

# Episode Fifteen:

## Between Worlds

*My mind to your mind...  
My thoughts to your thoughts...*

- 1960s Sci-Fi television program

*“It was precisely in those things that Michael has kept closest to himself, the things he tried to make least obvious, that made the greatest impact, on the war, and on each of us. Every thing I had thought I had known about him was to be proven wrong, and yet all the questions – all the little pieces that didn’t quite fit into what I had thought I knew, all the figures that wouldn’t add up, suddenly began to make sense. And I really had no idea. When that first came out, I thought it couldn’t get any weirder. Order me another drink, Pete, and I’ll tell you how much weirder it got. . .”*

- Jeanne Ducasse, in an interview with the author, at the pub “Old Soldiers”, 2059.

March 4, 2043

Michael and Jeanne were radioed into the Nantes region with warnings of caution to get in and on the ground with some degree of haste. The Invid were on the move, but were only assumed to be sending several patrols up towards the northern coastline. Michael felt an uneasiness welling up in the pit of his stomach as he worried about the uncertain fates of Roger, Laurie, Lihra, Blake, and Milo. His people were scheduled to come in later, and had to be careful. The uneasiness was accompanied with a lingering shock from his experience with Cipolla, and the near-destruction of Ohlfantoma, and how

the trauma had affected himself and Lihra above all others. . . in ways the others couldn't understand, even if Michael had dared tell them.

“There it is,” Jeanne's cold voice announced over the tac-net.

They could see the domineering cathedral of Nantes still intact through the previous Robotech Wars, and the current Invid occupation; it loomed over its environs casting a pall over the disorganized smoke spewing sprawl that made up this town. In the cathedral's large shadow, Austin and Ducasse noted a large hodge-podge of tents and other hastily thrown up enclosures stretching towards a robust cluster of French oak trees.

Landing lights winked on and off on the ground, and Austin chimed back, “Ladies first, Jeanne.”

“Copy, I'm going down,” Ducasse said in compliance as she started down on her final approach. Once the planes were on the ground and covered up under the rather large population of oak, Austin stood watch as Jeanne outlined several technicians on how to attend to their planes. Michael left Jeanne for a moment or two to retrieve his personal gear out of his Alpha's storage compartment when he heard a familiar voice declare, “They'll let any riffraff into this neighborhood, won't they?”

“Willem!” Jeanne squealed as she ran up to him and lavished a rather ardent hug on his tall figure, rain cape blowing slightly in the wind. Secretly, she'd always found his dashing figure and gentlemanly comportment quite attractive. He accepted her display of affection before gracefully extricating himself from her grasp. The lingering smile on his face, however, hinted that this little moment had not escaped his notice.

“Lieutenant,” Willem de Vries acknowledged. “It’s good to see you again.” And as Michael was approaching de Vries and Ducasse, the Dutch general offered up, “And you, Michael, you look good...”

Michael took his hand, shaking it firmly. “Flattery will get you everywhere, eh, ‘Clean’ Willie?” Michael quipped, knowing that de Vries hated the nickname Milo had coined for him a decade before.

“It seems that your Private Swift’s lips are as loose as his morals,” de Vries noted. “I’ve got a jeep double-parked outside, and we’ve got a meeting convened for sixteen hundred and thirty hours. We’re getting guff from the Burgundians, and the factions from Sardinia and Barcelona want a private audience with you and are not divulging anything as to the reasons behind their respective requests. Louise-Marie has got more intel concerning the towers for you, Ducasse, and the rest of the Grand Alliance military strategists to assimilate.”

“Good...” Jeanne acknowledged.

“Any word on a selection of the final launching site?” Michael demanded. He was already pleased that the machinery was in place attending to the details of this war. Intel was being gathered; supplies, men, and resources were all being allocated. And he had a head start on some of the political scuttlebutt he’d have to address. Michael found de Vries’ briefing to be right on target, and his wave of worries subsided. *Anyone who could hang with Milo would have to be on the ball, Michael thought to himself. Putting him at the forefront of our efforts here was a good suggestion on Roger’s part.*

“The Lady’s operatives are working on that one. Right now, we’ve narrowed it down to three spots. The front-runner is at the mouth of the Loire. It’s close to us, and

there's plenty of operating space with some decent cover. Then, there's an old and partially bombed out Southern Cross base near Brest that has decent facilities, but is reputed to attract the errant Invid patrol for just that reason. And since Brittany is Tirolian-controlled, and they're not too keen on hosting the offensive within their borders, that's out. Despite your best efforts, they remain a paranoid bunch and perhaps fear the kind of treatment that the Zentraedi suffered after letting the resistance into their midst. We can count on their help in the offensive, but I think even this would be stretching the bounds of their dedication to our cause. Although negotiations are still ongoing, I don't hold out much hope in having that facility at our disposal. Lastly, we're looking at Aquitaine, near the mouth of the Garonne. More seclusion, but less operating space." de Vries explained.

Jeanne nodded while soaking in all the activity here underneath the cover of the sheltering trees. Crews were restocking various mecha with both armaments and Protoculture cells, and in some cases the trio saw detailed repairs taking place. Artificial canopies had been erected and were draped over the treetops in large stretches secreting the diverse collection of mecha from the light of day. It was noticeably hotter in this man-made enclosure, and during just five minutes exposure to the sweltering heat, Michael and Jeanne found themselves sweating profusely. They walked by Louise-Marie's meticulously assembled squadron of pilots for most of the last remaining AGACs in Europe, attending to their high-performance transformable mecha. Michael issued a nod of respect in their direction.

Jeanne gasped when they rounded a bend in this labyrinthine conglomeration. She came face to face with the imposing and menacing outline of a Bioroid. Austin and de

Vries paused to marvel over the well-sculpted behemoth. Michael put a comforting hand on Jeanne's shoulder perhaps sensing that his confidante had some residual uneasiness concerning her most recent encounter with the clones.

"Come on, Lieutenant. Daylight's burning, and we've got lots to do," Michael's honey-toned voice urged.

Jeanne nodded and followed in their wake as de Vries blazed a trail towards their awaiting transportation. Willem drove like a madman, leaning heavily on the bleating horn of the vehicle as it covered the two-mile distance from landing site to the cathedral. On the way, he elaborated further upon the current state of affairs to his attentive audience, yelling at the top of his voice to drown out the earsplitting rumble of the jeep's overworked engine,

"We've got rooms for you two in a country estate nearby, where most of the high-ranking delegates will be staying. I wanted to keep you in one wing with all our own delegations in the other. I suppose that it still might be of some use as I think most of the individual meetings and requested audiences with you can be handled there. But with the safety issue, our security experts felt that the estate allows us to control all points of access to your person."

"Sounds good to me," Michael trumpeted back approvingly. He felt the need to wash away the gypsy life he'd led during the last fortnight, and the rooms set aside for them might just do the trick. After all, he did require a little privacy in which he could hone the presentation of his speech to the assembled delegations. Once he had written it, that was. He was having a rather hard time coming up with what to say. Not with the extra voice in his head, one more than usual, keeping him distracted.

They pulled up to a side entrance where two stoic looking guards stood watch over it. One of them opened the door for Austin and his entourage; Michael waved Jeanne and de Vries by as he stopped to say something to the sullen faced men. Willem watched him from the doorway and surmised, *He's already working the gathering like a seasoned pro. As much as he complains about having to press the flesh, there's a small part of him that craves it. There's a little showmanship buried under that military facade, somewhere.* The former smuggler silently cued Austin to bring his conversation to a close by holding up his own pocket watch, and dangling it about until it caught Michael's attention.

Michael nodded slightly, said his farewells, and marched inside.

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By the time the rest of the group had arrived in Nantes, Michael and Jeanne were already off again. Another mission, they were told. The conferees continued to meet, and the shaky alliance seemed to have been cemented by the days Michael and Jeanne had worked amongst the delegates, but things were still in a state of flux, and there were more than a few inquiries as to where they had gone off to, and when they would return – questions Michael's comrades found themselves unable to answer. Still, the setting and accommodations were pleasant, and they were all afforded the opportunity to clean up and bathe for the first time in several days, but their idleness was quickly turning to boredom.

“Where the Hell is Austin?” Milo demanded. “I thought this meeting was his baby, that he was supposed to be here. Do you really think they'll take his leadership

seriously if he just darts off again?” No one was really certain to whom Milo was raging, and most simply assumed it was to the empty air.

“You don’t think. . .” Laurie began.

“He’s fine,” Blake offered. “Jeanne radioed to say they’re okay, but she wouldn’t say anymore.”

That wasn’t what Laurie was worried about. She hadn’t shared Michael’s bed since their night in Ohlfantoma, and even then, she could see that his mind was elsewhere, that another woman was in his thoughts. It would never occur to her that Lihra was that other woman, and her presence there was more literal than imaginative. Lihra realized this, of course, but kept silent.

Indeed, Lihra’s silence had begun to trouble the group as much as Jeanne’s and Michael’s absence. She’d barely spoken a word to anyone in the group since Michael departed to exact justice from the traitor Cipolla.

And now they were here, seeing the culmination of their recent efforts to build a coalition against the Invid. Much of the coming plan was known: they were to take on the Atlantis Hive. The Invid forces were to be drawn off by the illusion of massive simultaneous diversionary attacks on the various hives within Europe. To minimize the degree of reprisals against friendly populations, these feints would especially be concentrated against those hives and outposts in the territories of the Invid’s human allies, like Hungary (and if the reprisals against Invid-allied civilians turned the populations against their pro-Invid puppets, so much the better).

To this end, the heaviest mecha Europe could bring to bear, including some old UN Army Destroids, their missile payloads refit with battlefield micro-nukes to make the

threat seem greater, had been dispatched on flatbed tracked transports, under conventional military escort, to camouflaged positions outside the Invid hives' primary defensive patrol ranges. The plan was simple, but impossible until Michael had proposed it, if for no other reason than that the mecha - and probably the men - assigned to the diversionary tactics - were almost universally believed among the nations contributing them to be without hope of return.

