

# Return of the Widow

By Triptych

Desert Inn Cantina  
Planet Marmech  
Pirates Haven, Periphery  
October 3066

One can always tell losers. They are the ones with slack jaws and sorrowful eyes. The inhabitants of the cantina were no different. With their dusty clothes and un-kept beards, you could tell that they were miners who had just finished their shift and needed a drink to allow them a temporary escape from the harshness of reality before they returned to their dismal shacks at night.

Marmech would do that to you, it was nothing more than a dust bowl where people who had given up their lives for whatever reason would settle down and die in obscurity. The howling dust storms and the eternal hopelessness hit everybody who breathed the air.

An old man behind the edge of the bar passed an ice-cold beer in a dirty glass over to a young man wearing a light windbreaker and combat fatigues.

"You ain't from around here, are you?" The old bartender queried.

"No sir, I just happened to get on the wrong transport and so I got lost." John Ronson replied.

Ronson had just graduated from the NAIS, the New Avalon Institute of Science, the premier mechwarrior academy of the Federated Commonwealth. Eager to get started in proving himself to his Godfather, Duke Peter Desmond, He quickly hopped on the nearest transport, hoping it would take him to the Periphery world of Perignon, home to his Godfather's mercenary unit, the Stilettoes.

But what happened was that somebody exchanged his ticket for one that would bring him to Marmech, a dry dusty planet with no value whatsoever. Ronson cursed at himself for being so naïveté with con men.

As he caressed his beer mug, wondering how he was going to get out of this mess, he overheard a conversation between two miners who had apparently one beer too many.

"Well mates! Here's to Marmech" The one with the scruffy beard said.

"What's so good about it? We are in a hellhole and we are gonna die here slowly." A man, with a moustache as white as snow, answered.

"Well, it beats getting involved in that civil war in the Commonwealth doesn't it? I've had my fill of war. Been a mechwarrior myself." Scruffy beard answered.

White moustache did nothing but grunt.

The scruffy beard continued, "Yes sir! I was serving in the DCMS right when the Black Widows took out our entire company. So here's to her: the Black Widow, Natasha Kerensky, may she rest in peace knowing that she was the greatest mechwarrior who ever lived!"

"Hear, hear." Moustache went along.

"She wasn't the greatest." The sound came from a voice on the far side of the room.

Ronson turned his head and noticed another bearded miner sitting at the back of the hall, apparently he had overheard of the conversation that these two drunks were having.

"What d'ya mean she wasn't the best?" Scruffy beard went on.

"She wasn't. It was a guy called the Bounty Hunter." The man in the far side of the hall answered.

"The Bounty Hunter? He's just a legend. He ain't real." Moustache went to Scruffy's defense.

"Oh he's real all right, he was the only one ever to beat the Widow in a one on one fight. In fact, he now uses that Marauder that the Widow was formerly using before she got her black Warhammer." the man answered.

Moustache and Scruffy beard didn't reply.

The man went on, trying to prove his point. "The Bounty Hunter appropriated her mech and painted it all green with money signs all over it. He disappeared shortly before the 4th Succession war. People said he got killed but I bet he is still out there somewhere. And God help anyone who gets in his way."

With that, the man got up and left the bar.

"C'mon Eddie, lets go." Moustache man said.

As both men left their table to head back to their tin shacks, Ronson could feel the fear in the air.

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13TH AMARIS SPECIAL FORCES GROUP  
(COMSTAR DECLASSIFIED #A116314)

*In order to understand the capabilities and the fearful reputation that this unit had during the Amaris Coup, you must first understand the life of it's commanding officer and how he came to be.*  
*- Acolyte Dennis Surban 3018.*

Born on the European subcontinent of Terra during the early 28th century, Christopher Fokker grew up wanting to become a soldier. After graduating at the top of his class in Sandhurst Military Academy, Fokker quickly rose up the ranks of the SLDF's 146th Royal Battlemech Division (the George S. Patton division) and was sent into a special RECONDO school where he again earned top honors. It was here that he earned his call sign: Meridian.

Fokker was then chosen as a special training officer for the SLDF's GUNSLINGER program in 2738. The GUNSLINGER program was a covert training unit that was formed in response to the "Hidden Wars" when the private armies of the Council Lords would secretly challenge the SLDF soldiers to private duels to the death. After being consistently beaten by Urizen Kurita's "ronin" (these were actually highly trained DEST commandos), the GUNSLINGER program was to submit carefully selected SLDF mechwarriors to intensive training using the most advanced simulators and the best instructors the SLDF could offer. As expected, Fokker excelled at this program and was soon the head instructor for the unit. However, events would drastically alter his life as well as the fate of the Star League.

It was in the GUNSLINGER program that Major Fokker met a young mechwarrior named Tanya Kerensky, who was a niece of the commanding general of the SLDF, Aleksandr Kerensky. The two fell in love, much to the chagrin of Tanya's father, Colonel Oleg Kerensky. Col. Kerensky did not approve of the young man's "peasant" upbringing and one night caught the couple kissing in his house. Quickly drawing his dagger, the enraged Colonel Oleg charged at Christopher, who used his elite training to throw the Colonel to the floor. However, Oleg's hand had slipped beneath his body and his own dagger thrust into his heart. Christopher Fokker had accidentally killed Tanya's father. Fokker was then quickly placed on court martial for murder and the trial was presided over by General Aleksandr Kerensky himself.

After pleading that it was an accident, Fokker's hopes turned to shock when the court found him guilty of killing a superior officer and sentenced to life imprisonment. That General Kerensky himself confirmed the sentence only added to his grief. During his third month in the prison, Fokker learned that Tanya had committed suicide while being three months pregnant with their child. As the months turned into years, Fokker's grief turned to rage at both General Kerensky and the Star League. He would make them all pay for destroying his life.

In 2749, Christopher Fokker and a few accomplices engineered an amazing escape from the SLDF military prison. By 2751 he had made his way to the Rim Worlds Republic. Stefan Amaris himself welcomed the renegade SLDF officer and offered him a commission in his own army, the Republican Armed Forces. Within two years, Fokker had gathered the best of the RAF officers and men and formed an elite commando unit, the 13th Amaris Special Forces Group. Using the same training techniques he

used for the GUNSLINGER and RECONDO programs, Meridian (as Fokker was now called) turned a group of rag tag, inexperienced house soldiers into a unit that could rival the best of the SLDF.

The first mission of the 13th SFG was to steal data-plans and operational prototypes for several advanced SLDF battlemechs from the top-secret plant on Hesperus II. Using tried and true commando tactics, the soldiers of the 13th SFG neutralized the sentries and made off with the plans and the battlemechs before anyone knew what was really happening. Each member of the 13th SFG was fanatically loyal to Amaris and they quickly earned the nickname of the “Apostles” for their fanatical devotion to him.

