# Prologue I

The interior of the space yacht was luxurious to a degree that even Lady Constance Turin, a distant relative of Duchess Turin, found staggering. No expense had been spared to ensure that interstellar travel was as comfortable as staying at home on the family estates. The cabins were huge, the food was delicious, and the companionship—composed of trusted family retainers—was excellent. She’d even been told that she could take a handful of travel companions with her, despite the secrecy of her mission. But she had the feeling that she was ultimately regarded as expendable. She was high-ranking enough to speak for her distant aunt, but too lowly for her missteps to rebound badly on the family. Her next voyage might be a far less comfortable flight into exile.

She poured herself a drink as the yacht dropped out of hyperspace a reasonably safe distance from Caledonia. It felt odd to be taking extreme care when approaching a world, but the starship’s captain had made it clear to her that there was a war on . . . as if he’d expected her not to understand the implications. Constance—Connie, to her friends—had to admit she hadn’t realized some things that should have been obvious. If the yacht came out of hyperspace too close to the planet, she might be blown away by the planetary defenses before they realized who she was . . . and, if they did realize who she was, they might blow her away deliberately. There were so many rumors about who was actually in charge on the planet below that it was hard to tell just what she should expect, from the king greeting her with open arms to the colonials arresting her and putting her on trial for crimes against the colony worlds. In hindsight, Connie rather thought her aunt should have made arrangements for Connie’s reception before ordering her to leave Tyre.

But that wasn’t an option, she reminded herself as she stood and posed in front of the mirror. They didn’t dare risk making contact with the king . . .

Her reflection looked back at her, her body and face almost painfully young. She was young, by aristocratic standards. A mere child of twenty-five, barely old enough to be taken seriously in a universe where the senior figures were rarely less than three or four times her age. And while they looked young too—human vanity was an unchanging constant even in a universe gone mad—they had an experienced glint in their eyes she knew she lacked. A year ago, she’d been spending her trust fund and sowing her wild oats before she matured and took her place in the family business. Now she was an ambassador on a deniable mission who could be disowned at a moment’s notice. She kicked herself, mentally, for not holding out for more solid rewards. Her aunt had put her out on a limb and was busily sawing off the branch behind her.

And the universe has gone crazy, she thought morbidly. Who expected an actual civil war to break out?

She shook her head. She’d never paid much attention to politics. The role of the colonials in the Commonwealth, the Theocratic War, and—most importantly—the balance of power between the king, the House of Lords, and the House of Commons had never much interested her. They’d never really touched her. She’d had no real prospects of making something of herself, certainly not like Kat Falcone or some of the others who’d thrown their titles aside and plunged into the military. It still seemed insane to her. If you had so much, why throw it away?

Her aunt had been very clear during their one and only private meeting. Officially, as far as anyone knew outside the family itself, the family and the giant corporation it controlled were firmly on the government’s side. They were working as hard as they could to ensure a victory, to put the king firmly back in his box and slam the lid closed. But unofficially, they were hedging their bets. There was no guarantee the king would lose the war. If he won, if he got into a position where he could compel the government to surrender, it was vitally important that the family ended up on the right side. And that was the side that won.

“If the king wins,” Duchess Turin had said, “I will be in some trouble. But the family itself must be spared, even if I have to fall on my sword.”

Connie hadn’t understood, not then. But she thought she did now. The family was double-dealing, saying one thing to its allies while pledging covert loyalty to its enemies. The entire affair still staggered her every time she contemplated what she’d been sent to do. She’d be disowned if the king lost the war, the mission branded as nothing more than a crazy child’s desperate bid for power. No one would believe Duchess Turin, Connie was sure, but they’d all pretend to believe her. The Duchess had said as much herself, citing hints and tips that their family wasn’t the only one playing a double game. They had to emerge from the war on the winning side.

Her terminal bleeped. “Your Ladyship, we’ve received orders to await inspection before we enter orbit,” Captain Turin said. He was family—barely. If he wasn’t, he wouldn’t be trusted to command the yacht. “We can still turn and run if you wish, but we’re rapidly running out of time.”

Connie felt a hot flash of irritation mingled with grim understanding. Before the war, no one would have dared inspect an aristocratic yacht. Their IFF codes would have been enough to get them into orbit and heading down to the surface without even a cursory inspection. But now . . . She supposed she couldn’t blame them. The yacht was harmless, yet the locals had no way of knowing this. A modern warship could do a great deal of damage if it closed to point-blank range before opening fire, if it were camouflaged and no one realized it might be a threat. She sighed. She’d endured indignities, such as being snubbed by society hostesses, in the past. She could endure having her ship searched from top to bottom. At least the gesture meant they were taking her seriously.

“We can deal with it,” she said tiredly. “Make arrangements for me to meet the king as soon as possible.”

She let out a long breath as she picked up her datapad. Her aunt hadn’t given her any written instructions—that would have been far too incriminating, if they’d fallen into the wrong hands—but she knew what she had to do. Talk to the king, open lines of communication . . . without making promises that would come back to haunt the family when the war was over. And she knew it wouldn’t be easy. The king would want promises—cooperation—that she couldn’t offer, not without being immediately disowned. The family didn’t dare choose a side for good until they were sure the other side wouldn’t be able to destroy them.

“Because we don’t know who will win,” Duchess Turin had said when Connie asked why. “If we knew, we’d support the winner. Right now, all we can do is keep our options open and hope we can pick a side when we still have something to bargain with.”

A low quiver ran through the ship, the background hum of the drives fading away as the yacht waited to be boarded. Connie looked up, feeling oddly uneasy. She’d never had to contemplate the prospect of death before, death or disgrace. High Society was quite forgiving, if you had the right name and connections. But now . . .

