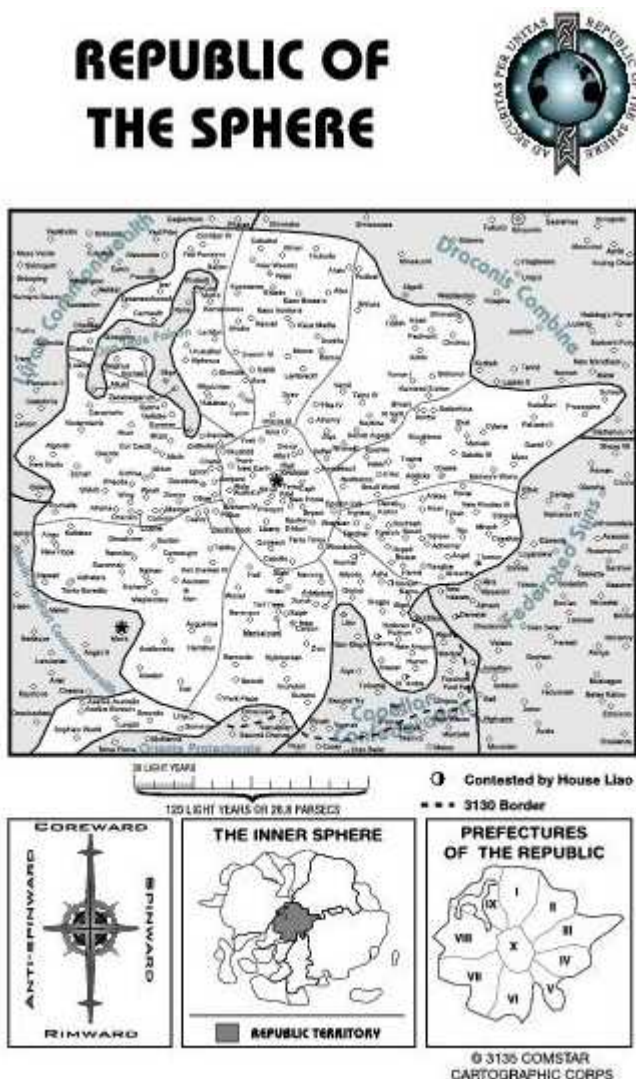


This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's Imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

The Penguin Putnam Inc. World Wide Web site address is <http://www.penguinputnam.com>



For Sharon Turner Mulvihill and Mike Mulvihill.
Great friends.

Acknowledgments

Working on *Sword of Sedition* was a treat and a terror. We spent so many years creating The Republic and introducing a cast of characters, and then Jordan Weisman asks me to take it, add a secondary cast,

larger plotlines, nitroglycerin, and shake it all up. Never a dull moment. And with support from so many good people, we'll keep bringing you more and more surprises.

Thanks to Jordan and Dawne Weisman and everyone at WizKids who continue to work very hard on this universe. A special thanks to Sharon Turner Mulvihill, who labors tirelessly with the authors to get our work out there. I'd be lost without her. And a big welcome to Liz Scheier, our newest shepherd at Roc books.

Big-time appreciation to Kris Rusch and Dean Smith, incredible teachers and even better friends. Allen and Amy Mattila, for their friendship. Randall and Tara Bills, Bryn and Ryana and now Kenyon Aleksandr, who are a large part of our lives. Phil DeLuca, Kelle Vozka, Erik, and Alex. Peter and Kathy Orullian, and Cheyenne. Russell and Bobbie Loveday, and Dwayne and Raven.

Mike Stackpole, Herb "Snuggles" Beas, Chris Hartford, Christoffer "Bones" Trossen, and our "cartographer" Øystein Tvedten. "Team Battle Tech" members Pete Smith, Chas Borner, Warner Doles and now David Stansel-Garner, without whom BattleCorps.com would never have gotten off the ground. Also, Alexander "Wild Knight" Strong, who gave me a good laugh and contributed to the "newswire" clips.

And to the new generation of writers it is my privilege to work with on BattleCorps.com : Ilsa Bick, Kevin Killiany, Phaedra Weldon, Louisa Swann, Steve Mohan, and Dan Duval. Welcome to the neighborhood.

Always—always!—the deepest of thanks to my wife, Heather Joy, for her love and generous support. My children, Talon, Conner, and Alexia, who are growing up far too fast. And yeah, the cats. Chaos, Rumor and Ranger. Our local "nobles." And Loki, our neurotic border collie and court jester.

TRIALS OF DAMOCLES

"Politics is war without bloodshed, while war is politics with bloodshed."

—Mao Zedong, "On Protracted War," May 1938

"Politics is the real two-edged sword. It always draws blood."

—(Exarch) Jonah Levin, "Overheard Conversations, Vol. IV," Terra, 4 December 3134

1

Historically, the proof is there. If you look—if you think past all the white noise the governments bombard us with from every media outlet—there is a trip-wire mentality among the Marches that when the strength of local military forces exceeds a certain ratio to the direct power supporting the Davion throne . . . a war happens. I've put my own life in danger by pointing this out, you understand. You have to let the people know!

—Free Radio, "TALK Conspiracies," New Avalon,

19 August 3134

Kathil

Federated Suns

17 December 3134

Julian Davion hunched over the ConstructionMech's controls, working backhoe scoops as they broke apart pale green sod and exposed the rich black soil.

Clawing down into hardscrabble and clay.

Widening the foundation for a new perimeter-gun emplacement at Kathil's Yare Industries.

The machine's cab smelled and tasted of diesel fumes. And honest sweat, though not Julian's own. The reversed buckets required a firm hand to control, in contrast to the responsiveness of the weapons systems of a BattleMech, and when the internal-combustion engine labored, growling under the load and coughing oily smoke into the air, there was no comparing this machine to the war avatar the prince's champion normally piloted.

Wasn't even in the same class.

Not yet.

Julian's "handler," standing on the edge of the excavation, gave him two thumbs up and then made punching motions. Both men wore sound-dampening headgear, a must for anyone spending long hours on the construction site, and didn't even try shouting to each other. Julian simply nodded, and lifted the full buckets up to the machine's chest height.

Throttling back on rocker pedals, he slowly reversed the bipedal machine away from the planned emplacement. One step. Two. A loud, shrill beeping warned others away from the lumbering 'Mech. Julian stopped, then pivoted in a shuffling sidestep to swing the buckets over the back of a dumper, clutching the triggers on each control stick. The buckets up-ended to dump sod and dirt and clods of red clay into the truck's low-walled bed. In a new trick he'd learned from Buddy Harris, Julian twisted the control sticks inward to knock the heavy steel buckets together. More clumps dropped out, shaken loose by the beating. Only then did he ease off the triggers so the buckets tucked back under long double-jointed arms. He swung the machine back around, ready for another go at the growing excavation.

And saw the site foreman and Duchess Amanda Hasek standing next to his handler.

Buddy frantically waved one arm for attention and made a familiar throat-slashing motion, as common on any battlefield as it was on a construction site.

Julian chopped at the kill switch, felt the engine die with a couple of hitching coughs. He sagged back for a few breaths, felt the seat's hard, premolded plastic through the thin padding someone had pressure-taped into place. Shook his head. It had been too good to last.

Rolling down the wrinkled sleeves of his chambray work shirt, Julian refastened the cuffs at his wrists and did his best to brush the wrinkles flat. He hung his ear protection on an overhead hook, but kept the yellow hard hat, which was only common sense on a work site. Then he patted the cab's dashboard with

something like affection, or apology. Before Christmas, he knew, the ConstructionMech's yellow-tinted foul weather shroud would be ripped away and true ferroglass armor added in its stead. One of the machine's back-scooping arms would be replaced with a light autocannon or missile-pack refit. Technicians would then rivet red danger signs over the construction-classic bumblebee striping, warning against fire or intense heat and giving proper loading instructions for the ammunition case, and care of the machine would afterward be shared with an ordnance specialist.

This ConstructionMech and others like it were to be added to Kathil's local garrison, requisitioned into military service. Julian had signed those orders yesterday.

Just one of many changes coming to Kathil as the Federated Suns prepared for war.

The 'Mech's engine *ticked* off the seconds as it cooled. Cranking open the narrow door, Julian grabbed an overhead rung and levered himself out of the cab. From an easy perch on the 'Mech's blocky hip joint, he took a quick survey. Yare Industries' geothermal plant lay a kilometer back, hunkered down between two low hills, dominated by the massive, twenty-story-high tower dish used to beam microwave energy up to orbiting Kathil spacedocks. Staggered between the plant and Julian's excavation were four other active work sites. IndustrialMechs labored alongside dozers and cranes. Crews of men and women, all working on the fortified bunkers meant to house soldiers and equipment, scurried around the large equipment.

And a short jaunt to one side, half-hidden behind tall, blooming dogwoods, was the executive VTOL that had ferried Duchess Hasek to the site. A small security contingent secured the area, including a pair of Pegasus scout vehicles and a squad of Infiltrator Mark II battlesuit troopers. Security Service agents in their suit jackets and dark glasses spread out in a wide fan to keep anyone else from approaching either the duchess or the site foreman, David Styles. Lines had already started forming.

More delays.

Leaning out from the side of the ConstructionMech, Julian cupped one hand around his mouth. "Decided to survey the project, Duchess?" Of course, he knew what had actually brought the grande dame out to Yare.

"Looking for you," she shouted back. Her voice was thin, but piercing.

Expecting her arrival through most of the morning, sweating through a mixture of anticipation and dread, Julian nodded and shifted his weight past the hip joint. A short ladder welded to the 'Mech's left leg made for an easy climb down. Dropping the last meter, he landed on slightly bent legs, then straightened to his full height to work the kinks out of his back. Julian stood one point eight meters, though his mother always said he carried himself as if taller. His father's name for it had been "bearing."

Sometimes Julian still heard The Chairman's voice in his head.

"A real man stands straighter when he's not carrying lies on his back or dishonor in his heart."

Julian welcomed those moments, liking to think he took after his father in more than looks. The same reddish-blond hair and healthy complexion, strong chin and hazel eyes, square shoulders. Christoffer Davion never served one day in military service, and had preferred his elected status as Argyle's world chairman to any noble title the Davion name brought home. But he'd have never begrudged his son the opportunity of fine schools and military academies, or the direct sponsorship of their cousin, First Prince Harrison.

“Men choose how to live their own lives.”

Which Julian accepted as a difficult truth. Ultimately, he had chosen to live his life under the bright edge of a suspended sword.

Julian believed his father would have liked seeing him graduate the New Avalon Military Academy, *and* being named the youngest prince’s champion in the history of the Federated Suns. It was a reassurance he’d held to for fourteen years, ever since his father passed. Twenty-seven now, he saw no reason to let it go.

Not even under Amanda Hasek’s disapproving frown.

“You certainly didn’t make yourself easy to find,” she scolded him.

Duchess of New Syrtis and Minister of the Capellan March—in charge of fully one-fourth of the Federated Suns’ star-spanning nation—Amanda Hasek’s glares had been known to melt generals and cause lesser nobility to quake. A powerful and dangerous woman. Still, her heart-shaped face had a strong, straightforward beauty that so reminded Julian of Prince Harrison’s first wife, the duchess’ younger sister. Turning matronly in her sixties, Amanda gave in slightly to her years by allowing a touch of gray at her temples to feather into the coal-dark hair she wore swept up and back in the latest fashion.

She cupped her hands over her ears in an effort to cut down on the noise of so many nearby machines. It was a large project. Julian doubted Yare Industries had seen this much activity since the Fourth Succession War.

The excavation was too big to jump, so Julian walked around the nearer side. The warm scent of turned earth rose to meet him. He was only half a dozen steps away from her when he finally said, “Well, you found me.” A ghost of a smile. “Which I suppose means that I’m done for the day.”

Buddy Harris gave the prince’s champion a friendly wink as he passed, heading for the ConstructionMech and his regular job. Julian offered his hand to the second man—the one who stood stiffly at Amanda’s side. David Styles looked like a scared wolf caught in a steel trap, desperate enough to chew off a leg to escape. He was obviously unused to visiting royalty, especially on an actual work site. It had taken Julian days to break through the foreman’s natural deference to hear what the man actually *thought* .

Now he felt reluctance return in Styles’ weak grip.

“Thank you for your time, Lord Davion. You handle a CM well.”

“A cockpit’s a cockpit,” Julian said. “And I hate standing around.” Buddy was already back in his cab, waiting for the order to restart. “I hope I didn’t cost you much in lost time.”

“Not at all,” the foreman politely lied.

Julian laughed. “Thank you, David.”

Taking that as his dismissal, the foreman bowed briefly to Julian and deeper to Amanda Hasek. “My Lord. Duchess.” He backed away quickly, then fled at a stiff walk to the next closest work site. The waiting lines trailed after him.

“Any news from ComStar?” Julian asked soon as the other man was out of earshot. Turning the duchess toward business before she pounced on any more of his shortcomings.

Amanda shook her head, mouth pinched into a tight grimace. “Nothing beyond what we have already heard. A priority message from The Republic, being delivered by diplomatic courier. Once it has been decrypted and all codes verified as genuine, it shall post according to diplomatic rank.”

Julian’s frown sat heavy on his face. “By courier,” he said. He made it sound like a curse.

It was, in a way. Certainly a far cry from the efficiency of ComStar’s vast interstellar network only two years prior. Before the Blackout. Practically overnight, upwards of eighty percent of all hyperpulse generators, which made instant communication possible between stars and stellar empires, quit talking to one another. And even those that worked did so sporadically, reaching only a few stations in the available network.

Kathil’s HPG was one of the silent ones.

“Three weeks from origin.” Julian shook his head. “Four years ago, a secure verifax could have made the transmission relay in three days.”

Or even in as many hours, at the highest-class priority. There was no way to tell even that, anymore. This hand-carried message might bring word of new trade offers from The Republic of the Sphere, or the flare-up of a violent boundary dispute. Tempers were running short on many worlds guarding the borders of the young nation. It might be the arrival of a dignitary. A natural catastrophe. Intelligence reports.

“It could be news of an invasion,” he said. “And we would not know until all passcodes and red tape procedures are verified.”

“Faith forbid!” Amanda was quick to say. But her brown eyes were veiled. Hardened.

Not that Julian needed any overt signs. He knew the Haseks’ Capellan March was lacking only an excuse to break the peace and invade the nearby Capellan Confederation. Or strike at the ever-troublesome Taurian Concordat. People were scared. Planetary governments were nervous. And despite fifty years of military downsizing, everyone was still too well-armed.

Even the duchess’ presence here, visiting Kathil, was a sign of the distrust building between Prince Harrison and the Federated Suns’ stronger noble families. Harrison Davion, as well, lived under the sword, mortgaging strained relations against the future of his realm.

At least with the duchess on Kathil, there was no immediate threat from New Syrtis. And whatever news had come from The Republic would come to them first.

Julian saw Buddy still waiting, and gave him a high thumbs-up. As the ConstructionMech’s engine roared back to life, dumping more oily smoke from its stackpipes, he caught Amanda’s elbow and escorted her away from the excavation. He noticed some gray dust staining the lower legs of his black trousers, and stopped to brush at them without much hope of success.

“Julian.” Amanda Hasek shook her head. “You’re a mess.”

He would be by her standards, of course, having spent the morning on site. But what else was there to

be done? “Plans can look fine on the table, Amanda, and be wrong for the field. You don’t leave military planning to civilian contractors.”

“Yes. But you do not trade skilled labor for an academy-trained MechWarrior either. Although Sandra wagered with me that I’d find you at the controls of some machine out here.”

Lady Sandra Fenlon was Amanda’s ward, and the duchess’ calculated attempt at matchmaking had been painfully obvious to both young nobles. Privately, they had agreed to let Amanda believe it was working. Better that, they decided, than worrying about whom the duchess had in her second-string lineup. For either of them.

“There’s so much to do,” Julian said, keeping to the subject. “This morning I had to shut down a site that was half-completed.”

He pointed out an abandoned work area where three high slab walls stood over a finished excavation and new-poured foundation. Half a kilometer behind it rose the massive, twenty-story satellite dish of Yare’s geothermal station.

“What was wrong with the site?” Amanda asked, studying the layout for herself and not seeing the problem.

“Too close to the microwave tower. Too far from the next supporting bunker. If it were me, I’d throw a combined-arms company right at it, with flankers to hold off any chance for reinforcement from the east or west.”

He made a steeple with his hands, showing the maneuver. Then *clap!*

“Bring them together, smash the defensive line, and storm the facility.”

The ground-based power stations were a known weakness of the orbiting shipyards. House Liao had pointed that out over a century ago, during the Fourth Succession War, and might have seriously undermined the Davion offensive if the Kathil Uhlans hadn’t successfully defended the world.

During the Steiner-Davion civil war the shipyard itself came under fire, and this local ground facility had been all but destroyed in the fighting as Prince Victor’s supporters rose up against the usurper’s garrison. Katherine Steiner-Davion had not relinquished her hold on the Federated Suns easily, and Kathil had been a hotly contested world over most of five years.

And right on its heels had come the Word of Blake’s Jihad, dragging the entire Inner Sphere to the brink of ruin.

Julian had studied the history of all three wars very closely, and recently had refreshed himself on Kathil’s failed defense during the Jihad. Victor Steiner-Davion, in fact, had authored several political and military papers about Kathil. Julian found his study of the man as fascinating as what Victor had had to say about the importance and vulnerabilities of such high-profile worlds—namely, that they were nearly impossible to hold, or to take, without ruining the infrastructure that made them valuable in the first place. Not without years of preparations and a unified vision for their defense.

Harrison Davion wanted no part in such destruction, which was why the first prince had dispatched his champion to oversee these final stages of planning—a decision that did not sit well with Amanda Hasek, or with other Capellan March nobles who wanted less interference from their prince, not more.

“And we are truly certain that House Liao will suddenly come for Kathil one day?” the duchess asked.

“They will,” Julian promised. “Suddenly come for Kathil. One day.”

Unless the Confederation was already defeated, he *did not* say.

He sounded so certain because it was his profession. Julian could read the signs—and the intelligence reports. The shadows of war loomed, and not just within the Federated Suns. Peace was at an end unless calmer heads prevailed very, very soon.

“Fighting in the Draconis Reach has intensified,” he said. This was the private, silent conflict financed against House Kurita by the Sandoval dynasty, noble heirs and ministers of the Federated Suns’ Draconis March. “The Republic of the Sphere is being torn apart from several directions, as well as from within. And if Daoshen Liao was not so preoccupied with reclaiming lost worlds from The Sphere, he might already be coming for us. When the Confederation does turn in this direction—not if!—Kathil, with its shipyards, will be a key world.”

Amanda Hasek might be born and raised among the Federated Suns’ nobility, but she knew enough of the leveraging of focused violence to at least appreciate the danger, and nodded.

“Especially when the Capellan Confederation has barely recovered from losing their own primary shipyards at Necromo during the Blakist Jihad,” she said. Noting Julian’s raised eyebrows, she added, “I do read my generals’ reports. It’s hard to forget the account of an entire world *sterilized*.”

She looked into the distance. “Kathil must shine like a forbidden gem to the Liao chancellor.”

The prospect of war, and her Capellan March turned into a battleground, turned the duchess’ mood very quickly. She walked along in silence for a moment, and Julian wished desperately to know what she might be thinking. Of ways to prepare? Or of taking the war to the Confederation’s chancellor?

And, sadly, knew that either was preferable to his prince’s true worry. That after half a century of near-autonomous rule, the Haseks were beginning to look very seriously at New Avalon, the very throne of the Federated Suns.

“The prince only has your best interests in mind,” Julian prompted the duchess.

Another long pause.

“When Isabella was alive, I don’t remember Harrison being such an alarmist,” she finally said.

Julian steeled himself against any outward reaction, wondering who was now goading whom. “Your sister had a way of making everyone see better days ahead,” he offered cautiously. The wounds still ran deep between both families. “But I think even she would have sensed this gathering storm.”

“Or perhaps *that woman* has sunk her claws in deeper than I imagined. Stroking Harrison with her dreams of martial glory.”

“That is unkind, Amanda. And unwarranted.”

But having brought it out into the open, Amanda Hasek was not about to be cautioned so easily. “Some

might say what is unkind is the way Harrison treats the memory of my sister.”

“Some might. Those who don’t see four years of mourning to be enough. *Or* how Isabella’s death stole the joy out of our prince’s life.”

Julian walked a thin line, upbraiding the Minister of the Capellan March. But she was also Julian’s cousin by marriage, and certain courtesies extended between family. Also, as prince’s champion, Julian often spoke for Harrison Davion. It was one of the greatest honors of his young life, and an awesome responsibility.

“Amanda, please.” Julian stopped them beneath the pink-flowering dogwoods. A sweet, roselike scent drifted around them. They stood within sight of Amanda Hasek’s executive craft but beyond the point at which her loose screen of security would converge. The duchess stared fixedly ahead. “Do you realize how rare it is that a leader born to Harrison’s duties finds a companion *and* a peer? I can only hope to be so lucky.”

As he had planned, the mention of his own single status brought the ghost of a smile back to Amanda’s compressed mouth. But she still refused to look at him. The patrolling Pegasus hovercraft glided by them on cushions of warm air. She followed their path with her gaze instead.

“Well, we shall have to see what we can do about that. Dear boy.” She said this last as an afterthought, but reached out for his hand anyway and tucked it under her arm, escorting him forward.

The Chariot-class VTOL waited, hunched low to the ground with its rotor drooping overhead as if wilted under Kathil’s strong sun. Two infantrymen in Infiltrator Mark II suits stood at the fore and two more at the aft. A shiny metallic gold trimmed in regal purple, the Chariot could not have shouted *dignitary aboard* any louder without setting its identification transponder to broadcast the message.

But one of the best things about having such a craft available was its cutting-edge electronics suite, which allowed the duchess to stay in constant contact with Kathil’s planetary administration. A colonel in the Federated Suns Armed Forces, wearing the unit insignia of the Syrtis Fusiliers and likely Amanda Hasek’s pilot, waited for them outside the craft with a verifax reader in hand. The device took secure downloads from the communications board and was specifically coded to Amanda’s DNA. No one but her could access its controls.

The colonel handed over the reader with a military precision that bordered on ceremony. Enough that Julian wondered if the grapevine already had the news, and it had raced here alongside or even ahead of the official transmission.

When the officer stiffened to attention as Amanda thumbed her print and her DNA onto the lock, the prince’s champion was certain of it.

Amanda caught her breath as she read, studying the first page carefully as if verifying for herself the message was real enough, then paging rapidly through the electronic file. Her matronly air deserted her for a moment, replaced with a kind of sorrowful resignation, which was quickly chased away by a calculating frown that looked very familiar to Julian. Anyone involved in the politics of the Inner Sphere knew that look. Julian had seen it before on Harrison, and quite vividly on Harrison’s son and heir, Caleb.

He’d even seen it in the mirror once or twice.

And it never followed good news.

“What is it, Amanda? How bad?” A prickly touch crawled over his scalp.

“Bad enough,” the duchess replied, “especially if we were hoping for stability within The Republic. And it is going to strike close to home as well, Julian. In fact, there is not one Great House or realm that shan’t feel this at some level.”

She had that sorrowful look again. One that spoke of seeing too much of this kind of news. Julian usually guessed correctly. Even so, he had not prepared himself for this.

“Victor Steiner-Davion is dead.”



Today, on the world of New Aragon, Paladin Anders Kessel declared a local state of “extreme emergency” in response to the Capellan Confederation’s hardest-hitting drive since the fall of Liao. This preempted any announcement from the office of the exarch, which remains silent on Terra.

—Damon Darman, Stellar Associated, 16 December 3134

Terra

The Republic of the Sphere

13 January 3135

“If this is going to be the next three years of my life, I’ll resign now and save myself the ulcers!”

Skylights warmed the exarch’s formal receiving office at the Hall of Government. Natural light soaked into the red cherry wainscoting and gleamed in the room’s bronze accents. Wood polish and leather richly flavored the room that had been nicknamed “The Bullet” by paladins for its unusual shape; one end wall of the long, rectangular room bowed outward and was set with floor-to-ceiling windows.

On good days, The Republic’s leader might stand in that semicircular alcove and stare out over Geneva’s Magnum Park. Fifty acres of cultivated grounds, including the Trees from Every World and some of The Republic’s most beloved monuments.

This was not one of those days.

Pacing the width of the office, traipsing back and forth over the Great Seal of The Republic, which lay on the other side of his desk from the magnificent windows, Jonah Levin ground his aggravation into tiny shards beneath the heels of his dress boots. His path cut the room in half, dividing his baroque mahogany-and-bronze desk from a more comfortable sitting area. The carpet mosaic robbed him of any satisfying stomps, however, and the Latin motto *Ad Securitus per Unitas* mocked him with every pass. *Through unity, freedom .*

Or if read another way: *Through security, freedom .*

He wondered, not for the first time, if Devlin Stone was having a joke on his successors.

Just as he, at the moment, was having a dark jest of his own at the expense of his guests.

Paladin Heather GioAvanti stood respectfully in front of the leather divan, hands clasped in front of her. She wore her formal white-and-gold paladin's uniform, but softened the martial appearance today by letting her blond hair fall soft and loose from the clips that pinned it behind her ears. She faced Paladin Gareth Sinclair across a small table, and he stood next to one of the two oversized armchairs, shifting from one foot to the other. Gareth was tall and wiry, with green searching eyes that never held still.

Heather's face was unreadable, her gray eyes cloaked. She was experienced in the ways of Republic politics as well as military campaigns. Sinclair, less schooled at this level of power, was unable to hide his scandalized frown, for which Jonah was thankful.

The man could still be trusted.

"You don't really mean that?" Gareth asked when silence bottomed out after the exarch's threat of resignation.

The hell he didn't—was what Jonah wanted to say. Staring intently at the young paladin, Jonah let his after-lunch mint burn with peppermint coolness at the back of his throat. Had he been as naive as Gareth once? When idealism mattered more than hard facts?

And hadn't that been only a few weeks before?

"No," Jonah admitted, reluctantly, "I don't."

He'd never lived his life that way. Fifty years old, Jonah had always stepped up when called and taken his best swing at the job. As MechWarrior, and then as a Knight of the Sphere. Later, inducted as one of the seventeen—eighteen, really—paladins. His oath, once given, was inviolate.

"But be damned if I'm not going to complain from time to time," Jonah told these two. His former comrades. Now two of his most trusted paladins—by process of elimination, if nothing else.

Both had been instrumental in managing the recent troubles on Terra, and Jonah had no choice but to rely on them. His election to the post of exarch had not come without sacrifice, chief among them being trust. Not even his paladins had proven themselves immune to the politics of destruction. Every paranoid report that crossed his desk, every dirty secret from The Republic's history Jonah was now privy to, they weighed. Oh, how they weighed.

And it was to the shame of all humanity that it had to be so.

"All right," he finally decided. But he did not return to his desk, that mahogany and bronze monstrosity that might have served better as a dining table than office furniture. He took a seat on the divan next to Heather GioAvanti, waving the other two back into their places as well. The supple leather stretched and complained, but was supremely comfortable. There were perquisites to the position.

"So where are we *exactly* with Prefecture IX?"

Prefecture IX was the latest in a series of catastrophes to befall The Republic. Clan Jade Falcon, using as their excuse their pursuit of the Steel Wolves, had struck through House Steiner space. Their grab for Republic worlds had been ruthless and extremely effective. So far.

Paladin David McKinnon worked to keep a handle on that region of space. But Heather had spoken to the Founder's Movement champion most recently, catching him before he departed on a follow-up mission to Lyons.

"The Jade Falcons continue to dig in and improve their position," she reported. "They control every world that matters except Nusakan and Lyons, all military industry within that region, and the economically rich worlds of Ryde as well. They chose their targets very carefully."

"None of which mattered so much before Landgrave Jasek handed over the world of Skye." Gareth sounded ready to strangle the wayward landgrave.

It was the latest news, and the reason for Jonah's earlier outburst. Interstellar media concerns would have a field day when it broke through public channels. Jonah could look forward to a plague of questions on this topic for at least the next two weeks. Skye's fall to the Jade Falcons would certainly redirect headlines away from the recent riots and military action in Geneva, but as silver linings went, it was thin, thin.

"As goes Skye, so goes the Isle," Gareth intoned darkly, obviously thinking along similar lines.

Heather nodded, though not entirely in agreement. "Jasek Kelswa-Steiner did engineer Skye's delivery to Jade Falcon control, but there is a certain method to his madness. Even David McKinnon called it 'inspired insanity,' and I have to agree. The Jade Falcons now carry Skye on their backs like a millstone. With luck, it will grind them down."

"With luck," Gareth said, "Duke Gregory would have smothered his son at birth. I don't like relying on luck." He glanced to Jonah. "Sir."

Gareth was from Prefecture IX, and had strong family ties to the old "Isle of Skye" worlds. Jonah wondered if the vitriol was all for show, or if Gareth was simply—and expediently—putting distance between himself and the Kelswa-Steiners. Then he recalled that the GioAvantis were another powerful merchant family from that region of space. Though she was estranged from her family, could Heather be second-guessing her choice as well?

He damned the necessity of having to wonder.

Jonah leaned back into the divan, hiding his annoyance at his thoughts behind a contemplative mask. "Nusakan and Lyons." He nodded. "Nusakan is in the hands of Jasek and his Stormhammers. Lyons has been claimed as Duke Gregory's capital in absentia. And does anyone know where the Wolves disappeared to this time?"

Gareth again. "If anyone does it's Landgrave Jasek. I wouldn't count on his sharing that information."

"He might." Heather shrugged aside Gareth's pointed look. "So long as our interests and his coincide."

"Jasek wants to lead the old Isle of Skye region back to House Steiner and the Lyran Commonwealth. He gave up Skye itself to an invading Clan force. How can that be in our best interest?"

But Jonah saw it as well. Another weight added to the pile pulling down his shoulders these days. "Because it keeps the Jade Falcons away from Terra," he said.

Heather nodded, and Jonah continued. “The Clans have never gone away, Gareth. Devlin Stone took in quite a few after the Jihad, and some even stayed. Paladin Drummond and Paladin Meraj Jorgenson are revolutionary thinkers to have come so far with us. But for the Clans who still wait inside the occupation zones, except for perhaps the Ghost Bears, the peace obviously did not take, which means that Terra is still their goal.”

One more in the growing list of problems. Jonah climbed back to his feet. Exhaled a sharp breath as Heather and Gareth stood as well. He walked a slow circuit around the room this time, hands clasped behind his back. There weren't going to be any easy solutions.

“When Devlin Stone originally created The Republic of the Sphere,” he said, mostly to himself, “it brought the possibility of a new dream to the Inner Sphere.” He glanced back at his paladins. “What happened to that dream?”

Still feeling his way with his newly conferred influence, Gareth kept his own council. Heather GioAvanti, though, was the quintessential paladin. She didn't back away from the hard choices, or the unpopular answers. “We made the mistake of most great societies,” she said. “We took it for granted.”

Jonah agreed. The people had forgotten so quickly the victories and birthing pains of their young Republic. This new Terran Hegemony, its borders circling roughly one hundred twenty light years from Terra itself, had blazed trails for disarmament of the great armies and the intermingling of national cultures. Most great leaders had endorsed Stone's vision. Some, like Victor Steiner-Davion, had rallied to the new banner and helped it come about.

Not all were so forward-thinking, however. Even in the wake of the Jihad, with mankind reeling from the Blakist pogrom, there were those leaders who resisted change. And Stone, for better or worse, had not been above enforcing his brand of peace. Skirmishes and political pressure plays eventually brought the recalcitrant few to heel, but, in hindsight, also planted seeds of discontent which quickly sprouted after the Blackout struck worlds deaf and dumb. Sprouted . . . and flourished.

Exceptional leaders—like Katana Tormark, like Aaron Sandoval—suddenly pressing their own agendas.

Neopolitical factions raising their own militaries, or scavenging from among The Republic's small standing garrison.

Outside forces striking back after a generation of patience. House Liao's Capellan Confederation. And Clan Jade Falcon. Now there were grumblings from inside the Federated Suns and Draconis Combine as well. On a flat map of the Inner Sphere, The Republic was a large pie right at its center. And everyone wanted a bite.

These were the blades suspended above Jonah's head. All held up by the thinnest hair.

“Maybe we did,” Gareth said. “Take it for granted.” The man seemed to hate the silence. “But we have a new exarch and a new mandate. There must be something we can do.”

“There is always something to be done,” Jonah agreed. But he also knew it wouldn't necessarily be a decision they wanted to face.

He paced a few more slow steps. Ended up at the tea service that one of his assistants had set out on a small, rolling cart, tucked in next to the door of one of his many private offices. The door blended into the

wall, and only a simple pressure plate and the faint outline of the seam revealed its presence.

Jonah glanced at the door, his back to the paladins, then stepped up to the tea service. From the small rosewood chest he selected a tea basket already prepared with a spice blend from Algedi, a planet just over the border with the Draconis Combine. Picking up a silver pot from the samovar, he poured a single cup and steeped the tea basket inside steaming water. The golden scent was rich and heady, unique to Algedi, and growing rare as the difficulties of The Republic impinged on shipping traffic and trade relations.

“So many difficulties.”

Though he was avoiding the worst of them with this long discussion of Prefecture IX. Or was he leading into it?

Senator Geoffrey Mallowes was a Skye representative as well, Jonah recalled. In fact, it had been Gareth’s family friendship to the powerful senator that tripped Mallowes up in the end. The senator’s cat’s paw turning against him and the cabal’s long-range plan to usurp power.

Of all the cancers eating away at The Republic, this was by far the most serious. And the resolution was a decision he had to make alone. Mostly.

“Thank you,” he finally said, dismissing the two senior warriors.

Both nodded, and Gareth sketched a half-bow as well. “Thank you, sir,” they said.

“Remain in the capital,” Jonah instructed them on their way to the door. “I may have something for you by end of the day.” He did not turn to follow them out, or even watch. He did not trust himself to remain appropriately distant from his former comrades.

Another necessity. Another sharp edge.

When the outer door closed heavily, leaving the exarch alone, he slowly made a second cup of the golden, spicy tea while putting his thoughts in order. He palmed open the nearby lock, waiting until a hidden mechanism swung the door open, and carried both cups into the private office, which was no less grand, but set up for better use as a personal command post.

The same cherrywood paneling. The bronze accoutrements and leather furniture. No window, though. Instead, a bank of dark plasma screens took up one entire wall, capable of individual or composite display. And this desk was a modern sculpture of metal and glass, occupying the exact center of the room. The top, at the press of a button, became a holographic display that accepted battlerom footage, hyperdetailed maps from the World Cartography Office, or feeds from any military satellite in orbit over Terra.

It was the room Jonah retreated to in order to watch worlds fall or send men to their deaths.

It wasn’t a happy room, either.

Lights had been set to a dim level, creating an atmosphere more appropriate for whispered secrets than political debate. A hand reached out from the collected shadows along one wall, accepting one of the cups Jonah carried. He handed it over with a thin, humorless smile.

Jonah stalked the floor, warming his hands around his own small cup, inhaling the pleasing aroma that wafted up on tendrils of steam. His guest followed him as far as the desk, standing next to a simple, straight-backed chair. The man wasn't short and wasn't tall, and had a build few would remark on as muscular or lean. His dark hair was pleasantly combed, with a touch of gel, certainly, to prevent any untidiness. The kind of man few remarked on to others. Perfect.

"Mallowes," the exarch finally said, breathing the name. He lowered himself into his leather office chair. The padding wrapped around him like a comfortable glove.

The ghost paladin sipped, and nodded politely. He was the secret, eighteenth member of the august body that helped the exarch run the military and keep order. Sometimes known as "Emil" to the visiting paladins and knights who came and went right under his nose without ever knowing his identity. Champion of the ghost knight organization. Master of spies and covert operations.

Also, the man single-most responsible for adding to Jonah Levin's sleepless nights.

"I've followed up on the legwork you ran before the election," the ghost paladin said. "Most of our evidence is still circumstantial, but we have the best timeline possible under the circumstances. For instance, we know certain members of the Senate began 'sponsoring' young and excellent MechWarrior candidates as far back as twelve years ago. Hundreds of them."

"All noble scions?" Jonah asked, surprised. Not paying due attention, his first sip of tea was too quick and he scalded the tip of his tongue. He pressed the pained area against the roof of his mouth.

"No. Some—Senator Mallowes for instance—went for top-drawer quality."

Like Gareth Sinclair, the ghost paladin did not have to say. As an up-and-coming knight, and then the newest paladin, Gareth had figured prominently into Geoffrey Mallowes' plans.

"Other members of this cabal spread their nets much wider, and were far more rough in their planning. Bribery, blackmail and intimidation; nothing was beyond their methods. They targeted nobles, citizens . . . even residents. In fact"—the ghost paladin paused—"I would think purchasing citizenship and a military billet for a disenfranchised resident goes a long way to securing loyalty. More so than favoring a noble's son or daughter already born to privilege, and serving out of natural aptitude or their own sense of duty."

Jonah nodded and sipped more cautiously this time. The bitter taste of caffeine was well-cloaked by the round, aromatic flavor of the tea. He let it sit in the back of his mouth a moment, determined to enjoy one thing in this afternoon. As with anything, though, savor too long and the bitter crept back in.

As with the senators, left unchecked for so many years. Noble born, every one of them. And from families with long histories of dominant rule. Histories that stretched back centuries, compared to The Republic's mere six decades. Why hadn't anyone else wondered about their reaction once Devlin Stone stepped down from power? Stepped down . . . and disappeared.

The promise of Stone's return, should he be needed, was a widely known tale. But that's all it remained. Not even Jonah, with his access to state secrets, could penetrate that level of security. Was there a shadow organization, then? Something Stone had set into place to watch the watchers?

Clearly some senators had thought the promise apocryphal, doubting Stone's ability or desire to return. Jealous of the exarch's power, remembering the before times when nobles controlled the fate of the Inner Sphere, the cabal's plan had been simple and ambitious at the same time. Get their hooks into the rising

stars of The Republic's military arm, and work to get them noticed as knights and, eventually, paladins. At that level, even one or two owned men could bear undue influence in upper-level military policy. And if one could be made exarch . . .

As conspiracies went, this was well-planned for the long haul. If it hadn't been discovered, it might very well have succeeded. But one paladin put it together. One very well-connected, very extraordinary man.

And it cost Victor Steiner-Davion his life.

Jonah swallowed his tea, letting it warm his throat. "Such a waste," he said, speaking of the cabal's efforts and Victor's loss all in one.

The ghost paladin nodded. Understanding. "Some of our information comes from running down Victor's leads, of course. Though we have never fully reconstructed the data erased after his assassination, or half of his sources. The memory of his caregiver—what she saw during the course of her duties—is still our best starting point."

"And we have nothing direct linking Mallowes to Victor's murder? A money trail? Testimony?"

"Nothing. We have the senator cold on conspiracy charges, but the rest is difficult. Henrik Morten is our direct access to the extortion and undue-influence case. We know Mallowes ordered him to bird-dog Victor once it became clear that Victor was snooping around. Morten conned information from the caregiver, then later ordered her unsuccessful murder contract to cover those tracks. We have that much in confession." And he produced a small data wafer, slipped it onto the edge of the exarch's desk.

Jonah left it alone. It seemed that every time he turned around, he was dealing with more state secrets than he'd ever wanted to know about. The interrogation and confession of Henrik Morten was video footage he could do without.

"It is a logical conclusion," the ghost paladin continued, "that Mallowes also dealt the lethal blow to Paladin Steiner-Davion in between those two events."

"But it cannot be *proved*," Jonah complained. He set his tea aside, no longer interested in it. "The rest would be enough to convict him in Noble's Court, if we were certain the other senators would stand an impartial trial. But it is Victor's murder I want to hang over the whole cabal! The man was a bona fide hero and a living legend. He deserved better!"

The other man remained silent, neither agreeing with nor refuting the commentary. It was not his position to suggest or make policy, Jonah knew. He was the exarch's greatest secret resource, and nothing more.

"There is no way to discover the extent of this conspiracy?" Jonah asked, resignation telling in the sudden loss of indignation.

The other man shook his head. "Not without a conviction in Noble's Court to force Mallowes to open his mouth in exchange for leniency."

"Let the conspirators police their own?" Jonah grimaced, the aftertaste of his tea turning more bitter by the moment. It wouldn't happen. The senators had betrayed and attacked the very state entrusted into their hands by the people. "Not a chance. They can scream 'separation of powers' all they wish. Until they start cooperating with *amilitary* investigation of the Senate, we stay the course."

The ghost paladin set his own cup aside. Leaning back, he steeped his hands beneath his chin, considering. “You know they are proceeding with argument for your censure,” he reminded the exarch, carefully retaining his neutrality.

Jonah did. The talk wasn’t exactly quiet anymore. By public fiat the Senate threatened to nationalize federal powers, working through The Republic’s planetary governors who were held responsible to the Senate and not to the exarch. Any other time, in the face of a common enemy, this show of solidarity among nobles might be heartening. Here, it turned his stomach. Censure the exarch! Devlin Stone would be sick to see what a complete shambles they had made of his flawed utopia.

“Maybe it’s time,” he decided, seizing on this last thought. “Time to remind them where we came from, and what The Republic was meant to accomplish.” He set a fist upon his desk. Its glass top felt cool to the touch. “One thing for certain, we must have our house in order before the Inner Sphere leaders start arriving.”

This raised an eyebrow. “You’ve received confirmation, then?”

“Some.” The exarch relaxed. Slightly. “The Rasalhague Dominion and Marik-Stewart Commonwealth so far. And House Liao.”

“Liao?” The ghost paladin raised an eyebrow.

Daoshen had been the one leader they both felt certain would ignore the invitation. “Never underestimate the power of paranoia. Daoshen’s message was terse but insightful. He wishes to make certain that Victor is ‘well and truly dead.’ I think he means to stick the body with a sharp pin.” He shrugged. “Of the others . . . I believe most will come.”

Jonah’s predecessor, Damien Redburn, had been wise to orchestrate events the way he had. A call to the state funeral of Victor Steiner-Davion. Hardly a Successor State or other realm could refuse such an event. Adoration or enmity, all owed Victor something.

“It will be the largest summit of Inner Sphere leaders since the formation of The Republic,” he said.

“Victor’s family is already protesting his lying in state,” the ghost paladin warned. “It will not look good if Gavin and Simone do not attend, or—worse—speak against the ceremony as going against their grandfather’s wishes.”

“It can’t be helped. It is a too-convenient opportunity—and possibly our last chance—to halt the fear and distrust behind the last two years of escalating violence. I know that Victor would not have wanted such pomp and pageantry. But Victor is dead. And the man was both a paladin and a patriot—he would not begrudge us this last service. The Republic *must* survive. Victor can buy us time to find new options.”

“And the senators?”

“Must be kept on a tight leash.”

He was asking something of the ghost paladin now. Both men knew it. Jonah had no doubt he’d created another entry in the growing file inherited from Damien Redburn. The exarch’s EYES ONLY report.

“Give GioAvanti and Sinclair whatever support you can,” Exarch Jonah Levin ordered. “Whatever they need. The Republic must not appear divided and weak. With everything else we have to deal with, my

friend, this we can ill afford. Certainly the Senate—the right-thinking members in their body—will come to realize that.”

The ghost paladin leaned forward. A diamond-edged glint shined in his eyes. “What will you do?” he asked.

Jonah Levin reached for his cup again.

“If I must,” he said, “I will put the fear of Stone back in them.”



... *At the office. I stopped to say a short prayer.*

... *In Mo's, and most of us had a quick toast. About damn time he paid for his sins.*

... *Who?*

—KBT—Kathil Broadcast Trivid, excerpts from “WHERE WERE YOU: The Death of Victor Steiner-Davion,” Kathil, 19 December 3134

*Firgrove
Federated Suns
18 January 3135*

The winds had strengthened in the last hour since Caleb's rushed landing on the world of Firgrove. Warm and dry, with a touch of static electricity picked up off the surrounding desert, the steady zephyr bent the tops of tall ponderosa pines surrounding the military academy and whistled through bleacher stands erected on the parade grounds. It wrestled with the guideon bearers of each cadet company for their red-and-gold standards. Here and there the winds also snagged a utility cap, or a loose-leaf prayer sheet dropped by attending alumni, and tumble-dragged it across the grinder.

Scents of desert sandstone and sage chased the winds. Dry thunder rumbled in the distance—which seemed strange to Caleb, with not a cloud in the sky and the yellow-orange sun blazing so fiercely in local summer. He kept a curious watch for any glimpse of Firgrove's legendary ball lightning, though officers had promised him no such phenomena happened over the academy. Too many grounding rods. Clusters of the tall metal poles stood a silent vigil at every avenue corner and staked out the parade grounds like a widely spaced picket fence.

Still Caleb watched, distracted. Which caused him to jump his cue.

“We take great pride in saluting the final passing of so great a man, soldier and peer of the realm,” Commandant Laurent Gadbois said.

Of course the commandant spoke of Victor Steiner-Davion. But hearing “peer of the realm” Caleb stood, anticipating his own introduction. Gadbois had not quite reached the end of his own remarks. The silver-haired officer nodded.

“We also welcome Prince Harrison Davion’s favor,” the militia officer said, “shown us in the visit of his son and heir. Firgrove Military Academy will long remember this honor, even for so sad an occasion. That the news of Victor’s passing reached us alongside his arrival we take as welcome. For there are none better to lead us in this brief farewell than the Duke of Taygeta, a commander-emeritus in the Davion Guards, and our future First Prince. Caleb . . . Hasek . . . Sandoval . . . Davion.”

Caleb froze an accepting smile of acknowledgment on his face, never letting his annoyance show for the holovid cameras. Being left to stand while Gadbois finished his inane lead-in did not sit well. Yes, he had insisted on full honors and lineage. Who else in the entirety of the Federated Suns claimed bloodlines of the realm’s three leading dynasties; leaders of the Capellan and Draconis Marches as well as the ruling line?

But he didn’t care for the way the academy’s senior officer drew out the patronymic, making it sound pretentious instead of properly deferential.

“A man’s career could be ruined for less,” Mason stage-whispered from one side.

A long-time friend and one of Caleb’s most astute councilors, Mason Lambert kept to his seat one row back and two seats to the side. His voice carried no further than Caleb and perhaps a few of the Security Service agents, so Caleb said nothing.

He simply nodded.

Always conscious of the image he presented, Caleb tugged at the hem of his green uniform tunic, pulling it flat across his shoulders as he stepped from VIP seating to the steps at the left side of the stage. A fine martial figure. A gilded cutlass jangled at his hip as he mounted the stage. White gloves, and leggings over his dark trouser cuffs, he wore the full ceremonial dress of a Federated Suns officer. As his father would expect of him.

He would look the part, give his speech, and cheer on the glory of the Federated Suns.

For the last time on this tour.

Caleb’s reprieve had come with the death of Victor Steiner-Davion. Now he was finished with this tour at the ass end of the Federated Suns. Finished with the public relations circuit on which his father had sent him while Julian, Caleb’s cousin, enjoyed the pleasures of New Avalon and the much finer, coreward worlds. Finished with shaking hands and kissing babies. Finished with photo-op meetings in front of academy classes and megamall openings.

Caleb paused for his last set, shaking hands with the commandant, waiting as the newsvid journalists zoomed in for stills. A dusty sage taste coated his mouth. The wind tugged at his dark curls except where sweat matted down the thicker hair behind his ears. He smiled, nodded to Gadbois, and replaced the militia officer at the lectern at the forward edge of the stage.

“Thank you, Commandant Gadbois. It is my honor as well to join Firgrove Academy for these solemn proceedings.”

Academy alumni sat closest to the stage, on bleachers set up to either side of the main grounds. They had stood through the invocation and the commandant’s address. They waited now out of respect for Caleb Hasek-Sandoval-Davion, who would preside over the lowering of the flags to half-mast. These

were older men and women. Retired officers. A few minor nobility among them, but hardly worth Caleb's time.

The future belonged to the others. Between and beyond the alumni, five hundred armed forces cadets in their parade best stared back at him, drawn up in perfect rank and file. Half his age at least, Caleb still identified with these children more closely than the has-beens. Young, eager faces. Most looking forward to their two years of civil service on Firgrove, no doubt.

But not all. Caleb saw the occasional sidelong glance. The eyes that strayed.

Because arrayed in perfect formation behind the cadets was a combined arms company from New Syrtis, sent to the ceremony by his aunt, Amanda. Sent *for him*. A line of Infiltrator Mark II battlesuit troops backed the cadets, their reflective faceplates bright and blue under the sun's strong glare. A pair of Hasek troop carriers behind them, their square-bodied bulk forming the next rank.

And then crowning the formation, an *Enforcer*. Fifty tons of metal and myomer, standing in a wide-legged stance. Its rotary autocannon pointed safely at the ground, but ready. Always ready. Not Caleb's preference, though Julian—if he'd been here—would likely rather have rode out the ceremony inside that sweaty cockpit than on stage.

By the expressions on the cadet's faces, Julian would not have been alone.

Eagerness and desire. Oh yes, Caleb knew that look. A few of these cadets hoped for selection by lottery to one of the nearby garrison posts, where they would see several years of advanced combat training and join a true regiment in the Armed Forces of the Federated Suns.

House Davion's military.

His military.

"Eighty-five years ago," Caleb said, beginning his short address, "when he was not much older than many of you here, Victor Ian Steiner-Davion graduated from the Nagelring. A fine institution, in what was then the combined state of the Federated Suns and Lyran Commonwealth. He graduated with honors. And that was also the way he lived his life. With honor.

"He was a student of war first, and of politics second. A leader for his time, when generals ruled the Successor States and warfare ravaged the Inner Sphere. Those times needed a leader such as him. They were fortunate. And so were we to have known him."

And because The Republic was now making a big deal over the passing of an ancient hero, Caleb would be allowed to return home and accompany his father to Terra. *That* was what was important here, he wanted to say. But a leader—even a future leader—had to remain above such obvious claims.

Instead, Caleb merely nodded his signal to the bandmaster, who struck up a mournful dirge of "Taps" as the cadet honor squad lowered the academy flags to half-mast. Caleb turned around, presenting his back to the audience while he watched the ceremony. The flag of the Federated Suns came down first, leading the way. Firgrove's flag and the ensign of the military academy itself followed.

When it was done, Caleb turned back to his captive audience.

"We wish we could honor Victor with a nationwide period of mourning, but the ComStar Blackout

makes this hardly possible and certainly not practical. Instead, every world has been directed to observe thirty days of respect for our fallen cousin. Take this time to reflect on the hard work it has taken to get here, and the sacrifices you may yet be called upon to make.” He allowed a passing few seconds of silence. “Take this time to think on the life of a hero who gave of himself so selflessly.

“Victor fought the invading Clans, and defeated them. He helped fight the Jihad. He led ComStar as its Precentor Martial and joined Devlin Stone in the formation of a new Terran Hegemony . . . The Republic of the Sphere.

“Victor Ian Steiner-Davion was many things to many people. His passing lessens us all.”

From there, Caleb departed from his carefully prepared speech. He leaned forward, gripping the sides of the polished lectern, conveying, he was certain, a sincerity in his directness.

“And now, in honor of his memory,” he said, “I travel home. Back to New Avalon. In this period of mourning, and with services to come on the birthworld of mankind, it is important that I take my rightful place at the side of our First Prince, my father.”

With that, Caleb straightened to assume strict military bearing. He knew the routine from here, could go through it on automatic, and often did.

The commandant called his cadets to attention. “And salute!”

Caleb snapped off a smart salute, proud of these young men and women who had devoted so many years to the betterment of the Federated Suns.

“Ready . . . to!”

Five hundred arms sliced down. Strong arms. Strong enough to carry Caleb back to New Avalon.

Though Commandant Gadbois was sorry to see the heir leave. He buttonholed Caleb as the cadets passed in review to a somber step set by the academy’s bandmaster.

“You must be off so soon, Sire Davion? Your schedule was to spend a week on Firgrove, was it not?”

It was. But that was before events began to move so fast and so far away from the backwater worlds of the Periphery March. Having already paid a brief and final visit to Duke Marsin in June, Caleb had raced ahead of schedule to Firgrove to make this ceremony. He wouldn’t wait on the ground one moment longer than necessary. “My DropShip leaves within the hour. New Avalon calls me home.”

His aunt had, at least. And his father would be glad to see him, certainly. Would Caleb be left as regent on New Avalon? Or taken to Terra at his father’s side, to see and be seen? That was the only question remaining.

“Duke Marsin will be sorry to lose your support,” Gadbois said, trying to play politics, and not very well. “Your long tour among our worlds meant a great deal to the people of the Periphery March.”

“I’m sure,” Caleb said agreeably. Though he wanted so badly to use Mason’s earlier rant. The one they had laughed over during the DropShip’s landing burn.

Babysitting a backwater March that has delusions of equality. The Marsin dynasty were

commoners when our families sat on thrones of worlds and nations.

And while the Davions raised up the Marsins, Mason's family had finally lost everything when the Draconis Reach grew to envelop Harrow's Sun. Hardly equitable.

"It was my pleasure to live among the worlds of the Periphery March," Caleb lied. The final rank of cadets passed by and left an empty parade ground behind. He traded handshakes and salutes with the academy commandant, and nods with the last few someday-soldiers.

And finished at last, Caleb barely waited for his security agents to fan out ahead of him before he abandoned the stage for the brisk walk back to his personal car. Mason caught up on the brisk walk, but said nothing. His secret smile said it all. Mason, too, was happy to be leaving Firgrove, which had never been more than a necessary delay before heading back to New Avalon. And home.

As for Victor, Caleb shrugged off the man's passing. A distant relation, and met only once in Caleb's thirty-five years, the young lord had no strong feelings either way. Victor Steiner-Davion had been very old, older than Caleb's father, and had had his time.

He had also been one other thing that Caleb had deliberately left off Victor's list of accomplishments. The honor Victor had chosen to give up, which Caleb could never understand. The position that Caleb cherished above all else, and would someday have for himself.

And perhaps then he could speak it without worry of sounding too eager. Too young.

When he was First Prince of the Federated Suns.



I did not know Victor Steiner-Davion. But I respected him and his myriad accomplishments.

I did know his politics. And those the Draconis March will not miss at all.

—Duke Corwin Sandoval, Official Remarks, Robinson, 13 January 3135

*New Avalon
Federated Suns
24 January 3135*

Julian barely arrived in time, walking briskly along the wide flagstone paths of Avalon City's Peace Park, jogging only when he felt certain that a screen of green foliage or the slope of a nearby hill hid him from sight. His bootheels scuffed against polished stones with insistent strides. The heavy scent of spring flowers in full bloom perfumed the damp, morning air, daffodil and early roses and delicate daylilies. Dragonflies darted across the path and around his head, bluejays complained about all the morning activity, and the chatter of background conversation led him to the natural amphitheater where First Prince Harrison Davion would call an end to the official thirty days of mourning on New Avalon.

Julian cleared the rope lines with only a cursory check of his identity, as he was well known to the security detail in charge of Harrison's safety. From there, he forced himself to walk sedately. No matter

how late. No matter the reason he had been held up at the palace. No one in Harrison's inner circle should be caught hurrying and out of breath. The kind of rumor spreading out from such a sight could cause market futures to plummet.

Peace Park camped in the shadows of the magnificent Davion palace, rebuilt along with all of Avalon City after the Jihad. A favorite weekend picnic area where citizens explored the maze of paths that wound between meadows and monuments, soft creeks and sunlit sports fields.

Today, however, access had been restricted as two thousand New Avalon citizens—nobles and military men, and commoners drawn by lot—waited for the final ceremonies. The speech would be a short one, but no one minded. They were here to see and be seen, or to enjoy their fifteen minutes with the first prince. Noble finery and starched uniforms mingled with civilian Sunday-best suits and sundresses.

Julian moved among them, elbowing through tight knots and circling around the larger enclaves, always moving down into the amphitheater's bowl. Only when he approached a cadre of military officers did a path magically open, the military men and women showing uncomfortable deference to the prince's champion. To a civilian and to many nobles he was just one more man in uniform, thankfully. They tended to overlook him, which was useful. As he walked, Julian caught more than one concerned glance down into the amphitheater's shallow depression.

Drawing closer, he soon saw why. Harrison. The first prince stood on the natural granite outcropping which had been shaped and polished into a low stage . . .

. . . waiting with Khan Sterling McKenna by his side.

Leader of the Raven Alliance, McKenna at least chose Inner Sphere style over Clan leathers, which was a small favor. Her tailored suit was fitting for the occasion if a bit flamboyant, done in the silver and blue of Alliance colors. Long, luxurious black hair pulled back into a severe ponytail, falling to her waist behind. A gunslinger's stance. Her earrings dangled near to her shoulders, and Julian did not need to see them to know they were the Raven Alliance insignia. One would hardly call her subtle.

Then again, he had to admit that she was a good fit for the bear of a man who waited on stage next to her. Julian would have recognized the broad back and great fall of curly dark hair from a hundred meters easy.

McKenna spotted Julian first, her sharp eyes missing nothing. She leaned in to Harrison, and whispered. The first prince turned just as Julian gained the stage, leaping easily up onto the sharp lip of gray-speckled rock, and Harrison made a show of studying the timepiece on his wrist before stepping forward to grip his champion in a strong, viselike handshake.

His full beard showed gray on the underside of the chin and in the sideburns, and his eyes had permanent laugh lines in the corners. Other than that, the sixty-five-year-old leader was aging well. There was no doubting the strength of his grip, which had contributed to his nickname of "The Bear," or the good humor behind those heavy brown eyes, a joy that had been missing for too many years before Sterling's arrival at court.

"About time, nephew," the larger man said, his voice gruff but warm. Cousins, actually, but Julian had forever known Harrison as Uncle. "Would have started without you, too much longer."

With so many from the palace press corps so close by, Julian forced a smile at the old saw. It wasn't too hard. "I see you're still wearing your own clothes."

It was a public joke, for which Harrison himself was responsible. The prince generally preferred paramilitary uniforms with a noble's cape of rank. Or, at least, that was the way his valet dressed him in the morning. But in parades and public meetings, he was prone to trade a dress jacket and starched button-down for a colorful T-shirt that caught his eye or was handed to him as a gift.

It was one of his more endearing traits, so far as the public was concerned. The line of "Harry Bears" brought out every month by Excalibur Collectibles always featured the prince's latest fashion travesty.

Harrison's mouth opened, then clamped shut against laughter. The prince did not take laughter lightly. His laugh came from deep in his chest, full of humor, and it would not be appropriate today.

He pumped his champion's hand again. A public relations aide waved frantically from near the front of the stage as Harrison threw the ceremony's stringent timing off, but the prince took the extra few seconds. "Good to see you, Julian."

Julian wished he could return the salute, but not replying was the best way to clue in the prince that there was a problem to discuss. And better now than having to force a word in after the ceremony, when the press and the people would throng the stage and give the security detail fits as everyone called for a moment or memento of their prince. Julian remained quiet, letting a touch of strain show on his face.

For all his bluff and bluster, Harrison was no fool. He barely missed a beat, slapping Julian's back with good-natured strength and pulling him toward the podium where the prince would make his announcement very soon.

A sidelong glance that lasted a single heartbeat. That was all.

Julian nodded.

"My dear," Harrison called Sterling McKenna to him. He handed Julian off to the Alliance leader. "Would you watch my nephew for me? Make certain he does not get lost again."

McKenna attached herself to Julian's arm, drawing him back to one side, leaving the leader of the Federated Suns alone at the podium.

One of the most dangerous moments in any leader's life, Julian knew. Even in Peace Park, where access was controlled and attendees had been screened by the best security team in the Inner Sphere. But Victor's recent death (by violence, according to the EYES ONLY version of the report he'd read) had Julian more nervous than usual.

Victor Steiner-Davion had deserved to die in his bed. It bothered Julian that the paladin had been robbed of that. He'd earned the privilege, one so many Inner Sphere leaders seemed denied. With life expectancy well over one hundred for the ordinary man and woman, it said something that lives of past rulers averaged out somewhere less than seventy.

Julian's father had pointed that out to him once, when Julian returned from a day of secondary schooling and asked why the family did not take full advantage of its birthright.

"Seventy!" he'd said. "I would rather look forward to another forty years or more with my family."

Julian had looked it up himself. Sure enough, his father had been right. Inner Sphere leaders and their

progeny, it seemed, were wise to avoid space travel, public speeches and gifts from their peers. They should never turn their backs on sparring instructors, a prisoner, or men who had been lifelong friends, and should greatly fear any enemy thought already dead. Stairwells and street corners were also among the known hazards. And under no circumstance should the leader of a House venture forth onto the battlefield to lead his armies to victory.

It just wasn't a good idea.

So the prince's champion scanned the crowds beyond the stage and the ropes, beyond the line of security service personnel who formed a living wall between their charge and the adoring public.

While Harrison stepped up to the forward edge of the podium, and clasped his hands behind his back.

"Thirty days," he said without preamble, no doubt trying to make up for his late start. The soft buzz of quiet conversations fell away into total silence. "Thirty days of mourning for one of our own. And Victor Steiner-Davion was one of our own."

In fact, Julian knew there were billions of people who still remembered Victor as their onetime prince and ruler. And as the man who had been forced to raise an army in the Steiner-Davion civil war, to remove his sister, Katherine, from the throne she stole. Julian's grandfather, Jackson Davion, fought on the wrong side of that war, honor-bound to serve the so-called archon-princess until finally he could overlook Katherine's transgressions no more.

Banishment had been too good for her.

Such simple words were far from enough for the man who had helped save the entirety of the Inner Sphere not once, but twice.

"Victor gave so much to the Federated Suns in the course of his life," Harrison continued. "Sterling military service. Peace, when he could. Justice, when he felt the need. We will not debate his choices or his life. We will simply remember him in whatever way each of us deems appropriate."

An interesting turn of phrase. Harrison's speech writers were earning their pay on this one, carefully walking the prince through a political minefield. Remember Victor as First Prince, Commanding General of a failed Star League, or veteran of the Jihad—he deserved the coming moment of silence.

"Victor Steiner-Davion lays in state on the world of Terra, and will be so honored by The Republic of the Sphere until his formal funeral service later this year. And though we raise our flags back up today after a month-long salute, we do so knowing there are worlds out there yet to hear this sad news. We invite them to share in our mourning as they see fit. Here, on New Avalon, I ask for one moment during which all may say their personal farewell."

Julian glanced at his own watch. Perfect. Noon, straight up. Harrison had abridged his speech, timing it with a master's touch to end just as a planet-wide moment of silence, planned and organized during the past thirty days, began. All city traffic lights would burn red for those sixty seconds. Radio and trivid broadcasts would observe the moment as well. As near as Harrison's administration could arrange it, New Avalon had just come to a complete standstill.

