

Therapy Notes

A BattleTech Story
By John McGivern

The drugs had made my mind---very--pliable. Yes, pliable, that's the word. That's the best, if not the only way to describe it, and as such they and their psychotropic soothing touches have made me easy to reason with. Which, in all honesty, was and still is a deeply disturbing experience that vexes me to no end, especially when I think about it for too long.

I had never before in my life felt serene or optimistic or for that fact---remotely cooperative in my life and, even stranger and more gut wrenchingly disturbing, I rather enjoyed the feeling. Regardless, it was taking a great deal of getting used to and, oddly enough or not surprisingly, which ever side of the psychiatric fence you ascribe to here, despite much of my artificially induced serenity I still possessed my innate desire to resist anything that wasn't of my choosing which is really difficult when your loaded on drugs that make you smile stupidly and feed you a sort of foggy euphoria. I likened it to walking into a dark bar and even though I'm delighted that drink is visible I know the air inside is tainted and vile.

The facility I'm in is nice; not one of those antiseptic white mausoleums that echo with the shrieks of the insane tied to their beds; cared for by men and women with sadistic streaks that delight in torturing their charges physically, emotionally and sexually day and night. And if they were getting tortured they were at least mercifully quiet about it.

No, I think that this is an honest to god medical facility where people can get themselves "adjusted" by professionals whose only desire is to help.

I hated them all when I got here. I viewed their compassion as degradation and their genuine concern for my well being as life threatening and wanted to gouge their eyes out.

I was screaming at the top of my lungs when I was carried in by the field police, tied down to a stretcher with para-cord and adhesive tape. I remember a woman's face hovering over me as soon as the automatic doors slammed open. She had auburn hair, sharp, raised eyebrows and one of those square sided jaws that came to a small knobby point in the center. Not what you would call attractive at all but her eyes were well-springs of compassion that scared the hell out of me when I looked into them. I screamed and spat at her, demanding to be let loose so that I could go back and die too. Expertly, she dodged my saliva and stuck me in the arm with a fast acting sedative. I was horrified as the drug raced into my body and bellowed like some maimed animal as I felt my running lights dim. Then I cried, knowing that they were gone and now I would never be able to catch up to them.

I want to say that I woke up the next morning but I don't really know how long I was asleep but I felt rested and strangely enough---calm, which was a surprise to me considering the room I was in was padded and I was on the floor in a plex-skin coat and unable to move my arms.

"Well," I said to myself as I surveyed my new quarters, "You've finally done it Lem. You have single-handedly managed to get yourself committed. Everybody has always told you that you were fuckin nuts and now you've gone and proved it." I rolled onto my face and brought my knees up to my chest and stumbled to my feet. Crossing the room's warm padded floor to the door I looked out the observation window: nothing. A nice celadon green painted hallway carpeted in a cool fashionably neutral beige and lined on both sides with neat, organized medical carts.

I leaned hard against the door to see if it would give and I could escape. I laughed afterward. It was as solid as a slab of steel.

Oh well...

I gave up and resigned myself to the idea that I was going to have to wait for whoever had the keys. I figured that someone would eventually open the door and when they did I'd charge at them like a bull and find a way to escape. Lying back down on the floor I struggled against the straightjacket to get comfortable and suddenly burst into tears.

They were dead. All of them. Except me. Dammit!! They had wanted to live. Each had plans for retirement and had talked about the future and how they were going to do this and that after it was over. They had smiled and their eyes had glowed when they spoke of their grand, petty plans. I had always listened in curiosity; having no plans of my own, apparently lacking the capacity to make one or any past the next bottle I was planning on drinking. I wondered what it must be like to have something to look forward to.

Must be nice I had mused sourly. To care, to hope and dream.

All of their hopes and dreams were for naught. They had died with them along with the memories of their spouses, their children their own childhoods, anything and everything that they might have held dear. There were zipped up in bags by now or lying on a mortician's table with their guts in a sack between their legs. That is always the way it goes. Your ride to your final destination that is. Naked, carrying your guts in a sack on your lap. I sniffed the tears back and pounded my head against the soft floor until the voices were gone because they were laughing at me again.

I could hear them in my mind. Harsh and pitiless cackles calling me names and telling me how I'm worthless and weak and that if I were a real man I would have died with my comrades.

"Go to hell! All of you!" I croaked. "I'm stronger than you know! I'll show you, damn you!" Then I cried more and when I thought I couldn't cry any more I cried harder than ever. My face ached as the tears rolled down my cheeks and soaked the cloth-covered floor. I was picturing Thrash Truth, the only man who had ever cared about me, despite my best efforts to dissuade him, laying on that table with some freakishly pale and uncaring gut collector scooping out his innards and bagging them up like so much garbage and then unceremoniously rolling him back into a bag again for storage in some black, heartless cooling unit.

I had cried myself to sleep on that padded floor and awoke with a start when the door opened on oiled hinges and a cool fresh breeze blew on my face.

A nurse dressed in the red pantsuit of a psychiatric expert came in. She was flanked by two orderlies that looked like they were out of work Clan Elementals, looking almost 3 meters tall and 2 meters wide. Under their watchful eyes she knelt close to me and placed a pupil magnifier over my right eye and asked me how I felt.

The magnifier made my vision skew and my stomach do a flip as it suddenly made my eye see things in a totally different perspective; huge on one side and normal on the other. "Sore and I have to pee like you can't believe."

With another of those frightening compassionate smiles she said, "Oh I can believe. You have been in here for almost two days after all but you can just go ahead and go. You had a catheter installed when you got here."

I didn't know what to say to that. I mean it made sense that they would do something like that. I'm sure they did it to everybody they locked in here. Wouldn't do to have the crazies whizzing on everything, but still---having your credentials messed without your permission or knowledge was a degrading thought. Looking at the towering mountains of men behind her I sidestepped my unhappiness with that issue altogether.

"When are you going to let me out of here?" Watching my eye intently she said, "That is what I'm here for. We've made some adjustments with some medications and we want to know for sure that you are non-violent. You were in quite a state of distress when you arrived."

"I bet."

"Do you remember what it was you were upset about?"

My stomach clenched and my heart skipped a beat as I remembered again in 128-bit color. "Yes."

The orderlies helped me get to my feet, or rather effortlessly picked me up and stood me up against a wall. One started unbuckling the coat while the other watched, ready to shoulder slam me into a grease spot if need be.

I was taken to a room with a single bed and mesh covered window that overlooked a botanical garden that was lush with all kinds of annual blooms that glowed vibrantly in the planet's spring sun. I scanned the room's antiseptic interior, looking for anything I could use as a weapon but there was nothing. Whatever wasn't bolted down with self-sealing lock thread retainers was made from a biodegradable soft polymer that couldn't be shaped into a stake or a poke. One of the normal orderlies appeared and handed me a sealed package containing blue pajamas and disposable slippers.

I was allowed to, no that's not right. I was **encouraged** to take a shower and given instructions on how to remove the catheter. What a hideous contraption. Just when you think that there couldn't be anymore of that awful tubing left, there's some more coming. The worst part was when the orderly told me that I would have to wear a diaper of sorts until my body remembered how to clamp the flow off by itself. The worst part was I wanted to keep the tubing to use as a garrote but the orderly watched me remove it and quickly carried it away after checking to see if it was all there.

Crap...

I scrubbed myself until I was a pink as a piglet and got dressed. Feeling clean and fresh I set my mind to the one and only thing I really cared about: getting back to my 'Mech. I needed to get out of this "facility" whatever and wherever the hell it was and back to Tuscany. I know that my 'Mech has to still be there. I had a 4-month contract for care and storage but that may not last. Especially if they think I'm dead. Nigel, our contracted warehouseman was as about as honest as a thief could be but he wasn't stupid and a 'Mech without a MechWarrior was profit waiting to be had.

Pajamas tied tight, slippers in place I moved to the door, peeked out the viewing window to see if hallway was all clear and seeing nobody I turned the handle and----. Nothing. It was locked.

Crap!

Of course it was locked. What the hell was I thinking? I mean really? Straightjacket, padded room, drugs. Like they'd use up all those resources and just drop me into a room that was totally open and let me waltz out just a plain as I wanted to?

Well?

It was just plain old wishful thinking I guess...