Michael didn't see it that way. And he didn't want the men so assigned to see it that way, either. So that's where he had gone; though informing his group had been left to Louise-Marie von Schönberg, who had just entered the common room in which Michael's followers had gathered.

Louise-Marie looked them over briefly, before her attention turned to Lihra. Michael had entrusted the young Saxon ruler with the secret of Lihra's identity. Her reaction had not been quite as harsh as Milo's, but she made her disapproval clear to Michael. The thought of a telepathic enemy officer in the midst of their planning for the upcoming offensive caused her significant anxiety: even if she were kept from the actual information, who knew how much she could read from their minds, Michael's assurances that Lihra couldn't actually read human minds notwithstanding. It was no more comforting that Michael refused to answer, when she had asked him how he knew that Lihra couldn't do this, or how he would know if she tried to contact the Invid. But so far Michael had done everything she could ask of him, and borne with grace the utterly unreasonable expectations she and her allies were placing upon him. All she could do was continue to trust, despite her misgivings.



Louise-Marie noticed that Lihra was returning her mistrustful stare, and averted her eyes. Looking back towards Laurie, Milo, and Roger (Blake, though barely her junior, appeared to be beneath her notice), she finally addressed them. “I’m sorry I’ve been so close about where Michael’s been. Suffice it to say he’s been clearing up some of the preparatory details back to the east, and if everything turns out as we expect, he’ll be back before the start of the conference next week.”

Milo sank back into the luxuriant chair into which he had planted himself, kicked his feet up on the plush footstool, and sighed in relaxation. “So we get to take some time off until he returns, right?”

The young duchess didn’t even hesitate, turning her gaze directly at Milo. “Not exactly.”

Milo grit his teeth. *I hate it when people say that. . .*

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Once again back on the northern coast of France, Milo was packing up the last of his gear into his Cyclone when Roger came running up to him with some last minute instructions and words of advice. Swift was snapping into place the last of his CVR-3 armor, and checking out his mecha’s Protoculture cells under the watchful and intent stares of Grondahl Tul and Laurie. Roger handed him a small plastic case.

“The mine schematics are inside accessible by disc, Milo,” Roger informed. “The demolition unit working the Chunnel has already been radioed to expect you by sundown. They are holding at their current location.”

Milo nodded, “With Grondahl’s help, I was able to put together a decent set of tools for the job ahead. I should be fine, Captain.”

Roger’s war-seasoned face was etched with additional concern as he spoke, “I was just glad the Saxons sent a recon unit into it on the offhand chance that Cipolla had more damage than we’d thought. And I expect when he mined the thing, he anticipated anyone using it coming from Britain – so I’m hoping it won’t be as tricky coming in from the other way.”

“Have we got a back-up?” Grondahl demanded. He had been paying close attention to the conversation but only now took an active role in the discourse.

“Yes. I’ve already set up a small fleet of channel runners for moving the supplies on the likely chance that the Chunnel isn’t made safe for our passage in time for us. Our timetable is quite strict. The fleet is traveling light, meaning they will have to fuel up on each side of the Channel. I’ve already sent word to get the fuel stores on the English side ready for their use. We’ll have good weather for the rest of the week. Milo, that gives you two days to assess the situation and report. Understood?”

“Yes, Captain,” Milo said, in a sobering tone. He’d never paid much attention to military protocol, but in front of Grondahl, Swift resorted to their version of military protocol just to keep up appearances. Michael still might need a little image bolstering for damage control with the Zentraedi, and in any event, Tul-ranked Zentraedi were bred to be intimidating.

“May fortune smile upon your courage, Private,” Grondahl.

“I appreciate your concern, sir. But I’ve done this sort of thing before. I should be fine,” Milo replied confidently. He shook the departing Zentraedi’s hand firmly before

turning his attention to Roger and to Laurie who up until this point had silently watched the proceedings with a keen interest.

“Good sell, Swift,” Roger appraised.

“It’s no snow-job, Roger. I’ve done a dozen mining jobs back in the day, and two of ‘em were sewer tunnel networks. . .” Milo admitted ruefully. “I don’t anticipate this being too different. I’ll know where to look. He’s used modified limpet mines, the bastard! Probably got a web-work of infrared rays as his trigger, and if he’s really on his mark, he might even be staggering the devices.”

“Is there anything you didn’t do as a mercenary?” Roger demanded.

“You don’t want to know half of the things that I’ve done, Captain. Most sleepless nights, I don’t want to know, either. But at times like these, those dark days seem to have had a purpose,” Milo ruminated aloud.

“Good luck, Milo. Just do the job, and don’t try to be a hero. It’s not your style,” Roger admonished. “We’ll see you on the other side.”

Pike and Swift could see Blake Hammond running up to them carrying a small package under his right arm. He skidded to a halt before the conspirators and in Milo’s acknowledging nod found sufficient reason to speak up.

“Here’s that modification you wanted, Milo,” Blake informed. “Didn’t have time to test it thoroughly. I needed more time with the seals.”

“You did your best kid. Don’t worry about it. I’ll make do, one way or another,” Milo vowed.

“It takes up one missile slot in the chest cavity. And you can access it as a sub-function of the life support menu,” Hammond said.

“Sounds good, Blake,” Milo said seemingly pleased.

“What are we talking about?” Roger demanded.

“I had Blake whip me up a little something special, just in case Cipolla or his goons planted something particularly complex - an auxiliary oxygen tank built into the chest missile launcher. How long?”

“Maybe two hours,” Blake mumbled.

“But you’ve already got a filter to deal with gassing, and some minutes of in-built oxygen to get clear,” Roger contradicted, alluding to the standard Cyclone specifications.

“I know. But I might need more, depending on where these mines have been planted. They might go for more than just a standard cave-in or gas job, I’ll need more air,” Swift explained.

“You’ve packed up the sub-environmental suit,” Blake asked.

“Nope. I’ve radioed ahead. One will be waiting for me,” Milo said.

“I guess you’ve thought of just about everything, Private,” the half-Zentraedi youth assessed. “Don’t worry, I’ll take good care of your plane.”

“I know you will. You behave yourself, Hammond, or the next time I see you, I’m gonna kick your butt!” Milo warned, as he lightly tagged the kid’s right shoulder with a mock punch. Blake nodded before leaving.

Roger reminded Milo, “You’ll meet up with the supply train on the other side once your mission is successfully completed.”

“Right. I’ll see this sorry lot in France...on the coast. Tell Mason to behave, and send the boss and Jeanne my best. I might drop out of contact once I get in deep, so don’t worry.”

His lighthearted banter failed to undercut the tension in the air between the Southern Cross soldier and his former commanding officer. Milo was being sent out to die under the Captain's watch. . . again. Pike knew the precarious work of a demolition unit, and the fact that their calling often entailed low success rates and conversely, high fatalities. Milo knew it, too. Perhaps, that made this whole mess easier for Roger to stomach. Pike issued Milo a nod of admiration, and walked away. That left Laurie behind, and the woman studied Milo's pensive face for any signs of softening before stepping forward to directly address him. "Milo," she began softly, holding out something in her hand. "Call it a belated birthday gift. . ."

"It's the thought that counts. . ." Milo had seen that Laurie was hurting, from missing Michael. He called it pity to himself, but he'd taken some small efforts to befriend her, though only now did it seem to be appreciated. He took the bundle of cloth from her outstretched slender hands. Milo unwrapped it, mildly curious at what lay within its concealing folds, only to find his harmonica, the one that he'd been looking for fruitlessly during the preceding fortnight. He'd assumed it stolen or lost in all the recent mayhem, and found himself glowering at Laurie, unhappy with the fact that she was responsible for its misappropriation.

"Read the inscription, Milo," she urged in soothing tones.

Milo continued his scowling, undaunted by her gesture of goodwill. He suspiciously brought the instrument to his lips and pounded out a few bars of the Robert Johnson offering 'Hellhound On My Trail.' The notes had balance and pitch that lingered on forlornly. It was **his**, alright. He flipped it over and read out the inscription:

*Occasions do not make a man either strong or weak, but they do show what he is...*

Swift smiled and tucked it away in one of Cyclone's storage compartments. He asked of his benefactor, "So what am I, Laurie?"

He reached for his helmet and put it on in one brusque motion.

"Someone with. . . potential," she whispered softly. "The potential to be much better than you ever thought possible."

Swift paused, and replied, "I'll see you on the other side, Laurie."

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Winter's grip on central Europe could be seen in the frost clinging to the treetops that formed a icy canopy above the woodlands stretching across the plains of eastern Bavaria. Michael looked languidly outside the windows in the door of the combat helicopter, watching the landscape roll by. It had been a mere four months since he had arrived on Earth in this region, and he could barely recognize the landscape, even from his superior point of vantage.

Jeanne sat silently next to him; he had not been particularly conversant, even taking into account the deafening din of the helicopter motor. She had begun to become concerned about him - he had seemed to have completely withdrawn into himself. He was performing in his job as well as ever, but there was no 'Michael' in Michael anymore. She had tried to ask him about it, but there really was no point. He only glared at her in response. Not glared, she thought. There was too much sadness and weariness in

his eyes, no anger anymore - not even against the injustices they were fighting to overthrow.

Suddenly he spoke. "If it's any comfort, Lihra agrees with you".

"What?"

"You were looking at me like you might a lost child. With pity. She thinks I deserve to be looked at like that right now."

Jeanne raised an eyebrow. "She's reading you right now?"

"We've been in constant contact since Ohlfantoma was destroyed. I've thought all her thoughts, and she mine. It's as if you split a brain's two hemispheres and stretched the corpus callosum: two halves of one mind, at the moment separated by almost three hundred miles. . ."

Michael looked off in the distance, as if lost in thought - though Jeanne had to wonder if his thoughts were his or Lihra's. "It's quite an interesting sensation - to be able to see with two pairs of eyes, hear with two pairs of ears. Not that there's much to see on Lihra's end. Louise-Marie has her confined to a plush bedroom. She's afraid Lihra will get wind of our mission plans. If she only knew, she'd have us both locked up. . . or shot."

