

# Episode Thirteen:

## Zor's Orphans

Breetai:

[ . . . ]

*Still an unsettl'd feeling that doth o'erpower reason*

*Warneth me that for evil shall this war soon end.*

*Millions of innocents yet in death shall moan*

*Before in blood are our masters' sins atoned.*

The Tragedie of Zor, I. i., by Gemral, a Tirolian living on Earth, composed in 2093 for a high-school Shakespeare course.

*“For all the talk of the destruction of human culture and the loss of human life in the greatest battle of the First Robotech War, there is one single statistic that puts this into its proper perspective: of all human dead, 6.6 billion; of all Zentraedi dead, 19.3 billion. Truly this was the most royal company of death in all of history.”*

Christopher Owen Miller, The Longest Pop-Song, a history of the First Robotech War (named for the version of Minmei's “We Will Win” sung during the battle, which droned on a full 48 minutes).

15 April 2043

The distant report of a horse's whinny broke the silence of the camp not long after sunrise. Jeanne looked up for a moment, but quickly went back to fondling the bolt assembly on her assault rifle. She was coming to the end of a long watch, but she was too edgy to be tired. The scent of danger permeated the air, and she had resolved that she wouldn't be the one caught with her guard down.

She disassembled the bolt and sprayed each component with a cleaner before setting it on a clean sheet of ancient newspaper. Satisfied that each piece was now immaculate and completely functional (except for the firing pin, which was showing a little premature wear), she oiled each lightly and reassembled the bolt. Cleaning the gas tube and the barrel were less time-consuming, but she wished she'd had a boresight to

check for hairline cracks, just to be sure. Satisfied that she couldn't do any more today, Jeanne added a little more oil and reassembled the rifle.

Someone began to stir in one of the tents, fumbling around and making a general racket. Without even turning around to look, she determined that the ruckus was coming from where Michael and the Invid prisoner were camped. *Hmmm*, Jeanne mused. *So they're finally hungry enough get their tails out of bed.* Lt. Ducasse ignored the commotion, and replaced the batteries in the multi-spectrum optical sight attached to the firearm, before moving to check the grenade launcher mounted underneath the barrel. Everything, as far as she could tell, was in working order. Jeanne locked open the bolt, and inserted by hand what looked to be a hollow point 5.56mm NATO round, save for the power cord that ran to a small battery pack emerging from where the primer should have been. Jeanne pressed a button on the battery pack, and a green laser beam emerged from the barrel. She hoisted the rifle up into firing position, and painted a distant tree with both the scope's infra-red laser and the sight-zeroing laser emerging out of the bore. The scope's onboard computer began to align the scope's laser based on the relative position of the bore laser's reflection. Once this was finished, she removed the bullet-shaped laser in the chamber and closed the bolt. Jeanne repainted the tree, and the beam's reflection off the trunk now appeared as a small reticle electronically drawn on to her scope's field of view, adjusted for wind velocity and range. Jeanne smiled.

"Nice toy you have there," she heard Milo say from behind her.

"The best of German engineering," she replied. "With this self-correcting optics package, I could shoot a cigarette out of your mouth at three hundred yards in a gale-force wind."

"I'd love to try it out, darlin', but I'm down to my last pack. So, are you plannin' on doing target practice with this thing, or are you saving it for someone special?" Milo intoned.

Jeanne snorted. "So you don't trust him either?" she whispered, looking in the direction of Cipolla, who had just emerged from his tent.

"I never trust anyone that comes out of nowhere, smile on his face, promising to be the answer to all my troubles - if that's what you mean," Milo replied. "That man's bad seed. I can't prove it yet, but I will."

\* \* \*

Michael had assembled the group for breakfast, which mainly consisted of leftovers from last night's festival. Blake was absolutely gorging himself, and Laurie could

be heard to mutter something about “another of his damned growing spurts again” under her breath. Lihra was nibbling only lightly; she’d had far more ale than her system could handle the evening before, and if the camp had been equipped with a toilet, she would have spent the night praying over the porcelain altar of the lesser god of hangovers. Michael had reacted to her affliction with a blending of compassion and humor, and before long, the prisoner’s spirits had been lifted, even though her insides were still in knots.

The meal proceeded in a mixture of silence and soft private conversations, and when finished everyone turned to Michael, awaiting the day’s schedule.

“Well, it looks like Cipolla is going to lead us to the Zentraedi lands up north; he says he knows the country well.” Cipolla nodded in acknowledgment, and Michael continued. “I’m going to take Milo, Jeanne, and Linda,” he said, the last name referring to Lihra - no one dared let Cipolla know her true identity. “Laurie, Blake, and Roger - you can join us as soon as you’ve found a safe hiding place for the planes. We’ll radio you instructions when you’re ready.”

“Michael, can’t Milo stay in my place? I haven’t been able to spend any time with my mom in months; since just after dad died. Besides, you need my help; I speak Zentraedi!” Blake insisted, beaming with pride in what he supposed to be a unique skill.

“Zentran or Meltran dialect?” Michael asked, smiling. He, of course, spoke both, and Tiresian as well.

Blake blushed. “Uuh. . . I think it’s mostly Zentran they speak there, with a few Meltran idioms thrown in. It’s sort of a synthesis.”

“Well, we’ll need you to blend in. I’m afraid I’d sound stiff and formal, using the old ritual replies and all. You’re in the party. Milo, you stay with Roger. Rog, how long do you think it will take to finish servicing the planes?”

“A day, tops. Commander, I was asking around about battle sites at the festival, as usual, and someone mentioned the location of the wreckage of an old Southern Cross convoy that got ambushed during the Second Robotech War. I was hoping to check it out; maybe I can piece together a new plasma gun for the hovertransport’s turret. That should keep me only a couple more days.”

“Good idea. We could use the extra firepower,” Michael replied. “But don’t take too long.”

“And if you find a Garland you can fix up. . .” Jeanne began.

Roger nodded. Jeanne had given up hope of replacing her Cyclone, and really would have preferred the more formidable Southern Cross weapon system anyway, if one could be found.

Michael waited for any additional comments, and then continued. "Since we can't risk taking Cyclones and attracting the Invid, and since there aren't enough of them for all of us anyway, we'll be going by horseback. I talked to a local last night, and he was willing to donate four of his more. . . docile animals to our cause. Any questions before we set out? Okay, let's break camp. I want us out of here by oh-nine-thirty."

\* \* \*

Concealed by the heavy cloud cover, the early-spring sun had just reached its modest summit in the sky. But what warmth it could have provided was lost on the small caravan traveling north on the pock-surfaced remains of an English roadway. Drizzle had just begun to fall, and though it was yet far from being a shower, the potential for ill weather was becoming rapidly more evident.

Lihra found herself dozing off more and more frequently, lulled to sleep by the incessant rhythmic 'clop' of the horses' footfalls onto the hard broken concrete. Riding wasn't nearly as difficult as it had looked, especially since she was riding behind Michael on a strong-backed chestnut stallion, and since her companion was doing all the work. The horse was cooperative, but would occasionally give a snort of disapproval; Lihra sensed that he wanted to lighten his load a bit. She nuzzled her face into Michael's back and tightened her grip around his midsection as she drifted into and out of a light slumber, perusing his thoughts as they came to her, and occasionally exchanging silent telepathic comments with her captor. If Cipolla had wondered about her true place in the group before, he was surely convinced now; she put on the farce of the shy and dutiful wife even better than she could imagine, 'wife' being an alien concept for her. Jeanne edged her horse alongside Michael's and Lihra's, leaned over to the couple, and whispered somewhat indignantly, "Don't bury yourselves in the part!"

Occasionally Lihra's ears would perk up to the sparse conversation along the way. Michael and Cipolla had been trading stories for a while, and Jeanne offered her comments or elaboration on occasion. Mainly, Michael told a guarded account of their adventures since arriving on Earth (guarded from both Cipolla and Lihra). After a long pause, Michael asked, "So, what brings you up here anyway, Mario? It's a long way from Sicily."

"Employment. We mercenaries have to keep busy, and I needed to get away from the continent."

"A job go bad?" Jeanne asked.

“My employer was suddenly put out of business. Surely you’ve heard of him; the Count von KönigsLöw of Mecklenburg.” Jeanne started, and noting her reaction, Cipolla added: “Don’t look so surprised, Miss Ducasse. Your friend Michael already knows. He has already sent an inquiry to Saxony about me.”

“And they told me you’re a mercenary to the core,” Michael mused. “The Duchess’ Intelligence Minister was rather unflattering.”

“You see, Miss Ducasse,” Cipolla lectured, “people like me don’t fight for country or cause. We fight for our employer. As long as we are being paid well, we remain loyal to our employer. That’s our code. When the well dries up. . .”

“You change sides?” Jeanne demanded incredulously.

“It’s not all that strange. Ask your Mr. Swift. He was a mercenary, and a famous one at that. He worked for Saxony, and for a while, even the Invid-supported regimes in Rome and Hungary.” Cipolla laughed slightly. “Yes, I knew of him too. A good mercenary develops quite a reputation.”

“Well, the gold I’ve put in your pocket should keep you loyal,” Michael added, and turned to Jeanne. “He won’t cheat a client; it’ll ruin his reputation and make him unmarketable.”

Cipolla laughed, and reigned his horse off the broken road to a stop. “I suppose here is as good a place as any to rest our horses and make lunch.”

Michael followed, and dismounted. “It’s my turn to cook. Jeanne, I could use some firewood. Linda, why don’t you and Blake take the horses to graze?”

Lihra smiled, and took hold of the reins, and the pair wandered off to a nearby meadow.

“Beautiful wife you’ve got there,” Cipolla said after Lihra was out of earshot.

“Huh? Oh, yeah. She’s great, isn’t she?” Michael replied. He still wasn’t used to the lie, but was playing it well.

“Where did you meet her?”

“Would you believe me if I told you she dropped out of Heaven?” Michael said, laughing.

Mario smiled. “To be married to an angel. . .”, the Sicilian mused. He extracted a cigarette from a pack in his pocket, and lit it up with a match. “What about Jeanne? I was always partial to French women.”

