

Suomi Warders: 3057 - *Innocence Lost*

Chapter 2 of 2

By: *David Wainio*

*Nuevo San Diego city
Baja California Island, Carver V
July 09, 3057*

Terry Quina jolted awake at the buzzing to find that he was in his bunk rather than at the controls of a BattleMech. His first impulse had been to check his warning board for the tell-tale light that matched the incessant beeping, but as quickly as that urge had formed it dropped away as the reality of his situation set in. It was funny how outside sounds would sometimes fit in with a dream: the awoken tone beeping at him had sounded just when his dream 'Mech had taken a severe hit. The dream was fading already, a wisp of fancy he didn't care to pursue as he studied the desk clock across from him and realized that it wasn't his preset wakeup call sounding. It was an incoming priority message, flagging him with a loud wake tone. Blearily he noted it was still an hour until sunrise. Terry could only think of one or two people that would priority flag him in the early morning. After all, he was essentially under house arrest. Not that he had had many friends even before the Precentor had publicly tagged him as unreliable and sentenced him to the psych-evaluation run-around.

Sliding onto the chair at the small desk he touched the answer key. It was with no surprise at all that Terry found Precentor O'Donald staring back at him from the screen.

"Good Morning Precentor," yawned Terry.

"Blake's Blessings be with you," replied the Precentor automatically. "I just received satellite shots from last night's fly-over that show what can only be the Suomi Warder BattleMechs marching towards a rendezvous with the Lyran Raiders heading down from the north."

The Precentor paused as if expected a response from Terry, but for the life of him the MechWarrior had no idea what it was his commander wanted him to say.

"Uh.. pardon me Sir but I have no idea why you have commed me with this information. Am I being reinstated to piloting to help man the battle line?"

The Precentor's frown told him that O'Donald hadn't called him for reinstatement.

"I called you because you grew up on their home planet and know more about these Warders than anyone else I have access to you. Why would they join with the bandits? What do they want? Can you think of any way we might buy them off? They are mercenaries after all."

Terry actually laughed out loud, more forcefully than was prudent thanks to his grogginess from just being awakened. "You know what they want as well as I do. They want their DropShip crew back."

O'Donald scowled fiercely at the MechWarrior. "As amusing as you might find the situation, as you already know returning the crew is not an option. We don't have them anymore and do not know who does."

Terry's thinking was getting sharper as he came fully awake. "Yes, of course Precentor. It's not that I am amused, it's just that there isn't any reason to get worked up. Colonel Linna won't be going to join them but to stop them. You have no need to but them off Sir."

"He's already threatened to destroy this relay station. There's no reason to believe these Warders plan to defend the city," countered the Precentor.

Breathing in a long breathe and holding it, Terry tried to find a way to convince the ComGuard commander that he had nothing to fear from the Warders. But he couldn't think of one. Logically the Precentor had every reason to assume the worse. That Terry knew in his heart that Colonel John Linna would never join bandits in sacking a city was not going to be a very persuasive arguing point. *Trust me* didn't carry much weight when the other party was convinced you had faulty wiring upstairs.

"I know that Colonel Linna holds you personally responsible for the injuries to the school children Precentor, but if you look at their history under the Colonel you will find no instance of them cooperating with bandits or undertaking any looting. It's not in Colonel Linna's nature considering his background. I can understand that you have to consider the possibilities otherwise but the only advise I can give you is not to react until his intentions are clear. Don't attack them again Sir."

Precentor O'Donald harrumphed. He'd expected this to be a wasted effort but he had to exhaust all avenues of information. "We will deploy to protect the compound. If they don't attack us then we won't fire on them. My apologies for waking you."

Abruptly Terry Quina found himself staring at a blank screen. The interview was obviously over. What, if anything, the Precentor had hoped to gain by calling him Terry couldn't fathom. Perhaps the Precentor hadn't know either. Terry had gotten the impression that the Precentor was worried though. He'd be a foolish man to not be worried. The Suomi Warders had arrived with the publicly announced purpose of escorting some off world children from their school back to their homes. They had done nothing to indicate they had an alternative motive but on Carver these days everyone always assumed there were secret agendas brewing. In this case the Precentor had orders to secure a stolen computer core that in some manner not explained to Terry had found its way to Carver. Assuming that the Warders had come to get it the Precentor had seized the Warder DropShip crew as soon as the mercenaries had left the city.

Other forces were following their own agendas and interfering with the Precentor's plans. Someone had grabbed the DropShip crew from the ComGuards and then his fellow ComGuard MechWarriors had panicked and opened fire on the Warder

'Mechs. The militia forces got into the act and the mercenaries ended up desperately defending several busses of children in a wild escape from the city. Someone had engineered the confusion that led to the skirmish but it would be difficult for the Precentor to convince the Colonel of that even if he was inclined to try. The fact that O'Donald didn't want to admit to the mercenary commander that the ComGuards had lost the DropShip crew pretty much eliminated any attempt to reach a peaceful resolution. So now the Precentor would rouse the five ComGuard 'Mechs (as it was clear that Terry wasn't being invited to resume the number six spot) to defend the ComStar relay compound against an attack that wouldn't be coming. The fact that the ComGuards were willing to let the rest of Nuevo San Diego get trashed as long as no one messed with the relay compound had not gone unnoticed by the Tukayyid veteran.

Being born to ComStar parents it was essentially ordained that Terry himself would also serve Blake. As he grew up on Sampsa stories of the Warders and their leader's one man crusade against all pirates as he sought his missing sister year after year had inspired Terry to want to protect others as well. Thus he had joined the ComGuards and pushed himself to qualify for the MechWarrior program. His first blood had been at the great battle that stopped the Clan invasion – a terrible ordeal where his entire Level 2 Six had been wiped out. His 'Mech had been destroyed as well but the avenging Ghost Bears had not found him in his hiding place after he had crawled off from his wrecked machine. Nothing had been the same for Terry Quina after that day on a number of levels. And it seemed to him that nothing had been the same for ComStar either. Blake's great organization to help mankind continually proved itself to be mainly interested in protecting its own power. As for the splinter groups that were forming into their own version of ComStar – they were even worse as far as Terry was concerned. He could never see himself joining those fanatics.

Which left him in a precarious position. He heard voices sometimes. His dead ex-comrades from Tukayyid. Perhaps it was all his imagination or perhaps they were spirits of some sort. Ghosts? Energy imprints from their minds still resonating in this world? Who knew. What was important to Terry was that they did not control his life, they gave him comfort, and their advice was usually good. And this time they had probably killed his ComGuard career. He had finally lied well enough to convince a bevy of heads that he was alone in his head not so long ago. That had allowed him to regain MechWarrior status. But now the secret was out again. The Precentor's report would doom him to light duty fixing low grade communication gear on backwater planets. Not his cup of tea...in fact, he really questioned if he wanted to still serve ComStar these days in any capacity. But if not ComStar and not Word of Blake what was he to do?

Well, whatever it was he wasn't going to accomplish it from inside the ComStar compound. He knew his way around ComStar security protocols fairly well from his duties but his personal work station wouldn't allow access to systems he would need to reach. But there would be ones in the sickbay with higher access. At the moment only one aid would be there and as Terry was on medical leave of duty he could enter the medical section without question from internal security. It wasn't much of a plan yet but he felt sure that something would occur to him in time. He did seem to have fairly effective guardian angels after all.

Across the city Samantha "Sammi" Cascade was loath to admit it but she was feeling the fatigue of the past twenty four hours. After rescuing the crew of the *Baltic Serenade* – including the one casualty the spacers had suffered – the Lieutenant had overseen whisking everyone to a set of vacation rental condos near the city's waterfront and the disposal of their last set of rides. So far they had kept the stealing of vehicles to a minimum and managed to return the 'borrowed' industrial ones back to their original locations before they had been missed. But this was where her plans ended. From sunrise today she was improvising. While the hard part was arguably finished, they still needed to find a way out of a city under siege and return to the Warder HQ some quarter way around the island. It was quite possible that the local militia manning the checkpoints had no idea who she, her team, or the ship crew were. There had been nothing on the all night news feed about her attack on the gang base or the explosion her people had set up in the industrial section. Dominating the news instead was the impending visit from the bandit force that had been ravaging the north end of the island. Presumably any ComStar people she might encounter on the streets could be briefed about the missing ship crew or might not know anything about it. As for the militia units, they might be inclined to fire on anyone they didn't know who was armed. Who was looking for them and who was safe to ignore was too much of an unknown – she would have to avoid everyone. They would have to try to get out with as little contact as possible with any of the various factions that had nominal control of Nuevo San Diego.

If they were operating with a full support unit they would have been gone already. A team would have secured a DZ and they would have lifted out. But "if's weren't her business. Working with the reality of any given situation was. Only a small force of Warder personnel had been at Outreach to undertake this mission. She wasn't wasting any time wishing that a more complete TOE had been on hand. As for now, if need be they could hole up in the condos for a few days until they came up with something feasible for an evac plan.

"Hey Sammi, check out this news report."

She looked up at the sound of Harper's voice, surprised that she had tuned out her surroundings like that. It was sloppy to zone out totally like that.

The news reader had been up all night and looked it as his voice droned on. "...we still don't expect the raiders to arrive for at least five hours but field reports claim that the militia coalition is already showing signs of cracking. Our reporters in the western city are telling us that Colonel Madison's Nuevo San Diego Freeman's Militia have abandoned its positions. So far we have no comment from the other Militias or from ComStar but as word spreads a mounting number of citizens are taking advantage of the unmanned check points to flee the city. What this might mean for the city's defense is still unclear...."

Sammi used the remote control to turn down the sound feed. Harper nodded towards the video transceiver set, "sounds like someone upstairs likes us."

She wasn't ready to attribute this turn of events to divine providence but she was prepared to seize the moment.

"We're going to need transport ASAP," she thought out loud.

Bronski, who had overwatch duty at the window, chimed in. "What about one of those?"

Harper and Cascade moved to where they could see what Bronski was pointing at. A tour company office was across the street. A number of their blue and white vehicles were parked in the front parking area including a double decker bus. Sammi wasn't too eager to climb back into a bus again after her last experience but practically speaking it would be better to have everyone together to exit the city than split them up. Plus she didn't have the time to second guess transport issues. She crossed the room to pick up the duffle bag of money they had never paid the ship crew's captors just as Captain Larrs of the *Baltic Serenade* entered from the bed chamber.

"I'm glad you're up Captain," nodded Sammi as she hefted the bag over her shoulder then stuffed a sidearm into a shoulder holster.

"Something happening?" asked the DropShip Captain.

"One of the militia units broke and abandoned their positions," supplied Cascade. "We're going to join the flow of people fleeing the city through that gap and then drive to the school where the rest of the unit is. I'm going across the street with Bronski to secure transport. If you would be kind enough to wake your people and prepare them for travel..."

Captain Larrs nodded as the special operations officer trailed off. "Of course Lieutenant."

"Good," snapped Sammi. "Harper, put the word out that we load in twenty minutes. Light battle kit under civies, keep the heavy stuff easy to reach though. Bronski – let's hit it."

The ship Captain sighed in wonder as the cocksure ground trooper leader slipped out the door. It was almost impossible to believe.

"Something wrong Ma'am?" prompted Harper as he read the unsettled look on her face.

"No... Yes... Not really," Larrs took a moment to gather her thoughts before trying again. "I was just thinking that our ordeal is ending so quickly and easily. I mean one minute we're hostages, then - Bang - you guys show up, whisk us away to luxury quarters, and now you're just going to drive us out the next morning like we're on a vacation trip."

Harper grinned as he touched two fingers to his forehead in a mini salute. "That's what we do Ma'am. Make the difficult look easy and the impossible commonplace. You're dealing with two Warder truths in this situation. First; no one can best Colonel John Linna or stop Lieutenant Sammi Cascade. There're like unstoppable forces of nature. Second thing is that you don't piss either of them off unless you want a world of hurt dumping on you. You're in good hands Captain. We'll get you home again. And some more rat bastards are going to pay before this is all over. Now if you'll excuse me Ma'am, Sammi gave me twenty minutes and I've already wasted most of the first one. I'll check back with you in eighteen minutes. Sisu."

She couldn't help but smile at his infectious gung-ho spirit. "I'll shake my spacers out of their bunks," she promised to his retreating back. Home for her wasn't the Suomi Warder current bivouac but her ship the *Serenade*. As happy as she would be to join up with the Warder command staff she would still be quit a bit removed from her true home. Why the ComGuards had abducted her crew, why a street gang had taken them from the Guards, and how she would return to her beloved ship where all questions she wasn't even close to being able to answer. But she'd been there at Hamano and Yu-shan with the John Linna. She had a lot of confidence in trooper Harper's First Rule. Sisu. Whatever it took, Colonel Linna would find a way.

Cussler Nautical Academy
Baja California Island, Carver V
July 09, 3057

Susan DaTang approached the French doors to the third floor balcony with a large dose of trepidation. On the other side was her new idol. A girl a year younger than her that rode into combat in BattleMechs with her dad and was so tough that Susan had seen her giving blood at the clinic rather than cringing in shock as most of the students had been. She even helped work on the deadly machines. Sandi Linna was the most incredible teen that Susan had ever encountered. As Susan was the daughter of highly placed parents and had grown up in the finest boarding schools of the Free World's League she had met her share of over achieving kids – but nothing like Colonel Linna's daughter.

Yet when Susan had spied Sandi up on this balcony from the courtyard the mercenary's daughter had looked so alone. Kinda like a tragic figure. Maybe 'forlorn' was the best word. After all Sandi had done to help the spirits of the other kids it had seemed like a natural idea to come up and offer Sandy some company. Now that she was standing next to the doors it seemed like it might not be such a good idea after all. Well, she did have this muffin and juice carton she'd brought all the way up here. Maybe she'd just leave the food and slip away after a brief hello. Gulping in a breath she twisted the handle and forced herself to walk out onto the balcony.

Sandi had been deep in thought, but she was still aware of someone suddenly opening the door behind her. Her body automatically jerked partially around, her hand starting to drift by some odd reflex for a weapon she had never carried. She saw the other girl freeze as Sandi's reaction.

"Sorry," mumbled an abashed Sandi. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"No..uh... I think I'm the one who should be saying I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt you or anything but we noticed you missed breakfast and then I saw you up here and thought... I mean... anyway, I brought you something to eat if you want it."

Sandi smiled in true appreciation. She wasn't hungry but the kindness of the act touched her. "It's Susan right? Thanks, I might try a bite or two. Although the truth is I probably won't relax until it's over out there."

Susan handed over the muffin and juice. "You mean the battle your Dad went to right?"

The youngest Linna turned her gaze back to the green horizon. "Yep. It will probably start any time now. We won't be able to see or hear anything of course. They're too far away. I suppose I could go watch the feeds real time in Bifrost but between you and me I'm just not up to it."

Susan studied the other girl in confusion. She knew that Bifrost was the mercenaries' command center truck but it was hard to fathom that the other wasn't 'up to it'.

Sandi noticed the other's girl questioning look out of the corner of her eye. "Something wrong?"

"No..it's just that...well, I kinda figured you'd be out there rather than back here."

It was Sandi's turn to be confused. "Why would you think that?"

"Um..we all assumed that you were your dad's co-pilot or navigator or something."

Several things about the way the students had been acting around her clicked in her head as Sandi laughed out loud at the thought. "You mean all of you think I'm some sort of kid MechWarrior?"

Susan flushed with embarrassment but admitted that it was so.

"Let me set a few things straight then," sighed Sandi kindly. "This is the first mission trip my father ever let me come on and he only did that because he thought it was a completely safe run with no combat involved. It was my first time in his BattleMech during an operation and my only job was to be a passenger."

"Then this is all new to you too?" breathed Susan in wonder.

Sandi almost started to say that getting shot at wasn't new to her but at the last instant decided that she didn't want to go down that conversational path. "I've never been out in the field with him before, but standing around waiting for him to come home from a battle is nothing new. Usually it was at the spaceport and I already knew he was okay from hyperpulse comms though."

"Wow, we didn't realize. I mean, we just thought that..uh...."

"That I was a tough as nails mercenary used to bloodshed and mayhem?" supplied Sandi. "Trust me, go down by the techbay or find some off duty ground soldiers. They're all looking off into the horizon worrying about their friends just like I am."

Silence followed as Susan tried to decide what to say next and Sandi processed this new bit of social information. Her father had told her more than once that many people look at soldiers differently than civie folk and at mercenaries even more differently. That they often had preconceived notions about who and what you were. Sandi hadn't given it much thought as her social situation at home meant everyone looked at her differently anyway. But here among peers that didn't know her she was getting her first taste of what her father had been talking about. Now she felt like an idiot for the gloating swagger she'd affected when she had dismounted from her father's *Camelot* when they had first arrived. The running battle in the city had sapped that swagger on her second dismount but the impression had already been made.

"I'm sure your dad will be alright," Susan offered at last.

Sandi smiled at the comment. "I know. He's always alright. Everyone says he's un-killable, which is a good thing considering the hairball situations he's always getting into. No, it's the rest of them I worry about. Like Aunt Gracie and Uncle Sven. Just because no one can kill my father doesn't mean that we can't lose our friends. We've lost more than one already."

A tear squeezed past Sandi's defenses as the memory of Ranger slipped unbidden into her thoughts. Sandi refused to call attention to it by wiping at the tear but clamped down and found a neutral emotional state that stopped that one bit of wetness from becoming a flood. She realized that she was far more on the edge than she had thought. As she hadn't slept at all no doubt the fatigue was amplifying her stress.

"I think I'll be going now..unless you want me to stay," offered Susan.

Although the other girl's visit had made Sandi realize that she really didn't want to be alone in her vigil, it also brought home to Sandi that she'd really prefer to be in the company of other people that understood the things she understood. In some ways she and Susan were much the same, but in other ways they were worlds apart. Right now the warrior part of Sandi Linna needed to be with other warriors.

"No, that's okay. In fact, I think I'll go over to Bifrost and listen in with Captain Woods after all. But thanks for coming up here. I mean it."

Susan wanted to tell her how much more she admired the other girl's bravery now that she realized that Sandi wasn't so different than herself after all. That she was sure that if their roles were reversed there was no way she could be as calm and strong as Sandi was. But she couldn't bring herself to do so. It would be too intimate, too embarrassing. So instead she just nodded and told the mercenary girl that she would see her later and left for the comfort of the friends she had known for the past two years, leaving Sandi to seek the comfort of what had literally become her comrades in arms under the hot Carver V sun.

