

Marion's Misfits

“Innocence Lost” (Chapter 9)

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Blood. The coppery taste filled Kevin's mouth. It overpowered the dirt in which he lay and the sweat running down his face. It ran freely from his nose, pooled around his mashed lips and he wouldn't have been surprised to find an open gash where he'd bitten his tongue. He lay there unmoving not even attempting to rise. He was only able to take shallow breaths so his strength was beginning to wane. All of this was due in large part to a man named Shadd.

Colonel Pietr Shadd, of Wolf's Dragoons Special Operation Command, had rewritten the training courses for the Outreach Mercenary Training Command (OMTC) to accommodate the Inner Sphere style recruits that would be passing through its halls. The OMTC was originally slated to train Dragoon personnel, however, they were usually of the vat-grown Clan-style sibkos and adept at a much harsher regimen. Kevin had been working his way through the Basic Infantryman Course for over a week now. Today's lesson: unarmed combat tactics. The group had been shuttled to a dusty hilltop out in the hot, open air.

Kevin grunted a puff of air as his opponent dug his knees in deeper between his shoulder blades while he cranked his right arm further behind his head. In this initial test of skills Kevin was doing poorly. It began with both men sizing each other up and then Kevin employed an old Greco-Roman style attack while trying to grapple the man to the ground. That only gained him a bloody nose and a mouthful of dirt to this point. But he wasn't ready to admit defeat just yet.

He sucked in as much air as he could and threw his left arm up over his head and twisted his hips. The momentum worked. The sudden shift dislodged the knees in his back and gave him the room to flip over onto his back. He spun his right hand around and clasped on the other man's arm to keep him from backing away then scissored his legs up around his neck. A quick jerk of his legs and the man was flipped over away from him. Kevin kicked his legs again to spin in place back over to his stomach and got up on his knees. The other man was quicker though and before Kevin made it to his feet, he was sacked again and the two men tumbled to the ground. A dust cloud kicked up amongst the flurry of jabs, elbows and knees flying obscuring a clean view of the fight. Kevin saw stars as their heads collided but he still managed to wrap one arm around his neck and squeeze. No force on heaven or on earth could pull Kevin's arm away now. He knew that if could just hold on that he'd win and then he'd be done with today's exercise.

He counted the seconds, and the elbow jabs, before all movement nearly slacked off from his opponent. Not wanting to kill him or permanently injure the man he released the chokehold and scrambled sloppily to his feet. The other man lay there on his back taking in big gulps of air, clearly defeated. Kevin threw up his arms with a resounding “Yes!” in triumph. As quickly as the adulation from the other recruits began, it died with a bone-crunching tackle of Kevin by the instructor. All two hundred kilos of meaty Elemental shoulder slammed into the small of Kevin's back throwing him a couple meters before body met ground again and Kevin flopped end over end like a discarded rag doll. He lay still, his mind searching for systems that were no

longer working or severe pain that had escaped his attention. When he found nothing crippling he breathed a sigh of relief only to have that replaced by the throbbing pain in his lower back.

“What you have all just witnessed,” the instructor, now covered in dirt, shouted “is the perfect example of how *not* to fight unarmed.” He paced around the circle of trainees taking each one with an icy stare. His shaved head gleamed in the bright sun. Instructor Pyro was rumored to have a heart of ice despite his namesake. “These two, wasted time trying to out last the other all the while leaving the mission uncompleted and their teammates unsupported. In combat if you find yourself unarmed you should find a weapon. If no weapon can be found then you should be capable of eliminating your opposition in a timely manner and get back on the mission. In wasting time subduing Trainee Preski, Trainee Lendar here wasted all his energy and left himself open for an attack that he was not prepared to repel. Seconds count out here people and the sooner you learn that the longer you may live to come home. Now lets get two people in here that can actually fight. Trainee Sanderson! Trainee Evans! In the circle!”

By now Kevin had levered himself to his knees but remained there while the next two trainees launched into a martial arts aerial ballet with spinning kicks and flying punches. He thought about what the instructor had said. *Seconds count*. Well, he was certainly counting the seconds until he could get off this blasted rock and as far away from the Misfits as possible. Just the thought of having to return and face the fact that he was, *dispossessed*. He shuddered involuntarily at the word. Morrison had stripped him of his 'Mech and turned him into a goddamn ground-pounder. How degrading! He wanted nothing to do with any of this and was constantly looking for a way to escape. If the training schedule wasn't so strict and time-consuming he might've found a way by now. As it was he spent half his time recuperating from the physical punishment he was enduring the other half of the time.

Kevin stood, brushing off the dirt in the hot sun, to watch the instructor bat the latest trainees from the circle like swatting flies and launch into another verbal tirade aimed at invoking some wisdom by destroying their egos. He pressed his hands to the small of his back and stretched the bruised muscles. He was surprised that he wasn't in more pain, likely the byproduct of the physical training. Although he hated to admit it, the training was working. He'd never felt better after a scrap before and he was learning some new moves. A few things he'd be dying to test the next time he visited the local pub for sure. Thinking back on it all, for a little more than a week it was a very productive one.

The week had begun when he first arrived on Outreach and convinced himself that this was a total waste of time and money. Standing on the University of Outreach parade grounds with roughly one hundred other malcontents, lackeys, miscreants, and losers he was certain that no training command under the heavens would even try to work these men and women into a formidable combat group. They would take one look at them and send them packing. Kevin had seen it that way, as did a few others in the crowd. The audacity of some of the more slovenly people to show up was incredible.

Before long small knots of people had begun to form as conversations ranged over a myriad of topics. Standing in the hot sun people began to wonder if anyone even knew if they were there at all, or if they would be missed. Then just as it seemed like people were about to up and leave when a commotion arose from the other side of the University. From between two medium-sized buildings barreled a *Mad Cat* OmniMech bearing the two-tone green markings of Clan Jade Falcon. Its torso-mounted lasers and cannons reached out with destructive force and obliterated the grand stand before the assembled recruits. Naturally pandemonium ensued and everyone scattered for cover. The MechWarrior thriving on the panic he'd caused began to

corral the recruits with his machine guns, stitching bullet holes across the ferrocrete surface to block escape routes.

With everyone trying to get away and avoid getting mowed down by automatic gunfire the Clan 'Mech managed to herd the hundred or so people into a tight mass in the open grounds. Kevin looked up at the green monster and swore that he could see the pilot laughing and pointing mercilessly at the “sheep” before him. Next came the whine and crackle of charging Particle Projection Cannon coils, a totally unmistakable sound to those that used to pilot the giant walking tanks. Kevin looked up at the hexagonal weapon pods mounted on the arms and spotted the telltale glow of a pre-discharged PPC. *This is it*, he thought. *I'm going to die on this worthless mud ball and there's nothing I can do to stop it.* He was literally frozen with fear. Some of those around him cried out loudly in fear or anger. A younger woman crammed next to him, had turned and buried her head in his shoulder sobbing uncontrollably. The high-pitched whine grew an octave and the openings began to glow an azure hue. The crowd grew silent, no doubt offering prayers to whatever gods they believed in.

