Frozen/Battletech: The Ice Duchess of the Federated Commonwealth

by The_Frozen_Guy

Summary

The Year is 3053.

The Clan Invasion has ended with the Truce of Tukayyid. In the sudden peace that follows, Victor Steiner-Davion is recalled by his parents to begin truly preparing for his future as Archon-Prince and the ruler of the greatest state since the Star League.

His first task?

Attend the investment of Duchess Elsa Jorgensson on the world of Arendelle as the representative of his parents.

A straight forward, more or less ceremonial task that is as much an excuse for a road trip with old friends as anything else.

What could possibly go wrong?
Hi All.

This may not be the most *sane* idea I've ever had.

But when you see an idea and then it gets stuck in your head ... and you just cannot get it out of your head so you have to write it down...

I mean, Frozen and Battletech don't SEEM to be natural crossover material ... but then BOOM, it cannot get out of your head.

There will also be a *degree* of Tangled in here - but mostly in the background just to get Rapunzel into the mix. More of an extension of what we saw in Frozen when she showed up at the Coronation in the background.

NO magic hair or anything like that.

Sticking with the widely accepted fanon that Elsa/Anna's Father and Rapunzel's Mother are siblings, making Elsa/Anna and Rapunzel First cousins. Because I think thats a neat idea.

To lay out the basics; this is a Frozen-Battletech fusion. Retelling the events of the movie in the context of Arendelle being a planet in the Inner Sphere, in the Federated Suns, set in the 3050s.

Elsa the Duchess Apparent about to be invested. The timeline below is a pretty standard Battletech timeline for those of you who know it well - major differences / key differences are bolded. Most of them occur towards the end of the timeline if you want to skim.

But if you want them, here are the three TLDR key contemporary background differences in Btech terms;

1. Hanse Davion did NOT die in 3052. He *did* have a heart attack, but it was mild. He survived and is being forced by his wife and core of advisers to take it easy. This annoys him ... but it annoys him much less then Melissa giving him that 'flinty' look she can do so well if he pushes it. As part of this, Victor is being pulled from the 10th Lyran into real high-level political duties - albeit on a much smaller scale than in the OTL when everything was dropped in his lap. And he is doing so under the watchful gaze of both his parents and other advisers.

2. Focht Let It Go and embraced a bit of his inner Lestrade to actually perform a *competent* purge of the upper levels of ComStar rather then blissfully letting the core of what would become the WOB just walk away or get set into place after shooting Myndo. Including most of ROM. Not to say that he got every bad apple, but he did a fine job of purging the critical people who would have made the WOB a reality.

3. Hanse doesn't agree to just let Candace run around and avenge Justin and leave it at that. *This* time, he issues her an ultimatum. Either she will stop poking from the sidelines and actually *take up the burden* of protecting her people ... or he'll have to deal with the situation *his way*. In a far more messy way - that will probably result in the Confederation ceasing to exist as a coherent state.

Candace agrees. AKA, Romano and her family are dead and Candace now rules the Confederation as an allied state of the Federated Commonwealth.

*I am always open for any comments, reviews or feedback anyone wants to give.*

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**Timeline of Key Events in the Universe**

2108 - First ever FTL voyage of a Jump Ship to another solar systems

2116 - First colony established on Tau Alpha Ceti IV (New Earth)
2213 - New Avalon settled
2315 - Formation of the Terran Hegemony under House Cameron

2316 - Arendelle settled
2317 - Formation of the Federated Suns

2377 - Corona settled
2439 - The Mackie MCK-5S BattleMech is developed
2571 - Formation of the Star League
2578 - The Reunification War begins
2597 - The Reunification War ends. 'Golden Age' of Mankind begins

2700 - Aleksandr Kerensky is born

2751 - The Federated Suns Military begins ultra-secret genetic engineering experiments on Arendelle. Codenamed Project Shatipole, they are in response to the Star League authorizing the Houses to double their military size, seeking a unique edge for the AFFS in human genetic enhancement.

2754 - Project Shatipole is terminated by direct order of First Prince John Davion. All traces of the project are removed from official Federated Suns records. All known test data is purged, the First Prince fearing some kind of eugenics arms might start given the rising tensions - a can of worms he is not prepared to open. However unknown to the First Prince, the project had moved beyond simulation into an actual test subject. Rather than terminate her to cover up everything, the sympathetic project team quietly give her a new identity and release her into the local community to live in peace, destroying any records of her former existence.

2762 - Hans Ole Jorgensson, second son to the Duke of Arendelle, is born. The Dukes wife is also the sole survivor from Shatipole. This fact is not known beyond the couple who take the secret to their graves.

2767 - Golden Age of Mankind ends with assassination of First Lord Richard Cameron by Stephan Amaris

2767 - Star League Civil War begins. Aleksandr Kerensky commits the Star League Defense Forces into a twelve year-long campaign to oust the usurper Amaris. The other Houses do not hinder the SLDF, nor do they help them.

2779 - Terra is recaptured and Amaris is executed, Star League Civil War ends. But there is no clear heir to the throne of the Star League thanks to the destruction of all known house Cameron heirs. All the major houses of the Inner Sphere begin jockeying for position to press their own claim. Less than a quarter of the once mighty SLDF remains intact and the Terran Hegemony, core of the Star League, is ruined thanks to the bloody war.

2781 - Dissolution of the High Council. The Council Lords fail to choose a new First Lord and dissolve. Technically the Star League remains in force, but with no First Lord in place. General War between the Star League member states is increasingly considered inevitable, held in check only by the uncertainty of the intentions and loyalty of the SLDF.

2784 - Operation Exodus. Pressed from all sides to become kingmaker by bringing the still formidable might of the SLDF to one of the House Lords banners, Kerensky instead leads an exodus of 80% of the remaining SLDF into unknown space. The remaining 20% either muster back to the armies of the Houses they were originally from, retire, or become Mercenaries. Among those going with Kerensky is Hans Ole Jorgensson, who while very tempted to stay and return to
his family, knows (or thinks) they will never accept his Capellan Wife he met while in the SLDF, Sandra Tseng. No-one in the Inner Sphere will know what happened to them for a very long time.

2786 - Minoru Kurita formally declares himself the First Lord of the Star League and demands recognition of this claim from the other Houses. In rapid succession, every other House Lord also declare themselves to be the rightful First Lord.

2786 - The Star League Hyperpulse Generator network, providing FTL communications through the Inner Sphere is placed into the hands of ComStar; a new organization built from the various corporations who owned it during the Star League led by Jerome Blake, the former Star League Minister for Communications. Their mandate is to maintain the FTL communications systems vital for communications, trade and commerce across the various houses. ComStar also seize Terra, humanities homeworld, officially announcing they will hold it in trust until such time as a new First Lord is acknowledged. All House Lords agree to honor their neutrality, for various reasons. Over the centuries however - and primarily due to the machinations of Conrad Toyama, Blakes successor, the organization will mutate from a neutral not-for-profit caretaker into a pseudo religious cult that sees itself as the savoir of mankind, Blake as a Prophet and their destiny to rule the Inner Sphere.

2787 - The Succession Wars begin. The most destructive conflict in the history of mankind bar none, the Succession Wars are generally divided up into four discreet wars by historians. Nominally, the war is over the Throne of the Star League but they are used primarily to try and settle old scores and long held grievances. The wars rapidly scale up into total war with each nation seeking to destroy the others ability to sustain high tempo industrialized warfare. Military units are set loose against key industrial centers, technology centers and civilian targets key to maintaining advanced armies and fleets. Warships and planetary bombardments, nuclear, biological and chemical weapons are all widely used; very quickly the death toll reaches horrific proportions. The Terran Hegemony, with no leadership or real Government ceases to exist and its worlds are essentially divided up between the other Houses, excepting Terra itself which ComStar continues to hold unchallenged.

2821 - The First Succession Wars ends. After over thirty years of war, the Inner Sphere has been catastrophically damaged with many planets devastated and economies ruined. Enormous amounts of advanced technology are lost and even more disastrously, so is the scientific and engineering knowledge itself fundamental to said technology. ComStar push along this rapid loss of technology along quietly in the background with surgical strikes against centers of higher learning, key scientists and other such critical targets, pointing the finger at other powers, who in turn retaliate. This serves ComStars purposes to become the single controller of all advanced technology in the long run, making the Successor States increasingly dependent on their services. The war ends mostly due to the fact that every powers military is exhausted and needs time to try and rebuild before continuing the fight. The real danger of total loss of advanced scientific understanding across all of mankind is not yet fully realized by the warring parties.

2830 - The Second Succession War begins. Much the same as the First Succession War, if on a smaller scale due to the reduced size of their armies, policy now becomes to ruthlessly destroy any major technological or industrial advantage held by the other side while protecting their own. The Inner Sphere sinks on average to a 20th century / 21st century level of technology, with but a few key worlds able to produce any really advanced technology. Terraforming technology required to keep any number of worlds habitable becomes lost and entire planets are abandoned and left to die as a result. Much advanced medical technology is also lost. Most alarmingly, the ability to build FTL capable Starships is lost, outside of a handful of remaining automated factories from the Star League era. The word 'LosTech', a portmanteau of lost (or loss of) technology comes into being, defining all advanced technology that humanity can no longer build from this point forward.

2864 - The Second Succession War ends.

2866 - The Third succession War begins. Vastly more limited than the first two wars, total war is completely abandoned as a concept out of necessity for human civilisation survival. Official and unofficial -but none the less absolutely adhered to- rules of war govern battles from this point forward. Factories are to never be destroyed or fought in, but fought over with the winner getting the spoils and the looser the knowledge that they can try to take it again another day. Battles are
rarely fought to the death but to the point where a victor is clear. Mechwarriors and technicians are
ransomed - and their equipment is typically ransomed with them, rather than being destroyed.
BattleMechs are often handed down generation to generation. Large movements of troops and
armies become increasingly unheard of due to the diminished number of jumpships, meaning
small unit raids of BattleMechs with significant numbers of infantry become far more common
than large invasions using combined arms. Jumpships themselves become absolutely off limits to
attack, even among worst enemies, as are the few shipyards capable of building them. Combat
Jumpships (or Warships) are long extinct. BattleMech are the kings of the Battlefield and focus of
armed conflict, but their components such as fusion reactors become increasingly scarce and hard
to build. Tanks and other vehicles increasingly become simplified as their reactors and other
advanced technology are stripped to keep the BattleMech forces of the House Lords going.

This 'slow burn' war continues for a hundred and fifty years. ComStar work hard through this time
to squash any sign of a technological recovery or renascence. Still thought of largely as entirely
neutral guardians of the precious HPG network, their control of information flows across the Inner
Sphere gives them incredible power - as does their secret hoard of Star League technology and
knowledge on Terra, long since closed off to the rest of mankind. They continue to wait patiently
for the right time to move openly and seize control of mankind into a Blakist theocracy wildly
alien from anything Blake himself ever imagined or would have wanted.

2960 - ComStar creates the Explorer Corps. A covert recon group charged with trying to find out
what happened to the SLDF after they vanished, using long range Scout jumpships.

2964 - Maximilian Liao is born

2976 - Katrina Steiner is born

2983 - Hanse Davion is born

2991 - Anton Beaulieu, heir Apparent to the Duchess of Corona is born

3005 - The mysterious Mercenary unit Wolf's Dragoons enters the Inner Sphere, under the
command of Jamie and Joshua wolf. An independent force of five regiments of BattleMechs in
excellent condition with their own Jumpships and support arms is all but unheard of in this day
and age. Yet they refuse to say where they came from. The generally accepted theory is that they
were Inner Sphere or Periphery soldiers who had the blindly good luck to stumble onto an ancient
hidden SLDF depot somewhere in the Periphery and used it to build a Mercenary unit. The
Dragoons neither confirm nor deny this assumption. They proceed over the next fifty years to
systematically work for every great power in the Inner Sphere, starting with the Federated Suns,
followed by the Capellan Confederation, Free Worlds League, Lyran Commonwealth and
Draconis Combine.

3007 - Katrina Steiner deposes her uncle and becomes Archon of the Lyran Commonwealth

3010 - Melissa Steiner is born

3010 - Idun Jorgensson, heir Apparent to the Duke of Arendelle is born

3012 - Karoline Iversen is born

3013 - Hanse Davion becomes First Prince of the Federated Suns upon the death of his older
brother Ian

3014 - Adgar Iversen is born

3015 - Hanse Davion discovers a vast storehouse of Star League era books buried on the planet
Halstead Station and recovers most of them against furious opposition from the Draconis
Combine. Determined to stop the slide of mankind back into the dark ages, he commits the
Davions personal funds to the construction of the New Avalon Institute of Science, sparing no
expense in building a highly secure, modern centre of higher learning. The Halstead Collection as
it is known, becomes the core of this effort, concentrated in one place rather than scattered to any
number of institutions, it has a dramatic cross-discipline effect on Davion R&D. ComStar
desperately attempt to covertly sabotage, infiltrate and destroy the NAIS from this point forward to 3052 but fail due to extreme levels of security and fortification put in place.

3020 - Archon Katrina Steiner sends out a formal Peace Proposal to all the Great Houses, in which she suggests that the Succession Wars have gone on for far too long and gotten humanity only misery. Her proposal is somewhat vague and rejected out of hand by the Draconis Combine, Free Worlds League and Capellan Confederation. However the Federated Suns who never had any real conflicts with the Lyran state, use the opportunity to establish a far ranging dialogue between Hanse Davion and Katrina Steiner.

3022 - After two years of highly fruitful discussions, Hanse and Katrina decide to seize the moment and change the course of history. They announce the Federated Commonwealth treaty to a stunned Inner Sphere. A union of the Federated Suns and Lyran Commonwealth, arguably the strongest military and strongest economy in the Inner Sphere respectively. The unification will be accomplished through the marriage of Hanse to the Archons only daughter, Melissa with their heir inheriting both thrones as Archon-Prince, a single super state the likes of which has not been seen since the Star League era.

3022 - The three remaining powers in the Combine, Confederation and FWL sign the Concord of Kapteyn. Theoretically balancing the power of the nascent Federated Commonwealth, it is not a union of states but a mutual defense pact heavily pushed quietly by ComStar. Mutual loathing and distrust between the Free Worlds League and Capellan Confederation ensures however that it is little more than a vague agreement to stand opposed to the Federated Commonwealth. ComStars leaders also firmly put the Federated Commonwealth in their sights as their number one threat.

3022 - The Third Succession War is generally considered to end with the Federated Commonwealth treaty signing.

3023 - Hohiro Kurita is born

3025 - Agents of House Liao almost succeed in a plan to replace Hanse Davion with a double under their control. The plot is foiled by Arden Sortek, Hanse Davions close friend. The imposter is found to have been brutally brainwashed and heavily surgically modified to such a degree that he truly thinks he is Hanse Davion. Appalled at the idea of completely destroying everything that makes a human being unique and rebuilding them in this manner - and furious at the outright act of war - Hanse Davion privately vows revenge against the Capellan Confederations leader, Maximilian Liao.

3026 - The mercenary unit, The Grey Death Legion, recovers a Star League era computer core from the planet Helm. Known colloquially as the Helm Memory Core or Grey Death Legion core, the computer databases contained in the core make even the great find of Halstead Station pale in comparison. ComStar make heroic efforts to covertly destroy every copy of the core, but two copies slip through their net and make their way secretly to both Luthien and, more disastrously, to the NAIS who at once begin working to explore and exploit the priceless knowledge therein.

3027 - Galen Cox is born

3027 - **Anton Beaulieu and Karoline Iversen are married**

3028 - Hanse Davion and Melissa Steiner marry on Terra, neutral ground, in front of the assembled nobility of the Inner Sphere. At their wedding reception, Hanse Davion gives perhaps the most famous wedding toast in history when he announces to his wife her wedding present; the Capellan Confederation.

3028 - The Fourth Succession War begins. The Lyran Commonwealth seizes over fifty worlds from the Combine. The Free Worlds League is beset by internal divisions that prevent it taking any real role, The AFFS meanwhile devote almost all of their forces into attacking the Capellans. It is a masterpiece of logistical work unseen since the days of the Second Succession war, with the Capellans simply overwhelmed by the staggered waves of elite troops seeking out and destroying their armed forces with overwhelming force. With their own command structure hopelessly compromised by Davion spies and a final betrayal by Candace Liao that removes an entire duchy from the Confederation, the Confederation is left a shadow of its former self. ComStar attempt to
intervene by staging an attack on a Federated Suns HPG station and using it as justification to cut all FTL communications across the Federated Suns. While a serious disruption that probably saves the Confederation from a deathblow, it does not stop fully half of the Confederation from being assimilated into the Federated Commonwealth.

3028 - ComStar find out about the memory core at NAIS and proceed to attempt a one-way sneak assault on NAIS to destroy it, posing as the Capellan Death Commandos during the 4th Succession War. Unfortunately for them, this attempt is not simply beaten back personally by Hanse Davion, Team Banzai and the Davion Heavy Guards, but the real Death Commandos are conclusively proven to be fighting on Kathil at that exact same time. Combined with the previous attack on the HPG that the AFFS proved was staged – but was thought to be a Capellan false flag operation, Hanse Davion gains strong suspicions that ComStar is a hostile power actively working against the Federated Suns/Federated Commonwealth. Accordingly, he treats them as a nominally hostile but necessary power from this point forward and a shadow war begins between the Federated Commonwealths intelligence agencies and ROM, ComStars own intelligence service.

3029 - While attending a party at the Davion Palace, Idun Jorgensson stumbles onto Melissa Steiner on New Avalon - despite her presence being a closely held secret as she works to conceive a heir with Hanse. She promptly becomes an extended 'guest' of Hanse, Melissa and MIO in the Davion Palace for some months ... but the newly married couple cannot help but warm to her presence as she appears completely indifferent to her status of being essentially being under house arrest as a result of her discovery. Along with Kym Sorenson, she becomes one of Melissa's closest friends while on New Avalon, also coming to know Morgan Hasek-Davion and Ardan Sortek reasonably well.

3029/3030 - Idun Jorgensson and Adgar Iversen are married. Melissa Steiner Davion is a hidden guest at the private wedding - a fact known to Idun but not Adgar - before Melissa leaves for Tharkard via a Command Circuit of Jumpships. Shortly after, Idun and Adgar leave New Avalon for Arendelle.

3030 - The Federated Commonwealth declares victory and an end to the 4th Succession War. The strategic balance of power in the Inner Sphere is clearly shifted firmly in favor of the Federated Commonwealth and ComStar, under new Primus Myndo Waterly, scramble to address the situation as their long range plans stand now in ruins. The first step in addressing this is the official formation (and major expansion) of the ComStar Guards – or ComGuards - as an independent military force under ComStar control, nominally to protect their HPGs from attacks like the one suffered in the 4th Succession War. Although dispersed across the Inner Sphere, it will eventually by necessity of the number of stations that need covering, become a significant force.

3030 - Victor Ian Steiner Davion is born

3030 - Kai Allard-Liao is born

3031 - Sun-Tzu Liao is born

3032 - Elsa Jorgensson, heir Apparent to the Dutchess of Arendelle is born

3032 - Rapunzel Beaulieu, heir Apparent to the Duke of Corona is born.

3032 - Spearheaded by the NAIS, advanced Star League weapons technology starts to go back into limited production in the Federated Commonwealth, again despite ComStars best covert attempts to slow down the technological recovery. With little choice to maintain the balance of power, ComStar starts covert negotiations with the Combine to supply them with advanced Star League era Battlemechs from their own significant stores 'under the table', knowing that sooner rather than later, the Federated Commonwealth will seek to finish the Combine off now that the Capellans are crippled.

3034 - The Ronin Wars. The Lyran gains in the 4th Succession war are undermined in a strategic masterstroke by the Combine when Theodore Kurita declares the formation of the Free Rasalhague Republic, a new nation whose stated borders mostly include worlds the Lyrans captured from the Combine by the Combine nominally held to be theirs. As Katrina Steiner was
nominally fighting to liberate these worlds on behalf of the native Rasalhague population, she is put in a politically impossible position and acquiesces to turning over the hard won gains, to the fury of certain Lyran factions. Some hard-line DCMS units, equally furious at such a 'dishonorable' action by Theodore go rogue to 'hold Rasalhague for the Combine and Coordinator'. They are Declared 'Ronin' or master-less bandits. After a time when the rogue units prove very difficult for the nascent FRR Armed Forces to deal with, Theodore then brings loyal DCMS units in to help and ruthlessly crushes the Ronin, before withdrawing back to the Combine. Grateful, the FRR now strives to maintain a neutral balance between the Federated Commonwealth and Combine - despite the fact that only a decade ago they had been furiously trying to fight for their freedom from said Combine. Theodore has essentially 'flipped' the strategic gains of the 4th Succession War for the Federated Commonwealth into a neutral buffer state, caused much unrest for the Federated Commonwealth and eliminated any number of units resistant to the sweeping changes he was pushing down on the DCMS, partially breaking the power of his highly traditional Father Takshi in the process. Many people will consider this the greatest political triumph of his life.

3035 - Anna Jorgensson is born

3036 - Maximilian Liao dies, reportedly by suicide but is actually killed by his daughter, who ascends formally to the throne, having essentially ruled Sian for the last six years. She at once chooses to wield fear, terror and brutality as her primary tools to hold onto power.

3039 - War of 3039 is fought - unofficially often considered either the 5th Succession War or 'Succession War 4.5'. The combined forces of the Federated Suns and Lyran Commonwealth finally launch their long expected attack on the Draconis Combine. A combination of sloppy planning and overconfidence combined with heroic work by Theodore Kurita over the last decade to rebuild the DCMS into a force capable of fighting the Federated Commonwealth causes the initial invasion to grind to an unexpected halt. Seizing the chance, against all apparent strategic logic, Theodore unleashes his ComStar supplied advanced Battlemechs in an offensive that captures a number of Davion worlds, including the important Battlemech producing world of Quentin. The unexpected skill, advanced technology, new Battlemechs and show of much greater strength than expected cause the Federated Commonwealth to lose their nerve and break off the attack, agreeing to a peace treaty by the end of the year. It would be almost a decade before the FedCom powers would realize they had been blufffed; the Combine had been pushed to the breaking point against the sheer numbers of troops being fielded against it and the counter-thrust had exhausted what reserves the Combine had. None the less, the Federated Commonwealth still paints the campaign as a victory. But among the populations of the two nations who remember the heady days of the 4th Succession War, it is generally seen as a strategic defeat - albeit a limited one.

3040 - Generally considered to be the end of the Succession Wars

3040 - While playing in their parent's throne room in the middle of the night, an 8 year old Elsa Jorgensson who possesses incredible, seemingly magical cryokinetic powers accidentally uses them upon her sister Anna. While her sister's life is saved and memory of the events removed from Annas mind through the intervention of mystic and mysterious 'monks' living in the hills outside of the planetary Capital, her parents consider it far too dangerous to keep them together. At first they just attempt to limit their time together, but Elsa's terror that she may hurt her sister again soon makes things untenable and they are split up in 3042, with Elsa being moved to an estate elsewhere on the planet. There Elsa is isolated from most human contact as she struggles to conceal her powers. In the aftermath of the indecisive 3039 war, her parents are simply terrified that if her abilities became public knowledge, she would be viewed as little more than a weapon to be employed or dissected to gain advantage for any of the varied House Lords or other power players and so they work to hide the truth as best they can and impress on their daughter the necessity. Neither sister will see each other in the flesh or have all but the most basic one-way communication with the other for a very long time. While Elsa lives in full knowledge and full memory of what happened and why she must remain alone, Anna is not told why her Sister is suddenly stripped from her life beyond vague statements of her needing to 'prepare to become the
The Periphery March is formed in the Federated Suns. Major tax incentives, economic incentives and technology offers are made to lure Lyran capital into the resource rich but people poor area. Moderate success will be gained by the end of this decade. Although there will be some grumbling that the Lyrans are simply buying up whole planets to be little more than giant resource piles, there is a slow but very clear rise in the civilian standard of living. The 'outbacks' economic activity is trending upwards as a result, for the first time in forever. Boldly, certain Mega-Corporations increasingly look further afield for economic opportunities in the 'Suns half of the Commonwealth.

A state of strategic stasis exists in the Inner Sphere between the end of the 3039 war and 3048. Limited raids are made back and forth, but the Federated Commonwealth invests most of its time, energy and resources into exploiting the economic opportunities of the union of states, continuing to recover and develop ever more advanced technology to greatly improve their populations standard of living. The Armed Forces of the Federated Commonwealth, unifying both states military forces come into being in an attempt to rectify the problems identified in 3039 and they too benefit from the economic boom, with increasing production of increasingly sophisticated technology making itself known. The Combine and Free Worlds League generally match the technological advances of Commonwealth quickly, partially due to their own R&D efforts but also partially due to discrete 'leaks' by ComStar to maintain as level playing field as possible in an attempt to maintain some kind of counterweights to the growing dominance of the Steiner-Davion alliance. The FedCom nations, firmly controlling the balance of power however seem content to let their economies continue to expand and grow in relative peace, with most analysts predicting an inevitable long term capitulation by the other Successor States as the gap is predicted to only widen over time in favor of the mega power.

Massive deposits of Germanium –critical for Jumpship production- are discovered in the equatorial desert regions of Arendelle, along with incredible deposits of rare earth elements in the Northern mountains, during an extensive survey called in for the first time in centuries. How the deposits were missed so long ago is completely unclear, but they are confirmed. News of these finds predict a massive export economic boom for the planet and the surrounding systems in the decades to come.

The ComStar Explorer Corps ship Outbound Light succeeds in the mission to find out what happened to the SLDF after they vanished from the Inner Sphere. Unfortunately, they discover that the SLDFs descendants have twisted and warped themselves into a loose competing federation of military states known as the Clans of Kerensky. Entirely dedicated to war and armed with technology even above that of the Star League, they have been waiting for centuries in the darkness a thousand light years from the edge of the Periphery. Led by genetically engineered warriors grown in artificial wombs and raised for nothing but war, they are almost an alien society culturally compared to any of the states back in the Inner Sphere, with a cast based system of 'civilians' treated as little more than property to support warriors playing at war. Politically, they are divided into two main ideological factions known as the 'Wardens' and 'Crusaders'. The former who see their role to stand apart from the Inner Sphere and only step back in should a threat great enough to threaten mankind itself show up. The later who dream of returning to the Inner Sphere in glorious conquest, overthrowing all Governments and ruling humanity in a twisted parody of the Star League based on their own society, seeing themselves as the pure descendants and the only rightful Heirs to the Throne of Man. Unfortunately for the Inner Sphere, Outbound Light is captured by one of the most hard line Crusader Factions, the Smoke Jaguars. Interrogating the crew ruthlessly, they gain a good understanding of the current state of the Inner Sphere and call for a meeting of the Grand Council, the joint Governing body of the Clans. There, they carefully and selectively present the 'truth' about the Inner Sphere, painting a picture of the Federated Commonwealth absorbing the rest of the Inner Sphere, declaring itself the Star league reborn and eventually becoming powerful enough to find and conquer the Clans. Horrified by such sacrilege, 16 of the 17 Clans vote to immediately commence 'Operation Revival' - a full scale invasion of the Inner Sphere.

The lead elements of the Clans forces arrive at the edge of the Inner Sphere. Four Clans
will commence the invasion, their goal being Terra, former throne world of the Star League. Three more Clans are held in reserve. Outlying pirate and periphery worlds are overrun almost immediately, with little word getting out. ComStar does get scattered reports and intrigued, sends a representative to investigate and parlay with these strangers. The Wolf's Dragoons, in fact an advanced force nominally sent to scout the Inner Sphere on behalf of the Clans, are formally sent a recall order to return to the Clans with all the strategic data they have gathered. Only one warrior, Natasha Kerensky, heeds the order. The rest begin preparing to protect their adopted home, turning their back on the Clans and formally being declared rogue and outcasts.

3050 - Operation Revival is launched. The Clans over the next two years will cut a vast swath through the Inner Sphere, heavily damaging the Lyran Commonwealth, Draconis Combine and all but destroying the short lived Free Rasalhague Republic. ComStar make contact with and eventually will become silent partners with the Clans, seeing them as a unique tool to crush the Successor States, while the Successor States in turn weaken the Clans. Allowing them to move into the aftermath and crush both sides. They are unaware at this time that the Clans goal is Terra. ComStar are soon employed by the Clans to act as Administrators on conquered worlds on their behalf, allowing the Clans to simply move on with minimal garrison forces left behind as ComStar keep things under control on their behalf.

3050 - Idun Jorgensson and Adgar Iversen die in a Dropship accident. Sadly, this trip had been planned to personally call on Hanse Davion to beg for help and compassion for their Daughter Elsa, whose control over her powers and mental state are becoming increasing concerns to her parents. Not knowing of Elsa's unique gifts, Hanse Davion appoints a regent for her until she will reach her majority and be able to take the position of Duchess herself. Grieving over their parents loss and feeling entirely unable to handle the responsibility of Anna in her current state on top of all the other issues between them, Elsa has Anna sent to live with their cousin (on their father's side) Rapunzel Beaulieu as she starts preparing to assume her position as ruler of a world.

3051 - The year of peace. The Clans war leader is killed in a suicide attack run by an Inner Sphere pilot named Tyra Miraborg. As a result, the invasion halts for a full year while they elect a new leader, consolidate and bring in additional Clans for reinforcements. The Inner Sphere uses the time to prepare as best it can. Most critically perhaps, the first seeds of a strong friendship between Victor Steiner Davion, Kai Allard-Liao and Hohiro Kurita are forged during a major conference between all Inner Sphere heads of state to discuss the Clan threat. It will grow stronger through the year after Victor, after a request from Hohiro's sister Omi, crosses the Combine border and rescues the Prince of the Combine from a Nova Cat force when the Clans return. An unofficial handshake agreement is made between Theodore Kurita, Son of ruler Takashi and defacto Warlord of the Combine and Hanse Davion, to respect each others borders while the Clan threat remains – with the provision that if Romano Liao does anything stupid, the Combine will not make waves against the Federated Commonwealth. Theodore is happy to the provision, Romanos behavior during the conference being entirely unhelpful, hostile and downright and appalling among the gathered Lords.

3051 - Battle of Luthien. The Draconis Captial comes under an all-out attack by the forces of Clans Nova Cat and Smoke Jaguar. Hanse Davion, not wanting the Combine to collapse under the Clan threat moves from a truce with the Combine to active assistance, sending the Wolf's Dragoons and Kell Hounds mercenary units who prove critical to holding the capital and defeating the invasion. Now firmly working together to fight the Clans, the Combine/Suns/Commonwealth borders are largely, though not entirely, demilitarized, freeing masses of reserve troops to face the Clans.

3051 - Justin Allard, Minster for Intelligence to Hanse Davion, is assassinated by the Capellan Confederation. Candice Liao is wounded in the attack, but officially announced as dead while she recovers, a secret held very close.

3051 - Hanse Davion orders 'Operation Reciprocity' to be prepared, furious at the Capellans playing politics, especially after coming to an understanding with the Combine who he had always seen as his biggest enemy. Theodore through back channels lets it be known to Hanse that he is washing his hands of the matter and will not object to Hanse's
plans - whatever they may be, having far bigger issues to worry about for his nation. Hanse in turn issues what amounts to an ultimatum to Candice regarding the Capellan Confederation.

3052 - The Battle of Tukayyid. ComStar discover the Clans ultimate objective is Terra. Deciding to fight them before they reach Terra, a proxy battle for the world is arranged on the planet of Tukayyid. The ComGuards are unleashed; fifty Regiments of Battlemechs along with many times over in supporting face off against twenty five Clan 'Galaxies' (Clan field armies). If the Clans win, Terra will be given to the first Clan who reaches it. If ComStar wins, the Clans will cease their invasion for fifteen years. ComStar take heavy losses, but triumph in defeating four Clans, drawing against two and losing to one. The defeat shocks the Clans, but honor bound by their agreement, the Clans are now unable to advance further into the Inner Sphere than the planet Tukayyid. It does not mean they cannot attack as the 'truce line' leaves a great many Inner Sphere worlds above it open to conquest, but the Clan Invasion essentially ends.

3052 - Simultaneously, the somewhat insane Primus Myndo Waterly of ComStar puts into motion her plans to finally seize control of the Inner Sphere. Thinking the Clans crushed by her ComGuards on Tukayyid and the Successor States heavily weakened, she orders ComStar administrators on conquered Clan Worlds to rise up and overthrow the Garrisons the Clans had left behind. She also orders the entire Inner Sphere HPG network shut down, hoping to cripple every Successor State and allow her to dictate terms of surrender to ComStar. Her plan is thwarted when Theodore Kurita is warned by a mole in ComStar of what is about to happen, who in turn passes on a warning to the Federated Commonwealth. Both nations promptly seize up to 80% of the HPGs in their realms; their recovered technology level has now risen sufficiently that their technical staff are able to operate the HPGs on their own – at least in the short term. The Clans promptly squash all the attempted uprisings on the worlds ComStar had taken in their invasion zones and move to start to fully integrate the worlds into their own culture.

3052 - Precentor ComGuard, Anastasius Focht, launches a coup after returning from Tukayyid and finding out what Primus Waterly has done, killing the Primus along with several dozen other senior ComStar personnel including several members of the First Circuit, ComStars Governing body. He then has his allies in ROM ruthlessly purge the higher ups of ComStars Intelligence Agency of the old guard still believing in ComStars manifest destiny. While there are still many at mid levels who believe in the manifest destiny of ComStar, they now lack any kind of nucleus, leader or resources to consolidate around or coordinate with. Most will be weeded out over time, convert their thinking, or simply retire. The new ComStar humbly admits its mistakes to the Successor States over Waterlys head and signs new service agreements to run the HPG network under closer over-watch, successfully banking on the stunning victory against the Clans that saved the Inner Sphere to give them credit against the actions of their former Primus. New service agreements codify that the HPGs are the property of the Successor States, but ComStar retains the full service contract and single supplier monopoly – as well as reaffirming its neutrality over handling messages across the Inner Sphere and affirming the right to station limited ComGuard forces at the HPG stations- are signed with all the Great Houses.

3052 - Operation Reciprocity is launched. 12 AFFC RCTs along with several regiments from the Saint Ives Compact and the Northwind Highlanders mercenary unit launch a decapitation strike on Sian and other key worlds in the Confederation. Romano is condemned by her own words as ordering the complete destruction of the planet with hidden WMDs for 'their total failure' as she attempts to flee, but she is stopped and killed by her sister, having 'risen' from the dead and snuck onto the planet to lie in wait for her. Her partner Tseng dies alongside her. The entire conversation with Romano giving the order to destroy the planet for failing her is rebroadcast across Sian and the Confederation by a helpful ComStar. What little loyalist support there had been mostly collapses at this confession, leaving little for the AFFC troops to mop up as units in droves promptly swear loyalty to the new regime. MIIO agents eliminate Kali Liao and Sun Tzu Liao who are off planet at the time, successfully framing their mother for the deed. In the weeks that follow, announcements of the re-joining of Saint Ives to the Confederation, the pending return of
two thirds of the worlds lost in the 4th Succession War and the release of thousands of political prisoners quickly cement the new Chancellors position. The pending formalization of an alliance with the Federated Commonwealth, including open markets and economic aide also dramatically increases support for Chancellor Cadence across the Confederation.

3052/3053 - Hanse Davion suffers a mild heart attack. Although he survives and receives the finest medical care at NAIS, he and Melissa take it as a warning sign and recall Victor late in the year. It is time for him to prepare to take on the role he was, quite literally, born for.

3053 - Elsa Jorgensson is to be formally to be invested as Dutchess of Arendelle, having reached her majority. Her sister Anna returns home to stay, accompanied by her cousin Rapunzel. This will be the first time in many long years the two sisters have had any direct contact with each other. To the extreme surprise of the other guests and local nobility being invited, they find out that Victor Ian Steiner Davion, the heir to both the Federated Suns and Lyran Commonwealth, will be attending as Acting March Lord of the Crucis March, along with Kai Allard Liao, Heir Presumptive to the Chancellor of the Capellan Confederation. Also tagging along is one Kommandant Galen Cox, a close friend and aide-de-camp to Victor.
In an Inner Sphere kingdom, a ruler did appear.
Born with a secret power so great, alone she stayed in fear.
Although the force was well hidden, one day she let it go.
And whole worlds will be covered in eternal ice and snow.

Yet if this day should come, hope should not be forsworn.
This fate can be avoided - and a new one born.
Hark well then, that for all of our Trothkins skill at war,
Love by far, is the greatest power of all.

[[Poem recorded as final vision of Oathmaster Johnathan Drummond - May 14 3034]]
[[Accessed Khan Severen Leroux - August 18 3053]]
New Avalon
Crucis March
Federated Commonwealth
April 03 - 3053

"Ardan said that you wanted to see me?"

Hanse Davion glanced up from the neat piles of paperwork that covered his desk, nodding to the figure at the door and gesturing to one of the seats opposite him. The other, dressed in the standard duty uniform of an AFFC MechWarrior entered at the invitation, returning the salutes offered by the two soldiers from the 1st Davion Guards standing guard as he did so before they exited the room, closing the door behind them.

Hanse set aside the files he had been working on, gathering them up and locking them in one of the secure desk draws. Opening another draw, he retrieved a new package of hard copy printouts and folders, pausing for but a moment to reflect on what these innocuous looking folders meant before he dropped them onto his desk and watched Victor sit down. An unexpected surge of pride hit him then, as he studied the easy and confident way his Son now wore his uniform – or more specifically, the way he wore everything that came with it, visible and invisible both.

Victor was no child anymore, but Hanse couldn't help but study the man his Son had become seemingly overnight. Thrown into the deep end after graduation from the Nagelring four years ago, Victor had gone from a green soldier filled with that dangerous mix of youthful ignorance, impatience and invulnerability into a hardened combat veteran tempered in the fires of war. Like any parent, Hanse quietly hated the loss of his son's innocence … but at the same time, he couldn't help but feel a surging pride in the fact that allowed a chance to sink or swim entirely on his own, that Victor had thrived in perhaps the ultimate test of a person's character. He had taken up the crushing burden of having people put their lives in his hands knowing that he would probably get at least some of them killed – yet he had not let it crush him or distort him. Far too many soldiers he knew had come back from the hell of war shattered and twisted mockeries who of what they had been beforehand.

And far too many soldiers, would never have the chance to come back at all.

The Clan Invasion had been a catastrophe – there was not really any other way to put it. Not just his wife's half of the Federated Commonwealth, but also the Draconis Combine and the Free Rasahlahuge Republic. The former had lost almost a third of its worlds and almost had its capital overrun, the latter had been all but wiped out and existed now as little more than a sad joke, a footnote in a history book. And yet, the Clans had been stopped for now, honor bound thanks to the sacrifices of ComStar and bloodied heavily by their ComGuards. They would not advance further for another thirteen years, time enough for the vastly larger industrial powers of the Inner Sphere to catch their breath, rebuild, unify after a fashion until finally they were ready to counter attack with overwhelming force and fury.

Such was the theory anyway.

Hanse couldn't help but glance away from Victor for a moment as he settled himself, to take in once more the massive map pinned to one wall of his office that he still found more useful than any number of holotanks or computer screens. Over five meters across, the star map was festooned with various pins, sticky notes and scribbled markings showing unit locations and strengths, logistical webs, Jumpship chains and other various tell tail signs of an energetic contest between nation states to those who knew how to read them. A few months ago, such a map would have been focused at the 'top' of the Inner Sphere, where the daggers of the Clan Invasion corridors had become a depressingly permanent seeming border on the newest generation of such maps hanging in varied war rooms and command centres across known space. This map however, was focused on almost the exact opposite side of the Sphere, with red and green lines stabbing out of the gold of the Federated Suns half of the Commonwealth deep into the jade emerald of the Capellan Confederation.

The fifth and smallest of the Successor States, that crazy idiot Romano had scoffed at the threat the Clans when the damning evidence of their prowess and power had been presented to them all on
Outreach. While he could appreciate from a ruler's perspective that she saw no reason to bleed for her enemies, especially given that she was under no direct threat from the Clans, he had thought it blindingly obvious that it was in her interests to not to anything to compromise the Commonwealths unwilling defence of her realm. Even if only to ensure her various enemies did the maximum amount of damage to each other while she used the relative peace to rebuild her still shattered nation from the wreckage of the 4th Succession War – it was plain common sense.

He had clearly underestimated her insanity. Or perhaps, it would be more accurate to think that he had overestimated the control her various retainers and family had over her decision making, compared to her father Maximilian. Because not even he would have been so bold as to overtly order the assassination of one of Hanse closest advisors on his own capital world. Granted, given her and Justin's history, she had probably seen it as a strictly Capellan event; a strike against Saint Ives and her 'traitor' Sister Candace, leader of the FedCom aligned breakaway Capellan region of the Saint Ives Compact. And granted, she also had no way of knowing that the Clan Invasion would come to a sudden halt shortly after, meaning that suddenly she would have the near undivided attention of the Armed Forces of the Federated Commonwealth.

But even Romano should have damn well known that when predicting the reactions of an enemy, it didn't really matter what you thought, but what the other person might think of your actions.

The assassin who had killed Justin had also wounded Candace, her Sister and Justin's wife in the same attack. It had been out of respect for them that for the longest time Hanse had limited his confrontations with the Confederation to defensive actions and limited objective raids that maintained the status quo left after the 4th Succession War. He knew perfectly well that Candace saw her Compact as the ultimate hedge; a lifeboat for the best of Capellan culture and society should the Confederation have been truly shattered during or after the 4th Succession War. He also knew full well that Candace truly loved the Confederation –through rose tinted glasses, but loved it none the less- and did not want to see its 'good' parts either destroyed or simply swallowed up by another state… but for all that he could respect that, Hanse had finally reached his limit.

Six months from Justin's death and Romano, her Consort and her Children were merely slowly fading memories and pages in history books – and good riddance! Candace now sat on the Celestial Throne of Sian as Regent for her son, Kai who was expected to take the throne within another five years after Candace finished starting the hard work of rebuilding what Hanse had shattered twenty years ago. It was early days yet to be sure, but all signs looked remarkably promising; it seemed the people of the Confederation did appreciate sane and stable leadership after all and Candace had been remarkably competent in cutting out all of those who may have been loyal to the ideals of the old regime. The treaties that would bring the Confederation into the Federated Commonwealth alliance as an associated state were in their final drafting stages even now and were expected to be signed early next year. Already, planning was underway for limited numbers of Capellan troops to be deployed to the Clan Front by late next year, even as a large number of units in the Capellan March started shipping across to the Lyran State Command, causing Nondi Steiner to actually smile once in a while – an event about as rare as a warm Tharkard winter. Map lines were even now being redrawn across the Inner Sphere to show a large bulk of his wife's 'Wedding Present' being nominally subsumed back into the Confederation – even if little to nothing would change on those worlds besides flags, anthems and holidays, as Candace took on the daunting task of restricting Capellan society into something rather more acceptable to her new allies before any real turnover would happen.

The coup had been surprisingly bloodless on the whole; a handful of Capellan units who would certainly not have approved of the new order had been dogpiled by elite FedCom RCTs in something more along the lines of a live fire exercise for new Mechwarriors and prototype next generation Mech Designs starting to come off the production line, than a struggle between great nation states. Many other people had been quietly 'eliminated' across the Confederation in dark alleys and at the end of sniper rifles to be sure, but ultimately a Successor State had fallen in less than four days with less than ten thousand people dead. And with that boil lanced, Hanse had been able to start giving more time to other matters that had built up over the last year.

Such as Victor.

Turning back to face his Son from the map on the wall, Hanse appraised him once more before
"Thank you for coming in on such short notice" Hanse started, before he paused and frowned slightly, annoyed that suddenly he was finding himself speaking so formally to his son.

Then again, it was a sort of formal occasion.

"It's fine" Victor smiled easily as he leaned back. "All I had today were more staff meetings with Galen, then going over the results of the last training exercises with the staff of the Cavalry".

"Oh? How did the last exercise go then?" Hanse asked, his interest suddenly piqued ... and Victor frowned at him as he noted the twitching smile trying to work its way onto his Fathers face.

"You knew". It wasn't quite an accusation.

"Of course I did" Hanse let the smirk bloom. "Who do you think gave Chapman the tools for the job? He and Banzai were working on this for months. Personally I thought it was a ludicrous idea, but once again we have been shown to never doubt the power of a mad scientist with a blank chequebook".

"Well he certainly hasn't lost his touch" Victor offered him a wry smile. "Chapman managed to get in, run our 'Cluster' around in circles while he accomplished his objectives, then disengage and get his main unit back out when we ran back to stop his assault force". Victor shrugged slightly. "Granted we were fighting strictly by Clan tactics and wouldn't have come out to play that way normally, but given the odds against them, I have to admit Marshal Devers was rather ... annoyed".

"But you were not?" Victor again shrugged.

"Yes, but to be perfectly honest, the 10th probably needed a good kick in the pants. Some of the troops have been getting a little too cocky after all the ass-kicking's we've delivered over the last year".

Hanse nodded, pleased to see his Son taking the lesson for what it was. Victors command, the 10th Lyran Guards, had spent the last 8 months on New Avalon in a training role, with the Clan Truce now firmly in place. One of the most skilled units in the AFFC who had fought no less than three different Clans, each with their own tactics and fighting styles, they had been rotated off the front line to serve as a Clan-style 'opposing force' to other units. Green units, units rebuilt after being shattered by the Clans early on and units that simply were too full of themselves or set in their tactical thinking; the 10ths job was simply to brutally beat them up, break their confidence with a hard dose of reality and then just as brutally rebuild them. Their Mechs had been modified for training purposes to simulate the Clans superior technology with wickedly advanced holographic systems that could make an Atlas look uncannily like a Daishi, linked into an integrated simulation network that was almost as terrifyingly realistic as a real battle. And they were using the technology well; again and again beating up their opponents until the lessons sunk in about just what it meant to fight an enemy with the technology, skills and hyper-aggressive mindset the Clans had.

Some units had gotten 'it' quickly and learned what not to do in combat with a Clan unit. Others had unfortunately required substantially more humbling before they started to shift tactics, more than a few senior officers had been quietly shuffled off to make way for new blood if they simply proved unable to cope with the dynamics of war in the 3050s. A modern Federated Suns Regimental Combat Team held the generally accepted distinction of being the most well trained, equipped and flexible military force mankind had seen since the Star League Defence Force – even perhaps to the point of getting a little too complacent with that reputation. Complacency could be a very dangerous thing ... and hundreds of thousands of soldiers had perhaps paid the price for that smugness early on in the Clans invasion. Although compared to the problems old Takashi was apparently having trying to get large chunks of the conservative DCMS fighting smart, his army was rapidly embracing the hard won lessons with blinding speed.

And with far fewer requests for commanders to 'use the garden' to boot.
His RCT commanders were *not* idiots; they already knew perfectly well that to fight a battle by the enemy's rules and terms was a sure fire way to lose a battle; most of them simply had not seen the Clans 'box' and so didn't know how to think outside of it. After a few beatings at the hands of 'Clan Steiner-Davion' as the 10th had dubbed themselves while on OPPFOR duty, most units had shaped up well and were even now being shipped off to the Lyran State Command with confidence that they knew how to fight this new enemy - and how to win against them. Of course, this kind of Opposing Force training had much less utility for units whose specialty already *was* looking at the box, laughing at it, setting it on fire before walking away to find a nice sphere to sit on.

Like the Federated Suns Armored Cavalry.

He didn't know if it had been Doctor Banzai or General Chapman who had come up with the completely absurd idea of modifying *Stuka* class Aerotech fighters to be able to 'bolt on' a man to their ordinance hardpoints, wearing the new Inner Sphere Standard battle armour. He also wasn't sure *where* they had come up with people crazy enough to actually *volunteer* to be bolted on. But he certainly couldn't doubt the effectiveness of the completely off the wall tactic. The Armored Cavalry had pulled the 10th out of position from the supply base they were supposed to be protecting, Clan Steiner-Davion moving out and attacking furiously like the Clanners they were simulating like a bull at a red flag, *apparently* scattering the Cav in all directions in the process. Ten Aerotech fighters, all modified *Stukas*, had then made a nape of the Earth dash and air strike against the supply base the 10th were supposed to be defending. But instead of dropping virtual bombs which would have been entirely ineffective against the distributed and well-fortified caches, or trying to slow down and make direct attacks that would expose them to a gauntlet of AAA fire, they had dropped forty battle armoured troopers into the base as they cracked past at Mach 1, all of them loaded down with as many demolition charges as they could carry. The sheer insanity of the tactic had so stunned the defending conventional infinity into disbelieving inaction that the neutral referees drawn from the Davion Heavy Guards had declared them wiped out within minutes. Sapper teams had swiftly torn open the bunkers and set demolition charges, even as other fire teams had fanned out to TAG a number of anti-aircraft emplacements and bunkers still intact around the perimeter of the base. A (virtual) hail of Arrow-IV missiles from the remainder of the air wing delivered from out of range promptly 'blew' a neat escape hole for the Battle Armour, transport choppers landing swiftly to pick up the attack force and fly away safely, just ahead of the return of the chagrined 10th Lyans 'Mechs.

And just to rub salt in the wound, it seemed the raiders had found and 'liberated' much of the 10ths daily alcohol ration which had also been stored in the camp before trashing the rest. And stolen the Clan Steiner-Davion flag to boot.

The Cav were, of course, now strutting around Avalon City they owned the planet. And credit where credit was due, they had earned the victory and were itching to have a real go at the Clans as soon as possible.

"Information is ammunition – so don't hand it over to the enemy" Hanse quoted to his son, gaining a mild rolling of eyes in return.

"When I ascend the throne, I think I'm going to *ban* that show" Victor replied. "God knows Adam tells me he is getting sick of having people thrust holovid boxes in his face every time he steps foot back into civilized society, asking for autographs".

"Then it might interest you to know that holovid sales and merchandising rights *so far* have made enough money to buy a full company of new Battlemechs for the Strikers. In fact, if the sales trends continue growing like they are, we should clear enough for Morgan to upgrade them into a near Battalion sized raiding force within a year".

"...You're kidding me".

"No, not at all" he assured the other. "For all the critics that panned it, it's been selling like *hotcakes* across the Commonwealth and Suns. And apparently Tharkard Broadcasting just penned an agreement for distribution rights in the Free Worlds League with Atreus TV, which should bring in, oh, another twenty to thirty million this financial year".

"Things are so much simpler on the Battlefield" Victor shook his head slightly – even as he filed
the information away to rib his cousin the next time he saw him.

"I know exactly how you feel" Hanse said – and not without irony, given what he was going to tell him now. But he was perfectly happy to use the opening his son had given him anyway. "After your Uncle Ian died … well, let's just say going from a Battlefield to a Throne is a no easy task".

"Very Subtle Father" Victor raised an eyebrow. "Why do I have the feeling that statement is the prelude to you telling me something I'm not going to like?"

"Because Ardan, bless his heart, still can't keep his mouth shut?"

"Well … not exactly. You know Ardan, how he gets in that super serious mood that tells you he knows something big is about to happen?"

"Ah" Hanse replied, taking a moment to frame his thoughts seriously. "Victor, you've made your Mother and I incredibly proud of you over the last four years. And not just on the battlefield; you've truly become your own man. But with the Clan and Combine truces in place and the Capellans finally under control, it's time to seriously look at your future plans".

"As in we're going to discuss and decide together what I want, or that you are going to lay out what you and Mother have planned for me?"

"You tell me" Hanse asked, leaning back as he noted there was not a trace of rebuke in his son's voice. He remembered only four years ago when told he was being stationed roughly in the middle of nowhere Victor had had something of a tantrum to both him and Morgan. But now there was no judgement in his voice, merely … acceptance. Perhaps curiosity?

His son really had grown up a great deal over the last few years.

Victor sighed and also leaned back in his chair, but didn't break eye contact.

"Well … I think we both knew that at some point I'd have to start taking a much deeper and more active involvement in political life. I had hoped to at least wait another year, to finish out my five years' service with the 10th Lyran. I couldn't help but notice Katherine has been very active on the New Avalon talk show scene since I got here – and doing a rather impressive job at it".

"Translation; 'Isn't whatever you want me to do something she can do?' Hanse dryly reflected – and Victor at least had the good grace to look slightly embarrassed for a moment. But it was a valid enough point he supposed. Ever since the mild heart attack, he had been 'encouraged' to offload as many of his duties as he possibly could to other people until he was fully recovered. And by 'encouraged' he meant his Wife, Morgan, Arden, Alex Mallory, half his Privy Council and most of his Children had taken it upon themselves to organize a soft palace coup against him that had considerably lightened his workload, spreading much of the day to day business across any number of his trusted advisers, to distil his attention and energy to only the most critical and important decisions that he had to take. At least until everyone was sure he was fully recovered.

Katherine had been tasked with keeping up the Royal families local public appearances. His daughter had shown a genuine knack for the kind of soft public relations work that was a political figures bread and butter, her media profile spiking quickly to the point that quiet alarm bells had rung in the back of the head of her parents. Not because they didn't trust their daughter. Far from it; Hanse was increasingly confident that when the time came for Victor to take the reins of leadership that she would be one of his most critical advisers and a brilliant regent when he was off New Avalon. No, the problem was Victors lauded war record that had dramatically increased his media profile during the Clan War and made him a hero, along with the 10th Guards.

Because it was exactly that. A war record.

The AFFC loved him and acknowledged him as one of their own - and having the military on side was rather …important… for the ruler of a Successor State. He had even won high praise for his decision to rescue Hohiro Kurita –outside of the Draconis March anyway. And even there, pointed questions about AFFC troops risking their lives to 'save a Drac Prince' were wrapped tightly inside smug sound-bytes on talk shows about how the action showed that their Prince had
shown he would honor his word. But the Clan War was fast becoming 'yesterday's news' –
despite how many times exasperated military press officers on New Avalon and Tharkard kept
saying that the war was neither over nor truly suspended. Attention was drifting back to many
other things in the news and on planets with other concerns from employment to the environment
across hundreds of worlds. Domestic issues that had been ignored for too long with the threat of
total conquest by invaders from beyond the Periphery on everyone's minds.

Victor, everyone agreed, was a fine soldier. A worthy leader who had fought furiously in defense
of his people. As was proper. But as a politician he was … untested. And after the heart attack
scare of last year with their First Prince, the first ‘what if?’ questions had been asked over scenarios
where one or both of his Parents died. Would Victor be in any shape to take over? Did Victor
have the training, the people, and the confidence of the various Government departments?

The questions were mild, and as of now, not being at all seriously asked. But both Hanse and
Melissa had taken notice and taken the warning for what it was. Hanse knew exactly what it was
like to be thrust suddenly into a position of unexpected authority. He had never wanted to rule the
Federated Suns. Like Victor had been perfectly happy as a MechWarrior and completely
unprepared when that awful day when his brother had been killed in action playing MechWarrior
instead of Politician as was his want. Somehow, Hanse had managed to struggle on until he found
his feet with a lot of luck, but they couldn't risk that happening to Victor. He was responsible for
two Great powers, not one. He had a strategic situation that made the Game of Thrones of the
Succession Wars look almost simple – and that was even without internal political challenges he
would face from both realms.

Victor had been born to rule. It was his birthright, but it was also his duty, something he had
learned and embraced fiercely on the field of battle. He was so much like Ian in some ways; he
loved the life of a soldier. The equality that came from being among comrades in arms without any
concern about political life. No concerns about the circumstances of one's birth, no concerns about
anything but trusting the man next to you to watch your back as he trusted you to watch yours as
you were forced to make decisions both so much harder … and yet so much easier than those you
would face behind this desk.

But unlike Ian, Victor had an enormous capacity within him to learn and the will to change. And
it was past time to awaken that drive in him. And if his Wife was mercilessly pushing him to
offload a lot of his tedious responsibilities until he was fully back on his feet, then he might as well
start piling some of them onto Victor … as they would all be his soon enough anyway.

"Your Sister has been doing an exceptional job – that is true" Hanse continued the conversation
after only a heartbeat of a pause, leaving forward again for emphasis to hold Victors gaze. "But it
is well past time that you started to get more hands-on experience with the realm you are going to
be ruling. My heart attack was an important wake up call Victor. A warning that we cannot simply
assume we'll have all the time in the world to play with here. If I had died, you would have had to
start running before you could walk. I'd much rather have it the other way around" he noted,
picking up the stack of folders neatly tied together with a paper seal wrapped around them and
tossing it across the desk to him. Victor reached out and slid them the rest of the way, glancing
briefly at the bold red letters printed across the cover sheet briefly as he reached to snap the seal
and lift the first folder … then he did a double take at the writing before snapping his eyes up at
his Father, pure shock coming across his face for a heartbeat before he got himself under control.

"…Victor Steiner-Davion, Acting Lord of the Crucis March?" he read out the text printed there
with a remarkably steady voice.

Hanse raised an eyebrow, genuinely impressed at his son's control.

"You were expecting, perhaps, me to make you parking inspector for Avalon City?"

"I'm not sure what I was expecting – but I wasn't prepared for this" he replied, pausing to exhale
slowly as he marshaled his emotions. "It's … a rather big step up from a Battalion command to
being in charge of a hundred worlds".

"True" Hanse nodded, again pleased to see his Son was taking in the gravity of this sudden new
direction in his life with the attention it deserved – yet without any kind of panic. "But it's
substantially less than the step from a Battalion to ruling eight hundred across two realms and six major political regions, each with their own egomaniac in charge. Besides, the Crucis March more or less runs itself these days since the Periphery zone was split off. There are few things that require my personal involvement in any given week that are not strictly ceremonial. But that isn't the point. This is hard experience for you. You will need to put together a staff just like James has on Robinson or Kym runs for Morgan down on New Syrtis. You will need to bring together a core group of advisers who know all the things you don't know, but who you can work with. You will need to start rubbing shoulders with the local nobility and deal with all the pesky interplanetary issues they should really sort out themselves, but prefer to drop in your lap so you can take the heat. And if you can learn to do this for the Crucis March, you can learn to do it for the Commonwealth. We're not throwing you in the deep end … but you will need to learn how to swim. This will be a challenge … but I can tell you that everyone at the highest levels of the Suns I ran this by – myself, your Mother, Arden, the other March Lords; all of them have total confidence in your ability to do this”.

He was pleased that Victor did not respond immediately or impulsively. Instead his Son glanced down in thought for some time, clearly thinking everything over and giving this matter the absolute serious consideration it deserved. But eventually, inevitably, he nodded, straighter and look him in the eye unflinchingly.

"Where do we start?"

Hanse smiled.

"You have a meeting tomorrow at nine with several members of the Privy Council" Hanse keyed up an itinerary on his desktop computer, swinging the screen so Victor could see the schedule listed for him tomorrow already in place. "$You won't need to make any major decisions on staff yet, but you'll need to get some short lists going for review and to think about defining exactly what your roles and responsibilities are, with the personnel to cover all of them. The public announcement will be at the end of the week, but you'll be on the road by then so you won't need to be here for that".

"On the road?" Victor echoed curiously.

"Top folder" Hanse glanced down at the stack of papers and Victor obediently broke the seal on the packet, pulling out the top folder and flipping it open to skim the summery sheet on the first page. "$Your first official function as acting March Lord will be taking a trip to Arendelle".

"Arendelle" Victor glanced to the side, his eyes narrowing slightly for a moment in thought, before refocusing. "$That's … about three jumps spinward from here, right?"

"Correct" Hanse agreed. "$Closer to the border of the Periphery March. Quite a nice place really, been there once years ago with your Mother for a little drop in with the rulers".

"Family?" Victor wondered aloud – and not unreasonably. The Davion family had for centuries become 'involved' with various local Governments, spawning countless branches to the family tree far beyond the ability of anyone but a dedicated genealogist to figure out. Some worlds like Argyle had a great many distant relatives and estates clustered on them, but most worlds could point to some kind of link somewhere with a little effort.

"Friends" Hanse clarified with a slight smile. "$The Duchess at the time was a close friend of Melissa, they met when she was single on New Avalon in '28 and had invited us to visit. We finally got around to it in 34".

"Hang on" Victor protested, as he backed up the conversation with a frown. "$I thought Mothers presence was a secret from pretty much everyone back in '28. How exactly did they meet when she was on New Avalon?"

"Oh it was a secret" Hanse laughed suddenly as he thought back fondly to those crazy days. "$How exactly Idun managed to just waltz past that many guards and security systems? That is something Quintus never entirely figured out. Drove the poor man to distraction, good lord that woman had enough energy for ten people and if you took your eyes off her for a split second,
poof, she was gone. Your Mother, of course, fell in love with her and they were thick as thieves while she was here with me – no matter if she became something of a technical prisoner as much as a guest in order to keep the secret. Not that they saw it that way of course. They kept in touch even after Melissa moved back to Tharkard’. Hanse paused then, the smile on his face fading as the past gave way to relatively recent events, a sigh passing his lips as he came to the point. "As for why you are going there; well that's simple. They are both dead - there is no current Duke or Duchess in charge of the place. Hasn't been for three years’.

Victor tilted his head in curiosity. It was highly unusual for such a position to remain vacant for that long – certainly not without it being big enough news that even on the Clan front he probably would have heard about it.

"Succession crisis? Foul play?’ He hazarded a guess - but Hanse shook his head.

"Dropship accident” Hanse grimaced as he recalled the events. "It didn't get too much attention – certainly not outside of the Crucis March itself – and we worked to keep it low key. Idun and her husband were on their way to New Avalon – they said they had something important -not exactly urgent, but important- to discuss directly with me. Their Dropship had an engine failure shortly after take-off. A pretty terrific storm was going on at the time and they lost control at exactly the wrong time and tipped over; went right in to the ocean without any survivors”.

"That sounds … convenient’ Victor narrowed his eyes slightly. "Sabotage?’ Granted, 3050 had been a very busy year, but that kind of scandalizing death of the rulers of a world was the stuff news channels just loved putting up. Or if not them, conspiracy theorists. He was surprised he had not heard about it until now. There may be 800 worlds across the Commonwealth –minus however many the damn Clans had taken- but it wasn't every day a ruler died in a dropship crash.

"Given that they said they had something important to talk to me about then mysteriously died, I had MIIO investigate. Their reports and analysis are in there” Hanse nodded again at the folder Victor was holding, "but the long and short of it is they concluded it was an accident. Just one damn thousand c-bill bracket that broke in the wrong place at the wrong time. There was no supporting evidence that it had been caused by sabotage”.

"Doesn't mean it wasn't sabotage – it might just mean they were really good” Victor pointed out, and Hanse smirked, both amused and pleased with his son's skepticism - but didn't say anything, letting Victor continue. "So … if they still don't have someone in charge three years later … I'm guessing there were no suitable heirs at the time?’

"They were survived by two daughters. Elsa, the elder, and Anna the younger. Neither were old enough to step in. But it wasn't an immediate concern either. The planet was highly stable and I decided there was no need to rush it through – in fact I had good reason to make sure she was ready for the job. So I green lit a local regency until Elsa would be old enough to take the throne, getting her slowly more involved in the decision making and seeing how she handled it. The reports I got back were favorable, so I had Arden swing by earlier this year and interview her. He tells me that she's somewhat … reserved, rather formal. Extremely bright mind you. Probably lacking a bit of confidence, but he's sure she'll be fine. She has a solid support structure around her, very loyal people, her parents were much loved. Her twenty first birthday is just over a month from now and she'll be invested as a duchess a week later’.

"Ohhhh? An investment?’ Victors eyes lit up. "I've heard … stories … about those”.

Hanse rolled his eyes – but he didn't try to suppress the smirk on his face either. Any new Duke or Duchess invested into such a position were required to legally swear allegiance and loyalty to their March Lord and the First Prince of the Federated Suns. For worlds in the Crucis March as this involved both titles belonging to the same person, it was often consolidated into a highly ceremonial trip to New Avalon instead of the rather busy First Prince coming out to see them. There the party of the Nobel and their retainers, often hundreds strong, would undertake a solemn week long stay at Mount Davion where they would formally be briefed on their duties and expectations, before the formal swearing in.

At least officially.
Unofficially it mostly involved getting absolutely plastered on the First Princes private alcohol stores for five days straight, among other entertainments. Then came a full day to recover from the hangovers and then the formal ceremony on the seventh day, with all the pomp that could be mustered in front of the cameras. Followed in turn by the First Prince kicking them the hell out before his wine cellars ran dry, while pretending he didn’t see the cases of bottles loaded into various hoverlimo boots as they headed for the space port.

"Not this time Son" Hanse shook his head. "There is a reason I'm sending you to them - and the reason I've been careful to make sure Elsa is fit for this position ... well, read appendix C's summery".

Victor did so, his face neutral and controlled now as he read through the single page summary report, before finally looking up and raising an eyebrow.

"This is confirmed?"

"It is" Hanse nodded solemnly. "Jamie Wolfs people confirmed the NAIS analysis; the specific rare-earth elements key to the production of Clan technology are present on Arendelle in levels not seen outside the Clan Homeworlds. Even ignoring the fact that the planet has significant Germanium deposits that could fuel Galax and Kathil for the next five centuries at current production levels, this … I don't need to tell you how big a thing matching the Clans technology would be, do I?"

Victor simply shook his head. While the Star League technology the Inner Sphere was mass producing now was a quantum leap over the technology used during the Succession Wars, it was still a significant step down from the technology the Clans had. Although the fundamental principles of what made the Clans technology so much better than comparable Inner Sphere technology were now broadly understood, duplicating it was proving to be a nightmare. The biggest stumbling block being the lack of certain rare-Earth elements that simply did not exist in the Inner Sphere on the scale needed to do more than hand tool a few examples as proofs of concepts. Arendelle could change all that at a stroke – and in so doing, shift the entire balance of power across the Inner Sphere in highly unpredictable ways.

The one thing everyone could agree on however, was that everyone in the Inner Sphere would want a piece of the production and demand would consume any supply as soon as it was harvested. It meant huge potential profits were in the wind and according to MIIOs commercial division, every two bit mining and refining company from across the Inner Sphere was already jockeying for a piece of the action. And he explained as much to Victor.

"Bear in mind that we've given a lot of these companies a lot of leeway since we established the Periphery March" Hanse finished. "Major tax incentives, investment co-payments, joint partnerships; the works. We overlook a lot of what they get up to out there, because they are bringing major net positives to the region. But occasionally we need to remind them, quietly, who holds the whip".

"And what's why I'm going" Victor determined. "My presence – my first official act in fact as March Lord, will be to show up and be seen showing up. Make sure everyone understands that we're keeping close tabs on them and this planet".

"That and the fact that your mother was extremely fond of these girls Mother – and wants them to know that they can turn to us if they need any help" Hanse qualified. "But yes, at the heart of this, it's just about being seen and letting everyone draw their own opinions. The Mega-corps will understand they are being told that we're watching them. The locals will take it as a sign of support and the greatest vote of confidence we can bestow in the new Duchess. The New Avalon media will eat up the footage of you looking dashing and official and send it out to every corner of the Commonwealth, without you having to lift a finger".

"Kill several birds with one stone" Victor thoughtfully nodded his head. "Efficient".

"You have to be in this job" Hanse snorted gently. "On a related topic, as March Lord you have the right to have an honor guard accompany you to any planet in the March – and you should get into the habit of it anyway. I've talked it over with Marshal Devers and General Kaulkas. They've
agreed to put together a mixed battalion sized unit based on the Revenants – at least for this trip. Morgan and Nondi are working to put together a new formation containing elements of the Davion Guards and Royal Guards to take over the job on a permanent basis, but that can wait for now. And at any rate” he paused for a moment, shooting a sympathetic look at his Son, "the 10th are going to rotate back to Lyran State Command next year with the next wave of resuffles from the Capellan March. I think at the least you’ve earned a final road trip with some of them. Apparently just about everyone in the RCT put their hands up for this mission”.

His Son smiled gently and looked away, clearly touched by the show of support by his unit.

"I'm keeping Galen" Victor decided after a moment. "He'll hate it, but he's too good an aide – too good a friend to let go”.

Hanse snorted gently at that deceleration.

'I'd insist on him staying with you even if you didn't want him – all of us need someone not afraid to pull us up when we do something stupid – God knows how many times Ardan pulled me up short over the years. Oh, that reminds me; Kai will be joining you as well”.

"Kai?” Victor asked with genuine surprise and no small amount of pleasure at the unexpected announcement before his gaze turned somewhat more wary. "Why is he tagging along?"

"Officially?” Hanse asked, and Victor nodded as Hanse held out his hand and started to tick off items. "One, his mother wants to keep him away from Sian until things have really cooled down, probably to help keep his mind off the death of Justin as much as anything else. Two, much like me, she wants him to start getting practical experience in political life – and Sian is too much of a vipers nest to train in without learning the wrong lessons. Three, it plays up your friendship with him across the Suns – especially the Capellan March planets unsure to be annoyed at me for giving back planets to the Confederation, despite our new treaty, or rejoicing for having Romano and her brood put down”.

"Right. That all makes perfect sense” Victor nodded, before adding "and unofficially?"

"Justin must have mentioned Arendelle and the recent discoveries before he died" Hanse laughed softly. "It's clear that Candace wants 'equal in' on the resources to kick start her own Clan-tech weapons program. And in order to do that, she needs to make nice with Arendelle, especially given that for the last twenty years the word most often associated with the Confederation was 'insanity'. She probably hopes Kai will charm the pants off everyone, laying the ground work for future negotiations. She always likes to play the long game".

"Do we have any problem with that?” Victor asked carefully.

"No, not really” Hanse shook his head, quick to dispel any possible wedge forming between Victor and one of his closest friends. "Kai's so relentlessly humble that he's almost a walking, talking advertisement for the 'new look' Confederation, even without his ridiculously impressive war record”.

"I see” Victor replied with a slow nod as he took it in. "This is going to take a while to get used to – seeing everything on ten different levels at the same time".

"Truth" Hanse nodded as he stood, Victor doing so as well. "But you'll learn Victor. That is your greatest strength”. Hanse came around the desk to his Son and, clearly surprising him, grabbed him in a fierce hug that Victor quickly returned just as firmly, Hanse enjoying the moment before letting him go and starting to walk him towards the door. "You're going to do fine. Don't stress about this trip. Have fun, catch up with Kai and have a final road trip with your Revenants – they could probably use some light duty". He paused to open the door, nodding to the bodyguards who snapped to attention. "This will probably be the easiest, most boring and most uneventful trip you'll take off New Avalon as March Lord ever. So make the most of it”.

Sending Victor on his way and closing the door behind him, Hanse Davion smiled slightly to himself as he headed back to his desk, completely ignorant of just how wrong his last statement would end up being.
“I have been blessed to meet a great many remarkable people in my life. Leaders of Great States and soldiers of spectacular skill to be sure. Nobles by the thousands and many more people of note by the tens of thousands. And yet, despite the differences between all of them, I’ve found an amusing commonality in that I am so often asked about the Duchess of Arendelle.

‘What is she like? What kind of a person is she, truly, the legendary Snow Queen of the Federated Commonwealth?’

To those questions, I always give the same answer I give now. If you wish to understand the Duchess of Arendelle, you must first understand - or at least try to understand - the delightfully chaotic blaze of infinite energy that is Anna.

Do not be misled by the fact that Elsa is the older Sister and Duchess and do not be deceived by the fact that Elsa has the power to manipulate the raw forces of the universe, while Anna is as ‘normal’ as any of the rest of us. Elsa has a strength of will few I have ever met could match, but never miscalculate which of the two sisters will ultimately get her way in the end should they ever disagree about something”.

- Archon-Prince Victor Steiner-Davion; ‘Cause and Effect’. Avalon Press, 3068

Anna disliked dropships.

This was not, as one might think, related to the tragedy of what had happened to her parents. Or at least not wholly so. While she had grieved – and still quietly grieved – the loss of her Mother and Father in a distant thunderclap and rumble one horrible night three years ago, the feelings of apprehension and sadness that spiked whenever she saw one of the massive craft centred on a much earlier event in her life.

It was the night, when a seven year old Anna had been told that her sister was leaving their home to go and live far far away.

She had not believed her parents when they had tried to quietly explain to her that Elsa needed to live apart from them - at least for a while. She had not believed them when they told her that she had already left and it was too late to say goodbye. And she had certainly not believed them when they told her it might be years before she saw her again.

And to prove them wrong, she had run.

In a blur of motion she had torn away from the dinner table, ignoring the pleas for her to come back as she had sprinted in her somewhat ungainly way up the main staircase two at a time. She had then launched herself off onto the second floor and down the passage to where she knew Elsas bedroom was. So many times she had run down this passage to the door set halfway down it. So many times she had halted in front of the door there over the last two years and silently stared, pleading for her to come out. More than once she had simply gone to sleep in front of the door at night, only to find herself back in her bed in the morning – apparently moved there by her parents.

But she knew she was there, even if she was still never to be seen.
Except … now she wasn’t.

The doors with the pretty snowflakes painted on them that had always been closed to her were wide open and the room beyond was dark. Panting slightly from her sprint, she had slowly walked through them, into Elsa’s bedroom for the very first time … and found the room was empty. A few boxes, a few crates sealed up against a wall, but nothing else. No bed, no draws, no toys, no pictures…

No sister.

A sudden panic had overtaken her at that point and she had exploded out of room calling for her sister. *Yelling* for her sister as she zigged and zagged across the family palace twice as fast as she had run to the room, ignoring the looks from the household staff as she blew past them, effortlessly dodging around their attempts to catch her and plead with her to just stop and wait. She knew that she had done something years ago. She didn’t know *what*, but she knew she had done *something*. She had heard all the times her parents whispered when she was lurking behind doors, their comments about how they had to be kept apart, that she was dangerous to Elsa and even that *she* scared Elsa somehow. She truly did not know what she had done, every time she tried to ask they kept telling her it was not her fault at all, that there was nothing wrong but that Elsa was just growing up into a big girl and so was so much busier.

It had just made her more determined to make the most of what time they had, trying to get close to her at dinner or what other family moments they had together, after Elsa had suddenly moved out of their shared room. Only to find that Elsa kept edging away from the closer she pushed. She saw when Elsa rarely looked at her across the table, how she would stare at her face for just a second and then flinch away as if she saw something there that scared her. Until one day when Anna had tried to surprise Elsa her by sneaking up behind her to give her a warm hug at the dinner table to try and make everything better …

Elsa had almost screamed as she jumped in shock, throwing her off and running from the room, crying, desperately clutching her arms and hands to herself as if panicked by the thought that *she* had touched *her*.

That had hurt.

A lot.

*She* had cried for the entire night, and no amount of hugging from her mother had calmed her down.

After *that* disaster, Anna had almost never seen Elsa. After that, they ate at different times, often in different rooms. *Her* days were even *more* filled with visits to other families and other ‘friends’ while Elsa stayed inside with her tutors doing school work or going on week long trips with one of her parents.

She *tried* to be a good girl like her Papa asked her to be. She *tried* accept that they were getting older and soon *she* would be busy with school and other things as well … but more and more she found herself staring at the locked door, shyly trying to ask if Elsa wanted to play, only to hear a muffled ‘Go away Anna’ from the other side that made her feel sad.

Not sad enough to ever stop trying though. *Never* sad enough for that.

Because when words failed, she slipped notes under the door in her slowly improving hand writing that tried to apologise for whatever she had done.

When notes got no response, she tried to slip tiny pieces of chocolate under the door with the notes, with the promise of more if she opened up.

When her Father told her to stop bothering her sister, she ignored him and left a toy just outside the door with a note carefully hidden inside it in the hope Elsa would find it.
When she got no response to that, she tried to lie in wait and ambush Elsa, only for various servants and her parents to show up mysteriously and make sure she was kept too busy or kept far away when Elsa was outside.

When she had been asked what she wanted her for birthday early next year, she had asked at once for Elsa to come out and play with her and had been heartbroken when her parents had come up with excuses why it couldn’t happen.

She had never stopped trying, had never believed that she couldn’t make things, somehow, go back to the way they were before. And so on that night two years after whatever she had done that had so scared Elsa, she had torn around the Castle in a complete refusal to admit that her Sister was gone until panting and out of breath, she had come into the library that overlooked the castle grounds, staggering over to the window ready to scream out Elsas name to the entire ground …

And instead felt a cold chill freeze her in place as she had seen a brilliant point of light rising into the twilight sky with a muffled roar of thunder through the thick window.

She wasn’t as smart as Elsa, but she loved the night sky – they both had. Even more since Elsa had slowly vanished from her life, she had looked to the sky, wondering if Elsa in her room was looking at it right then and liking to think that she was, so they were still doing it together. And she knew that those big ships never flew at night from the Royal spaceport. Unless they were on very important business.

And somehow she had just … known.

Elsa was on that ship.

Elsa was leaving.

Her sister was … leaving.

She had pushed her away. She still didn’t know what she had done but-

“Yes Anna … that is your sister leaving” a voice –her Pappas voice- had said gently from behind her as her mind screamed out for her Sister to not do this, her Father quietly walking up to her to put his hands gently on her shoulders. She had wanted to throw them off angrily and scream at him … but all the energy that had sent her running through the vast palace had left her all at once as soon as she had seen the sphere of light accelerating up into the sky.

Not even enough energy remained in her to reach up and wipe away the tears flowing silently down her cheeks.

