

BATTLECORPS

A TEST OF FAITH

by Jeff Kautz

Belleauxville**Tsamma, Federated Suns****2010 Hours, 14 October, 3064**

Victoria Hale forced her eyes open, blinking away dirt clods and chips of ferrocrete. Her vision swam up from the blackness, struggling to sort out the lines of the face that stared down at her. Slowly, the image constructed itself. Wild eyes like white saucers gleamed behind a visage blackened by grime and soot. The mouth moved, but a shrill ringing tone was the only sound that Victoria's ears could register.

"...you okay?" The ringing was beginning to subside, leaving in its wake a throbbing, echoing pain. Victoria recognized the voice as her mind crawled back toward clarity. Corporal Dolan.

"*Leftenant?* Can you hear me?" The voice was clearer now, desperate against the sounds of bullets and shrapnel ripping the darkening sky.

Her body felt numb and heavy, as if she were encased in ferrocrete. She felt hands on her shoulders, shaking her, coaxing her to move.

The sharp pain in her left arm lifted Victoria from her haze. A close mortar blast had slammed her to the pavement, peppering her body with shrapnel and leaving her sprawled on her back in the street. *In the street. In the middle of a battle. I've got to move!*

"I..." Victoria tried to speak but coughed on the dust that coated her throat. Spitting, she sat up, too fast, and was overwhelmed by a wave of dizziness that brought her to the edge of vomiting. Still, she managed a weak reply. "I'm okay."

"The Old Man's been hit. We gotta go!" Dolan's head whipped from side to side as if on a swivel.

The Old Man meant Captain Pierson, the company C.O. Victoria swallowed back the nausea, a mild concussion she was certain, and levered herself to her feet, slowly this time. Waving off Dolan's offer of assistance, she started down the street on wobbly legs, her pace hastened by the sound of more mortar rounds screaming in at her back.



A trail of blood led Victoria to where *Captain* Pierson lay in the temporary shelter of a burnt out apartment block. Still reeling from the concussion, she stumbled through the rubble to kneel beside him. One look was all that was needed to confirm the seriousness of his condition.

His stomach had been ripped open. A medic worked feverishly to repair a twelve centimeter gash that gushed black blood faster than he could wipe it away.

Pierson was still conscious, and his ragged screams raised the gossamer hairs on the back of Victoria's neck. She was sure the agonizing cries could be heard all the way back to the Lyrans lines, even over the thump of the mortar shells that they had finally been able to outdistance.

"Morphine", she barked at the medic who still waged a losing battle against the steady flow of blood. Despite several applications of clotting agent, the crimson fluid poured freely, slicking the medic's hands and causing him to lose his grip on his instruments. It was a noble but hopeless effort. Blood surged with each heartbeat, soaking through the bandages to mix with the ash and dirt, a muddy, dark pool on the ground. The medic may as well have been trying to hold back a raging summer tempest.

"Morphine," she repeated through clenched teeth, grasping the quaking medic by the shoulder. "Give him morphine and move on to someone you can help."

The man glared at Victoria, jaw quivering, for a moment and finally relented, tears born of frustration and helplessness carving muddy streaks down his ashen face. He peeled the adhesive backing from a morphine patch and applied it to Pierson's neck.

The effect was almost instantaneous. Pierson's anguished cries became soft moans as his eyes began to glaze over and the color ran from his cheeks. The blood flowing from his side slowed to a seep. He seemed almost to sink into himself, becoming somehow smaller, as if his body was a balloon, suddenly deflated. He grew quiet. Still.

A weak pressure reminded Victoria that she was still grasping Pierson's hand. She leaned in close to her friend.

"S'alright sir. I'm here," she whispered, her attempt to choke back a flood of tears transforming her voice into a throaty rasp.

Pierson wheezed and coughed a mist of blood. "H-Hale? *Leftenant* Hale? Vic?" His head swiveled, eyes groping in the encroaching darkness.

"Easy sir. Save your strength," answered Victoria. "Y-you're going to be fine," she stammered awkwardly. Despite her best effort, she could not hide the lie in her words.

"D-don' bu'shit me *Leftenant*!" The man managed to sound surprisingly strong, though the effect faded as quickly as it had appeared. He coughed specks of frothy blood with every strained breath.

"I know when I'm done."