In 2760, the Rim Worlds Republic and the Star League had signed a covert non-aggression pact due to the deteriorating situation with both the Periphery and the other Council Lords. As a consequence, the SLDF sent advisers to train the Republican Armed Forces in advance military tactics as well as providing state-of-the-art military hardware. Within 2 years, the Republican Armed Forces were nearly the equal in terms of training and equipment to the SLDF. In early 2765, while most of the SLDF units were engaged along the Periphery, Republican units began to outnumber them within the planets in the Terran Hegemony itself. With elite units such as the 13th Amaris SFG now covertly in Terra, Stefan Amaris knew his time had come.

The Amaris Coup of 2766 came as a complete surprise to the SLDF forces in the Hegemony, with only skeleton crews manning their posts; most SLDF units were captured with hardly a shot being fired. The Imperial Palace itself, however, presented a formidable task. Guarded by the elite Royal Black Watch Regiment, the royal guards of the Emperor would fight fanatically in his defence. Some historians had said that Amaris had decided to stage the coup on a whim, but many more believed that it was a carefully premeditated plan and that Meridian might have actually planned the Terra operation himself.

Using commando tactics, the Apostles quickly engaged the bulk of the Black Watch Regiment near the Imperial Spaceport and destroyed them in a two-hour running battle. Most historians believed that the swift destruction of the elite Black Watch Regiment caused many other SLDF units on Terra to falter and thus enabled Amaris and a few of his Apostles to storm the palace and capture the young Emperor.

As Kerenksy and the SLDF began it’s decade long campaign to retake the Terran Hegemony, Amaris pleaded with the other Council Lords to aid him in his cause. Amaris felt that the Star League had abused the freedom loving peoples of the Periphery for centuries and that killing the Emperor was the only way for the tyranny to end. With his pleas falling to deaf ears, Amaris hysterically vowed that if he could defeat the SLDF, he would also destroy the other Council Lords. Meridian was more pragmatic as he grimly prepared for the defense of Terra.

Despite being outnumbered by SLDF forces, the RAF fought as if possessed, giving ground by the inch. But despite heroic efforts, the more numerous SLDF forces smashed their way into Terra in 2779. While other RAF units were attempting to flee, the 13th prepared for a fanatical defense of the Palace. As the SLDF forces surrounded the palace, the Apostles fought like mad, killing four SLDF mechwarriors for every Apostle killed. However, superior numbers ultimately won out and the last of the Apostles died outside the palace gates. When Kerensky, in his Orion mech headed towards the steps of the Palace, Kerensky’s mech was toppled from a point-blank range attack by Meridian’s Exterminator battlemech. Just as Meridian closed in for the kill, his mech was destroyed by a lucky blast shot from the back by General Dechevillier, Kerensky’s second-in-command. Analysts believed that if it were not for the lucky shot of General Dechevillier, Kerensky might have been killed and his death would have radically changed the future of the Inner-Sphere.

In the aftermath of the battle, SLDF units searching through the rubble never did find Meridian’s body and some say that he survived. But even in his mysterious death hundreds of years ago, the name of Meridian garners a healthy respect to all scholars of mechwarrior lore.

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**Acheron Ravine**  
**Santander V**  
**Ghost Bear Dominion**  
**August 3058**

*We make our stand here.* Thought Helmar Valasek as he signaled his two surviving companions to power up their mechs.

It seemed to be a rather unfitting end to a pirate commander. Known for his cunning and treachery, Helmar Valasek once ruled this entire planet and made parents tell stories about him in order to make unruly children behave. How they must have forgotten him now.

*Almost ten years, Living like cockroaches and fighting for our lives.* Valasek's thoughts lamented on what might have been.

Less than ten years ago, Valasek had almost a regiment of cutthroats under his command, raiding other planets for mech parts and whatever resources he felt was needed. All that came to a crashing end when the Smoke Jaguar Clan made planetfall and proceeded to destroy his motley band.

Valasek did well against the Clans at first, baiting a trinary of mechs to his booby-trapped dropships, obliterating half of them and massacring the rest by sheer numbers. The sheer audacity of it! No one had ever thought of it until he did. And it would have worked against anyone else but these Clans seemed superhuman and possessed vast armies. Even his vaunted gang of killers had eventually succumbed through sheer attrition.

He did everything he could, used every trick he learnt and still they kept coming. First the Jaguars and now another Clan sought his destruction, the Ghost Bears.

Valasek's thoughts kept straying as he powered up his captured *MadCat*. Despite being a superior machine to the mechs he piloted before, it had patchwork armor and its right arm was missing, blasted off by an opposing Ghost Bear mech before he and his companions were able to bring it down with a massed volley of fire several days ago.

His two surviving companions, GrimJeff and Crazy Larry, were at the end of their ropes as well. They were the last survivors and were determined to go down fighting. Not as if they had a choice since the Ghost Bears had announced by HPG carrier wave that there would be no mercy to any bandit and anyone who tried to help them.

But then again, it wasn't like anyone could help them. After their dropship was shot down by Jaguar fighters while attempting to take off from the planet many years ago, they were able to steer the dying ship into one of the uninhabited regions of this bone dry world. The Jaguars thought they had rid of his band and so therefore left the world to the Ghost Bears. Out of sheer desperation and hunger, Valasek's band ambushed a Ghost Bear merchant convoy looking for farming areas. It took the Ghost Bears several months to realize that there were still bandits out in the badlands and began to dispatch Solahma units for training in the art of hunting.

Valasek hated it. He hated being hunted, running like a scared jackrabbit. It wasn't fear but rather disgust that drove him on. He didn't want to be the prey. All his life he was the predator, and now, oh the shame of it all.

Although the sensors on his *MadCat* were damaged from the last encounter with the Ghost Bears, it still functioned enough to give him a semi-accurate picture of the forces arrayed out against him.

"This is Valasek, two stars bearing down 1'o clock low." He quickly stubbed the microphone button in his cockpit.

"Understood." That was GrimJeff in his battered *Archer*.

"Yes." Crazy Larry's *Black Hawk* acknowledged as well.

Valasek knew this would be the final battle. GrimJeff's broken leg hadn't fully healed and his mech's Long Range Missile Launchers were practically empty. Crazy Larry had been burnt two weeks ago when a coolant pod exploded near him and burnt over 60% of his body. Larry's *Black Hawk* barely had any armor left and was wobbly from the lack of coordination due to Larry's injuries.

The first bear mech came into view as it crashed into the valley floor. It was a grey-colored *Grizzly* battlemech. Despite it being a second-line mech for Solahma units, it carried enough firepower to take them all down.