Michael noted Jeanne's look of concern. "That's not a real threat. Lihra and I have complete access to each others' minds, but we can't parse everything that's in there. There's a lot of Invid gibberish in her thoughts: she says the same of the human babble that's in mine. For now, at least, she's no more able to make sense - even inadvertently - of much of what I know any more than I can bounce a message off her to the Regis. And I assure you, if I could do that, I'd keep at the Regis until she decided to leave Earth with

her whole horde just to get me out of **her** head. But I don't expect these barriers to last long, and neither does Lihra. Aside from the obvious security risks, even the Invid don't maintain this degree of prolonged contact. If we can't sever the connection soon, it'll be too late. Our individual natures are already beginning to pour into one another, and it's just a matter of time before there is no Michael, and there is no Lihra, any longer - even if the psychic bridge is broken."

"But how is all this possible?" Jeanne demanded. "She can't talk to or read any of us at all. How can this even happen?"

"There's nothing magical about Invid telepathy," Michael replied. "It's a purely electromagnetic form of communication - a biological radio. Invid are built this way. They have a natural range of a few miles, and they build booster stations into every hive and outpost. Normally it works like a wireless down-link. Somehow, our brains have wired themselves to do network parallel processing instead."

"As for why this happened to me," he continued, "and not, say, to you or Roger, is simple. . . " Michael looked upward, with a tinge of regret in his eyes. "I haven't been all factory-original parts for several years now. After I almost washed up after Dahlori-4, when I disappeared for a while, I volunteered to be. . . adjusted.

"It started innocently enough. R&D wanted me to help them unravel the whole Nous'gran-diel phenomenon, and since I was the only one with direct experience with one, they wanted my observations. Things moved far more quickly than anyone anticipated - mainly because we came across some genetic templates the Masters were using. They wanted to make their first human trial, but they figured it would kill the test subject. In my state of mind, that was just fine with me.



“Have you ever seen me ill since then? Where do you think my reflexes, my situational awareness, on the ground or in the air, come from? When was the last time you have seen me out of action for an injury for more than a couple of days? Remember when we fought Kane? How do you think I was able to get up and go out again after a blunt trauma like that, after he shot me in the chest armor with a rifle that powerful? How do you think I could paste the floors with someone the size of Milo when he tried to execute Lihra, or how I - unarmed - was able to fight Kane, himself a Nous-gran’diel and his nekode claws and come away unharmed? Yeah, I’ve had a lot of martial arts training, more since I was ‘upgraded’, but I’ve been superhuman by any measure for years now. Same goes for my piloting skills. I was good before, but we’ve kept my most recent performance reviews secret. I’ve got better reaction times than Max Sterling ever did at his best. Come now, Jeanne, ever since I went back on the flight line, haven’t I become just too perfect to be real? That’s the upgrade.

“Ever since the Masters first encountered the Invid, they were fascinated by their telepathy. Some might say obsessed. So they tried to copy it. For the last couple of centuries, they’ve developed and used telepathic bio-implants in their higher-status and wealthier citizens and clones. They hook up to the auditory and speech centers, and can divert their words into a rudimentary transmitter organ. They had more advanced versions that hooked to the optic nerve as well, and they implanted these in unwitting spies, seeing and hearing all that the spy could see and hear, and using something like post-hypnotic suggestion with the auditory component to control them. There’s a side-effect, though – because this implant was attached to the speech center, just as some people mutter under their breath as they think, the implant produces a low-level telepathic

murmur, even when the clone's not trying to communicate, that can be detected a few yards away.

“With the Nous-gran'diel, they wanted to take advantage of this. Their assassins weren't meant for use against the Invid or subject alien races. What good would an infiltration agent be there? No, they were used against dissidents, on governors of colonies considering breaking away, on Tiresian Senators interested in upsetting the Masters' order of things, on the pre-imperial Tirolian colonists they'd never managed to subjugate. And part of the plan when the Masters made the Nous'gran-diel was to give them give them the ability to listen in to these kinds of telepathic implants, especially to the murmurs of someone thinking to themselves. They wanted this extra ability, but they wanted it to operate on a more natural, visceral level, with much more sensitivity. With the proper discipline, they could turn off their telepathic noise, and listen to their target's.

“To do this, the Masters went back to the source. They developed an analogous human DNA code for the Invid telepathic system and grafted it into their Nous'gran-diel template, integrated at a higher level with the brain function than the old-style implants. Because we used the Masters' own templates for our program, without anyone knowing it was in there, I got that as part of the treatment. As a result – and though I'm sure the Masters never intended this - I am not simply able to communicate with the Invid, but in a peculiar sense, I am part Invid.

“But our own attempt at a 'super-soldier' program didn't work, not like it was intended, at least. The scientists tried it on two other guys. One went insane. The other's body literally shut down around him, and he died of organ failure in days. We only know something went wrong. We're not sure if it was our method, or just as likely that even the

Masters never worked the kinks out of the system. They probably didn't even have the incentive to, what with the Zentraedi being essentially disposable soldiers. Even my abilities didn't manifest immediately – and the telepathy didn't show up until we met Lihra.

“But before we could get very far, Admiral Hunter stepped in. You can imagine his reaction when he found out that we were developing a program that would make the REF - the last vestige of free humanity - something other than truly human? And then he - and we - found out that General Peckenham was the one pushing the program. Then politics got involved.

“I had wanted to tell you about this for a long time. But the whole program is at a clearance level substantially higher than the one you hold. I'm telling you now because I'm losing myself. If we can't split apart, Lihra and I will become something never seen before, and I don't know if that will be a friend or foe. Whatever happens, I - we - won't be able to serve anymore. I'm telling you because I need you to carry on the fight for me.

“Jeanne, I know you don't believe much in yourself as a leader. You're young, you tell yourself. You've never commanded - only directed. No one would take you seriously. That's all bollocks. You're every bit the leader I am, and you're every bit as capable of making the hard decisions when the time comes to do so. I need you to be prepared to roll up your sleeves and muscle your way in to this alliance, make it work, make it **win**.

“I can't say there isn't a part of me that isn't enjoying the possibility of what Lihra and I are becoming, of letting it see itself through. The intimacy is amazing. I'm seeing glimpses of worlds beyond anything I've imagined. When we're romantic kids, we

talk of soul-mates. This is that, but only in a completely real sense. Don't worry - there's no love in the sense you, or Laurie, are afraid of. But even if we break this thing, even if we split apart into our component selves again, nothing will be the same, not for us, not for the Invid, and not for humanity. We've established a window between worlds, through which the other can peer. We can see why the other fears us, and why we fear the other. And we see that this window between worlds is only a mirror.

“It's only our unique positions that make this possible. One, a human partly remade in the image of the Invid. The other an Invid almost completely remade in the image of a human. When the Regis transmuted Lihra, she didn't realize that something like me could exist – nor when the Masters created the Nous-gran'diel could they imagine that something like Lihra could exist. For the first time, completely by accident, there is an Invid mind and humanoid mind each with the ability to directly make contact with one another, and similar enough that communication is even possible.”

Jeanne stared sadly at him for a long while. “Michael, you know that despite myself, I like Lihra. But I don't want you to. . . merge with her. How do we stop this? I need you, and not just because I still feel - despite your encouragement, which I greatly appreciate - completely unready for the task before us, but because I love you. I haven't said it for a while, and since you started your dalliance with Laurie it's been inappropriate. But I'm not giving up on you; I may not be your 'soul-mate' in this, frankly, bizarre way you are with Lihra,” and with this, Jeanne looked through Michael, as if speaking to an invisible person behind, or beside, him, “and I don't mean any offense, Lihra”, with which her eyes met Michael's again, “but I do feel that we are right

together, and I've felt that since I was a little girl. I don't know if I could still love whatever it you two might become."

"Lihra's not offended. In fact, she's chastising me at the moment for holding you at arm's length for so long,. She agrees with you pretty much on all counts, and has shown me things about my own fears of loving you back that have left me a little. . . embarrassed. Emotion was the first thing to be shared, and in this state she feels the same love for you I do but can't admit, and I've only come out and admitted that because her influence over me on the emotional level is so strong at the moment." Michael smiled. "I'm sure you'll make me regret that lapse quite soon.

"But I don't want to lose me either, and Lihra is just as attached to her own individuality. I don't know how to break free, and neither does she.

"We'll just have to see how this all plays out."

\* \* \*

Milo cut the engine on his Cyclone and rolled it to a gentle stop. In the dust-filled tunnel he and his accompanying quartet of experienced technicians took a few moments to acclimate themselves to their darker surroundings. One of them killed the trailing jeep's engine, lending an eerie solitude to the current proceedings. Milo lifted up the helmet's visor and took a whiff of the stagnant air. He could smell it - something there lurking in the dust. Milo's hand signal held them at bay; and he motioned for high-beams from the jeep's front grill, but that didn't necessarily mean anything to the seasoned

mercenary. Swift unpocketed his binocs (pre-set for the IR spectrum) and motioned for the lights to be cut off. He even heard some of the men go for weapons.

*Easy, boys!*

Milo easily made out the pencil-thin infrared beams crisscrossing the inky black hole before them. The lattice was simple in nature, but the fact that Cipolla had wired the ceiling meant that Milo would have to transform the Cyclone into its power armor mode to work just on those units.

“We’ve got sniffers, men!” Milo’s Cyclone amplified voice trumpeted. “One at eleven, one, three, six and nine o’clock, respectively. I’ll handle the ones upstairs; you guys concentrate with the three other ones.”

“Right. Goggles down, everyone! I’m familiar with some of Cipolla’s work,” Stubby John crowed. “Be on the lookout for bypass circuitry and nested triggers. That murderous wop loved the stuff! Okay, everyone, dismount and be careful!” Stubby John was an acquaintance of Milo’s from his mercenary days, a top-notch de-miner, completely devoted to his work. On one occasion, he failed to disarm the detonator mechanism, but managed to pull out the blasting caps from the explosives fast enough to keep them from setting off the bomb – at the cost of the hand that pulled them out, hence the nickname. More astonishingly, he had the presence of mind to remember to switch to his off-hand in the split second before grabbing the blasting caps, so that he would keep his good hand.

Milo tried to ignore the activity behind him while he transformed the Cyclone. Swift deftly lifted himself up to the two magnetically locked mines and routinely went about disarming the first one.

