

**OTHER
PERSPECTIVES**

Herbert A. Beas II

BATTLECORPS

Tharkad City, Tharkad
Protectorate of Donegal, Lyran Commonwealth
8 May 2643

With an ominous clang, the massive cathedral doors parted before Archon Kevin Steiner, revealing an expanse of marble floors, high vaulted ceilings, and timeless stone pillars engraved with the names of past Archons, all rendered in a tasteful yet understated combination of blues and whites, with just a little gold trim. As a pageboy announced his entrance and the gathered representatives and dignitaries applauded loudly, he marched forward with confident strides, his eyes once more taking in the chamber that had been home for more than fifty years.

Frescos depicting great battles and other heroic moments in Lyran history adorned the high ceilings, painted in colors vivid enough to command the eye's full attention, even at a casual glance. Dividing the room was a red carpet, trimmed in gold, which ran straight down across the floor from the chamber doors to a high throne of gold-trimmed oak, flanked by twin armored giants: *Griffin*-class BattleMechs, painted in the distinctive blue and gold scheme of the Royal Guards.

It was down this path that Kevin walked, between ranks of columns that stood silent sentry over two other, parallel paths kept religiously free of tourists and other guests at all times—the final resting places of some who had once walked this path before. Now ensconced within the palace floor, beneath gold-trimmed placards easily twice the size of their respective caskets, the visages of the Silent Archons—as Mother had once called them—stared back at the room, as if the artisans who had crafted their placards and etched their likenesses intended to remind the Archons, government officials, and courtesans to follow that the ghosts of past regimes still watched over those who did business in the land of the living.

But even as his eyes briefly caught sight of his mother's tomb when he strode by it—last one on the right, just before the throne itself (and the temporary podium that had been set before it)—Kevin fought the impulse to slow his steps or allow that moment of decades-old sadness in.

This was no time for weakness. The eyes of billions were upon him, and the few hundred chosen to represent them now sat in white marble stands, behind bas-reliefs that identified their worlds

of origin, divided and arranged by province and population, but united in purpose...after a fashion, anyway.

Special seating for the Estates General, for a special occasion.

Electronic lights flashed as holocameras silently tracked Kevin's every step, and over the din, he even heard several reporters muttering into their lapel microphones, commenting on his posture, his manner, how *old* he was beginning to look. He paid them no mind as he mounted the steps toward his throne, to take his place behind the podium throat dry as he focused on the task ahead,. Though inside he felt like a leaf in the wind, and he swallowed stagnant saliva with a lingering bittersweet aftertaste of Tamarite brandy, he knew that outside he still radiated calm, the legacy of half a century in the most powerful position in the Lyran Commonwealth, if not the Star League. A knowing nod from his sister, Sarah Steiner-Dinesen, who stood with the entourage beside the throne, encouraged him further.

Sarah's pale blonde hair—harkening back more to earlier Steiner heritage than that of their late, raven-haired mother—contrasted with the thicker and coarser black hair Kevin had inherited from Father. Hung in a simple but immaculate tail that curled around one side of her neck, Sarah's—Kevin also noticed—was not streaked with little bits of gray as his was. He could not even see crow's feet around her blazing emerald eyes—a Dinesen trait that Kevin also shared—but he knew that such a thing was more the result of the finest in Commonwealth cosmetics rather than graceful aging.

Though she eschewed a military uniform today (to avoid clashing with his blue-trimmed dress grays), Sarah wore a dark gray business dress and "Steiner blue" blouse that complimented her still-fit figure, and the family crest—the defiant mailed fist of House Steiner—rode proudly on the broach pinned to her lapel. Kevin clasped hands with her, offering a tight smile and wordless thanks for her support, and nodded to the other advisors and relatives gathered beside her in a rainbow array of uniforms, suits, and dresses.

But this was no court ball, and Kevin knew he could not linger. As the roaring applause of his entry finally began to fade, he turned to face the masses and signaled the remainder for silence.

Once more, his eyes took in the grand chamber, knowing this well could be the last time he did so. His entire career, and the survival of a nation, now lay in their hands. Inwardly, he muttered another prayer that they would see reason, for the alternative was just too dire to consider.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the Estates General, honored guests from the Terran Hegemony, members of the press, other esteemed guests, and my fellow Lyrans, I bid you welcome,” he said finally, his voice—strong and confident—echoing across the room, as if spoken by a higher power. “Today, the fate of a great and noble nation lies in the hands of her people—”

Stop playback. Screen off...

Chekswa, Donegal
Donegal Province, Lyran Alliance
15 March 3068

Heaven save me from the propagandists!

With a heavy sigh and the anguished popping of back muscles too young to be so tense, Bertram Habeas leaned back in his coarse, cloth-backed office chair and rubbed away the dry, stinging feeling in his eyes. Silently, he wished he could get back the hours he had spent—no, *wasted*—hunched before the holomonitor, even as the spherical cloud of dancing static above the projector faded away and the desk lamps intensified in reaction to its shutdown. The result cast an eerie glow about the office, like that of a steady burning candle.

The metallic smell of ozone faded more slowly, and Bertram licked his parched lips, but a glance at his forgotten coffee mug made him rethink a sip as a cloud of separated vanilla creamer floated above what surely had become a lukewarm parody of Tharkan blend.