*North of Nuevo San Diego city
Baja California Island, Carver V
July 09, 3057*

Colonel John Linna looked out the armored plexiglass of his cockpit into the tropical foliage outside. The sun had come up, changing the dark forest into a kaleidoscope of colors dominated by greens and a huge tree filled his viewport at the moment, obstructing everything else from view. Despite his limited visual plane, he had a very concise picture of what was transpiring a few kilometers from his current position.

After he took over the Suomi Warders from his grandmother he had invested heavily in the latest technology, always looking for force multipliers that provided the most punch for the lowest carrying mass as his plans would involve careening around the cosmos. That meant reinstating BattleMechs and using advanced command and control capacities to even the playing field when he found himself outnumbered. On this particular mission he didn't have the full bag of tricks he usually employed – no satellite overhead for example – but he still had his advanced C3 computer system and the Bifrost control vehicle along with the best communications gear his family's company could make. Even without a DropShip or satellite in orbit they were still in com range of

Bifrost and all six BattleMechs were sharing telemetry and sensor readings through the C3. What his extended lance saw, he saw. They all saw in fact.

The trip across the island to cut off Kommand Cosar's raiders had taken less time than expected due to finding a logging road that had run almost in a straight line directly towards the desired combat zone for over half the distance. That had allowed him to forward deploy the Bahti sisters to scout and report while he backtracked to choose ambush locations along the road to Nuevo San Diego. He'd found a perfect place, a shallow valley that had been mostly cleared of large trees. His people would start with the cover of hill ridges while his foe would be mostly out in the open. Assuming he could get them where he wanted them and hit them from surprise of course.

He had little worry on that matter though. The Bahti sisters both piloted *Camelot* models that mounted electronic counter measure suites while one of the pair carried the advanced Beagle Active Sensor equipment. Flame had identified the bandit force almost twenty minutes ago. Her coded transmissions were painting icons on his main battleplot map. The enemy 'Mechs plodded on ahead blissfully unaware that an enemy was ghosting along inside their detection range. A small convoy of vehicles trailed the enemy 'Mechs which John considered to be a tactical mistake. He would have sent the light *Galleon* tanks ahead of his BattleMechs if the situation was reversed. The 30 ton machines would be toast if ambushed by a sizable force but it was better to dangle two light tanks as bait than your main BattleMech force. Cosar was even leading with his heaviest 'Mech, the two lightest being in the rear. Obviously the man didn't expect any resistance until he was near the city and perhaps not even then. Still, the bandit had a numbers advantage that John would have to be careful of. Should the enemy make a cohesive attack on one of John's force elements of paired 'Mechs that particular duo would be overwhelmed and in serious trouble. Timing and skill would be critical to pulling off the attack. He was confident that his people were up to it.

"Flame and 'Dancer, take position at Gamma and wait for my fire order. Take out the LRM carriers at range first and try not to hit the cargo vehicles if you can help it. Those *Galleons* will probably come after you so make sure you have cover if any LRM trailers are left when you engage them." As he was speaking he reached over and touched a point on the electronic map, transmitting the "Gamma" location he desired them to attack from.

"Roger Duck, Blue One complying," came the response from Death Dancer. She was the elder and senior of the two sisters. They had been paired as Blue One for this engagement.

"Lawman," continued John with his final deployment orders, "you and Wildcat stay passive sensors until my fire order to Blue One. Then go active and move in to your fire position. The *Marauder* will be the first target. We'll hit it with everything we have then go to individual targets depending on how they react. Keep a special eye on the *Rifleman* though. It will probably try to backpeddle away from us and snipe from range."

"Blue Two acknowledges," came Lawman's reply from his modified *Lancelot*.

Actually all of the Warder 'Mechs were modified. It was another way to secure an edge. He had better equipment, well trained and highly motivated MechWarriors, better intelligence, had picked the terrain, and would dictate the starting terms of the engagement. It was most of anything a commander could ask for and unless he suffered some incredibly bad luck or his opponent was a tactical genius surrounded by elite MechWarriors victory should be the Warder's. It was too bad he couldn't just stop everything now and claim victory based on the advantages he had arranged for himself. Losing even one of his BattleMechs securing a win here might be crippling if he ended up having to deal with the ComStar Precentor the hard way. Winning battles was fine but he knew from experience that winning the campaign was paramount. That wouldn't be done until the Warders and the Cussler children were off this soggy rock.

"Hey John?"

It was Gracie, her voice mildly distorted by the fact she was calling on the laser-com system. Positioned ninety meters to one side and behind him she had line of sight to engage the communication laser. But as their standard comms were secure there wasn't much point in using the las-comms – except to talk to him privately on a channel that the C3 system wouldn't record to the Bifrost telemetry records.

"What's on your mind Gracie?" he asked curiously.

"It's not too late to switch me out and wing with Sven if you want to," she blurted after a minor hesitation.

"Why would I want to do that?" He was genuinely perplexed. They had rarely functioned as a fire team the past several years but he had felt they had always been especially effective when teamed up in the past.

Again there was silence as she hesitated. Then her voice filled his earphones in a rush.

"Hell John, I'm too old for beating around the bush and dropping hints. I'm afraid I'll screw up again and you'll end up paying for it. I'd feel better knowing Lawman was watching your back."

It was John's turn to hesitate before replying. He knew that despite her bravado she had been a little concerned about how she would do in real combat following her injuries back on Yu-shan. But he'd thought that the brief tangle with the militia in the city had gotten her over the jitters. Heck, Sven had told him that she almost went stomping back into the city looking for some payback after they had seen the way the busses had been shot up. She had seemed like the same old Gracie he'd always known after their retreat from Nuevo San Diego. Apparently he had been wrong.

"Gracie, back on Yu-shan you got sucker blasted by hidden mines. Then even after being half buried in the landslide the blast caused you still destroyed an enemy 'Mech and it still took an *Atlas* to put you out of commission. That wasn't exactly what I would call a screw up."

"I should have been more careful. I got Holly's friend killed. I got Ranger killed."

"It was my sister that screwed that up and you know it Gracie. Holly disobeyed orders and put her lance in danger. It's a miracle that only one of them were lost. And if you want to blame anyone for Ranger then blame me. I'm the one that okayed sending

him around on that solo flank run. But we both know that we lost him because the enemy sprung a successful ambush on us and he traded his life for yours just like either one of us would have traded ours for his.”

Gracie was hushed into silence by the force of passion in John’s voice. Of all the Warders that had been killed Ranger’s loss was felt the most by the MechWarriors. All of those that had been present secretly blamed themselves for not being able to help in some fashion. John and Sven felt the burden the most. Had not John gotten there in time they could have lost Gracie too – although most thought that Ranger had taken the *Atlas* down with him as a last act. John had altered the electronic record to make sure the misconception stuck.

John still felt the loss of their friend deeply. But he knew from practical experience that to keep from going crazy you had to focus on the living rather than the dead. “Look Gracie, bad things happen in our business. We both know that. I don’t know what has caused this sudden lack of faith in yourself but I tell you true when I say that there is no one else in the entire galaxy that I would rather have beside me than you.”

Gracie sat silently, ashamed at herself for letting John down like this. With the bandits about to drop into their laps he didn’t need her pulling some fool Joey school girl crap like this on him. She was a veteran MechWarrior and it was high time she started acting like one again.

“Roger that Duck. Mothergoose is standing by and ready for action,” she snapped crisply. Having decided that she didn’t have the luxury of worrying if she still had what it took to kick ass seemed to be the magic spell she needed to finally feel like her pre Yu-shan self. Belated she added; “What about that Kai Allard-Lio champion guy?”

John snorted to himself in amusement. Now this was more like the Gracie Aukland he knew and loved. “Okay, I’d take the multiple Solaris champion over you. But if an after battle sauna was included then you would go back to the number one spot.”

“They don’t seem to know what a sauna is on this world,” pointed out Gracie.

“Don’t remind me,” grumped John. Ordinarily they’d build their own but he’d come here without a full mission complement and the *Baltic Serenade* still lay effectively in enemy hands. “But since they don’t have any Solaris champions either I’m stuck with my number two choice. Now pipe down, here comes Cosar.”

“Piping down Sir,” she retorted before shutting down the laser comms. But she was grinning and eager for action once again.

The lead enemy unit was almost in his own sensor range, although he still had it marked on his plot thanks to the Bhati sister’s sensor range as well as Blue Two’s. The key to pulling this off was actually where the convoy was in relation to Blue One rather than if the enemy ‘Mechs were exactly centered in the primary ambush zone. John could see that the convoy was about as close to Gamma point as he wanted to let them. It was time to set the stage and get the show going. There was always a small chance the bandits would immediately withdraw...but he’d never had that happen before and had no reason to expect it to happen today. Still, he had to try. Maybe for once a bandit would listen to reason.

Working through the scout units Bifrost had already isolated and broken into the comm. frequency the raiders were using. John keyed himself onto that channel.

“Attention bandit element of Kommandant Cosar. You are in violation of this island’s sovereign territorial rights. Withdraw or you will be engaged and destroyed.”

“Hey, who’s on my channel ! Whoever it is I have a news flash for you. We’re the strongest military force on this island now so we decide who owns what. And we’re going to Nuevo San Diego.”

John saw that the ‘Mechs slowed to one quarter speed but kept advancing. The convoy stopped altogether which was perfect from John’s standpoint.

“I am Colonel John Linna of the Suomi Warders. And it seems you have not kept current with the news. I have the superior military force here and unless you withdraw in the next three minutes I am going to use it.”

“I don’t know what kind of fool you take me for but those mercs were run out of the city by ComStar and are holed up someplace on the western coast. Whoever you are come at me if you dare.”

Cosar grinned to himself at his deductive wit. He assumed that this was a trick – probably by the ComStar witches – to scare him into turning tail because they couldn’t muster enough force to stop him after he bought off two of the militia units.

“Since you insist we’ll skip your remaining two and a half minutes. I’ll start by destroying your vehicle convoy then move in and take you out,” shrugged John casually. He hadn’t really expected the exchange to go another way. Switching channels he ordered Blue One to open fire.

Inra and Yawni were standing by, ready to act immediately when the word came. They had pre-identified their targets and each rose up on jump jets to just clear the tree line in front of them and fire their extended range particle projector cannon. They had picked the two long range missile carriers that were most forward in case of secondary explosions, mindful of the Colonel’s order to spare the cargo vehicles if possible. Both blue-white thunder bolts struck home, one melting away the front cab of the lightly armored missile rack trucks while the second bored into another unit’s missile storage magazine system and set off the fuel of the missiles. A massive explosion followed destroyed it and flipped over a third LRM carrier that was nearby. In a flash half of the long range bombardment force Cosar was counting on to finish off any resistance had been disabled or destroyed. Screened from visual contact by the trees and radar contact by their ECM gear, the two ‘Mechs of Blue One landed from their short vertical jump and watched the recharge bars of their PPCs. In another ten seconds two more LRM carriers would die.

Blue Two went active radar at that point, pushing their throttles forward to rush towards their firing point on a ridge line overlooking the center of the valley. They weren’t listening to the confusion that now clogged the enemy comms but could tell from their improved sensor data that the enemy ‘Mechs were basically milling around rather than moving with any purpose.

Nikki read the designations of the enemy ‘Mechs on her targeting scope and locked onto the one marked MAD-3?. That would be the *Marauder*, marked with a question mark as there was no way to tell the exact model until it fired. Most likely it was the

R type. She toggled the frequency designated for use between her and her wing element Lawman. "I have marked the *Marauder*. Sir, is not eight on four odds a bit audacious?"

Sven had been thinking something along the same lines as he was scanning the unit listings. At the moment it was indeed eight enemy 'Mechs against four Warder machines. However three of those enemies were light 'Mechs – a *Stinger*, *Commando* and *Firestarter*. They wouldn't last long against the Warder mediums and heavies. A fourth unit was a *Hatchetman*, a design made for close combat. It was unlikely to survive long enough to reach hatchet range. That left two 55 tonners, a *Shadowhawk* and *Wolverine* plus a 60 ton *Rifleman* and the 75 ton *Marauder* to contend with. He knew what the battle plan's intent was however.

"They'll have to split forces to protect the convoy," Lawman explained as they started up the rise to their fire spot. "Confusion should keep them from making use of their numbers."

"Neg, I was not complaining Major," replied Nikki, mortified that her immediate commander might be thinking that she was concerned. "I like audacious. This should be a proper first blooding."

Sven rolled his eyes then put the exchange out of his mind. It was easy to forget that she was as much Clan as she was Warder. Combat jitters weren't part of her makeup. He'd do best to concentrate on piloting and shooting to whittle down the odds as quickly as possible. "Good hunting then Wildcat. Sustain fire on the designated target at first opportunity."

"Aff," came the response as she prepared to clear the ridge and fire.

As Gracie stomped forward John gave himself a little forward momentum and lit his jump jets, soaring ungainly upwards on vented plasma from his fusion plant. Cosar had ordered his command to their backup frequency so John had not been able to fully enjoy the confusion that erupted across the enemy comm channel once the switch took effect. The Bifrost staff would isolate the new one as soon as possible. In the meantime he could see by the way the enemy 'Mechs were facing various directions that they had not received coherent orders. They would be picking up Wildcat and Lawman on radar by now and start to react. Gracie was still passive while he was running ECM so the bandits shouldn't know about the Blue Three team yet. It was time to draw some attention and sow extra confusion.

The *Marauder* was turned half away from him, facing the direction of Blue Two. John touched one of his fire studs gently and stabbed out with his Clan spec ER PPC, slamming his shot hard against the *Marauder*'s flank. They had thick hides and one PPC blast wasn't going to punch through, but the discharge of energy that crawled along the hulking brute would disrupt cockpit electronics for a brief moment. A walking battlepod design, the *Marauder* lacked a human looking form but still had a definite front. As his own 'Mech descended under the tree line he saw that the enemy leader had definitely turned towards him. "I hit the right torso," John commed to Gracie as she strode forward past his landing *Camelot*. A one word response told him she had caught his message and would use the information for targeting as she concentrated on pushing through the jungle and stepping up the berm ridge she planned to fire from.

In the 75 ton MAD-3R the raider leader swore to himself as an unfamiliar BattleMech dropped out of his potential targeting area. It was now obvious he had blundered into a trap. The money question was what to do about it. Was he surrounded by superior numbers or beset by only a few 'Mechs desperately trying to deceive him into running. Plus something was attacking his support convoy but so far no one had been able to tell him what other than they were taking intermediate PPC fire. And losing LRM carriers left and right.

"Nesbet and Trollins, get back and help the convoy," Cosar ordered. "Murphy and Jacks...."

Cosar trailed off as laser fire from the first two contacts stripped armor from his 'Mech, making it sway as the gyros and neurohelmet link fought to deal with more than ton of armor getting vaporized and altering his center of gravity a bit.

Eindale in the *Shadowhawk* took advantage of the pause to jump onto the comm line. "My BatComp can't ID one of them...."

"Kill it now and worry about what it was later," snapped Cosar as he over-rode his complaining henchman. "Murphy and Jacks stay with me. The rest of you get those two bearing 87 from us." He pushed his throttle forward to the stop and the huge machine responded slowly as its myomer muscles overcame inertia to shove it forward. He'd only taken three steps before his defensive systems chirped a missile lock alarm. Numerous missiles crashed across his torso and side moments later, blasting away most of the remaining armor on his flanks and dropping his center armor a notable amount. This crate was built as a prime assault 'Mech but he wasn't going to last much longer under this concentrated fire. "MOVE IT!" he added, "I want those two engaged close up yesterday!"

His three heaviest machines had now started forward. If the enemy ahead was light his group could either destroy it or ignore it and turn in to drop fire onto the pair to the side. The *Rifleman* and his own *Marauder* were built for longer ranged engagements. If he could get that *Lancelot* and what his updated battle computer identified as a Clan *Ryoken* engaged with his mediums they could then pick the enemy machines apart from outside the melee with his own smaller units.

Before he even finished the thought though, his planning thudded to a halt as a green and black 80 ton monster with distinctive barrel shoulders stepped onto the ridge ahead. A friggen *Awesome!* Who the hell were these guys? Ancient Star League stuff, Clan stuff, stuff he didn't even recognize, and now a true Assault 'Mech too? Cosar's ego and courage had been stoked by the knowledge he had what was probably the toughest BattleMech in the hemisphere under him. His paired PPCs could rip most vehicles and light 'Mechs apart in one or two salvos. The famed *Awesome* carried three PPCs. Fear started to creep into the pit of his stomach as he found himself outgunned for the first time in memory. His top mounted autocannon was the quickest weapon he could bring on target as his arms (which mounted the energy cannons) were pumping to help create forward momentum. The burst tracked high. His chance to hit had been very poor as the *Awesome* was right on the edge of maximum range and was running but the act of firing made him feel a little better.

The broad shouldered mercenary machine paused deliberately, challenging the charging trio to hit it as its pilot took careful aim. Three green spears of light flashed out, one passing wide to his right but the other pair slashing deep into the side that had taken

the first PPC hit. Warning claxons and flashing lights set off in response to the massive structural damage his 'Mech had just suffered from the hits. That monster had Clan lasers instead of PPCs but it still hit like the devil. That suddenly seemed like a bad direction to go and he veered to his right so he could turn his left side to the *Awesome*. Slowing he raised and fired the PPC on that arm but failed once again to hit anything other than trees at the extreme range.

Murphy in the raider's 60 ton *Rifleman* took a few steps past his boss and let loose with his autocannons as his standard large lasers wouldn't retain coherency at that distance. A few shells actually impacted the *Awesome's* left shoulder but the assault 'Mech shrugged off the attack and didn't even bother to shift position as it continued to track the primary target while it's weapons recharged.

"What's the call Boss? This is still outside fighting range for me," Murphy wanted to know as his leader pulled up and turned suddenly.

Kommandant Cosar was trying to decide what to do when that exotic looking human-form 'Mech he didn't recognize made another jumping appearance, sending a PPC bolt just overhead so close the light dampers of his forward display activated to protect his vision. That shot had been from at least 200 meters behind the *Awesome* - which was at the edge of standard PPC range - and it had flown past him! One of those enhanced range models the forward units had started to get or maybe more ClanTech. It flashed through his mind that many an IS unit had gotten cut to ribbons out in the open by superior ranged Clan weaponry and it became imperative in his mind to get under cover.

"Eight-Seven! Eight-Seven!" Cosar yelled the direction bearing just short of actual panic. "Push those two off that ridge and take cover in the jungle before we get picked apart!"

Neither Murphy or Jacks were pleased with the fact they had just moved away from that direction, and would expose themselves to more fire by turning back towards it. On the other hand they did agree with the need to grab some cover and that was still the closest direction. Besides, as a second wave of long range missiles crashed into the *Marauder* from the newly ordered heading it was clear that until Cosar went down they were safe. Without waiting to support Cosar both MechWarriors broke at top speed towards the backs of their medium sized brethren that had previously been ordered in that direction.