An entire world, holding its breath.

Nearly everyone in the amphitheater stared at the ground or closed their eyes, hands clasped in front of

them or arms folded across their chest. A semblance of prayer, if nothing else. Julian snuck a look at Sterling McKenna, who stood next to him with hands clasped at her waist and a tolerant smirk on her lips as she stared up—eyes wide open—into a blue sky.

Clan traditions differed so greatly, and Julian wondered what she thought about. Victor's martial record? That would be very Clan, where a warrior's codex, the record of his accomplishments, was all that mattered and death was welcome so long as the warrior proved himself worthy of the breeding program.

At least Sterling McKenna observed the respectful silence, even if not in the true spirit of the proceedings.

"Thank you," Harrison said at the end of the appointed minute, and life returned to New Avalon.

He remained strictly nondenominational, though there were whispers of *amen* and *glory be* and even a few mutters *offinally* which Julian hoped did not get picked up by the newsvid journalists.

Harrison Davion would not use this event for political means. He simply nodded to the hillside full of people, to the cameras and to his realm. On the upper rim of the amphitheater, an honor squad from the Davion Guards surrounded a white-painted flagstaff, and raised the flag of the Federated Suns back to full mast.

"A life of service," Harrison said. "Long and full. We should all be so fortunate. Blessings on New Avalon, and the entire Federated Suns."

It was the end of the broadcasts, certainly, and the end of the official ceremony. On a normal day, Harrison would take time to mingle and meet people along the rope lines. Off-the-record stuff. Goodwill building.

Today he turned from the stage front and stepped back to where Sterling and Julian waited. She attached herself to the prince's side, standing as his equal as well as his escort. Julian was reminded of Amanda Hasek's injured feelings, and wondered again how she could deny her brother-in-law something so simple as a second relationship.

"If I don't shake a few hands," Harrison said quietly, "the rumor mill will move into overdrive."

"Take your time," Sterling said, acknowledging the undercurrent of tension running between the two men. "Your people need you." She gave him a chaste hug, which he returned with strength.

He offered a similar clasp to Julian. The kind any two men might exchange at such a solemn service.

It allowed Julian to lean in and pass along two simple words. Nothing significant, just to be safe, but a warning nonetheless that Harrison should not wait too long before taking a private moment with his champion.

"It's started."



Seginus was hit hard by expeditionary forces of Clan Jade Falcon in what could only be

described as a raid of petulance, punishing the world for giving aid and succor to Anastasia Kerensky and her Steel Wolves. The casualty count is coming in now. . . .

—Newswire, ComStar InterStellar Associated, Terra, 27 December 3134

*New Avalon
Federated Suns
24 January 3135*

Julian finished briefing Harrison as they rode a private elevator into the sublevels of the Davion palace. The opulent cab had a thickly padded bench seat that neither man used, a mirrored back wall, and a communications panel on one side that rivaled the sophistication of most military command cars.

It was also keyed to Harrison's DNA, and was one of many areas inside the palace routinely swept for surveillance gear, just to be safe.

"How many worlds again?" Harrison asked, his brow building into the start of a heavy frown.

"Only the three. But it's which three that make the difference. New Hessen, Demeter and Chesterton. Those worlds all have—"

"No," Harrison interrupted. "Don't tell me. Something . . ." The large man snapped meaty fingers together, as if trying to spark a memory. "Damn." He hated being a step behind anyone, even the man he had chosen as his chief military aide.

Julian bent his knees slightly, absorbing the cab's rapid stop as the elevator glided to its destination. A secure lock buried within the heavy doors ratcheted open, and a seam split wide as they trundled apart with mechanical reluctance. Six inches thick, with alternating plates of titanium and ferosteel. After the Jihad, no expense had been spared to make the prince's private corridors and rooms as secure as possible. The palace could take a thermonuclear weapon hit, and the deep bunkers would allow Harrison and his command staff to survive it.

Perhaps a bit of overkill, but once bitten . . .

The size of the prince's private war room was nothing compared to the massive structure built beneath the AFFS Watchtower, Julian knew, but there was something to be said for proximity to power. The small chamber was still staffed twenty-five hours of a New Avalon day, and possessed the resources to monitor and prosecute a war on any planet in the Federated Suns.

Of course, lack of access to the hyperpulse generator network made that monitoring a bit difficult, forcing the team to rely on reports keyed in through Watchtower computers, but it served as well as anything might for the first prince.

Two armed men guarded the elevator entrance and two more a set of doors across the room the only ways in or out. All four snapped to attention as their prince entered.

Julian nodded them back to at-ease.

Several large monitors angled down at the floor from where the walls bent into a cathedral ceiling. The

room was dimly lit, the better to read workstation readouts and overhead screens. It smelled of warm electronics. And strong coffee, the staple of military watches everywhere.

A dozen military technicians and a captain serving as today's watch officer manned various workstations. Monitors set above them displayed regimental rosters and force movements, maps and a queue of orders that had passed from the room to any of a number of other installations. Two screens showed the progress of a battle simulation being run on one of the room's computer consoles. A replay of the battle for Huntress, Julian saw.

Harrison made straight for the center of the room where a dark, glassy pit crouched within a waist-high rail. Workstation controls had been built right into the polished metal balustrade. Julian joined his prince just as Harrison ordered up a map of the Federated Suns.

A blue mist welled up in the open pit, filling it with a low level of light. Like fireflies, pale golden sparks swam up within the thin cloud. A hundred suns. Two hundred. More. Finally, a bright line of spun gold sketched around the holographic display tank, outlining the Federated Suns and dividing it off from the neighboring realms of the Draconis Combine, Raven Alliance, Taurian Concordat and House Liao's Capellan Confederation.

Near the stretch of space that bordered on The Republic of the Sphere, three golden worlds pulsed between gold and danger-red.

Worlds where fifteen months of fighting between House Liao and The Republic had finally spilled over into Davion space.

"The Chesterton Commonality," Harrison said, catching from the stellar map what he had been unable to pull from memory. "That is what worries you, Julian?"

"Somewhat," the prince's champion admitted.

The Chesterton Commonality was worlds annexed by House Davion five hundred years and three Succession Wars ago in a move sanctioned by the original Star League, though in a rather one-sided arrangement. And Capellans had long memories.

"I've spoken with your Marshal of the Armies, and we agree this could be Liao's opening gambit."

Making adjustments to the controls, Julian brought up a war plan that showed "force lines" where troops would spill into the Federated Suns through that narrow corridor. Setting up the dominoes. Chesterton through Sanilac to Bristol. Secondary assaults spearing over the border at Kathil. At New Syrtis.

Worlds fading from Davion gold to a cold, Capellan green.

"So fast?" Harrison asked. He stared at the calendar key, a series of amber-burning numbers near the edge of the holograph tank, ticking upwards.

He shrugged. "Our labors on worlds such as Kathil have not yet been programmed. And Daoshen is obviously better prepared than we are for a campaign."

"At the moment," Harrison added, but it was empty bluster. They both knew it.

The Capellan Confederation had stolen a march on everyone. Preparing, certainly, before the Blackout

ever hit, and likely laying groundwork as far back as their forced downsizing as stipulated in the Tikonov Accords. Part of that was in their national interest. Not one Successor State or Clan military, Julian assumed, had ever decommissioned as much equipment as they claimed. Everyone held back a little. Five percent. Ten. Enough to feel superior. Safe.

But House Liao had saved more, perhaps as much as thirty percent. Prince Harrison had some of his best intelligence analysts as well as auditors in the military's General Accountability Office working in special teams, reviewing old files to figure out how it had been done. Assessing the damage. Learning from the enemy in case the Federated Suns ever found a use for the technique.

It was a catch-up game, all the way. House Liao had an early lead, but work proceeded apace along the border. Given another year . . .

"How likely do you think this is?" Harrison asked, studying the holographic model. He held up his hand, stopping him from giving the pat answer. "What do you *think*, Julian?"

"I think House Liao is still some time away from looking in our direction. No matter what we've led Amanda Hasek to believe." He shrugged.

"But?"

"But the Confederation never formally relinquished these worlds, even though during the time of Sun-Tzu Liao and his *Xin Sheng* reforms it was heavily implied the Confederation would finally let that sleeping dog lie. Daoshen Liao, however, has proven less . . . predictable."

"Barking mad, you mean." Harrison did not bother to hide his concern or his disgust. "His claims of divinity notwithstanding, he threatens a generation of peace and spends thousands of lives to reclaim a dozen worlds from The Republic?"

"There are Federated Suns loyalists on either side of *our* border with The Republic who would risk the same," Julian reminded his prince.

"Marcher Lords." The name was a curse. "Sandovals, mostly. Haseks *generally* have better sense than to poke at a wounded lion."

Generally. But not always, they both knew.

Julian wrapped his hands around the railing's metal balustrade. Smooth, and cold to the touch. Staring down into the holographic map of suns and systems, he let his silence answer for him.

Harrison's father had been a Sandoval; the prince declined to use the hyphenated *Sandoval-Davion* to avoid Duke Corwin reading too much into it. And Harrison had married into the Haseks. So his only son was within two generations of both powerful dynasties.

Caleb wore their names like a mantle.

Family ties notwithstanding, however, House Davion stood in a very precarious position. Julian could have pointed out how the Hasek dynasty was still protecting its victory against Liao from thirty years back, when they seized Victoria and a large chunk of the Confederation's Victoria Commonality. They were as reluctant to share their wealth as they were eager for another bite. The Sandovals, meanwhile, lived with the Draconis Reach, a no-man's-land between Houses Davion and Kurita where low-level

warfare was a daily plague, and into which the once-powerful dynasty continued to push money and manpower. Under the guise of economic and strategic relief, of course.

Both had stepped up “defensive” preparations in the last two years. Generally. But not always, they both knew.

Both had withdrawn a great deal of their support from Crucis March worlds. From New Avalon.

Which had led to Julian’s preparations on industrial worlds such as Kathil. To defend the throne, if needed—but more!—to ready the Federated Suns for a preemptive strike at House Liao. When war became inevitable, the better choice was to attack first. And it was no small benefit that the nobles were likely to rally to the throne in such a time. War would galvanize the nobility, and turn the fraying tempers of Ministers Hasek and Sandoval away from New Avalon.

If it should come to that. If they still had time.

When the silence had run its course, Julian froze the map with Liao colors owning half of the Capellan March. Time elapsed: one year. “Regardless. If Daoshen turns his gaze from The Republic to threaten the Federated Suns . . .”

“We aren’t ready,” Harrison finished. He nodded. “So we trade Republican lives for our own. Perfect.” His voice suggested it was far from such.

The idea left a sour taste with Julian as well. He was trained to put his life on the line for prince and nation, not hide behind the misfortune of others.

“And we need to shut down these skirmishes at once,” Julian said, “or at least one of them. We show Daoshen Liao that he does not want to come knocking on our door. Not while fighting a hard-pitched war with The Republic.”

Harrison went very still. “What if Daoshen strikes a bargain with The Republic, and settles a peace now that he possesses the world of Liao and a dozen others besides?” He looked over at his champion. “What if he uses the funeral services being held on Terra as a way to settle up and then move against us?”

That had not occurred to Julian. Icy hands twisted his guts. “I had not credited the chancellor with that kind of political acumen.” It threw all the war models out of sync. He was already running through force strengths in his head, figuring out where he could pull more troops. His fingers itched for the keyboards on any of the nearby workstations. “You believe it is a threat?”

“I believe Liao is always a threat. Only a fool turns his back on a junkyard dog. Even when it is quiet.”

“If that is true, then you should cancel your state visit to Terra. Send an ambassador to attend Victor’s funeral and treat with the new exarch.” Julian frowned at the red-flashing worlds. “Do not put yourself into their hands.”

Harrison laughed, unable to hold it back any longer. It was strong and commanding, like a drill instructor’s voice on the training grounds. “Good to see there are some things left to teach you, Julian. This is precisely why I must go. Why we will*both* attend the funeral of my uncle, your cousin. For Exarch Levin, we remind him that we are, and have always been, his willing ally in peace.”

“And for Chancellor Daoshen?” Julian asked, sensing an unspoken caveat.

“That the Federated Suns does *not* run from a fight.” Harrison’s face tightened down. “Ever.”

For a moment, Julian felt a thrill of fear for the power his prince wielded. Let Daoshen—*or any* leader—make the mistake of coming after the Federated Suns throne. It would be Harrison himself who met the charge, shoving it back down their throats.

With Julian fighting right alongside him!

“That’s your final answer?” Julian asked, knowing it was, but his military training forcing him to ask. A commander’s orders had to be clear. Always.

Harrison never took affront at this. He had been the one to sponsor Julian into the best academy in the Inner Sphere, after all, and requested instructors from the New Avalon Institute of Science to tutor his nephew in history and political sciences after academy officers admitted they had little more to teach him. If anything, Harrison enjoyed it when Julian put his education to use.

And, of course, he had already forgiven Julian much more in the young man’s life than simple clarification of orders.

“It is my final answer, Julian. Victor was family. We take care of our own. You and I—and Amanda as well—will be there to see him off.”

“And Caleb,” Julian reminded the prince.

“Yes. And Caleb.”

Why that caused the leader of the Federated Suns to sound sorrowful, Julian wasn’t certain. Wasn’t certain he hadn’t mistaken the tone, in fact. Regret? Harrison’s decisions weren’t always popular with the nobility, but Julian had never known him to waste time on regret for any one of them. It wasn’t his nature to worry over such decisions once made.

“I wonder if she’ll be there,” Julian asked then, staring down into the swirl of suns as they floated in a blue-black mist, and hardly seeing it.

Harrison grunted. “If Melissa Steiner deigns to show up, you might see Callandre in the entourage. But you know better than to dig at that old wound.”

“Hardly an old wound, Uncle. Just an old friend.” It sounded weak, even to his ears, and Harrison wasn’t buying.

“I’m speaking about the Archon, Julian. She expelled you from Lyran space *after* the two of you caused half a million kroner in damages and stumped the Nagelring’s honor board system. It took three years to restart the student exchange program. Stay away from her.”

“She probably won’t be there anyway,” Julian said, properly abashed.

The prince shook his head, not letting it go so easy. “I’d rather come down on the safe side,” he said, “especially since Amanda will likely bring Sandra Fenlon with her. And *you* would do better keeping your mind on the trouble along our border. I want Daoshen stop-punched before he so much as looks in our direction.”

Nodding, Julian steered his attention back on track. "Then it's New Hessen we want to throw him off, since it's the world most likely to attract Daoshen's attention as a possible prize of conquest."

"Why?"

To supplement the map in front of him, Julian dug into his memory for what he knew about the world. "It sits on the border. It has stronger industry than the other two worlds." In fact, didn't it have an armor-rolling plant? He thought it did. But the big thing . . . "It was a Confederation holdfast as recent as seventy . . . eighty years ago. Daoshen's father ruled New Hessen for a time. He won't have forgotten *that*."

Harrison smiled and nodded, obviously pleased. "Excellent analysis, Julian. Yes, that should send just the kind of message we're looking to deliver. New Hessen . . ." He considered it, and nodded. "You will push ahead of my departure and quash any disturbance there. Then it is on to Terra."

"Then it is the long way around," Julian said, correcting his prince and uncle. "At least for you. I do not want you anywhere near those worlds."

The first prince considered that. "If we travel via Marlette and then Tikonov," he said, using the star chart floating in front of them to plan a course, "we could rendezvous at Yangtze. Does that keep me far enough out of danger?"

Now Harrison mocked him, but in good humor. Julian, though, was very serious. "I would prefer Tigress, but I know better than to argue. Yangtze it is."

"Do not let it worry you, nephew. Victor's services aren't until June. I'll want to arrive before May, so you should have . . . oh . . . at least a week to put things right on New Hessen before I am anywhere close by. And that's if you leave tomorrow."

"You don't make my job easy, do you, Uncle?"

"Builds character, my boy. Best get yourself ready and moving. And remember, I'll be chasing along behind you every step of the way. So keep your head in your duties."

Julian knew exactly what he owed Harrison, which was everything. He'd not disappoint. He'd make every effort to stay focused on the problems of New Hessen and not the coming summit and service on Terra. But it was hard. If Harrison's predictions were right, this would be the kind of grand gathering of political leaders that came once . . . maybe twice in a lifetime. That would be hard for anyone to ignore.

And he still wondered who else would be there.

House Liao invades through Prefectures V and VI. The Jade Falcons are well-entrenched in IX. Prefecture IV might as well be a Davion protectorate for all that Lord Governor Sandoval and his Swordsworn follow direction from Terra these days. And now the Exarch himself attacksus in a show of unsubstantiated partisan politics?

How many more enemies can The Republic afford?

—Senator Lina Derius (Nationalist Party, Liberty), “A Call for True Republic Unity,” Terra, 20 January 3135

Tamar

Clan Wolf Occupation Zone

8 February 3135

Alaric walked into the 'Mech hangar at the side of Loremaster Liam Ward, matching the other man stride for stride. The hangar smelled of hot metal and grease, a stench that permeated every pore in the ferrocrete and wedged itself into even the slightest flaw of stanchion or beam. It never dissipated, no matter how often cadets scrubbed at floors or washed down the steel gantries.

Alaric remembered nights after such work, lying in a barracks rack or on a field cot. The smell clinging to his hair even after a scalding-hot shower. That, he did not miss.

There were only a few techs on duty and little work to be done as yet. That would come later. Empty bays opened to either side of them all along the quarter-kilometer hike. All but the final two, in which a pair of seventy-ton *Blood Reapers* waited for the fortunate cadets testing out as Clan Wolf warriors this day. Reverse-canted legs and heavy lasers bulking up each massive forearm of the 'Mechs. One of those would be his.

The Clan's loremaster wore a spotless jumpsuit with military creases so sharp they could shave metal. His hair was light brown with a low widow's peak shorn tight against the scalp. His dark eyes had a deep frown line permanently wrinkled between them.

Already dressed down in combat togs—cooling vest and shorts—Alaric held a neurohelmet by the chin strap in his left hand. His scarred leather combat boots held no comparison to Liam Ward's glossy black uniform boots, but their footfalls both echoed in the cavernous interior, rolling along the back wall and bouncing around in the open-beam rafters three stories overhead until one step could hardly be distinguished from another. The applause of footfalls chased after and ahead of them, warning the small gathering of three cadets who stood in a short line before their instructor.

Three trueborn protégés remaining from a starting sibko of thirty-two.

Weakness.

“Loremaster Ward.” The instructor bowed his head out of deference, but did not break eye contact with the older man.

His name was Kyle, Alaric already knew. He had never earned a Bloodname. Though five years younger than Liam Ward's forty-three, Kyle would finish his career here on Tamar, wiping noses and training future warriors, future leaders.

Setting the worst to train your best? Such a backward system.

“Star Captain Kyle,” Ward greeted him coolly. Then: “Have you chosen your cadets for today's Trial of Position?”

The sibko instructor nodded. "Rahm and Gregor earned that right."

"Then Cadet Rahm will match up with Alaric instead, who will test out as a warrior today. Cadet Gregor, you are dismissed."

As simple as that. Alaric saw Kyle bridle and Gregor hang undecided at the quick turn of events, but there was no questioning the man who oversaw all ceremony and ritual within Clan Wolf. Their anger was useless. A Trial of Refusal could be called, of course. But Kyle did not have the stones for it, and Gregor as yet had no standing within the Clan.

Alaric had already dismissed the possibility of a trial before Kyle began considering it.

He turned his attention to the cadets instead. Trueborn, from the Clan eugenics program. Young and arrogant. The same as he had been at that age, Alaric supposed. All of eighteen or nineteen—four years his junior. They eyed him warily, as one might some alien creature discovered under a rock. Studied his easy, ready stance. His dark blue eyes, which never blinked often enough. Golden blond hair, iron straight and cut all at one length, even with his chin.

Scarred knuckles, broken when smashing in the faceplate of an Elemental, one story said.

A knotted rope of tissue along his right arm. Shrapnel—bouncing around inside a tank's crew cabin, tearing through his arm and chest several times. He'd used a hot shell casing to cauterize the wounds.

And a small crescent-shaped scar on the outside ridge of his left eye. A fast-draw barracks competition. But you should see the other guy.

They knew who he was. Of *their* born sibko. But hearing rumors and watching the barracks-tale come walking in dressed for combat were two different things.

"Gregor," Kyle said, conceding the argument as Alaric had known he would, "stand down. Rahm, you test with Alaric."

Loxmaster Ward nodded curtly. "Alaric. The DropShip lifts at fifteen hundred."

He would be there. It was promised.

The loxmaster turned and stalked away. His steps echoed, stirring the silence that enveloped the small gathering. Alaric had no time for Kyle's sour expression or Gregor's glare, so he simply swung his neurohelmet toward the nearest of the two *Blood Reaper*s. "I will take this one." He stepped past Gregor, too close, waiting to see if the younger man would bump shoulders against him. A simple touch . . .

Gregor jumped back.

Satisfactory.

"Alaric!" Rahm called.

One cadet to another, there was no need to answer or even acknowledge. But he did. Pausing. Turning halfway back to look a question with his eyes.

Rahm swallowed. Glanced at his companions and drew strength from their presence. “They say you’ve refused testing every year. Actually challenged by trials^{not} to test.”

That one. “Is that what they say?” Alaric asked. He waited for the others to nod. Even Kyle joined in. Alaric smiled, showing white, white teeth. “Interesting.”

Then he turned back to his ’Mech.

Tamar’s Golden Ranges rolled out for hundreds of kilometers once the two cadets cleared the training compound and a swampy river delta. A great sward of tall, yellow grasses and battle-scarred, blackened earth still healing from the last training battle. Low hills hardly worth the name. Out here there would be no games of hide and seek. No advantage in the terrain at all. Only skill mattered.

Skill, and the instincts of a hunting wolf.

Alaric trusted his instincts. Stomping his *Blood Reaper* onto the proving range, feeling its weight sway behind the cockpit, which thrust out of bulky shoulders eight meters above the ground, he felt complete. He felt that the machine’s gyroscope was not perfectly responsive to his neurological signal, as fed through the neurohelmet and translated by uncalibrated control circuitry, but his firm touch on the control sticks made up the difference. Every step felt strong and certain, and his weapons were fully charged.

He even had time for a quick hardwire bypass of the particle projector cannon interlock, which prevented weapons fire at dangerous cycling rates. The ’Mech was his.

Behind, on his left shoulder, Rahm lumbered along in his own *Blood Reaper*. He spread wide from Alaric’s line of march as the targeting computer suddenly painted icons for six enemy machines on their head-up display.

“I will break east on your opening shot,” the other cadet said over private comms. As if offering Alaric a gift by giving him first blood.

Alaric shrugged to the cockpit. “You do what you feel the need.” His voice-activated mic certainly picked up his lack of concern. “Do not cross my line of fire.”

The cockpit smelled of warm electronics, but the coolant charge flowing through Alaric’s vest raised gooseflesh on his arms. He dialed back on the flow, preferring to run warm alongside his machine.

His trained eye had already parsed out the ID tags on each of the six enemy BattleMechs. Two thirty-ton *Hellion*s. A pair of heavy *Vulture*s and another of assault-class *Jupiter*s. By Clan practice, he and Rahm would fight with live weapons fire against each pair of ’Mechs in order. One on one, unless one of them instigated a melee by firing on the other’s combatant—or each other. That was a tactic used by the blindly ambitious.

Alaric expected it.

One “kill” was all it took, of course. One light ’Mech and you qualified as a warrior. Of course, every sibko cadet dreamed of a clean sweep: three defeated enemies for bumps in rank through Star commander and straight to Star captain. That was the way of ristar—the rising stars of Clan militaries. And the holy grail was four kills. Star colonel. No one save the legendary Natasha Kerensky had ever

accomplished that.

Many had died, or failed looking very foolish trying, in the last seventy years since it was done.

“Here they come,” Rahm warned.

Alaric had already noticed the *Hellion* s moving forward. Through the BattleMech’s ferroglass shield it was hard to tell how they moved, but he saw at once from his tactical monitor how the two advanced in perfect concert. A pair of veterans. Liam Ward had promised a challenge, and the Wolf loremaster would deliver on his word.

Shoving his throttle to the forward stop, Alaric sped his *Blood Reaper* up to a running pace of sixty-two kilometers per hour. Rahm fell back for only a moment before following suit. Like a pair of savage wolves, they bounded over Tamar’s greensward.

The *Hellion* s carried heavy lasers only, which meant they had to wait for close-in shots. Alaric helped his enemies cut the distance quickly, holding his own fire for ten heartbeats. Twenty. Rahm must want to fire, he sensed, but the cadet was too honor-bound to renege on his promise to wait. Foolish, to have no plan of his own and rely so heavily on Alaric’s strategy.

Thirty . . .

Alaric pulled his crosshairs over the swift-moving *Hellion* , holding it as his reticle burned the deep, dark gold of a solid targeting lock. Now they were within range of the second pair of waiting combatants, the *Vulture* s, as well. But everyone held their fire as the BattleMechs closed with great strides.

Forty. Fifty.

Sensing at the last possible heartbeat when his opponent would open fire with a heavy laser, Alaric toggled for full weapons spread and eased into his primary triggers.

The PPCs on his left and right arms blazed with backflashes of cerulean energy, and like twin forks of lighting a cascade of charged particles slashed across the tall grasses to rip up and down the sides of the lead *Hellion* . Armor shards glowing white-hot at the edges rained down, starting small grassfires. The light ’Mech staggered as if sucker-punched, slowing. All but falling into the brace of advanced tactical missiles which corkscrewed in on gray exhaust trails to blossom yellow-orange fireballs from head to toe.

Hot-cycling his weapons even as his BattleMech’s reactor spike washed his cockpit in sweltering waves of waste heat, Alaric held his angle and traded another full salvo for the *Hellion* ’s laser.

A bright orange lance slash-burned armor from the *Blood Reaper* ’s right leg. It threw a hitch into Alaric’s step, but it was hardly a problem.

His second barrage was more than the light ’Mech could stand. A severed leg and heavy internal damage took the machine down hard, plowing it into the soft earth. High-velocity metal spat out of the gaping rents as the *Hellion* ’s gyroscope tore itself into shrapnel.

The MechWarrior would be a fool to get back up again.

And if he tried, Alaric would kill him.

True to his word, Rahm had cut eastward to spread some little distance between the separate one-on-one battles. He'd also throttled back, determined to keep some distance on the smaller, faster *Hellion*. Which left Alaric's *Blood Reaper* in between Rahm and his target. Alaric never hesitated, pivoting into a hard left and racing across the trueborn's line of sight, spoiling the other cadet's aim and waiting—ready—for him to burn so much as a small laser into Alaric's side.

Rahm didn't. He pulled out of his own shot rather than risk instigating a grand melee before his first kill. Surrendering initiative to the *Hellion*, Rahm rode out a pair of deep, angry wounds to his 'Mech's left arm and flank.

Sweat stung Alaric's eyes as more waste heat piled into the cramped cockpit, bleeding up through the deck plate. His breath came sharp and shallow, pulling hot coals down into his lungs. But already he had his crosshairs centered on the *Vulture*, having guessed that the other MechWarrior would not anticipate the *Hellion*'s surrender.

The *Vulture* stood there, immobile, waiting for the all-clear signal to advance and challenge the testing cadet. As the *Hellion*'s pilot shut down his targeting computer and his icon disappeared from everyone's tactical display, Alaric was already working his crosshairs carefully up the other BattleMech's lanky body, targeting the narrow profile of cockpit nestled between the shoulder-mounted launchers.

The *Hellion* went dark, and Alaric put one of his PPCs through the *Vulture*'s ferroglass face mask. The other cannon went just a few meters high, slashing impotently through the air, but the miss hardly mattered. The cockpit caved inward under the brutal stream of the first cannon, half-melted and half torn away, letting the interior fill with hellish energies that cremated the Wolf veteran on the spot.

Laziness should be a terminal illness in any warrior.

"Great Father!" Rahm yelled. Partly in admiration, of course. But in no small amount of shock, either.

Alaric, meanwhile, felt like howling his frustration over the common channel he shared with the other cadet. Four years he had waited for this. Four years during which he was *instructed* on how to challenge for a refusal of position. Waited for the moment when it was deemed appropriate for him to make his stand and separate himself from the pack. From his sibkin.

And they were making *iteasy* !

But the *Jupiter* was one hundred tons of pure, unpleasant war avatar, a massive assault-class 'Mech with vast reach in its large lasers and twin launchers capable of spitting out two score of long-range missiles in every flight. *This* Wolf was ready, or at least had learned something from the previous warrior's mistake. With the *Vulture*'s cockpit a smoking ruin, the 'Mech standing there, dead, the *Jupiter* waited for no call of engagement. Gem-bright laserfire burned through the space between them, slashing at Alaric's arms and right leg. With a backward-rocking motion, the *Jupiter* set itself as forty missiles took to the air in a wide spread of violence.

Alaric had no choice but to stand against the blistering assault. He'd pushed his fusion reactor deep into the red. The *Blood Reaper* responded sluggishly, as rising heat levels addled the 'Mech's control circuitry, and his targeting reticle cut in and out as the sensitive electronics suffered similarly.

The lasers stripped away armor, melting deep wounds into his limbs. Molten composite runneled down his 'Mech's leg, splashing into the grass. More sooty black smoke spread behind him as he staggered away from the budding fires and Rahm, who now moved up, having finally put down his own light *Hellion*

Warheads fell all around Alaric, tearing up the sod and smashing like huge fists over his head and shoulders. The shaking threw him against his seat restraints and threatened to beat him down to the ground. He wrestled with the control sticks, using his arms as counterbalance and ducking forward far enough that his own sense of equilibrium stressed the *Blood Reaper*'s gyroscope enough to maintain balance within a kilo or two of toppling.

He eased off his throttle, then slammed it back into full reverse as soon as he regained control of the *Blood Reaper*. The 'Mech nearly spun over, and Alaric felt like he'd been punched in the gut as the quick-release buckle on his restraint harness dug deep into his abdomen.

He glanced at his wireframe schematic. His left PPC showed a control circuitry failure. Pushed too hard too fast. And the thin armor protecting his cockpit was of desperate concern as well, as another salvo of missile fire hammered down around him. A single warhead slammed into the side of the *Blood Reaper*'s head, the noise of the explosion thundering through the cockpit as the brutal shove jugged him sideways.

Two kills in as many minutes. Alaric was a Star commander in Clan Wolf now. Good enough, but not what he had promised. Not what he had *been* promised.

If he'd had both particle projector cannons available, he'd still have had a shot at wearing down the assault 'Mech's thick armor. As it was, he was beaten. Beaten before he had even scratched the massive titan, having spent his equipment with reckless abandon. Which left him only one option.

Alaric staggered, letting the *Blood Reaper* sag backward.

He had assumed Rahm would not—could not—make the hard call. There Alaric was, falling back as the *Jupiter* pressed forward with a hard-hitting assault, everything about his 'Mech shouting weakness. Rahm was in his six. A ristar not afraid of making an enemy would seize the opportunity to attack and disable the faltering 'Mech. A warrior too full of his own sense of honor would instigate a melee first, and *then* turn his weapons on the other testing cadet.

Which would have given Alaric warning enough to take the first shot.

So the rude shove, slamming his *Blood Reaper* in the small of the back and slicing deep into hips and armored legs, actually caught the new Star commander by surprise. Rahm hit him with everything the *Blood Reaper* had, having learned the wrong lessons from Alaric's own blitzkrieg assault.

Warning lights flashed for attention as heat sinks ruptured. Destructive energy carved through armor and shielding to throw unstable surges into the fusion reactor. But his sagging midsection and splayed legs were for more than the appearance of weakness. Alaric's stance helped absorb the brutal assault.

Alaric held to his feet, twisting around to lever his arm straight back at the advancing *Blood Reaper*. Pinned between the *Jupiter*'s railing assault and Rahm's gamble, Star Commander Alaric squeezed off his first PPC blast to slap a scourge of energies into the *Blood Reaper*'s right arm. Slicing past laser damage. Coring out the shoulder joint and finally slicing the entire arm away.

It evened the odds with respect to raw firepower.

But Alaric had held his fire, letting his heat levels drop back down to a manageable range while Rahm had driven his own into dangerous territory. So Alaric hot-cycled and fired again. And again.

He blasted through more chest armor.

The particle cannon scoured composite flesh from the left leg.

As the *Jupiter*'s lasers bit into Alaric's left side and Rahm's remaining particle cannon flailed at fresh armor on his right, Alaric slashed another stream of energies lower down, and this time sliced clean through the lower leg. The *Blood Reaper* crashed down into a patch of burning grasses, disabled.

Then Rahm pulled the plug by deactivating his targeting system.

Three . . . Star captain!

But it was not over.

Shaken and beaten by the *Jupiter*, still Alaric stumbled his savaged *Blood Reaper* forward just far enough to lay the red-hot barrel of his PPC against the side of the other 'Mech's head. No skill shot this one. It was an execution, and perfectly within Alaric's right. The weak fell behind. The strong went on.

There would be repercussions, of course. Challenges to defend against. Perhaps some official notice of the waste of good genetic material.

Liam Ward would remind Alaric that mercy was also a virtue of warriors.

Alaric pulled the trigger, and a screaming cascade of energy left the Clan Wolf roster another warrior short.

Then he shut down his own targeting system, putting an end to the *Jupiter*'s impetus for attack. There was no personal grudge to settle here. And he had no intention of dying a fool who reached beyond his grasp.

Because Star Captain Alaric was scheduled to leave for Terra this day.

And one did not keep the Khan of Clan Wolf waiting.



Watching what has happened to Stone's "great" Republic, I can only be satisfied with Styk's decision to declare its independence in an attempt to preserve lives and the honor of our world.

**—(Former Senator) Countess Jiu Soon Lah, Styk,
27 January 3135**

*Woodstock
The Republic of the Sphere
9 February 3135*

The dingy yellow cab dropped Erik Sandoval-Groell off at curbside and, after Erik paid, the driver sped off with a belch of noxious exhaust and a severe rattle in the vehicle's old engine. The young noble

grimaced with distaste, brushed his hands together as if ridding them of something particularly gritty and unpleasant. Then, giving himself a moment, he studied his destination with a mixture of curiosity and wariness.

Ixtapa's family Mexican restaurant sat on the border between Woodstock's interplanetary DropPort and its capital city of Charleston. WORLD-FAMOUS SALSA, a sign promised. Tucked in beside a small strip mall serving this neck of suburbia, the adobe façade and garish colors made it an easy landmark. Warm reds and bright yellows stood out in a community favoring beige and grays. Pleasing musical chords floated down from overhead speakers and a deep, sultry voice with a Latin accent accompanied the guitar. An aroma of spiced meat and warm tortilla wafted out the open doors.

A welcome embrace that comforted Erik, even as he fought against it. He did not like clandestine meetings.

At least, not ones he hadn't set up personally.

Waiting for two men to enter ahead of him, the noble scion gave himself a slow count of ten before heading into the restaurant. Inside, the music competed with a noisy lunchtime crowd. People chatted and gossiped. In between conversation, they attacked large plates of enchiladas smothered in cheese and guacamole or built their own fajita wraps from chicken delivered still sizzling on cast-iron plates.

A steady stream of iced margaritas traveled from bar to tables on the trays of waiters, and Erik began to think he might like one. Then the hostess returned from seating earlier customers, stepped up to him and laid a slender hand on his arm. She was slender and small, with dusky skin and long, glossy raven hair casually held back with a tie of red cloth.

"Senor Groell?"

His defenses flashed back up in a heartbeat, then subsided. Obviously, he was expected.

He nodded, and the woman gestured for him to follow her.

Erik didn't worry about how she had known to watch for the young noble or how she had recognized him. He had dressed down today, eschewing any noble dress or even his more usual military uniform for khaki pants and a loose-fitting, chambray shirt that spoke "relaxed" to the casual observer. But Erik's hair, shaved up the sides into the classic topknot favored by the Sandoval dynasty, was different enough that the hostess had likely been told to watch for it. Certainly there had been no subterfuge in her warm, doelike eyes.

He could not say the same for the man who waited for him. His hair had been dyed a premature white, and shorn tight enough that one could count a half dozen scars that twisted over his scalp. The rough stubble of two-days' beard shaded his gaunt face, and his one good eye stared a red-hot hole through Erik. A patch covered his left eye, and a narrow scar trailed down through his eyebrow, disappearing under the black fabric.

Jack Farrell.

Freebooter. Pirate, some said. Erik had never met the man before, but knew him by reputation. When you worked for Duke Aaron Sandoval, Lord Governor of Prefecture IV and leader of the Swordsworn, it paid to keep on top of such things.

When you were related to Aaron, such attention was demanded.

Sliding into the seat opposite One-Eyed Jack, Erik nodded when a server asked him if he'd like to start with a drink.

"Margarita. Blended and salted."

Farrell had only a tall, sweating glass of ice water sitting in front of him, flavored with a single wedge of lime. Something in his glance said that he thought less of Erik for mixing pleasure with business. "I already ordered for us," he said.

"You will excuse me if I decide not to eat."

The pirate—if such he was—shrugged. "Looks strange, sitting in a restaurant, not eating. But suit yourself."

Well, perhaps it did. So Erik helped himself to the wicker basket of warm corn chips. Dipping one into an earthenware dish, he tried the restaurant's salsa. A thick mixture of tomato, sweet onion and a blend of peppers, evened out by oregano and . . . garlic? It had a fine taste and a long, lingering bite. Erik wasn't sure if "world-famous" was warranted. But it was definitely good.

"What do you want, Mr. Farrell?"

The other man chuckled. "That's good. If I didn't know better, I'd swear you were here out of idle curiosity." His voice was rough, almost gravelly. "Don't want to know how we sniffed out your travel arrangements? Got the message aboard your DropShip?"

"All right." Erik nodded. "How did you do that?"

"Sorry." Jack smiled, showing tobacco-stained teeth. "Can't tell you."

But he wanted to. Erik sensed it. Which meant that either Jack Farrell didn't know how it had been done, and wanted Erik to believe he did, or he was working on behalf of another. In either case . . .

"I'll give you two minutes."

"What's the rush? In a hurry to reach Terra? The funeral service ain't for another two-three months, you know."

So Farrell knew *that* much about Erik's mission. Well, it was hardly secret anymore, Paladin Victor Steiner-Davion's death. And certainly the lord governor would attend the funeral.

There was a question, though, of what kind of support Aaron still enjoyed within The Republic. Several officials had turned less than cordial when Aaron recently stepped forward as leader of the Swordsworn, reading into the situation—quite correctly—the lord governor's pro-Davion leaning. But then the Swordsworn *had* saved Prefecture V from a Liao offensive. And with the public staring match between exarch and Senate heating up, and the Senate's call for nationalized powers, it was a difficult time—maybe even a dangerous time—to challenge him.

Of course, since Aaron couldn't know for certain, he sent Erik first.

After two years, Erik was getting used to his position as the lord governor's lightning rod. How many times had he been left to his own devices, even in the face of almost-certain death? Achernar and Hunan. Shensi! That one had been close, and a situation completely engineered by Aaron Sandoval.

"Live and learn," Aaron once told him. And Erik had.

"You asked for this meeting," he said now, reaching for a second chip. Then paused as his drink arrived in a wide-bodied glass rimmed with a crust of salt. Erik sampled the mouth-warming salsa again, and took one careful sip of the tequila-flavored drink. Cold and quenching. Perfect.

"I'm listening," he said.

"The duke, is he listening?"

That would be for Erik to decide, wouldn't it? Information was power. If not, why the long dance by Farrell?

But Erik knew when to play his trump card. "He is. For another sixty seconds."

Farrell glanced at nearby tables. Carefully. Out of the corner of his eye. Erik didn't believe the one-eyed rogue was checking on partners of any type. Farrell seemed the kind of man who preferred to work alone. Maybe he was checking for any backup Erik might have brought, but the young noble trusted his agents to be inconspicuous. *He* knew where they were, and Farrell looked right past them.

"Okay. He said you wouldn't be much for fun and games. And he does want you to know that this is a serious offer."

"Who?"

Farrell gave him one of *those* looks. "The first taste is free. After this, it costs. So here it is. Get Aaron Sandoval off St. Andre. *Now.*"

Interesting. A warning of a Capellan offensive about to launch? He hadn't heard anything out of Elsa Harrod, his own double agent against House Liao, so he doubted it.

A direct threat against Aaron's person? Now that would be just too bad, wouldn't it? Remembering Shensi, and the mercenaries that had struck under Liao colors . . . Erik thought perhaps he wouldn't say a damn thing.

Regardless, it was worth another few moments. Especially when their food arrived. Both men made a show of taking a few bites, neither ready to look foolish in front of the other by not eating. Farrell had ordered Erik a steak burrito, the meat wrapped with rice and beans inside the tortilla. Warm, but not hot. A good meat-spice flavor. Erik chewed thoughtfully and considered the cryptic message. Get Aaron off St. Andre. Now?

"He won't leave now." Not until Erik cleared the way to Terra. Besides: "St. Andre is one of the safest worlds in Prefecture V, thanks to our intervention."

In fact, New Aragon and St. Andre were the crux of The Republic's position in Prefecture V. As the Capellan Confederation pushed forward on either front, securing its hold on Liao and Gan Singh and Styk, Menkar and Algot, the secure garrisons on New Aragon and St. Andre were a knife held to

Daoshen Liao's belly. These worlds played host to a number of knights and, with the exarch's election over, several paladins as well. What force The Republic could muster in the defense of Prefecture V was concentrated on those worlds.

"Lord Governor Sandoval came down out of Prefecture IV just in time, all right." Farrell nodded. Swallowed. "Everything I've heard, Liao forces didn't expect much opposition from the Swordsworn."

"No reason they should," Erik admitted. "No love lost between The Republic's standing military and the Swordsworn." So many of whom had once been regular army. And Aaron's private plans, he knew, involved turning dozens of worlds over to House Davion in one swift, bloodless action. A bold move that *might* instigate the full collapse of The Republic. If the dominoes fell right.

And there Aaron would be, Minister of a new Davion March.

But coming to the aid of Prefecture V had gone a long way toward disguising the Sandoval plans, promoting Aaron to the top of a large list of leaders all vying for legitimacy. The successful military operation was even playing well back on Tikonov and throughout the rest of Prefecture IV. Winning over worlds without a shot fired or a 'Mech on the field.

To turn and run now . . .

"Is this about Bannson?" Erik asked.

That struck a nerve. Jack Farrell started, his fork falling against his plate with a clatter.

"What about Jacob Bannson?" Farrell responded. He didn't try to feign nonchalance. "What do you know?"

"Just what I've heard on the political grapevine. That the corporate magnate sold out the world of Liao and a number of others to the Confederation. There's a rumor he stomped some toes on Terra and Northwind as well by being involved with the Black Paladin, and that he disappeared right after that debacle. And that for years, his corporate headquarters happened to be on St. Andre." Erik decided to bluff a bit as well, leaning in with a conspirator's whisper. "And, of course, you are a known agent of his."

Cold ice glittered in Farrell's one good eye. But he did not deny it.

"You are well informed."

"After Prefecture V, Bannson Universal's largest investments are in IV. That's Lord Governor Sandoval's holding. It pays to stay informed."

Farrell took a drink of water, then set his glass down with a rattle of ice. "No," he said. "It *costs* to stay informed. Now I've done my part." He pulled a dog-eared black business card out of his breast pocket. He threw it into the puddle of water sweated onto the table by his glass. "You call that number and deal with him direct."

Erik fished the card out of the water. Nothing on it but a common exchange number, centered on one side in silver ink. "It doesn't even say what planet," Erik said, tossing it back down.

Farrell shrugged, stood.

“Wait,” Erik said. Reasoning through it fast. So One-Eyed Jack worked for Bannson, but he was not the one making contact through him now. Was Farrell selling out his own boss on orders from a third party? “Why you, Jack?”

“Why me?” Farrell repeated the question, as if he didn’t understand it. He picked up his napkin and wiped his mouth.

Erik spread his hands. “If I’m to take the offer seriously, I have to trust the source, don’t I?”

Another shifty-eyed glance. Farrell was obviously ready to be away from this place, but something held him. Maybe worried that his job wasn’t done satisfactorily. Yet.

“Because this was part of *four* price,” he said, his rough voice pitched extra quiet. “And we want to keep on good terms with him.”

“Still doesn’t tell me who.”

Farrell nodded. “And you ain’t gonna hear it from my lips, either.”

But he did reach back down to the table, dipping his finger in the puddle of water and tracing a quick outline onto the red-grained wood tabletop. A triangle, or pyramid. He used a few more quick strokes to section off each of the three corners.

Then he tossed his napkin into that puddle and walked quickly away.

Erik watched him go, suddenly not believing anything the man had told him. Things just weren’t done this way. Of course, he really had no idea how such meetings were supposed to go, but *this* didn’t seem right. He watched Farrell leave, the rogue never once looking back.

Not even when he walked past the empty table where Erik’s backup men had been seated.

For the space of three heartbeats, Erik froze. Plates of food sat on the other table, hardly touched, and the two soft drinks were half consumed. No waiter appeared to bus the table, or look concerned at the absence. Something normal, then. Bathroom!

Erik tossed his own napkin down with a casualness he did not feel and walked with forced nonchalance to the restroom. It was painted as brightly and warmly as the rest of the restaurant, with burned orange tiles running up the walls and a pattern of red clay bricks decorating the stall walls. The same light guitar music piped in through ceiling speakers. There was also a burned-hair smell that didn’t seem to belong.

He glanced beneath the stall door, saw too many feet, and kicked the door hard, breaking the lock. He leaned in to see the collapsed forms of his men resting up against the back wall, the two men Erik had let precede him into the restaurant. Still alive, with taser burns charred into the small hairs behind their ears.

They had been lured or forced from their table and disposed of without anyone noticing. Not even him.

Splashes of cold water woke them up enough that Erik could leave them without the next customer walking in and raising an alarm. Then the young nobleman left the restroom and went immediately to the front register to pay for his meal. And Farrell’s, as it turned out. Erik used hard currency, and tried to maintain a calm countenance.

Especially when he returned to his table and pocketed the black business card.

Just in case.

8

The Senate does not want proof. They want to bury their own perfidy in a closed-door committee! Yes, Geoffrey Mallowes was treated below his station as a senator and peer of the realm. He was also treated far above his status as a facilitator for assassination and treason.

—Exarch Jonah Levin, “Questions & Answers,” Terra, 9 February 3135

*Terra
The Republic of the Sphere
16 February 3135*

Geneva woke early.

At three in the morning, the Hall of Government stirred to life. Secretaries and political aides opened up offices, gathered together documents and data crystals, many while on headset links to confirm the day’s appointments. A nervous kind of energy bled through the halls, and would not dissipate until hours after the arrival of the ministers, the legislators and knights who minded The Republic’s business.

Exarch Jonah Levin hadn’t yet gone to bed.

Crossing the Rotunda, letting himself through the velvet ropes that guarded a set of open doors, Jonah found the Chamber of Paladins brightly lit and eerily empty. A high, domed room, it possessed a mixture of senatorial grandeur and Arthurian legend: white stone and blue-gray marble, runners of plush, crimson carpet, the gallery, large enough to seat all three-hundred-plus knights of the Sphere. On the main floor seventeen separate stations were arranged in a half-circle facing the exarch’s dock—the stations from which Jonah’s peers had elected him to The Republic’s highest post barely two months earlier.

And only Gareth Sinclair occupied this impressive space. He was waiting, standing before his private booth and tapping halfheartedly at the glowing blue holographic keyboard, or using his light stylus to occasionally draw commands right onto the screen.

“All is in place?” Jonah asked, his voice amplified by the chamber’s acoustics. The question rolled around the main floor.

Paladin Sinclair nodded, his back still to the door, and Jonah.

“Then may I ask what in Stone’s name you are still doing here?” He put a bit more bite into his voice as he stepped onto the main floor and strode toward his youngest paladin.

Gareth regained a measure of martial bearing, suddenly aware whom he addressed. The young man pivoted away from his station, facing Jonah with respectful attention.

“Heather did not leave much to chance,” Sinclair reported. “I’m not sure she fully trusts . . . my abilities. The crowds will be in place in three hours. I’m monitoring the latest reports from here.”

Jonah frowned. “This is a closed system. Paladins in chamber are not to have direct contact with the outside.” At least, that was the way he remembered his own orientation as a new paladin.

“Not so much. There are emergency protocols built into the building’s data center that allow this room to be converted into a military command post. I tapped into that and slaved my office console to this station.” He shrugged. “I’m interrupted less in this room.”

Jonah stepped up next to the younger man, stealing a glance at the work. Yes, it displayed reports of police dispatches regarding the plans to cordon off several city intersections in Geneva in preparation for today’s activities. It bothered him that Sinclair had circumvented security.

“Though not the first,” he muttered.

“I’m sorry, Exarch?”

Jonah faced his man. He saw the telling signs of long hours and hard decisions on Gareth’s face. Shadows beneath the eyes and the bloodshot gaze. Reddish-blond stubble. Slumped shoulders.

“I said, you are not the first to bypass the chamber’s security. In December’s conclave, during the election debate, I received . . . anonymous communications.”

He almost let it go at that. It was information Jonah had trusted only to his ghost paladin. But, damn it, he had to start trusting more of his people at some point.

“Threats, Gareth. From among the paladins.”

“Surely not?” Gareth started as if he’d been slapped. “I mean, sure, Anders Kessel was running roughshod over me through our private messages, but maybe someone from outside . . .”

Jonah leaned in to the console, tapping at the floating keypad to override Gareth’s security with his own clearance. Easier this way. Slipping through his own security walls, the exarch brought up the scandalvid headlines that Jonah had saved to his private files. Senator Geoffrey Mallowes “held in an undisclosed location,” the caption read. The once-proud man looked harried and broken, wearing a prison-transport shock collar.

“I’ve seen it,” Gareth admitted.

“The entire world has seen it.” Jonah fixed the younger man with a withering glare. “It will be the headline on a dozen other planets by week’s end. My point is, that photo was leaked to the press *by a paladin* .”

That broke through Sinclair’s stoic reserve. The younger man braced himself up to boot-camp attention. “Is there something you are trying to say? Sir.”

“Just this. Quit feeling sorry for yourself. What we’re doing has to be done, and there aren’t many I trust to see it through. And if Heather GioAvanti did not trust *your abilities*, I promise you, she would have made any reservations known to me and *you* would be the one chasing rumors of a new Liao offensive on Kansu, not Janella Lakewood.”

To be fair, Gareth seemed to duly consider every word before replying. And his voice lost its token display of offense.

“I guess I have been feeling sorry for myself. But this . . . it feels—”

“Wrong?” Jonah finished for the young paladin. “Stone’s blood, Gareth! You think I don’t feel that? But what choice did Mallowes and his cronies leave us? Leaving aside, for the moment, that Mallowes tried to have me killed and was certainly involved in the murder of Victor Steiner-Davion, the great man you were considered worthy enough to replace, he led a conspiracy to control thought and overthrow The Republic. It *is* nothing less than that.”

“I know, I know. And I’ve nothing but contempt left for the man, believe me, Jonah. I wish our families had never crossed paths.”

Jonah stifled a weary smile. Hearing Gareth inadvertently call him by name had lifted the weight from the exarch’s shoulders for a brief instant. That kind of camaraderie was now missing from his life. But he clamped down on it quickly and smothered it under the blanket of duty.

He needed Gareth focused, not familiar.

“We all wish a lot of things,” he said. “Doesn’t mean we get to make the choice we like. Heather put together a solid operation. You need to hold up your end, and you need to do it without flinching.”

“You’re asking me to sandbag a friend. One of our own.”

An unavoidable evil, at this late hour, but not one to hang around the neck of his most inexperienced paladin. So Jonah slipped a bit more responsibility onto his own plate instead.

“I’m not asking,” he said.

Sir Conner Rhys-Monroe leaned over the partition and into the cab of his father’s Excelsior stretched hovercraft. He stared through tinted glass at the mob scene ahead. Since the December riots, all Knights of the Sphere on Terra had seen more than their share of civilian protests. This looked to be a large one. Conner counted hundreds of protestors at a glance. Maybe a thousand all told.

He tapped the limo driver on the shoulder.

“Ease back, Charles. Buy us some time.”

Conner ducked back into the rear. The hover-limo’s spacious passenger compartment was large enough for six men, with deep leather seats and plenty of leg room, but at the moment he shared it only with the senator. Gerald Monroe dug into a minibar freezer for a scoop of shaved ice, adding it to his morning drink of herbal supplements and fresh fruit. The scent of bananas and citrus was strong, nearly enough to overpower the senator’s aftershave, and Conner never tired of needling his father how *that* violated the Ares Conventions, articles one and six, governing the use of chemical warfare agents.

The joke wasn’t funny today.

"I'd feel better if you'd take the underground entrance," the knight said, sitting with his back to the driver, facing his father.

"In seventeen years, Conner, I've never been ashamed of the public's eye."

"You damn well should be."

It slipped out before he could guard his tongue. That was the wrong way to convince his father of anything. He knew it. Senator Gerald Monroe was also Viscount Markab—which made Conner a lord by official title—and he set great store in the family's honor. Always had.

This scandal was hard enough on his father without Conner breaking faith with the family. But . . .

"Influencing military officials at the highest levels? Coercion?" Conner swallowed back the tight knot in his throat. "Conspiracy, Father?"

Monroe nodded, winced, clearly at odds with his own behavior. "The decisions I made, I made in good faith. You know that, Conner." He stiffened his back. "I won't hide my head now."

"I'm more worried about your ass, Father." Conner looked over his shoulder. Even through the Excelsior's soundproofing he heard the chants of angry protests. *At least* a thousand. "They sound upset."

"And rightly so. They believe their government failed them. Where else do people go when they can't trust normal channels to address their grievances?"

Not after his father, preferably. But Conner did not argue with the senator. The headstrong man might be right, might be wrong, but either way he was emphatically so. Nothing ever dissuaded him once he set his course, which was about the only way a round-eyed liberal—even if a viscount—got himself elected from the otherwise conservative, Asian-centric population of Markab.

Of course, marrying a local businesswoman with samurai blood in her family hadn't hurt, either.

Certainly, it made for an interesting family mix. Conner had inherited darkish skin and slight folds at the corners of his eyes from Asai Rhys, but he shared more looks in common with his father. Good height and build, piercing, peridot eyes, the same light brown hair. At seventy, Gerald Monroe was finally going gray on the sides and wore his hair conservatively combed. Conner, half his father's age, preferred a tight Mohawk that heralded his flair for the dramatic. No one had told him that being a Knight of the Sphere meant being dull.

Then again, today's excitement *he hadn't* bargained for.

The protestors had real people power behind them, massing out in front of Geneva's senate building, sweeping in a living ocean of angry faces right up to the marble steps where a squad of large men in green fatigues waited, then around them and up to the gray, stately columns on the building's portico. Some protestors waved placards. Most waved their fists, pumping them to chants of "Stone the Senate" and "One nation, one law," among others.

There were a few pro-Senate islands weathering those turbulent seas, but they looked weary and besieged after a morning of being shouted down, shoved back, and generally failing in the face of the exarch's popular support. Of course, such an immediate groundswell of grassroots strength did not just

happen, and did not come cheaply.

Conner smelled the work of paladins in this.

“Bump the curb, Charles. Put us right up against the main steps.”

Gerald Monroe smiled tightly at his son’s concern. “That’s illegal,” he reminded the knight.

Like the senator had any room to talk. “I’ll take the hit.”

The crowd saw the Excelsior, of course, and swarmed to either side of the executive hovercraft, squinting through tinted ferroglass to see who had the nerve to arrive out front. One of the small pro-Senate packs, cheering and waving signs that read NOBLE VICTORY! and EXARCH, NOT MONARCH! anchored itself to the left fender of the Excelsior as the lower skirting touched the curb.

Charles goosed the lift fans, slipping the hovercraft over the curb and up onto the Mall walk. Pro-Senate supporters helped clear a path to the steps, where the men in fatigues separated them from the worst of the mob and then formed a tight cordon around the car’s rear door.

“Friends of yours?” Senator Monroe asked.

Conner nodded. Gauged the crowd’s reaction to the unarmored infantrymen. Still a great deal of anger out there.

“I should have ordered them out in battlesuits,” he muttered. Maybe call out some Pegasus scouts while he was at it, and slip into the cockpit of his *Rifleman*. “Stay put Charles,” he ordered the driver. “This one’s on me.”

The Excelsior’s gull-wing door cracked open, and Conner was first onto the Mall walk. His arrival set back several of the protestors, who obviously had not expected a man in knight’s uniform. He wore the formal steel gray, with scarlet piping and the gold shield on each arm and a cape of rank falling down to the back of his knees, in scarlet and gold as well.

Using the moment of confusion (and intimidation) to his advantage, Conner helped his father from the back of the hovercraft and escorted him quickly up the marble steps and past the high, thick columns that flanked the Senate entry. He half-expected a violent charge, a call for rope and a search for the nearest tall tree, unarmored infantrymen notwithstanding, but the mob was mad, not murderous. They let the two men through without any trouble.

Conner breathed easier. Until Paladin Gareth Sinclair met them at the door to Gerald Monroe’s office.

“Senator Monroe,” the paladin said by way of greeting. He lounged against the wall, making himself comfortable. There was little respect in the title. “Enjoy your morning commute?”

“You set that up,” Conner accused the other man. At Gareth’s glare, he added, “Sir.”

It was hard thinking of Gareth as a paladin and therefore his superior. His advancement was too recent, coming on the eve of the election of the new exarch. They had served together for so long, first as knights-errant and then as knights. Both were from noble families. They had more in common than they had differences. Or so Conner had thought.

“Of course we did,” Gareth admitted, levering himself away from the wall. He sounded surprised that Conner could think otherwise. “If the Senate thinks they can duck their head into the sand and ride this out, perhaps a few demonstrations will convince them to cooperate.”

“Convince?” Gerald Monroe asked, drawing on his seventy years politicking to infuse his voice with absolute contempt. “Or threaten? That circus out there”—he waved his hand dismissively—“that is not public debate. It’s the preliminary to a police state.”

It was a strong statement. But Conner, at least, saw the fear in his father’s eyes.

Gareth must have as well. He struck fast, like a shark sensing blood.

“And were you this concerned with the separation of powers when you attacked the foundation of The Republic’s national defense? Or were you only thinking about yourself?*Senator?* You compromised our security. You’ve called into question the loyalty of every officer and knight touched by one of your programs, and I believe you did this for no other reason than a selfish gathering of power for personal gain.”

“It was a mistake,” the senator whispered, crestfallen.

“It was a mistake to begin, Senator Monroe. Now it’s murder. Victor Steiner-Davion was a well-loved figure throughout The Republic. How do you think the people of Markab will react to news of your complicity in his death?”

“I will explain that I had nothing—”

The paladin cut him off with a violent slash of his hand. “We are not giving you the chance to explain. No appeal to the people for forgiveness. Paladin Heather GioAvanti has four knights on Markab already working the media and the local government to begin your impeachment, sir. *When* you stand Noble’s Court, not if, you will do so without the added status as a senator of The Republic.”

“Gareth!” Conner stepped in to head off the building storm. The young knight knew what resources the exarch and any of his paladins could bring to bear. But his father did not yet see the danger.

“I’ll fight you,” Monroe threatened, trumping his son by sheer volume. “I have friends and deep resources on Markab. When I reach them, you’ll find it won’t be so easy.”

“Senator, you are under the mistaken impression that you will be allowed to leave Terra. You are under military investigation, sir. The headlining charge is treason. ‘The Republic of the Sphere at the time being in a state of war against outside nations . . .’ *All activity which undermines the strength of the military shall be seized upon and tried at the discretion of the military.*”

“But I had nothing to do with Paladin Steiner-Davion’s death!”

“And why do you believe that matters?”

A hollow sensation opened in the pit of Conner’s stomach. Paladin GioAvanti—and the exarch—were willing to go that far? Stretching evidence to browbeat the senator into submission? He watched his father turn ashen, open his mouth and then close it when nothing came out, the great speaker stumped for words for perhaps the first time in his life as The Republic’s executive branch rolled over him like a juggernaut.

“Gareth.” The knight swallowed dryly, feeling sympathy for his father and the situation the man found himself in, but unable to rise easily to the senator’s defense. “Paladin Sinclair. Isn’t this a nonproportional response to the crime?”

Gareth Sinclair calmed, the anger in his voice subsiding as he addressed the knight. But not completely. “You tell me, Conner. Your father willingly conspired to influence military officers and undermine the power of the exarch. To prove treason *and* murder we only have to demonstrate that a weakening of our military and the need to cover up was a logical consequence of entering into such a conspiracy.”

Gerald Monroe had given up arguing his own case. He stared through the paladin, eyes unseeing.

Conner stepped forward and laid a hand on his father’s arm, steering the senator aside. “That’s the legal case. But is it *right*?”

“What’s right in this case would be the Senate owning up to its mistake and allowing us to properly investigate such that we can differentiate between those who went along, those who engineered, and those who plotted and carried out Victor’s murder. We believe your father *may be* innocent of these latter charges, which is why he is one of two senators who will be offered a deal.”

Senator Monroe found his voice. “What kind of deal?”

Having played out his bad cop routine, Conner watched as Gareth took on the good cop role with equal ability. Suddenly, he was understanding and helpful, if not sympathetic to Gerald Monroe’s plight.

“Sir. Viscount. You are finished as a senator. You might very well be stripped of all lands and titles before this is all over, but that depends on who you have left for friends. The exarch is in the position to be generous to the first senator who stands by him.”

Conner nodded his understanding. “You want him to roll over on the others.”

“Want? We *expect* him to. And just so you know, Maya Avellar is putting the same deal in front of our other choice this morning. First one to agree gets the exarch’s full support in return.”

All wrapped up in a neat little package. Neat and tidy for the exarch, anyway. For the Monroe family, this spelled ruin. Conner’s father could resign his post, certainly, but the scandal would never be wiped away. Seventeen years of direct service to The Republic, five generations of the family’s honor, all abruptly ended. That, more than anything, he later believed, was what finally got to the senator.

“If you will excuse me,” Gerald Monroe whispered. Shoulders slumped, eyes down, he stepped past Gareth Sinclair and slipped through the door to his office suite.

“The offer stays on the table until I get a call from Maya,” Gareth said, a little compassion creeping into his voice now that Gerald had left them alone.

Compassion for the senator? Or for Conner?