The PPCs flashed a bright light blinding the huddled mass of bodies. Like a deflating balloon the high-pitched whine wound down as the 'Mech settled back on its haunches. As Kevin, and several others, blinked the flashbulb spots from their eyes he noticed that the group was now ringed by ten large unsuited Elementals. They had to be Elementals because there was no possible way someone of their size was born in the Inner Sphere. Seven men and three women, to be exact, stood there at parade rest and eyed the group like a pack of ravenous dogs that hadn't eaten in months. *Two Points*, if Kevin recalled his Clan-ism correctly, and very serious looking. It took a half a heartbeat to put the confusing thoughts in order and realized that the 'Mech had not killed the group as he'd expected but had used a training version of the PPCs loaded with high-powered bulbs to simulate the blinding flash. And the Elementals standing around had to be the training instructors. *And that means*— Before any words could emerge from the trainees the instructors charged the group and began to grab people at random shouting unit assignments to them before tossing them clear of the throng. Markers had been placed on the ground indicating where each trainee should go to join the others in their unit and many raced to them once they'd been placed. Kevin was more or less fortunate that the male Elemental that chose him wrapped a sweaty hand around his face and head, shouted “Bravo” at him and tossed him clear of the pile. He stumbled into a run and made short work of the distance to the Bravo line, mostly due to the residual adrenaline from the faked 'Mech attack. As he looked at the Alpha line to his right and the Delta line to his left he saw the girl that cried on his shoulder a few minutes earlier standing ramrod straight, dirt smudged on her cheeks no doubt held there from the moisture of her tears.

During the short time where he thought he was about to be vaporized he didn't really think to check her out. She wasn't overly attractive but more so than one would expect for the infantry. Kevin always thought of women in the infantry as badass, hardheaded tomboys that had no business trying to enhance their feminine qualities. That sort of romanticism was reserved for MechWarriors. The elite should always look good, like there was some unwritten rule that declared it so. Kevin had wondered if her reasons for being here maybe mirrored his own and that would be an added bonus in getting to know her better. But he quickly filed that thought away for another time as the instructors had returned to shout at their ten trainees.

Now, Kevin had gone through “Basic” before; it was how he got into the military to start with. A floundering career in the Lyran Alliance Armed Forces led him to retire early and take up arms with a merc unit on Outreach. He knew that the obscenities, slander, and veiled threats

were all part of the program but when they were directed at you by someone with a two-and-a-half meter tall, two hundred kilo frame, it took on a whole new meaning. Kevin was definitely intimidated.

“Three months, maggots! Your ass is mine for THREE months.” Groans were stifled with a quick cuff to the back of the head.

That had been the worst news that Kevin had heard since landing on Outreach. If it wasn't for that Dragoon spy dragging him here, he might've taken the first chance to disappear to the Periphery and find work with another unit. As it was he was here and there was nothing else to do but to gut it out so he could leave. There was no drop out request (DOR) in the Dragoon Basic Infantry School. Pass or fail came with a set of bars or a body bag, respectively, they were told.

Coming back to the present, Kevin watched Pyro take on a proactive role as he explained a series of throwing moves on a helpless “volunteer” using the ancient techniques of Judo. The trainee was instructed to grab the front of the instructor's jumpsuit. Then Pyro clamped his hands on the trainee's, stepped forward with his left foot driving the trainee backwards and then yanking him forward to sweep the right foot with his left and drove the trainee to the ground. “NOW,” Pyro had a knack for sounding like he was shouting even if he wasn't, “at this point you could drive a knife into the target's throat, use a forearm to snap his neck, or simply drive a knee into the solar plexus. Any or all of these combined will disable your opponent.” Pyro stood and yanked the man back to his feet without any visible signs of effort. “Again,” he barked. They repeated the steps two more times before switching and allowing the trainee to take down the hulking Elemental and regain some of his modesty. They demonstrated two more variations where the attacker would flip the opponent using the same left foot to pivot off the person's knee or ankle. Kevin could see that it wasn't easy flipping the full weight of the Elemental, but with enough momentum the trainee was getting better at it. With the new lessons displayed the instructors had the trainees split into pairs and practice. Kevin and the rest of the group spent the next hour throwing each other around on the sun-baked dirt until their muscles burned and bodies ached.

When break was finally called everyone collapsed where they were, like marionettes cut from their strings. Kevin felt a new sense of satisfaction from the training. For starters he'd never been in better shape. He had leaned out, already dropping ten kilograms over his lithe frame and was quite proud that he actually could *see* his muscles for a change. It was that boost in self-confidence that he used to keep going everyday. But self-confidence was not taught in basic. Here they broke you down and built you back up. And they broke you any way they could.

“ON YOUR FEET!” Kevin was shattered out of his reflection by the thunderous shout from Instructor Pyro. Instantly the ten trainees leapt to their feet and ran to form a marching line, just like they'd been instructed to do so many times already. The training was producing automatic responses in the raw recruits and that was something that Pyro smiled at. Internally that is. The “Ice Man” never displayed any emotion save that of raw fury that he spewed at the trainees whenever he had the chance. He walked down the line with his hands clasped behind his back staring at each trainee, who in turn stared blankly ahead lest they incur his wrath. The unwritten rule was that you never met the gaze of the instructor because that meant that you acknowledged that they looked at you instead of through you, and to the instructors, you didn't exist as human beings. At least not until the day you graduated from training. And Pyro was all about the training. There wasn't a time when anyone saw him where he wasn't drilling, training,

exercising, or doing something to maintain his combat edge. In fact no one knew if he truly slept or not. He was up at all hours of the day and night, running the trainees into the ground and then even further.

His massive bulk seemed impossibly stuffed into the taut fabric of the olive green jumpsuit he wore. Above his name tag on the left breast sat the unmistakable red disk with an inset black wolf's head of the Dragoons. The left shoulder bore a Greek letter 'A' for Alpha Regiment but right shoulder was empty showing no particular unit affiliation. The loose pant legs were stuffed into black combat boots that laced part way up his calves. A single canteen hung at the small of his back from a dark green web belt cinched around his waist. The only piece of technology he carried was a single wrist communicator, which everyone figured was just for emergencies. He walked around the group once and stopped at the head of the line.

"Since you maggots have had at least five minutes to rest, I figure that now would be a perfect time to work up an appetite for dinner. I have called off the transport to bring us back to the base. With dinner ending in an hour and 10k of dry, dirty, unforgiving ground between food and you," he said with an all too familiar look that spoke of the pain everyone was about to endure, "I suggest you run." While the word *suggest* was spoke, everyone knew there was no suggestion about it. It was an order and with that the group broke into a full run. It took forty-five minutes for the first recruit to make it the mess hall, and an additional twelve before the last man arrived. This is how the weeks passed for Kevin. Up before dawn, run, training, breakfast, another run, classroom instruction, lunch, another run, exercise room time, another run, training, dinner, more training, and finally collapsing in their bunks for four or five hours of sleep only to repeat some hodge-podge of the previous day.

