

Marion's Misfits

"It's Always Darkest Before Dawn"

By: Slade Geance

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

"I want this situation with the governor dealt with quickly and quietly. I cannot have a politician tripping me up while I'm hunting those bastard mercenaries down. Our sources reported they had returned to the city two days ago to repair and refit from their fight with us. I want our troops ready to move out today to box them into the city. This Morrison character fought in the Clan Wars, so I'm hoping that he'll forego a city battle and surrender his forces to us. If he digs in then, well, we'll just have to dig him out."

Kreiger continued to pace as he work out the situation out loud. Neither Hauptmann Gants nor the guard moved to interject their opinions. They knew better than to interrupt their Commanding Officer.

"Now, I'm going to have to deal with the Governor, and lord knows that he'll balk if he learns about our plans against the city. Then he'll going running off to the Duke and then *he'll* start whining in my ear about civilian casualties, property damage and blah blah blah. I'd turn my troops on him in heartbeat if I figured we'd be able to take on the mercs AND the Alcor Home Guard. Damn my luck, I knew I should've passed this on to the Thirty-Second Guard. After Solaris they deserve another kick in the teeth, like this assignment." Kreiger sighed heavily and turned back to face Hauptmann Gants.

"Alright then. Gants call up the rest of the command staff and tell them to meet us in Conference Room Three to receive the Governor."

"Aye sir," replied Gants.

"Guard, alert the front gate to expect the Governor and let's try to have everyone look professional for the short time I expect him to be here. I want this to be as painless as possible."

The guard raised his hand in salute and his chest exploded in a red mist splattering Kreiger and Gants in fragments of bone and bloody meat. The guard pitched backwards, arms flailing wildly in the air grasping for purchase that would never come. He slammed heavily into the concrete stairs, head smacking against the edge with a sickening sound. Gants and Kreiger simultaneously watched him fall then turned back around as the report of the rifle shot echoed across the open parade grounds.

"SNIPER!" they screamed in unison.

Anthony wasted no time after his first shot, yanking back on the ramrod chambering his second and last round. One of the two left standing would survive, but they'd have the death of their comrades burned into their brain for life. He skipped the pleasure of deciding which one was going to live, took aim and fired again. As soon as he'd fired both men dove for the ground, the man under his sights pitched sideways in the process. *Down, but not out. Oh well.* Anthony placed the gun on the rooftop over a pressure switch on a bomb he'd prepared earlier. The weight of the gun tripped the switch, arming the bomb. When some fool picked up the gun the bomb would detonate. It was the last thing he'd need to cover his tracks. He placed the blanket over the gun carefully so as to not move it from its fatal resting place and bolted to the other side of the roof where a ladder to the ground awaited him. Taking the rungs two at a time he descended rapidly and jumped the last three meters to the ground.

Kreiger and Gants had both dove for the safety of the bushes in front of the building when Gants was hit by a second shot in the shoulder. Kreiger had hit the ground and rolled into the line of bushes obscuring him from view but Gants was nearly stopped in mid jump by the impact of the bullet. He lay only a meter from where he stood now clutching his arm. Kreiger peeked out from his hiding spot waiting for the fateful round to find him and snuff him out. It was a sad reality that after all the years in mechwarrior training, the Academy, all the battles fought in his 'Mech, all it took was one bullet to end everything he'd worked so hard for. The thought of his imminent death made him more angry by the second. He reached over to his wrist chronometer and hit a special button that activated a signal to his main comm center. He was relieved when someone answered his call in seconds.

“This is Kommandant Kreiger. Sniper on the grounds. Repeat. Sniper on the grounds. One man down, one injured in front of the main barracks. Sound the full alert and get a medic and ground squad over here now!”

Anthony had run past two more buildings before stopping at a stack of crates and supplies near a service door of one of the warehouses. He went behind one crate and pulled the tarp off of it. Then he wheeled out his escape plan from its hiding place. He took out the key from his pocket and shoved it into the starter of his Mitsu-Saki Demon 3000 motorcycle. He preferred standard street bikes to the more expensive hoverbikes that were the popular style on Alcor. Besides, his was the fastest one on the market topping out at nearly 200kph. He turned the key to the ‘On’ position and primed the starter. Just as he was about to hit the ignition switch a loud, piercing siren echoed against the walls of the buildings and spread across the spaceport. It startled him at first but then he shook it off knowing he was expecting that to happen anyway. He thumbed the “Start” and the bike roared to life. He throttled it twice, released the clutch and sped off down the narrow alley as fast as he could go without colliding with any equipment.

Reveille was only a half hour away for the troops of the 15th so anyone not required to be on duty was still sound asleep in their bunks when the Full Alert sounded. Ripped from their sleep and thrown into a panic the troops scrambled for clothes and gear as fast as they could. Officers were calling for transports over the radio net with one hand and opening doors to the barracks with the other screaming at their troops to hurry up. The sniper had been near the parade grounds and hopefully was still nearby so that they would be able to nab them. Just as the men were loading up into their carriers to move out the call came over the net that someone riding a cycle at high speeds had been spotted.

Kreiger was resting against the side of an armored personnel carrier as a medic tended to Gants. The guard was pronounced dead by the time the team got there. The medic had been ordered by Kreiger to help the Hauptmann leaving Kreiger to coordinate the search efforts. The medic simply accepted that he was fine and began to patch up the gapping wound in Gants shoulder. Kreiger had a portable radio in his hand listening into the “chatter” from his troops. He also got the report about the sniper trying to escape by vehicle and called out his ‘Mechs to cordon off the gates. “Lock him in and run him down,” was the command given. He continued to listen in as he sent a squad over to find out where the shots came from.

Anthony was a good distance away by this time, moving in a zigzag pattern between the rows and rows of warehouses. Up one, over one. Moving slowly toward the perimeter where he’d make his final dash for freedom. Nothing in the Lyran’s arsenal could catch him and once he was outside the spaceport grounds, he’d be free. As he moved past the last warehouse he could see the open grounds just over one kilometer away that lined the main road at the edge of the port. He crept up slowly to the opening between the buildings and looked out where he could see anyone moving around. There were people running about and trucks moving far away where he had positioned himself on the roof top, so it looked like he had successfully ditched his pursuers for now. He kicked the gear shifter into first and got set for his final dash. He felt an odd tremor in the bike motor and placed his hand on the frame to see if he was going to have a problem with his high-speed run. Nothing seemed out of place, just an odd piston tremor every few seconds, nothing to be alarmed about. He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out his black sunglasses. Once they were set on his face, he grabbed the throttle, gunned it and shot out between the buildings and headed right for the fencing.

“I’VE GOT HIM!! I need support, North-West corner!!” Kreiger near fell over when the call came in that the sniper had been found. “All units converge on that location. I want him alive!” he screamed into the radio set.

