

BATTLECORPS

IN LOVE AND WAR

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Terra

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The wedding of the year—the marriage of Melissa Arthur Steiner, Archon-Designate of the Lyran Commonwealth, to Hanse Davion, First Prince of the Federated Suns—would take place in four days and Aureleen Allen couldn't miss it. Absolutely, positively couldn't. The readers of Aureleen's very own, self-published gossip news site, the *Terran Tattler*, would expect her to feature a story on the wedding in her next update, and Aureleen, star reporter—okay, the only reporter—didn't want to let them down.

She just had to figure out how to get invited to the wedding.

Daddy had enough clout to wrangle an invitation, what with all those stuffy, rich, business types he and Mom always threw extravagant parties for, but when Aureleen had asked, he'd just said something rude about how in his day people actually married for love, not to consolidate territory or start wars, and he damn well wouldn't let his sixteen-year-old daughter be a witness to that. Aureleen had rolled her eyes. Daddy was always talking about war this or invasion that. He could see a conspiracy in almost anything, and even Mom didn't take his theories seriously anymore.

What mattered to Aureleen was that Daddy had refused to shmooze or bribe invitations to the wedding. He clearly didn't understand that Aureleen's reputation was on the line. After all, the wedding was taking place right here on Terra. How could she not go and call herself any kind of a reporter at all?

Sometimes life was just so unfair.

"You could get a job with the caterer," her friend Walden said one night when Aureleen, Walden, and Aureleen's best friend PJ had all been at PJ's house. Walden was fifteen and skinny, and he had dreams of being a MechWarrior someday. Not that he'd ever make it because Walden just didn't know how to go about turning his dreams into reality. "I bet they're hiring lots of people just for the wedding."

"Why don't you just go early, get a good place in the spectator areas?" This suggestion from PJ. "Then you could at least see who was going to the wedding and who they were with."

Aureleen had been best friends with PJ since they were both seven and PJ had shared her favorite desserts when Aureleen's mom had put the whole family on the newest macrobiotic diet craze. Aureleen didn't care if she ever saw brown rice again in her entire life.

"First of all, I don't want to actually have to work there," Aureleen told Walden. "How lame is that? I couldn't get any good gossip if all I was doing was washing dishes. And besides, washing dishes is just disgusting."

"Yeah, and you sure couldn't be a server," PJ said. "No one in their right mind is going to let you near a serving tray."

PJ was tall and thin and blonde with deep blue eyes and clear skin. She could have been one of the starlets Aureleen featured in the *Tattler*, except PJ was interested in 'Mechs too. Only she wanted to be a mechanic. Go figure. PJ's long-fingered hands were constantly dirty around the edges.

Aureleen wasn't tall or thin or blonde. The closest Aureleen would ever be to a starlet was to report the latest gossip on who was dating whom and how wonderful they looked doing it.

"Thanks a lot," Aureleen said. She might be legendarily clumsy with anything breakable but that didn't mean she wanted to be reminded of it. She swiped a brownie off PJ's plate in retaliation.

"And secondly," Aureleen said around a mouthful of brownie, "real reporters don't sit outside in the hot sun in a spectator area. Real reporters have credentials and get inside."

Both PJ and Walden knew better than to point out that Aureleen wasn't a real reporter.

"Why don't you just buy credentials?" PJ asked. "With the kind of allowance you get, I'm sure we can pay someone to make some."

True. Daddy always said that if you had enough money you could get whatever you wanted, and Daddy certainly had more than enough money. Lucky for Aureleen, Daddy liked to share with his favorite—and only—daughter.

"We'll have them put the name of the *Tattler* on your pass," PJ said. "You can dress up so you look older, and I bet if you act the part you can get in."

"Just like in all those chick 'vids you two like to watch," Walden said.

"Yeah!" PJ said, clearly warming to the idea. "You know, like the one with that actress you like—"

"Mellie Seavers," Aureleen said.

"—who convinces that MechWarrior guy—"

"Tristan Moore."

"—she's really an independent commodities broker for House Davion on holiday when in fact she's a Capellan spy, but she falls in love with him and sees the error of her ways—"

"And she rats on the Capellans because he's the most kick-ass MechWarrior for House Davion and she just can't help herself," Walden added.