Although the Warder techs had located the enemy frequency they had not broken the encryption pattern yet. But John had seen enough as he came down again to guess that Cosar had changed his mind about dividing his forces and decided to rush Lawman and Wildcat. There was a little time before the slower BattleMechs got there but he had to act quickly.

"Blue Two, fall back and go to open fire control. Blue One, forget the convoy and try to group with Blue Two. Watch for those two Lights headed your way though Blue One. Goose, cover advance towards Blue Two. Try to finish the *Marauder*. I'm going in hot to slow them down before Blue Two gets overrun."

Gracie "Mother Goose" Auckland ground her teeth in frustration as she watched John fire off his medium lasers with the sole purpose of driving up his internal heat levels. His *Camelot* was equipped with the rare and expensive triple strength myomer. When there was sufficient heat built up in the synthetic chords that muscled his machine's limbs he could engage the special circuitry and get extra strength and speed. It required a delicate dance of heat management to keep his 'Mech from overheating and stopping or cooling too much and slowing - a dance that had to be maintained while piloting, fighting, and directing his combat force. She knew he was practiced at the art but she also knew that despite the new full body cooling suits they had the heat inside his cockpit would be cruel on his body. Combat always took it's toll but running at extreme levels like that made the physical drain even worse. But all of that was the least of her worries. It also meant that he was about to go haring out into the open ground all alone to draw fire.

Sure enough, he rushed past her at about twice her own speed and down into the shallow valley. She had some choice words to fling in his wake but settled for a growl that could as easily be for their enemy as for his foolish charge. Truth be told - it was equally for both.

Lawman had been with John Linna almost as long as Gracie and immediately drew the same conclusion that Gracie had. The Colonel was charging in. He was less emotional about it as the tactical leader side of him recognized that if all six bandits closed over this ridge on him then Blue Two would be in a world of hurt as neither of them had jump jets and the terrain behind them would soon hem them in and let the renegade Lyran's encircle them. Keeping the enemy split into two groups was key until the odds changed a bit. He'd been given open control to pick his own targets so it was time to use that to best advantage. So far only the rushing *Shadowhawk* had fired on them as the *FireStarter* and *Hatchetman* needed to be closer to engage. He and Wildcat had the longer reach.

"Target your LRMs and large laser on the *Wolverine*," he ordered his wingmate as he did the same with his large lasers. "Then hit that *Firestarter* with whatever you have left and back down. We'll wheel towards One-Three-Five and hit them as they crest the ridge."

Nikki complied automatically even though she didn't understand what Lawman was planning exactly. The *Wolverine* unit had failed to engage anyone and was the trail element of the *Marauder* trio. It seemed far more logical to target the immediate threats such as the *Firestarter* with full weaponry. Then she saw the Colonel's BattleMech break from cover towards the *Marauder* with the Lt. Colonel's *Awesome* lumbering behind. Years of training with these people had taught her to think like they did and it clicked into her mind what was going on. Lawman wanted to damage the trio their superiors were attacking as much as possible before focusing their attention on the closing threat. Major Jorgenson had often admonished during exercises that applying damage to targets in a controlled order was more important than maneuvering to hit the closest target with maximum firepower. He was applying that principal now. He was also playing a little loose with their orders to fall back but Nikki didn't mind that one bit. She had been bred and raised to be aggressive. The hybrid Clanner-Warder looked forward to the fluid clash of 'Warriors that was about to engulf her. It was a worthy test of her mettle and the example her commander had set by rushing three machines heavier than his set a high bar to measure herself against.

Kommandant Cosar had willed himself back under full control by now. His worse fear - that the entire valley was ringed with attackers - had passed. No more fire had come in from new places, which meant that the remaining six of them only faced four

foes. Plus whatever was behind him but the *Stinger* and *Commando* he had sent to the rear should keep them busy for at least a few minutes buying him the time he needed to turn the situation around. All he had to do was back out of range of the *Awesome* and turn right while the rest of his unit went left and he should be able to slink out of this mess. Then he could...*aw crap* he thought to himself as the unknown medium 'Mech charged out towards him. The *Awesome* was following more slowly but it could match his speed so he wouldn't be able to get away if it kept on him. As for that other 'Mech he didn't recognize- it was moving damn fast for something he guessed to be in the 50 to 60 ton range. The armor on both his flanks had been breached so Cosar knew he was in deep trouble now. *Marauders* could operate with only the central armored core but if he suffered an ammo explosion he was done for. With his eyes warily tracking the *Awesome's* advance he frantically punched in the command that would jettison his remaining autocannon shells. As the thumps of ammo bin doors opening reverberated up into his cockpit he centered his targeting reticule on the fast charging smaller machine. He only had one working PPC and that wouldn't be enough to stop the *Awesome* but maybe he could blow something off the smaller one. His carefully aimed shot connected with the target's left leg in a shower of electro-magnetic discharge and melted armor shards but failed to slow the hard charging 'Mech one bit.

Gracie winced as the PPC shot slammed into John's *Camelot* but she knew that one hit wasn't going to breach his armor. What she needed to do was make sure that there wasn't a follow up shot. Smoke was pouring out of the *Marauder* from internal electrical fires but she knew that on a BattleMech with a standard engine core you had to bust open the central torso to stop it for good. It had not suffered much leg damage so chopping a limb out from under it would take too long.

She started to center her crosshairs when motion on one side of the bandit machine caught her eye. Something had just fallen away. As a second metallic shape dropped clear she realized that he was dumping his cannon rounds. In a smooth motion she toggled her main lasers to single fire mode, lowered her aim point, and started touching off shots. With John relatively close to her target the C3 system fed in his sensor and targeting data to her own computers, fine tuning the aiming algorithms that compensated for movement, atmospheric conditions, and a host of other variables. Thus it was almost as if she were shooting from John's much closer position. The first shot passed a bit wide but the second went into the mangled side of the *Marauder* just above the ejection port. There was no armor left to speak of and the mega-joule laser flashed through the cavity leaving molten metal in its wake. It wasn't the laser itself that ignited anything as the clip it struck was vaporized before the explosive shells could detonate. Yet as the superheated gasses and liquefied metal washed upwards the propellant charges in a number of shells of the next clip ignited, which started blasting off the shaped charge warheads, which lead to a chain reaction resulting in two huge combined explosions that nearly cut the 75 ton beast in half. Heavy blast shields and the automatic containment field over-ride kept the fusion plant from going nova but the grand BattleMech was done for anyway. Safety circuits automatically ejected the pilot command consol section from the doomed 'Mech before it's pilot even knew what had happened.

As smoke and flames engulfed the stricken *Marauder* a wry half grin crept onto Gracie's face. Right before her was the exact reason she liked Granny set up in an all energy weapon configuration. Conventional wisdom was that all energy 'Mechs ran too hot but in her opinion an ammo explosion was a heck of a lot hotter.

"Nice shooting," sounded John's voice over the Blue Three channel. "Keep the *Rifleman* busy for me while I take the *Wolverine*. I see Lawman fell back all of about 150 meters so be ready for them to break to our right."

"I'm already pushing over-ride levels Duck," she warned. "I can only harass him at the moment."

"Understood," replied John as he glanced at the screen with data feeds from all the *Warder* 'Mechs. No lie, she was well into her heat curve. "Don't push your luck. I'll stick with him until you shunt some heat."

"Roger. Just watch your hip."

He grinned under his neurohelmet. "Will-do Mother Goose."

She rolled her eyes at the teasing tone in his voice. Yeah, it had been an unnecessary warning. He knew to shield that leg from further damage if possible. But she couldn't help herself. Unlike everyone else in the unit she didn't believe in the myth of his invulnerability. No one's luck lasted forever if they kept pushing it and she didn't want to even think about what it would be like to lose him. Which - she reminded herself forcefully - wasn't going to happen as long as she was around to watch his back. Sweat beading on her skin even under the cooling suit she glared at her heat gauges and willed them to drop down tick by tick.

Sven's *Lancelot* stumbled over a boulder pile and almost went down as he reversed down the hill. His own sense of balance saved him from the fall as the neurohelmet fed his initial reactions into the 'Mech's computer, causing it to mimic as much as possible the automatic reactions his natural body would have made. That instant of automatic reaction was enough time for his piloting skill to be applied as he worked the foot pedals and manually adjusted the gyro trim to keep on his mechanical feet. It would have been an embarrassing and perhaps even fatal gaff to trip just then, but as quickly as the moment arrived it passed and Sven dismissed the incident as taken care of as he twisted and applied forward throttle to head in the direction he had ordered MechWarrior Nikki to go.

"You'll have to handle the *Shadowhawk* until I can scrub the *Firestarter*," the Major advised his wingmate over the Blue Two channel. "Keep your distance from that *Hatchetman* if he breaks your way."

"Aff Major," agreed Nikki as she eyed the threat plot screen and saw that the smaller enemy was headed directly for Lawman while the larger looked to be drifting along the ridge line and angling towards her. "I do not think the *Hatchetman* intends to engage however."

Sven was looking at the exact same information Nikki was. The red dot representing the ax wielding 45 tonner was falling behind the others. Perhaps he was hoping to wait until the *Warder* 'Mechs were engaged then slip in from a flank side or perhaps he was having second thoughts about pressing an attack. Either way, the bandit's action would turn initial numerical advantage to one on one encounters where the *Warders* would have individual unit advantage.

"He might try to slip in once you are engaged," warned Lawman.

“Understood,” acknowledged Nikki. But her full concentration was already on the blip that represented the enemy *Shadowhawk*. Her targeting box lay directly over the enemy despite the mound of dirt and lava rock that was still between them. Soon now he would show himself and she would be engaged in a real BattleMech dual for the first time in her life.

Her pulse quickened a bit in anticipation but there was no fear or hesitation in her as Nikki gripped her controllers and urged the *Stormcrow* stalking in a semi-circle with her torso pointed in towards the bandit. More so than any of the other Warder pilots being a MechWarrior was all of her being. Her free time was mainly spent studying BattleMech combat ROMs and memorizing the bewildering array of fighting machines that had been produced by mankind in the past 300 years. Even without visual contact she could picture the angular human form of the *Shadowhawk* with its Class 5 autocannon barrel perched on the left shoulder and the oversized housing for a medium laser riding the right arm. She knew that the 55 ton machine also mounted a five tube long range missile system and a small short range missile system for close in fighting. The ancient design also mounted jump jets, so she was alert to the possibility the enemy pilot would try to hop up and take a shot at her over the ridge rather than walk up over or around the barrier between them.

It was a foe of the same tonnage – and except for the legs where her *Stormcrow* had an advantage – the same armor protection. She was able to counter the mobility edge of the enemy jump jets with a better ground speed. Her missile superiority was already nullified as the enemy was already inside the use envelope for LRMs. She still held an overall firepower advantage if she placed her shots well and managed her heat levels.

The *Shadowhawk* pilot used two trees as a screen and came over the hill firing his shoulder mounted cannon before much of his ‘Mech was exposed. It was an excellent display of piloting and although the rounds struck home she had darted sideways just as he came up and the shots only caught her hip, blasting away at some left leg armor but leaving her otherwise unharmed. Waiting until half of her enemy rose up she fired her weapons, sending a fusillade of energy darts from her large pulse laser into the *Shadowhawk*’s side but missing high with her ER medium and large lasers. Coming down to her right the bandit used the uneven ground to add a vertical element to his horizontal dodging as he fired his arm laser and scored another hit on her. He was good she realized. She would have to be better. He only had one unfired weapon system left and she tilted her torso one way, implying she meant to dodge in that direction, while moving the opposite way. The paired SRMs flashed by harmlessly as the enemy bit on her fake and lead her in the wrong direction. She felt that she’d inflicted the more telling damage in this first exchange but knew that the battle was far from over.

Within his own cockpit Sven waited patiently for the small *Firestarter* to make its attack run. At barely over half his weight it wouldn’t seem to stand much of a chance but the anti-personnel ‘Mech was armed with flamers that vented powerplant plasma directly onto foes at close range. While this only did minimal direct damage to another BattleMech it did add to a target’s heat levels. If the *Firestarter* pilot could manage to survive making a circle or two around a larger foe there was a good chance of making return fire dangerous or impossible. The real danger added to the psychological factor that many MechWarriors feared internal fires meant a daring *Firestarter* pilot stood a chance against any foe he could close on.

At least she did through the era of the first four Succession Wars. That was before the advent of the double heat sink. Things were different now.

Sven calmly fired a single large laser at medium-long range when the final rush came, punching deep into his assailant’s left arm and destroying an actuator. Unlike the original *Lancelots* that were armed solely for long range combat, Svens had been modified by replacing the PPC with a C3 command unit and adding two smaller Clan weapons. As the *Firestarter* closed under 160 meters firing its medium lasers and washing fire over him he calmly stood his ground and returned fire with his Clan ER medium laser and Clan medium pulse laser. At that range Sven didn’t miss and the combined hits stripped almost a third of the armor off the bandit’s torso. With a damaged arm the bandit had missed with one laser and flamer with the net result that the *Lancelot* was barely scratched and still well under any danger points on its heat threshold. Conversely, the *Firestarter* was already into its own danger zones.

In desperation the *Firestarter* pilot opened up with her machineguns, hoping for a lucky hit on an actuator or heat sink while trying to stay behind the 60 ton Star League era ‘Mech while venting heat as fast as possible. Sven wasn’t having any of that however and easily counter moved in a reverse circle that brought his foe across his front arc again. This time he concentrated on the damaged arm, severing it completely with a burst from the pulse laser. The *Firestarter* shot off at a new angle, running a new loop that turned it straight towards Lawman at around 80 meters and charged in. He held off his large lasers still, using the medium one to rip a jagged scar across the center of the bandit’s chest while shifting his ‘Mech’s balance slightly in anticipation of a quick side step. As he had guessed, the Lyran pilot was attempting a ramming attack. The addition of a little jump jet at the last moment to bring its legs up near Sven’s cockpit was an unexpected twist to the charge run but it just made recovery even more difficult when the *Firestarter* pilot sailed by in a clean miss as Sven deftly stepped aside.

Forced to come down in a crouch to recover from the jump attempt, the *Firestarter* was immobile and broadbacked to Sven’s targeting indicators as he spun in place to follow the passing bandit ‘Mech. This was an opportunity for a quick finish that he couldn’t pass up despite the heat thresholds he would break. Toggling his main lasers onto the fire circuit he let loose with both large bore weapons and drilled completely through the *Firestarter*, destroying the rear mounted flamer and doing critical damage to the internal structure of the smaller ‘Mech. Sven had to enact the first level heat override and was considering flushing some coolant to finish his target off as the *Firestarter* struggled to its feet. But rather than push on in the face of such heavy damage the enemy MechWarrior had had enough. She punched out and the Lyran painted BattleMech sagged to the ground as its brain center blasted away on the escape seat.

That had gone a bit more quickly than he had expected. Sven looked out his viewport and could see Nikki and the *Shadowhawk* circling each other and blazing away. Despite Nikki having no real combat experience until the Nuevo San Diego fracas, Sven knew that she was a naturally gifted pilot in a more advanced machine who would not be subject to freezing up or irrational fears. On the other hand, that *Shadowhawk* pilot had to be a skilled veteran to be holding his own against her superior weaponry. That left the firefight in the valley or taking the *Shadowhawk* from behind as Sven’s current options.

“She can handle it,” sounded John’s voice on Sven’s comms suddenly. “Cut off the *Wolverine*.”

“Wilco,” snapped Sven. How John managed to do that – track everyone else’s situation while engaged in his own battles – still impressed the huge MechWarrior to this day. He had never met anyone else who could track as much information at one time as John Linna. Then again, he reminded himself as he rushed towards the hilltop the *FireStarter* had just come from, maybe he had. As the Training Officer for the Suomi Warders he was the one who signed off when Sandi Linna was allowed to unofficially use the base simulators.

Colonel Linna had completely submerged in his usual mental ‘combat zone’. But something unbidden, something extra, had clicked in his head and he had passed through the emotionless zone he had learned to create to reach an entirely new mental place as he zigged one last time and came in close on the *Rifleman*. The extreme heat in his cockpit was to him only one small factoid logged, noted and pushed to one side as unimportant. As a younger man he’d always had a touch of the berserker in him, something he had trained hard to suppress over the years but that still lurked within him. He often entered combat angry, but this time he had carried a huge reserve of rage into this battle. There was his anger at the ComStar Precenator and all the other idiots on this island that had conspired to injure the children he had sworn to protect and that had killed people that had followed him here like the engineer of the *Baltic Serenade*. His old hatred of pirates had easily resurfaced and latched onto scum like this Cosar that saw the great BattleMechs entrusted into their care as nothing more than terror tools with which to extort goods and destroy families with. Those Word of Blake fanatics that could offer him a ride off this rock but were intent on their games against ComStar had earned a his wrath as well. Finally, there was that anger with himself for failing to anticipate everything. For failing to be perfect. For getting people injured and killed.

As a young MechWarrior the rage has sometimes overwhelmed him. Eventually he had learned to bottle and channel his fiery impulses into coldly controlled action – something his sister was working on mastering. He had started this battle locking in that same icy state...but something deep inside him finally realized that anger at himself could only hinder him. But his anger at everyone else – that was a different matter all together. It wasn’t really a conscious decision. His own self anger he locked away.

The rest, he let it all loose.

He wanted not only to drive off these rogue Lyrans but to grind their BattleMechs into small pieces with his bare hands. Yet he found that he also retained the cold, calculating mind that soaked in the battle situation and made rational decisions based on tactics, personnel, intelligence, and odds. It was a fusion of emotion and intellect he had never felt before – never even imagined existed. He had always assumed it had to be one or the other. Now somehow he had fallen into the discovery that he had been wrong; he could have both. Later he could try to self analyze this new feeling. For now he would simply use this new ferocity to best advantage. It felt good. It felt intoxicating. He was shaken around violently in his seat as the *Camelot* took hits from both the *Rifleman* and the *Wolverine* but he just smiled as he slipped inside the traverse of the long barrels on the *Rifleman*’s weapon arms while using that bandit ‘Mech as cover from the second. In this new state he knew that he was not quite unbeatable...but he also knew that he was going to tear this *Rifleman* apart and nothing the bandits could try would stop him from doing so.

He fired his two torso mounted lasers into the *Rifleman*’s chest at point blank range then slammed his strength enhanced fist into the left shoulder socket of the enemy machine. As the bandit struggled to back up John brought his other hand down in an overhand chopping motion, striking the same location and shattering the connection gearing.

