

# Marion's Misfits

"The Unknown Factor" (Chapter 8)

By: Slade Geance

*Strona*

*Alcor, Federated Commonwealth (Lyrans Alliance Space)*

*30 Dec 3062*

*1200 Hours*

The shiny red and green garland still hung from the faux wood paneling. Cheap Christmas decorations fluttered in the breeze kicked up by the ceiling fans as they hung from faded-yellow ceiling tiles. The front door was a full panel of glass with "Pagano's Deli" written on it in green, white and red colors. It had one of those chimes hooked to it that would ring whenever the door opened.

Just then it dinged. Sergeant Jeremy Volksfram looked up at the rusty bell with an annoyed look then continued walking into the establishment. He first spotted an older man in a greasy white t-shirt that had obviously seen better days. His hair was thinning on the front and sides and his face was red from standing in front of the ovens for too many years. He was wiping a silver pizza pan with a cloth and chomping on his favorite stogie and barely even glanced at Jeremy as he passed by the counter and headed for a table near the back of the place. There was already someone at that table. Jeremy sat down in the chair just as the waitress brought over a large pie with several different toppings and fresh pitcher of dark beer. She was a young brunette, most likely early college working on her holiday break from classes. Jeremy poured himself a glass and took a drink while he waited for the girl to depart back to the kitchen. His facial expression revealed the drink was not what he expected and the other one laughed.

"Bah! Friggin' stout beer! Thanks a lot Drayton. You know I only like lagers, now this crap is going to sit in my gut like a rock for the rest of the day." He took another long gulp. "Ugh. But since you're buying, I'm drinking." His words hid their true meaning. *What's so important?*

Drayton took a sip of his own beer. Although a devout ComStar acolyte, he was sans white robe today. "I thought you robot jockeys were made of sterner stuff. A good stout will put hair on your chest. And a number of other places too." *Is it safe to talk?*

Jeremy chuckled. "The only thing I need to *put* is the crosshairs on the target. The rest just takes care of itself." *Everything is fine.*

Drayton pulled a slice from the pie and took a large bite. "So how you been man? I haven't seen you in ages and here you show up and you're a merc. Go figure. How's that working out for you?"

"Oh man, it's great," Jeremy replied as he grabbed his own piece of the pie. "We just tangled with some Lyrans that were giving our employer the run-around. Bloodied them good too and they took off. Word on high is that they were recalled 'cause of the war and all, but we like to think that we were too much for them to handle. The latter sounds much better than the former."

"The Lyrans Guards? You think that was wise beating on a Lyrans unit in their own backyard?" Drayton seemed skeptical at the news. *Do you know what you're doing?*

“Hey, “Jeremy put up his hands to defend the verbal attack. “They attacked us. We told them that we were here to protect our employer and they wouldn’t even sit down and talk it over. Y’know? Hash out our differences and the like. We acted within our contract and defended ourselves accordingly. There was nothing else we could have done.” *Yes, we do and it was a righteous action.*

“Alright man, relax, “ Drayton smirked. “I’m on your side, remember? It’s just that recently the media is either one-side or the other and you’re pretty much screwed if you’re on the wrong one. I’d hate to see you get hammered so fresh out of the gate.” *Just so long as you’re careful in the future.*

“Yeah, our CO is pretty sharp so I don’t have any worries there.” A pause. “Man, this is a good pizza.” The two talked in idle chitchat for the next few minutes eating and drinking. Once the food was gone they signaled for another full pie and a refill on the pitcher of beer. This time Jeremy chose a lager that was a bit lighter. The two men smiled at the girl when she brought the food over. She was cute after all. Or was that the beer doing the thinking for them?

Jeremy grabbed the pizza wheel and began slicing it up. “Seriously though. What’s up?”

Drayton moved to take a sip of his beer but talked through the glass to muffle his voice. “Command received your report and they’re very pleased.” Drayton recalled how Jeremy had slipped him the datachip when they shook hands the other day on the parade grounds. Concealing the chip in his ComStar robe was so much simpler than trying to arrange a dead drop. Especially when dealing with time critical information. “You’re being recalled for reassignment. Someone got wind of something down in the Chaos March and you’re their man. What’s your exit strategy?”

Jeremy moved to grab another slice. “I’m going to tell Morrison about the good fortune I’ve had with the Misfits, explain my cover story, and hitch a ride with the unit for a quick trip back home. Morrison is sending one of his yahoos back to the ‘World’ to get some sense knocked into him. And if I know Shadd, “Jeremy chuckled lightly, “this guy is going to come away with some serious lumps.”

Drayton nodded his head before putting the glass back down on the table. “Ballsy. Stupid, but ballsy. Command might not be all that happy about you breaking cover like that.”

“Tough,” he said as he slurped some cheese topping from his slice. “Morrison is a straight shooter and I don’t know how he’s going to take to being duped like this. On the down side, he could flip his lid and we lose a potential ally. On the up side, he grasps reality and we can call on them in four years to lend a hand when the truce ends. He may never get as big as the larger merc units, or us, but he’s got some serious potential. If he knows we back him instead of oppose him, he just might play ball when the time comes.”

### ***Governor’s Compound, Auxiliary DropPort***

“Sweet Jesus, that’s a big sonavabitch, “ whistled George. He brought the hoverjeep to a halt and he, Morrison, Fujimowa and Ed hopped out. Ed had caught up with Morrison right after the news of the new DropShip spread like wildfire throughout the unit. He made a solid case that he would need to check all the bays to make sure everything would be stored properly, and Morrison could hardly argue with his Master Chief Technician. The four of them stood there on the landing pad and stared up at the monstrous ovoid shape. At over one hundred thirty meters high, it completely dwarfed all the other buildings on the compound making it quite impossible to miss from a distance. Up close it simply threw a massive shadow across the grounds.

Standing in that shadow by the gangplank was the ship's captain, XO and navigator. Morrison saw the trio and the group headed over to meet them.

Morrison saw the captain easily matched his one hundred eighty-five centimeter height but he had a few centimeters on the XO and a good head over the navigator. George matched the XO and Ed sized up the navigator fairly similarly. Fujimowa fell between George and Ed in height. The captain and XO appeared to be in the standard Lyran Dress Blues; dark blue double-breasted suit jackets and matching pants complete with white hats with the symbol of the Steiner fist on the front. The navigator must've been of a lower rank for he only wore a single-breasted jacket and pants of the same color and held a much plainer hat under his left arm. Morrison, followed shortly by the other three behind him, stepped up and saluted the DropShip crew in the old traditional way of left hand to the forehead. The Captain and his crew returned the salute with the right fist over their hearts; the old Lyran style.

Morrison saw this and wondered if that feeling of apprehension was warranted for him and his unit. He lowered his hand and extended it in a handshake. "Captain, I'm Leutnant-Colonel Marion Morrison of the mercenary unit Marion's Misfits." The Lyran Captain took his hand and pumped it twice, "Pleasure to meet you, sir. I'm Captain Petre McIntyre of the *Heaven Scent*. This is my Executive Officer, Lieutenant-Commander Daniel McNamara, and our navigator Ensign Eduardo Ramirez." Morrison shook the hand of McNamara and Ramirez and then turned to present his men.

"Allow me to introduce my XO, Major George Kaplan. My aide-de-camp, and right arm, Sergeant Major Jest Fujimowa. And this is Master Chief Tech Ed Bird, our head technician and all around 'Mr. Fix-it'." All the men greeted each other with firm handshakes. A pregnant silence began to pass, so Morrison looked for something to keep things going.

"Excuse Captain, but is that really an OKS you've got there?" Morrison pointed to the medal of a gold Steiner Fist set against a silver propeller and hanging on a blue ribbon.

"Certainly is Colonel. I got the Order of Katherine Steiner in '52 fighting a delaying action on Waldorff so our forces could regroup on Alyina. Lost my ship in that one I did. The Falcons are a nasty bunch." Captain McIntyre shifted from one foot to another, the story clearly being an uncomfortable part of his past.

Morrison nodded and then stopped suddenly. "Wait, did you say Alyina? My unit was shipped to Alyina in '52. We got there first and the Falcons hit us two days later on the drop. I'd have to say that you indirectly saved a good number of my people on that run Captain. I owe you a drink sometime."

"I appreciate the offer sir and I'll take you up on that. You seem like an honorable fellow despite much of what I've heard and read." The Captain was still a bit standoffish but was slowly warming up to the mercenaries.

"Yeah, the media hasn't exactly done us justice over the past month or so. We'd just as soon count our blessings on this one and leave as soon as possible. I guess that's where you come in Captain. I hope that you don't hold this change in employment against us. We didn't even have a hand in the deal. It was a complete surprise to us all."

"Well, I can't say that I'd have reason to dislike you sir. After all, we only just met and as I said, you seem fairly honorable. I'm just happy to not be working for that, that, what did the crew call him again Mr. McNamara?"

"I believe that's 'snooty airhead', sir" the XO replied.

“Precisely. The Governor has his strong points, but I’m not in the mood to be gallivanting around the cosmos on a politician’s short leash. I’ve had the *Scent* too long to be smelling like roses everywhere we go.”

George chuckled at the play on words from the Captain, “I wouldn’t worry about that Captain. So far everywhere we go the stuff seems to hit the fan pretty well. No chance of roses with a unit like us.” Everyone laughed lightly and the ice seemed to be broken at that point.

“Colonel, if you and your men would like to join me I’d like to give you a tour of the *Scent*.” The Captain turned and extended a hand to the stairs leading into the belly of the DropShip.

“We’d be delighted Captain.” The group started up the stairs. “Will we be meeting more of your crew Captain McIntyre?”

“Most of the crew are on a twenty-four hour pass until we get all the paperwork straightened out on the transfer of employment but we have a few folks hanging around doing maintenance and whatnot. In fact I think my chief tech is down in the ’Mech bays. We’ll head there first.” The group headed to the main bank of elevators nestled in the core of the ship and rode them to Bay Level 1M. The doors opened to a massive cavern filled with eighteen ’Mech racks on the first level. The second level held another eighteen and was accessible by ramp that wound its way up the sides of the bay. There were sparks from an arc welder coming from a bay not far from the elevators and the Captain motioned the group in that direction. They came upon a hunched over figure in a dark brown jumpsuit and welder mask making a joint stronger with additional metal plates. The Captain had to yell over the noise to get the person’s attention. The welder turned around and upon seeing the source of the yelling, turned off the torch and hung it on the utility cart next to them. He stood about one hundred sixty-five centimeters in height and the flame-resistant suit gave him a bulk that hid the nature of his true size.

“Mr. Chirapongse, I’d like you to meet our new employers,” the Captain began. “This is Lieutenant-Colonel Morrison, Major George Kaplan, Sergeant Major Jest Fujimowa and Master Chief Tech Edward Bird. Gentleman, this is my Senior Chief Mr. Kris Chirapongse.” Morrison walked closer and extended his hand. Mr. Chirapongse pulled off the right hand glove and grasped Morrison’s hand in a firm grip. Morrison noticed immediately that his hand practically enveloped Chirapongse’s. That’s when the mask came off revealing a woman with short flame-red spiky hair that had been matted down from the sweat under the welder’s mask. Her round face held eyes the color of sapphires and her nose tapered down just above a set of thin lips. Morrison’s eyes went wide at the sight of her and his hand hung in mid-air for a second before it dropped back to his side.

“Weren’t expecting a woman, Colonel?” she said in a husky voice.

Morrison felt the hot flush on his cheeks. “Well, the Captain had said Mister, so I naturally assumed...I mean...I wasn’t trying to presume anything.” Morrison turned back to look at George. “Help.”

It was Captain McIntyre that spoke up first. “Don’t mind that Colonel. Mr. Chirapongse likes to break them for every man on my ship.”

“And the Captain calls everyone Mister on the *Scent*. He’s old-fashioned that way,” Kris finished.

“And she tends to be insubordinate. But she’s the best crew chief I’ve found this side of Terra and she keeps me flying,” said the Captain.

“Otherwise I’d have to listen to him piss and moan and that can be annoying,” completed Kris.

Morrison followed the banter back and forth between the two and felt like it was sort of tabletop sporting match with them. “You two work this out before hand or are you always like this?”

Mr. McNamara spoke up this time. “As long as we’re not being shot at, everyone on the *Scent* is pretty jovial all the time. We’ve got our own ship and most of us have been together since we joined the service. We’ve stuck together through several vessels and have pretty much developed into a tight-knit family. So it’ll take some getting used to at first, but I think you’ll all fit in fine.”

“Sí, el capitán... ‘mano es listo, eh...clever. Ésta es mi familia,” Eduardo said.

Morrison just stood there and listened. The people that he saw before him held the exact kind of respect and loyalty that he hoped would develop within the Misfits. He wanted everyone to rely on each other for anything they needed. He wanted them to respect each other and count on each other. In short he wanted what the crew of the *Scent* had. A sense of family. Well, if they could achieve it, then certainly so could the Misfits. In fact, maybe they could learn a thing or two from this crew. Morrison knew right then this was a good sign of things to come.

“Well, Captain I hope that myself and the unit can live up to your aspirations. You seem to have a very well rounded crew on this ship. I think we’re going to do very well together.” Morrison smiled and knew he meant every word he said.

“Well said Colonel. Now I think we’ve distracted Mr. Chirapongse enough, so let’s continue the tour shall we?” The Captain held his arm out towards the elevators.