A different red suited nurse appeared a short time later and with one of those giant orderlies in careful attendance took blood samples, shaved 3 or 4 patches of hair off my head and gave me a capsule that was blue with green stripes. "Take it." She cooed, "I promise it will make you feel better." I accepted the capsule and even though I desperately wanted to get ignorant and tell her to shove it up her ass or bolt for the door and make my escape I put it in my mouth and pretended to swallow it.

The orderly snickered and walked to where I was on the bed, stood over me and in a voice so low that it sounded like distant thunder said "Open."

Okay, I thought. I guess he won't be letting me get away with this trick. I quickly swallowed it for real and opened wide.

"Lift up your tongue please."

I did as commanded. Satisfied I had indeed swallowed it he stepped back. The nurse completed the procedure by offering another one of those smiles that scared me and said, "Now just relax for a bit. We have you scheduled for an intake interview shortly."

"Okay. By the way; out of curiosity here." I asked, "What would have happened if I hadn't taken the pill?"

Still smiling she said, "We would have given it to you as a suppository." I smiled lustfully at her answer but she slapped me down quickly by pointing to the human mountain and adding, "That is his job."

I winced at the thought of being held upside and having Moose or Rocko or whatever his name was use his giant fingers to cram something up my butt.

My intake interview was done in my doctor's office that was 2 floors above my own room/cell. It was a darkly paneled affair that boasted gigantic dark wooden furnishings upholstered in leather and rich, dark fabrics that reminded me of fine chocolates. Despite its near black walnut finishes the room had a set of French doors that spanned the entire length of the wall behind his desk that had ornate beveled glass panes that let the afternoon's light pour in unabated and gave the room a refreshing glow.

I stared at the French doors and studied its latch carefully. It had a grip lock on that would most likely be set to open only with his hand and that meant it probably had a back-up release in or around his desk as well. I considered it and looked at the framework holding it all together. It looked frail and ornamental but near the spot where the doors met the glassed wall I saw a faint line that ran from floor to ceiling that could only be a laser weld. Damn. The handle, back up release or nothing else.

The doctor was dressed in white, his shirt one of those double breasted looking affairs that sported rows of buttons down both sides of his chest in a wide looking V pattern that lent a rather handsome and retro-styled appearance. He stood up from behind his desk and rising up on legs that had to be two-thirds of his body and sent him skyward to at least 230 centimeters. He reached down and out to offer his hand to me. "A pleasure to meet you sir. I am Doctor Ruben Degroot." I accepted his hand and shook it and as it engulfed mine I felt for calluses or any other evidence that he was the kind of man that led a rigorous life.

Just because he was a tall a redwood didn't mean he was a fighter or even the type to be inclined to get physical if confronted. If I was going to try and get past him and out those doors I wanted to get an idea of what to expect.

Soft as a woman's behind...

Releasing my hand he gestured to an overstuffed leather chair that was behind me near the entranceway. I started to move toward the chair as a sort of feint when the floor shook gently beneath my feet. The doctor smiled jovially past me towards the doorway, "Ahh Hector. Very good. Have a seat and make yourself comfortable please. Glancing over my shoulder I saw that Hector was in fact one of the two monstrosities they called orderlies here; where ever the hell this may be. He wasn't the one that oversaw my interview with the nurse but one of the pair that partook in removing my straightjacket. He locked his eyes on mine and flashing a small smile he batted an eyebrow in a knowing kind of gesture and went to sit in a love seat near the French doors.

Crap...

The doctor was as big as a redwood---

I've already said that haven't I?

Well, he was a lanky sort, looking to be all arms and legs with bulbous, knobby knuckles and oddly enough, giant shocks of black and gray ear hair that jutted straight out of his ears and sort of drooped down long and loose to his lobes and evolved into his sideburns which in turn became a neatly cropped beard that ran parallel to his jaw-line and met at his chin, leaving the area around his lips and cheeks bare lending him a studious and intellectual look if not odd. I have a thing for ear hair. It's nauseating. If I were in charge humans would only have pubic and scalp hair. Nothing else.

Looking like a giraffe awkwardly trying to drink at a water hole he sat in my chair's twin and adjusting a small side table this way and that held an exposed a control panel and said into it, "In 10 minutes if you don't mind."

"Don't mind what?" I asked.

"Hmmm?"

"Don't mind what? You asked me if in 10 minutes I don't mind."

“Ohh! I see.” He smiled apologetically thinking he had mistakenly spoke to me. Of course I knew that he wasn’t but I can’t resist messing with people. “You see,” he pointed at his table, “I was speaking into my intercom to my assistant.”

“Oohh. I see. Sorry about that. My confusion.”

“Quite alright. It happens you know.”

“What does?”

“Confusion.”

“Ahh, when?”

“Just now.”

“It did?”

“Why yes, didn’t you just ask if I was speaking to you?”

“I guess I did. Didn’t I?” I was having fun messing with the doctor thinking that I was Oh-so-smart playing with words. He withdrew his noteputer from a pocket on his thigh and speared me with a look that I interpreted as saying; “You can stop being an idiot now. I know exactly what you’re doing.”

“Shall we begin?”

I hate that. I hate when I think that I’m being so cute and funny and witty and so much above it all and get caught. Caught by someone who knows what I’m up to and has from the get-go. Have I ever told you my ego is fragile? Well, it is. Really fragile.

Sensing that I was adequately deflated he referenced his display and started; “You were in quite a state of distress when you arrived here Mister----.”

“Podacka, Lem Podacka.” I said.

“Ahh, yes. Mister Podacka.” He activated his noteputer briefly, scrolling through my file. “Yes, right here it said that you were physically restrained and so violent that you had to be sedated right away.”

“Sounds about right.”

“Would you like to talk about what had gotten you so distressed.”

Dr. Degroot stared at me like an owl after he asked me to tell him what had pushed me off the edge. He was carefully interpreting my every word and movement now. I considered trying to lie my way out of this whole mess. Playing the cooperative type and telling him whatever would get me out of here the fastest but I could tell that he wasn’t some half-a-pfenning pill pusher that would fall for that kind of crap. Instead I decided to conserve my energy.

“No. I wouldn’t.”

Degroot nodded his agreement at me, like he knew what I was going to say before I said it. “Understandable,” he replied. We’ll come back to that at a later time then perhaps.” He tapped at his noteputer, ignoring me completely for a moment. Watching him tap at his noteputer, making notations about me in some electronic file that anybody would be able to read and use to cast judgment on me for whatever reason they saw fit I suddenly became overwhelmed with a feeling of panic. My breathing grew rapid and I suddenly became consumed with the idea that I had to get back to my ’Mech. I needed it, had to have it. If I didn’t get back to it I was going to fall apart and be trapped here forever. In an agitated voice I interrogated Degroot. “Look! Doctor.”—panting a bit---. Why am I here? I didn’t ask to be placed in any facility nor do I want to be here, so let’s

just end this “little” interview right now and I’ll just get back to my ’Mech and we’ll both be happy.” I fidgeted in my chair, my skin suddenly feeling two sizes too small for my body, stretching and itching all over. Degroot took in my obvious discomfort, made another notation.

“Mister Podacka, you are here for two reasons. The first is that someone had the foresight to register you as a patient and the second and most important: You were not in control of your emotions or actions the other day and had to be forcibly restrained. You were a danger to yourself and everyone around you and as you were already registered as a patient here you were easily committed against your will for however long it takes for me to decide that you no longer pose a danger.”

I jumped out of my chair and shouted at him, “A danger! Treatment!! Blessed Blake on a bouncing ball man! I’m a damned MechWarrior. I am supposed to be dangerous. How the hell can I do what I’ve been trained for if **I’m not dangerous!?!?!?**”

Hector blocked out the sunlight as he appeared behind me and with an undeniable, overwhelming force grabbed me by my upper arms and pinned them to my sides and slowly and unyieldingly forced me back down into my chair. I struggled, flailing my arms and pushing as hard as I could against his overwhelming strength. “No! Dammit! NOOOO! Panting like a winded dog now. “I have to get out of here! I’m going to lose my ’Mech, you don’t understand, he’s going to sell it!” And I was in my seat again with Hector’s hands firmly on my shoulders.

Degroot was unmoved by my display. He looked at me clinically, judging my display of distress then ignoring me again he told Hector to go ahead and sit by me for the rest of our interview and then touching a stud on his control panel and spoke into it. “Now please, if you will.” My eyes darted around the room desperately searching for help or an overlooked escape route or anything that would get me out of here.

