

# Episode Twelve:

## Friends and Enemies

*You will be left alone, unable to understand  
In a world where nothing lives anymore  
As you thought it did.*

Gilgamesh, tr. Herbert Mason.

*“With the overwhelming destruction of major urban and industrial centers by the successions of Zentraedi, Tirolian, and Invid orbital bombardments, the majority of people that survived the Robotech wars had been the residents of the countryside, where life had always taken a slower pace and where people had always clung more tenaciously to older ways. The result of the new demographics was that, though much of the tolerance, cosmopolitanism, and internationalism of the cities had survived, the world became suddenly more rustic, more old-fashioned, and in a profound sense, far more ethnic.”*

“Unification and the Robotech Wars”, Volume XV of The Cambridge World History, 2150 edition, page 551.

13 April 2043

Michael gazed disinterestedly at the sleeping hulk of his injured comrade, Milo Swift, who lay restlessly on a cot in the tent the two men had shared since departing the ruins of Vienna seven months ago. Laurie had been in moments before, her ministrations applied to the injuries Milo had acquired in the recent battle with their new prisoner. Laurie had then departed for one of the hamlets of southern England, having offered her services as a nurse in exchange for reprovisioning Michael's band of rebels with basic foodstuffs and (much to Michael's delight) several barrels of a hoppy Scottish ale imported from the north. It had been a good harvest in the British Isles the previous year, and the sympathetic villagers were more than willing to lend any assistance within their means to the continuing resistance against the Invid. Michael was even beginning to consider sending someone to Ireland to sue for aid; rumor had it that their harvests had been equally bountiful this year, and the armies being assembled in Europe would need

provisioning beyond what the continental farmers could provide. Besides, today's trip was going to keep Laurie away from the camp for most of the day, and though neither would admit it, both she and Michael were relieved to spend some time apart, however brief that break might be.

Austin shook his head. It was amazing; even when fully sedated Milo tossed and turned in his sleep, presumably wrestling with another of his many inner demons. The injuries themselves were mild, but upon seeing the alien in their midst, Milo had virtually gone berserk, and it took the greater part of the group to restrain him while he could be sedated. Michael was loath to think what he'd have to do to keep the captive safe from Milo's unbridled hatred when he came to; the next few days would be difficult at best.

Michael stepped outside the tent and greeted Jeanne, who was standing next to the camp stove, going over her notes for the impending interrogation.

"Morning, Michael," Jeanne said in a voice weighted by exhaustion. "Have you prepared your list of questions for the interrogation? I've been working on mine, but I'm not sure it's complete."

"I didn't put together a list. I'm going to play it by ear, and follow up with any gaps you leave as I see them."

"Don't you think that attitude's a little cavalier? Going unprepared like that?" Jeanne demanded.

"Not at all. Being prepared is your job. I'm here to make sure you're not too tough on her and to keep the big picture in mind. Besides, you're the Intel officer. I'm just a fighter pilot, however high my rank."

"Sounds to me like you're just enjoying a free ride," Jeanne jabbed, half-seriously. She was the subordinate, and was expecting the dirty work. And she knew Michael well enough to know that this was his way of telling her that he had full confidence in her to conduct the upcoming session with the Invid girl without his interference.

Michael smiled. "Yeah, well when you're the Commander and I'm the Lieutenant, you'll be the one to get to give the orders!" Austin chuckled, and began to head for the hovertransport, where the Invid was being kept. "Come on; our work's not going to get done by itself."

Michael took a seat facing the prisoner, behind where Jeanne would be standing. In his mind he quickly went over the strategy he was planning to adopt for the proceedings. Michael was certain that Jeanne would be unrelenting and downright intimidating in her questioning; it was just in her nature. *What I've got to do*, Michael thought, *is to make sure that I look like I'm on the prisoner's side. Whatever Jeanne gets*

*out of her won't be nearly as important as getting her to think she can trust me.* He had begun the relationship by personally attending to Lihra's injuries from the battle, leaving Laurie to take care of the group's resident giant, Swift. After cleaning her wounds and removing the odd piece of shrapnel in her shoulder, Michael had stitched her up and brought her some leftovers from the group's meal, staying with the silent woman until she was looking a little better, and then he had her sedated. "This will help you to sleep, until you're a little stronger," was what he had told her. He knew of the Invid's telepathic abilities, and figured that she'd be unable to use them to call for help as long as she was under. What she'd do now she was awake was anybody's guess.

The short but stalwart Roger led the prisoner into the hovertransport's cargo compartment, wrenching her arm hard behind her back. The prisoner's resistance was minimal, being more for show than anything else. Roger forced her into a chair facing Michael, about seven feet away from him, and stepped between them, activating the traditional interrogation light, which glared uncomfortably in the Invid's face. Roger reached for a coil of rope to tie the prisoner to the chair, but Michael stopped him.

"I don't think that will be necessary," he told Roger softly. Roger nodded, and left through the door leading to the cab. "Lieutenant, I think we can get started," he told Jeanne.

Jeanne nodded in Michael's direction and turned to the prisoner. The alien was of medium height, around five-foot eight, with brunette hair that sported enough red highlights that it turned burgundy in the sunlight. Her figure was slender and athletic, and her face bore distinct features that lent her a regal sort of beauty. The Invid humanoid's skin was pale; she hadn't been much exposed to the sun since her transmutation, and the dark green blood flowing in her veins seemed to accentuate her skin's pallor. Her darting eyes were a speckled amber, and glimmered with a vast intelligence.

For her part, the alien had done her share of observing her captors before now. The female before her was rather young and somewhat shorter than she, and had long, straight, fiery-red hair and gem-like green eyes. Like almost all humans, her thoughts were deathly quiet, barely a confused whisper in her mind. She seemed tough and no-nonsense in demeanor, and clearly held an intense dislike for, and distrust of, the stranger in their midst. The other, the male human, was tall and strong, with short dark brown hair (the blue dye having washed out during his four months on Earth, and his long locks were cut weeks ago by Laurie) and a well-trimmed beard on his cheeks and jaw, with a matching mustache to round out the picture. His eyes were blue and compassionate, and though he was clearly the leader of this band of insurgents, he did not share his subordinates' hostile attitude towards her. And unlike any other human or Tirolian Lihra

had ever encountered, he had a noisy mind, like any of the Royal Invid. Indeed, she had to give a good part of her attention to ignoring the indistinct mumbling of Michael Austin's thoughts.

Jeanne began to speak in a harsh, accusatory tone. "You appear to us as human; yet we have seen your blood. You can not hide what you are, Invid. Answer our questions, and no harm will come to you. Resist, and you will be dealt with severely," Jeanne warned. "Is my statement clear?"

Lihra acknowledged with a nod. At first, she'd been resolved to get away as quickly as possible; she had to establish contact with the Regis and get a rescue party out to her. She would make sure she was in charge of the termination force that would track these humans down, giving the rebels what they deserved. And a swift, ruthless victory would make up for the previous failures that gnawed at her royal pride. She could have summoned aid earlier, but the sedative left her disoriented and unable to mind-call. But she had begun to wonder why her captors had taken such great pains to keep her alive, well-fed, and healthy. Perhaps they thought it would gain them clemency from the Queen-mother's wrath?

*Mother has always told us that the Tirolians, their human cousins and their Zentraedi slaves are worthy of nothing but our contempt, Lihra thought silently. She knew of their primitive ways and of how they are one with the Shadow. She has always told us they were a simple race, easily cowed by superior force and power. Yet it is ironic that she has chosen this form for our people to adopt so as to inherit their world. Perhaps. . .*

"Let's start with a name, an individual designation," Jeanne intoned harshly. She wasn't even sure that a lower-ranking Invid would even have a name. She stared into those amber eyes; their unswerving resolve made Jeanne uneasy. "You do have a name, don't you?"