“How’s it shaking out, Swift?” Stubby demanded over the tac-net.

“One down, one to go. . .What about down there?”

“Two down, one to go.”

“Good.”

Milo exposed the circuitry for the second mine and gasped. He was quick to raise the alarm, “Stubby, I’ve got a problem!”

“What’s up?”

“I’ve got a nested transceiver, here. Did you come across any in your batch?”

“Negative. We’re all daisy-chained with chord from mine to mine!” Stubby John blurted back.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Milo questioned.

“A see-saw. . .” Stubby John assessed.

“Damn him! And he’s got it rigged to activate from either entrance,” Milo cursed.

“Get down here; we need to talk about this!” Stubby demanded.

Swift lowered his armored form down on gentle jets, and with his Cyclone suit still augmenting his CVR-3 armor, Milo towered above his slightly nervous compatriots. He took off his helmet and bummed a cigarette off Stubby John, while reminding the rest of the group, “I don’t care what we’ve run across, men. We have to clear the way!”

Stubby John grunted his agreement with Milo’s statement and the men started to come around.

“So what do we do about this see-saw?” Milo asked while taking a good drag from the cancer stick nestled in his thin lips.

“A see-saw?” one of the less experienced techs queried.

“Yes, a see-saw.” Milo explained to the others, “You mine both ends of a passageway, such as this tunnel. The target passes over the mined entrance and proceeds to the other side. Before they can get to the mined exit, its mines are detonated based on a relayed triggering signal sent from the entrance and a correlating signal determined at this exit point. The mark is forced to retreat or double-back to the entrance, only to have that summarily detonate when they get close to it. It’s strictly upper echelon stuff, and in my opinion is a bit of overkill for this structure. However, for something like this, laying down a see-saw is a good three week job, right, Stubby?”

“That’s being optimistic. A month is more like it, especially if they’ve put up signal relays to traverse the length of the Chunnel to it’s other mined point. A good twenty miles, at least,” Stubby John explained.

“What’s our move?” one of the others asked in a strong voice. Clearly, he remained undeterred by the sudden complications now associated with this once simple job.

“Something like this. . .” Stubby John held up a small rectangular object in his left hand.

“Fill me in,” Milo requested. He had a pretty reasonable guess as to what the device was, but this was no time to leave anything to chance.

“What we have here, gentlemen, is a self tuning echo transceiver. We’ll have to scan that mine up there, program this baby to phase lock onto its transmitter’s modulated signal, send a mimicked signal out, and hope that it fools whatever is down the line. I’m guessing that the unit on the other end won’t know the difference, and we should preserve the illusion of dormancy. Our device attaches to the surface with a standard magnetic



lock. Private Swift, you have the honors,” Stubby John declared as he tossed it over the Swift.

Milo looked it over, and nodded. He’d used something like this in times past back when demo jobs pulled in more scratch than the elaborate pick-offs that were his true calling during his well chronicled mercenary days. Milo crushed his spent cigarette out on the tunnel floor and donned the helmet once more. He hovered upwards towards the ceiling mounted mine while verbally activating a shoulder mounted illuminator to shine a cone of light at the device.

\* \* \*

The helicopter set down well inside the woods, away from the massing troops. The hike was long to reach the impromptu encampments. The Destroids had been running on emergency batteries as much as possible, and then slowly recharging them with the protoculture energizers while immobile, to absolutely minimize the protoculture signature the Invid might use to pick them up. This was the first of several stops over the next few days, as Michael was to visit what was quickly to become the front lines in the diversionary attacks to come.

The conditions in the camps left a lot to be desired. The men were short on food, cold-weather gear, medical supplies, and war materiel of every other sort. They were crucial to the attack, but they were not intended for sustained operations, and their level of supply reflected that. Moving only at night, during the day everyone but the Destroid pilots themselves slept in foxholes in the cold ground, because of fears that the Invid

might attack, or just as dangerous, their local human allies might learn of and shell their positions. Ahead of the Robotech mecha had come the conventional forces, just as poorly supplied as their high-tech counterparts, to clear the way through the lines of the Invid sympathizers. And although the Invid had not themselves yet gotten involved, there were pockets of heavy fighting between the diversionary forces and the local pro-Invid human troops in almost all the theaters in which these attacks were to occur. But there were signs of increased Invid patrol activity, and the general hope was that the early stages of the ruse were working. The Invid, it was hoped, were being deceived to think that the pro-resistance nations were launching a general offensive against their allies. Soon, the Invid should be pulling troops from Atlantis Hive to reinforce their continental hives. Some troop redeployments could already be seen in the skies above, as squadrons high overhead were observed making for the ultimate sites of these attacks.

Jeanne followed, carefully watching, as Michael worked the crowd. He didn't act like a general, much less the Supreme Allied Commander the European allies had appointed him to be. He worked the crowd more like a beloved home-town politician. Few of the soldiers had ever seen him, or even a picture of him, but all had heard of his exploits, suitably embellished for propaganda purposes. In this motley group of Dutch, Germans, Belgians, Danes, Frenchmen, Spaniards, Poles, and many others, nearly everyone seemed to know enough English to hold a short conversation with Michael, and for those few that didn't, Michael surprised with a few choice phrases of support and encouragement in their own tongues. Men offered cigarettes (he declined) and drink (he accepted the occasional swig). He sat with them around their electric space heaters telling stories of battle in deep space. He talked about the huge fleet that had been built up over

the last few years, and of their distant cousins born in deep space, itching to come to Earth and help make their homeland free. Mixed in among the troops were a handful of Mars Division survivors, who knew him by reputation, and two personally, and there were warm embraces of reunion. Jeanne smiled, realizing that these fellow survivors were much of the source of Michael's legend.

Eventually, Michael turned to her and whispered, "Feel free to join in." Jeanne looked at him curiously. "Come on, you're a Mars Division survivor too. You're a pretty young redhead among a bunch of lonely soldier boys. These guys are desperate to just have a chance to talk to someone like you. You've seen me work - just follow my lead."

Jeanne gulped, and against all her inclinations, joined in. She found herself surprisingly adept at the schmoozing, and just as surprising, considering her looks and the condition of the troops, found the soldiers to be perfect gentlemen. Soon, she was in full form, mimicking Michael's techniques, shaking hands, giving out hugs and words of encouragement, describing Invid warships going down under REF fire over distant alien worlds. She listened to complaints, sang drinking songs. And she spread hope.

*That's what we came for, she said to her self. We're here to remind these guys that we're thinking about them, that they're important, that they're not expendable. We're here to remind them that this isn't a job, it's a cause.*

Jeanne smiled as an old schoolmate who had been stationed on the *De Ruyter*, and who had come to Earth in an escape pod when his ship went down, embraced her, and they joined in regaling the men of a forward infantry battalion with tall tales of the greater universe they had seen beyond the comfort of the solar hearth. And then she

parted with the old acquaintance, promising to write, promising to join him for drinks when the war was over.

And almost as soon as they were there, they were off again to the next campsite. Jeanne and Michael both got away with bundles of small gifts. Favorite lighters, food, a favorite charm or necklace, whatever little these soldiers had that was worthy of sentiment, they gave. Michael and Jeanne tried to refuse, but the men always insisted. And mail. Their escort discouraged it, afraid that they'd be overwhelmed, but Michael wouldn't hear of it. Anyone who had a letter to be sent home in hand found Michael and Jeanne willing carriers.

But before they left, Michael shared with them his message: that they were crucial. That their courage would decide the battle to come every bit as much as those in the main attack. And that they were not sacrificial lambs. He told them to hold out as long as they could when the attack on the Invid hives came, and then to disappear into the forests, to abandon their mecha if they had to, to shed their weapons and uniforms and blend in with the civilian population. "This won't be your last battle," Michael would tell them. "We need you around for the final blow that will push the Invid out of Europe for good".

For the first time, Jeanne wondered how much of Michael's charisma was innate, and how much he had deliberately cultivated for such occasions. She wondered how much of Lihra was in him as he worked the troops. And she wondered what Lihra thought of his experience with his men.

And with that, they were gone. Off to another front line. Off to another batch of tired, haggard men looking for a boost, for a hero, to come in and inspire them. Michael,

she soon realized, wasn't there to lead them, to command them. That's what their officers were for. She and Michael were symbols of unity, of success. The irony of it galled her - they had begun their sojourn to Earth in a dismal military defeat, cast out of the heavens like fallen angels. But a fallen angel is can still be an angel, depending on the circumstances of the fall, and what he does after he lands, she mused. As the helicopter rotors began to spin, and the active noise cancellation systems began kicking in, Jeanne leaned her head on Michael's shoulder. Not knowing how much longer he would remain himself, she would have him to herself for these few moments, until duty called her again.

\* \* \*

"I'll take point!" Milo warned over the tac-net. "Stubby, tell the men to get their masks on!"

Milo's transformed Cyclone hovered ten yards in front of the trailing jeep. Not only did the men slap down their masks, but Stubby and the others went for their Gallant rifles, too.

"False alarm, boys!" Milo said.

He shone a shoulder mounted light attachment on the husk of a rusting *Iigaa* grasping at a long escaped enemy. Even though it was dormant, the sight of the derelict Invid mecha sent chills up and down the their spines.

"Let's move on up!" Milo said as he accelerated past the abandoned sentinel of this netherworld. Milo and the others failed to notice the near ground level pencil thin IR

beam emanating from the *Iigaa's* taloned foot and shooting across the tunnel floor to the other side. The jeep roared on breaking the beam's path momentarily and the men appeared to relax their guard.

“Swift, we should be closing in on the other side of the see-saw. Start scanning for this lattice. Now, if our jury-rigged bypass doesn't work, we have to push on through regardless of what we trigger. Got that?” Stubby said firmly.

Milo nodded, and pressed forward into the ominous darkness.

