

Hickock's Heavy Cavalry

II. Bad Omen

By: Methuselah

Overlord class DropShip Horatio Nelson *Approaching Outreach*

The small flag-suite aboard *Nelson*, normally intended as temporary accommodation for a military commander, had been occupied by the commanding officer of the Heavy Cavalry on a permanent basis for some time now. Colonel Hickock slumbered alone in the double bed that dominated much of the room. Aside from the small glow that came from the compact en suite bathroom, little more than a shower, sink and toilet, the only light in the room came from the red digits of a bedside chronograph. Logan Hickock's slumber was restless. He had managed to contort his sweating body amongst the thin sheets of the bed, and wore the shadow of a feral grimace upon his careworn face. His hands clenched and fingers twitched slightly as he fought through another dream.

Major Charlotte Hall, executive officer, battalion commander, MechWarrior and partner of Colonel Logan Hickock slipped out of the en suite with a measure of stealth. The wrinkling of Logan's face as the light from the bathroom lit the room gave her away.

"Mmmph?"

"Yeah. My morning run beckons." Charlotte sat upon the edge of the bed and pulled on one of her running shoes.

"What time is it?" Logan steadfastly refused to open his eyes, knowing full well that to do so would drive spears of painfully bright light into his brain.

"Oh five-hundred." The second running shoe was on now.

Logan slipped an arm around the waist of his partner and pressed himself close to her. "You feel like someone just threw a bucket of warm water over you. Are you ok?"

"Yeah." He sounded as sincere as he thought he could. "Just a bad dream. All gone now." It was a lie, but an easy one. He had no business burdening her with the spates of nightmares that swept over him after a contract was over. Old nightmares, new nightmares, they were welcome to have their way with him. As long as no one else died.

"Ok." Logan felt a gentle kiss upon his forehead. "I'll be back in forty-five. Try not to have any more nightmares."

Major Charlotte Hall slipped out of the bedroom silently, leaving Logan to fall back into a more restful slumber.

Flat 19, #1128 Morningrise Road *Harlech, Outreach*

Mark Forrester finished lacing up his boots quickly. His shaking hands made the task a difficult one. At the end of his twenties, he often thought to himself that he needed a new line of work. A new line of credit would have been just as good.

Mark 'Ghostrider' Forrester owed some very unsavoury characters a very substantial sum of money. He look around the dismally-appointed flat he'd been renting for the past month, ensuring that he'd left nothing behind. Peeling wallpaper, low-quality chipboard furniture, and a

both irritating and usefully thin door were all that he was leaving behind. In a remarkably foresighted moment he had salted away a few hundred c-bills in different banks. For a man who generally thought no further ahead than his shot selection this had been an act of particular prescience. It had not, however, prevented him from borrowing more money that his organs would garner on the black market.

For the last week he'd played a game of cat and mouse with his creditors, all the while doing his best to sign on with one of the many mercenary units that cycled through Outreach. Hopefully one that could offer him both money, and a fast escape from the Sozay family.

As he jogged down the stairs the sound of his heavily booted feet and the whirling of his thoughts distracted him from the looming shadows that the afternoon sun had cast into the lobby. Mark stopped dead upon jumping down the final few steps.

"Forrester." A thickly Azami-accented voice muttered. "Miss Sozay wants her money." The voice of Ashanna Al'Okway was not one that Mark wanted to hear.

"I don't have it yet Ash." He had to think fast. "I was just on the way to get it. Honest."

Ashanna was almost so tall that he needed to stoop to enter the building. He was also significantly broader than Mark. Truly, this was an assault-weight leg-breaker. "You were supposed to have the money today, Mark. Miss Sozay will not be pleased." Ashanna made an overly theatrical sigh. "What am I to tell her, Mark?" The delivery of his words was slow and deliberately menacing.

Mark could feel the impending punishment for his late payment rolling forwards like a storm cloud upon the horizon. A storm cloud with tattoos upon its face, and small brown eyes. "Ash, you know I'm good for my payment. I'm a little late this time, I know, but..."

"No. No buts. If I let you pay late today, where will it stop?"

Mark backed up away from Ashanna, eyeing the lazily-slouched tough that had appeared to cut off a sudden dash for the back door. He was adept enough at unarmed combat, and had learned well at boot on Marlette, but he'd need his *Wolverine* if he was going to come out of this unscathed. "Come on Ash. No need for the rough stuff. I just have to cash in some betting slips and I'll meet you at Mama Sozay's this evening."

