

Rock, Paper, Scissors

by Marty Franz

*Loren's Creek, Northern Territory
Laconis, Taurian Concordat
November, 3063*

The sky threatened both rain and daylight. Even before the hovercar reached the nav point, Bryce and Tavis knew they had found the site of the battle. The first clue was the smell: an acrid stench that penetrated the sealed cockpit. Then came the smoldering shapes they could not identify at speed, which grew more numerous as the range indicator on the car's HUD counted down.

It had been a quiet night watch when one of the listening devices they'd deployed around the mining facility's perimeter had signaled. From the direction and strength Bryce and Tavis determined the source was not on TMM property. Prudence dictated a late-night call to their client. They were curtly informed that since the disturbance was not on company property, they would not need to respond. Unable to help, for ten minutes they listened to the faint sounds of missiles firing, laser blasts, screams, and 'Mech footfalls. Then the noise subsided, and nighttime silence returned.

Since it had otherwise been an uneventful contract, they decided they'd better investigate when their watch ended. After Goblin and Torch arrived for morning patrol, Bryce and Tavis borrowed a TMM hovercar, programmed a nav point into its guidance computer, and drove away. They'd driven first south, then west around the yawning pits and crumbling piles of the Taurus Majoris Mining Northern Laconis Extraction Facility. As they drove, the barren dirt of the strip mines gradually gave way to rolling, grass-covered hills. They spotted small settlements: in this part of Laconis there was some sheep-herding and subsistence farming on land the TMM had hastily filled, replanted, and sold back to the inhabitants.

After a half-hour's drive in gathering light they saw they were approaching the village of Loren's Creek. More accurately: the site where Loren's Creek once stood. Carnage outside the hovercar's bubble canopy replaced the pastoral village marked on the map.

Every building had been destroyed. Those made of brick or plasteel were blackened and still smoldering. Those made out of wood had been blasted into kindling. Debris covered the ground for acres. It smelled like burning wood, brick, steel, plastic — and human flesh. Both men had seen combat, and knew the smell 'Mechs made when they turned their lasers on unarmed people.

Not a battle: a massacre. The site was filling with ambulances, fire trucks, and police cars. A Karnov medevac chopper idled nearby. All bore the shield of the Gladstone Public Safety Department. Gladstone was sixty kilometers away, and crews were just arriving. Tavis and Bryce looked at each other numbly, realizing they could've called when they heard the shooting start. It would have been the least they could've done.

Bryce stopped the hovercar where the village square had been. They got out. Emergency crews ran past them, but everything was silent. Black smoke billowed from two structures that still stood. Both were roofless. Bryce guessed one had been a church, the other a school. Past them were regularly-spaced, smoking holes where houses had been. On the ground, scattered, lay bedclothes, dishes, toys. Some were scorched.

They walked toward a VV1 Ranger that looked like the command post. The side hatch was open and people huddled around it. Bryce overheard radio traffic as they drew near.

"Twelve so far," a voice said. "But twice that are still missing."

"Negative from Gladstone," said another voice. "All Spaceport flights accounted for."

One man looked like he was in charge. He was as tall as Bryce and wore a GDPS jacket and an officer's hat. Bryce walked over to him. "A 'Mech assault did this," Bryce said.

The man turned on him. "Who are you?" he asked. His face was close to Bryce's. He had a large mustache and heavy jowls.

"Brigadier Bryce Spanner." He didn't offer a handshake. "This is my G-2, Tavis Locke."

Tavis nodded at the man. "We're from the TMM facility. We're part of site security there."

The man flushed dark red. He looked like he was about to hit Bryce. Another officer, a short woman, touched his arm. She had grey hair and a blue GDPS windbreaker. The man nodded at her. "Sorry," he said, speaking to her. "Talk to my second-in-command. I'm a little busy right now." He turned his back on Tavis and Bryce, squaring his shoulders to block them out.

The woman took a step forward. "I'm Captain Asher. Please excuse the Chief."

"We came at a bad time," said Tavis.

"You said 'Mechs?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am," answered Bryce. He pointed at large tracks in the ground. "Probably just one. We have listening posts all around the mine area. One picked up noise this morning, shooting and explosions. That would've been at 0400 local."

It was now a little after seven. "Why didn't you call?" she asked. She put her hands on her hips. "Because this isn't part of the mine facility?"

"Something like that. We just didn't think about it."

Captain Asher looked at him, and at Tavis. Neither looked at her. She looked past them to the ruins of the school and blinked several times. A three-meter hole had been scored in the wall. A classroom globe of Laconis lay near it, rolling slowly across a playground full of papers. "It's not like we could've done anything," she said quietly, shaking her head.

"TMM Security told us to ignore it," Tavis offered.

"Well, of course they would." She rolled her eyes. "Look, if you want to make yourselves useful, go put on some latex gloves, and ask that man there if he needs help," she pointed to someone wearing a black poncho with GDPS CORONER in yellow letters across the back. "We've got to get everything bagged before it rains."

Tavis' face sagged. "We really need to get back to base now," Bryce said.

She nodded, disgusted. "Sure. Look, thanks for telling me about the 'Mech. It's one less thing to do here. And I'll probably ask you to make a statement sometime,

Brigadier Spanner." She pursed her lips in thought. "This has happened before. Ask your security chief about it when you get back. It's still John Baker there, isn't it? Tell him Carla says 'hi'." She turned her back on them picked up the radio microphone.

Bryce and Tavis turned and walked away. As they walked back to the hovercar, they heard a pair of loud sonic booms, high in the overcast sky. Everyone at the site stopped and looked up, craning their necks. Some shrugged, then continued working.

"That sounded like a DropShip," Tavis said.

"The relief Lance is due into Gladstone today or tomorrow," Bryce replied. They climbed into the hovercar. Bryce powered it up. The car rose on its air cushion and Bryce guided it away. Both men were silent awhile.