Ed coughed lightly to clear his throat. “Actually, if it’s all the same to you Colonel I’m in my prime location so I’d like to stay and ask some more questions and maybe help out Mr. Chirapongse if she’d like.”

“Certainly,” said Morrison. “If the Captain and the lady have no objections?” Both nodded that it’d be ok and Ed walked around the group and into the bay to check out the work that had been going on. Kris followed behind him putting the mask over her head but leaving the guard flipped up. “I’m welding some braces on the lower control arms of the locking cradle for added support. We haven’t carried ‘Mechs in some time and I need to know they’re not going to go flying around my bay on a drop.”

“But,” Ed questioned, “shouldn’t the cradle be rated to support a ‘Mech without the extra bracing?”

“It is if you take the standard stress factor against the weight of the cargo in the brace times the deceleration rate, but you ever see what happens to an assault ‘Mech during a 2g drop when it gets loose in a bay this size? It ain’t pretty, I’ll tell you that. This will make sure your toys stay put when you rack them.” Kris gave Ed a sly grin.

“Oh hell.” Ed realized just what her explanation would mean if it ever came true for the unit. “Got an extra torch? Together we can knock this out in no time.”

Morrison watched the two techs instantly bond over their work and simply shook his head. He mumbled while walking back to the elevators. “Techs, Mechjocks, and Flyboys. We all have our own language, yet no one outside that group knows what the others are talking about. That’s the mystery of the military. It’s amazing we ever get anything accomplished.”

The group continued through the other parts of the ship. From the lower bays where vehicles would go, engineering and storage to the upper bays where the fighters would be stored, the mess hall, conference rooms, crew and unit quarters and finally the bridge and operations areas. The sophisticated equipment the *Scent* was packing surprised Morrison. It had its own 2D radar grid that could support combat operations with enough data feeds to handle three reconnaissance

satellites and two communications satellites, all at the same time. It was quite an impressive setup. Morrison felt that the cold, gray steel walls surrounding him were a bit foreign and eerie but then again none of the crew probably had the joy of spending the night out in the field under a green canvas tent.

Fujimowa was looking over the weapons control board with a feigned understanding of all the bells and whistles. The Captain walked up next to him and began pointing some things out. “With regards to weapons we have no back, front, top or bottom in space. We have arcs, or areas where weapon turrets can target. We have eight primary arcs around the ship. Easiest way to break it down, is imagine you’re looking down at the top of the ship. Then draw four lines through the center of the ship, each at a forty-five degree angle to the latter. That gives you the eight areas around the ship; each one designated Arc One through Eight. Now because *Overlords* are egg-shaped there are two planes of elevation in those arcs, the Upper and Lower that we designate with U or L for short. This plane cuts through the middle of the ship from the side. For example, Arc One U, is the upper first arc and Arc Four L, is the lower fourth arc. Targeting follows the arcs in a sequential order around the ship to provide constant firepower.” The Captain traced his figure across the screen to illustrate. “So if some fighter craft came up aft of us up the port side and rolled over the ship and crossed the nose, then the batteries in Arc One L, Arc One U and Arc Two U could theoretically fire all at the same time hitting the target. While having to call out each arc individually would be murder on fire control teams, everything is routed through radar and sensors that designate targets based on size, distance, velocity and trajectory. No sense in hitting something on the way out if you could stop something on the way in. Now on the ground things are much simpler. The arcs are turned off to allow the two planes full control and that lightens the load the targeting computers have to deal with. The lower handles anti-ground and the upper handles anti-air.”

“*Domo arigato* Captain.” Fujimowa nodded as he finally grasped the concept. It wasn’t everyday a MechWarrior got a crash course in DropShip combat tactics. Normally you only worry about what’s in front of you in a ‘Mech. On a DropShip there was a 3-dimensional ‘box’ in which you needed to defend. Fujimowa found the weapons readout screen and noticed some varying designations in available weapons that didn’t mesh with what he recalled should be aboard. “Does the *Scint* carry the normal firepower of an *Overlord*-class ship Captain?”

“Ah, you noticed,” replied the Captain. “We’ve been working on updating the systems, but since we’re officially a ‘non-military’ vessel, we’ve had to do it piecemeal. We just completed our swap of the particle projection cannons. Sold six of the old variant for four Extended-Range versions. We bartered our AC-20s for the Artemis IV Fire-Control Systems to add to the LRM racks. There’s much more to be added but given the knowledge that a complete weapons upgrade taxes the ship’s cooling system beyond its capabilities, we’re working on a more efficient cooling system first. The Clan version of the *Overlords* have solved this problem, but none of us have been that close to examine one.” The Captain shrugged an indifference to the weapons board and walked back to stand beside the command chair in the middle of the room. From there he could observe all three mercenaries as they continued about his bridge.

Morrison walked around the bridge looking over the different consoles and boards that enveloped the bridge area. He’d never been on the bridge of a DropShip before. He’d never been senior enough to warrant a trip beyond the bays on any mission. Now he was the most senior officer and soon-to-be owner of this ship. The feeling of accomplishment was a little heady as he basked in the glow from the monitors. A red beacon began to flash on one of the

comm. boards and McIntyre moved to get the transmission. After a few grunts and “yeahs” he put the headset back down.

“Port authority needs me down in their Ops building to finish the paperwork and file a flight plan out of here. Anything in particular you need from us Colonel?” the Captain asked.

Morrison thought for a second before responding. “I’ve got troops and material spread over two locations. The spaceport and an ad hoc repair base on the southeast edge of Strona. I hate to sound lazy but can we make two hops to pick everything up?”

“That’s not lazy Colonel. That’s called a training op where I come from. I’ll get us ready to get underway by 1300 tomorrow. Just give the coordinates of your base to Mr. Ramirez and we’ll take care of the rest.” The Captain turned and left the bridge.

Morrison and George both walked over to the navigation plotter where Ensign Ramirez was going over some updated maps for the global positioning Software. Once he had the location of Base *Indigo*, Ramirez then had a flight plan mapped out in less than a minute by hand. The computer confirmed the same plan through its calculations a few seconds later. With a head for numbers like Ramirez, there was no question as to why the Captain had the Ensign on his crew. Morrison, George and Fujimowa all left the bridge and took the lifts to their respective floors on the crew quarters levels.

After Fujimowa exited the lift and it continued to the officer levels, Morrison turned to George. “I don’t know George. This is all happening so fast. It almost feels like I’m not in control or that someone is pushing us towards something. The Lyrans leaving like they did; not even bothering to reclaim all their equipment? You’d think the Clans returned or something.” Morrison shivered involuntarily at the thought. “Then we get this ship without spending a single C-Bill and ComStar delivers us a new contract offer from the MRBC. Something just doesn’t feel right.” Morrison frowned in thought and crossed his arms. The lift came to a halt and the doors opened.

“Don’t worry Morrison. Sometimes you just have to go with the unknown.” George patted Morrison on the back as he exited the lift.

Morrison turned back to George, “It’s the unknown factor that worries me.” The doors closed on the lift taking George away. Morrison walked down the causeway on the command level and headed to his official quarters aboard the ship. His first official business aboard would be reviewing that datachip ComStar delivered.

### **Ludwig Steiner *Spaceport, Strona***

***Alcor, Lyran Alliance***

***3 Jan 3063***

***1400 Hours***

Morrison stood in the opening to the *Scent’s* ’Mech bay and watched as his troops loaded up their mechanical mounts. He already had his ’Mech racked as well as all of Baker Company. Next would be Delta and then Kampfgruppe Company would move their vehicles into the upper bay where double racks had been setup to put two into a spot for one. There was no time to look for a second ship to load up anyone else, so they were making the most of all the room they had to spare. Once everything was loaded and they lifted off, the Pack Hunters would follow them out and dock in the hanger bays towards the upper half of the ship.

Currently the hunched over form of a *Marauder* piloted by Leutnant Julian Pintall of Slasher Lance was making its way cautiously up the ramp. Its claw-like arms were held up high to keep

from catching on the ramp. The Leutnant was second-in-command for Slasher Lance behind the late Major Coleman. Morrison knew that he would have to name a replacement and better to do so from within than from without. Behind the 75-ton chicken-walker was a humanoid *Flashman*. Its cylindrical body and round head gleamed in the mid-day sun, mostly from the unpainted armor patching done all over the frame of the 'Mech. Morrison made a mental note to come up with some type of uniform paint scheme so that they would start to look like a cohesive unit. *Number fifty-seven on my 'To-Do' list.*

Captain McIntyre, tobacco pipe in hand, walked up next to Morrison to watch the *Marauder* power down and the *Black Knight* begin up the ramp behind the *Flashman*. "I never seem to tire of watching these things move around. Like giant chess pieces or something."

Morrison smirked and turned to look at McIntyre. "Yeah, they're great to look at but trying to run a unit is such a pain in the rear. All the paperwork, logistics, and money issues. Man, I'd almost give it up if I didn't think that some good would come of all of this."

"Well, of course some good has come of this Morrison. I know the 'Mech haulers have brought in your *Catapult* and you've got a Penta-something—"

"*Penetrator.*"

"Yes that. A brand new *Penetrator* to add to your unit. Plus, six new vehicles that we had a doozy of a time figuring out how to store in here. That provided Mr. Chirapongse with quite a challenge and that's not an easy thing to give her. And you've now got your very own DropShip. I'd say you're pretty ahead of the game." He tapped the base of the pipe on the palm of his hand to shake loose the ashes.

Morrison scratched the back of his head. "Yeah that's true. But what do you make of all of this?"

McIntyre stuffed the pipe and lit it before answering. He thought best when he smoked and it was unfortunate that zero-g was not suitable for smoking. "All I know Colonel is that I woke up one day and someone told me I was changing employers. I looked up what I could about you and reasoned you're much better than the Gov and once I met you, I figured you don't seem like the kind of person to value property over people. You're honest and straightforward. Like me. We're not out here to put blinders on our people and give them hand jobs to make them feel comforted. No, we tell them the blunt truth and we expect that they can deal with it like real men and women. That's why we lead. We're the ones out in front saying 'This is the way!' and they follow us with confidence. It wouldn't do us any good to go around waving our hands in the air going 'Oh shit, we're gonna die!' now would it?"

Morrison laughed at McIntyre's critique. It was nice to meet someone that wasn't trying to impress him or get some form of favor from him. There should be no politics in military matters, and it was a blessed thing to know another person that thought the same way he did.

McIntyre puffed away stoically. "So, Colonel, you ask me what I make of this? I tell my crew we've got a new owner and a new mission and if we do our jobs right then everyone will look good in the end. That's all they need to know from me. They have their jobs to distract them from the other stuff."

Morrison crossed his arms and look over at McIntyre. The man did not seem like the kind of person who walked around aimlessly and got into trouble. No, this was someone with a good head on his shoulders and a solid grasp of the here and now. Although he didn't wish it, he wondered what McIntyre would be like in a heated battle situation. If nothing else, Morrison knew he'd rather be under the protection of his guns than in the sights of them. This was going to make for an excellent set of adventures to come. "Yeah I suppose you're right Captain."

“Here’s a bit of free advice if you’d care to take it. Leaders don’t suppose. They know. Supposing builds doubt and doubt leads to confusion and that gets people killed. If you’re confident then you know. If you’re not confident then get there.” He puffed a big cloud of bluish-white smoke in the air. “That’s all I have to say on that. Now, c’mon. I’m heading over to the Spaceport Control Tower to file our flight plan so we can get the hell out of here before someone changes their mind. Care to join me?”

“Sure. Why not?” he shrugged in indifference. McIntyre had given him plenty to think about plus he’d be stuck inside the ship until they set down on their destination and all the free time outside before that would do him worlds of good. The pair exited the ship and hopped into a spaceport jeep they had requisitioned. The tower was only a few blocks away so the drive there was quite short.

Mostly it was the few civilians that watched Leutnant-Colonel Morrison and Captain McIntyre walk briskly from the parking lot to the doors of the Spaceport Control tower. They had many things to accomplish in order to make the next JumpShip leaving the system, and they were never known to wait for additional ships without making it worth their while.

The pair walked up to the flight departure counter and waited for the mousy man with a bad comb-over and exaggerated mustache to look up from his terminal. The man tapped a few more keys and then turned to the men with a grand smile. “How can I help y–, oh, it’s you. What do you need?” His demeanor changed, and was accented even more so by his nasally voice, the second he recognized the mercenary’s uniform. Most of the port staff were still a tad touchy on the subject of being caught between the two combat units not to mention the destruction of a quarter of the port buildings. Morrison had apologized profusely but was beyond groveling for acceptance at this point.

“We’re leaving and need to file a flight plan,” Morrison said flatly.

The little man smiled again and his voice dripped with sarcasm. “Oh, you’ll be leaving us soon? That’s too bad. Let me see if we can expedite this for you.” He turned back to the terminal and began punching some keys. “And your destination would be?”

“Galatea.” Morrison watched McIntyre from the corner of his eye but the man didn’t even flinch.

“Uh-hmmm.” A few more tapped keys. “Well, there’s a ship charging right now for Galatea. If you left today you’d just make it.”

Morrison lightly elbowed McIntyre. “Good thing we’re already packed, eh?” The two chuckled lightly but the joke failed to touch the little man. He stared slavishly at the two men.

