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FALL FROM GRACE

Chris Hartford

Part Two





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"It's hard. One day you think you know where your life is going, the next fate throws you a curveball. I took it calmly, almost excited by the shift in fortunes and opportunities, but if I had the chance to return to that day, I'd tell myself to run and hide."

—Private Journal

***Troistorrents, Valais Canton
Switzerland, Terra
Terran Hegemony
19 December 2581***

Laughing, the trio slogged their way up the slope from the station, snow crunching underfoot. This far from town, there was no under-road heating, but a manual snow-clearer had gotten the thick cover off. Frieda could've called the car down with the guide wires and autopilot—a system that terrified her aunt Therese—without disturbing the staff, but it was only a few minutes' walk even carrying their skis. The staff at the chalet, its lights illuminating the rapidly darkening fields, knew they were coming—the locator beacons sewn into their suits would've seen to that, and they could expect hot drinks as soon as they arrived back "home."

It'd taken a bit of wrangling to secure the use of her father's chalet and staff, but with the month-long sojourn on Terra as the cadets visited Sandhurst, Westpoint and St-Cyr, Frieda wasn't going to miss out seeing the house where she'd spent a large portion of her youth. Her fellow students, most traveling to mother Terra for the first time, wanted to immerse themselves in the bright lights of London, New York, and Paris. They'd been at St-Cyr on Friday, so many would visit the neighboring palace of Versailles this weekend, but Frieda, who'd visited Terra almost every year since she was a toddler, preferred a taste of "home."

The passes weren't difficult to arrange—she *had* pulled a few strings for that, not that Maddy or Colin knew. They'd have kittens

if they knew the commanding general of the SLDF, General Carlos Dangmar Lee, had personally authorized the vacation, intervening with the school authorities, something she'd have to thank uncle William for at some point—but getting clearance from her own family had been trickier. She'd never been to Troistorrents as "Mistress Frieda" and lived in fear that one or other of the staff would make a slip. There'd already been one major screw-up that she'd, thankfully, been able to brush under the carpet.

"Is that who I think it is with your father, Fred?" Maddy had asked shortly after their arrival, pointing at a holo on the bookcase. "The Captain-General?"

Frieda had frozen at that, her mind racing. That her outward calm had remained was a testament to her thirteen-year-old nerves. "Yeah. Some do on Atreus." Thankfully it was a formal picture, not a casual family shot. "I told you he was a big-shot economist."

"And I thought I was up on all the major merchant families." Colin muttered. "But my dad hasn't had his photo taken with Marion Marik."

Lying to her friends upset Frieda to some extent, but she knew its importance. On the one hand there was security—obscurity was the price for not having a 24/7 bodyguard—and she also wanted to make her way through the academy without trading on the family name and influence. That was more Lambert Allison's style.

Her breath billowed as she drove tired legs onward, crossing what she knew from summer visits to be a stream—she'd fallen in when she was six or seven—but today looked like a little ripple in the ground, and then up the final slope.

As ever, Colin and Madeleine followed behind her, arguing all the way. Something about one of the runs and which of them was the better skier. Their squabbling was the one constant in the relationship between those two—there'd been a fortnight when, for some reason, they'd not argued and it had felt...odd. Sometimes they got on like a house on fire. At others they barely spoke for days on end.

They'd either kill each other or get married.

Assuming they weren't swept up in the war by then. It had been four-and-a-half years since the Captain General had led the SLDF's Seventh Corps into the Magistracy, and despite a string of victories, there was still no end in sight. Another four or five years

and it was likely Maddy, Colin, and herself would find themselves thrown into the meat-grinder. At least the Canopus war was civilized; the First Lord had suspended the Ares Conventions and the fighting in the Taurian Concordat had turned bloody. Marion Marik and Crystalla Centrella had, however, clung to the old rules of warfare, sparing both sides from atrocities and minimizing collateral damage. *If any mass invasion could be said to be civilized.*

The trio crested the last slope and rounded the corner before the chalet. The estate's four-by-four was in the short drive, but another vehicle stood there too. A vehicle which, though unmarked, bore characteristics she was only too familiar with: anti-puncture tires, reinforced windows and, she assumed from the depth of the tracks it had left, substantial armoring. She heard the low hum of its idling engine.