The monotony wore on until about the middle of week five. By now when a run was begun the trainees ran in a straight line, spaced evenly a meter apart from one another. Pyro's surprise 10k runs were now completed in less than thirty-five minutes with everyone finishing at the same time. Today's morning run had been suspended while Pyro explained the change in the routine. An unarmed combat competition had been scheduled between the different training squads to see just what they'd learned. Each team of ten trainees would be judged on skill, style, endurance, efficiency, and of course total number of wins. As the instructor explained further, the team would have a captain that would be responsible for every accomplishment and fault of that team. They would lead to victory or suffer the pains from defeat. Pyro surveyed his trainees for a moment and Kevin instantly felt the icy hand clawing at his guts. He knew he didn't want that level of responsibility to the group, even if his thoughts of escaping had lessened over the past weeks. He was starting to enjoy his time here but still felt the sting of how he'd ended up here. He'd been seeing more of Mike in his dreams, but the shortened sleep cycles had made him wonder if some of the sightings were when he was still awake. Seeing your dead friend in your dreams was one thing. That was guilt, plain and simple. Seeing him in the middle of the day in the exercise room, standing in a corner of the classroom, or even sitting at a far table in the mess hall, was not normal and made Kevin wonder if it was sleep deprivation or if he was going insane. Even now watching Pyro searching for an unwilling victim to captain the team, he saw Mike standing next to the instructor casting that same disapproving look. He'd declined to get high with Kevin that night and had pleaded for Mike to do the same but had given up with the same look on his face that Kevin saw now in the middle of the morning hours. With their eyes locked on one another Kevin saw Mike give an almost imperceptible smirk and lean over to whisper in Pyro's left ear.

Pyro turned back scanning the group and coming to rest on one person in particular. Kevin saw Mike point at him even before he heard those dreaded words from the instructor.

“Trainee Lendar will captain. You are remanded to his command. You will report to your designated area at the Competition Center at 1300 hours today. Go grab chow now while you can. Dismissed.”

With his heart in his throat, Kevin waited for the rest of the group to move off before approaching the instructor.

Stopping before Pyro and coming to attention he spoke. “Trainee Lendar requests permission to speak to Instructor Pyro.”

Pyro crossed his meaty arms over his thick, barreled chest and nodded his consent to Kevin.

“Sir, this trainee does not feel that he is the appropriate choice to lead the squad in this competition and respectfully asks the instructor to reconsider his decision.” Despite the heat, his hands felt cold and clammy against his pant legs.

Pyro bent at hips, leaned over Kevin and spoke with a calm, vehemence that Kevin didn’t think possible. “Are you questioning my ability to train, or your ability lead?”

“Sir, the trainee is questioning his own ability to lead and does not feel capable of leading this team.”

“Because they would not follow your lead, or because you do not think they have what it takes to win?”

“Sir, no sir. The trainee doesn’t feel he is of the right caliber to command these trainees.”

“That is not what I asked you Trainee Lendar.”

Kevin stammered for a second. “Sir I, uh, the trainee meant—”

Pyro waved his hand. “Silence.” Kevin shut his mouth immediately.

“Trainee Lendar, in my youth a command position was so coveted that warriors would battle, and sometimes die, for them. Through competition we would know that the best and brightest among our troops would be elevated to command positions and they would bring us victory and glory on the battlefield. Here, no one wants to fight for the right to lead, which I cannot fathom, and so we must designate those that we judge worthy of command. Yet, even with the praise of being chosen to lead your kind still gripes and complains because you either do not want the responsibility or do not feel adequate. Are you not a warrior? Have I not trained you for five grueling weeks through the blistering sun and moonless nights? If this is not so, then perhaps I should return you back to the beginning of your training to start anew?

“I see great things for you Trainee Lendar as it is in my nature to do so. I was forged in the fires of battle and changed by the nature of war. I was not the man you see before you, just as you are not yet the man you are destined to become. You will accept command of your squad and you will perform to the utmost of your abilities. You will not broach this subject again with me. Dismissed.”

Kevin saluted quickly and headed off for some food. Although he didn’t turn to look, he could feel the cold dead eyes of Mike on his back and the haughty smirk that was plastered on his face.

Galatea, Lyran Alliance
15 March 3063

Julian shielded his face with his hand from the blowing dust and sand as he stepped out the door from the ’Mech bay. The local news had predicted a nasty windstorm for the day and sure

enough the pounding wind had begun in the waning hours of darkness like some unseen and unwanted alarm clock. It was reported to last most of the day and that had given everyone a false hope for some rest but it was not to be had with all the noise. Holding his sports hat down under the winds he squinted into the distance trying to make out some of the other warehouse buildings and structures. The blowing sand had blotted out most of the light leaving a pale yellow glow to everything. The winds tossed about anything that wasn't tied down and buried everything that was. Despite the hours of maintenance that was certainly ahead to clean up this mess, Julian was thankful that the storm had kept all but the most determined troublemakers at bay today.

Since the Misfits landed here on Galatea two months ago Donar Company had been on a near-constant state of alert. Perhaps it was due to the fact that they were attacked within 72 hours of their initial landing, or it could be that there'd been three other attacks since then. The second was a pathetic attempt by Hank's Harassers to reclaim "property" they'd lost the first time around. The other two were more probes than a raid-in-force by other units testing the Misfit's resolve. All the attacks were repulsed with extreme prejudice but the damage was still taking a toll on their banks accounts. Replacing armor and expendables without any incoming funds wasn't exactly the best way to run things. It wasn't going to be long in coming that they'd have to take some side jobs to supplement what was going out.

Julian didn't want to be the one to run the Misfit's bank account dry so he knew that it would fall to him to keep this part of the unit out of financial trouble. So far his troopers had performed excellent at staying out of all the other troubles. It was even rumored that word had spread around the immediate area to avoid tangling with the Misfits altogether. That would be a welcome relief to Julian. There was a constant nagging thought that someone bigger or better was going to wade in full-bore with his unit and the losses would be unrecoverable. If it ever came to that, he knew that he'd have to be killed in the fighting because there was no way he'd be able to face Morrison when he got back. Hell, he might not even come back if there was nothing to come back to.

He shook off the gloomy thoughts as he saw Lieutenant Jensen saunter up beside him. Wade wore his standard jumpsuit with his hands in his pockets and his ratty, old straw farmer's hat that went everywhere he did. He nodded a silent hello to Julian and smiled with a plastic straw clamped tight between his teeth. The only time Julian had seen Wade without the items was when piloting a 'Mech. But once he left the cockpit, on went the hat and out came the straw. It was oddly comforting that Wade had not given up on who he was at heart, despite trekking across half the known galaxy.

"How'd you sleep Wade?" Julian asked with a sigh.

"Pretty good Cap'n. Can't say I did need a few more hours but it sounds like a buncha bulls rasslin' outside. Makin' it awful hard to sleep."

Julian wondered how Wade had kept his New Syrtis draw so strong after all this time. "Yeah, same here. Figured I'd get up and take care of some work. Hopefully, we won't have any unwelcome company in this soup. I'd like to give the troops a break from all the drilling and alerts."

