

# Suomi Warders: 3057 - *Innocence Lost*

## Chapter 1 of 2

*By: David Wainio*

*Harlech city  
Planet Outreach  
June 27, 3057*

John Linna swept his gaze across the lobby of the Ritz-Carlton hotel as one hand fidgeted nervously in his suit pocket. This establishment was one of the most expensive hotels on the planet and thus the people passing by were well dressed in the latest fashions from a dozen or more worlds. Very few had the look of vacationers. These were business people – mostly arms dealers – and political types drawn to the self styled ‘Mercenary’s World’ of Outreach where the fabled Wolf’s Dragoons lived and ran an extensive operation that assisted in the maintenance and employment of the hundreds of much smaller merc outfits that permeated the Inner Sphere. Actual mercenaries were few and far between as guests here. The place was just too expensive to be worth staying at for most mercenary leaders. Colonel John Linna of the Suomi Warders was definitely not like most mercenary leaders however. As a scion to a wealthy electronics and weaponry component corporation and a well connected national hero on his planet he was both an arms dealer and a political type. However it was as a mercenary leader that he was once again on Outreach.

He still wasn’t sure if he should have come back to this world or not.

It had been almost five years since his last time here. Despite maintaining a unit recruiting office on Outreach and the business interests Danielle Electronics and Weaponry had here it had been almost half a decade since his last visit. Considering that two assassination attempts were made against him and a couple of good troopers lost their own lives defending his when he was last in these parts one could appreciate why the prospect of a return held little joy. John had visited the killers in their jail cell and he’d almost done some very bad things that day. Then again he had done even worse things months later as he tracked their employer, a mysterious enemy who wanted him dead. That had been a dark and confusing time for him, a time he only survived with the help of some good friends and the love of a woman now gone to him far across the cosmos. Duty- and perhaps destiny itself – had thrown he and Naoko together. Then it had wrenched them forever apart. She back to her place within the Draconis Combine and he back to his role leading the Warders within the Free Worlds League.

Yet for all the hardship, heartbreak, and bloodshed of that time he would do it again without hesitation. His long lost sister had been saved, slave labor camps liberated, and his parents’ deaths avenged. But most importantly the threat to his daughter that Chairman Miller embodied had been removed permanently and with lethal finality.

In the five years since he had started two military training programs on his home world while exploring options about making good on his word to help a group of Periphery refugees return to their home. Many of the ex-patriot Orbers served in his unit now and their home still lay in the hands of Clan Nova Cat and beyond any reasonable hope of liberation. That was one of the things he had come to Outreach about. The Dragoons had taken it upon themselves to be the central point of Clan resistance and in this détente period following the Truce of Tukayyid they were still the best source of anti-Clan training. John was here with a small number of his unit for seminars about understanding the Clan way, training classes in handling Clan technology, purchase a rare medical vehicle that popped up on the open market, and to have some specialized work done on some of the Warder equipment that couldn’t be duplicated back home on Sampsu. His lead instructor for the special operations school he ran had brought a few of her people for touch up training from Dragoon specialists while his infantry commander did a little shopping for specialized equipment not available from DEW industries and his intel officer mended some fences with his former employers – the Dragoon’s own intel outfit WolfNet. John had also attended a two day seminar on the Word of Blake / ComStar schism for what was hopefully a more objective view than what was available at home. The Blakists had moved into the League with the Captain-General’s blessings making them the interstellar communications brokers he dealt with directly while ComStar itself continued to operate the hyperpulse generators in most of the rest of known space. Coupled with the Steiner – Davion unrest and the crumbling situation in the Chaos March region 3057 was proving an interesting year to be involved in interstellar commerce or mercenary activities.

“Dad, quit fidgeting,” scolded a young voice from his side.

Releasing the small ring case in his jacket pocket John removed his hand and used it to pat his daughter lightly on the shoulder. She was fourteen now and he could see much of her mother in her blond hair and delicate features. He never told Sandi that of course. Sandi despised her mother with the same intensity she adored her father. The ex Mrs. Linna still resided in prison, where her new husband’s lawyers had managed to side step the most dangerous of the charges laid against her and were still quibbling over some minor legal issues. She’d be there for a very long time however. She had pled guilty to a number of lesser charges as it was unlikely she’d stay alive for very long should she leave the prison unless she fled far, far away. Although even fleeing might not stop John’s sister Holly from tracking the woman down and putting an end to her personally. He had enough complicated issues in his life without his semi-estranged sister chasing his ex wife around the cosmos. Hopefully Lydia would do him a favor and stay in jail for many years to come.

A small part of John remembered the woman he had married when they were young, before the tragedy of the *Starcade* massacre. That part still loved his ex-wife. These days it was a part he found easy to stuff away and ignore. He had moved on with his life and that woman was no longer part of future even though she was forever an integral part of his past

through Sandi. It was the young woman standing beside him and the one more akin to his own age he was waited for that were central in his life now.

"I'm still not sure this is the right time and place," he sighed more to himself than his daughter.

"Trust me, this will be perfect," she admonished him in a tone that brooked no doubting of her opinion.

A rueful grin stole over her father's face. One Sandi knew meant that he had found something amusing about her. She loved him mightily but it still annoyed her to no end when he got that look at one of his little secret jokes at her expense.

"What's so funny about me now?" she demanded with a bit of frost in her tone.

It was an old exchange between them. John knew that one of the few areas where his otherwise preternaturally grown-up young teenager got easily upset was when she thought he was amused at her expense.

"Not you, Snowflake," he assured her. "I was amused at myself for taking marriage advice from my teenage daughter."

Sandi relented and grinned back. She could see the irony. Plus it wasn't her that was the butt of the joke. "I suppose it is a little backwards. But an impressionable young woman like myself needs a good mother figure," she teased back. "And you've been dragging your feet for far too long on that count mister."

His control was far too strong to let any hint of the hurt her words stirred reflect on his face. Would things have been different had he not been haring across the InnerSphere chasing down rumors all those years of her childhood? John had eventually recovered the missing sister almost everyone had assumed was dead – but had it been at the cost of damaging his daughter's childhood?

John shrugged and put on his best innocent looking expression. He kept his tone light to match her banter. Now was definitely not the time to go down that road of thinking again. "Hey, Gracie and I have been busy with the Warders and setting up the training programs and all. We are the CO and XO after all."

"Well none of us is getting any younger," she reminded him. Then her voice took a more somber and quiet tone as she turned her gaze away from her father and towards the door. "Besides. We love her, she loves us, and it's time for all of us to have a happy ever-after, fairy tale type deal. We've earned it."

She hadn't meant it as a jab or accusation, but a jagged bolt of guilt ripped through his heart. Guilt was never far beneath the surface in John. Both the irrational kind such as guilt for not saving his parents or sparing his sister her ordeal to the more reasoned guilt of missing so much of his daughter's early life following his failed marriage and the very real danger that Sandi had been put in during his campaign against Miller. Some of them he had set right as much as was humanly possible – even though he was unwilling to absolve himself despite what had been accomplished. His lost time with his daughter he was still trying to set right. That's why he hadn't accepted a contract in years and why he had brought her with him here to Outreach for this three month trip.

"Yes, I suppose we do," he replied quietly after he was sure he could control his voice.

Sandi looked up at her father and could see the sad look that sometimes came to his eyes. She knew that he was thinking that he had failed too much again. Just for once she wished he could see himself the way other people saw him. To understand that he really was the hero that so many others named him and that she knew him to be. But she knew she couldn't make him see. She'd tried many times. All she could do was give his hand a reassuring squeeze. Maybe in a couple more years when he started thinking of her as an adult rather than a kid she could finally make him understand that he had no reason to feel guilty about anything he had done.

"Hey, there's Captain Laidie" she observed by way of changing the subject as the Warder VTOL company commander entered the lobby.

Jennifer Laidie was wearing a business skirt suit ensemble rather than a uniform. Either way – tailored suit or baggy uniform jumpsuit – she had the tri-vid starlet looks to capture the attention of everyone in the hotel. Sandi had a natural dislike for overly attractive people of either sex but after a while she had warmed up to the scrappy helicopter pilot. Jenny wasn't the sort that tried to use her looks for advantages and that carried a great deal of weight in Sandi's thinking after having spent her formative years living with her manipulative birth mother. The Warder helicopter pilot didn't notice her CO and his daughter standing off to one side by the pay phones and breezed up to the front desk then headed for the elevators. John briefly considered walking over to say hello then changed his mind. Often the best thing a commander could do for his people's peace of mind was leave them alone when they were off duty.

"I bet she has a date with Osmo," Sandi added as the elevator doors closed and swept the Captain away from view. Osmo was Major Osmo Woods, John's Intelligence officer.

"None of my business", shrugged John.

Sandi just grinned to herself. She knew her dad was especially circumspect about the romantic affairs of his officers. With good reason too.

The thick glass doorway spun again, letting in another Warder officer. This one was wearing Warder blue as Lieutenant Colonel Gracie Aukland strode into the lobby. She drew looks from the few others milling about as well but it was for the aura of purpose she carried herself with rather than her beauty. Gracie was tall but neither notably pretty or notably plain. Her auburn hair was trimmed very short in a cut suited for wearing a nuerohelmet. When she was in a mood she could look positively fierce, but she hadn't had much call for that type of business the past few years.

Sandi adored the tough and sensible MechWarrior second only to her father and saw Gracie as an attainable role model. While she had been waiting expectantly for just this very person to arrive, the sight of "Mother Goose" Aukland brought a bit of pique rising in the teenager. Had the woman no fashion sense at all? Sometimes what you wore didn't matter –

but sometimes it mattered immensely. This was not how the evening was supposed to start but youngster was wise enough, just barely, to keep her comments to herself and let the grownups sort it out.

John and Gracie spotted each other at about the same time and similar expression of surprise and chagrin flashed across their faces. Gracie walked up the short landing and stopped before the dressed up Linna then looked down at her casual duty uniform.

"I guess we had some crossed comms," she coughed as she cleared her throat. "When you said you and Sandi were going to take me out to dinner tonight I didn't realize you meant ...well, a fancy dinner. I thought you meant 'normal dinner' dinner."

"My fault," soothed John. "We haven't gone the formal dining route since we've been here on Outreach. I should have been more specific about the invitation."

"No worries Luv," Gracie smiled. "I'll just pop up to my room and slip into something more appropriate. Won't take but a few minutes. I only brought one formal dress."

"Gracie, if a pants suit would make you more comfortable..." offered John. "Or I could go toss on my dress uniform."

Gracie had an artificial foot. It was excellent work, a top of the line prosthetic that allowed her to walk and run normally and even continue to pilot a 'Mech. But while it was designed to look as natural as possible on close examination it was obviously an artificial limb. The Lt. Colonel was still a little self conscious about it especially on the rare occasions that called for a dresses and open shoes. With piloting shorts her combat boots covered up the foot and ankle entirely. But combat boots didn't go very well with formal wear.

"No, no worries," insisted Gracie. "It'll be fun to dress up a bit without it being a state function for once. I'll be down in a shake of a Joey's tail."

As he watched her slip back down to the elevator level John hoped this wasn't a bad omen of some sort. Gracie was usually on the same wavelength as him, often knowing what he was going to say before the words could leave his mouth. He wasn't prone to believing in premonitions but somehow this little mix up seemed to hint at further troubles. Maybe he should wait until they got home before asking her to marry him. Then he glanced down at his daughter and had a change of heart. It was indeed fairy tale time whether his princess wore a gown or battle fatigues. Or who was doing the rescuing he mused.

"Come on dear, I'll buy you a pop in the lounge," he told Sandi as he ushered her towards the hotel bar.

Several sets of eyes noted the tall man in the expensive suit and short MechWarrior hair buzz as he escorted the stunning young lady towards the bar after talking briefly with the uniformed woman. Most of those eyes knew who he was. Harlech was the kind of place where knowing who was who could be both profitable and important. John Linna was rich and connected enough to be known in important circles. Including certain intelligence agencies that liked to keep informed on his whereabouts when he left his home planet. Most of those watching eyes returned to their original business with but a passing thought as to Colonel John Linna's current plans. But some did not.

John carefully studied his menu – which was a futile endeavor as it was in French. This was the last time he'd let his daughter pick where they ate. He wasn't overly fond of French cuisine, something that he apparently did not share in common with his only child. He leaned closer towards Gracie.

"I don't suppose yours is in some useful language like English of Finn?" he asked hopefully.

"Negative," she replied with a grunt as fluttered her menu. "Useless as an *UrbanMech*."

"Hey, I like *UrbanMechs*," complained Sandi from her seat across from Gracie. "Besides, I know what all these dishes are even if I don't speak French. Not everyone's idea of fine dining is 'shrimp on the bar-be and a cooler of cold ones'."

John and Gracie both smiled. Sandi's impression of Gracie's voice was almost dead on.

"Then perhaps you'd like to order for us..." John started to ask his daughter when the low tone of Gracie's voice cut him off mid sentence.

"Uh-oh. Incoming. You recognize her John? She looks slightly familiar to me."

Following Gracie's gaze John could see a well dressed blond woman of middle age studiously ignoring the Maitre-de who was talking at her in a mix of English and French. She was carefully examining the occupants of the tables, apparently searching for someone. It took a moment but then her face clicked into his memory.

"You've met her at a few charity functions," John explained. "She and her husband used to socialize with my ex and myself in the earlier days and they still cross my path from time to time at big shindigs back home. Her name is Kylikki Relander and she seems to be looking for someone."

"She's probably the only person from Sampsa on this planet that we didn't bring here with us," opined Gracie. "So what do you think the odds are she's looking for you?"

"Heinasirkka, heinasirkka, mene taalta hiiteen," muttered Sandi under her breath in Finn.

John frowned at his daughter but didn't say anything. While the phrase literally referred to grasshoppers being driven away by an ancient Saint on Terra, in popular parlance around Suomi City it has come to be a wishful verbal charm to drive off an annoyance. He didn't welcome an intrusion right now either but he couldn't just ignore the woman. She was obviously in some distress.

He stood and called just loud enough to be heard. "Mrs. Relander? My I assist you in some fashion?"

"Oh, thank God you're here," she gushed in recognition as she sighted John and moved towards him like a homing missile. The Maitre-de, upon observing that the intruder had just become a guest of an important patron, motioned to another of the staff to bring a fourth chair to the table. As it was an exceptionally fine establishment, the chair arrived only a moment after the flustered Mrs. Relander reached John, Gracie and Sandi.

“Please. Be seated,” John nodded to her as he saw that all eyes in the place were currently turned towards his table. Gracie pressed her wine glass into the other woman’s hand and the newcomer drained most of it in one long pull.

“Thank you,” Kylikki gasped as she took a moment to catch her breath and gather her wits about her. “And I apologize for interrupting you like this. But I’ve been desperately seeking help for my son and the other children for weeks and when I found out you were here on Outreach I knew I had to find you immediately. A lady at your hotel told me I might find you here. The situation grows more desperate by the hour.”

Gracie and John exchanged concerned glances. There was a genuine aura of panic about the woman. This was no hoax, joke, or misunderstanding. Something had this woman deathly afraid.

“Take a few moments to get your breath,” suggested John, “then tell us what the problem is.”

She nodded, took three deep breaths to calm herself a bit more, then launched into her story.

“Our son has always had a strong interest in marine science and so for his university preparation program we sent him to a boarding school on Carver V that has one of the best programs in the Inner Sphere. The Cussler Nautical Sciences Academy on one of the main islands. Very exclusive school with over 240 students from all over the ‘Sphere. He was only supposed to be there for a year and that year is up. But he didn’t come home as scheduled and the troubles on Carver have made it difficult for the school to keep contact with the off-world parents. I came to Outreach because it’s only one jump from here to Carver to try to arrange transport but no ship’s were going there. I was able to get some messages through and the Academy Master informed me that he was trying to evacuate the school but couldn’t get off planet. A number of other parents are here now as well and we even started looking for a mercenary group to hire to go get the children. But the job is too small for the reputable mercenary outfits and the people we’ve talked to that were willing to take the job...let’s just say they were unsavory and leave it at that. In desperation we were thinking of trying to charter a DropShip and go ourselves. The Hiring Hall computers said the Warders were not currently accepting contracts but just today I tried your recruiting office here on Outreach on the slim hope that some of the Suomi Warders might actually be on this planet for some reason.”

“And here we are,” observed John into the pause that had come when Kylikki finally paused to take another breath. “A few of us anyway.”

“Carver V is not the most healthy of places to be these days,” noted Gracie dryly. “And it’s getting worse every day if the news casts are to be believed.”

“Can you help us?” implored the desperate mother. “Can you get my son home safe to me?”

John and Gracie each looked to the other to gauge initial reactions. Not that there was really much doubt about their willingness. A slight nod to each other sealed the agreement.

“We” do what we can Kylikki,” John assured her. “We’re going to need some things from you. Maps, faculty and roster lists; basically every scrap of information you have about this school. And a complete run down on who you already talked to. I wouldn’t put a kidnapping attempt past the worst of those you might find here although if you only talked to bonded outfits there shouldn’t be a problem. We’ll have to pull what information we can about the Carver situation and then make a determination if I have enough force on hand for a good probability of success. Time may be of the essence. Perhaps you would meet us at our recruiting office in around three hours? That will give us time to do some prep work.”

Even as he spoke a number of things were running through John’s mind. He happened to have six BattleMechs and the MechWarriors to pilot them on Outreach at the moment along with some tech personnel. His intel officer and a few comms specialists were on hand along with the Bifrost mobile combat information center. One VTOL flight crew but no craft for them to fly. No armor assets at all. He had two squads of his regular infantry plus one of his special ops teams. Some medical staff and the MASH unit if he wanted to risk them in a potential war zone. Nestled in the DropPort was one of the two Warder DropShips thus he had a reliable way on and off the target planet. It wasn’t a whole lot but he’d made do with less. The crux of the matter would be the situation on Carver and at the school itself.

Kylikki reached across the table and grabbed one hand of both Gracie and John. “Thank you, I don’t know what to say.....I just...”

She was on the verge of tears. Gracie slipped from her chair and placed a comforting arm around the other woman. “Steady on Kylikki. You have to stay strong for your son for a few more hours. Then you can leave it in our hands.”

Finding yet another well of resolve and strength that she hadn’t thought she had within her Mylikki stopped her sniffles and stood from the table. “Yes, you’re right of course. I’ll bring everything we have plus a few of the other parents to your office in three hours. Thank you again.”

As the three at the table watched her leave John sighed deeply as his mind started forming lists of actions and questions. “I guess I better call Osmo and break up his date.”

“True,” agreed Gracie. “This could be a bonzo cake walk or a walk into hell. We better get him working on figuring out which we’re looking at. Oh...and speaking of dates. Was there something special that was supposed to be going on tonight?”

Sandi and her father exchanged looks.

This wasn’t the right time John decided. It could wait. “No, nothing really.”

“Yeah, I just wanted to try out a fancy restaurant. You know, the pretend grown-up thing,” added Sandi to back up her father’s lie. Wheels were spinning in her head as well and they had nothing to do with matchmaking. If her dad blasted off with the unit for Carver V then there was an excellent chance he’d have to take her too. After all, he couldn’t just leave her here alone and she figured that he was still paranoid enough about her safety that he wouldn’t send her on the month long trip back to Samps alone. He might decide to send her home in the care of some of the troopers though. She’d have to start thinking about how to counter that.

Gracie wasn't buying the pair's innocent act but had no idea what they might have been up to. But her mind was far more eager to dig into the potential mission than ponder the mystery of the aborted dinner date. Truth be told she wasn't as content as John was just sitting at home and running training missions. She hadn't been in a real combat drop since she had almost been killed in her *Awesome* four years ago. John was a businessman and a father as well as an officer and pilot. Being a Mechwarrior was all she was. In her mind it was the essential definition of her being. She had to know if she still had what it took when the danger was real and people's butts were on the line. When her butt was on the line.

"Then let's get cracking boys," announced Gracie with a hint of enthusiasm in her voice. "We can have some pizzas sent to the office."

John grinned. That woman could eat pizza every night. She'd even eat it cold for breakfast. He wasn't so keen on the dish himself although Sandi liked it. "And maybe a few sandwiches or something," he added as he stood up and dropped some money on the table. Although if he got stuck eating pizza tonight it would probably still be better than what had been in store for him from the kitchens of this French restaurant.

"With sausages and bell peppers," Sandi added as she stood as well. When both adults turned to look at her she added, "What? You weren't going to leave me alone in the hotel were you?"

Right then was when the extra complexity of the situation registered with John. He'd detailed one of his people to be around as an unofficial bay-sitter / body guard whenever he had to be away at meetings this trip. Where his fourteen year old daughter was going to fit into his plans if he left the planet on a combat mission was going to be an issue. He knew that Sandi wanted to be a MechWarrior and planned to carry on the Linna tradition within the Suomi Warders. John had hoped other interests would seize her imagination as she got older but he had always known in his heart that it was unlikely she'd change her mind. The girl could be as stubborn and headstrong as he could be. He had no doubt that she was viewing this development as her chance to finally get to "go on a mission". This round he'd cede to her until he got a better idea of what they were looking at. She could come to the planning session.

"All right, sausages and bell peppers," he allowed.

Sandi smiled sweetly at her father but knew that while he had folded on the first hand the full game had yet to be played out. She'd have to see what kind of cards Osmo's information would deal out before she'd know if she had a winning hand. It was hard to keep her enthusiasm in check though. This was a dream chance. Somehow, someway, she would make sure she didn't miss the DropShip when her dad shipped out this time.

***Outskirts of Nuevo San Diego city  
Baja Californio Island, Carver V  
July 04, 3057***

To one side golden beach snaked along in a thin ribbon before giving way to endless blue water as far as the eye could see. To the other side open fields of crops and low brush rolled inland for a few kilometers where they fused into the darker green of a lush jungle that climbed a steep volcanic mountainside into the overcast sky. Between these lay a slate gray four lane roadway with the occasional cluster of buildings, most of them hotels surrounded by eateries and trinket shops. One lone passenger vehicle was westbound on the road but it turned off to hide at the first closed motel when the six BattleMechs wading through the crop fields came into view. Thus the occupants were not treated to a view of the three old busses, four drab green trucks, and the three armored tractor-trailer rigs that were eastbound under the protection of the giant bipedal war machines.

"What do you have on that car Sky One?" asked Colonel John Linna from the cockpit of the Fire Wraith, his 55 ton Camelot model BattleMech.

Sky One was the temporary designation of Captain Laidie. The Warders had purchased a general purpose combat helicopter on Outreach for the one air crew present to use. It had cost almost all the money they were getting paid for the mission but John wasn't thinking of this one in terms of a profit – loss affair. Besides, they could either sell the machine and recoup the C-bills or keep it for their VTOL company and shift the cost to the year's procurement budget. They had gone to Outreach with the intention of purchasing some new equipment anyway. Albeit VTOLs had not been on the original shopping list.

"Looks like locals taking cover Duck," replied the pleasant voice of the airborne Captain. "They're still in the car parked around back of a small restaurant."

'Duck' was the Colonel's call sign. Unusual as it was for a war name no one in the Warders ever gave him any grief over it. First, he was the CO and owner. Second, he had long ago earned the right to call himself whatever he wished with his own blood and bravery. A few people in the unit even knew why he used that particular name. A very, very select few.

"Roger, thanks for the update," answered John.

John's Suomi Warmer contingent had been on this planet for about a day and a half now. Carver V was in the middle of a vicious multiple party civil war fed by the split between Houses Steiner and Davion. Here on this island there were few signs of the strife however. Baja Californio Island was a tropical paradise of sun, sand, and water. Although at the moment it was lacking the sun part as a storm front was moving through and a low cloud cover had set in. It was also missing most of the tourists. Around the main city on the south half of the island people were plentiful. The farther out one traveled the scarcer they became until you crossed the rough interior to either of the two modest coastal cities to the north. Most of the places they had passed going to and now leaving the Cussler Academy along the one major east-west roadway along the bottom half of the island had been boarded up to await better days. Some were pessimistic about things getting better anytime soon but unwilling

to leave the homes they had made so here and there signs of inhabited shops and homes were sprinkled along their path. John had no idea what the mood was of the populace in the city as he had not stopped to ask anyone. The DropShip *Baltic Serenade* had put down at the small air field – becoming the only orbit capable craft present – and after paying off the Island Mayor with an electronically transferred bribe for permission to disembark his small task force had headed directly for the beleaguered academy.

So far the mission had run like clockwork. John had not expected any trouble and he had not found any. Carver was close enough to Outreach that communications were almost instantaneous via hyper pulse. He had quickly discovered that the main communications relay tower on Baja California had been destroyed cutting off the only data link from the city to the outlying areas. The academy had lost contact with its off world parental clients because the under confident head master was too afraid to send anyone to check at the ComStar facility for transmissions. He probably could have packed up the remaining children weeks ago and simply drove into the city but had been unwilling to take the risk. John had managed to find a courier company that was still in business via the airfield administration and arranged for a powerful radio set to be delivered to the school by boat. After that he had been able to coordinate the arrival of his force to escort the beleaguered head master and his pupils off the planet.

