

Episode Fourteen:

Requiem in Three Voices

*Dies irae, dies illa
Solvat saeculum in favilla,
Teste David cum Sibylla.
Quantus tremor est futurus,
Quando Iudex est venturus,
Cuncta stricte discursus.*

"It occurs to me to wonder what it must have felt like to live in a 'Dark Age'. Certainly, one wouldn't likely be conscious of the darkness. All one would know is that great struggles have recently brought to an end even greater civilizations - and that the time is not for reflection on the past or hope for the future, but on the rebuilding of the present. Only in retrospect would the darkness become apparent."

"For the Galaxy, it seems, a dark age began in 2009, with the death of Zor, and was in full-swing in 2022, with the descent of the Invid hordes onto Tirol. Who knows how many centuries it will last - how many Charlemagnes will try to impose a fleeting order of imperial size if not classical stature before we experience a renaissance - how many Arthurs will be dimly remembered in fantastic legend before we begin again to write workaday history?"

"But it seems likely that our battles and struggles - however mortal or tragic, and however dear to us in the here and now - will become little more than a footnote, as future historians gloss over our terrible century in a few paragraphs, writing 'the tales of the then-backwater world of Earth do not represent the main currents of the stream of history, and their veracity must be taken with a grain of salt'."

-Adm. Michael Austin, Recollections

20 April 2043

Cipolla made his way through the Invid hive with some familiarity - he had occasion to meet with Invid officials in the past, but was surprised with the especially large escort that was given him on this visit. Normally, only two Hive Guard mecha-infantry suits would accompany a human sympathizer into the inner chambers of the Invid installation, but on this occasion, an entire platoon was watching over him, making certain he went precisely where he was supposed to go. Either **he** was considered to be very important, he surmised, or he was being taken to see someone who was. The latter seemed infinitely more likely in the mercenary's mind.

Mario had departed for the hive as soon as his remaining men had reported to him with the stunning news; the knowledge was just the break he was looking for to help him complete his task, and bringing the Invid aboard his plan was essential. Leaving Ohlfantoma unnoticed was a relatively easy task. Mario had merely meandered to the docks, and discretely bought passage on a small freighter that was bound for Bordeaux. A little more gold was enough to induce the captain to put him off the boat at Brighton, a mere ten miles from the Invid hive, and he was able to. . . borrow a horse and complete the rest of the journey on his own.

Cipolla wasn't expecting much in the way of conversation from the Invid escorts. Most Invid communicated with humans only in the form of gestures - often by pointing at them with one of their power-armor's gun-laden arms, and then swinging the arm to indicate another location. This usually meant: "On pain of death, move over there". He had himself received several such gestures during his visit to the hive, and was not particularly bothered by it anymore.

Only the highest in the hierarchy were prepared to speak with humans, however much they aided the occupiers in rooting out rebellion. Cipolla wondered if it were merely an issue of language, or one of protocol. But either way, it ensured that if the Invid would deal with him at all, it would be at the highest levels.

He was finally escorted into a small room that had seemed prepared to receive conferences of humans. A table and chairs of sorts had been made of the same sorts of resins that the entire hive interior was built from, and though their functional surfaces were smooth, the rest retained the knobby organic look common to all Invid architecture.

A less than friendly point from a *Malar's* weapon-arm told Cipolla that he was to sit at a chair at one end of the table. Naturally, he complied. One of the guards flanked him, while the others left the room through various exits. Several moments passed, after which Cipolla heard a voice from another room boom in a language he couldn't understand, and his final escort departed.

From the entrance that faced him, a man emerged.

There were few times in Mario Cipolla's life when he felt he knew the mind of the Creator, but this was most certainly one of them - and the thought in the Lord's mind when he fashioned this man, Cipolla decided, was simply: "make him **big**". The figure stepping into the room was very nearly eight feet tall, and had to be almost a quarter-ton of solid muscle and thick bone. His hair was dishwater-blond and very short, parted slightly to one side. The man's jaw was square and strong, and his fierce eyes - an eerie color of red Mario hoped was artificial - bored straight through the Sicilian mercenary like cutting lasers. The giant - for that is certainly what he was - sported a black and olive

body armor, flexible at the limbs, but with hard chitinous plates on the pectorals, shoulders, forearms, kneecaps, and shins - as well as a high-raised hard collar that encircled the sides and back of his neck. The man sat in the chair across from Cipolla, and spoke to him in what seemed a British-accented voice. "Welcome, Mister Cipolla. We have been expecting your visit."

Cipolla snorted. "I have been assisting the Invid for nearly a decade - and I will not speak to anyone except the Hive Commander! I certainly will not discuss what I have to say with some giant knuckle-dragging flunky human sent in to intimidate me. I am insulted by this outrage!"

The Goliath across the table from him shifted uncertainly in his chair, and asserted in a softer voice, "Mr. Cipolla, I assure you I am authorized to speak for the Invid in this region in all matters. . ."

Cipolla crossed his arms and stared at the monster, and adamantly repeated his refusal. "I demand to speak to the Hive Commander!"

"I'm afraid that's not possible," the giant replied. Straightening up, he pulled a wicked knife - its blade nearly seven inches long with a blood channel cut out of the middle - from his boot, and enclosed his fingers around it, grimacing as the edges cut into his palm.

Perplexed, Cipolla watched as the expression on the man's face transmuted from conciliation to pain, and then to command - and jumped slightly as the man abruptly stood and slammed his open palm on the table before him. He slowly dragged his hand back towards him, leaving a trail of blood - **green** blood - on the table, before he clenched his fist into a ball, and sat down again.

"The Hive Commander is not available at the moment. I am her superior - Kharoth, European Regional Theater Commander of the Invid Nation. You may discuss your business with me," he said with a voice that sounded rather like what a mountain might, were it gifted with speech.

"But. . . but you look **human**!"

"Looks can deceive. Now, what has brought you to us?"

Cipolla spent a moment collecting his thoughts, and said, "I seek a favor, and can offer a favor in return. One that will allow you to do something you have wanted to do for a long time, at minimal cost to you."

"Go on. . ."

* * *

Michael escorted Lihra back to the hotel room they had been sharing in Ohlfantoma, and bade Milo farewell for the night. As they entered the room, Michael noted the time - it was just after 1:00 AM, and he wasn't very tired. Exhilarated would have been a more apt description, considering the energy he'd soaked up from the audience he'd just come back from playing for. Lihra was equally energized, and she clung to his arm the entire way back, and dragged him to the bed as soon as he'd shut the door, sitting next to him, and looking with adoring eyes as she thanked him for taking her to the club to hear him play.

"It was amazing," she raved. "I almost forgot I was surrounded by Zentraedi!"

"I saw you dancing with one." Michael smiled, and stroked his bearded face.

"His name was Frandar. He was very nice, and wouldn't even admit that I was trampling all over his toes."

Michael kicked off his shoes. If there was any part of him that was tired, it was definitely his feet. "Well, I'm glad you enjoyed yourself."

"It was even better than the festival - I understood more of what was going on around me, and I . . . loved the music. It was amazing."

Michael laughed, and stood up, wandering over to the mini-bar in the hotel room. "Would you like something to drink?"

"Something without alcohol, please. I don't think it agrees very well with my metabolism."

Michael nodded, and poured himself a double of Scotch. He brought Lihra some locally-bottled cherry-flavored soda, hoping it wasn't too caffeinated. His prisoner was wired as it was. "Well, I'm hoping this drink relaxes me a little bit. I need to get up early tomorrow - my business in this town isn't finished, despite the fun we've been having. I'll sleep on the sofa over there--"

Lihra stopped him, saying, "I'm really not all that tired. Can we keep talking until one of us falls asleep? I have so much. . ."

"No problem." Michael handed the alien a fairly conservative nightgown the pair had purchased early in the day, and said, "Change into this while I'm in the bathroom. I'll be back in a few."

When the door shut behind him, Lihra stripped out of the warm clothing she'd put on for the evening trip to the club, and donned the article of clothing Michael had given her.

Michael emerged from the bathroom, and before he had the opportunity to lie down was interrupted by a knock on the door.

"I'm sorry; let me get this," he said, heading across the room to receive their visitor. It was Grondahl.

"I'm sorry to disturb you and your wife, Commander Austin," Grondahl said, accepting without question the lie he'd been told about Lihra's status. "May I come in?" His face was ashen, and wracked with concern.

"Certainly, come - can I get you something?" Michael asked, turning on the lights.

"Yes, please. Gin, if the mini-bar has it. Straight." Grondahl walked to the desk in the corner of the hotel room, and turned on a light atop it. "Commander, do you recognize these structures? The Invid have been building them like mad since several months before your fleet folded into Earth-space - about the time a smaller task-force arrived," he asked, revealing a dozen photographs of some sort of Invid installation, three hundred and fifty or so meters in height.

"That would be the 7th Marine Division," Michael noted. "They were scheduled to have arrived and set up an advance base in South America - 'Point K' - last April. We lost contact with them and presume that the expedition was destroyed or marooned. But either way, it looks like we tipped off the Invid to our return too soon." Michael looked at the Invid structures in the photographs Grondahl had given him. The design was that of a thick burnt-orange column some seventy meters in diameter, narrowing in the middle, and widening at the top. The uppermost sixty meters sported a yellowish dome, like an Invid hive's outer shell, only in miniature. Surrounding the structures in a circle were between six and eight thin spires, looking much like three-hundred meter tall black cotton swabs. The structures were all nearly identical, though all the photographs were obviously taken at different locations.

"I recognize them. Saxony has been wondering what they were, and asked me if I knew. I'm afraid this isn't something we encountered in the REF. From the size, shape, and inferred mecha complement, my guess was that it's simply a new design of forward outpost and small patrol base - sort of a sub-hive. Perhaps it's something of a supply depot as well. That's what I told Saxony. Why?"

"An hour ago, at midnight, our AWACS planes' radar suddenly became unable to penetrate much further than fifty miles from the city. Something was broadcasting radio noise on all frequencies with such incredible intensity that long-range radar became useless. They could, however, triangulate the source of the noise - and it was coming from the two towers they've built near their hives in England and Ireland."

"What about those on the continent?" Michael asked, alarmed.

