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# FALL FROM GRACE

*Chris Hartford*

*Part One*



## *Introduction to the English version:*

This story was originally written for FanPro Germany where, together with my naming and chronological errors, it was published under the title *In Ungnade* (*In Disgrace*). Many of those errors have been corrected for this edition and, with a few elements, the story is unchanged from the version seen in Germany. Chapter 11 is the notable exception, with a reworking of events and character details to better suit details in the pre-existing source material that were overlooked in the original draft. Here too, while some of the details have changed, the story remains the same.



# Prologue

*“They say you never hear the shell that kills you. I certainly didn’t. One moment I was happy, with everything I’d ever wanted in my life, and the next it was all blood and flames, chaos and destruction tearing down everything I’d sought to build. I only wish I’d died when they killed me.”*

—Private Journal

**Hegemony Congress Building, Geneva  
Switzerland, Terra  
Terran Hegemony  
9 July 2571**

Wisps of smoke drifted up, the acrid smell of gunpowder redolent with every breath. Loud retorts echoed around the complex as cannons fired repeatedly. Bipedal war machines strode through the park while tanks rumbled along in their wake. The brass band that followed was...incongruous. Then again, so was having war machines parade down the Avenue de la Paix. Would the founders of what was then the League of Nations have appreciated the irony?

Albert Marik, Captain-General of the Free Worlds League and co-architect of the document the League’s leaders had just signed, chuckled as he drew in another mouthful of cigar smoke. He savored it, then blew out a ring of smoke that drifted gently across the terrace before being shredded by the wind. A satisfied smile played over his lips.

*It was done.*

The six lords of the main human interstellar nations had finally agreed on a plan to unite humanity—most of humanity, at least—ending the so-called “Age of War” during which the bullet and the

bomb had been the principal tools of diplomacy. Halting the use of warfare as a means of carrying out policy had long been Albert's goal, one he shared with Ian Cameron, and that they had both pursued vigorously since finding their mutual passion. Ian would claim the glory—he would be the head of this new "Star League" after all—but Albert's role as co-architect was well known among the Inner Sphere nations whom he had cajoled and pushed toward this day for years. Less than an hour earlier, the six leaders had met in the Salle du Conseil—the Spanish Chamber, some still called it, because of José María Sert's sepia-tone paintings that still adorned its walls half a millennium after his nation had ceased to exist—and signed the Star League into existence. *We pledge unto each other our Lives, our good Faith, and our Sacred Honor,* they'd sworn.

Albert didn't begrudge his friend the spotlight—maintaining order among the six houses would be akin to "herding cats," as his daughter Marion would say—and, after all, peace and prosperity was their goal, not personal aggrandizement. Albert drew in another lungful of smoke. No, not the slightest shred of jealousy. His grin turned wry as he scanned the crowd.

Most of the people here he recognized; political dignitaries from across known space, though he'd not had time or cause to talk to most. He regretted that—people fascinated him, their outlooks, opinions and quirks—but there were limits, even to his endurance. Albert was not a young man, having celebrated his ninety-third birthday three weeks before this gathering and medical science, though almost miraculous in its achievements, could only take him so far. He was relieved he'd seen the Star League born in his lifetime, his life's ambition realized, though he'd had his doubts that it would ever come to pass. He doubted he'd have much chance to enjoy its benefits or deal with its problems. That would fall to Marion.

Instinctively he sought her out across the room; a tall, auburn-haired figure dressed in an elegant, purple, sleeveless dress, the Marik eagle insignia worked into the embroidery crisscrossing the bodice. She chatted to a popinjay in Federated Suns dress uniform, her refined style a stark contrast to his gaudy display. It wasn't Prince Alexander Davion, who he saw across the terrace in discussion with Chancellor Ursula Liao of the Capellan Confederation, though the resemblance was there, so it must be his eldest son, Vincent. Marion didn't seem to be enjoying matters, though it was unlikely the man would recognize the telltale signs. Seeing her father's glance, Marion made her excuses. She appeared to glide

across the terrace, effortless despite being a long way from her youth. She was almost seventy, though most people placed her age closer to fifty. *The wonders of medical science, he mused, and an active lifestyle.* She had great-grandchildren, but still ran a dozen kilometers every day to keep fit, surrounded by her ever-present security detail.