Captain McIntyre spoke up this time. “Just book the passage little man. One *Overlord* to Galatea on the next outbound JumpShip.” He pulled a flimsy from his breast pocket. “Here are my ship’s specs to be transmitted to the JumpShip. We’ll boost the second you give the ok.”

The man took the flimsy and fed it into the terminal without another word. After a few silent minutes he turned and retrieved another flimsy from a terminal behind him. “Here’s your flight plan, weather conditions, space traffic, etc etc. We’ll just bill your account at the MRBC. You can lift at 1700 today.”

McIntyre took the flimsy and Morrison sketched a salute at the man. “Thanks for your time.”

The little man frowned at them. “Mmm.” As they turned to exit the building the little man hit the ‘Save’ button on the terminal to log the new flight in the computer system. The terminal immediately wrote the information to the storage disks and updated the flight board to show a new departure that same day.

At the same time the data was saved a low-grade computer virus copied the account information, access codes, flight information, passenger list, and cargo manifest and wrote them to a plain text file that was stored in a hidden directory on one of the servers in the control room. It would remain there until sometime early that morning when another virus would access the system through a trojan horse implemented backdoor and retrieve the file before deleting it from the system. That retrieval program would then send the file to a dumb-terminal operating in the basement of the local library in Strona. This terminal was running a batch program on files of the exact same type as the one created by the low-grade virus. It would breakdown the data and catalog the locations of military units all over the Inner Sphere, recording their prior, present and future locations to be programmatically entered into a large mainframe database. The database analyzed open troop movements and any secret ones that it could find for a project setup by a local scholar several years prior.

When it would come across this latest data file, the name 'Misfits' would trigger a secondary protocol added to the database program that would flag that entry. Then the data for that particular flight would be packaged into another text file with a specific alphanumeric code, encrypted and transmitted electronically to a reader terminal at the Steiner Embassy. Once there, it latched itself on to the daily dispatches that were sent back to Tharkad via ComStar HPG. The daily dispatches were transmitted each morning and the day this file showed up was no different than the next. Once the piggybacked file hit the ComStar systems, their filtering software triggered another background program hidden in the system that stripped the file from the daily dispatches before corrupting them beyond recovery to cover its back trail. ComStar would discover the corrupted files and request a new copy from the Embassy, apologizing and offering a discounted rate for the unforeseen system failure.

Once the files were resent all the new transmissions would go out, including the hidden file that had been grafted to the Galatea transmission that ComStar would never notice because of the multitude of files possibly damaged when the others were corrupted that same morning. The file would arrive at the ComStar station in Galatean City where it reversed the process it went through on Alcor to exit ComStar's system and make its way to the Steiner Embassy. Once there it lay in wait for a retrieval program to pull it from the system, where it would be decrypted and the instructions would be relayed to the appropriate agent.

### ***DropShip Heaven Scent, Outbound to Jumpship Illustrious***

***Alcor, Lyran Alliance***

***5 Jan 3063***

***1800 Local Alcor Time***

Morrison stood outside the main conference room door for a few minutes reading over his noteputer. He wasn't hesitating to enter the room on purpose but events over the past few weeks had certainly given him more thoughts than he'd expected. With Alcor slowly slipping away as the *Scent* motored to the jump point, Morrison was also trying to put Alcor behind him. At the time the inexplicable departure of the 15th Lyran Guard had Morrison perplexed but recent news reports of fighting breaking out all over the Commonwealth made it pretty clear that the Misfits and/or Gyro-Tech were small fish. The rumor mill had the 15th based on Hesperus II, a very important industrial world in the FedCom, er, Lyran Alliance.

That was another thing Morrison had to get used to now. With Victor's call to arms to unseat his sister the once proud Federated Commonwealth had been split into its former realms of the

Lyran Alliance and the Federated Suns. Forces that were once allies were locked in a bitter struggle over who should rule and who should not. No one ever said war was pretty but Morrison had a special distaste for civil war. Brother should not have to battle brother because the powers that be can't agree on certain issues. Morrison gave plenty of his years to the FedCom military and now he was going to do his best to keep out of the whole mess. There was no way he was going to choose a side for his unit. Mercenaries have only one side. Money. He tugged the sleeves of his olive-green jumpsuit down and keyed the digital lock and the door slid back with a whisper.

"ATTENTION ON DECK!" rang out as soon as he crossed the threshold. The commanding officers of the Misfits jumped to their feet in unison, the eight pairs of boots sounding like the crack of an autocannon on the diamond-plated metal flooring.

Morrison moved to the head of the long table and put the notepaper down. "Attention to orders. I have a presentation to make. Sergeant Major." Sergeant Major Jest Fujimowa walked around the table and withdrew an item from his pocket that he handed to Morrison before returning to his seat. "For actions above and beyond the call of duty during the Troper Plains Battle, I hereby promote Leutnant Julian Pintall of Slasher Lance to the rank of Captain with all the rights and privileges there within. Normally we would have a Major in command of a company but in this case I'm tasking Captain Pintall with commanding Delta Company once we reach our next destination. However, as per custom during our time here on the *Heaven Scent* all Captains are hereby brevetted to Major." Morrison turned to his left and shook Pintall's right hand and placed a pair of shiny new Captain's bars in his other. The rest of the group applauded with shouts and whistles. A touch of embarrassment flushed to Pintall's cheeks but he quickly shook it off and thanked Morrison and graciously accepted the well wishes of the rest of the other officers. With the presentation out of the way, Morrison moved to take his seat and everyone else followed suit.

"Ok," he began "I'm sure by now everyone is dying to know what's going on so let me squash some of the rumors and hearsay and lay down some TO&E changes and explain our next contract. First order of business however, I need a ready op report from each commander. Command Lance reports full readiness and my *Battlemaster* is out until we get some replacement weapons. Since I have the *Penetrator*, I'm toying with the idea of just selling my old ride but we'll see what comes down the road." Morrison turned to his right. "Major Kaplan?"

George Kaplan, Stalker Lance commander, folded his hands on the tabletop. "Stalker Lance is nearly 100%. We've got some armor replacing to do on the *Wraith* and the gyro is a touch out of alignment but nothing we can't fix with what we've got. We're a tad low on expendables but the *Scent* offers much more storage room so it looks worse than it really is."

Morrison nodded and continued down the table. "Good. Major Sakai?"

Brevet-Major Tushio Sakai, Recon Lance commander sat ramrod straight in the chair and spoke with an air of respect and authority in his voice, undoubtedly learned under the charge of the DCMS. "*Hai*, Colonel-san. Recon is at 100%. Armor loss has been restored and we are at acceptable levels on missile reloads." Considering that the brevet-Major's *Raven* was the only 'Mech in Recon that carried missiles, that little fact didn't surprise Morrison.

"Excellent. Major Picketts?"

Brevet-Major Sarah Picketts, Striker Lance commander brushed her blonde hair back from her eyes, hooked it behind her left ear and stared right at Morrison. For a brief second she held his gaze wondering if he remembered some of the things that she'd said while they were on Alcor. She still held feelings for him but things had been so hectic that she never was able to

find the time to tell him how she felt. She launched into her report before the silence became awkward and the reason obvious. “Everyone is pretty much back up to speed but we’re at an uncomfortable level in LRM reloads. If we had to fight right now it would have to be quick and decisive, not drawn out in the least. Beyond that, we’re ready for anything.”

With the ’Mech lance commanders on the right side of the table completed, Morrison turned to his left. “Major Pintall?”

“With the loss of Major Coleman, Slasher is down to 75% overall. Most of the ’Mechs took heavy damage but have been repaired as best we can. The new gyro in my *Marauder* is working very nicely but we won’t have an effective test until we run some combat training to test its limits. After procuring enough supplies to repair the other three ’Mechs my first act as lance commander will be to fill the fourth slot in Slasher.”

Again Morrison nodded. “Commendable. Moving on.”

Brevet-Major Jing Li, Ambush Lance commander lowered her eyes to the point where the epicanthic folds made it look like she actually closed them. It was merely a display of respect to deflect her gaze that had been drilled into her during her time in the CCAF. “Ambush Lance is at roughly 80% effectiveness mostly due to equipment problems rather than munitions even though we lack in that category as well. The transit time will allow us to perform some major teardowns to repair malfunctioning components but we will need to replace several items as well to bring the lance back into full fighting form.”

Brevet-Major Larry Fontana, commander of Kampfgruppe Company’s armor lances merely waited for Morrison to look in his direction before he began to speak. “Panther and Tiger Lance have no damage to speak of, so we got off light in that area but like everyone else we’re nearly dry on reloads. For future fire missions similar to those taken on Alcor I’ll need to submit a new Rate of Expenditure report for some new munitions.”

“Agreed,” Morrison said as he began making some entries in his noteputer. “I’d also like to revise our tactical doctrine with Kampfgruppe Company in that regards. Striker Lance was intended to be our sole mobile artillery battery but that didn’t play out on Alcor so we need to adopt a second mobile battery configuration in the TO&E. Larry, I’d like you to run some simulations on lance-, company- and battalion-sized engagements and get back to me on what you would need in each case so we can work out some form of happy medium.” Larry bobbed his head and he wrote down some notes. Then he motioned to Raptor to deliver his part.

Raptor coughed lightly and started reading from his own noteputer. “I’m not going into munitions numbers as everyone knows we’re low. All four craft need repairs and patching, mine being the worst of all of the cases. I guess that’s what I get for leading the Pack every time we go up. But that’s the gist of it all.” Raptor leaned back in his chair folding his hands over his stomach.

“Thanks Raptor. You and your crew did a great job on that mission. Without you guys we might not have been able to pull it off.” Morrison smiled lightly. “And lastly, the technicians. Ed?”

“Not much can be done about supplies until we find a place to stock up. We’re pretty thin on replacement actuators and our myomer-muscle stock is just over half full. We have four more units of the advanced gyroscopes that Gyro-Tech gave us at the end of our contract in addition to the four already in the *Bushwacker*, *Marauder*, *Guillotine*, and *Shadow Hawk*. We also got four of their comm sats for our use in the future. Captain McIntyre has his crew working on patching all those systems together for us. Once they’re done we can pop a sat on the drop and talk between the *Scout* and ourselves from anywhere on the ground. The pairs of *Typhoons*, *Condors*

and *Drillsons* we salvaged from the spaceport have all checked out fully armed and ready. Beyond changing up some of my supply sheets, I know where everything is right now.” Ed folded his hands over top his noteputer.

“Thank you Master Chief. Now, before anyone asks let me explain Kevin Lendar’s lack of presence.” Notably absent from the officers meeting was Captain Kevin Lendar. There had been much rumor and speculation as to his fate but nothing had substantiated anything. Yet.

“Mr. Lendar and I have discussed the future of ’Mech combat operations for this unit and we discovered there was an area in which we were lacking. Currently Kevin is preparing to depart on a special training and recruitment mission for the Misfits. No I have not fired him or busted him in rank. I think I’ve overheard just about every scenario possible over the past week and a half. While I cannot reveal the entire plan, I can tell you he’ll be recruiting another company-sized unit for the Misfits to join up with us sometime at the end of this year.”

Morrison looked around the table at his officers. “Any other business with the unit before I proceed?”

Brevet-Major Picketts raised her hand. “I’d like to nominate Leutnant Miravoska for a commendation for his part in the Troper Plains Battle. I’ve reviewed his battle ROM and he showed outstanding prowess in taking down four ’Mechs all on his own. His actions directly contributed to our ability to break off and escape.”

Brevet-Major Pintall nodded his head. “I remember seeing him in action that day. I second the motion.”

“So noted.” Morrison tapped a few keys on the noteputer. “Major Picketts, please bring that ROM to me and I’ll make sure the commendation goes on his official record. Ok, anything else? No? Good. Moving on to the Table of Organization and Equipment. Official changes to the TO&E will include moving Punisher Two and Four into the Command Lance after our next contract and Punisher will remain open for recruitment. The fourth slot in Slasher Lance needs to be filled. The six new vehicles will not be folded into Kampfgruppe Company but will go to forming the new company Captain Lendar will bring us.” Morrison paused as he tapped a few items into his noteputer.

“I’m changing some designations around as well. Lance call signs will run One through Four preceded by the lance name. Baker Company is renamed to Balan Company and Delta will become Donar. According to my sources, Balan is one of the princes of hell and Donar is the Teutonic god of war and thunder. Captain Lendar will run Erlik Company; Erlik is the ancient Terran Siberian spirit of evil. For now I’ll remain as Command Lance but if I ever get it built up to company size I’ll rename it then. Lance names will not be changed at this time. Any comments?” Morrison looked around the room as everyone shook their head. “Good. Moving on.”

“Here’s the new contract from the MRBC.” The lights in the room dimmed as Morrison slid a datachip into the reader on the tabletop. The black pyramid-shaped device in the center of the table kicked on and displayed a spinning world of lush green land and blue oceans not unlike a hundred other worlds in the Inner Sphere.

