



FALL FROM GRACE

Chris Hartford

Part Six



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"And fate, having diverted the course of events, seems to take a perverse pleasure in pulling the rug from beneath your feet."

—Private Journal

St Basil's Cathedral Moscow, Terra Terran Hegemony 19 September 2604

"They should've chosen somewhere bigger," Rinalla murmured under her breath.

They stood on the steps of the Cathedral of Intercession of the Virgin on the Mound, better known as Pokrovskiy Cathedral or St. Basil's. The red brick towers of the ornate structure spiraled off into a cloudless sky, decorated with multicolored tiles and topped with equally colorful onion-like domes. It was an imposing structure, but was dwarfed by the walls of the Kremlin just across the square. Only Tanya's family and the most senior dignitaries—which included them—would go inside to the cramped central chapel, where Tanya's body lay in state. The main service would take place out here, the assemblage viewing the service on massive screens erected by various Star League media agencies.

"Christ the Savior is much bigger." The diminutive Magestrix had been sightseeing since their arrival in the city the previous day.

"Historical precedent. This place is important to the locals." Rhean's sweeping gestu took in the square and its buildings. "No matter how pokey," she added in a whisper.

Red Square was full of people as far as the eye could see, from the walls of the Kremlin and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier along its southwestern flank to the massive fin-de-siècle retail arcades on the north-eastern fringe, and from St. Basils all the way northwest to the 2014 Monument that commemorated the end of

the Second Soviet Civil War and the NATO occupation of the city. The crowds also extended south from the ornate structure to the Moskva River. As an outpouring of grief, it was unprecedented in Rhean's experience. *How many of these people knew who Tanya Kerensky was before Leonard Kurita stabbed her to death?* Yet she *had* become an icon, for the Russian people and for the wider Star League. They saw a hero, a woman who stood in harm's way to protect her liege lord.

Rhean just recalled a bright young woman with whom she'd chatted, discussed music, and played chess. *A mother and a friend.* That's how she'd remember Tanya, not the blood-soaked soldier she'd fought to save back in the Star Chamber.

Leonard had fled back to the Combine, a hastily written communiqué claiming that agents of the Star League had attempted to assassinate him during the council session. Nicholas had taken the unusual step of releasing the security camera footage of the incident to the media. Combine representatives had called it a forgery, but the public, seeing a council session—warts and all—for the first time believed the version coming from Unity City. Kurita had ordered the DCMS to mobilize and it seemed war was inevitable. For an instant Rhean thought of Ivan the Terrible, the sixteenth century ruler of Russia and its first Tsar, who'd ordered St. Basil's built. *Would Leonard become Leonard the Terrible?*

She closed her eyes and forced that thought from her mind. There were other matters to attend to first.

"Who are we still waiting for?" Rhean's eyes snapped open and saw a tall, slender figure materialize at her side. Albrecht, the third of her four surviving brothers, and the least patient of the Marik scions. Quentin, the oldest, and only two years younger than herself, appeared a few seconds later, his six-year old son Tomas dozing on his shoulders.

"Davion and Liao." Rinalla injected. Albrecht favored her with a winning smile that she returned; the boy—Rhean still thought of him as that—still nursed a crush on the Magestrix from when they'd first met a half-decade earlier, but she had made it abundantly clear to the petite woman that her brothers were out of bounds. Amazingly, Rinalla seemed to have heeded the warning. Albrecht was eight years younger than Rhean, making him closer to a dozen years younger than Rinalla. Even the Canopian woman wasn't a cradle-snatcher, was she? Rhean blinked. Zane was *twelve* years younger than her.

Albrecht grunted. "Typical, waiting for pretty boy to arrive." He snorted. "Better if Kurita had stabbed him than the Russian girl." There had been tales of a feud between Zane and her brother, Rhean recalled. *An argument over a girl, most likely.* Albrecht hated losing and was a pit-bull who never gave up on an idea. It would be an admirable quality in some professions, but was something of a liability in the nobles of a ruling house. Diplomacy and tact were alien concepts to him.

