

Marion's Misfits

“Where The Difference Begins” (Chapter 10)

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“Three—eegrrraahh—weeks.” Julian grunted his reply as he hauled down on the torque wrench. With the telltale click that indicated the correct tension he stuffed the tool back into his belt and wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. Despite the effort it merely smeared more of the sticky, red myomer muscle grease across his face. He looked down from his perch at his *Marauder's* elbow actuator to the Misfits' Senior Tech Bjorn Reeh and wasn't the least bit surprised at the scowl put there by his answer.

“That's not enough time Captain,” Reeh complained. “Some of this stuff, sure, but I'm not a bloody magician. I mean, TWO Clan-tech PPCs, for Christ sake! Where the hell am I supposed to find those with less than ten Clan-tech 'Mechs on planet?” The flustered look in his ice-blue eyes passed between the noteputer in his hands and back up to Julian on the scaffold as he combed an errant strand of blonde hair back over his head. Reeh had been delegated to this half of the unit on Galatea by Master Chief Tech Ed Bird while he went off with Morrison and the rest of the unit to Eaton.

“Just do your best. Morrison won't fault you if it's just not here to be had. From what I'm guessing we're not going to find those PPCs unless we salvage a 'Mech, so just concentrate on what you can do and keep an ear out for the rest.” Julian smiled down at Reeh. “You've got time.”

“Time!” Reeh threw up his hands and stalked away still mumbling. “Time. The Captain is talking about time and I've got three weeks. Time. God help me if I ever...” The words trailed off as Reeh left through the hanger doors and sent Julian into a chuckle at the tech's frustration. He reached down and put the access panel back in place and grabbed the power drill with his free hand to tighten down the access bolts.

It was three weeks ago that Morrison had sent word that they were on their way back and it would be three weeks still before they landed back on Galatea. A laundry list of replacement parts was included in the communiqué and Julian had everyone that wasn't on guard, or repair duty scrounging every corner of Galatean City for the items. Senior Tech Reeh had come up with some things that even Julian was certain they'd never get but the Clan-tech equipment seemed to be a sticking point with the man who wasn't afraid to voice his concerns. Even Julian's attempts to soothe those worries failed simply because of Reeh's reputation of being able to “find ice on Zaniah III”. He knew that there'd be two Clan PPCs sitting in the hanger when Morrison got back and that he really wouldn't have to explain the three-day pass handed out over his signature.

Julian placed the drill back in the toolbox and wiped his hands with an overly dirty rag and wished that he had the same luck as Reeh when it came to recruiting some of those Clan MechWarriors. It had been two months and still all the requests and overtures to meet with the Clanners had been met with no reply. He remained determined to be levelheaded about it and

not get discouraged. He'd just keep plugging away and even if he got a "go to hell", that would be better than nothing at all.

He'd severely misjudged that his initial requests for a meeting would be met in good faith and had come to wonder in the recent weeks if he really would have to issue a Trial of something-or-other to even get their attention. Having to fight them to get them to join was not even on his list of possible options. He'd either pay them to join or he'd have to find another option to explore without them. But the benefits of employing Clan MechWarriors made him wonder if he really could just let it go if it wasn't working out.

Julian lowered the tools to the ground via a jerry-rigged pulley system and then climbed down the scaffolding himself. He peeled himself out of the tech jumpsuit while he admired his 'Mech from the ground. Reaching over twelve meters in height the *Marauder* was one of the most common 'Mechs in the known universe. Its well-known crab-like appearance came from the backward-canted legs attached to the long, hunched over body with its arms extending forward from just behind the cockpit area. Nestled in each of those boxy weapons pods was an erPPC and a Medium Pulse Laser. Also included in its arsenal was a Large Pulse Laser in the right side and a two-tube Streak short-range missile launcher. All that heavy weaponry could put a major strain on the fusion engine causing the waste heat from the power spike to bake the pilot like a potato in an oven. Luckily, like the weapons, the 'Mech was equipped with the upgraded technology of double-heat-sinks that would bleed off the heat and keep the pilot alive longer. Julian was no stranger to the blistering temperatures that would accompany him in that tin can when he went into battle and he was ever-grateful that his 'Mech had kept him alive this long. He glanced up at the arms and admired the way the fresh paint highlighted certain areas of the 'Mech.

The unit had finally started to employ the paint scheme and unit standards that were decided on several months back when they'd left Alcor. Morrison had decided against camouflage schemes because he wanted everyone to know that they were facing the Misfits. Just like with the Dragoons or the Kell Hounds, they too, would have a single paint scheme that would make them more recognizable to foe and clients alike. Right now the *Marauder* sat still in its repair cradle in an overall coat of cobalt blue with fiery orange highlights. Despite his reservations at the choices he'd come to really enjoy the complementary colors. Even the unit symbol seemed appropriate for the times. A spiked Morningstar set upon a broad shield in classic black and white gave weight to the martial nature of their business while the unit's initials in bright purple was the flair that made up the core of the Misfits' personality. With members from all of the Great Houses and 'Mechs from every corner of the known universe there was nothing traditional about the unit. It was as if Morrison thumbed his nose at the rules and put together a formidable team with whomever he could find and molded them into a fine fighting force.

Recently-promoted Captain Julian Pintall was proud to be part of that force even if the novelty of the promotion itself was part of that feeling. The other part of it had to be that he was now in command of the second of two 'Mech companies in the unit's Table of Organization and Equipment. He wasn't even bothered that he only had two of the normal three lances to his Company because it was still *his* Company. Donar Company had been sent to Galatea to rearm, refit and recruit while Morrison ran a little extraction mission on Eaton and Julian was determined to fulfill his duties before Morrison returned.

In three weeks.

Man how time flies, he thought. He checked his wrist chronometer and realized he had left himself just enough time to get cleaned up before meeting with a host of potentials to fill a gap in

Recon Lance. As he headed to his quarters he thought about how even though he really didn't know Fred on a personal level that didn't make his loss any less difficult to take. Losing a teammate (even though they all knew they were paid to be *in harm's way*) was a tough thing to take. Morrison hadn't included any details of how, just that they'd lost Fred and to find a replacement. Morrison had also included that they'd lost Vlad but had said to not find a replacement until he'd returned with the rest of the unit. Then there was the replacement parts list, but Julian had delegated that out to the rest of the unit already on Galatea so he could concentrate on more administrative tasks to get them out of the way faster.

After getting cleaned up and dressed in something more formal for the unit, Julian settled into his office and met with the first of three potentials for the open job. The young man was of medium height and build with a closely cropped head of brown hair. Adorned in a plain olive drab jumpsuit favored by MechWarriors he handed Julian his dossier and sat in the metal chair in front of the desk. Julian flipped through the records, the commendations and disciplinary actions and somehow managed to not display his shock at the holopic of the complete piece of rusted junk that was this man's 'Mech. It looked like the body of a *Spider* with a *Panther* head and *Commando* arms. As he closed the folder he silently swore that he'd never before seen a 'Mech in such sad shape. *Not even in the Periphery.*

“So Todd, tell me about your last assignment in a reconnaissance capacity.”

Todd squirmed a bit and then launched into this grand tale of scouting out a Clan party during a raid in what was the Clan Steel Viper zone. Gesturing wildly with his hands to describe unit movements as if he were speaking to a class of fifth graders he went on and on for forty-five minutes about how he'd skirted around behind the Clanners and radioed in that they were setting up an ambush and how his CO misread the map and walked right into it instead of hitting from sides and he was the only other person to make it out alive from his unit. After the wonderful tale was told, Julian asked a set of typical personal questions and then thanked the man for his time and said they'd be in touch once they made a decision.

The second applicant looked like an up-ended wobbling doll, the kind that never falls over because they are weighted on the bottoms. The man had an enormously broad chest with thick tree trunk arms and an impossibly skinny waist and bone thin legs. After getting some blood back in his hand from the vise-grip handshake he thumbed to the physical stats page and was not at all surprised that this one could bench 130kg and run the 1.5km in four minutes. It was unnatural, but not surprising.

The story told by this applicant was that he was more of a recon support role than just straight reconnaissance. He was usually the ones that pulled the recon boys' butts from the fire when they'd get spotted, so he drove a 'Mech that was as fast but heavier armored and armed than what Julian was really looking for. A 55-ton *Lineholder* was just too big for Recon Lance. Julian noticed that laced throughout the story was a scathing rebuke of anything Lyran. Lyran 'Mechs, Lyran tactics, Lyran officers; nothing Lyran escaped the poisonous venom spewed forth when mentioned. Immediately discounting his passionate hatred of the Alliance, Julian asked the typical questions, thanked the hulking MechWarrior and sent him on his way with 'we'll get back to you'.

