



FALL FROM GRACE

Chris Hartford

Part Four



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"Whoever coined the phrase 'the mailed fist in the velvet glove' obviously had Rinalla Centrella in mind. At first glance, people took her to be a vapid, self-obsessed hedonist. That was just before she ambushed them and got exactly what she wanted, be it by guile or force."

—Private Journal

Delphi Canopus IV Magistracy of Canopus 9 July 2598

A week back on Canopus after the funeral and already Rhean missed home. It wasn't the company—she and Rinalla had, despite the frictions of that first meeting, become good friends—but rather the environment and the war that was "over but not quite finished."

She tugged at the collar of her armored jacket, a necessary precaution and one her current protection officer, Annelise Corbin, an SLDF infantry officer of Davion heritage, insisted upon. Unlike Evangeline, currently enjoying maternity leave on Oriente with her Hegemony husband and young daughter, Annelise was a stickler for the regulations and wasn't going to take any chances with safety, particularly when the deputy governor was now also the heir to the Free Worlds' throne. To casual observers, Rhean's jacket was indistinguishable from those worn by all officers.

Grams' illness hadn't been a surprise, but her decline at the end had been swift. Even using an SLDF command circuit, Rhean hadn't made it back to Atreus in time for some last words, and so she'd thrown herself into the funeral arrangements. Most of the House Lords attended—Coordinator Kurita was the exception—and both Ian Cameron and Alexander Davion had made eulogies. Ursula Liao was dour and taciturn, her relationship with Marion

having been strained for years, but even she'd made respectful comments.

Her father's installation as Captain-General had followed, with the sundry lords of the Free Worlds pledging their support. Byron Allison was there, and Lambert had been in his entourage. He was a handsome man with a commanding presence, but even after so many years his sneer on seeing her had shattered the illusion in Rhean's eyes. His younger brother Carlton was much more amiable, and had actually danced with Rhean at the inauguration ball, prompting Rinalla—freshly arrived from Canopus for the occasion—to make a number of lascivious comments about “cementing diplomatic relations.”

“I'll marry who I want and when I want,” Rhean had said.

Rin had merely arched an eyebrow and said, “Who said anything about marriage? Have some fun for once in your life.” As ever—four years on Canopus had seen Rinalla dangle a number of men in front of her—Rhean ignored her friend and instead spent time chatting with officers from the Steiner delegation and with the lords of Stewart and Tamarind. The Canopian had thrown her hands up in despair.

“Auntie Rhean, can you help me with my hat?” Carla Centrella was the spitting image of her mother. Though only four years old, the honey-skinned girl with her long ebony hair was well on the way to becoming a master manipulator of people. Many thought the child a sweet little angel, but after years in her company, Rhean knew her for the minx she was. She couldn't help but fall for the girl's charm though, hence her agreement to take part in this riding trip, even though she wasn't an accomplished horsewoman.

“There you go.” She finished adjusting the chinstrap, which had been fine in the first place, the whole exercise being one of Carla's attention-seeking games.

A liveried servant lifted the young girl into the saddle of her dappled pony, a fat placid animal, and, after making sure she was properly seated, took hold of the guide reins. Rhean pulled herself into the saddle of her white mare. Annelise was already mounted, as were two Canopian security troops. This ride would stay within Delphi's grounds, but the security situation was still hazy. Sweet, kind Ragnarsson had died in a bomb blast eighteen months earlier as he traveled home from the ministry and both Melissa Humphreys and herself had been shot at on numerous occasions.