"Arrogant idiot," she whispered as she bent to kiss her father's cheek. She towered over him, 185 centimeters to his 160. He'd been nicknamed 'the dwarf' by friends and enemies alike, so compared to him Marion was a giantess. "Complaining about trade imbalances and financial coercion."

Albert raised his eyebrows. The Free Worlds had played tough with the FedRats, pushing them toward joining the pan-human alliance with economic force, part of Albert's master plan. *Did Alexander seek vengeance?* Albert put the thought out of his mind.

"Vincent also seemed to think the Suns would be Cameron's right hand man." She nodded over to another group, centered on Ian Cameron, the director of the Terran Hegemony and now the first First Lord of the Star League. "And he implied the Star League was *his* father's idea." She shrugged and a familiar wry grin crossed her face.

"What he thinks is unimportant. What the people as a whole think and do is what matters. Peace, prosperity, and cooperation are the victories we achieve today."

"Cooperation, perhaps. Prosperity, maybe. Peace? In the Inner Sphere, perhaps, but not for humanity as a whole."

"Ian told me his 'next step.' It won't be popular."

Marion frowned. That's an understatement. Bringing the Inner Sphere together took you how many years?" A smile tugged at her lips as her eyes darted back to Vincent Davion. "This next phase is idiotic and provocative. You need to talk him out of it."

"Believe me, I've tried. He's dead-set on bringing the periphery realms into the Star League, no matter their opposition. Personally, I don't think we have a bat-in-hell's chance. With the Rim Worlds, perhaps, but not Taurus or Canopus or the Outworlds Alliance. They were founded to escape Terra's authority in the first place, though so were we to some degree. They won't willingly put themselves back there."

"Not willingly. It'll come to war." There was no doubt in her voice.

A black-liveried waiter drifted by with a tray of champagne. Marion lifted two glasses and handed one to her father. She took a sip of the bubbling, amber liquid, but her father merely regarded his.

"I damn well hope not, but I think Alexander and Ursula and Hehiro—" he nodded toward the heads of the Federated Suns, Capellan Confederation, and Draconis Combine respectively, each surrounded by a knot of dignitaries—"will see a war under the Star League's auspices as a way of expanding their fortunes and influence. Ian sees it in different terms: educating children who are too stubborn to recognize what needs to be done."

"We'll have to join. We can't afford to let the others make political and military capital, nor can we threaten the Star League's integrity by refusing to cooperate. Damned if we do..." She frowned.

"My daughter the pragmatist. Yes, I'm pretty sure the Centrelas and Calderons will refuse out of hand. Avellar? I don't really know him, but I suspect a similar streak. Amaris is a pragmatist too, so he'll see which way the wind blows and follow it I suspect. So, yes, we'll have war I think, but I hope diplomacy will be given some chance to work."

Marion nodded thoughtfully. "Director Cameron—the First Lord, I mean—seems to be have run out of patience. He wants a summit next year, but I don't think it'll take that long for things to come to a head. Hell, I'd be surprised if we made it to the end of this year without some form of blow-up."

Albert grunted and took another long drag on his cigar, savoring the taste. "Damn it, Marion. I expected to be happy when this was all done. I *am* happy to have got this far, but I'm beginning to think it'll never be done, and that rankles." He ground the stub against the white stone balustrade of the low wall surrounding the terrace. Turning away from the gathering, he looked out over the Armillary Sphere and the botanical gardens of Ariana Park to Lake Leman and the mountains beyond. Mont Blanc was just visible, peeking above its consorts, wrapped in a thin layer of cloud. "I think you're going to become very familiar with that view, at least until Ian builds the new city he has in mind. Near Seattle, he said."

"There are worse places. Brion won't mind staffing me here at least. He decided to buy the house out at Troistorrents—conve-

nient for the skiing up at Portes du Soleil, he said. And speak of the devil..." She gestured over at a young couple who'd just emerged from the crowd. One was barely out of his teens, tall and auburn-haired like his grandmother, the other a few years older, short and slender with long dark hair, carrying a small, red-haired bundle that gripping her tightly around the neck. The youth bowed to the Captain-General, then kissed Marion's cheeks.