“Well, though long-range radar is down, we’ve been able to get VLF radio transmissions through - by using small booster stations we’ve built over the last few years. The quality of the transmissions is poor and scratchy, but we’ve contacted both Saxony and our agents on the Continent. It seems that every one of these the Invid have built in Europe has switched on simultaneously. I am open for speculation.”

“You want my guess? I say it’s an ECM array. The Invid may be developing a defense against the REF when it finally returns. The Regis’ forces have the ability to track protoclature emissions with fairly good range and resolution, and use this as their primary threat detection technology. It seems that they’re trying to deny us ours - radar - at least on a strategic level.”

“But why now?” Grondahl asked. “And why all over Europe?”

“A full-scale acceptance test of the system? Saxony’s had no intelligence indicating a build-up of forces for a continent-wide assault.”

“Our intelligence says the same thing. Perhaps. . .” Grondahl paused, deep in thought.

“I’d put your defenses on alert, anyway. I doubt they’d launch a continent-wide attack, but it’s better to be safe than sorry. At least until these ‘broadcast towers’ switch off.”

“Already done. What bothers me about this is that the Invid can perform tricks like these towers, with no warning, no hint, no foreshadowing.” The Zentraedi sipped the glass Michael had handed him, and looked over the photographs once again. “It’s times like this that we appreciate how very little we know about them - even those of us who have fought them all our lives. They are simply so alien - we can’t understand their way of thinking, we can’t understand their technologies, we can’t capture or bribe informants. We try to gather intelligence, but usually it’s no more useful than an entry in a travel gazetteer. For all our experience, we’re always in the dark with the Invid.”

“It certainly complicates things,” Michael mused, his thoughts turning to his prisoner.

“Anyway,” Grondahl added, “if anything else comes to mind, call the command center - I’m leaving their phone extension here on the desk. If you’ll excuse me,” Grondahl said, finishing the gin Michael had poured him. “I must get some sleep. I will see you in the morning, when we can confer further on this matter.” Grondahl bowed deeply to Lihra - who had been watching the brief exchange intently - and exited the room.

Michael paused for a few minutes, sitting in silence at the desk, gazing over the photographs and downing another Scotch. Lihra walked gently over to him, and gently placed her hands on his shoulders.

Michael brusquely brushed them off. "Okay, playtime is over. What the hell is going on here, Lihra?" he demanded with an intensity Lihra had never seen in him.

"I can't tell-

Michael grabbed her by the shoulders firmly and shouted in his thoughts, *You can, and you will!*

"All that I know, you have already guessed. They are molecular wide-band radio noise broadcast towers, for denying you your strategic radar. Considering their effect, you don't need me to tell you their power requirements and capabilities - you can infer that for yourself. Your guess that this is an operational acceptance test is probably correct. . ."

"You're not telling me everything!" Michael demanded.

"No, I'm not!" Lihra screamed, pushing him away. "I may look like you. I may be moved by your words and your music. I may even feel a fondness for you as a friend. But I am an Invid, and I will not betray my people, not for you or anybody!"

"My people will die if you don't come clean with me. There's not much left of my world-

"And my people will die if I reveal anything! There is not much left of us either, after six hundred and fifty years of living in flight and terror, terror of the Zentraedi fleets on one hand, and of starvation on the other!"

Michael looked at her for a moment, and grabbed a blanket. "I'm going to sleep," he announced, heading for the sofa. "I suggest you do the same."

Lihra lay down on the bed and curled up, wanting to scream in rage and frustration but not finding the voice, wanting to weep in anger and hurt but not finding the tears.

* * *

Jeanne stepped off the Cyclone and swore. The trail was getting increasingly hard to follow, and she was growing increasingly worried.

The alien party seemed to include only three of the Bioroid mecha and some sort of cargo vehicle, probably a modified version of the Bioroids' hoversleds. Still, the complement of individuals was more than twice that, not including Laurie and Roger.

Jeanne grumbled slightly. Even before this, the group was beginning to leave a bad taste in her mouth. There was Michael, and his stubborn insistence on paying complete attention to every woman he met except her, and then there was Milo - Jeanne got along with him well enough, but his attitude was beginning to grate on everyone, ever since their alien prisoner fell from the skies.

But Laurie was the part that made her guts tie up into knots. She couldn't prove that she had been the object of Michael's attentions, but Jeanne's suspicions were good enough for her. *That bitch*, she thought. *She's way past her prime, and isn't all that interesting to start with. Why the hell is he with her?* she asked herself. *And now here I am, with the pleasure of trying to save her from some goddamned Bioroid idiots. I suppose Michael'll be happy I brought her back to him. Lotta damned good that does **me**!*

Jeanne checked her weapon. The trail may have been harder to follow than she would have liked, but she felt she was getting close. *Shit. How the hell am I going to deal with them when I **do** find them? If I'm not careful, I'll end up dead, or a prisoner like the others.*

Pausing briefly for a breath of the spring night's air, Jeanne remounted Milo's Cyclone and continued her pursuit.

* * *

Roger's eyes examined the trio of clones that occupied the cargo vehicle in which their equipment had been haphazardly loaded. It was plain to him that the leader, a slim man who appeared to be about Roger's age, was eyeing him with equal scrutiny. The clones weren't speaking much, and what they did say was in Tiresian, a language Roger had never acquired, despite its syntactical similarities to Zentraedi, which he had learned in his days with the Armies of the Southern Cross. This bothered him greatly - it would have been nice to be able to divine the aliens' motives for holding him and Laurie prisoner from overhearing an off-hand comment or two. The motives for the theft of their hovertransport's equipment were transparent enough; their faces had 'scavenger' written all over them.

Roger's mind raced with plans for escape. Nothing presented itself as reasonable. They were tightly bound at hand and foot, and there were three armed clones within spitting distance of them. Even were they able to bolt for freedom, there was the minor issue of the three Bioroids that were outside, escorting the cargo vehicle.

If Roger was set ill at ease by their captivity, he could see that Laurie was faring far worse. The combination of nerves and the cold air had Laurie shivering violently, and her fear was leaking through her attempt at composure.

Roger turned to her, whispering, "Laurie, are you okay there?"

"Yeah. . . just fine," she replied haltingly. "In fact, I think I might even open a health clinic. 'Get captured by clones and lose ten fucking pounds a week. No, I'm **not** bloody okay!'"

Laurie's outburst had caught the lead clone's attention, and he sauntered over to her, pointing the barrel of a Tirolian particle-beam carbine at Laurie's temple. "Silence," he said, "or you will be silenced with this!"

Roger's eyes lit up, and he shouted, "Hey, leave her alone, asshole! You've got our equipment; what the hell do you want with us?"

The clone smiled a sadistic grin, and smashed Roger over the head with his weapon. Roger was knocked on his back, and rolled to his side, moaning. "I said 'silence', you filthy Earther, and I will have silence. Or I **will** shoot your friend here."

Roger's head pounded from the pain, and he anticipated quite a lump on the side of his head in a few days. *We last heard from Jeanne only a few minutes before they ambushed us. I really hope she's hot on our trail,* he thought over the throbbing of his skull.

* * *

"Well, I hope you're satisfied with yourself, Kharoth," said the Britain hive commander, an extremely lithe and pale *Solugi* named Doriel. "You pretend to hate theatrics, but you are just as enamored of them as the Regis," she accused, running her fingers through her lilac-colored hair. The sensation was quite new for her, and she couldn't overcome the compulsion to explore her new form. "Carving open your hand, for a demonstration. . . how preposterous! Were you in your old body, you would have bled to death before your wound could be tended to."

"But I am not in my old body." Kharoth walked casually to his subordinate, and looked into her pale green eyes, smirking. "We must all be indulged in our vices, now and again."

Doriel offered a haughty sigh, and turned away. "Vices, indeed! You seem far too eager to test the limits of your new body. I want to know what you will do when you have exceeded them."

Kharoth's smile waned. "I am sure that you are aware that the Regis has chosen us to be the first not as an honor, but to test the form. Why she transmuted Lihra before she was convinced of the stability of this form is beyond me, but you, Merog, and I are prototypes. It is precisely the uncertainty of our limits that we exist to probe."

"That may be. But do you not doubt the wisdom of revealing yourself to the humans so early? What if this 'Cipolla' reveals your nature to others?"

"He will not be believed. If he is, I will probably be viewed as a one-of-a-kind construct. But if discretion were the Regis' intent, do you think she would have had the *Gosu's* canopy provide such a spectacular view of its pilot?"

"Discretion has never been one of Mother's strong points," interjected Merog as he entered the chamber. He sported a body armor similar to that of his siblings, but was far more lanky and gymnastic than Kharoth, and almost two feet shorter. "Patience, discipline, foresight, perhaps. . ."

"Welcome, old friend," Kharoth said to his lieutenant. "It is good to see you again, even if it is not quite the same you I have known since we emerged from the hatchery."

"And you, Kharoth," Merog noted. Both Invid were old enough to remember the days before their arrival on Earth, unlike their sisters Doriel and Lihra, and had fought together across the Galaxy during the final days of the Invid resistance against Tirol. "I welcomed the Regis' assignment of me to your command - it will be like old times again."

Kharoth led the others back to the conference room where he had earlier met with the human agent, and sat at the head of the table. "The old times will never come again, Merog," he noted, sitting at the table. Several drone-caste Invid entered the room, unadorned save for a light robe, carrying trays of food suitable for their commanders' new bodies. "We will never be the same Invid - no, with our change in form will soon come a change in our entire society, whether the Regis likes to admit it or not."

Doriel nibbled at some of the bread put before her, and expressed her doubts. "New bodies or no, we are still Invid, Kharoth."

"Are we?" he asked. "Perhaps the first generation of *Solugi* will be, as we still remember the days of the hive. But when all of us are transformed, there will be no more hive. We will have no queen-mother to gather around, and at most three or four siblings each."

Merog laughed. "I am willing to surrender some of my old nature, if it means keeping this new body!" He stretched forth his arms, palms uplifted, almost knocking over Doriel's drink. "Look at us! Look at how strong we are, how robustly we are built!"

Our blood pressure is almost non-existent, our skeleton is as hard as stone. We will not dry out in the sun, or bloat in water. Hot and cold, wind and humidity - none affect us as before. One thing is for certain, nature made humans rugged. And our senses! I never imagined that light could be so vivid, that there was so much color to the world. I can imitate noises far beyond the limited range left to us before. . .”

