

# Play Me a Dirge

By John McGivern

You know you're drunk when you can't hold onto the bar...

The bartender squinted at me through the dank light and cigarette smoke and gauged my drunkenness. She was one of those dumpy, lumpy old women whose life passed by years ago and left her squatting on the side of the road bitter and outwardly resentful toward anybody that displayed an iota of spirit. You could easily read it in her eyes when she looked at anybody who dared smile at her which is why I'm sure she loved her job of dealing poison at 3 C-bills a glass.

I met her grim, appraising look by closing one eye, hooking my feet under the brass foot rail and leaning back just enough to lend a straight and sober look to my neck and back. I almost had her fooled, I think, when the room jolted hard left and started spinning counterclockwise and scaring the crap out of me.

I flailed my arms wildly and slapped a death grip on the bar top and held on with for dear life both hands like a panic stricken feeb. Throughout all this I tried to keep my face deadpan and silently prayed that the room would stop this stupid swirling. I needed to keep drinking and the damned spinning and this ugly assed bartender were putting a damper on my plans.

"Yer done pal." She announced, her veteran drink slinger's apathy fading away to flash a small and sadistic smile. Even drunk as a Lyran skunk her statement embarrassed me and made me mad. Mad as hell. "Whaddayer mean!?" I argued back pathetically. Foamy spit bubbles arced off my lips and peppered the bar top as I tried vainly to counter her accusations.

"Ima---fine. Not Druuunkk!"

Her smile sank back into her flabby jowls as she used a sour rag to wipe of my saliva deposits. Without looking up she said, "Go home. Go to hell, go anywhere but here. Come back sober and with C-bills."

Of course here and now, sitting in my room and safely medicated and under close observation, I can say that I really was drunk--- way too drunk actually and she should have cut me off long before she finally got around to it. I could barely speak or see I was so hammered. But then again I wasn't there to get drunk like everybody else. I was there to find silence; permanent or temporary.

For the month leading up to that night the voices in my head were making me insane. They were constantly abusing me, telling me how rotten and worthless I was and how everything I try to do is a joke and how I should just die and save the universe of killing me.

Staring at the bartender behind her polished steel bar, wiping down her shot glasses and battered beer steins, cigarette clamped between tar stained teeth, looking all haughty and superior I felt an urge form. An urge to maim and kill that started in the back of my head. Like a small coal gently glowing to life. Born of frustration and then, with speed born from years of barely contained rage it turned to fury. Blazing, tempestuous fury. Swaying on my barstool to and fro I took hold of my empty stein and considered it. It was a black enameled beauty with a hinged lid made of bronze and decorated with dancing horses and pine trees. It must have weighed two kilos at least and as the coal in my brains grew hotter and hotter I wondered if it would break when I hit her on the head with it.

I eased the stein off the bar and leaned back, way back. I wanted the stein to get as much speed as possible because I decided that not only was I going to try my damndest to break it on her head I wanted to see one of her eyeballs pop out of its socket too. I had the mug way back and close to the floor waiting for the right moment and when she started putting her glasses back onto the wall rack behind her and I made my move---. I struck at her with all my might! No! Scratch that. I fell... I fell backwards and landed on top of the stein.

I moaned in pain as the stein mashed into my back and eventually broke under my weight. I tried to salvage my dignity by leaping to my feet but they were tangled in that brass foot rail, so instead of leaping to my feet in a brilliant display of comedic genius and physical coordination I flopped and thrashed on the floor on the stained, stinking carpet like a sodden payday booze hound.

Two pairs of hands appeared out of the faint light above and rescued me and my tattered dignity. They belong to Wilma Mankiller and Dessie Nichimura. They were MechWarriors from my newly adopted mercenary BattleMech company "The Bone Crushers."

With more ease than I'm comfortable admitting to they jerked me upright and put against the wall next to the bar. Dessie, a short pixie-like woman pinned me in place with her shoulder against the brown upholstered wall and started rifling my pockets for my cash while Wilma picked up the pieces of the stein. Dessie found a knot of cash in my front pocket and yanked it out along with some pubic hairs.

I screeched like I had a spider in my dress as she yarded out my money and manly hairs and my agonized screech made her look up at me and grin like the evil little bitch that she was and say, "Serves you right. You're lucky I didn't yank yer pee-pee off too." I felt tears running down my cheeks and knew she was right.

Dessie is one mean bitch...

Wilma settled my bill and shoved the change into my shirt pocket and together with Dessie they shoved me out the door and into the night. Stumbling out the door I tripped over some unseen lump and fell onto my face and hands in the grungy slanted car-wide alleyway that served as the main street. I clambered to my feet and looked at the bloody gouges in my now filthy palms and shouted at them, "Whadderya thig yer Doon!?" I held my bloodied hands up for them to see. "Yooo see this? Do ya? Well, you can go to Hayl cuz I'm no quitter!!" I wiped my hands on my shirt and staggered as fast as I could in the direction of another bar up the hill.

I could hear Dessie and Wilma behind me as I tried to navigate the incline. It, the alley and hill itself, was known by the local forces as “Hooker Hill” for obvious reasons and while getting a woman would have been nice, even if I had to pay for one, I was there because that is where the booze was.

Stumbling and cursing as fast as I could I made tracks up the grade, I knew that there was a bar near the top of the hill that would serve me as drunk as I was and if I paid them in advance would probably pour drinks down my throat with a funnel until I was and probably even after I was dead.

I was making good time despite having to fight gravity, drunken instability and the knots of good-time seeking soldiers and spacers traversing the hill in all directions when I heard a scream come from dark and narrow building entrance to my left. Sweating and out of breath I stopped and leaned against the entranceway and tried to peer nonchalantly into the darkness.

The entranceway, I discovered as I peered down it, was in actuality a hallway that stretched for about 10 or 15 meters and then took a 90 degree turn to the right. It was down there where the grimy orange streetlights of the alley were faint and hopeless the scream came from. Leaning against the building for support I rolled my body around the corner and scraped, bumped and thumped my way to where it ended and the turn started. Don’t get me wrong here. I knew that the scream was from a female and to be honest I was curious to see if she was naked and if she was to get myself a peek, not be some idiot hero and rescue some dumbassed damsel.

I slid along the wall to the corner and wedged myself into it and with my hopes high I took a look.

A slim hipped redhead was slapping and punching at some guy dressed in a heavy leather Bolero jacket and dark fatigue pants. Judging from her short shorts, heavy make up and what was left of her shirt she was either a whore or a piss poor dresser. My eyes blurred as she gave him a solid one across his cheek and came back into focus as he grabbed her by her hair and Jack-Slapped her so hard she went limp as a noodle on the spot.

He let her drop to the pavement on her face and laughed a demented, raspy bark and reached into his jacket to produce a bottle and take a long victory hit from it. I stared at the bottle, transfixed by its amber glow.

“Can I get a pull off that?”

The guy nearly jumped out of his skin. He spun to face me ready to kick ass, his stance wide, center of gravity lowered he took me in. Even in the nearly non-existent light of the alley I could see that he was a brute. Short and built like a bulldog with broad shoulders and powerful arms bolted to a barrel chest but after that he, like a bulldog, was nearly comical looking with a very narrow waist and short, skinny looking legs.

He looked me up one side and down the other, gauging my threat level. Sensing that I was none his shoulders relaxed visibly, snorted derisively and offered his bottle. “Just save some for my date.” He laughed at his own joke and squatted in front of the whore, grabbed her hair and shook her violently. “C’mon lover,” he rasped, “wakey, wakey time. This isn’t any fun unless you participate.”

I chugged down whatever it was he was drinking and relished in the burning it made going down my throat, knowing that I was going to be even more intoxicated than I already was very shortly.

The whore was coming to when I reluctantly handed the bottle back. He took it from me without any consideration, not even really glancing at me, so intent was he on the whore in his other hand. I know that I saw him tear what was left of her shirt off but to be truthful I didn't really care that she was topless now. I stared his bottle and tried to figure how much time I should wait to ask for another hit. He drank a bit and stared at her, obviously trying to decide what he should do next and like I said before: I didn't care. I don't think I would have cared if I was sober either. She was a whore after all. Getting your ass kicked has got to be an occupational hazard like syphilis or bedsores.

Taking another pull the brute smacked his lips and shook the whore's head some more, making her cry mournfully and beg for him to stop. I pushed out of the corner and said over her cries, "Can I get s'more man?" This time the guy looked like he was going to bite my leg. He glowered at me, mad that I was ruining his fun and then holding the bottle by its neck he swung it down and broke it over the whore's head, knocking her out cold and drenching her with her own blood and his alcohol. Smiling ear to ear now the looked up at me and gave me the broken bottleneck. "Sure, there ya go shithead." and guffawed in my face.

I stood there looking at that bottleneck and listening to him bray like a mule for I don't know how long. When I did look back at him he was undoing his pants with one hand and shaking the whore with the other again. I was stunned. I couldn't believe him. He had just wasted all that booze. Just like that—Bam! All over her head like it was water or something just as worthless.

I couldn't move I was so shocked. I just watched him drop his pants and get set to rape the groggy, moaning whore. I had always known that was what he was going to do and to tell the truth I was okay with that. Personally speaking the notion of rape has zero appeal to me. I'm too lazy to do it. Hell I won't even work to get sex if it's a sure thing. What this guy was doing in this piss soaked hallway was as stupid as volunteering to run a marathon. But to waste good booze though? That was hateful. Absolutely hateful! I started to imagine what it would happen if I stabbed the guy in the throat with the bottleneck; just below his ear and mandible and twisted it hard like a jagged auger bit.

I could see it in my mind: the nearly two centimeter long green glass spikes piercing his ruddy flesh like it was rice paper and then twisting as hard as I can. I twist it trying to maximize the damage while I have the advantage of surprise. He spins away from me and faces me in wide eyed disbelief. Like I betrayed him. I feel his eyes accusing me and see his hands clamping around his neck to try and staunch the blood that is arcing into the air from the huge and craterous wound. But his heart rate is 96 beats plus a minute and in less time than I could have imagined his eyes roll back in their sockets and he passes out from blood loss and dies. Then it's over. Dessie and Wilma suddenly appear.

Shocked, Dessie stares at me incredulous and asks without taking her eyes from me, "Is he dead?"

Kneeling next to his limp body Wilma announces, "Oh hell yes he is. He sliced him up good."

Dessie, holding me by my shirt shakes me, trying to get my attention, “Lem. Lem! Are you okay? Say something.” I look down at Dessie and smile stupidly, “Shokay Deshie.” And then I fade out...

I woke up in my rack and to my horror couldn't open my eyes or feel my arms. I almost started screaming in terror but I remembered that Capellan rum always makes my eyes goop up and get crusty the next day.

You cannot believe how hard it is to open your eyes when they are crusted shut and your arms are useless...

When they finally creaked open I looked around to see what the hell I had done that would make my arms paralyzed. I hoped I hadn't broken them while I was drunk. That would be embarrassing and not to mention stupid. Nope. They weren't broken. I was lying on top of them and my body weight had shut off the blood flow and made them go dead.

I tried to roll to one side and get them to come out but as fate would have it I was tangled in my blanket as well. Feeling retarded for winding up as helpless as a turtle on its back in my own bed I rolled side to side but I couldn't get free. Dammit all to hell anyway! Out of desperation I threw my legs off the bed and let their weight and momentum drag me off my bed to the floor.

Laying on the cold ferrocrete floor waiting for my arms to start working again I realized that my head hurt really, really badly and tongue had a foul taste on it that made me wonder if someone had used it as shitpaper while I was out cold.

I threw up in the shower.

I hate hangovers that go to my gut...

When I was finally clean and was certain my breath didn't stink of puke and cheap booze and I at least looked more human than I was sure I would feel all day I went to the mess hall to search out some coffee and mooch a cigarette.

I walked gently through our moldy barracks, each step sickening my stomach and making my head throb; I didn't try to fool my body into letting me feel better by promising to never drink again because we both knew I would and will anytime or place and to excess. So I stepped gingerly and accepted my punishment as stoically as I could.

The lights in the mess hall made my eyes hurt even more than they did already, making me squint like I was in a dust storm and the sounds! Ye gods! The banging pans and pots were hell incarnate but this was where the coffee was and it was what I needed and to get it I was going to have to endure.

After I drained the dregs from the giant stainless steel urn I sat down in the darkest corner I could find to suffer and stagnate in private. I was going to need some serious time to nurse my hangover.

I wasn't there long when Wilma and Dessie appeared.

Wilma slid into the seat across from me and Dessie acting the total opposite plopped into the chair next to me and shouted “Good morning!” into my ear to be a bitch. I

clenched my teeth and forced my stomach to stay inside my body as the near 100 decibel shout made it do cheetah flips. She giggled viciously at seeing my head rock on its pivots from her verbal assault and looked like she was bubbling with glee. I ignored Dessie altogether and said, "Morning Wilma." Ignoring Dessie makes her nuts, matter of factly it makes her madder than anything I've found so far. "How are you this morning?"

"Oh, I'm fine I guess." Her voice was light and as such out of character and got me thinking.

"How about you tough guy? How do you feel?"

I looked at her over my coffee cup, her whimsical tone making me more curious than I was before. "Well, let's see... Other than the fact my head hurts like a 14 karat bitch and my stomach is threatening to murder me, my back hurting like a mother and I am convinced that someone crapped in my mouth while I was sleeping I feel fine."

Wilma cocked her head to one side, her waist length hair nearly touching the floor. "So, do you remember what happened last night?"

I spooned more sugar into my cup and thought hard. "Hmmm, I went to the Heavy Metal Club got ass face drunk and woke up in my bed." I could tell by her expression that there was much more to it than I remembered because her eyes which were normally a flat blue were sparkling which only happens when she is messing with me; in a good or bad way. Just one of those sick things about her I guess.

Typical woman stuff: mind games give her pleasure...

"Well?" I asked, "Are you going to tell me? Or are you just planning on aggravating me with your "I have a secret face."

Dessie, who had sat next to me in a plastic chair that looked much too big for her, as did most everything around her, had done a psycho mind flip, going from ultra happy to sad and had kept a silent, childlike pout on her face since I had chosen to ignore her earlier greeting/assault. Her head had been downcast, lower lip protruding, arms crossing her chest tightly; all of which served to make her look even more childlike in the blue skinned mess hall chair. But she flipped into happy mode again when it was obvious that I didn't remember what it was Wilma was talking about. Transformed again she sprung upright beaming in victory and slapping the tabletop she laughed in my face, "You don't remember do ya? Ha! You are such a stupid freak Lem!"

"Yeah? Well that me be true Dessie," I was sick of her already this morning. I try to keep my cool around her because I know that she gets a thrill out of pissing people off all the time but I was too hung over to take much, "but at least I aint so short I look like a pair of pint sized boobs on the floor that has a giant assed mouth attached and flaps like a Davion surrender flag!" I could have said worse, much worse actually but I felt too crappy to try very hard. It didn't matter though. She hates any reference to her height and or her womanly attributes.

She responded to my barb by way of slapping me on the neck so hard it sounded like a kilogram of hamburger hitting the bare floor for 2 meters up SMACK! I jumped at the strike nearly tossing my coffee in my own face as the flat of her hand connected with my shaved neck. I tried to punch her back but Wilma dove across the table and grabbed my arm and snapped at Dessie to leave alone.

Wilma is quick for an old broad...