It was at times like this that Mark really hated the fact that the Dragoons prohibited the carrying of small arms in public. A Sternsnacht, or just a stunstick, would have evened the odds in his favor.

"I am sorry to have to do this Mark. Perhaps next time, you will not be late in repaying Miss Sozay."

Overlord class DropShip Horatio Nelson *Approaching Outreach*

The *Overlord* class of DropShip had been designed with the task of conquering planets in mind. To that end the class had been bestowed with a small suite of rooms intended for battalion or regimental command officers. The *Nelson*, the newest of the regiment's three Overlords, had been designated as the regimental command vessel, and it was within her small suite of staterooms that the officers of Hickock's Heavy Cavalry had been conducting their customary post-campaign meetings.

"And now, for the bit we've all been waiting for!" A raucous cheer resounded from the regimental command staff. The Colonel waited for the cheering to die down before continuing.

“Total operating profit for the Othello contact was four million c-bills. That makes the value of an individual share, twenty-thousand c-bills. Congratulation ladies and gentlemen; you’ve all earned more in three months than a house MechWarrior makes in a single year.”

Another spontaneous cheer erupted, filling the small operations room to bursting. Rather than paying its personnel a set salary, the Heavy Cavalry offered a profit-sharing system, with bonuses for specific performance awards such as highest accuracy, least damage taken, best performance and so forth. The net effect was one that reduced the regiment’s operating costs, since its personnel realized that money they wasted was money that they would later not have to pad out their wallets.

“I knew it! I told you we’d be rich!” Captain Sallaston whooped with delight. As an officer her due would be three shares worth of the profit, approximately sixty-*thousand* c-bills. This particular contract had been one of their toughest, but it had also been the best paid contract that the unit had taken in its three-year history.

“No Sal. *I’ll* be rich.” Sallaston’s immediate commander, Major Lockheart leant over the table and grinned broadly, knowing that his rank afforded him an extra share.

“And if I may interrupt you, that brings me to the next point of order. Re-enlistment.”

“Not a discussion of what one hundred thousand c-bills can buy you?”

“No, Kendra.” He smiled with his officers, why shouldn’t he? Things had gone more smoothly than he’d hoped. ‘Unlike the rest of you, I know how much we have to make in payments to the banks that financed this outfit. I’ll be lucky if I can afford a drink and a cigar!’ Captain Kendra Sallaston mimicked a mournful look, while beside her Major Lockheart dug out a cigar and rolled it across to his long-time commanding officer. “Thank you Alex. That’s at least one worry off my mind.” He pocketed the cigar. “Back to the matter at hand. We have three pilots to replace, how many are we likely to lose when we start re-enlisting for our next contract? Major Lockheart?”

“I know of one we’re going to lose for certain Colonel. I’ve got one undecided, but I think that two and half shares of operating profit will be enough to keep him onboard.” First Batt’s Bravo company had been involved in heavy fighting during the storming of Badajoz, taking two of the unit’s three dead.

“Major Hall?”

“Two that I know of. One from Charlie company’s Tiger lance, another from Alpha’s Zulu lance.”

“And finally, Major Welkes. Tom, how many of your boys and girls are likely to come aboard for our next job?”

Major Tom Welkes was one of the older hands employed by the Heavy Cavalry. With a long career that had been spent mostly in the employ of the Free Worlds League, he had brought with him not only a wealth of experience in command, but also a lance of well-trained and well-equipped MechWarriors. “All my boys and girls are in. Three Batt will be good to go on your say so, Colonel.”

“Outstanding.” Colonel Hickock paused to fix his gaze on the newest officer in Three Batt, Captain Ogonowicz, before shifting his gaze back to the salt-and-pepper haired Major. “Since you have the least work to do, you won’t mind if I tap one of your officers to handle the recruitment process?”

Major Welkes popped the thick cigar from his mouth and leaned back in his chair, looking across at his young officer. “Ryan?”

Ryan nodded back at his immediate commander with a confident nod. "I'll take care of it, sir."

"Ok. Next on the agenda. The boring, and unfortunately essential part," Colonel Hickock paused for his buoyant comrades to issue their theatrical moans and groans of disappointment. "We've made the next payment on the Nelson, leaving only..."