The door to my left opened and that same nurse from my first night appeared with a stainless steel tray in her hands and came to where I was seated, Hector’s hands still firmly on my shoulders. She had a caring sympathetic smile on her face but her eyes broadcasted worry as she looked at me in that overstuffed chair with Hector’s hands resting on my shoulders, ready to put me into a 3 point strangle hold in a nano-second should I become a danger. I tried to see over the edge of her tray to get a look at whatever was on it but she kept it above my line of sight and slipped behind me. I tried to swivel my head but Degroot’s voice and Hector’s hands kept me looking forward. I felt cold steel against my scalp as she placed the---whatever they were against my head on the places they had shaved, which, oddly enough were the same places that a neuro-helmet touches. When she was sure they were snugly in place she snapped a medical bracelet that had to be at least 10 centimeters long that automatically seated itself on my wrist and inserted ultra-fine injection tubes into my blood vessels.

I stared wide eyed at the bracelet and thought to myself that for this to get any worse I’d have to get tied down to receive electro-shocks and then be beaten with a rubber hose.

Dr. Degroot fiddled with his control panel some more and then nodding in satisfaction at what he saw spun it so that I could see the display. It was a series of 3 dimension images of what I assumed was my brain. The major centers were colored according to some medical code and to whatever data the receivers on my scalp were collecting showed how deep they went into my brain. “Without any reassuring preamble Mr. Podacka this what is going to happen: Do you see the colors?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Those colors show what portions of your brain are doing what. The colors represent activity levels and just so you know, red is the preferred color. That indicates that there is plenty of blood and electrical activity there. And—.” He shifted in his seat, the leather groaning under him. “Certain brain centers need to be working at certain times. Its all dependant on what you’re doing at the time.” He tapped at the screen indicating a portion of the frontal lobe; “This part needs to be red during sex. But it’s also red when some drug addicts do their drug, hyperstimulants usually, or think about their next dose. Mr. Podacka what we’re going to do is measure your brain activity and adjust it so that it conforms to a more stable pattern that you may find will make your life more livable.”

“So, you’re not going to reprogram me?”

Degroot chuckled, “No Mr. Podacka we aren’t. It would be a relatively easy task to completely convert you to some other kind of individual but that isn’t what we’ve been paid to do.” My God! I jerked in my seat slightly and Hector’s hands instinctively tightened on my shoulders. Was it that easy to completely scramble somebody up and make them into somebody else? That means nobody is safe. If somebody doesn’t like you, you can just be---reprogrammed like a memory chip.

“What we’re going to do is move your rage and suicidal tendencies from the forefront of your mind by making other parts of your brain work harder for you.”

I watched the displays change colors as I suddenly became angry at the notion of being deleted. “Suppose I don’t want to cooperate?”

“Well that is indeed your prerogative but we have been paid to do this task and, mind you I’m not boasting here, I am very good at my job and I can accomplish the task with out your help or permission for that matter.”

I looked at the bracelet, its smooth satin silver surface standing out against the red hairs on my arm, small lights glowing faintly in the sunlight and felt a wave of apathy coming over me. As the wave consumed me I watched the display faded from red and oranges to blues and greens in places.

“I believe that you could.” Was all I could think to say to his professional declaration. “You don’t impress me as the boasting type.”

Degroot smiled happily, he was obviously proud of his skills and supremely confident because of them, and said, “Don’t be so depressed Mr. Podacka. Change can be a good thing and I am here to help you. We all are believe it or not. Now instead of talking about what happened exactly why don’t you tell me about how you got here, to say, within a day or two of your episode?” The bracelet hissed so faintly I wasn’t even sure I heard it and I felt it administer something that boosted my energy faintly and made me suddenly feel---chatty.

It's the rain that I miss most when I travel in space. Rain always seems so fresh like it's saying, "I am the only thing that is real. All else is pale and by comparison: worthless. So when the rain had started falling in wispy sheets that shifted directions with the wind I smiled, opened my access hatch and angled my 'Mech so that the rain and breeze could flow into my cockpit and refresh me.

We were parked at the edge of a small commercial DropShip pad waiting for space on an ovoid DropShip named "*George's Fortune*" to open up.

There were 6 of us, not including a ground truck our medic and techs rode around in. We sat in relative silence watching as a procession of forklifts and LoaderMechs conveyed cargo of all shapes and sizes out of the ship's innards to waiting trucks and tracked cargo haulers lined around the ships perimeter. I toggled the zoom and looked into the cargo bay of the DropShip to see how much was still stacked up inside and decided that I had some time to kill. Which in turn got me to thinking about killing time in space. The trip, as anticipated was going to be a short one; roughly 30 days give or take a week and that made me realize that close quarters with my compatriots for anything longer than, say, 3 days will most likely result in someone's death. Mine or theirs. With that thought fresh in my mind I put my 'Mech into stand-by mode, locked it down and went outside.

Out in the shifting rain I stood tall and surveyed the Bone Crushers. Six 'Mechs may not be much on some planets but on many out near the periphery we would be gods. We could be lords and masters of all we see before us. But here on Warlock we were a bunch of jerks getting the boot from the Capellans because we work for a buffoon. That thought track led me to look at the *Marauder*. We had cleaned it up pretty well; restored to its Bulldog invasion color scheme and had all its repair welds ground flat and polished up so well that they were nearly invisible. Its reactor was humming away quietly, the rain evaporating before it had a chance to settle on its armored skin but standing there, steaming like it was got me to thinking that the Capellans couldn't be done trying to get it back from us yet. Suddenly I had it. If they were going to try and get it from us again here would be the best place. Grabbing my chain ladder I dropped to the ground and went for the cargo truck.

The truck had an ad-hoc enclosure built of fiberboard around its cargo bed; the technicians use it as their mobile home away from home. They had flip down cots bolted to the walls and a small air cooler that could condition the ambient air temperatures down to a very pleasant and livable 65 degrees Fahrenheit and when we were in the field running combat operations it is where they live.

I had to knock and listen to them mutter among themselves to gain entry into their abode. One of the techs, a pointy headed guy named Rory exclaimed loud enough for me to hear, "Aw man, fuck him! I don't want him in here. He's always runnin his mouth and being a prig. I want this to be the one place where I don't gotta see him." I hollered back through the crack in their battered plank door, "Hey asshole! I don't want to move in. I need a couple of things, that's it but if you got a problem you can always come on out here and tell me about it." I knew that Rory was a spineless loudmouth that would back down from a direct challenge but I still needed to be careful overall about how I talked to

the lot of them. I wouldn't put it past them to let me in their little clubhouse, whip the speckled shit out of me and toss me out onto the tarmac bleeding and naked.

The door creaked open. I guess that meant I was in. Climbing into the back I quickly rummaged through the small parts bins looking for an over-ride module, a remote transmitter and a magnetic field regulator. As I rummaged the techs tried to ignore me and played cards on a small crate at the other end near the truck's cab. Rory, the guy who really, really, really hates me scowled at me from the shadows, his short, fuzzy eyebrows making a steep and angry V on his face. I was really hoping that he would have gathered his balls up and come outside to scuffle with me earlier. That would have been nice, mopping up the tarmac with his hairy eyebrows...

Parts in hand I trotted over to the *Marauder* and threw a rock at its cockpit screen. The hunk of granite arced high and went "plink" against it and slowly with sound like a hiss of air its torso swiveled down to look at me.

"Open up." I said.

The torso swiveled back to the neutral, balanced position and the access hatch popped open and its retractable chain ladder dropped down out of an unseen compartment.

I clambered up and into the *Marauder*'s confined cockpit and shook the rain out of my hair.

"What?" Truth asked without even offering a pleasantry.

Slipping in behind his command couch I started thumbing through the control boards and said, "I got a feeling that we're not done with the Capellans yet."

"Yeah, me too. What you got in mind?"

Finding the right board I told him to shut it down and as the reactor died I pulled it from its slot and went to work.

"Well, as we all know, I am one spiteful sonofabitch---."

Truth cut me off by adding, "Don't forget mean-spirited and damned near evil and uh, oh yeah, black-hearted."

"Uh, yeah, that too." *Screw you; you ass.* "Anyway, I got to thinking that if I can't have **my** 'Mech nobody can. So I'm going to rig up a little insurance policy."

Truth sounded dubious, "Yeah? What kind?"

