

## **Marion's Misfits**

“The Old Army Game” (Chapter 7)

Slade Geance

### ***Skyeward Plains***

***Alcor, Federated Commonwealth (Lyrans Alliance Space)***

***22 Dec 3062***

***1000 Hours***

Yesterday when the two Misfit 'Mech companies brought themselves back from battle, Morrison had dispatched the Misfits' newly renamed Kampfgruppe Company as a stopping force for any Lyrans 'Mechs that might try to pursue and attack them. Up till this point Kampfgruppe Company had set up camp in the Black Woods, west of Strona. Placed there mainly as a early warning in case the Lyrans tried a wide-flanking run into Strona, they had yet to see any combat except for the two air flights. Today was a welcome change of scenery in many ways. Not only were they out of the woods, but also now they got a chance to prove their worth to their employer.

During the night Kampfgruppe Company's ground units had dug defilades into the hillsides to reduce the exposure to the devastating firepower of any Lyrans 'Mechs they would encounter. It was widely known that a 'Mech could defeat a tank without taking much damage, but groups of vehicles were not something to be taken lightly. A well-placed shot to the cockpit doesn't really care where it came from. Kampfgruppe Company had a full lance of armored vehicles and two flights of aerospace fighters. Three *Patton* tanks were dug into the hillside about two hundred meters apart each. Between each and back about fifty meters was a pair of Challenger X Main Battle Tanks. The enormous reach of their Gauss Rifles had determined their placement. In a grove of trees to the west of the hillside about two hundred fifty meters lying in wait were a pair of LRM Carriers. To the east was a single Schrek PPC Carrier, which was the command vehicle for the Company. The Pack Hunters aerospace fighters were aloft, all circling near Strona flying high looking to spot any movements. Senior Airman Lawrence “Raptor” Pickering had taken the southern flight path simply because it seemed the most logical of places for the Lyrans to come up through. Flying mostly on instinct so that all of the systems that would betray his presence could be shut off, Raptor scanned the ground using both his eyes and a built-in gun camera currently trained downward. It wasn't long before his stealthiness paid off.

“Gruppe Lead this is Hunter Alpha. Eight Bravo Mikes sighted coming out of the forest due south of Checkpoint Sierra, heading zero-zero-zero. Estimate max range in five minutes. Pack Hunters regroup at rally point and prepare for close air support.” Raptor was hoping that tonight he'd get a chance to paint another 'Mech beneath the canopy of his fighter. But if the plan went as they'd hoped, he'd have to wait for another chance. He banked his fighter north towards his designated rally point.

Down on the ground the Misfit tankers were buttoning up their vehicles and loaders were prepping their guns for action. Gunners turned all their tracking equipment off and switched their sights to manual.

Hauptmann Kriston was leading the 15th's 'C' Company in pursuit of the wounded Misfits. Delegated with the task of shadowing the mercenaries back to their base, the two lances of Lyran 'Mechs were there simply to setup the rest of the battalion for a final decisive battle to destroy the mercenaries once and for all. Normally, 'C' Company would have three lances, but the first one was destroyed seventeen days ago in a mercenary ambush. Had they suspected the mercenaries would have rearguard units in place, they might have detoured around that area to prevent a repeat performance.

Hauptmann Kriston had completely missed the fact that they had now wandered into the same place the first lance was lost. Stomping his *Caesar* 'Mech at the head of a column of eight 'Mechs out from the Lexicon Forest, he was focused solely on his current mission. That cost him several seconds of reaction time when his MAD gear started picking up contacts hidden in the rolling hills ahead. He adjusted his sensors to get a better reading but wasn't rewarded with much. *At this range, he thought, 'Mechs would've fired at me. Intel reported these mercs had tanks, so this has to be them.*

"Lance Three break right and engage. Lance Two on me and push forward hard. Break their ranks and crush them." His HUD started to identify the targets as possible ground vehicles and his troops began to move into combat positions. He had no doubts that this would be quick and painless for his troops. He would be proven wrong.

The Lyran troops opened fire at a good 500m from their targets. Lasers, cannon shells, and missiles tore through the air and obliterated the face of the hillside. Dirt, rock, and other debris choked the air around the hills. Trees erupted in flame or simply exploded from the heat of lasers. From the distance they could see smaller fountains of flame spew into the air followed by thick black smoke that nearly blocked their view of the hills. Kriston chuckled lightly at killing the mercenaries before they could even fire on him. He toggled for his command channel.

"Lances form on me and let's go inspect our kills."

Captain Larry Fontana, the commander of the Schrek PPC Carrier, watched the display with a sober look on his face. This was crunch time, so there was no use for emotions here. He pulled the boom mic over to his mouth, "Kampfgruppe Command to Panther Group and Tiger Group. Targets have taken the bait. Engage on my command. Panther Group target the *Caesar* as the command 'Mech."

Behind the hill and the buried, burning drums of crude oil were three Patton tanks now covered in dirt and rock. Their main guns still pointed towards the approaching Lyrans, each one tracking the *Caesar* with their MAD gear through the thick black smoke. Behind them the twin Challengers were preparing for a volley of Gauss, LBX, and LRMs once the signal was given to begin active tracking.

"Kampfgruppe Command to all groups. Targets at three-five-zero, engage at three-zero-zero on my signal."

Kriston moved his *Caesar* to the left as he approached the burning hillside and began a determined sweep with all his systems. IR was off the scope from the burning fires and the

MAD gear wasn't finding anything larger than a small child and therefore neglected to report it. His threat-board was dark, reporting no active scanners or targeting systems sweeping his 'Mech. The only thing that was concerning him was the MAD gear every few seconds would find something and then lose it again. It was enough of a twitch to cause Kriston concern.

“Kampfgruppe Command to all groups. Targets are two-niner-five at a walk. Engage, engage, engage! Tiger Group go active and engage at will!”

Hauptmann Kriston was startled as his threat board began screaming in his ears about the active tracking systems locking onto his 'Mech just about the same time autocannon rounds began to slam into the center torso area, demolishing armor plating. Missiles streaked from within the black smoke cloud and blasted more armor from his 'Mech. Thick groups of missiles roared overhead causing Kriston to instinctively duck his 'Mech. He watched his lances return fire at unseen targets and taking heavy return fire as well. He spotted a silvery blur that nearly tore the arm off a *Starslayer* in Lance Three. *Gauss Rifles? Could I be facing 'Mechs instead of tanks?* he wondered. That thought was given more weight when a pair of PPC blasts snarled angrily around a *Vulcan* to his right blackening what little armor it left behind.

“Kriston to all teams, disengage. Pull back to the forest edge and regroup.” Kriston yanked the control sticks to spin his 'Mech in place and began to head away from the engagement zone. Without seeing the enemy he was not about to lead his men into a well-planned trap. There could be an entire company on the other side of that smokescreen and there was no way two lances could *BANG!* His 'Mech shook from head to foot.

Captain Fontana could still see the battle fairly well, despite the smoke from the oil fires and the weapons fire. The two Lyran lances had backed off just like he expected them to do and he finally cracked a slight smile as the *Caesar* and a pair of *Starslayers* stumbled into the well-placed Thunder-munitions minefield. The other five 'Mechs halted just short of the edge of the field and seemed to contemplate whether turning back or going forward would be worse for them. Fontana's troops had already stopped firing when the 'Mechs backed off. Now he needed to give them a chance to leave and not continue the fight. He grabbed the boom mic of his helmet again.

“Kampfgruppe Command to Pack Hunters. Trim the briar patch.”

“Hunter Alpha copies, Kampfgruppe Lead. Out”

Four aerospace fighters screamed out of the clouds on separate ground-attack runs, their hot engines leaving vapor trails in the early morning sky. The pair of *Gothas* came down first showering the area with LRMs. As they pulled out of their dives the *Rapiers* were close behind using their PPCs to keep the Lyrans from hitting the *Gothas*. The LRMs streaked over the heads of the Lyran 'Mechs, landing squarely in the midst of the minefield. The ground shook first from the LRM warheads and then rocked even more as the Thunder-mines began to detonate. The PPCs blast hit the less damaged 'Mechs as if to push them through the opening in the minefield. The Lyrans took that as their queue to exit and pushed on through the smoke and dirt tossed into the air.

Raptor was up flying lead in the formation watching the Lyran 'Mechs disappear beneath the tall trees of the Lexicon Forest. The battle was over for now and there were no casualties for either side, just a few bruised egos for the Lyrans. Once he was satisfied that they weren't regrouping to counter-attack, he turned back north and signaled this to Captain Fontana. With that done he headed back towards Strona.

"Hunter Alpha to Command Lead. We've bought you some time sir, but the sharks can smell the blood in the water. Pack Hunters returning to reload. Hunter Alpha out."

***Davion Palace, Avalon City***  
***New Avalon, Federated Commonwealth***  
***23 Dec 3062***  
***0800 Hours***

Last night's snow storm wrapped a peaceful blanket of pure white around the palace grounds. Workers had already begun to remove snow from the walking paths, stairs and causeways to allow access to the palace staff returning for work today. Several people were already at work having spent the night at the palace. One such person was the head of MIIO, Richard DeHaver, who was working on intelligence reports coming in from all over the Federated Commonwealth. Some spoke of civil unrest, violence, and actual combat between armed forces. The powder keg that was the Federated Commonwealth appeared to have been lit with the tragic death of Arthur Steiner-Davion and the explosive force was just beginning to gather momentum. Richard knew their were headed for a Civil War, but he'd be damned if he was going to tell *her* that. He gathered his papers for the morning brief, chugged the last of the coffee in his cup and headed for the Royal Throne room.

The "her" he was referring to was none other than the Archon Princess Katherine Steiner-Davion, Katrina Steiner to her loyal subjects. She stood in the Royal Throne room looking out one of the massive windows at the beautiful landscape surrounding the Davion Palace. She marveled at its brilliance, the white snow covering everything making it pure. She had adopted a similar process by always dressing in white and gaining the title "The Virgin Princess." Whether the media spoke to her womanly virtue or her peaceful nature in politics she accepted both with a hidden fanatical devotion that she would one day rule the entire Inner Sphere. Remaining clean and apart from the unsanitary aspect of politicking was the one thing that separated her from the animals that caused the Succession Wars. Or so she believed.

This morning she would receive a briefing from her Military Intelligence Investigations Office (MIIO) on the current status around her nation. *HER nation!* She warmed to the sound of that and smiled. However, that smile was short-lived because she knew that with the death of her brother Arthur and immediately following that Victor's call to arms against her that she was going to have a tough time bringing this situation under control. It wasn't that she had her doubts about her ability to lead and command, but she knew that Victor still held sway over the masses and popular figures invoking a revolt were not to be regarded lightly. She would appeal to her subjects' best interests to end any unrest so that a proper investigation could be conducted. She could use the trouble Victor was stirring up as a deliberate smoke screen he was using to hide his own guilt. Then the hysteria would solidify the logic behind her call for peace and Victor's powerbase would be cut out from underneath him. All without ever having to commit forces to

destroy him. It was a brilliant plan and today would be the day she would put it into motion. The new year would be a step towards peace and she would be the one to bring it to fruition. She took note of the time and took her seat to the side of a trio of thrones.

It wasn't long before the double doors opened and Richard entered the room. He paused, ever so slightly at the sight of the thrones before moving to the side to take a seat near his Archon. Katrina did not miss this motion and took it for a sign of respect for the position but also as a slight act of defiance to recognize her first as the current ruler. *His loyalties will bear watching in these trying times*, she mused as she smiled warmly while he sat down.

“So what news have you brought me about my nation on the eve of a new year?” she began. Katrina still found the man's flame-red hair and freckled nose incongruously boyish for someone who was the head of her Military Information and Investigations Office. But his eyes told the tale. Sunken and shrouded, their green was so dark as to look brackish. They were eyes that had seen too much.