“She’s not going far, just around the planet a bit” her Papa kept speaking as if from some great distance … but she didn’t really hear him as her eyes remained locked on the brightly ascending star moving into the night sky that slowly faded to joint all the other stars there. Eventually, at some point, her Father realized she just wasn’t listening to him and had left her alone to watch her Sisters star rising into the sky until it had just become one dot among thousands of others, Anna refusing to even blink as she kept her eyes on the glow.

Until eventually she had to blink. And as soon as she did … she was gone.

Slowly, mechanically, she had then walked back to her room, complexly ignoring her parents as she walked past them, shrugging off her mother’s attempt to try and hold her and simply not seeing the genuinely sympathetic looks from the staff as she walked into her room and shut the door behind her, feeling that her heart had been torn in two. All she could think was that she wanted to sleep and so she walked to her bed and collapsed into its soft arms, just wanting the oblivion of sleep to take her, unable to deal with reality anymore.
And frowned as she had felt her head land on her pillow, but felt instead something soft and crinkly like … paper?

Pushing back up in annoyance she had turned to look … and her annoyance had vanished in an instant. Sitting on her pillow was a piece of folded over paper … with her name on it. And she recognized the beautiful flowing handwriting that spelled out her name as her sisters.

With hands that had suddenly started shaking, she reached out and grasped the paper, hesitating then as she found herself both desperately wanting to read it and desperately not wanting to read it until she gathered her courage and unfolded it-

“Annnnnaaaaa!”

Anna jumped at the voice. So startled was she as she was torn from the past to the present that she literally jumped. Unfortunately, the Neptune class Dropship she was aboard was currently not under power as it slowly reoriented for its final deceleration burn – meaning that when she jumped, she kicked right off the railing next to the large window she had been looking out of as she had watched orbital ballet of other distant ships approaching the planet. An instinctive attempt to reach out and grab the aforementioned railing in chagrin succeed only in having Sir Isaac Newton mock her as the rest of her body twisted away in reaction, sending her slowly spinning into the Zero-G environment.

An explosion of snickering from the bulkhead door into the compartment strongly hinted at the source of the voice, an identity confirmed as she rotated lazily through the air to bring the figure into view.

“No. Funny. Punz” she yelled as she tried to stretch for the ceiling, failing as this somehow slowed her drift to keep her hovering away from anything she might be able to use. Something that should have been damn near impossible given the cramped quarters, and yet …

The Lady Rapunzel Beaulieu of Corona, beloved Countess of Pomerelia, Heir to Duke Anton Beaulieu and all around nice girl just giggled harder as she watched her cousin flail about in Zero-G.

“Yes it is” the other corrected her, laughing. Anna simply growled in the back of her throat, thanking small favours that Punz didn’t have a camera with her right now to capture her in this horribly undignified position – mentally congratulating herself at the same time for keeping to a very casual jeans and a T-shirt rather than the dresses she usually wore, which would have left her rather horribly exposed as she flailed about. Finally however, her foot connected with part of the ceiling and she gave a firm kick. It was of course, entirely coincidental that this launched her suddenly across the room at her Cousin, who had just enough time to say something very un-lady like before Anna slammed into her and sent the two of them pin wheeling back through the doorway to crash to the deck of the passageway outside.

The two of them lay there for a moment on the deck.

“Okay – I might have deserved that” Rapunzel coughed after a moment to get the wind back in her lungs.

Now Anna snickered slightly as she –carefully- got to her feet, being sure this time to set her Velcro covered shoes onto the strips that ran down the length of the passage before she offered a hand.

“You so did” Anna agreed as her cousin got to her feet, smoothing down the front of her blouse as she did so. “You didn’t used to be this mean before you went brunet”

“Jealous much?” the other replied with a snark, tiling her new hair cut imperiously and Anna laughed, all the sadness of the past pushed away in the face of the impossibly infectious cheerfulness of her cousin.

“Well I admit you were right about long hair being a nightmare to control in Zero-G” Anna
admitted, with a sigh, reaching up to poke at the bun she had made out of her hair with a critical frown. It looked horrible to her – she had never been good putting her hair up - but she wouldn’t have to put up with it for much longer. In an hour or so they would be on the ground and under perfectly normal gravity again. “Still, I think you looked better with the long blond thing going”.

“I’m so over the long blond thing” the other snorted as the two of them started walking down the tight passageway from the observation room towards their acceleration couches in their cabin, other passengers drifting by them as they too moved to get strapped in for their descent to the surface after one final drink in the bar or one final visit to the bathroom. “I know it’s heresy for someone with my name to think that way, but, I seriously needed a change”.

“Because of the six year old who tried to climb up your hair at that school last month?” Anna replied in a deadpan tone.

“Because of the six year old who tried to climb up it at the school” the other agreed with a sigh at the memory that she would never live down – not after some fool with a camera had uploaded it to Corona Information Web and it had ‘gone viral’ – and then some idiot had actually taken a copy with him to New Avalon where it had started to slowly spread across the entire damn Federated Commonwealth. “But that’s what I get for being named after a fairy tale; it was bound to happen someday”.

“Well it’s not like I don’t like the new look” Anna assured her as they drifted into their cabin and across to their seats. “Spunky-Punzy is awesome, but I liked Princess Punzy”.

“A little change now and then is a good thing” Rapunzel shrugged as she set herself down and started to strap her restraints in the luxuriously soft chair while Anna drifted past her to the window seat that she had won after sixteen consecutively tied rock-paper-scissors battles. “Plus looking after it was getting to be a nightmare. Almost as much as yours”.

“Hey my hair is great” Anna defended herself swiftly. “Well at least outside of Zero-G”.

“Have you seen yourself in a mirror after waking up?” the other asked archly.

“…low blow Punz. Low blow” she muttered as she felt the dropship rumbled under them, the stars outside turning as it shifted attitude.

Her cousin smiled, but said nothing, instead glancing past her to stare out the window. Anna followed her gaze - and her heart hit her throat.

Slowly, bit by bit, Arendelle was coming into view.

She couldn’t help but lose herself in the moment, drinking in every feature as if she was seeing her home for the first time. First the edge of the Northern polar ice cap, a brilliant white disk that glowed in the distant light of the systems primary surrounded by a chain of large and small islands. Then as the rotation slowly brought more of the planet into focus New Noreg slowly came into full view. One of the three main continents on the planet named after Norway on Terra from whom the original settlers had come … and her home.

She gazed down on it in longing wonder as she tried to drink it all in at once – even though it was far too large to see all at once as it mostly curved out of sight around the planet into the darkness approaching the terminator that separated night from day. She knew it was roughly diamond shaped and as big in surface area as Africa on Terra, starting with the icy mountains of the Northern regions slowly giving way as the continent broadened to increasingly temperate alpine regions. From there, vast plains and forests stretched out of sight down to the South and across the equator into a string of islands and smaller land masses that dotted the globe most of the way to the South Pole. Two other continents existed on the planet, a large arid and sparsely populated land named Rostokov to the South and a second continent mirroring the position of Noreg on the other side of the planet named Westlandet.

But she had eyes only for Noreg right now as she scanned up and down the Western coast … and finally felt her gaze soften slightly as she picked out the distinctive curve where Arendelle City sat.
Where her home sat.

It took a good ten minutes for the Dropship to complete its gentle reorientation, taking the planet back out of the windows as the spherical ship brought its engines to bear directly. Warning announcements and then alarm tones sounded before finally the engines came back online, the fusion drives increasing thrust until they were decelerating them into the planet at a full 1G burn that brought back simulated gravity to the spherical ship. The sudden feel of the thrust as she was pushed gently into her chair thrilled her, somehow making this feel real – as if they were not simply drifting by her planet in a dream; but they were really here.

After almost three years she was heading back home

She was heading back home to … her.

It was getting harder to control her emotions now – partially because she honestly did not know what she was supposed to feel at the sudden realisation that she was only hours or days away from seeing someone she had not seen for over a decade. She still missed Elsa so much – that had not changed in over ten years. A part of her had been damaged when they had been split up, a scar that marked her heart almost like the odd –Punz called it ‘exotic’ - white streak in her hair that had made her stand out since she was a young girl. But after so many years apart, so many failed attempts to reconnect with her, she was at something of a loss for any idea of what was going to happen now. She was not a child anymore, she was an adult. And so was Elsa; a young woman who was about to become the Duchess of their world, something she had been preparing for her entire life.

She knew that it was wrong to keep seeing Elsa in her mind as her big sister who had loved to play with her all those years ago. She didn’t even know what she looked like anymore; she had stopped trying to look at newer pictures or vids after Elsa had moved out of the palace, finding it just hurt far too much to see her but not see her. Even her invitation, delivered personally by the local ComStar Precentor to the Corona family palace along with those for her Aunt, Uncle and Cousin, had lacked any kind of personalized greeting or message from her Sister. And all of her family on Corona had tried to tell her to not hope for too much too quickly.

Small steps, one after the other, is what her Uncle had kindly told her.

But …it simply wasn’t in Annas nature to walk. And in the deepest parts of her soul where she desperately did not want to look … a question that she dared not ask herself kept trying to poke its way ever more insistently into her conciseness.

What if Elsa didn’t love her anymore? Didn’t care about her, didn’t really want anything to do with her?

She had always ignored that question, burying it under her memories of her sister and her unquestioned love for Elsa that still burned strong. But it was almost as if the closer she got to Elsa now, the stronger the fear became, causing her to tense up, to increasingly shift in her seat against her restraints, her heart starting to beat faster-

“Hey” Rapunzel softly called out to her suddenly, causing her to jump yet again –although strapped firmly in and under acceleration she at least didn’t go flying off this time. Gently, her cousin reached out and placed her hand on top of her own, and Anna realized that she had been gripping her armrest in something like a death grip. The warm touch caused her muscles to unclench at once, blasting the surge of emotion like a strong breeze shredding a cloud of smoke as she turned away from the viewport to face the other. “It’s okay Red, I’m right here”.

Anna offered her a slightly wan smile at the annoying pet name her cousin had decided on for her, but interlaced her fingers with the proffered hand gladly as she shoot her a look of thanks. Because that was her cousin. Always there when she needed her to pull her up or calm her down, tell a joke or slap her on the back of the head. She didn’t know if Rapunzel truly understood just how much she owed her … and it occurred to her belatedly at that point as their ship headed in to return her back home, that she had never actually told her that fact.

And now that she thought about it, she realized there was never going to be a better time than
now.

“Thanks Punz” she said simply.

The other shot her a slightly amused look.

“Chill red. If the pilot hits any turbulence on the way down, I’ll have Dad assign his ass to orbital garbage clean-up”.

Anna smiled and gripped her hand tightly for a second before letting go.

“No, I meant thank you” she replied, taking a deep slow breath before exhaling. “For everything. For everything over the last few years. I mean, I was a complete mess when I showed up on Corona. If you hadn’t been so damn patient with me, so understanding … so insistent on trying to drag me out of my, uh, funk I guess …”

Anna looked away, her gaze drifting to the far bulkhead and flight data on the massive holovid screen, but not really focused on it as she bit her lip, exhaling as she tried to put her thoughts into words.

“I honestly don’t know what would have happened to me without you” she finally admitted.

And wasn’t that the understatement of the year, Anna reflected, her gaze not leaving the bulkhead. Losing her parents in the dropship crash, then burying them, alone, had been hard. Incredibly hard. All she had seen of Elsa in that week had been another door when she had suddenly moved back into the palace - while Anna had been out, of course. All she had heard from her Sister in response to her quiet plea that they only had each other now, had been soft sobs she could barely hear from behind the oddly cold door that had caused her to shy away, leaving Elsa to her grief in the hope that when she came out, she would be able to hug her and tell her that she was here for her. Always.

And then the next day had come the news that she was going to be heading to Corona to live there for a few years - sent to Corona by Elsa - with her Aunt and Uncle who had been present for the funeral, without so much as a personal goodbye from her Sister.

Effective immediately.

To say that she had fallen into something approaching a deep depression would have probably been underselling it. She should have just gone back to the palace and kicked down the door to her Sisters old room that Elsa had moved back into. She had dreamed of doing that many times after Elsa had moved out, quietly cursing her constant turning away from the door whenever Elsa told her to leave. She should have kicked down the door and demanded her sister look at her, talk to her; told her that she loved her and needed her to get through this.

Told her that all she –they- had now … was each other.

Instead, with her parents dead, her sister crying in her own grief behind a closed door … she had just blankly joined her only other living relatives on autopilot and left Arendelle behind without so much as a word of protest, watching the planet slowly recede into the distance, somehow feeling that life had finally lost any and all meaning to her.

It wasn’t anger, it wasn’t sadness … it was more a sudden and complete sense of pure indifference to everything that had threatened to swallow her up whole.

It had been the woman sitting next to her that had dragged her back from the brink.

Good lord she truly loved her Cousin. No matter how much she had been intent on never loving anything again, Rapunzel had simply smirked, shrugged and completely refused to take ‘no’ for an answer. After avoiding her upon landing at Corona and then sitting quietly in her room for a few days, Punz had finally had enough and just come in anyway. She didn’t let anything as prosaic as a closed and locked door so much as even slow her down; the sight of her cousin abseiling down from the floor above her and crashing through her bedroom window –that had thankfully just flown open from the impact rather than shattering- had both stunned her into complete shock … and then made her wonder at once why she had never tried that with Elsa when she was younger.
And from that day on, and with every day she had dragged her outside her room to have fun, Anna had felt the black stain that was her state of mind retreat that little bit further. And that was how Punz had slowly become far more than a cousin; for the first time since Elsa, she had truly had a best friend in her life. Possibly because for the first time, she had a friend who had never tried to be Elsa.

Over the years since Elsa had left, her parents had tried to push her again and again into accepting new friends. And every time she had seen it in their eyes, heard in it in their voice that they were looking for someone to replace Elsa, to be a new sister to her. A new Sister like Elsa for her. And -entirely unfairly, she knew- she had hated those people because of that. Furiously resisted ever getting close to them.

But Rapunzel was … different.

Perhaps it was because she was family. A more distant part of it than her sister or her parents, but undeniably linked to her in a way that no other friend she had been forced to stay with could ever be. Despite being the same age as Elsa, despite being such a similar position as her Sister as the Heir to her own world, despite having more than a few bits of DNA probably identical to Elsas own genetic code, she had neither tried nor wanted to anyone but her own incredibly cheerful, exuberant and overly dramatic self. And day by day in those first few hard weeks, her presence had dragged her back out of the shell she had retreated into. Rapunzel couldn’t fill the Elsa shaped hole in her heart - nothing would ever do that. But she had helped her once again to come to terms with it, had helped her truly grieve her dead parents and accept their loss; she had taught her to live once more.

And for that, Anna owed her more than she would ever be able to repay.

“Anna” Rapunzel softly brought her attention back, an expression that was simultaneously amused and yet gentle. “You don’t have to thank me for anything. Period”.

“No, I really do” Anna tried to insist, but Rapunzel simply rolled her eyes at her.

“How much do you know about me – I mean who I was before we met?”

Anna glanced at her in curiosity as she considered the question.

“Uh, well, just what you’ve told me” she replied, before hesitating in embarrassment as it hit her that despite all the secrets they had shared over the years, she really didn’t know much about her cousin’s life before she had arrived. At least nothing that wouldn’t presumably be the same as after she had turned up. She knew Rapunzel had incredible talent as a painter that already had rumblings of her work going to New Avalon at some point and that she loved running around outdoors or riding around on a horse. She had a beautiful voice but was shy about singing. She loved dresses but hated shoes … and she seemed to have, much like her, absolutely no fear about doing anything on impulse no matter how dangerous it seemed.

Her aunt had often bemoaned the fact that this was clearly a genetic trait after Punz had pried her out of her shell and the two had promptly started driving the palace staff nuts by pushing everything to the limit.

“I … I know you don’t have any sisters or brothers. Oh – I know you were mostly looked after by a stay in nanny, uh, Gothic wasn’t it?”

“Gothel” Punz corrected her, making a face as if she had just bitten into something tart. “My Parents were busy running the planet, I had no brothers or sisters – I honestly thought for the longest time that they didn’t care about me”.

“But that’s not true – they adore you!” Anna spluttered in hot denial, pausing with a sudden scarlet flush on her face as her Cousin held up her hand.

“Yes I know that – at least I know now” she sighed. “But for a long time, I thought they didn’t
care about me. At all. An impression cheerfully helped along by Gothel. Even now I’m not really sure what her angle was; my parents think she was trying to manoeuvre herself into being the power behind the throne by grooming me to be her ‘perfect child’. I don’t know about that … but she did do her very best to isolate me from everyone but herself. Kept insisting that I should look at her like a second mother, that she was the only friend I ever needed. Even kept trying to have me call her ‘Mother Gothel’” she added with an almost contemptuous snort. “To be blunt, well, she was a passive-aggressive bitch who tried to keep me all to herself. I had no friends, no real contact with anyone except some of the palace staff and when I saw my parents, all I could see were the Duke and Duchess - not my Mother and Father”.

“That … sounds awful” Anna managed to get out, taken utterly aback and horrified even at the story she had never been told by anyone, suddenly feeling she had to apologise for her ignorance – and for making her cousin tell her. “I … I never knew ….”

“Don’t you dare apologize” her cousin warned her sharply. “I never told you – it’s not your fault you didn’t know” she scolded her, before adding in a softer tone “but it is your fault that I’ve gotten past that part of my life” as she turned away and chewed on her lip for a second, before sighing and leaning back into the plush comfort of her acceleration couch. “It’s … not something I like to talk about … I was so lonely for so long, never had much interaction with other people outside the Castle. My parents were told by Gothel that I was a very shy lonely child who didn’t want to get off the estate much, Gothel told me that I had far too many things to do to go off sightseeing. I only ever really got out for a few scripted public events where I had to show up, wave, and go back home. I just thought this was the way things were meant to be … until my 18th Birthday”.

“What happened on your 18th Birthday?” Anna asked, somewhat intently.

“…Long story” Rapunzel deflected after a moment of consideration, to Anns annoyance. She knew something big had happened, had heard rumours once or twice - but she was always getting fobbed off whenever she asked about it. “But to fast forward to the end, I finally realized that my parents really did love me and that Gothel had been, shall we say, misleading me for a rather long time. It all sort of came out in a very … loud … conversation between myself, my Parents, Gothel and half the Palace staff – and ended with her getting fired and exiled from the planet”.

“Seriously Punz, what the hell happened that day?” she pleaded after blinking at the revelation. Surely something so serious to warrant exile had to be big. “What did you do? What did she do?”

Her Cousin gave her a level look – but it was no match for her pouty face and her Cousin finally wilted under the fact that Rapunzel clearly knew shewas not going to be dissuaded from asking and she gave in with a sigh.

“Well let’s just say that it involved a frying pan, several car chases … and possibly the destruction of a small dam”.

“…You blew up a dam"

“Small dam”

“You … you BLEW UP A-?”

“Anna, forget the dam! The point I’m trying to get to is after Gothel was fired … I honestly didn’t know what to do. I mean I hated her, but she was also all I had – as sad as it sounds. Then, suddenly, I was on my own. I had always had someone telling me what to do and if I thought I was lonely before … well, now that I was expected to make friends, crazy as it sounds, things were a lot scarier for me. Here I was, the heir to the throne of the planet, all these social climbers who Gothel had been keeping away for years all suddenly being invited in, all crowding around me, pulling me in fifteen different directions … After a week or so I … I couldn’t take it anymore. It was just too much – and the irony was killing me. There I was, desperate to make friends for years. And now I was being encouraged to go nuts … but it was so overwhelming to me that in the end, I just ran off to my tower and locked the door. In fact, Mom told me later that the court Doctors were increasingly sure that I was suffering from a mild form of agoraphobia after spending so many years isolated”. 
“Rapunzel locked up in the tower? Cliché much?” Anna almost instinctively tried to lighten the mood like each of them always did for the other, earning a small smile in return, the timid and uncertain look vanishing from her cousin’s face almost at once in the face of her gentle snark.

“My parents pointed this out to me several times I can assure you” she acknowledged. “But my timing as always was pretty pathetic. Right in the middle of all this, well, we got word about what happened to your parents”.

Anna felt the pang that always came when she thought about that horrible night strike her heart again but almost in annoyance this time, she dismissed it, far too engrossed in her cousin’s tale.

“So they had to leave quickly to make it to Arendelle for the funeral leaving me alone, really alone for the first time. It … was a really hard month for me” she muttered.

Then suddenly her eyes widened and her head snapped around as she realized what she had said.

“God Anna, I mean – it was hard, but it was nothing compared to what you were going through” she hastily clarified, an expression of mild horror at her choice of worlds flashing across her face.

“That is-“

“Punz. It’s okay” she assured the other, both touched and embarrassed by the sudden reaction.

The last thing she wanted was her Cousin thinking that her hardship was any less valid or painful to Rapunzel than what she had gone through. “You were going through a hard time. I was going through a hard time – your issues were just as big to you as mine were to me. That’s all there is to it”.

“…I’m not sure I agree, but thanks for saying it” Rapunzel sighed, reaching over again to squeeze her hand with a soft smile, before she gathered herself and continued. “To get to the point, I sort of hid out in my room for a few weeks while my parents went to Arendalle, making excuses to beg off from talking to all the girls climbing over each other to invite me to their estates for a week, and all the guys trying to … well, as one of them put it, asking me to let him ‘mount my golden hair’ … and he was not looking at my head when he said that”.

“A guy said that to you?” Anna choked out in shock, her cheeks flushing a bright scarlet at the implications of the words. She had led a somewhat sheltered life sure, but not that sheltered – and the idea that someone would have the audacity to say something like that to her cousins’ face…

“Well – I cleaned it up a little” Rapunzel replied with a slight blush of her own across her flawless skin and Anna cringed slightly at the implications in that statement. “Anyway, I couldn’t deal with it all, it was just too overwhelming. So I tried to hide away until my parents got back. And when they did, when they explained a few days later that you had come with them to live here for the next few years … I didn’t even wait around long enough for them to explain that you were not exactly in the best place right now. I just fell in love with the idea of having a family member, a friend I might actually be able to handle in my house right there waiting for me”.

“And you came crashing through the window”.

“Yeah … I might have gotten a little carried away” she admitted with a blush. “I can, uh, do that sometimes. So people tell me anyway.

“And I am incredibly glad you did” Anna replied with every ounce of sincerity she could put into her voice. “I needed someone to drag me out of bed and back to life – and, like I said, that’s why I owe you so much”.

“And like I’m trying to tell you” Rapunzel sighed in exasperation, with a roll of her stunning green eyes. “I was a terrified shut in who wanted to reach out to someone, but was too terrified to do so. When you started dragging me around, wingmaning me to public events and outside into the city, my life changed. When you stared down any of the social climbers who pushed too hard, when you punched that idiot Ralph out cold when he tried to make a drunken pass at me… And that night you dragged me out clubbing last year … when we got home, it hit me that I hadn’t felt anxious or uneasy all night. I realized then that it had been you – you Red, had gotten me past my
fear of the world. You taught me to embrace the world! I might, I might have helped you get through a sad part of your life ... you started mine”.

“Let’s … just say we saved each other?” Anna suggested shyly.

“Deal” her Cousin decided, extending her hand which Anna took with a laugh, trying to not blush too much at the genuine emotion her cousin was stirring. She honestly didn’t feel at all worthy of her cousin crediting her with helping her ... but then her cousin didn’t seem to think that she was worthy of the, in her opinion, blindingly obvious credit for saving her from the darkness she had sunk into after her parents had died and her sister abandoned her.

So she’d split the difference with her.

“Personally, I think that the big change was noticeable after you got that holodisk delivered” Punz reflected after a minute or so of comfortable silence between them, glancing at the bulkhead mounted display that showed a graphic of their descent and an estimated time to the ground for ten minutes as they descended into the mesosphere, the darkness of space outside steadily giving way to a lightening blue hue. “You seemed to really cheer up after that was delivered”.

“It’s not every day you get a message from the Archon of the Lyran Commonwealth” Anna smiled slightly at the memory, before she frowned at the look on her cousins’ face. “What?”

“You … got a message from the Archon?” Rapunzel almost spluttered in shock, and Anna felt a frown cross her face

“I told you about that”

Her cousin slowly shook her head with wide eyes.

“I must have!”

Again her cousin shook her head and Anna bit her lip.

“I knew you got a message on Holodisk, but you didn’t say who it was from and I wouldn’t pry into your life like that. To be honest, I always thought it was, well, something Elsa sent you”.

“I can’t believe – you’re serious that I never showed it to you – I never even mentioned who it was from?” Anna asked in genuine confusion.

“Nope”

Anna felt a look of utter consternation passing across her face as she took in the revelation.

“I swear … I thought I had …” she muttered, mostly to herself.

“Anna, it’s cool, don’t worry about it-”

“But I want to show you!” she insisted.

Although on reflection she wondered if that was entirely true. She had absolutely no problem showing her now ... but back when she had first received the message it had become something incredibly precious to her. Something incredibly personal that had helped her set aside her grief over her parent’s death – or at least bring back the good memories of her parents to fight back the dark memory of their loss. The idea that the most powerful woman in the Inner Sphere with far too many demands on her time would take time out to send her a personal message ... it had genuinely touched her in a very special way.

Still, the least she could do for her cousin who had shared so much of herself was to share this.

“Hang on a sec” she muttered, turning and digging furiously into the pouch next to her seat, pawing around for a few minutes until she found her noteputer among all the other bits and pieces she had stored there over their trip. She still had the original holodisk – it was actually packed in
her luggage— but she had copied the file across to her personal computer years ago so she could view it if she ever felt like she needed a little ‘pick me up’. Pulling open a tiny compartment in her armrest, she pulled out a datalink cable and plugged it in, quickly tapping in the commands on the slide out keyboard to route the display to the large holoscreen on the wall of their cabin.

“Uh, you can just read the message to me – you don’t have to put it up” her Cousin pointed out with a confused look.

“Who said anything about reading a message?” Anna couldn’t help but smirk archly, as the screen blanked from its flight data, replaced with the Fist of the Lyran Commonwealth, which mutated after a moment into the Fist and Sunburst of the Federated Commonwealth. A delightfully almost strangled noise of astonishment came from her cousins’ mouth as after a few more seconds that too dissolved into a picture of none other than Archon Melissa Steiner sitting on her throne in the Triad on Thakard. Visible left and right of her were the well-polished legs of the Griffin Battlemechs that stood behind and protected the throne of the leader of the Lyran Commonwealth, although they were lost quickly to view as the camera zoomed in to focus on the others sombre, yet warm face.

“My … God” her cousin choked out, her emerald eyes wide as saucers and Anna couldn’t help but feel a slightly selfish sense of smug pride flow across her at the reaction. A personal video message from perhaps the most beloved and certainly the most powerful women in the Inner Sphere was just … completely out of scope of most people’s minds to deal with. Even lower level nobility on Thakard itself had little chance to ever do more than shake hands with their Archon in a receiving line. A personal video message hand delivered to the other side of the Federated Commonwealth in the middle of a major war …

That was something else.

“Good day to you, Anna Jorgensson” the stunning woman greeted them from the screen in a strong, yet kindly voice. Forty years old – ‘and going on twenty five’ as many female social commentators on talk shows across known space often complained, the Archon sat on her throne with the grace and dignity of one born to rule. It did not however in any way make her look remote or distant. There was a warmth in her eyes even framed as they were by the expression of regret and sorrow across her face that made even a video message seem intensely personal and special.

“I deeply regret that the first time we have been able to talk, so to speak, has been under such tragic circumstances” the Archon continued. “I had the great privilege of meeting your sister when my Husband and I visited your parents on Arendelle in ’34, when she was pregnant with you. And I truly hope to visit you in person one day, so I may be properly introduced to you as someone other than, as your mother put it, ‘this kid who thinks my diaphragm is a bongo placed there for her personal entertainment’”.

Rapunzel covered her mouth as she tried, with only partial success, to hold back her laughter at the quip, her face flushing from the effort. Anna, despite having heard the words many times before couldn’t help but giggle slightly thanks to the incredibly infectious reaction of her cousin. Sharing it with her made it almost brand new again, her reactions sparking an echo of the feelings in herself.

“Your mother … was a dear friend” the Archon continued a moment later after pausing to compose herself. “The story of how we met is known to very few people – a secret we kept because it had become something precious to those of us ‘in the know’. As I’m sure you have read in your history books, I was secretly on New Avalon in 3028, working with my husband to conceive a heir to Our Thrones. As far as the rest of the Inner Sphere knew, I had returned from Terra to Thakard with my Mother as the Forth Succession War raged on. And excepting handpicked guards at the Davion Palace, only seven people on New Avalon knew the truth. Until one evening, when I was walking to Hanse’s personal library, a door slammed open and your mother came storming through from a party downstairs, a hapless pair of Davion Guardsman trying to stop her and having absolutely no luck before she crashed into me – quite literally – and sent both of us to the floor”.

Now Rapunzel’s snickering ramped up into barely restrained laughter.
“Suffice to say, it was a bit of a shock that your Mother was able to bypass eight separate security layers and get herself into such trouble without anyone even realizing it – although I would slowly learn that your mother had something of a knack for getting into places she really had no business being”.

Some things never change! The look Rapunzel shot at her then said.

Look who’s talking! Her own gaze shot back before they both turned back to the screen.

“Because my presence remained such a high-level secret” the Archons image said, “your Mother quickly became an extended personal ‘guest’ of Hanse to ensure it remained so. Yet despite the fact that she was under virtual house arrest in the Davion Palace, your mother was by far the freest person I have ever had the privilege of meeting in my life, bar none. She could brighten anyone’s day just by walking into a room – and did so many times during the harder days of the war. She taught me all about New Avalon, all about the Federated Suns. Those hundreds of things you would never think to ask someone about, yet found that you truly wanted to know. I loved Hanse deeply after we were married, but your Mother spent months almost bullying the First Prince of the Federated Suns to make sure that we spent much more time together than we otherwise might have. And despite his initial irritation, I know that Hanse came to genuinely appreciate her efforts. When Morgan was given the gravest news about his Father, she was there with Kym, his future wife. For days she would simply sit and listen to his stories of his family, making sure he was never alone. She encouraged him to grieve for his Father’s death and helped assure him that no matter what his Father had done, he had every right to mourn his passing. She helped him come to peace with the past, to stand up and assume the burdens Hanse was forced to put onto his shoulders”.

Anna couldn’t help but wonder at the differences between the woman the Archon described and the one she had known all her life. Her mother had always seemed so … sober. So careful, so cautious. Controlled … almost frightened in some way she didn’t understand. There had been love yes - but always a distant expression of sorrow and regret in the back of her eyes whenever she asked about Elsa that had made her sad, knowing deep down that whatever she had done to scare Elsa that had forced them apart …

And yet, much like she had with Morgan Hasek-Davion, so many nights she had stayed by her bed, singing her softly to sleep when she had felt so lonely…

“In January 29’ Hanse decided that he trusted your mother to keep the secret and allowed her to leave the palace” Melissa continued her story faintly with a smile, bringing her attention back. Anna frowned slightly and tapped up the volume a few notches as the roar of the Dropships fusion drive increased as they came down out of the Stratosphere, their rate of descent slowing as they commenced final alignment with the Spaceport. “I left New Avalon in July, but was honoured to have secretly attended your parents wedding just before doing so. Your father was quite the eligible Batchelor at the time and had a great many other Noble ladies vying for his attention – quite furiously too I might say. I must confess to you that after your mother had shyly commented one day that she had quite the crush on him after meeting him at a function earlier that year, I … well, lets just say I made it my business to ensure that they would meet again”.

The Archon paused for a moment to let the slightest hint of an embarrassed flush pass across her face. “And … again … and again … several times. Hanse too spent no small amount of effort behind the scenes quietly encouraging the two families to allow the match as a gesture of both apology to your mother for inconveniencing her, as well as thanks for all she had done for Us and to Our delight, your parents indeed fell deeply in love with each other and were married later that year”.

Now the Archon paused, leaning back in her throne and seemingly staring deep into her from that position, her expression still gentle, but with an iron edge in it. The face of the leader – of someone who had made countless hard decisions in her life and had made her peace with them, because the alternative was to go mad.

“I left New Avalon to return to Thakard – but your mother and I stayed in touch through the next decade. After my Mother passed away and I ascended to this Throne, the letters became a little more infrequent –we were both busy, both with our Thrones and both with our children. But I treasured every HPG message – her yearly wrap ups were a high point of my Christmas year in and year out. We traded news and gossip. We exchanged well wishes and fond memories … but
and year out. We traded news and gossip. We exchanged well wishes and fond memories … but more than anything else, we traded news of our children. More than one long day of dealing with affairs of state ended in relief for me as I found a new HPG message from your mother, gushing on about you or Elsa. Her delight as Elsa’s French vocabulary widened with her diligent practice. Her unabashed pride in you Anna, the day you first tried to ride a bike and fell off within seconds, but instantly got back up again and again, without hesitation or fear until you got the hang of it. Your father often spoke of how much you reminded him of your mother – as much as your mother fondly spoke of how much of your father she could see in Elsa. And how much of Elsa she could see in you and vice versa”.

The pain of the memories her words invoked sharply hit Anna, as it always did. But she forced them to the side, taking strength from the seemingly implacable woman on the screen and her cousin watching in rapt attention next to her.

“I had been pushing your parents to bring you both to visit us on New Avalon for the last few years – although the Clan Invasion had made these plans quite impossible; I simply could not leave my capital when the Commonwealth was being invaded. And of all the things that their invasion has cost me personally, not being able to say goodbye to Idun and Adgar … “ the Archon cut off suddenly, seemingly taking a moment to get herself under control as her expression slipped for just a split second, before she nodded, at once back in control. “I know you are hurting right now Anna. I know your sister is too. I have the heads of two different intelligence agencies on speed dial so despite the fact that your parents went out of their way to try and keep it from me, I know that you and your sister have been separated for a long time. With so many of my Children out of contact for so long with each other, I have some idea how hard it can be to be separated from the ones we love. For all its glamour and beauty, trust me when I tell you that a throne can be so incredibly …lonely… to sit on. I know it must have been hard, all the years you and Elsa have been separated … but everything I have heard about you tells me that you are undeniably your mother’s daughter Anna. You have that same precious gift of bringing joy to those around you simply by being – and Elsa will need you, more than she knows in the years ahead. It may not be easy, indeed it may be so incredibly hard for the two of you to reconnect with each other … but I none the less charge you with finding a way to make it happen. If it takes a day, a year or more, make it happen – and always remember that wherever they are now, your parents will always be smiling down upon both of you”.

And with no fanfare, the video message ended with the Archons final firm nod, the screen cutting to black before switching back to the external camera view of the spaceport under them only a few thousand feet away, the thunder of the ships engines increasing as yet more thrust was poured on to slow their descent rate to a steady ten meters per second, the roar making conversation difficult.

But not impossible. And her cousin would never let a little thing like ambient noise stop her from being heard.

“She was right you know” her Cousin spoke up suddenly, causing Anna to glance across at her.

“Right about what?” Anna questioned as she took in the level emerald gaze.

“Well, everything, but most especially that you spread love everywhere you go just by being … you” Rapunzel clarified. “I don’t think you even realize you do it; you just … do. Look, Anna, I know you’ve never said much about Elsa to me, but I have an idea of just how much she hurt you by sending you to live with me after your parent’s died. And the reason it hurt you so much could only be because you still cared so much about her that it hurts you to even think about it”.

Anna felt a wave of shock ripple through her as her cousin laid out everything so … directly on the table. Rapunzel had always been so careful around the topic of her sister, knowing it was a difficult subject … but then again, it was getting to be an elephant in the room given that they were on final approach to Arendelle city! And perhaps she took her silence as a sign to continue rather than a mixture of stunned shock and angst, because her cousin kept going after a moment.

“You’ve been getting more and more anxious as we got closer and closer to your home – you were so tightly wound up half an hour ago that you went spinning into zero-G when I called your name out. I … I understand that you’re nervous, even scared – and that’s okay! You’re totally entitled to be a little on the edge right now! But I know you Anna. I know that you still care about Elsa so much and now that you’re about to be reunited, you’re probably thinking of about a
million ways this could all go wrong every second.

Anna remained silent. Her cousin was hardly *wrong* after all…

“So uh, the point I’m trying to embarrassingly trying to stagger towards … look … just, *be yourself*. Don’t try to overthink this, don’t try to come up with super complicated plans or words or whatever – just *be you*. You could turn the most hard-core Clanner into a big softie with a few days’ work. If your sister for some insane reason has forgotten how much she loves you, she’ll fall back *in* love with you by the end of the week. Sister love that is, not … well *love* love … uch you know what I mean!” the other flustered for a second, and despite herself, a smile started to work its way onto Anna’s face as she reached out and one last time took the others hand.

“I know” she assured her with the smile exploding onto her face slightly shy perhaps, but still showing the affection she felt for the excitable brunet sitting next to her.

“And if she tries to go and hide behind a door again” the other added with an expression so absolutely serious on her face that Anna honestly would have been unable to determine if she was joking or not, “I will *blow it down* and drag her, kicking and screaming if necessary, outside”.
Time was running out.
Anna could feel it slipping away from her.
And this … was not a new feeling.

No matter how fast she moved in life, no matter how much she hurried herself and tried to do things as quickly as possible, she was forever one step behind where she needed to be and a moment too slow doing what she was supposed to be doing.

Generally, this was because she could be rather easily distracted.

Today though, she had not been distracted by the events that were rushing towards her. If anything, she had been overwhelmed by thoughts of what was going to happen over the next few days and been unable to think of anything else. Hyper-focused if you will on the return to her home, reunion with her sister and the investment.

And as a result … she may have lingered a little longer than she should have in the shower as she had let the water wash away her stress and worries.

The zero-G conditions and extremely limited water supplies on board dropships made showers a laughable idea for even the most senior of nobility short of House Lords; it just wasn’t practical. Instead, like everyone else, Anna had been making do with disposable cleansing towels to keep clean over the two week trip from Corona to Arendelle.

And efficient and hygienic as they were, they offered nothing of the bliss of a long blast of water and scrub down under normal gravity.

Unsurprisingly, a great many other people over many centuries of human interstellar spaceflight had come to feel the same way. So much so that spaceport terminals across the Inner Sphere had long been built with extensive floors of private day-suits for VIP passengers disembarking from dropships to freshen up in, having often spent weeks or months jumping from system to system.
Arendelle City Starport was no different in that sense; the VIP terminal their dropship had landed at boasted hundreds of private suits in which a person with enough cash or social status could clean up before either facing their adoring public, or catching a final connecting flight to elsewhere on the planet. Anna and Rapunzel had barely been able to keep control of themselves as they had hurried off the dropship, clutching the electronic keys that had been delivered to them as they blew past the valets been sent to help them in favour of making better time. And indeed, as soon as they had waved goodbye to each other at the doors to their rooms, all decorum was thrown at the window.

Ignoring the food, champagne and other gifts laid out in the sitting room, Anna had moved straight for the bathroom, scattering clothes in every which direction as she did so, absently tossing her bags onto a convenient leather couch in passing. Staggering into the shower recess as she finally managed to pull her right boot off and kick it off somewhere into the main room, she twisted the taps and was greeted with a blast of water from a half dozen cunningly concealed shower heads, moaning in pleasure as the scalding warmth flowed across her body like a warm hug.

Common wisdom held that every human across the Inner Sphere was most comfortable on exactly two worlds. Terra, humanities homeworld was the first of course. No matter how far away you came from, it was considered inevitable that the sheer force the planet sculpting mankind over millions of years meant that the Earth had a rather unfair advantage in making you feel like you belonged there.

The same wisdom however held that the world you were born on would also forever hold a claim on your soul. Because the gravity would always be just right. Where the air was just right. Where a thousand different sounds, smells and sights triggered a hundred and one subtle feelings associated with ‘home’ in the back of your mind that simply meant things felt different on ‘your’ world compared with any other.

Anna would have vouch for the truth of the matter at that point in time – if of course her brain hadn’t been turned into warm mush by the flood of water having its way with her. The gravity on Arendelle was barely five percent lighter than on Corona, but she was distantly convinced she could feel the difference standing there as her muscles slowly relaxed and unknotted under the heat, feeling all stress and worries she had been carrying around pouring down the drain with the water. All the aches and pains from her extended space trip that had built up in Zero-G vanished under the caress of the pulsed jets. And in the thick clouds of steam that choked the bathroom … Anna felt time itself become irrelevant.

Of course, time didn’t actually stand still. And so when she lazily rolled her head around, luxuriating in the relaxed feeling of her neck muscles and just so happened to catch a glimpse of the clock mounted on the wall, she had let out a profanity that made her face blush as she was snapped back to reality.

She had meant to spent, at most, fifteen minutes in the shower before getting out to get changed. She had been in here for over thirty.

Slamming the taps off, Anna all but leaped out of the shower, snatching a bathrobe hanging on the wall in passing with frantic motions. Frantically, she worked to dry herself off, grabbing a towel and going to town on her hair in one hand as she blasted a hair dryer on maximum power on the other. The somewhat rushed efforts left her hair a nightmare of a mess going in every direction, but she ignored it for now as she hurried out of the bathroom to rip open her first bag and pull on fresh undergarments in record time before heaving it across the room in the general direction of the massively oversized vanity in the corner. Tearing open her second bag in a hurry, she then forced herself to stop, count to five and take her time as she carefully started to take out and put on her clothes. It was a lesson beaten into her by her cousin after one too many of her dresses had been wrinkled beyond easy wearability while rushing through her rather impressive wardrobe looking for something.

Getting dressed didn’t take that long though, and after making a quick inspection of her appearance, she moved to tame the gorgon nightmare that was her hair, sitting down at the vanity and trying to ignore the distinctive smell of something made out of freshly cooked chocolate coming from a table off to the side. Abandoning any thoughts of attempting the more exotic and time consuming hair styles she had planned on given the time, worked a brush through it
ruthlessly and pinned it into place, one hand groping absently into her bag for the compartment containing makeup and other accessories for a hair clip … then paused as she felt her hands come across a small box she had completely forgotten about.

Finishing the pinning and brushing, she reached down and withdrew the velvet covered box, placing it almost reverently on the desk before carefully opening up and looking at the treasure inside.

It was a hair elastic – but calling it that didn’t do it the slightest justice. Her 18th Birthday present from her Aunt and Uncle, the ‘elastic’ was actually a type of elasticized myomer fibre, set into a stylized metal disk about five centimetres wide. Embedded in the centre of the disk – in pure gold - was a stylized golden star, the national star of Corona to be precise. But while the Coronan flag simply placed the stylized star on a purple backdrop, this disk had been coloured in purple and green divided neatly down the middle, the national colours of Arendelle.

And orbiting the golden sun were a breathtakingly detailed pair of crocus flowers, chasing each other in a great circle. The national symbol of her world as the sun was the symbol of theirs, not made out of gold but made out of sequences of perfectly cut and polished emeralds.

It was a stunning piece of art that she had always been too terrified to wear, not even wanting to think about how much it would have cost - but on impulse, she carefully took it out of its velvet lined box, gathering her long hair draped down her back that had been brushed into submission and drawing it together at the back of her head. A swift turn and adjustment and she had the clip in place, letting it gather her hair to fall down her back in a loose kind of ponytail

It somehow felt right today to wear the gift that celebrated her family from two worlds – and the two homes she had had in her life.

With that done, she glanced at the clock on the desk nervously and found to her pleasant surprise she had made up some time by keeping her hair simple; now she was only running about ten minutes late. Standing – and again supressing the twitch of her head towards the delightful smell, she took a final critical look at her chosen clothes and decided the teal blouse and charcoal skirt and leggings worked well enough together, striking a balance between formality and casualness she could live with.

Although she was sure Rapunzel would have shaken her head and tisked at getting dressed in anything but her very finest for this occasion.

She only lost a minute trying to find where the hell she had kicked her left boot off to, pulling it on with one last with a snarl of complaint at the stiff leather, regretting her choice not to pack momentarily before reflecting on d. She eschewed the idea of taking any of her limited jewellery and applied onto the smallest hint of lipstick before she nodded, deciding she looked about as best as she could given the time and her rather plain looks.

And so she turned towards the door …

Then she found her feet weren’t moving.

She fought with herself for a good ten seconds … then she just gave in with a helpless whimper and spun around to face the cameral truffle head on. Glaring at its mocking satisfaction at breaking her, she snatched one up and let loose a soft moan of pleasure as she consumed it, her taste buds exalting in the rich taste … then added several more, just to be sure. It took a new act of supreme willpower she didn’t think she had in herself to walk away from the dozens of other samples on offer, washing the taste down with a quick gulp of water from a convenient bottle before she picked up her bags and hurried to the door -

And almost fell over as she near ran into the staff member waiting outside for her.

“Woah!” she squeaked as she crashed to a halt, now very glad she didn’t have heels on. If she had, she no doubt would have gone quite literally head over heels into the poor man. “Sorry!”

“No apologies necessary My Lady” the darker skinned man dressed in an immaculate suit replied
with a smile. “May I take your bags?”

“Oh – of course” she agreed with a slightly embarrassed smile as she finally noticed the luggage trolley in front of him already loaded with other peoples bags. “These…”

“Will be delivered directly to your hotel” the other assured her at once and Anna nodded before spinning and not quite running down the short corridor to the exit. Tonight, she was staying in the same hotel as her Cousin, Aunt and Uncle. She probably could have just moved straight back to the palace … but honestly, she was finding it overwhelming enough to just be back home. A full night’s sleep before she came face to face with her sister – especially as she probably had a lot of preparation to get done - was probably for the best.

Her hair swinging behind her, Anna hurried through the automatic doors at the end of the passage to the grand staircase that descended into the brightly lit VIP concourse, filled now with hundreds of self-important people shuffling from other dropships towards the much more distant customs areas and duty-free shops, suddenly feeling at a loss in the crowd for where to go. The local staff were thankfully on the ball however, a man waiting just outside the doors at once gesturing her across to a door marked ‘Royal Lounge’ down the stairs and on the other side of the concourse with another pair of security guards waiting.

Hurrying down the stairs and leaving a trail of squeaks of ‘sorry!’ in her wake as she cut across the slow procession of people pushing trolleys piled with luggage towards customs, Anna hurried to the door. The Security Guard there politely opened the door for her and Anna rushed in ….

… and at once found herself sliding across a polished wooden floor with a sequel of leather on wood, coming to a precise halt two meters away from her aunt and uncle, standing with the rest of their delegation from Corona in the spacious, gleaming room and clearly waiting for her to arrive.

“Very dramatic entrance Anna” her Aunt laughed as she came to a halt. Anna blushed bright red at that, yet was thankful that she hadn’t either been left behind from her tardiness … or crashed into a senior official and started a diplomatic incident. Instead, her Aunt just looked her up and down, closely studying her chosen outfit then nodded approvingly with a smile. “You look lovely dear”.

“Thank you, Aunt Iversen” she replied only slightly shyly as she forced herself to pause, regain what dignity she had left, and calmly simulate the poise years of painful lessons by the court protocol tutors had hammered into her both on Corona and here on Arendelle. “You look lovely yourself”.

And it was entirely true; her Aunt, one of her few living blood relatives always choose to wear simple looking clothes with just a few choice bits of jewellery, often just a string of pearls. And yet, she managed to always look as regal and stunning as the greatest of nobility. She almost defined ‘less is more’ as a fashion choice, letting her natural beauty speak for itself without the need for accents. Anna had always tried to copy her style, but had never quite pulled it off.

She was just too … ordinary. Too plain. Too … Anna.

“Oh the horror!” the other sniffed and turned dramatically in an over the top way and Anna had to work hard to squelch a giggle at her over the top airs. “You’re suggesting I wouldn’t? Oh the horror!”

“Of course I look lovely” she replied only slightly shyly as she forced herself to pause, regain what dignity she had left, and calmly simulate the poise years of painful lessons by the court protocol tutors had hammered into her both on Corona and here on Arendelle. “You look lovely yourself”. And it was entirely true; her Aunt, one of her few living blood relatives always choose to wear simple looking clothes with just a few choice bits of jewellery, often just a string of pearls. And yet, she managed to always look as regal and stunning as the greatest of nobility. She almost defined ‘less is more’ as a fashion choice, letting her natural beauty speak for itself without the need for accents. Anna had always tried to copy her style, but had never quite pulled it off.

She was just too … ordinary. Too plain. Too … Anna.

“I’d never dare” Anna smiled as she turned to face her Uncle. “And you look rather dashing My Lord” she noted with a functional, yet somehow almost impish looking curtsey towards him.

“I believe the word you are looking for is ‘old’, beloved niece” he chuckled back gravely, stroking his beard in amusement as he subtly started to carefully fiddle with his jacket, before a quick glare from his wife instantly made him stop. Cut in a military fashion, it was a very fine looking garment indeed, with a number of medals pinned over his breast both showing both awards he had earned as a Mechwarrior with the AFFS and his status as the Duke of Corona. He wasn’t wearing the spurs most Davion Mechwarriors wore to formal occasions – mostly because this wasn’t technically a uniform- but he none the less clearly took a great pride in his service with the 33rd Avalon Hussars through the 4th Succession War - when they had captured Liao from the Capellan Confederation. Perhaps the single greatest accomplishment in the history of the corps.
Or so he liked to insist anyway.

“You’re only sixty” she scoffed at his response. And besides, her uncle didn’t exactly act like your average sixty year old; still insisting on joining the monthly weekend training and yearly major exercises with the Corona Militia. The first time he had done so, she had asked why in curiosity, being told in return that it was his duty as Duke to ‘set the right example of civic duty for his people’ – although her aunt had scoffed at that claim when Anna had relayed it later that afternoon. She insisted that it was much more an excuse for her husband and a bunch of retired veterans to go and relieve their glory days by stomping around in their war machines that anything else.

Not sure who to believe, Anna had sought out her cousin’s opinion on the matter. Rapunzel however had been far too busy sulking to offer any help, annoyed with the fact that the countless vids she had watched that depicted Mechwarriors as incredibly charming 20 something year olds with bodies that professional athletes would kill for were grossly misleading. Instead, she had found only the grizzled older veterans of the Corona Militia. All of whom were mostly long mustered out of the AFFS, were mostly long married family men - and often grandparents to boot!

Punz’s sulking had really been quite remarkable that day – even more so when it turned out that said veterans were far too smart allow either of them to poke around their Battlemech cockpits, no matter how sweetly they asked. Apparently, their reputations for causing chaos and mayhem had proceeded them, as the idea of them sitting in the cockpit of the most powerful weapons platforms on the planet, no matter how locked down they were, had made the senior NCOs chaperoning them around the ‘Mech bay ‘twitchy’ for some reason.

And speaking of her cousin…

“Where is Rapunzel?” she wondered aloud as it finally dawned on her that her cousin was nowhere to be seen. Glancing around the room and not finding her, she double checked the buffet table with a suspicious look, ready to yank her cousin back if she looked about to go off her diet again. God only knows what Rapunzel would do with herself when she returned to Corona, without Anna looking over her shoulder. These days if that girl so much as caught a whiff of hazelnut soup within walking distance…

Then again, she worriedly remembered how easily her willpower had folded in the face of that mocking platter of chocolates only minutes ago, without her Cousin around to slap her hand back like she always did…

“She’s running late” her Uncle replied with a slight shrug to her question, dragging her attention back. “She’ll catch up when she catches up – that girl can take forever to get dressed”.

Anna could only nod at that. It was after all, perfectly true. While she could get dressed in a whirlwind of motion, her cousin was a perfectionist. Thank goodness she had at least cut her hair, the sheer amount of time Punz used to spend just sitting there brushing it … and brushing it … and brushing it…

“And it’s a good thing you showed up; we just got a request from the formal welcoming committee for you to go in at once – so you’d better get cracking”.

“What? Me?” she asked, taken slightly aback. “Shouldn’t … you two and Rapunzel go first?”

“Anna” her Aunt laughed softly, “this isn’t Corona – its Arendelle. Here, you are the second highest ranking member of the local nobility after your sister. In this case, protocol dictates that you go first”

“Oh - right” she remembered, successfully fighting off the sudden urge to facepalm at her embarrassment. After all, it wasn’t as if they hadn’t gone over this yesterday … but to be honest, her thoughts at the time kept had kept locking in with laser like focus upon two lines on the fifth page on the formal itinerary that had been transmitted up to their ship.

May 10 - 17:50 ACST – The Lady Anna Jorgensson assumes her place in the Great Hall
May 10 – 18:00 ACST – The Lady Elsa Jorgensson enters the Great Hall and joins her Sister
“Right! I’ve, uh, got this!” she declared, shaking off her preoccupation with a perhaps slightly over the top show of confidence, smiling openly.

_Decorum. Poise. Serenity. Confidence._ She quietly repeated the words her protocol tutors had desperately –and mostly unsuccessfully- tried to push into her head as she drew herself up. An encouraging nod and smile from her Aunt and Uncle and she was off, weaving her way through the room filled with probably a hundred other low and mid ranked nobles from all over the place, with probably several times that many staffers and family members along for the ride. Almost all of them none the less offered formal bows to her as she walked past confidently, apparently having picked up that she was the one they were waiting on and she tried her best to politely incline her head in return – while trying her very best not to blush at the rather … appraising … looks some of the younger men threw her way, firmly keeping her pace steady, elegant and unhurried.

The two staff members in front of the door wearing the most formal uniforms of the Arendelle customs service snapped to attention at some unseen signal as she cleared the crowd that was slowly moving up in her wake. Both offered her a formal bow in unison, before swivelling on their heels to open the oaken doors for her that led from the holding room to the final passage terminating in the VIP arrivals gate in the main terminal. She made herself slow down long enough to give them both her thanks with a dimpled smile, earning bashful smiles in return on their previously implacable faces before she stepped past them, entering a brightly lit tunnel that curved to the left sharply. The doors closed behind her and almost at once down the tunnel, she heard a brazen fanfare start - no doubt called in by the two people behind her now that she was finally on her way.

She was not sure _who_ was waiting for her. Certainly not her Sister Some local official senior enough to get the annoying job of trudging down to the spaceport and welcoming back the long lost spare she guessed. But she would not embarrass her sister by giving anything but her best. Taking another deep breath, she raised her chin and strode calmly around the corner with a confident stride.

In the defence of the Spaceport staff for what was about to happen, things had gotten a _little_ more chaotic then usual this morning.

It was always going to be an incredibly busy day, with so many guests arriving for the coronation ceremony from off-world and around the world via suborbital Aerodyne, but the sudden last minute notification that the representative from New Avalon was both arriving four hours earlier than anticipated … and that said representative was the Archon-Prince Designate … well, _that_ had caused any number of heart attacks in legions of protocol officers as plans prepared and refined over the last year were tossed into the nearest trash receptacle and replaced with a cunning mixture of panic and innovation, understandably making one or two false assumptions along the way.

It didn’t help that the local security forces found their own calm world turned upside down with the arrival of the advanced force from MIIO, under the operational command of the Intelligence Directorate Bureau. What had been a carefully conceived security plan more concerned about crowd control then any _real_ threat to high ranking people had been looked at … and promptly thrown out the window by the counterintelligence agents as they went to work locking down every venue Victor would visit, stay at or attend. There was no _anticipated_ threat mind you – it was just that many centuries of well justified paranoia over assassinations through the Succession Wars naturally led to an attitude of ‘better safe than sorry’ where their new March Lords safety was concerned. And despite being very well practiced at these situations, there was no small amount of chaos as security was dramatically tightened, redeployed and reassessed, leading to ripple effects.

One of those ripples was Anna. When it had suddenly become clear a few hours ago that the Acting March Lord was going to arrive well ahead of schedule, with the Regent _already_ committed to events on the other side of the planet and the Duchess by tradition in seclusion until the big ceremony tomorrow, orders had been frantically sent out by the protocol office attached to the planetary government who had the fun task of trying to coordinate the entire affair, to find someone – _anyone!_ - of sufficient rank to be in place to receive him.
Someone had then had the ‘bright’ idea of using Anna who was scheduled to arrive at more or less the same time. Granted, she had not functioned in an official capacity on behalf of Arendelle for a very long time, but her rank to do so was of course unimpeachable and she neatly seemed to fit in as the perfect answer to their problems. So a straight forward order had been sent out that even an idiot could follow from the top.

‘Get the Corona Starburst down an hour ahead of schedule and ensure the Lady Anna was in position to receive the Son of the First Prince and Archon, on behalf of her sister’

Unfortunately of course, reality had jumped in the way of common sense. Hundreds of dropships were converging on the planet from the Zenith and Nadir points with the arrivals scheduled to take place over the rest of the day in pre-ordered landing windows. Such intricate flight were not something lightly altered outside of a military emergency and, unfortunately, the message to flight control had been stripped of the important context of why it was necessary to alter twenty different approach vectors to get the Corona Starburst down early.

Perhaps understandably therefore, the rather overworked flight controllers had ignored the message on the grounds of the distinct danger of having to adjust no less than thirty ships burns to scoot the Starburst through – not even deigning to respond to the message as a measure of how much of a waste of time they saw such an exercise to be.

The end result being that the Corona Starburst had landed exactly on time … by the old schedule.

When this fact finally become clear, frantic messages had been thrown around demanding that Anna expedite her transit on landing so they could ‘flip’ her around to greet the Prince … but due to the heightened local security, this message had too had been delayed, only arriving at the dropship well after Anna had left.

And no-one was stupid enough to try and barge in on the second highest ranking member of the local nobility while she was in the shower, settling for leaving a message with her aunt and uncle to have her hurry through as soon as she arrived.

But even in the worst case scenario, all this should not have resulted in anything more than a moderate diplomatic faux pass. Anna would be late. Prince Victor would be greeted instead by a member of Duchess Elsas household staff – the man who had initially been sent here to greet Anna as it so happened. As soon as the Regent got back this afternoon he would apologise profusely that absolutely no insult was intended and presuming that Prince Victor was as generally disdainful of perfectly following protocol as had been reported by the advanced team, everything would be fine.

None of those calculations had anticipated the wild card known as Anna Jorgensson however.

Because as Anna hurried down the curving passage to the gate, she was unaware that a large party of people were moving down said passage, equally in ignorance of her presence, having narrowly, impossibly, slipped by the final security check by exactly two and a half seconds.

And so with the most perfectly incredible timing possible, Anna’s pace carried her straight through the curving sweep towards the brightly lit frosted glass of the gate … and her somewhat scattered frame of mind meant she completely missed the sound of footsteps of the other party that might have warned her, ensuring that she carried on right through the narrow moving gap of the cluster of CID agents who were looking in the wrong direction at the wrong time … and straight into the surprised personage of Victor Ian Steiner Davion.
Hail to the Prince!

***FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE***
***Cascade HPG Distribution list, FEDCOM-GVMT-FED-AA-11-BDCST-CRUCIS-OPEN-IMD***
***Office of the First Prince of the Federated Suns***
***Office of the Archon of the Lyran Commonwealth***

'Be it known throughout the Federated Commonwealth that on this day, the Eighth of April in the year of the Common Era Three Thousand and Fifty Three, we hereby invest Our Son, Victor Ian Steiner Davion, with the duties, responsibilities and obligations of the office of Lord of the Crucis March, to act in Our stead.

Be it known that his authority in this office is total, with all delegated ministries and authorities now his to exercise in Our name or distribute as he sees fit.

Be it known that he accepts this role with the humility and dignity worthy of his station and that he has our supreme confidence that he shall do his family, his friends and his people proud.'

Signed by Our hands; Hanse Davion & Melissa Steiner

- Verigraphed HPG proclamation on to all Federated Commonwealth worlds signifying official notification of the change in status of the Crucis March, April 8 3053

FCS Barbarossa
Approach Vector BA-12, Arendelle
Crucis March
Federated Commonwealth
May 09 – 3053
30 Minutes previously.

Victor Ian Steiner Davion frowned at the folder in front of him.

When he had accepted the job of March Lord of the Crucis March, Victor knew that he would be thrust into the rough cut and thrust of political life quickly. But the speed at which it seemed every member of the nobility or well-connected business person, extremely distant family member or just general busybody had decided to ‘volunteer’ their services … was nuts.

 Barely a day after he and his Father had made the announcement to the press and the public in a packed to capacity Throne Room, unsolicited officers had come pouring into Mount Davion from both halves of the Commonwealth – and even from outside the Commonwealth – offering their services. ComStar had probably made a small fortune from the number of priority HPG messages thrown across the Inner Sphere because of the announcement. So much so that he frankly wouldn’t be surprised if Primus Mori sent him a message at some point thanking him for all the extra business his announcement had sent her way.

Annoyingly, from the tone of the messages that had rolled in, it seemed most people thought that this whole reshuffle was just a face saving gesture to make him look like he was taking on bigger roles without actually doing so; to lift his profile without lifting his workload. It was sort of understandable; after all the title of March Lord was, in of itself, largely ceremonial over a normal dukedom. With lots of posing for the cameras, but little day-to-day authority or duties. The real work in running a March was done by the Minister of the March – and although they were generally one in the same person meaning it was mostly just a matter of semantics, the Crucis March was run a little differently to the other regions inside the Commonwealth.
Given that the First Prince of the Federated Suns had ultimate authority anyway - and frankly much bigger issues to worry about, it had become tradition for the ‘working’ titles of Minister and Marshal of the March to be devolved to trusted and capable subordinates who could deal with the day to day issues on his behalf, leaving only the ceremonial duties to deal with – when the Prince could be bothered with them. Joshua Davion on Argyle currently held the post of Minister; head of a distant family line which could point to a proud history of service over the last few centuries. No exception to that tradition, Joshua had performed his job so well that Victor found himself reluctant to lose the man’s experience and institutional knowledge, if this whole exercise was to have any real value in teaching him how to rule he needed the man to work with him. As there was a fine line to walk between being willing to take on the responsibility and the hubris of thinking that he could do an acceptable job out of the gate, simply because of his last names.

After a few days of reflection on the situation, Victor had drawn up a proposal that would keep Joshua on for at least the next year formally as Minister, giving him the time to move in and carefully set up his own administration on Argyle in a systematic and controlled fashion, to the approval of the various stakeholders.

He suspected that more than one of his father’s Ministers on New Avalon was sleeping easier at the news that he was not going to charge in and create a mess they would have to clean up.

Joshua himself had replied to his proposal simply to say that he served at the pleasure of the Davion Family and would be honoured to serve him as he had served his Father. Of course, he wouldn’t have had the job in the first place if he wasn’t fanatically loyal, but it was none the less a relief to get the assurance that there would be no bruised egos after the change of command.

If anything, Victor suspected the canny political operator was looking forward to the idea of being able to mentor and guide the future First Prince personally.

His Father had also praised his considered planning and endorsed his proposals, which had meant a lot to Victor. But in truth, he had only decided on this course after reading through the files on Arendelle and his first official duties thereon. He had noted the way Sir Richard Landers, the regent for Elsa Jorgensson and a thirty year veteran of the Federated Suns Foreign Service had made it a point to ensure Elsa was kept in the loop from the day he had arrived. He had insisted that she attend the cabinet and Peoples Councils meetings as soon as she had been in a fit enough state after the untimely death of her parents. He had clearly taken her under his wing and done his best to impart the decades of peerless political wisdom he had brought to her court, guiding her at first, but slowly stepping back to let her start making increasingly complicated decisions on her own as soon as practical.

Ultimately, Landers had become less her Regent doing his job running the planet and more an adviser or Councillor helping her to run it. Exactly as his Father had wanted.

Idly, Victor pondered the parallels between his situation and the young Duchess’s situation. Both of them had been thrust into a position of authority and responsibility and had needed to quickly come to terms with it. And although they had both been born knowing it would happen one day, neither of them had expected it to happen so soon.

Granted, the scale was different, but it might prove useful to find some time to just talk informally with her over the next few days. Any insights over her regency may well prove useful, saving him time and trouble in the coming months as he stepped up to the plate-

“Attention all decks” a crisp military voice suddenly broke into his thoughts over the ships PA system. “Prepare for immediate gravity changes; we are beginning our descent”.

Finally he thought as he carefully gathered the folders from across his tiny table and secured them all in the small safe bolted to the deck. He made sure to double check the safe was locked, before he stood, taking a glance around his cabin as he did.

His quarters on the Barbarossa were cramped, at least compared to a luxury civilian transport. But compared to the standard crew and passenger berths he was used to from his time in the AFFC, they were positively roomy. Victor had always disdained and fought hard against the idea of
special treatment based on his name – and getting one of exactly four single cabins on board the cramped *Excalibur* class dropship had probably done more to make the reality of his new position hit home than anything else.

Ultimately though, he had spent as little time as possible in the tiny space, preferring to spend most of his time on the Grav-Decks inside the Jumpships that had dragged them from New Avalon to Galax to Arendelle. By long standing naval tradition, Grav-Decks were so called ‘no-hat, no-salute’ zones where rank was essentially dispensed with and soldiers could just be soldiers - within reason of course - and Victor had made the very most of one last chance to just be ‘one of the guys’ with the soldiers and officers of the 10th, taking time out to remember all those who had fallen and all those who still lived – generally over shots of Zero-G scotch.

Kai had joined the ‘road trip’ at Galax, where a makeshift command circuit had dropped off both he and his famous Battlemech, now secured in a ‘Mech cradle below. Although technically Kai no longer worked for the AFFC, to the soldiers of the Lyran Guards he would always be the man who had single handily saved all their asses on Twycross, destroying one of the Jade Falcons premier units in the process - among other acts of odds defying skill, making him a welcome part of the party. In a war when the best of the AFFCs Military commands had suffered body blow after body blow, Kai had been a rare beacon of hope with his victories. Even the damn Jade Falcons apparently thought so highly of him that they had granted him safe passage back to the Commonwealth - probably in the hope of getting to face him in battle one day.

Or something.

*You could just never really tell with Clanners* Victor wryly thought as he secured his door and half walked – half floated towards the nearest vertical shaft in the microgravity, acknowledging the salutes thrown by the few personnel still hurrying to their own landing stations on the way.

Still, behind the legend was the man, the man who had lost his Father to an assassin while he was fighting his way back to friendly lines hundreds of light years away, never having a chance to say goodbye. It had been an act of spite by his aunt against her sister, but the end result of all the machinations was that Kai was now directly in line to take the throne of the Capellan Confederation … and a lot was riding on him to make this whole new alliance work in the long term.

Victor knew, probably better than anyone, what it meant to have such daunting expectations dumped on your shoulders. Kai had always been beset by crippling self-confidence issues, no matter how many times he pulled off genuine bonafide miracles, always tending to dismiss them as products of luck rather than his incredible talent and courage. He had seemed to get over them to some extent during his adventure on Alyina, but Victor knew the huge weight of responsibility now bearing down on him could easily cause him to slide backwards.

Truthfully, Victor suspected that as much as anything else, his mother had sent him out to reconnect among his close circle of friends to decompress from the sudden radical shifts his life had taken since returning from the Clan War, seeing the very real danger of Kai burning out or retreating back into his shell to escape the hammering of rapid changes to his world.

Victor snorted slightly at that thought, reflecting that at least he wasn’t the only one whose world had been turned upside down.

Pulling himself up the vertical shaft with a practiced ease that spoke of spending a great deal of his recent life on board dropships, Victor stepped off two levels up, stepping into the main passage that contained the ships command deck. The ships flight deck was situated here, but Victor knew far better than to barge in when they were in the middle of the rather delicate process of putting over sixteen thousand tons of rather unwieldy dropship on the ground in one piece. Instead, he turned and walked to the other side of the corridor and the door marked GROUNDCOM, even as a series of klaxons and red flashing lights warned that they were 60 seconds out from their control burn. The lock light winked green at his access code and he grunted as he slid the armoured hatch open, stepping through easily, his relatively short size meaning he didn’t have to duck anywhere near as much to do so as most other soldiers.

Three other people were lounging around the high-tech holotable that dominated the command
centre, all three of them among his closest friends in the Galaxy. They had clearly been using the state of the art table as a makeshift poker table if the cards and chips scattered around were any indicator, but that game seemed to have been abandoned, with the trio also ignoring the bridge repeater screens tracking their descent in favour of the massive meter wide flatscreen vid mounted on the far bulkhead. Normally used to display a tactical map of an Area of Operations, it was currently displaying what could only be a news feed from the planet below; a bulletin about what was probably the major news story of the year.

“...and rumour has it that Duchess Elsa's sister, the Lady Anna, is even now arriving home escorting the rest of their extended family to join with her sister on this historic occasion” an overly excited commentator in some kind of bizarre orange Hawaiian shirt announced rapidly on the screen. “No sightings of Prince Victor as yet – but the stunning, incredible revelation that he is personally coming to invest our Duchess for his first act as March Lord has sent shockwaves across the planet Kelly! Shockwaves I tell you! We were already expecting record crowds, but if you look behind me” – and now the commentator paused to let the camera feed switch over to an elevated view above a throng of people, “you can see that crowds are growing even beyond that and only expected to thicken as we get closer to the big day”

Victor was impressed as he took in the high angle shot that brought in the true scale of the crowd. It was still over twenty four hours to go before the event itself, but already he could see there were easily thousands –perhaps even tens of thousands- of people camped out with a mixture of tents, sleeping bags and mats on the ground, staking out the best spots in a large open square opposite what had to be the formal seat of power on the planet in downtown Arendelle City. Giant screens had been erected at discrete points around the square to let the crowds watch what happened inside – and the whole thing had the air of a giant public festival.

Understandable perhaps as the local Government had declared what amounted to a five day weekend in celebration of the event.

“Morning Colonel” Renny Sanderlin was the first to acknowledge his entrance, tossing him a casual salute as he drained the last of his coffee from a faded and chipped Zero-G LCAF mug as Victor moved to take a seat, the thirty second warning sounding as he did so. Renny was his old roommate from the Nagelring and one of the few close friends he could just be ‘himself’ with.

“Looks like the secret is out”.

“The advanced team were told to release the news when we hit six hours out” Victor explained as he strapped himself into one of the seats the ship's Mech Commanders generally used, eyeing the others mug and wishing that he had swung by the galley and grabbed a cup for himself … but checked that thought as moments later the ship started to rock and vibrate as the main drives throttled up to a 2G deceleration burn.

It was not a good idea to walk around the ship with a cup of boiling hot coffee during such evolutions.

“The idea was that people waking up this morning in Arendelle city would get sprung with the surprise over breakfast, leaving little time for anyone disgruntled at their income tax returns this year to plot an assassination attempt” Victor continued casually as he raised an eyebrow at the other. “Which reminds me; Renny, Galen, you’re still both more than welcome to tag along with Kai and myself tomorrow to the investment”.

“Pass” the other declined, holding up a hand. “I got enough sleep on the burn inbound and you’ve already got Kai as a meat shield to hide behind at the ceremony if anyone takes a shot”.

Galen Cox chuckled from his position off to the side, glancing up from what looked like a ‘Lonely Sphere’ travel guide for Arendelle before he glanced up. “I’ll skip out too. You’re already dragging me along to the reception in the evening; I’d rather not have to spend three hours trying to stay awake in front of the entire planets media beforehand”.

“Well it’s not quite that bad” Victor objected mildly. “Granted … there may be a few boring bits before the Duchess shows. But technically I’ll be holding court during the investment, so there is the ceremonial welcoming, shaking hands, handing out some public service awards, school kid choirs and the like to get through before I summon the Duchess. But after that, the actual
formalities should be over quickly and we’ll flip to the formal reception at her palace. Where there will be a state dinner in her honour” Victor concluded, turning to give Renny a pointed look. “And unlimited free booze”.

“That is tempting” Sanderlin reflected, the tall Mechwarrior frowning as he shifted under the two gravities of deceleration to try and get comfortable in his too-small seat as the ship corkscrewed around into a straight vertical descent. “But I earned enough betting on him” and now Renny jerked a thumb in the direction of the third person at the table “in the sim matches that I’m joining in the main bar crawl tonight with rest of the off duty rotation from the Guads. Rumour from those new Alacorn jockeys from the OT&E unit working with Third Regiment says that Arendelle sells an export-illegal fifty-percent alcohol variant of Pharaoh Beer we’ve made it our mission to find. I’m sure Kai can wave the flag well enough without my august presence”.

“There were people on board stupid enough to bet against Kai in a simulation?” Victor blinked, a slightly incredulous tone leaking into his voice as he shot a look at the man in question who just smiled slightly, but didn’t look away from the noteputer he was working on.

No shyness in that smile, just ego.

Which was a good sign. Kai had always been humble to the point of exasperation over his talent, no matter what stunning achievements he kept pulling off.

“Oh yeah. The newbies who transferred into the guards during the reshuffle back on New Avalon had never seen him in action” Renny chuckled, with a slightly self-satisfied tone. “Charles from Second Lance was able to convince a depressingly large number of them that ‘Kai The Monster’ was just propaganda to keep Romano awake at night. He gave them excellent odds and convinced them to go all in when Kai came down to the simulators, said that the lance he was going up against would simply smother him with firepower in ten minutes flat”.

“The poor bastards”.

“Literally” Galen confirmed. “I made two hundred pounds off that match”.

“Well, I like seeing friends get ahead” Victor shrugged before turning his attention back to Renny. “Still, I can’t say you’re going to be missing out on much apart from the free booze at the reception. It’s just going to be a room full of people circling for an hour, then the banquet dinner, then more circling and then the drunken nobility being dragged out by their aides before they make a pass at the wrong person and start a ten year feud that ends with both sides starting to hire mercenaries to have a little proxy war”.

“That actually happens?”

“Annoyingly, yes. Though it’s quite rare, it’s more of a Free Worlds League thing really. Although given that my Father started an interstellar war at his wedding with a toast to my Mother…”

“Sounds … interesting” Renny reflected, his tone still suggesting he saw no pressing reason to be forced into his Dress Uniform. Unlike Galen who was trapped by virtue of being well known as Victor’s aide-de-camp and thus socially doomed to follow him to all these kinds of events, ‘March Lords Former Roommate’ didn’t automatically include him on the same guest lists.

And that was a perfectly satisfying state of affairs as far as Renny was concerned.

“So, anyone interesting coming for this investment – excepting us I mean?”

“I had a look over the guest list for the reception; mostly its regional nobility and a whole load of business interests from the big end of town. Coventry Metal Works, DiNapoli Industries, Weselton Heavy Industrial and Mining… Frankly at a first glance, you’d think this was less a reception for the duchess and more a business convention looking to divide the planet between themselves” Victor snorted. "With that said, if they did have plans to make a bold move, you can bet they’ll throw them out the window and stay as low profile as possible with me landing on top of them. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if they all suddenly became almost sickeningly
sympathetic to the point that if Galen decides to punch one of them, they’ll just thank him for delivering the beat down and ask for another - it they thought it might please me or help them get on my good side”.

“Is that a blank cheque?” Galen asked with a raised eyebrow, suddenly seeming to rethink his opinion of being invited to the reception - if he could invoke the ‘Trell-I option’.

“Let’s … keep that option in reserve for now” Victor replied after a moment – but his mind did wander for a second to mull over the possibilities of bringing Galen along to the next social event. Ryan Steiner was also due to attend. “I’m impressed that the locals were canny enough to invite all the major players to the big functions. These Mega-Corps don’t kid around in trying to get in the door first, but they’re all being given the full VIP treatment. No favouritism”.

“Leaving them out, or some of them out, would just invite those so spurned to get nasty with the planets Government instead of each other” Galen shrugged in response. “If the Duchess has to deal with them, she might as well let them fight among each other for a while before she opens up negotiations. And speaking of the Duchess” Galen switched topics, nodding at the screen. “I haven’t heard much about her past these news reports – which are surprisingly thin, she sounds like a bit of a recluse. You have any idea about her Vic?”

Victor didn’t reply immediately as the roar of the ships engines suddenly increased as they slid down the last few hundred feet towards the heavily reinforced ferocrete dropship bay, the massive ship delicately balanced on a pillar of fire as the most subtle adjustments were made in their trajectory. Instead, he refocused his attention on the vid screen, which was indeed showing rare public footage of the woman he had come to invest with the authority to rule on behalf of New Avalon.

At first glance she had reminded him greatly of Katherine. And with her platinum-blond hair, practiced smile and tall lithe figure it was a very easy comparison to make in his mind.

And yet, there was something decidedly uncertain about her to his eye. He had been his parents enough as they had made public appearances to their adoring public that he could tell she lacked the almost unconscious projection of confidence his sister had inherited from them. On the screen, the Duchess Presumptive was holding herself just a little too rigid as she waved to the crowd from the balcony she was standing on. Her bearing was just a little too formal, a tad too perfect and entirely too methodical as she turned to wave in one direction, then turned back precisely the same amount in the other direction.

It was as if the crowd of people cheering and waving at her from below with clear enthusiasm and affection were making her feel uneasy to the point that she was having to put a great deal of effort into controlling herself…

Probably just nerves Victor decided, dismissing the train of thought as the news flicked back to any number of local talking heads. He could barely hear them over the roar of thousands of tons of thrust, but he could make out just enough to realize that they were talking about him and his love life – or lack of one in the context of the Duchess and her love life and he quickly reached out to close down the screen with a stab at the appropriate controls on the edge of the holotable, fighting off the flush that threatened to bloom on his face.

