



FALL FROM GRACE

Chris Hartford

Part Seven



~17~

"They say that time heals all wounds. Utter crap."

—Private Journal

***Cameron Palace, London
England, Terra
Terran Hegemony
2 November 2610***

"I'm glad you could make it Duchess. My cousin mentioned you'd missed many of the recent events." The speaker was a plump, dark-haired woman, her accented voice familiar and yet not. She was perhaps ten years older than Rhean, *about fifty*, she thought. The Marik woman wracked her brain, but couldn't place the speaker.

"Things have been a little busy." She replied neutrally. "You'll have to excuse me...I don't recall your name."

"No reason you should, Rhean. We have met, many, many years ago, but unlike Nicholas, I've shunned the limelight for the most part. I'm only here because Lydia is ill and it just wouldn't do for the First Lord's soiree to be without a hostess." She smiled benignly. "I'll give you a clue. The first time we met, which I'm sure you won't remember, you were two and I was nine. You took some of my crayons and your father caught you just before you could add to the murals in the *Salle du Conseil*."

Rhean lifted her hand to her mouth to cover her embarrassment. "Tomasina!" A grin replaced chagrin on her face. "My great-grandmother was fond of telling that story at parties, despite my protestations." She turned to her companion. "Tomasina—is it still Cameron-Havley?"

"Cameron-Havley-Weston," the older woman corrected.

"—is responsible for the Cameron Star." She gestured over at the prominent L-shaped insignia above the door, the symbol of

the Star League. She wore a version herself, just below the Marik Eagle pin on the lapel of her dark purple bolero jacket. Additional eagles soared on the gold embroidered trim of the jacket, her gown's bodice and the hem of its long, flowing skirt.

"Responsible is a little much, I think. My 'bad stars' provided the genesis of the idea that uncle Ian showed to the other House Lords." She looked wistfully down at her hands. "That was a lifetime ago now, though. We'll have to catch up, but first you need to introduce this dashing young man." She regarded Rhean's companion appraisingly and, her eyes meeting Rhean's, nodded approvingly.

Rhean had heard people say 'they look good together' too many times in recent months. Yes, he was handsome, and was a match for her height, but still found the circumstances strange. "I'm sorry, I should've introduced you. This is Baron Carlton Allison of Oriente, my fiancé."

"Congratulations! When is the big day?"

"It'll be next June on Atreus. I'll make sure you're on the guest list."

"Crayons?" Carlton looked at her quizzically as they moved into the throng, Rhean's hand resting on his forearm. The dark velvet of his jack was warm under her fingers.

"An old, old story. Dad will tell you it at some point, I'm sure." Rhean's eyes narrowed. Tomasina's reaction had rattled her slightly. She'd been friends with Carlton for years, an oddity given Lambert's antipathy toward her, for most of which time Carlton had been besotted and his feelings unrequited. She was fond of him, but her feelings have never gone beyond that. It was 'like' not 'love,' no matter how much she wanted to reciprocate Carlton's feelings. This wasn't a love match, rather it was duty.

"You're not getting any younger," Brion Marik had said pointedly the previous Christmas. "You *need* an heir." She'd goggled at that, and had been openly scornful when he'd presented her with a list of candidates. "I never believed the rumors about you and the Magestrix, but if you won't choose, someone will be chosen for you." He'd been cold and businesslike, even when she lost her temper.

"I'm not a brood mare," She'd countered snarling, "to be auctioned off to the highest bidder."

"No, you're a future Captain-General, and it's your duty not only to continue your line but to build alliances." That settled that,

though he'd given her the opportunity to choose, and a year to set things in motion. And here they were. Carlton hadn't taken too much prompting to turn their friendship into a romance of sorts, but taking the relationship as far as a marriage proposal had been a challenge. It wasn't as if she had cold feet, but rather that she didn't want to him to be under any illusions that this was anything more than a dynastic union. That'd been a delicate balancing act.

"Shall we dance?" Carlton asked, noticing her distant look. A dozen or so people were waltzing to Tchaikovsky.

She rubbed her temples, trying to ease the dull ache she had in her head. "Not yet. A glass of something sweet and fizzy first." She forced herself to smile at Carlton, who snagged a pair of glasses from a passing server.

"*Konban wa, Marik Rhean-san.*" A porcelain doll appeared before them and bowed. She was dressed in an ornate kimono and looked so small and dainty that the slightest breath of wind would break her. The pair of hulking armored guards at her shoulders reinforced the impression.

"*Konban wa, Kurita Sanethia-sama.*" Rhean returned the Coordinator's bow, making her own fractionally deeper. Carlton did likewise. "How do you find England? Your first visit, I believe."

"It is an interesting country with many fine museums and theaters." The woman was well known as a patron of the arts, though she'd spent most of her fifty-odd years in relative seclusion. She'd adopted Japanese dress and mannerisms during her brother's reign and was slowly introducing them at court. Rumor suggested that her great ambition was to craft a faux-Japanese city to serve as the Combine's capital, but dismal New Samarkand was ill-suited to such an artistic endeavor.