“I believe, your Highness, the most pressing issue on hand is the situation in the Draconis March. Duke Sandoval has used your brother's death as a rallying cry against the Combine. Reports show that several units are preparing for combat operations. And if I know the Duke those units will most likely cross over the Combine borders without direct orders from the AFFC High Command. Just on Robinson alone, we have the First Robinson Rangers and the Robinson Battle Academy Training Battalion loading up. Further, we show the Seventeenth Avalon Hussars on Cassias, the Eighth Crucis Lancers RCT on Mara, the First Chisholm's Raiders on Breed and Twelfth Deneb Light Calvary on Tybalt all preparing for combat operations. This represents a significant number of forces being diverted from the current crisis between Victor and yourself.”

She studied Richard for a second gathering her thoughts on the issue at hand. “Let them go. If they succeed then they will draw attention from Victor's ill-gotten crusade. And if they fail, I can denounce the Sandoval family and remove one more thorn in my side. James may profess that he is loyal, but his son Tancred is a close friend of Victor and I would do well to avoid having him in control of the Draconis March. What's next?”

“Interestingly enough Tancred Sandoval, the Duke's son, resigned his commission with the Rangers and has grown at odds with his father over this unauthorized attack. It's rumored that he's building a powerbase against his father to unseat him. With Tancred as Duke of the March that would swing a fairly large slice of the Federated Suns in Victor's favor.”

Katrina's voice took on an icy chill to it. “If Tancred can unseat his father for control of the March then I think you have seriously underestimated him. See to it that the Duke receives my support against his son. Next issue.”

Richard tapped his stylus pen on the screen and brought up his next report. “Here in the Federated Suns region things have been getting worse by the day. There are constant protests against you on countless worlds as well as fighting between our units. The worst fighting has been seen on Kathil where the Eighth FedCom RCT has lost considerable ground against the Kathil Militia and the First Cappellan Dragoons. If you intend to hold this world the Eighth will

need reinforcements, especially after losing the LAS *Robert Davion*. I suggest moving the Eighth Donegal Guards from Monhegan. Marshall Jackson Davion can have orders drafted and sent by this afternoon. Continuing in the Cappellan March, we have reports of fighting on Nanking, New Aragon, Algol, Alcyone, Brockway and Bromhead. Demeter looks like it might go at any time now. The Fifth Donegal Guards combat command has landed on Kentares IV and has begun suppressing the rebellion begun by Duke Dresari. And we've lost communications with Benet III because of an attack by the rest of the Fifth Donegal Guards RCT on the Seventy-seventh ComGuards Division. A HPG interdiction has been established on Benet III. We're looking for other means of communication while trying to negotiate with ComStar to lift the blackout."

Katrina forced herself to unclench her fists at the news of the interdiction. Since interstellar communications was dependant primarily on ComStar the last thing she needed was an interdiction on worlds where she needed to control the rebellion. She would have to make it a point to speak with the local Precentor for Benet III and the First Circuit to personally offer her assurances that no more attacks on ComStar stations would occur. "Schedule a meeting with Precentor New Avalon and myself. I'll deal with ComStar directly, Richard. Then I want Jackson to get our troops under control and tell them to avoid ComStar installations at all costs. I will not be forced to deal with additional issues on top of Victor's little rebellion."

Richard bowed his head in submission and continued with the report. "In the Alliance we have reports of Commanders that have sworn absolute loyalty to you and those that remain committed to the defense of the Alliance but refuse to take a side in the growing conflict. Naturally this has caused increased tensions, even between Lyran units. For instance, on Rasalgethi the Sixth Lyran Guard has attacked the Seventeenth Donegal Guards because Leutenant-General Quitman Brown and his staff failed to declare their support for you. This is going to be a problem."

Katrina raised an eyebrow. "It is?"

"Of course. Rasalgethi is on the border of the Jade Falcon Zone and those troops should be more concerned with defense of the Alliance. We have the same situation on Fort Loudon, another world from which we stage raids into Clan-held worlds, where the Fifth Alliance and Fourth Davion have squared off against each other. While the Clans might not stoop to attacking with our backs turned, I wouldn't rule out an attack in the future against our weakened forces."

Katrina narrowed her blue eyes as if focusing for laser beams to shoot from them. "That's where you and I see differently, Richard. Troops that do not declare their loyalties are just as seditious as those declaring for Victor. Our forces will be that much stronger once the corruptible and weak of heart are weeded out. I would not see to trusting the defense of the Alliance to a commander that was not loyal to me. See to it that all commanders not committed to the Alliance be forced off the fence or dealt with accordingly."

Richard submitted but he knew he didn't have to like it. "As you wish. To continue, there's fighting on Thorin between the militia and the Fifteenth Arcturan Guards. The Thirty-ninth Avalon Hussars on Newtown Square have basically destroyed the mercenary unit Deep Hunters after they launched a pre-emptive strike thus putting the planet in Victor's camp. The Fourteenth

Donegal Guards have already begun packing up to move on Newtown Square to assist the Hunters but I fear it will be too little too late, though it may come as a comfort to you that Leutnant-General Adam Steiner has declared solely for you. Solaris continues to flare up, whether it's from the pent up frustrations or now the forces deployed there to maintain peace remains to be determined. And given the importance of the world, I thought you'd like to know that Duke Frederick Bradford of Coventry has continued to voice his opposition to your rule. I don't think the Coventry Jaegers are going to wait much longer before trying to reestablish control of the planet."

Katrina nodded and then neatly folded her hands in her lap. "And what of Alcor? Has any progress been achieved against Gyro-Tech Industries?"

"A battalion of the 15th Lyran Guard was dispatched to Alcor to address the smuggling issues there." Richard scrolled down on his noteputer. He made a few quick selections with a stylus and frowned at the report. "According to their last report the Guard Battalion had suffered a raid by the mercenaries that Gyro-Tech hired. There were no casualties but there was significant damage reported. Both from our forces and a private report filed by the Spaceport Administration. The Guards report was a little more objective but both indicate a loss of control over the situation there. I don't know how much more effort you want to place on current situation but it's going to create a media frenzy if it gets any worse." Richard wondered at that last thought. Kreiger was not a man accustomed to failure. That raid had to really get under his skins. *I just hope the man uses his head*, he thought.

Katrina nodded but hid her disgust at the turn of events there. She had wanted to nullify the problem without the chaos that it had developed. Now it was a giant issue that was going to take some schmoozing to get it resolved. *Archon's don't schmooze*, she thought, *they command. Then why didn't this work the way it was supposed to?* "Where is the main force of the 15th Lyran Guard?" she asked.

"Hesperus II," Richard replied immediately. He already knew the implications of not having a full RCT on perhaps the most important Lyran world after Tharkad.

Katrina's eyes nearly popped from their sockets at the news. "What moron took troops from that world?!? Nevermind! I want them called back to Hesperus II effective immediately. Get them back. Get them refitted. And for God's sake get that Kommandant under control!" Katrina quietly counted to ten in her head as she forced herself to calm down and settle into a more fitting behavior for a ruler of her stature. "What else is there?"

"Our agents in the Skye Province are reporting increased grumblings over this latest incident. If Victor is successful in rallying enough troops to launch any kind of campaign, then Skye might use that as an inspirational piece to try another revolt. It's no secret that Robert Kelswa-Steiner has always wanted a 'Free Skye', but this might be just the thing for him to fire up a separatist movement. The three Skye Rangers regiments are about as far from Skye as possible with the exception of the 4th Skye RCT on Morges. It would not be impossible for them to hide movements and begin to return home under the leadership banner of Robert. That would create a large distraction from the more important tasks at hand."

“Richard, the safety of all my citizens is the most important task at hand. Therefore, anything that may threaten that must be dealt with swiftly and judiciously. Victor has openly declared for war against my people and that is an immediate threat. Robert, however misguided that poor soul is, has strayed from the path in the past but so long as he does nothing overtly against me then I will not devote resources to stopping something that may not come,” Katrina said through an icy stare.

“I never would suggest something so drastic over unconfirmed reports. But, and I say this with the utmost respect your Highness, are you willing to allow him to covertly engineer a Skye rebellion and break away from the Alliance before you even knew it began?” Richard knew he had to have some flexibility on the issue or else Robert would be long gone with a Free Skye before they could do anything to stop it.

Katrina drummed her nails on the polished tabletop for a few moments while she pondered that bit of information. She knew Richard would jump at the chance to take Skye away from the Alliance and she was fully prepared to send every unit she could into Skye to crush any and all opposition once and for all, but she wanted Victor out of the way first. If important resources she wanted implemented against Victor were suddenly arrayed against Skye, how much did it weaken her original plan?

“Tell General Steiner and Marshall Davion to issue the orders. I want those industrial worlds protected and I want someone to find out what Robert is up to these days. Victor is a large enough blip on the screen without the Kelswa’s trying to carve out their own little bastard kingdom. That’ll be all for today Richard.”

Richard bowed his head and walked out of the room. Katrina sat there in silence for a few minutes deciding that her sweet, innocent way of dealing with opposition was not going to muster up. Brute force had to be met by brute force if you ever wanted to get anywhere. She knew that all too well from her father. But subtle manipulations worked just as well, a fact proven in dealing with her mother. She realized right away that she’d tried the military approach and had been blocked by the zealous John Kaufman. Perhaps a less direct approach would be required this time. Then she grinned.

*Ah yes, Loki...*

***Misfits Repair Base Indigo***  
***Alcor, Federated Commonwealth (Lyran Alliance Space)***  
***24 Dec 3062***  
***0600 Hours***

Morrison was currently on his sixth cup of coffee, the last two being burnt in the pot. But he was too tired to care. He’d managed to get five hours sleep in the past forty-eight. His troops had been working non-stop for the past two days trying to repair all the damage taken when the 15th Lyran Guard drove hard on his unit. He’d lost three machines and their pilots. Five more ’Mechs were out of commission until suitable replacement parts could be ferried on-planet. Many more were going to be heading back out with offline weapons systems, incomplete armor patching and ammo racks not fully replenished. It was a certifiable nightmare for the Lieutenant-

Colonel, one he wished he'd wake up from already. Unfortunately, he was only awake enough to deliver a command-level briefing and get back to work. The conference room had filled silently with his troops not more than a few minutes ago.

Morrison stared down the table at his troops over top the loose reports and hand-held data-chip readers. The look in his eyes would shift between quiet fury and near exhaustion, neither of which the others could distinguish from at the present time. Twenty-five pairs of eyes stared back at him, waiting for the other shoe to drop. No one wanted to say how they felt because they all knew that they didn't have the burden of overall command and most were grateful for that small favor. Everyone was waiting on news from Morrison, hoping for the best but expecting the worst. Morrison tried to blink away the sleep in his eyes and gulped the last of the coffee from the mug. It was bitter and barely warm but there were other things on his mind at this point.

"Ok, let's get down to business," he said slowly. "In the past forty-eight hours we've managed to accomplish some major feats in repairing our machines. Five are down until further notice, three are write-offs and the rest should hold together for us now." *So long as we don't take on anything bigger than a group of Stellar Girl Scouts!* he thought. *Stop that! Focus dammit!* "Kampfgruppe Company did well the other day to repel that scout force but I don't think it's going to keep the rest of them back for long. The good news is that we wasted their replenishment stockpiles so they can't repair much and that's a plus. But they'll have access to whatever we missed and what was on their DropShips." Morrison paused and flipped through some hardcopy reports. "Their aerospace fighters have begun to patrol the area around the spaceport so another raid attempt will not have a high degree of surprise while they're up. Our defenses here at the base along with our 'Mechs, vehicles and fighters could hold off an assault, however at a great cost. If they employ their DropShips the cost would be severe. Frankly, I don't think anyone would survive an assault of that magnitude." Many of the troops nodded along silently.

