



FALL FROM GRACE

Chris Hartford

Part Five



~12~

"There are 'games of state', then there are Games of State ..."

—Private Journal

***Marik Apartments
Court of the Star League, Terra
Terran Hegemony
19 September 2602***

"Your *friend* is playing games." Brion Marik peered at his daughter over the rim of his half-moon spectacles. He held the loose sheaf of papers he had had been studying when Rhean entered his office. "The boy thinks its time to flex his muscles." His voice was dismissive.

Rhean held out her hand for the documents and scanned them quickly. "'Inappropriate financial manipulations'? What the hell is Zane on about?" A frown creased her forehead and she dropped the documents onto the table. "We're not meddling in the Suns." She regarded her father closely. "Are we?"

"No, we're not. Not now, at least." His voice was guarded.

"So we did. When?"

"Before you were born. Not for years." Rhean was thirty-four now.

"Yet it's enough for the Davions to still be upset about? We're not talking a bit of insider trading and a few quick Eagles, are we?"

Brion leaned back in his high-backed leather chair, steepling his fingers in front of his mouth. He blew his fingers, which Rhean saw were ink-stained from the old-style fountain pen he favored for notes. A personal touch, he'd told her years ago. "No, we're not."

"Dad, I'm going to find out anyway. I may not be an economist, but I do appreciate a diplomatic crisis in the making. If the Davions



are protesting to us now, you can be sure they'll bring it up in the Council session."

Brion sighed. "It began when I was young, probably only a few years old, after the Davions, Rostovs, and Varnays had their little civil war. Your great-great-grandfather Albert wanted to persuade the Davions to join with his and Ian Cameron's scheme for a united humanity, but Alexander was having none of it." He sipped his water. "The Davion economy was in tatters, so it was a small matter for League companies to get involved in the investment and rebuilding process—much like in Canopus more recently—and from there it was a small step to leveraging the FedSuns economy."

"You mean get a stranglehold on it."

"Yes and no. League companies never had a deadly grip on the Suns' economic infrastructure, but we—and by 'we' I mean Free Worlds companies, not the government, who were strictly hands off—could push things in the direction we wanted to go. Boom and bust. The game was played for a number of years, and finally Alexander realized that if he was to get a solid grip on fiscal matters he'd need to handicap the Free Worlds or gain protections for native companies."

"Enter the Star League."

"Precisely. The Federated Suns has stabilized in the last quarter-century, but it seems someone over there feels its time for payback."

"You think Zane is behind it?"

"Do you? I have my doubts. It was decades before he was born and he has no emotional investment in revenge. Quite the opposite, in fact. No, I think some of Alex's old cronies are seeing how far they can push the boy. The dukes of Robinson and New Syrtis, probably. They're like the Allisons and Selajs back home; always wanting a large slice of the pie, particularly after Alexander unseated the Varnays and Rostovs and limited their successors' powers. Unlike his great-grandfather and his father, Zane doesn't have the political clout or determination to stop them yet."

"I've seen the briefings on Robinson. But if this all stems from an effort to push the Suns into the Star League, Ian Cameron won't side with them, surely."

"Possibly not, but there'll be a political storm nonetheless. Ian Cameron's no spring chicken either. Nicholas will succeed him



sooner rather than later, and he's not got the same friendliness to the Free Worlds."

"So, what do we do next?"

"We do nothing. *You*, on the other hand, will have a chat with your friend and dissuade him from going public."

"You want me to exploit my friendship with Zane?" Rhean's eyes narrowed and her voice turned cold. Brion met her gaze unflinchingly. "You want me to get him to back off?"

"I want—" The Captain-General leant forward again and put his hands flat on the desk. "—you to deal with the matter. How, I leave to you. Consider it a test of your statesmanship."

* * *

"It's a diplomatic negotiation."

"Oh, so that's what it's called. I'll have to remember that one for the future." Rinalla lounged on a couch, a glass of white wine in her hand, seemingly half-asleep in the bright late-afternoon sun streaming in through the patio windows. "Do you have more ice?"

Rhean glanced over her shoulder and nodded toward the kitchen. "You know what fridges are, don't you?" She returned her attention to the mirror and adjusted her hairband.

