

# Criminal Intent: Part Six

By: Jawbreaker6

“Stack the dead next to the road so our  
enemy will know which way to find us.”

Hauptmann Eliza Paine

Leftenant Silva was in his office reading the files of the most recent arrests when his com-line chirped. Laying the paper copies on his desk he opened the line and enabled the video feed. The 50-centimeter desk display wavered and flickered as the signal stabilized and arranged itself into orderly pixels.

When the screen finally clarified itself Silva was greeted with a picture out of a cheap holovid. A bearded white man with soot marks on his face was standing before a wall of twisting flames coughing and shaking his fist at someone off screen. Then suddenly as the image came in it shrunk down to a dot of light and disappeared Silva left the channel open and waited patiently a moment later the audio crackled through broadcasting a baritone threat, *“Keep that camera crew back dammit!” ~sizzle-sizzle-hissss~* “Van, you have 5 seconds to get this right or you’re fired! Got me!!”

Silva’s waiting ended when the bearded white man appeared again and nodded at seeing Silva on his own screen. With the two-way link working Silva said, “Leftenant Silva, Hoan Military Police, how can I help you?” The figure nodded again as a reply and in terse tones said, “I’m Constable in Charge of Law and Order Chockpoyah of Nantucket’s Canyon and, he looked at Silva fixing him with a disturbing glare. “We, and by that I really mean you have a serious problem...”

Grier blew in through the narrow doorway of Silva’s office and crossed the scarred and tile floor to his desk so quickly it startled the junior officer. His look of fear turned to relief when he recognized his commander. “Glad you’re here sir.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t know for sure yet. I got Mumfries and a forensics team on their way, they should be on scene in two hours.” He tapped at his console for a second then stood and gestured for Grier to take his seat. “I’ll re-run the footage sent to me for you to see.”

Grier stared entranced as he watched the feed. Everything was burnt. The trucks, the mechs and the bodies. They had laid the corpses out in neat rows and in the far off fire-light they looked like ancient mummies, shriveled and black. The camera view pivoted and homed in on the mechbay, there all was black too. A ten wheeled fire wagon sat idling next to the wreckage of a pair of mechs spraying water onto them to cool their armored skins. A paramedic team was visible nearby waiting for the machines too cool down enough for them to search inside of them.”

When the screen blanked out Grier stared into it , trying to divine more from it. Silva read aloud from a print-out Nantucket’s Constable had sent him. “Preliminary investigation and witness statements state the following: Local police units

observed small arms fire in and around the vicinity of the armory. Their statements read they saw one mech burning and two others engaged in combat. The battle ended as a whole when one of the two mechs we observed in the feed exploded. They were of the opinion that the explosion disabled both operators..."

Grier shuddered at the clinical phrase and blanked out. His mind started replaying old images inside his head: He'd seen mechwarriors who had died from heat alone. Some had come out rigid, conformed to the shapes of their seats. Sometimes they were brought out without their hands, the medics having had cut them off at the wrist because they refused to yield their grips on their control sticks. Others, the real bad ones to him, where the heat was beyond intense, literally melted them into their chairs and the pressure inside their heads from the fluids boiling blew their skulls apart like fleshy melons. Grier shivered involuntarily and looked at Silva and in morbid curiosity wondered what he will look like on his day of death.

"Sir? Silva pushed into the present, Are you okay?"

"Huh? Grier unglazed his eyes and centered on the Leftenant, Oh, um, yes, yes I'm fine." Grier shook his head to chase away the wax-faced image he'd conjured up completely out of his mind. Then clearing his throat coarsely, he asked, "So what do we think happened?"

"Well sir, if I were to offer my opinion I would have to go with either a mutiny or a hostile takeover." The locals are just doing the preliminaries for us out of courtesy. I'd say, he looked at his watch and said, in 5 hours we'll know more."

It took Grier an hour to navigate the fog shrouded city streets and locate the militia headquarters. At the communications vehicle the duty officer pointed him in the direction of LaFortune's tent and sent him stumbling through the fog to find it on his own. Cursing at a tent rope that caught his foot he saw the tent and angled for it. In the front of the tent Grier saw a ground car parked in front. He couldn't tell what make it was only that it was white, smooth and clean. Its sleek body lines spoke of recent manufacture as did its unblemished white upholstery. He was still admiring it, wondering how it drove on an expressway when voices inside the tent caught his ear. He listened near the entrance flap to see if he was going to interrupt something important...

"Virgil I can't do a thing about it, Peter Wiser moaned, I've tried, lord knows how I've tried." Virgil looked to his friend and fellow Son. He could see how this was affecting him; his once flush face was ashen and his eyes rimmed red from lack of sleep. He sat limp in a folding canvas chair staring at his feet. "Those. . . idiots can't see past their own noses." He looked at La Fortune and gestured with a tin cup. The militia colonel refilled his friends' cup from the 3-liter bottle of whiskey he'd been using to put his own self to sleep with.

"Pete, how were you supposed to know this would happen?"

Wiser sipped at the acrid booze and whipped himself more, "Virgil I should have know better. No! He said with anger and embarrassment, As a matter of fact I did know better! I got horrid feelings at the first meeting, its just, its just... that I knew they were going to do something with or without my approval. The only thing I could think to do was keep them working together. To somehow keep it from, he couldn't say it out loud again.

"From becoming what it is now", La Fortune finished for him.

"Yes, from becoming the bloodbath it is."

Grier listened at the tent flap. He could scarcely believe his own ears. Actually he did believe it. He just didn't want it to be true. He felt he had enough problems without this holovid melodrama. Supposedly loyal Davion citizens had conspiring together in some giant plan that was supposed to remove the Lyran influences from their little world. He fumed at the thought and ground his molars flat as La Fortune traded woes with his companion: The unreliable infantry unit he sent to Wolfhagen just to be safe and how he himself was now seeing splits in his own command staff. People he had thought trustworthy now expressing sympathies for the Lyrans. La Fortune shared his feelings rage, shame and embarrassment over Second Battalion's outright gunning down of helpless civilians. Grier rolled his eyeballs back and snorted in disgust as the militia man whined away and confessed his treasons. It made him sick to his stomach listening to the two men moan and groan. But it also implanted a cinder of apathy, and it was that idea that really took form in him. Outside the tent in the milky white fog he accepted the idea that the people of Hoan were lying in a grave they had dug for themselves. They had no desire to reform their ways because they had worked for all the years before and if the Capellans could chase out all loyal St Ives Compact citizens why shouldn't they be allowed to run the Lyrans off world as they pleased? And there it was. The real issue at hand: revenge! Nothing more, nothing less just straight up un-adulterated revenge. He felt his anger recede like a retreating wave an almost purifying moment. The stress of caring sliding off his shoulders and washing out into the deep azure ocean to wind up anywhere just not back on his soul.