"I am called Lihra, daughter of the Invid people," the alien answered plainly. She looked at Austin; he remained passive, idly stroking his hairy chin.

"Lihra it is," Michael said softly, revealing a faint smile. He was hoping to put the prisoner more at ease; Lihra's eyes narrowed in skepticism, and the questioning continued.

"How long have the regional hives been searching for us?"

Lihra tensed up in her chair, and replied, "Opposition is noticeably more determined in recent times. The Regis has concluded that a stronger presence was needed to reinforce our control over the native population."

“That doesn’t answer my question,” Jeanne snapped in reply. Michael noted that Jeanne was really taking her role as inquisitor seriously. *Maybe too seriously.* There had been a substantial amount of inflection in her voice in both questions. But it seemed to producing the desired result from the prisoner; at this point, Austin saw no reason to step in on behalf of the alien.

“Extensive search and destroy missions have been launched from the hives on the continent within the last lunar cycle. We have met with some success; and eventually the Regis will defeat your pathetic band and overcome these minor setbacks,” Lihra promised.

“I’m not holding my breath,” Michael quipped. *That isn’t the story we’ve been getting from the Saxons,* he mused. *Then, we shouldn’t expect her to come out and admit that the Invid patrols are running like a trahl with his tail between his ears!*

Lihra frowned, sensing Michael’s thoughts. *For all the Invid might, this human dares to compare us to a frightened pollinator!*

Jeanne glowered. “Then we have weakened the Regis’s control over the European continent?”

“I refuse to answer that!” Lihra spat back.

“I’m afraid you already have,” Michael goaded.

“Next question: Why are you in human form?” Jeanne asked.

“It is a punishment for my many failures in serving the Regis. Until I prove myself worthy in battle, I am condemned to this ugly prison!” Lihra answered. She’d anticipated this question ever since she’d been taken prisoner. She spent most her conscious thought on formulating answers that would satisfy these simple humans. Of course, the answers and delivery had to be convincing. In this case, her quick forthright response wasn’t challenged by the one called Ducasse. She could see plainly see that her other inquisitor had not believed her explanation.

*As a punishment, my ass! I don’t buy that,* Lihra heard Michael think. *The mecha she was piloting was specifically designed to interface with a humanoid! And from its performance it was clear that it was top of the line for the Invid’s inventory.*

Lihra grumbled softly in disgust that her answer was not believed, and continued to monitor Michael’s musings. *This also means the Regis has not only been dabbling in genetic manipulation, but has made substantial progress. But why? What is she up to? She doesn’t just start redesigning her race on a whim.* Michael frowned at the implications brought up by his dissection of the alien’s answer.

“Describe your duties to the Regis, your rank, your mecha, your hive assignment, and your particular mission concerning us,” Jeanne ordered callously.

Lihra blinked, turning away from Michael's mind. It was a mammoth request. She was going to hold back some of the information these humans wanted, as much as she possibly could. Telling them of her real station in the Invid hierarchy was clearly out of the question. "My duties are mostly tactical management of patrols, and more specialized squads. I am an experienced officer, but not of the Regis's inner circle. Most of my orders are received from upper level officers. My mecha in the *Gosu*, a formidable machine, as you will no doubt attest to. More than that I can not divulge; I am not an engineer. I am not assigned to any one hive on the continent; but I am familiar with four or five. As for the reason of my mission, your exploits have gained the immediate attention of the Regis. So I was dispatched to deal with you; more of my kind will come with my failure," Lihra said.

Jeanne and Michael had the same thought: that she was relinquishing information too easily, and that something must be up. Jeanne circled back behind the chair to ponder her next move. Michael looked away from the prisoner for a moment to make eye contact with his Lieutenant, silently urging her to press harder.

Lihra seized the moment and lunged headlong into Austin's gut, bowling over the startled officer. Michael's Glock 17 fell out of its holster and clattered noisily onto the metallic floor of the transport. Lihra's cat-quick agility had her up and to the front cab. Jeanne stumbled out the back, sidearm in hand, hoping to cut off the prisoner's mad dash for freedom. She charged right into Blake, forcing him to drop the armful of parts he held to the ground.

"Michael! She's trying for the woods," Jeanne warned.

Michael shook his head in anger. He shouldn't have been surprised by the Invid pilot like that. He broke into a full stride trying to make up for lost seconds, but Lihra was already approaching cover, and in her mind freedom.

*This is just dandy! My best tracker is out cold!* Michael ducked in under the branches of an aging elm. Light filtered in from above the tree-line, but only in patches.

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"Milo! Get up!" Jeanne screamed. She'd rushed into the tent, almost bringing it tumbling down. "The Invid girl is gone; she bull-rushed Michael and made for the woods. Mount your Cyclone and ride along with me. We'll circle around and cut her off!"

Milo stumbled to his feet. The sedative had almost worn off, but he was clearly still groggy. "Should have waxed her last night, Jeanne!" Milo reminded her.

“And you should have used your head when you fought her, not your anger. Now, move it!”

They were both running to their cycles when Milo promised, “If she clears the forest and she’s in my sights, I’m not even going to think twice about doing what our *fearless* leader should have done last night,” Milo promised. He grabbed his SAL-9 from the vehicle’s storage compartment, and checked its energy level.

“Let’s go,” Jeanne ordered, ignoring Milo’s threat.

\* \* \*

The village was small; a conglomeration of thatch-roofed wooden houses amidst which were a few brick buildings. She was in the largest, the town hall, and underneath the flickering illumination of the hanging oil lamp, she examined the young woman before her.

“Where are you from, litl’ un?” Laurie asked, as she inoculated the child. The plague might not have made it here yet, but Small Pox was already making a comeback. She had unconsciously slipped back into her heavy Liverpool accent, and the little girl noticed it.

“A stone’s throw ‘way. Up from Manchester. We’ve been staked out at the ‘Henge for the festival. The spring celebration lasts for a fortnight.” The girl smiled, brandishing a couple of chipped teeth within her innocent smile.

“There, all set!”

Mason recalled that this community was only a hour away by hovertransport from Manchester, once an old industrial power before being reduced to craters by the Robotech Masters. Most of the survivors had fled the burning core of the city to the surrounding shires and took to peasant farming as a means to survive. Looters and highwaymen weren’t uncommon, as some of Mason’s patients told her, but there was not an overwhelming sense of anarchy rampant throughout this island state. There were a few semi-feudal pockets within England proper, and of course the Zentraedi nation to the north, but on the whole, there was no regional polarization like that of the continent. Resources were more evenly distributed from town to hamlet and a more pervasive sense of cooperation existed within the island nation’s borders, and beyond them, with the communities in Scotland and Ireland. The exchange of information and goods was less restricted; even the presence of the Invid here on these islands or a counterpart resistance network was less evident.

This cluster of relatively inconsequential islands could be easily monitored from the Invid strongholds in France, and Regis's strategy was to merely restrict access across the French-English channel. Opposition here was minimal and had always been dealt with from the mainland. While there existed a small hive within striking distance of the Zentraedi, the Regis had adopted a policy of containment rather than one of eradication. The Zentraedi were a concern; but reconnaissance parties from this regional hive had not been confronted when they toured the northern sectors of the island.