"Remote volcano."

"Oh, I see." Now he was sounding like he was wishing he was in his *Caesar*. "Are you sure it will work as it should and not slag me down accidentally?" I peeked around at him and smiled wide, "Hey. Relax, it's me. I know what I'm doing." His features wrinkled, making his forehead and skullcap look like a hairless scrotum. "Of course you know that statement carries no weight with me as you are a well known drunk and a fuck-up."

"Of course I do, but remember that I am pretty damned good at this part of the job; machines are easy. Its people that I screw up with."

I soldered the board back together with my new additions firmly in place and told Truth to relax. Nothing would happen. I did, however, offer to let him drive my 'Mech and I would run the *Marauder* until the volcano switch was gone. To which he replied, "No, that's okay. If this pig goes up accidentally I want to be in it so I won't have to try and explain things to anybody."

“Chicken.”

“Yup.”

Done with the *Marauder* I scanned the drop pad. It was little more than a collection of 10 or so prefabricated warehouses and a truck park, granted it was spread all over hell’s half acre but that was just to make room for the DropShips. Not much of a facility at all but I had the feeling I would find what I needed here anyway. I hitched a ride on a passing forklift and as the rain and wind plastered my hair flat I asked the driver with a wink and a 50 C-bill note where the “Lost and Found” was located. Turning away from his driving he took me in and within a half moment decided I was sleazy enough to warrant an honest answer. “I’m going to building 6 right now. When we get there find big Mike, he’s in charge of it.”

Building 6 was within site of the ’Mechs and there, deep in its fluorescent-lit bowels working the floor was Big Mike. He was **big** in the sense that he could be his own planet. He was clinically obese, morbidly so, his roundness swelling his clothing so tight around his middle he looked like a big ball with arms and legs. “Big Mike?” I asked.

Without even pretending like he was a polite human being he snapped at me. “What! Hurry up dammit. I’m busy here.”

I pulled a scrap of paper out of my pocket and handed it over, “I heard that you’re in charge of the lost and found and I was wondering if you might have seen these things? They fell off a LoaderMech.” Another series of appraising stares came from narrowed, shrewd eyes then, snatching the list from my hand he read it, his sickly blue lips working in silence as he did. He stabbed at me with the hand that had the list in it, meaning that I take it back. “That stuff is ‘spensive’ there is a pretty hefty storage and security fee for those kinds of things.”

“You got a remote terminal?” My answer was all he needed to hear.

“Yeah, come with me.” He yelled out as he led me across the building, “Sayer! Watch the store!” Instantly a voice responded in the affirmative.

Big Mike ran a well-oiled machine.

He led me to his office and there next to a life-sized poster of a nude and randy looking Miss May sat a well-worn looking Comstar Remote Transfer Terminal. With this device anybody that has an active Comstar money account can access and transfer funds to anywhere there is an active HPG station. I accessed my account and with my back to Big Mike I held my hand out stretched over my shoulder. A piece of paper was pushed into it by a chubby finger. I looked at the number and blanched. This was a shit-load of money for what I was wanting but I did come to him and as such I couldn’t really bitch about it. I keyed it in and turning away so that he could do his part I said, “For this price can you deliver?”

I didn’t feel like walking all the way back to where we were parked and in another flash of brilliance jumped onto the back of an outbound cargo skiff. It banged and rattled along at a moderate pace until it cleared the buildings. Then I heard its throttle open wide and felt it accelerate rapidly. I held on for dear life as it zipped across the tarmac at 80 kilometers per hour on its 10 giant tires, my hands slipping on a pair of wet hand holds. I could just visualize myself losing my grip as the rain and soot from its exhaust pounded

my face and go pin-wheeling head over heels on the rain slick ferrocrete and waking up with compound fractures in my arms and legs for all of my troubles.

I peeked around the side of the cargo bed and watched the mechs grow larger and larger as the skiff barreled along and I'll be damned if he didn't start going faster as it got closer to my unit. He had to be doing at least a 125 kph when we passed by them. Squinting against the wind I looked up at them as I passed by and saw Truth's *Marauder* pivot slightly to watch me as the skiff blew past and I knew that I was screwed to the wall. Not only was I going god knows where until this thing at least slowed down enough for me to jump off but my commander had witnessed my latest act of stupidity that consisted of me looking like a frightened baboon hanging onto the nosecone of an outbound DropShip. Oh god, the humiliation that I was going to suffer for this was going to be insurmountable.

And away we went; out the gate and down the highway. Me on the back in the rain and cold and the driver working his ass off trying to set a new speed record. This really sucked coolant fumes. In the comedy that is my life this has to be better than the time I fell asleep inside an ammo bin I was repairing only to wake up locked inside for the duration of a three-day weekend. Finally I saw that there was no way that this scenario was going to end with my dignity intact; no slipping off the back un-noticed no graceful leaps from the moving vehicle that might impress some young lady, nope. Not this time.

I leaned out around the back and got the drivers attention by flipping him the dismounted hand signal that he should fuck himself by extending the middle finger of my left hand into the fully upright and deployed position from an otherwise closed fist and then deploying my thumb outwards in a 90 or so degree angle from that same fist and hooking the last knuckle upwards in its own 90 degree deployment. The driver spotted me in his side view mirror and jammed on his binders gaped stupidly at me and locked his wheels sending the truck into a sideways slide on the wet ferrocrete roadway. "Oh cheese and rice!!" I moaned to the rain gods as my grip faltered as the gee-forces strained my hands on the wet handholds and my feet lifted off the cargo deck and sending them out in the direction of the slide.

The truck came to a tire groaning stop facing the opposite direction, its heavy wheels chewing up the grass median that separated to northbound lanes from the southbound ones as they slid sideways across the weed strewn turf.

I let go as soon as the truck stopped moving and headed out at a run back to the drop pad ignoring the driver's promise that he was going to kick my ass for trying to kill him.

Kill him? I'm not the one who locked the brakes up and sent us skidding like an out of control speed skater...

Despite the cold rain and wind I was sweating fiercely as I ran at a quick double-time towards the drop pad. The last thing I wanted to deal with was missing a movement and getting stuck on Warlock with the Capellans. I knew that our liaison officer would have some choice revenge in store for me if I got left behind. Not too mention I would just plain old feel stupid and believe it or not it was that fear of feeling stupid that propelled me down the road. I opened my stride all the way up and put myself into my running coma and let my fear energize me. I quickly lost track of everything around me; sounds,

smells, physical sensations of any kind. There was only fear of humiliation and it was with that that my legs chewed up the distance between me and the DropShip.

After some time running hard I became aware of a vehicle pacing me and honking its warning horn. I jerked out of my coma and looked at the vehicle. It was an old port authority ground car, its sky blue bodywork chipped and scratched from years of abusive treatment. I kept my pace and leaned forward to see into the passenger compartment and try and figure out what the hell this person wanted with me.

It was Rena! She was motioning for me to get into the car with her. Well HOT DAMN! This might be a good day after all. We both slowed and I got in while the car was still moving. Rena didn't even wait for my door to close before she gunned it and sent us speeding back to the pad.

She blurted at me as soon as I was in "Godammit Lem----!"

I interrupted her forcefully, not wanting to cope with having made her angry, even if it was by accident.

"If you're going to call me names or just verbally abuse me because I made a stupid mistake----don't."

She spluttered at my cut off notice, her mouth hanging open just slightly and whatever else she was going to say caught in her throat. Turning in my seat to look at her I took in her features and even though she was angry I took intense pleasure from them. I am quite sure that I could very easily just sit and stare at her for the rest of my life. But having her off balance I pressed my point home to her.

"Rena, I am truly convinced you're a better person than I am---most people are. But if you start acting like everybody else and call me names or berate me I'm afraid that I might change my mind and to be honest I don't think that is something I want to deal with."

I settled back into my seat and pointed my head toward the windshield to make it look like I was looking at the road instead of looking at her like I really was. I added "I don't think I could stand the idea that you're just like everyone else."

She wanted to reply, I could see that. Her mouth started forming words that never escaped her mouth. And for the moment it took for her to close her mouth and accept silence I watched her, overjoyed with seeing her beautiful lips curled over her perfectly aligned teeth.

"Remember this though," I said, "No matter who said what I never asked anybody to come and get me and on top of that I know exactly how you feel about me so I sure as hell wouldn't trouble you. I wouldn't if my life depended on it."