“Did you enjoy that?” he asked, not bothering to hide his own fury. “It was completely uncalled for, you realize.”

“You think so?” Gareth rescinded his brief pity, turning cold as if with the flip of a switch. “Which part?”

“All of it. You could have come to the senator with your offer first rather than put him through the wringer like that. Stone’s blood, man, you could have brought it to me. I might have sold him on it without a fight.”

Gareth Sinclair considered that a moment. A slight flash of pain behind his eyes promised that he might have pursued his target with ruthless efficiency, but he hadn’t enjoyed it. In the end, though, the young paladin simply shook his head.

“Couldn’t take the chance. A soft sell might have convinced the senators we’re weak, and wouldn’t follow through. They have to know we’re serious, Conner.” Gareth’s face pinched closed, his eyes turning hard like malachite. “And so do you. I know how hard it is at times to walk that line between family and exarch. I made my decision. I’m sorry to have to put you to yours.”

“We’re going to be sorry for a lot of things before this is over,” Conner snapped back.

“Maybe. But I’ll sleep well at night.” And Gareth Sinclair left with a curt nod and squared shoulders. A man bearing up under an unpleasant but (he thought) necessary duty.

Conner wasn’t so certain. Did Gareth truly appreciate the destruction he’d wrought today? He should—the man was a lord in his own right, with family estates in the Isle of Skye region. Did he understand that the Viscount holdings on Marduk would be curtailed, or stripped away by more powerful nobles in the feeding frenzy following a public trial?

And Asai Rhys, Conner’s mother. Business ventures would fall through, and she would face the shame of this every day for the rest of her life—if she did not embrace her samurai heritage and retire her dishonor with seppuku.

As for Conner, his chances for advancement were nil, but that mattered little to him. As a Knight of the Sphere he already served the exarch at a level few dared even to dream of. Paladinship had always been a distant thought, at best.

Pacing the hall outside his father’s offices, Conner wrestled with his options, coming to grips with what was expected of him now. The family or The Republic. He had sworn an oath. And while he’d known that such conflicts could arise, he’d never truly thought they would.

Gareth had been right about that much, at least. Conner was being put to the question. The line he walked was narrow, drawing out to a hair’s breadth where it suspended a sword above him.

A hair that snapped in the next moment, with a pistol’s muffled report.

9

Swordsworn soldiers participated in the failed attempt to retake St. Andre, suffering what Lord Governor Aaron Sandoval called “appreciable losses.”

This was the first attempt to recapture the planet since losing it to a combined assault of the Capellan military machine supported by heavy mercenary forces. At the time, Lord Governor Sandoval was almost himself a casualty of war. His fortunate escape and bolstering of Republic

positions is credited with keeping alive the defense of Prefecture V.

—In the News!, New Aragon, 26 February 3135

*New Hessen
Federated Suns
9 March 3135*

Julian Davion fought back another series of sneezes, strangling the first one in its infancy and breathing shallowly until the tickling sensation passed.

His sinuses ached and he felt half a lung short as he labored to breathe New Hessen's thick atmosphere. Airborne pollen left a feathered coating on his tongue. It tasted of warm grass and tree blossoms. And beneath that, something more. Some dank and rotting thing that never went away. He wiped constantly at his eyes and carried several handkerchiefs. His nose was red and painfully raw.

The Capellan forces on New Hessen might not kill the prince's champion, but his allergies certainly could.

"You get used to it," Colonel Palos Torris said. The two men rode in a military jeep, the old-fashioned kind with good, knobby wheels and no shocks, and a cab completely open to the atmosphere. "Only takes about two years."

Julian gave himself two weeks. Longer than that, and his lungs might never forgive him.

The jeep hit a pothole and jumped hard. Julian resettled his sunglasses on the bridge of his nose. "Wish I had that kind of time," he lied.

"Sure you do," Torris said, and laughed at the courtesy. The colonel was horse-faced and had a whinnying laugh as well, but sharp eyes and, as Julian had learned, a sharp tongue. "MechWarriors've got no reason to be subtle."

The prince's champion smiled, enjoying the garrison commander's breezy style. "All right. Would you believe my DropShip is already prepped for departure?"

The colonel laughed some more, obviously believing Julian exaggerated for effect. He didn't.

The trouble with New Hessen, in Julian's mind, began with its pale sun. He didn't care for it at all. And with the planet rotating through an eighteen-hour day, the cream-colored ball rose too early, set too soon, and washed out most of the world in flat, dull tones.

In fact, life under such a sun was improbable. Would have been impossible except for the small planet's thick atmosphere. Putting the greenhouse effect to good use, New Hessen trapped enough solar radiation to drive local daytime temperatures into the tropical range, and it hung onto the warmth with greedy fingers. The air was close and humid, wringing sweat from the body but unable to evaporate it. It also reeked of moist earth and rotting vegetation, like a giant compost heap.

"What is that stuff?" Julian finally asked as they raced alongside a city park. Piles of black-leaved vine squatted near the street, and the odor of rotting vegetation was stronger than ever.

“Black creeper. Got anything on New Avalon you just can’t get rid of, no matter how much you cut, spray, or fusion-burn?”

“Kudzu,” Julian said. “Pretty standard variety.”

“Well, we got the superstrength version. Iron rich, which gives it that blackish-green color. And it’s constantly sloughing off its outer husk, like snake skin.”

“So it’s growing and rotting at the same time. Nice.” He made a mental note to requisition a Fox armored car with an enclosed cab for the remainder of his mission.

Fortunately, the drive through Jarman City was a short one, and they would meet The Republic’s representative at the private home of Lord David Faust, featuring air conditioning and the best filters a nobleman could buy. Julian breathed easy for the first time in three days as soon as the foyer doors—serving as a kind of air lock—shut behind them. New Hessen’s point-nine standard gravity put a bit of spring in his step as well.

Lord Faust received them in his drawing room, already pouring a dark purple wine into tall blue-crystal chalices. The steward of New Hessen was whipcord thin, had oiled mustaches weighted on each end by a small silver bead, brown, almond-shaped eyes, and a round face. Capellan heritage, without a doubt. Julian was on his guard at once.

The other man in the room hardly needed an introduction. His uniform said it all. Gray tunic and dark trousers, chased with scarlet and gold piping. Name monogrammed over his left breast. *Raul Ortega*.

Knight of the Sphere.

Actually, knight-errant, since he lacked the cape of rank allowed a full knight. Still, as much an ambassador from The Republic as any military man. Lord Faust obviously hoped to keep things on an easy footing. With armies on the march and The Republic showing political stress fractures, now was not the time to make an enemy.

“Sir Raul,” Julian greeted the other warrior with a firm handshake and the proper address by The Republic’s manner. First name with the honorary, not last.

Raul Ortega returned the grip, and the courtesy. “Lord Davion.”

“Sir. Has The Republic received a request from the First Prince or the Duke Sandoval inviting your presence in the Federated Suns?”

That brought the room’s general bonhomie to a sudden, frosty standstill. Raul Ortega froze, still shaking hands with the prince’s champion. Colonel Torris winced and Lord Faust spilled a splash of wine onto the red table linen spread over the sideboard. Only Julian remained animated, with a warm smile on his face.

And he had to sneeze again. He felt the explosion growing at the back of his throat.

“In the interests of keeping peace along our common border,” Ortega released Julian’s hand, carefully treading along diplomatic lines for a good way to save face. “We thought it expedient—”

“Ah, so it is on your exarch’s orders that you violate our soil.”

The knight-errant wasn't about to commit *that* kind of political faux pas. "No," he said, taking responsibility. "That was on my . . . *interpretation* of my orders."

Faust set aside the dust-covered wine bottle, recovered his footing and stepped in to the knight's aid. He offered a glass to Ortega. "Certainly some allowances can be made, given the circumstances."

"Two years ago," Julian said quickly, racing the sneeze he knew was coming, "before House Liao invaded The Republic, I believe the duke of our Draconis March offered to send peacekeeping forces to stabilize the border. Do you happen to know the exarch's answer?"

Ortega surprised him, both in leaving Faust's offer unaccepted and in knowing the answer. "I do. Exarch Damien Redburn said no."

"Actually, his reply was more formal. 'When assistance is required, it will be requested.'"

Then he sneezed. Dammit.

But Ortega acted as if the conversation had not been interrupted. "Yes. That sounds right." He nodded. "I am from Achernar. We heard about the offer, and the exarch's reply."

Then the knight took a careful step forward. "In fact, even with the flare-up of fighting between neomilitary factions, most of us agreed with that decision."

This peace token offered, Raul Ortega finally accepted the glass being offered by Lord Faust. Julian accepted one as well, but did not drink. The dark, plum-flavored wine was sweet and strong—it filled his sinuses with a pleasant, warm scent totally alien to the pollen-and-rotting-weed odor. But he simply cradled it easily in his right hand.

"May I ask what changed your mind?" he asked.

"As you said. Two years of war. House Liao came at us, and then the Jade Falcons. We cannot even control our own military. Katana Tormark runs wild along the Combine border, inciting pro-Kurita fever. Jasek Kelswa-Steiner gutted Prefecture IX when he formed his Stormhammers."

Ortega drank, considered. "Perhaps if we'd showed greater foresight, accepting the offer of your Duke Sandoval to our Lord Governor Sandoval, we could have prevented some of these catastrophes."

Now it was time to extend his own olive branch. "Or perhaps," Julian offered, "the March Lords inside the Federated Suns would have used it as an excuse to annex the border worlds for their own. And now The Republic and Federated Suns would be at war."

Lord Faust swallowed his next sip of wine with great difficulty. Colonel Torris had waved aside his chalice, intent on the discussion.

"That has also occurred to us," the knight-errant admitted. "Lady Janella Lakewood and I discussed the problem at some length before she dispatched me here on The Republic's business. We both believe, in fact, that Aaron Sandoval's long-range plans involve just such an idea."

Julian nodded. Satisfied for the moment. It had to have been a hard admission, that last part. "Let's sit, shall we?"

Faust seemed more than happy to lead the small party to a waiting set of matching suede sofas facing each other over a low table. The sofas were large and overstuffed, and all four men chose to perch on the forward edge of their cushions. Torris was the only one who did not carry over a wineglass. The rest all grabbed marble coasters from a small stack at one end of the table.

At the other end, a chessboard stood ready with pieces carved to represent forces of House Davion and House Liao. The white king had long, drooping mustaches the same as the New Hessen noble, and wore a long, sweeping robe of the kind Capellan nobles usually favored. It could only be Maximillian Liao, who ruled the Confederation before and during the Fourth Succession War. And the bishops were his daughters, Romano and Candace. Liao always had had a thing for divinity.

The knights were men unknown to Julian, and the rooks fashioned as BattleMechs. *Vindicator*s. Pawns dressed in House Liao uniform and carried dao broadswords. They faced off against black, with smaller infantry bearing sabers and the royalty looking suspiciously like Hanse Davion and his brood. This was an old set. And the disposition of colors confirmed what Julian already suspected of Faust's family origins.

Regardless, the noble seemed very eager to please the knight. A good sign.

"Perhaps," New Hessen's steward began. "Perhaps we should discuss joining forces against the Liao interlopers." He toyed with one of the silver beads weighting his mustache. "They are, after all, a common enemy. And we do share a border with The Republic."

Julian shrugged. He set his glass aside, untouched. "We share a much longer border with House Liao's Confederation."

Raul nodded, but slowly. "You share a very checkered history with the Capellan state, as well. In the Fourth Succession War, House Davion decimated the Confederation. Then there was the Marik-Liao offensive of 3057. And the more recent flare-up in which your Capellan March seized Victoria. Hardly a history of peaceful coexistence."

"Besides which," Faust said with a small toast in the knight's direction, "it is New Hessen with which we are concerned. We border The Republic."

"Give it little more time," Julian offered. "If things keep going the way they have been, very soon New Hessen will be facing a stretch of space belonging to the Capellan Confederation."

Ortega offered a tight smile, totally without humor. "I'd like to prevent that."

Truth be told, so would Julian. But he would not bargain from a position of weakness. The Federated Suns would be at war with the Capellan Confederation soon enough. His job was to push that out for as long as possible.

The tension in the drawing room had not exactly abated, but Julian was fairly satisfied where things stood. The knight had neither apologized nor bridled at the champion's behavior. He had retreated, tactfully, but not surrendered the battlefield.

"According to the reports I've read"—and with this, Julian nodded to Colonel Torris—"House Liao has landed irregular troops on New Hessen. Mercenaries. Possibly privateers."

Raul Ortega shook his head. "If so, they are very well organized and ordered. My squad skirmished

with some of them eight days ago. The Capellan forces behaved well under fire.”

Torris accepted the knight’s appraisal. “So veteran mercs, or Confederation troops masquerading as same.” He shrugged. All the same to him. “They’ve seized the mountain area west of Mei-ling. Hard ground. Difficult to pry them out of there.”

“But not impossible.” Julian reached down to the chessboard, and advanced a pawn from the Liao side. He toyed with both sides of the board a moment, thinking, spreading out the pieces into classic attack and defense strategies. “Conventional strategies suggest we don’t have enough forces to hit the Capellans where they are strongest. Not without serious losses of our own. And if we do not strike them soon, we allow them to stage for new raids deep over the border into Republic territory.”

Or deeper into the Federated Suns.

Ortega leaned over Julian’s solo play, studying it. His dark eyes followed the rapid movements carefully. “My squad is more of a reconnaissance in force,” he said. “But it puts a few extra pieces on the board. I can turn over a *Legionnaire* and a strong assault lance.”

“Not a lot of good without the manpower.” Julian put the black king into check. “Which I suppose means you are putting you and your men into the game as well?”

“It works nicely that way.”

Julian pulled the Davion king out of check, and studied his opponent. “What if I decide against it? You force the issue and we end up in a three-way struggle?” Check, and retreat again.

Ortega frowned, glanced down. “Doesn’t look like this board is set up for three players. In fact, I think you are doing just fine by yourself.”

“Still,” Torris offered, “having an extra knight could be handy.” The colonel certainly had a stake in the negotiation. After all, it would be several of his men being asked to put their lives forward.

And Faust wanted no future troubles with The Republic. “I think we’ve come to an arrangement,” he said.

Check, sacrifice. Check, retreat.

Checkmate.

Raul Ortega studied the board as Julian pulled the second black rook—an *Enforcer*—from the table. Reaching out, Ortega tipped the Davion king over onto its side. “Nicely won,” the knight said.

Julian met his gaze openly. “Do you play?” he asked.

“I think I’m about to.”

Terra Republic of the Sphere

The sun arced high overhead, looking down with favor on the German countryside and the white stone mansion. From a third-floor balcony, Conner Rhys-Monroe surveyed the wide-reaching grounds of

Senator Lina Derius' Darmstadt estate. Manicured grass. Heavy stands of cultivated mahogany and oak. A prizewinning rose garden that spread over two full acres and wafted perfumed scent across flagstone paths, and marble fountains. The trappings of the rich and the powerful.

The kind of estate he had forever called home.

Privilege and potential. They walk so close together, his father had always said.

Conner was still getting used to the past tense.

"Can I have anything else brought to you?" Lina Derius asked, stepping up behind him. She attended him with the efficiency and warmth of a well-heeled hostess.

He was holding things up. He knew it. Conner shook his head.

"Another drink, Conner?"

An empty highball glass rested, abandoned, on the stone ledge near his right hand. The polished stone felt cold to the touch despite the warm spring day. But then a lot of things had felt cold to him these last few weeks. His father's apartments in Geneva. The empty condolences from other knights. The exarch's letter of concern and "deep regrets."

Did the exarch regret Gerald Monroe's death? Or the trouble Conner had stirred up in the weeks following?

Both, he hoped.

"I'm fine," he said, swearing off another drink while business was being discussed.

He let Lina take his arm and escort him back into the mansion. Twenty years his senior, she still carried herself with a youthful energy that often made more experienced politicians underestimate her. Shimmering, bronze-colored hair and bright, clear green eyes helped reinforce that air of innocence, though Conner had seen enough evidence of her backroom deals in the last two weeks to wean him of any such illusion.

Senators Michael Riktofven and Melanie Vladistock waited inside the third-floor library. They sat easily in opposing chairs, talking across an antique, spindle-legged table inlaid with gold and ivory. The inlay detailed a map of the Inner Sphere, with borders circa 3050. Before the Jihad. Before even the Clan invasion. Only the Five Successor States and the Free Rasalhague speed bump that later was all but consumed by Clans Wolf and Ghost Bear.

A digital reader sat in Davion space. A scattering of data wafers littered House Kurita's Draconis Combine and part of the Capellan Confederation. The Free Worlds League lay unblemished but ignored. House Steiner's Lyran Commonwealth cradled the senators' glasses.

"Ah, Lina." Riktofven shifted in his seat to include them in the conversation again. "You've brought back our wayward son." He gestured at the reader and data wafers. "Is there anything more we can show you, Lord Monroe?" he asked.

"I've seen quite enough," Conner said.

Millions of C-bills, kroners and Republic stones spent in the ambitious program to sponsor warriors and, later, some of the most respected knights Conner had ever known. A cascade of money, some from his father as well, paid out in many small fortunes to raise a host of “right thinking” soldiers with The Republic’s best interests at heart.

Meaning they were willingly supportive of the nobles who had—some of them—ruled worlds and duchies in the Inner Sphere when Stone’s Republic was not yet conceived.

Senator Vladistock smiled thinly. “ ‘Quite enough,’ you do not want to see any more? Or ‘quite enough,’ you are convinced of our policy?” Her smiles seemed incapable of reaching her dark, dark eyes. “There is a large difference.”

“Yes. There is.”

The three Republic senators weren’t certain what to make of that, so they played it political and said nothing. Riktofven refilled his glass from a nearby crystal decanter. The two women owned better game faces, and stared at Conner with serpents’ gazes.

“Have we at least,” Lina finally said with strained patience, “proven your father’s level of involvement to your satisfaction?”

Down to the last decimal place. Conner had spent several weeks digging through his father’s accounts and personal files. He knew what Gerald Monroe had mortgaged in this effort, and he had to give the trio credit that they had held nothing back. Not even when it exposed them to greater scrutiny. If he ran to Jonah Levin with what he knew now. . . .

Then again, if Levin had come to him first, or Gareth or Paladin GioAvanti, perhaps they would have been greeted with a warmer reception. And perhaps Conner’s father would still be alive.

I do not weigh the sins of the father against the son, Exarch Levin had written.

Except that Gerald Monroe had not accounted his actions as any kind of treason or sin. The senator had been nothing less than a patriot. The loyal opposition to the exarch and his military grip on The Republic. Conner had walked a line between both worlds for so long that he was not easily swayed by either argument, pro-exarch or pro-Senate, military or nobility. And neither was he blind to their shortcomings.

“If Geoffrey Mallowes is involved in everything he’s accused of, then may he burn in hell. But I know my father would never have condoned such radical action, and I now know he wasn’t even inadvertently involved. Which makes his death a crime as well as a tragedy.”

“And the armed quarantine of Senator Ptolomeny an abuse of power,” Michael Riktofven replied. He balled his hands into impotent fists.

“Not that Exarch Levin will stand up to the same scrutiny and the new restrictions he’d like to place us under,” Lina Derius added. “But who would ever hold him accountable?”

That was the question, wasn’t it? And everyone in the room knew the answer.

Even Conner.

“The Senate,” he said softly. “Only the Senate.”

What the hell does Katana Tormark think she's doing?

Does she want to raise the Dragon's ire?

—Commentary by Melissa Mako, Around the Sphere, Markab, 5 March 3135

Fukuro

Draconis Combine

13 March 3135

The samurai came at Yori Kurita with katana naked in his hand. He moved with short, shuffling steps. Legs bowed wide. Bare feet flat against the nonskid deck. Always keeping his center—his *swa* —in perfect balance.

Not an easy task in a DropShip under thrust, where minor course corrections caused microshifts in the artificial gravity.

Even this would not last long. *Ryu Hokori*, the *Dragon's Pride*, was under power only long enough to complete a short transit between carrying JumpShips. A window of opportunity in which the crew should be performing maintenance tasks too complex for the weightlessness of space travel. Someone would answer for the lack of productivity. But that was later.

Just now, Yori's entire world focused down on the bright edge of Hatsuwe's sword, where striations within the blade danced like pale flames under the yellowish cast of the 'Mech-bay overheads. She banished the distant blue arc of a welding torch from her mind, the acrid odor of hot metal, and the caustic scent of industrial solvent spread nearby to soak up a coolant spill. Distractions. For the same reason, she had braided back her long, luxurious fall of dark hair and stripped from her kimono down to MechWarrior togs. Shorts and halter top.

She waited. Hand on the hilt of her own katana, leaving it in the sheath while she read his approach.

Hatsuwe gave away very little. His wide-legged *hakama* draped comfortably, the way they were meant to do, hiding his step until nearly made. His upper body, stripped to bare chest and arms, remained in a rigid poise with sword held in the *strong position* over his right shoulder. Yori would have very little time to react.

Only the anger smoldering in his black eyes gave her an advantage. His *swa* was still disturbed. And without harmony, a samurai could be led into mistakes.

She should know.

With a powerful yell Hatsuwe leaped forward, katana flashing in at her exposed midriff. But Yori had seen the quiver of tightening muscles along his abdomen. Her draw timed it just right, covering her entire right side with the length of her own blade.

Steel clashed in bright, ringing tones.

Spinning inward, she slashed at his thigh. Hatsuwe skipped away, beating her edge aside with another clash of blades. Chop, riposte . . . parry, slash, turn, *lunge* .

He surprised her, blade driving in with the point rather than turned to use the edge. It nearly slipped her guard, close to giving Hatsuwe first blood and the honor he so desperately craved.

She leaned away from the deadly edge at the last second, and it carved nothing but air.

Overextended and so sure that he had had her, Hatsuwe pulled back too slow. It gave Yori the chance to slip away and come back on her own guard, waiting, while he inspected the bright edge for a trace of blood and found none.

A fresh surge of rage building behind Hatsuwe's eyes, the two combatants circled each other warily.

What little work had been ongoing during the fight now sputtered to a complete halt. Two samurai—friends of Hatsuwe—watched with forced dispassion, their faces carved out of ferrosteeel. The crew of the *Ryu Hokori* were not so well trained in hiding their emotion. Some obviously worried at the delay in their routine, taking their duties very seriously. Most, though, watched with dread fascination the skill being displayed by both samurai, and for the prospect of blood on the deck.

And there was one other witness as well. A Nova Cat warrior who had been jogging around the cavernous 'Mech bay when the samurai entered. He stood off to one side, leaning against the feet of a *BattleMaster* , sweating quietly and watching with sharp, gray eyes.

One by one Yori's mind found and dismissed them all, again pushing her toward the trancelike state that came only with clarity of purpose. She was very aware of her own body. The cool draft pushing around the cavernous bay, puckering the skin on her arms with light gooseflesh. The aching throb of her left knee, from when she had twisted away too hard in their first exchange of cuts.

She saw Hatsuwe reaching for that same state of mind, and failing *asthe woman* continued to match him as an equal. To him, her name would not have mattered. She had insulted his pride, and he would have his honor back.

First blood. That had been the agreement. But Yori wondered at the other samurai's lack of control. The murderous gleam in his eyes.

He held his sword back and away from her now, in *thesilent position* . Not letting her see the strike until it was well on its way. She waited, sword held low before her. *Resting* .

Hatsuwe stepped left, she countered right.

Backing up. She followed.

And he attacked, as she had known he would, trying to catch her in midstep.

The katana cut the air cleanly, coming around in an overhead arc that could easily have taken off her arm had she not whipped her own blade up in time to defend. The force of the blow was impressive. Enough to jar Yori's arm all the way up to her shoulder, and force her back a step.

Another blow followed, coming in low and sideways. Then a desperate lunge when he thought she had committed to a strong, defensive stance.

Yori parried each blow, relying on swiftness against Hatsuwe's greater strength. She felt his measure now. Knew he would run her through or—better—take her head if he could. There would be many apologies to the coordinator and Warlord Toranaga, of course. All honor would be repaired. But she'd be dead. That was Hatsuwe's goal.

She wouldn't allow it.

Sweat matted a few strands of hair to her forehead. It trickled into the corners of her brown eyes, burning. Yori backed off, giving ground now as she traded time against Hatsuwe's tiring muscles. Letting him believe that he had her cornered. Another flurry of sword strokes, more ringing tones as steel battered against steel. She slashed, looking for an opening, pulling her stroke just a bit such that she would wound, not maim.

He batted her aside, hard. And she stumbled.

His lunge came just as she had predicted. Trusting too much to his reach and strength of arm, as he had twice before when he thought he could gamble on a quick end to the match. Forgetting the basics, which always *always* demanded that a warrior remained centered and in control.

Yori stumbled, shuffling to one side, but she kept her center—her own *wa* —intact.

Turning his lunge aside with a quick brush of her own sword, she slashed up and in, resting the edge of her katana against Hatsuwe's neck just beneath his strong chin. He froze, sword held out to his side, never flinching as she used the tip of her blade to pick him up. One little slip . . .

Yori twisted her wrist, nicking him along the jaw. Nothing worse than a shaving cut, actually. But the bright, bright red drop of blood that christened the tip of her sword was plain enough as she held it in front of his face.

“*IIE!* THAT IS ENOUGH!” The voice slammed across the bay like a PPC blast. “What goes on here?”

Warlord Matsuhari Toranaga filled a nearby hatch-frame, the mantled shoulders of his overcoat nearly touching the metal edges. One of three warlords who assisted the coordinator in ruling the Draconis Combine, he was the only one to invite himself along on this journey to The Republic. If not the most powerful man in the realm at the moment, he was second in strength only to the Warlord of Benjamin. Excepting the coordinator, most would say.

But for the few who quietly rated Vincent Kurita a distant third behind both men.

Toranaga carried a sheathed katana in his right hand, as was his personal style, with only his sword of honor, the *wakashiri*, tucked into the cloth wrapping he used as a belt. He wore *tabi* socks and sandals, and stepped with a solid pigeon-toed stride that kept him perfectly strong at all times. His coarse dark hair showed touches of gray streaking back along his flattop cut. His heavy scowl threatened the entire bay.

It was as if a switch had been thrown. The crewmen did not return to work. Instead, they brought themselves to a respectful deep bow, which they held as the Warlord of New Samarkand stomped his way across the bay. All four samurai snapped to attention. Yori and Hatsuwe homed their swords with

quick, efficient flourishes. The samurai bowed, not so deep as the crewmen, and each in relation to their family status within the Draconis Combine.

Yori, of course, bowed deepest of the four.

“I asked what goes on here,” Toranaga said again. “The Coordinator of the Draconis Combine rests on the *Dragon’s Pride* and no one—no one!—dies on this vessel without the express order of Vincent Kurita.”

Hatsuwe deepened his shallow bow just a touch. “A matter of honor only, Matsuhari Toranaga-*sama*. A disagreement.”

Toranaga finally nodded a curt bow, and the four samurai straightened. No one else moved in the entire bay. Except the Nova Cat warrior, Yori noticed. He had remained near the feet of the assault-class *BattleMaster*, and hardly at strict attention. Now he stepped forward.

“Toranaga-*sama*,” the Nova Cat called out. He approached the warlord with hesitant strides, obviously involving himself unwillingly. Yori recognized him now. Kisho. The mystic traveling with them to Terra. “With your permission?” he asked.

The warlord gave the young man a regal nod.

“I will bear witness that the fight was conducted with due honor. There was no insult meant to the coordinator.”

“You approved this contest?” Toranaga asked. By their position, Nova Cat mystics owned certain authority over rituals, both within their Clan and inside the Combine. A relationship that had developed over nearly a century of integration.

“*Iwitnessed* it. This is the only reason I speak.”

The warlord turned back to Hatsuwe. “This matter is between yourself and Yori?” Hatsuwe nodded. “Apologize,” the warlord instructed Yori, turning his glare onto her.

“Toranaga-*sama*,” Yori began, “I—”

“Apologize!”

“*Sumimasen. Gozemashite.*” The words escaped Yori’s lips before she thought to argue again. “I am truly sorry for my transgression, Hatsuwe-*san*. Please forgive.”

Seeing her humbled, even after losing the call to first blood, was the best Hatsuwe was going to get this day. He nodded once. A dismissal of her apology. “Very well,” he said.

“Now leave the crew to their labors,” the warlord ordered. “We have ten more minutes under thrust. There will be no excuse for incomplete work. *Hai?*” the warlord called out.

“*Hai!*” Several dozen voices answered as one.

They scattered, samurai and crewmen, leaving only Yori Kurita standing in the warlord’s shadow. And Kisho lingering nearby.

“The honor was mine,” she said softly, and with great respect.

Toranaga would have none of that. His craggy face, set with deep lines in a permanent scowl, twisted into a mask of utter contempt. “You think it is so easy?” he asked. Though only as tall as her, the warlord exuded a physical presence far in excess of his size. It overpowered and humbled.

“Your honor will always—*always*—be suspect, Sakamoto Yori-san.” Refusing her the name she had only recently been honored to acknowledge was a stinging slap. “Your grandfather’s taint is not erased because of your performance at the Sun Zhang academy. It is not balanced by the favor, and the incredible patience, I have shown you. This will never be. *Wakari-mas?*”

His words, though spoken low, whipped at Yori like a scourge, biting into her flesh. She dropped her gaze to the nonskid deck. “*Hai, tonoe.*”

“Dismissed,” the warlord said abruptly.

Yes. Yori supposed she was.



When Devlin Stone created The Republic, he gave equal weight to the Directive Branch and the Legislative Branch, each with judicial review of themselves. Did he believe there never would come a time that Judicial intervention would be necessary between the two branches?

Blake’s Blood! What a mess!

**—Commentary by Jacquie Blitzer, [//battlecorps.org/blitzer](http://battlecorps.org/blitzer),
12 March 3135**

***Terra
Republic of the Sphere
14 March 3135***

Tara Campbell stepped awkwardly into the magnificent vestibule of Paris’ Republic Cathedral wearing her rumpled uniform, a small military gear bag slung over her right shoulder. If a traveling soldier could feel more out of place, she did not want to go looking.

Vaulted ceilings soared overhead, painted with a frieze of a blazing sun battling dark thunderclouds, the entire expanse held up by flying buttresses detailed in scroll-worked wood and golden gilt. Rich-grained mahogany stained reddish black paneled the walls, polished so fine and lacquered so thick your reflection, when you found it, looked trapped deep, deep inside the wood. A second soul, staring back at you from where the cathedral touched that *other* plane of existence.

Floors were rose marble shot through with veins of blue and gray. Her bootheels fell against the beautiful stone with imperative clicks, hard and demanding in this soft, elegant place. She ended up shuffle-stepping, sounding even more awkward. A few heads turned, knowing her hesitant footfalls to be out of place in the dark of morning when only the cathedral’s devout caretakers were usually about.

Acolytes looked over from where they worked around an alcove of polished stone. They guarded a delicate display of pottery and stained glass.

A Catholic priest in her dark robes broke from the conversation of hushed tones she'd been having with a shaven-headed Buddhist monk. Both stared.

Tough room, she decided.

But the atmosphere, at least, was both warm and comfortable. Scented with candle wax and wood polish, and a light touch of incense. Nothing Tara could grab hold of and put a name to, much like the best perfumes did not announce their presence, but invited.

“Countess Northwind?”

The monk, stepping forward with his sandaled feet whisking softly against the glassy marble. His orange robe contrasted with the cathedral's dark colors, but somehow did not seem to clash. He walked around one of the carpet runners, as if not allowed the luxury, and approached with casual ease.

Tara nodded, and the man smiled. Why had she thought the room a hostile one? Under the beatific gaze of the monk, all seemed right with the world.

“Your companion is waiting in the funerary. This is where our paladin lays in state. I will take you there?”

Of course he would, but the man did not presume. He asked. Tara nodded again.

“I would appreciate that,” she said softly.

Their walk from the vestibule bypassed the tall, arched doorways that led to the cathedral proper, angling instead for a smaller door tucked in next to a hanging tapestry of The Firmament—the dividing of the lands from the waters. It was simple, and yet strong. As the ceiling frieze had been.

Thinking about it again, Tara found her gaze wandering back up into the vaulted ceilings above. A simple depiction that pushed thunderclouds into competition with a large, blazing sun; its magnificent rays always holding back the darkness. It drew the eye like an uncompleted puzzle often ensnared her, and it took a moment to understand why.

Worked into the frieze, subtly, were the outlines of two great hands. They cupped the overhead artwork, implying an always-larger hand at work behind the universe.

In fact, the entire cathedral seemed designed to both intimidate and comfort. A cross-purpose that seemed impossible to achieve, and yet the artists—what they accomplished here transcended mere architecture—had pulled it off.

“I like that,” she told the monk when he held the door open for her.

“You see what most do not,” he told her, never doubting that she had spotted the greater design. “That can be a gift.”

Or not, he did not need to say. Tara had spent too much of the last few years looking at The Republic's troubles from many different angles. As Countess Northwind and commander of the Highlanders, she had served double duty on the political and military fronts. Her unique view had allowed her to rescue

Terra itself, mankind's cradle, from the Steel Wolves, and yet still turn down the paladinship offered by Exarch Damien Redburn.

Shehad accepted Redburn's charge to aid Skye against the Jade Falcons, but then (possibly) allowed herself too much leeway in her method of interpreting those orders. Or maybe it had been her strong feelings for Jasek that colored her view. Either way, she was due a dressing down.

But to do it over the body of Paladin Victor Steiner-Davion? That seemed a bit melodramatic. Not to mention disrespectful.

The funerary was dimly lit and cold so early in the morning, yet to be warmed up by the scone lighting and the thousands of people who daily walked through to pay their final respects to the legendary man who lay within. It smelled more astringent than the vestibule. Less welcoming. Victor's tomb was made of granite and ferroglass, resting at the head of the room on a small stage. Thick drapes hung along the walls, to absorb sound and keep the room soft. Velvet ropes cordoned off the wooden pews.

Only one man waited within the room for her, seated in the very front where the ropes did not prevent him. He rose at the draft of the opening door, and waited for her at the head of the short, wide aisle.

"Drop your gear, Tara." Paladin David McKinnon's voice was strong and strident in the quiet room. "Just set it on a pew. No reason to stand on formality here. Victor knew the details of a warrior's life."

Tara had started at McKinnon's strong voice, and glanced apologetically to her side, where she thought the monk had remained. But the man had simply let her in to the funerary, and shut the door after her.

So she set her gear bag aside—on the floor, not a pew—and walked down the aisle to clasp hands with the paladin. Finding her voice, she said, "It is good to see you, Sire McKinnon."

Pushing past a century himself and now, with Victor's passing, the oldest living paladin, David McKinnon still showed a great deal of steel and fire. It told in his strong grip and tall posture, in the catlike grace of his movement. Mostly, though, it was the spark of life buried deep within the man that was so apparent once you got to know him. That spark blazed very bright just now, showing behind his dark eyes.

"None of that," he warned her. "We were on a first-name basis on Skye, after all."

Four months before, yes, they had been. The paladin had worked alongside her, fought alongside her, to help keep Skye free of Clan Jade Falcon. Then came his summons back to Terra, which she had not understood at the time, and had resented.

"You came back for Victor," she said, understanding and apologizing at once.

"I came back for my exarch. Victor's assassination threw everything into chaos, and the future of The Republic hung in the balance. It still may." He glanced back. "Would you care to pay your respects?" he asked.

"I would."

McKinnon turned her alongside him, escorting her up to Victor's tomb. The stone coffin had a ferroglass top to it, protecting the paladin in death as The Republic had failed to do in life. Of course, a report of the actual circumstances had found its way into Tara's hands. Redburn had made sure of that, as had

McKinnon. Such a waste. Such a damned, silly waste.

Victor had never been a tall man, but there had been a strength of size about him regardless. Now it was gone. What was left was a well-preserved man of one hundred and eight, with snow-white hair the same color as David McKinnon's. But where McKinnon strayed more toward robust and healthy, Victor had finally succumbed to the gaunt frailty that came to most men at the end.

"He looks good," she said, stepping back from the coffin. "Peaceful."

"It takes a small army of the best funerary specialists on planet to keep him that way. Four months laying in state is not an easy task to make presentable. And every one of them considers it a high honor to be part of the team."

"As well as a full honor guard, no doubt," Tara said. "At least during public viewing hours."

McKinnon shook his head. Wispy strands of hair floated over his forehead. "Twenty-four/seven. The paladins do not leave him alone. Ever. One of us always stands watch."

"Standing watch or standing by?" Stepping back, she turned to her friend. "David, how did you people allow this to happen? All of this?"

McKinnon drew her away, walking her back to the front row of pews. "You are up to date." It wasn't really a question.

"Two weeks of travel time, even at the pace you set for my DropShip, leaves a lot of time for reading. A lot of time to miss in Prefecture IX."

"We didn't call you back to Terra lightly. If you think we'd pause a military campaign for a PR tour, you don't give me or our new exarch enough credit. Jonah Levin needs you. That's why you are here."

"Then why am I not meeting with Exarch Levin?" she asked. A need so great that it kept her even from being allowed to check into a local hotel, to freshen up after a long spaceflight, it seemed at odds with a visit to the resting place of Victor Steiner-Davion at such an early hour.

McKinnon stood, pacing the room with slow but deliberate strides. "You may need to keep some distance, politically, on this one. It gives you a chance to make a stand for sanity without looking like the exarch's mouthpiece."

A task for which she was well-suited. Tara Campbell was the current media darling of The Republic's military and political scene both. Had been since her stand against the Steel Wolves. Her preference for uniforms over noble's dress had inspired several paramilitary lines of clothing, and how she wore her hair on any given day might spark a new trend as well. More and more models, she had noticed lately, were moving toward a similar coloring, even. Her platinum blond hair was becoming less a rarity every day.

And her politics were just as trendy. Tara's arrival on a world had already proven itself capable of influencing the pundits and politicians, both of whom so often traveled with the sway in public mood.

"You truly believe that Exarch Levin cannot back down on this one?" she asked, a touch of resignation telling in her voice.

"Not a chance. The Senate brought this to a head when they began talking censure rather than

investigation. No one—and I mean not one of them—wants a public trial of Geoffrey Mallowes. They see it as the potential loss of stature and power.”

“Among the nobility, those words are often interchangeable,” Tara agreed. Speaking from personal experience.

“Paladins GioAvanti and Sinclair culled two senators out of the pack. Gerald Monroe and Therese Ptolomeny. We tried to pressure both into turning public against the cabal, and against the Senate’s stonewalling strategy. Perhaps too strongly.”

Tara scoffed. “Perhaps? That’s like calling the loss of Skye a ‘disagreement.’ Gerald Monroe is *dead*. And the news media is full of Senator Ptolomeny blasting The Republic, and the knighthood in particular, for ‘stormtrooper tactics.’ And let me tell you, parking an armored column outside her Riviera mansion to place her under ‘house arrest’ isn’t helping your image.”

She felt like a child lecturing her grandfather. And David handled it about as well, stiffening his spine and turning stone-faced as she spoke. But then, like anyone who recognizes the truth when it’s thrown in his face, he nodded reluctantly.

“It’s definitely a case of escalation,” he admitted.

“Worse, it’s mutually assured destruction. The Senate has upped the stakes. At this point, The Republic will come out of this smelling sour no matter what.”

McKinnon scrunched his face down as if tasting that for the first time. “That’s already begun,” he said. “Monroe’s son, Conner.”

“Knight of Markab?” Tara asked, remembering the name.

“No longer. He’s resigned his commission and broken his oath to the exarch.” He reached back to the second set of pews and pulled a thin file of video stills into his lap. Flipped to one in particular and held it out to her.

Tara studied it. Dress uniform castoffs arranged very carefully over a marble floor. Cape of rank. Tunic and trousers. Medals still pinned into place. All that was missing was the body to fill it. It reminded her, in a way, of a crime scene where the body has been taped out on the floor or sidewalk.

“Monroe’s uniform,” she said, understanding. “And that marble . . . it’s the floor in the Chamber of Paladins?”

“No. The Rotunda. Outside the chamber. *Very* public.”

“He’s made it clear that there is no chance for reconciliation.” Tara nodded. “When soldiers were branded traitors on the ancient Terran frontier, they would be stripped of all rank insignia and driven out to the beat of a drum. That’s why they call it getting ‘drummed out’ of the corps.” She tapped the image. “He’s got a flair for the dramatic.”

“More than you know,” McKinnon agreed. “The boy has also accepted his father’s seat in the Senate.”

“When did that happen?”

“Only three days ago. An emergency appointment. His confirmation vote takes place in Prefecture III later this month.”

“That’s going to play like hell in the media,” she said. But there was something else lurking behind McKinnon’s words. Something dark and dangerous. More than a young man running off to avenge his father. “What is it?”

“Conner Rhys-Monroe has retained possession of his *Rifleman*. And, of course, the Senate does have its own honor guard.”

Perfect.

“Tara, you know the kind of trouble we’re facing here. You’ve walked both sides of this fence for the last couple of years.” McKinnon was making his sales pitch now. And it was a hard press. “You can reason with the nobility and stand firm on military principles. This goes beyond mere duty to The Republic. I need to know, and Exarch Levin needs to know, if you can put some pressure on this boy. Get him *not* stand for the public confirmation.”

Her Highlanders, companions and kin, were bleeding and dying in Prefecture IX. Her home world of Northwind was still recovering from the Steel Wolf assault, and now a pro-Kurita voice was rallying new trouble back home and she had not resources with which to meet it. *And* the man Tara had pledged herself to, regardless of choosing to turn down a paladinship, had vacated the office, leaving her basing this decision on the bare bones of a friendship she’d started with one of the more outspoken paladins. A man with whose politics she didn’t necessarily agree.

But could she help? It wasn’t much to ask, was it, circumventing the usual protocols and acting outside of her chain of command as well as all social formalities?

Tara sighed, having made her decision the moment she boarded a DropShip to answer the exarch’s summons.

“I didn’t come all this way to stand back and watch,” she assured him.

12

. . . and encouraged by the Countess’ obvious ability to take the social calendar by storm as easily as she does a battlefield, Nolver Incorporated unveiled the next color in its femme fatale line: Northwind Steel.

**—Press excerpt, Published in “Terra Fashion Trends,”
20 March 3135**

*Terra
Republic of the Sphere
27 March 3135*

At barely more than idle, Tara Campbell’s chauffeured sedan crawled through the hordes swarming Magnum Park and the surrounding streets. Hardly a stretch of grass was to be seen among the thousands of protestors who spread blankets and opened up camping chairs, or even swung sitting hammocks from

lower branches of the famous Trees of Every World. Curbs were long, low benches and refuse cans were filled to overflowing. Not even the luxury sedan's formidable air conditioning could strip the air of its taint of sticky sweat and garbage.

"Two parts civil disobedience and one part street fair," the countess said to Paladin Gareth Sinclair.

Sinclair shared the leather bench seat with her in the rear of the car, constantly twisting in his seat to keep an eye in every direction. She wished he'd relax.

She wished more that Heather GioAvanti had been available, knowing the veteran paladin to be a woman of great resources. But after the action on Marduk, Heather had been sidetracked by growing unrest in Prefecture III. All thanks to the rabble-rousing and outright call-to-arms of Katana Tormark, who seemed determined to throw to the winds everything the two women had once seemed to share—loyalty and dedication to The Republic being first among them.

"We're slowly building up the military presence inside the Hall of Government," Gareth told her. "To contain any violence."

Tara nodded. "Hopefully, we'll head that off before it begins."

There were no signs of a burgeoning riot. Not the kind Geneva saw only a few months before with the Kittery Renaissance putting armed soldiers in the street. The nobles had either learned from that lesson, or simply believed in more subtle methods. People power, for example.

Quite a bit of it, in fact.

Outside the car, under a strong spring sun, there were the usual people wearing sandwich boards or waving placards overhead. A hundred different slogans, although a simple red-on-white NOBLE VICTORY! dominated among those Tara bothered to read.

Talented and not-so-talented troupes staged skits and performance art. Her favorites, in a sour sense of humor, were the men and women dressed up as paladins—white jumpsuits with gold braiding that fairly approximated the uniform Gareth wore—who led around others in noblelike robes by chains clipped to their noses. The paladin impersonators were often walking caricatures of the real people. Crippled old men with blinders on to represent David McKinnon and his like. Strident women with a great deal of leather and spiked collars, giving off an attack-dog air. Dwarves with Napoleon hats and whips: small taskmasters, meant to be a walking insult to the memory of Victor Steiner-Davion.

Those were the cruelest of the lot, in Tara's opinion. Free speech be damned.

Especially in the shadow of Geneva's Hall of Government, where the exarch and the paladins had worked so hard over so many decades to maintain peace throughout The Republic. Now, if the exarch cared to look down from his formal office, he'd see his capital under siege from an instant tent city.

Only up close could one see the organization behind the brute-force affront. Well-supplied vendors hawking hotdogs and kabobs, nutrition bars and fresh fruit at megamart prices. Some people had brought their own portable grills, and were busy charring burgers over open flames to feed long lines as quickly as possible, for free. And in any direction one cared to look, crates of bottled water were hand-carried and given out for free.

"It's a mess," Gareth declared, looking only at the surface.

“A very deliberate, very well-organized mess.” Tara pointed out the water delivery. Also the men and women carrying loudspeakers who managed to disappear into a crowd at any sign of a uniformed policeman or soldier. “No wonder it’s been so hard to meet with Conner Rhys-Monroe. This must have taken weeks to organize.”

Easily. Gareth had already told Tara about the large demonstration he had arranged on the Senate mall. The logistics it had required, and the thousands of man-hours. But if that effort had been the military equivalent of a tactical strike, what Conner and his Senate friends pulled together amounted to a full-on invasion.

By the hundreds and thousands people converged on Geneva. By DropShip and ballistic shuttle, carrier planes, trains, bus and car. There wasn’t a spare hotel room, campsite or apartment for a hundred kilometers. The paltry thousand-count mob Gareth had whipped together in support of Heather GioAvanti’s plan to bring the senators to heel was swept aside like sand before the tide.

Of course, Tara had *tried* to meet with the rogue knight. After several attempts, she had abandoned her formal requests and instead spent time visiting the few nearby military bases, currently suffering a crisis of confidence. Public outcry was one thing, but when service members of high and low rank began to openly debate policy, trouble followed. Putting out fires and reinforcing her base of popular support in order to strengthen the exarch’s position had become her first and second priorities.

Especially since Conner’s “legend” as a maverick was both well known and well loved by the people of Terra.

“There are the news vans,” Gareth said. He pointed out a small line of paneled hovervans behind a row of canteen vehicles. “We’re close.”

“Around that line and into the midst of the hounds, then,” Tara told her driver. “Gareth, stay in the vehicle.”

“Why?”

“You and Conner have history. Good and bad, now. I don’t need that in my way.”

Gareth’s natural urge may have been to argue, but the paladin obviously knew good sense when he heard it. He nodded a quick affirmative to her plan. Just in time, as the sedan rocked to a halt in front of a recording news crew. He leaned back, evading the camera angle as Tara popped open her own door, and she was loose among the pack.

Her sedan couldn’t help attracting the attention of anyone with an eye for news. The flag of Northwind fluttered over the left fender, a privilege of rank for any noble of that world, and the three gold sunbursts stitched along the flag’s lower edge promised a person of count’s rank. Over the right fender flew the ensign of The Republic, marked below with a single star. A general’s star. Her equivalent rank as commander of the Highlanders.

It got her noticed.

Strobes flashed and lenses swung her direction even before she exited the car. As if attending a gala event, Tara hung on the door for an extra second. There were no waves to invisible friends or side-turn poses to show off her couture. Today, she wore a simple Highlander’s uniform that merely modified The

Republic's standard with a red braid around the right shoulder and a swatch of Clan Campbell tartan from left shoulder to right hip.

But even for those who had not pieced it together from the insignia marking her sedan, Tara's face was one of the most recognized in The Republic and certainly here on Terra. Her platinum hair, upswept and spiked on top, was quickly becoming the latest fashion trend on this world and many more. Green eyes and lightly freckled nose lent her an innocent air the nonthinking public found very appealing, while her no-nonsense speeches endeared her to people who bothered to use their brain cells for something other than knee-jerk responses to the party line.

Calls of "Countess" and "Lady Campbell" begged for her attention. She gave it sparingly, with quick, firm smiles as she paced her way through the crowd of newsvid journalists in search of her prey. When she recognized a larger studio or personality, Tara would stop for a moment and exchange a pleasantry. She'd spent the last few weeks cultivating many friendships, after all. It was time to harvest that crop.

Her strategy garnered her an instant retinue, with holovid cameras and microphones committed to her every word. But about her mission, she stuck to a prepared line.

"I'm here on behalf of Northwind and all soldiers in the field who are demanding better of both sides of this disagreement."

It said everything about how she felt. And it committed her to nothing, though it raised the general level of excitement around her. The sense of a coming showdown.

Tara smiled, and worked the crowd.

The buzz swept ahead of her as she blazed her way into Magnum Park. Her vanguard of prominent news figures made certain of that. Soon it would find the onetime knight, and reflect back in a counterwave much like a radar signal returning from a distant target. Conner Monroe, Tara had felt certain, would not be too far distant from the newsvid crews. He wanted publicity. Needed the watchful eye of the public on him should he be arrested or harassed in any way. That exposure was the lifeblood of a political insurgent.

She forgot, momentarily, that the man had also been a knight. And had learned some very hard lessons from two of the exarch's best.

"Countess," Conner Rhys-Monroe greeted her, stepping in at her elbow and laying a discreet hand on the side of her arm. He spoke loud enough for the news journalists to hear. "I'm so glad to see you have come forward on the side of sanity."

Always seize the high ground. A military and political maxim. By outracing the returning buzz, he had caught her just short of her own prepared statement. And as his own retinue swept in with him, forming a cordon around the pair to separate them from the closest microphone, he ensured a moment of privacy in what was otherwise a very public forum.

Conner Rhys-Monroe was not quite the same man Tara expected. He had always been somewhat controversial, and she had expected a wildness about him still. The pierced ears. The Mohawk that had styled him an independent soul. But he had drastically reined in those impulses. Now he trimmed his hair an even length, very short but more in keeping with his new social circles. His multiple earrings had given way to a pair of tasteful emerald studs, matching his peridot eyes. He dressed in a fashionable suit. Conservative, with a banded collar to eschew any need for a necktie.

The wild knight, gone respectable.

“Sir Conner,” Tara said, granting him his title regardless of circumstance. He started to shake his head, but she continued. “Deny it all you wish, sir knight. We both know that you cannot walk away so easily from what you have made of yourself. First and last, you are a knight of the Sphere.”

Her return thrust, not necessarily aimed at him. It might not have made the newsvid recorders, but it did reach the ears of several in Conner’s circle of companions and aides. Obviously, by the sidelong glances and uneasy shrugs, it did not sit well with several of them.

A few even stepped backward, and Tara filled the void by challenging the nearest man with a quick move forward.

“Does it truly bother you, Lord Geist?” Tara recognized the man from the file of Conner’s likeliest supporters prepared for her by David McKinnon. This man a visiting noble from Markab. “With the Dragon stirring on the other side of our borders—and within your Prefecture as well—are you so eager to throw off the protection of The Republic? To risk your charges, citizen and resident, to the horrors of escalating violence?”

Tara had backed him up several steps, right into a crowd of reporters with a rainbow of logos among them. Sound sticks and trivid camera eyes were thrust his direction.

“N-no. Of course not,” Geist said. A sentiment that would play well back home, of course, but wasn’t completely popular with Conner’s wardens.

Quite so, since Tara now recognized two other senators in the surrounding crowd—both of them fading back to avoid any need to go on the record. By uniform, Tara also counted a dozen or more military officers from the Triarii and Principes Guards. The fracture lines were widening.

And Conner conceded no ground. “I made myself a knight,” he said, taking her arm again as if there had been no interruption. But the damage was done, as newsvid journalists and knots of glamour-struck civilians mingled freely among the ex-knight’s stalwart supporters. As Conner led Tara deeper into the park, the crowd moved with them and the newshounds swept around like dogs on the scent.

“I was born a noble. A viscount’s son.”

“And now you are Viscount Marduk. I am very sorry for the way things turned out for you.”

He could not help the pain-filled glare directed back at the Hall of Government. “It was not your hand that set events in motion.”

“No,” Tara agreed. Steeling herself against the need to inflict more pain on the young man, she said, “That would be your father, among others.”

Conner recoiled as if slapped, all but stumbling to a halt. Several people surrounding the pair reacted much the same way. Angry glares drove hot knives into her back. The reporters crowded in for better angles.

People relayed their words far back into the crowd, beginning several new arguments.

The ex-knight walked stiffly, wooden. “That, Countess, was extremely beyond the bounds of courtesy.”

His voice was low and hoarse. His manner turned frosty as if Tara had thrown a switch. Which, in effect, she had.

“I’m not here to coddle you, Viscount. Or to join your cause.” She raised her voice, ensuring that even the junior newsvid hounds at the edge of the crowd heard her clearly. “And if none of you can own up to your own part in this tragic state of affairs, then you are all living inside of Hectar’s fable.”

“Hectar?” Conner asked.

“An old Scots legend.” And the news journalists—the savvy ones—would look it up for themselves by air time. She softened her voice. “Hectar was a nobleman of ancient Terra convinced that the other lords were out to get him. He ordered built around his keep grand walls. Too tall to scale. Too thick to batter down. Impregnable. But there was only one small problem.”

“What’s that?”

“No gates. Gates were always the weakness of any keep, after all. So poor Hectar had no way out. He had built his own prison, walling himself away from his people, who fell into despair and ruin without their lord. And so the other lords *did* move in, taking away Hectar’s lands and subjugating his people. And he was left with only his walls.”

Conner stomped to a halt. Tara doubted he even recognized his own anger and grief, he was so caught up in the moment.

“When I heard that you had arrived on planet,” he said, “I had hope. And I waited, to see what you would do. Learning you had come here, now, today, that hope seemed well placed. You of all people, who turned down a paladinship and have steadfastly maintained your own independence in the face of high-level criticism, I thought would understand. The Republic is bigger than the host of paladins and knights who protect her. Bigger than the exarch. Bigger, even, than Devlin Stone, as we have proved in his absence. But it is, and always will be, only as big as the people of The Republic who make up the body politic. And the voice of the people has always been the nobility.”

There were cheers and chants to applaud the end of Conner’s impromptu speech. Fists thrust into the air. Righteous fire alight in so many eyes. Tara saw now how this former knight of the realm had pulled together so much support. For all his youthful impulses in the past, Conner Rhys-Monroe was a natural leader. Charismatic and forceful, daring in a way that people responded to, and so few nobles ever attained.

Quite simply, he was a very dangerous man.

A man coming into his own at exactly the wrong time. One, Tara felt certain, who could eventually have made a great paladin and some day become exarch. But that budding talent had been twisted with the suicide death of his father. A death Conner placed squarely on the shoulders of Jonah Levin and his paladins.

“I wish I could hold a mirror up to you right now.” She said this softly. For his ears only. “You sound bitter and very much alone.”

“Alone? Look around me.” He stepped back a pace and basked in the adoration of officers and a few

proud lords.

There were no other senators, not now, but it was enough to make a good impression for the cameras.

“Step in at our side, Tara.” Conner turned back to her, his peridot eyes aflame, extending his offer with burning intensity. “Join your voice to ours. The exarch will have to listen then. With the great leaders of the Inner Sphere arriving soon, we can force him to the table. Everything can be put right once more.”

“Everything can be put to the flame so much easier,” she said, challenging him openly once again. “You’re playing with fire, and in doing so you risk lives, worlds and perhaps The Republic entire.”

She willed him to listen. To hear her. Her words reached a few of those around him, and by nightfall they would be discussed around supper tables and in many closed meetings, but Conner was wrapped up in his own grief and his fresh purpose.

“Left to the military, The Republic is now caught up in a two-front war. We are surrounded by enemies, and have seen even the paladins corrupted by circumstance in the last year. Don’t lecture us about what we risk.”

There was a great chorus of cheers, but not so many as before. Enough, though, for the rogue knight.

“Join us. Help lead, if you would, as only the warrior nobility can. As a member of the loyal opposition.”

A role Conner no doubt thought he filled.

Tara stepped away from him, instead. It wasn’t a hard choice to make. She’d walked away from more enticing offers in her life. And to her, The Republic came first and foremost.

“I can’t hear you, Conner,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest. “Your voice has become nothing more than a whisper, behind very tall walls.”

Hectar. What a wonderful tale.

Erik Sandoval-Groell trailed along at the edge of the crowd surrounding Tara Campbell and Conner Rhys-Monroe, sipping at a bottle of lukewarm water and straining his hearing to follow the sparring match underway. Elbows jostled him, and the stench of unwashed bodies pressed close. But a little discomfort was a small price to pay for such valuable instruction. So far he had to give Conner more points on raw emotion and delivery, though the countess’s subtle play seemed more suited to win a victory in the long run.

Regardless, both leaders made for an interesting study. Tara for her subtle nuances and the way in which she worked the crowd and let the crowd, at times, work through her. From landed aristocrat to tough-as-nails warrior, she made the changes as easily as Erik might step across a threshold. *And no one seemed to notice that she simply played a part, or when she changed roles right in front of them.*

And Conner, as knight or senator, proved more baffling but far more interesting. Youth and vigor and a complete disregard for Tara’s subtle play. Not much older than Erik, if at all, the onetime knight showed much of the same righteous energy that Erik had once felt for the Sandoval dynasty. Maybe it took someone with a history of similar problems to recognize it. And he did. Doglike devotion. That had been

one of his problems.

That, and a complete confidence in his own superiority.

The events on Mara changed that, when Erik's cousin threw in with the Stone-blind population and rallied enough military force to stop his Rangers from taking (and holding) the world for the Draconis March. He had left the world, believing his life to be in ruin. Sent into the company and care of his uncle, Duke Aaron Sandoval. Aaron's plans were far more subtle, and yet reached farther than Erik's father had ever considered: the return of dozens of Republic worlds to House Davion, and even a dream of Terra as a Federated Suns holding. Aaron had taught Erik, through trials and terrible errors, how to play a long game.

How to recognize himself as a pawn on a very large board.

"What does not kill me makes me stronger," the young noble whispered. Then listened as Tara Campbell played more to the cameras and Conner's direct supporters than to the ex-knight. Fascinating.

But was it useful? And was it in time?

Lord Governor Aaron Sandoval was now on his way to Terra after narrowly avoiding a Capellan push against St. Andre. Aaron had made it look like Paladin Kessel all but threw him off the planet, which was playing well on other planets secured by the Swordsworn and the various planetary militias in Aaron's coalition. *And* Aaron owed his timely departure to Erik, a fact he would make certain his uncle did not fail to remember.

There would be questions asked, ones that Erik had no intention of answering. Time to advance across the board.

"I can't hear you, Conner. Your voice has become nothing more than a whisper, behind very tall walls."

True, in a way. But Tara might do well to worry about the words that did make it over. They had a way of shaking worlds, at times. Erik's had. And if the Sandoval scion had been too preoccupied to realize when he pushed a losing hand, well, that's what the next ante was for, wasn't it?

What does not kill . . .

Tara stalked off, playing the disenchanted voice of reason, and Erik lagged further behind, now that the scene seemed to be breaking up. Also, some of the newsvid journalists were turning to the bystanders, seeking that 'common touch' on the news, and Erik had better things to do than be caught here. With the exarch and Senate shuffling through their game of brinkmanship, there were opportunities to be had.

For Aaron.

For himself.

The stronger each side played their hands, the greater the stakes for all concerned. Nothing would be beyond their reach. And Erik had several ideas how to force the game to higher play.

He still had a black business card burning a hole in his pocket. With an exchange number on it.

One he was willing to bet worked here on Terra.

Terra has fallen! In a surprise maneuver as bold as it is shocking, House Liao landed ten regiments of elite shock troops on Terra. Geneva is in flames and the corps of paladins is fleeing for district capitals to reestablish a new line of defense.

**—attributed to Laurence Coalmin, New Aragon’s FoolsCorp
Press, 1 April 3135**

*JumpShipStargazer
Zenith Station, Kyrkbacken
Republic of the Sphere
5 April 3135*

At the head of his table, Caleb Hasek-Sandoval-Davion half stood from his chair, raising his highball highest among all those toasting his generosity and good health. A raucous cheer swept the three tables in his party, a discord of merriment that nearly drowned out the ten-piece symphonic band doing its best to force nuevo jazz from classically trained fingers and lips.

But not much remained in his glass except the dregs of his smoky amber bourbon watered down by melting ice. Caleb sipped it off, washing down the spicy taste of duck prepared Capellan-style with a peppery glaze. Then slammed the highball down hard enough to jump one rounded cube over the rim. The glistening chunk of ice bounced off thick table linens and tumbled to the floor, skittering “up” the concave bow of Galileo’s deck as if defying gravity as well as Caleb’s reach.

An optical illusion, created by centrifugal force that thrust gravity equally along the curve of the *Stargazer*’s main gravity deck. He knew it. But his equilibrium gave a queer half twist regardless.

The Davion heir half fell back into his seat, waving off offers to get him a new glass, a fresh drink.

“I’ll get it,” he said. He levered himself back up with one hand on the shoulder of his companion for the night. The daughter of the CEO for Joneson Multiplanet? Or had he gone back to the ward of Lady Dolmate from Hassad?

Didn’t matter. She reached up and gave his hand a playful squeeze.

“A short walk’s just what I need to clear my head, my dear,” he promised her.

A very short walk. But not one without risk. Caleb’s table crowded up next to the ferroglass wall, offering a dizzying view of the stars and—when it spun into view—the distant red coin that was Kyrkbacken’s red dwarf sun. The heavens swung about on an axis defined by the length of the wasp-bodied JumpShip, fast enough to impart a Terran-standard gravity as well as a feeling of vertigo. Especially when Caleb stood.

Galileo’s was not for the weak of stomach, or the shortened account.

In fact, the five-star restaurant with its live entertainment and unmatched view of the spacescape taxed even Caleb’s constitution and resources. And it wasn’t that he couldn’t afford it. Hardly that. But even

the strongest *gratuity* offered to the *Stargazer*'s purser had been unable to guarantee him more than three medium-sized tables.

Which was, by easy count, fully half of the exclusive dining club.