\* \* \*

Listening to the cold winds blowing harshly outside the panes of the window, Lihra gazed out onto the countryside. She had been quartered on the second story of the chateau (though in splendor it bordered on “country palace”), in a well-appointed bedroom, looking out on a courtyard, in which some troops were drilling. Completely unmindful of the armed men, some children – offspring of the families that served as caretakers of the great house, Lihra presumed, played with a ball, alongside an earth creature Michael's thoughts identified as a dog, who was tethered to some sort of goal, to which a net was attached. Some of the children tried to kick the ball into the area enclosed by the goal, while others tried to stop them. When the ball came close to the goal, the dog excitedly pounced on it, grabbing it with his teeth and forepaws, and wrestling with it as if it were some small prey. Then, one of the children would pet the dog, and take away the ball, and toss it out again amongst the other children, while the dog eagerly barked, hoping, it seemed, for another chance with the ball soon. *An odd*

*species, humans, Lihra thought, that they would entrust their precious offspring to the company and companionship of mere beasts.*

*Normally, in this game, there'd be a person tending the goal. Michael's thoughts told her. Still, that dog's pretty good.*

Lihra smiled and watched, trying concentrate on what she could hear and see, rather than the constant parade of grimy soldiers that passed before Michael's eyes. She tried to imagine what it must be like to be a human child, with only a couple of siblings, or a human parent, with all her care to be given to one or two children, and not thousands upon thousands. And it left her longing for something that was completely alien to her experience. Or was it? Her body was a human body, with some modifications. If she bore children, she would bear only a few, of princely stature among the new Invid, no doubt, but they would know the Invid of old only from their green blood and telepathy, and from whatever they were taught of her race by her. The continuity was already breaking. Humans weren't the aliens anymore. Those children playing football could almost be her children. It was the old Invid order, and the craving for the Flower of Life, and the old grudge against the Robotech Masters, that were alien.

Or was that just the influence of Michael's thoughts? She found it harder and harder to tell. She hoped that some of her Invid-ness had begun to rub off on him, but she was hard-pressed to find any. There was just something supremely resilient about this humanity, something that inexorably drew her to it. *Is that why mother took on human form after encountering Zor? Why despite all her lectures about finding the form most suited for this planet, she had always intended this new path for our people? Is this the real reason she broke from the Regent and the vast majority of the Invid people – not to*

*seek out the flower, but to seek out Mankind, the fathers of even the Tirolians, and to replace them, to **become** them?*

With that part of her mind that was still hers, Lihra probed her connection to Michael from the outside, scrutinizing how and where the thoughts merged. To use a computer analogy she gleaned from Michael's thoughts, she realized that the connection was as much a "hardware" as a "software" issue. Not only was there a constant stream of data shuffling back and forth between the two, but the antenna-organ along her spine that transmitted her telepathic signals was working at full power as well. The experience was tiring. Unlike Michael, with his enhanced metabolism and improved restorative capabilities, the constant contact was straining for her. The power required to sustain the constant emissions was significant, and her body struggled to compensate. She was already hungry again, having just eaten a few hours ago. From the sweat beading on her forehead, she concluded that she had begun to run a slight fever, and her transmitter organ began to feel something like the equivalent of hoarse - the constant usage, and the necessary blood-flow to power it, led to inflammation, which translated to a dull throbbing at the base of her skull.

Things were somewhat better than before, though. When Michael was in close proximity, the effort required to maintain the connection was minimal. But as he traveled further, their thoughts virtually had to scream at one another to be heard. But before Lihra passed out from the strain, the sensation suddenly passed. Michael had moved too far away, and instinctively, both of them had tapped into the local hives nearest each of them, taking advantage of the hives' greater receptive acuity and transmission strength to reduce their connection to a low murmur.



And yet the occasional glimpse came through, probing deeper than a shared awareness, breaking into his innermost thoughts. She saw him imagining attacks on the continental hives – she could see thousands of Invid leaving the hive on the ocean-ridge, swarming to defend against a continent-wide uprising against the Invid and their proxies. And she saw a small force sail and fly in and attack the planet’s second-largest hive, the most crucial but for Reflex Point itself. She saw forces using combined human, Tirolian, and Zentraedi arms to breach its defenses and plant weapons of mass destruction in its power core. And she saw Michael imagining it sinking beneath the waves, like the mythical island after which the humans gave their name for the hive: Atlantis.

Only a little more probing revealed all the details. The date and time, the disposition of various forces. She saw how much damage she could do to her people’s enemies and their schemes if she would simply break her oath of good-conduct and reveal it all.

And she realized that as could she, so could Michael. Maybe he wasn’t aware of it yet, but the damage he could do to the Invid was far greater than she could do the human resistance. She was connected to just one human, however prominent. Through her, he would soon be able to see into the entire Invid race! Through her, and her access, he could pry into all of the hive brains, into the mind of the Regis herself, and it wouldn’t be long before he realized how. Remaining discrete, anonymous, he could learn all of her people’s secrets.

Lihra wondered if Michael was conscious of the fact that he was now linked into the Invid’s hive communication network, a lone alien voice amidst the soothing din of her race’s psychic collective. *I am now*, she heard in her thoughts, in a mental voice that

was perhaps two-thirds Michael's, and the rest her own. *On computer networks, they used to call people like me 'hackers',* Michael thought. Along with the cognitive verbalization came a flood of mental images, of teenagers breaking into government or corporate networks, wreaking havoc, stealing information, vandalizing data and communications out of spite, ideology, or even mere boredom.

*What would be done to these hackers?* She asked.

*Networks had hackers of their own, called 'white hats' because they're the good guys, who would track down the hacker - or cracker, as the good-guy hackers preferred their adversaries be called - while protecting his system from the infiltration. Once the hacker was tracked down, the white hat would forcibly close the connection,* Michael replied.

*You told Jeanne that I could no more read your plans than you could 'bounce a call to the Regis off me', but that barrier wouldn't last forever,* Lihra thought. *It's just that I can begin to see your plans against us, how you plan to attack the hive on the ocean . . . and I wonder what other barriers have now come down - for both of us.*

Hundreds of miles apart, two pairs of lips shared a mischievous smile.

\* \* \*

In times past, Captain Roger Pike had only reluctantly assumed the mantle of leadership during his stint as a Southern Cross officer. But this was different. Leading the convoy of supplies down to the southern shores of England was vital to the resistance effort. He had gotten word from Swift to avoid the Chunnel at all costs, which Milo

promised would eventually be cleared of the intricately laid out mines, but not soon enough to suit the timetable that governed their efforts. The journey down to the cliffs of Dover had been slow, but uneventful; only the sporadic conversation with Laurie broke up Roger's monotony. They made the coastline at noon and oversaw several successful coordinated launches of channel runners laden with provisions for the Grand Alliance's upcoming effort. Roger had a cup of coffee in his callused hands as he surveyed the efforts down below. As he looked on from his elevated perch to the docks, Roger could see the Hammond youth scurrying back and forth among the various piers, pulling aside several men from the various watercraft, and coaxing forth the most recent updates. Laurie looked upon the scene, trying to categorize the various sea vessels braving the opaque and turbulent waters.

“How many trips will have to be made for a complete supply transfer, Roger?” Laurie inquired.

They looked down to the piers and saw a cluster of boats, ferries, and hovercraft launch for Brittany. Roger cleared his throat before answering the query, “We're half way through the process, Laurie. We'll need to make two more runs there and back.”

While scanning the docks for any further signs of activity, she asked, “Is that Blake waving us down?”

Roger looked back in the pier's direction and concurred with a nod. It seemed that Blake was trying to draw their attention. Roger started down the well-worn trail from the cliff top to the beach's grainy canvas. His efficient strides soon had him closing the distance to the latest addition to Austin's resistance unit. Laurie followed in his wake

sensing that something was amiss. Blake met them at the foot of the cliffs with a worried look on his stubble-covered face.

“This latest batch that just pulled in wants a quick turn around, Roger. They think that all the action on the other side has drawn out a patrol-sized party to check things out. They want the transport loaded up and ready to launch with this outgoing wave. Everyone here is jittery,” Blake informed.

“Present company included. Okay, we’ll humor them. Do you need help getting the transport ready?”

“Nope. I can handle it,” Blake said brimming with confidence.

“Good,” Roger ordered. “I’ll check up on Milo’s Alpha fighter.”

“I can’t believe that he actually turned it over into my care, Roger,” Blake said with a certain degree of disbelief in his youthful voice.

“Me either,” Laurie added in a tone mixing bemusement and exasperation.

“Necessity is the mother of invention. If we encounter anything over the water, you get clear, unless Laurie here says otherwise, is that understood?” Roger reminded him. While the boy was going to fly the high-tech war machine over unsecured territory, seeing any combat action in it was not something that Roger would condone. Pike’s stern countenance added more emphasis to this admonishment.

“Any word from the plane’s rightful owner?” Blake asked. He’d been so busy running from boat to boat that he’d missed the last few updates on Milo’s efforts.

Roger’s face lost some of its color as he gravely uttered, “He’s dropped out of contact...”

\* \* \*

The Hive Brain at Calais intoned into the lead Scout's slightly disinterested mind, *Our sensors have detected possible insurgent activity within this strategically vital artery. Our Regis wants you to determine the true nature of the disturbance and neutralize!*

The lead Scout bowed ever so slightly and delicately. It motioned with its claw and waved its companions into the tunnel ahead of it. The unauthorized protoculture emission was at down other end of Chunnel, as it had appeared that the insurgent force had successfully negotiated the carefully placed traps therein. The Invid formation rocketed forward through the old human transportation artery connecting the tightly clustered islands to the European continent, eagerly awaiting to fulfill the Regis's bidding.

Further down the tunnel, Milo had brought the last dormant mine down from the ceiling and handed the device over to one of the men who summarily stripped off a few wires rendering the limpit mine inert. Milo removed his helmet and wiped his sweaty forehead with a cotton towel handed to him. His face formed what on Milo would pass for a self-congratulatory smile.

"Well done, boys!" Stubby said offering up cans of brew to toast the mission's success. Swift was about to move to the English entrance just a few furlongs ahead and signal Roger that the Chunnel had been made safe for passage when his sensors alerted him to the acquired threat of multiple targets. . . approaching on a steady vector from behind towards their current position.

“We’ve got company, Stubby! Get the men away from here . . . I’ll charge them and hold them off as long as I can,” Milo shouted across the com channel.