“This is the planet Eaton.” Morrison watched their faces bathed in the greens and blues of the holographic image. “Eaton resides in the Lyran Alliance’s Skye Province. I’m sure everyone here is pretty familiar with the Isle of Skye’s reputation and that very factor plays a part in this contract. The planetary Governor has come to believe that Skye Separatists are going to make a play for independence again and as a loyal Lyran subject, he is under the impression that his family is going to be one of their first targets in their bid for independence. He claims to

have received credible threats from certain groups that would like to pull off a coup de tat and are affiliated with the 'Free Skye' movement. He's posting a significant amount of money for an extraction operation and we're going to answer his call." Morrison noticed a few murmurs with the mentioning of the family as a viable target. No one ever considered civilians as fair game. It just wasn't something that was done and there seemed to never be a shortage of people willing to use them. Just as there were an equal number of those willing to do something to prevent it.

"The four basic areas of the contract are pretty simple and quite adequate as far as I'm concerned. We have independent command rights on this one. Since the contract is being taken out by an individual there's no one to answer to but us. We also retain full salvage rights. Any thing that challenges us on this run will be gunning for the Governor or his family and the contract spells it out plainly that we're to kill or keep anything that gets in our way. The Governor, in his urgency, has liquidated his family's assets to pay for our services and has already transferred that money into MRBC escrow. The final payment amount will be in excess of forty-five million C-Bills." A low whistle from down the table broke into Morrison's monologue. "This amount will cover payment, overhead and support options during the mission. Coupled with this information and based on the current status of our forces, I'm going to only be taking my command lance and Baker, I mean Balan Company in the *Scent*. This will lower our operating costs against the full payment. Kampfgruppe and Donar will remain at our next destination which is Galatea where they will refit, rearm and recruit."

Captain Pintall was the first to comment. "Colonel, Galatea isn't known for, or more importantly, is well known for its reputation in mercenaries. Are you sure we want to be hiring from there instead of heading back to Outreach?"

Morrison nodded his head, as he too, understood the apprehension with Galatea. "I am well aware of Galatea's reputation and, unfortunately we can't afford to send half of us to Eaton and the other half back to Outreach. I'll need you all close once we complete the Eaton job. This contract was delivered specifically to us by the MRBC. It wasn't put up for bidding. Someone either favors us a lot or knows we're the only ones close enough to pull off a job like this. And that means that we could expect more favors to come down the road and I don't need us spread to hell and gone when the next one does come in. We'll just have to be extra careful in our screening process for new recruits. Ed, since you're coming with us I want you to pick your best man to stay on Galatea to supervise picking out new 'Mechs and repairing what we've got."

Ed smiled. "I have just the man for the job sir. Senior Tech Bjorn Reeh can handle everything in my stead."

Morrison nodded his head. "Excellent. Bring him up to speed on anything he needs to know while you're gone and brief him on what the unit needs to pickup while they're on Galatea. If Kampfgruppe and Donar can get back up to 100% by the time we get back so much the better." Morrison tapped a few buttons on the reader control pad and Eaton was replaced with a star map of the Lyran Alliance. Alcor was glowing to indicate their current position.

"From Alcor, we jump to Galatea. We set down, drop off two companies, load up expendables and lift for the first of several JumpShips setup by the Governor." On the map each world lit up as it was mentioned. "From there the *Scent* will jump to Alphecca, Carnwarth, Freedom, then directly to Eaton. This path was chosen to avoid crossing into the Skye Province until the last minute. We'll land on Eaton, extract the Governor and his family and boost for the JumpShip that will take us back to Freedom where we'll deposit our passengers and fulfill our contract." Morrison turned off the holoprojector and the lights came back to normal level in the room.

“So, that’s everything that is going on to date. Is there anything on anybody’s mind that they’d like to bring up before we dock to jump to Galatea?” Morrison studied their faces as his officers looked to each other to see if anyone was going to say anything new.

The silence permeated the room for at least half a minute before Brevet-Major Li sat forward to speak. “Not that it’s a big deal, but what about a unit standard? Every merc unit has a symbol that everyone can recognize and associate with that unit. I think we should come up with one as well. It would be nice to finally put some designations on our ’Mechs and maybe we could decide on a paint scheme too.”

Morrison and several others smiled at the idea. “I like that idea. Let’s open the floor to suggestions.”

Several hours later the officers, bleary eyed and yawning, stumbled out of what they affectionately dubbed the TacRoom. Some stretched while others rubbed their eyes, trying to shake off sleep long enough to make it back to their bunks to get some much needed rest. Morrison was the last to leave the room and pulled up suddenly when he saw Jeremy leaning against the bulkheads just outside the room door.

Morrison strained to not yawn through his question. “Is everything alright Sergeant?”

“Certainly is Colonel, but I need a minute or two of your time.”

Morrison looked at his wrist chronometer and frowned. “It’s kind of late Sergeant. Is this something that could wait until morning?” Morrison moved to answer his own question by continuing to walk to the lifts. He stopped when Jeremy stood from the wall and blocked his path.

“Sorry Colonel, but I need to talk to you. Now.” And before Morrison could rebuke him, he added, “I’m leaving the unit.”

It must’ve been the exhaustion that triggered the wave of anger that washed over him, but he managed to keep from throttling Jeremy long enough to step back and sweep his arm to the open door of the TacRoom, bidding him inside. Once inside Morrison closed the door and sat heavily in the closest chair. “Explain,” was all he said.

“Leutnant-Colonel Morrison, you and your unit have performed admirably and professionally on your first contract. And for that we couldn’t be happier with our decision to back your unit’s creation. In the time that I’ve spent with you, I’ve seen your officers make solid, tactical and strategic decisions and you as their leader have impressed upon them a confident image of guidance. In my role here I am no longer needed and as such I have already been recalled for reassignment. I will miss the unit though. You may be Misfits, but you’re the best misfits I’ve ever had the pleasure of working with.”

Morrison stared at Jeremy with cynicism and shook his head to clear the cobwebs and his ears. “What the hell are you talking about Sergeant? Who’s ‘we’? Who recalled you? What’s going on here?” He nearly launched to his feet but was still trying to remain calm. It was not getting any easier to do so.

“Although, technically, I’m not allowed to tell you I feel that you are owed the truth here Colonel. You know me as Sergeant Jeremy Volksfram of the Misfits Striker Lance, when in fact I am just Jeremy of Wolf’s Dragoon’s intelligence arm, WolfNet. I was assigned to you to act in part with the hiring liaison to offer any assistance as your unit worked out the bugs of its infancy. Mostly I was here to make sure our trust and our money was not misplaced and you have certainly proven yourselves worthy of both.”

Morrison was fully awake now. *Dragoons? WolfNet? What the hell?* “You were sent here to **spy** on us??”

“Not spy, Colonel. Evaluate and report. You’re well aware of the fact that the Dragoons sponsor many mercenary units with money, materials and training. Well, in most cases it’s determined whether or not that unit is qualified to receive our help. When units appear unstable or run into problem after problem it raises a flag in our offices and we begin to monitor that unit to identify the problem and determine if we should continue to help or cut off all assistance. Your hiring of the Bandit Crushers, your Delta Company, raised that flag and I was assigned to the unit to make sure things ran smoothly enough for you. With the death of Michael Coleman and your performance against the Guards, you acted beyond our expectations therefore I’m no longer needed here. I do apologize for leaving you short-handed on such short notice but I’ve no control in that area. I go where I’m told.”

Morrison rubbed the stubble on his face with his hands. This was all too much to take in as tired as he was. He was certain that it would make more sense in the morning because right now in his mind, *this was insane*. “So, you bounce around from unit to unit, keeping tabs on the Dragoons’ money and what does that get us?”

Jeremy folded his arms across his chest. “You get my recommendation to increase your Dragoon rating two levels, from D to B. That should generate much more lucrative contracts for your unit.”

Morrison stared blankly. An increase in rating would be dramatically beneficial to the unit as a whole. “Oh. I see. But why all the smoke and mirrors? Why not just assign me a liaison with orders to make sure we’re on the up-and-up?”

Jeremy shook his head. “As commander, would you be comfortable with a babysitter for your unit? Plus, how would we know if you were just putting on a show for us and wouldn’t ‘go bad’ the second we turned our backs?”

Morrison nodded. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. So, what do we do now?”

Jeremy shrugged his shoulders. “Well, unfortunately my leaving also means that my *Bombardier* goes with me. The Dragoon’s wouldn’t think highly of me if I didn’t come back with their property. Oh and any money that you spent on me will be credited back to your account. I was never a hired babysitter,” he said with a wink.

Morrison leaned back in the chair and folded his hands in his lap. “Y’know I wondered about that ‘Mech from the very beginning. Not many of them survived the Succession Wars and to find one in such pristine shape, not to mention built to use the Swarm Missiles, for which all their factories were destroyed in those wars, had me wondering just where you got it. It never was your Grandmother’s ‘Mech, was it?”

“Oh, it was hers. At least it belonged to someone that you would consider my Grandmother. It belonged to my sibparent, and I won the right in a Trial of Possession to pilot it in 3057.”

“Uh-huh. So, now I’ve got to find someone to take your place now, eh?” Morrison raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

Jeremy headed for the door. “Don’t think of it as losing a member of your unit Colonel. Look at it as gaining the trust and respect of the Dragoons. Besides, now you’ve a spot for that *Catapult* you picked up from the 15th on Alcor. As a final favor I’ve been authorized to extend a ticket to Outreach for Captain Lendar. I understand you’re sending him off to Infantry School after his malf-up that killed Mike Rior.”

Morrison bolted upright in his chair. “Wait a second! How’d you know that? Only he and I were privy to that conversation.”

“Another Dragoon secret, Colonel.” Jeremy stood in the doorway with a wolf-like grin.

***DropShip Heaven Scent, Inbound from Zenith Point***  
***Galatea, Lyran Alliance***  
***15 Jan 3063***  
***0800 Hours Local Time***

“Say again Galaport Control. All after ‘Under Attack’.” Lieutenant Jonathon Campbell, the communications officer on the *Heaven Scent*, pressed his right hand against the headset trying to decipher the signal coming from the Galaport Control Tower. The *Scent* was on its final approach to the Galaport Spaceport. For the past several days the crew of the *Scent* and the members of the Misfits passed the time by going over news reports and intercepted comm signals describing the open fighting that had enveloped the planet.

Apparently when Victor put out his call to arms to unseat his sister, dozens of representatives for private concerns and military agencies flocked to Galatea in search of quick ways to bolster their own standing adding to the existing recruiters from all the major powers. Literally thousands of mercenaries and would-be hired guns descended on Galatea in response to the massive increase in work. With so many different factions on the planet tensions had built up and one thing led to another, as they always seem to do. Now, Morrison was beginning to regret his decision to head to Galatea. Especially when he learned that he’d be dropping in a possible hostile zone but as they got closer to the planet the reports of fighting had shown them moving out of the city into several established free-for-all zones.

Thankfully, the Kevin/Jeremy situation was dispensed with shortly after arriving in-system. Another JumpShip was preparing to head out in the direction of Terra and offered to wait while Kevin took a shuttle over and Jeremy unloaded his ’Mech into the cargo hold of another DropShip. That ship jumped out even before the *Scent* was halfway to Galatea and Morrison was happy knowing that Kevin was out of his hair for a while. Now, sitting on bridge of the *Scent*, Morrison had much more pressing issues to deal with.

“DropShip *Heaven Scent* be advised.” The scratchy-voice poured through the speakers to the bridge crew. “Galaport is not secure. We were under attack less than two hours ago but the raiders have left since then. The whole planet has dropped into a giant furball. We cannot guarantee your security upon landing at the port but you are cleared to land at pad Beta 22-R.”

Campbell got the nod from the Captain that he’d heard it and to continue. “Copy that Control. Do you have any more intel on the current situation? Over.” A burst of static faded before the reply. “There are three other Overlords near that location. All the Captains have apparently banded together for mutual protection. The port has suffered moderate damage to our warehouses and comm relay units. Most of the warring groups have moved out of the city but that left us with a few groups bent on raiding facilities.”

Campbell hit the transmit button one last time. “Roger Control. Thanks for the heads up. *Heaven Scent* heading for pad Beta 22-R. Out.”

Morrison turned to McIntyre. “Well, that explains the crappy connection we’ve got to them. I wonder what else is going on that we don’t know about.”

“Well, we’re about to find out.” McIntyre strolled from the Captain’s chair to the communications board. “Give me 1MC Lieutenant.” Campbell flipped a single switch to his left and a series of high-pitched tones came over the speakers. “Aye Captain, 1MC.”

“This is the Captain speaking.” McIntyre’s calm voice boomed down every corridor and into every room on the *Scent* grabbing the immediate attention of everyone aboard. “We are three-zero minutes from landing. At this time no hostile activity has been reported at our

designated LZ but reports also state that can change at any time. So, with that said we are now going to Condition 1 General Quarters.” McIntyre thumbed a red button on the comms panel and immediately a klaxon blared five times throughout the ship. “All damage control parties report to your stations. Weapons control man all stations. MechWarriors to your machines. That is all.”

All around the ship the phrase “General Quarters” had gotten people moving even before the warning klaxon had gone off. Damage control crews rushed to vital areas wearing fire-retardant suits while techs found their way to every weapons turret in case a systems failure would require manual tracking and firing. On the bridge Lieutenant-Commander McNamara strolled past each station to report on their readiness as the Captain moved back to his chair in the center of the room.

Just over a minute had passed when McNamara shouted over the din. “All stations report manned and ready Captain. We are Condition 1 across the board.”

“Very well Mr. McNamara. Initiate landing procedures.” McIntyre turned away from the scene to face Morrison. “Colonel, you’re welcome to stay up here and coordinate your troops if you like but I’ll take no offense if you want to ride out in your ‘Mech. I haven’t met a ‘metal jockey’ yet that’s been totally comfortable up here.”