Anthony was moving quickly now, passing through third gear. The wind and the engine screamed in his ears. He chanced a look in his rear view mirrors and caught sight of something he really wished he hadn’t. A giant metal foot. He turned his head to look behind him and saw the ominous sight of several tons of BattleMech bearing down on him. The scarecrow-looking ‘Mech had both arms ended in barrels with two more mounted on the body. The blackened view screen had an evil look to it and the ‘Mech stomped furiously closer by each step. Anthony turned his head back around and hugged the bike as tight as he could with his entire body, kicked the gear shifter to fourth and gunned the accelerator to the physical stops. Smoke erupted from the squealing tires as they fought for grip on the ferrocrete surface, the bike wobbling slightly as he struggled to maintain control of it.

MechWarrior Rickels had spotted the fleeing sniper on the motorcycle as it shot out from between a pair of warehouses. He called in the pursuit and requested backup knowing that no matter how hard he tried he could never outrun the bike in his 40-ton *Vulcan*. He saw the rider turn back to look at him and then accelerate quickly. *He must not have been expecting ‘Mech support so soon*, Rickels thought to himself. Acting quickly he adjusted the targeting hairs on his main display and brought up the left arm machine guns and ripped off a series of shots trying to break up the ground before the bike to force the rider to slow it down. The shots stitched long jagged lines in the ferrocrete breaking off small chunks and sending shrapnel in all directions behind the speeding bike. In a matter of seconds the bike was out of the effective range of his machine guns.

Rickels swore under his breath and stepped up his speed. His only saving grace was that the bike was moving in a straight line and not making wild turns to throw off his pursuer. 'Mechs had no real problems running on smooth paved surfaces but to make turns one had to slow down considerably or else the 'Mech's feet would almost always slide out from underneath and the crash would severally damage the 'Mech and anything else nearby. He toggled out the machine guns and flamer from his Targeting Interlink Control and locked in his left torso mounted medium laser. He floated the reticule in front of the bike trying to lead the target instead of locking onto the small fast-moving object. *It's like trying to hit a Savannah Master*, he mused. *And just to be on the safe side...*

"Command, this is Rickels. In pursuit of target, they are not heeding my warning shots. Target is exceeding the top speed of my 'Mech. Requesting more support, or permission to switch to lasers."

"Rickels, this is Kreiger. I want that scum taken alive."

Rickels rolled his eyes as the Kommandant's voice came over the comms. "Copy that Kommandant. I can try and clip the front or rear tires, but I have to do it soon or he'll only be in range of my autocannon. I can't pinpoint shots with that thing."

"Is there anything you can shoot down in his path? Something to slow him down for more support to get there?"

"Negative Kommandant. He's in the open making for the edge of the spaceport grounds. I estimate he'll be off the grounds in less than a minute at present speeds."

There was a pregnant pause before Kreiger responded. "Only. Hit. The tires."

Rickels did not like the tone of that order and he said a silent prayer as he pulled on the trigger for his only laser. Brilliant blue light burst from the left side of the Vulcan and gouged a burnt black line across the path of the speeding bike. The rip was large enough that the bike's front tire snagged as it tried to go over it. The bike shed its rider and flipped end over end several times across the open ground. The rider slid and rolled to a stop after several meters. Rickels threw his 'Mech into a full stop and called in the report.

"Target is down. Requesting medic my location. Disembarking to provide aid."

"Stand down Rickels. You will wait for a ground support team at your loc-" Rickels shut off his comms system and locked down his 'Mech's systems. He pulled off the bulky neurohelmet and unbuckled the harness holding him in the seat. He grabbed a first aid bag behind the command chair and then tossed out the chain ladder kept in the cockpit out the hatch he just opened. "I'll not be remembered as the man that shot at civilians when all this is over with," he muttered to himself as he descended the ladder. He ran over to where the man lay still since the crash.

Rickels thought about drawing his sidearm, but he mental nixed that idea. Nobody can fight after going through a spill like that. He just hoped the poor bugger was still breathing. He set his bag down and gently rolled the man over to his back. He paused when he saw the young boy's face through all the cuts and blood. Skipping the time needed to try to understand any of this he reached out his hand and found a pulse in his carotid artery. Slow, but there. Rickels proceeded to check his neck for any out of place bones, then his arms, ribs and finally legs. As far as he could tell the boy survived the crash remarkably intact. He reached over to get some tools from his bag and a shot to alleviate any pain. "You're only lucky son of a gun," he mumbled.

"Mmm... not lucky enough," whispered the boy.

Rickels continued getting his things while talking to the boy. "Well, that depends on how you look at it. You survived a motorcycle crash with no helmet going a good hundred and fifty kilometers an hour. I'd call that lucky any day."

"Not...not what I meant." He coughed lightly.

"What do you mean then?" Rickels tested the syringe and moved to administer the shot.

"Did I get him? Did I kill my father's murderer?" Then he passed out.

**15th Lyran Guard Regiment HQ, Ludwig Steiner Spaceport, Strona
Alcor, Federated Commonwealth (Lyran Alliance Space)
17 December 3062
1000 Hours**

The first real thing that Anthony could make out after the crash was voices. There were several of them, all male. Then more of his senses came to him and he realized that he was sitting in a chair. That was right before he felt the snug restraints keeping him seated. His arms and legs were strapped in but his head hung down in front as if he were asleep or unconscious. Not wanting to alert the other men in the room he kept his eyes shut and his movements very slight. So far he knew he was captured, strapped into some type of interrogation chair and presumed unconscious. His head was pounding with a massive headache, likely from the crash but he didn't dismiss the thought of chemicals used by his captors. His hearing detected a quick set of beeps coming from behind him.

"He's conscious," a lone voice said.

"You. You cared enough to disobey a direct order, so now I want you to wake him up." The second voice was harsh and cold. Anthony didn't like that guy at all.

He felt a hand on his shoulder gently pushing him against the back of the chair sitting him up straight. Anthony opened his eyes slowly, the painful white lights stabbed through his eyeballs into his brain making the headache even worse now. After a few seconds he was able to focus on the person before him and saw a middle-aged man dressed in a military jumpsuit. He bore an emblem of the Guards over his left breast pocket. The man took out a penlight and flashed it over Anthony's eyes checking his pupils. "You alright?" he asked softly. Anthony simply nodded in affirmative. The man hung his head forward for a second or two then stepped to the side revealing the remaining men in the room to Anthony. Anthony first spotted another man in a white lab coat. A doctor. Then he saw another man standing there in full dress uniform. Medals adorned the left and right side of his chest, epaulets with golden fringe lined his shoulders and piping bearing the colors of the Guards ran down the right side of his uniform. Anthony looked at the face of the man and saw a burning hatred in his eyes as they locked on to each other. At first the man terrified him, but then he came to realize who he really was, and that made him just as angry as the man looking back at him.

"Hmph, I guess I missed," Anthony said nonchalantly.

Kreiger crossed his arms slowly. "Me, yes. However, you killed one of my men and wounded another. I'd say that places you in a really bad spot now, son. Your pro-Davion movement will gain nothing from killing any of my men. Except my wraith that is."