Bryce watched the road slide by. Finally he spoke. "After we return to headquarters, I want you to visit Gladstone. Meet the DropShip and see if it's our relief. Find out if there's anything they need."

"I will," said Tavis. He was silent a moment. "So that DropShip will have 'Mechs on it?"

"If that's really our relief force, yes. On my recommendation the TMM bought a Lance of light 'Mechs to replace us."

"Then that pilot will have to have his sensors on during his approach to Gladstone." Tavis stroked his chin. "IR, radar, everything. Oddly enough, it's a Concordat law. Military cargo and all that, landing in a TC Air Defense Identification Zone, et cetera. I looked into it when we came here."

Bryce looked at Tavis instead of the roadway. "Think he saw anything on the way in?"

Tavis shrugged. "I'll ask while I'm there."

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Brigadier John A. Baker, Chief of Facility Security at the Taurus Majoris Mining Northern Laconis Extraction Facility, sat at his desk drinking a mug of coffee. He was fighting obesity and losing, his olive uniform stretched tautly across his chest. Bryce

stood in front of him, looking past him to the topo map on the wall. It was outdated, but then pits and mounds don't change quickly. Baker had a few token reports on an otherwise empty desktop.

"Well, what happened?" he asked. He sipped the coffee and shuffled the papers.

"A 'Mech attacked Loren's Creek." Bryce searched the map and found the village. It was near the abandoned #6 and #7 mines, south and west of the main facility and its five operating pits. "That was the noise picked up last night by the listening post."

"It's not on TMM property," Baker repeated. "So we don't respond. In fact, we can't."

Bryce extended his hands, palms out. "I know. But I thought I'd better check anyway. We waited until the next watch came on. Tavis and I just got back."

"Fine, fill out a trip report," Baker said. His mug had a TMM logo on it, a red bull. He sipped his coffee with a loud slurp. "Anything I need to know?"

"Nothing Tri-V won't tell you. The village has been destroyed, and most of the inhabitants killed or missing. The Gladstone DPS was on the scene picking up the pieces."

"Bad news," said Baker. He put down the report he was reading and looked at Bryce.

"Very bad," said Bryce, innocently. "Do you think these could be the people who scavenge your mines? The folks I've been hired to protect your facility from?"

Baker put down his mug. He swivelled in his chair and looked at the map. He studied it, clueless. "Sure could be. A couple of the smaller towns and farms around here have been hit over the last two years." He pointed to a few places on the map. "Here, here, and here. The western side of the facility is sparsely settled, and rugged."

Bryce glared at him. "You might've told me about this earlier."

Baker swivelled back to face Bryce. He leaned back in his chair and tilted his head to one side. "Actually, I did, at our first briefing. I said we'd had some perimeter problems. What did you think I meant? And what would you have done? These attacks didn't happen on our property, so there isn't a lot I can do about them."

“But they’re related to the mines.”

“Probably.” Baker looked back at the map. He folded his arms across his chest. “You want to know what I think? I think you’ve got terrorists or bandits or somebody working around here.” He pointed to the #6 and #7 mines. “There is still ore to be had in those pits. Twenty years ago this place was yellow with limonite, and I know they didn’t get it all. Not a lot left now, but enough to pay a small group to scavenge it. Against the law, of course: this is our, I mean TMM’s, property. So, these guys camp out somewhere, and bring out their ‘Mech every once in a while to haul the rock away, and maybe sweeten the deal with some smuggling on the side.”

“Where do the attacks fit in?” Bryce asked. “That seems kind of dumb.”

Baker nodded. “These guys are likely ex-miners or deserters, real dead-enders. Once in awhile they need food or medical supplies. So they get some cooperation from the locals.” He fingers made quotation marks in the air, around the word “cooperation.”

“And when they don’t get it . . .” Bryce paused.

“...then they play rough,” Baker said, filling in the sentence. “You got it. Now that I think about it, maybe they are shaking down the locals, too. Providing fire insurance or something. Maybe that’s why they struck this morning: winter is coming, and they might be getting desperate.”

Bryce said, “so why don’t you do something about it?”

Baker sighed. “We are. We hired you. We haven’t had any perimeter problems since you arrived four months ago. Your patrols have kept these guys away, or at least made them keep a low profile.”

“I mean, go find these guys and deal with them. Once and for all.”

Baker looked at the ceiling, pleadingly. “Please, don’t make me say it again, Bryce. If I was Gladstone DPS, then I’d be on them like a rash. But I’m not. TMM gets to trash this nice planet because we, I mean they, signed a lease: a lease that makes us stick to our end of the street and mind our own business. I had to sign half my life away to hire mercenaries to patrol my facility. Then sign the other half away to buy ‘Mechs of my own. I can police this facility, and that’s it.”

“What about us?” Bryce asked. “My Lance, that is. Can the Euschelus Rangers go after them? Call it a ‘recon operation’ or something?”

Baker shook his head. “No. Even if this isn’t Euschelus, there are still some laws we have to follow here. Go read your contract. Your operations are confined to TMM property and the roads leading to and from. Even if they are camping out on our lawn, all the bad guys have to do is skip over the fence when you show up. If North Laconis Extract is a junkyard, then you Rangers are the dogs. And your leash only reaches the fence.”

Baker tented his fingers and leaned forward in his chair. “Look, Bryce, you’re a good guy. You and your Lance have done good work here. You’re neat, you show up on time, and your patrols run like clockwork. I’m pleased, and I’m going to write a glowing recommendation for you.”

Bryce avoided his gaze. “Thanks.”