Michael coughed slightly. He didn’t want Cipolla to get any ideas. “Oh, she’s got a fiancé back on Tirol. He’s a Marine Colonel, Special Ops.” *That ought to keep him from trying anything*, he thought. *I suppose I ought to tell Jeanne of her new fictitious intended, to keep our stories straight.*

“A pity.” Mario took a drag on the cigarette, and said, “How long have you been a soldier, Commander Austin?”

“Please, Mario, call me ‘Michael’. I got my commission back in November of ‘37, so that means I’ve been flying combat for a little over five years. I only started to see real action in ‘39, though. And you? How long have you been a . . . soldier of fortune?”

“As long as I can remember, Michael,” Mario mused. “I think I was thirteen, in the burned-out slums of Rome with thousands of other refugees from the parts of Italy the Zentraedi incinerated, and a local strongman was looking for some muscle against his rivals. I signed aboard, and by sixteen, I was commanding a ‘technical’ platoon - ten jeeps with light artillery or heavy machine guns mounted to them. Fighting is all I’ve known for three decades, my friend. It has taken me from nowhere to a presidential palace in the east, and back again. A soldier of fortune, indeed! Fortune is a fickle goddess, I have learned. Seduced, you embrace her, and she spurns you. You turn your back on her and rely on your own devices, and suddenly she seduces you again. So, Commander, why are **you** a soldier? Do you do it for the fame, for the glory, for the power? Do you fight for king and country?”

“My father was a pilot. A really good one. I’m sure you’ve heard of him. Thomas Austin?”

“Yes indeed! A truly great soldier, from what I’ve read. Fought off a Zentraedi vessel with only one squadron and some drones. So it’s your father’s memory for which you fight?”

“I fight so I’ll never have to fight again. That’s why my father fought, and why he died. He kept hoping that the next war will be the one to end all wars. I just try to keep his hope alive.”

“You’ll forgive me if I hope your wish does not come true until I am quite a rich man, and am ready to retire!” Cipolla said, laughing.

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Milo watched the scenery roll by on the look-down TV cameras on the Alpha fighter, displayed on his cockpit’s center color LCD. Normally used to scan for or acquire targets on the ground without having to put the plane into a dive (depending on whether the cameras are set in wide-angle or zoom mode), on a more routine flight, they were also excellent for a purpose no more tactical than a spectacular view.

“How are you doing, Milo?” Laurie asked over the headset radio. Her plane was leading his by several hundred meters, both of them skirting the ground at a mere five hundred meter altitude.

“I’ll survive,” Milo replied curtly. Letting her know that for once he was enjoying himself in the pilot’s seat of an aircraft was, of course, out of the question.

Laurie acknowledged Milo’s response, and added, “We’re about five clicks away from where Roger had wanted to hide the planes, and Roger should be meeting us in thirty minutes. Cut your throttle and prepare for a vertical landing.”

“Copy that.” Milo reduced his engine’s thrust, and returned to his panoramic view of the terrain below. “Not that I care all that much, Mason, but you’ve been more quiet than usual. What’s on your mind?”

“Same as on yours, for different reasons,” Laurie replied curtly.

Milo laughed brusquely. “Yeah. That’s Michael. Can’t live with him, can’t beat him senseless - that I know from personal experience. So, did he finally cut it off between you two?”

“What? You knew?”

“Darlin’, that wasn’t too hard to figure out. I’m surprised Jeanne doesn’t do more than just suspect, but she does suspect.”

Laurie snorted in annoyance. “Well, that’s just perfect.”

“You weren’t expecting too much privacy in a group as small as ours, were you? If you ask me-”

“Which I didn’t,” Laurie interjected as she spotted the landing site.

“-yours and Michael’s little dalliance has been a total disaster for the team. Next to that green-blooded bitch’s arrival, it’s been the worst thing for morale we’ve had around here.”

“Good to hear I have your approval. I’ll remember to seek your permission next time I-” Laurie looked down at a flashing indicator. “What in heaven’s name?”

“What?” Milo demanded.

“I thought I saw a blip on my screen - on the look-down radar. A large ground target, shadowing us. And then it vanished.”

“Could it be the hovertransport? Roger should be close behind us.”

“Yeah, but he had to take a more circuitous route. . .” Laurie stared in puzzlement at the screen. “Yeah, I guess it had to be Roger. I’ve gotten really bloody jumpy these days.”

“I don’t like it. We should check it out,” Milo grumbled. “If we’re being followed-”

“Negative, Swift!” Laurie replied. “Our primary duty is to hide these fighters. We can’t go around checking out every anomalous radar blip. Lower throttle and prepare for a landing.”

\* \* \*

The heavily armored *Gamo* set down in the midst of a recent battlefield, its escort of *Gurabs* and *Igaas* milling about, looking to identify the scattered bits of charred and twisted wreckage. It wasn’t long before the pilot of the *Gamo* found what he was looking for.

*Here it is*, Kharoth thought pensively. He found himself gazing upon the hulk of the *Gosu* previously piloted by his humanoid sibling Lihra. Damaged well beyond salvage, it sported a missing arm, and there were severe plasma burns all over the frontal armor, in addition to scores of shell-holes. The cockpit looked no better; panels and controls were twisted and shattered, and green blood, now frozen, was liberally splattered all over the seat and consoles.

Kharoth examined the area around the crash site. There were signs of a colossal struggle, presumably the one that had led to Lihra’s defeat. There was no sign of a grave for her anywhere nearby, and her body was nowhere to be found.

Kharoth summoned his will, and sent forth a call to his mother. *Regis, I have found Lihra’s Gosu. It has been destroyed, but she is nowhere to be found. Her capture by the human rebels is now confirmed. What are your orders?*

Kharoth waited for but a moment, and heard the thoughts of the Invid queen-mother reply, *Her return is of the utmost import! No other queen-dauphine has ever had such a unique bond with the Flower, none other has been able to transmute successfully so much of the Royal Jelly. Without her, the hopes of the Invid race are again in doubt. My reign is coming to an end, and we must secure our new home from our enemies before I pass my dfinar into the next Regis. But without Lihra, can there be any future for us? Return to the hive on the ocean immediately - I shall make you my chief lieutenant until Lihra can be found!*

*I hear and obey, my queen*, Kharoth thought in reply.

\* \* \*



“Where the hell do you think you’re going,” Laurie demanded of Milo, who was busy hauling his Cyclone out of the hovertransport’s storage compartment. “You’re supposed to help me move the last two fighters.”

“You can do it; it’s just one extra trip. I’m going to go and notify Michael about the radar shadow. I don’t dare do it over the radio, because if someone is tailing us, you can bet they’ll be listening in.”

“Milo, you’re under orders-” Pike began.

“And don’t make me violate another by ordering me not to go, Roger. I’ve got a feeling we’re headed for big trouble. . .”

“Okay,” Roger began. “Go. But find a jeep or truck or something and transfer to it as soon as possible - we can’t have the Invid tracing your Cyclone’s protoculture emissions.”

Milo nodded, tossed on a backpack filled with gear and rations, and sped off, leaving Roger and Laurie with nothing to do but watch.

“What are you thinking, Roger?” Laurie demanded. “Letting him go just added another day to our schedule. We needed him for the Alpha transfer, as well as helping at the battle site.”

“Milo’s instincts told him to leave. And I’ve learned to trust his instincts,” Roger replied. “And while you’re up there transferring the last two planes, I want you to follow up any targets you see, even if you think they’re spurious. The exercise of hiding the Alphas is worthless if someone knows where we’ve moved them to. That **is** an order.”

\* \* \*

“What the hell?” Michael asked out loud, as he heard a motorcycle engine approaching at high velocity. A pair of close lights illuminated the dusty broken road, coming to a screeching halt at the group’s camp. A tall figure sporting a heavy overcoat stepped off the Cyclone, and began to amble ominously toward the group. Michael stood up from his seat around the campfire, brushed the dust off his tail, and snorted in annoyance.

“Jesus, Milo,” Michael began, hands at his hips. “It was a little order. It wasn’t much to ask, was it? Help Laurie transfer the planes. Avoid using the Cyclones. Was I asking too much of you, Private?”

“Yeah, yeah. Want to demote me?” Milo replied with a sneer. “Boss, we need to talk. Privately.”

Michael nodded, and wandered off in the direction of the tree-line, Milo following close behind.

“Are the two of them always like this, Miss Ducasse?” Cipolla asked Jeanne, shaking his head at the spectacle.

“Oh, it’s as regular as clockwork, right Linda?”

Lihra, staring intently at the flickering tongues of orange light in the fire, found herself startled at the invocation of her pseudonym. “Oh, yes,” she began demurely. “They’ve been fighting for as long as I’ve known them.”

Michael turned back to look at the rest of the group as Milo stuck his hands in his pockets to look for his lighter, and his last cigarette.

“Okay, Swift, we all know you’re insubordinate, but you’re not the sort to have driven up here in such a rush unless you felt it was really important. So what’s the big damned deal?” Michael demanded.

“Laurie and I were transferring the first two planes earlier today, and just before we were about to set down, we saw a blip on the look-down radar. It wasn’t long before it vanished, but it was there. We were being followed.”

“Are you sure it wasn’t the transport?” Michael demanded, nearing the end of his patience.

“Absolutely. I checked with Roger about his route when he met us. He was at least five kilometers away from where we saw the target at the time. I considered radioing you-”

“Well, if you are right, I’m glad you didn’t. Okay, you’re off the hook this time. How were they coming along with the transfer?”

“Well, they should be moving the last plane right about now. But I’m not too sure about the site they’ve chosen. I’m afraid it might have been compromised.”

“Well, I’ll consider sending Jeanne back in the morning to help them relocate the planes again. I’d be more confident having her there in case they need to take them up in a fight.”

“Good thinking, Austin. Though by the time she gets there, Roger and Laurie will probably already be looking into that battle-site Roger wanted to scavenge at.”

“You have the coordinates?”

“Yeah. I can give ‘em to Jeanne. . .”

“Like I said, I haven’t decided to send her, or to send you back. I’ll let you know in the morning.”

“Whatever.”

“You eaten yet? We’re just about to have a bite.”

“I chomped on an MRE on the way, but I could stand a little more.”

“Well, come on, then.”