Frieda froze.

Her companions took several more steps before realizing she was no longer with them, then turned and marched back to her. "Come on, only a few more steps, then hot chocolate," Maddy said.

"Or mulled wine," Colin added, more hopefully than expectantly.

Frieda allowed herself to be pulled down the short, narrow path that led to the kitchen door, her stomach suddenly roiling. Ordinarily they'd use the main doors up by the drive, but soaking wet and carrying skis the kitchen, with its access to the laundry room and the guest quarters in the converted barn, was the better option. It would be warm too, as the oven in the old smoking room was almost never allowed to go out while the house was occupied.

Dropping the skis into the racks and unclipping boots, they stripped off their outer vestments, Frieda working her too-long limbs free of the insulated suit and breathing a sigh of relief. Her sudden growth spurt—she now towered over the diminutive Madeleine by a good twenty centimeters—meant she'd outgrown her old clothes and boots, and these were new for this trip. She draped a towel round her neck and rubbed her damp hair. As she did, the housekeeper, grey-haired and dressed immaculately as ever, appeared at the doorway to the laundry room. "You have guests, miss."

"So I saw, Eloise, thank you."

The old woman nodded. "They're in the lounge."

Still working on her hair, Frieda padded into the kitchen in just her socks, drawing a frown from the housekeeper, then climbed the wooden staircase to the main level of the house. Her long limbs powered her up the stairs, her movements graceful and efficient despite her coltish appearance. There was a squeal, then a grunt behind her as Colin and Madeleine fought over who should be the first up the stairs.

Taking a deep breath, she stepped across the hall into the lounge. *Better get this over with.*

Across the room, a dark-haired figure stood in front of the log fire, warming himself near the open flame. Movement in the corner of her eye startled Frieda, and she realized she almost walked straight past a tall, slender, raven-haired woman standing by the door.

"Commandant Pagliarulo, to what do I owe this pleasure?"

There was the rush of footsteps behind her, and both Maddy and Colin burst into the room, quickly saluting the officer. Frieda realized she'd not done so. *Oh well, if he's going to bust me...*

"Your Grace," his voice was icy, though there was a slight inclining of the head.

"I'm sorry Commandant," Maddy muttered. "I'm only lady, not a 'grace.' That's my father." She went pale. "Is he okay?"

Pagliarulo turned to regard her. "He is fine, Miss Bonnington."

"Then..." her voice trailed off and her eyes swiveled to Frieda. "Fred?"

"Damn it," Frieda muttered. "They didn't know."

"My apologies, Your Grace. I presumed they did and this isn't a time when I can call you 'Cadet Moran.' Your aunt Therese told me where to find you."

"Well, if you're going to bust me for calling in favors you'd best—"

"No 'busting', Your Grace. News from the embassy that I had to convey to you as your commanding officer."

Frieda felt her legs turn to jelly and reached for the mantelpiece to steady herself. "Dad? Grams?"

"Your parents and grandparents are fine, though news of your great-grandmother is a little...tardy. It's your uncle David. He was killed in an automobile accident three days ago."

Frieda felt her knees go and slid to the parquetry floor, one hand still clutching the mantle. Madeleine dashed over. "Fred? Are you okay? I didn't realize you were that close. You've never mentioned this uncle before."

"We weren't." Frieda managed in a hoarse whisper, her head spinning with the implications.

"There are...complications, Miss Bonnington, Master Eastwick."

"Tell them," Frieda managed to say, though her voice seemed a million miles away.

The commandant inclined his head toward her, "As you wish, Your Grace."

"What is this 'Your Grace' guff?" Colin asked, hooking one arm under Frieda's shoulders and helping her to stand.

Pagliarulo held up one hand. "Your friend here is her father's oldest child, and with his brother's death he is now his father's heir, who is in turn *his* mother's heir. As such, Her Grace stands to inherit her great-grandmother's title one day."

"So you'll be a real noble?" Madeleine stated, hugging Frieda. "Which world? Is it near Atematwa? We could be neighbors!"

"After a fashion." Fred said, her voice barely audible.