“And because I like you so much I’m going to give you some free advice. And that is this: you work too cheap. Take it from a career soldier who can’t afford his own coffee mug. You and the Rangers are a bargain. You need to think more like a mercenary. Worry about transferring security ops to the TMM Lance when they get here. Don’t worry about these guys; at some point Gladstone DPS will come out here and kick their butts, ‘Mech or not. Or maybe the locals will reform their militia and do it themselves.” Baker’s voice dropped. “Oh, nuts,” he whispered.

Bryce looked intently at Baker. “Militia?”

Baker sipped his coffee again. He looked at the desktop, trying not to smile. “Well, yes, out here they’ve got a militia. Gladstone is too far for civil defense, so the farmers and townsfolk get to keep a few armored vehicles and weapons. I’m surprised we haven’t heard from them. But maybe they haven’t been provoked enough. Yet.”

“Maybe they need some professional support,” Bryce mused.

Baker laughed. “It’s not like they’ve got any money. They had to buy their own land back from TMM a few years ago. Think like a mercenary, remember? But I don’t care what you do once our Lance arrives and is out on patrol.” He waved his free hand at

Bryce. "Now get out of here. We'll talk again when my new Lance is here." He slurped his coffee again.

"Thanks, John. For everything. By the way, Carla says 'hi'." Bryce left to wash off the smell of smoke.

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Later that evening, Bryce waited in his office for Tavis to return from Gladstone. He had been on patrol, what the Rangers called "fives and dimes": a five-hour stint in a 'Mech tracing a long circuit around the TMM facility; followed by a ten-hour break to rest, eat, and recover. Bryce had arranged the patrol rotations so there were always two 'Mechs out on the grounds, usually at opposite ends of the facility, ready for any trespasses. Mindful that the facility might be watched, he was careful to limit patrols to no more than two 'Mechs at a time. Listening posts spaced every few kilometers ringed the western and southern edges of the area, where the mine facility adjoined land that was little more than wilderness.

The Euschelus Rangers had brought a light Lance to Laconis. They had four 'Mechs: an *Uller* and a *Puma*, Clan 'Mechs salvaged from a previous assignment; an *Owens*, which they had obtained on Amber Grove two years earlier; and a *Wolfhound*, which Bryce's uncle Lucian had bequeathed to Bryce as part of his estate on Euschelus. All were painted blue and white striped patterns. Bryce had hired three MechWarriors, a dozen techs, and some support staff to round out his company and keep the 'Mechs operational. Tavis had signed on when they were on Amber Grove fighting the rebellion, and Bryce had no idea how many more people he employed for intelligence-gathering. While Tavis was punctilious about the amounts of his expenses, he was vague about the recipients. Bryce assumed he kept several locals on his payroll, asked no questions, and authorized the payments every month.

They had been on Laconis four months, during which time they had conducted daily patrols, practiced their gunnery and tactics, and filled out paperwork. Bryce spared no expense keeping the Lance supplied with food and ammunition, the former being purchased from the TMM at favorable rates. The way things stood, they would make a few C-bills from the job, enough to keep the Lance together while they looked for another assignment.

When it grew dark Bryce had returned from afternoon patrol; checked into his headquarters, confirming that nothing of importance had been recorded by any sensors; then quickly changed from his cooling vest and shorts into a set of clean plain fatigues. He had just finished dinner in his office when he heard Tavis arrive.

“Well, that was fruitful.” Tavis flopped into a chair opposite Bryce’s metal desk.

“Is the Lance here?” Bryce asked, rubbing his eyes.

“It was on the DropShip that arrived this morning, as you surmised. It is now being processed by Gladstone Customs. They need some paperwork completed, which I’ve brought back and placed on Brigadier Baker’s desk.”

“Are there any issues?”

Tavis absently picked through the leftovers on Bryce’s plate. “None. Once the licenses have been registered, or the registers licensed, whatever, the TMM people can come and get them. I’m told there are four: two *Fleas*, a *Raven*, and an *Osiris*.”

“Did you get to see them?” Bryce asked. “How do they look?”

“How would I know? They look like ‘Mechs. I realize they are puny as such things go, but to this interested amateur they appear huge. They are still strapped in their DropShip bays. They have lasers and missile racks on them. All bear the angry red bull of the TMM on their shoulders. And I can state confidently that there are four of them: no extras have been packed by mistake.”

Bryce smiled. “How long will everything take to clear Customs?”

“Two or three days, I should think. The Customs agents assured me they will rigorously check the manifest and end-user licenses before releasing anything. And they seem to be a fairly diligent crew.”

“What makes you say that?”

Tavis snorted. He dipped a cold french fry in ketchup. “There’s a DropShip rusting out on the tarmac that’s been sitting there almost two years. One of the agents pointed it out; she told me it came from the Capellan Confederation and didn’t have the proper

papers when it arrived, so they seized it. 'That one won't be going anywhere anytime soon,' she said, proudly. She seemed to think it made a good advertisement for having one's entry papers in order."

"It would," Bryce said. "So was anything aboard?"

"She didn't say, and I didn't ask. It's a large one, though; *Union*-class I think. An ovoid shape, sporting laser turrets."

"So it could hold a 'Mech, then?" Bryce asked, already knowing the answer.

"Oh, easily," Tavis answered. He paused and looked at Bryce. "I can see where you are going with this. By the way, I talked to the DropShip pilots during my visit, as you suggested."

Bryce stopped rubbing his eyes and leaned forward. "And did they report anything?"

Tavis nodded. He smiled, pleased by Bryce's question. "Why, as a matter of fact, they said they detected a 'Mech on their radars, one without an IFF transponder. They said it's happened before, too. They assumed it was a mining 'Mech, since it is the North Laconis area, and they detect it as they pass over on their final burn-in."

Bryce calculated. "That would've happened while we were at Loren's Creek this morning. We heard the sonic booms. Goblin and Torch were on patrol then. But our 'Mechs have IFF transponders on them."

