much accepted their situation weird as it is and have offered their services to the Commonwealth. They have a lot to offer, which brings us to two problems." At the Archon's gesture she continued;

"First, we may not be able to keep Tamar." Nondi's voice was flat, businesslike, it had to be to quell the anger the statement brought up. Melissa nodded and Nondi, not without pride for the fine ruler Katrina's daughter had become, knew she had seen it.

"The Wolves and the Jade Falcons have already almost surrounded it, I know...but to pull them out seems so wrong." Melissa's voice was sad at the thought of any more of her people being under the thumb of a conqueror.

Nondi sipped at her coffee and nodded.

"Ja it is wrong, but we cannot support them for much longer. If the Clans pass the line of worlds marked here..." Nondi pulled up a star chart on Melissa's desk. "We have to pull them out of there or risk losing both units."

Leaning back in her chair, Melissa closed her eyes and nodded.

"Do it, then." She said. "And may God forgive us."

"The second problem, is a bit thornier, but I may have a solution..." Nondi paused her features darkening at the memory of her meeting with Precentor Tharkad. "ComStar is requesting; as they put it; the repatriation of all Terran nationals and equipment in the unit known as the 90th Heavy Assault Regiment at the earliest opportunity."

"What?!" Melissa was aghast.

"The Black Tigers scare them, Mel, don't ask me how I know, but they do."

"Scare them, how? A few thousand men and women, some advanced hardware and okay three WarShips but..."

"It's not their equipment Archon, it is who they are, while the computer core provided by Colonel Carlyle has all the information we need to catch up to the Star League era, the practical applications will take

years to get us up to speed, unless we have help. The support staff of the 90th alone has the practical knowledge to jump start our armaments programs by years. Their Chief Technician Misha Vinson has more degrees to his name than I can count and at least two works on Particle weapons on the GDL core were authored by him...Melissa the MechWarrior that has your husband all in a bustle has a degree in fusion technology for God's sakes, learned on the road to Terra during the liberation back in the 2770's!"

As Melissa looked at her aunt in shock, Nondi went on; "Then there is this; they are Terrans, their databases hold locations and command codes to dozens of bases used by the SLDF Royal Command, including this one..."

"Camelot Command...a Naval base?"

Nondi grinned; "I've sent Cranston Snord to check it out, the little bastard already knew about it, said they were going to try for it anyway, he was the one who sent me the solution to the ComStar problem." Tapping the touch sensitive hologram Nondi brought up a file.

SLDF Support Command Regulation 11071-3 In the event of a collapse of regular SLDF pay and support channels any Member State requesting aid from or making use of SLDF personnel and or equipment must provide a support structure to maintain...

Melissa chuckled.

"General Steiner, the Lyran Commonwealth is hereby requesting aid from the Star League Defense Force..."

**Tamar, Tamar Pact
Federated Commonwealth
20 November, 3051**

"Okay boys and girls, the puppy dogs are on the move. That Dire Wolf is staying put..."

"Gotcha Didi, Alpha Bitch is still in the ten ring." I subvocalized, rolling my shoulders in the Nighthawk powered armor.

The Puppies are gonna learn what happens when you try to get sneaky with us...

Two days ago...

Katya laughed at something Scott had said. Her performance in the recent raid on Clan Wolf positions around the town of Helgasten had led to me cutting a second strand of her bondcord. She'd seemed surprised when I'd first told her she'd be running her Timber Wolf with us, Bondsmen don't traditionally take a warrior's role so quickly, but I had a good feeling about her. Taking a swig of Gatorade; I walked over to share in the joke.

*That was when it happened. A burst of machine gun fire mixed with the hiss snap of lasers was followed by screams and the blare of alarms. The misshapen form of one of those damn Elementals flowed with a strange grace around one of the Lyran's mobile headquarters. A headhunter ***** me, I cursed, we should have expected something like this from the red haired she-bitch.*

'Rat pulled his pistol and ducked back, but I was caught in mid stride. The clan trooper had leveled the 3cm laser on his left arm at the back of the HQ vehicle, but his right pointed a built in machinegun at me. As I tried to bring my

Colt Half Rife in line he fired. An impact slammed into my right side and a scream followed the Clanner's burst. Rolling away from the pale blonde form (Damn it Kitty Kat; don't you die on me; you've become a friend.) writhing in pain next to me I dialed the Colt up to its max setting and fired.

Enough energy to pierce 'Mech plate sliced into the Clanner's shoulder cutting off his right arm. As the form staggered back I pulled the trigger twice more, emptying the battery and leaving empty space where the massive armored figure's faceplate had been. Allied security and at least three 'Mechs were active and I could see we were pushing the Wolves back. Dropping the Colt, I knelt quickly and pulled a press on dressing from my med kit to place over the wound in Katya's abdomen.

"Medic! Stay with me Kitty Kat, c'mon talk to me!" 'Rat came up next to me and put a second bandage over the wound in the stricken bondswoman's shoulder.

A wan smile spread over her face made red from the blood she'd coughed up.

"Keep calling me that..." She bit back a wave of pain. "And I will regret jumping in front of a bullet for you...you straavag moron."

Truk Tranh hustled over with his platoon of NYNG rangers and I had him hold the pressure on the wound I had bandaged. He looked puzzled as I drew my KBAR and cut the last cord on Katya's wrist. I brushed sweaty hair out of her eyes and smiled down at her.

"Welcome to the Star League Defense Force skootch." I said just before she passed out.

Now...

I leveled the Philips M77 Target Acquisition Laser at the idling *Ice Ferret*. A series of clicks came over the TACCNET. Now. My pull on the TAG's trigger would light my position up if any of these guys had active probes, but with all the electronic interference from the repair gantries including work being done on a *Thunderbolt*...err...*Summoner's* fusion engine would help blanket the emitter's location.

The *Ferret* began to react then, too late. Flying at nape of the earth, arrowing in on the unique light frequency from the SAS company's M77s, eighteen Arrow VI guided missiles hit both the pair of 'Mech stars on guard and tents and gantries marked out as command and control or important repair targets.

Smokey flowers with bright golden centers blossomed throughout the encampment. Scythes of shrapnel reaped a bloody swath of technicians, 'MechWarriors and elementals. I saw Kerensky's *Dire Wolf* topple to the ground no having been hit but simply knocked over by the blast waves.

Little or nothing moved in the murk and smoke, some screams and cries for help sounded out as Didi and her team rose and ran out under the cover of my section. Her shooters would hit the headquarters tent and complete the mission. Somebody should have explain to the Puppies that we ***** *invented* headhunting damn it.