The ship rocked moments later as its landing skids kissed the ground of Arendalle for the first time. Massive hydraulic shock absorbers built into the landing struts sucked up the last of the ships momentum and eased it to the ground as the engines closed down - and then off, bringing blessed silence. Far taller than the typical StarBarge and Mule class dropships that generally landed here, the Barbarossa was far from the largest dropship in regular service, but it was certainly striking enough from its tall size and somewhat more prominent weapons mounts than the civilian ships carried. Capable of carrying a mixed unit of Mechs, Infantry, Tanks and Aerospace fighters roughly the size of a reinforced Battalion, it was the absolute minimum level of military protection his parents were willing to let him get away with following him around. ‘Just in case’.

Even though the last time Arendelle had been attacked had been during the 1st Succession War, his parents simply refused to take chances.
“There’s not a huge amount I know about her that isn’t in Burke’s Peerage” Victor continued into the sudden silence unstrapping himself from the chair and standing to stretch. No matter what the experts said, he could always tell the difference between simulated gravity through acceleration and honest to God real gravity. “Twenty one standard years as of a week ago, both parents dead in a dropship crash in 3050. One sister, Anna, who should be arriving today – apparently she’s been living with relatives on Corana over the last few years. Oh and she’s extremely smart. Took the standard FedSuns curriculum in between her official duties with private tutors and ended up in the top point two percent of the curve – even through dealing with the impact of her parent’s death”.

“That is impressive” Galen commented with a look of surprise. “Arendelle has a population of what, two billion? That must be a pretty big class for her year”.

“It did – but I meant that she topped the curve across the entire March” Victor clarified his statement, earning this time a low whistle from Galen and a muttering of ‘not bad … for a Duchess’ from Renny – which in turn earned an amused rolling of eyes from Victor.

Alone among their training company at the Nagelring, Renny had not held any kind of noble title, earning his position at the prestigious academy on pure merit – which was the precise reason LIC had ensured Renny was assigned as his roommate. The other members of his training unit had mostly been tolerable, but it was an open secret that hordes of political favours had been traded around to get the scions of any number of noble families into his company specifically because of his presence. Some of them of … questionable … skill inside a Battlemech, who just wanted to try and use the whole process as a social climbing exercise.

Like that damn traitor Ciro Ramirez.

It had meant that Renny had earned more than a few glares when he was assigned the coveted billet with Victor – and even more ire when it became clear that the two of them had become fast friends.

And Renny had taken a somewhat dim view of most of the next generation of middle level nobility in the Federated Commonwealth in return.

But some members of the Nobility were genuinely impressive figures beyond their names, who had earned the right to be called special. And for this woman to achieve such an incredible result despite the horrible tragedy of her parents deaths and the burdens she had been forced to start shouldering, said more about her character to Victor than any number of psych profiles that had been included with her file.

“Okay so she’s brilliant and isn’t exactly an eyesore” Renny continued as he unstrapped himself and stretched, before pausing and raising an eyebrow in sudden consideration. “She, uh, seeing anyone right now?”

“I … don’t know. Her MIIO file didn’t exactly include her dating activities” Victor replied, slightly nonplussed at the question.

“And why the hell not?” Renny huffed. “What the hell do I pay taxes towards an intelligence agency for anyway, if not for detailed intelligence reports on the relationship status of attractive young women on planets we’re going to?”

“I’ll be sure to pass your complaint on to Alex Mallory the next time I see him” Victor actually smiled before his expression twitched slightly and his amusement faded as the topic stirred up his own feelings, causing him to sigh. “Then again, I’m expecting that from this point forward, I’ll be getting reports on the relationship status of every single female Noble within the entire Commonwealth forwarded to me by their families”.

It wasn’t quite an exaggeration.

Now that he was officially moving into high political office, he was dreading the flood of suitors and interested parties who were already no doubt drawing up their plans – Victor having been essentially ‘off limits’ while serving with the AFFC. There was no pressure from his parents on
this front, at least not yet … but the honest truth was that Victor had little to no interest in courting. He was sure there were any number of stunning, eager young women who would be climbing over each other and up the walls of Castle Davion or the Triad for even a slim chance at winning his hand, but his heart was still not in the best shape for such thoughts, lost somewhere hundreds of light years away across the border with the Draconis Combine.

“You’re thinking about Omi again, aren’t you” Kai’s voice suddenly crashed into his thoughts, joining the conversation for the first time with all the tact and subtlety of an Assault Mech, completely unphased by Victor’s sharp look in response.

But there was no judgement or censure in Kais gaze though, just sympathy that said he understood – and Victor reminded himself that Kai had not exactly had the best recent luck with his love life either.

So Victor just sighed and among his closest friends, let himself be honest and open.

He had few chances to be so open after all.

“It’s … easier than it was” he admitted finally. He had never meant to fall in love with Omi; God knows that it was perhaps the single most complicated possible romantic choice he could have made short of Kali Liao. Their parents had allowed the communications to flow backwards and forwards in the hope that it would help lay the groundwork for a lasting truce, if not later a lasting peace. And indeed, he deeply valued the friendship he had cultivated with Hohiro. A friendship that had formed in spite of Hohiros initially less than pleased reaction, before he had quietly given his blessing after Kais quiet intervention.

Perhaps it had only ever been a dream, a shared dream that in their heats they knew they would have to wake up from one day. One stolen kiss on Outreach that still burned in his memory and nothing more … but no matter the months that had passed since her final message, her memory still shone brightly in his mind eclipsing even the possibility of anyone else entering that part of his life.

“I know it was something that could never work out in the longer term” Victor continued. “But the way it ended … I never even got the chance to say goodbye to her Kai” he continued after a moment to centre himself. “Even a damn holodisk to say farewell might have been enough…”

“So send her one” Kai shrugged as he stood, causing all three other people in the rooms head to swivel around and focus on him.

“Ah, Kai” Renny cleared his throat, clearly trying to choose his words carefully as he exchanged a glance with Galen, “Theodore demanded as the price for allowing Victor to rescue Hohiro–”

“-that she would never communicate with him again, yes yes, I got the story from the Gunny” the Capellan waved dismissively, ignoring the exasperated look on Victors face at the fact that the NCO grapevine, as always, knew everything. “Victor, I hate to be the one to point it out to you, but as I understand it, Theodore never said that you couldn’t send her a message – just that she would be forbidden from contacting you”.

Victor distantly felt his start to jaw drop open for a moment before he snapped it shut, as Kais words hit him. Almost frantically, he found himself replaying Omis holodisk in his head, every single world long burned into his head with perfect clarity…

‘…In return for permission to give my brother this one chance at life, I agreed never to communicate with you again. As much as that hurts me personally, I know Hohiros death would hurt the Combine more. Like you, I am trapped by who I am. Forgive me.’

How in the hell had he missed that distinction?

Hot on the heels of the hope that suddenly spiked into his chest though, was a dread and a worry. Because now with the question of ‘if he could’ answered in the affirmative, he was left open to the far more dangerous question of if he should.

It would it be crueller to simply leave her hanging. Never hearing from him and allowing the
vague hope that one day, somehow, it would all work out … but could he summon the courage to tear apart his heart? Even if it was the last thing he wanted, could he bring himself to close the door rather than maintain the vague illusion of hope for his love to one day, somehow...

“I’m not surprised you missed it” Kai continued, snapping his attention back at once to the other Mechwarrior who was staring at him, apparently taking his frozen expression of uncertainty for one of stunned surprise. “It’s an Asian cultural thing that’s more common across the Combine and Confederation. Where what is not said is often much more important that what is said and you learn to listen for the difference”.

“Kai, I don’t know how I ever managed without you” Victor sighed, offering a smile back at the other for his honest efforts, a pang in his chest making him realize just how much he had missed Kai for those dark months when he had thought he was dead.

“I’d imagine you did quite poorly” Kai sniffed in a friendly sort of way, clearly not letting the statement stand as a rhetorical one and also clearly not meaning any insult by it.

“Poorly indeed” Victor nodded back at him, remembering the horror in his heart he had felt as Yen-Lo-Wang had gone pin wheeling off a cliff dragging a Clan Omnimech with it and knowing how incredibly lucky he really was to have Kai back from the dead with him. “Poorly indeed my friend”.

A sudden crackle over the ships PA summoned both he and his ground party to the ships primary Mech deck seemed to provide a natural end to the conversation at that point. Renny waved them out as he started cleaning up the remains of the poker game to put the room back in order for the staff officers who would take it back over it shortly, Victor having used his rank to simply take over the room for his friends to have somewhere to be themselves. Galen and Kai followed Victor out and into the tiny access lift that ran down the core of the ship. Thirty seconds later they stepped out into the core of the ship and Victor felt a familiar surge of energy as he took in the view.

Around him packed tightly in the cramped space were twelve Battlemechs, the most powerful ground going war machines known to mankind. They all but gleamed in high-gloss ‘dress' paint, even under the subdued lighting, yet still managed to lend an air of faintly menacing power to the bay that reminded everyone that these were not toys or showpieces. Eleven of them proudly wore the dark blue and gold of the Lyran Guards while the twelfth machine, a fifty ton Centurion—with what looked suspiciously like a squad from the 314th Mobile Infantry standing in front of it taking a group photo- wore the light green and ivory of the 1st Saint Ives Lancers.

The bay was swarming with activity. Dozens of technicians were already climbing all over the titans, starting pre-deployment checks only minutes after touchdown, which spoke highly of their efficiency. While the unit was grounded, the battalion would be living in Fort Akershus, the local base conveniently attached to the Spaceport. It was mostly used as a staging ground for units deploying to or coming back from the Periphery March into the Crucis march. And even though they were hardly the same quality of accommodation as the barracks complex back on New Avalon, after the cramped conditions on board the Barbarossa Victor knew from personal experience that it would feel like a five star resort.

But he wouldn’t be joining them.

Victor had walked into bays like this literally hundreds of times over his career with the AFFC and they had never failed to fill him with a sense of awe, looking up at the massive war machines that it was his privilege to command and pilot. From the agile birdlike figure of Rennys shiny new Raven to the massive brooding presence of his own Daishi off to the side everything seemed familiar, but Victor couldn’t help but feel subtly out of place for the first time as he walked to meet the cluster of people waiting for him. Because rather than the duty uniforms, dress uniforms or MechWarrior combat gear had had always worn before in such locations … he was wearing a suit.

A suit of the finest quality no less, from Harrold’s Lane on Thakard. Cut in the classical Davion style but dyed a dark Steiner navy blue it fit like a glove as would be expected from such a
reputable firm that had serviced the Steiner family for centuries … and yet it made him feel as much of an outsider among ‘his’ people on the ‘Mech Deck right now as a DEST Commando would be at an Omnis family farm reunion in the Outworlds Alliance.

Pushing past the disagreeable feelings as best he could and projecting a confident gait, he walked across the deck, stepping around the activity to approach the cluster of people standing just inside the ships primary personnel airlock. Two AFFC Jump infantry in light combat armour carrying combat shotguns seconded to the ships Marine detail snapped to attention as he approached – but kept their eyes on the pair of civilians in seemingly identical black suits waiting for him.

“Highness” the lead trooper greeted him from behind his mirrored visor – and Victor fought back the urge to sigh at the use of his title rather than his rank. It was absolutely correct of the man of course, as he was out of uniform meaning he had his ‘March Lord’ hat on, but it still annoyed him to be so addressed by a man he had once commanded in such a fashion.

Better get used to it Victor he chided himself.

“Corporal” he returned the man’s greeting with a nod.

“How many more agents in the detail?” Galen asked as Victor gestured the group forward, Agent Samuels drifting behind them to bring up the rear as they moved through the tight airlock. Behind him, the two Marines followed, but stopped at the hatchway itself, sealing the inner door behind them as they started their sentry duty.

“Seventy six” the other replied curtly, causing Victor’s head to come around with a raised eyebrow.

“Seventy six” he echoed, fighting very hard to keep the sarcasm out of his voice as they walked down into the massive ferrocrete walls of the docking bay. “Doesn’t that sound a little excessive Agent Curaitis?”

“Frankly, it’s barely enough Highness” the other corrected him without breaking step, gesturing to a quartet of agents waiting at the end of the narrow gangway in a small annex who fell into formation without a word as they breezed past. “You have Six agents directly on the immediate protection detail. Four here and two more at the arrival gate” the other explained without breaking step, leading them with an unerring sense of direction through service passages and back passages secured by local police and security, bypassing most of the public areas with constant radio chatter passing back and forth from the other agents as they noted their progress.

“There are also fifteen agents in plain clothes throughout the immediate welcoming committee and
“Curatis continued explaining as they walked. “Twenty agents manning the vehicles to take us to the hotel. Twenty agents in Infiltrator Battle Armor with two fire teams on an orbiting Karnov for quick response and the remaining ten positioned as overwatch snipers along the planned route and fifteen agents running the communications and support vehicles. Plus twice that many agents for the two other rotations to provide full coverage and all the ancillary support staff, of course.”

“Of course” Victor replied, biting back his first impulse to ask the other if he was not being just a tad paranoid, knowing exactly what answer he would get to that question. The Intelligence Secretariats unofficial motto was ‘even paranoid people have real enemies’ for a good reason.

Instead he kept his thoughts to himself as they wound their way through the secured maintenance passages and private passages until they stepped back into what could only be a VIP private passage, if the wood panelling and high quality carpet was any indication, through a door guarded by a pair of local police officers flanked by the final two agents of his protection detail. One of the former promptly raising a radio at their approach and sending a quick message.

Moments later in the near distance, a band started playing and Victor cocked his head before he recognized the strains of ‘Hail to the Prince’; an ancient repetitive bit of music used to announce the arrival of senior members of the Davion Family in the Federated Suns. It had always been played for his Father when he had entered an event on New Avalon …

But this was the first time it was being played for him.

That fact, that simple musical tune, shook him quite a bit more than he would have thought possible as his friends and security agents stepped out single file through the narrow door. More than the fancy ceremony on New Avalon, more than his Father dumping the files in his lap and more than the suit; that music being played to welcome the guest of honour suddenly made him realize that he was now inexorably committed to the new phase of his life. He had to leave behind the Mechwarrior and become the March Lord, had to dive into the murky world of politics and perception he barely understood.

He paused for a moment, trying and failing to focus himself, feelings of resignation and perhaps even resentment that the day he had always knew was coming, but hoped somehow wouldn’t, had arrived.

The second he walked out of the gate at the end of this corridor … his old life would forever be altered as he took on the ultimate responsibility for this world and a great many others.

And a new life would begin.

Well, much as he might have wanted to, there was certainly no point putting it off.

And he would be damned before he embarrassed his family or his nation by shirking his responsibility.

“We all ready?” Victor asked, glancing to Kai and Galen, who had moved to flank him on the left and right.

“Are you?” the later asked pointedly, clearly having no problems reading his mood.

“As I’ll ever be” he replied with complete honesty as he took a deep breath and tried to let the tension out, with little success, fighting the urge to fiddle with his jackets cuffs and nodding at Curaitis. “Let’s go meet the public, shall we?”

Together, the trio started moving and knowing his friends had his back did help him at least project a confidence he didn’t really feel. The cloud of agents around him spread out a little into a looser bubble to give him some room in the empty passage, Curaitis chatting away on the microphone built into his suits cuff as he led his people in, making final checks as he let out the word that it was ‘game time’. The music grew louder as they came around a final corner, the glass doors now in sight with what looked like very bright lights from any number of TV crews on the far side awaiting him. Stealing himself and drawing himself upright while allowing a practiced
pleasant smile to paint his face, Victor strode forward, vaguely noting the cross corridor to his right that fuzzed with their own into a single passage as he walked past it-

And then a blur of red hair slammed into him.

He staggered, but kept his feet nimbly as he reacted to the surprise encounter. The other person – a young woman he determined as he refocused his gaze, came off worse, reeling away from him with a squeak and threatening to fall right over on her back. Operating on pure instinct, he reached out and grabbed her upper arm as she threatened to topple, stabilising her enough to let her get her feet planted and stagger to a halt.

After a moment of stunned shock at the completely unexpected event, Victor’s bodyguards started to move as one, several of them reaching into their coats including a suddenly red faced Agent Curaitis who had spun around from his point position with a needle pistol seeming to all but materialize in his hand. But he and all the other bodyguards halted as Victor snapped up his free palm behind the newcomers back, reinforcing the gesture with a look of pure command forged in the heat of grueling battles at the lead agent.

Curaitis backed off, albeit grudgingly, lowering his weapon and waving the rest of the cloud of agents back to form a perimeter. But the Agents gaze didn’t waver for a second from the person who had just made his entire team look like a bunch of idiots barely five minutes after meeting up with his principal.

“Are you alrig-”

“Sorry sorry sorry!” the newcomer suddenly exploded into voice as Victor gently released his grip and stepped back to give her some room. “God I am being such a me today! I wasn’t paying attention and was thinking –well sort of thinking, I guess I wasn’t really thinking – and really wasn’t paying attention because I’m probably running late and ruining everything and I’ve only been back for like an hour and already everything is going wrong and oh God, I’m just going on and on and I really need to get going because I’ll be national news if screw all this up-”

Victor blinked at the other as words simply poured out of her like water from a high pressure hose. She was young, younger than him, probably barely an adult if he was any judge. She was taller than him, but only by a matter of a few centimeters, with quite striking red hair that at once reminded him of his younger sister Yvonne.

Although her rapid fire talking without the need for anything as human as taking in oxygen, reminded him far more of his younger brother, Arthur.

Her skin was mildly freckled which only added to the almost overwhelming ‘cute’ factor and her eyes were a rather soft blue that, for some reason, Victor was instantly sure he had seen before.

“And so I’m really really sorry, uh, you” she suddenly finished, seeming to have finally run out of oxygen for the moment, her gaze flicking between himself, Kai and Galen, with an impossibly cute wince plastered on it as if she was expecting to be scolded.

“It’s perfectly fine” he assured her, finding something impossibly warm in her bubbly presence that seemingly burned away the brooding cloud that had been hanging over him and a slight, but genuine smile worked its way onto his face. “Are you okay though?”

“Of that depends on who you ask” she laughed at herself shamelessly. “But I, uh, seem to be in one piece. I think” she added, glancing down at herself as if checking. “Although this is the third time I’ve almost crashed into someone in the last ten minutes”.

“Perhaps … you may wish to consider slowing down slightly?” Kai suggested, a smile crossing his face as he too seemed to lift in the presence of this charmingly excitable woman.

“Oh you could always invest in a crash helmet” Galen helpfully suggested, drawing a mild rebuke of a look from Victor.

“Oh I don’t have time to slow down, I’m running late for this whole welcoming committee for me!” she suddenly fretted, as if remembering, whirling to glance down the passage, past the
bodyguards – Victor noted Curaitis’s gun had vanished into his jacket again as quickly as it had
appeared to the frosted glass doors, beyond which the music was still cheerfully thumping out.

“To welcome you?” Victor started to question her, but then his eyes caught sight of the clip
holding her hair in place as she turned her back.

He had been around more than enough jewellery over his life at Court to have a decent ability to
tell the difference between real quality jewellery and cheap knockoff stuff. And even at a glance
he could tell that this did not belong to the latter category, not in the slightest. The green and
purple background and the green crocus flowers at once caught his eye and his mind resolved
them into the national symbols of this world … and then while looking at the jewellery, he noticed
the very distinctive streak of white in her hair running down through the ponytail …

And suddenly in a perfect moment of revelation he knew who this had to be, a file photo years out
of date but suddenly superimposing itself on his mind flashing to the fore.

“I … don’t think you have to worry about them terribly much, my Lady Jorgensson” he said as
the other turned back around, feeling without seeing, the sudden looks from Galen and Kai
directed at him from the use of that name. “I have a strong feeling they’ll wait for you”.

“I suppose you’re right” she sighed. “Then again, I’m just the ‘other’ sister coming back home
after so many years – um … sorry, have we met before?” she cut herself off as her mind caught up
to Victor’s earlier use of her name.

“No, we haven’t” Victor assured her, fighting himself as his smile threatened to break out into a
grin, just enjoying the moment as it was clear that she didn’t recognize him or the people around
him.

Which was, frankly, a refreshing change of pace.

“I am, in fact, very pleased to finally meet you” he asserted, reaching out gently to take her hand
and raising it to gently kiss the back of it as was proper for greeting a woman of her stature and
rank. “My parents have told me several interesting stories about your parents - and they hold a
great deal of affection for both you and your sister”.

“Oh, um, thanks, I guess!” Anna replied, blushing charmingly at his gesture with her hand. “I
suppose that makes sense. So, you’re here for the investment of my sister and all that?”

“Exactly so” Victor smiled back at her as he released her hand. “It took a little rescheduling, but it
just wouldn’t have been right for me to miss this ceremony – and my parents insisted that I come”.

The noise from Kai off to his right sounded suspiciously like he was desperately trying to hold a
straight face together.

Anna though, just continued to smile with guileless cheerfulness.

“Well then” she said, drawing herself up almost formally, but not losing the openly friendly air as
she did so. “Um, on behalf of my sister and the people of this world, welcome to Arendelle!” she
smiled brightly. “I hope you’ll have a great time – we can throw a pretty terrific party when we
put our minds to it. So, I’ll see you at the investment tomorrow?”

“From what I understand, yes you should” Victor grinned with a slight laugh, neatly covering the
strangled snort that came this time from Galen. “And we’ll be attending the reception later that
evening as well. I presume, of course, that you will be at both?”

“Oh yes, of course!” Anna nodded enthusiastically. “Hopefully I won’t make too much of an idiot
of myself in front of the nobility coming in from off-world, apparently in these investments the
First Prince sends a personal representative. And I really really don’t want to embarrass my sister”
she continued, her smile seeming to fade slightly as her head dropped and she started fiddling with
her hands absentely. “It’s … well, it’s been a while since I’ve seen her. And … I don’t want
embarrass her … by, well, being me”.

“Anna…” Victor hesitated as her bubbly persona seemed to vanish as if a switch had been
thrown, somewhat awed by just how openly this woman wore her heart on her sleeves.

He felt a sudden pang of envy in that, in how she refused to put on a mask like he was so often forced to do and almost without thinking, he reached out to gently put his hands on her shoulders, feeling somehow that it was almost imperative that he cheer her back up.

“Anna” he tried again as her head came back up with the second use of her name. “I don’t think you could possibly embarrass your sister by being yourself. In the two minutes since you crashed into me, you’ve managed to make me feel more welcome on this world than entire ticket tape parades have on others – without even trying, without even realizing it. That … is an incredibly rare gift. Please; never stop being you”.

Anna once again had the grace to blush as Victor let get and stepped back, the other glancing at him, then seeming to finally notice Kai and Galen next to him.

“Ohh I’m sorry, where are my manners!” she suddenly blurted, sidestepping Victor to offer her hand almost shyly to Galen. “Anna Jorgensson”.

“Kommandant Galen Cox” Galen introduced himself with a smile, and for once he actually raised her hand to his mouth to kiss it in a way he rarely did when faced with nobility, his sentiments not quite as skeptical as Renny, but not far off either. Clearly, he was rather charmed by her too. Victor saw Anna tilt her head for a moment, probably having heard the name before on some news piece or propaganda broadcast and trying to remember where, but in the end she just returned his smile and backed past Victor to again offer her hand, this time to Kai.

“Anna Jorgensson” she again introduced herself with a smile, and Kai again kissed her hand, somehow adding a very Capellan Bow while doing so, as Kai too returned her incredible infectious smile with one of his own.

“Kai Allard-Liao” he gave his name, following Victors lead in omitting his varied titles and honorifics –that he didn’t much care for anyway- in staying under the radar.

It was a futile gesture in Victors mind and, indeed, only a second or two later Annas eyes almost seemed to bulge out of her face. Kais name had been trumpeted from one side of the Federated Commonwealth to the other both during the Clan War and again quite recently after the major changes inside the Confederation itself. And as she let get and seemed almost to shrink back before them, Annas gaze came back around to focus on Galen, her lips soundlessly repeating his name … and then another flash of sudden recognition passed over her face as it apparently ‘clicked’.

Then her face snapped back to Victors and started to go pale as she put it all together.

“And … you …” she asked in a tiny voice with wide eyes that said she knew exactly who he was.

Victor sighed and offered her a wan smile anyway.

“Victor Steiner-Davion at your service, my lady” he said, striving as best he could for a friendly, gentle tone … because right now she looked like she might just faint right there.

Anna didn’t move for about five seconds after Victor supplied his name.

She didn’t even appear to be breathing for that matter.

Then she made some kind of strangled sound as if she was trying to talk, which seemed to unfreeze her muscles, and she started to hurriedly drop down into a curtsey.

“Please Anna, don’t!” he asked her quickly, freezing her in place once again looking incredibly unsure, so he stepped forward and gently encouraged her back to her feet.

To hell with Royal Protocol he suddenly decided almost contemptuously as he cut through to the heart of the matter.

“Anna, our parents were close. So much so that my Mother considered your Mother one of her
closest friends. I … would very much like for us to be friends and dispense with any silly formality. At least in private where we don’t have to play our roles, you can do away with all the annoying formality if you’ll let me do the same with you”.

The other appeared to consider this for a moment, but only a moment before a smile once again exploded onto her face. Good Lord this woman could give you whiplash from how fast she could bounce back to cheerfulness!

“Uh, right, your High … um … friendshipness” Anna offered an almost cheeky smile, and Victor couldn’t help but laugh at that, the mood once again lifting as she settled herself. “So …” she paused as if in thought, then offered her hand out again to him much more casually, clearly suggesting that they start over. “I’m Anna – and I’m pleased to meet you!”

“Victor” he took her hand and shook it with a broad smile of his own, wondering just how this woman could be so incredibly … infectious … with her emotions, as he suddenly decided that this whole March Lord business might not be quite as tediously monotonous as he thought it was going to be. “And I am very pleased to meet you”.

“Highness…” Curaitis’s voice broke into their conversation, and Victor glanced past Anna to see the agent was actually wearing a slightly apologetic expression at interrupting the moment. “The reception?”

“Ah yes, that. Well I suppose we should get going before the poor musicians have a heart attack” Victor suggested, although he knew they had only been playing for a couple of minutes, perfectly normal for these kinds of events as people waited for the VIPs to show up. Hail To the Prince had been written very specifically to be switched at almost any point in the music to the brief fanfare that announced the arrival of the VIP in question, for that express point.

“Uh … I think I was supposed to be on the other side of this door, to greet you” Anna blurted, sounding almost guilty.

“Well that sounds incredibly boring” Victor scoffed, wondering if the cheerfully irreverent disposition of this woman was somehow infectious given the sudden mischievousness that blew through him as he stepped forward and offered her his arm. “How about we just cause the scandlevids to go berserk for a few days by entering together? Then you can show me and my friends around Arendelle city for the next hour or two before we hit the hotel?”

Anna blinked, then giggled, then bounded forward to link her arm with his proffered arm.

“It would be my pleasure – do you like chocolate?” she suddenly switched topics in a way that Victor suspected would happen a lot with this woman.

“Who doesn’t!” he confirmed with a snort.

“Then I know where our first stop has to be” she grinned and Victor felt a smile resonate back onto his face as the door opened ahead of them, the quartet of old and new friends stepping out into a whirlwind of light and sound that engulfed them.
None of us had a clue what we were walking into.

As far as the 10th was concerned, 'Operation Showtime' was just the Regiment giving Colonel Steiner-Davion the send-off the man had earned before we rotated back to Lyran State Command to settle a few scores with the Trashborns. No-one thought this would be anything but some guard duty, possibly one or two dress parades and lots and lots of bar crawling to make the MPs lives as miserable as possible.

Because there was certainly nothing in the rumour mill about what we actually walked into.

And that's a little unusual. See, there is always chatter in the rumour mill when something big is about to happen. 'No-shit' stories passed on from dropship crews who heard it from some other dropship crew who heard it from someone from a jumpship they were docked with last month, that sort of thing, with a tiny bit of truth hidden in the chatter. But there wasn't really any talk at all about Duchess Jorgensson – except that she was apparently quite the looker.

Well … score one for the 10ths grapevine there I suppose. Although I'm sure even SAFE could have figured that one out.

But no. To all those idiot conspiracy nuts who keep popping up on low rating late night holovid shows I'll make it as clear as daylight. Victor didn't have a clue what he was walking into when he went to invest her icy hotness – none of us did. You can be damn sure if we had even the slightest clue about what was going on happen on the 10th of May 3053, we would have damn well remembered to pack the artic warfare gear, I can promise you that!


Arendelle City Spaceport
Arendelle
Crucis March
Federated Commonwealth
May 09 – 3053

"Ahhh, Arendelle, our most mysterious potential market partner. Open those gates so I may unlock your secrets and exploit your riches! Oh … did I say that out loud?"

His Grace in the name of Melissa Steiner, the Duke of Weselton snickered quietly to his little joke as the spaceport gate in front of him swung open, seemingly at his command. The customs service personnel who had just finished validating the visas of both himself and his party twitched ever so slightly at his rather bold statement, but kept their peace as they smiled plastically and gestured him through like the good low-level drones they were.

Smiling with his hands clasped behind his back, the Duke strode forward through the final security checkpoint and onto the main concourse terminal in the VIP section of the spaceport. Behind him, the half a dozen Mercenary bodyguards he had brought with him followed in silence, towering over his relatively short stature in a way that did little to hide both their muscle and their incredibly deadly killing skills. Lesser men may have been put off or intimidated by the bulk and size of their own bodyguards – and these men had bulk to spare.
He however, was not a lesser man. The 'Dread Legion' was by in large made up of that wonderful combination of competent soldiers who came cheaply, combined with just the right level of desperation for a stable contract that made them fanatically loyal. Knowing that, like oh so many others, their Mercenary unit was sitting right on that thin line between survival and failure tended to make you far more … appreciative of stable long term employment opportunities.

And more importantly, doing what it took to keep them.

No, these men knew exactly who signed their ComStar escrowed payment authorisations and that guaranteed absolute obedience.

His eyes missed little as he strode down the concourse, soon picking out other VIP delegations from various corporations coming to the investment ceremony, with their offworld fashions and flaunted signs of wealth standing out boldly from the crowd. Unlike them though, he had no need for a large delegation to make him feel important, or to impress the locals.

No, among the people who actually mattered on this world, his reputation would speak for itself.

Because it was quite the reputation indeed.

His path to success had started when he took over both the Dukedom and the family business, Weselton Industries, when his Father had finally had the good sense to die in 3025. The fool of a man had done his very best to run it into the ground for the better part of a decade as his grip on reality had faded, leaving quite the mess to him to clean up.

With a firm hand, he had put his mark on the long and proud family name by making the hard but necessary decision to ruthlessly sell off what was untenable to hold onto, flogging off most of the defence side of the company to consolidate the core business into something viable.

It had been a humiliating process that he had never forgotten. Weselton Defence Industries had been a minor but persistent thorn in the side of the larger Mega-corporations of the Commonwealth for centuries, resisting all attempts to be brought out or crushed underfoot. And so Defiance, Quicksell and TharHes among others had taken great pleasure in dividing it up and absorbing the viable business units into their own operations, often for insultingly low prices compared to their true value.

Yet he had been left with little choice but to smile and accept what they had offered. Even if he vowed never to forget.

Still, stingy or not, it was working capital. And if the triage had been painful, it had also been necessary, letting him find a new direction for the company.

His first big success had been in the newly annexed worlds of the Sarna March in 3030. Shrugging off accusations of being a carpet bagger -by chagrined corporations belatedly following him in- he had snapped up and revitalized any number of failing corporations with FedCom capital and technology, turning a rapid profit by snapping up the low hanging fruit left by decades of mismanagement by the Liaos. In 3038 he had sold off most of those assets for a princely sum to various interests, just in time to avoid the recession in the aftermath of the failed 3039 war, spending the time growing his core business back to a respectable size in the Lyran Commonwealth and waiting patiently for the next opportunity he knew would come sooner or later.

The new Periphery March in the Federated Suns established in `41 had seemed to be the next big thing … but he had decided against moving that way. If only because other businesses had rushed in like bulls at a red flag as they had signed onto the major 20 year industrialization plans for the outback. Instead, he hadthreaded the market distortion to the other side of the Commonwealth, snapping up a string of corporations through the Trellshire region. All of them were struggling industrial corporations, all on the verge of failure thanks to the long decline of the Succession Wars, barely breaking even on a quarter-to-quarter basis. Much of their production capacity, electronics and technology had been stripped to keep bigger, more viable plants running on other worlds, leaving them great complexes filled with well-maintained machinery … few of which could do anything or operate beyond a tiny fraction of their true capacity.
He was hardly the first person to have attempted such ambitious rebuilding of decrepit facilities, of course. Others had held similar ambitions across the Inner Sphere in similar situations for over a hundred years, but very few attempts had ever succeeded in the long term. Sometimes the investors had run out of money, having grossly underestimated the necessary level of work and ongoing investment to actually get a return using kludged workarounds and highly inefficient alternatives to replace the automated, broken down systems no-one really understood. Other times they had appeared to succeed in triumph ... until a matter of weeks later in the middle of the first production run, everything would go haywire and the factory would mysteriously burn down or blow up; as if some great force was denying humanity the right to try and reclaim what had been lost in the folly of the 1st and 2nd Succession Wars.

Conventional wisdom therefore held that it was a folly to try and restart such facilities, most having eventually been looted for spare parts for other facilities over the years. That it was better to concentrate your eggs into as few baskets as possible and slowly expand your major facilities bit by bit, behind regiments of 'Mechs. Even right on the border in some cases, it was considered better to risk raids than risk losing their increasingly precious capacity by 'fiddling' or attempting to relocate.

Conventional wisdom in his mind however was little more than an excuse used by those who refused to take risks and followed the safe path down into irrelevance and stagnation.

Carefully cultivated friendships with a very select group of people he had developed over years as an industrialist had informed him ahead of the curve that a genuine renascence of Star League technology was indeed about to start flowing through the Federated Commonwealth in the early 3040s. It had started, unsurprisingly, with advanced Star League military technology doled out to AFFC units in dribs and drabs as NAIS had gone from laboratory proof of concepts to field-test ready units, but with the right 'donations' to the right people, he had found himself at the front of the line for the first runs of the computers, electronics and technology needed to restart his new array of factories.

Factories vastly more important to the future of the Commonwealth than the new toys Mechwarriors were making adoring gazes at.

Two years after he had accepted the delivery from NAIS of the first shipments of components, he had restored all his factories to some level of production. As he had determined when investing, his factories were surprising intact, simply missing a handful of key components that made them useless ... but when said components could finally be replaced relatively cheaply…

In five years, he had recouped his investments entirely, even as the rest of the Commonwealth also started to refurbish and repair half working production lines, producing starting to cascade upon itself as geometrics had its way.

By 3049 Weselton had turned two dozen more or less worthless companies into a tightly integrated industrial chain that were headlining economic activity reports across Trellshire. His efforts had been singled out and lauded by no less a personage than the Archon and First Prince themselves, he had appeared on the cover of the most prestigious Lyran Business Weekly publication and even been made a member of the incredibly exclusive 2341 Club that catered to the elite of the Lyran realm on Thakard as a tribute to his success.

All this activity and success had, inevitably, attracted the attention of the very biggest companies. Companies like Defiance might be focused on the absurdly lucrative military hardware market, but they did none the less own -or have interests in- a substantial array of civilian and industrial concerns which were finding themselves increasingly under pressure by the resurgent Weselton industries.

This of course could not, would not be tolerated, so a conglomerate had quite quickly 'made him an offer he couldn't refuse'.

Specifically, an offer to buy out his Trellshire holdings –for admittedly a significant premium- lock stock and barrel. With the unsaid but rather clearly hinted at alternative that otherwise they would simply undercut his entire business model with their parent companies incredibly deep pockets –
under the cover of generous patriotism- until he went bankrupt and they could buy him out regardless in the long term.

Hating himself for again giving them what they wanted as yet again they had worked to take away everything he had built, but at least getting some satisfaction that this time they were acting out of fear rather than opportunity. They were also paying him no small premium; he had taken the offer and turned over his shares all smiles and handshakes for the cameras of course, no matter how much he privately loathed them and proceeded to sit on his enormous pile of cash as he tried to figure out his next move.

Then, a year later, the Jade Falcons had invaded.

The calm, ordered world of Inner Sphere economics had been turned upside down and inside out as Kerensky’s deranged children had smashed into Inner Sphere without warning. Beyond the immediate military casualties, the damage to the Lyran Commonwealth economy had been appalling. Playing by no-one’s rules but their own, laughing at what they saw as an absurd idea of ‘Merchants’ being free to trade across lines on a map; the Jade Falcons had ignored centuries of well-established business rules as they had simply nationalized everything in their path! Not having any care for the catastrophic damage they were doing to major planetary and regional economies; clearly they were little more than a bunch of thugs with big guns who thought things economics were beneath their notice as they tried to simply impose their ridiculous cast system onto their captured worlds.

Of course it went unsaid that such large disruptions opened up the way for new … opportunities … and he had made the most of them. Once again he had found himself in that most happy position of being cashed up as the rest of the economy had been thrown into chaos. He had taken the advantage and snapped up corporations with an almost reckless speed, exchanging his pile of cash for controlling interests across the industrial space on a scale he had never dreamed would be possible, a stark lesson to all of just how quickly economic winds could change. So much so that even Coventry Metal and Achernar treaded very cautiously around him now, waiting to see what he would do next and where he would go.

And soon they would have that answer.

And that answer would be Arendelle.

Such a quaint little world, yet suddenly finding itself the centre of a storm of interest at the highest levels of industry. Its Germanium wealth alone would have made it a prime target for any mining company looking for steady income for centuries – and even more so with ComStars re-opening of the Titan shipyards that was set to double demand for the mineral easily- but the icing on the cake was surely the Clan-grade mineral deposits. That had made him determined to secure them, to do whatever was necessary while the other major corporations were far too busy directing their capital and resources into the absurdly lucrative AFFCs rebuilding contracts designed to upgrade the largest army in the Inner Sphere with the Star League equipment needed to face down and beat back the Clans.

And when all the dust settled from that massive enterprise, when all those corporations came looking for the resources to start producing Clan grade Battlemechs and weapons perhaps five or six years from now …

Then all the Mega-Corps would have to come to him.

Come to him on their hands and knees and be forced to pay quite the premium if they didn't want to be put so far down the list that the Marian Hegemony would be ahead of them in priority for these resources!

At least until he had repaid, in full, the debt in humiliation they owned his family…

He again let his mind dwell in that happy place as he walked through the terminal, suppressing the mocking looks he wanted to give the representatives of the other companies as they hurried past – but was quite rudely brought back to reality when he came to an abrupt halt as he found a wall of people in his path.
"I say, what's the meaning of this?" he demanded of no-one in particular, staring at the crowd that seemed to have halted ahead of him, distant music cheerfully playing over the muted roar of hundreds of conversations. He cursed his short stature and resisted the urge to try and stretch his height to see over the pack of humanity, glancing around to look to see if there was any way to bypass this mess. But it was clearly no good; this main concourse terminated exactly where the crowd had backed up. At a T-intersection of a glass wall that looked out into some kind of atrium with floors above and below them, probably serving different gates and classes of passengers.

None of which explained why everyone was crowding around the glass wall and busily pointing and chattering away instead of orderly moving past towards the exits.

"You there man" he demanded, stopping a lowly maintenance worker as he passed close by, "what the devil is going on here?"

"Prince Victor is arriving Sir" the man said with some small amount of disdain in his tone as he gently unlatched himself with an almost irritated look on his face that was surprising for one so lowly speaking to his betters. "At the ultra-VIP suit on the ground floor – you can see the reception party from there" he gestured at the thick glass wall, "if you can find a spot of course…"

The Duke decided not to make an issue of the thinly veiled comment about his relatively short stature.

"Ah" he replied instead, dismissing the other with a wave and letting him go back on his unimportant business, not knowing that the slightly harried 'maintenance worker' was in fact a plain clothes MIIO Counterintelligence Division agent who had just very professionally run both him and his bodyguards through an explosives and biochemical detection scan.

Finding nothing of interest besides their legal sidearms they had declared at customs -and been flagged for closer attention because of - the agent moved on to the next check he had been assigned, shadowed always by a half dozen other agents in an eclectic mix of invisible personas, all of them carrying concealed Defiance LasBlast PDWs and Rorynex submachine guns and ready to fill any threat with enough firepower to take down anything short of an armoured elemental in an instant.

Several of the members of the team would, in the coming weeks, come to regret the fact that the Duke of Weselton had done nothing warranting a summary execution for reasons of interplanetary security then and there. It would have probably made the lives of a lot of people much easier over the coming thirty six hours.

Instead, the Duke turned to address his chief bodyguard as the crowd continued to press in, now thick enough that squeezing past them somewhat difficult, glaring from behind his spectacles in irritation at the delay. "You, find me a way through this … rabble".

The scared man nodded and silently moved forward, the half a dozen men forming a very intimidating wedge around him as they pressed forward and together, they started to slice like a knife through the crowd as they worked their way forward. Dozens of people turned to glare at the people pushing past them, only for their objections to die stillborn as they took in the sheer size of the Mercenaries and the rather implacable looks on their faces that suggested it wouldn't be healthy to make an issue of their rudeness. Soon enough, they were past the bulk of people and managed to pick up the pace to his satisfaction, following the signs towards the pickup zone as they left the atrium and started moving through the various baggage claim areas. Behind them, the Duke heard a sudden cheer and surge of thunderous applause – no doubt his Highness had just appeared, a moment many of the 'sheepople' behind him would talk about for years. 'Oh I was there when Victor Steiner-Davion arrived' and all that, as if it was the greatest moment in their small lives, seeing in the flesh the great heir of the two greatest family lines in the Inner Sphere.

He personally didn't know what exactly to make of the young March Lord – except to be annoyed that his presence unnecessarily complicated what should have been a straightforward business deal. He was clearly inexperienced, this literally being his first assignment since being posted as March Lord … but it would not do the underestimate the man’s presence and what it meant, especially as he could smell Victors parents fingerprints all over his unanticipated presence.
After all, it made so much sense on a multitude of levels. Give Victor some exposure on a simple but formal task that even a Mechwarrior could handle. Warn people like him that they were watching and would not look kindly on any of the back alley knife work shenanigans that were known to happen when major corporations squabbled over a valuable strategic resource. And of course, wave the flag and get the locals excited that one of the Olympians had come down from their mountain to grace the people with their exalted presence.

Still, it wasn't anything he couldn't deal with. If New Avalon wanted Marquess of Queensberry Rules and not a back alley knife fight, then that was what they would get. He still held the best position of the various corporations jockeying for position … presuming of course that he was reading the Duchess of Arendelle correctly.

And that was his problem. And indeed, the problem of every other shark circling their prey.

Because it turned out no-one knew anything about her!

He had, as usual, paid a select group of people to build a full dossier on the woman, but to his both surprise and annoyance, they had put together a dossier barely more complete than he could have assembled from publicly available records! That she was an orphan, along with her sister. That Hanse Davion had appointed the –annoyingly canny- Landers in as her regent until she came of age - and he had been rather proficient at slapping down all attempts by various stakeholders to try and get her under their control in advanced of her taking the throne. Oh and that she was clearly a popular woman despite her youth and inexperience, with the people of her world firmly supporting her in opinion polls.

Well, that report had certainly been worth ten thousand Kronor!

There was no blackmail material. Nothing about her personal likes or dislikes to encourage or avoid. No known lovers, no secret lovers. No hidden perversions, no controversial political views. No geopolitical priorities, no pet causes she championed. No known family feuds or regional conflicts to manipulate for advantage … absolutely nothing!

There was something altogether suspicious about the black hole that was the life of the Duchess of Arendelle.

He had learned to trust his instincts on such things. And because he had trusted his instincts, he had put in place several … contingency plans to ensure that he would get what he wanted from this planet.

One way. Or the other.

Arendelle City Spaceport
Arendelle
Crucis March
Federated Commonwealth
May 09 – 3053

Anna fought to keep her composure as she walked through the glass doors into a thunderstorm of noise and light. The noise was the brass band off to the side, shockingly loud as they thumped out 'Hail to the Prince' with great gusto, Anna feeling the noise and trying not to flinch from the thunder of the all too enthusiastic base drummer. The light was made up of dozens of cameras exploding into action a couple of dozen meters away backstopped by bright TV floodlights above them that almost made her wilt under their focus, until she shifted her gaze upwards over the lights to clear her eyes.

She almost wished she hadn’t.

They had entered onto the ground floor of a large open atrium, with tastefully placed greenery running up and down the walls making it feel half indoors half outdoors. The bright green and purple flags of Arendelle hung vertically from the ceiling and walls with equal taste, but it was the
ten or so stories of the building above her that had caused her to be taken aback. Behind thick glass walls on every floor were hundreds, perhaps thousands of ordinary people looking down at the reception committee and press pack crowding the floor here. Even through the glass and even over the thunder of the music, she could hear the distant cheers and see their waves and almost on instinct, she shyly waved back, generating yet louder cheers and more enthusiastic gesturing.

It was almost as if the people of her world were welcoming her home and the sheer impact of the sounds and lights and people almost made her freeze up and collapse upon herself.

Thankfully, Victor didn't break his stride as he moved forward, clearly a man with vastly more practice at these events than she had and Anna followed his lead as he gently led her towards the reception committee, working to keep a shy smile on her face as she returned her gaze down to try and pick out the people waiting for them through the blaze of lights, her eyes working overtime to adjust from the dark tunnel...

Then the music stopped as if a switch had been thrown, Victor coming to a halt at the exact same moment. Anna followed suit, leaving only the distant cheering that also quickly faded until only the mechanical clattering of cameras continued unabated.

"Presenting His Highness, the Lord of the Crucis March, Prince Victor Ian Steiner-Davion" a voice bellowed into the sudden silence with authority and gusto, amplified by speakers across this part of the spaceport. "Accompanied by our Beloved Daughter of Arendelle, the Lady Anna Jorgensson, Lord Kai Allard Liao of Saint Ives and Komondant Galen Cox of the 10th Lyran Guards".

I got introduced second! Anna mentally squeed, having to really fight the urge to gleefully jump at the honour.

Granted it was probably entirely because she was on Victors arm, but she'd take what she got, given that the other members of this group were the Heir to the Capellan Confederation and Hero of the Federated Commonwealth and surely eventually someone would notice that she really didn't belong in such august company.

"My Lords, My Lady" the voice continued grandly after a moment, "in the name of Regent Sir Roger Landers and the Lady Elsa Jorgensson, I welcome you all to Arendelle".

Blinking away the spots on her eyes as some of the lights thankfully shut down so she was not half blinded, Anna finally got a good look at the man standing a few meters in front of them.

Her eyes widened as she focused in on the older man's face smiling at her–

Before she even realized what she was doing, Anna had detached herself from Victor and all but leapt across the distance to slam into the man and throw her arms around him.

"Kai!" she exclaimed--nearly squealed-- in surprise and affection, feeling the others arms gently yet firmly wrap themselves around her in turn as he chuckled deeply, relishing the feeling. Kai was one of the very few adult friends she had had, the man having been in service with her parents as the head of staff of the family Palace since …forever… along with Gerda, his deputy. They were as eternal to the place as the very foundations of the place in her mind; far more a close uncle and aunt than a pair of servants.

Even disregarding the fact that Kai had generally been the one tapped to rescue her from this or that 'situation' as she had grown up.

Be it when she had gotten stuck up a tree at seven years old (trying to climb up to Elsas window) and found herself too frightened to get back down.

Or when she had a year later tried to sneak out of the palace (trying to 'walk' to her sister's new house) and gotten lost in the extensive forests their estate backed onto within half an hour.

Or when she had continually crashed her bike into predictably expensive objects at nine – until her parents had firmly told her to not ride it inside.

All the way to the days where she had simply found herself sad and lonely; he had stayed with
her, taken her to sneak some chocolate from the kitchen to the eternal fury of the head cook and brightened her day back up.

Whatever the situation, he had always been there for her.

It wasn't that her parents hadn't been there of course, but they were busy people with an entire planet to run. Kai and Gerda had as much as anyone else, helped to raise her right up until the day her sister had shipped her off to Corona…

"Oh my dear Anna. It has been far, far too long. Welcome Home".

Anna felt her spirits soar yet higher at the familiar voice. It was at once instantly familiar to her and that feeling that she was home yet again grew inside her as countless memories associated with it flared inside her, taking just one more squeeze of the other before, reluctantly, letting go and stepping back shyly.

"The HPG messages your Aunt sent me were clearly not exaggerating what a beautiful young woman you have grown into" Kai continued with a gentle smile as he studied her quite closely, causing a blush to break out across her face. "I can see that if anything, she understated it".

"Oh, I'm just still the same old Anna" she demurred shyly, always slightly uncomfortable with people admiring her in such a fashion, before she beamed up at him. "I've really missed you".

"We've missed you too Princess" he smiled and Anna again blushed at the title, a pet name she had been given by Elsa. It had stuck after she had named her Sister the future Queen, back before Anna had quite understood the nuances of neo-feudal nobility and that just because her parents ruled a world, they were not a King and Queen like in all the fairy tales their mother had read them.

In fact the Federated Suns didn't have a noble rank of 'Princess' except at the very highest level of the Davion family itself. And even then the ultimate ruler of the Federated Suns regardless of sex was always known as the First Prince, a title Victor would take - Victor!

Her eyes bulged and she whirled around in a blur to face the Archon-Prince designate, feeling her entire body cringe as she realized she had just kept arguably the most powerful –or soon to be most powerful- man in the Inner Sphere waiting while she had jumped ahead like a child to nearly tackle the welcoming party…

But as she turned to face Victor, she just saw Victor, his fist held in front of his face … trying to hide a huge grin. With Galen and Kai not even trying to hide theirs one bit.

"Uh, sorry" she apologised awkwardly, wringing her hands slightly as she stepped back a bit. "I just-"

"My Lady Jorgensson, what did I say about apologising for being you?" the Archon-Prince designate interrupted her as he stepped forward, his expression turning playfully arch.

"Um … not to?" she hazarded, feeling a blush forming on her face … as the cameras behind her cheerfully flashed away with their frantic pace.

"Indeed" he agreed with a slight smirk, reaching up to touch her upper arm lightly for a moment. "Remember that" he stated, glancing at her with a somehow knowing look and causing Anna's blush to deepen to the point it was starting...
to rival her hair colour and a distinct snicker to come from one (or both) of the men behind Victor. "It is none the less my pleasure to also welcome you to our world".

"My thanks Mister Brevik" Victor inclined his head slightly, offering his hand. "Yes Anna and I ... ran into each other in the VIP passage" Victor smiled as Kai took his hand and shook it firmly, the smile twitching furiously again as Annas eyes shot him a look, before he let go and turned to gesture forward the two men next to him. "May I present Kai Allard Liao of the Capellen Confederation?"

"My Lord, your reputation precedes you. You are most welcome; it is our great honour to have you here for this investment" Kai said to Kai, offering another short but dignified bow.

"It is my pleasure to be here. Your family clearly had impeccable taste in names Mister Brevik" the young Mechwarrior quipped with a grin as he returned the bow, shallower as their respective ranks dictated, but given with a casual ease and grace that spoke pointedly about Capellan heritage before he offered his hand.

"As do yours My Lord" the other Kai smiled as he took it briefly before Victor now gestured towards Galen.

"And finally, my aide Komondant Galen Cox of the 10th Lyran Guards".

"Komondant, a true pleasure to have the 10th visit our world" Kai nodded.

"We're pleased to be here" Galen nodded while firming shaking the others offered hand, his eyes tracking around to re-focus on her with a grin moments later. "I take it that you've known Anna for some time then?"

"All my life" the other nodded, turning to give her an almost wistful smile. "The family residence has been far too quiet since Anna moved away to Corona, but we are all looking forward to having her back now. Anna" he turned back slightly to look at her, "as I'm sure you're aware, you'll be staying in a hotel tonight before moving back in tomorrow. I presume this is still satisfactory?"

"Very much so – this whole day has been a bit … overwhelming" she admitted.

"Very good. As it so happens, you have a suit at the Grand Arendelle, the same hotel the Prince is staying at" Kai nodded at Victor, who inclined his head with a pleased look at that news. "Your sisters personal VTOL is waiting on the pad, I would be more than happy to give you a lift to-"

"My thanks for your efforts Mister Brevik" Victor cut in smoothly as he interjected himself into the conversation. "But Anna has most graciously volunteered to show us some of her city personally before we get down to business. I will, of course, make sure she is dropped off at the hotel before I head on to the meeting with the Regent this afternoon, to sign the paperwork formally terminating his regency".

Victor was clearly not asking permission of Kai – but as he distinctly outranked everyone for seventy four light years in any direction, he didn't exactly need to either.

"I … am pleased to hear that" the other said after a surprised pause, recovering quickly from the unexpected news and taking a moment to ask her a slightly questioning expression that asked if this was indeed the case, which mutated into a respectful nod when she bashfully nodded at him. "Then indeed … I can think of no better hands to leave you in" he concluded before shooting a somewhat apologetic look at the stoic figure of Agent Curaitis hovering off to the side of the group. "My apologies Agent Curaitis; Anna has … a way, shall we say, of disrupting the most carefully laid plans on the spur of the moment that I should have warned you about".

"I have a feeling I'll get used to it" the other said dryly, his face none the less as expressionless as it had been since she had met him. "She certainly seems to be living up to her mother's legendary reputation at any rate".

Anna decided that there would probably be a better time to confess to Kai that she had almost sent the Archon-Prince designate flying onto his backside not five minutes ago.
Later.

Next week perhaps? Or next month?

No need to rush talking about such a minor issue…

So she ignored the raised eyebrow from the older man at Curaitis's cryptic statement and instead stepped forward to hug him tightly one more time. A final verbal confirmation that she would see him tomorrow at the investment and he stepped back, bowing to Victor. And with a 'by your leave' and nod from the March Lord, he was off, Anna watching him walk away and leaving them alone in the vast atrium, Kai himself seeming to have been the entirety of the reception committee...

But it meant that now she was standing alone in front of the hundred or so cameramen behind the velvet rope and police officers making sure they stayed there. She was slightly surprised that none of them were shouting questions at them like she would have expected from past experience, but she supposed there were different rules to these kind of events when dealing with the very top level of the Federated Suns - nae Commonwealth - nobility.

Anna started to turn away, but paused for a moment to look up. And on an impulse, she shyly waved again at the packed higher levels, earning an instant response of distant cheering muted by the armoured glass walls, accompanied by enthusiastic waving. Before she realized it Victor was standing next to her and waving just as cheerfully, earning yet more cheers and enthusiastic jostling from the crowds. Then Kai and Galen joined them; Anna following their lead in simply ignoring the press pack that once again exploded with camera flashes like a firing line, smiling and waving to acknowledge her people who had come out to welcome them. Hundreds of cameras in the hands on the spectators flashed too, but she offered her best smile to them, freely.

She didn't kid herself that many -if any- of them had come to see her specifically so much as Prince Victor … but she at least hoped some of them might have.

But this was much bigger than her. This was about the people of her world putting their best foot forward by taking time out of their day to be here and welcome the Prince, who she now knew had surprised them all on such short notice with his unheralded arrival.

And on an impulse she couldn't explain, she felt a sudden need to thank them and so-

"Thank you, all of you, for coming out to welcome Prince Victor and his friends to Arendelle" she suddenly yelled out, not knowing if there was any kind of microphone or broadcasting of her words, but desperately wanting them to hear her thanks to them as she swept her gaze up and down and left to right. She had no clue if she was violating any number of protocols about these events, but found herself unable to stop herself. "It means a lot to me – and I know it'll mean a lot to my Sister as well- that you all showed him such a warm welcome! It's great to be home again!"

A half second passed and then a thunderous roar of noise rolled over her, even through the glass, as the crowd exploded with applause and approving cheers. Giving a final wave, she stepped back as Victor gave a subtle hand signal and the party collapsed in on itself, moving briskly towards the exit and pulling Anna along with them. Her face fell slightly as they were hustled out by the bodyguards double time, and she wondered if she had made some kind of fux pass with her impulsive actions.

Again.

"I'm … I'm sorry if I was out of line~"

"Anna" Victor cut her off with a look as Curaitis marched everyone forward and down the private exit to the secure VIP parking garage where their vehicles were waiting, issuing curt commands over his radio to be ready to roll in ninety seconds or answer to him personally. "Why is it that every time you do something wonderful that makes people around you genuinely happy, you want to apologise for it?"

"Uh … I would suggest Tourette syndrome, but my parents had me checked. Twice".
Victors face rippled as he fought back the explosion laughter that wanted to come out, managing to limit it to a kind of choked off snort and mostly keep his dignity.

"Oh Anna …" he shook his head in amusement. "Don't ever change".

The blush that had finally just about faded away returned in full force at the Dukes amusement and for once, she just kept her mouth shut as they approached the automatic doors that slid open to grant them entry to the private VIP garage-

And she skidded to a halt a few meters later, closing her eyes and breathing in deeply the air of Arendelle as Victor, Kai and the main body of guards walked past her.

Granted, she knew ever since the dropship doors had been opened that she had been breathing the air of her planet, but that was filtered through the climate controlled air conditioning of the spaceport.

And her face frowned and her nose crinkled as the overpowering odor of a great many ICE powered vehicles idling washed over her.

Opening her eyes again, she glanced around … and then froze as she saw what was waiting for them ten meters away that Victor and Kai were happily jumping into.

"Is that …" she managed to try and get out as she pointed, Galen halting next to her curiously before he followed her arm and chuckled.

"Ah, yes. An Excelsior Model fifty one" the taller man confirmed with a glance at the huge, yet sleek black hovercraft waiting patiently for them. Half again the length of any normal Hoverlimo, it really couldn't be anything else but one of the legendary luxury craft. Only a dozen of them had been made a few years ago on Tharkad and they were exclusively held for the use of the most senior members of the Davion and Steiner family lines. Clearly it had been flown in specifically for Victor's use, it wasn't the sort of thing that would just be sitting in a warehouse on this planet.

"Bit more leg room than your normal limos" Galen smiled. "And most normal limos don't include Ferro-Fibrous armour plating, ECM suits or the best communications gear NAIS can build as standard options either".

Nodding vaguely as the Mechwarrior happily rattled off its military specs, Anna tore her gaze away from the vehicle that looked to have been so polished laser fire would likely just bounce off, taking in the flurry of activity around her in the rest of the loading dock come garage come staging point. Federal Agents and local police were hurrying about everywhere, getting into vehicles of every shape and size from police motorcycles to what she could only think of as tanks on wheels from the number of guns sticking out of them, all of which were starting to roll out and form up outside in a chaotic ballet. It again struck her, just how big the 'V' in VIP was with these people and how absurdly out of her 'proper' place she was…

"Well come on then" Galen poked her in the back, snapping her attention back and causing her muscles to unfreeze and start her legs moving again, Galen guiding her towards the Limos back door. "We've had nothing but standard AFFC jumpship ration packs the last few weeks. For some bizarre reason, Victor seems to want to have the authentic road trip experience - right down to the military rations we've been eating the last few weeks instead of the real food he could have arranged with about five seconds of waving his enormous authority around".

"I heard that!" the Princes voice came out from the cavernous interior of the Limo, causing Galen to roll his eyes. "You were supposed to!" Galen retorted before he started to turn back to her with a grin on his face … only to yelp as he found Agent Curaitis had materialized right next to him without a sound or hint of warning, jumping back half a step on reflex and glaring at the other.

"Damnit Curaitis, don't do that!"

"My apologies Komondant" the other said with an utterly unphased look on his face before
turning to face Anna. "Miss Jorgensson, I take it you know the address of where we are going on
this little tour of your city?"

"Oh yes, of course" she confirmed quickly.

She did know the address of the top of her head, having spent more than a bit of time there over
the years when her parents had let her out of the palace, often with Kai or Gerda – even if they
had clearly disapproved of her spending too much time there…

"It's two three nine Main Street, right on the intersection of Main and Davion parade" she
supplied, and the other nodded, tapping the information into a Noteputer he was holding and
starting to turn away. "Oh and…" Anna added on impulse, causing the other to turn back with a
slightly raised eyebrow and causing her to at once second guess herself as she was subject to the
full strength glower of the ISB agent.

"Yes?"

"I, uh" she verbally fumbled, the icy gaze the other was directing her way causing her to wilt
slightly before she just plunged ahead. "I just wanted to apologise. You know, for throwing all
your plans into chaos with this whole detour…thing…"

The other simply stared at her for several long seconds, and Anna felt herself collapsing in under
that uncompromising gaze. But then ISB Agent did something Anna thought he never would.

He smiled, if only for a moment and only barely, as he gave her another nod and walked away.

"Huh. You know, I think he likes you" Galen observed with a raised eyebrow, before shaking his
head and earning a yelp from her as he throw an arm around her shoulder and pulled her towards
the limo with him. "Now, back to critical issues; you were saying something about chocolate …"

CB-626 VTOL Alpha Romeo Foxtrot 01
Over Arendelle City
Crucis March
Federated Commonwealth
May 09 – 3053

Kai Brevik grunted as the VTOL clawed for altitude, pressing him back into the seat as they
ascended through the warm summer air. A Civilian variant of the military Ferret class VTOL, the
pilots of the Royal Squadron seemed to always fly the '626 like it was a military craft, with their
throttle kept wide open. Kai couldn't help but feel his age from the way his bones protested at the
stress of the acceleration until they stabilized at their maximum velocity, but he banished the
discomfort with a smile as he replayed the events of the last hour.

He had not truly understood just how large the Anna sized hole that had been punched in the day
to day life of the palace was until she had walked through the gates today. Because watching her
casually walk in, in complete ignorance of the chaos her 'vanishing act' had caused, hanging off
the arm of the Prince himself having mysteriously gotten herself to exactly the right place at
exactly the right time and made a new friend in the process…

If it had been anyone else, Kai would have been flabbergasted, embarrassed and disbelieving.
But Anna?
It had seemed to be nothing less than a signal that everything on Arendelle was once again back to
normal.

Her unabashed and entirely unfiltered joy as she had all but tackled him had genuinely touched
him, far more than he had let on in the face of the semi-formality of the occasion. He had been so
terribly concerned for her mental state several years ago, in the aftermath of their parents' death.
Over that week, he had seen Annas perpetually happy and cheerful face slowly fade into a dull,
indifferent despair that had nearly broken his heart no matter what he had tried to do to cheer her
up.
What with her parents cruelly robbed from her in a terrible accident … and her sister who she clearly loved denying her any kind of comfort or solace, instead ordering her off her world and away from her home from behind a closed door…

Of course, being sent off world did not mean that he hadn't kept an eye on Anna - from a distance. He had exchanged constant HPG messages with the girls Aunt on a regular basis, forwarding them all to Elsa in the hope that it might encourage her to at least start exchanging HPG messages with her sister, although sadly that had not come to pass. The Duke of Corona himself, brother in law to the late rulers of Arendelle, had quietly given him an open invitation to leave Arendelle and join them on Corona, if he wished to stay with Anna. And had Annas mental health situation not improved, he would not have hesitated to promote Grenda, entrusting her with Elsa while he left to help Anna as best he could. He owned the girls' parents nothing less.

Luckily, such … drastic … actions had proven unnecessary. By the Unfinished Book he was incredibly grateful for whatever higher power had placed Rapunzel in the path of Anna! He had made a firm commitment to be sure to take her aside at some point over the week she was due to stay on Arendelle; to extend his most profound gratitude for her everything she had done...

Still, over ten years of separation was not something that could be dealt with overnight … which was why in his opinion, Anna and Elsa leaving their first contact with each other in a very long time to their very public meeting tomorrow at her investment was just asking for trouble. Treating her sister as if she was just another a guest coming to her investment than her sister coming home? That didn't sit well with him. Not at all.

The girls' parents however had left him a circuit breaker that he had been preparing to exercise today to break this stasis between the sisters that Elsa had imposed. He would have preferred to use it years ago, but it had only been delivered to him from the personal effects of the Duchess and Duke after Anna had left – and his instructions on presenting it to the girls were extremely clear; it was to be presented to both of them at the same time. His carefully calculated plan had been to smuggle Anna to a surprise meeting with Elsa now, having conspired to ensure a two hour window of free time this afternoon for Elsa to sit down with her sister -that she was equally unaware of- to let him fulfil their parent's final wishes … but rather typically, Anna had decided to spoil his carefully laid plans in a very 'Anna' way by running off to show Victor her city.

But there was nothing to be done for it now, so he simply sat back alone in the passenger compartment and tried to enjoy the ride, looking out the oversized windows at the gleaming city under him.

Already, the neatly spaced out metropolis was giving way to a line of verdant hills as they powered north at two thousand feet, the aircraft shuddering slightly as it knifed through some updrafts from the rising terrain. The top of the escarpment that separated downtown Arendelle City from uptown Arendelle City was dotted with sprawling estates in a clash of styles and colours, all connected via a network of well-maintained roads with the occasional luxury hovercraft speeding along. Neatly manicured lawns, gardens and grand houses stretched from the ocean facing edge of the hills to much further inland. There was a wide variety in sizes of the estates and houses sitting on them of course, but to have a presence here was to place you in a very select group of people.

Formally called 'Mid-Arendelle City', to the locals it was simply 'Royal Ridge', the home of most of the planets senior nobility. Kai had visited most of the estates he could see out the window over the years of his service to the family at least once, be it accompanying the late Duke or Duchess on formal visits, or occasionally being sent to deliver a message on behalf of the new Duchess presumptive as her official representative. The majority of the local nobility were good people; loyal to the planet and Federated Commonwealth, with some of the families able to trace a direct line on-planet back to before the Star League. Others had only been granted a landhold in the last few years before the tragic death of the previous rulers, but were no less loyal for that lack of history.

But no matter how smoothly a planet was run however, there were always pains in the neck who it was his job to deal with, every now and again.
He smiled in amusement as he briefly spotted one overly grand and rather tastelessly garish building in the distance, recognizing it as the Forbes estate. That family, whose patriarch had been a Colonel in the Crucis Lancers killed in the 3039 war, had been forever pestering the Jorgensson family, trying to set up a match between Elsa or Anna and their son James. An absurd brat of a boy whose mother so doted on him that he had been spoiled to a point of being a genuine menace to polite society. Kai felt his smile widen into a fully-fledged grin as he recalled the day over three years ago when the Duchess and Duke had finally granted them the honour of having Anna over for lunch to silence their never ending requests for attention, thinking that a harmless pro-forma lunch would meet their social obligations without giving any lead on that might be taken the wrong way.

The boy's mother however was rather blindly taken with her notion that her 'perfect' son and Anna would be a spectacular match. So much so that she had insisted that he show her around the gardens for a while before lunch was served, sure that it would be 'love at first sight'. And without his mother present to mediate his more … impulsive thoughts, the brat of a boy entirely convinced of his own superiority had made the mistake of trying to flatter Anna by comparing her—in a positive way to be fair— to 'that crazy sister of yours locked up on the other side of the planet'.

Luckily, the resulting broken nose and corrective plastic surgery had been hushed up quite successfully to keep it out of the public spotlight, although it had taken some creative press work to explain why Anna had suddenly vanished for a month without having to use the word 'grounded'.

Not that it had stopped her from being considered a hero in the upper circle of society who silently detested the woman and her son as entirely unworthy of the late Colonels good name.

Idly tracking the estate as it vanished out of view, Kai wondered what would happen if that idiot of a boy ran into Anna at the investment, making a mental note to make sure it didn't happen. As amusing as it would be for Anna to deck him again, it was not the image Arendelle needed to present when a large amount of the Inner Sphere was watching them.

Soon enough however the band of estates perched on top of the ridge were past and the helicopter started a shallow descent, skyscrapers reappearing under them for a time before being replaced by the gleaming shimmer of the waters of Arendelle City Harbor. The docks that serviced commercial vessels were mostly now filled with long range cruise ships that had been brought in as short term hotel accommodation. Vast numbers of people had arrived in Arendelle City from across not just the planet, but the March and beyond and space was at a premium, with most hotels booked out for over a year now, with close to a million extra people in the city to witness the event and join in the celebrations. Descending as they lost speed, he saw another double line of cruise ships anchored in the middle of the harbour, a flotilla of smaller ships ferrying people to and from the shores - many of them bringing load after load of tourists to the North side where they hovered just offshore to let them take as many photos as they wanted.

And it was not hard to see why. Because straddling a peninsula that divided the Northern edge of the harbor from the Jorgensson fjord beyond that marked the absolute limits of Arendelle City, was a Castle.

Vastly grander in scope and size than the 'Castles' some nobles had built on Royal Ridge, the Jorgensson Family Residence and Duchy Palace sat on the location the very first explorers from the Terran Alliance had set foot on the planet over eight hundred years ago— or so the legends said. Four great walls enclosed a substantial central residence and a number of lesser buildings, all modelled after those dating from the 19th century on Terra. Bright pinions in green and purple fluttered from poles along the walls and turrets on the corners of said walls, while the Flag of the Federated Suns flew proudly from a steeple that rose from the roof of the main keep. A grand courtyard sat inside the walls behind the main gate, with capacity to easily hold thousands of people. Although he could not see it from this angle as their helicopter made a long turn bleeding off speed, he knew hundreds of workers were busy there putting the final touches in place for the reception tomorrow evening after the investment that would take place there, and the ball following it.

Around the perimeter of the Castle were expansive gardens and lawns, the private 'backyard' of
the Jorgensson family fronting the Ocean to the West, the Fjord to the North, Harbour to the South and hills to the East. Yet further to the East beyond the outer perimeter fence were tens of thousands of acres that also belonged to the Jorgensson family, but by tradition were maintained for and open to the public. Any number of well-maintained sporting fields, picnic areas and parklands, play areas and open air amphitheatres were scattered through the lower areas, with biking, riding and walking trails snaking their way up into the hills for those so inclined for more energetic activity. And even from this distance, Kai could see thousands of people enjoying the afternoon sun across the range, revelling in the festive atmosphere across the planet as the eve of the Investment fell upon them all…

The VTOL jerked as it pulled into a hard braking turn, jolting him out of his train of thought as the window crashed into his forehead. Kai again mentally glared through the forward bulkhead at the militia pilot as he rubbed at his head in annoyance, knowing that the pilot would never have dared flown so aggressively if either the Duchess or Regent was on board. But he kept his peace and settled himself as the nimble craft flared, drifting over the fjord briefly to align on the private helicopter pad inside the castle walls, easing down to land nary a jolt. Less than a minute later, he was out of the vehicle, walking briskly along the elevated walkway from the landing pad to the polished glass and steel doors into the palace.

"Welcome back" Gerda greeted him as the doors slid silently shut behind him, cutting off the thunder of the helicopter as it spun down. Kai nodded in return, not missing the brief look of disappointment on her face as she saw he was alone, but like he, Gerda was far too well trained to do more than that as she fell into step beside him, the two flashing their IDs at the guards who in turn nodded and opened the doors into the palace itself for them.

Polished wooden walls painted a vivid royal scarlet dominated the interior of the castle, with gold diamond patterns inlaid through it, all polished to a high sheen. Replica suits of ancient armour from the medieval ages stood like silent sentries alongside high quality oil paintings of past members of the Royal Family and Davion Family on the walls. Ancient looking swords and standards were liberally spread through the corridors, making it look as close to a genuine 19th century castle as it was possible for something constructed in the 2400s or there about.

Of course, occasional anachronisms such as the oil painting of old Duke Huffington's battlemaster all gunsblazing defiance during his last stand in 2930 may have greatly confused someone from the 19th century. But at least such disruptions were done tastefully.

"I see our Girl is still wearing her heart on her sleeve" Greda spoke up as soon as the doors closed behind them.

"You were watching I take it?" he smiled as they turned past the music room, where Anna had adorably spent so many years as a child talking to various paintings.

Sad, of course, when you knew the full reasons why. But adorable none the less.

"Prince Victor's arrival was carried on channels Two, Nine and Ten, live" Greda laughed lightly. "If anyone had somehow managed to forget about Anna, they won't be doing anything but talking about her for the rest of the day".

"I just wish I could have gotten Elsa to talk about her - with her" Kai sighed as they bypassed the grand -but exhausting- spiral staircase next to the main entrance, in favour of a carefully concealed elevator built into the wall next to it. "Anna, bless her soul, volunteered to take Victor on a tour on Arendelle before heading to her hotel room".

"A pity … but perhaps it's for the best".

"Oh?" he asked curiously looking at the other. Greda had been nothing if not enthusiastic for this idea of getting the girls in the same room today, well before they were due to come face to face with each other tomorrow.

"Please Kai, even from here I could see that Anna was high as a kite" Greda sighed. "I strongly suspect someone fed her chocolate on top of the stress of coming back home. I'd like to think the two of them would be able to sit down together and carefully, shyly feel each other out and take
the first steps of reconnecting with each other … but with Anna in the mood she is in?" The other shook her head once. "Perhaps we were being too clever".

"You might have a point" Kai conceded as the doors opened on the first floor. Most of the Castles first floor was given over to running the planetary administration - now unoccupied and locked down. The Regent had made the choice instead to work from the central Government complex downtown for various reasons, and on his frequent 'working visits' to the Castle had taken to using a small office next to the presumptive duchesses private library - come study - on the third floor, leaving the first floor silent and more or less empty, excepting the small suite of offices the small permanent household staff used.

"Anna did say she was a little overwhelmed at the events of the day" Kai continued his response to Gredas observation as he led the way through the one corner of the floor still occupied and active, nodding at the few staff up here and not running around the grounds frantically trying to coordinate everything. "And however she ran into the Prince between disembarking her dropship and the VIP lounge, it's not terribly surprising that she could have been rather taken aback at the enormity of such an unexpected encounter".

"She's clearly her Mothers daughter" Greda laughed fondly as she followed him towards his private office. "Crashing into people and places she has no right to be and causing everyone to just fall in love with her".

"True" Kai smiled as he unlocked his office and opened the door. "I suppose in the end, what's done is done". Crossing his office, he approached the painting on the left hand wall as Greda closed the door behind them. It was a gift from the late Duchess he treasured above all others; one of the last genuine family portraits that had been commissioned of the family together, so many years ago before Elsa had left. Future portraits had of course been commissioned, but they had been discreetly done by artists piecing together two different photos, generally of one parent with one child, painted then to look like a seamless 'real' picture of them all together.

Here however, the Duchess and Duke were smiling at him in their formal robes, a five year old Elsa looking incredibly prim, proper and regal - yet happy sitting next to her Father. While little Anna grinned mischievously from her Mother's lap in a way that suggested she was plotting and scheming something – most probably to do with the Castle cookie supply.

And as always, he couldn't help but feel a pang of gentle regret at the happy group, before he reached out and carefully swung the painting away on hidden hinges.

Only five people knew about this safe behind the portrait.

And only two people the combination to it.

With practiced hands he spun the combination wheels backwards and forwards until the locks released with a dull clunk and grunting slightly at the weight, he swung the door open.

Reaching into his suits interior vest pocket, Kai pulled out a small holodisk labelled 'For Anna and Elsa', pausing for several long moments before firmly placing it back inside the safe, locking it up securely once again and restoring the picture to its rightful place.

Soon enough, surely, he would remove it once again and hand it off. But not today.

He and Greda then got down to business, going through the checklists for the rather eventful day tomorrow, following up status reports and double checking everything on the list had been accounted for and confirmed as good to go. This event had been a year in the planning – and carefully laid out plans had been thrown into minor chaos with the surprise revelation that the New Avalon representative was Victor Steiner-Davion, now Lord of the entire Crucis March. But everyone had rallied together well to deal with it and they were more or less back on schedule. Greda had to leave to go and chase up the team setting up the 'lesser' banquet in the grand courtyard, something about ten thousand salad plates causing great confusion and Kai went through the last reports on his own, pleased to see that despite Anna's dynamic changes, everything was proceeding just about as well as could be expected.
By the time he finished making the last calls he needed the sun had traced its way across the sky to be quite low on the horizon, filling the palace with a muted orange glow. He had been keeping an eye on the clock and at Five Twenty he stood and gathered the last of his folders that needed to be actioned by a higher power, walking briskly – but not hurriedly- back to the elevator to rise to the second floor.

Security was much tighter up here, with the lift opening to face a fortified guard station. He was of course recognised on site, but the guards none the less carefully checked his ID before scanning him through. Every access point to the castle was secured guards, with a quick response team set up in the security building. There were more guards on the second floor and all of them were backed up by an extensive array of security and surveillance systems. The palace was hardly fortified to the standard of Castle Avalon or The Triad of course, but even the MIIO agents who had swept the place had been grudgingly approving of the security arrangements in place.

Not that it had stopped them from insisting on bringing in two additional rapid response teams with heavy weapons, six additional roving patrols and a sniper unit for the duration of the Princes stay over the rest of the week after tomorrow evenings ball when he would move into one of the luxurious guest buildings behind the palace.

Kai had however firmly put his foot down on the idea of stationing Battlemechs at the Castle entrances backed with heavy armour – no matter how polished up to look entirely ceremonial they would be. And he had point blank refused to turn the families private estate into an RCT bivouac, no matter how well behaved they were.

It had taken more than a few arguments with Agent Curaitis but eventually he had bargained the man down to the relocation of the dropship Barbarossa to the private landing pad just outside the Castle walls, where the 10ths command lance of Battlemechs as well as its Jump Infantry and Battle Armour contingents could remain on standby, as well as providing a convenient secure command post if anything did happen.