"Of course," agreed Tavis. As the Ranger's Intelligence Officer he'd found out what codes to set when they first arrived on Laconis.

"So perhaps this 'Mech might've come from a seized DropShip?" Bryce asked innocently. "One seized by diligent Customs officers who go home diligently at five o'clock each afternoon?"

"Perhaps." Tavis picked up Bryce's cue and stretched his arms. "You know, the roads around Gladstone are all 'Mech-rated. And I didn't see any surveillance cameras at the Spaceport, either."

"Where did they detect it? Precisely, I mean?"

"I knew you'd ask that," Tavis answered, "so I uploaded the sensor track from the DropShip into my Noteputer."

"The pilots let you do that?" Bryce's eyebrows arched.

"I confess I didn't ask them. They seemed eager to visit the pilot's lounge, and I didn't want to trouble them. I'll go through it now, and see what can be learned from it."

"Good," Bryce said. "And I have two other tasks for you to look into. They concern future business. First, I would like you to contact anyone in Gladstone who might wish to sell a 'Mech, maybe one without paperwork or a legal IFF transponder."

Tavis nodded agreement. "Happily I know of several establishments where such brokers can be found. However, I may need to incur some entertainment expenses."

Bryce nodded. "Just fill out an expense report. Second, Brigadier Baker tells me there's a local militia. They may have a liaison in Gladstone. Try the GDPS first; maybe Captain Asher knows someone. Contact them about a possible partnership."

Tavis whistled softly. "I see we're already looking ahead to our next assignment," he said. He slid the empty cafeteria plate at Bryce. On the bottom was a red TMM bull logo. It was smeared with ketchup.

"I'm trying to think more like a mercenary these days," Bryce said.

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Tavis blinked several times after the blindfold was removed. The first thing he saw was a cinder-block wall, then a bare lightbulb in a socket hung from a long cord. The room was windowless and had a concrete ceiling. He didn't know where he was and didn't bother trying to find out.

He was firmly pushed from behind toward an empty metal chair. In front of it, occupying another metal chair, a man sat wearing what Tavis assumed was a Capellan Confederation officer's uniform. It was grey, with a thin maroon stripe down the pant leg, and epaulets on the shoulder. It was baggy on the man and looked a size too big.

The officer nodded and the man behind Tavis stepped to one side. Tavis looked at him. He was taller than Tavis, although that attribute applied to most of the male population in the Human Sphere: at one hundred sixty-two centimeters, Tavis was short, and had long ago ceased denying it. The man filled a uniform that Tavis guessed was a corporal's or sergeant's. He held a laser pistol on Tavis, but his look was bland and professional.

Both men had stubble on their faces and deep, reddened tans. They had no unit insignia on their uniforms, nor accessories like caps or belt buckles. Their hair had been cropped by someone who didn't know how to cut hair. There was a chill on their clothing as if they had been outside, and they smelled like camp smoke.

"Sit down, Professor Locke," the officer said.

"Thank you," said Tavis.

"My comrade says you wish to speak with me."

Tavis nodded once. "I do, and I assume that's why I've been first patted down thoroughly, then blindfolded and driven about in a hovercar for the last hour."

The officer looked at him blankly. Tavis continued, "I have been told that you have a 'Mech. If I am mistaken in this belief, perhaps our conversation might be profitably terminated at this point."

The officer sat silently for a few moments. Then he nodded to the sergeant, who left the room. Tavis heard the door close behind him, but didn't look back. "You could be right," he said. "Continue."

"If you have a 'Mech, I am inquiring after it. I am prepared to buy it from you, assuming, of course, that it is operational."

"Assuming I had such a thing," the officer said carefully, "how much are you prepared to pay for it?"

"I have been told that this hypothetical 'Mech is of medium weight and armament. Further assuming that it is no less than 40 tons, is of solid Inner Sphere design, and is fully armed and operational, as I said, then I am prepared to offer two and one-half

million C-bills for it. Of course this includes the access codes, and all stock weapons and armor, but not the electronic equipment, which you would be free to retain. My client can dispose of this last encumbrance for a small fee, to be deducted from the selling price."

The officer's eyes widened. "And who do you represent, Professor Locke?" he asked.

"My client is a fully chartered mercenary unit. Be assured they are prepared to pay promptly; can produce the necessary paperwork to placate planetary authorities; and will to ask no further questions of the seller. The actual exchange can be conducted through a third party if that would be more convenient for your organization."

The officer sat back in the chair. He looked surprised and pleased. He seemed to consider the offer. "And what is your part in all this?"

"I have been retained by the prospective buyer to make inquiries, to negotiate a purchase price, and to arrange the transfer of the merchandise should an agreement be reached," Tavis said. "For this I am paid a flat fee plus a small percentage of the purchase price, if you must know."

The officer thought about that. "So you work for me, then." The trace of a smile crossed his face.

"Although I have not been consulted, my client will likely sell the 'Mech elsewhere," Tavis replied. "I will, perhaps, be retained to aid in this future transaction, too. My commissions and expenses therefore tend to balance out. As you can undoubtedly appreciate, 'Mechs are always valuable commodities."

The officer scratched the stubble on his chin. "And why should I sell it to you?" he asked.

"You certainly don't have to," Tavis answered. "I'm simply inquiring after it. My client will be leaving this planet in a short time, and thought you might wish to do business. I made certain inquiries at the Spaceport, and your associate said he could arrange this meeting with you."

The officer looked at Tavis carefully. He nodded, apparently satisfied Tavis wasn't bluffing. "You are polite, I'll give you that," he said. Tavis made a slight bow. "It is

good to deal with professionals." He plunged his fist into his open palm. He turned away from Tavis. "I am sorry to say that your offer, while generous, must be rejected." He looked sad, and Tavis spotted moisture in his eye.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Tavis said.