"And how is Siriwan-sama?" Siriwan McAllister-Kurita had held the office of Coordinator three times, the first time ninety-five years earlier and the last two years previously after—according to court rumor—engineering the death of her disgraced grandson, Leonard, and overseeing the short rule of his son, Blaine. The same rumors alleged that Siriwan remained the power behind the throne. Seeing how meek Sanethia was compared to her hedonistic brother, Rhean had little reason to doubt them.

"She is in excellent health, thank you. I'll tell grandmother you asked after her." She smiled and inclined her head to Rhean. "She finds travel too tiring now, however, and prefers to remain on New

Samarkand, though she remains intrigued by both the Combine and the Star League." The old woman was 113 years old and remained the spider who, with the exception of Leonard's wild years, had been the supreme power at the heart of the Combine for almost a century. "It is difficult, being here without her advice, but I will prevail." There was a glint in her eye and Rhean couldn't help but smile. *Perhaps Sanethia isn't as much of a puppet as she lets on.*

Lord Kurita—that title always amused Rhean, the Coordinator always being addressed as 'Lord' in the Combine, irrespective of gender—continued her round of pleasantries, gliding to the next group of dignitaries and making small talk. Rhean and Carlton did likewise for a while, then drifted into a corner with a plate scooped up from the buffet. Rhean slapped his hand away from a piece of pie, but wrinkled her nose after taking a bite.

"Damn it. They managed to burn quiche?" She thrust it back on the plate in disgust. Carlton snatched it up and sampled it.

"Tastes fine to me," he countered, his mouth full, shrugging as he did.

Rhean set the plate down, then picked up her empty glass. She waved it at him. "Well, for that you can get me a refill." He smiled and grabbed his own glass. Rhean leant forward and gave him a peck on the cheek before watching him disappear into the crowd. A dull ache echoed through her head and she reached up to massage her temples again. *Damn this cacophony*, she thought. For a few moments she watched the crowd then, slipping through curtains undulating in the light breeze, slipped out onto the balcony. The sun was setting, its last rays glinting off the long lake that ran from the palace off into the distance. She'd gone rowing on that lake with Rinalla in past years, taking along a giggling Carla and Nicholas' son, Joseph. The Magestrix and her daughter-heir were, unfortunately, already en-route back to Canopus.

A glass suddenly appeared in front of her and she took it instinctively, though surprised at its sudden arrival. Her hearing and peripheral vision rarely let her down, something that helped her immeasurably when in a 'Mech. It took a moment to realize that the hand that held it was more slender and tanned than Carlton's and that it projected from a green rather than purple sleeve.

"We seem to spend a lot of our time looking out over bodies of water." She whirled.

BATTLECORPS

Zane turned to regard the lake, only looking at her from the corner of his eye. She stared at him for an instant, then went back to her own gazing, pretending disinterest. Her eyes flicking in Davion's direction put the lie to that, however. "I thought we were going to be all business."

"Socializing is business. It's a vital part of politics." He sipped the champagne. "And it's not like we've not spoken since Moscow."

"I'm not alone, Zane." The words were said through clenched teeth. "My *fiancé* is here too."

"So is my wife." There was a note of amusement in his voice. "And don't worry. Your boy is sidetracked for a few minutes." Undoubtedly one of Davion's flunkies had dragged Carlton into some debate or other. He *was* very sociable and outgoing, unlike her, and people sought out his company. It wouldn't seem odd.

"You made sure we'd be undisturbed." She saluted him with the glass. "So, what do you want?"

"Nothing." His voice was a model of innocence. "Just to chat with an old friend. It feels like you've been avoiding me."

She snorted. "So, what is it you want?"

"Just to offer some *friendly* advice. Don't get trapped in a loveless marriage."

"Like you and your wife?"

"Yes, like me and Elaine."

"Funny that. The two of you keep producing kids. I would've thought 'duty' would've worn off after the second." Zane didn't answer and she rounded on him, incandescent with fury. "Go away, Zane. I leave you to live your life as you see fit. Have the decency to return the favor."

Zane's reaction wasn't what she expected. He laughed. "Oh, I did touch a nerve, didn't I?"

If Rhean's gaze had been a weapon, Zane would've been skewered and incinerated. "Just sod off."

"And if I say no, what will you do?" A Cheshire-cat grin was plastered across his face.

"I'll –"

Glass shattered. She hadn't deliberately dropped the crystal flute, nor had she thrown it down or crushed it in her anger. In fact, she hadn't even felt it fall. Only the shattering and explosion of liquid alerted her to the disaster. "Shit." She dropped into a crouch, immediately aware of her headache flaring again, and began picking up the pieces.

"Let me help." Zane crouched beside her. Their hands met and Rhean pulled away sharply.

"I can manage." She picked at the glass pieces, then reached out with her left hand to grasp the balustrade as she wobbled slightly.

"So I see." She was off balance and he took his chance.

Instinctively she went to slap him with her right hand as he pulled back from the kiss, but stopped herself before she drove the shards of glass she still held into his face. "You b—"

He kissed her again and she tried to pull back, but couldn't without falling on her backside.

"Imbecilic thug," she hissed as he broke the kiss again. "Moronic bastard."

She kissed *him*, her eyes widening in shock.

Zane stood and pulled her up with him. "We have a few minutes. Come on." He tugged at her hand. "There are guest rooms this way."