*Of course, Laurie mused, that's bound to change now that Michael has brought us here. We always seem to travel in a crowd.* It especially surprised her that word of who Michael Austin was, and of his arrival in England, had filtered so fast through the populace. Though the islands had neither the manpower nor the collective will to provide troops in any quantity for the upcoming battle, sympathy for the anti-Invid movement was running high, and representatives of town councils and other leaders had infiltrated in amongst the festival-goers and their provision wagons and musical troupes, in hopes of meeting the new leader of Europe's armies, to offer what aid they could. To this end, the group had been invited to attend the pan-insular spring festival, and Laurie was asked to carry the invitation back to the others.

Mason rolled down her sleeves and straightened out her blouse; her work here was done. She looked at the bounty placed in the anteroom. Several crates of bread, smoked ham and mutton, and apples awaited her inspection, along with the promised barrels of ale. A bite from one of the apples convinced her; the boys would love this, especially Michael and Blake.

"Are you the one who needs to be ferried uproad, luv? I'll take you up a spot, if travel by cart agrees with you," a townie asked from the entrance. She looked him over; he was grimy, with grease marks all over his face and bare arms, but at least he was well nourished, as were all most of the people in this town because of last year's bounty.

"Okay, but I'll need some help with these crates," Laurie decided.

Her new-found chauffeur agreed. He loaded the foodstuffs onto his cart, while Mason went inside to secure her portable medic's kit. From the time spent traveling this morning, Laurie estimated that she'd be back to the others within two hours, sometime before dinner.

The beasts of burden groaned piteously when the hard-bitten Englishman set the whip to them. "Come on, lassies. Let's go for a jaunt!"

\* \* \*



Michael could hear his prey breathing heavily up ahead of him; she could not have been more than fifty feet away. Austin was gaining ground; he was sure he heard her stumble, yelp in surprise, and resume her flight. Michael was having an easier time of negotiating the terrain than she. Snapping twigs heralded Austin's proximity; Lihra accelerated.

Austin leapt over a small bush and skidded to a stop. *Am I hearing things, the breeze? No, that sounds like a whisper. . . like voices. But from where?* Michael concentrated, trying to hear, but they were gone. He relaxed his concentration, and the voices were there again. Austin saw a shadow move before him and was off again.

*Mother, hear me, please, Lihra called telepathically. I am pursued, hunted like an animal. You must. . .*

Austin tackled her from behind, the chase was over. Lihra had surprising strength for a woman of her height and build, but Austin was too much for her. When Austin prodded her with the barrel of his Gallant pistol, she relented. This time he wasn't going to take any chances with her.

"I'm sorry I have to do this," he told her. Austin raised his clenched hand with extended fingers and struck her neck at a pressure point. She was instantly rendered unconscious within his grasp, and he took her limp body gently over his strong shoulder and began to head back to the camp. Michael listened for the voices again as he walked back, but they had stopped.

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"Milo! That's one of Michael's flares," Jeanne's voice rang in on the radio. Milo spotted the signal and put his gun away. "Race you back to camp," she challenged.

"Rain check, darling," Milo responded. Jeanne had already made the turn back to Austin's original point of entry. Besides, Milo had worked up a powerful thirst that needed his immediate attention. He reached into his storage compartment. His small metallic flask was there, somewhat lighter than he remembered leaving it. *Jesus, Austin. You have me drugged **and** you inhale my whiskey? You've got pluck, you bastard!* Milo's quick judgment was, of course, hasty; Blake, in one of his more mischievous moods, was the real booze-stealing culprit. Not that he'd been able to swallow the pungent liquor anyway. Still, there was a dram or two left for Swift, which he downed heartily. He'd need a little bracing up to actually pull off what he knew he had to do, what Austin had left undone.

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Deep within the inner chambers of Reflex Point, the Regis waited for her favorite daughter, her heir designate, to resume her communication. Lihra's plea for help had not gone unheard; the Regis's figure was surrounded by an aura of angry energy. It changed color from a passive blue to the red of her royal robes; perhaps an indication of her fury with herself at having miscalculated in exposing and now losing Lihra to the humans.

*Call to me once more my child! I urge you! Nothing. Curse my over-confidence. The best of the new order, lost to me! I will set Kharoth to the task of retrieving her from these savages and returning her to our people.*

She issued a mind-call to the mammoth Atlantis hive, a stilt hive situated precariously on the mid-Atlantic ridge. Her eyes narrowed on Kharoth's image; she had decided that he too would take on the new body, to become a *Sulagi*, in a matter of time. His body was kneeling before her image, awaiting her orders.

*Rise Kharoth and hear me! I have deemed it necessary to confirm or deny the death of your sister, Lihra. I have suspicions that she is alive and attempting to contact us while in captivity with the humans. You must return her to her rightful place, here. I will tolerate no ineffectiveness, Kharoth. Serve me well.*

Kharoth's membranous snout expanded in anticipation of pitting forces against the humans. *My queen, I will find her.*

*Hollow promises are not going to appease me, Kharoth. You have your orders and vast resources at your disposal. Don't fail me.* The energy field around the Regis's robed form was fluctuating; it swallowed her whole and Kharoth's audience with her was over.

*Curse that woman! Any fool would have known not to put Lihra in such jeopardy in the first place!* Kharoth thought bitterly. *I only hope the next Regis rules with more wisdom than Mother or Father has.*

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The waters of the channel had been choppy, but not unnegotiable. The ethanol-powered water craft bounced harmlessly across the surface of the dark turbulent English channel, speeding in the evening's rays towards its final destination. Cipolla looked from the port side to see if he could spot the island of refuge. His men were fidgety, a bit disconcerted at the turn of events surrounding their master and lord, Count von KönigsLöw, the self-appointed ruler of Mecklenberg. The Mecklenberger army was in

ruins at the hands of the Saxon offensive and had been driven to a hasty retreat through Denmark into the blasted wastelands of Scandinavia. *If it had not been for that damned Pole, Bogdan*, the aging mercenary mused, *none of this would have happened at all. But he had to turn over his information to the other side, and Saxony was able to use it against us*. Now, the remains of Mecklenberg's forces were enduring a forced march through what had been Sweeden, before the Invid reduced it to a lifeless tundra almost a decade ago. Many months before, the Count's intelligence had intercepted information that Saxony was giving generous grants for any engineer who would relocate to the reclamation survey town in the ruins of the Russian city of Murmansk. It was too far north to be effective agriculturally, and it was unlikely that many factories would have survived the Invid bombardment; no people had. The only remaining possibility was the old Southern Cross naval facility, near-by at Polyarnyy. Something was afoot there, and the Count was placing all his bets on the possibility of swiftly capturing the town and all its populace, including the priceless engineers, and whatever was at the naval base, and use it for ransom for the return of his territory. It was his only option left, with no more than three thousand rag-tag soldiers at his command.

Cipolla knew that no one would last out there; not through the wastes and as short on supplies as the Count's army was. Polyarnyy was the only answer and the chances of reaching it were shrinking with each passing day.

Cipolla returned his thoughts to the mission at hand. Saxony was putting a lot of stock in just one man to lead Europe's armies, and his death or capture would aid the Count's cause immeasurably. And then there was the issue of the Zentraedi. Whatever sort of attack Duchess von Schönberg was planning on the Count's Invid sponsors, it was clear that she had asked Austin to enlist the aid of the Zentraedi in it. Something would have to be done, and quickly.

*I won't fail you, Count.*

The channel-runner had been promised payment upon reaching the other side: the stark white cliffs of Dover. When land broke the endless monotony of the northern horizon, that payment was issued. Cipolla nodded to one of his rugged soldiers. A shot rang out and the channel-runner's body was casually dumped over the side of the speeding boat. The aging Sicilian mercenary took the wheel, spray drenching his gray hair, beads of sweat and icy seawater dripping down his leathery face.