The Cussler Academy was in a small town on the shoreline west of the city. All of the local kids had fled for home weeks ago along with most of the personnel as well. A core of five adult instructors had stayed to care for their off world pupils and it had been literally child's play to get everyone loaded into the creaky old academy buses and on the road. There was a rumor circulating the island that an ex LCAF officer had gone rogue to become a local warlord and was island hopping this way. Supposedly he didn't care that this particular chunk of land was under the protection of a small ComGuards detachment. Thus the staff and kids were "extra motivated" to vacate regardless of whatever personal possessions they might have to leave behind.

The mission had been a walk in the park so far. Many military commanders would have become extremely worried at this point fearing that it had all been too easy and thus something bad must be about to happen. John wasn't the superstitious type. A well executed plan was supposed to go like clockwork. Sometimes unforeseen circumstances gummed up the works and if that occurred you improvised accordingly. In John's view, until then worrying was a waste of energy as long as you were covering as many contingency possibilities as reasonable. He trusted his airborne unit to give him advance warning of any last minute trouble. That and the young woman piloting the lead BattleMech of his little group. She was exceptionally talented at sensor work.

The aircrew flying above him was originally from a periphery world. A little rough around the edges sometimes but they were all professional and capable people he had hired en masse when he took on their failing free company of VTOLs. Most of the small group of ground troopers present on the vehicles were all local to his home planet. Solid types from stock that left Terra centuries ago to eventually fuse ancient North American, Scandinavian, Nordic, and Australian peoples into a society that had suffered many tribulations including nuclear attack only to bounce back stronger and more determined to prosper after each setback. Staffing the MASH vehicle was more Samps natives – most of his unit's medical staff in fact. They had come to Outreach for the retrofit and upgrade to the MASH unit John had picked up. Bringing it to Carver had seemed like a reasonable precaution considering they were on a rescue mission. The tech staff in the repair trailer rig was likewise mostly native to his homeworld with a few exceptions.

While the support staff and infantry present were largely 'home grown', John's year long and Inner Sphere crossing campaign of a few years back had netting him an eclectic group of MechWarriors. Two of those with him today were from the original nucleus he had revived the Warder BattleMech forces around. The other three were definitely some of his more 'colorful' unit additions.

Unique among the Warders for their personal beliefs were the Bhati sisters. Originally hailing from the pirate stronghold of Circinus the duo shared a secretive religion that centered around a Goddess of Strife and Chaos who – as best as John understood it all - happened to channel her war energy through human hosts from time to time. They had originally taken to following his sister because their Goddess was hosting within Holly but now served under his command because their Goddess ran an even higher level of avatar through him. It seemed they felt he was some sort of cosmic receiver that channeled the deity's destructive force into the mortal world from time to time making him a living instrument of war. It all sounded far more weird than it proved to be in practical terms. The Bhati sisters were capable, rational, practical young women that also happened to be gifted MechWarriors. Yawni, the younger sister, was an exceptional talent with BattleMech sensors and rivaled his old friend and lance mate Vilho who was easily the best scout pilot John had ever met. The sisters just happened to believe that on rare occasions their commanding officer became an avatar of their Goddess. John figured that as long as he himself didn't start believing an ancient deity was channeling through him things were fine. He did his best to keep them out of Pastor Curtis' way back at the Warder's home base however.

Both sisters were marching ahead of him, one somewhat to either side of the line he walked. It was a bit unsettling for John to be looking at the backs of their 'Mechs. Each was piloting a *Camelot* externally a replica of his – which was the unsettling part as for years he had piloted the only *Camelot* that wasn't in the Solaris games. It felt a little like an out of body experience, as if he was watching himself. He'd have to get used to the sight however. Although DEW Industries had tried to break into the 'Mech production game their *Camelot* model had not caught on. Twenty had been built to date including his prototype. Four had been lost in combat in the Solaris games, five were still there, and the rest had recently been moved back to Samps where two had been given to the planetary defense force for testing and the rest had been placed in the Warder's care. They had been an innovative design that used weapon and equipment bays that could be prefabricated and then switched out in a matter of day or two. However interest in the design died with the Clan invasion and the copying of OmniMech technology

by the major BattleMech manufacturers. Omni technology was one step better than the *Camelot* modular system. DEW Industries and the Suomi Warders still had the most advanced Combat, Communication, and Coordination battle computer system in the Inner Sphere but the high price and limited deployment of 3C systems meant that few others used the BattleMech networking gear the Linna family held the patents on.

Built along the graceful and curved lines of the original Star League designs, the *Camelots* before him strongly resembled giants wearing sleek battle armor. Yawni's had just had the latest Beagle Active Probe system installed which along with its Guardian ECM suite, NARC and TAG equipment made it as electronically capable as the renown *Raven* design but far more battle worthy as it mounted jump jets and massed 55 tons allowing for a greater weapon load than the 35 ton *Raven*. Inra's *Camelot* lacked most of the electronics but traded that weight for extra weaponry. During drills when the younger sister moved in close to mark a target with her TAG or NARC gear the older sister was right there alongside to provide cover fire. Neither carried the rarely mounted triple strength myomer John's prototype carried nor had they the Clan weapons he now mounted. But as he was lugging five tons of C3 master equipment around the combat capability between the three machines was fairly equal.

In perfect formation to his direct left was MechWarrior Nikki. A number of his MechWarriors had exotic histories but he doubted that anyone's topped Nikki's. She was a Clan 'Trueborn', meaning that she had been artificially produced by the warrior societies that had invaded the Inner Sphere some years back. By now captured Clan warriors were not terribly unusual in IS or mercenary commands as their code of honor required them to serve their captors if captured. Nikki was different as she had not stayed with her Nova Cat Clan long enough to become a warrior. She had been captured from a training 'sibko' as a young teen by a Clan Bandit Caste group then had somehow ended up sold as a human trophy to a Combine warlord who then sold her to a Circinus Pirate group. John's forces had liberated her from the Circinus slave camp and a mutual adoption of sorts had eventually occurred. She still occasionally referred to the Warders as the Blue Lyon Clan in reference to their insignia. As far as John had been able to determine, Nikki was the only Clan born 'Warrior that had started 'Warrior training at a Clan home world and finished it with an InnerSphere unit. He grinned as he thought back on what an interesting training program they had ended up devising for her.

Nikki had trained hard with the special operations soldier who had found her as an infantry trooper, then petitioned for MechWarrior training and performed very well in the role she had literally been born for. John had even set up a 'Trial of Position' for her using the battle simulation gear in imitation of Clan ways to assure that she felt she had rightfully earned pilot status. Now 20, Nikki had adapted to the Warder's way of life and melded her earlier Clan teachings with what she had learned of Inner Sphere society. Though John had managed to secure an actual Clan OmniMech for her, a badly battered *Stormcrow*, he had felt that learning more about her Clan roots might be good for her so he had brought her to Outreach where she could interact with the Clan related Dragoons. He wasn't sure how that had gone. Nikki's pre-Warder experiences had caused her to rarely project emotion and to keep her feelings mostly to herself. He knew she had fought two unarmed battles with Dragoon bonded Clanners but other than a passing comment about not being as impressed with true Clansmen as she had expected to be the tight lipped young warrior had not shared her thoughts on her now truncated visit.

There was no doubt that the visit had been a success for her 55 ton OmniMech however. John had traded two upgraded IS designs, a *Vulcan* and a *Raven*, to a small merc outfit that had been paid part of a mission fee with the Clan 'Mech. The other merc outfit had done some work on it but had been unable to get it functioning and were more than pleased to trade one busted Clan OmniMech for two fully operation InnerSphere machines. Granted, this particular *Stormcrow* was not exactly a full OmniMech anymore as the merc group had torn out the damaged pod space mounts that rode high on the torso and permanently grafted a Clan-tech 20 tube long range missile launcher up there. It had come to the Warders minus one arm but Chief Harding had managed to scrounge one up from a machine that had been carrying a different weapon configuration. Thus the right arm carried the "primary" configuration while the left arm was set up for a "C" configuration. Although the Warders now mounted a number of Clan grade weapons, they did not have a stockpile of replacements. Without a supply of varied Clan weapons laying about the current arm pod configurations had become the default primary for this particular 'Mech. On Outreach the Chief had finally gotten a C3 slave unit to mount and function within the Clan machine and picked up some difficult to find spares for the key systems so while it couldn't be easily switched to different weapon mixes it could merge with the unit command and control systems and barring extensive damage the Warders wouldn't have any problems maintaining it.

For her part MechWarrior Nikki was not overly concerned with the lack of a true Omni capability to switch out weapons between battles. None of the other Warder pilots had the option – although the *Camelots* had a minimal ability in that area – and she was pleased with the hitting power her machine had across all engagement ranges with the loadout it carried. Although it was not Clan-like to name a machine, she had followed the lead of many of her fellow Warder MechWarriors and christened her *Stormcrow* the Blue Lyon in tribute to the costs her commander and new 'Clan' had undertaken to secure a true OmniMech for her. As her callsign she kept the name her fellow prisoners had dubbed on Yu-shan. Wildcat.

Behind John and trailing the vehicle convoy were two fellow countrymen and his two closest friends. They were also his two senior officers. Gracie was piloting her refurbished *Awesome*. The 80 ton assault 'Mech was a family heirloom although neither of her parents had piloted it. Named after her paternal grandmother, "Granny" had recently been fitted with Clan spec extended range large lasers in place of the standard particle projector cannons (or PPCs) as five tons of her mass was now devoted to a master C3 unit.

Next to Granny strode a true relic of the Star League era. Sven Jorgenson piloted a 60 ton *Lancelot* that he had never given a name. He simply shrugged when anyone asked about the lack of such and observed that when one presented itself he would adopt it. Several years had now passed without a name presenting itself and Sven was fine with that. It lacked the PPC

that was standard for the model. That tonnage was used for a master C3 system that was a twin to the ones John and Gracie carried. It was a wasteful redundancy at the moment as the three BattleMechs usually operated as the centers of their own lances rather than together. As each had been taken to Outreach for special servicing John had ended up with three command 'Mechs in the same extended lance. That cost his mission group some potential firepower but he didn't mind as it was very comforting to have his two longtime friends along with him on the mission no matter what they might be piloting. He'd never undertaken a combat 'Mech drop without at least one of them being alongside. It would be unsettling to him if he was ever forced to do so.

"ETA to Nuevo San Diego is fourteen minutes at current speed," came a voice across the private cabin comms of John's BattleMech. It was his daughter Sandi. She had been trying to make herself feel useful from the moment she had strapped into the rear facing second seat the *Camelot* models mounted. While she was really a passenger and not a co-pilot, Sandi had access to several information screens mounted for rear seat use and had quickly figured out the command protocols to see the information feeds that interested her. As she was sitting in a command 'Mech connected by wireless feed to the BiFrost combat - communications trailer there was plenty for her to look at.

"Roger Peregrine," John replied in a businesslike tone.

Although she had tried to keep her efforts to herself, John knew that his daughter had spent the entire trip to Carver fretting over a radio callsign for her to use. He'd found a long list of names scribbled on a piece of paper most of which revolved around ducks and geese. No doubt from his and Gracie's names. She had decided to stay with an avian theme but apparently had decided that something a bit more aggressive than waterfowl fit the bill.

Sandi wrinkled her nose as she heard her chosen name used. It was okay...but somehow wasn't quite right. Well, she only needed it for this one mission. The next time she could come up with a new one. She felt the BattleMech sway slightly to one side as her father shifted course slightly. Looking at the monitor that showed the forward view she saw that he had shifted to avoid getting too near a boarded up fruit stand. She logged it in the back of her mind that she would have to remember to be as considerate of other's property as well when she was a full pilot.

She knew her dad was a bit nervous about her being along with him – but even he had to admit that there wasn't anyplace safer to be than inside his BattleMech. She had taken rides in BattleMechs before – including this very one several times – but this trip it had felt very different. Even more alive somehow – more exciting. Realistically she knew that there wasn't anyone out there planning on shooting at them...but still there was always the remote chance. This trip was for real. And the looks of jealousy and awe from the academy students as she strutted by with her cooling vest in hand to ride the cable lift up to the cockpit; that had been priceless. If there had ever been a nagging thought that perhaps she should strive to become something else in life other than a MechWarrior, this trip had squelched it forever.

John clicked on the tactical frequency. "Flame and 'Dancer, move ahead about a two clicks and take a look at the city. Sky one, shadow them. I want to keep our passing to a minimum disruption. Let me know if there are any unusual groupings along our path."

Most of the city sat on a spur of land that jutted into the ocean. The airfield was on a thumb that stuck out, surrounded on three sides by water. There was a heavy industrial roadway that ran across the top part of the city to the landing field. They had used it to walk out of the area and would use it to return upon as well. It ran through a largely light industrial area although a number of no doubt lower rent apartments along with small supporting businesses were along the route. He didn't want to blunder into a funeral procession or some sort of holiday parade or anything similar. Six BattleMechs tromping by tended to create confusion and disorder among onlookers.

As they neared the city boundary proper Flame reported that that the streets were clear of all traffic. John frowned slightly at the news. The airfield knew they were coming and word would have spread that the mercenary 'Mechs were coming back today to leave the planet. People would naturally stay off the streets. But he would expect a little traffic using the roadway and the side streets. Somebody always wanted to take advantage of the lighter than usual traffic or had something they just wouldn't put off to do.

"What happened to the guard post?" Sandi asked as she studied the camera feed from Flame's BattleMech on one of her monitors.

John had just called up the same feed to examine and had been wondering the same thing. All the roads into the city had militia checkpoints set up at the city boundaries. The one Flame was currently looking at was unmanned. It could be a coincidence or oversight. But he doubted it.

"Flame, do you have anything that might look like a fusion power plant signature?"

"Negative Sir," came the response. "The city has enough concrete, steel, and power cabling to disrupt magnetic readings and the airfield's search radar is sweeping the skies but if there was an active 'Mech reactor within a click I would expect to pick it up. Unless they were in a shielded location of course Sir."

"Goose, Lawman – form on me," John decided into the tactical frequency. "Bifrost, keep the convoy rolling unless I call you off. Flame and Death Dancer, hold where you are then take up a middle guard position on the convey when it reaches you. Wildcat, take up rear guard. Keep an eye behind us in case someone is planning on sweeping in to close off our retreat route."

Waiting a moment for the other two 'Mechs to get closer to him, John then pushed his throttle forward and started a jog towards the city with Goose and Lawman in tow. In the rear seat Sandi's heart jumped into her throat in excitement. Even the short 'roger's and 'wilco's that had come in response to her father's orders had suddenly sounded electrified as tension started to mount.

“Step carefully,” she heard her father say almost offhand as they stepped into the low canyon created by the buildings to either side. “Let’s try not to bust up any sidewalks if we can help it.”

Sandi realized she was holding her breath when her lungs started to burn for lack of oxygen. Several more minutes passed uneventfully as the convoy entered the city and the three lead ‘Mechs moved ever closer to the airfield. John had Gracie and Lawman fall back to cover the forward vehicle and took the point position himself. It was all starting to feel like a false alarm when Osmo’s report came over the private channel to her dad. He had connected her into his comms so she could hear what he heard but without transmit ability on most of them. Either by accident or design he hadn’t cut out the private link he and Osmo in the CCC trailer shared.

“Duck, I’m not getting a response from the DropShip crew. The airfield isn’t answering our calls now either,” Osmo reported.

John clinched his teeth. That wasn’t a good sign. “Have Jenny do a flyby and see if she can see anything. But tell her to keep low and be wary of the missile turrets. And slow down your column until we find out what’s going on. No need to rush into trouble.”

“Will do,” replied Captain Woods as he then switched channels to relay the command to Captain Laidie.

Sandi watched the blue mark on her map plotter that represented the helicopter of Capitan Laidie pass by the left then move ahead and quickly drop off the plot. The hastily purchased mechanical bird was not equipped with the tracking equipment all the ‘Mechs had and they didn’t have a satellite feed. Once it passed out of the forward ‘Mech’s radar range - in this case the very machine she was riding in - it was represented with a blue arrow showing the last recorded vector.

“I have visual on the *Serenade*. I don’t see any damage,” reported the Capitan’s voice from the ‘copter, “but there are two light armored vehicles parked near it. None of the ramp doors are down...going evasive, missile turrets are swiveling to track us. We’ll swing around south of you and...whoa! ‘Mech contact! Repeat; BattleMechs visually sighted bearing roughly One-Three-Zero degrees from Duck’s current position. Range about fourteen hundred meters. They appear to be shut down. I count five so far crouched along streets. They’re all white - looks like a ComStar insignia on the *Warhammer* I just passed. They know I’m here, looks like they’re powering up.”

“Sky One, pick a clear vector and get out of there,” John immediately ordered. “Are you under fire?”

“Negative Duck,” replied Jennifer coolly. “The airfield did not fire and the ‘Mechs never had the chance. We’re running easterly now back along your marching line. It looks like all kinds of light combat vehicles are coming out of the woodwork and closing on your position.”

Other than trying to trap them at the airfield, John had no idea what the ComStar force could be up to. He planned to find out, but not here in a place of their choosing. “Bifrost,” he snapped as his mind ran through multiple scenarios, “turn everyone around right now and start heading back the way we came. ‘Dancer and Flame stay with the convoy, Goose and Lawman move to my position and hold on my flank, Wildcat fall back the way we came and make sure the backdoor stays open.”

While he had been talking he had been touching points on his electronic plotting screen to indicate where he wanted the various pilots to station themselves. Sandi had been flipping between the four external vis-feeds trying to see the other BattleMechs as many of the buildings surrounding them weren’t much more than waist high. Enough tall ones existed that lines of sight were impaired though. Where were the ComStar ‘Mechs now and what did they want she wondered? It had not yet occurred to her that they might fire on the Warder forces. In Sandi’s eyes ComStar was still the heroes of Tukayyid who stopped the Clans regardless of the newly formed Word of Blake’s rise around her home in the Free World’s League.

As his ancient *Warhammer* creaked to life from minimal power Precentor Perry O’Donald swore a few oaths about that helicopter. He had hoped to reason with the mercenary commander from a position where Colonel Linna would be predisposed to be helpful. He had read the man’s dossier and knew John Linna to be a capable and crafty commander. No doubt he was already withdrawing his vulnerable wheeled vehicles. Luckily this Linna seemed to be cut from the ‘honorable warrior’ mold of mercenaries as his record indicated he had a high regard for the Ares Conventions. The Suomi Warders were not likely to start a firefight in the middle of the city if they could avoid doing so. He had been counting on that fact heavily in his original plan. Now he was praying that Colonel Linna had not changed his ways so they could all avoid bloodshed today.

After issuing deployment orders to the rest of his Level Two “Six” of BattleMechs and checking in with two of the local militia unit leaders that were supporting the operation he switched to the ComStar designated emergency frequency. Almost all InnerSphere forces monitored it. The Suomi Warders with their advanced technological level would certainly be monitoring the channel and able to respond.

“This is Precentor O’Donald calling Colonel Linna of the Suomi Warders. Can you read me Colonel?”

After only a brief pause, what Perry assumed was the voice of John Linna came on the channel in response.

“This is Colonel Linna. You appear to be obstructing our peaceful rescue mission. May I ask your intentions?”

“I assure you I have no plans to do your people any harm Colonel,” replied the Precentor, relieved that Linna was willing to talk. Perhaps this would be settled amicably after all. Unless Linna actually had the core of course. But it seemed highly unlikely that after less than forty eight hours the Warders would be in possession of it.

“How very polite of you,” came the non-committal response. “I still want to know why you are impeding my path back to my DropShip.”

Perry took a deep breath. Here was where things would be resolved or go south real fast. “I’m afraid I must insist on inspecting your vehicles.”

“On who’s authority?” snapped Linna.

“The office of the Precentor-Martial of ComStar and the Precentor-ROM’s office.”

There was a pause before the mercenary colonel replied. “Last time I checked ComStar didn’t hold sway over the Free World’s League.”

“We are not in the League,” O’Donald pointed out.

“True,” conceded Linna. “But on the other hand it’s pretty debatable as to which government does hold sway over Carver at the moment.”

“Colonel, this need not be difficult,” sighed O’Donald imploringly. “It won’t take long at all and then you’ll be free to go. We’ll release your ship’s crew and you’ll be on your way.”

The Precentor winced at the tone in the Colonel’s voice as Linna’s voice came back over the emergency frequency.

“Am I to understand that you have arrested my flight crew!”

“Protective custody,” countered Perry. “There are plenty of people desperate enough to try to force their way on board your craft.”

“You can shove your ‘protective custody’ where the sun doesn’t shine Precentor,” growled back the voice of the mercenary officer. “You grabbed my DropShip crew to force me to do what you want me to do. I will lodge an official protest with the Precentor Martial himself as well as WoB officials and House Marik over your kidnapping of my crew. Now be advised Precentor. I have a great deal of experience dealing with pirates and kidnapers. You aren’t getting within 1000 meters of my trucks until you hand over Captain Lars and the crew of the *Baltic Serenade*!”

“Look Colonel, be reasonable,” implored the Precentor.

While the two COs had been talking the ComStar BattleMechs had been advancing on the waiting Warder ‘Mechs. Acolyte Lafoe and Demi-Precentor Shimizu had moved into a firing position against the *Awesome* and *Lancelot* of the Warders. Their third unit-mate, Acolyte Terry Quina, was still stumping along in his slower *UrbanMech* and not in position yet. They were not keyed into the discussion between their leader and the mercenary commander and thus knew only that they were not supposed to fire unless fired upon or were given the order to engage. This made both the ComStar pilots very nervous as the Warder ‘Mechs out-tonned them by a fair amount. Lafoe in her *Clint* was especially worried. If the two enemy pilots suddenly combined fire on her it was unlikely her 40 ton machine would survive the attack if everything hit her in the torso.

“I think that *Awesome* is targeted on me,” Lafoe announced shakily into her mic.

“Stand fast MechWarrior,” snapped the Demi-Precentor. “We have our orders.”

Sweat was pouring down Jennifer Lafoe’s brow despite the fact she hadn’t done anything to run up the heat in her cockpit yet. “I mean it Ma’am,” she insisted. “It’s sighting down on me.”

Demi-Precentor Gail Shimizu edged out into the intersection a bit more. The *Awesome* was indeed facing Lafoe’s ‘Mech but neither of its arm mounted weapons had been raised. “Get a hold of yourself Lafoe,” spat Shimizu in disgust at the other warrior’s fright. Gail was careful to keep her *Griffon*’s hand carried PPC weapon pointed towards the street rather than down range. No reason to antagonize the mercenary pilots.

In the *Clint*’s cockpit Lafoe’s head snapped to the right as a buzzer went off. Her eyes locked on the warning light that had started to flash. “Missile lock...they have missile lock,” shouted the panicked pilot. Raising her class 5 autocannon she fired a burst at the *Awesome* then engaged her jumpjets to cross the intersection and seek cover.

Gail was studying her own sensors. “I don’t read anything,” she started to say. But by then it was too late. Lafoe had fired what looked like an instant before something exploded high on the edge of the *Clint*’s shoulder. Then she was riding her jets up in a slanted arc filling the intersection with flame and smoke. Then the Demi-Precentor winced in pain as her comm line filled with a roaring static. ComStar communications gear didn’t fail. Someone was jamming the frequency and she could only think of one candidate. Sighting through the smoke she leveled her crosshairs on the *Awesome* as it started to turn in response to the *Clint*’s fire. But just as she pulled the trigger she was bumped hard from behind. The blue-white energy bolt went high, passing between the two Warder ‘Mechs as they took cover on opposite sides of their intersection.

Gail scrambled across the open roadway expecting to take another hit in the back at any moment. But she was able to get across and turn back to face behind her without incident. Quina’s *UrbanMech* was the only thing back there. She heard his distorted voice come through her comms and realized that he had switched to a line of sight laser-comm system.

“Don’t engage Ma’am. It would be a mistake,” Terry Quina stated firmly.

Shimizu frowned. Terry was an odd bird. A Tukayyid veteran who had obviously not come back with all his marbles in the same bag regardless of what his psych file said. He heard voices. But then so had Jerome Blake. And Terry’s voices hadn’t steered them wrong yet for the two years the two of them had been on Carver. She turned to try to establish a laser link with the fleeing *Clint* but it rounded a corner and was gone from sight. Two militia light tanks buzzed up the street towards the Warders though. If all the comms were down things were about to get very messy on that main boulevard.

In his *Camelot* John frowned as the line between him and the Precentor filled with static. Not that the conversation had been going anywhere when the line went dead. He was talking to Osmo in Bifrost to see if they could get through to ComStar on a different channel when Gracie’s surprised indignation sounded across the Warder tactical channel.

“Those little Com-Rats just shat at me!”

“Talk to me Goose,” sounded Linna as he backed his ‘Mech behind the cover of a taller building.

“A *Clint* put a burst of light autocannon fire into my leg,” supplied Gracie calmly. “Nothing serious, just mussed the armor a bit. Then a *Griffon* missed with its PPC. They took cover with an *UrbanMech* that just lumbered up. But we have light vehicles moving in on almost every side street.”

Sandi shrieked in surprise as their 'Mech rattled with multiple hits. She quickly quieted herself, mortified that she had made any sound at all. Her world suddenly spun and lifted as her father twisted to one side and engages his own jump jets while continuing to calmly issue orders without missing a beat.