~18~

"Appearances can be deceptive. Unless you take in every detail its so easy to come to wrong conclusions, turning joy of a sort into despair."

—Private Journal

***Marik Apartments, Atreus City
Atreus, Marik Commonwealth
Free Worlds League
27 March 2611***

"Morning sunshine," called Madeleine brightly from the sofa, a steaming cup of coffee in her hands and both Hector and Paris sitting at attention in front of her, tails wagging in the hope of begging scraps. "I have croissants." She sat with a white napkin on the lap of her dark blue slacks—the staff had been efficient and Rhean, emerging from the bathroom in her robe, hadn't realized she was here already. That could make things ... awkward.

"I'm not hungry at the moment, Maddy." She brushed the fingertips of her right hand over her mouth and continued onward from the bathroom. She dropped the left hand from where it had rested on her belly, hoping that her friend hadn't noticed it, nor recognize the discomfort Rhean felt.

Entering the bedroom, she half-closed the door, slipped the robe off her shoulders, and reached for the dark purple skirt her maid had laid out. "Is Colin joining us?" she called into the sitting room as she adjusted the shimmering garment before pulling on a cream blouse.

"Later. He has some paperwork to attend to first, the trials of regimental command. He'll bring the kids with him though, and these mutts' sister." That was Andromache, one of more than a dozen pups Athena had given birth to over the years. The old lady of her kennels had died five years earlier, but her children and grandchil-

dren were the literal top dogs of the Atrean palace. Rhean only kept a few of the animals, giving the others away to friends and family.

The tall, slender Marik finished buttoning her shirt and pulled on her jacket—made of a smooth silk and dyed, of course, Marik purple—and adjusted the collar of both it and her blouse. “I bet little Andy has grown.”

“He’s not so little now, Fred. Andrew’ll be twenty this year, and Alice is fifteen.”

Rhean emerged from the bedroom as she clipped her earrings on, her rich hair cascading over her left shoulder. “God, I feel old. It seems only yesterday we were at the academy. Speaking of which, Lambert is still a bastard.”

“I’m sure he says the same about you. Is he causing problems?” She set down the cup and turned to pat the dogs, light glinting off the Star League pin in her lapels. It was Star League Commissioner Bonnington-Eastwick now, her FLWM rank long abandoned.

Rhean sank into one of the other chairs and Paris came over to beg. She swatted his muzzle and he snapped at her playfully. “Not to speak of. He still resents my presence I think, though not as much as a few years back.” She’d been Warden of the Perimeter Defenses for a little over five years and while she worked well with most of the Seven Sons, Allison was always argumentative. “God knows how antsy he’ll be once I become Captain-General.” She snorted and reached for a cup of coffee that she sipped experimentally, inhaling the pungent aroma of the bitter liquid.

Almost immediately she knew it was a mistake. She felt her gorge rise and her stomach tensed. “Excuse me a moment.” She dashed toward the bathroom. When she emerged a minute or two later dabbing her mouth, Maddy regarded her intently.

“So ...”

“So what?”

“Which of your boys is to blame?” Amusement sparkled in her eyes. Like Rinalla, Maddy knew what had happened on Terra.

Rhean’s eyes narrowed. “It’s not morning sickness.”

“If you say so.”

"Maddy, I'm not pregnant." Though why the hell she'd fallen prey to Zane's charms again she didn't know—she'd kept him at arms length for best part of seven years, resisted his various efforts to renew their relationship...

Her friend frowned. "So what then. Food poisoning?"

"Probably, but it doesn't seem to affect me in other ways, and it's gone on for rather too long." She rubbed the back of her neck. "And to cap it off I've got a damned headache too. Again."

Maddy leaned forward and took Rhean's free hand. "And you've seen the doc?"

"I've kind of been putting it off."

Maddy rolled her eyes and took on a stern expression. "That's not like you, Fred. I'm the one who put things off and off. You were always 'Do it now or regret it tomorrow.' Grown soft in your dot-age, have you?"

"No, just busy."

"Well, if you collapse puking at the gala, tonight it'll be headline news." Madeleine's voice was light, but the look on her face was anything but. *Get it sorted out*, it said.

"Okay, okay. I'll slot something in this afternoon. Satisfied?"

"Yes. And if you don't Col'll kick your butt, no matter the charges of insubordination. He wants to escape that paperwork anyway." She grinned as they both rose and approached the door. It opened to reveal a waiting Evangeline and Annelise, together with two other security troops. "Lets go face the public."

Parliamentary Grand Hall, Atreus City
Atreus, Marik Commonwealth
Free Worlds League
27 March 2611

"I see our great commander has yet to grace us with her presence." Lambert nursed a glass of red wine as dark as his mood. The gathered masses swirled around the ornate hall, locked in conversation or dancing as the mood took them. The Duke of Oriente ignored them, as he usually did.

"Ree was at the Expo this morning, along with the duchess of Atematwa," his companion countered. "She's probably just delayed."