Pierson let go of Victoria's hand and fumbled feebly in a jacket pocket, producing a handful of identification tags. Victoria accepted the tags and unsnapped a spare ammo pouch, adding them to the dozen or so other sets she had collected over the course of the past months of fighting.

"S-something else," coughed Pierson. Reaching across his chest, he unfastened the *Captain's* insignia from his collar and pressed them into Victoria's palm.

"Th-these...yours now..."

Along with all the responsibility that comes with them. Victoria finished her friend's last thought for him as his lifeless hand slipped from hers. She closed her fist tightly around the insignia, as if by concealing them she could refuse their existence, but the cold emanating from the anodized metal would not be denied. She tucked them into a breast pocket. *Damn.*

Captain Pierson had been Echo Company's last surviving company grade officer, the others either killed or wounded in the prior fighting. That left Victoria, a first year *Leftenant*, as the sole surviving officer in the shadow of itself that the company had become.

Victoria removed Pierson's map case and used her combat knife to clip the nylon neck cord that secured the man's identification tag and service chip. Every soldier in the service of the Federated Suns, and most other militaries as well carried two sets of identi-

fiers. The metal I.D. tags, commonly called 'dog tags' listed only vital information while the plasteel encased service chip contained a detailed record of the soldier's military service, including a complete medical history and psychological profile.

Most troops wore one set on a plastic cord around their neck and snugged the other set up under their bootlaces, a grim tradition said to aid in the identification of bodies that no longer came equipped with a head. Hale found this practice, which dated back centuries, to be morbid but also vital to her troop's morale.

Soldiers, for the most part, did not go to battle seeking death. They feared dying, to be sure, but more so, they feared being left behind. Forgotten. Another faceless corpse buried in a nameless grave, that is, if there was enough left to bury at all. They yearned to be remembered, to have assurance that their legacies would live on, if only in the memories of their comrades. It seemed such a small consolation, but to the troops on the ground, it meant everything.

Victoria stood, trembling as she gazed down at Pierson's body. Absentmindedly, she traced the pattern of letters embossed into the steel dog tags, surprised that her cracked and calloused fingers still held any sensation.

PIERSON, JAMES A.
6924-983-77905
TYPE: APOS
R/A: CATHOLIC

Catholic. Victoria had never thought of Pierson as a religious man, but as she stared down at the ruin of him, she noticed for the first time the silver St. Christopher's medallion that swam in the morass of blood slicking his bare chest. Protection for all travelers. *Behold Saint Christopher and go your way in safety*, she reflected, remembering the inscription from her own, strict Catholic upbringing. *So much for that*. Victoria summoned the medic.

"Find a vehicle and get the wounded out of here. Take Cap'n Pierson's body with you."

She turned away from the body, leaving the medallion for the chaplain to find. Victoria had long since decided that she had no use for such trinkets anymore.



"Leftenant Hale", Victoria barely heard the voice of Sergeant Ecklund, the assistant platoon leader and comms officer. "Sar'nt Shoomer's on the horn. Wants to know where to deploy his Hetzers."

Victoria rubbed her eyes and temples, massaging out the dust. And the demons. *Back to business.* Kneeling in the rubble of a burnt out apartment complex, she reached into Pierson's map case and retrieved his rugged little noteputer. The unit gave off a slight, humming glow as she unfolded the clamshell case, the screen revealing a map of Belleauxville based on the last available aerial or satellite photographs. The timestamp on this one was six hours old. Should be fairly accurate.

Shoomer's Hetzers would be a welcome addition to the company's firepower, maybe even enough to enable them to stop the Lyrans cold, if they were placed right. Wishful thinking. Victoria scrolled the map up and down and side to side until she found what she was looking for. Using the tiny stylus, she traced a line along a wide boulevard with a municipal park in front and a row of mostly intact buildings beyond. The name of the street, Rue Madelaine, lit up on the map screen along with each associated grid coordinate along the line.

"Set in here", she told Ecklund. "The Elsie's'll have to come through the park and cross this wide street. All open. Use the buildings for cover and set up fallback positions at one hundred and two hundred meters. Have Shoomer stay out of sight until we sucker 'em in, then be ready to pounce!"

Ecklund nodded acknowledgement and hurried off into the night, leaving Victoria alone with her thoughts. She mulled over the orders she had given Ecklund, second guessing herself as she always did despite her best efforts to break the habit. First impulses were usually proven right, and one of the first rules of leadership was that a wrong decision was still better than no decision at all. In combat, however, wrong decisions were often paid for in blood.