"Enemy fire is confirmed Warders. I just took some AC 2 fire from a converted flatbed," John reported as he put a building between himself and the make-shift weapon vehicle. It wasn't a big enough threat to worry about chasing down. "Go weapons hot. Repeat. All forces go weapons hot. 'Mechs will need to clear intersections. Bifrost, try to shield some of the buses between the armored trailers. And the MASH unit too. Wildcat, how's that backdoor look?"

"An armored car has moved into position to block it Colonel," replied Nikki.

"Run it off or destroy it," John ordered her.

"Do I still need to worry about the sidewalks?" MechWarrior Nikki wanted to know.

If it had been Gracie, Sven, or one of the other old timers John would have taken the comment as a joke. But Nikki tended to be very literal in her interpretation of orders and rarely attempted humor.

"Try to keep property damage to a minimum but do what you need to do to secure that last intersection," he told her. "Don't worry about where your feet stomp."

"Aff Sir, I will clear and hold here," came the terse reply.

John was glad it was only a single armored car back there. Nikki had done very well in all her training exercises but this was her first actual combat engagement. He didn't expect any unusual behavior from her but he had been surprised before. Right now he had other worries though. Like if the ComStar and local militia forces planned to actually shoot at his soft skinned buses.

Lt. Samantha "Sammi" Cascade was riding in one of those buses, peering through the windshield alert for signs of trouble as one of her troopers accelerated to close on the armored trucks and two BattleMechs that were mid-convoy. Behind her the other troopers had gathered the children on the floor in the center isle and were literally shielding them with their own bodies. One other trooper stood as rear fire-watch looking out the back windows.

Two of the side windows shattered suddenly as stray rounds struck the bus. Sammi could think of about a zillion other places she would rather be for a street fight than inside this lumbering trouble magnet. This was probably what she got for letting them make a career Sergeant into an officer. "Bifrost, we're starting to take small arms fire," she advised the command center through her combat helmet.

"You're free to return fire as necessary," came the response. A little light visible inside the helmet face plates flashed green, letting everyone know that they were cleared to shoot back. Just then the right side windshield shattered as someone stepped out of a doorway and emptied a clip of submachinegun fire into the bus. Luckily the inexperienced shooter had started high and the recoil took his shots higher still. It didn't matter to Sammi at all that the gunman looked to be maybe all of fifteen. She pumped a three round burst from her assault rifle into him, practically shredding him on the spot, then quickly slapped three more rounds into car that had two more gunman sticking up from the sunroof. It swerved away and left the intersection.

More shots were starting to hit the bus now, sounding like heavy hail that was starting to come down in a growing storm. They had been the lead vehicle but now were the last one in the line after the about face. Those close to the BattleMechs weren't taking much fire. No one wanted to get anywhere near the lumbering death machines. But Sammi's bus still had quite a ways to go in fire-fight terms before reaching that same protection. Weapon fire started to pour out of it as the troopers covering the children lifted up their weapons and fired blind out the side of the bus. It wasn't very effective but it made them feel better for fighting back. Sammi had split her special ops troopers among the buses where they were now doing their best to place aimed shots against specific threats in protection of the children charged to their care. She was lining up another militia gunman when a rocket propelled grenade or small missile of some sort literally flew in the side door, across the front of the bus, and exited the opposite side before exploding on the building facing them. The blast shredded the left front of the bus, throwing Sammi down the stair well on the right side and converting the driver from a brave trooper trying to do a dangerous job into a gurgling mass of heavy wounds.

Despite her body armor and the enclosed heavy combat helmet, Sammi was dazed and woozy from the explosion. Her head still spinning, she forced herself up the steps to discover that there wasn't much bus left at all on the opposite side of the driver. He had been wearing the seat belts and was still in the seat, although slumped in a way that told her that he wasn't going to be doing anymore driving. The bus had stalled out near an intersection and the small arms fire was getting thicker. On shaky legs she forced herself upright next to the driver and pulled her puuko knife to slit the seat belts free. She regretted just dumping him down into the stairwell but if she didn't get that bus moving again they would all be dead. It turned out to be still running rather than stalled but she couldn't get the transmission to engage out of neutral. Struggling with the shifting gear and what was left of the clutch pedal she glanced out the open side of the bus as two rounds slammed into her. One hit her in the head and was deflected away but it was still like getting hit with a sledge hammer. The other was slowed by her armor but tore into her bicep.

By instinct rather than conscious thought her fingers switched her weapon to full auto and she sprayed bullets one handedly in the direction her brain told her hand the incoming fire had been coming from. The ground quaked again and almost bucked her from the seat – what she assumed must be another nearby missile or shell burst hit. Dropping the now empty rifle she tried to shove the gear shifter home to no avail. Another thump shook the ground and rattled the bus and she looked up to see which way to order those that could still move to run. It was time to abandon the stalled vehicle.

To either side of her now stood a *Camelot* BattleMech. Blinking in surprise as she fought to clear her head and think straight she realized that the big thumps must have been the Warder 'Mechs landing from jumps rather than further explosions.

One 'Mech had knelt down on one knee, literally shielding the bus from incoming fire with its legs. It finally dawned on her as she stared at the huge machines that the buzzing around her head was someone's voice.

"Lieutenant Cascade, can you hear me?"

"I read you Bifrost," she replied groggily.

"Captain Woods needs to know if that bus can still move," relayed the comms tech stationed inside the command trailer.

"I can't get it into gear, but the engine is still running."

"We're going to give you a little push," came back the tech after a quick moment.

A *push*? wondered Sammi to herself in bewilderment. Then she saw that one of the 'Mechs was gingerly reaching towards the back end of the bus. Realizing what Bifrost meant she leaned on the gear shifter as the bus was bumped forward. The transmission turned with the wheels and it lurched into gear. Stepping on the accelerator she palmed the steering wheel over to one side and got the bus moving in the proper direction again. With the threat of the two BattleMechs the militia had backed off and run. For the moment no more bullets were ripping into the battered wreck she was herding towards the other vehicles ahead.

"Lieutenant, we're going to need an injury report as soon as you can," prompted the comms tech gently but firmly.

Sammi looked down at the shattered body in the stairwell then back over her shoulder at the writhing mass behind her. "Understood Bifrost. It's not going to be good."

MechWarrior Nikki had fired one single medium laser into the armored car to judge the effects. When it continued to spit chaingun fire at her she fired her large laser and the small vehicle practically caved in on itself where her shot had melted the center portion. A small group of four or five militiamen were firing their rifles at her from behind a cinderblock wall so she washed the area down with her pulse laser. Either vaporized or gripped with a sudden need to be elsewhere, for whatever reason no more fire came from the now smoking area.

A second armored car turned to face her down at the next major road in. She could see it over a short building that stood between them. It didn't have the range to hit her but she judged it a possible threat to the busses if it suddenly rushed in so she targeted it with her LRM rack and let fly when she had tone. Obviously the crew had no faith in their vehicle she mused as she watched the crew bail out and dive away as the missiles arced down on it. It was a lucky thing for them that they had been at long range giving them almost five seconds or so to seek cover. Although she expected that one or more had probably been injured or killed in the rain of destruction anyway. It was rather difficult to dodge missile explosions.

That was two rather pathetic vehicle kills. It hadn't been much of a first bleeding so far. Lawman and Mother Goose had been pacing three ComStar 'Mechs that were headed roughly in her direction but unfortunately the ComStar units broke off before reaching her. She saw on her tactical display that the convoy had finally just about reached her rear guard position and she moved off the roadway to allow passage while intently surveying the surrounding area for any sign of a threat.

When the bullet riddled buses emerged into view her breath hissed through her teeth in a growl. What kind of savage barbarians were these ComStar warriors to shoot at unarmed civilian vehicles? Had they no honor at all? She suddenly regretted there hadn't been more vehicles for her to destroy. Perhaps the ComStar BattleMechs would emerge to try to finish the attack so she could get at them.

Goose and Lawman emerged from the building line a few moments later, moving into guard positions to take over for the Bhati sisters who had remained several blocks inside the city proper to provide cover fire for their Colonel who had been running a zig-zag retreat dissuading any militia vehicles from attempting to follow the fleeing convoy.

"I never even got to fire a shot," complained Gracie over the private channel she had set up with Sven. Then she lost her voice for a moment as the pair came into visual contact with the convoy. It had rolled only a short distance out of the most built up area then stopped to let medical personnel scramble from the Mobile Armored Surgical Hospital trailer into the busses.

"Holy sweet mother..." She breathed out at last as she gazed at a buss that was practically missing the front left section. A bleeding ground trooper was visible behind the wheel and as the figure hopped out through the open side and waved off medical aid towards other injured people Gracie realized by the trooper's short stature that it had to be Lieutenant Cascade. The MechWarrior happened to know that Sammi had not been the original driver. Judging by the damage it wasn't hard to guess the probable state of the original person that had sat behind the wheel.

"Now's not the time Gracie," murmured Sven's deep voice in her helmet speakers.

She realized that she had turned her *Awesome* away from the busses and taken a step back towards the city. She had no clear recollection of having taken those actions.

"I know," she allowed darkly. "But there will be a time. For now I'll take Wildcat and make sure our exit path stays clear towards the coast."

"Roger," replied Lawman heavily as he surveyed the damage below him. Stopping this type of stuff was why he had become a MechWarrior. He had failed again.

In the Fire Wraith's cockpit John wiped a sweaty hand on his combat suit then re-gripped the control sticks. "We're going to take a few more hits Snowflake," he informed Sandi. As the situation had become dangerous he had forgotten about his daughter's chosen name of "Peregrine" and reverted to his pet name for her.

"I'm ready," she replied in deep concentration.

John had been criss-crossing the retreat path of his convoy, chasing off militia vehicles that might otherwise move forward to fire on the fleeing busses. He knew from Wood's reports that the makeshift transports were already under fire. His

job was now to make sure it didn't get any worse. So far the militia forces had been intent on avoiding him rather than swarming him. Although he'd taken several hits, all had been from small caliber cannons, low power lasers, and small arms. Even his worse armor section was still at 80% overall effective value. The knowledge did little to mollify his worry over the fact his young daughter was sitting right behind him. Then again, so far she was probably better off in his 'Mech than with the other children in the busses.

Sitting behind him with her eyes glued to the rear view monitor Sandi's entire concentration was on looking for threats approaching from the rear. When she was nine a band of hired thugs had tried to kidnap her, killing several people in the process. After that she had thought she was beyond getting scared by physical danger. Secretly she had been rather proud of this "fact" actually. Yet as the rattle and ping of incoming fire had reverberated through the *Camelot's* cockpit she had been momentarily seized with panic. Wholly understandable and expectable as it was for a fourteen year old girl to be scared, Sandi didn't hold herself to the standards of young teenagers. Her dad was calmness personified as he not only fought his own personal action but directed the movements of the rest of the unit at the same time.

That was her standard.

Her heart was still pumping at what must be nearly 200 beats a minute and her stomach was roiling but she had forced herself to pick one thing to do that could help. One thing to think about and shut out all other thoughts. That was how she had dealt with the early years of her parent's separation, battled against her mother's manipulation attempts, and dealt with the fear of losing her father whenever it had welled up. By concentrating all thought on one activity. When they had tried to kidnap her it had been evading and getting out of the school. Now it was watching their rear arc so her father could worry about the other three.

"Here we go," he announced as he worked the controls and sent his 55 ton machine jay-walking across an intersection that he knew from his sensors had four vehicles lurking just beyond the corner in an alleyway.

Hollow clanging drifted up through the frame as a light autocannon caught the Fire Wraith in the leg. John immediately noted that other than the tank firing at him the other three vehicles were converted pickups with heavy machine guns mounted in the beds which were beating a hasty retreat. He fired two lasers into the light hover tank sending it spinning on its air skirts but let the trucks go. They were headed away from the convoy and not having any clue what this battle was really about he was loath to kill any local militia he didn't have to. Besides, at the moment his DropShip was sitting defenseless at the airfield. Do too much damage to them and they might decide to blow up his ride home no matter how valuable a DropShip was.

"Targets behind us now are two APCs and a boxy-thing with a big cannon. 240 meters," Sandi reported as the three red blips on the threat plot pulled out from an alley and showed themselves. Then she sucked in her breath against the lurching sensation of being rocketed up into the sky in a corkscrewing motion. As he had on two other occasions already, her dad had immediately activated his jump jets in response to a called threat from her. The three vehicles spun from her view, telling her he was coming down facing them. She braced herself for the landing.

As John balanced the controls, feathering the thrust and flexed the Fire Wraith's knees to absorb the landing impact he found a *Hetzer* combat vehicle practically between his feet. Unlike the other things he had been playing tag with the past few minutes this one packed a heavy punch. It had a very large cannon – one of the biggest mounted on 'Mech or tank. It also lacked a turret and could only fire in a limited forward arc. It was in reverse, trying to back up for either a shot or to get away. Either way, reverse was a poor choice as John was able to step forward and easily keep pace with it as it tried to back away. His second step he brought down directly onto the machine – but he eased the footfall as best he could. Rather than crushing the *Hetzer* outright his attack caved in part of the roof and broke the undercarriage. Perhaps he had spared the crew and perhaps not – but he wasn't going to have many more chances for such leniency if many more like this one showed up. He would have to pop them with his Clan PPC before they got a shot off.

"Clear," called Sandi, referring to the rear arc.

"Duck, convoy is clear of the fire zone," Woods informed the CO over the tactical channel.

"Roger Bifrost. Flame and 'Dancer, I'm coming right down the middle at flank speed."

"Ready to provide cover Sir," came the older sister's response.

"Okay Snowflake," John announced over the internal voice circuit, "time to leave. Sing out if you see anything shooting at us."

"Yes Sir," Sandi automatically replied without thought.

John maneuvered around and took off at running speed down the center of the avenue. Here and there he could see signs of the running skirmish of his force's retreat. Glancing at the battle plot he grimaced in displeasure as he worked the fine trim on the balance feedback to better steady his loping gate.

"Woods, get those buses rolling," he demanded. "You're too close to the fire lanes."

"The Doc wanted to get medical care going," Woods informed him. "We have several serious casualties."

"Tell him they can do triage on the move," countered John. "That area is too cluttered to hold long enough for him to finish performing a surgery. See if you can find a medical clinic or college campus we can roll up to at least 5 clicks away. I want those buggies rolling before I get there. And tell him that yes, I understand that lives might be lost making another move. But we need to get clear while we can before we collect even more injured."

As Sandi watched the other two *Camelots* come into her field of view and her dad and her passed out of danger by passing them. She realized that her whole body was shaking. Probably one of those adrenaline surges she'd read about she decided. She didn't feel scared anymore though. Oddly she felt euphoric – jubilant that they had bested their foe and escaped the trap. A near hysterical giggle kept threatening to escape but she held the impulse in check. A huge grin split her face

though. If she could have seen her father's face as he received the initial casualty reports that grin would have died immediately. As it was, her giddiness was quelled to a thoughtful sobriety on its own after the novelty of being uninjured wore off. Her concentration blown she had not even listened to whatever it was Captain Woods was telling her dad.

"They're back on the line now?," John asked anxiously for confirmation. "Good. Put this through on all channels we can broadcast on. I want ComStar, the local militia, and everyone else on this island to hear me. Ready?.....Attention all military forces in the vicinity of Nuevo San Diego city. This is Colonel John Linna of the Suomi Warders. An unprovoked attack by local military forces in the city has injured a number of innocent children that we were escorting off world. We are withdrawing a short distance and will then stop to administer medical care. If anything – man or machine – that even looks like it is carrying a weapon comes within 3 kilometers of us it will be killed without challenge...."

Sandi felt a chill run down her spine at the deadly intent that was promised in her father's voice. She had no doubt that even over radio channels his tone would carry the seriousness of his threat.

"... We withheld fire as much as possible in order to spare innocent civilians inside the city. But I swear that the next person that tries to harm these children will not live to finish the attempt. Stay the hell clear. This is your only warning."

A moment of silence passed as John listened to more update reports. Sandi turned her audio feed off. She preferred to be alone with her thoughts than listen to the communication jabber of a military unit making a rapid withdrawal. The cockpit circuit between her and her dad was still open and he must have gotten a call from Captain Woods about the Precentor as she heard her father bitterly say, "Tell him there's nothing more to say. I'll contact him after we finish our Med-evac. And I better not see any white BattleMechs in the meantime or he'll have some medical work of his own to tend to."

"I'm sorry Sandi," he said quietly a few moments later.

"About what?"

"About all this. About placing you in danger," he sighed. But before he could continue she interrupted.

"You didn't put me in danger," she retorted hotly. "It was that ComStar Precentor guy."

"Maybe so," he allowed more to himself than her. "Maybe so."

Precentor O'Donald walked his *Warhammer* into the cramped mechbay and carefully backed it into the receiving cradle. He had ordered a general recall and return. All the other BattleMechs had already docked. Their pilots stood at the feet of their machines, rigid at attention as he marched his in. No one looked up towards his cockpit. His anger had been made clear on the comms and he would be down on the ground with them soon enough.

Perry O'Donald was the last in because once the communication grid came back up he had been busy arguing with the five different militia factions over who's fault this fiasco was. They all blamed him for throwing them against BattleMechs. He blamed them for staging an attack he had never ordered. All the commanders were adamant that they weren't going anywhere near the Warde forces now and were demanding to know why they had been trying to stop the mercs from leaving in the first place. They had enough problems with civil wars and rampaging warlords without pissing off mercs that were on their way off planet. He had no intention of telling them what this was all about but he also had no intention of further antagonizing the Warde Colonel by pursuing him. After he finished with the militia leaders he was still nursing hope that he could peacefully resolve the issue once everyone had cooled down.

Then his chief intel officer had secure commed him with a priority flash. The DropShip crew was gone. *Forces unknown have forcibly captured DropShip crew from detainment at the airfield* read the message. Blessed Blake but what else could go wrong! The pissant ROM operative hadn't even had the guts to tell him directly but had sent a text message that noted he was unavailable as he was in the field trying to recover the missing crew. Perry had felt that detaining the crew had been a mistake when the ROM officer brought him the plan. Obviously he should have listened to his gut rather than his pet spy on that one. His best hope now was that the entire bus with children bit was a ruse by the Warders. But he wasn't betting on that hope panning out. The Colonel had probably spoken the truth and ComStar had better find that ship crew alive for Perry to salvage this mess without a bunch more shooting.

The Precentor had mishandled the situation and screwed up bad. He knew it and he was plenty angry with himself. But he had received plenty of help in the making of this disaster and one of the prime culprits was waiting at the feet of a *Clint*. The Precentor rode the lift down from his 'Mech and descended on hapless Acolyte Lafoe like an avenging wraith.

"Blake's Balls!," he thundered, making the other blanch at the vulgarity, "what in the name of all that is holy did you think you were doing!"

"They...they fired first," she objected weakly as she melted before his angry glare. "Missile tone...I took a hit."

"Oh you did, did you?" shouted Perry as he walked around the foot to gaze up at the *Clint*. "And may I ask which side of your BattleMech was facing the Warde 'Mechs when you were holding your assigned position?"

"Uh...the front Precentor."

"Then can you explain why there isn't a single dent in the front of your *Clint* acolyte?" he challenged.

"Uh...no Precentor. Maybe uh.. maybe..."

"Did you actually see where the missile came from acolyte?"

"Nn..No Sir," she admitted.

"Well you truly screwed us all this time Acolyte Lafoe," sighed the Precentor as his voice dropped to a low growl. "In case it skipped your attention, their six BattleMechs are bigger than our six. And judging by the way they withdrew from the city just now they obviously know how to pilot them in an orderly and controlled manner. Something I cannot claim about a few of you. Frankly I have no idea how I can defuse the situation now."

“Sir, if I may make a suggestion,” offered Demi-Precentor Shimizu. “Perhaps if we returned the DropShip crew as a gesture of good will? We still have the ship itself as hostage if we feel we need one.”

“A valid thought Gail,” he smiled sadly as he turned to face her. “I wish I had listened to you when you argued against detaining them in the first place. However at the moment we can’t pursue that suggestion. I have been informed by our intel officer that someone kidnapped the crew from our forces at the airport. At the moment we have no idea where the DropShip crew is.”

“Too much has gone wrong for chance,” Gail pointed out. “Obviously someone works against us in this endeavor.”

“I don’t think I need to give you three guesses,” he spat.

Only one group would want to interfere, have the means to do what had been done so far, and not give a damn about who got killed in the process. Word of Blake. The only question in Perry’s mind was if these Warders were innocent dupes or employed agents of ComStar’s deadly splinter faction.

Obviously the same question was floating around the minds of the others by the thoughtful expressions on their faces. Then MechWarrior Terry Quina stepped forward.

“Precentor,” started Terry, “you still haven’t told us what this is all about – but there is no way the Suomi Warders are here to do anything other than what they claim. Evacuate a group of children.”

The Precentor looked at the MechWarrior in surprise. Acolyte Quina had rarely spoken at all during his time stationed here much less spoken his mind in a group.

“You have special knowledge about the Warders, Acolyte?” O’Donald wanted to know.

“Not...exactly,” admitted Terry. “But my parents were stationed at the ComStar station on Sampsá – the Warder’s home world – when I was a boy. I grew up in their culture. I remember when the *Starcade* was attacked and when Colonel Linna started his anti-pirate campaign. To be honest Sir, it was the way the Suomi Warders were fighting to protect others that prompted me towards the ComGuards rather than the technical sector like my parents. I was gone before the *Starcade* massacre was put to final closure of course. That was after *Tukayyid* while I was in ... recovery. But the Warders wouldn’t hire out for anything, well... wrong Sir. I just know it.”

Precentor O’Donald considered the enigmatic MechWarrior Quina for a moment. He had always had a sense that the man was perhaps unreliable. Considering Quina’s experience at *Tukayyid* the man was a prime candidate for defection to one of WoB’s fanatical factions. Recently Demi-Precentor Shimizu had confided in him that she suspected the acolyte felt he heard the voices of his dead comrades talking to him from time to time. On the other hand by Gail’s own report the acolyte had just correctly kept her from pressing an attack on the Warders. And Quina did seem to know more about these Warders than what was in the ROM file available to the Precentor.

“Regardless of where things stand now we still have our duty to perform. Stand down and shed your cooling suits, but I want everyone in the ready room in ten minutes. Right now it’s Colonel Linna who will be making the next move. In the meantime I’ll fill all of you in on the stakes involved and acolyte Quina can flesh out what he knows about the Suomi Warders for us. Maybe we can come up with a plan before the Colonel comes calling again.”

Gravel crunched under Colonel Linna’s combat boots as he crossed the parking lot and surveyed the scene. Captain Woods had directed them to a regional Trauma Center where the Warder convoy had essentially taken over the small office park. Aside from himself and a few point defense security guards just about everyone he had that was combat capable was out in a defensive circle around the building cluster and parked trailer rigs. He had decreed that nothing would get close alive. His people planned to enforce that decree.

The Trauma Center was operating on reduced staff the last six months but had remained open. However it really wasn’t equipped for major surgery. Fortunately the Warders were. One of the reasons John had gone to Outreach was to bring back a Mobile Army Surgical Hospital that had become available and he had purchased. He had brought newly hired medical personnel to examine the vehicle, all of which – the MASH unit and the medical team – he had brought here to Carver with him. He hadn’t planned on anything more than a shakedown trip and perhaps dispensing some simple clinic-like care for downtrodden locals. Now the hinged right side of the main vehicle had been opened up and the surgery bays it housed put into use. The trailer unit could open up to house diagnostic and lesser care facilities but the trauma center was handling those functions so no time had been lost preparing the surgical center for use.

Despite his better judgment he was drawn towards the busses parked off to one side. The one that he understood Lt. Cascade had saved drew his attention in particular as it had suffered the worse damage. Looking at the way the left front was torn away he had a hard time imagining anyone managing to drive it very far. Around on the other side the door had been left open and he mounted the stairs up, careful to avoid stepping in the pool of blood that had collected on the lowest step.

The dark overcast day added an extra touch of somberness to the mute testament to terror he found within. Not a window remained intact and the seats were chipped and splintered, the green fabric torn and pitted to show puffs of the padding beneath where bullets had ripped through them. Here and there burn marks or dark streaks marred the seats. On the second seat back from the front a bloody hand print – from a very small hand – was clearly evident. The aisle down the center of the carnage was stained dark with blood. Empty shell casings shining their dull brassy color littered the interior from the return fire the soldiers had poured out of the bus while shielding the passengers as best they could with their own bodies.

In his mind he could picture the scene. A combination of imagination and memory fragments easily supplied the sights, the sounds, even the smells. And for a moment it was not the imaginary scene of wounded children that filled his eyes but the very real memory of the body strewn decks of the *Starcade* where he had watched his parents breathe their last breath. Then it was the ruins of the hospital at Ardana, then the makeshift mortuary after the riot in Lassing. Too many times he had

stood over the dying and the dead, helpless to do anything for them. Too many times. Then it struck him again with the force of an anvil that Sandi could have easily been in this buss.