"Pah. You're just making excuses for her because she's your fiancé. I'm surprised you and her aren't canoodling in a corner somewhere." He made little effort to hide the scorn in his voice. Lambert knew the power to be gained by joining the Allison and Marik clans, but he hated the idea that 'the bitch,' as he habitually called her, would be his sister-in-law in a few months. "And Maddy Bonnington is already here." He gestured across the hall to where Madeleine and Colin Eastwick were chatting to some other Star League lackeys.

"She'll be here."

"For you? Don't be soft, boy," he snarled at Carlton, the 'boy' reference making the brothers glare at each other. "I wouldn't bank on her loving you. She has her eyes on other prey."

Carlton broke eye contact with his elder brother, struggling to hide the hurt and anger in his voice. "I've put up with your innuendo and gossip about Rhean and the Centrella woman for years. Don't drag me into your playground fight. I know what I know and your venom won't make any difference."

"You *know* do you, *boy*? We'll see. You've put her on a pedestal but believe me, when she falls off, you're going to be the one crushed underneath." Wine sloshed from his glass.

Carlton took a deep breath, intending to make his reply calm and measured. His com unit beeped and he withdrew it from his pocket, scanning the text message on its faceplate. He blanched. "Enjoy the party, bro," he said levelly as he turned and walked away.

"Little shit," Lambert muttered under his breath. He took another mouthful of the wine, then a second to drain the glass. He snagged a passing server and replaced the empty glass with a full one, then turned to survey the gathering.

The Duke of Oriente watched Narinder Selaj enter the hall, some pretty young thing in a sari on his arm—his daughter? Granddaughter? Mistress?—then turn and speak to the girl. Leaning forward, the Regular kissed the girl's cheek then propelled her onward into the throng. He watched her go for a moment, then his eyes turned and met Lambert's gaze. The path he cut through the crowd was arrow-straight. He was a tiger, prowling through the jungle. People thought him beautiful and magnificent, when in truth he was a cold-blooded killer. Selaj'd been the one to give the order all those years ago, who formulated their policy and made sure it was executed. He was vicious and dangerous. And people loved him.

"Your brother already gone, I see," the silver-haired duke murmured. "My timing must be slipping."

"Slunk off to see that bitch of his, I suspect. She has him wrapped round her little finger. He's just a Marik plaything now."

"He might've been valuable in renewing that part of our Alliance. Since Marion died we haven't coordinated effectively. The brothers will be another matter."

"The cow'll never cooperate. Just like her milksop father; too weak and concerned with 'rights' rather than the Free Worlds' needs. We should just break the bitch and be done with it. The brothers would be much more amenable."

Narinder shot him a warning look, then smiled enigmatically. "You've not checked your com, have you?" Lambert vaguely recalled it vibrating—he turned the ringer off—just before his argument with Carlton. He fumbled in his pocket and gaped at the displayed message. "You won't need to," Selaj said, almost purring as he held up his own device so that Allison could read the screen. "She has cancer."

Archangel Raphael Clinic, Atreus City
Atreus, Marik Commonwealth
Free Worlds League
28 March 2611

Rhean lay on her side, her head resting on the single pillow. The sheets were starched and cool, the antiseptic-smelling room in pristine order. *Unlike my life*, she thought. Her hands drifted in front of her face, examining the ends of a strand of hair. Her fingers teased the red-brown lock absently, the action as much a comforting routine as for a specific purpose. She saw the hair, but she didn't see it. Her mind was still struggling to comprehend the sudden turn of events and her tresses, an inevitable casualty of the war within her body to come, were of no real significance. It was a sense of normality she sought. *Should I have sent Maddy home before I'd seen the doctor?* She mused. A shoulder to cry on would be good round about now.

They were still running tests and wouldn't know for sure for a few days, but the doctors suspected an aggressive and malignant tumor. They'd given her the technical name, but she'd not registered it. She'd have plenty more opportunity in the coming days and weeks. With hindsight, she could see the symptoms back into the previous autumn, at which the doctors had tutted about and sucked their teeth when she told them. Not a good sign. They'd not given her a definitive prognosis, but she knew that any delay in starting treatment could have drastic consequences. Just how long had she lost by stalling?

Rhean didn't register the door opening, but the snick as it closed stole into her consciousness. She didn't acknowledge it though and continued to stare at the lock of hair between her fingers.

"Ree, I came as soon as I heard." Carlton's voice was soft and full of concern. "I never suspected—"

"No one did." The hoarseness of her voice surprised Rhean. "Not even me." She continued to twist the strands of hair, intent on the patterns of light and color.

There were footsteps and she felt a light touch on her shoulder. She flinched and pulled away. "Rhean..."

"I can't do this, Carlton."

"We can get through this." He was intent, loving.

Rhean felt a twinge of guilt. *Time to be cruel to be kind.* She released the strand of hair and turned her face to meet his gaze. He was on the verge of tears. "No, we won't. You have to let go, Carlton. I can't marry you."

"But—"

She cut him off. "I *won't* marry you. It'd be unfair to put you through this."

"But together we—"

"Leave me alone," Rhean croaked. "This is punishment enough, without making you suffer too."

"Punishment?" Puzzlement replaced concern. *Damn it,* she thought. *Poor word choice.* "I don't understand. I love you. I want to help you through this."

Rhean turned back to her hair, examining the ends of another lock. For several moments they were both silent. "I'll do anything you want," she heard him say.