La Fortune was reaching for his whiskey jug when Grier slid the tent flap open and glided in. He was surprised beyond words at seeing him this late in the evening and felt himself forming words to question him with but stopped himself cold. He could tell by looking at him that he had heard him and Peter crying to each other. As Grier walked toward him he felt his breath grow faint and his strength vanish in quivering fear. He was completely ignoring Peter Wiser who, like La Fortune felt like his arms and legs weighed ten tons each. La Fortune swallowed repeatedly trying to lubricate his arid throat, his Adam's Apple bobbing through his flabby neck. Finally he croaked out "So, uh, what can I, uh, do for you, Kommandant?" Grier stared at him silent and knowing and just as LaFortune's tongue dried out and felt sure his heart was going to burst he said, "You got a serious problem Colonel, then laid his data disk down casually and pushed it towards him. And, until a short while ago I really felt sorry for you." He looked into LaFortune's eyes, invisibly sending waves of disgust at him, now? Now I feel...nothing, nothing at all. But anyway you'll get the bodies as soon as I can get them released to you and I'll keep the equipment in lockdown until the investigation is cleared."

LaFortune looked up at Grier in confusion. "Bodies? What bodies and where are they from?"

"Your mech unit Colonel, you know, the ones at Mill 17."

Grier knew he wasn't getting it yet and delighted in the wrinkles of frustration gouging his face. Grabbing the disk and he asked, "How many of them are dead and how did it happen?" Grier smiled and shook his head ruefully, "Looks like all of them. Matter of fact, not only do I have enough corpses to go man for man against the unit roster, but I got a load of extras too." Grier changed his expression back to apathy, and as far as why? Well, lets just say... it should still fresh in your memories. It is in mine." Grier moved to leave the tent but Wiser jumped to his feet faster than a man his age should and blocked his way. "Kommandant, if this should still be fresh in our collective memories as you say, may I ask you what you plan to do with your portion?"

Angry that his dramatic exit had been ruined, “The mere fact you are standing there asking this should be enough evidence as to what my intentions are” He backed away from Wisser and looked at both of the men and said, What you should be thinking about is “Why **aren’t** we in chains? Why **aren’t** we dead?” That’s what should really be on your minds.”

Wisser looked at his feet and then back at Grier, “Well then why?” Grier smiled reassuringly making LaFortune’s colon feel cold watery and said, “Oh don’t fool yourselves, my first impulse was to shoot you both in your seats. But...even though I knew I could get away with is as Provost Marshall I thought it might be better to clamp you in irons and turn you over to MIO or the LIC or whoever wanted you. He hissed a long sigh, but I figured that it wouldn’t solve anything at all. Even if the intel people turned you into screaming puddles of goo and you told them the name of everybody in your little secret society it wouldn’t change a thing. So I figured I’d let you people have your secret handshakes, do my job and stay out of it. Besides, he grinned like a sadist, I hate burial details.”

Grier moved to make another theatrical exit but Wisser moved to stop him once more which pissed him off to no end again. “Kommandant, in part I respect your supposed desire to remain neutral and be a good soldier and follow your orders. Wisser’s voice dropped two octaves, **but is it that you are covering yourself. I mean people are choosing sides all over the entire Commonwealth and the losers will be...losers and the winners will have the realm.**”

Grier swallowed his urge to break the old man’s hip. “You two are the exact reason this is happening, making people choose sides, here and all over. Ignorant little pockets of people that refuse to forgive the past. All over the sphere you live in little enclaves of prejudice and malice making secret revenge plans and sharpening you claws in anticipation of the day you make your move.” Grier grabbed Wisser by his rumpled white jacket and shoved him into the chair he had been using. “You may just be right about that old man but I take delight in the idea that I have remained loyal to the Commonwealth, he jerked a thumb up and pointed at himself, my realm, until it officially dissolves. I have hope that someone will finally see how Ignorant this all is!”

Kommandant Apodaca strained and kicked wildly at the air to finish her fortieth chin-up of the morning. Her triceps and upper back muscles shrieked in agony and despite their quivering and protests she delivered her chin to the top of the chrome-plated bar spat out the breath she had been holding. Releasing the bar she dropped to the floor snatched her towel up and mashed it against her dripping face and neck. “Dammmit!!!” she yelled then looked out across the room daring anybody to say or do anything at or even give her a look of any kind. She quickly realized it was an unnecessary gesture as she surveyed the room. It was empty except for her. Slapping the towel around her neck she stomped across the padded floor to an angled sit-up bench and went to work. She pounded out repetition after repetition as she raged inside herself. Lance leader Torker and Sergeant Hasekker had been on the ground for 16 plus hours and she still hadn’t heard a thing from them. Worse yet one of her staff had caught a snippet of news concerning some kind of “Disturbance” around the Nantucket’s Canyon armory. She had spent an hour in her office flipping through news programs trying to find out what or if something had happened. Nothing! Not one of the 87 channels held a scrap of information for her. She had taken a risk trying to appropriate Hoan’s twelve battlemechs, knowing full well that she had no legal authority to do so. But she knew that Grier wouldn’t see the need to like she did. She knew that ‘those people’ couldn’t be trusted with them and they posed a clear danger to her operations. “Dammit, dammit, dammit!” Up, down, up, down and it went like that for better than 112 repetitions. When her body called it quits on her she gasped for breath and lay upside down staring into the lights above her.

With her chest heaving she started feeling a tremor run through her body, a cold clammy hand inside her bowels gripping her and twisting. She tried to dismiss the feeling as general anxiety over the operation but a tiny voice in her mind told her it was fear and that she was in trouble. She squashed the voice by yelling over it, “No! No! No!” and rolled off the board and sprinted out the doors into the morning air.

Three days after the battle Criminal Investigator Mumfries handed his finished report directly to Grier. In the dismal yellow light of his fuel bunker he motioned for the investigator to pull up a crate and sit down as he called for Hauptmann Langemak to join them. After he had taken his crate Grier reached behind himself and poured three cups of coffee. He handed one to Mumfries gratefully accepted the cup and sipped it noisily. He picked up the brown paper binder and hefted it in his hand to judge its weight, “Condensed version please.”

“It was a firefight between the Hussars and a detachment from First Battalion. Nobody won.”

Grier stared at Mumfries, hoping he hadn’t heard him right but knowing that he had, “How do you know this?”

“I’d like to say it was great investigative work but, he reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a clear bag and laid it down next Grier’s cup, I got lucky.”

Grier ripped the bag open and read the names on the three ID cards: Crawford, male age 26, Moseby, female age 22 and another male named Taggart. And right on the front was the unit identifier: Second Battalion. “How solid is this?”

“The bodies were intact and the scene was very well maintained. The locals impressed me enough to say its 98%. I’d put a 10 kroner note on it too.”

Langemak whistled softly, “This really makes our lives complicated sir.”

“Yes it certainly has.”

“I’d sure like to know why they were there.”

Grier looked over the ID cards he held in his hand at his XO, “We both know what they were doing there.” He shoved the cards back into the evidence bag and threw them down, “Those people were there to take their mechs and they didn’t want her to.” He sipped at his coffee, smacking his lips. “The part that scares me and pisses me off in the same note is I know in my heart that she is behind this and she knows for a fact that if anybody had or still has the legal right to do it it was and is me and not her, which means that she had a mutiny, which is not at all likely, or there was a clear and present danger and being that they were all the way on the other side of the continent makes that hypothesis fairly worthless or she could be thinking or know for a fact that the militia was planning to use them against her or, dare I say us, but I honestly don’t think we rate that high in her address book. Or she just plain thinks they are trouble and we won’t or can’t do a damned thing about them.” Mumfries rubbed his bloodshot eyes and asked, “What do you want to do now sir? Procedure would be to call the CO and have her give a statement or at least question her as to why they were there. I hate to say it but she may very well have a legal order directing her to conduct that op.”