A slow walk took them out of the stable yard and onto the terrace that ran along the eastern flank of the complex. They descended into the broad meadow that surrounded a small lake. Carla kept up a constant stream of comments and questions as they rode and Rhean did her best to field them, though occasionally Annelise injected a comment. The Canopian guards were silent, their eyes darting back and forth as if expecting trouble to leap out at them. Rhean checked her holstered pistol, an SLDF-issue laser pistol rather than the slug-throwers she was used to, but an efficient weapon nonetheless, and caught Annelise's eyes as she did. The Davion woman raised an eyebrow but said nothing. She didn't approve of her charges being armed, but then most of them had been diplomats and government functionaries, not serving 'MechWarriors. They'd traded war stories one evening on the journey back from Atreus, Rhean's experiences on Wisconsin compared to Annelise's in the Concordat, her odd Davion accent adding to the telling of the tale. She was a solid companion and good at her job, but Rhean missed Evangeline.

"I want to gallop." Carla stated emphatically as they looped behind the lake and skirted a small copse. The trees were in full leaf, swaying idly in the breeze.

"No you're not, kiddo." Rhean's voice was firm but friendly. "Not until you're older." Carla pouted and Rhean relented slightly. "Okay, a short trot if Mister Harris agrees, okay?" The servant holding the pony's reins nodded, and the girl laughed excitedly. At the man's urging, the stout pony reluctantly broke into a trot. Carla giggled uncontrollably as she bounced up and down. "Just to the lake edge and back," Rhean yelled after them.

Annelise maneuvered her horse alongside Rhean's, her eyes regarding the tree line much as the Canopian troops had earlier. *Professional paranoia*, Rhean thought. "Feeling vulnerable, Anna?" Rhean glanced sideways at the woman, though most of her attention was on the young girl whose laughter could still be heard a hundred meters away.

"A little. It's too open for my tastes." There'd been a security sweep thirty minutes before the ride, so it was unlikely any insurgents would be lurking. "It's probably noth—" She stopped abruptly and Rhean turned back to her.

A surprised look was etched on the bodyguard's face as a red stain spread down her right side. She half turned toward the Canopian guard behind her then, in slow-motion, slipped from the

horse to land in a crumpled heap in the dew-sodden grass.

A wisp of smoke rose from the barrel of the guard's pistol and Rhean realized she'd heard the click of the silenced weapon firing, though it hadn't registered. Her right hand moved toward her own pistol, but the assassin aimed his gun at her and shook his head. "You're coming with us, Duchess. The governor will have to listen this time."

"The League doesn't negotiate with terrorists." She didn't say whether she meant the Free Worlds League or the Star League; the former had its own views on terrorists that were more 'hurt me and I'll hurt you more' than the SLDF's non-negotiation policy.

"We're *loyalists*, not terrorists. And you'd better hope the bloat-pig Humphreys does, else you'll end up like your friend." He nodded toward the fallen Annelise, whom Rhean noted was still breathing. "Take her gun." The other guard maneuvered in toward Rhean's right side, penning her in. She had to think quickly. Could she act before they disarmed her? Would doing so help, or would she just become another casualty figure?

"Auntie Ree, look at me!"

Carla raced toward them, scarcely two-dozen meters away now. The kidnapper's head jerked in her direction at the call, either having forgotten her presence or else hoping she'd be kept away from the scene of crime by the servant she usually gave the slip to. His gun was still leveled at Rhean's chest, but his attention wasn't fully on her.

Releasing the reins, Rhean slid back in her saddle and pushed up in the stirrups with the balls of her feet. The armed man saw the movement and started turning back to her as her own pistol cleared its holster. She fired without aiming properly, and the first bolt went into his horse's shoulder. The animal screamed in pain and reared, throwing off his own shot that whistled past her shoulder. Her second burst was true, however, taking the flailing terrorist in the center of his chest. He fell backward off the animal, which promptly bolted.

An immense blow struck Rhean high in her back and she was thrown forward off the horse, the wind driven out of her by the double impacts of the strike and hitting the ground. She rolled over, ignoring the pain between her shoulder blades, and scrambled to retrieve her pistol from where it had fallen several meters away. Her horse, confused by the sudden loss of weight on its

back, milled around aimlessly, impeding the second guard who, she realized, had shot her in the back. Given the speed with which the pain was fading to a dull ache, she presumed the armor plate had stopped the bullet, though she'd be bruised for a while—if she survived.