"Then just go," she said finally. For several moments Rhean almost thought she could hear his emotions raging. Then there were footsteps and the sound of the latch mechanism.

"You know where to find me if there's anything you want, Rhean. Anything. Just say and I'll get it for you." The mechanism snicked shut and she heard his footsteps recede down the corridor.

"Zane," she whispered.

~19~

"Chemotherapy. Radiotherapy. Surgery. They tried everything in those first few months. And yet I knew there was only one medicine I needed."

—Private Journal

***Captain General's Apartment, Atreus City
Atreus, Marik Commonwealth
Free Worlds League
12 March 2612***

"No." Brion Marik's voice was steely. "You're staying here." He stood, one hand braced against his desk for support, the other making a cutting gesture toward his daughter.

"You need me, papa." Rhean's voice wavered slightly, but there was steel there too. "I can't afford to miss another session." She was pale and thin from her treatments, the loss of weight making her tall and slender frame seem emaciated. Her eyes were intense though, peeking out from beneath the scarf she habitually wore now to conceal her long-lost locks. She felt naked without her hair, as if some part of her personality had been stripped away. She'd never had hair less than shoulder length in all her forty-four years and now she was bald. Not just bald, hairless; she had no eyebrows or body hair of any kind.

"It'll look worse if you collapse. In any case, Quentin's been briefed. No means no."

Rhean harrumphed. "Quent doesn't know the first thing about the military. His service to the FWL was as a signals officer!" She made emphatic gestures with her hands. "You'd do as well to send Tomas or Wayne." Her nephews were fourteen and nine respectively, or would be in the coming months.

"There are plenty of others to advise him. The Dukes'll be there." Oriente and Regulus, he meant. There were any number

of dukes in the Free Worlds, but *the Dukes* had a specific meaning.

"I'm fit to work, papa. The doctors said so." She gestured towards the papers strewn on the desk. "Stop coddling me. I'm not a child."

"I need you well. Your missing a couple of sessions won't harm the Free Worlds."

"It'll harm *me*. I need to go. I *need* to be there, contributing." Her eyes pleaded with him.

Brion took a breath and nodded. She smiled back. A year ago, she might have leapt to her feet and dodged round the desk to hug him. Today though she could barely summon the energy to sit straight, not that she let that show on her face. "You'll have Melissa as an advisor. And Quentin. He still needs to get up to speed on this." In case she died, he meant. While the Captain-General wanted his daughter to follow him, to take up the life she'd spent the past thirty years preparing for, he wasn't going to rely exclusively on that. He knew his health was failing, and an heir had to be ready to step into his shoes.

"Duchess Humphreys will keep me on my toes, I suspect." The formidable duchess was almost fifteen years older than her father, yet still played an active role in League and Star League politics. She was a senior commissioner, Madeleine's boss, but her position as a Duchess of the Free Worlds was still her first calling. Respected by the House Lords and the leaders of the Periphery, few ignored her opinions or advice unscathed. "Or slap me round the head." They both smiled at the image. Melissa Humphreys was still quite capable of doing that.

"And you'll have a medical team with you, no buts."

Rhean nodded resignedly.

"I'll let the staff know. We leave Wednesday."

Orbital Insertion Corridor

Terra

Terran Hegemony

4 April 2612

"You don't need to do this. I'll be fine," Rhean protested. She sat in an acceleration couch, a harness across her torso and waist. Orderlies had strapped her in and checked the buckles. *I'm not an infant doing this for the first time*, she'd fumed.

"Your father's orders. Someone needs to make sure you're well, and we've not had chance to chat, so why not kill two birds with once stone." The old woman gingerly lowered herself into another couch and set about the straps. *No one assisted her*, Rhean thought wryly. *Not if they wanted their heads left on their shoulders*. "A lot has happened since Canopus." *Hasn't it just*, Rhean thought. "There, sorted. I never did like this bit of space travel."

The look on Melissa Humphreys' face said exactly the opposite. She looked excited, a grin wiping years off her age. Rhean reached for a sachet of fruit juice and offered it to Melissa who accepted, then took another for herself. She pulled the straw free and sucked the tangy liquid through the valve. *This was the part of space travel she hated*. Zero-G and forced to eat mush and juice from sachets. *Not too different from life in the hospital*, she thought wryly.

An alarm sounded, then there was the sensation of being shoved in the back. Maneuvering thrusters fired, reorienting the DropShip before it reached the space-atmosphere interface. Rhean's stomach lurched as a rotational element was introduced to the maneuvering, followed by several more kicks. Then the main de-orbit burn began and both women sank into the couches. There was a mild whimper from over near the door where the dogs were locked in their cages. That'd be Paris. Like his namesake, Hector was the more stoic of the pair and rarely made a noise.

"Zane Davion." It came out of nowhere, and Rhean gaped. Now she understood why the Duchess had chosen this time to visit her. She could guarantee there'd be no one else around. Even their respective bodyguards were in their own cabins.

"What about the Prince?" she replied carefully.

"Don't play cute with me, girl. You and him." Rhean gawped. "Stop looking like you swallowed a fly. It makes you seem like an imbecile."

"How'd you—" She struggled for words.