Julian sat back in the squeaky office chair and silently accused the wall clock of lying that three hours had passed since he started his meetings today. He rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands and realized he'd never given thought that this would be so difficult. When Morrison promoted him and gave him command of the Company, he was told to refit, rearm and recruit.

He'd accomplished most of the first two but the third was proving bothersome. And the sad, ironic bit was that he was on one of the prime mercenary recruitment worlds in the Inner Sphere! Maybe it was the misconception that he would be fighting off eligible recruits to get to the best of the best. It actually felt more like scrapping the bottom of the barrel from the dregs that walked into his office. He closed his eyes and sighed softly and wondered what the next person would be like when they walked in the room.

A quiet knocking on the office door roused him from his thoughts and he snapped his eyes open. A man of medium-build and height stood at parade-rest in the doorway. His brown hair was shaved to the scalp along the sides leaving a closely cropped level stretch of hair across the top of his skull. A thin goatee covered an angular face down to his squared jaw. There was a sparkle in the deep recesses of his hazel eyes that betrayed a history there. An empty holster rode low on his hip suspended from a web belt cinched around his dark gray jumpsuit. There was a darkened patch by his left shoulder that Julian took for the location of a former unit symbol. Julian waved him into the office and to take a seat in the chair before the desk. The man walked stiffly to the chair, bowed his head quickly in thanks and sat ramrod straight in the chair. Everything about him oozed professional military and Julian was already starting to like what he saw.

"Dobraye ootro. Meenya zavoot Daniel Koharkovich. Kak pazhivayesh?" The man's voice was deep like the roar from an autocannon on full and equally unfamiliar in meaning to Julian's ears. Not sure if he should say anything he stared blankly for a few seconds when the newcomer realized his error. *"Eezveeneete! Prasteete...uhh, I mean, excuse, I sorry. I mean to say 'Good morning. My name is Daniel Koharkov. How are you?' I forget sometimes, my English you see."*

"Ah, well that's no problem," replied Julian. "Your English seems just fine to me. It's nice to meet you Daniel. I'm Captain Pintall, Donar Company commander of Marion's Misfits. Thanks for coming in today." Daniel simply nodded and Julian continued. "I'm sure your dossier contains all the technical details but what brings you to Galatea?"

"Da, I was attach to Khorsakov's Cossacks Recon Lance. We fight in war for Duchess Candace against Confederation. St. Ives no win so Duchess no need us now. Commander take contract with Federated Suns to sit on Bell but some of us no want to sit. Some want to fight Liao, some want to no participate in civil war, some want to fight for others. Not many but some. So Podpolkovnik Krivokrasov, uh, Lieutenant-Colonel, say we go with blessing and good will. No, luck, yes, good luck he say. Some go to Outreach, some come to Galatea with me. Either or, same to us. Just want to work for right people. You have ad for recon work so I here to meet you. And per ad I have own 'Mech as favor from Krivokrasov."

Julian smiled as he nodded then flipped a few pages over in the folder. "That's right. A, uh, *Wolfhound*. Odd 'Mech for a unit with strong ties to Tikonov."

"Yes, was trade in from Dragoons. Build on Tharkad but good 'Mech. Is ok, yes?"

Julian closed the folder and placed on the desktop. "Oh totally fine. Now Daniel, let me be frank with you. You're the only person I've seen today that fits the qualifications for this position. You seem like an able bodied soldier and I've got all the data I need here in your records. While our Recon Lance isn't on planet yet, I'd like to see how well you'd do in some live practice. We've got some unit maneuvers this afternoon if you're interested."

"Da, I am available."

The two rose from their seats and shook hands settling on an impromptu audition to finish off the interview. The pair headed for the door only to be nearly run over by an astech rushing through the doorway.

“Oh, sorry sirs! Uh, Captain there’s a person here to see you, he said it was of some importance to you and that you’d know what that meant.”

Julian furrowed his brow for a split second before the words clicked in his mind. “Yes, of course. Shoot. Dan I’m afraid I won’t be able to join you right away but I still want you to go ahead with the rest of the unit.” He turned to the tech. “This is Daniel Koharkov. He’s got a *Wolfhound* that needs IFF and comm. channels setup for today’s run. Before you do that, find Leutenant Gensen. Tell him to put Dan here with Punisher against Ambush for the Omega patterns and Captain Li has command until I get there.”

“Aye, sir,” he said as he saluted then turned to Dan and extended his hand. “I’m Astech Taylor. Nice to meet ya. Follow me and we’ll get you setup.” The tech and Dan headed over to one of the runabout carts and drove out of the hanger. Daniel had indicated that his ’Mech was racked about ten hangers away so it took just over twenty minutes to drive to it. Dan hopped out and Taylor indicated that he’d wait so that Dan could follow him back in his ’Mech. It only took a few minutes before Taylor could hear and feel the typical drop falls associated with ’Mech footsteps. As the eight meter tall ’Mech crossed the threshold of the bay, Taylor looked up in awe. Even though he’d been working on ’Mechs for some fifteen years now, the sight and sounds of them still gave him goosebumps. The majesty and the might all rolled into one nice neat package never ceased to amaze him.

The *Wolfhound* was a rather amazing piece of machinery and was considered fairly new by ’Mech standards. Conceived and designed in the mid ‘20’s the *Wolfhound* boasted a considerable array of offensive and defensive equipment. The humanoid body was offset by an elongated head shaped to look just like a wolf’s. Sensor equipment was formed into the “ears” that stuck up in the back and the “fangs” comprised of scanners for IR, MAD, and Low-Light detection. The left arm ended in a fully articulate hand while the right hand was replaced by a large diameter Large Laser. Taylor squinted and shielded his eyes against the glare of the sun and examined that laser. He knew from the shape of the tube and the focusing lens that this was an updated WLF-2 model with an Extended-Range Large Laser. That also meant that it was carrying the new double-heatsink technology which would keep the ’Mech running cooler and the pilot alive longer during combat.

By the time Taylor and Dan had gotten back to the hangar and began the work on the *Wolfhound*, Bjorn Reeh had gotten word of a possible new recruit and wandered over to see the machine for himself. Reeh greeted Dan letting Taylor work without interruption and the pair hit it off famously. They talked about previous experiences, missions and even employments. Reeh was most interested when he found out that Dan was from the St. Ives area.

“You wouldn’t happen to have any contacts back in the Commonality that could get us some parts for an EMP-6A?” Reeh asked.

“*Emperor?* Hmm...*Da*, I will make unofficial inquiry. Commonality has sold some to Lyran Alliance. Have you check them too?”

“Yeah, but with things going to hell between the Alliance and the FedCom, neither side is willing to budge on their stuff. I can’t tell if they’re more afraid they’ll need it or that we’d use it against them. Plus,” and Reeh had to stifle a chuckle “the Archon herself is none too happy with us anyway for beating up the 15th Lyran Guard a few months back. I doubt she’d sell us a bucket to piss in right now.”

“Oh,” was all Dan said before Taylor jumped in with a satisfied sigh that all the needed work was done. Dan thanked Taylor and shook Reeh’s hand before climbing up to the cockpit of his *Wolfhound*. He powered up and walked the ’Mech out of the hangar following the preset nav markers on his HUD. It wasn’t long before he sauntered up next to two Heavy-class Misfit ’Mechs. Both painted in the blue and orange of the Misfits color scheme they flanked and towered over the Light class ’Mech like a pair of older brothers. But the *Caesar* and *Guillotine* were anything but related to the *Wolfhound*. They both grossed 70 tons of solid armor and deadly firepower. The *Caesar* held the long-range with its hard hitting Gauss Rifle and Extended-Range PPC, while the *Guillotine* held back a closer range quartet of blistering Medium Lasers to back-up a Large Laser and six-tube Short-Range Missile rack.

“You must be Dan,” a voice said over the open comms. “I’m Leutnant Terry here in the *Guillotine* and Sergeant Jules is in the *Caesar* there. The basic idea of today is to prevent a lance of opposing ’Mechs from getting past us and simulating an attack on our hangar. They’ll be lighter and faster so we’ll have to rely on our firepower to hold them at bay. Normally we’d use a recon force to scout ahead and find them for us, but they’ll be coming right for us so we’re going to use you as a stopgap. Anything that should get by us will be hurting and with your speed you’ll be able to overtake them and crush them easily. Any questions?”