"I have servants for that kind of thing." Rin sulked for a moment, then levered herself up, heading to the wood-paneled kitchen, stepping over Athena who snored softly in the sun, all four legs in the air. "I've never seen the appeal of menial work, personally."

"Cooking can be therapeutic."

"I have other ways of...relaxing. And you're avoiding the subject."

"It's a working lunch between friends."

"Oh, that explains why you're not wearing that horrible uniform any more."

"I'm on governmental business, not that of the military now. The heir's duties and all that."



Rinalla tilted her head to one side and looked at Rhean closely. "So, where exactly do short skirts come into 'a working lunch between friends'? The bow is a nice touch."

Rhean blushed furiously and retreated behind the sofa. She had to stop herself reaching round to the sash-belt at her waist, forming a bow in the small of her back, its tails falling to mid-thigh like the hem of her fitted skirt.

"Oh, don't worry about that. The other girls are jealous of your legs, and the boys, well..." She let it hang." The Magestrix-elect arched her right eyebrow as a smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. "Others have done less for their nations. Even my mother isn't above a little...diplomatic negotiation from time to time."

"Rin! Do *not* go there." She waved a finger sternly at her friend. Rhean didn't need reminding that her grandfather had been one of the 'negotiators'.

"What?" The smaller women's eyes were wide in mock innocence.

"I'm not going to throw myself at him to score diplomatic points."

"No matter how much you like him?"

Rhean moved to protest, then clamped her jaw shut. She felt a flush spread across her face.

"My god, you do." There was a touch of incredulity in the other woman's voice, then a giggle worked up her throat, threatening to become a laughing fit. She set her wine glass down, allowing the laughter to overwhelm her.

"It's not funny, Rin."

The Canopian pulled herself together and regarded Rhean, eyes brimming with tears. She took a deep breath...then burst out laughing again. After a moment, she managed to compose herself someone. "Oh yes it is, dear. Extremely. Prissy miss ice veins has finally fallen off of her pedestal, head over heels with our 27th century Casanova. It's priceless." She took a deep breath. "Look, enjoy yourself—you're both adults—but be careful. He has his own agenda."

"It's a diplomatic negotiation." Rhean's teeth were gritted.

"Of course it is..."



* * *

“More coffee?” Zane brandished the pot.

Rhean waved him away, placing an exquisitely manicured hand over her half-full cup on the narrow glass-topped table. “I’m good, thanks.” It wasn’t that it was bad coffee, but adding more caffeine to her butterfly-infested stomach would be a recipe for disaster.

Zane set the pot back down and leaned back in his chair, regarding his guest levelly. For a moment his eyes met hers, then they flicked down, taking in the neck of her camisole where her sunglasses nestled between her breasts, then down to her delicately crossed legs. It was only an instant and Zane seemed to recover, but inwardly Rhean winced. *I’m bait, nothing more.*

“To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit? Something agreeable, I hope.” His eyes sparkled and he smiled, but there was a slight edge to his voice.

“We don’t usually get to talk without others present.” She smiled coyly and reached down for her cup. Her eyes remained locked on Zane’s, looking back up at him through her eyelashes. She sipped the bitter brew. “Can’t friends just chat?”

“You’ve never seemed fond of ‘just chatting’ before?” His eyes narrowed a little. “In fact I’d go so far as to say *you’ve* avoided it. You make sure there’s always someone present, be it Magestrix Centrella, your little friend Madeline, or one of those oh-so-protective security girls.” *Not stupid this boy, no.*

“What can I say. I’m shy.”

Zane guffawed at that, eying her legs again. “Very shy,” he deadpanned. “So, again, to what do I owe the pleasure?”

Rhean took a deep breath. “You’ve directed your judicial corps to begin proceedings against the Free Worlds.”

“Have I?” Zane’s mock innocence caused a smile to tug at the edge of Rhean’s lips. “Whatever gave you that idea?”

“Probably the papers delivered by the Department of the Attorney General.”

“That is a give away, isn’t it? Trust Star League civil servants to be efficient.” He leaned back in his chair. “For once,” he added



under his breath.

"You're accusing the Free Worlds of subverting the Suns' economy."