“I’m green,” called Gracie in reference to her ready lights. John pushed off from the beleaguered *Rifleman*, causing one of the two torso lasers it fired in retaliation to miss. That left him standing only a few meters to one side but with his own targeting system feeding telemetry to Gracie’s it was almost as if she was standing right there as well. From over 900 meters away she bored into the bandit with two of her clan lasers with no fear of accidentally hitting the Colonel at all. One severed the wounded arm and damaged the shoulder area further while the second speared deep into center torso. The *Rifleman* staggered and fell to one knee under the onslaught, jamming it’s remaining arm into the soil to retain what balance it had left.

As his lance mate floundered the *Wolverine* tried to use the opportunity to hit the mercenary ‘Mech with it’s autocannon but the nimble machine crouched down and the bandit had to sweep his shots high to avoid hitting his friend. He started to move in where he could more accurately use his medium lasers when warning klaxons sounded as he was rocked by hits from behind. The *Lancelot* was back and the *Wolverine* pilot found himself in the unenviable position of being between the 60 tonner at his back and the *Awesome* ahead with that rampaging whatever it was about to finish off the *Rifleman*. He started to back away from the stricken *Rifleman*, twisting to track the ‘Mech behind him as the *Hatchetman* on his side sprinted past. Dainer was a complete psycho with that *Hatchetman*. The *Wolverine* pilot knew he’d be heading the other way if it was him.

Gracie let some heat vent then fired her third laser into the *Wolverine* as it started to back away. It wasn’t until after she fired that she realized the *Hatchetman* was closing on John. Now she couldn’t do anything but call a warning while she waited for her weapons to recycle. With a cheerful “I see him” John took advantage of the fire from his friends to heft the severed *Rifleman* arm from the ground. The barrels made a perfect sized grip for his *Camelot*’s hands and he raised the improvised club just as the *Rifleman* surged to it’s feet and tried to swing it’s good arm around to bare on him. A detached part of John’s mind wondered what would have happened if the pilot had fired with his barrels full of sod like they were even as he brought the improvised club down in a vicious strike that bent both barrels midway, ruining the large laser and autocannon that comprised the arm. A big chunk of metal flew off the “shoulder blade” of the severed arm as well but the limb retained enough mass to remain an excellent club.

John almost felt as if he could feel the impact of the blow vibrate in his real forearms but that was impossible of course. His actual arms were gripping pivoting controllers at the moment – not a several tons of mangled limb. It was ghost feedback from the neural-control system. Musing at the phantom sensations didn’t slow down his fighting one bit however. Recovering his balance and footing he prepared to finish the *Rifleman* off, taking the time to fire two torso mounted lasers at the *Hatchetman* that was a scant 100 meters away before throwing all his BattleMech’s might into a roundhouse swing that crashed through the middle of the *Rifleman* and buried the makeshift club deep inside, shattering the gyro housing and snapping the main back spars. He smiled in amusement at the

sheer destructive power of the strike. He had run simulated foot-pound numbers to determine how much force could be applied when running in triple-strength mode and been impressed but this was the first time he had ever picked something up and used it to smack a target. This was what it felt like to hit twice as hard as an *Atlas*' battle fist.

Unfortunately his club was now hopelessly lodged in it's shattered parent and he was dangerously overbalanced. Four different people were shouting warnings of various sorts in his helmet earphones (Gracie, Sven, Osmo, and Sandi –who must have decided to go into Bifrost – he registered in the back of his mind) about the *Hatchetman*. He'd already known it was almost on him although he hadn't expected to be quite as exposed as he ended up. The 'Mech sized melee weapon swung down in a strike meant to split open the golden "faceplate" portion of the *Camelot*'s head where the bandit pilot assumed the cockpit must be. John knew it was too late to avoid the blow...but he also knew he didn't have to take it in the head either. He surged forward against the semi-prone *Rifleman*, turning his shoulder up and sheltering his head. The ax slammed into the upper arm, nearly severing it and sending a shockwave through the cockpit that made John wince in pain as his body was shaken like a rag doll.

But he was alive. And as long as he was alive he could fight. The *Hatchetman* pilot had to recover his balance after the attack and without conscious thought John moved a foot control this way, re-routed arm actuators that way, and manually re-centering his gyro-balance John in a blur of motion as the *Camelot* surged to it's own feet. He was no longer the pilot of a large walking machine. He was the BattleMech and it was him. He practically skipped over and around the *Rifleman* carcass, causing the *Hatchetman* pilot to fumble his footing in pursuit and miss with a wild axe swing. Gracie was about to fire into wild melee but John's *Camelot* pounced in close following the ax attack and lashed out with a kick that caught the slightly smaller 'Mech square in the knee. There is an angled armor baffle to provide extra protection to the knee joint on all *Hatchetman* models but the *Camelot*'s powerful kick drove the armor plating practically through the knee joint.

Swaying on the bad leg inside the *Hatchetman* Dainer regained his sense of balance but found that the axe was low and in front of him, pointing at the green and black enemy but not in position to strike. It didn't matter though because he would not lose! Screaming in rage he swung his 'Mechs left arm around in a wide arcing punch.

John wasn't only ready for the attack, he had been waiting for it. He countered with a thrusting punch from his good arm that caught the *Hatchetman* just below the elbow. A sharp crack sent the *Hatchetman*'s lower arm flying away as the *Camelot*'s forceful strike caught it before the round house could build up full momentum. Dainer managed to get a floundering ax swing around that John nudged down and took on his hip before firing his lasers into the chest of the bandit. Molten armor splashed between them as the *Hatchetman* shuttered with myomer spasms from it's widespread damage. Belatedly Dainer remembered his own torso weapons but he couldn't bring the AC 10 on target before his foe slipped around behind him taking advantage of the busted leg. Another kick smashed the leg out from under him and Dainer crashed down onto his back, stunned from the fall and the damage feedback that had surged past the protection circuits in his neurohelmet.

The *Hatchetman* lay at John's feet, feebly rocking a bit in response to control input from the semi-conscious pilot. A fierce rush filled John's being as he raised his foot over the prone enemy. His first impulse was to crush the pirate's cockpit but this wasn't an uncontrolled rage. He had full reasoning capacity and he knew that it was wrong to purposely kill the defeated pilot just because he felt like it. The foot stomped down just under the cockpit section, crashing completely through the enemy 'Mech and snapping the main spine spar and central control lines. Pulling his foot from the dead *Hatchetman* he picked up the discarded hatchet and turned towards the shot up *Wolverine* that remained.

"I give up! I give up!" shouted a panicked Jacks from the *Wolverine* on the most commonly used open channel for cross-military communications.

"I accept your surrender," John replied calmly, although the heavy panting as he labored for breath in his oven of a cockpit made him sound more sinister than he had intended. "Power down all weapon systems and pop open your main hatch but stay inside. I'm claiming your 'Mech as salvage and you'll be walking it back for me."

John knew it was over because even as he had been dealing with the *Hatchetman* he had seen on his main battle plot that Wildcat had destroyed the *Shadowhawk* while the Bhati sisters had downed the *Commando* and run off the *Stinger*.

Despite the fact he could hear her equally well from across the valley, Gracie stomped her *Awesome* up to the battered Camelot until the two 'Mechs were almost chest to chest.

"What the hell kind of greenhorn, Joey, reckless, boneheaded stunt was that!" she demanded over their shared Blue Three channel.

"The kind I used to always pull back in my academy days," he shrugged nonplussed.

"And didn't you learn anything from back then!"

"Yeah," he grinned slyly. "That as long as Senior Cadet Gracie Aukland is backing my play I can get away with them."

Gracie frowned and took a step back, letting the channel fall off line. That was not an answer characteristic of the John she'd known for around two decades now. Something had happened. She didn't know if it was a good something or a bad something, but with damaged 'Mechs this far from their makeshift HQ this was definitely not the time to try to talk about it.

A moment later she opened the channel again. "Sorry John, I was out of line."

"No, we'd have both given Frank Parks royal hell if he'd done something like that," he replied quietly. "But it's alright Goose. I have it under control. Honest."

Gracie caught the undertone in his voice over the comm line. He meant more than that he had the combat situation under control. Curious.

Later, she told herself again as she took up an overwatch position to cover the valley as well as the thrashed *Wolverine*.

Nikki limped into the valley proper, her gait thrown off by a blown foot actuator. Elated as she was about her single combat win over the *Shadowhawk*, she was chagrined to admit that she had completely lost track of the larger action during her personal fight. She remembered the Colonel ordering Major Jorgenson to leave her be for which she felt she owed Colonel Linna a debt of

thanks for allowing her to prove herself. But after that she had tuned out the rest of the greater fight as she concentrated and the movement, feints, and targeting of her personal engagement. Now she felt she must have missed a telling engagement. Aside from the smoking hulk of the *Marauder*, the *Rifleman* sat inert with what was clearly its own arm sticking out of its innards while there were pieces of the *Hatchetman* strewn all over the field. It looked to have been dismembered. The *Wolverine* still stood but she could actually see daylight through the left section and she doubted there were more than two undamaged armor plates left anyplace on the machine. Standing triumphantly amid it all was the Colonel's burnt and scarred *Camelot*, one arm hanging limply from its myomer bundles and the other still clutching the ax from the fallen *Hatchetman*. Unlike her and the Colonel, the BattleMechs of Mother Goose and Lawman looked to be barely damaged.

"Wildcat reporting in Sirs," she announced over the main line.

"Congratulations on your first battle kill," sounded the Colonel's voice. "I see that your foe foolishly tried to leg you."

She blinked in surprise. How had he known that? "He must have not been aware that the *Stormcrow* carries heavier armor in the legs than the *Shadowhawk* despite sharing the same total mass. His was a poorly chosen strategy."

"Looks like he didn't go down easy though," noted John as he surveyed the damage indicators from her on board systems via the C3 link. "What did you learn from your duel?"

She considered for a moment. "That I could use more practice in using terrain for defensive purposes, not to underestimate a foe, and that I must strive to understand where my personal fight fits into the larger battle – even while I am in the midst of fighting it."

"Then it was a good duel for more than just the outcome," mused John. "Now if you would take up position here and Lawman here to watch our backs"...he designated two points on the map..."Flame and Death Dancer come help me grab these PPCs off the *Marauder* and then we'll do the news feed and destroy everything left."

At the north end of the shallow valley the Bhati sisters throttled forward and hastened to join their commander. Following their recall orders they had been attacked by the *Galleon* tanks and quickly dispatched them only to be harried by the two light bandit 'Mechs. A deadly aerial ballet had followed with the *Stinger* and them jumping up above the trees to trade shots to minimal effect. Meanwhile the *Commando* had attempted to sneak in and catch them on a landing but they had been tracking it on their sensors the entire time and turned its attempted ambush around by ripping it apart with dual PPC blasts and finishing it with their lasers. The *Stinger* had fled after that but by the time they made it back to the main engagement the fighting had been almost over.

They had been in time to see Colonel Linna dispatch the *Rifleman* with its own arm and then practically tear the *Hatchetman* apart limb from limb. Perhaps it had just been the heat shimmering from his laboring heat sinks but both would have sworn that they could see an aura of power around him as he combated the rogue Lyrans. Surely the Goddess had manifested through him today and it was an honor to assist in collecting trophies from the scene.

John was using the hatchet to chop free the PPC arms from the *Marauder* when the sisters arrived. He told each they would have to carry one. He wished he had the time and crew available to grab all the remains but wishes weren't going to get him off this rock. To make sure none of the other parties on this war torn planet collected the salvage and put any of the 'Mechs back into use terrorizing islanders he'd shoot them up until only minor systems remained. Scores of millions of C-Bills was about to go up in smoke but he didn't care. Frankly he didn't really need the 400 grand in PPCs either but he was thinking more along the lines of weapons they might be able to jury rig for use than profit. Selling what was left of that *Wolverine* would more than cover their transport and payroll costs for the trip anyway. If he could he'd strip some of the torso mounted auto-cannons....

It was then that he realized that both of the other *Camelot* 'Mechs had come in behind him and kneeled down on one knee. Scanning his other camera views he noted that the other Warder 'Mechs were all conspicuously pointing away from the two kneeling BattleMechs as if to indicate they had not noticed – which was silly as they all had extra camera facings just as he did. But MechWarriors often reacted with their machines with the same body language they would have used otherwise. The Bhati sisters hadn't accidentally taken a kneeling position of course. He tried to respect the beliefs of all people but this avatar thing was starting to get out of hand.

He switched the Blue One channel before addressing them. "Ladies, do you have malfunctions with your knee servos?"

"Ah...no Colonel," replied the older as both 'Mechs regained their feet. "We were just paying respects to..."

"Inra," he sighed, "I understand and accept that you believe that your Goddess occasionally manifests within other MechWarriors. But I though we had settled this when you signed a contract with the Warders. When you are on duty you two are MechWarriors and not priestess."

Inra dropped her eyes from her main consul in shame. The Colonel was absolutely correct. Many of the others felt uneasy about the Goddess. Such public displays did not help unit cohesion. It was likely that the Goddess would not approve of them breaking discipline on a battlefield either. There was still the possibility of further action after all.

"My sincere apologies Colonel," she replied abashed. "It will not happen again."

"Please forgive us great Colonel," added Yani, making Inra roll her eyes. That kind of comment wasn't going to help.

But John chose to let things pass and move on to more pressing matters.

"You two come pull off these arms. You'll have to carry them back to the HQ but for now just put them down over there by the road behind us and then stand over by the *Rifleman*." He switched to the shared channel. "Mother Goose, we're going to do the news shot soon. Go over next to the *Wolverine*."

Although it was a lesson often forget by field military leaders, many centuries before warriors had learned the hard way that winning in the contest of public opinion could be as vital as winning on the battlefield. Mercenary commands often found that their public image could help or hinder their ability to get and complete assignments. In this particular case Captain Woods and John had decided that even though they would have acted to stop the bandits regardless of the current political situation that it would be wise to use the act for their own gain rather than let someone else claim the credit. Such as ComStar for instance.

“Bifrost, this is the Duck. Are you ready to record?” John asked.

“Ready and standing by,” came Osmo’s reply from the far side of the island.

“Okay, I’m starting the visual feed now,” noted John as he fiddled with the manual controls for his main gunnery recording camera. “Citizens of Nuevo San Diego, this is Colonel Linna of the Suomi Warders. By now you may have heard that the renegade Lyran forces of Kommandant Cosar have been stopped from attacking your city. As you can see from the wreckage Cosar’s ‘Mech force has been destroyed. In the right background you can see a *Wolverine* that surrendered to under guard next to Lieutenant Colonel Aukland’s *Awesome*. We stopped the Kommandant from attacking your city on our own initiative because we refuse to stand by and let innocents be injured when it is in our power to prevent it. Precentor O’Donnald of the Nuevo San Diego ComStar station along with a number of your milita leaders have been unwilling to let us peacefully withdraw from this world with the children we were hired to bring home. To avoid further senseless violence and loss of life when we return to our DropShip in the city I suggest that the peace loving citizens of Nuevo San Diego let their leaders know that they do not want further BattleMech combat in their city – especially after being spared what seemed an inevitable assault by these bandits.”

John let the video recorder run a little longer then cut the special feed. They would send that in a few hours, giving his detail time to get a good way back towards the school on the off chance the Precentor attempted to capture the children as hostages by beating John to the academy. As his commando team leader had contacted Captain Woods not long ago that they had successfully exited the city amid a rush of others fleeing the raid John knew that his DropShip crew would beat him “home” which meant that one way or another they would be returning for their ship. He was tempted to have Osmo round up Sergeant Harding and ask if the technical wiz had broken into the computer core they had recovered from the ocean yet. But John resisted the urge, figuring he’d give the Sarge a few more uninterrupted hours to work at it.

Besides, he wasn’t in any hurry to let his crew chief see how much damage John had taken to the *Fire Wraith*. He was in for a few choice comments from the Tech Chief – all of them uttered to other people just exactly loud enough to ensure that John overheard them. For about the next month. It was better getting the *Fire Wraith* damaged than having been personally shot up again though. Dr. Svengali wasn’t exactly shy about directly chewing the Colonel out for getting injured every time the skilled surgeon had to patch him up. With a rueful grin it occurred to him to wonder if the good doctor gave everyone a hard time or just him. He’d have to remember to ask Sven and Gracie if Dr. Svengali gave them a hard time too. Of course, they were less frequent guests of the doctor than he was.

The weird after battle euphoria John had been feeling faded as they marched home at the best speed the group could manage. Bit by bit John and the Warders had been gaining the upper hand in their struggle with the various factions on this island to escape this place but he still had a tricky area to negotiate with that computer core and the ComStar – Word of Blake face off. Despite his smoldering anger at both groups, his primary goal remained getting the kids off the planet without subjecting them to any more gunfire. He spent the next several hours turning that question over in his mind as the BattleMechs under his command wound their way back the Warder encampment at the Cussler Academy.

***Bifrost Mobile Command Center
Cussler Academy Grounds
Baja Californio Island, Carver V
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Sandi Linna nodded to the guard at the armored door, offering him something out of the plastic bin she was carrying as she did so. The trooper declined with a polite smile, his eyes then returning to the task of sweeping the area for any signs of trouble despite the fact it was a secured area. His vision always lingered a bit on the ComStar MechWarrior sitting at a table under a sun screen across the courtyard. The acolyte had shown up at the docks in a speedboat and surrendered himself, asking to talk to the Colonel about an hour ago. Captain Woods had spoken with him while they waited for the BattleMechs to return and now the figure waited under the watchful guard of two other troopers where he was close to Captain Woods should the intel officer have a need to speak to him again. He seemed like a decent enough guy, but after the unprovoked attack in the city none of the Warders were inclined to be trustful towards ComStar personnel.

Inside the cool trailer Sandi carefully worked her way down the narrow isle behind the main work stations, offering sandwiches and drinks to the tech specialists that manned the communications and computer gear that was the central nervous system of the Warders when they were in the field. It wasn’t standard practice for the daughter of the unit’s commander to wander around with a makeshift foodcart but she’d been running out of things to do trying to stay busy as she waited for her dad and the others to get back. She lingered behind specialist Dorn’s station as he rummaged through the sandwiches looking for a roast beef one, her eyes reading over the six subwindows Dorn had grouped to the right side of his main LCD display.

“Wow, that many already?” she asked as he waved around the sandwich he’d been searching for in triumph.

Dorn looked up at his screen to see what she was looking at. He had been handling incoming contacts from civilian sources, which included the media and employment inquires. Mainly he just gave the scripted responses the Captain had prepared and logged what the callers wanted for later evaluation. He had been organizing the job offers when she had arrived with some welcome chow. Captain Woods tended to forget to eat during their long stints on duty in the trailer so Sandi’s appearance was most welcome.