Sighing heavily, Bertram simply licked his lips again and closed his eyes. Twisting his head to one side, he briefly savored the release of some lingering pain with the popping of stressed neck muscles. But when his eyes opened, the room remained silent, dimly lit, and the recording pen by the holoprojector still beckoned. Worse, the coffee was not getting any warmer. In weary surrender to the inevitable, he sighed again and reached for the recording pen at last, activating it with a flick of the thumb.

“Johann,” he began, almost startling himself with the echo of his own dry voice. “I regret that I have not finished reviewing your full presentation at this time, but I thank you for sending it my way as soon as possible...”

...And now you owe me three hours of my life back, he mentally amended.

“Regrettably, the news is not good. While your approach was thematically accurate, the execution, particularly the visuals, was flawed on a number of points...”

Bertram’s eyes cast about the room as he spoke, finding books stacked on the end tables, leaning haphazardly on the shelves, a far cry from the original order they had been in just a few months ago.

And the coffee maker was shut off.

“...Particularly evident was the attire worn by the Archon. To be blunt, it was unforgivably off. The uniform worn by the Archon for his speech was not the ‘blue-trimmed dress grays’ of the Succession Wars. In fact, those uniforms did not even *exist* in the Star League period, but were commissioned by Jennifer Steiner soon after the First War began...”

Bertram suddenly noticed he was on his feet, pacing again. One of the newer habits that had crept into his life in the last month or so, unbidden. With an annoyed snort, he turned away from the recording pen, retrieved the half-finished coffee mug, and walked it to the reheater. *May as well make use of it...*

“Now, Johann, while I understand your work was commissioned by Archon Katherine, you had to have realized what you were doing. The Archon’s dress uniform in the original Star League was blue, and used the same diamond pattern Archon Peter uses today. In fact, that’s *why* it’s used today, to signify the Alliance’s connection to the new Star League, as in the old one...”

Right, his own mind scoffed. What connection to the League? The Archon and his sister could not kill the League quick enough once they took over, and look where that got us!

The reheater beeped, but Bertram had already paced away from it to draw open the blinds. Facing away from the gradually setting blue-white rays of Donegal’s F0-class sun, the window allowed only half as much light into the room as usual. But even the growing shadows of the Chekswa School of Literature’s Archival Wing across the well-trimmed greenery of the campus lawn lifted Bertram’s spirits, if only slightly. And then only for the moment he spared to look out upon a scene of life continued. A scene of society carrying on in spite of all the horrors happening as close by as two jumps away.

Turning away, his free hand fumbled at the bookshelf, shoving aside a pile to pull free a volume that was as strikingly new as it was already well worn. On the cover, the defiant fist emblem of House Steiner stood out in strong relief.

“Indeed, I am almost positive you would be fully aware of this fact, as I am *certain* that you received a proof copy of *House Steiner: A History*, in return for your contributions to the project. You know, the book in which, on page—” fingers flipped the pages furiously

“—thirty, there is a depiction of Archon Michael Steiner, contemporary of the original League, clad in the same uniform.”

The book slammed shut with a determined snap, and the moment of personal pride that came from briefly noting his own name on the spine—a tremendous achievement for a man barely into his twenties—fled Bertram as he dropped the tome unceremoniously upon the coffee table. A pile of student papers still awaiting their grades scattered on impact.

Where did I put that coffee? he wondered, then sighed as he remembered.

“Anyway, I am certain that you had access to the archival footage, even if you chose to ignore the book, so I presume you were injecting your own little defiance against the standing Archon at the expense of historical fact, which is exactly the kind of propagandist work we’ve been trying to avoid here at Chekswa...”

He opened the reheater, grabbed the mug, and looked at the pale brown brew within. The scent of vanilla and coffee invited a first taste, but Bertram knew better. A few stirs later, he brought the mug to his lips...and promptly hissed in pain as he burned his tongue.

“Verdammt dumbkopf!” he cursed as the recording pen bounced soundlessly on the thick blue carpet. The steaming mug returned to the counter beside the reheater.

“Son of a—!” he said to himself as he retrieved the pen, and clicked on the rewind.

Sure enough, the last string of curses replayed in perfect clarity.

With a final, disgusted sigh, Bertram turned off the recorder and set it down beside the coffee mug.

Pointless!

Standing in the middle of the office, Bertram suddenly realized he was angry. Another new habit, it seemed. Worse than the pacing, or perhaps one simply triggered the other. Around him, the room suddenly seemed to resolve itself in full as if for the first time. Like a miniature apartment, it had all the comforts of a bachelor’s home, a closet large enough for a few extra suits, an adjacent restroom large enough for one man to do his business and wash his hands afterward, bookshelves along three of four walls (even around the bay window), computer desk, kitchenette

with a mini-fridge, microwave reheater, and sink—most on a humble faux-marble countertop, two guest chairs, a small sofa, and his office chair, to which he had chained himself for the past, what, ten hours or so?

It was a Sunday evening, for Heaven’s sake! What in hell was he doing here?

As soon as the question struck him, the answer reminded him why he had just ranted into a recording pen for the third time today, and why his fists and jaw were now clenched so tight that they ached.

It had nothing to do with an obsolete and pointless bit of historically inaccurate holo-vid, nor with a pressing need to grade mid-term quizzes on the Triumvirate Regency.

It had to do with *doing* something—*anything!*

Anything but being home.

Only, there was nothing to be accomplished *here*, either.

With a final snort of disgust, Bertram forced his jaw to unclench, his hands to uncurl, and his eyes to begin looking for the keys to his car...