Morrison cupped his chin with his right hand and thought for a minute then shook his head. “I think I’ll stay and see how our new company commander handles his people. If he’s to be in charge while I’m gone I’d like to know if I made the right decision before I leave, rather than after.”

McIntyre nodded in acquiescence and turned back to the watch his crew at work. Morrison was amazed at the proficiency in which they moved about their jobs. Men and women moved in an intricate ballet from station to station, ever aware of their proximity to others that allowed them to avoid running into one another even with their backs turned. It was a well-oiled machine that kept a DropShip running, and Morrison couldn’t be happier with the crew of the *Scout*.

Lieutenant-Commander Daniel McNamara walked back and forth behind the crewmembers at their stations watching dutifully over the monitors for anything that he’d have to notify the Captain about immediately. He did this despite having a first rate crew but they also knew it was his job so no one chided him for it. “Sensors. Report all contacts,” he ordered.

“Sensors aye. Sir, I have no airborne contacts at this time. I show three *Overlords* in the immediate vicinity of our LZ. Ground clutter is obscuring movement inside the city but there’s nothing notable on the spaceport grounds. We’re in the clear for the moment.”

McNamara nodded and turned to the station to his left. “Pilot. Time to ground?”

“We’ll be down in one-five minutes sir. Weather reports forty degrees centigrade with twenty percent humidity and clear skies,” replied the pilot.

“Comms. Anything new to report?”

“Comms aye. I’m picking up sounds of a battle to the west but it’s several kilometers away. No immediate threat. The only other signals I’m picking up are the local radio and they’re just warning people to stay indoors and off the streets in the areas with the heaviest fighting.”

“Very well. Continue landing procedures.” McNamara moved a few feet away from the crew stations and assumed an at-rest stance.

Morrison felt the increasing downward pressure in the chair long before he heard the roar of the engines trying to slow the nearly 10,000 tons of steel from slamming into the ground. He listened as the pilot counted down the distance in ten-meter increments starting from one hundred then shifting to a single meter count after ten. The ship touched down with a light

thump and shimmy and the silenced engines echoed across the tarmac before the sound waves finally dissipated out in the distance.

Nestled in the 'Mech Bay the 'Mechs of Donar Company were released from their docking cradles and began to line up in front of the main door. As the ramp was extended to the ground the doors began to open spilling light into the bay. Once the doors were fully open Captain Pintall ran his *Marauder* down the ramp as fast as safety would allow and the rest of the company followed suit to set up a perimeter. As he ran through a full scan of the area his comm system picked up a wide-band transmission from the *Scent*.

“To anyone that can hear this transmission, this is Captain McIntyre of the *Overlord*-class *Heaven Scent* of the mercenary unit Marion’s Misfits. We have landed here on Galatea to purchase repair parts and recruit help for open slots in our rosters. We have no desire to join in current fighting but will we not tolerate any unprovoked attacks against our troops. We are deploying a defensive net around our DropShip and will not hesitate to fire upon any overtly hostile acts against us. This is your only warning to leave us alone.”

Captain Pintall smiled at the verbal warning from the ship’s captain and moved his 'Mech into position. He knew that the full weight of the unit would be brought to bear on anyone that did not heed the warning. Secretly he wished for a chance to prove his command in combat but he figured that he’d better take it one small step at a time or he’d end up like Coleman. Not something he was eager to do, ever. Pintall had devised a disbursal pattern for the 'Mechs he had left to guard the DropShip. With nine 'Mechs including his own, he used the DropShip firing arcs to assign zones to individual 'Mechs with one on standby to reposition in the event of “unwanted company”. The eight vehicles of Kampfgruppe Company would position themselves between each 'Mech for additional support, creating a lethal ring of force around the DropShip.

It took a grueling twenty minutes for all the defensive forces to deploy from which Morrison watched via the *Scent*’s radar grid. Reduced to a one to two hundred scale view, he watched the miniaturized versions of the 'Mechs and vehicles take up their positions around the ovoid ship. Once they were done deploying he turned back to McIntyre. “Everyone is in position Captain.”

McIntyre grunted a reply without taking his eyes off the bridge viewer screen that was split into multiple views from various external cameras around the ship. “Sensors report all contacts,” he bellowed.

“Captain my contacts are the *Scent*, nine 'Mechs, eight vehicles, and three Overlords. No other contacts at this time.”

“Very well. Comms.”

Campbell turned in his seat to face the Captain. “The Captain of the *Overlord*-class *Baby Blues* has commended us on our neutrality and has invited the Captain to join the other three for lunch to discuss a possible mutual defense pact.”

“Well, now that’s a pleasant surprise,” McIntyre said with a smile. “Colonel Morrison, I believe I now have a lunch meeting to attend. Since I’m certain that you won’t need us to complete your errands I’ll be leaving Mr. McNamara in charge while we’re gone. Mr. McNamara, if you would please inform Mr. Chirapongse to begin refueling and general maintenance on the ship. We will remain at General Quarters for the duration of our stay here.”

Morrison rose from his seat and stepped down from the dais. “Ok Captain. Then my officers and I will head out to conduct our business so that we don’t have to spend any more time here than necessary.” He started to walk to the lift doors and then stopped. “I think it’s ‘Request permission to go ashore Captain.’”

McIntyre chuckled. “Granted. Watch your back out there. I don’t want to have to come get you kids.”

“Yes Dad,” Morrison droned as he rolled his eyes. He stepped into the lift and headed out to collect George and Ed. The first stop would be the hiring hall to find someone capable of piloting the *Catapult*. Second stop would be finding a place to repair and upgrade the ’Mech for the Eaton mission. The normal LRMs would be fine but Morrison had given it some thought and decided to move into the newer tech with an Arrow IV update. That would convert the -C1 model to the -C3 and give Striker Lance an extended range. With any luck they’d be done and back in orbit in less than 48 hours. He hated the thought of having to leave half the unit here when the planet was engulfed in widespread fighting but he really had no choice. There would be no place to refit and resupply on the trip out, not to mention no way to hire new help. But with the unit here, they could observe the fights from a safe distance and possibly hire those that prove themselves in a pitched fight. The price tag might be high, but with the new B rating and some solid troops the Misfits would go far. That was the best Morrison could hope for right now. The lift doors shut with a whisper and Morrison descended to the lower levels.

***Galatean City***  
***Galatea, Lyran Alliance***  
***16 Jan 3063***  
***1300 Hours Local Time***

Strolling down Donegal Avenue, Morrison and his group were taking in the sights and sounds in their continuing pursuit of a pilot for their captured *Catapult* ’Mech. After some aggressive negotiations yesterday they were able to procure the necessary parts to convert the ’Mech from the C1 model to the C3 model. The LRM-15 launchers were sold for cash and the rounds were stripped and placed in the ammo holds aboard the *Scout*. Currently Master Chief Tech Ed had every available hand working with him to strip and re-wire the 65-ton monstrosity. He’d promised Morrison that it would be done and battle ready before they hit the halfway point to Eaton. Morrison figured the best way to help was to keep out of Ed’s way. That’s where today’s little walk came in.

Morrison, along with Major Kaplan, Captains Picketts and Pintall and Sergeant Major Fujimowa, were heading for another reported hiring location for ’Mech pilots. All over Galatean City mercenaries roamed in packs. No one roamed about alone for fear of his or her own safety. Just in the last two blocks there had been at least four brawls the Misfits had deftly avoided. Some of the stares they got from passersby had ranged from curious, to hateful, to suspicious and more. Unit attire was sparse today as most wore loose fitting jumpsuits, or even shorts and t-shirts. At just past noon the ambient temperature was already climbing through 40° Centigrade making the standard uniforms or jackets too warm. Morrison was enjoying the warmth through his olive-drab tank top while his jumpsuit sleeves were tied around his waist. He’d unzipped the pant legs over his combat boots to allow for some airflow, and to make getting to the concealed needler much easier. Major Kaplan was dressed similarly but refrained from stripping from the waist up and had just unzipped the long zipper instead. Captain Pintall had gone with boots, camouflage pants and a dark green shirt while Captain Picketts had chosen matching green shorts and a tank top with a black bandana holding her blonde hair back from her face. Fujimowa seemed to be the only one holding some form of military semblance as he was in a jumpsuit that was zippered all the way up the chest and down the legs. And the thing that got Morrison the

most about that was the man wasn't even showing sweat! It must be a great control of the mind to remain cool in this sweltering heat.

They walked passed a few storefronts looking for a particular address number. They found it in the middle of the block right between a laundromat and a travel agency store.

"Two-two-oh-four Donegal. This is the place," Morrison said and then looked up at the store sign. "You've got to be kidding." A provocative pink neon cat drawn in human form with long pink hair had its legs wrapped around a glowing gold pole right below the words, Big Kat's Kitty Perch. There were no windows to look in and a single steel door was the entrance. Morrison felt the warm flush of embarrassment rise to his cheeks as he watched George stifle a laugh. George stepped up and held open the door for everyone. He almost laughed aloud when Morrison walked in last and shot him that what-did-I-get-myself-into look.

Although it was the middle of the day outside, it was nearly pitch black inside. Neon signs dotted the entire room inside promoting dozens of drinks and in some cases dancers. The room opened up to tables and chairs for patrons looking for something to eat during the show. Closer to the stage were lounge chairs and sofas of varying lengths. The stage itself was shaped like a large cross a meter off the ground and had lights running around the borders. A large brass pole sat at the end of each runway and was illuminated by lights at the top and bottom of mounting brackets. There were two girls on stage right then, a longhaired blonde and a shorter, curly brunette. Both were dancing around their poles to some local dance music clad in bikinis that Captain Picketts swore to herself should not look that good on any woman.

Morrison turned to George and shouted over the music to be heard. "Go grab us a seat and I'll find out where our contacts are." George nodded and hustled the group over to a place where they could watch the show, and not be too obvious that they were able to watch the door as well. Morrison turned and headed to one of two bars in the place and motioned for the bartender.

A very large, muscular man with a nearly shaved head and a white shirt two sizes too small walked over and placed an empty shot glass in front of Morrison. "Drink," came with a thick Slavic accent.

"Actually, I'm looking for—" Morrison started to say.

"Drink." Repeated the man. "Talk cheap. Drink first." With that said the man pulled an unlabeled bottle of brown liquid from beneath the bar and sloshed it into the glass. He grabbed the glass with his free hand and tossed it down his throat and set it back on the bar. "Drink."

"Ok." Morrison slid onto the stool next to him knowing he was going to regret falling off the wagon like this. "I'm not much of a drinker, so what would you recommend?"

The man grinned and tossed down another shot. "You are?"

Morrison blinked twice and a confused look came over his face. "I'm sorry, I don't understand the question."

"You are." He repeated with a hint of frustration. "Merchant, Fedrat, Draco, Cappie. You are."

"Oh, I see. Well, I was born in the FedCom in the old FedSuns realm if that's what you're asking." Morrison wasn't quite sure where this was going but at least he'd been asked with all slang terms for the Great Houses so it didn't sound like the bartender held an animosity towards any one House. That might've been the only good sign. The bartender chuckled and turned around to grab a series of bottles.

He watched him pour some clear liquid followed by some brown into a large shaker. He tossed in some ice while placing the bottles back. Morrison was only able to make out part of the label on the clear stuff, Ever-*something*. He shook the mixer and poured Morrison a shot.

Morrison nodded his thanks, tossed down the shot and coughed as the liquor burned the back of his throat. The bartender laughed heartily, poured two more shots and placed one in Morrison's hand. Together they tossed down their shots and again Morrison coughed while the bartender grinned in satisfaction.

"Davion PPC good. Now merc," the bartender said as he leaned on his elbows "you need?"

Morrison scraped his tongue against his top teeth trying to erase the fuzzy feeling before he answered. "I'm looking to hire a Heavy 'Mech pilot. If I like them, the final tryout will be a mission I'm running leaving tomorrow morning. Know anyone that's available that soon?"

The bartender stood up and poured a final PPC shot for Morrison and stood there stoically. Morrison grabbed the glass, prayed that there'd be no pain, and tossed back the drink. His throat had already gone numb so there was no coughing this time.

The bartender nodded once. "I might. Enjoy show." Then he turned and walked away. Morrison watched him walk away and then let out a long sigh. He stood to head over to where the rest of his crew was and felt his head swim in the alcohol. He wasn't drunk yet, but he was starting to feel the effects from the drink. He summoned up all his control and strolled over to the table as calmly as he could muster. Fujimowa had seated himself across the table where he could watch the front door and the bar at the same time. George was to his left and Julian was to George's left. Sarah sat on Fujimowa's right with an empty seat to her right, *no doubt deliberately planned* Morrison thought.

Morrison half-sat, half-flopped down into the seat and was immediately grateful to be off his feet. He tried to blink away the feeling, but the alcohol was already impacting his reflexes making him blink rather slowly.

George diverted his attention from the show to look at Morrison for a split second and stopped when he saw Morrison's face. "Jeez man. What did you have?"

Morrison blinked once and licked his lips. "A Davion PPC. Three. I think." He shook his head to ward off the hazy feeling and was rewarded instantly with a pain that felt like a *Zeus* stepping on his skull. "Ow. What the hell's in that?"