Or fast escape off-world, should it prove absolutely necessary.

The whole exercise was both amusing and exasperating in the sheer paranoia of the ISB team overseeing the alphabet soup of agencies and units looking after the Princes safety. But all he could do was try to endure it until they left at the end of the week, knowing full well if he dug his heels in too much they could always call up New Avalon and get authority to overrule his. Something they were clearly loathe to do, as such interplanetary fights between New Avalon and the worlds of the Federated Suns only caused bigger problems down the road, but if they thought he was genuinely compromising their charges safety …

Pragmatism was a very valuable skill for someone in his position. As was picking your fights.

"Good afternoon Kai" the private secretary sitting outside the library doors greeted him as he entered the luxuriously appointed antechamber to the private library come study. The woman sitting at the desk there glance at her computer terminal only briefly, consulting whatever scheduling program was running there before looking back up to nod and gesture at the elegant oaken door next to her. "You can go right in".

"Thankyou Vanessa" he inclined his head in turn, settling himself and relaxing into his formal role as he stepped up to the doors, pausing for a moment to look at his reflection in a conveniently placed mirror and ensuring it was perfect, before stepping up and knocking twice firmly. A faint voice from the other side bid him to enter and he did so, closing the doors behind him before he turned to face the far side of the room, bowing to the figure sitting at the desk there with an ease of long practice.

"Good evening Duchess".

Convoy SD-Alpha
Arendelle City
Crucis March
"Death by Chocolate. This has possibilities".

"How so?"

"Well … I doubt we'd find as much enjoyment at a shop named 'Death by vivisection' Galen"

Galen Cox rolled his eyes at Kais quip as he hauled himself out the door after the agile young Liao to join Anna on the pavement as Victor followed behind him in turn. Glancing around past the CID agents already in place, he saw a number of afternoon shoppers staring with a mixture of curiosity and growing excitement at the hoard of black vans, police vehicles and light tanks that had suddenly descended upon this part of the city like an invasion force. Galen had in fact half expected hundreds of agents to materialize and form a hard perimeter, sweeping the shop in question and politely kicking everyone out until they were finished – he guessed that was his military training talking- but Curaitis was surprisingly subtle, keeping only the same half a dozen agents around them and using the local police to enforce a soft perimeter a dozen meters each side of them beyond that.

Of course, it went without saying that the two relatively harmless looking transport minibuses in the convoy with the convoy were in fact packed full of MIIO commandos, ready to respond in an instant should something happen. Backed up by the Groundhog escort vehicles –now there was a monument to mission creep- and an unknown number of 'Waldos' skulking about on various nearby rooftops on overwatch, plus probably an unholy amount of sensor technology…

Victor was in fact anything but lightly protected, appearances notwithstanding.

"So, Anna" Galen commented as he glanced around through the slow build-up of curious onlookers. "Walk me through this; what do we have to work with here?"

"Well, *everything* you can think of" the young woman beamed with her unquenchable energy as Victor joined them. "They've got about a *million* different types of ice cream, chocolates, drinks, cakes, biscuits; you name it, they have it! I must have spent an hour or two here every month when I was younger, before I left for Corona..." she continued, her gaze going distant for a moment before snapping back to the here and now. "Come on, I'll show you!" she said and like that she was off, half skipping, half running, half seeming to fly across from them and vanishing into the shop, in between blinks.

"Question" Kai put as soon as Anna had vanished into the store. "What kind of threat assessment should we be running on the idea of Anna getting hit with a sugar high?"

Several worried glances were exchanged among the assembled nobility at that idea…and Galen would have taken an oath that he saw some of the CID agents in close proximity seem to ever so slightly flinch at the comments as well, no matter how much they would certainly deny it. Anna was delightfully excitable to be sure. All of them had needed to work very hard to suppress the urge to laugh at the sight of her bouncing with excitement on the limos seat during their drive into the city until she had realized what she was doing and fought to control herself. Before two minutes later she had started to play, with an almost childlike fascination, with the holographic windows that could be turned at the touch of a finger into a TV or computer display with perfect opacity; yet more Star League technology NAIS had painstakingly recreated.

She was so charmingly open and unreserved, happy and utterly fearless in presenting herself. So completely unlike the typically ultra-reserved members of the courts he had seen in his time with Victor on Tharkad, New Avalon and Outreach…

But the thought of pumping a whole load of highly refined sugar into the girl…

"Well if I had to guess" Galen posited carefully after some consideration, "given her clear love of chocolate she may have built up an immunity over the years to the point that it'll have absolutely no effect. Or..."
“Or?” Victor prodded with a raised eyebrow as he trailed off with a slight frown.

“You remember that vid from Defiance that was all the rage with the RCT about, oh, six months back?”

“…You mean the one with the Triple Strength Myomer Atlas prototype picking up a Locust and using it as a club to beat another Locust to death?”

“Yeah, that one. Worst case, we’ll need a lance of those to try and hold her down. Emphasis on try”.

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Downtown Confectionary Solutions INC – trading as 'Death by Chocolate'
Arendelle City
Crucis March
Federated Commonwealth
May 09 – 3053

The door to 'Death by Chocolate' was somewhat old fashioned – at least when compared to most of the gleaming glass and steel shopfronts that dotted this part of the city. The entrance was a somewhat worn looking wooden frame with frosted glass that swung open not automatically, but when Anna carefully took the handle and pushed. An adorable little squeaking from the hinges mixed with a charming old fashioned bell set into the frame announced her entrance as she stepped inside into the cool air, a thousand aromas that mixed into something unique at once causing a sudden surge of memories to blossom in the back of her mind.

'Death by Chocolate' had been something she had missed on Corona. She'd admitted that she might have a chocolate problem —grudgingly- to Rapunzel, who had at once taken on the duty of glaring at her if she ever drifted too close to such treats at various state functions. But honestly, while the chocolate on Corona was quite good, it just … seemed to lack a certain something of the stuff made on Arendelle.

Or perhaps, it wasn't so much the chocolate itself she missed.

Death by Chocolate was ultimately more than an excellent purveyor of coco based products; it was really just another of the precious few things of her Sisters that she could hold onto in some small way. One of the last things she and Elsa had.

It had all started when they had visited the shop as a surprise treat. On her sisters Birthday.

It had been a huge mistake in hindsight from their parents perspective; supercharging the two girls into an explosion of uncontrollable activity for the rest of the day as they raced like hyperactive gazelles around the castle thanks to all the sugar they had consumed, utterly ignoring every command to slow down and calm down. Several hours of this had been followed by an incredible tantrum as the 'hit' had worn off, even from the normally placid Elsa … followed by them all but dropping dead together in the playroom from exhaustion without warning.

A quiet covenant had been made between their parents and the staff who had needed to clean up the mess that night; that they would never, ever do that again.

Although they had made small orders now and again, rationing out the treats very carefully. It had in fact been this chocolate they both so loved that Anna had tried to use to lure Elsa out from her room, slipping it under the door with the letters she had managed to sneak past the staff, hoping that she would remember how much fun they had had that day…

She had never gotten any direct response … but neither had the chocolate come back. And after Elsa had moved away to the chateau on the other side of the planet, her parents had regularly taken her on more carefully supervised trips to the store. Where she had been allowed to sample some small amount … but far more critically to her; she had been actually allowed —given the duty- of picking out a box or select an offering from the wide selection, to be sent with her parents … to Elsa.
From her. Not from her parents, not from the palace, but from her.

In the end … it was one of the few things she had left. Her parents had always told her about Elsa, what she was doing, how she was going, what she was doing and so on – although Elsa herself had been extremely distant. All the letters, birthday cards, presents Anna forced into the hands of whichever one was going out to spend time with her … of all of them, the chocolate was somehow the most important. Because her parents would always tell her what Elsa had thought of this variety and strange as it was, it was one of the few ways she ever got feedback from them.

'Oh she loved it dear, she went through most of it on that first night!'

'Tm sorry Anna, but she didn't really like it that much – but she did have quite a bit of it. She just said that the flavour wasn't really her thing'

'She couldn't put it down –we had to take it away from her!'

'I don't know how you can pick them so well Anna, she loved it!'

'No, you're not sending her more of that one. She ate so much so quick she felt ill. Then she ate more!'

It sounded rather pathetic now that she thought about it … but in the end, it was almost all she had of her sister.

Well that and she did love chocolate just as much mind you.

"Oh my Lord…" an older woman's voice breathed and Anna's head snapped up as she broke out of her introspection. There were a decent number of people inside the shop sitting down at the tables scattered around and enjoying a coffee and a treat – although a half dozen of them had noticed the activity outside and glanced up curiously at her before looking away, clearly not recognizing who she was. But that was fine with her.

One person however clearly had recognized her and yet again today, she felt her spirits lift as the somewhat heavyset but surprisingly swift dark skinned woman hurried out from behind her counter towards her.

"Hello Rita" Anna said happily, bracing herself as the much older, much bigger woman crashed into her and threw her arms around her, lifting her off the ground as she straightened. Anna coughed slightly, wondering in sudden alarm if this was how Kai had felt when she had all but tackled him, but just rolled with it with a smile as the other put her back down again and stepped back.

"I didn't expect to see you for at least a day" the other smiled.

"Well you know" she replied with a smile in her voice matching the one on her face. "We all need to keep our priorities straight".

The other laughed, unabashedly. Rita O'Connell was not just the very best chocolate cook on the entire planet, but yet another of the few people Anna had ever felt comfortable being herself with. Anna in fact strongly suspected she knew how much she missed her sister and what the chocolate purchases meant, indulging her visits with incredible patience and kindness and letting her test the various chocolates with an intense concentration other adults may have scoffed at. More than once she had even stayed open after trading hours for her to show up, when her days had been busy with various official duties, all without complaint and indeed, firmly rejecting any notion of compensation for doing so, or any of the major perks openly being associated with the royal family could offer.

She had done it just because she was a good person. And Anna again felt almost overwhelmed at the moment of reconnection.

"I take it you enjoyed the truffles at your suite in the spaceport?" the other smiled broadly.
"Oh God they were incredible – wait" she suddenly stopped as her brain caught up with the comment, looking up into the others face in slight confusion. "Those … those were yours?"

"Of course they were Child" the other laughed again. "Did you think your sister would send you anything but the best?"

The statement hit her like the fist of an Assault Mech and Anna's mouth, for once, opened and closed several times without saying anything as her mind reeled.

Elsa … Elsa had sent those?

For her?

"She placed the order yesterday, with very specific instructions about which ones to send – called me herself" the other continued, clearly not noticing the sudden and slightly abnormal paralysis of the young woman in front of her as her attention drifted past her to the front of the store where more and more people had walked up to the windows to study the commotion outside. "It was very nice to hear from her after all these years, she sounds so much like your mother …"

Anna tried to push past the pure overwhelming shock of the revelation as Rita edged around her to get a better look out the window at the chaos outside. Taking advantage of the older woman's distraction, Anna closed her eyes and took a deep breath, fighting past the sudden beating of her heart to hold it and then very slowly let it out, willing away the surge of fanatic confused emotions at the same time, a technique she had painfully learned through the darkest days on Corona when her despair had threatened to overwhelm her.

Elsa … Elsa had personally organized those chocolates. For her.

It was almost … almost like a tentative gesture from her distant sister, putting a toe into a bath to test the waters. Shy, cautious and ever so careful, cringing as if expecting the water to burn you…

Small steps Anna. One after the other.

It appeared that her sister had gotten similar advice to that her uncle had given her. And Anna couldn't help but smile, fighting back the sudden urge to snuffle at the emotion coursing through her, touched in a way she had not been touched for a very long time by the simple gesture, instead again focusing in on her breathing.

In … and out.

In … and out.

The bell set into the door rang again cheerfully as she finally mastered herself and Anna belatedly remembered exactly where she was and who she was with, whirling around. Two black suited members of the protection detail entered the shop, their eyes sweeping like targeting sensors as they moved forward. They wore friendly expressions and nodded to the customers who looked curiously at them, but took in everything as they moved in, fanning out; one raising his sleeve to his face and muttering 'Clear' as he glided across towards the far wall to watch the door into the kitchen.

"Child, what is going on outside?" Rita asked, a bewildered expression spreading across her face. Anna opened her mouth to explain – but any explanations was then rendered entirely redundant as the door that had almost swung closed again rung open … and Victor Steiner Davion walked in, followed closely by Kai Allard Liao and Galen Cox.

"Oh Good Lord" Rita whispered as a wave of gasps, choked coughs and spittakes from people eating and drinking exploded across the room.

"Don't mind us" Victor smiled and waved everyone down as half of the store started to get to their feet after the moment of shock. "We're just here to investigate what the Duchesses Sister here" and he gestured at her, which of course started a whole new wave of faces snapping around to stare in surprise at her, "insists is the that this is the greatest single chocolate store on the planet".
"Rita" Anna stated with a gentle broad smile as she looked at the stunned woman, "this is Victor Steiner-Davion" she gestured at the March Lord, who inclined his head in a friendly way, as if it was possible that she or anyone else in the room didn't know who he was. "And Kai Allard Liao from Saint Ives" she then pointed out the man next to him who offered a friendly wave "and Galen Cox of the 10th Lyran Guards" who smiled and nodded, but said nothing as he neatly stepped around them and made for the counter, studying the menus on the with a rather keen look on his face, one additional bodyguard discreetly stepping in behind them to stand near the door as it closed.

"My word" Rita composed herself. "Welcome all! I apologise if Anna is such an addict for my work that she hijacked your convoy to get here".

Anna felt her cheeks redden at that slightly and a gentle chuckle went around the room, but she almost imperiously lifted her head up, daring the blush to even try to spread further…

"Anna has been nothing but a pleasure to be with today" Victor assured the other. "Now, she was saying something about -"

"Hey, check this out!" Galen suddenly broke in and Anna turned to see him excitedly studying a selection of things inside the glass topped counter. Victor shrugged and the group started to move over, Rita herself taking the chance to disengage and move back behind her counter to regain her composure as conversation started back up in whispers and murmurs around them.

"No. Way" Kai muttered as he stepped up next to Galen, his eyes going wide as he looked down into the display cabinet. "Chocolate Mechs?"

Indeed, inside she could see dozens of brown miniature Battlemechs packaged in neat plastic boxes, terraced to be easily visible, a miniature army of them. Anna moved up behind them with Victor, squeezing between the other two men as all three almost pressed their faces into the glass, all of the sudden looking less like living legends … and more like kids in a candy shop.

Which … was oddly appropriate come to think of it.

"Enforcer, Valkyrie, Jaggermech, Archer … Gods, look at the detail on these miniatures … edible miniatures" Kai added as he leaned in. "We've got to tell the rest of the RCT about this place. I'm definitely taking the Centurion".

"I've got the Victor" the Prince put in, explaining with slight embarrassment when she asked that no, the AFFC had not named a Mech after him, but that he had piloted one during the first year of the Clan invasion thank you very much - before Jamie Wolf had given him a Clan Mech to help fight the enemy on even terms.

"Well I guess I'll have to take the Crusader" Galen tapped on the glass after some consideration. "Hey, are those nuts in the LRM racks?"

"Hazelnut dearie" Rita confirmed as she carefully pulled the Mechs out one by one.

"Sweeeeeeet" Galen grinned before turning to her. "So Anna, how about you?"

"Uh, I don't know" Anna blinked, taken slightly aback. Granted, she loved chocolate, but … she wasn't into and didn't really get the whole Cult of the Mechwarrior that seemed to be all the higher level nobility of the Federated Suns talked about some days at various banquets or balls.

"But … we can't have a Lance" and Kai gestured at the three chocolate BattleMechs standing on the counter, "with only three Mechs" Galen protested with a frown.

"It's just not done" Kai confirmed with a sage nod. "Very bad karma".

"And think of the stories you can tell, of the time you were part of the Archon-Princes command Lance…" Galen pointed out, looking down at the array of figures. "Well, until you dispossessed yourself eating your own Mech anyway".

"Oh alight" Anna sighed, not exactly needing a huge amount of convincing – they did look
delicious after all as she stepped up and study the different designs, not having much of a clue …

"Um…what about that one?" she said tapping the glass over one Mech that looked … precocious.

"The Urbanmech?" Galen wondered and Rita reached in to the cabinet to tap lightly on the box, causing Anna to screw her face up slightly in a frown.

"Uch, no, that one looks like a walking trash can" she dismissed it as she leaned in closer. "I mean the one to the right of it".

"Ah, the Locust" Victor nodded as Rita retrieved it and placed it next to the other three. "A hyperactive recon 'Mech that appears and vanishes between blinks and is the devil to try and keep up with. Somehow that seems … appropriate. And now we have a Light to go with the Medium, Heavy and Assault, so that works too"

Anna couldn’t help but blush slightly at the description of the 'Mech – which was clearly directed at her from the man she had almost put flat on his back earlier in the day. But she took the remark in good humour as the Mechs were carefully packed away and they quickly moved to look at other items. Rita brought out a handful of samples and to her slightly smug happiness, she saw that the three men were actually taken aback slightly at how good it was, instantly placing an order for several boxes to take with them – and promising to pick up a few more when they left the planet.

From what she understood from Galen’s repeated comments, the food aboard their military jumpship was not exactly the top of the line stuff one might have expected.

Soon enough they were ready. Galen and Kai hefted their bags full of confectionary while she carefully balanced her own extensive purchases on one arm, while balancing the drinks tray on the other. None of them seemed to want to touch the extensive supply of alcohol in the limo but it was rather warm outside, the men ordering Iced Coffees while she had gone with an Iced Chocolate frappe. Victor meanwhile was happily talking to the crowd under the watchful eye of his bodyguards, signing autographs for a few people and even posing for a picture with one of the groups who had been lucky enough to have a camera with them, said group earning hidden glares from all the other guests in the shop.

Finally it was time to leave. Anna freely and easily promised Rita that she would visit soon, thanking her for the chocolates at the starport before carefully easing out. Victor was gallant enough to hold open the door for her, earning a smile – that was probably caught on a TV camera she realized to her mild dismay when she stepped outside to find that the local crowd had expanded significantly with a number of TV cameras pointed at her like a firing line. Still kept safely away by the police line and less subtle threat posed by the pulse laser array on the Groundhog, but focused on the door no doubt with long range lenses fixed and filming.

Well, we wanted to give the Scandelvids something to go crazy over she giggled silently to herself as she walked to the limo and in that moment as she exchanged a look with Victor, seeing the mirth in his eyes, she knew he had had the exact same thought.

Laughing lightly with him for that second, they crossed the short walk to the door of the limo, Victor smiling and waving while Kai and Galen lug their purchases, humorously complaining that they had been reduced to minions carrying Victors shopping before they all piled in and the miniature army got underway.

Government House
Arendelle City
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Victor checked his reflection in the polished mirror that made up the back wall of the elevator one last time as it rose towards the top floor of Government House. Fortunately, the ultra-high quality suit from the finest tailors on Tharkad was living up to its reputation, looking as fresh as it had
when he put it on in the morning.

The face above it though…

Victor frowned slightly, pulling out a compact comb from his suit's pocket and hastily running it through his hair, nodding at the result as he put it back. Anna… was an incredibly charming girl, but by the Gods was it work to keep up with her once she started moving!

But then again, he wouldn't have traded the time he had spent with her today for anything.

After picking up their supplies of chocolate, Anna had directed their convoy to the Arendelle City botanical gardens. Several city blocks worth of lush vegetation secured behind both a solid wall and a heavy tree line. The gardens were technically closed while city staff prepared luxury marquee tents for a number of luncheon functions scheduled to take place on the wide lawns during the investment, but the security guards on the gate had been understandably disinclined to argue with either the absolute authority of the people in the convoy or the excessive firepower of their escorts and had opened the gates at once.

Then closed them in the face of the media pack who had tried to follow them in.

The security teams had deployed to make a quick sweep, but there was no presence or threat in the secluded corner of the gardens that Anna had directed them to. Almost before they had stopped, Anna had burst from the Limo in excitement, skipping across to a small pond in the shadow of a number of low trees, the trio of Mechwarriors following in continuing bemusement. They had found the young woman moment later kneeling and holding her hands out towards a flock of impossibly cute ducklings warded by a pair of much larger ducks. To Victor's disbelief, three of the tiny yellow birds had at once jumped up into her hand quacking happily, as the rest frolicked around her, Anna happily insisting that they were the descendants of one 'Mister Quack'; a duck she had apparently known for many many years from her early childhood in this park.

And that the duckling 'grandkids' clearly knew their 'Aunt Anna'.

Kai, equally bewildered and perhaps even slightly disbelieving had boldly moved forward and lowered his own hands carefully towards the ducklings in an attempt to duplicate her actions – only to snatch it back with a yelp as Mother Duck had rounded and lunged, trying to bite his fingers off in anger at his intrusion, quaking rather loudly in indignation. The legendary son of the legendary Justin Allard, hero of the Clan War and all around terror on the field of battle had rapidly put a considerable distance between the birds and himself, while Anna had simply frowned and asked Kai to please not be mean to the cute little ducks.

Victor had cracked up at that point; laughing alongside Galen as Kai had shot them a somewhat wounded look, complaining that the damn things had to have been talking to Jade Falcons and said Falcons had been clearly telling highly biased stories about his attitude towards birds in general.

Soon enough however, Anna had carefully returned the ducklings and the flock had carried on, all of them waddling to the pond and vanishing around the corner of the bank.

The Limo, as befitting the personal transport of a Successor State Lord or their family, was well stocked and soon enough a small rug had been found to unfold on the ground and a number of sandwiches broken out from the even better stocked refrigerator to supplement their excellent drinks and chocolate. It had been a pleasant afternoon and the group had made the most of it, Victor for one finding the fresh air, good food, sunshine and company extremely endearing after spending most of a month stuck in space breathing canned air and eating canned food in microgravity.

More than that, he had spent the time just being Victor. No Prince Victor, not Colonel Victor nor March Lord Victor. They had talked about entirely inconsequential things, Anna cheerfully swapping stories with them as all of them had 'hung up' their ranks and titles off to the side, isolated and alone under the shade of the ferns in this part of the garden. It was increasingly rare for him to be able to do so – even in the AFFC as an officer there were walls and boundaries he couldn't cross. And it wasn't as if Hohiro or Kai … or Omi … came around terribly often. So
finding someone like Anna who could so casually see past the dropship sized baggage he carried around with his endless list of titles …

Well, if he gained nothing else from this visit to Arendelle that alone would make the tip worthwhile.

Soon enough however the real world had returned in full force. He had an appointment with the planetary regent to formally discharge his office which was hardly something he could put off – not with the Duchess Presumptive due to take up the powers tomorrow! And so, with some slight reluctance as the sun had slowly moved towards the horizon, he had finally declared that it was time to get moving again.

And to be fair, he wasn’t the only one with plans for the afternoon

Marshal Jackson Davion had tagged a team from the Inspector General's office onto his bodyguard unit at some point without bothering to tell him, with orders to perform an inspection of the local militia under the aegis of the 10th. Apparently the bi-yearly audit of the militia was long overdue, having been put off during the sheer chaos of the Clan Invasion and subsequent restructuring and rebuilding the AFFC was still undergoing. And as far as High Command was concerned, if he was going out here anyway, surely he could do a quick spot check for the Inspector General?

Galen however had been suspiciously quick to put his hand up and take on the role as supervising officer of the audit. Frankly, Victor had more than a sneaking suspicion that he had done so only to have a clear fall-back position of ‘important work’ to retreat to if Victor threatened to pull him into any more luncheons or balls over the next week, other than those strictly necessary to attend.

Which really said it all about what Galen thought of these kind of social obligations; audits were the kind of thankless data shuffling most front line officers dreaded.

Still it was important work. No-one was expecting Tortuga to invade anytime soon or anything, but the strategic situation on-planet was changing quickly. Within five years Arendelle would be an exporter of some of the most sought after materials in known space – and the planet was dangerously under protected, with barely two companies of light 'Mechs, a couple of tank battalions and a few regiments of mechanized infantry on the books to cover over a billion people across the planet – far too little to cover a competent hit-hold-run raid by pirates.

There was already talk in the pipeline about substantially upgrading the Militia - perhaps by founding a Regional Training Battalion on-planet or perhaps even upgrading the Militia to a full March Militia RCT – but before any money was put on the table, High Command wanted to be sure of what they had to work with.

Paper assets looked nice on the books, but were surprisingly less than helpful in a real fight.

Kai on the other hand wasn’t here for work per se; he was just eager to ‘get out and stretch his legs'.

By which of course he meant Yen-Lo-Wang’s.

Fort Akershus where most of the mixed battalion would be bunking down, like most such installations had a fully functional training range that mixed holographic overlay technology with dummy units and sensor ghosts to create a quite effective training ground for Mechwarriors and Tankers. The announcement that Kai was going to 'take a walk' over there in the later afternoon had naturally been forwarded to the Militia, whose members were suddenly finding any number of reasons to be on-base this afternoon.

Victor had of course realized that such an official-unofficial event would be an excellent excuse for an 'icebreaker' where the 10th could meet some of the local soldiers and mingle – and in the informal atmosphere the elite members of the 10th would be ideally placed to get an impression of the unit – determine if they were toy soldiers in it for the uniform, or genuine professionals who took their job seriously, so he had encouraged his officers to make it an 'official - unofficial' event.
A pair of staff cars from the 10th had been waiting at the Grand Arendelle hotel when the convoy had arrived and soon enough both men were on their way to entertain themselves, leaving him alone.

Because Anna too had had own plans.

Which were to have no plans.

He had extended her an invitation to dinner, noting that it was entirely appropriate for her to join him at a dinner hosted by the planets expatriate Free Rasalhague Republic community. Victor had been mildly surprised to find that there were very strong cultural links between many worlds of the FRR and Arendelle – the two sharing a common heritage dating back to Terra that had never been forgotten. The Clan invasion had generated a flood of refugees seeking a new home – and Arendelle, a long way from the Clan OZ had seemed a natural choice for hundreds of thousands of the more wealthy citizens with the resources to flee the Wolves and Ghost Bears. The dinner was yet another political event as much as anything else, letting the FedCom show its support for the rather brutalized nation that had all but been swallowed up by the Clans – and no doubt a great many of them would take the opportunity to try and feel him out for more military support for their homeland.

He really would have liked to have Anna around to run interference for him, with Galen off terrifying some poor duty officer expecting a quiet night and Kai showing the locals exactly why he had become the Jade Falcons bogyman.

Anna however had declined, saying that she already had plans to have a quiet late afternoon, followed by a quiet dinner in her room, just wanting to rest up for tomorrow. In fact she had been almost profusely apologetic, as if worried he would order her imprisoned for daring to turn down an invitation to dinner as she had insisted that of course if he really wanted her to come she of course would…

It had taken him almost ninety seconds to finally break through her machine gun like chattering to assure her that it was perfectly fine and that he was in no way insulted.

Gods that girl could talk!

Then, in probably the most amusing twist to the day thus far –and with Anna raising the bar every twenty minutes that was saying something- Anna had then walked up Agent Curatis and almost shyly handed over one of her bags, filled with a great many tiny chocolate items. She had explained that they were an apology to all the agents in the detail who had either been forced to work extra hard after she had turned their plans upside down, or, had just had heart attacks in the way she had waltzed right through their 'airtight' perimeter to smash into the Archon-Prince designate.

In Victor's opinion, the ultra-cool CIB agent had come distressingly close for a split second to actually looking genuinely touched at the gesture before hurriedly 'blanking' his face again, turning over the bag to one of his minions to stash in an ancillary vehicle and politely thanking the young noble, before beating a hasty retreat back to the convoy just as they had started to pull out back towards the city.

The trip had been quick. Like many worlds, Arendelle lacked a major domestic car industry, instead importing their vehicles from offworld and relying on extensive underground public transport systems. The end result of which was far less traffic than on a world like New Avalon, letting them make excellent time, even during 'peak' hour.

Built during the Star League and named after Unity City on Terra, Unity Plaza was to be the focus of the ceremonies tomorrow. Dominating the square at the Northern edge was the Great Hall of Arendelle; a grand building scarcely smaller than the Duchy Palace itself where the investment itself would take place. Tens of thousands of people were already packed into the open air square facing it, planning to camp out overnight to ensure they had the best seats in the house and it was expected that the crowd would probably swell to over a hundred thousand by early tomorrow morning, with giant displays strategically set up to ensure the crowd would miss nothing that would happen inside.
Victor had decided not to pre-empt his formal arrival to the Great Hall tomorrow. Instead, the advanced team directed the convoy to an underground car park a few blocks away. From there he had walked through a secure and highly classified evacuation tunnel to the basement of the humble office block known as Government House off to the side of the square, where the Regent had set up his administration, wedged between the almost malevolent looking tower belonging to the Ministry of Taxation and the squat functional cube belonging to the Ministry of Customs and Border Security. Victor had actually enjoyed the brisk walk, stretching his legs and getting his blood pumping, as no matter how often you exercised on a Jumpships Grav deck, it just wasn't the same as solid ground.

He had also felt the glares from the gaggle of bureaucrats from New Avalon here to lug along the various seals of state and hardcopy paperwork needed for the formal transfer of power as they struggled to keep up through the warm tunnels, their ridiculous robes not exactly suited for the conditions.

He frankly could care less; if they insisted on wearing something that even an old-school ComStar Precentor would draw the line at as just downright silly because of some esoteric tradition, then that was their problem.

The Regents suite of offices sat on the top floor, overlooking the square. It was no coincidence of course, that his arrival happened to coincide almost to the second with the moment the systems primary dipped below the horizon. He had been assured that it was tradition for such transfer ceremonies to take place at sunset, the ceremonial symbol of the final day ending and all that.

Frankly, Victor thought it was a little over the top – but then to him this was just work. To the people of Arendelle on the other hand, this was a momentous occasion, a grand spectacle of pageantry and ceremony … and the least he could do was to play his part.

Applause broke out as the elevator doors opened on the 11th floor, Victor quickly affixing his standard 'professional but happy to be here' smile as he walked out, the corridor in front of him lined down one with dozens of excited looking senior staffers and bureaucrats, with a whole new media pack at the far end just outside what had to be the Regents office, their cameras flashes already blazing away with more light than some energy heavy Clan Omnimechs he had seen.

Setting himself, Victor started to stride down the corridor slowly, pausing every few steps to shake the many many hands of the many many people waiting for him.

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Grand Arendelle Hotel
Arendelle City
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'...and with the seal of the Lord of the Crucis March now affixed to this document, we hereby terminate the regency of Sir Roger Landers and retain all associated executive powers in ourselves, until such time as we see fit to invest them in the rightful heir of the Duchy of Arendelle. Sir Landers, we offer you our most sincere and humble thanks for your service, on behalf of the people of Arendelle, of the Federated Suns and of the Federated Commonwealth...'

Victors smiling face on the vid screen froze at that point, shrinking down to a small window in the top right corner of the screen, returning the view to a TV studio where a trio of people were sitting, the camera focusing in on the smiling middle woman.

'And with those words Prince Victor closed the chapter in the highly successful regency of Sir Roger Landers, who is even now on his way to the Spaceport to catch a private Dropship off world, leaving Prince Victor in charge of Arendelle - although of course he will be investing the Lady Elsa tomorrow formally in that role. The Palace press liaison also released a statement a short time ago, formally offering the deepest thanks of the Lady Elsa not just for all his hard work on behalf of the people, but for his personal advice and guidance in the hard years after the death
of her parents. Charlie, your thoughts?'

'Well we have known for quite some time that Elsa has been playing an increasingly active role in the affairs of state the man on the left with the air of an academic now nodded, leaning forward and pushing his glasses back onto his face as they threatened to slide down. In fact, from what I've heard quietly from behind the scenes, over the last four or five months she has been effectively making the decisions herself with Landers serving as more of an advisor than her Regent'.

'Which is a good thing, isn't it?'

'Oh no doubt Kristin. No doubt at all' the man nodded sagely. 'There is always the risk in a change of leadership of instability as a new leader gets their feet under them, but it seems that Landers has been very carefully grooming Elsa for the role and slipping her into it to the point that she is effectively already the Duchess in all but name. By all reports Hanse Davion personally handpicked Sir Landers, and like most choices the Fox makes, it was done with great care and deliberation. There should be minimal disruption to the planet'.

'So now we move to the investment tomorrow where the Prince will formally invest Elsa with all the powers and responsibilities of the Duchess of Arendelle. Do we have any idea if the two have even met yet? Or will meet before she arrives?'

'Tradition would say no, they have not' the other man, an older man in a very expensive looking suit put in in a gravelly voice. 'By tradition Elsa will have been in seclusion preparing today. And there is no schedule for the two to meet until she approaches him tomorrow at the Investment for the coronation ceremony. After that, they will have many meetings over the next few days where she will lay out her policies for him – he is her boss after all and bring anything needed to his attention that might need to be addressed'.

'Clearly that tradition does not apply to the Duchesses Sister' the host laughed lightly and the two men joined in with her for a moment.

'Indeed' the older man commented. 'Rumour has it that Hanse and Melissa were quite close to the former Duke and Duchess – and it is heart-warming to see the next generation also seem to be getting on very well'.

'More than getting on – Anna and Victor seemed inseparable from the point they arrived on the planet' the woman smiled. 'Could we be seeing the beginnings of something here? Dare I even suggest a courtship?'

Anna, sitting at the bar sipping on the soft drink she had been nursing for the last twenty or so minutes choked at that, coughing and drawing a few curious stares, but getting herself back under control, staring up at the vid screen over the bar on the Hotels second floor. A flush started to wash over her face for probably the tenth time today as trio on the screen started to talk about her and Victor's 'interactions' over the day.

Then they played the clip of them on each other's arms at the Spaceport.

Then the clip of the two of them laughing as he held the door open for her at Death by Chocolate and helped her to the limo.

Then the hug she had impulsively given him when he had dropped her off – conveniently editing out the same hugs she had given to both Galen and Kai!

She could feel herself trying to impersonate a turtle as her neck seemed to try and retract into her shoulders of its own accord, as if she could somehow minimise her presence in the bar. Anna felt her skin crawl as the commentators casually discussed the possibility of if Victor's parents were trying to set Victor up with her … and desperately prayed to any God

Well, they had wanted to give the scandlevids something to talk about, mission accomplished!

Gods what if her Sister saw this and thought she was trying to seduce the Archon-Prince?!

Finishing up her drink with a hurried gulp, she left a ten pound note on the bar for the bartender
and slinked away, never feeling as self-conscious as this before despite seeing that no-one was actually paying her any attention, probably not even recognizing her, she felt all their eyes on her back as she slinked off to the elevator bank outside. She wasn't exactly paying a huge amount of attention to her surroundings as she rounded the corner into the lift well, fumbling for the security card to her room that doubled as her lift pass-

So it was not entirely surprising that she slammed into someone coming the other way in a hurry.

She yelped as she rebounded and pin wheeled, crashing to the floor with an oomph as the breath was stolen from her lungs.

Well nice work Anna, you finally did it!

She had almost crashed into the poor porter at the day suite, barely skidding to a halt before crashing into him.

She had almost crashed into her Uncle and Aunt, sliding along the wooden floor to come to a halt a meter short of them in a way that looked spectacular, but was really pure luck.

She had crashed into the Archon-Prince designate, but the man's lightning fast reflexes honed on the battlefields of the Clan front had been up to the task of steadying her before she fell over and he himself had held his footing well.

But finally, her luck had run out and now she had crashed to the floor.

She was just lucky there were no cameras around.

"Hey!" she protested as she got air back into her lungs, wincing slightly as she reached up and pushed the bangs out of her hair.

"I'm so sorry! Are you hurt?" a man's voice replied at once, slightly anxiously.

Sighing from her position on the cold marble floor on the ground, she half looked and half glared up … into the most incredibly handsome face she had ever seen in her life … and the deepest green eyes she had ever known.
Its Corimation day?!

The last remaining holdout of a late Star League era colonization drive into star Cluster J-25, the Southern Isles is in most respects your typical outback system in the Federated Suns. One of four systems settled in 2750, it was the most ‘rimward’ of the four star systems, hence the rather grandiose name given to it by the Inner Sphere Cartography Society.

The three other worlds settled as part of this attempt, the ‘Northern’ ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ isles were abandoned with the eventual breakdown of their terraforming systems during the First Succession War. Alone among them, the Southern Isles had not required ongoing terraforming to remain viable- but even so, it had been heavily co-dependent on the other three systems for worthwhile trade links to be a stable colony. This was of course a state of affairs that would be duplicated across much of the Periphery as Terran imposed dependency links collapsed in the chaos of the Star League’s dissolution.

But through sheer grit and determination its population has, if not thrived, then at least survived well enough to the present day. Such an accomplishment may not sound like much to a denizen of the Inner Sphere, but if you were to take a good look at the sheer number of abandoned worlds marked on star maps today across the Periphery....

3052 Update

The initial wave of economic investment into the Periphery March has mostly bypassed this world, meaning you are unlikely to find your hotel booked out with hordes of Lyran businessmen waving around briefcases full of C-Bills. However, the refurbishment and reopening of its Zenith recharge station completed last year as part of a new direct shipping route between New Avalon and Filitvet has resulted in an over 2000% increase in Jumpship traffic through the system over the first six months of 3052 alone. Taking full advantage of the new trade routes, representatives from the Southern Isles can often be found on worlds up and down the shipping chain, in search of new opportunities...


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“I’m so sorry! Are you hurt?”

It took a lot to render Anna Jorgensson speechless. In fact up until this point in history’s inexorable march forward, it was mostly a theoretical concept as no-one had ever actually succeeded in leaving her speechless, per se. Indeed, most people who knew her well could have been forgiven for thinking that short of being rendered unconscious, there was no force in the universe that could leave Anna in such a state. Even if occasionally she had the good sense to keep her mouth shut rather than blurt out what came to mind, she nevertheless always had something to say.

But sprawled on the hard, polished marble floor of the Grand Arendelle Hotel looking up into the emerald eyes of the man who had just knocked her over, Anna was indeed speechless for a long, loooooong moment.

“Heeeey…” she finally repeated the exclamation she had given when knocked onto her backside now more or less on autopilot as her brain reeled from the devastating impact of those glorious eyes. “Uh, y- no no I’m okay!” she got out as she pulled herself up into a sitting position, the pains
in her arms and backside seeming to vanish in a moment as she absently brushed her hair out of her face. “I just wasn’t looking, well, looking where I was going and uh” GET IT TOGETHER GIRL!—“but I’m … great … actually” she finished, finding herself unable to break eye contact as the other man knelt down next to her.

“My fault entirely” the other waved her blubbered apology away magnanimously, offering her his hand with a smile that could have brought a dead puppy back to life. “Thank Goodness you’re alright”.

Anna shyly reached out to take the offered hand, feeling a sudden leap in her chest as he ever so gently took her hand in his own and carefully helped her back to her feet. “Oh, forgive me” the other suddenly said, letting her hand go and taking a half step back to let him offer her a formal half bow as he apparently mistook her dopey grin for the stare of an unasked question. “Hans Westerguard of the Southern Isles”.

The voice inside Annas head squeeed at the perfection of the gesture.

Shut up, let me handle this! Anna silently yelled at herself, not pausing for a moment to consider the mild insanity implied in doing so as she tried to focus through the fluttering swarm of butterflies in her chest.

“Lady Anna Jorgensson of Arendelle” she replied instead, performing an abbreviated curtsy in exchange that would have left her old dancing instructor facepalming, but it was the best she could do in her semi-casual skirt as for the first time in her life she found herself unhappy with the fact she had no Noble title of her own other than ‘Lady’.

He would probably just dismiss her as a nobody and-

“Anna Jorgensson?” he repeated her name, with an unusual emphasis on the first as if trying to remember something before suddenly his eyes went wide in shock and quicker than she could follow, the man dropped to his knee in front of her. “My Lady! My apologies, I should have recognized you”.

-He-knows-who-I-am-oh-my-God-he-knows-who-I-am-and-he's-kneeling-

She fought past the sudden tightness in her chest at the sight of this man, this incredibly handsome man, kneeling before her, impulsively reaching down to take his hand and urge him to his feet…

Unfortunately, once again, Anna did not entirely take account of the freshly waxed floors friction coefficient - and her slightly shaky legs - as she leaned down and tried to urge him back to his feet. And so with a yelp, she felt her feet slide forward across the floor sharply, sending her falling backwards, her head snapping around to see the floor rapidly coming up to meet her, yet in that moment feeling that it wouldn’t hurt as much as the humiliation of falling onto her back like this-

“-Woah woah woah-”

-and she stopped. Just short of the floor she jerked to a halt, cradled in strong, broad arms...

Anna had had the wind knocked out of her on several occasions in her life … well, several hundred occasions probably - it was an occupational hazard when someone was as active as she was.

But she had never had the wind knocked out of her this way before as she blinked and gazed up into the -very close- face of the man who had caught her, an expression of alarm and shock fading away rapidly to something more along the lines of mild embarrassment at their predicament … along with something else.

“Umm…” he seemed to freeze in place, trying to figure out what to do next as she cradled her in a way that sent her already rapidly beating heart towards cardiac arrhythmia.

“Uh, hi! Again!” she managed to get out, the words seeming to snap him out of his frozen state as he quickly pulled her back to her feet.
“Um … hi!”

“This is awkward” she laughed hyper-nervously as she pushed back to get a little distance, absently pulling her blouse back into place as she did so, before freaking as she realized what she had just said. “I mean, not you’re awkward” she hastily clarified, before deciding it needed to be made clear. “I’m awkward – you’re gorgeous” her mouth promptly ran away just one sentence too far, before the surge of panic followed as she belatedly realized what she had just let pass out of her mouth. “Wait, what?”

“I’d like to formally apologize for running into you, My Lady” the other said in his smooth, rich voice, his face neither scolding nor angry. If anything … he actually looked bashful, or even blushing at her embarrassing rambling! “And for knocking you onto your back because I wasn’t watching where I was going … and every moment after”.

The gallantry was almost enough to make her faint, but by an act of iron will she managed to get a grip on herself and suck in a deep breath full of precious, precious oxygen, deciding to just get out of there before she managed to do anything else to humiliate herself. Blindly, she reached behind her for the wall until she found the lift call button thankfully exactly where she thought it would be, stabbing it several times frantically.

“No, no it’s fine, my fault, I wasn’t paying any attention either!” she tried to wave away the others apology as she took half a step backwards from the other towards the lift doors, checking her clothes absently for a moment. “I mean, if I had been you know, Elsa, then yeash, you know … but luckily, it’s just me.

“Just you?” Hans questioned with an almost arch look that started at his eyes and ended in the slightest uptick of his lip as he stared into her eyes, seemingly cutting straight through her. Anna found herself feeling almost helpless at that look. It was somehow both mildly reproving of her choice of words to describe herself, while at the same time conveying … She didn’t know what.

Just that ‘it’ was … intense. Anna dared to take a slow breath in and out, sighing as she unconsciously let her mind wander places she really shouldn’t let it, until the entirely satisfactory moment was shattered by the soft ‘Ding!’ of the elevator she had called arriving.

“Uh … um … I should go!” she managed to get out, blinking rapidly as she backed up towards the doors opening. “I have to go – I should go, I’d better go!” she rambled as she shuffled towards the lift, wanting to leave before she said or did anything else that made her look like … herself.

“Of course – I … I hope I’ll see you tomorrow at your Sisters Invest-”

“Yes!” she near yelled back, before clearing her throat and moderating her tone. “I mean, I hope so too!” she agreed as she half walked - half fell into the thankfully empty elevator and let the doors slide shut behind her, cutting her off from the man and letting her collapse against the polished wooden banister that circled the lift, taking a moment to take some deep breaths to try and calm her thundering heart, reaching into her blouse pocket with a shaky hand.

It took three tries to fish the access card out of her pocket. Then two tries to slot it into the reader built into the elevator car. But, it only took one attempt to enter the five digit pin code into the security pad that sent the elevator ascending up to the 20th floor. And she found herself bizarrely proud of that fact.

Time seemed to pass in a blur from that point, Anna finding herself seemingly between blinks back in her enormous hotel suite. Staggering into the master bedroom, she managed to kick off her shoes and waddle to the bed, all but collapsing into its soft, welcoming arms as the events of the day and lack of sleep beforehand finally drained the last of her energy. Somehow she found
enough strength to raise an arm and vaguely slap for the bedside control panel from behind closed eyes, eventually managing to hit the right switch and plunge the room into darkness, humming agreeably as she burrowed into the thick blankets. Moments later the last of her energy fled and Anna fell into a deep, long sleep.

And dreamed of a very particular shade of green with a rather goofy smile on her face.

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Arendelle City, Arendelle
Crucis March
Federated Commonwealth
May 10 3053

Victor had known that when he took on the role of a March Lord, there would be paperwork.

He wasn’t exactly a stranger to paperwork mind you. As a Battalion, and then a Regimental level Command officer, most of his duties when he wasn’t stomping around in his Omnimech revolved around feeding the insatiable appetite of the AFFC’s bureaucracy for reports, status updates and logistical orders.

The big difference now was that as a Colonel in the 10th Lyran Guards he had been generating reports, but as a March Lord he was the terminus of them. He was now the ‘boss’ on whose desk landed all the major issues that couldn’t be solved by multiple layers of people under him, save those few issues he could in turn forward to New Avalon or Thakard. Thankfully, he’d had very few ‘March Lord’ issues to deal with so far. Most of his nominal workload was still being directed to and processed by Joshua Davion on Argyle, although some encrypted documents had been forwarded to him through ComStar. Coming back from a light lunch with the heads of local charities dedicated to the care of orphans whom the local Royal Family was patron of, he had dedicated his ‘free time’ before the Investment Ceremony to sorting through the new paperwork in case anything urgent was present.

The March Updates he put aside for later review - and resisted the urge to just outright delete the latest Skye situation report; everything concerning Ryan Steiner always seemed to give him a headache. Instead, he eagerly devoured an Eyes-Only file direct from Jackson Davion to him, finding past the pages of security warnings, there were frag and movement orders for Operation Keypunch; a counter offensive being prepared against the Jade Falcon and Steel Viper occupation zones. He’d had a vague idea from discussions with his Father and his advisers while on New Avalon that a massive counter-offensive had been years in the works, but only with his ascension to March Lord had he been apparently given a ‘need to know’ on the basis that multiple AFFC units supposedly stationed in the Crucis March … weren’t.

Some of the most elite AFFC, allied and Mercenary units available had been mustered under the direct supervision of Morgan Hasek-Davion just behind the rump Tamar March. Over fifty regiments of Battlemechs, with attached Infantry, Armor, Artillery and Aerospace support were quietly ‘drifting’ into the region in staggered movements, waiting for the signal to be unleashed. He could see his father’s fingerprints all over this document in both the meticulous logistical preparation … and the fact that the launch date, the 20th of August, would be his parents 25th wedding anniversary.

Rolling his eyes once at his father’s overly-developed sense of the dramatic, he flipped back and forth through the pages, astonished at just how advanced the operational preparation was given how little even he had heard of it. The rotation of his (former) unit back to the Clan Front alongside the FedSuns Armored Cavalry would, in fact, be two of the final shell-game style reshuffles that had been underway for most of a year, with few people apparently catching wind of the ‘big picture’.

Three months from now, the biggest military offensive since the 3039 war would be launched by the AFFC…while he would be busy on the other side of the Inner Sphere. Driving a desk. Victor suppressed the almost automatic sigh that came to his mind at the realization he wouldn’t be
a part of the next chapter of the Clan War. It wasn’t as if he liked war; he had seen far too many friends die to ever really enjoy all that came with war … but he also couldn’t deny the burning desire to pay back the Clanners for all they had done still burned strongly in him.

Perhaps he did indeed have just a little bit too much of his namesake uncles DNA in his blood after all...

Still, the past was in the past. He had to look to the future now, and so he reluctantly closed the file and got started on the real work that actually needed his attention.

Most of what work had been forwarded to him was routine. But then there were also one or two requests that needed his ‘ok’ … because the attached dollar values rivaled the GDPs of entire planets.

Thus prepared, his eyes did not entirely bulge out of their sockets when he opened the file from Ways and Means marked ‘Star-Sword’ and skimmed through the cover sheet summary. Attached were the final costings for this financial year for the RX-79 program, the first hulls of which were scheduled to be laid down starting 1st July. All his plans to rebuild some many units, raise others and refurbish local AFFC infrastructure seemed to vanish into a whirlpool of red ink as he looked over the figures … and part of him cried out in protest at the massive diversions away from the core ground combat arm of the AFFC.

Of course, he knew that was just the Mechwarrior in him.

For centuries since warships had vanished from the Inner Sphere and jumpships had been strictly ruled off limits, the Successor State militaries had tended to mostly view their Navy as a glorified taxi service. Then again, he had also had the unpleasant experience at Alyena of his RCT barely dodging a Jade Falcon warship gunning for them on their retreat from the planet - without any defensive option other than running really fast and praying they couldn’t keep up - so not building a new war fleet wasn’t really an option, expensive as it was going to be.

Indeed, ‘Starsword’ was one of the primary reasons he was here. Arenelle, with its newfound Germanium reserves had jumped from being a well developed but otherwise quiet Crucis March world into a strategically critical one for the Federated Commonwealth - given that said reserves were conservatively calculated to be enough to support expanding jumpship production across the entire Inner Sphere for the rest of the century. Which made this world a target for the enemies of the Federated Commonwealth - and a dangerously under protected one at that. According to the files he had reviewed, Arendelles Milita only had a single unit rated as capable of conducting major combat operations. Specifically, a company of ‘bugmechs’ backed up with a short battalion of mixed combat vehicles, a few mechanized infantry companies and a single aerospace squadron. Enough to take on your average pirate company perhaps, but certainly not any protection against a serious attack. All of their heavy equipment was Third Succession war vintage, but excepting a handful of semi-retired veterans, none of them had ever seen combat.

So the question was if he would spend the money to expand and build up this militia, or, if he would be better off bringing in a line unit - or hiring Mercenaries - to become the main planetary defense force.

In a quick and dirty attempt to take the measure of the locals skill, Kai had ‘gone for a walk’ last night with his famous Battlemech on the Militia training grounds. While most of the local troops and their guests from the 10th Guards had watched from the bases various command centers and rec rooms (with moderately priced champagne in the officers mess and local beer in the enlisted rooms) Kai had in a ‘friendly’ exercise taken on two of the Militias three Mech Lances in a simulated engagement.

All at the same time.

Apparently, several members of the 10th who had been burned betting against Kai on the way to Arendelle had more than made up for their losses by the time the last Stinger had ‘died’ to the white faced shock of the locals who had also clearly thought ‘Kai the Monster’ was more AFFC propaganda than truth. Still, Kai’s report had been of the opinion that there was certainly more
than enough raw potential to build from if he decided to expand the Militia, using what was present as a cadre. Which had led into the next issue that Galen would be checking.

If their table of organization and equipment in any way reflected reality.

Private militias commanded by the local ruling family but funded by the AFFC were rather infamous (if more on the Lyran side of the Commonwealth) for having a ‘reality’ that didn’t quite match up with the paperwork sent to Thakard or New Avalon. With the status of their equipment, number of troops collecting pay versus actual troops raised and so on often not matching up, and the difference going to line pockets or even worse, raise private armies on the Federal governments kroner. Galen accordingly would be tied up for most of the rest of the week inspecting the local records, personnel and hardware and comparing them to New Avalons files. All of which would keep him busy just long enough to avoid having to take part in anything even remotely ceremonial after tonight’s reception and dinner. Sometimes … okay, most times; he really envied his aide...

“Highness?” a voice broke into his thoughts and Victor glanced up from his noteputer to take in the face of Mavis Williams, his personal assistant from New Avalon standing at the door to his office. “Lord Liao has requested to come up and see you, if you are available?”

“By all means” Victor agreed with a smile, stretching in his chair.

The other didn’t return the smile or shift even slightly from her dour gaze.

“Very well Highness” the other simply nodded in reply, quickly tapping in an entry on a small hand held noteputer. “We’re due to leave for the Great Hall in fifty minutes” she reminded him, her eyes roaming disapprovingly over his rather casual looking AFFC field fatigues he had changed into after returning from lunch... Victor really tried -and probably failed- not to cringe under the gaze of the woman who had served first his Uncle, then his Father and been enticed out of retirement (just for a year) just to help him get settled into his new role after a personal request from Ardan Sortek, whom she had always apparently had a soft spot for. His Father had told him she had been the single finest and most valuable assistant he had ever had … and then very bluntly advised him to never cross her; explaining that she had the bullying power of an artillery regiment when it came to keeping people on schedule and managing access.

Even Quintus Allard had only ever tried once to do an end-run around her.

“So noted’ Victor offered, getting a nod in response before she silently glided out of the room to let him finish his work, Victor shivering slightly after she closed the door behind her. Quickly, he dotted the last I’s and crossed the last T’s before detaching the secure data core and placing it into the safe his staff had installed in his temporary office. At some point this afternoon a DMI messenger team would retrieve the data module and courier it to the Barbarossa for encryption, then take the resulting holodisk down to the local ComStar HPG. At that point the paperwork would bounce back up the chain of HPG stations to New Avalon and Argyle with the next batch of transmissions from Arendelle, completing the glorious cycle of bureaucracy.

And like any cycle, then it would start all over again.

He was left with that mildly depressing thought only for a moment before a knock on the door heralded Kais arrival.

“Afternoon Vic” Kai cheerfully greeted him as Curatis closed the door, his friend setting down a cardboard drinks tray and plastic container on the desk as Victor closed the system down. “Thought you could use some coffee before we hit the road, so I got Renny to make a run on his way through”.

“Remind me to nominate him for a FedCom Medal of Honour” Victor joked as he thankfully reached for his take-away cup, having no problems it from the scrawled order written on the side.
Sanderlin knew quite well what he needed in a mid-afternoon coffee thanks to those long, painful afternoons his roommate had spent walking him through basic of cryophysics and astronavigation back at the Nagelring. Victor also selected a small but delicious looking pastry from the half dozen on offer there as Kai retrieved his own cup. “I’ve gotten so used to Galen bringing the coffee I probably wouldn’t even realize I was waiting for him before I started to go through caffeine withdrawal”.

“Where is he anyway? I didn’t see him anywhere in the crowd outside”.

“Oh, he’s still at Fort Akershus” Victor said, taking a sip of his coffee - and raising an eyebrow in appreciation of the rich taste. He had grown up on Thakard, a world which prided itself on their hot drinks and this coffee was easily as good as anything he had been served there. He glanced at the logo on the side and smiled slightly as he saw it was in fact from ‘Death by Chocolate’, which was just around the corner from the hotel. He pondered for a moment if he could convince Rita to move to Argyle, before dismissing it as a fantasy; he suspected there was no way Anna would let her leave the solar system if her behavior yesterday was any guide. “Jackson Davion sent him a verigraphed order giving him a command authority level of O7 - and he’s been waving it around happily all morning playing Inspector General”.

“Well that’s what he has it for, I suppose” Kai reflected. “Hell of a sign of trust by the brass though, to give a Kommandant that kind of authority and autonomy. Even if he is your aide”.

“Well there are some constraints” Victor explained after taking another sip and savoring the taste. “It’s not a Morgan Kell note; really it was given to him to ensure that none of the locals can try to play games with his inspection team by pulling rank … because he now nominally outranks everyone on this planet”.

“So does this mean Galen technically outranks you, Colonel?” Kai teased with a smile.

“Sort of a grey area” Victor smiled in amusement at that idea with a shake of his head. The thought that Galen needed rank to tell him what to do? The man been giving him orders politely phrased as ‘suggestions’ ever since he had walked into his office and appointed himself his aide on Trell-I. “The paperwork to formally confirm my promotion to Marshal is still looping its way through the Department of the Army somewhere. Technically I have the rank, but not the pay, staff or office - or something like that” he paused to offer a shrug as he tried to remember the highly confusing message from the Department of the Army explaining his limbo status. “That being said, Galens still far too happy playing Battalion Commander to want a promotion. Frankly, he needs a good kick in the backside. If it wasn’t for the fact that my parents all but glued him to me after Trell, he probably would have been a Regimental XO by now and probably on the shortlist for an RCT command slot in a few years with all the fighting he's done in the Clan War”.

“Well that’ll change shortly, he’s going to have to get used to higher level work and rank if you’re keeping him on as your aide” Kai pointed out.

“He’s still in denial” Victor explained wave a vague handwave as he took a bite out of a pastry. “And you’re not?” Kai chuckled.

“No, I’ve moved up to bargaining” Victor swallowed down the treat before tilting his head in a slightly in sudden interest at the other. “Do you want to rule the Crucis March?”

“Sure, if you’ll take Sian in exchange” Kai parried with a snort, taking another sip of his coffee.

“Pass” Victor shuddered slightly. The worst he would generally have to deal with as a March Lord was listening to the talking heads on morning shows complaining about this or that issue that he needed to solve with a snap of his magical fingers because a Duke or Count or Baron was dragging their feet. To hold Sian, you needed to be willing to take the heads of those who complained.

Although to be fair, at least by Capellan standards, ever since Kai’s mother had taken the Celestial Throne the level of backstabbing had apparently fallen to the lowest level in decades. By all
accounts, most of the senior nobility inside the Forbidden City who had survived Romanos last minute temper tantrum seemed to be quickly warming up to the rather more inclusive, collaborative and downright sane style of decision making Chancellor Cadence embodied as she pushed the reforms she had already made in Saint Ives through the rest of the Confederation...

“So, anything interesting in the Big-News you can tell me about?” Kai nodded to the noteputer on Victors desk, snapping his attention back to the here and now as he considered the question, siping on his coffee for a moment. He’d frankly love nothing more than to tell Kai about Operation ‘Take out the Trash(borns)’, but he took his security clearance seriously enough to know that ‘March Lord Eyes Only’ meant exactly that ... even if Kais mother was clearly in the loop and would no doubt fill him in. Heck, she might even let Kai out to play, perhaps leading the 1st Saint Ives Lancers who she had committed as a gesture of solidarity alongside two of the Big Macs regiments.

Yup, he was still definitely not convinced about this whole March Lord to Archon-Prince thing.

“A few things” he confirmed after a moment, reaching for another pastry. “Remember the rumint that Ciro Ramirez had been sighted during the asskicking the 24th Guards delivered the birdbrains on Antares?”

“Unfortunately” Kai nodded. “It’s a real shame; I had been looking forward to dancing on his grave. With Yen-Lo-Wang”.

“Turns out it was true - looks like Adam didn’t knock him off on Somerset like we hoped. A LIC deep cover team on Butler faxed a confirmed sighting - several confirmed sightings in fact. It seems the birdbrains are trotting him out around their ‘capital’ as a ‘fine example’ of an Inner Sphere Freeborn making a valuable contribution to his Clan” Victor scoffed, his expression saying clearly how he felt about his traitorous classmate. “It doesn’t seem to be terribly impressing the locals, although their attached LOKI cell tried to request permission to break cover and terminate him as an example to the local population of what happens to traitors”.

“LOKI” Kai rolled his eyes, saying all that needed to be said about the almost childish delight they took in blowing things up. And they’d probably still manage to miss the target anyway - Victor was sure that Kai’s late Father had probably come home more than once bemoaning these facts. “Still, it’s annoying that all the bad Rumint gets confirmed but the good Rumint gets disproved” he complained. “I mean why couldn’t the vampire one have been real or something?”

Victor grinned at that. One of the more silly -yet oddly persistent- stories that had come out of the chaos of the initial Clan Invasion was that old Stepan Von Strang, ruler of one of the first worlds taken in the Clans invasion of the Inner Sphere, had risen from the dead as a Vampire that stalked Clan Jade Falcon through their OZ. Slaying Bloodnamed Clan Warriors and feasting on their blood in the middle of the night.

The actual truth had turned out to be rather more prosaic ... but Juliette von Strang and her bunch of her slightly oddball Mercs were doing vastly more damage to the Falcons with their Battlemechs than any undead creature of the night could have. Something he wholeheartedly approved of.

“Speaking of Rumint ... did you hear the local one regarding you and Anna?”

“Anna ... Jorgerson?” he clarified, getting a nod to which he shook his head, lifting his cup to finish the last dregs of coffee before they went cold.

“Oh apparently you’re both madly in love and we can expect wedding bells within the next year” Kai grinned, timing it just perfectly to cause Victor to choke on his coffee.

“We’re what?” he managed a few seconds later after he managed to get past choking on the hot liquid.

“It’s all over the breakfast shows this morning, with captures of you and Anna laughing and smiling at each other. Mysteriously, Galen and I never show in the pictures for some reason, so it looks like you had Anna personally take you on a tour all around Arendelle city”.
“That’s … absurd!” Victor protested. “You can’t fall in love with someone you just met!”

Kai gave him a long, meaningful look.

“What?”

“Victor, I was on Outreach” the other reminded him and Victor flushed slightly at the rebuke, instant images of Omi Kurita exploding into his mind as sharp and vivid as the day he had first seen her.

“We were on Outreach for five months” he retorted - although even to his ears it sounded just a tiny bit defensive. “For most of the first two months after I first spoke to Omi, I was busy trying to avoid giving Hohiro an excuse to put a sword through my eye socket if I so much as looked at his sister again”.

“Perhaps. But can you deny that there was definitely at least a bit of ‘love at first sight?’ mixed in there?”

Victor privately admitted the other might have some kind of point, remembering the jolt he had felt the first time their eyes had met across the packed conference room. But-

“Vic, look. I know you and Anna were just having a fun yesterday - we all were. She’s a great person, friendly and incredibly energetic, open and almost impossibly cheerful. God knows the Inner Sphere could use a lot more people like her around. All I’m saying is that you need to be more … careful in the future around these things”.

“Anna managed to walk right through a Grade-1 CID security perimeter without anyone noticing until she crashed into me. I don’t think I could have been more careful” Victor pointed out with a slight grin.

Kai rolled his eyes to the ceiling for a moment, his expression momentarily taking on an aspect suggesting he was asking for some kind of divine help before he sighed and returned his gaze.

“I’m not talking security risks. Victor, you’re such a genuinely nice guy who disdains all the pomp and ceremony that circles around you that you probably don’t understand how you’re perceived on the average persons level - and what it means to them when you directly interact with them. Do you remember those people having coffee in Death by Chocolate yesterday when our convoy crashed the place?”

“Vaguely” Victor confirmed after a moment’s thought. He had signed several autographs, even had a picture taken with one group who had happened to have a camera to hand, before they had left with their purchases.

“Most of them were guests on the news shows last night” Kai said. “Especially those who managed to get a group photo with you. They are local celebrities right now, apparently they’ve had a non stop procession of friends and family coming over just to look at that picture taken with you”.

“…you are joking, right?” Victor asked carefully after a moment. Surely he was joking...

“No at all” Kai sighed as he leaned back in his chair, picking at a small pastry. “Think about it. You’ll never visit every planet in the FedCom, probably not even close to a majority of them given travel times and your workload. It’s unlikely you’ll ever visit Arendelle again in fact, even just as a March Lord. House Lords and their immediate family don’t exactly show up often to your average planet. Which means that any time you visit a world, it’ll probably be the first and last time you will … and so there will be a hell of an intense spotlight on you from every angle. The average person the street won’t ever lay eyes on their local Baron or Countess in person - the odds of them ever meeting you, let alone getting a photo with you, are, well, on the same order as winning the New Avalon lottery.”
“Kai...are you actually trying to get to a point across here, or just stumbling about until you find the Vibra-Bomb? Because I’ve got zero read on your active probe...

“You’re not in the AFFC anymore Victor” the other continued patiently. “The media had a quiet agreement with your parents that while you were serving, you were off limits, even when off base or on leave. Fair enough. The price of that agreement was that all bets were off when you got out of the AFFC. And I don’t just mean the scandalevid idiots; any time you land on a planet like Arendelle the local media are going to be hyper focused on you. And more specifically to the current situation, anything you say or do will be thus blown all out of proportion where your love life is concerned”.

“Now you’re starting to sound like Katherine” he muttered. His sister had over the last few months on New Avalon been dropping more than one hint that he needed to start thinking about learning to properly deal with the media. He hadn’t really given much thought to it, busy as he had been with his RCT - and having whole teams of people whose job it was to do ‘that stuff’ in the palace … but perhaps it was past time that he did start thinking more seriously about it.

“You could actually do a lot worse for media advisors then your sister” Kai agreed with a shrug. “Look, I’m just saying that it’s something you need to seriously start thinking about. Everyone who knows you - the real you- knows that you’re not going to do anything improper or impulsive. But the local print sheets, vid news and offworld networks will happily take anything you say or do, no matter how small and double jump sixty light years past the mark given the chance. If you’re so much as seen with anyone whose female, good looking and is clinically alive, they’ll burn out HPGs to get the word out. You’re the heir to two dynasties stretching back six hundred years, destined to rule the greatest nation since the Star League - and single. To say your the hottest salvage on the bachelor battlefield is putting it mildly. You can, you should expect a lot of women to throw themselves into your general vicinity if they get the chance. Most of this you can just ignore, eventually people will build up a tolerance to the rubbish and just ignore it, but right now as you’re the centre of all news in high society, it’ll be what dominates it. And if that's the case, do you really want this to be the news that, say, gets out to nations outside the FedCom about you?”

Victor winced slightly at that, the not-terribly subtle hint of the first news Omi had of him not being a message from him … but a news clip of him with other women and commentators speculating on his love life. He didn’t think she would buy into that kind of commentary, but...

“Message received and decoded” Victor held up his hands in surrender. “I’ll be careful - and when I put my staff together I’ll be sure to get some good media people to run that side, I promise. Now, to entirely turn the focus of this conversation around” he unashamedly switched the direction of the conversation, “as I’m rather sick of talking about my love life, what about your love life then? You must be looking forward to the reception tonight?”

“Uh, why would I be looking forward to it exactly?” Kai asked with a slightly confused expression on his face.

“Well … you know...” Victor shot him an amused look … which seemed to stick on his face as Kai returned his gaze looking downright confused … and it suddenly hit Victor like a bolt of lighting that Kari hadn’t read the guest list yet.

He wasn’t by nature a vindictive or petty person, not at all. But he did have a slightly twisted sense of humor. And this could be pretty funny...

“...lots of young, stunning women? And you, the dashing hero of the Federated Commonwealth, bane of the Jade Falcons, pilot of the most famous Battlemech in the Inner Sphere?” he continued without missing a beat. “We are in the Federated Suns where the average person worships the ground Mechwarriors walk on you know”.


“A very sensible policy that one” Kai smiled, but somewhat halfheartedly as he stood up, pointedly avoiding the question. “You should get ready, we leave in about thirty minutes”.

“Copy that” Victor tossed him a casual two fingered salute as the other left, Victor following him after double checking his desk had been sanitized of any classified materials and the safe was secure, before turning back to his room to change into the suit that had been put out for him.

Yes, today was going to probably be a long, dull bore … but he had a feeling the reception with the newest Duchess in the Federated Commonwealth would be highly entertaining indeed…

Grand Arendelle Hotel
Arendelle City, Arendelle
Crucis March
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May 10 3053

It was an inscent buzzing sound that slowly, unwillingly, dragged Anna back to the land of the living.

A notorious late sleeper even in the best of times, Anna had not moved from her bed for over fourteen hours and counting. It wasn’t quite a personal best for sleep ins, but it was close. First class travel on a dropship … was still first class travel on a dropship, no matter how much you dressed it up, so Anna hadn’t been getting much sleep. And combined with the dramatic events of yesterday, it probably wasn’t terribly surprising that by the time she reached this bed, she had been running on fumes.

This room however on solid ground, with its soft, Empress sized bed had seemingly welcomed her like a lovers arms, Anna blissfully sinking into the embrace and happily snoring away the hours even as the city around her had woken in excitement to the event of a lifetime, with tens of thousands of people pouring in to fill Unity Plaza to capacity, tickets having been raffled off weeks ago to strictly control numbers, with countless other public areas across the planet also being prepared for the celebration of the start of a new chapter in the history of Arendelle.

Anna however, happily asleep with a smile on her face, didn’t notice.

Luckily, this had been anticipated by Kai Brevik, well in advance.

The buzzing continued, slowly getting louder and, eventually, there was movement. A vaguely discontented noise came from deep in the down filled blankets and after a good ten seconds or so a hand seemed to snake its way upwards from the nest of coverings, rising up on top of a long, slender arm. It seemed to look around almost like a sensor mast for a moment to determine what was going on before it vanished, replaced by a gorgon nightmare of tangled red snarls that rose from the depths of the blankets and pillows like a monster of ancient legend.

Pillows cascaded in every direction as Anna slowly struggled up to a sitting position, looking vaguely around the darkened room for whatever it was that had dragged her out of a perfectly pleasant dream.

“Yessss?” she slurred, stuck in that halfway point between dreams and reality as she idly wondered why that candelabra and clock at the end of her bed were arguing so loudly...

Fortunately, the voice-recognition technology inside her suite correctly translated her speech and intent, accepting her reply and opening a two way channel up with a soft beep.

“My Lady Anna” a voice suddenly entered the room from nowhere.

“Huh?” Anna shook her head sluggishly. “Yeah!”

“Sorry to wake you My Lady” the distant yet somehow familiar voice apologized to her.

“Oh no no no” she slurred out as she finally reached a sitting position, vaguely pulling a strand
of hair out of her mouth which she had apparently been chewing on at some point last night. “I’ve been up for hours!” she asserted, placing her elbow on her knees and using it to support her head as she struggled to wake up.

Within two seconds, the far too comfortable position crashed her progress towards consciousness and she started to backslide, a light snore breaking from her lips as her muscles relaxed … just until her elbow gave way and her head started to fall to the bed. A purely reflexive surge of adrenaline through her body jolted it back up, the sudden expenditure of energy jumpstarting her body just enough to fully force her eyes blearily open and air back into her lungs.

“Who is it?” she suddenly and loudly demanded the empty room, looking around in sluggish confusion.

“It’s still me, Ma’am, Kai” the distant voice replied. Anna was far too asleep to be able to pick up on any real subtitles in the voice, such as the barely contained laughter as the man on the other end in the Duchy Palace pictured exactly what she looked like right now. “Time marches on today, it’s time to get ready”.

“Of course!” she agreed happily as she slowly tilted her head left and right, finding a childish delight as her brain insisted that the world was in fact tilting left, then right around her, only vaguely involved in the conversation as she slowly rubbed her eyes clear of sleep. “Ready for … what?”

“Your sister’s investment? The coronation ceremony, Ma’am” the distant voice slowly explained to her.

“My sister’s … corimation” Anna mangled as she yawned, taking in the room, the strange room that was not her bedroom in her uncle’s palace on Corona.

Or the dropship … but a hotel room … on Arendelle? Which she had returned to for-

Anna gasped and an explosion of epinephrine blasted through her system, burning away any traces of sleep like inferno gel as she threw the covers off her bed with a mighty heave.

“Its coronation day!” she breathed, flying out of bed to the window and flinging back the blinds.

Painful, bright light flooded into the room, almost blinding her as she squinted out into a perfect summer's day, the one way glass ensuring that no scandlevids would get a horrific picture of her in her previous days clothes with her hair looking like some kind of disaster involving superglue and an EF-5 tornado. Outside, far below, she could see crowds of people moving excitedly through the streets behind temporary security fencing that had been put up to help secure the building, many carrying tiny flags or even wearing the colours of Arendelle, the Federated Suns and the Federated Commonwealth!

“Yes it is Ma’am” the voice on the phone replied, still sounding amused - but Anna was suddenly so hit with emotion at the fact that the day she had been so looking forward to - yet also fearing - for so long, was finally upon her that she didn't notice. “Your dressmaker will be up in thirty minutes”.

“Oh!” Anna gasped, as she spun back to look at the bedside control, the clock on it stubbornly reading 14:01 PM to her mild alarm. “Uh, right, of course! I’ll be right there!”

“Very good Ma’am” the distant voice agreed before a low beep tone signaled the disconnection. Anna clenched her fists to her chest for a moment as the storm of emotions in her chest threatened to explode out of any control, taking a shuddering breath to force some kind of calm before she half walked and half ran across the room -gigling at the feeling of the lush carpet on her bare feet- to the bathroom.

Ten minutes later she had taken a very quick shower, enough to wash away the sleep from last
night and vigorously get her hair into a rather more tame state, energy seething through every move she made as she all but threw on a clean shirt, skirt and pair of sandals before leaving the bedroom, entering the giant sitting room next to her room. She skidded to a halt with a gasp as she found that some incredibly kind soul had laid out a collection of finger food sandwiches on a sealed tray there, with several chilled drinks alongside. Seeing the food almost at once made her realize just how hungry she was as her stomach promptly protested loudly.

To her disappointment there didn’t appear to be any chocolate on offer, but she broke the plastic seal anyway, feeling slightly light headed as the wave of nitrogen that had kept the food fresh flooded up past her. She quite happily wolfed down the food, but it didn’t quite feed her hunger, more just taking the edge off it. She decided against raiding the minibar and finished up by gulping down a glass of icy water to wash it all down, finishing her breakfast/lunch/snack just as a knock came from the door.

It had to be the dressmaker her Aunt had told her was making her a dress to be delivered today.

She hastily wiped her hands and mouth down with the towel on the tray before squaring herself and walking towards the door, firmly telling herself to calm down and compose herself on this day of all days, with the grace and dignity her parents would have expected of her-

And then the door exploded.

A loud *eep!* escaped from her lips as she jumped backwards in shock.

The door didn’t *actually* explode of course. But the way the door slammed open and a team of people stormed in like SWAT team, exploded was probably the best word she could use to describe it.

“*Dahhhhling!*” the distinctive, almost nasal voice of a Thakard native preceded a woman as she strode boldly through the doors as if she owned the place. She was short to the point that Anna did a double take, the woman's head probably only coming up to her shoulders … but she carried herself with all the force and presence of a Battlemech and despite the physical difference, *Anna* suddenly felt tiny as the other turned her gaze sharpened behind a pair of thick framed glasses onto her as she boldly strode across the room.

She resisted the strong urge to back away as the woman came to a halt in front of her, other women behind silently entering to set down a number of boxes and lay them out over the tables in the spacious room.

“So you are the one I dropped everything and jumped halfway across the Sphere for yes?”

“Oh …yes?” Anna tentatively answered, too stunned to say anything else as she finally recognized the woman - what girl wouldn’t? Edna Mode in the flesh, the single most sought after, most famous, most incredible fashion designer in three Successor States! Notoriously picky in what jobs she took on these days, near impossible to get a hold of and even more difficult to hire, being both fabulously wealthy and entirely selective.

*What was she doing* here?

“Well clearly you can’t be anyone else *dahling* - I would not be here otherwise, ja?” she observed as she started to circle around to her left. Anna started to turn to follow, but a hiss and a blurred *thwack* of the others hand against her hip froze her in place as the other paced around her like a tiger. “I needed to get away from Thakard. Supermodels? Pah!” she snorted as she circled back around to Annas other side, her gaze taking in everything like a hawk as yet more people entered the room, passing through the sitting room towards her bathroom or the dressing room on the other side carrying yet more bags. “Even if the Archon hadn’t asked me to do this as a personal favor, I would have happily taken this on. Spoiled poofy lipped stick figures who only think of themselves and waste my time - you can only take so much of them, *yes*?”

“The … the Archon sent you to make my dress?” Anna asked, her voice squeaking at the implication. It was clear the Archon clearly had apparently been keeping an eye on her even all the way from Thakard for reasons she still didn’t quite understand, but *come on*-

“Well obviously Annah *dahling*” the other rolled her eyes with a sigh before she suddenly spun
back in a blur. “And I can see why” she murmured with an almost evil intensity in her gaze for a moment before she carried on. “Designing an investment outfit for you without even meeting you well, that was a challenge, yes. Even with the exact measurements your aunts people sent forward. But I love a challenge. And you and Prince Victor make quite a couple” she observed, either missing or ignoring the way Annas bulged at that assertion. “That Archon, always planning four moves ahead, yes, always such a fabulous game of chess with her, the only person in the universe even the Fox can’t out scheme. And a women with the most spectacular sense of fashion. Always leading, never following…”

“I … I really don’t think-” Anna started to protest but the other didn’t even slow down as she tutted and waved her down.

“Of course of course I’m sure I’m sure” the other sniffed indifferently as she spun and started to stalk back to the pile of boxes on the bed, her perfectly cut shoulder length hair swirling for a moment before once again magically falling into laser perfect straightness. “You have the eyes of your world upon you - after today they will never look away! Even by my standards I have exceeded myself with my latest creation!” she boasted, flinging her arms wide to take in the array of boxes on the table and Anna felt her eyes widen even further as she took in the sheer number of boxes that were covering it, several lounges and the floor, with a dozen women lined up silently against the far wall.

There was about three seconds of perfect silence as the other seemed to freeze in place studying the overwhelming collection of boxes. It was just long enough for Anna to tentatively start to think about saying something when suddenly Edna Mode slapped her hand down on top of one of the boxes, causing Anna to jump.

“Now, to work!” she snarled and spun, closing the distance between them yet again in blinks with a second woman who came from nowhere, placing an odd step-ladder/stool combination directly in front of her with such exquisite timing that Edna ascended without breaking step to suddenly be almost eye to eye with her, Anna almost flinching back at the sudden invasion of her personal space, but again freezing with a mere look from the other.