She composed herself and as if she were trying to gain the moral high ground she said in a sort of conciliatory voice, "You had a good pace going there and your style is clean too. Have ever competed?"

I faced her again and in the cramped and now steaming passenger compartment, smelling her personal scent and it raced through me I felt my heart skip a beat and enjoyed a brief moment of euphoria but it was quickly ruined because I could see that she was obviously uncomfortable and struggling with herself and the situation.

"Look," I offered, "You don't have to play nice or even be polite if you don't want to. I know you don't like the fact that you are here with me. I recognize the look. My mother used to get it all the time. So, just drive or if it will make you feel better let me back out

and tell whoever sent you that you didn't find me because I don't want to feel responsible for your unhappiness."

Keeping her eyes on the road she gripped the wheel tighter, her knuckles going cherry red suddenly. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Uh-huh. Now shush please. Enjoy the quiet."

"Shush! Did you just tell me to shush?! Who the hell do you think you are mister?"

Keeping her profile in the edge of my sight I replied in a rather weary, slow monotone, "I think I'm a guy you dislike a great deal without a having a specific grievance. Because for whatever generic reason, be it running with the crowd or because I remind you of someone or---whatever. It doesn't matter to me. Lots of people hate me for no other reason than it's a popular thing to do and I'm okay with it. I have to be because there is nothing I can do that is true to my character that will convince you that you're wrong. Or at least jumped to hasty, misinformed conclusion. Now please be quiet. I'm trying to fantasize what it would be like to share a comfortable silence with you."

That got her. I can be fairly articulate when I want to be. Most of the time I don't so it kind of stuns people when I do do it. She had no reply for that. I could see her brain skipping back and forth as she digested what I had said to her.

Back at the drop pad she parked the car and as she grabbed the door release I said, "If its easier just pretend I'm an idiot who sickens you still. It should return some equilibrium. Don't worry. I'm bound to bullox it up again and you'll be able to slip back into the favored way of thinking."

She didn't say anything. She just looked at me with a mixture of curiosity and calculation and then got out.

"You idiot." Dessie called out over her external speakers. Her amplified voice blared across the pad for all to hear. I gave her the same hand signal I gave the skiff driver and loped off to Truth's *Marauder*.

Truth's *Marauder*?

I climbed into the *Marauder* again and Truth couldn't resist saying. "You really are an expert at fucking up Lem. Do you know that?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, so long as that is clear. By the way, I got word from the loadmaster; we're going to start loading in 20."

I hung out with Truth in the *Marauder* and explained while he laughed how I wound up accidentally catching the express truck out bound and then to show that he felt sorry for me, he shared how he had to make everybody pick a number between 1 and 10 to see who would have to go and try to find me before lift off. "Needless to say," he added acidly, "nobody wanted to go. Matter of fact the medic told me he'd quit before he'd go looking for you."

I snorted in laughter and said, "I bet he would too. He doesn't like me much."

Truth snorted back, "I don't think anybody does Lem."

That put me in a fit of sarcastic giggles and clapping Truth on the shoulder I said, "Least I know where I stand."

The loadmaster and his assistants came out of the DropShip wearing bright orange rain slickers and one by one they guided our 'Mechs up the DropShip's cargo ramp and into its mechanical bowels. There, under yellow-white work lights that cast harsh, ugly shadows everywhere they backed us carefully into empty BattleMech gantries and locked us all down with heavy hydraulic clamps on our arms, legs and torsos.

As I expected Truth was still waiting by the time the rest of us had been parked and locked. So when the loadmaster came up to me shaking his head saying, "We're over our limit, it's going to have to stay behind." I wasn't surprised.

No sooner had he spoken those words then Wilma, Dessie, Rena and Carter started yelling.

I smiled...

I knew that this was going to happen or at least something like this. I snatched the loadmaster's noteputer from his hand and checked his numbers. He tried to grab it back but Dessie and Carter stepped in front of him and blocked his way. He started yelling at me and called me names and tried to shove past Dessie and Carter but I tuned him out and started checking his manifests and load diagrams. Bumping a DropShip's estimated weight content isn't at all difficult. All you have to do is move a decimal here and there and you have it. But! You have to be able to match your cargo to your manifest when customs comes aboard so you can prove that you have what you say you do. After a minute or two of querying his noteputer and comparing data sheets I found where he had moved his decimals to make sure he was too heavy to let the *Marauder* aboard.

I smiled like a shark and tossed him his noteputer and said, "Get him on the line."

Rain dripping off his coat and face the loadmaster shoved the noteputer into a thigh pocket and replied, "Get who on the line?"

"Whoever told you to falsify your weight documents and keep our 'Mech off the ship."

"Screw you pal. This ain't your ship. You can't make me do nothing."

Delighted with his stubbornness I smiled wide and countered his defiance with, "Oh yeeesss I caaaan. Now, before you get ignorant with me and start name-calling, which by the way, is really very counter productive, I want you to look at my 'Mech." I gestured to my *Hatamoto*. "If you choose to be obstinate I will make sure that this ship will not be space-worthy for many years to come and make everybody who works on it unemployed. And!" I emphasized this next part, "If you think I'm bluffing just ask these guys," I gestured to the rest of the Bonecrushers, "They'll tell you that I haven't got enough sense to keep from stomping on my own dick. Much less tear this bucket apart."

I don't know if he was convinced that I would do like I said but as a reply he spun around violently and stomped over to a wall mounted call box and said, "This is Emery. I need the Captain down here at the ramp."

The Captain had the red, bleary eyes of a blazing alcoholic, with pear shaped hips and a purple nose to boot. I hope I die before I look like that. He looked at us all nervously and probably wished he had something to drink before he had come down. Screwing up all his captainly courage he puffed up his chest and summoned a stern voice. "What's going on here dammit! I wanted this ship locked down by now." Not speaking a word the loadmaster pointed at us accusingly.

Wilma took the lead. “Captain your man here tried to tell us he didn’t have the room for our last ’Mech and we,” she pointed at me, “caught him in a lie. Your weight sheets clearly show that you’ve got plenty of room and then some. So why don’t you tell us what is going on.” Wilma is one of those women who can make your nuts shrivel with a look. It’s a withering expression and psychic energy may very well manifest itself in her eyes and body language but it comes from a dark place and if you have a conscience it can make you feel physically ill.

It doesn’t work on me...

Cornered like a rat the captain’s eyes flicked left and right as if he was looking for a way to escape or bluff his way out of it but he was stuck and he knew it. Having been caught cold in a lie he knew we could disembark and report him to the customs officers for fines and penalties which, judging from the looks and smells of his ship he couldn’t afford to pay. Then, having a valid excuse to stay on planet despite having gotten the official “boot” we would be able to have him fined for infringing upon our income potential by nefarious means and intent, which also meant that he wouldn’t get paid for our 500 or so cargo tons that we represented. So this deal, whatever it was, was going to screw his personal profit margin three ways to Sunday.

I edged past Wilma and before he could reply said as a way of warning him, “Captain, we both know how this can go. Either you can tell us who put you up to this and we’ll handle it from there and there will be no hard feelings between us,” I gestured towards the Bonecrushers who collectively looked like they would kick the shit out a 7 year old space scout if she came too close, “or you can unlock us and we’ll leave and we’ll all try to be extra careful to not have an accidental weapons discharge on our way out.”

That got him. I could see the fear on his face now. Threatening his livelihood was the key to his sodden soul. No ship, no drink. No drink, no happiness. He couldn’t have that. Holding his hands up in surrender he gave in.

“I was contacted by the Capellans a couple of days ago. They told me they were deporting you guys and that when you got here I was to keep that *Marauder* off. No reason given. Just keep it off.”

“Do you have a call back number?”

He shoved his hands into his pocket and pulled out a crumpled card. “They told me to call this before I lifted off.”

I gestured to Carter and said, “Make sure he stays close and away from the com panels for a while.”

I gently grabbed Wilma by the elbow and gestured for her to follow me. Together we went to a shipboard call box and dialed the number from the mangled note.

“Third Battalion Danbury speaking.” I laughed into the speaker hearing our former liaison officer’s voice.

“Danbury!” I shouted, “You rat! Get out to the drop pad and bring your commander or I’m going to rip this *Marauder* apart and slag the leftovers. You got one hour.”

“What!? Who is this!?”

“You know exactly who it is Danbury. One hour.”