His head sagged and his knees felt like they were going to give out. He draped his arm over the partition that separated the stairwell from the front seat on that side to hold himself up. How the hell could something like this happen he thought angrily at God. Didn't they know? Didn't those bastards in the city care? This wasn't war – this was senseless slaughter and he didn't even know why. What was it that was so damn important to a ComStar Precentor that he would order this?

“Sir?” intervened a voice into his thoughts. “Colonel Sir?”

John rolled his head sideways to take in the voice's owner. It was Sammi Cascade. His faithful sergeant now special ops officer who had seen as much of this crap as him if not more. Actually they'd seen a lot of it together. She wasn't looking her usually military crispness at the moment. Her face was streaked with soot and dirt, her armor breast plate dented and scraped, and one arm was heavily bandaged with a now dirty dressing that showed blood and filth on it. She looked bone weary – which was really saying something about Sammi Cascade. She never looked tired. Her eyes were as fierce as always though. For better or worse she was a flesh and bone fighting machine. Wounds, fatigue and all she was still looking to fight.

At the moment he didn't have anywhere specific to point her however. “Sammi,” he nodded in acknowledgement.

“I need your direct approval before I can be released for patrol duty Sir,” she informed him in a tone that was still crisp sounding despite her appearance.

“What kind of shape are you in?” he asked. He knew she'd give him an honest report.

“Mild concussion from a head shot that glanced off my helmet. A headache but no impaired sensory or mental functions. The arm wound is largely superficial. Lost some bicep muscle and I can't really curl it up right now but the hand still grips fine. I'm probably only about 80% right now Sir but we're a little short handed at the moment.”

“Eighty percent of Sammi Cascade is still better than one hundred percent of most troopers,” mused John. “I'm rather surprised you haven't skulked off already with Bronski and Harper.”

She shrugged and graced him with one of her rare smiles. “Doctor Svengali made me give my word of honor that I wouldn't leave the MASH area without your personal approval.”

“Ah, that explains why you're still here. The Doc's a pretty sneaky operator sometimes isn't he? Tell you what Sammi. First I want you to go get a new dressing on that arm. Then I need you to round up a few people – walking wounded or maybe some techs – and beg, borrow, or steal some more transport for the kids and staff. I won't ask any of them to get back in these busses after what they just went through. But after that I want you to stick around and try to get some rest.”

She cocked her head to one side slightly. “I take it you might have something in mind about...dealing with this situation,” she said as she waved towards the general scene beyond the bus.

They'd been working together for many years now. They both were thinking that some sort of unconventional actions would likely be required to resolve their current dilemma.

“Not yet,” John told her. “First we have to figure out what's really going on here. But one way or another I imagine we'll have to insert you and your team back into the city.”

A fierce flash of teeth showed through the smudges on her face. “Sisu. Sounds like our kind of work Sir. I'll get right on finding new transport.”

With a sharp salute she turned and left, her weariness lifted at the prospect of some payback for the hell she had driven through. He was about to call after her to remind her about the bandage when his hand-cell chirped for his attention. He lifted it from his belt and pushed the activation button. It was Doctor Svengali. The doctor wanted to see him right away in the MASH unit. Fearing whatever news the doctor could possible have for him he girded himself for the worse and climbed out of the bus. So far none of the children had died. But three were under the knife with Svengali and his medical team.

The white-blue interior of the MASH vehicle was a stark contrast to the olive drab paint on the outside. John threaded through the scrub room to a small observation niche that allowed visitors to see into the operating ward area without entering and risking contamination of the sterile environment. A young girl that was probably his own daughter's age was on the nearest table. At the moment only one med-tech was watching over her as the main surgery team was working on a form that was hidden behind the team's bodies on a table farther away. On a small silver table near the girl before him lay red shreds of flesh and a bone extending from the upper part of a slim arm that ended with an unmarred wrist and hand. He didn't need to be a doctor to understand the implications. The limb had been so terribly mangled that it had been removed to save the patient. Would she feel saved when she woke up without an arm?

His Medical Chief happened to look back and spot him in the observation window. Handing off the clamp he was holding to a surgical nurse the Doctor walked back and pushed the talk button on the comm panel next to the window. The blood on his blue surgical gown was worse to look at than the crimson ribbons in the dark bus.

“John, how are you holding up?”

“Better than them,” he replied with a nod behind the Doctor. “What's it looking like?”

“We have two that are touch and go. The two we're still working on. That's why I called you actually. From patching you together so many times I know your blood type by heart. We still have blood plasma but one of the patients is B negative. His chances would improve if we can get real blood into him.”

B negative was a moderately rare blood type. One that John happened to share. There would be a few others in the units as well – but they might be off on patrol or guard duty at the moment.

“You got it Doc. Here?” asked John.

“Actually they have a blood collection center set up in the clinic,” answered Svengali. “I have Captain Woods searching the medical records for other matches but time is an issue here. As I recall your daughter shares your blood type.”

It was unusual for a B negative parent to have B negative offspring, but it did happen. His first impulse was to say no. That his daughter would be left out of all this. But that was wrong and he knew it. John knew enough about medical care to know that blood was not generally drawn from donors under eighteen. That Svengali wanted to tap his daughter meant that things must be more touch and go on the table than he was letting on. And Sandi would certainly want to help in any way she could.

"I'll call her," he promised. "How's that girl there?"

"She'll recover. Minus the arm of course. We were able to make a good clean separation though. Nerve endings will be active for an artificial limb if she can afford a high end one."

"She'll be able to afford it," vowed John as he turned to head for the clinic. If her parents weren't wealthy enough he'd foot the bill himself. Actually he'd just pay for it regardless. That and any other special care anyone needed after this fiasco.

On his way to the clinic John had called his daughter, which proved a good thing as once inside the clinic John lost his voice at the sight of the wounded students laid out on cots, couches and even the floor. Three of his own people were there as well, along with two teachers that had been injured. Someone had turned up a supply of stuffed animals as he saw that many of the youths were clutching the brightly colored stuffed toys despite the fact they were all past the age for playing with fuzzy bears, horses, and the like. The sight of a shell shocked sixteen-year-old with blood flecks sprayed across her face rocking back and forth on a bench talking quietly to a purple bear broke his heart worse than the unconscious teenager on the operating table that had lost her arm. He let himself be lead to a gurney and prepped for drawing blood without comment or protest.

"Hey Dad, I'm here." Sandi hopped up onto the examination table that had been left open next to where he lay propped up with a needle in his arm.

There was a curtain that could be pulled that would block of the sight of the wounded and John started to motion to the med-tech to pull it closed but Sandi reached out and stilled his free arm.

"I've already seen it. Actually I helped some of them get in here. It's not a very good day is it."

"No," he agreed. "It's not a very good day. But it could have been far worse."

"That's hard to imagine," sighed Sandi as the tech swabbed at her arm and looked for a vein.

The two of them sat silently after that, lost in their own thoughts as the fluid of life passed from them into plastic bags to be used for another. It didn't take long. Soon they were both holding little pads over the punctures and keeping their arms crooked tight.

"Why did they do it?" Sandi asked quietly at last.

"I don't know yet."

"Well it was wrong. Just. Plain. Wrong," she spat in frustration as she struggled to keep the tears that wanted to flow in check.

"I know," he sighed. "I know." John had cried himself out years ago.

Sandi just stared unfocused at the assorted wounded for a bit then hopped off her bed and stepped over where she could lean forward and rest her head on her father's shoulder.

"It could have been me," she whispered.

Then he felt her shoulder's start to shake and felt the quiet sobs begin to start. It was the first time he had seen her cry since she had been around three or four years old. Not that maybe she didn't cry from time to time. But it was the first time she'd let him see it happen if she did. Awkwardly patting her back with his free arm he really didn't know what to say. It could have indeed been her. It almost had been.

An unhealthy rage started to fill in where grief held sway in his heart. The same cold rage that had sustained him through many dark years chasing rumors about his sister. He pulled out his hand-cell and contacted Captain Woods.

"Put me on the emergency ComStar channel and all of our internal ones for a unit wide broadcast."

After a moment Woods' voice informed him that he was patched through.

"Attention ComStar personnel. Make sure you record this for Precentor O'Donald."

John paused a moment and licked his lips in thought.

"Bob Stetham, Precentor. Remember that name because I will. He was one of my people. He was killed while driving a bus loaded with children to our DropShip for return to their parents off world. Sixteen of those children were wounded in your baseless and cowardly attack. So far none of them have died, but two are still on the operating table and I'm told their chances are not terribly good. I don't play games with people's lives Precentor. I have no idea why you have chosen to do so but I want the crew of the *Baltic Serenade* returned to me by sundown or there will be hell to pay. And you better pray to Blake or whatever God you believe in that those two kids pull through. Because I swear if either one of them dies I am going to personally pull that relay station of yours down on your head. ComStar will be become nothing but a bad memory in Nuevo San Diego. Sundown O'Donald. Colonel Linna, out."

"Sisu That!" came a voice across the airwaves that he immediately recognized as Gracie's.

More responses started to pour in, over-riding each other as the can-do call of the Suomi Warders filled the channel. Many were on the emergency channel itself, others on the various unit frequencies.

"Sisu" he heard from just below his chin and he looked down to see Sandi looking up at him with tears in her eyes. But her eyes held the same fierce determination he had seen in many a soldier's eyes. Right then he knew without a doubt that he no longer had a young girl for a daughter. He had a young warrior. He would always remember that instant as both one of his most proud and one of his most sad moments in his life.

Kilometers away in his ready room Precentor O'Donald listened to the recorded pronouncement in shock. There was little doubt now that a terrible mistake had unfolded and those buses did indeed have children aboard. It wasn't his fault – but convincing the Warder commander of that fact looked to be as impossible as turning up the missing flight crew by sundown.

"He just threatened to destroy a ComStar relay station," Demi-Precentor Shimizu breathed in amazed awe. "You don't destroy relay stations...they're...irreplaceable!"

"So are children," muttered Terry to himself at the end of the table. None of the others seemed to hear him.

"What was that they were saying? Sis-something?" Acolyte Jose Perez wanted to know.

"I didn't recognize it," answered O'Donald with a shake of his head. "I'll have linguistics run it through the computer."

"*Sisu* Precentor," supplied Terry more loudly this time. "The word was *Sisu*. It's a Finnish term. It kinda means a willingness to complete a task no matter the personal cost. Used in this context I guess you could say it's a war cry Sir. His people were letting him know that they backed him all the way. If he calls on them to war against ComStar to avenge those children that's exactly what they're going to do. They are a stubborn and surprisingly capable people Precentor. If they decide to trash our base here I don't think we have sufficient strength to stop them."

"You seem to admire these Warders a great deal," observed O'Donald darkly. The acolyte's earlier briefing on the mercenary unit had been quite glowing.

Terry shrugged. "There is much to admire."

"One might start to question your loyalties Acolyte Quina," continued O'Donald.

Terry's eyes narrowed. He'd been warned by his true friends that his days as a ComGuard warrior would come to a crossroads – that his time in the White 'Mechs might be at an end soon. Still the Precentor's remark angered him.

"Only our fallen heroes have given more to the ComGuards than I Precentor," Terry answered slowly and with deep contemplation. "From my first battle at Tukayyid to now I have never given the Guards any reason to doubt my loyalty. But perhaps it is time to question it myself. I joined the Guards to protect the citizens of the InnerSphere – not endanger their children over a computer core. Not to war with my brothers and sisters over exactly how mystical the Great Jerome Blake was or how much magic there is in a hyper-pulse generator. This is not what the Angels died for."

"Angels?" demanded the Precentor in confusion.

"His first unit. The other five were all lost at Tukayyid," supplied Demi-Precentor Gail quietly. "Terry was designated *Angel Six*. The others were Angels one through five. They um...talk to him sometimes." Gail kept her eyes downcast as she let the last part slip. That was supposed to be just between her and Terry. She had already hinted about it to the Precentor in the past but had not mentioned it publicly until now. But loyalty to ComStar had to take precedent.

"I see," grunted O'Donald. It seemed that the stress of the current situation was showing in acolyte Quina. "Terry, I want you to report to the infirmary and stay there under observation until this is over."

Terry Quina nodded and smiled softly to himself. He had plenty of experience dealing with psych evaluations.

"Yes Sir," he shrugged as he stood to leave. There wasn't anything more he could do for the unit here. The question was if there was something he should try to do for himself.

"Okay people," growled the Precentor as he turned his attention back to the rest of his people. "We need some ideas and we need them now."

***Outskirts of Nuevo San Diego city  
Baja California Island, Carver V  
July 05, 3057***

During the night the seasonal winds had pushed the clouds away after a brief midnight shower. Sea birds caterwauled overhead in a clear blue sky as the cluster of Warder officers sat around a table at the outdoor café eating breakfast as the morning sun started to climb into the sky. Closing one's eyes and soaking in the warm sunlight, balmy breeze, and the wonderful smell of freshly made bread it would be easy to conclude that another beautiful day was about to unfold in paradise. Looking across the parking lot to find a cluster of armored military vehicles, an armed helicopter, and the occasional rifle toting infantryman quickly dispelled any vacation fantasies.

The MASH vehicles had been compacted once again and prepared to roll. There were still four seriously wounded patients – two of them still in critical danger – but Doc Svengali had finally admitted that they could be carefully moved. The big question facing the Warders now was where to go.

Sundown had come and gone without the return of the flight crew. ComStar had not attempted to contact the Warders nor had John tried to call them. The local population of this area had turned out in support of the children and their protectors, bringing clothing, gifts and food. After cataloging the ComGuard 'Mechs John and Osmo were sure they had the upper hand so that the Warders could either take the ComStar compound or seize the airfield with minimal difficulty. However they couldn't do that and protect the children nor could they come up with anything resembling a constructive plan about what to do if they did roll into the compound or airfield. They needed more information. Both Osmo and John felt that there had to be at least one more party involved in this mess but there was no way to know if that group would contact them or have to be smoked out somehow. This was the subject of the current conversation around the large table.

"So that's why you think there are still more players on the field?" Captain Laidie noted.

Osmo Woods nodded as he spread some jam on a biscuit.

“Indeed Jen. We haven’t been able to unscramble our recording of the ComStar ‘Mech comms but we know who was talking and for how long. Judging by the tone and frequency of one their MechWarrior’s transmissions just before she fired she was under great stress. Probably panic from expecting an attack. Then someone jammed *only* the locally used frequencies including the ComStar ones. Normally if you’re going to jam comms you use a high power emitter that fills the use spectrum as military comms are programmed to switch channels in a preset pattern. To me this indicates that someone wanted us to be able to talk but not them.”

“So we have a secret friend out there somewhere,” Sandi opined. Then instantly regretted saying anything as all eyes turned to her. She had been allowed to sit with the command team during breakfast mainly because her father was unwilling to let her out of his sight unless he had to. Sandi wasn’t supposed to be taking part in the conversation.

“Not necessarily,” her dad relented and explained. “It could have been a group that dislikes ComStar or the militia that took advantage of the events for their own agenda. Or someone that wanted some or all of the children killed. The Precentor was unable to command his troops to order a cease fire even if he had wanted to for example. Or maybe whatever jamming gear they had was only capable of hitting a given set of channels. You should never assume that the other guys have the same tech level you do.”

Gracie swished the orange juice around in her glass. “So where does that leave us then?”

“Needing more answers,” shrugged John.

Osmo’s hand-cell buzzed and he lifted it to his ear for a moment and gave a go-ahead order into it then placed it back on the table.

“It looks like some of the answers might be coming to us,” he told the others present. “Or at least some more information with which we can try to guess the answers. A picket just stopped a lady coming in driving a car who claims she has important information for our CO. I’m having her brought in.”

Aside from conjecture about who it might be there was the thought of security. Perhaps this was an assassin of some sort with a weapon or bomb. However as the shapely brunette was escorted from her vehicle towards the waiting officers it was obvious she wasn’t concealing anything of notable size. Her light gauzy bathing robe was un-cinched to reveal a striking orange wrap around style bathing suit. Sun glasses hid her eyes but she wasn’t hiding much else about her body and had a figure that invited closer scrutiny. There was a definite sway to her walk that the guard seemed to find interesting but Gracie, Jennifer, and Sandi all thought a fake and overstated.

The Warders all stood as she approached and the lady flashed a stunning smile as she offered her hand towards John. “Colonel Linna I presume? It is an honor Sir.”

John gave the hand a quick and leery shake. His ex-wife had been incredibly beautiful as well. Unfair as the prejudice might be he was always extra cautious when dealing with beautiful women. “The honor is mine Ma’am. This is my exec Lieutenant Colonel Aukland. These are Major Jorgenson, Captains Laidie and Woods, and my daughter Sandi. Please have a seat Miss....?”

The group moved to retake their seats as she daintily perched herself in the one that had been left waiting for her.

“Precentor actually. Precentor Christina Dhenner.”

Again the disarming smile was flashed but Gracie Aukland and Osmo Woods both shot back upright as many hands reached to rest over available personal weaponry and the guard’s rifle came up to center on her back.

Christina held up her open palms. “Easy...easy...sorry about that. I should have clarified that I’m not ComStar. Not anymore anyway. I’m a loyalist. Word of Blake. With all that we have in common we’re obviously on the same side here.”

Both officers eased back into their seats, but everyone remained uneasy. The Warders were based out of the Free World’s League who’s leader – Captain-General Thomas Marik – had granted sanctuary to the break off ComStar faction. The WoB people now ran all the interstellar communications in League space and cooperated with House Marik on intelligence and military matters. Yet few League citizens trusted the Blakists very much as the group had several sub-factions, one of which had broken a centuries long taboo and used a nuclear weapon recently. What only John, Gracie and Osmo knew was that the Suomi Warders had become unwillingly intertwined with the WoB. John had found a Star League era WarShip drive factory in space and shared that information with House Marik in exchange for help dealing with a ruthless corporate leader that was running raider bands. Even with the help of the Linna family corporation it was going to be almost impossible to get the factory back on line. So Marik had enlisted the Word of Blake and now John found himself part owner of a secret joint WoB / Marik project. It was a complicated mess he had chosen not to think about for the past few years.

“I see,” John said noncommittally. That nuke incident had left a permanent distaste in him for anything WoB regardless of the faction. He had also found through his dealings with the mystically inclined group that they always tried to tell you less information than you told them and were secretive by nature. They never told you the whole story or laid all their cards in the table. “And the purpose of your visit today would be to...?”

“To help of course,” she smiled. “In any way I can Colonel.”

John thought he caught a special undertone in that “any way” line and judging from the slight frown that appeared on Gracie’s face she had too. This Precentor Dhenner was certainly like no other Wobbly he’d met. Or ComStar adept either. Heck, he didn’t think he’d ever seen either type of adept in anything other than those white robes they wore all the time.

“Well, I’ll admit we could use some help,” allowed John slowly. “Exactly what did you have in mind? You don’t have any troops or a DropShip here do you?”

Her smile fell to a sad frown of dismay. “I wish that we did,” she told him earnestly. “Unfortunately we do not. Just some limited intelligence assets of which I happen to be in charge. And frankly, I’m not really that good of a spy. I was trained

for administrative duties and social functions. However we all serve the great Vision of Blake in whatever manner we are called to do so. I do have a good stash of money and some local contacts that might be of use.”

John sighed to himself as he glanced at Osmo. Money wasn't an issue. He could easily afford to do so thus he always lugged a few cartons of cash around with him on missions. There had been plenty of times that C-bills had greased sticky spots in mission plans. Between the school staff and story of their defense of the children spreading around he was beginning to form his own local contacts. This self named Word of Blake agent either was a very poorly skilled operator or she was playing the game on a level that he hadn't figured out yet. Or she wasn't with the Wobblies at all. Osmo didn't seem to have a read on her either from the slight shrug he gave in return to John's look towards him.

“Well I have to be frank with you Precentor Dhenner,” John announced. “It really doesn't sound like you have much to offer in the way of help – and I'm not sure I would take your help anyway as I have absolutely no idea who you might actually represent. Now I hate to be rude but I do have a military operation to run and I'm a bit busy at the moment. If you would be so kind as to return to your vehicle...”

John started to stand up as he was finishing but Christina interrupted his dismissal with a tone that while still sweet had a bit more of a frosty bite to it.

“Colonel Linna, I assure you that I know things that you want to know. Such as why Precentor O'Donald wants to search your equipment so desperately he doesn't care who gets killed and the fact that your DropShip crew is no longer in his custody. As to my bonifides,” she almost purred, “I am sure I can convince you in private. Unless everyone within earshot of this table is on your intelligence staff.”

The news that O'Donald didn't hold the *Baltic Serenade's* crew anymore went through everyone like a thunderbolt. If the information was true John reminded himself as he kept his face impassive. Plus she was right of course. Sandi was certainly not command staff. And there were things this Dhenner lady might know if she really was a Wobbly ROM agent that he wouldn't Sven or Gracie to know. They were safer not knowing. So where should he debrief her he wondered. He didn't want a Wobbly inside his command vehicle or even his repair trailer for that matter. Then an idea struck him.

“My apologies Precentor,” he allowed. “It seems that you do indeed know important things. Let us and my intel officer Captain Wood here retire to one of those buses over there where we can discuss the situation in better privacy.”

Sven looked mildly unhappy about being dealt out while Gracie shot a scowl at John. Jennifer Laidie had pretty much expected to get shoed away sooner or later. All three knew that John and Osmo would fill them in as much as they felt they could pretty soon anyway.

“Come on Dear,” Gracie said to Sandi as she rested a hand on the youngster's shoulder. “We can go recalibrate my targeting sensors or something.”

“Really?” exclaimed Sandi in excitement. Anything that had to do with tinkering in a BattleMech was a big thing to her. Sure, she'd like to know what the spy lady had to say as Sandi didn't trust this painted up tart as far as she could throw her. But realistically there was no way they were going to include a fourteen year old girl in their conversation. She'd just have to see what she could find out later.

John grabbed his data pad and scanned it, punching in a few orders before handing it to Sven. He then lead Osmo and the Wobbly agent over to the shot up busses and climbed in one. The others followed without comment despite the foul smell within.

“Okay let's start with you convincing me you really are Word of Blake,” suggested John as he gingerly sat on one of the seats. He picked one that didn't have noticeable spots of dried blood on it.

Christina glanced at Captain Woods briefly but obviously the Warde CO felt that anything she had to say could be said in front of his intelligence operative. Still, this Woods might still have links to WolfNet so she had to speak carefully to avoid divulging details the Captain might not have been told by his current employer. “When our people found out you were coming here to Carver they sent me some information in case I needed to convince you of my identity. There is a space borne operation regarding propulsion units that you started with House Marik that our Blessed Order has become involved in it as well. There is a recognition code associated with emergency information about that project. Although Carver has nothing to do with that operation, they gave me the code in case I needed your assistance. That code phrase is ‘Lincoln Brigade’. Is this sufficient confirmation for you Colonel Linna?”

John nodded. It all checked out. Now she had to be WoB – or a well informed ComStar ROM agent. Either way he should be able to get to the bottom of the current mess.

“I'm convinced. Now perhaps you can tell me what this is all about?”

“Information spirited away from a BattleMech design facility on Terra was on it's way to Tukayyid via courier. A small DropShuttle to be precise. It was damaged and both we and ComStar believe it crashed here on Carver V. The information is stored in a heavy duty computer core placed in a one ton protective case. So it is both a very large object and likely to have survived all but the most devastating crash. Although even the pieces of the core would be valuable if the container broke open. Needless to point out, both ComStar and Word of Blake want that computer core. We think it came down near this island, perhaps in the water. With this world in civil war neither of us can bring in a large recovery team without causing undue alarm and scrutiny from Houses Davion, Stienner, or Liao and neither of us wants this technology to fall into the wrong hands. As you arrived with a strong military force, marched directly to an ocean research facility, then turned around and started right back out it looked very much to the ComStar people that you came to recover the core and take it away.”

Osmo and John exchanged looks and nodded in agreement. The scenario made logical sense. Assuming that ComStar also felt the shuttle crashed in the water then the Cussler Academy would have the kind of equipment useful to find the wreck

and raise the core. Being a FWL based unit ComStar might have imagined that John's people had arrived under Word of Blake hire specifically to return the core.

"What about the *Serenade's* crew?" prompted John.

"It's a good news – bad news situation," she replied without pausing to allow the traditional choice of which to hear first. "O'Donald had them under house arrest in a building on the edge of the airfield. He didn't have them long though as another group shot up his ComGuards and spirited your crew away. The problem is I don't know who has them now. The smart money is on Kommandant Cosar's bunch. He's a Lyran officer gone rogue looking to create his own little empire on this world. Seems the guy was dirty his whole career. Tied to the black market in a big way so he has underworld connections all over the islands. He's reportedly got eight BattleMechs landed on the north of this island terrorizing the civilians up that way and no doubt has people in Nuevo San Diego are calculating if he can sweep down and sack the city. Your DropShip is probably a prize he won't be able to pass up. With it he could strike anyplace on the planet in hours rather than days. I have people trying to find out what they can about who is holding your crew and where they might be."

John frowned. The situation was more screwed up than he had feared. Loosing his temper and threatening the ComStar forces yesterday may prove to have been a bad idea even if he was deadly serious about the matter.