Humphreys waved a hand negligently, despite the steadily growing gravitational forces. "I've known you since you were a teenager, and I've known Rinalla longer. You think I don't hear about all your games?"

"But—"

"You were discrete? Don't worry, Rin didn't break any of your confidences, though I imagine she struggled to understand why she had to keep them." Melissa's eyebrows arched. "You're not as bright as you think you are. Some people know. Be thankful that Kreiss came to me first rather than your father."

Rhean groaned. "Damn it. I trusted security not to tell. The whole 'absolute confidence' issue." Security didn't usually report on their charge's activities, save where security demanded it. A protectee needed to have absolute confidence in their detail if they were to be guarded effectively, had to have no secrets and trust that confidences wouldn't be passed on.

"Running off to Lake Geneva *was* something of a security lapse." The older woman watched new amazement appear on Rhean's face. "Yes, it has been known that long, but it was hardly the first dalliance of its kind, nor will it be the last. I wondered if it was a one-off when you seemed to break of your friendship for several years, but I see that's no longer the case." Rhean blushed. "Spare me—I lived on Canopus for twenty years. Very little shocks me." She smiled gently. "What I want to know is what you plan to do now, having wheedled your way back into the delegation."

"I'm needed for—"

"Don't give me that, girl. You know damn well we can get by without you. You're Warden, but the FWLM doesn't revolve around you. You *wanted* to come to Terra."

Rhean was silent. "I need to talk to him."

Humphreys nodded. "You're also not as inscrutable as you think you are." She paused for several moments, "It's a challenging proposition."

"You're going to tell me to avoid him. I won't."

"Not at all. Avoiding him would be impossible in your line of work. I was going to say be careful. Discretion is the watchword. No dal-

liances at Cameron parties. Find somewhere you're not going to be chanced upon by servants, reporters, or family."

Rhean laughed half-heartedly, her smile fighting against the g-forces. "And you have somewhere in mind?"

"As a matter of fact, I do."



Old Town, Lausanne
Switzerland, Terra
Terran Hegemony
9 April 2612

An old couple descended the cathedral's worn steps, blissfully ignorant of the security personnel they passed. They picked their way over the treacherous cobblestones, stepping gingerly over patches of half-cleared snow from a surprise 'last gasp of winter' fall before ducking back under the wooden covers that screened half of the path as it snaked down the hill past varicolored shops and apartments. It was a postcard scene.

Rhean watched them from the small terrace near the base of the stairs, her back resting against the low wall that bounded the café's territory. A portable heater took the edge off the spring chill and kept the area near the tables was free of snow. Rhean was still wrapped up though, swathed in a down-filled ski-jacket and a wooly hat. A blanket lay across her legs and a cup of chocolate steamed in her glove-wrapped hands, the remains of Chantilly cream on its rim. Watching the old couple descend, she sipped again, savoring the sweet taste and aroma of the thick liquid. He was late. They'd agreed on two p.m. in their brief communication after arriving at the Court and it was almost half past. *Another half-hour, she thought, then home.*

She caught movement in the corner of her eye and turned to regard Evangeline, who stood near the café door, one hand cupping her ear. She met Rhean's gaze, then flicked her eyes up the stairs. Rhean followed her look to where Annelise stood overlooking their terrace. She was talking to several new arrivals. Rhean couldn't name them, but they were familiar—Federated Suns close-protection officers. She closed her eyes, savoring the anticipation. There were boot-steps on the stairs, then a chair scraped back. Rhean fought a losing battle to keep the grin from her face. She opened her eyes and the grin froze and shattered.

A blonde woman sat in front of her, dressed in a long blue woolen coat and a fur hat atop her head. She was unmistakable—Elaine Romera. Elaine Davion. Not the weak, waif-like girl from Moscow, but a determined and incandescent she-wolf.

"Not what you expected?" The Davion woman's accent matched the cold air. "I'm sorry." Her inflection was caustic, anything but apologetic.

"Lady Davion." Rhean struggled to find anything sensible to say.

"A polite warning, *Miss Marik*. Hands off!" Her eyes were narrow, as if focusing laser beams on the older woman. "I don't like people playing around with my husband."

"I didn't know he was married."

"The first time. That's his usual method of operation. But you can't claim ignorance from your later indiscretions, no matter how much of a charming bastard he is."

"I'm—"

"Don't you dare say you're sorry. You're not, and neither is he. I know he has a wandering eye—God knows how many maids or junior-staffers he's gone through and who I've ignored—but you, you're a different kettle of fish." Her eyes blazed and she jabbed an angry finger at Rhean. "Your little fling threatens the balance of power." She took a breath. "You're the leaders of Great Houses, or will be. If you two have a falling out, it won't just be a lovers tiff. It could be war."

"I said much the same to him."

"And yet you still carried on. As I said, he's a charming bastard. Let me show you something that might put this into context." She reached into a pocket of her coat and drew out a small square of paper, a printed image Rhean realized. There were two young figures, one a girl of about six or seven and the other a toddler. "That's Sarah, and that's Samuel. And this—" She stood and opened her coat, revealing a swollen belly. "—is Mathew or Marie." She pulled the coat shut and sat. "Just so you know what you're playing with."

