



BATTLECORPS

FALL FROM GRACE

Chris Hartford

Part Three



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"Grandpa Albert bribed the Confederation into joining the Star League. Perhaps it wasn't the best footing to begin an era of peace and cooperation, but for the most part it worked. The problem was some people—on both sides—thought the deal over Andurien was part of some elaborate shell game, that no one would hand over such a hotly contested set of worlds even to win a long-lasting peace. Every denial from Sian and Atreus seemed to reinforce their delusions that only they knew the truth. Unfortunately the Freebooter's War was only the most visible aspect of this struggle."

—Private Journal

Weston

Wisconsin

Duchy of Andurien, Free Worlds League

19 March 2588

"Damn it!" Rhean swore as the impact threw her to one side, the seat restraints digging into her flesh. Her head whipped sideways as well, but the padded collar stopped it before the encumbering headgear could whiplash her neck. "Where the hell did that come from?"

Catching a movement in her peripheral vision, she kicked the pedals hard. The feet of her lumbering *Guillotine* turned slowly to the right in response to her foot pressure, but the waist servos reacted more quickly to her wrist twist on the left-hand joystick. Even as that brought the torso in line with the movement—an infantry squad she saw, one figure desperately attempting to reload the man-pack rocket launcher held by another—she used the right joystick to drop the targeting cursor onto the cluster of figures. She pulled the main trigger and parallel beams lashed out from the twin Medium Lasers mounted in the 'Mech's right arm. She grimaced as charred bodies flew away from the impact point.


"Sheng has the right flank." someone replied on the FWLM channel, rather than the Star League one she'd used in her broadcast. Rhean toggled the frequency shift.

"He's supposed to have the right flank." She growled. "But he's nowhere to be seen and a bunch of 'Booters just took a potshot at me." Shepperton's Freebooters, rogue Capellan troops who'd decided to continue the age-old war against the Duchy of Andurien. That Albert Marik had gifted most of the contended district to the Confederation as part of the incentives for the Liaos to join the Star League was conveniently forgotten. The Freebooters claimed Andurien would be handed back after a plebiscite on Shiro III had shown overwhelming support for such a move. They'd refused to heed the Chancellor's calls to stand down for four years now, and with Marion Mark threatening to abandon the mop-up operations in Canopus—taking the war to Sian if that was what was needed to stop the attacks on the Free Worlds—the Star League had intervened. The Slicks, the Star League Intelligence Corps, had passed intercepts to the Capellan intelligence agency, the Maskirovka, who confirmed the raiders were operating from Wisconsin, a newly settled world between the remains of the Duchy of Andurien and the Principality of Regulus. Sian announced that forces of the Capellan Confederation Armed Forces would "deal" with the rebels, but Ian Marik refused to sanction a CCAF operation on League soil. Instead, it would be a joint operation, FWLM and CCAF working alongside each other. The First Free Worlds Guards, including newly commissioned lieutenant Rhean Marik, would fight alongside Sheng's Chasseurs. That was the idea, at least.

"Well, Intel said there was no one there and this'd be a clean sweep through the complex."

Rhean snorted. "That's spooks for you." She toggled back to the command frequency, realigned her 'Mech, and continued the advance through the industrial complex to the rendezvous point. The rest of her lance were already there, the other three 'Mechs painted the same deep purple as her *Guillotine*. Ordinarily they'd have opted for something a little more like camouflage, but with forces from two militaries on site and no SLDF command structure, despite the presence of the intelligence agents, they wanted to be damn sure friend-and-foe identification wasn't going to be a problem.

"Okay, let's go. Tactical advance to point Epsilon." That was the western edge of the industrial complex, en-route to the main settlement. "Connor, point, Sebastian, rearguard."



Alain Connor's *Hunchback* lumbered forward, seeming to waddle under the weight of its huge, shoulder-mounted cannon. Rhean advanced the throttle of her own *Guillotine*, following thirty meters behind the lighter 'Mech, Michelle Chen's *Thunderbolt* falling into stride alongside her. Joachim Sebastian in his *Griffin* held his ground at the rendezvous point for several moments, his head-like sensor assembly sweeping back and forth on the lookout for hostile troops then, seven-ton PPC cradled in both hands like an infantryman with a rifle, he too began to cautiously follow the team.

"Too much junk to get a clear mag-rez," Connor reported. Magnetic resistivity sensors were often key to spotting enemy vehicles on the modern battlefield where a combination of ground clutter and stealth systems made radar and its ilk largely ineffective. Unfortunately, mag-rez couldn't tell the difference between the iron girders of a crane and the ferro-titanium skeleton of a 'Mech. Connor's display would be a sea of red contacts.

"Keep your eyes open." She didn't need to say it, they knew the drill, but Rhean felt like she had to say *something*. "We're not out of the woods ye—"

The front of the warehouse Connor was passing exploded, showering him with debris before engulfing him in an expanding fireball. The heavy machine staggered, but didn't fall. "Bastards," he yelled, swinging his arms toward the shattered ruins of the building and playing his twin medium lasers across the wreckage. "I'm a little toasty, but otherwise fine." He reported in response to Rhean's barked query. "Probably agrochemicals, rigged with a proximity fuse."

Or a command-detonated device, in which case they're watching us.

As if in response to her thought, a hail of machinegun fire lanced out from her left, ineffectually peppering the war machines. The missiles and large-caliber shells that followed were certainly not ineffectual.