Grier nodded conceding the point to Mumfries but added, “Yes but I was there when the last Operations order was handed out but, as it has been so clearly pointed out to me recently, sides are being drawn all over the planet and the Commonwealth. Not to mention she’s had 72 hours to contact us.”

Langemak’s brace squeaked in the silence before he said, “Sir I think that your idea about sides being taken is the real issue here. You and I both know that if we had planned that op we would have those mechs come hell or high water. I’m

pretty sure that when I say this I speak for you too sir. There is no way we would send a small element out unsupported like that. And there is no way that if our team failed we wouldn't be all over them again. I won't get into letting things stew for 3 plus days."

Grier chewed on Langemak's statement, reviewing the facts as they were it didn't show Kommandant Apodaca in a light of innocence at all. Matter of factly by his reckoning it was showing him the truth in LaFortune and Wisser's words the previous evening. But! He had a job to do despite his newfound revelations. He turned to Mumfries and said, Good job. I'll let you know after your 3-day pass what I've decided."

Mumfries, although surprised at the idea of 3 whole days off, nodded and said. "I'll be ready sir."

After the investigator left Grier looked to Langemak in the yellow light and said, "Okay, suppose you are correct, just for the sake of argument, how would you handle it knowing the situations at hand?"

Langemak scooted in close and lowered his voice further. "At the risk of getting myself shot for breathing conspiracy against the realm, but knowing Kommandant Apodaca the way I do, he slapped his knee for emphasis. I would give real strong consideration to any idea that might help us out, should our worst fears come to fruition."

Grier's breath stopped short in his throat. The implications of what Langemak had said so far splashed an image of himself dangling at the end of a sloppy noose. Kicking and thrashing as the life was squeezed out him. Dropping his own voice, "Just for the sake of conversation, what, in your opinion, would help soothe our collective anxieties." Langemak rubbed his flabby chin, he was obviously nervous at going further too. More people had been killed for what people had thought they had said much less what they had meant by it. Giving strong consideration to what he was thinking of saying. Even saying it in a hypothetical sense was a risk to his life and limb. He gulped a deep breath and pushed forward-"I would do something very, very brash. Something vile and even... treacherous."

"Like...?"

"Like this, he grabbed his braced knee and shook it at Grier. A deliberate and willful attack without regard for life or property. We've all talked about there being two units here on Hoan and ultimately two houses. After she rammed me like she did I knew in my heart that she is as cold as a day on Misery. I wouldn't put anything past her."

"Do you think she would actually come after us?"

"Sir, when I say this I am as serious as a clan invasion. History is written by the victorious. I don't want to overstep my boundaries as your XO but I feel compelled to say this: We have been hamstrung for a reason. To me that reason is to help keep Hoan property of the Lyran Commonwealth. You have to face facts. Our Battalion is a joke by any comparison. Besides the PUB we are probably the only unit in the regiment that has an Urbanmech on its books. All of her mechs are straight up killers, all big bore auto-cannons and missile launchers. If they were to decide we were expendable we would have a helluva time just stayin alive. Matter of fact sir she would mop up the floor with our collective asses."

Grier fidgeted in his chair and played with his coffee cup. He knew deep inside that he had been playing down all of the inter-house frictions he and everyone else had been seeing since Katrina grabbed the throne from her sister Yvonne. Now he foolishly admitted that he had kept his hopes high in that Victor would return and set it all right again and all of the ill will would fade away. But after looking at the charred and bloated corpses of the militia mechwarriors he knew that he had been fooling himself, or more truthfully lying to himself. In retrospect he knew he had insulated himself with a desire to be that portrait of the professional soldier that would be viewed as the shining example for all to follow and anybody and everybody

who met him would see that devotion to duty and it was more important than any political affiliation could ever be. Unfortunately the rest of the realm was incapable of his level of professionalism and dedication. And now here on Hoan his life was boiling down to the most basic human desire: survival. “What’s your Idea Carvin?”

Langemak blinked, surprised that Grier used his first name. He had never done that before, it was a significant change for Kommandant Grier, whom the men called the Iron Bastard. “What I think we should do is give her cause to stop and reconsider her position. Now in a straight up fight she will kill us all in short order, but what if she severe limitations, say she only had one issue of ammunition?”

Grier chewed on that for a second, “She would have to either go ultra-conservative or come at us head on.”

“Right, Langemak rubbed his hands together, we both have seen her jacket. She has no combat experience at all so she would either go by the book or stop altogether and request re-supply, thinking it was an isolated incident. Either way I think we would get the upper hand.”

“How do you figure?”

“Well, we hold the port so we can keep anything from leaving without our okay and not to mention between the two of us we got more experience using real tactics than her. Plus, he smiled knowingly, she is way too arrogant to listen to her junior officers advice no matter where they have been before.”

Grier nodded his agreement, “Yes I’d say you have her pegged right. But to do this we’re going to need LaFortune’s people. We don’t have enough bodies to pull this off.”

“I agree sir.”

“Carvin, Grier now spoke in a cold distant voice, You do realize that we are starting a shooting war and you and I as of this moment are guilty of treason against the crown?”

“Yes sir, but it has been made apparent to me that the crown that we are rebelling against abandoned us.”

Grier found LaFortune a scant 5 kilometers away comparing names on coffins to the names listed on his personnel roster. Shouting over the runway’s shrieking SCRAM-JET engines surrounding them. “Oh what the hell do you want!?” He didn’t even try to hide his anger.

Grier didn’t offer his hand or any other conciliatory gesture instead he shouted above the cargo planes, “You and your friend were right! I made a choice!” Lafortune looked across the tarmac for hidden cameras or agents skulking in the shadows ready to haul him away in chains. He wholly unbelieving that Grier could, much less would, have a change of mind about anything so quickly. “I don’t know what the hell your talking about Kommandant!” Grier nodded expecting this type of answer. He zig-zagged his way through the polished coffins. “I understand that you don’t believe me and I don’t blame you! Pick a place and I’ll meet with you and before you tell me to go to hell ask yourself this: have I ever lied to you!?”

Grier and Langemak navigated New Manheim’s surface streets haphazardly. Repeatedly forced to double-back and try and find a different route to their intended destination. Once they drove up on a shootout and got their grill and left fender riddled with bullets as Langemak set a new planetary record for speeding down an alley in reverse bouncing garbage pails and yowling cats into the air as they ran for their lives. Eventually they found their intended destination: a conservative three story home nestled in a deep wooded lot far away from the gunfire and house fires of the city. To Langemak, who was still

shaking from the gunfire that riddled the battalion's poor ground car. He'd actually felt the slugs smacking the body panels through its foot pedals and the seemingly serene, insulated calm of the home he was looking at made the entire night seem unreal or fictitious. He found it hard to believe that he could go from nearly dying in an anonymous, dark gunfight to a soft suburban home setting. To him and his way of seeing things it was just one more piece of evidence that everything was spiraling down the toilet and making less sense as it went.

