

Author's Note:

Out of all of the e-mails I receive, one of the top questions I get is, "what happened to Archer Christifori during the fight for New Avalon?" Good question. Thanks to some prodding from Loren, the time has come to complete the saga.

The following events take place after *Operation Audacity* and during the novel *Endgame*. The start of this takes place just before the events in Chapter 24 of *Endgame*.

THE LONGEST ROAD

*The Untold Story of Archer Christifori
and Archer's Avengers*

By: Blaine Lee Pardoe

Prologue

DropShip Colonel Crockett, Landing Approach New Avalon, Crucis March Federated Suns 29 December 3066

The *Crockett* quaked slightly as it punched through a pocket of clear air turbulence. For a moment, everyone's heart skipped a beat. If it wasn't turbulence, it could be an attack. Captain Fuller, an old friend from years past, cast General Archer Christifori an unshaken nod. Archer remembered when Fuller used to react to every bump that the ship took. That was before the war, before he became a seasoned veteran.

The heavy almost sweaty air seemed to get more stagnant as everyone else wondered if they had been fired upon. Archer didn't worry. If Fuller wasn't worried, then he wasn't. This was not normal landing. This was the big one, the big show, the one that they had all been waiting for. This was New Avalon. This was the end of a tyrant.

We aren't going to be shot down, not after all we've been through. God wouldn't let that happen. That's why we're here, now... for the end.

"We've got final clearance," came the voice of the comm officer.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Colonel Chaffee asked from his side. Archer turned to her quickly, absent-mindedly. He had forgotten that she was there. He had been so focused on their approach, he had not paid much attention to his surroundings. When he saw her face he wanted to kick himself. Only an idiot would forget someone like her.

"Me?" he replied coyly. "Just about a hundred or so thoughts. How secure is the LZ? What about our decoy force on Graceland—how are they doing? What is the current status of operations on New Avalon? Are we too late, if so, is that bad? What if her side has the upper hand? How's that for starters?"

"I guess shouldn't be surprised that you had a few things on your mind," she said giving him a smile in rebuttal. "Par for the course."

He wanted to say more. A wave of emotions came over him, washed with memories of the last few years of his life. It had begun on Thorin. His sister Andrea was killed by an operative of Katherine Steiner-Davion, who in turn pardoned the killer. The fighting on Thorin had been his entry into the Civil War on the side of Prince Victor. Thorin had been home. He had done his duty for the military in fighting the Clan invasion and had hoped to retire to the family business. He had become a businessman. The war had torn him away from all of that. Circumstances had forced him to take on the mantle of a warrior again.

There had been months of fighting on half a dozen worlds in the Lyran Alliance. Hit and run strikes, constantly keeping the Lyran's off-balance and forcing them to send countless troops after him. Then he and his rag-tag band of regiments, cobbled together from a dozen different units, had been sent to woo the services of Snord's Irregulars to Prince Victor's cause.

That had proven difficult. The elite mercenaries had nearly been wiped out themselves in political maneuverings that had pitted him against them. It was pure luck that he had been able to sort through the mess and prevent slaughter. Colonel Tasha Snord now commanded the unit and kept them out of the civil war—a blow against Katherine's cause.

He had hoped to be on New Avalon months earlier. But that was not to be. The Jade Falcons slammed into the border with the Lyran Alliance. Archer had volunteered to go and try and rally support to stop them. He forged an uneasy alliance with Adam Steiner and caught the Falcons off guard by seizing the initiative and attacking their own occupation zone.

It was a risky gamble that paid off. For Archer it had been gamble that he had played with the blood of his men. His Avengers, "Archer's Avengers," had been decimated in the fighting. He hated that name, but didn't want to hit their morale by forcing them to rename the unit. A relative peace had come over the Lyran/Falcon border.

The last few years had taken their toll. He felt older than his years. Roles had been thrust upon him that he never expected. There had been many times that he was in over his head. Prince Victor seemed to have faith in him when he didn't even have faith in himself. His troops had faith too. In the end it was Katya's faith that mattered the most. It had helped him get this far. She had always been something more than just an officer. She was his confidant, his friend, the one person that he fully trusted. He was counting on her faith in him to get him to the end.

Archer had thought about stopping, settling in on a world for a few months and rebuilding. Some of his officers had suggested it. But he couldn't. There was an appointment that had to be taken care of, a final mission. The death of his sister had compelled him into fighting in the war. Removing Katherine Steiner-Davion from power was the ultimate goal and with the Prince driving to New Avalon, Archer knew where he needed to be—there, at his prince's side for the endgame.

Intelligence had said that Katherine's agents were watching him, so slipping away was not easy. On Graceland he used some of the local militia and some of the personnel to stay behind and create the ruse that the Avengers were still there. They paraded 'Mechs, stirred up dust, caroused in bars, and maintained the illusion of a presence.

In reality the battered regiment that remained of his hodge-podge force packed up and began the trek across the Inner Sphere. They rebuilt and recouped along the way. At two jump points, they met up with friendly ships, picking up supplies and parts, and even a handful of troops for replacement. Snord's Irregulars had sent a ship to rendezvous with them at Northwind at the recharge point. Two of their MechWarriors had volunteered to come along, temporarily relieved of duty with the mercenaries. It was a gift from a dear friend and he appreciated it. The sound of the troops cheering for their new comrades in arms brought a smile to his face. It seemed that everyone that had a stake in the Civil War wanted to be there on New Avalon for the resolution.

Archer sighed and closed his eyes. So many dead. Katherine had an ocean of blood on her hands. The time had come to put an end to the war. She was a tyrant. A bitch. For his sister, for his men and women, for everyone that that suffered under her rule, he was coming to New Avalon.

"I'm coming for you, Katherine. Going to make you pay," he muttered under his breath.

"What was that sir?" Katya asked.

He opened his eyes. "Nothing, Katya. Just talking to myself I guess."

"Right," she said slowly. "For what it's worth, Archer, I was thinking the same thing." She gave him a smile, warm, beyond friendly. For a moment he allowed himself to think of her before the war and even after it. Perhaps there was going to be some sort of life after all of this. Maybe, just maybe, she would be a part of that life.

"Sir," the comm officer called out. "We are approaching the LZ. A private file has been transmitted for you. Orders sir, and one more thing."

"What is it?"

"Sir, we just got these words: 'Welcome to the party Avengers.'"

Archer smiled. Yes, indeed. But this was not a party, not a game. This was the last battle of the last war that he would be called to fight in, or so he hoped. "Signal back comm. Tell them that we bring greetings from the Lyrans Alliance, the Falcon Occupation Zone, and all points in between."

Chapter One

Daring Flood Plains

New Avalon, Crucis March

Federated Suns

29 December 3066

"Any word yet?" Victor Steiner-Davion asked as he raised his head from the holotable where he and the other officers surveyed the battle zone. Dust swept through the air as a *Cicada* kicked up a cloud of dirt, swirling through the interior of the HQ area.

"He's on his way," replied Kai Allard-Liao, walking over to the table. "He wanted to ensure his troops were billeted first." Kai smirked. They joked privately that Christifori cared more for his men than anything or anyone else. It was an admirable trait, but on more than one occasion he had kept Victor waiting.

Victor flashed a fast grin. He expected that from the General. "For that, I can wait."

Kai nodded and crossed his arms. "Have you given your idea any more thought Victor?"

"You still worried?"

"You're asking quite a bit from him. After all he's done for us so far, you may be asking too much. The Civil War has cost him a great deal as well—his sister and all." There was a hint of hesitation in his voice, one that the Prince did his best to ignore.

"I know, Kai." *I know all too well, this war has cost many of us our families.* "I know he wants in the middle of the big fight, but I need him to do this assignment. I know I'm asking him to go into harm's way one more time. But if he does it, he might just be able to help us bring this fight to an end faster."

Another officer, his arm in a sling, stepped forward and snapped to attention. "Your Highness. Major General Archer Christifori, sir," the Lieutenant said. Behind him a man stepped forward and offered Victor a salute.

The man seemed older than the last time that Victor had seen him two years ago. *The Jade Falcons will do that to you.* There was a little more white hair in his sideburns and a wrinkle or two

more. When they had last met, Archer had assumed command of Operation Audacity, a plan to blunt and drive back a Jade Falcon incursion into the Lyran Alliance. He had performed brilliantly, far better than what Victor or his staff had anticipated. Christifori had punched into the Falcon occupation zone and had forced them to pull back or risk losing their honor. More importantly, he had won over his cousin Adam and had denied Katherine vital political and military support.

As Victor looked at the faded jumpsuit that the General wore, he could see that the man was weary, almost sagging in his salute. His eyes were sunken, dark, with bags under them and crows-feet marking their ends. He had gotten a tan somewhere, one that was fading and making his face appear almost leathery. The fight along the Lyran border had forced Christifori to forge an alliance with a difficult man, Adam Steiner. In the end Archer had managed to not only blunt the Falcons, but had won over Adam enough to have him back out of either his or his sister's side in the civil war.

"General," Victor said, planting a smile on his face, "I'm glad you were able to join us." He extended his hand and as Archer took it, Victor reinforced his shake with his other hand as well. "You look good for a man who's supposed to be on Graceland."

Archer allowed himself a brief smile. "I take it that our little decoy still has your sister convinced?"

"Yes. Our own agents in MI5 say that you are still back there, far from her prying eyes."

Archer looked around at the HQ area, then back to Victor. "I never thought I'd be back here again, on New Avalon."

That's right, he was in the Academy and NAIS. "I always knew we'd be here—again," Victor replied.

"Yes sir. I'm sure you did." He glanced over his shoulder at a lance of 'Mechs in the distance. "I'll be damned. Is that our old unit?"

The Prince smiled proudly. "Tenth Lyran Guard. Fighting during the Clan invasion seems like a lifetime ago."