A *Lancelot* rose through the roof of one warehouse, its dual large-bore lasers and single Particle Projection Cannon stabbing into the FWLM 'Mechs. Sebastian's *Griffin* bore the brunt of the assault and rocked back under the fusillade. He returned fire, lighting coruscating across the chest of the *Lancelot*, then triggered his jets, leaping up and over the heavier machine. It tracked him, firing as he flew, and armor shards flew off the fifty-five ton 'Mech. The *Griffin* wobbled in flight but Sebastian maintained control,

twisting the machine as he brought it in for a heavy landing. Dust flew as it hit the ground and even Rhean felt her machine struggle for balance. The *Lancelot* attempted to turn, but hampered by the ruins, it was too slow. Sebastian fired his PPC into its weak back. The *Lancelot* convulsed as its innards were shredded, then made one last valiant attempt to stand. The *Griffin* fired again, and his target seemed to go rigid then toppled forward, its power plant crippled. The *Griffin* ducked behind cover, then when it became clear the 'dead' machine wasn't going to suffer a catastrophic ammunition explosion, stood up once more and fired into the flank of an enemy *Crusader*.

That machine, accompanied by a lighter *Dervish*, hammered at Rhean's machine as if sensing that was the commander's 'Mech. Rhean returned fire, giving as she got but backing away slowly to open the range to her opponents. Though they'd gain an advantage with the maneuver too – both needed time for their missile guidance systems to direct the small projectiles to their targets – the *Guillotine* didn't suffer such restrictions. To her, the maneuver was purely tactical. Both opponents sported Short-Range Missile launchers and lasers as well as the LRMs, but they were, to all intents, handicapped in close-quarters combat.

With the rangefinder reading ninety meters, Rhean leveled both arms at the *Dervish*. Her machine outweighed it by fifteen tons, but that was no reason for overconfidence. She fired both weapons, a wave of heat washing over the cockpit as three lasers burned into the target. The Freebooter 'Mech staggered back, its chest glacis in tatters, but remained upright. Rhean pulled the secondary trigger and missiles and more laser beams stabbed out at the damaged machine. "Yes!" she yelled as she saw the distinctive puff of black smoke as part of the artificial musculature was consumed. Still it remained upright a testament to the pilots skill. Clearly struggling – the pilot was probably fighting a damaged gyroscope – it raised one arm toward Rhean in a gesture of defiance, the covers of its missile tubes popping open.

The shells from Connor's *Hunchback* decapitated the blocky machine. Almost in slow motion, it tipped over onto its back and lay still, smoking.

Despite Chen's distraction, the *Crusader* launched volley after volley at Rhean. Again, she brought her weapons into line with the enemy but refrained from pulling the trigger. She needed to allow her 'Mech to cool a little, and she could weather the storm for a few more seconds, particularly with Connor and Chen there

to apply pressure. Centered on its chest, her crosshairs blinked readiness but rather than firing them into the torso, home to the vital sensors and power plant, but also the most heavily armored part of the machine, she allowed the crosshairs to drop. Centering on the joint between its bulky shin armor and the thigh plating, Rhean fired and at ninety meters found it almost impossible to miss. Laser-fire burned into the weak knee joint, which immediately froze. The *Crusader*, caught in the act of backing away, stumbled and nearly fell, only remaining upright when the pilot grabbed at the side of a warehouse that bowed ominously under the weight. She aimed at the other knee then, on impulse, triggered a small round stud on her control stick.

"Freebooter, surrender and place yourself in the custody of the Free Worlds League. Continue to fight and you will be destroyed. You have ten seconds ... mark."

The armor panels of her own 'Mech popped as they cooled, a familiar sound to MechWarriors but the only one that permeated her cockpit above the distant thrum of the *Guillotine's* fusion power plant. Her lancemates held their fire too, wondering if the enemy pilot would choose to fight to the last or acknowledge he was outnumbered four-to-one.

The radio cracked. "I will be held by the Free Worlds, not the Capellan Confederation?"

"Yes, you have my word."

The only answer was a sudden gust of steam from the *Crusader's* radiators, then the machine sagged to the ground and lay still. Keeping her weapons in line with the downed machine, Rhean reached up and toggled a viewscreen overlay. Judging by his electronic emissions, the Freebooter had shutdown his fusion reactor. He wasn't going anywhere.

"Connor, Chen. Secure the prisoners and check the other two." There was little chance the *Dervish* pilot was still alive, but the Rifleman's one might well be. Two more for the stockade at Caulfield Island on Atreus.

She scanned her systems and checked her armor and weapon status. Listening to Sebastian calling in an infantry squad to take custody of the captives, Rhean mused on the *Crusader* pilot's words. Was he that fearful of being repatriated to Sian? She'd have to ask him when they got back to base, but for now she needed to remain on her guard in case other Freebooters joined the fray.

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"There are some things that imprint themselves on your mind like indelible ink: your first love, the first person you kill. For me, I'd add the first time I 'worked' on the international diplomatic stage. Coming just days after I'd killed several people, the efforts to save the very same group from further harm was something of a turn up for the books. That the deal eventually seemed to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory was a bitter lesson in the reality of foreign relations."

—Private Journal

Madison

Wisconsin

Duchy of Andurien, Free Worlds League

21 March 2588

Dressed in olive-green overalls unzipped to her waist to reveal the cooling vest beneath, Rhean felt distinctly underdressed in Madison's town hall. She stood away from the large table, commandeered by the Guards' commander for all his maps, lounging against a heavy wooden sideboard, a sachet of juice in her left hand. Save for a handful of adjutants and NCOs, she was the most junior person present, and wouldn't ordinarily have been here. Appleton, the Guards commander, had insisted, her presence a two-fold break on their expected guests.