"Aw, don't worry 'bout us Cap'n. We'll be jus' fine s'long as we stick tah-gether till Morrison gits back. Ain't none of these sorry 'scuses for 'combat troops' gonna push us 'round, no sir." Wade clapped Julian on the back and smiled out into the swirling sand. The two stood in silence for a moment or two when Wade turned back around to say something else. Instead of

getting out his words he was greeted with a mouthful of sand tossed about by an errant gust of wind. Julian tried to keep the grin off his face as Wade spat and cursed at the lousy weather.

From the corner of his eye Julian spotted Terry heading towards them through the swirling sand. Julian's mouth formed a hard line when he saw that Terry had taken the steps to put on goggles and a dust mask to block the sand. *Should've thought of that*, he deemed. Rather than catch a mouthful of sand and dirt like Wade had, Julian simply raised his hand at Terry.

"Hey'd you guys hear the news?" Terry was muffled through his mask so it made it difficult to hear. After a few seconds of figuring out what the words had been, Julian shook his head.

"Yeah, turns out there's a fight today. Someone torqued off someone and there's to be a brawl over at the old granite quarry. And get this." He paused for dramatic effect that was lost partially to the mask and partially to the sand that was starting to work through the layers of clothing Wade and Julian were wearing. "They're Clanners. Well, at least some are. I did some checking and if my sources are right, these guys have their own Clan 'Mechs too. That's worth checking out, right Captain?"

Even though he couldn't see it in his eyes, he could tell the sound of a desperate need for a day off in Terry's voice. Julian mulled over the multitude of conditions that would have to be met and then decided that a more direct approach would just be simpler on his troops. They could stand for a day off after all.

"Wade, rouse the children from their bunks and tell them they've got five minutes before the bus leaves. Terry, find Captain Fontana and tell him that any of his crews that don't want to watch some 'Mech jocks pound themselves into snail snot are on stand-down alert and those that do have the same five minutes to shag it." The two snapped a pair of perfect salutes and took off running back into the hanger. Julian looked around at the warehouses the surrounded them and watched as the storm revealed and swallowed the buildings at random. *You'd have to be mad or cunning to fight in this crap*, he thought. *What kind of folks are we going to see today?*

It took ten minutes to gather everyone into a transport and head off to the quarry. Not only had the storm keep the warring factions at bay today but it also had cleared the streets of all but the occasional civilian vehicle. The warehouse district was in the northwest quadrant of the city, snuggled between Galatean City and Galaport. The quarry, one of the common melee sites that developed since January, was over on the east side of the city. The trip was quiet and uneventful, especially with the storm cutting down nearly all ability to sightsee. By the time they'd arrived at the quarry an hour later a large crowd had already formed to watch today's clash.

The large, gutted quarry was offering protection from all but the worst wind gusts of sand, but visibility was still pretty poor from the airborne particles that swirled down into the pit. Julian looked down and from what he could tell the pit was barely 500 meters across and had several ramps leading down into it. There were piles of rock that he imagined could be used for cover but the heights of them were obscured by the sand and distance.

Hundreds of people had turned out for the fight today, prompting comments of Solaris from the Misfits. One could only imagine the amount of betting and promotional material being used at these kinds of events. And with today's weather it was almost like the storm was choreographed for the fight.

It wasn't long before the combatants began to entire the makeshift arena. Using a set of high-powered optics he was able to distinguish a *Shadowhawk*, *Centurion*, *Starslayer* and ugly looking *Chimera*. The variants of each 'Mech were undeterminable in the distance, but all four

'Mechs had the same paint scheme and unit crests, and oddly enough he'd never seen that unit before today. Julian leaned over and tapped Terry on the shoulder.

"I don't recognize the unit from the ones we've seen on planet. Any idea who they are?"

"I overheard someone on the way in say they were new. Call themselves 'Smash-n-Grab' or something like that. Guess they're trying to prove their worth cause the word is there's a contract for them riding on this performance."

"Newbies. Figures. I just hope they live long enough to know if this was a mistake or not. Where's the competition?"

Terry shrugged as he squinted into the distance. "Ain't seen them yet. I-uh, wait- there they are. Oh no."

Julian swung the optics towards where Terry had pointed to and felt a lump of ice form in his guts. Walking down into the pit was a Clan *Mad Cat* and *Loki*, painted in an all too familiar mottled gray. Either the pair had no insignias or the weather was making it impossible to spot it amongst the camouflage paint but that didn't stop Julian from searching hard for that symbol that should have been eradicated years ago.

"They certainly look the part, don't they?" Julian heard Jules mutter.

"Bah, I think that's jus' a scare tactic. Dem Clanners know seeing dat paint style bound to cause a merc's butt to pucker a bit. Can't say dat it ain't workin', neither." Wade said with a sly grin and adjusted his straw hat tighter on his head. "Poor bastards are gonna be in fur a hurtin' if dis goes da way I think itsa gonna."

Julian finally gave up on his search, lowering the optics to his lap. Things were about to get messy. The two groups stood there facing each other for a few tense seconds that seemed to stretch on forever in the silence of the crowd. Without any comm. units or tracking equipment no one could know what was being said or once the action started, how badly hurt the players would be. A thousand questions were running through Julian's mind. And then it began.

Not sure whether to be surprised or not the four Inner Sphere 'Mechs rushed forward as a group letting fly with every missile system at their disposal. Grey smoke choked the bottom of the pit as fiery blossoms swarmed over the Clan 'Mechs. A faint staccato echoed among the explosions indicative of an anti-missile system hard at work. The four broke formation and scattered around the floor. Julian simply shook his head knowing that their strength had been in numbers but now the Clanners could pick them apart one at a time.

True to the same thought that was running through everyone else's mind the *Mad Cat* turned to track the *Centurion* and ripped two brilliant blue beams from its ERPPCs into the 'Mech's chest. Nearly two tons of armor flowed off the *Centurion* in red-hot rivers severely unbalancing the 'Mech and sent it crashing head first into a boulder it was about to use for cover. The head folded like a tin can. The *Loki* had tracked onto the *Chimera* but luckily for the Inner Sphere pilot, the Clanner only hit with one ERPPC but even that scoured all armor from the right leg. Even as the *Chimera* bit back with both lasers and another round of missiles the *Mad Cat* had begun to move towards the *Shadow Hawk* that was sniping with its AC5 and Medium Laser from behind a large boulder. The *Starslayer* circled around the *Loki*, opposite the *Chimera* in an attempt to angle for that thin back armor.

The *Mad Cat* headed around the boulder to the right just as the *Shadow Hawk* vaulted over the top riding hard on its jumpjets. It spun in midair towards the Clanner and ripped into the left side with its AC5, Medium Laser and SRM2. The damage shredded the left side SSRM rack from the Clan 'Mech but not before it loosed two volleys of its own missiles, spreading damage across the entire 'Hawk. The force of the missiles and the 'Mech in mid-jump caused the pilot to

lose balance when they fumbled the landing several steps before they could regain control. But it was far too late.