"Things were easier then," Christifori added. "With the Clans you had defined enemies. Good versus evil; that's how it seemed anyway. You knew where you stood. Now with all of this," he swept his arm out to where a salvage team was working to recover the remains of a destroyed Seventeenth Avalon Hussar's 'Mech. It had been a victim of the fighting the day before and was now fair game

for the technicians salvaging it for parts. The techs struggled with a stubbornly clinging strand of myomer that refused to let go of the actuator at which they were pulling. "You don't always know who the bad guys are."

Victor's voice changed tone. "I want to congratulate you personally on your operations against the Jade Falcons. You performed brilliantly."

Archer allowed himself a grin. "I appreciate the kind words, sir. But I assure you, I wasn't the driving force."

Victor gave him a nod. "I know. If it's all the same, you still deserve the congratulations. Any man that can work side-by-side with the Wolf Clan, tangle with the Jade Falcons, and soothe the ego of Adam Steiner is a man that deserves congratulations."

Archer paused for a moment, drinking in the memories of the last campaign. "There was a price for that victory, Highness. We accomplished our mission, but the cost was steep."

"I haven't gone over your readiness reports," Victor replied. "What is your current status?"

"We started operations with three regiments, though realistically these were combined elements of militia, veterans, locals, a real cobbled together group. At this point, on paper, we're at regimental strength. That's on paper. Realistically, we've lost more personnel than equipment. The gear we do have is patchwork. I'm low on expendables and ammunition. If you want a realistic assessment, I would rate us at two reinforced battalions—tops." His voice was weary. His words seemed mixed with memories of the campaign, the fighting, the deaths and perhaps even worse.

Victor understood. He had seen war at its worst and knew how commanders felt the pain of loss. Loss was something that he had struggled with for a long time himself. First his father at the end of the Clan wars, a loss that seemed to hit him harder now that he was on New Avalon. The assassination of his mother, then Omi. Archer was older than he was, but was carrying the weight of the loss of his troops as if it was a physical burden. "General, I need you to get what forces you can ready. We have ammunition, parts, and replacement MechWarriors. We need to get you up to strength."

Archer cocked his eyebrow as he looked at the shorter prince. "You're sending us into the fight so soon?"

"Not necessarily," Victor said. *Not the way you're hoping...*

"I'll need a little more than that, Highness," Archer replied. "Truth be told, my men are going to need more."

Victor understood. *That's what I like about him. He's a soldier's soldier.* "Archer, I want your men ready for a fight but they aren't going in right away."

Archer crossed his arms and leaned back on his heels. "Details?"

Victor shifted his stance slightly. "General Christifori, since you joined my cause it has been known that you have wanted my sister to come to justice."

"Her actions led to my sister's death." His voice seemed to ring with anger.

"I know." There was more that Victor wanted to say. The list of his sister Katherine's crimes was long. The dead attributed to her arrogance was a list that was a scar across the shattered remains of the Federated Commonwealth, now segregated into its original Lyran and Davion halves. "It is a fact that is also known to Katherine and her people. Our own propaganda people have made sure that your motivations are well known."

Archer said nothing. He was obviously drinking in the information that Victor was providing him.

Victor continued. "We are going to covertly reconstitute your regiment, the First Thorin, the Avengers. Officially we're going to disguise you as part of the Outland Legion, a ploy of hiding you right under my sister's nose. You will be seen meeting with a number of other regimental commanders, handing out orders, directing operations."

"Disinformation?"

Victor nodded. "My intention is to create the illusion that you are going to lead the final assault to Avalon Island and the palace. There are spies everywhere here. Your successes in the past, my known pretense for leveraging people such as yourself to render justice—it will all play well with her intelligence corps. MI5 is going to believe that you are going to be leading the final push."

Archer uncrossed his arms and rested his hands on his hips. "Permission to speak freely sir?"

His request caught Victor off guard. "Of course."

"Sire, I didn't come all of this way just to sit on the sideline and be a diversion or some sort of intelligence ploy. I have buried my troops all over the Commonwealth and the Falcon Occupation Zone. I came to put an end to this." Christifori paused and let his words sink in. There was no venom in his voice, no demands. It was as if his emotions had been drained from him.

Victor understood. Like so many officers that had fought for him, they had lost a great deal—family, friends, livelihoods, all cast aside for him and his cause. Archer Christifori was not asking for anything more than what he had wanted from the very beginning of the conflict—justice.

"Archer," he said slowly. "You have my word. You'll be there at the end. There will be plenty of fighting for you and your troops. This isn't just a diversion; it's much more. You have my assurance that you'll be there when the curtain falls."

Archer sighed heavily. "Your word has always been enough for me. Very well then, Highness," he said saluting. "I'm at your disposal then. Can you give me the details of what you have in mind?"

Victor saw a glint in his General's eyes, something of the determination that made Christifori so useful. "Archer, it would be my pleasure."



The Avengers, Archer's Avengers, were deployed not far from their DropShips on a sandy plateau. Every time the wind swept their tents and 'Mechs, it kicked up tiny twisters of dust and dirt. The air was dry this season and each breath made the fine dust stick to the roof of your mouth. The plant-life was sparse in this area of the flood plains, mostly scrub brush and saplings. It was not the paradise that most people associated with New Avalon.

Archer walked over to the campfire near the center of the camp and as he approached, he saw his officers rise to attention. He gave them a quick salute. Formality of this kind was not typical of his unit. *Must be the presence of so many regular army units...*

Colonel Katya Chaffee drank down her last gulp of coffee, shaking the last bit out of the cup at the fire, then walked over near him. He would have called it a saunter, but there was nothing exotic

about it. Months of being in the field and aboard a DropShip had forced him to forget sometimes that Katya was a woman. The look in her eye was enough to remind him.

Maybe if this war is ever over...

"General," she said. "What's the word?"

He allowed himself one chuckle. "The word? The word is that we are going to play a crucial and critical role in the eventual assault on Avalon Island."

"That explains the arrival of five trucks loaded with replacement parts," replied Captain John Kraff of the Muphrid Rangers. The Rangers had been the heart and soul of the Second Thorin Regiment...when that regiment had existed. The Jade Falcons had decimated its ranks. Now it was little more than a battalion of troops. "I don't think we've ever been this well outfitted."

"That doesn't bring back the dead," Katya added solemnly.

Archer had seen her gloom before. "Regardless," he said, ignoring the comment, "we have some major operations to plan. The role of the Avengers in securing a beachhead on Avalon Island is critical."

"We leading the way in sir?" asked Major Alice Gett.

"In a manner of speaking, yes. We will be landing six hours prior to the rest of the invasion force."

His officers gave each other nervous glances at the news. For a moment, there was no sound other than the noises of the troopers in the camp and the crackle of the flames as a log settled, sending sparks upward into the darkness.

"Sir," Katya asked hesitantly. "Are you serious?"

"Yes, I am," he said solidly. "And if we do our jobs right, we can help bring this war to an end." Turning he scanned the eyes of his officers and made sure that he had eye contact with each and every one of them. "We will have a secured briefing tomorrow to go over the operational plans. Get some sleep and I will see all of you at 0830 hours." Before they could rebut him, Archer pivoted and walked away.

They're good people. I need to ask them to take part in one more fight. That's all, just one more fight...

Chapter Two

Camp Avenger, The Daring Flood Plains New Avalon, Crucis March Federated Suns 31 December 3066

The dull, flat-green plexi-dome had guards posted all around it. A fine layer of dust covered it and was streaked where people had brushed up against the dome, taking the dust with them. As the ad hoc command center for Archer's Avengers, the roof of the small collapsible structure was covered with a prickled layer of antenna, stabbing skyward.

Inside the dome, Archer stood over the holotable. Millennia before, a table covered with sand had served the same purpose—to allow a commander to model combat terrain for tactical planning purposes. The holotable was a familiar tool, but Archer found himself waxing nostalgic, wondering what it was like to use a good old-fashioned sand table.

While the hot sun beat down on the plains outside, the portable AC unit strained to keep the interior of the command center cool. His officers stood around the table, staring at the holographic image of the target—Avalon Island. Most had their arms crossed over their chests. They said nothing. Despite orders, Captain Kraff had a cigar in his mouth, a thin wisp of smoke rising from it. It didn't reek like a cheap cigar and Kraff was quick to point out to anyone that complained that he had stolen only the very best—the spoils of war.

There were a few guests in the room as well. They hadn't been introduced to the Avengers command yet. They stood out in that their olive drab jumpsuits, while worn, were not nearly as faded or patched as those worn by the Avengers. There were no signs of old patches, pulled off as their affiliations and units had changed. Some of his people had handmade their lance or company patches and wore them proudly. The elbows of more than one Avenger uniform was threadbare.

Archer's people had been cobbled together from dozens of other units and retired veterans, all answering the call to support Prince Victor against his sister Katherine. While some had outdated uniforms, a few still wearing their spurs of the Federated Suns, all

had one thing in common—a desire to see the war brought to an end, swiftly if at all possible. Archer was proud of the way they looked. It wasn't the uniforms that were important, but the men and women in them.

General Christifori leaned forward over the holotable, putting his palms on the edge of the three-dimensional map and leaning on his arms, over the terrain. He tipped his head back and let his gaze sweep the tight confines of the room. "First and foremost, let me say how proud I am of all of you. We've fought our way across the Inner Sphere to get here—at the right place, at the right time.

"The Avengers have been given a unique and special honor. We are going to lead the assault on Avalon Island. Our forces are to be the first ones ashore in the final assault against Katherine's forces." He didn't expect a cheer. These were seasoned military personnel. They had a pretty damn good idea of what they would be facing if they led the assault. He did hear a few mumbles.

"For intelligence purposes, we're officially being designed as reserve elements of the Outland Legion," he said, making eye contact with each of his officers. Reaching into his right flank pocket he pulled out a wad of Outland Legion patches. "Sew these on, pass them out to the troops. Orders will go out to repaint our 'Mechs for the time being with Outland Legion colors."

"Sir?" Kraff said, taking up the patch as if it was manure in his fingertips. "Why all the cloak and dagger stuff? Outland Legion? That's crap in a can if I've ever heard it. They're good and all, but we're the Avengers." His words were met with more than one nod of agreement.