"Look, we don't have this core nor do we have any idea where it is. All I care about is the safety of those kids out there. I know it doesn't fit into your plans but I don't see why I can't just contact Precentor O'Donald, tell him I agree to his search, and then see what we can do about finding and retrieving my ship crew. Plus if this Cosar's 'Mechs come down this way the city might need our help dealing with them."

Christina reached out and wrapped her hands around one of John's, locking her deep blue eyes on his. "I share your caring for these poor, unfortunate children John. It is a vile and evil thing that they have become pawns in this game. And I know you don't have the core and thus don't have what O'Donald wants. But you're going to have to ask yourself who you can trust. ComStar controls all contact off this rock. Nothing that happens here will get out unless they allow it. Maybe O'Donald would rather get rid of all of you and blame the civil war than be forced to publicly admit to harming these dear sweet kids. Or maybe he won't believe that you don't know anything and try to use them as hostages to make you talk. Not to mention that his control over the militia is tenuous at best. There are factions that support the various warring parties on Carver and who knows – some of them might even be in Cosar's pay by now. Surrendering to O'Donald could be the death of all your charges. ComStar has a long track record of killing innocents just to retain scraps of technology exclusively in their hands. It's one of the things that made me sick of my superiors – too sick to continue serving their deceit."

John didn't answer at first as the wheels spun in his head. She could see that he was skeptical of her claims and decided to press the issue more.

"Before I was stirred by Blake's Spirit I lived in the Andurien Duchy. Like you, I am native born to the Free Worlds League. After I joined ComStar I ended up in a position to hear some disturbing things and had the clearance to research certain secure files. I found out that ComStar had targeted various firms and even specific researchers over the years that were deemed to be making too much scientific advance. It started as far back as the mid 2800s with Operation Holy Shroud. At first I simply believed that it had been a desperate measure for a desperate time. But curiosity forced me to investigate recent events around my ex-home in the League. Sometimes I wish I had remained in ignorance but it was the Spirit of Blake leading me to see with open eyes so I could follow the righteous path. When we were both children there was a fire at a DEW research facility on Samps. Tragically the fire suppression computer malfunctioned and locked all the doors rather than aiding escape. Almost everyone died. Do you remember that?"

John nodded, dumbstruck by what she was implying. He hadn't known anything other than twenty four of his father's employees had died at the time. Later he would discover that they had been working on the C3 system his unit now used. The work had been believed lost for almost seven years until the accidental discovery of a portable memory bank stashed in an accounting office that one of the programmers had been secretly backing up the work to as a failsafe in case of disaster. With great secrecy Dew industries had finished the project, not announcing it until they had working prototypes. To this date only the Suomi Warders employed the command and control systems. Sale to other parties had never been authorized during the time that John had been the CEO.

"It was no accident," she whispered as she squeezed his hand in hers. "It was discovering incidents like this that made me understand that I could not serve someone like Focht regardless of what he accomplished against the Clans. I know that many people shun and fear us. That people laugh behind our backs that the Word of Blake is a bunch of loonies that worship radios and call technology their God. That's not what we're all about, and it's not Jerome Blake's vision for his descendants to be lording it over the InnerSphere using technologic access as a control club. Your family company builds the things of war. You must understand the implications of technology – that the social good is derived by what it's technology can do or can not do. We want to do what I believe you want to do. To help people. To safeguard those that cannot protect themselves. To bring about peace so that no one is required to kill in anger anymore. I cannot demand anything of you and you must do as you deem best for the children. But I implore you not to put yourself willingly into ComStar's hands." She touched her face to his hand and he felt a bit of wetness from a tear or two that had squeezed past her resolve. "I seek truth in Blake's wisdom."

At a loss for what to do or say, John said nothing and awkwardly patted her hair gently. In a moment she composed herself and sat straightened. "I told you I was no good at this stuff," she smiled in apology as she wiped at the corner of one eye.

"What is it you would suggest we do then?" John asked quietly as he gazed out the broken windows towards the MASH unit.

“If nothing else at least give me some time to see if I can locate your flight crew. Get them back and your options get better. In the meantime maybe you could look for the core. If you can secure it you not only have a bargaining chip with O’Donald but I’m sure that my high command would be willing to risk sending a task force this close to Terra to retrieve it. With the communications lockdown that has been activated I can get one message through but they’ll know when I send it and track down then seal off my access to their system. With the core I could get a small fleet here – more than enough to lift your unit and the children to safety. One with enough firepower to make sure no one got in the way. Most of the ComStar forces in the Carver system are on the moon. O’Donald doesn’t have sufficient control of the militia or a large enough ComGuard force on this island to both safeguard the city and chase you around. As long as you stay away from Nuevo San Diego the children will not be in danger. Waiting a few days won’t hurt anything.”

“You’ve given me a great deal to think about,” sighed John. “I presume you don’t plan to stay with us, so how can I get in touch with you if I need to?”

She pulled a slip of paper from a pocket in the robe. “This is a local telecom system number. A direct line to me. Its secure but not encrypted so you’ll want to be circumspect and set up a face to face meeting. Thank you for hearing me out. You are a man of great compassion and honor. Call me if I can be of any help in *any* way.”

Gracie’s *Awesome* had been parked close to the compound so she could get to it quickly. By happenstance she could see the busses from her cockpit allowing her to see when the striking WoB woman left with John and Osmo in her wake. The Precentor headed out towards her vehicle with an armed escort while Sven appeared from the clinic and started for his CO. Leaving Sandi in the middle of double checking diagnostic numbers Gracie hustled out of her cockpit and across the open ground to where the other three were coming together. Seeing her heading their way they waited until she joined them before speaking.

“So what do you think?” Gracie asked as soon as she was close enough to not be easily overheard.

“That she’s nothing like any Word of Blake or ComStar member I’ve ever met before,” John replied in contemplation as he watched Christina’s car doing a slow three point turn to leave.

“Amen to that,” agreed Osmo Woods. “If they have many more like her around then Word of Blake should gather them up and send them out on recruiting drives.”

“So you believe her then?” Sven wanted to know.

“Mostly,” nodded John. “I believe that she’s with Word of Blake. She claims that some sort of lost computer gear taken from Terra is what ComStar wants back so bad. ComStar sure seemed to think we had something they wanted to I’m willing to believe it’s tech related. A shuttle carrying it reportedly crashed around here. She never really did say which faction owned the shuttle or why it might have crashed but I don’t think she’s lying about the ship or the crash. She seems very sure that ComStar doesn’t have our people hostage anymore. I’ll push Precentor O’Donald to let me talk to them as a sign of goodwill. If he won’t we can assume she’s right on that count as well. She claims that this O’Donald guy will just make us disappear and cover it up if we try to cooperate with him.”

“You believe that?” Gracie snorted.

“I don’t know,” John hedged. “She presented a compelling argument. I’m not ready to trust O’Donald’s or ComStar’s intentions at this point. Not with the lives of these kids anyway. But there are still several somethings that don’t fit quite right going on here. And Precentor Christina Dhenner is one of them. Those tears of concern she shed were of the crocodile variety.”

“You didn’t buy her sob story huh?” noted Osmo.

“It came across as a genuine and heartfelt performance,” John recalled with a slight grin. “But I can’t help but suspect that her heartfelt interest is the computer core and not the children’s welfare regardless of her claims otherwise.”

Osmo gazed at John in curiosity. Woods was trained for intel work by the Dragoons. He treated everything said to him by people he didn’t know as suspect. He had wanted to find some fault in her performance, something tricky in her words to catch her out on. But he hadn’t detected anything. If she had lied about her epiphany and intentions she had been damn good about it. He hadn’t detected anything amiss.

“My gut feeling is to mistrust her for no other reason than she isn’t one of us,” allowed Osmo. “But I have to admit that she didn’t say or do anything that rang my mental alarm bells other than try to play up to your sense of chivalry and flash bedroom eyes at you. So at the risk of admitting to my boss I missed something...what did you see that I didn’t?”

John frowned slightly. “Two things bother me. The first is that for someone that claims to be an admin type forced into field work she was pretty damn blasé about chatting inside a buss full of bullet holes, dried blood, and the stench of death. She never even batted an eye or remarked about the mess. Makes me think she must have a hardened soul behind that innocent look of hers. The other thing is the kids in the clinic over there.”

“The Clinic?” asked a puzzled Gracie.

“How many of you have been inside to take a look?” John asked quietly even though he knew the answer.

Each of the others nodded that they had indeed visited. More than once in fact.

“Indeed”, observed Sven Jorgenson as what John was driving at dawned on him. “The Precentor left directly”

“Exactly,” agreed the Colonel. “I’ll bet that every person wearing a Warder uniform that has been around the base camp here long enough to get the chance has checked inside personally to see how the children are. We feel responsible for their safety. We can’t help but be drawn to look to see how bad it was for ourselves. For all her talk about caring for the poor, unfortunate children she didn’t ask to see them.”

Osmo chuckled. A new thought occurred to him. “Not to mention that she doesn’t want to use her one sure hack into the hyperpulse grid on just the kids. She wants the computer core found first before she asks for Word of Blake intervention.”

“So then what’s our general plan of action?” wondered Gracie out loud.

“We’ll withdraw back to the academy. It’s a defensible position and there are water craft to use the ocean as a last resort exit route for the kids,” decided John. “In the meantime we insert Sammi and her boys into the city in civilian garb to see if they can find out anything about the rogue warlord or our missing DropShip crew. The odds are a little long but if we can liberate the crew by ourselves we can more easily take both ComStar and Word of Blake out of our escape equation. While we wait for developments from either Cascade or Dhenner the rest of us will organize a fishing expedition to see if we can land us a computer core.”

“Remember the early days when we used to just swoop in and shoot up the pirates without getting mixed up in all sorts of political crap,” sighed Gracie wistfully.

“Not really,” shrugged Sven with a slight grin. “There was almost always something extra going on. Riots, informers, religious zealots, corrupt politicians, people on the take, crime gangs, and so forth.”

Gracie paused and rubbed at her chin in thought as she ran through the missions they had taken over the last decade or so. “Point well made Lawman. Well, I guess if it was easy to do what we do then everyone would do it.”

“I’d be willing to take ‘easy’ if it ever came along,” sighed John. “But we do it the hard way when we have to. Osmo, tell Cascade that her mission is a go and that I authorize any action she deems necessary to find and secure the DropShip crew. Have Captain Laidie insert them where ever Sammi thinks best then circle around and come back here on a different vector. Lawman – did you and Sergeant Harding manage to work anything out?”

Sven nodded. Before walking over to the bus the Colonel had typed a brief order into his data pad and transmitted it to Jorgenson and the Chief Tech of the Warders. “We didn’t know how much time we had so the Chief couldn’t whip up anything special. He pulled the speaker unit off an emergency beacon so it wouldn’t beep when pinged and attached it under the car. Any decent search will probably find it.”

John shrugged. “Well I didn’t have high hopes on short notice anyway. But who knows, we might get lucky and find one of the Wobbly safe houses. Osmo make sure that Cascade has a locator receiver for the beacon. I’ll go tell Doctor Svengali that we’ll be pulling out fairly soon. That’s about it for now. Let’s saddle up and get ready to roll.”

***Cussler Nautical Sciences Academy  
Baja California Island, Carver V  
July 07, 3057***

Sandi Linna walked along the wood plank dock and took a deep sniff of the brine tinged breeze. A brilliant sun sparkled off the gently lapping water as water gulls circled overhead issuing challenges at each other. She had never been to anyplace with a tropic climate before. Under different circumstances she’d be dazzled by the warm, early morning glow. Instead she felt unsettled. If asked, she wouldn’t have been able to put her misgivings in precise terms. The best she had been able to think it through to herself it was like her inner sense of ‘normal’ was out of whack. As the sight of a BattleMech standing knee deep in the gentle surf off to her left was part of what she considered a normal event it took a fair amount to unsettle her.

It was the incongruence of the situation that was difficult for her to digest. They were trapped and held hostage on an alien world with hostile forces sitting on their only means of escape with no ability to call out for help. Heck, this entire planet was embroiled in a small scale global war. Who knew what side or the other might come gunning for them. Yet other than a few armed troopers and the MASH and repair vehicles you could walk around the school grounds or village and see almost no sign that they were under siege. The local fisher-folk were still here and still putting out to sea every day. There was no barbed wire, no gun emplacements, no military aircraft flying overhead. For a girl that had spent the past few years living on a huge military base this quaint little tropic village was unusual enough. To have a vacation feel mixed with the tension of fearing an attack – it was unsettling even for her.

But not – as far as she could tell anyway – for her dad or the others under his command. Yesterday he had visited all over the town just chatting with the locals while Captain Woods, Captain Laidie, and the meteorology teacher worked out the likely approach vector a damaged shuttle might use if it was trying to land at the airfield on the other side of the island. As the ocean floor was relatively smooth for hundreds of kilometers around the island the tech crew had spent the day modifying the scout *Camelot* for underwater use. As a general rule most BattleMechs are sealed enough that they can operate submerged. Radio doesn’t work very well underwater however. If MechWarrior Yawni was going to be able to communicate and help with the search something special was needed. Sergeant Harding had spot welding a reel of cable with a float and antennae to the ‘Mech’s shoulder. As Yawni walked along the bottom the float would play out the cable giving her a surface antennae to send a signal from. With the huge cable reel slapped on one shoulder, a giant cutting saw normally mounted on the field repair truck attached atop one forearm and a large steel girder as a makeshift pry bar clutched like a melee weapon in the other hand Sandi thought that the ‘Mech looked like something from one of those cheesy Post Apocalypse tri-vid holos where civilian industrial ‘Mechs have crazy modifications for battle use and all the actors have bad hair and wear various pieces of sporting equipment as scavenged body armor.

Tied up along the dock on her right was what seemed to her a pretty big boat. Or technically a ‘ship’ she guessed – although to her a ship was usually something that was huge and carried tons of cargo and passengers or something that went into space. This watercraft was about three times bigger than the biggest fishing boat she’d seen around here but it only seemed to need two people to actually crew it. At least a dozen could comfortably ride on it without feeling crowded though. It belonged to the school and was designed to carry a four person diving canister capsule. The bright yellow chamber was lowered through the U shaped tail of the ship from a large crane boom and to her eye it looked like it might be fun to take a

ride in it and go sight seeing among the colorful native fish. Nobody would be doing any sight seeing from it today however. The yellow hull had been carefully laid out on a nearby concrete dock. There was a different use planned for the hoist system on this voyage.

Ahead of her she could see her dad helping two younger men load diving equipment off of the dock and into the boat. Or ship. Whatever it was. All three wore brightly colored swimming shorts that almost reached their knees along with garish floral print shirts that buttoned closed. Their outfits, along with the lime green one piece bathing suit she wore, had been purchased yesterday from a local shop. Except for the footwear. All three men wore their combat boots. Her dad had a black web belt with a Japanese style tanto knife rather than a Finn puuko or lueko plus the ancient automatic pistol he carried the rare times he felt he wanted a sidearm handy. Appropriate wear for a balmy morning cruise that was a military salvage operation she supposed. Yet at the same time a disjointed appearance. Just like the entire past two days.

Her dad had just handed up the last piece of equipment when she reached him.

“Hey Snowflake, glad you made it down in time for me to see you. We’re about to shove off,” he smiled down at her.

“You were gone before I got up,” Sandi remembered. “I knocked on your door and peeked inside.”

He shrugged. “I was out early. Patrol shift to walk and other things to do.”

She examined his face closely. He didn’t look unusually worn but she knew that he often operated on little sleep. “You did actually go to bed right Dad?”

John laughed. “What’s with you women? That’s the same thing Gracie asked when she relieved me on patrol and Captain Laidie wanted to know when I passed her in the hall early this morning.”

“We all know you too well,” mused Sandi.

“Ahoy Sandi,” boomed a new voice from up on the exploration ship. “You coming aboard?”

Sandi smiled as he looked up at Chief Master Sergeant Harding. The large framed technician was the lead tech of the Warders and her father’s personal crew chief. Called “The Wizard” behind his back and “Chief” to his face, there didn’t seem to be anything in the universe that he couldn’t fix, modify, or replace with something better. The Chief had even taught her a thing or two about computer hacking in the past two years. When her dad wasn’t around of course.

“Noooo,” she drawled out in disappointment. “The Old Man here thinks it’s too risky.”

“So it’s ‘Old Man’ now is it?” snorted John.

The Sergeant chuckled and though his eyes twinkled his dark face turned serious. “Then I reckon it’s best you stay on shore. My experience is that the Colonel knows his business.”

“Yeah, yeah,” grumped Sandi as she waved off the rebuke. Besides being extremely competent the Sergeant was exceedingly loyal to her dad. It was no surprise that he’d back anything her dad said. Back when she had lived with her mother the servants had disliked the ex Mrs. Linna so much they would willingly assist Sandi in any scheme that would have been against her mother’s wishes. With the Suomi Warders it was the reverse – everything she did was looked at with an eye towards if they should tell the colonel or not. Fortunately most people figured that it was better to stay out of the commanding officer’s family life barring major incident; and she had no desire to cause one. It had been mildly annoying the first six months or so. But after that she realized that she wouldn’t have had it any other way. She had dozens of people around her that all really cared about her and her dad. Unlike the people just collecting a paycheck from her mother.

“We’re burning daylight honey, I better get aboard.” With that John gave his daughter a quick hug and then clamored up onto the craft.

“Do you think you’ll be gone long?” Sandi asked from the dock.

Her father shrugged. “At least half the day. Maybe all day. If it really did come down by this island we know where to look and have the equipment to find what we’re looking for. But I’m told it’s about two hours one way to the search zone.”

The oceanic school had a string of sensors off shore. Had anything impacted in the water nearby it would have been recorded. With nothing in the data files they knew they had to start farther out. Three of the sensors had been detecting slightly higher pollution elements. This meant that something might be on the bottom and leaking. Matching the currents with the likely approach vector estimates gave them a small – by oceanic standards anyway – search area.

“Uhh...Colonel Linna,” called the staff teacher that would be piloting the ship from the open air flying bridge. “We’ll need to cast off the lines before we can go anyplace.”

John rolled his eyes and laughed at himself. It had been a while since he had been on a water ship. He’d forgotten that the last person aboard before departure generally unties the craft.

“I got it dad,” called Sandi, pleased for the chance to be at least minimally involved in the trip. She unlooped the bow line and coiled it, tossing it over to Sergeant Harding who had moved to the front. Then she walked to the rear of the ship and unfastened that line, tossing it to one of the privates going along. Both had recreation diving experience and represented the entire sum of Suomi Warders with underwater training. Well, barring Lt. Cascade and her people Sandi amended. They had training in all kinds of stuff but they weren’t around. The official word was that they were on a long range patrol sweep around the academy area. Sandi didn’t buy that for a minute though. Cascade had snuck into the city. Sandi would have bet her considerable inheritance on that. Not that anyone would ever hear from her even a hint out loud about what she believed. Sandi Linna had long ago learned the importance of secrets.

As she watched the BattleMeh wade off following the research vessel a sense of melancholy settled in. She wasn’t worried in the least about her father’s return. Like most everyone else from the unit she was convinced of her father’s invulnerability. He always came back. Always had and always would. Her concern was what to do while waiting. Playing in the surf didn’t seem enjoyable knowing about the wounded kids her own age in the academy infirmary. Wandering off to explore would just prompt Captain Woods to send some people out looking for her and the small force was already stretched

thin as it was. She could go to the tech trailers and see if she could help with maintaining the 'Mechs. That seemed like the best way to pass the time waiting for her dad to get back.

Although maybe she'd swing by the academy first and see how the other kids were doing. A couple of them were still really scared and for some reason they seemed reassured simply by her presence. It puzzled her why that might be the case but if they felt better having her around to talk to she didn't see any reason why she shouldn't make some time to spend with them.

Across the island in Nuevo San Diego a somewhat disreputable looking figure was peering through a pair of binoculars.

"Hey Sammi, that guy's back again."

Lieutenant Cascade looked up at the sound of Sergeant Bronski's voice. She had been sitting in the small kitchenette of the hotel suite reading through the local newspaper looking for anything that might be relevant. The brief engagement in the city with the Warders was still in the news although so far there didn't seem to be public knowledge of the DropShip crew no longer being on their ship. An editorial made it clear that the newsfolk were curious why the airfield refused to let them near the DropShip to interview the crew however. It probably wouldn't be long before someone figured it out and printed it. She didn't know if that would be a help or a hindrance.

"You sure it's the same guy?" she asked as she picked up a snoop scope and walked across towards the window.

She and Bronski had served together for over a decade. They were both in their later thirties now but still as physically capable as they had been ten years ago. The rest of the team was out on other tasks at the moment while they kept watch on what they assumed to be a Word of Blake safe house. They had tracked the car of the Wobbly agent to the motel then taken rooms in an expensive hotel across the street. At first they thought she had simply dumped it in the lot. They had went and retrieved the locator that night. But the next morning the WoB Precentor had come out of one of the motel rooms and then left in a different vehicle. While she hadn't returned, two other men had arrived later and gone into the same room she had come from. One had not left as far as they knew. The second had gone and was now coming back again.

"Unless there are many two meter plus guys with orange mohawks hanging around the neighborhood I'd say it's the same guy."

Cascade trained her scope on the area below and quickly found the thin giant with the spiky hair walking up the sidewalk. She watched as he looked around a bit to make sure he was unobserved then crossed the parking lot towards the door to the room they were watching. All the rooms of that motel opened towards the lot from a U shaped building. Presumably they had rear exits as well but there wasn't a good location they could set up a long watch at to watch the rear.

By his swagger and appearance Cascade had pegged the young man as a local street tough type. Probably a leader of some sort by the unconcerned way he strolled the local streets. Unless he was undercover posing in a role he wasn't a trained Wobbly agent. He stuck out in a crowd. Intelligence operatives hate being memorable and make an effort to remain unnoticed. This guys wanted to be seen. Except for when he got near the motel when his cloak and dagger routine was almost comical to watch.

"He's packing," she observed casually.

"Under the left arm," agreed Bronski.

Sammi considered their options. They had been asking around the local watering holes looking for rumors. They hadn't turned anything up and sooner or later people would start wondering about the strangers asking questions. Since she left in the morning they had lost track of that Precentor woman and barring luck had no real way to find her. Breaking a few arms to get the answers she wanted wasn't beyond her – but at the moment they didn't know which arms to break. Two of her team were posing as mercs looking to hook up with the warlord operating to the north. She decided to call them in. They weren't too far away and she wanted to tail mister Mohawk when he came out. The teams casing the airfield, ComStar grounds, and the storm sewers she decided to leave on mission. They might need to know about those locations.

She picked up the encrypted radio transceiver and made a few clicks with the transmit button. A few tones came back at her, indicated that team two knew she wanted to talk to them and they would call as soon as they could get clear of whatever it was they were involved in at the moment. Cascade hoped it wouldn't be too long.

John watched the sonar display screen on the flying bridge as a five color representation of the ocean floor scrolled across it. He had graduated with an engineering degree in BattleMech systems but all types of technical equipment interested him. The gear on this craft was quite extensive and impressed him a great deal. They were towing a buoy that was taking real time water samples capable of finding elements to the millionths of parts. That was helping them follow a fuel leak that was likely thruster fuel. The academy had mapped out the ocean floor for hundreds of kilometers around in past years. By matching the computer files to what the sonar was now mapping they knew which mounds or crevices on the floor were relatively new and which were old so they didn't waste time digging up every deformity they came across. It was the perfect vessel for searching the waters.

Which was why the ComStar people would have been suspicious of his arrival and departure John could see. He had breezed in, went straight to the maritime school, and marched out with a few extra vehicles. Being League based ComStar would have ample reason to suspect that Word of Blake had secretly contacted them. Of course had the local ComStar people trusted the school master enough they could have easily done exactly what John was now doing. Or the Word of Blake folks for that matter. But trust was a rare commodity for either outfit –even within their own ranks. Who knew how much the local

ComStar Precentor knew? Maybe he didn't know anything about how what he was supposed to recover had been lost. For that matter, John didn't know who had crewed that lost shuttle. People loyal to ComStar or to WoB. Or had there been some of both aboard, leading to a struggle that resulting in the crash? He didn't know and he didn't care. He just wanted to find it to buy the academy kids safe passage off this waterlogged rock. It might be a tropical Eden but the way the politics of this planet were falling apart it was going to be one hell of a paradise pretty soon. His fellow mercenaries would make plenty of money here over the next few years but it wasn't his kind of war. The sooner they got the hell off this planet the better.

"Colonel, I'm picking up another magnetic anomaly," reported MechWarrior Yawni Bhati over the speakers. They had found two sunken ships already, one a pleasure craft and one some kind of small gunboat.

"Give us the bearing," he instructed into a handheld microphone. Third time a charm he wondered?

The *Camelot* couldn't make very good time under the water so it took almost ten minutes before the contact grew close enough to get a sonar map of. John felt in his gut that this was it when he finally got a sonar plot. There was a trough that ended in a sand mound exactly like one would imagine of something plowing into soft ground at a decent clip. He called out to the two troopers now divers to get their tanks ready. They were about to go for a swim. John ached with the desire to go down and look for himself but he had learned the hard lesson of letting others do such things. Especially when their skills were far better than his. He'd never even touched a SCUBA regulator before helping load the gear this morning.