"I'll keep my distance. Purely business," Rhean replied, her voice small.

"You'd better. You and my husband weren't exactly discreet in London, and it'd be a shame if the recordings got out." The threat hung in the air between them. Elaine stood and looked down at Rhean. "Enjoy the rest of your birthday, *Miss Marik*." With that, she turned and stalked away.

~20~

"They say trouble always comes in threes. I can't dispute that. Certainly my encounter with Elaine was only the first disaster, and there was bitter irony in what followed."

—Private Journal

Marik Apartments
Court of the Star League, Terra
Terran Hegemony
24 April 2612

Rhean sat on her balcony, lost in thought. The remains of lunch lay scattered on the table and a coffeepot stood half empty. A book lay discarded on the table—she'd managed a few pages, but the story hadn't grabbed her. For all his military terminology, the author had never been a Mechwarrior and his story, set against the backdrop of the Andurien Wars, was all hype and heroics, nothing like real battle. She couldn't understand how it had made it onto the Terran bestseller lists. She'd wanted a distraction, but *Daggers Drawn* wasn't it.

The sky was overcast, but the air was mild. A *far cry from Lausanne*, her subconscious added. "Damn it." She muttered. No matter how hard she tried to forget about Zane and the encounter with Elaine, something dragged her thoughts back to it. Back in her academy days she used to run to clear her mind, achieving a zen-like state in which no errant thoughts intruded. In her current condition, she'd be lucky to make it to the end of the hall, let alone the fifteen-kilometer runs she did as a teenager. *Traitor*, she told her body.

Her memory of Lausanne after Elaine departed was fragmentary. She recalled security moving in and being bundled into the car. There was a descent through the town to the lakeshore, then past the IOC and the Kurita compounds along the coast road.

Someone—Evie, she presumed—had decided a return to Geneva and a suborbital hop to Unity City weren't practical with Rhean alternating between near-catatonia and weeping. Instead, they'd gone east, past Montreux and the Châteaux de Chillon and up into the Rhône Valley. She'd woken up in the Troistorrents house the next morning, and spent the day there pulling herself together. Rinalla had arrived to keep her company and had managed to lighten the mood. The Magestrix had seemed distant though, pre-occupied with something Rhean couldn't quite put her finger on. When they finally returned to the Court of the Star League, the official story was that they'd been enjoying the mountains before the council sessions began. Most people were none the wiser.

She rolled her neck to ease a kink, then looked back into the apartment where a stack of briefing papers waited her attention. There were still six days to the start of the council meetings, but she needed to be up to speed before then. She levered herself up, letting out a low groan as she did, then hobbled into the lounge. That was one of her 'deficits' as the doctors called it; impaired coordination as a result of the tumor and the surgeries to combat it. She hoped to learn to counter it, but at present she wobbled everywhere and usually walked with a cane. She stretched, rolling her shoulders and twisting at the waist, then grabbed the top half-dozen folders. She was halfway back to her balcony perch when kitchen door opened and Evie slipped in.

"The Centrellas are on their way up to see you."

Rhean noted the plural. Carla would be with her mother. "Saved by the bell," she whispered, making a quick about-face and dropping the documents back on their pile. "Give me a minute, then send them in." She crossed to the mirror and checked her bandana. Some members of the Marik delegation had adopted the bald look as a mark of sympathy, a gesture she thought was sweet, but she remained self-conscious about her lack of hair. Seeing all was in place, she took up her usual place on the sofa.

Rinalla and Carla entered arm in arm, the latter the spitting image of her mother at the same age. Paris and Hector fussed round their feet, having been roused from their den in the hall. Rinalla had been a little older when they'd first met—that occasion was engraved in Rhean's memory—but the look of sensuous mischief was there in her poise and demeanor. Carla wasn't quite as forward as her mother had been, and looked set to be a formidable magestrix. Her economic skills had even been lauded by Rhean's father, no small praise.

Rhean beamed as the Canopians took their seats. The dogs came and sat by her; there would be biscuits, and they knew who was the weak touch. "Tea, ladies?" she asked, beaming. Both nodded, but did so without returning Rhean's cheer. Her smile faded. "I thought I was the one with problems," she deadpanned. "What's up?"

"This is my last council session. Carla will take over as Magestrix during the summer recess."

Rhean gasped. "You're retiring?"

Her friend nodded. "On medical grounds." She took the tea offered by a servant and sipped it. "Advanced glioblastoma multiforme." After a year of cancer therapies, Rhean knew exactly what that was.

"You have a tumor."

"Up here, like you." Rinalla tapped her head. "But untreatable." Carla clutched her mother's other hand.

"I'm so sorry."

"Oh, don't be, Ree. I've had a good innings. Actually, the docs gave me two choices: advanced chemo that might give me another six months but be sick as a dog with the side effects, no offense, mutt." She leant forward and scratched Hector's ears, prompting the hound to close his eyes in bliss. "Or they could just make me comfortable and I could spend my last days ensuring a smooth transition." *And enjoying life to the hilt*, was the unspoken codicil. "Better Carla takes over while she's young and energetic rather than an old maid like you." That trace of her friend's humor brought the smile back to Rhean's face.