"Pro-Davion? You're as blind as you are stupid." Anthony sat up straight and bent his head from side to side to crack his neck. He glanced at the restraints and realized that escaping the chair was not going to work unless they released him. Solid steel rings held his arms and legs in place against the chair, locked down with powerful electro-magnets.

"Really?" Kreiger added a touch of sweetness to his voice that could choke a mule. "Would care to explain your reasons for killing me then?"

As thoughts of his father popped into his head, Anthony clenched his teeth together and said, "Vengeance."

Kreiger threw his head back and belted out a single laugh, which only soured Anthony's mood further. "You are just a boy, what could you know about vengeance?"

Anthony spited Kreiger with an evil glare and started to open his mouth to speak when he overheard some rather loud voices in the hallway. Suddenly the door burst open and a stately dressed man entered followed by two heavily armed guards. Anthony surmised he was a high-ranking politician by the receding hairline and an increasing waistline.

"Governor. How nice to see you," Kreiger said under his breath.

The governor was beet red in the face and his motions betrayed his agitation. "Kommandant Kreiger, what is the meaning of this? First you keep me off the base for an hour when I specifically said I would meet with you and your staff at seven o'clock. Then you keep me waiting in your conference room for the past two hours while you conduct an interrogation of an alleged insurgent. I will not be kept waiting like some lackey soldier, I will speak with you now. Your image among the people is that of a savage bully after the Clemenza incident. Have you any idea of the dust you kicked up with that one? My office alone, has fielded hundreds, of...reports...." The Governor trailed off as he looked around the room at its other occupants and focused intently on the young boy strapped into an interrogation chair. He raised a finger towards the boy and looked right at Kreiger.

"What is this? Is this your version of an insurgent? A young boy?" The Governor's tone bordered on incredulous.

"This boy, *Governor*, " the word dripped from Kreiger's lips with disdain "is the sniper that killed my guard and wounded Hauptmann Gants all in an attempt to assassinate me."

“Rubbish. He wouldn’t know one end of a rifle from the other.” The Governor laughed in disbelief.

“No, I assure you he does know how to use a rifle. He also knows how to mix explosives and design pressure sensitive triggers.” He turned to look at Anthony. “My team found the device and disarmed it without incident.”

Anthony shrugged his shoulders the best he could with the restraints. “You realize I had to try.”

Kreiger nodded. “I would have succeeded.”

The Governor jumped in the conversation. “Is this true boy, did you come here to kill the Kommandant?”

“I came here to avenge my family. To right a wrong against us.” Anthony’s voice was as hard as steel.

Kreiger waved his hand dismissing the comments. “He is a Davion rebel. Nothing more.”

“Oh I am much more than that Kreiger. I am the son of the man you murdered. I am Anthony Clemenza, and you killed my father in cold blood.”

All eyes turned to look at Anthony at his announcement. Kreiger caught his surprise but not before Anthony saw the look of guilt in his eyes. “Is this true Kommandant?” the Governor roared and bits of spittle flew from his lips.

“If he is who he says he is then yes, his father was shot and killed by one of my guards protecting me after Mr. Clemenza became violent. Just as I stated for the press and just as I said in my report that I forwarded to your office and my higher command. That the boy would feel hatred and anger at the tragic loss of his father is justified. However that does not justify his actions against myself and my men this morning.” Kreiger kept his voice controlled and even as if he were reciting a speech he’d prepared for just such an occasion.

“Then how’d he get on a military controlled base Kommandant?” The Governor switched gears to a condescending tone.

“Governor, we invite snipers on to the base often”, Kreiger cooed. “I consider it a key to the training regimen of my MEN!” Kreiger stormed over to where Anthony was strapped to a chair and yanked his head back by his hair. “This is precisely why I need to finish off these mercenaries now, stop Gyro-Tech from conspiring with traitors and get off this rock before I get caught up in any more of this retched conspiracy. And YOU,” he thrust an accusatory finger at the Governor “want to talk to me about my public relations problems? After this mornings fiasco I should have your thrown off my base for being so audacious!”

“How dare you address me in such a tone of voice!” The Governor shook his fist at Kreiger.

Kreiger pressed the fingertips of his right hand to his chest. “How dare I? I command a regiment of the elite Lyran Guard. I can –“

“Not anymore,” the Governor interrupted.

Kreiger growled. “What did you say?”

“You said you command a *regiment* of the Lyran Guard. That would only be true if you had all your ‘Mechs in working order. According to your *reports*,” the Governors seemed thrilled at the use of Kreiger own words against him “you’re down six ‘Mechs. Lost in action I believe was the term. A seventh one was captured by the enemy and most likely restored to full battlefield capability. You only have a pair of reinforced companies now. I was a Hauptmann in the LCAF once, I know these things.”

Kreiger’s facial expression softened and he nodded his head. “You’re right we have incurred some losses of material. But there’s something you forgot about in your time in the LCAF.”

“And what might that be Kreiger?” The Governor placed his hands in his coat pocket for comfort.

Kreiger’s boots squeaked on the newly waxed floor as he stormed over and got right in the Governor’s face. Everyone, including Anthony winced as Kreiger launched into a verbal tirade, dressing down the Governor like some poor infantry Private.

“Proper chain of command! I am a Kommandant! A superior officer to your rank as Hauptmann! You do not presume to address me on issues of my ability to complete this mission! You do not think unless told to think by me! I make all your decisions and you will follow them! If you ever question my authority again I will make sure that the only way you return to your office, is in an urn! Now if you have nothing of value to add to this conversation, you can shut the hell up for the remainder of your time here or you can leave now!” Kreiger spun back around, marched over and stood in front of Anthony in silence.

Kreiger’s face was flushed red with anger, his arms crossed in front of him like he was trying to squeeze the life out of an imaginary person. Anthony tried to sit back against the chair like he was relaxing, but the beads of sweat forming on his forehead betrayed his fear. The doctor that was in the room had backed against the far wall, trying to escape through the ferrocrete. Rickels had remained motionless standing off to the side on Anthony. He was used to the violent outbursts of his commander and merely let the words flow around him instead of absorbing their weight like the rest of the room’s occupants. The only fear he felt was that he did not know what the Kommandant had planned next. If the boy was telling the truth, then Rickels was sure that Kreiger could just kill any of them in a moment. Just to be sure he flicked his eyes to the side of the Kommandant and silently thanked the stars that the Kommandant was without his sidearm right then.

“Doctor,” Kreiger began in a calm collected tone. “I will require your assistance. Rickels I would like you to locate a holorecorder and tripod and bring them in here.” Rickels departed the room in search of the items Kreiger requested and Kreiger and the doctor began to discuss something in whispered voices. The Governor stood motionless near the door; his face had drained in color after Kreiger’s outburst. The doctor and Kreiger concluded their discussion as Rickels return to the room, camera and tripod in tow.