Okay not really, the tactic of a stealthy strike to decapitate your enemy's leadership goes back to the dawn of warfare. But still we are pretty good at it. Mike Kelso's team swept in to plant booby traps and leave our calling cards. As the volume of fire died down and the smoke began to clear I allowed myself a small smile of satisfaction.

"Shit, no dice B, that redheaded bitch ain't here!"

"Gods damn it, okay Didi you know what to do...let's finish this..." A flash of movement caught my eye. *"Wait one I've got movement grid n-105. Sally, Grims lets go..."* Sally Leonards and Jay Grimsby took to their feet behind me.

Flash of red hair, should have worn a field cap bitch.

Natasha...

Wiping her bloody nose, 'Tasha ducked out of the burning tent. At the first warning of attack she'd given the order for the techs to scatter. Dalton Ward, the 328th's new commander had rushed out to get to his Summoner only to flattened by a concussive blast wave as one of the guard binary 'Mechs brewed up.

Little bastards, she almost grinned, they must have moved out right after we hit them. Shit, I bet the follow up strike is on the way now. I've got to warn the rest of Alpha. Her short ranged comlink was not enough to reach the nearest unit a trinary of the 4th Wolf Guards. As she hit the tree line a trio of blurry machines about two meters tall leapt after her.

Nighthawk team, oh that's just wonderful.

Bruce...

We'd close the distance soon; I'd confirmed the identity of our prey the moment she'd spotted us. The look of annoyance, not fear on her face made me laugh. Well if she had even half the character Katya had (...has, she ain't dead yet!) I wanted her check off the target list one way or another.

Unfortunately a nova of assault and heavy 'Mechs and Elementals from the Fourth Wolf Guards had other ideas. Grimsby and Leonards froze along with me. I knew the remaining fighters tasked to cover our retreat could have engaged them directly, but they would take a few minutes to get here.

Standing off at Arrow range meant they could stay within our air defense umbrella and it would cost the Wolves heavily to take them out. If they came to engage these guys directly they'd be low on fuel and vulnerable. Already those Elementals were close enough that if I tried for a TAG on a machine they'd spot me.

It wouldn't be like our strike on their camp, we'd taken a full day just to creep up on them. They knew we were here; if they wanted us there was a decent, not great but decent chance they'd get us. *Crap, well honey, the gods do love somebody with balls, and you've got them in spades.*

The Elementals went to ground just outside TAG range. On a hunch I zoomed in on the 'Mech carrying Natasha Kerensky. And didn't you just know it, that nasty girl was staring back at me through a pair of binoculars. I could hear Sally cursing me out as I stood up and bowed.

Looking back at me with a lopsided grin the Black Widow gave me the bird.

They left and so did we, when we reached the extraction point and climbed on the Ripper VTOLs to go home I had a text message from Samantha Wynnham that Kitty Kat was out of surgery and in stable but critical condition. Likewise she was awake enough to be grouching about being confined to bed. Our strike against the Wolves had knocked them back damn near to their DropShips. That was good news. The bad news was really really bad. Between them the Wolves and the Jade Falcons (where the ***** do they get these names, I mean really?) had between them almost cut off the Tamar system.

We were being given our ROWing orders. Y'know Retreat Off World.

Crap. 🙄🙄🙄🙄🙄

HHC, 2nd Battalion, 26th Lyran Guard, Tamar...

Christian Traumentieri felt his brain begin to numb as he signed off on the 'nteenth load of 80mm free flight rockets bound for the Tigers' *Bombardiers*.

Easy now Chris m'boy you'll be back in the saddle soon enough, those Wolves ain't lettin' up despite the drubbin' we gave them.

Still Chris was a brawler, a battle leader, he was never one to enjoy the paperwork involved with command. He'd forced himself to become not just proficient in the bureaucracy of command, but as good at it as he was behind *Harbinger's* controls for one reason and one reason only.

The men and women who relied on him. Not just for leadership in the heat of battle, but outside of it, food, water, ammo, a reassuring nod or a kick in the ass; all these things were required. To fail in even one was to fail everyone who looked for him for leadership. Turning to Eddie Martinez his senior company boss he stopped dead.

HOLYJESUSJOHNANDMARY...it can't be...

"Boss; what's..." Eddie started to say following his commander's gaze. "Holy shit."

"I gotta know." Christan said as he stalked towards the Lyran Hauptmann seated casually on the foot of a nearby *Griffin*.

HHC, 2nd Battalion, 26th Lyran Guard, Tamar...

"...SLDF guys are *tough* as hell..." someone commented. Hauptmann Patrick Ngo looked up from his letters to see Grimes and Baker watching the officers from the 90th Heavies inventorying ammo pallets.

"Yeah." he said, "They're tough."

One of the foreign officers, looking in that half-idle 'alert' that combat officers get, noticed him sitting at the foot of his 'mech.

The man's expression did a double-take, and he apparently got the attention of his companion.

"Uh-oh, Paddy, looks like they they saw you wrote *****' on your 'mech." Grimes commented, as the two Terran officers started walking across the quad.

"Yeah, well, they can take it up with the Liason officer, like everyone else." Pat said, and went back to reading-casually, though he watched over the top-rim of his sunglasses as the foreign officers walked over.

"Excuse me..." one of them said.

Pat looked up. "Sir?" he asked, keeping the relaxed pose, 'If it's about the chest-art, It's in-reg."

"Where are you from, son?" the taller one asked.

"Kowloon." Patrick said, "Not that I've seen it much."

Twelve Hours Later...

"DIDEE MAOGODDAMMITMOVEMOVEMOVE!!!" Pat shouted over the Company frequencies as the Clanners' little toad-bastards appeared from the dust-cloud of the spaceport's outer perimeter. He beaded on one of them, and triggered his PPC. the little bastards could take hits, but...

He pulled up a light-tower from the approach way, and swung it like a bat-sending one jumper tumbling off into the distance. "Fall back by ranks, lowest to highest, those DropShips need *time*." he scolded.

voices of assent echoed in his ears, and his status-board showed that most of his Company was moving retrograde, while the view out his cockpit showed they were still firing.

he tongued the frequency for the long-toms on the sole Fortress class still on the ground, "Grid Two One Nine, I need HE and Cluster, my position, Repeat, Repeat, Repeat, Over!"