After we, Dessie and I, had calmed down some and I had silently sworn to get my revenge on the nasty little midget bitch, Wilma told me what had happened; she even told me how I threw up in the cab and started taking my clothes off in the barracks hallway on my way to my room.

“Hmmmph”, I spooned more sugar into my coffee. “That sounds like me. So, are the MPs looking for me?”

Wilma didn't reply for a few seconds, she sat there gauging me. I guess she was waiting for more of an emotional reaction or---well----shit! Who knows? Anyway, when she figured out that she was getting all she was going to get from me she said, “Not you, per say but they are looking for whoever carved that pig up.”

“Is there a reward?” Dessie asked, smiling in sick curiosity; trying to be even more of a bitch to me. Wilma ignored her and kept her eyes on me.

“Well?” I asked in an equally obnoxious tone, “Is there? A reward? I mean you two could turn me in and when I get proved innocent you could give me a cut. That whore has to remember what happened.”

Dessie, suddenly transformed---again, leaned over and in front of me blocking my view of Wilma pushed her face close to mine answered in voice that was little more than a hiss and with her violet eyes flashing fire and brimstone said, “Oh sure, she remembers alright, and I quote here: ‘Some asshole showed up and started drinking with the guy as he was beating the crap outta me.’ So yeah you got character witnesses lined up alright.” He voice elevated to a louder and generally more threatening note. “Figure between her and the bartender you were gonna brain at the Heavy Metal club with that stupid beer stein you got enough circumstantial evidence lined up to get you 100cee-cees of 'Mech coolant.”

I frowned, not at the implication of being a dirty S.O.B. but at catching a shot of mech coolant in the arm. The injecting of mech coolant had lately turned into the preferred method of execution for individuals convicted of a serious crime in the Capellan armed forces and for that matter anybody operating under their flag like me. It was by medical standards and by witnessing first hand a most grisly way to cash in. The victim goes into uncontrollable convulsions and is racked with searing pain for the better part of 30 minutes. They flop and scream their eyes boggling so hard they look like they are going to pop out of their sockets and their veins bulging hard and turning from their dark blood color to bright yellow. Eventually the chemical coats enough of their brain to disrupt all of its chemical and electrical signals and they die. Personally I'd rather die of intestinal bleeding or a good old fashioned sucking chest wound or be burned to death. I mean, I'm not afraid of death; hell! I crave it but there are a few transitions into the next life or whatever it is that awaits I would like to avoid and make no mistake mech coolant is definitely one of them. That and I think getting my guts eaten by starving kittens while I watch.

Wilma reached her arm out and eased Dessie aside and sneered at me and matching my jack-assed tone said, “Yeah there is a reward but its not enough to warrant turning you in. We need a heavy driver more than Dessie and I need 10,000 C-bills.”

Dessie stared dismayed a Wilma and snapped at her, “Hell! I'd trade him for a half pack of cigarettes and a pillow that smells like egg farts. She turned to face me after saying that and added, “That is if I didn't kill you myself for thinking that you were in it with that guy. I'd make what you did to him look like a shaving nick, only I'd do it to

your goodies first.” She pointed at my crotch for emphasis. “Trouble with you Lem, you see, is that you’re a bag of shit generally and I wouldn’t put something like that past you. Honestly. I think you screw the dead if it suited your purposes but! You were with us. So you’re saved. This time. But! Being that you are a bag of shit and as such you have zero credibility. With me anyway.” She brought her boot up where it could be seen and slapped at the handle of the dagger she kept there, “Next time you might not be so lucky and don’t misunderstand me either, I would seriously enjoy carving you up.”

That little woman loves to hate my guts...

Wilma got me more coffee from the urn the cooks had hidden in the back for their own use and then led Dessie out of the mess hall. She said I needed some quality time with my hangover which I did. I also used the time to wonder what it feel like to get knifed between the second and third rib by Dessie. I bet it would feel hot at first and turn from a sharp pain into a burning agony and then? Then I would slowly fade away, leaving the pain behind. Mmmmm, nice. Of course Dessie would stand over and gloat, call me names, she’d probably kick me in the head a couple to try and keep me around a while longer. It wouldn’t work though. Death would come for me and Dessie would be left with a bloody knife and a dead playmate.

I let the coffee get cold in my cup as I thought about the kind of peace that death will bring to me but those fantasies were shattered by the sound of Dessie’s shrill ranting outside the mess hall’s side doors. She was really pissed at something or someone. She was screaming so fast and loud though I couldn’t understand a damned thing she was saying.

Dessie. Dessie, Dessie, Dessie. She is a real piece of work. When I first met her I pegged for a short, loudmouthed wench that just by virtue of being short and a mechwarrior would be mean. Mean as the day is long. I was right of course but she is more than that. Much more. She is physically attractive. Drop dead gorgeous actually. Proportioned perfectly; beautiful skin, smooth as cream and glowing violet eyes. Just absolutely amazing, But all that fades when you get to know her. She keeps her hair cut short like a man, all spiked and standing on end with some sore of gel that makes it look more reptilian than womanly and she kick-boxes for the fun of it.

I asked her, shortly after I met her, what toy store she bought her uniforms at. Mind you there was a lot I didn’t know yet and I did it because she was riding my ass about my recklessly wading into their battle. Anyway, as I came to find out later, she hates to be reminded of how small she is because when I turned my back on her she side kicked me in the kidney so hard I blacked out.

I urinated blood for 3 days but I learned to not turn my back on her...

I got kinda even with her a week later. I was in the ’Mech bay working on my ride when she appeared in front of me. I had my hand inside an access panel when she leaned against the panel door. I was working so low I was actually on my knees when she did this. I could feel my fingernails splitting as the heavily armored door crushed them against the mech’s ankle joint. I gasped in pain, surprised that the panel door had closed on me and when I saw her there next to me leaning on that door smiling like the cat that ate the canary I new she was evil. I swear I could her eyes twinkling in glee as blood ran

from my cuticles. I was helpless too. I had nothing in reach to hit her with, nor could I grab her with my free hand so out of desperation I dropped from my knees onto my butt and then to my hip and kicked at her head like it was a frickin soccer ball. Her eyes went wide in surprise as my foot arced up at her and connected. Her violet eyes rolled up into their sockets when my foot pounded her head into the side of my 'Mech. I jerked my hand free as she slid to the floor unconscious and before she hit the ground completely I grabbed her shirt with both hands and shook with rage. I wanted to kill her. I could taste it. I wanted to put her head between the access door and my mech and slam it on it until it popped like a bit pimple. The blood and fury roared in my ears like a DropShip engine but god only knows how; better sense prevailed. So instead of killing her I gathered her up like a sleeping child and carried her up her gantry to her 'Mech. I dumped her in the cockpit and stripped her naked and left. On my way out I dropped her clothes into a trash burner.

I half-ass waited around to see if she would make another appearance that day but she didn't. Matter-of-factly she didn't appear until the next day. I spotted her in the mess hall pushing a battered green tray down the serving line. The side of her head that I kicked was black and blue and the side that bounced off my mech had a huge red and purple lump that was making her entire head look mutated. To this day she has never said a word about it; I haven't either but we both know that I won't let her do as she pleases when she pleases and that I would give it back as good, if not better than I received. But because of that its become apparent that I am her favorite for she is always around me it like a nasty little horsefly biting me in my butt whenever she can with her insults and venomous little physical attacks. So if I was some journalist or writing some piece of literary schumtz and I had to describe Dessie I'd say this: Dessie was petite, buxom and beautiful. She was smart and could be charming as she was beautiful; as alluring as any siren born or made. She was also evil, mean-spirited and blood thirsty. Like a beautiful forest pixie flitting about on gossamer wings toting a machine gun, a bullwhip and long list of people she desperately wants to kill.

That, in a nutshell, is Dessie.

We were still on Warlock. Not a bad planet I guess. It had decent weather and the people were used to be conquered. One old man I ran into told me he had kept his money from the Fourth war because he knew the Capellans would comeback and how he wasn't going to throw out his St. Ives currency for that same reason. "None of you ever leave for long." He had said with a certainty born from experience.

But anyway, still here on Warlock enjoying moderate temperatures, watered down booze and diseased prostitutes and as if that wasn't enough to keep us busy intelligence says that the St. Ives are gathering the remainder of their assets for one final push. Which way you ask? I didn't know and for the most part didn't care.

This whole mercenary thing was working for me. I have never really cared who was doing what on the grand scale. I just want to know who what where and when and being a merc means that is all you'll really ever know so it feeds my innate sense of apathy. It works like this: the worse you're treated by your MACOM (major command element) the more you don't care and the more you don't care the worse your MACOM treats you and the worse they treat you the less you care. It's great. It feeds itself, requires no maintenance and lasts as long as you do.

So anyway, Dessie had made sure that my headache was in Alpha-Strike mode before she left the area completely and when I left the mess hall to go to the mech bay I was half expecting to see her outside with some MPs shouting “He’s the one! He was trying rape that whore and killed that other guy and made it look like he was the one doing it!” But as I stepped into the sunlight and cast my furtive glances about I discovered that I was wrong: for now but there was no way in hell I would trust her not to use that against me. I know that as sure as god made little green apples that she, because she is the most wicked thing I have ever in my life met, will pull it out and slap me with it when it is the least convenient for me. The thing I have going for me though, and granted it aint much, is I know it.

Major Truth, our battalion’s executive officer and until such time when our Colonel arrives, our detachment’s commanding officer was in the ’Mech bay talking with some techs about our now pilot-less *Uziel*. Sigfried Hajari, its previous operator, had ejected after catching an Arrow IV missile dead center of his chest and convinced his ’Mech was going to volcano on him, pulled the yellow striped handles next to his command couch’s floor mounts and took “the ride”. Problem was there was a ’Mech in his chair’s flight path: mine. So Sigg, for all his flair and style and charming looks went out like a comet, flaming and in chunks. Little was left of him except a scorch mark on my shoulder plate.

Lucky bastard...

I walked into the ’Mech bay, as I imagined a vampire might, around the sunbeams careful as to not get any on me, that were invading through the hundreds of holes in our ’Mech bay’s roof, their beautiful, life giving rays making my eyes burn even worse than they did already, and waited with Wilma and Dessie. They had taken up static positions on the left foot of Dessie’s *Firestarter*, ‘Lil Hotfoot’ were looking bored and mad at the same time.

Catching Wilma’s eye I shouted above the chattering pneumatic ratchets and hissing welders and asked rhetorically, “Is he keeping us waiting again?”

Wilma spit onto the greasy floor and nodded, “Like always.”

This always pisses me off. Don’t get me wrong here the Major is a good man, I guess—well—he’s better than me anyway and he’s a qualified leader but! He loves to put us into, what we call a hover pattern. He’ll call a meeting or brief and he’ll always be doing something when we arrive and we always have to wait for him. I had even taken to coming in late to bypass some of this hemorrhoid cooling time but to no avail. It’s like he has a set period of time that we, collectively, must wait until he is ready to deal with us.

After about 10 minutes he finally clapped the greasy tech on the shoulder and came over to us. “Morning boy and girls.” He said in a way too happy tone that inflamed my innate sense of bitterness. “We got an easy one today.” He handed us back our updated noteputers. Open file Oscar and go to section 3. He waited an appropriate amount of time for us to get to the section he wanted us to see and put the meeting into motion. “It’s a simple prisoner trade. We are going to escort a 6 truck convoy north on route 41 to the road junction you see labeled ‘Point King’ there you are to stand by while our employers conduct their business with a St. Ives unit. When they’re done dancing their little dance you come back here.” He snapped his noteputer shut and grinned. “Easy as pie.”

“Bullshit.” Wilma dropped her noteputer onto the *Firestarter*’s foot with a clatter, “If it’s so easy why are they willing to pay us to go along and provide security. I know

Capellans well enough to know that they hate to pay us what they owe us and the very idea of incurring any additional debt to any mercs and especially us is against their nature.” She reached behind her and pulled her thick ponytail around and started picking at it; a sign that she was perturbed, something I had learned after she had punched me in my mouth. Dessie and I sounded off next, moaning that he needs to tell us the real truth and to not hold out on us.

“Alright, Alright!” He held his hands up to shut us up. “You are all a pack of goddamned crybabies. I swear!” Sitting on the *Firestarter*’s opposite foot, “Look, the St. Ives are desperate now and are starting to get nasty, resorting to some pretty nasty shit and giving the Capellans back any war material be it men or machines isn’t sitting well with them. This deal includes ransom payments for some high profile Capellan MechWarriors and their machines. Command has intercepted some data that indicates that the St. Ives forces may allow the exchange to happen and then ambush the column as it makes its way back to our lines.”

Wilma dropped her ponytail and looked at her boots in mock interest for a moment and then asked how much the job was paying. Truth couldn’t hide his embarrassment or his anger when he answered her. “It gets us even with the company store. That’s it.” He stood rapidly to keep her quiet and kicked a grimy bolt across the floor in anger. “Look godammit! We’ve gone over this a hundred times already, until the colonel shows up we,” he pointed to each of us one at a time, “are on our own; all we have are our organic assets; techs, medic and us MechWarriors. I had to bend over and take the company store deal to get us all put back together after operation “River Rage”. It was either that or we start working as clerks and jerks and sell our ’Mechs as salvage. So don’t start pissing and moaning at me. I don’t want to hear it.”

Truth’s outburst subdued us a bit. I was angry because the job, in my mind, wasn’t going to be close enough to the action. I wanted, no that’s not right at all. I needed to be in the fray. There and only there would I be able to die like I want to. Sure I could go and mount up and traipse across the countryside looking for a fight; that is how I wound up sitting on a *Firestarter*’s foot with a blistering hangover and a case of hemorrhoidal itch that could put a pacifist monk in to a killing frenzy. And I’m certain I would come across somebody that would be able to kill me right and proper but; now excuse me while I conduct a little introspection here. But, I guess it would be meaningless to do that. People would only remember me as that nut-job MechWarrior who showed up wanting to die. Granted death would come and that would be a good thing but for some damned reason it seemed the same as eating my pistol.

It’s all just too confusing...

I walked around my *Hatamoto-Chi*, checking the anti-tamper seals on all of its access panels; small pieces of red wire strung around the access handle and through a protruding metal loop on the ’Mech’s skin and then twisted together tight. Then on its very end a ball of lead is crushed onto it making the two wires sealed as one. The ball of lead is crushed with a special pair of pliers that I have the only pair of and has a customized design engraved onto the flats of its jaws so when the lead is crushed it also embossed with my personal insignia. So while it is conceivable that someone would/could crack the seal open, access the internal workings of my ’Mech and re-seal it again it wouldn’t have my insignia and I would notice that right off. Not to mention that kind of event is highly unlikely. I don’t go through the trouble of sealing all my panels because I’m afraid of

high level sabotage, I don't think I'm important enough to warrant that kind of treatment at all. I do it to keep the rank and file knuckle-busters we call techs from trying to fix my mech for me. Of course in combat it's different. If I need a field repair or a reload they just rip the seal off and get to work. I wouldn't dream of interfering with that aspect of their job I just like to have my 'Mech 'just-so' when I go out and the seals are the easiest way to get it and keep it that way.