"So, we can't stay here and expect to hold them off and we can't move to finish them off without being spotted first. So here's what we're going to do." Morrison spent five minutes going over the details during which no one said a word. When he finished George Kaplan, Morrison's XO, spoke up. "That has got to be the craziest, most insane plan I've ever heard of Morrison! The lack of sleep must be affecting your brain." Then the smile that he'd been holding back finally broke free. "Those damn Lyrans will never know what hit them!" The mood in the room immediately shifted from one of gloom to one of rejoicing. Some shouted while others pounded their fists on the tabletop.

Morrison stood from his chair. A renewed sense of energy shown in his eyes, the tiredness washed away by the enthusiasm of his troops. "I need to see all those in my command lance now, and you too Ed. I want everyone else to get some rest and be ready to go at 0100 tomorrow. We're going to give those Lyrans a Christmas gift they'll never forget!"

As one the command troops of Marion's Misfits shot to their feet and all saluted Morrison in unison. Morrison stood as well and saluted them back, his shoulders back and chest puffed out in pride of the men and women willing to fight along side of him. Everyone filed out of the room to begin last minute preparations, equipment checks, planning sessions and sleep, leaving just five people in the room. Morrison looked over at each person and mentally noted on their

resolve right now. Each one looked just about ready to get back in the fight, but that's not what Morrison needed to know right now. Right now he needed to settle something that was far more dangerous than the fight with the Lyrans.

“Sergeant Major Fujimowa. I want you to assist Ed here in getting the other two 'Mechs up on the command channel access. Configure Jules to liaison with Baker Company and set Kevin to liaison with Kampfgruppe Company. I'm going to need instant data feeds on this one.” Ed and Fujimowa both nodded in unison and then headed out when Morrison gave them the signal to split. “Jules, “ Morrison continued. “You'll be my direct link to Baker Company. You'll be reporting on their progress as well as assisting Major Kaplan with tactical data. He and I both need to know exactly what's going on at any given moment so that we can react accordingly. It'll get real hairy once we get into it, but I'm counting on you. Understand?” Jules saluted smartly with a wide grin on his face. “Ok then Jules. Go get some sack time and I'll see you this evening.”

That left just Morrison and Captain Kevin Lendar in the room. “Ok Mr. Lendar, you'll be running the same routine but for Kampfgruppe Company which makes it more complicated. Have a seat so I can go over this with you.” Both men sat. “It's like this, Mr. Lendar. Kampfgruppe Company is not 'Mechs. They're slower, less armored and more vulnerable to being overwhelmed. You need to be clean on this one for me.”

Kevin was nodding his head right up to the *clean* comment. A look of confusion quickly hid the twinge of fear in the corner of his eye. “Clean sir? I'm not sure I under--“

“I **know**, Mr. Lendar. The bio-patches used to pilot the 'Mech also record your bio-stats so that the tech can troubleshoot problems with piloting. It's very accurate at diagnosing problems with the system, and/or with the pilot. Now, I don't have enough proof to destroy your career, but you can be 100% sure that if you use narcotics again while under my command I will personally take an interest in seeing you suffer. Off the record, I hold you solely responsible for Mike's death. If you weren't hopped up on whatever it was that you use, he wouldn't have gotten killed trying to save your ass.”

All the color drained from his face as Kevin finally realized that Morrison knew everything. Mike had declined to get high that night but Kevin went right on ahead anyway. Then in the fight Kevin couldn't function so Mike tried to buy him time to get out and paid for that time with his life. Mike had been his friend to the very end and Kevin let him die. The nightmares since then had been just as intense as the battle itself. And whether it was his conscience or lack of sleep, the nightmares were showing up even when he was awake. The fact that Morrison knew removed all the fear Kevin held of being found out but the void was quickly replaced by a wash of guilt. Suddenly, Kevin felt the need to throw up.

“Sir, I request permission to be relieved of duty and put on trial for my actions. I don't expect...don't want any leniency...sir. I never thought...I mean...I didn't mean to...” Kevin wasn't sure if that's really what he wanted but his mouth seemed to be in more control than his brain at the moment.

“Oh I will hold you accountable Mr. Lendar. You can rest assured of that. But I’m not letting you off the hook that easily. Your request for relief of duty is denied. **Further requests** are also denied.” Morrison raised his voice to stall a protest from Kevin. “You’re not done till I say you’re done. If we survive to lift from this world, I’m giving you a promotion without an increase in pay or rank. You’ll be put in command of creating and training a new company in Anti-’Mech tactics for the Misfits. You’ll be remanded to Outreach for a period of no less than six months while you learn everything there is to know about Anti-’Mech tactics. During and after that time you’ll recruit members to fill a company-sized unit and then rejoin the Misfits. Depending on how well you do, we might even sell your *Warhammer* to finance the new company.” Morrison rose to leave, signaling the end of the conversation.

“But...sir. How can I lead a company without my ’Mech? If I’m training on Anti-’Mech tactics, then I’ll need a ’Mech. W-Won’t I...” Kevin stammered before adding “sir?”

Morrison turned without a word and headed for the doorway. He stopped just short of exiting the room but kept his back to Kevin. “Congratulations on your promotion Mr. Lendar. I wish you luck as the commander of Easy Company, the Misfits’ first Anti-’Mech Infantry Company.” Then he walked out leaving Kevin alone with his thoughts.

Morrison left the briefing room and headed for his private office. Or at least, what one might consider as his office. All that it really amounted to was a tiny cubicle behind thin glass and wood walls in one corner of the repair bay. He had much paper work to do before catching a few more hours of sleep and then an attack to coordinate. He wondered if he could get more done by skipping sleep but then decided against it. He needed to be as rested and in control as possible for this one. He only made it halfway to his office when his comm unit began to buzz on his hip. He picked up the call without breaking stride but soon stopped in his tracks.

“Yes. Uh-huh. Really? Who? What? Ok. Give me...five minutes to round up my XO and we’ll be there. Thanks.” Morrison hit the button to end the call and then hit the speed dial for Major Kaplan. It rang twice before it was answered. “George? Morrison. Drop what you’re doing and meet me by the front of the bay. Something’s happened.”

George met a tight-lipped Morrison at the front bay doors in less than two minutes. After three more minutes the familiar *whump-whump-whump* sound of a VTOL craft permeated the air in front of the bay. A Sprint Scout VTOL in yellow and blue appeared and landed right in front of the bay. Morrison and George ran to get inside and barely had the door closed when the pilot cranked the collective and took off like shot.

The pilot was a skilled one, taking on speed before worrying about altitude as they skimmed over the treetops and roofs at over 140kph. The passenger compartment was surprisingly quieter than Morrison expected but he figured that billion C-bill corporations could afford to sound proof something that was basically military in nature. Morrison let his thoughts wander as he watched the ground zip by out the left side of the craft. George was equally quiet but would glance over at Morrison every few seconds as if waiting to be told what the hurry was about.

There’d be no time for conversation however as the VTOL banked for landing less than nine minutes after picking up it’s passengers. George noted with a raised eyebrow that they were

landing on the roof VTOL pad of the Gyro-Tech Corporate office. Morrison held a stone face look all the while. The VTOL descended fast like an amusement park ride but landed with a soft thump, a true testament to the pilot's skill. Morrison hopped out with George in tow and wondered if the pilot would be willing to change employers but filed that thought for another time. They half-ran to the stairs where a "suit" was waiting for them.

"Mr. Morrison. Mr. Kaplan." They shook hands. "I'm Ted Winston. Please follow me." The trio walked down several flights of metal stairs arriving on the executive offices floor. A few lefts and rights and they entered the main boardroom where this whole mess had begun that fateful morning. Seated at the head of the table just like before was John Kaufman. To his left was Peter Baker who had been thumbing through some documents but stopped when the duo entered. To John's right was Batt Cooper, looking rather dejected and rubbing his wrists where the handcuffs rested. Two burly looking guards stood just behind his chair, assault rifles slung over their shoulders. One of them held a solid rubber baton at the ready, apparently convinced that Cooper was going to be anything but cooperative. Morrison and George both grabbed a seat, Morrison knowing what was going on and George looking confused but starting to catch on to the situation.

"Thank you for coming on such short notice," John began. "I hope that the conclusion of this meeting will have a sense of closure on many levels. I would expect nothing less." He directed his comment towards Cooper whose eyes never left the tabletop. "A little over a week ago we began an operation to identify security leaks in our organization as part of a corporate restructuring that we were to be undertaking in just under a year. Much to our surprise we learned of a leak at the highest level and of the most damaging kind. As you can see, " John motioned with his right hand "we've stopped the leak and Mr. Cooper here owes you an explanation." All eyes turned on Cooper who still stared at the table and scratched at it lightly with his fingernail.

"I have a gambling problem," he began after a terse bought of silence. "While that may not seem like much of any explanation, there's more to it. A few months ago I placed a large bet on a football game that I was told was to be a 'sure thing'. I was going to take the money and re-invest it here and see about expanding our manufacturing capabilities into other 'Mech components. I was so sure of the outcome of the game that I bet more than I had, figuring that the winnings would more than cover my shortage. Well, I guess I wasn't as lucky as I thought, cause the game was a major upset and I lost big. More than I could cover and tried to duck my bookie but he just forwarded the request to his boss. Well that turns out to be this big crime lord, Peter Clemenza. So he comes calling one day at my home and says that I owe him in full plus interest for making him collect personally. Well, I didn't have the cash and I happen to like my bones in one piece so I cut him a deal. I figure that 'Mech parts have to be worth a lot to someone that can fence them on the open market. Maybe worth enough to cover my debts, y'know? So this Clemenza guy and I strike a deal. I get him information on getting the parts and he sells them and keeps the profits to cover what I owe him." Cooper coughed to clear his throat and took a sip of water from a glass in front of him.

"Well, I guess these parts were really profitable cause he kept wanting more to sell. I figured just a couple of units would be more than enough to cover me, so I'm like 'I thought that this was just to cover my debt?' and he's like 'It would be in your best interest to continue this' and I'm

like 'But I don't like this' and he's like "Do you like broken bones more?" So I gave in and kept going. I didn't know where the units were going to I just knew that Clemenza must've been making a mint on them. Then we get this warning from the Archon about our parts showing up in rebel hands and I've got to play dumb and say that we only sell to the manufacturers and we don't control where the 'Mechs go but they're not hearing that. And I can't say that I'm smuggling units out over the black market or rat out Clemenza cause no prosecutor would give two seconds of thought on why I had to do this. They'd send me up the river without a care in the world. So, then John brings you guys in and I'm thinking that maybe I can use you to get Clemenza off my back but the Archon sent the Guards and that interrupted everything."

"So Clemenza comes to me and wants info on you guys in order to get out one last large shipment. He figures he can feed you to the Guards and make off with the goods and then cut bait and hide for a bit. Then when you foiled the Guards' trap, Kreiger killed Clemenza thinking he was playing both sides. But I didn't know what Clemenza had fed to Kreiger and I needed to get rid of any evidence. So I got on the 'net to see if I could get any information to work Kreiger into another trap and then this," he waved his hands at the guards behind him, "happened and I don't think that anyone here is in a real forgiving mood. And I know saying it doesn't really mean anything, but I am sorry for what I've done. It really is **all** my fault."

"You're damn right it's your fault!" George shouted incredulously. "What went through your...I mean, why'd you...How'd you expect to get away with all this??" Cooper's eyes darted back to the tabletop and Morrison put his hand on George's arm to calm him down. Kaufman straightened the paperwork before him and folded his hands before continuing.