Overlord class DropShip Robert Blake ***Approaching Outreach***

MechWarrior Mike Bastogne could never quite get used to the smell of the *Robert Blake*. It smelt polluted, like an unflushed toilet mixed with cigarette butts and unwashed bodies. It was so bad in the small billet he shared with his lance that they'd had to take mild tranquilizers for the first few nights. The stench had been that bad that none of them could sleep. The regiment's only *Union* class DropShip, the *Tamar Triumphant*, smelt better but was full to bursting with the men and women of Four Batt.

Mike had been with the Heavy Cav almost since their inception, just after the formation midway through the St. Ives conflict. Back then he'd been with Aleisha's Mounted Fusiliers up until the surrender on St. Loris. Even facing a similar situation, Hickock had kept his abbreviated battalion fighting longer and harder than Aleisha Carling had managed. No one had noticed him slipping away when it became obvious that the Mounted Fusiliers intended to surrender.

"Hey Mike."

Mike looked up at the door to see his lance commander and company captain walk in. "Good meeting Jerry?"

Captain Jerry Brown shook his head before replying. "Same old same old. Outside of contract I feel more like a banker than a MechWarrior." The Captain ducked his head as he sat on one of the bottom bunks. "An accountant maybe. Still, payday looks like it'll turn out well." Mike put his book down without thought and looked directly at his CO. Of the many things that lured MechWarriors into the mercenary life, money was almost as important as freedom. "Single share works out to twenty K, gonna be a while before we find that sort of money floating around again."

Despite this being the best payday by far that he'd had since joining the Heavy Cavalry, Mike would have traded half a share for a good night's sleep. "Shame I won't have a chance to spend it for a while. God damn do I hate traveling."

"I know what you mean. In both cases. I always seem to wake up with a splitting headache after sleeping on a DropShip. Feels like I tore something inside my head."

"I hear that. I just have to put up with bad dreams."

Although Mike had been with the regiment longer than his lance and company commander, the two had formed a friendship quickly and easily on the field of battle that had stretched off the field as well. "Anything out of the ordinary, or the usual?"

"The usual." Mike answered confidently, dismissing the ill omens that haunted his sleep. "Desperate last stands, fighting on against impossible odds, real *Immortal Warrior* stuff. Except the bits where we all die." Mike swung his legs out into the small clearing in the centre of the billet, following them out with only a little stiffness in his back. "Okay. I'm going to grab some chow and hit the rec room. Enjoy your book." Captain Brown had doffed his jacket and pulled out one of the many technical manuals from under his bunk. He lifted a hand in

acknowledgement, and then sank back into the well-thumbed manual, either immune to or blissfully ignorant of the stench that circulated throughout the ship.

Hiring Hall Harlech, Outreach

Mark left the Hiring Hall as late in the day as he could, just early enough not to seem desperate for work, but late enough that every potential employer had been cased. The Hiring Hall was a grand stone building that dominated the skyline of eastern Harlech. Its gigantic dome and three supporting towers were of such a scale that the building was often used a navigational landmark for those new to the city.

It had not been a productive day. He suspected that some of the coolness that prospective employers had displayed to him was due in part to the way he winced whenever he moved, and the unsightly bruises about his face. None of the injuries was serious. He'd stopped pissing blood a few hours after his punishment beating, but who was going to hire a MechWarrior who looked worse than his BattleMech?

The sun had dipped below the horizon some time ago, illuminating the clouds overhead with a bloody tinge, filling the small gap between ground and sky with a strip of molten gold. Tomorrow would be better. He'd spend some more time working on his *Wolverine* in the morning, hire a not-too-cheap suit on his way into town with some of his stashed money, and see if he could impress anyone in the open simulators operated by Blue Shot Weapons.

And there was the next payment for the Sozays that needed scaring up. That he'd have to earn the old fashioned way until he could get off-planet. Thankfully, Outreach was forever welcoming mercs with fat wallets and over-sized egos. Above the band of cloud in the eastern sky Mark could see what looked like a cluster of egg-shaped *Overlord* DropShips making their final descent. To his trained eye they seemed to be burning hard, a telling sign that they were ferrying BattleMechs down to the planet, probably for repair and refit in any one of the 'Mech engineering firms that operated on Outreach. That many *Overlords* meant a regiment, and a regiment meant a lot of mercenaries looking to spend their pay.

Mark Forrester rubbed his still swollen jaw gingerly as he watched the DropShips descend through the low bank of cloud. This day might turn out to be more productive than he'd previously imagined.