"Yes."

"Allegations dating to our great-grandfathers' times."

"Indeed."

"An old tale to be dragging up."

"Not a tale. And sometimes old wounds are the ones that hurt most."

Rhean frowned and set the coffee cup down. "Enough pain that your father and great-grandfather let it lie."

Zane drew in a deep breath and sighed. "Sometimes it requires distance from the events to best judge what needs to be done."

"And a push in the right direction. From Robinson, perhaps." The narrowing of Zane's eyes and the momentary absence of the smile from his lips told Rhean her aim was true.

The Davion prince waved his hand dismissively. "That's not important. Your father must be worried though."

"Is he?" She lowered her chin and turned slightly away from her host, regarding him from the corner of her eyes.

"You're here."

"That is a give away, isn't it?" A lopsided grin crept onto her face.

"Touché."

"And so you're going for straight for the nuclear option. For the courts rather than negotiating." She turned back to him, her expression intent and her coquettish glances momentarily forgotten.

"Aren't we negotiating?" Zane cupped his chin with his right hand and scratched the back of his head with his left.

"We're friends having a cup of coffee." Rhean smiled sweetly.

Zane reciprocated. "I thought as much. So...what do you propose?"



"The Captain-General was talking about a new development fund. Investment has done wonders in Canopus and could apply equally well in the Inner Sphere. He wants to carry out a pilot first though. Perhaps you could suggest somewhere."

"Robinson is feeling a little...neglected at present."

"Excellent idea." Her voice was calm and businesslike but her eyes sparkled. "I'll suggest it to dad."

"Please do. I'm concerned as to how such a move will play out in some parts of the Suns, however."

Rhean's eyebrows rose slightly. *He wants more? "So?"*

"A gesture of good faith." He met her gaze.

"Such as?"

"The League's support in tomorrow's vote."

She smiled wryly. "So that's what this is about." Zane didn't react, but continued to eye her like a wolf sizing up its next meal. "You know it makes no economic sense."

Zane tapped the arm of his chair with his fingertips. "There are times for economics and times for politics. Do you want the Free Worlds embroiled in a long, legal wrangle?"

Rhean pursed her lips. "I'll pass on your *suggestion*. And in exchange?" She adjusted the position of her legs slightly and watched Zane's attention waver. "I presume it's too late to stop the legal juggernaut."

Zane leant forward, hands on his knees. "It's in the Star League's hands now."

"Then forget about it. Let it linger and be dragged down by bureaucratic inertia. The League isn't *that* efficient."

"Interesting. I can't be accused of pulling it, but you're largely free of it."

"Though it's only a temporary solution."

"And what do you suggest as a more permanent resolution?"

Rhean leaned forward over her knees until her chest almost touched the hands still folded in her lap. The sunglasses dragged at the neck of her top. "We talk." She pursed her lips slightly.

He leant further forward, mirroring her posture. Only the small coffee table separated them. "Talking is good." His roguish grin was back.

Rhean moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue. "All communicating is good." She tilted her head slightly.

Zane leant in further, intent. Twenty centimeters separated them. Ten.

"But not today, I'm afraid." She leaned back, simultaneously shifting her hands to the chair arms and uncrossing her legs. She stood in a fluid motion and turned to the door. "Thank you for the coffee, Prince Davion. I look forward to our future *diplomatic negotiations*."

Zane looked astonished, his mouth hanging half open, but though Rhean could feel his eyes on her back as she strode to the door, he didn't say a word.



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"The murder of Tanya Kerensky by Leonard Kurita sent shockwaves through the Star League, but it was the less obvious ripples radiating out from the event and it's aftermath that would reshape my life. Fate, it seems, doesn't like being ignored and will give a hard shove when you try to divert it."

—Private Journal

***Star Chamber,
Court of the Star League, Terra
Terran Hegemony
1 September 2604***

"Where the hell are the medics?" Rhean screamed. Blood flecks dotted her dress blouse and it was almost impossible to tell her dress jacket had been white; Nicolas was holding it tightly against Tanya's abdomen, attempting to stop the blood gushing from her chest as the Marik woman and Zane Davion took turns administering CPR. It was a losing battle; the First Lord's bodyguard had taken on a pale, clammy pallor and her eyes were glassy. "Why are they taking so long?"