“Such potential” she muttered as she reached out casually to take a lock of her hair that was freely hanging, just brushed into submission from its chaotic sleep state to study it closely. “Such raw potential I have not seen in years! You wear your innocence like a cloak, yes? It’s wunderbar! And there are models who would sell their souls for hair this colour - or eyes as expressive as yours” she observed, before shifting her gaze to the side was a frown. “That would be of course if they had not mortgaged them at least three times already” she added turning back to poke at the white lock of hair that had been her bane all of her life. “Was ist das?”

“Its … I’ve had that in my hair since I was five” she stuttered, suddenly feeling incredibly self conscious about it and having to fight the urge to turn away. “I … dreamed I was kissed by a troll one night, and the next morning-”

“Spectacular!” the other declared loudly, cutting her off in a voice that brooked no objection. “Oh yes dahling, this will be your signature, your statement; your you!” she decreed, spinning away and flowing down the stairs. Snapping her fingers several times as she trotted across the room. “You you, get her hair washed, straightened and done in style sixteen-four-two. You and you, nails. You, my scissors! We have too much work and too little time for my creation to be prepared” she declared before waving her hand in a general direction to get to work.

Everything seemed to pass in a confusing blur for Anna from that point on as she found herself all but grabbed by a dozen hands and yanked into a makeup and dressing room next to the sitting room. It was almost suffocating as she was passed from person to person almost like a doll, her hair washed, straightened and then braided and tied up into some kind of bun, a pair of shimmering ribbons worked into it. Simultaneously her nails were worked on, cleaned, filled and then polished until they gleamed, even as another team went to work plucking out some of her eyebrows, ignoring her squeaks of protest as her head was yanked this way and that way. It took long enough that her stomach, not entirely satiated from the taste of food earlier started to complain again-
Then, just as suddenly as it had begun, it was over.

The crowd of women with identical haircuts, dresses and makeup who had been manhandling her were walking out the door without a word and slowly, she got to her feet. Looking around she saw no mirrors or other surfaces and so followed the people out shyly into the main room where Edna was sitting on a chair, her hands steepled in front of her as she intently studied the end result of the work.

“Mag-nificent” she drawled in a far too smug and satisfied way.

“Can … can I see a mirror?” Anna asked tentatively, only to be tutted as the other stood and ambled over.

“Mirrors always lie dahling - before you get the full picture. Remember that! Now, my latest masterpiece” she announced and her arm snapped up to point off to the side, but didn’t turn to look. Anna did-

And felt the breath being stolen from her lungs.

It was a green dress, shimmering on a mannequin that had been brought in, but the word ‘dress’ didn’t seem to do it justice and she found herself agreeing on the spot with the rather grandiose label of ‘creation’ that Edna had insisted upon using. It was strapless, with delicately tasseled aqua wraps curving around the upper arms, but otherwise leaving her sleeveless. The sweetheart neckline would curve around her torso, which was coloured a black so perfectly dark it seemed almost like space, embroidered with a cunning flower pattern in red, blue and greens. A green metallic binding that seemed to become golden as the light played across it bordered the bodice, separating it from the segmented floor length dress, which green, shimmering and embroidered with yet more designs also seemed to change in tone as light played across it.

“Oh…” she breathed, feeling almost light headed as she stepped closer. She had worn plenty of dresses over the years of course for this or that event, but nothing had ever captured her attention like this one, as she dared to step closer to it. “Its … its incredible…”

“That? That is just a dress Dahling. Is frosting incredible before it is put on a cake? No! Is paint incredible for it is expertly applied to a canvas? No, no no! You will be incredible when you put it on. Go go, hurry now and put it on. I demand it”.

Anna nodded dumbly and stepped up to the mannequin as two helpers carefully removed it and unzipped an almost invisible zipper on the back, before carefully placing the dress on hooks behind a convenient screen, before withdrawing to give her a little privacy. Anna shakingly removed her clothes and got into the dress, cringing as she put it on, desperate to not damage it in any way, feeling at a touch that this fabric was something special. With it loosely hanging off her, she stepped out from behind the screen and the two women at once helped her fit it and zip it up. It felt incredibly snug, yet incredibly free at the same time. So perfectly smooth, yet not loose…

Finally the two women helping her finished the last adjustments and stepped back, one making a discrete coughing noise. Edna who had been sitting with her back turned finally swiveled around … and gasped.

“Oh I knew it - some of my finest work, no question at all - no-one would dare” she almost snarled, her eyes alight with something that made Anna wonder if she was not entirely sane.

“Dahling, you will destroy everyone. Even your sister in that horrific traditional nightmare they are forcing on her” she sniffed, shaking her head almost sadly. “It does not suit her, not at all. So constraining so constricting so rigid, uch! And those colors with that cape? Still, we are all slaves to tradition are we not? The answer is no!” she slammed her hand on the chairs armrest yet again - had that chair even been in the room before?- and hopped down, ignoring Annas startled jump.

“Now, these and this” she demanded, pointing to boxes and in a whirlwind of motion the two women rapidly had a pair of black low heels on her feet and a silken choker with a small golden pendant hanging from it wrapped around her neck. Finally, a tiny amount of makeup was applied,
“Peeeeeerrrrfection” Edna hissed from point blank range, Anna feeling almost like her glasses were microscopes as she seemed to study every inch of her before stalking away, looking smug. “Once again I have surpassed even my own impossible expectations. It's all up to you now!” she said, snapped her fingers several times. Almost at once the door opened again and the hoard of people who had clearly been waiting outside returned, gathering up the unopened boxes which Anna guessed had other unused accessories or something and leaving in haste.

“Wait, what's up to me?” she asked in more than a little confusion, feeling thoroughly off balance as Edna started to stalk out of the room after her staff.

“It, Dahling” she replied almost with a sigh. “It!”

And with that, the door ‘imploded’ closed behind her with a slam that caused Anna to jump one last time, leaving her alone in her room that was suddenly, blessedly, silent and still.

Anna granted herself a full thirty seconds to stop and try to regain her equilibrium from the whirlwind of activity. Then because she couldn’t help herself, she started swishing her long dress around. It made a fascinating rustling sound as she twirled backwards and forwards, a giggle escaping her mouth as she felt the incredibly light dress swirl as it moved flawlessly around her...

She had to see it!

She hurried back into her bedroom with a grin on her face to where there was a floor to ceiling mirror … and stopped dead in front of it in shock.

The woman in the mirror gaping back stupidly at her was a stranger. A striking, unique, grand even woman of the highest nobility. The white streak she had always had a love-hate relationship with had been somehow wound down through her braid to give her a highly exotic look, the braid itself curling around to form into a large bun on her head, with just a vestigial tail dripping off the back of it, with ribbons tied into it. Her freckles that she had always hated, envying her cousin (and Sisters) fair flawless skin seemed to somehow fill in her bare shoulders and neck and work with the exotic look rather than against it.

And the dress … it was just incredible, breathtaking. She was hardly the most vain person, but she just couldn’t stop staring at her reflection, daring to strike a pose, trying for a pose of sophisticated grace.

Imaging herself at the ball tonight.

In the mirror she saw herself, regal, stunning and even just a little hot, dare she think it, trying to affect just the right level of mystery in her reflection as she concentrated. And there he was, tall and regal, his glorious green eyes shimmering in the dim reflected light of the ballroom as he approached. And then the awkward, cute yet charming icebreaker as they started to talk, finding so much in common as the rest of the ballroom seemed to fade away. The two of them dancing to the swirling music, lost in each others faces, held by his broad, strong arms. Laughing at each others jokes until finally in a dark corner of the room he raised her hand to his lips, never breaking eye contact as then he gently pulled her hand - and her -closer -

Anna squealed, bouncing a full meter in the air and clutching her chest in a panic as she looked around wildly as if somehow someone would know what she had been fantasizing about, before taking a deep breath and getting herself back under control as the illusion shattered.

“Yes?” she asked the room when she was sure that her voice was back under control even as her heart hammered in her chest.
There was a soft click, then a smooth, aristocratic voice broke in.

“My Lady, this is the concierge” the voice said. “Your scheduled transport to the investment ceremony has been confirmed to arrive in half an hour. It will be waiting for you immediately outside the main VIP entrance” the voice explained.

“Uh right!” she replied. “Thankyou!”

“Certainly Ma’am” the voice confirmed, then with the two toned beep, the channel was closed.

And with that, suddenly the ball and reception and her hopes for something different in her life this evening seemed infinitely far away as she slowly sat down on the edge of her bed. The chaos of getting dressed and ready had kept her utterly off balance since waking up, distracted and focused entirely on other things … but now with nothing to do but wait, she realized that she was only an hour or two away from meeting her sister for the first time in over a decade.

Suddenly, she was no longer feeling hungry.
The Duchess of Arendelle

"Give me the thunder of a thousand guns rather than the fanfare of one trumpet!"

- Comment attributed to Victor Steiner-Davion

Great Hall of Arendelle
Arendelle City, Arendelle
Crucis March
Federated Commonwealth
May 10 3053

Victor Ian Steiner-Davion had come to the conclusion early on in his life that Thrones … were overrated.

Especially as unlike his preferred seat of power, they didn't come with 'Mech grade weapons.

Not that they didn't look impressive; that was sort of the point after all. Your average throne room was designed for the express purpose of directing all attention to the throne (or more specifically the person sitting on it); to intimidate the hell out of anyone approaching it & them. The Throne Room in the Triad for instance took that logic to typically Lyran extremes by having a pair of Battlemechs -generally Griffins- stationed inside the room, manned by some of the finest pilots in the 1st Royal Guard. Cunningly decorated almost like glorified statues and symbolically positioned directly behind the throne, it was far too easy to mentally put them into the background and forget they were, in fact, fully operational weapons of war. More than one angry petitioner had been reminded of that fact over the centuries when their body language got just a tad too threatening; having a Donal PPC suddenly swing up to point directly at your face could do remarkable things in terms of reminding people of the due level of respect and deference that should be maintained at all times towards their ruler.

The Great Hall of Arendelle wasn't technically Duchy Throne Room at all mind, that being back at the Palace and used for smaller more intimate events - although very few of those since the untimely deaths of the rulers of Arendelle several years ago. And while it technically would have been a more appropriate and traditional venue for such a solemn event to take place, it could barely hold five hundred people - a tiny fraction of the VIPs who simply had to be present at this event (according to them anyway). And as the Great Hall had been constructed specifically to provide a large enough secure venue for the Duke or Duchess to hold a rare 'full court' audience of the Royal Court, it had been the natural choice for the location of the investment, no matter the grumbles of some more conservative commentators who really had their hearts set on a classical throne room ceremony.

The throne sitting at the centre of the vast chamber was the real deal however. It had been shipped across from the Palace under the careful eye of Kai Brevik by a specialist team of movers, said movers rapidly made aware that the phrase 'worth its weight in gold' was not exactly hyperbole for this particular piece of furniture as they had grunted and hauled it into position. Now, polished until it probably qualified as laser-reflective armor, the impressive throne rested on a raised marble dais in the middle of the Great Hall, sitting on a broad marble stage. Two lines of chairs flanked it on either side - but all were empty as the clock slowly counted down to the start of the ceremony.

They were probably the only seats in the Great Hall that were unoccupied however.

The upper and lower galleries were covered in people, the chamber packed to absolute capacity by those lucky enough to have scored one of the coveted invitations issued in the name of Hanse Davion on behalf of the people of Arendelle. Most prominent of those seated was the People's Council', the grandiose and not entirely accurate name given to the mixture of senior regional nobility and elected representatives of the people who effectively ran the world on a day to day basis. Filling out the rest of the seats was an eclectic mix of lesser nobility and VIPs who through birthright, position, influence or just plain old luck had managed to score one of the coveted golden tickets, the allocation of which and seating arrangements of which had involved
the brisk trading of favors, promises and probably no small amount of cash between various groups.

In truth, despite the fact that this event was technically all about the Duchess, a large chunk of attendees couldn't care less about this formal ceremony to install her, seeing it as a foregone conclusion and highly inefficient way of ultimately just saying 'she's the boss now'. Instead, they saw far more value in using the rare gathering of most of the planet's richest and most powerful people in one place to advance their own agendas.

This was very much a *working* coronation thank you very much, not a holiday!

Mere money however *couldn't* buy the best seats in the house. The *lower* stalls that came right up to the edge of the stage itself had charmingly been reserved for several thousand school children selected from across the planet, to allow the next generation a chance to witness this once in a generation even up close; to see history in the making and hopefully be inspired by it. Cynical keen observers may well have noticed that a substantial majority of the 'random' children excitedly bouncing up and down in their seats were in fact the scions of the planets senior nobility … although if any did, they had the exquisite tact to not make a mention of it on the live feeds going out to hundreds of millions of people watching. Lest they (correctly) hint that favouritism may have played some small part in the selection of the cross section of youth picked to have a front row seat to history.

Standing outside the main doors as the time wound down to the start of the events, Victor Steiner-Davion in a somewhat more cynical frame of mind couldn't help but wonder if MIIO had quietly *arranged* the presence of the Children, on the grounds that a mass of people with an average age of twelve would be unlikely to have any trained assassins hiding among them. And more to the point, that any of their parents who might have wanted to do harm to him or the Duchess would *probably* hesitate if they found out that their child was going to be in the line of fire...

Still, any chance for further reflections on the paranoia and/or ruthlessness of his security teams were lost when at exactly 15:00 local, a lone trumpeter started to play. The chamber lights fell quickly, plunging the room into darkness, silencing even the restless children as the notes hauntingly rang out across the chamber and the world beyond. Then a second trumpet joined the first - and then a third, the three harmonizing perfectly up and down for several minutes before merging into a final crescendo and note … and then there was light.

Under the sudden glare of a spotlight, a quintet of men and women could now be seen marching down the red carpet that linked the main entrance to the stage and Throne. In the lead was the Sergeant at Arms of the Royal Court, a retired NCO who had served in both the 4th Succession and 3039 Wars; finding to his pleasant surprise that herding politicians was really little different than herding junior officers. Behind him marched a quartet of local militiamen, each one carrying a flag of the highest quality, all five in perfect lockstep. Together, they climbed the broad steps to the stage, the chamber filled with the sound of their feet marching across the marble until they snapped to a halt directly in front of the Throne. The Sergeant then with great care came to full attention and saluted it, the flag carriers stepping forth to place their flags into cunning hidden points in the floor flanking the gleaming seat. Their task accomplished, the quartet reformed, spun on their heels and marched off to the side of the stage to vanish into the darkness.

The sergeant remained behind, holding the salute. Only when they had vanished and the sound of their footsteps ceased did his arm snap back down, the man spinning around to march alone to the very edge of the stage, just off the stairs and red carpet. He waited for a moment until absolute silence hung in the air …

Then he spoke.

"**HIS HIGHNESS, PRINCE VICTOR IAN STEINER-DAVION, LORD OF ARENDELLE, LORD OF THE CRUCIS MARCH, PRINCE IMPERIAL OF THE FEDERATED SUNS, ARCHON DESIGNATE OF THE LYRAN COMMONWEALTH, ARCHON-PRINCE DESIGNATE OF THE FEDERATED COMMONWEALTH!**" the man roared in a voice that may not have needed the broadcast team to be heard on the other side of the planet.

*If I didn't already know the man was an NCO …* Victor grinned tightly to himself for a moment,
before schooling his expression into a slightly more solemn one as the main doors were opened in front of him and at a nod from the event manager, he stepped forward into the lights and sound as the orchestra struck up 'Hail to the Prince' - he had a feeling he'd be hearing that a lot more now in his life...

Victor kept his pace measured against the beat of the music, but he did his best to not just march in like a soldier. Instead, he forced himself to pause and meet the eyes of as many children as possible as he passed them, taking in their awed faces with a smile while ignoring the discrete presence of the two close protection bodyguards silently shadowing his movements down the broad red carpeted path, their eyes scanning like targeting scanners - and trying not to think about the number of 'friendly' snipers in the rafters doing the same. Both of them clearly extremely worried that one of the children might make a spitwad assassination attempt on him ...

Mentally rolling his eyes at their paranoia -while acknowledging that it was their job to be paranoid- he reached the stage without incident and climbed the steps alone as the bodyguards sheared off to skulk in the shadows around the base of it. He stopped momentarily to return the salute of the Sergeant-At-Arms crisply with the respect due of one soldier to another before he finally crossed the rest of the white marble stage to reach the Thrones dias, climbing it halfway before turning to watch the entry of the most 'VIP of VIPS' as they were announced one by one by the Sergeant at Arms.

Kai, as the heir to another Successor States throne was first of course, striding down towards him looking far too cheerful - and rather natty in a striking neo-Hanfu business suit. It was all the latest rage on Sian, part of his mother's 'Xin Sheng' movement launched to give the Confederation a new sense of unity, purpose and hope as she moved it from the dark days of Romano, remodeling it much as she had Saint Ives - drawing on Terran Chinese history for much of her inspiration...

But he knew Kai hated the clothes as much as Victor hated his suit.

Both men put smiles on their faces however, pretending they liked wearing their clothes even if they would vastly prefer the hard and rough kevlar of a cooling vest...

Immediately after Kai followed the closest family of the apparent Duchess; her relatives from Corona. Then came some of her household staff led by Kai Brevik, her chief of staff and a few other VIPs from her staff whom the Duchess had chosen to sit in the places of honor on the stage.

Next came the High Council; the rather grandiose name given to the personal advisors and counselors of the planetary ruler, who would sit on his left. Most of them had served the former Duchess and then the Regent Landers. Some had taken the change to Elsa as a chance to gracefully bow out as their age had caught up with them and so their chairs were for now empty; he would in fact be swearing in their replacements as part of the preliminaries to the investment itself.

But he couldn't help but wish more of them had taken the chance to resign rather than cling to their positions.

Because some of them moved slower than an Annihilator with shattered knee joints...

"HAIL VICTOR!" the Sergeant at Arms barked into the silence when the last of them reached their seat. Eventually.

"Hail Victor!" the assembled masses chanted back.

"LONG MAY HE REIGN!" the ex-NCO politely screamed.

"Long may he reign!" the rest of the locals agreed quickly, clearly not daring to disagree with the man.

With that out of the way, Victor stood to attention, swiveling on his heel to face Kai and the line of VIP's behind him to offer a formal half bow. Straightening, they returned the gesture much deeper - Kai exchanging the briefest glance with him that spoke volumes of their mutual dislike of this kind of excessive veneration- before he repeated the gesture with the councillors flanking to
his left. And then finally he repeated the gesture straight ahead to the assembled masses gaining a mass bow in return … except for one cute young schoolgirl in the front row who offered an impeccable curtsy by mistake. A wave of laughter and snickers erupted from the other children around her until rapid hissed commands from a number of teachers silenced the mockery, but the poor girl none the less looked like she wanted to melt through the floor right now and vanish as the focus of the entire room briefly oriented on her mistake.

Victor could sympathise with her quite a bit in that moment.

Settling himself, he switched on the tiny headset/microphone he was wearing with a touch of a control cunningly worked into a watch on his wrist.

"Please, be seated" he said, and waited for everyone to settle themselves before continuing in a clear, steady voice. "In the name of First Prince Hanse Davion on this day, May the Tenth in the year Three Thousand and Fifty Three I, Archduke Victor Steiner-Davion acting as Duke of Arendelle in this matter hereby declare this special sitting of the Royal Court of Arendell, open. Per standing order one-three, I now assume the chairmanship - the Scribe of the Court will note these events accordingly".

"So noted, My Prince" a voice confirmed formally from somewhere off stage and he nodded, letting his formal expression softened to a much more friendly one.

"First, I would like to welcome, on behalf of the people of Arendelle, all those who have also traveled a great distance to be here with us today. Most especially Kai Allard-Liao" he gestured to his right. His friend stood briefly to offer a half bow in thanks of the polite applause that generated before he sat back down. "And a very warm welcome indeed" Victor continued gesturing past Kai to the trio next to him, "to the Duke and Duchess of Corona and their daughter, the Countess of Pomerelia. They did Arendelle the enormous honour of providing a loving home to their niece and cousin, the Lady Anna Jorgensson, after the tragic death of her parents. And for that, we thank them, deeply".

A second wave of applause accompanied by a wave of 'Here Here!' comments thundered through the room as the locals showed their appreciation for the two sisters distant family helping out during a difficult time. The two elder nobles rose with a great dignity to offer a bow and a curtsy to the applauding locals, while the younger Rapunzel shyly offered more of a brief dip … with the dimples in her smile more devastating than a Black-Hawks Alpha Strike.

Of course, why Elsa had sent Anna away for the last few years was still a great mystery and source of confusion for Victor. From what little he 'knew' of her from Ardans comments and his chat with Roger Landers yesterday …

Although he would be the first to admit he barely knew Anna and hadn't even met Elsa yet, something in the reluctant part of his mind that had been trained in the polite vipers nest of court politics was nagging him about the disconnection between the two young women, insisting he was missing, well, something...

Still, it really wasn't any of his business. Even as Elsa's boss, how she related to her sister was up to her and no-one else. But at the least, he could thank their relatives for looking after Anna; he had caught enough from Anna yesterday to guess shrewdly that they may well have helped her through a rather bad place after her parents death.

Finishing up the introduction of the necessary people who merited a personal acknowledgement from him, Victor then turned to glance at the Sergeant at Arms, who had remained standing rigidly at attention in a way that would have had drill instructors all over the AFFC nodding in approval.

"Sergeant at Arms; stand easy and proceed with the agenda of the day" he ordered as he settled onto the throne. It was surprisingly comfortable compared to either of his Parents thrones that he had tried out at one time or another, with more cushions and not quite as much beaten Gold over marble.

He still thought it could use at least a few Pulse Lasers, but suppressed the thought -and his grin- as the Sergeant-At-Arms saluted, then turned to demand with a roar for the Bishop of Arendelle
City to come forth and proceed with the opening prayer- seeming to almost give the poor man a heart attack.

**Hire Car NBV-112**  
**Arendelle City, Arendelle**  
**Crucis March**  
**Federated Commonwealth**  
**May 10 3053**

It was probably to be expected that despite the best efforts of the local constabulary, there was a great deal of traffic chaos in the central business district of Arendelle City today, but if so then the eye of the storm was undeniably Unity Plaza.

Sitting in the core of the Government district, Unity Plaza was roughly two thirds well maintained parkland and lawns and one third open paved area. Named after (and in honor) of Unity City on Terra, the plaza had originally been paved in various shades of native stone to form a giant Cameron Star; the symbol of the Star League and its ruling house. Nominally in celebration of the union of humanity across all known space.

More than one local historian had suggested over the years however that the Plaza had been dedicated less to the ideals of universal brotherhood and more towards reminding everyone exactly who ruled their world; 'like a tramp stamp right in the middle of the Government district' as the late Professor Baron Eric Kindler had put it rather bluntly in 3024. Given that the plaza had been built using funds from the Bureau of Star League Affairs directly on the order of First Lord Richard Cameron, it was a common-if slightly controversial- contemporary view, against those who tended to view the Star League as an unparalleled golden age for mankind. Especially compared to what had come next.

As the centuries of Succession Wars had rolled on, arguments had waxed and waned on what to do with the square - and more specifically, the rather outdated fresco. It had only been in 3028 with the wedding of Hanse Davion and Melissa Steiner that momentum had truly built to update it as a new age dawned for the Inner Sphere. Now, the still aptly named Unity Plaza sported the Fist and Sunburst of the Federated Commonwealth Alliance and such was the quality of the masons work that even at ground level, it was quite a sight to behold and a major tourist attraction for the city.

Today however, the giant fresco was almost invisible at any level, covered as it was by a large chunk of the hundred thousand people who had scored tickets to 'ground zero' as the plaza event had been dubbed. A six meter wall made out of the same material as Battlemech faceplates had sealed the entire plaza off from the road that ringed it, with all access in and out of the plaza via underground shopping strips, leaving the streets empty. From deep underground chambers where remote sensors kept watch all the way to rooftops, where Infiltrator suits carrying massive anti-material rifles sulked in the shadows; security was everywhere as one might expect for a city that the Archon-Prince designate was visiting. With only some authorized vehicles allowed onto the streets under police escort.

Anna Jorgensson didn't notice any of this. Despite looking out the window her whole trip between the Hotel and Great Hall in the hire car flanked by a motorcycle escort, her mind was very busy elsewhere doing absolutely nothing. A Locust could have started racing them in the overtaking lane while loudly playing Taurian polka music on a giant accordion and she probably wouldn't have even noticed - such was the level of distraction she was under right now.

Indeed, it wasn't until the third time he had tried to get her attention, that Anna realized she was being addressed by her Driver.

"Yes?" she asked uncertainly as she turned back to face the other, who was smiling kindly at her.

"We're here".

"Oh. Ohh!" she gasped, glancing at the clock beyond him on the dashboard -the spare here with twenty minutes to spare!- and looked outside her window. All she could see past the tinted one
way glass however was that they had stopped inside what looked like a security checkpoint of some kind. "Um, thanks!"

The other smiled as she undid her seatbelt and slid over to the door, Anna so caught up in the moment that she didn't even really notice the nice man wishing her good luck. She hesitated for a second, trying to calm her nerves as she gripped the door handle, telling herself that she was here and she had been worrying about nothing in terms of being late...

It didn't really work of course. Her treasonous mind promptly switched tracks, going from frantic worries about not turning up on time to frantic worries about now doing something incredibly embarrassing and wishing she had stayed away. She was a klutz; she knew it, everyone knew it. And if there was going to be someone who screwed up the day for everyone and humiliated her family and planet...

A distraction was thankfully provided as her door was opened by a protocol officer outside. The distant roaring noise she had noticed earlier now came into full force as she alighted from the car. Immediately next to the car door was the door to what looked like a demountable building of some kind that blocked the entire road off, a large tent-like canopy stretching out from it to provide privacy (and sniper protection) from the public. But she had little time to examine the structure, as she was quickly hustled through the door as her car moved off, the man closing the door behind her and cutting most of the noise off.

"Please just step through the tunnel Ma'am" a voice came over a hidden speaker as she glanced around, blinking as her eyes adjusted. A few seconds later she realized she was inside a broad tunnel perhaps five meters long. More or less featureless, she recognized it from past experience as a security scanner of sorts, one that would poke her with all manner of (more or less) harmless radiation to ensure she wasn't carrying any explosives, poisons, guns, laser eyes, mono-edged fingernail knives or other possible weapons on (or even inside) her person.

Trying to put as confident an air as possible on, she walked under the giant microscope, emerging into a much larger processing room of sorts, with a door on the far end and a half a dozen MIIO agents. Clearly set up to sort through a dozen people at a time (and probably only one of several such screening rooms in this access control building) she was the only guest present - unsurprising given that she was arriving towards the end of the extensive ceremonies. Unlike the somewhat excitable police, these people looked both utterly calm and looked deadly serious, so she mentally told herself to not make any sudden moves. One agent stepped forward gently into her path as she exited the tunnel and offered her a slight bow and smile - although his eyes didn't leave her face for a moment - in fact everyone seemed to be looking at her with almost excessive wariness for some reason…

"My Lady, your name and invitation please?"

Anna's lightning fast wit just couldn't resist the opening, a mildly confused look coming across her face in the certain knowledge that some of the nobility would have probably hauntedly sneered at these poor people just doing their jobs; insulted at the very idea that they were not at once recognized. With Anna delaying just long enough to make them think that she was about to berate them for not recognizing the sister of the Duchess Apparent...

"Didn't you get Agent Curatis's 'priority threat' handout this morning?" she asked with as much innocence as she could muster.

A wave of noises that sounded suspiciously like strangled snickering and barely contained laughter came from the hard looking men and women, shattering the icy-professional mood in a moment - although all of them discreetly but hastily raised their hands to cover a sudden outbreak of coughing as the lead agent turned slightly with a raised eyebrow to not quite glare at them.

"Presuming, my Lady, that I did not?" the older man calmly asked as he turned back … although Anna could see the side of his impassive face twitching furiously as he fought for control of his blank expression.

"Oh. Well, in that case" she replied as she reached into the cunningly concealed pocket in her dress to withdraw and unfold her invitation (that she was proud to say she had only checked to
make sure it was in her pocket three times during the whole car trip). Made of the very finest ComStar letterhead, she pressed her thumb into the holographic plate woven into the plaspaper, causing an embedded thumbprint mirroring hers to light up and glow green as the verigraph sampled her thumbprint and DNA to confirm she was indeed the authorized holder of the message. Simultaneously, a second string of previously invisible numbers and letters illuminated along the top of the page and without prompting, she turned the invitation over the man who gratefully took it from her.

"I am Anna Jorgensson" she formally identified herself with a shy look under his stern gaze.

"Very good My Lady" he bowed to her before glancing down to the paper to inspect the verigraph seal to make sure it was intact and not tampered with. He then lifted some kind of portable sensor and waved it over the string of numbers and barcodes now visible, a light on the side of the small box flashing yellow for a moment before turning green. At that, the group of agents seemed to relax ever so slightly as the code in the paper was apparently confirmed by some computer and he carefully re-folded the paper up as her thumbprint started to fade away from the paper. "Thank you, Lady Jorgensson" he said professionally, handing her back the invitation with a bow and stepping out of her way to gesture to one of the doors in the far wall. Anna in turn offered the cutest smile she could muster back and, finally, the man's stoic facade cracked ever so slightly as almost against his will he offered a smile back before Anna stepped past him to the doors, which slid open and closed behind her.

Unheard behind her, the lead agent then wheeled on his people and started to demand answers on who exactly had told Anna Jorgensson about Agent Curatis's briefing this morning.

Anna meanwhile found herself in little more than a small anteroom that faced a pair of elegant looking frosted glass doors, with a red carpet on the surface of the road leading outside. Clearly this was the main 'red carpet' entrance as opposed to the more discreet direct-into-building side entrance most people would use. The roaring noise from outside was again much louder here and except for her, there was just a single elderly man waiting inside grasping a clipboard. Clearly he was not part of the security team, not unless MIIO were so strapped for good people they were hiring seventy year olds anyway. And something about his moustached face vaguely tickled the back of her mind as he offered her a formal bow …

"My Lady Anna" the other greeted her with a deep bow and slightly raspy voice. "It is the greatest pleasure to see you home once again".

"Uh … and good to see you as well…" she desperately racked her brains before it suddenly clicked in her mind and belatedly added "Mister Cogsworth". One of the stuffy protocol officers of her parents, whose primary job had seemed to be forcing her to stand perfectly still for excessive amounts of time as a child, before being announced and allowed into incredibly boring receptions with her parents.

The irony that right now, at this time, she sort of felt that she would be entirely happy to stand still in this room for as long as necessary rather than walk outside was not entirely lost on her.

"You look quite marvelous, My Lady" the man continued, seemingly chuffed that she had remembered his name. "The Coronation Ceremony is due to begin soon, right now the hall is in a recess break until then. So the networks will be covering your arrival, live".

"Oh…good" she managed, trying to force down the sudden surge of panic at the idea of a good chunk of the planet's population focused entirely on her every move. Everything that had been theoretical before was starting to become just a tad too … real … for her.

"Quite" the other nodded, clearly utterly misunderstanding her terse response. "Now, you will have the press to your left behind a rope line, you can feel free to just smile and wave and ignore them no matter if they shout questions at you. The armor barrier is immediately to your right with the public. Just walk down the red carpet between them until it turns up the stairs into the front doors. At that point you will be expected to say a few words-"

"No-one ever said anything about that!" she protested, her eyes widening and feeling a sudden urge to start sweating. She had never exactly been a good public speaker…
"It's just a few words" the other sniffed, his mustache twitching over her objections. "No-one is expecting you to make a speech. Just say how happy you are to be here, thank everyone for coming and that will be quite sufficient thank you!"

"Okay … I guess I can handle that" she agreed hesitatingly, anxiety starting to slowly edge up from under her control as she mentally tried to fumble together a few words in her mind and came up with nothing...

"Excellent!" the other smiled thinly. "Now" he gestured to the door. "I'll announce you, then remember is just straight out and down the red carpet until you get to the protocol officer who will hand you a microphone. Say a brief greeting, wave, then inside you go. Easy and simple".

She managed an almost mechanical nod to the other, who in turn nodded back and then touched a button on the wall, the frosted glass door sliding opening and the roar of noise from outside increasing markedly as he stepped out. A repeater vid screen on the wall showing the live TV feed suddenly switched from a pan shot of the massive crowd to a close up zoom of Davis from just outside as he stepped out from under the slick looking canopy to a lectern and smiled proudly.

"Presenting..." his voice boomed across the area that immediately forced a lull in the general chatter. Say what you will about the man, but he certainly had a voice fit for introducing people. "Presenting" he tried again when he had their attention, "the Lady Anna Jorgensson of Arendelle!"

The thunderous roar from outside in response was surely intended be both welcoming and supportive, but Anna felt her legs wobble slightly and her stomach twist as it really started to hit her just how many people were out there. Thinking about all the people who would be looking at her, watching her, ready to about freeze up in place as bad, dark memories came back of the last time she'd had the entire focus of this planet on her. The day she had buried--

-and with that, she felt a pulse of shame slap her across her self-absorbed face. 

*She didn't have the right* to feel anxious. Not today.

Because in an hour or so, a woman only a few years older than her who had also lost her parents … *their* parents … would be given the singular burden of being responsible for every man, woman and child on the planet, while *she* could go to sleep tonight with no more a burden on her shoulders than choosing which clothes she would wear tomorrow.

Today wasn't about her. Not in any way, shape or form.

Today was about her sister. And about *helping* her … however she could.

If she couldn't find the confidence in herself to face these crowds on her own … all she had to do was think about her sister, *about doing this for her* … and just as suddenly as that, her back straightened and her chin lifted and without even thinking, Anna strode out of the tent with a broad smile on her face, with all the confidence and determination of an Assault Mech.

**Great Hall of Arendelle - Royal Suite**
Arendelle City, Arendelle
Crucis March
Federated Commonwealth
May 10 3053

At ten stories tall the Great Hall of Arendelle was far from the tallest building in the immediate vicinity of Unity Plaza. That particular honor belonged to the Ministry of Finances (better known as the Tower of Taxes by the locals); an angular flat structure that had been all the rage of style in the 2900s when constructed, but to most people looked more like a giant guillotine hanging over the entire district. Even so, the Great Hall would be hard to miss, having the pride of place directly opposite the massive FedCom muriel set into the Plaza.

But the hall itself was not the totality of the building.
While the massive chamber certainly dominated the lower part of the building, two dozen stories of offices, conference rooms and smaller council chambers rose above it. This was where the real day-to-day work of the planet was performed; scaling from small local Government working groups ran by professional politicians all the way to inter-regional 'dispute resolution committees', who had the thankless task of trying to deal with friction between senior Nobles before the Duke or Duchess would be forced to personally step in. But it meant the building was, in normal times, a madhouse of activity and constantly changing personnel from all over the solar system.

Indeed, the only permanently assigned office space in the building was levels four through ten, used by the local Government authority of Arendelle City. And as part of that, a suite of offices on the fourth floor were set aside as the official chambers of the Count/Countess of Arendelle City. It was a title held by the planets Duke in fact, but was traditionally invested into their spouse or another trusted family member to manage on their behalf, allowing them to serve as a sort of de-facto First among Equals in the People's Council. But since the untimely death of Adgar Jorgensson who had last held the title, the offices had been empty, vacant and silent.

Nevertheless, the suite was kept secured, ready and tidy on the expectation that soon enough they would be used again. And that diligent work by the housekeeping staff was rewarded when, at midday, the executive elevator directly linking the private office to the rooftop helipad pinged open unheralded to deposit a security detail. They made a quick but thorough sweep of the suite of rooms before calling in the main 'party', withdrawing to cover the entrances and leave the rooms alone to the single young woman who they were sworn to protect.

The vast majority of nobility across both halves of the Federated Commonwealth, mere hours away from such a life changing event, would typically be surrounded by a hoard of close family, friends, retainers, vassals, mentors and media advisors as they prepared to accept the enormity of the change in their lives.

The Duchess Apparent of the planet of Arendelle however waited alone.

The dictionary definition of grace, Elsa Jorgensson cut a most striking figure as she glided silently around the room; an avatar of classical beauty that would have grabbed undivided attention across the Inner Sphere - even without the royal blood flowing through her veins. Her dress was a deep teal in colour with black highlights and hugged hugged her body from its high collar down to her waist like a second skin, making the most of her perfect physique to leave only her neck and face exposed. Completing the outfit, a pair of aqua colored silk gloves covered up the last of any skin that might have shown … which, as she slowly strode over to the far wall from the window and large oil painting there, she ever so slowly started to strip off.

Reaching the painting and clutching her gloves in her hands, she stared up at the image of her parents. Feeling as always the un-muted pang of loss, she put it aside behind the mask she wore as she studied the Images. Her mother stood in it, dressed in almost identical robes, holding the scepter and orb that symbolized their families right to rule this world in the name of the First Prince of the Federated Suns next to her Father.


The painting all but blazed with the confidence, wisdom and leadership demanded by House Davion of the people who ruled worlds in their name, beloved by their people …

And then there was her. The girl who wanted more than anything else to keep away from her people.

"Don't let them in" Elsa said softly as she wringed the gloves in her naked hands. "Don't let them see … be the good girl you always have to be. Conceal … don't feel …"

The words were recited with the absent intensity of someone who knew them by route. Someone who had repeated them to herself over and over and over again yet perhaps, deep down, didn't quite believe them … but desperately wanted to.

Hesitantly, Elsa lay her gloves down the on the top of a long sideboard. Then with controlled, deliberate movements, reached out to gently take hold of a large candlestick with one hand and a
small decorative ornament with the other; vaguely similar in shape and size to the scepter and orb in the painting. Holding both in her hands for a moment and cringing slightly at the feel of the cool metal and ceramics against her naked skin, she took a deep breath and turned to face the window on the far wall - and distant public beyond them.

"Put on a show" she whispered as her back straightened, raising her arms as she set herself, as if this was the ceremony. Her eyes set with the most intense focus, mirroring the stance and look of the former Duchess on the painting above her.

And despite the fact that it was only a candle and decorative ornament being held in her hand, for those long moments, Elsa looked as majestic as any House Lord in history.

The mask of perfect regality fell away from her face as a soft crackle broke the silence. Elsa's gaze shifted almost unwillingly down to her hands, looking on in almost resigned desperation as from around her fingers frost impossibly started to hungrily spread along the surface of the metal and ceramics. Hurriedly, she turned to rid herself of the two objects, placing them with a thud on the side table and snatching her gloves back, encasing her hands swiftly into the soft, protective fabric as she mentally commanded her suddenly racing heart to still.

"One wrong move…and everyone will know" she whispered in a low tone that was not exactly anxiety, not exactly dread and not exactly fear … but somehow seemed to take a bit from each emotion as she stared at the two partially ice covered objects, glittering in the low light as if in silent prophecy of what was to come today.

Turning away sharply from the table, Elsa marshaled her emotions, feeling the cool power racing under her skin once again receding with the return of the gloves. She could drive herself into a panic over what had just happened, but she knew from experience that would get her nowhere and simply waste energy she would need today. Instead she enforced the glacial calm onto herself with a slow deep breath, before turning to walk to the window. Outside, the world seethed with activity, the tens of thousands of people in the square opposite throninging and cheering, even as she was as always, hidden from their view behind the one - way mirror glass. Directly under her window was the main entrance - and on the road that crossed in front of it were a pair of her childhood nightmares.

Specifically, a pair of Battlemechs.

Part of Prince Victor's escort, the Warhammer and Marauder were a sight unseen to the people of Arendelle for a very long time. Their world had been at peace for centuries and while increasing numbers of units used the planet as a staging depot too and from the Periphery March, it was rare that their Battlemechs were ever shown off to the public. The population were as Battlemech crazy on the whole as the rest of the Federated Suns however, and unsurprisingly the news feeds following his convoy had focused in probably more on the two Battlemechs escorting it than the Archon-Prince designate himself. Retired AFFS talking heads on Vid shows had spent most of his trip excitedly pointed out various Star League grade upgrades to the classic designs and bringing up old war stories before the convoy had reached Unity Plaza. And while Victors convoy had vanished to a secure underground car park at that point, the two Battlemechs had continued forth, strolling almost casually once around the Plaza to the wild cheers of the crowds to take up position flanking the main entrance. Standing there 'on guard' as it were, like two giant sentries.

But while the crowd had waved and taken countless pictures as the two titans stomped their way around the plaza, looking down at the heavily armed war machines standing like titans in front of the ant like crowd Elsa just felt her skin crawling.

As a young girl, in the months after the … accident … she had overheard her parents talking about what more they could do to help her and weighing the risks of if they dared seek help from New Avalon. And while silently listening at their door, she had heard them speculating on what might happen if they had gone to New Avalon for help, after their limited resources had been exhausted with more clue than Elsa as to how her powers worked or how she could control them. Clearly, against the backdrop of the failure of the failed 3039 war they had been terrified over the possibility that she would be shipped off to New Avalon if they went public. Not to get help, but to get studied like a curiosity of nature, taken away from them forever.
Or worse, instead of helping her, they feared she would be moulded into the perfect weapon for the Federated Commonwealth. To kill and destroy on a level far beyond anything the Inner Sphere had seen since the early Succession Wars as their ace in the hole.

The discussion, unknowingly overheard by the young Elsa, had unsurprisingly terrified the already fragile eight year old girl and Elsa had fled back to her room - not needing to hear any more of their talk; hiding under her bed's sheets, shivering as for once, she felt the cold. Wild nightmares had flooded her mind that night; of being sealed away from all human contact inside a Battlemech. Fuzed inside the iron monster for all eternity to serve as a weapon of death and destruction as she brought death to millions of people ... all wearing the face of Anna ...

That night had also made her driven from that day to do whatever was necessary to control her powers, to suppress them. Doing anything and everything to avoid being sent away, to show that she could be a good girl and keep the secret safe and keep everyone else safe too!

She was no longer that girl of course ... but no matter how many times she told herself that she was being irrational, no matter how many times she told herself that she was doing a great disservice to the volunteer soldiers of the AFFS and then AFFC the nightmares of children were no small thing to disavow when she had to but lose focus of her powers for even a second ...

Sighing, she let the emotions wash out of her, closing her eyes and letting the late afternoon sun just still barely visible over the tops of the buildings warm her. The distant voice of Elias Cogsworth could be heard outside, getting the attention of the crowd to announce yet another VIP, her faintly amused mind noting that they were running very late indeed if they had only just gotten here ahead of her entrance which would be the culmination of the three hour long court session...

"... Lady Anna Jorgensson of Arendelle!"

Startled, Elsa's eyes flew open and her head snapped around to stare at the VIP entrance a hundred or so meters up the road in a flash, leaning down against the glass for a better view without the slightest concern for irony as, without even realizing it, she adopted the exact same posture she had often taken when inside her bedroom so long ago. As she had looked out to watch Anna rampage fearlessly around the castle grounds while she stayed out of sight during those long months before she had moved out of her home. Her curse that had been so well controlled until that night wildly throbbing and swirling inside her...

Yet she had often found a rare sense of peace in watching her sister play, almost able to imagine herself down there with her, that everything was back to normal. At least until, inevitably, she'd catch a glimpse of the white lock in her sister's hair and it would all come crashing back. And with that surge of fear, frost would start to spread across the windowsill...then the wall...

But as the crowd roared in approval, Elsa, for once in her life, didn't even think about that night at all.

Instead she felt her throat constrict as she tried to swallow past the lump that had formed, watching as her sister emerged from the checkpoint to an explosion of camera flashes from the media pack on her left and public crowds to the right, her gaze rapidly switching back and forth from the distant figure standing there to one of the high-definition holoscreens in the plaza providing a much closer picture.

Gone was the impatient young child from her memories, who had jumped on her bed in the middle of the night far too often, demanding that she play with her. Or who'd conspired with her to sneak into the kitchen to smuggle out chocolate while Elsa ran a diversion on the other side of the room. Gone too was the gangly girl she had seen in vids and photos her parents brought her, racing everywhere because she clearly had no time to walk!

No; in the place of those memories was a young woman looking every inch the true treasure of the Jorgensson family. Wearing a spectacular dress that took her breath away, Elsa found herself slapped in the face by the unavoidable reality that her sister had grown up into a beautiful young woman who looked every inch the noble she was.
And yet … it was still Anna. So undeniably Anna.

Everything, in every part of her, at the briefest glance, told Elsa that whatever had changed over the years … this was still absolutely her sister from the smile on her face to the enthusiasm with which she greeted the crowds cheering her forward.

A frown marked her face however, as her attention was reluctantly drawn from her sibling to the dozens of reporters in the press area, who she could see even from this distance were clearly shoving microphones in her direction with a frantic energy that made them look like a pack of straining hyenas held back only by the presence of the police in front of them. Her gloved hands curled unconsciously into fists - a rare indeed breakdown in her self control- as she saw them jostle to try and get at her sister to probably yell questions over the roar of the crowd. She recognized a few of the worst local scandlevid types among them, who she knew would do anything to try and get a reaction, darkly anticipating the kind of questions they may be throwing her sisters way…

But Anna, to her relief, simply ignored them. Instead, she focused all her attention on the throngs of cheering crowds, acknowledging as many of them as possible as she strode down the line until she reached the two massive Battlemechs standing on either side of the main stairs and paused between them, looking up at the two Battlemechs.

Elsa couldn’t help but let out a very undignified not-quite-giggle as Anna stared up at the highly polished Battlemechs … and waved at the pilots inside.

And after a moment of what had to be confused surprise, both Battlemechs stirred and waved their weapons pods back at her. Gaining an immediate cheer and round of applause from the crowd.

And just like that, any specter of the Battlemechs from her nightmares had been vanished as if they never were.

Turning away, Anna then climbed the stairs, reaching the main entrance - that just so happened to be directly under her window. And then after a microphone was given her to … she spoke. And her voice, a voice Elsa had not heard in person for years seemed to resonate through the air, a jumble of a million-million memories flaring to life in her mind as she watched and listened to her sister from a distant window, once again.

"Thank … thank you all so much" Anna started, pausing for a few seconds as her head turned to take in the massive crowd hanging on her every word from corner to corner of the Plaza as they rapidly quieted down, straining to hear her. Standing up on the top of the steps meant she was visible to just about all of them and Elsa could see that she had all of their attention as she continued. "I know a lot of you here waited all night for today and I want to let you all know that it means a lot to me that you're all here. And I know it'll mean a lot to my sister as well that you've all come out to support her like this" Anna said, gaining an immediate cheer from the crowd - and a pang in Elsa's heart. "I also know there are a lot of people around the planet who are watching this live - and I want to thank every single one of them for their support. Oh, and all those kids staying up past their bedtimes to watch this? You guys rock!"

There was another cheer and wave of applause from the crowd at that, and Elsa couldn't help but feel awe at the sheer exuberance her sister raised so effortlessly from the people. Elsa was quietly terrified of large crowds of people, finding it so hard to even just stand there and wave, let alone speak. But Anna? Effortlessly ... casually ... easily; Anna had them all cheering louder for her then for any other person to date who had arrived.

"I'd probably better get going before someone has to come out and drag me inside" her sister continued, getting a laugh from her captive audience and drawing her attention back to the here and now, "but I just wanted to say that it makes me so proud to come home and see you all so welcoming to everyone visiting this place. Party on Arendelle!"

Roaring cheers and flag waving from a hundred thousand people thundered through even the armoured window and Elsa could only shake her her slightly in bemused wonder. No other noble had been so casual, let alone told the people to 'party on' - no-one would dare!

But Anna had.
There was a warm feeling of affection flowing through her as she watched her sister wave one last time before turning to head inside, like nothing she had felt since her parents had died and left them both alone. The intensity of it was actually almost a little intimidating … but she greedily embraced it anyway. The warmth of the feelings at least temporarily burning away the deep guilt and regret that had been swirling in her head since her sister had arrived on-planet.

Moments later as Anna vanished under her window into the building, there was a discreet knock at the office door.

"Yes?"

The door opened just a crack, enough to give her privacy, but to allow communication.

"My Lady? It's time" Gredas voice came solemnly and Elsa straightened herself, turning away from the window to cross the office. She made the briefest of final checks in a convenient mirror as she crossed the room, mostly using the moment to re-focus her thoughts on the business of the day, but marveled -and indeed, even clung to- the odd warmth flowing through her that had seemed to come with Annas mere presence again in her life.

_Time indeed _she thought as she arrived at the door, Greda promptly opening it the rest of the way. The older woman clucked and fussied, making a quick check of her attire to ensure it was still perfect before she stepped back, Elsa determinedly _not_ meeting her eyes she noticed they looked suspiciously teary. Greda could get emotional even at the best of times - but as much as the woman meant to her - Kai and Greda being the nearest thing to her parents after she had lost her own - she dared not indulge her in own emotions. Not now. Not today.

Leaving the room behind her, Elsa didn't spare the slightest glance for the candlestick and ornament, having put them out of her mind in the knowledge that no-one would enter the office anytime soon and the ice would melt sooner rather than later.

It was perhaps a shame that she did not though. Because if she _had_, she might have found it rather astonishing to note that there was not the slightest trace of ice upon either of them.

_Great Hall of Arendelle_  
_Arendelle City, Arendelle_  
_Crucis March_  
_Federated Commonwealth_  
_May 10 3053_

As the cheers of the crowd outside faded behind the thick stone walls of the Great Halls main entranceway, Anna allowed herself to start fretting again.

_Rock on? Party on? Seriously Anna, your first real public 'here is a microphone say a few words' and you chose to say that? Oh please God, don't let Elsa have seen that!_  

Somehow, she managed not to openly cringe at the idea of her sister having seen her make an idiot out of herself and embarrass their family ... but only just.

"Lady Jorgensson?" Yet another formally dressed protocol officer with a headset/microphone and a noteputer seemed to materialize out of nowhere as the main doors were closed behind her. "If you will come with me?"

Without waiting for a reply the other spun on a heel and started to walk away, the sudden action spurring her own legs into motion as she followed the other woman on autopilot.

The great hall was a spectacular structure, polished sandstone and marble all around, the finest wood finishing and so on. On a normal day, she could have lost herself exploring the countless chambers, waiting rooms and so on around the place. But she simply didn't notice _anything_ as she followed; her entire focus locked entirely on the stark fact that she was taking the last steps in a very _very_ long journey...

"-ady Jorgensson?"
She snapped out of her daze as she belatedly realized that they had come to a stop, with the woman in front of her trying to get her attention. Glancing around in mild embarrassment, Anna found they had stopped in a small but luxuriously appointed waiting room, a couple of older women busy inspecting her dress to ensure it was sitting properly while another poked at her hair, but all seemed satisfied her appearance was correct.

She had been so out of it she hadn't even noticed people touching her…

Get with it Anna! she snapped at herself.

"Yes?" she managed to reply, trying not to look too red in the face. She had to be doing wonders for her reputation for being absent minded today...

"As I was saying … My Lady..." the other explained, managing not to roll her eyes despite sounding very much like she wanted to, "are you ready?"

No she very firmly declared in her mind.

"Yes" she agreed quietly.

"Excellent" she nodded, turning to the doors, before reaching out and twisting both handles to push them open, leading her through and down a short hallway to turn onto a long hallway she also recognized from memory as the one leading to the main entrance of the Great Hall itself, with the broad polished doors at the far end. Dozens of people were running around in that fashion best described as organized chaos, as they tried to get the last second tasks needed to be done...

But Anna didn't really notice.

Because as she was hustled down the hallway and turned to face the doors that would lead into the Great Hall, Anna found herself halted directly behind a young woman in a teal and black dress standing in front of and facing said polished brass doors. A woman with pale skin and long platinum blond hair swept up into an elegant bun standing in the middle of the chaos like the eye of the storm; a bubble of seeming perfect serenity.

Time … stopped.

For a moment, if felt like she was back on the ship that had brought her here from Corona as its K/F drive engaged; the moment seeming to stretch out to infinity as her eyes - as her very being - became hyper-aware of the presence of her sister directly in front of her and everything else faded to background white noise.

So many times, so many times she had imagined -dreamed- of this moment over twelve years. Thousands of scenarios, of possibilities for how it might come to pass. Of what she would say, what her sister would say. Of what she would do, what her sister would do. Hopes and dreams waring with fear and terror. Expectations set by her cousin, her aunt and uncle, even Victor, Kai and Galen yesterday being shouted down by wild swings of emotion as they wared for dominance in her mind.

She wanted to leap forward and engulf her sister in a hug and never let go.

She wanted to hold in place like a tiny mouse hoping against hope to not be noticed.

She wanted to call out.

She never wanted to say anything again.

Her legs wanted to throw her forward.

Her legs locked up and refused to move.

She wanted to hyperventilate.

Her breath froze in her lungs.
And all through her explosion of emotion and feeling... her sister didn't so much as spare her a glance.

Didn't so much as shift slightly.

Not until she turned slightly to acknowledge some minion who walked up to her with a printout of something, exchanging a few short words before he nodded and moved off before she turned to once again simply look straight ahead.

And that tiny action, that in no way acknowledged her, somehow seemed to shatter the extreme emotion in the moment. Slowly deflating as the bustle of noise around her once again returned to replace the dull roar of blood rushing through her ears.

Two meters away and suddenly it still somehow felt as distant as the sixteen light years it had been a week ago.

Desperately, then firmly, Anna started to pull herself together, one piece at a time, telling herself for once, not to overreact and read too much into five seconds of 'contact' that amounted to staring at her sister's back, forcing her gaze to the side and off Elsa. This was just the start and...and...

...amnnnnd then the Galaxy flipped off its rotational axis.

Left and right of the doors into the Great Hall were two polished mirrors at offset angles. It was a common design for grand entrances used in formal venues, allowing the nobles and their retainers to make one final check of their appearance before the door was opened and they were announced. But when Anna had forced her gaze away from the back of her sister's head, it had settled onto the mirror to one side ... and in doing so, she found herself looking directly at her sister's face.

She looked ... incredible. Regal. A true Royal in a way she could never possibly be, so like their parents in every way she wasn't. Someone who wouldn't look even slightly out of place next to the First Prince and Archon, or Victor and his Siblings. Her complexion was utterly flawless, the slightest hints of lipstick, blush and a deep purple eyeshadow only drawing attention in the perfection of her face framed by her platinum-blonde fringe and deep blue eyes, yet somehow affecting an almost mysterious air to her that suited her perfectly.

Yet, no matter how striking, all those things Anna only noticed them vaguely. Because as she stared at the reflection of her sister, she realized her sister had, in turn, been staring at her all this time through the mirror.

Hyper-aware of every small detail, Anna saw Elsa's eyes widen imperceptibly as their gazes met - but her sister did not turn away or flinch as Anna had dreaded she might. Instead, Anna felt almost naked as the icy blue eyes of her sister seemed to study her, knowing that the anxiousness, fear, longing and loneliness of twelve years apart from her sister were entirely on display; she could not have concealed her emotions even if she had wanted to do so.

Emotions seemed to flash across her sister's face too, far deeper and greater than anything she could hope to comprehend, like the tip of an iceberg that merely hinted at far more under the surface ...

She swallowed thickly as the other blinked, her sister's mouth opening slightly for a moment as they silently looked at each other, an almost shy and awkward air coming across between them as they both found themselves in this perfect stasis.

And then it happened.

Hi Elsa mouthed silently at her through the mirror. A nervous, tentative and shy smile accompanied the mouthed word, like a shaky hand uncertainly extended towards her, not knowing -and perhaps even fearing- what her response would be, but taking the risk of extending it nonetheless ...

Through all the years deprived of contact with her Sister, Anna had been aware of a 'diminishing'
of her own self that she had never really been able to explain. To anyone. Not her parents, not her Aunt and Uncle, not to Kai or Greda. Her parents had listened to her, but not really listened to her as they continually told her that her sister was simply too busy to visit or vice versa. Instead, they tried to keep her active, to distract her with countless other people her own age as the years had passed. Anna still didn't know if they had just thought she was lonely and needed to be swamped with people, or, if they thought that with time she would slowly come to forget her sister behind a patchwork of 'someone else's'.

Absurd as that idea was.

She had survived, slowly learning how to go on despite feeling almost like she had woken up one morning missing a limb that no-one else could see or understand was missing. In every photo, seeing the ghost of her sister standing next to her, always finding herself turning to share a joke or comment with her, only finding empty air standing there, fighting back the feelings and putting on a brave face, never able to understand, but trying her very best to be a good girl for her parents. Until they had left her as well.

For all Punz had done to drag her out of the dark hole she had fallen down, reality had only thrown into sharp relief the ongoing absence of her sister. And the never ending silence to her trickle of HPG messages from Corona year by year had crystallized into a deep, almost primal fear. A terror that the reason her sister had cut her off had been … because Elsa hated her.

That she had done something so horrible that she didn't even remember, but had hurt Elsa so much that the only possible response had been for her sister to simply cut her out of her life. To determine that as far as Elsa was concerned; she had no sister.

The logical part of her mind she (sometimes) listened to had always objected to such an idea, poking rational holes through the theory all over the place … but while the head could be convinced easily in such things, the heart was much harder.

And so, finally 'face to face' with her sister, the five year old child that had watched her sisters dropship rise into the sky could not help but jump to the forefront and with the most intense focus, look for even the slightest, most subtle hint to validate her fears.

And found … nothing.

She saw nervousness and uncertainty to be sure. And there were snatches of regret and even perhaps sadness on display, mixed with loneliness, or … longing?

But not hate.

Or anger.

Or rage or disgust or loathing. Or the slightest trace of any of the dark emotions she had been terrified she would see on that face that had been absent for so much of her life.

Hi Anna mouthed shyly back at her sister.

Elsa's face seemed to light up at her response, the nervous and uncertain aspects melting away to be replaced with affection. The emotion seemed to resonate through the air, Anna feeling her own face helplessly forming a small, shy but raw smile; like a flower instinctively lifting towards the radiance of a star cresting the horizon at dawn as time, stopped for so many years, started to move forward again.

The shared moment - a mere six seconds of time that seemed to last from Big Bang to Big Crunch- went unnoticed by everyone but the sisters, but ended abruptly as Elsa suddenly turned away from the mirror, a man approaching her with some kind of report or some such, a polite 'business' face rapidly falling into place as she turned away to deal with the interruption. Anna rocked back as the moment was broken, finding herself inhaling sharply - apparently she had forgotten to breathe, again- yet feeling lightheaded in a way that simply could not be explained by oxygen deprivation.
She didn't feel lightheaded, she felt light.

Working to regain her thoroughly razzled composure Anna surreptitiously reached up to wipe away the water that had threatened to push out from her eyes as she blinked, forcing herself to take a slow, deep breath, mechanically forcing her lungs to move as she sternly ordered her heart to slow back down-

"My Lady?" that annoyingly pushy protocol officer reappeared as if by magic, but Anna could have kissed her for the distraction as she turned to face her, latching onto the business at hand to try and ground herself.

"Yes?" she said, then paused as she saw that the woman (followed by a pair of beefy looking security types) was carrying a velvet purple cushion. And sitting on said cushion, clearly the reason for the security guards ... was a tiara.

Her Mother's tiara.

"It's time" the other said and with great formality, she presented her the velvet cushion to her. Just as carefully, Anna reached out to accept it, mildly surprised given everything that had just happened that her hands were so steady as she took the soft cushion, entranced by the beautiful crown with its gorgeous blue emerald and shimmering diamonds set into flawless gold. Memories of her Mother wearing it on the most formal occasions flew by her eyes as she stared at it and, for the first time today, she felt a distinct pang of loss as she recalled why this ceremony was taking place.

I miss you both so much she silently cast the thought out, remembering for once not the day she had buried them, but the last moment she had seen them; the hugs exchanged and goodbyes said without knowing it would be the last time, focusing on the laughter and love in their final parting. But I promise, I promise, I'll do you -and Elsa- proud. Setting herself, she turned back to see her sister move forward to the door which was being opened in front of her. Distantly but clearly, she now heard Victor's voice, laced with great formality and authority. So much so he sounded far more like his father then the person she had met yesterday.

"I call Elsa Jorgensson. Daughter of Ildun and Adgar and rightful heir to the Dutchy of Arendelle. In the name of House Davion, come forth and accept your right to rule".

A new fanfare exploded moments later with a thunder of timpanis and Elsa seemed to straighten herself in response. Hesitating for only a moment, perhaps considering the final moments of her life as the heir apparent, or perhaps even the future now ahead of her, she then started forward. Anna glanced at the woman with the headset who held her gaze a couple of seconds, clearly listening intently before she sharply nodded and gestured her forward.

Drawing herself up just as her sister had, Anna took a deep breath and started to follow her sister into the Great Hall. A half dozen paces behind at the same steady walk, holding her sisters crown out in front of her for all to see as spotlights and the attention of a Solar System, focused on the two sisters.

Great Hall of Arendelle
Arendelle City, Arendelle
Crucis March
Federated Commonwealth
May 10 3053

As Elsa stepped into the vast room accompanied by the thunder of two dozen timpanis, trumpets blazed. String instruments simultaneously resonated as other percussion cut in and a not half bad choir raised their voices to add to the noise as the soon to be Duchess strode down past the thrilled schoolchildren towards the March Lord sitting on the throne at the centre of all of this, her sister following exactly six steps behind carrying the crown that he would place on her head. The voices singing out the glory of the Federated Commonwealth loudly and proudly for all to hear sent a
surge of energy through the vast room as the vast crowds stood.

The FedCom March had been a surprise smash hit with the crowds on New Avalon when first played in 3048 at FedCom day celebrations, to celebrate the martial might of both nations. It had spread like wildfire across the armed forces to become almost a de-facto anthem for the AFFC almost overnight. Bombastic and triumphant; it had unofficially and then officially been adopted by both states as an official piece of acceptable music for top level formal occasions - such as the investment of a planetary ruler.

Elsa personally would have preferred something a little less over the top for her 'grand entrance'. But she was more than enough of a politician to both understand the value of playing a song that Prince Victor would appreciate was selected to honor his presence … and would also appeal to the deep reverence most Federated Suns Citizens held for their armed forces.

She kept her pace steady, her manner calm and composed as she slowly walked down the nave, smiling gently at the awed faces of the schoolchildren watching her as the music thundered. Her face was otherwise serene, but inside she was trying to master emotions that were raging. If seeing her sister outside had been enough to take her aback, staring at her even indirectly through the mirror, had been almost overwhelming.

And then it had become overwhelming when her sister had shifted her gaze slightly and noticed her reflection, their gazes locking through the mirror for the first time in so very very long.

Anna had always been an open book to her, mostly because her sister had always worn her heart on her sleeve. And despite how many years it had been, Elsa had found herself almost effortlessly able to see that heart and understand it at a glance … and been struck to the core with that glance.

For thirteen years she had pushed Anna away. For her protection. No matter how hard it had hurt Elsa to do so. So much that she had run away to another continent after a year of soft knocking at her door had almost broken her resolve to do what was needed to keep Anna safe.

For thirteen years she had cut her sister off, yet she had remained confident despite her parents pleas that Anna would be fine. Even as a child, her sister had pulled people into her orbit as effortlessly as a star pulled planets; it was just who she was. She could - and would- simply fade out of her sister's life until such time as she learned to control her powers. As hard as it would be for a planet to break away from the stars pull, she had forced herself to do so.

Of course Anna would miss her, at least at first. But she was young and vibrant. She would get on with her life, make new friends and new experiences while Elsa became a distant presence who could no longer hurt her. Until she mastered her powers and could return to be the big sister Anna deserved, once again.

It … had not worked out quite the way she had hoped.

It had taken her thirteen long years of painful work and terrible expenditures of effort to get to the marginally controlled state she was at now. Her father had given her the gloves when she turned nine, her 'magic gloves' she recalled fondly, which seemed to help. But even so, with every year that passed, her powers had only seemed to double in strength testing any progress she made with far more dire consequences should her control slip. She had slowly discovered that when she was focused on other things, her powers seemed to at least be held in check. So she threw herself into her studies, pouring her time and effort into her education. And she hadn't stopped with her top level grades; she spoke five languages perfectly, could play a half dozen musical instruments at near professional orchestra level and was physically in superb shape, having also found that sometimes simply running to exhaustion was also one of the few ways she could banish the powers raging through her veins whenever she got agitated … but she had never truly gained the kind of control she needed to be confident that her sister was safe from her.

And so, despite her parents pleas, she had refused to come home or allow any contact with her sister. Far better that she stay out of sight until she finally did, no matter if it took another ten years then she risk a repeat of that night.

And then … their parents had died.
All her hard, exhausting work over the years had seemed meaningless after she had been told the news. She had barely been in control of herself during that black week - and even calling her state 'in control' was pushing it, even alone locked in a room. So tenuous had her 'control' been that she had forced her sister to bury their mother and father alone … and then sent her off on a jumpship. Convinced that history would repeat itself if she didn't get her to safety; if she didn't get Anna away from her.

For that alone, Elsa fully expected Anna to hate her. Would have deserved for Anna to hate her - all she ever did in her presence was bring misery. And she had been dreading the moment they would come face to face again she she had landed. Braced herself as best she could for the inevitably of looking her sister in the face and seeing the righteous loathing and contempt for her in those eyes spear her like an icy shard through her heart.

But all that had been in that mirror when their gazes finally met, was Anna. Anna, looking at her with a nervous, yearning, almost pleading expression...

Sisterly instincts Elsa had long thought dead had surged to life at the almost overwhelming need in Annas gaze for her to acknowledge her. Her little sister was hurting. And on pure reflex without realizing she was doing it, Elsas lips had moved, mouthing a single word to her sister. A single word, that came with a feeling pushed down at Anna, that told her that she was here. That she saw her. That she was here. And that everything would be alright -somehow.

The answering smile and mouthed reply from Anna had been almost overwhelming as Elsa realized what she had done entirely on instinct. Almost as overwhelming as the electrical surge of shock racing through her as she started to understand that despite having every reason to do so... Anna didn't hate her.

It was a scenario her sometimes cynical mind had not even considered, let alone hoped for. She could never have comprehended it being even a theoretical possibility after so many years coldly closing down anything but a brief sort-of-message between their parents, pushing her away even to the point of forcing her sister to bury their parents alone. Indeed, some hidden part of her still drowning in guilt may have even hoped she would hate her, that it would let her go on and live a wonderful life, using the hate to move on and live her life without her...

With some effort, Elsa mentally composed and centered herself. She had been trained all her life to place duty before everything and, accordingly, she compartmentalized the tempest of emotion in the back of her mind as she stepped up the marble steps to the stage, ensuring the placid mask she wore in public was locked down into place.

Left and right of the throne, the VIPs rose from their ornate chairs respectfully as she stepped onto the stage proper. She timed her approach with calculated precision to reach her mark as the music approached its thundering end. Aware of all the eyes focused on her, she took hold of her dress and offered a curtsy, carefully dipping low while bowing her head. She held the respectful position for a full second before slowly allowing herself to rise back up and finally dare to glance up at the man who had come over a hundred light years to invest her with the authority to rule.

The personification of the Federated Commonwealth sat on the throne with the ease of one born to rule far more than one planet. His eyes locked with hers and she held herself rigidly still as his gaze seemed to press in on her, seeking something. There was a brief, irrational surge of fear that he could see right through her to her frozen power and was about to expose her, but the moment passed as he seemed to find whatever he was looking for, offering her a sharp nod of respect in return for her gesture as he leaned forward slightly, the subtle signal a gesture for her to get this to get underway as he waved everyone else to sit back down.

"Summoned, I have arrived" she announced clearly, the tiny microphone clipped onto her collar picking up her words and amplifying them to echo around the vast room. "I am Elsa Jorgensson. Daughter of Idun and Adgar Jorgensson. Rightful heir to the Duchy of Arendelle".

"And how may We know this?" Victor challenged her, the formal worlds easily rolling off his tongue.
"By these, you may know her" a voice spoke up from her on cue as the kindly old Bishop of Arendelle City -local head of the New Avalon Catholic Church- moved up beside her holding an ornate wooden case that he now opened and presented to the Prince. Inside, gleaming softly under the spotlights, were an ancient golden scepter and orb. "Placed into the hand of Michael Jorgensson by Lucien Davion - these tokens show her claim is just and true. By God and Davion".

Prince Victor made a show of looking over the items from his position - as if he could somehow tell at a glance that the jewel encrusted objects were in fact the real deal. Confirming her identity had actually been done earlier today with a DNA test against her parents samples brought from New Avalon, then cross checked with her relatives and local archives using independent systems. The quadruple-checks a legacy of the fascinating -if terrifying- attempt by 'Mad Max' Liao to replace Hanse Davion with a double that had come far too close to success for any ruler to ever take such issues lightly again.

"Truly, this is Elsa Jorgensson" Victor agreed, turning his gaze out beyond the stage to take in the assembled masses. "All other measures having been determined to be satisfactory, are there any among you who would dispute the wisdom of this choice?" he asked, his gaze slowly sweeping around the room and assembled nobility, politicians, VIPs and schoolchildren assembled before him.

Elsa couldn't help but hold her breath slightly at that. One of the five core rights of all citizens of the Federated Suns was the right of ordinary citizens to appeal to a higher authority - all the way to the highest authority on New Avalon in fact - to remove highly unpopular or ineffective members of the nobility from their posts. Victors question was really ceremonial - but it was also absolutely serious. If someone did formally ask him to reconsider he would be obligated to question them and make a decision on if their claim had merit.

And there would never be a better time for someone to stand up and denounce her as a freak.

A mutant.

A monster.

But there was nothing but absolute silence in response to his question.

"So be it" Victor intoned and Elsa felt a slight chill pass down her spine that, for once, had nothing to do with her powers as Victor stood.

Two militiamen met him at the base of the dais, each carrying one of the flags that had been brought in at the start of the ceremony, pivoting on their heels to fall in as Victor approached her, solemnly lowering the two spearpoint like tips of the banner poles to touch at the midpoint between Victor and herself. Unbidden, she reached out with only the slightest hesitation to lay a hand on each flag, before Victor in turn lay his hands on top of hers - Elsa fighting to keep calm, focusing only on the feeling of the gloves snugly fitting over her hands.

If Victor thought her hands were cold or abnormally cool, he gave no sign.

"Do you, Elsa Jorgensson, of your own free will swear true loyalty, fealty and obedience to your Prince Hanse Davion, his Heirs and those he appoints over you?" Victor asked her with great formality.

"I swear it" she agreed with equal gravity in her voice.

"And do you, Elsa Jorgensson, understand the duties, responsibilities and powers being invested into you on this day - and accept your responsibility to perform them to the best of your abilities until either your death, abdication or investment of these powers into another by the First Prince?"

"I do understand" she confirmed solemnly and with the utmost seriousness as she accepted her burden. Elsa had in fact thought very long and very hard about -privately before the ceremony- simply confessing everything to Victor, begging him to find someone else to rule their world.
But even more pressing than her fears about what would happen if she revealed her secrets to Victor, her parents had taught her from a very young age that this was her duty. And after all the sacrifices they had made protecting her, helping her, it would be nothing less then spitting on their graves to take such an … easy … way out of her responsibilities.

She was capable of doing this job - she knew she was. So she would do it. No matter how hard it would be, or how much stress she may suffer from hiding her affliction.

She owed her parents and her world nothing less.

They continued back and forth in this fashion for several minutes, Elsa promising several mundane things then several important things in a odd process that mixed something together of ancient royal traditions and a modern employment contract. Slowly she started to relax into the moment as everything went like clockwork, having mentally practiced this hundreds of times, the two of them spending a good ten minutes slowly going through the extended oaths to her Prince, her Planet and her People.

Finally Victor reached the end of the various oaths and released her hands, Elsa also letting go of the banners of the Federated Suns and Arendelle, fighting the urge to reflexively close her hands into fists nervously as the flag carriers retired, Victor turning now to face her Cousin, Rapunzel, as she stepped up with a cushion, upon which was a folded purple cloak. Victor nodded silently in salute and together, the two of them draped a royal purple cloak onto her shoulders, Elsa reaching up to help secure the clasp at her throat before Victor reappeared in front of her, now holding her crown, no doubt having picked it up from Anna off to the side somewhere - but Elsa dared not turn to find out, not knowing what would happen to her poise and control if she happened to look her sister directly in the face right now at point blank range.

Without a word, Elsa bowed her head towards him and she shivered ever so slightly; a wave of goosebumps flaring down her spine at the feeling of the almost delicate looking tiara settling on her head.

"Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown" Victor intoned as he placed it on her head, the line from one of William Shakespeare's plays, still so very valid well over a thousand years after his death. "Remember well this weight Elsa Jorgenson and that for all its beauty, the burden of this crown now rests on your shoulders, and your shoulders alone". Finally getting the tiara set just right into her hairstyle, Victor now stepped to the side as Elsa raised her head again, finding the Bishop of Arendelle City had stepped forward.

Holding the open wooden case and the scepter and orb sitting inside.

Elsa started to reach for the two items - only for the Bishop to cough very softly, too low for her microphone to trigger.

"Your Grace" he whispered in a sotto voice. "Your Gloves…"

Elsa froze in the action of starting to reach for the two objects as, despite her attempts to keep calm, a sudden lead ball of dread settled in her stomach. She hesitated for at least a second or two, before with almost robotic motions, she stripped the gloves off and placed them in one side of the box.

Conceal … DON'T feel she mentally told herself as, feeling the eyes of the Bishop, Victor Steiner-Davion, her sister, her people on her as she reached in and took the two heirlooms of her house, forcing herself to get a firm grip and pleading to God, just this once as she devoted herself to his service, to have pity on her as she turned around; holding the two items up, the blinding spotlights seeming to isolate her so completely on this stage...

There was a distant rumble she could barely hear over the thunder of her heartbeat in her ears as the assembled masses got to their feet, the Bishop calling down Gods blessing on her and her reign,

Conceal don't feel … conceal don't feel …
She almost lost her composure as she started to feel the stirring of her power, rippling under her skin and building on itself. Desperately, she mentally yelled for the Bishop to hurry up, bending all of her willpower to trying to control herself as she continued to chant the mantra in her head faster and faster as her heart started to beat faster and faster with it. But it was like trying to grasp at a bar of wet soap, the harder and more intensely you tried, the faster it started to slip away...

...Conceal don't feel conceal don't feel don't feel...

Her panic only seemed to fuel the surge of power however and to her horror, she felt a cool tingle of pressure start to almost ooze out from her perspiring hands. She risked the briefest glance down and saw the telltale signs of white frost starting to spread from under her hands - and she could not wait.

Turning suddenly as she dared, she placed the orb and scepter back into their case - just as the Bishop finished with "...be known as Elsa Jorgenson the First, Duchess of Arendelle!"

She caught for a split second the slightly amused look from the Bishop at her slightly jumping the gun to put the objects back. But he said nothing as she didn't quite snatch the gloves back before closing the box - before anyone caught the unnatural shimmer on the golden leaf. Composing herself in a moment as her hands dove back into the safety of her gloves, she turned around fully as the assembled masses thundered their response.

"Huzzah! Huzzah! Huzzah! Huzzah!..."

And then she realized that she had made it.

No-one had seen.

No one knew.

It was a more pure wave of relief then she had ever felt in her life, all consuming in a way like nothing before. Elsa only barely sensed Victor stepping up on her right to offer his arm as the crowd continued to chant. Taking it without thinking, the reassuring warmth of her gloves protecting both of them as her power faded again, she allowed herself to be led almost in a daze towards the edge of the stage where he released her as the crowd fell silent.

"Hail Elsa, Duchess of Arendelle!" Victor stridently thundered into the silence suddenly, snapping her back to reality with the sheer authority in his voice.

"Hail Elsa, Duchess of Arendelle!" the masses roared back in front of her.

"Long may she reign!" he declared.

"Long may she reign!" the crowd affirmed and with that, led by Victor, the crowd broke into thunderous applause and for the first time since entering the vast hall, a smile appeared on Elsas face.

The applause, and more than a few cheers and whistles went on for some time, so much so that Elsa felt slightly taken aback by the unconditional support she saw in so many faces. So many people who didn't know her, so many people who now answered directly to her were smiling and approving of her despite knowing nothing about her. Were expecting her to lead them and this world into a new golden age.

It should have been a crushing weight, a dreadful realisation as she tried not to look down, lest she realize just how far she could fall.

Instead she felt almost giddy as the tension drained away.

Clearing her head and refocusing her attention, she turned to glance at the shorter Prince next to her (who seemed to grow to twice the stature in her mind every time she looked away) as he ceased his applause and once again offered her his arm. Smiling slightly she took it lightly as a massed choir somewhere in the room began singing. An ancient Terran hymn known as the Heimr Àrnadalr, a song only sung on Arendelle when a new Duke or Duchess was invested.
As the applause died down in the face of the choirs soft haunting voices joined by a few more of the more knowledgeable crowd, Victor led her forward, off the stage and down the stairs. The assembled crowd of VIPs behind them started to slowly shuffle after them as she and Victor descended the stairs, leaving a generous gap of course. Reaching the bottom, the children in the front rows started to bow - but then, without warning, Victor squeezed her arm slightly to get her attention as he halted.

Keeping her poise as she also came to a halt, she felt Victor gently pull away and watched in curiosity as he turned to face a young girl on the edge of the front row, probably only eight or so years old who was, like all the children in the immediate vicinity, seemingly frozen into silence and immobility by the sudden direct attention of their rulers. Waving his bodyguards aside with a brief gesture as the rest of the procession also came to a halt behind them in response to their stopping, Victor stepped forward and eased down to face the starstruck looking young girl with a smile on his face.

