

Marion's Misfits

“Everything Is Relative”

Chapter Four

by: Slade Geance

Southeast of Lake Stinson

Alcor, Federated Commonwealth (Lyran Alliance Space)

13 December 3062

1730 Hours

Exactly one and a half hours after the first shots were fired Morrison stood on the ground helping his men salvage a Lyran *War Dog*. The armor was savaged all over the mech and several large holes bore testament to the previous pilot's decision to punch out. Since he had left his technicians behind at his main base of operations all the Misfits really had to work with was the few minor tools stored in the cockpits of the mechs and the mechs themselves. None of his mechs were badly hurt, but the after action reports were not a swan's song either. Every mech had suffered at minimum 30% armor loss. Those with ammo-based weapons were down to less than half their reloads. Things looked pretty grim if they still had to fight, but Morrison had driven the enemy from the grounds and was currently salvaging those mechs they had left behind. Things were looking up for a change.

Once the last Lyran mech had moved far enough away, he ordered the four mechs of Ambush Lance to haul the *Penetrator* back to the main base. They had a three-day march lugging the disabled mech back to the mech bays setup in the empty warehouses provided by Gyro-Tech and Morrison instructed Captain Li and her lance to not stop for anything. He wanted that mech back in working order as soon as possible and all the more better if his techs could begin working on it before he returned for his own repairs. Right now they were trying to determine if they could get the *War Dog* and maybe the *Gallowglas* back up on their feet and perhaps get a tech flown in to pilot them back to base. They would make a wonderful addition to the Misfit's TO&E. The *Falconer* and *Orion* were down for good unless they got a mech hauler out there but Morrison hadn't written that possibility off yet.

Right now he had Sergeant Jeremy Volksfram from Striker Lance nestled into the open head of the *War Dog*, trying to get some response from the controls. When the Lyran pilot ejected it took out some of the sensor controls, communications, and most importantly, the command chair. Jeremy found a sheet of armor blown off some mech and had it cut to form an ad hoc chair. It was at least something to lean against while the mech was still flat on its back. Sergeant Cain Lorus was using the built-in hands of his *Hunchback* mech to slowly upright the *War Dog* and see if it could function enough to be walked off the field. Morrison had ordered Lieutenant Jessup Raines to see about getting the *Gallowglas* up right and Captain Sarah Picketts was helping him with her *Archer*. George was out of his mech directing them so that both operations to go off together to save time. Just as a precaution Morrison detached Sergeant Logan Woods in his *Black Knight* and Sergeant Major Fujimowa in his *Thor* to scout the area the enemy retreated through to make sure there were no surprises awaiting them.

Coleman and the other two members of Slasher Lance were currently crawling all over the downed *Orion*. Morrison had given permission for the mech to be gone over for parts for Coleman's mech. If nothing else it would keep Coleman busy and out of his hair for a few minutes. Especially since he wanted to go over the cockpit recorders to find out why Coleman tried to pull back instead of grouping the firepower of his lance against the *Penetrator* in the very beginning. It could've been over much sooner had Coleman led his men in a successful attack instead of crumbling under the first traded shots. But that would have to wait. He had salvage to recover.

Morrison lifted the hand-held comm device to his mouth and tried contacting Jeremy in the cockpit of the *War Dog*. "Can you get the hip actuators to unlock any more Jeremy? It looks like Cain is trying to stand a tall redwood back up. I don't want the difference in weight to pull him down on top of you."

Jeremy sounded excited in his reply, but it was more than likely the strain of trying to maneuver the metal beast back to its feet. "Copy that Colonel. It's a mess in here but I think I can get more slack in the legs. Stand by." A few tense seconds passed before the legs pulled back some to center the weight directly under the body of the mech. "Looking good Jeremy! Now try to bring the right leg back under the mech to push up with. Cain? How are you doing up there?"

"Doin' just fine sir. Feels just like pickin' up a large baby. Just get him to hurry up, it's getting hot in here working the engine like this." Cain's voice was filled with the strains of having to control two mechs at the same time. Chancing a quick glance over to where George was working on the other Lyran mech, he saw that they were both about dead even for getting the mechs up and moving again. He checked his watch and realized that Woods and Fujimowa had been gone for about ten minutes now without so much as a call to say there was nothing else out here but the Misfits. Silence had proven nearly deadly once already today and he was not in the mood for any more surprises today. Pressing a few buttons on the handset he dialed up a specific frequency.

"Stonewall to Stalker Three. Head to the top of that hill and see if you can pick up Slasher Four and get a sit-rep from him."

Morrison received a hasty "Yessir" from Stephanie as she broke into a full run to the hilltop. He was happy to see everyone working together and moving about to get things done. It looked like he had some good people working with him. And that thought actually stuck with him longer than he figured it would. He had good people working *with* him, not *for* him. This wasn't your average military unit where he's the head honcho and barks orders to everyone and they just obey him. No this was actually becoming family-like. Everyone shared their ideas and interacted well with everyone else. No one had to tow the lines while others slacked off. The recent battle was proof enough of that. They were coming together as one, not just a bunch of misfits when he first met them all. It was a warming feeling inside and Morrison liked that feeling. Smiling for reasons only known to him he turned back around to continue guiding Jeremy to his feet.

No sooner did Jeremy and Jessup get the Lyran mechs on their feet did Morrison detect the faint sound of cannon fire echoing across the valley. He turned his head slightly as if trying to locate the sound that eluded him. What he assumed was cannon rounds was quickly replaced with the roar of jumpjets going full throttle out the back of Stephanie's *Wraith* as she cleared the hilltop in long, low-angle jump. She landed solidly on the ground; the tremor Morrison would later swear rattled his back molars. The comm unit barked to life with fast-paced speech from Stephanie who was still trying to move the mech as fast as she could get it to go.

"Enemy Battlemechs are on their way here. Looks like a whole 'nother company and they're moving quick. The fastest elements are tangling with Woods and Fujimowa but they have the upper hand in firepower. They're making best speed back here but we have maybe five minutes till they're all in weapons range. Colonel, we need to bug out and like now!"

Morrison spat on the ground and cursed his luck. He mentally scratched the mech haulers off his list of things to do today and dialed the hand held for the unit general frequency.

"Alright listen up. If you missed the report the Lyrans are back and they're brought a new company with them. Jeremy and Jessup get down out of those mechs and back into yours as fast as you can. When they're clear pull the arms off those mechs for salvage, then slag the rest with all your energy weapons. Let's not leave anything useful behind. We've got three minutes to pack up and get lost and we're going to need every second. Lets move people!"

Morrison stood near the bottom of the *War Dog* as Jeremy tossed out the rope he brought with in case the mech wouldn't cooperate once it was on its feet. Jeremy descended the rope rapidly and hit the ground with both feet firmly under him.

"Damn Lyrans," he cursed. "Just a little while longer and we could've had a new pair of mechs all to our own."

"That may be true Sergeant, but lets hustle up so we can keep the ones we came here with first."

"Roger that sir!" Jeremy set off at a full sprint for the chain ladder of his mech and Morrison did that same. He'd only reached the bottom of the ladder when he heard the screeching sound of metal being torn apart and the sizzle of lasers burning through metal. As he climbed he saw Coleman dropping something through an open panel in the back of the *Orion* he'd been crawling over not more than ten minutes prior. Morrison reached the apex of his climb and swung inside the hatch and dogged it behind him. Since he'd not replaced any of his clothing he only had to toss on the cooling vest he'd left behind and strap back into the command chair. He glanced at his watch and saw they had just over a minute left to get underway. He plugged and snapped everything in place in rapid succession and flipped over the comms to the general unit frequency.

"Get the most damaged mechs out of here first. Head back the way we came and head for the rendezvous point. Make sure those Lyran mechs are good and toasted." Just then a

massive explosion outside of his Battlemech tore the *Orion* apart and sent bits and pieces scattered across the field. *Ammo bin explosion*, he mused. “Point taken. Get up, get moving. As soon as the scouts crest the hill, we’re all outta here.”

Just as if saying made it happen, Fujimowa hit the crest of the hill and turned around to face the unseen Lyrans. A blast from his ER PPC tore across the hidden landscape, followed shortly by his *Black Knight* partner coming up and over the hill without stopping. The *Thor* let loose with a salvo of missiles from the tube launcher over its left shoulder and then turned and ran down the hill at full speed.

“Report Sergeant Major, ” Morrison called over the comms. He needed to know what was going on. So far only three mechs had departed the immediate area. Striker Lance was holding position a couple hundred meters behind Morrison and George was actually moving up in line with him. He needed to know in order to coordinate an organized withdraw.

“No time now Colonel-san. We need to go. We really need to go.” To emphasize his point several missiles exploded right at the spot he’d been standing at on the hilltop sending dirt and rock flying.

“Well, no sense arguing with that. All units pull back now. Best speed to the rally point. Go go go!!” Like a herd of spooked buffalo, the eight remaining mechs of the Misfits turned in place and settled into the best speed possible as they headed for the south bend of the lake where they would turn north and move at full throttle to link up with the other lances left at the north bend. Morrison was practically bringing up the rear and had taken but a dozen steps when his threat indicators on the main board lit up like a Christmas tree. He looked up into the visual readout from the Heads Up Display that compressed 360 degrees around the mech into 160 degrees with lines denoting front, side and rear arcs of the mech. His eyes froze to the display as he watch four, six, seven mechs crest the hill with amazing speed and begin to pursue his departing mechs.