Overhead, the roar of engines drew Bertram’s eyes skyward as he descended the wide stone steps of the school just in time to see the large, boomerang forms of two *Chippewa* aerospace fighters streak past. Flying low enough for him to make out the familiar black and white checkerboard pattern of the First Donegal Jaegers, the twin fighters continued their lazy patrol pattern over Chekswa, heading toward nearby Media City. Their routine had become so regular one could set a watch by it, but that did not stop Bertram from staring at the craft that had become such a constant sight above Donegal since early December.

Since that day everything changed.

“Professor Habeas?”

Bertram blinked and looked down, his eyes readjusting from the harsh, pale-blue glow of the clear evening sky to find the source of the rich, cultured voice at the foot of the school steps.

The man was perhaps in his mid-thirties—which put him a full decade older than Bertram—and sported a full head of rich, black hair and a complexion too perfect to be natural. His cobalt eyes studied Bertram with the same interest he recalled from many of his more intense students, matching an expression kept carefully neutral, unreadable.

It took Bertram all of a half second to recognize the man, whose image had graced more than a few holovids across the planet, especially since the fires first fell on far away Tharkad. He hardly even needed to note the INN badge on the lapel of his black jacket to recognize Elroy MacNair, the voice of ComStar's Inner Sphere-wide news agency here on Donegal.

"*Herr MacNair,*" Bertram answered coolly. "I don't recall anything newsworthy happening on campus lately."

MacNair broke out a practiced smile, one Bertram would've laid five kroner on having been used equally well to disarm wayward politicians and shell-shocked shuttle crash witnesses alike. *Vultures like you think they can handle anyone with a smile and a kind word, don't you?*

That the thought crossed his mind at all shocked Bertram almost as much as finding the INN anchorman even knew his name. Despite the impulse, however, he felt a tingle of anticipation in his stomach, and ran a hand through his long brown hair to straighten it somewhat, before continuing down the steps towards the man.

"*Scheiße!*" he muttered under his breath when his fingers felt the oily texture of hair that hadn't known shampoo in two days. *Wrinkled suit, filthy hair...I must look like a slob to this guy.*

MacNair did not seem to notice the whispered curse, nor did he show any revulsion at Bertram's disheveled appearance as he offered a hand and demonstrated a firm but hardly overpowering grip. "That would depend on how you define the term 'newsworthy', Professor—"

"It is just Mister Habeas still," Bertram corrected with a shrug, using the Anglic term to make sure the reporter understood. "Technically, anyway."

“They have you teaching already, and they have you writing books, despite having barely more years on you than the alumni here. That’s worthy of more than ‘Mister’, I’d say.”

“Editing, actually. I was just one of a team, even if they put my name on the cover. But INN doesn’t drop by to interview historians unless the news day is slow.”

Despite being corrected twice in as many sentences, MacNair’s easy smile never wavered. “Indeed, we don’t,” he readily admitted. “But who is to say when the news day is slow?”

Bertram sighed and glanced around the campus. A few students milled about—dorm students, taking advantage of another pleasant Sunday—along with a few faculty whose apartments were also on campus, and even a few security guards. Of course, the ever present troop detachment from the Third Jaegers was also present, a handful of soldiers in combat fatigues, toting M&G service automatics on their hips as they marched along the cobblestone walks—another sight grown all too familiar in the past few months, along with a veritable platoon of recruiters in conspicuous LAAF dress blues. Bertram was sure that, even at this late hour on this lazy day, one Jaeger BattleMech still stood vigil by the school’s main administrative building, though what possible attack one might imagine on a house of literature eluded Bertram.

Until he remembered *who* the enemy was, anyway.

Which brought him back to the uninvited guest, who seemed to take the same interest in the surroundings as Bertram had. *Probably another confidence-winning technique these people train in.*

There was that anger again...

“I suppose you *could* find something newsworthy here, Herr MacNair,” he said finally. “I hear military recruitment has reached an all-time high for Chekswa, with even a few faculty rumored to be interested in service, given the current state of emergency. And, for a change, the usual anti-war rabble one sees on college campuses at times like these is statistically lower than ever...”

“Of course,” MacNair cut in, “all to be expected when terror strikes home, but considering the fact that you just recited—verbatim, I think—the results of a DBC survey that aired last night, I suppose I’d have to pass on that angle.”

You’re sparring with me, aren’t you?

Bertram's green eyes returned to find the man's smile had faded only slightly.

"I don't want to keep you if you have somewhere to go, Mister Habeas," he promised, "but if you're interested, I would like a moment or two of your time?"

Bertram sighed and gave a short nod, rubbing his hand again through his hair as he suddenly noticed his mouth was parched. The image of a half-empty mug of coffee—forgotten *again*—formed in his mind. Right on the countertop where he left it.

They both walked toward the nearby lot, Bertram tucking one hand securely in his pants pocket while MacNair kept his folded in front of him. The gesture vaguely reminded Bertram of the way a monk might walk, and he realized he could easily see this man in the classic robes of ComStar.

Or, more to the point, of the Word.

That thought sent a new chill down Bertram's spine, and his eyes narrowed slightly.

"I'll cut right to the meat of it, Mister Habeas," MacNair announced. "I've been asked by my superiors to get in touch with you and personally offer you a proposition for which you are uniquely qualified."

"Hmmm?"

"It's an international panel we're setting up on Orestes, a way for viewers across the Inner Sphere to hear firsthand the reaction of the various states to the recent series of crises. Humble as you may try to be, Mister Habeas, your recent efforts have made you an 'expert' on your realm, a voice to represent the Lyran people in dark times."