She sipped her juice, hoping the tangy liquid would settle her stomach, and toyed with the tail of her waist-length braid. Her old friends the elephants were back again, using her stomach as a trampoline while she contemplated her first piece of foreign diplomacy.

The prisoner debriefing after Weston had gone pretty much as expected, as had the Freebooter's explanations of why he didn't want to surrender to the CCAF troops; Under Capellan law there was only one crime for convicted deserters. They weren't talk-

ing a private hanging or firing squad either. Public beheading was what they expected, an example to others. It was barbaric to her Free Worlds sensibilities, but the Star League did grant member-states the right to their own legal traditions. And there was the rub. Jurisdiction.

"They're here," the communications tech announced, looking up from his data-slate. Around the room, officers drew themselves up to their full heights and made sure they seemed to be busy with their tasks. Rhean sipped her *naranji*—there wasn't much else for her to do.

Precise, rhythmic footfalls on the stone floor announced the arrival of the Capellans. Two officers entered, one in his fifties, the other probably in his early thirties, both dressed in dark green livery with black chest plates and boots. Each carried a black helmet tucked in the crook of their left arm. Their look was disparaging and they acted as if they'd entered a hovel. *Arrogant*. The older one bore the triangular insignia of a colonel, the younger the yellow band and twin triangles of a major. The colonel walked straight over to Appleton and gave a curt bow of his head. The major hung back, eyeing the other occupants of the room carefully. His gaze drifted past Rhean, then darted back. He looked her in the eyes as his own brows lifted slightly. He stepped up to the Colonel, Sheng she presumed, though she'd never met him or seen pictures, and whispered something in his ear. The older figure dismissed him with a gesture. The younger man stepped back, a faint frown furrowing his brow.

"Welcome Colonel. Can I offer you refreshments?"

"Most kind, Colonel Appleton. Mint tea would be most refreshing." *Pushy too*, Rhean mused. Appleton motioned to an orderly, who poured two cups, offering the first to the guest and the second to the Guards' commander. Both took a sip, then set down the cups. "You are well prepared, Colonel."

"It helps to plan ahead. Surprises can be so inconvenient."

"That they can." Sheng glanced over at his aide. Probably an agent of the Maskirovka, the Capellan intelligence agency. "You wished to discuss the repatriation of our citizens, yes?"

"Correct, sir." Appleton drew himself up to his full height, towering over his Capellan peer. "I must respectfully decline your request that all the prisoners be sent back to Sian for *trial*." He stressed the last word, knowing full well the Freebooters had been tried and convicted in absentia.

"Sir, you cannot. These are Capellan citizens who must be returned to our homeland to face justice. Your Free Worlds has no authority to detain them."

"That," Appleton's voice was chill, "is not true, Colonel. They have committed crimes of piracy and assault against Andurien—"

"Andurien is a Capellan world, Colonel."

Appleton inclined his head slightly, but his eyes narrowed. "Against the Free Worlds Duchy of Andurien, and furthermore were apprehended on a planet within the Free Worlds. Under the Star League charter, as the victims of their crimes—which the Capellan state allowed to continue for four years—and the lords of the worlds where they were apprehended, our jurisprudence takes precedence."

"Then, Colonel Appleton, we will call for their extradition."

"As is your right. However, I believe you will not find matters as clear as you think." He turned to Rhean, a thin smile crossing his lips. "Lieutenant, you are well schooled in Star League and Free Worlds law. What is your opinion on how this will play out?"

Rhean took a deep breath. "The prisoners fear for their lives—"

Sheng made a dismissive gesture with his free hand. "They fear legal punishment, and seek your gentler legal system. We *will* extradite them." He made no effort to keep the disdain from his voice.

"You can try, Colonel, though I don't think the courts will cooperate. As for our "gentler" system—this is a capital case, sir, and the Free Worlds *does* have the death penalty. However, we also have a tradition of free trials and human rights."

"*Wēnshén*. Do not lecture me, *mèimei*. This is the will of the Celestial Wisdom."

Rhean's eyebrows rose, and a smile tugged at one corner of her mouth. "I'm sure Ursula would wish to avoid a diplomatic incident." At her familiar use of the Chancellor's name, dark blotches appeared on Sheng's face.

"Do not speak of the Celestial Wisdom like you are an intimate." He spluttered.

Rhean's eyebrows rose in mock surprise. "You mean your Maskirovka associate didn't brief you? I *am* an intimate of your

Chancellor. I've known her since I was three years old." He eyes widened in mock innocence. "Would you like me to describe her apartments in Unity City? They really are quite magnificent."

"*Chòu sǎnb.*" Sheng was incandescent with fury.

Rhean met his gaze levelly. "Something else your associate should have told you." She nodded at the major. "I'm fluent in six languages, including Mandarin, so I am aware when you're calling me a bitch or a little girl." Color drained from Sheng's face as he caught sight of the name ribbon sewn onto the breast of her jumpsuit at last, and glared at his companion. "So if you continue, I'll have to conclude you're *nǐ shì shénme dōngxī* and tell Auntie Ursula."

Sheng's jaw clenched and he muttered something under his breath that sounded like "*qu di yu*" before turning back to Appleton. She stifled a grin. It was hardly elegant, but it *had* thrown the Capellan off balance. With a League noble here, and one who would probably rule the Free Worlds one day at that, he wouldn't press his luck. Too far, at least.

