

**Marion's Misfits**  
"Family Reunion" (Chapter 11)  
By: Slade Geance

*Galatea, Lyran Alliance*  
*12 June 3063*

*One of my men.*

Julian thundered down the main thoroughfare with the entire Galatean contingent of the Misfits in tow. His throttle pushed to the physical stops, the beastly *Marauder* pounded the ferrocrete surface at a teeth-rattling 60kph. While other 'Mechs of the unit were capable of speeding on ahead, no one dared to even pull abreast of their commander right now. He was a man on a mission and damn anything that got in his way.

Less than thirty minutes ago when the full alert sounded the Misfits had geared up in record time. Every single 'Mech under the Misfits flag had double-timed it to the rally point without any information, only to have Julian tear past with a simple command over the general frequency. "Troops on me!"

*Out there alone, probably dead by now.*

The warehouses and container buildings rushed by in a blur as several hundred tons of metal moved past like a herd of elephants. Vehicles and workers of other various units and crews beat a hasty retreat out of their path knowing there was no way the Misfits would slow down or stop for anything right now. Only a scant few times before had the unit moved in this fashion and it was the same thing each time.

Battle.

*God help those that harm my people.*

Julian shook his head to dispel the thoughts and checked his Heads-Up Display. The N-S run of warehouses was about to break off in a spoke that ran NE-SW and he needed to make a turn ahead. Turning on ferrocrete was normally not done at these speeds but he had no choice. He needed to be some place and he needed to be there yesterday. He took the turn tight hoping to play out the curve gradually, only the 'Mech's feet slipped on the dark grey surface. The neurohelmet instantly fed the telemetry back to his inner ear and he "felt" the 'Mech begin to slide and fall. Throwing out his right arm, he jackhammered the PPC weapons-pod off of the surface pushing the 'Mech back up right without slowing it down much at all. The whole slip lasted less than 2 seconds but it was enough to cause Julian's heart rate to jump way up.

*Perhaps I should try to get there in one piece...*

He dispelled that thought and kept up the pace. His Combat Computer showed all the Misfits making the same turn and keeping up with him. They only had 2.3 kilometers left to go and then they would see what all the fuss was about. Julian realized he was rushing blindly into the situation but he had no choice. One of his men was off the 'net and he needed to know why. With the amount of firepower backing him right now, it had to be bigger than a company or it was going to be a very short discussion. Checking his weapons status screen he saw the yellow caution light flickering on the right side PPC. A diagnostic right now would take too long and render the weapon useless. He only could hope that whatever it was could wait until this was all over with.

*More likely it will become a really expensive club.* He chuckled.

Suddenly his targeting computer picked up a large metallic mass ahead. Shifting from magscan to optics he punched up the magnification to the max and looked out. Standing there between two buildings was the familiar blue and orange paint scheme covering a *Griffin*.

*Ambush Two!*

The *Griffin* was there waving its left arm at them in the typical “all ok” sign when comms were down. Julian glanced at his comm board and saw that they were entering an ECM bubble now as they got closer. He didn’t like this one bit when his LasComm light bled a brilliant blue. He dialed over to the proper channel.

“Ambush Two to Slasher One. Come in sir!”

Julian exhaled a sigh of relief. It was the voice of Leutnant Arthur Chin, pilot of the *Griffin* and more importantly the same Ambush Two that called in the emergency report.

“Ambush Two, this is Slasher Actual. Report.”

Chin’s voice bled strong with enthusiasm over the circuit. “It’s ok sir. There’s no threat. You can all slow down.”

*What the hell??* “Care to expand on that Leutnant?”

“Sir, you wouldn’t believe me if I told you.” The *Griffin* waved them closer. “You have to come see this for yourself.”

Julian despised guessing games but he did ease off the throttle as he flipped back to the command frequency and sent a tight beam back to his commanders. “All Misfits this is Slasher Actual. Form on me at a walk. Set Condition Two. Keep your eyes on your scanners.”

Seventy-five tons of devastating firepower slowed to a purposeful walk. Despite being a “chicken-walker” ’Mech, Julian forced the machine to almost walk tall with its arms out wide to cover any threat that could come at any time. In a way it made the ’Mech even scarier looking, if such a thing were really possible.

He neared the corner and the *Griffin* stepped back and pointed down the hidden stretch of warehouse at something. Julian took one step and rotated the ’Mech and took a second step before he jerked the throttles to a full stop. His jaw fell open in stunning disbelief.

“I told you that you had to see it.” Chin’s voice echoed in the silence of the cockpit.

Stretched out on front of Julian were rows upon rows of tanks. Spanning four vehicles across, Julian quickly counted a dozen rows. Sitting atop the turrets in the first row, was each tank’s commander. Each one was waving a white sheet in the air.

*Surrender? Nah, probably just don’t shoot us but right now I wish I had my own flag staring down at this much firepower.*

A cold shiver slid down his spine at that thought. If they had come to fight, there wouldn’t have been anything he could have done about it. They would’ve pounded him into scrap before he’d get a warning off and probably sliced the rest of the unit to ribbons. But they didn’t come for a fight. They’d gotten inside the Misfits zone and were hopefully here to talk. Maybe they came to join the unit. Julian chuckled at that thought. At most they’d hire the Misfits for some ’Mech work.