It was Caleb's experience that gravity decks on JumpShips—even civilian passenger liners—tended toward cramped corridors and closet-style galleys. Which was why, discovering the *Stargazer* on the Kathil-to-Axton leg of his journey toward Terra, he had decided to make it his de facto flagship for the rest of the voyage and who cared if it traveled along the rear lines of the ongoing Capellan-Republic conflict? A onetime military class *Invader*, it had been converted and refurbished with the grandest luxuries in mind. The see-through walls of Galileo's being only one of the most ostentatious. It carried four DropShips: three luxury-designed *Monarch*s and Caleb's own Spartan *Triumph*. For the remainder of the voyage, however, he had the presidential apartments on one of the *Monarch*s as well as a gravity-berth on the *Stargazer*.

Space and weight—two of the greatest luxuries in space travel.

It would get him to Terra in style, or at least close enough to make rendezvous with his father. Maybe he could convince the old man to take leave of his military escort, just this once, and enjoy the privileges of their position.

Maybe even Julian would unbend enough to join them. His younger cousin had once been fun to hang around with, though he had returned from Lyran space far too serious.

People needed to know when to relax. To enjoy.

Weaving out from between the three tables he now “owned,” Caleb waved two security agents back to their seats and their drinks. Best duty in the Davion Guards, working with him. Working *for* him. He laughed, then swung up the spinward direction of Galileo's and nodded at the curious stares directed his way from the other diners. Certainly a few recognized him, even if most of the current passengers now hailed from Republic or Liao space, or from worlds formerly part of the Free Worlds League. There were a few frowns at his excess—he ignored them—as well as a few hopeful looks that they would be invited over—and he overlooked them too.

His attention remained focused instead on the short bar. It nestled beneath the second-story overhang on which the symphonic members labored, belting out the high-energy music Caleb had fallen in love with this year. They hit a rough stretch now and then, but he was gracious enough to overlook it. So long as they kept up a good beat with plenty of brass. And if a few of the older men showed strain from the energetic playing, sweat glistening on wrinkled brows or a slight sag to their shoulders, well, so what?

His party. His music.

His next conquest!

She waited at the bar, leaning up against it as if it had been designed with her height and subtle curves in mind. The dark-stained ironwood matched her almond-shaped eyes both in color and hardness. A French-roll style tucked away most of her glossy, black hair, except for a few loose, long strands that fell forward to frame an elfin face. Her evening gown was cuffed to her right ankle, in case of a sudden loss of gravity, but her other leg showed a shapely calf through the slit that traveled partway up the side. Athletic without being militant. Alluring but not trying too hard. She pulled off a poise that was as much attitude as it was beauty.

And she waited alone.

Everyone in Galileo's owned one of the ultraexclusive seats, so the bar was hardly for those waiting for table space. Instead, it was more of a rendezvous. There were exactly two chairs, where a couple could enjoy a moment's privacy. No more than two at a time was the unspoken rule.

Which suited Caleb immensely.

"Looking for a new table?" he asked, extending the invitation at which nearly half the room would have jumped.

She raised her wineglass, sipped at a dark purple nectar that smelled of plums and honey. "Not really."

He tried on his best smile, practiced on a hundred worlds in the last two years. Even if that smile had not silenced all the gossip chasing along his public relations tour, worrying over the distance between father and son, at least it had wooed a few nobles along the way. And a few nobles' daughters.

"Just enjoying a quiet moment at the bar then?"

"I was."

The way she said it, with a touch of amusement and the promise of possibilities, made it impossible to take offense. A challenge!

The music above softened as the brass rested a moment, and Caleb hummed along with the deep bass and piano runs. From a dimly lit door, the bartender stepped forward and quickly poured Caleb a new bourbon. A long, dark splash over fresh ice. And like a ghost—a very well-trained and expensive ghost—the tender faded back into the service corridor with barely a moment's interruption.

Caleb sipped carefully at the rich, warm bourbon, mustering his wits. Giving himself a moment to enjoy the breezy music and let her get used to his presence. Waiting, however, was not his strong suit.

He set the thick glass down on a linen napkin and offered his hand. "I'm Caleb."

"Danai."

She didn't offer her own hand in the dainty way most high-born ladies were taught, or take it in a short, sharp businesslike shake. She had a strong grip. Warm. Caleb found himself lingering over it for an extra heartbeat.

She hadn't offered a last name, he noticed. But then again, neither had he. He'd simply assumed that she would know him. And be duly impressed, of course. The way she'd returned her own name, it almost felt as if she'd expected the same. That he would know her.

But if he felt a moment's disappointment that she showed no sign of recognition, Danai appeared satisfied when he didn't make an issue of her name. Was she some celebrity, then? Her confidence and allure—he could easily place her as an actress. Or a celebrated musician.

He imagined her in the band playing above, resting with a nearby cloth to pat the sweat from her forehead. Bringing an electronic saxophone back to her lap, or—better!—a real trumpet to those full,

moist lips.

Danai slipped from her seat, ruining the start of a wonderful fantasy. Her body moved with the grace and power of a gymnast. Like a cresting wave. She set her unfinished drink on the bar after one last sip, and smiled at the Davion heir.

“It was nice to meet you, Caleb.”

“You’re leaving?” He’d been refused before, but never so quickly. Almost *dismissed*. “Don’t you know—” *who I am*, he didn’t finish. Those words sounded petulant, even to him. Well, if she didn’t know, let her find out on her own what she had missed!

One more offer, though. Just in case. “You won’t finish your drink with me?”

“Not tonight.” She paused, considering. Obviously and almost rudely appraising him. Then: “But you might talk me into it on a more . . . calm evening.” Her dark eyes shifted, seemed to take in the boisterous party and the band now ratcheting back up into full swing again. “I believe I’ll be back at Galileo’s in a day or three.”

That damn list of the purser’s. “I can get you back in sooner,” he offered.

She nearly laughed. “Oh, I didn’t mean to say I couldn’t come back. I have a permanent seat reserved. I simply choose not to take it every night.”

“Why?” That made no sense to Caleb. What good were such status positions if one didn’t make use of them?

“Never be completely predictable,” Danai said. She flicked a few stray hairs back from her face. “That’s a rule.”

And Caleb rarely planned his social calendar out that far. Not when it didn’t involve state dinners and prearranged publicity ops. But for her . . . “How long are you here?” he asked. “How far are you going on the *Stargazer*?”

“All the way.” Danai smiled. “Bound for Terra.”

“Really? I am as well.”

“How convenient.” She turned her smile up by several watts.

Damn. Caleb simply could not tell if the woman knew who he was or not. It was infuriating as well as attractive. But if she wanted to play that game, he’d follow suit. “It could be,” he said, putting a few grams of suggestion into his voice.

It was the first time in their short conversation that a shadow of displeasure darkened her features. She leaned away from him. A few centimeters only, but enough. “Convenience is also something to be wary of,” she told him. “Another rule. Good evening, Caleb.”

He shrugged, as if it really didn’t matter to him, and before she left him at the bar he slid away and sauntered back toward his party. A determined saunter. A going-to-have-a-great-time-without-her sort of walk.

Mason passed him just beyond the secluded alcove. His friend nursed a sweetened gin and a pretty good hangover from the night before. But there was nothing wrong with his smirk.

“Going back empty-handed. Is that going to be a rule for the rest of this voyage as well?”

Caleb thought about a frown, but really couldn't help himself when Mason was in a cutting mood. He smiled, then laughed, and toasted his friend's misery.

Danai.

This one time, he'd suffer the ignobility of a tactful retreat. Because with both of them traveling to Terra, it looked to be a wonderful campaign. And the harder conquests were often the sweetest victories.

Hoisting his drink overhead, returning the salute as his party cheered his return, Caleb silently promised himself that victory. He'd make his triumphant debut on Terra in such a way that the tale would make its way around the entirety of the Federated Suns. In what was certain to be the biggest media event in several years, what could be better than showing up at his father's side?

With the beautiful Danai on his arm?

Terra Republic of the Sphere

During planetfall over Terra, Julian joined Harrison Davion on the flag bridge of the *First Sun*. The *Excalibur*-class DropShip rolled over to bring the cradle of all humanity into view through the ferroglass window. Bright and blue-green and still the epitome of a “perfect world.” Harrison thanked his captain over the closed-circuit comms.

“Duchess Hasek decided to return to her cabin for the landing burn,” Julian said from the door, dogging it after him with a quick-use lever and sharp, metallic ratcheting.

“And Sandra?”

“Begged off for the view from the weather deck. You make her nervous.”

He didn't have to see his prince's face to recognize the smile in his voice. “Yes, I suppose I do. But then, it wouldn't make your charade any easier if I embraced the girl, would it?”

Never try to keep secrets from princes. Julian's father. His voice as calm and as reasonable as ever. *They know such games far better than we do.* The way Julian remembered it, Christoffer always sounded as if he pitied their distant cousins, not envied them for it.

“How long?” Julian asked.

He used the handrails to lever himself over to his own seat, opposite the prince from a small command console full of communications equipment. Harrison shook his head, but Julian made no apologies for his lack of “space legs.” He was a Mech Warrior, and only had to be comfortable enough in a DropShip to get from planet to planet. Nothing more.

“Long enough. If Amanda wasn't so set on the alliance, she'd have known it by now as well. The two of

you enjoy each other's company too much for it to be love. Passion, my boy, means reveling in the bitter as well as the sweet."

Harrison tamped a shred of tobacco into a specially constructed pipe designed for zero-G use. He rarely smoked anymore, which Julian attributed to Sterling McKenna's influence. The Khan of the Raven Alliance looked down upon most destructive indulgences as unfitting of a warrior or a leader. But everyone had their nervous habits, and the prince was hardly a connoisseur of space travel either.

Holding a meaty thumb down over the pipe's lighting stud, the prince puffed with contented satisfaction and the smell of cherry-flavored tobacco drifted across the room.

"Sometimes I wonder if you aren't *too* levelheaded," he said after a moment.

Damned if he did, and if he didn't. At times, Julian wanted to throw his hands in the air and give up. Fortunately, those times just inspired him to try all the harder.

"I've had my moments, as you remember."

"Yes, I suppose you have. And given the choice, I'll look for steadfast heart and a good mind anyway. Still, some time spent in . . . a lady's company . . . couldn't hurt."

For bluff-and-bluster Harrison to skirt so delicately around a topic felt alien to Julian. Almost prudish. "Uncle . . . you aren't asking if I'm still a virgin, are you?"

Harrison choked on his next draw and then doubled over in a wheezing fit of coughing laughter. Julian leaned over to pound the large man on the back, trying not to laugh. If the prince wanted to take a "birds and bees" moment, well, the champion had had worse lectures in his life.

A merry thought that came crashing down as soon as the prince was able to draw breath again. "Faith defend, Julian. That was priceless. I command the largest Successor State and have access to one of the best intelligence services in the entire galaxy, Inner Sphere or Clan. You think I don't *know*?"

Julian's face burned a siren red, he knew. But as much for the honor of others as for his own. He spent a moment collecting his thoughts, staring at Terra. Feeling its storied draw just as certainly as the DropShip was beginning to feel its gravitational pull.

"All I'm saying is . . . well, there's time for that later. Never mind, son. Never mind."

Still, Harrison chuckled to himself for a few moments, long enough for the engines to light off and gravity to suddenly press both men back into their padded chairs. Gravity slowly climbed up toward a full, Terran-standard G as the DropShip fell down over mankind's birthworld, trapped now by the planet's irresistible pull. The meridian between night and day—or, actually, twilight and true dark—slid by as the DropShip powered through its deceleration burn and easily, smoothly, rolled onto its back. The darkened sphere dropped out of the ferroglass window, leaving only a handful of stars peering through the faint blue-black of upper atmosphere.

And a bright white-hot flare, like a tiny sun, drifting along the same entrance vector.

"Coming in awfully close to us." Julian reached for a switch on the comms panel. "I'm surprised Streng is allowing that." Riccard Streng, Harrison's spy master, usually concerned himself with security service demands as well.

Harrison caught his wrist in a large, strong hand. “No need to bother Riccard.” He nodded at the drive flare of bright, eye-searing fusion flame. “That’s ours.”

Julian looked askance at his uncle. “The *Ribald Song*? Came after us from New Hessen?” Except for a lance of damaged vehicles, the only other thing aboard the *Song* had been salvage from the Hiritsu left-behinds.

“Not exactly. No. I sent the *Song* back to New Avalon. That would be the *Markeson Pride* .”

Julian leaned back, staring at his prince with a certain amount of caution. “That is a DropShip from the First Davion Guards.” Julian’s honorary command.

“Yes. I believe so.”

And it trailed along with the prince through Republic space? With no hint of its presence? Harrison’s calm, confident gaze told Julian that the prince was neither reckless nor witless. But an answer certainly escaped the champion. “Should I know what the *Pride* is doing here, dropping onto Terra?” he asked carefully.

Harrison simply raised pipe to lips and puffed more cherry-blossom tobacco over his private bridge. “I believe you should,” he said.

Secrets were indeed a game for princes.

14

News of The Republic’s death has been greatly exaggerated!

Paladins are on top of the panic on New Aragon, and, I assure you, the exarch is well and Geneva still stands. As does Terra. This April Fool’s campaign was not only ill conceived—it also was reckless and criminal in the extreme. Suicides and riots notwithstanding, the least charge I would level at the perpetrators of such a fraud would be aiding and abetting the enemy, to sow discord at such a time as this!

—Knight-Errant Raul Ortega, A Public Address, Achernar, 4 April 3135

*Terra
Republic of the Sphere
8 April 3135*

Jonah Levin stood in the window alcove behind his massive desk, waiting on the arrival of ComStar’s First Precentor. Hands clasped behind his back. Shoulders braced up. Swallowing dryly as he stared down at the tent city that had claimed Magnum Park for the past two weeks.

Today, one way or another, it ended.

From this height the people were not much larger than ants come to a picnic. A dangerous view; better if

he could be down among them. Talking to those he ruled, as he might have tried to do only four months before when he had been a paladin, and not exarch. Perhaps he'd have tried it anyway. Today, even, if not for the new security concerns.

Reaching out, he traced a circle on the cold, smooth glass around a flaw chipped against the outside. In a vehicle windshield, it would have looked like a rock chip. But he knew it for what it was. He'd been standing here two days ago when it happened, after all. And Jonah had seen bullet scores against cockpit shields enough times to recognize this one.

Someone had tried to kill him. Again.

A shot from the trees, half a kilometer away. One hell of a shot, really. The assassin hidden among the press of demonstrators, protected in his escape by the inability of Jonah's people to secure a perimeter. How did one contain a mob thirty thousand bodies strong?

Very, very carefully.

"Come on. Here I am again." He looked out over the formerly peaceful expanse. "Take your best shot."

Nothing. So Jonah relaxed, and watched over the preparations as Geneva's public security force took their places at several strong positions around the park. Platoon-sized units with their backs against the capitol building, against the Terran Archive Center across the way, against one of the many forested stands making up the park's famous walk of the Trees from Every World. They wore black riot-squad uniforms and full-body shields. Carried water cannon. Tear gas canisters and rubber-coated billy clubs hung from their belts. It didn't take much to imagine tomorrow's headlines.

Exarch's Stormtroopers.

The Battle for Magnum.

It was all coming apart at the seams. The Republic. Devlin Stone's dream. A solution had to be found to patch things back together, if it was not already too late.

"It's not going to be easy," a powerful, deep voice shattered the silence, "what you have to do."

Jonah had left the door to his office open, but still the sudden arrival of Brian May startled him. Steeling himself against any show of nerves, the exarch glanced back over his shoulder as if merely checking the time of day.

First Precentor May stood next to Jonah's chief of staff and all-around majordomo, Héloïse Montgolfier. Two people could not have looked more different, regardless of the difference in sex. Héloïse's red hair was bobbed just beneath her ears in a sensible cut that needed little attention. Her pale green eyes and milky complexion always left Jonah believing the woman needed more time in the sun. She dressed conservatively in a dark blue pantsuit and red choker scarf, and wore a minimum of jewelry. Gold studs in her ears, and the engagement ring her fiancé had given her just last week. Subtle. Nonconfrontational.

Political.

And for a man who moved so silently, almost eerily so, Brian May made quite the opposite impression. Pushing seventy years of age, there was nothing frail about the second-most powerful member of

ComStar's organization. Two meters tall if a centimeter, he towered over Héloïse. Built like a BattleMech with his broad shoulders and a thick, muscular neck, his dark skin was only a few polishes short of flawless ebony. Iron gray shot through his dark hair, worn long and braided, with the braids pulled back into a thick ponytail. He dressed in the voluminous white robes once so common to ComStar and recently coming back into favor. His were embroidered with a gold brocade that twisted around the hem and up the lapel in arcane mathematical symbols.

First Precentor May stepped further into the office and Héloïse closed the heavy wooden door behind them.

"Not much is easy, these days," Jonah said by way of greeting.

"There is no other way?" the ComStar representative asked.

Jonah left his window alcove, coming around his desk to shake hands with May. The man had a firm, encompassing grip. "That depends on what news you've brought me. Not to put too fanciful a spin on this, Precentor May, but I'm desperately looking for a silver bullet. Something that can kill the monster quickly and completely before it devours The Republic entire."

Héloïse gestured the first precentor to a seat on the leather-wrapped divan. She continued to stand while the exarch took a seat across from May on one of the office's two chairs. "The Senate refuses to budge," she said. "Some on ideological grounds. Others because they sense the opportunity to gather power. Not even the paladins have had any luck bringing pressure to bear."

"I read a dispatch yester-week. Senator Therese Ptolomeny suffered a no-confidence vote by the people of Park Place."

Jonah frowned darkly at the reminder. "It was a narrow margin. And the world governor, under direct order from the Senate, has refused to acknowledge it. If I want to make it stick, I'll have to order the Seventh Hastati Sentinels off the front lines with Liao and send them home."

Héloïse shifted her weight from one foot to the other. "Obviously the exarch does not want to do that."

"Obviously," May agreed. "And you cannot arrest Ptolomeny herself."

Another point that left a sour taste in Jonah's mouth. "No. Conner Monroe stole a march on us there, as well."

In fact, Jonah had put armed forces around Ptolomeny's Riviera estate. And then was forced to back them off when *Sir* Conner led in a double squad of the Senatorial Honor Guard to "secure" the area.

"The Senate polices its own," Monroe had said in a short press statement. "That is how Devlin Stone set things up. We will guard Senator Ptolomeny until an honor court establishes her guilt or innocence."

And the Riviera was not all. Conner, drawing from the garrisons and a large reserve of personal "guards" kept by most nobles, had forced border closures in England and in India. The Senate, through their newest member, all but controlled the entire nation-state of Germany, and the Siberian proving grounds were under a new communications blackout now as well—presumably under Senate orders.

It was a hot-button situation, one that had forced Jonah to discuss more extreme measures with his ghost paladin. The Republic, according to historical files to which Jonah was now privy, had handled similar

situations in the past. And not always with above-board tactics. Was it time to remove Conner Rhys-Monroe—the former Knight of the Sphere—completely from the equation?

The ghost paladin had not recommended it one way or the other. He'd simply told his exarch, "It can be arranged."

Jonah Levin had not slept soundly in the last three days since that meeting.

"I'm not sure what ComStar can do for you," May said, his deep voice revealing a measure of uncertainty. "We're hardly in a position to come between the exarch and the Senate."

"Don't dissemble, Precentor." Jonah leaned forward, his gaze biting hard at the other man. "ComStar has a long and mostly infamous history of involving itself in just this kind of trouble. I'm simply inviting it on behalf of the exarch's office."

Héloïse played the conciliator. "We understand ComStar was forced to dismantle its primary intelligence-gathering operations after the Jihad," she said. "No government trusted an organization proven to pry into interstellar communications at their own discretion. At the same time, no one believed they could completely restrict such activities either. A devil's bargain if ever there was one."

"And an image we've worked very hard to overcome," May said. His face hardened into an unreadable mask.

"I'm not asking for the keys to Pandora's box," Jonah pressed. "But if there is anything you can give me to help get a handle on the situation, ComStar owes it to The Republic. Devlin Stone stood by you when *every* Great House stood ready to pull your organization apart. He gave you a home on Terra again. He lent to you from his own credibility. Now the walls of Camelot are beginning to crumble, Precentor, and you are on the same side as we are."

"ComStar appreciates that, sir. I am to extend the personal awareness of Primus Koenigs-Cober as well. And her pledge of assistance, such as it comes." He spread his hands open, as if to emphasize their emptiness. "But I think you do not appreciate ComStar's current situation, Exarch. We are failing."

"What do you mean, 'failing?'" Héloïse asked for the exarch.

"Three years without reliable HPG service? Without our primary income potential? We've tapped our reserves to the limit, but ComStar is quickly and officially heading toward bankruptcy."

"Preposterous." Jonah thrust himself to his feet. He paced once across the great seal inlaid into his office carpeting, and back. He felt the walls pressing in from all sides, weighing on him. "ComStar must have diversified its operations long ago. Centuries ago! The Blackout cannot have crippled so large a body."

When the exarch stood, no one sat. Precentor May rose, hands balled into fists. "It can! And believe me, sir, it has done so."

Then he calmed himself with visible effort, tucking each hand into the opposite sleeve and exhaling his frustration in one long breath.

"Of course we have diversified," he said. "ComStar owns real estate and resources on a thousand worlds, Exarch. We are the second-largest investor in interstellar markets, behind House Steiner's Lyran Commonwealth. We own a large percentage of the shipping industry in every Successor State and most

Periphery realms as well.” He sighed again. “Of course we have.

“But the Blackout . . . it’s like an arterial wound. ComStar is hemorrhaging capital and confidence at a rate that would sink most medium-sized realms. We’ve liquidated resources at incredible losses in our efforts to research the cause and to rescue operations. All to no avail. A prudent corporation would have amputated the damaged limb a year ago or more! Instead, we’ve risked the life and livelihood of *all* of ComStar in order to save the corrupted flesh.”

Jonah looked to Héloïse Montgolfier, who stared back, wide-eyed, as the implications settled home.

“But if ComStar fails,” the exarch said, stumbling through the minefield of disastrous possibilities, “then we could lose even the working HPG stations. And who could ever bring back up the entire network?”

Mankind cast adrift among the stars. Not even the “pony-express” routes being implemented by most Great Houses could keep a nation tied together strongly enough. They had all grown so dependent on interstellar communication. It would take the rise of strong, local warlords to keep everything in line. A decentralization of power.

As The Republic was finding out, that way disaster lay.

May nodded slowly when the exarch gave voice to his concerns. “We are not far from that now, Exarch. Only the working stations and our A hubs are fully staffed at this point.” He huffed out more frustration. “In some places, adepts have begun praying to the machines again!” He withdrew one hand from a sleeve and plucked at the brocaded cuff. “ComStar is dusting off its robes, Exarch. Prayer may be our final hope.”

“I cannot accept that,” Jonah said. Though some part of him asked *can’t ? Or won’t ?*

“Accept it or not, Exarch, that is the way of things at this moment. I am here on behalf of the Primus to offer whatever assistance we can in these dark times, but also to ask for your aid as well. ComStar, too, stands at the brink.”

Allies in sickness and in health. This was the kind of situation where drowning men might climb up each other’s backs in order to be the last one breathing.

“Wait, wait.” Jonah snapped his fingers, clutching at a memory from an earlier briefing by the ghost paladin. “What about the savant you rescued off Wyatt? The one who fixed the local HPG? Don’t you have him at your Australia facilities yet?”

Héloïse looked sharply at the exarch, but remained quiet. She knew many secrets as his chief aide, but not all of them.

May frowned, showing a bit of worry at the breach in security. “Your network is still very good, Exarch.” He tucked his hands away, and shook his head. “He is not in Australia at this time, and I am not authorized to tell you where this adept has been taken. We had hoped for him to be *our* silver bullet.” May’s expression was carefully neutral. “Our investigations are ongoing.”

“So what you are saying,” Héloïse began in her gift for summation, “is that ComStar is our willing ally but we should not rely too heavily on your ability to remain a credible resource. You might even become a weight around The Republic’s neck that will drag us under with you.”

“Not the most flattering analogy,” May said darkly, “but accurate.”

And instead of finding a lifeline in the troubled political waters, Jonah Levin now had more worries to heap onto the scales against him. Against his Republic. Was there nothing left, then, but the fail-safes planned so long ago by Devlin Stone as The Republic’s last-stand strategies?

Were they so desperate as that?

“You have nothing for us, then?” he asked, still looking for a way out from under the blade.

“Nothing helpful,” the first precentor replied. But he did reach into a fold in his robes, and draw out a data wafer. The thin circle of black silica was marked with the Greek letter ρ , the insignia of ComStar’s supposedly defunct intelligence-gathering agency: ROM.

Hesitant to pick up the small wafer, Jonah watched as May set it on the edge of the low table. Héloïse eyed it warily as well, as if it might uncoil into a tiny, poisonous viper.

“What is it?” Jonah asked.

May shrugged, as if hesitant to say. Then: “Answers to some of your recent questions regarding Victor Steiner-Davion’s methods of investigation. The material he unearthed. And the resources he tapped in the process.”

“You say that as if Victor had something to hide,” Héloïse said.

“He did. Believe me, he did. And that something will come out in the next few days. Which is why we turn over the information to you now, before it leaks to the public in such a way that will only strengthen the Senate’s case.”

Jonah picked up the small data-storage device. It was cold and smooth to the touch. Not much larger than a quarter-stone coin and half as heavy, he knew it could contain gigabytes of data. Likely it did. He felt the looming presence of the sword’s edge, held up only by the thinnest of hairs.

“And if I orchestrate its release first?” he asked.

“As I said before: ‘It’s not going to be easy, what you have to do.’ You may be able to salvage something from this disaster, and give us all time to look for new options. Perhaps this summit of Inner Sphere leaders will bring about new ideas, new answers. Regardless, you’ve been a military man long enough to know that when war is inevitable—”

“It is always best to strike the first blow,” Jonah finished.

Which was when he felt certain he heard the thread of hair finally snap.

Run teleprompter:

Citizens and residents.

It is with heavy heart that I appear before you on this day,
To inform you of the drastic action deemed necessary
To restore order to our Republic and
To promote safety for the entire realm.

In this dark hour, as we face a two-front war,
and with the imminent arrival of many Inner Sphere leaders,
it is a time for us all to stand together.

But instead, we have shown ourselves divided.

This helps no one but our enemies

And those within our own borders who would profit from The Republic's misfortune.

I can no longer allow the government to remain hostage to such men and women.

Which is why,

With great reluctance and after exhausting all reasonable efforts to restore the peace,

I have issued the following orders.

Today, by executive order, under the War Powers Act of 3082,

I have ordered the Senate disbanded.

The authority of any noble now extends no further than the boundary of dedicated fiefs.

Prefecture governors will continue to administer all laws of The Republic.

Legates and command-level officers remain under local dominion,

except where a world or governor refuses to acknowledge this action by word or deed.

Any attempt by a former senator to wield undue power or influence
will be met with the harshest penalties.

This state of emergency must and will persist
Until the danger to The Republic is past
And all people, citizen or resident, have had their chance to voice an opinion
on a new and better form of representation.

I sincerely regret the pain and the fear of uncertainty that this action will bring.

Let us all pray that a brighter future awaits us
on the other side of this terrible darkness.

COMRADES IN ARMS

*On, on, you noble English,
Whose blood is fet from fathers of war-proof!—
Fathers that, like so many Alexanders,
Have in these parts from morn till even fought,
And sheath'd their swords for lack of argument.*

—**Shakespeare's** *King Henry V*, Act III, Scene I

War is never so clean and neat as we would like it. As recruiting drives would lead you to believe. For every act of bravery you can find one of cowardice, and for every decorated hero a father, a son, who died ignominiously.

Why, then, are there always those who are so willing to call 'Out swords, and to work!'?

—**Tara Campbell, Countess Northwind, "A Response," Terra, 11 April 3135**

The exarch would think to abolish us? We, who have stood at the precipice and gazed into the abyss on behalf of mankind for century upon century? There is no greater lie than the one he thinks to unveil: That we are dispensable, and he is necessary. I say, we abolish him!

—Senator Therese Ptolomeny (Unilateralist, Park Place), Terra, 10 April 3135

Terra
Republic of the Sphere
11 April 3135

It was organized to look like a parade.

It began at Geneva's DropPort, escorted by a paladin and a double column of armored vehicles leading the way through the streets. Aerospace fighters circled overhead, occasionally making low-level passes to distract and entertain the cautious crowds who turned out for the spectacle. Bright rainbow banners and green garlands of fresh boughs decorated the entire city. At main intersections, pennants with the House Davion crest stirred under a light breeze, the sword-and-sunburst insignia marking their route and supporting the illusion of a festive event.

A parade. Only days after the exarch of The Republic forcibly cleared Geneva's Magnum Park and announced the dissolution of the Senate.

Right.

To Julian Davion's trained eye—and likely to anyone with a little common sense—the “parade” was obviously a fortified guard. There were reactionary factions within The Republic's government, its civilian population, *the military* ; there was no saying for certain what they might do. What they might try.

Julian had been allowed his *Templar* , repaired after the fighting on New Hessen and freshly painted in the red-and-gold parade colors of the Davion Guards. He stomped along behind an armored limousine, presumably standing guard over his uncle. But it was Harrison's body double who waved to the curious as the military convoy wound its way through Geneva proper and finally gained the rural highway that twisted alongside the grand lake and (eventually) up into the nearby Alps. Here the body double, at least, could relax. Enjoy the limousine's well-stocked bar and pantry.

Another sixty tense kilometers for Julian, to the chalet over Thonon-les-Baines that had been given over to the diplomatic party from the Federated Suns. The prince's security team kept Harrison buttoned up in a Fox armored car the entire way. Julian insisted on the precaution. The Fox trailed at the end of the column, ready to run for safety at the first sign of trouble.

None came. Between David McKinnon's *Atlas* and Julian's *Templar* , and another thousand tons of rolling military might, any thoughts of taking the prince for an important political hostage must certainly have fallen by the wayside.

The chalet itself sat on expansive grounds only a few thousand feet below the Alps' spring snowline. A mountainside retreat, overlooking the quaint town of Thonon-les-Baines and Lake Genève's wide blue waters, the building's steeply pitched roof and narrow windows were common to the local architecture. Though Julian doubted that many such estates were built from ferrosteel and hardened, fusion-formed bricks stronger than the best steel-reinforced concrete. The site was as physically secure as any military bunker. Gardens and flagstone paths, and the gingerbread-house trimmings of scalloped gables and picket fences notwithstanding.

The hidden defenses were just as impressive, Julian knew, especially after a month of being worked over by the prince's advance teams. New video surveillance and an installed sensor suite package sensitive enough to pick up the armored column at five kilometers. Spider holes on the grounds, manned by armored troopers. A "panic room" below the wine cellar where Harrison could bolt in case of any security breach.

As the column approached, a pair of Kinnol main battle tanks split away from the column and took up station before the front walls. A trio of armored personnel carriers fit—barely—into bays of a seven-car garage.

Except for approved military aerospace craft, the entire area was a no-fly zone.

The site was secure as Julian could make it.

He left his *Templar* standing vigil off to one side of the chalet, near the helipad. Scaling the three-story drop down a chain-link ladder, Julian breathed deeply of the brisk mountain air. It tasted of wildflowers and alpine conifers. And snow. His breath frosted in front of his face, and the skin on his arms puckered with gooseflesh. He had pulled a simple jumpsuit over his military togs, and now had cause to regret not planning for warmer clothing. He saw a great deal of fleece in his immediate future.

"We aren't going through this every trip into Geneva?" Harrison called over.

His strong voice carried across the garden that separated Julian's BattleMech from the chalet's main drive. The prince stood next to the Fox armored car, bundled quite warmly in a full-length coat of brown faux fur. More than ever, he looked the part of his namesake, the Bear.

"Not usually," Julian promised, jogging over.

From the drive, all that could be seen now of the military guard was McKinnon's lone *Atlas* astride the road at the main gates. Julian tossed the paladin a casual salute in farewell, thinking that McKinnon would return to Geneva now. But the one-hundred-ton machine simply turned and set itself in a wide-legged stance, a massive titan guarding the chalet.

Frowning, but taking the added protection at face value, Julian turned toward the chalet's large stone porch and heavy lodge-style doors. The latch was heavy brass, cold to the touch. The doors were hung perfectly. Heavy, but opening easily at the lightest push.

"I have a Warrior VTOL coming in later today," he told the prince. "We'll use your body double on the road, as a diversion, and fly you into Geneva. Faster. Safer."

"And a very good idea," a hearty voice greeted them as they stepped into the chalet's common room.

Julian had never met Jonah Levin, but had no trouble recognizing the one-time paladin and current exarch. His face was probably the second-most popular on newsvid programs and scandal sheets throughout The Republic. Right behind Tara Campbell, of course.

Exarch Levin waited in front of the fire, which crackled and snapped on the hearth within a massive stone fireplace. Julian had slept in DropShip berths that were smaller. The heat was enough to warm the common room, with its vaulted ceiling open to the rafters high above. Levin seemed to welcome the warmth, though, standing close enough to the flames that Julian would be surprised if the man's eyebrows weren't singed.

The man might have stolen a march on Julian, but Harrison Davion rolled with the unexpected visit as if he'd expected it the entire time. He shrugged out of the heavy fur coat, and tossed it with casual aplomb over the back of a nearby chair.

"Sire Levin, may I congratulate you on your ascension to exarch."

It wasn't exactly a question, and Levin answered it in kind. "Thank you, First Prince Davion."

"Harrison." The gruff man waved off the titles with an easy brush of his hand. "A perquisite of the job, Jonah. You get to first-name the rest of us." He grinned. "Except for any of the Marik wannabes. They will insist on their Captain-General rank, all three of them. Part of their cock-swinging contest."

"Isn't one of the captains-general female?" Levin asked.

"My point exactly."

Such earthy humor would no doubt have crashed a high-society function into cold, uncomfortable silence. But Harrison Davion had read the other man well for never having met him. Julian watched as Exarch Levin relaxed with a tired smile and a hard glint sparkling in his dark brown eyes.

"So noted," the exarch said. He crossed the room in quick strides, reaching out to trade clasps with the prince of the Federated Suns. "Welcome to Terra."

"We've been enjoying the hospitality around Annemasse's DropPort for five days, actually. But the sentiment is welcome." Harrison introduced Julian, who also traded brief clasps with The Republic's most powerful man. "Since we are all here, I trust arrangements have finally been taken care of?"

By which Julian assumed Harrison was speaking about the *Markeson Pride*. And two companies of House Davion's finest, landed on Terra in clear violation of the terms of the exarch's original invitation.

"It wasn't an easy request to handle, given the short time frame and other . . . complications. But yes, we've managed to arrange for a 'tour' of Terra, starting with the Groom Lake Operational Proving Area in North America. It's a small step, Prince Davion, but I welcome the gesture. And your presence here." His gaze measured Julian again, and the obvious absence of anyone else. "But weren't you traveling in a larger party?"

Silence stretched out after that question, until Julian realized that Harrison was staring at him. He felt the silent prodding, and stepped forward to fully join the conversation.

"Duchess Amanda Hasek and her ward, Sandra Fenlon, will join us from the Annemasse DropPort later this evening. I did not want them making the journey until the full security force was in residence. Caleb Davion, the prince's son, will arrive in a few days to a week. And Sterling McKenna"—Julian glanced at Harrison—"remains in orbit aboard her own DropShip."

Which left out a lot of the undercurrents, having traveled for several weeks with Duchess Hasek's disapproving gaze and Khan McKenna's casual disregard for anyone other than Harrison. Separating those two women, and the prince, had been the highlight of Julian's morning.

Levin nodded, as if reading the champion's mind and offering his sympathy. "And Duke Corwin Sandoval?" he asked.

Harrison took up the thread. "Was convinced at the last moment that the needs of the Draconis March were too important to waste for a family reunion."

A politic way to separate Corwin from the entourage, Julian had thought. If there were any deals to be made within The Republic, after all, it should be Harrison Davion making them. And there were already too many Sandovals in play.

A sentiment Exarch Levin must also agree with. He smiled and nodded.

"Please." He spread his hands at the sectional couch and the large armchairs which helped section off part of the common room into its own smaller space. "Don't let me keep you standing. This is, for the next few months anyway, Federated Suns soil. Be comfortable."

All three took seats. Harrison easing his large frame back into the corner of the sectional, spreading his arms out to either side along the back. Julian took one of the arm chairs only after the exarch had claimed the other for himself. The prince's champion ended up sitting closest to the fireplace. The wave of heat emanating from the stone hearth began to cook the left side of his face.

"First," Jonah Levin said, speaking directly to Harrison, "let me apologize for any perceived slight to the Raven Alliance. We've been organizing this since December, but there are still a few legal kinks to work out."

Harrison nodded. "The Clans setting foot on Terra being a major one," he said, understanding. "That was the entire point to their invasion in 3050, wasn't it? To become the chief Clan?"

"The ilClan," Julian said, providing the correct term. "But there is some debate among military historians as to how that works. First Clan to simply set down on Terran soil? First to win a victory? Or does it take the subjugation of the entire world to trigger that event?"

"We're playing it safe," Levin said. "Geneva and the surrounding environs will be officially classified as neutral ground for the duration of Paladin Victor Steiner-Davion's funeral. And as we cannot commit to an ambassador's privilege of granting 'sovereign soil' to any Clan, the Sea Foxes have helped us draw up a 'contract' by which a Clan representative is granted diplomatic immunity so long as they agree to abide by the boundaries and renounce all claim of sovereignty for the duration of this visit. It should be ready for Khan McKenna by tomorrow at the latest."

"We are the first to arrive then?" Harrison asked.

"Nearly." Levin smiled tightly. "First with a Clan warrior, at any rate. But a small contingent from House Steiner arrived two days ago. They have taken over the Carlton-Swiss in Geneva." He hedged, obviously uncomfortable. "The Commonwealth embassy in Mannheim is currently . . . unavailable."

"Melissa is here?" Harrison sounded surprised.

"No. A distant cousin, Trillian Steiner, with a small escort of military attaches."

"Steiner-Davion," Julian said.

"I beg your pardon?"

Julian shifted to the side of his chair, leaning away from the fire. He hadn't meant to speak aloud, but now that he had: "Trillian Steiner-Davion. She is Peter Steiner-Davion's granddaughter. Victor would be her great-uncle."

"Interesting. That relationship was not made clear to me. And Trillian, when I spoke briefly with her, actually requested a city residence rather than take a nearby estate."

"Family issues," Harrison said, dismissing the problem. "Relations with the Commonwealth have been less than warm of late. And shared blood makes it no easier."

The exarch frowned. "Well, we aren't going to make that any easier, I'm afraid. There are several reports due to break publicly any day now, a few of which I recently released, to support our political agenda. Others I wish I had never seen myself. They will tarnish Victor's record, and the Steiner-Davion name, I'm afraid. Which is a shame, coming on the eve of his funeral services."

Julian rubbed at the side of his face. He wondered if *his* hair was beginning to singe. "I thought Victor helped uncover the Senate cabal? Wasn't that why he was killed?"

"He did. It was, we believe." Levin blew out a frustrated breath. "But how he went about it makes it difficult for The Republic to maintain the high ground in our situation with the Senate. Documents in my possession, and in the hands of others, I'm afraid, make it clear that Victor kept ties to some ex-intelligence operatives after the Jihad, for starters. ROM agents whom he might have encouraged to return to ComStar. Even worse, he essentially supported one of the plagues of The Republic; an organization of spies-for-hire and information brokers who hide behind the illuminati pyramid."

The conversation was quickly veering away from security issues and into territory not exactly within Julian's purview as the prince's champion. Political territory. He was as fascinated as anyone with family gossip—especially gossip at this level—but this was material more fit for Harrison's intelligence corps. They should vet it, and decide what Julian needed to know.

Plus, truth be told, Julian felt as if he were being broiled to death. He stood, taking a step away from the fire.

"I should see to the security of the grounds, Uncle. And to the Duchess Hasek's disposition."

But Harrison made no bones about it. "Sit down, Julian."

There was no disputing a direct order from the first prince. Especially when he used the curt tone of voice normally reserved for recalcitrant generals or his wayward son. It warned that Harrison would brook no argument or interference.

It was not a tone he took often with Julian.

Julian sat, though he edged over to the sectional first, away from the blazing fire. He perched on the arm of the long couch, sitting at attention but looking as if he were ready to leave at a moment's notice. At the prince's whim.

"I appreciate the heads-up," Harrison told the exarch. "Have Gavin and Simone been told?" he asked, naming Victor's two surviving grandchildren.

"Simone, yes. Gavin has dropped out of sight—hopefully, just as a protest over our political use of his

grandfather.” Jonah shrugged. “Kitsune has also lodged a formal protest”—naming Victor’s son from a previous relationship—“but he’s keeping it low key.”

“I assume none of this will impact plans for Victor’s state funeral?”

“No. We will move forward as outlined in the calendar we sent. But I wanted you to be forewarned, in case this will cause you any difficulty back home.”

Harrison combed his fingers through his black beard. “Not nearly what it is causing you here,” he said. “Your senators will use any handle they can get on Victor to smear the rest of the paladins.”

“Which is why most of them are off-planet at the moment.” Levin held up four fingers. “I’ve kept only a handful of my best on Terra. The others are tending the desperate situations with Clan Jade Falcon and the Capellan incursions, or running down senators with delusions of their own nation-state.”

Julian had his own opinion on that subject. But he remained quiet, feeling far out of his depth. Harrison, though, seemed determined to drag him under the exarch’s nose.

“Julian and I talked about that on the way in-system. You have bitten off quite a large problem, Jonah. What was it you called it, my boy? ‘Brute force politics?’” He chuckled, a laugh that rumbled deep in his chest.

“What I meant by that—”

But Levin waved him down. “Don’t start apologizing for speaking the truth, Lord Davion. It is a rare and precious thing at the higher levels.”

“Personal experience, Exarch?” Harrison sat forward, placing large hands on his knees. “Have your teat caught in the wringer already?”

“I’ve discussed things,” Levin said slowly, choosing his words with obvious care, “given orders and solicited advice that I would not care to repeat in front of a recorder. And I’ve smiled into the faces of people I knew I’d have to send to their death in battle, or ruin politically as soon as they were no longer useful to The Republic. Honestly, Harrison, I don’t see how anyone can live with this job for as long as you, or Vincent Kurita, have done.”

“It needs doing. And if you have those kinds of questions, Jonah, then you might be the right man for the job after all.” Harrison glanced meaningfully at Julian, but if there was a silent message behind it, the prince’s champion did not catch it. “You’ve been thrown into the deep end on your first time out,” he continued. “Redburn left you with a right foul cock-up. And in your position, given the relative youth of The Republic and the forces you have pressing against you . . .”

He trailed off, and Julian suspected that his prince had begun to regret going so far with the praise. But then Harrison Davion often surprised his champion.

“I’d have done just the same thing,” the prince said, nodding.

Levin smiled, but quite obviously didn’t believe it. “You would have, eh?”

“The Lyran Commonwealth radically altered their government once . . . Julian?”

Julian leaned forward, rubbing a finger alongside his jaw. "2375," he answered, digging back into his history classes. "Before Steiner rule. That was when Archon Robert Marsden deposed the other eight ruling Archons and turned the Commonwealth into a single-monarch nation. Also, House Liao formed the Capellan Confederation, they say, in a single day when Franco Liao put up his own life as collateral and wrested power from a small group of allied worlds."

"Actually," Levin said, "I believe that was his wife who bargained on Franco's life, but your point is well taken." He nodded. "I can cite dozens more such circumstances, in fact, even dating back to ancient Terra when the New America scrapped its Articles of Confederation after one year and drafted instead a new Constitution."

"It was a tough decision," Harrison agreed, "choosing to disband the Senate. In effect, you are looking to reform your entire system of government. That takes brass ones. The kind of scrotal strength that might actually be able to handle such a task. And it was a task that needed doing. Your senators have proven that with their actions."

The exarch shrugged, still uncomfortable. And Julian suddenly saw two sides at war within The Republic's leader. The warrior who wished to cling doggedly to his orders, and the status quo. And the visionary who was being forced to deal with a government and a realm in a state of flux. With only the barest appreciation for what Jonah Levin must be going through, Julian also felt a strong measure of pride in Harrison for coming out and speaking the cold, hard facts as the prince saw them.

Levin certainly seemed to appreciate the support. Though, "I don't suppose you'd go on the public record with such comments?" he asked. But it was hardly a serious request. It sounded more like the exarch making a joke.

And Harrison answered it in the same vein. "Not a chance in hell," he promised. "In public, I have to denounce you. You understand."

Meaning, Julian assumed, politics.

The exarch as well. "What isn't political these days?" he asked.

Obviously a rhetorical question, though Julian noticed Levin's gaze slip to him for the measure of a quick heartbeat.

"So what will it be?" he asked the prince. "Suppressing the public's rights with dictatorial force?"

Harrison grinned, strong and savage. "I was thinking more something like . . . denying representation to so many people once accustomed to free voice under Davion rule." He paused a moment, tasting the sound bite. "Yes. I think I like that."

"It's good. It will get good play at home too. Your March Lords will eat it up."

"We'll keep the Sandovals off your back," Harrison said, making Julian a party to the promise. "But you do not have a great deal of time. If history is any judge, when you reach this kind of cusp your action is best done quickly."

"Then I should get back to work." Levin rose. Harrison and Julian followed the exarch back to their feet. "First Prince." He shook hands with Harrison, and then Julian. "Lord Davion. Again, welcome to Terra, and The Republic."

“And with a bit of luck,” he added, “both will still be around when you leave.”

16

There is also every indication that more fighting has spilled outside of Republic borders, with evidence of skirmishes being fought on New Hessen and now Demeter as well. With the First Prince on Terra, such happenings cannot go unnoticed, or unremarked.

—Terra Today, Terra, 16 April 3135

*Terra
Republic of the Sphere
17 April 3135*

Tara climbed her new *Hatchetman* out of the wreckage of a collapsed shop, using the 'Mech's titanium hatchet to sweep aside the torn sheet metal, the mangled beams. Gray-green coolant leaked out of the gaping wound in her machine's left side, spilling from a ruptured heat sink. It splashed over the *Hatchetman*'s shovel-blade feet.

Leaning forward, Tara waited for a new bout of dizziness to pass. She tasted blood from where she'd bitten her tongue.

Spots swam before her eyes. Dark. Fuzzy. Her vision cleared quickly, though, as lasers sizzled in around her, burning wood and scoring the flimsy sheet metal that had once been part of the dealership's wall. A scarlet lance sliced along her right arm, burning an angry wound through armor composite.

Nothing like a hot combat zone to sharpen the senses.

“Tango-one, back on the grid.”

The neurohelmet's voice-activated mic gave her hands-free communication. A good thing, as she was busy enough on her control sticks lining up a shot against the attacking *Griffin*. The heavy autocannon riding over her *Hatchetman*'s left shoulder let out a long, tearing blast, hammering rounds into the *Griffin*'s right shoulder. A second blast in the rapid-fire assault struck the enemy machine centerline. Both dangerously close to the head, and cockpit.

Close enough to back off *Sir Cray Stansill*, The Republic's newest “black knight.” She'd make sure to christen him with the title at her next media event. If she survived.

Now the *Griffin* raced back toward the highway, pursued by an SM1 Tank Destroyer pulled in to safeguard Tara's recovery.

“Glad to have you back, Prefect.” Heavy accent. Her new adjutant, Lieutenant Spiritos Demos. “We began to wonder if that Condor had picked your bones clean.”

The Condor in question was little more than a mangled wreck, sitting at the edge of the tractor dealership lot, crew cockpit hammered in under repeated blows from her hatchet. She had chased it down after its high-speed run at the civilian convoy.

“No, but that *Catapult* nearly had me for lunch. Where the hell did it come from?”

“Behind us. From the railway depot we passed a kilometer back.”

She nodded, kicking her way through the wooden wall of a low billboard. *Watkins Tractors* it read—plus messages in French, Swiss and English trumpeting the high quality and long life of their machines.

About half of which she'd already destroyed, wading through the lot under repeated fire from the *Catapult* and then the *Griffin*.

“Not in an *Atlas* anymore, T.” Her voice was barely more than a whisper, to avoid transmitting on open channels. “Move first. Fire second.”

Good advice. If she found time to use it.

The firefight had run over her crew with blitzkrieg assault tactics. One moment, she was nothing more than a glorified escort for a trio of armored sedans, parading them along the highway between Annemasse's DropPort and Geneva. Two SM1 Destroyers leading, followed by a short column of hoverbikes and Demon wheeled support tanks, her brand-new, fresh-from-the-factory *Hatchetman* trailing the car designated with the flag of the Draconis Combine.

Then, suddenly, the Swiss countryside was hot with weapons fire, her cockpit alive with warning alarms and confused comms chatter.

It had taken her only a moment to pull down intelligence on who it was they faced. Forces out of the military depot at Annecy. A short lance of fast 'Mechs with better-than-average ground and VTOL support.

Throwing their strength behind the disgraced Senate.

Making a grab for a political hostage.

“Demos. Take Sierra-two and double back with a couple of those bikes. Do not overextend.”

“Sierra-two is burning on the other side of the highway, Prefect. We need to drop one of these 'Mechs, and soon!”

A pair of Cavalry attack helicopters made low strafing runs from the east, striking at her with their light cannon.

“We need a lot of things,” Tara said, chasing after one VTOL with her autocannon. It missed low and wide. Throttling up into a half-speed walk, she kicked her way past overturned tractors and backhoes, back toward the highway. “Air support. Reinforcements.”

“Fifteen minutes,” Demos told her.

Nice. This battle would be over in five.

Not that her small crew hadn't given a good accounting of themselves. Her ground forces had corralled

the dignitaries' vehicles beneath a wide overpass and taken up station on either side to challenge any enemy approach. A second Condor and two VV1 Rangers rolled dark, oily smoke into the sky, all three burning on the highway, which was now completely devoid of any civilian vehicles. In a furious display of defensive driving techniques, the light morning traffic had hit off-ramps, soft shoulders and ditches to clear the battlefield. Two tractor-trailer rigs that had tried bluffing their way through were now overturned half a kilometer back, forming a roadblock from the Annemasse side at least.

But Cray Stansill still had two 'Mechs under his command, and those damned VTOLs Tara could not counter. He'd also pulled a couple of Anat APCs out of his hat when she wasn't looking. Her HUD painted their icons against a dark band, showing them as they sped down from the direction of Geneva.

Tara was willing to bet she'd spoiled a trap laid out further ahead by hunkering down rather than sending the sedans racing forward.

"Last chance, *Countess* ." Stansill made her title a curse. By his way of thinking, no doubt, the nobles were either pro-Senate or traitors to their birthrights. "Give the Dracs up. We'll have them one way or another."

They could do it. Stansill's *Griffin* was barely hurting, and the *Catapult* marching around behind his position lent serious weight to his argument. They could engage her small crew and keep them tied up while the Anat APCs rolled in to seize prisoners.

The rogue nobles had thought through their choice very carefully. With the coordinator of the Draconis Combine in their grasp, they could control two, three Prefectures easily. *And* there was always Katana Tormark to consider. How the ex-prefect would jump was anyone's guess, either in support, or simply to get her own hands on Vincent Kurita.

"Demos?" Tara asked, toggled for private comms only.

"Twelve minutes," the wiry little Greek told her. He slipped his Destroyer back around, pinning it at her side as the *Hatchetman* finally returned to the four-lane highway.

So be it. She cut away from the Senate loyalists, racing back for her besieged crew. "One way or another" was exactly what they'd get.

"Spoilsport," Tara said, throttling up to a flat-out run as long-range fire sniped at her back. "I've got the high road."

"Copy," Demos said, racing ahead of her. "I've got the low."

Stomping along the highway's shoulder, the forty-five-ton *Hatchetman* pounded footprints into the soft edge. Where Tara steered too close to the pavement, the hard footfalls cracked ferrocrete in long, radiating webs. Nearer the overpass, Tara veered aside and took the quick dogleg up onto the raised off-ramp.

Standing astride the overpass.

Ready for Cray Stansill's charge.

Demos' Destroyer rallied a trio of hoverbikes and a single Demon wheeled tank, the dedicated escort standing its line as the *Griffin* and *Catapult* bore straight down at them along the highway. The Anats

swept wide and the pair of Cavalry attack VTOLs raced up from further back afield to take leading positions.

Tara Campbell adjusted her grip on sweat-slick control sticks, holding her fire as the *Griffin* sniped from long range and the *Catapult* dumped a score of missiles into the air, which arced overhead on gray contrails and fell around her in a scattering of red fireballs and a hail of broken ferrocrete.

Two warheads slammed into the side of her *Hatchetman*'s head, shaking her hard against the restraint harness. A muscle in her neck twinged. Sparks blew out of a short-circuited power conduit, stinging her right arm and choking her with the acrid scent of burned insulation.

“So much for that new 'Mech smell.”

Having rode it out long enough, Tara pulled crosshairs over the boxlike shoulder launcher on the *Catapult*, blasting away armor. A second, carefully aimed shot hammered deep into its flank. Gray smoke rolled out of this new wound. Enough to make the other MechWarrior think twice.

“Now!” Tara called as the assault force closed.

She slammed down on her pedals, lighting off the *Hatchetman*'s jump jets, which lifted the forty-five-ton machine on streams of bright white plasma. Leaning into the forward thrust, hatchet raised, she flew into the teeth of Stansill's attack with her ground support running hot right after her, weapons blazing again, and again.

But while the SM1 and the faster attack vehicles concentrated on Stansill's *Griffin*, Tara had a “higher purpose.” Getting on top of the overpass had added ten, maybe fifteen meters to the top of her arc. She was now high enough to threaten the VTOLs that had raced on ahead of the 'Mechs, usually so unconcerned for ground-bound machines.

Tara's hatchet swatted sideways at the lead Cavalry. Rotor vanes sheared off against the titanium head, and the tail of the craft broke completely free as the VTOL fell away in two large pieces and a storm of high-velocity metal shards.

She landed in a crouch among the wreckage, right between the *Griffin* and *Catapult*.

It all happened so fast after that, Tara wouldn't be one hundred percent on the events until later review of her battlerom footage.

Both enemy 'Mechs turned their weapons on her at the same time, though the *Catapult* was too close to successfully arm its long-range missile warheads and so only added in a pair of medium lasers to the *Griffin*'s savage assault. Ruby-bright energy flared between Tara and Cray Stansill, connecting the machines in a blistering salvo of lances and sharp, stabbing knives of light.

Spiritos Demos, at roughly the same time, charged his makeshift lance along the left side of the firestorm. Every vehicle targeted the wounded *Catapult*, which staggered back under the Destroyer's assault autocannon and then went down as the Demon and hoverbikes added in lasers and heavy machine guns. It collapsed heavily onto its left side, driving its shoulder down into the chest cavity and crushing the reactor's physical shielding.

Smoke roiled out thick and black, but the MechWarrior brought down his dampening fields in time to smother the fusion reaction before it unleashed its full fury, saving his life and his machine.

And then Tara was through the worst of it, staggering out the far side with molten composite bleeding from every limb and several deep rents in her right side. She chopped once at Stansill's *Griffin* as she passed, wedging the blade into the 'Mech's knee joint, caving it inward.

Staggering the fifty-five tonner just as the black sedans blew apart beneath the overpass, right in the face of the Anat APCs.

Two of the luxury sedans erupted in bright fury a full second before the third, sending the mangled vehicle rolling out from beneath the overpass to detonate alongside the lead APC. The explosion tore through the side of the Anat, ripping through the infantry carrier compartment even as it flipped the APC into a violent roll. It tumbled side-over, flinging the broken bodies of armored infantry out on wild trajectories.

The following Anat swerved violently aside, escaping serious injury though it plowed headfirst into a deep drainage ditch alongside the highway.

Chasing after her fleeing support crew, Tara gained several long strides along the highway before Stansill even thought to pursue. No doubt thinking to collect the surviving Anat and his MechWarrior from the fallen *Catapult*. Already planning their escape route to Senate-friendly territory.

He'd be back.

Meanwhile, Tara and Demos pointed their wounded unit toward Annemasse and relief. She watched the scene on a rear-channeled monitor. Fires burned beneath the partially collapsed overpass and greasy clouds of smoke blew out from either side. But no more lives had been lost today. Demos' Destroyer and her remaining Demon had already collected the drivers of the decoy sedans.

And in the distance, above Annemasse's DropPort, an *Overlord* now rose on majestic flame. Too far away to make out any crest, she had no doubt the splash of red on its side would be the bloody field on which a golden dragon reared.

"Tango-one to base," she said, toggling over to the channel she shared with the DropPort control authorities. "My compliments to the *Dragon's Pride* and the Coordinator, and we apologize for the delay in his schedule.

"I hope he enjoys Nihon."

The long-rumbling echoes of battle barely reached back to the Annemasse DropPort, sounding like distorted thunder by the time they found the Monolith Lines DropShip *Argent Beauty*.

Caleb actually dismissed them as such for a moment, even though he stood under a blue sky without a dark cloud in sight. Of greater concern to him were the hot gusts sweeping the DropPort's black tarmac, tugging at his gold-trimmed range rider jacket and mussing his hair.

The scent of scorched ferrocrete, from the DropShip's landing, still hung heavily in the air. Caleb wrinkled his nose as the scent burned up in his sinuses.

He'd left his sunset orange Stormfire off the foot of the *Beauty*'s main cargo ramp, the sports car

growling on the tarmac as its powerful engine idled high enough to compete with a CargoMech unloading pallets to a waiting flatbed. A few dockworkers glared at him for interrupting their routine, but Caleb's gold dignitary's badge and the nearby quartet of security service men in their dark jackets and darker glasses put them in their place.

They gave him a wide berth as the young lord walked directly up the middle of the three-story ramp.

Surprising him, Danai suddenly appeared at the ramp's head. The dark-haired beauty stepped from the shade of the cargo bay right into the path of a custom's agent, who cornered her with his noteputer at the ready. She brushed the DropPort officer aside with a gesture back into the bay, nodding him ahead of her, but then paused to study the nearby cityscape, hands on her hips, a frown settling over that elfin, exotic face.

Half a dozen shared dinners over as many different star systems, and Caleb still had no idea who she was. Just that she was one of the most self-confident women he'd ever met. Though comfortable around the trappings of money and power, ranks and titles apparently meant nothing to her. If she had found out his identity, in fact, she never remarked on it. He had watched her take dinner with a Capellan officer one eve. Stroll comfortably with a newsvid journalist the next. And had even caught her—in passing—in the *Stargazer*'s small gym, trading jokes with three ships' crewmen she'd joined for a workout.

It had been one of the hardest decisions in his life, not to ask one of those men later—in a passageway—just who the infernal woman was! Harder still not to put one of his security agents on her. They'd have done it, had he asked.

He didn't.

Pride, fortunately, was a very strong force.

Though not so strong that he hadn't driven from his *Triumph*-class DropShip straightaway to the *Argent Beauty*, hoping to catch her one last time before she debarked for Geneva and who-knew-where.

"If you are wondering where the best restaurants are," he called up to her, still at least one story below, "I might be convinced to share information."

Danai tore her gaze away from the city. In her red jodhpurs and a matching suede jacket, she looked both comfortable and stylish. Earrings dangled almost to her shoulders. At the end of each swung a golden supernova with a yin-yang symbol etched into the center.

Something familiar about the design . . .

"Actually," she said, cocking her head to one side as a new deep rumble echoed over the tarmac, "I'm more interested in what's going on than where to eat." She waited, but obviously saw no gleam of understanding from him. "That's weapons fire, Caleb."

"Of course it is," he said, covering the awkward moment.

It was weapons fire. How had he missed that? He stepped up next to her, looked out over Annemasse for himself. There really was nothing to see. And the echoes seemed to roll in from far outside the city proper, in the direction of Geneva.

"Hardly our concern," he said.

“You think so?”

He shrugged, then removed his sunglasses. The day seemed blindingly bright after guarding his eyes behind the dark lenses, but he wanted her to see his eyes. Soft brown with gold flecks. They were among his best features. Everyone said so. “Not unless you are Republic military,” he said.

A guarded look crossed her face. A tight smile that did not quite reach sloe eyes. “No. I’m not Republic. Citizen or resident.”

He knew *that* much. And given the cruise line’s route, she could have been of the Federated Suns, Confederation, or any of the old Free Worlds League realms. Which hardly narrowed it down at all.

“Then we simply avoid it. What happens on Terra hardly matters to the rest of the Inner Sphere.”

Her sidelong glance spoke for her. The same question she had asked earlier. You think so?

“The universe does not revolve around Terra or The Republic of the Sphere,” he said defensively. In fact, in Caleb’s mind, very little mattered that happened off New Avalon. The capital of the greatest realm in history.

His realm.

His capital.

“Yet we are both come to Terra,” she said, speaking up louder as an *Overlord* on the far side of the tarmac lit off its engines and rose under hard thrust. She could be fishing for more information about him. She could be trying to simply argue her point.

“A matter of family obligation,” Caleb said, brushing over the entire situation with Victor Steiner-Davion and his own father’s need to pay final respects.

It still bothered him that his father had not waited for Caleb, so they could arrive together. But then his aunt Amanda, in a couriered letter, had mentioned some trouble on New Hessen and other Davion worlds. Better to arrive quickly and deal with the situation from planetside, he supposed.

Anyway, that was more Julian’s purview. His cousin was certainly a hands-on personality.

The magnificent roar of the launching DropShip’s fusion drive made further conversation difficult at best, so both watched the rising vessel, as improbable as it was graceful, like a thirty-story skyscraper suddenly deciding to bend the rules of gravity to go in search of a new city. The Draconis Combine insignia was four stories high and clearly visible to the entire field. Caleb frowned at the crest.

And as the noise of its ascent faded, both realized that no more echoes of battle pounded through the city.

“Well,” Danai finally said, “it seems to have stopped. Which means we can leave the DropPort without fear of being blown up.” She reached over and flicked the badge clipped to his jacket. “Gold, eh? Nice. A free pass through all security.”

“Perquisites of the position,” he said, his eyes narrowing. Certain she was fishing now. She didn’t know!

But she could hardly miss the security service agents standing post at his car, where Mason also waited, or at the foot of the DropShip ramp, or the one who had followed him up and now stood a respectful distance away at the opening to the cavernous cargo bay.

“Makes up for all the nuisances.”

“I hear you.” Danai nodded. “Unfortunately, this trip, I’ve earned a less-than-optimal welcome.”

“I can’t imagine anyone not being glad of your arrival, Danai. Though if there is some trouble, perhaps I can move things along a bit. I have some influence.”

“I’m sure. But there isn’t much you can do to free up my cargo. It’s heading right into customs lockdown. I just need to oversee its handling.”

A merchant, then? Or the daughter of a shipping magnate, at least? Either way, Caleb felt a moment of letdown. He had imagined her a much more exotic figure. The truth, as it often happened, did not quite measure up.