Now the *Mad Cat* had the *Hawk* wide in the open and was turned completely towards them. Two azure bolts of lightning caught the 'Mech full in the chest blasting off most of the armor and sending the rest pouring down in rivulets of molten metal. The beams' energy wasn't fully spent and bored deep into the chest cavity where it burned a hole through one of the reload cassettes of SRM ammunition. The pilot never had a chance. The resulting shockwave that tore apart the machine was enough to shake the ground beneath the *Mad Cat* and the rock crumbled under the right foot and sent the 'Mech spinning to the ground.

The *Loki* turned to see the source of the explosion behind him, and that lapse in concentration gave the two Inner Sphere 'Mechs a much-needed opening. Both of them bracketed the Clan 'Mech with laser fire burning horrible scars all across the legs and torso. The *Starslayer* held a solid lock with its SRM4 rack and the *Chimera* fired its MRM20s on the run only hitting with half the salvo. The *Loki* held under the pounding and took two steps to regain control. Then like a savage animal it reared back around and split its ERPPCs at both 'Mechs. He caught the *Chimera* in the same right leg as before snapping it off at the hip. The *StarSlayer* took the hit on the right arm nearly denuding it of protection. Sensing desperation the *Starslayer* lit out in a full run for the closest boulder but failed to reach it before the *Loki* hit it again with three Medium Lasers and a volley of Streak missiles. The blasts pitched the 'Mech forward where it hit the ground with its right arm. The last of the armor shattered and the limb was torn from the socket. The shoulder caught next smacking the 'Mech face first into the boulder it was heading for protection behind.

The *Loki* turned back to its partner who was trying to work the *Mad Cat* back to its feet. Unfortunately the left arm was wedged in a trench and wouldn't budge. Wandering over to lend support the *Loki* bent over to add some more leverage to free the arm. Red and green laser beams lashed out burning jagged scars while missiles pockmarked the back armor. The *Loki* whirled back around to face a crouching and defiant *Chimera*. The *Chimera* was not going to go quietly as it let loose another round of laser and missile fire. Obliging a glorious death the *Loki* marched forward firing a particle cannon with each step. Blast after blast tore into the *Chimera* destroying systems and ripping limbs from the body. When the arm propping it up was sheared off and the 'Mech collapsed back on its face the *Loki* stopped firing and turned away from its defeated foe. After a few minutes the *Mad Cat* was free and the pair walked back up the trail they came in on.

Julian watched them leave and then waved quickly for everyone to gather around him.

“Ok, I'm sure I'm not the only one with this idea so we need to move quickly. We need to find out who those two are and see if they're looking for work. If we can hire them, then we'll have some serious firepower to add to the Misfits. I want everyone to start asking for names, places, and whatever else we can find and we'll meet back here in thirty.”

The group scattered talking to different people trying to find out more information on the pair of Clanners. Julian was certain that while they were hunting up information on the pilots word would travel to them that people were asking questions about them. Maybe they'd be curious and seek out the Misfits first. Maybe they wouldn't even care. Maybe they weren't Clan after all. No, that couldn't be right. Watching the fight Julian felt it in his gut that no one born of the Inner Sphere was that good. There was something about the way they moved and the way they fought that just sung, *Clan*. There was a commotion of joy in the crowd when word passed that

the *Chimera* and *Starslayer* pilot were alive and being transported to the local hospital. No one mentioned the other two pilots but it hung heavy in the air like an unseen fog.

The biggest problem with approaching the Clanners would be whether or not they were adapting to the Inner Sphere way of making money or were they still holding to their Clan beliefs and fighting for fame and glory. Julian wanted a strong set of players but they would need to be team players after all. There was no room for glory hounds in this day and age. They were the ones that usually got everyone else killed, right before they bought it.

Everyone met back at the transport and relayed their findings to Julian. On the trip back to the base, he logged everything into his noteputer crosschecking and analyzing the data. He worked the data over and over as he listened to the sand pelting the sides of the truck. It seems he was about 50/50 on his assumptions about the pair that would work just fine towards the plan that was forming in his head.

Eaton, Lyran Alliance
15 April 3063

Jacob held on for dear life. The air inside the cockpit was stifling hot and stale as the battle raged around Fred's eight-meter tall BattleMech. Crammed in the back Jacob had no idea how things were going for the mercenaries. Fred struggled against another vicious assault and attempted to return fire. The already hot air singed as waste heat bled up through the floor setting fire to Jacob's lungs. "Hang in there kid!" Fred called behind him, "We're almost out of here. I can see the DropShip from—" A massive, jarring boom cut off his last statement and the 'Mech lurched violently forward then pitched left. Fred growled audibly, struggling against the controls fighting a losing battle with gravity. As the 'Mech plummeted to the ground it twisted and rolled. Jacob could not discern up from down as he was tossed from the jump seat. The arms of the 'Mech hit first folding under the weight of the 30-ton monster. The chest came next, whipping the head into the ground shaking Jacob and Fred like ball bearings in a metal can. Darkness enveloped the cockpit as the canopy glass buried into the dirt.

Moments later Jacob pulled his body off the wall now serving as the bottom of the cockpit. Somewhere within the blackness his name was being called. So was Fred's. But Fred didn't respond. Jacob recovered from his position and attempted to make his way to the voice. He choked on some smoke bellowing from a shattered control board and fumbled in the darkened cockpit. They had gone down hard. They were still down. He fought back a wave of fear and panic that threatened to paralyze his entire body. Light started to seep in from sections of the canopy and he waved his arms about in a feeble attempt to dissipate some of the smoke. He continued to crawl through the cockpit towards the voice still calling for him and his would be rescuer. Then he spotted him, hanging limply in the harness of the command chair. Fred lay motionless, his head brutally twisted, his neurohelmet hanging by the chinstrap. Jacob reached the front of the cockpit and found the source of the voices coming from the built-in speakers. He tried to wake Fred, pushing on his chest, screaming his name. Fred didn't move. His eyes were still open. They didn't blink. The panic that Jacob had tried so hard to keep from reaching him, finally hit. He broke into a fearful fit, shaking Fred, pounding on his chest to try to stir some bit of life from the man. Jacob collapsed into a sobbing mass, shaking from overwhelming emotions.