She shook it off. Her plan was solid. In truth, she didn't expect the Lyrans to just walk right into her gun sights. Tonight's ambush had hurt them and they were too good to fall for the same trick twice. They would approach cautiously, deliberately, and it was that caution that she hoped to exploit. Echo Company's mission was to delay the Lyran advance for as long as possible. Every second the Elsie's hesitated before charging forward, brought her one second closer to accomplishing that mission.

Time to move. Victoria levered herself to her feet, an action requiring significant effort. Her legs still trembled, knees cracking and popping like the bones of a dry corpse. She felt the adrenaline wave wash away from her body leaving her cold, weak and tired. She stood slowly, steadying herself, and took in her immediate surroundings.

The apartment complex where she stood was an almost unrecognizable heap of debris, scorched remnants of walls and scattered bits of broken furniture and personal belongings the only clues that someone had once lived here. Civilians. Families. Where were they now? Had they been able to get out before the war bulled and blasted its way into their lives, or were they buried beneath the rubble and ash at her feet? Victoria hoped they had escaped, though if history were any teacher, she thought it doubtful. The innocent always suffered most in war.

Once considered legitimate military targets, civilian population centers throughout history were sacked, burned and bombed into oblivion. Their inhabitants were often viewed as unfortunate victims or sometimes intentionally put to the sword by their conquerors. Only in the latter years of the twentieth century did viewpoints begin to change. Weapons and strategies were developed in an attempt to limit civilian casualties, but in the end, none of that mattered. As the weapons became more destructive, their toll on noncombatants, civilians, only grew larger. Generals bantered around phrases like “acceptable risk factor” and “collateral damage” to gloss over the grim reality. Victoria knew the truth, as did any soldier who had spent significant time in a combat zone. Innocent people continued to die, most of the time in far greater numbers than the actual combatants did, for no reason other than the fact that they were in the way. Wrong place at the wrong time.

Victoria was troubled by her thoughts more and more each day, it seemed. She used to pray for an end, or at least some respite, but the battles continued on and on, no end in sight, only endless suffering and death. She gave up on prayer.

Victoria realized she had been standing in place for too long. Her troops had moved on without her. She willed her legs to move but stopped short when something caught her eye. In the ruined corner of what must have once been a small bedroom, atop a pile of smoking rubble, lay a child’s toy. A teddy bear. Victoria stooped over the toy, prodding it with the muzzle of her weapon even as her combat senses screamed *booby trap!* Sensing no danger, or

perhaps no longer caring as much as she should have, she reached down and picked up the toy, studying it. Its fur was singed and caked with ash, its plastic buttons melted, but as she held it, Victoria felt a strange calm wash over her. Almost without thinking she tucked the toy inside her tunic and trudged off through the rubble toward Rue Madelaine.



Victoria approached Rue Madelaine through Grossberg Park, the same route she expected, hoped the Lyrans would use. The park's once abundant flora was reduced to uprooted trees and a few bare, withered saplings. From its edge, Victoria gazed across the wide expanse of Rue Madelaine. Five lanes in either direction, the boulevard resembled a silent river of ferrocrete snaking through the city. Victoria saw it as nothing more than a hundred meter wide swath of open ground. A killing ground. She imagined it overflowing with Lyrans bodies, but the image sickened her and she blinked it out of her mind.

Victoria noted the activity along the line. Her troops were barricading the ugly tenement complexes that fronted the broad street, setting in support weapons and marking fire lanes. Others strung communication wires out to the forward positions in the park. *Sergeant* Ecklund supervised a group of soldiers who, along with a small tractor liberated from a construction site, were piling up rubble and abandoned cars to create fighting positions for Shoomer's gun tanks.

Walking along the cratered avenue, Victoria noticed a huge stone cathedral. Set slightly back from the road in roughly the center of the line, it would be an ideal location for a forward command post. Built in the old, Terran gothic style, the building's heavy walls, though pockmarked, had held firm. Its slate roof had collapsed in a few places but it too appeared mostly intact.