Still, he wanted to see her again. He wouldn’t beg, but he’d make one final offer.

“If you let me know where I can reach you later, then, perhaps we can trade our first impressions of Geneva.”

Danai searched his face carefully, no doubt wondering how much was simple curiosity and how much was the need to find out more about her. In the game they played, he was asking her to concede a point. Concede, or end it here in a stalemate, with little chance to resume later. Finally, she nodded. Once.

“You can reach me through the Capellan Cultural Exchange,” she said, voice terse.

A Capellan! Truly forbidden fruit. He had wondered, with her Asian heritage, but sloe eyes and a Mandarin accent was hardly conclusive proof of Confederation birth.

Now that he knew, it was a large piece to the puzzle that was Danai. Cargo being seized by customs . . . Capellan artifacts, perhaps? Or something perishable? Good Sian wine, or naranji fruit; both were considered a restricted export item. And with hostilities between nations right now, House Liao and The Republic at war, it couldn’t make things any easier for her.

But Caleb might. He did have influence. Maybe not on Terra, but through his father he could reach so many worlds. And he might be convinced to do a favor for a friend. For the right price.

“The Exchange,” he said. “All right.” He nodded toward the waiting customs agent. “If you are certain there is nothing I can do now?”

She shook her head.

Caleb put on his sunglasses again. “I won’t keep you any longer, then.” He had what he wanted. He turned down the ramp, following a trio of dockworkers maneuvering a large pallet jack.

“Caleb.”

He stopped, looked back.

Danai had paused in the shadow of the cargo bay. She shook her head. “Never mind. I’ll see you.”

She would. He was certain about that. Caleb nodded, and then stepped easily down the ramp to his waiting Stormfire. Its air-conditioned interior was a welcome freshness after the heat that rolled off the tarmac. It smelled of fine leather. The engine, when he let it have its head, growled with released fury.

Mason laughed, cheering him on, and Caleb grinned savagely as he cut very close to a scrambling port worker. “Watch out!” Mason warned.

“Missed him by a good meter.” He followed the track of DropPort personnel, all waving their red batons to guide him along a safe road. Sometimes he even obeyed their directions. But not often. What would they do? Kick him off-world for failing to yield to an electric cargo bus?

Right.

17

Polls show at least a base of support for the exarch and his extreme policies, strongest on Terra’s European and North American continents, which favor Exarch Levin 51% to 37% with 18% undecided.

Off Terra, favor follows the nobles on most worlds, but only at 39% to 34%, with 27% still to weigh in.

These days, that is with an error of +/- 100%.

—Pollster Jared Ladd, Stellar Associated, New Earth, 18 April 3135

*Terra
Republic of the Sphere
19 April 3135*

Yori Kurita walked the banks of the Kitakami Gawa, measuring the estuary’s fall since high tide. About two hours. The rank smell of uncovered salt-muds, mussels and water grasses lifted from the wide basin and fought with the flowering orchids cultivated in the nature preserve’s many nearby koi ponds.

Caught between the poisoned and the perfumed. That was her story.

“We carry our own honor and that of our ancestors,” she whispered. Barely loud enough to reach her own ears. “What we accomplish adds to their glory, or erases a small measure of their failures.”

As a mantra it brought little peace of mind, but with no one to really talk to, the introspection kept her thoughts busy. Focused. And there was little else to do now, other than to think and consider. Pacing the flagstone path in short, uncertain strides, Yori kept to the Kitakami “riverside” as she wrestled with her own feelings for being on Terra. She did not belong here as part of the coordinator’s entourage.

Rescued from obscurity by Warlord Toranaga.

She nodded a bow of respect toward a pair of samurai guards who stood an alert vigil at the next fork. A mix of the old and the new, this watchpost. Both men wore body armor beneath silk kimonos, and carried Nakjama laser pistols as well as katana swords. Flickering torches burned above them though twilight was still an hour away, the brands fed by a natural gas supply hidden inside the bamboo poles. One samurai held a small scanning device that measured infrared heat signatures.

The coordinator of the Draconis Combine did not travel lightly.

In fact, the natural preserve above Ishinomaki Port had been chosen specifically for its remote location and ease of security controls, as much as for its simple beauty. The flower gardens disguised remote sensors, and several of the small teahouse structures were actually security posts crammed with electronics and infantry squads. Even the two BattleMechs standing constant guard on the northern and southern approaches were artfully hidden behind screens of tall, thick-bodied cypress.

She passed beneath a short walk of cherry trees that were dropping a light snowfall of pink, perfect blossoms. “Beautiful,” she said. But her tone left the word sounding flat. Unappreciative.

“You do not approve of flowers?”

The voice, coming almost from right beneath her left elbow, made Yori jump to one side, her hand flashing quickly to the katana tucked into her *obi*.

Kisho sat cross-legged beneath the deep shadow of a cherry tree, resting against the silver-gray bark. Completely still. The Nova Cat mystic had white-pink blossom petals stuck in his dark hair, littering his shoulders and lap. His eyes were dark pits. Cloaked and impassive.

“Do you mystics routinely involve yourself in someone else’s thoughts?” Yori asked, snapping off the question with a hostile glare.

“Contrary to what you might have heard, we are not mind readers.” Kisho did not pretend so much as a civil nod. He remained motionless. “Mostly, we observe. And just now I observed you apparently talking to yourself, Kurita Yori-san.”

He was right. If anything, she had disturbed his *wa*, not the other way around. The Kurita name and Toranaga’s patronage allowed her to forgo any kind of apology, no matter the transgression, but she nodded politely regardless. “You are correct, Kisho-san.” Her voice was softer. Conciliatory. “I did not mean to interrupt your meditation.”

“No meditation. Just a plan for an evening away from the looks and glares of your . . . comrades.”

Meaning Katsuwe and the other samurai making up the coordinator’s escort. They refused to accept the mystic, who they saw as a fraud and perhaps even a spy for the Nova Cat faction that lived inside the Draconis Combine. Kisho’s blood notwithstanding, he was not samurai. He was not to be trusted.

Much like they treated Yori, actually. And much—she now saw—like she had also treated the young Nova Cat warrior. Outcast.

Unclean.

A flush burned on her cheeks. “You shame me alongside them, Kisho. I apologize on all our behalf.”

And because her honor could not simply leave it at that, Yori moved off the flagstone path and sank to the grassy, petal-covered ground. She was surrounded by fragrant blossoms, and the smell of the changing tide receded until there was only the slightest—yet persistent—hint of rot beneath a wonderful perfume. Yori knelt, resting back on her calves, assuming a posture she knew she could roll out of and into instant readiness. She made such choices almost without thinking.

“I am not your enemy.”

Kisho was soft-spoken, but hardly at peace. His demeanor was like the pleasant calm on the morning of a great storm, when animals skittered about nervously and birdsong held a nervous edge. She sensed a great deal of anger within him. And anger was rooted in either fear or ignorance. Did he fear her name? Or was he an outcast by choice, unwilling to create a bridge to the other young warriors in the entourage?

“No,” she said, choosing to answer his question literally. “You are not my enemy. But I have lived with my own fears for too long to set them aside easily, Kisho Nova Cat.” She brushed her fall of thick hair back behind her ears. “Three assassination attempts before I was sixteen years of age. Did you know this?”

“I can imagine.” He smiled bitterly. “Mystics have wonderful imaginations.”

“I thought the Nova Cat mystics trusted to visions and portents. Not flights of fancy.”

“Some might say there is no difference between the two.”

“Some” meaning *himself*? A mystic who debunked his own abilities? Yori had a basic idea of the training such men underwent, and the role they played inside Nova Cat society. Mystics were the keepers of their Clan’s futures. It was the Nova Cat visions that had led the Clan into abandoning their homeworlds, uprooting themselves seventy years past to seek sanctuary within the Draconis Combine. She had never heard one—or heard *of* one—doubt himself before.

Fear and ignorance. Yes. Kisho Nova Cat would be a very angry man.

“So you have never read a vision?” she asked, probing lightly. She set aside her own problems as she offered a hand to the entourage’s other outcast.

Kisho shrugged. A pair of small petals tumbled down his brow. One caught in his long eyelashes for a moment, until he blinked it away. “Have you ever guessed at something about to happen?” he asked. “A relationship that would break up? Two men you *knew* would eventually come to blows—be it days or weeks, but it would happen?”

“I would think so,” Yori said.

Kisho spread his hands out of his lap, as if she had answered her own question.

“We observe,” he reminded her. “We allow ourselves to think about what we see and experience. It is nothing more than that.”

“Nothing more?” Yori asked, uncertain if he believed it himself.

“Nothing!”

She almost left him then. Isolation was nearly preferable to his reined anger. Nearly. “So you are here to observe,” she said, as if explaining his presence away with so simple a statement. She did not mean for it to sound belittling.

“That is enough.” His tone was short. Obviously, he had read more into her words than she had meant. “But what are you here for?”

The blunt question caught her off guard. Especially as Yori had wondered the same thing many, many times since leaving Luthien. “I believe I may be here for the opposite reason. To be seen. Or not, as the case may be.” She plucked up a complete cherry blossom that had fallen into her lap. Twirled it back and forth like a tiny umbrella. “Most of the others look away from me. The coordinator, he stares right through me, as if I do not exist.”

“And Warlord Toranaga?” Kisho asked.

“He sees something in me that might be worthwhile. Whatever my grandfather’s transgressions, he overlooks them. I can only try to be worthy of his attention.”

It was a difficult admission, especially to a near-stranger. But Yori felt she owed something to the mystic, who twice now had come forward to involve himself with her affairs when it was not required. Such people were rare in her life. She often had to fight the inclination to push them away. She did not push him, because she knew he had no power to hurt her.

For his part, Kisho simply thought about her comment a moment. Then he uncoiled, rising to a kneeling position to face her at an even height. “Everyone *sees* you, Kurita Yori-san. What they see you *as*, that is the question you should ask yourself.”

She felt a hesitant tug at the corner of her mouth and nearly smiled. Might have, if his words hadn’t sounded so sad. Pity, she *did not* need. “Is that a vision?” she asked pertly.

Kisho shook his head. “An observation. And now I observe it will be dark soon. I will go eat.”

He rose to his feet in one fluid motion, looming above her, then ducked out from beneath the cherry trees without another word. Blossom petals trailed down from his hair and shoulders. His shoes scuffed the first few stones. He had been sitting for at least as long as Yori had been walking. His gait was stiff and awkward, but loosened up fast.

“Kisho!”

Her call stopped him only three or four strides down the flagstone path. It pulled him around slowly, as if against his will. Very nearly she did not ask. She wanted to know, but then didn’t at the same time. It was the kind of question that might allow him to hurt her. But how often did you get the chance to ask outright?

“What do you see me as?” she asked.

Kisho held her gaze evenly, staring back along the path and beneath the fall of blossoms. “As whatever you would like to be,” he said. Clipping off the words as if talking to a stranger.

Then he turned and walked off.

Some mystic he was. Ready with overtures of friendship but too caught up in his own problems, really, to make much more than a hesitant offer. What did he really know of her life? Only as much as she had told him, and while more than most others had bothered to learn it was still hardly anything at all. And it still explained nothing of the fluke of birth that had brought her to Terra as part of the coordinator's entourage.

Yori shook her head.

Whatever she would like to be. . . .

"As opposed to what?" she called after him. Expecting no answer.

Receiving none.

18

Paladin Victor Steiner-Davion has been known for many things in his life, but primarily as a patriot and a true citizen of the Inner Sphere entire. Whatever his faults, whatever his methods, I am confident he meant nothing but the best for The Republic. And what the Senate says be damned!

—Prince Harrison Davion, Terra, 18 April 3135

*Terra
Republic of the Sphere
19 April 3135*

Conner Rhys-Monroe stalked his *Rifleman* across what was left of Basel's southernmost bridge across the Rhein, following the one hoverbike that was all he had left of his personal lance. They'd been caught halfway across by overlapping artillery barrages, pinned down inside a hellish nightmare of flame and shrapnel and twisted steel. He'd watched an APC ripped apart from a direct hit, sides bulging as a shell gutted the interior. A *Legionnaire* had disappeared through a sudden rent in the paved surface, swallowed by the deep waters far, far below.

Now the fire-scorched bridge structure groaned and buckled under his BattleMech's sixty tons. It shifted on a broken support column, shaking him with a small quake as he labored through each careful step. Pieces of superstructure crashed down around him. One girder smashed into his shoulder, crushing armor and *clanging* down his side in sharp, angry peals.

Conner swallowed dryly, his hands sweat-slick on his controls.

"Striker Team . . . is Able-three." His comms system crackled to life with a clear, strong voice broken up by a wash of static that could only be caused by particle cannon discharge. "We have gained the northern bank. Two down, one dead. Pressed . . . the river."

Conner edged carefully around another rent in the bridge's paved surface, coming close to the western

side. “Copy that,” he said. But his team wasn’t out of this yet.

Below, skimming over the river, were a number of Republic hovercraft dancing across the Rhein’s wide waters. Two Regulators hammered down the river, strafing the northern shore with their gauss rifles. A pair of Fulcrum heavy hovercrafts trusted their gunners less and their armor more. They trailed lazily back and forth, working over the loyalist’s entrenched positions with scarlet lances of laserfire and flight after flight of long-range missiles.

Conner saw a few loyalists making for relative safety in the nearby stretch of the *Schwarzwald*—Germany’s landmark Black Forest. Sir Cray Stansill limped his battered *Griffin* after a JI-100 recovery vehicle. A Hasek APC guarded his flank, surrounded by half a dozen Infiltrator armored infantry. Two Po heavy tanks trailed behind, one slapping at the ground with a stretch of broken tread.

The forces Conner had rescued at the request of Senator Derius. Safe enough.

Battered and busted up, the *Legionnaire* that had fallen earlier struggled up from the river’s deeper waters near the northern bank. Its autocannon broke the surface first, looking like the deadly snout of some dark river beast, then the cockpit and shoulders of the tall BattleMech.

It waded up onto the bank, climbing for safety, protected by a pair of Schrek PPC carriers that kept up blazing salvos against the river-born targets. The armored vehicles on both sides of the shooting engagement bore the Roman profile crest of the Tenth Principes Guards, and Conner’s HUD was a tangle of gold icons with the IFF transponders all reporting “friendly” units.

It was as surreal as it was likely to get for the ex-knight.

Conner had armored troopers scattered over the rocky banks as well, these from the First and Tenth Triarii Protectors. They bounded from one large boulder to another, or hunkered down inside small stands of willow and alder, waiting for their shots. Four squads with their APCs crouched behind some riverside warehouses. The Schrek PPC carriers. It was all he had this far south.

He would need a great deal more down here very, very soon.

Toggling comms for his small team, Conner brought the Schreks right down to the edge of the riprap in order to cover the *Legionnaire*’s slow climb up the treacherous bank.

“Full force and damn your heat,” he ordered when one PPC carrier started alternating between weapons, firing the two outboard cannon and then the inside PPC in a two-one-two arrangement.

It had to be hellishly hot inside those vehicles. But he’d push men to heatstroke before he saw even one more of his soldiers dead beneath Republic weapons fire.

The bridge trembled and buckled again, taking a severe list toward the western edge. Conner had no time to wait, sending his remaining hoverbike flying forward and edging his *Rifleman* into a faster walk. Another artillery strike would finish off the bridge. And him.

Fortunately, he’d called up a squadron of *Stingray* aerospace fighters to reinforce Stansill’s wounded VTOL support. The battle for air superiority had been fast and brutal, with two *Hellcat*s down on the “Republic side” of the Rhein.

Two quick strafing runs had silenced the artillery positions barely a moment later.

Not that he was out of the woods (or into them, actually) yet. Hell, even a good nudge by one of the Fulcrums would have done the trick, sending Connor plummeting into the dark waters of the Rhein. At best, he'd have flooded actuators or a cockpit leak to deal with. At worst . . .

At worst he'd never return home. At worst he'd suffer the same fate as his second Schrek carrier, which took a pair of gauss slugs directly through the crew cabin even as he watched.

Gauss slugs accelerated to near hypersonic speeds tore through the PPC carrier with devastating power, both Regulators out on the river getting lucky at the same time. Raw kinetic force rocked the eighty-ton tank up on its hindquarters, as if it were sitting up to beg for a treat. The turret spun off its track, torn away and flipping end over end against the riverbank. Then the tank slammed back down on both wide-spaced tracks, rocked back and forth a few times, and finally settled.

No fires. No huge explosion. Just silent oblivion for the men Conner had called out from their barracks this morning.

Swinging his *Rifleman* at the waist, Conner drew a quick line of sight on the retreating Regulators and pulled into his rotary autocannons. Both RACs ate deep from his ammunition bins, the hot metal tipped with depleted uranium for vehicle-stopping power.

Water geysered up in twin lines, drawing straight up to and across one of the Regulators. The shots crisscrossed its flat body, tearing into the armor and blowing a few holes into the hovercraft's lift skirt. Not enough to bring it down.

"Infantry teams, fall back over the bank. Someone check that carrier for survivors."

He knew there wouldn't be any. The concussive force alone would have snapped necks and pulped bodies against bulkheads.

"We've paid a high price. Let's get out of here."

But The Republic's military force wasn't finished. The Fulcrums drifted across the river below with an almost casual disregard for the hot fire zone. The same kind of disregard the exarch's attack dogs had shown in hounding Gerald Monroe to his death. The same that Levin himself had proven in trying to disband the Senate. As if his word was enough to strip the nobles of their birthright and end centuries of enlightened rule.

To end the responsibility carried by generations of men and women.

One Fulcrum drove up very near the northern bank, angling in at the back of the struggling *Legionnaire*. The remaining PPC carrier torched it with a trio of particle cannon. Armor runneled off the tank's sides in fiery streams, feeding the Rhein's dark waters. Where molten composite splashed into the river, the water hissed and steamed grayish wisps.

But it kept up its hammering attack, drifting slowly down the river's course as it sent flight after flight of LRMs at the retreating *BattleMech*, slashing with the red-hot fury of its single large laser.

Drifting down to the bridge.

No time to attack the side of fresh armor facing him, to take the chance that he might—*might*—drive it

away under the threat of his rotaries, Conner acted more out of instinct than any concerted plan. Using the long barrels that made up his *Rifleman*'s arms to batter aside a few suspension cables, snapping the overstressed wires with gunshot echoes, he gauged the drifting Fulcrum's progress completely by eye and then stepped off the high bridge at the moment it was about to pass beneath.

For a nonjumping 'Mech, the *Rifleman* had extremely strong and well-armored legs. As its double-bladed feet slammed into the top of the Fulcrum, crushing the missile launcher and one of the tank's pontoonlike skirts, Connor worked his controls to maintain some order of balance—to stay on top of the hovertank as he shoved it down into the river's grip.

High-speed vanes chopped against the water, pieces shattering at flaws and hairline cracks in the long blades. The struggling fans growled and snarled in an attempt to lift the Fulcrum's body clear of the river, but it was impossible with an extra sixty tons sitting atop the craft.

After one hitching gasp, the Fulcrum completely disappeared beneath the Rhein's surface, driven down into the muck and mud at the bottom of the river.

Conner stumbled his *Rifleman* forward, stepping off onto the bank of the river without getting much more than one leg wet up to the hip and the other to the knee.

Between his rotary autocannon and the Schrek PPCs, they drove off the remaining Fulcrum. The Regulators slid back, supporting the tactical retreat, but their comrades' quick, watery deaths made them think twice about another reckless charge.

"That's it. Everyone back into the *Schwarzwald*. Infantry, clog up the rear lines in case one of those hovercraft tries to follow too close."

It wouldn't happen. The fight had gone out of The Republic's attempt to contain the loyalist forces. The hovercraft skated back to their side of the river, patrolling for stragglers or simply setting themselves on guard against any attempt by Conner's team to return. But he was done with Switzerland, just as he was done with The Republic.

Though looking back at the Rhein's still waters, where he had buried the tank and crew in a watery death, Conner knew.

The Republic was hardly done with him.

"Is the boy mad?"

Jonah Levin stomped through the Chamber of Paladins, eschewing his high seat and circling the array of monitors where the paladins often met, discussed, voted and planned. His footsteps echoed back from the empty corners of the grand room. All but four stations were dark at the moment. At the manned consoles, only one face looked up from her work to answer what should have been a rhetorical question.

"Angry, yes," Heather GioAvanti said. Her voice was calm, but far from soothing. "But not insane. *That* we could deal with far more effectively."

David McKinnon never bothered to look up, but his weathered voice carried through the room easily enough. "We can handle this. I can haul the Seventh Hastati Sentinels back to Terra within the month."

Escalating the struggle quickly past a point the nobles could not match. That was always McKinnon's advice. Victory at any cost. The Founder's Movement—of which the venerable paladin was an open supporter—did not hold with half measures.

Ad Securitus Per Unitas. Through security, freedom. The Republic motto taken to its extreme conclusion.

Even in the face of the attempted assassination against him, Jonah had refused such a solution. Disbanding the Senate had edged The Republic right up to the brink of disaster, where the exarch had hoped to bring his fracturing realm back under control. The only other option had been to accept a decentralized government with no clear voice or direction, at a time when outside forces threatened The Republic of the Sphere with invasion and conquest. Ten individual Prefectures, governed by the greediest nobles, looking out for themselves rather than the common good. That way lay disaster. That much he recognized.

To paraphrase Victor Steiner-Davion: The Prefectures must hang together, or they would certainly hang separately.

So Jonah continued to ground his frustration into shards and splinters beneath the heels of his dress boots. He felt the crushing weight of so many troubles and so little sleep riding on his back, adding to each heavy footfall until they might have been the thunderous, mechanical steps of a BattleMech. A wounded one. One day he'd simply stop; his feet welded to the floor wherever he had finally come to rest.

They could winch him out into Magnum Park and set him as a statue. A warning for future exarchs.

Beware an excess of optimism. No good deed goes unpunished.

Having stormed quickly through the dregs of anger and self-pity, Jonah was finally able to thrust aside his black musings for a clearness of thought. He needed those dark moments, at times. They reminded him of his own weaknesses, but also his strengths. They made him think about the kind of damage another paladin, one with less pure designs on The Republic, might have wrought.

Not that they wouldn't have all likely ended up in the same place anyway.

"All right," he conceded. "We've already lost or are likely to lose . . . what? Half of the Tenth Triarii and nearly the same from the Principes Guards? And ten . . . fifteen percent of the Tenth Hastati?"

"Twenty," McKinnon promised. He would know. After Victor Steiner-Davion, he had the most experience with military coups and the fracture lines that built into civil wars.

"Terra's garrison is a prestige posting for half of the sons and daughters of The Republic's nobility. The Senate loyalists have gut-shot our officer corps on planet and all but shattered the chain of command."

It still seemed wrong, turning the Chamber of Paladins into a command post. But as Gareth Sinclair had demonstrated, it was a too-convenient rallying spot. From here, GioAvanti worked on the logistics of isolating and dealing with senators and their forces still on planet. Maya Avellar and Otto Mandela ran simulations to predict the likely outcome of any hard fighting. And McKinnon extrapolated on their findings to other worlds and Prefectures, working with the chaos swarming throughout the rest of The Republic.

And Sir Gareth Sinclair had been looking into wild-card stunts, off-the-wall solutions that didn't fit into the expected responses. At the moment, however, he was taking his watch over Victor Steiner-Davion's body at the Republic Cathedral. The paladins took *all* of their duties very seriously.

And just as well. Only Jonah knew that Sinclair's efforts paled next to the plans drawn up in Stone's files. Radical solutions to some of the most complex problems likely to face the young realm.

Those times might be fast approaching.

"Why the Seventh Hastati?" he asked McKinnon. His mouth had dried to cotton, but his voice was still strong. Decisive.

The eldest paladin stepped away from his console to face the exarch, in order to pitch his plan with all the serious attention of a cadet called to his academic boards. "The Hastati are less susceptible to political pressures. We've seen that in the forces sent to Prefecture V to fight the Capellans." He might just as well have called them "the Liao hordes" for all the contempt he layered into "Capellans."

"I would counter that we saw massive defections in Prefecture IX," Maya Avellar said. She jumped in to play devil's advocate. She also had a way of getting beneath McKinnon's thick skin very quickly. "When Jasek Kelswa-Steiner formed the Stormhammers, he stole away better than half of the Hastati."

"Cult of personality." McKinnon waved off her concerns. "The Isle of Skye region has always been an unstable area, from before The Republic was formed." He looked to Heather GioAvanti for support, and the Skye native nodded reluctantly.

Jonah had no need of fancy imaging chambers or holographic tanks. He held a perfect picture of The Republic in his head. The worlds, and the presumed strength of their commitment to The Republic. He knew which were under assault, which in rebellion, following the lead of the disgraced senators, and which were stalwart Republic strongholds.

A dwindling number, this last.

"Prefectures II and III are threatened by Katana Tormark's campaign to provoke House Kurita," Jonah said, working it through. "VIII, IV, and I are compromised by the stronger senators and our uncertain Lord Governor Sandoval. V, VI, and IX are under attack, or"—for Prefecture VI—"holding firm in the face of imminent attack." Which left VII. "We are not worried about the Marik-Stewart Commonwealth?"

"I'm not," McKinnon said, folding his arms over his chest.

The tough-as-nails paladin never worried for tomorrow when he had an enemy to defeat today.

Avellar backed him up. A rare occurrence. "I think the 'pieces of Marik' are all too concerned about each other, at the moment. Thaddeus is the real expert on that region, and he's down on New Aragon, but his opinion has been fairly consistent, and proven right, over the years."

But why invite disaster? How many supports could The Republic have kicked out from beneath it before it collapsed under its own weight? House Liao from one side. Clan Jade Falcon, another. Rumbblings from along the borders with Houses Kurita and Davion.

Davion . . .

“If we ignore Senate loyalist positions in the Americas and leave ComStar to enforce a rigid blockade of Australia, and push at their local strongholds in Spain and Germany . . . what would it take?”

Maya Avellar returned to her console, typing rapid input on the holographic keys, joining Mandela in a brief skirmish of probabilities. The dark-skinned man looked up once, locked eyes with Avellar, and nodded. She shrugged. Waggled her head. Silent communication between two people who knew and respected each other’s work, and had been comrades for a long time.

Mandela finally answered the first part of the question. “We can easily isolate Spain,” he promised. His voice was deep and rich, with an opera singer’s control. “Enforce a no-fly zone and stop any ground action south of the Pyrenees. We’d write off eastern Asia to do so, but then the loyalist forces out there won’t be in much position to do anything other than hunker down and wait it out.”

Avellar delivered the bad news. “Germany is the problem. It’s close. It’s well protected. And they have Krupps Armaments as well as the new Skobel Mechwerks facilities near Berlin. And Conner Rhys-Monroe has concentrated forces there.” She glanced to McKinnon, and gave in grudgingly. “We’d need the Seventh Hastati.”

“We’d need something,” GioAvanti said, frowning.

Jonah nodded slowly. “We’ll have something,” he promised. “But for now, I want to contain the loyalists. Tara Campbell is signing on for this, so make good use of her. Public use. Push the loyalists up into Stuttgart . . . maybe as far north as Mannheim. Get solid garrisons into Basel and Zurich. Soldiers we trust implicitly. Then draw a line down the French countryside with field camps stretching between the Ura and the Ardennes.”

It made sense to most of the paladins, who nodded. Any direct threat was likely to roll through France, with its open terrain, working around the Alps. The time of Hannibal was certainly past.

McKinnon was not quite so sanguine. “It won’t be enough. We’ll be tempting them to come out and fight, spread so thin.”

But Jonah was not finished. “We back our line, quietly, with a combined arms battalion. Mixed ’Mechs and vehicles. Not much in infantry, but it’s what we’ll have.”

Having looked at force rosters in the past few hours, McKinnon frowned. “That’s not the breakdown of the Seventh Hastati.”

“No. It isn’t.”

He had all their attention now. Heather GioAvanti asked the question for them all. “Where do we find these forces, then?”

And Jonah Levin told them.

Death to the Davions! Got no bizness here! <SC>

—Graffiti painted on walls around the Hall of Government. Attributed to the radical movement Stone’s Cutters, Terra, 24 April 3135

*Terra
Republic of the Sphere
24 April 3135*

Julian Davion found the chalet’s lower balcony, welcoming the brisk slap of the fresh mountain air as he looked for a quiet moment in which to clear his head. A two-hour meeting with Harrison’s intelligence chief had his brain swimming with the names of worlds, the dossiers of foreign dignitaries he was likely to be introduced to at festivities and functions in the next month, and recently decoded military reports that detailed new troubles on and around New Hessen. Under Harrison’s order, the great machine that kept the prince in contact with his realm piled it onto the shoulders of the prince’s champion, as well.

No rest for the wicked. That had been one of his father’s favorite teases when duties pressed.

“Good morning, cousin!”

His father had never spent a great deal of time around Caleb, though.

His cousin relaxed on a cloth-wrapped chaise he’d pulled out onto the balcony. Lying back as if napping, warming himself under a heavy fleece blanket while sunglasses protected him from the afternoon brightness. Caleb’s enthusiastic cheer was barely muted by his usual hangover, though he winced at the loudness of his own voice.

“It is after noon, Caleb.”

“Bah.” The young heir snuggled himself deeper into the plaid-striped fleece. Only his head stuck out, and one arm which could just reach the steaming coffee on a nearby tray. It smelled bitter and black, fighting local wildflowers for dominance of the balcony. “I’m not quite used to Terran time yet. Still jump-lagged to another world’s clock.”

“Really? Which world would that be?”

“Oh, pick one, would you? I’m sure it is early morning somewhere in this blasted Republic.”

Julian laughed. He couldn’t help himself, though he felt uneasy for it after. Caleb was incorrigible. Always had been. They’d met during Julian’s earliest visits to the capital world, when Caleb still bothered to attend his classes at the New Avalon Military Academy. Seven years older—a good age for some old-fashioned hero worship—Caleb had been planning to become a MechWarrior. Which to an eleven-year-old seemed about the coolest thing ever.

It hadn’t lasted.

In fact, if it hadn’t been for the long-standing tradition of the Davion heir serving his time in the military, likely Caleb would have dropped out completely. Instead, he rushed through armor crew training and took a sinecure position as a field commander in the New Syrtis Avengers. But he remained on New

Avalon, mostly. And when it came time for Julian's run through NAMA, he and Caleb had actually struck up a tentative friendship.

And though it was hardly due to Caleb's influence alone that Julian slacked off near the end of his freshman year, sometimes he wondered if his sudden acceptance for a transfer year at the Nagelring wasn't engineered by Harrison to separate the two of them.

Certainly when Julian returned early, expelled from the Lyran Commonwealth, that thought had at least crossed the prince's mind. "I expect this kind of trouble from Caleb!" Harrison had scolded him, his lead-in to a thirty-minute lecture.

That had been when Julian vowed to never give his prince, or the memory of his own father, another reason for such disappointment.

"So are you just getting up?" Julian asked. "Or just getting in?"

"Ah, Julian." Caleb sat up with a sudden burst of frantic energy, swinging his feet over the chaise and wrapping the blanket over his shoulders like a cape. He grabbed up his coffee and took a healthy slug, as he might have thrown down a shot of good sour mash whiskey. "A ballistic shuttle showed us dawn over Antarctica and an afternoon among the Himalayas. Evening was the northern lights above a territory called Yukon. You should try a few of these tours. Such an adventure we had."

"I hope to get the time," Julian said, but his sardonic sting was lost on the Davion heir. He exhaled sharply. "So who is she?"

"I have no idea." He was alert enough to see the confusion on Julian's face. "It's a game we play," he said, and briefly explained the way the two had met, and continued to meet.

True, the Davion Guards did not vet Caleb's schedule and guest list as they did Harrison's, but it seemed a bit strange they would allow such an assignation without clearing her. Then again, they might be conditioned to Caleb's excesses in the same way Harrison and Julian made allowances for the young heir at times. He would have a word with Caleb's security detail, at least.

"Keep your nose where it belongs, Julian." There was nothing playful in Caleb's tone now. "I'll be very upset if you spoil my game."

"Just doing my duty, Caleb. But I will be discreet, I promise."

"Discreet. Yes, that is you, isn't it? Discreet and oh-so-serious. Most of the time, anyway." Teasing again, he dipped his head toward Julian, exaggerating the wink mostly hidden behind the dark lenses. "But I'm keeping you."

Julian fished over a chair, hooking its leg with his foot and landing it close enough that he could sit within a comfortable distance of Caleb. The two Davion scions stared at each other over Caleb's coffee, which steamed up more of its bitter-bean scent. Julian tasted its earthy flavor from the air, and thought about ordering up a cup for himself.

"Actually," he said, "I just finished. A meeting with Riccard." Julian frowned, reminded of the troubling news. "There is going to be more trouble on New Hessen, and maybe Chesterton as well. I would not have thought Liao so bull-headed to threaten a second front while engaged with The Republic."

“Yes, yes.” Caleb brushed aside such matters with an imperious wave. “I’m sure Dr. Strange had many awful predictions for your future,” he said, calling Riccard Streng, Harrison’s spy master, by an old nickname. “I meant your *next* meeting.” Above the dark lenses, Caleb’s eyebrows waggled suggestively.

Which seemed at odds with the next event on Julian’s schedule. “I have a few hours before my meeting with Erik Sandoval-Groell. Whatever it is he wishes to speak to me about. I think he bullied his way onto my calendar after Harrison’s people shut the prince’s door on him. Is he here early?”

Caleb reached up with his free hand and lowered his sunglasses to the tip of his nose, peering over their upper rim. His hazel eyes were bloodshot from lack of sleep, but still sharp.

“No one named ‘Erik’ looks this good, *Jules*. And even if she is a handful—by all reports I’ve read, anyway—gender swapping her name does not appear to be among her faults.”

Jules? Julian stood.

Oh no.

Caleb smiled toothily. “First time I’ve met her, though I was in little condition to hold a long conversation. Father might pop a blood vessel when he learns she’s here.”

He might at that. Which was just one of many reasons Caleb enjoyed this. Julian glared at his cousin, made a show of straightening out the sleeves on his thick sweater, plucked the pilling from his cuffs. “Where is she?”

“Wandering the common room,” Caleb said. But he said it to Julian’s back, as he was already striding for the balcony’s French doors. “Do give her my best.”

Julian would give the woman something, all right. But damned if he could think of what, yet. The headache he had felt coming on after two hours with Riccard Streng now pounded in his temples. And he felt a stirring deep in his gut, hollowing him out. Reminding him of the vacant, sick feeling he’d had when Harrison spent those thirty long minutes berating Julian as he might a small child.

Seven years. As fresh as if it had happened yesterday.

She waited in the common room, all right. Kicking around like a caged animal. Testing the edge of every piece of furniture with the toe of her boot and leaning in at every window as if seeking an escape. Julian paused on the open stairs, leaning on the rail. Not yet noticed. Or ignored. He watched her toy with a table lamp. Nervously flicking it on and off, until the light bulb suddenly burned out with a flash and *afizz*.

Typical.

“Calamity Kell.”

Her back still toward him, Julian saw her shoulders hitch with a silent laugh. “Don’t start with that again, *Jules*.”

She turned, and there was no mistaking the Nagelring’s “darling rogue” from the class of 3129 (and 3130, thanks to her suspension). The same gunslinger’s stance. The doe-brown eyes full of life and laughter, and curly, hazelnut hair highlighted (today) with golden tips. Callandre Kell wore leather boots and pants, and a baby-doll T showed under the unzipped leather jacket. Riding clothes. Julian’s sharp

eyes found her full-face helmet sitting on the sideboard near the chalet's large doors.

She was stunning.

She was trouble.

"I heard that you got married," he said, pacing himself slowly down the stairs, "to a mercenary captain."

Callandre nodded. "I did." Shrugged. "Didn't take." A mischievous glint passed behind her eyes. "And you? No one to catch your eye yet? I hear things about a Sandra Fenlon."

Julian shrugged. With Callandre, it spoke volumes he felt certain. "They all pale next to you, Calamity."

This time she laughed out loud. The old joke between them. Fast friends. Inseparable for the ten months they'd known each other. And missing that vital spark of chemistry for anything but a platonic relationship. They'd tried to force it, once. It had been one in a series of shared disasters.

A merely large fire snapped and whispered in the great fireplace as the two of them began a slow-paced shuffle toward one another, as if drawn by gravity, and fighting it the entire way. "You know," Julian said, "I've always wondered . . ." He ran fingers back through his reddish-blond hair.

"What's that?"

"What I'd have to say when I met you again."

She shrugged. The leather jacket was well-worn, rolling with her shoulders. "Well, you've had seven years to think about it." Her tone wasn't altogether friendly.

"I have." He stopped with a wooden, straight-backed chair between them, wrapping his large hands over the backrest. "And do you know what I'd really like to do?"

"Bust that chair over my head?" she asked.

"After that."

Callandre smiled, showing her teeth in a vicious smile. "Ain't love grand," she said.

And then she leaned forward, swinging up a large fist to smash Julian right on the jaw.



The exarch does not understand our problems. He has shown that with his complete inaction in curbing the excesses of Katana Tormark. And Senator Monroe—he was a good man.

—World Governor Feyd Olson, Cylene, 25 April 3135

*Terra
Republic of the Sphere
2 May 3135*

“She actually hit you?”

Sandra Fenlon sounded two parts amazed and one part jealous, Julian decided. Waiting on the green marble steps of the Republic Cathedral in Paris, he stood an uncomfortable vigil with Sandra, Callandre Kell, Duchess Amanda Hasek and Caleb Davion. As well as a small retinue of aides and officers.

Caleb spoke softly with his aunt and Countess Tara Campbell, who had been in charge of the military escort to safeguard them from the Thonon chalet to Paris. The three passed time waiting for Harrison Davion to arrive by trying to pick out historical landmarks. The Eiffel Towers, of course, were easiest of all, dominating the skyline to the west, rising up above the Terran Mint and the block-long memorial to Richard Cameron. The New Louvre, Caleb claimed with an air of superiority, had beautiful spires as well, but was lost behind the cathedral’s massive bulk.

Julian would rather have been a part of their conversation.

“She did,” he admitted. Again. He straightened his uniform jacket with brief, hard tugs at the lower hem.

Callandre Kell smirked. She wore a spring dress today, very feminine, likely in an effort to soften Harrison’s reaction when the prince saw her with Julian. But the purple highlights dyed into her hair fought pretty hard against the attempt at convention. “How’s your jaw?” she asked.

“Hurts like hell.” At least the bruise was fading. Finally. It had gone from dark purple to a sickly green and finally, today, barely a pale stain of yellow. The swelling in his lower lip had only lasted a day. “I can’t believe you actually slugged me.”

“You just can’t believe I loosened a tooth.”

Julian smiled without any sincerity whatsoever. “I think the roll of silver*kroners* you had tucked into your hand played a small part in that.”

Sandra laughed. It was like hearing crystal chime. Light and airy, and full of ringing peals. She wore her ash-blond hair extremely long, down to her curvaceous hips, refusing to bend her neck to the current, shorter styles. Often, she pulled it forward over her left shoulder, letting it cascade down her front. Today, she wore it in a straight fall down her back, the better to show off her scoop-necked blouse and the necklace Julian had bought for her on a quick visit to Athens.

Caleb circumnavigated Terra for the romantic spots. Julian and Harrison had gone to visit the ancient birthplace of democracy. Lots of goats and crumbling stone to see there.

Worse, though, than any long day reviewing logistics reports while touring a few final crumbs of history, was the fact that Sandra and Callandre enjoyed each other’s company.

“I can’t tell you how often I’ve wanted to do that,” Sandra said, drawing a disapproving frown from Amanda. She looked back a cross-eyed expression, and the duchess couldn’t help a guilty smile at her ward’s obvious happiness.

“No more than he deserved for leaving so abruptly. No goodbye. Just a letter left in care of the Kell Hounds. And after everything I did for him.”

“Everything you . . . ?”

Now that was too much. Julian couldn't even finish the question. He saw the extra security tightening up around them, which meant the prince wasn't far behind, but he couldn't let such a shot go unanswered.

"Maybe I missed something. Did you enjoy having an entire academic year voided by the honor board?"

Callandre shrugged, as if such things happened to her all the time. "You needed more work in your games-theory classes anyway."

Listening to the quibbling, Sandra shook her head. "What did the two of you *do*?" she asked.

Julian could only imagine the guilty look plastered to his face. He felt heat bloom in his cheeks, and rise up the back of his neck. Callandre at least had enough shame left in her to glance away. "Just your usual academy hijinks," he said, but the words sounded small even to him. "Besides, she started it." Usually.

"Oh! Like I knew how to hot-wire a *Zeus*."

Julian winced. He'd forgotten about that one.

Fortunately, he noticed a large SUV and a pair of armored sedans easing through the switchback of pylons on the *Rue d'Égalité*. Parts of the nearby crowd pressed forward against rope barriers, eager for a glimpse of a new celebrity, but the local *gendarmes* held them back.

"Cars pulling up," Julian said, awkwardly deflecting the conversation away from his past with Calamity Kell. It deserved to be forgotten.

Harrison Davion's arrival was enough to stir up any social event. Especially when the first prince of the Federated Suns opened his own door, before the security service fully vacated their SUV, and then leaned back in to offer his hand to Sterling McKenna. The Khan of the Raven Alliance was the one who alighted like royalty, her gray hunter's eyes hooded. The two leaders waited curbside, Harrison waving to a few people in the nearby crowds while two men joined them from the second sedan.

Aaron Sandoval, The Republic's Lord Governor of Prefecture IV, Julian recognized from his dossier. Erik Sandoval-Groell the champion had already met. And had not been impressed.

Amanda Hasek's eyes froze over the moment Sterling McKenna stepped from the dark sedan. She cursed beneath a whispered breath then pulled Sandra and Caleb ahead of the group. Julian waited until his prince had caught up, though the ice in Harrison's gaze as he recognized Callandre Kell promised that Julian would hear something about *that* later.

"Are we late?" Harrison asked, watching his sister-in-law lead the way inside.

The public viewings of Victor Steiner-Davion were closed off for certain hours of every day to provide security and serenity for the visiting dignitaries from so many worlds and realms. There was a fairly strict schedule for large parties, though it was understood that no one with the right credentials would be turned away, no matter the hour or the press of visitors.

This was, after all, the reason for such a grand summit of Inner Sphere leaders.

Julian consulted his watch, strapped to the underside of his wrist instead of on top. Lyran fashion, he remembered. One more thing he'd picked up while attending school abroad, and had never quite let go.

“Early still, I think.”

Countess Campbell traded a brief greeting with both the first prince and Snow Raven khan, but chose to wait outside on the marble steps. Julian and Callandre followed Harrison and McKenna into the Cathedral, the quartet easily catching up to the others who were all momentarily robbed of speech and locomotion while viewing the magnificent vestibule. The ceiling frieze and baroque moldings. Deep-polished mahogany and marble floors that gleamed to perfection. A platoon of religious men and women waited to offer advice or answer questions, but it was fairly obvious which way to go. A runner of red carpet led from the main doors to a side entry, away from the nave. To the antechamber where Victor’s body lay in state.

The same door from which a long line of Kurita nobles and officers began filing.

Julian had met Vincent Kurita before. The Coordinator of the Draconis Combine was third in line, behind a token “guard” of two samurai warriors. They wore no uniform but matching kimonos and mantled white overcoats, and carried no swords in the presence of their liege lord. But Julian never doubted that the men were highly trained. It was in the way they carried themselves.

Vincent Kurita, of course, carried the twin swords of a samurai tucked into the wrapping around his elaborately embroidered silk robes. The only other man to go so armed followed right behind him. Taller than Vincent, and rangy with the implied strength of a man who had spent his entire life training for battle, Matsuhari Toranaga, Warlord of New Samarkand, carried his katana by the scabbard in his left hand. Ready to draw it on an instant’s notice in the service of his coordinator. Or so that story went.

Both men were contemporaries of Harrison Davion, and Vincent was also the son of Hohiro Kurita, who had owed Victor Steiner-Davion his life during the Clan invasion. So it was no surprise that the Combine had brought a respectful party to Terra to see Victor off.

The surprise came with how Vincent Kurita reacted to Harrison.

“Prince Harrison,” the coordinator greeted his opposite stiffly. His accent was sharp, used to the Japanese language. His dark eyes stared daggers at the woman Harrison escorted. “I’ve seen you in better company.”

At nearly two meters, Harrison could easily have looked down his nose at the smaller man. Instead, he shook his head in casual reproach while patting McKenna’s hand where it rested on his arm. “That is beneath you, Vincent.”

The two warrior samurai stilled at Harrison’s casual use of the coordinator’s name. Warlord Toranaga positively bristled.

“It looks more like this is about who’s beneath you,” Toranaga said loudly.

There were few women in the coordinator’s court. Two ladies both wearing traditional obi and a young woman wearing a basic military dress uniform with patches from the Sun Zhang Military Academy and the rank devices of a *Tai-sa* . Captain. The young officer surprised Julian in two ways, first being that he did not recognize her from any of the intelligence briefings Harrison had insisted he attend. Second, she was the only one able to hide her emotions. The other two women blushed at the rough, sexual innuendo, and the poor grace of Warlord Toranaga to say such in public.

If there was a better way to kill the hushed conversations and envelop the two parties in a hostile silence,

Julian could not think of it. Everyone waited on the prince, to see how he would handle the flagrant insult. Even Sterling McKenna, who on most days would have a great deal to say over such a slight to her and her nation.

Julian quietly stepped up to Harrison's side. He should have seen this coming the moment he recognized Vincent Kurita. Of course the Dragon had issues with McKenna. Her Raven Alliance nestled up against the Combine's back, often an enemy and always a threat. In a way, the animosity was stronger there than over the five decades of low-intensity fighting inside the Draconis Rift.

Which was when he recalled the Sandovals!

Aaron Sandoval was Republic and not necessarily a Federated Suns loyalist. Regardless, the man was very accomplished, and him, Julian did not worry for. But Erik Sandoval-Groell . . . He came sponsored by March Lords inside the Suns' Draconis March. It was Erik's father and uncles, his brothers and cousins, who sponsored the pro-Davion movements within the Rift and kept that low-level war constantly raging. If Erik had a greater enemy on the planet than Toranaga, the other side of that fight, it could only be the coordinator himself.

Julian stepped to the side, putting himself in front of Erik, his heel coming down on the toe of the other man's boot. Out of the corner of one eye he'd seen Erik open his mouth to make some comment. He'd also noticed Aaron Sandoval laying a hand on Erik's arm, forestalling any outburst, and Callandre swung around behind Erik, likely without knowing exactly why but backing Julian's play regardless.

In the space of a heartbeat, Erik Sandoval-Groell had been isolated and his soft yelp over bruised toes was lost to Harrison's forced chuckle.

"Never a dull moment, Coordinator Kurita.*So ka?*"

Isn't that so? Julian knew enough polite Japanese to hold his own, German and *Nouveau Monde* French as well. At his own expense, Harrison offered the Combine's ruler a method to save face in light of his Warlord's transgression.

Kurita drew himself up stiffly, assuming a superior air. "*Hai*, Prince Harrison.*So ka.*" That was so. He bowed curtly, barely more than a nod, but at least it satisfied the strict forms of Kuritan diplomacy.

Everyone went home satisfied, and alive.

A small crowd of minor dignitaries had built up behind Harrison's party, no one willing to cross the tight no-man's-land between the two rulers. Now, as tensions eased, Warlord Toranaga turned his back on coordinator and prince both as he stepped past them, striding hard for the Cathedral's arched entryway. All eyes remained fixed on Vincent Kurita, who led the Combine delegation after his warlord.

Harrison nodded his sister-in-law and son ahead of him, and turned the small group from the Federated Suns back toward its original purpose: viewing the body of the fallen paladin.

"Never a dull moment?" Callandre asked, sotto voce. "What do you think the old bear—sorry—the *prince* meant by that? Never a dull moment . . . on Terra? In politics?"

It could have been anything. Or nothing. An inane comment to paint over the rough words. He whispered as much to her as the delegation began filing through the small antechamber door.

Callandre wasn't buying. "You don't believe that."

No, he didn't. If anything, in the past few weeks as Harrison demanded more from Julian and made him privy to ever greater secrets and plans, Julian had glimpsed more of the first prince's life than he'd ever expected to see. And he knew that Harrison Davion, for all his bluff personality and personal foibles, did not make inane comments. Ever. Every moment of every day counted for something.

"Never a dull moment," Julian whispered, staring ahead in the line at his uncle's profile, "as leader."

21

Arrest Senator Derius? We celebrate her courage and her leadership! The Republic was never meant to be an absolute monarchy. And with women such as Lina Derius, it will never become so.

Anyway, isn't the senator still on Terra? If Exarch Levin cannot enforce such a decree on the capital, how does he expect to bend Liberty to his will?

—(newly appointed) Legate Nahib Jamal, Liberty, 28 April 3135

*Terra
Republic of the Sphere
2 May 3135*

Never a dull moment *among our lessers*. That was what Erik Sandoval-Groell heard in the prince's reply.

The nape of his neck crawled with an embarrassed flush. He sensed his uncle's eyes boring in between his shoulder blades as he preceded the lord governor and the prince into the viewing room, being escorted—guarded!—by Julian and the Lyran trull who had apparently glommed onto the prince's champion.

Released at the door, Erik sidestepped into one of the rear corners. Too full of nervous energy to take a seat in the pews, too worried about his appearance to pace the wall or make a scene by leaving before the prince or his uncle were ready to go. And, if he happened to run into any members of the Combine delegation outside, he knew he could only make things worse.

Cut your losses and regroup. It was a lesson he had learned well in the past few years. His near-slip today did not invalidate the weeks of work he'd already put in on Terra. This, too, he could overcome.

So Erik hovered near the back, pressed to one side by the arriving party from the Federated Suns and then buttonholed by one of the prince's security agents, who took up station against the back wall with Erik off his right shoulder.

The viewing room off of the nave was smaller than he'd thought it would be, given the grand architecture of the Republic Cathedral. Barely larger than a military briefing room, actually. Erik easily imagined the dozen double sets of pews as ready-room benches. The heavily draped walls could conceal the flatscreens over which maps and force estimates would march in military cadence. Near the front, Victor Steiner-Davion, resting before rising up for one last campaign. Paladin Tyrina Drummond stood guard

over the venerable leader, protecting Victor's rest but obviously ready to wake him once the troops were assembled. Erik imagined Victor sitting up, sliding back the ferroglass top to his sarcophagus, and then pacing a tight box around the stage as he harangued prince and duchess and governors, generals and senior officers, instructing them as to their roles in a grand new age.

An age without him.

The irreverent fantasy helped Erik calm his nerves, divorcing himself from the proceedings as well as from the fiasco that had nearly occurred inside the vestibule. It also let him view the room's occupants in a new, neutral light. He recognized those who approached Victor's resting place as if it contained a holy saint, truly moved to be in *His* presence. Also just as many who faked it; genuflecting before they swaggered up, feeling superior in the only way they could, that they lived while the great hero did not.

And one man who circled the room like an angered lion, prowling with restless, dangerous energy. Avoiding the viewing line and the rows of pews as he put on his own show of righteous indignation. Glaring at those who stared through him, or—worse—recognized him and then dismissed him out of hand.

Caleb Davion. Caleb Hasek *Sandoval* Davion.

Erik detached himself from the corner, moving slowly so as not to draw more than a curious glance from the nearby security agent. Those kind of men were nervous enough in controlled environments. It wasn't the kind of attention Erik was looking for just now. He gave the man in the black suit a simple nod, acknowledging his presence and his purpose, and then steered well clear of Prince Harrison as he edged around the room, intercepting Caleb just behind the dais where Paladin Drummond stood her silent and respectful vigil.

"Never a dull moment," Erik said. Not whispering, but speaking softly enough that his voice would not carry far.

Bringing back the prince's words to Vincent Kurita, Erik gave the Davion heir a chance to reprimand him and thereby assume his own superiority.

But Caleb had his own interpretation. One that was obviously festering like a septic wound. He stopped, glared at Erik, then nodded once. Curt and regal.

"Never a dull moment," Caleb repeated. "When you are at war."

Now *that* was an interpretation Erik could get behind. One any *Sandoval* could, after the dynasty's decades—centuries—of struggle against the Dragon. The Davion throne had avoided a very necessary war in the late thirty-first century, too exhausted from a decade of Jihad. Instead, it hung on the *Sandovals* and their fiefdom of the Draconis March the millstone of the so-called low-intensity conflict. A politician's way of avoiding responsibility for what was, in effect, a limited and long-term period of war.

"The Dragon never truly sleeps," Erik said, voicing a family motto. "It merely gathers strength."

"You are one of the *Sandovals*," Caleb said haughtily, as if recognizing Erik bestowed imperial favor.

Of course, the dark topknot was a huge clue.

"I am, sire. Erik *Sandoval-Groell*." A distaff line of the dynasty, but still strong. And related to Caleb

within three generations. “Aide to Duke Aaron Sandoval, and a leader within the Swordsworn. A loyal subject of the Federated Suns.”

“How does a loyal subject of the Federated Suns rate title and rank within a Republic militia?” Caleb asked, suspicious.

“It’s all a matter of family, no matter where the borders are currently drawn. Wouldn’t you agree, Lord Davion?”

Which was as close as Erik could come—without Aaron Sandoval’s permission—to admitting the Swordsworn faction did indeed champion the Federated Suns and, by extension, House Davion. A token of faith, offered to Caleb, that he had friends inside The Republic, and within the room.

Caleb nodded Erik along with him. The two men paced each other, side by side, as they swung around behind the dais and found their own private conversation just to one side of Victor’s entombed body, screened by a trio of flags set in a stand at Victor’s feet. These were the flags of the Federated Suns, Lyran Alliance and ComStar’s ComGuards. Victor’s early life.

The flag of The Republic of the Sphere and the Terran ensign both stood at the tomb’s head. The colors Victor had died under.

Caleb plucked at one corner of the nearby flags, drawing it out to glance at the sword-and-sunburst crest of the Federated Suns. He had banked his dangerous energy, stepping it down now that he had found an audience.

“So,” he said, “as family, how would you say my father handled the . . . *situation* ?”

Careful. “With great diplomacy.”

“By diplomacy, if you mean accepting the ungracious mockery of Vincent Kurita, and the direct and infuriating insult of the coordinator’s aide, I would agree.” Anger seethed in Caleb’s voice.

“*Thataide* was Matsuhari Toranaga, Warlord of New Samarkand. If your father had acted upon the insult, and forced Vincent Kurita to address it for propriety’s sake, it would have given Toranaga the chance to directly flaunt the coordinator’s will in public. And Vincent Kurita sits uneasy on the throne as it is.”

Hindsight twenty-twenty. Erik wished he had put his political acumen to the task earlier, before nearly making a fool of himself. Think first—act second! Hadn’t Aaron been trying to school him in that for the past two years?

“So to appease Vincent Kurita, and help him in looking less weak, the Davion prince abases himself and so looks weaker in return?” Caleb looked ready to spit. “I would not have allowed the Dragon so easy a victory.”

Erik shrugged uneasily. Wondering how far he could push this topic with Caleb, absent his uncle’s guidance. Then again, what Aaron did not know . . . “Nor would I,” Erik said. “Perhaps it is time to show the Draconis Combine just how weak they really are. And how strong is House Davion.”

Caleb smiled. Just a slight grin that peeked through his dark eyes. “Perhaps it is,” the Davion heir agreed. “Perhaps I’ll mention that to my father. Thank you.”

Recognizing a dismissal when he heard it, Erik knew he had pushed his own agenda far enough for one day. A more satisfying meeting than he'd had with the prince's champion. He bowed lightly and stepped back, ceding the floor to Caleb, who moved off to find his father's side in the viewing line. Harrison made his way forward quickly, assisted by security agents and a Cathedral priest who politely asked others to step aside for the royal delegation. Most did. A few of the lesser dignitaries lingered to make the prince's acquaintance, slowing the party, letting a few last well-wishers pay their final respects to Victor Steiner-Davion.

Erik had already walked through the viewing line on a previous day. He'd gazed through the frosted glass at the well-maintained face of an Inner Sphere legend. Even in death, Victor had looked both sincere and magnanimous. Or maybe that was what Erik brought with him to the small dais and the marble sarcophagus. Not all Sandovals treated Victor so kindly, but Erik remembered his Aunt Dorann had never said an unkind word about the prince-turned-paladin. That alone would have colored his perception.

Everyone brought some kind of personal baggage along on such an event. The old veterans who left medals in a neat and orderly line at the foot of the tomb. Men and women who saluted Victor with pride. A few who did so mockingly. Most gazed quietly, whispered a word or two, and left just as simply.

Erik, hovering at near the corner of the dais, behind the stand of flags, heard a few of the parting comments.

Fairly dull, most of them, especially out of context. A withered man wearing a ComGuards pin on his dark suit and old enough to be a contemporary of the deceased complained jokingly about the size of his children. He also laid a medal in the growing rank and file order. "Good men did something, Victor. You did."

A middle-aged couple, dressed richly, who "came all the way from York. Thank you, Sire."

Others. Everyone today a member of the privileged who could command some part of the time reserved for diplomats and family and long-time associates.

"For the memory of my grandfather, who served."

"For Tikonov."

". . . wish you could have met him, Victor. Just once. Then everything would be complete."

So familiar to the onetime prince and paladin, and yet so cold. Erik had been about to skirt the room again, to wait for his uncle and Prince Harrison near the exit. But the old woman in her black-laced dress and veil caught his attention.

As did the young man escorting her, letting her grip his arm for support. He wore a simple-cut black suit, appropriate for the circumstance, but his bearing and confident, steady gaze spoke of military. The scar at the outside of his left eye gave him a dangerous cast, though right now he remained very composed.

What he whispered, bending over to stare deeply through the ferroglass, was lost under his breath.

They, too, finally stepped aside. And when he escorted the woman past the lower flags, Erik caught a glimpse behind the veil and adjusted his estimate. Not an old woman, then. But not young, either.

Beautiful, but frail, and a striking contrast to the roughly handsome man who held her arm.

Erik had followed them halfway around the room, then paused to stare back at the entombed paladin. "So many lives," he whispered. Victor had reached and affected so many people in his hundred and five years, was it any wonder that the tributes went on, and on, and on?

Perhaps not.

Tara Campbell waited on the Cathedral steps. Patient. Confident. In full view of the press, who had their own island roped off across the street, where they could monitor the comings and goings of all important personages.

She could have stepped inside for a moment of peace. But she'd had her moment in Victor's presence. And Exarch Levin wanted her in the camera's eye as much as possible now that The Republic push against Senate loyalists had begun. If she wasn't in a 'Mech, she was to be concerned with high-profile charity-relief efforts or championing the ad hoc summit of Inner Sphere leaders in any way she could.

Today, it was taking charge of the Davion security escort.

Tomorrow it might be arranging a second funeral service, if the dark, glowering faces on the exiting Kurita entourage were read correctly.

Warlord Toranaga led the way, his hand always gripped tight around the katana he habitually carried. Coordinator Kurita followed at a more leisurely pace, but there was no mistaking his hard scowl or the dark moods of his samurai escorts. True, she had rarely seen Combine nobility who *did not* look as if they had just found half a slug in their naranji, but that rarely caused white-knuckle grips on the hilts or scabbards of swords. Or the hard-bitten glares that stabbed her direction.

Those would play well on the evening newsvids.

Still, Tara brazened it out, still playing her part for The Republic. She waited as members of her party began to drift back out of the Cathedral. Duchess Amanda Hasek and Sandra Fenlon were first, and passed more time staring at the nearby architecture. Tara considered joining them. The Duchess was a bit standoffish, but Sandra was approachable and, all considered, things could be worse.

"Hello, Tara." From behind, hands settled comfortably at her waist.

Like this.

She recognized his voice, of course. She'd memorized it during their first meeting on Skye. Jasek Kelswa-Steiner was not a man you forgot easily, if at all. His warm voice, with just a touch of "Skye Italian" to color it, was comfortable in intimate settings and strongly confident on the battlefield. He had a panther's grace, dusky, exotic features, and blue eyes so dark they bordered on indigo.

And he held her for the cameras on what would soon be interplanetary news.

Tara turned inside his grip but then stepped back sharply, breaking away. He hooked his thumbs into the front pockets on his Stormhammer's uniform, while she clasped her hands behind her back. Formal. Distant.

“Jasek. What are you doing here?”

“Come to find you,” he said with a hesitant smile. “Callandre Kell told me that you would be escorting the Davions to the viewing.” He shrugged. “It’s been awhile since Nusakan, and I was wondering how you were. If you’d changed your mind.”

She hoped that the news journalists across the street did not have long-range directional audio as well. They likely did.

“I mean, what are you doing *here* ? Paris? The Stormhammer leader on Terra?”

“On Tara?” he said, an impish grin teasing her. His tone suggestive.

“On *Terra* !”

The man could be so infuriating. And it didn’t help that he had cost The Republic the world of Skye, and nearly the entirety of Prefecture IX. She still wasn’t certain how much she approved of his ultimate plans against Clan Jade Falcon. Their history was brief, volatile, and a mixed bag of emotions that she had yet to fully sort through.

“Even your father declined to visit while his Prefecture is under siege.”

Jasek nodded. His dusky skin was flawless, and his teeth a bright, bright white. She was sure now, that his smile was as much for the nearby cameras as it was for her. *He was enjoying this!*

“I came as a part of the Lyran Commonwealth’s representatives, and under special dispensation from your exarch. Didn’t Paladin McKinnon tell you that he escorted us here?” Obviously not. Which made Jasek smile all the wider. “I believe Jonah Levin thinks to repair some of the damage between my father and I. As if that might help solve The Republic’s problem.”

“The Republic has many problems right now,” she said softly, fouling any chance for a directional microphone to seize on her words. She hoped. “I’m personally involved with at least three of them. I have no time for your games.”

Jasek affected a wounded air. But not for long. “Not even at the Grand Ball next week?” he asked. The formal reception being held for visiting dignitaries. A night of politics and parties, neither of which Tara planned to enjoy. “And do not tell me that you won’t be there. The exarch will make sure of it. All the cameras. And you clean up too nicely for an officer. *Countess* .”

Which Tara could easily read as Jasek trying to broach the subject of solidarity among the nobility. Trying to drive a small wedge into Levin’s plans.

Or perhaps he was simply working his charms on her. For personal reasons.

She pulled further away, angling back toward her charges. Duchess Hasek and the Lady Fenlon had been joined by Julian and Callandre . . . and now Erik Sandoval. “Don’t presume too much, Jasek. Not ever.”