Kreiger helped setup the unit across the room pointing at the side of Anthony in the chair. The doctored meanwhile had wheeled a metal cart up to the back of the chair and began to arrange some instruments. Anthony could hear glass clinking softly behind him, but couldn’t turn his head enough to see over the back of the chair. The doctor walked around the side of the chair and stabbed Anthony in the arm with a hypodermic needle pumping the contents into his body. A warm sensation passed up his arm and spread throughout his body. His head began to fog over and his vision blurred just slightly. It took a great deal of concentration to keep his head upright and it was making him tired just trying. He looked to the side where several visions of Kreiger danced before him

“That was a mild sedative to keep you from any unexpected outbursts. I can’t have you spoiling my plans right now young man. You’re going to play a big part in helping bring down those mercenaries and put an end to the riots that began with Victor’s call to arms against this nation state.” Kreiger smoothed the lines on his uniform and turned to face the camera. The red recording light glowed and Kreiger cleared his throat.

“Good evening citizens of Strona. I bring you a message of profound importance. By orders of the Archon Katrina Steiner-Davion, my unit and I were dispatched here to investigate a large gyroscope smuggling ring and arrest the leaders involved. When we landed here we found an uncooperative owner of Gyro-Tech, and his hired mercenary guns to prevent us from performing our assigned task. Since the landing we have fought two engagements against the mercenaries and have had to deal with citizens caught up in a disinformation campaign started by the same mercenaries. Their progress had been marked by the unfortunate death of one innocent civilian corrupted by this campaign.”

“At six o’clock local time this morning this base came under sniper fire. We’ve had one fatality and another injury. Upon capturing the sniper we were able to find out through interrogation that his actual target was myself. The sniper was paid by someone in the employ of these rouge mercenaries to assassinate me and force a change of command on my unit. It has also been said that this was an attempt at having the Archon pull my unit off planet without a successful completion of our mission. To those that wished this as a result of my death, I say to you: ‘We will not rest until this matter is resolved’.”

“It is with a heavy heart that I must now take drastic steps to bring an end to this conflict as peacefully and as quietly as possible.” He lowered his head slightly and glared at the lens. “As of right now I am instituting martial law. A citywide curfew will take effect at eight o’clock tonight. All lawful citizens will remain indoors from eight until dawn. Anyone caught out of their homes, unless in extreme emergencies, will be arrested and charged with servile insurrection. They will likewise be held incarcerated for the duration of our mission.”

“Finally, it is with much reservation that I must fulfill my duty to my Archon. Any attack on the Archon’s men, is the same as an attack on the Archon herself. Let this be a lesson to all those who wish to oppose her rightful rule.” Rickels zoomed the view in so that cut out most of Anthony from the shot and pinned Kreiger in the center. Kreiger pulled his hands out from behind his back revealing a silver-plated slug-thrower handgun. He raised the gun up in a dueling stance, thumbing back the hammer in a single motion. He turned to face Anthony in the chair. Rickels kept everything focused solely on Kreiger for this part of the recording. “By the power vested in me by the Archon Katrina Seiner-Davion, I sentence you to death for the murder of Comm Tech Jerner, the attempted murder of Hauptmann Gants, and the attempted assassination of myself, Kommandant Kreiger.”

As the last syllable rolled off his lips, Kreiger leveled the gun at Anthony, and fired a single round. From the view of the camera all it caught was the jerk of his legs. Kreiger turned back around to face the camera one last time. "This concludes our object lesson for today. Remember, that I am enforcing a curfew tonight at eight o'clock. I would hate to see protestors caught outside during any military operations." Rickels held up his hand signaling the end of the recording as the red light dimmed on the front of the camera.

Kreiger placed the handgun on the tabletop and started to walk out of the room. He stopped in front of the Governor and shot him a disgusted look. He turned back to look at Rickels and motioned with his head at Anthony, "Take care of that. I have an assault to plan."

**15th Lyran Guard Regiment HQ, Ludwig Steiner Spaceport, Strona
Alcor, Federated Commonwealth (Lyran Alliance Space)
19 Dec 3062
1158 Hours**

"Are you sure this is going to work?"

Morrison was startled out of his thought process by Coleman's question. It took a half second to realize he'd tight-beamed it to keep with the strict radio silence Morrison ordered. The Misfits had been creeping up on the spaceport for the past several hours. This raid on the 15th's base of operations was well planned. Now if they could just get in and out without too much fanfare.

"Of course this will work," Morrison replied. "We know their 'Mechs just left this morning for Strona. They can't be more than a hundred kilometers off according to our last fly-over, so once we hit the base they're going to turn right around and come back for us. We've already bloodied their nose. Now we're going to kick'em in the groin."

Coleman persisted. "There are a few rules of life that I try to live by. Never smack a bear in the face; never play cards with a man named Doc; never assault a spaceport under the control of a Lyran Guard unit!" Despite the electronic filters, Coleman sounded exasperated over the comm.

"That last part sounds made up," Morrison replied then sighed low enough to prevent the voice-activated mic from picking it up. Coleman had been nothing but a pain in the rear end ever since the 15th landed. He had significantly less backbone than most mercenaries Morrison knew. Even with the odds stacked against them like this, things weren't nearly as bad as they could be.

"Look *Major*," Morrison stressed the rank to forestall any further outbursts from his Company commander. "Being unpredictable has kept us all alive up to this point. The 15th is designed for a standup fight, not all this hit-and-fade stuff. This raid is to teach them that they really have no solid hold here. If it goes off like I'm hoping it will, they're going to really be hurting when we're through and they'll have to leave. Now button up and prepare to deploy. It's time."

"Time for what?" asked Sanderson.

"Time for lunch. We've been up here all morning so I thought your stomach would be empty by now. It's been quiet so I'm gonna go grab us something at the mess hall and be right back. What do you want?"

Sanderson leaned back against the railing keeping him from falling out of the guard tower and down the fifteen meters to the ground. With a few pops from his spine and a quick sigh of relief, Sanderson turned to look out at the view. Despite being assigned guard duty for the day, the view over the area from up here was amazing. He could see all the way from the north corner of the spaceport to the east corner and down to the south corner, even if he did need binoculars to make out anything that far away. Outside the port was green as far as the eye could see. Flat plains, trees and small rolling hills dotted the landscape. To the west a hawk coasted on a warm air current that rustled the leaves of distant trees. He paused for a double take of those trees, as something seemed to rise up from within them. Something fast, riding on contrails of white smoke rose up into the air and the increasing roar meant they were heading towards the port. Sanderson took a half a heartbeat to react before shoving his friend down the ladder. "I want you to get outta my way, we've got missiles incoming!"

Descending the ladder as fast as possible, they only made it down one landing when twenty long-range missiles struck the octagonal shaped guardhouse tower. A giant fireball blossomed against the ferrocrete face blasting chunks out of the wall and collapsing the hut in a cloud of smoke and dust. The force of the blast was not fully spent on the top of the tower as the support legs of the structure bent and buckled under the strain. In just over ten seconds since the first missile impacted the tower, it began to topple over quickly to the ground. Unable to jump to safety the guards rode out the fall.