His pulse quickened as Yawni's reports started to come in. She had visual confirmation of a lifting body type shuttlecraft partially buried down where she was. It was largely intact with no sign of active power. The ship lay belly up with the nose pointed back the way it seemed to have come so it must have tumbled end over end. Heavy damage to the nose section backed that theory up. By using the saw blades to disturb the water she was able to clear away enough sand to discover that the shuttle had been a bottom loader. That was pretty common for orbital craft that usually loaded and unloaded on a planet's surface where dropping stuff down through a ceiling hatch would be a pain. It was well within SCUBA diving depth. About as perfect as the condition could be really. He ordered her to start working on opening the hatch and then went back to talk to his two divers.

"Okay guys, remember that you're basically on your own," he reminded them. "You can swim up to the 'Mech's cockpit and use your writing boards to have her relay a message but you'll probably have to scout it out then come back up so we can discuss what you found. I doubt there's much aboard expect the computer core we're looking for but you never know. You two ready?"

"Sisu Sir," replied one as the other simply nodded. He'd never been this close to their illustrious commander before and had found himself tongue tied the entire trip.

"Good. Time to go then...Oh – one more thing," John added as an unhappy thought crossed his mind. "The crew is probably still down there. Your own safety is the main priority then the core. But if possible I'd like to bring up any bodies you can get to. They deserve a decent burial from somebody. Can do?"

The pair gulped and exchanged uneasy looks. They hadn't thought about the fact that dead people might be floating around down there. But the Colonel was counting on them to get the job done.

"Aye Sir, can do," nodded the first.

"Yes Sir," managed the second.

And with that they fitted their masks and flipped down back first off of the diving ledge built into the rear of the craft. Sergeant Harding started freeing the crane hoists as he tisked at their nervousness.

"You'd think those boys had never seen a body before."

John just shrugged as he moved to unlimber the other side of the crane lift. He'd seen far too many himself. And expected to see more before his days in the universe were through. "Both those guys are pretty new with us Chief. They probably haven't."

Harding paused a moment and gazed at the bubbles they had left in their wake. He tended to forget that not everyone in a uniform had lived as colorful a life as he had. "Well, maybe they'll get lucky and the fish will have dragged the bodies away or something."

"Maybe," grunted John. He didn't really want to dwell on the subject. Whether the Sergeant got the hint or was simply done thinking about it himself the subject was dropped in favor of discussing the most likely way to lift the core free of the shuttle once it was found.

About twenty minutes later the divers resurfaced to report that some sort of large armored component was still clamped to a support cradle in the hold. It was the only thing they'd seen aboard so far and it had lifting rings welded to it. It looked like securing the hoist line and getting it clear of the shuttle would be a snap. Another twenty five minutes and their observation was proving correct. The core was hanging free at the end of the line and being reeled up to where it would be swung around and laid down where the submersible usually rested. The divers gingerly took a few plastic body bags that had small bottles of compressed gas and inflating balloons attached and went back down to make a more complete search of the wreckage while the core was slowly winched up out of the water. It hadn't been submerged long enough for any sea life to attach to it and came up dripping from the gentle swells about as pristine as it had been when first loaded onto the ill fated shuttle.

John didn't say anything as they swung it in and rested it on the cradle arms of the sub rest. Although it weighed around two tons it wasn't particularly large. The armored casing, shaped roughly like the bulbous section of a heavy truck's drive transaxle, had framing of open bars around it and was painted white. The only marking it bore was a black painted "X – 2" on the case.

The Colonel and Sergeant both walked up to it in awed silence. After a moment John asked, “does that look like what I think it looks like?”

“Down to the input ports and lock down mounts,” breathed Harding, scarcely daring to believe what his eyes were telling him. “But at a bit less than half scale. And that hump on the upper left is different.”

John stared silently at the BattleMech component for another moment. For that’s what it was.

“Those Bastards!” he swore at last as he slammed his hand into the side of their find. He remembered at the last moment what happened the last time he punched solid metal and opened his fist so that his palm smacked into the device rather than his knuckles. It still stung but he hardly noticed. “How could they do this?”

Harding had pulled out a tool from his belt and started to work at opening a connection plate. “It’s the exact same plug we use Sir,” he breathed in wonder. “It’s definitely a copy of our master C3 units – but smaller.” The sergeant copied his commander and lashed out at the offending component as well, choosing to kick it with his booted foot. While John was shocked, Harding was outraged. The linked battle control computers the Warders fielded were the most advanced in the InnerSphere. It was proprietary technology. What right did those fascist robed geeks have in ripping off *their* technology? He wasn’t clear to himself if he meant him, the Colonel, or the Suomi Warders – but either way... this was simply as low an act as the tech Sergeant could think of.

John closed his eyes and rested his head against the wet framework around the computer unit. His grandfather and father had both nursed the C3 computer project through a series of setbacks for decades. He hadn’t really been sure he believed that Wobbly Precentor’s claims about ComStar causing the fire that had finally almost stopped the project but he was sure he believed her now. Not only had they been sabotaging his family’s work on the project they had been stealing data and working on their own model as well.

Before now John had been planning on trading whatever was in the shuttle to however turned up his DropShip crew first in exchange for passage off the planet. But an entirely different set of ideas had started to run through his head. They couldn’t be allowed to get away with something like this. Whichever “they” it might be. Both of them probably.

“It might be booby trapped so be careful,” John grounded out through clenched teeth, “but as soon as we get back I want you take this thing apart and confirm if it really is some sort of advanced C3 master unit.”

“I’ll crack it open,” promised Harding. “The academy has some sonogram equipment and chemical sniffing gear that will help. But come sun up tomorrow if not earlier you’ll have a full report.”

“We’d best get ready for the dead,” sighed John as he turned his gaze towards the water.

Sergeant Harding wondered if the Colonel meant the dead that might be aboard the shuttle or the dead that were likely to result from whatever payback was in store for stealing their C3 plans.

Toren Altas still had a soft looking face with rounded cheeks despite almost three years with Cascade’s First Platoon specialists. Until one looked closely at his eyes. It was there you might catch a glint of the steel resolve he had forged within himself. He wasn’t particularly big in size but had the lean, solid muscles of a young man that could walk for days on end without tiring. He was first squad’s electronics specialist; a land warrior- technician mix. Sitting at the table with him under the dim bar lights was a woman a few years older that matched his fair haired looks just enough that she might be his sister but not so closely that she might also be his lady friend. In fact she was neither. She was another first squad member by the name of Ouni Haarno. Ouni had a slightly wider set to her shoulders than Toren although he was about a half head taller. Other than being a butt kicking special ops soldier her specialty was heavy weapons. She wasn’t carrying any of the special tools of her trade this afternoon as squad level machine guns or automatic grenade launchers would be a bit too much even for this dive. Toren did happen to have a few of his special toys of his along.

One was a hand sized electronic parabolic mic pickup. At the moment he was pointing it unobtrusively at a table where three beings that could marginally be described as local citizens sat hunched around half finished beers. One of the three was the orange haired guy that was visiting the Word of Blake location at the motel. Toren and Ouni had followed him for twelve blocks into a part of the city that was probably not on the usual tourist brochures. It really hadn’t been difficult to trail him. With fuel difficult very expensive few vehicles were on the streets and most people were walking their errands. That put a good blend of pedestrians on the sidewalks to mix into for the Warder soldiers. Mr. Mohawk – or “Chaz” as Toren had recently discovered – was taller than most everyone else and sported that neon sign of a hair-do making him easy to keep an eye on.

Toren was recording the conversation for later review while he listened with an earphone. When the conversation at the other table turned to the most recently transmitted Solaris games he turned his attention to Ouni.

“I think you better call the L-T on this one,” Toren told her. “These guys are part of some local gang called the Razorfins. The Mohawk guy is called Chaz and seems to be nominally in charge. They’ve talked about if they should move the ship crew they have and if someone named Nefter can be trusted around them. They seem to think they’re working for the Capellans but Chaz and a guy called Dizzy have been arguing over if they should push for more money, deliver the captives, or try to sell them to a higher bidder. I got the impression that the only reason Dizzy hasn’t tried is he doesn’t know how to get in touch with the Lyran warlord to the north and they can’t trust ComStar to deal with them because they killed two ComGuards when they grabbed the crew. I don’t know how long they’re going to be here but I think we might need to move quick on this info.”

Ouni nodded in agreement and slipped out of her seat. It was incredibly important information but she forced herself to keep her breathing calm and relaxed as she made her way casually towards the dim hallway that housed the toilets and a local phone unit. The troopers had small radios but reception had been spotty in the city, especially inside the larger structures. A quick call on the local communications system would do just fine.

As she passed the restroom doors her senses went on full alert as she heard somebody softly thump into the wall ahead of her just beyond where the hall made a ninety degree bend. Both pay phones happened to be around the corner in that alcove. She had prescreened the area checking to see if there was an exit after they had first entered and taken a table so she knew there was no exit that way. Ouni paused for a moment to assess the situation and then heard a muffled complaint that sounded like a female demanding to be let go. Taking a breath and prepping for immediate action she stepped forward so she could see around the corner.

A moderately large but otherwise nondescript man maybe in his forties had a small woman pressed into the back corner just past the last phone. He seemed a little unsteady on his feet but no so drunk that he couldn't contain his much weaker target.

"I said no, Troy," spat the woman after twisting her mouth free of his hand. "Now back off."

"You owe me from last week," slobbered Troy as he grouped under her short skirt with one hand.

Other than realizing that they knew each other Ouni had no idea what had started this. She did know that she wasn't the sort to just stand around and let the situation go. Plus she needed to use the phone ASAP.

"Hey lovebirds," she called out at them. "Get a room or something. I gotta a call to make."

Ouni figured that once they were out of that clinch the girl could make for the freedom of the open bar.

The guy looked over his shoulder at the intrusion but didn't let go of his quarry. "Go piss on yourself lady. I'm busy here," he growled.

That hadn't been part of the plan. She'd expected the guy to back off once a stranger showed up. At first she was unsure what to do and the thought of going outside to try the radio flitted through her mind. But the pleading look the frightened young woman gave her made up her mind.

*Right. The hard way,* she told herself. Out loud she made no sound however. There wasn't any reason to give the clod any warning. In a fluid blend of motions she drove a fist into his kidneys, then yanked back on his collar while kicking his knee forward so he pivoted and slammed flat on his back, then stomped down hard on his sternum. That left him stunned and gasping for breath in less than five seconds. That wasn't going to be good enough however. With a practiced blow she kicked him upside the head to knock him out. It was a delicate art actually. Hitting someone hard enough to slosh their brain around inside the cranium and cause unconsciousness without seriously damaging the skull took a good touch and precise amount of force. Most everyone in First Platoon had worked a long time on that touch.

"Is...is he dead?" the other woman wanted to know. Almost a girl really. Ouni doubted she was over eighteen. Now that she got a good look at her it seemed likely that this particular member of her sex was a whore. That didn't change much in Ouni's eyes though. No one deserved to be forced around that that guy had been doing.

"Nope. But he should be out for a while. Smells like he's drunk so I'd say a good while. I'll just prop him up in the corner."

Ouni remained tense though. She'd had MP training in the past and that included domestic violence work. Sometimes the rescued party would turn on you. That didn't seem to be the case here though.

"Good. He's a jerk but I don't need the trouble a killing might bring," decided the brunette. "Thanks by the way. That was some go-go chop-suki you did."

Ouni just smiled and nodded. She had no idea what 'go-go chop-suki' meant exactly in local slang but it must have something to do with kicking ass. Right now she really needed to make a call rather than shoot the breeze with a local working girl over an unconscious bar patron. "Look, maybe you better clear out before this guy gets up again."

"Sure...uh, see ya 'round."

As the dark haired younger woman slipped around her Ouni had a quick thought.

"Hey - before you go. Do you know anything about a group called the Razorfins. Some of them hassled me and my man yesterday."

The girl took a nervous glance down the hall into the bar so obviously she knew that some of them were in the taproom beyond. "Pretty new around here. People say they fleeted together after the troubles started under a pair of deserters. They harbor in an old theatre on Seashine around Seventh. I wouldn't go down that way if I was you. I heard tell they got maybe a dozen bangers. I gotta go."

Ouni waved by way of a good bye and the young street girl scooted from sight. There was an empty beer bottle on the floor so the Warder trooper propped the Troy guy upright in a corner and left the bottle in his lap then punched a number into the phone after feeding it a few local coins.

"Yes," answered the curt voice at the other end. Ouni recognized the tone as being the Lieutenant's.

"It's Haarno. We're solid down at Bluefish Bill's on fourth near Wave Crest. It would be great if you could drop by with the gang before the party moves again."

"We'll swing by," agreed Sammi as she hung up the hand unit in the hotel suite. Then she grinned a predatory smile as she turned towards Bronski and Harper who had paused in their devouring take out Chinese from small white cartons.

"We going somewhere L-T?" Harper asked curiously.

"Haarno and Altas have a direct lead," Cascade replied. "We need to be at a place on fourth street several blocks from here double time. Small arms and light body armor under civie garb. And bring the stun guns. Let's grab the others and roll."

Evening was setting in soon and the Razorfin members at Bluefish Bills decided to go find something to eat. They knew from previous experience not to trust any of the limited food Bills served up. They were tipsy but not really drunk. While

unprofessional in many ways, they weren't stupid enough to get wasted anyplace other than their home turf. Especially with so much riding on the job they had been hired to do.

Having recently trained for counter terrorism and surveillance work Cascade's people had no problem keeping the gang members surrounded with two person teams. The question throbbing in her mind was what to do about the situation. They could just follow them; jump them; leave them be and go look at the theatre; or a number of other options. The communications unit capable of reaching across the island was back in the hotel so whatever she did would be without input from HQ. She really didn't have much to go on but her gut told her she needed to deal with the situation as quickly as possible and that this Chaz guy wasn't the type to keep an agreement. The crew probably couldn't wait another day for rescue so she'd have to force the issue.

"Three reporting," came a voice in her ear phone. "They just walked into a parking structure. Either they have a vehicle there or they're using it as a short cut to walk through to the next street over. Shall we follow?"

Sammi glanced in the rear view mirror of the car she sat in. She had driven ahead on the parallel street and parked. The garage they were talking about was only a dozen meters behind her. It was time to take the initiative she decided.

"Follow but stay out of sight. I'm going to make contact from the other side."

Without her having said anything Bronski and Harper floated her way from their posts on the street as she walked towards the garage. They paused at the main entrance. It was an automated affair rather than a manned station.

"Here's the plan," Sammi told the others quietly as she shifted the shoulder bag she was carrying around to be in front of her. "You two stay low and out of sight. Stun the two guys with Chaz and then sit on them. Then I'll have a little chat with Mohawk-boy."

The two experienced troopers nodded their understanding. As soon as the trio entered the shadowy concrete structure and could no longer be seen from the street they both ghosted down into crouches and used the parked vehicles for cover to shadow their leader as she walked down the main drive path close to the bumpers on her right side. She could see the three targets walking towards her. They hadn't even noticed her yet so they hadn't seen her two human pitbulls slip in either. Sammi paused at the end of a light truck that had an empty space next to it and pretended to dig in her bag as she whispered the distance and direction of the targets. Some ten meters away the Razorfins finally noticed her and became a bit more alert. Sammi could practically feel them trying to decide if she was pretty enough to hassle or if perhaps it might be worthwhile to grab her shoulder bag and run. As she'd never be winning any beauty contests her money was on them trying for her bag with a small chance of deciding to ignore her as unimportant.

They wouldn't be getting the chance to make up their minds.

"Now," whispered Cascade after the trio had closed half the distance between them.

Bronski and Harper had let the Razorfins pass them and then slipped in behind. They rose from concealment and steadied their aim across the hoods of two cars and fired for the butt of their assigned target. It was a wide target unlikely to be armored which the taser darts would readily sink into for a solid connection. Before either target could yelp in pain from getting stabbed in the rear the electrical current surged down the guidelines and sent the pair crashing to the ground in spasms.

Chaz was startled by his compatriots sudden flopping about but reacted faster than Sammi would have given him credit for. It wasn't nearly fast enough however as she already had her needler pistol leveled at his face.

"Freeze Chaz," she commanded in her best drill sergeant voice. Having been a drill sergeant for years it was a very convincing vocalization. Chaz froze with his hand on the butt of a laser pistol he wore under one arm. He was immediately glad that he had not pulled at the weapon as two very dangerous looking men appeared over his downed comrades. Either one of them could have dropped him in an instant had he tried to finish the draw.

"So what's all this then," he asked. "Are you a cop?"

She stepped closer and smiled. It was not what he would have called a friendly smile. "Do I look like a cop?"

Despite her diminutive size she looked like a stone cold killer to him. He had two in his own gang so he knew the look. Her dark eyes were those of someone that made a living killing people, not arresting them.

"Uh...no," he admitted.

She let her gun hand fall to her side as she stepped closer to him but remained just out of his reach should he make a sudden lunge. "I've been told that your people took something from ComStar that I'm willing to pay a lot of money for. However, judging by how easily we just smacked you down I find it rather hard to believe."

Chaz's temper bubbled up in indignation despite the inferior position he had found himself in. "So you ambushed us when we were off guard just like we got the drop on the ComGuards. Big deal. No one's going to be able to do that where the crew is stashed. Assuming anyone can even figure out where that is."

"I so hope you are right," she snorted. "There are people in this city willing to kill you and all your friends to get their hands on that crew. Luckily for you I'm not among them. I'm willing to offer cold hard cash."

It was a lie of course. She'd willingly kill all three of them right this moment. But doing so might compromise her chance of setting up a solid rescue plan.

"What kind of cash? You talking Local script?"

"C-bills," smiled Cascade. "As in 200,000 of them."

Chaz actually laughed at that. "No one around here has that kind of cash in C-bills lady...."

His voice trailed off as she fished a banded stack of C-bills from her shoulder bag and tossed them over. He fumbled the catch but managed to recover and grab them before they hit the ground. Looking down he found that he had a stack of 100s. The bank seal around them said it was a 10,000 C-bill stack.

"I have solid backing," she supplied as he whistled at the amount of money in his hands.

“Who do you work for?”

“Does it matter?” she snapped. “Not the people you took the crew from or the people you are supposed to be delivering them to.”

“Yeah well those people could make some big trouble for me if I back out on them,” countered Chaz.

“You don’t have the brains God gave a baboon do you.” It was more a statement than a question. “You want to try to bargain? Fine, we kill you three and then find some other Razorfins to offer the cash to. I figure somebody lower down the food chain will take us up on it. We were going to cut you in figuring anyone smart enough to outfox ComStar might be worth future employment. You could go far with the right friends. We could eliminate unwanted rivals for example.”

She nodded towards the one that had been arguing with Chaz about looking for a different buyer and Harper whipped out a wicked looking knife and held it over the unconscious man’s throat.

“No..wait,” exclaimed Chaz. “He’s a buddy from my army days.”

She shrugged and Harper backed off and slipped the knife away.

“So what’s your call cheese head? We deal or not?”

“We deal,” he allowed sullenly.

“Two blocks west of the landing field near the north end of the city is an industrial area,” noted Cascade casually. “The Scandian Bear HVAC factory complex out there is burned down and abandoned. It’s on Twenty Third street. We’ll have a blue car there with the money and a bus hidden nearby to take the crew. You bring the crew at 3 am local and we’ll make the trade. You can even keep the car as a bonus.”

“That’s not even twenty fours hours from now. What’s the big rush?”

“I hear that things are shaking up north,” shrugged Cascade. “Plus ComStar is prowling the streets looking for payback. We’d like to clear this all up right away. Just good business sense. You going to be there or should we arrange to talk to more freshly installed Razorfin leadership?”

Chaz understood the implied threat. And the tough little witch was right. If she did kill him on the spot the others would snap up the deal in a moment. “I’m in. We’ll be there,” he ground through gritted teeth.

“Good. By the way – don’t be visiting any motels in the near future. We’d hate to have to kill you or the nice contact man. We prefer not to leave a mess when we don’t have too. Play nice and maybe we’ll let you play again in the future. Money is never a problem.”

Chaz just nodded, watching warily as Harper and Bronski pulled the two unconscious men into the empty parking stall and dumped them there. The three Warder troopers then exited the way they had entered the garage and at Cascade’s unspoken order piled into the car and drove off.

“He’s going to try to take the money by force without giving up our crew,” opined Harper. “His pride is wounded. He’ll want payback.”

“Probably,” agreed Sammi. “I’m counting on it actually. If he does play on the up and up we’ll make the trade. But we’ll be setting up for a different ops plan. Right now we need to get team members on that theatre and keep a tail on Chaz.”

“You can drop us off near the theatre while the squads gather their gear for prolonged surveillance,” offered Bronski. “We’ll keep an eye on the place.”

“No can do,” countered Sammi. “You two have something else to take care of.”

“Oh?” asked Harper with a raised eyebrow. “What would that be?”

“Someone has to buy, borrow, or steal a blue car and a small bus of some sort,” she grinned.

Yawni Bahti wore a huge smile as she watched the waterline wash down the cockpit viewports. She had slowed her march up the side of the island a bit to get an eyeful of the swirling foam as her *Camelot* ‘Mech emerged from its hike along the ocean floor. That had been a blast. Not as exciting as real combat but the novelty of performing a sub-marine search had been entertaining. Stories of BattleMechs walking under a water body to gain tactical surprise were legion but she’d never actually met anyone who had operated undersea much less done so herself. The effects on her sensors had been the most interesting of all. Some become essentially useless and others that she rarely used – like the sound gathering equipment – becoming quite helpful.

Ripping open a downed drop shuttle had been a first too. The sand swirling up had been a problem at first until she figured out to use the flow caused by the saw she was carrying to blow away the silt when it got too thick. Yawni was glad that the Colonel had brought a salvage ship though. While this area had few reefs and looked fairly smooth, the footing was actually very unstable. It was difficult to see subtle undulations as well. Between that and the current pushing against her she was happy she hadn’t been required to pick up the salvaged gear and walk all the way back. The stuff she already had was taxing her piloting skills to the max.

The ship had stayed fairly close but once they were near the shore had moved ahead to dock and unload. As her head section came fully above the water she zoomed in on the craft where it was berthed along the large concrete dock. Colonel Linna happened to be looking right at her from his position on the bow. He nodded to himself as the BattleMech rose from the water and turned to stalk out of sight, presumably to climb onto the dock. Her pulse quickened at the sight as he turned away. She hadn’t been zoomed in close enough to read his expression but she could see his body language. The Goddess was touching the commander again. The loss of innocent blood and the Colonel’s reaction to that loss had no doubt roused her attention.

Action would be immanent. This spool of wire on her shoulder would have to go ASAP.

At the head of the dock Sandi Linna waited alongside Gracie, Lawman and Captain Woods. The truck that had been backed down the cement pier took up most of the available width and they knew that John wanted the core loaded and hauled away as quickly as possible. Thus they stayed out of the way as the computer unit was lifted and swung over onto the truck with the ship's crane. John, Sergeant Harding and the two trooper-divers wrestled a tarp over the unit and then the truck came up towards them off the dock. John had hopped down and walked the distance in thought while the others stayed aboard the truck and shot the gathered officers a salute as they drove past. It didn't pass the notice of the quartet at the dock that three body sized bags had been loaded aboard the truck and covered as well.

"Where those....dead people?" asked Sandi as her eyes followed the truck past them and lingered on it's retreat up the road.

"I'm afraid so," confirmed Osmo Woods. "The crew of the shuttle. Your father felt that someone owed them a decent burial."

The thought of the dead bodies passing right by sent a little shiver down her spine but she pushed any more thoughts about them aside. She'd seen dead people before. Much closer and bloody. In fact....

*No!* she firmly told herself. Don't think about it. Sandi turned her gaze to her dad who was nearing them with a peculiarly determined gait and an expression set on his face that she had never seen before.

"Are they what's bothering my dad," she asked towards Gracie.

"Hmm? No dear," the tall MechWarrior replied absently lost in her own speculation about what might be on John's mind. "That's just his 'someone is about to get shot' look."

The instant it left her lips Gracie realized her quip wasn't appropriate given who she was talking to. But it was too late now. As she looked down at the young girl beside her Gracie kicked herself at the look of surprise and hurt in the wide eyes looking back at her.

"Crikes Sandi, that was a damn fool Joey thing for me to say." Gracie rested a hand on the girl's shoulder. "I'm just a stupid old battle-axe sometimes. He's not literally marching up here looking for someone to shoot. But whatever he discovered has obviously set off a line of thinking that he knows he has to do something about. I've seen that look plenty of times. It just means we're about to do some serious planning. Right Lawman?"

Sven turned his huge head towards the two and nodded an agreement. "No worries Sandi. He's just thinking."

Despite his words, privately he was inclined to agree with Mother Goose's original statement. John was quit adept at hiding his personal feelings when he choose to but it wasn't his ingrained habit to do so. In the past when Sven had seen their CO looking that way it was because John's sense of morality and decency had been offended. When that happened Colonel Linna had a tendency to act about the situation – which usually meant that the shooting part of their job was about to start.