In the cockpit I attached the pads to my arms and legs and dropped the 'brain buster' onto my head and kicked off the start sequence. One by one my control boards came to life and a soft thrumming sound filled my cockpit and as my 360 panel came on, showing me everything around me. I imagined the coolant circulating around me inside my now activated cooling vest was thousands of worms there to eat my body and return me to the universe. Relays kicked on and off and finally Betty's voice cooed in my ear telling me that all systems were online and in standby. That was her cue to me. It seems to me that every MechWarrior has a dramatic or noble phrase they like to say on start-up. It's usually something like: "We Are the Knife and the Wound or Bring Forth the Pale Horse So We May Ride. Or some melodramatic crap like that. I like to keep mine simple so when Betty cued me I said: "Move Dammit!"

We, Wilma, Dessie and I, arrived at the Prisoner Facility two hours ahead of schedule. The facility was only a facility in the sense that the word is a noun. You could substitute the word facility for gulag or toilet or hell-hole and still be right on the money. It consisted of about 9 longhouses made of salvaged wood and corrugated bauxite sidings and a slit trench about 30 meters long running north to south under the watchful eyes of two machinegun towers for a latrine. The entire camp was surrounded by three spaced fences of razor ribbon 7 meters tall that had at least 5 meters between them. The ground was a black soupy muck that looked ankle deep with only a few dry spots for the sick and wounded to gather on like coastal seals. Yeah, the Capellans aint real big on amenities and judging by the 50 or so people camped on the slit trench doing the personal they had hot and cold running dysentery as a bonus for their gold-star occupants.

The facility was actually close to a suburban dwelling center and from my vantage point I could see a retail outlet a few blocks off with its flashing advertisement signs glowing and pulsing reds and yellows on its roof. Rather than wait and listen to my head pound like a murderous war drum I walked my 'Mech down the tree lined streets to the outlet and used my magnifier to look into its front windows.

The clerk jumped out of his socks when I walked my 'Mech right into his parking area and stopped. Its always funny to see them grabbing their counters and jerking their heads back and forth as their displays shake and weave from the vibrations of a 'Mech's footfalls. His eyes stayed wide with fear as I climbed down and walked through his glass doors.

To say the clerk was nervous would be an understatement. He stood stock still, hands glued to the counter top as I cruised the aisles in my cooling vest, gun belt, stretchy shorts and steel reinforced boots. In the back in the coolers I found what I was after. I grabbed 4 one-liter bottles of imitation Combine Sake and one of tomato juice. I carried my selection to the scarred checkout counter and set it down to pay. The clerk didn't move. I peaked my eyebrows at him and gestured to the pile. Still nothing. He stayed put, sweating and scared. With slight look consternation on my face and my hangover raging

at me to jaw-jack him like a Lyran priest I said to the lumpy faced clerk. “Add it up dumbass.”

“Uh-it-t-t. It’s on the house.”

“No it’s not, Lumpy. Add it up.”

He looked at the pile and blurted out “Three C-bills!” Now I was getting pissed. When you’re driving something that weighs 80 tons and is blue and looks like a feudal aged Samurai warrior you can’t afford to risk having some MORON in a retail outlet give you something for free. Jerks like this one freeze up when they see you and give you the milk and cow at no charge but when the MPs come around they say you took it and then you get jammed for looting. 15 lashes on my back pressed that lesson home years ago. Taking my slug thrower out of its holster I pointed it at the idiot’s crotch and said, “I am going to shoot your wee-wee off if you don’t add this up now.”

That got him going...

Receipt in hand I mounted up and made my way back to the camp through the residential streets, amazed that just on the other side of these manicured lawns and swept streets men and women were languishing in the mud.

Back at the camp I mixed some sake and tomato juice and plopped 4 commercial pain relievers into my mouth and washed it down. The alcohol warmed my innards and instantly took the edge off my hangover.

Hair of the dog they call it...

I was trying my best to ignore Dessie’s relentless bitching on the common channel when I caught something out of the corner of my eye in the prisoner yard below me. I swept the faces below, panning left and right three more times before I saw it again. Someone down there was staring right at my Mech with more than just average curiosity. I toggled my display and zoomed in on the face and started laughing.

I laughed for 5 minutes straight. Every time I thought I had it under control again I would look at that face again and lose it and finally, with no good reason other than demented kicks, I mixed the rest of my tomato juice into my water bottle with a lot of sake and went to visit an old friend.

“Smokey!” I shouted through the fence. “How the hell are ya? Ya fat bastard!” Except he wasn’t fat any more; he’d had to have dropped at least 20 kilos since I’d seen him last and he was now ghostly pale instead of red-cheeked. “Lem!” he shouted back, “You bastard! You traitor you! You got to get me outta here! You owe me.” I laughed uproariously, delighted at his buggered up way of thinking. If there was one thing I was sure of in this world it was that Smokey hated my guts. I had taken his job from him, humiliated him in front of everybody he knew and gotten him transferred to a crap unit which I’m sure is who got him captured.

“How do you figure I owe you and that I am a traitor?” He got his face as close to the wire as he could, its razor sharp teeth pushing into his face. “Because of you I’m in here, that’s why! If you had done as you were told and not deserted things would be different.”

“Okay. You’re right in that that is true.” His argument was weak and a bit vague but it was true. Things would be different. He might be dead or he might be in the rear area nice and safe and I could be in there with him or just by myself squatting in the mud. I was about to laugh at him more and just walk away; leaving him to his fate when an idea hit me.

Near the front gate the officer in charge of the prisoner exchange was sitting in the driver's seat of a scout truck going over a list of names on his noteputer and rattling off orders to a trio of NCOs standing close by. Seeing me, a MechWarrior coming he set his noteputer aside, "Are you our escort?"

"I guess I am at that."

"Well then MechWarrior", he made sure to add just that little bit of disdain that all non-'Mech drivers sprinkle into their voice when they speak to us. "What can I do for you?"

"You're in charge of the exchange?" He shrugged his shoulders in the affirmative and said nothing. I took drink from my bottle and winced at its heat, waiting for more from him. Getting nothing I asked, "Can I trouble you to look up a name?" He pushed his helmet back on his head a bit and nodded at my bottle and said, "I could."

Ahh, another boozer...

I let him pour as much of my cocktail into his canteen as it would hold and gave him the name and unit of my and Smokey's former MechWarrior commander and looked at who they had in custody. I smirked. They had nearly everybody. The maintenance chief, the warriors; even Stinky, and they had had them all since the day I left too This was shaping up to be a worthwhile expenditure of booze after all. "Tell ya what," I said to my new drinking buddy. I highlighted the commander and his pilots and Smokey's name. "These guys, the warriors, trade them off."

"Why? Command doesn't want them to get too many warriors back right off."

"Trust me. These guys are complete and total idiots. You can't win without them." He looked at me quizzically for a second but my grin became infectious and spread to his freckled face as he became convinced.

"Okay. What about the other guy?" He pointed to Smokey's name; I had highlighted it in green instead of red like the others.

"He's a puss. He's a whiner and he's just generally pretty stupid. Worse yet he's my tech, or was anyway. I didn't pay him on time and he found other work. So I kinda owe him." I threw in a sheepish smile for good measure.

Smokey was led to me as the rest of my former MechWarrior superiors were put onto the waiting hover trucks. None of them recognized me which was just as well. I would have been tempted to kick off their kneecaps if they had and tried to talk to me. Smokey on the other hand came out the gate, turned right away from the trucks to where I was waiting.

Bag of possessions in a dirty hand he slipped and slopped through the mud with all the grace of a cow on ice, groveling, sniveling and stinking of filth and illness. "Get away from me you smelly piece of shiznit!" I ordered. I really didn't give a rat's ass what happened to him and to tell the truth had thought nothing of him since I sent him away and if he dropped dead of a stroke in front of me I wouldn't care at all, matter of fact I was kind of wishing he'd have one right now. One of those painful ones that let you linger for a while. That way I could slowly pour mud onto his face and drown him as he lay paralyzed in the mud.

He backed away, tears of—some kind of fruity emotion running down his cheeks and snot down his nose onto his upper lip.

"Give me your noteputer."

He dropped the bag into the mud, got on his knees and rifled its contents. In short order he held it up to me. I snatched it from his hand and scrolled through its last entries and grinned like a thief I reached into my vest pocket and pulled out a knot of C-bills and dropped them on him and left him there on his knees in the mud.

I didn't have my own noteputer when I was working for the St. Ives. I pawned mine for drinking money on the JumpShip ride to this planet so I had used Smokey's to upload all of our salvage data into. I had never met with anybody in the command during that op so the salvage data was intact and from what the noteputer was saying it was still undistributed, meaning nobody had copied the files or opened them for review. I figured that when I got back to the rear I'd meet with the major and see if we could work a deal of some kind if it was all still where we left it. I had stashed a *Marauder* that was equipped with some clantech; more specifically a single ER-PPC that had me very excited at the time of its discovery. I would have taken the 'Mech for myself but it was too badly damaged for a field repair to get it powered up and moving.

The 'Mech itself was worth quite a bit as straight up salvage. As it was we could sell the PPC off and that alone would cover most of its repair costs but I wanted that PPC for myself. I figured that even if only half of the salvage was still out there we could make a bundle and move into some serious contact areas.

I still find it annoying that I worked this hard to get myself into a position that might get me killed when everybody who knows me knows that I am a lazy. I know that I want to die. My doctors all know it and what makes me hum to boot, or so they say, but I'm stumped as to why I am so chicken-hearted about just blowing my brains out. Even drunk I can't get all sloppy melancholy and morose enough to lie down on a mag-lev line or hang myself with a bootlace or use whiskey to chase down a handful of narcotics so I can be done with it all. But I will bust my ass to no end to get myself into a combat zone so I can chance being killed.

We moved out of the suburban housing tract and into an area covered by grassy fields and pockets of trees and roads leading off into scenic views, my map said it was part of a watershed and wildlife preserve area. We moved like sheep in a pasture; stopping to admire a view here or gaggle in a loose and sloppy air watch while the convoy grunts did the personal in the brush-line along side the road. I used my zoom to look at birds on the glades around us and wish to hell grandpa would shut up and quit calling me a bastard child of Combine whore.

Eventually we came to the designated rendezvous point and got down to business. As the designated heavy hitter I stood close to the trucks while Wilma and Dessie took up flanking positions left and right. If any inbound ordnance got too close to the trucks I was supposed to get in front of it and take the hit for them. Made sense; its not like they wouldn't be aiming at me as soon as they could anyway.

Panning the area and comparing what I saw to a topographic image I put up on my HUD I could see that not only were we heading into the setting sun but facing a small series of hills, Land battle 101 says hills in front are bad. If the enemy has any aviation assets to use he will screen his movements with hills and everybody knows that coming low out of the setting sun is both Dramatic and advantageous. I keyed open our private channel and said, "We all know which way they're gonna come from right?"

“Out of the sun and from behind the hills.” Wilma droned out. “These guys,” She snorted with disgust, “they always think we’re morons; like none of us here has ever been in a war before.” This of course launched Dessie into a tirade that I’m pretty sure set an all time new inner sphere record for the most F-words used in a single statement: 34. Her mastery of profanity is above and beyond anything I have ever experienced and I consider myself to be a black belt foul mouth. She could make a spacer blush and run to church in the same breath.

Wilma pivoted her *Kraken* to orient her weapons to the west and asked, “So how long till after the exchange do you think we got Lem?”

I gauged the distance to the hills and the availability of cover. There wasn’t much close by. Up ahead the road curved into a cut in the hillside that rose enough to protect against direct fire from my position. I figured it would take a minute or so to get to it. “My guess it that as soon as the trucks get to that left curve ahead they’ll attack.”

“VTOLS or Aerospace?”

“VTOLS; too hard to time fast moving fighters.”

“Okay. Do we tell the convoy to run or stay with is?”

My answer got caught in my throat. Wilma was the lance leader why was she asking me these questions? Dammit! Me and my mouth; if I could learn to be one of those silent kinds of guys I bet my life would get a whole lot simpler, I know that I would at least have more time for drinking if I could keep quiet.

Gagging on my own stupidity I said, “Keep them with us. We should edge back toward that greenbelt we passed; although, I can’t imagine them trying too hard after seeing us.”

Dessie pulled her *Firestarter* up closer to my *Hatamoto* and said, “Guess that depends on who we’re escorting back.”

“That is a good point.” Wilma agreed. “Might be some nobleman or politician’s kid in the mix.”

The St. Ives convoy appeared on my radar at or about the designated time; a series of red triangles coming to life on my scope. One by one they emerged from electronic limbo forming into a continuous column on my screen. All in all there were 5 of them. My computer tagged them as standard 3-ton cargo haulers with no special configurations noticed. I was about to switch to magnetic and see if there were any other giant lumps of metal in the area when my HUD got a faint fuzzy look to it for a half second. Urgently I asked the women, “Did either of you see that?”

“See what?” Dessie’s voice came back as excited as mine was going out.

“My HUD fuzzed.”

In the world of BattleMechs having some sort of system glitch or an outright total failure is nothing; the downgrade of technology and the inherent jury-rigging of non model specific parts that follows the overwhelming desire to keep these behemoth machines in the war has created an air of acceptance when it comes to equipment reliability. I, for one, have an attitude that is quite similar. It’s a machine made by men who have only so many days to make so many parts come together and do such and such task. It is flawed, especially when a *Javelin*’s targeting computer and central processor is salvaged from a battlefield loss and put into a *Hatamoto-Chi* such as mine. But that doesn’t mean squat to me when it happens at a time like this.

Wilma panned her torso in slow sweeping arcs. I knew she was trying to see if changing her radar angles would give her a different read. "Scout track with ECM?" She asked.

"Probably." I sighed and started drinking water from my "Water Only" bottle. The show was going to start soon.

Dessie keyed up next, "What if it's a *Raven* or ECM equipped 'Mech?" Wilma answered before I could, "Then, sweetie, we're in for a helluva fight."

The transfer was tense. We had told our guys that there was something over on the other side of the hills and to be ready to move on the double and that made them mean and nasty. They shoved the prisoners around, kicking and thumping them with rifle butts to keep them moving which provoked the St. Ives soldiers to do likewise, nearly causing a riot in the middle of the road. Fortunately both sides got it done without resorting to mass murder.

I told Dessie that if she got the chance to hit the St. Ives guys with her flamer. I wanted to see them jump and dance and run around like headless chickens in the plasma. She giggled and said, "I'd love to." Wilma called us sickos.

We both laughed...

I watched the trucks go around the corner and got ready. No sooner had the last truck vanished than did three big black VTOLs appear from behind the hill.

How nice, one for each of us...

With the setting sun behind them they angled their noses down and headed straight for us. Actually mine was headed for the trucks the other two homed in on Wilma and Dessie. I moved my sticks and put my mech directly in front of the line of trucks to protect them. Down below me on the ground the last men were scrambling into their cargo beds and screaming their fool heads off.

Like angry bees the VTOLs jinked left and right and up and down to keep us from getting a lock on them. The lead bird, the one headed at me, let go with a frill flight of LRMs. They swizzled on black contrails heading right for the trucks without pause. I brought my feet together to put more armor between the trucks and the missiles and flipped my anti-missile system to auto. The electric gatling gun in my torso came to life and put up a wall of steel jacketed slugs that ripped into the inbound missiles detonating some in white hot flashes of smoke and fire and broke others apart in flight and sent them hurling aimlessly to the ground in jagged, bouncing chunks that tore up the ground and shredded trees and bushes, I counted hits on my legs and feet that scarred my armor and sent my HTAL (head, torso, arms and legs) display in to color change mode. The damage wasn't too bad; only one orange patch on my left instep, the rest was faintly yellow.