Grier was only faintly surprised when LaFortune's friend Wisser answered the doorbell. As he walked up to the home he was visiting he thought that it was a little too...neat and understated for the militia man. He'd figured him for garish lawn gnomes and bright yellow paint, not earth tones and cedar shakes and had assumed that the home was someone else's but Wisser was a surprise. He scoffed at the idea that the old man could be important to any decisions military men might make. Wisser led them through his home into his furnished basement. There in a corner sipping Vodka LaFortune was sitting quietly. From there he eyed Grier and Langemak in open hostility. It had taken him nearly three hours of internal debate and then another hour with Wisser before he'd called and told Grier to meet him at Wisser's home. And at that moment, with Grier swaggering in, he was never more afraid. Nothing he had ever done carried an immediate death sentence with it. But this did. Even the veiled conversation on the runway, ironically enough amidst coffins of freshly dead soldiers from both sides, was enough to get him killed. Of course having Grier witness his conversation with Peter the previous night was his only reason for accepting his request to meet.

Wisser entered ahead of Grier and Langemak and took a seat near the fireplace and near LaFortune too. From his chair he gestured to a waiting pair of low-backed overstuffed black leather chairs. Grier was trying to ignore LaFortune's flaming gaze and keep his calm. He was not used to being openly hated by someone he knew as a friend at one time. He purposely ignored, or tried to look as if he was ignoring LaFortune by nodding to Langemak and taking one of the vacant seats near the fire. Reaching out to warm his hands near the flames he heard the faint buzzing of a white-noise generator and felt a degree of reassurance. At least what was going to be said couldn't be recorded by anybody with it going. It would destroy any audible signals that any electronic recording device would try to pick up and get then hung with.

"So what do you want now?" LaFortune went right for the heart.

"Its like I said earlier, I've made a decision and now I need your help."

"Shit, he breathed. I was hoping that I heard you wrong out there. And now that I hear it again I think that I oughta just bust you in your mouth." Before Grier could respond he carried on, "I mean really! Who in the hell do you think you are? Huh!!! You ignore Kentarres like it's a voter's issue. We both saw what they did and you blow it off! Then we start going to hell here, and we both know why," He didn't add it was Katrina's obvious dislike for the Davion side of her house. And to top it off that Lyran BITCH!! Kills everyone in my only mech company and all you can do is smile at me and say 'I hate burial details' and ship me dozens of bodies." He gulped his drink, "Your kind is the worst. Did you know that? No...I suppose you don't or you wouldn't be here. You and your proud, silent, haughtiness. Hoping beyond hope to be ignored so you don't have to decide anything for yourself and risk being wrong. You know what? You should have been a politician it suits you better."

Langemak held his breath and waited as LaFortune said his piece. While he agreed with the militia colonel in some respects those being Grier's BS air of nobility and his desire to stay out of any of the politics swirling around like floaters in a high-speed latrine. But to blatantly come out and insult a superior officer like he was now was tantamount to shooting your career dead, not to mention asking for a knuckle-burger in the bridge-work.

Grier, to everyone's surprise didn't flinch or even visibly react to LaFortune's berating. Instead he kept his hands close to the fire and said, "Colonel LaFortune you need to go out and get your brain-pan scraped. You've been suckling on the open end of a bottle of rot-gut since I met you and its affecting your judgment horribly right now." Pulling his hands away from the fire he settled his eyes on LaFortune. "You sir have had the benefit on never being anywhere but here in a very long time Colonel. You can afford the luxury of being part of a secret society bent upon the preservation of old grudges and promotion of ethnic cleansings. I haven't. I've been shuffled from unit to unit Lyran and Davion and I had to learn how to swallow my own personal preferences and then be professional above all else. But right here and right now I'm here trying to tell you that you and your nefarious cabal may be so close to the truth that I'm not only willing to agree with you but ask you for your help in saving our selves." LaFortune began to respond but was cut off by Wisser who said, "Would you kindly explain your new position and your sudden change of heart." He smiled in a fatherly way, "after all it was only a fortnight ago that you proudly spoke to the contrary and unless I miss my guess, Colonel LaFortune is having difficulty believing that anyone, especially you a man so well anchored in his beliefs, could change his mind so quickly."

Grier laid it all to LaFortune and Wisser. He told them about the operation order and the subtle overtones delivered with it. He told them about the hobbling of his unit, his inability to get supplies or repair parts and how it appeared to him, Langemak and his investigator that it looked like Kommandant Apodaca was following a separate and altogether different agenda that had all the appearances of jeopardizing them all.

LaFortune moved forward in his seat poised to attack but Wisser's hand gripped his forearm firmly enough to halt him. Instead Wisser continued on, "So Kommandant what is it you are proposing? An uprising or..."

"Nothing so blatant" Grier said. We have been discussing this at length and feel that we can make the other battalion re-evaluate the local threatcon and even the playing field in one fell swoop."

And what do think would do this Kommandant?" It was amusing to Wisser to see Grier's falter as he contemplated what he wanted to say. He likened it to a leap of faith and Grier an Atheist. He knew he would have to say it out loud to be taken seriously. He would have to stick his head in the same noose as everybody else if he wanted any help no matter how mutually beneficial it might be. "We want to blow their ammunition supply." There he said it. "We, meaning I, think that by doing that she will have to re-evaluate her vulnerability and any plans she might have."

LaFortune spoke before Wisser could stop him again. "And let me guess, you want to use my men to get the job done-right?? Well you can just stuff that idea where the sun doesn't shine Kommandant!"

Grier didn't reply right away which earned him a quizzical eyebrow from Wisser. Instead he put out an offer, "I'll give you a squad of my guys to go on the mission with your team. But there has to be two special elements in this. The first is it has to involve improvised or untraceable munitions and it has to be run by an expert, both of which I have none of."

"Why those elements Kommandant?"

"There has to be plausible deniability for both of us. My men are going to run the investigation but it has to look solid enough to stand on its own."

Wiser nodded in appreciation it certainly appeared that he had considered more angles than he might have. But then the Son's of Davion were everywhere on Hoan and a simple call could squash nearly any investigation. There was one thing though. "What about re-supply? He asked. She's bound to request replacements for her lost supplies. What then?"