Rhean glanced up at the clock, which showed 11:16 a.m., the second hand just sweeping past the quarter-minute. It had been ninety seconds since Leonard Kurita had attacked Nicholas Cameron and his bodyguard had intervened. It felt like an hour.

* * *

The Coordinator of the Draconis Combine had never been stable, celebrating his ascension to the throne in 2591 with a two-month planet-hopping spree of excess and hedonism. Three years ago, a year after Nicholas' father had confronted the Coordinator over his military provocations, Leonard had decided to go hunting for the children he'd likely sired in his "campaign of 2591." Six days after



Ian's death in 2602 the Coordinator, who deigned not to attend the funeral of the first First Lord, sent troops to Asta, a world jointly administered by the Terran Hegemony and the Draconis Combine, believing Ian Cameron had hidden some of Leonard's bastards there as part of a scheme to usurp the Combine's leadership. The SLDF countered the move, but weren't quick enough to prevent the DCMS troops kidnapping fourteen children, all of whom DNA testing demonstrated to be unrelated to the Kurita line. This disappointment only made Leonard even more convinced that the other nations of the Star League were conspiring against him.

Two years of tense standoff had ensued, with Kurita being represented in Star League councils more often than not by the Combine's ambassador to the hegemony or the venerable—and considerably more effective—Siriwan McAllister-Kurita. It was something of a surprise, therefore, when Leonard announced his intention to attend the Fall 2604 session of the council, though no surprise when he failed to appear on time and the session began without him.

"You're a bunch of upstart children," he'd announced on finally staggering into the Star Chamber blind drunk and still clutching a bottle of whisky. "A bunch of treacherous, disrespectful bastards." He slurred. "And you," he waved at the First Lord with his bottle, "Are the king bastard."

Leonard had staggered toward Nicolas, security ever-watchful, and spat in his face. The security personnel took a half-step forward, but were waved back by Cameron, who calmly pulled a handkerchief from his trousers with his good hand and wiped his face.

"What is the meaning of this, Leonard?" the First Lord had demanded.

"You know quite well!" Leonard had screamed. "Everybody thinks you're so honorable and great! Look at me! I am Nicholas Cameron! My daddy built the Star League! I am chivalry incarnate! Everybody loves me!" He jabbed a finger at the First Lord. "Whereas in truth, you are the most phony and deceitful *baka yaro* of the entire Inner Sphere!"

"For years you've been sending your lackeys on all worlds to find my lost sons and daughters, only to kidnap them! Don't you dare to deny it—I know what aims you're trying to pursue with your deceitful plans, alright! Your father already planned the total annihilation of the Draconis Combine. Only he failed! Too bad!



Daddy died before seeing the loathed coordinator fawning at his feet. But his heritage lives on! More diabolic and deceitful than daddy would have ever been capable of, you are trying to finally bring to an end what he begun. But you won't succeed!" Kurita wobbled visibly. "Don't you think I didn't notice how your father placed DCMS troops in the Reunification Wars in such a way that they had to feel the attack's full force? Don't you think I don't know how first your father and now you don't miss a single opportunity to gut the Combine?!"

Nicholas held out a soothing hand. "Leonard, let's sit down and discuss this issue calmly. Obviously, there have been misunderstandings between my father and you..."

"I WILL DO NO SUCH THING!"

The whisky bottle the Coordinator had been drinking from flew from his hand, clearly aimed for the First Lord. Alcohol and agitation meant Leonard's aim was off, however, triggering the catastrophe that unfolded.

As the coordinator threw his impromptu missile at the First Lord, Cameron's bodyguard stepped forward to protect her principal, her usually ceremonial weapon leveled at the assailant. The weight of the bottle struck her right arm with considerable force, jerking her hand back.