"So am I. Unfortunately, what you speak of is an essential part of our enterprise. As you can tell, we are a military organization, not terrorists or bandits. When possible, we abide by the terms of the Ares Convention." The officer's dark eyes flashed. "We require this 'Mech for our operations, and selling it would not fit our plans in the long run."

"I understand perfectly," Tavis said. "In that case, my client sends his regrets."

The officer rose from his chair. It scraped across the cement floor. Tavis flinched, then did the same, the interview concluded. "You needn't worry," the captain said, spotting the look on Tavis' face, "we are not criminals who shoot polite businessmen in the back. We are warriors of honor who abide by the Ares Convention," he repeated, "and expect the same courtesy in return."

Tavis heard the door open behind him. "My comrade will drive you back. Regrettably, you must be blindfolded again."

"Of course. It protects both our interests," Tavis said sincerely.

"Good bye, Professor Locke." The officer paused a moment. "There is one thing before you return, however." He pointed a dark finger at Tavis' chest. "I hope you will see it clearly to convince your employer not to take what is ours using the forces at his disposal. Patrolling pits in a couple old 'Mechs is one thing, but assaulting a prepared base in them is something else. I meant it when I said we were a military unit. Will you tell him that, Professor Locke? You would be doing all of us a large favor."

"I will relate to him all you have said with exactitude," Tavis promised.

"Good. Thank you for your inquiry, and your courtesy," the officer said.

“And thank you for your refreshing frankness, captain,” Tavis replied. He pulled the blindfold down over his eyes and said to the bulk beside him, “You may drive me back now, sergeant.”

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The Rangers’ headquarters was an old chateau on the main road north from Gladstone. It stood across from the main entrance to the #1 mine. The TMM had rented it to the Rangers, and it sounded better than it was: an old set-stone mansion, built with two wings and a slate roof; hot in the summer and now cold and damp as winter approached. One wing held the officer’s quarters, while the other had been converted into offices and a briefing room. It was here the Rangers assembled. The one amenity Bryce had permitted the fledgling mercenary unit was a holomap projector, and the four MechWarriors, four senior techs, and Tavis now gathered around it.

Bryce began his briefing. He touched a button and a relief map of the area appeared. “The relief Lance paperwork has cleared Gladstone Customs,” he said. “So we’ll be leaving Laconis shortly. Our evacuation will be the reverse of our deployment from the Spaceport.” A blue arrow threaded itself south from the mine entrance to the Gladstone Spaceport. “We’ve all done a good job here; the client is very satisfied; and we are leaving with a fat purse and a letter of recommendation.”

The other three MechWarriors — Goblin, Torch, and Boomer — nodded approval. With the exception of a few weekends’ leave spent in Gladstone, they’d been cooped up in the chateau on patrol duty since they’d arrived four months earlier.

“We have, however, an opportunity for additional salvage,” Bryce continued. “As you know, six days ago the village of Loren’s Creek was destroyed.” He tapped a key and the village appeared. An animated explosion highlighted its location. “Unknown parties with a single ‘Mech attacked. Twenty were killed, and another forty-one injured. Five are still missing. All were civilians. And among the casualties were women and children.”

The officers and techs murmured. Bryce waited until everyone grew silent and looked at him again. “As the result of this attack, we have an additional contract opportunity. I’d like Tavis to talk about it, and then we’ll decide how we want to handle it.”

Everybody looked at Tavis. He stepped up to the holomap. "As far as can be determined, the attackers are deserters from the Capellan Confederation. There are roughly a platoon's worth, perhaps 30. They arrived here about two years ago. They surreptitiously exited Gladstone after their DropShip was seized. Based on recent DropShip data, and some area human intelligence, I believe they've encamped at #6 mine, here," he pushed a button on the remote and it lit up. It was about ten kilometers northeast of Loren's Creek. "My best estimate is that they have one 'Mech, of medium size, and perhaps some battle armor. This mine pit is abandoned, and it has very likely been fortified and camouflaged."

"Do we know what kind of 'Mech it is?" asked Torch. He was the oldest MechWarrior in the Lance.

"Afraid not," said Bryce. "There were tracks at Loren's Creek, all I can say is they belong to a medium Inner Sphere 'Mech."

"That's right," Tavis interjected. "It's at least 40 tons, if that helps. And it has splayed feet."

Torch touched his lips. "Then it could be one of those new *Chimeras*, a *Hellspawn*, or an *Uziel*," he said. "Probably only the *Uziel* is bad news. It packs a couple of PPCs, and it's fast."

"Do we know how much ammo they've got stockpiled?" Boomer asked. He was the youngest MechWarrior. "Two years is a long time."

Bryce held up his hand. "No, we don't. Let's listen to Tavis first."

Tavis continued, "Opposing these deserters are a local militia. They have been recently reconstituted. They have a charter to operate in this area, issued through the Concordat. No 'Mechs, of course, but they have several armored personnel carriers, armored cars, and squad automatic weapons. They also have SRMs, radios, and good bit of ammunition. They can field an light armored infantry company led by reserve officers. As one might expect, they are eager to work with us. I have the contract here. It needs only signing."

"So how much will they pay?" asked Goblin. His large eyes stared intently at Bryce. He was a thin, pale MechWarrior who usually didn't say much.

"That's the nut," said Bryce. "They can't pay us anything, but they'll give us salvage rights to whatever we capture."

"So what's a medium Inner going for?" he asked, not blinking.

"Three million C-bills, minimum," Torch answered. "And that's if it's damaged. 'Way more if it's ready-op. Salvaging a working *Uziel* or a *Hellspawn* would be a nice piece of work. It could double what we take home here, am I right Brigadier?"

Bryce shook his head. "You've got it about right, Torch. But remember, we don't get anything if we blow up the 'Mech. Maybe a million worth of arms and ammo— rockets and reloads — but that's hardly worth it if we lose one of our 'Mechs in this op."