“And we shall spend even more of our time trying to acquire food - as the Flower of Life is now insufficient for our needs. We lose the non-breeding castes, so no female is expendable anymore. We are now exposed to desires and needs we only barely understand.”

Doriel picked at the meat before her. Like all Invid, a vegetarian in her previous incarnation, she was hesitant to consume the flesh of any other animal, however primitive. “One almost might think from your words, Kharoth, that you are opposed to the Regis’ decision to follow the path of enlightened evolution.”

“Opposed? No. I am certain, however, that we have taken the first step down a path that will destroy the Invid nation as it has been. Our bodies will be forever gone, and even our culture and values will change as new generations reinvent what it means to be an Invid, and also to be an individual.”

Merog heartily consumed the dinner before him, and added, “I find it no mystery, then, that the Royalty are the first to be transmuted. It will be to us to reinvent our society in the appropriate fashion - so that the lower-castes that come after us will be able to be brought up in the proper environment. No longer will the Royalty be the literal parents of all Invid, but morally and intellectually, we shall still be. All will be as the Spirit of Light has required of us, and with our efforts, all will be as promised.”

Kharoth grumbled. Religion never sat well with him; another of Mother’s theatrics, as he saw it. He knew Lihra would have upbraided him for such sentiments, but she was still missing - presumably a captive of the humans, if they hadn’t executed her. “Another matter is pressing my attention, and this is why I have summoned you to me, Merog.” Kharoth pensively clasped his hands together in front of his face, and stared past his uplifted forefingers. “I have been offered an opportunity to finally take decisive action against the descendants of our ancient oppressors, and I plan to seize it soon.”

“We are to attack the Zentraedi?” Doriel asked.

Kharoth smiled subtly. “We are to attack the Zentraedi.”

* * *

“Well, what should we do with them?” one of the warrior clones inquired of the party’s senior officer. “We have their equipment. Why do we continue to carry this useless baggage?”

“It is not your place to question, Allarno,” Cabor, the lead Bioroid pilot, replied icily. “These have value to us.”

“And if we are being followed? Steal something of value, and the owners will hunt you to the ends of the universe. If nothing else, the Invid should have taught us that.”

“That is why I have sent the others on patrol. We will make the crossing in the morning, and will then be among our people again, and safe, if that is what concerns you.”

“What concerns me-” Allarno began, before a bullet tore through his back, shattering his spine. The three other clones looked about, but all they could see was darkness. Another shot rang out, and a second was crippled, this time by a wound to the neck.

“Where are you?” demanded Cabor of the cold night air. Besides his prisoners, he was now alone. “Show yourself, or I will kill them,” he threatened nervously, indicating his prisoners.

“That wouldn’t be wise, clone,” a female voice shouted from a distance in the Tiresian tongue. “I can have your brains out of the back of your head before you can even think of pulling the trigger. Now put your weapon down. **Now!**”

Cabor complied.

“Now lie face down on the ground, hands on top of your head.”

Again, Cabor did as he was told. “You realize that the others will be returning soon,” he blustered, his mouth in the cold dirt.

The heavy footfalls of military boots slowly grew louder in his ears, and soon he felt the barrel of a gun pressed against his neck, and the sole of a boot on his back. “I’m pissing in my panties,” Jeanne mocked in English. “You see, buckaroo, I have you. And you are going to take me to your command triumvirate, and I shall have a word with them about your conduct. Your men - those that can still walk, that is - will form my escort.”

“Who are you?” Cabor demanded.

Jeanne returned to his native tongue, and forcefully replied, “I am a soldier in the army that liberated Tirol from the Invid and now administrates it the request of Proconsul Cabell. I am the daughter of the current Commandant of D’leratia Military Academy of Tiresia, a position by ancient law held only by a member of the first Senatorial order,” Jeanne snorted. “By genetic right, that makes **me** a Robotech Master, and you will obey

me, as you obeyed the Masters of the past. And by abducting my comrades-in-arms, you have committed an act of mutiny, and for this you will be punished. Now, on your feet, and help your men. I shot to cripple, and do not want to see their lives wasted needlessly.”

“You speak in our tongue and command as a Master,” Cabor taunted as he stanchd the bleeding of his companions and carried them to the group’s cargo hauler, “but I doubt your claim that you - an alien - legitimately hold Senatorial rank. We shall see how haughty you are when my superiors put it to the test.”

“Indeed. And we shall see you at the very least re-educated, if I have any say in the matter,” Jeanne retorted, unbinding Laurie and Roger. “Now move! When your troops return, you will direct them to obey my directives, or you will join those two there,” she menaced, pointing her rifle at the still-moaning Allarno.

* * *

The sight with which the trio of resistance fighters was greeted as they were escorted into the underground shelter saddened her. Though high-tech equipment littered the entire place, the people who had once been the archons of the Galaxy appeared to live in abject squalor. Pairs and triads of clones huddled around heaters, while others slept fitfully or sought out food from the ration line. There were even a few children about. Jeanne knew little of the social hierarchy of the Triumviroids, since they had been an artificial population isolated from the start on the Masters’ motherships for centuries, and had by all accounts diverged culturally from the native human population of Tirol. She knew that some of the clones - the most fit, according to the Masters’ standards of eugenics - did reproduce biologically, though many were simply constructed from basic genetic stock. And even those children that were born to the loveless arranged couplings were themselves always identical triplets, though on occasion a Y chromosome would be missed in one, and a woman might appear in a triumvirate with two brothers. But current circumstances seemed to have eliminated the policies and culture of the ancient absentee rulers of Tirol, and their once noble finery was now torn and faded.

“In here,” pointed Cabor’s senior subordinate. Jeanne, Laurie, and Roger entered a smaller rough-hewn antechamber set apart from the common area. They waited for a few moments, and Jeanne was then directed into the command triumvirate’s meeting room, while Roger and Laurie remained in the antechamber, as food and drinks were brought to them.

Jeanne saw three men, identical in appearance and wearing long collared robes, standing around a mushroom-shaped console, and strode into the room toward them.

“We understand you have business with us,” one of a set of middle-aged triplets told Jeanne in a basso voice. “We have examined your claim of command, and reject it. New appointments to the first Senatorial order may only come with the Robotech Elders’ approval, and not from another Senator such as Cabell. Whatever titles your people hold on our ancient homeworld, they have no meaning for us.”

“It makes no difference to me. I made the claim not because I expected it to be accepted, but because I needed a means by which to see you.”

“Yes; your actions were very bold. For that, you have our admiration,” the second in the triumvirate answered.

“First, I would like to know the conditions of the clones I was forced to wound earlier. Will they recover?” Jeanne inquired.

“Eventually, yes,” the third of the group answered. “Both of their spinal cords were severed - I gather this was your intent - but we are preparing neural repair. It will cost us much in the precious enzymes derived from protoculture to do it, but let that expense be our fine for the conduct of our officer.”

“Why did he abduct our people?” Jeanne asked.

“We are not quite certain yet,” the second answered. “Though it seems when our scavenging party came upon them, Cabor recognized the male as having a bounty on his head in the German Principalities. We are a poor people, Lieutenant Ducasse. We have none of our own food, or clothing, or materials such as this. We are forced to trade our bio-services and technology for whatever scraps you humans will give us. We supplement that income by selling scavenged and repaired mecha and equipment, and some of our more overzealous field commanders turn to bounty hunting. I doubt he knew that your compatriot was wanted because of his ties to the anti-Invid resistance.”

“That bounty’s old news to me. But I expect Cabor will be disciplined.”

“Yes, he will be. We apologize to you for the error in his judgment.”

Jeanne relaxed slightly, and looked at the three impassively. “Since I am here, I need to inform you that Saxony is putting together a coalition against the Invid. We are looking for others to help us in a major offensive soon to be launched against Invid targets throughout Europe.”

“We are aware of the activity,” the first replied.

“Will you consider throwing in your strength with us?”

The third scowled. “Look around you, Lieutenant. This hovel is one of two dozen refuges for our people in the land we nominally control. All are like this, and we have

many more we keep hidden and unoccupied, and by cover of night we move from one to another, trying to stay hidden, trying to avoid the watchful eye of the Invid. Would you have us draw that eye to us by attacking the Invid?"

"I would have you help us pluck out that eye, sir," Jeanne answered coldly.

"We were a proud people," the second added. "We once ruled an empire with thousands of worlds in our grasp. First civil war, and then the Invid, brought us low. Depleted and desperate, we came to your world to follow the secrets of Zor's battlefortress. In the war that followed, our civilization was finally destroyed. Some managed to go to Tirol before the Invid came, but the rest of us have been hiding since that terrible day. All for the possession of a flower. Our lot mocks us, but at least we remain. What hope is there for us, what promise can there be that if we sacrifice now that our lives will be made the better for it?"

Jeanne stared him in the eyes, and answered, "Come with me to Ohlfantoma. I will show you."

* * *

"Good afternoon, Commander Austin."

Michael looked up from his bowl of Highland cheese soup as he sat alone inside a quaint restaurant in the center of town enjoying a light lunch. "Ah, Mario. Glad you could join me. Have a seat?"

"Yes, thank you." Cipolla pulled a chair out from the table, and sat across from Austin. "So what looks good today?" he asked.

"You ought to try the Welsh walnut salad - that's quite nice. And don't worry - there's chicken in it."

"Hmm. . ." Cipolla leafed through the menu pensively. "I'm more inclined for something from the entrees."

"I haven't seen you around the last couple of days, Mario." Michael noted.

"I've been trying to line up my next job," he replied somewhat truthfully. In reality, he had been gathering information - sensitive information - about the Zentraedi city's defenses. Those of his men who had been making sure Austin's group (or anyone else) would not be returning to the continent via the Chunnel, and were thus not with the squad that had been killed by Laurie, had come upon a fortuitous surprise. They had managed to kidnap an engineer who had recently worked with the gun systems as he and his family were en route to Saxony, where he was taking a new job to help the Saxons repair and maintain their burgeoning complement of mecha. A little torture of the man's

children was all that was needed to convince him to surrender the more useful information about the Zentraedi defenses, and how they might be rendered ineffective. The opportunity was too choice to pass up, and when he was informed of the development, it was motivation enough for Cipolla to immediately have set out for the Invid hive to meet with the Invid. Obtaining Kharoth's collaboration, he quietly returned to Ohlfantoma to finish the job.