"And they live happily ever after," PJ said. PJ really liked that happily ever after part. Aureleen did too, but she was just a little more cynical about it. Happily ever afters were for the 'vids. It didn't usually happen in real life.

"You think I could really do that?" Aureleen asked.

"Sure. Why not?" Walden shrugged.

Easy enough for him to say. He wouldn't be the one doing it.

"If anyone can do it, you can," PJ said.

Right. Although the way her friends were looking at her made Aureleen think that maybe she could. After all, she was the star reporter for the *Terran Tattler* and her readers were depending on her.

"Mellie Seavers would do it," PJ said. "That is, if she wasn't already an actress and probably already has an invitation."

Details, details.

She'd do it. She had to. Nothing stood in between a star reporter and a really good story.

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Aureleen had bought herself a suitably dull, suitably conservative business suit like she'd seen the reporters on the holovids wear—purchased on her Daddy's credit account, of course, just like her transportation to Hilton Head Island. She'd pulled her muddy-brown hair into a tight bun at the back of her head, trimmed her fingernails to what she thought of as an adult-acceptable length, and painted them an adult-acceptable color. Now she stood outside the press entrance to the cathedral where the wedding would be taking place in less than two hours, sweating and nervous and pretending not to be, while a dour-faced security guard examined her press credentials.

"The *Terran Tattler*'s not on my list of approved media outlets," the guard said. He was all muscles and square-jawed implacability. Aureleen tried hard not to stare too long at the weapons he had strapped to the belt of his dress uniform.

"We're a small, private publication," Aureleen said. A bead of sweat had started to trickle down the small of her back. She tried not to squirm as she realized she'd never looked up exactly what the penalty was for attempting to crash a state wedding. Would they actually arrest her?

They wouldn't—would they?

Would they... do something worse?

She tried not to gulp as she considered the possibilities. Telling PJ and Walden she'd get the story or die trying was one thing; facing a real guard with a real gun was something else entirely.

"Hmm," the guard said. He seemed to be consulting his database for far longer than necessary. His silence and scowl made Aureleen more nervous than she already was.

"We're not very big," she said. "Less than a thousand hits a month." Way less than a thousand, but the guard didn't need to know that. "But I have very loyal readers. They seem to like the stories I run about celebrities. You know, all the typical gossip column stuff. And I'm sure they're going to love the piece I plan to run on the bride's dress. I hear it's going to be amazing."

Aureleen knew she was babbling, but she couldn't seem to help herself. Isn't that what Mellie Seavers did in that 'vid? And didn't Tristan Moore believe her? PJ and Walden did say she'd have to act. There were worse people than Mellie Seavers—rich, tan, successful Mellie Seavers—to pattern a performance on.

"Hmm," the guard said again, still consulting his list.

Aureleen felt her cheeks begin to grow warm, and not just from the heat of the hotter than normal August day. As the guard continued to make her wait without saying anything else, Aureleen began to hear a buzzing that had nothing to do with the insects flying by in the humid air, and a sick feeling settled into the pit of her stomach. Aureleen felt her adult façade slowly melting away. She wasn't going to get inside. She was going to be arrested. Maybe they'd even think she was a spy. What would they do with her then? Why did she ever let PJ and Walden talk her into this?

Why did she ever decide being a reporter was a good thing in the first place?

Another reporter stepped up next to her. "Is there a problem here, George?" the man asked.

The guard looked up and snapped to attention. "Sir! She's not on my list, sir."

Aureleen was amazed. Whoever this white-haired man was, he couldn't just be another reporter. Could he? His double-breasted gray suit was fashionable yet understated, his face pleasant enough to be on the 'vids yet with an unmistakable air of authority and... humor?

"Am I on your list, George?" The white-haired man sounded amused, and his grin turned up the corners of his mouth in a mirthful way.

"Sir?"

The white-haired man looked Aureleen over. He still grinned, but his eyes didn't seem to miss anything—the suit she wasn't quite comfortable in, the way she held her own datapad a little too tightly. She had a ridiculous thought that just by looking at her he could even tell she'd just skated by on her exams last semester. She didn't feel like an adult. She didn't even feel sixteen anymore. So much for being a brave, star reporter.