"Damn bitch," the guard swore as he bullied his way past the distressed mare and saw his fallen comrade, all thoughts of capture driven from his mind. The pistol was only an arms length away now, but she knew she'd never reach it in time. "You're going to die for that. I'm going to make you suff—" His words stopped suddenly.

Rhean glanced back and saw a look of slack-jawed surprise on his face as a wisp of smoke rose from the hole drilled between his eyes.

"Bloody amateurs," came a weak, Davion-accented voice. Annelise was on her feet, pistol in her left hand and her right arm hanging at her side. "Should've shot me in the head or at least finished me off. Incompetent wankers." She strode over to the one Rhean had shot. "He'll live, if the medics get here before the governor does."

"Auntie Ree?" Carla was goggle-eyed at the carnage. "What happened? Why are you and Anna so angry and why're mummy's men asleep?"

Rhean plucked the youngster from the saddle and wrapped her in a ferocious hug that sent waves of pain across her protesting back. "They're bad men, little one." She pulled Carla's head into her shoulder and turned so the child couldn't see the bodies any more.

The medics indeed did arrive before the governor, hastened to the incident site with a full security detail by Annelise's emergency beeper—Rhean realized that in the brief incident she hadn't triggered her own. Melissa arrived scant moments later and immediately took charge of the situation, containing the scene and seeking to ascertain how terrorists had evaded the vetting procedures in place on the Canopian staff. She was furious, but her anger was quickly eclipsed by a supernova that erupted in their midst.

Rhean and Annelise were sitting side by side on the steps of the ambulance, both stripped of their armored jackets, Anna swearing at her bad luck; the would-be assassin had fired a three-round

burst, two of which had fragmented on the armor plate in the back of her jacket—which the killer had seemed to be ignorant of—and the third had clipped the edge of the plate, gouging muscle and bleeding profusely, but posing little risk. Rhean had been shot once between the shoulderblades, but the plate had taken the full force. She'd be nursing a bruise for a while though. She fingered the buckled plate as the storm broke.

"Where is the treacherous bastard?" A voice screamed. "If he's not dead I'm going to kill him myself."

Though only 158 centimeters tall, Rinalla's fury made her appear like a giant. Canopian and SLDF troopers faded from the path of the young woman in her diaphanous white gown.

"Mummy!" Carla yelled from Rhean's side where she'd been dozing, head on the Marik woman's lap. She leapt up and ran to the petite woman, who scooped her up and hugged her. Rinalla stalked over to the ambulance.

"Where are the pieces of shit who did this?"

Anna regarded her coolly. "One is having a long conversation with the Angel Gabriel right now." She nodded toward a body bag being loaded onto another vehicle. "And the other is over there." She gestured to where Humphreys and her people were grilling the semi-conscious survivor.

Rinalla marched over, daughter clinging to her neck. Rhean levered herself up and followed. Anna tried did likewise, brushing away the protestations of a medic. "This should be interesting," she stated deadpan, her accented voice pitched so only Rhean could hear.

"Is he talking?" Rinalla demanded of the governor.

"A little. Nothing useful."

"Allow me." Ice dripped drop Rinalla's voice. "Are you awake, you treacherous bastard?" She shook his shoulder violently and a medic moved to protest, immediately silenced by the glare she sent his way. The wounded man's eyes blinked open and widened upon seeing her. "You recognize me, yes? That's good. You know who you've betrayed, and you know the penalty for treason." He nodded, fearful. "However, I don't think you're going to have too long to contemplate that."

In a swift movement, she turned toward Melissa Humphreys and pulled her pistol from its holster. Not a laser pistol, but a classic

and well-oiled Makarov; an antique of old Terra, but still lethally effective. The fluid movement continued and the barrel came to rest on the would-be assassin's nose. His eyes went cross-eyed focusing on it. No one moved. "You're not going to have long to consider it, because I'm of a mind to blow your brains out here and now."