"Sorry grandma, Rhean threw a tantrum after the signing, and she's just had a time-out." Hearing her name, the red-haired bundle looked up and grinned upon spying her great-grandmother and great-great-grandfather. Her left hand released her mother's neck and reached out, demanding a hug. At three years old, Rhean was precocious and all too used to getting her own way. Her parents, both little more than children in Albert's eyes, gave in far too easily. They needed to install discipline, make it clear to the little girl who was in charge.

He blinked when he realized he'd allowed the little terror to grasp him round the neck. She hauled herself up into his arms, the youngest and oldest of the Marik clan standing together, overlooking the lake and the procession. Rhean giggled and reached out toward the military vehicles still parading through the park. The girl cooed excitedly and pointed.

"Congratulations, Albert." The accented voice made it sound like *Al Bear*. "The end of many years work for you."

He turned to regard the newcomer, the wriggling toddler objecting and twisting so she could see the thundering 'Mechs. Dressed in a long, elegant gown of powder blue inlaid with gold thread, Viola Steiner-Dineson, Archon of the Lyran Commonwealth, stretched out a hand. Carefully, he grasped it with his free one and shook it. "The end of many years of work for many people, and the start of many more."

"Ja, I think this is something our children and grandchildren—" The Lyran woman smiled and reached out to ruffle the child's hair. "—and great-great-grandchildren will inherit. Many duties and responsibilities if this great effort isn't to be squandered." Suddenly self-conscious, Rhean buried her face in Albert's shoulder, peeking out after several moments. "No need to be afraid, little one." The Archon smiled. "My name is Viola. I'm a friend of your great-grandmother and great-great-grandfather."

"Say hello, Rhean." Albert suggested.

“‘Io.’ A small voice asked from Albert’s shoulder. “Are you a princess? Daddy read me a story about a princess.”

The archon laughed. “*Prinzessin?* I suppose I am, *liebling*, though the word we use in the Lyran Commonwealth is Archon.”

“Ark-con.” The little girl said, struggling with the word. Viola smiled.

“You’re a princess too,” the Lyran woman added.

A frown crossed Rhean’s face. “I don’t want to be a princess.” She stated emphatically, shaking her head.

“What do you want to be then? Let me guess. A pirate?” A shake of the head. “A policewoman?” Another shake of the head. “What then, *engel*?”

The child twisted round and pointed toward the military procession, her finger setting on one distinctive bipedal vehicle, striding along, its massive gun-barrel arms swaying with each step. “A *Warhammer*.”

# Part 1

## *Growing Pains*

*“Most people look back on their childhood with fondness. I tend to cringe when I look at mine, not that I was given much chance to be a child. Privilege and duty contested for my attention, neither giving me the opportunity for a “normal” childhood. Nonetheless, the friends I made in those years would stick with me through my life. So would the enemies. ”*

*- Private Journal*

## ~1~

*“Most MechWarriors remember the first time they went off to war. I do too, but I also recall the first time someone close to me went off to war. Back then it was just a game—they were going away for a while but would be back, and to a child of interstellar travel long weeks or months apart were hardly unusual—and I didn’t appreciate the horror of watching a loved one ship out, nor of being one of those who had to leave their family behind while risking some death on some distant world.”*

—Private Journal

**Captain-General’s Apartments, Atreus City  
Atreus, Marik Commonwealth  
Free Worlds League  
19 March 2575**

“Damn it!” The curse was followed by the tinkle of breaking glass.

Six-year-old Rhean looked up from the chessboard, one hand still reaching out to her white rook, her wide eyes focusing on her great-grandmother across the bright atrium. Had one of the plethora of windows in the brightly lit chamber broken, or perhaps one of the hundreds of lamps? Grams—Captain-General Marion Marik, to give the statuesque woman her full title—stood at her desk, shaking with anger. The remains of a wineglass lay a half-dozen meters away. Surely she hadn’t dropped it.

Rhean’s eyes swung from her great-grandmother to the film of water trickling down one of the massive, sloping windows that were the distinctive hallmark of this office. Rain? Liquid dripped

from the window onto the floor. Inside? Realization dawned. The cry, the liquid, the broken glass. She'd never seen Grams lose her temper before and the thrown glass had bounced off the bulletproof glass that sheathed the atrium-office. She swallowed. Adults were always telling her not to throw tantrums, and here was Grams being...angry.