"I wonder how his news will dovetail with ours," wondered Captain Woods out loud. The ship didn't have a secure radio set up so other than general information regarding arrival time not much had been discussed over the open comms between those on the island and John out at sea.

John walked up to the waiting foursome, smiled at his daughter, then turned his steady gaze on the other three present. "What happened that changed the patrol pattern?"

Since their return to the academy grounds John had kept four BattleMechs on patrol duty and two off. The three shifts had been staggered so that at any one time only two MechWarriors would be outside their mounts. As he, Gracie and Sven made three with Yawni a fourth, obviously Gracie had decided to change the standing orders for some reason.

"We've been monitoring the militia comm traffic," supplied Osmo. "The raiders up north have finished their looting and have set up camp rather than ship out. The militia expects them to march south against Nuevo San Diego and is drawing into a battle line just outside the city."

Gracie took over the narrative at that point. "As the raiders are headed for the city and the city defenders are setting up to repel them that doesn't leave anyone to come bother us. Infantry pickets are still out there and we've been using the VTOL for hourly sweeps but I figured that I would call in the 'Mechs and have the tech crew update their prep status and give the pilots a chance to rest. I figured that you'd probably want to move against the raiders. Especially if Lieutenant Cascade comes through as she thinks she will."

"She found the crew?" John asked in pleased surprise.

Osmo took over the report duties once again. "She's pretty sure. About ninety minutes ago she sent a coded flash. A local gang has the crew hostage. The gang was in contact with the Blakists but Cascade doesn't know for sure if they made the initial hit on ComStar. It seems most probable this gang did it but whether on their own or for hire she doesn't know. Anyway she set up a ransom deal with the group but expects that the gang will not deal in good faith. Thus she is preparing to storm the location she believes the crew is being held at and will go to ground with the crew inside the city until she gets further orders from us. Either by funds or force she expects to have the crew back before sunrise tomorrow. Unfortunately she cannot ascertain if any of Captain Lar's crew has been killed or injured. It is remotely possible they are all dead already and there is no crew left to rescue. She left two contact times if you want to call her off or adjust her plans."

"I see," John breathed out slowly as his mind ran through many implications and courses of action. "Her news is better than mine. My guess would be that the Wobblies backed the raid that took the crew from ComStar. Not that ComStar had any right to arrest them in the first place. Either way, I'm not in a mood to play nice about it. Tell Cascade that she should try to keep any destruction to a minimum but otherwise she and her team are to consider her ops area a free fire zone. Oh, add that she shouldn't waste any resources tracking the Word of Blake agents but instead spend all her effort on getting the crew back any way she can. The Wobblies will come to us now that we have the core. We don't need to know what rock they live under at the moment."

“Yes Sir,” responded Woods formally.

“As to that raider force...is it still two lances?” John asked.

“That’s what the island militia thinks,” agreed Osmo.

“Well, not much choice in the matter really. Gracie made the same call I would have. We can’t risk leaving it to the militia forces.” Had John not been preoccupied with the need to safeguard the academy students he would have already marched north to run the raiders off from the towns they were robbing. He still had a deep seated hatred of those that went pirate and preyed on the weak.

“Uh...Dad?” interjected Sandi tentatively. “I know I’m really not supposed to be part of the conversation...but why do you have to go fight the raider ‘Mechs? We still have to get back into the city. Isn’t it better for us if the ComStar and Raider ‘Mechs mix it up?”

John regarded his daughter with an unreadable expression for a moment. He really should have run her off before listening to Osmo’s report on the team in the city. Not that she would let the information slip but the more she knew the more danger she could be put in simply because she knew something valuable. Yet it seemed that he had quickly gotten used to having her trailing him into planning sessions. She certainly was getting a first hand look at the kind of life she was intent on living. That was for sure if nothing else was.

“I’d like nothing better than to watch the two face off in an open field and pound each other to scrap. But that’s not what would happen. The ComStar ‘Mechs will stay in the city core near their relay base as their top priority mission is to defend that compound. So the militia will take the brunt of the attack and judging by the way they ran from our ‘Mechs they won’t stay around too long against the raider BattleMechs either. A good deal of city will get trashed when the ‘Mechs clash there. Plus we still have two important assets in Nuevo San Diego. Our DropShip and it’s crew. While I don’t mind tangling with pirates simply on general principal we’re faced with the problem that the only people that are going to seriously defend our ship and crew are us. The pirates will want to capture that ship if they can and there will be plenty of people waiting to sell them the information that the crew is missing.”

“It might get pretty tight,” observed Sven. “We don’t have enough ‘Mechs to fight the Raiders and guard the academy against a push if ComStar tries to run out here while we’re busy or a fast raider ‘Mech or two decides to come see what we might be hiding over here.”

“Agreed,” sighed John. “We’re just going to have to be real good. And luckily I have some of the best ‘Warriors available with me. Off the top of my head I’d say our best bet is to have boats standing by to evac the kids. Despite this being an island area so far none of the players involved have any significant naval elements. We’ll meet in an hour to lay out a battle plan to cut off the pirates before they get to the city. They really aren’t our major concern at this point. Hopefully they’ll break and run away at a show of force by us. That renegade Lyran officer probably can’t afford to lose any of his ‘Mechs. I doubt he has replacements.”

“Which brings us back to whatever your news is,” nodded Gracie. “We have a major Robehead problem don’t we?”

“More than you know,” sighed John. “Any of you get a decent look at what we fished from that shuttle before we covered it?”

“Not really. Looked kinda familiar,” shrugged Gracie.

“It certainly looked like a vehicle or ‘Mech component,” agreed Sven. “But we were up here to stay out of the way and didn’t get a good look.”

As she hadn’t gotten her head bit off the last time she had spoken up, Sandi felt emboldened to add her own observation. “It was shaped a lot like your master C3 units but smaller. Some sort of specialized BattleMech computer would be my guess.”

“Sweet mother....” gasped Gracie. At Sandi’s prompting the MechWarrior realized why the unit had looked familiar. It was a smaller version of the one stuffed in her *Awesome*. While the youngster had no reason to intuitively grasp the implications Gracie did - even if she wasn’t part of the Linna family clan.

Osmo Woods’ eyes narrowed. “Are you thinking that they recently stole the data or are you thinking about what the Blakest Precentor said?”

“The latter,” John replied darkly. Noting both Sven’s and Sandi’s confused expressions he decided to lay out his whole line of thought. He’d had a considerable amount of time on the return trip to try to piece the whole mess together.

“We examined the outer casing thoroughly on the ship,” John supplied. “The Chief confirmed the same things I saw. Not only did it look like a scale model of our advanced C3 master unit it even had the exact same power and data ports ours has down to the prong formations. The communications, cooling, back up power batteries and electronic shielding surround the central data processing and storage core within. Harding figures that ComStar has notably smaller and better battle computer equipment than ours in the center wrapped by other equipment that can’t be reduced much more than what we’ve managed to do and still retain effectiveness. Thus it has almost the same shape as it has a smaller central core. It’s not the kind of thing you just slap together in a year or two. My family’s company worked on an advanced C3 for going on thirty years. The earliest work was marred by suicides and accidental killings of the lead researchers. Then when I was a kid and the work had finally almost reached prototype stage a fire wiped out the lab and killed everyone there. Just before I went to the Suomi Academy a hidden copy of the work was found and DEW Industries was able to produce working units of the C3 by the time I took over the Warders and rebuilt a BattleMech force within it. That final stage went without a hitch. No problems at all. The bad luck curse was suddenly over.”

Gracie made the obvious connection. “Those bastards were sabotaging your work and stealing the research. By the time the research turned up again in your academy years they already had something better underway so there wasn’t a need to mess with DEW Industries anymore. I never did trust the damn Robeheads.”

“The Word of Blake person that talked to us didn’t say what was on the shuttle,” supplied Osmo. “But she did imply that ComStar had set fire to a DEW facility in the past.”

“That feels odd,” wondered Sven out loud. “Out of the blue she just happened to let drop that ComStar used to firebomb Linna property? What’s her game?”

“I’ve been asking myself the very same question for the past few hours,” answered John as the same facial set he walked up onto the dock with returned unconsciously to his features. “Unfortunately I don’t have a clue who on this planet knows what between the ComStar and Wobbly factions. If either of them does know what was on the shuttle and where it originally came from they would have to assume that I would recognize their advanced C3 for what it was. From the ComStar side of things - assuming somebody involved was aware of my personal history with the C3 history - then ComStar might conclude that I came here with the Warders to grab it. Coupled with the fact we have direct ties with House Marik these days they couldn’t afford to assume that we popped out of semi-retirement and dropped in on Carver V with a bunch of BattleMechs just to make a money losing trip to pick up some school kids.”

John rubbed at the back of his neck as he continued. “What I don’t get is the Word of Blake angle on this. They could have just asked Marik’s Admiral Alexander to request our help looking for the shuttle. I wouldn’t have liked it but I wouldn’t have had much of a choice if she pushed the issue. I owe her a favor. So either the Wobblies don’t want the League intelligence to know they stole it or maybe they don’t want Alexander to know they botched the job and lost the shuttle. Or maybe Word of Blake’s ROM didn’t know for sure that the shuttle went down here and had all local agents within a given range of Terra on the lookout for any move by ComStar that smelled of them looking for something. It gets confusing real fast. I know from previous dealings with the Wobblies that they like to play elaborate psych games and try to manipulate people into doing what WoB wants. Maybe it’s a big over-complicated conspiracy plan to get us to find their damn C3 for free. After all, ComStar might be the one that doesn’t know for sure exactly where the shuttle went down. Maybe it’s all a wild coincidence and we happened to put down on top of a computer core that no one in the area – Word of Blake or ComStar – realizes is a stolen knockoff of my company’s work. There are just too many maybes right now. As to Sven’s specific question; I don’t know what her game is. I imagine she brought up the fire bit by way of trying to convince me that ComStar was untrustworthy while Word of Blake was my helpful friend.”

“That’s pretty stupid,” grouched Sandi. “How dumb does she think you are Dad? Word of Blake is made up of ComStar drop outs. The people that set the fire could just as easily be Word of Blake as ComStar at this point in time.”

“The thought had crossed my mind,” smiled John.

“Sporting that body of hers and with that breathy voice, I think she was pretty much counting on your Dad not paying too much attention to minor details,” snorted Gracie.

“Why?” a confused Sandi wanted to know. Everyone knew that her dad always paid attention to details.

Gracie actually blushed. “Uh...I think I’ll let your father explain that one to you later.” She shot an apologetic look at John.

“I want to grab a quick shower and wash this dried salt brine off me,” John announced. “Osmo, I’d appreciate it if you would gather what intel we have about the raiders for the meeting. Gracie and Sven why don’t you two see how we’re doing with ‘Mech readiness. Yawni’s going to need a priority flag on yanking that extra junk off her ‘Mech.”

“Roger,” nodded Sven as the others also acknowledged his orders. The three Warder officers drifted off in one direction while John headed in another with Sandi walking alongside him.

“How are the other kids holding up?” He asked by way of making conversation.

“Most of them okay,” she shrugged. “A couple of them are still pretty spooked.”

“Understandable all things considered. And how about you? Things have gotten pretty rough this trip. Obviously I wouldn’t have brought you along if I had expected any chance of real trouble.”

“I’ve been in worse scrapes,” she shrugged stoically.

John cringed inside because he knew that she was right.

“I’ll be scared when we get back to Outreach,” Sandi decided out loud. “Until then the other kids are counting on me to be strong for them.” *Plus I don’t want to add any extra worry to your plate*, she added to herself. She knew her father would already be shredding himself inside for bringing her into this mess. She had to remain cool and collected for him. He had more than enough things to worry about right now.

“Fair enough,” he nodded with a fond smile at her as he reached over and tousled her hair. “Once we get off this rock I’ll join you and we’ll be scared together.”

He let it go at that and they walked the rest of the way to their living quarters in silence. A few things were troubling Sandi still and although she had meant to hide her doubts her father had picked up on the vibe.

“What is it you’re turning over in your head so hard?” John asked her gently as he stopped and leaned against a walkway railing.

“Well...it’s just the whole C3 thing with ComStar I guess. I mean...why would they kill a bunch of innocent people over a stupid thing like a BattleMech computer. It’s not that important, it’s just a thing. A thing they could have probably built on their own. It doesn’t make sense. It’s...it’s not right!”

John sighed heavily as he tried to formulate an answer. “Some people are obsessed with power and control. However much they have they want more and they want everyone else to have less. It’s like a disease I guess. They start seeing every

thing as a potential piece of their power machinery and everyone as a pawn in their control games. Those people don't place much value on any life that isn't their own. They often delude themselves that some greater good is being served by spilling the blood of a few hapless innocents or potential foes."

He placed a hand on each shoulder and turned her so they were looking at each other face to face.

"Sandi, people kill each other in this universe all the time. For love, for honor, for money, for power, by accident, in self defense, for revenge, just because they can....for all kinds of reasons. Sometimes the reason is a good one and sometimes a bad one. Either way dead is dead and you can't take it back. People like myself and the other people in the unit try very hard to make sure that the killing we do is a smaller amount that stops a much larger amount of killing from happening later on. But despite all the wars and fighting humanity has endured over the centuries far more people have never taken a life than have killed someone. That's what good people like Ranger risk their lives and die for. To protect as many people as possible from having to fight for their lives or from getting hurt and killed by others over power or riches. It doesn't always work out, but that's what we fight for."

"I know as well as anyone that life isn't fair," mumbled Sandi as turned her head to one side to wipe a tear way on her shoulder. "But when I think about people doing stuff like Mom did...I just can't understand." She took a deep breath and fought to keep control of herself. *This is not acceptable*, she snapped at herself. Her dad and Aunt Holly had gone through far worse than she had and they didn't fall to pieces out of nowhere just because something popped up to remind them that bad things happened all the time.

"Snowflake," her dad said soothingly as he pulled her into his chest in a gentle hug. "You're far too young to take the weight of the universe on your shoulders. The universe was spinning along on it's merry way long before you and I were born and will be here long after we die. While we're here we do the best we can to make it a better place but you can't fix everything. If you think too hard about it you'll drive yourself crazy. Trust me, I know from experience. You're a beautiful, intelligent, compassionate fourteen year old young lady. Let yourself be a teenager as much as you can, don't be in a big hurry to take on the responsibilities of an adult. You are not like your mother – but you don't have to be like me either. Let yourself find out who Sandi is and let the universe take care of itself for a while."

It was often a silent payer of his that she wouldn't end up being like him. He often wasn't very comfortable with what he felt he had become. John had accepted that he was a warrior and – essentially – a war lord. Violence had become an acceptable fact of his life. Between he, his ex-wife and the family businesses their daughter had been born into they had probably already polluted any chance that Sandi might take a different path but he had missed the first half of his daughter's life chasing his nightmares while looking for his sister. Sandi's mother had spent those years trying to make their daughter into a socialite without success. John knew he had no right at this point to try to direct Sandi's life in any given direction. He simply had the responsibility to support her any way he could. Granted after the last few days she had essentially started on the warrior's path when instead he had hoped the boring realities of military life where they weren't celebrities might have deflected her path.

She hugged him fiercely then stepped back. "Okay Dad," she smiled. "I'm done with my bout of teenage angst. Run along and make yourself presentable to the troops."

John snorted to himself in mild amusement. He knew when he'd been dismissed. "Yes Ma'am." He snapped up a salute.

"Daaad," she drawled as she pushed him towards his door. "Stop being silly." It bugged her when he teased her like that. But deep down she knew she liked it too. It was like a hint of what he must have been like when she was a baby back before his parents got murdered in the *Starcade* massacre. Sandi backed up three steps then turned and made a quick cut around a huge potted plant type thing that was at the sidewalk intersection and almost walked right into Gracie Aukland who had been concealed behind the two meter tall shrubbery.

Gracie took a step back in surprise to avoid the collision. She'd been expecting Sandi to go the opposite direction rather than backtrack. "Uh...hi kiddo."

Sandi eyed the tall MechWarrior suspiciously. "Where you standing there listening?"

"Not on purpose," protested Gracie. The teenager continued to glare at her. "Mostly," Gracie added weakly.

"I see," snorted Sandi and Gracie had to work hard to keep an amused grin off her face for the John had a tendency to say that exact same thing in the exact same tone when he caught someone out in an obvious falsehood but was going to let it pass.

"I was on my way to my room to grab my service 'puter," explained Gracie. "I heard you two but didn't want to interrupt. So I overheard most of the conversation. My apologies."

"Well, no big deal really," shrugged Sandi. "Just your usually silly father – daughter stuff."

"Usual for you two maybe, but I doubt usual for most people," scoffed Gracie. "But I can certainly understand why you'd be thinking about stuff like that. Seems like an extra heaping of heartache and tragedy got tossed the Linna direction. But your Dad's come through it all okay and he's a wise man for it. He doesn't always take his own advice of course. Has a bad tendency to take on the worries of the universe onto his own shoulders for example."

"I didn't help any on that score," sighed Sandi. "I shouldn't have pushed so hard to come on this mission. Now I'm just adding to his worries."

"Oh I wouldn't worry about that," smiled Gracie softly. "Despite your proven track record of getting what you want it was never your decision. If your Father hadn't felt it safe he wouldn't have let you come. In fact he almost sent you home from Outreach with Lawman."

"Why would he foist me off on Uncle Sven like that?"

“I keep forgetting that you don’t know all the unit secrets,” grinned Gracie. “Mums still the word but Uncle Sven is going to be Daddy Sven in about four months.”

Sandi was happy for Lawman. The giant sized MechWarrior had gotten married just over a year ago in what had been quite a large celebration despite Sven’s preference for a quiet ceremony.

“So your father was thinking about sliding you both out of harm’s way in one act. He knew that none of us could turn down a request to safeguard you if he asked. But he also knew that Sven would feel just as strongly as himself about staging this rescue mission and that if we did run into trouble it’d be handy to have Lawman sitting in a ‘Mech cockpit to help out. It was a tough call but the kind of decision he has to make all the time. So don’t you feel guilty about being here as it wasn’t your fault. Besides, he’d probably be more worried about you if you were in transit and out of contact than here where he knows where you are and what the general situation is.”

Sandi ran that last thought through her mind and pondered Gracie’s statement. The woman she called Auntie Gracie knew her dad better than anyone else probably. Even herself. If Mother Goose said her dad was probably less worried with her here rather than on a DropShip someplace then Sandi would accept her word for it.

“Now, as you are here,” continued Gracie, “we might as well put your freeloading backside to work. As I recall you’re a fair hand with a multi-meter. We’re running a little short of techs at the moment so why don’t you come help us finish the diagnostic testing.”

“Yes Ma’am,” agreed Sandi enthusiastically. Even something tedious to do was far better than having nothing to do, and anything to do with BattleMechs was always fascinating to her. Although she had to admit to herself that she was starting to see far more represented by the giant ‘Mechs than just complicated fighting machines used to battle other complicated fighting machines. She couldn’t help but wonder what it was the veteran MechWarriors were seeing in their mind’s eye when they would occasionally just stand and stare silently at their majestic war steeds.

A dim pool of light pushed back at the darkness just outside the main entryway to the Bifrost Command Trailer. Carver V happened to rotate close enough to Terra’s spin to operate on a twenty four hour clock by simply adding a monthly adjuster hour. It had just turned eleven o’clock local time, or twenty-three hundred in standard military terms. Arrayed around the four people standing in the lamp light where the shadowy forms of four BattlMechs with their running lights almost merging into the bright stars visible in the night sky. Two other ‘Mechs were hunched over closer to the trailer. They were dim now, waiting for the two MechWarriors conferring on the ground to climb within and give them life.

“Sounds like Cascade’s team is as ready as they can be then,” John observed quietly to Osmo Woods to keep his daughter from overhearing. Sandi was standing a few paces away where she was talking with Gracie.

“I’ll keep you updated,” promised Captain Woods. “You ready to deploy Sir?”

“Just about,” nodded John. Movement caught his eye and he noticed Doctor Svengali walking towards them with his blue-green lab coat fluttering in the mild night breeze.

“Good evening Doctor,” nodded Osmo.

“Hey Doc,” added John at the same time.

“It would be a better one if mayhem was not in the air,” sighed the Doctor. “But I know that you only do what must be done.”

“How are the kid’s doing?” John asked with true concern.

“The two worse cases are now in stable condition. In another day or so they should be able to safely stand the strain of an orbital lift. Physically they can all eventually be healed. Emotionally? We can only hope for the best. It would be best to avoid any more traumatic incidents getting off this tropic shooting range.”

“I’m working on that Doc,” sighed John. “It’s my number one priority.”

The Doctor smiled wanly. “Forgive a tired old man his grumpiness. I know that you are doing everything you can to get us back home without placing the children in harm’s way. And do not be coming back here with any new holes in that body of yours by the way. I have already declared tomorrow an emergency surgery free day.”

“I’ll try real hard not to mess up your golf plans Doc,” grinned John.

His expression soured a bit as Doctor Svengali reached into his pocket and pulled out two small plastic boxes and tossed one each to John and Gracie. “I did not say that I would have time to golf,” he chastised.

“I know. Sorry. And thanks Doc,” nodded John as he waved the small box.

“You know that I do not like dispensing those.”

“And I don’t like using them,” shrugged John in agreement. “But we do what we must. Sisu Doc.”

“Sisu,” agreed the stately figure sadly. “Good luck to you John Linna. And you as well Gracie Aukland. I shall see you both tomorrow.”

“You can bet on that Doctor,” waved Gracie jauntily.

“Thanks Doc, we’ll be careful as always.” John turned his attention to his daughter. “Hey Sandi, we won’t be in position until tomorrow morning. Make sure you get some sleep tonight okay? Osmo will let you into the Bifrost later if you want to listen to the comm chatter. Assuming you’ll behave yourself.”

“I will,” promised Sandi. Although how her dad expected her to get any sleep when he was out marching towards a battle was beyond her.

“Roger that,” smiled John. “I need to go make a quick check on the Chief’s progress then I’m going to mount up and we’ll get this show on the road.” He was talking more to Gracie than Sandi but it was notable information for both of them.

“Good luck then Dad,” Sandi mumbled into his shoulder as she hugged him briefly. “Smack down some bad guys for me.”

“You’ve been hanging around with Auntie Gracie all day haven’t you,” he snorted in amusement. “I’ll see if I can ‘drop down some smack’ for you. And don’t get to worrying. I’ll be back around noonish.”

“I know,” shrugged Sandi as she stepped away from her father. “You always come back.”

“That’s what they say,” allowed John as he lingered for a final glimpse of his young daughter then turned away to go see how Harding had done with that computer unit they’d fished from the water.

“Not to worry,” announced Gracie as she laid a long hand on Sandi’s shoulder. “He’s really does always come back.”

“I know,” Sandi gratefully patted the older woman’s hand. “What’s in that little box?”

“Oh this? A few *Wake-Wake* pills. Mild stimulants,” shrugged Gracie.

“You guys use drugs?” Sandi chirped in surprise.

“Not very often,” Gracie explained matter-of-factly. “We don’t allow them during training exercises for example. But in a real drop if we’re looking at ten plus hours in the cockpit added to awake time prepping before the mission then a little pharmaceutical help to stay alert is on hand. The neurohelmet calibration is very sensitive though. Dosages have to be kept very low or you get weird feedback effects. I’ve actually seen ‘Mechs with the jitters from over amped pilots. It’s bad for the myomer and can make it hard to hit what you’re shooting at.”

“Oh,” replied Sandi as she had no other response on tap. She’d never really considered the physical conditions of operations like this one before. Walk five hours in the dark to get to the battle then walk five hours back. BattleMechs weren’t like an aircraft that could be put on autopilot. It made logical sense. But still...her dad had never smoked and as far as Sandi had been able to tell after living with him for the past few years didn’t drink much either. Heck, he hardly had any bad habits at all. Didn’t even drink coffee. To think that he used drugs sometimes was somehow unsettling even though her logical mind was cognizant of the need and advantages. Sisu right?

“Come Child, I will walk you back to your room,” prompted Doctor Svengali.

Sandi glanced at him and nodded, but looked back at Lieutenant Colonel Aukland as she stepped towards the doctor. The serious looking woman in the high tech cooling suit with her slim puukko knife belted at her hip, combat shotgun dangling from a sling and neurohelmet hanging from one hand was definitely MechWarrior Aukland at this moment and not “Aunt Gracie”. The two were the same person of course. Yet there were not. Just like the man she had just hugged was both her loving father and a coldly calculating military commander. And those BattleMechs lurking in the darkness were both instruments of protection and vessels of terror. The full depth of who and what the people and things she had been growing up around had never really dawned on her until now. Maybe it was the things she had seen on this trip. Maybe it was just that she was growing up and understanding more. Maybe both. But whatever the reason, she was also aware that she was both a teenaged girl and something else as well. Just what exactly what else she wasn’t clear on yet.

“Good luck Mother Goose,” waved Sandi as Gracie turned to go.

“Thanks kiddo. Take care while we’re gone. See you tomorrow afternoon.”

“Tomorrow,” agreed Sandi with a determined nod. They’d all be back tomorrow because Sandi wouldn’t let herself consider it being any other way.