"We'd be doing the right thing," Boomer said.

"That's true, but you need to think like a mercenary, Boomer. Personally, I think it's worth the shot. These guys are basically bandits. They're hungry, and short of ammo. I've planned an op that should take them out without too much trouble. Are you in?"

Boomer nodded approval. Goblin remained unconvinced. "You didn't answer Boomer's question," he said quietly. "Do we actually know how much ammo they've got? It seems to me they could hole up in that mine pit and ruin our day."

"Goblin is right," said Torch. Goblin's eyes swivelled to look at him. "If they dug an *Uziel* in, they could snipe at us forever as long as they vented it."

Tavis spoke up. "My professional opinion is that they believe we've only two light 'Mechs. At least, one said as much to me."

"I've been careful about our patrol rotations," Bryce said.

Goblin looked at Tavis, and then at Bryce with his large unblinking eyes. "In that case, they might not go to ground right away. So let's hear the plan."

Tavis backed away from the holomap. Bryce stepped up to it again. "Boomer, you take the *Wolfhound* on Patrol Route One to the north." A look of disappointment creased Boomer's kid's face. "Turn south here, and seal off the area north of #6 from retreat.

Make it look like a normal patrol. My guess is that they have someone watching the site.”

Bryce turned to meet Goblin’s eyes. “You’ll take the *Owens* south on Patrol Route Two. Again, they’ll have seen it before.” He swept his eyes over both of them. “We’re going to adjust both your nav points a little, though.”

He looked over the whole group. “Torch and I will take the *Puma* and *Uller* down the highway to #4, here,” he said. “Then we’ll sweep up this valley north and west toward Mine #6. My guess is that our friend will come out to meet us. He’ll think he can take out two light ‘Mechs on good terrain.” He lit up more explosions on the holomap.

“Torch and I will keep him busy in this valley,” Bryce continued. “Because Goblin, you are going to link up with the militia infantry here, and push west to Mine #6. Supported by the *Owens*’ LRMs, one company ought to be able to take care of the nest.”

Bryce splayed his hands. “We’ll force their ‘Mech driver to make a bad choice. Either he tangles with Torch and I on good terrain, or light armored infantry with an *Owens* and *Wolfhound* in support on bad terrain. And we can all converge if needed.”

“It sounds like a plan,” said Goblin. “I guess I’m in, then.”

“Good,” said Bryce. “We need to execute this starting 0300 tomorrow. Everyone get some rack time and we’ll meet here then. This meeting is officially adjourned.”

* *

The chosen battlefield turned out to be undulating grassland with an occasional copse of evergreen and fir. The hills were low and rounded, running northwest to southeast. The mine’s unquenchable thirst for running water had quickened erosion that left bare areas in the grass, and a network of gullies and ditches between the hills. Attention was needed: they were deep enough to trip a ‘Mech.

It was an hour after dawn. Slate clouds blanketed the sky. Bryce and Torch were moving methodically up the valley, headed north and west from the #4 pit to #6. Both he and Torch had their radars and probes on, although neither Bryce’s *Uller* nor Torch’s *Puma* had ECM equipment.

They had advanced halfway up the valley with Torch on point. Bryce could see the *Puma* skitter ahead, then slow down and turn. It's two Clan ER PPCs swung from side to side as Torch swept the valley ahead, looking for an ambush.

"Contact," Torch said. The *Puma* had a BAP and over his headset Bryce could hear the alert in Torch's cockpit. "One 'Mech, two clicks northwest. Moving southeast. Fast."

Bryce accelerated and pulled up to Torch's flank. The enemy 'Mech was moving toward them. Bryce and Torch both crabbed their 'Mechs sideways. The enemy pilot would have to choose who to shoot at first. He was almost on them now. Bryce saw the blocky profile of an Inner Sphere *Hellspawn* emerge from the morning haze. It was painted tan and ivory. It had a rocket rack on its right arm. From the 'Mech's back flames sprouted, and it took off.

"He's jumped," Torch said. The target lock alarm went off in Bryce's ear. He pivoted the 'Mech's head up and saw a salvo of missiles leave the *Hellspawn's* left torso when it reached the apogee. Grey smoke wreathed the flying 'Mech. On the way down it twisted and fired on the *Puma*. Ruby laser bolts stabbed out from its left and right arms. Torch took the laser shots on his 'Mech's backplate.

The *Hellspawn* landed a hundred meters from the Rangers' 'Mechs. Torch leaned back, swung up the *Puma's* PPCs, and fired. Both shots hit the *Hellspawn's* legs. Bryce wasn't as fortunate: his *Uller* received the SRM6 salvo and the light 'Mech was rocked backwards. The *Uller's* LAMS automatically fired, and a blizzard of shrapnel from the inbound missiles hit swirled around it.

Bryce bounded the *Uller* away and stepped in a ditch, toppling over. He stuck out the 'Mech's arms and braced with them, bouncing off the ground and slamming against his harness in the cockpit. The *Hellspawn* pivoted again and fired a burst from the machine gun array in its right torso rack. Tracers ranged out and bullets clanged off the *Uller's* back armor.

The *Hellspawn* turned on the *Puma*. Torch circled away, waiting for the PPCs to recharge. The *Hellspawn* had wisps of smoke coming off one leg. Bryce ran toward it, first firing his lasers and then his LRMs. Both scored hits, chipping off armor. The *Hellspawn* fired missiles at Torch and tried to pivot to hit Bryce, but he slipped sideways behind it, moving south down the valley.

Torch circled around the *Hellspawn*, dodging its medium pulse lasers. He headed south down the valley, too. Bryce charged around in the *Uller* and fired again. His LRMs swirled in on the *Hellspawn* and hit it, shredding more armor plating. But the *Hellspawn's* pilot straightened his 'Mech and fired an alpha strike at Bryce.