“We’ve got a couple of followers. Once we make it around the lake they should break off pursuit. We’re still out of their range so everyone keep going.” The excitement in his voice only spurred him to move faster. He targeting computer was busy marking makes and models of the enemy mechs. The warbook was identifying the markings as Bravo Company, Charlie Battalion, 15th Lyran Guards. The fastest mechs were apparently the ones in pursuit as he counted a pair of *Centurions*, a *Commando*, *Vulcan*, *Maelstrom*, *Falconer* and a *War Dog* not far behind and at the edge of the hill were the remaining heavy and assault mechs of the company. *And they’re not slowing down!*

The five remaining mechs poured down the hill as fast and as safe as possible. Three assaults and a pair of heavies made up the remaining firepower that was still out of range of the trailing units of the Misfits. Morrison suddenly realized that the lighter mechs were going to catch up and try to wound enough mechs to have them fall out of formation where the heavier mechs would pounce and destroy them. “Oh we’re not having any of that, “ he mumbled low enough to not activate the voice-triggered mic in his neurohelmet. He dialed up a tight beam signal and directed it at the lumbering *Thor* just ahead of him.

“Now would be a good a time as any to call in our fighters.” He said matter-of-factly.

“Hai Colonel-*san*. They’re already up and inbound. ETA seven minutes and they’re packing heat.” Fujimowa had seen the same thing Morrison had with the pursuing mechs and had called in fighter support to help expedite their hasty retreat.

“Seven minutes, “ he paused as a few shotgun-like rounds from an LBX cannon rattled off his back armor, “is going to be tight.” He flicked the comms back to a single channel. “Stonewall to Stalker Three. Push ahead and try to raise our boys at the north end. Let them know we’re coming home quick but have an enemy company in pursuit. Air support is inbound but the timing is going to be real close. Have them setup a defensive perimeter to keep the enemy off our backs as we head back up the mountain.”

“Roger that Colonel.” The *Wraith* edged out from the group and then increased to an absurd speed of 115 kph. Its long-legged strides widened the distance between itself and the group rather quickly. As soon as she could transmit to Recon and Punisher Lance, she’d explain the situation and get them ready to repel the trailing mechs of the 15th.

Morrison glanced at his watch and saw that he still had four minutes before his air support arrived and about twelve minutes of his fast paced march to complete before he made it to the north bank. But mechs weren’t meant for long distance runs and he knew some of them were going to suffer disabling problems if they couldn’t slow down. More scatter shot across his legs and back made him disregard the slowing down part and he feverishly searched for something that would give them the edge they needed. It nearly seemed hopeless when a torrential blast of charged particles from a PPC slagged the remaining armor off the right arm of 2nd Lieutenant Hasic’s *Shootist*. The mech leaned dangerously to the left with the loss of armor, but Hasic quickly straightened it and kept right on running. It wouldn’t be long now before more enemy mechs could hit more damaging sections of his mechs. He thought about stopping to fire back, but in the time it would take to slow and turn and get everyone lined up to fire the heavier enemy mechs would be in range to cause even more catastrophic damage than the few shots that were connecting now. A handful of missiles blasted into the hip socket of 1st Lieutenant Miravoska’s *Avatar* on Morrison’s left side throwing a hitch into its step. Things were quickly getting desperate.

“Stonewall this is Pack Hunters. Hunter Alpha requesting fly-by.”

They’re early! Morrison was so happy to hear the voice of his pilots that he almost forgot to acknowledge their transmission. “Copy that Pack Hunter Alpha. Uploading our position to you now. Tangos are due south and are a feisty bunch. Concentrate on the seven Bravo Mikes closest our position. We need more time to get out of the soup.”

“Loud and clear Stonewall. We have your position locked in and will be in visual in two-zero seconds. Tell your boys to keep their arms and heads down. Pack Hunters have the ball. Alpha Out.”

Morrison quickly switched over to the main unit channel. “Keep going everyone. Air support is here.” A few cheers and yips over the comms gave Morrison the first relaxing thoughts since the whole thing started. A glint of light reflected off something up in the clouds in front of the fast moving mechs. He silently regarded it as his guardian angels.

But in the biblical sense the fast approaching fighters were anything but angelic. All four were riding the maximum thrust possible and were bristling with weapons from nose to tail. Senior Airman Lawrence “Raptor” Pickering was leading the Pack Hunters in his 85-ton *Rapier*. Sets of razor sharp teeth were painted across the dark green nose to go with a pair of yellow-green eyes right below the start of the cockpit canopy. To his back left and right were the pair of 60-ton *Gothas* and directly behind was his wingman in another *Rapier*, all flying in a loose diamond formation.

“Hunter Alpha to Hunter Flight. Five thousand meters to the deck. Friendlies bearing one-eight-zero true, distance two thousand clicks. Seven Tangos are up five hundred. Alpha will lead the strike followed by Echo, Beta, and Delta. Take separate targets and watch the crossfire. Good hunting. Good luck.”

“Hunter Echo copies. I’ve got a hundred C-Bills says I get first kill.”

“Hunter Beta copies. I’ve got a hundred that says you miss your first shots.”

“Hunter Delta copies. I’ve got a hundred that says we all make it back alive.”

“Hunter Alpha to Group. I’ll take that bet Delta. Tally Ho!!” With that shout Raptor executed a perfect barrel roll and nosed over towards the ground. Already flying at maximum thrust for level flight the digital air speed indicator started its race to keep reporting what the sensors outside the craft were telling it. 500...600...700...800, the numbers sped past with every second as the ground loomed in closer. The altimeter was going just as fast as the speed but in the opposite direction. Raptor was actually enjoying the dive pressed back in his seat by the force of 4Gs. Ever since signing on to the Misfits, his group had just been running training flights. This was first time he’d be allowed to push his aircraft to its limits and the thrill was exhilarating. At one hundred fifty meters off the ground he pulled up on the control stick and leveled out at just over ninety meters and going roughly seven hundred twenty kph. The ground rushed by in a blur of melted colors and shapes. So much that he actually needed the computer to tell him he just tore past a Misfit *Wraith* headed in the opposite direction.

Tapping the air brakes to bleed some more speed off, he toggled the controls on his HOTAS throttle. The Hands On Throttle And Stick system allowed the pilot to perform a majority of all cockpit functions without removing their hands from either the throttle of flight stick. Two taps of his left thumb switched over from air radar to ground target and tracking. Instantly the Heads Up Display refreshed the holographic view to report new data to the pilot. The Bauer-Scope 130Y Targeting System began tracking all possible targets within range and labeling them friend or foe based on their IFF signatures. With a flicking of his left ring finger, he changed the view to only display enemy or unknown signatures. A pair of red squares appeared directly ahead indicating Battlemechs. Circles would have meant ground vehicles and

triangles would have been Dropships. He selected the first square with his right thumb and the computer spit back the necessary data on the target. His left index finger toggled through the *Rapier's* weapons and selected the Ranger class AC/20 autocannon that was stuffed into the nose of the fighter. Immediately the HUD displayed a firing solution for the weapon and began to increase that value as he quickly approached the enemy mech.

A distance from the fast-moving fighter, Raptor spotted his target lumbering across an open spanse of land firing its weapons at the backs of his 'mech mates. A tall, gangly *Centurion* Medium Class mech was ripping away at the landscape with the right arm mounted LBX autocannon and trying desperately to lock on with the torso mounted LRM launcher. The firing solution hovered at 87% and Raptor grinned in perfect predatory fashion as he mashed down on the main trigger with his right index finger. A high-pitched banshee-like scream emanated from the below his seat as the autocannon spun to life belching fire and smoke from its muzzle. The force of the weapon firing was so powerful that for a split second Raptor saw the airspeed indicator go from 675 to 100 kph and then back. The Lyran pilot never had a chance to defend himself. At the speed the *Rapier* was moving he never saw it coming. The warning lights only flashed to life a split second before the force of the 120mm rounds of the autocannon rocked the mech. Raptor's aim was true as he punched through the center torso armor chipping away at the gyroscope and engine shielding. The Lyran had no chance to keep the mech upright under that level of punishment and it twisted violently to the right before slamming into the ground digging a large furrow littered with armor plating before coming to a halt. By the time the mech had hit the ground Raptor had already flown over his target and was pulling up and left to circle around for another run.

Hunter Echo in his own *Rapier* had followed close behind Raptor taking full advantage of the surprise the air raid would have on the Lyran mechs. He passed up a fast moving *Commando* for a more targetable *Falconer* mech. Mirroring Raptor's attack he blast away at the mech with his autocannon catching it high on the right arm. Although he couldn't physically see it the gun camera would record the arm falling limply to the side of the mech causing it to stumble and slow but not fall. Likewise, Hunter Echo pulled up and out to the right.

Although the attacks were just two seconds apart, the Lyrans were on alert for the next ones coming in at them. The pursuing mechs had slowed and turned their attention to the skies inviting any craft to come up on them and meet their doom. Unfortunately Hunters Beta and Delta were not about to oblige them and came at them from the left and right sides, respectively. Beta hit a *Maelstrom* across the left, center and right torso with a mixture of PPC and Medium laser fire. Delta angled a bit further back in the ranks and caught a *War Dog* in the leg and arms. Both craft rolled out and disappeared behind the trees easily avoiding the return fire of the mechs. The *Vulcan* and the *Commando* mech, not realizing that their larger brethren had slowed or stopped to deal with the fighters, had continued right on chasing the tails of the Misfits. It only took seconds for them to escape the protective umbrella of their comrades' firepower. Morrison wanted nothing more than to turn on them and pound their puny mechs into sardine cans but he had the rest of the unit to worry about now. Besides, Hunter Alpha had already called him off those mechs, claiming the 'fly-boys had first dibs'.