\* \* \*

The last Alpha fighter streaked through the night sky, hugging the ground closely, towards the site Roger had chosen to conceal the fighters. The other three were already perched there, and Roger was on scene, finishing up the camouflage.

Mason grumbled quietly as she contemplated Milo’s hasty departure earlier. The extra work load placed upon her and Roger’s shoulders - not just for today, but for the next several, with two fewer hands to help Roger scavenge - had put her into a foul mood she was in no rush to get out of.

*Irresponsible, inconsiderate, hot-headed. . . jerk!* Laurie called him in her mind. She frowned; she was running out of fresh epithets, and that concerned her. Soon she’d find herself blowing the whole thing off, and that was the last thing she wanted - deep inside, she wanted to stay furious. *Him and his goddamn wild goose chases! There’s no one following-*

Laurie’s eyes were distracted by a warning alarm on the plane’s main console. Her plane had been acquired by an IR laser paint, and was being tracked as it flew through the sky.

“What the hell?” she muttered incredulously, checking her instruments again to see if she hadn’t been mistaken. She soon convinced herself that she was not.

*Alright, let’s see what this Wild Weasel Alpha can do!* she thought excitedly. As Jeanne had been assigned this plane after it was stolen from Snoek in Arnhem, Laurie hadn’t the chance to test out the green VAF-6R’s extensive and powerful reconnaissance and anti-radiation sensor suite yet. She punched up the countermeasures program, and all her plane’s sensors immediately went to work determining the source of the paint. It didn’t take too long before both the telescopic night-vision optics and the millimetric imaging radar had tracked down the offending vehicle. It was a flat-bed truck of some sort, following her as fast as it could considering the rough terrain. Six men were seated on the bed of the truck, while two more were working at some sort of communications set, and another was painting her plane with a hand-held laser. Even though she was puttering along at a mere two hundred knots, she realized that it could not have been following her long to be as close as it was. She could only surmise that it had been waiting for her, probably to get a better fix on where she was going; to where the other planes were hidden. *Scavengers?* she wondered. The laser that was painting her was

switched off, and the man who had acquired her plane - himself wearing a set of nightvision goggles it seemed, turned to say something to his comrades at the communication set and began to speak into it. She could destroy them at any time, in any number of ways. But she was waiting for something special.

“Come on, boys!” Laurie said under her breath. “Light up that antenna,” she dared, smiling as she set her missiles’ tracking on anti-radiation mode.

\* \* \*

Lihra found herself alone with Cipolla at the dwindling campfire as Jeanne and Milo had followed Michael off to the outskirts of the camp to discuss his plans for tomorrow. The evening fire was dying, and the cold night’s bite was beginning to creep into everyone’s flesh.

“So, Linda,” Cipolla began, looking into the smoldering coals and tossing several branches onto the fire. “How long have you known Michael?” *If she’s his wife*, Cipolla reasoned, *then she’s the best person to get information about his habits and vulnerabilities. But I have to be patient.*

Lihra was startled. She wasn’t expecting to answer too many questions yet, and felt she knew too little about humans to string together a coherent story.

“Since early. . . autumn,” she answered truthfully. She had a fair command of the humans’ language, but many concepts were still strange - such as their names for the lunar cycles, their quadrantal divisions, and the annual seasons - and she tried to mask it by appearing to be, as Michael had described the appropriate behavior, shy. “We met in the. . . Alps.”

“Really? I’ve been hearing about Commander Austin’s group for some time, and I don’t remember any mention of you,” Cipolla replied.

“I don’t know how to pilot any of their mecha,” Lihra replied, again, accurately. “I have been following a little behind them since Michael and I met, and only joined them when we reached the island.” *A lie is not so hard*, Lihra mused, *when it can be constructed from the truth. Still. . .* “You were a mercenary?” she asked him, trying to turn the conversation away from her.

“Yes; and still am. It’s a living.”

“Who have you worked for, Mister Cipolla?”

“Please, Linda, call me Mario. Well, I have worked for many people in my many years. As fortunes turn this way or that, so does my search for an employer. I have worked for Saxony and Catalonia on the pro-resistance side, many years ago, before the

disastrous defeat of the Duke's armies. And I have worked for Rimmmler in Munich and von KönigsLöw in Mecklenberg, both of whom receive a lot of their power from their alliance with the Invid. But with Mecklenberg and Rimmmler gone, I'm running out of clients on that side of the fence. Since I'm a wanted man in Hungary, for unrelated reasons, I can't find work there. So here I find myself, in the employ of a former enemy." Cipolla was telling the truth as well, in a sense, given that Saxony, his former employer, was indeed the enemy of his true current one, Mecklenburg.

*He has worked for our allies in the past, Lihra pondered. Perhaps he can be lured into our service again, to help free me from these humans. What could I promise him that would turn his allegiance from Austin? Perhaps a realm of his own? But would he turn me in to Austin? He spoke of a mercenary's code not to betray his employer. And would he even believe that I am an Invid? If he did, would he attack me, as Swift did? No, it is too soon to try to enlist this one. I will observe him further.*

Cipolla saw that Lihra was deep in thought, and took it as an opportunity to change the subject away from himself - he was as uncomfortable with his lies as Lihra was with hers. "So, Mrs. Austin, when did you and Michael finally marry? It doesn't seem there would be time for that sort of thing with his involvement on the resistance movement and all."

Lihra was pinned - and she was forced to call for help, telepathically asking Michael for an acceptable response to the question. "Just this March. It's not really the honeymoon I had dreamed of, but with the war on and all. . ." she replied, echoing the answer Michael's thoughts had supplied her. "It was sort of a strange engagement, but it's just one of those things-"

Cipolla smiled, and stood up, quite suddenly in Lihra's opinion. "Well, there's plenty of time to tell me all about it. If you'll excuse me, I'd like to turn in for the night. Good evening, Linda." Cipolla turned away, and began to head for his tent.

*What a strange exit, Lihra noted. But I don't think I could have answered his questions for much longer. If they are to take me into the Zentraedi lands, then I must make certain I understand my role better, in case others pry like this one has.*

Upon entering his tent, Mario looked over his shoulder to see if anyone was within earshot. Convinced that he was out of range of both the woman and the group of soldiers, he pulled a pocket-sized field radio from his jacket's inner breast pocket - it was still vibrating its silent ring by the time he was his tent, and he terminated the silent ring by opening the flip-down handset.

"Status?" he inquired quietly in Italian.

“Commander Cipolla, we currently triangulating our telemetry from the rebels’ planes. Our computer is calculating the most probable location for their fighter craft. We are ready to move in and take possession at your command,” was his lieutenant’s reply

“Excellent. Where is the hovertransport?”

\* \* \*

Milo walked away from the conference relieved that Austin was absolving him of the responsibility of returning to aid Laurie and Roger, and was sending Jeanne instead. He was certain that the two of them would spend more of their time berating him for his hasty departure than the work, and he was looking forward more to seeing the Zentraedi city than scrounging a battlesite for parts again. Sending Jeanne back was the better choice all around, and he was glad Michael had finally come around to it.

As Milo skulked around the camp with his usual indifference to the ravages of weather, he watched from afar as Michael and Jeanne rejoined the Invid prisoner at the fire, which she and the Sicilian mercenary had stoked minutes before during their conversation. *I wonder what that alien bitch and Cipolla were cooking up*, he mused, having watched their discussion from afar.

Milo was about to join them to pick apart the left-overs when an indistinct mumbling from Cipolla’s tent caught his ear. *More importantly, what’s that crooked bastard is up to now?* he thought. Swift stealthily crept to the exterior of the tent, hand at the ready by his holster. Cipolla seemed to be having a one-way conversation - meaning that he was probably on a radio.

*Damn*, he thought as he recognized the language as Italian. It had been years since Milo had worked in Italy, and he’d never really mastered the language.

*Something about following someone*, he thought, trying to decipher the muted, rapid, and partially coded speech. *Blast! I should be able to make this out!*

\* \* \*

Just as the flatbed had disappeared over her horizon, Laurie released her weapons safeties, and gunned the Alpha’s engines, pulling up into a steep climb, rolling at two thousand meters and bringing the target into her arc of fire. *Okay, Hammerheads, follow that radio transmission*, she told her missiles. For their part, the weapons were only listening to the telemetry being relayed from the Alpha’s anti-radiation targeting program.

“Hello, boys,” Laurie laughed as she fired a salvo of four hammerheads at the flatbed’s communications set. “This is going to put new meaning into ‘tracing a phone call’!”

\* \* \*

“Damnit, come again, Remora One, this is Shark.” Cipolla swore. Just before his men were to relay him the coordinates of the fighters’ location, their signal had been suddenly interrupted. *What could have happened?* he wondered. The transmitter his men were using was notorious for breaking down, and the decrepit satellite that had somehow managed to survive the Robotech Wars they were using to bounce the signals off of was none too reliable itself.

Cipolla put the handset away, and began to get ready for bed. *Well, if it’s serious, I’ll know soon enough. If not, they’ll resume contact as soon as they can.*

\* \* \*

Milo had gotten up early, to help see Jeanne off. She would be taking his Cyclone back to Laurie’s and Roger’s location. Jeanne was bundling up for the chilly ride to the south, and was none too excited to be left out of the trip to the Zentraedi settlement.

“Well, try to look on the bright side,” Milo suggested.

“There is no bright side. We’re in England and it’s raining. I was hoping for a little taste of the comforts of civilization. Is that unreasonable?”

“We’ll keep a light on for you,” Milo joked. “Well, I’ll let you get started,” he said, before ambling off toward the camp. Michael and Cipolla were soon there, to see her off.

“All ready, Jeanne?” Michael asked.

“Yeah. I’m just about to set off,” Jeanne replied, putting on her riding gloves. “Want me to keep in radio contact?”

“That’s probably a good idea; though we need to code our transmissions, just in case we’re being monitored, and we don’t have encryptors on us. Any suggestions? I’d suggest Tiresian, but that’s not altogether unknown in these parts.”

“Yeah,” Jeanne suggested, looking up from the Cyclone. “How’s your D’zrouñk?” she asked.

“What’s that?” Cipolla asked, having listened in on the conversation.