"I'll take the center one." I said to the ladies and worked to put my target reticule on it. The pilot, whoever he or she was, was good and wouldn't hold a steady course for more than a second of two as it closed the distance between us which really made it hard to get a bead on him or her and that frustrated me to the nth degree. I wouldn't let myself just snap off a shot and trust to luck; of course my unwillingness to shoot wastefully didn't keep it from trying to hose down the trucks with machinegun fire and lock another set of LRMs in place. The incoming machinegun rounds sparked and banged off my armor and the truck's sidings and tailgates, sending ricochets zinging in thousands of directions and showered the cowering soldiers with red-hot hunks of shattered machinegun slugs.

Finessing the sticks as gently as I could to keep my reticule as close as possible I started to get a feel for the VTOL's moves as it bore down on me. My reticule started staying closer and closer to the VTOL's fuselage and as it dropped to nearly ground level to volley off between my legs into the lead truck I got it centered and ripped off a pair of PPC shots before it could fire its ready salvo. The temperature in my cockpit went from sultry to hellish in the amount of time it took for the electrical circuit in my firing stud to complete itself and made me squint against its heat.

The VTOL seemed to stop in mid-flight as the blasts of purple-white lightning tried to disassemble it forcibly. The main rotor mast assembly flew apart under the assault and I watched with a grin as its 4 black and yellow tipped blades, free from the moorings flew in 4 separate directions each flipping and twirling like blades of grass in a stiff breeze. The body was a different story. No graceful twirls for it. The PPC blasts flash fried its electrical system and detonated the fresh flight of LRMs it readying to launch in their rails resulting in I can only describe as a huge fart. All of the explosives and propellants discharged out the rear of the launcher built into the VTOL's fuselage in a sickly cloud of orange flame and gray black chunks. When it hit the ground the airframe pin wheeled each end over end and with each subsequent rotation it let loose new and larger chunks of itself that sailed through the air aimlessly. By the time it had stopped there was nothing left but the main cockpit section; the engine compartment, tail section and every last one of its 4 sponsons had broken away as it flipped ass-over-head in front of me.

The VTOL's carcass was still gently rocking from its "hard" landing when I took a quick inventory of my 'Mech's readiness level. Technically it was fine but seeing the faint yellow and that one orange spot on my armor read out made me mad. This whole scenario was stupid. There was no damned good reason for this other than someone on the St. Ives was an ignorant and treacherous bastard. This damage, while nowhere near a problem technically, was going to make me insane until it was repaired properly which meant I wasn't going to be able to drink tonight which meant they were going to come and I hate it when they come; always whispering to each other about how much of a shithead I am and how I can't do anything right and that my mother was really a prostitute my dad bought out of a club in the Pesht Military District.

My blood boiled in my veins as I thought about the abuse I was going to suffer tonight. Without drink they would flay me alive, like they always do. I felt myself pulling on control sticks as hard as I could, trying to tear them out of their moorings as I raged. I watched as the veins in my forearms bulged and the muscles rippled as I levered back and forth on them.

A sudden feeling of vertigo injected itself into my consciousness and brought me out of my blind rage. I had been yarding on my sticks so hard and fast that I was moving my torso back and forth at the waist too rapidly for my equilibrium to stay centered, This made me even madder as my grandfather sneered at me and told me I'm so stupid I can't even get mad without screwing it up. And then I saw the VTOL. It was still now, faintly smoldering, helpless and pathetic; like a 5-year-old child might look after crashing his bike into the side of a parked hover car.

A flood of voices suddenly drowned out my thoughts, all yelling and screaming at me. They were berating me, telling me how I should be ashamed of myself for scratching the finish.

The VTOL's cockpit canopy started coming open, its smoked transpex entry panel trying to swing up and over the top of itself NO!! I screamed at myself! He must be punished! It doesn't matter if it was an accident. In four giant steps I was standing over the wreckage. I raised my damaged foot high into the air and brought it down as hard as I could on top of the wreckage. I could feel the airframe collapse under the weight of my 'Mech's foot.

"Hey Lem! Lem! You fricking idiot! Little help if you don't mind!" Dessie's voice slashed through my brain like a piece of rusty steel. Spotting her on my compressed view I panned left to get her centered. I laughed as I saw her trying to chase after one of the other VTOLs, her bell-snouted flamer pointed up like a gimpy arm. The VTOL pilots must have been having fun with her. They were staying just out of range and leading her around by her nose while using their lasers to skin her 'Mech alive. If it were a kid and the VTOL a butterfly it would be cute but it wasn't. Dessie wanted to kill the VTOL and the pilot was grouping his shots quite nicely around her cockpit trying to return the favor.

Dessie let a squirt of superheated plasma arc through the air at the VTOL and surprisingly enough it got pretty damned close. The pilot reared back, tipping his nose high into the air, and moved the craft safely away from her. I really felt like letting Dessie chase the damned thing until doomsday.

I'm all for anything that makes Dessie look stupid. So instead of rushing to her aid I recorded some of the scene on battlerom to show everybody back at home base and then only after I had recorded enough of her hopping and swinging of arms and indiscriminate weapons fire did I line up my PPCs. Instead of using both like I had on mine I gave it a single blast. I figured that would be enough to scramble it up and give Dessie the edge she needed.

I let loose and it connected cleanly and scorched the paint right off the elusive aircraft, making it waver in flight momentarily. That was all that Dessie needed. Seeing the VTOL momentarily helpless, she dashed forward and doused it from nose to tail with burning liquid plasma. Enveloped in 2000 plus degree fire the VTOL spun out of control clockwise flinging wads of sticky plasma off itself as it whirled about and fell to the ground.

Dessie pounced on it like a cat as it landed in a flaming heap. I heard her cursing on the open channel at the pilot, she assumed was listening. "You are gonna die you bastard! DIE, DIE, DIE!" She screamed in rage. Putting her 'Mech into a trot she ran around the downed craft in a circle, nearly dancing the 30-ton machine, spraying her flamer at it. Fascinated by the scene, I haven't used a flamer very often and so it was a spectacle for me, I watched mutely as the white-hot Plasma rolled like syrup all over the maimed aircraft and detonated all of it's onboard ammunition in a rippling series of booms, bangs and pops and then, like boiling wax, begin to dissolve into glowing white and red slag.

I was still watching Dessie run around the flaming pile of molten metals cursing and screaming when Wilma broke in with a few choice swear words of her own. In my compressed view I could see her VTOL smoking hard from its engine compartment making a hasty exit the way it had come.

"Nice shooting grandma." I chided her, knowing how much it would piss her off at me. "Ever think about retiring? Maybe get a job with the junior space scouts teaching mech recognition classes to 3<sup>rd</sup> graders?"

She pivoted her *Kraken* and ran right at me full speed. Oh shit! I thought to myself, I have really done it this time. But I couldn't help but smile as she ran at me. Thinking that she would just nudge or bump me a bit I adjusted my center of gravity and giggled in anticipation of getting bashed for getting her goat. I stopped giggling when she stopped 50 meters short and hit me with both of her medium lasers dead center of my chest. Two tons of armor fell off my 'Mech like hot rainwater as the blue beams seared into my 'Mech's chest. Of course I was already leaning forward, anticipating a collision with her, so the armor loss doubled my efforts automatically and I literally threw myself face down onto the ground.

I was seeing stars and dirt still when Wilma kicked my 'Mech in the head hard enough to send circuit breakers snapping and barked at me.

"Boy! If you ever say anything like that to me again I swear I will burn you down to nothing. Now get up off your sorry ass."

The commander of the exchange thanked us for saving their lives and mentioned that seeing us, Wilma, that is, shooting at each other, at me precisely, after the battle proved that we, MechWarriors one and all, are weird bunch and, no offense intended mind you, he will only feel better after we have departed his area of operations. He said he didn't want to see us scuffle amongst ourselves again and accidentally step on him or any of his troops.

Like we'd do something like that...

Back at the 'Mech bay Wilma heaved a wrench right at me from across the bay and stomped off to give Major Truth the payment voucher and an after action brief. I ducked the whirling wrench that, if it had hit me, would have given me a permanent speech impediment at best. Worst case it would have killed me graveyard dead. So I ducked because I knew I would live. It kablanged off my 'Mech and flew into a pile of ammo cans with a chorus of bangs and crashes that brought all of the techs out of their holes to see what the hell was going on.

Dessie came prancing up to me, looking happy and full of sunshine. I instantly went on my guard. "Hey Lem." She chirped at me. Keeping one eye on her I inspected the damage to my 'Mech's legs and grunted.

"Anyway," she continued on, unabated by my indifference, "I was thinking—seeing how you're such an ignorant bastard and all and don't have any friends that will admit to knowing you, that you should give me your 'Mech when you're dead."

Turning away from my 'Mech I looked down at her in a rather stunned bit of silence. She just fixed me with sparkling eyes and fantastic smile, looking all innocent and shit. And even though it was the most callus and insensitive thing I had heard in a very long time I knew it was true so I said the only thing I could.

"Okay. But only if I can have yours if you die, because you're a stupid evil little bitch with no friends either."

Didn't faze her a bit.

She pulled out her noteputer, switched it on and handed me the stylus. I looked down and read: Lem's last will and testament. Dessie Nichimura can have my 'Mech when I die. Looked legal to me. I signed it. I figured I'll be dead and won't care what happens to my corpse or my 'Mech. She turned the noteputer around and quickly duplicated the document, erased my information, inserted her own and signed it. She thanked me, which

was a very disturbing experience in and of itself, and trotted off to go and register both of our new wills with the Major.

Probably means that Wilma is going to shank me in the shower tonight...

I never left the 'Mech bay after that mission. I wasn't afraid of Wilma or what she might be planning on doing to me if and when she saw me again. I just wanted my 'Mech fixed. The two technicians on the payroll for the Bonecrushers' Warlock mission were recent pick-ups from Outreach. They were knowledgeable about their craft and did good work but after I promised to amputate their feet with a plasma cutter should they ever try to touch my 'Mech again without my permission they've been a bit standoffish with me and tend to not offer to help me.

Oh hush! I don't want to hear it...

I started off my repairs by getting the ankles re-armored. Their compound angles and obscure shapes are always a hassle to set up in the auto-jig. I never ceases to cause me to wonder that there is a machine that can create seeming impossible to reproduce armor shapes in nearly any size in less than 20 minutes that can take hours to program. I must have spent 3 hours programming the jig to create the panel I needed and have the damned thing spit it out in no time flat and then spend 4 hours welding it into place properly. There were 5 panels I needed to fabricate too.

And so it went. On and on and on. A relentless task it seemed to me but in a sick way I relished in it I think. The more I suffered the more pride and vindication I felt and I wouldn't stop until the job was done now. I ate in the cockpit or the shadow of my 'Mech and drank enough sake to keep my hands from shaking out of my sleeves, For nearly two days straight I stayed at it, only sleeping when I was overwhelmed with exhaustion and then only as long as the voices would let me. By the time I was done and satisfied I was so filthy that Dessie didn't recognize me when she showed up to give me copies of our new wills.

I was catching some tortured screaming zees on the newly refinished foot of my *Hatamoto*, trying to get my good natured self back, when the unmistakable vibrations of an inbound 'Mech roused me to wakefulness. I cracked an eye and waited to see what happened next. If it was a friendly all would be well. If it wasn't everybody would start running around mindlessly and screaming like terrified baboons.

As I waited for one or the other Truth appeared and walked past me, angling toward his *Caesar*. Seeing that I got a little more curious about who was coming to dinner unannounced. If he started saddling up I would most definitely mount up and god help them all if they scarred my new armor. The damned paint on it was still damp.

It turned out to be a lone *Osiris*; a bulbous looking thing with rectangular weapons pods on each side and chicken legs; kinda like a *Locust*, but beefed up. Still a piece of crap though. Behind it, trying to steer clear of its feet, a "for hire" hover truck was churning up all the dust and garbage lying around by the front doors sending it swirling through the air. Soldiers and techs gagging on the debris ran away from the garbage deluge with their hands or rags over their mouths.

The *Osiris*, ugly and all, stopped dead center of the 'Mech bay entrance, came to a squat and powered down. Probably going to lay an egg. Seeing that it wasn't a raid, Truth, noteputer in hand as always, went to greet whoever the hell it was that was gracing us with their presence and blocking the only exit.

Asses. I swear brains are more rare than good heat sinks.

A woman hopped from the back of the truck and met with Major Truth. She was a fit specimen from the looks of her. Blondish, muscular and lots of tattoos. I watched her move as she went to shake hands with the XO. She moved like a cat, no wasted motion all fluid and efficient. Very appealing. I briefly thought about actually getting up off my ass and introducing myself but grandpa laughed at me and asked me what a handsome woman like that would want with a piece of crap like me.

He was right. I stayed put instead. The *Osiris* driver clambered down his chain ladder, its links and rungs rattling and banging as he went. I could already tell this guy was going to be a schmuck. I think that's the word anyway.

Just the noise he made getting to the ground was enough for me to decide he was an idiot. Ya see, real MechWarriors have enough practice that they can climb a chain ladder, up or down, without hardly making a sound, its just one of those things that you learn to do. This guy was making noise on purpose. He dropped to the ground from nearly 2 meters up his MechWarrior boots making a boom inside the tin-sheathed 'Mech bay. His voice was even worse. It was loud, like a foghorn and heavy with a Galatean accent that slaughtered vowels and dropped consonants left and right. "Majuh Troot! He blared. How are yah?" I tuned out the rest and went back to sleep.

A slap on the boot woke me up. There he was in person: Mr. Loudmouth. Up close he was smooth skinned with blue eyes and had one of those noses holovid stars pay thousands of C-bills for. He was standing next to me, his cooling vest unzipped to show off rock hard abdominal muscles and a needler pistol carried in a low riser quick draw rig on his waist and I swear he had a bundle of socks stuffed into the front of his stretch shorts to simulate another dangerous weapon at his disposal or, and I shudder to think, he was happy to see me.

"Yo! Greaseball," He blared at me, "Get offn' yer ass and fix my ride. It's got a funny wolk, like the leg is messed up or sumptin."

I looked at him and thought this must be moron-ese for "Hello, my name is so and so. Could you please assist me?" Now normally I might say or do something crass or just slightly uncalled for but this time I recalled the bombers, smiled obligingly and said, "Okay. I'll find out what's wrong with it for you."

By three AM that night I had the entire left leg assembly off and stripped down to its base components. Just by walking it around in service mode I knew what was wrong but I wanted to be really sure so I stripped it down.

Oh hush! I wasn't being a jerk. I was doing what a fellow comrade in arms had asked of me and all of my intentions were altruistic.

I know, I was laughing as I wrote this part...

Staring at the femur ball and socket assembly I could see that there were imperfections present and that these "rough spots" were causing the leg to hang up as the socket and ball swiveled on each other. Like calcium deposits in a human hip joint actually. Someone was going to have to polish these high spots away and repack the joint with a multi-purpose lubricant we called "whale juice" and re-assemble it. A simple job. Time consuming as all hell, but simple none-the-less, of course putting the entire leg back together was another story, but that wasn't my problem.

Grandma and grandpa only let me sleep about three hours so I was up and moving by 0600 hours local time. Anytime I don't drink with zeal I don't sleep very much and I have a lot of energy that makes me stir crazy. I try to counteract this with exercise.