"I believe I can help with that." Said a voice from the doorway behind them. Grier froze in his seat sure that a bullet was on its way to split his head open. Langemak, Wiser and LaFortune reacted by jerking and hopping in bug-eyed spasms not knowing whether to jump or dive or pray." They all watched as the owner of the voice stepped into the fire-light. Long and lean, impeccable features, beyond handsome, nearly perfect with closely cut black hair that shined like glass. Behind him in his wake they saw a pair of lumbering torpedoes in off the rack brown suits and 60-centimeter necks. In their goliath hands they held wicked looking sawed off scatterguns with barrels that looked like giant black holes. Grier glanced at the old man to gauge his reaction and his sphincter did a wootie-doo. He was bone white, not the white accompanied by a sudden surprise but the kind of bloodless white that he associated with being dissected alive or some other kind of torture for the damned was a shock of sorts. The old man had LaFortune dancing on a string and spoke about their secret society like he was a major component earlier but he sat there in his chair looking like he was a breath away from the great beyond which to Grier's mind meant whoever this beautiful man was he had more juice than the old man did and that would probably be a lot. Still he spoke unsolicited not really knowing if it was out of bravado or stupidity. "And who in the hell are you supposed to be?" Showing rows of perfect teeth the man chuckled just like the bad guys in the holo-vids right before they punched the hero in the mouth so he readied himself for an ass kicking of his life. Instead the two torpedoes with the tree trunk necks came in close and stood on both sides of him one resting his shotgun on his shoulder and pointing it his head. *Guess the movies got it wrong after all although that damned blunderbuss he got looks bigger every friggin time I look at it.* The stranger walked across the room and clapped Wiser on the shoulder, "Peter you've been very difficult to find these past few days and that vexes me to no end. You know I hate it when I can't get a hold of someone. Especially you Peter, especially you." He motioned Wiser out of his chair and took it for himself. "Kommandant Grier is it?" Grier nodded, feeling the shotgun barrel brush his ear as he did so.

"Yes? He nodded in self satisfaction as if he'd remembered a doorman's name for the first time. You should know who I am by now. My obese pile of a solicitor has been littering your offices with his motions, request and return receipt requested veri-graphs from all over the Commonwealth."

"Okay, I guess I do after all. So, you are Mr. Reed huh?"

"Yes Kommandant, he sighed, I am he---and you have something I need rotting away in one of your cells as we speak."

"Pig-boy?" Langemak asked.

"Yes! He laughed. Delighting that someone else found Iggy as pathetic and disgusting as he. Yes yes Pig-boy. Who is my nephew and I want back."

"I suppose you do but he did kill one of my soldiers."

"Who was hopelessly overweight and asking for some kind of deadly episode to claim him. I read the reports. His cholesterol was near 400 hundred and his heart was near the breaking point years ago. He may well have died having a bowel movement that morning. He waved his hands to dismiss the topic, but as my solicitor has informed me, much to my

displeasure, your case is as solid as the crown itself.” Now he smiled in a way that was not cruel but---painful in Grier’s estimation. “But as we have seen, heard and spoken tonight and in previous days, the crown isn’t as solid as it once was.”

“And?”

“And I can help you and most importantly help myself.”

“Don’t misunderstand me Mr. Reed but the one thing that a lot of people have gone out of their way to tell me is around here you are the de-facto lord of lords here and I am having trouble understanding why you would even go to the trouble of even talking to me. It seems to me that a man of your stature could more easily have me killed and convince the next guy to see things your way.” Reed looked down at manicured nails and then up to Grier and said, “You are right Kommandant I could and if it suited me I would have no qualm with sending you to a dog food plant somewhere to be mulched alive into puppy biscuits. Matter of fact, he menaced, I have considered it more than once but I have decided that I am better off following this path at the moment for you see your plan contains an elementary logic to it that is inescapable.” He ticked off his fingers, “First, by only destroying the ammunition supply you establish a solid knowledge of her longevity in combat and have an advantage. Second by only destroying the ammunition you keep the incident a case of low-intensity sabotage, the equivalent of a lucky punch. Third by using the plan you outlined you can control the course of the investigation and guide to its necessary outcome thus protecting your own life and your accomplices’s, another advantage. The fourth, this where I come in, by denying her her muchly needed supplies or at least keeping the flow to a drizzle that is hardly useful you maintain the strategic advantage until things develop to whatever they become.”

“That’s what I was thinking. Grier replied, but he added, this cooperation can’t be just about your ugly nephew.”

“Kommandant, this entire planet lives off of that spaceport, me included. I need people to go to work and make money so I can make money too. This is a Davion world which means if every Lyran on it died tonight they wouldn’t be missed too much. They compromise 21 percent of the labor force I deal with most frequently. So if the Davions feel secure enough to go to work and toil for their meager pile of C-bills they will be more than happy to give them to me by way of my subsidiary organizations. That is what motivates me Kommandant. My nephew is a part of a separate issue altogether.”

“I see.” That was the only thing Grier could think to say. *That was the longest most self-effacing admission of guilt I have ever heard. But he’s right. And I hate that he is.* “I guess this is where I ask how you are you able to help us.”

“You are exactly right Kommandant.” He patronized Grier now, “You see I know what is in every cargo terminal and dropship and on the inbound jumpships. Matter of factly Kommandant I know where everything is coming from almost from the moment it enters the transit system. I can divert or have pilfered nearly any item inbound or have any item I desire re-routed here and then procured.” In an unexpected display of humor he bobbed his eyebrows and added, “That is the beauty of knowing me Kommandant. She won’t know when her supplies are coming and I always will.”

Grier stared at him in the orange firelight feeling his breath travel in and out like a wood rasp. He could scarcely believe how deep he was now and how quickly it had happened. In the blink of an eye it seemed he was pretending that nothing was happening to being hip deep in a treasonous conspiracy with a secret society and a planetary crimeboss. “Okay Mr. Reed I’ll give you your nephew---but I have a laundry list I’d like filled beforehand.”

Wiser swore his heart had a major infarction when he heard Butler Reed’s voice come out of the shadows of his very own basement. Then, as if trying to finish him off, Grier had the gall to speak to him like he was---somebody other than the

most powerful man he had ever known. Then after Grier and his executive officer left Reed turned to look at him and said, "Peter if I ever have to come looking for you again I will be the last time anybody ever sees you again." And then he too departed leaving Him and LaFortune alone.

"Well that was fun." LaFortune said acidly. He had never actually seen Butler Reed before and would not in a million years ever thought he would. The very notion of him showing up in his best friend's basement was as incredulous as finding an opossum in his pants but it was also an indicator of how close he was to the underworld. By his assessment he was very close no more like in bed with them. He had watched the exchanges between Reed and Peter and then him and Grier in silent interest. He had made plans of his own for this meeting and had a vision in his head on how it would go and the sheer spectacle of it had thrown that plan into the wind and left him clueless as to what was going to happen next. Before Wisser could reply to his friend's sarcasm a shadow slid into the room directly behind LaFortune. "Well what do you think?" he said, meaning the shadow behind him.

"I know only what I've seen of him and I think he can be trusted at his word. He lacks the divine kind of inspiration to be truly treacherous. But then again Judas was reputed to be of similar mettle."

"Your not helping mother but I am glad you didn't come in earlier it may have been ugly."

"Rest assured sir I had the situation well in hand."

"Make sure you keep in hand because I want you to go out with his men to do the job."

"As you wish sir. I will deliver unto the very wrath of god if you wish."