"Radio the Count's command; we'll be reaching strike position within two days," Cipolla ordered. His radio man stripped off his pack and set up the radio for the transmission.

"I might have to use more power to boost the signal."

“Very well; just make sure the transmission is secured,” he ordered. “We’ll make use of the boat, if possible, once we dock,” Cipolla decided. He returned his attentions to navigating the channel.

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Milo leered at the prisoner, bound and unconscious in the same chair she had occupied during the interrogation by Michael and Jeanne. He was alone with the Invid, the others having left for a moment to discuss with Roger some of the outstanding issues to be resolved with regard to the Alphas’ maintenance. Lihra came to at the sound of his footsteps, looking into eyes glazed over with same hatred that had once been inspired in Milo by the assassin Kane; yet, unlike the *Nous-gran’diel*, this enemy was in no condition to challenge him. She tried to scream, but he gagged her roughly with the bandanna he’d worn around his forehead. Milo smiled cruelly, and chambered the first round in his pistol.

Lihra tried to summon all her powers as the Regis-designate to drive her enemy away. She strained against her mind’s sluggishness, distracted by the seething fury she could sense in the human approaching her, but her powers’ immaturity and her own weakened condition left her helpless. She watched impotently as Milo silently cocked back the hammer on his pistol. She was near panic, and her thoughts turned to the humans’ leader and his overly noisy mind. Yes, **he** might hear her. *Help me!* she thought hurriedly, telepathically broadcasting her cry to the one human that seemed to care for her welfare. *Please, he means to kill me! Michael Austin, hear me!*

Milo placed the barrel of his Desert Eagle squarely against her left temple. One squeeze of the steel trigger would end her captivity amongst the humans. Lihra did not fear death, but she had a duty to her mother, to her people to survive and lead them into their future. Her fear was not for herself, but for the people that she would one day call her children. Her mind’s eye saw visions of the Invid led by another, by Sera, or perhaps Ariel, or, Spirit of Light forbid, by Corg. Did they have the power, the leadership, the **wisdom** to protect the Invid people as Regis or Regent?

Like a flash of lightning against a dark ceiling of storm clouds, Austin burst into the transport and flung himself at Swift’s arm, knocking the weapon away from Lihra’s temple. The gun discharged, but the bullet flew harmlessly into a box of spare parts for the Cyclones. Austin shouted fiercely, and chopped downward on Milo’s wrist, knocking the gun loose. It fell to the floor, and Michael kicked it into the corner of the hovertransport. The instant Swift recognized his attacker, he growled. His enormous fist

cocked back for the swing and then struck Michael in the ribs, flinging him back several feet into the wall.

Austin sprang to his feet, yelling, "This is not what we're about, Swift! What the hell do you think you are doing, you idiot? I swear to God if you kill her, you'll end up in the grave next to hers. I'll see to that, personally." When Austin had finished spouting off his threats, he added in a forced tone, "We don't kill prisoners, and she's more use to us alive than dead."

"You've gotten as much information from her as you can expect. And she's not going to take captivity much longer. She's the one of **them**; I plan on doing to this monster exactly what every single fucking one of these green-blooded bastards deserves. I'm going to pay her back for what they've done to us for the last eight years," Milo said bitterly. "You want to keep her alive? Then you gotta come through me!"

Austin didn't waste time debating Milo's terms, and adopted a fighting stance. If he had to beat Swift senseless to get his point across and to protect his prisoner, then he had no qualms about doing so; it seemed Milo only learned through pain. He edged in towards his hulking subordinate, who crouched slightly, clenching both fists tightly. Milo's eyes narrowed; he was ready to take on the smaller man, however tough Austin might be. Michael waited and stared into Milo's eyes; there, Michael had learned, would an opponent reveal his next move. Swift broke the stalemate and lunged forward at Michael, who side-stepped his assailant, and landed a circle kick on the back of Milo's neck. Milo stumbled forward, and then reeled around to try to recover the fight's momentum.

Austin preempted him, and hit Swift with a clawed strike to his kidney and a chestnut fist to the solar plexus. Swift howled from the pain; but grabbed Michael around the abdomen with a bear hug. As the air was squeezed out of his lungs, Michael took no comfort in knowing that his next strike could have had Swift unconscious. But Milo had different ideas. He tried to drive Austin into the gunnery platform's support column. Austin's body bent awkwardly and his clenched face registered pain, but a snap knee to Milo's groin had loosened Swift's vise-like grip on him. Milo was soon staggering due to a vicious combination of punches and kicks, all to vital areas. Milo was neutralized, resting on one knee, and wheezing heavily. Michael resolved to try reasoning with Swift one more time and he hoped to God Milo would listen; the only other option now would be to knock him cold or finish him off.

"I am an officer of the REF, and as long as I'm alive, no prisoner under my care will ever be executed, and no soldier under my command will ever commit anything even remotely resembling a war crime. It's against everything I was raised to believe in, and

don't you think for a second you're man enough to get away with it in my outfit. Let it go, Milo. And that's an order," Austin warned sternly. His eyes locked with Milo's with a piercing intensity.

Swift's eyes, one of which was swelling shut due Austin's last onslaught, met Austin's and clearly demonstrated to him that Milo had no intention of letting up. Milo's gaze was displaying an intensity of its own, as he got back to his feet. Michael's warning hadn't reached the man and that left him with no options.

Again Austin moved into striking distance. Milo lowered himself, and waited for Austin to press the issue. Austin was eager to end the disagreement; this had gone far enough. Milo ducked under the sweeping chop from Austin's left arm, but caught the full brunt of his heel on the chest and was sent flying. Michael hadn't used all his strength in that last kick; if he had, Milo's ribcage would have been crushed. As it was, Swift's massive body slumped to the floor and his head hit with a solid 'thud' against cold metal.

Michael dropped to his knees and took several labored breaths before he dragged Swift's form to a cot and threw him in. Jeanne burst in, having run over as fast as she could after hearing the gunshot, and her face lost all color when she noted Michael's condition.

"What happened?" Jeanne said hysterically.

"Swift was about to cancel her ticket," Austin gasped. For all his conditioning, Austin had been pushed as well, and he would be the first to admit it. Jeanne tracked down Milo's gun, unloaded it and put it with the other conventional weapons stashed in the hovertransport. She examined the wounds inflicted upon him. Blood was dribbling out of his nose, his eye was practically shut, and his upper lip was swollen and also bloodied, and his chest was sporting bruises. Her face soured at the sight.

"I didn't think he was serious about killing her; I just thought he was just blowing steam."

"He threatened to kill her today, and you didn't tell me?" Michael accused angrily.

"I didn't think it would come to this. . . I didn't want to worry you," Jeanne said haltingly.

"You idiot! If I'd known that he was still foaming at the mouth, I'd have never have left her alone, not for a minute. Next time, don't **think**! You're obviously not qualified!" Michael shouted.

Jeanne had been an officer for two and a half years, and knew how unprofessional tears were, especially in front of her C.O. But that didn't stop her this time. She'd

screwed up in front of Michael, which was humiliating enough, but his response had really hurt.

“Aw, Jesus, Jeanne,” Michael said, embracing her firmly. “I’m sorry; I was out of line - **way** out.” He let go of her, and tried to catch his breath. Today wasn’t one he’d remember fondly. “The important thing is, is the prisoner all right?”

“I don’t know,” Jeanne admitted, trying to regain her composure. “She looks unharmed to me. Let me get this gag off of her.”