All along the north and west side of the spaceport, more guard towers were beset and destroyed. Missiles decapitated them while lasers cut through supports, sending each one crashing to the ground. The 'Mechs of Delta Company stormed over the chain link fencing on the north side of the spaceport and headed right for the warehouses north of the number three landing pad. Baker Company breached the west side and headed for their designated warehouse targets. Morrison positioned his Command Lance at the north-west corner and began to coordinate the raid.

"Punisher Lance commence your run on munitions. Slasher Lance target armor supplies. Ambush Lance I want you to find anything military and trash it. Recon Lance find any units of the 15th and coordinate with Stalker to hold them off. Striker Lance, you're my backup. Just plant yourselves in the middle and ready-op fire support." Each lance commander radioed back their own confirmations and moved their teams into position.

Punisher Lance stalked down one side of a double-row of single story metal buildings, until they came upon one marked with the crest of the 15th Lyran Guard. A man attacked by two lions served as a beacon for Captain Kevin Lander while he strutted his *Warhammer* across the grounds. He sighted the building with his cross hairs and triggered a double blast from his arm mounted ER PPCs. The cerulean beams tore into the thin metal structure, melting the walls and support beams. The rippling energy of the blast touched off the propellant contained in the Streak Missiles stored in the building. The resulting explosion carved a large hole in the ground and completely erased anything within fifty yards. The next building down was actually built within twenty yards, and housed another storage of Streak Missiles just like the third building. The fourth didn't have any missiles in it. It carried autocannon rounds instead. And so on it went for ten buildings in all, each one dying in a red-hot flash and ensuing mushroom cloud overhead. Kevin cackled loudly as he toggled for wideband comms. "Someone send me some Lyran weenies. I've got the barbeque already for'em!"

Morrison could see the explosions over the near kilometer distance followed by the distant thunder rolling across the spaceport. If nothing else, that was sure to get someone's attention.

Ambush Lance was using their jump-capable 'Mechs to float from rooftop to rooftop in search of anything marked military. The buildings were designated for the other lances, so they were getting everything else. They had already torched half a dozen jeeps and tore apart a radio antennae tower. Since all the 'Mechs of the 15th appeared to have left the spaceport, it gave the Misfits the freedom to go wherever they wanted to for the moment. Captain Jing Li pointed the right arm medium laser of her *Shadow Hawk* at a large building to the south. "Looky looky guys. I'll bet there's plenty military in that 'Mech hanger," she called over her private lance channel. The four 'Mechs rocketed towards the 'Mech hanger together.

Slasher Lance was having an easy time turning stockpiles of armor plating into molten slag with their multitude of energy weapons. Major Coleman would bash down the large doors to the warehouses using the barrel-shaped arms of his *Orion*. Then the *Marauder*, *Flashman*, or *Black Knight* 'Mechs would aim through the opening and unleash a barrage of weapons fire. Pools of melted armor plating would spill out through erratic holes punched in the walls, or oozed out the front door. Coleman hated destroying all this material that could be looted instead but he didn't run the unit. And that small fact fueled his anger as he smashed in door after door.

Further to the south Recon Lance was running a game of hide-and-seek with each other as they darted in and around the two- and three-story buildings. Captain Tushio Sakai was using his two jump-capable 'Mechs as lookouts from the roof tops since his *Raven* was permanently ground bound. The Captain stopped at a four-way intersection to watch Lieutenant Fred Hanser vault his humanoid *Javelin* diagonally overhead to the next rooftop. Several buildings to the east of his position Sergeant Troy Vassik jumped across an intersection in his *Jenner* while Lieutenant David Drake cut left at the corner with his Clan *Puma*. A few random blips showed up on his 'Mech's scanners but they could just as easily be phantom readings. In a place filled with buildings and large metal structures, a contact could just be the radar signal bouncing off just about anything. But when a single contact clicked on steadily, he stopped and adjusted the gain on the Beagle Active Probe. This time it was no radar shadow, something was definitely there. "Recon Lead to Recon Lance. Contact bearing one-five-two, distance five hundred meters. Move to investigate but consider contact to be hostile." The bird-like Raven pivoted left on one foot and marched off to find out whom they just woke up.

Morrison watched the digital chronometer on his Heads Up Display wind down the time on the mission. Only ten minutes into the thirty-minute mission and they'd already destroyed enough munitions, armor and supplies that the 15th would be feeling the hurt real bad if they tangled in full force any time soon. He knew once Kreiger got here to assess the damage he'd be more reluctant to just send his troops out without considering what would happen if they were damaged. Or lost in combat. At twelve minutes his recon flight radioed in that the 15th had turned around and were headed right back to the spaceport just as they figured they would. Kreiger was looking for the Misfits but this time they showed up were they knew Kreiger wouldn't be. Right after that report came Recon Lance's report of a contact near the southeast corner of the spaceport. They were quite a distance away from Morrison and buried well in the back of the port. Morrison didn't feel like having his troops cut off so he ordered Major Kaplan to close support with Stalker Lance and moved Striker Lance's missile support 'Mechs further into the complex. All the while he and Fujimowa were blasting military jeeps and transport trucks into

blackened hulks whenever they drove by bracketing him with small-arms fire. The quiet ones they let go but there were few of those.

Stalker Lance was pushing hard to catch up with Recon. The Light Class 'Mechs of Recon Lance were much faster in the tight quarters of the warehouses but lacked in the firepower that Stalker more than made up for. But just to be safe Major Kaplan sent Lieutenant Stephanie Boze on ahead in her jump-capable *Wrath* to catch up with the other Misfit lance. The last thing he wanted was the troops in his command trapped behind enemy lines, especially in this urban environment. His guts twisted into a tight knot when calls of panic streamed over the comms.

"Tanks! Armor vehicles are loose on the grounds..."

"Stoopid sonofa sassanach ... Two look out!"

"All units this is Recon Lead. We are heavily engaged south-east corner."

"Boss you'd better move!"

"We need backup like now! That's a damn *Behemoth* Tank!"

Kaplan pushed his 'Mech to top speed and urged on the other two members of his lance. He needed to get there and lend a hand. They were only a few hundred meters away when a Typhoon Urban Assault Vehicle pulled out from a cross street and stopped directly in the path of the three charging 'Mechs. The six-wheeled 70-ton vehicle mounted a single hundred twenty-millimeter large bore autocannon in the upper turret as the main weapon as well as pulse lasers and short-range missile racks. Kaplan shouted a warning to the men behind him and lit off his jets to sail up and over the vehicle. Passing overhead he lashed out with his four medium lasers scoring dark lines across the tough hide of the UAV. Right behind Kaplan was Lieutenant Jessup Raines lumbering along in his *Bushwacker*. Not one to go toe-to-toe against the largest autocannon ever made and without jump jets his only option was to cut down a cross street. At the first opening on the left he whispered a silent prayer and wrenched the controls sticks to the left. Moving at close to 70kph across smoothed ferrocrete the *Bushwacker's* diamond-rough treads slipped in a shower of sparks and sent the 55-ton 'Mech into a sprawling slide down the street.