Bertram scoffed. "I would never presume to speak for the Archon or the Estates General, *Herr* MacN—"

"Nobody's asking for you to lead the nation," MacNair said. "I'm talking about the chance to set the record straight, clear the air..."

Become a propagandist?

Bertram realized his expression must have soured at that moment, because suddenly MacNair's hands came up as if to ward off an anticipated rejection. The familiar pressure at his jaw also threatened to spark another headache. With another twist of his neck, he drew in a deep breath and willed his face to relax.

“Look,” MacNair said, “you don’t have to say yes right now, and I’m not looking to put you on the spot.”

They had reached the parking lot, where only a handful of personal vehicles in a muted rainbow of shining metallic colors sat scattered upon a sea of black-tarred ferrocrete. MacNair sighed as he abruptly stopped walking, prompting Bertram to face him at last.

“Listen, *Herr* MacNair, I—”

“Just think it over,” MacNair continued. “Now, I have to check in with my own people, but if you’d like to discuss this further, I’m going to be at Finnegan’s in East Harlow in a couple hours. I understand from the locals that that’s your hometown, so I’m sure you know the place. Meanwhile, here’s my card.”

Bertram blinked and took the proffered card more by polite reflex than anything else. The urge to toss it away flitted through his mind for a moment, but instead, he simply nodded, and muttered thanks as he tucked the small piece of laminated paper into his jacket pocket.

“Hope to see you there, then,” MacNair said, taking Bertram’s hand for another quick shake before turning away.

As MacNair strode off, back toward the campus building and, presumably, his unseen INN-leased transport, Bertram stared after him. His burned tongue rolled about inside his mouth, dry and yearning for something more than the lingering aftertaste of stale Tharkan blend with vanilla creamer.

But that will have to wait, he resolved. For now, there was somewhere else he had to be...



Long bell sleeves slid back to reveal the plain gray shirtsleeves beneath as the receptionist at the ComStar HPG station spun the flatscreen around to face Bertram. Her hood pulled back—a custom adopted by all ComStar personnel in civic services since the 3052 Schism, intended to put guests to their facilities at ease—the

acolyte revealed an almost angelic face, with eyes the color of jade amid a face framed by a short mane of auburn hair. Though the makeup she wore was clearly understated, lightly muting her freckles and bringing a little more color to her cheeks, her perfume—an exotic scent that made Bertram think of roses and lilacs in summer—verged on stifling.

“Here you are, Mister Habeas,” her voice came to him with professional, librarian softness. “Casualty figures and lists as of 1745 hours yesterday, GST. Let me know if you need anything further.”

“Thank you,” Bertram mumbled.

The acolyte nodded and departed swiftly, heels clicking on the simulated black-and-white marble that lined the floor of the ComStar substation’s main lobby. Left alone in his cubicle with a public access terminal and his thoughts, Bertram focused on the monitor before him, scrolling through the endless lists of names, arranged alphabetically.

A list of the dead, the wounded, and the known survivors of the worst attack on New Avalon soil in history.

Scrolling quickly, he looked up names, every one a life—man, woman, or child—snuffed out light-years away. He wished he could burn each one in memory; *somebody* had to, anyway. But the names he alone knew—the ones he now searched for, hoping *not* to see—were enough for right now...

One appeared soon enough, halfway through the “D”s...

Domokos, Luther.

Bertram swallowed back the ash in his mouth. Doctor Domokos had been finishing up a three-year tenure as part of a now defunct academic exchange program between the University of Tharkad and the New Avalon Institute of Science. The man was a good friend, practically a mentor. Bertram had always quietly suspected that it was a recommendation from Domokos that had helped him secure a position in the editorial staff for Chekswa’s publications department.

Now, he was another name among thousands of dead...

Bertram closed his eyes, tried to come up with some kind of prayer. Something to offer Domokos’ memory.

And failed.

Opening his eyes again, the list remained, with Domokos' name still on it.

Bertram sighed, and with shaking hands, resumed the search...

He reached the "H"s only a few minutes later...

Haarbenger... Haas... Hachiwa...

Bertram's relieved exhalation came so loud that it startled him. Blinking furiously, he checked the list again, just to be sure. No "Habeas" appeared.

With a determined keystroke, he switched search lists, pulled up "Known Survivors," the far more fragmentary list of those who reported in *somewhere* to be counted, whether in a federal hospital, a shelter, or a refugee camp. Repeated the search...

And again, the name failed to appear.

Verdammt!

Four months. After four months, the best lists available to ComStar still refused to say whether or not Arastide Habeas still lived. Bertram felt his hands shaking again, clasped them together in his lap, and stared at the screen as if he could will the name to appear among the survivors list.

Someone should know by now...

There were answers to that, of course. A missing name could be hidden as part of a security protocol, a means to keep the Word from locking in on key members of government or the resistance that still remained at large. The data could be fragmentary, the result of the ongoing bombardments that the newsvids claimed were now a daily occurrence on New Avalon...

But someone should know!

With a heavy sigh, Bertram turned away from the monitor, forced himself to stand.

ComStar's Media City substation was little more than an outlet for off-world communications traffic, a post office for HPG messages relayed through the actual compound in Marsdenville. Inside, an entire crowd of Donegalites and ComStar personnel milled about, many in cubicles just like the one Bertram had just abandoned, which offered only the illusion of privacy. More dead-

and-survivor lists scrolled upon perhaps half of them. Bertram felt his own frown deepen.

So many names. So many loved ones being sought.