“Nyet, is simple enough for me,” replied Dan.

“Alright then. Just to give you a quick background, we’re calling this the Omega pattern because the defending ’Mechs will be moving in a circular pattern to change up who gets hit and blocking the OpFor paths in an erratic pattern. Take your ’Mech back about 150 meters and get ready, ’cause we just got the green light.”

After Julian had passed Dan off to go run some exercises with the unit to see how he’d work out he settled back into his office chair and pulled up a code-worded file on his desktop compunit. It was by no coincidence that the phrase “some importance” caused such a reaction with Julian. It was in fact the very name of a folder he was using on the compunit to store his files on the Clanners he was trying to recruit. He grabbed his handheld datareader, uploaded the files to it and headed off to the common area to meet with whoever had shown up.

Julian entered the common area to find five people standing there, all at parade rest, all very formidable looking. He quickly shoved the unpleasant thoughts of what could happen if this meeting went sour from his mind and walked over to the group. They were all dressed similarly in gray jumpsuits, and black combat boots. No patches or unit insignias were evident but there were faded spots where they once were located. From their stance and looks, Julian had no doubt they were all Clan and very likely ex-Jaguars. He had very little real experience with Clanners but he’d read up as much as possible to become as familiar as possible before meeting with them.

“Thank you for coming and meeting with me. The purpose of this meeting is to determine your interest in joining with our unit.”

“Why would we want to join your unit?” spoke the tallest Clanner. The others didn’t move to add in so Julian marked this guy as the leader of the group.

“Well, that would depend on what you are looking for. Would it not? I suspect that the idea of fighting for money and fame does not appeal to you now as it did not before. There is plenty of glory to be found in the turmoil gripping the universe these days and our unit will be looking to take on bigger assignments once we have regained our full strength. You could be a part of

that if you desired.” Julian made a conscious effort to avoid contractions and hopefully speak to their sense of glory through combat, instead of the typical merc creed of money-money-money.

“Hmm,” the Clanner half smirked, half sneered. “You speak well for a freebirth Spheroid, but how does your glory differ from the glory here on Galatea?”

“You consider trudging through mud and grime to slug it out with third-rate units using fourth-rate equipment glorious? I call that stacking the deck in your favor.”

“Have you called us here just to insult us?” growled the Clanner. Julian merely crossed his arms and kept going hoping this bought of reverse psychology would work as he planned.

“I’ve seen your ’Mechs. Two months ago your tore apart a lance of ’Mechs with just two of your own. Knowing how you have been trained, I would not be wrong to suggest that you could have taken on twice that number and still won. But,” he paused for dramatic effect “if you fought with us the odds would not be in your favor so much and the glory you won would be all the more better. You would be facing foes twice your number and yet equal in skill. It would be a chance to get off this hellhole and prove that you were bred for something better than petty grudge matches in a filthy rock quarry.”

The Clanner didn’t reply but merely stood there, lock-jawed staring at Julian. It felt like an eternity waiting, wondering if they were going to laugh, scream, or maybe even kill Julian for speaking to them like he had. Finally the lead Clanner spoke up again.

“You seem to be among the few on this planet that has an actual grasp of how combat should be. Fighting these matches against such poor opponents proves nothing about ourselves. It is perhaps, a time for a change. How many of us do you need?”

Julian nearly jumped out of his skin at the question he’d been praying to hear, but he kept his elated emotions from showing.

“Officially I need four to fill a lance but,” thinking of Vlad’s spot in Striker Lance “I could actually use all five of you if you would all be willing.”

“Then you shall have all five of us. We will be back in three days time with our ’Mechs and our equipment.”

Julian thanked the group for coming and they parted ways. He waited until they were gone from the building and then looked around to see if anyone was watching before he jumped high in the air, let out a loud “Whoop!” and danced a quick but sad version of a jig. Five new people in one shot! Not only was Punisher Lance back on active duty but he even had a person to fill Striker Lance’s opening even if Morrison hadn’t mentioned finding a replacement. What better way to impress the boss than not only accomplishing what you set out to do but going a step further without being asked or prompted. Nothing could spoil his spirits now and so he headed back to the ’Mech hangar to take his *Marauder* out to watch what was left of the Omega exercises.

By the time Julian arrived the exercise was in full swing. The sensors attached to everyone’s ’Mechs was showing damage across the board. Ambush Lance, playing the part of the OpFor, had rushed headlong into close range with the defending ’Mechs no doubt planning to blow right through the defenders. What they had obviously discounted was the superb gunnery skills of the former Punisher Lance members, backed up by a nearly untouched candidate for hire. Julian watched Dan in his *Wolfhound* lashing out every now and then with its ER Large Laser while dancing back and forth across the grounds avoiding returning fire. Julian was certain that Dan would fit in well with the unit and only hoped that he would accept the offer they planned to extend to him at the end of this exercise.

Continuing to watch, Julian wondered why Ambush didn't begin the assault from long range. All their 'Mechs were equipped with enough long-range weapons that they could've easily outgunned each 'Mech in turn and walked right over them. That was something he'd have to bring up to Captain Li at the debriefing. Then he'd have to address that issue with possibilities for rebuilding Punisher Lance as well as making sure Morrison knew of his own lance's abilities. No sense in having your CO knocked out because the enemy could hit without being hit back. As if on queue the *Wolverine* of Ambush sucked up a blistering quad-Medium Laser assault from the *Guillotine* nearly toppling backwards before the pilot regained control. Instead of firing back all four 'Mechs of Ambush lit their jumpjets and soared over the heads of the Heavy 'Mechs blocking their way.

They rode the jets far down range in a low-angle hop that Julian could've sworn made Jules duck his *Caesar* slightly. Landing in a run the four 'Mechs rushed the *Wolfhound* to point-blank range. Only Dan didn't move. Julian watched Dan hit with everything, tearing the left leg off at the knee of the gravely wounded *Wolverine* with his ER Large Laser and bracketing the *Griffin* with all four Medium Lasers knocking it back a step. The thermal sensors detected a huge spike from the *Wolfhound* as it sidestepped to block the *Shadow Hawk's* path. Spinning in place the *Caesar* and *Guillotine* speared the rear of the *Dervish* with an ERPPC and Large Laser, respectively, coring the 'Mech and forcing a shutdown. Dan spread the arms of his 'Mech wide to reduce the running room for the 'Hawk. In a feat of amazing piloting skills the 'Hawk pilot posted off the left leg, hit the jets on the right side only, and spun around the *Wolfhound* to the left. The beautiful post maneuver only seen in sporting events was quickly ruined when the *Hawk* caught a Gauss slug in the gut from Jules and was dumped unceremoniously on its rear-end. And with that, the signal came across indicating the end of the exercise.

Once the 'Mechs had returned to the bays to have the sensors removed and weapons dialed back to normal, the troops gathered around Julian on the floor to have an impromptu debriefing. Dan walked over to join with Terry, Jules and Julian already in mid-conversation.

"...lucky with that. You could've easily lost had they worked you over from range." Julian had said to the other pair.

"Yeah, we know and were expecting it too." Terry said. "We even had a fade-feint ready to go incase but they just came tear-assing on in at us. I guess Li figured we'd focus on one and let the others slip or get all flustered and miss them all, or something."

"What'd you think of it Dan?" Jules asked.

Dan didn't say anything right away. He wasn't even sure that it was his place to critique the unit when he didn't belong. But then he figured that he'd better be honest if he hoped to become part of the unit. They wouldn't keep someone that wasn't honest about things for very long. "It was most unusual, *da*," his thick accent adding to his presence. "That lance configured strongly for hit and fade tactics. Never closing to take damage but good on harassing. Make you mad you can't hurt back, make you do something dumb, make you die. Good group, bad planning. Who was pilot of *Shadow Hawk*? I has never seen moves like that."

"That would be our own Captain Li," Julian replied. "Commanding officer of the lance. In fact, here she and the rest of her lance come now."

The four men turned and no one saw the instant look of surprise turn to hate across Dan's face. Captain Li was rubbing a towel through her short jet-black hair, still clad in her cooling vest, shorts and boots. Her olive skin shimmered with sweat from the 'Mech cockpit and her eyes locked onto Dan from beneath their epithetic folds. Behind her were two other men and another woman, the rest of Li's lance. Dan made his face neutral but his eyes still held a look of

contempt that he couldn't erase before Li saw it too. Li kept the confusion she felt to herself and stepped up to the group.