"Stop teasing," the diminutive blonde cajoled. "Put me out of misery. Which world?"

"Atreus."

Madeleine swore. Loudly. She looked like she wanted to bolt, but remained at her friend's side. "But that means..."

"I don't get it." Colin's voice was quizzical. "I thought Atreus was the holding of..." his voice tailed off and his eyes widened. "Oh hell."

"I'm sorry. I wanted to tell you but..." Frieda fought back the urge to cry.

BATTLECORPS

Immediately Colin stepped forward and wrapped her in a hug, followed a moment later by Madeleine. "Shush, shush. You're still the same person. 'What's in a name? A tulip by any other name would smell as sweet.'" He misquoted. Then realizing what he was doing he frowned. "Umm. A horde of elite assassins aren't about to murder me for *lèse majesté*, are they?"

He got a punch in the ribs in return, but both Madeleine and Frieda laughed. "Rose, you idiot. 'A rose by any other name.' And I'm sure Fred won't have you executed. Yet."

"I have to point out that this is classified information and, as cadet-officers of the FWLM, both of you, Miss Bonnington and Master Eastwick, will be expected to hold your tongues. You can do that, I presume? The Duchess will continue to be 'Frieda Moran' at the academy." They nodded. "Good, now Duchess, there are security protocols that need to be observed. Protocols we've been a little lax on to date. This—" he gestured to the young woman, who made a deep bow toward Frieda, "—is agent Evangeline Sukhanov. She'll be your close-protection officer."

Frieda smiled at the slender woman, who overtopped her by only a handful of centimeters, despite probably ten years difference in their ages. "Pleased to meet you, Evangeline. For a moment there, I thought I was going to be lumbered with a full protection detail."

A weak smile tugged at Sukhanov's thin lips. "You are, Duchess." Her surprisingly soft voice carried a note of amusement. "There'll be a thirty-man backup team."

Frieda blanched. "Well that'll be a challenge to hide."

"I'll be your principal agent. The others will remain in the background unless there's an incident."

"By incident you mean..."

"The usual. Kidnapping. Assassination attempt." She shrugged and Colin's eyes widened.

"Which is how we're introducing agent Sukhanov at the school, a protection agent because of threats received by your father." He turned his eyes on the trio. "Provided you can keep the secret, there's no reason why miss...Moran...shouldn't continue to hide her identity for the rest of her sojourn."

"Aye Commandant." They saluted.



“And Miss Moran?”

“Yes Commandant?”

“I’ll let you off regarding the demerits for not saluting a superior officer. This time.”

The logo for BattleCorps, featuring the word in a stylized, blocky font with a metallic or gold finish. The letters are partially cut off on the left side of the page.
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“Three may keep a secret if two of them are dead.’ It never came to that, thankfully, but I’m amazed things held up as long as they did. There were times over the years I wanted to beat someone round the head with it, but I always resisted, to a point.”

—Private Journal

Princefield**Oriente****Duchy of Oriente, Free Worlds League****14 June 2584**

Frieda felt rather than heard or saw Evangeline slip into position on her shoulder as she strode from the examination hall. Evie was like that; a ghost she often forgot was there. Sometimes minder, most often just a “big sister” to chat with and swap tales. She grinned. *Older sister*, she corrected. She remembered when the dark-haired woman had scowled down at her when she’d broken one of the plethora of security rules that governed her life. Somehow the agent still managed to impose her will on her charge, despite now having to peer up at Frieda.

“Happy?” The agent asked softly as they crossed the marble hall and entered the bright sunlight of the quadrangle. A few other cadets lounged on the grass, chatting or reading, but it was quiet compared to the usual daytime hubbub.

Frieda grunted and tugged on the long braid that hung over her left shoulder. “Done, at least,” she said wearily. Somehow the commandant had conspired to add more subjects to her study program: she was doing fifteen academic subjects rather than the usual nine, all on top of the physical training regimen and piloting program. She spent most of her existence in a state of exhaustion.

“You, least of all, cannot afford to slack off,” Pagliarulo had stated as if in explanation for the workload. History. Languages. Political

studies. Languages. Psychology. Subjects inextricably linked to high-level command and diplomacy. A number of high-flyers had been singled out for leadership-related courses in addition to their Mechwarrior and tactical combat training, but none were quite this...thorough.