“Those are just the creditable ones,” he grinned. “After the Colonel’s news feed was picked up by the planetary stations we got a flood of calls. All planetary of course – I doubt ComStar allowed the interstellar agencies to send it off world. A couple of them are offering us our own tropical vacation island if we want one. But as far as I know our plans to evacuate the planet rather than pick up a new contract here.”

The last bit had actually been a fishing expedition for information from Sandi rather than a bit of inside information. Dorn figured that Sandi probably had a better track on her dad’s plans than what he might pick up from the closed mouth Captain Woods.

“You got that right,” agreed Sandi vigorously. “We’re out of here as soon as we can manage it without having to shoot up half the city.” She had no doubt that her father would never waver from the mission they had been hired for. No amount of money would sidetrack him.

“Figured as much,” smiled Dorn. A small icon starting blinking on his control bar. “Incoming call, duty calls. Thanks for the sandwich.”

Sandi moved down to the last work station, which was the largest and a semi-circular depression into the equipment bank with the seat surrounded on three sides by monitors and banks of tell-tale lights. Specialist Lisa Hays looked up from the BattleMech Information Center station. “Hey thanks, I could really use something to drink for my throat.”

While Sandi liked everyone that usually staffed Bifrost she liked Lisa Hays the best. Lisa’s younger sister had become a classmate when Sandi switched from the fancy private school she used to attend to the base school and Lisa had what Sandi considered to be the coolest job possible other than actually piloting ‘Mechs.

“That cold still nagging you huh?” asked Sandi kindly.

“Yeah, typical me,” smiled Lisa. “I finally ship out to a tropic paradise and not only do I spend all my time locked in a truck I manage to come down with a cold too. Hey, I have something for you.”

Checking to make sure that Captain Woods was still in the soundproof chamber talking to the Colonel on their private channel, Lisa slid open a drawer and pulled out a shiny memory disk and slipped it to Sandi.

“It’s an uninterrupted vid from Mother Gooses’s main view feed along with a computer compiled iconic overview of the entire engagement,” whispered Lisa conspiratorially. “I thought you might be interested.”

Sandi whipped the disk into her waist band so her shirt hid it. “You know I am. Thanks tons.”

During the brief battle Sandi had been down at this end of the trailer along with Captain Woods. He’d kept switching the feeds though, watching what the other MechWarriors were seeing so that her father’s ‘Mech kept popping up then getting replaced by something else. The main battle plot showed everyone as an icon and listed base conditional information as a string of numbers and symbols but she hadn’t learned to read all of them yet. As a result she had been able to follow the general thrust of what was going on but missed all of the details of her father’s thrilling charge into the bandits. From what she had seen she knew that Aunt Gracie’s view was the best to watch from as Mother Goose had been providing support fire thus her father was generally in Gracie’s forward view arc.

“I haven’t seen something like that since the last Solaris small arena finals,” enthused Lisa about the feed. “Except for that time when Lawman was piloting the Fire Wraith against the Blitzkrieg commander. It’s a little jumbled to watch because of all the jumping but the vis-feeds from Death Dancer and Flame are fairly intense too. I’ll try to cut you a disk of it later on when I get some free time.”

“Can you track all the feeds?” pleaded Sandi. “It looked like Wildcat had a serious duel going and I’d like to watch my father from Lawman’s angle too.”

“You got it girlfriend. Just remember that if the Colonel ever finds your little battle rom collection the story is you jacked them from the base system yourself. I like my job.”

Sandi grinned. This was the main reason she liked Lisa so much. The information specialist treated her like a kid sister rather than a commander’s daughter. “He’d buy that. Heck, I probably could jack the files if I needed to. It’s just a lot easier to get your feeds.”

“Got anything there for me?” asked Captain Woods from halfway down the aisle behind them.

Lisa spun back to her station as Sandi twisted guiltily towards Osmo Woods. How the heck did he do that? She would have sworn he was in the secure comms chamber just seconds ago.

“Column ETA is sixteen minutes,” announced Lisa Hays crisply as she checked the location and speed of the Warper BattleMechs.

“Thanks Lisa. How’s the cold?”

“Doing fine Sir.”

“What do you have there Sandi? Asked Osmo.

At first she thought he meant the disc she was hiding. Then she got a hold of herself and looked down into the tub she had borrowed from the school cafeteria. “Looks like mostly turkey, egg salad, and sea-plant.”

A slight grimace crossed Osmo’s face at the mention of the sea-plant sandwiches. He knew the locals ate a variety of the ocean plants that grew on this planet but they looked rather unappetizing to him. Luckily several types of Terran fowl had been imported here centuries ago including chickens and turkeys. “I’ll go with the turkey.”

“Here you go Captain. When do you think I can talk with my dad?”

Osmo scratched at his chin. “First I need to debrief with him on the latest sit-rep, and he might want to talk to that ComStar pilot. Then he’ll want to talk to Sergeant Harding. He scheduled the after-mission debrief for six hours from now so he’s planning on letting everyone grab a little sack time after their all night deployment. Unless he plans to answer any of these media requests I’d say he’d probably be clear to grab some sleep himself about an hour or so after they get back. He’ll make time for you if appear anytime after I’m done with him of course but I think it might be wiser to let him finish what he needs to do and meet him in your quarters.”

Sandi liked and respected Osmo Woods very much, but he had never been high on the idea of her coming on this mission. It seemed to Sandi that he had become much more sour on the idea since the trouble had started even though he wouldn’t say anything out loud about it. The worse part was that she felt he was right. Her presence was only making dealing with all of this harder for her dad.

“Okay Captain. I’ll see him in our place. Could you let him know so he doesn’t think I’m hiding or something?”

“Of course Sandi,” nodded Osmo.

Sandi thought about asking if she could bring something to the ComGuard pilot but decided against it. As much as she wanted to get involved in as much as possible around here she had to admit that his presence really wasn't any of her business. Technically she was just her father's civilian teenage daughter after all.

"Thanks then. I'll see you later," she smiled.

John Linna ached all over and was exhausted as he rode the cable lift down from his cockpit but as he stepped out of the harness and turned to face Captain Woods he stood straight and hid his weariness from showing in his voice.

"So what do you have for me Osmo?" he asked with forced interest. The only things he really cared about right now were the computer core and his bed, but he knew that there would be numerous other issues waiting for his input. There always was.

"Nineteen marriage proposals, fourteen interview requests, seven creditable contract offers, six messages of thanks from various civic leaders, two surrender offers from Nuevo San Diego Milita leaders, three complaints from northern civic leaders that we didn't do anything to help them, two complaints from different NSD Milita forces that we let the bandit convoy get away, a bill for damages to a water pumping emplacement that you guys accidentally stepped on cutting through a danga fruit field on your way back, one ComGuard defector, Lieutenant Cascade's people and the crew of the *Baltic Serenade*, a note from Dr. Svengali reminding you that you are not superhuman and need to sleep just like everyone else, and a request from your crew chief asking you if he should take apart the shoulder of either MechWarrior Bhati's *Camelot* to effect repairs on the *Fire Wraith* as we do not have a replacement shoulder assembly in stores here on Carver V."

John snorted to himself. "So it's starting with Harding already I see. Now you're going to tell me that you've already handled most of that stuff in your usual efficient manner right?" he asked hopefully.

"I sent the pre-canned nuptial response your PR people crafted for use fending off the proposals you get on Sampsa, accepted the thanks, told the surrenders that as we had no intention to capture the city there was no reason to surrender to us but we would appreciate it if they stayed home on the day we march for the airfield, blew off the complaints about the convoy, sent a payment voucher to the fruit farmer, debriefed the ComGuard pilot, found quarters for Captain Larrs and her crew and arranged medical and psych checks, put Cascade's bunch on R and R but last I heard they were trying to mock up the academy storage buildings to work out assault paths to retake the *Serenade*, assured the Doctor that you would be in your quarters within an hour after returning and would get at least four hours of sleep, and left the Chief as your problem."

"Coward," grumbled John good naturedly. "So what's the ComGuard's story?"

"Claims he grew up on Sampsa, has lost faith in ComStar and retired his commission by taking advantage of a medical waiver the Precentor tagged him with, and decided to come to us with what he knows in the hopes we could use the information to get off the planet without any more people getting hurt."

"And in return he wants?" John wanted to know.

"That's the surprising part. Nothing. He willingly told me his tale – which wasn't anything we didn't already know but confirmed what we had surmised. I gather that he'd take a ride off the planet if we're inclined to offer one but he hasn't asked for anything at all. Claims he just wants to help resolve the situation."

"Interesting," mused John. "Guess I'll have a quick chat with him. Damage to my 'Mech aside, have you talked with Harding about the computer core?"

"He's waiting to brief you on it. He managed to break into it without blowing it up and it's what you figured it was. An advanced C3 system remarkable similar to the Warder units. He says that big parts of the software code are actually identical to ours. If it wasn't derived from the early work of your company then magic fairies made it for them."

A dark look flashed across John's features. "Right. I'll start with the ComGuard pilot then go visit the Chief."

Terry Quina looked up from studying the concrete under his feet at the sound of people approaching. His two guards snapped to attention as the dark skinned Captain that he had already talked to came near in the company of a person that Terry recognized from pictures as Colonel Linna. Terry got to his feet as well, offering the standard military salute with right hand to brow rather than the stylized ComStar salute-bow.

"Ex acolyte Terry Quina Sir," he offered.

"I'm Colonel Linna," nodded John as he studied the younger man. Even without the robes and hood he looked every centimeter the proud ComGuard MechWarrior. There was something about his eyes though. Wiser than his years, and haunted with events best not witnessed. He'd seen that kind of look plenty of times before on fighters of many stripe who had decided they had seen enough.

"Let's take a little walk," John said as he nodded a direction and started that way. Terry fell in step next to him.

"Captain Woods filled me in on what you had to say Mr. Quina. So I'll share some things from my end. We really did only come here to retrieve the children. After we got attacked in the city I put some people to work investigating the full situation and through means other than yourself discovered the existence of the computer core. We have also already located and retrieved our DropShip crew from the people that were holding them."

"Impressive," breathed Terry. "The ROM guy at the station still has no idea where the crew is. He couldn't even tell the Precentor who took them."

"Precentor O'Donald could improve his hiring qualifications," noted John dryly. "My point, however, is that we have already figured out why he acted and are now in a position to try to leave again. My question is if you think Precentor O'Donald will resist our attempt to do so."

Terry considered the question for a moment before answering. "When you threatened the relay station it spooked him a bit. I think it convinced him that you're a bit unbalanced and probably have the core or you would have accepted the search in the first place and wouldn't be threatening a ComStar facility. The general conclusion around the base is that Word Of Blake must have set up the first fight so he may be assuming you're working with the Blakists and trying to make ComStar look so bad they don't dare try to stop you."

But even if he doesn't try to intercede – for I have no idea what his most current orders might be – it seems to me that the Word of Blake people might try to stop you by riling up a militia unit or two. If you rolled into the city tomorrow I really couldn't say what would happen. Unless you can convince ComStar and the Blakist faction you don't have what they want getting away clean will be a dicey proposition. On the other hand, I believe that you have the raw firepower to blast your way to the airbase. As far as I know the ship is still sealed up. Airfield security has kept people away from it in fear that you'll lay waste to their facility if someone messes with the ship."

"Pretty much what I was thinking," allowed John. "I really don't want to fight my way to the base and get a bunch of people hurt, but I might have an ace in the hole to get around that. So that brings up the question of what to do with you. Don't take this personally, but until we can confirm your story I have to assume you're some sort of ROM plant trying to determine what I might have or not have and report that back to either ComStar or the Wobblies."

Terry shrugged, unconcerned. "I understand. I'm glad you're committed to a peaceful solution Colonel. Those kids already suffered more than anyone should ever have to. As for me...I won't give you any trouble. I'll accept whatever type of arrest you feel is appropriate. I understand that you can't take any chances, but I'm not working for anyone. I left ComStar because they've changed for the worse since the Clan invasion but I can't stomach the Blakists. They crave political power even worse than the new ComStar does. All I ever wanted to do was protect people. Both groups are only out to protect themselves these days."

John stopped and studied the other MechWarrior's face. His sense was that the young man was being truthful. John looked down at the medal uniform tag that the ComGuard had been turning about and about in his hand the entire time. "I take it you were at Tukayyid?"

Terry blinked in surprise, then followed the Colonel's gaze down to the battle token he held in his hand. It was the only ComGuard icon he had taken with him when he'd rented the speedboat and left a bunch of stuff on the dock behind him. "Yes. It was my first campaign actually. We got wiped out by the Ghost Bears."

John's gaze unfocused as his mind's eye drifted back to that time. "I was on campaign back then too. We had tangled with some Nova Cats but mainly I was up to my neck in corporately backed pirates. I'm afraid that you'll find that ComStar never was the organization your parents thought it was and taught you to believe it was Terry. But at Tukayyid ComStar did the right thing. Your friends died fighting for a noble cause."

Squeezing his fist tight Terry smiled sadly. "I believe you are right Colonel. I believe you are right." He sensed that this was a man that understood about loss and sacrifice. Beyond the personal tragedy of the *Starcade* incident that Terry knew about from growing up on Sampsa. This man understood why brave men and women risked their lives for others because he did so himself. People like Precentor O'Donald were honorable in their way but could not see beyond their blind allegiance to the needs of ComStar and following orders.

"There's a grounds keeper hut that's empty now that the keeper has fled," decided John. "We'll have to pull the comm-set out but otherwise you can get some rest, watch the vid-feeds, and whatnot until I have more time to deal with your case. I'll have a guard put on the door but I won't really need him will I Mr. Quina?"

Terry smiled and shook his head. "I'll stay put until you've decided what to do with me," Terry promised.

"Good. I'm going to turn you back over to Captain Woods now. I need to go have a talk with my crew chief."

John's battered BattleMech was visible over the low buildings to their left. Terry had taken a liking to this remarkable man and couldn't help but comment. "If I may say, it's a good thing you're the CO Sir."

"Why's that?" asked a puzzled Colonel Linna.

"Because I'd catch royal hell if I brought a 'Mech back in that condition Sir. As CO you should have some pull with the tech staff," grinned Terry.

"You too?" sighed John. But Terry didn't understand the reference.

"It's not as bad as it looks," snapped an exasperated John to the refugee-prisoner in response to the quizzical look. Then he remanded Terry to Captain Woods and headed off towards the 'Mech repair trailers where he could see that they were already starting to replace the armor plates on two of the machines. He knew they wouldn't be able to effect full repairs, but they did have a decent supply of armor to patch up the worse holes. With any luck they'd be able to fix up the foot of the *Stormcrow* as well.

John found his chief tech sitting at a folding table studying the onboard damage data that had been forwarded from Bifrost to his portable computer station.

"She left last night with 98.7 percent systems green," observed Sergeant Harding mildly as John approached.

"An incredible feat of engineering work considering what we had to work with after I got knocked around a bit in Nuevo San Diego," allowed John.

"Begging the Colonel's pardon but I hope you're not expected a similar ready level for a while. Like until about a week after we get back home," noted Harding in a pleasant enough voice but with a very unhappy set of eyes.

John just grinned. "I get the message Chief Tech. Yes, my 'Mech got trashed a bit. Hey, yhey're combat machines – they get shot up sometimes. I know you'll do the best you can and I know you won't be able to fix the arm. Just tack it back on so it isn't obviously about to fall off it someone shoots an angry look at it. But hopefully I won't have to get it dinged up anymore and you'll have loads of time on a nice quiet flight home to tinker with it...assuming you have some good news about our little ocean find for me."

Harding looked around to make sure no one was listening – which was hardly required as everyone had cleared a wide distance between he and the Colonel. Harding snorted in disgust. "Where did everyone go? They expecting fireworks or something?"

"You can get a bit colorful in your discourse when you're unhappy," grinned John. "And everyone knows that non-functional equipment tends to make you unhappy."

"If you don't growl at them from time to time they get lax," shrugged the Sergeant. "I'm just happy there aren't any holes in you. The *Fire Wraith* I can put back together. Good to have you back Sir."

“Thanks Chief. This won’t stop you from making snide comments when I’m almost out of earshot of course.”

“Course not,” grinned Harding. “I have a reputation to uphold. Now about that C3 core. I’m not sure if it’s good news or not but I was able to scan it with equipment they have here at the school. It was booby-trapped but I bypassed that by cutting into the casing in a safe place and disconnecting the internal power so I could open her up. The damn thing is so much like our stuff I was able to hook up our diagnostic cart to it and get readouts. The circuit boards are smaller of course. It does one up us though – it can link six units rather than five.”

“That makes sense,” shrugged John. “ComStar operates in force groups of six BattleMechs or vehicles. I take it that it’s a slave unit.”

“Yes and no,” replied Harding. “Pretty ingenious actually. It’s both. That is to say unlike the normal C3 with one heavy command unit and slaves these operate as independent nodes, sharing their computing power. That part of their programming is different than ours and probably all original work. The frequency bunching ability of their stuff is better than ours allowing each unit to act as a master by sharing some duties with other units tied into it. But otherwise it does exactly what ours does as far as the pilot interface and data feeds between ‘Mechs. According to the hand engraved plate I found inside this is final test prototype unit ten of what they now call the ‘3Ci’ system. My guess is that with full shielding and the power coupling units it would mass around 2 tons. That would free up three tons in your *Camelot*.”

John considered the implications. Right now one command ‘Mech had to carry about five tons of gear with each associated ‘Mech a one ton unit. This would require two tons in each unit but allow one more to connect in than the Warders could manage at five or the standard C3 at four with an extra benefit that losing the unit with the five ton command core wouldn’t crash the network. Interesting but hardly something likely to change the balance of power in Inner Sphere. Although he had no doubt there were armchair generals in both ComStar and WoB that probably believed the system would give them just the edge they needed for their plans of conquest. Small units would certainly be able to maximize their firepower connected through a C3i system though. Obviously ComStar and the Wobblies were willing to kill over it.

“What about this booby trap you mentioned?”

Harding shrugged. “Nothing special. I doubt it would be in a production unit. Just thermal explosives that would go off if you didn’t punch the right code into the main access panel.”

“Hmm,” thought John out loud. So, they didn’t mind losing this prototype as they had plenty of others. They just didn’t want someone else to get their hands on it. That suggested a plan to John rather than just picking one side or the other and handing the thing over. “Could you take everything important out of it and then seal it back up so on casual inspection no one would know it had been cut into?”

Harding smiled. “We’re about to do something sneaky aren’t we? No problem. Do you want the thermal grenades active or disarmed?”