The speed at which the 'Mech fell lessened only by a fraction by the time it slammed into the UAV fifty meters away. The crunch of metal on metal was sickening, only to be outdone but the screeching tires as they slide sideways down the corridor of warehouses. When the pair came to rest the *Bushwacker* had up-ended the vehicle over on its side and was laying prone over it compressing it slowly under its weight. Sergeant Cain Lorus arrived seconds later and helped up his friend with the built-in hands of his *Hunchback*.

"Raines? Raines, you alright in there?" Lorus called over the comms.

His reply was no less heard than felt over the radio waves. "Ow."

"Great slide man. Say, you ever think about trying out for baseball?" Lorus quipped.

The two laughed lightly as the both laid a good kick into the underside of the UAV destroying the main drive shaft before running along to catch up with the rest of Stalker and Recon Lance.

Recon Lance was caught up in a serious fight. They had stumbled upon several lances of heavy vehicles exiting a hanger. They had tried to bring down the hanger, but their light weapon compliment only allowed more vehicles to turn and track them in the process. A single *Behemoth* Heavy Tank anchored itself between the Misfits and its escaping comrades. The *Behemoth* was a 100-ton monster bearing dual AC/10s, long- and short-range missile racks, and machine guns. It was more than enough to keep Recon Lance at bay and even drive them off.

Fred had spotted the vehicles first and drilled a pair of medium lasers into the side of a *Drillson* Hover Tank that was just exiting the building. The tank turret swung around quick and snapped a shot off with its Large Laser missing the head of the *Javelin* 'Mech by inches just as Troy called out the initial warning. The *Drillson* continued on its path escaping between a pair of buildings just as Sakai ran his *Raven* into the open area next to the hanger as more vehicles continued to spill out. Fred and Troy targeted several support beams of the hanger with their medium lasers in an attempt to bring down the house around the remaining vehicles inside but the structure withstood the assault easily. Sakai called in the situation over the command channel and toggled everything save his Narc launcher into the main trigger. A *Condor* Hover Tank jetted from the hanger doors throwing up a huge dust storm in the process. Sakai quickly floated the targeting reticule over the body of the tank and mashed down on the trigger as it burned gold for a solid lock. A pair of ruby beams carved over the body and down onto the air-filled skirt. Following close behind was six short-range missiles that blasted away armor in the same location and tore a gapping hole in the skirt of the hovercraft. No longer riding on a cushion of air the *Condor* dipped wildly to the right and

caught the front right side along the ground. The force of the impact spun the craft into a lazy cartwheel and it smashed longways into the nearest building. A red and yellow fireball blossomed out the entrance hole and the rest of the building folded in on itself.

His time to appreciate the kill was short-lived as a 100-ton *Behemoth* rounded the exit of the hanger and fired both AC/10s in his direction. The first of two rounds turned his chest armor into a mere memory. The second ripped past his right side, through the front of a building and exiting out the side. He began to back peddle out of the way while calls for support poured from his lance mates. Troy's *Jenner* was perched on the rooftop to his right while Fred's *Javelin* was on top of the building to his left. Both 'Mechs lashed out with their medium lasers scouring armor off the tank but doing little more than cosmetic damage on the thick hide. Sakai hit the secondary trigger for his last weapon, and launched a single missile straight at the tank. The rocket motor burned harder than a standard one pushing the missile at twice the speed. As it neared the target the cone shaped warhead split evenly into six jagged spikes designed to dig deep into the armor as it impacted on the left side of the turret. The rocket and fin section detached under the impact revealing a red, glowing beacon sticking out from the base of the tube.

"Recon Lead to Striker Lance! Have engaged Narc! Request single salvo!" he called over the comms. He stopped moving backward and cut right down a side street while Drake moved his Clan *Puma* up to cover his commander with his dual ER PPCs. Several hundred meters away Striker Lance halted their advance to pick up on the Narc Beacon's telemetry. Captain Sarah Pickett's *Archer* picked up the signal first, followed by Lieutenant Russell Miravoska's *Avatar* and then Sergeant Jeremy Volksfram *Bombardier*. All three 'Mechs arched back and ripped off a full salvo of missiles each into the air. Four and a half score missiles sailed into the air and locked on to the Narc's homing signal and adjusted their flight accordingly. "Missiles inbound!" Sarah reported.

Drake watched as the *Behemoth* continued to track the *Raven's* exit from the scene. Not wanting to destroy or damage the Narc Beacon, he aimed low on the vehicle and fired just one of his ER PPCs. The man-made lightning tracked low and slammed into the metal treads melting them instantly to the rollers, effectively locking the tank in place. In a cruel twist of fate the missiles rained down less than five seconds later. A small number missed, hitting the ground or the sides of the nearby buildings but most hit the intended target. The tank disappeared from Drake's view and the view of his lance mates atop the buildings in a hell storm of fire, smoke and flying shrapnel. Fred and Troy both jetted from their perch back to assist Sakai in his withdraw. When the smoke cleared, all Drake could see was the blackened hulk of the *Behemoth*, fires burning where armor was blasted clear or hatches that had been popped open from internal explosions. He savored the scene for a second and then backed away before more vehicles could be brought around.

Morrison called back his teams with one-minute remaining for the mission. Overall the raid was a big success. Captain Lendar reported a "best guess" at several hundred tons in destroyed munitions. Major Coleman, despite his apparent disapproval of the result, reported similar numbers of armor and equipment trashed. Captain Li's lance managed to level to the ground a ten-rack 'Mech Hanger building by detonating a resupply truck that had taken shelter inside of it. Recon Lance had run across some vehicles during their sweep of the grounds, undoubtedly from the 816th Lyran Panzer Regiment that Kreiger brought with him. Morrison was mildly shocked when Captain Sakai reported his run-in with the 100-ton *Behemoth* Heavy Tank, the surprise being the Sakai's 'Mech was still intact. The destruction of a *Condor* Hover Tank and the *Typhoon* UAV along with a pair of *Drillsons* that turned right into the path of Punisher Lance would cause Kreiger more grief but it was far below the number of kills Morrison had hoped for. Striker and Stalker Lance were still trading long-range shots with some vehicles who's crews felt were brave enough to try and take a bite out of the mercenaries. Most scurried back under cover with broken and disabled weapon systems.