Like it was for months after the civil war. Like it was through the Clan War.

Along one side of the wide foyer stood a trio of kiosks, all emblazoned with bold placards that bore the fist-and-diamond insignia of the Lyran Alliance.

Seated behind one was a man in a Steiner blue dress uniform, an LAAF recruiter, his face and haircut severe as he handled questions—and paperwork—from a half dozen young men and women, eager to learn how they could throw themselves on the altar of military service, to save their land, protect their families. Or maybe to gain a measure of revenge...

I should be with them, Bertram thought.

The second kiosk bore the new Steiner logo as well as the familiar dual standards of a red cross and crescent. The woman behind its counter was processing the application of several more young men and women. Their donations of blood—and perhaps tissues—would be taken as soon as their medical histories could be verified in the adjoining room ComStar made available for just such services.

Bertram's frown deepened even more.

The third kiosk had already been passed by the others, but still had two patrons as he came upon it. As Bertram read its sign—same one it had borne for the weeks he had continuously come to visit this place—the cynicism boiling up in the back of his thoughts surged again.

No shortage of volunteers for service or for blood, but ask a Lyran for money...

He shook the thought away. The others surely had donated before volunteering for the blood drive and the services. As the couple standing before the kiosk was doing now, no doubt. Elderly, perhaps in their mid-sixties, Bertram wondered for a moment if they had yet seen the names of their loved ones among the dead on some world like New Avalon, Tharkad, or perhaps Skye...

Repeating a ritual begun in the waning days of December, Bertram approached that kiosk, digging into his pocket as he went.

The salary of a teacher's aide (and assistant college publications editor) may not be much, but when it was all one had to give...



"Professor!"

A chorus of voices—half of them slurred—greeted Bertram as he stepped through the doors of Finnegan's Pub in East Harlow, a small, downtown suburb barely worthy of being called a town in Media City's southern shadows. The diminishing light of the Donegal evening had already cast a fading yellow glow to the skies, but even so, the fluorescent-lit bar and restaurant he had called home more than his own apartment in these past few weeks allowed Bertram to stop squinting.

He coughed at the smell of cigarette and cigar smoke—some laced with a little bit of Thuban cannabis or its locally-grown equivalent for that "extra effect," guessing by the sour stench—and stepped down the plain cement steps. Bertram strode forward, waving wearily to the collection of "hardworking" men and women who had become regulars here—or already were regulars—since he started stopping by. Deftly, he maneuvered through the small collection of metal tables placed about the room, avoiding the few that were occupied by tonight's more casual diners and their assorted meals (mostly club sandwiches and appetizers like hot wings and stuffed Grille husks).

His mouth watered at the smells, but in his mind's eye, Bertram could already feel and taste the cool splash of a Schamig Light Ale...until a pair of cobalt eyes suddenly drew his attention to one barfly in particular.

"Scheiße!" he muttered.

The moment he saw MacNair's face among the patrons huddled around the central island of cheap alcohols and cheaper advice, Bertram paused. MacNair smiled and rose from his seat. With one outstretched hand, he offered him a Schamig Light, the pale blue bottle already open and glistening with condensation, while his other hand clasped a mug of Timbiqui Dark.

"Prof—er, *Mister Habeas!*" he said with a smile. "I'm so glad you decided to come."

"*Herr MacNair,*" Bertram frowned as he took the bottle, savoring its weight and its cold. "Would it burst your bubble much if I told you I forgot entirely about our chat earlier?"

MacNair's easy smile sprang back to his face, lopsided this time. He shook his head quickly and his eyebrows bounced. "Not really. But, still, won't you sit down and hear me out?"

Bertram glanced furtively at the bar, but still allowed MacNair's guiding hand to steer him toward an empty dining table, flanked by only two black iron chairs.

Holovids planted around the corners of the bar mixed their droning noise—mostly from ongoing news reports about the war and the constant advertisements to "give to the cause"—with the grumbling chatter of a dozen or so voices of Finnegan's patrons. Bertram's gaze, avoiding MacNair's as he spelled out his pitch, wandered to each in turn, trying to decipher the topics being discussed by each of the talking heads who represented Donegal or Tharkan Broadcasting companies. MacNair went on, oblivious to Bertram's inattentiveness.

"As I mentioned earlier, INN is putting together a panel on Orestes, a place where representatives from each state can discuss recent events on relatively neutral soil..."

On the holovids, the coverage of the Tharkad attack flashed again—unnecessarily repeating images already burned into the minds of countless Lyrans across the stars. The mushroom cloud rising over Tharkad City. The earth-shattering explosions as Government House took a direct hit. People running, screaming, and dying in the streets. The blood- and tear-streaked face of a DBC reporter, all but wailing into her microphone, covering the carnage with inhuman bravery, even as her co-anchor hundreds of kilometers away noted that she had already taken a lethal dose of radiation from Ground Zero...

"...Mister Habeas?" MacNair said. "Bertram?"

Bertram's eyes snapped back around to meet MacNair's.

"Hmm?"

MacNair sighed, his smile faded. "Look, *Mister Habeas,*" he said. "I can see you don't care much for INN or ComStar. I read your

overview in the introduction of your last book, after all. Maybe you even see the current crises as somehow ComStar's fault. Lord knows enough of the public sees it that way, and I'm sure we *can* shoulder some of the blame. But my point—*our* point—in asking you to do this is to give the Lyran people an authoritative voice for those who can't speak for your nation. I mean, someone is going to speak on behalf of the Lyran people and face representatives for the others, and maybe even challenge *them* for some answers. Why not yourself?"