“Active if you please. If you started work right away – and didn’t touch my ‘Mech until you were done with the core – when could you be done?”

Harding frowned. He had assumed he would do what he could for the poor *Fire Wraith* first, but obviously this C3i was more important to the Colonel at the moment. “By nightfall. Maybe a bit earlier.”

“Good. I’ll need a cradle it can sit on too. Something we can get on and off a truck. And I saw some large dump trucks at a mining site on my way back. I want to weld some armor to them including across the open beds to make a few make-shift armored personnel carries.”

“Colonel...I only have a skeletal tech staff with me. Not even a full as-tech per BattleMech tech chief. When exactly did you plan to use your ‘Mechs again if we’re making cradles and whipping up APCs?”

“Point taken,” sighed John. “I’ll move my plans back a day or two. And I’ll give you Cascade’s bunch to help out with the trucks. They’re a pretty industrious bunch.”

“Among other things,” agreed Harding. “Well, off with you Sir. I have work to do you know.”

“Don’t we always,” laughed John. But there was a grim undertone in his laugh. He had plans for his two Precentors.

Lincoln Cove
Baja California Island, Carver V
July 11, 3057

Precentor Christina Dhenner of the Word of Blake pulled down on her short skirt as she waited next to the closed diner. The tight red mini-dress tended to ride up on her, but then again that was the intent. Headlights turned onto the drive and a wheeled car came towards her and she smiled and struck would should be a demur pose as the car rolled up next to her and stopped. That smile faded as a rather fierce looking small woman wearing infantry armor climbed out from behind the wheel. The blue lion insignia of the Suomi Warders was on the figures left arm sleeve so the figure had definitely come for her...but she had been expecting someone else.

“Precentor Dhenner?” questioned the not very friendly voice.

She briefly considered denying it but decided it was unlikely this person would believe her.

“Yes. I was...expecting someone else.”

“The Colonel is waiting for us,” deadpanned the figure. After running her eye critical over the Precentor’s attire the soldier added, “dressed to get laid?”

Christina started spluttering a reply when the trooper reached into the car and tossed a green jumpsuit at her. “Put it on,” nodded the Lieutenant. “Trust me.”

The WoB operative harrumphed to herself but unzipped it and stepped into it as arguing with the stern faced trooper was decidedly a bad idea. Once she had it on over her dress Christina raised an eyebrow and studied the armored figure in return. "So now what?"

"Now we see the Colonel," announced Sammi Cascade.

The trooper got in behind the wheel without indicating where Christina should go. She considered getting into the front seat but decided it would better to have a seat between her and the fierce woman that had been sent to collect her. Obviously something had chilled the Colonel's perception of her and she had a bad idea what it might involve. It was too late to back out now though. As she opened the rear door for herself the driver spoke again.

"At one point five kilometers from here we will open a gate and turn off onto a side road. A crew armed with shoulder fired SRMs will be waiting in the trees and they will fire on any vehicle that follows us. If you have any compatriots lurking about that you value I suggest you wave them off before we go. There will be no warning shots."

"If I decide I no longer wish to visit your Colonel?" Christina asked hesitantly.

"Then I would have to insist," deadpanned the trooper dryly.

"I see," noted the Precentor through clenched teeth. She stepped over to where two dirt swept chairs still rested on the diner porch, wondering if the driver would suddenly rush out of the car. But nothing happened as she slowly gripped one of them and turned it to face the other, her pre-arranged sign for the backup team not to follow her. Then she slowly eased into the backseat of the car.

"We'll be there in about ten minutes," Cascade informed her passenger. "Enjoy the ride." Then she put the car in gear and pulled smoothly away.

Dhenner quickly discovered that the Warder officer had not been bluffing as they soon pulled over in front of a rusty gate. A faded sign identified the area as the Krystal Sugar Refinery. The sugar cane plant had been closed many years ago, long before the start of the current troubles, and the rusty apparatuses that could be seen rising above the low trees hinted that few visited this place anymore. A camouflage clad soldier suddenly appeared from the roadside and jogged over to open the gate, waiting to close it behind them before melting back into the foliage along the road. They drove through the abandoned buildings towards the huge main rendering plant where she could see two figures standing near a little mound of dirt before the huge main door that was designed to let large trucks pass through it. One of the figures was Colonel Linna wearing green fatigues. The other was Precentor O'Donald of ComStar.

Cascade pulled up near the two men and parked, then got out and this time went around and opened Dhenner's door for her. There wasn't anything to do now but see what the Colonel had to say so Christina squared her shoulders and walked over to the two waiting men with Cascade a few steps behind her.

"Precentor Dhenner," nodded John as the two women approached. "May I present your counterpart here, Precentor O'Donald."

She smiled her most dazzling and nodded slightly. "Perry, it's good to see you again."

O'Donald looked at the woman more closely, surprise registering on his face. "Christina?"

"So you two know each other," surmised John.

"She was the investigating officer in an internal security problem I was involved with cleaning up a few years ago," supplied Perry O'Donald. "I hadn't realized that she had gone over to the Word of Blake people."

"Well, we're all full of surprises aren't we?," shrugged John. "Why don't you two chat about old times while I bring out someone I'd like you to meet."

Neither of them spoke as Lt. Cascade went over to the huge doors and slipped through the small opening that remained between them. Christina couldn't help but nervously eye the shallow pit that had been dug and was just a few meters off to one side. It was obviously fresh and looked big enough for a few people to lie down in. Precentor O'Donald looked decidedly uneasy so it was obvious that he wasn't expecting her nor had any idea what the Warder Colonel was up to. She wondered what Linna had told O'Donald to get him out here all alone.

"Not talkative tonight," observed John casually. "That's okay, I'll do most of the talking. Precentors, I would like to present Captain Lars of the *Baltic Serenade*. You may have heard of that ship. It's that big round ship still at the airfield in the city which had it's crew forcibly removed and held against it's will until early this morning."

John saw that O'Donald was surprised to see the DropShip Captain. Dhenner looked like she was expecting the possibility.

"But how...where did...where have..." started O'Donald.

"Now that would be telling," tutted John with a tight nod. "Let's just say that the scum sucking bastards that were holding them hostage were rather forcefully persuaded to return them to me."

The two Precentors exchanged an uneasy glance. Colonel Linna was obviously in a dangerous mood. That pit was starting to look more ominous to both of them.

Captain Lars stomped up and glared at each of the two figures flanking the Colonel for a full minute before speaking, addressing herself first towards O'Donald.

"I opened my bays for a customs inspection team and two robed acolytes that claimed to have a priority message for Colonel Linna that had just arrived and required hand delivery. I trusted the office of ComStar. My mistake. They pulled guns and forced me to gather my crew then drove off with us without legal cause. Those were ComGuard soldiers Precentor. Your soldiers. Not much longer we were forcefully taken by a second group. Criminals that thought they were working for someone else, but that I believe were working for you Precentor Dhenner. Those animals killed one of my engineers because he had the audacity to prevent them from raping his wife. As far as I am concerned, you both share equal culpability," spat Jennifer Lars as she struggled to hold back her tears at the memories. She paused to regain her control for a moment.

"Lieutenant Cascade offered me the chance to execute the man that had actually pulled the trigger and killed my engineer. I was too weak to do so myself so she kindly slit his throat for me. I have regretted that the past few days...regretted that I did not perform

the deed myself. I should have avenged my lost friend personally. So I asked...I asked Colonel Linna if I might be allowed to shoot you two instead.”

Both Precentors took a step back in alarm. Only the fact that no one present appeared to have a weapon – other than the knives the two Warder officers were wearing – kept them from trying to take some sort of desperate self defense action.

“So you see part of my problem,” sighed John as he paced back and forth in front of the two. “I came to this planet to save some kids that had been cut off from their parents. But you two couldn’t mind your own troubles and had to involve me in yours, which cost several militia members their lives, two of my troopers, one of the Captain’s crew persons, and inflicted serious injury on a number of innocent children. We had nothing to do with your precious computer core but you had to make it our problem, making yourselves indirectly responsible for a number of deaths and injuries. So I imagine you can appreciate my dilemma. The Captain wants to shoot you for her engineer, I want to shoot you for my troopers and the children, and Lieutenant Cascade here wants to shoot you...because she likes shooting people that make me angry.”

Cascade flashed her own version of a dazzling smile at the Christina Dhenner. It was anything but reassuring.

Dhenner felt the safest thing to do was stay quiet but O’Donald was outraged.

“Now see here,” he demanded. “You can’t just murder us in cold blood and dump us here. ComStar would...”

John savagely cut him off with a chopping motion as he raised his voice to over-ride the Precentor. “Yes Precentor. Yes I could. But I’m not.”

Perry O’Donald stopped his protesting in mid sentence.

“It’s not that I don’t feel you deserve an unmarked grave,” continued John. “But it would be a very big hassle for me if both ComStar and Word of Blake stopped passing interstellar comm traffic for my family’s interests and kept the Suomi Warders from being able to use the hyperpulse network.”

Christina Dhenner nodded to herself. She hadn’t expected to get killed by the Colonel for the simple fact she was still alive. He didn’t strike her as the kind of man that bothered pontificating. If he wanted them dead they would be dead already. So there was a point to this show. The question was where this was all going. It had been a masterful display so far.

“Then what’s this all about?” O’Donald wondered out loud.

“If I have learned anything over the years I crashed around the Inner Sphere getting into fights it’s that one must always keep the true goals foremost in your mind. Thus ultimately this is all about me peacefully leaving this pleasant little hell hole without any more injury to those I have sworn to safeguard,” smiled John. “But in the short term it’s all about missing computer cores and the people that will kill for them.” He nodded to Cascade, who headed back towards the doors. “Another thing I have learned over the years is to not get too closely wound up in chasing the goal. When I’m not fending off unwarranted attacks or saving cities from rouge Lyrans I like to go fishing. So come take a look at my latest catch. I think you’ll be interested.”

Cascade pulled open one of the doors on it’s slider, revealing the core. It was resting on a metal frame table complete with a flower lei along the edge and a grass skirt covering the lower table area like a presentation at one of the resort hotels.

“Festive, isn’t it?” intoned the Colonel as he started towards it and motioned for his two guests to follow him.

They walked up to as he talked about locating it. “It was fairly simply really. I have no idea why neither one of you managed to find it yet. ComStar didn’t trust the local station master with enough details while our Word of Blake friend couldn’t find anyone she trusted to perform the task I suppose. Say, I don’t suppose either of you can authenticate it can you? This is what all the fuss is about right?”

He motioned for them to go examine it. They slowly walked around it, studying it, going in opposite directions and careful not to brush each other on the far side. There was no doubt in either of their minds. This looked like the device that had been pictured in their orders.

“Either of you know what it is?” asked John casually. Neither spoke, making him snort in amusement. “No, I suppose that even if you did neither of you would admit it. I’ll tell you what I think it is. It looks like a one third scale version of the special battle tracking computer I have in my BattleMech. As my C3 is proprietary property only fielded by my unit, that would make this an illegal copy. One built by sabotaging and stealing the work of DEW researchers. But that’s just a guess from looking at the outside. We’d have to open it up to be sure. Hey, here’s the main maintenance panel. I don’t suppose either of you knows the access code? No? Well, let’s try the standard one from my version.”

“Wait,” cried out O’Donald. “If you put the wrong code in it will self destruct. But they didn’t provide the code to me. I really don’t know what kind of equipment it is or anything about damaging private company research. My word of honor.”

John rolled his eyes at the Precentor’s mention of honor. But he believed O’Donald. Not that it mattered.

“So why did you bring us both here?” spoke Christina, breaking her silence at last. “To bid against each other for it?”

“Being very wealthy already I’m not really interested in money,” shrugged John. “Besides, whichever side lost the bidding would just give me grief I really don’t want. And I can’t keep it, take it home, and crack it open because then both sides would pester me.”

“So what are you suggesting then?” asked an exasperated O’Donald. Dhenner was confused too. Where was he going with all of this?

“Well it is a puzzler,” allowed John. “I can’t just kill you, I can’t give it to you, and I can’t keep it. Sammi, can you help me out here? What is it you teach your troopers? When it doubt...”

“Blow it up Sir,” provided Cascade.

“An excellent suggestion!” beamed John. “O’Donald, how long is the delay on that self destruct you mentioned?”

“Uh...fifteen seconds to give you time to put in the correct code I believe. But surely you don’t intend to purposely destroy it after going to all the trouble of finding it?”

“Sammi, show the man how serious I am.”

Cascade grabbed a hold of the palm leaf table skirt and yanked it clear, revealing a notable amount of explosives that were attached to the bottom of the armored core. John reached under and grabbed the timer detonator and reeled it out from the explosives.

“Oh, about thirty seconds should do it,” John announced as he punched in the number and rested the timer so that the numbers could be clearly read by the two Precentors. They watched as if in a trance as he punched the start button and the numbers flicked to “29”.

“I’d ditch those shoes,” opined John to Dhenner as he slowly and casually started punching the number one repeatedly into the keypad for the core access hatch. He waited for the last “one” so that five second should pass between the thermite going off inside and the explosives they had set up outside.

“Now what,” asked a shaken Dhenner with her eyes on the timer.

“Run!” shouted John as he put his suggestion into action. The four of them scrambled for the freshly dug pit with Cascade in the rear in case one of the Precentor stumbled and fell. Unfortunately the Colonel’s plan required both of them to remain alive.

They heard the whump of the thermite charges before they made the cover of the enlarged foxhole but clamored under cover with a few seconds to spare before the explosives beneath the core blasted it into scrap and sent the front of the rendering plant blasting out over their heads. Captain Lars had left with the car as the four had first walked into the building, leaving nothing but smoking debris around them as they carefully emerged from the bunker and looked around.

“That blew up real good Sir,” decided Sammi with a note of satisfaction in her voice. She’d rigged the explosives.

“I would tend to agree,” replied John as he surveyed the remains.

The two shell shocked Precentors looked at the two grinning Warden officers like they were crazy maniacs that had just escaped from an asylum someplace. For a quick moment they looked like a pair of teenage pranksters that had just blown up a post box. But that moment passed and their faces turned deadly serious, leaving no room for doubt in the Precentor’s minds that this was a pair of very dangerous individuals who were done playing games.

“Compared to innocent lives that computer core was worthless to me,” announced John savagely. “It was an impediment to my getting those kids back to their rightful families and the advanced medical care some of them now need so I destroyed it. Tomorrow I am returning to my DropShip and anything or anybody that hinders me from getting those kids off this world will be just as efficiently destroyed. As I surmise that the secondary priority of both your orders was to ensure that no one else got that technology if you were unable to secure the core I have arranged for your missions to be complete. As you clearly witnessed, I blew the crap out of it and no one left Carver with it. I don’t care how you sugarcoat your reports to cover your own asses – the point is there is no more conflict between your missions and my mission. It’s over.”

John dug in a hip pocket for two sets of vehicle keys and tossed them on the ground as he finished his pronouncement.

“Do not get in my way again. You wouldn’t like what would happen to you. One of those keys fits that truck over there. In it are the bodies of the shuttle crew that lost their lives hauling that core. The other fits that beater parked over there. I expect whichever one of your organizations that owes the crew a decent burial to take the truck. Now get lost.”

Perry hesitated over which keys to grab but Christina scooped up the truck keys. Word of Blake infiltrators had stolen the DropShuttle.

“Well played,” purred Christina in appreciation to Colonel Linna. “Disappointing from my end but what’s life without a little disappointment now and then. You know, I have some leave time coming after this. Perhaps I might stop by Sampsa and we could sooth some of that disappointment?”

“I don’t think my fiancé would approve,” John told her. “Besides, I really do want to kill you and I am not sure how long I can control that impulse.”

He had made the remark calmly and without rancor, but looking into his eyes she knew he meant it. A fascinating man...but one she should clearly stay far away from in the future. “Pity,” she sighed as she headed for the truck praising Blake that she was driving away from the encounter in one piece.

O’Donald gaped after Christina, then turned to face the mercenary Colonel again but had no idea what to say. Between purposely destroying new technology like that and his behavior tonight the man was clearly dangerously unbalanced. He had no doubt that should a ComGuard Mech be anywhere near that airfield this man would fire on it without hesitation. Crazy as he might be though, he was obviously intelligent. Colonel Linna had indeed created conditions that met his orders so that he had no more need to detain the Warders from leaving. This entire affair had clearly been above the head of a simple MechWarrior like himself. With a resigned shrug he turned away and headed for the indicated vehicle, praying to Blake that from now on he’d have far more ordinary situations to deal with.

As he watched them drive away, John pulled out a hand radio and called in Captain Laidie to pick up himself, Sammi, and the security detail that was scattered about the grounds.

“That went well I think,” John allowed as he sat down on the dirt mound. “What do you think Sammi?”

“It should keep them out of our way,” she agreed as she watched the tail lights disappear. “I imagine that the intel file updates those two file on you should be interesting reading.”

That made John smile. “I wonder if I can find a way to get them. I’ll have to ask Captain Woods.”

They waited in silence for a short time until the whup-whup-whup of the approaching helicopter could be made out.

“I think...I think something has changed in you on this trip Sir,” she suddenly announced.

John looked at her curiously. “Really?”

“Really,” she nodded. “I can’t really pin it down. But I think I like it.”

He laughed. “Let’s wait and see if it sticks,” he decided.

“I think it will,” shrugged Sammi. “Now about that fiancé remark....”

John's eyebrow went up as he looked at her. "Sammi ? Can it be that you've gone all talkative on me after all these years as my stoic and silent ghost?"

She grinned and shrugged. "Maybe I've changed a bit too. Happens as we get older."

"Older eh?" smiled John. "Well, I suppose it's better than the alternative. Which in our line or work has almost happened too many times to count. Yes, I said fiancé. I just haven't gotten around to asking her yet. Now be talkative about something else if you please."

"Roger Sir," grinned Sammi. "She'll say yes by the way. Now, how do you think the Bulldogs will look this year? I think they might make a run at the cup."

John shook his head silently in split wonder. Split between the surprise of dour Sammi Cascade finally coming out of her shell around him and wondering exactly how transparent he was and how many people in the unit were waiting for him to marry Gracie. Probably everyone except Gracie herself he mused.