Frieda stifled a yawn as she followed the path round the quad and ducked through the arch that led to Albert Hall, her residential block. She barely recalled the man for whom it was named—Albert Marik, the man who'd taken the Free Worlds into the Star League —little more than an infant's recollection, but the approach to the halls, with the larger than life-size marble statue of him just before the main doors, always tugged at her heartstrings. Kissing the fingers of her right hand, she touched the statue as she passed, sweeping into the lower foyer, sumptuously decorated with paintings and statues of the League's military heroes, and ascending the main staircase to the upper levels.

Reaching the first landing, she turned into a small side corridor, much less impressive than the public areas. Chatter came from side-rooms as she strode down the passageway, nodding to several people as she passed, a few still in their cadet-whites but others in civilian garb or, in a few cases, draped in towels and robes as they strode back from the communal showers. Almost at the end of the corridor, she knocked once on a door then pushed it open. Evie peeled away, heading into the room opposite she shared with Maddy's bodyguard. With its permanently open door, allowing the security to maintain a constant watch on the entrance to their charges' suite, the room had been nicknamed 'spook central' by the other cadets.

Madeleine glanced in her dressing table mirror as Frieda entered, her eyes tracking her tall friend as crossed the room and flopped down on her bed. She didn't move though, rather she continued to adjust the neckline of her outfit. It was daring, per the current trend, as was her skirt, cut several inches above the knee. "At last. Now summer break can properly begin!" She'd finished her exams three days ago and was looking forward to the six-week vacation the junior students were allowed before beginning their senior studies in September. "Come on, get ready. We're going to Impact." The bar was a favorite among the cadets, even though at sixteen the members of their class were too young to drink. Officially. The music and dancing were enough for most.

"I think I'll pass," Frieda said from her recumbent position on the bed, one thin arm draped across her eyes. "I think I need to go and work out some kinks first. I might join you later."

Maddy snorted but continued to look over her shoulder at Frieda via the mirror as she applied lipstick. "Come on Fred, don't be a misery. You'll miss all the fun and can, err, work off your excess energies later." She paused. "Davies will be there," she said, her voice a sultry purr.

Frieda blew a raspberry and gave her roommate a level stare beneath her arm. Madeleine's eyebrows rose quizzically and, for the first time since her roommate's arrival, she turned to face her friend directly.

"He's a little too...attentive." Frieda murmured in response. She mimed wandering hands.

Madeleine rolled her eyes and chuckled. "And you expected..."

In a single, smooth motion, Frieda launched a pillow at her friend's head. Maddy ducked, laughing.

"You do need to lighten up, Fred. Study and training is all well and good, but you need to relate to people too. You need to buy yourself some dresses rather than wandering around in uniform or gym-kit all the time. You don't have to live up to your family every minute."

Frieda shot a warning look at the door. "I've not worn a dress since my Confirmation, and I relate to people just fine." She glared at the petite blonde who'd filled out considerably over the last few years, now sporting generous curves while Frieda had just gotten taller. She wasn't as skinny as she used to be—four years of extensive physical training had seen to that—but her physique remained boyish. "Professionally."

"If you say so." A smile still tugged at the corner of Maddy's mouth as she reached for her purse and took a step toward the door. "You know where we'll be."

"I *may* see you there," Frieda countered, grudgingly, but I'll probably be in the sim-tanks until nine. After Tuesday night..." She allowed her voice to trail off, and Maddy, for once, had the decency to blush.

* * *

Cold air washed over Frieda's skin as she un-dogged the hatch to the simulator tank. The new pods had been designed in the Terran Hegemony, and were a cut above those the school had used previously. When they'd "played" in them at St-Cyr, the reality of the simulations had been overwhelming—most of the students had had limited field experience in a 'Mech – and the self-contained units, situated on gimbals and moved by myomer and hydraulic systems recreated the gait of the bipedal war machines perfectly, as well as the impact of weapons fire, both giving and receiving. That wasn't revolutionary—vehicle simulators going back five-hundred years included such features—but the addition of heater units in the pods to recreate the heat dumped into the cockpit by maneuvers and weapon fire was, adding a whole new level of realism.