The status-indicators showed that the tanks weren't falling back in order on his right. "Charlie Third, Get your ***** asses in GEAR, god-dammit, Mosovich, you dilly-dally and I'll have your-"

his world was white flash, heat, and pain, as something didn't just *shred* his cockpit armor, but pulverized it into white-hot powder, and then, the cool air of outside wrapped around him.

the 'mech that did this, stepped around from behind the perimeter wall. Hunched and turkey-looking, with a *Marauder's* arm-joints and shoulders under the box-launchers of a *Catapult* and a glassine cockpit jutting from the thing's chest.

His leg-actuators were seizing on the left side...*not NOW not NOW...* the thing's secondary 'chin mount' weapons licked fragments from his staggered 'mech.

"Okay, *****..." he lifted his improvised club, looked at the cracked and barely working heat-guage, and shrugged. "I got something *you can't do*" He stomped his jump-pedals, bounding forward at the enemy 'mech. the artillery warning alarms sounded as the snap-crack of enemy fire echoed in his ears.

At the ending arc of the 150 meter leap, he brought the club down, and cut his jump-jets' retrofire, bringing the entire mass of his machine down as additional leverage and power.

This move took whoever was driving the MadCat by surprise-the ELED light-arrays shattered off the thick, high-intensity alloy post, which drove down on the Clanner's ferroglass cockpit, shearing off support struts and pulverizing panes of transparent armour.

The world turned white, and he felt the thunderclaps into his bones, as the battery-strike came down.

something lanced through his chest....and it was even harder to breathe in the darkness...

Fourteen minutes after...

"...dead, we got here late." The AFFC firebase had been right on the edge of the 90ths' area of responsibility, and the Tigers were the first unit to react to the Clanner probe.

Truk Tranh squatted on the edge of what was *probably* the head assembly of a Griffin. He reached into the mess in the cockpit, and retrieved a set of tags.

"Patrick Ngo. Catholic, Blood Type B Negative." he read off, "There won't be any celebrating back home from this."

"You sure it's him?" Kelso asked.

"You saw him, same as I did....there can't be too many Hauptmanns named Ngo around here." Truk said it without emotion, "and none of them would probably call in artillery on their own position to cover their men." he looked at Kelso. "It's him. We gotta send him home." Truk started cutting straps, and gingerly extracted the shattered, burnt corpse from the cockpit, laying it out on a poncho-liner, "Get the goddamned *Chaplain*, right ***** now." he said it without looking up.

"Truk, they're probably coming back..."

"I don't *care*, get a ***** *Chaplain*, last rites..."

Broadmoor Street, Dependents Housing, Arc Royal

To: Mrs. Alice Russell-Ngo

From: AFFC High Command, Personnel Section

Dear Mrs. Ngo:

AFFC High Command regrets to inform you of the death of your son, Hauptmann Patrick James Ngo, in combat on

the world

of Tamar. Patrick Ngo died a hero of the Federated Commonwealth...

"What is it, mom?" Elizabeth asked.

"Your brother Pat." Alice told her, "He...won't be coming to see you for your birthday."

"Like Dad won't, or like Henry won't?" Elizabeth asked. The thin shard of hope for Henry's return was all that was left.

"Like your Father." Alice said.

"So...they can't find a body? He might still be alive?" Liz asked.

"Pat's remains are...in custody, Liz." Alice told her, "He's confirmed."

i'mnotgoingtocrynotgoingtoburblenotgonnacry... Dad was like a stranger most of Elizabeth's life-even when she'd gotten into trouble and they put her in the rehab, it was always her big brother who came...now he was gone.

"They're shipping his remains, I just have to tell them where." Alice told her.

"Pat liked it on Kowloon, mom, the summer house." Liz said. It was true, the best summer they'd ever had as a family was visiting her father's world...

"We'll see." Alice told her, which, in Alice-ese, meant 'no way in hell you'll talk me into even visiting that lousy planet'. Alice Russell hated her husband's 'landhold', and made little secret of it when he wasn't home...before he'd gone missing in the first attack of this new invasion.

"You should think about it...for Pat's sake." Elizabeth said, and went to her room.

Quote from: Cannonshop on March 06, 2010, 07:39:00 AM
Evac Point Echo, Tamar...

"...problem, Truk?" Didi Moran asked. The support units were still loading, but the infantry were basically on 'standby'.

"Yeah, you could say that." Truk Tranh replied, "I got word back on the next of kin."

"You're still worrying on that guy?" she was surprised, "You only saw him for, like, five minutes, twelve hours before he bought it..."

Truk shrugged, "Old habits, Dee. I remember when the Colonel approved my transfer request-he said Me or any of the other guys could come home any time we felt like it...that he'd make sure Home was *still there*."

"And?" she asked.

"Duke David Ngo is confirmed KIA in the Falcon zone, Pat here was the Heir and he's dead, word has it there's a brother who *might* be alive as a POW, the dead Duke's wife is living in military dependents' quarters on Arc Royal, there's a daughter, but she's like, *Twelve*...and word has it, *Mrs. Ngo* hates going to Kowloon so much she hasn't as much as visited in the last six years." Truk said, "My homeworld, it's a nice place, y'know? or it *was*."

He held up the jar of ashes. "And the Commonwealth would just as soon leave the ashes *here* as spend the budget to hold a funeral on his homeworld or return the remains to the family."

Deedee took a sip from her water bottle, "SO what's got your knickers twisted, is a foreigner in charge of Kowloon." she said, "and an absentee landlord situation."

"Both, yeah." Truk said, "Guy's letters to his little sister and her letters to him talk about problems..."

"I read 'em with you, remember?" Didi said, "I pointed out that was one *disfunctional* family... kids don't end up in drug rehab at eleven when everything's normal."

Truk sighed, "Dee, *everything's wrong*." he said, "Not just us being...in the future, and the future looking like Mad Mel, but...we gotta do something to make it...*right* Dee."

"Well, we're going to have to live through this first-hear that?" she cocked her head, and raised an armoured glove.

"Perimeter alarm. Got it..." Truk grabbed his 'hat' and started organizing his men

Evvie...

The pain was muted, still there but in the background. Evvie, that was her name she remembered just then, Evvie then, drifted in a drug induced haze. Where she was Evvie didn't know, but she knew how she got here...

"Charlie Three Six watch it you've got a Black Hawk real interested in you."

Kommandant Evvie Mosovich swore as she ordered her command platoon to target the fast moving Clanner. Four Rommel Main Battle Tanks cut loose with their main guns. Rapid fire 120mm cannon buzzsawed armor off of the medium Wolf Omni and Randy Prinz her gunner crowed with triumph.