Coming back over the lake Raptor spotted his prey catching up to his unit quickly. The Pack Hunters had a nasty surprise for the Lyrans, but they really needed to hurry or they'd be shooting into their own ranks soon. He clicked over into his paired PPCs mounted on either side of the nose and tracked down on the *Vulcan* firing a one-two shot each a heartbeat apart. The first beam hit the ground in front of the mech while the second devoured the armor over the right torso. He passed over the mech in level flight and then quickly pulled up to allow Hunter Echo to pass below him and inflict similar damage to the *Commando* mech. Caught way out front and without support the mechs made a futile attempt to return fire at the departing planes. Had they been watching the horizon they would have seen the two *Gothas* diving in on a strafing run from behind. White puffs of smoke belched from the wings of each plane as a total of sixty LRMs corkscrewed through the air towards the unsuspecting Lyran mechs. As soon as the missiles had fired the pair of *Gothas* crisscrossed their paths and formed up side-by-side and headed back north. The missiles themselves never struck the mechs directly. At thirty meters off the ground the built-in altimeter circuitry triggered an electrical charge that surged into a small amount of explosive material that was woven into the casing of the missile tube. This explosion cracked the exterior of the tube and split apart the internal container the held a mixture of polystyrene, benzene, and petroleum. Buffeted by the high winds around the missile the liquid combination began to flow from the cracks and spread through the air. When the internal container split it trigger another explosion, this time a thermite charge detonated in the very center of the missile tube. The heat from the second explosion ignited the liquid that was housed in the internal container into a massive fireball. The fumes and the liquid caught fire as it spread through the air coating the ground and the mechs.

Now while the technical description of napalm, or inferno rounds as they are more commonly know, is intimidating enough the actual use of them against anything is down right terrifying. The path of the attacking fighters coordinated the inferno rounds into the shape of an 'X', pinning the pair of Lyran mechs right at the cross point. The intense heat added to the existing heat level from their attempt to bring down one of the mercenary fighters and forced both mechs to shutdown without warning. Rather than be roasted alive in the burning machines, both Lyran pilots ejected from their mechs and sailed backwards towards the remaining mechs that had halted before the wall of fire now burning freely and blocking their path.

The Misfits now with plenty of distance between themselves and the enemy moved off at a slower pace to head up and over the mountains to get repaired and prepped for the next encounter. Morrison marched along side his troops silently beaming with pride in overcoming the odds today, twice. First when he turned the tables on an ambush by a Lyran Company, and the second time when his battered troops escaped the pursuit of a fresh Company with the help of his aerospace fighters. The "fire wall" had been an especially nice trick that he was going to have to find out whom to give the credit to on that one. Plus not only did every mech make it back on its own power, he was heavy one. The *Penetrator* he'd picked up as salvage would make a nice addition to the unit, or when (no longer if) he made it back to Outreach would fetch a handsome price. As the rest of the unit moved off to head up and over the shortest route through the mountains, Morrison stopped his mech and turned back around to get one last look behind him. A soft orange glow in the distance pinpointed the fire that was set by his fighters to block the pursuit of the Lyran mechs. He knew by all means they could have gone right through it and kept on coming but they must have decided that enough was enough. He sighed in relief

that the day was over and wiped his sweaty hands on the cooling vest before turning around to follow his men home.

If he had waited a few more minutes he would have seen the flash of light from the *Commando* as the ammo cooked off shredding the mech into a thousand pieces.

***15th Lyran Guard Regiment HQ, Ludwig Steiner Spaceport, Strona
Alcor, Federated Commonwealth (Lyran Alliance Space)
14 December 3062
1100 Hours***

The communications tech at Monitoring Station Two was the closest in the room to Kreiger's main office. Although he had a headset on and was currently listening in on radio waves trying to locate some clues as to the whereabouts of the mercenaries, he could hear the bellowing voice of his CO clearly, even with the heavy wooden door closed. He had heard about the after action reports, the casualty list, the damaged mechs, the mercenaries that got away intact and with a captured mech. Kreiger was none to happy about the turn of events and was currently chewing out his company commanders, even though one of them was just appointed to the position to replace the late Hauptmann Jonnes. The tech silently thanked God he never wanted to aspire to the command level.

Inside the office Kreiger was pacing back in forth behind his company commanders like a frustrated caged lion. He traded off screaming in each of their ears over the displeasure of the recent setbacks. Despite his volume the men held themselves ramrod straight at attention.

“You lost an ENTIRE lance in the first encounter Hauptmann Kriston! Their incompetence reflects on your leadership! Their snafu derailed ANY faith I had in you as a commanding officer.”

“Hauptmann Harris. You may have been promoted in rank, but that was only from the direct result of the inability of your men to keep your former commanding officer ALIVE! I don't care that Jonnes ordered a charge that CONFLICTED with the initial battle plan. The men of Alpha should have held their ground and let the mercs come to them. Instead you ran right at them like a bunch of screaming teenage GIRLS and you lost two mechs because of it. The ONLY good thing to come of this is that fool Jonnes is dead. Screw up again and I'll personally see that you follow him quickly.”

“And you Hauptmann Gants. I dispatched you in a supporting role for Alpha Company, not to go chasing the mercenaries across the plains like a bunch of ‘cowboys and indians’. Not only did you fail to capture or destroy any of their mechs, but you lost a mech and had another badly damaged. How that justifies your actions, I CANNOT fathom.”

Kreiger circled around the room and flopped heavily into his stuffed leather chair. He flipped open the lid to a small cherry wood box on his desk and pulled out a long black cigar. He chomped down on one end of it and tore it with his teeth rather than use the silver cutter that was

next to the box. He lit the stogie and puffed it heavily several times before speaking again in a more civil tone.

“Gentleman we have an unacceptable situation here and I want to know how you are going to salvage it for us. Any ideas that you may have, I don’t care how trivial, I want to hear them now.”

Kriston was the first to speak up. “Kommandant Kreiger, I met with the civilian that gave us the information to find the mercenaries. He’s obviously involved in some form of criminal activity, but I think he meant to deceive us. I went back over the planetary archives after meeting with him and found that he has been implemented to have connections to a dozen hijackings of industrial equipment including gyroscopes from Gyro-Tech. He could have misled us to prevent us from stopping his scam operation. I think we should look to him for our answers.”

Kreiger blew out a plume of blue–gray smoke from his lips directly at Kriston, who tried to blink away the cloud that enveloped his head. Kreiger stared at the Hauptmann for a long silent moment as if he were contemplating whether to shoot the officer or not. Finally he placed the lit end of the cigar in an ashtray and folded his hands on the desktop.

“I want this man found and brought here for questioning, “ he said flatly.

“He’s actually coming here sir.” Kriston piped up. “He sold us the information to recover losses he incurred from the mercenaries. I didn’t trust him at the time and I remember you made part of the deal to pick up the balance of payment here, in case there was anything wrong with the information.”

“Hauptmann if he was setting us up, do you really think that he’d be stupid enough to come here to collect his money knowing full well that we would looking to repay him for misleading us?”

A quick rap at the door interrupted Kriston’s response and then it opened. A young man popped his head in the door and cleared his throat to speak.

“Sorry about disturbing you Kommandant, but there’s a rather posh looking gentleman out here looking for Hauptmann Kriston. Something about money we owe him for the mercenaries. It sounded suspicious so I figured you’d want to know right away.”

The look of surprise was pasted across Kreiger’s face at the announcement. “Thank you Jamesson. Please tell our friend that we’ll be right with him. That’ll be all for now.”

Kriston let the corners of his mouth rise just slightly. “Stupid enough is fine by me, sir.” He quickly straightened up as Kreiger shot him a venomous look. Rising from his desk like a cobra about to strike he snuffed out the cigar and placed it in the ashtray. He straightened his uniform and smoothed out any wrinkles, then turned and walked around the desk and headed out the door. Leaving the door open he told the company commanders to fall in behind him.

The four men walked down a small corridor quickly to conference room where they were told the man was sent to wait. Kreiger stopped for a brief second to change his composure before opening the door and entering the room.

Inside sitting on a tan couch was Peter Clemenza, the man who fed the information about the mercenaries to Hauptmann Kriston three days prior. He rose to his feet as the four men entered the room. Kreiger walked right up to Peter with a big grin on his face and extended his hand to welcome him.

“Mr. Clemenza I’m Kommandant Johann Kreiger. These are my company commanders, Hauptmann Gants, Hauptmann Harris and I believe you already know Hauptmann Kriston?”

Peter nodded his head at the men. “It’s good to met yous all. Nice seein’ you again Kriston. My wife says to tell you hello. She was going to send me here with some more wine for you, but I had to tell her today was just business.” He laughed heartily at his own joke and the officers chuckled mildly with him.

“Well Mr. Clemenza, “ Kreiger continued “ I’d like to thank you for the help that you’ve given to us. The information you gave us on the mercenaries was accurate and we found them right where you said they’d be. I was skeptical at first, but you’re proving to be quite an asset to removing certain obstacles to our mission on Alcor.”

“I like to help yous guys out in any way I can. Those mercs are a bunch of no-good scum I think. When I learned of some information that could help yous I made sure to tell you right away.” Peter straightened the suit he was wearing trying to make himself appear more important to these men. It was all part of his plan to milk them for more money.

Kreiger crossed his arms over his chest and raised one eyebrow in interest. “Yes, how is it that you came upon this information? I have a dozen men tracking the mercenaries and yet you come up with their exact location and you appear to have no military ties.”