*Well, let’s see what they want.*

Julian signaled an “All Stop. All Ok.” command to the rest of the unit and then crouched his ’Mech down as best he could to get closer to the three troopers walking towards him. Seeing no comm gear with them, he flipped on the external mic and speakers.

“I am Captain Julian Pintall, commander of Marion’s Misfits here on Galatea.”

The middle trooper waved up at Julian from beneath a heavy tanker’s helmet.

“Hello Captain. I’m Major Paul Winston. This is my XO Captain Gregory Shardun and my aide Sergeant-Major Wardine Ydjrisl. We’re part of the command staff for all this.” Winston waved his hand back towards the rows of tanks. “The Spearhead Division. If you’re interested, my Colonel would like to speak with you about a proposition.”

Julian raised an eyebrow in disbelief. “A contract?”

“It would be premature for me to speak on the Colonel’s behalf Captain. I assure you that we won’t be wasting your time.”

Julian tossed the idea about in his head for a second before realizing there wasn’t enough to go on anyway. *What could a talk hurt?*

“Ok, Major. As they used to say, your place or mine?”

The Major smiled up at him. “Unfortunately we are between homes at the moment. I’ve been authorized to ask if the added security of our forces would suffice to meet at your base. We completely understand if you feel uncomfortable with the size of our force in your personal space.”

Julian thought about that fact. With his ’Mechs and their tanks, anybody that came looking for trouble would instantly find themselves in a whole heap of it. *Why the hell not?*

“Ok Major. We’ll meet back at our base. Would you like to follow or do you already know the way?”

“We’d be delighted if you led Captain. We’ll follow up as close behind as we can. Not all our *tincans* move as quickly as yours.” And with a quick salute, the Major turned and waved for his troops to mount up to move. Julian smiled slightly at the tanker’s use of the MechWarrior’s term for the tracked beasts.

About an hour later, Julian was climbing down the chain ladder of his *Marauder* after he’d racked it in the Misfits’ ’Mech hangar. Nearly every other ’Mech was in their racks as well, except for the *Cauldron-Born* that appeared to be having actuator trouble, again. Ever since they brought that ’Mech in to the unit it had been one problem after another. Blown-circuits. Shattered actuators. Miswired myomer strands. Chief Tech Reeh was beside himself trying to chase what he called “ghosts in the system”. Julian suspected it was payback from the ’Mech for all the expletives thrown at it by the Chief during repairs. Sometimes you just had to baby the machine; talk nice to it. Hell even during combat, pilots were known to beg for it to hold together for a few more minutes. It wasn’t an uncommon thing after all.

Outside the hangar Julian bore witness to one of the largest and most organized traffic jams ever. Tracks, hovers and wheeled armor moved about in a ballet conducted by a group of MPs standing atop Heavy APCs directing where each group would go and park, or stand guard. Julian watched as *Padillas*, *Schiltons*, *Manticores* and *Partisons* rumbled past to his left as more APCs, *Packrats*, *Chevaliers* and MASH units moved to the right. It was a wall of armored vehicles as far as he could tell. Something only akin to a full FedCom RCT Armor Regiment would be greater. Only this was merc-sized, but still big by mercenary standards. Most units would try for a combined-arms approach if their budgets could do it. The smaller units that didn’t have the bank for it stuck to one type of unit, be it ’Mechs, armor or infantry. But this was a sizeable armor force built along the lines of self-sustainment. It had fast movers, heavy hitters, artillery, and support. *Even a dedicated command center*, Julian noted as a *Morningstar CCV* pulled up in front of the hangar. Its massive four tires were as tall as he was and the body had to be as long as an aerospace fighter was wide. And with all the goodies packed inside it, it made the ideal mobile command center for any unit commander. Even more so for this group.

He turned his head slightly as his hearing picked up the telltale *whup-whup* sound of rotors. Over-head shot Calvary Attack and Yellow Jacket VTOLs at break-neck speeds, banking hard and coming in impossibly fast for a soft landing. Mini tornados kicked up dust and debris as the pilots killed the engines and the blades spun to a halt. Julian smiled at the sight of all the muscle behind this new unit but quickly tucked that back under the veil of professionalism and looked on as the rest of his troops formed up behind him. He motioned at three people in particular to line up with him and then turned back to the sound of an opening hatch on the *Morningstar*.

Several people exited the vehicle all dressed in combat fatigues. Last out was an older gentleman who took a moment to affix his cover properly over his short crop of gray hair while taking in the view of the assembled troops and machines. With a short tug of his field jacket he walked over towards Julian, his staff falling in behind him by a half step. Stepping up to Julian, he stopped and saluted smartly to which Julian mirrored with perfect timing.

“Captain Julian Pintall, I presume?” Julian nodded once. “I’m Colonel Lucius Dun, commander of the mercenary unit Spearhead Division.”