Actually, I try to exhaust myself as close to death as I can so that I can sleep later. By 0800 I was back from the longest damned run I'd been on in a while; I had a screaming side ache and my lungs felt raw. Coming back into the little industrial complex our macom was using as a logistic base I weaved between rolling trucks and tanks and past columns of men and women marching off to god knows where and for one fleeting moment felt a sense of peace. Of course I didn't recognize it for what it was because I hadn't ever knowingly felt it before but for that brief moment everything seemed like it was going to be okay. Then grandpa yelled, "Hey Stupid! Look out for the LoaderMech!"

Sure enough a yellow-framed LoaderMech was walking out of an enclosed cargo container carrying something huge and I was right in its way as it took its huge and awkward steps. I dove aside, narrowly missing getting stepped on and landed next to the container unit tearing my knees and hands up on the gravel and some glass shards lying about. I had just gotten my hands healed up from the previous night—dammit! I hate LoaderMechs and quite oblivious to me as I bled and cursed at it as it tottered away to a waiting cargo truck.

A LoaderMech is the simplest form of BattleMech technology. It is, in essence, an exoskeleton made of tubular steel and ferrotitanium and equipped with jaws instead of hands at the ends of its long and swivel-jointed arms. They are slow, haphazardly assembled with a minimum of myomer pseudo muscles; they rely on hydraulics mostly, and are driven by complete and total idiots, you know how security guards are the law enforcement cadets that can't make it past the psychological evaluation phase? Well, LoaderMech drivers are the guys who can't get into a BattleMech.

I peeked in on the 'Mech bay as I made my way to the medic's office. Sure enough he, Mr. Loudmouth, was there stomping, kicking and jumping up and down and screaming at the techs to find the Emm-Effer that tore his 'Mech apart and have him put it back together right that instant. I giggled like a schoolgirl and was even still smiling about it when the medic dug a piece of glass out of my palm a few minutes later.

I put on pants and thin black piloting gloves before I went to go find the Major. There was no way I was going to be seen with bandaged hands and knees by Dessie or Wilma. The pornographic comments that would flow from that spectacle would be unbearable to me in a sober condition.

It took me an hour of searching but I finally found the Major. Out of financial desperation he had gone into the building next door to talk to our Capellan liaison officer. From what I could glean by way of an open window he was trying to get just enough of an advance on our next payment voucher to put that stupid snowman looking *Uziel* back in operation and get us current on our payroll. The liaison officer, dressed in green fatigues and spit shined boots was seated behind an ornate mahogany desk that had probably been stolen from someone's home as it looked totally out of place on our little base, smiled as I imagined a shark probably does a second before it bites some penguin's head off, and offered his understanding, saying that he knows its tough to keep a merc unit afloat these days, opened his own noteputer and said he'd see what he could do for him. Shit! I had to stop this but quick! Not that I have a great deal of concern for these people and what the future holds for them but I didn't want to get hosed into getting transferred even further away from the good stuff, guarding a shitpaper stockpile somewhere in the periphery.

Knowing that a polite intrusion and a tactful request for an audience would get me nowhere I backed up out of sight and burst in, throwing the door against the wall with a crash yelling "Major Truth! Come Quick! Dessie's got her gun out and is gonna kill the cook!" Truth, wide eyed and mouth agape, jumped out of his chair, whipped the Capellan a hasty salute to and followed me double time back toward our barracks.

When we were safely out of sight I stopped running and started laughing like an idiot. Major Truth, who had been hot on my heels crashed into my backside and dumped me on my face, I thought he was gonna stomp the snot outta me when, as I laid there laughing, told him that I was lying about Dessie shooting the cook and that I just needed to get him out of there so I could talk to him. His wrinkled, bald head got tomato red and he burst into a fit of name calling that while technically correct was way out of context for this particular occasion. When I explained that I thought I had a way to get the unit back in the black without doing something stupid and drastic he was almost forgiving and definitely all ears.

We went into the mess hall to have a sit down and figure out how we were going to get the salvage, if it was indeed still there. All the way to where we were now, it was about 100 kilometers to where I stashed my goodies and another 50 or so to the *Marauder* and the *One-Armed Atlas*. "So," he said, his voice suspicious and slightly accusing, "All you want, big ticket item wise, is the Clantech PPC off the *Marauder*?"

"Uh-huh."

Cracking his knuckles he leaned back in his chair and alternated between staring at me and the ceiling. I could tell that he was dubious about the whole scenario. I hadn't been in the unit very long at all and my reputation as a boozier and a dishonest prick was definite roadblock to real trust in general and here I was offering up a lot of potential wealth for him to have and do with as he pleased. Don't get me wrong now; a clan ERPPC is worth a lot of C-bills and it alone could help to make me a wealthy man, if I sold it to the highest bidder and then invested the money decently. I could probably retire to a comfortable life in three years and providing I didn't get an outrageous drug habit or marry a gold-digger I could stay retired. But that is neither here nor there: I was offering up 11 salvage 'Mechs potentially and a basket load of parts and pieces all for the one low asking price of a Clan ERPPC. The bulk of the monies earned were to be the Battalion's to do with as they saw fit.

I guessed, to him, it was just one of those situations that seemed too good to be true. After all something for nothing was pretty damned rare in the universe and a lot of something for nothing was virtually unheard of. Eventually Truth agreed that to pass up free money was tantamount to being the galaxy's biggest fool but we both conceded that we didn't really know who to offer the salvage up too. Technically we were unattached; the Capellans fed us piece work enough to keep us solvent and agreed to sell us supplies which we agreed to as we were renting a 'Mech bay from them and we were co-located but that was about it. We, the unit as a whole, hadn't signed a long term contract with them or any loyalty oaths or anything that said we will sell any excess, as if there was such a thing, salvage to them, or even offer it to them first. So as far as I was concerned we could gather the salvage and name our price and sell it to who ever came a cross with the C-bills first. The downside of this idea was that we serving at the pleasure of the Capellan government, could anger them to the point of being released from our current meager, part-time support contract and forced to seek employment elsewhere i.e. the St

Ives armed forces and while the idea of working for them wasn't repulsive it was a less desirable position as they were currently losing this particular war; Kai Allard or no Kai Allard.

Now me? I woulda auctioned it all off to the highest bidder and then spent it all on whores and cheap booze but the Major was one of those sissy guys who thinks that his responsibilities lay with caring for the unit as a whole; responsibility is just another way to say chickenshit if you ask me.

So anyway, he said we'd go see if it was still out there and offer it to the Capellans first. But! He surprised me when he said, "They are going to not only going to pay fair market prices but a handling fee too. If they don't we'll see if the St. Ives will."

Not ballsy, but not spineless either. Eh! It's a start...

Truth chartered a civilian VTOL and together we took off in search of our would be treasure. The industrial sector we had been living in gave way to rolling grasses and hills peppered with shaggy ram-horn cows. Once we were recognized by the military air traffic control operators the pilot shifted azimuth and aimed the orange and yellow commercial craft in the direction of the *Marauder*.

I hadn't grabbed this one myself Tattoo face and Stinky had done the honors. They had driven their truck into an old dairy barn, unloaded the 'Mech and some other miscellaneous bits and pieces in the center of its wide floor and as they left pulled the roof supports out with their tow cables, collapsing the roof on top of the damaged 'Mech as they left. A 'Mech with battle fists or a salvage claw would have no trouble clearing the debris away but it would definitely be some work. I hate to admit it but those two freaks did a good job. I shivered involuntarily as my mind relived the hellacious odor that was Stinky.

I climbed under and over the piles covering the *Marauder* and took as good a look as I could at it. It looked like a crushed bug; its giant, gangly legs askew and its top weapon mount ravaged exposing its internal mechanisms and gyro cage. It was a Capellan rig and it had "Operation Bulldog Victory" painted on it. That made it a decorated unit and as such was much more valuable as a walking piece of inspiration and Capellan history. I didn't give a crap about that. I wanted the clantech and only the clantech. The Capellans could reminisce and fawn over their 'Mech and relive their half assed effort to assist in the destruction of the Smoke Jaguar clan.

We lost out on the *Crusader*, a *Shootist*, a *Javelin* and 5 others my section had risked life and limb to steal like cowardly thieves from the battlefield. Those I had stashed near the clearing I had found my *Hatamoto* in later that same day but we struck gold on a *Phoenix Hawk*, a *Hollander* and the famous "One Armed *Atlas*" so out of the 11 we got 4 and that was more than either of us expected. The *Hollander* and *Phoenix Hawk* were really bad off. They would need a lot more than anybody could probably afford to spend to get back in to service again but the *Atlas* and *Marauder* were B- C+ salvage. Of course any *Atlas* in one piece is good salvage; 100 tons of Assault 'Mech is always in demand.

As soon as we landed Truth contracted a civilian salvage and recovery firm to do our dirty work for us. We had them haul Dessie and her *Firestarter* along with them as heavy labor and security, ours mostly. The contractor's name was One Eyed Willie and when you think of that name ignore the first thing that comes to mind and picture the second and that's him, only scummier, lots scummier but he agreed to work for 1% of the sale's

net profits and that in the end was what made him “our boy” and being scummier than a drying pond in June we told Dessie to roast them all alive if they tried to rip us off.

We were in the 'Mech bay. Damn! I just realized that I am always in the 'Mech bay. Doesn't it seem odd that I have no other place to go? Well, there is drinking and sleeping. But in general?

Just plain odd...

So anyway, Truth and I were kicking around the idea of selling the *Uziel* and keeping the *Marauder* for ourselves as it would be nice to have a second heavy in the formation when Mr. Loudmouth stormed into the bay kicking cans and shouting vulgarities saying that he was gonna kill the sonofabitch who took his 'Mech apart. Truth just happened to glance at me as Loudmouth was hanging his ass out and caught me in mid snicker. A “you bastard” look flashed across his face as he yelled for Loudmouth to shut his pie hole.

Coming straight for us I could see from 15 meters that his beautiful skin was a deep and furious red and the capillaries in his eyes were nearly glowing with that same angry color. Boots clomping hard he closed in and shouting again, “I can't find the bahstad! I've looked everywhere for him and nuttin. It's like he don't flippin exist.”

I kept quiet and tried to plaster a dumb look on my face but it was hard. I was snorting and nearly shaking out of my seat from laughter as he carried on. I mean really! Here this idiot was howling and crying about how he couldn't find the guy that took his 'Mech apart and I was right next to him.

How dumb can one person be?

Seeing that I was shaking in my seat he scowled and said, “Whut's yer problem?” My eyes were watering when I looked up at him and tried to say without laughing, “Alcohol Detox.” Truth tried to hide a smile. I held up my hand as if to wave off any help he would offer and added, “Really I'm fine, the spiders and snakes were gone hours ago.”

“Hmmmphh.” I wasn't sure what he was thinking but I was pretty sure that he hadn't recognized me yet. I'm sure that he would eventually though and I was thinking that it was going to be fun when he did.

Truth told him to quit looking for “whoever” the guy was that took his mech apart and get started on getting it reassembled. We had some missions coming up soon. I watched him head off to his gantry struggling to hold back my desire to fall to floor and laugh my ass off. Without turning to look at me Truth said, “If it was you, you're a real bastard.”

“Speaking of which what's up with him and the other one?”

“New bodies man, new bodies. We need them and have for a while.” Then he told me that “The colonel” is on Galatea right now doing who knows what and that he got an HPG that read he was on his way and reinforcements and support would arrive shortly.

“So we get tattoo woman and Mr. Mouth?”

“Yeah. The female; her name is Rena, is rated on most mediums and a couple of heavies. The colonel hired her on Galatea 2 weeks ago and shipped her right off to us as a replacement for Hadjari.” Mr. Mouth, as you have so eloquently named him, is supposedly one of the colonel's favorites. But, I suspect that by being here with us instead of “there” with the colonel that that may not be the case now.” He held up his hands in a gesture of helplessness, “But what can I do? I need 'Mechs and MechWarriors.”

I knew the question was rhetorical but I couldn't help but say, "Send him back and tell the colonel that it was a very funny but that you were serious about the need."

"It must be nice being such a prick Lem."

"It is." And I laughed despite the fact it was a rebuke.

I ran into Rena at the base's shopping outlet. I spotted her from across the building sliding like an oiled shadow down the aisles.

Pure grace...

Just watching her was a treat. I had never seen anybody that could move so effortlessly. As I got closer I could see her tattoos undulate and sway with her motions and it reminded me of a heat mirage. One particular image on her back was of a dragon roiling in flames it was peeking out above the backside of her black tank top. The flames looked like they were really consuming the beast as her shoulders shifted front to back as she walked. Whoever did her work was a real master of the art. I followed her, transfixed by her physical grace and beauty all the way to the back of the store where the alcohol was kept and as I yanked open the cooler I was looking for I introduced myself "Hi, your name is Rena right?" She turned to face me and my heart froze in my chest, her eyes were green, bright green like emeralds not dark green like most people's. They glowed brilliantly like navigation beacons, intense and steady and reassuring.

She smiled at me briefly her long, delicate eyebrows arching high and long over her eyes. "I'm--."

"You're Lem."

"Right. I'm Lem." Her voice was like—music. When she spoke I felt like I could spend my whole life just listening to her talk and above that I was delighted that she knew my name already. This was great.

I was heartbroken a second later as her smile disappeared, replaced by a frown that looked like pornographic vandalism on her high cheekbones and exquisite lips.

I tried to recover from her frowning at me. "So I hear you're a medium and a heavy driver."

"Uh-huh." Disdain and repulsion were taking form as she muttered at me.

This had turned to shit faster than usual and had me really struggling to keep my social equilibrium. She was too beautiful, too frickin **perfect** to let get away like this. I couldn't let grandpa be right, not again, not this time dammit! "So, uh, do you like it here?"

"It's okay." She turned her back on me and walked away, leaving me standing there like a buffoon with my arm in the cooler. I grabbed three bottles instead of two and followed her to the cashier's stand.

I caught up with her outside. "So hey, do want to go out later and have some drinks?"

She surprised me by spinning around and saying, "Look Lem. I already know all about you and while I generally don't believe everything I hear, I will this time. So just do us both a favor and leave me alone all you can, especially when I'm on my own time. Understand?"

I heard them all laughing at me as I struggled with her scathing and instructions. "Okay, that's fine but if you're gonna get on the I hate Lem party train you should really get to know me first because to hate me well you really have to get to know me."

Anger filled her features and I suddenly felt dirty knowing it was me that soiled her beauty. "You don't get it do you!?" She stepped close to me and stared into my eyes and

I swear I could feel her probing my very soul. She broke the gaze and said, “You have dead eyes. Your very essence is rotting or is rotted all the way through and I won’t have anything to do with it. From where I stand you are the living dead, a blight or some kind of creature that feeds on the flesh of the living like a ghoul and the only reason you haven’t been smote yet is because there is something you have to learn. So in essence, you are cursed. Cursed to walk among the living and I don’t want you or your personal plague around me.”

I think my mouth was still hanging open when she walked away. I’ve been beaten, scathed, whipped, shot, insulted, verbally scourged and abused by people who were supposed to love me but nothing in my life has come close to what she said then and there and because of it I felt hollow, like my very guts had been ripped out and flung onto the ground. Stunned, I actually looked around me at the pavement to see if what she had ripped out was lying around and if it was maybe I could have it put back in.

That night I sat locked in my cockpit and drank. I drank and cried and cried and drank and cried more. I felt lower than I ever had before and I wanted to die. I fumbled with my gun belt and drew my slug thrower and blubbering apologies to my mother and father for being a bad boy I stuck its barrel in my mouth and squeezed the trigger.