Tilly's Atlas Bar & Grill East Harlech, Outreach

Tilly's was a ritual watering hole for mercenaries passing through Harlech. The original bar had been crushed thirty years previous during a raid on the planet by Kuritan mercenaries seeking lostech. The actual crushing incident happened when the mercenary commander's *Atlas* had taken one PPC blast too many to the back, and had fallen upon the then-empty building. A month later, Tilly's had reopened. The same style of pre-fab building, this time sporting the

hollowed-out head of an *Atlas* as a grossly over-sized entrance hall. The Valhalla club, it was not.

Getting one's self staggering drunk at Tilly's was also a ritual for members of Hickock's Heavy Cavalry upon returning to Outreach after a successful contract. After an hour or three spent within Tilly's charms, the younger and more foolhardy Mechjocks, techheads, tankers and DropShip crew would begin to filter down the Strip, while those who had already had their skinful would turn-in for the night at accommodations rented for them by the regiment.

What passed for the bar's function room was full of the smells of cologne, cigars, and sweating bodies. Major Hall had long suspected that this room had been constructed from the blown heatsinks of the bar's totem. She needed fresh air.

Charlotte murmured into the ear of her poker partner. "Ok Logan, I'm going to go and mingle. I'll see you back at the dorm later on." She laid a discreet kiss upon the scarred cheek of her partner and commanding officer before excusing herself from the table. She slipped through the swarm that occupied the main bar area and out through one of the doors marked 'Exit Only' into the street outside. Harlech by night was pleasantly warm. In the closing stages of spring, the air was just noticeably warm upon the bare skin of her arms. The air smelt good, almost tasted good. Filling her lungs with it after a long DropShip ride was a distinct and tangible pleasure.

Here, outside in the clean air, with the last glow of sunset painting the undersides of the distant clouds, she felt human. Some smells were missing; the smell of ozone, of baking circuit boards and boiled armor composite; the smell of unwashed bodies too long in the field and the acrid flavor of a sweet and sour chicken MRE. This was worth every bloody nose and broken bone and bitter battle. The disjointed thumping from inside Tilly's took her back to Battle of Badajoz for a moment as it joined step with memories of artillery fire raining from the sky, before disappearing like vapor with another lungful of clean air.

"Nice night, huh, Top?"

Charlotte didn't turn to see who was speaking to her, she knew exactly who it was. "I was thinking the same thing Chenko." Maurice Chenkowitz was her self-appointed minder, both on the battlefield and off. She'd not seen fit to tell him that she was more than capable of looking after herself inside and outside of the cockpit, especially as he made such a big deal of taking care of her in the Colonel's absence. "Until you came out here, anyhow."

Maurice tapped her gently on the shoulder. "The rest of Alpha is going to run the Strip tonight, break a few hearts, maybe a few heads as well. You want to come with us?" He was shorter than she was, slightly, but made up for it with what in its prime was a weightlifter's build.

"You ask this every time we touch down on Outreach. Or any planet where we're at liberty, for that matter." She added for effect. "How often do I say yes?"

"Every time a pilot from the Gemini stable wins the Solaris championship?" The two laughed briefly with the ease of those who had seen combat together. "Come on. It's Goldfinch's last night in the Regiment. We'd never forgive you if you didn't make at least a token appearance."

She would regret this in the morning. She knew it. There was no way that she'd mangle her morning run in anything approaching a respectable time. Not with the skinful of liquor that would eventually end up being consumed. But she felt like living. "Count me in."

Casa di Reso
East Harlech, Outreach

The sun outside was well above the horizon when Captain Ryan Ogonowicz found the strength to lift his head. Swiftly and sensibly, he put it straight back down. His only point of reference, aside from the scratchy-yet-clean sheets covering his body, were the distant voices of other members of the Heavy Cavalry engaged in what passed for witty repartee between soldiers. The rhythmic pulsing of nausea, then agony, did nothing to help orient him.

“Son, you look like a sack of shit.” If there was a voice he *didn't* want to wake up to, it was the age-worn gravelly bass rasp of his commander. “And by saying that, I’m putting the best face on it that I can.” The hard mattress sank near his feet as Major Tom Welkes sat down upon it. “Are you alive in there?”

“Kill me.” This was no time to open his eyes, and barely past time where he could form a coherent sentence. Even thinking was a chore, with the passage of blood through his brain feeling like marbles more than corpuscles. Maybe marble-sized corpuscles.

The Major chuckled, “You don’t have time to die son,” in amusement both at the situation his charge found himself in, and memories of the times he too had uttered that phrase. “I need you functional by midday. That gives you an hour to recover before I send you to the hiring hall.” The weight at the end of the bed disappeared smoothly. “And do yourself a favor. Take a shower, eat a few aspirin, and rinse your mouth out before you do anything else.”