Rhean slid into the space next to the petite woman and gently lifted Carla from her arms. "Watch the kick, Rin, and take care; Blood is a bitch to get out of white." Rhean's voice was *sotto-voce* and the prisoner's eyes bulged as Rinalla released the safety and pulled back the hammer.

"You see, you put my daughter at risk. You shot my friend, and you and your associates seem to think you're waging a 'people's war', only it's a war no one wants. Canopus has never gotten what it wants through violence or threat of violence." The wavering gun seemed to put a lie to that, but no one corrected her. "We persuade, we cajole, we seduce. SO WHAT THE FUCK DO YOU THINK YOU'RE PLAYING AT?" She screamed, thrusting the gun back between his eyes.

"Rinalla—" Governor Humphreys began.

"This is Canopian business, Melissa."

The Governor shrugged her shoulders.

"You are going to talk." He nodded weakly. "You are going to tell us who put you up to this. And this stupid war is going to end." She lifted the gun clear and reset the safety. "Because whether you like it or not, we are part of the Star League now, not murderous barbarians like the Inner Sphere media portray us of the Periphery." She handed the pistol back to the bemused Governor, then reclaimed her daughter and strode back toward the buildings.

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"Sometimes you can be oblivious to what's going on around you as all the while others marvel at why you don't act."

—Private Journal

Star Chamber
Court of the Star League, Terra
Terran Hegemony
2 January 2600

Rhean took Ian Cameron's proffered hand and shook it. "Have you had any news from Nicholas?"

"Just reports on the peacekeeping operations—nothing too onerous." The elderly First Lord smiled, then shook her father's hand and that of Prince Alexander Davion. The Davion First Prince was alert and combative, a far cry from the broken and absent-minded old man she'd encountered at recent council sessions. He was ninety-two, six years older than the First Lord, and had been "on his last legs" since the loss of his sons four years earlier. His grandson, another Ian, had been de-facto leader of the Federated Suns since then but had fallen to an assassin's bullet the previous summer. Alexander had come to the fore again after that, aided by Ian's son—his great-grandson—Zane. The boy was only nineteen and a lieutenant in the AFFS, but had been thrown into the deep end of interstellar politics. Zane was taking leave of absence from the Davion military to aid his great-grandfather at the opening sessions of the Star league council. *To be introduced to us*, her sub-conscious added. *So his succession won't be a complete shock when the time arises.* She'd liked his father, but for all the charm he'd demonstrated over the last few days, Zane was a relative unknown.

"I've had my own taste of such operations, so I hope it goes well." Rhean looked at the floor as the grey-haired man was lost in his memories for a moment. A strand of her auburn hair, though

now only shoulder length rather than the waist-length style she'd favored in her teens and twenties, fell across her face and she brushed it back. She regarded the room, the Star Chamber in which the lords of the great houses met to discuss the affairs of humanity; Ian's wife, Shandra, formerly commander of the SLDF, was locked in a spirited debate with attorney general Amanda Blair; Chancellor Norman Aris seemed lost in thought, studying a data projection with his advisors; the youthful Zane Davion was chatting to a prematurely grey-haired Kevin Steiner-Dineson. *Probably discussing their hangovers after the New Century's Eve ball*, she thought. Rinalla, an official observer in advance of Canopus' formal induction into the Star League, chatted with Melissa Humphries. The situation in the Magistracy was calm now, leading to suggestions of an early incorporation.

"Are we waiting on Kurita again?" Alexander injected into the conversation, matching Rhean's train of thought. Leonard Kurita obeyed his own rules and looked set of provoking a confrontation with the Star League by marching his troops back and forth along the Hegemony-Combine border.

Rhean's attention wandered, her eyes drifting back across the chamber to where the younger Davion and Steiner-Dineson stood. Zane glanced back at her and a cheeky smile crept onto his lips, prompting Kevin to look her way too. Immediately, Rhean looked away and her mind leapt back to the conversation at hand.