As the last Misfit 'Mechs passed his position Morrison looked out over the spaceport. Black smoke drifted lazily in the gentle breezes. Fire-fighting crews rushed around trying to contain the blazes from spreading to other buildings. It didn't seem right to walk in there and just destroy the supplies instead of looting them but Morrison wanted to put the squeeze on the 15th. By not taking the supplies he hoped it would fool Kreiger into thinking the Misfits had more staying power. He knew Kreiger was prone to violent outbursts and unpredictable knee-jerk reactions, but this had to be done. He had to make their hold on the planet weaker so that he could eventually push them out. Morrison chuckled to himself at the thought that *he* could push out a Lyran *Guard* unit. But he knew it would happen. Now sooner than later.

**15th Lyran Guard Regiment HQ, Ludwig Steiner Spaceport, Strona
Alcor, Federated Commonwealth (Lyran Alliance Space)
20 Dec 3062
0400 Hours**

Kreiger sipped the hot coffee slowly as he scanned over the damage reports that were still pouring in to his office. He'd already burnt the feeling from his tongue and was now trying to be more cautious. His anger over the mercenaries attack wasn't helping. The office clerk had just dropped off a new batch of datadisks for the past hour. Things had been steadily going downhill since he'd aborted the raid when the Misfits showed up.

Kreiger placed his mug back on the desk and popped the top disk into the noteputer drive. The machine scanned the media and brought up the files automatically. A heavy sigh escaped as he read through the first sections of the equipment losses. Several thousand tons of munitions destroyed, not to mention the collateral damage the explosions caused to the buildings they were stored in. Armor replacement stocks were reduced by more than half. One of the larger 'Mech hangers was completely destroyed. There had been some loss of life but it was mostly technicians and ground crews. His support regiment of vehicles had scrambled to meet the mercenary threat, however, their arrival seemed to signal an end to the raid rather than have driven off the mercenaries. There had been plenty more havoc to wreak. Several fires had broken out from the fighting but the spaceport firecrews had most of them under control by this time.

The spaceport administrator wasn't happy that combat had come to his neck of the woods but since the mercenaries kept their targets strictly 'military', the loss of several warehouses was negligent to the level of destruction that could have been caused. He had withdrawn his complaint when Kreiger reminded him of that fact. Plus he had to maintain his unit's presence here to keep the number of players involved in this fight to an acceptable level. But after this raid even if someone didn't come to the mercenaries' aid, he might not have the materials to win this fight. Not with acceptable losses anyway.

A knock at the door and it opened to let Hauptmann Gants enter the room without waiting for Kreiger's invite.

"Kommandant I think you'll want to see this." Hauptmann Gants handed the data disk to Kreiger who took it with a mixed look of confusion and frustration. "What's this?" he asked with a huff.

"It's a unit readiness report I had pulled by one of General Nondi Steiner's staff. It shows the next closest units are two to three jumps away from the Alcor system. The 15th Arcturan Guards are on Thorin fighting the local militia. The 1st Sky Jaegers are fully deployed on their bases across Skye. The 36th Lyran and the rest of our 15th are on Hesperus II. As for mercenaries, the Legion is sitting tight on Glengarry and Galatea is about to explode with all the tension brewing after Victor's call for war. At best any unit is three weeks from anywhere to here."

Kreiger's eyes nearly popped from his head as crimson flooded his face. "What!?!!" he asked incredulously. "That means no one is coming to help the Misfits! It had to be a bluff, their answered calls for help. A well orchestrated lie. I was deceived by a worthless bunch of green-back soldiers!" Kreiger launched himself out of his chair with such momentum that the chair sailed backwards and slammed loudly into the wall. With both hands he swept the contents of the desktop to the floor, dumping paperwork, plastic bins, pens, a noteputer, and his favorite coffee mug in a tangled heap. He tried to up-end the desk but was soundly defeated by the metal brackets holding it to the floor. Gants had retreated several steps back from the desk to avoid being hit by anything the Kommandant might get his hands on. Hauptmanns Harris and Kriston had bolted in the room to see what all the racket was about and stood there open-mouthed to witness their Commanding Officer's tantrum. Although Gants had told them of the news in secret, none of them had expected this level of reaction from Kreiger. It was a fine line between scary and ugly.

"I want him dead! I want his family dead! I want his unit burnt to the ground!" Kreiger rested his clenched hands, knuckles-down on the hardwood desktop. He stared at his three company commanders with a burning hatred in his eyes that would consume them given half a chance. His chest moved in and out, his lungs taking in large amounts of air. His breathing slowed showing that he'd regained his composure.

"Ok, here's what's going to happen. Launch all fighters on recon. If those bastards aren't back in the city I want to know EXACTLY where they are. Load up everything. 'Mechs, vehicles, troops, supplies, everything. I want everyone ready to roll in three hours." His company commanders stood still, not wanting to move in hopes they might get Kreiger to calm down and rationalize this out. It wasn't going to happen. "Why are you three still here?" he growled. Kriston grabbed for the door and stopped as Kreiger began to speak again. "Oh and one more thing. Have them unrack my 'Mech from the *Stahlhammer*. I'm going with you this time to see that its finished."

"The DropShip? Y-you're going with us, sir?" Gants stammered. It was a rare thing to find a Kommandant leading his troops into battle. The highest ranking combat office was normally a Hauptmann. Kreiger visible bristled at the question.

"Is there a problem with your orders, *Hauptmann*?" Kreiger stressed the rank to show his displeasure.

"N-no sir." Gants saluted and turned to leave the room, the other two following close on his heels. Harris sprinted down the hall, the newly promoted Hauptmann having much to do and little time to screw it up in. Gants and Kriston simply walked away and headed for the comms center to call in their lance commanders to get the ball rolling. For several minutes they walked along in silence.

"Kreiger's going out there with us. You know what that means?" asked Harris.

Gants sighed before replying, "Yeah, the mercenaries are going to kill him."

Troper Plains, West of Salsburg
Alcor, Federated Commonwealth (Lyran Alliance Space)
21 Dec 3062
0500 Hours

The Misfits had been on the move for the better part of the past thirty-six hours. Stopping only briefly at times, they kept moving to get as far from the spaceport as possible. The farther the distance the less likely a chance encounter with the 15th became. It was about two o'clock in the morning when Morrison decided to call a halt and set up camp to get some rest and some food into everyone.

After drawing lots to see who would take the hour-long guard shifts, all the other 'Mechs were locked down in low power mode and the men and women settled in around some campfires for warmth and food. As Morrison walked through the makeshift camp he could see members of every lance conversing with others and generally having a good time. Spirits were high after the raid on the 15th's supplies and the comradery was a big morale boost to the unit as a whole. Some of the men had made their own instruments from wood and cooking pots and were holding an impromptu dance around one of the large fires. Morrison watched as Lieutenant Drake and Captain Li performed some odd-looking dance spinning around each other, arms locked together. For the briefest of moments he thought it was a rather improper display of fraternization but just as quickly dismissed it. After all the cat-and-mouse games, the combat, the hours upon hours cramped in the cockpits his troops deserved this much-needed break. Besides, they were kilometers away from anything and he had patrols going just in case. Morrison slowly spun in place looking around the camp.