Peter smiled in a very proud fashion and stepped closer to the four men. In a low voice he whispered, “Yous didn’t get this from me, but I found out from this guy at Gyro-Tech that don’t like those mercs either.” Another gut shacking laugh busted from Peter and the others joined right in again.

Kreiger stepped back and stopped laughing slowly. “So someone working for the company that hired the mercenaries, gave you information on their whereabouts so that you could get it to us, and then your source would remain discreetly hidden to keep giving you information to help us.” Kreiger tapped his forefinger on his chin and smiled. “It all makes sense now.”

Peter playfully slapped Kreiger lightly on the shoulder. “It’s a beaut of a plan, dontcha think?”

Kreiger nodded his head. “Oh that it is Mr. Clemenza. We play hide and seek with them for almost two weeks and suddenly information to find them comes out and we follow up on the information and find the mercenaries right where we were told they’d be. I don’t suppose you’d want to share the name of your source with us so that we can thank him as well?”

Peter shook his head. “I can’t do that Kommandant. But any money that you wish to give to him I can certainly pass along.”

Kreiger raised his one eyebrow in surprise. “Money? What makes you think that you’re getting any money? My troops were shot up; I lost a man and didn’t get a single one of them. They had to have known where we were and when we would attack to have gotten away from our ambush. And Mr. Clemenza that kind of information only comes from someone trying to play both ends against the middle. If you were expecting to get paid for misleading us, I’m afraid you made the trip for nothing.”

Peter’s face flushed red in rage and he stabbed a finger in Kreiger’s face. “I expect to get my money! I gave you information that was given to me. I had no way of verifying it, and you’re a fool if you didn’t! I made a deal with Kriston that day and I expect you to hold up your end of the deal. I want what I came for!”

Kreiger kept restraint over his facial expressions but brought more authority into the tone of his voice. “MISTER Clemenza whether you believe that your information helped us or not is all relative. Personally, with the loss of men and material I feel that it hurt us more than anything. AND because I hold the money that you feel you are entitled to, I don’t believe that you deserve any of it for the trouble you have caused me. Now if there is nothing more that we need to discuss here, I want you off my base before I have you jailed.”

“On what grounds?” screamed Peter.

Kreiger stepped closer to Peter and crossed his arms in front of his chest. “Our mission here on Alcor came as a direct command from the Archon herself. That directive was to land here on Alcor, seize Gyro-Tech Industries and locate the rebel sources they are distributing their gyroscopes to and shut off the flow of those supplies. I get here only to find the company has hired mercenaries most likely at the behest of that dog, Victor Davion. Now I not only have a company to seize but a mercenary unit I have to drive off first to do so. Then YOU come to us saying that you can help us find them only to dupe us into falling into their trap where I lose valuable men, materials and time. Time I don’t have Mr. Clemenza, and I especially don’t have time for back-alley-dealing, double-crossing, manipulative scum like you.”

Peter threw his arms up in disgust and stormed to the couch to retrieve his coat and hat. He then marched right back over to Kreiger and got right up in his face. “You picked the wrong person to screw over *Kommandant*. I have friends and influence all over this planet. I can make your life a bed of roses, or the nine gates of hell. It’s just too bad that you chose to do it the hard way. We could have had a cozy partnership but nooooo, you gotta be all by the book. I figured all Lyrans were in it for the profits, the money. You must’ve been one of those FedRats they sent over when that bastard Davion married our Melissa.”

Kreiger snapped when Peter called him a FedRat, the slang term for denizens of the Federated Suns realm. He caught Peter under the chin with a right-handed uppercut that snapped his head back. His body followed in motion and Peter slammed down on the floor flat on his back. Before he could move to get back up Kreiger was standing directly over him, pointing an old slug-thrower pistol at Peter's face.

“Too bad you had to do it the hard way Mr. Clemenza, “ and Kreiger yanked on the trigger twice.

The company commanders were in total shock at witnessing the execution of a civilian at the hands of their commanding officer. Standing still behind him, nearly afraid to move for not knowing if they'd be next under the gun each man stared blankly at the blood slowly oozing across the floor. Kreiger turned back around to face them and tossed the gun to Hauptmann Gants.

“Clean that up. When you're done, send a story to the press that we apprehended a local rebel conspiring with the mercenaries we're tracking. He fed us false data that resulted in a failed mission to locate these mercenaries. We executed him for misleading us with false information.”

“Let's see how the masses digest that one.”

Misfits Repair Base Indigo
Alcor, Federated Commonwealth (Lyran Alliance Space)
15 December 3062
0800 Hours

Senior Technician Ed “Jarhead Ed” Bird had gotten word of the battle between the Misfits and the 15th right after the fighters had been launched to support the withdraw. Expecting the worst he sent everyone and every supply part he could lay his hands on and headed over to the largest of four facilities Gyro-Tech converted over to repair bases for the duration of the Misfit's contract. By the time they had loaded up everything to move over to the repair facility the fighters had returned with the good and the bad news.

Despite the damage taken, all the mechs were still operational enough to return home under their own power. In fact they were bringing home some salvage in the form of one full mech and several parts ripped from downed mechs on the field. Ed sent out a few mech haulers to bring back quickly the worst cases and take the extra mech in himself. Morrison's *Battlemaster*, a *Hunchback*, and a *Marauder* were the most damaged mechs, but each pilot refused to take a rest that couldn't be given to the whole unit.

All the techs and support staff had turned out this morning to watch the mercenaries return home. Everyone was cheering and yelling as the mechs walked their battered hulks over to the Repair Bay. Indigo was the largest warehouse Gyro-Tech could spare for the mercenary unit. Ed was able to construct seven repair bays in the building. One towards the back which

was Bay One and Bays Two, Four, and Six on the left and Three, Five and Seven on the right side of a wide walkway for the mechs entering and leaving. When they arrived Morrison asked Ed to deal with the simplest cases first and get them back online for sentry duty while the tougher cases got worked on afterwards. While the mechs were in town, he called in the Misfits Charlie Company and had all the vehicles set up a perimeter around the mech bay to add to the firepower of the mechs.

Morrison was walking his *Battlemaster* into the hanger as he watched the techs reloading LBX autocannon rounds into the right torso of Lieutenant Jessup's *Bushwacker* in Bay Two, and hammering on more armor to 2nd Lieutenant Stephanie's *Wraith* in Bay Five. The last LRM reloads were being lifted into Lieutenant Russell's *Avatar* in Bay Four, and Sergeant Major Fujimowa was helping his techs cut the leg armor on his *Thor* in Bay Seven. Morrison stopped in front of Bay One and turned the mech around 180 degrees to back it into the rack. As he turned he saw the salvaged Lyran *Penetrator* in Bay Three as arch-wielder torches shot off white-hot sparks from the chest as tech worked to replace the armor on it. Morrison finished locking down the *Battlemaster* in the rack and powered everything down. He set the heavy neurohelmet on the rack above the command chair and shucked off the cooling vest that he stowed in a small locker at the back of the cockpit. He tossed a small blue duffel bag out the open hatch and then levered himself through the same exit. As he reached the raised platform that jutted up against the mechs head, he spotted Ed Bird leaning over the railing to get a better look at his damaged mech.

Morrison reached down and pulled a gray t-shirt from the bag on the landing to put on over his bare chest. The dry cotton felt good over his body as the heat from being stuffed inside the mech all this time was finally dissipating. He threaded his right arm through the handles of the bag and set it up on his shoulder. "So Ed, what do you think?" he asked quietly.

Ed straightened up over the railing, his face red from the forced flow of blood to his head. He pulled a greasy red rag from the back of his jumpsuit and wiped down his hands before stuffing it back in the pocket.

"Well, overall not too bad. The armor is pretty thin all over, but I think we can get that back up to par. Ammo doesn't appear to be too much of a problem. Generally speaking I think it'll hold together nicely." Ed crossed his arms and smiled at Morrison.

A puzzled look crossed Morrison's face. "Uh Ed, I was referring to the unit."

Ed aped the look Morrison had. "So was I." The two men started to chuckle.

"Oh don't think you're getting off that easy," Ed paused before adding "sir. This mech of yours is a wreck. You got armor loss all over, dirt and rock ground into the joints, and what looks to be some other mechs armor mashed in with yours in two different spots. Were you even *with* your men or out beating down Lyrans by yourself? I mean look at it for crying-out-loud!" Ed thrust an accusatory finger at the *Battlemaster*.

Morrison shrugged his shoulders. "It's here isn't it? I walked it back with no problems."

“That’s not the point, sir.” A tone of sincerity crept into Ed’s voice. “Battlemechs are just like humans. They can be mortally wounded and die, just like we can. Mortal mech wounds I can fix.” Ed walked up and put his hand on Morrison’s shoulder, “Human ones, I can’t. Try not to take unnecessary risks so soon in the fight. Don’t mistake bravado for stupidity.”

In any other military unit such remarks expressed to the unit commander would surely land the person in hot water. However in the Misfits, Morrison valued opinion greatly and he mentally realized that Ed was right. He had taken several careless risks the other day. He made a mental note to try to work out of the head-of-the-charge battlefield thinking.

“Yeah, I know you’re right Ed. But it was a great fight none-the-less. Let me stow my gear and I’ll be back up to give you a hand here.”

Ed reached up above him and pulled down a retractable cable that he hooked on to a harness he had strapped around his legs and waist. “I’ll just hang around and see how much you messed her up then.” Morrison walked off the landing towards the stairs to take him down to the ground level and Ed crawled over the railing and began to rappel across the mechs chest.