The mercenary was dead. He had sacrificed his life trying to get Jacob to the DropShip. Jacob's head sprang up. *The DropShip!* He scrambled to the other side of the downed 'Mech

and popped the emergency release on the hatch. With a hiss and a loud pop fresh air rushed in replacing the burnt, metallic smell of fried wires and conductors. He pulled himself through the opening and landed in a heap on the ground. Pain shot through his body. He had been too shocked to register his injuries until that moment. He quickly glanced around the field at the carnage of the battle he'd survived to this point. Blackened carcasses littered the field, some smoldering, some still afire. Lyran 'Mechs of the Skye rebels outnumbered any mercenary 'Mechs he saw, including his own, by at least four-to-one. A low rumble vibrated across the valley behind him attracting his attention. He looked beyond the death and ruin before him and spotted it. The rescue ship! It was *leaving!* Lifting off the ground atop a pillar of smoke and fire. Beams of blue and red light burst forth from circular weapons pods on all sides striking at targets on the ground that he could not see from his position on the ground. He quickly scrambled for a better view atop the 'Mech. Looking out at the scene once more he could see Skye 'Mechs firing into the ship as it lifted higher and higher. He began to cry again, mixed tears of joy and sorrow. He realized that his parents and sisters had made it safely to the departing ship. But he was still there, still on the ground. They had escaped! He wasn't so lucky. The thunder of the ship's engines drowned out any sounds of the battle but Jacob could see the DropShip's weapons fell one rebel 'Mech after another. A smile spread across Jacob's tear-soaked face. He knew that although he may be left behind, the rest of his family made it out alive. Maybe if he survived long enough he could get out a message to let them know he was alive too. His elation quickly turned back into panic as an unfamiliar sound rose up over the engines. It was a sick metal twisting sound. He spotted the DropShip. It was no longer ascending but tilting awkwardly off the pillar of smoke. Rents in the armor reflected off the sun and smoke poured from too many spots for Jacob to count. "NO!" Jacob screamed as if his very voice could save the ship. He stood there frozen in place as the ship's engines groaned one last cough of energy before dying out. The vacuum of sound was quickly replaced by the hull hitting the ground and collapsing under the thousands of tons of weight. Flashes erupted from all over the body as more of the hull folded and in a split second vanished in an awesome fireball. The waves of heat from the explosion spanned the distance and lapped at his body. He couldn't move anymore. He couldn't form words. The shock had taken over his body. His parents, sisters, and the mercenaries! Everyone was gone! He watched the shockwave from the downed ship approaching, ripping up the earth, devouring everything in its path. It slammed into his small body, tearing flesh from bone, stealing the life from him. As the flames consumed him, he managed one final ear-piercing scream of pain. He pitched over in mid-air off the sofa and came down hard on the metal floor.

Lieutenant-Colonel Marion Morrison was struggling with his own demons. The commanding officer and founder of the Marion's Misfits was going over the after-action reports of the battle that took place on Eaton earlier that week. Morrison had taken on a contract from the governor of Eaton to extract his family after they'd become a target for a growing rebel faction. Eaton sat in the infamous section of the Federated Commonwealth known as the Isle of Skye. For hundreds of years the denizens of Skye fought numerous revolts for independence and each time the revolts were put down or pacified. Now a civil war had erupted in the FedCom attracting the attention of every politician and military unit. The Skye rebels saw another opportunity to win their freedom and acted upon it. Morrison was given a lucrative payment to bring in troops and get the governor and his family out. Although Morrison had pulled it off, the cost had been high.

Morrison looked over at the stack of paper work to be gone over. This was the part of the job he hated the most. The top paper was a report documenting the readiness of every BattleMech at his disposal. He grimaced at the numbers written in red ink for his 'Mechs. No machine had taken less than 30% damage and there were a few that he had written off for scrap parts unless enough repairs could be made before he landed back on Galatea. He slid the report into his 'Out' bin and moved on to the next sheet. He hung his head after reading the title, Killed in Action. Gritting his teeth he forced his hand to pick up the pen, then hesitated. He tried to convince himself that things could have been worse but that's what they always tell you when you're the commander. He wrote the number two on the appropriate line. He was angry with himself and upset over the loss of his men. He couldn't help but think that he should have controlled the situation, prevented those deaths. His only wish was that he could convince himself to believe that lie.

He wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand and set in to complete the task before him. Line by line he began to fill out the forms for the deceased. First came the name: Vlad Hasic. Rank and position: Leutenant, fourth in Striker Lance of Balan Company. Morrison attempted to retrieve a mental image of the man's face but he only came back to the final dying moments of Hasic's 70-ton *Shootist* locked in a duel against a 90-ton rebel *Emperor*. Technically Hasic's death was Morrison's fault. Morrison had foolishly charged back into the thick of the fight to retrieve a downed pilot and Hasic's sacrifice saved him. Morrison never even saw the *Emperor* kill him. Hasic had eagerly joined the unit when Morrison started up his mercenary unit. He had volunteered to become the close-in support for the missile-laden 'Mechs. Artillery units were valuable and thus highly targeted in combat. Hasic had given additional protection to those 'Mechs of the Misfits to a degree only matched by top line House divisions. Morrison had commended Hasic's actions in the field before but suddenly realized he never truly knew the man. Morrison shook the dismal thoughts from his mind and returned his thoughts to the report. He was just about to enter the cause of death when a piercing scream erupted from behind him, startling him enough to skew the pen across the paper. He turned just in time to see Jacob twist violently from the sofa to the floor.

Morrison sprang from his chair and moved quickly to the sofa, kneeling beside Jacob, the eldest son of the governor's family. Earlier that night Jacob had been restless and had come to Morrison office. Since Morrison was the man in charge of the rescue the boy felt safer with him at the moment. Morrison placed a comforting hand on the boy's back and felt the cold clamminess of his shirt. "Another nightmare?" Morrison asked. Jacob answered with a nod. "That's one every night since we left Eaton, isn't it? It might do you some good to talk about what's bothering you." Jacob didn't answer but simply picked himself off the floor and moved back to the sofa. He settled on his back staring up at the ceiling, quietly contemplating the horrible dream still on his mind. Morrison turned back to his paperwork trying to focus on the job more than the emotions running rampant between the two of them.

"I don't understand."

Jacob has startled him with the sudden question. "What don't you understand?" Morrison asked without looking up from the desktop.

"Any of it." The response was strained. Morrison looked over and saw tears running down the boy's face. Jacob turned his head to the side to look back at Morrison as more tears rolled off his cheeks. "It's all my fault isn't it?"

"No Jacob. None of this is your fault." He didn't look convinced so Morrison continued "There's an old saying I learned in military school. 'No battle plan ever survives contact with

the enemy.’ Some field commander in the twentieth said it, I think. What happened back there is just the hard truth of that saying.” Morrison felt his chest tighten and he tried harder to take deep breaths and keep his emotions in check, for the boy’s sake.

“What went wrong then?” Jacob continued.

Morrison shrugged his shoulders. “Everything. Something. Nothing. I still haven’t figured that out. I guess that’s what all this paperwork is supposed to tell me.”

Jacob rubbed his nose on the sleeve of his pajamas. “My teacher says” he paused, then tentatively continued, “used to say, if you go back to the beginning you can figure out almost any problem.”

Morrison pulled out a drawer of the desk to rest his feet on, sat back in his chair and folded his hands together behind his head. “The beginning would be when I landed my unit on Eaton.” He then delved into the events leading up to the present. The mercenaries had fought their way into Capital City on their way to City Hall to pull Jacob’s father, then governor of Eaton, out of a siege by rebel troops. They had arrived in the center of town to find several armored tanks and other assorted vehicles trying to blast the governor out or level the building around him. Morrison had signaled his troops to attack in an attempt to drive them off. He figured they’d flee under the threat of a full ’Mech company-sized attack but he had figured wrong. The rebel vehicles turned on the ’Mechs with a savage fury that led to their total destruction. Morrison went into detail when recounting how he had to stomp a *Myrmidon* medium tank into submission. Jacob had sat up on the couch listening intently. Morrison went on to explain that he had not wanted to kill all those men but he wasn’t about to endanger his own troops and destroyed the armor convoy.