She heard him say, "I'll take responsibility, George," and the next thing Aureleen knew he had taken her elbow and escorted

her past the guard and into the cordoned-off press area on one side of the cathedral. The guard made no move to stop them.

"Okay, young lady," the man said. "I've just staked my considerable reputation on the fact that I don't believe you're a spy or a saboteur. Am I right?"

"No," Aureleen said in a tiny voice.

He frowned at her, a line forming between his bushy white eyebrows, and she realized she hadn't answered the question quite right.

"I mean, yes, you're right. I'm not a spy or a saboteur."

He kept looking at her with eyes that Aureleen just knew saw past every lie anyone might ever try to tell. There really was no reason to act anymore anyway.

"I do write for the *Terran Tattler*, but it's my own site. I think I have like a dozen people who actually read it on a regular basis."

"So you report gossip." He made it sound less than honorable.

"Not malicious gossip," Aureleen said. "I never report anything that's going to hurt anyone. Just who's dating who, what they're wearing, what new 'vid they're going to be in. Stuff like that. I don't even print links to negative reviews."

He raised an eyebrow. "You only report happy news?" He made that sound just as bad.

"Well, no." Aureleen was at a loss what to say. "I just try not to repeat lies, especially if I know they're lies."

He nodded, almost to himself it seemed like.

"So can I ask you where you work?" Aureleen asked. She offered a nervous smile. "I don't mean to insult you, but I don't know who you are."

"The first of the questions a good reporter always asks," he said. "Who. What are the others?"

Even though she had made it inside the cathedral two hours before an official state wedding, Aureleen suddenly felt like she was back in school.

"What, when, where, why. And how," Aureleen replied.

"Good, good. And those questions all need answers. But that's just the start."

Once inside the cathedral, the press, including Aureleen and her mysterious benefactor, were directed down a narrow hall into what Aureleen could only guess was a media room. Reporters already packed the place. When Aureleen and the white-haired man walked inside, the reporters, almost like a solid pack, descended on the two of them.

Before any of the reporters could say a word, the white-haired man raised a hand as if to ward them off. "I'm here to attend a wedding just like everyone else," he said. "Anyone who wants to stay on my good side—and I'm assuming that's everyone in this room—" He paused and turned that intense stare of his on the reporters. For effect, Aureleen guessed, and it certainly had an effect. Everyone in the room went still. "—will respect my privacy. I hope I make myself clear."

The reporters all backed away, but not before they looked Aureleen over like she was some interesting and slightly revolting new insect species. Aureleen had never been the focus of so much attention before, and she wasn't sure she liked it.

Just who was this man?

Now that the reporters had backed away, Aureleen took a look around the media room. Holovid cameras were already set up inside, but instead of focusing on a central podium like with most press conferences Aureleen had watched on the 'vids, these cameras were focused on what looked like a clear glass wall that separated the media room from the main entrance to the cathedral.

"One-way glass," the white-haired man said, nodding at the wall. "We can see them, but they're spared from looking at us. Don't worry, they all know we're here," he added before Aureleen had a chance to say that it hardly seemed fair to all the invited guests. "Most of the people on the other side of that wall are here to be seen, for one reason or another."

A long, opulent red carpet had been rolled out down the center of the main entrance, and on the other side of the glass a few celebrities were filing in and mingling with politicians and royalty. Aureleen recognized some of the actors and actresses among the guests—Mellie Seavers wasn't among them, at least not yet—but overall it looked like most of the guests were stuffy politicians and

business people. All this work, and she might just as well have been reporting on one of Daddy's boring parties. Aureleen tried not to be disappointed.

So far she hadn't seen any of the wedding party either, not that she really expected to. The media room's one-way glass wall didn't offer a view beyond the heavy wooden doors that separated the entryway from the church proper where the wedding would take place.

The white-haired man led Aureleen to an area in the back of the media room where a bar had been set up. He took a fluted glass of champagne off the polished oak counter for himself. He handed Aureleen a similarly-shaped glass, only this one held water.

"Don't think you're quite old enough to drink," he said, but he smiled when he said it. "There's only so much I intend to take responsibility for."

The water was cold and it tasted wonderful. Aureleen drank it all and put her empty glass back on the bar.