*The TACCNET crackled to life then; "Charlie Third, Get your ***** asses in GEAR, god-dammit, Mosovich, you dilly-dally and I'll have your-" A flash of light and fire cut Patrick's voice off as an enemy 'Mech laced his Griffin with fire. The howl and crump of an artillery strike hid the aftermath in smoke and dirt.*

"Charlie Third, Wendigo Six, pull back to grid three oh six four and get you gone, we'll cover for you." On her secondary screens she saw the icons of the 90th's Hungry Tigers surging forward to engage the Wolves.

As she started to relay the orders, Randy screamed; "Toads, they're all over us." A clang hammered through the turret as something landed on it. As she turned to face the vision block fire filled her world.

"Jesus Christ is she still..." A young sounding female voice intruded on Evvie's haze.

"Kelly, keep your mind on business girl! I need her in the regen tank right now."

SLDS Sledgehammer...

Samantha Wynndham pushed back her mass of dark braids and collapsed back in her chair. She could forgive Kelly her outburst, the Lyrans Kommandant was barely alive, the laser shot the Clan soldier had fired had been partially deflected by the armored glass of the vision block. But Evvie Mosovich would be in the tank for the better part of four months.

The woman had lost her eyes, tongue, most of her nose. Her larynx had ruptured and Samantha was sure she had at least some brain damage. She shook her head, three hundred years and nothing had changed.

Well, we're still dumb enough to be blowing ourselves to hell and before the days out I'll be lucky if the Kommandant there is the worst.

The sad thing was that the Lyrans had looked at her like she had two heads when she'd mentioned regenerative therapy. They'd lost so much it made Samantha, who'd been raised to revere life, want to cry. She'd be willing to bet the Lyrans would have put the poor woman out of her misery rather than trying to fix the damage.

The worst part was in the Kommandant's shoes, with only the degraded medical technology available, she didn't know if death would have been preferable.

Updating from both Cannonshop and me....

Transit Quarters, SLDS Sledgehammer

"...not sure saving her was that bright an idea." Corporal Alan Hoffritz said.

Truk Tranh looked at the Lyran tanker, "What?"

"Her, an' Hauptmann Ngo, right? crocodiles on the radio or in the field, but We all knew what they were into off-duty, you can't keep secrets like that from your crew, right?" the enlisted man told him, "She didn't hear him go-at least, I don't think so, anyhow...they were plannin' to elope, get hitched...he was gettin out, an' she was gonna follow him-give up her career, pension, piss off gott-knows how many of her old friends in the command. she was gonna help him take back his legacy, get shit straightened out on that planet they both come from."

"You know this for certain?" Truk asked.

"Yeah, I played driver when he went to get the rings, an' Corporal Days from the Charlie Four track drove her down to get fitted for the gown...they swore us to secrecy-officers inside the same unit ain't supposed to be...well, y'know, right?" Hoffritz said, "Only we knew, helped 'em hide it from the brass." Hoffritz shrugged, "Hauptmann Ngo dyin'? when she finds out, she's gonna be devastated."

"She's a noble?" Truk asked.

"Baroness of the Golden Lake area-the Mosovich family's been there...well, she said her people been there since the Amaris war. a few thousand hectares, her dad runs it, but..." Hoffritz said.

"But?" Truk pressed.

"Somethin's wrong with her old man, it's kind of...had her on edge the last few months. She wouldn't talk about it, but it had her on glass..." the tanker passed a PADD to the SLDF infantryman. "I cracked her diary." Hoffritz said, "She was worried her daddy wouldn't have 'nough marbles left to recognize her-Alzheimer's ***** people up."

"You shouldn't crack a person's diary, Corporal." Truk admonished, "Handing it over to...a stranger, that's even worse."

Hoffritz shrugged, "She's my track-boss, been my track boss a long time, she's family, we worry about her-you want to turn me over for charges, you go right ahead-I bet *Your* guys would do the same for you."

Truk tapped his nose, "Keep it quiet, Corporal. Just inside your crew, and with me, okay?"

"Aye sir."

Dear Captain Truk Tranh,

My mother declined to answer your last message, but she's...not been well the last few months, and I hope you can forgive her for this.

I am Elizabeth Anne Ngo, daughter of David and sister to Hauptmann Patrick Ngo. I appreciate your sensitivity in handling the matter of my Brother's demise and final resting place, as well as your taking charge of his personal effects. Having a Hero of Elbar as guardian and executor would have made him proud, as it makes me (though a bit astonished at the same time. Coming three hundred years into the future must be quite a shock.)

My grandfather had a bit of land on the Little Mekong, and as the third child, it was that portion that I was set to inherit upon my majority. I would appreciate it greatly if you could find the time to bring my brother to that place,

at the base of a Lemon tree overlooking the river, and lay him to his final rest where he was, I think, most happy. We only spent one summer there as a family, but it was, to my knowledge, the best summer-after that, Grandfather died, and we never got to visit it.

I would be deeply honored if you, and any of your Marine Veterans, could meet me here on Arc Royal, Mother's duties in the Theatre Logistics office will keep us here until late next year, or until the Clanners over-run this world, whichever comes first. If you answer to this 'yes', I promise not to get myself incarcerated as an in-patient until after we have met.

It's important. AFFC says Dad's dead, and with Henry still MIA and presumed captured or dead, I think a visit with Legends would...it would honor the family greatly.

If you do come, don't mind Mom-she's from Kwangjong-Ni, and does not really understand. Grandfather once said that Dad married her to spite grandma, and sometimes, I wonder if that is more right than even HE knew.

If you go, watch out for jackals, and sharks.

*Thank you,
Elizabeth Anne Ngo*

"What's that?" Didi asked, pulling the message out of Truk's hands, "I didn't think you'd be getting letters..."

"Dee, I need to see Colonel Winters." Truk said.

"Why?" Didi Moran asked.

"Because two animals don't live on Kowloon." he said, "Sharks, or Jackals. Sharks the RimJobs tried to introduce, they were wiped out by Brassfish, and Jackals is slang for corrupt officials. She wrote this in English, which means she's assuming someone would be reading it besides me."

"How you figure that?" Dee asked.

"Kowloonese?" he said. "besides, I've read Patrick Ngo's journal, their letters, everything-they were passing a code, and she's assumed I've cracked it."

"And you did." Dee said.

"Yeah. I did." he said, "My homeworld's in heap-bad-trouble, Patrick Ngo knew it, his little sister knew it, she's warning me about it...and she's asking for help dealing with it...and she doesn't trust her own mum about it."

"Don't take it straight to Sam, take it to Bruce first." Didi told him, "I'll go with you."

"Thanks."

Nha Tranh, Kowloon...