If I fail, I will be disgraced, Connie thought. She had no illusions. Failure would mean permanent exclusion from the inner circles. I must not fail.

I will not fail.

And she waited.

# Prologue II

“We’ve got to stop meeting like this,” Captain Sarah Henderson said as she poured herself a mug of coffee and took her seat at the table. “People will talk.”

“People will always talk,” Governor Rogan said. He smiled at her, the expression never touching his eyes. “We’ve gone to some trouble to ensure we can speak privately.”

Sarah nodded, taking the opportunity to look around the table. There were seven people in the room, counting herself, all movers and shakers within the Colonial Alliance. They came from seven different worlds, all colonies. None came from Tyre. She had the nasty feeling it boded ill for the future. The Colonial Alliance had sworn to support the king to the bitter end. Just by being here, by meeting behind his back, they were breaking their word.

And the king may already know, she thought grimly. Caledonia’s government was so close to the king it had practically ceded authority to him. The king’s security forces were growing larger, pervading the spaceport and the surrounding facilities like nits in hair. If he knows, what will he do?

Governor Rogan didn’t mince words. “You know what happened at Tarleton,” he said. “The king’s man arrested and imprisoned the entire government on charges of treason. If Admiral Falcone hadn’t intervened, they might well have been executed by now and the planet under permanent martial law.”

“The king was within his rights to be angry,” Ambassador Yang pointed out. She looked young, but Sarah knew she’d been an ambassador longer than Sarah had been alive. “The planet did surrender.”

“The planet had no choice,” Sarah said flatly. She was the only military officer at the table. She was the only one who could point out the truth and make them believe it. “The Tyrians had complete control of the high orbitals. Resistance would have been . . .”

“Futile?” Ambassador Guarani asked. “Or useless?”

“I was going to say impossible,” Sarah said. “They could not have so much as scratched the paint on the warships while the Tyrians reduced the planet’s surface to radioactive cinders. There comes a point, sir, when further resistance is pointless.”

“That wasn’t the attitude we had when we fought the god-botherers,” Guarani snapped. “We fought to the bitter end!”

“If a planet surrendered to the Theocrats, the people knew what to expect.” Sarah met his eyes, evenly. “The planet would be forcibly reshaped. Planetary leaders would be executed, military and police personnel would be put to hard labor, women would be forced into the home, and children would be raised in their poisonous religion. The Theocrats wouldn’t honor whatever terms they offered the planet in order to induce the locals to surrender. Once we knew that, we didn’t surrender.

“Tyre is different. This war has been marked with a notable lack of atrocities. There was no mass roundup of traitors on Tarleton, let alone any of the other worlds and settlements they’ve occupied over the last six months. The Tyrians have been clever enough to ensure that we can surrender without baring our necks for the executioner’s blade. They’ve made it clear they intend to be decent, and so far they’ve honored their word. I cannot blame the local government for surrendering when they had a flat choice between a reasonably harmless occupation and complete destruction.”

“It wouldn’t have been harmless,” Yang pointed out. “The House of Lords has made it clear that they intend to recoup their investments, somehow.”

“Somehow,” Guarani repeated. He laughed, harshly. “I wonder what they have in mind. The money to repay them simply doesn’t exist. And if they levy heavy taxes, they’re going to kill the goose that lays the golden eggs.”

“More like iron eggs,” Yang said. “And there are cheaper, easier, and safer ways to get iron.”

Sarah looked from one to the other, keeping her thoughts to herself. Guarani had a point. The Colonial Alliance wasn’t that rich. The concept of careful development had been tossed out the airlock when the Theocratic War had begun, destroying all the plans for the colonial worlds to repay Tyre for its massive investment. Sure, they could recover all the industrial plants and productive nodes they’d built over the last ten years, but it would cost them more than it was worth to transport everything back to Tyre. And, at the same time, they’d destroy a sizable market for their goods. Her lips twitched, humorlessly. No one would be buying anything from Tyre if they didn’t have money to buy it with.

“We’re getting off topic,” Governor Rogan said. “Can we trust the king?”

The words echoed in the chamber. Sarah shivered despite the warm air. She’d sworn an oath to the king when she’d donned her uniform; she’d betrayed her then commanding officer to take control of her ship when the king and his former government had finally come to blows. She knew she would be executed for mutiny if she fell into enemy hands. And yet . . . she felt uncomfortable, as if she were betraying a second master.

“He shouldn’t have passed judgment on Tarleton so quickly,” Guarani said flatly. “But—”

“It isn’t the first time he’s acted without our agreement.” Yang cut him off, her expression grim. “Right now, he’s running the war like an autocrat.”

“He may not have a choice,” Sarah said. “There’s no time to debate when the missiles are flying.”

“That’s not in doubt,” Governor Rogan said. “But the missiles aren’t flying.”

“Yet.” Sarah hadn’t seen any tactical or strategic projections, but she was no fool. The House of Lords had to be planning an offensive against Caledonia itself in the hopes of capturing the king and his loyalists in a single blow. It wouldn’t be long before they amassed the power to launch a major offensive. “If we don’t hang together, we’ll hang separately.”

“And what will we do,” Governor Rogan asked, “if the king doesn’t keep his promises after the war?”

Sarah looked down at her hands. She had no answer.

“So . . . what do we do?” Yang smiled, humorlessly. “Which of us will volunteer to bell the cat?”

“There’s already discontent on the streets,” Governor Rogan said. “It’s only going to get worse as news of Tarleton spreads from one end of the Alliance to the other. The StarCom network will make sure of it.”