“The international language on Karbarra,” Michael replied, turning to Cipolla. “Sort of like English became on Earth. The Karbarrans are sort of like Earth’s. . . bears, with mushroom-shaped horns on their heads. They were our allies during our fight against the Invid in deep space.”

Jeanne nodded. “Even the Zentraedi and Tirolians never bothered to learn it, so anyone within sixteen hundred parsecs that tries to eavesdrop on us will probably think we’re just growling playfully at each other. Think you can manage it, Commander?”

“I’m pretty rusty, and I never was as good at those tri-tonal vowels as you were, so try to make the context as clear as you can. I remember the last time I misspoke gr<sup>i</sup>r<sub>o</sub>wk as gr<sub>i</sub>rowk in public and got a paw across my face for it.”

“Well, that **was** a pretty serious faux-pas,” Jeanne lamely punned. Cipolla, of course, stood in silent incomprehension. “I’ll see you in a few days, Michael. Drrzer<sub>u</sub>m grr<sup>å</sup>k!”

Michael shook his head, smiled, and walked away to join Milo at the morning fire, mumbling, “Either she just wished me farewell, or my teeth are turning purple.”

Now only Cipolla remained behind, as Jeanne finished her final preparations to leave. “Well, I’m disappointed that you will be delayed in joining us in Ohlfantoma, Miss Ducasse.”

“Hopefully, I’ll be there soon,” she replied disinterestedly. “As soon as we get done at the wreckage site,” she added, checking to see that the cargo boxes on Milo’s cyclone were securely fastened to the motorcycle. The stranger made her nervous, and she couldn’t wait to put some distance between herself and Cipolla.

“Would it be forward of me to ask you to join me for dinner when you arrive?” he asked in as silver a tongue he could manage.

“Yes, it would, Mr. Cipolla. Good day,” she answered with a cold mechanical precision, gunning the Cyclone’s engine and driving away.

\* \* \*

“Would you look at that!” Milo exclaimed, as he observed the stern of the *Nupetiet-Vergnitzs*-class Zentraedi flagship looming a mile and a half into the sky, leaning at a shallow pitch from a pure vertical.

“Wow,” Michael understated, bringing his horse to a halt, and reaching for his binoculars. “That **is** impressive. It looks like the first fifteen hundred meters buried itself into the bedrock. Damn, those Zentraedi had tough ships. I’d heard about all the ones that



crashed to Earth, but I thought the UEG had systematically demolished all of them in the teens and early twenties.”

Cipolla nodded. “They did - all but a few. A nuke here, a nuke there, and down the towering wrecks came. All in the interest of ‘planetary security’. I suppose I understand the reasons, but still, the half-buried Zentraedi warship sticking a kilometer or more into the sky was as much a symbol of the reconstruction as anything else. I remember the years after the Holocaust; they were everywhere.”

“So why did this one get spared?” Michael asked.

“Friends in high places,” Blake interjected. “Grondahl, the ship’s commander, was trained by Breetai and remained loyal to him throughout the battle, even though he was attached to Dolza’s Grand Fleet. Many of his crew managed to survive the wreck, and turned the place into a refuge for Zentraedi who survived the battle from both sides. They agreed to all be micronized, on the condition that their ship be allowed to remain, and they began to gut it to provide the raw materials for their new city. There were some tense times with the Southern Cross High Command, but the Zentraedi kept a low profile, and went unmolested.”

Michael handed his binoculars to Lihra, and turned to Blake. “So, when was the last time you visited home, Blake?”

“Too long. Mom and Dad spent most of their lives in Manchester, and then Bonn-Remagen. I haven’t been here since just before the Invid invasion.”

The group rode on for several more miles, until they began to pass the first perimeter checkpoints of the Zentraedi town. Their militia was out in force, and though generally courteous, cast a watchful eye toward anyone approaching Zentraedi-controlled lands. The edge of town itself was only a few miles off, and as they approached it, the group found that the entire settlement was surrounded by what appeared to be an electrified fence, the gate being denoted by a large sign straddling the road over a final checkpoint, spelling out in large block print in both English and Zentraedi, “Welcome to Ohlfantoma”, with the same message apparently repeated in hundreds of languages, both Terran and alien, in tiny multicolored print surrounding the two larger renderings. Immediately behind the large and well-crafted sign, looming up into the sky - almost touching heaven - was the wreck of the Zentraedi ship, low clouds obscuring the engine section looming a mile into the air.

Michael laughed aloud, to the surprise of his fellows. “Someone here knows his myth. ‘Fanto’ was the chief god of the Ein’liba - they were a classical Tirolian civilization; sort of like the Romans were to us, and Tiresian and hence Zentraedi have a lot of words made from Ein’liba roots in it. ‘Ohlfantoma’ is Ein’liba for ‘Gate of God’.”

Blank stares greeted Michael's explanation. "In Akkadian, 'Gate of God' is 'bab-ilu' . . . **Babylon**. Behold the tower of Babel!" Michael cheered, pointing with both hands up to the fortress.

The blank stares were immediately exchanged for indifferent ones, and Blake went so far as to outright roll his eyes. "Bunch of damned cultural illiterates," Michael grumbled audibly. "Well, **I** thought it was funny. . ." Disgusted, Michael moved his horse ahead of the group and stopped at the gate under the sign, saluting in Zentraedi idiom. The sentries stood at attention as he approached, barking at them with ritual perfection in their native tongue, "Greetings and salutations. I come as a comrade-in-arms. Take me to your commander!"

The senior Zentraedi guard glared at him for an awkward moment, and burst into a belly-laugh, reaching out to shake Michael's hand. "From a Micronian I have never heard a better and more old-fashioned greeting. I presume you would be Commander Austin? Come, friend; you have been expected."

\*       \*       \*

After a brief journey by jeep (their horses being stabled at the entrance to town by the Zentraedi guards), the quintet of travelers were quickly ushered to the town hall, built near the base of the warship that formed the main landmark of the entire region. The trip from the edge of town was short and uneventful, but afforded the visitors a quick view of the main thoroughfare of the settlement. The streets were clean and uncluttered, and the main road was populated by numerous pedestrians and more than a few battery-powered vehicles, and rows of vibrant stores and busy shops lined both sides of the road. Near the center of town was a large and crowded open-air market, in which Zentraedi and human haggled for goods and services.

"Business has been good?" Michael asked the jeep's driver.

"Excellent, recently. Times were tough during the early years of the occupation, but the customers are slowly coming back. We've been able to build a city all Zentraedi can be proud of."

Michael smiled. "It's nice to see that the Zentraedi have become something more than soldiers. Back at Tirol, the Zentraedi Corps forms one of the most elite fighting units the Sentinels alliance has. But there's never really been any desire among them to give up battle."

“We still go to battle, after a fashion, Commander Austin,” the Zentraedi replied with good-humored smugness. “We have just tried to turn our struggles toward more productive ends.”

In moments, the vehicle pulled to a stop in front of an unassuming office building some five stories high. Only a small placard near the door revealed it to be the city hall and mayoral office. The building’s architecture was a quaint fusion of Georgian and modern forms - with certain hints of an innovation sprung from an architect with no native tradition of his own to inspire him. Michael’s group was escorted up a small flight of steps into the building, where they were greeted by several middle-aged Zentraedi men and women.

“Councilman Dortal Kravshera, at your service,” said one blue-haired man as he vigorously shook Michael’s hand. The man had a certain aristocratic air about him that reminded Michael of another Zentraedi, someone he’d seen in the history books. He racked his brain for several moments, until Dortal noticed his expression and smiled. “That’s right. Khyron and I were of the same clone series. I guess that answers the ‘nature’ versus ‘nurture’ argument, eh?” he laughed, slapping Michael on the back.

“Michael Austin. . . but I suppose you already knew that,” Michael answered with an uncomfortable smile.

Another man bowed deeply. “Utema Forman, good to meet you.”

Michael continued to accept the greetings and introductions from the Zentraedi city council members, who also showed the same hospitality to the others in Michael’s party.

“Commander Austin,” Dortal said after the initial round of small talk and greetings had concluded, “Mayor Grondahl is looking forward to seeing you. He’s in his office with Mrs. Paarino-Hammond right now; I’ll take you up to them.”

*Paarino-Hammond?* Michael mused. *That would be Blake’s mother. He never mentioned she was a Paarino. . . or did he?* Michael was uncertain how to treat the news. Clones in the same series were far closer in their genes than fraternal twins, but weren’t quite identical. Among the Zentraedi, there had been about a hundred truly distinguished clone series, and of them Paarino was the cream of the crop. Michael knew, of course, the most famous (or infamous) of them, Miriya Paarino-Sterling; she and her husband Max had practically raised him as one of their own after Michael’s mother had died. He grew up in the same house as their younger daughter Dawn (she preferred any but her closest confidants to call her by the Latin equivalent, Aurora), Michael’s junior by thirteen years, and, for the last three years that he lived in the Sterling household, with the Sterlings’ eldest, Dana - an accomplished fighter in her own right from the Southern Cross who had

returned to Tirol after the defeat of the Robotech Masters, and four years Michael's senior. But these fond memories of his adoptive home and his surrogate mother Miriya were not what was foremost in his mind.

*I wonder how much she'll look like. . . Meliana.* The micronized Zentraedi assassin sent to track him down when he crash-landed on Dahlori-4 what seemed like a lifetime or two ago. The assassin who hunted him, who tracked him like an animal while he cleaned his wounds at a river, the woman who had fallen under the spell of his song, as Zentraedi are prone to do. The woman he seduced and cynically exploited to save his ass and get him off the planet. The woman who discovered her own humanity by falling in love with him. The woman that had thrown her body - her **life** - into searing plasma fire from a Bioroid skysled's guns to save his. *It hasn't been long enough*, he thought. *I can't let that get to me, not now!*

Michael was relieved when he entered the mayor's office. Michael could see only a little of Meliana in Blake's mother - her middle-aged beauty and short hair was far more reminiscent of the matron of the family that took him in than the ghost that haunted his memory.

Querennina Paarino-Hammond rose to greet and introduce herself to the newcomers, while a gaunt man with thinning white hair who appeared to be in his fifties remained seated behind his desk.

"Mom!" Blake shouted, charging toward the Zentraedi woman, who caught her son in a firm embrace.