"Why don't you just round up everyone you don't like, Albi," Quentin injected bitterly. "Lubyanka is only a short way that way. He gestured off to the northwest. The infamous home of a succession of old-Russian secret police agencies had shown its half-millennia age when Rhean had toured it back in her academy days, its structure now divided between a 'spy museum' and a bar serving a variety of garish—and highly intoxicating— Soviet and espionage-themed cocktails. Sneaking past their chaperones and into the bar had been a major event on that trip. She winced at her memories of the hangover.

"Boys, remember where you are." Rhean slipped into elder sister mode effortlessly and she could almost hear their jaw muscles creak as they bit back further retorts. She reached over to Albrecht and brushed some lint off his shoulder. Like the bulk of the guests, all three Marik children wore black, but whereas Quentin wore a smart and functional business suit and Rhean was severely elegant in a flowing dress, Albrecht looked like he'd been dragged through a hedge. Rhean adjusted his tie too, then stepped back frowning. "I despair. You need a wife."

"Not half as much as you need a husband, Ree."

"I'm married to the job, boyo. One of you kids will succeed me."

Quentin shuddered. He was the next in line. Like their father, he was an economist, but unlike their father, he had no inclination at all to politics. "Come on Rhean. Find some nice young man and have some kids. Save me and Tomas from a fate worse than death."

"Don't rely on her. Your sister has terrible taste in men." Rhean shot the Canopian a warning look. Rinalla rolled her eyes. "You've heard her taste in music. Ryan Suarez, for heavens sake." He was a guitarist from Oriente who basked in the planet's Iberian Heritage. He was also extremely handsome and popular with teenage girls.

Rhean ducked her head, the wide brim of her hat concealing her face from her brothers. They took it to be her hiding her embar-

rassment at this 'revelation.' Rinalla saw the look of relief on her face.

"And speaking of pretty-boys..." Albrecht voice dripped scorn. A small flotilla of groundcars had pulled up, each displaying the sword and sunburst insignia. Rhean felt her heart flutter and took a deep breath.

"I'll see you after." Quentin, sleeping boy in his arms, disappeared back toward his seat. Rhean barely noticed him go. She did feel Rinalla place a hand on her forearm. She glanced down to see the Magestrix looking at her with concern.

"I'll be fine." She whispered. It hadn't been hard for Rinalla to wheedle the details of the trip to Lake Geneva out of an exhausted Rhean. The Canopian squeezed harder, looking anxiously from her friend to the opening doors of the vehicle.

Rhean felt her heart surge as Zane stepped out. He was immaculately turned out, as ever, dressed in a somber but high quality business suit with a sunburst pin on the left lapel. He nodded toward the dignitaries assembled to greet the arrivals, then made a half wave to some of the crowd, who seemed excited by his arrival. He motioned for them to be quiet and, miraculously, they were. He turned to take in the VIP ranks, his eyes surveying and cataloguing each face. He seemed to linger on her a moment longer than the others, but then his gaze swept past. Rhean blinked.

She expected him to step forward and take the hand of the Patriarch and the First Lord who stood a handful of yards away, as her father had done a few minutes earlier, but instead he turned back to the car and held out his arm. A well-manicured hand reached out and grasped it, using him as a support. An elegant honey-haired woman stepped into the late summer sunlight and blinked. She was petite – not as small as Rinalla but easily thirty centimeters shorter than Rhean – and waif-slim. The reason for her difficulty in exiting the vehicle became apparent; a small child was nestled in the crook of her right arm. The woman smiled up at Zane and he smiled back. She steadied herself then the Davion Lord placed a protective arm round her slim shoulders before stepping forward and grasping the First Lord's hand.

"Who the hell is that?" Rhean whispered urgently, turning wide-eyed towards her friend. "You know, don't you?"

Rinalla looked up at her, sorrow etched on her face. "Elaine Romera," she said. Her fingers felt like talons on Rhean's arm. "She's his wife."



**Novodevichiy
Moscow, Terra
Terran Hegemony
19 September 2604**

A sudden gust whipped at Rhean's dress, causing it to snap in the wind. She didn't seem to notice, though she instinctively placed a hand atop her head to prevent her hat from flying into the pond or the Moscow suburbs beyond. She'd been on autopilot through both the service at St. Basils and then the drive to this south-western district. There'd been a second service in the Cathedral of Our Lady of Smolensk in the grounds of the Novodevichiy Convent, but she had little recollection of the details. Rinalla had steered her through that too and it was only when the actual burial had taken place that Rhean had felt in control of her actions once more.