Archer smiled. Pride in the unit was one of his cornerstones for holding his troopers together. "Just relax. It's temporary. When the time comes, we'll show Katherine our true colors. I can't speak for the rest of you, but I can't wait to get her panties in a bunch when she finds out that we're here." As if to add emphasis, he winked at his officers who, in turn, took up the patches with a new sense of purpose and chuckled at his response.

"The shortest distance between Avalon Island and our current base of operations is Portsmouth. That will be our target. We will hit the beach to the west of the harbor and city and drive inland, sweeping back into the city and catching it from the rear." As he spoke, Archer triggered the animation on the holotable showing where the landings would take place. A long red arrow swept in behind the port city and punched into it from the rear flank.

"While we secure the port facilities, the Sherwood Foresters will punch in towards Reamuth and cripple the satellite relay station there. Katherine's intelligence people will expect this kind of surgical strike during the assault. The attack on this installation will have the net effect of creating a four to five hour disabling of Katherine's capabilities to get downloads from satellites while they reroute to secondary facilities." The image of Reamuth appeared, nearly five kilometers inland from Portsmouth. It was a short distance on the map, but the officers knew that it was a long way to go. "For a while, they'll be blind."

"Sir," Major Gett of the Armored Company queried, "how long until the rest of the invasion force gets on shore with us? If we're the beachhead, I assume that they'll be right on our tails ready to drive us back into the water."

Archer cast a glance at one of the visitors. "Major, this is a two part operation. First part is us hitting and taking Portsmouth. Phase two is best left to our guest. It is my pleasure to introduce Kai Allard. Most of you are, I believe, familiar with his exploits on Solaris a while back." General Christifori waved his hand to the officer who gave him a slow nod/bow in response. The officers turned to the stranger that had been standing with them and gave him looks of acknowledgement and respect. Kai's reputation had easily preceded him.

"Thank you General Christifori," Kai said in response, scanning the officers. "The Outland Legion never looked quite *this* good." The officers laughed at his words. "To answer your question, Major Gett, we will be following with the rest of the invasion force four hours after your initial landing."

"Four hours?" barked back Captain Kraff. "Holy freaking crudstunk, might as well be four months. Those bloody damned troops that Katherine has at her disposal are going to hit us with everything they have. Landing in Portsmouth will be like kicking a beehive. They'll come from everywhere to pummel us back into the sea. General, sir, you have gone out of your way in the past to piss her off. She's going to want your ass on her wall—sir."

Kai nodded. "True enough. In fact, we're counting on that."

"Sir?"

"This is a two part operation, as General Christifori has pointed out. The first phase is the Avengers leading an assault force into Portsmouth and gaining the full attention of the defenders

on Avalon Island. The second part is a deception campaign that started several weeks ago. The Avengers are not the main blow of the invasion, but a carefully crafted diversion. In the eyes of our enemy, you are the spearpoint. We're sending enough disinformation now to the other troops to convince them that no one other than General Christifori would be leading the initial landings."

"We're bait?" the usually reserved Thomas Sherwood asked, his eyes unblinking as he spoke.

Allard nodded. "In essence, yes."

"Crud," Kraff added. "I like the sound of the word 'diversion' a hell of a lot better than 'bait.'"

"Regardless," Archer cut in, knowing that the commentary would wear on for hours if he let it. "From what I've been told, an intelligence operation has been running to paint our force, specifically me, as the leader of the invasion. Most military people would assume the assault would come somewhere along the Portsmouth coastline. Katherine's defense is concentrating there. They are going to be convinced that I'm the key leader in the field. They will throw everything they have at us. They will attempt to shatter our beachhead.

"Don't kid yourselves, boys and girls; this is the reality of this mission. We are going to be the biggest damn target on Avalon Island. Katherine is going to come at us, at me, full force. She'll want my testicles on a platter. For four hours, we will draw their fire, suck them in, let them think we're a full-blown invasion. Then the real invasion force will hit the other side of Avalon Island."

Kai jumped in. "We know that Katherine will respond to the real invasion, but it will buy us the time to establish the real beachhead and to set up the kind of defenses that are going to be necessary for a campaign of this type."

Captain Kraff shuffled the cigar to the other side of his mouth. "Don't get this wrong, sir, but what happens to us while you all pitch your tents and settle in?"

"You'll be extracted. DropShips and naval transports will come in, pull the Avengers out. Portsmouth would be nice to have, but is not necessary for the final operation. The beachhead on the other side of the island is what is critical."

Captain Joey Lynn Fraser of the White Tigers spoke up. "We're just one regiment. It won't take those people long to know how

big we are. Once they figure out that it's just one regiment, they'll know it's a diversion, sir."

Kai waved his hand in the air. "Under normal circumstances, you're right. However, we have a few little surprises. First, we have these MA generators. Magnetic Anomalies. They are small and generate signals as if they are moving BattleMechs. The signals on long range sensors appear as several lances of 'Mechs of varying size. Properly placed and moved by infantry, they can confuse an enemy into detecting a significantly larger force."

Archer spoke up as well. "We are also going to have some comm units with us. They will generate simulated combat communication traffic. From the sound of it, combined with some of the jamming units we'll deploy, and you'd swear that you're facing five or six regiments worth of troops. On top of that, our positions will be urban in nature. Without a clear line of sight, it will be difficult for even an eyewitness to tell just how big the force is." He paused. Most of his officers nodded their heads. Given the right circumstances, the plan had a good chance of working. Battle, however, often altered circumstances dramatically.

"How do we know that Katherine's people will take the bait?" Katya Chaffee asked. "I'm in intel and I have to tell you, it's a fickle business."

Kai offered her a thin smile. "I understand your concerns. We know they are monitoring all of our actions and key personnel. We are on New Avalon, after all. Your General Christifori will be meeting with a number of other regimental commanders and other leaders. News of this meeting here will reach them. We already have double agents that have reported that they have already taken note of the fact that your units are undergoing major refit right now. In fact, we're going to spread counterintelligence that states the General is definitely not leading the attack, knowing full well that Katherine's people will suspect that it is false.

"There's more. Katherine knows that for Prince Victor to claim a true victory, he must be true to this cause in the eyes of his people. General Christifori is the perfect tool for that. He is from the Lyran Alliance, making this less than an internal fight. He's been harmed by Katherine and has sought out justice—and made it public. Our own public relations people have played him up. It's an easy story to buy, and one we deny if asked—adding credibility to it."

"I guess," Chaffee added. "The only real question is, will it work?"

"It had better," a new voice added from the doorway. Entering the inner tent dome was the short figure of Victor Steiner-Davion. The air seemed to jump five degrees in temperature at the sight of the Prince. Most of the officers had never seen him, or if they had, only from a distance. The abrupt Kraff slowly pulled the cigar from his mouth, the closest he got to a salute. "I trust fully that the Avengers are up to the job we're giving them. I assume you all agree?"

There was a chorus of yes sir's, barked out in unison. Victor gave them a smile. He warmly patted several of the officers on the shoulder as he made his way to the holotable. "We are going to go out of our way to play up the minor role of the Avengers. But we've made sure the supplies and gear you've received are the kind of stuff we'd ship to a front line assault-unit. We know there are spies in our logistics chain. They'll get the word out to Katherine.

"As far as anyone outside of this room knows, this operation is not happening. You are to tell your personnel that your role in the invasion will be as a strategic reserve. Their spies will pick that up as well and will assume that we are trying to deceive them."

Katya smiled. "Oldest trick in the book. Get someone to believe what you want by denying it."

"We're counting on it working," Victor added. "Even my visiting here today to speak with you is something that is likely to have been observed and reported. Don't kid yourselves, there are enemies watching everything we do. We just have to learn to turn that to our advantage. And trust me when I tell you, there is more that we are going to do to convince my sister that this is indeed the primary assault. By the time we are done, she will think of Portsmouth as the most important target on the island."

Archer smiled. *I'm counting on it too. All of us are counting on this being successful. If it's not, we're dead.* "So there you have it—our role. You have the backing and support of everyone on the staff of the Prince and of the Prince himself. Is there anyone here that believes we cannot pull this off? Anyone here that doesn't want to jerk Katherine's chain just one more time?"

"No. We're behind you, sir...Sire," Kraff added, giving the prince a glance. There were nods all around, confident nods. Even the usually reserved Katya seemed to grasp the eloquence of the plan.

"Excellent. Well then, it is New Years and we're on New Avalon. Next year, it and all of the Alliance and Suns will be free!" he added. There was a cheer around the holotable, one that even Prince Victor joined.



Field Marshal Simon Gallagher was Champion for Katrina Steiner-Davion, Archon-Princess of the Federated Commonwealth. He wielded incredible power but at the same time served at her whim, and there wasn't a moment that they were together that she did not remind him of that.

Despite his loyalty, he knew that he was always one mistake away from termination. He had wanted many times to correct her use of her own title; the Federated Commonwealth was gone—a memory—but he said nothing. Best not to make waves. Men like Gallagher were not allowed to retire or walk away from their mistakes; they took them to their graves.

The conference room was dark, lights dimmed so that his holographic slide show in the center of the briefing table would show up better. It made reading Katrina's face difficult at best. It was just another ploy on her part to keep him off balance, this much he was sure of.

"What is Victor planning?" Katrina asked from her seat, elevated slightly higher than the others in the room. "And don't rattle off facts and figures, Simon, I want your assessment." There was a hint of bitterness in her voice.

"Highness," he said, clearing his throat, "We cannot ascertain for sure what your brother's plans are. But our experts in military analysis believe that he will strike at the Portsmouth region, perhaps at the city itself."

"Why do you think that?" queried a smoother voice, that of Jackson Davion, the leader of Katrina's military forces.

"Distance and facilities-wise, it is the most logical location for establishment of a beachhead."

"And Victor will lead the assault," Katrina added.

"Not necessarily, Highness," Simon replied. He saw her eyebrow cock at his words. Yes, this was something she had not planned. "Remember my reports a few days ago about the Outland Legion being reinforced?"

She nodded curtly.