Whipping the bulkhead playfully with her ponytail Wilma asked off handedly, “What’s the plan?”

“The plan is I’m going to sell that ’Mech to them or I’m going to volcano it right where it stands.”

“What if they call your bluff?”

“What bluff. I’m as serious as a Hanse Davion heart attack.”

Wilma, stopped slapping the dirty steel wall in front of her and in a suddenly charged voice said, “You can’t be serious! That thing is worth way too much to blow up.”

“Yeah?! And they just tried to steal it from us. So, to me in my warped way of thinking means its worth too much to think intelligently about it.”

Swinging her ponytail like a pendulum now Wilma adopted her previous relaxed posture and realizing it was hopeless to talk to me about it walked away and said, “Okay, whatever you say my man. But I think you may be making a big mistake.”

Well sure I am. But that’s what I’m all about. Mistakes, screw up, gaffs, bullocking, bugging and malfing. My grandfather used to tell me that I could screw up the moving parts of a 9 inch steel spike so what the hell is one more? I mean the worst that could happen is I could get myself killed and hell, I’m alright with that.

I spent a few minutes briefing Truth, who had remained in the cockpit totally unaware of what was going on to which he cursed me up one side and down the other and in no uncertain terms explained that he was in charge not me and not Wilma but him and him alone. I kow-towed to him to ease his tantrum down to a dull roar and asked him to center the *Marauder* on the pad’s vacant space and leave it on idle.

He waited with me in the rain clad in his cooling vest and gunbelt enjoying the crisp faint sting of the flecks of rain that were swirling around us. Neither of us spoke for the longest time. I don’t think we felt any need. Some people can’t stand silence I guess and feel compelled to fill and silent moment with blather of any kind. I think those people are scared of introspection or the voices in their head or---god knows what really. But at that moment in time my voices were quiet and we were both comfortable being together and silent as the rain washed the world down.

Truth’s exposed skin was a cold, cherry red by the time Danbury showed up in his hover car. Its long, sleek lines cut across the pad like a spear in flight as it angled towards us and the steaming *Marauder*. When it stopped its gull-wing doors opened silently and Danbury popped out and hot-footed it around to our side and deployed a rain parasol for his emerging commander.

Danbury’s commander, if it was in fact him was a weathered looking field grade officer. Maybe 50 years old but looking older, his face was lined like an old road map with deep wrinkles that made his eyes recede into his ethnic mongoloid features. He appraised Truth and me and spoke in Mandarin to Danbury who then translated.

“His Excellency, Senior Colonel Zhang Kungzheng is deeply upset that unworthy mercenaries such as yourselves feel you are in possession of anything that might make you feel you are entitled to order any man who faithfully serves the great Capellan

Confederation and all powerful Sun Tzu Liao to bend to your will and it is not out of desire to please but curiosity that he is here now.”

I bowed in Combine fashion to show respect to Kungzheng, who I could tell was a man who did not suffer fools and spoke to him directly.

“Excellency, I am in a situation that cannot seem to be easily remedied. I am in possession of a BattleMech that has a colorful and prestigious link with Capellan history.” I gestured toward the *Marauder* and waited for Danbury to translate. “Your officer, Danbury, has on many occasions tried to purchase this machine from us but at insultingly low prices. Whether he thinks us half-wits who have neither the intelligence nor capacity to understand what it is we possess or that we are so unworthy that we do not deserve to be treated fairly is not known--.”

Danbury translated that. “But, we are neither Excellency. I have only desired a fair price for what is mine, not outrageous by any means.”

Danbury translated again and gave me a dirty sideways look as Kungzheng replied to my oratory. “His Excellency understands what you have said but it does not explain why you feel that you have the power to order men as great and powerful as he about. He also says that your time is fleeting and unless you provide a clear answer he may exercise his authority and have you hanged or injected with coolant for such disrespectful behaviors.” Danbury smiled like a snake as he delivered that last bit.

Unfazed by his reptilian display I said, “Excellency, if that be your wish than there is nothing that I may do to dissuade you for here I am under your power. But my point is this: I am of the opinion that our character and or intent has been untruthfully represented. I have been perfectly willing to sell, for a reasonable sum, this BattleMech back to your illustrious forces for you to do with as you see fit. Now we have been told, untruthfully, by our ship captain that there is no room for it and it must stay behind. After questioning our captain he explained that he was given instructions by someone in your forces to lie to us. Further questioning revealed a contact number that led directly to your man Danbury here.” I shifted my gaze directly to Danbury and said to him, “Make sure you tell him **exactly** what I said.”

Danbury fidgeted and with a fearful look translated. Kungzheng’s eyes flitted back and forth between Danbury and me as he Danbury whispered in his ear.

I plunged ahead. “Excellency, I feel that we have been treated poorly and our characters have been maligned, as we have found ourselves in the disgraceful position of being exiled from this place and feel that we deserve justice in one form or another for such dishonor.”

More whispering between Danbury and Kungzheng, this time in an excited manner. With Kungzheng growling and shaking a fist. Danbury’s ire was on high on the horizon and pointedly said, “His Excellency says that mercenaries are with out honor as they fight for no lord only a pay master and as such are not deserving of justice for tainted honor.”

This was not going like I had hoped. Actually I had no idea how this was going to go when I called Danbury an hour ago.

Oh well...

“Of course in that respect your Excellency is most correct and the justice I seek is in the form of money.” I reached in a coat pocket on the pretense of retrieving a handkerchief but as my hand was inside I activated the reactor idle circuit with the

remote I had placed there earlier. So slow did it happen I was the only one who could hear the reactor begin to speed up.

Wiping my rain damp face with the handkerchief gently I made my demand. “I feel that the only way justice to one as unworthy as me is by purchasing **my BattleMech** for 22.5 million C-bills. Ten times its market value. If it is as historically important as we have been led to believe I feel that the price, while exorbitant considering its value as working, combat ready machine is still within the realm of reasonableness. If that is unacceptable I also feel that complete and total destruction of the machine, as it is my personal property, would serve justice just as efficiently.”

The reactor was thrumming away now and could be heard quite clearly and as Danbury raised his voice over it to translate. As he did I could see Kungzheng’s eyes widen with shock, anger and disgust. Shock that I had demanded so much and that I had threatened to destroy the *Marauder* if my price was not met. Anger because I was in fact blackmailing him and for that matter the entire Capellan Confederation and disgust because to save face he would have to let the mech be destroyed but to do so would not reflect well upon him in the eyes of his commander. He went to whisper to Danbury and realized that the reactor was humming so loud that he could not be heard, then, looking around more intently, he also noticed that there wasn’t anything within 300 meters of us. Coming to grips that the ’Mech was in a safe position to be destroyed he understood just how serious I was about it all and swore in mandarin.

For a man of his status this entire episode must have been the equivalent to skinny-dipping in a sewer and I could practically hear his blood boil. He needed to get this ’Mech back in one piece. I was certain that he had already boasted to his commander that he had it so, in essence, his ass was on the line more than mine was. Sure he could arrange to have me assassinated, which would suit me fine but that wouldn’t remove the stain on his record for having failed to retrieve the *Marauder* in the first place.

Crap! I really have to leave this planet now...

Honor bound to negotiate to his favor he held up four fingers to indicate 4 million C-bills.

“I am sorry Excellency but the slight to our honor, both personal and professional demands a higher penalty. I am certain that if the tables were reversed he wouldn’t acquiesce in the least as he is obviously a man of distinction and untarnished honor himself.”

Danbury translated and together the men chattered excitedly, sounding like a bucket of coins raining down on a temple floor. When they were finished Danbury, with his back erect and his cheeks red from the cold and anger faced back to us and declared, “No! His Excellency refuses your demand and says his offer of 4 million is more than fair for men whose honor is less than that of a whore.”

I bowed deep to Kungzheng and thanked him for granting us an audience and shouted over the whining reactor, “You should be well away soon. The explosion this machine will make will be a mighty one indeed.”

I turned to Truth and said, let’s go. We’re done here.

I set a slow pace across the tarmac determined to volcano the *Marauder* where it stood. I had wanted to beat the crap out of Danbury and his commander just because they were Capellans but kowtowing to them like some Combine sycophant courtier changed that anger into stomach into a nearly intolerable rage and feeling of revulsion. But I knew that we'd never get off planet if I talked to Kungzheng like I had really wanted to. I could tell just by looking at him that he'd have no qualms about maiming our DropShip on the pad and putting the "needle" to all of us. I let the reactor spool up; waiting for what I thought was max pressure. I wanted it to be peaked when I let it go.