"Your officers have an interesting interpretation of respect for their seniors, Colonel." Sheng murmured coldly.

"They have perfectly good respect for their superiors, Colonel, and the orders they are given. Thank you lieutenant, you may go. More tea, Colonel? Then we can discuss the disposition of the prisoners at length." Rhean came to attention and saluted her commanding officer, then made a deliberate show of saluting Colonel Sheng before turning on her heels and marching out of the chamber.

* * *

Perched on the left shoulder of her *Guillotine*, spray gun in her free hand and a respirator mask across her nose and mouth, Rhean watched the Capellan officers stalk from the hall and climb into a light utility car before weaving their way out past the security barriers. The League troopers raised the barrier and saluted. The Capellan officers did not return the gesture. Standing at the head of the broad steps, Colonel Appleton watched them go. Even from her high vantage point, she saw the displeased look on his face.

Hooking the gas gun onto her harness, Rhean gingerly worked her way over to the chain-link ladder hanging from the cockpit, tak-

ing care not to tread on the yellow-and-black no-step panels that marked access hatches and heat-sink vents. The presence of such markings on a machine weighing dozens of tons and designed to withstand a firestorm of enemy projectiles and laser beams always struck her as incongruous, but she had no desire to damage valuable components nor to melt the soles of her boots to the armored behemoth. *Not that the sun isn't going a good enough job of heating the armor surface*, she mused.

Reaching the ladder, she unclipped her safety tether and descended quickly. At the bottom, she pulled off the bulky respirator and shrugged out of the harness, laying both on the 'Mech's broad foot along with the spray gun and its spare canisters. A strand of hair fell across her face and she instructively brushed it back. She swore as she realized what she'd done; patches of purple paint dotted her hands, and probably her hair and face now. Cursing, she walked over to the entry hall, where Appleton regarded her levelly.

"Maintenance work," she apologized, saluting the colonel very carefully so as to avoid further paint accidents. "Sorry, sir."

The colonel returned the gesture curtly, then stood with his hands interlocked at the small of his back. "My first reaction, lieutenant, would be to write you up for failing to maintain your uniform in good order." His eyes regarded the paint blotches on her uniform then examined her face and hair. He hesitated. "But not enough MechWarriors chip in with the humdrum work."

"Noted, sir." She took a deep breath. "I was wondering, sir."

"Yes?" He arched one eyebrow.

She swallowed. "How the meeting went after I departed. Sheng wasn't happy."

"Colonel Sheng—" Rhean felt her cheeks color —"is never happy. You'll learn that, in time." He glanced over at the gate through which the visitors had left. "As for the meeting...my junior officers know that ordinarily I don't discuss operational matters with them."

"I'm sorry sir, I wasn't asking for preferential treatment in the matter."

"Weren't you?" A wry grin crept onto his lips. "My hearing must be playing tricks then." A look of puzzlement crossed Rhean's face, and Appleton barked a laugh. "I used who and what you

are against the Colonel, so I should really explain. Besides, there aren't many teenagers in the unit who I *know* will outrank me one day."

"I plan to earn my rank, sir." *And I'm only a teenager for another nineteen days.*

"You do that." He said wryly. "But for now, listen and understand. The agreement is to share jurisdiction. The Free Worlds will deal with the prisoners it holds, the Confederation with those already in Sheng's custody. Both sides get what they want and no one loses face."

"Apart from the Freebooters who lose their heads." She failed miserably to keep the dismay from her voice.

"As with the battlefield, the political arena rarely sees clear-cut results. It's all shades of gray, pacts with the devil and all."

"But—"

"But what, lieutenant?" The friendly tone of a few moments earlier vanished, replaced by icy steel. Rhean seethed but held her tongue. "It's not the deal I wanted, but short of sending troops into the Capellan cantonment or orders from Sian or Atreus, there was no way we were getting the rest of the prisoners. Your great-grandmother may be willing to risk a war with Ursula Liao, but she'd have *my* head if I started one. He gestured back at the half-repainted *Guillotine*. "Take what victories you can and don't let the 'might have been' distract you."

"Sir," Rhean replied coldly, saluting crisply before she stalking back to the waiting machine.

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"Life and death, the yin and yang of existence. With such a large and sprawling family, my early life saw a constant series of births and deaths though the latter seemed to dominate. Both of Grams' siblings died in the Reunification War, and Grandpa Ian fell victim to a heart attack in the same year I finished my first tour with the Guards. The loss of the oldest of my twin brothers, Arthur, in a stupid fall while hunting hit much closer to home, as did Therese's fate. All were perfectly mundane, unforeseeable happenings. Of course they were..."

—Private Journal

***Cascade Square
Court of the Star League, Terra
Terran Hegemony
22 August 2591***

The small, pink, wriggly thing in her hands belched, and tried to roll out of her grip. Rhean clutched it fearfully, neither wanting to drop it nor to damage it by applying too much pressure. She felt sweat bead on her brow and adjusted her hands, fighting back the terror. Twin blue eyes met Rhean's own hazel gaze, seeming both innocent and demanding. The eyes narrowed and the nose wrinkled. Saliva dripped from a toothless maw onto Rhean's dress slacks and she adjusted her position. The little thing objected, mouth opening wide as an ear-splitting wail rent the piazza. "You'd better have him back," she muttered.