The weapon fired, a beam of coherent light searing a path across the chamber. Fortunately for the Kurita lord, the impact had thrown her aim off and the shot only singed the hip of his robe. Leonard Kurita didn't see himself as fortunate; He leapt forward and appeared to punch the young woman in the stomach, screaming as he did. A look of shock crossed her face. Then the gathered lords and their aides saw the blade the Coordinator had pulled from his robes. He stabbed again. "Bitch!" he hissed. Kerensky stood there for a moment, resolute in her determination to guard her lord. Five seconds after Kurita's assault, then ten. She appeared to cough and blood appeared on Tanya's lips as her legs buckled.

There was an explosion of movement as chairs were pushed back around the room, but Leonard didn't seem to notice. A strong hand caught his arm as it pulled back for a third blow. Yatomo. The Coordinator looked like he might attack his own aide, then seemed to come to his senses and notice the movement around the room.



"You can shove this *baka* Star League and your *kuso* planet, First Lord." Leonard snarled as he hurried to the door. "Though I'm tempted to bring it under Combine protection." He hesitated at the portal momentarily. "In a real nation, a *bikko* like you would never rule. Would know when to let his betters take over and remove himself from the picture."

He turned on his heels, storming from the chamber with the bloody knife still clutched in his fist. Yatomo, his eyes scanning the gathering, remained at the door, guarding Kurita's retreat.

Pandemonium erupted.

Zane, seated to Nicholas' left, was the first to reach the First Lord and his fallen guard. The First Lord's body had obscured Rhean's view of the confrontation with the Coordinator but she'd seen Tanya step forward. She hoped against hope that the body armor SLDF troopers routinely wore had protected the young woman from the worst of the blow. A quick glance into Zane's eyes dashed those hopes as he and Kevin sought to save the woman.

"She's got no pulse!" Zane called as he waved her over, knowing she had first-hand experience of battlefield medicine. This was peaceful Terra, not war-torn Canopus, and it was painfully obvious that that Kerensky had not worn the form-fitting under-armor; blood soaked the lower half of her jacket and was beginning to pool underneath her body.

Military training came to the fore. Take command. Get things done. Zane and Nicolas were looking to staunch the bloodflow, the First Lord trying desperately despite his single hand. Rhean motioned Nicholas back a moment, then lifted the now-crimson shirt, ripping it in two. Two puncture wounds marked the woman's torso, one two centimeters to the left of her belly button, the other about eight centimeters above it at the base of her sternum. Blood welled from both wounds, but it surged from the upper one. Nicolas tried to wad cloth from Kevin's jacket against the torn flesh, Norman Aris helping him. Rinalla tore up her skirt for more material, but it wasn't enough. Rhean nodded toward her dress jacket, slung over the back of her chair at the start of the meeting. Kevin followed her gaze and nodded.

Hell, Rhean thought. They needed to keep blood circulating and maintaining brain function, but CPR would increase the blood flow. There was little choice. She balled her fists and pushed on the fallen woman's chest. Zane pinched Tanya's nose and breathed for her.



“Where the hell are the medics?”

* * *

Rhean’s nerves were on an adrenalin-enhanced knife-edge. She wanted to pace but forced herself to stay standing, her left shoulder resting on the doorframe of the Star Chamber. Her mind was equally twitchy. What would be the upshot of this?

Leonard’s attack on the First Lord and Tanya Kerensky were shocking, and on one level her mind was processing the legal implications of that. Would the Combine claim diplomatic immunity for the Coordinator? Was he still in the city or had he already fled off-world? *Why hadn’t someone shot the bastard there and then?*

Another part of her mind dismissed Kurita’s physical attacks as a secondary issue. The Coordinator had, to all intents, threatened to invade the Hegemony and occupy Terra. Was he really that insane? *Probably.* The DCMS couldn’t hope to prevail against the massed might of the Star League and the other houses, but a war between the member states so soon after Reunification War would have disastrous consequences.

She glanced back down at the bloodstained marble floor, now secured with crime-scene tape and guarded by a squad of SLDF troopers. Bandages and medical gear lay strewn across the floor from the efforts to save Tanya Kerensky, including Rhean’s own discarded jacket. It would all be photographed and presented as evidence when the murder inquiry began. *If the murder inquiry began,* she corrected herself, though she recognized the vain hope. The medics had said there was no hope, but they’d still rushed her to Mount Grace Hospital. Rhean had enough medical knowledge to know that the Lords’ attempts to keep the SLDF sergeant alive hadn’t been enough. Tanya’s heart had stopped as a result of the blood loss, and despite valiant efforts at CPR, Rhean expected the news to be bad.