When we were at a safe distance I pulled the remote out of my pocket and thumbed it gently and I waited for the last little bit of pressure to build. By listening to it I could tell that it was near override temperatures and really only had a minute or two to wait. I glanced at Truth next to me. He didn't say anything, he didn't need to. His expression said everything. I know that he wanted the *Marauder* or the money but he also knew that it was mine to do with as I pleased. He had explained his reasons for thinking our Colonel had sold us out and that if it had in fact happened he had plans to form his own unit and move to Outreach. He had said that over the years he had made some good connections with some of the more creditable merc units and a couple of Taurian Concordat nobles who had said if he was ever to strike out on his own that they might be able to make him a house unit commander and since he was pretty sure he was for all intents and purpose unemployed it was time to do just that.

Personally the idea of going to the periphery to be a house unit made me want to defecate. A life of boredom and politics. I'd be lucky to be assassinated with a slow poison out there. I recommended that we should sign on with the Lyrans and go out as privateers on disputed worlds. His reply to that idea was to call me an idiot. I was faintly surprised when I watched Danbury's ground leave the area and then as it neared the gates make a U-turn and head towards us.

Hissing to a stop in front of us a red faced and shamed Danbury exited and without uttering a word thrust a Comstar voucher at me. I snatched from his hand and unfolded it. I smiled snidely at him when I read the number in the upper left corner: 22.5 million C-bills and signed by Kungzheng's shaking hand. I handed it over my shoulder to Truth and took to my knees, bowed and said politely to Kungzheng who was seated and looking out the windscreen, trying to ignore me.

"I thank your Excellency for his decision. Justice has truly been served this day." Then standing, my knees dripping wet now, I got close to Danbury. So close our faces were nearly touching and said, "You stupid shit, if you had only been fair to begin with none of this would have happened. Have a Comstar Acolyte and one of your people meet us on Galetea. Once I confirm that this voucher is good I'll sign it over in front of the Acolyte and complete the deal." Then turning away from him I said, "Not that I think you'd cheat me but I think you are a lying bastard who would steal a dead man's teeth."

We were an hour from lift off and sitting around the second tier cargo bay watching the crew lock the gantry down when Truth finally asked, "So, what are you going to do with all that money?"

"Oh, I don't know I was thinking about b----."

“Don’t say booze and hookers.”

“Booze and hookers.” I finished smiling like a sinner.

Rolling his eyes at me in exasperation he declared to the universe, I guess, “You are probably the only man who not only would spend 20 million C-bills but could spend that much and live through it. Me? Or anybody normal would die within the first 500.”

Still grinning like the cat that ate the canary I said, “As long as you’re smiling when they bag you up who cares how much you spent to get there.”

Dessie, Wilma and Carter appeared after that, all wanting to know what the hell had happened. Truth, downplaying everything as usual, told them that we had handled it and all was well. That went over like a fart in church with all them crying “bullshit!” at us and demanding that we come across with the intel.

I left them there not wanting to listen to their asses. I was suddenly very angry and really wanting to break things. Heads, boards anything. I was smart enough, well that is a relative term I guess. Anyway, as I was saying I was smart enough to realize that the reason I was probably so mad now was because Rena was not with the others when they came to find Truth and me to hear what had happened. All of which I found to be disturbingly neurotic. I mean, here I am; a person who doesn’t want anything to do with people getting upset because somebody doesn’t want anything to do with me and has told me as much. Blessed Blake I need a drink----and a lobotomy!

Needing a drink reminded me that I had some personal cargo coming so I went to my billet which to look for it. Our “billet” was a common cabin that all of us Bone Crushers had been allotted for the voyage. It was dark, its overhead lighting failing and casting a sick orange hue it about and it smelled. Smelled like sweat and farts and some sort of chemical that made my eyes water. Acceleration couches were bolted to the walls six to a side making 18 berths total and that was it. No lavatory facilities, no lockers for storage just mesh bins on the ends of the couches for personal effects. Just by looking at them I could see that the couches were so close together that if the guy above you passed gas you would be able to tell what he had for dinner in a matter of seconds. I knew I was not going to be here after the acceleration run because I would go off the deep end guaranteed if I had to stay cooped up with my---compatriots? Knuckleheads? Dipshits? Whatever you want to call them.

Made me really glad I had seen Big Mike...

I found my package which was actually two cases of really good Lyran scotch packaged for consumption in zero G environments and a 6 month supply of T-bar 55, a hospital grade tranquilizer drug that is the rage in all the upscale celebrity addiction treatment clinics inner sphere wide. That is what I paid so much for. It worked out to almost 10 C-bills a dose but there were going to be no in flight movies.

I slammed down some of the scotch as we neared lift off time and being that I hadn’t eaten yet I became really drunk really fast. Climbing with drunken carefulness I navigated my way to the top couch. I had taken a top couch hoping that being that high up I might stay relatively unnoticed. I really didn’t feel like being around anybody and even with a belly full of booze I knew that my temperament was at best dangerously volatile.

I hate space travel...

As the countdown timer neared 5 minutes and the captain ordered his crew to do their final checks and strap in the rest of my unit filtered in. My unit? Oh crap, what made me think like that?

I could tell by many of their expressions as they entered and looked me that they were not happy about being confined with me either. I started feeling bad for them because I am such a shit in general but then I started thinking: Why the hell should I feel bad for them? It's not my problem that they don't like me. I mean, Blake! It isn't my fault they have issues with me. Matter of fact they can go to hell! No better yet, I'll send them there right damn now! I started to unstrap myself so I could leap down and kick all their brains out when Dessie's face appeared out of nowhere in front of me and scared the hell out of me.

She had climbed the couches like a ladder to get to me and announced for everybody to hear, "Hey peckerhead! What'ch ya doin all the way up here?"

I jerked in fright, banging my head against the ceiling bulkhead so hard I saw stars. Everybody laughed at the spectacle congratulating her for so masterfully scaring the shit out of me. The funniest part was that my first impulse was to grab her by her scrawny neck and fracture her trachea for scaring me so bad my second was to stick my finger straight through her eye for insulting me for no damned reason other than she's just a bitch and likes it but before I could get my self free of my couch straps Truth shouted, "Dessie! Shut up and strap in!" and she disappeared.

I don't think she realized that she almost died right then and there...

I dropped one the tranquilizers as soon as the ship started to lift and between it, the booze and the pressure of liftoff I went to sleep. Not good sleep but tortured light sleep that allows you to dream and hear everything around you. You can hear everybody around you talking like your part of everything but you are dreaming too. Interacting with who or whatever your dreaming about; trapped between worlds is the only way I can describe it but in retrospect that is/was more of an accurate representation of my life than anything else I've ever seen. Part of two worlds but belonging to neither and unable to fully enter either.

Fortunately it was only a 5-day burn to the JumpShip so I didn't starve to death keeping myself drugged and out of trouble during the trip. I watched through a view port as we and two other DropShips used maneuvering thrusters to get connected to our jumper. Our giant ovoid bodies moving with near glacial slowness toward our frail, skeletal prime mover, our speed a necessity because if one of us were to come in too fast our mass could very easily destroy the frail lattice work that was the JumpShip. Then we'd really be screwed. Ever so slowly we edged closer and closer and with the barest of bumps we made contact and then, in contrast to gentle connection a series of echoing clangs reverberated through the ship as heavy steel lugs secured themselves around the ship's immense docking collar.

I locked myself in my 'Mech with my scotch and tranqs and tried to keep away from everybody as much as possible knowing that the boredom and inactivity of space travel would strain my self control to its uppermost limits. Truth came around a few times and drank with me and I as good-naturedly as possible listened to him vomit his life on me. I

found that a steady intake of scotch and a quarter of a dose of tranquilizers kept me manageable and to my surprise, almost sociable. I ran into people as I was going for chow or the lavatory be sure of that and most of the time it was uneventful. People who know me either like to pretend I'm invisible or that they are, hoping that I'll just let them be. But I tell you this: that damn Dessie was really trying to make me kill her. It got so bad that when I was outside if I heard her voice I would go the other way. One time I saw her in the mess hall getting her dinner and she was wearing damned near nothing. Now I will be the first to admit that a DropShip is a nasty thing to ride in. They're hot and humid and cramped. Unless you got a 'Mech or vehicle you can hide in you have no privacy whatsoever and everybody is nervous, frustrated and generally horny enough to rub up on any wall conduit that will take a coupling. So her floating about in a threadbare tank top and bikini cut skin-tight running trunks was just a way for her to get attention and try and make all the people susceptible to those kinds of charms insanely randy.