I couldn’t do it. I tried but my finger just wouldn’t make that last little push and take all of the tension out of the firing mechanism. I cried harder and they laughed at me louder.

The next morning Dessie stomped her *Firestarter* into the ’Mech bay, backed it into her gantry, locked it down and came out yelling and screaming at everybody under the sun that the salvage freaks should be shot for trying to spy on her all the time they were out there together.

Nothing really new with that...

When her ’Mech was off the work floor and in its gantry One-Eyed-Willie’s son-in-law appeared in the doorway and acted as a ground-guide for the ’Mech haulers. Willie’s son-in-law was a prime example of why brothers and sisters aren’t allowed to marry. He had about 20 strands of hair that he was trying to train as a comb-over but only stood straight up on his pimply head. His face reminded me of pureed puppy crap; brown and tan, porous and lumpy with little pig like eyes peering out. He wore filthy bib overalls that had holes in the butt---all over his butt—and he wasn’t wearing underwear so wads of jet-black and curly ass hair pushed their way out into the sun. Worse yet—no shoes. I mean it was bad enough his hairy ass was squeezing out of the holes in his overalls but his feet! Oh god! They were wide and flat with gnarled, leather looking toes that that splayed out like some tree climbing primate with wide dark yellow-brown and jagged nails that, to me, looked like they belonged on some sub-human beast.

He communicated in unintelligible barks and whistles as he guided the reversing J-27 towards an empty gantry. The driver, an near equally inbred looking son of a bog beast barked and whistled back at him as he hung out the driver’s window and eased the rumbling truck backwards in its chunky, thread bare tires.

Definitely a case of inbreeding. Def-i-nate-LY...

A caravan of Capellan officers followed the last truck into the bay and watched intently as our techs winch hoisted them into service gantries. As each was locked down and safe to approach they, as a group, would come up to it and scribble furiously into their noteputers and whisper amongst each other. As expected they focused on the

*Marauder* and the *Atlas*. The *Marauder* drew the most attention because it was a decorated Capellan chassis with a recorded history. I was sure they were going to want that one back. I was also hoping that Truth would be smart and ditch that *Atlas* instead of the *Marauder*. He said he could drive it and I didn't doubt him but he didn't have a death wish like me and for anybody who wants to drive an assault 'Mech of any make is an invitation to gunnery practice. There is good reason for this mind you: they scare the buhjeezers out of people. As a former scout I remember my whole lance scattering like roaches in a sunbeam at the mere sight of an assault 'Mech coming our way. Of course our lance collectively weighed less than it or any assault made but the premise holds true. Assaults are scary and scary things get shot first and get shot often.

The *Marauder* would be a better ride and keep us a bit more mobile and help us draw more missions and that would help me expedite my egress from this universe. A much better alternative if you ask me. Truth ignored the jabbering officers and came over to me. Holding his noteputer up for me to see he displayed a very large number. "And that is in C-bills," He said with a wry smile. "But," he added in a mixture of cynicism, greed and anger, "I'm having a hard time with the idea of giving all of this money to the colonel."

"Why is that?" as if I didn't know already.

He sighed and scuffed the floor with his boot, "Lem, I've been in this unit for almost 3 years now and I think the colonel and I have been together on maybe 4 missions tops. Not deployments mind you, but missions. The rest of the time I have been forward deployed, waiting on him, waiting for money, medics or 'Mechs; always waiting for him to get around to taking care of us. Meanwhile his headquarters unit is flush with everything it seems or at least very well taken care of. Did you know that everybody that was in this unit when I started is gone or dead? So it's been me all along begging supplies, using my money to send priority HPG messages to him pleading for support and so on. So here and now I'm looking at a DropShip load of C-bills that will without a doubt benefit the whole unit but if I put it in the battalion account I know we," he pointed at me and himself, "won't get anything out of it."

I really hate this kind of "Oh woe is me shiznit." I must look like a bartender or like I care or something. I have never been able to figure out what it is about me exactly that convinces people that it is perfectly alright to vomit their lives onto my lap. This was a prime example. This guy has known for a long time that he is and has been getting abused by "the colonel" whoever the hell he may be, so this little spiel isn't just a recent revelation for him. He's looking at embezzling from the unit because of the C.O's incompetence or his outright I-don't-give-a-damn attitude when it comes to our particular section and so now he's whining at me saying, in way too many words mind you, that he's seriously considering taking all of the money from the sale of these 'Mechs, taking what he feel is owed to him and lifting off never to see any of us again.

Now the way I see his reason for talking to me is this: I gave the 'Mechs to him and the unit and he wants my permission to take the money and run, if I give it to him, which I will---of course. From there it can go one of two ways. The first mental justice/morality equation goes like this: I, (Lem, to be clear) a known bag of shit that acts without conscience and from all appearances has almost no moral compass whatsoever, approve of his plan of thieving the money so it must be wrong and therefore be avoided at all costs. The second goes as such: I (Lem to be clear again) gave them to him and if I say do

what you want he will strongly consider it and may just be gone in the morning. Truth be told— hahahaha, that was funny; I don't really give a damn what he does. I don't want to hassle with selling the 'Mechs. I don't have any need for wealth because all I want to do is die in battle so wealth would be a hindrance more than a boon and as long as I have enough money to get me to my grave I'm fine. I took Major Truth's noteputer from him and scribbled what I thought would be enough money to get me by for say, oh, a year and to get the Clan ERPPC mounted onto my 'Mech and said, "See that number? That is what I would like to see in my account if you decide to bail. To be brutally honest here Thrash; I don't give a damn what you do. I gave these 'Mechs to you because I'm mooching ammo and chow from you and you are paying me for my services as a MechWarrior." I shrugged my shoulders in a 'what the hell' fashion and added, "You did me a favor and this was the only favor I could do for you in return. You don't owe me anything and now that I have given all of this to you! I don't owe you anything." He looked at me not knowing how I could be so glib about the notion of him taking millions from me and then leaving me and everybody else high and dry.

He stood to leave but before he could get away I said one more thing, "Major, do what you gotta do. I truly don't give a damn, but I have one idea that you might consider: keep the money in your personal account and use it as you see fit. We'll tell everybody that it was all my salvage and because we were in between missions and I contracted Dessie and our techs to work on their own time to gather it all up and make a sale. That way if the colonel finds out you can tell him that we were so short on support that we had to support ourselves and if he wants a share of the sale because we used his equipment he can ask me."

"What will you tell him if he does?"

"I'll tell him that I'll send it to him in a Comstar voucher once I get a chance to break it out of my investment portfolio. Which is a polite way to say; Fuck Off."

Truth, despite my counseling, left the bay wearing his personal dilemma like a lead crown. With his shoulders stooped and staring at the floor he moped out into the sunlight and as I watched him leave I didn't know if I would see him again. He could arrange a sale from his office, get an electronic transfer confirmation and be off planet by 0800 tomorrow if he wanted to.

I was helping the techs do the status reports on our four new 'Mechs when Mr. Loudmouth (I hadn't asked what his name was and nobody had told me yet) spotted me dressed in my work coveralls. You could almost hear the audible "Click" as some part of his brain made the connection. The connection that told him I was the mysterious tech that took his 'Mech apart. He dropped the 24millimeter spanner he was using to the floor where it rang like a tuning fork, and stomped across the bay right for me. I heard the wrench ringing a high E note behind me and felt his eyes burning holes in the back of my head as he clomped across the ferrocrete.

I knew what was going to happen before I knew what was going to happen.

If that makes any sense...

Sitting on the floor next to me was a mop bucket and a mop. The bucket was full of heavy detergent and waste oils; used all day every day to clean up the spills and leaks associated with 'Mech repairs. When his footfalls were at their loudest I grabbed the mop handle and swung around with it head high aiming for where I think he might be.

The metal frame that supported the mop head and attached it to the wooden handle hit Loudmouth in the ear sideways and split it in two while the detergent soaked strands went “SPLOP!” against his head and wrapped all the way around his noggin and over his face. The detergents held in suspension by the stringy mop head flooded his eyes and blinded him quite nicely and as they went to work attacking his eyeballs I let go of it and kicked him in crotch as hard as I could, literally lifting him off the floor as I put every ounce of energy into my kick. A strangle gasp burst out of his mop covered face as I tried with all my might to take him out of the gene pool.

He was quite debilitated by this point but I was beyond that kind of rationalizing and closed in fast without conscious thought. Grabbing his left arm and yanking it from his mashed genitals I twisted it straight, elbow facing down, and wrenched it as he started falling to the floor. Under that tension his armpit opened wide and again I reared back and buried my foot right into it with another kick. I heard his shoulder dislocate with a loud “POP” and him squeal in agony and felt the tension that held his arm in place go away. Falling to the floor I twisted the arm further to keep his face from hitting the floor so my next kick could catch his throat.

In retrospect I figured out 5 different ways I could have handled that entire situation. I could have talked, I could have run, I could have squatted on the floor and laid a giant egg, but I didn’t. I didn’t even really know what was happening when it was happening. I just knew that someone was coming up behind me and I felt threatened and automatically assumed that who ever it was going to kill me.

But we all know the trouble with that don’t we? You know it! Even though I want it, you got to earn it...

Three of the technicians jumped on me to get me away from Loudmouth. Fully involved in fight or flight mode I started beating the crap out of them too until one of them broke that same mop handle over my head and put out my running lights.

I woke up in the sick bay shackled to an iron-framed cot with a bitchin headache. I tried to probe the spot that was hurting but the chains on my wrists kept me from being able to reach it. Hearing the links jingling the medic spun in his chair and rolled across the floor on it to peer into my eyes with his penlight. Satisfied that I wasn’t anymore brain-damaged than before I got clobbered he went to the communications terminal and announced that I was awake.

Truth came in a while later and just stared at me from the doorway. He looked sort of angelic with sunlight illuminating him from behind and I told him so.

“You are such an idiot.” He replied acidly and came over and plopped down on my chest. The air whooshed out of my lungs and unable to dislodge him I struggled for breath under his body weight. Wiggling his butt to get more comfortable he asked me if I had any goddamned idea how close I came to actually killing Loudmouth (his name I came to find out was Robert Carter) and how big the medical bill the Capellans were going to send us was going to be.

Grunting for a breath I said, “Well they should have let me kill him; a cremation is a lot cheaper.” He frowned at me for that and for punishment swatted me in the testicles with his noteputer. “So, as I was saying. It is going to cost us a pretty pfenning to get Lieutenant Carter put back together again.” He accessed his noteputer doing a fine job of ignoring my agonized fish-out-of-water faces. “Yes, here it is.” He smiled huge and false read from his display. “Torn rotator cup and connective tissues. One smashed testicle and

damage to the survivor and the blood vessels and 27 stitches across his ear and scalp.” Adjusting his seat for comfort again he peered into my face and tried to divine truth from my eyes. “What I need to know before I have you drug out in chains is this:

“What in the hell happened?”

I told him. I told him that I was helping the techs do a rundown on the *Phoenix Hawk* when all of the sudden I got this feeling that I was gonna get attacked and I went on auto pilot. The next thing I was really conscious of was how my head really hurt like a bitch and that I couldn’t move. He just kind of looked at me funny and hmmm’d and haahhed a couple times and scrolled through his noteputer for a while and then without speaking to me got up to leave. On his way out the door he told the medic to let me loose.

Turns out that the techs I was helping told him the same thing: I was helping them and Loudmouth, i.e. Carter came up behind me really fast and looking very mad. They said they felt that he was looking like he was going to assault me and that I was, as far as they could tell, defending myself. So it all worked out and everybody who doesn’t want to be dead is happy or at least back in one piece and I have a new fan club member.

Truth surprised me a bit by still being around a week later. I fully expected him to take the money and run, but he’s the honest type, well, kinda anyway.

I figured that he stashed the money into a separate account on account of our CO. sounds like a rotten bag of crap that would get his toilet gold plated before getting our equipment repaired like he should, of course I’ve never met him and I could, mind you this is a stretch, just be holding him to an impossible standard and condemning him before I know all of the facts. Intelligence is a nice thing to have but being stupid and critical is just plain fun. So on to the surprises. *Uziel?* Gone. *Phoenix Hawk*—gone, *Hollander*—gone, *Atlas*—gone, *Marauder?* Still here. For the time being anyway. Our liaison officer, a junior officer named Danbury was pushing hard to get Truth to sell it to him, offering competitive wage increases and salvage bonuses which sounded nice but in all actuality turned out to be crud. To take advantage of all those perks he was talking about giving us we’d have to run missions in a combat zone and we weren’t being given missions like that because we were under strength. What we were pulling was basic security for the region and a few BS escorts, nothing that would get us close to seeing those big bonuses; something else I blame on our invisible colonel. If he would get his ass here on planet we could actually get close to the good stuff. I had to hand it to the Capellan man though. He made it sound like a sweet deal. Thankfully Truth isn’t an idiot. That wasn’t the end of it though. Danbury kept coming back with offers and he kept leaving with nothing. All the while we kept working on the *Marauder* and its price kept going up. Eventually the Capellans would give up or come across with something good.

Carter was released from the hospital a week after he went in. I saw him in the mess hall getting lunch. His ear was in one piece and you couldn’t see where I split it and his scalp wide open. He wouldn’t look directly at me either. He just pushed his tray along the serving line and sat on the far side facing the wall.

Dessie bounced in like a happy schoolgirl, grabbed some biscuits and boiled beef from the serving line and sat at my table across from me. She was all smiles.

Probably just got done killing a puppy...

Ignoring her I concentrated on Carter’s ear; looking for the scar or a mark that showed where I split it. Not liking the idea of not being the center of my attention her expression shifted from happy smiles to cold, calculating wench, she edged her chair as

close to the table as she could and kicked me hard in the shin. I yelped in pain and surprise.

Seeing my pain made her smile again, “Hi Lem.” She chirped happily.

Man this woman breaks my cookies! Gritting my teeth and pursing my lips I grunted a “Hi” back to her and kicked her back as hard as I could. Have to give it to her, she didn’t squeal a bit. Her eyes bulged as my work boots peeled the flesh of her knee and thigh open. But no sound. Then as if nothing had happened at all she said, “Nice job on Carter by the way. I heard it took all three of the techs to keep you from killing him.”

“Thanks. When did you get back?”

“30 minutes ago.”

“Anything good happen?” She, Wilma and the new gal, Rena had gone out on a regional patrol three days prior to see if they could find any evidence of enemy activity in our sector. Sometimes armor or small ’Mech units will infiltrate a rear area and conduct raids on soft targets like maintenance depots and logistics bases.

“Nah. Just rabbits, wretches and refuse.”

“We have got to get out of this sector. Nothing is happening.”

Taking a bite out of a biscuit Dessie said she agreed with me, spraying me with big brown biscuit crumbs on purpose as she spoke her agreement.

I was doing the final hookups on my new Clantech PPC, I installed it on my right arm and it didn’t look too bad. A bit boxier looking than the well-rounded look of the left but not so much that it stood way out but I took a lot of time to custom fabricate some add on panels to make the thing blend in better. Last thing I wanted was to have part of my ’Mech look vastly different and have it be more powerful too.

That kind of thing would draw fire.

The techs were down below admiring my work when they scattered like roaches. *What the hell?* I waited to see what had sent them running like thieves in the night.

A metal chair flew into the ’Mech bay and crashed and skidded into a workbench with a bang.

Dessie...

She walked right up to my ’Mech and yelled up at me. “Lem! I hate her!”

I shouted down. “And I care why?”