"Hello there" Victor greeted her gravely.

To Elsa's silent approval, the young looking brunette girl swallowed and set herself remarkably quickly. Elsa tilted her head ever so slightly, thinking she had seen this girl somewhere before. Not in person of course, having been isolated from most human contact for some time, but she had kept up to date with her 'who's who' of people on Arendelle, with the occasional video conference thrown in when needed. And she knew that the children were in fact seated by some calculation of their social rank, with the front ranks being made up of the immediate scions of some of the planet's most senior nobility - so this was probably the child of a very high ranking noble...

"Uh … hello?" the child wondered tentatively before hurriedly correcting herself at a hissed rebuke from a shocked teacher nearby. "I mean, how can I help you Your Highness?"

"May I have your name, my Lady?" Victor asked gently, a hidden microphone on him picking up and carrying both conversations to the packed hall and beyond who were watching in fascination, trying to figure out why Victor had suddenly stopped.

"Uh, it's Sofia, your Highness" the girl quickly supplied, rallying remarkable composure for someone coming unexpectedly face to face with Victor Steiner-Davion and become the centre of worldwide attention.

With a click in the back of her mind, Elsa mentally matched the face and name to the nobility charts she had studied for years. Sofia, the First child of Count Roland Winters and his second wife Miranda from the Southern city of Fortryllet. Good people from what she had read, competent and loyal with high approval ratings from their people. And clearly they had raised their daughter well if her remarkable poise at suddenly being confronted by the Archon-Prince designate was any indication.

"I believe you were the one who decided to curtsey when everyone else bowed?" Victor asked.

Elsa kept her face poised but mentally frowned at Victor stopping to chide a child for making a mistake like that - but was silently impressed again that despite a slight blushing of her face and despite the snickers she heard from the children around her, Sofia kept her poise.

"Yes, that was me" she admitted, working her hands together for a second before she forced them away. "I'm really, really sorry!" she apologized.

"Actually my Lady Sofia, the reason I stopped was to complement you" Victor smiled at her, causing the other to blink in confusion for a moment. "Yes, I was extremely impressed; that was one of the most well done, most graceful curtseys I had seen in a long time. Even if some of the children around you" he added, his tone turning if not annoyed, then certainly as least filled with a mild rebuke as his gaze swept past her to focus pointedly on a few clusters of other children -who gulped cringed and otherwise did their very best to not wilt under his gaze like he was some kind of Uber principal calling them onto the carpet- "didn't seem to appreciate your skill".

"Th...thank you, your Highness" the other exclaimed, looking insufferably bashfully cute. "I've practiced a lot".

"Hello there" Victor greeted her gravely.

To Elsa's silent approval, the young looking brunette girl swallowed and set herself remarkably quickly. Elsa tilted her head ever so slightly, thinking she had seen this girl somewhere before. Not in person of course, having been isolated from most human contact for some time, but she had kept up to date with her 'who's who' of people on Arendelle, with the occasional video conference thrown in when needed. And she knew that the children were in fact seated by some calculation of their social rank, with the front ranks being made up of the immediate scions of some of the planet's most senior nobility - so this was probably the child of a very high ranking noble...

"Uh … hello?" the child wondered tentatively before hurriedly correcting herself at a hissed rebuke from a shocked teacher nearby. "I mean, how can I help you Your Highness?"

"May I have your name, my Lady?" Victor asked gently, a hidden microphone on him picking up and carrying both conversations to the packed hall and beyond who were watching in fascination, trying to figure out why Victor had suddenly stopped.

"Uh, it's Sofia, your Highness" the girl quickly supplied, Rallying remarkable composure for someone coming unexpectedly face to face with Victor Steiner-Davion and become the centre of worldwide attention.

With a click in the back of her mind, Elsa mentally matched the face and name to the nobility charts she had studied for years. Sofia, the First child of Count Roland Winters and his second wife Miranda from the Southern city of Fortryllet. Good people from what she had read, competent and loyal with high approval ratings from their people. And clearly they had raised their daughter well if her remarkable poise at suddenly being confronted by the Archon-Prince designate was any indication.

"I believe you were the one who decided to curtsey when everyone else bowed?" Victor asked.

Elsa kept her face poised but mentally frowned at Victor stopping to chide a child for making a mistake like that - but was silently impressed again that despite a slight blushing of her face and despite the snickers she heard from the children around her, Sofia kept her poise.

"Yes, that was me" she admitted, working her hands together for a second before she forced them away. "I'm really, really sorry!" she apologized.

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"Th...thank you, your Highness" the other exclaimed, looking insufferably bashfully cute. "I've practiced a lot".
"I could tell" Victor assured her with another grin, the ridiculousness of the Archon-Prince designate pausing in a major event to chat with a child in this way clearly pleasing him. "So let me tell you a secret" he continued, his voice adopting an almost conspiratorial tone, despite the fact it was being repeated across the entire room (and planet). "I'm going to be going to a lot of ceremonies like this. And eventually most of them will probably blur in my mind into one vague memory with tens of thousands of people across hundreds of planets - but I can promise you that for the rest of my reign, I will always remember that at my very first investment, I was lucky enough to be the first member of the Steiner and Davion families to witness the most perfect curtsey from you Sofia".

The murmured awwww from the assembled masses in the Great Hall was appropriately heartfelt - and Elsa was herself touched by the gesture, perhaps even a little envious of how easily, how casually Victor could reach out to people and make such a connection. Clearly he had his mother's touch as much as his father's skill in a Battlemech. She knew that Sofia would never forget this day.

Nor, she thought silently, would any of those who had dared to mock her mistake ever do so again.

"Thank … you, your Highness" Sofia blinked rapidly, clearly slightly overwhelmed and, for lack of any more perfect response, she lifted her skirt and gave a curtsey. Which Elsa indeed noted, was pretty much textbook in its execution and grace.

Victor in turn grinned as he stood, offering a shallow bow from the waist in return before turning back to Elsa and offering his arm, which she took, pausing only to offer a smile to Sofia before they walked up the nave, the procession once again getting into motion as the choir continued their song. Exiting the great hall soon enough through the same door she had entered they took a quick series of turns as they gently let each others arms go, walking smoothly in a comfortable silence through the quick zig-zag of passages to the access lift the security teams were holding for them. Up five stories, just above her private office in face, was the balcony upon which Victor would present her to the seething throng outside. Mentally, Elsa mentally running through the same checklist she had run down a million times already as she recalled exactly what she needed to do...

"Well, that didn't turn out to be the disaster I was fearing it might be" Victor suddenly broke the silence with a sigh as they approached the elevator. "I admit I was worried for a bit there during the actual investment itself that things were going to fall to pieces, but I'm sure you'd agree all seemed to work out in the end".

Elsa felt her heart rate start to accelerate again as the meaning of Victors words hit home.

Did he know? Did he see!

"Disaster, your Highness?" she managed to ask him in a level tone (somehow), mentally having to fight the sudden urge of her legs to stop moving as the lift doors opened in front of them. She had always had a slight tendency towards feeling claustrophobic - a legacy of the long year she had tried to stay locked up in her room with her sister trying to get through the door- but it had rarely been an issue for her. Right now though, as the polished steel doors of the elevator car closed shut with the bodyguards packed around them, the dull thud sounded like a cell door slamming shut and ever so slowly, the lift began to crawl its way up the shaft, Elsa trying not to feel like a ticking time bomb in the enclosed area...

"Well that might be overstating it a little" Victor smiled at her. "But this was my first time doing this kind of work - and I had to admit I was rather nervous that I would stumble. Have you promise to rule with great concern for use of the colour yellow or something". Victor gave her a wry smile. "Perhaps I spent a little too much time around your sister yesterday".

The statement was so absurd, so completely out of line with what Elsa was both expecting and dreading, so utterly out of step with what she would have expected from the son of Melissia and Hanse Davion … that she couldn't help herself as the doors opened and all the tension that had seemed to compress the enclosed space exploded out.
It wasn't even that funny, but Elsa giggled in an incredibly un-regal manner in a way she had not done in public for a very long time.

And for the first time in forever, dared to hope that, somehow, everything would turn out alright in the end.

**Great Hall of Arendelle**  
Arendelle City, Arendelle  
Crucis March  
Federated Commonwealth  
May 10 3053

People flooded out of the Great Hall as the procession ended. Many -indeed most- headed out the 'back' to where a conga line of hover limos waited to pick them up and fight through the chaotic traffic ballet caused by the security checkpoints. A great many men were hurried along mercilessly by their wives and partners who knew the ball at the Arendelle Castle started in two hours giving them precious little time to get ready for the social event of this decade; to get back to 'Royal Ridge' and get ready - and tardiness was not an option. And of course, thousands of schoolkids made for a crowd control problem that gave their limited number of teachers instant headaches as they tried to herd their specific charges to painstakingly planned assembly areas with mixed results.

Often quite literally.

Other adults also hurried away to get ready for the ball - although they were not particularly interested in the fine music, food, drink and dancing that awaited them there. Or even the public relations boon of finding themselves on the news sheets society page standing next to the new Duchess or Archon-Prince designate.

Or better yet, both.

No, they were preparing for the other type of dancing scheduled to take place tonight where clusters of offworld Mega-Corp representatives (who had not been invited to the Great Hall) and their associated local reps and nobility would spin around each other across the Castle grounds, jockeying for position with the Duchess and her senior advisors while seeing to block out their competitors. The simple fact was that for these people, this coronation wasn't about celebrating the elevation of a new Duchess to the ruling nobility, but about the rocks in the ground that had put this world on many maps in many offices across civilised human space. By comparison, a smaller amount of Germanium had once let Marius O'Reilly turn the Marian Hegemony from a laughing stock of a bandit kingdom into a genuine Periphery power - and Arendelle's reserves were calculated to be at least a third greater than the Hegemonies - using the most conservative +95% probability data. And when you added the Clan-grade materials on top of that...

Accordingly, it wasn't terribly surprising that the 'dance card' for Elsa tonight was more than a little overbooked, figuratively speaking. And literally too for that matter - although no-one was sure if she would dance. Or even could - such was the scarcity of information on her.

Still, a number of very powerful people were very determined to get in and make their first impression count with her before their competitors. Although any more adventurous plans had been derailed by the unexpected arrival of the chaperone from hell in the form of Victor Steiner-Davion, that simply meant they had to be more subtle … if not necessarily less ruthless.

Some might have even gone so far as to try and charm the pants off her, but that was more a Plan-C given again the lack of details such as sexual preferences, relationship status and so on. The risks of such an attempt causing immense blowback ruled out any seduction angle … at least for tonight anyway.

And suffice to say more coarse actions were right out the window. Even without Victor's presence, this wasn't the Periphery where friction and jockeying could very well escalate into 'Pirate' raids against a competitor's operations. No, this was the Crucis March. There was a level of **civility** expected this deep in the Inner Sphere when engaged in cutthroat business work with competing
And so tonight it would be smiles, handshakes and laughter from behind glasses of wine, looking on the surface for all the world like a joyous celebration in honor of the newest Duchess in the Federated Commonwealth … but with *oh so* much going on behind the gaiety, as people worked to try and ensnare Elsa in their web while fighting off the other spiders - yet doing it all without annoying Victor Steiner-Davion to the point that the soon-to-be most powerful man in the Inner Sphere marked them as a personal enemy.

To the old hands at this game, there was most *definitely* a sense of electricity in the air - a sense that this would indeed be a night to remember with *very* high stakes. Success here could fuel massive expansion for any company through the steadily expanding Federated Commonwealth economy for the next 50 years, easily.

Failure on the other hand …

Still, while many of the adults exiting the hall *were* focused on the coming evening of 'fun', the more numerous children pouring out were far more enthusiastically yelling to each other about the incredible pageantry of the Investment.

The biggest child of them all, the loudest of all. The younger sister of the family Jorgensson was even now bouncing down a cross corridor while her extended family followed after her. Closest behind the woman moving like an out-of-control jump infantry pack was her cousin, who was focused less on the rapid non stop stream of words coming out of Anna's mouth and more on trying to steer Anna away from the valuable glass, porcelain and stone sculptures lining this corridor that she was continually coming terrifyingly close to in her wild gestures and movements.

Cursing her somewhat constricting purple dress, then her parents for not being any help but just walking slowly after her. Closest behind the woman moving like an out-of-control jump infantry pack was her cousin, who was focused less on the rapid non stop stream of words coming out of Anna's mouth and more on trying to steer Anna away from the valuable glass, porcelain and stone sculptures lining this corridor that she was continually coming terrifyingly close to in her wild gestures and movements.

Cursing her somewhat constricting purple dress, then her parents for not being any help but just walking slowly after them with amused expressions, Rapunzel did her best to try and help Anna avoid disaster, having given up on trying to tell her to slow down after the first five attempts failed to get through. It was as if a switch had been thrown; Anna had been astonishingly placid and dignified in the ceremony itself as if the mere *presence* of her sister could somehow calm her or encourage her to be on her best behavior … but the *moment* she had been out of sight ...

Praise be to whatever high power was looking down on them this day; they managed to arrive at the bank of elevators *without* destroying any Star-League era sculptures - a few close shaves notwithstanding! Rapunzel stabbed the call button frantically as Anna was forced to come to a halt through the sheer fact of the corridor running out at this point, although she started pacing in circles without so much as a half second delay, zipping back and forth as she continued to chatter away making wild gestures with her hands. The guards on duty at this access point behind a wall of bulletproof glass monitoring the security systems stoically did their very best to *not* crack a smile or grin at the behavior of the sister of the new Duchess - who was busy acting like a crazy person.

They didn't really do too good a job of it though and Rapunzel doubled her stabbing at the lift call button accordingly, cursing the thing as it slowly came down from upstairs.

"...and then I waved to the Battlemechs and they totally waved back, it was *awesome*…"

Rapunzel wondered if Elsa would mind if she slipped a mild sedative into a drink for Anna?

"...crown was so incredible, I mean like wow, the size of those diamonds was just…"

Nothing *major* mind you, just a little something to bring her back to human norms?

"...really impressive, Victor is just such a nice guy but he really nailed the attitude I think…”

Then as the lifts arrival chime *pinged*, she banished such thoughts with an amused snort. As if mere *sedatives* could calm down Anna now…
Ever since they had hit the Zenith point a tension had been building inside Anna like a fusion reactor building towards overload until by the time they had made planetfall, she had needed to start keeping a close eye on the other. She had been mildly amusing that it took personal intervention by the Archon-Prince designate himself to keep Anna stable and distracted yesterday, but had feared for what might happen on this day.

And so this morning, she had crept into her Cousin's bedroom fully prepared to be walking on eggshells the entire day, expecting Anna to be wound up tighter than a stowed jump sail. Ready to do what was necessary to keep her calm until the investment and her first meeting with her sister in so many years...

Instead, she had found the other snoring.

Never much of a morning person, Anna could be notoriously difficult to wake up and after a quick giggling conference with her parents outside, they had agreed to let her sleep in. It was going to be a long day after all and she had nothing on her official schedule until the Investment itself. A quick call had ensured that Kai Brevak at the Palace would keep an eye on Anna and make sure she did get woken and dressed at an appropriate time, but without Anna tagging along (who no doubt would have been mobbed - in a good way - by the public), she and her family had elected to change into casual clothes and go exploring the city, dodging the press easily, as most of them seemed to be frantically trying to follow Prince Victor around on his unexpected visit to this planet.

For nobility in the Inner Sphere, going to a different planet and going 'casual' was one of the rare times they could hang up their titles and ranks and just be themselves - if they so wished of course. Rapunzel had (more or less) gotten over her parent issues and treasured these kinds of moments when she was able to just be with them casually. It had horrified their security of course - the fact that they had flatly insisted on only two bodyguards coming along. But with so many other Nobles running around the city this day, often with a handful of hulking bodyguards present, they were hardly going to stand out. They had visited dozens of shops and stalls, arcades and malls and picked up no small amount of charming little souvenirs, Rapunzel buying a delightful 'bobblehead' of Anna that she was just dying to show her cousin...

Of course eventually the time had come for the investment which, unlike Anna, she had to sit through as a guest of honor of the Arendelle family from start to finish. The preliminaries had been both boring and entertaining in various measures - and even touching as Victor had handed out bravery and community service awards - but long practice at her family's court back home had ensured she had kept a calm and polite facade up at all times, while trying not to worry about Anna out there on her own. Knowing that she and her sister would probably have at least a few minutes together before they entered together and hoping that it didn't go bad with some kind of explosion...

But from the way that Anna was happily blowing out all the stress that had been building up for months right now as she bounced around like a maniac with a smile on her face… well as much as she was driving her nuts trying to stabilize sculpture after sculpture, she was happy for her that apparently her first meeting with her sister hadn't gone terribly bad.

She was still going to tease the hell out of her about this though, as Anna without breaking a step spun into the opening elevator door saying something about the 'first time in forever-' And then there was a loud oomph! that sounded entirely masculine as Annas voice cut off with a sudden squeak.

Oh for the love of … Rapunzel rolled her eyes to the ceiling momentarily in supplication, before sighing and turning...

Woah.

Anna had crashed into a man.

No, not a man. At least an eight, possibly even a nine.
She did a double take.

No, definitely a nine and she fought the urge to drool.

He was gorgeous. Tall and handsome, rocking a suit with a distinct military cut like so much of the male fashion in the Federated Suns but actually tasteful rather than the gaudy styles in vogue among men this year with excessive braid and decoration.

Even the sideburns that would have looked silly on most men looked … wow!

And Anna had slammed into him hard enough to drive him into the back wall of the elevator and was now half wrapped around him like an idiot. Oh she was going to get lots of mileage out of this.

Punz would not let her live this one down and as the Elevator dinged impatiently, clearly annoyed at her standing in the doorway, she stepped in, starting to reach for the 'Door Open' button to keep it there for her parents to catch up, just because this was just too precious a moment for them to miss-

"Anna … we need to stop running into each other like this" the man grinned - causing Anna to giggle - and without the slightest hesitation, her hand changed path to firmly hit the 'Door Close button as she stepped inside, shifting at once into 'fly on the wall mode' as the doors slid shut behind her, fascinated suddenly by the first name basis of these two people...

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So sue me, I watched several hours of Sofia the First with my niece just before writing part of this chapter :) Hope all of those who have been bugging me for 'We want Elsa!' are happy with her finally showing up :)
No one goes to an investment ball expecting to see a defining moment in human history.
Let that be a lesson for you. History rarely announces itself before it punches you in the face.

- Extract from ‘Elsa’ by Misha Auburn. Tharkad Printing House, 3059

Duchy Palace / Jorgenson Family Residence
Arendelle
Crucis March
Federated Commonwealth
May 10 3053

“Attention all staff; the gates will open in thirty minutes. Frontline personnel to first positions”.

The PA announcement across the palace and its grounds was neither surprising nor unexpected
given that it was, in fact, exactly thirty minutes until the gates were due to open for the first time in
a very long time. Well, outside of brief monthly tests to meet fire code regulations that was.

But it nonetheless set into motion an explosion of anxious and frantic activity.

In the kitchens of the great castle, dozens of chefs and their staffs accelerated their preparations,
the best catering team the planet could muster preparing the finest meals fit for a First Prince (or
his son) and their new Lady of the Castle. Musicians inside the grand ballroom started to tune their
instruments as final checks of the sound systems were made, while dozens of other people started
to scramble in every which direction to finalize those hundred last minute details that needed to be
attended to.

Kai Brevik, Master of the Jorgensson Household, was in his element as he circled through the
orchestrated chaos. He gave direction where it was needed, calmed down people who might have
been a little too close to panic for his mind, but otherwise just kept everything on track to make
sure that there would be no last minute surprises. But even he could not help but feel a slowly
growing excitement (that he hid absolutely behind his professional mask) as as time slowly
approached when the great gates into the castle courtyard would be flung open.

Truly, it was almost as if a giant reset button had been pressed on the planet. Elsa was now
formally invested as ruler, ready to lead her people. Anna was once again home where she
belonged, by her sister's side. All was as it should be, with time ready to start moving once again
after being seemingly frozen after the tragic death of the girls parents. Once again the Castle
would ring with the sounds of laughter and celebration, with a confident ‘best foot forward’
presentation to the planet to mark the start of this new era.

He looked around the activity and nodded once. Yes. All was finally as it should be once more.

“Mister Brevik” a young staffer hurriedly walked up to him, breaking him out of his train of
thought as he raised an eyebrow at the flustered page. “Sir, Mistress Greda is ...well, she is
insisting that you come upstairs to get changed at once”.

“And behold the doom on those who dare cross her” Kai chortled slightly before waving the other
away … but moments later, as fast as his dignity would allow, he was in motion across the
courtyard heading for the palace. Technically he was Gredas boss … but that hadn’t stopped her
for one minute from ordering him around for a decade.
Or Elsa and Anna.
Or their parents too, come to think of it…
Shaking his head once in amusement at the thought, he crossed the courtyard towards the Castle, making a final pass over things as he did. This area, directly behind the still closed gates, would be where most of the guests would celebrate with only the most VIP of VIPs allowed into the Castle proper. Tables sufficient to seat near a thousand people were scattered through the courtyard, with hundreds of Cororan lanterns crisscrossing the sky colourfully above them and all of it set around a large dance floor laid over the cobblestones. The tall halls defining the edge of the square had all been opened up into an inside-outside style, with pop-up bars and various entertainment inside. The front of the Castle itself was now illuminated with soft blue floodlights and Kai took a moment to appreciate its beauty as he approached, the building almost looking as if it could have been lifted from a fairy tail.

Of course, Kai thought squinting up momentarily at the dark spires looming above, fairy tales generally don’t have men in stealth capable power armor lurking around the Queen’s Castle…

Although he couldn’t see them, Kai knew a number of Infiltrator Battle Suits were discreetly stationed on the ‘high ground’ of the Castle’s turrets, there to keep an eye out for any trouble this evening. Invisible in the darkness, they were backed up on the grounds by the normal palace security teams, plus a number of MIIO security teams Prince Victor had brought with him. It struck Kai as a little excessive, but Agent Curatis had made it clear that while he would very much work with him rather than against him, his responsibility to the Prince Victor meant this was the minimum level of force he would accept.

Shaking his head slightly as he stepped into the castle, exchanging nods with the guards on station at the main entrance, he couldn’t help but be mildly bemused by the sheer paranoia of Curatis and his merry men. The man seemed to see threats around every corner and in every shadow - even to the point of requesting to reactivate the seldom used (if perfectly functional) ‘Mech Hanger on the estate grounds to stash two lances of Battlemechs from the Princes escort, to have them close to hand should they be required ‘in an emergency situation’.

Kai was frankly at a loss as to what possible emergency on Arendelle would require that kind of protection. This was Arendelle, not Atreus! That Mech Hanger had been for centuries nothing more than a place for the ruling royals who happened to be Mechwarriors to stash their ‘mount’ - and even then mostly to stop Techs at the milita base taking their mechs out for joyrides in the name of ‘maintenance tests’. Technically in fact even Elsa owned a Battlemech - it was just on a long term loan to the AFFC, as she wished to have nothing to do with it.

Still, in the end he had bowed to the inevitable and accepted the request - with the provision that the damn things stay strictly out of sight unless there truly was an emergency. He knew Elsa got somewhat ‘twitchy’ around Battlemechs for whatever reason. And short of an emergency on the order of an Assault Mech piloted by some kind of tactical genius rising from the swimming pool or stepping out from behind one of the grounds many tall trees, he didn’t want the silly things seen. This was Elsa’s celebration first and foremost. Even the Archon-Prince designate was ultimately her guest tonight. And he wasn’t going to let anything ruin it for her - or her sister.

Convoy SD-Alpha
Arendelle City, Arendelle
Crucis March
Federated Commonwealth
May 10 3053

Victor Steiner Davion couldn’t help but smile as the convoy pulled into the (long) driveway that ultimately terminated at the Duchy Palace and formal residence of the new Duchess of Arendelle.

Why he was smiling however would have probably surprised people who didn’t know him personally.

It wasn’t a public face for the throngs of well wishers just outside the main gate behind crowd
control barriers; the mirror glass on his hover limo made it impossible to see him after all. Nor was it expectations of good food and good conversation tonight making him happy. If anything, Victor was mentally bracing himself for people trying to drag him into political arguments, seeing him as the political equivalent of a thermonuclear weapon they could use to advance their own agenda.

No, in truth the smile on his face was entirely down to the fact that he was back in an AFFC uniform for the first time in days. Albeit a brand new dress uniform rather than a Mechwarrior combat vest … but he’d take what he could get at this point.

The joint AFFC Dress Uniform that had finally clawed its way out of the depths of whatever committee had been working on it since ‘41 wasn’t the horrific mishmash of a well intentioned monstrosity he had feared it would be. A fear founded when told this afternoon by his secretary that he and Galen would be the very first people to publicly wear it at an official event, yet another idea to try and draw just that much attention to his new life and his grand public unveiling of the March Lord version of Victor. Apparently his sister’s idea, Katherine had decided to enforce the plan by ensuring his old uniform had gotten ‘lost’ somewhere in the shuffle from New Avalon. He could however forgive her stage management of his fashion sense on the grounds that he knew perfectly well he didn’t have any. Thankfully, it seemed whoever had put together this uniform did.

The dress jacket was flashy without being over the top; a creme white with gold braid similar to the older AFFS style jacket, riding loose over an undershirt coloured for the division of the forces its wearer belonged to. In his case, the burgundy of a Mechwarrior. The unit patch of the 10th Lyran Guards and the Fist and Sunburst of the Federated Commonwealth rode proudly on his left and right upper arms respectively while the bars and Steiner Cross of a Marshal sat on each of his shoulders. A pair of well creased pants in Steiner blue descended to his polished boots, where he wore the spurs of an AFFS mechwarrior earned through an exchange year at NAIS during his training.

On his left breast, a -comparatively given his exalted rank- small line of five medals rode and Victor wore them with pride. Technically he could have worn a dozen more medals, badges and devices that reflected his political rank, noble lineage and position, but in this matter he took after his Grandmother. Katrina Steiner had made it a point to only wear an appropriate minimum of decorations on her dress uniform when she put it on, her somewhat sparse look doing wonders to mock most social generals brave enough to approach her … what with the fact that some of them wore enough metal to probably qualify as light body-armor, yet hadn’t seen an infinitesimal fraction of the combat she had.

No, each of the medals he wore he had earned the hard way like a true soldier. They had not simply given to him as part of his birthright -like his automatic promotion- and idly, he let his gaze in the window trace across them.

The first two medals were campaign medals showing he had fought in the Clan War both before and after the so-called ‘year of peace’ - each with two ‘stars’ on the ribbon itself showing he had fought in four major engagements through said war. The third was a unit citation for merit, awarded after the victory on Twycross. He had apparently impressed a lot of senior officers by keeping a level head and thinking fast when the Clans had thrown all their carefully laid plans into chaos that day. Although personally, he had given full credit for his battalion's success to his company and Lance commanders they had insisted that he deserved the credit for their victory. The Unit citation had split the difference neatly and both he and Galen wore it with pride tonight.

The fourth medal was a training excellence ribbon that signified he had graduated in the top five percent of his class at The Nagelring, putting him among the elite of that year. And more than that, it told anyone who knew about such things that he had not simply been parachuted into the AFFC by ‘mom and dad’, but had damn well earned his place in the armed forces - especially given the intensity of the competition for placing in that five percent and its right to request which unit you would be posted to.

Not that he had ever had even the slightest choice of being able to choose his unit, given that his parents (unlike the rest of his classes) had both the absolute power and right to tell him where he would go … but it was the principal of the thing.
And then, finally, there was the fifth medal.

Shifting his focus, Victor's eyes locked in on the colored gem inlaid on pure gold under the blood red ribbon. The ‘Guardian of the Lair’. Highly prestigious, it was only ever awarded on the personal orders of the Warlord of the Pesht Military District, to soldiers who performed heroic deeds in the defence of that part of the Draconis Combine.

And it belonged on an AFFC Dress Uniform about as much as a Smoke Jaguar ristar belonged teaching anger management classes.

The Warlord (most likely at the ‘suggestion’ of the Coordinator or his Gunji-no-Kanrei) had awarded him the medal via the Combine Ambassador on New Avalon early this year, as a gesture of thanks and respect for his actions in rescuing Hohiro Kurita and his DCMS forces from Teniente - trashing a Nova Cat cluster that had gotten in his way in the bargain. It was a gesture clearly intended to honor his unit, but by the same token the quiet presentation of it was a message in of itself. That the Dragon appreciated his actions, but understood if for political reasons he simply could not wear the decoration.

Katherine -and no doubt his parents - had apparently decided that he should wear it however as it had been pinned to his new uniform when he had unpacked it alongside his other medals. No doubt they had intended that it be impossible to miss by various commentators, setting a specific tone around the Federated Commonwealth's current relations with the Combine - and perhaps sending them a message in turn...

Or perhaps … he was overthinking things.

Victor sighed softly to himself as he studied the dim reflection in the armored windows. These days it seemed he was wearing more layers of messages than layers of clothes-

“You know, you’re not the only person in the FedCom to have been given that medal recently” Kai casually spoke up from the other side of the limo and Victor's head turned to gaze at the man with a raised eyebrow.

Kai as always, had the uncanny ability to read his mind. Which would have been rather annoying if he wasn’t such a good friend.

“My uncle, along with several other Hounds and Dragoons, were awarded it after Luthien. And Gods knows they all had a lot more ‘history’ with the Combine than any of us” the other pointed out.

“Fair point, but I’m betting that none of them were the heir to a Successor State or two” Victor retorted dryly. “I’m sure James Sandoval would be just delighted to see me wearing this” he fingered the medal briefly, trying not to picture the look on the face of the virulently anti-Draconis leader of the Draconis March at him wearing such an award.

Not, Victor admitted, that he didn’t have a lot to be bitter about.

As much as he hoped that this strange new dente with the Combine could lead to something better for the Inner Sphere and genuinely thought of Hohiro as a friend, Victor was not so foolish as to think that centuries of Draconis aggression and cultural inertia would just vanish overnight.

Still, who knew what might happen in this strange new world of theirs where the heirs of the Capellan Confederation and Draconis Combine were good friends of the Heir to the Federated Commonwealth...

“I think the entire Inner Sphere is well aware by now that you led a strike force to rescue Hohiro from Teniente” Kai pointed out, bringing his attention back to the present. “As I recall, the Sandovals publicly accepted the necessity almost as soon as it was announced-”

“after we just so happened to drop off all the salvaged Clantech at Robinson on our way to New Avalon” Galen interjected dryly from the other side of the limo, earning a smirk from Victor-

“-and the only real complaints he made were around the lack of public recognition from the Combine” Kai finished without missing a beat. “The medal” he nodded at him, “undercuts that claim quite neatly. And you can bet that there will be press officers on New Avalon waiting to spin this as soon as the first pictures are published leaving him no room to complain”.

Or perhaps … he was overthinking things.
“Publicly, at least” Victor shrugged stiffly, as always impressed by Kai’s handle on political matters and trying not to think too much about the Lord of the Draconis March. Although if the Sandovals ever found out about his feelings for Omi...

“That's the spirit” Galen approved as with a slight bump, the Hoverlimo crossed through a secondary gate in the outer palace walls, then turned right to follow a service road running between said wall and the decorative but still functional moat around the edge of the castle and inner complex. They followed the road for a time before crossing a short but heavily reinforced bridge through the inner wall where an empty vehicle park awaited them.

Well empty of vehicles anyway. But filled with security personnel.

As the rest of the convoy's vehicles smoothly fell out to park in predetermined positions, the hoverlimo drifted across to where a red carpet had been laid from the Castle and came to a precise stop. The door swung open moments later as the fans spun down to silence and the trio of VIPs exited, Victor and Galen accepting their swords from staffers who magically appeared out of nowhere. The things made one look dashing, but they were an absolute pain in the neck to wear inside a vehicle.

Glancing around, he took in the usual cloud of bodyguards and aides … then smiled as he noticed a new figure also approaching from the direction of the Castle.

“Highness” the man greeted him with a deep bow. “It is a great pleasure to welcome you to the Jorgensson Family Estate. Please consider our home, your home”.

“It is our pleasure to be here Mister Brevik” Victor said to Elsa’s Chief of Staff, extending a hand which the other took for a brief but firm shake, before the older man extended similar greetings to each of his companions. “It is a magnificent building” he added then, jerking his head at the softly floodlit castle looming ahead of him. To be sure it was only a fraction the size of Mount Davion or the Triad, but those ‘castles’ were modern fortresses reinforced to no-sell a rogue Assault Mech ‘knocking on the door’, with a thin veneer of ‘ancient charm’ over the top. They were elegant enough to be sure, but to a trained eye it was blindingly clear that they were defensive buildings first and throwbacks to Terras feudal age second.

But what this Castle lacked in size, scale or 31st century military practicality; it more than made up for in authenticity. Victor had seen enough half-assed attempts by various nobles build a ‘new-old’ Castle to to be able to tell that this one had been built with a meticulous attention to detail. So much so that he half wondered if, like a few other such rare examples, it had been dismantled on Terra and reassembled brick-by-brick as one of the later vanity projects in the Star League era. Lit up with blue floodlights under the evening sky, it was almost felt like he was about to walk into a fairy tale...

“Thank you, Highness - we’re rather proud of it” Brevik brought him out of his admiration of the building as he invited them onwards with a polite gesture.

Nodding, Victor started down the carpet at a brisk but not hurried pace, his friends and bodyguards falling into line behind him. Then halfway to the door, he heard a voice call out.

“DETAIL … ATTEN...SHUN!”

Victor’s gaze flicked to follow the voice, noticing now the dozen men and women in Militia uniforms standing just off to the side of the carpet, carrying standard issue M42 rifles. He reasoned that given they were standing at parade rest and not on the ground in a pool of their own blood courtesy of his overprotective bodyguards, they were an expected presence. A guess confirmed a moment later as Kai Brevik cleared his throat, an expression on his face suggesting he had just remembered this little thing.

“Oh yes” he added belatedly as Victor offered him a raised eyebrow. “The local militia” Brevik nodded at the men and women, “have mounted a permanent honor guard at this castle for several centuries - and were hoping you might inspect them on your way in” he explained in an apologetic tone, as if thinking Victor was going to be annoyed having to deal with this.
Of course, nothing could be further from the truth and without further ado, Victor moved forward and caught the eye of the man in charge, giving him a slight nod.

“PRESENT … ARMS!” the detail leader barked in response and with a unified clatter the rifles were brought up from the ground to be held at present arms with envious unity. Then, the Sergeant who carried no rifle stepped out of line, spun on a heel and marched towards him down the carpet, halting a few meters away to snap a perfect salute. Traditionally, the sergeant would have pulled his sword and saluted with that, but Victor suspected his security details advance team had made it clear waving sharp objects in the face of their charge would be a very big mistake. It was nothing personal, it was just that since the days of the Mechwarrior Cabal, armed soldiers tended to make the paramilitary security teams nervous. So they had a habit of disarming any ‘honor guards’ as a matter of routine. Well unless you happened to be a member of either the Davion or Royal Guards, who had an equally proud history of telling the spooks to bite their Battlemechs shiny metal-

“Marshal Steiner-Davion Sir!” the other barked after Victor returned the salute, dragging Victor’s attention back to where it belonged. “Honour Guard Detail ready for inspection Sir!”

“Very well - carry on” he acknowledged the other. Saluting once more, the other pivoted and moved to flank him as Victor in turn started to examine the troops one by one with a critical eye. Certainly, they looked utterly immaculate in their turn out … but that was not the measure of a soldier. More than a few militias in the Inner FedCom were little more than social clubs wearing uniforms like fancy dress to pick up people. Clubs that tended to fade away the second any serious enemy force showed its face. Unlike March Militias which were line AFFC units, planetary militias answered to the local Government and were funded, equipped, trained and organized by the same. Which meant, with a few exceptions on key worlds, they were held in some level of contempt by regular troops. And as that thought hit him, Victor came to a stop and smiled as he took in the young soldier in front of him, who was no doubt wondering why Victor had stopped in front of him. And why he was smiling like that.

Still, the man held his composure, which was a good sign. “Private…”

“Walters SIR, First Class, SIR!” the other barked without hesitation.

“Weapon” Victor ordered.

Now the eyes of the man shifted to focus in on the Sergeant behind Victor. And from the way his glance jerked back to him and his face went slightly pale, Victor could almost visualize the kind of glare the Sergeant had given him for daring to look at him when he had been given an order by a Marshal of the Federated Commonwealth. To his credit, Private Walters didn’t respond by throwing the rifle at Victor in a panic, but instead, he took the weapon back from Present Arms, correctly pulled the bolt to visually inspect that the chamber was empty, double checked the safety was activated and only then held it out for Victor to take.

Victor had held his training companies top time in rifle drill, able to disassemble and reassemble a weapon faster than most of the Infantry trainees across the quad in fact. It hadn’t gotten him any praise from his instructors of course, just mocking comments that perhaps he should go join the Jump Infantry because he was only a so-so Mechwarrior who was an utter disgrace to his family, Katrina Steiner and Ian Davion no doubt spinning in their graves... But he had always none the less enjoyed taking apart rifles be they slugthrowers, needlers or laser rifles and putting them back together again. The M48 was like an old friend to him and he could tell after a brief inspection of its chamber, the magazine feed and rails that while this weapon it was in excellent condition, it was also well used. Several parts were clearly replacement components for worn out pieces, with other parts showing the clear signs of being repeatedly fired...

This was a weapon regularly used and he made a note to have Galen pull the training logs for the Militia to double check that when he went back to their HQ tomorrow.
“Private Walters, this is your field weapon?” He asked without turning away from his inspection of the rifle as he worked the bolt and found to his approval it moved flawlessly.

“Sir, yes Sir!” The other confirmed instantly, so rigidly at attention the poor man's muscles looked like they were about to start spasming, no doubt just a little worried about why he was being picked on in this way. And probably starting to imagine what would happen to him if he failed his unit their inspection by the biggest VIP to visit the planet since his parents vacation decades ago...

Turning, Victor passed the weapon to Galen, glancing at the Sergeant in passing, whose face was unreadable.

“Komondant, do you concur?” Victor asked, fighting to keep the mirth off of his face as Galen inspected the weapon carefully.

Galen of course enjoyed these kind of games too, as he passed the weapon back.

“I do concur Sir” Galen agreed - without bothering to tell anyone what exactly the two of them were agreeing to. Which was nothing of course - Galen and Victor had long perfected ‘good cop / bad cop’ and taking on either role as needed.

Turning back to Private Walters, he decided to have pity on the poor man before he had a heart attack at 20 years old.

“Indeed. Private, this rifle is in excellent condition - despite clearly being well and frequently used. Outstanding work” Victor nodded at the other as he handed back the rifle. “Carry on”.

The pure sense of relief mixed with pride coming off this man was almost a physical thing.

“Sir...thank you Sir!” Walters barked before accepting the rifle Victor handed back and snapping it back to port arms. And with his hands only barely visibly shaking.

Moving on, Victor inspected the rest of the troops, pleased to find that they were equally meticulous in their appearance. This was a unit that had pride in itself, which boded well as a strong foundation for future growth. And grow it would need to, given the value of the planet would increase by at least an order of magnitude over the next five or six years. Reaching the end of the line, Victor turned to face the Sergeant who had shadowed him down the line.

“Sergeant, my compliments to you and your detail. Their presentation and equipment was correct in all aspects. Carry on” Victor instructed and the other nodded before stomping back into line and starting to bark orders to march off his men to disperse them back to their sentry posts - clearly fighting off a smile.

“That was fun” Galen smiled as Kai rejoined them. “Although for a minute there I thought that the poor bastard was going to throw up on you when you stopped and asked him for his weapon”

“Well that would have added an interesting twist to the new uniforms” Kai dryly put in as they moved into the Castle. Easy laughter accompanied them into the castle and guided by Mr Breivik their party made quick time through the corridors. The older man happily pointed out this or that point of interest along the way and Victor's first impression from outside only being reinforced by the attention to detail on the inside, with very few hints of modern technology showing through the building. Even the candles providing illumination looked absolutely real - only the complete lack of any smoke and somewhat brighter light levels giving the game away there. It was truly magnificent, a work of art as much as a place of residence and he looked forward to exploring it over his stay...

Still, despite the ample illumination, Victor made it a point to carefully check each cross corridor as they approached, a habit that the Chief of Staff noticed quickly enough.

“Is...there something wrong highness?” Brevik asked with a slightly concerned expression, clearly having noticed his actions as they approached the next cross corridor.

“No; just keeping an eye out for any energetic red-heads coming in from our blind side” Victor
explained earning an immediate chuckle from both Galen and Kai and an understanding smile from Brevik.

And, Victor noted with some amusement, *a sudden alertness in his bodyguards at the reminder that this was Anna’s home turf*...

“Oh, Anna *is* here Highness, but she is out in the courtyard with the general admission guests”.

“Not in the ballroom?” Victor raised an eyebrow. It would be a slight faux pas for Elsa’s sister to not be present when her sister and guest of honor arrived after all...

“Forgive me Highness” the other said with a slight expression of unease after a pause of consideration. “She seemed to be enjoying herself, mingling through the courtyard. I ... had thought to leave her there until her presence was needed. for a time. I can of course have her brought at once to—”

“No no no” Victor stated quite firmly as they approached a small antechamber for the ballroom, inside which Victor could see a gaggle of protocol people standing ready, mentally sighing at the necessity of the formality as he forced himself into ‘on-stage’ mode and let a wry smile pass onto his face. “If Anna is able to just enjoy herself out there and not get caught up in all this” he added with a nod of his head at the waiting people and political fun he was about to walk into, “then by all means just let her enjoy herself for a while longer”.

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As she stared at the gaggle of smirking and laughing people in front of her, Anna distantly noted that *this* was probably the most miserable she had been at a social celebration in her life.

It hadn’t *started* that way though.

She’d arrived with her Aunt, Uncle and Cousin almost an hour ago, entering via the front gates as the last group of VIPs due before Prince Victor and her sister. At the bridge into the castle a media pack had waited like a firing line, their camera flashes almost blinding her as she stepped out of the limo and their shouted questions and comments overlapping and competing into a ridiculous mess of noise. However unlike earlier today, *no-one* had told her that she was expected to stop and talk or make a speech. So after a brief smile and wave she just ignored them, strolling up onto the bridge and leaving them behind to start crossing the moat towards her home, her cousin right beside her.

Anna stared wistfully as she approached the softly floodlit building, no words coming to mind but feeling a broad spread of emotion as she looked upon her *home* for the first time in many years. Punz had unsurprisingly sensed her mood quickly and offered no conversation, just walking with her in companionable silence studying the flags hanging along both side of the bridge. Each flag was the planetary flag of a world in the Crucis March and as they reached the end of the bridge Punz let out a delighted little squeal as she finally found the purple and gold standard of Corona. Anna smiled at her cousin’s reaction, feeling a stirring of happiness as she saw that the flag of Corona had been given pride of place at the end of the bridge, just outside the castle and opposite the flag of New Avalon itself. It was a lovely, quiet nod to the links between the two world’s Royal families and Anna made a mental note to find out who was responsible for that and thank them, before she set herself and stepped through the open gates with a deep breath …

… only to anticlimactically find herself stepping inside yet *another* temporary security station.

While there were what looked like a few MIIO types present, the staff mostly wore the grey and green of the palace guards and the leader offered her a deep bow of respect as she stepped inside, welcoming her back home and bringing a slight blush to her cheeks, before he promptly turned to offered a bow only slightly shallower to welcome her kin here for the first time. Apparently already satisfied they were who they said they were they were gestured through and Anna braced herself as Punz didn’t *quite* drag her forward into an explosion of light and noise.
Hundreds, perhaps a thousand or more people were crowded into the open square just inside the castle walls. Stepping quickly off to the side from one of the doors that led out from the security station, Anna subtly waved off a far-too-young protocol officer already moving to intercept her, the man thankfully just nodding and stepping away as she and her cousin edged off to the side of the gate more or less unnoticed.

Anna couldn’t have really managed more than that right now. Emotions were flowing through her thick and fast as she looked upon her home for the first time in years, filled with life in a way it had never really been since the awful day Elsa had left her-

“You okay?”

Anna’s head swiveled at the question to take in her cousin - looking annoyingly stunning in one of her favorite purple dresses - who was eying her with an expression far too knowing for her liking.

“I’m good” Anna offered her a smile, one that probably didn’t do too much to hide the emotion running through her body. “It’s just a little ... overwhelming”.

Without saying anything or any hint of self consciousness, Punz slid closer and threw one arm around her shoulder, the casual and familiar gesture doing something to ease the emotional surge running through her as she relaxed into the other.

“Take your time” she smile guilelessly before craning her neck to look at the massive castle itself that loomed above them. “I have to admit” she added “I’m totally digging the place so far”.

“Wait till you see the grounds tomorrow - there are some great riding trails up into the hills” she offered, getting an excited smile from the other. Corona was famous for its incredible horses, the animals sought across the Inner Sphere for racing and personal use and, unsurprisingly, the royal stables had been some of the best. Anna had fallen in love with the majestic animals almost from the first time Rapunzel had taken her down there and had spent a lot of time learning to ride them. Indeed her instructors had tried to convince her to compete professionally - no small compliment given how seriously Corona took such things. She had declined their offers though, a little shy about the spotlight that would be put on her. But it would be nice to take one last ride with her cousin and show her off her home … and just maybe Elsa could come with them.

Or perhaps … someone else ...

“So, uh, should we head into the ballroom now?” Punz broke into her thoughts, nodding towards the main building with a second layer of guards at the doors beyond the fountain happily bubbling away.

“You go ahead. If it’s okay I’m going to just wander … you know, through the crowd for a while. And mingle…” Anna let her voice trailed off vaguely, gesturing at the crowded square even as her eyes were casually sweeping it, searching... Her body language caused an instant smirk to form on the face of her cousin and Anna realized, again, that she really couldn’t hide anything from her cousin.

“Ohhh ... looking for a certain side-burn-elevator-riding guest are we?” Punz asked in a sing-song voice with an almost evil smirk on her face.

Anna’s face flushed at that and the others smile only grew as she noted the response. But before Punz could press in with her teasing, a hand landed on her shoulder from behind.

“Darling, I think we can leave Anna alone to mingle” her Aunt joined the conversation with some amusement as she and her Uncle moved up to join them in their little off-to-the-side area.

“But mom...” Rapunzel started to not exactly whine, clearly extremely eager to stalk … that is, to follow Anna through what came next. She had almost gone beserk this afternoon after Hans had left the elevator, trying to drag every bit of information she could about this incredibly cute man who-knew-her-name out of her - and had clearly been driven to distraction over the fact that Anna
point blank refused to give anything away. And that he had left the elevator only a floor down before she could interrogate him. 
But her Aunt was clearly not having anything about that as she started to not-quite drag her daughter off towards the Castle proper.

“Anna, Kai says he’ll see you inside when you’re ready to join us” her Uncle relayed in passing, looking terribly dashing in his old AFFS uniform, an understanding smile on his face as Anna nodded to him before he moved up to help wrangle Punz towards the Castle itself.

Anna watched them go with a smile before turning away, slipping out into the edge of the crowd alone. She was wearing a nice little cloak with a hood that Edna Mode had left in her room with a scrawled note demanding she wear it tonight. And it did surprisingly well to cover her dress and disguise her presence so long as no-one paid close attention to her.

Shielded in this anonymity she threaded her way through the party like a ghost, picking up on bits of conversation here and there, smiling to herself despite her nerves, at the casual, pleasant ambience - which she knew would contrast with an awfully formal atmosphere inside. A lot of people were sitting at their tables enjoying hors d’oeuvres or drinks and she recognized some of them as local vid celebrities or lower order nobility she knew she had met once but couldn’t remember the names of. Once or twice one met her gaze but only in passing and without any recognition - although one incredibly cute young girl sulking in her chair saw her and her eyes went wide, causing Anna to playfully raise a finger to her lips and get a cute nod back, before slipping back into the crowd as she continued her search. She suppressed a giggle or two when she noted a teenaged guy clearly trying to put (very clumsy) moves on a teenaged girl in a small alcove she passed by - then did giggle slightly when a few steps on she heard the crack of a palm meeting a face, followed by the distinct sound of high-heels stomping away from said alcove.

More people were packed inside the long hallways that marked the edge of the square at various temporary bars, vid screens and so on and Anna glided away from them, knowing the odds of remaining unspotted were low there, instead swiping an orange juice from a waiter in passing to sip on as she searched. But after spending over half an hour looking without any luck for that distinctive shade of auburn - and with the giant vid screens mounted on the castle walls facing inwards turning on now to show what could only be Prince Victor's convoy approaching, to the cheers of the crowd, she decided that perhaps it was time to head inside…

But then she stopped as she heard her name called out.

Her heart pulsed as she worked her way towards the conversation-

“…but I tell you by God Anna Jorgensson is such a social climber”.

Anna froze at that statement. She found herself standing just off to the side of a group of a dozen men and women her age, all listening raptly to a tall, lean looking young man with a not-quite-sneer seemingly ground into his face.

“I mean think about it. Prince Victor lands and barely thirty seconds later Anna is ‘falling into him’ according to the people I talked to! Then she spent most of the day with him! I mean that is fast work, you have got to hand it to the girl”.

Anna felt her heart sink in her chest as the group laughed and nodded along with the now grinning man.

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“I mean I can’t blame her for looking out for number one” the man continued as Anna belatedly recognized him as James Forbes - the boy whose nose Anna had broken after he had called her Sister a freak on their first meeting many years ago.

Perhaps she had hit him too hard. Or not hard enough...

“After all, she’s just the spare - soon to be the redundant spare. Her parents - God rest their souls-didn’t even bother to give her a title you know? They just kept her hidden away here in a box somewhere, while sending Elsa to get the finest possible education and training on the other side of the planet. Then when Elsa comes back, she kicks Anna off to her relatives so she doesn’t have to deal with her … well … that says it all really doesn’t it? Clearly she can’t stand her. Hasn’t
Anna’s growing anger spluttered and died in moments; extinguished as all her other emotions came pouring in like a tsunami. Already rather on edge tonight, the insult she would have shrugged off any other day landed squarely in the depths of her deepest fears and sent anxiety surging through her body. Even as another woman in the group started to scornfully natter about how her lack of presence in ‘their’ social group of junior nobles proved she was ‘weird’, Anna felt like she was collapsing in on herself. The fragile house of glass shattering into a heap as she was confronted with the stark question of her life.

Who was she? Especially when compared to her sister?

Elsa, the Duchess. Who seemed to blast exquisite perfection in everything she did … while she was making an idiot of herself crashing into the heir to the Federated Commonwealth? What purpose, really, did she have in her life next to that, other than being some ‘break glass in emergency’ contingency if something horrible happened to her sister? For that matter; what worth did she have that wasn’t defined by her relationship to her sister? Forbes was an asshole … but that didn’t make him wrong.

She had no role or title beyond being the sister of the Duchess. She had no holdings or responsibilities of her own, not even a plain ordinary job. She was just … a hanger on. An accessory. The spare.

And now she was standing here. Inside her own home she was being shown exactly what her peers thought about her … and she suddenly wanted to find some corner to hide away in. Not because of Forbes and his rudeness -and she sure as hell wouldn’t give him the satisfaction!- but the overwhelming emotion of the day was just starting to be too much for her to deal with anymore. Anna wasn’t someone who had anxiety attacks, but the cumulative stress of the last few days had been no small thing to keep suppressing. And as the group ignorant of her presence but a few meters away continued agreeing on her lack of worth as even a person, Anna found herself rooted to the spot fighting back the tears that were trying hard to come out-

“You are an idiot, you know that don’t you?”

The voice -that voice- shattered her paralysis, cutting clean across the thunder of her heart in her ears. The tightness in her chest slackened and she took a cool cleansing breath almost on reflex, letting the panic recede as she exhaled. Recovering her poise, somewhat, she turned her attention now to the man striding into the suddenly silenced group of people in front of her and felt her eyes widen.

Not just a man. The man.

Hans Westerguard let a cool almost smirk sweep across the group as he strolled into their groups space without so much as a by-your-leave, that seemed to weigh them all and dismiss them in the same action. Standing taller than any of them in his utterly immaculate white uniform-like suit, he had them all struck speechless for a long moment until Forbes managed to work his mouth again.

“Excuse me?” Forbes offered him a sneer, puffing himself up slightly. “Do you know who-”

“No and I really don’t care either” Hans cut across the other with an indifference that caused the others eyes to go wide in shock as gasps erupted from his toadies - and Anna’s heart to skip a beat in (slightly malicious) glee from the sheer casual scorn the others eyes held, as if Forbes was something unpleasant he had found on the sole of his shoe. “The only thing I need to know is that you are clearly an idiot who decided to come into the Lady Jorgenessons home and casually insult both her and her sister with a disgraceful lack of manners or brains. Now” he continued with a slight shrug, “there is certainly no law against being either an idiot or rude in the Federated Suns, but it is a rare person who manages to accomplish both so … efficiently. So I suppose there is something praiseworthy about that…”

“I am a Baron you insolent fool. How dare-” Forbes started to splutter with his face going red,
only to be cut off once again as Hanse suddenly stepped into the group, his body language seeming to somehow change in a heartbeat to become … dangerous in a way that caused most of the gaggle of people to edge away reflexively.

“Oh quite easily I assure you” Hans replied with a thin smile. “Living in the Outback means you learn how to deal with rude idiots lest they waste precious resources. And, as such-”

Anna did gasp at that point, loudly enough to give her away … if not for the fact that her gasp was mixed with dozens of others as, in a blur of motion she could barely follow, Hans’s arm flicked out and a white glove slapped into the face of Forbes sending his head jerking to the side, his eyes bulging almost out of their sockets.

“Baron … whoever” Hans shrugged indifferently as Forbes eyes gaped, the blood starting to drain from his face with impressive speed as he realized what had just happened. “You have offered grievous insult against the Lady Anna Jorgensen and, on her behalf, I demand satisfaction”.

“You…” Forbes spluttered as he fought to rally his composure. “You, some offworld riff-raff commoner from the Periphery? You think you can challenge a Baron of Arendelle?”

Anna blinked at that as his repetition of his title sunk in, realizing that with his father dead James would have inherited the title when he turned eighteen. Which probably explained the sycophancy around him come to think of it. His social group was probably made up of scions of local nobility (the worst of them she fervently hoped) but none of them had titles in of themselves yet. Making him first among equals.

But one of the rules around the issuing of challenges like this was that only a member of the nobility could challenge a member of the nobility …

Wait … that had to mean-

“Periphery March, not the Periphery” Hans corrected the other with a single raised finger and chiding tone - even as the crowd around them grew with people whispering about what was going on in excitement (and Anna noticed to her annoyance, more than a few highly interested looks from young women towards Hans from the edge of the crowd). “And I’m actually a Knight of the Southern Isles. Now” and with that Hans’s whole tone and demeanor changed to be entirely businesslike as he carefully put his glove back on. “We surely don’t want to spoil the party for the Duchess’s family or Archon-Prince-Designate, so I’ll have my seconds call on you tomorrow to discuss the terms. Knives, swords, pistols - I am entirely flexible and ready at your earliest convenience of course” he said with a terrifyingly charming smile and brief slightly mocking bow at the increasingly white faced Forbes.

Anna couldn’t help but admit that she felt a tiny little flutter in her heart as she stared at her figurative (and quite possibly literal if he had a BattleMech back home somewhere) Knight in shining armor. A man who had unasked and unlooked for stood up to defend her honor like a tale out of a book...

Then her mind came back down to reality and she realized that she had to put a stop to this. Touching gesture or not, hurtful comments or not, did she really want blood spilled? For people to risk dying over a bunch of idiots calling her names behind her back?

This was the 31st century after all, not the 13th. And this was the Federated Suns. Not the Draconis Combine, where it was apparently considered a dull party in Luthien high society if at least two challenges had not been delivered by the end of the night...

But before she could open her mouth to interject, James Forbes opened his and made the whole issue moot.

“I … well, yes” Forbes started to say as it started to dawn on him how deep he was in it - and that a quick apology might save him an awful lot of painful physical therapy in the near future. And realizing that while it would be politically acceptable to simply apologize and move on with a small loss of face, accepting the challenge, even if he won, meant he would publicly be defending what he had said about her. And, if he lost - even if he lived …
“I think that, given the celebration we are at, it would perhaps be better if I simply expressed my … regret? That is” he added hastily as Hans’s eyes narrowed dangerously again at the non-specific words, “to apologize to the Lady Anna for such rude and clearly untrue statements”.

Then in that case” Hans didn’t quite hiss, “I’d suggest you turn around and do so”.

Those words hung in the air for a heartbeat, as if no-one could believe (or wanted to believe) what he had just said, but then almost as one, the faces of several dozen people snapped around and locked quickly onto her. And after only a heartbeat’s hesitation to school her face into the most impassive look she could muster, Anna reached up and pulled back the hood around her face, earning a sudden gasp from the crowd as her shimmering auburn hair emerged and caught the light. Many of the crowd who had gathered looked delighted -or were grinning outright at her- as if this was a sudden twist in some play they were watching.

The cluster of people around Forbes who had been enjoying insulting her, however, almost looked they were about to be sick.

Forbes face, impossibly, seemed to somehow become even paler as he saw her step forward, the crowd almost magically parting in silence for her as she held the man's gaze.

“My … my -”

“My Lady Anna?” She replied, trying for a neutral tone but not quite able to keep the acid out of it. “Or perhaps that was My Lady Social Climber?” she added causing Forbes to flinch, the man perhaps wondering if she was about to claim satisfaction with another right hook. But as cathartic as it might have been … she knew the scandal would only increase if she did so. Her sisters great celebration ruined by her starting a fist fight over people calling her names behind her back. Especially with the number of young people in the vicinity pointing vid cameras at them. This was not the footage Elsa would want on the morning talk shows. Nor the example Elsa would expect her to set.

He just wasn’t worth it.

If he had talked smack about her sister again on the other hand … well, he should count himself lucky!

“I…” Forbes tried, drawing her attention back as he closed his eyes and seemingly forcing himself to take a deep breath, before he bowed his head and held it down. “My Lady, I apologize. There is no excuse for the slander I was throwing around behind your back. I think perhaps I have had one too many-”

“Baron Forbes, I accept your apology” she cut him off, suddenly just wanting this over with, getting a slightly surprised reaction from the man as he hopefully raised his head, before she let the other shoe drop. “But I think it would be best if you and your … companions” Anna glanced to her side to take in the still shocked group of toadies before turning back, “made a discreet exit from the party now”.

There was an strangled moan come gasp of shock from the group at the news that they were being kicked out of the social event of the decade, but it died stillborn as Anna turned a not-quite-glare around them - and at the same time, they noticed that several of the guards and servants had not-quite pushed their way through the crowd to the group, clearly having caught onto what was happening and moved to stand ready should things escalate. Catching the eye of one, she beckoned him over.

“My Lady?” he asked with a slight bow and click of his heals.

“Can you please escort Baron Forbes and his friends to the door? They will be retiring for the evening. Arrange transport for them safely home if they do not have any ready. Oh and find their parents if they are present to let them know they are leaving” she added, trying not to enjoy the sudden look of terror in the eyes of most of the young adults at their parents being told their children were being kicked out of the party for insulting her.
“At once My Lady” the guard saluted before turning to Forbes. “My Lord?” he gestured in a friendly, but still rather pointed way.

“Of … of course” he muttered, seemingly grateful just to be able to leave on his own two feet and not find out if the Castles authenticity extended to it having a dungeon. “Once again My Lady, I apologise unreservedly for my rudeness” he bowed to her, Anna giving him a short nod back before he let himself be led away with a guard, the rest of his group being shepherded along behind him, none of them daring to meet her eyes … and leaving Anna in the middle of the crowd.

“I apologize for all that - please, the night is still young - enjoy the party!” Anna forced a smile and the crowd started to disperse, Anna vaguely noting the words of praise offered to her for her handling of the situation, but not really absorbing it. Because her attention was on the man who stepped forward and offered her a textbook perfect deep bow with yet more heart stopping grace and power.

“My Lady Anna” Hans greeted her as he swept back up to his tall and dashing self, an apologetic look on his face. “I most humbly apologize if I overstepped when I challenged the Baron to a duel on your behalf” he stated, looking almost sheepish in an impossibly cute way that caused Anna’s heart to flutter once more … but in a good way this time. “My Brothers always tell me I keep acting before thinking. I had just intended to chastise him and tell him off … but when I saw that you were standing right there and had heard everything those disgusting people said … I perhaps got a little … carried away”.

“My Lord Westerguard” Anna offered a curtsy in return, for once pulling it off exactly right before she let go of her skirt and felt her hands starting to wring each other before she forced them apart. “You don’t owe anyone an apology - least of all me. I mean, I don’t want people to die because they talked about me behind my back - which isn’t to say I don’t appreciate the offer … not to kill for me I mean but to challenge” she started at once to trip over her words before screaming mentally at herself to get it together. “But … well, I really appreciate the gesture is what I mean” she managed to say, starting to get lost in that deep gentle smile, ignoring the stares and whispers around her...

A cheer went up from the crowd suddenly and the moment was broken, Anna tearing her gaze away to note that the screens were showing Victor, Galen and Kai entering the grand ballroom inside the Castle.

“So uh, I think you should probably go inside My Lady” Hans noted gently, looking slightly disappointed for a moment before he covered it up behind another smile. “It was a great pleasure meeting you again” he said, offering another bow and clearly about to turn away-

“Would you like to come in with me?” Anna spluttered, before closing her eyes for a second and cursing herself for her tongue twisting itself into a pretzel and her brain for refusing to let her think before she talked, as Hans blinked in slight confusion.

“I mean…” she forced herself to take a breath and looked up into those devastating eyes. “My Lord Westergard … would you like to come in with me? As my … guest?” she barely managed to avoid saying ‘date’. “To the ball?”

The other was clearly taken aback and for a heart stopping moment she thought he was about to turn her down … then he offered another of his incredible smiles and a half bow.

“My Lady … it would be my pleasure and honor” he said before straightening … and extending his arm.

Clenching the muscles in her arm for a second to stop their annoying trembling, she linked her elbow through his and tried to ignore the electric thrill that shot through her arm into her body. Suddenly, she found herself mostly ignorant to the whispered smiles and smirks of the crowd as they moved through it. People gliding out of their way as word continued to spread about what had happened; Anna ignoring the looks from young women annoyed she was taking Hans away
and ignorant of the looks from young men annoyed Hans was taking her away. And soon enough, they stepped through into the castle proper heading for her sister … and Anna realized that this was the best social event she had ever been to in her life.

This was not Galen's first rodeo.

His introduction to the world of high nobility had been back in the day on Sudeten. Barely three years past and yet feeling like a lifetime ago now. Morgan Hasek-Davion, Marshal of the AFFC and Lord of the Capellan March had used the planet as his forward operating base during the Clan War. He and Victor after the destruction of their RCT had withdrawn there, to meet up with the reinforcements swarming into the theater. And with a number of elite units moving in, more than a few members of the upper nobility had shown up from both sides of the FedCom too - Kai Allard-Liao, then Heir to Saint Ives (and now Sian), among them.

But Sudeten had been very much a ‘business meeting’. The niceties of social protocol had been put to the side in favour of the AFFC trying to come to grips with the terrifying unknown enemy chewing up any unit thrown at them as they implacably advanced from planet to planet. His first real taste of court life thus had been after Twycross. First on Tharkad, then Outreach, New Avalon…

Yet he still couldn't help but feel more than a little out of place as he stepped past the bowing palace servants behind Victor and Kai, bracing himself for the wave of people expected to come at them. Even though they were here a good thirty minutes before the Duchess herself was due to show up and so the main ballroom was only half filled, the entrance of the Heir to the Federated Commonwealth unsurprisingly caused a sudden surge and people started to round towards them.

Tonight however luck was with him. By chance or design, the first person in Victor’s line of sight past the grand doors was Arendelle's ComStar Precentor. Happily, it turned out he was in fact a Tukayyid veteran; a Mechwarrior promoted to command of the local HPG station. Such a position was long considered the ultimate reward ComStar could give a member of the order; this man had clearly earned it through exemplary service on that massive battlefield. Or, the cynical part of Galen interjected, he’s part of Focht and Mori’s cleanup of the old guard after Myndo Waterlys ‘retirement’; replacing someone just a little too loyal to the old order… He knew better than to ask of course. The true scope, impact and consequences of Operation Scorpion were still being kept mostly secret from the general population of most Inner Sphere nations. But especially after Kai had shared one or two stories of his time on the run from the robes on Alynia, Galen couldn’t help but be somewhat more wary around Blakes followers these days. ‘New vision’ or not.

Still, on balance, it was an auspicious enough start to the night. It only took Victor ten seconds to determine that the man was ex Com-Guard; a former member of the legendary 104th Division. And inside a minute, the Precentor was delighted to start telling war stories, enthralling both Victor and Kai from ‘...and there I was jumping my Highlander out at thirty thousand feet …’ Of course, said ad-hoc tactical review quickly gained a crowd of the military and ex-military types that tended to dominate nobility in the Federated Suns, all very eager to hear of the famous battle from a first hand participant. Taking his chance with the opening, Galen slipped away through said crowd, making for the balcony that circled this part of the castle and swiping a flute of champagne from a waiter in passing as he made good his escape.

The Balcony ran along the outside of the grand ballroom, connecting two wings of the palace. Large floor to ceiling French doors were closed against the night air, but a smaller door to the side was available, with a palace guard in their green/purple uniform standing unobtrusively by it. For a moment as he approached, Galen thought the woman was going to try and deny him exit, but she hastened to open the door as he got closer with a nod, most probably recognizing him as part of Victors entourage. Although he noted that she did quickly close it behind him. Mentally shrugging at that, he stepped outside and took a deep breath, finding the crisp evening air filled with the scent of roses and flowers from cunningly placed planter boxes and hedges that
divided up the balcony. Making it almost an outdoor garden, and quite a charming one too.

Now this was more like it. No-one out here but-

“Good evening Kommandant. Can I help you?” a voice asked from his right. Sighing slightly, Galen turned to see yet another plain clothes security type. Not one of Victors - the man was missing the tiny silver and gold fox pin his bodyguards wore; this was clearly someone from palace security.

“No, just coming out here to get some fresh air” Galen replied with an easy smile, nodding at the stone railing that marked the edge of the balcony.

The bodyguard seemed to hesitate for a split second before smiling and nodding back, fading back to his previous position blocking off the upper third of the balcony in an unspoken message that it was off limits.

Mentally ignoring the odd behavior, Galen strode forward towards the railing in front of him, casually sipping at his champagne and finding it pleasantly agreeable for a local vintage. The balcony faced north, situated on the opposite side of the Castle from the main gate and the grounds were only softly illuminated, so he had to wait for his eyes to adjust.

The immense egg shaped silhouette of the Barbarossa, Victor’s command dropship, was immediately visible though, by virtue of being both the size of a small skyscraper and having its running lights on. She had flown across from the spaceport earlier today and now sat placidly on the Royals private dropship landing pad that jutted out into the fjord - probably the largest dropship to ever use it. Beyond said fjord a heavily forested bank rose quickly towards the sky with mountains looming close behind, forming a natural Northern barrier to the Arendelle city regional area. One distinctive peak in particular, only a dozen or so kilometers away, stabbed into the sky and vanished into the clouds like a spearhead.

_The North Mountain_ he recalled after a moment, one of the key geographical features on the AO maps he had studied purely out of habit on the flight in. He admired the the distinctive knife like profile and noticed the hints of snow on the upper regions, reflecting that the one thing he really missed from Trel-I was its sphere-class ski resorts...

“Next time, I’m bringing skis” he promised loudly to the mountain with a smirk, raising his glass in a mock salute to it-

“Excuse me?” a slightly surprised and muffled woman's voice came in and Galen felt his face go red as he turned to the right. The box hedge there that blocked off the eastern third of the balcony was reasonably thick, but squinting through the hedge he could vaguely make out a figure standing on the other side.

Well that was embarrassing.

“Oh … Sorry” he apologized, feeling slightly sheepish in the way one did when caught talking to yourself. “I was just talking to myself - I thought I was alone out here”.

“Oh” the other -a young woman he determined after a moment - noted. “Then … I'm sorry for disturbing you”.

“No, no it’s fine” Galen hastened to clarify, not wanting to offend her. “I’ve just been cooped up indoors or in vehicles pretty much all day, wanted to get some air. Well that and” he admitted with a slightly wry smile to himself, “these kinds of events are not really my specialty”.

There was a brief pause and then the other voice came back again, this time tinted with just a hint of curiosity.

“I would have thought … that is, surely you have been to far grander celebrations than this on Tharkad and New Avalon? With the Archon and First Prince?”

Galen raised an eyebrow at that. Clearly this person knew who he was. Then again, it wasn’t exactly a state secret, was it?
“Oh, far grander” he admitted with a shrug after a moment of thought, turning back to step up to the balcony and lean against it, admiring the grounds that stretched out towards the fjord. “Peter Steiner-Davion’s 18th Birthday party back in February had something like two thousand guests and some of the best bands from the Federated Commonwealth doing live performances ... and that was pretty lively”.  

*Even more so,* Galen silently reflected, when Victor had suddenly approached him on the sidelines and hurriedly told him that he had just been given a heads up from a friend in palace security that Yvonne had snuck into the ballroom incognito - with a little help from Arthur running a diversion. And if Hanse Davion found out his precious youngest daughter -who could pass for sixteen with a little effort- had slipped into a darkened room filled with alcohol and young men?  

Well, no-one *wanted* the 1st Davion to crash the party...  

Yvonne had refused to talk to him for months after he had been the one to track her down and firmly pull her out of the room and away from the three young men who had been far too interested in her for his liking.  

“Still, I’m not a blueblood” he continued as he leaned down against the stone ledge of the balcony. “At a big event on New Avalon or Tharkad I’m just part of the crowd. Everyone who is anyone brings along aides and people of all sorts, so I’m not anyone special three. But here” Galen jerked his head back to the palace before remembering that the other couldn’t see him, “I’m a tad more conspicuous next to the heirs of the Federated Commonwealth and Capellan Confederation as the only other member of their offworld delegation. More than a few people probably look at me and conclude I’m the greatest social climber since Cinderella”.

There was something of a half gasp, half amused laugh from the other at that quip, which rapidly strangled off into an apologetic clearing of the others throat.

“Yes ... I suppose there is an advantage in being ‘nobody’ at these events. No pressure. No expectations...” the other's voice trailed off and Galen frowned, cocking his head slightly in thought.

He had always had a bit of a knack for getting a handle on other people’s moods and insecurities. More than one NCO he had served with had bemoaned the fact that he had chosen to ‘waste’ his talent by becoming an officer instead of the Master Sergeant he was meant to be.

And right now, those instincts were telling him that this young woman was wound up tighter than a furled jumpship sail.

Pausing, he took another look through the planter box at her vague silhouette as he wondered who she was ... and this time caught a shift of one of the guards out of the corner of his eye - and then it finally clicked who this person *had* to be.

And why she was out *here* instead of in *there*.

*Well, it was a nice party while it lasted* Galen sighed to himself as he idly considered a new career as a life coach for young nobility. So far he had held Victors hand through his first war, slapped some sense into Kai on Outreach and even run interference on Victor's parents when he had wanted to go and ‘say goodbye’ to Omi...

“Perhaps. Although I have *something* of an understanding of what it's like being trapped into social situations like this with unwelcome attention” he admitted to her, before letting a smirk come across his face as his mind flashed back. “I remember one night, back during the war, when Victor and I returned to Tharkad after Twycross. It was getting late and Vic decided we’d just grab a bite before crashing for the night - it had been a long high-G burn in after all. So,” Galen chuckled, crossing his arms and leaning against the balcony railing, “he took me to a room in the Triad and knocked on the door … and moments later I found myself dragged inside by Katherine Steiner-Davion. Victor ‘neglected’ to inform me that *this night*, by pure coincidence was ‘family dinner night’. And while he and his siblings ran into the kitchen to help Yvonne and Arthur cook, *I* spent the most terrifying fifty six and a half minutes of my life trapped on a couch opposite Hanse Davion and Melissa Steiner”.

Galen paused for a moment at the memory. He had thought he had known terror on the battlefield,
terror that never truly went away but could be mastered … but that hour had made the desperate fights for his life on the Clan front seem like a cadets training exercise. Even eating Yvonne and Arthur’s ‘creative’ attempt at Spaghetti Bolognaise had been a minor thing afterwards.

Yet after surviving that night, hanging around and dealing with the events of the Royal Courts had become almost casually easy for him, putting everything in perspective …

Just boring as all hell.

“That...must have been intimidating” the other noted after a moment, now sounding mildly amused rather than anxious. Which was progress.

“Very” Galen admitted. “But I learned a rather pointed lesson that night kid. “One” he added, “that I think might be somewhat relevant to your situation, kid”.

There was a slightly startled silence from the other at that and for a nanosecond Galen wondered if he had genuinely overstepped the mark … before he heard the soft but sharp sound of a heel striking stone and caught a flickering of movement off to the side. On instinct his gaze came up …

Galen had seen Elsa before, of course.

Well, at least he had seen her image several times.

Her photo in the MIIO file Victor had forwarded to him for review as part of his briefing packet had been striking enough in a formal sort of way he supposed, but had no warranted more than a glance. And while on base overseeing the auditing of the local militia, one of the vid-screens in the briefing rooms he and his people had been using had, naturally, been turned to the live coverage of the coronation and he had seen her image more than once in passing in between data files and noted her beauty in an equally distant sort of way.

Face to face barely a meter away he found himself frozen as he met her gaze across the balcony.

The first thought that flew into his mind was that Elsa had a wash of freckles across her face. Unlike her sisters, they were incredibly faint and only visible close up. And yet they seemed to suit her skin perfectly, while also with their presence linking her to her younger sibling in a way he found entirely appropriate.

The second thought a few milliseconds later was that she was gorgeous. Her hair was a rare shade of blond, with a light enough mix of colours that it seemed to all but glow in the dim lighting like a precious metal, shimmering in a way that made him irrationally annoyed he was utterly horrible at poetry given how it took his breath away. Not so much as one hair was out of place in the bun that swirled up onto her head, her fair skin - that he knew many ladies of the court would have happily murdered for - contrasting perfectly with the deep colors of her dress and dark eyeshadow; colours that lent her a mysterious mature air despite her youth. But all of that was nothing as his eyes locked with hers.

Some people like Hanse Davion or Jamie Wolf were rather hard people to hold a gaze with. They had such a presence that it took constant conscious effort to not find something far more interesting in the shoes they was wearing. Other people like Elsa’s sister, were so innocently honest and friendly in their gaze without any guile or deception, that you could talk with her all day without the slightest hint of self consciousness. Even bloody Curtias hadn’t been able to help but smile back when Anna had given him chocolates yesterday - even if the smile had looked like his facial muscles were frantically looking up old books to try and remember how to do it.

And then you had Melissa Steiner who with a smile and a wink could make you feel that your life was complete … and it was all downhill from here the second she turned away.

But Elsa…

*Her eyes danced in the dark like twin sapphires. A deep blue whose shade Galen couldn’t name that held his gaze that he couldn’t have looked away from even if he wanted to. There was just such … depth to them, infinite facets that hinted she was so much more than she seemed; removing all thought from his mind and leaving him simply staring at her as that gaze seemingly drew him deeper and deeper …*
“...Yes?” she asked him after a pause - and just that like he blinked … and the moment was gone. Now he was just seeing a slightly confused looking young woman waiting for him to finish his thought.

*Get a bloody grip Galen! She’s twenty one ... and a Duchess!*

“Just remember” he said, managing to fight off his faces desire to flush bright red through sheer willpower, wrenching himself back on topic. “You are the Duchess of Arendelle. Short of Victor and Kai, *you* are the most senior member of the nobility in that room” he jerked his head backwards slightly towards the palace, but didn’t break eye contact “and *you* the one that most people have come here to see. So take it from someone who has been in their position recently; *they* will be far more terrified of screwing this up than *you* could possibly be of making a bad impression of them. If you just shake their hands, smile and nod at them for ten seconds before moving on, they’ll leave tonight telling everyone that you personally gave them a tour of your castle and passed on your personal phone number. If you make any minor faux pas, they’ll be falling over themselves to claim that it’s entirely *their* fault and beg your forgiveness”. He paused for a moment to let that sink in as he judged her intent expression before he shrugged.

“But, if you need a diversion to get away for a moment, just catch my eye, brush your collar and I’ll have Anna crash into Victor again”.

There was a brief moment of imperiously raised eyebrows - at his last comment … but then came the snicker. Then a second as she fought to keep control … and then with a strangled snort, Elsa broke out into pure laughter, letting her head slump and just letting it go.

And it was one of the most charming sounds he had ever heard in his life.

Kai was, to his mild surprise, having a pleasant time at this ball.

So far anyway.