Madeleine grinned and plucked her son from Rhean's arms. Almost immediately the crying stopped and young Andrew gurgled contentedly. "You'll get the hang of it eventually, Fred. In fact, it probably won't be long until you have your own family to look out for."

Rhean rolled her eyes as she dabbed at the sodden patch on her uniform with a napkin. "Not much chance of that." Abandoning

her efforts, she dropped the napkin into her lap. "Athena will be my only baby for a while." At the mention of her name, the young cream-colored dog looked up from where she was worrying a napkin, her eyes full of expectation. Rhean scratched the Labrador's ears.

"Why not? Surely not lack of opportunity or motivation." The blonde woman's eyes glinted mischievously. "Far flung military outposts, not much nightlife..."

"None of your beeswax, Maddy." Her tone was icy, but the faint grin tugging at her lips put the lie to her annoyance. "I'm not the issue here, anyway. How'd your papa take the news?"

"Well, I thought he wouldn't be too thrilled at the idea of me getting knocked up almost as soon as I'd graduated the academy—all that time and money invested—but he was actually quite happy."

"I suppose grandchildren will do that."

"That and that fact I'm not off getting shot at in the Periphery." She glanced over at her husband who was walking back from the vendor with a tray of coffees, watched over by members of Rhean's security detail. Colin was slated to head out to Canopus on his next tour of duty, like so many of the FWLM's soldiers. Duty there wasn't as arduous or dangerous as the other SLDF deployments, but despite the end of major combat operations five years earlier it remained a war zone with bombings and sniper attacks a regular occurrence. Free Worlds administrator Melissa Humphreys was working diligently to calm matters, but no one relished the idea of going there. "Daddy's quite happy that the succession is secured. He says I can go off and get my 'damn-fool self shot at' in the Peripheries to my heart's content now, so long as I leave Andrew at home."

Colin distributed the cups, then sat next to his wife, tickling his son's chin. The boy cooed.

"So it's just as well you're assigned to Terra for now," he muttered.

"Your work?" Maddy asked, looking at Rhean.

The taller woman shook her head. "Nope. I wish I could claim credit, but I guess you fit the liaison officer profile and this way they can make use of your skills without interfering with your parenting." The Free Worlds had always been egalitarian in its treatment of its armed forces, with both maternity and paternity

leave, but for all its considerate treatment of families, the FWLM always expected its investment to be repaid.

"Are you here long?" Colin asked.

Rhean shrugged. "Not sure. I'm done with the guards for now and I suspect Grams wants me here for a while, to help with the autumn council session, for sure, and possibly longer. 'To get a feel for what makes the Star League tick,' she said. Assuming the session happens—I gather Leonard Kurita is celebrating his accession with a debauched rampage across the Combine."

Madeleine's eyebrows twitched. "You can't escape the fact that one day you will have to make decisions that impact everyone's lives, so knowing how this place ticks is pretty important."

"When I succeed, sure. In ten or twenty years, perhaps. Not now. If I'm going to head up the Free Worlds, and the FWLM in particular, I need to show I can do the job. After six years of hiding who I was at Princefield, I'm damned if I'm going to be coddled now."

"I'm sure the Captain-General has no intention of coddling you. From what I gather, it's every bit as much of a battlefield here as it is out there." She made a sweeping gesture toward the sky. "Only here the battles are fought with words and ideas. They're every bit as dangerous, though."

"Sounds just like home." Rhean sipped her coffee as she ordered her thoughts, the bitter taste drawing her back from an angry retort. It'd been almost ten years since she'd been sucked into the succession, but sometimes her friends forgot she'd lived in the highly politicized atmosphere of the Free Worlds capital since she was an infant.

"Forget the dubious pleasures of Parliamentary debate. The political sharks on Atreus are minnows compared to those here. Davions seeking to one-up Kuritas who seek to blind-side Lyrans who—"

"I already have some inclination, thank you." No sooner had newly-promoted Captain Rhean Marik arrived in the Star League capital than she'd been besieged with new "friends" seeking her support on one matter or another, or inviting her to some soiree or event so they could say they'd had a future Captain-General as a guest. She'd been relieved when news of Maddy's assignment had come though, even if Colin was being shipped out after the end of his leave in January. There'd be at least one friendly face here be-

yond her detail. Athena wasn't much of a conversationalist. She'd been glad to see Evie again—the security detail didn't accompany her on FWLM assignments—but that she needed such protection here, in the heart of “civilized” human space, was ironic.

She glanced over at her bodyguard who was, as ever, dressed smartly but practically. Her hair was somewhat longer since Princefield, now cascading over her shoulders in ebon waves that mimicked Rhean's own style. Evangeline's left hand covered her ear, but Rhean couldn't tell if she was speaking into the microphone she knew nestled at her wrist or cupping her ear to better hear some message over the background noise of the square. Whichever it was, Evie was intent, a frown creasing her brow. Rhean's eyes met her bodyguards, but the older woman looked away after a moment. *A problem?* Rhean wondered. *Surely not, else Evie'd bundle me away to a secure location.* Regardless, she kept an eye on the security operative.

“I suspect I'll be inducted into Grams' unofficial High Council delegation, though she may use me as a wild-card. I'm not sure it's the ‘done thing’ to use future council members in the bill-vetting process.” Each rulers' advisors vetted every piece of legislation before it reached the High Council itself. *Just like Parliament back home*, she thought wryly, *it's the bureaucracy that shapes policy.*

“And don't forget the parties.” Madeline grinned mischievously. “Lady Shandra may have retired from the military, but she throws an excellent ball.”