“Because she’s sweet and nice and thoughtful and...” I half listened to her and kept working, or tried to anyway.

“and beautiful and just friggin PERFECT!”

Who in the hell was she ranting about? Glimpsing that she was right below me I nudged a nearby hand tray full of tools and bolts off its perch to see if I could shut her up with a concussion.

She combat rolled out from under the hail of screwdrivers, wrenches and heavy fasteners, Smirking, I pretended to be oblivious to the incident but it didn’t fool her. She grabbed one of the big bolts and threw it at me.

“Dammit Lem! Knock it off I’m trying to talk to you.”

Okay, this was getting old fast. “Yeah!” I yelled back, “I’m trying to ignore you, so shut the hell up and leave me alone!”

He eyes narrowed at me and grabbing another bolt hurled it at me. *That’s it! Now I’m mad.* Looking around me the only thing of any heft I could find was the armored access panel door for the compartment I was currently trying to work on. With both hands I

picked it up and standing up straight I looked off the edge of my PPC and threw it down at her.

She's quick I'll tell ya. She flashed out from underneath the falling armor slab and headed right for the gantry stairs double-time. She was coming to get me for that one. She flew up the stairs taking them three at a time. On my level she came off the stairs and crossed the gratings between us at full gallop. In her hand was her dagger and there was murder in her eyes to go with it.

Damn women! Looking back on all this I remember that I didn't know who or what the hell she was talking about. Really. I was minding my own business and she came out to mess with me. Oh sure, trying to cave her head in with the tool tray would look bad in court and the whole access panel looks like an attempt at murder even to me but Hell's Bells anyone will tell you that this girl is just plain nuts.

She charged right at me just like a mad badger; heedless of danger and out of control, dagger held low and flat.

I let her come...

When there was less than 5 meters between us I gave a quick sprint to close the gap and hit her in the center of her chest with a flying kick. She flew back faster than she came at me, knife flying from her hand and slamming into the catwalk's handrail and side-guard hard enough to make the whole thing shake. I landed on my hip, which always hurts like hell by the way, and got back on my feet as fast as I could not sure if she was down or still wanting more.

She was down...

My kick would have caved her chest in if I had been wearing my boots but this time I was wearing my athletic runners so she just got the wind really knocked out of her and a couple of cracked ribs. She was face up making fish out of water faces like I did when Truth hit me in the goodies the other day, her mouth making large and small circles as she struggled to breathe.

I went to where she lay, finding her knife as I did. That I picked up and stuck in my coverall pocket, didn't want her to get that anytime soon. Looking down at her I knew that this wasn't finished. I could see the rage in her eyes. She would keep coming until something dramatic happened to one of us. Only then would it be done as far as she was concerned. This had to end now, while I was in control of myself. I didn't want to risk losing my mind the next time she came around for payback. Reaching down I took hold of her hair and pulled her head up off the catwalk. Twisting the shock of hair that I was holding I turned her head to the side and punched her in her left eye quadrant of her head as hard as I could and knocked her lights out.

Wondering if that would be dramatic enough to end it I drug her back to where I was working and used electrical wire to tie her by her throat, wrists and ankles to the handrail and catwalk and went back to work wondering just what in the hell this entire mess was all about.

Dessie started coming around as dawn was breaking. I was cursing at my grandfather and telling him to leave me be as the connections in her brain started re-establishing themselves. The voices were bad tonight. They wouldn't let me sleep at all so I had kept drinking and working all night to try and keep them muffled. It worked some but I had to work hard to do it. No minor adjustments or busy work. Hard labor, full of sweat and foul language and bleeding knuckles.

I needed to get paid so I could go and drink furiously. That shuts them up. Drinking times are when I get the best sack time.

I was really going at it with grandpapa when I heard Dessie ask. "Who are you talking to?" Pulling my upper body out of the hole I had been working in I moved to a sitting position and looked at her. WOW! Her eye was blacked out and swollen completely shut. The swelling reached down her face to the corner of her mouth and up into her forehead. This was going to be something that she was going to remember.

So a quick recount here: Wilma hates me. Carter really hates me. Rena thinks I'm blight on the universe. The techs kinda hate me but respect my skills. The medic? He avoids me like a plague. Dessie? We'll see in a few...

I made no move to let her loose. She was going to have to ask me to do that and she knew it too because her one working and visible eye kept looking at the floor and not at me. I moved to go back to work.

"Lem. Wait---please."

I thought she would have burst into flames before that word would ever escape her mouth. Genuinely surprised I said, "What."

"Will you let me go?"

"I dunno. You gonna try and kill me again?"

Managing a half smile that looked disturbingly innocent she cooed, "Not today."

I guessed that was the best I was going to get...

I used a pair of cutters to free one of her hands and left them next to her and went back to work. She was rubbing the circulation back into her hands and frowning at the deep grooves the wire had made in her flesh as she lay unconscious all night. "Can I have my knife back?"

I had forgotten about that thing.

I reached into a pocket and pulled out her "Pig Sticker". It was a nice blade; thin and strong with a blood groove that ran its entirety and it was razor sharp. I spotted a narrow space in my 'Mech's leg armor and slipped the blade between the plates and snapped the blade off at the hilt. *Tink!* I handed her the bladeless handle and said, "Sure, here ya go." Looking more childish than I can ever remember seeing her; with down cast eyes and pouting mouth she accepted the handle, "I guess I had that coming."

"Yup. And just so we're both on the same sheet of music: if you ever try that kind of psycho crap again I will kill you. No ifs, and or buts about it."

The techs showed up a while later and shook their heads in disbelief when they saw I was still at work but I was done by then and instead of hanging out with them and talking shop I went and showered and as I was missionless went to my room to try and bag some sleep.

I keep an old blanket tacked up over my window to keep my room as dark as I can and with only the faintest of light squeezing through some moth holes I sat on the edge of my bed and wondered if sleep would actually come. I nearly leapt out of my skin when the bed moved beneath me. Jumping off it as if it were a snake ready to bite my ass I turned and squinted to see what the hell was going on.

It was Dessie! I saw her face sticking out from under my blanket, a pain patch over her bruised face and sound asleep. I peeled back the covers to see if she was faking it and lying in wait with a needler or club or some other kind of payback device. Nope, just a birthday suit.

This was getting weird. Plain weird and it was getting weirder every damned day.

Drink, must drink...

We woke up at the same time and got dressed in the dark like we'd been doing it for years and there, in the dark, alone and invisible to each other she told me that she was mad at Rena because she was so nice and thoughtful and everything she's not and it made her jealous because everybody was paying attention to her now.

I sat there quietly and listened patiently wishing she would just shut the hell up. I didn't care what her problem was nor was it likely that I would—ever. I just wanted to be left alone. Nobody here had understood that yet and it was making me crazier than I already am. So out of desperation I rummaged around in my mental garbage pail for something that would lighten the mood and be relatively soothing. This is what I came up with:

“Dessie. I am absolutely certain that out there in the universe there is a man who will absolutely love being abused by you and I promise that any man who is attracted to you will have no interest in Rena whatsoever.”

Drink! I must drink. I must drink in copious amounts and great speed and pray for darkness...

Dogs and women man! Dogs and women... You feed them and they follow you around everywhere and to tell the truth I'd prefer a mangy red-boned-leg-humping hound to Dessie. She was everywhere I was now. In close and running her mouth and being more obnoxious than ever. Don't misunderstand me here I don't care what people think of me, not one bit but there are times when its better to not piss people off. Like before you ask them for something and every time I tried to do something she was right there calling them stupid or lazy or something I didn't want to hear. One time she was laying into one of the techs I was trying to work with, calling him names and harassing him for no damned reason whatsoever. I told her twice to knock it off and it was so sick because she smiled and glowed knowing that it was getting on my nerves and making me crazy. Finally it was so bad I lost control and slapped her to get her to shut her mouth. I let her have it good too. Her good cheek glowed red and blood seeped out of the corner of her mouth I hit her so hard but she didn't say anything about it she just looked into my eyes in what I can only describe as searchingly. Of course you know how that went over on the gossip channels: Lem's a woman beater and Dessie is a victim and so on and so on. All this because I just didn't go ahead and give her the “Blackie” treatment and throw her ass off the gantry and kill her. It would have made life much simpler. She's gone and quiet and I would get a 'Mech to sell. So when Truth told me to saddle up for a 3-day patrol I was ecstatic. Dessie was crushed though, especially when Truth told her that she couldn't go with us.

The patrol was made up of me in my *Hatamoto*, Truth in the newly running *Marauder*, the Capellans were still trying to figure a way to cheat him out of that, and Carter in his *Osiris*. It was supposed to be Wilma but she had told Truth that she wasn't ready to deal with me yet. When she gets mad she stays mad. Never met anybody that worked so hard to avoid me. Rena doesn't count because I only introduced myself she doesn't really know me yet.

I know, I know. It's all semantics but some days it's all that makes things work.

Our patrol sector turned out to be a flank area that was running parallel to the final Capellan push on Warlock. Our job was to provide east side security for the Capellan supply trains that were running back and forth between two supply DropShips and the contact area. Truth said the liaison officer told him it was easy money.

Ha...

Off we went though. Stomping through the countryside in lazy tracks parallel to the supply route. We tried making our movements frenetic and nearly impossible to predict which was exactly what we wanted. That way the risk to the enemy, should they want to cross through our area, was significant. Not that I cared really either. This job was paying bounties only, so like vermin hunting in a farmer's field we were only going to be paid by the head. Truth had even told us before we left to lock out our projectile weapons i.e. missiles, machineguns and autocannons. He said we weren't going to be paid enough to waste the ammo on anything that wasn't a 'Mech or heavy tank.

We did our patrolling and picked up a couple of Savannah Master scout craft full of sappers but nothing else. I tried to make small talk with Carter on the common channel but he wanted none of it. Boy, you try to rip a guy's arm off and try to kill him and he holds a grudge.

Whatever. Least I know who will be in the witness box cheering when I get my shot...

The rest of the day held nothing so before the sun dropped completely out of sight we moved into a Redwood grove and set up for a while. Truth wanted to night hunt and made us try to catch some sleep before moving out again. I tried to sleep but it wouldn't come so I drank a bit to see if a cool buzz would help. It didn't. I just cried and begged them to leave me alone.

I gave up sleeping and told Carter and Truth to sleep all they wanted and I would take over the watch. Later Truth started a fire and together with Carter sat on a log shooting the shit with each other. Carter eventually got up and made his way to his 'Mech and when he was halfway up his ladder Truth pointed at me in my cockpit and pointed at the ground in front of him. I used a different finger to indicate he should do something really obscene with himself. His rebuttal came by way of a fist sized rock banging off my cockpit and then to point more energetically at the ground again. I hate getting out of my 'Mech in the field. I feel---vulnerable and I hate that feeling.

I was pretty close to the ground when my foot slipped off a rung, losing my grip altogether I dropped to the ground and hit like a sack of crap.

That was very embarrassing...

Truth, laughing at my fall with great abandon, patted the log next to him, indicating that I should sit next to him.

I held my hands up and said, "Back up there big man. I don't go that way."

"Shut the hell up and get over here dammit."

He opened his notepaper and showed me the numbers from the salvage sale and minus One Eyed Willie's cut. A very healthy number. "Now I was thinking that with this we could--." I stopped him before he could go any further, "If you want to talk about this mount up and tight beam me. You know Carter has his external mike on and is listening in, ready to run his mouth later on to anybody who'll listen." I turned and looked up at his

'Mech adding, "Aren't ya Carter?" Silence, only the crackling flames could be heard. Changing the subject forcibly, Truth asked me how things were going with Dessie.

I wanted to swallow my tongue. I wanted to rip my head off and throw it in the fire. I wanted to explode and die. But I sat there instead and as serious as a heart attack said, "There isn't anything."

He countered my denial with arched, inquisitive eyebrows and an elbow nudge and said, "Everybody says you two are rubbing yummies and beating the crud out of each other too." Exasperated I groaned at him "Boss, that little girl is very disturbed and I have no idea why she is always hanging around me because I don't encourage it and NO! We are not involved that way and it's not because I don't like women." I emphasized the next point more. "Matter of fact I think women are the only way to go but." I held up a finger to count my points of argument to him. "One: I don't have the energy for them and two, Dessie makes me want to strangle her every time she opens her mouth and I have been to enough psych sessions to know that that is bad. So there is no Dessie and me."

Truth got serious suddenly, the fire's light wavering across his features. "What happened to her face then?"

I told him. I told him how I was by myself and she came after me and how I tried to run her off and then how I tried to brain her---twice from the gantry and how she came after me with her knife and that I marked her to make sure she knew it was over. "Because we both know that she doesn't listen worth a damn." I left out the part where I found her in my bed that morning.

"Dramatics" Was all he could say. "You people I swear. Wilma still hates you for whatever you did on that escort mission. Carter thinks you're a prick who is out to kill him. The medic thinks you should have been aborted when you hit the air and the techs think, well the techs say you're a complete ass. You don't have many friends right now Lem."

"What about you?"

Wide eyed he looked at me and exclaimed, "Me? Me he asks." He Laughed cynically for emphasis and said, "Mister you're a commander's nightmare. You have skills and experience and in a battlefield environment you are without a doubt a killer. You are also reckless, overly destructive, sadistic and costly to maintain. You, so far, have a higher repair cost than any two MechWarriors I have ever had. In garrison you are a walking case of crotch-rot. You drink to excess, you're rude to your peers; hell, you cause more trouble than you're worth in garrison. Did you know that?" He asked that rhetorically. I knew enough to know that kind of question when I heard it. "You are also honest no matter what and when you aren't being a prick you can be okay to be around. Sometimes." He clapped me on the shoulder and stood to leave and before turning his back said, "Lots of times Lem, I close my eyes and hope you'll go away."

On my back up to my cockpit I put my hand in something that was spread across the rung I had slipped off of. I put my hand to my nose and sniffed at it: grease. Somehow a thick coat of grease had accumulated on it. I turned to look at Carter's *Osiris*. I imagined him sitting in his cockpit laughing at me when I fell earlier, slapping his thigh, tears running down his cheeks as I bounced off the ground.

Let the games begin...

Grandma and Grandpa and Aunt Genivie wouldn't let me sleep so I was wide awake and out of breath from their abuses when we headed out for the night work. My hands

were shaking so bad from fear and anger that for the first few minutes it was tough to keep my 'Mech on track and I actually bounced off a couple of trees on our way out, tearing huge rents out of their bark.

We wandered slowly through our patrol sector, each of us scanning on all wavelengths. I tried to concentrate on reading my monitors but they wouldn't leave me alone. It was like I was 7 again and there I was alone with them, trying to be a good boy, trying to get them to like me but not knowing how to make it happen and only making them hate me more. Their screams were echoing through my head making my bladder weak and making me feel like I was going to pee myself when grandpa shouted above them all, "Heads Up Stupid!"

A flight of LRMs slammed into my head and chest with tremendous impact. My gyro lurched and squealed in agony, struggling to keep me standing as the explosive warheads blasted huge craters into my chest armor and sent my decorative head and cockpit panels sailing into the night. Betty cooed out that my gyro was over-extended and that my anti-missile system was destroyed, her soothing voice no help at all as I tap-danced the foot pedals and wrangled my sticks to keep myself from doing an 80-ton face plant.