A side-door opened and tall Mister Almes entered. He was Gram's bodyguard, distinctive in his close-cropped dark hair and black suit. He was one of those people she was scared of—he had a gun and always looked so serious. He didn't seem worried, at least, not once he'd confirmed that no one was in danger. Almes looked at the wreckage of the glass, an eyebrow rising. "I'll send housekeeping." Grams waved him away and he ducked back into the lobby.

Marion paid the little girl no heed, their weekly game forgotten in some excitement. She reached down and hit a switch on the desk. "Get Ian up here now." There was a brief acknowledgement. Marion stood lost in thought for a moment, then remembered her visitor and forced a smile onto her face. "Your grandfather will be here shortly, poppet, but we'll be busy for a few minutes, so you'll need to keep quiet."

Rhean looked at her, eyes wide and lips pursed. She nodded, then frowned. She hardly ever saw her grandfather, Ian Marik. He never seemed to have much time for his second son and his children, instead lavishing his time on uncle David, his eldest son and heir. Grandpa Ian would succeed Grams, and David would succeed Grandpa Ian. That meant her dad had been free to pursue his passions, skiing and economics, after leaving the academy rather than spending all his time as a soldier like uncle David. That was why she had three brothers—Quentin and the twins, Arthur and David, and mama said she'd like to have more children, hopefully giving Rhean a sister—and uncle David had no kids. She wished she had cousins too. Mama was an only child, but dad's sister Therese had had a little girl the same year as the twins were born. Little Marie had only lived a few days, but for some reason Grandpa Ian wasn't too upset by that. He'd made little effort to hide his dislike for his daughter's husband—Uncle William was a Liao, and for some reason grandpa was *really* upset by that. Why did his name matter? It didn't make him a bad person, did it? Therese and William lived on Terra now, working with First Lord Cameron.

"I'll read my book, Grams," she said, lifting the thin book from where it rested. She was good with books and was reading sto-

ries written for ten-year-olds. Dad had a word for it, precocious, which she thought was adult-speak for good when you were almost seven.

Marion stepped around the desk and looked at the book appraisingly. She nodded. "I remember that one from many, many years ago when I was your age." She smiled and leant back on her desk, crossing her arms. "Don't worry, we won't be long."

As if on cue, the main doors to the Atrium swung open and her grandpa strode in. Rhean glanced over the top of her book at the tall, solidly-built man who sported a well-trimmed goatee that she'd pulled often as a baby. He glanced at her and smiled. Rhean felt her cheeks redden and she ducked back behind the book, pretending to be engrossed.

"News from Terra, I presume? I heard a courier had arrived."

His mother grunted. "They say no." A frown creased her forehead.

"Of course they do. You've said that since the signing."

"Uh huh. Only I expected Ian to lose his temper and go gunning for them, not the Periphery states to stick two fingers up and say 'come and get us.' They know they'll lose, but god, what a propaganda coup for them." She gestured for Ian to take a seat. He did so, and she slipped back behind the desk, sliding into a high-backed leather chair.

"They get to be the victims. It'll be a mess."

"Ian's determined not to let that happen. He's appointed Mitchell DeGrason to spin the media situation, playing the Peripheries as bad guys and drumming up support for the coming war."

Ian stroked his beard. "Well, that'll cause a stir. The Bureau of Star League Affairs isn't a propaganda machine, and appointing the best man at his wedding to head the PR effort could cause resentment. Ian better be careful this doesn't come back to bite him in the ass, you know what some of the court are going to say about nepotism."

"After the Proclamation—" That was the Pollux Proclamation, Rhean knew, the ultimatum Grams and the other lords of the Star League had sent to the Periphery just after Christmas—"this has been inevitable. The Chancellor and I warned the other Lords, but they're to set on their own goals. Kurita wants to prove that join-

ing the Star League hasn't cut off his manhood, the militaristic jerk, while Davion wants the arms contracts for the SLDF."

"And the Seventh Corps? Is the First Lord sending you against Canopus?" A dozen Free Worlds regiments and almost three times that number of Star League troops formed the SLDF's Seventh Corps, commanded by Grams. Rhean knew the names of all the regiments too, both the Marik units and those of the SLDF proper, and their insignia.