“No. I’ll do it. Get Roger, and haul Swift to a tent,” Austin requested. “I’ll need some time alone with Lihra; there are some things that need sorting out.”

Ducasse complied, and called Roger in. With much effort, the two had soon lifted the cot, with Milo still on it, and had hauled it out of the transport. Once out, Jeanne quietly shut the rear door behind her.

Michael took off the mouth gag and slid it down the prisoner’s neck. “Are you all right?” he asked with a gentleness that took her by surprise.

“I think so,” she replied, gasping. “I wasn’t sure you would hear my call.” Michael wet a rag and wiped the sweat off her forehead. She was panting, and trying to calm herself after the brief ordeal.

“I heard it,” Michael said as he looked her over, “but I was lucky that I was already on my way back here. I’m sorry about his actions; we aren’t supposed to do that sort of thing.” He shook his head in disgust. “Well, that settles it. I’m going have to keep an eye on you at all times, for your own protection. And you’re going to have to bunk with me for now, in case Milo tries something in the middle of the night. But you’re going to have to trust me. Do you?”

Lihra nodded. This human, at least, was worthy of it.

Michael continued. “I don’t know what you were trying to do by escaping, but I was not intending to kill you when we were through questioning you, whatever any of my subordinates may want. You are a prisoner of war and will be accorded such treatment. That means no torture, no brainwashing, or anything else the Regis might have said we’d try,” Michael explained. “Just confinement.”

“Then what are your intentions concerning me?” Lihra asked. She took note of the fact that she was alone with him this time. She was most intrigued by Austin’s last statement, mainly because it illustrated that certain members of the human race was willing embrace reason over blind hatred. Perhaps the Regis was wrong in her sweeping assessment of the Terrans. Lihra would listen. It seemed that the channels of compromise were open, perhaps for the first time in this long, ugly war.

“Ideally, it would be to return you to your people without exposing our group to danger or capture. Just an even swap,” Michael said in a steady tone. “How that could be arranged is another matter.”

“I could contact my people telepathically,” Lihra offered.

Austin paled. “Have you already tried?”

“Yes. In the wooded region during my flight. You prevented a complete thought transmission. But contact was made and broken,” Lihra responded honestly.

*So that’s what it was*, Austin mused. “And before then?”

“I hadn’t the opportunity. Your toxins rendered me unconscious overnight, so I was not able to mind-call. If you are worried about your unit’s location, I don’t think my mother knows. Although she now knows to resume the search.”

“I’d like to think we’re establishing an air of mutual cooperation here, Lihra,” Michael reasoned. Lihra nodded. She wanted more time study the humans; in her eyes they were worthy of it, even if her mother had decided that they were to be eradicated. Invid history would have a detailed account of the enslaved Terrans. Lihra would see to that much, at least.

“Yes, we have. For my part, I will refrain from telepathic contact, until your conditions are met,” Lihra promised.

“Good. Because I can’t guarantee your safety if your troops arrive and try to take you back by force. And since, for some reason, I can hear your ‘mind-calls’, so I’ll know if you try. Don’t endanger my people, or I won’t be quite so accomodating. In the meantime, this won’t be necessary.” Michael undid her ropes and escorted her outside. “Of course, you can not interfere with the operations of this unit, nor sabotage any part of the resistance network. If you do, I won’t be able to protect you. And for all intents and purposes, you are now a human. If anyone else outside the group got wind of your true nature, we’d all be in big trouble.”

“I will remember that,” Lihra promised. She limbered her up wrists.

“Good. Although you might not hear it from anyone but me, I’ll say it. Welcome, Lihra. And you’ll find out that we’re not as bad as you might have heard, and I’m sure some of us might discover the same thing about your people,” Michael said. “Come on; let’s get something to eat.”

\* \* \*

The sharp report of Milo’s Desert Eagle ruptured the silence of the afternoon like a cannonade; once, and now again. Eight shots in a row, and than a pause - and then



another seven shots. His target was his old Southern Cross uniform, nailed with arms outstretched to a thick tree trunk. Only scraps of it remained after he had all but unloaded his second clip. Milo could hear someone coming; from the sound of the heavy foot falls, it could only be Austin.

“What the hell are you shooting at, anyway?” Michael demanded as stepped into the clearing ten meters behind Swift. Leaving Lihra in Jeanne’s care for the moment, Austin had come out here to get Milo in the simulator, and perhaps to let him vent off his frustration and anger in the programmed scenario. But it looked like Milo had found his own way of dealing with his hostility. Milo pointed, and fired this clip’s last round, as Michael squinted and saw the target; the clothing had been shot to ribbons. “What is that? Your uniform?”

“That’s what it looks like, or rather, used to look like.”

“Why?”

“Because I’d hate myself later for having shot at yours,” Milo whispered hoarsely, while reloading.

“You owe me an immediate apology for what you’ve just said; and for your conduct earlier. I’m not going to tolerate this nonsense from anyone in my group,” Austin stated. He edged a step closer, hands behind his back.

“Apologize? I’m only sorry that I didn’t off her sooner. She has no place with us, and what’s worse is she could give us away. We don’t know what we’re dealing with here! Now, if you want to stick your principles that’s fine, but don’t force them on me. I want her dead. She can’t be trusted.”

“Neither can you,” Austin countered. “Trust has nothing to do with it. I have my eye on her.”

“Have your eye on her? She’d say anything - do anything - to keep her sorry hide alive; I know I would. You’ll trust her, drag her around, and let her into your confidence.” His face turned into a sneer. “Maybe even let her in your bed.” Michael growled almost imperceptibly at that; Milo knew he’d hit a button. “Then one day, just like today, you’ll be alone with her and-” Milo swung around and faced Austin with his weapon drawn. “It’s over.” He emptied blank rounds over Austin’s head.

Michael didn’t even flinch when the shots went off, and remained rigid as Milo brought his pistol to bear on Michael’s heart.

“You think you can handle anything, take down anyone,” Milo’s stare was stone cold, made even more gruesome by his facial disfigurement. “And look at this, I’m just this close to killing you. And I bet you’re wondering if you can get your gun out if its holster before I can pull the trigger.” To be fair, the thought **had** crossed Michael’s mind.

“This is a war, Austin. Something in which principles are bought and sold like refined ethanol. Now, we’ve been through so much together, the two of us. This shouldn’t even be happening.”

Austin silently conceded that.

“I know what you’re thinking, Austin. I’ve got one eye swollen over, and a bunch of other injuries from earlier. You’re wondering how accurate I can be from here. You know, my aim tends to get a little better when I’m hurt and pissed off. Are you the gambling kind, Commander?” Milo rasped.

“After you kill me, then you go for the prisoner,” Michael concluded.

“It doesn’t have to play out that way,” Milo offered.

“Yes, it does! If you want her dead, you’re going to have to murder all of us. Not just me; Jeanne, Roger, Laurie, and Blake!” Michael said firmly. Michael widened his stance; it looked like Milo was relenting, and he wanted to project an aura of strength. “You know, Swift, I could have killed you when we fought earlier. But I didn’t.”

“That’s your problem, Austin. You let your principles guide you, and you go soft on us; you even go soft on them, those fucking green-blooded monsters! I don’t have that problem. Killing is a reflex to me, like blinking an eye.” Milo’s grip tightened up on his Desert Eagle. “You know if I pull this trigger, I’d eventually be up for a Court Marshall hearing, if I’m not executed on the spot by the others. Do you think I care about that?”