Time was running short for Cipolla. The now-deceased engineer would be expected in Saxony in another day or so, and if he were to turn up missing, there would be a high probability that security at the Zentraedi air defense stations would be improved. As it was, he learned, the security was supposedly shockingly poor, and a little discreet observation of his own seemed to confirm this. He and the Invid would have to move soon, and the agreed-upon date was fast approaching.

If he and his people are not killed by the Invid attack, Cipolla mused as he looked across from Austin, who had returned to his meal, It should be easy for me to finish him in the confusion of the battle or immediately after. He'll simply turn up missing, I shall get my bounty from KönigsLöw - or if he doesn't make it to Polyarnny alive, I'm sure I can sell Austin's head to the Invid - and no one will suspect my role in Austin's disappearance, and no one will be coming after me for retribution. You have powerful friends, Mister Austin. Better for me to perform my duty discreetly than to run afoul of them.

"Any prospects?" Michael asked.

"Hmm?" Cipolla replied, a little startled. "Oh, yes. And I am happy to say that it will earn me enough to retire."

"A rich man?" Michael added jovially, alluding to their prior conversation.

"Yes, reasonably enough. Enough so for me to add my blessing to your wish that this be the war to end all wars." Mario laughed softly, and turned to the waitress, and ordered a glass of wine and some smoked salmon.

"What do you plan to do?"

"Well. . . You wouldn't believe me."

Michael looked up from his soup, a quizzical expression on his face. "Try me."

Mario leaned back in his seat, and scratched his chin. "Well, oddly enough, I was raised in the country, and I would very much like to return to it. And no one in the isles knows me, so I can leave my past behind. I think I shall purchase a cottage in lowlands and raise sheep - that is something I can do. It would be hard work for my hands, but my heart will find leisure."

"I like it," Michael beamed. "And I can definitely see you doing it."

“And you, Commander? What are your hopes for when the war is over?”

Michael thought for a minute. “I haven’t had a true home since my mother died when I was a boy. And I’ve certainly not had a place I truly call my own. I’d like to change that. Perhaps to build a house with my own two hands, overlooking the ocean. I will wake every morning to the sound of the waves crashing on the shore, and smell the fresh sea air. Yes, I think that is what I’ll look forward to.”

“We are very much men of one mind, Michael.” Mario sipped the glass the waitress had just placed on the table for him. “I will miss you, my friend.” *And I shall*, he thought sadly. *It is a pity this war has made a fine fellow such as you my enemy, Commander. Far more so that circumstance forces me to appear to you as a friend until it is too late.*

Michael grinned. “We’ll most certainly visit one another, and meet in taverns like this one, and tell war stories just as old soldiers always have done, and we will pretend we miss the days where our blood ran hot and we lived by our wits and the skin of our teeth, rather than looking forward to dying in our beds as old men.”

There will be no visits or reminiscences for us, my friend, Cipolla thought. *Not, at least, in this life.*

* * *

“Doriel, wake,” nudged Kharoth gently. The female Invid stirred in the hastily-assembled bedchamber her hive’s central core, near the incubation chamber for the eggs of the reigning sub-queen - of whom Doriel had been named successor before she had been adopted by the All-mother, the Regis, and nominated for her new body. Doriel offered a prayer to her hive-mother, and telepathic blessings were immediately received by the hive’s military commander from the hive matriarch. The recipient’s heart leapt with the sense of warmth that her hive-mother’s benediction gave.

Doriel rolled over and opened her eyes. “Good morning, my lord,” she said to her commander as she rose to her feet.

“I have taken the liberty of having the drones prepare a morning meal for us,” Kharoth noted.

“Thank you. It is quite the bother to keep all these new complicated gastrointestinal organs we now possess satisfied. But though my sense of smell is not one tenth as keen as it was before, I can still taste the scent of the food in my nose, and it makes my insides churn,” she noted with anticipation, a graceful smile on her face.

Kharoth laughed, and looked down fondly at his diminutive subordinate. There was something about her new shape that touched him in a way he barely understood; the soft gentle curve of her flesh over its new skeleton, the play of the light on her hair and face. *Is this what sexual attraction is to be for us now?* he wondered. Kharoth had already fathered a hive many decades ago, and he could only barely remember his mate, and certainly could never remember any attraction during their one six-hour coupling; an irrational compulsion, certainly, but nothing like he felt now as he walked along a young sub-queen junior enough to have been, had they been in their old bodies, two or three hive-generations removed from him. His former mate's hive, and their brood, had been mostly killed by Zentraedi in the final days of the war against the Masters, when the Regis' wisdom compelled her to abandoned her partner and take the bulk of the survivors of her race elsewhere, to follow the bright path of hope instead of the dark trail of vengeance.

Kharoth placed a massive hand on her shoulder as they walked through the hive's corridors, and wondered faintly if she was experiencing the same odd new sensations with regards to him. Still, there would be time to explore this later - for now, the business at hand was far more paramount. The two emerged in the same chamber where they had dined with Merog the night before, and prepared to seat themselves to break the night's fast.

"Preparations for the attack are already underway, Doriel," he interjected suddenly. "I must travel to the other hives very soon and ready the troops."

Doriel bowed deeply. "I will make my soldiers ready for the attack. We will launch at your command, my lord."

"Excellent. In two days we will see the elimination of one of the greatest obstacles left to us on this planet. Seven hundred years ago, our forebears' fields and hives on Optera were burned by the Zentraedi. Soon the greater part of the Zentraedi remnant that lingers here on Earth will themselves burn."

* * *

Jeanne stepped off the docks, looking warily about her as the Triumviroid delegates were escorted off the small boat by the Ohlfantoman security, to be taken to their respective quarters. She quickly recognized Michael - he was the only one remaining still in the midst of the activity.

"I was hoping for a welcoming committee," Jeanne admitted dryly, casting Michael a cool glance.

“Budget cuts,” Michael replied. “I was all they could afford,” he suggested, offering a broad grin.

“Their finances must be pretty desperate,” Jeanne spat lightheartedly.

“Roger and Laurie are heading off the hotel we’re staying at; I’ve staked out a room for you as well. If you’d like, we can head over there, and you can take a long, hot shower while I haul your clothes to the laundromat and give them the once-over. You’re free for the rest of the day, on the condition that you let me tag along; I want the opportunity to debrief you, and to bring you up to speed on what’s been going on here.”

Jeanne approached Michael and smirked. “I’m sorry, Commander. I stopped listening to you after the words ‘long, hot shower’.”

“I thought you would have. Come on,” he said, leading her to a jeep. Their driver was patiently trying to find a local radio station that was coming through over the static, and was not having much success. He perked up when the pair climbed into the vehicle, and without a word being exchanged, started the engine to take them to the hotel.

As the buildings rolled past them, Michael pointed out the city’s amenities to Jeanne, whose mood softened as she found places she later wanted to explore, and learned that they were being allowed to shop on the city’s tab. “I’d like some clothes; something to work in, and some new underwear.”

“Yeah,” Michael joked. “We’d all gotten pretty desperate in that department. What else? They’ve got some really great book-stores. I picked up a few to read myself in my off-time.”

“Music,” Jeanne replied. “I want to pick up ‘Rubber Soul’. I love that album, and haven’t heard it in ages. And I need to visit an gunsmith. I have some ideas for my H&K. I want to see if I can’t get them to convert it into something like a 5.56mm version of the PSG-1; maybe if I can get them to mate it to one of those old Bushmaster 26 inch fluted barrels for the XM-15E2S. . . That and a new stock, sniper pistol grip, and hand-guard. I’ve got these great optics we scavenged, and they’re so much more accurate than the gun. I want to change that.”

“Jeanne, you scare me when you talk like that,” Michael cried, bursting out into laughter.

Ducasse formed her lips to launch into a retort, and then thought better of it.

Soon, the vehicle and the pair arrived at the hotel, and Michael escorted Jeanne upstairs in silence. They entered the room, and Jeanne made a bee-line for the bathroom, closing the door behind her. “You know,” she shouted through the door as she was disrobing, “I’m pretty pissed at you.”

“Is this a new sort of pissed, or the usual pissed I always make you?” Michael asked, sitting on the bed.

“I can’t believe you were here putting on a rock concert while I was tracking down the Triumviroids who kidnapped Roger and **Laurie**,” with a special acrid emphasis on the name of Michael’s paramour, “and ransacked the Hovertransport! And I didn’t even get to hear you play on stage again for the first time in how many years?”

“I’ll try to get you a bootleg tape,” Michael replied.

“Some consolation.”

“How bad was it? The transport, I mean,” Michael asked.

“Well, I got them to agree to return everything, though I wouldn’t be surprised if some things come up missing. Here,” she suggested, opening the door a crack and tossing out her soiled clothes onto the floor outside the bathroom. “Now make yourself useful as well as ornamental and go wash these, so I won’t stink when I go off looking for new ones.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll be back in an hour and a half.”

“Good, I was thinking of indulging myself with a bath **and** a shower, and then I plan to write an essay comparing and contrasting the two, from the perspective of someone who hasn’t had either in too damned long,” she shouted after Michael as he slipped out the hotel room’s door, chuckling and carrying a heap of laundry in his arms.

* * *

“Hi there,” Michael beamed as Laurie cracked open the door to her hotel room. He was hoping to catch Laurie awake - Jeanne had mentioned that Laurie had been extremely worn out from her ordeal, and went straight to bed for a long nap. In that time, Michael had accompanied Jeanne on her errands, and had caught her up on the status of the negotiations, and of the emissions from the alien broadcast towers.

“Mind if I come in?” he asked sheepishly.

Laurie opened the door wider.

Michael gently put a hand on her shoulder, kissed her on the cheek, and then wandered inside. He found a comfortable chair, testing its cushions with his hands, into which he promptly planted his posterior.

Laurie remained silent, closed the door, and sat upon the bed, facing him. “I’m glad you dropped by,” she said meekly.

“I wanted to see how you’re holding up. I’ve been told you went through a rough time the last couple of days. Do you want to talk about it?”