Morrison reached the ground floor and headed straight for the lead tech working on the *Penetrator*. After a brief run down of the prognosis, he found out that all the weapons were still viable, the armor wasn’t too bad but needed the most attention, and aside from needing an entire new cockpit it wasn’t going to take long to bring it up to operational level. Morrison made sure the tech knew he wanted it back online, but not at the expense of the rest of the unit. As Morrison turned around to check the other bays the red strobe lights mounted around the hanger walls began to flash. A horn blared twice to warn the people of mech movement inside the hanger. Just as the last horn sounded a large shadow moved in front of the hanger doors from the right side.

A jutting nose appeared first, followed quickly by a pair of claw like hands below the body of the mech and then feet as it walked slowly around the corner and down the main walkway. Even though Morrison knew the *Marauder* was heading for Bay Six closest to the doorway, the sight of it bearing down on him made his heart rate jump quickly. He nearly jumped out of his skin when Stephanie tapped him on the shoulder as he watched the 75-ton monster back in to the docking rack.

“Sorry sir. I really didn’t mean to startle you like that,” she apologized.

Morrison waved off her apology. “No need Lieutenant. I tend to forget the lost perspective when ridding in these things. Ten meters high, surrounded by armor and weapons and you forget just how spooky it looks like from the outside. What can I do for you?”

“Whether or not the rest of the unit follows me, I just wanted to be the first the thank you for your quick thinking out there. You’re one helluva commander.”

A sheepish grin stretched across Morrison's face. "I appreciate the kind words, but I'd have to owe the praise to the training in the AFFC."

"Training doesn't build confidence, sir. I've known enough League commanders that would've turned tail and run in that situation. Seeing you lead from the front like that was something else. You did good out there L-C. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise."

"I'm glad you approve Lieutenant." Stephanie snapped a salute the Misfits adopted, palm down and fingers to her brow. "My pleasure, sir." Morrison returned the salute and the two parted silently. He started to head over to where Fujimowa was working on his *Thor*, when he was almost run over by a young blond haired tech carrying an arm full of cans. The boy stumbled a bit trying to avoid a collision with Morrison and dropped pair of cans in the process. Morrison bent down to help retrieve the cans for the tech.

"Slow down a bit son. The repairs are necessary but unless no one told me of approaching enemy mechs you don't have to rush the repairs." Morrison handed back a can that turned out to be spray paint.

"Sorry sir. I mean, Lieutenant-Colonel sir!" The boy almost dropped the entire set of cans trying to muster up a salute. Morrison quickly caught his arms and a few cans before the whole thing turned into a big scene.

"Ok, ok slow down. When you've got an arm full of supplies there's no need to salute. I get the idea if you can't. What's your name?" Morrison saw the boy relax just a bit at his calm words.

"Joe. Joe Salzy. I was hired a few weeks before we lifted off Outreach. Jar, err, Mr. Bird assigned me to the team for Lieutenant Miravoska's *Avatar*." Morrison nodded just as a shrill whistle echoed from the direction of Bay Four catching both of their attentions.

Lieutenant Russell Miravoska was the source of the whistle, standing on a pair of machine guns that jutted from the front torso of his *Avatar*. A single safety line extended from his waist to a handhold just below the cockpit area.

"Tech Salzy I do not have all day to wait for you to return to your duties," he bellowed from his perch on the mech. Morrison tossed his head in the direction of the Bay and Joe set off running back toward the *Avatar*. Morrison casually walked over and stood almost directly underneath Russell. Russell watch Morrison walk in to the Bay the whole time the tech ran up the stairs to the top of the mech with the spray paint cans.

"What's doin' Lieutenant?" Morrison had to practically shout to make his voice heard over the din.

"Since I have finished all the repairs and reloads I wanted to make a designation on my mech, sir. I did not mean to take away my tech from your conversation but the sooner I am done the sooner I can free this Bay for someone else."

“Understood Lieutenant. So what are you calling it?” Morrison took a few steps back from under the nose of the mech where he could just make out a gray blob of sorts on the nose of the mech where Russell stood.

“I am painting a salivating canine here and will put the title of Mad Dog above it in gold lettering. I am certain that after our recent scrap with the Lyran Guard they will be more cautious when attacking us again. I would be remiss if I did not remind them who helped serve up their defeat.” Morrison could see the wide, white-toothed grin Russell had.

“Mad Dog huh? Kind of ironic don’t you think since this mech was designed from the salvaged chassis of the Clan *Mad Dog* mech?” With the distance between them Morrison was unable to tell if the look Russell shot him was confusion or annoyance.

“Yes, I see. I do suppose there is a certain level of irony in that. Thank you for pointing that out, sir.”

“Good luck with your art Lieutenant.” Morrison shouted as he began to walk out of the bay.

“Thank you sir.” Russell shouted back, as he turned to accept the first can of paint from Salzy.

Morrison headed diagonally from Bay Four to Bay Seven to where Fujimowa was climbing down from his *Thor*. After all the conversations he’d had with him since the engagement, he still hadn’t thanked the man in person for helping him pull the unit’s butt out of the fire.

“Hey Colonel!” “Hey L-C!” Morrison stopped just short of the entrance to the Bay as shouting at the hanger entrance caught his attention. Morrison turned to see Captains Kevin Lendar and Jing Li leading the men of their lances into the hanger area. He stopped and turned to face the group of people from the bankrupt merc unit he purchased on Outreach to add an additional company of mechs to the unit. He had yet to have any serious discussions with the men of that unit, but it looked like now was going to be as good a time as any to clear the air. The eight of them stopped and formed a semi-circle around Morrison in front of the Bay Seven.

“Colonel, we just came by to lend a hand to the rest of the repairs, but we wanted to stop over first and thank you.” Jing Li spoke up for the group and the rest nodded their heads to her words. Her speech had a slight Chinese accent, as Morrison recalled her dossier revealed she served in the Capellan Confederation Armed Forces before turning merc.

“Thank me? For?” Morrison asked inquisitively.

“Y’know,” Kevin shrugged “for running the unit the way you do. We haven’t seen action like that in years, and aside from the dangers of attacking an elite line unit of the Lyran Alliance it was rather exciting to be back in combat.”

Terry spoke up next. “Yeah, I haven’t seen any one lead like you do, and I thought I’d seen everything from my days in the chair.”

Mike Rior lightly punched Li in the arm. “Yeah, I bet the L-C would even give those Death Commandoes a run for their money!” The group including Morrison broke out in light laughter.

“Alright you turkeys, “Morrison started “I really appreciate the compliments. But I couldn’t have done it without you guys there, so don’t sell yourselves short on my account. You did the work too. You were the ones that took down the Lyrans and forced them from the field. It doesn’t matter what anyone says about us now. We proved ourselves to Lyran Guard unit. The toughest bunch of nuts to crack in the Lyran Alliance military. And, “ Morrison pointed back at the *Penetrator* in Bay Seven “we even brought home a trophy to prove it.”

The men around Morrison let out a bunch of yells and cheers and clapped their hands together. Morrison hadn’t intended this to be a pep talk or even a morale-raising speech, but it just seemed to come out that way. He shook hands with all the mechwarriors around him and the all parted ways to help the techs repair the damaged mechs currently docked. As Morrison parted with Captain Jing Li he turned around to see Fujimowa a few steps away. Out of the corner of his eye he spotted Coleman standing against the doorway to the hanger smoking a cigarette. Coleman shot Morrison a look of hatred and tossed the butt to the floor and walked out snuffing it under his heel.

Fujimowa walked up to Morrison and in a voice he was sure only the two of them could hear, “He doesn’t appear to like your standings in the eyes of his troops Morrison-san.”

“Yeah, I don’t know what his problem with me is, but it’s starting to look mighty personal. I’d better have a talk with him before it gets someone killed out in the field. Have you heard anyone mention anything about this or allude to what the deal with Major Coleman might be?”

“Regrettably, no sir. No one seems to talk about their feelings or the feelings of others. It seems to be a hands-off topic, or it just might be something I’m not picking up on.” Fujimowa dipped his head as if ashamed he could offer no help to Morrison.

“Oh well, no biggy. Just let me know if you do overhear something. I’d rather kill the rumor mill before it gets up to speed, if you know what I mean.” Morrison smiled trying to warm up the nature of their talk.

“*Hai*, I do Morrison-san.” Fujimowa winked in silent understanding of Morrison’s words.

“Oh by the way, now that I’ve got you…” Morrison was interrupted as George rounded the corner of the hanger doors and raced over to where Morrison and Fujimowa stood. He thrust a sheet of yellow paper into the waiting hands of Morrison and bent over with his hands on his

knees to catch his breath. He took a couple of deep breaths and stood back up as Morrison finished reading the sheet.

“Oh that’s just freakin’ great,” hissed Morrison. He hand the sheet to Fujimowa and ran his hands over his short stubby hair. George and Morrison waited in silence as Fujimowa read the sheet and handed it back to George. An ashen look washed over Fujimowa’s face that nearly aped that of Morrison’s.

“This is not a good thing Morrison-*san*. We could be in for a whole new level of trouble.”

George jumped right in after Fujimowa. “I agree. This could get out of hand long before we have any chance to fix or use it to our advantage.”

“Advantage? How can you see this as a useable advantage?” spat Morrison.

“Well, I’m no PR man Morrison, but since the 15th took over the spaceport I’m sure there has been disruptions in commerce.” George tapped his index finger on his chin. “Now, if we play this up to the people we could use them to support us in forcing the 15th off Alcor.”