Both Valasek and GrimJeff fired as the Bear mech got into range. Valasek's Lasers melted parts of the *Grizzly's* torso but didn't penetrate its thick armor. As the Ghost Bear mech pivoted to face him, the last of GrimJeff's missiles slammed into its side, showering it with miniature explosions and nearly toppling it. The Clansman would not give up however, firing the *Grizzly's* Gauss rifle which gutted Valasek's *MadCat*.

Alarms started to whine in Valasek's cockpit as instruments informed him of an imminent engine breach. The solid metal slug of the Gauss Rifle, which was essentially a cannon propelled by magnetic energy, smashed through the *MadCat's* flimsy armor and into the engine core. Valasek struggled mightily with the controls as he fought to keep the dying *MadCat* alive and upright.

At that moment, Crazy Larry used his *Black Hawk's* jump jets to make a "Death from Above" attack on the Ghost Bear mech. With a boost that propelled his 50-ton *Black Hawk* into the air, Crazy Larry did what any follower of Valasek would have done to save his master's life, he drove his mech's legs into the swaying Ghost Bear *Grizzly* and succeeded in toppling it. The *Black Hawk* then continued its assault on the fallen *Grizzly* by repeatedly punching and kicking it, knocking out sheets of armor and tearing into the internal machinery.

Valasek allowed himself a grim smile as he rightened his mech. *Perhaps we may yet see another day.*

But that one flicker of hope was extinguished in a split second as the *Grizzly* was able to break free of the *Black Hawk* and fired its Large Pulse laser right into Larry's cockpit. The pilot-less *Black Hawk* quickly crumpled on itself as the *Grizzly* got up and continued shooting at it with its lasers. GrimJeff apparently got the message and took off running the opposite direction, as fast as his *Archer* would take him.

Valasek cursed his retreating companion, saying he would fry him alive when he got his hands on him as he toggled the trigger on his lasers. The *Madcat's* lasers fired straight into the back of the *Grizzly*, finally burning through the thin rear torso armor and sent the Ghost Bear mech down.

Another Ghost Bear mech entered the valley floor and fired at the retreating *Archer*, bringing it down as well. This new mech was a *Kodiak*, another powerful second-line mech from the Ghost Bear arsenal. The pilot of the *Kodiak* made the mech raise its arms, giving Valasek the ultimate insult: one on one combat. It tore into Valasek's pride because the *Kodiak* was signaling to its teammates that it wanted Valasek all to itself.

As Valasek prepared for his final hour, a loud crashing came through the ravine where the *Kodiak* expected its teammates to begin assembling.

From the side of Valasek's vision came a most unholy sight: instead of more Ghost Bear mechs, strange machines came lumbering into the clearing. Valasek could hardly believe his eyes as he saw monstrous metal machines that seemed to have come from a Heironymous Bosch painting.

One mech had ostrich-like legs but had a humanoid torso which ended in a demon-like head. Another mech followed it, this one had monstrous claws for arms and resembled a demon. The pilot of the *Kodiak* was also stunned, expecting his star mates and instead watching as metallic devils leaping from the gates of hell.

Valasek recovered his senses first and made his choice. He overloaded his lasers and fired it into the *Kodiak* as he charged his damaged *MadCat* head on into the Ghost Bear mech. The sheer audacity of the attack gutted the *Kodiak* but it was able to tear the *Madcat* in half, just as Valasek was able to fire a large laser into the *Kodiak's* cockpit.

Both mechs came down as the other, demon like mechs just stood there as if watching two insects squirm on the ground. Valasek quickly unstrapped himself from his chair and got out of his cockpit towards the pilot of the *Kodiak* who was himself able to eject before the laser hit the *Kodiak's* cockpit.

Valasek's thirst for revenge as well as hunger was satiated as he tore out the clansman's heart and ate it in three big chews.

After his frenzy had died down, Valasek wiped part of the blood from his mouth and waited but it seemed that the observing metal demons did nothing. All he could feel was the hum of their engines.

It was then that a lone figure emerged from underneath the shadows of the towering monstrosities above him. It seemed a man, but was heavily wrapped in a dark cloak that Valasek could hardly see the outlines of his body. The face of the man seemed covered in a brown, leather-like mask that was fashioned in the shape of a grinning death's head. As the tall figure loomed over Valasek's kneeling body, it smelled of leather and brimstone.

"Ah Helmar, it has been a long time." The figure's voice carried a strange accent to it, as if it was the devil himself.

"You know of me?" Valasek could barely speak.

"Oh yes I do. You were one of my lieutenants once." Again the strange accent.

It was then that everything came into focus for the first time in over 20 years for Helmar Valasek. "My Lord? You have returned?"

"Yes, and I need your services once more." The answer came almost as a whisper, but one that carried power.

For the first time in nearly a decade, the smile came back to Helmar Valasek. It was the smile of the predator, the cutthroat, the killer. "How may I do your bidding, Lord?"

"Follow me." The figure turned and started walking towards the mechs.

Valasek followed. Once again he would be doing what he always wanted to do.

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**Dropship Roger Young**  
**High Orbit, Solaris 7**  
**Lyran Alliance**  
**October 3066**

On most dropships, sickbays are usually nothing more than staterooms with medical equipment. But due to the cramped spaces of the Roger Young, it sometimes doubled as an impromptu briefing room as well, despite being inhabited by patients in some instances. It was one of those times.

"I think the worst is over. It looks like she will pull through." The man in the white coveralls said after examining the young, red-haired woman lying on the sickbay bed.

"Thank you Doc. Can Ronson and I talk here for a minute?" Kelly Ravin asked.

"Sure thing, I'll be back later to check on her." With that, the doctor left the room.

John Ronson dug his hands into his fatigue pockets. "I ain't really comfortable talking about this you know."

"Look Ronson, I'm gonna have to make a report to the Colonel exactly what happened and how we got into this mess. Let's just get it over with okay?" Kelly Ravin was senior to Ronson both in rank and experience. She had the certain patience and coolness that was essential in leaders.

Ronson looked down at the metal floor and then looked up at her. "I... I don't really know where to start. It's just that I did get lost in a Periphery world out there in the boondocks and the next thing I know all hell breaks loose."

"Let's start from the top okay? How did you meet this girl?"

"I didn't meet her, she just sort of popped in. I was able to make it from that Periphery hellhole to New Syrtis where I was just shooting the breeze, waiting for you guys to pick me up when all hell breaks loose. Victor decides to retake the Commonwealth back from his sister."

Kelly Ravin's green eyes focused on the young woman in the bed. "Go on."