"Not yet. We're on alert and to deploy along the border, but for now there's a hold order. The Magestrix isn't likely to take pre-emptive action, but Mitchell Calderon might, to spite Alex Davion if nothing else. The bulk of the SLDF will head there first, though I've no illusion that the First Lord won't send us in. It's just a matter of when."

"Well, at least we've got a few months at least to work on Crystalla. She's a pragmatist."

Marion lifted a data slate from the desk and handed it across to her son. His eyebrows rose as he scanned the text. "Ah." He chuckled. "'What can he offer us that we cannot already buy?' That sounds like Crystalla all right. Perhaps I should head to Canopus to try the economic argument?"

"I thought Humphreys would make a good delegation lead. I'm going to send Brion too."

"The boy is a wastrel," he retorted, a bitter edge creeping into his voice.

At the insult to Rhean's father, Marion's eyes darted a warning glance toward the girl. She continued to act engrossed in the book rather than listening to the grown-ups. Marion frowned across the desk at her son, her voice cool. "My grandson is a skilled economist and has had experience of high-level diplomacy in Geneva. I know you don't approve of his choice of career, but we Mariks need to be more than just generals and politicians. I'm sure young David will appreciate his brother's financial and administrative skills when he succeeds you."

Ian nodded, his eyes narrowing. "As you say, mother."

"Don't worry, kiddo." Amusement crept into her voice; grandpa Ian was at least fifty. "You'll have your hands full running the show for me here. I'm going to be busy with the Seventh and war planning, so you'll need to take up some of the slack in Parliament.

You'll have full executive powers once I head to the front as well. I'm not going to allow the winning of this war to impact on the Free Worlds any more than it has to."

For a moment they both sat in silence, each lost in thought, then Ian rose. "We've got a vote scheduled in an hour, so I'd best go and prepare. I'll get the National Intelligence Agency to workup a new dossier on the Magistracy. The delegation will need as much leverage as they can get." He sketched a short bow to his mother. "I'll see you there, Captain-General."

"Ian." She picked up data slate and browsed its contents. Ian walked over to Rhean, then bent and kissed her on the top of the head. Rhean looked up, startled, and watched her grandfather stride from the room. When the door clicked shut behind him, she turned toward her great-grandmother and was surprised to see her looking back intently. She swallowed.

"You're going to fight the Peripheries, Grams?"

"Soon, yes, I think."

"In your 'Mech."

"Yes."

Rhean stood and raised herself up to her full height—she was tall for her age, and skinny too which made her appear even taller—and sketched a formal court bow. "Captain-General, can I come too?" It would've looked better had she been wearing trousers rather than her pink skirt, but she hated curtseying. She wanted to be formal, like grandpa Ian.

Grams rose from behind the desk and walked back to the games table, a smile tugging at her lips. Halting two meters away, she returned Rhean's bow, then gestured for the girl to sit. Marion lowered herself onto the stool she'd occupied before the messenger arrived and turned to regard the chessboard once more. She cleared her throat and adopted her 'Parliament voice.' "The Captain-General apologizes. She is afraid she must deny the young lady from Marik's request. The young lady is, I think, a little too short to reach the 'Mech's pedals and—"

"Great-Grandpa Albert had a special 'Mech he could pilot, didn't he?"

"He did, yes, but my father was a grown up. You still need to go to school, and to grow taller."

"But I'll miss the fighting!" Rhean's face was intent. Marion smiled at her, but the smile didn't extend to her eyes.

"Sadly, I don't think this will be a quick war. You may yet get your chance to fight, but you'll only do that if you study well at school and the academy."

"It's years until I go to the academy though. And Princefield is so far away."

"Don't rush things, dear. You'll be there soon enough." She gestured at the chess board. "Your move."