Getting my balance back I turned the gain on my sensors all the way up and found the shooter. It was a 5H *Grasshopper*, a 70 tonner that, when in stock configuration packs a LRM launcher, 1 large laser, 4 mediums, and jump jets. Betty did a quick scan and confirmed the weapon load for me.

Squinting into my HUD I could see that he had some friends with him too. I counted them off to Truth so he could get a quick situation report assembled and sent.

"Looks like a *Grasshopper*, a *Black Knight*, a *Rifleman* and a *Jenner*." I shouted over Betty and a loud warning buzzer. Truth burned out a quick sit-rep and came back with "I'll take the B-K. Lem! You get the *Grasshopper* and the *Rifleman* if you can. Carter, cover our backs because that Jenny is going to try and cornhole us."

I zoomed my reticule in on the *Grasshopper* and edged forward wondering if he was going to be the one? Was this MechWarrior going to be my savior? I hoped so. God I hoped so. I walked forward to find out. I wanted to get him within range of my standard PPC and work with that for a while. I was going to save the Clan PPC for a surprise. The *Grasshopper* launched another flight of missiles at me but this time Truth and Carter were close enough that their anti-missile systems overlapped their fires and knocked most of the close ones down with their nearly continuous streams of tracer bullets that sent them crashing to the ground where they made ragged streaks of fire in the grasses around us or exploded into orange balls of fire in mid air.

I switched to the common channel and asked the *Grasshopper* driver if they were the one "Are you the one *Grasshopper*? Are you going to be the one who releases me? **ARE YOU?**"

No answer.

That didn't matter though. I will be able to tell very shortly now. My screen was in night vision mode and the *Grasshopper* was displayed as gray-green and I watched mutely as he fired his torso mounted large laser at me and as if it were being drawn by hand between two static points I watched it slowly make it way towards me.

I had a feeling that he, or she for that matter, wasn't going to be the one as I pivoted on my right foot, turned sideways to narrow my target profile and lined up my stock PPC and aimed low. The light flash from its discharge overwhelmed my display and created a

whiteout effect for a half second but it didn't stop me from seeing my shot hit home. The lightning from my PPC burnt a trough through the tall grass and wrapped itself around the *Grasshopper's* legs and jangled its electrical system enough to make it stand rigid as a statue, arms and legs frozen in place as its mynomer pseudomuscles were flooded with high voltage. I asked again. "Are you good enough? Are you going to be the one? Or are you here looking for my help?"

I kept half an eye on my Radar and watched the *Rifleman* back out of the engagement box and try for a flanking maneuver while the *Jenner* took off at full sprint to look for an opening that its light weight and high speed could exploit. Text book procedures. I glimpsed briefly at Truth to see what he was doing. He kept close to us to help with missile protection and kept to his PPCs as he and the *Black Knight* volleyed back and forth in what I can only describe as marginal gunnery displays by both parties with both of them sending shots far and wide of each other. Which was a real surprise to me because Truth is a Gauss *Rifleman* and guys who use those are almost always very good marksmen and not prone to this kind of shoddy marksmanship display. A flash of light from the *Grasshopper* brought me back to it. It had fired its large at me again. This time the shot was better placed and it caught my shoulder and slid across my back cutting a wide furrow through my armor slabs and making me tilt backwards as it washed a ton and a half of armor off.

"Dammit!" I cursed aloud. He isn't the one. I knew it now. He was here looking for my help and it made me mad to find that out. When is it going to be my turn? When do I get my release?! **WHEN!!**

Furious that I was going to have to spend another day on earth because this MechWarrior was too weak to help me I sprinted across the open ground that separated us. I heard truth and Carter shouting for me to come back but in all honesty I couldn't if I had to. My only thought was of killing the *Grasshopper* pilot.

Seeing me eat the distance up between us the *Grasshopper* shifted west to try and get closer to the Rifleman. A 5H Grasshopper is technically a heavy 'Mech but its armor is very weak. Its prime mission profile is a heavy raider. Equipped with lots of weapons, jump jets for mobility and light armor and that translates into: "Get in, blow it all up and get the hell out." No protracted battles. So my running at it full speed was exactly what it wasn't designed to handle: a heavy with lots of armor and heavy weapons being operated by a MechWarrior who doesn't want to live anymore.

The *Grasshopper* was fast. It took off in a sprint for the protection of the *Rifleman's* weapon arc but it really didn't matter because my next shot caught it in the hip and sent it down to the ground in a cloud of dust and shredded trees.

How PATHETIC! I raged and writhed in my seat. He never had any intention of killing me whatsoever. He was just here to use me, so he could die. I screamed at him over the open channel calling him a coward and a liar as I ran to where he went down.

I found him on his hands and one knee. His right leg was nearly stuck straight, frozen at the hip and it was making it nearly impossible for him to stand up again but I didn't want him to stand again. I wanted him to die and I wanted him to see me doing it. I heaved my armored foot back and kicked the *Grasshopper* in the chest and rolled it onto its back. Hunks of shattered armor rained down on the ground as it flipped over and faced me. I knew already that he was going to try a desperation Alpha Strike at me and stepped back as all of his weapons discharged at once. Two of the mediums scored hits on my

chest and carved my armor open, making deep penetrating cuts that nearly hit my internals. It didn't matter. I lined up my reticule and fired my inferno SRMs. They exploded on and around the head and chest of the downed 'Mech and bathed it in thousands of degrees of liquid fire. The pilot thrashed the 'Mech violently trying to get it on its feet again, its arms and one working leg striking the ground nearly convulsively.

I stood by and waited for my launcher to reload, I decided that cleansing fire would be the best way to kill this imposter. My reticule went from red to gold, the signal that reloads were now in place and ready to go, and I took aim once again---

All at once it sounded like a thousand monkeys were attacking my 'Mech with hammers. Bangs and sparks sounded and flew every which way and my HTAL started flashing with yellow and orange polka dots all over my body.

*The Rifleman...*

That silly sonofabitch had actually come here to try and save this fool.

Fine...

I opened the circuit on my clan PPC and looked for him, I found him 300 meters away at my 3 o'clock and let him have it. It was a stunning experience. My heat spiked harder and faster than anything I had every felt before. One second I was breathing warm sweaty air and the next I was in the doors of a blast furnace.

*The Rifleman* you ask? Oh my goodness gracious. I had heard of 'Mechs popping from clan weapons but they were stories of scouts and piles of rat shit that had no business being in one piece much less in combat but this 60-ton *Rifleman* was different; it was in good condition and combat ready and it volcanoed on the spot. One second he was there the next he was a ball of fire and a concussion wave that I felt inside my 'Mech. Abso-fuckin-lutely incredible. I stared stupidly at the spectacle wondering how we beat those guys in the first place when they had stuff like this.

I had fought Clanners before but I guess the power of their weapons hadn't really registered at the time. But now it did and it was really damned exciting to think that I could do that kind of damage now. "WhoooooWeeeeeee! I yipped in elation across the open channel. "**Oh Yeah! Who's next????!!!**

Turning back to the *Grasshopper* I was all smiles. I felt like a god, ready, willing and able to smote any and all who stand before me and always happy to oblige and like a child being allowed to pick any puppy from the basket I trotted back to the crippled, flaming *Grasshopper* and very carefully, I didn't want to crush the LRM launcher mounted in its head now, used the front of my left foot to crush the cockpit and kill the MechWarrior inside.

I walked away from the now dead *Grasshopper* I set my sights on the *Black Knight* and asked him if he was the one. Faint static hissed across the channel as he and the *Jenner* backed away from us and withdrew from the area.

There were no contacts after that. We finished our mission with the only excitement coming from me sneaking into Carter's cockpit and hiding a baggie full of coyote shit inside his control console as my revenge for greasing my ladder rung for me. It was funny as hell to watch him climbing in and out of his cockpit half a dozen times to look at the soles of his boots and sniffing around frantically like a starving hound to find what was stinking his 'Mech up so bad.

Our liaison officer dashed into the 'Mech bay right as we were parking to check on the *Marauder*. I watched him let out a visible sigh when he witnessed that it was still in

one piece. He waited near its foot for Truth and then walked out of the bay with him. Truth later said we got paid enough to fix our 'Mechs, reload our ammo bins and make the month's payroll. Nothing else though. No bonuses or spare change to put into the battalion's account.

Cheapskates...

Not having anything for the Colonel's profit column seemed to upset Truth more than I figured it would or even should for that matter. Talk about dedication. I seriously doubt our big Colonel—do you know what? I don't know what his name is. Everybody just says "The Colonel" Gonna have to find out one of these days.

Anyway, "The Colonel" is really getting his money's worth out of Truth. This guy is more dedicated than an old school Lyran zealot.

Personally, I was faced with a very tough choice in the 'Mech bay. I had gotten paid finally so I had the means and the motivation to go out and try and destroy my liver and brain and shut grandma and grandpa up and finally get some serious sack time and when I sobered up fix my 'Mech ----in a week or so. Or, or I could just get it over with and get hammered to my heart's content safe in the knowledge that I have no real responsibilities waiting for me when the booze dries up.

I worked fast and furious...

The King Club was full when I got there. Trendy music that had its lyrics electronically removed blared from 2 meter tall and 2 meter wide sound units bolted to walls in various places and made the bones in my ears buzz like a pneumatic paint stripper. Taking a stool at the far end of the bar, next to the fire exit, I waved to my favorite bartender: Wang. He was my favorite because he didn't talk to me unless he had to and he kept my drinks coming and was slick about stealing my change when he thought I wasn't looking. Without changing his usual sour expression one bit he slithered down to my end, grabbing a towel on his way and as he wiped up some sticky crap near my elbow asked me what I wanted. I took a 100 C-bill note out of my pocket and laid it on top of the bar and said, "Keep 'em coming till it's gone."

I woke up when 2 military police soldiers rolled me over and, shining flashlights in my face, slapped me awake. "You got a name man?" The world spun hard counterclockwise as I came to and I tried to speak but words only dribbled from my lips. One of them said with an audible measure of disgust, "He's boiled. Let's get him in the truck."

I woke up again when our medic spooned something into my mouth that tasted like lemons, only worse. The burning citrus taste was horrid and it was only the beginning of the fun. My eyes snapped wide open as my tongue cried in horror at what he'd done to me. Wide awake suddenly I found myself inside his makeshift office/clinic lying on the floor with him standing over me holding me by the seat of my pants and my shirt collar shouting "Get out now!" I didn't know what he'd done but not only was my tongue burning like the fires of hell itself were sitting on them but my stomach was doing cheetah flips. He jerked me to my feet and threw me bodily out of his office into the parking lot where I staggered and stumbled while holding my newly enraged stomach.

I felt all of my plumbing gurgling in upheaval. From my lower bowels to the top of my throat it bubbled and surged and then it all exploded. He'd given me something to flush my entire body out. My knees buckled as the forces inside my body went ballistic

and started expelling everything everywhere and it wasn't just once or twice it was—forever.

I was on my hands and knees, pants around my ankles, dry heaving when the medic, cup of coffee in hand, came to me and in the predawn light said, “If you find a little brown ring down there pick it up. That’ll be your asshole.” Slurping his coffee loudly he walked around me a couple of times; taking in the spectacle I imagine, and said, “You are such a piece of shit MechWarrior. You are such a piece of flaming **shit!** And the sad part is that I cannot begin to describe it clearly because words like that elude me but the next time you go out and do something like this; do me a favor and just **fucking goddamned die!** You are not worth losing any sleep over.”

Wow. He was mad wasn't he?

Dessie jimmied my door open with her new knife and found on the floor me sleeping in my own filth. Gagging at the smell she stepped over me and went to the window and pulled the ratty blanket down and let the sunlight rush in.

“Get up! Get up you stinkin, rotten thing you!” She shouted. “We got orders to be off planet in 24 hours! And you need to wash your ass!”

I prayed for death as she bellowed at me, each syllable of every word feeling like a hammer blow. I gasped as I got off the floor; all the vomiting made me feel like I'd done a million sit-ups. She pinched her nose as I walked by her grabbing my shower kit and heading to the latrine. Just then Rena stepped out of her room carrying her duffel bag and saw me in the barracks hallway walking her way and gagged at my stench. Clamping a hand over her nose and mouth she did a U-turn and sprinted for the exit before I could get closer slamming the door against the building with a boom as she bolted for breathable air.

“Galatea? What in hell is on Galatea?” I demanded. “Nothing ever happens there fer chrissakes!” Truth grabbed his coffee cup off his *Caesar's* foot and winged it at me sidearm style.

I ducked and watched it as it shattered against a workbench behind me. Okay, I thought in surprise, that's a bit out of character. Holding my hands out in surrender, “I'll shut up now.”

Truth nodded a harsh chop at me and clearly mad at everything in the universe continued from where I had interrupted him, “Galatea. Yes, Galatea. We are to rejoin the main body and prepare for movement to our next employer. Wilma, who hadn't looked at me since I entered, asked if he knew who our next employer was. He shook his head and declared to all, “You now know what I do. If you don't like it look at your contracts and see if there is an escape clause that will apply to this situation and ask for release. If there isn't: shut yer mouths and load up.”

I was a bit confused as to what my situation was going to be now. I wasn't a contracted MechWarrior and therefore free to go and do as I pleased but I had nowhere to go and nothing to do. The Capellans would probably take me as a walk on but I didn't see them being very tolerant of my---my quirky behavior and I would probably wind up in a prison somewhere near the periphery and I was guessing that the fighting was over on Warlock so wherever there was a war going on I was going to need a ride to get to it. I needed to come up with a plan.

Truth caught me in my room as I grabbed my duffel from behind the door. “Lem,” he said, “We need to talk.”

I sat on my dresser and said, "Shoot."

"Here's the deal, we got released from our contract because of the Colonel and in a way because of you." Now that was a surprise. I didn't recall killing any Capellans in front of witnesses or in an illegal altercation. "The Bone Crushers were supposed to be in the theatre completely 90 days ago and it never happened. Our macom has been very understanding and had been actually going out of their way to keep us solvent. It sucked exhaust fumes mind you; all of that piecemeal work we were doing but it was all the scraps they had to throw us." He wrinkled his nose at my leftover scent and opened the window and took up a seat on the sill.

"Then you go and give us the *Marauder* that you admitted to stealing from the battlefield, under orders we know, and give it to us along with the others and I suppose if it wasn't that *Marauder* it wouldn't have been a big deal but our liaison officer, Danbury, has been crying his eyes out to get it from us and between that and the colonel's inability to live up to the contract they've decided to can us."

"Didn't you tell them that it wasn't your 'Mech and that I was just loaning it to you? You could have done that you know." I always get angry when people get in trouble for my actions. "I would have told them to stick it up there ass sideways and sold it to the St. Ives for drinking money."

"Yeah, I thought of that and I knew you would do something like that too but I also want you to come with us to Galatea. I have an uneasy feeling we've been sold out by the Colonel."

"Sold out?"

"Yeah, our contract's sold to other units along with our equipment. That means Wilma and Carter's 'Mechs will go along with 7 others that are battalion property."

I got it. It took me a minute but the whole merc thing was new to me. "So why do you want me of all people to come with you?"

"Because you are an asset in your own way and you own your 'Mech and between you, me, Dessie and a few others I know we could form our own light company and buy out our contracts with the salvage money I've been hiding from the colonel."

"But what if you're wrong?"

"Then I'm wrong and we go from there."

I couldn't understand what his real reason for wanting me along was. I tried rephrasing the questions, coming in from different tacks but he kept saying that he felt that I would be an asset which I felt was total crap.

I wonder what Galatea is like?

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