Jim Lee Condit was a long way from Kirklin and the 7th Crucis Lancers. "Hecatoncheires?" his guest asked, "Where were they hiding these?"

Jim just shrugged, "Does it matter, Mister Ryan?" he asked, "They were hiding them, now they're not hidden. That's got to be worth something to you?"

"Worth something? Oh, yeah. Worth a Lot, Meself wonders if you're trying to screw with me, though-why sell

'em?" the guest asked.

"Oh, a few reasons come readily to mind-your group's behind Clanner lines, and you need materiel, and if you've got it, your folks can keep them at least somewhat occupied-that's the reason I'll give if anyone from the AG office or Loki or DMI shows up...the real reason, of course, is the Germanium you're offering-enough to buy the extra support I need in the Estates General."

"What makes you think I won't turn around and use 'em on YOU?" the guest asked.

"Well...first of all, because raiding us costs you, second, I'm selling you munitions, and third, you're not stupid." the Governor-Regent said, adding, "Now, if you raid the neighbours, say, I won't mind too much-gets me additional financial support from AFFC, and it's to be expected...but you're an idiot to fight to steal what you can buy for less."

"True that." the Pirate said with a nod, "You want maybe I should pull a demonstration or something on those hinterlands that're giving you trouble? I mean, we ARE here, after all..."

"I'm not entirely opposed to the idea, but we should make it look good, maybe get those troublemakers to come into line if they're afraid of bandits..."

In-Transit, 8 December, 3051

Truk Tranh waited while Bruce read through the documents. "You're sure about this?" Gilmour asked.

"I'm sure." Truk told him, "Dee passed it to Sweetie to make sure I'm not reading into it, Sweetie cracked the cipher in about ten seconds-called it 'amatuer', which fits with a kid writing secret notes to her big-brother."

"Supporting evidence?" Bruce asked-Sam would want something more solid than the word of a young teenage girl.

"Well...public records show that the late Duke David Ngo consented to an appointed regent when his father died-and the FedCom Development Agency's got public accounts showing that Kowloon's been in a recession since 3041, drawing more development and support money than they generate in tax revenue." Didi said, adding, "They've also been hit almost annually by pirates since '41, though..."

Bruce nodded, "What else-you wouldn't bring this to me to take to Sam without more."

"She asked for help." Truk said quietly. "Even if the rest of its just frustration and fantasy, everything I've gleaned off the public record and Pat's Journal supports the idea that..." he looked frustrated. Sometimes, his English slipped trying to convey some concept-even after years of study.

"Heroes." Didi said quickly. "Bruce, they remember us. Not from 'records', but as heroes, and it's something...a kind of...well, a touch-stone, something we can get under our feet."

"I'll take it to Sam-you want to do this as a recon?" Bruce asked.

"I think that's the best way to go into this-until we know for certain what's really going on..." Didi Moran said, "A few of our guys, we can use a funeral detail as cover, if it's as bad as the reports?"

"That's Sam's call." Bruce said, "If he asks ME, you'll have full support-assuming things really ARE that bad."

11 December, 3051, Dependents Quarters, Arc Royal...

"...turn left, it's the left side of the third duplex." The provost trooper said, "Watch yourself."

"Why? You go in there a lot?" Truk Tranh asked.

"Let's say we used to get disturbance calls two or three times a week." The trooper said, "The daughter's...a problem kid."

"Problem kid?" Didi asked, as they walked up the street.

"Legal trouble, she's been mostly good the last couple months, but I've had to escort the daughter's Rehab counselor a few times, and then, there was this morning." the Provost trooper said.

"This morning?" Truk asked.

"Word came down-a rescue mission went pear-shaped, they lost another son." The Provost trooper said, "The mom's pretty broken up, she chased off the Grief Counselor."

They reached the walkway, and...

Bang!! The gunshot was muffled, Truk and Didi were moving, sidearms drawn.

Bang!! Thud.

Didi Moran applied the universal lock pick-in this case, the heel of an SLDF issue combat boot, and the door slammed open.

They rushed in by twos.

In the living room, there was a small mess-half-eaten pre-cook meals, papers.

The hallway to the bedrooms was orderly and neat, there were pictures on the walls...and a woman's body on the floor.

Dee knelt down, "Dead." she said.

The dead woman's thumb was jammed into the trigger guard, and the hole in her chest...

Something was moving in the bathroom.

Truk and Dee lined up, and entered.

"MEDIC!! GET A ***** MEDIC!!" Truk shouted, scooping the damaged little girl out of the bathtub, and he began treating the sucking chest wound...

"She's in shock, Dee, see if there's a first-aid kit..." Truk worked frantically, but in the back of his mind...too late...we were too late...

SLDS Sledgehammer

I watched them take the little girl to our med facilities. A chill ran down my spine, she looked so much like Syn, it wasn't funny. Sam joined me in the Cat's Eye's passageway. He put his hand on my shoulder.

"I know." Was all he'd said.

Shaking myself out of the fugue, I nodded and looked down at the datapad in my hands. Funny it was all cloudy. After a moment I could speak normally.

"Preliminary reports forwarded to us by the LIC internal security boys don't come out and say it, but if you read

between the lines..."

Sam nodded; "They don't wanna rock the boat with the Kerenskites rampaging through their space. Okay look the local Duke here Kell like that Elliot guy back home, he wants to talk to us, something about setting up a support structure," the Colonel paused then came to a decision, "Take the Black Cats and Truk's crew when Miss Ngo gets out of regen. Call it an Honor guard. You'll have two jobs; first check out Kowloon if there is a problem; fix it quietly. I don't want the Lyrans to think we're going to play Hegemony with their internal politics but we need somewhere safe to base out of." He fixed me with a steady gaze as he went on.

"After you've secured the planet for Miss Ngo; check on the feasibility of our basing out of there. This is priority one Major..."

Looking back towards the infirmary he said softly.

"The Tigers need a home."

2 January, 3052, SLDS Sledgehammer, Med Bay, 1430 Hours...

One of the most human moments in wartime, is the sharing of grief. Sometimes it is shared loudly, sometimes silently, with dignity, and without.

"Can you count my fingers?" the doctor asked. Evelyn looked at the hand, "Three." she said, then, she looked beyond the healer...and saw a face she'd only seen in pictures.

"Elizabeth?" she asked.

"Yeah." Liz said, "You must be Pat's girlfriend."

"We kept that-where is he?" Evelyn demanded.

Elizabeth Ngo looked up at the Star League Doctor. "You didn't tell her?"

"We couldn't, she was in deep-regen." The doctor said.