~2~

*"Tradition is a two-edge sword: it can manage our fears and expectations, shaping our lives, but it can also be claustrophobic and oppressive, forcing us to do things we'd rather not. I knew from a young age that, barring some great misfortune, I would attend one of the League's military academies and continue the tradition of exemplary military service. No pressure..."*

*—Private Journal*

### ***Princefield***

### ***Oriente***

### ***Duchy of Oriente, Free Worlds League***

**19 July 2580**

The girl her fellow students knew as Frieda Moran dashed down the ornate corridor, her white cadet uniform a stark contrast to the black marble walls decorated with their friezes and statues. A strand of her long, auburn hair, always falling just short of regulation—something the instructors frowned on—flapped loose as she ran well in excess of the usual walk expected of students. She skidded round a corner, almost colliding with another group of students, equally late for the first class of the morning and struggling to find wakefulness in the pre-dawn gloom. The tang of polish pervaded the air, evidence that despite the early hour the maintenance staff had done their rounds. The floor shone like a mirror, polished daily by hundreds of feet and then buffed to perfection by the staff. *And the students*, she thought wryly, recalling a run-in with a particular instructor at the start of the year just after her arrival at the military academy.

She was young for her class, though her height went some way to offsetting that disadvantage, and had quickly fallen afoul of some fellow cadets whose noble status gave them particular authority over their fellows, especially those whose parents were not gentry but rather business leaders like hers were alleged to be. If she was honest, her own aloofness hadn't helped—she'd been dead-set on

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standing on her own two feet and had been rather slow to make friends. Most new arrivals found themselves victimized by the upperclassmen, bullied and used to run errands if not outright hazed, but to some in her own year the young arrival had been seen as so far down the pecking order even they could harass her. She'd weathered the storm for the first few days, swearing to herself she wouldn't cry and call on the adults for help, but then Lambert Allison had pushed matters to the brink.

The grandson of the Duke of Oriente, Allison lorded it over his fellow new arrivals. As the one-day successor to the Grand Duchy, he'd taken it upon himself to lead the new group. Many had accepted his assumption of authority, and even some of the senior class looked on him with respect. *Sycophancy, more like* she mused. When Frieda refused to comply with one of his "orders," a number of the onlookers had gasped. Who was she to refuse such a high ranking noble? She'd walked away then, but later on Lambert and some of his clique had cornered her and made it clear she *would* do what they said. Then they attempted to make sure she learned the lesson.

It wasn't long before one of the upperclassmen arrived to break things up, but by that point one of the goons was nursing a fat lip and black eye while another writhed on the floor after she'd driven her knee into his groin. Surprise had allowed her those victories, but Frieda hadn't escaped unscathed and was hunched over on her knees, blood pouring from her nose, when the fight had been stopped. The upperclassman had hauled her and the goons—Lambert had somehow managed to keep clear of the fight—before the commandant for disciplining. Though officially against the rules, such squabbles were tolerated by the authorities, both as a means of "building character" and allowing youthful tensions to be released. Of course, the upperclassman—Davies, his name was she remembered, a dashing fourteen-year-old she recalled, her cheeks coloring—had thought this a routine disciplinary action. Commandant Pagliarulo knew differently. He'd been fully briefed on her secret and the need to maintain it, though most of his staff hadn't, and the fracas posed something of a quandary.

Neither she nor the goons admitted to what had happened, though the cuts and bruises would've put the lie to any outright denial. She could see the look in the commandant's eyes, wondering how he was going to get out of this without showing signs of favoritism. Her silence and that of her attackers gave him little choice but to punish them all equally; each had been assigned a corridor and ordered to polish it by hand for a week.

To give Lambert his due, though he'd escaped punishment, he and his clique had helped their punished cronies achieve the task, organizing work crews to ensure the corridors were almost as well polished as those served by the cleaning staff. He was charismatic and loyal, key qualities in a leader, and might one day be a good duke if he'd lose the arrogance and self-importance. Meanwhile, Frieda had no such associates to help her—then again, she had no ambition to lead—and had struggled through several late nights and early mornings to get the task done. Some of her classmates had helped, but after someone—Lambert or his chums, no doubt—had urinated in the corridor all but the hardcore had abandoned the doubly unpleasant task.

*That's how you know who your friends are*, she thought as she slid into the classroom and took her seat just as the instructor arrived. All the cadets stood and saluted, a precision move they'd perfected over the last six months. The officer ordered them to be seated and to open their textbooks where they'd left off. Frieda glanced to the next desk, where Madeleine Bonnington, countess of Atematwa and one of those who'd stuck with her all through the punishment, sat. Maddy rolled her eyes, then glanced at the instructor, tapping her chronometer as she did. The petite blonde girl mimed tucking a strand of hair behind her ear—her own was cut boyishly short—and Frieda quickly tucked the errant strand up into her hair. She'd fix it more permanently once this class was done.