Laurie shook her head. “No, I’m fine now. I’m just really tired. I just got up from a nap a minute ago to order something from room service, and am probably heading back to bed soon after. It was pretty grueling.” Laurie stood up and walked to Michael’s chair, setting herself in his lap and throwing her arms around him in a heartfelt embrace. “I hate this war,” she exclaimed suddenly.

Michael chuckled, and tightened his arms around her waist. “You and me both.”

“We really need to talk, Michael. I mean, about us.”

“I know. We can’t put this thing, whatever it is, off forever.”

Laurie squirmed in Michael’s lap, and he shifted his weight in the chair to allow her to sit more comfortably. Laurie nuzzled her cheek against his, and whispered in his ear, “I think I’m weaker than you.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I want so much to tell you off - to make you show a little seriousness to the relationship before I let you get close to me. And I can’t do it. I just keep wanting to have you any way I can, committed or not, serious or not.”

“No, I’m definitely the weak one,” Michael offered. Here you are, with all this sincerity and - God, I hate this word - love, and I don’t have the guts to return it. I’m really sorry for that.”

“You don’t have to be sorry. Jeanne’s told me what you’ve been through. I know what it means to have someone stolen from me; my daughter may still be alive, but I’ll probably never see her again.”

“Jeanne told you? Did you two-”

“We talked a lot on the way back, and I have to say I think we understand each other a lot better. She told me about Dahlori-4 and Vikki, and I told her about Richard and Susan; more even than I’ve told you. She knows about us - **all** about us. I know she’s jealous - she told me so herself. But we’re both in love with you, and so we can put ourselves in each others’ shoes. I think I’m coming to like her; if it weren’t for you, you bastard,” she teased, “we might even have become friends.” Laurie smiled, and kissed Michael on the lips. “Her questions. . . well, some of them got **rather** personal. Then, so did mine. She even told me about all the little stuff you did for her, even after you’d started avoiding her. That was so sweet.”

Michael laughed nervously, and replied, “I don’t know if that makes me more uneasy or less.”

“You asked for it. I mean, your inner angst is your business, but you’re the one who puts on the ‘handsome charmer pilot’ act. Lord knows why I still fall for it at my age. And the more I get to know you, the more I see that it’s **not** you. It’s a façade, and

you know, it's not attractive anymore. I'd like to see more of the real you, and Jeanne would too."

Michael lowered his head. "I'll be more than happy to show you and everyone the real me as soon as I find him. I can sometimes hear him whisper to me, but I can barely make him out over all the ghosts that wander around in my head. Ghosts of people who've died, and who are still living. Memories of all the times I let the people I care about down, and when I lost them. Milo, at least, knows what I mean."

"You handle it better-"

"Do I? Hell, he only hurts himself. I'm hurting other people. It was so easy when I was young. The other women on the ships - pilots, crew, whoever - they never wanted anything deep from me, and I was all too to keep things shallow. It got so much harder when I had to start tip-toeing around people's hearts, trying not to break them. Milo drowns his sorrows in drink, I drown mine in women. What's the difference?"

"Does it work?" Laurie asked.

"Pathetically enough, yes. For a few hours, I can't hear the voices in my head."

"Then stay here tonight. No promises. No commitments. I've almost forgotten how warm your touch is, how your skin tastes, how the weight of your body on top of me feels. I want to be reminded. I want things between us to be, just for tonight, like it was back in November."

"You sure? I mean, after all the-" Michael began, before Laurie's kiss silenced him.

* * *

Michael's brow furled with frustration. What troubled him was not so much that the Triumviroid commanders were so resistant to his pleas for aid. Rather, it was the fact that he'd had precisely this same conversation, in the exact same building, only a few days before with the Ohlfantoman city council. At least this time Jeanne was there to help. She had clearly impressed the clones, and they seemed to pay more attention to her words than his.

"Please try to understand our position, Commander Austin," Churah suggested. "Yes, we have troops we can commit. But the Invid know next to nothing about us, and we conceal our numbers, so they do not hunt us. We have no defenses, like the Zentraedi here. If we expose ourselves, the Invid will come after us most of all. It may have been the Zentraedi that defoliated their world, but it was we who ordered it. We need absolute guarantees of our safety. If necessary, we need permission to relocate our people here. If

you can assure us that the Ohlfantoman Zentraedi will give us a ward of their city in which to dwell should we be forced to evacuate, and their cooperation in providing troops to the effort against the Invid, we will consider your request.”

Jeanne rose indignantly, her hands on her hips, and chastised Churah and his brothers. “You are foolish, then, to hold out on us. If the Invid hate your kind so much, and we know that they do, then it is only a matter of time before efforts are made to exterminate you. It is essential that we unite now, to keep the Invid occupied until the fleet returns! Delay will leave the Invid strong enough to repel our forces, and if our fleet is defeated, then where will you be? The last hope of your people will vanish.”

Churah turned to his brother Zened, who offered in a quiet voice, “Their points are correct. Our refusal to participate will inexorably lead to our demise, even if our participation risks it sooner.”

“Are we of one mind then, Maliro?” Churah asked the third in his triumvirate.

“We are. Commander, we will participate. But our conditions remain. You must secure the Zentraedi’s military assistance as well, as well as the right of safe passage for our civilians when the time of reckoning comes. Can you do this?”

Michael wanted to curse. *I feel like a damned volleyball, being bounced back and forth between the various camps.* “Let me get back to you; we will have to open three-party negotiations with the Zentraedi.”

Michael slouched back in his chair as the meeting adjourned. *How am I going to break this damned deadlock? The Tirolians won’t move without the Zentraedi, and the Zentraedi aren’t sure whether or not they can afford to move.*

Jeanne sensed his frustration, and placed a hand on his shoulder. “Don’t throw in the towel yet, champ,” she told him. “Something will happen - we can’t stay at loggerheads forever.”

* * *

Michael helped Lihra zip up the back of the dress they’d bought for her several days before, readying themselves to go to Blake’s mother’s apartment. “God, I haven’t been to a dinner party in ages,” Michael said as he struggled with the zipper.

“I’ve never been to one,” Lihra noted. “I assume we eat and socialize, making banter about irrelevancies.”

“That’s just about right. And don’t forget to politely complain about the hors d’oeuvres,” he added whimsically.

“Good. I can be as irrelevant as any of you,” she jabbed, not entirely cordially.

“Don’t tell me you’re still angry with me too! Sheesh, I mean, I thought I was doing so well. The only person in my close circle I was getting along with was a member of the high royalty of my sworn enemy, and the irony was just too perfect to give it up.” Michael’s tone was mixed - part of him was trying to make light of the situation, Lihra surmised, and another part was very uncomfortable.

“I was hoping to talk to you last night, to try to see if we could be friends again, even if I won’t betray my people to you. And I waited and waited. And you never came. And, in my mind, I went to look for you, and you were spending the night mating with Laurie.”

“You-”

“I can see inside your head as if it were my own, Michael,” Lihra replied coldly. “I saw, I heard, I experienced everything. I heard you try to reason out the best way to please her. I saw you contemplating every position you changed into. I felt her as you felt her, and I felt with you as you felt yourself. And I saw that deep down, you did not want to be there. And I did not want to be there either.”

“Nice picture you get of my people,” Michael muttered resignedly, “Looking through my eyes at Laurie lying on the bed with her legs up over my shoulders.”

“You shouldn’t be doing it.”

“Is that any of your business?”

“You don’t want to do it. You don’t enjoy it. It’s just like meditation for you - you focus completely on her body, and your mind empties. But you hate the next morning, when you have to talk to her, to cope with her feelings, or to see her later on and know that having done it before, she considers you obligated to do it again.”

Michael sat on the edge of the bed. “You know, you’re really beginning to annoy me. I have enough trouble with my own introspection; I don’t need you examining my thoughts to reach the same conclusions.”

“On the contrary, I think you need my voice to tell what you already know, since you clearly won’t listen to your own. Shall we go to this ‘dinner party’ now?”

* * *

“Well, I have to say that you both simply look smashing,” Querennina beamed as Michael and Lihra greeted her at her apartment’s second-floor patio. “Come in; the others have arrived, except for Mr. Swift. Do you think he’ll come?”

Michael laughed. “If there’s free food, Milo will be here.”

“Good - Roger and Blake have been helping me with the cooking, and we’ve got quite a lot of food. I hope there are a few notches left in your belt.”

Michael and Lihra took a seat on the couch across from Blake, who was in the process of being humiliated by an album of baby-pictures his mother had fished out of a drawer, using it as a visual aide as she was busily narrating what seemed to be his entire youth.

Michael leaned forward on the couch, and half-whispered to Blake, “Enjoy it while you can, kid. You’ll miss it when she’s gone, trust me.”

“I’ll have to take your word for it,” Blake offered discreetly in reply, fidgeting with his pale-green hair. “But if I get my cheeks pinched one more time, I’ll scream.”

Michael looked up, and turned to his hostess. “So what’s on the menu for tonight? It smells delightful.”

“I decided to go for a ‘linguine fra diavolo’ - it’s sort of a spicy marinara with shrimp, prawns, scallops, mushrooms, mussels, and lobster tail. For the less adventuresome, I’ve got a veal parmesana. Blake’s put together a romaine salad with a vinaigrette, and we’ve got several bottles of red wine to top it off. Jeanne told me you were fond of Italian-”

“Well, the approximations to it I could get in the fleet, using meat and vegetables from other worlds,” Michael demurred. “My older friends insisted that they’d made something rather close, but I don’t know how much to take them at their word. I can’t say I’ve ever had it with authentic and fresh ingredients. I’m positively giddy!”

“And after dinner,” she added, I have an authentic tiramisu and courtesy of my son, Richard, believe it or not, Sumatran coffee, and then I thought you might all like to watch a video.”

Roger turned the pages of the photo-album he’d been given, and noted, “I don’t see too many pictures of your brother here, Blake.”

“Richard wasn’t very photogenic,” Querennina interjected. “We lost a lot of his early pictures during the Invid invasion, and by the time things became sane again, Richard had moved out and gotten married,” she said, nodding to Laurie. “It wasn’t until much later that they moved back in with us.”

“So what happened to Richard?” Laurie asked softly. “And do you know if he took Susan with him?”