“You’ll be there,” he said, watching her walk off. “And I’ll find you.” It was offered as a simple statement of fact.

As self-confident as ever, and Tara had to admit that it was one of his many qualities that drew her to him, no matter how much she struggled to stay away. And she never lied to herself. She felt better, knowing that he hadn't forgotten her. And that he had come to Tara—

Terra!

Invitations are at a premium, I can tell you. A who's who of The Republic's political, economic and military leaders, not to mention the visiting royalty from nearly every ruling government in the Inner Sphere. Geneva is on high alert and the exarch has commanded a no-fly zone of 200 kilometers for this evening. A wise precaution . . .

—Chris O'Reilly of HardFire, “The Big Night,” Terra, 9 May 3135

*Terra
Republic of the Sphere
9 May 3135*

With the final arrivals now on planet, The Republic's formal reception and Exarch's Ball for all visiting dignitaries was held at the Geneva palace. A night of dinner and dance, with nothing on the political agenda.

Julian Davion did not believe that for an instant.

Large enough to hangar a *Leopard*-class DropShip, the ballroom rivaled the best facilities of the Davion palace, in his opinion. At least in presentation. Each of the ballroom's four corners was its own stage, raised above the main floor by soft, carpeted stairs. Each stage had its own bar and a small host of servers carrying about trays of champagne flutes, brandy snifters, aperitif thimbles, and spreads of exotic hors d'oeuvres.

A forty-two-piece orchestra arrangement dominated the south end of the hall, seated between two stages and halfway up the wall in a band shell formed—Julian noticed at once—in the shape of an *Atlas*' head. Light strains of a neo-Bach revised cantata floated through the room. Good for dancing, and with just enough of a march beat to keep the exarch's receiving line moving and his heralds at the northeast and northwest stage busy announcing the next guest.

Guests filed in through large doors at either of the north-facing corners, foreign delegates through one door, domestic the other. Nobles, politicians, military officers—most wearing multiple hats—spread down the stairs to the main floor where they were formally met by Exarch Jonah Levin and his wife. A brief handshake and a word or two as the exarch greeted both lines, made quick introductions, and then passed mixed parties to the main floor where they could mingle, eat, dance, or—as Jonah Levin certainly planned—just talk.

An efficient and strategically sound plan. Harrison Davion nodded his own approval when Julian quietly pointed it out.

“This is about more than Victor,” he said.

Then the prince allowed the world governor of Yangtze to pull him and Sterling McKenna aside for more introductions, eventually hooking Julian into the conversation as well with quick introductions and a hand on the younger man’s shoulder.

Harrison, also, was here for more than honoring the paladin’s memory.

Julian followed his prince’s lead for the better part of an hour. At times he felt more like he was standing in for Caleb, who always seemed to be off on his own agenda, rather than being simply the prince’s nephew and current champion. Harrison made a point of inviting Julian’s opinion, and more than once left him in the company of a Republic representative too minor for the prince’s time yet still too important for an easy brush-off.

But there were duties, and then there were duties. All too quickly—implied by Harrison’s pointed stare—Duchess Hasek came to claim Julian on Sandra’s behalf. Under her anxious and encouraging stare, Julian escorted Sandra Fenlon onto the ballroom’s main floor. Sandra’s ash-blond hair, pinned to one side, fell in a broken waterfall over her left shoulder, and Julian’s gold tux-style jacket was a perfect complement to her golden-bronze gown. Their secret smiles could have been fondness or budding love, and not the charade two friends played for Amanda Hasek’s benefit.

The main floor was immense, large enough for several dance areas separated by strolling lanes and table seating for conversation, drinks and eating. It was also, Julian discovered, inlaid with a stellar map mosaic. Every star in The Republic burned in cold tile. Common, yellow suns. Red dwarfs. Binary systems. Habitable planets surrounded the stars, each wrapped in atmospheres of blues, green, yellows, reds. Each named in a delicate scroll that circled the planet. Julian and Sandra waltzed among the stars of Vega and Moor and Styx. In the vicinity of Northwind they met Countess Tara Campbell talking to Callandre Kell and Jasek Kelswa-Steiner, also from the Lyran delegation. As a group, they strolled past Liao and Gan Singh (now under the aegis of the Capellan Confederation) and left the main floor by way of New Aragon, The Republic’s stronghold in Prefecture V.

Spreading up the stairs on the southeast stage, the young nobles had an excellent view of the entire hall. “Impressive,” Julian whispered to Sandra.

And it was. An entire wall of flawless ferroglass, three stories high, looked out over greensward and a private section of Magnum Park. Fireworks had begun shortly after the Davion contingent’s arrival, lighting up Terra’s twilight sky in a riot of color that caught and danced inside the glass. Along the opposite wall were set the serving stations for those wishing to sample fare from all across the Inner Sphere. The “wall,” Julian noticed, was actually a holographic projection. Servers walked right through it, appearing as ghosts within the golden shimmer, then stepping into the hall to deposit laden trays on the long tables shrouded in linens of white and gold.

Sandra caught Julian’s hand and pointed overhead, where more holographic projectors suddenly filled the ballroom’s pristine dome with a display of stellar phenomena to rival the outside fireworks. Red-hot nebulae boiled away into the dark reaches of space. Comets with long icy tails showered overhead, followed by the Slow Birth of a World as composed by renowned graphic artist Jai Yuen Kanto.

It was better, Julian was forced to admit privately, than anything they had at home.

Meanwhile, Callandre Kell, always eager to set the standard, had found a young, dangerous-looking man in Clan leathers and was walking him through an easy minuet on the lower floor. Sandra escorted

Jasek away for the remainder of the dance, leaving Julian in the company of Tara and, strolling up, Lars Magnusson, whom Julian had met during the tour of Athens.

A Ghost Bear crest tattoo centered on Lars' right temple and covered part of his face, so there was no denying the young man's heritage, though he wore a nobleman's robes rather than his military uniform. A trueborn of the Rasalhague Dominion and of royal blood as well, Lars was one of few Clan warriors allowed outside Geneva's "neutral grounds," because he made such distinctions. For this journey, he'd explained to Julian, he had set aside his rank and codex. He had no standing as a warrior, which did not sit well with others from the Dominion.

"On your own again?" Julian asked. He quickly explained Lars' voluntary discommendation to Tara.

Lars combed fingers back through unruly, ash white hair. "My companions stormed the southwest stage." He nodded across the way, where Khan Dalia Bekker stood at the top of the stairs as if *she* presided over the Exarch's Ball, surrounded by a coterie of warriors. Obviously, more than one with Elemental blood. Huge, hulking brutes. "I was not bid into the Khan's escort."

"Their loss is our gain," Tara welcomed the Clan patriot. She, too, had eschewed military dress, trading her Highlander's uniform for a red-sequined gown that slimmed her figure and drew attention.

Small talk, however, was beyond them. Conversation quickly turned to troubles within The Republic, and throughout the entire Inner Sphere.

"No more problems out of Germany?" Julian asked.

Having kept abreast of the situation between Republic forces and those who had gone over to the ex-patriot senators, he knew Tara and Paladin Heather GioAvanti had retaken Stuttgart but also that ex-Knight Conner Rhys-Monroe had organized a firm defense in Mannheim and Essen.

"At this point," Tara said, "I have to think that your local intelligence assets are beating even Terra's free press corps in acquiring facts and distilling them into full reports.

Neither man admitted to anything, though Julian felt his own face harden slightly, which in itself was a tell.

"No," Tara admitted, taking an appetizer off a passing tray. The men joined her. "The senators left on-world seem comfortable, at the moment, to wait us out. It's what is happening out in The Republic that worries me. We had two senators go native after the Confederation invaded. I'm afraid the exarch's decree to disband the Senate will cause more such defections."

Julian tasted the appetizer—two pepper-stuffed olives on a silver skewer—and enjoyed the hot, salty flavor, especially the way it burned pleasantly up into his sinuses. "You believe the exarch should have waited?"

"Or did he wait too long?" Lars asked, preempting Tara's reply. "When Clan Ghost Bear merged with the Free Rasalhague Republic, we faced similar challenges among some of the older noble families. The strategy of leaving off until tomorrow never worked."

"I guess we will have to wait and see how it turns out," Tara said, obviously hesitant to second-guess her exarch. But she unbent enough to admit, "With House Liao now pressing us in Prefecture V, and the Jade Falcons holding onto their captured territory with a steel grip, it does seem as if Exarch Levin has opened up a third front at home that we can hardly afford."

“It was already a live battlefield,” Jasek said, returning with Sandra on his arm. He handed her off to Julian with an affable nod. “At least now you have some forces on the ground.” The man’s dark blue eyes—nearly indigo—and his dusky skin gave him an exotic look. His accent, though, was pure Skye aristocrat, with a touch of Old Mediterranean.

With a strange mixture of embarrassment and pleasure, Tara made the needed introductions. Lars and Jasek shook hands. Now it was the five of them holding court, with Tara Campbell presiding only by a few years seniority and her higher noble title.

There was also Tara’s mantle as a media icon, a role, Julian felt certain, to which she’d been born.

Not that he minded the opportunity to step back with Sandra at his side and observe. The floor, after all, was getting rather crowded with faces he recognized from the many intelligence briefings Harrison had insisted Julian attend. By some hidden signal, or possibly just following a law of mutual fascination, the southeast stage had become a lodestone to attract the younger crowd. Paladin Gareth Sinclair showed up with Dame Christine Sandoval on his arm. Some cousin of Erik Sandoval-Groell, if Julian remembered correctly, but not a friend of the Swordsworn officer. Anson Marik’s son, Kenyan, patrolled the area like a shark scenting blood. Alone. Always ready to strike. Even Caleb ended up on the southeast stage, eventually, having made rounds with some of the Inner Sphere leaders for his father or on his own behalf.

Most of the young scions circled around and by each other with careful conversation and wary eyes. Conditioned by intelligence operatives to give nothing away. Counseled by cultural experts to offer no offense. But not everyone worried about such caution. Caleb’s arrival, in fact, coincided with the sonorous voice of a herald rolling over the music and low buzz of a hundred conversations to announce the arrival of the evening’s third captain-general. This one of the Regular Fiefs.

Caleb laughed openly, not bothering to hide his disdain. “How many captains-general does it take to put a broken lightbulb back together?”

“Only one,” a new voice said over Caleb’s shoulder, drawing glances. She had dark reddish hair and bright jade eyes, whose gleam matched the sheen on her modestly cut gown. She joined the growing knot of young nobles. “But first they have to decide which one owns all the parts.”

Given that Nikol Marik, daughter of Captain-General Jessica Marik, had stolen the punch line, Julian and most of the others chuckled out of politeness. Caleb gave back only a wounded silence, and the others sent uncomfortable glances his direction.

“I’m sorry to interrupt. I recognized Countess Campbell, and I’ve always wanted to make her acquaintance.” She smiled at Caleb and rested her hand lightly on his arm in an attempt to thaw his frosty demeanor. “That joke is one of my favorites,” she said.

Irritation and superiority warred on Caleb’s face, then he smiled in return, which went a long way toward restoring the group’s bonhomie. A passing server lowered a tray near the group, and hands reached for champagne or brandy. Lars Magnusson ordered a Timbiqui dark ale. Julian accepted a sparkling water.

Sandra Fenlon laughed around the rim of her champagne flute when it arrived. “Always the steadfast, Julian.”

“When I see the prince relax with a drink,” Julian said, “I’ll consider it.” The comment caught Caleb trading his emptied brandy snifter for a fresh glass from a passing tray. His cousin started guiltily, then glared sharp daggers.

But Julian hadn’t been upbraiding Caleb. He’d simply been pointing out that the prince’s champion was always on duty. At least, so long as the prince was. Tara Campbell, playing the conciliator, invited Nikol Marik to remain while she stole Caleb away for a waltz.

Sandra chided Julian with a nudge in the ribs. “I doubt we’ll be attacked by an armored column tonight. Enjoy yourself a bit.”

Which was a perfect point in the conversation for Callandre to arrive. Resplendent in a black gown with wide red stripes plunging into a “V” at her navel and matching highlights in the hazelnut hair she’d pinned up for the evening, she returned with the Clan Wolf warrior and in the company of another couple they’d captured on the way back from the serving tables. Callandre had hooked her free arm through the other woman’s, pulling her along almost against her will.

It was the young Combine officer Julian had seen the week before in the company of Vincent Kurita and Warlord Toranaga.

Her escort wore a Nova Cat uniform, curiously devoid of any rank or rate symbol. A mystery.

“Jules used to have nightmares of being attacked by an armored column,” Callandre confided to her new friends. Loudly.

“Only because you gave them to me.”

Why not wave a red flag in front of a Smolensk bull while he was at it?

She smiled slyly. “He’s still bitter because I skewed the bell curve on the JES scores in our third quarter.” Seeing a few puzzled frowns, she explained. “Joint Exercise Simulations at the Nagelring. Armored vehicles versus BattleMechs. My Destroyer took down an entire lance. Julian rated a distant second with five tank kills.”

Julian sipped at his fizzing beverage. It tickled his nose, and loosened his tongue. “You cheated, Callandre,” he said. Then, to be fair: “Well, maybe not. But it was damned unconventional.”

“Wait a minute,” Jasek said. “I heard about that from some friends on Hesperus II who were alumni of the Nagelring.” He stared from Callandre to Julian and back. “You’re Calamity Kell,” he said.

Callandre fumed and Julian laughed at his friend’s discomfiture. It didn’t often happen that way.

To cover her momentary loss of composure, Callandre introduced her new companions. Besides Alaric Wolf, who skulked at the back of the crowd and had accompanied Callandre to the floor nearly under duress, she had returned with *Tai-sa* Yori Sakamoto and Mech Warrior Kisho of Clan Nova Cat. Julian wondered if he were the only one who caught the cautious glances that passed between the two Combine warriors as they were introduced.

“Quite the enclave,” Nikol Marik offered, looking around. “All we’re missing is a Jade Falcon and a *janshi* from House Liao, and we’ll have representation from the entire Inner Sphere.” She laughed brightly. “We could convene our own Star League council.”

Having studied the history of the ancient Star League as well as the neo-Star League convened to end the threat of the Clans, Julian did not think they missed much. "I would hope the Inner Sphere is beyond the need for such a governing body, which always seemed to create more trouble than it solved." The Reunification War. The Amaris coup. Even the Steiner-Davion civil war and the Word of Blake Jihad. All based on the power struggles and intrigues that accompanied the concept of an all-encompassing power.

"Still," Julian said. He let his gaze wander the lower floor, and the opposite stages. "I haven't heard much of the Falcons."

"You aren't missing anything," Callandre said with real ice in her voice. And both Tara and Jasek frowned at mention of the Clan.

Julian couldn't blame them. According to the reports he'd read, The Republic's forces in Prefecture IX, aided by Jasek's Stormhammers and Lyran regular forces, had been fighting off a Falcon offensive, and losing, for the better part of a year.

"The Jade Falcons will not send anyone," Jasek said. "House Liao, because of their recent aggression, will be announced last."

"After the Hell's Horses, even?" Lars asked, hearing the name of Khan Gottfried Amirault announced next. He whistled. Winked at Alaric Wolf as if inviting him to share a joke.

Alaric shrugged. His new Clan leathers squeaked with protest. "They hardly merited an invitation in the first place," he said with no diplomacy whatsoever. Shifting from one foot to the other under everyone's attention, he continued. "Though I heard their arrival yesterday came complete with a fighter escort and a small parade through the streets of Geneva they put together themselves." He shook his head. "Still looking for validation. It is almost embarrassing for the rest of us."

With such strong opinions, Julian wondered if Alaric had been feigning his reluctance. He looked sidelong at the Wolf, offered an amused smile. "I thought all Clans stood on equal footing?"

There was no humor in the Wolf warrior's glacial blue eyes. Like dead ice. Alaric's smile came slow and confident, and the crescent scar on the outside of his left eye puckered, only making it seem like he winked in jest.

"Some," the young Wolf said, "are more equal than others."

It was certainly a sentiment Caleb Hasek-Sandoval-Davion understood, overhearing it as he and the Countess Northwind rejoined the party.

"And is Clan Wolf more equal than the other Clans?" he asked, thinking to put the young warrior back in his place. Never believing the younger man would have so much brass to openly admit it.

"More than most, *aff*," Alaric boasted.

But he lapsed back into silence under Lars Magnusson's glare, and Caleb retook the spotlight at the center of the small gathering. The Davion heir wasn't surprised to see Alaric fold so easily, having already

sized him up. Ten years Caleb's junior, though he looked to have had a rougher time of life with his hard face and rough, scarred knuckles, Caleb easily dismissed the younger man as a boisterous warrior.

Instead, he focused his real attention on the newest arrivals. Two military officers from House Kurita's Draconis Combine.

Members of the delegation that had so blatantly insulted Caleb's father, and with him the entirety of the Federated Suns!

Callandre Kell noticed him staring, and offered introductions.

"*Tai-sa* Yori Sakamoto and Kisho Nova Cat, this is Caleb Davion. Son of Prince Harrison."

Hasek-Sandoval-Davion. Duke of Taygeta, commander (honorary) of the Syrtis Avengers, heir to the throne of the Federated Suns! Julian's Lyran trull couldn't even handle a proper introduction. Rather than offering their names to him, as would have been more appropriate, she gave his name to this Yori Sakamoto and Kisho of Clan Nova Cat. Caleb had already put his time in this evening as low man among the *real* Inner Sphere powers—being seen with his father, briefly, then spending time talking up Exarch Levin and Anson Marik and Trillian Steiner. Comparing notes with Mason, later, would be interesting. Mason had talked quite at length about Trillian Steiner.

Caleb had also spent some political capital on Khans Dalia Bekker and Seth Ward. He didn't care for the elitist Clansmen, but he'd given them fair measure out of diplomatic politeness. He *had not* been forced into the company of Vincent Kurita again, studiously avoiding the coordinator of the Draconis Combine when he could and gazing through him when the press of dignitaries and diplomats forced the two into close proximity.

Only one time had the coordinator intentionally veered his direction.

Caleb quickly found business to discuss with the legate of New Home.

So to find the Dracs here, now, offering no apology for their earlier attitude and Callandre Kell simply granting them a familiarity they had not earned made Caleb flush warm with a stir of anger.

Anger he had to set aside as he lost his audience of young scions to the herald finally announcing Daoshen Liao's arrival, and his sister, Ilsa Centrella (Liao), ruler of the Magistracy of Canopus.

It often surprised Caleb, the strength of a herald's voice to lift above the din of music and conversation, reaching even this far corner of the ballroom. In this case, however, the announcement grew louder and more distinct as the herald continued with full titles, and a stunned silence swept the room at Daoshen's audacity. The arrival of the man responsible for the first real war in two generations, like a raven plucking at the eyes of a blinded Inner Sphere? To actually set foot on Terra while his army continued to pound away at Republic defenses?

No wonder the Capellan people all but revered him as a god.

The Duke of Sian and Chancellor of the Confederation swept down from the northwest stage, followed by a small retinue of proud nobles and officers in their finest dress uniforms. Daoshen was easy to follow as he approached Exarch Levin and traded shallow bows with The Republic's leader. More than two meters tall and skeletally thin, the chancellor stood a head and shoulders above most men. He also wore a bright, golden suit of Mandarin style, like a small sun adrift in the room.

It was no coincidence, certainly, that the outside display of fireworks quieted for Liao's arrival. Or that the overhead holographic presentation strolled aimlessly among barren, icy worlds, lacking the grandeur of its earlier composition. The changes weren't particularly subtle, yet Caleb thought them rather effective.

Though perhaps not in the exarch's best interest. The downside was that more people watched Daoshen Liao's arrival, and followed his progress as he led the Capellan delegation in a slow tour of the grand hall.

Caleb sipped at a new brandy, enjoying the hard bite and smooth, silky aftertaste. Watching the procession with clinical interest.

"His wife?" Nikol Marik asked aloud, jade eyes on the woman of poise and mature beauty who all but floated at Daoshen's side. The woman's dress had a flowing train that brushed the floor and hid her footsteps.

"Sister," Caleb instructed the Oriente heir. An honest mistake, perhaps. Daoshen stroked the back of Ilsa Centrella's hand as they walked, and gazed more often at her profile than bestowing his favor on the people around him. But how could one not recognize the leader of an Inner Sphere realm?

"*Sothat's* how it is in their family," Jasek said in a whispered breath.

There were chuckles, a few sounds of disgust, and one outright laugh. Callandre, of course. "Behave," she mock-scolded the Stormhammer leader. A word Caleb had not been certain she knew. "What happens on Canopus, stays on Canopus."

A play on the latest advertising blitz for the Canopian pleasure circuses, Ilsa Centrella's most profitable "export." Which showed a greater wit to Callandre than Caleb had originally—no!

"She's here," the Davion heir said. Pleasantly stunned and yet scandalized at the same time. "Mason . . ." He looked first for his friend, to point her out, but Caleb's traveling companion had disappeared again. Instead, he grabbed his cousin's arm. "Julian, she came."

"Who?" Julian asked.

"Danai." The woman Caleb had spiraled around Terra with, like two fire-moths avoiding the other's flame. Her hair was fanned up in an avant-garde style, and she had accented her eyes with long, trailing slashes of eyeliner, but it was her. He counted. "Second . . . third from the end. On the arm of the Capellans*ang-shao*. The colonel!"

Staying at the Capellan cultural center . . . but an escort among Daoshen Liao's royal party? Caleb's head spun, knowing he had surrendered a few points in their game. Not yet realizing he had all but lost it.

"Caleb!" Julian gripped Caleb's elbow. "That is Danai Centrella-*Liao*."

Nikol Marik craned forward. "Danai? Didn't she win the Ishiyama Open on Solaris two years back?"

"And was last year's favorite for Grand Champion," Callandre volunteered. "But she withdrew from competition because of the war."

A Solaris champion? A MechWarrior icon? Caleb had pegged her for a media figure, recognizing her

ease with the high-profile lifestyle. But not this. Never this.

Julian pulled his cousin back, fingers pressing painfully into the joint, breath a hot whisper in Caleb's ear. "You mean to tell me that your mystery woman is Sun-Tzu's youngest child? The chancellor's *sister*? Have you . . . has your security team been *that* lax?" Julian's fear was almost tangible. "Tell me you two haven't—"

"We haven't!" Caleb broke away from his cousin with a violent shrug. They hadn't! Though not for his lack of trying. He took a healthy swallow of strong brandy, letting it burn up into his sinuses. Daoshen's baby sister?

A Liao!

No! No . . . no . . . no . . .

Julian was still staring at him. "We haven't," he hissed. "You can ask Mason."

"Mason? Who is—"

Caleb cut him off. "It's been"—What? Innocent? Hardly—"casual."

Most of the young group had missed Julian's reaction, though a few stared over quizzically. Countess Campbell. Alaric Wolf. Caleb felt a sudden need to wash, as if caught at a high social function with mud caked beneath his fingernails.

Sandra Fenlon continued to watch the chancellor's progress as he detoured by their southeast stage. She shuddered. "I hear that Capellan forces have struck as far forward as Tikonov. Into Prefecture IV."

Caleb had heard the same rumors, though not bothered to follow up on them. Julian likely knew for certain. Countess Campbell, perhaps. "What should that mean to us?" he asked, dismissing her concern with a careful sneer. Trying to get his feet back under him.

Well, why should they care? The Federated Suns had controlled Tikonov for a few decades following the Fourth Succession War, but the world hardly had a long-standing tradition of House Davion rule. It was, in fact, one of the most-conquered worlds in the last century. Better that Caleb's father focus more on planets such as Mallory's World. Schedar and Caselton. Rio. Markab. Old Federated Suns worlds, gobbled up by Devlin Stone in his formation of The Republic. Worlds, many of which were now under control of the Swordsworn, and possibly leaning toward Davion affiliation again, according to Erik Sandoval-Groell.

Who cared for Tikonov? Or for House Liao, for that matter?

Julian, of course, stepped up for Sandra.

"For Liao to strike at Tikonov," he said, carefully stepping around the fact that he would know for certain if it were happening, "they would necessarily move a great number of troops and logistics support through worlds close to New Hessen and Demeter. Chesterton."

And Chesterton was the hereditary fief of the Fenlon dynasty. It would, in fact, be Sandra's one day. Caleb wasn't sure if he should thank Julian for providing a further distraction away from Danai's presence, or curse his cousin for making Caleb look even more a fool for his lack of concern for

Sandra's future.

"So it would seem to mean a great deal," Kisho Nova Cat said. He offered it off-handedly, not really as part of the conversation. Staring up at the hall's domed ceiling, unfocused gray eyes looking right through the sculpted ice moons of Denebola, he tilted his head slowly to one side as if following an image only he could see. "Especially to you, Caleb Davion."

Yori Sakamoto laid a hand on Kisho's arm, as if to warn him off. The Nova Cat warrior blinked, then shuddered as if in the grips of illness. "I am sorry, Kurita Yori-san." He turned and sketched a half-bow to Caleb. "I did not mean—"

Kurita! If Kisho had searched for hours to find a better conversational hand grenade to throw into the small party of mixed nobles and warriors, he couldn't have done better. Conversation ceased at once. Daoshen Liao and his entourage were forgotten as all eyes turned against Yori and her companion. Some curious. Some hostile. Most of them, like Julian, confused.

Not Caleb. The name slapped him across the face with a stinging rebuke, compounding his own error in not recognizing a scion of Liao. Now, he had been made a fool of by the Kurita delegation as well!

"Kurita," Caleb said, tasting the name and finding it distasteful. "Not Sakamoto. Did you think we wouldn't discover this?" he demanded.

Yori stood transfixed, her eyes wide. "*Iie*. It is not that."

Surprisingly, it was Sandra Fenlon who stepped up and offered the young officer her support, gently grasping her hand. "What is it, then? Were you ordered to disguise your name?"

"*Ichose* to," Yori replied, casting her gaze at the floor. "My grandfather was Franklin Sakamoto, a bastard of the noble Kurita line. It seemed less a dishonor to the coordinator, to borrow my grandfather's name, than to arrive bearing Theodore Kurita's disgrace. I meant no insult to the rest of you."

"Just like a Drac," Caleb sneered. He pounced on the newest victim, the revelation of Yori's secret eclipsing Kisho's offhand rebuke. "Smile with one side of her face, lie out of the other."

"And just like a Davion, to go on the attack to cover their own weakness," Yori shot back.

Embarrassed she might be, for herself or her coordinator, but the woman was still samurai. She was going to be no one's victim. Not easily.

"The Davions are never weak," Caleb said, warming to the challenge. Carefully sidestepping his own vulnerability. "When we attack, we win. I would think the Combine, of all realms, would realize this by now."

"How is that?"

"In the Jihad's early years, after your Black Dragons prompted renewed aggression, we occupied Galedon, Matsuida, even Benjamin before pulling back to turn our strength against the Word of Blake. And during the Clan invasion it took intervention by the Federated Suns to save Luthien, and Theodore's son on Teniente. In the War of 3039—"

Having wilted before Caleb's initial onslaught, Yori bounced back quickly now that he had walked into her trap. "In the War of 3039, Hanse Davion committed more resources than was healthy for his realm. All in an effort to look strong against mounting criticism for the costs the Federated Suns bore from the Fourth Succession War. Oh, he had crippled the Confederation, *hai*. But even he later admitted that 3039 was a mistake."

Caleb scoffed. "I know of no such admission."

"Outreach," Julian interjected. "3051. He reportedly said as much to Theodore Kurita himself."

His cousin, the prince's champion, took the side of a Drac over the Davion heir's? Caleb stood stunned at the betrayal.

"And the coordinator," Julian continued, regurgitating more of his studies of military and political history, "admitted that the Combine's defense was little more than an empty shell. A bluff that just happened to work." He smiled disarmingly. "You dig deeply enough, you can find blame and regrets enough to go around on either side of an engagement."

As a peace-making attempt, Caleb felt that Julian could have done better. Like jumping in on his side with the appropriate facts and shutting down Yori Kurita. Had Julian missed the fact that Yori's spirited debate had actually swung a few approving nods in her direction? Alaric Wolf and Jasek Kelswa-Steiner, and Lars Magnusson? Even Nikol Marik seemed ready to forget Yori's deception. Dogs, banding together to snap at the heels of the stronger, more successful, Federated Suns.

Whatever small feeling of camaraderie had been in the group vanished at that instant for Caleb.

"I do not necessarily agree with that," he said.

Yori, who'd looked for a moment as if she'd been ready to accept Julian's analysis for the face-saving gesture it was, suddenly stiffened her spine. "Then I cannot, as well."

"A Trial of Refusal?" Alaric Wolf asked Lars, sounding amused at the battle of wills playing out before them all.

But Lars Magnusson shrugged away the idea. "They both refuse. This seems more a point of honor to me." He laughed. "He said, she said."

"Do not discuss us as if we are not standing right here," Caleb snapped, fuming. He felt a light sweat beading at the nape of his neck as his flush of anger burned hot and steady.

Alaric Wolf grinned, no doubt enjoying getting something back for his earlier treatment. "If you had made the challenge for yourself," he said with acidic bite, "we would not need to. Though I suppose The Republic would be resistant to the idea of a live-fire trial taking place here on Terra."

Tara Campbell glanced once to Jasek Kelswa-Steiner, as if expecting his support. "That would not be Exarch Levin's preferred method for diplomats or warriors settling their differences, no."

Jasek, though, offered a second plan. "Why not use simulators, then?" He ignored Tara's glare. "No blood, no foul."

"No fun," Alaric added. But he nodded. "For honor only, then. They could refight a battle from the War

of 3039.”

Yori hedged a brief second, then, “That would seem appropriate.” Though she said it half-heartedly.

“It would seem childish and pointless to me,” Caleb scoffed. “I see no reason to further subject myself to your juvenile games.”

Alaric smiled. “Then we will simply assume the Combine victorious.”

“How can there be a victory when there is no contest?” Caleb asked.

“Because as you agreed before, some are more equal than others.”

Caught out on his own words, Caleb felt the noose tightening. He had put off dealing with whatever trouble his relationship with Danai might bring, but now there was the Combine rearing its dragon’s head.

When you fight a dragon, you send your best knight.

“Very well,” Caleb agreed. “This shall be settled. But between military minds. For his”—interference—“his exemplary analysis of a few moments ago, I name Julian as my champion.”

Alaric sneered. “He is the prince’s champion, not the prince-ling’s.”

And for that slur alone, Caleb decided that Alaric Wolf needed to be taught some manners. “If his inclusion frightens you so much, Wolf, perhaps you should fight on the side of Yori Kurita and the Combine.”

Was that a flicker of doubt shadowing Alaric’s eyes? He glanced aside, as if searching for someone, then nodded. Subdued, but not submitting. “*Aff*. So be it.”

“The War of ’39 also involved House Steiner,” Callandre Kell jumped in. “I will second Julian, if he’ll have me.”

“And I—” Jasek stepped forward. “Sounds like fun.”

It obviously sounded like a lot of things to Julian, whose face clouded under a dark storm of emotions, but “fun” did not appear to be among them. Caleb stared back calmly, having trapped his cousin as a fitting punishment for his earlier offenses. Laying hands on Caleb. Treating with the enemy. Prince’s champion or no, Julian should be reminded where his loyalties lay.

Sandra glared openly at Caleb, and then gave Julian a supportive nod. Tara Campbell waited, patiently, for Julian’s decision, while others also looked to the countess now as a kind of neutral party. A referee for the event.

“I’ll do it—” Julian agreed. His dark glance in Caleb’s direction promised words later. Quite a few of them, the heir thought. But of course he would fight for the honor of the Federated Suns.

Really, what choice had Julian ever had?

We support Devlin Stone! We support The Republic! And we support Exarch Jonah Levin!

Let anyone try to stand against us!

—Rally Cry, Republicans for Righteous Rule, Denebola, 4 May 3135

*Terra
Republic of the Sphere
12 May 3135*

The Genève Auxiliary Training Center was not for the common soldier. That much was apparent to Julian the moment escorts appeared to walk them across the grounds. Men wearing conservative dark suits, with military buzz cuts and restless eyes.

The training center bordered the well-guarded facilities of SIS, the Sphere Intelligence Service, and Julian quickly compared it to its analog back on New Avalon: the Advanced Simulation Project housed beneath the Watchtower, pride of the Federated Suns' military arm. He also had seen the short bank of lockers in the outfitting room. Seventeen of them, with a thumbprint scanner set near each lock. No names stenciled or etched into the doors. Everyone knew to whom these lockers belonged.

Paladins.

Julian leaned in toward Callandre as they shouldered their way through heavy doors, back into the hall. "If I had to guess," he said, "this is where they run simulations based on the intelligence recovered from other nations."

"Guess that means you'll be running this one without being able to hack the hardware first."

He affected a wounded expression. "That was your specialty," he reminded her. "Not mine."

Sandra Fenlon, with her own plainclothes escort, waited for the warriors in the hall between the outfitting room and Simulation Center. Hearing the end of their conversation, Sandra shushed them both. "Don't even joke about that here." She glanced at the back of the two well-dressed men who led the way, obviously uncomfortable.

With reason. It had taken several days to set up the simulator grudge match. Not just to program the historical battle, but also to secure permissions. A few diplomats from The Republic made halfhearted attempts to cancel the event, but with Prince Harrison as well as Warlord Toranaga supporting the honor match, and both determined to view it from the SIS data center next door, there was no stopping this ball once it got rolling.

International relations at their finest.

The entire building was brightly lit, but cold, the hallways particularly so. The chill was emphasized by a tiled floor, steel walls painted a neutral beige, and overhead lights that flooded every corner. Dressed only in MechWarrior togs—shorts, cooling vest and combat boots—Julian shivered. The touch of cool

air raised gooseflesh on his arms and legs. Callandre had on padded tanker's gear, which gave her a bit more protection, but Julian caught her rubbing her arms. Only Jasek Kelswa-Steiner did not seem to notice the cold at all, ranging ahead with long, eager strides.

Their escorts split up at the next corner, where a stairwell shot off from the branching corridor. Just ahead, along the main hall, were the reinforced doors leading into the simulator room. One escort set his hand over a scanner built in next to the doors. There was a buzzing sound inside the walls.

The other escort waited at the stairs. "I'll escort Miss Fenlon to the observatory."

All four scions paused, and Sandra wished them luck.

"Don't worry," Callandre whispered, sneaking furtive glances from side to side. "I got us an inside guy. He'll bring you a minirecorder to the observatory."

"What's that good for?" Sandra asked, wide-eyed, falling into the trap.

Julian smiled. "About fifteen to twenty. With time off for good behavior. Stop it, Calamity."

Jasek laughed and Sandra scolded Callandre Kell with a sharp glare. But she couldn't hold it. No one stayed mad at Calamity Kell for long. She shooed Julian on with a quick kiss on his cheek and a wave.

Julian turned around, clapped Callandre on the shoulder and turned her into Jasek and the doorway. "Time to get our game faces on," he said.

"Let's go to war."

Yori Kurita rode out the hard shaking as her *Grand Dragon* tumbled backward and slammed into the ground, laid flat out on its back as the artillery barrage continued to shatter the ridgeline on which she'd stood. Fire and smoke rolled over her position. Gravel and blackened earth pattered against her ferroglass shield.

She heard frying sparks and smelled burning ozone as one of her auxiliary monitors crashed.

She tasted blood where she'd bit her tongue.

The simulation was that good.

Yori Kurita had not given Republic programmers enough credit. Or their hardware. She had expected simulators of similar or lesser quality than what she had trained on at the Sun Zhang academy. But The Republic had built theirs on some of the best ComStar hardware available before the Jihad, offering full sensory immersion, the smells and sounds and visceral feel of being in a live-fire situation.

The taste of blood, that was real. Being slammed back as the simulator pod rolled and jumped in its gimbaled framework, she'd truly bitten her tongue. It throbbed with dull pain.

Wrestling with her control sticks, Yori struggled her *Dragon* back to its feet. The grasslands burned in large patches for kilometers in every direction, but eight meters above the low ridgeline she looked out over the worst of the smoke. On the ground, vehicles tore through patches of flame while armored

infantry used the ash-choked columns as screens.

Calling down her fighter screen in an attempt to silence the Long Tom artillery fire working over her line, Yori carefully walked her 'Mech down into the general fray. The sixty-ton *Grand Dragon* had lost serious armor across its shoulders and chest, but the machine was still plenty randy, with hard-hitting power behind it.

As a Davion *Firestarter* found out in the next moment as she speared it in the chest with her particle projector cannon, ripping through armor and myomer muscles and opening up a huge wound with molten edges, dripping crusted splashes of ceramic composite to the ground. A double handful of LRMs slammed into the wound right after, tearing apart the fusion reactor and releasing the golden fury deep inside the 'Mech.

It disintegrated in a violent explosion that overturned a nearby pair of Joust tanks and spilled riders from the seats of hoverbikes.

And left a large gaping wound in the line of Julian Davion's main thrust.

"Ghost Company," she ordered, "advance and fire."

Her voice-activated mic picked up the commands, relaying them to her teammates and to the central computer that juggled all auxiliary units. Three heavy lances pushed forward, swinging into the Davion line, spreading the gap wider as they used their firepower to worry the Federated Suns positions. Two *Warhammer*s and a *Catapult*, leading forward a pack of Demon assault tanks and several APCs full of Raiden battle armor. The mix of units was not perfect, historically, but did a good job of capturing the flavor.

Countess Tara Campbell, refereeing the match, had been very specific on that point.

"The historical records are not one hundred percent," she'd explained the day before. "And The Republic's best hardware is configured for modern-day units and for running auxiliary null-tactical slaves using today's force-mix philosophies." The successful simulation of any large-scale combat came down to the ANTS. Units run wholly on computer probabilities, based on overall strategic commands given by the "real" commanders.

Being offered a glimpse of the technology used by The Republic to train its knights, its paladins, was too good an opportunity to pass up. Yori knew that providing a report on the equipment to Warlord Toranaga would be of great worth. But a recent Sun Zhang graduate against the prince's champion?

Of course she would lose this battle.

In the end, the honor-match participants had all voted to go with the better technology package. Eager to see what tricks The Republic had cooked up. So instead of fighting a specific battle from the War of 3039, Tara had boiled the entire war down into a single tactical game. Julian Davion was given deep munitions reserves and equipment with better tactical flexibility. Callandre commanded a veteran armor battalion, and Jasek Kelswa-Steiner the "Lyrans front," which consisted of two regular assault companies that he wielded at his own discretion—*Atlases* leading Behemoth combat vehicles.

Their mission was to capture three cities, and they had two of those already, while Yori's concern was to simply hold them off for as long as possible. She had been given two medium-strength battalions, one of which Julian had chewed up and spit out in the first hour, her own heavy command company, and a

final company of “hidden” forces to simulate Theodore Kurita’s Ghost Regiments, which had been used back in ’39 to turn the tide of battle. Kisho commanded the Ghosts. Alaric Wolf she let freelance a combined forces company, with only the most general guidance to “devil the Lyran assault and keep them busy.”

So far, the wolf had done an incredible job. Jasek’s contingent was spread out over five clicks, trying to regroup, and Alaric had claimed five “kills” for himself.

Yori had only the one *Firestarter* and a Mobile HQ so far. A poor showing.

Desperate to improve her record for Toranaga, Yori pushed her weapons, fast-cycling them in order to add to the damage already being wrought by the twin *Warhammer* s. White-hot energy arced across the burning ground as her PPC sliced deep into the side of a retreating *Centurion* . Her missiles corralled and decimated a short squad of Cavalier infantry.

Yori pulled a pair of Shoden assault vehicles in close, protecting her flanks as she half-walked, half-slid down the ridgeline’s tailings. Kisho continued to push forward past her position and deep, deep into the Davion backfield.

Springing the Ghosts on Julian so late in the battle had been a risky maneuver, but now the fresh assault force not only blunted the Davion thrust, it began rolling up both sides of his forward line. The *Warhammer* s slashed apart vehicles and infantry formations with their PPCs. Demons raced down more versatile tanks—Condors and even some of Callandre’s deadly SM1 Destroyers—using pack-tactics to drag down the stronger vehicles.

Raidens clung to the sides of armored hovercraft or swarmed the lower legs of BattleMechs. A pair of Jousts attempted to retreat. VV1 Rangers and Hasek MCVs pressed forward, milled about uncertainly. Some dropped Infiltrator infantry, which Kisho’s *Catapult* shattered and scattered. The rest tucked tail and ran.

Not what she had expected to see.

Not at all.

The entire Davion front was stalled and wide open!

There was nothing concrete. Nothing that said this wasn’t a trap to draw her in for the kill. It was simply a gut feeling, gauged from the reaction of the auxiliary units and how that chaos was likely extrapolated from a broken Davion strategy. The conservative decision, she knew, would be to take advantage of the lull to reform her line.

But a very loud and dangerous voice inside her argued for an immediate reprisal attack.

“It is often better to fail spectacularly than persevere in mediocrity,” she whispered, careful of her voice-activated mic.

The words weren’t hers. They belonged to Theodore Kurita. They belonged to the Kurita defense in the War of 3039.

Swallowing back the taste of blood and scorched electronics, Yori toggled for an all-hands channel before she could think better of it.

“Main forces, advance!” she ordered.

Throttling up into a run, the *Grand Dragon* ate up the ground in strong, four-meter paces.

“Straight into the teeth, and kick them back down their throat. *Wakarimas-ka?*”

She swapped fire with a *Davion Pack Hunter*, trading particle cannons. But she had greater armor reserves to fall back upon. Soon the fast-attack 'Mech was also limping for its rear lines. Her missiles arced out in wave after wave, falling among the infantry and light armor assets Julian had left exposed. Kisho's *Warhammer*s speared forward in a two-prong drive.

His *Catapult* and her *Dragon* followed.

The Davions were in full retreat. It was working!

“Banzai Company, push to liberate Nagasoku. Alaric, if you have anything left, now is the time! Hit them. CRUSH them!” she shouted, already tasting victory.

“Forward the Dragon!”



Devastation! Far as the eye can see! The world of Misery is certainly earning its name as mercenaries supported out of the nearby Federated Suns' March continue their pogrom against rogue samurai who have taken up the Combine's cause in the Draconis Reach. Oh, the humanity!

—Misery Broadcast Trivid, Unknown Report, Misery, 16 April 3135

Terra
Republic of the Sphere
13 May 3135

Erik Sandoval-Groell was allowed to accompany his uncle into one of the training center's monitoring stations. A narrow, windowless bunker-style room suffering from a lack of good ventilation, it was close and stuffy. And he was choking on the dueling perfumes worn by Sandra Fenlon and Nikol Marik.

Lars Magnusson did not seem to mind. The Ghost Bear warrior seemed to enjoy the company of both women as all three crowded near the left-hand wall, watching the battle unfold on a number of wall-mounted flat-D screens where “guncam” footage played alongside tactical and strategic overviews. Lars stood in a modified parade rest, as if concerned with where he might allow his hands to roam. His gaze kept jumping from one screen to the next, and when asked he offered commentary on how things were progressing.

Badly, from the looks of it. But no one could be certain.

No holotank display. No live network to pull up a review of casualty percentages or tactical scoring. Erik and Aaron had both been surprised at the rudimentary facilities offered their small group. Erik

wondered if the better monitoring station had been given to the Dracs and the few Wolves who had shown an interest in the battle. Or had a cadre of Republic knights—or paladins—reserved the best equipment in the Auxiliary Training Center?

And Erik could only imagine the treasures being shown off inside the Sphere Intelligence Service building next door, a show catering to Prince Harrison and Warlord Toranaga.

“Is Julian faking weakness?” Erik asked aloud, voice pitched for his uncle alone. Not that either of them had any doubts that the barest whisper could be—and was being—recorded.

Duke Aaron Sandoval had chosen a paramilitary uniform similar to the modified Republic dress worn by most Swordsworn officers. Worn by Erik as well, this day. The lord governor of Prefecture IV stood in a posture of relaxed meditation. One foot out in front of the other. Resting his right elbow in his left hand, propping up the right arm so he could tap two fingers against his chin. A study of idle concentration.

Always playing a role. Today: the indulgent nobility.

“If so, it is a very good act. And Yori Kurita has bought into it.”

Erik watched the battle as it turned against the Federated Suns. It bothered him deeply, watching Combine forces roll in against a Davion line—the Sandoval dynasty’s greatest fear, the threat they had lived with for so many generations. Erik might be displaced into The Republic of the Sphere for his education and edification under the care of his “uncle” Aaron, but that did not make his heart beat blood that was any less sworn to the Draconis March. And the family.

He swallowed dryly, edging up to the brink of their latest talks. “What about the March?” he asked. “Are they buying?”

Aaron shot the young scion a hard look, but did not rebuke him. What they knew about Combine troop movements was, for the moment, private knowledge. As were efforts by the Sandoval dynasty back in the Federated Suns to take advantage of them.

“What the family decides to do will be without the input of you or I, Erik. Our concern remains with the worlds of The Republic.”

Except that they could be elevated to so much more. Now! At this moment! Erik had watched his uncle put it all into place over the last few years. The support he’d garnered from like-minded nobles and military leaders. Governors and legates and even, he suspected, a knight or two. All for the express purpose (expressed to Erik, anyway) of turning over Republic worlds to the Federated Suns in one fell swoop.

Aaron might have hoped for greater, even, in his private plans, but with Harrison Davion cozying up to the exarch, why not take what they could, now, and support the dynasty’s plans at the same time?

“Patience, Erik.” Aaron cautioned him, as if sensing the younger man’s thoughts. “The wisest leaders delay the longest, and then move the swiftest. After all, look at what the last few months have brought us.”

A fractured government. Disgraced nobility and a diminished exarch. More worlds teetering on the edge, including Tikonov! The Confederation struck at will throughout Prefecture V, and had begun making inroads into IV and VI, and yet Aaron continued to wait things out on Terra.

“There are even rumors of an assassination attempt against the exarch. Now is not the time for rash decisions.”

Which played well to any hidden recording equipment, as it could be read two ways. In support of the exarch, or simply waiting for him to fall on his own time. But . . . rumors! Aaron had no idea what it had cost Erik to help arrange that “attempt.” Now was precisely the time! There were loans being called due.

Still, he understood Aaron’s caution. Would Prince Harrison support any bid by the Swordsworn worlds for Davion sponsorship? That was still the question. “We have friends, at least,” Erik said. And they did.

“But which are our best and most able?” Aaron asked. “The Republic is awash with its own struggles. We are courted from all sides.” No surprise there. In fact, that was information the Swordsworn leaders *wanted* in the hands of The Republic’s wardens. “And there is always the new question of House Davion.”

“Question?” Erik frowned.

The lord governor turned his attention away from the monitors, and the honor match, to rake at his nephew with a cutting tone. “Prince Harrison has his own agenda, Erik. Never doubt that. And he has not forgotten the Sandovals in his dealings with The Republic. But I’ve barely had forty minutes alone with him since I arrived on planet, and he has completely rebuffed your approaches.”

“So?” The prince was a busy man with layer upon layer of subtleties. Why should it be surprising that he was reluctant to appear too cozy with the Sphere’s resident Sandovals?

“So I find it odd that he made a point to push your meeting onto the schedule with Julian Davion. And now, after a lengthy introduction at the Exarch’s Grand Ball, I will meet with the young officer as well. Not the prince, Erik. But the prince’s champion.”

Strange, yes. But: “I guess I do not see it. What is the question?”

Aaron turned his gaze back to the match winding down on the monitors. A final, no-holds-barred slugfest with units broken and burning on most every screen. “I’m wondering, is all,” he said, tapping at his chin again.

“Where is Caleb Davion?”

It should have been Caleb, Julian decided, standing up under Yori Kurita’s withering assault. Caleb, who the night of the reception had gone after the Combine warriors with something to prove. Whose casual insults and superior air had made the honor match happen. No accommodation. No other way to save face.

And now, no clean victory.

Yori Kurita kept coming at him, throwing units into the face of his line, spending lives and materiel in good samurai fashion and never letting him reset his forces. The *Warhammer*s tore apart anything he thrust between them, and the *Catapult* and Yori’s *Dragon* were no small threat as well. Julian finally drew

a trio of JES II missile carriers into a short line near his position to threaten any advancing unit with missile envelopment.

Which lasted until Alaric Wolf slipped in behind Jasek's *Atlas* and took out all three of the allied munitions stockpiles in quick order. Wham, wham, WHAM!

They erupted in catastrophic gouts of fire that shook the entire battlefield and started several large forest fires burning behind the Davion positions. A simulated wind carried more dark, sooty smoke over the battlefield, which filtered through his cockpit's simulator system as a distant, charcoal tang.

Worse, the loss of his stockpiles "turned off" the unlimited ammunition option Tara Campbell had granted his forces during the simulation setup. Suddenly, his JES carriers all reported low ammo bins, and began firing with miserly care. And as the threat of missile envelopment fell aside, the Combine line regained its courage.

Julian had recognized the munitions dumps as his strategic weakness, but had counted on Jasek's two companies handling Alaric Wolf. Seven kills! And now his munitions stockpiles as well!

Julian's frustrations ate away at his confidence. Worried him in a way that, in a live firefight, he'd never have allowed. A field commander could not afford to second-guess himself. He had what he arrived on the field with, and did the best he could against the enemy force.

That's how it had been on New Hessen, with Raul Ortega and Colonel Torris.

It's how he prepared every day for the coming conflict with House Liao's Capellan Confederation. Studying their tactics and force strength deployments. Readyng the Capellan March to hold under what would likely be a devastating assault.

But here, in a tactical simulation, however "real" the equipment made *it seem*, Julian understood every moment that he was in a battle for pride alone. And pride was about the most ridiculous reason for war. Pride had caused Hanse Davion to overreact against the Capellan Confederation in the second part of the Fourth Succession War. It was one of the primary forces that had brought about the annihilation of Clan Smoke Jaguar, if one counted pride as the motivating force behind the lasing of Edo City.

And with pride on the line instead of life, he couldn't say for certain he fought at his best. Though he wasn't so certain the same could be said of the Combine contingent, when pride and honor meant as much to some of them—many of them—as their lives.

"Calamity," he toggled for his armor commander. "Weneed one of those 'Hammers silenced. Now!"

"It's gonna cost."

Julian dropped his crosshairs over a nearby *Shoden*, determined to put the tactical missile carrier out of commission. One of his Jessies slammed a score of warheads around its position, but somehow managed to miss with just about every one.

"Pay it," he ordered.

The *Templar*'s targeting computer drew a second targeting reticle just off to the side, correcting for the odd angle and the *Shoden*'s movement. Julian squeezed into both primary triggers, lancing through the gray, sooty haze with two bolts of man-made lightning.

Both struck the seventy-ton assault vehicle. Suddenly a line of bright, argent fire backwashed out from around the main turret track, tearing it half away from the mount, and was quickly overpowered as the missile load in its launcher exploded in a column of tall fire.

At the same time, Callandre Kell speared out from the sidelines with her SM1 leading a charge of two Condors and a second pair of Goblins. She'd even managed to scrounge up a combat engineer squad as well. *That* would grab some attention.

If he let it.

“Concentrate fire on the eastern *'Hammer*,” he ordered, buying Calamity some grace. He pushed his throttle forward, angling away from the *Catapult* to offer his own support.

“I’m a bit out of position,” Jasek cautioned.

Well, yeah. Strung out over far too many kilometers, torn between an advance and a rear guard strategy that had already failed. Julian had something for him, though. He squinted to read his blurred HUD. “Take down Alaric Wolf. *Do not* let him regroup.”

“My pleasure.”

For a reason Julian couldn’t quite pin down, he felt like he’d just thrown more meat to the . . . well . . . wolves.

A different pair of Destroyers drove back Yori Kurita’s *Dragon* while Julian worked his own fire team into position against one of the *Warhammer* s. Calamity Kell did not let tactics get in her way as she charged through a thin Kurita line, forming the second half of a brute-force pincer maneuver. Her Destroyer rocked sideways under a PPC lashing, but powered forward regardless, spitting a fury of hot metal from its autocannon which hacked brutally through one of the *Warhammer* ’s arms, dropping the limb onto a charred piece of ground.

Then Julian’s particle cannon sliced long and deep across the *'Hammer*’s right side and chest. Shrapnel exploded out of the centerline gash as the *'Mech*’s gyro tore itself apart, spraying in a storm of high-velocity shards. Callandre’s Condors raced up with lasers flaring gem-bright energy and missiles hammering a lethal tattoo over the BattleMech’s head and shoulders. The cockpit canopy caved inward and the pilot’s space filled with fire.

The *Warhammer* was “dead” before it ever hit the ground.

But the Kurita team was not finished. Pushing forward, as if sensing the end of the battle, Yori’s *Dragon* threw bolt after bolt of particle energy Julian’s direction while Kisho concentrated on Callandre’s position. The Nova Cat’s missiles crippled, then hammered into scrap one of the Goblins.

The remaining *Warhammer* spent more vicious energy on a Condor, which flipped off a small rise and overturned.

And on Juian’s tactical HUD, he saw one blue icon after another go dark as the Lyran force continued to feed Alaric Wolf more victims.

“Dammit, Jasek.” His voice came out as a croak, sucked dry of all moisture as special vents in the

cockpit floor dumped hot, stale air into the compartment. Simulating the heat spikes that followed so much cannon fire. "I said take him down, not choke him on your own men."

"Easier said . . . done" was the distant, broken reply. "He's not . . . your way at least."

No. Alaric seemed quite content to rest on his laurels, leaving the Draconis Combine's main thrust on their own while he continued to decimate the entire Lyran front.

Everything was happening at a quicksilver pace found in the most desperate battles. Julian's JES carriers all ran out of missiles at the same time and became nothing more than blocking dummies. Yori stepped on one as she pushed by, grappling into point-blank range with Julian's *Templar*. And Kisho was suddenly knocked down onto his side as Callandre's Destroyer slid past the downed *Hammert* to unload her last few hundred rounds into his *Catapult*.

The remaining *Warhammer* was under siege as the last Goblin spilled out a line of hoarded Hauberk battle armor and the combat engineers attacked from its blind side with grapple rods and the black boxes they would need to try and take over the BattleMech. If they could clear out the MechWarrior inside.

Everything else on the field was fighting one-on-one skirmishes, already burning, or trying to limp away.

One broken unit after another. On both sides. It would take a damn good computer to rack up the scores and debits, and try to pull a winner out of this charnel hole.

Yori claimed another kill as she blitzed Callandre's Destroyer from the side, burning through the crew quarters with argent fire. Kisho stayed down as Hauberks jumped from the *Warhammer* to his *Catapult*, swarming over the sides and shoulders of his machine, burning and tearing with their mechanical claws.

Julian slammed his PPCs after Yori, arcing the blue-white whips after her in one last effort to take her with him. Surprisingly, he was laughing. Croaking out a hard, barking laugh that seemed incongruous with the "death" of his friend and the carnage being piled up around him. It was all too much. Too many simulated deaths. Too many serious players.

"You and me, Yori Kurita," he challenged her, toggling to an unsecured circuit. He pushed his heat scale into dangerous territory, flailing with his PPCs in desperation. "The sword and the Dragon!"

She did not have that much more left to give either. The armor on her sixty-ton 'Mech was more memory than materiel, and grayish smoke seeped out of several deep wounds in the 'Mech's torso. But she rallied gamely to his call, flinging out her own curses in Japanese even as she struck with missiles and particle cannon.

Her final blast of hellish fire washed over the face of his *Templar*'s cockpit even as his own final pair merged into one raging torrent of crackling energies, coring through her *Dragon*'s chest and spearing completely through and out the back side. His cockpit slammed back hard and the screens all washed over with blistering red before blinking out.

Darkness crashed in around him, and the simulator pod settled into its cradle with small rocking motions.

Only the lights on his communications board stayed lit.

"This concludes our test," Julian said, gasping for breath in the stifling hot air. A smile turned up the corners of his mouth.

“We now return you to your regularly scheduled lives.”

I can imagine a perfect world. A world without violence. Without armies. Without war.

And I can imagine us attacking that world because they would never expect it.

—Anonymous signature line, SphereNet, Terra, 15 May 3135

Terra

Republic of the Sphere

19 May 3135

Conner Rhys-Monroe shucked his cooling vest inside the Cavalry, dug out a one-piece coverall from the storage locker built in behind the VTOL’s copilot seat, and pulled it on in the final moments before landing at the Darmstadt estates given to him by Senator Derius. He had power-napped for most of the flight, resting uneasily as the rotors thundered overhead, shaking his entire world. His muscles were stiff and sore from too much time spent in the crash seat of his *Rifleman*. The cordite scent of spent gunpowder trailed along wherever he went.

Seeing him awake, the pilot toggled for his onboard speakers. “We’re going to bounce you down, Senator, and get back to Mannheim, *ja*? We’ve called for a civilian transport to follow up.”

There was no easy way to conduct a conversation, so Conner simply nodded as the pilot glanced back through the cabin. He caught a stanchion next to the open door, leaning out as the Cavalry swept in low over the rose garden and aimed for the helipad.

The skids had barely kissed ferrocrete when he was down, ducking low, and running out from beneath the rotors as the craft leaped back into the air and thundered south again.

It was a short jog through the rose garden to the rear of the mansion. Double-wide French doors waited open with an infantry guard standing watch just inside. Conner threw a quick salute to the military officers looking at a map rolled out over a twenty-eighth-century breakfast table, and took the plush-carpeted stairs three at a time, heading for the upstairs library.

The Darmstadt estate actually had very little to recommend it as a military strongpoint, but was far enough behind the lines not to worry about it for now. What it had was a certain level of comfort and familiarity for the few senators who had remained on Terra, and was convenient to the forward lines. Growing more convenient by the day, in fact, as The Republic continued to press the loyalists deeper into Germany.

As a viscount’s son, he’d been born to these kind of surroundings. As a knight, he’d seen plenty of time in stark barracks and lonely battlefields.

As a loyalist he was now trapped between both worlds, and the border was wearing thin.

Especially when Cray Stansill met him at the library doors, dressed in a smart suit of dark green silk and

carrying a sweating highball.

Conner reached back, then double-pumped his fist right into the other man's jaw.

Hard.

Stansill flew back off his feet. His highball crashed and tumbled over the thick Berber, staining the oyster knit with a splash of dark bourbon. Two other people in the room jumped to their feet, but out of shock, unprepared for violence.

"Lord Monroe . . ." Senator Riktofven didn't seem to know what should come next, and stood there, mouth agape.

Therese Ptolomey shook her head in disappointment. "Certainly, Conner, there was a better way to voice your disagreement. Especially when Sir Stansill is a guest in your house."

Conner stood in the doorway, tense, breathing hard from his run up the stairs. He looked at the room's final occupant, and traded long, hard stares with Melanie Vladistock. Of the senators, after Lina Derius left for her homeworld of Liberty, she was the one he spent the most time with. Planning. Discussing the future of the loyalist movement.

"I told you," Melanie said to the others with a shrug. "He would not be happy."

Cray Stansill rolled onto his side, rubbing a hand gingerly at his jaw, careful of the split lower lip that bled bright red droplets onto his chin, his white shirt and the carpeting. He spat more blood, not caring about the floor or the company. "He's going to be less unhappy very shortly," the rogue knight said.

Riktofven helped Stansill to his feet, then steered him toward a nearby chair. "Do not embarrass yourself further, Cray."

Conner was not about to let the former knight and his comrade-in-arms off so easily. "What were you thinking?" he asked, chasing after him. Grinding his fury beneath each hard footstep. "You had an aerospace squadron try for Geneva? The Hall of Government? Do you want to escalate this war?"

"I'm not afraid of it," Stansill said, shrugging off Riktofven and jumping back into Conner's face. "And the timing was perfect, with everyone's attention suddenly diverted by incoming news of the Combine's invasion. Why else did you organize a quick push to retake Stuttgart and Karlsruhe? Strike the head from The Republic, and we'd be back in Geneva, better to organize a real defense of The Republic."

"That is not your decision to make. Those decisions come from here, in this room. You're a loose cannon, Cray."

"I'm not limiting myself to half-measures, if that's what you mean. The Republic has pushed us back nearly every day for three weeks. This series of 'containment skirmishes' they keep harping about on the newsvids. We are in a war, Conner. And we need to start fighting it without you acting as if your father was still looking over your shoulder."

Blind with rage, Conner swung at him again. Stansill was ready for it this time, blocked the jab, and then looped an arcing blow that smashed into the side of Conner's head. He tried to follow it up with a hook to the jaw. Conner ducked back, then used a stiff-armed blow to the underside of Stansill's chin to snap the other knight's head back. A double-fisted palm heel into Stansill's gut knocked the wind and the fight

out of the other man, dropping him back in his chair while Conner stood over him, blind with rage, chest heaving.

Senator Riktofven moved in physically to separate the two of them and this time haul Conner away. "This solves nothing! Lord Monroe, take hold of yourself."

It was hard. And growing harder every day. Conner's temper had a short fuse at the best of times. His closed-door argument with Lina Derius had been one of the driving factors for her relocation off Terra, he was certain.

Now he shook Riktofven free from his arm. "You people brought me in to this to do a job. We had a plan, and it was a good one. But if Cray goes freelancing again, I'm done. Are we clear?"

He waited for a simple nod of acknowledgment from Riktofven and Ptolomeny. Melanie was more cautious with her agreement. "So you think we can salvage this still?"

Her calm voice soothed the inflammation, and Conner gave the question a moment of thought as he dropped onto the leather divan next to her. His hands remained clenched into tight fists. The others arranged themselves around the room, waiting. Even Cray Stansill, recovering his breath, sat forward quietly to wait for some kind of decision.

So much happening. Within and without. From every direction. It wasn't enough that the Jade Falcons had taken Skye and Liao continued to push at Prefectures IV and V. Now House Kurita had pushed forward, striking at the border worlds in Prefecture I. Add those burdens onto a Republic currently at war with itself, trying to reestablish its own identity. . . .

"I don't know," he finally said. "Everything is breaking down, both on world and off. The news journalists are taking cheap shots at us now. Not even pretending to carry our message. It's getting lost between sound bites. Countess Campbell, damn her, owns the media on Terra and half the other Republic worlds, it seems."

Riktofven found his own drink on a nearby marble coaster. He sipped and then gestured with the glass toward the ceiling. "We knew it might come to that. The exarch's strongest here on Terra. We've weakened him, and perhaps that is enough. Especially with the latest burden being heaped onto his plate."

"Not just his, Michael." Melanie Vladistock came from Prefecture II. Along with Senators Onataki and Rwal. "This couldn't have come at a worse time."

"Or a better one," Cray Stansill said, rejoining the conversation.