The rebel siege had chased the governor deep within the building so by the time the mercenaries managed to get him out they were a good two hours behind schedule. In an effort to make it up, Morrison scrubbed the initial evacuation plan, stuffed the governor into one of his ’Mechs and raced off to the governor’s rural estate. They didn’t encounter any more rebels for some time after the initial skirmish. They crossed over flat grassy areas where other estates and mansions stood. A river they needed to cross had slowed them down. With only half the mercenary ’Mechs jump-capable, it took some time to wait for the others to ford the river. Through great effort they had actually made up an hour of time during the speed march across the valley, but he was more worried that they hadn’t seen any more rebels since the city battle. Information over the public airwaves had been sketchy but it sounded like the rebels had control over most of the town and was forcing the local garrison off the main spaceport under a fierce firefight. When they finally reached the estate, they gathered the other family members and hustled them out of the mansion to the waiting ’Mechs. Morrison, his XO Major George Kaplan and the governor all raced against the clock to get the governor’s family ready to move. After much aggravation and debate Morrison had finally convinced the governor’s wife that it would be much faster and safer in the mercenary ’Mechs than driving to the waiting DropShip in an unarmored hoverlimo. Reluctantly, the governor’s wife and three children were crammed into their own separate ’Mechs and everyone set off to the DropShip.

Jacob’s breathing quickened as he remembered the frantic yelling and pushing of his father trying to get the kids out the door. Jacob had been excited to see the ’Mechs but scared that no one would tell him why they were leaving in such a hurry. He was hoisted up and placed in a humanoid looking ’Mech piloted by a mercenary that introduced himself as Fred. Jacob was silent at first but Fred got him talking and answered all the questions that Jacob had. The pilot calmed him down, talked to him about his own life so Jacob could hopefully concentrate on

something a little less traumatic. In the brief time they spent together Jacob found out that Fred drove a *Javelin* Light Class 'Mech for the mercenaries in their only reconnaissance lance. Fred had come from a lower-class family in the Federated Commonwealth and through some basic military training ended up working many small odd jobs with various merc units. He enjoyed the work a lot. The pay was good, the scenery always changed, and he got to pilot a 'Mech. His romanticized way of talking about his life had fed Jacob's wildest fantasies about glory and fame. By the time they'd gotten within radio range of the Misfit's DropShip, Jacob had unofficially adopted Fred as an older brother. That's when everything went wrong.

Morrison looked at Jacob's wide-eyed stare and suddenly realized that maybe rehashing the events wasn't such a great idea. He forgot to take into consideration that the boy went through all this hell without the benefit of years of training and conditioning of combat. It wasn't right to put him through this all over again. "Perhaps I shouldn't be telling all this to you Jacob. I imagine it was pretty rough the first time around. I'm not sure your parents would be happy that I was going over all this with you." Morrison picked his feet up off the drawer and began to rise from his chair when Jacob quickly launched himself off the couch and over to Morrison.

"No, it's OK. I want to hear this. I keep seeing in my nightmares, how it could've have gone. We all die in the end you know? We never make it." Morrison felt his heart sink to his stomach. This was what was plaguing this poor child? Nightmares of his family dying. Him dying. He stared into the boy's eyes with a mixture of sympathy and disbelief. "If you tell me how it did go," Jacob continued, "maybe I'll stop making it worse in my dreams. Maybe then I'll be able to sleep."

The pleading in his voice tugged at Morrison's emotions further. "Alright Jacob. Alright." Jacob hopped back over to the couch and lay back down so Morrison could continue his strange version of a bedtime story.

Morrison rubbed the stubble on his face with his right hand as he thought about how to approach this part of the story. Things were so hectic during that time that it all seemed to be jumbled in his head. Maybe in helping Jacob he would help sort things out for himself. He started back up close to where he left off and Jacob listened closely. The Misfits had gotten the governor out of the city after a minor scrap with rebel forces. The best Morrison could figure now was that the counterattack by the vehicles was simply to buy enough time to warn the other rebels that a 'Mech force was on the planet to evacuate the governor. The rebels used the Misfits to locate the governor's family on their estate and tracked them towards the waiting DropShip. Right as they'd gotten within radio range of the ship, the attack happened. Two companies of rebel 'Mechs launched themselves in a perpendicular attack to the mercenaries' line of escape; a bold attempt to cut them off from the DropShip. Morrison shifted their own line of advance to the right to meet them head-on. At close to nine hundred meters distance missiles roared from their pods overhead as the artillery 'Mechs of Striker Lance sought to get first blood. The old-time *Archer* and newer *Avatar* OmniMech each brought down a 'Mech right away. The newest edition to the Misfits was an Arrow-IV fitted *Catapult* with TAG-guided artillery missiles. A single missile was enough to blast most 'Mechs to scrap and the mercenary was determined to hold that ratio of one-hit, one-kill. The commander of Recon Lance piloted a TAG-fitted *Raven* and together they were picking out all the Heavy Class 'Mechs lumbering in at the Misfits. None of them survived being hit by the Arrow-IV missiles. The last of the five reloads the *Catapult* carried slammed full force into the chest of a 65-ton *Axman*. The warhead blasted off all the armor of the rebel 'Mech and touched off a store of AC/20 ammo shredding the monster into a thousand pieces.

With the *Catapult* dry on reloads, Morrison ordered all the 'Mechs carrying the family to circle behind and head for the DropShip while the rest of the Misfits held the rebels in place. The five Misfit 'Mechs headed out leaving the rest of the nine to face off against the nineteen remaining rebels that were still charging across the field. Morrison reached out with both ER Large Lasers in the arms of his *Penetrator* and severed the leg of a 45-ton *Stealth* bringing it down before it could track the 'Mechs carrying the governor's family. The rebels must've not been prepared for a standup fight because they tried to run in under the guns of the Misfits. By the time they started to fire back with any kind of unit cohesion another four rebel 'Mechs were out of the fight. The rebels quickly employed strength in numbers and began to target individual Misfits with several 'Mechs at the same time. Morrison watched as Leutnant David Drake tried to disengage from three rebel 'Mechs as they picked apart his captured Clan *Puma*. Pushing the limits of his 'Mech he staggered his ER PPC shots as best he could to inflict maximum damage to break away. Morrison lashed out with his Medium Pulse Lasers at a 35-ton *Talon* that was attacking Drake, stripping nearly all the armor off it like a ripe orange. Drake crushed the *Talon's* gyro with one shot and then tore the head off a 60-ton *Merlin* owing most of his luck to the Clan Targeting Computer stuffed in his 'Mech. The last of the rebel trio Drake was fighting launched a devastating flight of missiles that wrecked both arm-mounted ER PPCs and tossed the 'Mech over on its side. Two other Misfits moved in to guard Drake while he got his 'Mech back up to head off for the DropShip. There was nothing more he could do on the field.