With a heavy sigh, Bertram leaned back in his chair, bringing the bottle of Schamig Light to his lips. He took a quick sip, savored the curiously warming taste of Donegal-grown hops and barley.

Why not indeed? he wondered.

He lowered the bottle.

"Herr MacNair—"

"*Gott in Himmel!*" someone at the bar exclaimed. "Turn it up!"

Reflex snapped Bertram's head around as the volume of the holovids—all now showing the same Steiner fist logo—rose in direct proportion to the silencing of the other patrons. The audio increase caught the voiceover announcer in mid-sentence.

"—for this urgent news bulletin."

The face of DBC's local news anchor appeared on the holo vid, his weathered expression stern, dark eyes intensely focused just off-center of the camera, reading straight from a teleprompter, no doubt, and clearly unafraid to show it.

"People of Donegal," he said. "Steven Marcus, DBC News. Officials at Marsdenville Aerospace Command have just informed this station and others across the planet that an unidentified WarShip, believed to be of Word of Blake affiliation, has been detected in Donegal orbital airspace. Officials with the LAAF Command in Marsdenville have confirmed that aerospace fighter elements from the First Donegal Jaegers have engaged the enemy ship's fighter screen, but at least two craft have entered the planetary atmosphere somewhere in the region of Media City—"

"Holy shit!" someone shouted from across the bar.

Right on top of us! Bertram thought.

Somewhere outside, beyond the doors of the bar, the loud, universal peal of the air raid alarm sounded, a screaming, artificial wail that penetrated all and sent chills down Bertram's spine. All at once, the voices became chaotic, the DBC anchor's words lost in a flood of alarmed gasps and anxious chatter.

"...Command *had* to have seen this sooner!"

"What kind of WarShip is it...?"

"...Has anyone seen DropShips? Did they say..."

"*Mein Gott!* It's Tharkad all over again..."

A hand tugged at Bertram's sleeve. "*Bertram!*"

His eyes found MacNair's again, barely noticing the dropped, discarded bottle already rolling off the table. MacNair tugged harder. The INN anchor's smile was gone altogether now, replaced by a creased brow and an intense, wide-eyed stare.

"Shelters," he said urgently. "We have to get moving!"

Numb, Bertram nodded. His chair toppled with a clang as he scrambled to his feet, close on MacNair's heels as the man blazed for the door along with the few other diners who had the presence of mind to do the same. A few more alarmed shouts from the bar rose to meet them as the mass of three bodies simultaneously blasted the doors open and the sound of the air raid sirens echoed into the room at ten-fold their original volume.

On the dusk-lit streets of East Harlow, Bertram saw throngs of people running to cars parked on the roadsides, or eschewing their vehicles altogether to race along the sidewalks, their attentions equally diverted between the growing masses among them and the skies above.

Amid the scramble, Bertram managed to grab MacNair by the shoulder and pointed to the pale blue Kavallerie ground car bumped against the curb barely five meters away. "My car!"

MacNair spun around with him, even as Bertram fumbled for his keys.

As soon as they reached the two-door sedan, however, the scream of turbofans pushed almost to their limits made Bertram glance up. Racing down the street, lights off, came a death-black Avanti. Bertram's eyes darted to the people crossing in front of his car, and his mind did the math in a fraction of a heartbeat.

“Nein!”

“What are you—?” MacNair shouted as Bertram raced ahead.

Bertram squeezed his eyes shut and prayed as he ran. Turbofans shrieked with the driver’s too-late braking effort, and a woman’s voice pierced through the noise of metal-on-metal, nearly deafening him as he shoved two bodies across the narrow street and out of harm’s way. He felt, rather than saw, the mangled Avanti careening off his own car, spinning drunkenly away.

“Th-thank you...” someone whispered, but by the time Bertram dared to open his eyes and look around, the woman who said it had gone, and so was the Avanti.

MacNair rushed up beside him.

“Damned fool!” he cursed breathlessly. *“Are you alright?”*

Bertram felt as though his legs had become rubber, and his arms tingled as though electrified. He struggled to stand, eyes wide and sweeping a street now flooded with panicked people, running westward—away from the shadows of Media City. MacNair offered a hand and he pulled himself up, breath coming to him only in shallow gasps.

This is insane!

Then came the roar of jet engines.

MacNair’s eyes were already heavenward, scanning for a glimpse.

Bertram’s eyes found it first.

“Gott in Himmel!”

The glow of fighter engines, and the arrow-shaped silhouette were all he could make out in the darkness, but the direction was unmistakable: south, not west. A second, smaller glow escaped the fighter as it banked away hard.

That’s not Media City!

“Nein!” he heard his voice scream. *“Nein!”*

The smaller glow dipped below the artificial horizon of East Harlow’s skyline, but a heartbeat later the flash lit up the skies like the noon-day sun. Voices all around him shrieked in horror.

Hundreds instinctively ducked, but Bertram's eyes were transfixed on a point made invisible by the buildings in front of him.

The mushroom cloud rose as if in slow motion, curling into the sky as it faded from white, to yellow, and finally to an angry orange.

BATTLECORPS



The ground began rumbling a full ten seconds before the sound of the detonation reached them.

“My God!” MacNair was saying. “My God! That was Chekswa, wasn’t it?”