***Cussler Academy Grounds
Baja California Island, Carver V
July 12, 3057***

John stood near the foot of his *Camelot* and surveyed the scene around him. The makeshift dump trucks-cum-APCs were nearby with their human loads clustering to climb into the back. The mobile medical unit, Bifrost, and the repair vehicles were all packed up and waiting on the roadway. Jenny was circling overhead in their VTOL, keeping an eye on the proceedings, and he could catch glimpses of what were still designated Blue One and Blue Two walking a perimeter patrol in their BattleMechs. Pretty soon now they should be on their way back to Nuevo San Diego. They were taking the *Wolverine* as well, even though they would have to leave the helicopter behind to get it on board. The original pilot they had handed over to the local police who were still trying to decide what to do with him. As that Terry guy had expressed an interest in returning to Sampsa they had disabled the fire control and calibrated a neurohelmet so he could walk it to the ship for them. He seemed genuinely happy to be of some help. Right now John was just waiting for Sandi before mounting up. She had gone over to talk with the kids that would be loading into the trucks.

"G'day John. How are you feeling?" asked the familiar voice of Gracie Aukland.

He turned and smiled at her. Yesterday he'd tried to explain what had happened to him during the 'Mech fracas and she had kind of understood but didn't really get it at the same time. Understandable as he really didn't fully get it either.

"I feel fine Goose. No berserk pillaging for me today."

"That's not what I was getting at," she complained, stung by his remark.

"Easy Gracie," he soothed. "I was kidding. I know you didn't mean anything."

She looked at him quizzically. She was used to him in all his moods but he seemed more carefree, more loose than she could ever recall. Not that he still didn't take the weight of their situation and their losses seriously. It was in his eyes that he did. But he was carrying the load a little differently somehow. "It's just that...you seem a little different is all."

He glanced at her with a curious grin. "You think so? Funny you should mention that. Sammi was telling me just the same thing last night."

"Sammi Cascade?" asked Gracie in disbelief. Gracie hadn't known the woman to talk about anything except her job in all the years she'd known her.

Over at the trucks Sandi couldn't help but notice that most of the kids were spooked about climbing aboard trucks and driving back into the city. She couldn't really blame them after the way the busses got shot up. But they certainly couldn't stay here. Then she spotted Susan DaTang and walked over to say hello. Susan was looking at the truck with its armor pieces tacked on with obvious fear on her face.

"They put the gymnastic mats from the school in the back along with seats," Sandi told the girl hoping to encourage her. "The ride shouldn't be that bad at all."

"If you say so," Susan allowed doubtfully.

"Will that...will that stop a bullet?" a younger student asked as he pulled on the bottom edge of Sandi's cooling vest to get her attention and pointed at the armor plates.

"Yeah, sure it will," she assured him. "But it won't have too. Everything's all fixed now. No one will be shooting at you this time. It was all just a horrible mistake the first time. It'll be safe. I promise."

The little guys still looked doubtful, and even though they didn't say anything she could see the silent accusation in the eyes of the older ones. It was easy for her to feel safe. She was riding inside a BattleMech. It was supposed to be safe last time after all.

"We will be okay this time, right?" asked an adult voice from her left.

Sandi's voice caught in her throat as she realized it was one of the teachers. This was not a good scene. Even the teachers were terrified. A ten year old standing next to her tentatively grasped her hand, worried that as soon as Sandi left and got in her dad's 'Mech that would mean it they had to get into the trucks. But there was no place safe to land the DropShip around here. They had to go to the ship to get home. Obviously they weren't going to refuse. They knew they had no choice. But she felt terrible staring into the fearful faces around her. There just wasn't anything she could do though.

Or maybe there was.

"Hey guys, I'll be right back okay."

Slipping gently out of the ten year old's grip she rushed over to where her father was talking with Aunt Gracie next to the *Fire Wraith*.

"Uh Dad...I have a favor I need to ask," she announced.

“A favor?”

“It’s like this. Those guys are really, really scared about driving back into the city. I mean really scared. I was thinking that if I went with them instead of with you that would help show them that it’s going to be okay and help calm them down. If it’s okay with you of course.”

John just stared at his daughter thunderstruck for a moment, his mouth working up and down but with no sound coming out. He wasn’t expecting trouble this time but as a parent he wanted her where he could directly act to safeguard her. Which meant in the ‘Mech with him. But he could tell by the earnest look on her face that she really felt that it was the right thing for her to do. And that she was a little bit scared about the prospect of riding in the trucks no matter how hard she was trying to hide it.

“If you really think it’s best,” he allowed at last, “then I recon I can manage to find my way into Nuevo San Diego without my navigator.”

Sandi grabbed him in a tight hug. “Thanks Dad, you’re the best. Bye dad, bye Aunt Gracie. See you on the *Serenade*.”

She ran back to the waiting kids and even though he couldn’t hear what was being said he could tell by their body language that the general mood had improved over there.

“Wow,” breathed Gracie in amazement as she stared after Sandi Linna. “That was one incredibly mature act.”

“Do you think I did the right thing?” John wanted to know.

“It’s your decision,” she hedged.

“I’m serious Gracie,” he pressed. “If you were her mother and standing in my shoes would you have let her go or had her ride in your ‘Mech with you? No one can guarantee that some militia crackpot won’t take a shot or two at us.”

“Why is it important what I think?”

“Because it just is,” he persisted. “Well?”

“I think,” she allowed at last, “that I would have done the same thing. I’d have hated it, but you can’t stop them from growing up. Bad decisions you have to derail but how can you say no when she’s doing something so selfless. Sometimes you have to accept the risks. Of course this is coming from a woman that never even had a younger sibling much less kids of her own.”

She looked at him and frowned, unable to read his expression.

“What are you looking at me like that for?” she finally asked when he kept staring at her.

“Because I love you, you silly Goose,” he grinned. “Just before all of this started I was supposed to work my way up to asking you something at that restaurant. I still haven’t gotten around to it and to paraphrase a great MechWarrior I know I’m too old for beating around the bush and dropping hints. Let’s get married. Sandi’s all for it if you are.”

“John...I don’t know what to say,” she stammered in complete surprise.

“Hopefully you’ll say yes or I’m going to feel awfully foolish.”

“Yes,” she said joyously as she hugged him. “The answer is yes.”

They hugged fiercely for a moment, drawing curious glances from those in the area. Finally they parted, each aware that duty literally called. There was still a bunch of civilians to safeguard to a DropShip and the convoy wouldn’t leave without them.

“Sandi’s going to be upset with me,” he grinned as they strapped on their neurohelmets.

“Why’s that? You said you had already talked about this with her.”

“I did,” he explained. “But she wanted to be there to help pop the question. Be a dear and act surprised when we ask you again on the DropShip okay? I’ll have the ring with me by then. It’s in my personal gear on Bifrost right now.”

She laughed. “I’ll do my best...but only if we can have Captain Lars perform the ceremony on the *Baltic Serenade* on the way home.”

“Works for me – but we’re still going to get stuck having one of those fancy show weddings on Samps. As a planetary celebrity I’m afraid I come with a certain amount of baggage.”

That made her laugh even harder for she had indeed been trying to avoid a ritzy media event back home. He’d read her like an open book. “I’ll just have to take the bad with the good I guess. Now I think we better mount up because we have a ship to catch.”

As Gracie Aukland giddily sealed her hatch and strapped into her command couch she reflected that something was indeed different about John now. Not just that heightened combat sense he’d felt – although maybe that was part of the bigger picture. It was kind of like he’d finally merged all the different faucets of himself. The good and bad, tragic and happy, heroic and mundane, vicious and gentle, famous and humble; it had settled into a whole that he had accepted and become comfortable with. Which meant he was the same as he had always been – but more so.

Nah, that didn’t really make sense she chided herself as she went through the warm up procedure for Granny. It somewhat did, but it didn’t really cover everything. But whatever this contradictory subtle yet vast difference was she liked it and looked forward to exploring it. Heck, maybe she was changing somehow too. Maybe they all were.

Then again, maybe they were all becoming as loony as waterfowl.

But one thing hadn’t changed. Anyone that got in their way was going to get flattened.

No one in Nuevo San Diego felt like testing the temperament of the mercenaries and the trip to the DropShip was largely uneventful. There was a small problem negotiating the trailer rigs through an abandoned roadblock and a small number of citizens actually showed up to cheer the Suomi Warders on as they picked their way carefully through the edge of the city and down to the airfield. Fearful of getting their facility flattened if they offended the Colonel, the airfield people were as helpful as possible and made pains to point out several times that they had kept anyone from trying to force entry into the craft. With about a third of the *Serenade*’s cargo areas filled with sectional living quarters hastily loaded aboard at Outreach the space for carrying vehicles was limited and John gave the helicopter he had brought to Carver V to the airfield to make space for the salvaged *Wolverine*. Captain Lars didn’t bother

asking for permission to depart. She simply informed the tower when the ship was twenty minutes from lifting that everyone had better clear the launch area.

As soon as they had broken free from the gravitational pull of the planet and could unbuckle from the acceleration couches Sandi had moved to one of the observation cabins so she could see the planet receding below them. She wasn't the only one. Most of the students and staff of the Cussler Academy felt a need for visual proof that they were actually on their way home. It was unlikely any of them would ever attend a school that wasn't on their home planets after this.

Watching the blue and white ball drifting outside the ship Sandi was feeling a whirl of emotions, most of them colored with her relief that it was over. It had indeed been an adventure – but she had come to appreciate a number of things from a different perspective that she had known before. Among them was her understanding of fear. How it could make people act, how group dynamics or leadership affected the equation, and the different shades of fear. She'd faced down several different fears, realizing that she wasn't nearly as fearless as she had thought she was. But she had faced them down she thought proudly.

She couldn't help but think about the people that they were leaving behind that lived on the planet though. Her world had suffered terror in the past but had been politically stable for many generations. The people of Carver V looked to be in for a hard time. Taking a handful of people off the planet seemed like just a drop in the bucket.

"There you are," sounded the warmly familiar voice of her father behind her. "I wondered were you blasted off to when the buckle lamp went off."

"You looked like you were busy," she told him. "I guess I just wanted to actually see Carver going away."

"Well, you'll have about eight hours before it becomes a featureless ball," John told her. "We got lucky and there's a JumpShip at the Nadir point recharging after dropping off garrison reinforcements and a mercenary outfit I haven't heard of. They don't have any riders so they'll wait for us to link up to pick up a fee back to Outreach. This means we're going to burn out there all the way at 1 g rather than hang around in orbit waiting for a ride. We could go faster but Doctor Svengali doesn't want to subject the critically wounded to high g."

"How's my blood sister doing?" Sandi had taken to thinking of the girl she had provided an emergency transfusion for as her 'blood sister' even though they had only exchanged a few words. The girl had been kept in the intensive care within the MASH unit the entire time, much of it in a special healing coma maintained by medical equipment.

"She should recover eventually," her dad told her. "Fortunately she has no memory of how she got hurt. She's going to need some synthetic intestinal work to properly digest food when we get someplace where that kind of surgery can be done. Could have been worse though. She's a lucky girl. Well, obviously not for getting hurt....heck, you know what I mean."

"I know," Sandi allowed with a sad smile. "We all had some wild luck – both good and bad I suppose. And even though I don't know all of what happened, I gather from the last leg in that you made some of our good luck to get us one the way home."

"It was mostly the others," shrugged John. "The commander always gets most of the credit but we never do most of the work."

The younger Linna snorted in amusement at that. Yes, everyone in the Warders pulled their own weight but she knew perfectly well how important her father was to the process even if he wasn't prepared to admit it. She turned back to the view outside, lost in her own thoughts until her dad said something she missed.

"I'm sorry...what?" she had to ask.

"I asked if you were okay. You seem to be awfully...preoccupied," he said gently.

"Yeah, I'm fine. It's silly but I guess I was just thinking about what it all means. You know...life and stuff. It's just weird that we're headed to safety on a JumpShip that just brought in more troops that could end up shooting up the place you just risked your life to save. It's just....weird feeling."

John rested a hand on her shoulder. "I'm afraid I don't have perfect answers for you Snowflake. We did what we could, when we could but we can't save the entire Inner Sphere. Maybe Baja California won't see any more trouble for years. Maybe if they do they'll deal with it better because we were there. Maybe we spooked them about BattleMechs so bad they won't. All I can tell you is that we accept responsibilities in life and then do what we can to honor them. Mine was to protect you, return these kids, safeguard our people, try not to screw up our future, and then protect any innocent civilians within my sphere of power. I did the best I could. The fate of Carver V as a whole is in other people's hands. I don't choose to take that responsibility, nor would it be my right to do so."

"About that Dad...I'm sorry," she said contritely.

"Sorry? About what?"

"About making you take me on this mission. I didn't belong here and just made things harder on you."

"Oh no you don't," he told her sternly. "Despite being wise beyond your years I'm still the parent of the relationship. Your welfare is my responsibility and I was the one that made the judgment call about taking you. You didn't have the experience to properly decide and even though I did, in this case I made a poor decision. So any extra hardships were my own fault, not yours. Besides, as much as I hate to admit it, I think you belong just fine with the Warders. We just need to work on keeping you confined to age appropriate roles for the next few years. And even though if I had it to do all over again I'd have put you on the first ship for home instead of taking you to Carver V; I am very, very proud of the way you handled yourself. If you were actually enlisted I'd put you up for a Merit Award for comforting and aiding the students above and beyond the call of normal duty. As it is I'll have to settle for a Mission Pin for this trip that civilian auxiliary get like Captain Lars and her crew. If you want it that is. I may have finally accepted that you want to follow my footsteps into being a MechWarrior but that doesn't mean I'll support you all the way if you change your mind."

"It's funny Dad," she smiled. "This trip made me actually realize for the first time the kinds of things it means to become a soldier of any type. And to realize how important people like teachers are, to see that there are lots of honorable important things I could do with my life. I also discovered I like boats and water ships and stuff. We should get some. But I'm wandering a bit on you. Coming here also reinforced what I already knew from you and mother. That there are greedy and power hungry people in the universe willing

to hurt others to get what they want and there are good, decent people willing to try to stop them. Simplistic I suppose, but that's how I see it breaking down. I'm going to be like you and Aunt Gracie and Uncle Sven. One of the good guys." She had planned to stop there but after a heartbeat couldn't help but add a teasing, "In an 'age appropriate' way of course."

John just smiled at her. It was a simplistic view of the universe...but one that he had come to share to a strong extent. In months past he would have brooded over dark thoughts of how much of a 'good guy' he really was considering the fact that at some base level he killed people for a living but recently it had finally settling in his mind that he was one of the good guys. Not the perfect kind you found in heroic stories. Definitely a flawed kind prone to the occasional bout of violence. But any positive acts in his life were no longer byproducts of a drive to strike back at fate by punishing pirates and finding his sister. He'd been there, done that, and survived to become someone new. Someone not as grandly heroic as his reflection in his daughter's eyes, but someone not as selfishly tragically driven as he had painted himself in his own mind.

"So I guess you want the pin then," he mused.

"I think I earned it," she sniffed with a mock haughtiness.

"And speaking of things you've earned, remember that happy-ever-after stuff we were talking about back on Outreach?"

Her eyes lit up. She remembered. Of course she had forgotten about it in the excitement of leaving Outreach and the pressing needs once they got to Carver V. But she remembered just fine now.

"Well, I was thinking that there's no time like the present. It's not terribly romantic I suppose," he sighed melodramatically with a mischievous twinkle in his eye as he continued. "But if she's going to be married to us Gracie will just have to get used to our unstable lifestyle. You do think she'll say 'yes' right?"

"If she doesn't I'm not ever going to calibrate her 'Mech sensors for her again," snapped Sandi. But she really couldn't imagine that Aunt Gracie would say no. Anything was possible but surely not that. "You have the ring?"

"It's in my shaving kit. I figured that since your legs are a lot younger than mine you might go fetch it for me."

"I'll be right back," she agreed with a huge smile, fighting to keep any tears from sneaking out. "Don't you dare more Mister!"

"I'll hold station here," he promised as she raced out the door. Then he pulled out his hand-cell unit and punched in Gracie's contact number. "Hey Gracie.....just wanted to give you a heads up. Sandi and I will be looking for you soon so remember to be surprised."

"Oh, there will be surprise all right," promised Gracie with a chuckle that sounded a bit...unsettling. Then the line went dead.

He contemplated the small communication device as he folded it closed. John wasn't worried that she had changed her mind – but she had a dry and sometimes dark sense of humor. Then he shrugged and put it out of his mind. Whatever it was it wasn't going to kill him. Probably.

***Mannerhiem Convention Center
Suomi City, Sampsu
August 28, 3057***

When one plans to entertain over 800 guests the venues are limited. John had thought about using the base itself but ultimately decided that a non military facility would better fit the tone for the reception. Especially after Gracie had surprised herself and everyone else by falling in love with an elegant wedding gown she saw in a store window and deciding on it over a dress uniform. John had run with the idea and bought himself a traditional "tuxedo" style suit and arranged that only the honor guard wore Warder dress kit. Everyone else wore civilian garb and was unofficially forbidden from addressing fellow Warders by rank for the evening.

The convention center had proven an idea location. The secondary building was large enough and had been decorated with large ice sculptures, flower clad trellises, helium balloons and various floral displays. An adjoining show room area had been used for collecting the various wedding gifts. Things were finally winding down now, with the newly wed couple standing at their table greetings those actually close to them after having suffered the traditional reception line earlier.

John smiled as Gracie's father turned from hugging her to offer his hand to his new son-in-law. The elder Aukland was the sole survivor between John and Gracie's parents, the others having been killed during the *Starcade* affair years past. A retired non-commissioned officer from the planetary defense force, Gracie's father carried himself with the same ram-rod stiffness he had maintained through his thirty years with the SDF.

"It's about time you made an honest woman of her," his gravelly voice intoned sternly as he shook John's hand.

John grinned as he was long used to the old man's growling ways. "Well, I made her a married woman but I don't know that I can say she's any more honest."

A slight grin formed in return. "Rightly spoken young man. Rightly spoken. On the bright side I won't have to hound her about grandchildren. At least right away."

"Daaad!" drawled Gracie in complaint. Her father had taken a liking to Sandi Linna right away and doted on the girl – but he had already been hinting that it would be a shame to have the family blood line end with her. While she certainly didn't qualify as "old" yet, Gracie figured she was a bit past child birthing age even if her biological clock still had a few ticks left in it.

Probably anyway, she thought to herself as her father and husband traded one more jest at her expense before her dad drifted away into the crowd.

Sweeping her eyes across the crowd she saw many faces she knew as well as quite a number that she half-recognized as government and business leaders she had been introduced to along the line. How John kept track of all these people and their various levels of importance or influence was beyond her. A knowing smile found her lips as she spied Jennifer Laidie and Osmo Woods dancing close over by the band. Jen still had the bridal bouquet in one hand. Gracie had rigged the game a bit to make sure that Jen caught the thrown bouquet and gained it's superstitious karma of thus become the next one fated to get married. Gracie figured she'd

be attending another marriage – on a smaller scale of course – fairly soon. Jen’s independent VTOL company had become firmly embedded into the Warders and no longer thought of itself as anything other than Suomi Warders and had been linking into the Sampsa society accordingly.