With Drake gone the battle line shifted again. This time the rebels tried moving laterally to get closer to the DropShip. The movement was a cover to allow some of the faster rebel 'Mechs to break away from the fight and run down the governor's family. Morrison saw the move but reacted too late. Quickly changing direction he launched his 'Mech into the air along with two other Misfits to come down behind the pursuing rebels while the rest of his unit was left to fight their way through the remaining enemies. "Bash them aside if you have to!" he told them. Morrison pushed his 'Mech into a full run to protect the family only to realize the rebels were headed for the DropShip and not his 'Mechs. Morrison gave chase along with the rest of the eight fighting Misfits. Two rebels had turned back from the DropShip attack to tangle with Morrison. But the 75-ton 'Mech designed from Clan technology was no pushover and made short work of the rebels. The last rebel 'Mech was destroyed right as it fired a round of missiles at the DropShip. The damage was negligent against the thick armored hide. He turned back to the field where some rebel 'Mechs still lingered to conduct a rearguard action while his troops loaded up. Firing from near extreme ranges Morrison, his XO George Kaplan in a *Blackjack* OmniMech, and Sergeant Major Jest Fujimowa in his Clan *Thor*, poured on the fire power across the field striking any rebel 'Mech that tried to wade back into the fight. But Morrison wasn't the only one with that idea. From the backfield well out of Morrison's reach came a large flight of long-range missiles fired by an 80-ton *Salamander*. Under the cover of the missile umbrella came a 90-ton *Emperor*, its cylinder-shaped arms packing a deadly pair of Large Lasers and a pair of LBX-10 AutoCannons.

Morrison knew the *Salamander* was firing so the *Emperor* could get close enough to damage or kill the 'Mechs carrying the governor's family. Determined to give them something else to aim at he broke into a run at top speed, his XO calling back for him to wait for more support. The *Salamander's* missiles reached their max flight time and slammed into anything they could find. Damage spread across the *Catapult*, *Javelin* and *Raven* 'Mechs. Rear armor was never thick on any 'Mech and was even worse on the lighter ones. The *Catapult* weathered the attack easily and pushed hard for the bay doors of the DropShip as Morrison raced past him heading for

the *Salamander* to put an end to the missile threat. The *Raven* and *Javelin* stumbled under the ferocity of the attack but kept on running. Morrison set his lasers on the *Salamander* and fired at the same time the *Emperor* fired its lasers at the *Javelin*. Morrison's shot was true and ripped an arm from the rebel 'Mech but the savage attack on the *Javelin* was far worse. Morrison watched the *Javelin* spin as Fred tried to regain control. The *Emperor* fired again this time with its pair of LBX-10 AutoCannons. The scatter shot scoured armor off all parts of the *Javelin* further upsetting the balance of the 'Mech and sent it crashing into the ground. Morrison tried to move to help Fred when the rebel Assault 'Mech stepped in his way.

He knew his 75-ton 'Mech was not much of a match for the rebel Assault-Class 'Mech but Morrison mashed down the triggers for all six pulse lasers and hit with four. The savage assault staggered the rebel 'Mech back a few steps but he remained upright and intact. In the searing heat of the cockpit Morrison moved left to circle around and hit him again. The *Emperor* twisted its torso, tracking Morrison when it was hit from the left side. Armor melted off in molten rivers while explosions swallowed the left side in fire and smoke. "Get Fred and the kid and let's get out of here Morrison! I'll deal with our friend here." Vlad Hasic had followed Morrison back into the fight with his 70-ton *Shootist* and attacked the *Emperor* with everything it had to buy Morrison time to get over to the downed *Javelin*. Morrison was elated to have some help and swung back around to hit the other rebel 'Mech but it had already fled when he took its arm. Leaving Hasic to duel with the *Emperor* he ran over to where Fred's 'Mech lay still since it crashed.

Without concern for his own safety he stopped his 'Mech, locked it down and descended the chain ladder to the ground. The sounds of combat behind him were dying out so he chanced a look and saw the *Emperor* was down for good. He managed to get the emergency hatch to release and was able to crawl into the inverted cockpit area. Jacob lay against a wall at the lowest point and Fred was still strapped in the command chair. Morrison pressed his fingers against Fred's neck and cursed silently when he felt no pulse. The crash must've snapped his neck under the weight of the neurohelmet. He maneuvered around the chair to get to Jacob. Fearing that death had struck twice he placed a shaking hand on Jacob's neck. There was a pulse there, a weak one. He glanced for what might be any broken bones and when he deemed the boy fit to be moved he scooped him up in his arms and shifted back to the emergency hatch. George Kaplan had already arrived and was standing at the opening right as Morrison reach it. Together they worked Jacob out of the 'Mech, then removed Fred's body. Morrison called back to the DropShip to have a cargo hauler sent out to retrieve the pilot. "George I want you to ride back with Fred and Jacob. I'll deal with the clean up out here and then we can get off this blasted rock." Morrison turned around and saw Hasic's *Shootist* still standing over the fallen *Emperor*. "What's up with Hasic?" Morrison asked George. George visibly paled at the question and before he could answer Morrison took another hard look at the 'Mech. It took a second to realize that between the blocky shoulders sat a mess of crushed metal and wire. The unforgiving sign of a crushed cockpit. "Hasic overheated on that last exchange," began George. "We tried to get there in time but that rebel just slammed both arms into his head. Four of us hit him with everything after that. But we...we were too late." Morrison shook his head slowly. Death *had* struck twice. "We'll honor both men when we get home. Right now we need to finish here and get going. If the rebels can scrounge up two companies that quick, I don't want to know what else they have." The remaining Misfits on the field dragged what salvage they could into the bay of the DropShip then racked their own 'Mechs. Only moments after the bay doors closed did the engines fire on the ship and they lifted from the planet.

Jacob covered a yawn with his hand and rolled on his side to face Morrison. “Why’d you come back for me through all that?” he asked. Morrison blinked a few times at Jacob not sure how to answer. Up to this point in his life, Morrison had spent more time in the FedCom military than as a mercenary.

In fact he was still trying to get used to the idea of actually working to live now. And as he thought of his newer position in life the answer to Jacob’s question came to him, “It’s what I get paid to do.”

Jacob smiled silent thanks at Morrison and closed his eyes. He was fast asleep in a few moments. Morrison watched the boy for a few moments and quietly turned around to finish up the paperwork he’d need to present to the Mercenary Review and Bonding Commission. He’d just picked up his pen when the cabin door opened again. This time it was Jacob’s mother standing in the hatch. She immediately spotted Jacob on the couch and breathed a sigh of relief. Morrison motioned her to enter and she quietly crept over to his desk. “I hope Jacob wasn’t bothering you Mr. Morrison. After everything you’ve been through I’m sure that you’ve got a ton of work that needs to be done.”

Morrison looked over at the sleeping form of Jacob on the couch and smiled. “Nah. He was just helping me sort some things out.”

Jacob slept through the morning and into the afternoon hours. He didn’t have a single nightmare.

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