George chuckled lightly. "You don't want to know."

A waitress dressed in a black leather halter-top and matching miniskirt with a pink cat ears headband and tail, strolled over with four bottles of beer for the rest of the Misfits. Captain Picketts slapped two pills of SoberUp down in front of Morrison then grabbed her beer and put it into Morrison's hand. "Drink all of this. Its should be enough to help dilute the alcohol in your system." Morrison smiled drunkenly at her - she had such a pretty face - tossed down the pills and began to suck down the entire bottle. Two long pulls and a decent burp later, Morrison set the bottle back on the table with more motor control than he'd had five minutes ago.

"Ok, someone take a note that we don't go to bars for business anymore," Morrison slurred out. He was feeling better but it was going to be a long day at this point. Just then Fujimowa slid his bottle across the faux marble tabletop causing a hideous screeching sound. Morrison looked over and caught the flick of his eyes towards the door right before he picked the bottle up from its slide and turned to watch the girls on the stage. *Smooth...*

Morrison glanced and saw two men, obviously military and more than likely MechWarriors, enter and walk over to Morrison's earlier drinking partner. A few brief words were exchanged then they turned and headed over to where the Misfits were sitting. George and Julian both stood and greeted the men a small distance from the table. Once everyone was seated around the table, Morrison leaned forward to be heard over the music and was very grateful for the beer now that his head was clearing up. He made a mental note to find out what the heck was in a Davion PPC

so he could avoid them in the future. The music died down as the pair of girls on the stage finished their act, giving Morrison a moment of respite to speak without having to shout.

The two men were of the same lean athletic build, both about one hundred-ninety centimeters tall. The first one had dirty blonde hair cut short in typical MechWarrior fashion. His crystal blue eyes looked cold and unforgiving. The second one had wavy muddy water hair but wore his a little longer with just the temples shaved for better contact with the neurohelmets. Unlike his friend, his hazel colored eyes were soft and warm set in a face that was shaped by the Gods on one of their better days. That was the first thing that Sarah noticed about him. It was a strange feeling, something entirely different than what she felt when she was around Morrison. With Morrison it was the sense of power he held, the wisdom in his age, the confidence and control he exuded. But looking at the newcomer with his hair done just so and his inviting eyes staring back at her, it was just...*ooo*.

“Gentleman, I’m Leutenant-Colonel Morrison.” He pointed to the others in turn. “This is my XO, Major Kaplan. Captains Pintall and Picketts and Sergeant-Major Fujimowa.” The two men shook hands with everyone. The blonde spoke up first. “I’m Royer Sanderson and this is my friend Frank Lamberti. We hear that you’re looking to hire some ’Mech pilots.”

Morrison leaned back in his chair but spoke louder as the DJ was announcing the next act on the stage. “Right. We have an immediate opening for a mission that will be leaving in short order. What I need to know from you gentleman is what experience do you have?”

Frank spoke up first. “Well, we’re both qualified ’Mech pilots and we both gravitate towards the Heavy Class ’Mechs mostly. I’m rated on *Crusaders, Thunderbolts, Catapults, and Excaliburs.*” Royer picked right up when Frank stopped. “I’m rated on *Warhammers, Quickdraws, Riflemans, and Marauders.*” This was very good news to Morrison. Already one of them was the right weight class and ’Mech model pilot that they needed. Now came the hard part.

“So, where have you guys seen action?” Morrison took a disinterested look and began peeling the label from his empty beer bottle. *No sense in appearing too eager.*

Royer took the lead again. “After my unit got pounded by the Red Corsair in ’55, the survivors went down to Outreach and signed on to a older League-bound unit. I met Frank then and we got involved when Marik sent us against Davion worlds on ’57. Then we were sold to Sun-Tzu and he stuck us on garrison while his Warrior Houses went to war with the Compact. We didn’t like the feeling down in the CapCon what with all the internal politics going on so we didn’t renew the contract and headed back to Outreach. Halfway through the Chaos March we made a pit stop for supplies on Liberty. Well the local garrison there thought we were Capellan spies or sleeper agents or something cause we get attacked and our CO gets killed. The MRBC sided with the garrison commander and planetary governor and they disband us. Myself, Frank and a handful of others made our way here instead of Outreach looking for work. With the FedCom war brewing up people are hiring but you’re the first that’s looked at people that, ah, need a ride.” Morrison took note that Royer deftly avoided using the term *dispossessed*. To a MechWarrior losing your ’Mech and becoming dispossessed was akin to losing a loved one to cancer or some other horrible disease. Even the mere *word* was avoided when possible.

“Before I met up with Royer,” Frank continued, “I’d done mostly garrison and raid deterrence along the League-Periphery borders. With Marik sending his line units to fight the Clans we took up all their posts while they were gone. After the Truce of Tukayyid we cooled our heels on garrison for a few years and then we got the call up in ’57 to take back worlds lost

to the FedCom during the Fourth War. We successfully took Marcus and Castor and then got transferred to Sunny Boy but that didn't last long anyway."

Morrison nodded thoughtfully as the two recounted their experiences. The haze of the PPC shots had mostly worn off thanks to the SoberUp, so he was certain that he was thinking pretty clearly when he'd decided on whom to keep with the unit. "Well, gentleman, I'd like to thank you both for your time. Currently, I need just one warm body to fill my billet and I've decided that Mr. Sanderson—" He was cut off short as three men made a noisy, quick entrance into the bar and began to scan the room looking for someone. Morrison silently groaned when one of the trio spotted his group and tapped his companions before pointing in their direction.

"Friends of yours?" Morrison asked in a low voice.

"Former employer." Frank replied just as quietly.

The waitress had returned with more bottles of beer and placed them around the table. At the sight of the three men she quickly snatched up the empties and scurried away from the table. The newcomers wormed their way through the sea of tables towards the Misfits. All three were dressed in boot, shorts and coolant jackets. Morrison wondered if they were coming from or going to a fight between 'Mechs. The sweaty, grimy looks on all of their faces quickly answered that question. The short one, flanked by two gruff looking men stepped up to the table.

"Frank. Roy. What's going on here?"

Frank answered curtly without looking up at the men. "What's it look like Hank? We're trying to find work. That's what unemployed people do in case that little fact slipped your mind."

Hank waved a hand over the table as if erasing Frank's comments from the air. "That's all behind us now. I need you both back. We just took a beating from the Kingpin Killers but I salvaged two machines for you."

Royer turned and raised an eyebrow. "Salvaged you say? Do you need us to pilot them or repair them for you?"

Hank looked flustered for a second. "Pilot of course. I've got my tech working on them now, getting them ready for you guys."

Royer apparently wasn't buying the nice-guy act. "Uh huh. And these 'Mechs would be?"

"C'mon now, our reputation is hanging by a thread. I need you back so we can win the next bout for the money and possibly a new contract. Word is that the Davions are looking at this next match closely for a raiding contract. And that usually means big money and big salvage." Hank tried to show a smile beneath the frustrated look he wore and patted Frank on the shoulder.

Frank didn't shrug off Hank's hand but sat back and turned to look directly at him. "The 'Mechs Hank. What are they?"

Hank thrust his fists on his hips and looked down at the floor for a pair of heartbeats. From his breathing the group could blatantly see he was struggling with the information. "Alright, " he said with a sigh. "It's an *Assassin* and a *Clint*."

Frank barked a harsh laugh and the soft look he had earlier hardened with anger. "40 tonners? You expect us to come back after you let us go, for *Mediums*?" He laughed again. "Just how many head hits you take in that last bout Hank, cause you must be flippin' crazy. Colonel Morrison here at least has the *decency* to offer us our normal weight class."

Hank tried to reply to Frank when Royer laid into him even harsher. "Tell you what there Hank ol' buddy. We'll come back if you get down on all fours, lick our boots and tell us how wrong you were to toss us out like trash. That'd be a good place to start you slimy dog!"

Morrison jumped to his feet and put both hands out to stall any response that were coming in the heated argument. “If I may before this gets out of hand, Hank what was the reason you had to let them go?”

Hank’s face screwed up like he just tasted something sour. “We were short on machines, so I gave them the day off and put two other guys in the ’Mechs they were sharing. They got trounced and the machines weren’t salvageable. So, rather than pay an idle pilot I let them go to save the money.” Hank turned back around to get back at Royer but Morrison tapped his shoulder before he could get a word out.

“One other question if I may? Why not fire the two that lost the ’Mechs instead of the two that had the day off?”

Hank answered indifferently. “I fired all four.”

“Ah, good money saving decision. Please, continue.” Morrison tried not to sound too sarcastic but it bled through his words like cheap gauze as he sat back down. Hank turned back to his former troops but whirled on Morrison when he caught the subtleties in his reply.

“Oh like you could do any better! Who the hell do you think you are?” Little white dabs of spittle started to form at the corners of Hank’s mouth.

Morrison stood slowly as to appear non-confrontational and offered his hand to Hank. “I’m Lieutenant-Colonel Marion Morrison, of the mercenary battalion Marion’s Misfits newly arrived here on Galatea. I’m here to hire a Heavy ’Mech pilot for a mission I’m partaking in that leaves tomorrow and Mr. Sanderson and Lamberti answered my call.”

Hank batted away Morrison’s hand causing the rest of the Misfits to sit up straighter in their seats and caused Hank’s two companions a look of worry. “I don’t give a rat’s ass if you’re the Primus of ComStar. What makes you think you’ve got the clout to come in here and take my men? I say who comes and goes in my unit!”

Morrison widened his stance and opened the distance between Hank and himself. He held up his left hand and counted off the points on his fingers. “One. I came here to the Mercenary’s Star to hire MechWarriors. Two. This is an interview, so I haven’t taken anyone yet. Three. I never asked if they were currently employed because, four, by your own admission and theirs, they’re not employed. And five, my *battalion* sits under the protective umbrella of an *Overlord-Class DropShip*, so I think that’s plenty of clout. Don’t you? So before this goes any further, *Hank*, let me ask who do you think *you* are coming in here and sticking your nose in business that neither concerns nor involves you?”

Hank folded his arms across his chest in a clearly defiant move. “You can’t hire them.”

“Really. And why not?” Morrison mimicked Hank’s movements.

Hank puffed out his chest. “Because they’re not fired. I just rehired them.”

As if on queue, Frank and Royer both said, “We quit.”

Hank whirled back around. “You can’t quit!”

“I think they just did Hank,” Morrison said with a shrug.

Hank spun back around and thrust a finger in Morrison’s face. “This is all your fault. You just cost me two good pilots and I don’t take that sort of thing lightly. You haven’t heard the last of me Morrison. You’d better be looking over your shoulder because my Harassers and me are going to be waiting for you. This is far from finished.” Hank spun in place and pushed past his two companions and stormed out towards the door. One of the two cronies shot Morrison a smirk and both followed behind Hank.

“Well, that was interesting,” Morrison said as he retook his seat. Frank and Royer both had looks of slight embarrassment while the rest of the Misfits were relaxing down from the heightened anxiety they were feeling.

“Any other surprises I should know about from you two?” Morrison asked spitting a glare of suspicion at Frank and Royer.

“No sir,” Frank said immediately. “That was not expected at all and I’m - we’re - real sorry that you had to be put through that. But Hank...Hank’s all talk. I wouldn’t take anything he says at face value. His unit has been beaten on too much these past few weeks to be any kind of threat.”

Morrison nodded silently. It wasn’t like he would have to deal with Hank directly should push come to shove, but the other half of his command was staying on planet. That little fact had given him cause for concern despite Frank’s assurances that it was more rant than anything.

“Well then. As I was saying we have room for one person for this mission. The both of you have excellent skills and I wish I could take the both of you with me but Mr. Sanderson,” he paused to take a breath “Mr. Lamberti has the skills needed to pilot the machine we have in our possession. I wish you luck in your job search but Frank will be coming with us on this mission.”

Frank tried to hide his smile and shook hands with Royer in a consolatory manner. Royer was obviously upset that he hadn’t been picked but he took the decision and accepted it. He stood and held out his hand for Morrison. “Thank you for taking the time to meet with me sir. Frank here will do you proud, I’m sure of it.” Morrison got up from his seat and shook his hand heartily.

“Um, Colonel?”

Both Morrison and Royer turned, without releasing their grips, to look at Captain Pintall who up until this point hadn’t said much of anything. “Yes Captain?” Morrison inquired.

“Well sir, like you said, *you* only have room for one person on this mission but I’ve got a open slot in my lance that needs filling.” Morrison began to smile even before Julian had explained the matter fully. “Mr. Sanderson has the right skill sets to run that spare you-know-what we’ve got, so with your permission Colonel, I’d like to hire Royer here for my lance.”

Morrison looked back to Royer, who had that look of oh-dear-God-please in his eyes. He figured that this would most likely be the best chance for Royer to get into a decent unit and definitely his only chance of making it off this rock alive.

“Well, Mr. Sanderson, it looks like I was mistaken. I’d like to welcome you *both* to the Misfits.” A bright smile broke across Royer’s face as he shook Morrison’s hand more vigorously this time. Frank and Royer turned to give each other a backslapping bear hug that only years of camaraderie can produce. Congratulations and well wishes were conveyed from the rest of the Misfits as well, to the two new hirees.