"Well, it appears your brother was attempting to mislead us. It was not the Outland Legion at all. Our agents have discovered that the unit there is Archer's Avengers—the First Thorin Regiment."

She clenched her teeth and said nothing.

"More important, our recent intelligence operatives in Victor's camp indicate that he has placed a high degree of emphasis on General Christifori and his Avengers." He tapped the remote control for the holographic display and the image of Archer Christifori appeared in the middle of the table, a giant floating holographic head.

"Christifori?" Katrina asked, half-spitting his name. "Him again? You'd think that Victor would be tired of sharing the spotlight with this man. Isn't it enough that he lured away that traitorous cousin of mine into keeping his units out of the fighting?" The reference to Adam Steiner's ordering a portion of the Alliance to stand down from the civil war was not lost on the small gathering. Katrina's ranting about the incident was legendary in the palace corridors. "You told me he was on Graceland."

"As we thought he was. It was a ploy, just as is Victor's failed attempt to hide him right in front of us as part of the Outland Legion. Once again we have penetrated his veil."

"Hopefully not too late," she added.

"Indeed, Highness," Simon replied. "We are wise to not underestimate him. He was responsible for luring Snord's Irregulars from their contract with the Alliance. He has been a thorn in our side for some time. *And* he has been meeting three times a day with Prince Victor and his staff. These may be indications that he is the leader of the first wave of troops. What few assets we have in place show him to be conferring on strategic issues—things we'd expect to see from an invasion leader. We're confident that Victor will be with the landing forces, but our intel points to Christifori leading the assault."

"Why him?" Jackson Davion asked.

"He has a grudge against the Archon-Princess," Simon said carefully, knowing he was on thin ice. "He claims she is responsible for the death of his sister."

"I'd never even heard of him until the last two years, let alone his tramp-sister. What he thinks means nothing to me. He is simply a tool, a pawn in Victor's hands. What would I care about someone like him, a junior officer at best?" Her voice rang with contempt as she waved aside the allegation.

"I understand, Highness," Gallagher replied. "Nevertheless, the accusations have been made and they have played well with the media. Adding to this, one of our operatives has learned that the holotable in his command tent has been used recently to go over terrain in and around Portsmouth. This only adds fuel to our belief that it is the target area."

"A ruse perhaps?" Jackson added. "Victor has proven himself a formidable military leader. He could be fooling us, fooling your people, Simon." Unlike Katrina, there was no venom in his tone.

"I can't rule that out," he replied. "But you asked me my thoughts and I have provided them as best I can. Our experts believe that General Christifori will lead the assault in the Portsmouth area. Victor will use him as a tool to show that this is a war, in his eyes, for justice. He's become quite media savvy and will play that against us to take the hearts and minds of the citizens here on Avalon Island."

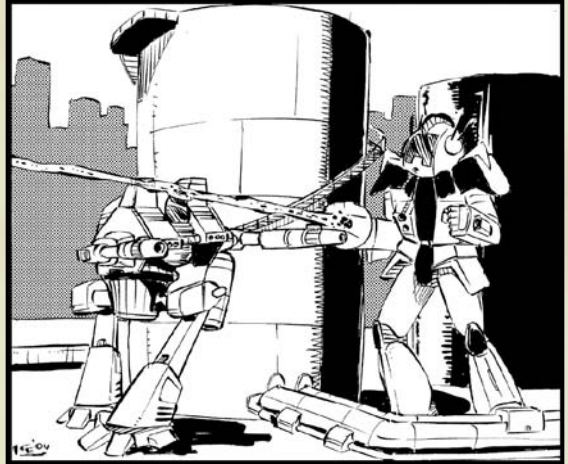
Katrina rose from her seat and all eyes fixed on her in the dimly lit room. She stared at the holographic image in front of her. As she rose and closed with the image, Simon could see her the anger in her face. "Very well, Simon. Portsmouth is the assumed target. We shall send in additional troops there—not many, but enough. If you're right, they'll buy us time. If you're wrong, I want to be prepared for defense elsewhere. For your sake however, I would not be wrong..."

"And as for this General Christifori," she said waving her hand at the hologram. "I want him dead. When his broken body is shown on the newscasts, it will shatter the morale of Victor and his people. Let him see what happens to those icons that are held against me. In fact, Jackson," she said turning to her General, "I want you to assemble a team to do just that. When they come ashore, kill this Christifori...no matter what the cost."

Chapter Three

Portsmouth, Avalon Island New Avalon, Crucis March Federated Suns 24 March 3067

As the DropShip *Little Sorrell* swung wide of the landing zone, Archer double-checked the tension on the five-point security strap of his cockpit. His BattleMech, a *Penetrator*, had been rebuilt so many times that he wondered just how many of its components were original. *Do I really want to know?* It didn't matter really. It didn't matter that it



was built by the lowest bidder either. What did matter was that he was armed with replacement Clan weaponry, captured in a previous lifetime when he had been in the Revenants, serving with the Prince.

His urban paint scheme of grays and blacks covered up the temporary insignia of the Outland Legion, replacing it with his own regiment's markings again. If they fought, it was going to be under their own names.

There was a comfort in fighting under his own colors. It was like being in a familiar chair.

Back then he had been a young wide-eyed officer, hell-bent for leather. He had fought the Clans, won, and then retired. War was gone to him. Then the loss of his sister. Her killer, pardoned by Katherine Steiner-Davion, had killed his only remaining family member and then paroled the man that had committed the crime. Since then all he had lived for was wrapped up in the events that were to follow this day.

The downfall of Katherine Steiner-Davion.

"Katya," he said on the command channel. "I show us closing in on the LZ. Are you set and clear?" In their efforts to confuse the enemy even more, Katya Chaffee had drawn a critical role. She was not a MechWarrior by trade, but today would be piloting a 'Mech. It was a big one, hopefully safe for her.

"Roger that, General," she came back in the speakers in his neurohelmet. "I'm showing us on drop-stand-by. I've got this beast ready for action. I sure hope you picked the right person for this."

Archer allowed himself a chuckle. "It's got to be safer than piloting a command vehicle out there."

"You'd think," she replied. Archer suddenly heard a metallic grinding and saw the drop door in front of his *Penetrator* open up. Dirt and dust were kicking up. He could make out the forms of the cliff-tops where the landing zone was located. In the distance was the outlined shapes of Portsmouth City about a kilometer away. Warning lights came on in his cockpit. Yellow—prep for debarkation.

He switched to the channel for the rest of the command company. "Avengers, stand by for deployment."

The light went green. The safety harnesses came free on his *Penetrator* and he tapped the foot-pedals. The gyro feedback was stable as he leaned forward slightly. They were in the right place, that was for sure. "Alright, Avengers, standard deployment, just like we practiced. Recon lance deploy to the north, command to follow."

He stepped out onto the ramp and in three steps was on Avalon Island. Almost immediately he heard the familiar ping and thump of small arms fire slapping his BattleMech's torso. Pivoting at the waist, Archer saw the source, a small building near the LZ. Infantry, huddled inside, were firing at him despite the odds.

Waste of perfectly good infantry. He brought his pulse lasers online and using his joystick, swept the targeted reticle onto the small building. Archer didn't wait for a weapons lock. Hitting his secondary target trigger, he unleashed a burst of crimson energy bolts into the building. The small stone and brick structure seemed to pop. Smoke and steam rose from the debris. It didn't stand a chance, nor had the men hiding in there.

"Sit Rep," he queried on the command channel.

"Sir, we've secured all five LZ's," came back Katya's voice. We are showing indications of substantially more troops present than

we anticipated. Saber Beach LZ reports that two companies of troops, 'Mechs and armor attempted to swarm their LZ upon landing. Similar reports coming in from the White Tigers at Halo LZ."

"Sounds like someone knew we were coming," he replied, moving his *Penetrator* out to deploy. The *Little Sorrell's* turrets were firing at some targets off in the distance, too far for him to make out even with the visual enhancements of his T&T system. Whatever it was, it was firing back at the DropShip, no minor accomplishment. *Maybe our little bluff worked after all.*

He switched to the broad command channel and set his comm unit to scramble. "Specter One to Avengers," he snapped as he angled further away from the DropShip. "Move out to your assigned targets. Be warned, we are getting signs of reinforced troops in the area." He then sent an encoded message back to the command post near Portland for Prince Victor and his people.

"Red Rover, Red Rover."



Jackson Davion stared at the multiple reports scrolling by his screen. The map of the area showed the landing zones. Five, possibly six. Multiple reports of deploying 'Mechs. Despite moving in the reserve 4th Avalon Militia, a unit mostly made up of reservists and veterans, it was clear that something was going on in Portland and that they were facing the invasion of Avalon Island.

Possibly...

Behind him, arms crossed defiantly, Katrina Steiner-Davion stood brewing. "So, Jackson, is this it or some sort of ruse on the part of Victor?"

Jackson didn't look at her; he kept his eyes focused on the reports. "Someone is hitting Portsmouth, which is what Simon had predicted. It seems to be multiple regiments, but right now there is a lot of confusion. We've tossed in the 4th Avalon Militia, which is wreaking some havoc with whoever is landing there, but we can't be sure if this is a diversion or the real McCoy."

"Well, troops are deploying. Isn't that enough?" Her tone was demanding, it always was demanding.

Jackson didn't waver. "If it's a diversion, Highness, it could have us shifting troops that we need elsewhere."

"You're my Marshal of the Armies. What do you recommend?"

"Patience," Jackson replied. "Until we are sure."



The Militia *Gallowglas* swept behind the water reservoir tank just as it fired off its ER PPC. Archer winced as the bolt of blue energy stabbed outward at his *Penetrator*. The shot went just a little wide of his right leg, but an arc from the blast of manmade charged particle burst seared the paint on his knee joint. A small residual arc of blue electrical charge danced up the thigh of his 'Mech. *Too damn close.*

Archer swept the opposite direction and brought his medium pulse lasers on-line to the second and third target interlock circuits. The *Gallowglas* had gutted a *Hitman* from his command company, leaving it a smoldering heap tossed into the side of an apartment building. He had been chasing it for ten minutes and was not about to lose it now. As the *Gallowglas* rounded the far side of the water tank, Archer locked on half of his pulse lasers—three of them—and fired.