“I’ve never been impressed by your crap about how easy killing is for you. You’re like a little boy; a lot of talk and little action. As for me being soft on the Invid, you don’t know what soft is. Do you know how many Invid I’ve killed? **Do you?** I have seven-hundred and sixteen confirmed kills in an Alpha fighter, thirty-two in a Cyclone, and I have either pulled the trigger to fire the missiles myself or have given the order to destroy enough hives to bring that total to over two hundred thousand! Have you ever killed two hundred thousand of anything? Can you even imagine butchering almost a quarter of a million, living, breathing, sentient beings? **CAN YOU?** I don’t brag about those numbers; I’m sure as hell not proud of them.” Michael stepped closer. “As far as I can tell, you’re nothing more than a coward, a frightened brat, hiding behind a big gun and a lot of bluster.”

Michael took another step forward. Milo’s aim was getting uncertain; he’d expected Michael to back down. “What I said earlier still goes, Swift. If she’s a threat, I am the only one here who will determine that! Look, I believe everyone deserves a chance to prove themselves. I took that risk with you; I’m taking it with her. End of story,” Austin said. “Now, it’s up to you.”

“I know what kind of risk you’re taking; it’s a bad one. But I’m not fool enough to take it. I don’t trust her, and I never will. There’s nothing she can do to change that. But if you’re willing to take her in then I can’t stand in your way. It’s your call. I’ll be on her like a fly on crap; if she tries anything, and I hope she does, she’s mine. . . regardless of the consequences. That I promise. You’re walking a high wire with her, Austin; I’m going to save your butt when you fall, even if you don’t want me there,” Milo said harshly, allowing his aim to droop towards the ground between Michael’s legs.

“Well, if you don’t like the way this group is run, you can consider yourself discharged as of now. Just say the word, and you can take your booze and go rot back at your hovertank, no strings attached. I don’t need your insubordination, and I don’t really need you. For all your tough talk, you’re not half the soldier Laurie is.” That was a low blow; he knew how much Milo loathed Laurie. “So is that it? Do you want out?”

Milo looked away, and remained silent.

“I thought not. So you watch yourself around here, Swift. I’m going to be keeping you in line from now on,” Austin vowed. “You better take a long hard look at the face in the mirror before you try anything, because I’ll bury you!” Michael reached to his side with fantastic agility, and had his pistol aimed between Swift’s eyes before Milo knew what was happening. “And I won’t be giving **you** speeches first!”

Michael holstered his weapon, and began to turn away. “Get Mason to clean you up; you need it.”

\* \* \*

“Oh, Milo!” Laurie moaned when she first saw him. “Can’t you stay out of trouble for even half a day? Never mind, I know the answer to that question.” Milo shifted uneasily under her gaze.

She made him sit on a folding stool and gave him a cursory examination. Laurie efficiently broke out her medical kit and popped it open. She took out what she thought she would need.

“Anything feel funny?”

“Well, my left shoulder was dislocated. But I banged it back into place an hour ago. Feels a little tight, though,” Milo confessed. Having shed his shirt, he looked at his bruises for the first time.

“What set you off this time?” Laurie inquired.

“The newest addition to our group.”

"I assume from the looks of things that the subject is closed," Laurie commented. She rubbed a scented balm on the shoulder. Milo clenched his teeth as the heat sank into him.

"Unless she gives me cause to open it up, blondie," Milo grumbled in discontent.

"Hmm. . . The eye looks bad. Your lid has swollen shut over it, but it will subside in time," Laurie decided.

"It'll go down even faster if you cut it," Milo said.

"Are you sure?"

"Do it."

Laurie complied. Her incision with the scalpel was delicate. Blood drained out and onto Milo's face. He dealt with the pain by grinding his teeth and clenching his fists; his knuckles were sheet-white. Some of his blood trickled into his mouth. Laurie cleaned up the wound.

"We're done here," she said, putting away her med-kit.

"See ya soon," Milo grumbled sarcastically.

"I sincerely hope not."

\* \* \*

Michael had found Lihra examining his Alpha from a distance. At first, he worried about her sabotaging the Veritech because her journey here had apparently been unsupervised. Michael was thinking of letting Jeanne have a piece of his mind about having let Lihra out of her sight. But Roger could be seen scurrying around Austin's plane from time to time and presently Jeanne appeared from behind it, so that particular fear had been alleviated. Besides, Roger would barely let Austin near the planes when he was working on them, much less Lihra.

Michael motioned her towards him. She came, after getting a nod of approval from Jeanne, who headed back to the hovertransport.

"How are you holding up?" he asked.

"Better, now that I've had a chance to get some air," she replied, turning back to look at the planes.

Michael smiled. "So, what do you think?"

"I have never been this close to one before. Especially when the pilot wasn't firing at me. This one," she indicated by pointing to Michael's blue Alpha, "is the one you found at the base in the mountains and repaired before my patrol could reach you. You cut my squadron to pieces then."

“That was your squadron?” Michael asked, surprised.

“I have known of your group for some time. I was piloting a - how do you call it - a Shock Trooper when our paths first crossed.”

Michael laughed. “This is just too good. Does Milo know that it was you he tried to run down with that truck?”

“He has told you about that?” Lihra asked, embarrassed. “No, and I do not think I will tell him. I was more foolish then. Foolish enough to hesitate. I could have killed him. I should have killed him. But something in his eyes made me afraid. And I ran, my task still incomplete.”

“Would you have preferred it if he had fired? You weren’t the only one that hesitated that day, if I remember the story correctly. Maybe if we all hesitated a little more often, and pulled the trigger a little less, there would be a lot less misery in the Galaxy.”

“Our people are merely defending our right to survive!” Lihra demanded.

“As are mine. That’s the problem.”

Lihra looked at him, puzzled. Michael nodded lightly, and continued.

“I know something of your history. No one can undo the crime committed by the Robotech Masters against your people. But my people shouldn’t be made to suffer for it. We were as much victims of the Robotech Masters as were you. But they’re gone now. Their civilization has collapsed and their empire has crumbled; why are **we** still fighting? Your people need the Flower of Life? Fine - you can have it. And you can grow it here on Earth and live among us for all I care. Isn’t there a better way to resolve this than fighting to the bitter end?”

Lihra didn’t know what to say, but she was sure of one thing: this human asked good questions, ones she had already begun to ask herself. *Perhaps mother will be better able to explain her decisions to me*, she thought.

\* \* \*

Cipolla had two men with him; the rest had circled around the rear of the abandoned and decrepit rail car. The journey had been long and arduous.

His twenty-man outfit had battled past a well-entrenched scavenger pack on the outskirts of London’s ruins. But the skirmish was not won without cost; he’d left two of his dead behind and granted the others only a moment’s silence to pay their respects to their fallen comrades. The detachment sent by Mecklenberg was reduced to eighteen.

“We set down here for the night. I want a two-man watch set up. London is full of dangers, especially when darkness descends. At oh-five-hundred hours, we will journey to the last known coordinates of our target and begin surveillance. Monitor all radio transmissions on 1090 kilohertz, and notify me if Austin contacts the continent or moves his men,” Cipolla ordered the pair of gruff soldiers before him. “You will be relieved in four hours.”