Bryce saw orange missile tracks, ruby laser bolts, and yellow tracers streak toward him. He heard the LAMS cycle and he crouched his 'Mech. The lasers carved into the right pauldron, where the armor was thick; machine gun fire bounced off the cockpit's ferroglass; then the missiles struck.

This time the *Uller* was slapped backwards and down on its legs. Bryce heard balance servos whine and the hip joints shriek. Static roared in his headset: his antennae had been blown off. The cockpit filled with smoke. Bryce engaged fire extinguishers, dumped coolant, and popped vents on the cockpit. When his vision cleared, Bryce saw the *Hellspawn* facing him a hundred meters away.

He also saw the *Puma* on the *Hellspawn's* six, aiming its PPCs. Torch fired. Both cannons scored direct hits on the *Hellspawn's* legs, at the back of the knees. The 'Mech staggered forward, azure fire on both knee joints; black, roiling smoke poured from the myomer bundles. Without looking at what was charged, Bryce fired all his weapons.

His lasers missed, but the missiles didn't: from a hundred meters the LRMs bored into the *Hellspawn's* chest armor. Unable to avoid them, the bandit 'Mech staggered backwards. Smoke poured from several holes in the torso. Both Bryce and Torch backed away south again.

A spiral of smoke followed the turn of the *Uller's* torso. Something on his 'Mech was burning, although the fire extinguishers had stopped and the wireframe in the HUD showed yellow, not red. The *Hellspawn* was limping toward him. The *Puma* had whirled behind him, waiting for its PPCs to recharge.

They had gone a few hundred meters more when the *Hellspawn* fired another laser blast at Bryce. He heard sizzling and smelled scorched myomer. The shots caught the *Uller's* right arm. A critical hit showed red on the wireframe. The enemy 'Mech pivoted and fired its machine gun array at the *Puma*, hoping to spoil Torch's aim. Torch sidestepped away. Both Bryce and Torch backed away again.

The *Hellspawn* kept stalking the *Uller*. It snapped off a pulse laser shot, then a machine gun burst. It was trying to bring Bryce down, then focus on the *Puma*. It seemed to be aiming for something, likely the right arm. Bryce realized both lasers were on that arm: if he lost it, he'd lose his close-in firepower. Then the *Hellspawn* could rake him with its machine guns and lasers, because his LRMs and the *Pumas'* PPCs were too slow to recycle.

Bryce kept backing away south, feinting left and right. The *Puma* stayed on the sides of the battle, looking for a clear shot. Torch had switched to chain fire mode on the PPCs and was firing single shots at the *Hellspawn's* legs, exploiting a large burn, minding his heat level. The *Hellspawn* was limping slowly now, trailing a long cloud of black smoke.

The *Hellspawn* abruptly stopped. It pivoted. For a moment Bryce wondered what had happened, but he realized Goblin and the *Owens* had almost certainly reached the base at Mine #6 by now. Even though his radio was out, everyone else was talking. The other bandits were probably calling for support, under attack by a third 'Mech. Then it registered that he was looking at the back of the *Hellspawn* which was turning around to get back to the base, several clicks north through the valley, the way it had come.

Instead of an alpha strike, Bryce targeted the *Hellspawn's* right arm, where one medium pulse laser and one rack of missiles were housed. He carefully aimed for the back of the vambrace and fired. Both lasers burned into the joint and melted it. The forearm sparked, then hung straight down: drops of molten red myomer hit the ground.

Torch fired both the *Pumas'* PPCs. They hit the *Hellspawn* in the hip joint on the right side. It rocked and the right leg seized up. Bryce pointed his targeting reticle at the 'Mech's back, waited for lock, and fired his LRMs. They peppered the back of the *Hellspawn*. Inside the ball of smoke Bryce glimpsed an orange explosion. Something had cooked off, perhaps an SRM6 or one of the jump jets' fuel tanks. The 'Mech was staggering now, limping with its left leg and dragging the useless right one behind it. White smoke poured from several holes in its back. It had suffered a coolant failure. It stopped and crouched.

Something flashed and Bryce saw Torch flashing his spotlight at him. Torch raised both the *Puma's* PPCs in the air and then pointed one north up the valley. Bryce bobbed the *Uller's* head up and down, pantomiming agreement, and Torch took off. He was going to reinforce the assault. Bryce could handle the *Hellspawn* himself.

All he had to do was accept the pilot's surrender.

* *

Without a radio, Bryce waited in silence. The *Hellspawn* crouched and had its top hatch opened. It smoked and the reactor had been damped down. Bryce kept the *Uller* off to the side with his lasers trained on the cockpit, but whoever was driving it wasn't going anywhere. He turned off the LRMs because the lock-on alarm became annoying. And he waited.

He regarded the *Hellspawn*. Instead of the standard three Magna 400 P medium pulse lasers, it carried two and a machine gun array in its right torso rack. And thankfully the LRM10s had been replaced with SRM6s. It had been painted tan with ivory stripes. A light blue had been used to highlight some of the armor. There was a white blank spot on the chest where the unit insignia would have been. This looked like a teardrop. The 'Mech came from a unit that had been disgraced. Instead of reporting to some Confederation border post for garrison duty, these soldiers had decided to take one more Jump.

After an hour Bryce's radar picked up fresh targets. When they drew closer, he saw it was the *Owens* and two APCs. The *Owens* bounded up to the other side of the *Hellspawn* and stood off, training its rockets on the 'Mech. The APCs pulled up at its feet, and one dismounted camouflaged infantry. Bryce waited, watching on his monitor. They seemed to be deciding who would climb up to the 'Mech's cockpit. One soldier, a fat one, seemed to be convincing a younger, skinnier one to do it. Eventually the skinny one agreed and started climbing the 'Mech, using the astech's handholds.