Bertram blinked, and suddenly noticed a salty taste in his mouth. Spots swam before his eyes and he suddenly found himself leaning against a wall. His eyes stung, and he rubbed them, feeling the moisture of his own tears. His breath came in ragged gasps. His heart raced.

Why? his mind screamed what his mouth would not. *Damn you, why?!*

East Harlow’s streets were now full of panicked people, racing off to shelters amid the ongoing wail of the air raid sirens, the desperate honking of vehicle horns, and the cries of the terrified masses. Bertram felt himself sliding to the ground, his legs giving out beneath him, but someone’s hand was trying to pull him back up. He turned to the source, stared blankly at MacNair.

MacNair’s own eyes remained glued on the smoldering fireball.

Bertram suddenly felt a surge of power in his muscles, a pounding, driving need to stand as he looked at this man.

“ComStar!” he hissed.

MacNair snapped his own tear-streaked face around to look at him.

“What?”

“*ComStar!*” Bertram snarled, suddenly seizing the man’s arm, forcing him to let go. “This is all ComStar’s fault! There were over five thousand people in that town! And those are *your* people who killed them!”

MacNair struggled to break free of Bertram’s furious grip, his eyes widening in fear.

“Get a hold of yourself!” he shouted over the din.

Bertram growled and wrestled MacNair against the wall, facing away from the blackening cloud still rising in the twilit sky. The roar of fighter engines overhead almost failed to register in his mind, but he focused his outrage on the man before him, this ComStar toady, brother to the monsters who just snuffed out a city and a school for no reason he could wrap a thought around.

“You filthy *schweinehunde!*” he roared. “You could have stopped them years ago! You could have put an end to this before it even began! Now, they come for us, and you sit back and have the *gall* to ask us how we feel about it?”

“Damn it, man, *listen* to me—!”

“Listen to what? More justifications? More lies? More deaths?”

“We’re as much a target as you are, damn it!” MacNair shot back. “They nuked us on Tukayyid! Christ, they annihilated our fleet at Terra just last week! ComStar *is* fighting them—and dying—just as your people are!”

Bertram stared blankly at MacNair for a moment, then closed his eyes and fought back a sob. The news had covered the attacks on Tukayyid and the failure of ComStar’s “Case White” in almost as much detail as they had the bombings on Tharkad and New Avalon. MacNair was right. But it did nothing to help anyone now. The Word had declared war on *everyone*. What use was there in blaming the messenger?

He opened his eyes and let go of MacNair’s jacket, stumbled back a step.

MacNair opened his mouth to speak when suddenly a throng of panic-stricken young men raced by. One bumped Bertram, hard, and he stumbled back, into the street.

The squeal of tires was the last thing he heard, before a painful *thump* sent him flying through the air...



Government House was an impressive building, to be certain, but no match for the Royal Courtroom, even in this, the heyday of the Star League. But as Bertram’s gaze wandered the room, slowly taking in the gray marble walls, the triple banners of the Star League, the Lyran Commonwealth, and the Tharkan banner that dominated one end, he felt the giddy excitement of history in the making. All around him, ensconced in their tiered synthleather seats, behind emblems of their respective worlds (or, for the less

populous, world voting groups), sat the men and women, minor nobles and high-powered politicians, of the Estates General. The smell of their sweat—as much from nerves as from the somewhat higher-than-normal heat filling the crowded chamber—combined with a hundred different traces of exotic colognes and perfumes.

Arranged beneath balconies from which the commoners, media, and political aides could watch this moment, in twin rows that arched inward toward the back of the room, all three hundred and twenty-one representatives sat in a split “U” formation. All eyes in the room focused on a single podium beneath the banners, flanked by holomonitors and microphones. There, backed up by his sister and other representatives of the Commonwealth Council, stood Archon Kevin Steiner, this time attired in the striking Steiner blue, capped, diamond-pattern military jacket of his office.

His voice was deep, rich, and vibrant, belying his eighty-three years of age—almost fifty of which had been spent in office. The only true evidence of his advanced years visible from where Bertram sat was in the white-gray colors streaking through the man’s short-cropped hair, and the glint of old-style spectacles he barely used to read from the notes before him.

His words, amplified electronically, reverberated throughout the room, as though spoken by some deity to the packed room:

“My friends,” he said, “we here are all businessmen in one way or another. We know the value of most things. We are admired throughout the Star League as the shrewdest of industrialists. We even feel a secret pride when someone chides us as ‘Money Demons’ or as ‘Pirates of Profit,’ do we not?”

A round of muted laughter rose for a moment in agreement.

“Well then,” he continued, “why should we, of all the League’s people, forget what it means to invest for the future or to set aside emergency money? How could we fail to realize that some of today’s profit might be needed tomorrow?”

“Yes, these have been sainted years, filled with peace and the sound of money filling our coffers. But are we so naïve as to expect the shower of money to go on forever? No! And if the shower should end—as showers always do—and the hot sun of misfortune should reappear to evaporate the profits of everyone, everywhere—what then? Do you for a moment believe that cooperation and trust will reign to save the day?”

“Banks are something that you and I understand. Consider the Commonwealth government as a bank, not of money, but of a future where we may store good fortune now, to be used later when times get rough, as surely they will.

“Friends, fellow Lyrans, a vote for the continuance of the Commonwealth is not just a vote for a nation, and it is not a vote against the unity of the Star League. The matter lies before you now; please choose our destiny wisely.”