“Kaplan-*san* has a point. Military is military, but this is just evil,” Fujimowa commented.

Morrison folded his arms and started to pace a few steps. He couldn’t believe that the 15th would stoop so low, especially for such a prestigious unit. And George was right about this getting out of hand quick. Morrison already had a dozen reasons the Misfits could be blamed for this, and none of it was pretty. If it were possible to somehow use this against the 15th, then it would increase the burden of being here on them and with any luck force them off planet. George caught Morrison’s attention when he cleared his throat.

“Morrison if we are going to anything about this it has to be done quickly,” he pleaded.

“Agreed. Call an emergency meeting. I want everyone, not just commanders. Techs as well. Have them all meet down by Bay One. Bring the patrols in, tell them to park outside the hanger and get in here. We’ll start once everyone is assembled.” He waved off the salute from George, who then ran off to find a comm unit to call in everyone. He then turned to Fujimowa.

“Organize the group. Make sure we’ve got everyone.” Fujimowa executed a quick bow and walked off to the mouth of the hanger to bring in all the members of the Misfits. Morrison turned around to walk back to his mech. As he got near the feet of his mech he called up to Ed who was now crawling through the holes in the chest armor. Ed rappelled the rest of the way to the ground and Morrison told him to get all his techs over here for an emergency meeting. Ed walked two steps away and reached into his pockets and pulled out a small beverage-shaped can from one and a small plastic cone from the other. He attached the cone to the top of the can and held it up over his head. At the last second Morrison caught on to what Ed was about to do and plugged his ears. Ed depressed a button on the top of the can and the compressed air rushed out into the cone and produced an ear-splitting horn that echoed off every wall in the hanger for at

least five seconds. When the sound faded and Ed knew he had everyone's attention he snapped his feet together and stood at attention.

“Troooooop! FALL IN!!” His deep baritone voice carried all the way to the hanger doors and even appeared to reach the few people that were coming in from the outside. Everyone in the hanger dropped what they were doing and hotfooted it over to where Ed stood. Techs and mechwarriors alike were running in from all directions across the hanger. Morrison shuffled over to Ed. “You sound like that drill instructor I hate,” he said sarcastically. Ed just flashed a quick smile at Morrison's comment.

Fujimowa was the last one to move around the crowd and stood off to the left side and nodded at Morrison to confirm that everyone was present. Morrison looked around at the seventy men and woman that made up the fighting element of the Misfits and the equal number of techs and support staff that huddled before him in a large clump. Only once before had this many people been present before him and that was the day they loaded up into the waiting Dropships on Outreach. He had been so proud that day, and so very nervous to have to speak to all these unfamiliar faces. He could feel the anxiety creeping through his veins as the murmuring died down to let him speak. He cleared his throat and decided to plunge in with both feet.

“Major Kaplan has brought something to my attention that needs to be shared with every member of this unit. This morning the local news stations broadcasted a report of an execution of a local by the 15th Lyran Guard.” He continued on regardless of the concerned looks and quiet murmurs that rippled through the crowd. “The report reads as follows: Yesterday afternoon the 15th Lyran Guard Regiment apprehended a local man they claim was operating as an insurgent for the mercenary band Marion's Misfits hired by Gyro-Tech industries. A spokesperson for the 15th was reported as stating they were called here by Archon Katrina Steiner to arrest the situation of Davion rebels conspiring with Gyro-Tech for its BattleMech level gyroscopes. It has been said that these BattleMech supplies are being smuggled to resistance fighters throughout the Federated Commonwealth. Acting upon information provided by Peter Clemenza, a well-known local businessman, the 15th were set into an ambush by the illusive mercenaries. Only one loss was reported, the 15th claiming their excellent training and preparation that turned an ambush into a rout. When they confronted Mr. Clemenza about the information he provided them, they reported he became fanatical and violent and guards protecting Kommandant Kreiger had to use lethal force to stop Mr. Clemenza. Kommandant Kreiger was quoted that he regrets the loss of life of a non-combatant but he stressed that if the mercenaries wanted to manipulate and abuse the populace for their own meager gain, more innocent lives may be lost. Spokesmen for Gyro-Tech had no comment on the incident and said that they would forward the claims to the mercenaries to get their side of the issue. When asked if they knew when that would be, they simply said ‘they call us, we can't call them’. Peter Clemenza is survived by his wife and seventeen-year-old son.” Morrison folded the paper up and stuffed it into his back pocket before crossing his arms in front of him.

“Now, this report paints us in a pretty negative light. First it claims we're Davion rebels supporting Victor's push to remove his sister from the FedCom throne. On a Lyran Alliance world, that's not a good thing. Second, it states that we're conspiring with civilians to conduct a disinformation campaign against troops sent here by the Archon herself. Third we're letting

these civilians we supposed coerce, get killed. We need to get a handle on this situation before it blows out of proportion leaving us to deal with a rioting mob AND fight against other mechs. The only way we can do that is by figuring out what actually happened and get that information out to the people. Major Kaplan and I are just a pair of old war horses. We have zilch in the way of counter intelligence training. Does anyone here have any level of training in that area?"

Captain Picketts stepped forward out of the throng. "I minored in Counter Intelligence and Propaganda at the NAIS. I'm sure I could help out with something." Morrison read the hunger in her eyes and saw that she really wanted to do this. Whether it was for herself or for the unit that remained to be seen. "Ok, anyone else? No? Well, one is more than I expected. Ok, then the rest of us will be Captain Picketts bloodhounds. We're going to start talking to people and find out what they know. We got to get on the air and let the people know we didn't know this guy and we certainly aren't trying to kill civvies. We..." Morrison stopped abruptly as one of the mechwarriors from Delta Company elbowed his way to the front.

"Um, that's not exactly accurate sir," replied Terry. Terry shifted uncomfortably as all the eyes fell on him. Jules joined him up front and Morrison stepped back as if the pair were a dangerous explosive rather than men under his command.

"Well, don't make me beg Lieutenant, out with it!" Morrison was trying to control his anger but it was just a bit beyond his reach.

Well, it's not as bad as you think," stammered Terry "I first met this Clemenza guy at the casino back in September. We played some hands of Poker and I beat him for a tidy sum with a four-of-a-kind. He didn't take kindly to loosing and tried to have me skewered. He failed and I grabbed the guys from Delta that were with me and left. I didn't go back cause I didn't want there to be a scene. Then the 15th came down and I forgot all about it. I would've said something earlier if I had any idea this would've happened."

"So you only know of this guy from a couple hands of Poker, is that right?" asked Morrison. Terry stood there silently and just nodded his head. Morrison stepped forward and grabbed him by both shoulders.

"Just poker? Here I am thinking you're some Lyran mole and you're turn out to just be a hustler. Dammit don't do that to me, I'm too old for that." The group laughed at the light ribbing Terry got from Morrison. Morrison playfully stuffed Terry and Jules back into the group and walked back to his spot.

"Ok, but this gives us motive. He lost some money and as Terry said forcefully tried to get it back and that gives us motive against us. He must've tried to fool the 15th and sell them bad information."

"But was it bad, or just misread?" asked Sarah. "The reports says that the data he gave the 15th led them into our ambush. We were scouting the day we took down that Lance, but the report says they turned it into a rout of our troops. We were forced from the field by the 15th's Bravo Company, but certainly not routed by them. The only ambush I can think of is that poorly

executed one by their Alpha Company that cost them two mechs. I think they got information on us and tried to ambush us and it failed badly.”

Morrison started to think through the process out loud. “So Clemenza feeds the 15th information on us, but leaves out some details or doesn’t have them. Kreiger plans an ambush but that fails and so he blames Clemenza instead of his own men.”

“So Kreiger kills Clemenza, blames us and stirs the populace against us because he can’t get us.” Ed shook his head in bewilderment. “He’s more politician than military that Kreiger. It’s gonna take more than brawn to beat him down. We’re gonna have to strike back using his own medicine.” The group nodded in collective agreement. Morrison paced back and forth and tapped his chin with his index finger.

“But there’s still something missing from all this. The 15th landed and we scattered so they couldn’t find us. It wasn’t until we marched to their back door, that we fought and it was a rigged ambush. Ambush would have meant prior knowledge of our movements. Where did Clemenza get information on our whereabouts and how did he know to give it to the 15th? That’s the piece that’s missing. No one outside the two mech companies knew where we were going.”

Coleman stepped up to the edge of the crowd. “And that knowledge was kept to the command staff. There was strict radio silence so it couldn’t have been anyone on the inside. It had to have come from without.”

Sarah turned to face Morrison. “But who outside the Misfits would have the resources to track us like that?”

Morrison threw up his hands and shrugged. “Whoever it is, they’ve got connections to us somehow.” Then he stopped. A look of deep thought stretched across his face along with the silence. No one dared move, and it seemed most stopped breathing lest the sound disrupt their commander’s train of thought. “I might not know who ratted us out, “ Morrison said in a low voice “but I know someone that might have a clue. Sarah, I want you to prepare a statement to the press based on everything that we’ve figured out to this point. Stress that we didn’t know this guy or condone anything he did. Also, point out that we are investigating his murder by the 15th. That’ll get the glory hounds back on them instead of us. I want it on the noon news. Terry?”

Terry jumped back up front at the call. “Yessir.”

“What kind of person was Clemenza? What was your take on him?”

“He was dirty, sir. The kind of guy that has his hands in everything illegal. When he came back for my money he brought two big friends with him. He’s connected, and I’m guessing its not small ones either.”