"As it stands, we now know the root cause of all of this. Unfortunately that knowledge has come too little too late as your unit," Kaufman motioned to Morrison and George, "is already involved in combat actions with the Lyran Guards. Making this information public to the proper channels wouldn't get us anywhere either because it will look as if we can't even control our own executives or at the very least, fabricated the entire thing. So, that leads us right back to the current situation and our only solution of a military victory over the Guards. Effective immediately Mr. Cooper here has resigned and turned over his shares of this company to the board. He will be taking a permanent vacation, far from here." Kaufman turned to face Cooper, but Cooper still refused to look anyone in the eye. His face was flushed red with shame. "Cooper, although we've know each other in friendship and business for all these years, I'm sure you understand what I must do now."

Kaufman nodded to the guards standing behind Cooper and they assisted him from the chair and led him from the room. The whole thing hadn't lasted more than five minutes.

"Now that formalities are over with back to the business at hand," continued Kaufman. "What can we do for you at this time Morrison?"

"Well, for starters you can guarantee me operational security now," Morrison replied coldly.

"Done." Kaufman slid a piece of paper across to Morrison. "What else do you need?" Kaufman seemed eager to put things right again.

While Morrison read, George piped in. “I don’t suppose you have a regiment of ’Mechs and pilots just laying about?”

Peter Baker, the CMO, spoke up this time. “Not likely. But we have enough parts to hopefully get your machines moving like they should again, including some new gyroscopes we’ve been working on. They’re a tad experimental, but they’ve passed brilliantly through the beta testing phase. I know you have some down machines that we could easily take the new prototypes.”

“I have four that you can start on as soon as you’re ready,” Morrison commented without looking up from his reading. “And this,” he shook the paper “will do perfectly, John.” Morrison’s use of John Kaufman’s first name eased the tension in the room, easily by half. George shot Morrison an inquisitive look but he wasn’t about to let the cat out of the bag. Yet.

Peter reached down and activated his personal comm. unit. “This is Peter Baker. I want four units of the XT-GS 004 moved to the Misfits’ repair bay for immediate replacement in ..uh...wait one. Morrison, what ’Mechs are we fixing?”

Morrison put down the paper and thought for a brief second over what Ed had told him the other day. “Not my *Battlemaster*, but the *Bushwacker*, *Marauder*, *Guillotine* and the *Shadow Hawk*. If you’ve got some techs or spare weapons around they could use some of them too.” Peter acknowledged with a nod and finished relaying the information. “Done. Anything else you need?”

“A little luck and a lot of prayer wouldn’t hurt,” Morrison joked. “I do need to uh, store, some folks with you. I’ve got four Lyran Guard MechWarriors as POWs and I don’t need them stuck in some cages should this not go well. They’ve been nice and cozy with us but even the Hauptman we nabbed isn’t willing to talk so I don’t need to waste warm bodies guarding them. Beyond that, I’ve got to get back to finish up our plans and get this new information worked in.”

***15th Lyran Guard Regiment HQ, Ludwig Steiner Spaceport, Strona  
Alcor, Federated Commonwealth (Lyran Alliance Space)  
25 Dec 3062  
0300 Hours***

First Lieutenant Henner was tonight’s watch commander. A budding soldier of the LAAF he was on the fast track to a high command position that would place him well up on the social chain of the Archon’s Military Court. He wanted nothing more than to be one of those important people that had the ear of the Archon. Someone that could actually say, “See? I helped set that policy.” He graduated from the Nagelring Academy on Tharkad in the top 5% and was immediately assigned to the 15th Guards at the standard rank of Lieutenant. Shortly thereafter he was promoted to First Lieutenant and given a Lance Commander position with Alpha Company. That was only a year ago.

Always able to positively catch the attention of his superiors he knew that he could do no wrong. Given praise at nearly every turn of his career he was well on the way to achieving his goals. But he also knew that a good commander couldn’t rest on his laurels. A good commander

must have the faith of the troops that he commanded as well. That's why when he checked his watch for what seemed that thousandth time that night/morning, he finally told the only two technicians on duty to go get some rack time as an early Christmas gift and he would take over their spot until the day shift arrived. Besides, it had been quiet enough for the past two days and after all, it *was* Christmas. Henner watched the men smile as they left the room and then he flopped down in the chair, checked the scanners twice for any anomalies noting that nothing was happening in the duty logs. He sat back in the chair and rubbed his eyes. The third watch was always the longest and most tiring. Or most boring, he wasn't sure which. At least the quiet allowed for some productive down time as he pulled out his noteputer and proceeded to plow through the mountain of paperwork that crossed his desk in the past week.

Several buildings away stood the Spaceport hospital. Every port had one because you never knew if sick passengers would arrive or a ship would have an emergency crash landing or something equally drastic. Currently it was empty save one person, who was under heavy guard at the moment both by doctors and armed troopers. Kommandant Kreiger lay there in the bed, in an unconscious state brought on by the heavy medication. His legs and arms were held in air-casts while his chest, neck and head were wrapped in medicated clothes to sooth and heal the second-degree burns. The doctors had recommended keeping him sedated as much as possible to let the worst of the injuries heal and then they could bring him around and get him working on the normal aches and pains. The guards were under strict orders from Brevet-Kommandant Gants, not to allow anyone but the doctors near Kreiger. It would not do any good if the mercenaries, or anyone else for that matter, managed to sneak someone in to kill Kreiger in his sleep. That crazy mercenary had come close enough with his suicidal tackle of Kreiger's 'Mech. But with Kreiger out of the way, Gants had full control of the Battalion now.

Gants was currently tucked away in what served as the Battalion War Room, with his other Company commanders going over plans for ending the current conflict. It was not how he anticipated getting the command slot but that twit Kreiger never really understood the politics of it all anyway. Always looking for a fight, using brute force when finesse would be much better suited. Gants didn't mind thinking more like a politician than like a soldier. After all, it was the politicians that controlled the military. Gants was sure that he could have easily negotiated control of Gyro-Tech away from the mercs but Kreiger wanted to do things his way. Well, he is the boss. Or rather *was*. Now it was up to Gants to turn this ... this mess around in the Guards' favor. Gants was working on a feint strategy. The ideas was to use the holiday to call for an immediate cessation of hostilities and to allow a third party inspector to go over the current inventory reports and recent orders for Gyro-Tech to determine the validity of the company's business practices. This would allow Gyro-Tech to defend itself legally, allow the mercenaries to stand down and more importantly, allow the Guards to plan a sneak attack taking the mercenaries and Gyro-Tech in one fell swoop. The plan was simple enough that it couldn't fail. Both DropShips would be used to capture the plant and the corporate offices cutting them off from the mercenaries. The Guards' vehicle Regiment would move on all the repair bays and bases and the rest of the Battalion would catch the mercs in the middle and squeeze till it hurt. The plan was simply enough that it couldn't fail. And it would all start this morning with a wakeup call at seven o'clock and a comm call at eight o'clock. Gants dismissed his officers and headed off to get a few hours of precious sleep. Later that night he dreamt about being awarded the rank of Colonel by the Archon herself.

## ***Remote Airfield, Strona***

Christmas Day. The ambient temperature was a balmy 22° Celsius, with reports of cloudy skies and a possibility of a thunderstorm later in the day. Yet in the pre-dawn hours not one of the pilots for the Pack Hunters could see any stars in the sky and that held an ominous feeling for each of them. Each one was quietly checking his equipment and plane before getting ready for their mission. They had a large part in the newest operation and it was a critical part, to say the least. If anyone was nervous about it they were sure good at keeping it to themselves.

Flight Leader, Lawrence “Raptor” Pickering was doing his final walk-around on his craft pulling the red pre-flight tags that flapped in the steady breeze from each system that he checked. After making three revolutions, he stopped in front of the last red tag to be removed. The long cylindrical pod was mounted on a center rail beneath his *Rapier* aerospace fighter. Roughly three meters in length and weighing in at a hefty 900kg it was locked tightly in place with a single red tag hanging from the nose of it. Raptor squatted down to get beneath the wing and checked the mounting hard points and gave the device a quick tug to see that it wasn’t going to go anywhere on its own. Satisfied that it was prepared, he pulled the flag and handed it to his flight tech behind him. The bomb could now be armed in flight. Lastly, he checked the venting cowls on the PPCs mounted on either side of the cockpit to make sure they were functioning normally and wouldn’t overload the heating/cooling system if they were fired in pairs. It was a common problem with *Rapiers* that had a simple modification solution, but one never took anything for granted in war.

Raptor climbed up the ladder and hopped into the cockpit seat. He could see the other members of his flight finishing up their own inspections and getting ready to take off. Every one of the Pack Hunters was carrying the same bomb beneath their fighters. Raptor donned his helmet and started on the pre-flight warm-up. He plugged in the comm cable dangling from his helmet and powered up his electronic systems. He switched through the channels holding longer on the command channel but hearing nothing but faded clicks. He hoped that the use of the Gyro-Tech CommSat would work under such hasty preparations. He knew the main ’Mech force was traveling under black out conditions but it would’ve been nice if they could have communicated that everything was fine and still on schedule.

Everything about this new plan that Morrison had come up with was based on a critical timetable that left very little room for error. Raptor wasn’t particularly happy about that fact but he was more interested in proving that he could live up to his commander’s expectations rather than put up a bluster of criticism and complaint. What the boss wants, the boss gets. Within reason that is. And Raptor reasoned that he was lucky that his skill was good enough to pull the job off. But luck and fate were two things that no one controlled, and that was usually when Murphy’s Law of Probability stepped in unannounced. It would be no different this time.

Raptor taxied his fighter to the runway, set the brakes and idled his power while waiting for the “GO” command from the tower. The take off time was calculated for 0320 hours, taking into account the fuel, the added weight of the bombs, the winds, everything. Raptor went over the mission plan again and again in his mind, picturing each task that he had to do and how he would respond to the slightest change in plan. He wanted to be ready for anything that might pop up.

“Pack Hunter Alpha this is Tango-Two-Niner-Niner. You are cleared on runway zero-two for immediate takeoff. The ceiling is 4000 meters, winds are West-Northwest at 15kph. Reports at the target show them at 20kph. Looks like that weather front picked up some speed overnight. Good Luck.”

“Hunter Alpha copies Tango-Two-Niner-Niner. Rolling. Out.” The changing weather started to nag at his thoughts but he quickly pushed that to the back of his mind and concentrated on the mission at hand. Raptor throttled up to full power until the gauges peaked and flipped off the brakes. It was the equivalent of drag racing, except there was more power involved now and drag cars didn’t normally leave the ground. He waited until nearly 100kph before easing back on the stick. The nose came up about a meter and the fighter slipped effortlessly into the air. Once off the ground the wheels retracted and he adjusted course towards the target. Seconds later three other aerospace fighters left the ground and followed their leader into the night.

At the same time much further to the south, the bulk of the Misfits ’Mech force was following several kilometers behind Kampfgruppe Company’s tanks as they rolled on still further south and ever closer to the Spaceport. Morrison moved Kampfgruppe Company out sooner than anything to give them a head start so all his assets would be in place all at the same time. His plan loosely followed the principles of an all-out assault with everything being committed at the same time. It was comparable with the “Blitzkrieg” attacks in the 20th century but Morrison was adding his own flavor to this one. While the true nature of blitzkrieg was to overwhelm and rout the enemy, Morrison was hoping that it would be enough to annihilate the Lyran Guard. It would be a tough mission but it was now down to a make-or-break decision and he knew he had to succeed. The alternative was not even thinkable.