It took Ryan fifteen minutes to make it to from his bed to the dining room that occupied much of the Casa di Reso’s ground floor. His immediate lancemates had taken and held a corner table located well away from any sources of natural light.

“Well, well, well.” Jessica Steilhoff, *Shotgun 2*, drawled from behind oversized sunglasses. “Look what the salvage teams brought back!” The three MechWarriors at the table raised a ragged whooping cheer to their glorious leader.

Ryan could not yet bring himself to speak, and settled for giving his comrades a lopsided grin before settling down into an empty chair. “I’m so hungry I could eat Kuritan take-away. I think I’d just throw it right back up tho’.”

“You look pretty rough, Top.” *Shotgun 4*, Aaron Fletcher, muttered through a mouthful of toast. “Hair of the dog?”

Ryan fought a wave of revulsion as he caught the scent of whisky and coke, pushing himself back from the table. “I think I reached my limit twice over last night. My head feels like it got caught in a vice.” He grabbed over and took a piece of toast from the rack in the middle of the small round table. “No one ordered brandy butter, did they?” As unlikely as it sounded, that trick had been played out on a regular basis when Ryan had been promoted to Captain. Butter had been mixed with a number of alcoholic substances from brandy, through to vodka and cream liquor. It had happened almost enough to induce an entirely rational fear of dairy products in the still-young Captain.

“Got a plan for today, Top?” Mike Cazlode looked as chipper as ever, seemingly unaffected by the night of heavy drinking that had taken place. On Mike’s scale, the evening had barely ranked as a heavy bender, well short of the legendary assault-weight session he had embarked on after the Liao-Marik invasion back in ’57.

“Yeah. Interviews.” Ryan carefully helped himself to a glass of cold orange juice, well aware of how bitter the local oranges tasted. “I’ve got six billets to fill, and the Old Man wants people with combat experience. Preferably ones who survived the experience with their ’Mech in one piece.”

“Good luck. Maybe you’ll be able to find some rocking horse shit as well.”

Ryan smiled and flipped a finger at the only woman in his lance in a most ungentlemanly manner. “What about the rest of you? Planning on pickling yourselves with yet more alcohol through the day, or did you have something more constructive in mind?”

“Hell no. It’ll be another six hours before the room finally stops spinning, considering the amount I drank.” Aaron groaned and pulled on his short brown hair, before gazing down at his coffee with a sick look upon his face.

“I’m going to stop by sickbay first. Get my hand looked at.” Jessie’s left hand was badly bruised around the knuckles. “Then I think I’ll do the girly thing, get my hair cut and my nails looked at.” Ryan had a vague memory of a drunken mercenary attempting to back Jess into the corner, only to have more than his ego broken. “You have fun dehydrating in a badly air-conditioned office though, Top. We’re meeting up at Tilly’s for drinks at eight.” Ryan almost puked what little had settled into his stomach as he took his first sips of bitter orange juice.

“I’ll meet you all there, but I think I’m going to have a lie down first.”

Exhibition hall, Hiring Hall Harlech, Outreach

There was a thrill in simulated combat that was nowhere to be found in the real thing. Mark Forrester, for one, had never managed to piss himself during a simulator battle. In a simulator battle, the worst that could happen was limited to bruising of the ego. The consequences of a badly fought battle in the real world were much more permanent. Hence, Mark had been particularly excited. The simulator pods in the Grand Hall of the Hiring Hall were networked, allowing exhibition battles to be fought between contestants from intimate 1 vs. 1 affair to battalion-sized actions. Around the hall, large screens displayed the battles in their Technicolor splendor, happily avoiding any resemblance to the reality of warfare.

The atmosphere within the Grand Hall was part Steiner employment exhibition and part Canopian funfair; the stands of larger employers, the Successor States, Megacorporations, and a handful of the richest mercenary units were gaudy, exciting, and in one case pyrotechnic. The Davion stand even contained a 1/3 scale *Victor*, gesturing for the less shell-shocked members of the thronging crowds to come to the Davion ‘encampment’.

“Anyone ever tell you how dirty you fight, Forrester?” Mark turned to look over his shoulder as he queued to use one of the coffee machines dispersed about the hall. Behind him stood Lieutenant (SG) Wylder, wearing the uniform of the Free Worlds League Militia.