Morrison visibly cringed. “Organized crime type then?” Terry nodded.

”Damn, I was afraid of that. George takes over here. I want everything back online and the entire unit back up to 98%, minimum. If this guy is connected we can expect reprisals and I don’t want to be here for them. I want double security on everything.”

“Where are you going?” asked George.

“Its time I had a talk with the man that got us here. Dismissed.”

Gryo-Tech Industries, Strona
Alcor, Federated Commonwealth (Lyran Alliance Space)
15 December 3062
1200 Hours

Morrison stood in the center lobby of Gyro-Tech Industries clad in a pair of blue jeans and a white t-shirt bearing the logo of a MechWarrior Stable on Solaris VII. He realized that until the Misfits cleared the air about their alleged involvement in Clemenza’s death, appearing in unit gear out in public might not be the best thing. He issued an order that anyone going off the base must change into civilian attire and carry nothing to tie them to the Misfits until after Sarah got her report on the news. Sarah and Morrison changed out of their uniforms and took an unmarked civilian hovercar from the base to drive into town. She dropped him off at Gyro-Tech around eleven o’clock and headed directly to the news station to get her report on the noon news.

While waiting for the elevator Morrison replayed the drive over here in his head. Sarah had talked about her report to the media where she implicated Krieger as the one behind Clemenza’s death, and the battle ROMs from the fight south of the lake so that they would see there was no rout, but a failed ambush of the 15th. She also included some bold assumptions that if the 15th challenged their validity might give the Misfits a clue as to who their mole was. The report laid the groundwork of conspiracy at the feet of the 15th, and dared them to pick it up and unravel it.

He was impressed with the effort she put to the piece and was surprised at the level of duplicity it had for someone with just minor training in that field. Her cheeks turned red at his compliments and her voice tended to waver when she thanked him. He tried to focus on his upcoming meeting at Gyro-Tech but his eyes tended to drift back to Sarah while she drove the car. She chose a more fashionable approach to her attire and had on a simple white t-shirt and blue jeans with a matching denim vest. She pulled her blonde hair into a ponytail that she fed through the back of a baseball cap bearing the same logo as Morrison’s shirt. This way we’ll look the part, she had explained.

Halfway through the drive Morrison’s attention diverted to wondering if the sweet perfume he could smell was part of the ruse as well, or done on purpose. Many of the items that military units considered luxury were common in everyday civilian life. Certain types of clothing were one of them and perfume was also certainly on that list. He took deep, slow breaths through his nose and let her fantastic scent distract him for the remainder of the ride. They arrived much sooner than he hoped at Gyro-Tech.

Morrison stepped into the elevator and hit the button for the executive branch level. As the car rode up through the building he recalled the feel of her hand on his arm as he got out of the car. She told he good luck and that she'd be back after the news station to pick him up. Then she touched his arm. Not like a playful slap from a long time friend, but a gentle touch that sent out warmth from her fingertips and caused his heart to skip a beat. He thought about it so much that he could recall exactly how it felt when she touched him. The doors opening to the floor he requested startled him and brought him back to the task at hand. I'll save those thoughts for another time and he quickly put the situation at hand before him.

He walked into the main lobby and turned right at the main receptionist desk. Down the hallway of closed doors about five meters he turned left and headed for a large office surrounded by glass walls. He walked right passed another receptionist without acknowledging her requests that he wait to be announced and burst right through the door to the office and closed it behind him right in the face of the squawking lady. And just to make his point he leaned back against the door and crossed his arms so that all she could do was jiggle the handle to the door. The owner of the office had to finally wave her off to let her know the intruder was unexpected but not unwelcome. She pitted Morrison with a venomous glance before returning to her desk.

The man motioned for Morrison to have a seat in one of the three stuffed black leather chairs before the desk. "Please Mr. Morrison, have a seat."

"Oh, are we formally greeting each other now? Am I going to have to pull rank to get some answer Staff Sergeant?"

"What did you expect Morrison? You barge in here, scare Ms Peterson to death by locking her out and then expect me to be nice?"

"I wasn't looking for nice, Peter. I'm looking for an explanation, and you're the only friend I've got in this place. You were the only friend I had in the AFFC, so I'm turning to you now for help."

Peter Baker, CMO of Gyro-Tech Industries, sat back in his high-backed light brown chair and silently stared back at Morrison. The pair had been friends for a few years when they served in the same FedCom unit. Peter was retired out two years before the Clans came and Morrison had decided to be a "lifer" the day after Peter left the unit. The hell that was the Clan invasion changed everything and they lost touch. Peter went on to get some schooling and got hired at Gyro-Tech in the accounting department. He had worked his way up the corporate ladder and was actually nominated by the outgoing CMO to handle the job given the background in the AFFC Peter had.

Peter handled all the military-grade contracts that Gyro-Tech held for the past few years and using his job he was able to track down Morrison and get off a letter to him so that they might catch up on the years they'd missed out on. Morrison filled Peter in on the nightmares of the Clan War and Peter bored Morrison with the daily life of corporate work. When Morrison had mentioned retiring Peter was the first to voice against it, sighting his depression after leaving

the military. After some joint-planning for Morrison's future he settled on the idea of going merc and Peter would see if he could get Gyro-Tech to hire him for a small contract to start building his resume.

That's about the time the hijackings started and the members of the board were getting nowhere with the local authorities. Gyro-Tech forced the local law enforcement to signoff on the situation so that they could handle it themselves as they saw fit. After much debate, Peter convinced the other members of the board to hire the mercenaries to garrison and guard the plant. If nothing else they would intimidate anyone looking to cause trouble for the company. Then the 15th showed up and everything just went to hell since then.

"Well, if you're coming to me for help you've got to be desperate or things are worse than the news reports are saying." Peter twisted in his chair and unbuttoned the suit coat he wore. "What can I do to help an old friend?"

"I need to find out who's selling out my unit," Morrison asked bluntly.

Peter whistled softly. "That's a mighty tall order there. Care to shed some light on the matter?"

Peter listened intently as Morrison broke down everything up to this point. The hyperpulse messages Gyro-Tech helped the Misfits send out. The days of hide-and-seek against the 15ths patrols, including the ambush on the one Lyran Guard lance. The trip over the Strawberry Mountains and around the lake to scout the spaceport and maybe raid it. The 15th's ill-fated ambush, then the forced withdraw from the fresh Lyran Guard Company and the battle with his aerospace units. He included all the details up to and including the units dissection of the news report of Clemenza's death. Then he explained his theory about why he figured it was someone in Gyro-Tech that was trying to hang his unit out to dry.

Morrison knew that they had no satellites of their own in orbit and no Dropships to serve as a mobile command post for the Misfits. Everything they needed was carried with them at any given time. The only external help they had was the communications satellite that belonged to Gyro-Tech that they used to send encrypted messages over a wireless network to the men and women back in the hangers. It was precisely how they scrambled their fighters to support their withdraw that day. Morrison knew he'd only used it on two other occasions. The first being when they ambushed that lance and brought the techs out to salvage what they could, and the second when he reported he was going to scout the south end of the space port by going over the mountains to the west side of the lake.

"So, there has to be someone with access to the wireless network your company is running that monitored my reports to our main base. That person is the one who had to have given the information to Clemenza to give to the 15th. I need to find out who that was and why he felt compelled to write us off."

Peter pressed his hands together fingertip to fingertip and gnawed on his lower lip. The facts Morrison had presented were by no means rock-solid proof of a mole in Gyro-Tech, but the

conclusion to which he arrived made too much sense logically to simply dismiss it. If there indeed was a mole in Gyro-Tech, they needed to silence that person or else this would rob Morrison of his only device to communicate with forces not out in the field.

“I’d like to plant some bait to catch the mole,” Morrison said while getting up to pace in the office space “but that would mean the 15th had more than Clemenza working for him, and in killing him I don’t think they do. I could broadcast some false locations of my troops and if the 15th respond in kind that’ll prove they do.”

“Nobody blunders twice in war.” Peter stated an old Latin proverb they’d learned in their days in the military academy.

“Ah, true. So, if I can’t bait out the mole, how do we catch him?” Morrison flopped back into the chair and rubbed his temples to ward off the headache he was expecting.

“Well, the only people that can gain access to the comm network are the board members, myself included. You can scratch me off the list of suspects. The CIO that runs and maintains the network is my second cousin on my mother’s side. I trust him as much as I do you, so I can say he’s not a suspect. That leaves the CFO, CEO, and COO as possibilities. Our CEO argued against needing a whole merc unit. The Operations Officer explicitly wanted no part in re-organizing the warehouses for you. And the Chief Financial Officer, really balked when the Archon sent her demands because they choked our profits with having to pay you now for possible combat time. If I were a betting man, I’d put my money on one of those three being the culprit. The trick is figuring out which one.” Peter let a smile grace his lips as he stared out the plastisteel picture window in his office.

“I take it by your smile you have a plan?”

“I learned a few tricks as a Staff Sergeant that might net us a mole. I’ll need to make a few calls to set up some traps and then run some backlog checks. We just might get the person if he thinks we know that he knows we think we know who he is.”

Morrison’s expression went blank. “Huh? Wouldn’t it be simpler if he just thinks we know it’s him?”

Peter shook his head. “Nope. If you thought I suspected you ratted me out to the enemy, you’d just deny it. If you think I know that you know I might suspect you ratted me out, that gives you enough reason to try to cover it up. And people are always caught trying to clean up a mess they left behind.”

Morrison just nodded in bewilderment at Peter’s logic. “Uh, sure. If you think it’ll catch this guy, then I leave it in your capable hands. Just don’t say that line again. It’s hurts my head.” He got up from the chair and moved towards the door.