“Richard comes and goes from here, and yes, Susan is always with him. She’s becoming a very charming and intelligent little girl, and I will never forgive my son for taking him from you like he did. In fact, I made him leave a picture of her for you - he didn’t want to bother, but then he’s not a mother, and I am, so I understand, and he’s not

a Quadrono, and I am, and you do not refuse a Quadrono.” Querennina smiled, and gave her daughter-in-law a small photograph.

“Oh, God, she’s gotten so big!” Laurie noted, tears welling up in her eyes. Michael got up and leaned over Laurie’s shoulder to see the image of a smiling blonde-haired girl, who looked to be closing on her tenth birthday.

“Pretty daughter you got there,” Michael whispered gently to her. “I’m sure they’re all right, and you’ll have a chance to be a mom to her again.”

“So anyway,” Querennina added, “Richard travels a lot, and he never tells me where he’s going or why. But I’ve noticed him pick up a lot of strange languages, ones from regions of Earth I’m not familiar with. And he brings back some exotic gifts. . .”

Blake wandered into the kitchen to put the finishing touches on the food and to check the veal to see if it wasn’t overcooked, and called out, “Mom, I think it’s all ready.”

“Wonderful! All of you, feel free to take a seat,” their hostess said, indicating the dinner table. “Blake, would you get the salad?”

Soon the group were all seated around the table, heartily consuming the vast portions of food Blake’s mother had prepared for them. Before anyone knew it, the third bottle of wine was drained, and they’d begun on the fourth. “I hope Milo comes soon,” Jeanne noted with a grin. “We’re running dangerously low on garlic bread!”

Soon the conversation turned around a recounting of the group’s adventures since Michael’s and Jeanne’s arrival on Earth in September, and of Querennina’s experiences over the last decade with the resistance movement.

A knock on the door heralded Milo’s late arrival to the ensemble. Swift took off his overcoat and hung it up, offering for his tardiness the most contrite apologies anyone had heard him make. He was clearly interested in making sure he still had a share of the meal.

“Glad you could join us, Milo,” Michael noted, raising a glass of red wine in honor of his estranged friend.

“You won’t be for long, Commander,” Milo replied. “Part of what kept me late is that Mayor Grondahl was looking for you. He caught me, though, and gave a message to carry. There’s been some more activity with the broadcast towers, and he told me to pass along that he wants you to meet him as soon as possible in the command center.”

Michael rolled his eyes. “And I was only half-way through my third helping, too. Michael turned to the others, especially Lihra and Querennina, and offered his regrets before grabbing his coat and heading for the door. “I hope I’ll be back in time for the desert and the movie, but it’s running too late, start up without me.”

* * *

Working feverishly in his hotel room to finish the preparations, Mario Cipolla suddenly paused and looked nervously at his watch. With a frown, he chambered a round into his pistol and closed the briefcase in which he had loaded his equipment. *It's time.*

* * *

“Still no activity, sir,” the communications operator told Grondahl. The leader of the Zentraedi settlement looked up towards the tactical screens in the air defense command center of Ohlfantoma.

Michael, standing at Grondahl's side, turned to his host, and whispered, “These towers have been switching on and off for a week now. Either they're still conducting tests, or they're playing with our heads.”

Grondahl nodded. “Downgrade alert status to second-stage, Sergeant Bolema, and recall the patrols.” Grondahl turned to Michael, and smirked. “The Invid are sure to kill me - I shall have a stroke or a heart attack or some other typically human disease.”

Michael laughed nervously, and looked towards the door. “I suppose all this changes the stakes for the City Council's vote on participation. The old status-quo is gone. The clones are tentatively willing to join if you will, and this new stand-off can't last forever.”

Grondahl nodded. “It might be just the push needed to secure the vote our way. Come, you should get back to your party, and I promised to meet with the Triumviroid commanders about the possibility of relocating their people here, and I'm already thirty minutes late.”

“I'm sure they'll under-” Michael began, before the tech's voice interrupted his train of thought.

“Grondahl Tul!” the young Zentraedi shouted. “We are receiving contacts from all directions!”

“Can you identify?” Grondahl demanded.

“No sir; no IFF codes at all. Range is seventy miles from the center of town, closing. Enemy strength coming in now. . . Sir, there are too many to count - our short-range radar can't pick them out over the background.”

“Holy-” Michael interjected.

“Launch all Striker squadrons!” Grondahl commanded. “All pilots and reserves to their mecha. Sound the air attack alarm, and get the civilians into the shelters.”

“Sir, AWACS planes now attempting an estimate on the enemy attack force - Great Fantoma, there are more than fifty thousand enemy mecha in the air, maybe a hundred thousand or more. Identity of mecha confirmed; they’re Invid.”

Michael leaned over to Grondahl and spoke in a low voice, “That’s a significant fraction of their European Theater forces, from our estimates. They must hope that the numbers will be sufficient to avoid the air defense guns.”

Grondahl nodded. “They may hope that, but I expect they will find otherwise. Still, we should take all necessary precautions.” He turned again to the tech, and said, “Sergeant, send orders to all gunnery batteries and fire control crews. Prepare for full-”

“Grondahl Tul!” the aide interjected. “Fire control reports three - no, **four** explosions in the air defense system. Power and targeting radar are down! Sir. . . ?”

Grondahl and Michael stood in stunned silence for what seemed like a minute.

“Sir?” the aide insisted.

“Get security and damage control teams in there now! Priority goes to bringing the systems back on line, but watch for armed saboteurs!” Grondahl turned to Michael, his expression vacant and hollow. “We’re blind and naked. The city’s defenseless. . .”

“What about the Striker squadrons? Surely-” Michael began.

“Not enough. We only have two thousand converted *Nousjaedul-ger* suits with micronian-sized cockpits, fifteen hundred converted *Quaedluun-raus*, and two thousand converted fighter pods for aerial support. We’re-”

“Look, I can fly anything,” Michael suggested. “Give me a mecha, and I’ll go out with them. Maybe we can fight them to a stand-still. . . to force them to retreat.”

Grondahl tried to keep his focus on Michael as pandemonium began to sweep throughout the command center. “I appreciate the offer, Commander, but you won’t last five minutes under these conditions sitting in an unfamiliar cockpit. The answer is ‘no’. You’re sitting this fight out.”

“Look, Grondahl, I have to do something. What can my people do to help?”

“Do you have much experience with 2020’s-era targeting and power conduit systems?”

“Some. Roger has a lot more.”

“Then the two of you get to fire control and help with the repairs. I’ll call them and let them know you’re coming. The rest of your team can head for the shelters and help with the evacuation.”

“Right; I’m on it,” Michael called as he began to dash for the door.

“First wave at city border in six minutes, Grondahl Tul. Orders for the mecha, sir?”

The sullen and grim-faced mayor looked straight ahead, his eyes glazed over with horror and regret. When he spoke, it was almost a whisper:

“Tell them to die like Zentraedi.”

* * *

“*Quaedluun-rau* squadrons, launch!” cried out Querennina Paarino-Hammond as her giant battle-suit leapt out of its hangar, mounted on the hull of the Zentraedi flagship whose carcass loomed at the center of town. Even though the anti-aircraft guns were silent, the Invid were targeting the surface of the fortress, to do as much damage as they could, should the weapons come on-line, and to destroy if possible the mecha hangars. The *Quaedluun-rau* power armors’ first task was to relieve pressure on the mecha hangars so the remainder of the comparatively small Self Defense Force could enter the air.

Her mecha had been rebuilt since her people were made human-sized. A cockpit similar to that on the human war-machines had been installed in the giant cavity where her formerly thirty-foot tall body would once have resided. Control couplings and computers had been rebuilt, and though the mecha responded in an uncomfortably different fashion than it had when she fought for the Robotech Masters three decades ago, the net effect of the refit was to substantially reduce the weight, adding the needed edge of maneuverability to the already agile warcraft.

“Outnumbered twenty to one,” Querennina mused, cutting three Invid to ribbons without a second thought. She brought another group of mecha into her mecha’s sights and unleashed the forearm-mounted laser cannons once again. “Bound to grow much, much worse. . . We are Quadrono! **That** is a battle worth fighting!”

* * *

Michael and Roger wound their ways to the Zentraedi flagship at the center of town, to be greeted by one of the junior technicians. “Grondahl Tul told us you’d be coming,” he said, ushering them into the complex.

“What’s the situation like?” Michael asked, out of breath, as they entered the service elevator that led up to fire control.

“We’ve lost our main targeting computers - I don’t think we can bring those back on line even if we had a week. The back-ups and secondary back-ups look only slightly damaged, but we’ve lost our power connections to both areas, and to the targeting radar sites. I have people inspecting the guns, but the outer hull of the fortress is taking a beating. The Quadronos have been trying to buy us time while we work on repairs. . . Other than the ones getting shot out, the guns themselves look undamaged.”

“What can we do?” Roger asked.

“How are you with the targeting systems for Southern Cross TASC space ships?” the tech asked.

“Not my main area of specialty, but I’m qualified. . .”

“Good. You can help the chief repair the damage to the secondary computer targeting hardware. Commander Austin, if it’s not too much to ask, could I get you to help carry some of the conduit to the power breaches? It’s rather heavy, and the damage is in areas hard to access with power-lifters. We could sure use a pair of strong arms.”

“Got it,” Michael confirmed. “Roger, keep your sidearm handy. Whoever did this is probably still lurking around, maybe trying to get out. If he’ll sabotage the defenses of an entire city, he probably won’t hesitate to shoot.”

“Understood, Michael. Good luck.”

Roger exited the lift at the lowest level they came to, and the tech pointed out the way to the control room. The lift doors closed again, and the small elevator continued upwards.

“How do you think the saboteur got in?” Michael asked the middle-aged Zentraedi.

“We have several secondary access stairways for service of the individual guns and power conduits - how he got past the guards, or how he knew where to hit us we may never know.”

The lift doors opened at the level where Michael was to assist the repairs of the power conduits that ran from the old battlecruiser’s main energizers, which lay towards the aft of the vessel, and the engineer stepped through them, adding, “If this wasn’t an inside job, then whoever did it might have paid off one of our people to find out the-”

Gunshots suddenly rang out, and the tech was cut off in mid-sentence. He choked, staggering backwards and coughing up blood. Michael drew his sidearm and pumped several rounds into the corridor, but whoever had fired had taken cover behind an intersection with another hallway. Michael checked the technician that lay on the elevator floor. He was still alive, but wouldn’t be for long - and Michael could see there was nothing he could do.