This took five minutes, the skinny one looking down and the fat one ordering him upwards. When the skinny one reached the head, he pulled out a laser pistol and crept over the top. He was greeted by a white rag, tied to what looked like a railing, thrust up through the hatch. He wiggled the pistol and a shirtless man crawled out. The man wore an opened mesh cooling vest, white shorts, and boots. He put his hands up, and turned round to face first Bryce in the *Uller* and then Goblin in the *Owens*.

It took five more minutes for the 'Mech pilot and the skinny, wary militiaman to climb down. When they reached the ground, the second APC disgorged another squad of infantrymen. They surrounded the 'Mech pilot, guns drawn.

Bryce walked the *Uller* around the back of the *Hellspawn* to the *Owens*. He opened the top hatch and stood up in the seat, flashing his spotlight. Eventually Goblin got the picture and opened his hatch. Bryce yelled at Goblin that his radio was out, and Goblin, barely audible, told him the base had been secured.

They hastily contrived a plan. Bryce checked the *Hellspawn* to ensure its reactor had been damped and its weapons placed in safe mode; then, leaving one squad of infantry to guard it, he borrowed a trooper's radio and climbed back in the *Uller*. If he damped his reactor and stuck the radio out the hatch, he could just barely talk to Goblin over the static. They loaded the enemy 'Mech driver in the other APC and headed back to Mine #6.

The *Puma* and *Wolfhound* were standing sentry duty when they arrived. Twenty prisoners had been rounded up; two more APCs sat smoldering on the lip of the pit. What looked like an empty battle armor suit lay on the ground, without helmet, gloves, or boots. When Bryce drew nearer, however, he realized that it was not empty: an LRM had caught the occupant. The gravel underneath the leaking suit was damp with blood.

Bryce crouched his *Uller* and dismounted. Tavis greeted him. He stood next to the large GDCPS officer they had met at Loren's Creek. Instead of a jacket the man wore camouflaged fatigues and a helmet. "This is Chief, excuse me, Colonel Erskine," Tavis said.

The man pumped Bryce's arm. "Thanks for your help, Brigadier."

"Don't mention it." Bryce looked around the pit, which now had dozens of smaller craters in it. "How many did we lose?"

Tavis looked at Chief Erskine. "Looks like about nine of theirs, and sixteen of ours," he said. "We're still counting up the pieces. They had SRMs and squad lasers."

"Your man in the *Owens* did a number on them, though," Erskine said cheerfully. Sweat beaded on his face and moustache. "All it took were a couple salvos and they threw in the towel. That guy there," he nodded toward the suit, "tried to stop him."

The APC that had come with Bryce pulled up. The infantry climbed out, their guns trained on the enemy MechWarrior still inside. He got out slowly and looked around, numbly. He recognized Tavis and beckoned to him.

“Know him?” Bryce asked.

“That’s the gentleman who didn’t want to sell his ‘Mech,” Tavis answered.

The vanquished MechWarrior stiff-armed his guards and walked straight toward Tavis, eyes flashing. His arms pumped up and down. Cords stood out on his neck. A militia trooper raised his rifle, but Bryce signaled him to put it away.

“Who is the senior officer here?” the man demanded. He stared at Tavis, Bryce, and Erskine in turn.

Erskine and Bryce looked at each other. Neither spoke. “Then I will speak to the MechWarrior.” He faced Bryce. “I am Captain Tseng. I wish to negotiate the surrender of my men.”

“I can do that,” said Bryce.

“We will be treated as prisoners of war in full accordance with the Ares Convention,” Tseng began. “My men will keep their uniforms and rank, will be properly housed and fed, and will not be interrogated or tortured.”

Bryce looked at him. He signaled to the troopers standing a few meters away. They surrounded Tseng.

“Captain Tseng, I’ll make this brief, because I’ve got to catch a DropShip. I accept your surrender. But I’m a mercenary officer, and Laconis is in the Taurian Concordat. We never signed the Ares Convention here. I made a deal with Colonel Erskine here that I’d turn you and your men over to him in return for your ‘Mech. And that’s what going to happen. I don’t break deals. And I don’t kill civilians.”

Tseng looked dumbfounded.

“Colonel Erskine is commander of the local militia,” Bryce continued. “Unfortunately for you and your men, he has full civil authority out here.”

"I accept your surrender," the Chief said. He cracked his knuckles. "You can quit with the demands. Your men will keep their uniforms. And you can rest assured they won't be interrogated or tortured."

* *

Tavis and Bryce stood on the observation deck of the Gladstone Spaceport and watched the *Hellspawn* being loaded aboard the DropShip. Last and newest of the Euschelus Ranger's 'Mechs, it's damaged right leg had been encased in plasteel foam, looking almost like a cast on a human.

"How much do you suppose we'll obtain for it?" Tavis asked.

"I can't be sure yet," Bryce answered. "I'll list it when we get back to Euschelus. It's in good shape, considering it spent two years in the field. Tseng had a couple astechs and they maintained it pretty well. It was mostly used for hauling ore and killing civilians."

"That bothers you, doesn't it?" Tavis looked at him. "I mean, for more than the obvious reasons."

Bryce scowled. "It's senseless. Those people, the militia—they hate the TMM, too. They just hated those Capellans more. If Tseng had asked for help when he came here, and fought with the militia against the TMM, then we'd be the ones taking the dirt nap out there. Instead those deserters chose to be terrorists. Senseless." He shook his head. "Well, it's business for us."

They watched the power loader finish up. At length Tavis spoke. "I could never understand why they called them 'terrorists' anyway. When we left, those militiamen didn't look terrorized at all. Angry was more like it. I can't say I blame them, either."

Both men looked to the northwest, where a smoke pall could be seen. Few in Gladstone would ever know it came from the #6 pit of the Northern Laconis Extraction Facility, now filled in.

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