"Tell me what? What aren't you telling me?" Evelyn tried to stand, and the room spun as she lost her footing.

Evelyn saw the girl's face...harden. "I'll tell her." she said, and looked at Evelyn, "Pat died on Tamar, he was fighting to protect...a lot of people." the girl said it so...calmly. "You've been in that tank-thing, and apparently nobody could tell you."

"How...long?" Evelyn asked.

"We're two jumps from Kowloon." Liz told her, "I need to know you're with us."

"With you?" Evelyn asked, "What do you mean?"

Liz straightened up, "We're going to fix what my father neglected, what should have been Patrick's-and yours, for our people, and our home...and for Patrick."

"And Henry?" Evelyn asked.

"That's the other reason you're here, Baroness." Liz said, "Right at the moment, I've got lawyers and lobbyists working Tharkad and New Avalon to get you appointed my legal guardian-they're meeting resistance from...friends of Jim-as a Minor, I'm not legally permitted to assume the Ducal seat, as non-Lyran citizens, the Black Tigers aren't qualified under Federated Commonwealth Law to assume full legal parental authority, and I'm a year too young to qualify as a 'liberated minor'-I'd rather have someone Patrick trusted overseeing my legal affairs, than Jim Condit or one of his cronies."

The girl hopped up onto one of the medbay benches.

"Your mother-" Evelyn asked.

"Dead. She almost killed me in the process." Liz told her bluntly, "It took them a couple of days to fix me, when I found out who you were, and who you were to Patrick I called one of Grandfather's lawyers and had him start the paperwork. After that, it was a matter of the Tigers organizing the...ah...funeral detail."

"Um...Duchess Elizabeth, your grace, why do you need me again?" Evelyn asked.

"Because I'm firing the regent, and if I don't have a suitable replacement, it won't stick legally." Liz stated flatly,

"You're from Kowloon, you're a landed noble recognized by FedCom law, you're an adult, and you've completed your mandatory five years, plus extra time, and per AFFC FedCom regulations, you're patient-status, which makes you non-deployable personnel, but you get promoted in your zone."

Truk Tranh's quarters, SLDS Sledgehammer...

"...kid is a damn iceberg." Didi commented.

"Yeah, I noticed." Truk said, "Nate found half a deck of stimmies under her mattress."

"Half a deck? that's all?" she shook her head, "I'd think running like that, she'd have more in her stash than that..."

"Expired stimmies." Truk clarified, "Probably been there since we left Terra."

"So...Nate didn't find her stash." Didi clarified.

"Probably not. He found a pack of nic-stix, that's recent." Truk said, "So, do we play parental figure, or turn it over to Mosovich?"

"Evvie's just got out of regen; she's still talking to the grief counselor..." Didi said, "Kids shouldn't be using that stuff...still, it's a good sign she's not using anything harder than nic-stix considering her history."

"You're awful permissive..." Truk commented.

"I saw a lot worse with less justification in the lower Manhattan welfare islands." Didi said, "at least our vapid little rich girl's not doing mindshred, bluerock, or Neuroin."

"You really think she's vapid?" Truk asked.

"No...but, y'know, I think I've seen a VR personality with more...feeling." Didi said, "when she snaps, she's going to be in real trouble."

"You think she will?" Truk asked.

Didi scraped her ration tray with the spoon before answering. "Yeah. Her frikking mom tried to kill her, and she probably witnessed the suicide too." she tossed the tray into the receptacle, "I'd say that kid's a sure case of PTSD, and I don't see her taking anything LIKE a normal outlet." she paused, and an idea seemed to form, "Wait, I take that back...jesus, she's fourteen..."

Elizabeth Ngo's quarters, passenger accommodation area, SLDS Sledgehammer...

Liz checked to make sure, then, she opened the vent, pulled out her reading light, PADD, and the half-pack of Shangtao nic-stix. She shook one out and popped the tab on the end, drew in a long huff, and switched the room's main lights off.

she activated the PADD.

She focused on SLDF procedures as they applied to carrying out summary courts-martial tribunals, and field expedient execution regulations.

"Elizabeth, Honey?"

"I'm in the bath, Mom." the water was warm, soothing...

"Open the door, honey."

She got out of the water, and walked to the door. the brass was cold, she turned the knob.

something...exploded in her chest, and there was a sound of thunder.

as she fell backward, her mother stood in the doorway, "YOU WERE SUPPOSED TO COME WITH ME YOU LITTLE BitCH!!!" the cadaver sneered, the hole in its blouse black with dried blood, it levelled the service automatic at her,

"I wOn'T mIsS tHiS tImE!!!"

Elizabeth woke up. The chronometer read 0320, she felt her self, the throb of the dropship's systems in the bulkhead next to her, the bunk...

"Hell with sleeping." she muttered.

Spider Moon, 3rd body circling Gas Giant Boojum, Kowloon System, 5 January, 3052...

"...last patrol by Condit's 'Planetary Militia' was about a month ago, Alicia." Dao Cu'ong of the Pham Co-op said,

"About the time that Bandit unit hit Ia Drang." she handed Alicia Li a datadisc, "This is what we picked up-the so-called Militia pilots flew cover for the Bandits' jumpship during the raid, then moved to the Nadir point just in time to completely miss the raiders' dropships."

"You didn't let Rick try to pull his plan, did you?" Li asked.

"Not this time. Pham's steamed about it, but the pirates plus the Regent's boys are too much to tackle with a few squirreled away SB-27's, smallcraft, and a slinger." Dao said, "But we got plenty of visual with the telescopes, and radio telescopes picked up most of their transmissions-I want to know if the rumors are true."

"What rumors?" Alicia asked.

"Rumor has it, the absentee-Duke's gone, and his Heir's taking over." Dao said, "Rumor has it Patrick Ngo's coming home."

Alicia pulled a press-bottle from the rack, and stepped into the airlock, "Dao...I don't know." she said, adding, "If I did know, I wouldn't be talking about it-you're sure the codes are valid."

"Pretty sure. We intercepted a lot of chatter." Dao said.

"Okay, then, um...we may be a little late meeting your customer on Jessenica, the Rachel Zabel's KF controller's been acting up again." Li said.

"It's okay; I booked the delivery a month after you'd normally arrive." Dao said, "I figured you'd take another of your diversions after hearing about the raid."

"Thanks. your cargo's ready for drop." Li said, as the lock cycled to vac, and they stepped outside.

Li raised her right hand, and made a '3' with her fingers. they turned off the suit radios, and put their helmets together.