“Alright, you fucker,” Michael swore under his breath as he checked his ammunition. Fourteen shots in the Glock, another seventeen in a full clip at his belt. Crouching low, he crept out of the elevator and scanned for targets.

The service pathways were a light scaffolding built perpendicular to the large full-sized Zentraedi decks that had once served the original crew of this vessel. The elevator had been cut straight through the mid-deck, and Michael now looked over the metal bridges into a giant hangar space, tipped on its side along with the rest of the fortress, with only a few feet to either side of him of pathway that separated him from this artificial chasm.

Michael cautiously traced his way to where his assailant had vanished, arm outstretched and weapon at the ready. Eyes darting all around, he quickly popped around the T-intersection cut through what had once been a wall.

Nothing was there to greet him. Michael proceeded forward cautiously about another hundred yards along the side pathway, which led into an inky darkness. “Damn it, where are you?” he whispered to himself.

Something motivated Michael to check behind him - and about eighty yards back toward the intersection he could see a figure climbing from underneath the scaffolding - where, presumably, he had been hiding - back onto the pathway and to his feet. “Freeze!” Austin shouted, training his gun on the figure.

Two gunshots rang out, and sparks flew from a coolant pipe near Michael’s head. “Damn,” Michael shouted as a large fragment blown off of the pipe imbedded itself in his cheek. He hit the ground hard to avoid being hit by the next volley of shots that went off, and lost his grip on his pistol. The gun slid off the pathway and fell down into the abyss of the flagship’s former hangar. Michael could feel blood running down his face, soaking his beard and dripping off his chin. The splinter of metal had dug deep.

Luckily for Michael, he saw the saboteur duck back along the pathway to make his escape. As he turned the corner toward the elevator, Michael caught a glimpse of his face - a hundred yards away in poor light, but he immediately recognized it.

“Cipolla!” Michael cried, climbing to his feet and charging back to the elevator, unarmed, after the mercenary, who had already disappeared into the lift.

* * *

“Come on people,” Jeanne urged, ushering the multitudes into the underground shelter near the center of town. She could smell smoke wafting down the entrance to the

shelters, and the reports of explosions and the crackling of fires punctuated her admonitions to the citizenry. “Keep it orderly; there’s room for everyone.”

A Zentraedi soldier looked across the corridor at Jeanne, and commented, “We need to get these people down quickly. It’ll take a while to set up all the weapon emplacements. The Scouts can’t easily fit down here, but the Enforcers can - and we have no idea how far the infantry are behind the aerial units.”

“How long can we hold out down here?” Jeanne asked as Milo returned, carrying the bulk of a 7.62mm minigun across his shoulder, with Blake and Laurie ferrying the ammunition and tripod, as well as an external battery, on a pair of sturdy carts.

“Not long enough. If the Invid are intent on finishing us. . .” The soldier hesitated as the entrance was rocked by sudden tremor, probably that of the collapse of a near-by building. “Our best hope is getting the AA guns back on line. If we can regain control of the air, we’ll be able to take the city back a street at a time.”

Milo set the heavy gun down, and began to set up the mount. “Are you sure this’ll stop the Enforcers? Their armor’s pretty thick.”

“It should. We’ve fabricated tungsten-coated depleted uranium munitions for our infantry weapons. It’s not effective on the mecha, but it’ll punch through the power armor, sure enough,” the soldier replied.

Laurie reached over to Blake to help him with the gun emplacement’s power connections, bracing herself as the hall was again rocked. “Has anyone seen Linda?” Laurie asked, using only Lihra’s pseudonym in the Zentraedi soldier’s presence.

Milo shook his head. “No. I thought she was with you.”

“I think I last saw her in the rush to get into the shelters. . . She looked kind of dazed by the whole thing,” Blake replied.

“Aw, Jesus.” Milo swore. Everyone knew what he was thinking, but didn’t dare say it in front of the Zentraedi preparing the shelters’ defensive positions. *That green-blooded bitch is going to give us away!*

Laurie’s eyes lit up. “Blake, check in the shelter for her! Hurry!”

* * *

All units, converge on the secondary defenses, but remain cautious. The primary defensive systems may be repaired at any time. Merog, I leave the city to you. Burn it to the ground. Doriel, take your escort and join me. Let us finish off these Zentraedi gnats so that our infantry can move in! Kharoth telepathically commanded his subordinates.

Understood, my lord, Doriel and Merog replied in unison. Within seconds, Doriel's *Gosu* had formed up alongside Kharoth's, and the two sped directly into the onslaught of the modified *Quaedluun-Rau* suits, which had regrouped and were launching a troublingly effective counter-attack against the Invid forces, despite overwhelming numerical inferiority. Before the *Gosu*, no Invid mecha used missiles, where the Zentraedi mecha were littered with them, and the salvos were finding deadly marks in the target-rich environment.

Kharoth weaved among his enemies, cutting them down with practiced mechanical precision. He watched with pride and amusement as his companion also began to decimate Ohlfantoma's finest pilots; indeed, she demonstrated even more agility than he in the cockpit. *I shall have to watch this one. She has promise,* he thought.

Doriel sensed Kharoth's approval, and smiled. Kharoth was, most of the sub-Royalty castes perceived, slated for grand things in the Regis' new order, and Doriel looked forward to a prime role in that future, with Kharoth's favor. Boldness gripped her, and she launched her *Gosu* after a trio of refit Fighter Pods that had begun to circle around and cut into the slower ranks of the massed *Iigaa*.

A protoculture signature of Zentraedi origin swept across Kharoth's screen, catching his attention. *Doriel,* Kharoth shouted in his thoughts. *Watch your flank! There's a-*

A salvo of micro-missiles swung past him. Kharoth watched in stunned silence as his subordinate's mecha was torn asunder by a salvo from the mecha that appeared to belong to the Zentraedi's chief ace. Kharoth grimaced with anguish as his mind felt the telepathic death-cry of his sibling echo through his thoughts.

To his surprise, Doriel's last thought of agony was not the only thing Kharoth could feel; another voice was there in his mind, great and terrible, and it shook the giant to his bones.

* * *

Without really knowing why, Lihra had wandered against the tide of citizens filing hurriedly into the shelter where her captors had taken her. Only half-consciously, a set of presences - familiar, and yet unfamiliar, inexorably drew her towards them, towards the battle raging in the sky. Before she knew what she was doing, she had climbed to the roof of an evacuated eight-story building near the shelter's entrance that had once housed offices for the Zentraedi's North Sea petroleum interests, and was

shaken back to awareness by what she saw. From her vantage point, she could view large parts of the city below her.

Fire.

Fire.

Fire.

All around her, everywhere her eyes could make out, she could see fire, swelling and surging, consuming the shops and homes and streets. The night's darkness was no longer, and in its place, a red glow surrounded her, so bright that the overcast sky, so far as she could see as she fell to her knees, was reflecting the hues of the terrible conflagration. Thick black smoke rose from the ground, and the air around her was hot and stifling, and Lihra began to choke.

Waves of *Iigaa* and *Gurab* mecha, fierce and terrible, and apparently infinite in number, flew overhead, wheeling about maniacally and blasting secondary anti-air ground emplacements where they could, and destroying indiscriminately when they could not.

Lihra's thoughts turned to the evening in the club several nights before, and to the Zentraedi who had asked her to dance, and to the kindness her ancestral enemies had shown her, mistaking her for human, and she began to weep, oblivious to the grave danger of flame and weapon around her.

Before the anguish could sink in further, Lihra heard voices in her mind. Kharoth was leading the attack. She considered calling to him, or to the others, begging them to rescue her, to take her home, to take her away from all of this. But before she had the chance, her heart sank into her stomach as she felt her beloved sister Doriel's telepathic death-cry.

Lihra lost all composure. All her power, the power of the Regis and of all of the Invid, which lay nascent in her while her mother yet ruled, exploded forth like a plume of ash from a volcano to issue a cry of anguish and horror and pain that caused all her people in the battle to take notice and halt in awe and fear. *Doriel, my sister, no!* she cried out in her mind, following with a formless emotion of agony her mind took up like a song, to which Kharoth and Merog found themselves unable not to echo in a harmony of mourning and loss.

* * *

"What the hell?" Michael asked himself suddenly, hand holding a piece of cloth pressed tightly to his cheek, trying to staunch the bleeding from his wound.

“What is it?” Roger asked, nervously checking power connections to the guns’ secondary computer systems. His ears perked up as another series of blasts rocked the hull of the giant fortress.

Michael looked around to see if any of the other Zentraedi techs were watching, and whispered to Roger, “I just heard Lihra’s. . . telepathic voice. It sounded like, I mean it **felt** like someone close to her had just died.”

“That’s weird,” Roger noted in a soft voice. “Wait. Michael, do you hear that?”

Michael stopped. He listened, expecting to hear more of the fire coming onto the guns that lined the fortress’ exterior, but all he could hear was silence.

* * *

Stunned and torn, Kharoth didn’t know whether to feel grief for having lost one beloved sister, joy at having found another, or fear that she stood in the middle of the cross-fire somewhere. “By the Regis, if anything happens to her. . .” he muttered to himself. The giant *Solugi* cleared his head, scanning the conflagration below him, and formulated his thoughts.

Lihra is in the city! Kharoth exclaimed hurriedly to his troops. *Cease the attack and find her! She must not be harmed!*

* * *

“They’ve stopped attacking”, Grondahl’s aide told him from his console in the underground command center. “They seem to be merely observing the city for some reason.”

Grondahl Tul scratched his head in contemplation. “I wonder what they’re - no, it’s not important. Sergeant Bolema, what is the status on the air defense system?”

“Fire control reports that the secondary computers are booting up. . . loading target data. Sir, we’re on-line. All weapons ready.”

Grondahl’s face curled into a slight smile as he engaged the communications link. “Striker squadrons, fire in the hole! All batteries. . . open fire!”