The House of Lords will make sure of it when they realize what sort of propaganda tool has fallen into their laps, Sarah thought. They’ll go out of their way to make the news as harmful for the king as possible.

“Yeah,” Guarani said. “Who’ll tell the king he needs to back down?”

“There aren’t many of us who can,” Governor Rogan said. “We’re being frozen out of the innermost circles. His closest supporters are unlikely to go against him.”

“Kat Falcone might,” Sarah said quietly.

“She lost status when she lost the Battle of Tyre,” Guarani pointed out. “And the king’s already pissed at her.”

“There’s another point,” Yang said. “If we talk to the king, and the king refuses to listen to us, what do we do? And, if we do something drastic, what will happen to us?”

“The king is not all-powerful.” Governor Rogan indicated Sarah. “A sizable chunk of his military is composed of colonials.”

“Yes,” Sarah said.

“That’s not the point,” Yang said. “If we start disputing with the king, if matters start heading downhill rapidly, the House of Lords will take advantage of it. We could lose the war. And what will happen then?”

Sarah winced. She had no answer. But she knew that others did.

# Prologue III

Ambassador Francis Villeneuve of Marseilles was finding little to impress him on his incognito tour of Caledonia. His experienced eyes noted the places where the colony world’s natural development had given way to rushed industrialization to fight the greatest war the galaxy had ever seen, followed by the planet’s hasty incorporation as the capital of a government-in-exile. Or semiexile, he supposed. His intelligence staff had made it clear that King Hadrian and his staffers were exchanging hundreds of messages with friends, supporters, and possible contacts on Tyre. For a war that both sides had pledged to fight to the last, there was an astonishing number of people making official, semiofficial, and blatantly unauthorized attempts to bring the two sides to the negotiation table. He supposed it wasn’t too surprising. There were hundreds—perhaps thousands—of families that found themselves torn in two by the war.

Which gives them a chance of coming out on top no matter who wins, he thought as the aircar finally landed on the embassy’s roof. Or at least of making sure whoever winds up on the losing side gets nothing worse than a slap on the wrist.

He kept his thoughts to himself as he clambered out of the aircar, exchanged salutes with the guard on duty, and stepped through the security field. There were so many intelligence and counterintelligence operations underway on Caledonia that he would have been surprised if he hadn’t been stung with a nanotech bug or two . . . dozen. Marseilles was bending the laws on interstellar relationships to a breaking point, although Tyre hadn’t bothered to do more than lodge a formal complaint. It was only a matter of time, Francis knew, before that changed. The legal fiction that allowed his government to establish an embassy on Caledonia wouldn’t stand up to scrutiny, although that didn’t matter. The only thing that mattered was military power and the will to use it. If Tyre ever found out what his government was doing, they’d get very willful indeed.

Another guard passed him a datapad. Francis glanced at it, noting that the security field had killed fourteen bugs. He had no way of knowing who’d stung him or why, although there was no shortage of suspects. One complication of a civil war was that both sides used the same equipment and technology, their forces interchangeable in a manner the galaxy hadn’t seen since the Breakdown. Francis shrugged, returned the datapad, and made his way down to the makeshift office. Admiral Giles Jacanas was waiting for him.

“Mr. Ambassador,” Jacanas said. “I trust the mission was successful?”

“The king is running out of time to stall,” Francis said with heavy satisfaction. “He must decide, soon, if he wants to do more than flirt with us.”

He sat down, mentally composing his report. In one sense, Marseilles didn’t care who came out ahead in the Commonwealth Civil War. The war wasn’t going to really alter the balance of power unless both sides took the gloves off and started slaughtering entire populations on a scale that would make the Theocrats blanch. But, in another way, it was important to keep the fighting going as long as possible. The Commonwealth had been a growing threat to Marseilles simply by blocking interstellar expansion away from the remnants of Earth even before it had fought and won a war with the Theocracy. In the short term, the war had been incredibly costly and destructive; in the long term, it had positioned Tyre to make a bid for galactic power. Marseilles had been relieved that Tyre had stopped the Theocracy but wasn’t blind to the threat Tyre represented. The combination of a powerful military, an experienced officer corps, and the need for a distraction from serious structural weaknesses might have pushed Tyre into considering a second war. Francis wasn’t so sure, but it wouldn’t be the first time a government had done something outsiders had considered insane even without the advantages of hindsight.

“The king will have to give up the technical specifications soon if he wants to win,” he said dryly. A maid brought him coffee, bowed, and retreated as silently as she’d come. “Or he can stay here and wait for his enemies to come knocking.”

“Time is not on his side,” Jacanas agreed. “The House of Lords will be ready for a decisive offensive within twelve months, if not less.”

“And so we must time it carefully,” Francis said. He sipped his coffee. “And make sure he pays us while he can pay us.”

He smiled coldly, then sobered. The Commonwealth had developed enough newer and better weapons technology to give it a decisive advantage if it went to war against a peer power. Marseilles was working desperately to catch up, as were all the other interstellar powers, but the Commonwealth had a window of opportunity. Francis and his superiors weren’t blind to the implications. The longer they took to catch up, the greater the chance of Tyre turning expansionist and punching Marseilles out before they could mount a reasonable defense. If they could get their hands on pieces of hardware to study, let alone the blueprints themselves, it would be a great deal easier to catch up.

And put us in the position to contemplate some expansion for ourselves, he thought. Or even to gain unfettered access to unexplored stars.

Marseilles was in an odd position, geopolitically speaking, hemmed in on all sides by other interstellar powers that could block its access to the rim of known space. Blockading hyperspace wasn’t easy, but it could be done.