The rest of his men had each staked out a place to bed down for the night. One was still up, rummaging through his field pack looking for food. Cipolla looked out on the tattered skyline of this English city and poured some wine into his glass. From his vantage point, he could make out the burned-out Houses of Parliament, and its lone sentinel, the timeless clock tower that adjoined it. It saddened him in a way he had not felt in a very long time. He swallowed down a lump in his throat. His eyes looked wearily at the scene before him. *At least there are ruins here*, he thought. *In Sicily, there’s only the burnt ground. . .*

Cipolla remembered the last time he was here on an errand for the Count KönigsLöw. He was somewhat younger both in body and mind at that time. But as he looked at his face in the glass, he took into account how his tenure in Mecklenberg’s army had aged him. His beard was a fine salt and pepper adornment, now. The scar above his left eye was a painful reminder of the life he’d chosen and the master he’d followed. His hand traced over the scar tissue; if he could cry he would, but his eyes had seen too much to form tears. Instead he shut them.

*After this, I’m through. There is still a war to fight, but I’m sick of the fighting, of the killing. So much killing that I can’t remember a day passing by without hearing gunshots. No more! Up here, I’m just another nobody. I’ll perform my final mission for the Count; and then I’ll settle down on a farm somewhere up north and raise sheep, and watch the days roll by one after another. Maybe then I can find some peace.*

\* \* \*

Laurie took Michael by the hand, and dragged him to a secluded part of the camp. She hadn’t had much time to talk with him for several days, and was beginning to miss him. “So, I hear there was some excitement around here earlier,” she said, sitting down on a large stone.

“Excitement is hardly the word.” Michael reached for his chin, and began stroking his newly-grown beard. He wasn’t too keen on breaking his promise again and leaving Lihra with Jeanne, but Laurie was insistent.

“Are you all right?” Laurie asked, pulling him toward her.

“Nothing I won’t get over with a good night’s rest.”

“Michael, what’s going on? With us, I mean.”

“To be honest, I’ll be damned if I know. What do you think?”

“That’s just it. Mike, I’ve-”

Michael scowled. He hated to be called ‘Mike’ or ‘Mick’, and as far as he was concerned, ‘Mikey’ was a fighting word. Laurie was pretty good about remembering that, but still sometimes slipped up.

“Sorry: Michael, I’ve missed you. I mean, you’ve been around, but you haven’t. We haven’t made love in weeks. I can hardly get you to even hold me anymore. This isn’t what I was hoping for.”

“Laurie, I’m sorry, but you know how things have been for me. I talked with the Duchess von Schönberg yesterday; she tells me that her negotiators and those of her allies have finally agreed upon what my title and rank will be, assuming they can work out the other political kinks in the alliance. I’ll be known as the ‘Supreme Commander of the European Grand Alliance, Field Marshall Michael T. Austin’. Shit, Laurie, I’m only twenty-six bloody years old. I’m not ‘Field Marshall’ material, not yet at least. Get this: they’re already asking for my measurements so they can make me a suitably gaudy dress uniform for the upcoming conference in France. A damned dress uniform! I can’t even begin to imagine parading around France like some sort of modern-day Napoleon, getting cheers and flowers from adulating crowds. It’s just too absurd. But this isn’t military operations anymore; it’s politics. It’s just all too big for me.”

“You’re ducking the issue, Michael.”

“What would that issue be, then?”

“That maybe after this war we can get married and settle down, and make a commitment to do it now. I’m twenty-nine. I want to have a husband. I want to have children. And I’m not planning to just wait until you’re ready for it.”

“You already have a husband. . . and a daughter,” Michael asserted indifferently.

“You know?”

“Family portraits don’t lie. And there were a lot of them in Blake’s house, despite your attempts to hide them. You married Blake’s brother Richard. And you have a daughter-”

“Susan’s her name. I wish you could see her. She was so sweet and pretty. . .”

“What happened?”

“I woke up one morning, and Richard was gone; and he’d taken Susan with him. We were living with Richard’s and Blake’s parents at the time. Richard was a committed

pacifist; he thought that if we didn't resist the Invid, they'd leave us alone. That didn't go over well with Colonel Hammond or his Zentraedi wife. I think Richard was worried that the Invid or the Baron of Arnhem would find out how deep Joss's ties to the resistance and to Saxony were, and would have his parents, and his whole family, killed. And he wanted Susan as far away from that risk as possible."

"In a sense, his fears were justified. But why didn't he tell you?"

"I had already begun training in the simulator, on the rifle range, and as a field-nurse. I wanted to help fight the Invid; I guess I always have, but when von Schönberg's offensive ended up in total disaster, I knew that if we were to win this war, every single one of us would have to join the fight. And Richard couldn't understand, and he especially didn't want to deal with the fact that his pretty young wife was hell-bent on getting the skills she needed to help fight a war, a war he didn't endorse. I haven't seen my daughter in nearly three years. I don't know if she's even still alive."

"I wished you'd have told me earlier," Michael said.

"Why? I was only a girl then. Richard and I got married as kids, before Joss even moved his family to Germany. Besides, there's a lot you haven't told me about your life."

*Touché*, Michael thought. *Like the fact that somewhere on Tirol I have a son or daughter of my own.*

Laurie pulled Michael closer. "Michael, I don't want to be alone anymore. And I'm sick of your bullshit excuses."

"What is it you see in me, anyway?"

"A father for Susan, if I ever find her, and for the other kids we could have. This world's an empty place, Michael; it could use a few more children. I see someone I can grow old with. Someone I could love."

"I can't be the only candidate for that--"

"No; but if we win this war, things are going to be a lot different. People like me - we're just players. But your role in all of this is much, much bigger. Look at how the news of your arrival, of your command, has galvanized the furthest reaches of Europe, even these islands. Just like your father, you're one of those people that comes maybe once every several hundred years and single-handedly leaves history forever changed in his wake. And I'm afraid that if I'm not part of that, part of your. . . destiny, there won't be a place for me in the world anymore. I want to be part of the future you're going to help bring, and I want my children to be a part of it too."

"Laurie, I don't know what to say. You sure seem to see a lot farther than I do. My biggest concern is what's going to happen in the next few days - not the next few decades. There is just so much uncertainty in the future I see. Will I get the Zentraedi and



the Tirolians on board? Will we manage to work out the petty differences that are keeping the alliance from coming together? Will we beat the Invid at the Atlantis Hive? What then? Can we really hope to take on Reflex Point? There are just too many questions. And to be honest, I'm scared."

"Of what?"

"Of really falling in love with someone, and then losing her to this war. I've already lost the only two women I've ever truly loved that way, and I don't know if I could go through it again. I've made Jeanne accept that, though grudgingly, and I'm afraid you're going to have to accept it too."

"But it's different with us than with you and her. Or at least, I hope it is."

"Yes, it's different in the details of the relationship; she's always been like the kid sister I never got to have. But not in the general spirit, and not in the intensity of my feelings for the two of you. I absolutely adore you both. I would do anything in the world for either of you. But I just can't bring myself to make that final jump. Not under these circumstances. I hate to leave our relationship at an impasse like this, but I can't give you what you want."

"So is that it? Is it over between us?"

"I don't want it to be. Maybe we should give it a little more time. Listen, I promise to spend some time with you when we're up north negotiating with the Zentraedi. Maybe we'll get a room together, a candlelight dinner, the works. . ."

"Sorry, Michael," Laurie said. "That's just not good enough. You're just going to learn that you can't be my lover only when it's convenient for you."

Michael was left speechless. Vikki or Jeanne would never have told him off like that. He far was too used to people, women especially, being infinitely patient with him.

Laurie began to walk away, and said, "So are you just going to stand there and gawk, are you going to brief the others on this festival?"

\* \* \*

Michael had summoned his troops, and sat them around the campfire as they imbibed the ale Laurie had brought back with her. Even Lihra had some, and was already going back for seconds.

"So what's the deal, Michael?" Jeanne asked.