Peter sighed. “Life was so much easier when I was a non-com in the AFFC. Things were simpler then. You knew who your enemies were.”

“Yeah, today you have Capellan’s fighting Capellan’s, a civil war in the FedCom, rogue Dracs attacking the Clans, and Wobblies corrupting the League and the Periphery. Humanity is taking a dump on itself, and none of us have any shovels.” Morrison closed the door behind him and walked back to the elevators.

***15th Lyran Guard Regiment HQ, Ludwig Steiner Spaceport, Strona
Alcor, Federated Commonwealth (Lyran Alliance Space)
17 December 3062
0600 Hours***

The sun was just starting to come up over the east side of the spaceport. The golden rays of sunshine stretched across the tarmac blasting everything they touched with a warm glow. The light chased the shadows out of the corners and warmed the cold night air to a light mist hanging over the ground. Kreiger zipped up the light jacket to his jogging suit as his sneakers squeaked on the linoleum floor of the barracks hallway. The situation at the spaceport was turning into a diplomatic nightmare. Only hours after the broadcast of the 15th’s spin on the Clemenza incident, the mercenaries got their version on the news. Every anti-Lyran and sympathizer for the Clemenza’s seemed to descend on the spaceport. The phone lines were flooded with angry threats, and the gates had to be shut when a group of protesters made their way onto the barrack’s parade grounds.

Kreiger called all the MPs they had and even converted some of the staff over to guards to keep the civilians out. The protests were peacefully, yet annoying for now but he knew that things could easily get out of hand. The Eradani Light Horse’s experience on Milos was proof enough of that. They landed under Star league orders to prevent the forces of Sun-Tzu Liao from gaining control of the planet, and the people turned on their would-be saviors. Kreiger swore that nothing would happen to his troops at the hands of the civilians, no matter what the costs would bear. The stressful past twenty-four hours had given him such a headache that he decided early this morning to take a run around the grounds to clear his head. As he passed the front desk to the barracks the guard caught sight of him and jumped to his feet and saluted.

“At easy soldier. I’m just going out to run and clear my head,” he said plainly.

“Understood sir. Shall I summon an escort for you sir?” Kreiger recognized him as one of his comm staff that normally would be listening through dozens of radio transmissions room a terminal high in the Dropship’s control room. Now he stood there in full fatigues, flak vest and sidearm. The vest itself looked abnormally large on his scrawny frame, almost like it was the only size they had available for him. Even the shoulder straps were a good three and a half centimeters above his actual shoulders.

“No, that’s not necessary. It’s early enough I think. If I’m needed I’ll be around.”

The boy snapped a crisp salute. “Very well sir. Enjoy the run.” Kreiger thrust his hands in the jacket pockets and grunted something in the affirmative to the boy and headed out the doors. As he reached the top of the stairs he saw the sun rising up over the buildings to the east.

The light was coming up over a small storage bunker and the edges of it were twinkling like it was peering over the edge to spy on Kreiger. A light shiver raced down his spine as the thoughts of spies and infiltrators raced through his brain. He shook off the wild fantasy and walked down the stairs. He turned his back to the grounds in front of the building and placed his right foot on the third step and began to stretch out his legs.

Shrouded in the darkness of shadow and wrapped in a dark blanket a large mass moved up a small wall. A single eye peered from under the blanket over the top of that wall and focused at the scene before it. That concrete wall surrounded the rooftop of an office building that stood across the open grounds that spanned in front of a barracks building. The same building Kreiger stood on front of stretching. The dark object shifted to face the wall and shed the blanket from its left side. A hand reached down in to the folds beneath the blanket and pulled out a rifle. The large bore rifle was an old manual feed, bolt-operated weapon that currently mounted a telescopic lens over the center.

As more blanket fell away from the figure the image of a young man came into view of the rooftop, shielded by the wall from prying eyes below. In a smooth fashion, he lifted the lever on the bolt and pulled the slide back. The exposed magazine compartment revealed a pair of silver tipped high-velocity rounds. He pulled the slide all the way back and the first round raised up level with the chamber before it. Quietly he pushed the bolt forward and locked the lever down loading the first round. He cradled the loaded weapon against his chest as he placed a small piece of wood on the top edge of the wall. The piece was flat against the wall and was rounded at the top just slightly more than the barrel diameter. In a slow fluid motion he swung the gun up to the level of the wall and rested the barrel in the notched of the wood. He uncapped the scope with his left hand while he right steadied the gun around the trigger guard. He put his right eye up to the sight and used his left to bring the gun in line with Kreiger's body. The distance was enough that small inconspicuous shape of Kreiger was brought to full life by the scope's high-powered lenses. He turned the dials of the scope to make the image crisper and was able to distinguish most of the details of Kreiger in the early twilight.

He pulled his eye back from the lens and looked to the direction of the rising sun. The sun had yet to climb high enough in the sky to reach over the building rooftop wall and expose him to the world. He was far enough down the length of the building that the sun would need to be level with the roof to bath him in its light. *Still have time.* The man turned back to his target and thumbed the safety off the rifle. Whispering to himself as if Kreiger might accidentally hear him, "I wonder just how close you were to my father when you killed him."

Anthony, Peter Clemenza's only son, adjusted the sights through the scope to allow for the distance the rounds would have to travel and then refocused on his target. He placed the crosshairs over Kreiger's form and watched as he stretched over in a toe-touching exercise. Although he could not hear the man he imaged the heavy breathing as Kreiger warmed up his muscles for a run. *It's a shame that he's doing all that for nothing. No, I think not.* Suddenly the form stood upright and looked at the top of the stairs. Anthony moved the scope slightly and focused on a pair of figures descending the stairs toward Kreiger. Great flashes of light bounced off their bodies as the sunlight was finally high enough to reach the doors of the barracks.

The pair of men stepped up to and around Kreiger and began to talk to him. Fearing they knew of his presence Anthony held absolutely still. The three men moved as a clump of shadows and reflections in the scope and before he could do anything the light broke free of a rooftop on the other side of the compound and bathed the men in a massive burst of backlight. All that Anthony could see now was the silhouettes of the men.

Kreiger was startled when the same guard he'd passed early came bursting out the door calling his name. Hot on his heels came a half dressed Hauptman Gants, his dress coat completely unbuttoned and an unmatching set of pant fatigues. The guard saluted Kreiger motioned toward the Hauptman.

"This had better be important Hauptman, to interrupt my quiet time." Kreiger's voice took on a familiar threatening tone that all the men of the 15th knew all too well.

"It is Kommandant. We have some disturbing news that just came in. I sent the guard here to find you. I'm glad you hadn't gone far yet." Gants tried to sound apologetic in his explanation, but it only came out patronizing. That made Kreiger even more irritated. "We received word that at oh-seven hundred hours this morning the local governor is coming here at the request of the planetary Duke to discuss the matter of our involvement with Clemenza."

Kreiger's face turned a shade of red that matched an embroidered pattern in the jacket he wore. "Why is there a politician coming to talk to me about military matters?" His jaw was clenched in raw fury at the audacity of the Duke to send a slithering yes-man to question his military authority.

"I don't know sir. The message said that we're to receive him this morning and to work with him to resolve the matter over Clemenza's death. The Duke provided no further reason or explanation. I came to get you as soon as I got the Duke's 'command'. I'm terribly sorry to interrupt your recreation time with this news." Gants had shuffled from foot to foot, but not so much as side to side by added a few more inches between himself and Kreiger. This way if he lashed out the closest target was actually the guard, giving Gants enough time to protect himself. Kreiger simply clasped his hands behind his back and dropped his head as he paced in front of the other two men.

Anthony was having a rather large problem with the situation at this point. With the sunlight backlighting the men the dark blobs merged whenever they crossed in his line of sight. It had been over a minute since he could no longer distinguish which one was Kreiger. He had two rounds, both intended for the man that slain his father and now he had three targets. There was a two-thirds chance at getting him on the first round, but a whopping half and half chance if he dropped his first victim was not Kreiger. The odds were not in his favor, but his father was a gambler and taught Anthony that you take the odds and your turn them into your favor. He needed an inside track to find out which one was Kreiger.

He blinked away the drop of sweat that had latched on to his eyelashes. The three silhouettes failed to move from the base of the steps. At eighty yards the men looked the same through the high-powered scope. He traced the cross hairs from body to body hoping to catch a

glimpse of something – anything – that would identify the man he came to kill. He would avenge his father this morning if he had to take all three men with him. The edge of the sunshine crept closer to him across the roof, threatening to reveal his position to the onlookers on the ground below. Once he was spotted his chance would be lost for good. The men of the 15th would catch him for sure under the command of that filth Kreiger. He knew he could make good his escape plan if they were more concerned over their fallen leader. *Cut off the head and the body will wither.*

The sunlight was now just a meter or two from bathing him in brilliant radiance. He checked the range once more and refocused on the three shadows. Suddenly a lump caught in his throat. One of the men looked like he had epaulets on his shoulders! It had to be Kreiger in his uniform. He centered the crosshairs over the sterna notch of the man in uniform. He took a deep breath and tightened the stock of the rifle against his shoulder. Then he exhaled slowly. The world around him melted away and silence followed in its wake. All that he could see was the shadow of Kreiger, speared by the cross hairs. Justice was about to be served up to Kreiger, Clemenza-family style. Anthony smiled at the thought of how proud his papa would be of him for what he was about to accomplish. Then he cleared his mind.

And squeezed the trigger.