His lip still bled, and he smeared the stain over his chin with the back of one hand. But his voice was strong and confident again. "I mean, here the exarch has the coordinator of House Kurita *right on planet*. And so do we."

Through the few contacts Conner had left on the other side of the wall, he knew that Vincent Kurita was making large noises accusing the Warlord of Benjamin District, Mitsura Sakamoto, of taking matters into his own hands. And putting a great measure of the blame for this "brushfire action" on the shoulders of Katana Tormark. But how well was that playing in the upper circles?

Could they take advantage of it?

“One way or another, we need to rally whatever we have here on Terra and make a decisive stand. Possibly”—he waved Cray Stansill back—“a proactive one. But we need to strengthen our borders here in Europe first and foremost. That means risking overland flights with the men and materiel we have trapped in Spain and hopefully Asia as well. The Americas . . . we likely need to write them off. We can rescue the one or two knights we have in the desert outside of Sante Fe, but not much more than that.”

Stansill’s face darkened, but he held his peace. For the moment. Riktofven and Ptolomeny nodded, adding their silent votes, while Melanie Vladistock leaned in with one final question.

“And if the exarch decides to get in our way, Conner? What do we do then?”

The ex-knight of the sphere, and the only warrior-senator on the books, rested back. The only answer he had was the same one he’d known since his father’s death, and his decision to stand against the exarch.

“We do whatever we must.”

Geneva had sprouted up quickly to support its status as the capital of The Republic. Besides the impressive Hall of Government and the Senate Mall, Magnum Park and more ambassadorial offices than any small city should have descend upon it, there were numerous buildings along the so-called white collar belt that were filled with factions and functionaries with no other purpose than to help keep the impressive machine of government working as well as could be expected.

And on one of many floors dedicated to the Department of Fiscal Planning, the exarch had another private office.

Walking the abandoned halls late at night, with cleaning staff redirected to other floors and his security agents disappearing into the shadowed corners, Jonah Levin let himself slouch along without a care for appearances. The dark, empty offices fit his mood perfectly. Gloomy. Bitter.

With barely six months in office, he was ready to call it quits. Chuck the problems and return to his family and home on Kervil. And would have, if he’d been made of any less stern material. If he hadn’t taken an oath that he had always held more dear than his own life.

The Republic: first and foremost.

And now it was dying.

The door he chose was marked in no special way. A simple slab of polished oak, with the usual kick plate along the bottom edge decorated with black and brown scuffs. A long bronze plaque at eye level labeled Deputy Undersecretary for Economic Redevelopment.

That was him. He grabbed the door handle and held it a moment, letting the discreet sensors take a full palm reading, waiting for them to trip the hardware built into the wall and allow him access. He was one of two men who could open this door without setting off quite a few alarms and bringing a platoon of armed security crashing down. And the other man was already in the room. Of course.

The ghost paladin rose respectfully as the exarch entered the room, but Jonah waved him back into his

seat, a straight-backed chair set on one side of a simple desk. The entire office was modestly appointed, with conservative décor and plain, working furniture. A desk lamp cast only a small island of light into the center of the room, a precaution the exarch knew was redundant. The windows were sealed against any evidence that the office was occupied.

“You promised to have more for me,” Jonah said without preamble, dropping into the swivel seat behind the desk. “Let’s have it.”

The ghost paladin sat forward in his chair. Shrugged. “My network can’t work much faster than the JumpShips that brought the original news in-system,” he said. “But yes, I’ve picked up a few extra details. The advance forces are mostly part of the Benjamin Regulars, though at least one regiment of the Combine’s elite Sword of Light is operating within our borders. I expect them to lead any push into Prefecture III.”

“Will they hit Prefecture III?” Jonah asked.

“They will have to. Whether as a pretext for invasion or to truly oppose Katana Tormark . . . she has made III her power base and they will move to take it apart one world at a time.”

Liao . . . Jade Falcon . . . Kurita . . . the Senate. As a paladin, Jonah Levin had sworn to uphold the power and authority of the exarch against all enemies, foreign and domestic, never once believing that he’d see such opposition. Or that he’d be in the chair when it came.

“Another month. Two more weeks, even. If they could have held off just long enough to get us through the funeral services. To put our own house back in order, and perhaps strengthen our nascent alliances. We’d have had a chance at them, Emil. A chance at an eventual peace.”

It was the first time since taking office, perhaps, that he had called the ghost paladin by name. Certainly the first time in so long that he couldn’t remember for sure. It was so much easier when he dealt with his staff by titles and positions, not as real people. Especially when Jonah had to ask them to do things he was not proud of, and would never have done if it were only himself in danger and not the lives of billions at stake. Trillions, even.

“And to save even a fraction of them now, we must make some very hard choices. And hope there will be pieces that can be picked up later. But so many. So many.”

“And if I say, ‘This one shall not go with you,’ then he shall not go.”

Jonah recognized the paraphrased verse from the Unfinished Book, and also knew its earlier roots. “‘By these three hundred, I will save you.’ The biblical Book of Judges. Yes, it does feel like we must play God now. And if we don’t, all will perish.”

Emil nodded. “The ghost knights stand ready to deliver whatever assistance they must.” He paused, rarely accepting the chance to editorialize. Then: “You have good men and women around you, Exarch. They will all do their best. Even in the most trying of circumstances.”

“The Republic is dying, Emil. Stone’s grand vision fails. There will be no more trying times than this.”

“What is the order, Exarch?”

Jonah exhaled, long and tired. It always came down to that, didn’t it? And it did not help that the plans

for such an occurrence had been set down by Devlin Stone himself. It didn't help at all.

"Carefully," he said. "Quietly. Because I hold out some hope for a miracle. Begin preparations for our final line of defense.

"Ready Fortress Republic."

A THOUSAND CUTS

"Ah, woe the day! The handsome form of prince Siddhattha will surely be destroyed! What will he do to save himself?"

—**Buddhist Writings, I. The Buddha, The Attainment of Buddhahip**

Enlightenment would be a strange and glorious thing. But too often, I am afraid, we do not keep our seats long enough for reason, at the least, to prevail. And men who draw the sword of rebellion too often throw away the sheath.

—**Julian Davion, Lord Markeson, "War in the Historical Context,"
Published first on Kathil, 2 December 3134**

26

With calls for Capellan blood now rising from such worlds as New Syrtis, Kathil, and Chesterton, it is time for us to wonder if a strict policy of isolationism is, in fact, in our best interest. Or if stronger alliances are not the way of our future.

—**Jacque Blitzer, //battlecorps.org/blitzer, 12 May 3135**

*Terra
Republic of the Sphere
23 May 3135*

The touring shuttle's recycled air had a metallic, stale taste to it. Dry and lifeless. Fitting, Julian decided as he climbed the steel stairwell, seeking the upper decks. He slapped the cold, metal railing with each change of grip. Rattled the steps extra hard with pounding stomps, as if the banging tones could drive the images of a scarred and twisted wasteland from his head.

They couldn't.

The devastation was indelibly printed in his memory.

They were on another of the exarch's arranged tours and events to encourage interaction, and the shuttle's first pass over Hilton Head "island," or what was left of this historical site, had been a quick overflight at two kilometers. Julian had counted at least three distinct craters among the rocky shoals and barren scraps of land. The prepackaged "tour guide" being played over the shuttle's intercom system had explained these craters could have been made by burrowing nuclear warheads or preplanned spoilsport

bombs—historians still debated that today.

A second, lower pass in partial hover mode had taken twenty-two slow, excruciating minutes, and Julian pressed forward against the ferroglass walls of the portside viewing lounge with the rest of the diplomats and off-world delegates. Marking where the ComStar main compound had once stood, and finding the slabs of reinforced ferrocrete that were all that was left of a parade grounds or small DropPort. The steel-girder skeleton of a single building still thrust itself from the churning waters. Vegetation, what little survived the high background count of radiation, was stunted and coarse and twisted. Parodies of the island's former strength.

“Hilton Head Island was the de facto capital of Terra during ComStar and, later, the Word of Blake years.”

The professional narration continued even in the stairwell. A soft feminine voice, but serious.

“A seat for powerful organizations that controlled a virtual monopoly on all interstellar communication throughout the Inner Sphere. ComStar's formidable military strength was first suspected in 3025, when a glimpse of the island's underground warrens by outsiders proved the organization had safeguarded or restored several regiments of pristine, Star League-era BattleMechs.”

Another turn. Another flight of diamond-grate stairs.

“When ComStar emptied their vaults to defeat the Clans at Tukayyid in 3052, it was thought that most of Hilton Head's extensive complex fell into disuse. Until Word of Blake captured Terra, in 3058, and restored the underground complex.

“Exactly what resources these facilities lent Blakist forces preparing for and conducting the Jihad, we will never know. At least one nuclear warhead in the fifty megaton range detonated far below the surface of the island, collapsing the tunnels and great caverns. The island's center imploded even as other weapons—conventional and strategic—blasted its surface. What once had been a landmark of beauty and power, one hundred twenty square kilometers of cultivated forests and a sprawling, modern complex, was reduced in the space of a single hour to scorched bedrock and radioactive debris.”

“And that,” Aaron Sandoval said firmly as Julian finally gained the upper observation deck, “was nothing less than the entire place deserved.”

Aaron Sandoval wore a double-breasted suit rather than noble's finery or the paramilitary uniform he'd adopted leading his Swordsworn to the aid of Prefecture V. Today, he appeared more the businessman or a conventional politician on a junket than one of the most powerful men in The Republic.

The enclosed deck stretched wide enough to open up smoke-tinted portals on both sides of the narrow-bodied shuttlecraft. The two men had it to themselves, as the view from here was poor compared to the port and starboard lounges below, with their ferroglass walls and better angle on ground-based landmarks. Even the large digital monitors at the front and rear of the deck offered a better vision of the shattered island than the side portals, which posed the problem of seeing down over the curve of the shuttle's hull.

Standing near the forward monitor, Aaron turned down the volume on the nearby intercom system, leaving only a soft whisper reaching them from aft.

“Do you really believe that?” Julian asked the duke and lord governor. As he approached, Aaron

stepped forward and the two men shook hands. Brief but firm.

“Why not?” Aaron said. Shrugged. “ComStar, and especially Word of Blake, caused more than their share of misery in the history of the Inner Sphere. And we’re still reaping this particular whirlwind. The Blackout. Why didn’t we learn decades ago the hazards of being so dependent on HPG communications?”

There was a nearby table with a tray of iced drinks on it. Fresh; the glasses still sweating. Aaron had thoughtfully provided refreshments, as well as the conspicuous absence of service personnel. Julian helped himself to a glass of sparkling sweet seltzer. A sip helped clear the dry taste from his palate while he thought.

Aaron’s question had sounded rhetorical, so he left it alone. Instead, he answered the lord governor’s first statement.

“Their fair share of misery . . . There are few who could withstand that charge historically, Davions and Sandovals included.”

Did the duke flinch? Julian couldn’t be certain.

“And House Kurita most recently,” Aaron said.

“Yes.”

There wasn’t much else Julian *could* say. For the last five days, people had talked about little else, in private or public. Including the young scions, who continued to mingle carefully, and in meetings at the highest levels of power, which Julian continued to audit at Prince Harrison’s request. News of the first skirmishes between Draconis Combine and Republic forces eclipsed the expanding Liao war effort as headlining news, and also the ongoing struggle between Senate loyalists and Republic nationals happening right here on Terra.

“Vincent Kurita maintains that his realm has no official standing in the conflict.”

“And you believe that?” A hint of the Sandoval paranoia regarding the Dragon peeking through. And extra emphasis on *theyou*. Aaron helped himself to a shallow glass of a dark scarlet wine.

Julian sipped more of the sweet seltzer. He wagged his head. Not committing himself, or his prince, in any way. “It could be just as he says, two renegade leaders wrapped up in their own honor. Katana Tormark has certainly been agitating worlds on both sides of the borders. Warlord Benjamin could be simply following in the same form.”

“But what do *you* believe, Julian? The Dragon’s troops on the march? You must have a personal opinion.”

There was no way to be certain if Aaron Sandoval asked on behalf of The Republic, the powerful Sandoval dynasty, or himself. Which was Prince Harrison’s trouble in trying to deal with the lord governor; the man played his cards far too close, and bet conservatively.

“I think House Kurita has always been a formidable foe and, at times, a strong ally. I would never seek a war with them.” Especially as the Federated Suns continued to prepare for certain hostilities with the Capellan Confederation. But there was no need to mention that to Aaron Sandoval.

And no need to preempt the prince's decision, either.

"But if the Combine stepped over the line, I would not hesitate to meet them."

Aaron smirked. "A sentiment you proved with your recent showing in the simulators. A fine performance, by the way. Though I'm sure the prince must have hoped for a more unambiguous victory, especially with bootleg roms of the entire battle already available on the market."

Julian's turn to wince. This would be his second political headache involving simulators. His and Callandre's both. Though because of it, he had been approached with quite a bit of cautious praise. The young nobles and even some of the experienced delegates still weren't sure what to make of one another, but it helped when they had an icebreaker. Like discussing the finer points of the simulated battle, or what Julian thought of his opponents, or his allies, in the honor match.

"Regardless," Julian said, "Prince Harrison is taking good advantage of the moment. I've hardly had a moment to myself since that day."

"And now I am intruding with my request for this meeting. I could tell you that I'm sorry, but it would be a shallow apology, I'm afraid."

Shaking his head, Julian pointed out some nearby seats they could occupy, nodded the lord governor ahead of him.

"Don't worry about it. This is my third tour of the violent scars left behind after the Jihad. And the worst of them all, I think, though I have the Manhattan ruins and Gorst Flats still to visit."

No matter the mounting tensions or shifting political landscape, Harrison Davion continued to insist that Julian visit the militarily and politically poignant historical landmarks of Terra, either in the prince's company or with other important leaders from around The Republic and Inner Sphere. Not many cultural centers or museums of art in the champion's future.

But Harrison had *something* in mind. *That* was becoming more apparent every day. Julian exhaled heavily. "Though after *this* excursion," he said with great seriousness, "I may see to chartering a private flight."

Aaron laughed, calm and steady: a politician's laugh. He took a seat at the same time as Julian, easing his tall frame into one of the leather-backed tube-constructed chairs that were so common in executive shuttles and civilian DropShips.

"Having a rough day, Lord Davion? It can't be any worse than the shuttle's starboard lounge, where my ticket sentenced me."

"Julian, please. And I don't know about that. It's been . . . an experience."

Aaron Sandoval leaned forward, suddenly energized. "All right, I'll play my hand against yours. What have you got?"

If Julian thought Aaron was serious at all in an attempt to show his true hand, he'd be far more worried for his uncle's absence. Still, this was a game safe enough for now. "A pair of Captains-General," Julian said. "Anson Marik and Cameron-Jones. You can put those two at the same table or across the entire

lounge, and they'll hold a bitter conversation at volume over whom should resurrect the Free Worlds League."

"Never admitting that it is simply beyond the resources of either one," Aaron interjected.

"Exactly. And the one thing they can agree on is that they will oppose Jessica Marik to their last coin and final bullet." In fact, only the low-level pass over Hilton Head's ruins had silenced them both, for a moment, until Anson made a point, loudly, of how Cameron-Jones' ancestors had been among those to welcome the Word of Blake in the old days of the League.

"So?" Julian asked. "What's your hand?"

"Three Dracs," Aaron said, deadpan. "Warlord Toranaga, Yori Kurita, and one of the coordinator's advisors."

Julian didn't hold back his grimace. "It must be very . . . *polite* in there."

"To the point of screaming. Bowing and smiles, and cold, murderous looks. Their arrival killed all conversation before takeoff, and the bounce from Geneva was very chilly. And apparently no one's office of foreign affairs considered the inherent problems in seating a Sandoval, even one from The Republic, so close to high-level members from the Draconis Combine. I half-expected a katana at my throat when I moved too quickly for the viewing window earlier."

Annoyed Julian might be, but his professional relationship with the "Marik" leaders stopped far short of personal animosity. "I think I'll fold to your raise," he said. Then: "What's on your mind, Lord Governor?"

"Aaron, Julian. Aaron." He took a tentative sip at his red wine, untouched until now, then nodded his approval. "We're close enough to family and political companions to make titles superficial."

"How is that, when I champion the Federated Suns and you are one of The Republic's most vaunted administrators?"

But to this, the lord governor of Prefecture IV and Duke Caselton merely smiled, and took another sip of his wine.

One point to Sandoval. It served Julian right for asking the question directly, trying to get the man to tip his hand. In the awkward silence that followed, he might try to speculate on the relationship, and see if Aaron would lean one way or another. Might.

Instead, he turned to the video monitor, watching the trivid display as the shuttle swung around one last time to view new highlights. On the backside of the twisted framework of metal girders Julian had seen earlier, lying in five meters of water, the outlines of two rusted-over BattleMechs could be seen lying prostrate on the lifeless shoal.

It amazed him, the clearness of the water here. But then there were no seaweed beds or thick algae in these waters. No living coral. Only a touch of silt, washed up from deeper floors.

Chilling.

"You must understand," Aaron said a moment later. "Except for joining the prince for the viewing of

Victor's remains, my access to Harrison Davion has been less than optimal. And it is exactly my position within The Republic that prevents me from making too strong a push for an audience. My exarch, I believe, would rather I kept my distance from House Davion."

Fair enough. "We have received much the same . . . impression."

"Your schedule, at least, is slightly less daunting."

Julian nodded. "Which is why you sent your nephew, Erik, ahead. To feel out the waters." Julian glanced at the monitor again. Saw the unnaturally clear ocean rolling over shattered bedrock, and swallowed hard. "So to speak."

This time the lord governor did not exactly confirm Julian's supposition. "Erik's report was not encouraging, though the boy rarely knows what it is I'm looking for." Keying up the point that Julian could not be certain, either. "Still, given your resistance, and the prince's unavailability, I've been content to be patient."

"And now?" Julian asked.

But Aaron waited. Waited for him to open with one of the two most-obvious gambits. The Dragon again, which dealt the Sandoval dynasty into the game, or local politics, which brought in the exarch. This man was a master player. Julian chose to gamble conservatively.

"Tikonov," he guessed.

"What have you heard about Tikonov?" Aaron asked, very, very still. Giving away neither pleasure nor disappointment in Julian's choice.

How to answer that? "Everything Prince Harrison knows, I believe. I've been kept abreast of most reports concerning the fighting here on Terra and around The Republic." Which said a lot, and not much all at the same time.

"Have you?" Aaron asked. "That is interesting. And yet Caleb Davion was hard pressed to say what planets are currently being contested by House Liao."

Harrison had arranged for Aaron to meet with Caleb? Or had Erik slipped into the young heir's schedule? "Caleb has his priorities. Harrison Davion has mine."

"Does he." It was not a question, this time.

Julian simply shrugged, letting the stakes stay on the table. He saw no reason to mention that such had been his father's advice, when Julian first looked toward a life in the military under Harrison's sponsorship. "Being a prince's man, Jules, will often demand your very best. I know you have that to give. But it must come without reservations and without hesitation."

Julian had not always lived by such a priority. And regretted those years when he had not, taking the prince's favor for granted. His father, as was so often the case, had the right of it. A little early on his advice, as if knowing he did not have many years left in him, but, ultimately, right.

"Taking the Swordsworn into Prefecture V," Aaron said, "relieved a great deal of pressure against local Republic garrisons. But it opened *my* worlds to attack. Tikonov is the nerve center of Prefecture IV *and*

of the Swordsworn. These recent raids could be nothing more than flanking assaults, meant to drive me back into my own territory, leaving New Aragon open for a major blitz.”

“But they could be something more,” Julian said. “Probing attacks to test your strengths and weaknesses at home. And Tikonov was once one of the crown jewels in the Capellan crown.”

“Precisely. And I should not need to point out that if Tikonov falls, it would destabilize the border between The Republic and the Federated Suns.”

Implying that House Davion had a major stake in keeping the world secure for Aaron Sandoval. Or, possibly more on point, that having a Sandoval in power along the border was good for the Suns’ long-term interests in the region. There were reports that the Draconis March lords had already moved “peacekeeping” forces into the area, to supplement Swordsworn positions. There was no proof that the lord governor had invited such assistance, but neither had he protested very strongly.

Was Aaron Sandoval playing both sides for his own benefit? Or was there more in play here than a stable border?

“Certainly Exarch Levin could be persuaded to put a regiment of the Principes Guards or Hastati Sentinels on Tikonov?” Julian suggested.

The lord governor gave him a sickly smile. “Certainly. Though I would hate to tax The Republic when its forces are needed against Liao and the Jade Falcons, and now House Kurita as well. . . .” He trailed off suggestively. Then: “Let me ask you, Julian. Would you consider The Republic a strong ally?”

Meaning, did Julian, and Prince Harrison, give better than even odds of The Republic surviving the next six months or a year? Julian thought that might be the question lurking behind Aaron’s careful words. The duke seemed to be searching for a pledge of interest, or support, before he committed to any long-range goals of his own. What would Harrison ask Julian to do? Encourage Aaron Sandoval to defect back toward his roots in the Federated Suns? Bolster the man up here, such that House Davion would end up with a strong ally within a stable Republic?

He’d tell Julian to keep his options open. Always.

“As well let me ask you, Lord Governor: How will you respond to the exarch’s *sorder* that you oppose and arrest any senators seeking asylum or returning to their base of power inside your prefecture?”

How much was Aaron planning to undercut the exarch’s direct authority? That would be a very telling indicator.

Aaron rose in a fluid motion, wine glass cradled, forgotten, in his right hand. He appeared to be wrestling with how to answer, which in itself spoke volumes, as no doubt the duke and lord governor were aware. In a case such as this, not answering could be as damning, or as certain, as answering.

But before Aaron Sandoval made up his mind one way or another, the shuttle banked slowly away from the ruins of Hilton Head. Julian felt the shift as acceleration tilted gravity back on its heels for a moment, and knew the touring shuttle had turned its “jump” thrusters over for a horizontal vector once again. The shattered island fell away on the nearby screen, receding quickly as the small craft sped toward its next destination. Inland, where the diplomats would visit a mothballed complex at Devil’s Tower, Wyoming.

“Cameron’s Last Stand,” the onboard “guide” whispered from the back of the observation deck. “Sixty

minutes.”

On break, or held out by the lord governor’s specific request, suddenly the service personnel returned with a vengeance. They swept into the observation deck with a purpose, quickly emptying the trash and removing glasses left over from earlier. The tray of drinks, brought to Aaron before Julian’s arrival, was whisked away as the staff hurriedly prepared for the guests who would seek more room on the upper decks.

Aaron Sandoval let one of the waiters take his glass, surrendering it with barely a flicker of annoyance. They’d run out of time, and the lord governor knew it.

But he was not about to let the conversation die.

“I hear,” he said, slowly, “that fighting on New Hessen and Demeter has picked up again.”

“It has,” Julian admitted, cursing the bad timing. Prince Harrison would not be satisfied with the open ending of the conversation. Julian needed something to bring back for his prince. “Pirate raids backed by Liao support, it seems. It is an ongoing situation we are looking into.”

“Look deeper,” Aaron suggested. “And see if it might not be in the best interests of the Federated Suns to take a stronger stand.”

Pro-Aaron? Or pro-Republic? Guests were arriving from down below now, seeking escape from the crowded lounges with their uncomfortable political baggage. More than a few cast anxious glances in the direction of Julian and Aaron, divining what they could of the conversation or planning a method to crash the private talk and chat up either man. With moments left to them, at best, Julian floundered in the conversation, reaching for that last piece of information that would tip Aaron’s hand.

Duke Sandoval began to withdraw.

“Prince Harrison”—Julian stood, stopping the lord governor—“would want me to pass along his highest regards. Would you have any further message for him?” Last chance, Julian coaxed the other man.

Aaron Sandoval paused, then nodded once, deciding. “Tell Prince Harrison . . . There are a great many more things that unite us than divide us. Borders notwithstanding. Tell him that I hope to speak with him, and with you, Julian, again. In fact,” Aaron considered, “that I believe you will do just fine.”

It wasn’t much, but it was enough. Julian’s “inner Harrison” was satisfied. Mostly. But he had a question of his own suddenly pressing forward, raised by the lord governor’s carefully chosen words.

“Why me?” he asked. A question Julian could not raise with his prince. The champion simply served. “Why the . . . vote of confidence?” It only came to him as he asked the question—that’s exactly what it had been. A vote of confidence.

“You mean you haven’t figured it out yet, Julian?” The smile was slow and secretive. “Harrison still has some things to teach you, I see. But don’t worry. There is still time.”

And with that cryptic remark, Aaron moved off. To be buttonholed immediately by a man in a Spirit Cat uniform.

Julian eased back into his seat, sipping at his sweetened water and impressing Aaron Sandoval’s words

firmly into his mind. For the moment, anyway, the images of desolation from Hilton Head were pushed far back into the shadows, as he wondered exactly what his prince was up to that Aaron believed he knew and at which Julian could only guess.

Plaguing the champion with more questions.

27

The Republic has squandered its legacy of honor and righteousness. A false legacy, built on the blood of innocents conquered by Devlin Stone and pressed to support his new Terran Hegemony. Liao is simply among the first of many worlds soon to realize their mistake, to throw off the shackles and step forward as free voices. Yóng yuan Liào Sun Zi!

—Transcript reprinted in the *Dynasty Daily*, Liao, 16 May 3135

Terra
Republic of the Sphere
31 May 3135

Erik Sandoval-Groell waited at the foot of the *Patriot*'s auxiliary ramp as another VTOL swept in from the direction of Annemasse. He'd been watching for a certain one for two hours, as twilight fell over the DropPort, waiting to see if his new allies would honor their pledge, or if he'd been played for a fool. So far, everything promised had come through, from extracting Aaron Sandoval before St. Andre fell, to the early information on the Combine assaults in Prefecture II. But Erik had learned to be wary, always wary, when it came to politics or military alliances.

And this was a bit of both.

The air tasted of warm ferrocrete and aviation fuel. A feeling of anticipation crawled over his skin. The VTOL banked wide around the control tower, angling toward the *Patriot*. It took Erik a moment to recognize the craft in the fading light. An executive Brightstar, with telltale sleek lines and a muffled engine capable of near-silent travel.

And he'd barely made the ID when it dropped fast and hard, skimming dangerously low along the tarmac for several hundred meters before it finally thumped down next to the *Union*-class DropShip. The twenty-stories-tall vessel dwarfed the Brightstar, but there was something about the executive craft that made it seem larger than life.

Something beyond the obvious expense of the craft and the talented manner in which it was handled.

Something dark.

The rotors kicked up a wash of sharp gusts and grit, blowing a quick zephyr across the tarmac that died away as quickly as the Brightstar had arrived. The rotors wound down quickly, and the running lights were extinguished. Erik was only slightly surprised when no passenger alighted from the back compartment, and instead the VTOL's only occupant jumped down from the pilot's door, shouldered a small rucksack, and strolled over to where he waited.

The newcomer was older than Erik. By a decade. Perhaps more. Unruly, chestnut brown hair and flat, hazel eyes, and a way of looking through Erik that bothered him a great deal.

“Are we ready?” the man asked.

“I could ask you the same thing.” And in a way, he had. But the VTOL pilot merely waited with the patience of stone. “We have preliminary approvals for launch. The *Patriot*’s captain is waiting my ‘go’ to request finals.”

“Good. You will have a lift crane bring aboard my Brightstar, please.”

A very polite order, but an order nonetheless. Erik bristled, but quickly regained control of himself. He looked north, at the city lights of Annemasse glowing against an overcast sky, and wondered about nearby Geneva as well. He was leaving Terra, and he doubted—very much doubted—that he would ever return here to mankind’s birthworld. Aaron had let enough slip from his meeting with Julian Davion, and plans being set into motion with the Swordsworn, that he recognized how quickly things were coming to a head within The Republic. For better or worse. Successful or not. The wheels were in motion.

And to get a jump on his uncle’s plans, maybe steal a march altogether, Erik was leaving now. On the eve of the services for Victor Steiner-Davion. An event he was *lightly* sorry to be missing.

“You are sure that it will happen tomorrow? No chance of error?”

“Were you able to get the lord governor off St. Andre before the walls fell?” the other man asked. “We do not deal in bad information.”

Fitting, then. Aaron had once left him in the path of an assault sponsored by the lord governor. It had nearly cost Erik his life. Learn or die—that seemed to be one of Aaron’s favorite training tools. Now Erik would see how his uncle’s luck held up.

Also, in the likely chaos of martial law to follow, Erik would be already off planet, in the position *todo* something. He wasn’t about to lose out on the opportunities.

“After you, then,” Erik said, waving the older man up the ramp.

A flat gaze stared back impassively. He wasn’t turning his back on Erik. Not even for a moment. “I insist,” the man said, nodding Erik ahead.

Erik shrugged his indifference, laughing inside the entire time. They all thought they knew him. They all underestimated him. But Erik recognized when he was safe, and when he tread on dangerous ground. Hard lessons, and ones he would never forget. And when the time came, he’d show them all how much he’d learned. Turning, he walked back up the ramp, hearing his new “friend” following at a careful pace behind him.

He never looked back again at Terra.

Not once.

Conner led his column out of Sieberg just after twilight, on the cusp of dark. His *Rifleman* set the pace

at a steady forty kilometers per hour, swaying back and forth as its long-barreled arms pivoted first left, then right. Always searching for a target, it seemed.

Not so soon, though. Not anywhere within several hours march, and hopefully a great deal further than that.

He dialed the coolant in his vest down to minimum, and spent several kilometers working kinks out of his neck as he loosened up under the weight of his bulky neurohelmet. His short columns crossed the Rhein at Bonn, and were joined by Cray Stansill's veterans from the Tenth Hastati. In the next hour, through Duren and Aachen, Conner added the Essen Mobile Infantry force and a company of armored vehicles from Senator Vladistock's Honor Guard.

A full battalion crossed the border into Belgium just before midnight.

Controlling Belgium would be the key to the loyalists' success. For this and this alone, Michael Riktofven had been an invaluable aid. The man owned most of the politicians and half of the officer corps who routinely trained in the Ardennes. With his help, the remaining senators on planet had shifted men and materiel into the area, hidden from the exarch's ever-watchful spies.

They hoped.

"Tomorrow they gather to say goodbye to Victor."

Conner's whisper was loud in his own ears, trapped by the neurohelmet. He had his voice mic toggled off, but some things were just meant to be whispered.

"All of them, gathered in Paris. Vincent Kurita. Harrison Davion. The exarch!"

The plan was fairly simple. Seize the city, and the Republic Cathedral. Avoid the need to barter hostages back to their own realms. Everyone was in place to air grievances and make long-term decisions. If they would recognize the Senate nobility, see that Exarch Levin was using his power to strip away centuries of noble authority—

They would still be under duress and unlikely to do much more than scatter to the winds at the first opportunity, Conner knew.

But dammit! They had to try. They had to show the excess to which Exarch Levin would move, and the danger of a divided Republic. This was no longer about Geoffrey Mallowes, and whatever dark hole into which Levin had thrown the Skye senator. No longer about the supposed assassination of Victor Davion, or the small cabal of nobles who had tried to support their own cause.

This was not even about Conner's father. It wasn't!

It was about leadership, and the just use of power, and who was best suited to hold those reins. Which had been, and always would be, the nobles.

Yes?

Watching the clock count up toward local midnight, Conner knew that now was the wrong time to be questioning their course of action. It was too late. In the next hour, small riots would break out across Belgium, France and Switzerland. Civilian organizations such as the Stone's Legacy movement and even

some remnants of the Kittery Renaissance would provide lots of energetic chaff.

Meanwhile, loyalist forces in the Belgium militia would seize resources and create a military screen under which the stronger military units Conner needed would rendezvous and strike, hard, down into France. The exarch's Maginot Line of field camps would collapse back into the interior of the country, ready to meet them, but it would be too late. They would be too far out of position. And Conner had some fast-insertion forces prepared to strike ahead of his main line as well.

"This is it, Father. Where else do people go when they can't trust normal channels to address their grievances? When they believe their government has failed them?"

They take it into their own hands.

For better. Or for worse.



Victor Steiner-Davion often called for "the right of free men and women to choose their own destiny." Even Prince Harrison so lately quoted his estranged uncle when condemning the exarch's high-handed tactics.

Why, then, should the Senate be vilified so aggressively for opposing the disenfranchisement of so many citizens with the power at our command?

—Senator Lina Derius (Nationalist Party, Liberty), Liberty, 22 May 3135

*Terra
Republic of the Sphere
1 June 3135*

Tara Campbell considered it one of the great injustices of the day (for there would be several) that by some stretch of bureaucratic reasoning, which listed the various political contingents by nationality rather than by name, the Davions and Steiners—the *Federated Suns* and *Lyran Commonwealth*—were seated several dozen rows back from the front of the Cathedral's chapel. About the middle to the back of the forward section, well behind the pews for immediate family.

Also that "Campbell" seated her near the front, next to "Capellan Confederation."

She'd already had the dubious pleasure of meeting Daoshen Liao at the Exarch's Grand Ball, and spending time in his presence this morning during the final, preservice viewing. Now, watching him shuffle down the aisle ahead of her, wearing robes the color of arterial blood chased with heavy gold brocade and decorated with a crouched tiger on the back, made her want to chuck something large and heavy in his direction. Like an *Atlas*. Instead, she slid along to the outside edge of a pew and trained her mind on the magnificent room instead of the malevolent Liao.

Fortunately, it wasn't hard to lose oneself in the chapel. The grand, vaulted ceilings rose sixty meters above the congregation, and stretched nearly one hundred fifty meters in length. Not quite tall enough to park a DropShip in, but almost able to take an *Overlord* laid on its side. Tara bet she could find room

enough for a full battalion of BattleMechs if she were willing to ruin the magnificent vestibule by parading them through.

Skylights opened up at either end of the room, with light filtering in through awe-inspiring examples of stained glass art. Religious and—some might say—mythological scenes. The one she liked best showed a priest, a monk and an earth-mother druid all waiting in line at the gates of Heaven.

Which sounded like the start of a bad joke, but was quite tasteful and elegant in the display.

The air was actually damp with the night's heavy rains, and it tasted of old wood and new carpet. A sluggish chill crept through the room while everyone waited for the last guests to file in. The Republic Cathedral seated over four thousand souls, and would be filled to maximum occupancy with relations, foreign and domestic dignitaries, an entire regiment of military officers, and the friends, associates and well-wishers accumulated along a century of full life.

Victor's transparent coffin had already been brought into the chapel, resting on the altar's stage under an honor guard of six paladins. David McKinnon. Heather GioAvanti. Drummond, Mandela, Avellar and Marik. All wearing their dress uniforms. All with eyes on their former comrade, as if willing him back into service.

Tara spent some time leaning forward, eyes closed, lost in thought as she contemplated what Victor might have wanted said at his final service.

And what was likely to be on the agenda instead.

"They should plant him quick," Daoshen said, his tenor voice rising above the whispered conversations which buzzed throughout the grand chapel, "before he changes his mind."

The Chancellor of the Confederation sounded more amused than bitter. As if Act II, Scene I of his own little drama demanded an obnoxious comment at the expense of those truly sorry for Victor's passing.

Tara opened her eyes but refused to glance his direction, to give him the satisfaction. She stared straight ahead, past several rows of pews holding the As and Bs of the distinguished guest list. It surprised her to see, in front of the seated paladins and a space reserved for Exarch Levin, a mostly empty pew for immediate family. Victor had been survived by at least one son and a daughter, and grandchildren, that Tara knew of. One or two great-grandchildren as well? Plus there would be a few immediate cousins still alive.

But there were only two adults sharing the long bench, and one child between them. Tara recognized Simone Davion from a charity social they had both attended years before. And Sir Kitsune, of course. Knight of the Sphere, and Victor's recognized son by his lover before Isis Marik. Was it Simone's son who sat there between the stiff-backed adults? Or Kitsune's?

A pregnant hush swept through the room, and the air of expectancy did cause Tara's head to turn this time. Exarch Levin, escorting his wife, and former-Exarch Damien Redburn walked the lonely aisle between the chapel halves. A carpet runner laid out over the marble floor soaked up their footfalls as the dignified trio moved straight to the front of the chapel, to the front row where, after a word of condolence to Simone, and likely seeking her blessing as well, they joined the family members at the very front.

The paladins smoothed over the gap in their row by sliding over to fill the space.

A full house.

Tara swallowed past the tightness in her throat as Bishop Wesley-Smith of the New Catholic faith walked in from a chamber off to the right-hand side of the altar. A friend and long-time counselor of Victor Davion, he would open the nondenominational ceremony. His goatee was not exactly church-standard, but it was well groomed and he had a light of grace in his eyes that few pious men truly achieved.

The silence deepened as he seized the podium with large, rawboned hands. "Let us remember," he said, "Victor Ian Steiner-Davion."

The reminiscence would replace an opening invocation. It was long but heartfelt. The bishop personalized Victor, speaking of him only as a man, and a friend.

"Never so strong he did not recognize his own weakness. Never so weak he could not take a moment to help lift up another.

"He lived his life so simply, in the end. Preferring a daily routine not so different from one you might find in any home, in any city, on any world. A normal man with a very large heart and an enormous capacity for living."

"At times caught up in extraordinary events. But, in the end, someone's son, and someone's father. A husband. A brother. A friend. Let us all take a moment of silence to recall who Victor was, to each of us."

Tara tried to imagine the answers being thought and whispered around the room. A leader. A prince. An enemy. A patriot and a tyrant. For her, Victor was an ideal. She had never known him well, but had studied his history—from birth through the Clan invasion and Jihad, and finally into his twilight years as a paladin exemplar.

She knew Victor might not care for his funeral serving political expediency, but he'd also have been strong enough to make the same, hard decisions to which exarchs Redburn and Levin were being put.

"Thank you," the bishop said, ending his part in the service.

There were some whispered amens around the room. People who had taken the time for prayer, according to their own beliefs. Devoutly Catholic, Tara crossed herself.

Next, two score of Gregorian monks moved up onto the stage from behind the altar, taking the place of the regular choir. With no musical accompaniment, they launched into a spiritual chant. Their strong voices lifted, cascaded throughout the magnificent chamber, echoing strains from Berlioz' requiem, the *Grande Messe des Morts*. One of very few ancient pieces to survive the various neo-classical movements mostly intact.

Tara lost herself in the rendition, swept away by the masterpiece and the powerful delivery. It wasn't until afterward, as echoes of the last four great beats died away, that she wondered about the choice. The *Grande Messe des Morts*.

The requiem that was nearly murdered by the political intrigue and infighting of its day.

Message? Almost certainly. Nothing today would be confined to a single meaning. Not one pregnant

pause or turn of phrase.

Certainly not the eulogy being delivered by former Exarch Damien Redburn. The first of three planned eulogies, it was effectively the keynote address of the morning's service.

Redburn rose from his seat, moving slowly and stately as he took the podium from Bishop Wesley-Smith. Only fifty, the former exarch carried himself as if he still bore a great weight of responsibility. Tara was close enough to see the extra gray that feathered into his dark hair, and the exarch's face was lined heavily with the stresses put on him in the last few years. The rumors of his graceful retirement to the "easy life" seemed greatly exaggerated.

"I knew Victor Steiner-Davion," Redburn said, by way of beginning. "As a warrior and a patriot. As a statesman and a paladin. As a friend.

"There are few of whom it can be said that they gave more selflessly to this great Republic, or to the entire Inner Sphere. He gave of his fortune and his faith, and he so often bled for his beliefs. Victor was never happy with the status quo. He graduated the Nagelring with honors, and took command of several line regiments. He served as archon and prince, as commander of a new Star League army, as precentor martial, and as a paladin of the Sphere. And he worked tirelessly, his entire life, toward one, single, pursuit."

He let a hush lie over the grand room for a few precious heartbeats.

"Peace."

Not war! As so many in the audience had certainly been thinking. Tara found herself praying. Cheering the assembled masses to listen to Redburn. For faith's sake.

"There are those who would say that Victor worked hard, fought hard and never lost. Not when it mattered. Except that Victor lost his very first command to the Clans on Trelwan. He lost his mother, and also his first love, to political assassination. He lost friends and comrades to a thousand different battles fought over hundreds of worlds.

"Of course he lost," Redburn said, forcing a calm over himself. "Of course he did. But I can tell you this. Victor was never *defeated*. Because he never, *once*, gave up."

The former exarch had the crowd in his hands now. Tara sensed that. Most of the crowd, anyway, as there would also be those who remembered facing Victor across a battlefield, wishing the man would give up. Would turn away. Would just lie down and finally die.

But as Redburn warmed up to the list of specific events Victor had "fought" against, including the controversy surrounding Victor's ultimate decision to abdicate his throne as a final conciliatory gesture to an Inner Sphere long suffering under the hardships of extended warfare, those who knew anything of Victor's history were reminded again of what a heroic figure he truly was. And the litany of struggles and personal losses and overwhelming victories swept even Tara away. Tara, who knew the histories as well as anyone might. She stopped hearing the repeated *slam* as Redburn drove another nail into the coffin of the Senate loyalists, the ones ultimately responsible for Victor's death. She closed her eyes again, and wrapped herself up in a warm blanket of memories and patriotic sensation.

Which lasted until a hand touched her on the elbow, and the breath of someone leaning down at her shoulder warmed her ear.

“Countess?”

More than a whisper. Strong and certain.

“Countess. It’s time.”

Tara opened her eyes slowly, glanced up to her right where a Buddhist monk hovered over her from the end of the pew. She wanted to deny the summons, even though she had expected it. They had all expected it, today of all days. Another large injustice.

The disruptions were minor, so far. Monks and acolytes and even some young priests, moving along the outer aisles, delivering small notes or reaching in to tap an expectant officer on the arm or shoulder.

Redburn continued, never letting the interruptions steal the crowd away from his words. His message.

“Not when wars threatened on every border,” he said as Tara stood and shuffled out from the pew. “Not even when good men stopped listening for a time. Victor persisted. He fought his way forward. He fought his entire life. And in the end, he even fought for his life, and ruined a dark conspiracy’s efforts to threaten the peace once again.”

Not ruined. Not completely. Delayed.

“They did not defeat him.”

A priest approached the row of paladins. Another stepped toward the fore, making certain the six standing for Victor also saw. Also knew.

“He defeated them.”

He did. Tara agreed. She stood at the end of her pew a moment, matching gazes with Damien Redburn, who looked out over the disturbed service, and silently agreed. But that was one battle in a much larger, long war.

And now they would go to carry on Victor’s legacy.

“Now?” Julian asked. “They are coming now?”

His whisper carried little farther than Prince Harrison. Perhaps Sandra and Amanda Hasek as well. Caleb leaned in from farther along, his gaze quizzical as he obviously tried to put it together. The speech. The disruptions.

Julian’s sudden conference with Harrison Davion.

But everyone else knew once the messages started filtering out across the chapel. Shoulders tapped and officers excusing themselves as silently and swiftly as they could. An expectant buzz as, one by one, the paladins slid out of their seats, forming a tight knot in the far, forward corner of the chapel.

Damien Redburn seized on the interruptions to add more animation into his eulogy. To drive the point

home that his words, and the events happening on Terra, were very much linked.

“Victor’s loss is far from an ending, however. It is a beginning. It heralds a fresh start for The Republic, and new opportunities for all realms of the Inner Sphere to work together and fight for a better future. For peace.”

Toward that better future, Harrison simply handed over the slip of a note delivered by a priest’s hands. Julian unfolded it. He felt Sandra next to him, crowding up to his side, pretending she was not trying to read it, to catch a hint of what was about to happen.

The first half of the simple missive read only: *It’s time*. Terse and to the point, Julian imagined it was similar to the messages being passed about the entire chapel. Except for the second half. One word. A name.

Meaux. A small city about twenty kilometers outside Paris.

To which elements of the First Davion Guard had been secretly brought from the American southwest! Julian knew it at once. A thrill shook him as he anticipated Harrison’s next order.

“Go, Julian. There will be transport waiting for you outside. You will take local command at Meaux. Under Exarch Levin’s direct orders.”

“He authorized it?”

Julian slid forward to the edge of his pew. It was all streaming past him at a fair clip now. The funeral. The threat of imminent action. A Republic commission? All too fast.

“Under the Foreign Powers Visitors act. Temporarily.”

Julian reached over to give Sandra’s hand a quick squeeze, then slid past Harrison and Amanda, Caleb, then Riccard Streng, to the chapel’s left-side aisle. Harrison stood as well and followed him only to the end of the pew, as if anticipating the question that suddenly leaped to Julian’s thoughts.

“That act only applies in the event of a wartime alliance between the Federated Suns and The Republic,” he reminded his prince. They stood there, near the side of the chapel, both wearing the dress uniform of the Armed Forces of the Federated Suns. Alone out of every House and faction represented.

An oddity that appeared to worry the prince not at all. “Which Exarch Levin has offered,” he said to Julian. “I told him, if you were sent, he should consider the alliance as good as signed.”

Julian glanced to the front of the Cathedral’s chapel. Redburn continued his eulogy of Victor Steiner-Davion, keeping hold of the room with brute force willpower. But few people were paying attention just now. Especially as the six honor-guard paladins filed off the altar. All but one, left to stand for Victor, no doubt chosen earlier by lot or by vote. There were duties, and there were duties, and the paladins would not forgo one obligation for another. One of their number would remain.

Sire David McKinnon. Eldest of the seventeen, and certainly a paladin exemplar in his own right.

And one other face at the front of the room looked back now, catching Julian’s eye. Exarch Levin. The onetime paladin and ruler of The Republic of the Sphere let nothing show on his face. Not concern or relief. But he nodded in Julian’s direction. Once. A strong vote of confidence.

“How long did you have to consider it?” After all the meetings and briefings into which Julian had been brought, it seemed strange to have missed out on this one.

“Since our final viewing this morning. Jonah offered the alliance in the vestibule.”

About two hours, in other words.

“How do you do this?” he asked. No worry in his voice. Simply awe for the man he had chosen to follow. “You’ve shown me so much this month, and I still didn’t see it.”

“You make it happen, Julian.” Harrison’s voice grew a touch short. As if explaining an answer that his best student should already know. “You do it because there is no one else. And now no time to delay any longer.”

“Yes, sire.” Julian braced up to attention. He was never too old to feel properly scolded by his prince, it seemed. “And now it’s my job to carry out those orders. I understand.”

He turned to leave, but Harrison held fast onto his arm. “Not yet, son. But you will. Get used to it. *You* need to learn how to make it happen. As . . . a leader.”

Julian felt something cold and heavy settle into his guts. Down deep. Something had passed between Harrison and himself, far more serious than the promise of coming battle. Both of them knew that the prince had stopped one step short of something momentous. Harrison, by the way he suddenly recoiled, as if having moved a step too far, too soon. Julian, when he nearly stumbled away from his prince as Harrison Davion released him.

Harrison retook a seat at the end of the pew. Julian looked past his uncle, and lord. Saw Caleb watching him with a hooded gaze. Saw Sandra Fenlon, watching with a desperate one.

As . . . a leader.

First, though, as a warrior. Prince’s champion. Julian collected himself, and paced up the aisle toward the Cathedral’s main doors. The gazes of hundreds turned to follow him, just as they also found other officers and knights and paladins making their way from the service. No one asked the question. No one shouted warnings or started a panic.

But Callandre Kell stuck a foot out into the aisle, nearly tripping him.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

She had dressed down in a black pants suit with a silver scarf knotted at her throat. Her hair was conservatively coiffed today, without colored highlights or wild styling. But there was nothing soft in her hissed words.

“As it turns out,” he said, “I have a . . . previous arrangement.” And because there was no one else. And because there was no time to delay. He made it happen. “Guard my back?” he asked.

She smiled. And it was pure Calamity. “You got it.”

He stepped past, and felt her slip from her seat to follow.

Services were over.

Outside, things were just beginning to heat up.

Aerospace fighters streaked overhead in squadrons, tearing down out of the gray canopy, thundering through the skies over Paris. Julian recognized *Stingray*s, with their distinctive swept-wing design, and following them a squadron of flying wings that had to be either *Chippewa*s or *Riever*s—assault fighters.

It made the line of VTOLs, crowded along the *Rue d'Égalité*, so much less appealing. Better, he decided, that the paladins seemed intent on the fragile aircraft.

Most of the regular line officers present were being herded onto APCs by infantry in Cavalier battle armor. Julian and Callandre joined one of the queues, keeping a wary eye on the skies. And were quickly yanked out of line by Countess Tara Campbell.

“Not for you,” she said, pointing Julian toward a Fox armored car instead. “Those APCs are heading for an underground garage.”

“Where you have an armored column waiting?”

“Where those men and women will be safe.” She smiled grimly. “The knights and paladins had to show in person. But do you really think Exarch Levin gutted our officer corps for the services? Those are technicians and administrative personnel, Julian. Now if you’ll excuse me.” She had caught an impatient wave by Paladin Sinclair, who stood next to a VTOL. “Luck,” she said.

Tara jogged away and Julian nodded Callandre toward the Fox. She recoiled in distaste. “That tin can? Are you kidding?” She grabbed him by the arm to drag him over to a nearby pair of grounded hovercycles. Escorts.

Jumping onto the cradle-seat, she scooted forward. Reaching under the lip of a protective cowling, she dug out a small nest of wires, sorted three of them out, and used her teeth to bite through and strip away the thin insulation. She spit the plastic to one side. “Where are we going?” she asked.

Julian hesitated. “There’s more armor on a Fox.”

“And it’s a bigger target. I’ll get us there faster, and probably alive.” Twisting the three wires together, she then thumbed the ignition stud and the cycle’s lift fans howled to life. She whipped the silver scarf off her neck and tied it bandit-style over her hair, letting the ends trail behind. “Where are we going?”

“Meaux,” Julian said, resigned.

He climbed on behind her, and had barely put hands on her waist when she leaned down and applied full acceleration, jumping the cycle forward and slewing down the wide avenue. The hovercraft barely missed a parked Anat APC and skirted dangerously close to a few lifting VTOLs. They pushed through a backwash of thundering sound and flying grit.

“Don’t do that again,” Julian shouted near Calamity’s shoulder.

She looked back for several long seconds, taking her eyes off the road ahead. “No promises.”

Last week on Skye, a resistance cell was discovered and crushed by the vigilant patrols of Clan Jade Falcon. The industrial sector in which the cell had hidden away its military resources was then “put to the torch” by the order of local commander Tabitha Wimmer.

“Let this be a learning experience. There will be no safe harbor for those who resist our mandate.”

—reported by Avanti Free Press, Nusakan, 15 May 3135

*Terra
Republic of the Sphere
1 June 3135*

Further than Conner Rhys-Monroe thought to get. Not as far as he'd wanted.

The Republic made its first stand as loyalist forces moved south of the Aisne River, near Soissons. A combined column of armored vehicles and two modified AgroMechs slowed his point of the three-prong advance by nearly twenty minutes, sniping at his flanks, pushing him south and east.

They held strong defensive positions inside thick woods, and moved nearly as fast as his people did through open terrain, which at first made him believe that there was a stronger force set against him. It wasn't until a flyover by two *Transgressor* aerospace fighters that he found out about the hidden trails cut in obvious preparation of his assault. That he realized how weak the defenders had to be, and sent his skirmishers in to pin them down.

Now he waded his *Rifleman* in alongside a *Pack Hunter* and two Scimitar fast-strike hovercraft. One AgroMech was already toppled over, struggling to rise under the Scimitars' overlapping missile strikes. The second anchored a short line of M1 Marksman and a single Regulator.

The Regulator's gauss rifle worried Conner most, and he trained both of his rotary autocannon against its low-profile silhouette. Pulling into his triggers, he sent several hundred rounds of hot fifty-caliber metal into the hovercraft, chewing deep into armor and the backside of its crew compartment.

The turret swung over, but late. A single silvery blur and a hard-hitting *shove* against Conner's left side as the nickelferrous slug crushed into his BattleMech's shoulder. He heard the sickening crunch of shattered armor even through the cockpit's sound suppression.

But one shot was all the Regulator would get.

Conner's autocannon fire hammered at the fusion reactor's physical shielding. He held down the triggers too long, and one of his autocannon suddenly fell silent under an ammunition jam. His second RAC, however, managed to finish off the Regulator. Golden fire burst through several deep rents and carved its way through the crew compartment. The fusion reaction expanded, gobbling up all the fuel it could find. Flesh, composite, metal—didn't matter.

The force of the explosion tore the turret off the tank and flipped it into the side of a Marksman, crushing its missile launcher and cracking wide gaps into the armor plating. A squad of Infiltrators swarmed up the

Marksman's side and thrust arm-mounted lasers into those gaps, filling the inside of the tank with lethal energy.

Meanwhile, the *Pack Hunter*'s PPC had carved both arms and a leg off the remaining *AgroMech*, silencing its small, stuttering autocannon and leaving the *IndustrialMech* prone and helpless.

His Scimitars still picked away at a fleeing Marksman, and Conner left them to it. "Forward," he ordered the rest.

Breaking through the far side of the wood, he hauled his column back into some semblance of order. Morning was creeping toward noon too fast, and his timetable was in danger. He toggled for his command circuit. "Fields One and Three, report."

Sir Cray Stansill commanded Field One, moving in from Chauny along the Oise River. His report was terse but complete. "No opposition. *Senator*. Pushing past Creil." Which meant that Stansill was further along than any of them. Twenty . . . maybe thirty kilometers outside of Paris.

That was the good news.

"Field Three, Field Three!" The worried voice of Colonel Roger Thorne. His wide swing around Riems to come down through Champagne along the Marne had run into delays and several small holding actions by Republic troops.

"We have paladins in the field! Two of them, commanding forces out of Epernay. Light and fast, but we are still angling for Chateau-Thierry, avoiding contact."

Damn straight. Conner had worried about that after receiving reports of the Paris exodus. VTOLs from the streets. Not fighters from the local airfields, which he had struck first and hardest with advance forces. VTOLs meant short hops. Fast-into-the-field.

If the paladins had any kind of force this far back from the border, they could rip apart one third of Conner's assault force.

So far, their appearance had been limited to fast strikes. Harassment. But that could change in an instant.

"I'm sending you another squadron of air cover," he told Thorne. Not that air cover had proven effective yet in blockading The Republic. "Set a rear guard and push on toward the city." If it became necessary, he could join forces with Thorne and set a trap for the paladins. Near Meaux. If necessary. "Move!"

It was the weakest side of his assault, but also the most expendable. If he picked up survivors near Chateau-Thierry, and Stansill held to the timetable . . .

Yes. They were still fine. The Republic's VTOL charge out of Paris showed a measure of undeserved confidence. Typical. Eight VTOLs counted lifting off the *Rue d'Égalité*. Three of them knocked from the sky or forced down.

One destroyed in the air.

Obviously, they had not considered his plan to use *all* available aerospace assets to secure air superiority. Let Levin guard Germany's border. Let him worry about how to "contain" the problem he had helped create. Because it was too late.

Conner was already behind the exarch's line, and was moving on Paris.

And there wouldn't be much left in his way.

Five kilometers of heavy city traffic and then thirty-eight more of the winding, rural highway Callandre chased toward Meaux. All in twenty-two minutes flat.

A VTOL couldn't have done much better, Julian decided. But he saved his reluctant praise. With the end in sight, he didn't want to jinx his luck. Callandre finished power-braking the hovercycle to a dust-cloud stop on the dirt-and-gravel lot at the Meaux Country Fairgrounds. A lance of 'Mechs stood on the wide expanse, which would have been decorated with tents and carnival booths in season. Only two armored vehicles had been removed from the 4-H barns that stood year round. The rest were still tucked away.

Choking his way through the dirt and debris that drifted around them, Julian thanked her as he staggered away from the suicide sled.

"Could have done better." She certainly didn't sound pleased to be alive. "We lost two minutes in that trouble in Lagny."

"If by 'trouble' you mean being chased through alleyways and across those sewage treatment culverts by two JES missile carriers and that *Spider*, you need to work on your definitions. Did you *have* to fire the laser?"

"Did *Itag* that *Spider* in his back? Stupid 'Mechjock, ignoring us. Bet he won't make that mistake again."

"Bet we won't either," he said, but with only the merest frown. It was hard to stay angry at Calamity for long. Especially when results were what mattered.

Of course, when Sergeant Montgomery and Lieutenant Todd Dawkins of the First Davion Guards jogged up with a report of "Two 'Mechs and a short column of tanks heading this way, Lord Davion, from Lagny, five minutes." Julian's frown darkened.

Montgomery apologized with a shrug. "Looks like our secret's out."

"I wonder how that happened?"

Callandre untied the scarf from around her head. "Look, if your guys can't keep things under wraps until we get here, that's not our fault. Now what have you got for me?"

"What do you want?" Julian asked. But he knew. Just like he knew the grin lurking behind Calamity's calm veneer. "Is two-lance with us?" he asked Montgomery, who nodded. "Give her Gamma-unit and tell Major Hastings that she's allowed to freelance with Delta."

"Major's not gonna like that."

"Tell him to stand in line. I've not been liking her for a lot longer." But those were the kind of decisions

one made. As . . . a leader. Julian held out a fist, which Callandre punched in traditional Nagelring form, then she left with the sergeant at a dead run.

Meanwhile, Leftenant Dawkins hustled the champion toward his waiting *Templar*. The junior officer was Julian's personal intelligence aide, and likely one of Riccard Streng's spies as well. "How the hell did they get behind us?" he asked.

"Near as we can tell, the loyalists dropped a mixed-force company on Paris as soon as the alert went out that they were on the move. Meant to contain and harass while the main push rolls down from the northeast."

"So we're trapped in between." Julian seized the chain-link ladder suspended from his cockpit hatch and scaled up with practiced ease. "Got any good news?"

"Yeah," Dawkins yelled up to him. "Looks like the main advance of the loyalists is swinging right down in our direction."

Not quite what Julian had in mind.

Fortunately, a Davion Guards tech had already put Julian's *Templar* through the reactor start-up procedure, which only left changing his dress uniform for MechWarrior's togs, plugging in, and freeing the lockout on the gyro and his main weapons. An easy three-minute race. Julian shivered as the first slug of coolant raced through his vest, raising gooseflesh on his arms. Codes in and accepted. *Templar* taking its first ponderous step forward as an SM1 Destroyer skated out from one of the nearby barns.

If he'd had any doubts it was Callandre, the hasty insignia spray-painted next to the Federated Suns crest on the vehicle's side gave her away. A V-shaped head, hastily colored in all black, and red slashes for eyes and mouth. Kell Hounds.

"I thought you divorced him," he said, toggling for a frequency she'd monitor out of habit. One of the mercenary channels common to most systems.

"I did. But I stayed with the unit." He could hear her grin. "They are family, after all."

Any further conversation was interrupted by new warning alarms and his heads-up display popping half a dozen threat icons onto the field. The *Spider* pushed its way through some trees on the far side of the fairgrounds, followed by a *Legionnaire*. From around the nearer edge, where the country highway continued to bend around toward the front, an armored column raced forward on treads and tires and lift fans.

Julian imagined the sudden shock the other side received, suddenly facing a BattleMech lance of the First Davion Guards supported by an armored company.

Make that *two* armored companies, as the rest of the unit scrambled out from the nearby barns to draw up a ragged line of attack. It included a Mobile HQ and a MASH truck, as well as a pair of Behemoth II assault tanks and enough APCs to spread a full company of armored infantry across the fairgrounds.

"On my advance." Julian throttled forward, pulling his crosshairs over the center of the *Legionnaire*. "Faith serve the Prince!"

He pulled into his primary triggers, and twin bolts of man-made lightning streaked across the fairgrounds

to slice the *Legionnaire* from shoulder to shoulder as the Federated Suns had struck their first blow on behalf of The Republic.

The smoke from several forest fires spread thick black smoke into the sky north of Tara Campbell's position, south, and east. Every direction but west, where Paris waited to see how The Republic fared this day, struggling against the Senate loyalists. Where too many heads of state were pinned in place by diplomatic propriety, and would be heading for deep bunkers built beneath the city if things did not go as planned.

It wasn't looking good.

Running her *Hatchetman* back to the safety of her line, Tara dodged in behind Gareth Sinclair's Clan-designed *Black Hawk*. He had abandoned a stand of flowering plum trees to cover her retreat. His extended-range lasers slashed with the efficiency of ruby scalpels. Arm-mounted four-packs tossed out a wide spread of fat-bodied, short-range missile loads.

The missiles fell in overlapping waves around a fleeing Condor, hammering it hard across the front. They shoved the nose down into the earth. Momentum jacked up the Condor's back, sending it in an end-over tumble that rolled and flipped the speeding hovercraft into a stand of burning pine.

It rocked to a halt between two large trees, both aflame. Glowing cinders and ash drifted down over it in a final curtain.

"Thanks for the assist," Tara offered, panting as she caught her breath.

The air inside her cockpit was dry and acrid and very hot. Laser damage to her centerline had breached the *Hatchetman*'s engine shielding, causing the 'Mech's reactor to dump excess waste heat into sensitive control spaces. The taste of scorched insulation burned in her throat like hot coals.

"Feel free to return—"

Gareth's reply was cut off as his *Black Hawk* was rocked back by twin gauss hits, taking one silvery streak in the right leg and another dead center in the gut. More than three tons of armor rained down onto the ground in shards and glistening splinters. The BattleMech stumbled back.

Even off-balance, he still managed to spear out twin lances from his right- and left-arm lasers. They streaked back along the path of the gauss slugs, slashing at the thick composite armor of a Kelswa assault tank. Say what you wanted about Gareth Sinclair. Young, certainly. But every measure a paladin.

Kicking the *Black Hawk* back at its best walking speed, Gareth pulled out of range.

"—the favor," he finished. Late.

Between them, they commanded two strengthened companies from the tenth Principes Guards with a few units from the green Triarii Protectors thrown in to fill holes in the TO&E. They fielded the second heaviest force to set itself between the Senate loyalists and Paris. But it wasn't enough.

Not when *Sir* Cray Stansill had added a pair of Kelswa assault tanks as well as four Kinnol main battle tanks to his support forces—and knew how to fight the heavy armor.

He set them as an anchor, wherever the fighting was heaviest, and wheeled his faster vehicles around them in flanking strikes. Stansill then shored up any weak points with a pair of twenty-ton *Stinger* s, using his *Griffin* and his partner's *Catapult* to spearhead the major offensives.

For two hours now, the loyalists had consistently pushed Tara and Gareth around, coming one step closer to Paris with nearly every maneuver, or one step closer to linking up with the force commanded by Conner Rhys-Monroe.

Either way, it helped the loyalist position.

"We're in trouble," Gareth said.