"Blake, it's so good to see you again." Querennina kissed her son on the cheek, and then released him from the embrace. "I'm so glad you got away from Bonn. When I heard that the place had been attacked by your father's killer, I . . ."

"No need to worry about him, ma'am," Milo interjected. "Commander Austin here saw to that."

"I am grateful to all of you, for protecting my son and for avenging my husband. The urgency to rebuild that which was broken by his death forced me to return here suddenly, and I regret being forced to have left Blake behind. I hope he wasn't too much trouble to you all." Michael shook his head, smiling. "Good. Ladies and gentlemen, may I introduce Grondahl Regrel Tul, formerly of the 103,142nd Zentraedi Naval Battlegroup, mayor and founder of Ohlfantoma." Querennina indicated the man behind the desk, who rose to shake Michael's hand.

"It is a pleasure, sir," Michael began. "I'm Commander Michael Austin, 8th Naval Air Group, Mars Division, Robotech Expeditionary Force. My companions are my

wife Linda,” Michael said, indicating Lihra, “Private Milo Swift, formerly of the Southern Cross, and our guide Mario Cipolla.”

Grondahl’s voice was deep and resonant, and though age had thinned his Micronized frame, it had taken nothing away from his presence. “I am honored by your visit, Commander. I am familiar with the reasons for your journey, and have convened a meeting of the City Council tomorrow morning to allow you to present your case and for us to discuss the matter. Until then, you will be our guests. I have arranged to give you a brief tour of the city, and then to show you to the suites we’ve reserved in your name. From there, you should feel free to explore out town, perhaps do a little shopping, and enjoy our hospitality.” Grondahl indicated towards the door, and smiled. “Now if you’ll come with me, we can get started.”

\* \* \*

“To your left,” Grondahl called out, indicating an area near a group of low and wide buildings that brimmed with activity, “is our industrial district. We’ve been able to encourage a major part of our economy to develop in the area of light industry. We get imports of raw materials from all over Europe, and to a limited extent from Asia, and trade them for finished products. Most of the things we manufacture are geared toward agriculture - since most of the population we trade with are subsistence farmers. We produce tractors and farm implements, stoves, things like that. We do manufacture some electronics, though demand for those is pretty low.”

Grondahl urged their vehicle’s driver to move on, and after passing by some of the residential districts, and the new football stadium under construction, to a region near the Wear river, where the shipyards and docks were located. “We’ve widened the Wear into a ship channel, and have a good relationship with the settlement in Sunderland at the river’s mouth,” Grondahl said, pointing out the warehouses and the docks. “We’re equipped to handle vessels of all sizes - and make no mistake, there are indeed a few superfreighters still in operation in the world. Most of our trade goes out by sea, but we do some overland trade in the British Isles.”

Michael shifted in his seat in the limousine, and poured himself another Scotch. “Do you have any trade or intercourse with the Americas? I’m really interested in learning the state of affairs over there.”

“We get reports trickling in, and we’ve had some trade along the north-eastern seaboard. Most of our trade to the Americas, such as it is, goes in through Manhattan, which is still a relatively vibrant city, despite the Invid hive built into the shell of the

Empire State Building. But we don't get much further than that; that would require ships to get too close to the Atlantis Hive, and the Invid are fairly strict about trans-oceanic contacts. It's a risky business, and we don't derive much profit from it. If Atlantis Hive were to disappear tomorrow, that would be a different thing. But I suspect discussion of that subject will have to wait until our formal meeting tomorrow."

Grondahl ordered the driver to move on, and soon the vehicle was passing under the shadow of the giant flagship that formed the center of the town. "We also have extensive shelters, just in case the Invid decide to violate the unwritten cease-fire we have lived under with them for the last decade. The shelters have room for two hundred thousand people; that's the population we can expect in town on an especially busy trading day - we wouldn't want our guests and trading partners to suffer the brunt of an Invid attack while we hide safely underground. We have AWACS planes circling the area at all times, and additional sensory devices along the hull of the ship, so we'll have quite a lot of notice if an attack comes."

Milo looked out the window at the looming husk of a fortress, and laughed. "I was going to ask about why the Invid haven't tried to come after this place, but I think my question has already been answered. Michael, look at those AA guns running up along the side of the hull. There must be thousands of them."

"Sixty-five thousand, to be precise," Grondahl said. "It's not really a secret, but we are discreet about it. We use a combination of 78mm Rheinmetall type 966 guns, like those on the old Destroid Defender, the 22.3mm AC-L guns from the Regult pod, and the PB-10 beam guns from the same mecha. With a combination of projectile and beam guns, we maximize our firepower, without requiring too much from our powerplant and minimizing our dependence on ammunition supplies. The systems are independently and automatically targetable, and are keyed to IFF codes. If it's in the air, and it's not a friendly, it goes down."

"Has it ever been put to the test?" Michael asked.

"Once. And after that, we found ourselves with the unwritten cease-fire with the Invid I mentioned earlier. We do not challenge their authority beyond our own borders, and they do not wish to commit the troops that would be needed to take us out."

"Impressive," Cipolla noted.

"Indeed. Right now," Grondahl suggested, "you are in the safest city on the planet."

\* \* \*

Blake had declined to join the others on the tour, and was walking with his mother outside one of the shopping districts in town. She had insisted on finding Blake a better (and better-fitting) wardrobe, should he decide to continue his travels with Austin.

"I must admit, Blake," Quereninna began, as she examined the quality of a shirt to which Blake had shown fondness, "I am somewhat uncomfortable with you being placed in the position you are in. This may sound odd coming from a Meltran and a Quadrono, but the last thing I want to see is for my son to risk his life in battle."

Blake nodded. "It's scary, sometimes. I had the misfortune of seeing the inside of an Invid hive during the attack at Köln, and we got in a pretty serious bind there for a while. But Michael doesn't let me near the fighting most of the time - mainly I help Roger with the repairs of the mecha."

"Well, I should have known it was just a matter of time before you ended up in the resistance movement, considering the example your father and I set." Blake's mother held up a pair of heavy woolen slacks for Blake's consideration.

"Not that Richard went that direction," Blake muttered.

"Richard has his own demons, Blake. Only he can answer for himself, and I will neither condemn or apologize for him. Though I am somewhat disappointed that Laurie is not here. I would have very much liked to see her."

Blake rifled through a rack of clothing, noting, "She'll probably be here soon. So where is Susan? Is she still with Richard?"

"Yes, and last I spoke with Richard, he was trying to get passage to America. He wouldn't say why, but it seemed urgent. I tried to convince him to leave Susan here with me, but he wouldn't hear of it."

Blake wandered into a fitting room with an armful of clothing to try on. "Still," he shouted through the closed door, "I like serving in Michael's group. They're all good people, even Milo. Roger and I have become close friends - I think of him as the big brother Richard never was."

"What do you think of Michael?" Quereninna asked him, as he stepped out, wearing some woolen pants and a flannel shirt. "Too tight in the crotch," she noted before giving him a chance to answer. "If you decide you want it, we'll have to have it taken out, or you'll chafe. But I like the shirt. It goes well with your hair."

Blake looked inquisitively in a mirror at his outfit, and answered, "He's great. I've learned a lot about Tirol from him - things not even you could tell us. He lived there for a long time, and he's been to Karbarra, Haydon, and even Optera. He's really nice to me, and treats me like an adult most of the time. And he's strong - I mean the kind of strong where you can expect to watch him to walk straight into Hell, and by the time he's

done, he's in charge. He makes a good subject for sketches, too. I need to show you my sketch-book before we leave; I've gotten a lot better."

"I would love to see it." The Zentraedi woman paused, and looked pensively at a leather jacket she was considering asking her son to try on. "So, are you happy, Blake?"

"Happy? I guess so. It's a rough life sometimes, but they're almost a family of their own - an appropriately dysfunctional one, to be sure. And I feel like I'm helping. I feel like I'm an important part of a bigger cause, and that's pretty cool."

"Would you mind if I asked you all over for a dinner party, once Roger, Jeanne, and Laurie arrive? I would like to get to know your friends better, especially Michael."

"I think that would be great. By the way, you should ask Roger to cook - he's really good at it."

"Well, when you see them again, extend the invitation for me. Now, let's find you some shoes. Those you're wearing are about to fall apart!"

\* \* \*

"That was very enlightening. Thank you, Grondahl Tul," Michael beamed, as they exited the limousine at the entrance to their hotel. "I must say that I am very impressed with what you've managed to accomplish amidst all this adversity."

"You are too generous, Commander," Grondahl replied. "Perhaps we can meet this evening for dinner, informally. Your wife is, of course, welcome to join us."

"I'll decline, but thank you," Lihra said. She sensed that Michael and Grondahl would want to talk business, and realized that Austin would have found some way to exclude the Invid prisoner masquerading as his spouse from the sensitive discussions. Eliminating herself without having to wait for Michael to do so, she felt, would be taken as a sign of good faith by her captor. "It's been a very long journey. I'd really like to turn in early, if you don't mind," Lihra added.

Michael nodded in his approval. "Well, I'm sorry you won't join us, Linda," he said, playing along with the fiction. "But I would be happy to accept. What do you have in mind, mayor?"

"I was going to suggest 'Yellowfin'," Grondahl suggested. "It's the finest seafood in town. I'll have a car here to pick you up by, say, seven in the evening?"

"I look forward to it," Michael answered. The Zentraedi mayor nodded, and soon his vehicle was speeding down the street.

Milo chuckled as the foursome headed for the hotel desk. "I never realized you were such a good schmoozer, Austin."



“You hit command ranks, you learn,” Michael replied. “Though I personally would rather not have to.” Michael introduced himself to the desk clerk, who soon procured them their room keys. “You folks go and enjoy yourselves in town,” he told Milo and Cipolla as they approached the stairwell. “It’s not often we get to taste the fruits of civilization in our line of work, and I don’t know how long we’ll be able to make it last.” The others nodded, and wandered off to their separate rooms. Lihra looked on with curiosity as the pair entered the room the Zentraedi had reserved for them. It was spacious, and comfortable, with a large king-sized bed set off by a desk and numerous closets. The bath was equally spacious, and most impressive of all, the room had hot and cold running water, and indoor plumbing, almost unheard-of on war-ravaged Earth.