He sat back in his chair, schooling his thoughts into calm. There was no point in contemplating a future that might not come to pass, not when everything depended on a king who was under immense pressure. The poor bastard was caught between multiple factions, all of whom could be relied upon to react badly if the king seemed to be favoring their rivals. Perhaps it was no surprise that the king was already making mistakes. His friends and allies—his true friends and allies—were few and far between. Everyone else wanted something. And woe betide the one who failed to supply it.

It doesn’t matter who wins, Francis told himself. As long as we get what we want out of the bargain, the king can win or lose and we still come out ahead.

# Chapter One

Caledonia

There had been a time, Kat Falcone recalled with a bitterness that surprised her, that King Hadrian would have welcomed her to his palace. There had been a time when he would have instantly dismissed petitioners when she arrived, doing whatever he had to do to make time to see her. There had even been a handful of times, when they’d been planning the final stages of the Theocratic War and, later, the occupation, when they’d even just kicked back and been nothing more than friends. Her lips quirked at the thought. They hadn’t been lovers. They’d been friends who’d wanted, who’d needed, nothing the other could supply. They’d been free to be themselves.

She sat in the waiting room, tapping her fingers in impatience. The room was strikingly luxurious, designed to give an image of limitless wealth and power, but there was nothing to do while waiting. Whoever had designed the chamber had set out to convey the impression that everyone who waited to be seen was nothing more than an insignificant petitioner, someone who didn’t matter. She’d seen the pattern before, back on Tyre. It had never impressed her. Anyone who had a reason to be in the waiting room, anyone who was important enough to see the king, wouldn’t be impressed. They’d probably even be aware of the manipulation, which wouldn’t amuse them in the slightest.

And we’re wasting time, she thought, looking at the door on the far side of the room. She could walk through it and then . . . and then what? The king was in negotiations with someone. Her sudden appearance might make things worse if they thought she heralded bad news. She snorted, bitterly. In a sense, she did herald bad news. The war was still trapped in a stalemate. And the last engagement had been a tactical victory but a strategic defeat. We need to find a way to tip the balance in our favor.

She rose and paced the room, wishing she’d thought to bring a book or an e-reader with her, something—anything—that could distract her from the war. She’d read the reports, both the official ones submitted to the makeshift Admiralty and the unofficial ones from a bewildering network of influencers, pollsters, and outright spies who reported to the king. There were people who blamed her for everything, from losing the Battle of Tyre to the recent engagement, insisting that she was secretly working for the House of Lords—an idea so absurd she honestly couldn’t wrap her head around it. If she’d wanted to betray the king, all she would have had to do was arrest him the moment he set foot on her starship. There would have been no need to fight a civil war when she could have ended it in a second.

A mirror hung in the corner, glinting oddly as it caught the light. She stood in front of her reflection and studied herself. Blonde hair fell over a heart-shaped face, the hair really too long for military service. She’d cut it short when she’d joined the navy, even though she probably could have gotten away with bending the regulations that far. The navy made accommodations for people, provided their accommodations didn’t get in the way of military efficiency. And she was an aristocrat . . . She frowned as she noted how tired her blue eyes looked, how pale and drawn her face was. She looked tired—tired and beaten. She rubbed her eyes, wondering if the king’s PR specialists would recoil in horror the moment they saw her. She didn’t look like a great heroine. No doubt the pictures and videos would be carefully tweaked before they were released to an unsuspecting public. The laws against manipulating content, everything from smoothing out one’s skin to outright deepfakes, had been tossed aside long ago. She wondered, sourly, if anyone truly believed the lies. There were just too many independent news producers, scattered across the Commonwealth, for a largely fictional narrative to take root.

Which might make crafting such a narrative possible, she thought grimly. If everyone thinks faking a story is impossible, they might not realize that it can be done.

The door opened, revealing a dark-skinned man in a simple suit and tie. Kat turned to face him, noting how he stood. His hands were never far from his belt. A bodyguard, she thought. Probably someone with genuine military training. The king’s paranoia had only grown in the days and weeks since the Battle of Tyre, when it had sunk in that the war wasn’t going to end in a single vicious engagement. He’d recruited so many guards that wages were going up right across the planet. Plus, half the population seemed convinced it was only a matter of time before the planet was invaded and brutally put to the sword.

“Admiral.” The bodyguard inclined his head, his eyes never leaving her. “His Majesty will see you now.”

Kat nodded, allowing him to lead her through the door. The bodyguard’s act was good, although she could see the weaknesses. He always kept himself a certain distance from her, as if he feared she’d put a knife in his back. Kat rather suspected he didn’t really trust the guards on duty outside the palace, the ones who’d scanned her right down to the nanoscopic level before they’d allowed her to pass the first checkpoint. There was literally nowhere she could have concealed a weapon, not from that level of security. And yet, the bodyguard was paranoid. His master was probably the foremost target in the entire galaxy.

She kept the thought to herself as the bodyguard showed her into the king’s private office. It was surprisingly comfortable compared to his more formal office or the council chamber where his closest advisers and supporters met. There were comfortable armchairs, welcoming sofas, and, to her dismay, a sizable drinks cabinet. She’d helped him to bed only a few short days ago after he’d drunk enough to challenge even his genetically enhanced biology. She was not pleased to see him pouring himself a rather large drink.

“And thank all the gods that’s over,” the king said as he held up an empty glass. “Will you join me in a toast?”

“No, if you don’t mind.” Kat kept her voice even, although she knew the king might mind a great deal. “I need to keep my wits about me.”

“Always a good idea, in this place.” The king waved her to an armchair, then sat himself to face her. “Everyone has a plan to win, and everyone else doesn’t want to hear it.”

He lifted his drink. “Cheers.”