Kevin and Mike had just finished eating and had taken it upon themselves to head away from the festivities. Kevin had told Mike he wanted to talk to him in private so they took a walk over to where they parked their 'Mechs. Kevin grabbed a seat on the giant metal foot of his *Warhammer* and pulled out two small plastic bags with a tiny amount of white powder in them. Mike immediately focused all his attention on the substance.

"Is that—" he began.

"Moondust? Yup. I scored two hits worth last time we were in town. I figured with all the celebrating going on no one would miss us for a few hours." Kevin's grin widened as he worked the airtight seal of the bag.

"Kev, man. I dunno. I mean we're still out in the field and all. I'd hate like hell for something to go wrong or to get on a bad trip, or something. Let's wait till we get back. This way we know it's ok." Kevin paused to listen to Mike's protests.

"Look. You saw the kind of damage we did to those Lyran suck-eggs. Right now I bet their CO is either passed-out drunk in some bar or crying in his office. Nothing is going to happen now. We're in the clear, so shut up and let's have some fun." Kevin handed the second bag to Mike who took it somewhat reluctantly. As Kevin inhaled some of the powder, Mike stood up from his seat and put the bag in his vest pocket.

"Y'know Kev, I just don't feel right about this. Not now. So I'm just gonna save this and I'll catch up with you later." Mike turned and walked briskly back to the main gathering of the Misfits. Kevin watched him walk away and then shrugged to no one in particular and finished off his bag.

Morrison watched as Mike returned from the shadows and quickly take a seat near one of the fires. He turned away from the party to head towards his fire and bumped into Terry from Delta Company. Terry saluted Morrison with a smoking turkey leg, a gift from a local farmer that had come out to bring food to the mercenaries. Morrison smiled and clapped the man on the shoulder as he passed by. He continued walking over to the fire where his company commanders sat, hungrily devouring their own dinners. Morrison glanced at his wrist chronometer and thought, *Should be breakfast actually.*

George handed a plate stocked with corn, two legs of turkey and some bread to Morrison as he straddled a log for his seat. Morrison grabbed the first leg of meat at the top of his plate and ripped a mouthful of crunchy, salty skin and juicy meat from the bone. Part of the juices dribbled down his chin but he paid it no mind. The meat was really, really good. It was a welcome change from the rations they been eating the past week before and after the raid. Morrison had just taken another bit when Coleman interrupted the silence.

"So, what's our next move here chief?" he asked with a hint of sarcasm in his voice. If Morrison noticed it he failed to show it. The tasty meat was enough of a distraction right now to suit him just fine. He chewed the mouthful slowly and then swallowed it before answering him back.

“Well, the 15th is going to have to make some hard decisions about what they want to do next. Without those stockpiles of supplies they can’t hold out here indefinitely. Plus we’ve proven to be more than a match for their prowess so a straight slugging match has to be out of the question. We’d just beat each other into the ground and I feel that Kreiger would like a decisive victory here. Something to show off to the brass. I think this is going to wind down to a bunch of low-intensity skirmishes until they just give up trying to move us.” As Morrison reasoned out his thoughts he could see Coleman was becoming agitated. It was no secret to anyone in the unit that the two didn’t see eye to eye, and Morrison had wondered if that lack of committal on Coleman’s part was hurting the unit. It wasn’t anything Morrison saw in the performance of his troops but they could just be putting on a show for their commanding officer. He decided now was as good a time as any to get their differences worked out.

“You disagree Coleman?” he asked in a more accusatory tone than he meant to use.

His response was curt. “Whatever you think. I really have nothing to say to you Morrison.”

Morrison put down his plate. “What’s your problem Coleman?”

“I don’t like you, you don’t like me. You give the orders and I follow them. Let’s just leave it at that instead of all this insight junk about how you and I should interact.” And with that, Coleman stormed off into the darkness leaving Morrison and George confused as ever.

Morrison tossed aside Coleman’s comments and went back to eating again. If the man wasn’t going to get with the program then he’d just have to replace him once this mission was over. He couldn’t have this much conflict with a company commander. That just spelled disaster with a capital ‘D’. Morrison slowly chewed another mouthful of meat when someone crossed his line of vision. The first thing he noticed was the long flowing blonde hair. Then it was the coolant vest, unzipped overtop a dirt-smudged white t-shirt. She continued to walk past, tossing her hair back over her shoulder, a hint of a smile across her face.

“Morrison, your pants are on fire, “ George said in a low monotone voice.

“Hmm. That’s nice.” The swaying of her hips was hypnotic enough that he completely missed what George had said. Morrison bent over to take another bit of food while he watched her walking away only then realizing what George had said to him.

“Ha. Ha. Funny George.” Morrison shook his head at George and torn another piece of meat from the bone.

“Hey, don’t blame me. That was all you my friend. Why don’t you go over and talk to her while we have this down time.” George nudged Morrison with his elbow.

“George there’s really nothing there. Honest.” he lied.

“Uh-huh. Sure. You may be the commander of a military unit but you’re also human. Don’t forget that. Not everything you do has rules and regulations to abide by.” George knew that the pain of military life could be unbearable if you didn’t sever yourself from emotions. But all you got then was a mindless drone. A killing machine with no way to stop or slow it down. George saw that horrible aspect in the Clans during his time in the 2nd Davion Guards. It was something he could certainly live without seeing again. Especially in his friend and commanding officer. A quiet moment passed between the two as Morrison mulled over George’s words.

“Do you really think that something could come from this?” he asked.

“That’s up to you and her to find out.” George said matter-of-factly.

Morrison guffawed and looked up at the stars moving across the sky and the hue of sunlight coming up over the horizon. Wait a second. Stars don’t *move*. His thought process was derailed when he realized he missed what George had just said. “I’m sorry what was that?”

“I was just reminded of something I once heard when I was young.” George shifted a log in the fire with the heel of his boot. The ash and embers floated up into the light night wind like little beacons.

Morrison thought back to his youth, a time when things were much simpler. When you knew who your enemies and your friends really were. He shook off the trip down memory lane. “And what’s that?”

“That it’s always darkest before dawn.”

A shout erupted from the other side of the campsite breaking their quiet reflection. Then Morrison heard it again. Someone was calling his name. “Morrison!! Colonel!” Fred Hanser from Baker Company came running, vaulting over people that didn’t move quickly enough out of his way. “We just picked up ‘Mechs inbound. Looks like the 15th has mounted an assault!”

Morrison stood abruptly, his plate spilling onto the ground. “How many ‘Mechs are coming in?” Morrison asked quickly.

“Looks like all of them.” Fred shouted back before turning to run for his 'Mech.

Morrison wasn’t sure if he said it out loud or just thought it. Either way he really wished that something else came out instead. Something witty, something awe inspiring. Something that would make the troops shout with a fiery anger that would drive them to victory. Anything but what first came out of his mouth.

“Oh crap.”