***15th Lyran Guard Regiment HQ, Ludwig Steiner Spaceport, Strona  
Alcor, Federated Commonwealth (Lyran Alliance Space)  
25 Dec 3062  
0630 Hours***

Morrison was moving forward in his newly captured *Penetrator* ’Mech. He was still getting used to the new ’Mechs movements. This was much different from his humanoid *Battlemaster*. The ’Mech’s unseemly gait due to the backward canted legs was the only thing keeping him from falling asleep at the controls. Mentally he was exhausted from all the work that had been done, but physically he was as charged up as one could get before a fight. He pulse was up, his muscles tense and he even had butterflies in his gut. He was still working over the plan in his head, wondering if he should have made this change or that change. But it was a little too late to be second-guessing himself now. His biggest concern was the actual kickoff time for the attack. Typically you attacked before dawn, when the enemies reaction was at its slowest but Morrison reasoned that they would expect this and pushed the attack back two more hours to increase the element of surprise. Then there was the commitment of his forces. It wasn’t possible to not expect more casualties for what he hoped was the final fight. He was already down three ’Mech pilots and that tally was sure to increase. There was no way around that. It was a price they were all willing to pay but would the end result be worth it all? That was the question that was gnawing at his thoughts. He knew that as commander of a military unit there would be times when he would lose members of his team but it was just so damn soon. This was supposed to be a cushy garrison job while he took on little side contracts to boost his daily funds. Instead it

turned into the biggest furball this side of Solaris VII. If only they'd known about the Archon's threats to Gyro-Tech. If only Kreiger had been more receptive to discussion. If only he'd been better prepared. If only, if only. He shook his head to clear his thoughts. The "if only's" were going to have to wait. It was time for the "can do's" to take over. He looked over at the mission clock and was shocked to see that he only had thirty minutes before H-Hour. It was gut check time and he keyed the comms.

"Command Lead to Hunter Flight." There was a second of static as the encryption gear contacted the Gyro-Tech CommSat orbiting Alcor and then came the reply.

"Hunter Flight copies, reading five-by-five." Raptor wasn't sure if he was overjoyed to actually have the damn thing work or that they'd made it this far. But having live communications over the entire battlefield provided by Gyro-Tech's newest satellite was a very welcome thing.

"Hunter Flight commence your run in one-zero mikes. Tiger Group prepare battery fire, Panther Group to support Tiger Group." A series of clicks came over the comms confirming everyone received their orders.

"Command Lead to Command Lance. Signal 'All Stop'. Ambush and Striker Lances to positions." In the first light of dawn, Morrison could see 'Mechs of his command come to a stop and hold their positions. Spread out over nearly a half kilometer the 'Mechs merely had the shape of dark blobs in the slowly increasing light. It was slightly frustrating to Morrison to not have exact positions on all his troops but it was necessary to keep all electronics off to avoid detection. *Besides*, he thought as he looked at the mission clock, *in two minutes the entire world is going to be awake*. It was then he noticed a third droplet of rain on his cockpit window.

Hunter Flight was proceeding in from the east this time, flying in a loose diamond formation with only their own anti-collision lights as a guard against accidental bumping. They were under strict radio-silence unless they were compromised or reached the target on time and undetected. The winds had picked up to more than 40kph by now and it was no small feat to keep the flight level and steady on target. They had already increased speed twice to make up for the headwinds that were slamming their aircraft around like an angry child would his toys. Raptor flickered his AC lights to signal a break for attack formation and the four craft slid almost effortlessly into a line abreast formation. They were now thirty seconds from commencing their attack run.

First Lieutenant Henner decided that he'd get a cup of coffee to shake the sleepies off before the relief shift showed up. The pitter-patter of rain on the window was starting to increase and with it making him more tired. He took a quick look at the screens, noting there was still nothing and headed for the break room. This would only take a minute.

Off to the west were Flight Leader Hermann Ziggler and his wingman, returning on their BARCAP patrol with their *Corsairs* flying a line astern formation. Since their path would take them directly over the Spaceport, their radars were off to avoid the expected ground clutter that would spoil the return. *Plus what idiot would be out flying in this weather? Me, of course*. Ziggler looked out into the night and wished this last hour would hurry up and pass so he could land and get some sack time. All this 'hurry up and wait' was really getting on his nerves and

besides, CAP duty was really ... beneath ...*hmm?* Directly ahead he noticed a blinking light. Just then his warning senses screamed as the light broke up into several pairs that were now rapidly approaching the ground. *Fighters!!*

Ziggler immediately threw on his fire control radar, kicked in the afterburners and mashed the control stick comms button. “Courtyard Courtyard!! This is Zulu Flight One-One! You are under attack! Sound the alarm!” Nothing. “Courtyard this is Zulu One-One!! You are under attack! Respond!” Still nothing. He was closing rapidly on medium range, and toggled in both his Mediums and Large Lasers. There were four sets of lights and with luck he’d get at least one of the bastards on the first pass. “Courtyard this is Zulu One-One! Respond you assholes!”

Henner walked back in the room and stopped a second as he could swear he heard someone talking. The comms light was flashing on the board and he walked over to get his headset instead of checking the recorder to see what had been said. “This is Courtyard. Who’s on this channel?”

Raptor had his *Rapier* now in a steep dive. Flying solely by the seat of his pants he lined up his fighter on one of the landing struts to the giant *Overlord* parked on the Spaceport landing pad. Thankfully the Lyrans hadn’t thought to turn off the normal facility lights and he could see the target perfectly through the gloom. His wingman was right next to him lined up on another. The pair of *Gothas* were bearing down right on top of the wings to the *Triumph* DropShip. In another minute the Pack Hunters would cripple the DropShips of the Lyran Guard and strike the first fatal blow in this battle. His eyes were locked on the target area, when he caught his threat indicators lighting up on the warning board. *Must be the ground radars coming on for the morning shift*, he thought and secretly hoped.

Ziggler and his wingman had each taken a single target but without the enemy radars on the target lock was only partial. But he was just seconds away from effective medium range and that would have to be enough. His headphones crackled just then. “This is Courtyard. Who’s on this channel?” *Sonofabitch!* “Where the hell have you been Courtyard?!? You’re under attack!!” The targeting computer hummed with a lock-on tone and Ziggler trigger his paired Large and Medium Lasers at the enemy fighter.

The computerized voice in most war machines had been created in a sexy feminine tone, the reason being it made it easier to accept death when some hot vixen was warning you of a core breach in progress. Raptor was really surprised when his “lady” warned him of a target lock just seconds before his craft shuddered and lurched from the impacts of the *Corsairs’* lasers. The *Rapier* pitched left just as he triggered the bomb release, spoiling his aim. The sudden loss of weight shot the fighter upward as it reclaimed it’s power and he rolled out left over the building tops now his own radar on and alerting him to a *Corsair* Medium Aerospace fighter closing on his ‘six’.

Henner was in no mood for games. “Identify yourself. We are not under - “ His response was cut off by massive explosions that developed between the landing pads and the control booth where he was standing. A massive fireball consumed the number three landing strut of the *Stahlhammer* and the resulting shockwave shattered the tower windows spraying the room in tiny

razor-sharp shards before Henner could look away. Three more subsequent explosions erupted outside, the fireball erasing the darkness and shaking the very foundation of the buildings.

The rumbling vibrated the mirror in front of which Gants was currently shaving after a nice hot shower and the lights faded and flickered for a second. He quickly grabbed his personal comm. device and dialed up the control tower.

“Control this is Kommandant Gants. What the hell is going on?” There was no reply. Gants wasted no more time waiting for a reply. He quickly towed off the shaving cream on his half shaven face and raced out the room grabbing his boots in one hand and combat jacket in another. Down the corridor from his room the hallway turned left and continued down a long stretch that held windows facing out onto the spaceport. Gants stumbled to a stop in his bare feet when he saw the windows were shattered to bits across the hallway carpet. Grumbling he slipped on the boots and didn’t bother to lace them up. The fireball chewing on the *FireWing* was enough to point to the urgency of the issue.

Gants reached the control tower less than ninety seconds later and slid part way across the tiled floor littered with more glass shards. His eyes immediately looked on a young Leutnant fumbling aimlessly on the control boards.

“What the HELL are you doing you idiot?!? Sound the goddamn alarm!!” Gants screamed.

Henner heard the slightly muffled voice, his hearing damaged from the blast concussion. He turned to face the unknown person.

“I can’t FIND the alarm button! I can’t SEE!!!” He screamed back. His face and eye sockets looked as if he’d been scrubbed with a cheese grater. Blood flooded freely from every cut and his eyes were beyond help at this point. Gants rushed to the alarm board and pushed the man away with enough force that sent him sprawling across the floor. He had no time to help the man. His duty was to alert his defenses against the attack that surely was happening now. He slammed his hand down on the red alert button and bolted for the doorway. A siren began its wailing call across the grounds muted somewhat from the falling rain.

Captain Larry Fontana was watching the spaceport through laser-enhanced optics from the tree line when the bombs hit. *Time*. He swung the boom-mic over to his mouth and spoke calmly. “Kampfgruppe Command to Tiger Group. Commence your fire mission.”

Two *LRM Carriers*, their missile pods already elevated, and two *Challenge X MBTs* launched their first flight of missiles totaling one hundred and forty high-explosive rounds into the spaceport. The missiles tracked in and slammed into various Lyran-occupied buildings. ’Mech and vehicle bays, barracks, and the control tower were all badly battered. A second volley followed not more than fifteen seconds behind the first, just long enough for most of the echo to die off. This time the rounds concentrated on administrative buildings, smaller supply buildings, and ripped the hell out of open grounds. Fires sprang up where gas pipes ruptured or building material burst into flame. Debris lay everywhere in all various sizes from fist-sized chunks to actual walls that had once been connected to structures. Men began running about heading for vehicles, ’Mechs, or their pre-planned defensive positions. At the same time, the three Misfit

*Pattons* began laying Thunder LRMs at the north edge of the port grounds. Captain Fontana counted down exactly one minute from the second volley launch before issuing his last command. “Kampfgruppe Command to Tiger Group. Fire airburst.”

Raptor knew it was only a few moments since the attack began (it had actually been just under five minutes) and he was already in the fight of his life. One PPC was shorted out due to wiring overload and the fault light keep going on and off for the nose-mounted autocannon. *This is a hell of a way to fly into a war*, he thought as he yanked the control stick to the right and rolled the *Rapier* over the top of a long warehouse and back down to the next street over. The second *Corsair* casually popped up to follow down on the rear of the fleeing *Rapier*, only to be caught in the crosshairs of a Misfit *Gotha*. Thirty missiles, two medium lasers and a PPC made short work of the craft and it broke up before the pilot could even reach the ejection handles. The *Gotha* applied power and began a steady climb to gain some altitude for the fight. Raptor continued south before turning east for an escape vector.

Ziggler was tracking the *Rapier* he first hit while dodging missiles from another *Gotha* that was all over him. A pair of “Alert-5” *Corsairs* were now pursuing the first *Gotha* that splashed his wingman and the last pair were chasing another *Rapier*. Ziggler banked right and rolled into a split-S still visually searching for the *Rapier* he wounded. He spotted a trail of smoke through the rain splattered canopy glass just south of his position and he dove for the deck.

It’s amazing just how fast you can get men to move when they realize they under attack. The MechWarrior barracks was emptied before the first of the LRMs had hit, the men shaken from their bunks by the aerial bombs. As the volleys rained down they sought shelter wherever they could find it, hoping for a lull to let them make a run for their ’Mechs. The lull came and they waited a few more seconds to make sure it was safe and then darted across the parade grounds to the ’Mech bays. The sound of fighters roared just over their heads and they could see one of them trailing smoke as it passed. They were only halfway across when the screeching sound of a third LRM volley hit their ears. Their training took over and anyone not able to seek shelter indoors hit the ground and covered up as best they could. It would be the worst decision they would ever make. The first twenty missiles were incendiary rounds and they added to the pyre that was devouring parts of the port. The rest exploded at various heights over the port, ranging from a hundred to as little as ten meters above the ground. The resulting shrapnel storm tore through flesh, flak jackets, body armor, doors, windows, walls and anything else that wasn’t half-meter thick steel. The carnage on the open grounds was horrific. Those lucky enough to only have suffered minor wounds picked themselves up and continued running for their posts. There was no need to stop and render aid. Anyone not moving was clearly dead.