“There speaks the voice of experience.” Her husband deadpanned, receiving a punch on his shoulder for his interjection.

“The First Lord and Lady are a little old to be partying all night, but they arrange matters so us youngsters can work hard and play harder.” Maddy continued. Colin rolled his eyes. “I don't recall you complaining before...” she countered, rocking little Andrew as she did.

Rhean held up her hands in mock surrender. “Okay, okay, I'll make time for some fun too, if Evie will let me out.” The bodyguard had finished her conversation and her face had returned to its impassive mask. Almost. As Rhean glanced in her direction, the agent made a quick two-fingered sign with her left hand, one of dozens they'd shared over the years. *We must talk.* Rhean's eyes widened. She ran her right thumb along her jaw line. *Now?* Evangeline nodded, almost imperceptibly. “One moment,” she told her friends. She rose and strode the half-dozen meters to where there guard

maintained her vigil. Athena leapt to her feet and attempted to follow but was brought up by the lead looped around the table leg. The puppy turned and began to worry the leather tether.

"Problems?" Rhean pitched her voice low, resting her left hand on the low coffee table where Evangeline had rested her dataslate.

"News you should be aware of before making social plans." Evie's voice was cool.

"Do we need to alert the advanced teams?"

"No that's taken care of, it's family business."

Rhean felt her heart leap into her throat. "Grams?" She'd already lost her brother Arthur this year and grandpa Ian was gravely ill after a heart attack. Had Marion died too? She was in her nineties.

Evie shook her head. "The Captain-General is well. It's your aunt Therese. I'm so sorry."

Instinctively Rhean lifted a hand to cover her mouth as shock crossed her face. "How?"

"A vehicular accident coming back over the Cascades from Darrington. Her car went off the road. The suspicion is a guide-wire failure or a glitch in the car's autopilot."

"And the baby?" Therese had been pregnant again, the first time since little Marie a decade ago. Evie shook her head, and Rhean punched the table. "Damn it!" Colin and Maddy turned to look at her and she raised a placating hand. "Does William know?" Evangeline nodded. "I should go see him."

"I'll tell the others." Evie said, setting the rest of the security detail in motion. She only ever saw Evie or one or two of the others, but there were dozens more out in the crowd or monitoring electronics.

Rhean crossed back to her friends. "Sorry, I have to go. Family matters."

"Serious, Fred?" Colin asked. She explained briefly.

"I'm so sorry. Pass on our condolences to your uncle." They'd met him and Therese not long after Rhean's identity had been revealed to them.

* * *

Rhean was lost in contemplation when the door to her apartment opened. Her eyes were fixed on the drip-drip of the coffee maker. She preferred to make her own snacks and drinks where possible—life as a junior officer in the field meant you mucked in with everything—though it scandalized the staff to no end. She didn't look up. "What do you have, Evie?"

A deep chuckle brought Rhean back to the world, her head snapping up. "Miss Sukhanov has no message."

"I'm sorry, Grams. Please." She gestured to a high backed stool at the breakfast bar.

Captain-General Marion Marik gingerly lowered herself into the chair, then propped her cane against the table. She was dressed formally, the tight coils of silver hair atop her head a stark contrast to the cascade of unbound auburn hair that fell to Rhean's waist. Athena trotted over and sniffed the old woman's maroon slacks, then licked the Captain-General's hand.

"You saw William Liao?" There wasn't much pity in Rhean's voice. "How was he?"

"As well as can be expected for a man who lost his wife and child on the same day." Marion grunted. "He's hanging together, for now at least."

Athena closed her eyes in doggy bliss as Marion scratched her between the ears, her eyes never leaving Rhean. "A tragedy. All our technology and planning and my granddaughter dies because of a computer glitch."

"She would've had a girl. Another great-granddaughter for you."

Marion's eyes narrowed. "Indeed. I should talk to Ursula Liao. The child was kin to her too." *And a prospective heir* was the unspoken codicil. The Capellan chancellor had no children, nor an official heir. Distant cousins like William were in the running to succeed as leader of the Confederation when Ursula died or stood down, though there were suggestions the Celestial Throne might pass to someone outside the Liao dynasty.

"William was talking about funeral arrangements. About whether to bury Therese back on Marik or Atreus or here. I think she would've liked to be laid to rest here, up at Snoqualmie, perhaps."

Her great-grandmother nodded. "Liaise with William and the Master of Protocols to make the necessary arrangements." She levered herself up and steadied herself with the cane. "I'll see you in the morning."

"Good night Grams." Rhean said distractedly. Something rattled around inside her brain, her subconscious hammering for attention.

Therese had often driven up to the beauty spot to go hiking in the woods. Rhean remembered a trip to Mount St. Helens with her aunt and uncle, particularly Therese's refusal of a chauffeur and the slim woman fighting the steering on every switchback, the petrochemical engine letting out a throaty roar as it drove the heavy four-by-four upward.

Therese fighting every switchback.

Not using the guide-wires and dog-brain AI she distrusted.

Driving on manual.

Part 2

Tipping Point

"I'd grown, I'd learnt and I'd fought a war. The first two decades of my life were a constant learning experience, but if I thought things'd slacken off in my twenties and thirties I was wrong. Very nearly dead wrong."

- Private Journal



~9~

"Growing up with five brothers and then attending military college, I was never a particularly feminine young lady. For the most part I was always "one of the lads," and joined in whatever was going on. Some people took exception, however, offended that I didn't conform to their preconceived archetypes, starting all kinds of rumors. Others saw me as a challenge, precisely for those reasons."