Kat frowned as he drained the glass. The king was as handsome as ever, the combination of genetic engineering and cosmetic sculpting gave him a mature look, with an angular face, short dark hair, and a smile that didn’t quite touch his eyes. But he also looked . . . sloppy, as if he’d been liquefied and practically poured into his outfit. He wore a simple black suit with a single golden rose pinned to his breast. Yet . . . it looked ill-fitting. Kat felt a flicker of concern mingled with a grim awareness that clothing was the least of their concerns. The war could still go either way.

“I concluded preliminary a deal with Ambassador Villeneuve of Marseilles,” the king said. “If things go well, they’ll be filling the gaps in our roster and supplying everything we can’t make for ourselves.”

“That’s rather a lot of things,” Kat said. She would be astonished if Marseilles sent actual starships to fight beside the king. The House of Lords might turn a blind eye to diplomatic missives, and even the establishment of an embassy, but they’d hardly ignore a foreign fleet defending Caledonia. It would be a de facto declaration of war. “What do they want in return?”

“Nothing much.” The king reached for the bottle and poured himself another glass. “They want some minor border concessions, where the Commonwealth brushes against their territory, and access to detailed technical specifications for our latest weapons.”

Kat’s eyes narrowed. “They want us to give them advanced weapons?”

The king snorted, as if she’d said something stupid. “How else are they going to supply us with modern weapons?”

“It will take them months, at the very least, to gear up their plants to put the latest missiles into mass production,” Kat said. She’d never taken any interest in the production side of things, but she knew the basics. Months was an optimistic estimate. “In that time, Your Highness, the war may be won or lost. They may never supply us with a single missile.”

“They flatly refused to supply us with their missiles,” the king said. “They claimed it would be impossible for us to fire them from our ships.”

Kat frowned, uneasily. There was a certain amount of truth in that, she supposed. Foreign missiles weren’t configured for Tyrian missile tubes. Their control links would have to be reprogrammed to allow their new owners to target and fire them. And yet, it was possible to overcome such problems. She’d had no trouble capturing enemy hardware during the Theocratic War and pointing the systems right back at them. But then, the Commonwealth and the Theocrats had already been at war. Marseilles probably didn’t want to risk pushing the House of Lords to the point where their provocations couldn’t be overlooked any longer. The king’s ships firing Marseillan missiles would be something they’d have to respond to. The Marseillans might as well have sent the House of Lords a calling card attached to an insulting note.

And that might draw some of the heat off us, she thought. But . . .

She shook her head. Widening the war would be utterly disastrous, no matter who came out ahead. If Marseilles won a decisive victory, they might claim Tyre itself and then advance to swallow the remainder of the Commonwealth. The king would count for nothing if the throne was lost beyond all hope of recovery. And if the House of Lords recovered, they’d have all the proof they needed that the king was a tool of a foreign power. His reputation would never recover, whatever happened. He would certainly never be allowed to rule unchallenged, even in the colonies. The Colonial Alliance would be reluctant to swap one master for another.

Which makes me wonder if they know what the king is doing, she mused. And what they’ll do if they find out they’re being kept in the dark?

She put the thought into words. “How many people know about the negotiations?”

“Here?” The king looked down at his glass. “Only four . . . five, counting you. We conducted the discussions under immense secrecy. No point in letting everyone know. It would only upset them.”

“It would galvanize the House of Lords to throw caution to the wind and attack us here,” Kat warned. “And not all of your supporters would go along with trading information for missiles.”

“They won’t have a choice.” The king corrected himself, sharply. “They don’t have a choice, do they? If we lose this war, we lose everything.”

“Yeah.” Kat couldn’t disagree with that, even as she wondered at his methods. “But we also have to think about the future. We could win one war only to blunder straight into another.”

“We’ll worry about that when it happens,” the king said. He put his glass aside, somewhat to her relief. “If we win the war, we can renegotiate terms with our suppliers. If we lose, they’re not going to get paid anyway. And anyone who finds out ahead of time will have to think about the future too.”

Kat frowned. “Do you really think you can keep this setup a secret until the time is right?”

“Yes,” the king said. “Only my most trusted advisers know the truth.”

“Really.” Kat wasn’t so sure. Caledonia was infested with spies. She would be astonished if there weren’t at least a million spies on the surface, ranging from long-term sources to information brokers and opportunists keen to make their fortunes before the war came to an end. Someone would be monitoring the palace, the embassies, and everywhere else that had even the tiniest shred of importance. And someone else would be tying it together into a single picture. “I doubt the House of Lords will remain in the dark forever.”

“As long as they remain in the dark long enough,” the king said. “And who would believe them?”

“Too many people,” Kat said. “They don’t have a reputation for outright lying. Not yet.”

She leaned back into her chair, feeling grimly unsure of herself. The House of Lords could certainly claim the king was allying himself with foreign powers . . . and discover, later, that they had been telling the truth all along. So far, they’d been remarkably restrained. That would change, she was sure, as attitudes hardened on both sides and all hope of a relatively peaceful return to sanity faded away. Or when it finally dawned on them that they didn’t need to lie to do immense damage to the king’s reputation. All they had to do was tell the truth about everything that had happened on Tarleton. The king’s man had tried to arrest the colonial government. The Colonial Alliance wouldn’t be pleased when it learned that Justiciar Montfort had acted under Hadrian’s orders.

If a somewhat loose interpretation of his orders, Kat thought sourly. She wasn’t blind to the simple truth that Justiciar Montfort’s defense was quite reasonable and would have been sufficient, if there hadn’t been so much outrage at him. If they decide the king knew what was going to happen, or gave the order, they could do anything in response.