Curiously, her troops had thus far avoided occupying the strong structure, despite its obvious defensive merits. Maybe it was the sprawling graveyard in the rear of the building. Maybe they still clung to the belief that holy sites were to be revered rather than exploited. All those superstitions meant little to Victoria. The graveyard could actually be used to military advantage. Its rows of headstones and massive mausoleums would provide cover in the event that her troops would need to fall back to their secondary positions. Victoria shrugged. This *would* be her command post. Holding her red-lens away from her head, she pulled open the heavy wooden door and entered the building's darkened interior.

Belleauxville
Tsamma, Federated Suns
2334 Hours, 14 October, 3064

"What's the word, Eck?"

Victoria, fresh from her latest tour of Echo Company's defenses, stepped through the stone archway that opened into the church sanctuary. *Sergeant* Ecklund had set up the company radio in a back corner alongside an urn normally used for dispensing holy water. The long-range antenna ran up the side of the wall and exited through a broken stained-glass window. The sergeant sat beneath the window gulping down cold beef stew from a mylar pouch. He held it out to Victoria, but she waved it away. Ecklund shrugged.

"Rierre and Kanssuu are under heavy pressure but they're holding," he said between mouthfuls. "Third Batt got pushed out of Kana-Hoi by the First Royals. Command's throwing everything into the counterattack."

That was bad news. Kana-Hoi was a vital link in the chain of towns that sat along the Allies main supply artery. If any of the towns fell, the two allied commands, Baron Sandoval's task force and Victoria's own First Crucis Lancers could be cut off and destroyed piecemeal. Worse yet, Kana-Hoi was only six kilometers from Belleauxville. If the counterattack failed, the Lyrans would be free to roll up the allied flank, and Belleauxville would be their next target.

"What about us?" Victoria asked, although she suspected she already knew the answer.

"Hold until relieved." *No surprise there.* "Major Henderlite says he needs eighteen hours."

"God dammit!" Victoria slumped down into a pew, exhausted. "Eighteen hours? We'll be lucky to last eighteen minutes once those Elsie's get their act together!"

She took off her helmet and rubbed her itchy head vigorously, leaning forward to let her dirty blond hair hang down in front of her eyes. What she wouldn't give for a shower and some shampoo. She flipped her hair back over her shoulders and sat for a long moment, saying nothing.

Ecklund finally broke the slightly uncomfortable silence. "Shoomer show up?"

Victoria nodded. "Yeah, and he brought hot chow and coffee. You should go and get yourself some. Helluva lot better than that dog food you're eating!"

Ecklund held up the pouch like it was infected with the plague and tossed it out of the window. "Sounds like a plan. 'Bout time I made the rounds anyway. You going to be okay here?"

"I'll be fine *Sergeant*. You go ahead."

Alone, Victoria closed her eyes and allowed her mind to drift away to a warmer, happier place. She smiled thinly, surprised that she was actually able to remember a time and place unmarked by war.

Exhaustion overtaking her, she stretched out along the pew. Not to sleep, just to rest. Only for a few minutes...



A noise like footsteps startled Victoria awake and she nearly fell off the pew. Embarrassed at having nodded off, she stood and scanned the room, finding nothing save the radio humming in the corner.

The radio. Of course. She leaned in close to the radio, listening for a repeat of the squelch she must have missed while dozing. Nothing. Must have been a rat.

She settled back into the pew and retrieved her water bottle. She fished around in her tunic pocket, her fingers brushing against the *Captain's* bars, until she found an electrolyte tablet. Crumbling the tablet into the water, she shook the bottle and took a long drain, wincing at the medicine taste of the bitter liquid.

The sound again. This time, there was no mistaking it for a rat or the radio. It was a human voice, or rather, a few human voices, speaking in hushed tones from somewhere within the building.

Victoria hastily grabbed her rifle and helmet. She shone her red-lens into the dark corners of the sanctuary but the muted light revealed only shattered tiles and pools of stagnant rain water. Leaving the church interior, she crept slowly and quietly around

the building's outer wall, examining every nook and crevice. Along a side wall, a sheet of plywood lay across a small stone foundation. Victoria carefully lifted the plywood, exposing a set of stairs leading down into what could only be the sanctuary's cellar.

Leading with her rifle, Victoria descended the stairs. Halfway down she considered calling for backup and chastised herself for not doing so in the first place. She needed to start thinking like a company commander instead of a naïve recruit. But, deciding she had already come too far, she allowed her foot soldier's predatory instinct take over and went hunting.