Almost on cue, footsteps echoed behind her and Rhean turned to face Nicholas Cameron, flanked now by two marines in battle-dress. He was ashen faced, the scar across his forehead even more pronounced than usual. He looked at her mournfully and shook his head. He’d already announced his decision to address the nation.



She took a deep breath. "My condolences, First Lord. If there's anything the Free Worlds can do, just ask. I'm sure my father won't mind me saying that."

A faint smile tugged at his lips. "He already offered as much and said he'd trust your judgment on military matters." Dad the efficient economist, knowing precisely when to delegate.

"I'll have our state department provide a dossier on Combine assets within the Free Worlds, should push come to shove."

Nicholas nodded. "All in good time, Rhean, all in good time. I need to do something infinitely more difficult than deciding whether to go to war with the Combine or not, or addressing the media."

She looked at him quizzically.

"I must speak to Tanya's husband and son."

* * *

How long she'd sat in the quadrangle, Rhean was never able to work out. She recalled leaving the Star Chamber and the First Lord, Evie a ghost-like presence behind her. She'd thought about returning to her apartments, but was too on-edge and wanted to walk. She'd wandered the labyrinthine corridors of the administrative complex, eventually emerging into the early afternoon sunshine in the enclosed garden. It was deserted, the building having been cleared of non-essential personnel after Leonard's flight. She sat on a bench and watched the water cascade down the fountain, allowing the steady, silvery stream and tinkling sound to lull her into dreamlike state. Her mind wandered and the noise of the fountain became the sound of children playing. Then a child playing. A three-year-old Russian boy who would grow up without his mother.

The tears, when they came, were unstoppable. She screamed in frustration, her hands balled into fists as sobs wracked her body. Life was so bloody unfair. An insane, vindictive bastard like Leonard Kurita gets to live while Tanya Kerensky, a woman only doing her job, dies. How many more would Leonard take down with him?

Rhean felt rather than saw someone sit down next to her and then arms wrapped around her and pulled her close. A hand stroked her hair and she nestled her face against the person's shoulder.

After what might have been a minute, but may have been an hour, her sobbing subsided but she didn't immediately push away. She allowed her head to rest on the shoulder for a few more moments, then turned her head to look up into her benefactor's face.

Zane's face bore the marks of the morning's horror. His eyes were tight and worry lines creased his brow but he graced her with a faint smile. "Thank you," she whispered.

"Don't do that, Ree. I haven't said how you look yet."

"Dreadful, I know."

"Possibly, but you could add vulnerable. Human."

"Vulnerable, eh?"

"You're in my arms, aren't you?"

She snorted and pushed herself upright, her hands forming a barrier between them. "Cocky bastard." There was no malice in her voice though, and the ghost of a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth put the lie to her words.

He raised an eyebrow at her, then reached up with his right hand to brush her hair back from her face. He tucked the bang back behind her ear, then allowed his fingers to carry on down her neck and then along her jaw. His thumb caressed her cheek. Rhean's eyes tracked the movement, but she didn't pull away. Only when Zane's fingers began to trace the corners of her lips did she gently reach up and pull his hand away.

Then she leaned forward and kissed him, passionately and without a care for who might be watching.

Zane seemed taken aback at first, but only for an instant. His arms encircled her and pulled her close, returning her passion. His hands caressed her back. A part of her mind said *no*, but her voice didn't comply. Only when his hands drifted lower did she push him away. *No*, her brain said again. "Not here," said her treacherous vocal cords.

He stood, drawing her up with him. His right hand encircled her left. "I know somewhere," he whispered as he led her from the garden.



~14~

“Sometimes the course of history hinges on a single day – or night. This was one such moment, though I didn’t appreciate that at the time.”

—Private Journal

Thonon-les-Bains
France, Terra
Terran Hegemony
2 September 2604

Awareness and memory returned slowly, washing over Rhean like the cool breeze from the window. Something was odd, but it took her several moments to register what was out of place and fit all the pieces together.