"The army of the Federated Suns would support you without hesitation, my lord!" Alexander Davion said. Rhean rewound the conversation in her head. Kurita's provocations and a suggestion the SLDF—with Fed Suns aid—should fight them.

"There will be no war!" Cameron was clearly displeased by Davion's suggestion. "The Star League exists to bring prosperity and peace to mankind!" No room for old feuds. Davion muttered an apology, then looked concerned as a grimace of pain crossed the First Lord's face as he rubbed his chest.

"Are you alright?" her father asked as Rhean stepped forward to support the old man. Cameron waved her off, explaining the warnings his doctors had given about stress. Rhean shot a disapproving glance at the First Prince, who merely shrugged.

Zane Davion and Kevin Dineson joined them, but while she regarded the Davion heir impassively, she favored the Steiner Archon with a wink; the three of them had formed a loose fellowship along with Rinalla. The "kids clique," Rhean's father called it,

despite their spread of ages and the fact Kevin was a head of state. The odd friendship, if it lasted, should proved a boon to the Star League; the older generation—Leonard Kurita, Alexander Davion and even her father—were locked in their pre-unification mindset, with rivalries and old wounds tainting their relationship. The next generation—her generation—were more likely to go partying together than planning war on each other. That wasn't to say they weren't up to the challenge of interstellar politics.

"We should start the session. If Kurita's late, it's his problem." Dineson, who at almost forty was eight years Rhean's senior and twenty years older than Zane, had been hardened by the strife in his realm before his succession, strife that had left his mother crippled and the Steiner equivalent of Parliament, the Estates General, suspended.

The whisper of an opening door made them all turn. Leonard Kurita strode into the chamber, accompanied by *Tai-sa* Tetsuo Yatomo. He didn't look happy as he slumped into his chair. The First Lord called the session to order as the other leaders took their seats. Rhean took up her place behind her father, keying commands into her dataslate to transfer reports and presentations to her father's display as a succession of briefers gave their reports. The atmosphere soured notably when the issue of the Kuritan troops was raised, prompting an argument between Leonard and Alexander Davion. The First Lord intervened, but Leonard continued in his belligerent stance and only when Cameron threatened war did the Coordinator half-heartedly back down. "I'll see what I can do," was his response to the threat of SLDF troops on New Samarkand.

The lunch interval arrived and the various retinues dispersed. Kevin Dineson caught Rhean's attention as she left. "I'll catch you up in a sec, dad." Brion nodded, his gaze taking in his daughter and then the grey-haired Archon, then continued out of the hall.

"We're going to Cavanaugh's later." His accent was crisp and precise, with only a slight trace of his native German. *That would be the Dineson heritage.* "A chance to have a few beers, play pool, and unwind. Are you game?"

"We?"

"The usual gang." Which meant him and Zane with their respective security; despite their age difference, those two had been in cahoots all through the recent celebrations, the boundless energy of the Davion youth a counterpoint to the introspective Steiner-

Dineson. She glanced over at the Davion heir, who was talking to his aged great-grandfather. He didn't glance back, but she sensed he was aware. "You should ask your sister too." He glanced over at Evangeline, who was waiting in the doorway."

Rhean looked at him, puzzled. "Evie's my bodyguard, not my sister."

He blushed faintly at his faux pas. "She looks so like you, I just presumed she was, you know..." His voice trailed off. A bastard sister was what he meant. "Well, she should come anyway. And the Magestrix-Designate."

"I'll think about it. Anyway, I didn't know Archons played pool."

"A classic primer on ballistics and physics." She laughed at that.

"Is that a yes?" He looked her straight in the eyes, though it meant craning his neck somewhat; she was probably fifteen centimeters taller, even in flat shoes.

"No."

"Is that a no?"

"No." This time Rhean laughed. "I'll think about it. I need to check with security." She could see Annelise with Evie now, both constantly scanning their surroundings. After the attempted kidnapping on Canopus, they'd become very protective. It was something Kevin knew full well after his own security issues during his mother's rein.