Morrison acknowledged Kampfgruppe Lead’s mission completion over the radio. This was the most inhumane part of his plan. Catch them off guard with the air raid and then catch them in the open with the artillery barrage. It wasn’t right for a soldier to die so senselessly, but the Lyrans did declare their intent to wage war. It was their own fault to fail to expect the Misfits to bring war to them. Morrison knew he was justified but it still hung there in the back of his mind like a specter you couldn’t see but could still feel. Perhaps that’s why he only planned for three volleys after the air raid. Well, probably, at any rate. What he accomplished next would be the swing vote on that issue.

“Lyran Command,” he began. The CommSat allowed for open band broadcasting so he didn’t have to waste time trying to decrypt their communication network to talk to someone in charge. “This is mercenary commander, Colonel Morrison. We have come here this morning to settle this once and for all. Our attack has left you severely crippled and hopelessly outmatched. Your only viable option is to accept our terms for an immediate end to hostilities and to return to your base of origin. We have no desire for further loss of life. We will give you one-five minutes to comply. Morrison out.” *And now we wait*, he worried.

Kevin quietly sat in the cockpit of his *Warhammer*, hoping that the Lyrans wouldn’t surrender and instead come out guns blazing. He kept thinking about Mike and how he died. Even his own conscience had taken on Mike’s voice telling him that this was all his fault and now he’d have to make amends. It was down right creepy. Kevin was aghast that he would lose his status as a MechWarrior and what made it even worse was that he was expected to be a ground-pounder when this was all over. A worthless PBI (Poor Bloody Infantry) and that was no way to go out in life. MechWarriors were the closest thing to royalty and here Morrison was stripping Kevin of that title. Well, if he couldn’t resign then he was going to go out in one final blaze of glory this morning. He would see to that personally.

Although Gants was nowhere near a transmitter he would eventually get the message from the mercenaries. He had almost made it to the main doors of his building when the airburst barrage came. The initial shockwave knocked him backwards, probably saving his life. A chunk of metal the size of a manhole cover was embedded in the wall less than a foot from his head where he lay on the floor. Gants quickly shook off the shock of his brush with death and hauled ass to the bay where his *Berserker* ’Mech was racked. A commander’s place was at the head of his troops. As he ran he wondered how many troops were left to fight. *Damn those mercenaries!*

Raptor had to throttle back to keep the engine from overheating as he rocketed past the last buildings on the port grounds and into the clear. He began a system check to see what worked and what didn’t. The view screen before him began to scroll through the diagnostic test. *PPC Port, offline. PPC Starboard, online/charged. Autocannon Nose, feeder malfunction/loaded. LRM10 rear, ready/loaded. MAD, ok. Thermal, ok. Radar, ok.* “Warning, lock-on.” *Threat detection, ok.* Her voice in his ears made Raptor look behind, spot the *Corsair* and grumble “No shit.” He punched the afterburners and nosed down for the treetops. The wind and rain was making it hard to hold the craft steady as he raced a few meters from the tops of the trees. It was unlikely that he’d be able to outrun the *Corsair* with the damage and he certainly couldn’t outlast the more heavily armored fighter. Raptor toggled for the LRMs in the tail and dove lower into an open grass field. He held the height to 25 meters not wanting to plow into a raised hillside and held his breath for the two seconds it took for the computer to lock up the *Corsair*. With it directly behind him, Raptor mashed the trigger and a half a heartbeat later hit the airbrakes, throttled back to minimal power and yanked back on the stick.

Ziggler was surprised when the LRM launch was detected. He’d expected it much sooner what with the chase and all. He was even more surprised to learn that he couldn’t pull up to avoid the missiles because the merc pilot placed himself in the way by pulling up into a stall. A mid-air collision was not the way to go. His only choice was left or right and right through the path of the oncoming missiles. Ziggler banked hard left. He took all the hits on the tail

stabilizers and engine port. He continued the turn coming back around to give as good as he got. He'd made it through 180 degrees when a PPC blast ripped into the right wing. He was able to control the craft and watch the inverted *Rapier* rush past behind him now heading north. Ziggler yanked the stick to the right reversing his turn. *I'll shake the man loose!*

"Gants to Courtyard, somebody get me a goddamn SitRep!" He was busy flipping through a fast-start sequence and had taken a quick second to get on the comms. It would certainly be chaos out there for his troops and he had to make order out of it all. And to do so, he needed to know what was going on. Just knowing that it was all going to hell in a hand basket wasn't going to suffice. He quickly attached the bio-patches, plugged in the neurohelmet and strapped into the five-point harness.

"Bravo Lead this is Courtyard." *'Bout damn time*, he wanted to say but didn't. He punched in his security code to unlock the rest of the 'Mech. "Bravo Lead here. What's going on?"

"We've got structural damage on the *Stahlhammer* and *FireWing*. The *Stahl* took a direct hit on the number four strut and a near hit on number three, no serious damage but repairs will be needed. *FireWing* took two direct hits, one on each wing. Crews are working on containing the fires there and around the port. We've got casualties all over and I don't know how many dead. All bays are intact but Bay Three and Bay Twelve have jammed doors. All our fighters are up but we lost one early, and I can't raise the Flight Leader. 'Mechs and vehicles have been spotted outside the north end of the spaceport, so I assume that's the mercenaries. We also have a transmission from their commander. Audio only."

"Play it," Gants said evenly. He was playing hell keeping his temper in check so he could control the situation. He lost it when he heard the Misfit's ultimatum. "I want every 'Mech, vehicle and trooper assembled at the north staging area in five minutes and I don't want any excuses! Make it happen! Out." Gants grabbed the controls and stood his 'Mech up. He ran out of the bay while techs and soldiers scattered before him. Ten minutes later he finally had a small semblance of a fighting force arrayed around him. Eighteen 'Mechs including his own, three *Schreks*, two *Behemoth Heavy Tanks*, and two *Drillsons* managed to assemble. All the others were either still being freed from their demolished bays or lacked the crews to man them. Gants had no time to wait for them. He turned and headed north. "Everyone form on me."

Morrison wondered what was going on inside the port. All the men dead or dying, screaming for help. The calls for troops to mount up. The fires that would need to be put out. It had to be the closest thing to chaos. Unless of course they killed some of the commanders and then it might be something beyond that. Well, their time was almost up and Morrison was willing to bring the port down around the Lyrans to make his point clear.

"Hunter Alpha to Command Lead! I could use some help here sir!" Morrison hadn't expected to hear from any of the Pack Hunters, especially not with a call for help. He realized that he was going to have to budget some better form of communication gear for the next trip out and clicked the dial over to the Pack Hunter's frequency. "Command Lead here Alpha. Relay your situation."

“Coming in hot from your southeast. I’ve got some critical damage and a shadow. No chance to shake him, I’m going to need some cover fire. Requesting flyby sir.”

“Granted. Keep that IFF chirping so we don’t frag you by accident.” Morrison switched back to the ‘all’ channel. “Heads up everyone. We’ve got an inbound bird from the southeast with a clipped wing and a hungry hawk. I want all crews to switch tracking to A-A. Fire on my command.” With that every ’Mech pivoted to the left and raised their arms to the sky.

Ziggler was fighting stabilizer damage and the weather but he had a decent bead on the *Rapier* and he was closing in for the kill. The merc wasn’t doing much now but running as fast as he could and jinking enough to keep Ziggler from getting a lock-on in his sleep. “Oh, hold still you bugger. This will only hurt for a second.” His finger poised over the trigger.

Morrison could see Raptor approaching quickly on his radar as well as his shadow. “Command Lead to group. Lock-on and fire at will!”

Ziggler wouldn’t know it but he got a lock on the *Rapier* at the same time as the Misfits locked on him. His computer began screaming about the multitude of scanners that had him targeted. He hesitated on the trigger as his eyes drifted to the radar. Where one dot once stood there was now a sea of enemy targets. And they were all aiming at *him*! “Oh f” The Lyran Guard *Corsair* was replaced in an instant by a yellow and red fireball.

“Thanks Command! Good luck and good hunting!” Raptor wiggled the craft to wave goodbye.

“Anytime Raptor. See ya back at base.” Morrison replied.

“Recon Lead to Command Lead.” It was Major Sakai who drove a *Raven* ’Mech. The sensor suite on that ’Mech rivaled any war machine in the Inner Sphere in detection capabilities and was currently worked by a superb MechWarrior. “Command Lead here.”

“They’re coming sir.” Morrison was surprised when his stomach dropped because he had actually expected this kind of response. Well there was no time to quip about it now. “Can you get a count Recon Lead?” he replied.

“Negative. Too much structural interference. At most I can tell you it’s a lot of them cause this signal is pretty big. And in all this rain visibility is really terrible. If not for the lightning and the fires I wouldn’t even know the spaceport was there.”

There was a torrential downpour from the passing weather system with high winds and frequent lightning strikes to match. The weather was really helping and hurting at the same time. On the one hand it was keeping any of the Lyrans from seeing how his forces were disbursed but on the other it was preventing him from seeing the Lyrans. He could see slight movements when the lightning would flash but he was relying more on his scanners to paint an accurate picture. And at best he was getting the same information that everyone else was, that this was about to get ugly.

“Command Lead to Command Four. Execute Pinwheel.”

Kevin relayed the same signal to Captain Fontana and then moved his *Warhammer* to cover the tanks as they repositioned themselves behind the 'Mechs. There was no point in having them caught right in the middle and besides they were going to be used to block any flanking maneuvers the Lyrans might try. Kevin's job was to remain close to them acting as a shepherd for a very valuable mobile reserve. He just needed that once chance to rush into the heat of battle. He owed that much to Mike. “*You owe me Kevin,*” was the repeating thought in his head. It sounded very much like Mike. “I know Mike. I know,” Kevin muttered back careful to not activate his mic.

Morrison was able to see most of the Lyrans line at the edge of the spaceport now in the backlight of the sun behind the clouds. It was such dreary weather but all the more better for combat. At the least the rain would keep most civilians from wandering around to watch. “Everyone ready to charge on my command.” The tricky part of the plan now was to move forward and hopefully sucker the Lyrans into the minefield. At a run it would be too late to stop before the Misfits could tear them to shreds in the open.

The two armies faced each other across the open fields like the knights of old. There was something ‘old age romantic’ about the scene but it was just another day in the life of a soldier. Gants sat there in his *Berserker* wondering what this Morrison was thinking attacking a Guard unit like this. The man had to be insane. No one attacks a premier Lyrans line unit unless they have a death wish or something to prove. The minor damage inflicted by the artillery barrage wouldn't be enough to save the mercenaries from a severe thrashing. Gants was determined to have Morrison's head on a plate before the day was over. The lightning continued to flash overhead, illuminating the ground forces across the field. It was quite an ominous sight. *Well, enough of this lolly gagging about,* Gants thought. It was time to kill something.

“Courtyard to Command. Courtyard to Command.” It was the command tower interrupting Gants realized.

“I am about to launch an attack, what is it?” he yelled.

“Sir I have a Priority One Communiqué from LAAF Command. It's, uh, from General Nondi Steiner herself sir. Eyes Only for the Battalion Commander.” The technician was doing his best to distance himself from having interrupted his commander.