"Well, the whole city erupts in chaos. Lootings, general lawlessness everywhere. I try to mind my own business until I saw her being chased down the street by armed men. She looked so helpless, she was wounded in the leg and had nothing on except a tank top shirt and shorts. She looked like she got beaten up. I was observing her as the men surrounded her, they didn't look like typical gangbangers but rather professional soldiers made up to look like a gang. Do you know what I mean?" Ronson asked.

"I do, please continue."

"Well it looked like she was a goner for sure cuz they had cut her off and cornered her in an alleyway and I felt she was dead before I could get to them. But she gave a hell of a fight, when the first guy tried to grab her she side stepped him and broke his neck with one with one flick of her elbows. She was pretty quick, almost too quick. And this was even when her left leg was gimpy. Never seen a technique like that before."

For a split second, Kelly Ravin's eyes defocused in deep thought, then it went back to normal again. "I have heard of a technique like that. It's a lost martial art, something called *Jeet Kune Do*. Nobody I have heard knows how to teach that style anymore. Not since the Star League days anyway."

"Okay, but then it looked like the goons learned their lesson cuz when they came at her a second time, they came as a group, not as a mob but as a combat team. They were able to almost hold her down when I was able to knock out the closest guy to me with a rabbit punch on the back of his neck. That's when two of them turned around to face me and one of them pulled out a vibroknife." Ronson continued.

"And then?"

"Well, I was able to take one of them out but the guy with the knife cut me on the side of my chest. Deep wound. I fell sideways and he was about to slice me up and then.. and then..."

"And what?" He had Kelly Ravin's full attention now.

"And a figure came out of the corner of my eye. He seemed to move as fast as the girl but with better coordination. He was carrying a hand-held gauss rifle in his arms and he just shot it like he was cradling a toy. The slug hit the knife guy dead center in his chest and blew a six inch hole in it."

"What did he look like?" Kelly Ravin inquired.

"Couldn't really tell. It seemed like his body was in shadow half the time. His silhouette seemed that he had shoulder length hair and he was wearing fatigues with an armored vest. His arms had huge muscles on them and he cradled the gauss rifle casually, like it was an ice cream cone." Ronson kept going.

Kelly Ravin didn't need to goad Ronson into continuing, the young man kept talking. "You wouldn't think that with all that hardware and that thick body of his he couldn't move quick but he was the quickest I ever saw. He took down the rest of the thugs before anyone knew he was there. I was starting to black out and the last thing I saw was that he was checking on the girl and then taking the thug's wallets."

Kelly Ravin said. "Hmmm... Sounds like a brigand. A highwayman. Did he take your wallet?"

"No, that's the weird part. He didn't take anything from me and left me there with the girl. We both recovered a few days later and the only thing she would tell me was her name." Ronson again looked confused.

"Which is?"

"That's another weird thing. She can't seem to remember much of her past. She said her name was Karen and that's all she knew. She didn't know why the thugs were after her or who that Brigand was either." Ronson said.

Kelly Ravin had one more question. "Hmmm... Now how about that battle we pulled you out of?"

"Oh yeah, that. Well, I got my mech out of the storage bay when the Loyalist attack on the planet started and was making my way to your ship's beacon when I noticed that Karen had stolen another mech, a Hatchetman from the hangar. Since two mechs are better than one I shrugged it off and made my way to the outskirts of the city with Karen right behind me. That's when they hit us."

"Who? Loyalist forces?"

“I’m not exactly sure, I mean they had the insignias of the Ridgebrook CMM but I just think it was a ruse. I mean, the mechs were way too advanced like they had a Spector, a Devastator and even a new Uziel. No way those were militia mechs. Even their tactics were different. My guess is that it was the same person who hired those thugs to take us out in the alleyway.”

“And that’s when you lost your mech?”

“Hey! There was three of them against me! I took out the Spector and dented the Devastator’s armor somewhat but the sheer volume of firepower tore both my legs off. Thank God for Karen, she took out the Devastator’s head off with the hatchet but the Uziel blasted her from behind. I think she suffered her concussion from the feedback from her neurohelmet from that. But She took out the Uziel by a precise headshot from her autocannon as she was going down.” Ronson looked up again.

“That’s one remarkable-“ Kelly stopped in mid sentence.

A groan came from the figure on the bed. Karen stirred.

The first thing Karen noticed as her eyes swam back into focus was two figures standing over her. She was in a bed and her head felt like a nail had been driven through it.

“Karen, can you hear me?” The brown-haired woman with the green eyes asked.

”Yes.” Karen’s voice came out light and raspy.

“My name is Lieutenant Kelly Ravin. You are in a sickbay of a dropship orbiting Solaris 7.” The woman continued.

But Karen wasn’t paying attention anymore. The moment she heard the planet Solaris mentioned a jumble of memories began to flood and overwhelm her senses.

Kelly Ravin stopped talking. She sensed that the young red haired woman wasn’t listening anymore. Ronson was observing this as well as examining Karen’s physical state. What struck him the most was that Karen seemed quite young based on her general appearance. No more than 17 years old he suspected. But the muscles underneath her medical gown showed that she was in superb shape. But it was the eyes that confused him the most.

She had the stare. The thousand-yard stare that doctors say that soldiers acquire through constant combat. It was the sleepy look. The look of an executioner.

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## **Dropship ???**

**Location Unknown**

**November 3066**

Anyone who knew him called him the Gentleman. Like his partner, no one knew his real name. His actions and deeds earned him the sobriquet and the reputation. He was a gambler, an arms merchant and a lover of women. He always traveled in a stealthy Union-class dropship of indeterminate origin. Such was his reputation that when he made planetfall women would swoon to him and traders of all sorts would bargain for his wares.

In the usual sense, he was always carefree and had an animal magnetism that would make one either cringe with fear or bow down in reverence. But on this day, this hour, he was troubled.

Dressed in the finest clothes of a bygone age, the Gentleman sat in his luxurious stateroom, where solid metal walls were decorated with rich tapestries and artwork from a lost epoch. Sitting in an ancient chair once used by mariners of Terra’s oceans and pouring over reports on his solid oak table, the Gentleman arched his brow and brooded.

“The fighting in Tharkad and New Avalon has gone up to fever pitch. It looks like Victor’s Alliance will carry the day.” A seated figure on the far side of the room commented.

The Gentleman did not look up. “Yes, but we have other, more pressing worries to deal with.”

“By that you must mean the Bounty Hunter?” The figure was obscured by the heavy tapestries that partly hid his face in shadow.

“Yes. It seems that he has begun to make his move.” The Gentleman scratched at his left pork-chop like sideburn.

“Then we must act. Bring your dropship to Solaris 7 so that I may secure the replicant.”