"Well fought Lieutenant, Sergeant." Li said nodding to Terry and Jules, then turned to Dan extending her hand. "I don't believe I've had the pleasure sir?"

"*Nyet*, you have not." Dan said a little harsher than he intended. A flash of understanding lit across Li's face as she slowly closed her hand and brought it back to her side while every one else was wondering what was going on.

Julian quickly stepped in. "Captain Li, this is Daniel Koharkov pilot of the *Wolfhound*. Dan this is Captain Jing Li pilot of the *Shadow Hawk*. So, Captain what did you think of today's exercise?"

"It was very educational to all. I knew that the defenders were aware that we could outrange and outgun them so they would've planned to suck us in and destroy us. I took that in turn to see if we could rush in as fast as possible to overwhelm them and make for the objective. As a stopping force they proved most effective. I don't think I would've gotten far past Mr. Koharkov here, even if the Sergeant hadn't knocked the wind out of my sails. If we refought under the same terms and at range I like to think the OpFor would walk away with a 'win' that time."

Julian nodded along with her assessment. "Agreed. You three were horribly outranged and outgunned had they played it smart. This is something we'll have to address immediately. We can't go getting slaughtered like sheep because we couldn't reach the other guy in time. But I'd like to say that I was most impressed with you Dan. You move well, have excellent reflexes and your aim is top-notch. I hope I don't sound too premature, but I'd like to offer you a job with the unit. You would do well with our Recon Lance and the rest of the unit would do better for it too. So what do you say Dan? Interested?"

Dan never took his eyes off Li but gave a curt nod of his head, "*Da*, I will join with your unit. Thank you Captain." Li nodded forward to acknowledge his thanks, but she knew there was something deeper going on.

"Well then," Julian said with enthusiasm, "I want to get the paperwork started right away then while I've got it all fresh in my head. Everyone hit the showers and Dan come see me later and we'll go over everything.

The group broke up and all headed off in different directions, except for Captain Li. She lingered a bit before turning for her 'Mech to get her personal items. She grabbed her duffel bag from the foot of her 'Mech before giving it an affectionate pat and headed for the locker rooms. She got a dozen or so steps before she broke into a fast walk across the bay, directly toward the *Wolfhound*. She could tell that Dan saw her coming but didn't raise his head or make a move to meet her. She came to a halt at the *Wolfhound's* massive feet and looked up at Dan descending a chain ladder after retrieving his belongs from the cockpit.

"Mr. Koharkov is there something you want to tell me?" she blurted out.

Dan stopped descending, looked down at her and then dropped the last two meters to the ground. He adjusted the bag on his bag while looking her up and down.

"*Nyet*." He moved to take a step towards the locker room.

Li moved to block his path. "Bull. There's something there Mr. Koharkov and if you want to be part of this unit you're going to have to learn to work with all of us. Which means that we smooth this issue out here and now, or I call the CO and tell him to forget that contract. So," she crossed her muscular arms, "out with it."

Dan clenched his teeth until his jaw started to ache. Every bone in his body told him to lash out but he just couldn't bring himself to do it. He hadn't felt this level of rage since his days

with the Cossack's and he knew he couldn't, shouldn't, feel this way since he no longer worked for them. But seeing Li brought back feelings he didn't know he still carried with him and that made him just as mad as it did surprise him.

"*Da*, there is as you say, something. I have problem with Capellans, that is all."

"But I'm not Capellan Mr. Koharkov. I'm a merc, a Misfit to be more precise. I won't deny that was my past, but that's just what it is. Past. Gone. No longer."

"*Da*, so you say."

"Look. No one is expecting you to fit in right away and start trading war stories over mugs of beer and know all our moves inside and out without having to think about it. We all took some time to get used to each other, that's what these training runs are for. With time we all got used to how to fight and live together. I'm asking you to give it some time."

Dan opened his mouth to reply but never got the words out. A loud warning klaxon began blaring in the bay echoing off the walls and every red strobe began spinning and flashing.

Dan looked around and then back at Li who hadn't even acknowledged the commotion in the bay. "What is going on? That sound like attack warning."

"It's a raid warning of eminent attack. General quarters bells and all. But before I go back to my 'Mech, Mr. Koharkov, I need to know if you'll give it time. My lance and I didn't fight our way out of the CapCon to fall back under the same suspicious eye of troops that you *thought* were on your own side." Li extended her hand to Dan as other people began to enter the bay at a full run. "Just some time. It's not all that hard to give Dan."

Dan looked back at her eyes and saw something he'd never really looked for in another person. Honesty. But when he saw her whole face, all the thoughts about what the CapCon had done to his unit came flooding back. He knew he couldn't right all the wrongs by snubbing the Captain but he couldn't bring himself to trust her either. One way or another, this issue would be revisited again. Dan smirked and grabbed Li's hand and shook it. "Time. *Da*. Now let us go do what we do best." The pair split, Dan climbing back up his ladder and Li sprinting across the bay. She spotted her lance exiting the locker rooms still dressed from the mission while Jules was fumbling with his vest still dripping from the shower. Li paused on her ladder and called to Jules between the warning bells, "Aw, honey I told ya to wait for me!" She laughed while climbing as Jules sheepish grin nearly caused him to slip and fall in front of his 'Mech.

She dove into the cockpit of her *Shadow Hawk* and began firing up systems while getting locked into the seat. After hooking up her cooling vest and setting the neurohelmet in place, she toggled into the comms.

"Ambush One online, awaiting SitRep." If she didn't hear from someone soon, she'd take charge and move everyone out of the bay and then get sorted out. Luckily, she didn't have to make that call.

"Ambush One, Slasher One. Take Dan into your Lance and move out one klick southwest of the bay. Punisher form on Slasher one klick northwest. We have tangos coming in from the west. Shake it people, this isn't a drill."

Li acknowledged the orders and then relayed them to her lance and Dan before moving them all out of the bay. She took that time to get Dan quickly familiar with which channels he'd need and that all his systems were back to fighting trim. He seemed much more receptive to her now, but she couldn't be sure that it wasn't the professional warrior persona now and the old Cossack wouldn't return if they all got through whatever was coming. She pushed that thought from her mind and took off at a near run to her designated rally point with four other 'Mechs in tow.

It was only a few minutes to reach their assigned area but the anticipation had caused Li's temperature to climb several degrees. The 'Mech wasn't running hot enough yet to kick in the coolant system but that could change in a blink of an eye these days. She took the time to order her lance to run a full system and weapons check and then perform one herself. She half watched her radar screens while the ready lights for all her weapons blinked green and then held solid. Her threat panel was eerily silent even though the only contacts were her troops.

She keyed her encrypted command channel. "Ambush is on station."

There was a slightly extended delay as her comm gear decrypted the incoming signal, "Ambush One, Slasher One. Acknowledge. Tangos due west, execute Upsilon pattern."

"Copy, out." She dialed in her lance channel and relayed the orders. Rather than spend time explaining it she told Dan to form at the end of the echelon left as they moved forward. The five 'Mechs moved out at a walk looking for any sign of movement. The area was nothing but warehouses and storage buildings, but their sensors had picked up enough movement to warrant a full scramble which meant at least two lances of 'Mechs nearby. It wasn't long before sensors started picking up large traces of metal. Normally magres scans would be useless among all the steel girder work in the buildings, but the Misfit's techs had figured a way to filter for only moving metal. Which meant they would see any moving 'Mechs or vehicles, even in a crowded city, but the range was limited. The first 'Mech popped on the screen at less than 500 meters.

"Ambush hold. Two, get eyes on the target." Behind and to her left a *Griffin* lifted up on plumes of superheated plasma and landed on the roof top. Its pistol-like PPC pointed westward, tracking what could only be another 'Mech.

"One, Two. I've got three 'Mechs, in-line formation. They're pretty beat up from the looks of it. No tracking sensors active. If I didn't know better I'd say they were running from something."

Li was even more puzzled now. She knew over the past few months that battles were sticking to certain areas, almost like designated combat zones. The rest of the city had remained untouched and mostly just traveled through. Even this spot now was fairly distant from any fighting, so why would they still be moving like they were being pursued? Unless they still were...

"Two, track west further. I don't think these boys are alone." She switched over to the command channel and relayed her report to Captain Pintall.

"I agree Captain. I'm bringing Slasher over to you. Let's corral these three and see if we can get a better picture in a hurry."