“Hey little lady; congratulations,” greeted the Sven Jorgenson as he kissed her on the cheek. Gracie was a tall and broad shouldered woman. Few people could really think of her as “little” in comparison but the monstrously proportioned Lawman could. Actually most of his blood family could as the entire Jorgensson clan ran huge. A trend that should continue as Sven’s wife was the forward of the city’s professional women’s basketball team.

“Congratulations yourself ‘Dad’ ”.

Sven beamed proudly, the newly minted father of an infant son. His wife was seated across the hall at the moment feeding the lad.

“Thanks. In a few years we can start scheduling play dates and discussing pre-schools.”

“Don’t you start on me too!” she warned as he laughed and turned to pump John’s hand in his outstretched paw.

After Sven spoke briefly with him then returned to his own budding family John found himself thinking about those they had already spoken to tonight as well as those that couldn’t be here for various reasons. Keena Washington, “Cowgirl” by call sign, had moved off to sit by herself despite the fact she had been Gracie’s Maid of Honor and could have stayed at the main table. Of all the non-native Warders that had flooded their ranks since the Chairman campaign Cowgirl had been the slowest to integrate. Keena had grown close to Gracie over the past few years but other than her own brother the MechWarrior had few other friends. John was pretty sure that if it wasn’t for the fact her brother clearly loved working for the technically advanced Suomi Warders so much that she would have moved on. Keena was the type of pilot that needed the adrenaline of real combat and the Warders had not been very active since the deal he had made with the FWL and WoB over the secret warship drive factory.

As for her brother, Shane Washington had acclimated just fine. He had become Harding’s protégée and was the most gifted engineer and technician John had ever met outside the Chief himself. Right now he was dancing with the Bahti sisters. John had made note of the little trio some months ago and while in idle times he wondered how that was going to play out he mostly ignored it. It wasn’t his karma as long as everyone performed their duties in a professional manner.

At another table sat his newest MechWarrior recruit – Terry Quina – next to his youngest active MechWarrior the ex Nova Cat Nikki. Quina was a bit of a security risk of course but so far his story had held out and he and Woods had figured that it wouldn’t hurt to have someone familiar with ComStar practices on hand. Especially as the Warders might start employing a variation of the ComStar Six to take full advantage of the new C3i equipment coming on line soon. Nikki was quite perplexed by the entire marriage concept but figured that an occasion that seemed to be honoring her CO and Exec was a good thing. That the two of them – ex ComStar warrior and ex Clanner seemed to feel comfortable with each other had been something of a surprise. But one that John wasn’t going to rock the boat on by prodding at it.

Rounding out what he thought of now as the essential core of his MechWarriors was Vilho Rajanen who along with his family was sitting at a table with Misty Florens and her husband of two years. Vilho now piloted the *Ranger’s Atlas* and lead the home guard lance of BattleMechs permanently assigned to protecting the base. Misty had been part of Gracie’s Alpha Lance but John had been working on how he might reorganize his forces – especially in light of the C3i units he expected to be able to field within another six months. He fielded a company and a half of ‘Mechs at the moment but had enough unpiloted machines in hanger bays to swell that number to better than two full companies if he desired to do so. He certainly didn’t lack for applications despite the fact he had his Outreach office tell everyone they weren’t hiring. It would be easy to expand beyond a company of armor as well if he wanted to saddle Ben Runeburg with additional units under his command. But so far John had been content to keep his unit moderate in size for a number of reasons.

First of all, people that built large mercenary forces – or armies of any type for that matter – tended to look for an excuse to use them. The second reason was that as financially endowed as the Suomi Warmer mercenary corporation and he himself was, he had been secretly siphoning funds all this time for a special project. When he had stumbled across the space factory station that was now producing ship drives to be used in the new *Impavido* class for the League navy they had found a few ships as well. Some were easy to get back into service. He had officially claimed a JumpShip and some DropShips while the League and Wobblies had taken the derelict WarShips. The Warders had the contract for security and thus his now twelve strong fighter craft force and his two attack DropShips were still far away from Sampsa. Jeffery Tapiovarra had taken their ancient *Leopard* class carrier out there to set up the original detail and made a secondary discovery which was the reason no one on the Warmer command staff had seen him more than a few times in the past four years. Jeffery had found a mothballed Star League vintage *Vincent* corvette.

As WarShips went the 412,000 ton craft wasn’t especially large or powerful. It was perfect for the Warders though as a larger ship would have been beyond even John’s ability to have refurbished. He was fairly sure that Admiral Alexander of League Intel knew that the ship existed and had become operational recently but she seemed to be keeping the information to herself as he had not heard anything from the Wobblies that indicated they knew he had joined the small fraternity of groups in the Inner Sphere with an actual working WarShip. The *Lion’s Heart* was on it’s way towards Sampsa where it would take up station hidden in the outer asteroid ring of the system. It had been a serious financial drain but John had watched the growing strife of the Inner Sphere with alarm. Battalions of BattleMechs were of no use in conquest if you couldn’t get them to the planet – thus he had gone ahead with the *Lion’s Heart* despite the cost and potential political trouble if word of his private WarShip eventually leaked out.

“Together I see,” mused Gracie’s voice beside him. “No surprise there.”

John pulled himself away from his musings to look over at what his wife was talking about. It was Lieutenants Jason Nellson and Holly Linna. The pair had finished a modified two and a half year program at the Suomi Military Academy – barely in Holly’s case – then served a two year hitch with the SDF. Jason had followed his sister through thick and thin, the apparent junior partner of the pair but John had no doubt that it was Jason’s steady influence and hard won maturity that had steered Holly through the rapids she was so found of jumping into.

“Sorry we missed the official reception line,” apologized Jason as they joined the Linna party at the table. “Someone around here isn’t too good with patience or lines. If it’s not too late and I can be excused for mentioning rank...may I kiss the bride? I’ve never kissed a Lieutenant Colonel before.”

Gracie laughed and leaned down a tad and offered her cheek as Holly rolled her eyes at the display. Which only made John chuckle at his sister.

“I think,” decided an amused John out loud, “the question isn’t how many LCs you’ve kissed but which Lieutenants you’ve laid lips on recently. Such as your date perhaps?”

Holly turned beat red and actually stamped her foot as she announced “this is not a date” and turned to huff off. Jason shrugged apologetically and hurried after her – pausing just long enough to wink and say quietly, “yes it is.”

Sandi was sitting at the table, talking with her uncle Dan but still alert to what others were saying around her.

“That’s weird,” the girl announced.

John turned to look back at where his daughter sat next to his brother. “How so?”

“I always thought Holly was...uh...you know....”

“I know what?” he asked in real puzzlement.

“Not into guys,” sighed an exasperated Sandi at having to spell it out. “As in attracted to females.”

“You know,” added his brother with a shrug. “A lesbian.”

It was John’s turn to be embarrassed, although he reminded himself there was no reason for him to be so. His sister’s love life was her concern and not his. In truth he had assumed the same thing after his sister’s first return. After all, she had plenty of reason to distrust and outright hate men after her ordeal. But more than the biological factor of a relationship it was trust and allowing herself to have feelings that were the dominate barrier against intimacy for Holly. As far as John knew his sister hadn’t had any type of romantic liaison at all since her return.

“Whatever the case I hope it works out for them one way or another,” decided John. He’d accepted them both back into the Warders last week as MechWarriors. He hoped he hadn’t just enlisted a soap opera. But mostly he just hoped his sister would finally find some inner peace.

“Me too Dad,” agreed Sandi. “Now, if you two are done playing host can we finally go look at all the stuff you got as presents.”

John rolled his eyes at her fascination with the wedding presents. They had everything they wanted already. But Sandi professed to be interested in what the present said about the person that sent it. Maybe. And maybe his brother’s hints as to some of the esoteric items – for Dan had inventoried it while the security people were making sure nothing was booby trapped – is what really piqued her interest.

“The sooner we look at the stuff the sooner we can start the honeymoon,” prompted Sandi as she prodded at her dad to announce they were done with the reception.

John and Gracie had sent Sandi back from Outreach ahead of them and spent a first honeymoon week alone before returning for what would be their second wedding together. There really wasn’t that much of interest to do on the Mercenary’s World – but they had managed to keep themselves pleasantly occupied. The trip Sandi referred to was on a huge ocean cruiser ship that specialized in family vacations and stopped at a number of the more tropic islands along Sampa’s equator region.

“Well, I there is that one special one I’d like to see opened,” added Gracie with a twinkle in her eye.

He knew which one she meant but made himself not comment further about it.

“Okay I know when I’m out numbered. I surrender,” he announced. “Let’s go check the booty.”

“There’s some really interesting stuff there John,” chimed in Dan. “Some of it quite thought provoking.”

That seemed an odd comment from his brother but John sensed from the look on Dan’s face that he wasn’t going to elaborate. There really wasn’t a need for him to do so as they could all go see for themselves easily enough.

Making a graceful exit required longer than John would have thought but eventually they managed to extract themselves thanks in part to Sammi Cascade and her detail. Dressed in matching dark suits they had security duty at the reception. Once she had realized that the Colonel was attempting to depart her people had closed in and provided a screen of bodies that ‘accidentally’ hindered any more well wishes from getting close to the trio and made sure no one followed them into the exhibition hall.

“Radtech!” breathed Sandi as her eyes settled on the red sport model hover-convertible in the main entry of the exhibit hall where the gifts had been stored.

“A hover-car?” wondered a surprised Gracie. “Who the heck would give us a hover-car?”

It was an interesting question. Most everyone that knew anything about them would know they had access to just about any vehicle they wanted. This was the latest model released on the League home world. John walked over and checked a paper tag attached to it as his daughter slipped in behind the wheel.

“Ah...that production company that wants to do those John Linna movies,” observed John.

“We’re going to keep it right?” implored Sandi.

“We’ll see,” sighed John. He really didn’t like those people. They had just felt...slimy.

“Here’s a nifty little something addressed to you John,” said Gracie as she picked up a small package off a side table that contained several other items.

“For me?” questioned John as he took it. Then he saw that it was from Gracie. With a puzzled look he opened it, finding a traditional puuko knife within. It was common practice for the soldiers of Sampsas to wear puuko or leuko knives patterned after the ancient weapons originally from Finland on Terra.

“It was my father’s,” Gracie quietly told him. “He gave it to me years ago but I decided to wear the academy class one like the one you would be getting back when I graduated. I was thinking that you might be willing to swap out what you have been carrying

the past couple of years for something more traditional. I already asked my dad if he minded and he said he'd be proud to have you wear it."

Unique to the unit John happened to wear a tanto style Japanese derived knife. He had lost his original knife in an attack on Outreach when a would be assassin disarmed him of it. For a while he didn't replace it in shame at having lost the original. Then Naoko had given him the tanto. She'd left him shortly there after, called by duty back to her native Draconis Combine. For a while he hadn't really let go of her memory. It was past time that he fully did so.

"Of course," he nodded. They weren't wearing their steel badges of station at the moment nor did he have a belt to loop it through but he slipped it into his pants pocket rather than leave it for later collection as they would with the rest of the stuff.

"Wow, look at this," came Sandi's voice. She had left the car and approached a glass case that held a full suit of ancient Japanese armor. There was also a set of delicate glass swans made of glass mounted on invisibly thin wires so that they were taking wing on a low table next to the armor case. The table top sculpture was lit from it's base. Sandi glanced at it but was drawn towards the imposing set of armor. She whistled in surprise as she read the brass plate set into the case. "Hey...it's from the Coordinator of the Combine. Why would he even know you who you were?"

John just shrugged as he took a closer look at the swans. There were three of them, the third smaller than the others as if it were a younger one perhaps. He saw that it was from Naoko. He hadn't been sure if the wedding announcement had reached her in light of her secret duties within the Combine these days. Obviously it had and someone had passed the information on to higher channels.

"You guys aren't going to tell me how you met the Coordinator are you?" sighed Sandi.

"We never met him," smiled Gracie. "Just did him an accidental favor. But no...we're not going to tell you about it."

Sandi harrumphed in dismay but knew that neither one would bend on the issue. Secret unit stuff was secret unit stuff. She might as well move on. "Hey, are those golf clubs? Looks like a set for me too. How do you play golf anyway?"

It was indeed a set of custom clubs engraved with the Suomi Warder insignia on all the grips. Along with a number of pieces of native art work and a framed set of the rank insignias and awards of the new militia of the Emir of Jeddah at Hamano. Bashir had left to assume command of the unit two years ago. With the current state of affairs Bashir had been unable to leave his duties to travel to the League but he sent his personal thanks for all he had learned with the Warders. Looking over the awards John noted a Linna Medal of Honor and Aukland award for Meritorious BattleMech piloting. Sandi didn't have to ask this time. She had been able to learn the story of the Hamano defense long ago. That one wasn't classified.

"This little Joey is odd looking," mused Gracie as she examined a round silvery mound that filled her palm. "No tag either."

"Well, that looks like a button right there on the edge," shrugged John. "It must be safe to push. Everything in here has been triple checked by security."

"Can I?" asked Sandi. Gracie placed it on a table and Sandi touched the small protrusion.

A blue-green light sprouted from the top, forming a cone with defined edges rather than a beam. The image of a face formed above the cone as a hologram. Hologram projectors had existed for centuries of course but these days they were huge devices that required a special chamber. Or at least Inner Sphere ones. They had no idea what ComStar or the Clan might have. This little unit had to date back many years back to the golden age of technological production. Thus it could only be one thing.

"Lostech," whispered Sandi.

"Greetings and congratulations on your nuptials," said the face. "We have not met but perhaps you have heard of me. I am Colonel Paul Masters and I head the Knights of the Inner Sphere. I have heard many tales of the honor and military prowess of the Suomi Warders and it's illustrious leader. Sire John Linna, you have shown exceptional chivalry in your crusade against pirates in many realms. Dame Gracie Aukland-Linna, your actions and prowess in a BattleMech have shown you share the same dedication to the welfare of all citizens of the Inner Sphere. I invite you both to join our order. Obviously there would be a great deal more to discuss but this device has a limited recording time. Please contact me at your earliest opportunity. And whatever your answer, keep this device as my personal gift to you. A panel on the bottom slides open for access to the recording controls. The small blue button plays an instructional message that is hard coded into the memory. With regards, Masters signing off. I look forward to hearing from your honorable selves."

"The Knights of the Inner Sphere?" whistled Sandi. "That's...incredible. Are you going to do it?"

John knew what he thought but he looked over the Gracie. "What are your thoughts Dear?"

"I think he hasn't been looking too closely at the specifics of several of our operations," she mused. "I also think that after negotiating a fail safe so that House Marik couldn't try to seize any of our contracts or co-opt our equipment that I have no intention of joining Thomas Marik's personal toy army. Besides - I'm a Suomi Warder. Period and end of discussion."

"About what I was thinking," smiled John.

"Aren't the Knights 'good guys'?" Sandi asked curiously. She had learned that image wasn't always truth.

"After Gibson I'd say the jury was still out," shrugged John. "But they definitely don't fit into my plans."

"Or mine," agreed Gracie.

"Then mine neither," shrugged Sandi. If her parents weren't interested then the issue was closed.

"Speaking of your plans," John mentioned casually, "Gracie and I were thinking about your future and if you check that box over there we think there's something you might have need of in the future."

Curious Sandi skipped over to the indicated case. Opening it she found a cooling vest and one of the newest model ultra-light neurohelmets. The name "Peregrine" was stenciled on it.

"Oh wow...my own MechWarrior gear," she gushed in excitement.

"Since you're going to keep growing for the next few years a cooling suit is jumping the gun a bit," John explained. "But we figured you're about ready for level one sim sessions with all the bells and whistles turned on."

"Something wrong?" Gracie asked as she watched Sandi turning the helmet over and over in her hands.

“No...uh...it’s no big deal really. Just that I had been thinking that maybe ‘Peregrine’ wasn’t the best fit for me.”

“We considered that possibility,” grinned John. He took the helm from her and carefully peeled off the adhesive label that had color matched the rest of the neurohelmet. It was now marked as ‘Snowflake’.

Sandi laughed. “You can be downright spooky sometimes.”

“And yes, that one comes off too,” he added. “In case you change your mind again.”

“Super spooky,” Sandi murmured. That had been exactly what she had been thinking. “Hey, I don’t suppose these go to an even bigger surprise do they?” she added hopefully.

“Something like a 55 ton surprise?” guessed Gracie with a knowing grin.

“You didn’t!” exclaimed Sandi.

“No, we didn’t,” confirmed her father and crushing her rising excitement. “For some obscure reason there are planetary laws against minors owning military vehicles or BattleMechs. I think full simulator access will be enough for now.”

Sandi frowned at first but in retrospect she could see that it wasn’t very realistic for her to own a BattleMech at her age. It was inevitable though. She would own one when her time came. For now she needed to re-set her sights.

“I understand. I would like to point out that there is no age limit regarding owning hover cars however.”

“There are about driving licenses,” countered her dad.

“But they don’t have effect on base property,” retorted Sandi. “I drive the utility carts all the time.”

Gracie laughed. “I see we’re in for another hard fought campaign.”

John nodded. “It’s a new one every week. She’s quite the nimble adversary.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything else from your daughter,” smiled Gracie.

“Our daughter,” corrected John.

“That’s right Mom,” confirmed Sandi. “Your daughter too.”

Gracie breath caught in her throat. “Mom”. Her. A new role. Scariest than being a MechWarrior really. And as thrilling.

“Tell you what Mom, as I’m feeling generous on your wedding day we can make a deal. You can wait until my next birthday before giving me the hover-convertible.”

John hid his smile behind his hand. He could read his daughter’s sense of humor and knew she was joking. Gracie wasn’t sure how much to red into the statement. So she looked over to her husband.

“I think I’ll let this one be your call,” she told him. “So what do we do?”

“We live happily ever after,” he informed her with a hug and kiss. “And if anyone tries to mess with that we kick their butts.”

“Now that I can live with,” grinned Gracie. “Good plan.”

“Works for me!” Sandi added enthusiastically as she joined in for a family hug. She had gained an inkling of how dangerous the politics of the Inner Sphere was from the Carver V trip. There were undoubtedly all kinds of other icky stuff she didn’t know about out there as well. Yet she had no doubt that these two people meant what they said. Anyone that threatened the family would be harshly dealt with. Strange as it was, the ability to bring violence against those that might threaten them was a comforting thought. All that was for later as she finished growing up though. Right now there were other more pressing matters at hand.

“So...do I get the car?”