“Forget it! We’ll provide you with cover, and you can plant the mines on those monsters. We can remotely trigger ‘em from here. It’ll take us a few moments to do the patch jobs, Swift. How many do you need?”

“Three. I’ve got one with me on which I can punch up a standard five-second delay. Listen, keep the jeep close to them, I don’t think they’ll chance their cannons in here; they’re won’t be willing to risk a cave-in. We just have to avoid the claws. Get a good driver on the wheel, Stubby, someone who won’t flinch when they turn up the heat,” Milo ordered as he trained his eyes on the bellwether of the gruesome pack.

“Incoming!” Milo yelled.

His Sal-9 pistol flashed indiscriminately, but the lead *Gurab* brought down its massive claw in what proved to be an easy block of Milo’s initial barrage. Swift was not about to pull out the missiles, not just yet. *Besides, Stubby’s plan might actually work.* Milo waited for its line of vision to be totally obscured and shot forward. He could see a set of two sets of glowing points behind this lead mecha, and from the spacing of the formation could tell that it was made up of two more cannon packing Shocks an a base Scout.

Milo clasped the mine like a discus, punched a few protruding buttons on its side rendering it ‘hot’ and hurtled forward towards the alien menace. *One.* Milo’s battlesuit hopped upon the *Gurab’s* lowered claw exposing himself to the enemy, but he waited for the pilot to react by bringing the other claw down the bear. *Two.* The opening revealed itself to him, and Milo still possessed the battle-tested reflexes to take advantage of the

weakness. *Three*. One claw slammed into the other, but Milo's Cyclone was already reaching out for the exposed torso plating; his hand successfully slammed the mine down and sealed it into place with by triggering the self-contained magnetic locks. *Four*. With the aid of propulsion, Swift leapt off the torso and twisted his armored body back towards the jeep and away from the mecha. *Five*.

The explosion leapt up from the armored torso and ripped out a large chunk of the region's substantial plating. The stunned and wounded pilot tumbled feebly to the ground. It was a simple matter for him to dart back in and dispatch a flurry of laser fire into the already flaming gash of the *Gurab*, silencing its resident pilot once and for all. He fell back to the jeep under the cover fire of the jeep's driver whose feeble retort with a Gallant failed to prevent the advance of both Shocks past their fallen brother. Milo reached the reversing jeep and latched onto the mines extending from Stubby's hands.

"One down, three to go," he shouted over the sounds of the skirmish.

Milo nodded, "Cover me. I'm heading back for round two."

He ducked and bounced past several claw swipes, and while they kept their cannons primed as designated by their indicative glow, neither *Gurab* happened upon an a clear shot. As a result, their plasma weaponry remained dormant. Milo heard the ground rumble under the weight of a massive claw strike that hurled a large plume of dust and debris into the air. The shadowy beast towered over the resistance fighter's Lilliputian frame, but Milo's agility allowed him to deftly side step away unscathed. He caught a glimpse of the Cyclopean monstrosity and activated his chest-mounted spotlight. The ruse worked to his advantage as the blinding light dazzled his opponent, allowing him the chance to successfully attach this mine to the mecha's vulnerable underbelly. Upon

Milo's verbal acknowledgment, the second mine was successfully triggered, killing the Invid instantly in a glorious flash of primal violence. Milo put his Cyclone into a tumble but the Scout caught him across the back sending him flying against the back wall. Milo instinctively came up firing blindly, but it seemed to work and the Scout was forced to sidestep. His on board computer was screaming out damage warnings and he knew he'd have to end this engagement soon. The smoke and dust cleared for a split second revealing the menacing of the charging Scout, which was all he needed to successfully down the retreating Scout with some inspired marksmanship. He soon heard the cries for assistance coming across the tac-net and tried doubling back only to see that the other remaining Shock was toying with the reversing jeep. Milo loosed a volley in its direction to distract the mecha from its well-cornered prey, but the ploy failed. The Invid was still concentrating on the jeep. A subtle feint with the mecha's lead claw caused the jeep's driver to rumble right into the wheelhouse of its other claw.

Milo's scream of warning and anguish was drowned out by the massive explosion caused when that Shock's claw slammed through the jeep's front grille into the skidding vehicle's engine block killing both sets of protagonists instantly. Milo scoured the flaming wreck for the removed mines only to see them and Stubby's corpse twenty yards away from the flame-licked hulk of the vehicle. In his last conscious act, Stubby must have seen the end coming and heaved himself off the back of the jeep with all the deactivated mines in tow in order to prevent them from going off when the jeep got smashed up. Milo shut his eyes and initiated his filtering system and the additional oxygen supply. He slowly made his way back towards the French side of the Chunnel staggering along the walls for support. The engine kept cutting out on him, giving him



thirty seconds of usage before failing. It would take five minutes of a cool down before he could reengage it only to have it cut out on him. And so the tedious process continued, with Milo hiking towards the exit during the engine's downtime. However, the claw swipe he'd endured was starting to catch up with him, and Milo found his breath being more labored than usual,. Each step he took seemed like climbing up a mountain and sapped his reserves of stamina. The engine finally cut out on him five miles away from Chunnel entrance and the last thing Milo remembered before fading into unconsciousness was activating an emergency beacon.

\* \* \*

In the hallowed halls of Reflex Point, deep in the core of the vast alien hive complex, energy crackled and throbbed in sheets of luminescent plasma. The hive guards went about their business as if nothing particularly noteworthy were taking place. The Regis often appeared with such a pyrotechnic prelude, and they had long since learned that their role was to continue about their business as the Regis railed against her enemies or voiced her thoughts on her plans for her race. Unless one of her children/servants was being directly addressed, then absolute attention must be paid their work. The Regis often thought aloud, and those close to her inner chambers knew that these thoughts were ephemeral will-o-the-wisps of the mind, and could change from day to day, and were not cause for indolence.

And when she thought aloud, she did so literally. Reflex Point was filled with receivers that would translate whichever of her conscious thoughts that might correspond

to an internal dialogue into an audio form, booming out of hidden speakers in all the walls, in the language of whomever happened to be present to listen. In all but a half-dozen cases over the centuries, this was the Invid's tongue, or at least the verbal component of their communication. Because of this infrastructure, no one could remember a time where the Regis where she had spoken audibly, whether in her original form as the great queen, or her present forms, alternating between that of a giant bald humanoid female, or concealed in a ball of luminescent plasma with a humanoid-shaped shadow at its center. This even kept the Invid in awe - for all their telepathy, except when they were a great distance from the individual with which they intended to communicate, the Invid still used sound to convey most of the meaning and syntax, using telepathy to convey subtext, meaning, and emotional impact. By never "speaking" to her subjects, the Regis demonstrated the degree to which she was supposed to be removed from concerns of base matter; rather the mind and the soul was supposed to be her purview.

But the Regis wandered the halls without speaking her mind. Something troubled her. She could feel a strange presence in the royal chamber, as if another mind - completely alien to her knowledge or experience - had penetrated into the Invid hive consciousness.

And she heard a voice. An alien voice. The first she had ever heard inside her own head.

And it terrified her.

"Thus saith the LORD GOD", it cried out with a supremely resolute, irresistible command. "Let my people go, that they may serve Me. For now I will stretch out my

hand, that I may smite thee and thy people with pestilence; and thou shalt be cut off from the earth. As yet exaltest thou thyself against my people, that thou wilt not let them go?”

Startled, and not knowing where the voice came from, or to whom it belonged, and – for the first time since she watched from a safe distance the transmissions of those that remained behind at their first exodus, as the skies above her ancient home-world were choked with Zentraedi warships waiting for the order to burn the world into ash – she quaked. She wondered if this were not the Spirit of Light commanding her to undo what she had done. Could these humans be the Spirit’s children as well, that the Invid were not the Spirit’s sole chosen people?

But before her fear could lead to reaction, the hive brain of Reflex Point dryly announced: *Intruder detected in telepathic network. Triangulating location.*

The Regis clenched her teeth with rage and humiliation at the trickery, at her own fear. Not since Zor had she personally been violated to this degree, and he had never penetrated into her thoughts. *Find the intruders! Eliminate them!* To her entire race, she cried out, her mind still unsettled from fear and shock and wrath and shame.

*INTRUDER!*

*ELIMINATE!*

And her heart hardened against the humans.

\* \* \*

Roger looked out upon the water from the ferry's upper deck, just outside the enclosed bridge compartment. A pair of footsteps heralded a crewman's impending arrival at his side.

"The skipper expects landfall within the hour, Captain Pike. We should-"

A massive THUD echoed throughout the cargo hold, and Roger's eyes opened up when he thought he caught a whiff of smoke. Mason's voice was frantically coming in on the ferry's radio, "Pike! Pike! Pike! We're under attack!" It was only when the boat's skipper, now busy giving orders to his subordinates, shooed him away that Roger finally scampered back to the hold, inside his beloved vehicle to its communication's console. He slammed on the headset and yelled back, "What's the situation?"

"A patrol strength party. . ." Mason's voice was riding waves of static surfacing only intermittently. "Assumed a position on the beach. Waited for the last wave of channel runners to approach land, rose up from the water and opened fire. . . Damn near wiped the runners out. . . We've got them engaged now, and should prevent them from getting to you guys!"

"Forget about us, Mason!" Roger screamed. "We can't risk them going inland and taking out the rest of our supplies. We can't let them leave the water. Over eighty percent of our supplies are off-loaded on the Normandy coast. Take them out before they can get across the Channel to the supply train. We'll deal with the troopers that come here!"

"I copy. Over and out!" Mason said.

Roger scrambled outside and hurriedly cut through the harness holding the transport securely in place. He then heard a massive explosion. He scrambled up to the front cab and through its large bay of windows could see the ominous outline of two

Invid mecha peering in through the fissure they'd caused in the now listing ferry's side. The transport's hull shook again as the ferry's fuel tanks exploded. The treacherous flood of water tumbled into the cargo hold, and buffeted the hovertransport's box-like form. One of the alien assailants was not satisfied to just cause damage and move on; it entered the hold.