“My intelligence reports are saying that the Falcons will hit Solaris within two weeks time.”

“Why? Solaris 7 holds no strategic value.”

“Khan Marthe Pryde suspects something is amiss. She may have some inkling as to the Bounty Hunter’s intentions there.”

“You mean as to eliminating the replicant?”

“No, the replicant is nothing more than a luxury to the Bounty Hunter, that’s why he has not committed his own forces to kill her, rather he was using mercenaries hired through third party intermediaries.” The Gentleman answered.

“What then? What could the Bounty Hunter possibly want in Solaris 7?”

“It’s a matter of sentimentality, my dear Brigand.”

The Brigand leaned over so that his face came out of the shadows. “I don’t understand.”

“Just before Snord’s Irregulars began fighting, they reached a mutual agreement with the Solaris government on transferring a few of their artifacts from their museum on Clinton to the Battlemech Museum in Solaris City for safekeeping.”

“And?”

“Think about it. What artifact would warrant the Bonty Hunter’s attention?”

The Brigand leaned back as if he had finally gotten the picture. “The Amaris throne.”

“Correct. The throne is on display in a glass cage on the upper-left wing of the museum.”

The Brigand’s fist clenched. It was as if he could break rocks. “We should destroy it.”

“We’ll let the Falcons do that for us. Khan Pryde is quite angry at being tied down by Victor’s strategy that she wants a little bit of revenge. But I have already instructed the crew to alter course for Solaris 7.”

“What for then?”

“Why, to secure the replicant of course. As you suggested.” The Gentleman gave a wicked smile as if saying a private joke to himself.

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-From Meridian’s Journal

*I once gave a lecture to our newest graduates of that term. They were an advanced class of splicers. Of course, most were young and therefore full of energy and boundless enthusiasm. But being so full of prime does have its disadvantages, such as an inherent feeling of invincibility, much like a child seeing the outside world for the first time, one sees nothing but opportunity and is blind to the dangers. It is rather a pity then that the perpetrator must be made an example of to serve the many.*

*There were about 40 splicers present in the classroom, seated in the audience area. They seemed to be quite enthusiastic, due to the fact that rumors had filtered on down to the student body that our Leader had finally decreed that we would make our presence felt all across both Clan and Inner-Sphere space.*

*And this group had every reason to be excited. For these splicers were the first of the batch in the successful fusion of the Kerensky and Amaris bloodlines. It would be a curious mix of the Kerensky aptitude for tactics and leadership with a sprinkling of Amaris cunning and guile. Each student, though only in their late teens, were conditioned to kill human beings in the fastest, most efficient way possible.*

*Each one had already killed over 150 slave fighters in hand-to-hand combat before their twelfth birthday. However, one can only judge an experiment a success upon testing it.*

*I discussed the essence of the faults of the first Star League and why it had fallen. This lecture was primarily focused on why we needed to liberate the Inner-Sphere from the clutches of the Star League. I had highlighted the superiority of a society with no feudalism and no castes. There would be no war, no poverty, no traumatic events that would destabilize the lives of ordinary people.*

*“The original Star League had created a symbol of unity for all humanity, or so the League publicists would have you think.” I continued. “Yet they had to commit several hundred SLDF regiments on ‘peacekeeping’ operations in the Periphery which caused the lives of millions of people.”*

*“So the bulk of humanity was united, but at what cost? Is the abuse and exploitation of 800 million justified in order that 150 billion would live in prosperity? Did the Star League stop war? Has the new Star League abolished war? The answer to all of these questions is a resounding no.”*

*“The only answer to lasting peace and prosperity for all mankind is the complete abolishment of the Star League and its power base, namely the Great Houses and their respective militaries.”*

*One of the students, a young man, raised his hand. “What of the Clans?”*

*I answered. “The Clans of Kerensky are nothing more than misguided children who have reverted into something far worse than barbarism, they have become an abomination that must be completely destroyed. A caste-based society that is ruled by psychopaths with every excuse to start a conflict? How completely ridiculous. I may hold the Great Houses in much contempt but these Clans are even less than maggots on flies. Only an insane individual who was ravaged by brain disease could have envisioned that type of society, and I think even less of those that had accepted it.”*

*“Nevertheless, do not underestimate them. A pack of cowards are just as dangerous as a single well-trained individual. They may outnumber us now, but we have the advantage of surprise as well as a superior cause.” I continued.*

*“Unlike the Clans, we make use of every tactic, every piece of technology. Our assassins are the best infantry troops in the galaxy. While Clan elementals use powered armor, our assassins use a combination of stealth suits and personal force shields. This branch of science was abandoned a long time ago by their idiotic scientist caste as being un-Clanlike. But of course based on our mutual experience, there has never been nor will there be any rules in war.”*

*I held up a death wand for all to see. “Another one of our innovations. The death wand was in the experimental stage in the SLDF laboratories as a way of harnessing dark matter. Little did they know at that time that we have at last perfected this science as a most lethal handheld weapon known in existence.”*

*With a flick of my wrist, I activated the wand, letting loose a twisting beam of black matter that swayed and curled with the movements of my wrist. “This black beam will cut through any known metal in a matter of milliseconds. Science such as this will enable our assassins to achieve a five to one kill-ratio against opponents in powered armor. This beam can bend around walls, even curl up a spiral staircase to kill its target. Of course, one must be trained from birth to use this weapon because one is liable to cut a new hole in himself as much as the enemy.”*

*The audience erupted in laughter.*

*Another young man stood up. "Then nothing will withstand against us. Why doesn't our Leader unleash us now? Let them tremble before our might!"*

*"Easy my young pup." I countered. "You are young and still do not know the full extent of our strategy. Why bother to commit our forces now when we can let those fools pound themselves into oblivion. We shall bide our time, only when it is right do we strike."*

*"But we are the most advanced soldiers of all time. You yourself had said that we are the pinnacle of science!" The young man would not be silenced.*

*I remembered his name now. "Voldoss, what if I were to tell you that you are not the pinnacle of science?"*

*Voldoss stood in silence until his anger overwhelmed him. "I have beaten everyone in this class. I am the best."*

*"A splicer is not the ultimate in evolution Voldoss. Only when you have achieved replication can you consider yourself as among the 'best' as you say." I was smiling now.*

*"Replicants are inferior." Voldoss said haughtily.*

*"To be a replicant is the ultimate honor. It means that you have achieved the pinnacle of your evolution. Why bother to splice your genotype with another when you are already perfect? With combat conditioning and memory implants, you can create hordes of perfect, proven soldiers."*

*"I don't believe that." Voldoss replied in anger. Apparently he could not fathom that he was not the ultimate warrior.*

*"Then this will be your hardest lesson Voldoss. Not just for you but for your class as well. For I am a replicant."*

*Voldoss registered only a slight surprise as I unleashed the black beam of the death wand and sliced off the top part of his forehead.*

*It was a hard lesson, but it was learnt by the rest of the class. No one dared risk angering me again.*

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**International Zone**  
**Solaris City, Solaris 7**  
**Lyran Alliance**  
**November 3066**

On the day when three front-line clusters of Clan Jade Falcon made planetfall on Solaris City, panic and general chaos was the order of the hour. Ordinary people would be faced with two choices when raiders would strike: either evacuate to the outskirts and hope that they had a home to return to or hunker down in their basements and hope that the raiders would not come knocking on their front door.