Bright sunlight poured in through large, open patio doors, whereas her apartment had small, weather-sealed windows except for the lounge. Fine sheets—silk, she thought—whereas she always had a duvet. An ornate, mahogany sideboard where hers was simple and oak. An unlit mirror on the vanity, whereas light strips surrounded hers. The absence of a telecom, where hers was always in easy reach. There was some form of disc on the wall too, but she couldn’t quite make it out.

She lifted herself up on her elbows and turned her head ninety degrees, blinking sleep from her eyes. The “disc” metamorphosed into a sunburst and sword. Memory flooded back.

A surreptitious exit from the Court of the Star League; a covert shuttle flight; champagne on the shore of the lake; passionate kisses; moments of ecstasy.

“Shit.” It was a whisper, but the explosive epithet seemed deafening in the quiet, sunlit room.

She sat upright, allowing the sheets to fall away, and scanned the room for her clothes. Her boots lay in the corner of the room



together with her underwear but her trousers and blouse were missing. “Swine.” She snarled to herself as she swung her legs round and stood, then padded over to the discarded clothes, swearing as she went.

Though life in the academy and in the field with the military had stripped away any self-consciousness she might have had about her body, there was a particular vulnerability to being in a strange house dressed only in bra and briefs. She pulled open a wardrobe and rifled through the contents, extracting a large plain shirt. Loosening the topmost gleaming jet button, she pulled the ivory shirt over her head and turned to quickly examine the result in the mirror. It was a little tight round the chest and rather too short for her liking, Zane being somewhat diminutive by comparison, though thin and wiry in his own way—*the story of my bloody life*, she thought—but there wasn’t much choice until she found her own clothes.

She glanced at the bedroom door, then at the open patio doors, opting for the latter. She pushed through the fine, billowing drapes and stepped onto a bright, sunlit terrace. A tree-line boulevard disappeared off into the distance, cutting through ornate gardens. Beyond them lay the glistening waters of the lake, dotted with the white sails of pleasure craft.

“Morning, gorgeous,” came a faintly accented voice from her right. Zane was sitting at a black metal table. Steam wafted from a small cup of coffee while an array of meats, cheeses, preserves and fruit dotted the table. Zane had a fork of scrambled eggs in one hand and a data slate in the other. She ignored his greeting.

“I appear to have mislaid my clothes. And my security.”

“Housekeeping have the former though Miss Sukhanov, the latter and who is presently asleep downstairs, told them to simply vacu-seal seal them for now in case the SL spooks want to go nosing around after yesterday’s unpleasantness.”

“Evie’s sleeping?”

“She was up most of the night and although it’s early afternoon local time,” he gestured at the bright sky, “It’s 4 a.m. back on Puget Sound. The joys of time zones.” He put down the slate and stood. He was dressed in loose fitting shorts and a white t-shirt. He walked over to her, then stretched up to kiss her. “And I always though it was all heels and posture. Just how tall are you?”



“One-eighty-seven.”

“That’s...sorry, I need to turn that into real heights. Just shy of six-foot two, yes? I’m only five-ten myself,” He made a play of standing on tip-toes for a moment. “But I make up for it in other ways.”

Rhean rolled her eyes. “Always over exaggerating...and anyway, I thought that archaic system had been abandoned centuries ago.”

“Oh it was. Officially. Its somehow stuck around though, so we’re a poly-measurement culture: Miles, kilometers, meters, feet, inches and centimeters. Not to mention weights and drink measures. A *pint* of beer sounds much better than a half-liter.” Rhean held up a hand to cut him off before he carried on.

In response, he guided her to a chair, gently pushing her into it. Self consciously she tugged at the hem of the shirt that rode up as she settled into it. Zane grinned wolfishly, admiring the view. She blushed and draped a napkin over her lap.

Returning to his seat, the Davion lord lifted a coffee pot and poured her a cup, followed by a glass of water from a gleaming decanter. “It’s freshly ground, and the water is local, a *little* bottling plant the family have owned for years.”

“I’ve seen the logo,” she said dryly, taking a sip and glancing round to look at the not-so-distant mountains. “‘A taste of Old Earth’ was the advertising tag line in the Free Worlds, I think.”