Bright, piercing blue eyes that had seen much in this lifetime starred back at Julian. Worry lines from countless encounters etched across his face and forehead, but they were diminished by the cheerful look currently in place. A single red lightning bolt was pinned in the center of his cover and again on the collar tabs of his uniform, no doubt announcing his rank as “Colonel”.

“You’ve already met my XO, Major Paul Winston. He heads up First Company. And this firecracker to my left is Major Riley Lann, she heads up our air wing.”

Her raven black hair was twisted up under her flight cap and her grey eyes reflected back the greens in her flight suit. Julian shook hands with each of them in turn, taking note of the especially firm grip of Major Lann. Women in the military always had something to prove and he figured she wasn’t about to let any misgivings through on the first meeting. That didn’t really phase him much since he was of the opinion that you had to have some brass ones to get this far anyway.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you Colonel Dun. May I present Captain Larry Fontana, our own armored unit commander.” He motioned to his right, “This is Captain Jing Li of Ambush Lance and the gentleman to her right you’ve already met. Leutnant Arthur Chin, pilot of the *Griffin*.”

The group shook hands and exchanged quick pleasantries before Arthur spoke up first.

“I hope I’m not too blunt about it, but you folks just about scared the bejesus out of me back there.” The group chuckled collectively.

“Yes, I do apologize for the theatrics,” the Colonel said. “The climate around here has grown ugly and it’s hard to tell friend from foe, even if you try to put your best intentions forward first. I’m just glad that your boy wasn’t quick on the trigger right then.”

Julian smiled at that remark, but more so at the thought of how it could’ve all turned out *had* Chin fired. “So Colonel,” Julian chimed, “what is it that we can do for you. Major Winston mentioned something of a proposition you wished to discuss? We could step inside to my office if you...” The Colonel waved his hand to stop Julian.

“I don’t want to sound rude Captain, but I’m a man of short years and shorter boots so please indulge an old man’s desire to wade through as little bullshit as possible. We’re in need of a base for rest, refit and repair. We’ve heard enough stories about your unit to know that you’re trying to do the right thing here. You’re not after fame or glory, but I know as a merc you’re still after money. My proposal is thus; let us rent some space here from you so I can let my people sleep, and in return we’ll team up with you until one of us decides it’s time to get off this rock.”

Julian was surprised by the directness but it still gnawed at him that there must be something else in the works here. There was always the other angle being worked.

“Ok, so how would this work then?” Julian inquired.

“If we have to take orders from you so I can get my people a hot shower and some rack time, then that’s good enough. We can sort the details out later.”

“Fair enough Colonel. As they say, the devil is in the details,” Julian said as he extended his hand.

“True, but I’ve already paid the Devil his dues.” The Colonel took Julian’s hand and for a half second that cheerful look on his face since he’d stepped out of the *Morningstar* washed away into a look of pain and remorse. Julian instantly knew that there was something here that he wasn’t going to like.

Three days later, the *Heaven Scent* punched through the atmosphere of Galatea and landed unmolested at the Galatean Spaceport. Much of the fighting had still managed to stay bottled up in turf wars with neither side gaining much ground. The only unit to make any noticeable dent in the chaos was the Misfits and their new teammates, Spearhead Division. Julian had worked it out with the Colonel that in lieu of Morrison’s immediate arrival, they would begin a joint operation to expand their area of control over the civilian sector to stop the collateral damage and begin cross training exercises to keep their troops on their toes. Little perks of this arrangement sprung up almost instantly, particularly in the area of logistics and repair. Suddenly both units were presented with the men, materials and room to repair nearly anything and everything. Senior Tech Reeh even had a few more hands to help with the *Cauldron-Born*, so much so that it was actually out on test maneuvers the same day Morrison landed. Julian was quite pleased with himself. While he was certain that the tankers wouldn’t sign on with the Misfits, it was nice to have some peace and quiet now that everyone had been scared away from the area.

It took a little over 12 hours but their area of operations had nearly quadrupled in size. Many warring units simply pulled up stakes and left rather than face the awesome might of the forces now bearing down on them. A lance of ’Mechs, with two lances of armor, backed by two lances of air support was more than enough to give any one a moment of pause to consider a fight or flight option. No one seemed stupid enough to choose to stick and fight. Even the remnants of the Grey Slayers were reportedly moving as far away as possible now.

Which was an exceptionally good bit of news as Julian was not in the mood to explain to his commander why they got attacked right after they got back. Just to be on the safe side, Colonel Dun dispatched some hovers from Third Platoon, Second Company and his VTOLs from First Squadron, Fourth Company to escort the returning Misfit’s Company back to base. Julian wasn’t sure if Major Lann was simply being professional about the assignment or if she felt it was beneath her to baby-sit some ’Mech pilots, but her demeanor during the briefing was flat and unemotional. It almost dissuaded Julian from staring at her as she left for the flight deck.

Almost. His eyes roamed over her lithe frame tucked away in the full body flight suit...