The following morning Grier checked with his clerk, Corporal Bleau, to see if Kommandant Apodaca had contacted the MP station reporting her dead soldiers as AWOLs yet or tried to get a hold of him at his CP and try to glean information or inform him about any special orders she might have. There was nothing. *That cinches it. She's had 5 days to talk to me and try and sell me a story or dance a jig. I'm just not seeing a way out. Or maybe I'm over reacting and seeing demons too or maybe Langemak, Wisser and even drunken LaFortune are right and the line has been drawn and its been there all along.* Grier was suddenly overwhelmed with a feeling of despair and self-loathing. Self Loathing because he suddenly realized and accepted that a civil war was already in motion and had been for some time since his former liege and lord returned from sacking the Smoke Jaguars to find his throne gone. That was when it truly began and here and now his battalion was serving two purposes it would guard the port and free up Kommandant Apodaca to be deployed elsewhere and they were already in position to take Hoan and keep it as a veritable dagger in the heart of the Suns. All with the idea that he and his rag-tag mechs would offer little in the way of real resistance. The despair came from the notion that his life was worth nothing not to mention all of his troops and as soon as it was seen to be the right time they would reach out to try and snuff them out and his trivial dream of retiring away from it all was for nothing as well. *15 years for nothing!*

"Is there a gas leak around here? or have I suffered a head injury and am really lying in hospital bed comatose??" Langemak snickered at Hauptmann Bashline and said, "You wish."

"So if I'm not hallucinating or moderately braindamaged may I ask what brought this on? I haven't heard anything from command and you and old iron pants don't strike me as the rogue elephant types." Langemak leaned against the foot of Hauptmann Ramierez's Awesome and motioned Bashline closer and gave him the scoop. "5 days ago a bunch of guys from

the other battalion tried to pull a snatch and grab. Their targets were the militia's mech company. To make a long story short they're all dead, the militia troops and hers both and she hasn't said anything about it yet. Near as we can tell she's going to keep pretending it never happened and hope we'll do the same."

"Holy shit, Bashline breathed. Everybody?"

"All of them."

"So how does blowing her ammo-bunker fit into all this?"

"Look Jerry, don't play coy with me. I've heard you talking around the compound and I've read your jacket. You're here because you are a malcontent and undesirable in any pro-Lyran unit. Of course we all know that's why we're all here anyway."

"So—Carvin," Bashline felt odd using the XO's first name but he figured if he was going to play the first name card he would too, "You still haven't said how this was going to be a good thing."

"Okay the I'll tell you. We, I mean me, the Kommandant and the militia CO have a feeling that the other battalion may come after us. We don't really know why, other than the Lyrans want to keep this planet for themselves when the war kicks off. We all concede that we could be wrong about the war and I for one hope we are. But between you and me I don't see how it can be avoided. But after her people took out those militia guys unprovoked we want to insure that the scales are better balanced."

"So popping her ammo bunker will reduce her to the one issue of ammunition she has on board her mechs." Langemak could hear the gears turning in Bashline's head, "Then she would have to play it quiet or at least safe or until she is re-supplied."

That's when all the pieces snapped together for him and made him look at Langemak in admiration, "You guys aren't going to let her get re-supplied are you?" Langemak batted his eyebrows in reply, "That's our insurance she'll have to go all or nothing to get us. That's the balance."

"All of you are completely insane do you know that?" Bashline bopped himself upside his own head for emphasis, totally off the deep end. I mean if you had any shred of proof you might be justified." Anger flooded his voice, "But now you come to me and say you are planning to commit an act of treason and for what? A half assed hunch that they **might** come after us! A hunch that belongs in some piece of far-fetched fiction! Granted now it looks bad for them and I got no love going their way either... Ah CRAP! Okay I'm in I'll do it. What the hell else can I do as a dispossessed going nowhere Hauptmann in a House that is falling apart before my eyes." Langemak shook his hand and said fatalistically, "Yeah, but at least now you know right where you're standing."

"Yeah, in shit, in deep shit."

Hauptmann Bashline, Sergeant Penix and eight of their most reliable soldiers sat in the darkness waiting for their militia counterparts to arrive. Earlier that day Bashline and his troops requisitioned seven of Lieutenant Silva's military police trucks and then drove them off the spaceport in a circuitous route in and around the city proper then into a series of craggy foothills that eventually brought them to a spot that bordered the city and Second Battalion's outlying training areas. In the soft and fuzzy darkness Bashline relived the day and still felt that he knew better that to go along with Langemak and Grier's

hair-brained plan but truth be told he had nowhere to go after this assignment. He was in a dud unit in a dud position. His reviews were generally fair but in that regard he blamed the Lyrans. He had always been attached to mainly Lyran units since graduation and always felt that he had been judged unfairly. His latest review was by Grier and while he had gotten his ass reamed for various things he did praise him too. He complimented him on many things that his Lyran CO's had chastised and penalized him for. Not to be confused because Kommandant Grier was by no means his favorite person but he had to give him a degree of respect for being fair and professional with everybody. So in essence he felt that Grier's review was the first honest one he'd ever had but he had also decided the night Grier made him and his company an infantry unit that the very second his mech arrived from refit he was cashing out of the AFFC completely. He had read that the Rim Collective had started advertising on Outreach and had as good if not better pay structures than the one he was in right now. He had gambled on them already and spent a month's pay forwarding his dossier to their representative on Outreach in the form of a very expensive Com-Star Veri-graph. Hoping that by dropping that kind of money to contact them would impress them. The part that bitched him right now was his mech still wasn't back from god-only-knows where and if they told him tomorrow to report he'd be ass out. And he was pretty sure that having his own ride would be the cincher for him. Somewhere in a deep recess of his mind he figured that this kind of thing was fate. If he lived long enough to see any kind of reply it was because someone or something wanted him to. That is why he decided to accept the mission of blowing her bunkers. If he lived through it was because he was supposed to. Of course in the middle of a black night drinking foul coffee while waiting for someone you didn't know in what was considered to enemy territory didn't make him or any of his troops feel that providence was on their side at all.

"I see you brought your best pukebags with you." Bashline choked on and spat his coffee onto the inside of his windshield. He couldn't and most probably never ever forget that voice. By no small miracle he kept most his composure by just spraying cream and two sugars out of his nose and mouth instead of screeching out loud and doing a cheetah flip in his seat and said "I should have guessed that you'd be the one they'd send." Wiping the coffee off the windshield with his sleeve he griped to himself. *Of course a stupid and insane job requires stupid and insane people. I should have just asked for his address and picked him up on my way here because out of everybody I know he's the looniest and it wouldn't be complete without him.* Without looking at him he said. "Your late. What took you so long?"

Reverend Mother drawled his reply, "Hael, we been here over a half hour sir watchin and waitin."

"For what, dare I ask?"

"To see if you're goats or lambs."

"Uhh, whatever." He had no idea what that was supposed to mean. "Get in, lets get this show going. He said, I got a courts-martial to attend later."

They drove in slow and easy, using night vision glasses instead of lights usintg the few stars that poked through the low clouds to illuminate the dirt roads they were using. The goggles amplified the starlight and made the road tops into bright green strips leading them into a dark green and black horizon. After an hour of slow mechanical slithering they came to a small hilltop that let them see Second Battalion's compound.