A door at the bottom of the stairs opened into a dark hallway. A side door revealed a lavatory. The plumbing still worked, as evidenced by water dripping slowly into the sink. There were footprints on the floor. Muddy footprints. Someone had been in here recently.

Victoria continued along the hallway until she came to another door. A faint, flickering light escaping from underneath illuminated the hallway only slightly. Placing her hand against the jamb, Victoria rotated the knob just enough to ascertain that it was not locked. This was it.

Gathering her courage, she turned the knob fully and pushed against the door with her shoulder. The door flew open, creaking on its hinges and Victoria rolled into the room, coming up on one knee, rifle at the ready.

Screams and startled voices heralded Victoria's entrance. Her red-lens revealed frightened faces as she swept the room. The source of the flickering light was a collapsible chemical stove, around which several people, civilians by the look of them, cowered, hands shielding their faces.

Victoria stood, still training her rifle on the crowd. They huddled into corners and pleaded with her not to shoot. She heard crying. Children.

"What the hell is going on here?" she demanded. "Who are you people?"

Her only reply was more frantic whimpering as the people crowded themselves even further into the corners.

"Who's in charge here?" Nothing. "Answer up!"

Finally, someone stepped forward from the shadows. The red-lens revealed him an older man, bespectacled. At one time, he had

probably been quite distinguished. Now he looked drained, as if he were barely alive.

"Please..." he begged. "Please lower your weapon. You are frightening the children."

Victoria lowered her rifle to her hip, keeping it at the ready. "Who are all you people?" she repeated.

The man looked at her incredulously. "We are not combatants. We live here," he said. "Well, not here...in the church. Or at least, not till recently." He rubbed his chin, searching for the right words. "We are from the neighborhoods in the area. When the war came... it all happened so fast...we couldn't get out. So we all came here." He spread his arms to indicate the room, and the people in it.

"Can we get some light in here?" Victoria needed to see exactly what she was dealing with.

A few solid fuel lanterns were lit and hung from the low ceiling. Victoria broke open a few illum-sticks and pitched them into the corners of the room, revealing even more occupants than she had first suspected. Civilians all, most were women or older men, well past the age of military service. Several children also huddled in the room, most clinging to the legs of nearby adults. They were filthy, scared and some appeared injured or sick.

The bespectacled man stepped closer to Victoria and extended his hand.

"I'm Father Kittridge," he said. "I'm the pastor here." He managed a weak smile, barely visible in the dim light.

Victoria shook his hand. "*Leftenant* Victoria Hale," her new rank felt awkward, undeserved. The words stuck in her throat. "First Crucis Lancers."

Kittridge nodded, head bobbing up and down nervously while his hand continued to pump her outstretched arm.

"Father..."

"Oh, I'm sorry," he said, finally releasing his grip on her hand.

"What are you all doing here?" asked Victoria. "Why didn't you leave when the city was evacuated?"

Father Kittridge rubbed his chin. "We...we never got the evacuation notice. The police came into the neighborhood and ordered

everyone off the streets. We watched from our windows while the mayor's motorcade passed through. The police and the local militia followed after." Sorrow etched deep lines in the old man's face as he continued but his words betrayed no hint of the bitterness he certainly would have been justified in feeling.

"It wasn't long after that the bombs started falling." Kittridge spread his arms to encompass everyone in the room. "They all came here, where they felt safest. Most of them have lost their homes. Some have lost much more."

This was bad. These people could jeopardize the entire battle plan. Victoria's eyes swept back and forth as she thought about what to say to Father Kittridge.

"You can't stay here," she blurted out finally. "At dawn this area will be a combat zone. I can't have a bunch of non-combatants caught in the middle," *and I won't give up the only defensive position left in this city*, she thought.

"Where are we to go?" countered Kittridge. "These people...they have lost relatives and friends. Would you have me turn them out into the night to be shot down by one side or the other? And what of the sick and wounded? Some of them cannot even walk. What would you have them do?"

Victoria chewed her lip. Kittridge was right. Wandering in the dark would only get them shot. There was not enough time for them to reach safety, if such a thing existed at all. If they remained where they were, they would more than likely be killed when the battle resumed in the morning. On top of that, Victoria was certain that plopping a command post on top of what was, in effect, a civilian shelter was a violation of all sorts of rules of warfare.