He shook the thoughts from his head and turned back to the map of the city he and the Colonel had been going over. He could swear he caught the Colonel eyeing him as he checked out the Major. It wasn’t unheard of for military personal to become close or even intimate, but for some reason he suddenly felt like he’d been caught kissing a girlfriend by her parents. Quite an odd feeling to say the least.

“There’s been some unusually heavy fighting going on in the north-east sector over the past 24 hours. The word on the street is that two gangs held the area and now a third came in under

some double-cross or something and is hitting both sides now. They're all playing 'peek-a-boo' in the streets and its getting ugly. It was civil but now desperation is feeding into carelessness." Julian gestured at an eight square-kilometer section of the map. "I'm not about to become a police force but someone needs to do something before more civilians are affected by this. The streets are too narrow for strafing runs by our aerospace fighters. Plus if one *did* get shot down, the resulting crash would be more carnage than I could stomach. What I'd like to do, is borrow a VTOL flight for recon and harassment, two platoons of your quickest heavy hitters for bait and I'll back that up with my two lances. Use the birds to give me eyes-on from a safe distance, hit quickly with the tanks and as they give chase, I'll swing in and put them down before they can react. We drop enough of them and they'll stop the fighting."

The Colonel had crossed his arms and listened while never taking his eyes from the map. The man was a tactical master as far as Julian could tell, even if the Colonel had deftly avoided questions about his background. Julian enjoyed the Colonel's company and council during these sessions because the man always managed to pick apart something Julian had felt was pretty solid. And they always made it better together.

"Ok, there are a couple points here. One. We need recon now to determine size of the forces down there. Two lances, two platoons and backup flight is good, but what if they number more than two companies and all turn on us when we hit? We've built quite a reputation here and I'm sure someone out there would love to knock us down a peg or two. That being said we need to know how many people we need for this. Two. If your idea is enough, I still want backup in case. This is 80% of your available 'Mechs, so that's not much room for error. The only other two you have is a light 'Mech and one that's still being debugged. Which means more of my troopers. Maybe..." Colonel Dun traced a finger down one of the roads, "we could position some troops here and here in the buildings with SRMs and PPCs in case things go south and you need to bug out. But then that would lead the enemy to flatten the buildings to root out the PBIs. Nope, don't want that. And three, we don't want to load the flight with infernos because one stray shot will set the city ablaze. What we need is insurance."

Julian looked up, puzzled. "Insurance?"

"Insurance that what we send in is enough the first time. If we get jumped and have to pull back, it will set a precedent that we can be pushed. If we go in and get mauled, it will show we can be hurt. If we have to bring in backup, that will show that we're over eager and prone to mistake. No, we need to hit first, hit fast and hard and completely. That means changing the attack. Your heavy lance is mostly PPCs and Large Lasers. Good damage potential. Your medium lance is mostly LRMs, not so good in the city. Which means that we need to hurt them badly enough with my tanks so that your 'Mechs can put them down in one or two salvos at the most. Which means big bore autocannons and SRMs preferably Streaks. We need plenty of weak armor by the time they turn to face us."

The Colonel ran a hand over his unshaven face and stared intently at the map for another minute.

"Ok, here's how we stick it to them but good."

### ***Outreach, Chaos March*** ***11 July3063***

Slowly, the gyro-stabilized binoculars swept across the camp for the third time. The user mentally recorded everything they saw. Guards, buildings, vehicles, gates, troops, weapons,

open spaces, narrow alleys, bushes, trees, litter blowing around in the night wind, and even the small cat that had just killed some rodent that was dumb enough to come out into the open. Satisfied nothing had been missed, the optics were lowered just as slowly and tucked inside a combat vest pocket. Reaching to the right, the Rorynex Submachine Gun was lifted gently off the ground and cradled so that it made zero noise as the scout lowered his upper body backwards and twisted to crawl away from his observation point. It took 5 minutes of hand over hand pulling to silently return to the rest of the platoon back through the woods. Silence was broken just as he reached the line by a pair of clicks that sounded very much like a cricket's song.

Travers replied back with a single click, waited, then moved quicker at the single-click reply from his platoon leader to enter the ground. He stopped next to his squad leader, three other sergeants and his platoon leader, First Sergeant Kevin Lander. Travers quickly relayed all the data he'd collected. Square camp 50x50. Guard towers in the corners, single entrance with flanking MG bunkers, single barracks, single ops building, two-bay vehicle garage, fuel barrels, light fencing around the perimeter, a single squad on duty and a hungry kitten. No vehicles or 'Mechs.

Kevin took in all the data and then dismissed the trooper back to his squad to get some rest in the few hours of darkness they had left. Turning inward to his squad leaders he sketched out the compiled data on the forest floor under the red flare of his combat flashlight.

"Ok, so we're looking at a company of troops backed by two Rotunda scout cars in a fairly tight perimeter of a base camp. Diminished night patrols that are doubled during the day. Rotation seems to be right after breakfast, right before mid-evening with the final group at 2000 hours. Small arms mostly with a few heavy guns here and there. The towers and bunkers will be the biggest concern. We either take them out or suffer close to 50% on the initial assault."