*More balls than brains*, Roger thought of the Invid. *Must be bucking for a promotion*. Roger reacted instinctively by fleeing the cab for the gunnery platform. He strapped himself into its contoured seat and brought the weapons targeting system on-line with a simple tapping of several buttons. The Invid reacted to the hovertransport's increased power signature, but too late. Missiles leapt from the transports side-mounted turrets, and tore the alien mecha to pieces.

His attention to the momentary victory was diverted by the sound of twisting metal. The fissure in the ferry's hull buckled and widened, and the cargo hold floor was covered in five feet of water with the hovertransport bobbing inertly atop it. A second salvo of missiles expanded the hole the Invid had made, and the transport lifted up on a cushion of air as Roger maneuvered the behemoth out of the gaping wound of the listing ferry. Roger flashed on the headlights only to see a majority of the Invid scouting party pulling back to attack the land-based forces. Most of this last wave of Channel runners had been sunk or wrecked by the Invid patrol. Roger ran to the back to open up the back doors, secured a line and threw it out behind the transport, and was able to take on a dozen or so drenched and shivering survivors.

Roger guided the hovertransport for the rocky beach of the northern French coastline, powered down, and hurried to the back of the transport to check on the status of those that he'd rescued from the water.

\* \* \*

Blake was in Milo's older Alpha and had just received the unusual order from Laurie to acquire lock-ons. His slender hand trembled with the thrill of excitement. The taste of battle was such a rush. *Time to turn and burn!*

"Ease up on your stick, Blake!" Mason chided. "You and I will make a stand here, cut them off, and put them down. The others will fly by and baby-sit the supplies, just in case a few of them slip through the cracks. Follow my lead, and you'll do fine."

"Radar's tagged 'em, Laurie. A party of five, no six, one's trailing."

"That's the lead Scout, the brains of the outfit. . . Work your way to him and take him out! I'll keep the others occupied."

"Gotcha!" Blake erupted; he could barely contain himself.

The Invid formation was opening up in front of them. Laurie rained destruction from her gun pod unleashing death upon their ranks. Her younger charge had found a crease in the widening formation and nudged his plane through it. He made it out intact, but the gap closed right behind him; this was confirmed by the residual flash of plasma fire he felt lightly buffet his plane. His ride continued to get bumpier, but Blake held the course. A brief glimpse over to the radar readily showed contacts winking out as Mason's

marksmanship proved too much for such standard fare as this patrol. Blake took a deep gulp of air and checked his HUD.

“You’re in the clear, Blake. Take him down!” Hammond heard his battle-tested sister-in-law exhort across the tac-net.

The Scout closed the gap with the approaching human pilot. Blake fired and banked up and away, getting his shots off but not exposing himself to the Scout’s counterstrike, causing his first salvo to miss.

“Watch your six! That Scout’s got the beam weapons, not the plasma disk ejectors,” Laurie chimed in.

“Got it, Laurie,” Blake shot back, slightly annoyed with all the mollycoddling he was getting on the battlefield. Hammond circled back and waited until it felt. . . right. With but a fleeting thought of regret, the uninitiated youth opened fire on the startled Scout and blasted it from the night skies.

“Good shot, kid. That’s the last of them. Let’s double back to Pike and the others; the supply train here has enough air support,” Mason decided. Blake followed behind Laurie; he was still numb from his kill. He had finally taken his first life.

\* \* \*

Swift felt the acrid vapors of the smelling salts snake their way through his nostrils and he coughed himself back to the land of the living. Voices mumbled around him and he could vaguely see his boxed up Cyclone being hoisted into the back of large

truck while his own form was being supported by two peach fuzz faced volunteers for the offensive. His bleary senses still detected an inordinate amount of activity; and if Milo had to hazard a guess, he'd wager that he'd been found by some part of the resistance bearing for the coast. Unfortunately, he wasn't in much condition to press the issue. He felt himself being maneuvered into the back of an awaiting ambulance. Milo was still a little groggy from his recent bout with unconsciousness, but instinctively asked the attending medic to radio a message on ahead to Captain Roger Pike at the shoreline. When the field medic asked for a name, he blurted out, "Private Milo Swift of Southern Cross. Austin would benefit from this message, too."

"Don't succumb to delusions of grandeur, Private!" the medic chortled as he pumped a potent sedative into Milo's arm. "Just lie back down, and close your eyes. We're eight hours from the coast, so rest up!"

Milo heard doors slam shut, and an engine whine to life. He shut his eyes with the calming realization that he'd lived to fight another day, and the sorrow for the acquaintances he'd left in the mine – some old, like Stubby, some new – who would not.

\* \* \*

The Invid reaction to Michael's 'crank call' to the Regis was instantaneous, and far more violent than either Michael or Lihra had imagined it might be. Finding the alien voice was not difficult, he had left himself open to be seen. More effort had been given to concealing Lihra's involvement, and it took all her effort to hide from the network, while Michael left himself exposed.



In Michael's head, he heard the Regis' psychic voice cry out at him, accusing, laden with fear and hate, sounding the same two words over and over:

*INTRUDER! ELIMINATE!*

Other Invid, first by the dozens, then hundreds, then thousands, then millions, echoed the cry:

*INTRUDER! ELIMINATE!*

The voices in his head quickly became deafening, throbbing, burning. The base of his skull pounded with a million voices, with the heat of electrical fire. Michael's eyes rolled up in his head, and his limbs began to tremble, and then spasm.

He could now hear another voice through the din, as this voice came in through his ears, and not his mind. It was Jeanne's, soothing him, "I've got you, Michael. It's okay, I've got you." Michael wondered what a stroke felt like, if it felt like this, if this was one.

*INTRUDER! ELIMINATE!*

The voices continued to shout, ebbing and surging as one great wave of racial hate, with the intonation of every wrong done to an entire species. He found that he couldn't breathe anymore – his lungs simply wouldn't respond. Despite the din in his head, he could hear with his ears with perfect clarity – and as the alien voices shouted unceasingly, he heard perfect silence – and realized his heart had stopped.

Michael struggled with consciousness, though he could no longer see, he knew Jeanne was preparing to perform CPR on him, he could hear her unzipping his flightsuit, holding his hand. *Not yet!* he wanted to say. Maybe his lips voiced it, but no breath came out. How would she know? Would she start too late? Or too soon?

*INTRUDER! ELIMINATE!*

And then nothing. Nothing. Michael waited. Still nothing.

Only a ringing, maybe, it or was that his ears? No, because as he squeezed Jeanne's hand with his last strength, he could hear her shout to the helicopter pilots, "Take off! There will be a thousand Invid mecha here in twenty minutes and I want us to be fifty miles away by then! You heard me!" Then he could faintly feel her lips touching his, breath being forced into his lungs, and then an electric shock to his chest.

And knowing he was in good hands, he let go, and fell willingly into the darkness.

\* \* \*

Roger's ragged form was staring at the Nantes cathedral's jagged outline. Although he knew Austin would want a detailed account of the events that had transpired in the last two days, it still seemed a blur to the normally detail-obsessed mind of Roger Pike. The Southern Crosser stroked his chin as he took in the shadowy protrusion of one of the cathedral's spires which appeared to reach up to the very heavens themselves and block out some the stars from Pike's celestial panorama. He looked back in the direction of 'tree-town' as the Grand Alliance personnel had starting calling the adjoining thicket and camouflage nets used to house and conceal the mecha of the various delegations on hand. He didn't like leaving his hovertransport there, where everyone and their uncle could get at it, especially considering how the Tirolian clones had vandalized it, but he could console himself with the fact that it was locked up tight, and that he wasn't planning to stay here for long. Captain Pike knew his part in the grand scheme of things

was to be at the launching point regulating the influx of soldiers, supplies, and mecha. If von Schönberg hadn't personally requested Pike's attendance, Roger might have gone on ahead to the river, but Michael did just that, and Roger found himself being driven to the estate where treaty signing ceremony was to be held, hoping he could get through tonight's soirée with a minimum of discomfort.

Roger made his way towards the others who were already in thick of the impromptu celebration, and Pike looked knowingly in de Vries' direction. De Vries acknowledged him with mischievous grin approached him with a drink in one hand. Scotch neat, the way he remembered Pike liking his libation. Roger wordlessly raised his glass to Willem's champagne flute. Roger could see that the Dutch general was well versed in playing this part, waiting to acknowledge several delegates before pressing Roger for information.

"Any news from Swift?" Willem asked.

"Nope. I'm worried. But-" Roger interrupted himself while availing himself of the sweet intoxicating ambrosia within the cut lead crystal glass in his hand.

Willem sucked down the rest of his bubbly, finishing Roger's thought, "He's not dead, not yet, anyway. He's just. . . unaccounted for, that's all. And the Swift I know loves it that way. He loves to keep us guessing,"

"Rog!" Blake shouted from across the room. Roger looked over his shoulder and frowned as he saw the adolescent hoisting up a huge stein in his wiry right arm. Blake was clearly inebriated, and was generally making a fool of himself, though it was clear that this indiscretion amused some of the delegates. Roger rolled his eyes skyward, and

started over to Blake hoping to undo the damage already done to the lad's liver, and reputation.

"If you'll excuse me, Willem," Roger seethed before tearing himself away from de Vries to put an end to Blake's debauchery. "What's wrong with you tonight, kid," he asked Blake, tugging him by the elbow to a quiet corner.

"This is going to sound stupid, Roger. . . I'm sorry. Maybe, I should have just stayed in my room. . ." Blake hesitated and made a move to leave.

Roger motioned him back into place with an authoritative wave of his strong hand, and urged, "Get it off your chest, Blake."

"Well. . . okay. . . Did Laurie talk you since we got back from the channel?"

Roger nodded. She'd confessed to him that Blake had stomached his first serious combat encounter, and notched his first kill. "Yeah. . . she mentioned that you'd shot down some of the enemy, as I recall. Congratulations, Blake."

Blake gulped, "I don't feel good about any of it, Roger. Now that we've gotten to know Lihra. . ."

Roger rose up to swallow up his young friend in an almost fatherly embrace, and sagely offered, "Most of us don't want it like this, Blake. . . I don't. Sometimes..."