Li shuffled her lance north one row of warehouses, while Slasher moved south so that the corridor that the three unknowns were using ran straight between the two Misfit lances. It didn't take long for them to stumble right in between at almost a full run. And stumbled they did as they suddenly spotted eight 'Mechs surrounding them on both sides and came to a screeching halt on the ferrocrete. Julian hoped that they'd notice none of the Misfits had their targeting units on or weapons pointed at them to give them a chance to speak. When nothing happened for almost a half minute he figured that the non-aggressive gesture worked. He opened a channel over his laser comm. to the lead 'Mech rather than broadcast over an open channel for all to hear.

"Hello there. My name is Captain Pintall of Marion's Misfits. We're not here to fight, but our sensors picked up some movement over here and we came to investigate. Is everything ok?"

The lead 'Mech was a *Chimera* that had seen better days. It had patchwork armor all over and just as many holes to boot. Its left arm swung freely at the elbow joint barely connected by strands of myomer. There was a smoking hole where the torso mounted MRM launcher would

sit and a hitch in its step that could be a busted leg actuator or maybe a damaged gyro. Or both Julian realized as he looked the 'Mech over again.

"I know who you are," replied the pilot. "You're the one's trying to stay out of the fighting. If it's all the same to you we'd like to just keep going before...we just need to go, that's all."

Julian raised an eyebrow. "Before what?"

"Look I know you're not stupid. You've probably figured it out by now. We've got to get moving before they get here. Now are you going to stand aside or not?"

What the hell is going on? "I'm not stupid but perhaps you could clear up the picture for us a bit. Are you being chased?"

"Of course we are!" There was panic mixed with anger in the voice.

"I see," Julian tried to appear calm so perhaps the others would calm down as well. "Do you know who is chasing you?"

"Everyone! What's with all the damn questions??"

Julian was even more confused now. "Wait a second, why is everyone chasing you?"

"Heh heh, you don't know do you." There was something unsettling in the way he laughed. The *Starslayer* and *Phoenix Hawk* behind the *Chimera* were shifting from foot to foot as if they too were wondering what the hold up was. "Everyone is chasing us. And everyone is chasing everyone else. It's chaos. They breeched the zones." Julian held his breath as the implications crashed down around his brain. "The fighting has come to Galatean City. You're not safe in your little hole any more Misfits. They're coming."

Before he could reply Captain Li's voice came over the comm. "Sir, my picket is detecting more 'Mechs heading this way. The count is five but with the interference I'm thinking eight or better."

"Understood Ambush One. Hold for orders." He turned back to the fleeing 'Mechs. "I have no reason to doubt you, especially since we've just picked up your pursuers. You're welcome to pass through and we'll hold them off as long as we can. Our 'Mech bay is back that way about a klick and a half if you want to stop for some repairs, maybe we can get you guys up to snuff so you can get back to your base in one piece, more or less."

"You don't know us, why would you risk your necks to help us?"

"Aside from being strangers in need you got a better reason that we shouldn't help you? And you may want to think a little quicker as your friends are getting closer still."

The *Chimera* twisted slightly as if to look over its shoulder and then came back to face Julian. "You'll have to forgive my haste but we'd like to take you up on your offer. You said the bay is that way?" The *Chimera* pointed with its good right arm.

"Yup, straight back down this throughway about 1.7 klicks but I'm going to have to ask you to step aside quickly. You're almost in range of their guns now."

The three 'Mechs lurched forward into a full run and ducked around the corner of the building behind Julian. Julian checked his scanners and saw the pursuing 'Mechs finally come on his screen just over half a kilometer away. It would be seconds before visual contact was established.

"Slasher One to Ambush. Get eyes on and see if you can tell me who's coming up the road here." Julian switched over to the company channel and continued. "Everyone listen up. Apparently the combat zones don't exist anymore. The fighting has broken into the city and my best guess is that everyone is a fair target now. I let those 'Mechs through and have pledged our support to give them enough leeway to get away. I want Ambush to hold and keep ready, and I

want Punisher to push west a block, passive sensors only. If these fellas don't back down I want to show them the error of their ways."

A quick succession of acknowledgements echoed in his neurohelmet and he watched his troopers move off into position. Julian decided to make a very visible target and marched his *Marauder* about 100 meters between two warehouses, pulling the *Flashman* and *Black Knight* behind him to his flanks effectively blocking the entire road with over 200 tons of man and machine.

"Slasher One, Ambush Two."

That was fast. "Slasher Actual, report Two."

"War book reports them as The Grey Slayers, mostly Leaguers if this history is accurate. CO is Blair Negro. They haven't noticed any of us yet, or they're just not paying attention."

"Well, let me clear my throat and see if they're listening. Slasher lance, go active."

Within seconds of the command, Julian watched his sensors range from 500 meters effective to 1000. And by the reaction of the Grey Slayers, they noticed it too. Every one of them slowed to a near crawl just before they came into view. The lead Slayer 'Mech was a humanoid looking *Ostsol*; 60 tons of 'Mech carrying paired pulse lasers of the large and medium variety in the chest, truly marking it as a League 'Mech. Following closely behind that was an *Anvil*, another League 60-tonner.

Julian resisted taking a hard lock on the closest approaching 'Mech and keyed the comms again. "This is Misfits commander calling Grey Slayer leader. Do you copy?"

"This is Grey Slayer Actual. What do you want? You're holding me up from my fight."

"This area is off limits. The Misfits have established a protectorate and will exercise our right to keep it free of all violence. If you're so hell-bent on pounding each other into a dark age then you'll have to find some place else to do it. These 'turf wars' should not impact the lives of innocent civilians and we will keep this zone safe so that it remains that way."

Blair Negro laughed as he spoke. "So, you're establishing your own turf then? Do you now own this part of the city proper?"

"Feel free to twist my words any way you want Negro, but this is not our 'turf'. This is a safe zone. Demilitarized. Off-limits to your kind. You want to test my resolve? I hope your life insurance is paid up."

The laughter turned to a snarl. "Such strong words from a hypocritical misfit. I wonder if you're so bold as to act upon your threats."

Julian turned to his nav-display that held the current city map and he could see all the Misfits were in place to encircle the Grey Slayers. It would be a trap from which there would be no escape. He signaled over the encrypted band and watched as Ambush and Punisher Lances both went to active sensors. The Slayers were officially surrounded. He was certain that Negro knew it too. "Go ahead. We're ready," he taunted over the wide-band.

Negro chuckled lightly then keyed back, "While I'm certain the battle would be glorious to the end I have no need to contest this ground. You can keep your pathetic oath to protect these people. They mean nothing to me, but you should take heed that I won't be so forgiving in the future. The next time our paths cross Misfit, I won't hesitate to crush you."

Julian watched the 'Mechs of the Grey Slayers turn and walk away and thought to himself, *Things don't ever really change, do they?*

Outreach, Chaos March
5 June 3063

The sun had barely crested the horizon on the parade grounds while the men and women of Training Command Twenty-Two Fifty-Three, stood proud and tall. The morning mist swirled and wafted between their lines obscuring the surrounding buildings as their instructors visually examined each and every one of the recruits with a scrutinizing eye. The inspection took five agonizing minutes where no one dared move let alone give a sign that they were breathing.

Kevin stood there in his fatigues, watching from the corners of his eyes, never really moving them from the back of head of the person in front of him. To do so would earn him an undoubtedly grueling physical punishment as that habit had been ground out of the recruits by the end of the first month. Kevin had endured quite a lot in the past three months but so had everyone else. No one was truly spared the wrath of the instructors and it was done so on purpose. Everyone was broken. And everyone was rebuilt into the image of the perfect trooper. They had to be perfect because on the field you can only rely on one person. And that was the trooper next to you.

He thought back to those early days, back when he was certain that he didn't want to be here. When he knew that he had to find a way to escape and get back to a life he was positive was better for him. But all that had changed. Now, if someone brought up the idea of a night on the town of women, booze and some light partying, he would've stared them down into a stunned silence and then walked away. He was better than that. Better than anyone that indulged in that sort of debauchery. He felt it deep down in his bones.

Oh it was tough at first, there's no denying that. But he gutted it out. Mostly because he refused to be beaten in the beginning but that progressed into something he knew was the right choice. And that was all the difference it took. He believed. Believed that he was capable of being the best, capable of succeeding, capable of becoming the soldier he was destined to become. He did miss the feel of being strapped into several tons of towering metal bristling with weapons able to vaporize whole cities, but it was mere memory now. He had a new passion now and that was soldiering. Infantry. Mud-sloggers, and any other name for what was in his opinion the end-all be-all prime military service in the universe today. Naval fleets couldn't take and hold planets but the infantry could. 'Mechs we not designed to clear out cities of hostiles but infantry could. Fighter jocks couldn't fight back against troops easily, but the infantry could. They were that round peg for a round hole that fit in every niche that every army needed. There might be that awe of supremacy from the other branches but who got the call when they got in a pickle? The troops, that's who. From this point on Kevin knew he'd be on the front line every time doing what he'd been trained to do best. Win.