True to Star League designs the other battalion was surrounded by 15 meter high walls easily measuring two meters in width complete with firing slits and cutouts with built in steps to accommodate battlemechs in a defense. Using NVGs they

surveyed the compound and made notations of patrol patterns and projections of infra-red or passive UV night vision beams projected from any stationary fixtures. Within an hour and a half they reached the conclusion that they were not engaged in active security measures. In slang terms they were 'sitting on their asses.' "But, Bashline added. They do have a pair of mechs patrolling the compound." Reverend Mother grunted and added scornfully, Yeah, but they're moving like slugs. I say its about 40 minutes between patrols, and that's being generous. I think we got this job wrapped up already." Shouting over his shoulder, "Get the charges ready boys and girls. I figure we'll have about 15 minutes to get them in place and us gone."

Bashline slid his NVGs up and looked at the perplexing Reverend Mother. He was having a real hard time dealing with the changes in his behavior. One minute he was a spitting and swearing NCO style, like every other one he had known, and the next talking like a vengeful minister, full of fire and brimstone, threatening everyone that god was coming and he was his messenger sent to save them or smite them. It was very friggin disturbing. No! Take that one back. It was scary and giving him a queasy feeling in the pit of his stomach, like a ball of snakes writhing and twisting and it wouldn't go away. He'd felt it ever since they met up and now it seemed that his every thought was swallowed whole by a mental image of The Reverend Mother leading them merrily into hell.

Back at their trucks he shouldered his rucksack he looked at the militia man who was now whispering biblical verses to himself and tinkered with his shoulder straps "So, he asked caustically, exactly how many people are in that skull of yours sergeant?" Without stopping he rang out "Just me and the Lord Hauptmann. Just me and the Lord."

Kneeling next to the compound's westernmost wall Bashline and The Reverend Mother listened for any sign of alarm inside the compound. Their plan was really simple, the Reverend Mother would scale the wall, somehow, and attach ropes for the rest of the squad to use. Before they made their sprint The Reverend Mother had shucked his rucksack and pulled on a pair of mynomer gripper gloves. Bashline was surprised as hell to see those. Gripper gloves were a rarity in these days. They were classic examples of lostech. Lostech being Star-League era items or devices that can't be re-produced due to the loss of the Star-League technology that created them in the first place. The gloves, amazingly enough, operated on the same principles as mynomer pseudo muscles in battlemechs i.e. using electrical impulses to signal bundles of artificial muscles into operation. The gloves were a skin of pseudo-muscles that operated off a battery and amplified the strength of the wearer in whatever task at hand. In Bashline's mind the very idea that he, a militia soldier, had a pair and his entire **battalion** didn't made him green with more than a little bit of envy. But militaries everywhere were just like daycare centers where children desired all the toys that weren't theirs. Now he watched as The Reverend Mother slid a set of hooked climbing spikes over his gloved fingers, smiled at him displaying wide glowing teeth and disappeared. Just like that with only a faint scratching sound marking his trip up the bedrock wall.

The Reverend Mother laid on top the high wall and tried to breath as deep as his single lung would allow, he needed to remember that he only had the one now and mentally flogged himself for his foolish display of pride. He would, of course, punish himself for that later but now he had the lord's work to do. Reaching into a cargo pocket with slow and deliberate motions he withdrew a spool of translucent commercial fishing line and unreeled a weighted end down to the waiting Hauptmann Bashline. The line went taunt and then tugged twice in rapid succession, the universal signal for "ready". He reeled the line back up and emplaced an attached trio of padded grapnel hooks and and crawled down the wall and into the compound to cover the rest of the team.

Bashline was the last man down the line and bolted for the cover of a nearby work shed as soon as his feet touched the ground. There in inky shadows he mentally reviewed the layout of Second Battalion's compound. He remembered that it was laid out in a traditional AFFC rectangle and followed equally traditional AFFC base building placement with one exception. The mech hangars were only 300 meters from the command building which in turn only 500 meters west of the ammo bunkers. From a micromanager's standpoint everything was placed perfectly allowing easy and direct supervision of nearly all subordinates and still see what a mech-commander needed to see: The mechs. Trouble was, as Reverend Mother had pointed out to him earlier, "By being smack dab in the middle--you're smack dab in the middle. Ya' see Hauptmann, he had giggled, when we blow those bunkers her command building is gonna need a shitload of new windows and a coat of paint. Bright commanders try to stay out of the impact areas so they can see more of what is going on around them from a single perspective. But that's okay because the lord, you and I are going to educate her well and proper this evening."

That middle of the sentence personality switch kicked Bashline's gut sideways but also in a perverse way infused him with confidence and made him think that this skinny whack job might actually know as much as he professed. *Cripes! I must be going nuts too.*

Nearing the bunkers they stopped and slithered en'masse into a storm drain when a patrolling Locust appeared and bobbed past them on its patrol rounds. Its sensors broadcasting Infra-Red Light beams that, through his night-vision goggles, looked like sun-beams frying the ground as they swept back and forth.

When they were 50 meters from the bunkers they laid out prone in a loose cigar shaped perimeter out of sight behind a mound of dirt and next to a sign that proclaimed their hasty meeting place would soon be an Olympic sized pool facility. Bashline and The Reverend Mother surveyed their intended targets. A pair of bunkers sitting side by side partially submerged with raised earthen tops that were covered with grass leaving only an octagonal ferrocrete face showing forward at the bottom of a sloped approach ramp.

After a quick meeting Bashline sent the second team off while Bashline's team provided cover and he personally acted as a nervous audience as they skittered toward their target. Without incident they arrived at "their" bunker and with little more than a quick purple zap of a plasma cutter the bunker's titanium lock was off and they were in.

Bashline, on the other hand, found his bunkers' doors already open and a soldier visibly inside. The Reverend Mother pressed against him and looked over his shoulder and asked, "Hauptmann Bashline are you a Christian?"

Looking down the isle he wondered if the one person he could see was the only one in there. *If there are others besides him in there this whole thing is blown and we're all gonna fry.* Standing in sweaty apprehension he audibly surrendered and replied, "I am tonight."

"Good enough Hauptmann." He swooped past like vengeful smoke and disappeared into the shadowed bunker startling Bashline and his bladder for the second time that evening. Evoking a mental scream, *That FreaK!!!! God I friggin hate him!!!!*

A widely spaced row of circular overhead lights cast down dirty light into the center of the bunker leaving both the left and right sides in murky shadows. The soldier was marking something on the side of a crate when a black cloud welled up and pounced from behind a stack of wooden crates and danced around the soldier. Bashline almost yelped in surprise but regained his composure, logically knowing it could only be the Reverend Mother, and watched as the soldier fell to their knees clutching at his or her throat with The Reverend Mother's shadow poised above and behind, arms extended out and

down like a preacher administering to the penitent. Or he added, a demon consuming another soul. When the body went slack he eased it on the floor and waved him in.

The team rushed in and fanned out opening ammo crates and attaching demo charges without being told. The Reverend Mother and Hauptmann Bashline were to pull security. Bashline took a knee next to a stack of inferno SRMs and covered the doorway as his psycho sergeant drug the dead Lyran trooper into the shadows. As he watched the entrance for intruders he cringed at the horrible sounds being made by his team as they cracked the crates open and planted their charges. *Keeeriist!!! Could they make anymore noise??!!* In reality he knew they were working rather silently and it was common for every heartbeat to sound like thunder and anything else to sound like Armageddon. Just as he began chiding himself for being a nervous little bitch a silhouette appeared the doorway and shouted, “Hey Sal you almost done? Sarge said count’em not field strip em!” and fell dead.