The shots were not aimed at the militiaman, but at the base of the water tank. It was a city reserve tank, probably for fire control. He didn't want to target it, but this was the final fight. Now was not the time to hold back. *Katya will castigate me for this afterwards.* The crimson bolts stabbed at the thin metallic skin of the tank and suddenly it collapsed. The rush of water was nearly 20 feet tall and slapped into the side of the *Gallowglas*. The MechWarrior fought the sudden imbalance, but it hit the side of his left leg with such force it was almost impossible. He fell sideways into a ten-story office building, sending a shower of glass and metal raining down onto the street below.

General Christifori didn't hesitate. He unleashed the remaining pulse lasers at the suddenly stationary target. The scarlet bursts of light stitched the frontal glacial plate of the round cockpit. At first they seemed to do no damage at all, then the cockpit popped like a balloon. It imploded under the burst and instantly charred black inside. Smoke billowed from the holes made by the laser

bursts, wisp-like, marking the end of the 'Mech. The heat in his cockpit had risen slightly, enough to make him start to sweat for the first time in a few minutes.

"Scratch that tally-ho I called," he said on the comm channel.

"Roger that," came back Katya's voice. "We just managed to drive out that Demon tank that was pulling the hit and run. Chalk that up to the White Tigers. Fraser has the MA devices running. Anyone scanning this area of the city without our filters is going to think that we have another twenty 'Mechs running around here."

"I wasn't planning on this militia," Archer said as he angled his *Penetrator* down a wide boulevard. Some small arms fire, mostly manpack PPC's, danced out ahead three blocks, signs of another firefight.

"Orders sir?"

"Let's give them something to see. Katya, deploy into the city. Let them see you," he said.

The 'Mech appeared a few moments later. He saw it first on his tactical display. It was massive, a *Daishi*. Lumbering down the street, in its blue and white paint scheme complete with silver piping, he saw it approach and felt the streets rumble slightly under each thundering footstep. The plan had been to deploy the 'Mech and a few other decoys. This one was special, and Katya was piloting it.

The 'Mech was painted to look exactly like the one piloted by Prince Victor.

"Got you on my scopes," he said.

"Roger that," she replied, firing a burst down the street in the direction where he saw fighting. Apparently from her angle she had a shot. "Looks hot down there."

"Yes, it does. You head down that street, I'll take your flank. Let that enemy infantry get a good look at you before you open fire. Then blast them."

"Why the pause?"

He juked his *Penetrator* out to the middle of the open street for a better angle as he watched a missed short range missile snake into the air, run out of propellant, then drop into the side of a building, blasting a hole in the fifth floor. Flames lapped up from the hole.

"I want them to have time to signal their command that Prince Victor is on the field. Then they need to be put down. You have a war to win, Highness."

He heard her chuckle.



Jackson Davion stared at the image that was being relayed from the suburb of Portsmouth. That was the 'Mech—that damned *Daishi. Prometheus*. He had seen it before, studied the images from other battlefields. Too many other battlefields. It meant something. Victor. He was there, in Portsmouth. Reports from his sentries and infantry troops with scanning gear indicated there was at least three regiments operating there, possibly more.

Yes, it could be deception. That was why he had called in Simon Gallagher.

"So, is that him?" he asked, stabbing his finger at the freeze-frame image of the massive BattleMech.

"I have reports of a highly painted up and modified *Centurion* leading the strike on our satellite relay facility at Reamuth."

"*Yen-lo-wang?*" Kai Allard's deadly 'Mech.

"If the reports are accurate, and I have little reason to doubt them," Gallagher replied. "Taking out that facility is the kind of mission that Victor would send his trusted friend to lead, don't you agree?"

Jackson said nothing for a moment. Instead, he stared at the image of Prometheus looming on the holographic display in front of him. He wanted to believe that this was a diversion, a ploy. But it appeared to be a direct assault. Moving in the Fourth Avalon Militia had stalled the assault, bought him time to confirm who it was. Victor, Christifori, and the others had been in the city for an hour now. There was still time to drive them into the sea.

"Final recommendations, Simon?"

The older man flinched. "I believe this is the main assault."

"So do I," Jackson replied. *That is what makes me nervous.* "Very well."

"What are you going to do?"

"What I'm supposed to do: my duty. I'm sending our front-line units straight at Portsmouth. I will crush them because if I don't, Victor will do the same to me."



Archer pivoted at the waist. There was a slight metallic grind as his *Penetrator* performed the maneuver, the result of a piece of armor that had been splayed back from a barrage of missile hits. Smoke rose from several places over Portsmouth, black, churning, rising high into the air. The streets had been chewed up from the feet of 'Mechs and the carnage of battle. Craters pockmarked the ferrocrete all around where he stood, some still spilling out grayish white smoke.

"Sit Rep," he commanded.

Thomas Sherwood's voice came back in a crackle in his ear. "Forester's company reports that Reamuth is green." Green, as in obliterated.

"Losses?"

"Too many. The Militia may be a hodgepodge unit, but they were tough. I'm down a full lance sir. Falling back in good form to the city now."

"How's the new 'Mech?"

Sherwood chuckled, a rarity for him. "Let's just say I always wanted to try out the arenas of Solaris. This was the next best thing. I just wish my nephew had a holoimage of me in the cockpit of this beast."

Another voice cut in. "This is Ranger One," came back the ragged voice of Captain Kraff. "Militia units have fled the city. I've lost half of my company either down or dead. You'd think the Militia was trying to tell us to leave or something."

Major Gett came on line. "Second Battalion losses are less, we're running at 20% down. I'm pleased to report our sectors are secure sir."

Archer punched up the tactical monitors. "Okay then. If we've done our job they are going to be coming for us any time now with everything. Get the sappers out. I want the main avenues of approach rigged with mines, traps, everything we brought with us. Clear out your fields of fire and establish fire zones. Get the artillery deployed at their assigned sectors and get your fire control teams in place."

"Do you think it worked sir?" Major Gett asked.

"I sure as hell hope so," he replied. "Otherwise this was the biggest waste of troops and material I've ever seen."

Chapter Four

Portsmouth, Avalon Island New Avalon, Crucis March Federated Suns 24 March 3067

The artillery rounds ripped apart the street at his 'Mech's feet, raining chunks of ferrocrete into the bird-like legs of the *Penetrator*. Water surged up from one of the holes, an obvious hit on a water main, the cold water seemed to hiss and steam as it hit his legs—a warning as to how hot they were.

The artillery had been dropping all over Portsmouth. The spotters were either not in place or doing a bad job of directing fire. Many buildings had been hit, many streets had been so badly mauled that they were impassable. It would be some time before life in Portsmouth returned to normal.

Archer turned slightly and brought the targeting reticle down on the advancing *Watchman*. It was already battered somewhat from fighting its way into the city, but was still a dangerous threat. A millisecond after he heard the tone in his ears from the target lock, he hit the primary TIC.

The heat in his cockpit soared as the emerald green beams lashed out from the captured Clan ER lasers his *Penetrator* mounted. Both shots hit the *Watchman* in its left side. The beams cut like knives slicing through hot butter, searing through the armor plating on the 'Mech as it tried to advance. The *Watchman* stopped for a moment mid-gait and seemed to quake where it stood. Archer knew that was an indication of ammunition cooking off deep in the torso of the 'Mech. It rocked in place for a moment and a thick cloud of gray smoke churned out of the cuts from his lasers. The *Watchman's* MechWarrior had managed to save his 'Mech, but apparently no longer had a taste for the fight. He limped off to the right, taking refuge behind a building.

The sweat stung in the corners of his eyes inside of his neurohelmet as Archer walked through the rising column of water from the blasted water main in an effort to get a better angle. No joy. The *Watchman* had limped out of line of sight.

He stared at his tactical display and did not like what he was seeing. Reinforcements from three different Davion regiments, all loyal to Katherine, had hit Portsmouth. The only saving grace is that they had not coordinated their attack as well as they could have, but had come in as they had arrived—albeit from different directions. Apparently Jackson Davion felt that it was more important to hit them than to wait and coordinate. His third and second battalion had stubbornly been forced to give ground in their sectors, but they still held the waterfront port.

First battalion had suffered three waves of attack; the *Watchman* had been the last element of that third wave. Losses had been high, but they had only dropped back three blocks—three painful blocks. Most important to Archer was the time it was taking for the attackers. Just over three hours had elapsed from the time of the start of the battle for Portsmouth. In another hour, the *real* invasion would begin.

“Katya, how are you doing?” he asked.

A sigh came to his ears, a weary sigh. She wasn’t normally a MechWarrior. Katya had been injured in her career and had been relegated to commanding from a vehicle. Only recently had she been pressed once more into a cockpit, this time playing the role of Victor Steiner-Davion, piloting a duplicate of Prometheus. “I’ve got one leg that is just about gone and have been hit just about everywhere else. I’m coming up on your flank right now,” she replied.

He looked over at the ‘Mech and saw scars of black laser and pockmarks from missile hits. “You’ve looked better,” he managed with a wry twist of humor.

“You’d almost get the idea that these folks have something against the Prince.” Her voice rang with sarcasm.

“Right,” he said, his attention suddenly turned to his tactical display. The approaching red dots on the tactical overlay of the monitor was not going to be good news. “I’ve got a lance of bandits closing down the street in front of us,” he said.

“I’m painting them too,” she replied.

“Let them close in,” he said. “The sappers will take care of at least the lead elements.”

“Affirmative,” she replied, sweeping her *Daishi* into line next to him. Together they stared down the street.

The enemy 'Mechs came. Painted with urban camouflage, the lance of four 'Mechs were led by two mediums, both *Nightsky*'s. Behind them, almost in formation, were a *Salamander* and a *Gunslinger*. None of this was good news. They were fresh, ready for a fight, and were rushing straight at them. The *Nightskys* were closing rapidly down the street, moving with precision down the corridor between the 10-20 story buildings on either side.