"Laurie, tell them," Michael said, smiling. The smile was a bit forced; he and his ego were still smarting from Laurie's comments earlier.

“Well, there’s a pan-Britannic May Day festival going on for the next week or so at Stonehenge. Since there’s no real large-scale government in the islands, the various town councils use it as an opportunity to meet, and people come to celebrate making it through the winter. We’re talking maybe twenty-thousand people or more in all at the thing. There’ll be more musicians than we can count, from all over: traditional Irish and Scottish music, English Rock and Roll, whatever turns people on. There’s a Shakespearean company putting on plays every night, and we can’t even begin to talk about the food that’ll be there!”

“Funny what happens when there’s no television anymore,” Roger teased. He was the only one who was old enough to really remember the heyday of the information age, before the Robotech Wars put an end to that.

“Roger’s right. It’s the way people have always built communities, and kept in touch, before electronics at least.” Michael added. “What’s more, a number of the mayors want to meet with me to see if there’s anything they can do to aid the continent’s efforts against the Invid. If we were just going to party, I’d have been against it. But since we can party and get some work done, too, I say we go, drink ourselves silly, and have a grand ol’ time.”

“Besides, Blake’s birthday is tomorrow,” Laurie added jovially, causing Blake to blush slightly. “He’s hitting the big one-eight. We’ve got to get him wasted and laid!”

“Hear, hear!” Jeanne added. The ale was already beginning to have its effect. Blake blushed, and glanced Jeanne’s way. Wasn’t her endorsement of Laurie’s bawdy suggestion a little hasty? Jeanne noticed the glance, and said, “Keep dreaming, kid.”

Michael tried to shout out when they were planning on leaving, but the burlesque had already begun, and he didn’t feel like being the bad guy and bringing them all back to the real world. Michael stood up, and began heading back to the hovertransport.

\* \* \*

A cool breeze tossed Roger’s unruly mop of hair about as he surveyed the festivities. Blake had set up a small stand, and was doing pencil sketches for whomever wanted a portrait. Several came as couples, others alone, but instantly, Blake’s drawings were a hit. Roger peered over the shoulders of a few satisfied customers, and he could easily see why. They were somewhere between very good and magnificent, and he tossed them off like an assembly line.

Roger smiled, and patted Blake on the shoulder. Blake looked up, and nodded. “I should bloody well start charging for this!” the boy insisted.

“Yeah, but who’d give money to a green-haired boy?” Roger teased. But it apparently didn’t bother the townsfolk. Zentraedi came and went among them frequently enough, and they were valuable trading partners in the north.

“Funny. So what are the others up to?”

“Listening to some of the musicians,” Roger insisted. “Jeanne and Lihra - uh, I mean ‘Linda’ - are rounding up some food for all of us, and we ought to join them before too long.”

Blake nodded. “All right, people, I’m closing down for now. I’ll be back up in a couple of hours.” A chorus of groans went up from some who had been waiting in the queue for a while, but Blake waved them on. He packed up his pencils and sketch pads, and followed Roger to the stage. Tonight’s fare was traditional Irish folk music, and Michael was particularly enthusiastic about that. In her younger years, as an aspiring amateur musician, Michael’s mother had tried to distance herself from her homeland - Americal Rock was where the action was - even going so far as to mostly replace her native accent with an American one. But after Michael was born, she finally conceded her debt to her homeland, and as a boy, Michael was lulled to sleep many a night by an old Irish ballad.

Jeanne and Lihra, or ‘Linda’, as everyone was calling her to avoid raising eyebrows, soon joined Roger and Blake, and handed them platefuls of food. Lihra was posing as Michael’s shy wife, the hope being that out of respect for Michael, she wouldn’t be questioned too intensely.

Jeanne arrived to where she’d left the others, and greeted Laurie with a smile and a plate. “So where’s Michael?” Jeanne asked.

Laurie pointed to the stage, and laughed. “The bloody fool is trying to dance! They dragged him up there as their ‘special guest’ and are now encouraging him to make a perfect ass of himself.”

Jeanne shook her head and laughed. “I’ve known Michael since I was twelve, and the one thing I know for certain is that he **doesn’t** dance!”

“What to you call that, then?” Laurie said, laughing.

Jeanne studied Michael’s movements, and the total lack of grace or agility therein, and replied, “About six shots of whiskey. If he remembers this, he’ll feel like a total idiot in the morning.”

Of course, Michael was not drunk. Tipsy perhaps, but certainly not drunk. He found himself caught up in the festive mood of the festival. All his life he’d lived in the fleet, among people of all nations and races, sharing a common purpose and culture. But here, for the first time, he was truly among his own people, his own kinsfolk. Aside from

the fame one of his more distant relatives had made for himself two centuries ago in his father's native Texas, Austin was a thoroughly English name, and he had met several others bearing that name tonight. His mother was a Flannagan by birth, a family well-represented in the Irish delegation, and he had a McCloud for a grandfather. And as much as he looked out of place, he felt at home. And the crowd was loving it; who can resist being charmed at seeing a total stranger having the time of his life?

\* \* \*

Things had eventually settled down, and Michael was sitting amongst the representatives of the various town councils of the island countries. He had already explained the situation on the continent to them, including the upcoming conference to seal the alliance among Saxony, Catalonia, Burgundy, and France. Another keg of beer had been tapped by now, and the daughter of one of the town mayors went cheerfully about, refilling mugs.

"Well, I've got to say I'm impressed with the spirit you people have managed to keep up here," Michael began, admiring the thick head of foam atop the amber liquid in his glass. "On the continent, they're so serious, it's absolutely dreary. So, once again, here's to the Isles!"

The others let out a raucous cheer, and raised their glasses.

"So what can we do to help?" one of the Scotsmen asked. "We in the Highlands canna' provide more than, say twenty-five hundred men, and we hana' many weapons than can fight the Invid."

The others seconded, and told Michael of their resources. In all, no more than seven thousand men could be mustered in the Isles.

"Well, troops aren't what we're looking for. Of course, I'm prepared to accept as many volunteers as we can arm and train in the time we have, and certainly your participation will be guaranteed in the future. But what I mainly need now are resources. We need beef and mutton, grain and potatoes, wool uniforms, tools, anything that might help keep this army well-fed, -clothed, and ready to fight. Ethanol is at a premium, so we need horses to draw supply wagons. The continental farms haven't done well the last couple of years, and things are just going to get worse with that plague about. And weapons. I know there are weapons caches all over these islands, and you can't hold out on us, however meager what you do have may seem. If you participate, your security will be guaranteed, on the assurance of the Duchess von Schönberg of Saxony. But this may

be our only chance at driving the Invid out of Europe, and we have to have everyone on board.”

“So what do we do now?” interjected one of the English delegates, from the Leicester area.

“Go back to your towns and see what you can reasonably offer. Then we need you to send three delegates, one from each of the three countries, to the conference in France I was talking about earlier. Everything will be hammered out there.”

There was some discussion among the delegates for a moment, then a general murmur of agreement. “Well, then, it’s settled. I suggest we all rejoin the party, before we’re missed!”

Michael stayed behind and continued personal discussions and conversations with the representatives for some time. But eventually, the last of them drifted away, and Michael was rejoined by Jeanne and Lihra.

“So how did it go?” the redheaded Ducasse asked.

“Better than I thought. They were all eager and willing to help, and I think we’ll really benefit from the exchange. All we need now is to find a guide to take us to the Zentraedi holdings up north-”

“Consider him found,” said a tall, aging man in a deep, gruff voice. “Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Mario Cipolla, and it’s a true pleasure to finally make your acquaintance, Commander Austin. . .”