“This had better be good. Patch the transmission to my 'Mech.” Gants watched the view screen as General Steiner issued a full recall order and completely crushed his hopes for winning this battle and probably single-handedly ending his career. He played it two more times just make sure he wasn't dreaming or that it was an elaborate hoax. The message ended the third time, just like before, with the clenched armored fist of the Lyrans Alliance. Gants reached over and shut off the viewer. Then he took a look outside his 'Mech at his forces grouped around him. Such a fine fighting force he had at his command. Ready to charge headlong across the field and fight to the death against the mercenaries. The shame of this would be enough that any Drac would gladly commit *seppuku*. Probably right here in the seat, even. Gants moved his *Berserker* a few steps to the left towards a concrete watchtower. In the 'Mech's right hand was a

battle-axe, used for close-in combat. Gants raised the right arm high over the 'Mech's head and slashed repeatedly at the base of the tower. The tower quickly crumpled under the harsh blows of the battle-axe.

Morrison watched from his *Penetrator* and tensed for what he expected was the signal for a commitment to battle. His finger hovered over the comms button ready to give the charge order even though the scene before him was confusing at best.

With a fraction of his frustration released Gants ordered his troops to stand down and then he opened a wide-band channel. "Against my better judgment, I am ordered to turn over command of the port to you, now that we are leaving. I have ordered my forces to stand to, but I will destroy anything that moves towards the port while we load up. I understand you have some of my personnel, as POWs and I would like them returned as soon as possible to hasten our departure. No further action is to be taken against your unit; that is a direct order from the Archon herself. There will be no further communication between our forces after this."

Morrison sat there his jaw hung down in total shock of what he was hearing. He was sure every one of his own troops was getting this too and the looks on their faces must have aped his own. The transmission continued. "A pity, Colonel Morrison, you played this hand well. I would've liked to see how this fight might have played out. Until we meet again."

Morrison sat there in silence for a few minutes not really sure what to make of it all. None of this made sense. First he comes to this planet on a sweet garrison job. Then a Lyran Guard drops on their heads because their employer is mixed up in some shady deals. The fight goes back and forth, each side getting in some licks and then the Lyrans just up and leave! His brow furrowed.

"Somebody want to explain to me what the hell is going on??" he shouted in the confines of his cockpit.

**Ludwig Steiner Spaceport, Strona**  
**Alcor, Federated Commonwealth (Lyran Alliance Space)**  
**28 Dec 3062**  
**1100 Hours**

It had been three days since the end of the conflict on Alcor and just a mere eighteen hours since the 15th Lyran Guard Regiment/Charlie Battalion and its supporting 816th Lyran Panzer Regiment/Alpha Battalion lifted from the Ludwig Steiner Spaceport. The drives flares of their pair of DropShips could still be seen by the naked eye even in the near mid-day light. They were obviously pushing some hard Gs to clear the system. Something serious must be in the wind to relocate a Guard unit like that. That would bear some looking into. Morrison stood in the center of the main landing pad looking up at the two new stars in the sky and then around at the damage done to the port.

It hadn't been his intention to demolish most of the buildings but there really was no other way to rout the 15th from their hold on the port. All the fires had since been extinguished and the debris had been swept from the open spaces. Recovery efforts were well underway with all the Misfits lending a hand to repair that which they had sought to destroy. Although neither the

Misfits nor the 15th admitted fault in the carnage, Morrison felt partly responsible and had declared his intentions to fix what he could to hopefully make things right with the spaceport. He had to get back into their good graces, lest he have to hike his unit halfway around the world to be able to leave.

The repair process was going slowly, but steadily. All the condemned buildings had been flattened completely and the areas cleaned for new construction. Other buildings had been reinforced to make them sound enough to clear them out for later considerations. Two such buildings had been bays for 'Mechs and vehicles and had been jammed shut by the Misfits artillery barrage. The 15th, in their haste to leave, never bothered with the time to pry them back open. Morrison turned to get back to work when he saw a familiar face approaching. There was a definite show of pride in her step, almost over compensating for the sense of failure that she must have felt.

She stopped in front of Morrison and saluted him crisply. "Lieutenant Boze requesting a return to duty, sir." Her cheeks were flushed and her hair was mussed but she had a fire in her eyes. Morrison thought that he would have to keep an eye on her just to make sure everything was all right.

"At ease Stephanie. So, the medics cleared you for duty?" She relaxed into parade rest and kept her eyes locked forward. Yup, she'd bear watching.

"Yes sir. Just some bumps and bruises. Nothing a little hard work won't cure." She was on autopilot. Her words were sharp and short.

"Uh-huh," Morrison grunted. "What if I don't believe you?" His arms were crossed now.

She looked at him and then quickly looked away. "Sir?"

Morrison walked over and put a hand on her shoulder. "Look, Steph. I may be your CO, but I'm still a human. I can sympathize with what you went through. I've been shot out of my 'Mech too. There's nothing wrong with that. I'm not expecting you to be Morgan Kell, or Kai Allard-Liao or any one like that. I'm expecting you to be, you. I know why I hired you and it was because you're good at what you do. And in this case you did excellent. You survived and you came back to us. It sounds cold, but that's one less slot I have to fill with a warm body. That's something a commander never wants to have to do. But we're in the business of war and war kills people. On both sides. So, I want you to go easy on yourself and realize that it wasn't your fault. Heck, we're all just glad to have you back in one piece." He could see the fire in her eyes die out and the resolve on her face slackened.

"Permission to speak sir?" Her voice was noticeably softer.

"Granted."

"Thanks. For ... everything, sir."

“Don’t thank me yet MechWarrior. I’m assigning you to some heavy-duty repair work. Seems the Lyrans left without checking all the buildings. There’s a ’Mech over at Bay Twelve that you might find familiar.” A smile escaped past her lips and she knew right away that things would be all right after awhile. She snapped another salute, which he returned heartily. “My door is always open Steph. Now, scoot.”

Ed had reported finding the Wraith to Morrison not long after the Misfits took control from the empty base. The ’Mech Bay door had suffered a direct hit from some missiles and had collapsed in on itself. Next to the Wraith was a Catapult ’Mech, with a detached leg. It looked as if the Lyrans had tried repairing both ’Mechs but never found the time to complete those repairs. Well, both were in Misfits’ hands now and both would be added back to the TO&E just as soon as possible. Ed had even found some additional vehicles in another damaged bay and promised to get the details to Morrison once he had a chance to go over everything. It certainly looked like it was going to be a busy week.

Morrison began to walk back across the parade grounds that were cleared but still bore scorch marks from explosives. His Penetrator stood off to the side on the main parade grounds, still pristine from the day they’d captured and repaired it. His other ’Mech was still back at Base Indigo waiting for crucial parts before it could be functional again. Morrison chuckled at the thought of having two ’Mechs to himself. But it was something he’d have to get used to as commander. Who knows what else they might procure along the way. He checked his watch and realized he was due at Bay Four to help repair some of the structural damage. He was halfway there when two more familiar people stopped him. Morrison was quite surprised to see the second of the two.

“Colonel Morrison-san, “ began Sergeant Major Fujimowa “I would like to introduce you to Anthony Clemenza, son of Peter Clemenza and recently resurrected from the dead.”

Anthony took the outstretched hand of Morrison and shook it firmly. “Reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated. I don’t like being used as a pawn in these types of games but from what I hear Kreiger got his in the end. I would’ve preferred his life for my father’s but we all can’t get what we want. We just have to make do with what we get.”

Morrison was a little taken aback by the confidence in the boy’s tone. Barely a man, yet speaking as though he had lived two lifetimes. Morrison sensed there was something dangerous about him but couldn’t quite put his finger on it. “It’s good to know that you weren’t killed because of us after all, Mr. Clemenza. It was a relief to me and my unit to find you and Leutnant Boze in the jail cell, both alive.”

Anthony smiled. “Please, call me Tony. All my friends do. And Miss Boze was a pleasant person to converse with during our captivity. Please convey my thanks to her when you have the chance. I must take my leave of you earlier than expected, unfortunately.”

“Oh, I’m sorry that you have to leave so soon. I’m sure the rest of the unit would like to congratulate you on getting through all of this,” then Morrison added “Tony.”

“Yes, I’m sure. But with the passing of my father I have to take his place now and there are some business considerations that must be addressed.” He raised a hand to stall Morrison from speaking. “I learned from Steph why you were here and I can assure you that I will be terminating that area of enterprise and moving on to other things. With this civil war heating up, there is much profit to be made elsewhere. I do not wish to cause you any further undo delay in your duties Mr. Morrison. If there is anything that you need from this time forward, you may feel free to call upon me. In my capacity here or on other worlds I may be in a position to assist you.”

Then it clicked. Morrison realized that Tony was going to be taking over the family business and that could not bode well for anyone that would be willing to cross swords with him. Tony had been through enough that he would not trust people easily and his retribution for betrayal was likely to be very harsh. Tony was going to become a crime boss, plain and simple. “Thank you Tony. I appreciate the offer and I’ll certainly keep you in mind.” And hopefully not piss you off in the future either, he thought.

“Take care Mr. Morrison.” They shook again. “You too, Tony.” Morrison and Fujimowa watched Tony walk to a waiting black hover limo and drive away. As the car passed around the buildings, Fujimowa turned to Morrison. “What do you make of him, Colonel?”

“A very dangerous but competent man Sergeant-Major. Too much subterfuge in that line of work to suit me, but if he can make a go of it then more power to him.” Morrison rubbed a hand over the stubble on his chin.

“But not too much power Colonel-san, for a man like that would become superlative. Do you think we will meet him again?”

“It’d better be under the best circumstance, I’ll tell you that. I do not want to be on the wrong side of the line against whatever he can muster up. We’d never see it coming.” A slight chill ran down his spine as the words he spoke hit home with a hard realization. Then as if on cue, a pair of black hoverlimos rounded the same corner Tony disappeared behind.

Morrison felt a sudden rush of panic but that quickly dissipated when he saw the Alcor Pennant displayed across the front grill of both vehicles. They pulled up near Morrison and Fujimowa and several people exited from both cars. Half of them appeared to be a security crew there to guard the person in stately dress and carrying himself with pomp airs. Like an overstuffed peacock, Morrison thought trying to suppress a grin. Fujimowa’s face was frozen in a deep study of the approaching official.

“I’m Stephen Bass, the Planetary Governor for Alcor. Are you the commander of the mercenaries working for Gyro-Tech?” he directed at Morrison.

Morrison extended a hand in greeting. “I am Leutnant-Colonel Morrison, commander of the Misfits.” The Governor held his gaze and did not take his hand. Morrison lowered it back to his side with slight embarrassment. “What can we do for you Governor Bass?”

“You can pack up and leave. Today.”

“Excuse me?” Morrison tried to hide his shock but failed miserably.

“Your little war with the Lyrans has fueled the hundreds of protests that I have to deal with every day now that Victor made it public that he plans to unseat Archon Katrina. Not to mention the massive damage done to the spaceport! You’ve nearly wrecked our ability to do commerce. You’ve caused enough damage around here and I will not stand for any more. I want you and your unit gone. Off my planet before I have to log a complaint with the MRBC for excessive damage to civilian property.”

“Certainly sir. Then I presume you’re prepared to honor our existing contract with Gyro-Tech Industries and pay us in full. And for that matter I also assume that you’ve procured us suitable transportation back to Outreach, because last I looked we didn’t own a DropShip.” The sarcastic tone of his retort was not lost on the Governor.

“I don’t care how you do it. I want you gone. I don’t need any more interference in my official affairs and you are one hell of a distraction right now. Since I don’t have the forces to detain you here at the port, I want the peace of mind knowing that you’re no longer here to cause any more trouble.” The Governor had no intentions of backing down from his initial proposal and the growing volume of their discussion was starting to attract attention.