The media room was beginning to get more crowded, if that was possible, especially around the bar. The sweet smell of fresh flowers in ornate holders at each end of the bar couldn't quite mask the odor of sweat and the conflicting smells of perfume and aftershave worn by the reporters. The white-haired man, his champagne barely touched, led them to a less-crowded area at the far end of the room.

"Reporters never turn down free drinks," he said. He *hmpfed*, then chuckled. "Me either, unless it's scotch."

"So where do you work?" Aureleen asked again, remembering that he had never quite answered her question.

"Tenacious. I like that." He pointed to an area of the back wall opposite the glass wall. "I think you're a little disappointed because you think you won't get to see the actual wedding. Holovids will be projected there. You'll get to see what everyone else throughout the Inner Sphere sees, you just won't be in the same room as the bride and groom and all their invited guests." He took another sip of his champagne. "Never forget that you're important to the process. They need you here to put the human spin on things, filter things through your senses. But they still want to manipulate what you see and hear. It's all about control. They can't tell you exactly what to report. They just let you see what they want you

to see and hope you'll do your job without asking too many of the wrong questions."

He was starting to sound a little too much like Aureleen's Daddy with his conspiracy theories. Did all adults get paranoid as they got older?

"Who are 'they'?" she asked. Who was one of the important questions after all.

He gestured with one hand in the general direction of the glass. "The people out there. Even those celebrities you're so interested in, they'll only feed you just enough information to report what they want you to. It's all about public perception, and news is part of that. The trick," he said, leaning in a little closer to her, "is to learn to look beyond the obvious. Tell me what you see that's not so obvious."

Aureleen did her best. At first she didn't see anything different. More of the same boring politicians, people whose names she didn't know. Then she looked closer at one of the few celebrity couples beyond the glass. The entertainment news 'vids were touting the couple as the hottest flavor of the moment. He was set to star in the new *Battle of the Behemoths* 'vid due out next year. His actress girlfriend, petite with auburn hair and nearly skeletal thin, was seen on his arm at every celebrity event, both of them young and rich and happy and smiling. Only now, when they apparently didn't think anyone was watching them, they appeared bored with each other. Although no one else was near them, they weren't talking to each other. The actress still had her hand in the crook of his elbow, but her purse, strap over her bony shoulder and hugged close to her body, was on the same side on which he stood. It almost looked like she was holding a shield between the two of them. When the actor did look her way, he gazed over the top of her head. There was almost enough space between the two of them for another person to fit.

"They're not really a couple," Aureleen said, amazed. "It's all fake."

The white-haired man nodded. "Very good."

"Why would they do that?"

He put his empty glass on a tray carried by a passing waiter. "I'm sure you're astute enough to figure that out. You do deal in celebrity gossip."

She looked at the actor and actress. Now that she saw them for what they really were, they made her sad. He was a rising star, the actress's last 'vid had tanked. The actress probably just needed to be seen with him at an important event in a last-ditch effort to salvage her career. Aureleen wondered what was in it for the actor.

"I'm going to have to leave you now, as I have things to attend to," the white-haired man said. "You'll be able to stay here and watch the wedding; I'll see to that before I go."

"You still haven't told me who you are. I don't even know why you helped me."

He nodded, a gesture that seemed to encompass the whole room full of reporters. "Everyone here was invited. All carefully screened, you understand. No surprises. You were the only one with enough gumption to try to get in with something as simple as this." He fingered the counterfeit press pass hung around her neck. "I doubt it would even occur to anyone here to try that kind of trick."

Aureleen could feel a blush heating her cheeks. She started to apologize, but he stopped her.

"Don't get me wrong. I admire your courage and tenacity," he said. "This time."

She blinked. For a moment she saw the kind of steel in his eyes, heard the authority in his voice that could make even one of Daddy's richest business associates blanch. She understood his subtle warning not to try the same trick again. Then he smiled at her and the moment was gone. Just who was he?

"You've got the makings of a good reporter, Ms. Allen. You came here for a story, and you were willing to risk your life for it, whether you realized it at the time or not. History lives in the chronicles of the people who report it, and who have the courage to report it accurately. History's going to change rather quickly after today. Your generation will be the ones who live this history, and your children's future will depend on how you chronicle it. Ask the right questions, get the right answers. Don't take things at face value." He looked pointedly at the fake celebrity couple beyond the glass. "Remember that a story is not always the same thing as the truth."