It was a somber place, but beautiful in its own right. The Kerensky family had rejected Nicholas' suggestion that Tanya be buried in the David Cameron cemetery, and another that she be interred by the Kremlin Wall, perhaps the most prestigious burial ground in Russia. The Kerenskys favored this place, and those who had proceeded Tanya here were no less impressive; Anton Chekov, Sergei Eisenstein, and Nicolai Gogol. Oleg Tikonov was buried here, as were the Gorbachevs. Rhean approved of the choice; the cemetery was a much more elegant setting than the convent's larger cousin in the city centre.

Soft footsteps behind Rhean broke her reverie. She half turned and saw Zane making his way down the slope. Wordlessly, he moved to stand beside her, looking out over the lake to the wooded shore beyond.

"You should've told me."

"You didn't ask."

"And that's a justification?" She spat as if the words could repay the hurt she felt. "'Not my fault, she didn't ask'. Wanker." She mimicked the crisp tones of his Davion accent, exploiting the Davion vocabulary she'd picked up from Annelise mercilessly.

"It would've gotten in the way."

"Damn right it would." She turned to face him, incandescent. "I don't sleep with other women's husbands."

"Then we have different views on marriage. I see it as a bond between two people. Not an exclusive one, but a bond nonetheless." His voice was cool and he continued to look out over the lake rather than at Rhean.

"Well, bully for you. Other people have different views on the sanctity of matrimony, you know. Some don't have your flexible morality."

"Some people might do their homework too."

"So you're saying it's my fault that you're a philanderer?"

"I'm saying you have the intelligence gathering apparatus of a nation at your disposal and you didn't think to check the announcements page of pretty much every newssheet in the FedSuns?" There wasn't much she could say to that. Rinalla had known. *Why hadn't she said anything? Had she assumed Rhean already knew?*

"How long?" he voice was scarcely more than a whisper. "I've not seen her on Terra before."

"Four years." Rhean's eyes widened in astonishment. *So long!* "Elaine and I met at the academy and were married just before I graduated." When reading briefing papers on the House Lords she'd skipped over his time at Point Barrow and as a result had missed that detail. She wanted to kick herself. "And she hates traveling—gets jumpsick, in fact—which is why she's never visited before. She made an exception for this and is still drugged up to the eyeballs to remain functional. She'll adapt."

"And the child?"

"My daughter and heir, Sarah. She's four months old."

"Congratulations." Rhean realized she meant it, though there was a cold void inside her. "You know this means we can't carry on."

"I guessed as much from your reaction." His habitual grin began to tug at the corners of his mouth again. "Though that's your decision."

"You said I could walk away if I wanted."

"You can, though I can't say I like the idea."

Neither do I, she wanted to say but couldn't. "I have to."

"So be it." He turned to face her, then reached out and wrapped her in his arms.

Rhean returned the hug, burying her face in his hair for a moment. Then she pulled her head back, darted a quick kiss on his lips, and pushed Zane away. He blinked at her in puzzlement, then his eyes opened wide in shock as her right hand arced round in a vicious slap. His hand reached up to his stinging cheek. She reached out and enfolded the hand with her own. "How you explain *that* is your business." Her voice was false sweetness. "From now on it's all business between us." She took a step back, still maintaining her grip on his hand.

"All business," he repeated in a monotone as she turned away. Her movement extended his arm and he maintained a grip for as long as he could. She glanced back as their arms reached full extension, a wan smile on her lips. Then their fingers parted and she turned away, making back up the slope to the monastery's white walls.

She didn't look back.

Part 3

Descent

"Life is a slippery slope. You can pick your way through it carefully, avoiding an uncontrolled descent, which is pretty much what I'd managed to this point, though it's somewhat lacking in excitement. Alternatively you can throw yourself into life without a care, hurtling down the slope at breakneck speed and trusting your instincts to steer clear of trouble. That was Rinalla's approach.