The International Zone was aptly named for despite the fact that Solaris City was a microcosm of the Inner-Sphere itself, people of all creeds and nationalities were welcome in that part. It was also the center of the planetary government and therefore a prime target for any would-be raiding party. It was therefore decreed that in times of emergency, it would be evacuated.

Explosions rocked the streets and a few hardy bystanders that were not caught in the initial sweep would either try to make their way out or become opportunists, stealing what they could. As fear and panic hung in the air, an olive-drab jeep stopped in front of Apollo Street.

The jeep's driver, a man named Troy Montroc toggled the dashboard radio. "Looks like the Space Port has just fallen. I can't get any units stationed there."

Karen leaped out of the front seat onto the pavement. "Okay, better head on back and get to your mech."

"Karen, we've just disobeyed a direct order from Lieutenant Ravin and now we could face a firing squad when we get back there." John Ronson said as he leapt out of the jeep as well.

Karen's fiery red hair danced in the breeze. "This is where the Falcons will mass their forces in. I'm going in there."

"What? The museum? What could the Falcons possibly want in there?" Montroc asked.

"I think we may need your *Stealth Hawk* here, Montroc. Get back to the storage bay and get it moving." Karen said.

Ronson had had enough. "Karen! Kelly Ravin told us to get our mechs north of the Solaris River! That's where we are supposed to link up with the stables to coordinate a defense."

"Trust me. This is where the Falcons are going to concentrate their forces. If the stables stay up north of the river, it would give the Clanners unfettered access to this area and they will succeed in taking what they were looking for in the first place. I need you two to power up your mechs and cover St. Helens Avenue, that's the only street big enough for the Falcons to bring their mechs in. If you can convince any other friendlies to come as well, so much the better." Karen was adamant.

"Dammit Karen. I don't like this." Ronson was fuming.

"You don't have to. Just do as I say." Was Karen's reply.

Ronson got back into the jeep and faced Montroc." Well, what are you waiting for? Let's go!"

As Montroc drove the jeep, heading back to the hangars, he smiled. "She can sure tell people what to do."

"Shut up and drive. And when you get into your mech, take off that silly Heavy Guards uniform!" Ronson was still furious at himself for not being able to stand up to Karen. But she had an air of command about her that he couldn't quite stand up to.

Karen watched them go. She hoped that they would get back here as soon as possible or all might just as well be lost. She quickly turned towards the museum and came face to face with an angry trooper of the Solaris Militia.

"We've been told to shoot all looters!" Said the soldier as he swung his rifle butt at her.

With a speed of a cat, Karen quickly blocked the soldier's rifle and gave him a wicked kick to his chest that sent him sprawling across the concrete pavement. She quickly continued up the steps and into the main lobby of the museum.

One of the most popular tourist spots in Solaris City, the Battlemech Museum covered almost an acre, filled with displays of technology as well as valuable artifacts from the Succession Wars. As such, the Solaris government spared no expense in making this the most elaborate museum in all of the Inner-Sphere. The dozen glass doors of the main lobby led into an ornate hall, richly decorated by sculptures of mechs and had floors of solid marble. This grand entrance hall was flanked by two massive, marble stairs that led to the upper level. The upper displays could be seen from open balconies on the ground floor.

As Karen stopped, momentarily distracted by a flood of memories that nearly overwhelmed her as if she had been here before, the barrel of a laser rifle poked itself along the side of her head.

“Looks like we got ourselves a looter.” Said a Militia soldier as he held his rifle point-blank to her head.

Karen was cool and collected. “I’m not a looter. Put your rifle down.”

“Oh yeah? Give me one good reason why I should.” The trooper answered.

Karen tapped the rifle away from her head with her forearm swing and spun around to deliver a roundhouse kick that caught the trooper’s jawline, just above his Kevlar vest and below his helmet. The unconscious trooper dropped to the floor along with his unused laser rifle.

“What the hell is going on?” A uniformed sergeant of the Solaris Militia that came out of an adjoining room queried.

“Sergeant, set your men up to cover this front lobby. The doors are too narrow for mechs but elementals would definitely attack this point.” Karen said.

The Sergeant was aghast. “Elementals? We’re only supposed to protect the museum against looters. Oh my God! This wasn’t part of our mandate.”

“Sergeant! You have a duty to this city! That’s why you wear that uniform!” Karen had at last lost her temper.

The Sergeant quickly recovered. “And who are you supposed to be?”

“I’m part of the mech stables that has volunteered to help defend this city. I was put in charge of this area.” Karen lied. She was wearing her mechwarrior gear minus the cooling vest and helmet but hoped that it would carry her bluff.

“Okay, fine. Can we expect any reinforcements? Our radio went dead about an hour ago.” Looked like he swallowed the lie.

Karen rolled her eyes. “Not for awhile. I need you to set up your strongpoint along the base of the stairs. Find some cover and I hope you’ve got support weapons.”

“Yes, we have two heavy machine guns. Corporal Mallick!” The sergeant barked.

Within a few minutes, the militia had set up two strongpoints at the base of the stairs. Office desks were piled on top of each other to provide some cover as well as a base for the machine guns. Karen hoped that it would be enough. Just as they had finished setting up the machine guns, explosions could already be heard outside the museum.

“Good luck Sergeant.” Karen said as she bounded up the stairs, not waiting for a reply.

As soon as Karen got to the top flight that led to the second floor she could hear the clatter of the machine guns. It seemed that she didn’t have too much time at all. As Karen ran along massively arched hallways supported by massive granite pillars, she kept trying to remember anything of significance from her jumble of incomplete memories, she would sometimes pause at a glass display in order to somehow jumpstart her amnesiac brain, but the true purpose of what had drawn her here remained quite elusive. The screams, gunfire and explosions coming from the ground floor did little to ease her mind.

Rounding the corner of the left wing, she quickly stared at a glass display along the far side of the north wall and stopped cold. Behind glass panels stood an old, wooden antique chair. Made of heavy oak, it had leather cushions sewn into it and was encrusted with jewels. It was this artifact that had drawn her to this museum but she could still not understand why.