There were plenty of times he felt that he might just quit but he stuck it out. The instructors gave him plenty of motivation. They pushed him farther than he could've pushed himself. Made him find reserves of strength he never thought he had. Always ready with a quick retort or a surly command, they pushed him and every other recruit from a bungling bunch of baboons, into a finely tuned military unit. They marched, ate, fought and slept as one. They learned how to anticipate, coordinate and improvise like no one's business. It didn't seem like the instructors knew anything more than beating on them at first but it all came together in the end. All the hard work, the marching, training formed them into a solid soldier.

The instructors finished up and took up a parade-rest stance at the head of the group beside the head instructor. The head instructor stood a good two heads above the assistant instructors at

two and a half meters tall. His two hundred kilo frame filled every last inch of the fatigues he wore. It often came to quiet wonderment how he never burst through or tore his clothes with his massive size. It was no secret the Instructor Pyro was an Elemental. Elementals were of the Clans, born and bred in “iron wombs” to pilot armored power suits capable of taking down ‘Mechs by themselves or faster in groups. They were twice the size of your champion body builders and meaner than a junkyard dog. Pyro had taken his ten charges and molded them into a thing of military beauty.

“Today”, he bellowed “is graduation day. Today you are no longer maggots. Today, you are infantry. Born-again hard, you are no longer the worthless piece of meat I had the displeasure of meeting over three months ago. You belong to a brotherhood now. The men and women around you are your family. No matter where you go, no matter what you do, the infantry is your new home. You will live, fight, and die side by side.” The words echoed across the grounds giving a rather morbid outlook into the future. Three months ago if Kevin had heard those words he would’ve stood and asked for the nearest exit. Today his chest swelled with pride at once again being part of something he believed in.

“Shakespeare said it best. *We few, we happy few, we band of brothers; for he today that sheds his blood with me shall be my brother.* But you still have far to go. The BIC of the OMTC is designed to wean out all non-hackers. Those that do not deserve to call themselves infantry. You have earned that right with your blood, your sweat and your frustrations. You now move on to become the best of the best. Today is the first day of your Advanced Infantry Training. Basic taught you how to look like a soldier. Now we teach you how to think like one. This course takes twice as long because we must teach you everything there is to becoming an effective combat unit and not cannon fodder. Ladies and gentlemen, this is where the fun begins.”

Inside Kevin’s mind he could hear Mike’s voice sarcastically saying, “*Like the last three months were any fun.*” Kevin hadn’t been seeing any more of Mike during training. Any more than the typical twice a week that is. Kevin had resigned himself to the fact that his guilty conscience was not about to let go of the fact that he got Mike killed, which was why he tended to show up right when things were about to go from tough to agonizing. He still had that smug smile on his ghostly face and was always quick with some sarcastic whit. At first it was a little unnerving to see his dead friend, but after awhile he got used to it as one would get used to a pebble in their shoe. You know it’s there and annoying but you do your best to ignore it.

They were dismissed for chow and then to report directly to their first class, Command Leadership.

Galatea, Lyran Alliance ***8 June 3063***

The crowd was starting to grow unruly despite Julian’s attempts at keeping the peace during this impromptu meeting.

“Folks! Folks, you’re missing the point. We’re not looking for anything from you. Not money, not food, not shelter. This is just to let you know that we’ll be patrolling the streets to keep the other gangs out so your homes don’t get destroyed or your families get killed.”

“That’s a load of hogswallow!” cried the old man. He’d been badgering Julian from nearly the beginning and wasn’t showing any sign of letting up. Several others around him seemed to be following his lead. “That’s what they always say in the beginning. Then it’s ‘can our

wounded stay here for a day or so', then it's 'do you have any food', then they want money to hang around and keep the other thieves out when they're cornering the market on thievery themselves!"

Julian sighed. He'd give anything to be able to shut this guy up but there wasn't anything he could do that wouldn't play to his voiced concerns. He'd just have to suck it up and keep pushing on. "Sir, I appreciate your concern. If I were in your position I wouldn't care to trust me either. But I'm not in your position. I'm in mine, which is that I have the ability to keep these turf wars from spilling over into your streets and homes. Now, whether you like it or not I'm going to use my men to keep some semblance of peace around here, *without asking for anything in return*, and you're just going to have to deal with it. I've given you fair warning, so I'll let my actions speak for themselves."

Julian hopped down from the roof of the truck and let the complaining fall on deaf ears. Just about every neighborhood they'd visited these past few days all felt the same. No 'Warrior was to be trusted no matter what they said. Well, that was fine by Julian as he wished to waste no more breath on the issue. Morrison was due on planet in a couple days and he was more than happy to give all this crap over to him and get back to being a soldier again. Once the people saw them protecting the area, the tune would change. And he truly didn't want anything from it, except maybe that they would just shut up long enough to hear it from his point of view. He shook his head and rolled his shoulders to dispel the aggravation of the last hour as he walked over to the troop transport that was taking him and his men around the local neighborhoods.

Ever since the fights spilled from their remote locations outside the city and into the neighborhood streets, the war on Galatea grew a newer, uglier face. Now instead of fighting for bragging rights, they fought for control. Control over territory, control over people and buildings and control over materials. A real, low-down dirty turf war. Some of the smaller units had to form quick alliances to keep from being annihilated. Many alliances failed at the time of greatest need. Julian didn't have any alliances but then he didn't have a small unit to command either. He didn't have the biggest, but with so many others fighting amongst themselves, he had one of the few units fairly unscathed by the fighting. And that gave him the edge on dominance. They'd shrugged off enough on-comers that now most units avoided them wherever possible.

But that didn't stop a few from trying to be brave. Most of the time they'd get some that would get close to the Misfits Area of Operations (AO) quickly, only to turn at the last minute after a patrol would challenge them. Almost like probing the defenses but never close enough to gather any real intel on what was lying in wait for them. It was mostly an annoyance for anyone on guard. They'd picked up the unknowns on sensors, report in, get told to move to intercept and then report the target exiting the area. It was now to the point where Julian's troopers had halved the distance to close so as not to waste too much time with the mundane. In fact it was getting so routine that aside from the minor note in the logbooks, it wasn't given a second thought. And that was starting to become an itch in the back of Julian's mind.

He'd expanded his AO gradually, bringing more and more city blocks under his protective umbrella. His forces were becoming stretched out more to cover the ground but he had calculated just what he could handle. He couldn't directly challenge to other warring groups but if he could nudge them enough to move on he might gain a lot from such a silent victory. Maybe even make a pitch to Morrison to contact the planetary governor for a contract to run some of the more ruthless bastards to ground and bring some order back to the city. It was worth a shot at least because it was giving everyone the needed integration time they needed. Daniel was progressing very smoothly with the rest of the group and he couldn't have been happier to get the

Clanners over to his side. Two of the five he'd seen in action before during a skirmish at one of the mining pits. Their *Mad Cat* and *Loki* took apart a green merc lance with ease. The other 'Mechs were a pretty beat-up looking *Cauldron-Born* Prime, a *Bandersnatch* from God-only-knows-where and a *Daikyu* -02 model. All the machines had seen better days with the *Born* being the worst for the wear.

Julian could still see the look on Reeh's face when the 'Mechs entered the hangar. He'd already been at his whit's end looking for parts and this was not something he needed. Julian tried to explain that they would work as is for now and to not worry about it but that did little to soothe the Senior Tech's anger. As his driver turned down between a set of warehouses, he could see a pair of his *Patton* tanks taking refuge in the shadow of the long buildings. He'd asked the ground units of the other Misfit company to deploy through the area to give a hand to the 'Mechs patrolling the streets. A concentrated push into the area certainly wouldn't be repulsed by a pair of 65-ton tanks, but Julian was keeping them on the inside ring of a two-ring defensive setup. 'Mechs on the outer ring and tanks on the inside, that way the 'Mechs could slow down the attackers while the tanks moved up to support. There really wasn't many other ways to vary it with what he had to work with.