She unplugged her neurohelmet and cooling vest from the connectors on the command couch's arm, then hit the harness release. Swinging her legs around, she grasped the pod frame and levered herself up and out. On the gantry, she pulled off her neurohelmet and savored the fresh air, aware of acrid tang of sweat in the pod. Sweat matted her hair to her skull and against the nape of her neck. Many female students wore their hair short to facilitate a better contact with the helmet's sensors, but Frieda refused to do so, her hair the one vanity she cultivated.

Looking up at the gallery, she waved at Evie, who was chatting to the operations technician, presumably discussing her charge's performance in the simulator run. Grabbing the waiting towel and sachet of juice, she strode toward the locker room. It hadn't been a fair fight, she thought as she sipped the isotonic drink—her *Griffin* against a lance of 'bandit' 'Mechs. Officially it was just red team and blue team, but she recognized the tactics, formations and battleground: This was Canopus, a world her grandfather and great-grandmother had captured two months earlier. For all the talk that the war was 'nearly done' they were already training the next generation to continue it.

Punching in her locker's access code, she slid the neurohelmet into its cradle. Although only intended for use in the sims, the helmets electronics, designed to allow the wearer's balance to complement a 'Mech's gyros, were as delicate as the real ones. gingerly, she peeled off the cooling vest—it adhered to her skin in several places—and hung it alongside the helmet. Reaching deeper into the locker, she grabbed her shampoo.

Crossing to the shower cubicles, Frieda turned on the spray and adjusted the temperature to suit. She placed the shampoo bottle

in the holder, then draped her towel over the glass wall surrounding the cubicle. Grasping her t-shirt with both hands, she pulled it over her head, swearing as it tangled in her long hair that still hung free down her back. She wriggled her arms, working one elbow free and maneuvering the other for better leverage.

"For a lanky bitch, you're fit."

Frieda froze. The voice was unmistakable, Lambert Allison, and his tone made it clear that 'fit' was the colloquial usage, not recognition of her hours in the gym. What the hell was he doing here? Surely he should be at Impact with the other social butterflies of his set. A surge of anger gave Frieda the impetus she needed and the t-shirt came free of her hair. Modesty wasn't an issue here—in a unisex class there wasn't much they hadn't seen of each other over the last four years—but instinctively she clutched the flimsy, sweat-sodden garment to her chest.

"Sod off Lambert." Her voice was icy. "Go and mingle with your own kind, or have the sewer-rats decided they don't want to know you any more?"

"Very funny, Moran." She smelled alcohol on his breath. That explained things: He had been at the bar. Had Maddy let slip where she was? "Sometimes you proles get too full of yourselves, all high and mighty and indignant at the inherent unfairness of the universe. Face it girl, you and yours need to be nice to your betters. You're being all friendly with Bonnington, but to really get ahead you need to spread your attentions around more." He leered at her and took a step forward.

Instinctively, she backed away, halting when her heel touched the shower basin. "You're a pig, Allison."

"Don't get all coy on me, Moran. You know you—"

"I'd step back right this second if I were you, Master Allison." Evangeline glared at the youth who stared daggers back at her.

"Oh please, like some merchant's guard is going to tell me what to do." He stepped forward and pushed at Evie's left shoulder.

Evangeline grasped Lambert's lapels even as he shoved her, suddenly twisting and pulling the boy against her right hip. He looked bemused for a moment, as if wondering what this body contact meant, then his expression turned to shock as Evie continued her turn and leveraged his body up and over. He somersaulted and landed on his back on the hard floor, breath driven from his

lungs and one wrist still gripped by Evangeline, which she suddenly twisted to a painful angle. Frieda recognized the *Taoitoshi*, the body drop throw, where Lambert's weight advantage over the slight bodyguard had been turned into a liability.

"Bitch," he gasped as soon as he'd sucked in a lungful of air. Evie released him and stepped back, but Frieda recognized the wariness in her bodyguard's stance.

"Go home and sleep it off." Evie's soft voice had an uncharacteristically hard edge. "Or shall I call in the MPs?"