“Now, Captains Picketts and Pintall. If you’ll take charge of your recruits I’d like to get back to the *Scant* before we piss any more people off today.” With that said the seven of them exited the bar. Morrison being the last to leave sketched a brief salute at the bartender who returned a nod and wide grin to the mercenary commander.

***Galatean City***  
***Galatea, Lyran Alliance***  
***17 Jan 3063***  
***0915 Hours Local Time***

The next morning, after two satisfactory maneuvers drills in their 'Mechs and one quick night march, the men and women of the Misfits' Balan Company and the command lance loaded up into the *Heaven Scent*. With the extra room gained from the company they were leaving behind, they packed in all the extra armor, ammo and supplies they were able to scrounge up for the two days they'd had to shop.

The rest of the unit loaded everything that wasn't going on the Eaton contract into railcars on the spaceport. Since Galaport was the only DropShip port on the planet it had plenty of accommodations built into it. One of the biggest perks was the GalaRail MagLev Line that had track running along side all the landing pads to bring in freight cars to load up whatever the ships might've brought in. Perfected in the late 21st Century, Magnetic Levitation technology allowed rail cars to move faster and carry more weight. Over time the cars and the lines grew in size to the current day when they were capable of transporting four Assault-Class 'Mechs per car. With only ten 'Mechs and a dozen vehicles, the remaining two companies loaded up into three freight cars including all their personal effects, supplies and equipment. The troops had moved into the passenger car to watch the *Scent* lift off as the train pulled away heading to the rented hangar.

The thick gray smoke roiled at first obscuring the landing pad and the lower third of the ovoid hull. A deep rumbling was more heard than felt in the distance as the engines powered up to full thrust. As the ship slowly rose from gravity's grip, bright white and yellow flames were seen belching from the bottom of the massive ship. Captain Pintall took a second to look at the faces of the men and women he would command for the next few months. Every face held a look of awe at the wondrous sight as thousands of tons of metal blasted off into the sky. Even for Julian he never ceased to be amazed when watching DropShips coming and going, even if this one was taking his commanding officer and half the unit strength off planet. Gaining speed the *Scent* slipped through the clouds and out of sight from the train passengers.

The train ride was going to take the better part of a half hour, or so the engineer had told them. Everyone took a seat in the car and talked or read the local papers to keep up with the current events in what was certainly a partisan view. Julian sat working on his noteputer, making sure that he was on the ball with running this half of the unit. There was just so much to deal with. There was daily maintenance schedules, training ops, munitions requisitions and on top of that there was the on planet fighting to worry about. Where the hot spots were, who was causing the most trouble, who was trying to stay out of the fighting, and most importantly how to avoid the fighting all together. Morrison had left explicit instructions to avoid any and all confrontations if possible. It wouldn't do any good to get the 'Mechs blasted to scrap when there wasn't much money to get them fixed up. Plus how would that look to Morrison if Julian took the unit to war while he was away. No, Julian knew that the safety and integrity of the unit was entrusted to his care and he was not going to disappoint anyone. Lost in thought going over the duty roster Julian didn't notice that the train had slowed. It was one of his lancemates, 2nd Leutenant Linda Coronado who spoke up first.

"Oh we there already?" she asked looking out the windows. Linda had a buzz cut through her brown hair and was mostly muscle on her petite frame. Although the butt of many jokes in the lance, no one bothered to tangle with her when she was driving her *Black Knight* into battle. In her element she was ruthless.

Her question slowly roused Julian from his noteputer and he too looked out the window. But his look of puzzlement quickly changed into one of concern. He'd seen the maps and this was

not the warehouse district. Julian reached over the lifted the in-car comm device and dialed up the engineer.

“This is Captain Pintall, is everything ok? ... Uh-huh ... I see. Suggestions? ... Well, that’s not what I had in mind but I take it there’s no other option? Right then. What’s our distance? Good. Hold here. I’ll get back to you.” Julian hung up the phone and turned to see all eyes pointed in his direction. *So much for easing into command*, he thought ruefully.

“Apparently there’s a speed bump on the way to our little vacation spot. Four ’Mechs are blocking the rail we’re on but they’re still a ways off cause the engineer got an early warning about them. Since the train is unarmed GalaRail won’t authorize a push through, so it’s up to us to clear a path or find another way around. Given the distance we still have to travel, it would be more prudent to deal with the issue at hand.”

Linda Coronado, who was only a row away from Julian to begin with, spoke up. “Who are they?”

Julian shook his head. “I don’t know. They haven’t broken radio silence to announce themselves or their intentions. They’re just camped on the rail line blocking our path.”

Captain Jing Li of Ambush Lance voiced her opinion next. “Four ’Mechs against our ten plus our tanks? It would appear our adversary is under informed or desperate. I hope it is the former because desperation can get ugly pretty quick.”

Julian thought about that for a second. “Agreed. We don’t need this fight right now. With any luck a show of overwhelming force will be enough to back them off and let us continue unmolested. So, here’s how I see this going. Captain Fontana and Panther Lance will deploy with Slasher Lance. I want Punisher Two and Four deployed around the train with Tiger Lance in support. Ambush Lance will form up five hundred meters to my rear as a fast, mobile reserve. We’ll move up and see about talking our ‘friends’ down from their high horse.”

The group chuckled at the light joke and moved from their seats and headed through the crew passageways to the cargo holds while Julian had the engineer move the train to within five kilometers of the other ’Mechs. Everyone worked together getting all the tie-down chains and restraints loosened. It had taken a painfully slow thirty minutes to unlock everything that was going out. During that time Julian had checked with the engineer twice to see if the other ’Mechs had moved or were still waiting. He was hoping that they would wait for the Misfits to come to them, or even better that they didn’t think the train would stop to let them out. The best move would’ve been to take the train intact with the machines separated from their pilots. It would’ve been the most bloodless move possible but now that the Misfits were alerted, the ball was back in their court. Julian smiled at the news that the other ’Mechs had yet to move on the now stopped train. *So far, so good*, he thought. *Dear God please don’t let me screw this up.*

Julian climbed up the chain ladder to the cockpit of his *Marauder* ’Mech. The elongated main body was hunched over a pair of backward canted legs and two arms extended to claw-like appendages from the torso. The *Marauder* was a Heavy-Class ’Mech sporting an extended-range PPC and Medium Pulse Laser in each arm. Replacing the typical top-mounted autocannon was a Large Pulse Laser and for added backup it sported a dual-tube Streak SRM launcher in the left torso. The newest piece of equipment was the advanced gyroscope in the guts of this beast, provided by the Misfits’ last contract, Gyro-Tech Industries. In theory the advanced gyro was supposed to reduce “knock” from weapon hits and help the pilot when running the ponderous machine. To Julian, this looked like a good a time as any for a decent field test. Running on the ferrocete surface would be akin to running on ice in sneakers and any combat would prove the new gyro’s worth.

Reaching the cockpit opening, he shimmied through the egress/ingress hatch closing it behind him. Since the climate on Galatea was primarily a desert he was already dressed in shorts and a thin t-shirt that would come in handy during combat. 'Mechs were powered by large fusion engines that gave energy to their movements and ability to fire the weapons. The amount of energy used by the 'Mech could at times exceed the normal output of the reactor causing it to spike to supply the required power. That spike would result in debilitating heat to the machine and pilot. Controls would become sluggish and the pilot could pass out from heatstroke if not for the heatsinks that bleed away the heat for the 'Mech and the coolant vest that protected the pilot. Julian picked the vest from the command chair and flopped down into it. The vest was made of a ballistic weave to protect against small arms fire and shrapnel and included a set of tubes that would carry coolant fluid to keep the pilot cool. Julian settled into the chair and fastened the 5-point harness around him. From the right armrest he pulled out a black tube that he plugged into a port on the vest. The left armrest held a set of bio-patches that Julian stuck to his arms, legs and chest. With the patches firmly in place, he reached up and pulled the neurohelmet off the shelf above the chair and nestled it on his head. A few adjustments made sure that the helmet contacts were good and firmly set on the thick shoulder pads of the coolant vest before he tightened the chinstrap. Lastly he pulled a set of six wires from the helmet and plugged each one into its own bio-patch. The helmet and the patches were used to feed the pilots sense of balance and movements, respectively, to the massive gyro that allowed the several tons of steel to remain upright and move around.

Julian began flipping toggles to run through the warmup sequence for the 75-ton monster. Power plant to preheat. Gyro to active. Sensors and targeting systems to standby. Escape system armed. Slowly a low thrum was felt moving up from the guts of the 'Mech as if it were waking from a deep sleep. The multitude of lights and monitors winked on and bathed the cockpit in a luminescent glow. A rich, feminine but still computerized voice came over the speakers in the helmet.

“MAD-5D Authorization Program Initiated. Identify pilot.”

He responded in a flat tone. “Captain Julian Pintall. Slasher Lance Commander. Donar Company Commander. Marion’s Misfits.”

“Identity acknowledged Captain. Proceed with security code.” The reason for two security codes in a BattleMech was simple. Every one carried enough destructive force to level a city block in a single salvo. With such power came great responsibility and even stricter security measures to prevent anyone from walking off with a 'Mech. Although in the centuries of warfare, no one could really recall any instances of a stolen 'Mech but no one really wanted to go down in history as the first person to have his 'Mech stolen.

“Live for something rather than die for nothing.” The irony of that statement was not lost on Julian during this time of the civil war, even though he’d been using that same phrase for nearly ten years now.

“Security code acknowledged Captain. Full control is yours. Good hunting.” Julian grabbed the control sticks and throttled into a slow walk and began to march out of the rail car. Once everyone that needed to disembark was off the train, Julian headed for the other 'Mechs and called for the rest of the Misfits to form up according to the plan. “Slasher Lance form on me at a slow walk. Panther will bring up the rear. Ambush Lance will support us or Tiger Lance as needed. Let’s flex some muscle people.”

Moving at a steady 25kph it took just over 10 minutes to get within sensor range of the screening 'Mechs. Slasher Lance held a line abreast with Slasher Two and Three to Julian’s left

and Four to his right. Once he was able to establish some form of identifying what he was up against, Julian couldn't really believe he was reading the scanners right. He was facing a single lance for sure, but it was a lance of three Medium class 'Mechs and one Heavy. Reading off the 'Mech IDs he double-checked the system for any possible errors. Again the computer spit back the confirmed readings: *Griffin*, *Merlin*, *Assassin* and a *Clint*. "Well, that's not too much of a threat against what I'm fielding," Julian muttered carefully so the boom mic didn't pick it up. Something about the 'Mechs began to gnaw at his consciousness but he dismissed it to concentrate on the task at hand. Although it was pretty far for the cameras to pick out the details, all the 'Mechs he was facing were painted a different color, as if four separate people came together for this single purpose. But still, he was certain it was something beyond that.

He switched over to an open channel and broadcast to the opposing lance. "Attention unidentified lance. You are currently blocking a GalaRail MagLev Line cargo train. Kindly step aside and let the train pass. Please respond."

A cold, unfriendly tone bled over the airwaves in response. "You think you can just come down here and expect everyone to bow to your command? You think you're above the rest of us? Well, I don't think you are. I don't think you're worth half the talk you give out and I'm gonna be the first person to knock your ego down a peg or two." A lump caught in Julian's throat as the other lance started forward.

"This is stupid," Julian said over the radio. "You can't match our firepower and we have no desire to fight you. Let's be reasonable about this. Stand down."

"Too late for that merc. Prepare to meet your maker." It appeared there would be no compromise. The range was well over 900m between the two lances, so unless someone was packing Clan tech the two groups would have to close to just under 700m before any weapons would be in range.

*Fine, you want to see what we're made of?* Julian switched over to the command channel. "Slasher and Panther fall back at a walk three-zero-zero meters. Ambush hold position and be ready for a wide flanking run just incase. Everyone warm up your weapons but do not release until I say so." A series of acknowledgements echoed through the neurohelmet speakers. Julian toggled the master arm switch and activated his targeting scanners. Above his direct line of sight the neurohelmet projected a 360-degree view around his 'Mech, compressed down into 120-degrees. Gold vertical bars denoted the edges of his front-firing arcs and red bars showed the reach of his side arcs. He switched off the MagRes scan because the amount of metal around them would cloud the return and instead switched over to VisLit. Punching up the magnification he spotted the wide-shouldered *Merlin* stalking toward his lance and dropped the black crosshairs over its torso. The crosshairs remained black while the targeting system counted down to the *Marauder's* maximum range. Once that max range was reached the crosshairs would pulse gold indicating the targeting system had a hard lock and was ready to fire.

"Slasher One will take the *Merlin*. Slasher Two and Three target the *Assassin*. Slasher Four I want you to dog that ... *Clint*." *Wait a second; Merlin, Assassin, Clint. Assassin and Clint. Why did that sound familiar,* Julian thought. Suddenly it hit him. "Slasher Four this is One. You don't happen to recognize any of those 'Mechs, do you?"

"One, Four. Let me check." Roy Sanderson as Slasher Four and the newest member to the unit, punched up the magnification to the borrowed Misfit *Warhammer*. He didn't recognize the *Assassin* nor the *Clint*. But the *Griffin* and the *Merlin* certainly spiked some memories. "Slasher One, I'm pretty sure those are Harasser 'Mechs and that *Merlin* has to be Hank. I'll take a wild

stab and guess that the *Assassin* and *Clint* are the two mediums that he wanted Frank and myself to drive. Guess he found pilots after all.”