The driver pulled up to the front of the main bay and Julian thanked him as he hopped out. Walking through he could see the newer additions to his forces being worked on in the gantries. At least five techs were pouring over the *Cauldron-Born* like fleas on a dog. Sparks shot from an arc welder while unwelcome ones shot from within an open control panel accompanied with several colorful expletives of the tech that had to back away quickly. Two seriously ugly 'Mechs were directly across the thru-way, a *Bandersnatch* and *Daikyu*, both being loaded with missiles. The last two 'Mechs to join up with the Misfits were further down the bay, racked on either side of Julian's *Marauder*. A *Mad Cat* and *Loki* stood silently, as if they were guarding a 'Mech that many saw as a big influence in their design. The *Mad Cat* shared the same hunched over body style and the *Loki* took on the box-shaped arm weapon pods. The *Marauder* design dated all the way back to the ill-fated First Star League. It was General Kerensky who fled into the far reaches of unknown space with the Star League Army in tow to prevent their use during the wars that engulfed the Inner Sphere. In an odd twist of fate, the Star League Army eventually formed the Clans and decided to return home in an effort to bring peace to mankind. Unfortunately, that peace was at the tip of an invasion force the likes of which had never been seen before. Ultimately the Inner Sphere prevailed and now an uneasy peace sat between the two groups.

Julian watched the crews working on the two-story tall machines with awe. Without care these machines were about as worthless as a rock, but without care from the pilot they could reduce whole city blocks to ash. It was a major responsibility on everyone's part. All the needless violence taking place on Galatea made Julian wonder when people started to forget that little fact. He frowned as the thoughts of the fighting interrupted his otherwise pleasant mood and so he turned and headed into the offices. He only made it a few steps when a pair of running feet caught his ear.

"Captain!" a commtech called clutching a headset as he ran closer. "Captain, there's a call for you on the tactical band."

Julian accepted the headset with a nod and the tech was off before he even started to place it over his head.

"Slasher Actual is on the net."

“Slasher Actual, this is Ambush Actual. Reporting contact in Sector Five-Two. Multiple contacts, multiple weight classes. Their gathering for what I’d say is a push Captain. Our space is about to be invaded. Recommend Alert One, my lance isn’t enough to back these guys down.”

Julian closed his eyes and exhaled harshly, It looks like today is the day that itch became a rash. “Slasher Actual acknowledges Ambush One. Sit tight and keep eyes on. We’ll be there shortly.” He raised his right hand the headset and pressed a button twice, switching over to the Command channel that allowed him to talk to everyone on the Misfits communication net.

“Attention all troops, this is Slasher Actual. Set Condition: Alert One. Repeat. Alert One. All crews ready your machines and move to Sector 5-2. Shag it people, this is no drill.” His own words echoed off the cavernous ’Mech bay as he took the headset off. All the people stood still for a fraction of a second before a hectic rush of preparation began taking place. They’d had so many false alarms that getting the machines fired up and moved out was a simple task now, but they’ve never gone to Alert One before. Alert One meant that there was a fight coming no matter what they tried to do to avoid it. As Julian ran to his ’Mech he shoved that part into the back of his mind so he could focus on the now. Climbing the rope ladder quickly he saw others doing the same for their ’Mechs. Most of the Company was already patrolling so there would be a quick response to the call.

Climbing into the cockpit he reached behind him and dogged the hatch, twisting the seal lock. He maneuvered into the command chair, removing his jumpsuit at the same time and stuffing it into a duffel bag behind his seat. Clad in only a t-shirt, shorts and boots he reached for the cooling vest he left on the controls. The vest was made of tiny tubes woven between ballistic fabric that carried coolant to keep the pilot from passing out due to the extreme temperatures of combat action. He zipped it up and took the flow tube and plugged it into a port near the base of the seat back. After securing the safety straps, he reached up and pulled down his neurohelmet that allowed his sense of balance to control the massive gyroscope in this 75-ton beast.

Once he was all plugged and strapped in, he punched in the commands to give life to the machine. At once he could hear the fusion plant coming online with a dull roar. Lights flicked on and off as the computers ran quick diagnostic checks giving him green across the boards. He grabbed the control sticks and set his feet on the plates as the machine rose up off its haunches. The first step from the gantry vibrated up through the legs and straight to his seat. He couldn’t help but grin at the feeling. Carefully but quickly, he exited the bay and turned on the ferrocrete thru-way and headed for the door.

Behind him followed the *Mad Cat*, *Loki*, *Bandersnatch* and *Daikyu*. The *Cauldron-Born* had suffered a system board failure, according to a frustrated tech. Still, Julian had four more machines than previously and that was a plus in his book as far as he was concerned. Turning right out of the hangar, he headed north to Sector Five-Two. Glancing at the monitor to his right he could see an overlay map of the immediate area. Ambush Lance including Dan in his *Wolfhound* had taken up position to the northeast where they obviously had a good vantage point on the approaching ’Mechs. The rest of Slasher Lance was lumbering northward as well to the west of Julian’s position. Tiger Lance consisting of *Challenger X MBTs* and *LRM Carriers* were between the action and the hangar and Panther Lance with their *Pattons* and single *Schrek PPC Carrier* and the rest of Misfits were south of the bay where they could lend a hand in any direction.

Julian hit the switch for his tactical comm. channel. “Slasher Actual to Ambush One, give me a sitrep.”

“The Captain won’t believe this but the Grey Slayers are back and Blair brought friends this time. I’ve got a company bearing down on us in line formation. Transmitting data now sir.” Julian rolled his eyes as he remembered the last encounter with Blair Negro and his Grey Slayers. It hadn’t ended amicably and that would probably play into account now. His command console began painting a rather interesting picture. They were indeed marching shoulder to shoulder with a mix of mediums and heavies with nothing over 65 tons. A pair of *Assassins* and *Cicadas* and a *Hermes II*, looked to be the lightest ’Mechs with a *Jinggau* and *Tempest* the heaviest. He spotted Blair’s *Ostsol* in the middle and pushed his ’Mech faster into a run.

“Slasher Actual to Punisher Lance, you guys hold back a bit behind me. I don’t want to reveal our entire hand to these guys just yet.” Julian didn’t want to spring his Clan Heavies on Blair just yet. It could just make him panic and launch an attack.

“Captain, deceiving the enemy is not an honorable action,” replied Tobias, pilot of the *Mad Cat*.

“Neither is dying for stupid reasons. Just hang back about a hundred meters. Trust me that you won’t be far from the action if the shit hits the fan.”

“Aff, Captain.”

Clanners, Julian thought as he came upon an area of the warehouse district that opened up into a flat, clear space. Directly in front of him he could see twelve ’Mechs, all painted up in urban camouflage. Without even prompting Blair was the first to greet him.

“Well. Well. Well. I knew you’d show up Misfit. Looks like my Sergeant owes me twenty C-bills for betting against me. Could it be that you’ve finally grown a spine?” Blair taunted over the open frequency for all to hear.

“Kinda hard to not be here, this is our area. If you wanted to make a fair bet you should’ve marched north through the city.” Julian checked his display to see that almost everyone in his command was in position.

“Oh, no it wasn’t that you’d be here. It was a bet that you would fight. I won.”

Alarms and klaxons screamed in Julian’s ear as a flight of missiles leapt from the torso of a *Merlin* to his right while directly in front the Large Pulse Lasers of Blair’s *Ostsol* nibbled away his armor with little red darts. A 45-ton *Blackjack* next to Blair blazed away with its AC/2s in the arm, chipping more armor across his chest. The *Merlin*’s five-shot of missiles arrived at the same time a gauss slug from the *Tempest* to his left shattered half the protection across his left leg. Julian shuffle-stepped his *Marauder* to regain his balance and floated the target crosshairs across the boxy outline of the *Blackjack*.

“Forcing my hand to win your bet only proves that you’re too stupid for a command position. In fact, I’ll take that bet and double the ante!” Julian jammed down on the main triggers sending twin azure bolts into the chest of the *Blackjack*. Mini-lightning storms danced a horrific pattern as armor plates melted and disintegrated in rapid fashion, yet failed to absorb the entire force of the attack. Inside the mighty machine, a round of ammo cooked off under the extreme heat causing a domino effect throughout the bin. The *Blackjack* shivered and shook for a second or two before the faceplate blew out and the pilot auto-ejected just an instant before a massive explosion tore the beast inside out.

“Slasher Actual to all commands: Engage!”