Climbing to his feet, Lambert glared back at her, rubbing his wrist. He shifted his gaze to Frieda. "You're a coward, Moran. This isn't over. Unlike you, I don't need to hide behind guards."

"No, you just hide behind your father's name."

The youth stumbled toward the door, then turned. "You'll regret this," he snarled. "You need to learn who you're messing with." He stormed out.

"So do you," Frieda whispered softly to his retreating back.

The logo for BattleCorps, featuring the word 'BATTLECORPS' in large, gold-colored, block letters. The letters are partially cut off on the left side of the page. To the right of the logo, there is a vertical column of smaller, faint text and a small illustration of a character in a suit of armor.

~5~

"I never took that much pleasure in humiliating people—it's usually counter-productive. For some people, however, I made exceptions."

- Private Journal

Princefield

Oriente

Duchy of Oriente, Free Worlds League

11 May 2586

The slide mechanism on the compact assault rifle chattered as Frieda leaned around the wrecked truck and fired a volley up the slope at the enemy positions. She fought the barrel's efforts to rise, the bulky sound suppressor that slowed the bullets to sub-sonic speed doing little to counter the weapon's recoil.

Simulated recoil, simulated bullets, and simulated silencers. For all their insistence on teaching the realities of warfare, Princefield didn't want to actually kill off their students, no matter that some of the instructors probably wanted to by now. It was all smoke and mirrors, laser beams mounted atop the barrels and sensors on weapons and body armor to record hits. The exoskeletons built into their combat suits would freeze up when hit, simulating impairment and death. Medical corpsmen could unfreeze the suits too as they 'treated' the fallen, but most would remain immobilized until the instructors wiped the damage stats at the end of the battle.

She ducked back and pulled up the tactical map on her data-monocle, one of the perks of being the Red Commander. Things weren't going according to plan, and the Blues were staging a bitter counter-attack. Her sub-commanders—Colin Eastwick and Arisa Muthmucaru, a dour Regulan—were hard pressed, but had held the Blues back from the Red base and flag so far.

Ordinarily, that's where Frieda would've remained, coordinating the team's efforts, but desperate times called for desperate measures. Normally she wouldn't be concerned about losing—she'd done it enough times over the six years at the academy, though her win-loss ratio was much more favorable than most of the other cadets—but there was no way she wanted this Blue commander to get the best of her, particularly so close to graduation.

Lambert Allison had given her his usual shit-eating grin when the officer roles had been assigned, miming a fighter falling and exploding with his left hand. 'Crash and burn' was the usual meaning, one she had no intention of living up to. To give him his due, Lambert was no slouch. Despite his arrogance, he was good at what he did and would be a creditable officer if he ever got over himself. Okay, it was possibly a little late for that as they'd be assigned to line units within a few months, which meant this would probably be her last chance to dent his confidence.

Frieda signaled her accompanying troopers to head right and flank the enemy position. They were bait, she admitted to herself, a lure to try and draw the Blue guards out of position. Would Lambert fall for it? Given the pressure on Eastwick and Muthmucaru, there couldn't be that many troops guarding the Blue command post and they'd no doubt assume the four man detachment represented entire threat arrayed against them.

Moving across the debris-strewn battlefield, the troops dashed from cover to cover, exchanging short bursts of fire with the defenders. Satisfied they would make it to their assigned position, Frieda and her sole escort circled the opposite way around the target. Two clicks on the radio signaled the troops were in position and she acknowledged with a single click. Reaching her own jump-off position, Frieda checked the map one last time, then thumbed her radio and issued the awaited one-word command: "Mark." Colin and Arisa would fall back to the Red command post, turning it into a redoubt, while the half-squad would launch their feint on the enemy HQ. She counted slowly, giving all three groups time to carry out their tasks and for reports to filter back to Lambert. She needed him to be jubilant. Needed him to be confident of victory and thinking he'd won the skirmish.