*Nuevo San Diego city*  
*Baja California Island, Carver V*  
*July 08, 3057*

Trooper Gailen Lefontaine lay on his belly in the warm night gazing into a snooperscope through the small gap between the tar and gravel roof he lay on and the decorative false roofing that made the flat topped food stand he was perched on appear to be a taller, fancy tiled, structure. The façade that created the impression of a taller and sloped building ringed the actual roof of the building and was open to the sky creating an ideal lair from which to observe the taller theatre across the street. Even if someone stood on the roof of the theatre they would not have line of sight to the Warbler trooper laying along the base of the false roof front.

He took his eyes from the scope and looked at the forearm mounted infantry battle computer he was wearing. It was just past 2:30 am local civilian time. Pretty soon the gang members would have to emerge if they were going to make the 20 minute cross town drive to be at the designated meeting place by 3 am. It was yet another sign that these were not professionals posing as gang types to the seasoned special ops trooper. Professionals would have already been at the exchange site doing a recon. Two squad members of his unit had been there for hours now, preparing for the Razorfins. Just as he had spent many hours hunkered down on this quick food shop. It was the long, boring, pre-mission work that was the mark of true professionals.

The eatery below him was a garish affair that catered mainly to those looking for cheap and quick food. Something called fish tacos was the house specialty according to the signs. Assuming that fish tacos could be considered a specialty in any way. There were hundreds of millions of these types of lunch stands spread across the Inner Sphere. Gailen had been on ten different planets in his life so far and curiously there was a sameness to these types of places no matter which world you were on. Sort of like death and taxes, fast food joints were some sort of cosmic constant.

Although part of his mind was musing over random things, he continued to keep a close vigil over the theatre. Getting up here had proved no challenge. As usual for a food stand of this nature the only security measures were a few cameras inside and locks on the doors. He’d just pulled up into the parking lot and waited carefully until no one was about and quickly scaled

the “secure” ladder access and hopped onto the roof in broad daylight. Civilians usually paid very little attention to their surroundings, something a professional could take advantage of. The rest of the surveillance team had gone in and ordered some food just to make sure that no identifiable Razorfin members were inside as a precaution then drove away.

The team hadn't gone very far away though. On the opposite side of where a ratty looking chain link fence surrounded the theatre parking area was a long light industrial building with a tall roof that housed a few vehicle repair shops, a parts store, and a discount furniture outlet. Putting a man on top of that building had been just as easy. In less than fifteen minutes the enemy building was under full surveillance. In the hours sense there had been no sighting of the missing DropShip crew, but just before nightfall three rumbled looking yahoos wearing red and black jackets emblazoned with Razorfins on the back had walked over from the theater and passed practically directly under Gailen. He'd heard one of them complaining about having to play waiter for captives while a second laughed that it was the “Captain's money” so they might as well get a little something to eat out of the whole “deal”. Not conclusive of course – but enough to indicate to the trooper that the probability was high that Captain Larrs and her crew were being held inside the cinema building as Lieutenant Cascade had surmised. He had relayed the information via his wireless computer link by painstakingly tapping in a text message.

Then he had waited. Every fifteen minutes a small icon would appear on his arm computer that simply informed him that everything was going as the Lieutenant desired for the moment and for everyone to hold their posts as ordered. He'd send a non verbal affirmative and the icon would change colors once everyone had checked in with Cascade. Isolated as he was on the food shack, Gailen knew that the rest of the team was out preparing and so far nothing amiss had occurred. He liked the system. It made waiting on surveillance duty much easier when there was continual reassurance that you hadn't been cut off and left out to dry. Joining the Suomi Warders three years ago had been the best career move he'd made. These people knew how to operate. Probably why they were in the business of teaching others.

The lights of the glassed in lobby area had been on all night and movement by the half asleep guard posted within caught his attention so he zoomed in. Chaz appeared followed by seven of what must have been some of the gang's shooters as they all carried guns of various types. He could tell they were laughing and joking but as he didn't have a parabolic mic available had no idea what they were saying. The eight gang members got into two different vehicles and roared off. As there was no sign of the captives Chaz obviously wasn't planning on making a straight forward exchange for the money. Tough luck for him. He had probably just signed his own death warrant. One thing Gailen had learned right quick was you don't screw with Lieutenant Cascade.

This was what the operation had been waiting for. The majority of the spec ops team was waiting about five minutes away in a small moving van. Had the captives been taken from the building then Cascade and the van would have headed for the HVAC plant to facilitate the exchange. Now they would drive straight here to take the captives by storm while the gang had it's membership split between two locations.

Gailen turned his attention to his arm computer and activated the communications mode and selected the icon that was designated to mean the enemy had left for the meeting place without any of the DropCrew, then sent the number eight to indicate how many had left. Almost immediately it began blinking to indicate that the message was received and the team was in route. Once they got close to the theatre Cascade would come on voice comms for a situation report. The trooper got busy scanning the area very closely to make sure he didn't overlook anything. Lives could easily depend on the accuracy of his observations.

The dirty white moving van rolled up to the fence behind the gang lair. A dark clad figure hopped out from the passenger door of the cab and cut the old iron chain holding the fence shut with a large cutting tool. After the van rolled in the figure closed the gate and draped the chain to hold it closed for the moment before hopping back in. Sammi was seated between the driver and where Sergeant Harper was climbing back in with her eyes on the rear wall of the theatre.

Why the Razorfins had chosen this particular place as their domain she hadn't a clue. Someone in the gang probably had a family member that owned the building or some such. It certainly couldn't have been chosen for security concerns. The only windows faced front, there were no cameras, and they didn't even leave the parking lot lights on at night. Someone on the roof could see behind and to the sides of the building of course. She knew there was roof access from within the building as several Razorfin members had been seen by her watch team on the roof a few times during the day. No one was up there now which made the operation much simpler. Sniping guards was always a chancy thing. Luckily it wouldn't be necessary for this op.

With it's lights off the van simply pulled up to the side of the soundproofed building. The rear door rolled up and out swarmed seven armed troopers wearing their armored combat vests along with the lower arms and thigh sections, their enclosed combat helmets, and a variety of weapons. Two ladders also appeared, one that was propped up to allow the team to scramble to the roof of the box like cargo section of the van and a second that went from the roof to the lip of the building top. In less than three minutes the seven warriors plus Sammi herself where up on the roof and the two remaining with the van had lowered the ladders and hunkered down inside the van. Anyone driving by that looked closely at the old theatre would see a beat up looking truck parked next to a beat up looking building. With most of the city worried about what was coming down from the northern part of the island there really wasn't anyone about in the predawn to notice a beat up moving truck.

As easy as that the assault team had secured the roof and was covering the access hatch. Now came the tricky part thought Sammi to herself. Ordinarily you would want to do simulated attacks in a mock up of the target building before trying a hostage rescue by force. They didn't have the time and unlike the action tri-vids where floor plans was always conveniently on line for the heroes to hack into she had been unable to get a map of the building. They were going in the worse way – blind. As her arm was still stiff she probably should have kept herself off of the raid team but there was simply no way she was going

to drop the responsibility of leading a blind raid on one of her subordinates. The responsibility was hers and she would not duck out on it.

She nodded her helmeted head towards the hatch. "Team One. Hatch. Go," she announced into the helmet mic.

One trooper pulled open the covering while remaining out of any potential line of fire. A second held her weapon out over the opening, using the camera link mounted to the silenced submachinegun to sweep the stairwell. Seeing no movement on the small screen mounted inside her faceplate Ouni slipped silently into the opening with her weapon held low. Her team mate slipped in behind her to provide cover. The rest quickly followed into the stairwell and then moved quietly through a door into a darkened empty hallway. Having night vision gear and weapons emitting a light beam above the visible spectrum the darkness was not really a hindrance for the team. Team One moved to the end of the hall and discovered the elevator and stairway down. They had passed three doors on the way, one of them being marked "Projection Room". That was the one Cascade had been banking on using to advantage.

"Team Two, enter projection room. Team Three is Delta cover. One and four will watch these other doors," Cascade ordered.

Readying flash grenades Team Three stood by to either side of the door as Two got ready to enter. A test of the knob proved that it was not locked so the door was pushed open and both Team Two troopers bolted through low to opposite sides. In the instant they entered they had to make a snap decision about calling for the grenades or not. Their helmets would protect them from the disorientating flash and loud bang but using the devices could warn others in the building that something was happening. In this case the grenades were not called for.

"Projection room clear," came the call from Doren Chan of Team Two.

Leaving the hall and other doors covered by team members Sammi entered the projection room and approached the small observation windows that opened into the four different theatre rooms. The windows let the equipment operator see if the projection was working correctly. The first was dark and as far as she could tell empty. In the second the dim lights were on and among the trash tossed about the space were seated a line of people, their heads all slumped in what she hoped was simply slumber. They were in the very first row of seats. A guard was seated in a folding chair in front of the screen with her head bent down looking at the screen of a small electronic device. Probably a game Sammi thought. What looked to be a laser carbine lay across the woman's lap. There could easily be other Razorfins in there as well but her angel only allowed her to see the front quarter of the screening room. A third one was dark, the last lit and had all the seats pulled out. Various piles of goods – much stolen presumably – was piled in that one.

"Paydirt," Cascade announced into her mic as she went back to look at the hostages again. "East facing screen room. Looks like they're asleep in front seats. I make one guard with a carbine in front of them by the screen. Possible other hostiles in the room. I count...only nineteen crew. Someone's missing. Teams One and Two will secure the other rooms on this level on my mark. Three cover the hall entrance from below."

What had once been offices on the upper level had been converted to sleeping areas although it was obvious that not all the gang members slept here on a regular basis. Along with some ammunition and weapon power packs of various types one sleeping female was found. Knowing they might need live members to find the location of the missing crew person the sleeper was grabbed with the intention of gagging her but the maneuver proved pointless as the figure didn't stir. A quick check revealed that she was heavily intoxicated or drugged and wouldn't be going anyplace for a number of hours so they left the comatose form in the room and prepared to go down the stairs.

The eight troopers then flowed down the stairs to the main level in a silent wave of deadly purpose. Team One rushed through the lower door and dropped into firing stances to cover the main lobby area as the rest immediately passed by following Sammi and quick stepped directly towards the doors to where the hostages were held. At the moment the lobby was clear but they knew from the outside team that two Razorfins were in the front center section just out of sight around a concession stand. As Cascade lead her group into the individual theatre room the two members of Team One shifted to take up cover in the short entry hall to the restrooms. While Toren kept the front lobby area covered Ouni slipped into each restroom to make sure they were clear so that Team One could hold a covering position without a sudden surprise wandering out of the a toilet stall and stumbling over them.

In the theater the doors opened to a wall with the hall running to both sides so that patrons would be funneled to either the right or left sides of the seats. Sammi took her partner to the left while the other four went right. With the enclosed combat helmets they could talk quietly and not be heard except over the radio link. Sammi crept forward ready to cover the guard at the screen while the two teams on the other side would back in and be ready to cover the upper seating that was not visible from the projection room. At her signal they stormed in.

Toggling on the two speakers built into helmet Lieutenant Cascade barked for no one to move as her forces swarmed in with weapons at the ready.

Startled by the sudden intrusion the guard at the screen looked up in surprise and dropped her electronic game. Her eyes widen in fear as she realized two armored people were bearing down on her along the wall with their weapons trained right at her. Bulky black chest plates and dark visored helmets concealed the intruder's identities. She didn't even think about trying to grab at the carbine in her lap.

There were two more Razorfins in the upper seats. Both had been intent on settling down for a little snooze but one of them didn't share the screen guard's good sense. He tried to pull a needler pistol from his waistband and was hit by about a quarter clip of ammunition each by two different Warder troopers. The subsonic rounds fired by the silenced submachine guns were heavy slugs that alternated between hollow tipped rounds designed to mash open and tear up an unarmored body and ones they were quartered with a steel pin core so the round would peel open like a four bladed flower when it struck armor or bone.

Those metal blades would be spinning and slice through many anti-ballistic materials not to mention do a right nasty job on anything like a rib that crossed it's path. Crimson gore splattered out from the gang member's chest and he was dead before his limp form even hit the floor. The surviving Razorfin was very, very careful not to move as the deadly figures moved in on him.

Captain Larrs of the *Baltic Serenade* blinked the weariness from her eyes as she struggled back to consciousness. For a moment her brain didn't register what she was seeing then overwhelming relief surged through her almost bringing her to tears on the spot. She knew that armor even with no insignia. After all, the Captain had been hauling Suomi Warders across known space for the better part of decade.

Sammi held up her hand to indicate keeping quiet at the DropShip Captain as she paused to get a report from Team One. Though "silenced", any ballistic firearm does make some noise when fired. However the limited shooting had not roused the door guards at the front. With the sound deadened walls Cascade had not expected them to react but she was always careful to cover all possibilities. With a touch on her arm computer she slid open her visor so that the hostages could see her face.

"Time's short. Is everyone here capable of moving?" Sammi asked the Captain.

"Aye," replied the other woman. "Some bruises and we're stiff from sitting in these seats but we can walk."

"What happened to the one you're missing?"

"Assistant Engineer Toriseva is dead," Captain Larrs spat bitterly. "That pig up there was going to rape his wife and he tried to protect her. So he stabbed him." The Captain turned and pointed at the living gang member up in the higher seats.

Cascade's eyes narrowed to slits. Murder was on her payback list but rape was something paid back with interest when time allowed. "Did she get..." the Lieutenant started to ask.

"No thank God," breathed Larrs heavily as she fought to control her own emotions. She was their Captain. She had to be strong for them. "The leader of these...people...didn't want us messed with. I guess that whoever hired them to grab us had left specific orders about handling us. He was mad about the killing and kept the other guys away from us after that until tonight so at least Toriseva didn't die in vain."

It flashed through Sammi's mind that the engineer's killing might have had something to do with Chaz's willingness to consider selling the crew to another party. He might not have admitted to his Word of Blake handlers that one of the crew had been murdered. But there were other far more immediate matters on her mind. What Chaz did or did not tell Word of Blake didn't matter to the current situation.

"We're getting you all out. No one will be left behind," promised Cascade to the DropShip Captain. The Lieutenant turned her steely gaze on the gang member nearby. "Where's Toriseva's body?"

"He's...he's...in the...the basement," stammered the young woman. There was no doubt in her mind that she was looking into the face of death.

Looking back to the now freed hostages Cascade saw that one had collapsed into the arms of a companion near by, shaking with silent sobs. Mrs. Toriseva no doubt. Cascade turned back to the ship Captain. "We can't take her husband's murdered with us for civilian justice. If you have no objections I'll apply some immediate military justice."

Captain Larrs just nodded. She wanted to kill the bastard herself but was unsure if she could really do it in cold blood like this. She'd never killed anyone before. The Captain knew that it wouldn't be an issue at all for Samantha Cascade.

Standing with his hands on his head in the upper seats, "Darkray" Davis couldn't quite overhear the conversation taking place between the short person in the dark armor and the Captain of the ship crew but had a pretty good guess what it was about after having been pointed out by the ship Captain. By the time the short person marched up to him the visor was closed again making it impossible to see her face or read her expression. He wondered what kind of cops these were as the figure approached. Or if they even were cops.

"Name," barked the speakers of the figure as it stopped before him. It sounded like a lady. Since he hadn't been shot already she was probably some kind of cop. That meant he had a chance. His dad had money. A good lawyer, plea bargain for ratting out his supposed 'friends', a little bribe money for the jailers....all he had to do was play it cool for a few weeks.

"Mathus Davis Ma'am," he replied in a neutral voice.

The armored lady raised her forearm and plucked a small stylus from some sort of data unit mounted on her arm and made some selections then entered his name into the unit. Definitely a cop. This wouldn't be the first killing he'd wiggled out of. In fact....

He sucked in a grunt of breath in surprise as a searing pain slashed across his stomach. As his hands automatically clasped over the bleeding wound he realized that she'd just cut him open with a wicked looking knife. He hadn't even seen her draw it the motion had been so fast.

"But..." he protested as he sank to his knees in agony. It hurt so bad...so bad.

"Mathus Davis, you are hear-by executed for the crime of murder against a civilian contractor of a military command," announced the slightly distorted voice via the speakers. She reached out and grabbed his hair, yanking his head back and then the blade flashed across his throat nearly halfway to the spine. Lt. Cascade deftly stepped to one side in the same cutting motion to avoid getting splashed with any blood but Davis was unable to appreciate her skill and precision. He was dead.

Sammi let the body drop without giving the incident another thought. Her life was one of violence and death where the difference between a "good" kill and a "bad" one was often a very fine shade of gray. Her sense of morality played a part, but a complicated set of engagement rules and any practical needs of the moment were the major factors in deciding who was a valid target and who was not. On the rare occasion she was in a situation like this no one ever came along after the fact asking questions anyway. The Colonel knew what to expect from her and always made sure she knew what level of response he was comfortable with. He had made it clear that he had a very wide comfort zone in for this operation.

“Teams Two and Three,” she ordered into her helmet comms, “form up with Team One and eliminate the entrance guards. We’re going to have to secure the building so we can go to the basement. My team will cover the hostages.”

Cascade then returned to where the DropShip crew had stood and gathered. “What about that one?” Sammi asked as she pointed to the last Razorfin alive in the room.

“She was probably the best of the lot,” offered the *Serenade*’s executive officer with shrug. “Made sure we got some food and even slipped us some aspirin for a headache Janice had.”

The Lieutenant went over and studied the Razorfin girl. Early twenties was Sammi’s guess. Didn’t have the hard eyes of street fighter. They were the terrified eyes of a hanger-on finally caught in real trouble. Her overly tight beach pants had a notable wet spot in the crouch. This one was too scared to be a threat. Maybe even too scared to be of any use to Sammi’s immediate needs.

“Piss me off and you die,” hissed the speakers from the sides of the dark visor. “Be slow, lie, or break down whimpering on me and I’ll get pissed. How many of your people are in this place right now?”

Stream of consciousness speech was all the young woman could manage in her terror. “Uh...us three...and Stretch and Flitter at the door...I think Wylanda is crashed out someplace. Maybe upstairs. That’s it, I swear.”

“Do you know where the basement entrance is?”

“Uh...ye...yeah...yeah I do.”

As the wanna-be gun moll was answering her questions, Lieutenant Cascade was getting a set of terse reports over her comms. ‘Engaging’ sounded first by a ‘Tango down’ then a brief moment later another ‘Tango down’. That meant that Stretch and Flitter were taken care of. She made sure the speaker circuit was turned off before using orders to her strike team.

“According to my captive all Tangos are now accounted now for. Team Two: kill the entryway lights and pull the bodies into the lobby. Then form with Team One covering the lobby just in case my info is wrong. Team Three return here and take charge of the DropShip crew. We’ll exit out the fire escape in this room. Van Team; that will be the doorway around the corner to your rear at eight o’clock from your current facing. Back up and prepare to receive the crew. Car Team; new plan for you. Come to the van. We’ll load the deceased crewman in your trunk then you can pick up the surveillance team and meet us at rendezvous Alpha. My team will secure the body.”

She didn’t have to add anything like “let’s move it” or “the clock is running”. Her people knew what needed to be done and how to do it. The minor change in the op plan shouldn’t be a problem. It wasn’t strictly necessary but Sammi knew from past experiences that whenever possible it was best to transport your dead out of sight from the survivors. She needed the DropShip crew as mentally alert as possible until she got them under cover. Having their dead friend stuffed into the open box that was the rear of that cargo van with them would be a terrible distraction. There was no way in hell she’d leave him behind though. He’d more than earned his final trip home.

Sammi quickly explained the plan to the *Serenade*’s crew to reduce their anxiety and make sure they knew what they were supposed to do. Which was essentially to run out the door and pile into the cargo van as rapidly as possible when they were told to move out. Then she turned her attention back to the urine stained Razorfin.

“You’re going to take me to the basement now. I’m feeling unusually generous today so if you behave yourself and do as I say you get to live through all this. Assuming you do survive the next ten minutes I would suggest you consider finding something else to do with your life than hang around with sludge-pocks like the Razorfins. Now move out girl. Basement.”

Trembling, the woman scuttled toward the doorway on shaky legs. In the last few moments she had suddenly found religion and was swearing to God that if she walked out of this building alive she would go straight to that big church on Topaz street and sign up on the spot to become one of those ladies in the green and white gowns that lived and worked there.

There were no signs if God was handing out redemption this early morning. Lieutenant Samantha Cascade was done handing out retribution for the moment though. After locating the plastic wrapped body of the unfortunate assistant engineer Sammi left her captured guide zip-tie handcuffed to the railing before she and her team mate wrestled the body into the elevator entrance and departed. Sammi made sure to turn the lights off though. It was very dark, quiet and tomblike in that basement once the elevator doors slid closed.

Across town some five minutes after Cascade and the DropShip crew were rolling away from the theatre, troopers Bronski and Harper were squatting behind the roof façade of a partially burned out building chowing down on some rolls and coffee they had picked up almost an hour ago. The coffee in the giant sized plastic mugs had gone cold but they finished it off anyway as Bronski looked into the periscope eyepiece.

“Here come our chumps. Right on schedule,” announced the Warder special forces warrior.

“So what’da’ya think?” wondered Harper out loud. “They going to play nice or go for a quick kill?”

“Well they didn’t come ready to trade. My money is on a dastardly sneak attack.”

“Sorry,” drawled Harper with a grin. “I won’t take that bet. They about in position?”

“Pulling up near the doors now.”

The pair already knew what had occurred at the theatre via radio link. It had taken less time to finish the rescue than it had taken Chaz and his chosen Razorfins to drive across the city to the money drop location. From their current vantage point they could see into what was now a roofless warehouse. The same fire that had damaged the one they hid within had destroyed the roof of the one across the corner from them. Inside they had parked a blue vehicle as discussed in the parking garage earlier yesterday. Two store mannequins waited very patiently inside, one with an elbow visible jutting out the open window. From their vantage point the pair couldn’t hear the tunes blasting from the radio they had left on to keep the dummies occupied.

“What idiots,” spat Bronski in contempt as he kept watch through the vision scope. “Chaz is smart enough to stay at his car but he sent the rest of his guys slinking into the building with weapons drawn in a big pack. Like the same people that

jumped him in that carpark earlier are going to be stupid enough to sit blissfully ignorant in the payoff vehicle and let his yahoos sneak up on us.”

“We’re not exactly dealing with regular forces here,” noted Harper. “In fact, these guys aren’t even up to your average pirate level and that’s not saying much. I’m set by the way. I’ll watch Chaz.”

“Roger,” agreed Bronski. He hadn’t been told that one of the ship crew had been killed and thus didn’t have any particular urge to kill the gang members. Although they had been told to kill Chaz if they had the chance so he had a feeling something bad must have happened. As for the remainder of the gang it was their choice. If they behaved themselves like nice little extortionists they got to live another day. If not....

The sound of gunfire echoed from the other warehouse as the gang members riddled the parked car with bullets. Apparently they weren’t concerned overly much about holes in their money. Not that there was any money there. It sitting up between him and Harper. Had Chaz brought the crew to deal on the level he would have got his money and Cascade and her attack team would have been on hand to peacefully take charge of the crew. Now it was going to get messy.

Bronski wasn’t really a sadistic sort. He did have a definitely bent sense of humor though. He waited until a few of the Razorfins cautiously approached the bullet pocketed wreck they had just created so they could see that the occupants had never been alive in the first place. Some arm waving, yelling, and running followed but getting away from the vehicle wasn’t going to help. The explosives were in the walls. He set them off and the walls collapsed inwards, bringing down the steel of the ceiling rafters and the concrete of the walls themselves.

Chaz reflexively ducked behind his car as the explosions sounded. Car alarms sounded down side streets as the concussion vibration set them off and then Chaz stood up as the dust swirled about and finished yelling the first two a series of swear words before he was slammed forward by the bullet tearing into his back. The shot was off a bit to the left and caught his shoulder high enough that there wasn’t any lung damage. A survivable hit if medical aid arrived fairly soon. But Harper wasn’t one to take chances and wouldn’t have time to run down there to check the kill. He quickly put two more rounds into the prone form making sure that a morgue unit rather than a med team would be required to take care of Mister Chaz.

“So much for the Razorfins,” shrugged Bronski casually. “Time for us to slip away before the fire trucks get here.”

“Hate to lose this beauty but that’s the breaks,” sighed Harper as he edged away from his shooting position.

The rifle and detonator would go in a dumpster located below them after Harper pulled out the firing bolt to make sure it couldn’t be used as again. Both had been wiped down and the pair wore gloves as a precaution but it wasn’t as if their prints would be in the local police database. Wearing street clothing over light body armor the two men slipped out of the building with their duffle bag of cash and walked casually to their waiting car and drove off as the sounds of emergency sirens were just starting to make themselves heard. Their ground team had been the recipient of good luck finding a link to follow to the hostages and were skilled enough to take advantage of the luck and complete the first part of their mission. All they had to do now was rejoin with the Colonel and a significant advantage would shift to the Suomi Warders in their bid to get off the planet.

It promised to be a bright morning for those wearing Warder blue. Bronski and Harper took pleasure in the knowledge that for a bunch of other folks a very bad day was about to begin.

End - Chapter One