"Okay, let me know." And with a broad smile, Dineson disappeared into the crowd.

"A strange one that." Rinalla materialized at her shoulder. She'd accompanied Melissa Humphreys as an observer. "What did he want?"

"I *think* he wanted a date. Only I'm not sure if it was me he was after or Evie."

"You should go. Both of you." There was a mischievous glint in her eyes.

"We're not on Canopus now Rin, not to mention I'm not interested and Evie is married."

The Canopian looked puzzled. "And?"

"Never mind, you're incorrigible."

"But I'm not a prissy miss." She smiled sweetly and Rhean scowled in return. "Anyway, he's harmless, I think. The other one, however, he's the real instigator."

"Zane? But he's only a kid."

"A twenty-year old kid who's going to take command of one of the great houses sooner rather than later. A kid who has already broken a number of hearts in the city, carving god-knows how many notches in his bedpost in the process." Her voice contained a touch of admiration and Rhean's eyebrows rose. "Oh yes, quite the Romeo. Which is what you should be careful of."

"Of Zane? He's like a little brother." Despite the twelve-year age difference, they'd found themselves attending many of the same Star League soirees and had become friends of a sort.

"Well, believe me missy, he doesn't look on *you* as a sister. To my mind, he put Kevin up to this." A smile tugged at the corners of Rinalla's mouth. "He likes a challenge."

Rhean's eyebrows rose. "Well, that puts a whole new spin on things." She paused for thought a moment. "A 'Thanks but no thanks,' I think."

"Hold your horses. I'm not saying don't bed him. Just if you do, go into it with eyes open and enjoy it for what it is."

"Rinalla!" Rhean's cheeks flared.

"What?" Her innocent look was honed to perfection. "Did I offend your prissy sensibilities again?"

"I'm the daughter of a House Lord and future Captain-General. I'm not going to simply fall into bed with someone for fun, and particularly not another potential houselord. It'd be a diplomatic disaster."

"But it *would* be fun. And history tells us the best alliances are made in the bedroom."

Rhean threw up her hands in exasperation. "Rin, I'm not talking about this any more. If you want to 'have fun,' then feel free, but don't drag me into it." She stormed out, Evie and Anna falling into place at her shoulders. Rinalla followed, the smirk still on her face.

Star Chamber
Court of the Star League, Terra
Terran Hegemony
15 January 2600

"You're a shark." Kevin Dineson protested, glowering at Rhean. She stood there, right hand on hip and left held out toward the Archon. Her chin was down and she looked at the looming figure through her eyelashes, which she batted deliberately.

"Moi?" She said innocently, then beckoned with her open hand. "You assumed I couldn't play when you asked. Now pay up, or is the Lyran reputation for tight-fistedness more than just a myth."

The Lyran grunted, then put down the pool cue and reached into his pocket. "You're lucky. I don't usually carry cash." He laid a crisp Star League note in her hand.

Rhean smiled at him with false sweetness and tucked the note in the back pocket of her jeans. "Thank you Kevin. And to show my grace in victory, I'll let you stay on. Evie, you want to play?"

"I'm on duty, Duchess."

"It's hardly a high-risk area. Let your hair down." Evangeline met her gaze levelly, her face seeming an impassive mask. Rhean saw the glint of amusement in her eyes. "Should I make it an order?" Evie picked up the cue and Rhean withdrew to her drink.

"Well, isn't this a pleasant fiction." Rinalla deadpanned as Rhean slid back onto her bar stool. Ostensibly this was a public bar in the Star League capital, but in reality the security considerations and vetting of attendees—and the presence of so many bodyguards—made the family bar seem more like a fortress.

Rhean reached down and scratched Athena's ears where she half sat half slumped against Rinalla's legs; her loyalties had been bought earlier in the evening with a bit of cheese. "Traitor," she said to the dog, a smile on her face. Athena's tail thumped, and as if summoned by the drumming—if they could hear it over the music—her sons Hector and Paris trotted over from where they'd been harassing the other guest for scraps. They licked their mistress' hand then turned expectantly as new figures joined the group.