Reaching sixty, she tapped her escort's shoulder and motioned 'forward' with hand signals. Maddy grinned back and acknowledged. They quickly crossed the forty meters in short order, zig-zagging around obstacles as they ran. Frieda kept her pace in line with that of her shorter associate, and they both reached the

improvised barrier around the base at the same time. Maddy detached a grenade from her webbing and Frieda did likewise. They pulled the pins, released the triggers and counted to two before lofting the small devices over the fence. There was a thump and a puff off smoke from the other side of the barrier, followed by swearing. Grabbing handholds, they vaulted up and over.

Two blue troopers were down, their suits frozen by the simulated explosives, and a scant two meters away a third was struggling because of his 'wounds.' Even if she hadn't had his face etched on her consciousness, his monocle would've identified him: Lambert.

The blue commander wasn't carrying a rifle, but he'd drawn his sidearm. He fired and Maddy groaned as her suit froze and she pitched forward. The gun tracked toward Frieda as she brought her own weapon in line and fired. Sensor lights flashed on his arm as the 'shots' raked him, but Lambert didn't fall. He cursed as his own shot went wide, his suit's arm locking up, then grunted as Frieda's flat-palmed strike caught him on the sternum. The suit registered the physical blow and froze. For a moment, Frieda thought Lambert might retain his footing, then smiled inwardly as he toppled over onto his face. Gun still leveled at him, she leaned over and rolled him onto his back. Blood streamed down his face from where his nose had hit the ground and he glared daggers at her. She hit the unfreeze override on his suit, grabbing his webbing and pulling his torso upright as she did that that he wouldn't choke.

"Medic," she yelled, triggering the casualty beacon so it would be clear this wasn't part of the exercise. Satisfied that she'd done all she could, Frieda leaned closer to her bloodied rival.

"Look," she whispered. "No guards."

* * *

Frieda pulled at the cuffs of her dress uniform, adjusting them for what seemed like the millionth time. She and the other cadets milled about while awaiting the summons to the award ceremony. Each of them would receive their diplomas today, as well as their initial assignments in the FWLM, called up to the stage to shake the commandant's hands and those of the visiting dignitaries. That was what made her nervous. One was the Duke of Oriente, Byron Allison, a regular attendee at such ceremonies. Lambert's grandfather. The other was the heir-apparent to the Free Worlds itself, Ian Marik. That presence set her heart aflutter.

"What's taking them?" she muttered, and Colin ceased his own nervous pacing to pat her on the shoulder.

"I don't think you've got much to worry about," he grinned nervously. "I just hope you get top-of-class. That'll put Allison in his place, even with his grandpa here." She glanced over at Lambert Allison, who seemed strangely devoid of his usual arrogance. The bruises he'd suffered in the skirmish a week ago had faded, but the injury to his pride remained.

One of the instructors appeared at the entrance to the hall. "Take your seats, ladies and gentlemen." They filed into the hall and seated themselves by class and team. Glancing up at the gallery, she caught sight of her father, mother and—she counted them one by one—all five of her brothers. Her heart skipped a beat. *Nope, no pressure, Col.*

After a few minutes that seemed like an eternity, Commandant Pagliarulo entered, chatting to his VIP guests as he did, all three resplendent in dress whites bearing numerous decorations. The two guests wore the stars of SLDF generals in addition to their FWLM rank insignia, and though she couldn't see it from the floor of the hall, but Frieda knew both Ian Marik and Duke Byron Allison bore campaign ribbons from the Canopus Campaign still being prosecuted by Ian's mother, Marion Marik. Parliament had finally recalled Ian from Canopus late last year after the death of his uncle, Reginald, on New Vandenburg during the Taurian Campaign. The Free Worlds government, long wary of the participation of the Captain General, both her siblings, and her only son in the Reunification War, had acted. Shannon Marik remained with the SLDF First Corps in the Taurian Concordat while her nephew Ian oversaw the government.

As if a single mind, the assembled students rose and saluted, a crisp and precise move. The three figures on the dais returned the gesture, then the two wearing general's pips sat. Pagliarulo remained standing and walked behind a frosted glass lectern. He glanced down at the assembled students, then up at the galleries, and finally at the gaggle of journalists assembled at the back of the hall.

"Ladies and gentlemen, members of the League press corps, cadets." He inclined his head to each in turn. "I bid you welcome to the graduation ceremony for the class of eighty-six." A small cheer rose from the assembled students, but quickly faded.