Bashline stared through the wisps of smoke drifting off his rifle, keeping his sights lined up on the door he hoped nobody else was coming. He’d surprised himself by the automatic way he’d squeezed off that burst of rounds. It was like he imagined it and it happened. *I’m glad I wanted to shoot him.* He thought. It was frightening to think you are only imagining something and finding out that it had really happened.

The Reverend Mother was making his way to the front of the bunker via the shadows when the voice rang out. He sprinted the rest of the way to the front, garrote in hand believing that Hauptmann Bashline would be incapable of dealing with the intrusion properly but after taking the final left at the front end of the bunker he watched the body fall to the floor in a loose heap; much to his surprise, relief and delight. He grabbed the dead man’s arms and started dragging him out of sight puffing and struggling against the weight but another trooper appeared and grabbed the legs and helped him fling it out of sight.

Bashline was seriously fretting now. Just like a real nervous bitch! Still staring unblinkingly at the door. Earlier he felt trickles of sweat running down his back had but since he had shot the soldier in the doorway they had burst into full blown rivers, veritable ice-cold torrents that made him shiver uncontrollably. Its not like he was some novice on his first patrol or anything like that. He had killed people before. Actually he had killed quite a few. The last three were clanner infantry, not the monsters just the regular sized ones, but he had killed them down and dirty. The first was taking a crap in some bushes and he drilled him in mid squat. The second he shot in the face as he came to his friend’s aid and the third he shot in the back. But he knew then he had legal orders directing him to engage a known enemy in a combat zone. Here and now he felt like a criminal. Already guilty of murder and in a few minutes; treason.

Kommandant Apodaca’s lungs burned as she sprinted the last two kilometers back to her office. She relished the pain as it washed away her anxieties and filled her mind with nothing but her labors. Turning the final corner she eyed her office window and poured on the heat, forcing every ounce of energy she had into her legs, willing them to extend longer and push off harder and propel her even faster than they had a scant three hours before. She was euphoric with endorphins when the night turned to day. Seeing the light on the horizon confused her but she could not yet figure what it was and kept on running and hit an invisible wall face first and then get lifted into the air then drop on her head. When her eyes opened again she could see gouts of fire spurting into the air and wads of people rushing back and forth silhouetted against the white and orange flames. Only there was no sound, dazed she grumped that some idiot had left the sound down. *I’ll have their ass for that...* Struggling to her feet she made her way towards the commotion to see why the sound was down and why her base was

burning. She was within 300 meters of the inferno watching curiously as cannon rounds and missiles exploded and zipped crazily through the air when she was picked up bodily and dumped into a culvert and smothered by a sweaty body. She punched and slapped at the body on top of her until its weight relented and took the form of a corporal who could only mouth words to her. “Goddammit!!! Someone turn the damned sound up!!!!”

Bashline eyed the glow in his rear view mirror as his team tore off into the hills and said to no one, “We have really done it now. Really, really.”

La Fortune, Grier and Langemak were crowded around a radio-set listening to Second Battalion’s main transmitter frequencies. They had spent two tense hours listening to their routine chatter nervously awaiting confirmation that the mission was successful when the channel electrified with a hundred yelling and screaming voices at once.

The near instant blast of sound startled them all but Grier listened intently despite it all; trying to interpret who was saying what but it was totally impossible. There were so many voices broadcasting at once that they were stepping all over each other making comms between themselves equally impossible. After 20 seconds someone somewhere got tired of it and forced 100 decibels of feedback back over the channels making every set, including Grier’s, squeal so loud and shrill it made his molars ache. When the sound dropped off a voice sounded.

**“Every body shut the hell up!!!----Now! sound off by the numbers with status and location!”** One by one all of their units checked in and stayed silent. “Alright then. Now! Unit 6 give me a sit rep.”

“There has been an explosion at the ammo bunkers. I’ve lost contact with patrol 2 and I see casualties on the grounds.”

“Rodger that 6. Maintain your position. Help is on the way. Guard posts! Listen closely! You will maintain your positions and prepare for a possible assault. You may use channel 3 as your direct frequency to the staff duty office until further notice. Everybody else go to your battle stations and stand by for further orders. Out!”

Grier shuddered mentally. He had hoped that there would be no casualties and he had even convinced himself that it might be bloodless. But he realized now that he’d been rather foolish to allow himself to think like that. Turning away from the radio set shared a “Well, we’re really in it now.” look with Langemak and LaFortune.

“What now Boss?” Langemak asked.

“Yeah, what now? I’ve been dying to know that myself.” LaFortune added.

LaFortune’s sarcasm was chafing his ass raw tonight and Grier really wanted to invite him to either shut up or eat his service pistol but rather than do that he pulled a city map out of his desk and laid it out. He had decided earlier that he was going to get his revenge a different way.

“Speak Up you idiot!!!!” Kommandant Apodaca screeched. Still barely able hear anything she was convinced that the problem lay upon the shoulders of her moronic subordinates and not with her. The part of the entire episode that infuriated her beyond words was how she was being forced to deal with entire situation directly. Her executive officer had managed to get himself killed when a wildly pin-wheeling inferno rocket landed on top of him and a team of medics as they were tending to wounded. Now that he was dead she had to deal with recovery operations and issue directives to her mindless trolls. And it didn’t help that her eyes where almost completely blacked out now and her head ached like she had been run

over by a truck. On the opposite side of the coin, her soldiers would most days rather eat broken glass than make eye contact with their *bitch* commander now had to speak with her directly which made them hate the dead Hauptmann more than their commander already did.

“I SAID THE FIRE IS OUT M’AAM! WE ARE READY TO LET THE INVESTIGATOR IN!”

“What Investigator!?!?”

“THE ONE THEY SENT.”

“Who sent!?!?”

“THE MILITARY POLICE.”

Kommandant Apodaca jumped to her feet and screeched about a centimeter from her Alpha company commander’s face “You tell them to get the hell out of here. We don’t need anybody’s help! Especially theirs!!!!”

“YES M’AAM!!!” The man saluted crisply and bolted from her wrecked office leaving her to stomp her feet and kick at the wreckage that was once her beautiful, plush office. Nearly everything was ruined. Her leather over-stuffed furniture sat in tatters, bleeding white batting from a thousand slashes her desk, once polished to a mirror-like finish sat near its shattered picture window its finish burnt to a bubbled caramel color. A cannon round had put her private bathroom into the adjacent parking lot and not had the common courtesy to shut the water off as it blasted her commode across the blacktop. Staring at the destruction of her dream office and her dream base she started shaking with rage. She had fought hard to get where she was and now they were trying to take it away from her. That idiot Lafortune and his jackass mechwarriors who had to fight back and her own troops had to be part of it too. *How else could this*, she gestured her arms out towards her ruined office, *have happened. Only planned incompetence or worse... Treason against the Crown could account for what has happened here.* She had worked too hard and enforced her will too well for this, she gestured at the room again, to happen on accident. *Well*, she snarled silently, *I am going to rip their testicles off and show them to them before I kill them. I want them to all know I am nobody’s fool.*