—Private Journal

Delphi
Canopus IV
Magistracy of Canopus
3 October 2593

Rhean stifled a yawn as the briefer droned on about production figures and economic projections. It wasn't the most thrilling of subjects, but his monotone and delivery would put anyone to sleep. She glanced across at Melissa Humphreys, the Star League governor of the occupied territories and a fellow Free Worlds duchess. The iron-haired woman was intent on the presentation, but even after only six weeks on-world Rhean recognized the little signs that indicated even the formidable duchess Humphreys was losing patience with the presenter.

All in all, Canopus wasn't what Rhean had expected. Yes, it was an occupied territory, but Delphi was a fortified compound, its inhabitants isolated from the day-to-day existence on Canopus. Isolated from the reality of war and its consequences. After so many years of fighting, it wasn't surprising that some parts of Canopian society hated the occupiers and fought against them. What did surprise Rhean, however, was how many of the natives accepted the occupation, showing every willingness to cooperate with the Star League troops and bring about integration as part of a greater humanity. That was mostly Humphreys' doing, the duchess persuading the League authorities to make a mas-

sive investment in the war-ravaged realm. Though the benefits of this influx of cash weren't yet obvious save in the macroeconomic yawn-fests like this briefing, it seemed likely that Canopus would emerge from the occupation with an economic infrastructure to rival—or perhaps exceed—that of the Inner Sphere.

"Thank you, Chigusa." Humphreys' deep voice carried a note of dismissal and the stocky DCMS-uniformed officer bowed and retreated to his chair. "I think a short recess is in order." The governor placed the stylus atop her dataslate and rose.

Rhean flexed her shoulders experimentally as the other attendees moved to get fresh drinks or else to visit the bathroom. Humphreys walked to a sideboard and poured a fresh glass of iced *naranji* juice then moved to stand by one of the tall patio windows. She beckoned Rhean to follow, which she did after grabbing her own glass of juice. Two others joined them, lean Huw Ragnarsson, Humphreys' chief economist, and Martin Demianchuk, the representative of Magestrix-Emeritus Crystalla Centrella.

Demianchuk had led the official Canopian welcoming committee for Rhean's arrival—though technically an FWL-SLDF staff officer for the occupation, she was still a Free Worlds duchess and thus received in the pomp and ceremony her rank dictated—and had helped Rhean and a severely space-sick Athena settle in. The Labrador had been miserable on the flight, tormented by the zero-g-adapted ship's cats even as she struggled futilely to comprehend weightlessness and its impact on her digestive system. A détente had eventually been reached between cats and dog, but the sickness persisted and the animal had sulked for days, even after landfall.

To be honest, Rhean hadn't fared much better. Not the space-sickness—infancy traveling between worlds had inured her to such matters—but she'd been bored nearly out of her mind. She'd spent some time mulling over her Aunt Therese's accident, dissatisfied with the official ruling of accidental death, but there was only so many times she could go over that material. Evangeline had been there for company as well as security, but she could only be distracted by books, vids, zero-g sports in the hold and dinners with the ship's officers for so long, and after nine weeks in space she would've happily chatted with Lambert Allison to break the tedium. She'd turned down the advances of the dashing first officer, but she'd lost Evie for the latter part of the trip when she'd taken up with a Hegemony lieutenant also bound for the capital. Demianchuk had smoothed their integration into Canopian soci-

ety and had grown to become a good friend over the last month and a half.

"Someone ought to beat some brevity into that boy." Her eyes tracked Chigusa's reflection in the window, though at forty-odd he was only a 'boy' in relative terms.

"I'm sure Leonard has tried." Ragnarsson muttered. Though born in the Combine, his Rasalhague roots left him little love for the ruling family. "Assuming he was sober long enough."

Melissa chuckled. "You've met him, Rhean? Would you agree the Coordinator is a drunken sot?" Demianchuk's eyes widened at the character assassination of a house lord.

Rhean's eyes narrowed. "He—" She paused as the memory of a chance encounter in Unity City came to mind, an encounter in which she was very glad Evie had been present. "—Enjoys life."

The governor burst into laughter and patted Rhean on the shoulder fondly. "We'll make a diplomat of you yet, Duchess." Almost as quickly as the laughter came, her face was serious again. "He's dangerous though. Self-centered. Unpredictable. That's the big difference about what we're doing here—rebuilding and thinking to the future. Leonard doesn't think much beyond his—"

"Wine glass," Ragnarsson interjected quickly, drawing a smile from the governor.

"Just so. Ursula Liao, on the other hand, thinks of the broader picture, but is disillusioned with the League already."

"Hence the 'cattle tax'." Demianchuk added. The Liao chancellor had levied a tax on SLDF vessels traveling though Capellan space, prompting the re-routing of vessels through the Free Worlds or Federated Suns. Tensions were simmering, threatening the occupation of Canopus and the ongoing war effort in the Taurian Concordat.

"And the others?" Ragnarsson asked.

Melissa raised her left hand and extended her index finger. "Archon Steiner-Dineson is too busy clearing house and dealing with her own guilt." The Commonwealth had teetered on the brink of civil war the previous year as Archon and Estates General vied for power. She extended the second finger. "And Alexander Davion is still rebuilding the Suns' economy."

"Which leaves the Free Worlds and Terran Hegemony as the focuses of altruistic endeavors in the Star League." Demianchuk concluded wryly.