* * *

Kharoth looked about him as beams and projectiles by the thousands, by the tens of thousands began to fill the air about him. Seconds passed, and Kharoth could see his

troops cut to ribbons. The fires that had burned so fiercely on the ground were becoming matched with the aerial fireworks of Invid mecha being holed, cut in half, and shredded by their own internal explosions by the hundreds every second. He reeled as his mecha took a hit, and he feigned falling out of the sky, hoping that he would be taken for a kill.

Merog, are you still there? Kharoth asked.

I'm below the arc of fire; what are your orders, lord? Merog replied nervously.

Full withdrawal, Kharoth thought in anguish as he watched his task-force go down in ruins, as he dimly experienced the death-cries now of thousands of lower-caste Invid, *while we yet have troops to withdraw.*

* * *

As the city's fires were being brought under control, Michael rejoined Grondahl in the command center. Immediately after the Zentraedi guns had come back on line, Grondahl had told him, two underground hangars opened, and gigantic refit Theater Scout pods, escorted by Ohlfantoma's remaining air squadrons, launched into the air and toward the Invid hives in Ulster and Sussex, their bomb bays laden with the Zentraedi's two remaining anti-hive fusion bombs. Both missions, Michael was told, were successful. A bright flash had engulfed both hives, leaving only a mile-wide crater in their places, though only one of the attack squadrons exacting Ohlfantoma's vengeance on the Invid managed to return; the other was caught in the midst of a fleeing Invid formation, and was cut down. There were no large Invid outposts remaining on the British Isles by day's end, and the Invid troop presence available to do more than defend the remaining hives in the European theater, it was estimated, had been reduced by more than half. But the cost was extremely high. As much as eighty percent of the city's buildings had suffered moderate damage or worse, and large numbers of civilians had perished, not having made it to the shelters in time. Worse yet, the city was literally on fire, and all citizens were called out to help douse the flames and keep them from spreading. The Triumviroids had departed without making a commitment to the fight, though they promised to attend the conference in France, and to give the matter due consideration. Still, their grim faces suggested to Grondahl that under the current circumstances, their aid to Michael's cause might not be more than a token. Major Zentraedi participation in the effort, it went without saying, was now out of the question.

Michael shook his head as Grondahl told him all of this, and replied, "It's all my fault. I brought all this upon you."

“Commander, the Invid brought this upon us. Now, you have been more than generous to us. Please, go back to shelters and rest. Have that gash on your face taken care of. Our rescue teams found your wife on the roof of a building - she’s all right, but non-responsive. She seemed a very sensitive person; I think the shock of the battle overwhelmed her. Right now, you need to be with her, Michael.”

Michael’s thoughts turned to Lihra. He was indeed concerned for her, but knew that Laurie was already tending to her, and he had other priorities.

He looked up at Grondahl, fire in his eyes. “I’m going to be leaving the city for a few days tomorrow morning, and I need provisions and a couple of horses. There’s something I have to do.”

* * *

Laurie examined the wound on Michael’s cheek as he sat on a chair in the infirmary in one of the city’s shelters and frowned as she put in the last of many stitches. “This thing’s pretty deep, though I think I got all the fragments out. Well, I hate to be the one to tell you this, but you’re going to have a two inch-long scar here, and it’ll be a real beauty. I can try to minimize the impact, but you’ll carry this around for life. There go your boyish looks,” she said, squeezing his hand as she tried to cheer him up.

Michael looked up at Milo, who was leaning against the wall in the corner of the room. “Private Swift, I’m going to need your pistol for a few days - I’ve lost my own.”

“Wait a minute, Commander, I ain’t-”

“Your sidearm, soldier! Now!” Michael demanded.

Milo looked into Michael’s eyes - there was a rage there he’d never seen before, not even in himself. Michael was carrying Death’s sickle in his heart, and he did not dare contradict him. Milo unholstered the weapon and handed it to Michael. “Here’s the other clip, in case you need it. I hate to say ‘I told you so’ . . .”

“Don’t. Because you didn’t tell me so. No one told me so. Whatever suspicions you harbored, you kept them to yourselves. Just as I’m going to have to deal with my own failing here, you’re going to have to deal with yours. So don’t give me that ‘I told you so’ bullshit, Private.”

Milo nodded. Michael was right. “If you’ll excuse me.”

“Get Jeanne, Milo,” Michael added more softly. “I need to confer with her.” Milo saluted half-heartedly and stepped out of the room, leaving Michael and Laurie alone.

“I’m sorry, Michael, but you can’t blame yourself,” Laurie began.

“I can and I do. I was blind. I was an idiot. He smooth-talked me, and Jeanne and Milo saw right through him. And my poor judgment cost thousands of lives. I understand you’re just trying to make me feel better, but that’s not going to happen for a long time.”

Laurie stood up, and tussled Michael’s hair affectionately.

“Laurie, we need to get ready to head out. We’ve left the Alphas unattended too long, and we need to move on. I’m going to be pre-occupied for the next couple of days, but I want you and the others to head down to the rendez-vous point and start getting ready to move out back through the Chunnel. I’ll meet you there.”

“Got it. Anything else?”

“How’s Lihra?” Michael asked.

“Better. She’s resting in the room three doors down the hall. You can go see her if you like.”

Michael nodded, and excused himself from the room, following Laurie’s directions down the hall to where his prisoner was sleeping.

Lihra lay upon a cot in a small side-chamber, her hair still drenched with sweat. Laurie had covered her lightly with a blanket, even though the shelter was reasonably warm. Michael pulled a chair next to the cot, and sat alongside her, running his fingers through her auburn hair.

Lihra’s eyes opened, and in them Michael saw a profound look of sadness and pain, as if the city’s holocaust and her people’s slaughter were still reflected in them.

Michael returned the gaze with equal grief in his expression. He leaned forward, clasping her head in both of his hands, and kissing her lightly on the lips.

“I’m going away for a little while,” he whispered to her, standing up to leave the room. “I wanted to tell you I’m sorry.”

* * *

Dust swirled around the clearing, raised by a brief howl of the cold wind. The sun had almost set, and in the east, a few lonely stars had become visible, their pale and remote light mocking the fires that still raged in what was only a week before a vibrant city some miles to the north.

Cipolla rose from the small campfire he was tending while waiting for his surviving men to rendez-vous with him, turned toward the figure who had just moments before stepped out of the shadows, and smiled grimly.

“I’m surprised at you, Austin. You should have caught up to me days ago.”

“I was busy trying to salvage what was left after the mess you created.” Michael’s grip loosened around Milo’s pistol, allowing his thumb the leverage to cock back the pistol’s hammer. His aim quickly returned to the Sicilian mercenary.

A tense silence fell over the pair, broken only by an indignant snort from Michael’s horse.

“So are you going to shoot me,” Cipolla mocked, “or are you going to stand there looking pensive?”

“Why?” Michael demanded.

“That, my friend, is a rather open-ended question.”

“Why did you do it? Why did you sell us out?”

“I beg pardon if my service to you was beneath your expectations. But I had a prior contract to arrange for your death or capture, and to bring you, or your corpse, to Mecklenburg. If deceit was what was required to draw you out, then that’s what I had to use.” Cipolla laughed harshly, and placed his hands on his knees, leaning forward, closer to the flames, as he squatted next to his fire. “Of course, since my mission to capture you was a failure, and because my service to you was only a ruse to allow me to get close enough to perform my prior obligation, a full refund of my fee is naturally in order. You may feel welcome to either retrieve it from my person or my corpse, depending on how you have decided I should be dealt with.”

“But why bring the Zentraedi into this?”

“It was a shame, I admit. I have nothing against them, I hope you understand that. To see what they have accomplished in a mere three decades! It always amazes me to see that sort of industry and commitment. But there was the opportunity to discreetly dispose of you in the confusion, and anyway, to mangle an old phrase, the enemy of my employer’s sponsor is my enemy. And the Invid paid rather handsomely for my sabotage - in more ways, I am certain, than they intended. I see nothing wrong with taking a second job on the side, especially if it goes toward completing my first. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“I can’t believe you set all this carnage in motion, led all these lives to the slaughter, just to turn a profit!” Michael sneered.

“Don’t be so naive. You’d do the same - and for no greater a motivation than to fulfill an oath of service to a rag of cloth or a man wearing more paraphernalia on his sleeve than you. At least my remuneration is tangible.”

Michael shook his head. “Get the hell out of England.”

“You’re letting me go, just like that? How charming!”

“I’m sick of all the goddamned killing and destruction. I don’t want to be a party to it anymore.” Michael decocked the hammer, and threw the pistol to the ground. “Consider this a second chance. Go off and raise those sheep, like you talked about. I don’t care. I just want you out of my sight.”

Michael turned away, and began to approach his horse. His head lowered, he took the reins and was about to mount when he heard Cipolla shout after him.

“I’m disappointed in you! I never expected you - of all people - to lose your stomach. I had thought you more. . . solid than that.”

Without turning to face him, Michael replied, “I can’t begin to tell you how ashamed I am that I’ve let you down,” sarcasm dripping from his words.

“Unfortunately, I still have one uncompleted contract,” Cipolla said, unholstering his own gun. “Capture seems out of the question now. Bringing back your head should be much more economical.”

Michael turned to face him. Now he was the one looking down the barrel of a cocked pistol.

“Don’t feel so bad,” Mario consoled. “To see fire and holocaust, to experience numbness and disillusionment, to be haunted by the death-cries of hundreds of comrades and foemen and innocents in your dreams, to see young men never come home to their wives and children, to watch dreams be shattered and the spirits of men broken, to be swallowed by oblivion, to face death with so many things left undone - **this** is a soldier’s fortune; this is the only fate that can be hoped for by any man who takes up arms.”

Cipolla smiled faintly. “Believe it or not, I will mourn for you, Commander Michael Austin. True warriors are a rare commodity in this world. The light that burns in our kind will dim forever when you are gone.”

Michael closed his eyes, and waited for the sound of a gunshot. It came, sooner than he expected.

Cipolla collapsed to the ground, a hole bored through his heart. Jeanne carefully stepped out of the brush, rifle still smoking, and approached Michael, calling his name softly, caution in her footsteps and concern in her voice.

He looked down at her, sadness welling up in his eyes. Jeanne dropped the rifle and embraced him, as the tears began to flow down his cheeks.

“It’s over, Michael.”

“No, Jeanne,” Michael managed, choking on the words. “It’s only just begun.”