"I'll sit in on most of these spring sessions, so from the Star League's point of view there'll be minimal impact," Carla injected, her hands still wrapping her mothers'.

Rhean smiled at the girl. She'd had still been at Princefield when she was Carla's age. "You'll do great." She turned back to Rinalla. "You knew when we were in Switzerland, didn't you?" Her voice was soft.

Rinalla nodded. "It wasn't the time to tell you, though."

"Sorry about that." Rhean felt her cheeks color.

The Canopian made a dismissive gesture. "I'm so proud of the way you fought your illness," the Magestrix said, her voice little

more than a whisper. There were tears in the corners of her eyes. "But I don't have the same reserves of strength and courage." Rhean blinked at that. She didn't think of herself as strong. Bloody minded, yes, but strong? She leaned over and grasped Rinalla's hand. Then they were embracing, all tears.

"Well," Rinalla said, breaking the hug after a few moments. "I think there's only one thing to do."

Rhean looked at her quizzically, head cocked to on side.

"Throw a party!"



Unity Spaceport
Court of the Star League, Terra
Terran Hegemony
2 July 2612

A raised hand kept the sun from Rhean's eyes as she watched the spheroidal DropShip rise into the sky atop a plume of plasma. It accelerated, punching through the scattered clouds on the way to orbit, its vapor trail slowly dissipating in the wind. Light glinted off the distant vessel's hull, and for an instant she imagined it was the sunburst that decorated its side. She watched until the ship was little more than a speck, then turned away, leaning heavily on her cane.

"Zane gone?" Rinalla asked from the air-conditioned comfort of the lounge. Rhean nodded, then sat next to her waiting friend. "I'd better think about moving. We're fourth in the queue behind Sword-one." The Canopian vessel was scheduled to depart in thirty minutes. They'd watched CargoMechs loading containers of supplies and luggage while their larger military cousins patrolled the perimeter of the compound. Rhean would never pilot a 'Mech again, she realized, but that didn't stop her from thinking they were some of the most beautiful—and terrifying—of man's creations.

They both stood and embraced. "*Adieu*," Rhean whispered. *Until god*, a definitive goodbye, unlike *au revoir*. It was a verbal acknowledgement of what they both knew; in a few months one, if not both, would be dead. Rhean felt tears in her eyes. "Go, before I create *another* scene," she whispered. They separated, and she saw the Canopian was equally on the verge of tears.

The Magistris took a few steps to the doorway leading down to her waiting limousine, then turned back. "You—" Rinalla jabbed a finger at her friend. "—will live. No matter what, you'll survive. You have to." Then she was gone, shielded from view by security.

Returning to the balcony, leaning on the rail, Rhean watched the limousine snake its way across the landing field, stopping alongside a sleek, aerodynamic vessel. Staff brought her water, but she refused to leave her vantage point until she'd seen the vessel's hatches dogged shut and it taxied out to the huge runway that ran alongside the sound. Even from two kilometers away, the roar of its engines was deafening as the massive vessel lumbered into the air, then arced west toward the Pacific before beginning the climb to orbit.

"Let's go," she said to no one in particular before being escorted down to her own waiting car. The cool air in the vehicle felt icy after the warm summer air, and she shivered before reaching over and adjusting the climate control settings.

The spring session was done, but she and her father had decided to stay on Terra for the two-month summer recess, visiting old haunts while they still had the chance. Papa felt the weight of mortality on his shoulders, a feeling she was now all too familiar with. David could hold the fort on Atreus, another Marik being groomed for a position he hadn't expected. Quentin was still undergoing a crash education in the responsibilities of the Captain-General and with his son too young to succeed him—Tomas was only fourteen—David was being groomed by the staff as Quentin's heir. It was Byzantine in the extreme, but Rhean saw a method behind the madness.

She looked up and saw Evie in the front passenger seat, having an animated conversation on the com. Glancing out the window, she saw they were speeding through a wood valley, not something she usually saw on her route between the spaceport and the apartment. She reached forward and hit the button to lower the screen to the driver's compartment.

"Shouldn't we have taken the West Tunnel?"

"We're heading to Grace Memorial, Warden." Evie said coolly. "At the Captain-General's request."

"Is he okay?"

"Eagle is well, as far as I know." Her father's codename. She was Osprey and her brothers were other birds of prey. "It's Peregrine."

"Quentin? What happened?"

Evangeline looked at her apologetically. "A medical emergency is all I know at this time, sorry."

Fifteen minutes later when the limo pulled up outside the medical facility the picture was clearer. Her brother had suffered a heart attack.

"We were playing tennis," her nephew explained when she entered the family area. "And Dad just keeled over." Tomas' unruly hair was held in place by a baseball cap bearing a *Stuka* logo. An aerospace fanatic, he was very proud to have blagged it off a Davion pilot. Rhean hugged the boy, pulling him into the seat next to her as she alighted alongside her father.

“What’s the prognosis?” she asked.

Brion shrugged imperceptibly, then nodded toward a white-clad doctor who emerged from the emergency room. He came to stand before the Marik lord. Rhean hugged Tomas to her; his mother had died when he was six and he’d been raised by his father alone.

“Captain-General, Warden, master Marik,” he inclined his head to Tomas. “I’m so sorry.”