“We have to win the war,” the king said. “Whatever . . . questionable . . . decisions we have to make will be handled then, once the war is over. Or put aside forever, if the war is lost.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Kat said. “I understand.”

“Very good.” The king poured himself yet another glass. “I have a meeting with my inner council in twenty minutes. Do you have a plan to win the war?”

Kat’s eyes narrowed. She hadn’t been invited to the meeting, even though she’d been one of the king’s strongest supporters. An oversight or . . . or what? The king might have chosen to exclude her to please the idiots who suspected her of treason, or . . . or chosen to exclude her because she disagreed with him openly. Or . . . Was she overthinking the problem? She was a military officer, not a political leader. She’d never tried to hide that she found nonmilitary matters boring when she’d first been invited to the privy council. The king had gone along with it.

And being hundreds of light-years away didn’t help either, she reflected. She’d been so far from Tyre that she couldn’t even attend via hologram. Nor did she have the time to read the highly classified transcripts that had been forwarded to her. No time to do more than read the summaries and cast meaningless votes.

She put her concerns aside. “Your Majesty, we need to continue to wear them down, in hopes of creating an opening we can use to win the war in a single blow.”

“Quite,” the king said. “And how do you intend to achieve this?”

“I don’t know, not yet.” Kat scowled. “If we deploy our entire fleet in hopes of making the diversionary operations convincing, we run the risk of giving them a clear shot at Caledonia.”

Or of making the House of Lords too unsure of themselves to deploy their fleet away from Tyre, she added, silently. The trick is to offer them a shot at victory without actually giving them a shot at victory.

She watched the king stand and start to pace, a mannerism they had in common. He knew as well as she did that they couldn’t hope to win a long, drawn-out war, no matter what assistance they received from Marseilles. The House of Lords was bringing the reserve fleet online, training up new officers and crewmen, and building newer and better weapons. It would be just a matter of time until her brother and her best friend—her former best friend—felt strong enough to hit Caledonia without leaving Tyre exposed. And that would be the end. The king couldn’t keep his cause alive once his capital had been captured and his fleet scattered beyond hope of resupply. He’d have to throw himself on the House of Lords’ collective mercy, a trait Kat knew to be in very short supply.

“I’ll look for options,” she said calmly. “We may have to gamble.”

“We can wait until we receive the newer weapons and supplies,” the king said. “Marseilles isn’t the only interstellar power interested in supporting us.”

“They’re interested in keeping the Commonwealth off-balance,” Kat said, sharply. “They’re not interested—”

The king rounded on her. “Don’t you think I know that?”

He calmed himself with an effort. “I apologize,” he said stiffly. “The stress is getting to me.”

“I quite understand,” Kat said. She did, although she wasn’t inclined to forgive people who shouted at her. At least he’d had the grace to apologize. “Perhaps you shouldn’t be drinking so much.”

“There’s little else I can do,” the king said. He snorted, humorlessly. “I’m a prisoner of events.”

“Then we’ll try to find a way to take control,” Kat said. She knew that wouldn’t be easy. The king was rapidly running up against the limits of his power. His fate wouldn’t be decided on Caledonia, or at least Caledonia alone. All their plans might come to nothing if the House of Lords put its own plans into operation. “There are always options.”

“Yes,” the king said. “And sometimes we need to stake everything on one throw of the dice.”

# Chapter Two

Caledonia

“Justice for Tarleton,” the voices bellowed. “Justice for Tarleton!”

Captain Sarah Henderson shivered, despite herself, as the protest march hove into view. It was as spontaneous as any large protest could be on a planet under martial law; she’d heard the local government had only granted permission after it had been pointed out that the march was probably going to go ahead with or without the government’s blessing. The protest was already growing rapidly in size and shouting power. She felt something deeply primal within her, both luring her into the crowd and urging her to run. She’d had two days of shore leave and . . . She shuddered. She hadn’t had the chance to do much of anything for herself before the shit hit the fan.

She lifted her cup to her lips and took a sip. She’d spent the last few hours exploring the city, trying to get a sense of local feeling. The time hadn’t really been informative. There had been grumbles about shops selling out of imports from Tyre and the rest of the colonies, but nothing that hinted at a change of public opinion. And anger about the problem of Tarleton had been mounting steadily as the king and his closest supporters failed to do anything to quell the unease. She had the grim feeling that it had finally burst into the open.

The mob advanced, shadowed by a handful of policemen in riot gear. The march was both threatening and remarkably well behaved, shouts echoing off the tall skyscrapers even as the protesters stayed within the road and allowed pedestrians to walk down the street without harassment. Several teenagers handed out paper leaflets, running in and out of the crowd as if they expected to be cited by the policemen if they stood still for more than a few seconds. Sarah took a leaflet from a young girl and scanned it quickly. The paper charged that the king had given the justiciar private orders, which he’d attempted to carry out. Sarah frowned, concerned. Secret orders were not unknown in the navy, but they were of questionable legal value. Justiciar Montfort would probably have had more latitude than anyone outside the establishment would realize. It didn’t absolve him of his crimes, even if it did land the king in hot water.

She gritted her teeth as the shouting grew louder. Her eyes swept the mob, noting people who were clearly spacers along with industrial workers and immigrants who’d moved to Caledonia in the hopes of finding newer and better jobs. The latter would be in some trouble, she suspected, if the protest turned violent. Caledonia had never been as welcoming to immigrants as Tyre—the planetary infrastructure and security forces were less capable of handling potential disruptions—and the locals would demand their immediate deportation if they appeared to be more trouble than they were worth. She frowned as the noise grew worse, trying to ignore the handful of police flyers hanging menacingly in the distance. All along the road, doors closed and heavy shutters slammed shut. Caledonia had seen too much political and social unrest for anyone to believe the mob would disperse peacefully. The leaders might hope for a peaceful resolution, for a simple march to show local feeling, but there would be troublemakers in the crowd yearning for violence. Rumor claimed the House of Lords was funding every loudmouth with a lack of common sense.