“All the time.” The queue shuffled forwards slowly as they talked. “I seem to recall that was why you hired me last year.” It was true, as well as mildly supercilious. A broad playbook of dirty battlefield techniques had landed him a contract that was short term, well paid, and extremely dangerous.

“You did good out there today. Maybe today will be your lucky day huh? I saw the rep from Kessel Mining and Securities checking your Dragoon record out.” The line seemed to slow a little more with each sip that the FWLM Lieutenant (SG) took from his styrofoam cup. “Mark, if this one doesn’t work out, or you don’t fancy babysitting miners on some planet off the arse end of nowhere, drop by my office. I can always find work for someone like you.”

The payoff that Mark had received last year had been more than generous. As he watched Wylder melt into the crowd, it struck him once again how much that ‘little job’ was going to end up costing him.

***West Wing, Third Floor, Hiring Hall
Harlech, Outreach***

The afternoon had been relatively fruitless. The office, which was little more than an extended broom closet to be fair, was small, cramped, and airless. It was also intolerably warm when more than one person occupied it.

Ryan had returned to the office after grabbing a drink from the vending machine down the hall. The one saving grace that this section of the Hiring Hall possessed was that it was quiet, which suited his delicate constitution perfectly.

Catching sight of himself in the polished metal nameplate on the front of the office door, Ryan realized that he wasn't the greatest walking advertisement for a mercenary unit. Calling it a hangover was an understatement. Calling it the mother of all hangovers was still an understatement, albeit a less monumental one.

So far, of seven interviews, two had agreed to come down to the unit's temporary headquarters, and only one of those struck him as likely to sign up. With four more interviews to go for the day Ryan was fervently hoping that some better candidates would turn up fast, otherwise he'd end up spending his entire time on-planet trapped in this office. The next interview looked promising though. Ryan sipped his soft drink slowly. His stomach still hadn't settled, and based on past experience it was unlikely to calm down for some time to come.

Ryan was about ready to stretch back in his chair when a gentle knock at the door announced the arrival of his next appointment. "Come in." The door was thin enough that he hardly needed to raise his voice.

"Good afternoon." Ryan stood and leant over the desk to offer his hand to the new arrival. "I'm Captain Ogonowictz of Hickock's Heavy Cavalry."

"Mark Forrester. Formerly of Tsona's Tigers."

"Please, take a seat." Ryan sat down at the same time as his interviewee. Mark Forrester was nothing special to look at, neither handsome nor ugly, but the man looked as though an Atlas had rolled over him in the not-too-distant past. "Okay, let's get this started. There are plenty of mercenary units on Outreach. Why do you want to join Hickock's Heavy Cavalry?"

"Money." To his credit, Forrester was honest and to the point. "I'm tired of working badly paid contracts with two-bit lances and companies."

"The Heavy Cavalry aren't about money. But we pay fairly."

"I hear you pay more than fairly." Mark Forrester rubbed a long, fresh bruise on his jaw. "Twenty thousand for a three month stint is a lot more than fair."

"The last contract was something of an exception. Depending on how this interview goes, you'll receive a full run-down of the payment obligations of Hickock's Heavy Cavalry to its contractors." Ryan had spent two years studying law before he realized his true calling in life. Even on a bad night's sleep and having woken up with the hangover from hell, legalese flowed from his lips like his father's tongue. "Aside from the money, what do you look forward to from working with the Heavy Cavalry?" Best to bring the interview back on track sooner than later. The issue of money could always be resolved at a later stage.

"I'd mostly look forward to working for a unit with some real clout. It's easy for a House liaison officer to beat a small merc unit with any number of sticks; re-supply problems, payment problems, reinforcement problems, redeployment problems." Mark, apparently, had seen his fair

share of 'problems'. "I'll make no bones about this, Captain Ogonowicz, I'm a good MechWarrior. Better than most that I've worked with, and to be frank, I'm tired of propping up zombies and DOAs. I want to work with professionals again."

"Well you're not shy about selling yourself." Ryan had glanced over Mr. Forrester's dossier, and although the man was arrogant, he was also as good as he claimed. Aside from a few gaps in his Dragoon record here or there, he'd fought in almost every major inter-house conflict in the past six years. If nothing else, he knew how to survive and fight under fire. "And your level of experience, plus your Dragoon rating, makes you an ideal candidate. However I have to ask, you've been on Outreach now for over a month and haven't successfully found work. Why is that?"

"Some people consider me a bad omen."

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