Or you can attempt the former and slip, tumbling uncontrolled, which, in a nutshell, is what happened."

—Private Journal



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"There are wheels within wheels. Sometimes you see the patterns they weave, other times you don't until it's too late. I'll admit I was too distracted by the looming war with the Combine to really appreciate what happened that Christmas."

- Private Journal

**Prospect Avenue, Atreus City
Atreus, Marik Commonwealth
Free Worlds League
22 December 2604**

"Pull over there," Albrecht grunted as he set the dossier down on the cool leather. The armored sedan maneuvered to the side of the road with a grace that belied its weight and armoring. "I'll just be a sec."

There was no grumbling from security, they just adapted. The flower shop was an irregular haunt of the Marik lord and his detail knew its weaknesses and access points. Albrecht knew they'd make a quick sweep of the building before he reached its doors, if they hadn't already. The heavy car door hissed open, propelled by hidden hydraulics, and he levered himself out into the bracing air. The cold made him suck in a breath and he could taste the vehicle fumes heavy in the air; many of the vehicles in the city still used internal-combustion engines.

"Good afternoon, Lilliah." He nodded to the girl at the counter who sketched a curtsy that he waved away negligently. She was pretty, but too meek for his tastes. She knew her job though. "The usual, I think, but with some ribbon orchids if you can."

The girl bobbed her head and busied herself gathering a collection of flowers; lilies, roses and others he couldn't name. The bouquets were gorgeous though and usually well received by their recipients. Unusually this one wasn't for one of his paramours—though

the girl was cute in her own way, he supposed—but a thank-you for services rendered.

A number of years back Rhean had gotten a bee in her bonnet about aunt Therese's death, and had had him look into the documentation sent from the Court of the Star League to Atreus. It'd been a fruitless task, involving countless tedious hours of researching and cross-referencing and they'd pretty much given it up as a bad job. Until, that is, he'd mentioned to his research staff at the newly-formed Anti-Piracy Taskforce during a general discussion on 'missing' documents and the problems they cause. *And the political embarrassments of explaining such omissions to the Lyran Intelligence Corps, their partners in the Taskforce*, he thought wryly.

One of the researchers had been a junior NIA clerk back in the nineties and recalled the flurry of documents. She'd been able to fill in the gaps that had lead Albrecht to the briefing document that lay on the back seat of the car. To say it was explosive was an understatement—he hadn't the slightest idea how to deal with its contents; that would be for oh-so-serious Rhean to sort out. She wouldn't be making fun of him any more.

Lilliah finished up with the spray, tying a purple ribbon about the stems and then wrapping the assembly in paper and plastic. "Excellent as ever. Charge them to the usual account." She curtseyed again, thanking him for his custom.

A guard pulled open the shop door as he left, stepping back out into the bitter air. Albrecht cradled the bundle in the crook of his left arm and as he stepped briskly toward the waiting vehicle he buried his face in the flowers, inhaling the rich scents. A liveried footman pulled open the heavy car door. "Shall I place the flowers in the luggage compartment, sir?"

"No need. The seat is fine. After all, it's not far." He glanced up and across the avenue to where the towers of the Captain-General's residence poked up behind the Parliament building. The atrium housing the Captain General's office glinted in the late afternoon sun. He reached into the cabin and lay the multi-colored bouquet down gently, then slipped past and into his still-warm seat beyond. The door clunked shut and as gracefully as it had arrived, the sedan slipped back into the traffic. Albrecht reached for the dossier again.

Captain General's Apartments, Atreus City
Atreus, Marik Commonwealth
Free Worlds League
22 December 2604

A low rumble made Captain-General Brion Marik look up from his papers. He glanced over to the multitude of windowpanes vibrating with synchronized rattles. *Thunder, this late in the year?* His hand was halfway to the intercom button when the side door opened. He expected his adjutant to step through, or perhaps Rhean if she was still plowing through the troop deployments and political reports he'd dumped in her lap this morning, but instead found himself looking up at Ross MacArthur, his head of security, and half a dozen security goons.