"Pat's dead, his little sister Elizabeth's the new Duchess, she's coming in with some troops to put Jim Condit's little syndicate out of business." Alicia said.

"Why couldn't you tell me that inside?" Dao asked.

"Mole." Li told her, "Someone leaked the Nguyen shipments, I made damn sure that I only mentioned those in the station this time."

Dao scowled. "You think they have a listener, or a bug?"

"Not sure which. Pick people you trust to tell-stick to people who're in the Association." Alicia said.

"You're going to meet her..." Dao said.

"Maybe." Alicia told her, "Keep THAT under your helmet."

Smallcraft Trâu nước, en-route to Boojum/mặt trời đỏ lagrange point, Kowloon system...

"...told Chao we were meeting up with Duke Patrick Ngo at Jerangle," Bianh Pham said.

"good, that makes three possibles, each with a different location. If our contact people bump into Condit's friends at one of them, we'll know who our leak is." Alicia said with a sigh, "and if WE run into them, then I know it's inside the Association."

"I hope it's not inside the Association. we sure as hell don't need kẻ cướp cộng tác viên in our ranks." Denh Vu said, "It's bad enough that someone in our normal circles is informing."

ahead, the merchant class Rachel Zabel loomed. "I know." Li said, "take us in, Denh."

1st Class quarters, SLDS *Sledgehammer*, 0530 Hours, Bruce Gilmour's cabin...

"Hey, uh...?" Elizabeth was standing in the hatchway. "if the conditions, they match what we've got on the Regent....should I wear a shower-cap or a hair net when I blow his brains out? which would look better on Tri-Dee and television signals?" she asked, "I mean, I've reviewed the regs, you guys would have to arrest me for crucifying him, but the regs shows he can still be shot. I lost one brother because of late delivery to Blackjack, and I'd suspect that there are a lot of other orphans who'd still have dads and homes if he wasn't ripping off the FedCom-I think there's a good chance of Treason sticking in a Tribunal..."

Her eyes were glass beads, doll's eyes, utterly without feeling.

"Its simple kid, you don't do shit." I said, "you're the ruler, by then we'll have the jury stacked, we won't need to but we will and you let the firing squad handle the Regent." I smiled coldly. Damn she's what Synthia would have become if fat boy had won on Terra. "First rule of politics let others do your dirty work for you, not as satisfying but it's the only way if you wanna be taken seriously." I kept my voice light and hoped I kept the horror off my face. Calm cool and matter of fact was the only way to go with Elizabeth.

Thank god it was me and not Katya she'd asked.

"You're the senior officer, I'll leave it in your hands, then. Could you communicate to the vessel commander, I need a rendezvous at our next charging stop at Arluna." Elizabeth said.

"Who are we meeting?" I asked.

See, here's where she stepped in to my cabin, and closed the door. "While I can't assume my ducal responsibilities

thanks to Commonwealth laws regarding the exercise of power, I hold controlling shares in one of the larger interstellar industrial trusts in the Commonwealth-and as long as I don't draw salary, I can, and intend to, assume that responsibility."

"Why can't you draw a salary?" It was an idle question, but this path seemed less...horrible.

"Because I have no intention of breaking, or fighting, child labor laws-but there's no law against being a sole proprietor." she told me, "But that's not the contact-our contact is with Alicia Li, she runs a freight circuit from Mainstreet to Melissia-at least, since the Regent dismantled the Coast Guard's official operations in Kowloon's outer system."

"What was she...before?" I asked.

Liz shrugged, "an officer of the peace-before that, she was an officer in the Commonwealth Transport Command."

"Not a background that can afford a ship." I commented.

"I know, I own the ship we're meeting." Liz told me, "it is...part of the business half of my inheritance-I own the note on Alicia's vessel, through my late Uncle Truk's half of the family-he died without issue. I have an Aunt-by-marriage on that ship who's serving as the Chief Engineer. The crew are all former Coasties."

I leaned back in my chair. "Technically, right?"

Liz nodded. "They have the most up-to-date info we can get, they'll be arriving straight from Kowloon, and diverting to Arluna instead of going on to Jerangle."

she reached into that little jacket, and handed me a PADD. "Personnel and vessel specifications. I don't know these people personally; Evelyn's vouched for most of them, but..."

"You're not taking chances." I said.

"Correct." she stated, "If Pat were here, he could take a chance. He knew...people. You guys are bringing me home, I'm responsible, so I don't want to take any un-necessary risks."

"What are you worried about?" I asked her.

"Police that are forced out often become criminals." Liz told me, "While the records don't indicate it, and Evelyn thinks they're clean, the chance does exist that Li's ship may have gone pirate-the Mainstreet-Melissia run isn't exactly known for being a lucrative trade route, and if she hasn't gone dirty, then there is the alternative possibility that news of the diversion and meeting may have leaked to Jim Condit-and if he's as deep with the Bandits as we suspect..."

"Another possible ambush." I said.

"Yeah. You're the military professionals, it's best if you have the information to do...what you do." she said, "Based on risk-analysis numbers, this meet should give our side a leg up, but..."

Jesus. she's too young to be that old. "You worked this out yourself?" I asked her suddenly.

"Most of it." Elizabeth told me, "Well...sort of anyway-I placed some calls, and talked to a few people in grandpa's black book, and I ran what I could by Evelyn-especially about Li..." she stopped, "Yeah, I did it."

I looked at the files. "Where'd these come from?" I asked.

"Corporate Security." she told me, "Mister White didn't want to hand them over, but I...made him."

Nadir Jump Point Arluna...

"...scared the hell outta me Truk, she really wanted help planning an execution." Bruce said as he poured a shot of Jameson into the squirt bulb. "Prosit."

"Cheers...Gaah...At least you set her straight." Truk knocked back half a Coke as a chaser, a thought occurred to him, not a pleasant one. "She seems to trust you tho', think you can manipulate her."

Bruce stiffened and rounded on him, but then relaxed. Truk had seen him mad as hell, in sorrow over losing friends, but this...this was different.

"Isn't about that T, she's a...a fucking kid man, I mean yeah she's the same age I was the first time I raised a rifle, but damn it she needs to have a goddamn chance...hell I don't know what I'm saying."

"It's Synthia isn't it?" If there ever was a man who could tame a Shark... He looked up into Bruce's wide green eye; the other one covered by a patch and realized he'd spoken aloud.

"You knew...I mean...?" The Terran stared off into space.