Sergeant Rivers motioned to the map, "Or we remove them as a factor by going around. These bunkers face the one and only gate. So, we just make a new one away from their field of fire."

"Leaving the question of the towers," Kevin countered.

"We've got a single-shot SRM in each squad Top," Rivers added. "I say we pop their corks at the same time, make a new door and secure the barracks before they can grab their socks."

"Good idea Rivers, but a full company is a big deal to have to hold down while securing the few that will most certainly get to their weapons. Undoubtedly so if they keep them with themselves in the barracks." Kevin carefully rubbed an itch on his nose so as not to disturb the night camo face paint applied there. He ran his fingers in the dirt around the objects holding place for the real buildings. His squad leaders stared at the plan in silence as well, their noise conditioning training taking full hold. There was no need for unnecessary words while hiding out in the dark forest.

"Sonja," Kevin whispered to his Third Squad leader "I want Travers again."

Sonja, the raven-haired sergeant from the FWL nodded and melted back into the night. Kevin watched her go and shivered a bit at the ease at which she moved. There wasn't even the rustle of a blade of grass or fallen leaf. His thought of moving her up to platoon sniper was feeling better and better. In a half-minute both troopers were back to the group.

Without looking up from the diorama Kevin asked, "Private, the doors on the barracks...do they open in or out?"

Travers blinked and thought back for a second to be certain. "Out, sir. Double doors on either end opening out to a two-level set of wooden stairs flush to the building."

Kevin smiled, nodded. "Thanks Travers, that's all."

Travers hesitated for a second. “Sir, if there’s more data you need I can go back and…”

Kevin waved away the remark. “No need. You actually gave me the key to the puzzle just now. Get some sack time, we move out in a few hours. Sonja will brief you later.”

As Travers moved back to his squad for the second time that night, Sonja leaned over to Kevin. “Praise like that will just keep that boy up all night.”

Kevin chuckled as he remembered his own feelings when praised by the higher-ups. “And orders from his superior should get him some sleep too, but we don’t live in a perfect world. The designers of this camp thought they’d be perfect too, but I just found their flaws.”

Rivers spoke up this time. “What’s so special about the doors?”

Kevin pulled out the platoon’s TO&E and then looked at each of his sergeants in turn. “They are the keystone to securing the entire camp.”

It had taken an hour to explain and then two hours for the sergeants to relay to the squads and another hour to clean, prep and hump down to the kick off positions, all while under radio silence. Not wanting to take the chance that the base had ECM gear to sniff them out, everything was done by word of mouth. Relayed, repeated back for confirmation and then delivered in person to the recipient. Slow, but efficient and damn quiet as far as Kevin was concerned. Now as he sat in the thick brush of the tree line outside the camp he could see the first rays of light starting to filter through the tree tops.

Sunrise was in less than twenty minutes with the first patrol rotation another forty minutes plus behind that. But the troops about to go on patrol were about to get the rudest wakeup call of their careers. The sun was hitting the back of the camp first, which would be blinding to anyone approaching the front gate. It also created a blind spot for the camp to anyone approaching from the rear.

He glanced at his watch for what felt like the million time and felt his pulse quicken in anticipation.

“Are you sure this is going to work?”

Kevin spun his head at the sound and spotted Mike sitting there in the bush next to him with that same whimsical look on his face. Mike looked grey-green in the dim light, but that didn’t surprise Kevin since Mike was dead anyway. Kevin had been seeing more of Mike lately since training had gotten harder, but he chalked that up to fatigue and stress. A few days of R&R and he’d be back to normal and not seeing Mike much…

“You know this won’t work.”

Kevin speared Mike a harsh look and raised a single finger to his lips. Which suddenly was foolish since Mike wasn’t really there anyway, he surmised.

“You’re going to get all those boys killed. Just like you got me killed.”

Kevin looked away and focused his attention on the camp. He poured all his concentration into the mission and the plan in the hopes that it would send Mike away.

“And even if this does work, you’re going to get cocky. Just remember, you owe me.” And with that Mike was gone.

Kevin watched his troopers inching their way to the fence and under in the shadows of dawn’s light, while others setup the missile launchers and locked on to their targets. He looked down at his watch and counted silently in his head. Five. Four. Three. Two. *WHOOSH!!*

Four Short-Range Missiles leapt from their tubes with the sound of a passing freight train in the dead silence of the morning, directly in front of each corner tower. It took less than a second to cross the distance but within a heartbeat the towers were virtually destroyed. A half second

into their destruction the front gates were blown inward under a massive concussion force and totally obscured in smoke and raining debris.

Kevin leveled his Emperor submachine gun at the south door of the barracks, counted to three, and ripped a long burst peppering the doors while First Squad added in on the north door. Tracers shot out from the camp machine gun bunkers arching harmlessly into the thick white smoke blocking the view out the front gates. A second later a blinding flash followed by a loud strike silenced the west bunker, and then a repeat event silenced the east bunker.