“And in the Commonwealth and the Suns.” He smiled. “The plant is about eight kilometers that way.” He gestured east along the lake-shore. “We can go see it if you like.”

Rhean pursed her lips and gestured at her attire with both hands, turning them thumbs out about six centimeters from her body and running both down to her waist. “Ahem.”

“Between the staff and the local boutique, I think we can sort something out. This is France after all, home of *haute couture*.”

“I’ll pass on the sightseeing, I think. After all, it’s not like it’s far from home.” It was Zane’s turn to raise an eyebrow. “I have a house about two mountains that way. In the Val d’Illiez.” She gestured southeast. “It overlooks the Rhone Valley and the Dents du Midi. Very good for skiing.” She carved a slice of cheese off and popped it in her mouth, then reached for a slice of toast. “Dad



bought it just before the treaty was signed, but pretty much never uses it now."

"One of several on Terra, if I recall correctly. London, Paris, Prague, and so on."

Rhean set down the toast she was buttering and regarded Zane levelly. "So you really did a workup on the Marik family assets."

"*Oui*, but it's gone no further. As we agreed."

"So I saw. And the case is in limbo."

"Where it'll remain, again, as we agreed. If you want it buried permanently, we'll have to discuss matters further."

Rhean's eyes narrow. "This isn't a pay-off for you withdrawing the case, you know. My reputation as an impartial negotiator is somewhat in tatters right now."

"I never thought it was part of the deal. It's a pretty woman staying the night, a couple of consenting adults enjoying each others company. No strings attached whatsoever. You should know I don't mix business with pleasure." He sipped his coffee. "Not often, anyway."

"So I could hop a shuttle back to Geneva or the Court and we could forget it ever happened?"

"I doubt I could forget, but if you want to walk away you're free to do so."

"When I have some clothes."

"When you have some clothes." He smiled. "Do you want to do that? To walk away?"

"At this moment, I really don't know. It's a scary situation. Complicated."

"It always is."

"Yeah, but this isn't just an office fling. Sex between people like us isn't just sex. It's politics."

"And here I thought I was consoling you in a moment of grief."

"Exploiter." There was no anger in her voice and the smile on her face erased any doubts Zane might have had. "Corruptor!"



A faux-innocent expression crossed Zane's face, his eyes wide.

"You look like Rinalla."

He snorted. "Damned with faint praise, though—unlike some people—she knows when to let her hair down."

Rhean frowned and took a sip of water. "Work hard, play harder is her motto, though it's hard to tell which she's doing at any moment in time. And I resent the implication that I don't know how to have fun."

"You *are* usually a little...stand-offish."

"It's professional reserve. Remaining objective. Not letting personal desires get in the way."

Zane ignored her protests. "And yet you're quite happy to play the coquette when it's to your advantage." He regarded her intently. "Not that you were very reserved or stand-offish last night..." He reached across the table.

Cheeks flaring, Rhean looked down at where he'd placed a hand over hers and was running a thumb gently between her thumb and forefinger. She slid her hand free. "I really should find some clothes." She lifted the napkin from her lap, placing it carefully on the table then stood.

Zane rose too, taking a step toward her. Rhean backed away. "Perhaps I will have to press the suit. 'Reclaiming Davion property illegally seized by the Mariks.'" The wolfish grin appeared on his face again. "Starting with that shirt."

Rhean took another step backward, then a third. Her shoulders touched the wall and she pressed her palms against the smooth stone. Shifting her weight onto her right foot, she lifted her left and placed the sole against the wall too, turning her knee into a barrier to his advance. Zane ignored the obstacle and leaned in, his bare legs brushing against hers, placing his hands either side of her shoulders. She twisted her face away from his attempt to kiss her, but the faint curl at the edge of her mouth egged him on. She twisted to avoid another attempt then tried to duck out of the cage of his arms.

An arm caught her round the waist and pulled her close. She felt his breath on her neck, then a soft kiss just below her ear. His free hand reached round and caressed her face. The hand moved down and deftly undid the top button of the shirt. Then he kissed her again and the hand undid another button.



“You can always say stop.”

She didn't.