A rumble came, and at first he thought it might be thunder even though he knew differently. The street quaked, but it was the buildings on either side of the two lead *Nightskys*. The sappers had planted explosives in them, very carefully. He had reluctantly given the orders for them to lay waste to the city this way—it was necessary, bitterly so. The blasts had knocked out the structural supports on either side of the street. The buildings seemed to lurch towards each other and hit in the air above the charging BattleMechs.

For a moment, Archer wondered if the leaning buildings were going to hold each other up, each preventing the other from falling. They didn't. Gravity won. The thousands of tons of debris plowed straight down into the *Nightskys*. Both tried to outrun the trap, but there was no hope. The debris hit the 'Mechs hard, cutting off the two assault 'Mechs behind them. A rolling cloud of gray white dust churned up and visually blinded Archer's *Penetrator*.

The airborne dust seemed to linger forever, even though Archer was sure that it was just a minute or two. He relied on his sensors to tell him what was out there, if anything. The collapsing of the buildings wasn't the only trick he had up his sleeve, it was just the most spectacular. He was also counting on the fact that the enemy would keep coming at him. *They want us out of here. In their minds, we are the only threat on this island.*

The *Nightskys* were history, but he picked up the faint magnetic reading of the assault-class 'Mechs moving on the far side of the debris-filled street. He tried to get a lock on them but the intervening mountain of building rubble blocked a clear shot. Archer watched the tactical display and saw they were moving around, attempting to turn his position. Their move was obvious—if the path to him was blocked, they were angling to get down the street that Katya faced.

"Specter One to Brain," he beamed over on the direct channel. "You're going to have company shortly."

"Tracking that already," she said. Archer moved his *Penetrator* off to her side.

"Let them come," he added. There was good reason. His street was not the only avenue that had been booby-trapped.

Archer didn't have a clear line of sight yet, but he knew they had come into range. Katya's *Daishi*, painted identically to that of the Prince, rocked under a wave of 40 long-range missiles. The General reeled for a moment. Yes, the *Daishi* was a huge 'Mech, but for a moment he was unsure how anything could have survived such an attack. Smoke enveloped Katya, black, churning, sick smoke. Red and yellow flames lapped through the smoke. Archer waited. If she was out, he'd feel the grind of her 'Mech falling onto the street.

The fall didn't come.

Instead, through the smoke, he watched her side-step towards him. She fired, her weapons pod fitted with a Gauss rifle. The slug was so fast that it looked like a bolt of silver light, firing down the street where the missiles had come from. The arm recoiled slightly from the launch. Archer didn't see the results of the shot. He moved his *Penetrator* even closer to Katya's side.

The pair of assault 'Mechs were two blocks away, rushing forward like a tidal wave. Katya fired another nickel slug down range into the *Gunslinger*, hitting it in the right arm. The arm of the *Gunslinger* twisted backward under the impact, tossing armor plates. The Loyalist 'Mech didn't stop. In fact, its stride only slowed slightly, as if it was hesitating, but only for a second.

As they charged forward, they fired. The shots came down the corridor of buildings with full force and fury. One Gauss rifle slug burrowed deep into Archer's left side with such force that he rocked back in his seat and felt his ribs ache under the restraining straps. A burst of lasers slashed across Katya's chest, splattering globs of melted armor, like drops of mercury, into the air.

Archer dropped his sights on the *Gunslinger* and locked on. He fired, first the Clan-made lasers, then half of his pulse lasers. They hit the *Gunslinger* square on, most in the torso and legs. Armor popped off and danced down the street. The 'Mech came on.

The *Salamander* didn't wait. Another wave of missiles fired, a literal wall of warheads. Katya started to move the massive *Daishi* as if to dodge them, but it was to no avail. A few missed, racing past her 'Mech and further down the street. The vast majority hit her, blasting at her cockpit, torso, and legs. The flames seemed to linger, to hang on to the 'Mech. Archer sucked in a breath and hesitated like he had never done in combat before. *No...not her.*

The *Daishi* started to topple. She fired a gauss slug down range into the *Salamander*, a snap-shot, one that seemed to be on target. It struck the *Salamander* at the right knee so hard that the Loyalist 'Mech contorted to the side and glanced into the side of a building. Glass shattered and rained down onto the street from the running blow. The *Salamander* was still charging.

Right into the mines.

The mines had been hastily hidden, concealed in hovercars on the street with trip lines carefully laid. Most were not even mines but ad hoc booby-traps, explosive laden cars. They went off, first one, then another. The *Salamander* was lifted by the concussion of the blast, tossed in the air slightly but appreciably. Its footing slipped mid-stride and the MechWarrior was obviously struggling to keep upright. It was a losing battle. Archer could see that the armor on its left leg was all but gone. Myomer strands, severed in the blast, snapped and hung outside like torn muscle tissues. The *Salamander* hit the ground at almost the same time as Katya's 'Mech.

Her *Daishi* dropped face forward, grinding into the pavement with a sickening metallic moan. Archer winced. Katya was down. Smoke billowed from half a dozen holes from the missile hits.

"Specter One to all commands, Brain is down. Send backup," he said as he locked onto the closing *Gunslinger*. Its six lasers lashed and pulsed out at him, a lightshow of green beams and brilliant red bursts of light reached out at his *Penetrator*. Several shots missed, but not nearly enough of them. His *Penetrator* seemed to scream from the impacts as armor melted and cut free from internal supports. A ripple of heat, suffocating, wrapped his body. *Damn you! Damn you all to hell.*

He fired. Not just one target interlock, but all of them. His ER lasers lanced out and caught the *Gunslinger* square on. The peppering crimson blasts from the medium pulse lasers seemed to hit everywhere. He knew that at least one of the shots missed, but most found their mark. The *Gunslinger*, its barrel chest puffing white smoke and a slick green streak from a severed coolant feed, still ran forward. The heat was searing in his cockpit as his chest sucked it in. It burned, it hurt, it reminded him that he was still alive.

Archer glanced over at the *Daishi*. It wasn't moving. No. It had to move. She had to be okay. She had been with him from the start. He was rocked suddenly from a hit to his leg, a gauss slug. It hit with a cracking sound, like a wet towel being snapped by his ear.

The *Gunslinger* was sixty yards away and slowing, readying for the kill. He looked at his damage display and saw the red and yellow warning lights, indications of the damage that he had taken. *Far too much in the red.*

Jabbing at the foot pedals, his *Penetrator* moved slowly, awkwardly. It was as if it was fighting him as much as the Loyalist 'Mech. The heat was playing havoc on it. He took a wobbly step forward and made sure he was still locked on target.

He waited what seemed like a lifetime for his ER lasers to recycle and recharge. Without even looking, he toggled one of them to the primary TIC and fired. The cockpit became an inferno. It didn't matter. If he cooked, he cooked. What was important was taking down this 'Mech.

The shot hit, barely, cutting from the right ankle of the *Gunslinger* upward to the thigh. It left a black steaming scar, sick, deep, hot. The *Gunslinger* was slowed as well. It aimed its Gauss rifles for another cycle.

They fired.

One shot passed his cockpit by less than two meters, the airblast buffeting him hard as it whizzed past. A millisecond later the second one plowed into his left torso as if he had been punched in the stomach. Archer lurched forward to meet the force of the shot, but he couldn't resist. The *Penetrator* that had carried him through so many battles was groaning under his efforts. A red warning light went off, flashing, a gyro hit. He contorted in his seat as if shifting his own weight was somehow going to help. There was a popping sound somewhere down under him, deep in the bowels of the BattleMech. An audible moan filled the cockpit and his neurohelmet.

The ground seemed to rush up at him. There was a sickening thud, a metallic ripping sound. His head slammed into the cockpit seat as he felt himself being tossed around. A warning went off, but the sound seemed lost in the roar that filled his ears. Archer looked out his cockpit, ignoring the thin crack up the middle. The air was so hot that it was almost impossible to breathe.

Across the way, only 20 meters distant, was the fallen form of the *Daishi*. He strained, stabbing at the foot controls. No response. Before the darkness overtook him, his last thoughts were not for his own safety, but that of Katya Chaffee.



Jackson walked into Katrina's office, the report in his hand. He had gotten the feed only a few minutes earlier. Perhaps it was the turn of luck for which they had been waiting. God knows they needed it.

"What is it?" Katrina demanded. "Word from Portsmouth?"

"Yes, Highness," he replied. "I just got confirmation from a unit in the city. The enemy still holds the city and the port facilities but we are making headway. More importantly, your brother's 'Mech has been taken down."

"Victor, dead?" For the first time in a long time, Jackson Davion saw the look of pure joy, almost twisted, in the eyes of the Archon-Princess.

"We're not sure. I had assembled a special lance to take out the Prince and General Christifori per your request. Headhunters. Both BattleMechs were taken down in battle but we were not able to confirm the status of the MechWarriors. Victor's people overran the position a few moments after Christifori went down. Unfortunately, all four of our MechWarriors were apparently killed in the action."

"Acceptable losses if Victor is dead," she replied.

Jackson said nothing. *Not for the families of the men and women that had been sent to their deaths.*

"Can we send in other forces?" she asked, waving aside the deaths. "We need to make sure that he is dead."

A knock came to the door followed by a military sentry. "Apologies for the intrusion, Highness."

"This had better be important," Katrina snapped.

"It is," the adjutant officer replied. "We just got reports of an invasion."

"We're aware of that," Katrina replied. "The situation in Portsmouth has been going on for hours."

"Highness," the officer said, obviously nervous. "These landings are on the north end of the island. Initial reports show multiple regiments dropping in. Prince Victor has been sighted on the field of battle. Kai Allard has been seen at the head of the Outland Legion, driving off to form flanking positions." The officer handed the report to Jackson Davion. His eyes raced through the materials.

"Impossible," Katrina said, rising to her feet. "Victor is dead. Christifori is dead. Allard is in Portsmouth."