With that he walked to a door in the back of the press room. The security guard stationed there came to attention immediately and ushered him through the door.

Aureleen tried to let herself relax and enjoy the wedding, but she found herself staring harder than normal at the guests who passed on the other side of the glass. So many high-ranking officials and dignitaries. People who might have been merely stuffy and boring to her an hour ago seemed different somehow. She still didn't know all their names, but now she wondered what secrets they were hiding, why they were with the smiling people who surrounded them. Real affection? Power? Prestige? Wasn't anyone who they appeared to be? She wondered if that was what growing up was all about—realizing things weren't really what they seemed. For the first time, Aureleen felt like she might actually be grown up enough for her business suit.

The great wooden doors finally closed behind the last of the guests, and on the back wall of the media room the holovids came to life. Aureleen and the rest of the reporters turned to watch the actual ceremony. Hanse Davion was as handsome on the holovid screen as he'd appeared on Aureleen's holovid at home. Melissa Steiner looked resplendent in her magnificent bridal gown. The cameras focused on her face as she said her vows, and Aureleen thought she had never seen a woman more in love. This was just like one of the chick 'vids Walden teased her about, only this was so much better. No matter what Daddy said, this wasn't a union for political gain. Aureleen just knew it.

Aureleen nearly forgot all about the white-haired man and his annoying way of not really answering her questions. Almost anyway, until the holovid cut to a quick reaction shot of the wedding guests, and there he was in his smart, gray, double-breasted suit, sitting near the front on the groom's side of the church. Whoever he really was, he must be someone really, really important to sit that close. She remembered what he said about history changing quickly after today. What had he meant? Was something going to happen here today besides just a wedding?

Aureleen only half listened to Hanse Davion recite his vows. He was just as much in love with his new bride as she was with him, Aureleen could tell by looking at him, but she was preoccupied with the thought of changing history.

The rest of the wedding went by like a normal wedding. Well, if you could call a wedding with two cardinals presiding normal. The assembled guests applauded as the Prince kissed his new Princess, and everyone filed out of the cathedral to make their way to the reception. Aureleen wondered if the press would be leaving, but none of the reporters made for the exits. Instead, the reporters

congregated around the bar. Aureleen realized the reporters would cover the reception the same way they'd covered the wedding, with remote cameras broadcast on the screens in the media room, and everyone was just settling in to wait for the reception to start.

By the time the reception finally started, Aureleen thought she might be the only sober reporter in the room. The noise level in the media room made it hard to hear some of the audio feed from the reception, but the video on the screens was still spectacular. Better than any of her 'vids, even without the sound.

When the newly married couple rose to cut their wedding cake, the guard at the door to the media room suddenly changed his stance. Walden called it battle ready when he was playing around pretending to be a MechWarrior. The guard now stood with his feet spread slightly farther apart, his shoulders squared, and his arms straight at his sides but within easy reach of the weapons at his belt.

A chill ran down Aureleen's spine. She wondered if anyone else had noticed the guard.

On the holovid Hanse Davion had just been fed a piece of cake by his new bride. He smiled at her and raised a piece of cake of his own to feed to her. The noise level in the media room dropped as everyone stopped talking to listen.

"Wife," the First Prince of the Federated Suns said, and he paused for a moment as a smile crept over his face. "In honor of our marriage, in addition to this morsel, I give you a vast prize. I give you the Capellan Confederation."

The collective gasp of the assembled guests was heard clearly on the holovid in the media room, where all the reporters had gone deathly quiet.

"What did he just say?" a woman near the front of the room asked.

Someone cleared his throat. "He just declared war."

Pandemonium broke out in the media room as all the assembled reporters used their links to call their respective employers. Aureleen stood by herself, her gaze glued to the holovid where Hanse Davion enthusiastically fed his new bride her piece of cake. She could only guess what the wedding guests from the Capellan Confederation were doing. The holovid cameras hadn't cut away to them. Deliberately, no doubt.

Aureleen felt ill. Her daddy was right. The Inner Sphere was at war.

How could love lead to something like this? Is that all people in power really cared about, just more territory and more power? Those were questions she would ask, and she would keep right on asking until she got a real answer.

She was a reporter. That was her job. To report the truth.