*Flash-bangs are nasty buggers*, Kevin thought as he swapped clips and opened up on the doors again. By the time the thirty-round clip was exhausted, the main part of his plan was in full motion. Two Rotunda scout cars crashed through the doors to the vehicle bay and fishtailed towards the barracks each heading for a set of doors. Kevin slapped in a third clip and stitched lines across the dodged window guards, giving anyone a second thought about finding an angle to use out a window. Fish-tailing around to face the doors, each Rotunda slammed to a halt with its 2-tube SRM launcher and Large Laser facing directly into the severely abused doors. Kevin heard the telltale thump of the grenade launcher from Fourth Squad followed by the flash and crash of a single grenade launched into the barracks. Then there was silence.

Kevin held his breath while searching for a target for his four clip of ammunition with just his eyes. There was no sound and nothing moved except for the cloud of thick smoke that rose up over the main gates.

“All teams this is Control. Simulation is over. Stand down, safe your weapons and proceed to the staging area.”

Kevin allowed himself to breath again and smiled big. Looking to his right he could see the sun begin to rise over the tops of the trees. It was turning out to be a really good start to a new day.

The noonday sun had warmed the slight breeze that was working its way through the staff tent and wasn't doing anything to cool or dry the sweat running down the back of Kevin's neck. He'd spent the past two weeks in the brush, and all he wanted was a good shower, a hot meal and 5 hours of solid rack time but after reading his new marching orders he knew that he wouldn't even come close to half of that.

“Any problems, First Sergeant?” the field-coordinator asked.

“No sir, just committing some of the finer details to memory. If you don't mind my asking, what's the urgency? I mean we just finished up a two-week bush op.” Kevin replied.

“Don't know and even if I did I couldn't tell you. Just like you, I go where and when they tell me.”

Kevin sighed and replaced the datacube on the desk. The orders would have already been copied down to his field noteputer, but he wanted to give the basics to his platoon before he got them into the APCs in two hours.

“So much for that shower I wanted.” Kevin intoned.

The messenger grinned slightly, “I think there's a stream where you're headed.”

“Oh har har.” Kevin turned and headed out of the tent. He walked through the makeshift camp past several logistic tents and walked into the mess hall. He spotted his squad leaders and made a line for their table while waving them down from standing to salute him. Mike was sitting at the same table about a foot away from the troopers; his hands folded together holding up his head while he watched Kevin approach. Kevin did his best to ignore him.

“Alright, I need a sitrep and five minutes for chow. We're moving out.”

A chorus of groans emanated from the group and Mike just sat back with a grin and crossed his arms over his chest.

“Get your people fed and packed. We hit the trucks in,” he glanced at his wrist – chronometer, “seventy-three minutes. Any questions?”

Sergeant Rivers spoke first. “What’s the op?”

The corners of Kevin’s mouth edged just slightly. “Sapper training.” He glanced where Mike had been sitting but his image was already gone.

***Galatea, Lyran Alliance***  
***18 August 3063***

If someone had asked her what Hell on Earth would have looked like, Captain Jing Li would have simply pointed at the scene before her that day. The neighborhoods stretched before her in endless rows of streets. Those buildings not still on fire smoldered in blackened ruins. Their empty shells a testament to the fighting that had raged here for the past week. A feeling of sadness welled up inside her as she pushed her *Shadow Hawk* forward scanning for signs of life. The rest of her lance was spread out in the adjacent streets performing the same task. Morrison had wanted to commit the bulk of his forces during the fighting but it was just not possible.

In a twisted copycat move of the “safe zone” the Misfits had established, the other ‘Mech units had started to carve out their own areas of control. What once resembled a schoolyard brawl had formed into “king of the hill” matches. Units would claim areas only to be challenged by the next comer and the fights would ensue. Whether or not the first unit retained control or was forced to withdraw, the area around them suffered greatly. No care was made for reducing stray shots, or keeping certain weapons and ammunition from being used. Flammers, incendiary missiles and heavy autocannons caused more destruction than ‘Mech-to-‘Mech damage.

Li was disgusted by what she saw. This wasn’t what she signed on for. This wasn’t what being a mercenary was all about. Of course there was the obvious money reason, but it was also about being in a unit that wasn’t bound by the rules and regulations of the State it served. She hated having to “toe the line” when it came to innocents and collateral damage. Higher ranking officers ordering troops into areas they didn’t belong without any regard for the local population. That’s why she signed up with the Misfits. Morrison claimed that he was going to run his unit on strict moral grounds. To keep the civilians out of harm’s way and protect them from those that wouldn’t give them a second thought otherwise. They’d done a fine job so far and she knew tactically that this wasn’t their fault. There was nothing they could have done against the sheer numbers of enemies that battled through this area. But that didn’t make it any less of a bitter pill to swallow.

She passed by a hunk of flattened metal that she guessed was once someone’s hover car. Now it was nothing more than a charred hunk of scrap. She blew out a breath in frustration and keyed up her lance on the comms.

“Ambush One to Group. Anyone got anything?”