The waiter materialized at her side. “We’re closing,” he said bluntly. The politeness he’d displayed when she’d entered the café was gone. She had no trouble recognizing his fear. Mobs were terrifying, even if one had enough firepower to crush an army. They had no brain and no fear, at least until the bullets started flying. “Do you want to come inside or leave now?”

Sarah considered his words, then shrugged. It went against the grain to allow fear to dominate her life, even though she was nervous. The shouting was growing louder, pressing against her eardrums. She wanted to run, to turn and flee for her life. She knew she couldn’t give in to the fear or it would forever overshadow her. She reached into her pocket and produced a handful of royals, the planet’s local currency. Caledonia had never embraced e-currency to the same level as Tyre and the other first-rank worlds. The locals were justifiably suspicious of money they couldn’t hold in their hands.

“I’ll go.” Sarah paid him, adding a midsized tip. The coins weren’t worth their face value. She was grimly aware that inflation was rising, despite the king’s pleas for calm and the government’s best efforts. It was only a matter of time before the government started to fix prices, blowing the bottom out of the economy. “I’m sure I’ll be back. It was very good coffee.”

“If we’re still here,” the waiter said. He’d tried to flirt with her when she’d entered, but now . . . he looked too worried to muster even a single tedious quip. He seemed torn between the urge to tell her to run and inviting her to take shelter inside the café. “Good luck.”

Sarah nodded as she stepped through the tiny gate and onto the street. The mob seemed to be good about not pressing onto the pavement, but that would soon change. She caught sight of a handful of children amid the crowd, grinning as they chanted as if it were just a special day out. Shouldn’t they be in school? She laughed at herself a moment later. She was thinking like a Tyrian, not someone who’d grown up on a piss-poor planet in the middle of nowhere. School? Kids couldn’t go to school when there was work to be done on the farm. But Caledonia had schools, didn’t it? The government had worked hard to catch up with the first-rank worlds.

She kept moving as a line of policemen marched past her wearing armor that would have been intimidating to uninformed civilians. She shuddered, wondering just how uninformed—and unarmed—the civilians in the mob actually were. They could have all sorts of weapons, from makeshift tools to actual guns and ammunition. Caledonia had no gun laws, a legacy of the days when the police didn’t exist and a horde of religious fanatics might fall out of the skies at any moment. If the mob turned into an insurgency . . .

“Justice,” the mob howled. “Justice!”

A man pressed another leaflet into her hand and hurried on before she could get a good look at him. She crumpled the paper and shoved it into her pocket, then resumed her walk towards the road linking the city to the spaceport strip. The mob seemed to swell, as if half the city was on the march. She spotted a stream of spacers, some wearing naval uniforms, flowing out of the spaceport and joining the crowd. They’d be in hot water if they were caught . . . or they would have been a few short months ago. The military wasn’t supposed to get involved in politics, but . . . She snorted. The Royal Navy had been dominated by politics. Pretty much all of her former commanding officers had been selected by their patrons for political reliability rather than demonstrated competence. A number had been killed off during the opening days of the war. The last war. The remainder had stayed at their posts until they’d been reassigned or pushed into resigning.

You can’t count on the Theocrats for anything, she thought wryly. You can’t even count on them to rid us of incompetent officers.

The noise rapidly dwindled as she made her way through the spaceport strip. There were guards everywhere, locals and marines, looking wary as they glanced towards the distant gates. A number of shops and entertainment facilities, even brothels, were closing, something she’d thought impossible. The spaceport was normally open every hour of every day, even on planets that observed the Sabbath or their local counterpart. Now . . . She saw spacers hurrying around, their eyes nervous as they took in the lack of crowds. The handful of people who sneaked through the gates, mainly youngsters intent on visiting facilities that were rarely available outside the wire, were gone.

It felt like the end of the world.

She reached the terminal and stepped inside, noting just how few shuttles were prepped and ready for immediate departure. The frantic push to get as many military and former civilian ships online as quickly as possible was putting huge demands on the planetary infrastructure, demands that it couldn’t even begin to meet. She knew things were going to get worse before they got better, if they ever did. The king had no shortage of trained manpower, but he was very short on materials and support infrastructure. The only upside, as far as she could tell, was that the Tyrians appeared to have the opposite problem.

“Captain,” the dispatcher said, “I can have a shuttle for you in twenty minutes.”

“There’s no hurry,” Sarah lied. She wanted to get off the planet, back onto her command deck. She’d be happier up there, even though she knew there would be people trying to kill her. At least such potentially deadly dynamics would be nice and understandable. The politics on the surface left her cold. “I’ll wait.”

She took a chair and dug through her pockets until she found the leaflet. It looked like something that had been run off by hand, rather than mass-produced in a printer. She snorted, wondering if that was deliberate. Caledonia had never fallen that far in the years since she was cut off from Earth. But printed matter did tend to be taken more seriously than electronic text. There was something about it that carried more weight. She smiled at the thought—all of her tactical manuals were electronic—as she unfolded the leaflet. The text warned the reader, all readers, that they’d better not be caught with the document. The results might be disastrous for their employment, their reputation, and even perhaps their freedom.

Her eyes narrowed as she skimmed the remainder of the leaflet. The writer seemed to believe the king was on the verge of imposing a tyrannical regime across the entire Commonwealth, threatening the freedoms of every last world . . . regardless of which side it had taken when the dispute between the king and his government turned to civil war. The justiciar’s decision to try to arrest the entire government on Tarleton was only the beginning. Soon, the writer warned, the king would move to take control of the entire government. The colonials were already being frozen out.