Blake shuddered, but made no sound. He was trying so hard to keep his sadness inside, until it overwhelmed him. The child residing in his powerful embrace was stripped away with each falling tear.

"Some times I feel a little bit of myself die when I kill one of theirs, Blake." Roger admitted. "I know we all feel the same – Michael, Jeanne, even Milo, though he won't admit it."

“So, I’m not wrong about. . . feeling this way?”

“No, you’re not, Blake,” Roger promised. “None of us is. . .”

\* \* \*

Jeanne found Michael on his feet – though wobbly – in the room Louise-Marie had assigned him and Lihra, still pretending to be his wife, ‘Linda’. As she saw the alien prisoner that had shared Michael’s mind cleaning up in a renovated privy attached to the room, Jeanne realized from the smell that Michael’s ordeal had caused, among other things, a recurrent nausea.

“Hey, Jeanne,” Michael said weakly, upon seeing her walk in. “Thanks for restarting the ol’ ticker,” he joked, lightly tapping his chest with his fist.

Jeanne smiled, embraced him, and kissed him lightly on the lips; and then embraced Lihra as she joined them in the room. “You all alone in there,” she asked, mostly of Michael.

“Yes,” both Michael and Lihra replied, simultaneously enough for Jeanne to wonder for a moment. Both women helped Michael sit down on a small sofa, and while Lihra moved on to continue to tend to him, bringing him something to drink (hoping it would stay down this time), or at least to wash the taste out of his mouth (again), Jeanne sat beside him.

“Lihra and I haven’t exchanged a word since I got back. The connection’s broken, but it’s almost as if it’s still there. We just don’t need to speak to know what the other’s thinking. It’s as if a little piece of me stayed in her, and a little piece of her in me,”

Michael said. "And she was scared for me. The connection to her broke just after my heart stopped, and she didn't know if I was dead or alive for almost three hours, until we could radio back. She doesn't show it, but she was shaken."

Jeanne ran her fingers through his hair, and he leaned down and lay his head in her lap. "What happened, exactly?"

"I put the fear of God into the Regis."

"I mean with the connection."

"The Invid overloaded me. I think they were trying to shout me to death. They almost succeeded. But when my heart stopped, my guess is, the telepathy organ continued to try to burn energy without blood flow, and burned itself out. Stroke, maybe, I don't know. I certainly don't want any doctors looking too closely into it. As far as they know, I had a heart attack, and they have me on blood thinners, and are telling me to eat better."

"Will it come back?"

"The connection or the telepathy?"

"Either," Jeanne said, stroking his hair.

"I don't know. I may be permanently telepathically deaf and dumb. On the other hand, part of being enhanced is my enhanced ability to heal. I guess we'll find out. But my guess that the connection won't return, even if the organ does heal. Not without the same sort of stimulus that started it."

"But she knows all our plans?" Jeanne asked, nodding toward Lihra.

"I do," Lihra interjected. "You are very bold. Dangerously bold. You don't have a chance of success. And that, of course, is why you will win." Anticipating Jeanne's next

question, Lihra added, “No, I will not reveal you to the Invid. As Michael said, part of him seems to have been left in me. Michael told you that what we shared was a window between our worlds. That window may be shut, but I can still see through it. I can not betray you any more than I can betray my own people. I must keep watching that window, watching for a way out for us all.”

Jeanne nodded. She decided that she really did like Lihra, and that she envied Michael for sharing her mind almost as much as she envied Lihra for sharing Michael’s. Lihra could somehow tell, and nodded respectfully. Jeanne accepted the silent gesture, and turned back to Michael. “The delegates are all here. You’re scheduled to go on in six hours. Can you make it?”

Michael gasped slightly. “Have I been out that long? I might be able to stand, possibly speak, but I haven’t even begun my speech!”

Jeanne pulled some paper out of a jacket pocket. “I took the liberty of writing it for you. You tell me I have all this potential as a leader, and seem to actually believe it, so I thought I’d prove it to myself. Actually, I could hear your voice in my head as I wrote it, your words, as you would say them. Maybe we have some sort of connection too. . .”

“Of that, I no longer have any doubt,” Michael told her, sitting up and smiling. He took the papers from her, and looked them over. He paused, reading the speech. His words, her hand.

“No doubt at all. . .”

\* \* \*

Milo stirred as the vehicle slowed to a stop. The sedative had worn off and his senses were returning to him. He remembered the ambulance, its medic informing him that his mecha was safely stowed away, and the ambulance being funneled into the tail end of the supply convoy. Then, it all went black. His gurney in the ambulance's rear bay hopped suddenly.

Milo let out a labored gasp. His right side was slightly sore, and Milo suspected that his nagging rib injury had come back to haunt him, yet again. The unremarkable face of the medic looked down upon him and informed him, "We've been asked to stop for the night. Do you feel enough to walk or do you want to sleep if off?"

"Where are we?" Milo gurgled back. He probably should have stayed put, but staying true to his essence, Milo wasn't about to do what he should have. He stumbled off the bunk and slipped on his boots. While he was still groggy from the sedative, Milo had his full range of motion and flexibility as evidenced by his back snapping into place as he stretched his massive frame.

"A few hours from the coast. . ." the medic answered. "The truck ahead of us pulled in to check on a minor mechanical problem and our driver pulled in behind it to lend a helping hand. One of the friendlier inns has obtained a radio link up of Austin's acceptance speech at Nantes and is going to pipe it out over the inn's sound system. Some of the recruits wanted to grab a quick meal at the inn while taking in the speech, and pull out during the night after the truck is repaired. That should put us at the coastal assembly point right about dawn."



Milo nodded solemnly as he took a few uneven steps towards the rear doors of the ambulance.

“My message ever get through to anyone, bub?” Milo huffed.

“It ended up at the feet of a Laurie Mason, someone closely tied to Austin’s group. She wanted a detailed medical update of your condition, and when it was nothing serious, she asked for you to be trucked in with the rest of the men. She said she’d notify the others. . .” the medic replied.

“Good. At least Austin will know,” Milo said quite satisfied with the reply.

“You actually know him, don’t you?” the medic asked incredulously.

Milo ushered him outside into the night jovially touting, “Well enough to have saved his life, and to have traded punches with him. Let me tell you all about it over a pint or two.”

The medic’s face soured as he said, “I think this is what Mason meant when she told me to keep you sedated for as long as possible. . .”

The pair immediately felt the warmth of the inn’s main hall pour into their weary bodies. Milo motioned for a couple of frothy covered mugs and handed one over to the lanky medic. Swift found a clear spot along one of the walls of this large room, which was already congested with the off-loaded soldiers from the truck. Swift saw a few shouting matches break out, but nothing escalated into a full scaled bar brawl. The inn’s bouncers were keeping an eye on the situation often accompanying some of the waitresses to the tables, making sure that the servers were not unduly accosted. Swift blinked and took a long gulp of the house lager from his mug.

He almost brought it back up, cursing, “God! This is vile!”

The medic sniffed at his mug and put it down on the floor, cautioning Swift, “Don’t indulge yourself too much. You’ve still got the sedative in your system.”

Milo nodded. The head barkeeper screamed out a general announcement for better behavior on the part of his patrons, and he drove it home with a veiled threat to not broadcast Austin’s speech for the assembled soldiers in the main chamber. After ducking a sporadic shower of hurled mugs in his direction, he quickly motioned to one of his staff to tune to the appropriate channel, lest they degenerate further.

Milo stomached another sip and closed his eyes as he tried to picture what Michael looked like when he took the podium to deliver his address. He would be in costume, not his REF dress uniform. No, it was something more. . . ostentatious. He was facing a sea of expectant faces, and Milo could see them all in his mind’s eye – de Vries, Jeanne, Mason, Pike, and the others looking proudly upon Michael from one of the nearer collection of seats as he made his general acknowledgment to the rest of the assembled crowd. He sounded a little weak – the rumor among the soldiers that he had suffered a mild heart attack a dozen hours before, and this seemed only to enhance his capital among them, that he was up on his feet again so soon. Milo didn’t know what to believe. Still, Michael’s only occasionally quavering voice carried well in the hall, even filtered through the tinny radio, perhaps because it was some grand old building built some earlier grand explosion of humanity’s creative spirit. And the words issuing forth from Michael’s mouth in the voice that Swift and the others at the inn could hear thundering across through the speakers were slightly out of place – his ideas, almost how he might put them. But with none of the exhaustion or despair he knew Michael had felt since Ohlfantoma. *Jeanne must have written it for him. It’s a good match*, Milo guessed. Still,

the sentiments might have been Michael's, and even some turns of phrase he knew Jeanne had taken from Michael. *Jeanne knows him well.* The borrowed words were stoking up something deep in the contingent of soldiers that made up the majority of the audience. Even Milo's seasoned and cynical heart felt enthralled by Austin's voice as it soared through a railing litany against the occupation - and then tumbled lowly towards a softer reminder of past heroics of the human spirit, before finally rising up to a powerful crescendo that ended with his clear vision of the future that awaited them all. Milo's concrete heart was used to blocking out most plays on emotion, but this was something else. He, no, everyone in the room felt. . . empowered. Michael's voice faded into silence and in its wake, Milo felt the fresh sting of his own tears rushing down his cheeks. If ever his loyalty to Austin had been in question before now, his reaction to this passionate plea clearly showed where he stood. He was not alone. The younger, more innocent, ones in the room soon to be led into the fray were much more vocal in their proclamations supporting Austin and the European Grand Alliance and towards Austin's inner core that were clearly at the forefront of the offensive. Friendships were being forged over more pints of lager, even if only to be torn asunder by the random cruelty of Invid plasma fire and the other vulgarities of the impending battle. But for tonight in this little corner of the world, it didn't matter. They believed in themselves, and more importantly they believed in the dogged determination of their figurehead. If they had known that one of Austin's own was in their midst, absolute pandemonium might have erupted, but Milo discreetly exited the main room for a breath of fresh air.

*Screw the fresh air*, Milo thought to himself, smiling, and noticing his Cyclone and gear in the back of one of the trucks, and looking down the dark road. *I'm well enough to ride.*