“Is this how you lived before the wars?” Lihra asked, scrutinizing the room. “Before the Zentraedi, before the Masters, before. . . us?”

“Well, not really. This would have been pretty luxurious even for those days, but that’s because we’re VIPs here - ‘Very Important Persons’. But it’s a lot closer than the way we’ve been forced to live on the road. Hell, I never had it this good even back in the fleet! I’d like to take a nap before I get ready for dinner, so you may want to relax and take a bath. We can call up for dinner for you. Just wake me up when you want me to explain the menu.”

“There is so much you and the others talk about that I simply have to nod my head and pretend to comprehend. But a bath - now that, I understand,” Lihra stated matter-of-factly. “But it will be strange to take one in water, and not the nutrients of the Flower of Life.”

“Welcome to the wonderful world of being human,” Michael said, kicking off his boots. “Don’t forget - the soap is for your skin, and the shampoo is for your hair. Use the towels to dry off.”

“I could have figured that out,” Lihra shouted from the bathroom. “Not all of us are the unimaginative drones I’m sure your propagandists have made us out to be.”

“Of that I have no doubt,” Michael called after her. “Sometimes you pick these things up so quickly, it scares me.” Michael set the wind-up alarm clock to wake him an hour and a half before his dinner with Grondahl, and lay back on the bed, allowing the sound of running water to lull him to sleep.

\* \* \*

“Michael, wake up,” Lihra said, nudging him lightly. Michael groaned in reply. “I’m getting hungry, and your alarm’s about to go off anyway.”

Michael rolled over, and looked at Lihra. She'd wrapped herself in one of the complimentary bath-robos provided by the hotel, and was laying on the bed alongside Michael, propping her head up on one shoulder.

"I put on the robe because it seems your people has some sort of aversion to bare skin. Was I correct?"

Michael groggily affirmed her conclusion, before rolling out of bed and standing up. "Yeah, that's right. It's-"

"A prelude to your mating ritual, I gather. Nakedness, I mean," Lihra said, confident in her accurate description of human conduct. "Had I come in here disrobed and lain on the bed with you, that would have been considered a . . . seduction, is that the word?"

"More or less-"

"Peculiar. Your people make such a fuss about mating. Among the Invid, only the royalty copulate, and then only once in their lives. We are driven by instinct to do it, but it only lasts moments, and we take no pleasure in it. But your people do nothing else, it seems. Why are you so obsessed with it? Why do you humans dwell on such interactions, especially when it is to the detriment of the other things that concern you?"

"You mean my relationship with Laurie, don't you?" Michael asked. "And the tensions in the group it causes."

"That, and the conflicting fondness you have for Jeanne," Lihra replied.

"Sometimes I forget you can read my mind - is there any way I can keep some privacy from you?" Michael asked, milling about the room impatiently.

"No. 'Captured Greece holds victor Rome captive' - is that a correct. . . paraphrase of that saying about your world's two ancient empires?"

"I think so. Why are we so preoccupied with. . . gender relations?" Michael said, rephrasing Lihra's question. "Well, I suppose from a biological point of view, it's because we're social animals, but not hive-oriented. We use sexual interactions to establish social relationships. You can tell that reproduction isn't the main goal because we're one of the least fertile animals on the planet. Some think that the preoccupation is because we have so few offspring, and the mating bond has coevolved with us to keep parents together."

"You haven't answered my question. I was asking about individuals, not species. Why are you humans as individuals so preoccupied with that sort of thing? I understand from a biological perspective, but not from a personal one."

"A personal perspective?" Michael began to wander towards the bathroom himself. "Why don't you take some time and figure out precisely how and where the

most sensitive nerve endings are concentrated on your new human body, and then get back to me,” he called out, shutting the bathroom door after him. Lihra gauged his tone - and decided that it was playfully sarcastic. He seemed both amused, annoyed, and **embarrassed** by the discussion.

Lihra snorted in disgust, listening to Michael’s voice, as it rose in song in the shower above the patter of the falling water:

La donna è mobile  
Qual piuma al vento,  
Muta d’accento  
E di pensiero.  
Sempre un amabile  
Leggiadro viso,  
In pianto o in riso,  
È mensognero.  
È sempre misero  
Chi a lei s’affida,  
Chi le confida,  
Mal cauto il core!  
Pur mai non sentesi  
Felice appieno  
Chi su quel seno,  
Non liba amore!

*What is that supposed to mean?* Lihra wondered.

\* \* \*

Michael greeted Grondahl, who was already sitting at the table with his own wife, a Zentraedi woman he introduced as Ezolia, and rose to shake his hand. “I hope you don’t mind that we’ve already ordered the wine - it’s a Hungarian bullsblood; I think you’ll like it.”

“I have a wide range of tastes - if it’s a wine, it’s almost sure I’ll like it,” Michael replied cheerfully, sitting at the table.

“May I recommend the oysters as an appetizer,” Ezolia said, “They’re excellent. The lobster is also very good, but for the main course, my personal favorite is the salmon - it’s fresh from the Nordic coast.”

Michael chuckled. “Well, you’ll have to educate me. I’m not too familiar with Earth’s sea creatures; I’ve lived all my life away from the planet, though I appreciate the

irony of being in a position of culinary ignorance of my own world, with two Zentraedi warriors graciously assisting me alleviate this condition.”

Grondahl laughed, and ordered several dishes for Michael to sample. For the next several hours, the trio made light and jovial conversation, Michael updating the pair on the course of the Sentinels war and the situation on Tirol and the Sentinels worlds, and of the REF’s war against the Invid. He told them of Breetai’s valiant death, and the prominence the Zentraedi played in the REF’s defense of Tirolspace.

For their part, his Zentraedi hosts told Michael of the history of the settlement, and something of the affairs of the world, from the news that came in through the trading vessels. He knew much of what they told him already, if in sketchier detail, but he found the new information rounded out his understanding of the European situation.

Eventually, after the trio had finished dessert, and as the men were ordering rounds of brandy to round out the evening, Ezolia smiled, and apologizing profusely to Michael, said, “Well, I must get home - it’s getting late. That’ll give you two an opportunity to talk business. Grondahl, don’t be out too late.”

“Of course, dear,” he said, rising and kissing his wife good-bye.

Michael also rose, and lightly shook Ezolia’s hand. “It was a pleasure to meet you. I hope we all have the opportunity to do this again before I leave.”

“Count on it, Commander,” she said, before taking her leave of them. The two men returned to their seats, and immediately took a drink.

“I have to admit,” Michael told the Zentraedi mayor, “I continue to be astounded at how well you all have adjusted to life on Earth. I know it’s easy to stereotype the Zentraedi, with that myth of a genetically-programmed Imperative and all, but still, I wish we were as well adjusted on our own world as you have become.”

“We owe a great debt to your people. In a sense, you liberated us from the darkness in which the Robotech Masters created us. You opened our eyes to a world of possibilities, and pleasures. We learned that there is more to life than war, and we have applied our drive toward prosperity instead of battle. But with that prosperity comes a certain. . . comfort.”

“I was worried about that. Helping us out will draw unwanted attention to this place. The Invid may decide that it will be worth their effort to try to take it.”

“Yes. Or they may try to disrupt our trade routes, or attack our trading partners. Comfort breeds a measure of conservatism, Michael, and there will be those in the City Council that will want to discourage the attack you plan, and resist our participation in it.”

“Where do you stand?” Michael asked.

“I have mixed feelings, from a practical standpoint. I would very much like to get rid of Atlantis Hive - we could open up new markets in America almost immediately. But I know that the risks are grave. We stand to lose a lot by raising the Invid’s ire. And the biggest unknown is the Invid themselves. They have spent the last several centuries as marauding guerrillas, razing worlds when they could, and fleeing when they could not. Conquest is new to them, and rulership is even newer. I do not know how they will eventually decide to treat their subjects. Eventually, they may grow tolerant and increasingly liberal towards all of us, as their needs for the Flower and fears of their own persecution are allayed. And then, they may be ruled by their own fear and anger, and opt to eradicate us from this world. And our actions - whether to resist, or to comply - may help determine this, but then they may not.”

Grondahl sipped from his glass, and continued. “But where practicality is uncertain, I use principle to guide. And principle tells me to help fight the Invid. I have tasted the fruit of freedom on your world, and I like it, as do my people. We owe it to you to help fight for it. We do not fear death, Commander Austin,” Grondahl said. “We were made for it. Before, we had little to fight for, beyond empty glories. Now, we have something to believe in, something worth fighting for. I can not vouch for the others. But I stand with you.”

“I’m glad to hear it. What can you tell me about the Triumvirate clones in Brittany? Can we expect help from them?”

“Unlikely. The Clones are an extremely suspicious lot. They were hated by both human and Invid alike, and we Zentraedi were cold towards them as well. No heart is more bitter than that of a nobleman reduced to poverty - and the clones were once the ruling elite of much of the Galaxy. They have a long memory, and shame and resentment are the most you can likely expect from them. Perhaps they can be appealed to - they do have underground ties to the resistance. But they will be ruled by no human, and I have difficulty imagining that they will serve under any commander but one of their own. The fact that you have lived much of your life on Tirol may help - but Tirol is almost as alien a world to the Triumviroids as Earth.”

\* \* \*

“Another drink, sir?” the Zentraedi bartender asked. Milo nodded, and saw his glass refilled with the strong barleywine ale he had been sucking down all evening. Milo took his glass, and wandered back outside the establishment, to the concrete steps that led

to the cozy Zentraedi bar. Councilman Kravshera was sitting on the steps, and nodded when Milo returned.

“So, you’ve actually taken on a *Nous-gran’diel*?” Dortal asked, sipping a Pilsner.

Milo nodded. “Commander Austin has apparently met two, including Kane. Believe you me, I never hope to have the dubious pleasure again.” Milo took a long gulp from his pint-sized glass, and changed the subject, as a breeze of chilly air blew between and around the both of them. “I’ve been planning to make it up here for a long time now, but never had the chance. I really like the place. I have to admit the irony, though. Look at the way the Zentraedi were when you came to Earth - and look now. The fires of human civilization are being stoked by our first alien enemy.”