Of course to be fair, the fact that it had started out not so much a ball as an impromptu and highly entertaining tactical analysis of anti-Clan tactics had helped greatly. He and Victor had managed to stretch that out for a good fifteen minutes or so, with Precentor Richards entirely happy to walk them through the famous hot-drop his division had made that had broken the back of the Jade Falcons at Robbins Crossing - with several dozen other current and retired AFFS and Militia officers ‘casually’ joining them, all eager to listen in on a story about the single biggest battle in the Inner Sphere since the 2nd Succession War from someone who had been there.

However soon enough, the dread secretary and protocol officer Mavis Williams, wearing an *exactly* suitable gown for the evening had materialized and ‘politely’ broken up the group, not quite dragging Victor further out into the room where masses of VIPs were forming a receiving line of sorts to greet him. Kai had taken the chance to break formation as Galen had cunningly done earlier (without either he or Victor noticing), despite the look that said ‘Traitor!’ on Victor’s face as he did so, to circulate on his own. Understandably, most of the locals were gravitating to the Prince of the Federated Commonwealth so, for now, Kai was alone - and happy to be so in this casual pre-ball mixer.

He had been a little uncertain as to what reaction *he* would get tonight. His clothes were of the finest quality, but clearly *not* the current fashion inside the Federated Commonwealth. No, the cut and colors of his formal dress were all the rage on Sian right now. Part of his mother’s Xin Sheng (or ‘rebirth’) movement as she worked to restructure the Capellan Confederation along the lines of the major changes she had made to Saint Ives over the years - to great acclaim. Granted, she was getting almost unprecedented support from the population as she worked to rebuild her people's pride in her nation … but his cynical side couldn’t help but reflect that after Aunt Romanos reign of terror an *inanimate flower pot* may well have gotten just about as much support on the Celestial Throne....

Even so, the Confederation remained the Confederation and thus his clothes had been chosen with the same considered political calculus that governed all his Mothers decisions. They clearly
identified him as a Capellan - but more than that as a new Capellan. Modern and vibrant, standing with the Federated Commonwealth rather than against it. Refreshed and dynamic yet proud and unashamed - and being worn by a man respected and trusted by the upper realms of the Federated Commonwealths nobility. So … could the Confederation pretty please have a cut of the local resources to build Clan weapons technology?

Frankly; Kai felt a bit like a giant billboard.

Angling off to the side, he started to make for the very impressive looking line of drinks on a table at the back when a voice suddenly hit him from the side.

“Ah my Lord Liao - I have been looking for you!” a voice suddenly cut into his mulling and Kai pivoted to see … no one. Until he glanced down slightly.

A much older man in an oldschool Lyran uniform was standing in front of him, bespeckled with various medals and rank signals. None of which, Kai noted, were for military service, but for noble rank and position. Honorary ranks and the like from his worlds militia most likely alongside political awards. A shockingly bad toupee on his head shifted slightly as he clicked his heels together and offered a sharp bow before he looked up with a shrewd gaze through an almost caricature monocle.

“It would seem you have found me,” Kai said in a friendly sort of way, with a bow that was almost a nod. “Can I help you, Mister…?”

“Oh?” Kai asked politely as he wracked his brains - and managed to untangle his hand. He knew of this man by reputation - his mother had said many unflattering things about him and his actions in the Sarna March in the aftermath of the 4th Succession War. ‘Carpetbagger’ being about the nicest. He also knew he was here to win contracts with Duchess Jorgensson for Arendelle's massive mineral wealth. Kai in fact had already spotted representatives from Achernar and Corean, Defiance and Universal Air moving towards Victor, based on the company logos they were unabashedly wearing on their suits. And, from the way several others were sharing in the polite glares with them and each other as they jockeyed for position to talk to Victor, he suspected many others were also present tonight.

He also knew that Victor would pretty much ignore all of them - and suspected this man had come to the same conclusion.

“Oh it's simple. Quite simple indeed my friend!” the other boldly reached up to take his upper arm … and ignoring the pointed look Kai gave it steered him off towards the less crowded part of the room, Kai deciding to tolerate the other for now. “Your mother wants access to the raw materials to begin building Clan technology, materials this planet possesses. Well! As it so happens, my company Weselton Industries -I'm sure you've heard of us- is of course well known to be the frontrunner for winning the local resource extraction tenders. Frankly we're the only logical choice” the other sniffed before sighing. “Sadly, many other companies are here to try and push their way in and slow things down and drag things out - possibly for years or even decades! I'm sure as a soldier who fought the Clans, you surely want your comrades to have access to comparable weapons as quickly as possible, do you not?”

“Well, of course, but-” Kai started to say as he pointedly removed the others hand from his arm-

“Exactly!” the other talked over the top of him, his impressive moustache shimmering with pleasure at his ‘agreement’. “I knew I could count on you my boy! So, if you were to speak with Prince Victor to arrange shall we say an expedited meeting, hmmm? We can get started immediately! After all, who knows when the Clans will attack again eh? And I would not forget
such … friendship when deciding who is first in line! Enjoy the evening!” and with that, before Kai could say anything, the Duke clicked his heels together and bowed sharply (the toupee looking dangerously like it was about to come off) before he was up and striding happily across the floor and leaving Kai standing there working his jaw.

Kai shook his head slowly, catching himself from the sheer speed at which the man had appeared and vanished. *That* was the man’s idea of subtlety?

“He’d last a *day* on Sian” Kai muttered as he wanted the other strut (yes, strut) away to join a large group of offworld nobles busy plundering the drinks table.

On the other hand, perhaps the man had simply played to his audience, not wasting time with innuendo or double talk. His mother did want the mineral resources, having made it clear that it would be a huge benefit for the Confederation to lock in such a supply of materials. And, with new export agreements in place soon with the FedCom-CapCom treaty signing, it would indirectly mean so for the AFFC too.

And if he didn’t play along…

Kai shivered. Politics was something he truly wanted to avoid at all costs, yet he knew that it was an impossibility now more than ever. He and Victor were both trapped; both warriors who had to become politicians. *Perhaps* as the heir to the Saint Ives Compact he could have gotten away with abdicating to his sister and remaining a soldier, but his Mother since retaking the throne of the Confederation had been full speed ahead plowing the way for him to rule after her; rule a full scale Successor State and he could no more abandon that fate than Victor could. Even if unlike Victor he could still put it off for some time yet…

And as he was want to do, Kai started to second guess himself. It annoyed him because he knew he was second guessing himself, but he couldn’t help it. *Should* he in fact look to bring this up with Victor with his support? Get the Confederation their ‘cut’, ensure the mines were up and running as quickly as possible by doing an end-run around the other companies? Or should he ignore the man - who if he then did *win* the contracts (which he recalled was actually quite likely) might well decide to punish him by working to ensure the Confederation was well down the priority line? Or should he back another bidder no matter the merits of the bid from the Duke? Or Play them off against each other?

With no easy answers, Kai turned away and drifted away, his body language and motion clearly dissuading the other people heading towards him as he shifted into one of the many adjoining rooms, this one thankfully empty of people right now, just off the ballroom with wonderful floor-to-ceiling windows looking out over the palace grounds. And he stopped in front of the windows … and started brooding. He got away with it for exactly six point two seconds.

“I know *that* look” a voice cut into his thoughts and caused his eyes to inadvertently widen in shock. He knew that voice. A voice that froze him in place, as it continued with a tone that was clinical … and yet tinged with amusement. “*That’s* the ‘I’m going to start second guessing myself and fret into indecision, so I’ll go and sulk in a corner and hope it all goes away’ look”.

Slowly, very slowly Kai raised his slightly shifted his focus from the outside to the reflections on the glass, seeing now one of a woman roughly his own height. Her dark hair was cut short, just resting on her collar and a sleeveless white gown hugged her figure extremely well, leaving her clearly well toned arms free, crossed in front of her. Swallowing hard, Kai turned around.

“Is it really that obvious?” he asked, unable to help the faint smile that came across his face as he took in the woman in front of him.

“Yes” Diedre Lear noted with a thin smile - but a smile all the same- as she slowly closed the distance, making him feel like he was under a microscope as she looked him up and down for a moment, before her expression shifted. “It’s … good to see you Kai” she said continued more softly than he might have expected as she halted in front of him with a whisper of sound from her gown.
“It’s good to see you too” he replied, fighting the urge to step closer and brush back the hair from the side of her face … or snark back and note that that was not what she had said the last time he had seen her. “You look” -Kai frantically searched for a word- “great”. 

*Damn it, I should have said beautiful* he promptly cursed himself for wimping out. Like always.

“Thank you” she replied, her polite smile briefly softening in a way that gave Kai the uncanny feeling she knew exactly what he was thinking, before she nodded. “And I have to admit, you’re actually pulling off that look rather … dashingly I suppose?”

“Well it beats looking like a complete idiot” he shrugged feeling slightly sheepish as he stared at her, lost in memories of flowing back across his mind. The weeks on the run, dodging bounty hunters, ROM agents and Elementals. Their skin-of-the-teeth escapes, the chaos as allies became enemies and enemies allies. The heated nights when their bodies had moved against each other, the tension of months or years finally exploding. And almost unwillingly, the way he started to come to understand her on a level he had never understood anyone.

And then that painful moment when he realized he had fallen in love with her … then but a moment later realized that they were simply too different as people for it to ever work. That when he had finally accepted who he was and what he did (mostly due to watching a point of *Elementals* break down, rolling on the ground laughing so hard they couldn’t breath when they realized who they had been chasing) … it became clear that he was not someone Diedre could ever truly come to accept.

So he had gone to her, prepared to break her heart to force her to let him go … only for her to come to *him* with what he had later realized was exactly the same plan to break his.

It had *still* hurt like a gauss slug to the heart though.

And so they had separated, leaving Alyina on different dropships. She heading towards the Crucis March, he diverted down a command circuit to Sudeten where Morgan Hasek-Davion had gently informed him of his Father's death and his mother's -then secret- survival at the hands of a Capellan assassin.

Ironically, as horrible as news of his father's death had been, he had in some way almost welcomed it for the numbing effect it provided to his own pain. But free of those events now and face to face with her, Kai couldn’t help but feel that same pain at the way things had ended between them, long buried, start to rise up again.

“I…” Kai paused, took a breath and rallied as he pushed past the memories to focus on *her*; here and now. “I thought you’d returned to Odell after finishing up in the AFFC?”

“I did” she admitted, looking down briefly at her hands crossed over her stomach before looking back up. “I took some time to decompress from … well, everything I suppose. But I was looking for a new challenge and after asking around, I was headhunted to consider a job offer forwarded to me via New Avalon”.

“On Arendelle?” Kai asked, tilting his head in curiosity. While it wasn’t exactly the beating heart of the Crucis March, Arendelle was a well established and prosperous (soon to be extremely so) world. As he recalled, she had been dreaming of a *challenge* once her AFFC service ended, making sweeping medical improvements on far less fortunate worlds than this one…although at the time she had not so subtly hinted that it was to try and counter the sweeping destruction caused by armies and Battlemechs.

“For now, yes” she nodded once with a nod as she slowly stepped around him to start drifting towards the back of the room, Kai standing and watching as she moved. Beyond her, he was amused to note one of the CID agents on Victor's detail had quietly taken position at the door, partially to keep him safe but far more he bet to keep people away from them - as it finally hit him that the clues Victor had dropped earlier today meant he had *known* she would be here.

And now he wanted them isolated together in a room.

*Subtle Victor, very subtle. Not that I’m complaining…*

“To be honest I’m actually just passing through, waiting for my team to arrive next month. I’ve taken a position as joint director for regional medical affairs development in the Periphery March,
part of Prince Davions push to finally start to bring the health care out there to the level it should be”.

Ah, Kai thought to himself, *that makes sense.* The Periphery March of the Federated Suns had been created as a framework to allow massive development of the region successive Princes had ignored for centuries, leaving it a far cry from the core of the Crucis March - and on some worlds honestly little better than Periphery outposts in quality of life. Kai had seen the economic modeling that an economic chain reaction could start in less than twenty years that would have the region cease being a net negative for the Federated Commonwealth economy. And in less than fifty, probably the massive driver of growth as populations, technology and industry exploded. The Clan Invasion *had* diverted a large chunk of the planned funding into crash military-industrial programs by necessity, but even so it was still a hotbed of activity for the first time in far too long … and that neatly explained Diedres presence.

*A chance to shape and set the foundations for medical policy for an entire March? A massive possibly impossible project to save lives by the millions? Sounds about right.*

“They couldn’t have found anyone more determined for the job” he said - honestly. Hubris or not, he knew she would *never* stop trying.

Now she *did* blush - ever so slightly - as she turned back to face him, raising her chin, her eyes boring into him as if *daring* him to make a comment on her reaction as she started to moved back towards him.

“Thankyou, Kai” she almost shyly replied before clearing her throat and setting herself again. “Anyway; while I’m waiting I’ve been teaching and consulting at the children’s hospital in Arendelle City. I’ve also been helping out directly with a number of charity clinics the Duchess was, I found out later, quietly a patron of. So she invited me …” she said trailing off and looking a little uncertain. She didn’t actually say ‘before I found out you and Victor were coming’ - but he heard it none the less, causing him to break her gaze to glance off to the side for a moment.

“I … didn’t know you were coming tonight” Kai clarified. *Thank you very much Victor … although he might have thought I would just run away screaming rather than risk facing her … and damn it, he might have been right “I didn’t even know you were on the planet in fact”.*

“Indeed?” she raised an eyebrow for a moment before seeming to nod and accept his answer. “But … I’m glad you’re here tonight” she admitted, surprising him and causing him to turn back to face her, noting the uncertain but *honest* look on her face.

Kai started to open his mouth to say something to that, when he caught a flicker of motion out of the corner of his eye. Acting quickly on impulse, he quickly took Diedres arm and edged her backwards, feeling her stiffen at his sudden action before she seemed to relax and move with him. *Just in time too as Anna Jorgensson cleanly slid to a halt where she had been standing, a tall and rather dashing young man being half dragged along with her.*

As quickly as decorum would allow, he let go of Diedres arm and stepped back with a muttered ‘sorry’ and earned a smile back as she regained her composure, she turning to face the new arrivals and he following suit.

“I think they may have polished this floor a little *too* much” Anna complained with a frown directed at said mahogany floorboards.

Kai couldn’t help but snicker at the observation, feeling the somber, conflicted mood around he and Deedress lift as the younger woman casually crashed into their little corner of the room - straight through, he noticed, the MIIO agent who must have been steering people away from the two of them. *Had they tried to stop her and she just ignored them? Did they recognize her as the second highest ranking noble in her own house and decide not to? Or, based on the sudden startled look said agent was giving the three of them, she had just phased through time and space, *again*, to mock their security.*

“Good evening Anna” he bowed to the other as the other with great interest poked at the
floorboards of the ballroom with the tip of her incredibly expensive looking shoe, with a complete indifference for where she was or who she was with. His greeting however drew her attention back and she quickly beamed at him.

“Hey Kai!” she replied, her eyes shining (they seemed to be more green than blue this evening - might be the dress?) perfectly happily. “Uh, welcome to my home and all that? Wow, did someone actually paint the windows in here?” she suddenly switched topics without reason, her head whirling like a *Rifleman*’s targeting dish to take in the floor to ceiling french doors before shrugging and coming back to them with a huff to blow her fringe out of the way. “Anyway” she continued before anyone could even think about trying to get a word in, “so I was out in the courtyard and traveling with my hood up when I came across some people laughing behind my back at how I was the biggest social climber in Arendelle's history.”

“Wait, what?” Kai broke in at that, a sudden almost reflexive jolt of anger coming from nowhere at that statement that cut through his own troubles as he fully focused on the younger woman. Feeling a touch of guilt as he recalled his jokes earlier today to Victor about Anna being madly in love with him according to the local scandalvids. It seemed far less funny now as he realized the consequences on Anna’s reputation among her peers...

He could almost see his mother rolling her eyes at him as she mentally criticised him for only *now* thinking of that possible blowback. With Uncle Tormano next to her shaking his head and making him down on some giant report card as he weighed the skills of the heir to the Celestial Throne...

“Who said that?” he demanded instead, pushing that picture out of his head to focus on Anna.

“Oh just some stupid kid and his toadies” Anna shrugged it off - but Kai could see the hints in her body language and face that suggested she was putting more effort than normal into her carefree attitude *on that* topic, before she turned to her companion and her smile rapidly became more genuine as the other blushed slightly. “Anyway, they’ve been sent home for the night thanks to - wait have you met Hans?” she asked as her head snapped back.

“Uh, no I don’t believe so” Kai replied, amused as ever at the rapid changes of subject Anna could speed through. He made a firm mental note though, to follow up tomorrow on the disturbance outside *before* Victor heard about it. If Anna was being given a hard time by some local people for daring to be open and genuinely friendly with him as a human being first and Prince a very distant second, the odds were about even Victor’s first instinct would be to power up *Prometheus* and go for a ‘walk’ without Katherine here to slap him on the back of the head.

Perhaps a *slightly* more nuanced approach could be used to help ‘correct the narrative’ as his mother might say?

Putting the issue to the side for now to focus on the present, Kai extended his hand and let a well practiced smile cross his face as he focused in on the young and rather dashing man Anna seemed to have taken a distinct interest in. “Kai Allard-Liao” he said, leaving his titles out - on the not unreasonable assumption that most people would probably know who he was.

“Hans Westerguard - of the Southern Isles” the other took his hand with a firm shake - but no silly contest of strength and thankfully taking his que to also drop the titles - before in a twist shifting in a precise Capellan bow *of exactly* the right duration and depth as was appropriate for a distinct subordinate to give to a superior in a casual social situation. “A true honor Lord Liao - your reputation precedes you - even out on the Rim” he said as he rose back up and let go of his hand.

“Thank you” Kai replied as on pure reflex he returned the bow at the depth expected, before turning to his side. “May I present Doctor Diedre Lear? A former … colleague in the 10th Lyran Guards during the Clan War with Victor, Galen and myself”

“Doctor Lear, also a true pleasure” Hans offered her a more Federated Suns style bow, taking her extended hand as he came down to gently kiss it - in a way that was respectful and very proper. Kai was still hit with a completely unworthy spike of possessive jealousy at the visual. And then rather embarrassed as Diedre’s eyes caught him for a split second, a smile smirking out from the corner of her mouth for just long enough to say that she *knew* exactly what he was thinking.
Hans however didn’t seem to have the slightest design on his ex, instead stepping back to Anna and exchanging a smile with her as she casually eased back into him and clamped onto his arm - like Battle Armor riding an Omnimech. For some reason, that entirely innocent gesture and way the two kids were smiling at each other with very little in the way of thought in their eyes, flagged the attention of the part of his mind his mother had painfully trained in the intrigue and intricacies of the Capellan Court. Mentally, Kai rolled his eyes and told his mind to shut up for once. He was here to get away from the paranoia capital of the Inner Sphere and he would not start jumping at shadows.

“My Lady Anna” Diedre continued, shifting slightly to give a curtsey to the younger woman, who half-detached from Hans to return it looking rather … what was that word Galen used? Oh yes, ‘adorable’.

“Oh, just plain old Anna will do Doctor” Anna greeted her with a guileless smile and similar gesture before immediately starting to quiz her. “Soooo, medical Doctor?”

“Surgeon - and call me Diedre dear” Diedre smiled at her - clearly surprised yet pleased to be asked - and falling right into the Anna trap. “Although I’ve been doing a lot of strategic health care policy development recently, I’ve also been busy working and lecturing at the local hospitals on Arendelle while I wait for the rest of my team to arrive before I head to Filvet for a March directorship”.

“Oh” Anna blinked, looking impressed in that completely guileless way of hers that said she really was impressed. “That’s, well … that’s incredible. You’re an amazing woman to be able to do all that”.

It amused Kai that not even Diedre Lear, a woman who generally hid her emotions under an utterly professional persona that made the walls of Troy look weak, was immune to the simple honesty of Anna’s response. Anna said she was an amazing woman - so she was amazing woman. It was that simple.

It also happened to be a sentiment Kai was in full agreement with so perhaps he was just biased?

“I … thank you, Lady Anna” Diedre managed to get out before Anna suddenly changed targets as was her want, giving Diedre previous time to regain the composure she had lost for a moment clearly touched at the casual given yet genuine comment.

“Hey, has anyone seen my cousin?” Anna wondered aloud, walking to the threshold with everyone following her, seemingly automatically, to take in the increasingly crowded room, her eyes narrowing slightly as she searched. “She’d better not have missjumped off that diet plan again, so help me God…”

“I think I saw your Aunt up by the dias at the front of the room” Kai hastily jumped in before Anna went off on a tangent. “I’m guessing she’ll be around there somewhere?”

“Really? Thanks Kai! Oh and it was really nice to meet you Doctor Lear - I hope we can talk later but I should let you too get on with your date. Come on Hans, I wanna introduce you to my relatives!”

“Uh - sure, of course” the other blinked before smiling at her, then turning back to nod to both he and Diedre. “A true pleasure Doctor, Lord Liooooooo” his voice shifted into something of a startled huff of air as Anna was off again, Hans seeming to bounce along behind her like a child’s balloon behind an excited child … leaving Kai and Diedre Diedre struck silent in their absence at her casual identifying of them as on a date. Quick Kai … think of something to say he mentally yelled at himself as the silence became deafening…

“So … would this be a second date? Or do we count the Hatchetman on Twycross?”

The words escaped his mouth before he even stopped for a nanosecond to think … and now the mental image of his mother and uncle simultaneously facepalmed as Diedre turned to face him...
...and laughed

It was not a bellyache or a roof shattering laugh by any means, more of a low snicker, but it was an incredibly endearing and honest chortle as she clearly struggled to compose herself, closing her eyes and covering her mouth with her hand for a good five seconds or so, before looking at him and offering a slightly wry smile and left Kai feeling as if he had just dodged an AC-20 shell whistling past his cockpit by half a millimeter...

“You need to get out more if you think ejecting from a Hatchetman as the world explodes below you is your idea of a date” she noted dryly, brushing her fringe back as she eyed him with a considering expression for a long moment that Kai didn’t want to even consider interrupting before she finally seemed to mentally make an important decision and nod slowly, once. “But … if you can find time … Friday … perhaps we can have lunch?”

Kai’s response, he knew full well, should have been that he had a lunch with a Victor and a whole hoard of local business leaders, with several guest speakers ready to make long speeches no doubt about sharing the wealth around and investing in the future - preferably their company’s future.

“I’d really like that” he didn’t even hesitate to respond with a smile that she returned before glancing off.

“Okay then” she agreed before a slight buzzing interrupted. Quickly she reached into a small clutch she was carrying to pull out a cellphone, looking at the caller ID on the small screen before up at him, her face somewhat serious yet apologetic. “Excuse me Kai, I have to take this”.

“Of course” he nodded. “I’ll see you Friday then?”

With a smile and a nod she moved off, flipping open her phone and taking softly but quickly to whoever was on the other end of the line as she vanished into another antechamber. Kai managed to resist the urge to pump his fist in the air as soon as she vanished. Barely. Instead, he turned around and walked out back into the main room - noting it was suddenly near full, clearly Prince Victor’s arrival had hastened that of others. Victor himself had shifted to the slightly raised dais where Elsa’s throne now sat at the front of the room. Catching his eye, Kai couldn’t help but shoot him a very discreet ‘thumbs up’ and Victor clenched a fist in triumph before he schooled himself back to formality as the loud bang bang bang of a staff of office being pounded on the floor sounded from the side of the front of the room.

“Presenting Duchess Elsa Jorgensson of Arendelle” Victor Steiner-Davion loudly proclaimed through the room and with that, Elsa Jorgensson made her entrance, her long purple cape trailing behind her as she glided in.

It was quite an entrance indeed; looking every micron from her head to her toes the perfect Duchess. Anna dared to simply stare and drink her in from her position off to the side as Elsa took her place rightful place just in front of her throne. As was protocol given their respective noble positions, Elsa first offered Victor a curtsy. Then as she rose, he fully faced her and -accompanied by the crowd as a whole- offered a bow, the entire room showing their respect and homage to their new liege. As was proper.

Off to the side of the crowd standing with her relatives and Hans, Anna also rose from her curtsey (held just a tad deeper and longer than others around her) and regarded her sister with no small amount of awe. Her sister’s presence was again suddenly overwhelming, leaving her somehow feeling caught by surprise all logic, despite being rather more focused on other things. Rapunzel, for example, hadn’t stopped prying from the second she and Hans had shown up, with only the occasional look from her aunt holding her cousin’s curiosity -barely- in check.

Hans though had proven to be astonishingly good at engaging her cousin in polite conversation while also deflecting her questions with an ease so smooth that Anna would have completely believed him if not for the fact that she had actually been there. And yet he did so without actually lying even once.
Clearly *someone* had spilled the beans about the little confrontation outside but with remarkable adeptness Hans had quickly downplayed it as a bunch of probably half drunken idiots making stupid comments with him overreacting just a tad and Anna showing *incredible* maturity in handling the situation on her own. That had earned her beaming smiles from her Aunt and Uncle - and let her hope that perhaps it wouldn't be a media disaster tomorrow once news got out.

It had *also* earned her a suspicious look from Punz that clearly said ‘*You’re not telling me everything*’ which she had returned with a roll of her eyes that said ‘*Duh!*’. With an implied promise she would tell her the truth later. Well. Most of it.

All of *that* however had fallen off to the side as Elsa had entered the room, her heart hitting her throat as once again Elsa materialized before everyone, the moment seemingly having snuck up on her despite everything else-

“And her sister” Victor continued, shattering the moment of stasis in her mind, “the Lady Anna Jorgensson of Arendelle!”

Anna’s eyes bulged for a moment as Victor turned to look at her.

*Me*? she mouthed at him.

A clearly amused Victor nodded - and then she felt two hands (one clearly a young woman’s and one clearly a young man’s) on her shoulders *push* and she skidded out from behind the pillars on this side of the front of the room barely biting back a curse, walking up onto the dais, waving with a nervous smile at the masses of nobles who in turn offered her bows and curtseys as she came to a halt a respectful distance away from her sister.

Okay, a *log* distance away from her sister.

Victor raised an eyebrow at her - before shifting to look at someone behind her and nod. Moments later she felt the iron hands on her shoulders that she *instantly* recognized as Gredas and was not *quite* frog walked her across to her sister. Her fear spiked to the point that she was utterly unable to resist as she was dumped *right next* to Elsa, shoulder to shoulder - although Elsa simply continued to look out at her people and smile gently as they were both given a round of applause and Anna nervously waved and smiled back.

As the clapping died down, Victor stepped several meters in front of them, continuing to speak to the crowds (and for the cameras she could see subtlety in the back of the room), leaving them more or less alone for now. Anna managed to rally *just* enough muscle control to ease a footstep or two away from her sister, suddenly terrified that she would feel her personal space had been invaded by her presence.

Beyond that, she suddenly felt once more, frozen in place.

It was not *quite* as bad as in the Great Hall this afternoon, but not that far away either as she stole rapidly several glances at Elsa, her mind spinning at a significant fraction of lightspeed as she nervously reached up to brush her fringe back, and glanced off to the side at her relatives - who were all looking at her with encouraging smiles and utterly unhelpful happiness that ignored the fact that she felt on the verge of a panic attack-

“*Hi*.”

One syllable. One gentle, softly delivered word pitched to reach her ears alone. It made Anna’s muscles twitch and bounce in place ever so visibly as if someone had just touched her with a live electrical wire as her head whipped around to her sister … who was looking directly at her.

Anna considered it a major miracle that her voice actually sounded normal as she opened her mouth to speak to her sister for the first time in well over a decade.

“*Hi … hi me*?” she managed to say like an idiot, touching her chest as if in confusion over who her sister was talking to as the moment she had waited for most of her life, finally started, her entire world narrowing to the woman across from her who nodded gently - almost as if afraid of startling her.
“Oh! Um … hi?” she replied, before breaking her gaze away for a second to cringe at her utter awkwardness and study the floorboards. A moment she had dreamed for so many years and this was the best she could do-

“You look beautiful” Elsa observed with that perfect voice (seriously was there anything about her sister that wasn’t perfect?!) and Anna at once felt the need to correct her - feeling perhaps irrationally- as if she was trying to downplay her own unearthly beauty by praising hers and needing to correct her at once!

“Thank you” she blushed at her sister’s words. “But you look beautifuller!” she insisted, before horror hit her as she realized what she had said. “I mean not fuller” she rapidly rambled on, falling over herself to correct the error. “But more beautiful!”

Her sister gave a tiny laugh at her rambling, her smile turning genuinely affectionate at her as she tripped over her tongue and Anna firmly shut up.

“Thank you” she said kindly and they broke eye contact to look out at the crowd, Anna suddenly very grateful for the touch of rouge Edna’s people had applied that hid her blush as Elsa continued smoothly even as Anna found herself lacking anything to say.

“So … this is what a party looks like” Elsa noted, as off to the side music started to play and couples squared off to start dancing, leaving the two young nobles subtly screened by a number of palace staff to let them talk alone for a moment - with no doubt who had organized this interlude as Victor caught her eye and smiled before shifting off to the perimeter of the crowd, Galen and Kai both in tow with him (and both in turn also shooting her supportive smiles) as they dragged away a significant chunk of people in their wake as the dance got underway.

There was a wistfulness in Elsa’s tone that fascinated Anna just as much as the words - as if Elsa had never been to a party before? So many questions reared their heads - and she beat them all back down violently with a mental club, knowing this was not the time.

“It’s more crowded than I thought” Anna admitted as she realized just how many people were squeezed into this part of the castle.

“And what is that smell?” Elsa wondered with a tilt of her head, Anna sniffing and closing her eyes as she sought out the scent, her eyes going wide as her taste buds tingled.

“Chocolate” they both breathed in simultaneous delight before opening their eyes to see they had unconsciously turned to face each other - and both of them broke into a giggle of laughter at the synchronized delivery; enough to actually have Elsa raise one gloved hand to cover her face as she laughed. It caused another jolt to Anna as she felt her sister's formal polite mask slip for just one second to see what she dared to name affection in her sister's eyes before she composed herself once more.

“Rita is in the kitchen making some of the deserts - but she did make a few super mix caramel truffles for snacks before dinner” Elsa explained.

“Really?” she gasped, “they’re my…” and Anna paused to offer Elsa and shy knowing smile. “My favorites”.

“My favorites” Elsa admitted, her eyebrow raising in slight surprise.

Why do you think they’re my favorites Anna mentally thought - and, oddly, from the way Elsa’s expression again softened, she had he oddest feeling her sister could read her mind...

Turning away, Anna watched the crowds of people dance and mingle with her sister, the two of them simply standing and watching the dance progress … but it wasn’t awkward. If anything, it just felt right as she stood there with her sister.

Or perhaps the fact that she felt enough emotions right now to keep seizing up her throat prevented her from chattering nervously away … but in either case, she firmly kept repeating the
advice everyone had been telling her for days now.

Small steps Anna. One day at a time, one conversation at a time.

Presently, the first dance of the night ended to applause and the crowd started to move, Elsa immediately putting what Anna was already calling her ‘Duchess’ face back on as Victor again started to make his way back towards them. Anna suspected that he was going to ask Elsa to dance as would be the kind of protocol of these things - and part of her squeed at that idea- but before he could approach Kai Brevik did so from the side with a man in tow.

“You Grace, My Lady. May I present his Grace, the Duke of Wesealtown-”

“Weselton” the other snapped back at him before quickly turning to face Elsa and affect a smile on his face that just looked … wrong. “The Duke of Weselton” he again stated as he approached and offered a short bow, the kind that one equal peer offered another, Elsa returning it politely. “Your Grace - as your soon to be closest partner in trade and peer, I thought it only fitting that I should offer your first dance of the night as Duchess and welcome you to our ranks!”

With that, the man sharply bowed deeply, extending his arm to Elsa … and causing his toupee to partially detach and flop down, barely held in place.

Anna’s hands flew to her mouth to firmly muffle the explosion of laughter that desperately was trying to escape, turning to look with wide eyes at Elsa - who to her delight, was also clearly trying incredibly hard to not break down laughing. The moment of shared joy resonated between them for a second as they desperately worked to get themselves under control, Elsa clearing her throat and forcing herself back under control.

“Thank you” Elsa bowed slightly at him with an easy smile. “But I’m afraid I don’t dance”.

The Duke rose (his hair neatly flipping back into place and threatening another giggle from her which Anna managed to restrain to a slight snorting sound, as he made a disappointed noise.

“But” Elsa quickly added as she turned to look at her with something that looked suspiciously like a smirk on her face, “my sister does - very well”.

Anna was so struck by the sudden unexpected smile and praise from Elsa that it took her a good two seconds to realize what had just happened - which proved to be more than enough time for the good Duke to brighten up and seize her elbow, hurrying her towards the dance floor that was starting to fill again for the next dance. Startled as her mind finally caught up to the fact that Elsa had just outsourced her dancing duties to her, Anna had just enough time to screeching to a halt with the Duke.

Who started strutting like a … a … she didn’t know what. With absolutely no self-consciousness at all - despite the double takes increasing numbers of people were doing of him as the music kicked into a fast dance.

Well this is … different she thought to herself in a slightly bewildered way as she placed her hands on her hips and started to move to the music as best she could.

“Well this is … different” the other pronounced as he strutted around her, Anna doing her best not to gawk as his energetic movements caused his toupee to jump around hilariously. “If you swoon, I’ll do my best to catch you!”

“Like an agile peacock!” the other pronounced as he strutted around her, Anna doing her best not to gawk as his energetic movements caused his toupee to jump around hilariously. “If you swoon, I’ll do my best to catch you!”

Well … he’s certainly spry she noted as she tried to make heads or tails of what he was doing, it not being any dance she had been taught.

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Well … he’s certainly spry she noted as she tried to make heads or tails of what he was doing, it not being any dance she had been taught.

“Uh … thanks?” she managed, feeling more than a little off balance.

“Hmm. So good to be here though, with the gates open and your sister visible. Such a … reclusive’ figure he noted before suddenly he leaned in close to her. “You wouldn’t happen to know why she has been so hold to get a hold of, would you?”

“Hm, but she’s been so …” she hesitated, feeling a little …

Well … he’s certainly spry she noted as she tried to make heads or tails of what he was doing, it not being any dance she had been taught.

“Uh … thanks?” she managed, feeling more than a little off balance.

“Hmm. So good to be here though, with the gates open and your sister visible. Such a … reclusive’ figure he noted before suddenly he leaned in close to her. “You wouldn’t happen to know why she has been so hard to get a hold of, would you?”
The absurdity of this man asking a question - the question - Anna had been grappling with all her life shifted her from feeling off balance to feeling irritated. Especially with Elsa back, right here, right now.

“No” she said somewhat curtly before he took her hand.

“Ahh, no matter” he smiled and with that she found herself flung in an absurd dip in a whirlwind of motion that stopped … with her upside down looking back at her sister across the room. Who was watching her and clearly trying not to laugh. Anna managed an upside down smile at her before she was back up and swinging into the dance.

Several minutes of … interesting … dancing later, Anna managed to stagger back to her sister who quickly smiled as she moved next to her.

“Well - he was … sprightly” her sister laughed softly as she adjusted her dresses straps.

“Especially for a man of that age” she agreed with a wan smile as she reached down to run her hands over a couple of points where the others steel tipped boots had crashed into her legs.

“Are you okay?”

“Actually … I’ve never been better” Anna said honestly as she set herself and looked at her sister. “This is just so … great. I hope it can be this way all the time now”.

Instantly, Anna knew she had chosen the wrong words. Something in those words stilled Elsa, almost as if the very air had cooled between them. The affectionate smile slowly mutating into something almost … regretful before she broke eye contact to look out at the people, or at nothing in particular.

“Me too…” she agreed. “But … it can’t”.

“Well … why not?” Anna asked in confusion, stepping forward towards her sister-

As quick as a snake Elsa moved, sliding away from her a half meter, her body language suddenly screaming at her to stay back.

“It just-” she didn’t quite snap before the mask fell back in place on her sister with her back half turned.

“It just … can’t” she finished quietly.

Only meters separated them now, it was the closest she had been to Elsa for most of her life … and yet she was starting to understand that some doors didn’t need to be visible to be real as her heart sank. And against everything she had wanted to do for so many years and so many dreams … Anna took a step away from her sister.

“Excuse me” she said softly and slowly she turned and walked away into the crowd, fighting back a sudden surge of emotions that made her right on the verge of crying, her abandonment issues roaring up from nowhere and raging in her mind, leaving her desperately wanting to get out of the public eye now because she knew she was about to break down crying.

And thus she failed to see behind her, Elsa turn slightly to watch her walk away. Her mask slipping, just for a nanosecond, to show the anguish under it before her sibling forced it back on and turned to go back to work. As was her duty. But no longer with any joy in her expression.

Not paying any kind of attention in the packed room as she tried to get out it was probably thus inevitable that Anna caught the backside of an overweight man as he bowed to his partner at the end of the current dance, sending her careening to the side her arms uselessly pin wheeling with a yelp

Only to jar to a halt as a hand latched onto her wrist - her own hand instinctively grabbing onto the
other’s wrist as she gasped and looked up from her suspended position-

“Glad I caught you … again” Hans noted with a grin.

“Hans” she breathed - her angst flying off as her heart frantically beat from the adrenalin jolt of her near crash. Smiling with a level of class she would only have thought existed in her dreams, Hans simultaneously pulled her up, placed his champagne flute onto a passing waiter’s tray without looking and pulled her in close against him as the music around them started up into a classic waltz.

“My Lady … may I have this dance?” he asked her with such gentleness it made her heart flutter again as her emotions swung from one extreme to the other.

“You may” she breathed, lost in his gaze - and with that, they were off.

They must have spun around the dance floor for a good ten minutes or so, Anna reeling with his physical proximity (and flushing bright red as she felt the rock hard muscles under the man’s suit as they moved against each other) as they danced and spun and just let everything go except this moment.

It … it was like a dream.

This was the dream she had been having all her life. A strong, noble, beautiful man moving with her as one around the floor. And then around the castle. The two of them talking and laughing and sharing and joking and everything as the night deepened - with the two of them eventually finding themselves sitting on a balcony deeper in the castle, beyond the public areas - but the guards certainly hadn’t tried to stop her moving into her own house. Something about this man was incredibly mesmerizing; everything she had wanted to share with Elsa, stories and events in her life, now came spilling out to this man who she felt she had known all her life! It was incredible!

“So let me get this straight” Anna said, sitting on a table with absolutely no care for decorum, hugging her legs, with Hanse across from her having made a seat out of an antique dresser in this clean, but clearly unused room. “You have twelve older brothers?”

Dealing with one sister had been impossible enough.

“Sounds crazy doesn’t it?” Hans chuckled, leaning back with his eyes going slightly distant.

“Although three of them decided to pretend I was invisible … for two years”.

“That’s horrible” Anna breathed in shock.

“Half-brothers anyway” Hans sighed. “My father married four times. The first four sons were to his first wife. The next two to his second. Five more to the third … and then there was me. The runt of the litter”.

“Don’t call yourself that” Anna scowled slightly at him and the offered her a wan smile, apologetic but not taking it back, seemingly having accepted the label.

“Well its part of the reason I try to keep busy offworld” he explained to her, shifting slightly. “I suppose it’s sort of what brothers do with their pecking order to keep putting each other in place - Father was very supportive of having his children fight to win his approval and handing out titles and responsibilities based on some idea of who was most loyal”. Hans shrugged to her horrified face. “It’s a large part of the reason I spent as much time as possible offworld as an ambassador. If the brother want me to be invisible, well, that’s what brothers do I suppose”.

“And sisters” Anna replied, her smiling face fading away as she returned to the fact of the night. Something in the back of her mind quickly warned her she was entering dangerous waters here, but she was just too exhausted around Elsa right now to care. She needed to vent.

“Elsa and I were really close when we were little. Then, one day she just … well, shut me out. And … I never knew why” she finished, blinking back tears as she looked away … then looking
up as Hanse took her right hand with both of hers, his thumb rubbing the back of her hand and sending shivers down her spine as he looked at her with such compassion, such empathy that it made her smile despite herself.

“That’s horrible. ’d never shut someone like you out” he breathed softly and Anna felt her heartbeat start racing again and that fluttering feeling in her stomach come back again.

“Really?” she asked softly.

“Really” he confirmed, his hazel eyes reflecting everything that she had ever wanted back at her as he reached out to gently ease her fringe back into place. His finger felt like it was leaving trail of fire on her skin from the brief touch...

“And I do look forward to seeing you later Councilor” Victor bowed slightly to the nth VIP to gushingly shake his hand in awe. This one, one of Elsa’s personal advisors, unfortunately could not be lightly dismissed as he would probably be sitting in several meetings with him at some point in the rest of the week. And it wouldn’t do to get things off on the wrong foot...

Still all he wanted was to just introduce himself and his plump but charming wife, which was more than enough.

Unlike the gaggle of industrial magnates who had all with various levels of subtlety, start to feel him out to support this or that proposal to turn Arendelle into a glorified strip mine. Granted there were trillions of Kronor of materials at a minimum in the ground just waiting to be extracted, but he would have thought they could have at least given him one night before starting in on him!

Made worse by the fact that all of them were watching each other like hawks and instantly correcting the other. It had gotten to the point that Victor had flatly told them all that there would be no more talk about business tonight. And anyone who defied him would face a summery negative appraisal for their presentations from the outset.

They had scattered like Bugmechs having a Clan Assault Star drop into their formation after that. Sometimes it was good to be the Archduke and Archon-Prince designate.

“And I’m sure we will Marshal” the other addressed him before backing away with a bow, addressing Victor but his military rank given the uniform rather than his political one.

“And … that is it” Galen noted”.

“What is it?” Victor asked with only mild irritation, as he surreptitiously massaged his hand which had shaken one too many hands tonight.

“That’s it for the receiving - I think we’ve covered most everyone in the room”.

Victor looked up in surprise - indeed there was no one more seeming to want to converge on him through the gatekeeper of Mavis Williams.

“Praise be” he muttered in relief before turning on his friend with a glare. “Where the hell did you run off to earlier?”

“Outside” Galen shrugged with an utterly unsympathetic smirk. “As it so happens, I actually ran into Elsa out there”.

“No, not like Anna” he chuckled as his gaze went distant as he crossed his arms across his uniform. “Still, she’s … rather fascinating”.

“Oh?” Victor asked carefully as he studied his friend’s distant face with sudden interest.
“She’s unsure of herself and slightly insecure, but hides it almost as well as you did back on Trel!” he noted, leaving Victor wanting to protest that he had not been insecure … until he remembered that, in fact, he had in fact been damn insecure about leading a Battalion right out of school even if he had been in denial about it at the time. And that he had been incredibly lucky to have Galen assigned to him.

Well, incredibly lucky to have Galen assign himself to him, anyway.

“She’s smart” Galen continued. “She’s got a sense of humor. I think she genuinely understands the sheer depth of what she has agreed to do for the rest of her life -possibly too well- and takes herself almost too seriously…” he continued. Sounding, Victor noticed, remarkably taken with the young Duchess. Casually following Galens distant gaze, he found himself unsurprised to find that Galen in fact was looking at her right now as she conversed with a small group of nobility…

No. Victor thought in growing amusement, looking back and forth.

“And she’s hot of course” Victor carefully added as casually and neutrally as possible.


“Oh my God you have a crush on the Duchess?!” Victor breathed in a theatrically horrified tone, grinning nonetheless as his friends almost iron composure cracked at the accusation.

“Don’t be silly” he said with a snort as he turned away to face him directly (but the twitch above his left eye gave him away delighting Victor even more). “She’s just a kid”.

“She’s twenty one” Victor retorted with his arms crossed, greatly enjoying this moment as he made Galen squirm for the first time in a long time. “You’re only thirty three. Lest we forget how old my parents were to each other when they married”.

“Victor, she’s a Duchess. I’m the son of a farmer”. And now Victor snorted, his mind starting to plot and scheme … probably in ways that would have had Katherine slapping him on the back of his head if she had been here. But luckily his sister wasn’t present, so...

“And you’re a War Hero” he rolled his eyes. “You know, Federated Suns, mania for Battlemech pilots and all that? Plus if you want a noble title-”

Now Galen simply rolled his eyes, his expression back firmly under control, if slightly amused. Although Victor would have bet half of New Avalon that it was nothing more than a bluff.

“Victor” he sighed, “You can’t marry someone you just met!” he pointed out. Then frowned. A frown shared with Victor.

Not because of the context of the statement per se. But because they both distinctly heard the slightly raised voice of Elsa saying the exact same thing at the same time. Pivoting, the two of them turned to see Anna had reappeared from wherever she had run off to an hour ago (he guessed because ‘dinner’ was just about to be served in the informal way chosen) and she was now standing with a tall, handsome looking AFFC officer - no, wait, that wasn’t the new AFFC uniform. It was just cut remarkably close though. At any rate, tall and red hair was standing off to the side looking somewhat ashen as Anna and Elsa started to argue openly on the dance floor, more and more people turning to face them as the volume slowly rose.

The two men exchanged a glance and without any further words, they started to drift towards the two sisters, Kai materializing from the side to join them as they moved in to defuse the situation.
Elsa felt miserable.

All her hopes. All her dreams of finding a way to start over had been dashed in but a moment. All her fears started to swirl around her again as she found herself once more completely unable to handle her sister.

Watching her sister, her shoulders slumped and a look of ancient pain in her eyes before she turned, walking almost listlessly onto the dance floor was almost more than Elsa could take. Her instinctive flinch away from her when Anna reached for her; a sudden compulsion of horror at the thought of her sister of all people touching her had caused her to just react. Her sister simply wanting to talk with her and being pushed away.

*It's not the time. It's not the place* Elsa repeated to herself like a mantra. *When it's right, when it's safe, then we can talk. Carefully.*

The logic was as cold as the power thrumming under her skin, but she knew it was for the best. It didn’t mean it didn’t ache. Didn’t *hurt.*

Elsa threw herself into circling the room, her face a mask of a pleasant expression as she greeted various people from onworld and offworld. Impressing all with her greeting them by name as she circulated, deftly pushing aside any questions about those damn rocks in her planet's crust and insisting that everyone simply enjoy themselves. Her sister had vanished deeper into the palace with that strange man - and she couldn't help but feel more than a little anxious at her being unchaperoned. Gerda bless her had clearly seen them leave and passed her a note, stating that she was having palace security keep tabs on them to make sure nothing untoward happened, which eased some of her stress as she simply threw herself into greeting guest after guest to keep her mind off it.

Somewhat amusingly, she noted that Galen had been perfectly correct about the guests. Most were falling over themselves to greet her and were happy enough with a brief handshake and needed nothing more than a smile and a few words she delivered over and over again. It didn’t make it much easier - especially with her stomach in knots over how she had already managed to hurt Anna *again,* but it was at least bearable.

And then her sister returned.

It was sudden. She was talking to a Baroness from New Fredrikstad on the other side of the continent when her voice called from over her shoulder.

“Elsa!” turning sharply Elsa faced her sister as she nimbly stepped through the packed ballroom floor towards her. Quickly she turned back to the Baroness and offered a slight bow the other returned and she shifted her full attention towards her sister - who she noted slightly uneasily was happily running hand in hand with that strange man.

But the deep, dark sadness that Elsa had seen in her sister's eyes was no longer there. So she smiled a little, if carefully, as she felt the tension pull back a little from her chest.

“Uh, I mean, Duchess” Anna quickly corrected herself, skidding into a cute kind of almost bow as she stopped in front of her. “It’s me again. May I present Sir Hans Westerguard, of the Southern Isles” she grandly introduced the man next to her, who offered her a perfect bow.

“Your Grace” he smiled at her … and Elsa offered him a minimal sort of nod back, suddenly for some reason she couldn’t put her finger on, wary of this man.

“Sir Hans” she simply said.

And then the two of them started to babble at high speed.

“Well, I would like-”
“That is to say we would like”

“Right! We’d like your blessing” and then the two of them turned to smile and look each other in the eyes before looking back with joy on their faces.

“Of our marriage!”

Elsa stared at the two of them for a long moment, her head not moving. Only her eyes flicking backwards and forwards between them in a stunned loop.

She could not have heard that right … could she?

Her eyes wide, all she could do was dumbly repeat the word.

“M...Marriage?!”

This … this was a nightmare. An insane nightmare.

Or a joke. Possibly a joke. Oh Gods please let it be a joke.

“Yes!” Anna squealed, closing her eyes and seeming to shiver with delight before turning to beam up at Hans … with terrifyingly little in the way of common sense or restrain flowing between them.

No.

To her horror, Elsa realize that Anna was not joking and the tension returned … and doubled.

“Wait” Elsa managed to get out as she struggled to control herself, her emotions paused in shock now surging forth. “I’m sorry, I’m confused” she managed to get out but Anna flew right on, not listening.

“Well, we haven’t worked out all the details ourselves” she breathed giddily, her eyes shining with a horrifying lack of guile or deception. “We’ll need a few days to plan the ceremony” she considered, seemingly ignorant of the way Elsa’s frown was deepening the more she rambled at two hundred words a minute. “I mean we’ll of course have soup, roast and ice cream and then -” and Anna suddenly gasped and whipped around to look at Hans with wide eyes. “Wait, will we live here?”

“Here?” Elsa managed to choke faintly out as she slowly started to make her way out of shock into denial as Hans laughed saying that absolutely they would live here. “Anna-”

“Ohhh we can invite all twelve of your brothers to stay with us for the wedding! Of course we have the room!”

“No, No no no!” Elsa tried to get a word in edgeways - something that she had rarely been able to do with her sister since she had been born. “Wait!” she finally commanded and Anna in turn finally halted her uncoordinated rambling to look at her almost in confusion. Taking a deep breath Elsa tried desperately to find some kind of calm in the insane moment, putting a firm expression the like of which she used when putting her foot down in council meetings. “Slow down. No-ones brothers are staying here, no-one is getting married”.

She regretted her words, or at least the tone of them almost as soon as they were out of her mouth as Anna’s joy … drained.

It was not something she relished doing … yet bitterly, she realized she seemed cursed to do so.

“Wait … what?” she asked in disbelief and hurt.

A tornado of conflicting thoughts of what to do next stormed within her … and Elsa, as terrifying as the idea was to her decided that she didn’t have any choice now.

“May I talk to you please?” she asked Anna directly, unable to help glancing at Hans who was looking slightly hurt and unsure - but Elsa couldn’t even begin to deal with that now. “Alone?” she stressed to Anna, her voice ever so slightly wavering as she begged with her eyes for Anna to listen.
Her sister’s eyes narrowed.

“No” she said, stepping back and holding onto Hans’s arm firmly, seeming to close in on herself in a way that Elsa had never seen before, as if she was pulling back the heart she always wore on her sleeve.

It was painful.

A dark voice in Elsa’s mind whispered that she had been hurting her sister to protect her all her life … what was one more time?

“Whatever you have to say” Anna continued, “you can say to both of us”.

That stubborn tone … now that brought back memories.

She pushed the thought aside and settled herself, putting her ‘Duchess’ mask firmly in place as she looked her sister square in the eyes.

“Anna, you can’t marry someone you just met” she flatly told her, not quite speaking down to her.

“You can if it’s true love” Anna shot back with a not quite glare.

Elsa simply scoffed, feeling frustration now edging up from her normally iron hard control as her sister continued to insist on this insanity from a fairy tale! And her expression slipped with hints of exasperation and condescension creeping into it.

“Anna what do you know about true love?” she didn’t quite roll her eyes. The sheer absurdly over her sister deciding to marry the first man she had met?

Insanity didn’t even begin to cover it-

“More than you” Anna shot back suddenly, her tone turning hurt and even angry. “All you know how to do is shut people out!”

The words struck Elsa with the force of an orbital strike to her heart, leaving her speechless and stunned.

That … hurt.

It hurt a lot. Elsa found herself transfixed in place for a miniature eternity.

All the years she had isolated herself from her sister.

Everything she had done in her power to protect her.

Everything she had sacrificed to keep her safe, to keep her happy, alive and unharmed.

The life she had dreamed of night after night, the life she had denied herself to let her sister enjoy hers, free of the burdens she would have imposed on her with knowledge of her … condition.

All of that sacrifice for her flashed before her eyes as it was tossed back in her face by the person she had done it for.

Distantly some part of her saw the sudden deep regret in Anna’s eyes. An understanding that she had gone too far and didn’t really mean it. It was a statement made out of ignorance - a statement only made because she knew it would hurt because it was so false and was just her lashing out in anger.

That part of her mind was dismissed as she felt her heart pierced by her sister’s words and felt her mask shatter to show the hurt in her eyes.

“You asked for my blessing” she said, “but my answer is no. Now” she turned, needing to get out of here as she felt her fanatic emotions, to her horror, start to reflect in her powers. A storm building inside her that she needed to calm down in peace. Now. “If you’ll excuse me” she started to walk away.

“Your Grace” Hans started to say as she moved off, “if I may-”

“No, no you cannot and I think you should leave, now” she said without pausing, suspicious of this man and wanting him gone as she moved off towards a nearby guard. “I’ll be retiring for now,
I’ll return later” Elsa said as she moved off.

“Elsa! No, no wait!” she heard Anna say – but ignored her as she resolutely moved towards the doors.

Right up until her sister suddenly grabbed her hand.

It had been a very long time since someone had touched her like that. The pure shock of it, combined with her emotional state caused her to half jump and spin … and to her horror, she felt Anna’s grip yank the long glove from her hand. The horrible, horrible feeling of cool evening air wafting over her right arm as Anna staggered back with her glove.

“Give me my glove!” Elsa frantically demanded, with absolutely no composure, snatching for it with her left arm only for Anna to pull back, looking utterly miserable at her.

“Elsa” she gasped, her glorious eyes on the verge of tears. “Please, Elsa, I can’t live like this anymore!”

There was a moment of perfect silence as Elsa stared at her sister, mentally seeming to commit every part of her into her memory as she suddenly realized there was only one way she could truly protect her sister from her.

And that this whole idea to try and find a way to work with her sister had been a terrible, terrible mistake.

“Then leave” she said simply.

Elsa felt her heart crack as she saw Anna recoil in utter horror at her response. The two stared at each other for long, horrible moments until, unable to bare looking into those eyes that she knew would haunt her to the end of her days, Elsa turned away again, clutching her arm to her chest as she started to feel confined, almost claustrophobic.

The room was too small, the dress too tight and heavy; her powers without her glove raging under her skin and feeding upon her emotions in an unstoppable chain reaction.

She needed to get out.

She made it two steps before the anguished voice of her sister started to lash at her.

“What did I ever do to you?” Anna almost sobbed and Elsa squeezed her eyes shut, feeling tears well up in them. Nothing Anna. You never did anything but love me – but it’s too dangerous to love a monster.

“Enough Anna” she said weakly out loud starting to edge towards hyperventilating. She knew more and more people were staring in confusion and shock but she didn’t care.

Out
She needed to get out.

“No! Why? Why do you shut me out?” Anna’s voice lashed at her and Elsa hurried on, clutching her arm.

Out. Get out!

“Why do you shut the world out? WHAT ARE YOU SO AFRIAD OF?” Anna all but yelled – and for the first time in close to two decades, Elsa’s control snapped as the stress of every single moment in the last day finally, perhaps irrevocably, pushed her past breaking point.

Outoutoutoutout-

“I said ENOUGH” Elsa spun and roared at her sister with raw pain, anger and grief.
And in that moment, the course of human history was forever changed as for just a split second, the raging storm under Elsa’s skin was unleashed as her arm whipped out to gesture for emphasis and obeyed her raw emotional state.

In a split second a blast of white energy ripped from her arm and described an arc along the floor, exploding upwards into a forest of long spikes and shafts of pure ice … one of which intercepted the forehead of Victor Steiner-Davion as he had approached to help deal with the situation, sending him flying backwards through the air to crash to the ground with a thump that seemed to echo across the Inner Sphere.
When in Danger or in doubt...

So yet again I got away with myself and this chapter exploded in size. So I've sliced it in half. Not sure it flows exactly well thus, but it works well enough. Will post the next half of it / next chapter, next week

Chapter 9A: When it danger and in doubt...

"Spectacular! The Steiner and Davion blood has mixed well in this one. Fire and steel. A little tempering and he'll be invincible. And this one, the quiet one; he's one to watch. You know back in the days of ancient Rome, they used to put a dwarf in the chariot with victorious generals. During the public parades, as the crowds lavished adulation on the general, the dwarf would whisper reminders that earthly glory was fleeting. An officer that carries his own dwarf with him, one that constantly checks to make sure he is right instead of just believing that he's right, that is a valuable man."

- Major Sveng Ngov to Victor Steiner-Davion and Kai Allard-Liao, 10 November, 3050

The Foxes Den
Arendelle City, Arendelle
Crucis March
Federated Commonwealth
May 10 3053
T = - 5 minutes

There was an impressive level of drinking taking place in the Foxes Den. The idea that officers stationed in the primary strategic command centre of Federated Suns State Command would toss their work aside and start throwing down shots was, of course, almost unbelievable. Or an indicator that someone had left the door open and a gaggle of Social Generals from their Lyran allies had staggered in with a case of schnapps.

Although to be fair, there was a persistent legend that Natasha Kerensky and Ian Davion had gotten into a rousing rendition of 'One hundred bottles of beer on the wall' inside, after a highly successful Dragoon raid on the Capellan border. Although if there was actually any truth to said legend, no-one knew. To this day, the Black Widow refused to do anything more than offer a knowing smirk when asked.

Irrespective of all that however; this Foxes Den was most assuredly not any kind of command centre … but it was filled with people in AFFC uniforms.

A bar on the corner of Dropship Drive and 14th Avenue just outside of Fort Akershus, the 'Den' had become the chosen watering hole of the Forts personnel ever since it was opened a century ago by a retiring AFFS Major. Accordingly, it had evolved the kind of ambience that most such places 'adopted' by a planetary garrison might well have. A central horseshoe shaped bar extruding from one wall was surrounded by a field of free standing tables while the walls were lined with countless booths. Setting it apart from all other bars on the planet, the brick walls were covered in oversized unit patches of the AFFS and AFFC units that had rotated through the planet over the years. All of them autographed by their units CO.

Today a new patch had joined the array in a solemn ceremony marked with the toasting of copious amounts of hard liquor. Said patch had been installed on the well illuminated back wall, where the most prestigious insignia were mounted, sadly displacing the 20th Avalon Hussars onto the right wall near the battered jukebox.

Steiner blue in colour, the new patch was dominated by a rather sinister looking skeletal figure that glared out from the crest with twin scarlet eyes. Its bonny left arm held a bronze shield in front with large 'X' painted in white. Its right arm ended not in a hand; but in an enormous metal gauntlet easily recognizable as the first of the Lyran Commonwealth clutching the sword Excalibur from the flag of the Federated Suns.
And the specter looked, frankly, downright eager to use said combination.

The perimeter of the crest was defined by two links of text that wrapped around it. The upper text proclaiming in gold that this was a unit of the ‘Armed Forces of the Federated Commonwealth’. While the lower text in blood red warned all that this unit was in fact the ‘10th Lyran Guards RCT’.

Or, as its members liked to call themselves, *The Revenants*.

Thus far, the large wooden insignia had not been signed by the senior officer of said RCT on-world - one Archon-Prince Designate slash Marshal Victor-Steiner Davion - but the officers of the 10th were entirely confident that he *would* swing by on the way out to do so. And with the crest now up on the wall (the bar owner had done it personally lest a drunken Mechwarrior make a mess of things), this most important impromptu staff meeting moved onto the next order of business.

War stories!

By long standing tradition going back to well before humans left Terra, when a military unit that had been in the thick of things rotated back to rear areas to be hosted by another unit, a brisk exchange of war stories for booze was considered to be in order. The local Militia, whose ‘combat record’ was pretty much limited to a handful of riot police actions, were understandably eager to hear all the stories from a unit that had been in the most famous battles of the Clan War and - unlike most others - emerged with both more victories than defeats on the books and a never ending argument with the survivors of the rebuilding 26th Lyran Guards as to who the best anti-Clan unit in the Guards were.

But *that* was a feud for another day.

The tales had already run through craziness of Twycross and dark day of Alyina, then onto the rescue of Hohiro Kurtia (while beating up the Nova Cats and taking their lunch money). But now the stories had switched to the conventional assets of the RCT and *their* moment of glory. As while the 10ths Mech and fighter Jocks had been off pulling Takashi's grandson out of the fire, the rest of the RCTs regiments hadn't been allowed to simply sit around and catch up on some light reading. No, after finishing their refits, they'd been shuffled up to Sudeten and attached to their sister unit in the 11th Lyran Guards. Just in time for the Jade Falcons to stroll into the glorious trap AFFC High Command had patiently and painstakingly prepared for them.

This story was being told by Staff Sergeant Kurt Adler, who had won the McKennsy Ground-Pounder's Medal for his part in the engagement. Leading a mixed unit of four *Demolisher* tanks backed up with a company of anti-mech infantry, some combat engineers and a couple platoons of power armor ‘borrowed’ from the Grey Death Legion, he (with some help from his Lieutenant it might be noted) had pulled off the kind of ambush most Mechwarriors had nightmares about (and conversely, most Tankers *dreamed* about). Ambushing a mixed Binary of Omnimechs and Elements in a tight City battle, layering the attack so precisely and rapidly that the Falcons had been torn to pieces in less than ten minutes with only fragmented transmissions getting back to their Star Colonel as the trap was protected and then sprung.

At this point in his story, Adler paused to take a long sip of his beer, leaving the locals on the edge of their seats (some literally as the bar was packed beyond capacity) before he put the mug down, leaning forward with a gleam in his eye to start to lay out the *obliteration* Morgan Hasek-Davion had dished out in what had become known as 'the mother of all killboxes-'

Then a loud beeping cut in.

Renny Sanderlin, squeezed into the corner of the 10ths booth frowned at that and with a little effort, managed to retrieve a small box from his pocket. Roughly the size of a cell phone, it was in fact a long range communicator - known commonly as the 'killjoy' by AFFC troops. Similar to an ancient pager, the 'killjoy' could receive communications via a variety of ways, including directly from the powerful transmitters on the *Barbarossa* herself directly or bouncing signals off the ionosphere or even SATCOM sets if they were around.

The system was also blinding with its illuminated screen, very noisy and incredibly tough with an impressive battery. So you couldn't ignore it, destroy it or otherwise stop it from screaming at you when you were on R&R and more than a little loaded.

Renny, as the senior officer present, was carrying his little outings unit and slowly the
"MARCHING ORDERS!" he yelled the code-word loudly in shock and heads snapped up and around -with varying degrees of muscle control depending on how much liquor they had had. Turning then to the massive crowd of militia personnel staring in confusion, he slightly moderated his voice - but kept a tone of iron command "All militia personnel who are on active service at this time, back to the fort - you may well be getting an activation order shortly. Everyone who isn't drunk, help those who are. Move!"

Orders had been given. Questions could wait. A chaotic exodus took place at that point as the soldiers (mostly kids in Rennys eyes) hastily started to vacate the premises, speculation exploding everywhere in excitement over what had happened. Luckily their officers took charge of the mob quickly enough and hustled them out as Renny managed to squeeze past the others to head to the bar. Returning a minute later with a number of empty mugs and a few jugs of water with the help of the barman, he poured the drinks and retrieved a jar full of white pills from inside his jacket. Putting one into each of the cups, the pills at once started to dissolve quickly. With the 10th Lyran crew looking at them with no small amount of distaste.

"Alright" Renny muttered when he was finished, picking up a mug. "Suck it up and suck it down" and leading by example in the way AFFC officers were encouraged, he gulped down the mixture as quickly as possible.

It tasted … horrible. Yet he had barely finished before he felt the fuzzy sort of cloud over his head start to dissipate as the 'soberup' did its job, rapidly.

The pills were something generations of troops across the Inner Sphere had detested - and secretly wished would become Lostech. Unfortunately it seemed that all the top brass on all sides of the Succession Wars loved them far too much and thus the officers would have the horrible taste in their mouths for days.

Along with a headache that would probably require light painkillers tomorrow for those who had drunk too much … but you didn't screw around when a Level-1 recall was declared.

"What's going on Boss?" Adler asked as he and the two dozen others worked their way out of the booths and stretched, their initially irritated faces turning increasingly serious as the horrid but horribly effective drugs kicked in.

"Level One recall, beyond that I don't know" Renny shrugged, wondering what in the hell could be going on as he stepped outside the bar to the street, where the militia were hurrying across the road into their part of the spaceport, lights and sirens coming on all over the place as Victors bodyguard unit was called to action and the locals followed suit. An APC now roared to a stop with a squeal of metal on asphalt that would leave a mess to clean up for the local Government, its ramp dropping with the clang of a crash drop for maximum embarkation speed. He frowned at the somewhat excessive gesture but said nothing as the Revenants officers and men piled inside the spacious yet cramped infantry bay, mentally counting each of them off until only he was left. Still, he made a final turn back to make sure no one was left - and was forced to shut his eyes as something sprayed into his face. Awkwardly he blinked and wiped his face clear to get a look at what the hell that was … and then he blinked again.

It's … snowing?

Arendelle Castle
Arendelle City, Arendelle
Crucis March
Federated Commonwealth
May 10 3053
T = 0

There was a sound, a single sound, that haunted the Duchess of Arendelle.

Such 'triggering' was far from unheard of, of course. It was often the result of people who had
been part of an event so horrifying, so totally consuming, that it became stamped on their very soul. To the point of similar stimuli then setting off anything from unease to full blown panic attacks.

For Elsa, the trigger in question was the sound of a human body slamming into a hard floor. An unconscious human body. Limp and unbraced, little more than a ragdoll as gravity took hold, yanking it down towards the core of the planet - only for a floor to get in the way. The sound of Anna's body crashing to the polished floor of the castle ballroom was forever locked into Elsa's memory with perfect clarity, not having faded one bit in all these years. She had to but close her eyes and she could watch as her magic missed its mark to slam into her sister's head, snapping it back and leaving the unconscious Anna to, without any control or awareness, arc down and smash into the floor, bounce once and then sickeningly slide to a terrifyingly still halt that could still wake her in the middle of the night gasping and clutching herself.

And now ...it had happened again.

Archon Prince Designate Victor Steiner-Davion crashed to the floor in a heap, rebounding off the ice that had formed in front of him. A hideous cacophony of sound from the two events merging and filling the room to exclude all other noise.

The room seemed to shudder to a halt for a moment, to let everyone take in the horrible, impossible vista in seemingly perfect silence. To let reality itself soak in the sheer magnitude and gravitas of this event.

Then chaos took hold.

Accusations, panic and threats exploded into a senseless roar as people ran madly around in every direction - except towards the ice and woman behind it, who was utterly fixed in place, unmoving and unresponsive. Elsa could only stare in dumb denial of the truth her eyes were showing her, her gaze switching back and forth between her ungloved hand, the ice in front of her and her liege on the ground beyond it with Kai Allard-Liao now dropped to his side. Frozen inside and outside at the sheer enormity of what had just happened, as the horrible truth of what she had done hit her.

Too fast and too vast to accept, her thoughts scattered to the storm inside. Unable to think, unable to even breathe as her heart pounded frantically.

All of which ensured there was zero chance that she would notice as, of to the side, Agent Curaitis cleared the panicking crowd, smoothly bringing his needle pistol around and sliding his finger onto the trigger barely five seconds after Victor had been sent flying as he lined up on her head-

"HOLD!"

********

The order ripped through the chaos like the gunshot some had been expecting in that moment. Loud enough to be heard over all the noise it demanded obedience; freezing the security team in place and shutting up a rather large part of the chatter to boot as gazes were almost unwillingly drawn from the horrified Duchess to the source of the command. Galen Cox too shifted his gaze as he forced his way past the front of the crowd, knowing what he would see.

Victor Steiner-Davion, looking pale and unsteady on the floor, was staring directly at Curaitis - with the help of Kai Allard-Liao holding him up. He seemed to be barely able to keep awake, his shaking face (including a nasty red mark on his forehead darkening as they watched) betraying how much that single shout had cost him … but his eyes blazed. It was a look of command to match the voice; an authority forged in the fires of some of the toughest battles of the Clan War that said he would be heeded; there was simply no other option - and Curaitis froze in place. The ISB bodyguards around the room to a person were handpicked soldiers. An elite among the elite, with fanatic loyalty to the Steiner-Davion line and the best training the Federated Commonwealth could give them. And despite the complete impossibility of the Duchess of Arendelle shooting ice from her hands, their training was to identify threats to their charge and eliminate them. Thus even as their principal had been flung away like a ragdoll, injured or dead,
said training had activated without the need for any conscious thought. Compact but powerful weapons had come out and swung towards the threat with barely enough time to even register the impossibility of this - only a desire to deal with it the only way they knew how.

And then the voice hit them and they ... hesitated. Until finally Curatis subtly lowered his weapons aim point not quite to the floor and so too did they. In that moment, their conscious minds caught up with their reflexes and discipline re-asserted itself as they took a moment to stare at both the shimmering wall of impossible ice and state of the subject of interest beyond it. Galen himself moved up, looking down in worry at his friend and boss as Diedre Lear pushed past him to slide to a halt next to Victor on the floor, with zero care for decorum or her stunning dress as she coolly started to examine the Archon-Prince designate. A bodyguard started to move in at her sudden presence next to his principal before a glare and gesture from Kai froze said bodyguard in place - and then running down the room and shoving people out of the way, a team of paramedics from the rapid response squad encumbered with a full field medical kit hurried to join the Doctor. Galen however barely noticed as Victor's gaze suddenly connected with his.

"Galen..." he gasped loud enough to be heard, "take charge..." and with that Kai and Diedre carefully eased him back to the floor, Victor seeming to sag into it as thought he was now a spent force just fighting to just remain conscious.

Oh great Galen thought as eyes now turned to him but nodding at his boss and understanding what was both said and unsaid, Galen took a deep breath and turned away to redirect his attention to the pressing, somewhat impossible scenario confronting the room-

"Sorcery" some pompous tiny man flanked by two men in uniforms that screamed 'Mercs' said in a not quite hiss as he pushed to the front, his voice carrying over the silent tension far too clearly. "I knew there was something dubious going on here in this family, I knew it!"

At that accusation, all eyes in the room shifted back from Galen, to the lone figure standing behind the wall of glittering ice.

The naming of the impossibility on everyone's mind seemed to make the thick atmosphere in the room that much grittier and darker, with people again edging away from Elsa. Except for the bodyguards gripping their weapons tightly who had moved to shield Victor; leaving the entire room paused in a brittle sort of stasis. Galen took all this in in a moment of cool consideration before deciding the time had come for him to step in and start to take control of the situation …

But he was a second too slow as someone else moved in.

Galen froze as Anna stepped out in front of the crowd she had been swallowed up by initially after the chaos. Carefully, like she was approaching a wild animal that could be spooked into flight at any moment. Her own face was tight with emotion - but there was (unsurprisingly to him) not sign of even the slightest trace of fear. He glanced back to Elsa and in a moment read the absolute terror and panic in every clenched muscle and eye movement. Every part of her that had been so utterly confident and controlled was gone and what was left was screaming to him that she was sitting right on the edge of a major flight/fight reaction, as she jerkily managed a step away from the ice clutching and covering her ungloved hand tightly - Galen noticing Anna was still clutching her sisters glove.

Was she going to try and give it back?

Galen bit his lip before he called Anna off, wondering if that alone might trigger Elsa as he desperately tried to figure out a way to catch her sister's eye and tell Anna to just step back and give her room-

"Elsa..." Anna called hesitantly as she approached - and instantly Galen could see that it had been a mistake. Elsa's gaze jerked to Anna and her panic and eyes seemed to only widen as she saw her sister was moving closer. Something about that moved her beyond rational self control and brought life back to her as she clumsily stepped back to yank the door behind her open while still tightly shielding her ungloved hand ... and then in a blur of motion she was gone.

"Kai-" Galen started to call only for the other to shake his head firmly.

"I've got it - go" the other urged and Galen nodded, everything that needed to be said passing
between them with just those few words as he turned to face the chief bodyguard.

"Curaitis - with me!" Galen snapped an order, turning to glance at the bodyguards around his friend who had stepped back to let the medics work. "Everyone else, hold with Victor and keep your safeties on!" he added before striding around the edge of the impossible ice. Reaching the door Elsa had vacated he carefully eased it open - only to find an empty corridor beyond.

Empty that is except for the glittering trail of frost on the wooden floor.

Exchanging a glance with the ISB agent who had obediently moved with him, Galen was about to launch into a sprint after the fleeing Duchess - only for Anna to fly past him at speed, yelling her sisters name. He debated for a quarter of a second trying to tell Anna to stay inside; that her presence might actually be frightening Elsa before deciding it would be both useless and time wasting. Instead he hurried after her in turn as Galen heard more people coming up behind him, one of them yelling 'After her!' like they were bloody chasing down a criminal.

Oh. And on that thought-

"Curaitis - relay order to all points weapons tight" he snapped, determined to get to Elsa before anyone did anything stupid. And as Curaitis relayed the order with short barks over the radio, he noticed Anna impossibly managing to outdistance them even wearing heels.

Bloody hell that girl could move!

Gritting his teeth, he forced his legs to go faster and cursed his very well polished but not suited for running dress shoes and far too tight trousers as he pursued the fleeing Duchess and her sister.

********

Hauptmann Warren Vickers was not bored.
MI6 Commandos did not get bored.
He was an MI6 Commando.
Ergo, he was not bored.

Contrary to most holovids about MI6; the 'Rabid Foxes' and their peers around the Inner Sphere were not superhuman agents of chaos and destruction who could take out entire Regiments with a sidearm. Although of course they were superbly trained infantry, they were also cross trained in everything from Battlemech operation to astronavigation to deep-sea demolitions making them too valuable to waste on missions normal infantry could perform. Their specialties were things like deep reconnaissance, asset recovery, hostage rescue and counter-terrorism - often missions where they never even fired a weapon despite their reputation as 'trigger happy doom-commandos'. They fit into a unique middle ground capability of special forces; generally performing missions with limited personnel and support that required a wide array of capabilities. Things too violent for MI5 agents and too complex for more standard AFFC Special Operations units.

They, in short, got the 'odd' missions that fell through the cracks. Like this one.

Their mission orders were to provide invisible but rapid, heavy and precise support for the ground teams perimeter security. When they needed more than a 'suit with a pistol', but less than a Firestarter. To that end, each operator in the fourteen man team had been issued a new variant of Infiltrator Battle Armour specifically designed for this kind of work. In addition to its incredible sensor systems, the suit known as the 'Waddle' gave each agent a view of the battlespace that rivaled command 'mechs - the better to let them spot, anticipate and eliminate any potential threats. So far, the threats had been … limited. A few hours ago, it had looked like some entertainment had been about to start when one man outright challenged another to a duel over some insult but
that had gone nowhere, with the second man slinking away with his tail between his legs. And since then, everything had been bland. The worst thing Vickers could see right now was a drunken lower ranked noble in the courtyard who was getting a little too handsy with the non-noble celebrity sitting next to him and causing her increasing distress.

He wondered if he had spent too long out in the field if his first answer to these things was to consider putting a HV slug designed to penetrate Elemental armour through the man's wrist ...

Sighing, Warren started to place a call to palace security to deal with the drunken asshole, but even as he triggered his radio, it suddenly beeped with a loud override signal and a slightly breathless voice brought the nights boredom to a screeching halt.

"Break Break! All callsigns, Angel down! I say again, Angel down"

There was a moment of stunned disbelief and then without conscious thought, Warren found his rifle in his hand and crosshairs sweeping for targets as all his suits combat systems went from standby to active, his heart starting to race. 'Angel down' meant that Victor Steiner-Davion had been attacked, status unclear and a million questions exploded into his mind.

However he and his people were far too well trained to start broadcasting and demanding information, focusing their attention onto their inner and outer perimeter zones around the Castle just looking for a threat to service-

"All Callsigns" the voice of Agent Curaitis cut in sharply onto the net next, the sound of boots running and heavy breathing making it clear he was on the move. "Angel is down - but secure" and there was an invisible but very real exhale of tension across the region as the words came through that Victor had been incapacitated, but, was alive and being seen to with the immediate threat controlled. "Immediate; the Duchess Elsa is the active subject of interest but something well, something crazy is going on right now with her. All points orders are acquire and track - but do not, I say again, do not engage. Stand by-" and with a beep the voice cut off as Curaitis found something else to deal with

"What the fuck is going on?" Sandra, one of the other MI6 agents muttered on their dedicated squad frequency. "The Duchess? Attacked the Prince?!"

"I know as much as you do Three" Warren pointed out, pushing aside his own sense of dislocation at the unexpected events - and Curaitis's abnormally unclear response. The ISB agent had only impressed him thus far with his straight talking yet considered and intelligent leadership - for a civilian. "Curaitis doesn't fuck around - everyone keep your eyes open for-" he started to order before ceasing to talk as he spotted the doors to the palace's main building suddenly open up.

Shit. There she was. He hit the command channel link.

"Command, Uptown One" he called out as he swung his massive Zeus-51-BP rifle around. "Target acquired, main exit into the courtyard". With a blink and a chop of his fingers, his suits advanced optics zoomed down onto young woman who had just staggered out of the doors, down the stairs - and skidded to a halt as the civilians filling the courtyard started to round on her, cheering in surprise and pleasure at her presence.