"Sir, if you could come with us. There's a situation." MacArthur hadn't waited for an acknowledgment and had marched across the room to stand at the Captain General's shoulder. Brion knew Ross hadn't been asking, and if he delayed in complying the bulky, Stewart-born spook would lift him bodily and make him.

"What's going on?" Brion asked as he got to his feet, snatching up the sheaf of documents as he did.

"The situation is dynamic, sir." Still in progress, he meant. "You'll be briefed once we reach a secure room. We're assembling all the family there." Gently but firmly MacArthur pushed his charge toward the door. Only as they neared it did the security officer glance back to regard something outside the windows. Brion followed his gaze and saw a pall of black smoke rising about a kilometer distant.

They walked in silence down the deserted corridor, two guards leading, two flanking Brion and MacArthur, and two behind. The party reached the security elevators in less than a minute. Another four guards waited here, two inside the waiting car and two in the corridor. Unlike the suited figures that accompanied him, these were in full battledress and armed with rifles. Brion's eyebrows rose and he glanced over at MacArthur. The agent remained stony faced.

"Dad, what's happening?" his youngest son Ward asked as the Captain-General emerged from the lift into the spartan sub-levels of the palace. The boy stood there along with his wife Emma who clutched Brion's newest grandchild, four-month old Kernath. The

doors of a second elevator opened, disgorging Rhean and Quentin, together with their respective details.

"Ross was about to brief me, weren't you Ross?" He regarded the security man levelly but the younger man's only response was to gesture toward the blast doors before them that were cycling open. They filed through into the chamber beyond. It was no less utilitarian than the halls, but it contained furniture. Brion sank into an armchair and regarded the others as they did likewise. MacArthur remained standing. "Go on."

"There's been a security incident in the city. A bombing."

"In the ministry district?" Brion asked, triangulating the plume of smoke. MacArthur nodded.

"Yes, on Prospect Avenue. As a precaution, we've moved you to a secure location until the nature of the threat can be ascertained."

Ward frowned. "But why us? Over in the District it could be any crackpot with an axe to grind with his local MP. Unless..."

Brion blinked. *David was off world, but where was Albrecht?*

"It was your brother's motorcade that was targeted, sir. From initial estimates of the blast it's unlikely there are any survivors."

Another son gone, Brion thought. *Arthur, and now Albi.* Emma had a hand to her mouth in shock and was on the verge of tears. Ward put an arm round her shoulders. Quentin and Rhean looked stunned, but he could almost see Rhean's mind whirring.

"I presume it's too early to know, but any suspicions as to who did it?" She asked carefully.

"We'll know in a couple of hours."

"Rhean, liaise with Mac and the NIA. Call on whatever resources you need." She nodded gravely, "so long as it doesn't compromise the war effort." Preparations for a Star League attack on the Draconis Combine were progressing swiftly and the FWLM would have a role to play in the operation. "I have another task for you too."



Dormuth

Marik

Marik Commonwealth, Free Worlds League

27 December 2604

Rhean strode into the room, shrugging off her flight jacket as she did. Rather than wait for the slow orbital insertion and re-entry of her DropShip, she'd hitched a ride down to the surface in a *Stingray* fighter. It was an exhilarating ride, but not one she wanted to repeat too often.

"What is the status?" she asked of the figures sitting around the table.

"Good morning to you too, Marik. Glad you could join us." Lambert Allison deadpanned. She shot him a look but he didn't seem to notice—he'd gone back to looking at figures on his display.

"Nothing much since the last data-packet, Warden," Duke Narinder Selaj added more respectfully. In his sixties, with close-cropped silver hair and a silver goatee, he looked more like someone's grandfather than a provincial warlord. "As of the 12th, the SLDF is massing near Dieron."

Fifteen-day old news. We have to improve on that, she thought. We can travel faster than light, but messages can only go as fast as the courier vessels. That was why she'd come to Marik, to the FWLM command center, to minimize the communication delays. *And bloody Lambert thinks I've been dawdling.*

"There is one thing though, not military and not yet confirmed," the lord of Regulus added.

"Go on," she said as she hung her jacket on the back of her chair and settled into it.

"Our trade legate picked up rumors that Elaine Kurita may have killed herself in protest at her brother's excesses."