For a few seconds, Karen stood there, confused. As she stared at it, transfixed, Karen noticed a reflection behind her. She turned and crouched. And barely dodged an elemental’s laser beam which burned a massive hole on the glass partition and consequently, the chair. Karen tried to get away from the armored toad but she slipped and fell on her back upon the smooth stone floor. The Clan elemental was quickly upon her as it crouched down and drove its armored claw to stomp her face. Karen quickly bobbed to the left as the elemental’s claw cracked the granite floor where her face should have been. But the armored infantry of the Clans still had part of her clothing pinned on its metallic boots and it would just be a matter of time till it had gotten to her.

At that moment a loud noise akin to a giant metal sheet being dropped from a skyscraper nearly tore out Karen's eardrums. The Elemental then stooped over her and stayed still as she noticed a hole on the top of its armored head.

"Come on." The Brigand said as he dragged her out from underneath the fallen behemoth.

As Karen got up she realized what the chair was. "It's the Amaris throne."

The Brigand nodded.

"But what would the Clans want to do with- look out!" Karen screamed as another Clan elemental leapt up onto the second floor balcony in front of them.

With the speed of a mamba, the Brigand pivoted and fired his gauss rifle. The solid, armor-piercing slug hit the elemental's visor dead center and made a three-inch hole in which a black, gelatinous liquid oozed out. The elemental swayed sideways for a few seconds and then fell over the balcony as its massive weight tore through the marble columns and into the floor it fell with a massive thud.

"We've got to go." The Brigand said as a matter of fact.

Karen turned back towards the Amaris throne. "What about that?"

The Brigand held out a radio detonator in his left hand and activated it. A split-second later, the Amaris throne was obliterated by a combination of high-explosive and thermite.

"Go!" The Brigand gestured towards the rear.

Karen didn't need any more prodding. She ran in that direction.

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As the battle in and around the Battlemech museum raged, a figure was enjoying the quiet breeze and the fluttering birds on the grounds of the Running Fox Country Club, in the Black Hills sector that was overlooking the downtown area where the fighting was taking place. Of course since the Club was deserted, the tall man with the flowing white hair had the grounds all to himself.

The man quickly activated a hand-held communicator. "This is Meridian, is the throne secured?"

"Yes M' lord. We stole it last night and replaced it with the fake one." A voice on his communicator answered.

"Well done. I will be in the rendezvous point within the hour." Meridian turned the communicator off.

Judging from the songs, it was the bird's mating season, he was sure.

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## **Location Unknown**

### **Planet Talos**

### **Beyond the Rimward Edge of LA and FWL**

**December 3066**

Feigning unconsciousness, Karen tried her best to analyze where she was and attempting to find a tactical solution to her current dilemma. From what her senses could tell it seemed that she was located in an underground cavern. The walls apparently had been hewn smooth from solid rock. Vast stone pillars reached up to a high vaulted ceiling where embedded lights seemed to emanate from it, casting long shadows onto the concrete floor below. Along the stone walls were hung banners which symbols that she had never seen before.

It was apparently a function room of some kind. Karen did not have the full range of her vision for she was on her side, lying on the floor, her hands and feet bound from behind. At the corner of her eye, she sensed that there was a raised stone platform behind her.

It had all happened too quick. It was no more than a few days ago when a combined SLDF and mercenary force landed on the Planet Talos, a supposedly uninhabited planet far across in the deep Periphery. Located in the vast gulf between the Lyran Alliance and the Free Worlds League, this planet seemed the least likely place to deploy 3 SLDF regiments plus mercenaries, including Karen's parent unit, the Stiletto.

But that was before word got out that scouts from the Explorer Corps had uncovered something ancient and long-hidden from the eyes of both the Inner-Sphere and the Clans. After the debriefing by the commanding officer of the Stiletto on the incident in Solaris 7, Victor Steiner-Davion as well as Khan Phelan Kell ordered the multi-regimental strike force to this planet. Things went well until the strike force had lost contact with their jumpship support and a few hours later, their entire aerospace cordon came under attack from unknown enemies. Once the SLDF task force lost command of the air, all hell broke loose. Two SLDF regiments had reported making contact with an unknown adversary in the mountains 200km south of the LZ. Within a few hours, contact was lost with all forces south of the security perimeter.

And then the demons came.

Strange mechs, of designs never seen and which resembled denizens from hell came and smashed their way into the perimeter. These mechs apparently had access to Clan technology and yet used devastating tactics that were akin to Inner-Sphere guile. The Stiletto and the surviving SLDF units attempted to establish a defence and held on for a few hours until the rear areas, including grounded dropships as well as the headquarters units were destroyed by several nuclear explosions.

Karen, along with Montroc, Ravin and Ronson had a position north of the landing zone and were quickly attacked by the strange new mechs. Their lance put up a good fight but they were overwhelmed in the end. Karen had seen Kelly Ravin sacrifice herself, drawing off at least half a dozen of the enemy before she was killed in her cockpit. Karen herself was knocked out after destroying three of the demon-like mechs that attacked her. She did not know the fate of the rest of the lance.

Karen shed a single tear from her eye for the memory of her few friends. Despite the Brigand's suggestion that she stay with him, she had decided to accompany the Stiletto on this mission. She did not want to admit it but she had a fondness for her unit. She did well, leading them in an unauthorized engagement against the Jade Falcons on Solaris 7. Now all that seemed to matter little.

As Karen lamented on her loss, the edges of a boot appeared in front of her face. "Ah, my little missy is now awake."

Karen opened her eyes wide and stared back at the leering face of Helmar Valasek.

"Oh you thought I was dead my dear? I'm afraid it is your unit that is dead. Hahaha!" Valasek roared with laughter.

Karen spit in the bandit king's face. Valasek snarled and was about to beat her until a voice spoke from behind her.

"No, Valasek. Prop her up so that she may gaze upon her benefactors." It was a voice that spoke almost in whisper yet carried force.

With a growl, Valasek grabbed Karen by the shoulders and made her get to a kneeling position. With a new angle to her vision, Karen quickly scanned the room.

Behind her there seemed to be a raised dais in which a seated figure was looking at her. Sitting on what seemed to be the Amaris throne, a masked figure that could only be described as the devil himself could be seen. Standing beside the figure on the throne was another man, this one with long, flowing white hair, yellow eyes and dressed in an all-black jumpsuit. Helmar Valasek grunted and took a seat alongside the figure on the throne.

The masked figure turned to the yellow-eyed man. "Meridian, what is the current situation report?"