“Nothing.”

“Nope.”

“Nada.”

“Keep on it. Break in twenty. Radio anything suspicious.” She disconnected without waiting for their replies. They would do their job, of that she was sure.

Fifty meters later, Li was passing by the mostly standing remains of a dwelling when her motion sensors pinged to activity. Shifting debris from the multi-ton footfalls of the 'Mechs had caused much of the false readings all day, so when she glanced at the screen and saw a man sized shape disappear behind a window frame it took at least two seconds for it to register in her brain. It took a third for her to stop.

MagRes was useless amongst all the metal reinforcements, thermal was blinded by the smoldering ruins, starlight didn't help during the day so they were reduced to motion sensors. Totally impractical for targeting it was solely used in a scouting role and when looking for humans moving around the rubble it was the only thing that helped out the ol' Mark One system. Eyeballs just weren't able to pick out the details from the three stories up. But right now Li was staring hard through the plastisteel viewport of her *Shadow Hawk* at the second story window before her.

She moved to signal her lancemates but hesitated. Did she really see anything? Was it wishful tricks her mind was playing? She needed to be sure before pulling someone away from possibly finding someone for real, so she flipped on the external speakers.

“Hello? Is anyone there?”

She waited a heartbeat or two and when no one answered she frowned in disappointment and puzzlement. She was certain that she'd seen-

\*CRACK\*

Her initial reflex at the loud sound was to jump back, but hooked to the 'Mech's gyro through the neurohelmet she wore mimicked the move in the 55-ton beast and she had to quickly step backwards to regain her balance and not topple over into the rubble behind her. She focused on the dark smudge on the view screen before focusing back on the window. There she saw the source of the sound. A man with a rifle, aimed right at her. A flash bloomed followed instantly-

\*CRACK\*

“What the?!” she yelled. “Hold fire! Friendly! We're here to help!”

\*CRACK\* \*PING\*

The double tap had Li's eyes focusing on the scanners again. It was picking up more movement. A *LOT* more. She hit the comms.

“Ambush One has movement. Rally my location!” She backed up two steps to appear less threatening to the people and to also figure out how many there were. Over the rooftops soared

the rest of her team on super-heated plasma jets. Even with the jets feathered the landings shook the ground and cracked the ferrocrete.

“Where away Cap?” called Zhang from her *Wolverine*. Li pointed with one hand at a group of men scrambling out from hidden positions. She recognized their movements as searching for cover to fire from, so she moved to drop to one knee. “Please! We’re here to help!”

In that instant a puff of smoke erupted from one of the windows and a single rocket sailed right through the space her 'Mech had just occupied. The men on the ground stood in disbelief of the near-hit and Li and her team turned to follow the rocket's trajectory. It sailed three more streets over before smacking into the face of a crumbling brick building where it blossomed into a brilliant fireball and burned intensely.

*Inferno!*, Li thought. Before she could issue the order to back off a bright stuttering green beam lashed out like tiny darts from behind her at the ground around the men.

“No! Cease fire!” Zhang pulled up from firing her Medium Pulse laser but not before she'd blasted some of the spots hiding the troops that were now no longer firing at their 'Mechs. Li began to back up and ordered her lance to do the same.

“Why don't we engage them?” Zhang asked.

“What would that accomplish? More destruction and death? Do you know who they are? I can't tell if they're military or scared civilians that found some weapons. So, no, I won't engage them. They don't want our help so we're leaving. We're not equipped for CQB, so there's nothing we can do. Return to base.” Li killed the channel and looked at the condensed view in her Heads Up Display to see behind her.

She saw movement in the street but there wasn't anything she could do about it. So she turned her back on those she wanted most to help. It left a familiar bitter taste in her mouth.

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Morrison paced before the assembled troops.

“We've all been tested here on this planet. We've honed our fighting skills, our coordination and in many cases our survival instincts. You have all become a coordinated bunch of misfits that I couldn't be prouder to command.” A few smiles broke out amongst the crowd. “That's why I'm pleased to announce that we've been offered a job. A new contract that will take us away from here and back into the moneymaking game. And this one is a big one.” A murmur of approval rippled through the ranks. Morrison continued, looking down as he spoke. “We've done our part here. We've done enough. These people haven't appreciated what we've done for them and we're all tired of it. We're going to pack up and leave them to the self-destruction they've created. They made their bed and now they will have to lie in it. Leaving the dregs to kill each other off will be the best thing we could do for them.” A few troopers chanced glances around and a shuffling of feet broke the silence. Morrison pressed on, “Yes, we will just walk away and wash our hands of this planet. We need to look out for ourselves and we can't do it by

holding the hand of every sob story that wanders our way. We just don't have the resources to deal with a crisis of this magnitude and we can't be expected to waste our time trying to do anything about it." Morrison stopped suddenly and turned to face his troops. On their faces he read the looks he wanted to see. Rage, anger, disbelief, and resolve. Ever back was ramrod straight, every gut sucked in, every chin out in defiance.

Morrison smiled, "Yeah, that's what I thought too."