As she pondered what to do, Victoria felt a tug against her pant leg. She looked down into the eyes of a girl, no older than four or five years, who had been holding on to Father Kittridge's leg. The child held out something in her right hand. It was the mylar bag holding Ecklund's half-eaten beef stew. The little girl looked as if she had not eaten in days, yet she was offering Victoria her only food.

"Oh, thank you," Victoria said, kneeling to bring herself to the child's level. "You eat it, sweetie. I'm not hungry. What's your name?"

The child merely stared back at Victoria, her left hand fingering a necklace that was many sizes too big for her neck.

"We don't know her name," Father Kittridge spoke up. "She wandered in two days ago, alone. She has not spoken since she got here. I don't know where her parents are. It frightens me to imagine the things she may have seen"

Staring into the little girl's eyes, Victoria suddenly remembered the stuffed bear still tucked inside her tunic. She fetched in and handed it to the child. The little girl took the dirty toy and scrunched it against her face.

Her round, innocent eyes still locked with Victoria's, the child carefully set aside the toy and her food and removed her necklace. Victoria bowed to allow the little girl to place it around her neck. Lifting it up to the dim light, she noticed the pendant that hung from the chain. A silver crucifix.

Victoria stood and swept her eyes over the throng of refugees that had gathered around her. They waited in silent expectation for her decision regarding their fate. Avoiding eye contact, she stalked from the room. There was only one decision she could possibly make.

Lyran Field Command Post, Belleauxville
Tsamma, Federated Suns
0213 Hours, 15 October, 3064

Victoria struggled to maintain her footing as her captors led, nay, dragged her across the rough ground. Blindfolded, she could not see where they were taking her, but her highly tuned sense of hearing betrayed the scene in the Lyran camp. All around she heard the crack of splintered wood as boxes were opened, the clink of ammunition belts being handed out, and the scuff of shovels striking earth. Though she did not speak German, she recognized the sound of officers and noncoms issuing orders by their tone of voice. The camp was preparing for action.

They stopped. Victoria could tell by the light filtering through her blindfold that they were inside a building. Her handlers exchanged a few words in German with the room's occupant before releasing their rough grip on her arms. The plasticuffs that bound her hands behind her back were cut and Victoria instinctively massaged her sore wrists as the guards exited the room and closed the door.

"You may remove your blindfold, *Hauptmann*." The voice was calm. Male with the hint of an aristocratic Germanic accent.

Victoria's eyes narrowed, adjusting to the light in the room. She immediately took in the details of her environment and filed them away for later reference. It was small, square. A private office complete with a large desk, two chairs and a corner curio. A rainbow colored banner advertising a pest control company adorned the wall behind the desk, along with a framed picture of the company's founder, a smiling, slightly balding man of his mid-thirties. *Wherever you are, I'll bet you're not smiling now*, she thought.

Standing behind the desk, arms folded across his chest, was the source of the calm voice. Two meters tall, blond and well muscled, Victoria thought the Lyran officer perfect recruiting poster material for House Steiner military academies.

Great, she thought. *A martinet. Probably a political appointee. This should go well.*

"I'm *Kommandant* Groth, commanding officer of this battalion." *Am I supposed to be impressed?* "And how may I address you, *Hauptmann*?"

"Lef...", she caught herself. "*Captain Hale, First Crucis Lancers.*" Victoria had reluctantly decided to pin her new rank insignia to her collar, hoping it would increase her bargaining power, however slightly. She felt its points rub against her collarbone.

"Please, have a seat, *Hauptmann Hale.*" *Kommandant* Groth motioned to one of the folding chairs arrayed in front of his desk.

"I prefer to stand." Victoria maintained a perfect "parade rest", according the *Kommandant* his due amount of respect while, at the same time, robbing him of the opportunity to assume a position of dominance over her. She knew she would probably have to submit to his ego eventually but she would pick her spots. For now, she preferred to bargain from a position of strength.

Kommandant Groth seemed not to notice, or care.

"Very well. At least stand at ease", he sighed, seating himself behind the broad, oak desk. "Unless you're trying to make me uncomfortable."

Groth's comment took Victoria somewhat by surprise. She allowed herself to relax a bit, but only just.

"I trust you have been treated well." It was more a statement than a question but Victoria answered anyway.

"As well as could be expected." *From troops who just got the shit kicked out of them*, she thought, remembering the sharp pain in her ribs. Some of her captors *had* been a bit liberal with fists and rifle butts, and Victoria was fairly sure they had cracked at least one rib, yet she was careful to swallow the pain. It would not serve to show weakness in front of this man. Besides, Echo Company's raid had cost the Lyrans. They had lost friends. A reasonable amount of *payback* was to be expected. Would *her* troops have behaved any differently?