Rhean leant forward in the chair, intrigued. "And the older sister, Sanethia?"

"Nothing. Presumably she's still in seclusion. No-one's seen Siriwan recently though, which doesn't bode well."

"Leonard's moved against her?"

A new voice chipped in—NIA director Maria Kreiss. “There’s no knowing at this point. It’s possible, and he’s unstable enough, but it could be she’s distancing herself from him, particularly with military action imminent.”

Lambert sniffed. “No one wants to be on the losing side.” Hubris, perhaps, but with the size of the SLDF force that was gathering, it was unlikely the DCMS would prevail.

“And our preparations?”

“Proceeding according to the schedule laid out in the last packet.” Selaj, as both the oldest and most senior officer present, gravitated back to his leadership role. “Task Force Eagle will leave Tamarind on the second of January, while Task Force Hawk will leave Oriente on the ninth. They’ll both be at Dieron by the end of February, ten days ahead of the SLDF timetable.”

Rhean nodded. “Good, good. Send the timetable and TOEs to my slate. I’ll run through them shortly.” She glanced around the assembled commanders. “And the borders?”

“Secure Warden. Minor incidents on the Periphery border, but nothing out of the ordinary.”

Rhean nodded. She knew most of this from the updates. “Marshal Kozurek.” The Marshal of Tamarind met her gaze. “What’s the status of the Nineteenth and Sixty-Second Militias?”

“Personnel and stores are nominal for both. The Nineteenth is a little armor-shy at present, but a new tank battalion will be with them in January.”

Rhean nodded thoughtfully. “There’ll be a new tasking for them after this afternoons session, just to forewarn you.” *Pirate hunting*, she didn’t need to add. *Revenge*.

Rhean steepled her fingers and regarded the gathering. Known as the Seven Sons of Solon, they were the supreme commanders of the Free Worlds military. She took a deep breath. “I know my appointment may have come as a shock to some of you, particularly with my lack of brigade- and army-level command.” The promotion had been her father’s ‘other task.’ He’d made her his official deputy for military affairs, the Warden of the Perimeter Defenses as Parliament called it. “But you all know me. Some of us even went to school together.” She smiled at Lambert, but he returned her gaze impassively. “And you know I can lead troops in battle—” She touched the faint scar on her jaw. “—and kick ass

when it's needed." Several of the Sons smiled at that. Her exploits on Robinson seemed decades ago rather than months. Her mind drifted to the encounter there. *Damn him!* Rhean admonished herself mentally as images of Zane rose to the fore. She steeled herself. "I'll be relying on you all as I get up to speed. Now, I need to grab a quick shower. Meet back here in fifteen minutes?" There were nods from around the table.

Chairs scraped back and the assemblage dispersed. Rhean motioned for Selaj to wait and he dropped back into his chair, pouring himself a glass of water while waiting for the others to leave.

"I hope my being here doesn't offend you, Narinder. After my father, you were the head of the FWLM." *And thus commander here,* she didn't have to add.

He shrugged. "As the wheel wills. Favor comes and goes. I am no less a man for your being here." A wry grin crossed his face. "And now you get to play the political games with Parliament. I can get back to being a soldier."

Rhean laughed at that. It was the first time she'd been able to since Albrecht's murder. Her smile faded, replaced by a look of sadness.

"You miss him, your brother?"

She nodded.

"Of course you do. A tragedy to lose one so young. Is there more news of the investigation?"

"Nothing concrete. The NIA believe there are links to one or other of the pirate bands his group was hunting, but there's nothing definitive. All the bomb components seem to be off-the-shelf."

"Regulus will aid any way it can. Just ask."

"Thank you. Now—" She turned and grasped her flight jacket, wrinkling her nose at the tang of sweat. "—I really had better go and get that shower." She rose and left, leaving Selaj with his water.

"Well?" Lambert asked from the doorway almost as soon as Rhean had left the room.

"She is a nice girl," the older man said neutrally, regarding the door the new Warden had left through.

“She’s a conniving bitch, and you know that’s not what I meant.” The Orientan’s eyes were hard. Selaj shook his head and Lambert grunted. “Let’s hope it stays that way.”