***Outreach, Chaos March***  
***09 Nov 3063***

The arms market was quiet this morning. Vendors were just opening up; the sounds of early morning preparations began to fill the cold, humid air. Kevin zipped his field jacket up to keep in the warmth he was still carrying from the party he'd left an hour ago. He could still feel Aslinda's arms around him, still smell her perfume. He relived the night in his mind, playing over the scenes like a big movie producer editing a film for just the right amount of detail for the audience. He remembered them dancing closely at the club, the whispered suggestions in his ear, the quick rendezvous in the bath-

"Morning, Kevin."

Mike's impromptu arrival caused Kevin to stutter-step but he hid it well behind a faked trip over something that wasn't there in the first place. He shot Mike a disapproving glance but didn't move his head. After all, looking at a dead-guy that wasn't there would make people think you were nuts.

"You have impeccable timing, you know that right?" Kevin muttered under his breath so that no one else would hear him.

"Well, like you said, I'm in YOUR head so really YOU have impeccable timing for my arrival. Besides, you know you'll never see her again so why dwell on the past?" Mike said matter-of-factly.

"Oh there's the ISF calling the Drac a Snake," Kevin retorted.

"Tsk tsk. Is that any way to talk to your friend whom you killed? Besides, I only show up when you need reminding of your responsibilities. A guilty conscience call, most likely but it's all up to you buddy. I don't particularly like hanging around you after what happened, but you can't seem to let it go. Heck, you let go of Aslinda fast enough last night..."

Kevin nearly took a swing at Mike but stopped short of flailing wildly at nothing in the middle of the street. It never helped matters when Mike showed up and it was always worse when he spoke. The circular arguments were enough to drive a person mad!

"I'm busy today, Mike. Go haunt someone else."

"Like who? You're the only one that can see me and hear me. You're the only one the listens to me." Mike faked an emotional snuffle and then busted in a gut-wrenching laugh. Kevin didn't remember him like this in real life but maybe it was something his own mind had enhanced as part of the guilt-trip. Either way, he was done listening and increased his stride to reach his destination faster. Mike just fell in step right beside him and kept quiet for a few minutes.

"So, Kevin, where are we going at this bright early hour?"

It couldn't have been any stranger being asked by yourself what you already knew, but he answered anyway.

“We’re going to see a man about a horse.”

Three hours later and 8,000 feet off the ground, Kevin was strapped into one of the twenty-four folding troop seats of the Karnov UR affectionately named “Mustang” by her crew. Her sister was off the starboard side by about 15 meters which was incredibly too close for his comfort, not that he’d ever admit that fact to anyone. The ride was fairly smooth for moving at nearly the top speed of the craft. Add to that fact that they were high enough that in combat, nothing but another fighter could touch them and it made for a fairly comfortable point in his mind. Besides, an enemy fighter would blot them from the sky before they even knew what happened and if you had to go, better to be quick than to plummet out of control for several seconds of pure terror knowing there wasn’t jack-all you could do about it.

He could hear the narrations of the co-pilot up front in the headset that he was given when he first boarded the craft. The guy was droning on and on about battlefield capabilities; lifting, combat, rescue, blah blah blah...all the stuff Kevin already knew from the tech readouts at the Academy. All Kevin wanted to know was if these guys would be willing to fly into harm’s way and how much they wanted to do so. The plans in his head for the usage of this flight team were formed weeks ago during his class’s last combat training op. They had done a HALO drop into an armed camp from a similar craft and the impact on the mission was exponential in value. He knew right then that if he came away from Outreach with anything, it was going to be airborne options for the Misfits.

“Ok Mr. Lendar,” the co-pilot began saying. Kevin fumbled trying to remember the guy’s name; Andy...Anders...Anderson-something. “Say for example we got word of a bogie in the AO, call it a fast-mover. Sitting up here ain’t gonna do us any good, so...”

And with that Kevin’s stomach lurched upwards through his throat, past his mouth and straight into his skull as the pilot dropped the Karnov like a rock in mid-air. His body pressed painfully against the five-point harness as he rode out the rapid descent and leveling out of the VTOL down to where he could now see the tops of trees rushing past them.

“...we drop down like this. The rate is too quick for any fixed wing to track and to follow he’d overshoot something crazy like and this baby packs twin extended-range Medium Lasers in the nose to let him know that we mean business. Plus the extra armor over the older models helps out.”

Kevin made a visible effort to keep his gourd down knowing there were no airsickness bags on this little trip. And while very effective, that maneuver would have to be adjusted least his troops end up yakking. If one guy tossed his cookies, then another guy would and then the whole team would get sick and that was no way to ride into battle. Particularly, if the mission were recon because the smell alone would give them away to the enemy. He listened in on the rest of the sales pitch as the twin Karnovs flew back to the airfield.

With the hiring of the flight crews and their machines completed, Kevin caught a cab over to the Harlech DropPort. It was time to get off this rock and back into the thick of things and his last task was to arrange transport for his two platoons of troopers, and their “horses”.

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