Jackson threw the report onto her desk with what force he could. "It's not impossible Princess. As was my initial fear, we have been duped. Portsmouth was a diversion. I'm going to pull the Seventeen Avalon and Twenty Second Avalon Hussars out immediately to challenge these new landings. The Tenth Deneb will need to be extracted from Portsmouth immediately and rushed to the north too."

"But Victor."

"Victor has fooled us," Jackson said. "It may have cost him Christifori, but the cost was well worth it for him if he secures a beachhead."

"Damn him," she spat.

Jackson said nothing. He simply saluted and turned. There was much to do. The war had taken a whole new twist.

Chapter Five

Barrington, Rear Area Field Hospital New Avalon, Crucis March Federated Suns 25 March 3067

His throat was so dry that it hurt as he gulped. Archer knew that the smell he was catching, the whiff of chemicals mixed with his own bad breath, meant one thing—he was in a hospital. For a moment, he didn't want to open his eyes. He didn't want to know how bad it was.

The last memories that he had were not good. Katya was down and not responsive. An almost fanatical pair of 'Mechs were rushing them. There was fire. His *Penetrator* had keeled over, baking him like an oven. It had been a long time since he had passed out due to heat build-up, but the memories of it were never fond.

There was no point stalling any longer. His eyes were caked at the edges but eventually opened. Yes, a field hospital. The white curtain blocking his view was a clue. Shifting slightly in his bed, Archer's muscles ached but he felt all of his limbs. That was a good sign. Turning, he saw an IV bottle hanging next to him. Yes, he was alive, battered, baked, but alive.

What about Katya?

He rose slightly in his bed and was surprised that he could. The privacy curtains on either side of him blocked his view, but at the foot of the bed a nurse emerged. Wearing green fatigues under a white smock, she moved in quickly to help him to a sitting position. "Take it easy, General," she assured him.

"Situation?" he rasped, his voice barely audible.

"Relax, sir. Some of your personnel are here. They knew you'd want a full briefing. I'll get them." The fact that she wasn't hovering over him told him that his own situation was not serious. He didn't matter anyway. Archer's real focus was his people, his command.

Lieutenant Thomas Sherwood entered first, followed by Captain Kraff. Both men looked alright, though Archer noted that Sherwood had a bruise on his forehead that had to feel worse than it looked.

The nurse returned quickly with a glass of water and a bent straw. Archer took a long drag and the water stung at his throat. He winced and was almost embarrassed by the gesture.

His voice had returned. "What's the situation, gentlemen?"

Sherwood spoke first. "Major Gett assumed command and coordinated our extraction sir. Our losses are pretty significant, currently we show less than 32% operational effectiveness. We took one hell of a beating."

"The Loyalists took worse," Kraff added. "A *lot* worse."

Thirty-two percent? The loss was staggering. Casualties and damaged equipment would account for a lot of that, but it still meant many good men and women dead. Killed under his command. More blood on Katherine's hands... "What about the primary assault? Any word from the attacking force?"

"Reports in from General Sortek, Kai Allard, and General Sanchez all indicate that they have secured a strong beachhead on Avalon Island with minimal losses. Fighting was rough, but a lot less than if we had not made our diversionary attack."

"What about Colonel Chaffee?" he asked.

There was a hesitation. The two officers looked at each other. He felt a knot in the pit of his stomach. "What is it?"

"The Colonel was badly injured," Kraff said, minus his usual gruffness. "By the time we got to you, two 'Mechs were about to grind you both into greasy spots on the ferrocrete. It was some sort of headhunter lance; they fought right to the end. Damned fanatics."

"How is she?" he pressed.

Lieutenant Sherwood broke in. "She's going to pull through, but she's pretty busted up sir. Her legs are broken—it looks like her cockpit got pretty battered up. She was lucky that her fire suppression system kicked in or she could be facing severe burns." He paused for a moment. "She came around a few hours ago and her first question was how you were."

Archer allowed himself a thin grin of satisfaction, if only for a few seconds. "I need to get back to duty. We have work to do. We've got to get the regiment back up to ready status in case the Prince needs us."

"General," came a voice from behind the white privacy curtain. A short muscular man stepped around the corner. It was Prince Victor Steiner-Davion. "That won't be necessary. You and your personnel can stand down for now."

Christifori sat up a little more and gave him a salute, which he returned. "Sir, what are you saying?"

"General Christifori, the Avengers fulfilled their mission gloriously. I came here to tell you that, and to thank you. If it wasn't for your efforts, we would have lost many more people. Your people are tough as nails, tougher," Victor cast a nod to the officers of the Avengers regiment.

"You're going to be held in reserve, but I'm hoping we won't need your troops any more. God knows they've done their bit for king and country, as have you. But they've been rebuilt and refitted a lot in the last few years. The Avengers have helped win us a signal victory in the assault on Avalon Island. It's time for some of our other troops to finish this up."

"Sir, my men..."

Victor cut him off. "Archer, your troops are going to need you. You've suffered substantial losses. Trust me when I say this, if we need you, you and they will need to be ready. I'm just hoping it won't come to that."

"Sir," Archer stirred in his bed. "I was hoping to be there at the end."

"You are there, General," the Prince replied. "But I haven't forgotten my word to you months ago. You'll have to forgive my rush, but I'm needed elsewhere. When the time comes, you'll hear from me. Until then, your orders are to get your unit patched up." Victor glanced at his chronometer and gave Archer a short nod. Archer saluted. He understood. It took a great deal for the Prince to come to the rear area when the fighting was still going on. It was a mark of respect. *I only hope I've earned it.*



"Simon," Katrina said, templing her fingers in front of her. Her office went silent as she spoke, eerily silent. "You have let me down. You have let down the whole of the Federated Commonwealth."

Because of you, and your incompetence, my brother has been able to land his troops on Avalon Island."

Simon Gallagher did his best to restrain his nervousness, but Katherine could see it. A bead of sweat on the brow, a hand tapping on the arm of the chair. *Good, he understands that his life is on the line, Champion or no.* "Your Highness, I have already sacked the personnel responsible for this grievous error. From where I sat, with the intelligence at hand, the landings in Portsmouth looked to be the primary assault."

Katrina shot a glance at Jackson Davion, then back to her pet Field Marshal. "We are far too pressed right now for me to try and replace you, regardless of what I think of your competence, Simon," she fired back. "But know this, if Victor reaches this palace, you have plenty on your files that he will find most amusing. You will, as will your family. I will see to that myself. Do I make myself clear?"

For a heartbeat, Simon Gallagher said nothing. Staring at her coldly, he understood the implications of what she was saying. For him, there would be no endgame. "I understand you completely, your Highness."

"Good," she replied. "Because this war is not mine alone. Everyone loyal to me stands to lose everything should we fail here."

"Everyone..."



General Christifori stood beside her bed. Two IV bottles fed Katya, keeping her alive and hydrated. The nurse had told him, advanced neurofeedback. The hits had set off an internal explosion that had sent a pulse of bio-electrical feedback into her neurohelmet and right into her brain. It was the bane of a MechWarrior. The condition was survivable, but painful.

Archer reached out and took her hand. It didn't move. She had been there with him from the beginning. In fact, it was her prodding that had convinced him to take a stand against Katherine. Now she was lying here, in a hospital bed, because he had ordered her into action.

Damn.

Archer winced. If she were awake, he knew she would be pushing him, telling him not to waste time at her bedside. With Katya, the cause had been everything. Taking out Katherine had been the focus of her last few years. Injury would not stop that.

Christifori leaned over her. "I'm always counting on you to be my conscious, Katya. Now you can't. So what would you want me to do?" He spoke in a low tone, almost a whisper.

No response came. He didn't expect any. In his mind he heard her talking. Heard her words. He nodded. "Alright then. Once more unto the breach, eh?"

He let go of her limp hand and turned away. Activating his comm unit he signaled. "This is Specter One. What's the status of my 'Mech?"

"Sir," came a voice that could only be Major Gett. "Why do you want to know?"

"Major, I assure you I don't need or want a lecture. What is the status of my 'Mech?"

"Sir," she replied curtly. "Your *Penetrator* is little more than a shell. It's going to take two days and two teams to get it operational. We don't have any reserve equipment not allocated."

"Then get those teams to work, priority one," he said. Turning he gave Katya a glance. "Yes, my friend, I'll end this thing once and for all."

Chapter Six

Approaching the Davion Palace New Avalon, Crucis March Federated Suns 20 April 3067

Sergeant Reed swung his battered *Lancelot* wide of the incoming missile salvo. The SRM carrier had unleashed a volley of death and destruction down at his position at maximum range. The stubby missiles twisted and contorted, raining down all around him. His *Lancelot* quaked. Its right arm, already a mangled clump of metal, caught three warheads, twisting it around even more. A puff of white smoke popped out from the elbow actuator and he watched as the metal and myomer stump dropped off to the ground. The 'Mech's weight shifted with the loss of the arm, but he easily compensated.

Suddenly he saw something out of the right side of his cockpit. It was a BattleMech and according to his tactical display, it was friendly. The massive bird-like 'Mech was a dull primer gray color, obviously repair armor plating. It stopped and leveled its massive arms out for a shot. He watched as glowing-jade beams stabbed out at the SRM Carrier.

The boxy little tank was easily in range and tried to make a break for better cover. The beams sliced its flank armor, cutting long black slashes. Reed watched as smoke, oily black, rose from the rear hit. The SRM carrier lurched to a sudden stop. Hatches opened and the crew began to crawl. The smoke seemed to come from every seam, every crack, every hatch. Small wisps, then tendrils of twisted darkness.

Then it blew up.

It was an orange ball of fire that engulfed everything around the SRM tank. The blast was massive and over in less than a second. The crew never stood a chance. Sergeant Reed was stunned at what he had seen. If not for the 'Mech, a *Penetrator*, arriving, he might have been wiped out.

He stabbed his comm panel. "Whoever you are, thanks for the assist."

A very solemn, almost calming voice came back to him. "The Remagan boys are a tough unit. Watch yourself trooper."

"Who are you?" Reed asked.