Humphreys' eyes narrow a little at the veiled barb. "We're pursuing League policy, but we are doing our best to minimize the impact on your people, and to more than make up for the damage caused. Given the investment in your industry and economy, you'll be giving us a run for our money in short order." She turned her gaze on Rhean. "Something your great-grandmother and her people will have to bear in mind. I'm sure Brion will make the situation clear."

"I'm sure my father will make the Captain-General aware of the economic situation and encourage inward investment as well as aiding our new friends. We have nothing to fear from bringing the wonders of the Star League to the periphery."

"Even though we are not wanting such assistance, yes?" The new voice was treacle-smooth and matched the speaker perfectly. Short, lithe and draped in a diaphanous gown that did little to hide her figure or her obvious pregnancy. Her skin was a lustrous gold that appeared to glint as she moved and her hair cascaded in dark ringlets down her back. No one so distinctive had been at the conference. Her hand came up to Rhean's cheek and touched it softly. Rhean jerked away. "Such a pretty thing, not like her grandfather. I miss him though."

Ian Marik had died several months earlier after eighteen months in a coma. Shannon Marik, Marion's youngest sister had died in the fighting on Port Fallon too. Yet more butcher's bill from the Reunification War.

"Play nice, Rinalla," Melissa growled, though her face showed amusement.

The girl's eyes grew large and round with feigned innocence. "But you are bringing me a new toy. Mother enjoyed the grandfather, so why shouldn't I enjoy the new pretty?" Rhean recoiled further, but found the young woman's grip a sudden vice on her wrist. "We might've been sisters. We still could be, if you wanted..." She let the words hang as her fingers traced delicate lines on Rhean's trapped wrist.

The governor stepped forward and gently prized the young woman's hand away. "You're a wicked child." Amusement still marked her voice, but a note of warning seeped in around the edges.

"I know, it's a burden. But someone has to make you all feel virtuous." She turned her eyes back to Rhean and gave her an appraising look before running the tip of her tongue around her lips. Rhean blushed furiously and the girl shrugged her shoulders and turned back to Melissa. "Bored now. She's too easy to tease."

"You're the Magestrix-designate." Rhean blurted. Rinalla *Centrella*. She chided herself for missing the obvious. Crystalla, the mother, was the Magestrix-Dowager while Melissa Humphreys ruled, and she'd as good as said she'd never take the throne again, making her eldest daughter her presumptive successor when the Star League returned the nation to self-rule.

The girl-woman tilted her head in a mocking bow. "Guilty as charged. Probably more so, actually. There was this DCMS officer...she's blushing again." Rhean felt heat radiating from her cheeks. "Which looks so cute." The heat intensified.

"The Duchess isn't a play-thing, Rinalla." Melissa Humphreys injected. "You know better than to treat your guests in such a way. The manners of Canopus are alien to many outsiders."

"I beg leave to differ. People know exactly what they're getting with Canopians, unlike you Spheroids. The stereotype of the hedonistic Canopian and our pleasure circuses is known throughout human space, and while exaggerated as all such things are, that image has proved lucrative. Very lucrative. We're no Free Worlds League, but you'll find our gross domestic product exceeds most League provinces, and in the service sector we're way ahead of you." Her eyes narrowed and regarded Rhean carefully. Gone was the coquette who moments earlier looked set on having her wicked way with the young Free Worlds officer, replaced with a flinty-eyed businesswoman. Rhean realized that the *girl* was probably older than she by a few years, though it was hard to judge precisely. "If you'd like, I can give you the figures by specific product areas, including the birth/death ratios of key sectors. The former more than makes up for the latter, I assure you." A hand reached down and caressed her swollen belly. "And in my opinion is much more fun."

"And the Star League seeks to further enhance your economy and standard of living." Duchess Humphreys added with an ease that suggested that this debate had raged several times before. "You *are* weak in heavy industry and microelectronics."

"Which brings us full circle. Perhaps we aren't wanting to be strengthened in such areas and to give up our traditional occu-

pations. The gist of mother's refusal of the Pollux Proclamation: What can you give us that we don't already have or can't buy with our wealth?"

Humphreys snorted. "We have work to do Rinalla. You can play your games later. You're welcome to sit through the rest of Chigusa-san's economics presentation ..."

"Bleh!" Rinalla pulled a face. "I think there are some Fedrat officers I've not been introduced to yet. I'd better go and see if any of them look dashing in their spurs. What kind do you like, little duchess? Not to worry, I'll leave some of them for you." She stood on tip-toes and kissed Melissa Humphreys on each cheek. "I'll see you at dinner, 'auntie' Mel?"

She kissed Demianchuk and Ragnarsson in rapid succession, threatening to turn the chaste kiss with the DCMS economist into a smooch, then turned to face Rhean, who immediately took a step backward only to find her path blocked by the patio windows. Rinalla reached up with one hand and stood on tip-toes, pulling Rhean down into a chaste kiss on each cheek. Her other hand, slipping round Rhean's waist, was anything but chaste. Rhean reached back and pulled the wandering hand away, but Rinalla maintained the grip on the taller woman's neck. "Don't judge a book by its cover, prissy miss ice-veins."

She departed, chuckling, as Ragnarsson and Demianchuk both tugged at their collars, avoiding Rhean's embarrassed gaze.

"Don't worry girl, Rin was fairly well behaved today. You ought to see what she and her sisters get up to at parties."

Rhean wished she could run away.