All around Bertram, voices murmured and representatives shifted uncomfortably in their chairs. Urgent whispers among the delegates added to the electric feel in the artificially heated air. Bertram’s mouth went dry as he watched them shift, whisper, and finally vote. On the holomonitors below, the names of each representative flashed, along with their vote: “Yea” for a continued Commonwealth, which had nurtured a people even before the Star League, or “Nay” for a dissolved state, homogeneously mixed under the Cameron Star, without identity or meaning beyond an almost reckless freedom from Steiner rule.

Minutes crawled by as the numbers grew and names flashed by, a dead heat between each other. The almost palpable tension in the air, magnified by gasps and groans from the balconies above, added weight to each vote. The Archon himself, in the midst of it all, stood quietly to one side of the podium, whispering to his sister, keeping his hands stiffly behind his back. But even at this distance, Bertram could see those hands wringing, could see Sarah Steiner-Dineson’s eyes darting nervously about.

One-hundred and thirty votes for. One-hundred and thirty against.

The whispers among delegates grew more agitated. A voice cried out unintelligibly from above. Others shouted back. All drew the Archon’s stare from below, and all silenced with a wave of his hand.

One-hundred and forty-five for...

One-hundred and forty-six against...

Nobody was abstaining...

For no truer time in Commonwealth history, the nation’s fate lay in the hands of its representatives equally. Not in the hands of its Archon alone. Not in the hands of its military. Not in the hands of a foreign enemy...

One-hundred and fifty-five for....

One-hundred and fifty-four against...

The representatives were not soldiers. They were business leaders. They were nobility. They owned land, held stock in corporations, led lives of luxury. But in all of their eyes, in all of their nervous whispers, they felt the weight of a responsibility that could not be shirked...

One hundred and sixty for...

One hundred and sixty against...

One vote left to tally...

Looks were exchanged, whispers and mumblings neared the panic level, lungs inhaled, but refused to exhale. The Archon returned to his podium, looking momentarily at his own monitor, then up at the masses, trying to catch each pair of eyes in turn...

And finally focusing, like the steady beam of twin lasers, on Bertram's chair.

Only then did he realize where he was, and *who*...

Looking down at the display panel before him, the simple toggle that would decide the fate of a nation, Bertram Habeas—no, *Rashad Gettright*, Baron von Kessna Bay on Chahar—reached out a hand and threw the fateful switch.

One hundred and sixty-one for...

The Commonwealth survives...

The Commonwealth would *always* survive...

Bertram? Bertram Habeas? Can you hear me?

**Media City, Donegal
Donegal Province, Lyran Alliance
21 March 3068**

The Estates General dissolved into the harsh glare of fluorescent lighting around Bertram as his eyes fluttered open. The sound of applause, and the heartfelt, almost lost-to-the-noise thanks from Archon Kevin Steiner, faded away, replaced by the sounds of a beeping heart monitor and the sounds of breathing machines laboring away somewhere beyond the pale blue curtains surrounding him.

Swimming before his vision were two silhouettes that gradually resolved into that of a young, dark-skinned, dark-haired man in a white lab coat, and another—more familiar, but no more welcome man, still dressed in a black suit jacket that seemed somehow more threadbare and unraveled than Bertram remembered it.

“MacNair,” he muttered.

“Welcome back to the land of the living,” MacNair said flatly.

Bertram licked his dry lips, but found it impossible to purge the sticky, tasteless film his tongue found there. As if reading his thoughts, the doctor offered a water bottle, helped place a straw into his mouth. The cool, metallic taste of filtered water washed away the dryness and loosened his tongue.

“Danke,” he whispered.

“Herr Habeas,” the younger man said, “do you understand where you are?”

“By the look of it, a hospital?”

“Ja,” the man said. “You were brought here by your friend. You suffered a concussion, a broken leg, and three cracked ribs, but you’re going to be just fine.”

Bertram rolled his eyes and surprised himself by how much pain that simple move invoked. Nonetheless, he managed to face MacNair’s bland smile again and nodded.

“Danke,” he whispered.

“Don’t mention it,” he said. “But you may want to consider a better way to thank me, and to serve your people...”

Bertram narrowed his eyes, as much in caution as to reduce the glare of the overhead lights. "That panel of yours?"

MacNair nodded, then leaned closer. As if taking his cue, the doctor vanished from sight, passing through the privacy curtain with the faint rattle of plastic curtain rings on their metal guide.

"Listen, Bertram," he said. "I know all about you. You wish you could serve, but that heart condition of yours keeps you out of the military. I know about that past bout of Chungalomeningitis-C that keeps you from donating blood. And I know you give almost half your weekly salary to the war charities while you wait to hear about word from your brother on New Avalon."

"*Ach so,*" Bertram mumbled. "ComStar does spy on me, eh? And these spies tell you I'm an easy spokesman for the Alliance because I'm desperate to help?"

"Something like that," MacNair said. "Bertram, it's an opportunity to tell the universe of your plight, to express the outrage anyone should feel for what's happened, and maybe—just maybe—to get some answers from the people responsible."

"Like the Word? Or ComStar?"

"Or the Free Worlds League..." MacNair added.

The Word's puppets, Bertram realized.

"It is up to you, Bertram," MacNair said. "Nobody can force you to speak out, but I think that it would be a greater tragedy not to give you one last chance to say yes."

Bertram closed his eyes and allowed his head to settle against the nearly nonexistent hospital pillow beneath.

"History," he muttered, "sometimes teaches us that even those who have no strength on their own, or who have little else to give, can still make a difference in the destiny of worlds..."

Maybe there is still a way I can help, he finished, as he once more drifted off to sleep.