"We do our best for our honored guests," Lydia Petersen-Cameron said, sliding into the seat next to Rinalla, the bundle that

was her new son tucked in the crook of one arm. Her pale skin and ash-blond hair plaited into a crown atop her head were a stark contrast to the Canopian. "A chance to be ordinary twenty- and thirty-something folk for the evening."

Rhean's eyebrows rose fractionally. Ordinary folk; the heads of two interstellar nations and the heirs of several more. It was diplomacy of a sort, another deliberate bonding exercise designed to overcome the factionalization of the current ruling generation while masquerading as a going-away party for young Zane, due back with his regiment on the Concordat border. It seemed to be working at present, albeit very different from the small-scale gatherings that had comprised just Rinalla, Kevin, Zane and herself—and their respective bodyguards, of course. With the addition of Lydia to the mix, as well as a host of Avellars, Amaris's and Calderons, the old cozy feel had gone.

Rhean fished the note out of her pockets. "Well, the next round is on the Archon. The usual, Rin?" The Magestrix-elect waved her hand negligently, and didn't take her gaze from a cluster of Steiner officers she regarded in a predatory manner. "Lydia?"

"Just juice for me," Lydia spoke softly and glanced down at young Joseph. "Doctor's orders."

"And for me, as Kevin's paying ... a Skye malt I think," Rhean added rhetorically while flexing the crisp note. She caught the barman's eye and ordered, adding juices and water for the bodyguards; it was a long duty, and while alcohol was forbidden, she wasn't going to deny them soft drinks. She glanced at Lydia's security escort, a solidly built red haired woman dressed in Black Watch colors. "What would you like? I'm sorry, I don't know your name." She had the preferences of the Marik, Canopus, Davion and Steiner security detachments down pat, but this was the first time she'd been able to chat to any of Cameron's detail.

"Kerensky, Duchess Marik. Tanya Kerensky. Water, please." Her accent was unusual, more Atrean than the Terra-standard she heard at Court.

"Russian?" Rhean ventured. The red-haired woman nodded.

"Tanya is from Moscow," Lydia added before turning to show off her child to a newly arrived Calderon.

"Ah. *Zdravstvuyte. Radas vamee poznamomit'siy.*"

"Spasiba. Dobriy vecher Rhean Brionova. Your accent is excellent, duchess."

"Linguistics was a key part of my education, and given the role of Russian in the Confederation and Hegemony it was on my curriculum. I don't get much practice though. Perhaps I should visit Moscow or St. Petersburg while I'm here. It's been years since I was last there."

Lydia turned back to the group. "The League would be happy to make the arrangements, Rhean," she interjected. Her bodyguard took a half-step backward, as if embarrassed to have been drawn into the conversation. Rhean was very familiar with her detail, in particular Evie and Annelise, but the Camerons clearly favored a more stand-offish approach. She doubted he even knew her name.

"And here's Z-man," Rinalla drawled. "I don't know...the guest of honor late to his own going away party." Zane was standing in the doorway, looking uncharacteristically anxious. He spotted their little cluster and made directly for them, not caring that his bodyguard swept people out of the way. "Someone looks like they need a drink." Rinalla gestured the bartender over once more.

"I'm not staying." His voice was distant. "In fact, Ambassador Kinman will serve as delegation head for the next few days." A pained look came over his face and he seemed to be close to tears. "My great-grandfather doesn't have much time. He needs to go back to New Avalon."

"Needs? You mean..." Both Rinalla and Rhean reached out to comfort him, but he brushed them off.

"The doctors don't think he'll live out the week, and he wants to be at home when he goes. And I need to be there too. To show there's an orderly transition both with the Federated Suns and the Star League."

And so a half-trained boy who didn't expect to rule for another twenty or thirty years is forced to step up to the plate. Rhean thought. I'm not sure I'd be ready, and I've had almost two decades of preparation.