For several minutes he extolled the virtues expected of Princefield graduates and the traditions they epitomized, one moment lec-

turing, the next bringing matters back to earth with a humorous anecdote. "But most of you are probably less concerned with tradition and expectations than you are with the little bits of paper over there on the table." He smiled gestured to where the rolled diplomas rested, each bound with a purple ribbon. "For those of you who don't know, Princefield awards three levels of diploma: *Cum Laude*, *Summa Cum Laude* and *Magna Cum Laude*. Honors, greater honors and greatest honors. I shall announce the first group in alphabetical order while Duke Allison shall announce both recipients of the *Summa Cum Laude* and Lord Ian the single *Magna Cum Laude*. When your name is read, please come up and receive your diploma."

He paused for a moment. "Let's begin. Adkinson, Richard." A blonde haired youth rose on the far side of the hall, marched to the stage and saluted the visitors and the commandant. Pagliarulo handed him the diploma and shook his hand, followed by Byron Allison and Ian Marik. "Arbuthnot, Estelle."

Frieda glanced at Maddy, who looked back, eyebrows raised. So Allison was in line for a higher. She shouldn't be surprised, really. Which one though?

A steady stream of cadets marched to the stage, including Colin and Madeleine, but her own name wasn't called. The butterflies in her stomach turned into elephants as the pile of diplomas dwindled. Finally, Pagliarulo yielded the podium to the duke and moved to stand alongside Ian Marik.

"I'm honored to be here today to award this first group of higher-honor awards for the Princefield class of 2586. The recipients of these awards have excelled during their time here, both in the classroom and on the battlefield, and will have their choice of assignments in after being commissioned into the FWLM." He smiled then lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "And if the FWLM reneges on that promise, they can have a job with my Ducal Guard." The cadets laughed.

"The first *Summa Cum Laude* graduate of the class of eighty-six is..." He picked up one of the three remaining documents and read the name on the ribbon. "Aaronofsky, Clarissa." A studious redhead rose as her fellow students applauded. Frieda barely noticed—she was too busy staring at Lambert Allison whose cold eyes glared back at her. Which of them would be next?

Duke Allison reached for the other roll. "And the second and final *Summa Cum Laude* graduate is..." He grin broke out on his face.

The elephants in Frieda's stomach started tap-dancing. "Allison, Lambert."

The boy rose and strode toward the dais. As he ascended the short flight of stairs, he looked back at Frieda. A smile was plastered across his face, but she knew it for what it was and recognized the hate in his eyes. Lambert shook his grandfather's hand and they exchanged a few words before he moved on to shake the Commandant's and Lord Ian's hands. As the younger Allison descended the stage to be clapped on the back by his friends, the older one resumed his place and Ian Marik took center stage.

"The award of Magna Cum Laude is made to the Princefield student who epitomizes the school's values and who has excelled at their academic and physical studies. They demonstrate not only the physical and mental strength expected of graduates, but also a strength of spirit. The recipient of this award will be given their choice of assignment in the FWLM or, with the kind permission of the commanding general, the Star League Defense Force." Murmuring broke out among the cadets. That was a new development. No Princefield graduate had gone straight to the SLDF before.

Ian reached for the remaining scroll, then frowned. "Hmm. There appears to be a problem here." He turned to his associates as the students began to whisper among themselves. "Commandant, would you happen to have a pen?" Pagliarulo reached inside his jacket and handed over an ornate fountain pen. *Damn you, you're doing this deliberately.* The Marik heir smiled down at his handiwork, then turned to the audience, brandishing the document.

"My apologies, the name here was in error." The cadets' murmuring intensified. "The administrators had written Moran, Frieda, but they spelt it incorrectly. You see, it's supposed to be M-A-R-I-K, R-H-E-A-N." He enunciated every letter carefully. "If you'd care to come and claim your diploma, granddaughter." She rose, the last vestiges of Frieda Moran evaporating as Rhean Marik took deliberate steps toward the stage. As she did, she couldn't help but glance over at a visibly shaken Lambert Allison. His eyes were wide with shock, and that alone was worth all the stress and grief.