"Good. Well then", he began. "Let's get down to it. What is it that you want, *Hauptmann?*"

Groth leaned forward on his elbows, steepling his fingers as if to indicate that he had no time for idle chat, which, of course, he didn't. Victoria at first mistook his manner for, in her mind, typical Elsie arrogance. She had dealt with enough of their officers that she expected the behavior. As she studied Groth's features in the light of the desk lamp however, she noticed for the first time his furrowed brow, the dark circles under his eyes and the deep lines that weathered his face. His eyes were ice blue, yet the crow's feet

in their corners made them appear more sad than piercing. She detected no hint of arrogance in this man, or else he was hiding it well. He just looked tired.

It suddenly occurred to her how haggard her own appearance must be. The pain in her ribs grew sharp, drawing a quick breath from her lungs. She decided to oblige Groth and sat down opposite him.

As he waited for her response, Groth's eyes did not meet hers but instead seemed fixated on something below her chin. *Is he actually staring at my...no*, she thought, realizing that he was examining the crucifix hanging around her neck. It had somehow worked its way out of her tunic. She quickly palmed the pendant and tucked it back into her collar.

"No need to be embarrassed," said Groth, his tone somber and serious. "The way things are these days, we all need something to believe in. This travels with me wherever I go." Groth reached inside his jacket and produced a tiny copy of the Torah, placing it on the desk in front of him. "I don't get much time to read it anymore, but it's comforting just to have it with me."

Victoria slumped a bit, a gesture *Kommandant* Groth alerted to immediately.

"You did not think of us all as godless monsters, did you?" He chuckled. "Surely you're not falling victim to your own propaganda?"

Too much familiarity, thought Victoria, sensing the conversation beginning to drift into dangerous waters. *We are not old friends*. Time to get back on mission.

"There is a situation you should be aware of, *Herr Kommandant*," she began matter-of-factly. "There's a group of refugees, civilians, caught in the fire zone."

Groth's face visibly grayed. "How many?"

"As many as two-hundred, maybe more. We haven't been able to get an accurate head count in the dark. Most of them are in an improvised shelter," she continued, not wanting to give away the exact location, "but there may be others in the surrounding ruins."

Kommandant Groth's brow furrowed even more. His face became stone, mouth set in a hard line. He stood and began to pace behind the desk, rubbing his chin.

"What is it you want from me, *Hauptmann*?"

"Time, *Kommandant*. Time to organize an evacuation. There are aid agencies..."

"Time for your troops to improve their positions you mean. Impossible! I cannot postpone the offensive", he said, shaking his head. "It's simply out of the question." He leaned on the desk, eyes cast down toward the miniature Torah, which he promptly snatched up and tucked away.

"Besides, I am just a junior officer, as are you. Neither of us have the authority to make such a decision."

He was reaching. Playing the "just following orders" card. It wouldn't work here. Victoria wouldn't let it.

"We are the commanders on the scene. There is no one else. This is *our* problem to solve"

Victoria, sensing his obvious discomfort, chose her spot to apply pressure. She stood and leaned forward over the desk, placing herself within the Lyran officer's personal space.

"*Kommandant* Groth, if we do not get those people out of the city they will be killed!" Groth continued to shake his head and stare at the desk. Victoria took his refusal to make eye contact as an invitation to go in for the kill.

"Do you really want the blood of two hundred innocent people on your hands?"

Victoria backed off, leaving Groth to brood. If all else failed, she had a final trump card she could play, but she wanted to take the measure of the man before doing so. Before leaving her own lines, she had contacted Relief Services, a humanitarian organization that helped provide aid to civilians victimized by war, and informed them of the situation. In doing so, she had placed the impetus to get something done squarely on the shoulders of *Kommandant* Groth, while, at the same time, deflecting the blame away from herself in the event he refused. She felt a pang of guilt over this, but it was how the game was played. In the end, however, her ace was not needed.

When Groth's eyes finally met hers, they reflected a look of sad resignation.

"What are you proposing?" he asked, quietly.

"I need twenty-four hours."

"Impossible. Eight hours is plenty of time."