“Our units are now commencing mopping up operations m’ Lord. The SLDF task force has been destroyed, we are pursuing two battalions into the mountains 600km to the northwest of our position.” Meridian answered.

“Call off the pursuit, reprogram the Reagan defense pod to plaster that mountain range with 500 megatons.” The masked figure said.

“At once m’ Lord.” Meridian activated a handheld communicator and spoke into its receiver.

“You bastard.” Karen glared at the masked man.

With a catlike grace, the masked figure bounded from his throne and in a split second he towered inches away from Karen. Dressed in what seemed an identical black jumpsuit as his other two companions, the rest of the figure’s body was obscured by a black cloak. The mask on his face smelled faintly of leather and had a dull tan color to it. The mask was fashioned in the shape of a skull, with darker pigments along the eye sockets in which bright green eyes stared back at Karen.

“My prodigal daughter, you have returned to us.” Said the masked figure.

“I’m not your daughter, you lunatic.” Karen spat back.

For a moment the eyes behind the mask seemed to radiate extreme anger but it was quickly extinguished through sheer force of will. “Do you know who you are? Let me explain. You are the clone of the Black Widow herself. Natasha Kerensky.”

Karen stared at him. She was speechless.

“Ah, the first of my clones! We let you go so that we could see just how much you could have survived on your own. And you did remarkably well. It seems that this experiment is a smashing success!”

Karen’s memories began to come back. She remembered the training sessions, the mess halls and the lectures of Meridian. It seemed that this figure had placed some sort of trigger words that manifested itself deep in her subconscious. It was all coming back now. She grimaced in pain as her memory blocks began to unravel.

The figure bent down at her and said. “Well now, isn’t that better my dear?”

“So you’re this great leader everyone’s been talking about. I never met you before.” Karen looked up.

“Of course. The only one who ever shown themselves to you is Meridian and the other instructors. As for me, well I cannot take this mask off because it has been grafted to my face.” The figure replied.

“Let me guess, you are an Amaris.” Karen said.

“Well now that is quite good. Yes. I am the twelfth replicant of Stefan Amaris himself. People know me in another name. I am sometimes called the Bounty Hunter. ”

Karen gasped.

“Oh come now, surely you have suspected this all along? I’m sure you have. Do you know what this mask on my face is my dear Natasha? Let me tell you. This mask has been fashioned from the very skin of Richard Cameron himself. The last Emperor of the Terran Hegemony!” The Bounty Hunter tilted his head back and laughed.

The Bounty Hunter continued. “And we will now play our final act, we will destroy this new Star League as well as the Clans. And I shall do it through you, Natasha, yes, I am creating replicants as we speak and within a decade I shall unleash hundreds of Black Widows to do battle against them all!”

As the Bounty Hunter uttered those words, huge explosions could be felt coming from outside. Meridian quickly went to his master’s side and activated his communicator. Helmar Valasek got up and looked around.

“Well?” The Bounty Hunter asked Meridian.

“Static, I am getting interference from somewhere.” Meridian replied.

As Meridian finished his sentence, two men came out from the shadows on the far side of the hall. One man had shoulder-length black hair, he was cradling a gauss rifle in his muscular arms and had a granite-like face. The other man was dressed impeccably in an old Terran cloak that hid the rest of his

body, he had a roguishly handsome face with long brown hair combed and tied in ponytail fashion as well as pork-chop sideburns.

“Well, well, well if it isn’t the Brigand and the Gentleman. I should have expected this.” The Bounty Hunter said nonchalantly as he activated his force shield.

Meridian pulled out his death wand. “You both should not have come back. You realize that this will only end in your deaths?”

The Brigand stepped sideways so that he could cover the room with his rifle. The Gentleman activated his personal force shield as Helmar Valasek pulled out his vibroknives.

“Meridian. We did not come here to fight you.” The Gentleman said.

“I don’t believe you have much choice.” Meridian replied as the Gentleman reached into his coat pocket.

Meridian activated the death wand and its black energy beam slid out, like a coiled whip ready to be unleashed. “I instructed you both on how to fight, you will not stand a chance. Surrender now.”

The Gentleman held out a mini-data disk in his gloved hand. “I offer you a bargain.”

“A bargain? Don’t be ridiculous.” Meridian started moving forward, his death wand uncoiling. “This data disk holds your past, Major Fokker. If you leave this fight you may have it. If not, then the encrypted virus in the disk will destroy the records once I am dead.” The Gentleman replied.

Meridian stopped in his tracks.

“Meridian!” The Bounty Hunter shouted. “Kill them both, now!”

The death wand in Meridian’s hand deactivated.

“Meridian! Obey me!” The Bounty Hunter was furious now.

The Gentleman flung the disk into Meridian’s outstretched hand and the former instructor began to walk away.

“Meridian! You will die for this betrayal!” The Bounty Hunter’s rage knew no bounds.

For the first time in many years, a trace of a smirk manifested itself on the Brigand’s granite-like face. All he had to do was to find a way to free Karen from her bonds and the fight would be even.

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## EPILOGUE

### **Dropship ???**

### **Location Unknown**

### **December 3066**

Karen stared at the unconscious figure of the Brigand. She was concerned whether he was going to survive the battle between them and the Bounty Hunter. She had screamed when she saw him struck down by the Bounty Hunter’s death wand. Her shoulders trembled when a gloved hand rested on them.

The Gentleman had the soothing touch that calmed Karen somewhat.

“The Brigand will be okay. It was a life-threatening wound but we were able to get him into the sickbay in time.” The Gentleman said.

Karen’s throat was sore and her voice came out raspy. “So Valasek is dead then?”

“Yes. My pistol shot killed him. But then again, the Bounty Hunter could make a replicant if he so wishes, but not for many years at least.”

“Its too bad he got away.”

“Yes it is. I wasn’t aware that there was a false panel behind his throne. We had sealed the exits to prevent his reinforcements from coming in but that’s what happens when your battle-plan encounters the enemy.” The Gentleman answered.

“My friends. All Dead. Was their sacrifice in vain?” Karen asked.

“No. We disrupted his operations somewhat when we detonated the explosives on his cloning center. It will take the Bounty Hunter a few years to recover from this setback.”

“Then we have just delayed the inevitable then.” Karen stared blankly out of the porthole into space.

“Perhaps.” The Gentleman changed the subject. “So what are your plans now?”

“I think I will stay in the Inner-Sphere for awhile.”

“Very well, where shall I tell the crew as to which planet to drop you off then?”

“Drop me off at Solaris 7. I want to start reliving my memories there.”

The Gentleman sighed. “Very well. My spies are looking for the Bounty Hunter. Once he has been located I will call upon you in the future, Karen.”

The Black Widow turned and faced him. “Call me Natasha.”