“Culture has strong allures. It was hard for us at first. For example, Utema - Councilman Forman, I mean - was typical of many of us. He fell in love with Minmei’s music, and under the spell of your society. He worked for a while among humans, and then got fed up - because he didn’t fit in. He grew malcontent, to use the word your government called us. He started pillaging and robbing, because he knew he could pick a fight that way, and as much as he was attracted to culture, all he knew was war. It all came to a head when he was causing trouble in New Macross, I believe, and when a pair of Destroid Tomahawks came in to apprehend him with guns ready. He left, and came here. It took years for all of us to acclimate, but here we are. We’re proud of what we’ve become.”

Milo nodded, and a silence fell over the two, as they looked out into the street, watching the passers-by. Milo eventually reached into his pocket, and extracted his harmonica, and asked Dortal, “You don’t mind, do you?”

“No not at all,” the Zentraedi replied, smiling.

Milo nodded, and began to play. The song was a long, wailing Blues number, in Milo’s typical idiom. Dortal laughed, and was soon tapping his feet. The commotion soon attracted others, and before long, Milo was giving an impromptu and informal concert.

He played for a half-hour, and ended only when enough of the crowd had offered to buy him a round that he could comfortably drink until closing without having to dig for his wallet.

“You’re very good,” Councilman Kravshera noted. “One of the clubs downtown has an amateur night tomorrow. Would you like to be the town’s guest and play? I can arrange it.”

Milo chuckled. “Nah - I’m not one for gigs with paying customers. I just play when the mood takes me. Though I understand Commander Austin played in a band

when he was younger. If you can get him to headline, I might be convinced to play back-up for him.”

“Excellent,” Dortal exclaimed. “I will have the City Council ask him tomorrow!”

Milo laughed to himself. *Boy, when Michael finds out he's been volunteered to play for the town, he'll spit fire!*

\* \* \*

The council chambers smelled of fresh pine, and Michael could see that the walls had undergone a recent renovation. The chamber was circular, with the councilmen and -women seated at a semicircular table, the mayor, Grondahl, seated at the center of it. Opposite the table was a podium where Michael was directed, and all about the room buzzed clerks and secretaries, handing papers and folders to the individual council members. Michael stepped up to the podium, and waited to be recognized. Because of the sensitive military matters to be discussed, the chambers were closed to outsiders, and Michael felt very, very alone.

Grondahl concluded the meeting's old business quickly, and addressed the remainder of the council. “As I'm sure you're all aware, Commander Michael Austin of the REF has come to sue for our aid in the upcoming months. I'd like to give him the floor, and then we can address our questions. Commander?”

“Thank you,” Michael said. “I will make my request simple and to the point. As your intelligence agents have no doubt informed you, Saxony is assembling an alliance of the European powers to fight the Invid presence in this hemisphere. Our immediate goal is the destruction of the staging hive built on the mid-Atlantic ridge, known commonly as Atlantis Hive. I have come to request immediate and substantive military aid in this endeavor. We need troops, materiel, supplies, and support. The resistance movement, and Saxony, both appreciate what you've indirectly done for us so far - but now is the time to decide if you can live under the Invid yoke forever. Do you think that they will forever tolerate your community in their midst? No, eventually, they will feel comfortable enough in their own position to come here in force. Your defenses are formidable, but there is no wall that can not be breached, no armor that is without chink. Europe must move now - and we must move together, or not at all!” Michael went on about logistics, about the tentative commitments made by other countries and powers. He elucidated his own role, and the basics of the strategy he was forming. He suggested the Zentraedi would have a significant position in the chain of command. He asked for their help in influencing the clones in Brittany.

It was difficult for him to judge their reactions, and their formal aloofness concerned him. When he had finished with his speech, the floor was opened to questions. He found himself grilled on his estimates of their chances for success, and whether he understood the magnitude of the Invid reprisals should they fail. He countered fears of Invid retaliation even in the event of success, suggesting that the Invid would be unable to stage attacks on the continent for some time, since the Invid mecha were not equipped for trans-Atlantic flight. Michael dismissed concerns about other powers backing out and leaving the Zentraedi without support. He was forced to assure several councilmen that the Zentraedi would not be treated as if they were expendable. Eventually, he found he had lost count of the questions and concerns he had to answer, and after several hours, the ordeal came to an end.

“Commander, we’d like to thank you for coming all this way to bring this matter to us, and we will give it due consideration. Expect an answer from the Council in a few days.”

Michael tensed up. He was hoping for a quick answer, and hated the thought of spending several days in total uncertainty of the success or failure of his mission.

“I thank the Council for allowing me to present my case.”

“Commander,” Grondahl began, “whatever we decide, we’d like to officially welcome you to our city. We have always held strong sympathy for the resistance movement, and we will continue to help as our own local situation allows. Until you have our decision, then, consider yourself officially a guest of the city, and you and your party are welcome to enjoy yourselves in our restaurants and stores at our expense.”

“Thank you very much.”

“Now if you will excuse us,” Grondahl insisted, “I suspect that the Council will wish to discuss the matter privately before we break for lunch. But before you go, there is one other thing. . .”

Michael suddenly got the feeling he was going to be volunteered for something.

\* \* \*

“Well, how did it go?” Lihra asked as Michael returned to the hotel room they were sharing.

“Now, you can’t expect me to tell you that,” Michael replied teasingly.

“I know. I was just trying to make conversation.”

“Well, then I forgive you.” Michael sat down on the bed, and began to loosen the REF uniform he’d worn to the meeting. “Suffice it to say I haven’t felt that tense even in



front of an angry Invid horde! Anyway, how have you been?" he asked, as Lihra volunteered to massage his back.

"It's been nice. I've been able to watch several films on the video player - that was interesting, and a lot of fun. But I've felt cooped up. It's almost like I'm a prisoner in here."

"You **are** a prisoner, Lihra," Michael laughed as her hands worked out a particularly tight knot in his shoulder muscle.

"To the others. But I was hoping you would come to see me as a friend, and not as an enemy. Do you think that is possible?"

"Milo would tell me at this point that you're trying to earn my trust so you can betray me later."

"Is that what **you** believe?"

*No, Michael thought, knowing Lihra would hear it in her mind. I don't know why, but you are very different from what I expected. You act less like an enemy soldier, and more like a . . . princess. Is that it?*

Lihra coughed in surprise. *How could you tell?*

"You're too impractical - it's as if you have the luxury of a certain amount of power, but not the responsibility of wielding it. You've taken to me as a friend and fellow leader too easily for you to be a menial warrior, and I know the Invid caste structure fairly well, though I've never had the pleasure of discussing it with a sub-queen. I have interrogated a sub-king and several drones, but your caste-mates are very elusive, despite their immobility."

Lihra paused in thought, and replied, "I was an adolescent when mother transmuted me into this form. I was not the first, though I was among them. Something of me misses the role I would have played as mother to a hive - had not. . . circumstances intervened."

"I can't imagine what that's like. I hear that sub-queens have an empathic bond with their entire brood, and are the spiritual center of the hive."

"Yes. Besides the Regis, we are the highest members of Invid society. I do not know what role the Regis envisions for us now - I can not penetrate my mother's mind."

"I have a thousand questions for you," Michael began. "Not as an interrogator, but in the same spirit with which you have asked me so much about my people. But that can wait. I'd like to take you out to see the town tonight. The Zentraedi live now how we lived before the wars, and I thought you might enjoy it. And besides, I was convinced to perform music at a club tonight. I'd like you to be there; you might have fun."

"I think I would."

\* \* \*

“Whoa, look at this!” Roger exclaimed, as he leapt out of the hovertransport and surveyed the old battlesite. A group of hovertanks were apparently escorting a supply convoy over a decade ago when a squadron of Bioroids ambushed them. The wrecks represented the remnants of the desperate chaos of the last days of the Second Robotech War. Now, all that remained were the shells of a dozen or more mecha from both sides, several trucks, and a hovertransport much like Roger’s. Though it was clear that the ruins had been picked over once or twice by scavengers, Roger was confident that he’d be able to piece together a new plasma turret from what he’d find there.

It had been four days since the group had split up, and in that time, Laurie and Roger had managed to successfully move and camouflage the planes, and after the pursuit of Laurie’s aircraft, investigate the wreck of their pursuers’ vehicle. Now, the distractions finally having been put aside, they were able to finally get about to achieving Roger’s desire to supplement their supplies and weapons by scavenging.

“Come on, Laurie, let’s get started.” Roger dashed to the back of the transport, and began to assemble his tools.

“You know, it’d still be nice to have some help at this,” Laurie suggested, standing at Roger’s side.

“You’re just annoyed that it’s hard to stay mad at Milo for being right,” Roger suggested, “but it would be nice to have an extra pair of arms around here.”

“You think we ought to try to contact them to tell Michael about the tail on us?”

“Well, you said you took care of them.”

“But I could only find three bodies when I checked out the truck. I could swear there were several more people when I acquired the target in my optics.”

“You hit the thing with four Hammerheads. I’d be surprised if you didn’t blow several of them into so many bits that you’d never identify what’s left of them. We’ll be careful, but Michael ordered us only to use wide-beam radio if absolutely necessary. I don’t see this as necessary.”

Laurie grumbled, as the Hovertransport’s radio set began to crackle, indicating an incoming transmission from Milo’s Cyclone. “Looks like someone can’t follow orders.” Laurie turned to the radio and began, “Where the hell have you been, Swift?”

“Getting a sex change and dying my hair red,” she heard Jeanne quip in reply. “I can’t talk long, but I’ll be there in four hours.”

“Well, we’ll appreciate the help. We’ll be here,” Laurie said before signing off. Turning back to Roger, she added, “That should speed things up quite a bit.”

Roger nodded. “Let’s check out the wreck of the hovertransport first. If luck’s with us, we can transfer the turret completely over from it to ours.”

Laurie helped him haul the equipment over to the wreck. The transport they were scavenging from had taken a direct hit to the cab, and contents of the cargo bay - what was not destroyed with the driver’s compartment, that is - had been removed by earlier visitors to this site. But, so far as Roger could tell, the turret was still in good shape, and after climbing atop the hovertransport, which was at rest at a slight angle in a ditch, the pair began to get about to disassembling it, piece by piece, while Roger examined the parts for obvious damage as they went.