He turned his *Black Hawk* upfield, and used his large lasers to worry the loyalist line. One scarred a *Stinger* over its left arm, but did little more than drip molten armor down into dry brush, which immediately caught flame.

Tara traded long-range autocannon fire with a Kinnol's PPC. Pushed a pair of Cavalry attack helicopters into place to counter a run by some hoverbikes.

"I'm figuring that out."

"No, I mean I just received word through channels. Maya Avellar never made it out of the city. Meraj Jorgensson is confirmed dead. His VTOL was destroyed over Louvres."

Avellar and Jorgensson. The two paladins who should have taken command at Senlis, bridging the gap between the Montataire defenses and Julian's First Davion Guard at Meaux. No wonder the center had crumbled!

The hoverbikes had broken around the Calvary copters' strafing runs, and had reformed on the eastern flank. They harried and ran to ground a Shandra scout vehicle painted in the black and gold of the Tenth Hastati. It overturned and roiled greasy smoke into the air.

"How soon until we can expect stronger reinforcements from the border?" She throttled her *Hatchetman* forward, overrunning a Triarii Marksman and chasing down the hoverbikes herself.

"Excuse me?"

"The border, Gareth. The border. Levin set a long line of field camps." A pair of the hoverbikes drifted in too close, and Tara blasted one right through the engine cowling with her autocannon. It blew up, tossing the rider into a broken heap. "Where is the closest one?"

"Across the border by now. The moment Conner moved into Belgium, all camps were put on alert and prepped to assault loyalist positions in Mannheim, Stuttgart, Frankfurt and Cologne. We're retaking Germany."

"At the expense of Paris?" A sinking sensation hollowed her out. Levin had told her . . .

No, Levin had led her to believe that the line of field camps would collapse back around Paris. Had led everyone to believe. Which meant the senators sitting safely behind their protected lines in Germany may have left themselves vulnerable.

Gareth's *Black Hawk* stalked her direction, pulling the balance of their supporting forces behind it as the paladin shifted their entire line again. "They won't be able to hold Paris. They might throw a sweat into the politics, but we'll have them safely hidden away in time."

And if the Inner Sphere leaders felt threatened by the loyalists, that didn't hurt Exarch Levin's entreaty at all, did it? Enemy of mine enemy. . . .

Across the field, stomping through a small farm plot of early cabbages and wax beans, Cray Stansill's *Griffin* marched up beside the *Catapult* and began summoning hard-hitting flankers like the Kinnol MBTs. They readied a new push. Always seeking to break through and open up the drive into Paris. Wanting only to brush aside the force under the joint command of Tara and Gareth.

She'd see about that.

Planting a wide-spade foot in front of her, Tara shifted the weight in her forty-five-ton *Hatchetman* to suddenly cut straight in at the forming enemy line. Calling her Cavalry VTOLs and a pair of Fulcrum heavy hovertanks in behind her, rallying a trio of VV1 Rangers who raced forward to flank her left side, she threw a fast-moving assault right into the teeth of the loyalists.

"Tara? What are you doing?"

Getting Cray Stansill extremely irritated with her, she hoped.

By luck more than planning, she caught the Kelswa assault tanks shifting position, not covering the forward path and unable to clear the *Stinger*s out of their own field of fire in time. It left the core of the loyalist force exposed to her quick strike.

She hammered out with her heavy autocannon in rapid-fire bursts, joining a storm of hot metal to the scarlet lances spearing out of the Fulcrums. Her weapon chewed more armor away from the *Catapult*'s centerline, while two lances of burning light fused together near the machine's elbow to completely sever the lower arm.

The Fulcrums' missiles arced and fell, arced and fell. Raining heavy fire over some APCs and exposed Purifier infantry, casting aside scraps of armor and scraps of personnel.

"Back to our lines," she called out, slamming her 'Mech's throttle from full-out run to a backward walk.

Momentum nearly threw the *Hatchetman* down on its face, but a hastily planted leg levered the walking machine backward. The tanks veered one way or another. The Cavalry copters pounced on a stray Kinnol, blowing the treads off one side to ground the tank.

Return fire was hastily organized and haphazard at best. Lasers and a few flights of LRMs struck at Tara's small force. Nothing too damaging. A pair of Condors flung themselves after her, but her trio of Rangers pinned down one of the hovercraft from either side and nearly ground it down to a halt, while a few daring Infiltrators bounded forward into the no-man's-land.

No prize to be won in this scrape. The trapped Condor reversed its drive fans, powering down into a dead stop while still under the protective umbrella of loyalist guns. The Rangers did not dare follow suit, and raced back for their line.

Tara, though, was left with an easy broadside. Pulling crosshairs over the slowed Condor, she hammered out once, twice, and again to finally open up the Condor's lift skirt. The tank limped back to the pack before she could finish it off.

"Was it good for you?" Gareth asked as she regained her place next to him.

"I hate being ignored. Do you think I got Stansill's attention?"

A deadly rain of missiles fell against their positions, geysering dirt and gravel into the air on columns of fire. Two warheads smashed into the *Hatchetman*'s arm. A gauss slug blurred by her cockpit, plowing into the earth some sixty meters behind her, spraying soil and rock out from a lopsided impact crater.

"Yes," Gareth said. "I'd say so."

Both MechWarriors fell back, but slowly. Taking their turns at trading weapons fire with the advancing loyalists.

"Their line is erratic. He didn't set himself well." Gareth sounded excited. "We can't stop them, but we can make it hurt."

Tara had seen the same thing. Stansill's failing to drive the Kelswa assault tanks to the front was a mistake. She gasped for air as her heavy use of the *Hatchetman*'s laser drove her cockpit temperature up another tick. "We stick it to them, then. Concentrated fire against weaker targets. We get him good and angry." She raced her 'Mech back a few dozen meters. "We make it *personal*."

It was already becoming personal. The loyalists powered forward in pursuit of the Republic line. Lasers and particle cannon spread out devastating lines of destruction. The barrage of missile and autocannon fire created a sound like rolling, continuous thunder.

"And then what?" Gareth asked, his *Black Hawk* stumbling under the initial onslaught.

Tara tightened her grip on the *Hatchetman*'s control sticks.

"Then we get ready to run."



We delayed them several days at the zenith jump point. We rallied at the asteroid belt, and challenged their landing near Jasmine's City. We have struggled against the Dragon for weeks, calling for help while spending the blood of our patriots. Where are the paladins?

—Final transmission, ComStar Station A7-O, Ashio, 21 May 3135

*Terra
Republic of the Sphere
1 June 3135*

Particle cannon discharges slammed back and forth across the no-man's-land like Zeus' lightning,

indiscriminate and deadly. With dark skies piling up overhead, threatening more rain, it was as if the storm had started early, on the ground.

True thunder beat across the woodlands and river salient, all but impossible to distinguish from the echoes of missile barrages, autocannon, and sporadic artillery fire.

Fires burned out of control all along the Marne.

The *Templar*'s cockpit stank of ash and cordite. The air was filtered by the BattleMech's life-support systems, but still tainted. Julian fought for breath. He licked sweat from his blistered lips and wrenched his control stick over to twist his machine around at the waist.

Not . . . quite . . . far enough.

Stutter-stepping, he leaned the *Templar* into the turn and snap-fired one PPC at an encroaching Scimitar. The stream of hellish energy slammed into and through its ferroglass canopy. For a heartbeat, every gunnery position and observation port glowed with an azure backlight. Then all went dark, and the hovercraft grounded in an awkward skid that tore up more earth and finally piled it up against a snag of tree stumps and boulders.

A temporary victory only.

"Guard-one, Guard-one, break off. We have a Schmitt leading into your blind spot!"

Too late. Gem-bright laserfire scorched his left leg, and missiles fell in a firestorm all around his position. The Schmitt registered on his HUD as it cleared a light stand of poplar, the tracked tank carving up soft ground and spinning a small rooster tail of mud behind it. Flanked by Regulators that swiveled their turrets over and slammed a pair of gauss slugs in his direction.

One missed wide, blasting a large crater into a nearby tower that had likely stood for hundreds of years. The other skipped off the *Templar*'s forward knee and slammed up into his right side in a hard-angle ricochet.

That kind of coordinated firepower threatened even a BattleMech, but Julian's Guard responded with swift fury. A Fox armored car swung around the back side of the tower, Infiltrator infantry clinging to its top, leading one of the Guard's two *Centurion*s to Julian's support. A lone SM1 Destroyer—not Callandre's—raced up from the other side.

The Schmitt threw itself into reverse so hard that its tracks slipped for several seconds, trying to gain purchase. The Regulators crossed in front of it, hammering away with their gauss rifles, putting some hurt on the Destroyer which jumped and skewed sideways but rode out the hard hits.

Return fire chased the loyalists back to the trees, but there would be no pursuit. Again. A line of destruction suddenly walked a hard line between Julian's strike force and the retreating vehicles, throwing earth and rock and great large columns of fire into the air and nearly into the face of the *Centurion*. The artillery barrage shook the ground, and the fifty-ton 'Mech dropped to one knee, shielding its cockpit with a thick, metal-clad arm.

"We have got to get some of those," Julian whispered, but too loud.

"Sir?" Lieutenant Dawkins, back in the Guard's mobile HQ. The man coordinated all reports coming

from every part of the wide-spread battle, and he never missed his cue. Not once.

Julian twisted back to a neutral profile, cut the *Templar* away from that line of death and faded back behind the tower, the great wall it anchored, and some tall willow trees.

“Those mobile defense systems. Paladin artillery vehicles.” His voice broke, and he swallowed dryly. “Their destructive line is impressive.”

The First Guard had heavy guns at their command as well, of course. Standard Long Tom artillery pieces. Julian could move them faster than a Paladin Defense System, but by using a fusion reactor a PDS supported two heavy artillery guns per vehicle.

“Noted, sire.”

And it would be. Jotted down in an electronic file, and forwarded back to the prince’s champion at the end of the battle.

If he were still alive.

Which, if Conner Rhys-Monroe had anything to say about it, wouldn’t be the case.

“If we’re not interrupting your planning session . . .” Callandre’s voice was strong and cutting in his ear. “We could use some help along grids four-five through four-seven.”

“What have you got, Calamity?”

“Not much. Just a *Rifleman* and two *Pack Hunter* s gearing up for a major push. Oh, and Monroe is throwing—*Verdammt! Nadelschlauch!*—hovercraft down the Marne again.”

Ten years since his classes in Deutsch, Julian remembered *those* words rightly enough. And it took quite a bit to shake Callandre Kell. He throttled up into a run, pushing sixty-five kilometers per hour as he raced back to the riverside. Leaving the *Centurion* and the Destroyer behind to guard their flank.

Back and forth and back again. Forward. Then retreat, retreat, retreat. From an early, decisive victory at Meaux, Julian’s force had chased a wounded *Spider* right into the loyalists’ advancing line. At first they’d managed a standstill, even when outmassed. But as survivors from a southeast line of advance straggled in, momentum slowly shifted into the enemy’s favor. News of two sidelined paladins did not help, even if they had broken that third column near single-handedly.

Julian’s warriors couldn’t stand up to this for much longer. Even rotating units back to a small cadre of support vehicles for fresh armor when possible, the toll of nonstop fighting was beginning to dig deep into the Guards’ strength.

They didn’t have much more to give.

Julian’s *Templar* broke through a stand of willow, shoving aside the lazy branches with swinging arms. On the far side, Chateau-Thierry’s wide-bodied buildings crowded narrow streets, the old-fashioned town crouched up against the Marne as if afraid to come across. So far it had been spared much in the way of collateral damage.

Not so the near side, where the wide, flat riverbank, once pristine, was now a nightmare of grass fires

and churned earth. A dozen vehicles lay still all along its length; some charred and smoldering, others still burning, and some just quietly dead.

The main fight raged further upriver but fell back closer on Julian's position with every passing moment. And he had a chore to do here, first.

Chasing ahead of his fire team, Julian pounded across the bank and waded several dozen meters out into the Marne. It was the third attempt in an hour by Conner Rhys-Monroe to use the river as a fire road, trying to skate hovercraft and amphibious APCs quickly down the wide, still waters. This time Julian had missed closing the gates. Two JES carriers were already downstream, far beyond his reach. He pulled his crosshairs over an approaching MHI Amphibious APC instead, waited the extra second for his targeting computer to make adjustments for velocity and angle, then eased into his triggers.

Twin streams of hellish energies crackled over the river, snapping out small arcs of electrical discharge that jumped and skittered over the water's surface like neon insects. Both arcs of man-made lightning slashed the APC from tip to tail, drawing long, angry wounds down its side.

Opening it up as the Destroyer slid out onto the waters, skated across the near surface and hammered through the rent armor with its assault-class autocannon.

What few scraps of protection the APC mustered were carved away, and the interior gutted by long, lethal streams of hot metal. It sank out from under the targeting sights, with only one Purifier infantry making a long, desperate leap for the opposite shore.

The Destroyer's secondary machine guns ripped him out of the air. Like a well-trained attack dog, the SM1 about-faced and skimmed back across the river to rein itself in at Julian's side.

But there were two more hovercraft approaching, guarding another amphibious personnel carrier. Julian couldn't believe they'd try to run the gauntlet. And they didn't. All three swung wide, racing for the far bank on which Chateau-Thierry continued to wait. By unspoken consent, both sides had avoided the small city. It was a truce Julian had been glad to see, though now it was about to be broken.

He watched as the hovercraft skated along the far riverbank, looking for a shallow slope. Dawkins confirmed that loyalists had turned some of their ground vehicles for the eastern bridge as well. Upstream. Julian could barely see the low-lying bridge near a turn in the river's course. Clear so far.

"If they start using the city to get behind us, we're in trouble."

Dawkins, as usual, had just the news to relay. "We're in trouble anyway. We've a second loyalist force chasing Tara Campbell and Paladin Sinclair in our direction. They'll hammer us from north-northwest if we don't fall back. ETA, forty minutes."

A crawling sensation pricked at Julian's scalp and along the back of his neck. Then he wrote it off as immaterial. "This battle will be over in twenty if we can't keep that bank clear."

He'd worry about the collapse of the northern defensive line later.

"Just a little help," he whispered. Wading further into the stream, until the waters swirled sluggishly around his *Templar*'s waist, Julian reached for the nearest hovercraft at the far shore. A Scimitar. "Just a bit."

He considered sending the Destroyer after them, chasing them down. But an assault cannon could do terrible things inside a tightly packed city if it missed. When it missed.

Fire support coming from *inside* the city firing outward, though, Julian hadn't thought of. Or expected.

Laserfire slashed outward from a narrow alley, one Julian would have considered too close-quarters for an armored vehicle, much less a BattleMech. It caught the Scimitar in the front left fender, chewing through the hovercraft's skirt. The vehicle listed as air spilled out from beneath it, but did not ground.

Not until four-score missiles slammed over it in a curtain of fire, smoke and debris. Sharp blossoms of fire tore away armor and engine cowling, ferroglass canopy, and a wide swath from the lift skirt. It exposed the high-speed fans beneath the craft. And when two final warheads detonated in among the whirling vanes, the fans shattered with catastrophic effect.

Pieces of high-velocity metal slashed out through the skirt like razors, spilling the Scimitar's entire air cushion on one final blow.

The vehicle grounded, spun about on what little kinetic energy remained in the ruined lifters, and then jumped back up awkwardly into the air to pirouette through the cloud of settling debris.

The violence was so immediate, so surprising, the following loyalists had only seconds to respond. And in any crisis situation, even with trained soldiers, you had three basic personality types.

Those who froze, as the APC driver did, driving forward toward the same riverbank stretch where the Scimitar had just met its death.

Those who acted—even if turning directly away from the bank, and under the weapons of Julian's *Templar*, wasn't the best of options for the second Scimitar.

"The Scimitar is all yours, Lord Davion."

And those who called for help.

It was a vaguely familiar voice, belonging to the pilot of the *Vulture* that side-shuffled out of the narrow alleyway. Painted in bright, bright white with gold and burgundy accents, it could only be one of the paladins.

And there was only one he knew of who should have been operating on the local lines, even if she was several hours late.

"It's ours, Lady Avellar."

The Destroyer powered forward to carve half the Scimitar's nose away with its autocannon. Then Julian neatly sliced away the remaining half.

The hovercraft plunged into the river's strong grip, throwing up a white sheet of spray. It quickly sank from sight, disappearing as, on the far bank, the amphibious APC also fell under the *Vulture*'s impressive firepower.

The *Vulture* did not dally. Maya Avellar turned it upriver, stalking the far bank as she protected the approach to Chateau-Thierry. The 'Mech had a limp to it, dragging its right foot just enough to keep her

from full-on running speed.

“I will hold the bridge,” she promised, looking to be doing it by herself. “No one enters this city.”

Dawkins had followed the firefight and the arrival of the paladin. His Praetorian mobile HQ vehicle crawled down the riverbank, flanked by a bare-bones protective detail of Infiltrator and two Fox armored cars. “If she can do that, sir, we have a chance to withdraw. Set a new line once Tara Campbell and Sinclair link up.”

“Whatever you are going to do, Jules, figure it out soon. Conner’s pressing hard, and we’re hardly stopping to reset our line now.”

Julian waded his *Templar* out of the river’s grasp. He paused, shuffling the *Templar* in a tight circle, surveying the area. If Maya could hold the far bank—somehow—and if he could stop the two loyalists lines from collapsing against him in a classic pincer—some way . . .

It reminded him, actually, of the situation in which the Federated Suns found itself. Static position. An open back (against the Periphery). Two potential enemies looming up on different fronts. And without the resources to hold them both off. One fight or the other. Wasn’t that the choice?

And if it was, could he turn this battle in the same direction?

Only one way to find out.

Julian throttled into a walk that pushed his ’Mech upriver, the same direction as Maya Avellar. “Calamity, blunt the nose on Conner’s push. Chew it off if you can, but I want that line held.”

“It’s gonna cost,” she warned. The same words she had used in the simulation battle against Yori Kurita.

And he remembered his cavalier answer. Only this time, there *were* real lives on the line. There was no forgetting that now.

“Pay it,” he said. “We draw a line in the earth, here. This far. No further.

“And may fortune favor the foolish.”

Today on New Aragon, local political leaders (minus the world governor) held a joint press conference to declare the situation “hopelessly lost” and asking for terms of surrender from the invading Capellan forces. New Legate Kelly Simone branded the political triumvirate “cowards and traitors and the worse kind of leaders for a struggling people.”

—Damon Darman, New Aragon, 25 May 3135

*Terra
Republic of the Sphere
1 June 3135*

Tara Campbell nearly died within sight of Chateau-Thierry.

A slow patter of rain fell, dotting her ferroglass canopy with splashes of silver-gray. The droplets mixed with grit and soot, running muddy fingers down the outside surface, smearing her distant view of the city's white brick buildings and the older gray stone walls that stood from centuries past, wars past.

The Republic force pushed in from the northwest, running upriver alongside the Marne. For the first time in an hour, she and Gareth pulled Cray Stansilla^{away} from Paris, teasing a rabid dog with fresh meat. Certain to be a short-lived chase as the MechWarriors trailed at the back of the widespread column, pulling rear-guard duty as they shepherded some of the slower vehicles. Two Jousts. A crippled M1 Marksman.

Both remaining Cavalry VTOLs flew high cover, crisscrossing overhead as they spotted for advance elements of the pursuing Senate loyalists.

They missed.

Two *Stinger*s charged out of Belleau Wood from the north, one taking to the air on a high, arcing jump while the second ran beneath the VTOL coverage. A pair of Demon wheeled striker tanks chased after them. And from the direction of the river, a pair of Condors broke cover as well, coordinating a quick pincer.

The jumping *Stinger* swatted at the Cavalry attack copters with its rocket launchers, sending the fire-and-forget warheads on quick beelines. Two warheads missed. Two more slammed into the side of one of the fragile craft, blossoming bright and angry red, and nearly knocked it from the air. The stricken Cavalry cut around in tight circles, fighting for control, while the second VTOL ditched to one side.

The second *Stinger* rushed in behind the retreating line and slashed at Tara's back with its large lasers.

A ruby-bright lance speared the *Hatchetman*, coring through the thinner, rear armor, slicing away at support struts and engine shielding. More waste heat bled into the chest cavity of Tara's 'Mech, jumping the temperatures already pushing redline.

Worse, supports shifted beneath the weight of her gyro. The forty-five-ton machine shook with a mechanical palsy as the massive stabilizer trembled and rocked out of balance.

Before she could do much more than bring her laser in line with the Condor charging in at her front, the *Hatchetman* pitched forward, sprawling out in a facedown slide through a field of wildflowers. Shaken so badly that her teeth clacked together hard enough to chip a molar, Tara kept a firm grip on her controls and waited for the nightmare to end.

"Tango-one! She's down."

". . . lost the Countess!"

Comms chatter filtered in through a dark haze. She thought she heard Julian Davion, asking if they needed assistance, urging them forward where the First Davion Guards continued to hold a hard line. Sounded like him. Might have been him. Might have been the actor who played him on trivid.

Which was when she truly realized how close to the cusp of darkness she walked.

Tara shook herself. “Go, go!” Suspended from her harness, hanging above her control console, she urged Gareth and the others forward. “Don’t wait for me!”

All she had time to say as the loyalists drove in at her like wolves sensing blood. Missiles hammered around her, tearing bites out of the ground and out of the *Hatchetman*’s armor. Lasers slashed. Machine guns picked at the edges of her open wounds, drilling deeper, looking for meat.

Her cockpit was all high-pitched alarms and red warning lights. The BattleMech’s wireframe schematic showed heavy armor loss across her back and down the left side. She’d also scraped a good swath from her machine’s head. Ruptured heat sinks. A damaged laser in her right chest.

The ringing in her ears that had nothing to do with warning alarms.

Blood in her mouth from where she’d bitten the inside of her cheek.

Working the ’Mech’s arms beneath her, Tara *shoved* with the strength of myomer muscles and picked her machine up from the ground. A Demon raced in at her right side. Bad choice. Propping herself on the war machine’s left arm, she chopped at the vehicle with her titanium hatchet.

Her first blow caved in the forward left side of the tank and broke the nearby wheel right off the axle. The front corner of the Demon chewed down into the ground as the back wheels continued to dig and spray back a long tail of mud in a desperate fan. Raising her hatchet again, this time Tara brought it down through the crew cockpit, leaving it a tangle of steel, ferroglass and flesh. The Demon stopped trying to power forward.

One of the Condors actually tried to sideswipe her arm, thinking to knock her back flat. It bounced off as if striking a reinforced post—which in a way it had—and then all but disintegrated ten seconds later as nearly a score of short-range missiles hammered down over it like Thor’s own hammer.

Gareth Sinclair had come back.

So, in fact, had the Jousts and M1, and about half of their armored column. VV1 Rangers ran off the remaining Demon while their two Cavalry attack VTOLs harried the Condor. Both Jousts opened up against one of the *Stinger*s, ten-packs spreading out flight after flight of LRMs. Lasers slashed through the air. And the M1 Marksman added its own guns into the desperate barrage.

It was enough. The crippled *Stinger* managed one dying gasp, slicing deep into the Marksman’s side with its own laser, burning through armor and the crew compartment. Then it stumbled and fell. And did not rise again, as Gareth’s *Black Hawk* did a high-speed run-by with large lasers slicing across the backs of the *Stinger*’s legs, severing both below the knee.

“Are you going to lay there all day?” he asked, pacing a tight box around the prone *Hatchetman* .

It was a struggle, returning the unbalanced ’Mech to its feet. Worse when she tried to throttle up for the race to the end of their long-running firefight. The BattleMech swayed like a drunken sergeant, and Tara felt lightheaded with the sauna-like heat of her cockpit and the acrid, ozone scent of fried electronics burning in her sinuses. She finally throttled down to a walking speed, working her control sticks to keep the *Hatchetman* upright.

Behind them, Cray Stansill’s line powered forward, closing the gap in large strides. Three kilometers. Then two.

“Back on,” she said, still fighting the rough handling. “Back on the grid.”

“Good to hear.” It was Julian Davion. “We could use the help.”

Tara wasn't certain how much help they could be. A crippled *Hatchetman* and an armor-stripped *Black Hawk*, leading in a ragged short company of vehicles and infantry?

With a solid loyalist force chasing right up their ass, ready to slam into the back of Julian's First Guards?

Coming up on one kilometer distance, the Republic force had just made sight of the eastern bridge below Chateau-Thierry. Not close enough to see the fighting further upriver, though by the thunder of weapons fire and the rising smoke from burning woods, burning vehicles, she guessed the main battle to be just up around the river's far turn. A long kilometer. Maybe two.

Too far.

“We'll need every one of you to make this work,” Julian said when she informed him.

Tara read her HUD again, and the strategic map she had loaded up on an auxiliary monitor. Estimated the distance, and the remaining time. “Can't do it. We'll never make your line.”

“Don't need to.”

“How do you figure?”

His answer was a moment of silence. Toggling over to his personal channels. Checking with intelligence officers, or rallying troops to throw her direction. As if he had forces to spare. *Point-eight clicks!* Tara turned back to face Stansill's approaching line. Gareth Sinclair did not bother to urge her onward. She simply hauled in their column, spreading it in a two-line set behind her. He limped the *Black Hawk* up to her side. They continued walking backward, grabbing every meter they could. The rain continued to trickle down.

“So close,” she said on a tight-channel transmission.

Coming up on half a kilometer.

Then the skies really opened and rained down streaks of fire, gouging the earth all along the front of Cray Stansill's charge. Trees splintered into matchsticks and blackened dirt geysered up into the air. A hoverbike at the forward edge of Stansill's line simply *disappeared*. A JES carrier overturned as a gout of fire and smoke erupted beneath it.

Whatever artillery Julian Davion had been using to support the Guards, he'd turned it back to buy some time for the others! The distant positions spent their munitions supply in a sprint, hammering the open ground full of deadly barrages that continued on, and on. Firing for deterrence rather than effect.

It stopped Cray Stansill cold, pulling his line back until he could mass for a more coordinated strike.

“Never bet against a Davion,” a new voice chimed in on an unsecured frequency. Female. Mocking. “They've been waging war since before it was fashionable.”

“Impressive.” But it wasn’t enough. Tara saw that Gareth had already turned his *Black Hawk* around, herding the armored line back another two hundred meters. Three hundred. She continued to pace her *Hatchetman* back one methodical step at a time, never taking her eyes off the enemy’s forward units. Seconds. Seconds only.

“Got anything else in your bag of tricks?” she asked.

Julian was apparently in no mood to disappoint.

“Watch this,” he said. And there was silence on the channels again. For about thirty seconds.

As artillery dropped hard and heavy on Cray Stansill’s position, Conner Rhys-Monroe slammed a fist into the side of a nearby access panel, rattling the metal and taking his frustrations out on his equipment. Every time! Every probing attack cut off and sent back reeling. Every major push blunted. Each flanking attempt running foul of artillery or the fast-response units of the First Davion Guards.

Julian Davion steadily sold off pieces of his unit, but he was getting a seller’s-market price for them.

Conner was frustrated, but at least he was beyond his surprise at finding a Federated Suns force fielded on Terra, and the anger that had consumed him while listening to a third of his assault getting torn up by two paladins and a handful of green militia. He was! Not even panicked news of the assault into Germany, driving the other senators to flight, had made an impact on him. Those were the fortunes of war, and if nothing else, The Republic had taught him how to accept such setbacks. Hadn’t it?

New plans were now in place. Fallback positions, as well as reevaluated goals. A knight did not surrender to a broken strategy. A knight shifted tactics on the fly, wrestled with the conditions as presented, always searching, always hungry, for victory.

Except that Julian Davion appeared to have taken many of the same classes. Of an age with Conner he might be, but the prince’s champion did not hold an empty title.

Likesenator ?

Another frustrated bash, then hand back on the *Rifleman*’s throttle. He could not afford to think about such things. Not in the field.

Instead, during a brief lull that settled over the hot-fire zone, he concentrated on wheeling a trio of Demons around the Guards’ flank and repositioning his Paladin Defense Systems to blast the hell out of Julian’s line.

He also spared a Kinnol main battle tank for Avellar’s rendition of Horatio-at-the-bridge—the other black hole in his tactical plan.

One paladin—one!—had stopgapped his attempts to swing flanking forces through Chateau-Thierry. Maya Avellar’s *Vulture* had fallen twice already, and both times had struggled back to its feet, laying waste to any force that tried to fly across the river, or challenge it for possession of the western bridge. Not many knights Conner knew could have stood up under that kind of punishment.

This attempt faired no better. The Kinnol rolled up onto the bridge, under cover by Jesses on the

rain-churned water. Avellar's *Vulture* ignored the hovercraft for a moment, concentrating lasers and flight after flight of missiles on the main battle tank. A single PPC, even supported by a Delta Dart ten-pack, was no fair trade in firepower.

It cost the *Vulture* more armor. A few heat sinks, it seemed, as gray-green coolant burst from new ruptures in the chest. But Conner was forced to pull the Kinnol back before Maya scrapped it into a seventy-ton roadblock.

Magnificent bitch!

Something new on his HUD. Several Guard units had edged back to the treeline, or just inside. Possibly readying a move around his position. Checking his flank, Conner wheeled a Schmitt out against a pair of Pegasus scout craft—but didn't see anything more threatening building.

Taking advantage of what appeared to be a Davion fallback maneuver, he stomped forward to haul crosshairs over the outline of a fleeing Destroyer. It threw back a curtain of mist, shattered rain drops. It was also the one with the V-shaped design scrawled next to the crest of the Federated Suns, deviling his line for the last half hour. Always where the fighting was thickest. Always with that damnable assault-grade autocannon blazing away.

Almost as bad as, if not worse than, the *Templar*'s accuracy.

The angle, the Destroyer's speed—the best Conner could get was a flashing-gold reticle. Partial lock. He reckoned it by dead-eye sight, then pulled into his rotary autocannon, winding up the rotating barrels and pitching a hail of hot metal after the hovercraft. His right-arm cannon jammed on an ammunition misfeed. His left-arm rotary cut a deadly swath. Running from nose to tail on the Destroyer, he zeroed in on the rear propulsion fans.

Only to have the Destroyer cut out the props and crank over its steering rudders, skimming around in an end-for-end flip that spread the damage out over more surface area, preventing any kind of penetration.

Worse, the end-for-end also pointed its own autocannon back the way of some pursuing Scimitars. The hard-pounding assault weapon chewed off the front of one lift skirt, spilling the craft nose-down into the earth and flipping it into a death roll that tumbled and tossed the high-speed hovercraft until it rolled itself out into the river.

"Why isn't that tank crew on *our* side?" he asked no one in particular, clearing his feed jam.

And in case the hovercraft powered into a stop to reverse its path, Conner edged his *Rifleman* further out, treading over artillery craters and places where molten armor still smoldered against charred earth. The SM1 continued to skate backwards on its cushion of air, just out of reach. Drawing him after.

Which put him near the front of a scrambled line when suddenly the entire Davion force turned and wheeled into a stand of willow and poplar and tall, skinny alder.

He watched an *Enforcer* shoulder aside some of the younger growth, snapping the slender trunks in greenstick fractures to create a path for the following Praetorian command crawler. A set of Fox armored cars chose more careful routes, worried for their precious lift fans, but most armored vehicles crashed into the brush and forest with equal abandon.

Julian Davion's *Templar* splashed through muck and water near the river's edge, leading its own path of

retreat and already with a fifteen, twenty second jump. Conner watched as the Destroyer he'd been chasing after snapped about end-for-end again, and powered in a long, sweeping curve that finally spread it out over the river with another SM1 and a JES hover-carrier.

The last men off the field were Cavalier battle armor. Racing for the forest's cover, having missed hitching a ride on any of the APCs.

Conner had followed slowly, worried for a trap, still set to an easy walk as he had tracked after the Destroyer. It didn't occur to him for several long seconds that Julian was actually pulling completely away.

It was another four or five before he realized why.

"Advance! All units, flank speed and follow!"

Too late. The feeling settled down inside the pit of his stomach, like freezing-cold glass. Too late.

The First Davion Guards massed only a bit lighter than his own force, but what he gained in raw firepower, they made up in mobility. By the time his people had made the far treeline, Cray Stansill was already yelling for assistance. Artillery support. Aerospace.

Except Conner had given up his aerospace fighter cover two hours before, flinging them back into Germany, into Spain. Spreading some of that wealth for Asia and the Americas as well. He ordered his Paladin Artillery Defense to shift position, again, calling fresh coordinates back to the distant positions. But it would take several slow minutes. The kind of time Stansill did not have.

Two strengthened companies slammed into the tall woods behind the Davion line. A few light tanks reported infantry ambushes, swarmed by Cavalier and Infiltrators. But not many. Not nearly enough to convince Conner that it had all been a ruse. Ordering his people forward, charging his *Riflesman* through the thinning stands, he crashed through the far side, onto a new riverbank where the Marne had turned back southward, and saw the devastation drawn out before him.

Julian Davion's entire First Guard had abandoned cover and a firm operations line to join Campbell and Sinclair with all haste, and now moved forward under cover of artillery fire to steamroll Stansill's entire field.

Throwing all their weight at the lesser half of the loyalist assault!

Shame burned on Conner's face even as rage trembled in his muscles. He felt the urge to cut his force loose: best speed forward and save the day! But wars were not fought on emotions. They were fought, and won, and sometimes stalemated for another day, by cold, rational thought and the precision application of skill.

Too late, his knight's training was returning. Too late he was beginning to see that the entire campaign on Terra had been doomed from the start. Whether the other senators had seen that, and used him, or trusted in Conner's own righteous fire to make up the difference, it no longer mattered.

What mattered now was salvaging something—anything!—from this setback.

Because it was only a setback unless he handed Julian Davion the prize.

“Field Two, form on me,” he ordered calmly. “BattleMechs spread two and two to either side. Heavy vehicles backing a light skirmish line. Advance on my pace.”

And he kicked his *Rifleman* into a steady walk, already dialing for the channel he had never wanted to use.

The cooling rainfall meant nothing to Julian, trapped in a blazing cockpit. Heat rose by ticks and jumps as the *Templar*'s reactor spiked again, and again, driving temperatures well past any safety limits, deep into the red.

He gasped for breath. His vision swam with heat stroke and burning sweat. There was no looking for the shutdown override. He simply slapped at it every thirty seconds or so, cutting out the safety interlocks, keeping his 'Mech alive and commanding the field as his troops set about their massacre.

Which is what it was. A massacre. Based on the Federated Suns' strategy that said, with two able enemies, concentrate force in one direction and unite disparate forces for (hopefully) a sound victory.

It didn't go off without problems, though. The First Guards lost one of their own *Centurion*s to a combination of enemy luck and friendly fire when an artillery barrage landed too close, and a JES carrier got off half its load before both machines crashed beneath a roiling ball of fire and smoke. The MechWarrior punched out, dragging his parafoil toward a distant MASH truck. The Jess was not so lucky.

After that, the next ten minutes belonged to the First Davion Guards and a strong company of Republic troops. Conner Rhys-Monroe handed it to them, advancing his line in a slow, steadfast manner. At the time, Julian considered it a setup to the knock-out blow yet to fall. A temporary period of grace.

And the allied forces would make good on it.

Gareth Sinclair teamed up with Callandre Kell to bring down the *Catapult*, then Callandre spun herself away from the main line to chase after a fleeing *Stinger*, which ran itself right out over the river. The twenty-ton 'Mech had no intention of facing down an assault-class weapon. It lit off jump jets, sailed out over deep water, and quite intentionally belly flopped into the Marne, going where no hovercraft could follow.

Calamity skated her Destroyer back to the main skirmish, cursing fluently in gutter-Deutsch the entire way. She'd have to settle for an “assist.” The *Catapult*'s “kill” would be claimed by Paladin Sinclair.

The center of the loyalists' line caved as Tara Campbell led her line against Stansill's *Griffin*. Julian blasted more armor from the side of the ex-knight's machine before being forced to leave off. His heat, pushed too high too fast, added his *Templar*'s control circuitry. The 'Mech responded sluggishly, but still with deadly force.

His PPCs cored through a Kinnol main battle tank, turning it into a smoking ruin.

Fast-cycling, spreading his arms wide, his next salvo blasted armor from a Hasek infantry carrier and all but scrapped a crippled Marksman.

Then a pair of gauss slugs cracked into Julian's back and his left knee as a Kelswa assault tank rolled

over and buried a line of Republic Cavaliers, training its big guns on the eighty-five-ton 'Mech.

The brutal assault shoved Julian forward and kicked one leg out from beneath him at the same time. The *Templar*'s gyro screamed in protest, and Julian abandoned himself to a rough landing.

Which threw the second of only two major hitches into his off-the-cuff plan. His *Templar* sprawled in the very *wrong* direction. Crashing down on its right side, shoulder digging into the ground and head laid right under the Kelswa's rail guns.

No time to wrestle the assault-class monster back to his feet. Julian got the 'Mech's arms beneath him and managed to prop himself into a half-prone position. His left-arm PPC flayed armor from the Kelswa, blasting away protection and leaving a half-melted scar down its front side. Not enough.

Which was when Calamity Kell burst back onto the scene.

"No you *do not*!" was all she had time for as she barreled her Destroyer in at its top speed of 120 kilometers per hour, autocannon blazing, and ramming it into the right side of the stationary assault tank.

Julian had a front row seat. Saw the autocannon hammer hard into the Kelswa's side, and hoped, even though he knew—somewhere back inside his mind—that she couldn't possibly burn through before the assault tank's gauss rifles took out the *Templar*'s cockpit. At that point, he hadn't considered the wreckage about to pile up in front of him.

But then the SM1's forward-thrust barrel speared into the assault tank's side, ruining the weapon but giving the Kelswa just that start of *anudge*. Rocking it up, off its right-side treads, as the hovercraft slammed in behind its weapon to cave in the tank's side. The impact shoved the Kelswa over and ramped the Destroyer into the air. It flew, gracefully, for about three seconds.

Then crashed to the ground in a belly flop that beat the *Stinger*'s earlier performance hands down.

"Callandre!" Julian stumbled his *Templar* back to its feet, lying about on both sides with PPCs, keeping enemy vehicles back from his friend's wrecked Destroyer. "Calamity Kell!"

"Ow."

It wasn't much of a response. But it was enough.

Julian turned with a vengeance into the nearest line of loyalist 'Mechs, relieved for his friend and ready to put an end to the march on Paris. The Guard lost its *Enforcer* in the next few minutes, but wrecked incredible havoc amongst the shattered loyalist line as well. Julian burned down a Hastati Regulator, and a Condor so new out of the factory it had only a base-primer paint job.

Then Tara Campbell finally stumbled close enough to Stansill's *Griffin* to rip out the ex-knight's heart with her autocannon. The BattleMech died on its feet, fusion reactor bursting free in a golden blaze, shattering limbs and armor, casting pieces in all directions.

The force of the blast knocked Tara Campbell back, but the stubborn *Hatchetman* flailed about, trying to rise again.

Loyalists broke from their line, fleeing for the safety of Conner Rhys-Monroe's direct command. Already Julian's Guards were sparring at range with the stronger force. Surprisingly, enough to slow

Monroe, set him back a step. Julian threw forward a pair of Jousts. A Kinnol main battle tank, captured by Dawkin's engineering squad and pressed back into the battle, rolled in as well.

It bought them seconds.

"Artillery?" Julian toggled for a direct line. "What do you have left?"

"Another few hundred pounds. Then we're down to throwing rocks."

"Use it! Retard distance minus two hundred."

He didn't even try to put the fire into Conner's line, which might have prompted them to speed their attack. He simply filled up the ground in between them with a line of fire and shrapnel that no one would willingly cross. Four . . . perhaps five hundred meters separated the two lines now. Julian wanted to keep that as long as possible.

Longer, it turned out, than he'd ever imagined.

As the debris cleared in a rain of blackened earth and gravel, and the smoke drifted into fading wisps, the loyalist line stood there. Centered on the *Rifleman*. Unmoving.

Then the entire line began a slow but certain retreat.

Allied units converged on Julian's position, rallying. Two strengthened companies . . . three. . . . Julian took a head count, started weighing out what he had left against the knight-senator. Even odds. Or pretty close to it. Even with Tara Campbell's *Hatchetman* staggering up along with Gareth Sinclair and his *Black Hawk*, Julian gave an edge to the loyalists. Fewer BattleMech units at this point, but heavier ground forces and better support with their recovery vehicles and mobile gantries.

"You won't get a better shot at them in an hour," Calamity broadcast on a general channel.

"Or them at us," Tara responded. She sounded about how Julian felt. Battered and utterly spent. "Are they thinking to take and hold Chateau-Thierry?"

Julian frowned, and waited, and watched. The loyalists began forming up in company-strength units, then dividing down, it seemed, into lances as organized by an outside force. Conner Rhys-Monroe, then? Getting his people readied for. . . ?

"Check your high-gain sensors," Maya Avellar broke in on the chatter. "That's not ours."

Julian didn't bother. He'd figured it out already. Turning toward the distant city, he gazed through a mud-streaked cockpit canopy into the sky. At first, it was just a darker mass moving against an overcast sky piled up with heavy thunderheads. Then a shadow that moved down through the light curtains of rain, falling over the far side of Chateau-Thierry.

Finally a DropShip *Excalibur* -class.

Two elements of fighters streaked down behind it, taking high-speed turns over the city and the surrounding woodland and flats. Transgressors. Julian was just as happy to leave them alone. At least for now.

But he knew, felt it, that it wouldn't be for good.

This wasn't over.

"It's not, is it?" Callandre Kell asked, as if reading Julian's mind. She had crawled out of her ruined tank, and now perched atop it with a bloody compress held to the side of her head.

Julian sat back in his command chair, breathing easier now that his cooling system had made headway against the stifling heat of combat. Now it was *merely* a sauna. And he was through with it. Until the next time.

"It is," he said, "for now."

People of Terra! You can no longer hide your heads in the sand and pretend that what you do has no effect on the greater realm of humanity. Your support for the exarch's illegal actions is scorned by most worlds. You make it possible for an outlaw government to survive.

Look within yourself the next time you see a uniform of The Republic's military. Ask yourself the simplest of questions.

Are you proud? Or are you beginning to fear?

**—(Senator) Conner Rhys-Monroe, departing transmission,
Terra, 1 June 3135**

*Terra
Republic of the Sphere
1 June 3135*

Asomber pall smothered the Chamber of Paladins, draining the energy of the room—which Tara thought could have been more upbeat, if still severe.

As twilight rolled up on Geneva, the day spent, all but six paladins had returned to the chamber and their stations. Always in motion, they conversed with each other, or with handfuls of the twenty or so knights milling about awaiting missions or a request for data. Occasionally, one would be called away, but never for long. It had all the trappings of a war room, and the war was going well. Better than could have been expected, all things considered.

But then, Meraj Jorgensson was dead. Another name lost to the rolls of the vaunted paladin corps.

She had not really known the giant man, but she'd respected his position and his history of accomplishments. Sad, yes. But there seemed to be something more lurking under the surface. A grim determination as the paladins monitored the last remnants of fighting, the retreat of the senators and their supporters, and culled names from the Republic's roster of active servicemen. Separating those who had supported the loyalist cause from those who had remained steadfast.

Tara put a hand on Gareth Sinclair's arm as he and Heather GioAvanti finished up a hasty conference

and returned to their comrades, and their own stations. "What's left?" she asked.

No one had spent much time or energy to freshen up after battle. After cleaning up the fighting around Chateau-Thierry, Tara and Gareth had grabbed simple jumpsuits to pull over their combat togs. Heather GioAvanti had found a moment to drag out a working uniform, but her hair was also still matted down from wearing a neurohelmet.

Gareth sipped at a lime-flavored sports drink, still hydrating himself after the long day spent inside a cockpit. He toasted the paladins working at their stations with it. "They're tracking down the last of the on-planet holdouts. Some small skirmishes being put down in Sverdlovsk and Sao Paulo."

"We can't be certain how many loyalist supporters made the final DropShip exodus, either," GioAvanti said. "It will take some time to set Terra to rights. But we'll get the job done. David McKinnon will bring in part of the Seventh Hastati after all, to supplement our losses. We'll rebuild." She glanced at one of the darkened stations set in the circle. "And tomorrow we'll bury Meraj in a small ceremony."

"That doesn't seem right. Especially after the trouble The Republic went through over Victor Steiner-Davion." Though there weren't many who could compete with Victor's resume. Next to his life, most paled.

Gareth and Heather were far more practical. They both began to speak, both stopped. Heather nodded at the younger paladin, ceding the floor to him. "What's not right is that we put Victor through the trouble to begin with. No paladin wants their death to be a long, drawn-out affair. It's what we do with our *lives* that we want to matter."

"Also," Heather reminded them all, "Meraj was Clan. He kept his codex up to date. A copy and his DNA gifttake will be returned to the Dominion. He'll be remembered through new generations." She paused, glanced at her colleague, and then offered, "You will, of course, be asked to attend the service for Paladin Meraj."

Tara nodded. "I would be honored. But is there anything more I can do, today?"

She didn't feel up to much more. And her BattleMech wasn't ready for anything but a long and detailed overhaul. But the offer had to be made.

She hadn't come back to Terra to stand back and watch.

Paladin Mandela walked by and slipped a wave and a glance in GioAvanti's direction. Heather checked back toward the door, and then returned a quick nod to her comrade. "I guess that is going to depend," the paladin said.

She turned Tara toward the entrance to the chamber with nothing more than a directed look. The exarch's chief of staff waited there. Héloïse Montgolfier. Scanning the room. Heather nudged Tara with a light touch on the elbow. "I suspect she's here for you."

Jonah Levin played bartender, pulling three glasses out of a Chippendale and pouring healthy splashes from a clear bottle. His staff would frown later, seeing that he hadn't properly called for one of the servants who existed for such menial tasks. But Levin had had enough today of letting others handle the workload around him while he sat, and waited.

“I can’t tell you how many times I wanted to storm out of my office today, and take to the field.”

Cradling all three glasses in his hands, he carried them over to the small sitting area. The Bullet had curtains drawn over its windowed alcove and lights set to eight percent. As close to an intimate setting as he could make it. He handed one glass—carefully!—to Tara Campbell. Julian Davion looked ready to refuse, but the exarch nodded.

“It’s flavored water.”

He had learned many things in the last few months regarding the Federated Suns’ champion. Levin had made it a point to find out, the moment Harrison Davion insisted that the young man stay and sit in on that first meeting. Knowing that Julian would refuse an alcoholic drink was only one piece of valuable information.

Knowing why was another.

Both Tara and Julian sipped politely, still standing. The exarch joined them, taking a seat on one of the leather chairs, letting the supple material form around him like a glove. The others sat after him.

Julian set his aside first. “I imagine the exarch taking to the field would have been looked on as a reckless act to some,” he said.

“To most, Julian.” Jonah sipped, letting the fresh hint of lemon wash away the dry taste that had plagued him all day while pacing floors in his many offices. “People forget so quickly that I came up a warrior. Was a paladin before I was ever exarch. When news came of Jorgenson’s death, that was hard. But it wasn’t the hardest part of my day.”

“What was?” Tara asked.

She had remained distant, almost cold, since being escorted up by Héloïse. Even now, the questions seemed to be pulled out of her by some outside force. Jonah recognized it instantly. He was getting to know all too well the pressures of “outside forces.”

“When I noticed that they had come into my office, in my absence, and changed the seal.”

He nodded over at the carpet inlay. The normal ensign of The Republic ran a knot-work banner through a globe of Terra, surrounded by a field of ten golden stars to represent the various prefectures. And the motto: *Ad Securitus Per Unitas*. Through unity, freedom.

But now the stars all burned red, not gold, and the banner had been replaced by a sword. A not-so-subtle reminder, meant expressly for the exarch, that fighting had come to Terra itself. “Damien Redburn did not mention that customary change, which must also have happened during the Steel Wolf assault last year.”

There were many things about the job that Damien had failed to mention.

“Still,” he continued, “Terra is secured. Mostly. The Republic stands.” For now. “I don’t think I need to tell either of you how desperate things have turned in the last half year. You saw a great measure of that today. But I did want to thank both of you for your efforts.”

“And the senators?” Tara asked. “What happens to them now?”

“Well, that depends on what they try next. Conner Rhys-Monroe, we expect, will return to Markab. Ptolomeny, Riktofven, Vladistock to their own worlds. We hope that some will come to their senses and split the loyalist ranks, especially when they have to deal with outside threats without the full support of The Republic military behind them.

“Regardless, it is a problem for tomorrow. One I hope to meet with my allies,” he nodded toward Julian, “and . . . my paladins.”

Tara had prepared herself. Smart woman. As much a political animal as a warrior, she had to have suspected the offer was coming. Her face betrayed nothing as Jonah offered her the same position she had turned down once already.

“The Republic needs you, Countess. Now more than ever. It is a sad opportunity that a seat in the chamber has opened, but not one I am willing to overlook when the best candidate is sitting in the same room.”

Tara sipped at her water, then carefully set it aside on a marble coaster.

She stood. Again slowly. Deliberately. Bringing herself to attention.

And shook her head.

“I’m sorry, Exarch. And please don’t believe I’m making this decision lightly. I’ve had a year to think about it. During the fighting for Skye and Prefecture IX the challenges The Republic faces were driven home, and maybe at that time I would have accepted. But after this, my second tour of duty on Terra itself, and how you *needed* to use me here . . . there are things I might need to do. Things you might ask me to do. And I wouldn’t be able to get the job done draped in paladin’s colors. You need people on the outside.”

Jonah felt his composure slip at the end. A brief moment, when the mask slipped away, and he nearly let them see the desperation lurking so close to the surface. *People on the outside*. Yes, he’d need them. If it came to that.

Faith defend, it would not.

He stood, and Julian followed suit. There was not much left for the exarch but to exchange solid grips with Tara Campbell, and wish her the best. “I will not hesitate to call,” he warned her. “And I know you will not hesitate to answer. The Republic’s thanks, Countess Campbell.”

He turned them all toward the door of his office, walking across the seal, sparing it only a quick glance downward.

“And you, Lord Davion. If I thought I could steal you away from Prince Harrison, I might try.” He waved back Julian’s beginning of polite refusal. “No need, no need. I saw it the first day we met. Your devotion is admirable. Harrison is fortunate to have such a strong . . . champion. And I know he is waiting for you, and it grows late. Go, Julian. Both of you go with my blessing and appreciation.”

“There is nothing more we can do?” Julian asked. Tara waited on the answer as well.

“Nothing that cannot wait until tomorrow. We aren’t finished yet. I have high hopes of turning today’s misfortunes into a boon. A formalized alliance with the Federated Suns is only the beginning of what we might accomplish. We, all of us, work toward peace. Out of everything Damien said at the service today, that sits strongest with me. And we will continue to do so. All it will take is for the right people to step forward. And I think we are close to that.” So very close, Jonah could almost reach out for it.

Tomorrow.

And when he was left alone in his office, with a few minutes until his next appointment in a long string of meetings and planning sessions that would burn away most of the night, Jonah Levin crossed back to his desk and took a moment in the alcove. Pulling back the curtains. Watching twilight gather over Magnum Park, Geneva, and The Republic. *His Republic now.*

He only needed to hold things together a short while longer. To stop the nation from bleeding out through a thousand, tiny cuts.

“No. We aren’t finished yet.”

But it was looking more and more like a race to the end.

Epilog

It has been my privilege to lead men into the field on behalf of my prince. A privilege and a responsibility I would gladly forswear should the time come where we could indeed beat our swords into plowshares. Now if you will excuse me, my prince awaits.

—Julian Davion, Lord Markeson, Outside the Hall of Government, Terra, 1 June 3135

Terra
Republic of the Sphere
2 June 3135

Midnight had come and gone.

Still, Caleb Hasek-Sandoval-Davion stormed the wide, third-floor balcony at the chateau at Thonon-les-Baines, pacing back and forth, restless and wrestling with his suspicions. His anger. Still awake, waiting for the *hero’s* return. Killing time. He cradled a glass in one hand, filled half-full and sloshing with smoke-colored bourbon. In his other, he pinched a cigarette.

“Julian left Geneva hours ago. Where the hell is he?”

The doors to his personal suite stood open, with golden light bleeding out onto the open-air patio. The only illumination he’d wanted. The two other rooms opening onto the balcony, given over to his personal staff (*all two* of them!) and his security agents, remained dark and closed off.

Only one agent on duty this time of night anyway, and he stood post in the hall outside of Caleb’s living area.

“Where is he?” he asked again.

He finished his cigarette in a long, greedy drag, searching for something—anything—to help calm him. Nicotine wasn’t it, and he flicked the butt over the balcony’s stone railing. The cherry-red ember arced out into the night, falling in a slow tumble past the second-floor balcony and into the trees below.

Summer had dried out the grounds and raised the snow line farther up the mountainside. There was a danger of fire, he supposed, but that was for others to worry about.

“Denied!” His father had actually denied him the opportunity to join his cousin in the field. “He forbid it.”

Caleb had realized his mistake the day Julian fought Yori Kurita to a standstill in the simulator battle. Until then, he had played his own part perfectly. His father’s son. The heir to the throne, and the future of House Davion. He had seen and been seen. Rubbed elbows with all of the major political figures *except* the damnable Kuritas.

He had even managed since to avoid another run-in with Danai *Liao*. No matter his personal fascination. For the good of the Federated Suns. His image.

But none of that mattered because it was Julian everyone looked to. Courted. Questioned.

“They forgot,” he said. He took a stiff drink, letting the bourbon taste roll around in the back of his mouth a moment before swallowing. “Forgot that I engineered that conflict. Alaric Wolf and Magnusson, they jumped in after it was already set off.”

And then he had made the mistake of pushing all the glory onto Julian, as prince’s champion, when he could have—should have!—suited up to command the armored corps. Not Calamity Kell, who nearly ran the entire battle into the ground with her showboating. Almost as bad as Jasek Kelswa-Steiner, who had fed Alaric Wolf an impressive victory of his own.

With him in the fight, certainly the Federated Suns would have prevailed with a strong showing. Then everyone would have remembered his part.

Another lost opportunity. Like being too late to arrive on Terra at his father’s side.

Who had taken his place there? Julian!

Who found every opportunity to take personal meetings with the Sandovals and the exarch? Julian!

“Who was tapped to champion this budding alliance with The Republic of the Sphere? To show himself off as a hero of the Federated Suns? To usurp my proper place?”

Caleb spun and hurled his glass with all the strength in him, sending it smashing into the chateau wall next to his door. The glass shattered into tiny shards and splinters, littering the threshold. Dark liquid stained the wall, the flagstone patio, and the edge of the carpet just inside the room.

The scent of bourbon rose up in the night air.

“Caleb? Is everything all right?”

Harrison’s voice. His father. From Caleb’s room!

A shadow filled the doorway, large and solid, as *The Bear* stopped on the threshold. With the light behind him, the prince's face was dark and unreadable. He was all beard and hollow pits for eyes. His words sounded guarded.

"Everything all right?"

"Why shouldn't it be?" Caleb stopped his pacing as his father stepped out onto the balcony. He folded his arms over his chest and stared out over the mountainside drop. The slender tops of tall pine trees reached almost level with the stone railing. "Everything's fine so long as Julian is around."

The large man shrugged away Caleb's concern. Shrugged!

"It was not appropriate to send you with him. This kind of fight is the job of the prince's champion." But he did not sound convincing. Not this time.

"And the prince's heir? What of him, Father? What of me?" Caleb kept his fury in check, but felt it quivering in every muscle. Like a hive of angry hornets. "Is this my punishment? To keep me buried from sight over a small"—he reached for a word, trying to sum up his error in judgment in the least-damaging way—"indiscretion?"

"This has nothing to do with whatever passed between you and Danai Liao."

Caleb wasn't listening. "Someone had to know who she was. Someone should have told me." He remembered the Grand Ball. "Julian knew. He recognized her right off. And he's always poking his nose in where it doesn't belong. He should have found out and warned me."

"Julian is not your keeper, Caleb. He has more important things to do than double-check your security agents, whom we have obviously let grow far too lax."

More important . . . ?

"*Heard* you, in the church. The Cathedral's chapel. Mason and I, we talked about it afterward. And Mason agreed, what you said, it could give Julian ideas, Father."

"Who?" Harrison asked.

Was his father now trying to distract Caleb from his point? Certainly he looked concerned. Even a touch fearful. And the princenever looked fearful!

Had Mason been right?

"Did you mean to do that?" Caleb asked, letting his suspicions surface for the first time. "You couldn't have." He stepped back a pace, glanced aside. "He couldn't have."

Harrison followed after him. "Caleb. Son." He seemed at a loss for a moment. Torn between father and prince. Then: "I expect you to be upset," he said. "But I also expect you to understand what is best for the Federated Suns. You will have to see this my way."

Son. Caleb had heard his father use that recently as well, and not with him.

“See what your way?” His voice was hard. Cold. “Father?”

“It is not easy to explain. . . .” Then he trailed off, something farther out into the night catching his eye. “Lights on the road. That will be Julian.” A hard exhale. A decision? “Let’s not talk about it now. Everything is falling into place, and we’ll be leaving soon as it’s all tied together. Once we are away from Terra, Caleb, we will—”

“See what your way?” Caleb asked again, far more forceful.

“Julian will be my heir.”

Just like that, the words were out. They lashed at Caleb like a storm of razors, nicking and cutting at him, getting into his nose and mouth. He swallowed dryly, painfully, and felt the same pain down in the pit of his stomach. Julian . . . would be . . .

“No.”

It wouldn’t happen that way. It couldn’t. Not after so many years of believing. Of work. Overcoming the troubles he’d had at the academy to qualify as a field commander in the armored corps. His years of work building relations among the common people. The lesser nobility. Building a groundswell of common support.

Or being kept out of the way.

“No,” he said again. But almost a question, this time.

“I’m sorry, Caleb. I didn’t intend to have this discussion now. This should have been done at home. But events stole that opportunity away from us, and presented us with new choices and new chances. I had to take them when they arrived.”

Harrison’s words echoed hollowly in Caleb’s ears. Like a drowning man, hearing the calls from shore. Keep your head up. Don’t quit. Important words, perhaps, but all equally useless.

Whatever you do, don’t drown!

“You can’t.” Caleb backed away, toward the railing. Pointed a shaking finger in his father’s direction. “He can’t.” He looked to the side. Past his prince and father. “Tell me that can’t be done so easily. There has to be . . . a hearing. A debate among the nobility. I’m the heir. I’m his son!”

Harrison glanced back, and around, and followed Caleb, who continued to back away. “Caleb, who are you talking to?”

“His son,” Caleb whispered, losing volume as his strength all but gave out. “That has to mean something. Tell him it has to mean something. Tell him!”

His father seized him on either shoulder, shaking him around until Caleb relented and looked his father square in the eye. “Caleb. Talk *to me*. There’s no one else here!” Harrison relaxed his grip, hands only lightly set on Caleb’s shoulders now. He tried a reasonable tone. “Stay with me now, son. We’ll help you understand. We will.” He tried to pull Caleb to him.

We.

Down the mountainside a set of lights swerved through corners, disappearing behind trees, reappearing closer to the gates.

Julian.

“No!”

Wound tight, Caleb uncoiled like a steel spring, knocking away the comforting arms and driving his father back. His hands grabbed the prince’s beard and bunched up thick wads of Harrison’s shirt. He shoved and twisted and *pushed*

And Harrison fell.

The balcony’s stone rail had struck Harrison below the small of the back, leaning him too far over a three-story drop and a steep mountainside. Caleb could not have caught his father had he tried, it happened so fast.

So surprising, that Harrison barely had a chance to yell.

His father’s cry cut off short when he struck the side of the second-floor balcony. The prince hit it hard, then pinwheeled off that edge to fall silently the rest of the way. Falling, while Caleb watched. The body slammed into the ground, and rolled down the slope into a stand of trees.

And Mason Lambert put a hand on Caleb’s shoulder.

Just like his father. Unable to recognize anyone who did not benefit the throne. Mason had been there the entire time. Mason was always there for him.

“You did what had to be done” were his friend’s only words. And they comforted.

They did.

About the Author

Loren L. Coleman grew up in the Pacific Northwest. An avid reader, he became infatuated with stories and the art of storytelling at a young age. He wrote creative works as early as twelve years old and began to write actual fiction stories in high school for a creative writing class. But it was during his enlistment in the U.S. Navy that he began working seriously at the craft, spending his deployment in the Persian Gulf writing his first novel. Discharged in 1993, he went to work as a freelance fiction writer and eventually became a full-time novelist.

His first novel, *Double-Blind*, was published in 1998. He has since explored the universes of *BattleTech*, *Magic: The Gathering*, *Crimson Skies*, *MechWarrior: Dark Age*, *Star Trek*, and *Conan*. Around the time of this printing he has sold twenty novels, a great deal of shorter fiction work, and been involved with several computer games.

His latest works are a new trilogy set in the Conan universe and codevelopment of a new fiction market for the Classic *BattleTech* and *MechWarrior* universe: www.BattleCorps.com.

When he isn't writing, Loren plays X-box games, collects far too many DVDs, and holds a black belt in traditional tae kwon do. He has lived in many parts of the country. Currently he resides in Washington state with his wife, Heather Joy; two sons, Talon LaRon and Conner Rhys Monroe; and a young daughter, Alexia Joy. The family owns three of the obligatory writer's cats, Chaos, Ranger and Rumor, and one dog, Loki.

His personal Web site can be found at www.rasqal.com.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Sword of Sedition

AROC Book / published by arrangement with the author

All rights reserved.

Copyright ©2005 by *WizKids, Inc.*

This book may not be reproduced in whole or part, by mimeograph or any other means, without permission. Making or distributing electronic copies of this book constitutes copyright infringement and could subject the infringer to criminal and civil liability.

For information address:

The Berkley Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Putnam Inc.,

375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014.

The Penguin Putnam Inc. World Wide Web site address is
<http://www.penguinputnam.com>

ISBN:0-7865-5694-3

AROC BOOK®

ROCBooks first published by The ROC Publishing Group, a member of Penguin Putnam Inc.,

375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014.

ROC and the "ROC" design are trademarks belonging to Penguin Putnam Inc.

Electronic edition: April, 2005

Contents

[Acknowledgments](#)

[TRIALS OF DAMOCLES](#)

[1](#)

[2](#)

[3](#)

[4](#)

[5](#)

[6](#)

[7](#)

[8](#)

[9](#)

[10](#)

[11](#)

[12](#)

[13](#)

[14](#)

[COMRADES IN ARMS](#)

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

22

23

24

25

A THOUSAND CUTS

26

27

28

29

30

31

32

Epilog

About the Author