"Christifori," came back the voice. "General Christifori." Suddenly the *Penetrator* turned and ran off, obviously having detected another target. Reed sat in his *Lancelot's* command seat, his mouth hanging agape. He had heard stories from the other MechWarriors about Christifori. For the last few weeks, he and members of his unit had been operating as an independent command. Word was that Prince Victor had ignored the action. There had been rumors that Christifori and a lance or two of 'Mechs had showed up at several battles, the Avengers adding their fire in, almost always in the nick of time, then disappearing.

Some of the men said that Christifori was sanctioned, that the Prince was using him to help troubleshoot battlefield areas...a fire-fighting unit. Word was that his own regiment, Archer's Avengers, were being disbanded.

Reed had written it all off as rumor. Now he saw differently. Christifori had appeared, saved his butt, then taken off.

Damn, I didn't even get a chance to thank him. He realized that his peers were never going to believe what had happened.

***Forward Observation Post
New Avalon, Crucis March
Federated Suns
22 April 3067***

The hovercar was a staff vehicle, bearing two fender flags. The traditional flags of the defunct Federated Commonwealth had obviously been replaced with handmade flags. One was a white flag of truce, the other was the single gold star above the symbol for the Federated Suns—the sign of the Marshal of the Armies. Victor stood in his MechWarrior's shorts and tee-shirt, arms resting on his hips as the car pulled up. The tiny flags stopped fluttering and the door opened. A regal man rose from the back seat. His uniform was pristine, his face was lean and tight. He was tall, and as he looked at Victor he had to look downward. There was a familiarity between the men, genetic. It was in the eyes and cheeks.

The drive had been short. Prince Victor's forces were just outside of the palace itself. The broadband carrier transmission had called for a cease-fire, which had surprised everyone on both sides of the conflict.

Jackson Davion stepped forward and saluted Victor Steiner-Davion. As he clicked his heels together, his spurs jingled. The gathering crowd of officers circling the staff car were surprised by the gesture. They were more surprised when Victor returned the salute.

"You called for a cease-fire, Jackson," Victor said coolly. "I assume that your intentions are honorable and that this isn't some vain effort to buy you time."

Jackson's face betrayed no emotions. "No ploy, Victor. Katrina... Katherine sent me here to negotiate the surrender of the palace."

Victor paused, glancing over at the man at his side, Kai Allard, then to the other officers gathered. As he returned his gaze to Jackson Davion, he crossed his arms defiantly. "Our terms are unaltered. Unconditional surrender. Your forces must stand down, surrender their armaments, vehicles and BattleMechs. Prisoners not involved in war crimes will be paroled accordingly."

"I understand," he replied. "I know that she will ask, so I must as well. What will become of her?"

Now Victor put on his poker-face. "I will be honest, Jackson, our efforts have been concentrated on fighting the war. My plans for

peace-time have been second-fiddle to our combat mission. I will say this, though. She needs to be surrendered to my forces immediately. Personally."

"I do not think that will be a problem," Jackson replied. "At this point I think she expects that."

Victor nodded. "Her custody is important, Jackson. If you'd like, I can send an emissary with you to take her under arrest. That is the quickest way for us to ensure that no one else dies in this conflict." His words were not hollow. While a cease-fire was in place, it was perilous and any small incident could cause it to erupt in full battle. The war was long and the emotions tied to it ran very deep with the troops on both sides.

"I agree," Jackson replied.

Victor scanned the eyes of his officers gathered around the staff car. Each and every one of them had earned the right to go. A part of him wanted to be the one that went to Katherine herself. But this was a political opportunity, a chance to restore the lines of the Federated Commonwealth.

"General Christifori?" Victor called. Archer stepped forward. Like Victor, he was donned in his MechWarrior gear. His tee shirt was soaked in sweat, having just been pulled from the lines.

"Highness?"

"I have one last assignment for you."



Katrina caressed the arms of the throne. Closing her eyes, she could feel the arms of it in her hands. This was the place from which her father had ruled. It was a Davion throne, a throne of power. From this place, from this seat, the fate of the Inner Sphere had rested. It was hers, but in a few minutes, it would not be.

I'll be back...someday, somehow.

She heard the footsteps in the room on the marble floor. Slowly, dangerously, she opened her eyes and saw the figures before the throne. An officer, a General, in a dress uniform. It had obviously been a last minute addition; his face still showed some of the

grime of battle. His face was familiar, but she did not focus on it. At least he was civilized enough to have dressed appropriately for court. Next to him was Jackson Davion, her defrocked Marshal of the Armies.

"I have done as you asked," Jackson said formally. "Prince Victor has offered no terms other than your arrest and unconditional surrender. Given our current state, I felt compelled to accept." She noticed that he no longer addressed her as "Highness." It was already over—it had been so for some time.

"Very well," she said, waving her hand as if to dismiss him and his words. She rose slowly, almost wearily from the throne and took a step down to the marble floor.

"May I present the emissary of your brother. This is General Archer Christifori. General Christifori, this is Katherine Steiner-Davion." Jackson had not lost his formality or dignity given the circumstances. He waved his arm during the introduction as if court were in session.

Christifori stepped forward. There was no bowing, no averting of the eyes, no signs of respect for her authority. Yes, his face had appeared different in the holodisplay images. He was less imposing. Victor's public relations staff had done a good job. Katrina stepped in front of him. "So you are Archer Christifori? Somehow I was led to believe you'd be much more."

His eyes met hers and for three seconds, said nothing. "Oddly enough, I was thinking the same thing."

"I suppose Victor send you here to gloat?"

"No," Archer replied. "He chose me so that the media could get a picture of me, a FedCom officer, leading you out of the palace. He felt that the image would play well in the Lyran Alliance."

"According to my intelligence, you hate the media." Her words were coy, as if she were digging at his motivation.

He offered her nothing but a poker-face stare. "I do. But this one time I'm willing to bend even my own rules. I owe that to my people."

"Your people? You mean my people."

"They ceased to be yours a long time ago," he responded.

She ignored the entire line of argument. "That's right," she said with a wry smile. *You petty little man.* "You lived on Thorin if I remember correctly."

"Yes."

"And you blame me for your sister's death? How sad for you. I never even heard of you or your sister. Your entire involvement with this war was a mistake on your part. I didn't kill her; I didn't even order her death. You've been fighting for no reason at all."

Archer's face reddened slightly. *Good, I got to him.* "I'm not surprised that you don't know her name. Petty tyrants often stomp on people and never know the names of their victims. Yes, Katherine, you didn't order her death, but you pardoned her killer. In many respects, that's worse."

"Watch your words General," she said bitterly.

"I will not," he spat back. "You're not a Princess any more," he snapped back. "You're just a person. One that will be held accountable for her crimes."

"We shall see."

"Yes," Archer grinned. Reaching down to his belt, he held up a pair of restraints. "But that is the future. It is for people in pay bands above mine to ponder. This is the present. For now, Katherine, put these on and I will take you to Victor. You can discuss your plans for the future with him. As of now, consider yourself under arrest and susceptible to the military code of justice."

She glared at the restraints. *Handcuffs? Who does he think he is?* "I will not put those on. I am royalty."

Archer said nothing. Stepping forward, he slapped them on her wrists. The metal was cold and hit her left wrist bone hard. It hurt, not much, but enough. "I assume you don't want me to carry you out of here for the media on my shoulder? Please—" he hesitated, "please say yes. Nothing would make me happier right now."

Her jaw locked in anger. She stepped beside him, lowering her cuffed hands. He put his hand on the center of her back and led her out of the throne room. He would pay for what he'd done. *They all will pay...*

Epilogue

Ecol City, Thorin Militia Parade Grounds Thorin, Lyran Alliance 15 September 3067

Archer stood on the field inside the palace grounds and made his way to the podium. He had been asked to take part in the ceremony inside, but had declined. His job was done. There was no need for the media to see his face. In fact, he was looking forward to the obscurity. *I hope I can rebuild the family business...*

In front of him was what was left of Archer's Avengers. They stood at parade rest, perfect formation. Some were bandaged. Some, like Colonel Chaffee, had to have help to stand even after the months of recuperation during the trip home. She, like everyone else, had come to this place, for one last ceremony...one last gathering.

"My friends," Archer began, his voice hesitating and almost cracking. "And you are my friends. We began this fight back on our homes. We fought in the Lyran Alliance and even in the heart of the Jade Falcons honor. We went to Twycross and tangled with their best, plucking the wings right off of the Falcon Guards.

"We all came for different reasons but for one common goal—to end the reign of a tyrant. That has been done. There is no longer a need for the Avengers, not now. Prince Victor has sent formal congratulations to us as a unit. We have earned our pay and earned the respect of the people we left behind. Moreover, we've earned the respect of the men and women who are no longer in our ranks, those that died at our sides on the field of combat." He paused, lowered his eyes for a moment. There were so many.

"I was going to do a long speech," he said, wadding up his notes and sliding them off the podium, "but that isn't necessary. What matters is this: the Avengers are family. If called upon again, we would serve. The time for service for most of us is now over. Some of you are being offered positions in the Thorin FTM. For those of you that take those commissions, I offer you the best of luck. I would say, 'make me proud,' but you all already have.

"But that is the future. This is now. Usually when a war is over units like ours are disbanded. I have conferred with the Prince on this. We are not breaking up. You can't break up a family like us. On the books, we will still be listed as active duty. The reason is simple, there may yet be a time when the Avengers have to take up arms.

My final command to you, all of you, for now, is go home. Put this damn war behind us. Be with your loved ones. If you make as good citizens as you did fighters, our people will always be proud of you and so will I. Go to your families, return to your lives, but never forget our time together. Never forget when a handful of good men and women made a difference.

"Avengers, I salute you." He snapped to a pristine salute. The troopers went to attention and saluted back. There wasn't a dry eye staring back at him. The salt from his own tears stung at the edges of his eyes. He didn't let his voice waver despite the desire to do so. Out of respect for those that faced him, he maintained his last bit of control and restraint. Not just for them, but for all of the troops he had commanded that were no longer alive, or were in a hospital somewhere. They deserved a moment of dignity.

"Regiment," he barked out. "Dismissed!"

The End