“Looks like it Four. How’s his command ability?” Julian wanted to know if he was about to be in a world of hurt or if this was going to be a walk in the park.

Royer answered with a slight chuckle. “Simple. He sucks under pressure.”

“Good. Slasher Four, belay my last. Target the *Merlin* with me. Take out the first two ’Mechs then everyone hit the *Clint* and that should make the *Griffin* run. Prepare to engage.” Julian halted his backward walk and slaved both ER PPCs into his primary triggers. *Here’s where the rubber meets the road. Or would it be ferrofibrous armor meets the ferrocrete? Oh the hell with it.*

The crosshairs pulsed and then held a steady gold. A heartbeat later Julian stroked both main triggers sending two bolts of azure lightning hurling towards the Harasser ’Mech. Following swiftly was a wave of heat that bled up through the floor of the cockpit causing him to break into a sweat before the pumps kicked in and fed chilling fluid through the vest and vented the hot air. To his right he watched an identical pair of blue bolts match his own from Royer’s *Warhammer*. The man-made lightning wrapped around the ’Mech dancing angrily as its energy spent melting armor and scorching the paint. Julian’s shots bracketed the *Merlin* in the left and right torso melting just over half the armor protection to those locations, while Royer hit him in the left torso and right leg obliterating the remaining armor and burning off half respectively. The sudden loss of two and a half tons of armor plus the kinetic force of the blasts spun the *Merlin* to its left as it crashed to the ground. As it hit, the left arm popped off like a cork and a gush of green fluid ruptured from the side as a sure sign of a destroyed heatsink. There was so much fluid that Julian suspected it was two heatsinks they’d gotten.

*C’mon, stay down!* Julian wanted to scream as the *Merlin* levered itself back to its feet. “Four, One. Hit’em again.” Julian triggered both particle cannons and was again rewarded with a stifling wave of heat. This time the computer broadcast a heat warning to him that surprised him because the ’Mech was capable of handling the heat from both cannons by themselves. It wasn’t till he remembered the climate they were fighting in that he realized he needed to watch his heat band lest he shutdown unexpectedly. The *Merlin* took all four shots again since the attackers weren’t moving and the damage was spread over the left leg, right arm and torso again. Two and half more tons of armor sloughed to the ground in rivers of molten metal upsetting the machine while Hank rode it down on its left side once more.

While Julian and Royer were putting a hurt on Hank, Leutenant Wade Gensen and 2nd Leutenant Linda Coronado moved to engage the Harasser *Assassin*. Unfortunately, Wade’s *Flashman* and Linda’s *Black Knight* were built on a lower tech level and that meant that both sides would have to be in range before anyone could fire. Wade fired three Large Lasers hitting with just one on the right leg scouring away all the armor protection and Linda fired off her PPC and two Large Lasers hitting with a single laser burning a black scar into the *Assassin*’s center torso.

The *Assassin* must’ve taken the *Knight* as the bigger threat and unleashed everything it had. A Medium Laser burned a deep line in the ferrocrete surface as two short-range missiles fell short and peppered the area with stone fragments. It had better luck with its five-tube LRM system. The missiles shot high so only two connected but both hit the faux armored-helmet head. Linda winced under the deafening thunderclap and jarring she received from the missile warheads. Added to her misery was the tidal wave of excess heat that bloomed up into the head of her ’Mech as her heatsinks struggled to bleed off the heat from the straining reactor.

Both Wade and Linda held their ground and tracked the *Assassin* as it moved closer but shifting to their left opening the distance between itself and Hank's *Merlin*. Wade locked on with the same three Large Lasers and added two torso mounted Mediums into the mix. Linda, trying to recover from the excess heat, switched out her last volley for four lower-heat Medium Lasers.

This time their luck was much better. Wade's arm-mounted Large Lasers hit the *Assassin*'s arms melting all the armor from them and damaging the shoulder actuator locking the right arm in place. The coup de grace was the one of two Medium Laser to hit burned through the last of the titanium bones of the right arm and severed it at what would've been the humerus bone removing the Medium Laser from the 'Mech's arsenal. The last Large Laser dug a jagged scar across the left torso burning away the painted-on unit crest. Linda was on the receiving end of that last Medium Laser that burned a fifth of her right torso protection away. Her reply was ruthless as one Medium amputated the left arm at the shoulder and two others worried the right torso free of its protection destroying a jump jet in a silvery flash.

Sensing its impending doom the *Assassin* backed off with a parting LRM volley that blasted a small chunk of armor from the left shoulder of the *Knight* as the *Clint* shuffled in to take its place on the line. Subsequently the *Griffin* placed itself between Hank's *Merlin* and the other two Misfits. By double-teaming the Harassers, Julian surmised that they'd either disable the 'Mechs in short order or force the non-engaged Harassers to act as shields to protect their comrades thus coming under the concentrated fire themselves for offering relief.

That relief came as anticipated but not at the level Julian was expecting. As before Julian aimed both ER PPCs while Royer used the lesser distance to try and lock on the Streak SRM packs along with his own ER PPCs. The beauty of the Streak system was that unless the launcher had a confirmed lock on the target it would not fire, saving the ammo for a better shot next time. But the *Griffin* struck first in this exchange, hitting the *Warhammer* with a Large and Medium Laser as well as four of five long-range missiles that spoiled the Streak targeting lock. Royer weathered the damage across his torso and right arm with little to show for its effects. Julian struck back hitting with just one ER PPC but that alone stripped half the armor from the right torso of the *Griffin*. Royer was luckier hitting with both cannons one boiling more than half the right leg armor and the other cracking the chest armor open and angrily attacking the gyro buried in the belly of the Harasser 'Mech. The two Misfits watched the *Griffin* reel under the attack but with the damaged gyro it succumbed to its wounds and fell backwards, crushing armor plates across its back. Their joy was short-lived however, when nearly a dozen missiles peppered the right side of Royer's 'Mech causing him to adjust his footing to remain upright.

Both Julian and Royer pivoted their torsos to the right, and spotted the newest Harasser 'Mech to join in the fight. Standing there in defiance of their combined firepower was a lone *Hellspawn* painted in motley green, blue and black. Using its Guardian ECM suite to mask its approach it had closed the distance to launch a volley from its dual ten-tube LRM racks. A relatively new 'Mech to the Inner Sphere, it came equipped with a triple set of Medium Pulse Lasers and a sick amount of mobility that included jump capability. Proving its role in reconnaissance, it was able to sneak up and launch its attack without any warning. But with the advantage of surprise gone, it was now at the mercy of two Heavy Class 'Mechs.

Linda and Wade were also in for their own surprise when the *Clint* didn't attack but waited for a 55-ton *Bushwacker* to make its presence know by lashing out at the *Flashman* with LRMs, an extended-range Large Laser and a Class 10 Autocannon. Nine missiles blasted a half-ton of armor from the left leg while the laser cauterized a half-ton from the left torso. The worst

damage came from the smoothbore Mydron Model B Autocannon as the 80cm shells ground down the left arm armor. Wade called out a warning to Linda as he struggled to keep the Heavy-Class 'Mech on its feet after the pounding it just took. Linda turned along with Wade to face the new threat but the classic rookie mistake gave the *Clint* an open shot and this time the Harasser chose the right 'Mech to pound on. The *Clint* missed with its own autocannon but burned an ugly scar across the *Flashman's* right arm. The *Bushwacker* launched a double flight of LRMs and thrust autocannon out again. The anti-missile mini-chaingun mounted to the right shoulder of the *Flashman* roared to life putting up a curtain of high-velocity shells striking down one of the incoming missiles. One hit the right leg and three hit the left arm while the rest blasted more ferrocrete shrapnel around. The autocannon again chewed on the left arm armor nearly denuding that appendage. The Misfits hit back hard rocking the *Bushwacker* backwards a few steps. Linda's PPC attacked the autocannon arm of the *Bushwacker* making the protection there a mere memory but missed with her Large Laser. Wade hit with two of the five weapons fired, melting armor plates over the center torso and right leg. Linda wiped her hands over her coolant vest and retargeted the *Clint*. Things were certainly heating up.

Julian took a step forward to get a clear shot on the *Hellspawn* while watching the *Griffin* fail miserably in its attempt to stand with a damaged gyro landing on its right side. Seeing it was without any support the *Hellspawn* lit off all its weapons and tried to jump away. Julian lashed the jumping 'Mech with both ER PPCs eradicating nearly all the armor off the center and right torsos. Adding insult to injury he used the turret-mounted Large Pulse Laser to denude all the rear center armor from the prone *Griffin*. Royer again failed to lockup the Streak launchers but bracketed the *Hellspawn* with both particle cannons nearly crushing the right torso and opening the left to the air.

The excess heat slammed into Julian like a freight train causing him to take shallow breaths while the heat registers fought to bring the temperatures back to normal levels. The *Hellspawn* had jumped to their right trying to make its way into their rear quarter while increasing the distance from the *Griffin* that just made its way back to its feet. Royer turned with the airborne 'Mech and Julian faced down the *Griffin* in what would have been compared to an old holovid gunfight in Terra's ancient "rugged western history". The *Griffin* lit off a classic alpha strike, firing everything it had and hitting across the *Marauder's* arms with all but one Medium Laser. Julian ablated the last of the *Griffin's* right torso armor. Oddly enough the *Hellspawn* fired all three pulse lasers, and missed just as did Royer with both ER PPCs that flashed harmlessly into the sky.

With the Harasser 'Mechs in front and now moving behind, the *Griffin* took the initiative and slid to its right to keep both Misfits from concentrating fire on either of their 'Mechs. Julian had decided that he'd had enough of this cat and mouse game and took a step closer to the *Griffin* bringing the rest of his weapons complement to bear. Royer continued to follow the *Hellspawn* as it circled behind the pair bringing it closer to the Heavy 'Mech. The *Marauder* was already carrying a higher heat scale than Julian would've preferred but at this range the point was moot. He slaved everything else he carried into the secondary triggers, which included two Medium and a single Large Pulse Laser and his own Streak SRM2 launcher. Both 'Mechs fired at the same time lighting up the air with brilliant red and green veins through the launcher smoke. Julian lost a quarter of the armor on his right torso and cursed aloud as he only managed to score hits with his short-range missiles on the *Griffin's* right leg and left arm. Royer fared better against his target as emerald needles of light nibbled away at his right and center torso but failed to spoil his targeting enough to save the *Hellspawn*. A single pulse laser chewed up nearly all

the armor remaining on the right arm but the killing shot was a finally successful targeting lock by one of the two Streak systems the *Warhammer* fielded. Two missiles leapt on white contrails from the launcher and bracketed the *Hellspawn's* torso. The left torso lost the last of its armor and the lack of any armor on the right welcomed the missile with open arms into the internal structure where it shattered the 270 extra-light engine shielding.

The fury of the sun threatened to free itself from the crippled fusion reactor giving the pilot just scant seconds to throw the dampening field and shutdown or risk a catastrophic explosion. Lucky the pilot was able to stop the chain reaction and the *Hellspawn* hunched over and locked down in place. The front canopy blew away on explosive bolts and the pilot blasted free in the ejection seat. The *Griffin* and the armless *Merlin* both moved to retreat from the field but the *Griffin*, pivoted too sharply to its left, slid on the smooth ferrocrete surface and came down hard on its left side sending armor shards in every direction. Julian radioed Royer to hold their fire since it was clear that they'd won the field and Royer watched the *Griffin* finally scamper away like an upset child. Meanwhile, Julian turned back to give some support to Linda and Wade.

Surprisingly, or perhaps not, Linda and Wade were also watching their adversaries run away. After a vicious exchange that breached the torso on the *Clint* and flashing nearly all the head armor from the *Bushwacker*, it seems that the Harassers had finally lost their nerve and turned tail. Neither Linda nor Wade seemed to be in the mood to pursue the wounded 'Mechs especially with severe armor loss in several places. Julian checked the scanners one more time to make sure that there were no more surprises waiting for them then ordered everyone to stand down. The Misfits fared pretty well in the exchange with no systems damaged and just a small fortune in armor cooling in molten piles on the ground. Plus, they had a fairly salvageable *Hellspawn* even if it did need a new engine. Julian radioed for the rest of the unit to bring the train up so that they could load up everyone and their salvage and get moving before it got dark. While they were waiting for the train Julian disbursed Slasher lance in a quick recon to make one last sweep to secure the area. Walking the ponderous *Marauder* around a warehouse to be certain, Julian stopped the 'Mech and stared blankly at the monitors reporting no other contacts besides his own troops. He'd won the day, kept everyone alive and brought every machine back in still working order. *Then why are my hands shaking?* Jittering like leaves in the slight breeze while his arms rested on the command chair arms, Julian stared at them silently for a few minutes. Then he wiped his hands on his shorts and figured that it had to be left over adrenaline from the battle. Grabbing the controls again he walked the *Marauder* back around to the rail line getting lost in his thoughts.

The undeniable fact still remained that they were attacked, and more importantly attacked by a unit they'd only met less than 24 hours ago. Julian vividly recalled the veiled threats that Hank had flung at Morrison and the unit. It was quite unnerving that he was able to act on those threats so fast and that was something he'd have to bring up with Royer. Julian wondered that if the Harassers could mount a small, albeit ineffective, raid in less than 24 hours, what would it take for another larger, more coordinated group to come after the Misfits where they could do some serious damage?

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