Her friend nodded, kicked the chair in front, then feigned innocence. Colin Eastwick, a merchant's son from Hamilton, turned to glower at his tormenter. Maddy and the boy fought constantly, but she regarded both as her friends. Colin had also been one of the few who'd stuck by her. He likewise tapped his watch, causing Frieda to scowl. She glanced across the room to where Allison sat regarding her, a faint smile tugging at the corner of his lips as he saw her harried expression. She feigned a saccharine smile back at him, then allowed her scowl to return as the instructor began to drone.

\* \* \*

"Lambert again?" Colin asked as they grabbed breakfast rolls an hour later, sliding generous portions of cold meats and cheese onto their plates. Princefield fed its students well, but also worked them hard, so there was little chance to gain weight. Colin grabbed a couple of boiled eggs and dropped them onto his plate before

reaching for a pot of yogurt. Madeleine held out her hands and the youth tossed her the first one, then grabbed another. He offered it to Frieda, who shook her head.

“Probably.” Frieda said cautiously as she ladled cereal into a bowl, then added milk. Her stomach rumbled as the smell wafted past her nose. “It’s his style.” Someone had poured cold water over the uniform she’d gotten ready for this morning while she was showering, prompting her to dash around quarters finding appropriate garb for the morning classes. Arriving late or with a less than immaculate uniform was severely punished. That she’d avoided demerits for either probably rankled Lambert, though he’d seemed satisfied to have inconvenienced her.

Seating themselves at the end of a long table, the trio immediately set about their breakfast – they only had twenty minutes before the next class and it was another five hours until lunch. After a month of these rushed breakfasts they’d jokingly come to the conclusion that eating quickly and efficiently—along with sleeping while standing, as needed—was part of the core curriculum, a companion skill to the fine dinner manners and etiquette taught to older students. Frieda took a mouthful of sugary cereal and immediately washed it down with a gulp of tangy orange juice. She spooned bites of the milky mass into her mouth with her left hand as her right assembled a hasty sandwich from the assorted meats and cheeses. That was a skill neither Maddy nor Colin had ever mastered, their few attempts to match Frieda’s ambidexterity in the early weeks of their friendship turning into messy failures. The instructors had marveled at her hand-eye coordination too, claiming it would pay dividends when the classes started using ‘Mech simulators in the coming months.

“Do we strike back, Fred?” Maddy asked around the whole boiled egg she’d just popped into her mouth after stealing it from Colin’s plate. She had bestowed that particular nickname, and had stuck with no matter how many others called her Frieda or Moran. Not that it mattered to Frieda. *One made up name is as good as another.* Maddy blushed faintly as she realized how she appeared with the egg causing her cheeks to bulge and began to chew.

Frieda scoured across the room in search of Lambert, finding him “holding court” at the far side of the room. His cronies laughed at some joke, and Frieda imagined it was his trick on her they found so amusing. “Nah, I’m not going to stoop to his level.” she proclaimed. Pushing the empty cereal bowl away, she bit into

her sandwich, chewing for a moment, a thoughtful expression on her face. "Not yet anyway."

"Why not? The little sod deserves it. Put itching powder in his camo paint or piss on his bed. Col will do it for you, won't you?" She nudged the boy who, mid-way through a gulp of juice, choked, his eyes almost popping out as he struggled to breathe. Maddy thumped him on the back. "You're meant to drink it, not inhale it, damn idiot."

"Do I know you?" Frieda said deadpan. "I used to have a nice, mild-mannered roommate named Madeleine. Are you her evil twin?" That Madeleine, for all her petite frame and angelic appearance, was the most vicious of their little group was well-known, but this beyond the pale, even for her. The blonde swung a half-hearted backhand slap at her taller friend's face, one she easily dodged. They both smiled and returned to their hurried meal.

"Seriously, leave him be. He'll be expecting it now, so let's leave it a while. It'll be more satisfying if he thinks we've forgotten about it." *And god help him if he's still playing tricks when we graduate. On that day, when the secret is blown, he'll really be squirming.* She forced a smile onto her face. "Deal?"

"Deal," the others said in unison.