"Lots of people did, I mean c'mon we all knew you went off on that commando just before Unity, rumor was some deal with Amaris to end the war." Truk shrugged and pulled on his Coke. Love this stuff hope the robes let us import it. As Bruce digested the revelation that Synthia's parentage, she was Stefan Amaris' youngest daughter after all..., was an open secret, Truk idly wondered if Coca Cola was still in business.

"Remember when Lanh mustered out so suddenly," Truk went on as Bruce nodded annoyed at the memory; they'd been close friends Truk recalled. "He figured it out, B, was gonna do her on general principle, Jimmy Qua talked him out of it." He chuckled at Bruce's narrow glare, "He said to me later that we have to let go of the past...Smoke?"

"Yeah." Bruce tossed him a Marlboro. "Only got a couple of packs left, man these nic-stix suck."

"Well these colonials can't even cure cancer so what do you expect? Liz reminds of Syn doesn't she?" Tran asked carefully.

"Yeah, damned if I know why?"

"You like to take in strays." And you're so clueless about it that it works.

"Huh?" Bruce's expression was so damned funny and Truk bit back on the laughter.

"All you Tigers do it, us on Elbar, Satoh's Dracs, Taurians from New Vandenberg, hell you're doin' it now how many Clanners you got running with you?"

"Dunno, fifteen or so maybe, what are you getting at?"

"You guys take in hard luck cases from a bazillion different cultures, adopt what's good about 'em and make them yours...hell Bruce you make them believe. And that's powerful, real powerful...and the bitch of it is you don't even realize what you're {hic} doing." Bruce started to reply but Truk cut him off.

"Hell that's why we all loved your daughter, even though she was the spawn of the Fat Man, she became one of us. Even if she was a sorceress."

"A what? Truk my man you've lost me..."

"When you were in a coma after that damn fool Donner had you shot, my team pulled guard duty over your family, Lanh was there too...Synthia was sleeping in the hospital room back then, shit, she'd scream bloody murder if anyone tried to take her home. Anyway {hic} I heard talking from inside and when I went in there she was carrying on a conversation with you. I told her somethin' like "I'm sure he hears you kid." You remember how bad my English was..." Bruce nodded carefully, that was always a sore point with the Kowloonese marine. "Well she looked at me and said "Sure he does Uncle Truk, he's right there." And she pointed at the corner of the room, and damn it Boss, I knew you were there and I knew you were laughing."

Truk shivered and he could see Bruce wrestling with something, a vague memory.

"Whatever...It don't matter now Boss we're here and they're not, so look Liz needs to be on the straight and narrow, you, me and Didi we gotta fix this {hic}. Evey Mosovich is gonna be too much of a basket case for a while and any of our people are gonna treat her like the goddamn messiah, so its gotta be us." Fuck I'm hammered wanted to have this conversation sober.

Bruce sipped at his own Coke collecting his thoughts. Then he grinned that Cheshire Cat grin of his.

"Hell Truk, we'll fix this shit, you said it, it's what we do...Ohh man I gotta hit the head."

As Bruce rushed out he missed the small slender form hiding behind the bulkhead door.

Damn, these guys are really going to try, Elizabeth Ngo clamped down on an odd swelling in her throat and went back to her room to think things over...she was surprised when for once sleep came on her without her even trying.

Black Tigers Compound Arc Royal...

Jackson Davion nodded to his companion and started down the access way to the Drop Port. Three men waited at the end, Jackson recognized Morgan Kell and he guessed the other was Patrick's son Christian, the other a tall dark skinned man with graying close cropped hair wore a uniform not seen in three hundred or so years. Archduke Kell nodded to him as the others saluted respectfully.

"Morgan good to see you, and Christian if I'm not mistaken?" He smiled and extended his hand the grip from the other man was firm as was his gaze.

"Major Kell is bossing one of our battalions; Jack, Dan wanted to be here but with the Jade Falcons wave of attacks..." Jackson nodded as Morgan spread his hands. The damn Clanners are just eating everything we have, but the key might just be here... "And if I may introduce Colonel Samuel Winters of the Star League 90th Heavy Assault..."

As they shook hands, Jackson took in the man's weary eyes despite his strong grip and ramrod straight spine. This is someone who's seen too much war, had too many of his illusions shattered. He smiled warmly for the man's benefit and brought his own companion into the mix.

"Colonel I can say without regret that the entire Federated Commonwealth is glad you and your troops are here."

He motioned his companion forward. "Allow me to introduce your liaison officer Kommandant Sandra Gilmour-Davion Baroness of Landing."

As the woman stepped forward he saw the shock in the Terran Colonel's eyes. The slender woman with the fiery red hair and almond shaped hazel eyes saluted smartly. Her coffee au lait skin had a slight flush as she shook hands with Sam. Her voice was even when she greeted him.

"Colonel, my pleasure and honor..." She looked around sheepishly then. "I bring greetings from the Family on Chesterton. I was wondering..."

"He's on detached duty Kommandant," Sam answered knowingly, "Call it a matter of honor."

"Jack, why don't we get you settled in, Chris would you show the Kommandant to her quarters and we can adjourn to the Hound Pit for a meet and greet before we get down to business." The Archduke smiled and gestured them along. Jackson nodded and turned to Sandra.

"Sounds good, Sandy a little later." The woman nodded and said; "Okay Uncle Jack, see you later," She turned to Christian Kell and smiled dazzlingly. "Okay handsome show me where I can bunk, then maybe I'll let you buy me a drink." She then proceeded to drag the bewildered major off.

"Jesus, there are two of them..." Sam said quietly then looked an apology at Jackson.

"My brother's eldest kid so yeah I can guess, by the way Sam is it...call me Jack."

ROM Compound, Olympus Mons

Mars

Two days earlier...

Demi Precentor Cameron St. Jamais stroked his goatee thoughtfully as he went over the pocketcomp's display. So it's confirmed, Terran troops almost turned back Clan Wolf at Tamar. And not just any Terrans, the Butchers of New Vandenberg, Kerensky's Sledgehammers...interesting.

"Your thoughts Cameron?" The voice rasped out of the darkness.

"Yes," Cameron chose his words carefully, "The most fanatical Terran regiment in the Defense Force, equipped with the best and most advanced technology in the Hegemony...Waterly is wrong to antagonize them. We should bring them to us, slowly with great care. What they know about our hidden resources, even though they don't realize it could be damaging to our plan, but..." He looked up into the darkness in the far end of the room. "...If they were brought into the light..."

"Our thoughts are one; my chosen one; the Primus is a misguided fool shield your actions from her and bring them to us...if not well one regiment, their destruction should be of no moment."

Cameron bowed low and once again felt the pride of his leader's favor in him.

"As you wish...my Master."