“Well, sir, by MRBC rules only the contract holder can terminate the contract prematurely and thereby incur a number of penalties the least of which is payment in full for services rendered. Now while I’m certain that Gyro-Tech is happy to still have it’s company after the Lyran Guard has left, I’m in no position to assume that they are done with us at this time.” Morrison crossed his arms. This was to be a battle of wills and Morrison was determined to win out over this ostentatious lackey.

The Governor smiled smugly and waved his hand at the parked vehicles. One of the doors opened and John Kaufman, CEO of Gyro-Tech, stepped out and walked over. Morrison’s heart sank to his knees the second he saw John. John didn’t look happy either.

John straightened his tie before finding the right words to explain his presence. “Colonel Morrison at this time the board of Gyro-Tech feels that your services are no longer required.” Morrison could tell from the smug grin on the Governor’s face that it wasn’t John’s decision to make. This was going to be a losing battle. “Gyro-Tech will pay you in full for your services and have issued a request to the MRBC to terminate the contract and release you from your bond to seek other employment.” John shrugged his shoulders and stuffed his hands in his pants pockets. “I wish there was more that we could do for you Colonel but our hands are tied. You’ve been a phenomenal help to us if that counts for anything.”

The Governor took a step forward to block John from Morrison’s view. “Yes, yes, kisses and hugs all around. That means you’re done here merc. I want you gone. As you say, PDQ, Colonel.”

“We don’t have a ship to leave in and it will take some time to schedule a trip off your planet,“ Morrison growled back.

“I don’t care about your problems Colonel. If you’re still here by tomorrow I’m going to have you arrested,” the Governor countered.

By now a few of the senior officers of the Misfits had come looking for the Colonel only to find him embroiled in an argument with the planetary Governor. This didn’t stop any of them from gathering around to find out what all the noise was about. Many of them began shouting slurs or complaints back at the Governor and that made his security detail rather nervous and twitchy. The Governor only added to the ruckus by trying to shout over the group at Morrison and Morrison struggling to hear the Governor was trying to get his own people back under control.

Everyone was busy shouting and so they didn’t notice another black limo pull up and a single person exit the car. But when he walked right into the middle of the screaming match and stood between Morrison and Governor Bass the voices died quickly. Morrison was surprised to see the reaction on the Governor’s face. It was as if he was scared of the new comer as he turned to look at everyone there. It was Tony!

“It seems to me that this situation is going to escalate and that neither party is going to get what they need to accommodate the other. Therefore I propose the following. The mercenaries, having recently been released from the contractual obligations to this world require transportation to deliver them to their next destination. With the proper transportation they could be ready to depart within the week, correct Colonel?” Morrison nodded his head wondering where he was going with this.

“Since suitable transportation would take nearly a month to schedule to pick up the mercenaries I suggest that the Governor’s office supply them with their own DropShip that they will purchase for a fair price. I believe the Governor knows of a DropShip that is not currently in use. The Heaven Scent, I believe is her name. What class is that anyway, Governor?”

The Governor stammered trying to form the words while his fear of Tony betrayed him the entire time. “It’s a ... a ...that is to say...the Heaven Scent is a ... a.... Overlord Class. But I’m not...well, I mean...I don’t think...that they could...well...afford it.”

Tony turned and looked Morrison right in the eyes. “How about they purchase it for 100 million C-Bills?”

The Governor coughed at the figure that was easily less than a quarter of the actual value. “A hundred million! That’s less than” Tony’s head snapped around changing the Governor’s tune abruptly. “Yes, Mr. Clemenza. A hundred million would be more than fair. I’ll even sign over a crew for them. Will there be anything else?”

Tony shook his head. “No. You may leave now.” The Governor bowed his head and scrambled back to his car. The security detail that hadn’t moved since Tony returned, nodded to him almost imperceptibly and got back into their cars and drove off. Tony watched them drive away and then turned back to Morrison.

“My debt to you is now paid Colonel. Use it in good health. And,” he smiled widely “good luck.” And with that Tony turned and walked back to his car and drove away.

Morrison stood there in awe of what just transpired and looked at the faces of his officers around him. This place just keeps getting weirder by the minute! “Alright everyone, you heard the Governor. First order of business is to pack everything we don’t need to complete the recovery work here. Then we’ll finish fixing things here and get the heck off this rock before things get any stranger. After the new year Major Kaplan, Fujimowa and myself are going to check out the ship and see about getting it over here. Any questions? No? Good, let’s move people.”

“Leutenant-Colonel Morrison?” An unfamiliar voice spoke from beyond the circle of troops freezing everyone where they stood.

The crowd of troops parted before the voice. Morrison spotted him instantly, for he stood out like a sore thumb. The ComStar acolyte was dressed in the formal white uniform and had his hood up over his head framing a fair-skinned face. Morrison saw this and threw his hands in the air. “Oh hell, now what?” he yelled.

The acolyte did not show any reaction to Morrison’s outburst and stepped forward so he could be heard without shouting. “Peace of Blake be with you Colonel. I am Acolyte Drayton and I bring you an HPG message from the MRBC.”

Morrison gave him a look like he’d just spoken in a foreign language that no one knew. “You’ve got a what? Jesus, that was fast.” Hyper-Pulse Generator messages were really the only means of communicating between the star systems. Data was packaged up using ComStar’s proprietary equipment and sent out from huge transmitter dishes to hop from system to system until it reached its destination, which could take several days. The fact that Morrison was being handed a message from the MRBC now, meant something or someone was calling the shots behind the scenes.

“These are perilous times and work is hard pressed to find those willing to take it upon themselves. The MRBC has apparently upped its control over new contracts to its members. You’ve been selected to take a new contract as you are now unemployed.” He withdrew a cipher-chip from within his robes and handed it over to Morrison. “You may read that at your leisure and transmit your reply to me at the local ComStar office here at the port.”

Morrison blinked twice before replying, “Oh. Okay. I’ll get back to you then.”

“Very good sir. I will await your message.” Acolyte Drayton bowed and turned to depart as quietly as he’d arrived.

Just then a muffled shout echoed across the open grounds. “Drayton! Is that you?” Morrison turned to see Sergeant Jeremy Volksfram from Striker Lance come bounding across the way, shouting as he ran. The acolyte stopped at hearing his name and turned back around. A smile spread across his face when he saw Jeremy coming at him.

“Jeremy! Damn I haven’t seen you in ages!” The two clasped hands and slapped shoulders in camaraderie.

Jeremy took a step back. “Look at you! What’s this acolyte crap? I thought you were going into the ‘Guards?’”

“Not everyone has the brains to make it through NAMA Sergeant High-and-Mighty. Besides, we all serve our purpose in ComStar whether we know it or not.” Drayton pressed his hands together and bowed his head but kept a sly grin on his face to show that he understood the inside joke.

Jeremy slugged him in the shoulder. “Yeah yeah. So listen, I’ve got plenty to do here but we’re not leaving for a couple days. I’d love to get a beer and catch up on old times.”

“Well, let’s see. I’m off Saturday, so how’s two days from now sound?”

“Sounds good to me. See you then.” Jeremy and the acolyte shook hands and parted. Jeremy ran back to his Bombardier and the acolyte turned and walked back to his office.

By this time most of the Misfits had returned to their work leaving Morrison, George, Fujimowa and Sarah standing in a small group.

“I’m not sure I like ComStar peddling new contracts out like this. It’s too soon after our last one. I mean, we’re still all pent up from not getting that last fight with the Guards,” George said.

Morrison shrugged. “ComStar chairs part of the MRBC so I guess it could be seen as a conflict of interest but that would only be if it was something for ComStar’s benefit. And I don’t know what could relocate a Lyran line unit like that but it had to come from pretty high up the chain.”

“We have many reports of unrest around the Alliance these days, Colonel-san.” Fujimowa clasped his hands behind his back and continued. “With Victor Davion’s call to wrest control of the FedCom throne from his sister, it is possible that the Guards were needed elsewhere and this conflict on Alcor was not important enough in the grand scheme of things.”

George harrumphed at that. “Call it what you want, it’s still underhanded dealings in yanking military units around like that.”

“War without politics is like a tree without roots, Major-san. Just on Alcor alone we have seen news of protests against both sides of the coin.”

“True enough Fujimowa,” Sarah offered. “It’s no secret that this war is politically motivated and it’s gonna get a lot worse before it gets better. The question is, how do we avoid getting sucked down into the quagmire of a civil war?”

“We pick our contracts carefully, Captain.” Morrison looked at each of the three before continuing. “I didn’t start the Misfits to become the pet project of some House leader to be used

as cannon fodder when their line units refuse or are unable to carry the fight. Especially when the fight is over succession rights. That's petty sibling rivalry and they can keep it for all I care. If Vic and Kathy can't settle their differences like adults then neither of them is fit to rule in my opinion and I will not call the unit or myself subject to them in any way, shape or form. This new contract," Morrison held up the cipher-chip "was sent to us by the MRBC, a neutral party in all of this, which leads me to believe that we're not going to be used for any political gain. And if we can't find work that doesn't have some sort of politic aim to it, then I guess we'll just have to grow a conscience and strike out to help those being hurt most by this war. I'm in this for the long haul folks, so we have to tread carefully but we still have to eat. It won't always be easy to balance the two."

George clapped his hands together. "Well said Morrison. Now all we need to do is keep out of the way of every pro-Victor and pro-Katherine unit and we'll be just fine."

"We might not have to avoid them, " Sarah interjected, "but if we act as a neutral party in defense of those not party to the civil war we might be able to uphold a sense of nobility that might keep us from the slaughter. I mean, would they be more likely to attack someone defending civilians or someone opposed to their idea of a rightful ruler?" She balanced her open hands as if weighing the options in the open.

Morrison cut off George before he could respond. "Sarah is right, George. If we maintain neutrality in the civil war then we're still serving our interests as well as those directly affected by the war. I'm sure there are some commanders in the AFFC and LAAF that are trying to remain neutral and focused on other issues, like the Clans. And that focus on the more important things has to be respected by the rulers because that's the right thing to do. It's what I would hope to be true."

There was a small moment of silence as the four of them mulled over what had been said. There was a good amount of logic to it but no one ever said civil war was logical. Morrison knew this fact and knew that it was bound to cause trouble down the road but like Sarah said, if they maintain neutrality then they could avoid getting swept up in the mayhem. It was worth a shot.

Sarah stared at Morrison from the corner of her eyes hoping that the others might not notice. There was so much more that she wanted, needed, to tell him but this wasn't the time or place. Plus if she just threw herself at him and he didn't return the same feelings then she knew she'd be devastated. It was going to take some time to feel Morrison out to see if he might feel the same way about her. It was time she didn't want to spend that way, but there really was no alternative. She inhaled deeply and steeled herself against any unwanted display of emotion.

"Well," Sarah began, "I'd better get back to helping those unfortunates we're talking about. Then we can get out of here and help the next set of folks. Gentlemen," she said with a nod towards the men and turned on her heel.

The three of them watched her walk away but Morrison was the only one to let out a nervous sigh. George noticed it immediately. "You've got it bad for her don't you?"

“Is it that obvious George?” Morrison remarked without taking his eyes off her departing form.

“More than you realize Colonel-san.”

“Cripes, not you too Fujimowa!” Morrison ran his hands over his shaved head in frustration.

“Just tell her Morrison,” George said sincerely “You can see it in the way she looks at you. There’s something there. You’ve just got to go for it.”

“But I’m her commanding officer. How can I do that and not have it be a conflict of interest, or fraternizing or something worse?”

“That’s something for you to decide, Colonel-san. As you lead the unit with your heart, so you must follow your heart in your own matters.” George and Fujimowa turned to leave Morrison with his own thoughts.

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