The next two hours passed quickly, and evening was soon beginning to descend, leaving Laurie a little restless. “Roger, can we take a break from this for a minute? It’s getting time to eat.”

“You go on,” Roger insisted. “Give me a holler when it’s ready, and I’ll join you. I’d still like to get a little more done before it turns dark.”

“Sure thing.” Laurie stood up, brushing the dust off her pants. “Uh, Roger. . .” she began, looking around her.

“What is it?” Roger demanded, looking up. “Oh, shit. Where did they come from?”

\* \* \*

Milo stepped into the club, greeting several of the Zentraedi councilmen who were waiting for him at the door. Michael had reluctantly accepted his offer to play back-up harmonica, despite his annoyance that Milo had gotten him shanghaied into the gig in the first place. Still, Milo planned on having a few drinks with his new companions first, and wanted to wander the crowd.

The club had a non-assuming exterior, but the interior was large and cozy, with dimmed lights revealing two dozen waitresses that went to and fro among the rowdy but cheerful crowd. Milo could see most of the City Council in attendance at various places around the establishment, and the alien prisoner Lihra, sitting with Blake and his mother near the stage. But the place was packed to capacity and then some with ordinary folks who were looking forward to hearing the music of the town’s favorite guest.

The opening acts were mostly playing twenty-first century hard rock, though there was a female vocalist who played the standard Minmei-song set which was almost

mandatory at the Zentraedi establishment. Eventually the last opener finished their set, and the stage cleared. Employees came out and removed the last band's equipment, and set up the instruments for the next group.

"What is he going to play?" Dortal, who was sharing a table with Milo, asked.

"A lot of stuff. Some rock, a little blues. He and I have similar tastes in music, if nothing else, so it'll be sure to be good."

Eventually, the club's manager came onto the stage, and walked up to the microphone, "Ladies, and gentlemen, we have a very special guest with us tonight. Commander Michael Austin is a pilot with the Robotech Expeditionary Force, and has come to Earth to help us ready ourselves for the fight with the Invid. Our city council has asked him to play for us, and he's asked our house band to back him up. Let's all give a big round of applause to this freedom fighter!"

Michael stepped out tentatively to a vociferous round of applause, an electric guitar strapped to his chest, and took the microphone, while Milo nudged his way through the crowd to reach the stage. Without either uttering a word, the house band struck a number. It was an upbeat folksy tune, and Milo joined in after the guitars had set the beat. Michael swayed with the tune, and after a brief introductory instrumental, broke in:

Once upon a midnight dearie  
I woke with something in my head  
I couldn't escape the memory  
Of a phone call and what you said  
Like a game show contestant with a parting gift  
I could not believe my eyes  
When I saw through the voice of a trusted friend  
Who needs to humor me and tell me lies  
Yeah humor me and tell me lies  
And I'll lie too and say I don't mind  
And as we seek so shall we find  
And when you're feeling open I'll still be here  
But not without a certain degree of fear  
Of what will be with you and me  
I still can see things hopefully

But you  
Why you wanna give me a run-around  
Is it a sure-fire way to speed things up  
When all it does is slow me down

Milo looked out into the audience as he blasted the harmonica throughout the song. They were loving it - the tune was just the right thing to get them in the mood to party. Already, a crowd had congealed on the dance floor, bobbing and weaving gently to the music.

Michael finished the tune to a deafening round of applause, and spoke to the assembled masses. "Thank you. It's a great honor to be playing here, or to be playing at all. This is the first time I've performed for a group in five or so years, and it's nice to have the opportunity. I'd like to talk to all of you about my mission, and about the war. But you didn't come to hear speeches. You came to hear music - and that's what I'm gonna give you!"

As the crowd applauded, Michael had the band launch into some rockin' blues. He launched into "Highway 49", and slowed things down with a cover of B.B. King's "Ain't Nobody Home", a song he'd last played for Jeanne back in Neumünchen.

The music had quickly hypnotized the crowd, as Michael and his impromptu band moved into a set made up of Beatles and Rolling Stones numbers, and the roof nearly blew off the place with the roars of approval from the crowd when Michael struck up the opening chords of "Jumping Jack Flash". Blake was immediately on the dance floor, thrashing about like a madman, and Milo looked out into the audience to see Lihra, animatedly talking with one of the younger clerical assistants to the City Council, a olive-haired Zentraedi lad who was clearly attracted to her, despite keeping a respectful distance from a person he had been led to believe was Commander Austin's wife.

Michael played for two hours, frequently turning around in the middle of a song to jam with the mostly-Zentraedi house band's members, who were obviously having the time of their lives. Michael was clearly not the best musician they had played with, but he was more than competent, and where he lacked skill, he more than made up for with enthusiasm.

Eventually, with all the songs that required accompaniment from the harp out of the way, Michael dismissed Milo from the stage. Milo hopped off, and shook hands all the way to the table where Querennina was sitting with Lihra, the two having been joined by Dortal and the young Zentraedi clerk who was talking up Lihra, whom Milo learned was named Frandar. He listened into the conversation, and saw that while the alien prisoner he had taught himself to hate was guarded, she was peculiarly friendly. Milo wanted to be suspicious about it, but had quite a difficult time with it. She seemed to be sincerely having fun, and even offered Milo a rather contented grin when she noticed his observation of her.

It seemed that Michael would never be allowed to finish. He called it quits three times, and each time the crowd called him out for another encore. He worked his way through "She Caught the Katy" and went a little political with "Chimes of Freedom". But finally, he decided enough was enough.

“Okay, folks just one more,” he told the crowd as the last song finished. “I’m slowing it down a little for my final number, so if you’ve got somebody special you want to dance with, get ‘em out here, and pull ‘em close.”

Michael began with a few notes, with to which the rest of the band joined, and he spoke as the tune echoed through the hall. “You see, when I went to sleep last night, I had a wonderful dream that, we all put this war and anger behind us, and started working as one people. Now in this dream, universal love was the theme of the day, with peace and understanding - and it happened this way.”

As Michael began his maudlin monologue, Lihra was interrupted from his words by Frandar, who said, “I know it’s forward, and that you’re married and all, but would you like to dance with me? I’m sure Commander Austin wouldn’t mind.”

Michael looked up from the microphone at that point, and began to sing:

The sick and the hungry had smiles on their faces  
The tired and the hopeless had family all around  
The streets in the cities were all beautiful places  
And the walls came tumbling down

“I’m afraid I don’t know how, Frandar,” Lihra replied sheepishly, hoping to avoid the situation. “I never bothered to learn.”

People of the world all had it together  
Had it together for the boys and the girls  
And the children of the world looked forward to a future

Frandar looked across the table at her intently, and smiled. “It’s easy. I’ll show you.”

Lihra laughed. Here she was, future successor to the Invid Regis, listening to a human sing about brotherhood and being asked to dance a human dance by a somewhat shy - but definitely smitten - Zentraedi. She laughed sweetly at the absurdity of it all, and said, “I’d love to dance, Frandar.”

Remember that  
Tick tock tick tock tick tock  
People, time’s tickin’ away

Her first steps on the floor were tentative, but her partner was helpful, and especially tolerant when she stepped on his toes, something that happened more frequently than she would have liked. He held her closely, but not too close, and was sporting an enormous grin throughout the song. Even with the distraction of trying to move to the music, Lihra’s attention couldn’t help but be drawn to the words Michael

was singing. They were quaint and somewhat sentimental, but there was a simple beauty to the message behind them she found particularly attractive.

I had a vision of blue skies from sea to shining sea  
All the trees in the forests stood strong and tall again  
Everything was clean and pretty and safe for you and me  
Worst of enemies became the best of friends

*You're singing this song for me*, Lihra thought - and she projected this thought to Michael, who only looked down at her from the stage and smiled. *When we get back to the room, I really want to talk with you, Michael. There is so much I want to ask.* Lihra leaned into her partner and let her feet move to the music without struggling with them - and she found that she had suddenly become more graceful. She quickly forgot who and where she was, and let the song be the whole of her consciousness.

People of the world all had it together  
Had it together for the boys and the girls  
The children of the world looked forward to a future

Milo looked on with concern as the alien prisoner wandered away from the table with the Zentraedi she'd been talking to. *What does she think she's doing. . . I hope she doesn't try to escape.* Milo soon discovered his fears to be unfounded, and as he watched her stumble over her dance partner, and giggle at words he said to her that were lost to Milo over the music, and as he saw her look up approvingly at Michael on stage, something forced Milo to burst out in a belly-laugh. It had never occurred to him to see her in this way, but he looked at the green-blooded abomination he had sworn to kill if she stepped out of line, and realized just how. . . cute. . . she could be. Milo shook his head, and laughed more softly, as he watched her sway to the last song of the night. Only one thought distracted him from his mirth - and the more he dwelled on it, the more hollow his feeling of amusement became. *I thought he would be here, but I haven't seen him all night. So that leaves only one question: where the hell has that crook Cipolla got off to?*

Remember that  
Tick tock tick tock tick tock  
People, time's tickin' away

\* \* \*

“Roger!” Jeanne shouted out over the incessant howling of the wind. “Laurie!” Not a soul lingered around the battlesite to answer. Night’s inky blackness hung like a shroud over the area, adding silence to her eyes as well as her ears.

*I’m sure this is the right place*, Jeanne mused. It was definitely a battlesite, and she could see through her nightvision goggles numerous Tirolian and Southern Cross mecha lying about in various states of disrepair and decay.

About a hundred yards ahead lay the wrecks of two hovertransports. One was old and rusting, and lay at an incline, having come to rest in a depression in the ground. The other - definitely a wreck - she quickly recognized as the groups. Clutching her rifle tightly, Jeanne dashed over to the transport, and found that it, like the mecha at the battlesite, had been thoroughly looted. Not only were all the contents of the cargo bay missing, but the rapid-fire laser emplacement mounted to the roof behind the plasma turret was also gone.

Jeanne looked around the site further. In the dust near the wrecked transport seemed to lie the signs of a struggle, as if two people were quite unwillingly dragged off by several others.

And at the perimeter of the site, she saw several giant-sized footprints, made from some sort of mecha. She recognized them instantly, and swore.

“Bioroids. . .”