"Eighteen then", she countered. "Relief Services can't move into the area until mid morning." At that, Victoria tipped her hand, purposely letting the Kommandant know she held the high cards.

Groth's face hardened once more, realizing her ploy. His mouth formed a thin line.

"Twelve hours. Not one minute more." His jaw was set. Victoria knew she would be able to push him no further. She had hoped to allow for enough time for her reinforcements to arrive, but twelve hours, plus the three that had passed since she left Rue Madelaine would have to do. Hopefully, her men could hold for a few more hours.

"Agreed."

Now it was the *Kommandant's* turn to make demands.

"Of course, my troops will be present to assist with the evacuation."

To force me out of my defensive position is what you really mean. Groth understood the game and played it well.

"Of course." Victoria smiled cordially, her insincerity certainly not lost on the *Kommandant*.

They stood, silent for a moment, each taking the full measure of the other. *Kommandant* Groth was not what Victoria had come to expect from a Lyran. She hated to admit feeling a grudging respect for him.

"This will ruin us both," he said, finally, his tone somber once again. "Militarily I mean."

"Are you *that* concerned about your career, *Herr Kommandant*?" she asked, though the answer was obvious.

"Not anymore," he answered, fetching a bottle and a pair of glasses from a cabinet in the corner of the office.

"I don't drink on duty, *Kommandant*," cautioned Victoria.

"Neither do I," he replied, turning the bottle so she could read the label. Mineral water. "And please, call me Ernst."

She reluctantly accepted the glass. Ernst. In military circles, officers almost never referred to each other on a first name basis, particularly enemy officers, but many rules had been broken today. One more wouldn't hurt.

"Victoria," she offered. *To hell with convention.*

Ernst drained his glass in a most unprofessional manner and poured himself another.

"Shall we start the paperwork?" There was always paperwork.

"Yes," she replied. "Might as well make everything nice and legible for the review board." That brought a chuckle from Ernst.

"Ha! If either one of us lives to see the review board! I think I'd rather just face the firing squad!" Ernst raised his glass in salute.

Victoria joined him in his mock toast and emptied the glass. The cool water tasted sweet.

***Rue Madelaine, Belleauxville
Tsamma, Federated Suns
0729 Hours, 15 October, 3064***

Seated on a set of marble steps that no longer had a building attached, Victoria watched another truckload of refugees rumble away from the collection point. The driver was careful not to stray from the marked route that would guide the vehicle through the maze of mines planted by one side or the other. Relief Services had arrived just after dawn and already three truckloads of the able-bodied had been evacuated. Medical tents had been set up to assist the sick and wounded and they even had a MASH truck, long since retired from military service, serving as an emergency triage center. Their efforts were well organized and coordinated and they paid little attention to the troops, both her own and the Lyrans, who stood by watching both the relief operation and each other.

The silent little girl from the church cellar waved from the back of the departing truck. Victoria waved back, clutching the silver crucifix as she watched her fade from view. She wondered if the little girl would ever be reunited with her family.

A voice interrupted her melancholy. It was Ernst, or rather, *Kommandant* Groth, excusing himself from a circle of junior officers and noncoms. Back to business.

Victoria stood, snapping to and saluting him as one did when approached by a superior officer. His answering salute was crisp and military.

"The evacuation is going well, don't you think?"

"*Jawohl, Herr Kommandant,*" she replied. According him a bit of Lyran formality served to assure him she knew their roles had been reestablished. He seemed to take no notice.

"It's a good thing we have done here today. Be proud of yourself, *Leftenant.*"

It took Victoria a moment to realize he had addressed her as *Leftenant*, even though she still wore her *Captain's* bars. *So he had me pegged all along. He probably sensed my discomfort from the moment they dragged me into his office.* Groth smiled out of the corner of his mouth. He had held his own trump card until the game was over, when it no longer mattered.

"I suppose," he began, "we will meet again in a few hours. As enemies."

Victoria said nothing. She simply stared past him, watching as her troops dismantled their defensive positions and prepared to move out.

"Too bad, really," he continued. "In another time, perhaps we two could have been colleagues."

"Maybe."

"Ah well," he sighed. "Such is the way of things, in war." He started back toward his group but turned back toward her before he had covered two steps.

"I'll be praying for you, *Leftenant*," he said, saluting.

"I'll be praying for you too, *Kommandant*." Victoria held her salute until he was out of sight. *I'll be praying for us all.*