Which might be true, Sarah thought. Governor Rogan had said the same, back when they’d held their meeting. The king’s government was torn between his clients, many of whom hoped to return to Tyre if proper terms could be arranged, and the colonials, who knew they wouldn’t have a future unless Tyre was brought to heel. And who knows what will happen then?

She crumpled the leaflet, then dropped it in the bin as her shuttle was called. The unknown writer might be right, although it was hard to separate cold hard truth from demented ravings. Princess Drusilla, the king’s wife, might have come from the Theocracy, but blaming her for the crimes of her father, brothers, and everyone else was simply unfair. She’d had no power whatsoever. Besides, by the same logic, the king himself was a traitor. He’d been born and bred on Tyre.

The House of Lords would probably agree with that logic, she thought. They think he’s a traitor too.

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There was no shortage of irony, Governor Bertram Rogan considered, in establishing the Colonial Alliance headquarters in a skyscraper that had once belonged to the Falcone Corporation. The building was the kind of place where the Colonial Alliance’s representatives had never been welcome, where anyone who dared mention words like “union” or “political rights” was shown the door as quickly as possible. Bertram had always loathed the corporations for their arrogance, but he’d hated the simple truth that they had a reason to be arrogant. They’d sewn up political power on Tyre, and by extension in the Commonwealth, decades before he’d been born. What they said went, and if there was even the faintest chance that a colonial would come out ahead, they’d change the rules to make sure he couldn’t and didn’t.

Bertram stood at the window, watching the protest march as it strode down the boulevard and past the House of Worlds, where the king’s makeshift government was taking shape. The king had said all the right things as the Commonwealth had lurched towards civil war, but now . . . Bertram had his doubts. The king and his closest supporters were too intent on returning to Tyre, too determined to recover what they’d lost to build something new. Bertram wasn’t blind to the simple fact that they held most of the power, controlling most of the fleet and the ever-growing planetary security forces. The colonials would need to launch a second round of mutinies to get rid of him if they felt they had no other choice. That wouldn’t be easy. The first set of mutinies had been largely unprecedented. Indeed, there had only been one mutiny on a naval vessel before the civil war. But now . . .

He rubbed his forehead, feeling a dull ache behind his temples. There were dozens, if not hundreds, of armed soldiers on each and every starship, save perhaps for the lowliest gunboats. A mutiny might be quashed before it could take the starship out of commission, let alone turn the vessel against the king. And even if they could mutiny . . . He felt his headache grow worse as he considered the dangers. The House of Lords might move to take advantage of the chaos and smash the Colonial Alliance, and the king’s faction, before they could get back on their feet. No, there was no might about it. So many spies lurked on Caledonia that it was hard to believe there was room for civilians. The House of Lords would know if the king fell out with his supporters, and they would take advantage of it. And that would be the end.

“We don’t have a choice,” he muttered tiredly. “We have to work with the king.”

All had seemed so simple, once upon a time. The House of Lords, the Tyrians, were exploiting the colonies. Even calling them colonies was a mark of disdain. It wasn’t as if any of the worlds Bertram represented had been founded from Tyre. And the king had seemed their protector, the one willing to make investments that would eventually turn them all into first-rank worlds. Bertram didn’t regret allying with the king, not after the recession had thrown millions out of work and kicked off a series of economic collapses. There was no way he would have worked with the House of Lords, even if they’d wanted to work with him. He’d always be aware that they were measuring his back for the knife. And yet . . .

He knew the war hung in the balance. The Battle of Tyre had been lost. Elsewhere, the king had made gains, only to lose them again when the House of Lords struck back. Bertram wasn’t blind to the simple truth that they had to hang together or be hung separately, yet . . . he knew, all too well, that they couldn’t allow themselves to become too dependent on the king. What would Hadrian do with absolute power? He’d already shown signs of losing control of himself. The decision to send the justiciar to Tarleton might not have been a misstep—Bertram knew there were factions in the colonies who would have loudly cheered if the entire planetary government had been sentenced to death—but trying to arrest the government without the Alliance’s consent had been a disaster. The king owed Kat Falcone more than he could ever repay. His allies were now worried about the future. If the king was prepared to throw his weight around when he wasn’t all-powerful, what would he do when he was?

We don’t know, Bertram thought. And that’s the problem, isn’t it?

The intercom bleeped. “Sir, the petition has been presented to the House of Worlds,” his secretary said. “They’re going to pass it to the king tomorrow.”

“I’m sure they are,” Bertram said with heavy sarcasm. He wasn’t sure the king would take any notice. His advisers probably wouldn’t give a damn. Most of them simply wanted to go home, back to Tyre. Bertram was morbidly sure they’d betray the king in a heartbeat if they thought they could get away with it. “Inform them I’ll take it to him myself.”

“Yes, sir.”

Bertram frowned as he turned back to the window. The crowd was steadily dispersing now, streams of people flowing away in all directions. He allowed himself a moment of relief, though it was combined with the grim awareness that next time the protest might well be different. He’d sought to steer the groundswell of public opinion, but he hadn’t originated the outrage. He was all too aware the king had started it by doing something that alarmed and horrified the public. And if he failed to meet their demands for change, for a concession, they’d seek newer leaders. And . . .

“And we could lose the war,” he muttered. Out on the streets, he could be arrested for defeatism if he dared say those words out loud. Here . . . he had to face up to the possibility of defeat. The Theocracy had lost, at least in part, because its leaders refused to admit they could lose. “It could be the end.”