The quick-kill gave the Grey Slayers pause and the Misfits that split second they needed to regain the upper hand. The other three ’Mechs of Slasher Lance to Julian’s left concentrated on the *Tempest* and bracketed it with laser and PPC blasts. It stumbled backwards like a punch-

drunk fighter and crashed onto its back. Ambush Lance on the right flank lit their jump jets to pounce on a *Cicada* and savaged it like a pack of rabid dogs then moved onto the second one. Dan rushed the *Merlin* with his *Wolfhound* cutting deep wounds with his lasers like a knife fighter. Julian braced against another five-shot of missiles from an *Assassin* while the *Ostol* and *Anvil* punished him further with blast after blast from their lasers. Fighting the gyroscope in the *Marauder* he backed up and nudged the targeting over the *Assassin* only to watch it disappear in a yellow and black cloud as five and a half score of missiles launched from the new Punisher Lance 'Mechs erased 95% of its front armor. Julian reacted quickly pinning the *Anvil* under his sights, and burned most of the armor from the right torso and denuded the left leg with twin azure blasts.

The Misfit's *Mad Cat* stepped out from Julian's right and caught a gauss slug in the guts for its effort to protect the *Marauder* from a sneaky shot by the *Jinggau*. Undaunted by the attack it pressed forward with a round of missiles from its LRM20 launchers while hitting with a left-right-left pattern using the large lasers. The *Loki* moved to Julian's left and began trading fire with a *Hermes II* and the second *Assassin* in the Grey Slayers. Slasher Lance ripped into the struggling form of the *Tempest* convincing the pilot that enough was indeed enough and he blasted out on ejection boosters.

Julian took another brunt of attacks from the pair of 60-ton Grey Slayer 'Mechs knocking him sideways into the building. He thrust his left arm out to brace himself but the thin skin of the building simply gave way under the massive weight. Bouncing around in the seat as the restraints rubbed painfully at his shoulders he reluctantly rode the 'Mech down to the ground. Not wasting any time he grabbed back at the controls and began to get back on his feet. It would do no good to lie there and it was already bad enough to have a Captain, let alone company commander, get knocked on his ass by some third-rate mercenary-wannabe. Just as he got a leg underneath, the all-too familiar sound of jump jets grew louder. He looked up out of his plexisteel canopy at the looming shadow of a *Firestarter* soaring above him. *So this is how I'm going out*, Julian thought, *crushed beneath the foot of a 'Mech*. Not willing to roll over and die, he wrenched the controls to get out of the way or at least spoil the aim of the enemy 'Mech.

When the shadow cleared and nothing happened, he turned to see what was going on. The *Firestarter* had jumped clear over him and was now behind his forces heading toward the hangar. It would only be a matter of time before it came upon his armor lying in wait to ambush any Slayer 'Mechs that got through the line. He throttled up in pursuit just about the time as the rest of his lance waded in against the *Ostol* and *Anvil*. "Tiger Lance, go dark!" screamed Julian as the *Firestarter* OmniMech stepped into view and looked in the direction of the hidden Misfit armor. An extra large fusion engine gave this 45-ton Beagle Probe equipped 'Mech a hefty advantage when used to sniff out hidden units. Julian didn't need his tanks discovered just yet as he levered both arms at the merc and fired.

And missed.

Both PPC shots screamed right in front of the 'Mech's face and continued unabated into the unknown. The MechWarrior in the *Firestarter* visibly flinched as the machine tipped backwards a step or two. From the darkness between the buildings rained hot, metal death upon the unbalanced Slayer 'Mech. Flashes of light and smoke trails from missiles blotted out the scene as the enemy was thrown backwards from the intersection. Julian shivered involuntarily at the thought of coming upon two *Challenger X MBTs* in a medium weight 'Mech. There was no point in checking on the enemy, the tanks held a Gauss Rifle and LBX-10 autocannon in their

turrets as well as lasers and long- and short-range missiles on the chassis. If the 'Mech was salvageable, he'd be impressed.

Turning back to the main fight he saw that the fight was, in a sense, over. The *Ostol* and *Anvil* were both gone but there was enough armor plating on the ground where they stood to cobble another 'Mech together. The *Tempest* was missing, evident from drag marks on the ground. Telltale signs of the fight were everywhere, including the blackened spot that once held the *Blackjack* Julian vaporized at the start. The third lance of Slayer 'Mechs was also missing from the field and judging from the looks of his own Ambush lance 'Mechs they must've mixed it up until the very end. Even the *Mad Cat* of Punisher was limping across the grounds, likely from the *Jinggau's* Gauss rifle.

"Misfit commanders this is Slasher Actual. Give me a sitrep."

Julian listened to the after action reports. No 'Mech had been destroyed or taken more than medium damage which seemed reserved in the lighter class of their 'Mechs. Dan's *Wolfhound* seemed to be the worst after tangling with the *Merlin* for an extended period of time. Much of his paint job was charred black and the armor looked like a colander. That would take some time to fix.

He also knew that the Grey Slayers had been handed a serious defeat. It would take a review of the battleroms but he knew they wouldn't be able to field another force against them for some time. Not unless they got help and with the growing conflicts on Galatea these days, friends were few and far between. And that thought was enough to get things in motion for him as well.

"All right, we've shown some impressive work today but the jobs not done. Let's get back and get repaired and refitted. Start with the easy jobs first and get back on patrol. We'll rotate those troops out with the harder repairs once their complete. We won a solid victory over a foe that seriously misjudged us. Let's not give anyone else that false impression, shall we?"

Chuckling and shouts of joy filled the airwaves and Julian turned back toward the hangar. Right now all he wanted was a shower and 20 minutes of sleep. He'd have to check his schedule for an open spot.

Four days had passed since the action with the Grey Slayers and word had gotten around quickly about the Misfits and their prowess. Even the local populace had started coming by, bringing food or helping in the bays on the 'Mechs. Julian spotted the old man that heckled him the prior week and got a nod of approval from him. While it wasn't a full apology, he wasn't about to be greedy. He figured it would've taken a lot longer to win people over; it just so happened that the fighting didn't leave any one else in position to challenge the Misfits. Even now Julian expanded the AO by two miles in diameter from the main hangar. Like an expanding balloon, things just shifted out of their way. And with Morrison due in a few days time he'd be able to nearly double the protected area and then they could get some contract work and then start an offensive campaign and then, well, he'd have to get clearance from Morrison of course first.

And for the first time in what felt like forever, Julian realized that he would soon not have full control over the unit. With Morrison back with the other company he'd be back to following orders and relaying commands. No more hard decision making, no more consequences of his sole actions, no more life or death matters that hang in the balance nagging at the back of his mind. He exhaled a great breath in a sigh of relief. What a load off his mind this would be. Of course, there'd still be responsibilities and duties but it wouldn't *all* be on his shoulders. Maybe he'd even get some sleep. If all the damn paperwork didn't kill him first.

Sitting in his office near the back corner of the hangar, he shuffled through some more reports, supply requests and daily action reports. It was all so dull and boring but it had to be completed. Such was the life of command. You knew everything, mainly because you'd just filled out the forms in triplicate to tell the same story for the umpteenth time. He stopped himself short of wishing for something to break up the monotony if only to avoid the growing pile of papers on his desk. He leaned back in his chair to stretch his back, the springs squeaking in protest. He made a note to meet with Tech Reeh to see how they were doing on refit supplies so he could brief Morrison in full when he landed.

Just then a nervous looking commtech ran over to Julian's office with a headset. "Captain? Call for you from the field, sir."

Julian took the headset and keyed the set that he was online.

"Sir! I'm picking up a lot of movement here. They just showed up on the scope from out of nowhere. Negative on the IFF and no open comms have been made. They're inside the zone, repeat, inside the zone. I'm moving now to establish visual ID."

"Settle down Ambush Two, and give me a SitRep."

"Roger that. I round this corner and I'll have them in view." There was a ten second pause that seemed to stretch on into eternity. Julian was hesitating to order a full alert hoping that his one lance could stall with whatever was moving through the zone this time.

"Ambush Two to Slasher One, I've got visual now, I've – HOLY MOTHER OF GOD! There must be two, no, make that THREE companies of –" A burst of static cut off the rest of the transmission. Julian slammed a closed fist on the table sending his coffee mug airborne and over the side smashing on the floor. "Damn it all to hell!" *Jamming, probably ECM*, he thought. *Someone has been doing their homework.*

He grabbed his coolant vest off the back of his chair, then turned and pointed to the nearest commtech. "Raise Ambush Two and when you get him," he purposefully kept from saying *if*, "patch him through to my 'Mech. Send out a full alert, scramble all teams."

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