She and everyone below naturally ignorant of the fact that she now had a half dozen UV laser beams from all points of the compass playing over her body and the snipers took aim on her. He ignored them to focus on her face … which looked to be in a near panic as she tried to sort of work her way through the crowd that only closed in more and more until she halted next to one of the fountains in the square. Her gaze wildly flickered as she spun, seeing cheering and clapping civilians everywhere and looking to him like a cornered Razorback back home on Kathil, clutching one of her hands under an elbow...

She suddenly seemed to react to something and he panned back out as he saw the sister of the Duchess along with Curaitis and Galen Cox skid to a halt at the doors to the palace -stalemated by the huge crowd blocking them that had naturally coalesced around the Duchess. With another gesture he triggered the audio pickups they had placed earlier and scrolled through to find - there!
'Your grace … is something wrong? Are you alright?’ the woman in front of her, holding a baby asked closing in and the Duchess seemed to recoil at that away from her. Overlaid on the tactical map in his peripheral vision, he could see the green transponders of the MIIIO rapid response teams in more traditional SWAT style gear swarming into position through the periphery buildings lining the courtyard; out of sight, but ready to rock. Just in case things went hot. But the sheer number of civilians in the area pressing in on her made anyone trying to do anything hostile an incredibly bad idea. All his counter-terrorism and urban combat training telling him of the kind of mess heavy anti-personnel fire would cause in such a situation, as he watched her flinch backwards against the fountain-

Warren Vickers had seen many things in his service with the AFFC. He had seen a rare binary sunset on Niangol - which had been, frankly, spectacular. Pure luck his unit had swung through when it occurred. He had seen a Clan Daishi become a short lived Land-Air-Mech when a building his Joint SpecOps team had filled with petrocycline on Baker-3 had exploded, obliterating a Star of lighter units outright and sending the Cluster commanders massive Assault Mech on a short lived flight through the air, ending up smashing upside down into an empty warehouse almost forty meters away a tangled mess. He had even personally seen First Prince Hanse Davion and Gunji-no-Kanrei Theodore Kurita shake hands on Outreach as they had agreed to an informal, but real, truce with each other. Something he knew no-one would ever have expected before the Clans had invaded.

But this...

As the disbelieving snipers, crowd and hundreds of people beyond via his suits sensor feed watched, a blue wave of energy pulsed out where her ungloved hand touched the stone of the fountain as she stumbled into it. Frost rippled out from there with ice crystals radiating before she snatched her hand back, but it did nothing to stop the progression. The energy washed across the water of the fountain, solidifying it instantly into perfect frozen stillness. Warren felt his eyes go wide in a way they never had before as the energy seemed to leap up the fountain snatching the water that had been squirting into the air. In a split second, the liquid in the air solidified before his very eyes; the chaotic dance freezing into something that for all the world like a giant claw, arrested in the act of reaching for the horrified looking Duchess.

"Ty che, blyad?!" splurted the voice of Uptown Six - Rastov, a native of distant Tikanov … and Warren found he had absolutely nothing to add. Not even a harsh rebuke for him breaking radio discipline as the impossible suddenly became possible.

The crowds around her gasped, although looking more confused and shocked than fearful or alarmed, probably thinking this was some kind of entertainment or something. Warren knew with a glance at her face this was anything but entertainment.

"There she is! Stop her!” a voice yelled, audible given how eerily silent the masses had become and Warren snapped his field of view back. From a second door into the palace to the side of the courtyard, a silly little man covered in medals -flanked by a couple of big guys in poorly fitting suits- pointed accusingly at the Duchess, who turned to face them as the crowd rapidly melted out of their path.

Who the fuck was this idiot he wondered?

"Please" she begged the newcomers as she staggered backwards, holding her hands up as if warning them - or pleading. "Just stay away from me - stay away!” she said … but as she frantically gestured, seemingly warning them, something happened and a bolt of blue energy ripped from her ungloved hand and shot through the air fast as a PPC discharge to slam into the steps the trio were starting on. In an eye-blink, frost and ice washed over the steps and the interlopers were tossed onto their backsides as jagged icicles sprouted from the stairs and columns around them.

"M...Monster. Monster!” the man spat as he squirmed away in a wild panic on the suddenly slick ground, made more difficult by having one trembling arm pointed at the Duchess in accusation.

"Did...did she just-" Three started to ask on the squad chat in a shocked voice before Warren cut her off.
"She did, focus people" he snapped on reflex as the two hulking Elemental wannabes reached out to drag baldy with them into what cover was available and with them cowering, he switched his focus back again.

The young Duchess was now seemingly moving beyond panic into full scale meltdown as her gaze switched rapidly between the crowd (who had recoiled away at the blast with children starting to cry in alarm and clutch at fearful parents and more than a few screams of fear and terror) and her ungloved hand … and then something seemed to snap and she was off, running full bore for the wall of the courtyard nearest the fjord, the crowd scattering out of her way as she left a disturbing trail of frost shimmering on the ground in her wake - before she was out of sight, fleeing her home into the night.

Cursing his suits lack of jump jets as she vanished through the wall, Warren threw his suit into motion and stomped across the roof to get a line of sight, ignoring the rather expensive mess he was making of the beautiful tile-work with his claw-like feet as he traded subtlety for speed.

"Subject of interest is moving through the North Gate!" he barked over the command channel - unnecessarily as he was sure his feed was being watched- as he navigated his power armor, trying to desperately not think about the fact that he had witnessed a woman projecting ice from her hand. "Six, do you have her?"

"Affirmative Lead" Rastov came back and a new video feed went live on his COM board..

"Subject is through the wall, now on the North grounds in grid six-bravo; she's heading for the Fjord!"

********

Stupid.

So stupid.

She was such an idiot.

Such a stupid, moronic, 'never think things through' idiot!

**WHY DID SHE HAVE TO BE SUCH AN IMPULSIVE IDIOT ALL THE DAMN TIME?!**

A significant part of Anna's mind was trying to tell her that she could always spend time later kicking herself up over so spectacularly failing her sister when she needed her the most. But the part of her that was locked into screaming at herself over how this was all her fault was awfully loud.

"Elsa!" she yelled out again as she pushed past the crowd and followed her, vaguely hearing people calling her name behind her but ignoring them, her one and only focus on getting to her sister as she charged through the side of the castle. Even if she didn’t know the place like the back of her hand, the glistening trail on the floor was a dead give away as she followed, briefly finding herself inside and pushing past bewildered guests who had clearly not seen what happened outside and cutting through a couple of doors, to the exit and stone steps that descended past the castle wall to the thin strip of land that extended out from the ground to the fjord.

Her sister was easy to spot from the top of the stone stairs, having run right up to the edge of the water-

"ELSA!" she shouted and her sister seemed to flinch again at that, but now turned to face her as Anna forced herself to stop at the top of said stairs, clutching the railing there as she looked out at her sister. "Please!" she begged.

And as in the Great Hall earlier today - and yet seemed almost like last year now - the two of their gazes met. Anna pouring everything into hers; begging Elsa to just stop and please let her come to her and calm down, that they would find a way to get through this...
But this time … this time Elsa didn't make everything better with but a smile.

This time to Anna's growing horror, she read only one thing in the gaze that met hers.

I'm sorry.

And with that, Elsa turned … and … and ran across the Fjord.

Anna gasped, staggering down the stairs, unable to tear her gaze away as she watched her sister running at a full sprint across the body of water. With every step her sister took, a glow of blue light flickered under her feet and the water froze to ice, supporting her weight as she ran further and further away, her purple cape fluttering behind her.

"Elsa, stop!" she screamed desperately and without even thinking she started after her - but almost instantly she slipped and crashed onto her backside on the perfectly slick ice. Or would have if not for strong arms grabbing her as she fell backwards, arresting her fall and helping her back to her feet.

"Are you alright?" Hans asked quickly as he helped her back onto solid ground as Anna found to her dismay that her heels simply couldn't get any kind of grip on the slice of frozen water.

"No" she replied hoarsely as she saw her sister, with surprising speed, moving across the frozen water, a mist or fog seeming to rise behind her from the solidified water that started to obscure her until Elsa vanished from her sight once again, a horrified part of her wondering if that would be the last she ever saw of her sister.

"Anna … the fjord" Hans said a moment later, seeming to stiffen - and Anna reluctantly refocused her attention … and sharply inhaled at what she saw.

The blue wave of … magic … that had pulsed out from her sister's feet with every stop was still spreading - no, it seemed to be accelerating up and down the waterway. Both inland and out of sight and towards the final curve around which the Northern sea waited. And as it passed, it left a chill in the air … and ice instead of water.

"She's … freezing the fjord" she breathed, feeling more than a little overwhelmed and almost lightheaded. Hans, gripping her gently yet firmly started to pull her back. Anna almost wanting to fight him as she stared across the frozen water where her sister had vanished, before reluctantly acceding.

"Come on, there isn't anything more to do here - let's regroup and figure out our next step inside" Hans said gently and Anna nodded distantly, her mind already leaping ahead to what she needed to do next.

"She what?" Galen asked incredulously, sharing a look with Curatis.

"Some kind of energy materialized under her feet, causing the water to freeze and let her run across the fjord" the distant voice of Komandant Harrison came back over the radio Galen had confiscated from one of the ground agents, holding it up to his ear to listen to the chatter over the roar of the crowd. "The energy seemed to coalesce and build upon itself as she ran - no idea if she even noticed as she never looked back. But the energy has frozen the fjord surface solid in the immediate area and seems to be still progressing. And thickening too - looks like the ice is almost up to a meter thick at the initial point on our sensors".

"Do you still have a track on Elsa?" Galen asked the only question he was concerned about right
The castle's private dropship landing pad jutted out slightly onto the Fjord and had thus given the massive Excalibur class ship a grandstand seat to this … this insanity...

"Negative - her thermal signature became obscured by the woodline once she crossed - although it was hard to hold her even at close range. At Last track her heading was zero two nine degrees and there are limited paths for her out of that part of the woodlands. Only a few trails up into the mountains behind and negligible human presence, although it's pretty open once you're past the treeline".

"Pull every map and start planning a sweep through those woods for my review" he ordered. "I want the NapFind’s launched as soon as humanly possible, we need eyes on her now" and with that he jerked his head at the palace, Curatis obediently snapping his fingers and causing several fully armed MIIO commandos to appear, their intimidating auto-rifles and black combat gear magically opening up a path through the nobles that had been converging to start demanding answers from him. "Keep your distance, but we need to track her location until-"

"Sir - I don't think we're going to be able to do that" the distant officer replied. "We're starting to see some rapid local atmospheric changes in this proximity that would make drone operations extremely difficult".

"What do you mean?" Galen demanded tersely. The drones carried by the Barbarossa were small, but surprisingly stealthy and loaded with sensors; ideal for keeping tabs on Elsa while giving her space to try and settle down from what Galen was suspecting was the mother of all panic attacks. Replaying the incidents in his head, he was increasingly confident this had all been a horrible accident, with things cascading out of control. And his gut told him she had fled less because she was concerned about her own life and more because she felt everyone else was in danger from her.

If she simply wanted distance and space, he was more than inclined to give her that space … but he didn't want to lose track of her either - both for their safety and for hers. And now, this damn Mech Commander was telling him that his vaunted toys weren't working...

"Look up Sir" Harrison suggested and sighing, Galen did so … and blinked.

What had been a mostly clear night sky was now a wall of grey, with low fast moving clouds seeming to roll across the sky above them and a cold wind starting to pick up around him. And from those low clouds and illuminated by all the lights of the castle … he could see-

Oh you have got to be kidding me!

"It's snowing" he observed flatly. Of course it was. Why not?

"Pulse doppler track shows a low altitude cloud bank has formed, centered on where the Duchess crossed the fjord - it's already thick enough that low altitude sweeps with the drones would be dangerous and high altitude sweeps with IR through this kind of cloud is almost useless for finding a single person. And …"

"And?" Galen asked with slightly strained patience as he and Curatis entered the palace and hurried back towards the ballroom, trying to ignore the staff and personnel running every which way in confusion as word steadily spread down through the ranks of what had just occurred. Mostly generating a lot of ‘what the hell are you on?’ responses at the idea that Elsa had just shot ice from her hands, knocked out Victor …and now had apparently kickstarted winter.

I have to be fucking drunk Galen told himself silently, able to appreciate the active disbelief of the staff they passed. That makes so much more sense! This is day three and I've gotten way too plastered with Renny or someone and if I just close my eyes for a half second…

Nope. Didn't work. And his radio kept talking too.

"And its spreading sir; expanding both up into the higher troposphere and out across the region a hell of a lot faster than should be possible. I don't think this is a natural event".

Galen exhaled and focused, mentally shifting himself fully into crisis mode. Absurd as this
situation was … it was happening and he was the man on point. He had more than used up enough time marveling at the insanity. Time to get to work.

"Alright. Issue a level one Recall for the 10th - and put the Militia on alert for possible disaster mitigation deployment" he ordered, not sure exactly what they were going to be doing but wanting everyone at their posts and every possible asset and person ready to face this crisis, that he had a feeling was going to get worse before it got better. "Have the Militia contact the civilian emergency services and put them all on notice as well - wake up everyone. Then liaise with the Palace security teams and find Elsa's High Council and bring them in. And someone bloody find Anna and get her in here ASAP before she does something ... 'Anna-ish'” he finished as the doors to the ballroom -now guarded by troops alongside the uneasy Palace Guards- were flung open.

The guests had been corralled towards the back of the room, with Kai Brevik seemingly on crowd control and doing what he could to keep things calm with the more senior nobility. There were several dozen people, bodyguards, medical personnel and others still clustered around where he presumed Victor was and while several noted his entrance, no-one immediately flagged him down, so he he presumed he could take a few seconds to study the impossibility directly in front of him.

Slowing down and letting Curatis move past him into the room barking orders, Galen took a good hard look at the arc of slender yet lethally sharp looking ice crystals that had exploded in an arc on the floor. It seemed hard to believe, even though he had seen it with his own eyes, that such a thing could have been created with a gesture ... with magic if he was going to use that word ... and yet here it was. The impossible now possible. Carefully, he stepped up to hover a finger just above the ice, feeling the chill in the air, but nothing spectacularly so. Very carefully using his shirt, he briefly touched the ice, then for longer periods before assuring himself it wasn't dangerously cold and doing the same with his naked skin.

It was incredibly smooth to the touch, flawless ice one did not see in nature. The forest of crystals had narrowed to very sharp points that were solid enough and hard enough to have easily punched into a person and at the speed Victor had crashed into it, he should have been skewered.

And yet the thick one he was pretty sure had struck Victor was nothing like that. Instead of hard ice its consistency seemed to be loose, almost snow-like as it readily crumbled away at his touch. What did that mean? He shook his head. Too many questions, no answers. Right, time to start getting some-

"...hey, it's ole Doc Leir" a voice croaked and Galen whirled and strode to the cluster of people around Victor, not quite shoving his way through them.

Victor was on the floor still, his uniform jacket and shirt open and a bewildering array of medical supplies and gear around him. A dozen sensor pads similar to those used in Battlemech life support systems had been stuck to him with data fed to a noteputer being monitored by a medic. A high-tech looking bandage had been slapped on his forehead to cover where he had cracked his head and his eyes were sort of wandering around, but at least he was alive and no-one looked to be in a panic, which he took as good news. A stretcher was being unfolded rapidly next to him from memory foam and frameworks and a neck brace was being fitted to the semi-conscious Prince

"Glad to see you're still with us Marshal" Diedre noted from her position on the right of his head, opposite Doctor González - the man in charge of Victor's medical team who seemed entirely happy with letting her take the lead. Which wasn't surprising given that, as Galen recalled, she had been the mans boss back when she was still with the 10th Lyran Guards. Right now, Diedre was running some kind of esoteric scanner over his bandaged forehead, looking into a monocle connected to it by a cable as if she was seeing through to the injury underneath.

In fact that's probably exactly what she was doing come to think of it. Another NAIS special it seemed.

"Its definitely blunt force, the penetration is only superficial, but we have a lot of bleeding we need to get in and contain swiftly before we start to see any pressure building up ... and a possible fracture" she observed, looking across at her opposite number as she handed the sensor thing back
"I concur" Doctor González agreed smoothly, looking down at his charge. "Victor!" he said slightly more loudly than necessary to get his attention, "you've taken a hit to the head which is causing some internal bleeding. It's no serious yet, but we need to treat it quickly. Do you understand?"

"Hey González" Victor happily drawled, his eyes focusing onto him. "Do you know that Kai and Diedre are still in love? I'm not sure they do. Someone should tell them!"

Galen killed the urge to facepalm … or smirk.

"Well that answers the question of if he has a concussion" Diedre muttered earning a 'what is that supposed to mean?!' look from Kai that she ignored - but Galen noticed a slight flush to her cheeks that he was sure hadn't been there before. "It's safe to move him - we need to get him into a trauma bed".

"The palace hospital is fully equipped" González stated with a glance at her. "They're staffed and waiting".

"Alright, let's move him there now. Shift to the stretcher on three. One, two…” and with a single smooth motion, the medical staff very carefully lifted the prince onto the stretcher. His Liege, his CO … his friend was still with it enough to make a thumbs up gesture at the nobility corralled down the end of the hall who were frantically trying to peek over each other to get a glimpse of Victor as he was hurried out.

Alright. Victor was alive and being seen to by the best people in the business. That was good. Now …

"Uh Sir" a MIIO agent noted, stepping up to him as Galen took her slightly flustered face in, a powerful command radio in one hand that he offered, Galen accepting the swap for the more subtle unit he had been using. "We just got a report about the Duchess's Sister..."

Galen forced himself to take and exhale a deep breath somehow knowing this was not going to be good news.

"Yes?"

********

"She's what?" the incredulous voice of Galen Cox crackled over his helmet speakers.

"She's on a horse Sir" Warren Vickers repeated his last calmly, the ridiculousness of this report pleasing him. It was tradition that each year on New Avalon, the best crazy story in the Rabid Fox division earned said commando a bottle of Northwind Glengarry Black Label, Special Reserve from their CO.

At this rate, I'll fucking have a case of the stuff on account before the night is out he mentally thought as he tracked the sister of the Duchess as galloped away from the Castle, through the grounds of the estate in a way that only someone very familiar with them could as she wound her way to the frozen fjord and eased it onto the ice. He half expected the horse to lose its footing, but in no time she had it galloping across the frozen waters, heading for the far bank. Clearly she knew how to handle horses. "And now she's crossing the Fjord on said horse, seems to be going after her sister" he added.

An expletive came from the radio entirely at odds with the professionalism the AFFC aspired to. Vickers cut Cox some slack on the grounds that he had come up through the LCAF rather than the AFSS … and besides, he could entirely understand why he would be pissed at the kid running off like some Junior Officer fresh out of NAMA with a compass and a map thinking they could
take on a Warrior House.

Strike that, that wasn't very PC these days. Hmm … 4th Wolf Guards Cluster?

"Do we have anything that can intercept her to hand?" Cox demanded, drawing his attention back. "She's next in line with Elsa gone, I need her back here!"

"Charlie Lance is in position - but that ice is still marginal -at best- for the Mechs" Komandant Harrison warned - and rightfully so. After all, Battlemechs focused their entire ground pressure into the small area of their feet. Which made them surprisingly agile when combined with their Gyros and Neurohelmets … but it also mean on a surface like Ice you had to be damn sure about its thickness because otherwise it could crack right through even as Tanks of the same weight drove happily by.

Left unsaid of course was the fact that Battlemechs were hardly ideal for trying to safely bring back a person on a horse riding away at speed. Alive anyway.

He had to admit, the kid was rather good on that thing, guiding it at a gallop across the ice to the far bank, where snow was already starting to pile up…wearing a stunning looking dress and cape rather than winter survival gear.

Well she had balls, no question about that. Brains … perhaps less so. His suits environmental sensors showed the local temperature steadily dropping and with a long night ahead of them all, there was a decent chance she wouldn't be coming back. Which was a shame. Her fierce loyalty to her sister, charging off after her like a Subaltern fresh out of the academy was something sadly missing from too many noble lines around the Federated Commonwealth in his view.

And yet …

Something in his gut had noted the look of utterly implacable determination in the young woman's eyes as she tore past. He trusted his instincts - in his business you had to or you died quickly ... and right now they were insisting that against all logic, the kid might just surprise him and everyone else by the time this crisis was over.

And almost against his cynical will, a faint smile came across the face hidden behind the mirror-glass visor as he nodded a salute after the crazy young woman.

"Go get 'er kid".
...run in circles, scream and shout!

Sorry for the delay. I actually finished this off one night at Disneyland last month (hilariously I did a chunk of it in Calafonia Adventure Land wearing my Battletech hat inside the animation studio building right outside Anna and Elsa's digs on my iPhone while waiting for the next animation class... felt like a total geek too!) but I never got around to posting it.

My bad!

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“You know, it's one thing to step in during a battle when your CO falls. We’re trained for it. Prepared for it. But it’s another thing entirely to find yourself thrown into the deep end like Galen was that day. And yet, everything he did unquestionably put him on the radar. Well more on the radar; a lot of people close to Victor—including his parents—had already tagged him as Victors ‘Ardan Sortek’ or ‘Morgan Kell’ by then. But after Arendelle a lot more people started to take him seriously as something much more than just a social climber.

True Leadership I’ve long since learned is about gathering people around you that you can delegate to. People who you trust and who know you trust them so they can do their jobs without you breathing down their neck and wasting both your time and theirs. It said a lot about Victor even back then that there were so many remarkable people around him who stood up to be counted, as reality and fantasy smashed into each other in a way never before seen in human history.

Although as it turned out, having such incredible people around provided the perfect camouflage for other incredible but not so loyal people - which I think taught us all a valuable lesson.”

- Lt General Reginald ‘Renny’ Sanderlin (RET), ‘Walking with Giants’; Avalon Press, 3080

Arendelle Castle / Jorgensson Family Residence
Arendelle City, Arendelle
Crucis March
Federated Commonwealth
May 10 3053
T + 16 minutes

“The APCs are gearing up, they’ll be rolling in fifteen. The Ready-5 Air Lance has been scrambled, they should be overhead about-

There was a dull rumble from outside the palace as the two Corsair Aerospace fighters ripped past overhead above Mach-1.

“-now” Harrison finished without skipping a beat. “With your permission, I’ll have them start running IR passes as low as we can get away with. We might get a break through the clouds to try and localize one or both of them, but at any real altitude...”

“Understood. Weather status?” Galen asked as he watched the last of Victors entourage leave, hurrying him to the small but (thanks to the advanced team) lavishly equipped medical wing of the palace, pointedly closing the door behind them.

“Unchanged - the storm is expanding at the same rate, but the troposphere is still warm enough that the temperature is only dropping gradually at ground level. But that will change by tomorrow morning if the weather doesn’t and the snow is piling up quickly. I’d like your permission to bring in the local meteorology department to assist with this - even if it wasn’t magic powered, this is, uh, well outside my expertise Sir”.

“Granted” he said, Galen counting what blessings he had in this insane situation. The fact that the storm was still expanding against all the laws of physics was, frankly, terrifying given what kind of power it suggested had been unleashed. On the other hand, it wasn’t leading to an immediate
snap freeze that could kill a lot of people unprepared for the sudden weather change, giving them a window to prepare the population for a summer winter.
Although secretly, it terrified him far more that the person in charge of dealing with this crisis was him.
He wasn’t a politician by even the most generous stretch of the imagination, but his boss in his infinite wisdom had dumped the problem onto him, so it was up to him to deal with the situation. Until he could dump said situation on someone else’s shoulders anyway.

First though, he needed information. As Victor’s cousin -apparently- said; ‘information was ammunition’ and right now he was running dry without an ammo truck in sight … and speaking of cousins…

“Stand by Harrison; Cox off net for five” he called into the radio before replacing it on his belt and turning its speaker right down as he strode to a young brunette in a purple dress. The young woman was frantically working a phone off to the side in an alcove away from most of the crowd and he made his way towards her swiftly, the remaining MIIO agents with him silently moving in a loose screen that turned away people trying to approach him with polite - but backed by a lot of guns - words. “Excuse me, my Lady Beaulieu?”

The other jumped slightly and turned to face him, looking slightly sheepish - but recovered her poise quickly. “Uh, no - I mean yes. Sorry. Just trying to ring … someone who isn’t picking up” she finished sounding so awfully like her cousin he couldn’t help but smile slightly.

“Anna?” he asked and Rapunzel hesitantly nodded once - the worry and tension in her face clear before she glanced around and lowered her voice as she stepped closer, clearly not wanting to be overheard - despite the fact that it was only various guards immediately around them.

“She’s not picking up her phone - and I don’t have a number for Elsa - if she even has a phone with her. I mean, haven’t even had a chance to introduce myself yet! I’m worried sick. I just know Anna is going to do something…” she paused and her gaze seemed to lock onto his face and suddenly Galen felt entirely like an open book. “Oh God, what’s she done?!”

Galen debated for a full half second about not telling her, before deciding that A) she was surely going to know soon anyway and B) as Anna and Elsa’s cousin and probably Anna’s closest friend, she had a right to hear it from him first.

“She was last spotted riding a horse across the fjord, seemingly in pursuit of Elsa. With quite impressive skill too, by all reports” he added.

“Wait … what? She rode a horse across water!?"

“Elsa preceded her - I’m afraid your older cousin quite literally froze the water under her feet into ice as she fled the castle - and most of the fjord to boot. She’s since vanished into the Northern bank of the fjord with Anna charging after her after finding a horse from somewhere. And” he added as the young woman’s jaw dropped, “it seems this release of her powers on a large scale has set off something of a major snowstorm that’s spreading out all over this region without any signs of slowing down”.

Rapunzel stared at him for a long, long few seconds without any change in her expression before finally closing her jaw with an audible click.
Frankly, she took the utterly impossible news rather well.

“I know I should be surprised, but…” she trailed off before closing her eyes and taking a deep breath in and out, before looking at him, the young woman's face lined with tension and worry, but focused. “How can I help you Kommandant?”

“Given that I’m almost entirely positive Anna knew nothing, I can assure you Countess this isn’t meant as any kind of insult. But I have to ask; did you know anything about Elsa and her … abilities? Anything at all I can use here to try and get her back safely and deal with this crisis?”

“She doesn’t - but I might” a voice softly cut in from behind his shoulder.
Galen managed not to jump at the unexpected voice and he turned around to find Lady Karoline Iversen, the mother of Rapunzel and aunt to both Elsa and Anna, had snuck up on them. Standing just behind the line of agents -clearly she had excellent hearing- and Galen gestured for her to be let in to join them.

“You knew?” Rapunzel asked, shock and a hint of anger written all over her expressive face as she stepped around him to confront her approaching mother, her hands starting to clench into fists. “You knew and didn’t tell Anna-”

“Punz” the older woman said, silencing her daughter with but one word and a look. “Go upstairs to your room. If Anna contacts you, call me at once. I’ll be up shortly and I promise I’ll explain”. Rapunzel hesitated until her mother reached out to gently lay a hand on her shoulder. “Please dear”.

Impressing Galen, the young woman fought back the urge to ask questions she clearly wanted to ask and instead nodded slightly stiffly, turning and stalking away towards the exit as the older woman turned her attention back to him.

“To cut to the chase” the Duchess Consort said after watching her daughter leave the room, “when Idun and Adgar died a holodisk arrived for me. One prepared for in the event of their unexpected deaths. It was sent via private courier and arrived shortly after we returned from their funeral”.

“Clearly they wanted to keep a secret” Galen observed. Private couriered holodisks cutting ComStar out entirely were not exactly cheap or fast, but they did have the benefit of security. And in hindsight, Galen didn’t even want to think about what someone like Myndo Waterly would have been tempted to do if ROM had found out about Elsa’s unique gifts...

“Indeed. In retrospect, there had perhaps been hints about Elsa in the regular HPG messages I received from both of her parents, but it wasn’t until the disk that they admitted she had special needs - unprecedented needs and gifts - that they had been trying to help her with all her life. Nothing more than that, they were annoyingly vague. The message was simply a hope, a plea even, for us to watch out for their daughters in the event that they both died. To make sure they knew they had family they could turn to, no matter what” she said, her face turning exasperated for but a moment. “As if we would do any less”.

“Given that you had already stepped in to look after Anna even before the disk arrived, your sisters faith in you seems to have been well placed” he nodded in salute to her.

The Lady Karoline just snorted somewhat contemptuously at that attempted complement.

“My sister was clearly a bloody idiot” she corrected him with rather charming directness. “She and my brother in law seem to have decided that isolating Elsa from the world was the answer to her unique challenges; a choice which clearly hasn’t helped anyone - least of all Elsa! Although … to be slightly fair” she added with a reluctant looking frown, “reading between the lines after this evening I now have a feeling something similar to the events here with Prince Davion must have happened in the past. Something specifically between Anna and Elsa”.

“Why do you say that?” Galen asked, eager to hear any insights into the girl's past that might help him in the present.

“Because by all accounts, in every picture and letter I have; the two sisters were fundamentally inseparable until Elsa cut her sister out of her life without warning or reason, roughly around when Anna turned five” the Duchess-Consort huffed. “Indeed, up until then Elsa seemed to be the far more adventurous and outgoing young girl - not surprising as she was the older sister. The two sisters shared a room, shared their lives with each other, always in the public eye. But then with no clear cause, everything just … changed. The two were isolated from each other, supposedly so Elsa could start preparing for her education as the heir. Not exactly unprecedented in the Inner Sphere, but never really seen on Arendelle mind. But Anna’s recollections to me suggests it was far more than simply schooling - Elsa’s entire personality and attitude towards Anna changed at the same time. Then a year later Elsa actually left the palace entirely and all contact between them was terminated until earlier today - even to the point of Elsa forcing her sister to bury their parents, alone”.

The Lady Iversen raised her gaze to meet his at that, her eyes hard.
“Something” happened. Either my sister and brother in law went utterly insane and decided Elsa had to be locked away, or, Elsa was so terrified of herself that she pushed everyone away - especially Anna. Perhaps it was when she first discovered her powers and she came close to hurting Anna without realising it? Regardless, given that Elsa seems to have carried this separation forward well after their Parents died…” she sighed, shaking her head. “Fear and terror can have a far more profound and longer lasting impact upon children than anger in my experience, my good Kommandant. Often to the complete exclusion of rational thinking”.

“It makes as much sense as anything” Galen allowed as he mulled over it, trying to think back to what Anna had told him over the last few days. Elsa having a desire to protect her sister and everyone else in the only way she thought she could; cutting off and shutting out the world would neatly fit into what facts they had. And even her reactions tonight made sense in that context... but ultimately, it was still just speculation. Then again, all he had to go on was speculation!

He wasn’t a bloody psychologist, he wasn’t even remotely qualified to try and dig into this. But it was enough to conclude to him that given the extremes she or her parents had gone to to separate them, Anna chasing after Elsa when both were so emotionally charged … well, for all the best of intentions that could be a complete disaster. Which meant in turn he had to get her back here now, because the last thing they all needed was Elsa being spooked into making this worse by Anna being … Anna.

Something of his thoughts must have shown in his face, because the older woman stepped closer, her eyes locked on him with the intensity of a Garret D2J that made him feel just a tad small, despite the fact that he was half a head taller than her.

“So, I must ask you, Kommandant. What are your intentions?”

The slight stress she put on his rank made her meaning very clear, as did her gaze which said clearly that if he gave the wrong answer, he could look forward to an enormous amount of problems in the immediate future.

“Elsa is the legitimate and lawful Duchess of this planet and Victor made his feelings crystal clear to me” he replied directly. “Accordingly, my job is to find Elsa and Anna and get them back home where we can work all this out. Together”.

Then he let his no-nonsense expression shift to a slightly irritated one. “Although I reserve the right to have Anna grounded for running off like an idiot, best of intentions aside”.

The woman simply nodded slowly, but Galen perceived the air of relief around her as he confirmed he was going to save them, not hunt them down.

“Then I will leave you to to your work Kommandant. Anna’s cell number” she supplied, holding up a small piece of paper and Galen nodded reaching to take it - at which point she suddenly grasped his hand in both of hers causing him to look up, slightly startled, to see the cool mask of the Duchess-Consort drop to only leave an aunt whose family had just been shattered into an unknown future in one crazy hour of revelations.

“Please … just …” she paused for a second to catch herself. “Just bring them home safely” she said before she released him and spun away, striding with purpose towards the door her daughter had left through without waiting for an answer.

He took a second to compose himself before he pulled his radio and flicked it back onto the command frequency.

“Harrison, Cox. I need a track and triangulation on a local cellphone. Get me the DMI duty officer”.

“Stand by one Sir” the distant Mech Commander came back in his ear, several beeps followed by a pause of a couple of seconds before a new voice came onto the line.

“Agent Samuels here Kommandant, ready to trace on your command”

He unfolded the small piece of paper and relayed the local phone number, waiting as the agent on the other end worked his esoteric EW gear. Sometimes it paid to ride with the heir to the Federated Commonwealth whose command dropship got all the goodies NAIS could cram into it...
“We have an active signal” the DMI agent finally came back. “Triangulating … it’s moving. Track shows it’s within fifty meters of your position Kommandant - and closing”.

What!?

Galen shot a confused glance at one of the guards near to him - who after a moment holding a hand to his earpiece, glanced up and nodded at the main door. Galen turned to face it just in time to see it open and a familiar man walked in to be stopped by the troops on guard. Galen recognized him at once as the man who had been with Anna earlier in the night and a sinking feeling hit him as he stomped across the room, signaling the guards to let the man in, meeting him just next to Elsa’s impressive ‘ice sculpture’ still sitting on the polished floor of the ballroom.

“Kommandant Cox?” the young man asked as he approached, glancing briefly at the gleaming ice for a moment before looking back to him.

“Yes” he nodded once and the other man returned his nod.

“Sir Hans Westerguard” he said directly. “The Lady Jorgenson asked me to give you this” he said and with that conformation, the man handed over … a cell phone. Clearly Anna’s from the adorable picture of a Terran Sloth on its back cover. “Her instructions were that I give it -and the video she made- to you alone before she … well … “

“Got on a horse and rode off after her sister like a heroic idiot” he finished dryly as he accepted the phone.

“Ah … yes, that” he agreed looking more than a little uneasy before adding under his breath something that sounded an awful lot like ‘this is all my fault’.

“What was that?” he demanded, glancing up from his examination of the phone. Hans blinked, startled as if he hadn’t realized he had spoken aloud and after taking in his unamused face, clearly decided to expand on that point.

“I, um, well” he paused and seemed to set himself, the look of a man who knew that there was not any way to make what he was about to say sound any better. “Just before everything happened, I proposed to Anna - that is, the Lady Jorgensson … marriage”.

Galen stared at the other.

Long and silently. Said silence spoke volumes without actually saying a word.

“It all just happened so fast” Hans pressed on moments later, his face flushing a little but otherwise remarkably keeping his composure under a look that had broken Mechwarriors far too full of themselves. “I mean we only met yesterday but she’s so incredible and we kept running into each other, literally, then we were talking and talking and before I knew it, I couldn’t help but blurt out a proposal to her - and she said yes! I mean, on my world proposals like this are common, but then people hold a long courtship afterwards. Half a year or more before we really get engaged. I was trying to explain this to Anna, but she might have gotten a little, uh, carried away? And before I knew it or could really explain she was asking Elsa permission to marry me. They started arguing and …” he tailed off.

“I see” Galen stated neutrally, glancing back down as he activated the phone.

He actually didn’t see, but he found the idea that Anna would leap off the cliff entirely … unsurprising. It seemed that the debate over surprise wedding had simply become the trigger for unleashing years of tension and emotions between the sisters. And on any other night, on any other planet with any other family, such a shouting match would have at worst caused a moderate social scandal and intervention the next morning between various adults to calm everyone down and talk things through … It was just everyone’s bad luck one of the two sisters had been hiding perhaps one of the greatest secrets in human history during the emotional meltdown and lost control at the worst possible time.
I can’t deal with this shit right now he silently thought, dismissing any concerns about the events as he turned his attention back to the phone and booted its video playback utility, loading and playing the last file listed...

“-hing on? Oh, good” Anna appeared on the tiny screen, visible if not terribly clear in the low light outside as she finished putting on some kind of cape over her dress, drawing herself up looking disturbingly serious, her voice slightly static filled but clear enough. “Galen as you seem to be in charge now, I thought I should let you know that I’m going after Elsa. I know I can bring her back and sort all this out before it gets out of control. And I know you can handle things, but politically someone needs to look after everything, so, um, I’m declaring Sir Hans Westerguard of the Southern isles -my fiance- in charge until I or my sister return. Don’t worry - I’ll fix this mess and put everything right again, I promise!” she finished as she turned to a white horse -that looked slightly miffed to have been pulled out of whatever comfortable stable it had been in- Anna with an admittedly clear competence swung up into its saddle and took the reigns.

“Anna” now Hans voice - clearly he was the one filming- came on from offscreen. ”Please listen; this is a very bad idea. You’re not equipped for the weather, you’re not trained and your sister is clearly in a state of panic. You need to stay here and lead your people and let the professionals go out to bring her back! It’s too dangerous to-”

“Elsa would never hurt me” Anna retorted emphatically - and clearly that was that to her; the only thing that mattered. “And she can’t have gotten far. She just needs someone to talk to. Somehow she knows won’t hurt her and someone she trusts. So don’t worry, I’ll bring her back and we’ll solve this. Together” and with that said firmly, she was off, the horse she was on galloping away into the night with great strides to vanish from view, at which point Hans let loose a profanity, before the video cut off.

“I thought about just dragging her back here … but” he trailed off, clearly uneasy at the idea and Galen couldn’t really blame him. He wouldn’t have had any such compunctions over doing so, but then he was confident that Victor would back him up on such a call and he had relative field experience in dealing with senior nobility who were intent on doing very stupid things they thought were heroic.

Anna, he would bet his retirement pay, had clearly (correctly) concluded that if she had asked for permission to run after her sister, he would have denied it. So instead she had sent her fiance with her message in a video on her phone. Making her intentions clear while at the same time removing any ability for him to do anything about it … or track her by said phone.

He immediately upped his threat estimate on the young woman. Headstrong, determined and cunning … while utterly indifferent to the chaos she was causing? It was Yvonne Steiner-Davion all over again.

Presently he looked up from the phone to glance back across the room in annoyance as the background noise started to steadily build. Oh goody, now all the nobles who had been corralled into one corner of the grand ballroom were starting to argue with each other, with Kai Brevik trying and slowly failing to keep everyone calm.

“If that is all Kommandant, I really need to be off” the young man dragged his attention back from the brewing political shitstorm and Galen again raised an eyebrow at him as he started to edge away.

“And where exactly are you going son?” Galen’s voice stopped him cold, somehow knowing exactly what the answer would be.

“After her of course” Hans blinked as if surprised he asked the question. “After I get some survival equipment, a long range radio and-”

“Absolutely not. You’re staying right here” he cut the other off bluntly, meeting his gaze evenly, even as internally he begged God to save him from all these idiot kids who seemed to want to charge off into the freezing night after each other like lemmings!

“With respect Kommandant” the other replied - and Galen managed to not roll his eyes at the traditional prefacing of a polite ‘Go to hell!’; “I’m not a child. I’m from the Outback and perfectly
capable of taking care of myself out there - and I can move fast”.

“You also don’t know the terrain, I’m sure don’t have ready access to the supplies you know you need, have no idea where Elsa and Anna are going and have an excellent chance of just sucking down my resources that should be looking for those two women looking for you instead” he pointed out in as blunt a tone as he could, feeling slightly exasperated that this man who had so very correctly pointed out the flaws to Anna of her decisions, was now ready to cheerfully do the same thing going after her like some giant conga line...

The other met his gaze directly for a long moment before sighing and glancing aside, seeming to slump in on himself.

“You’re … right. Of course you’re right Kommandant” he said, reaching up a hand to rub his brow for a moment as a look of extreme frustration came across said face before he got a grip. “It’s just that Anna and her sister are out there right now and there isn’t a damn thing I can do to help them - or anyone else around here for that matter! Back home I’d be in the thick of this organizing disaster relief teams and civil defense responses. Here I’m just a bloody tourist!”

Galen tilted his head slightly as the noise from the nobles roaring off to the side increased yet again … and in a moment came to a quick and convenient decision.

Kai Brevik, the Chief of Staff to the Duchess is Arendelle had noted much earlier this evening that it was as if a giant reset button had been pressed on Arendelle. If that was the case, someone had clearly left the wrong disk queued in the vid-system to be loaded after the reset completed. The mood of stunned shock and confusion in the VIPs after the new Duchess had just exploded ice out of her hands and knocked down her Liege, was steadily wearing off and leaving only fear and confusion in its place. He had stepped in almost on instinct to take on crowd control duties, even as his subordinates worked to clear the ‘lesser’ guests out of the palace courtyard and organize to return them to their homes as rapidly as possible, with cars and buses now departing in a constant stream from the castle.

But the more senior nobility who had been present to see the astonishing events had made it clear as a whole that they were not going anywhere until they had some answers. And he couldn’t blame them. He wouldn’t want to leave in their place.

So he ruthlessly pushed aside his deep hurt that neither the Duke and Duchess, nor their daughter, had ever trusted him enough to bring him in on this secret, trusted him to help Elsa - mostly by harshly reminding himself that even Anna clearly hadn’t been let in the terrible truth. Instead, he recommitted himself to their service, to help out Elsa and Anna the only way he could right now. Damage control.

There were a lot of very frightened people to deal with. People with enough power to make the situation much, much worse if they decided panic was the best response.

“As I said Baron, I had no knowledge of the Duchesses … unique gifts” he tried to explain yet again, marshaling his calm. The group of nobility had formed a circular cluster looking almost like a firing squad, each of them trailing a cluster of supporters or aides or family behind them who were pushing and shoving with glares for a place closer to the talking. MIIO agents had already quietly but firmly escorted Elsa’s High Council upstairs to where a crisis room was being set up to actually do useful things. Which left the rest of the most senior nobility on the planet and guests from offworld looking to him for answers. Or for someone to take things out on.

“I can assure you that Duchess Jorgensson and her parents were very protective of her privacy and-”

“-and now we know why!” that ferret of a man who had stirred up far too much trouble tonight jumped in harshly. Unfortunately, as a peer to Duchess Elsa, Weselton had the nominal ‘right’ to rant and rave and he had little choice but to stand here and take it, the wonders of their neo-feudal society. “They gave birth to a witch who almost killed our Archon-Prince designate and has cursed this land!”

The accusation infuriated him, but he kept his rage hidden behind his calm facade as more than a
few of the nobles muttered agreement with that. Thankfully the majority looked contemptuous of claims of witches and curses. For now anyway.

“We must immediately send out all troops to find her and put a stop to this madness! Men willing to do whatever it takes to—”

“No” a new voice cut in and Kai killed the urge to sigh in relief as Galen Cox walked up next to him, that one word silencing everyone with the calm authority in it. “Gentlemen, ladies” he acknowledged the nobility in a tone that brooked no compromise. “We are not going to start forming mobs. Elsa is not in my view an immediate threat to anyone—”

“She almost killed me!” the tiny man spluttered in outrage, vibrating furiously at the newcomer. Kai knew that Galen Cox was a Mechwarrior of no small skill, who had faced off against Clan Omnimechs with enough weapons in one arm to pulverize a city block. And won. A man who had been swept into the highest echelons of nobility of the Federated Commonwealth and thrived, even if he was as common as Kai himself was. Accordingly, it didn’t surprise him that his response to the man’s angry denunciation was to simply lower his gaze slowly to the much shorter man and raise an eyebrow.

“You slipped on some ice” a new voice joined the conversation as Galen let the somewhat pointed silence linger, another familiar man moving up to stand next to the AFFC officer. “And that was after you chased her from her home, yelling to not let her get away, ignored her warning to get back and then called her a monster”.

Interesting. Hans Westerguard, the young man Anna had been apparently running into over the last few days. The man who had apparently overheard a bunch of people daring to insult her in her own home this evening … and challenged them to a duel on her behalf! That was just a little shocking, but thankfully no blood had been split and the young nobles doing the insulting had learned a valuable lesson in manners. He wasn’t surprised that after such an intervention, Anna had then asked him to escort her inside, Kai had quietly ordered an eye to be kept on the two of them. The man was far too handsome and dashing by half for his tastes. Thankfully, it also seemed he was a gentlemen; nothing he had been worried about had happened … but then something worse had.

They had decided to get married!

It was something so completely out of scope of his concerns that he wasn’t at all surprised Elsa had reacted so badly - hells he even wholeheartedly agreed with her sentiment about marrying someone you had just met … even if it said sentiment had been delivered somewhat harshly. Instead of a more measured response to cool things off and talk tomorrow, Elsa had flatly rejected her sister which had caused ten years of emotion in the tightly strung Anna to come roaring out all at once. Elsa then reacted in turn and like a fusion reaction heading to a runaway to a … what was that word … ah yes, ‘Stackpoling’; things had simply moved with the force of nature to an inevitable conclusion in a giant explosion.

Although come to think of it. If Hans and Galen were here … then where was Anna?

“That Elsa has remarkable abilities is not in doubt” Galen nodded in agreement smoothly, turning away before the moustached man could reply to take in the gaze of everyone. “But let’s not go start throwing insane accusations of witchcraft around. It’s clear she never intended any of this to happen. Everything tonight has been impulsive, reactionary. When combined with unhelpful people yelling for her to be caught and calling her a monster…” he didn’t quite glare at the Duke of Weselton but from the way he actually seemed to flinch back -for once- he got the message, “it’s understandable that she panicked and ran as far and hard as she could. All of this” he pointed to the window where snow was clearly falling around the castle, “is probably because she has lost control of her … abilities. Mister Brevik, I take it that summer snowstorms in Arendelle City are not a normal thing?”

“Most certainly not Kommandant- this is unprecedented” Kai agreed quickly and Galen nodded confidently.
“Which suggests she controls her abilities - and if we calm everything down, can reverse all this. Ergo, it’s counterproductive to go chasing after her with pitchforks and torches” Galen smoothly and calmly drained some of the angsty tension from the crowd. “So no, we’re not doing that. Lest we forget” he added with a look because clearly some people had, “she is still the Duchess of this star system”.

“That’s all well and good” an young woman snapped at Galen, her dress and accent suggesting she was from somewhere in the lower Capellan March - probably here as part of the delegation from Kallon Industries. ‘But while we’re talking about getting her a therapist, her planet is starting to enter a new ice age! What are you going to do about that? What are we going to do about that?” she expanded, glancing at her peers who nodded in agreement before seeming to notice something and look around the wider room. “And on that topic, where is is her sister? Shouldn’t she be here in this discussion?”

That was a very good question and he couldn’t help but glance at Galen, his sense of worry spiking as he saw the man seem to brace himself.

“She left the castle. On a horse. Going after her sister to bring her back” he said directly.

Kai was torn then and there between a sense of incredible pride that, despite everything, Anna’s first reaction to her sister’s situation was to charge off after her to bring her back home … and a far greater surge of absolute terror that both of ‘his’ girls were now running out into the darkness of night. Alone. Unprepared. He could almost feel the blood draining from his face at the news.

“So who the hell is in charge then if both of them are gone?” another noble demanded in a high pitched voice after the flurry of talk at that revelation ended, forcing his attention back. “We’re going to need strong leadership to deal with this crisis. We can’t afford to try and deal with this by committee!”

“Well if the Jorgenson sisters have … recused… themselves…” another of the men started to suggest, a faint smirk fighting to push its way onto his face and push off the appropriately serious look currently thereon, “it only stands to reason that we should appoint a temporary regent to deal with this crisis, no?”

“And who are you suggesting Charles” another man sniffed back. “You?”

“I can think of far worse people, Aaron” the first man sniffed with a look that said without saying ‘like you’. “And given I am the senior Count of record, I’m sure I’d have the support of the Court if-”

And with that, to Kai’s disbelief and growing anger, a new argument broke out around the group with people clearly starting to argue and jockey for position, seemingly to replace the Duchess they had sworn in only hours ago? One who had sacrificed everything for them, for so many years-

He jumped slightly as a hand landed on his shoulder and turned to see Galen standing there, giving him a tiny shake of his head. The message was clear enough - and he felt slightly embarrassed that he apparently was so easy to read in his anger, unclenching his fists and stepping back subtly to try and marshal his calm as the mob ranted and raved at each other. He idly wondered if Cox was about to pull a sidearm and shoot into the air like most Vid shows would suggest. Instead, he lifted the large radio from his belt, pressed a button, raised it to his lips-

“IF I MAY HAVE YOUR ATTENTION?” Galens voice exploded into the group and shut them all up.

Ah. Apparently his radio had a ‘bullhorn’ mode.

Probably better than risking shooting someone on the floor above them come to think of it.
“For the record” Galen continued calmly into the silence as he replaced the radio on the belt, “I will be assuming primary planetary authority until such time as the Duchess or her sister return, or Victor relieves me”.

Kai barely held his composure at that quite brash announcement. Very military - he supposed - but he was sure the nobility would … object. Naturally, the Bluebloods didn’t disappoint.

“You? You’re not even a noble, Kommandant’” Count Charles McNeill rounded on the AFFC officer with an outraged quiver of his double jaw. “The very … the very presumption! Granting yourself control of an entire planet? Without the slightest authority? No Sir, I will not accept even the idea of—”

“Actually, he does have the authority” a different voice corrected him stepping forward through the planet’s nobility, Kai feeling some relief as Duke Iversen, Anna and Elsa’s Uncle from Corona, moved into the limelight with a hard look towards the arguing locals. “I heard -and I’m sure his bodyguards recorded- Archduke Steiner-Davion’s final order before the medical team arrived” he continued. “Which was, as I recall, telling Kommandant Cox to ‘take charge’ ... which seems to be exactly what he is doing”.

“To take charge of the immediate situation perhaps” McNeill immediately tried to spin the orders, but now uncertainty was mixed into his tone as he glanced around at his supporters who suddenly looked slightly more unsure of themselves. Not surprising; contradicting an Archdukes orders (let alone those of the heir to the Federated Commonwealth) was an excellent way to end up in jail. If you were lucky.

“But clearly, he would not mean for this man to lead the planet!” the other continued, trying to rally support. “He has no authority for that - he’s a junior officer, a commoner without any legal status!”

“And you’re willing to bet your title, lands and life on that?” Iversen replied with the precise tone of a wise old man wondering why the children were being such idiots today and refusing to listen to their elders. “When Victor Steiner-Davion wakes up and finds you defied his second in command and friend? My what courage you have gained since you started making all those … offworld friends” he added casually with a knowing glance at quite a few of said off-worlders, causing a subtle flinch to pass through several people in the room. Kai made a note of that as well and to have a chat with the Duke sometime soon. The girl’s Uncle was clearly better informed than he about some of the maneuverings going on in that space, while he had been occupied with the preparations for the investment-

“So I suppose that you are going to name yourself as regent for your nieces?” McNeill narrowed his eyes in suspicion and no small amount of hostility.

“No-one here going to be named ‘regent’ for my nieces without the say-so of someone authorized to do so, least of all me” the Duke didn’t quite growl, stepping towards McNeill with a glare on his face that at least made the other guy flinch backwards ever so slightly, his bearing as a veteran Mechwarrior and ruler of a planet suddenly clear to everyone. “Elsa is the Duchess and Anna is her heir. Aside from Victor Steiner-Davion, no-one on this planet has the authority to appoint or become a regent without emergency powers being invoked according to Federated-Suns law”.

“And that is where I come in” Galen interjected before that conversation went any further in a placating tone before a brawl broke out. “An attack on Victor is automatically grounds for an immediate state of planetary emergency to be declared” he noted, neatly ignoring the fact that he had just previously noted that this event was hardly an intentional attack.

Then again, said laws Kai knew had been happily written by House Davion to give maximum flexibility around invoking them. Technicalities could be wonderful things, at times.

“In the absence of the planetary ruler or higher nobility, if the senior military officer on planet declares it to be necessary the authority devolves to them to invoke” Galen continued. “Giving them total authority to deal with the situation until relieved. And suffice to say that given the situation” he nodded to the window where the snow outside was, if anything, thickening, “such a state will need to be declared, immediately”
“Ah but my dear Kommandant” yet another noble, some idiot Baron, smiled as he stepped forward with an expression that said ‘I’ve got you now!’ louder than words ever could. “The problem there is you are not the highest ranking member of the military on planet, are you? Why, my nephew Colonel Thomas” and with that he stabbed a finger at the man in an older style AFFS dress uniform trying to look tiny at the edge of the crowd “outranks you, does he not?”

There was an ‘oohhing’ through a small part of the crowd as if the man had just struck a mortal blow and, clearly reluctantly, Colonel Thomas was edged to the front of the group. Thomas White, the local militia commander was one of only a few full-time AFFC officers on the planet answering technically to both Theater command on Point Barrow and the serving Duchess. Kai had met with him many times and he seemed to be competent, but most of his job consisted of shuffling papers and attending various formal events...

“And this means that clearly he should make the call if such a state is necessary and grant such powers, is that not so?” the Baron asked with a broad and modestly condescending smirk. The Colonel glanced at Galen for a moment who looked entirely unconcerned, the AFFC officer simply nodding at him, the gesture causing the other to take a breath and start speaking.

“Count Abnett, Kommandant Cox is entirely correct that the highest ranking officer on-planet during a situation such as this has the authority to declare a military emergency and personally assume full emergency powers over the entire planet. And you are correct that strictly speaking I outrank him-”

“There you see?” the Noble preened to his audience who dutifully seemed to smile and make approving noises and even a couple of stillborn attempts to applaud at his wisdom. “Now, I propose-”

“However” the Colonel sharply spoke over him with a look of irritation at being cut off, silencing him. “Kommandant Cox arrived on Arendelle with verigraphed orders from Field Marshal Jackson Davion himself. These orders give him the simulated rank of a Flag Officer and full command authority of the same, placing his authority explicitly as only second to Marshal Steiner-Davion while he is on Arendelle. In short” he concluded, “he is in charge Uncle” he finished before turning away from the suddenly red faced Count glaring at him.

“Thank you Colonel” Galen replied, deciding to tactfully ignore the noble who had inserted his foot into his mouth who dutifully seemed to smile and make approving noises and even a couple of stillborn attempts to applaud at his wisdom. “Now, I propose-”

“Sir” the other snapped a salute that Galen returned before the Colonel happily obeyed his orders to get out of the firing line as his red faced uncle continued to glare at him, picking up a handful of other militia officers who had gotten invitations to the now aborted ball and dinner and taking them with him.

“Now that we’ve sorted that out” Galen said, turning on the rest of the nobles and starting to issue orders in a tone that now brooked no arguments, “everyone who is not local, I need you to please stay out of the way -preferably by returning to your hotels or places of residence as soon as possible. Mister Brevik will organize transport as needed” he added with a glance and Kai nodded back quickly, already starting to work out the logistics in his mind. He couldn’t really do anything about the media packs outside screaming on every phone line at them for information and trying to interview every guest leaving about what happened, the unfortunate price of having a free press. But that was a problem for later.

“Everyone who is local, we have work to do. If we’re lucky” Galen continued “this storm will blow over and we can focus on first finding Elsa and Anna and then sorting this whole crisis out. But regardless, we’ll need disaster plans ready to execute tomorrow morning in case winter has come six months early. So I need all the senior local nobility to return to your landholds and be prepared to execute them. I will be leading a unit to sweep and recover both of the sisters - we’ll deploy within the next hour”.

“Kommandant, you can’t lead the search yourself - you need to stay here!” another Noble protested in mild shock, other confused faces around suggesting that some of the groups failed to understand why Galen had taken the steps he did to put himself at the top of the food chain …
only to walk away from the position immediately afterwards.
He decided not to point out it was clearly to keep them out of the way so he could do his job.
Still, the point was true that someone needed to be in charge of this unfolding mess...and it had to be someone who would be accepted.

“With respect Kommandant” Duke Iversen agreed - reluctantly- “you cannot lead the search and rescue effort. You are needed here. Work needs to start at once on possible disaster plans - this storm outside is going to cause no small amount of chaos even in the short term ... and if it isn’t stopped…” he left the thought hanging in a somewhat more ominous tone before shaking her head. “We need someone in charge to coordinate the Government response”.

“Your point is well taken Duke Iversen” Galen offered a nod that was almost an abbreviated bow as he recognized the preeminence of the ruler of Corona and its blood ties with the Arendell ruling family. “But I won’t be leaving the planet without leadership in place. Elsa’s High Council is already assembled upstairs to coordinate civilian responses and your younger niece, as it so happens, authorized a representative to manage the crisis with them, whom I also grant. Until either one of the Sisters returns - or Victor himself is medically fit to relieve us of course” he added.

Iversen nodded slowly at that as others exchanged looks, most seemingly waiting for him to make a decision. “If Anna has made such a decision, I trust her judgement” he agreed after a moment of thought - exchanging a glance with him that all but screamed ‘I hope’.

“Then in that case, may I present Sir Hans Westerguard of the Southern Isles” Galen replied, turning to gesture to the man standing next to him.

The response from half of assembled nobility was exactly as measured, calm and considered as Kai had been expecting.

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“How is he?” Kai Allard-Liao asked softly, looking at Victor sleeping on the bed on the other side of the glass wall, taken slightly aback by the number of medical devices attached to him as a number of medical personnel fussed about the bed. It had been just under an hour since the ‘event’ - as people had taken to calling it - and this was the first time he had been able to come down to the castle’s small hospital after Victor had been hustled in. While waiting he had found his way upstairs to the palace situation room taken over by the CID team to help the team there start to come to grips with the crisis, liaising with the 10th Lyran for them as the locals started to try and wrap their heads around the situation. A public announcement was due to be made within the hour to calm down people, but behind the scenes one department at a time Arendelle was moving onto a full disaster footing as data started to come in faster and faster. The unnatural weather was continuing to expand at an impossibly steady rate, now reaching hundreds of kilometers from Arendelle City and approaching areas that rarely got any snow even in the middle of winter. Only the fact that it was late at night locally had kept things reasonably calm in the capital, but the rest of the planet so far unaffected was looking on with no small amount of shock and chatter over the impossible events.

So it would really help if Victor could get off his ass and onto Vid screens sometime tomorrow morning … which didn’t look likely to happen.

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“I need your help” he muttered under his breath, earning a look in the reflection in the glass that told him not to go there and he accordingly changed tracks as he turned back to face her. “Anyway, I uh, I need your help”.

“Stable” Diedre noted from behind him, her reflection glancing up from a noteputer she was working on before noticing his focus and expanding on her two syllable answer. “He’s in no danger Kai. The impact was hard but we dealt with that quickly enough and stopped the swelling before anything happened. Thanks to the toys from NAIS he’ll be more or less back on his feet by some time later tomorrow and back to full strength within a day after that” she said, signing off whatever paperwork she had been working on with a stylus and putting the noteputer to the side to stand up and stretch in a highly distracting way in that incredibly sleek dress. “Letting him sleep this off lets the technology do its work”.

“And stops him giving any more relationship advice” he muttered under his breath, earning a look in the reflection in the glass that told him not to go there and he accordingly changed tracks as he turned back to face her. “Anyway, I uh, I need your help”.
The good Doctor simply raised an eyebrow at that.
Kai refused to let himself be intimidated by the look.

…

Oh who the hell was he kidding, of course he was intimidated by the look.

“Harrison is still pulling the data together, but the situation outside is deteriorating - quickly, much more than the Media realize yet” he started to explain. “The fjord, the harbor and even some of the coastal waters have frozen over and the impacted area is continuing to expand. Snow is coming down all over the damn place and the storm front is expanding. The other side of the Fjord from the castle is already near impassable trying to send people after the sisters. Seems like even a little snow is enough to shut it down for Mechs and Vehicles to move up and past -”

“You’re sending Mech’s after Elsa and Anna?” Diedre looked at him like he was crazy and/or an idiot. “Just send people on the ground after them Kai! They can’t have gotten far!”

Kai shook his head once grimly.

"Slight problem there; no-one bothered to pack arctic warfare gear for our infantry” he replied admitted, fighting the urge to roll his eyes at the SNAFU that gave the 10ths provisional Combat Command two complete sets of desert warfare gear in the rushed ad-hoc splitting off of part of the unit as a Bodyguard for Victor.

He could almost hear the Cetti Hussars laughing their asses off at them from here.

“... and cold weather gear. And Galen isn’t going to risk deploying people who could easily get bogged down and trapped”.

He then realized he had started to pace and forced himself to stop and face Diedre.

“So, Galens deploying our Battle Armor to sweep the other side of the fjord. But we’ve only got four Standard suits and there is an awful lot of ground to cover. Cloud cover and fog have shut down any air recon but if Anna and Elsa made it past the immediate tangle, which is likely according to the locals if they kept moving, the area becomes a bit more open. There’s quite a few hunting cabins and lodges nobles use in the winter that -we hope- Elsa is heading for and Anna following her to. So the plan is to cross the fjord on a bridge about a dozen klicks upstream and spread out to sweep all of those locations with APC's, then broaden the search from there if we don’t find them - bringing in air and extra ground support as it becomes available”.

“Alright” she shrugged after digesting the plan. “But what does this have to do with me?”

“We … err, need a Doctor for the MASH” he confessed, hastily pushing on as her eyes narrowed. “Elsa may or may not be able to deal with the cold. Anna I’m sure can’t and in either case neither of them are dressed for this. We’re talking risks of exposure, frostbite - and whatever else might happen as they stumble around in the dark. We’re going to need someone with us who can deal with the situation if the worst happens”.

“I retired from the AFFC Galen” she pointed out, crossing her arms. “If you need a Doctor, take González!”

“González” Kai jerked his head past the glass wall to where the Doctor could be seen with several other staff around Victor’s bed, “won’t leave Victor. I think Curatis would shoot him if he even tried, he is the serving chief medical officer of the command after all and can hardly abandon his patient”.

“Then find someone else, surely the militia has field surgeons?” she insisted.

“Some yes. But none of whom have a fraction of the experience you do and, frankly speaking,
none of them are in your league” he paused for a second feeling slightly taken aback at her resistance to his request. “Victor is in safe hands - he doesn’t need you. But there are two terrified young women who are the key to ending this … whatever this is” he fumbled for a description for a moment before pushing on, “fleeing into a flash-winter who might. And if I know you at all, I know that you would never walk away from people who genuinely need your help when we’re on the clock…”

That earned him a flare in her eyes … but it was not anger. It was something else he couldn’t put his finger on.

“Kai, I-” she started to try and explain - only for a sudden musical chiming to break in and her eyes to snap to a small cell phone that was merrily ringing and vibrating slowly across the desk she had just left. Her eyes darted back and forth for a second before she turned back, picked it up and after a quick examination of the number there she then glanced back at him.

“I have to take this - wait here” she all but ordered him and with that she stalked off into a tiny little office off to the side and shut the door, leaving him alone.

“I’ll uh…” he blinked and glanced around the empty room feeling nonplussed, “wait here” he agreed lamely.

With nothing better to do, he turned back to glare at Victor for springing his ex on him as a surprise. The bastard simply continued being happily unconscious and ignoring him.

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“It’s me” Diedre said as soon as the door was closed and she opened her small phone, tension leaking into her voice against her will at the expected/unexpected call. “Is everything okay?”

“Everything is fine here” the familiar voice on the other end of the line came back, calm and reassuring and causing her shoulders to slump slightly in relief. “David went to sleep several hours ago without a fuss, I just thought you would want to know”.

“I did, thank you” she smiled faintly as she leaned against the tiny desk in the small office, some tension coming out of her at the news that her son was safe and well. “I’m sorry I haven’t called Fai. There are … some things going on around here that have held me back”. 

“So I heard - the local media is going crazy right now Doctor Lear. Someone just leaked some footage of the Duchess freezing a fountain in the courtyard with her bare hands - no-one can really believe it, but then the state of emergency come through and reports of the militia and 10th Lyran Guards mobilizing … well, there are a lot of confused news people trying to figure out what happened”.

“Great” Diedre muttered to herself, knowing how quickly things could spin out of control in a crisis when the media was ‘helping’, having been through more than a few herself. But how did you prepare the world for something like this?

“Any news about … Prince Victor?” she asked carefully.

“The media are searching for answers right now and crossing back and forth to their teams outside the palace, but it sounds like the people who really know what is going on are out of contact … hang on … the vid’s now saying that Victor Steiner-Davion was … my God! The Duchess attacked him with her powers?” Fai asked, sounding appropriately aghast as the news broke.

“Not exactly” she answered, before deciding to not even try and explain it all over the phone, hoping that the people in charge were going to go live quickly before the rumors exploded out of control. “But Victor is at least for now out of the equation. And with Elsa fleeing into the wilderness, a bit of a power vacuum has been behind”.

“But she has a sister does she not? Should not she step in as acting Duchess?”.

“Yes, but Anna ran after her sister. Now they’re both out in the middle of this snowstorm” she sighed before lowering her voice slightly. “Kai and Galen are preparing to go after them both,
they want to bring them back safely and sort all this out”. She hesitated for second before pressing on. “And they want me to go with them as the sisters may need - will probably need- medical attention and the 10ths duty doctor is tied up watching Victor”.

“Then you may be assured my Lady that your Son will be safe until you return” Fai confirmed without hesitation, but with absolute surety. “You have my word no harm shall come to him”.

Diedre looked at her phone for a moment as if stung by the response slightly taken aback by the way Fai was so … sure … she was going to head out … and do exactly what she had sworn she never would.

Her late father had been away so often when she was a very young child. Off Fighting Hanse Davion’s wars and then running off to Solaris where he had eventually gotten killed … by Kai’s father as it so happened.

She had sworn when she had first held her son in her arms that she would not be the same. That he would always come first and she would always be there. That her service to the AFFC was done with honor and she would never head back there again.

Her resentment at her father so often leaving to serve Hanse Davion was thrown into sharp relief as she suddenly found herself trapped in the same fork of obligations. She had always dismissed as him choosing the glory life over family life and his responsibilities as a parent-

“Doctor Lear - is there a problem?” Fai suddenly cut into her thoughts on the phone. “Do you need anything from here before leaving?”

“No Fai” she replied as she leaned against the edge of the desk, a hand reaching up to her hair and running through it briefly, a bitter sort of brief laugh escaping her as she did so at a surge of guilt over the fact that she had been actually considering sitting this one out. “I’m just wondering how selfish a person I am for actually thinking about denying Galen’s plea for helping people in great danger, so I can go home to my son who is in no danger..”

“With respect Doctor, that doesn’t make you selfish, it makes you a mother” the other calmly corrected her down the line. “Your child is your first responsibility - as is proper - and it is understandable that you first look to his safety, no matter who is looking after him”.

“So if I then abandon my Son to go running off with ‘the boys’ instead of coming home, what does that make me then?” she snorted with again the image of her father walking out the door over and over carrying his kit bag and neurohelmet coming to the fore.

“Firstly, wrong because if you trust me, then you’re not abandoning him” Fei rebuked her in a way that among other employers would probably be grounds to start looking for a new job. “Second, it makes you who you are; a healer who goes to save the lives of those in need; someone your son will look up to with great pride in the future. And finally it makes you a loyal friend who stands by those who stood with her, when their need is great and they ask for your help. A friend whom I am confident had already made her decision before I called, no matter how hard it had been”.

Diedre was silent for a moment - but it was entirely down to her coping with the sudden surge of affection for the young woman who had become part of her family since she had shown up one night back on Odell as a last minute replacement babysitter, proving so damn effective she had made her an offer to be the permanent one on the spot. And then hired her on as a permanent nanny. Especially after it turned out that the young Capellan woman from the Sarna March was working her way across the Crucis March on a trip to see the Inner Sphere, taking on jobs here and there. When Diedre had pointed out she was about to leave for the new Periphery March via the Crucis March, Fai Mulan had all but jumped at the chance to come with them, becoming the third member of their family, almost like a kid sister most of the time.

And damn her, she was even right this time.

She was a Doctor.

There were people who needed her help - and it was utterly unworthy to try and use her Father as an excuse to fail to do what was right.

“Thanks Fai” she instead sighed into the phone. “As always, for everything. I’ll be in touch as soon as I can”.

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“We’ll be waiting Doctor Lear” the other confirmed and with that Dedre snapped her phone shut, taking a deep cleansing breath to centre herself. Her son was safer than most other people on this planet and Kai and Galen needed her help. Time to go to work.

Kai was still waiting outside and he turned to face her with an expectant look that said without saying that he knew what decision he had made. It was both annoying … and oddly endearing that he had such confidence in her.

“Tell me at least you have something more suitable than this for me to wear?” she asked with only the slightest sigh in her voice and completely unsurprisingly, Kai simply smiled and reached back to pound his fist on the door to the room twice, causing it at once to open and an AFFC trooper to pass a kit bag through, which Kai turned to dump on the table in front of her. Dearie opened it to find that inside were indeed standard AFFC medic fatigues, a heavy field jacket and standard field webbing, identical to the gear she had worn during the Clan War and from memory she started to pull it out and sort through it.

“Welcome back to the AFFC” he smiled just a little too smugly.

It pleased her that it took less than ten seconds to remove the field uniform package neatly tied up inside before throwing the now empty bag back into his face with exactly sufficient force to send him crashing to the ground as she stalked back into the private office to change.

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“Reactor; Online”.

Her real name had been Beatrice McAlister. But to every Mechwarrior who had sat in a cockpit since the first Mackie had walked off the production line, her name was - and would always be - ‘Bitchen Betty’.

An engineer in the Terran Hegemony’s advanced research projects agency, Beatrice had been behind much of the original coding for the Mackie voice command interface system, another one of the less well known innovations that had gone into service with the advent of Terras new superweapon. And when the time came to provide the voice synth profile for the mech computer to talk back, she had simply provided her own voice as a matter of practically, the super-classified research lab being somewhat short on voice actors.

Thus in a short space of time, Beatrice was busy chiding, exasperating and otherwise yelling at the first generation of Terran Hegemony Mechwarriors as they had unleashed their new superweapon against the Inner Sphere. Quickly enough the other Inner Sphere powers had started to produce their own Mackie clones from massive espionage and salvage efforts and in the rush to get their own onto the field, most of the software had been simply copied, spreading Betty’s ‘joy’ around the Inner Sphere.

It hadn’t taken too long for someone to change it of course. The Lyran Commonwealth had been the first to modify the voice interface, using a synth profile from their ‘beloved’ Archon Alistair Marsden Steiner after he had taken issue with the voice warning him he was overheating his mount, the update patch deployed to inspire his troops as they had gone into battle against the Draconis Combine.

“Sensors; Online”.

The patch had, of course, become legendary as a complete disaster. Despite only changing that one thing as far as the engineers could tell, Battlemechs had fallen over on power up as their Gyros seized up, weapons gone into diagnostic modes when activated and in one case, activating an ejection seat during a marching out parade right in front of the theater Commander on Buckminster. The Mechwarrior had landed mere meters away and, with an astonishingly straight face, had saluted his CO and begged leave to report that the Archon was trying to kill him. Techs had rapidly changed the software back and again the Commonwealth's Battlemechs had become powerful weapons of war, with attempts to rectify the bugs mostly successful, but never seeming to quite go away - thus leading to everyone in the field simply keep the older voiceprint package
installed and suffer Betty bitching at them.

Very similar stories had come out of the next generation of design teams building the first ‘local’ Battlemechs in all the great powers. No matter how much programmers and engineers insisted it made absolutely no sense, mysterious glitches and gremlins seemed to emerge as soon as the voiceprint pattern was changed. A massive superstition had thus become entrenched in Mechwarriors everywhere over the centuries that you did not mess with Betty, even if the rest of the voice command software was now light years beyond those first examples. Not even the Clans had dared to change said voiceprint (well, at least not after the first Prototype Woodsman had exploded when Nicholas Kerensky’s voiceprint had declared ‘Reactor online’), leading to the joke that no matter who you swore allegiance to; all Mechwarriors bowed before Betty.

“Weapons; Offline, safety interlock engaged. All systems Nominal”.

Galen smiled to himself as Betty gave him permission to ‘come out and play’, a counterpoint surge in the pitch of his Magna 260 fusion engine sending energy racing through his Crusaders myomer bundles. A final glance out his cockpit narrow earned a thumbs up from his chief tech, followed by a salute that Galen returned with aplomb as rotating yellow lights started accompanied by a klaxon to put everyone in the dropships Mech bay on notice that if they didn’t want to get stepped on like a bug, it was time to get out of the way.

His grin broadened slightly as he saw that across from him, Yen-Lo-Wang was already walking out of its bay with a fluidity in its motions that said a very special Mechwarrior was at its controls. Kai had been just that little bit faster in his pre-walk checks than he - although to be fair he had needed to first have a chat with the local ComStar Precentor. Kai with his usual foresight had pulled the man out of the crowd, correctly anticipating that he’d have messages to send about this whole situation. The Precentor had been happily no-nonsense and professional compared to most of the rest of ComStar people he had dealt with in his life, something he put down to his long service in the ComGuards.

As for what was in the message however …

Galen had toyed with the idea of sending an uttermost priority message, which would mean the HPG station would power up and bulldoze a message now across the network to New Avalon but had ultimately decided against it. While he certainly had the authority to do that, simply using the normal transmission window in six hours would have a message on New Avalon four hours after that with the ‘very high priority’ tag. Especially as such ‘damn the cost, they need to know now’ messages tended to be a message in of themselves.

On the order of ‘wake up the First Prince, his staff and start the coffee machine’.

Galen had felt a little leary about following such a wake up call with a message saying essentially ‘Oh your son was almost killed by an ice witch on a planet that may or may not be about to sink into an eternal winter’. Accordingly, he had left his initial report brief and kept entirely to the facts at hand, with a postscript that either he or Victor would send a follow up report within a day. He had also sent - and MIIO would surely be charged a pretty penny because of it - a medium resolution vid of Elsa’s actions in the courtyard as well as her flight across the fjord. Less to give NAIS something to work with and more to ensure that High Command didn’t first ask the entirely logical questions of ‘What the hell is Cox smoking … and where can we get some?’ after reading his words.

Shaking off the thoughts, Galen concentrated as he stepped out through the always seeming too small hatch, moving down the ramp and breaking into a jog as he cleared the dropship, automatically turning to follow the mech sized footprints in the snow Kai had left in his wake. He blinked and the smile on his face at being back in a Mech faded as his mind caught up with what he was seeing, swinging his torso around to take in the view as he engaged his compressed holographic HUD … and felt a chill go down his back that had nothing to do with his cooling vest.

Only a bit over an hour ago the grounds of the palace had been covered in perfectly kept grass and hedge boxes, a summers delight with flowers and trees gloriously spread out across the grounds in a perfection of color and life. Now, in his Mechs low-light vision mode, the entire grounds that
had once bustled were silent and muted, with snow falling to thicken the layer that had already coated the grounds a silent white, a low mist rolling in from the icy fjord behind the bulk of the Barbarossa.

My God. It's gotten this bad already?

Galen glanced ‘back’ via the compressed holographic display, the imposing line of hills backed by the massive blade shaped ‘North Mountain’ all now also seemed to sport significantly more snow along their peaks, with a constant spray of flakes still falling from the sky and what seemed to be somewhat worse weather up in the higher foothills.

Something about that massive knifelike mountain drew his attention and his mind flashed back for a moment to that moment with Elsa - Duchess Jorgensson that is - on the balcony where she had for just one nanosecond looked almost longingly at the distant vista of isolated mountains and hills before the mask of the Duchess had fallen back over her face...

Shaking his head to bring himself back to the present, Galen glanced at his TACMAP. He and Kai were moving quickly to join the MASH track outside the palace where Kai’s ex girlfriend was swiftly putting herself back on the top of the food chain. Hauptmann Sanderlin was leading the convoy from the militia base in his Raven, which might just prove the edge he needed to find the girls with its advanced recon technology. With him was some militia Mechwarrior named Flynn whose Javelin was nothing terribly impressive, but he was very familiar with the terrain in the area making him a natural forth for their lance, as they escorted the dozen or so APCs carrying their infantry search teams from the spaceport. On the opposite side of the fjord, four green transponder signals showed where their four Inner Sphere Standard suits were scouring the ground where both girls had vanished from sight, but when placed against the sheer size of the search area...

Galen exhaled heavily. He had never wanted responsibility on this scale … but that was irrelevant. He was an officer in the AFFC and his CO had made his wishes clear. More than that, his friend had placed his trust in him - and he would be damned if he let him down.

So he ruthlessly narrowed his focus, leaving Westergard and the High Council to deal with the planet while he did what he was best at; running to the ‘sound of the guns’ - or at least the biggest concentration of trouble for a few hundred light years.

There were two people out there who needed his help. One, a remarkable young noble with incredible abilities to defy reality, overreact immediately and cause trouble on a planetary scale while sending FedCom princes flying to the floor.

The other was her sister, the Duchess of Arendelle.

Kicking his Crusader into a run with Kai and his Centurion effortlessly keeping pace alongside, Galen charged head on into the storm.

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This is also FINALLY the last filler chapter, with everything signed off after Elsa just blew everything wide open.

Now we'll have the fun next chapter of WTF Ice Castles showing up, Letting it Go, sisters who redefine the term ‘determinator’, Reindeers proven clearly to be better than people and of course bigass jerks with a secret heart of gold, ComStar technicians wondering why chanting isn't working like it usually does and proof that Clan Wolfs ancient scientists were actually lazy SOBs.

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