I floated next to Rena, Carter and two of the ship's crew and asked Rena, "Has she been doing shit like this the whole time?"

Rena nodded her head and said disgustedly, "Yeah, soon as we locked up to the JumpShip space harpy there stripped down to as close to nothing as she could get and has been teasing everybody since."

"Has anybody told her she's being a stupid bitch and to get some clothes on?"

Despite hating me Rena snorted with laughter at my remark but added, "Not that I know of. I figure she'll wake up in a locker somewhere naked and buggered for her trouble."

I kicked off the wall and floated to the serving center to grab my rations and as I stuffed the packages into my pockets Dessie appeared next to me all smiles and nipples. Trying to look like a naughty schoolgirl she batted her eyes at me and pushed her breasts out so they would look even more prominent and said in a little girl's voice, "Hi Lem. How are you? I haven't seen you around much at all."

Using my forefinger I pushed on her forehead to make her get away from me and said acidly, "I've been avoiding you."

Taking a pouting expression she tried to make herself look innocent and asked, "Why is that?"

I put on my own condescending voice and cooed back at her in an equally syrupy voice, "Because you're a stupid bitch that's why. And! If you don't get some goddamned clothes on your gonna get chained to a toilet and raped blind----dummy."

Rena was red faced and shaking with laughter as I left the room and as I floated out.

Shortly after I was floating in my 'Mech's cockpit whacked out of my mind on booze and pills I heard Dessie wailing on my access hatch with a spanner screaming for me to get out so she could kick my ass.

The rest of the trip was a blur punctuated with eating, crapping, drinking and crying and trying hard to avoid all human contact. I remember becoming slightly sober and discovering to my horror that I was almost out of scotch and in desperation asking Truth how much long we had left.

He stared at me, confusion flooding his face and said, "I just told you about 3 hours ago we're starting our burn in to Galatea soon. Where were you? Huh? You better get your liver working again man."

This time the burn was awful because it was 4 gees instead of 3 and having that kind of pressure on you constantly and sobering up from a 30 day drinking binge is the equivalent to having a fat woman sit on your chest and face and feeling like you have to throw up and have explosive diarrhea all at once.

I staggered down the cargo ramp, my guts feeling like someone had tied them into knots and my vision shifting in and out of focus; going from blurry to so crisp and clear the lights and details seared my brain. I shaded my eyes with my hands and laid down on the ferrocrete tarmac near a light pole. The cold ground penetrated my clothing and soothed my aching body. For the last 24 hours I had been suffering withdrawal symptoms from the tranquilizers and they were bloody awful. I know that it sounds like I'm trying elicit sympathy but shit! These people probably have no idea what I have put myself through for them. I know, I know, I know. Since when do I give a damn about anybody? And truthfully I don't think I do---really. Mostly I did it for the Major. There haven't been many guys who have put up with me like he has and it seems that in some perverse way I have developed a sort of loyalty to him. Probably because he has accepted me the way I am and doesn't place any social demands on me, content with letting me be myself. If the tables were reversed I would have chained me to a tree like a mangy dog and left my ass behind on Warlock. But that is neither here nor there. At this moment I am suffering. My heart feels like its going to burst and my breath is coming in short panting breaths and every joint in my body feels swollen and achy like when you have the influenza but only 100 times more painful and I am thirsty beyond reason but when I drink water it doesn't help. To this point I've taken in 3 liters of water and I still feel like I've been without for days and my belly is swollen and painful to touch from all I've drunk.

Blake! Take me please!

Out of professional dedication and curiosity the medic came over to check on me, wondering if I was dead. Nudging me with his boot he asked, "You alive down there?" I laughed bitterly and croaked. "Just barely. Who knows though, you may get your wish yet."

Cynically he replied, "Not likely MechWarrior. Someone's going to have to cut your head off to kill you. I've come to the conclusion that you're indestructible. Oh sure you may have some sort of major cardiac event that leaves you in a permanent vegetative state or totally paralyzed from the eyeballs down but I'm pretty sure you can't be killed by any normal means." Squatting down close to me he pulled out a pupil scanner and checked my eyes and checked the glands in my neck and felt my pulse. "It's like Rena said man, you got something going on besides what you got here and now and until that happens you are cursed."

I held still while he checked me. "Did she tell you all that?" I was impressed that she would even speak of me with somebody else. "What else did she say?"

"That you're an ass." Finished with his inspection of me he stood and said, "I know I'm wasting my time here but I recommend that you get some rest and lay off the booze for a while. Your system is stressed near capacity and unless you want to spend the rest

of your life in that vegetative state I was talking about you'll give it a break. But then again you're an idiot who will do as he pleases so whatever."

You want to see something funny? Just go someplace where people frequent and lay down. Most will try to act like its perfectly natural for you to be there; like that is the way it has always been. Like they say to each other all the time, "Oh! That guy? He's always been there." And carry on. Others will ignore you completely, not wanting to get involved in somebody else's problem(s) especially those of a person who will lay down in the street or on the sidewalk like a stupid drunk.

Like me...

I can honestly say that Galatea did not make a good first impression on me. While all spaceports smell the same all planets smell different and Galatea smelled like sour laundry and the weather upon landing was gray. Gray and sweaty and----humid. Just blah. I definitely prefer Warlock to this place.

An older model ground car pulled up and parked near where I was laying and three people got out, or should I say six feet got out, I couldn't look up it made my head hurt. The person who got out on my side had nice shoes on. Hand tooled leather with platinum buckles. Very spendy. The last time I saw shoes that nice was back home in the Combine. Our commander's wife and son had some that they wore to dress mess dinners. But I never saw them anywhere else. Those kind were way too expensive for everyday use, but off they went, tromping through coolant and grease stains.

I fell asleep on the ground oblivious to the industrial sounds and activities around me, enjoying the peace of oblivion. No sounds, no faces just sweet, tender nothing then from the darkness appeared a very disgusted looking woman in a Capellan uniform. She had a Comstar Acolyte with her and an ethnically Asian looking man carrying a neuro-helmet. "Are you Podaka?"

"Yeah, whatufit?" I said in mush-mouthed tones. My lips and tongue had become strangely numb and my face was tingling on pins and needles like a sleeping limb does.

"I'm here for the *Marauder*."

Struggling to my feet I started wavering and feeling like I was going to fall over and grabbed the light pole with a sweaty hand for support. I hugged it like a friend and pulled the now crumpled voucher out of my pocket and handed it to the Comstar guy to verify. Without a word he copied its details into his noteputer and within seconds announced, "It's good." Taking it back I gestured, because I couldn't get any words out it seemed, for his noteputer and entered my account number. Getting my meaning he completed the deposit and printed out a receipt. "Will there be any further services needed?"

The Capellan who had used every minute since our meeting to look at me disgustedly said, "No thank you Acolyte. I don't intend to deal with this swine anymore than is absolutely necessary."

What is it with people anyway? This woman, although ugly as a mud fence and in possession of a giant ass that stretched the seams of her pants to what had to be there uppermost limits, didn't even know me or what had transpired on Warlock. She has no idea how Danbury tried to cheat me of my 'Mech all those times and how he basically had us deported just to try and steal it. But in all fairness I, or I should say my section

actually, did steal it from the battlefield, breaking convention in terms of battlefield salvage rights. Still, she has no right to be sore at me. I only stole it because it was my job to. She shouldn't act like I did something wrong.

We weaved through the crates lining the main floor and made for the gantries, using the *Marauder* as our guiding landmark. All around us freight hostlers cursed and muscled stacks of cargo into designated pick up zones for pallet jacks and loadermechs to hustle out onto the tarmac. I led them up the gantry and crawled inside. Once inside I reset the lockouts and cleared the rest of the security protocols and left them alone with their new toy.

I scanned the floor to find Truth and tell him the deal was done, not really coming to grips with the notion of having 20 million C-bills to do with as I pleased. It was more surreal than anything I had ever experienced. I have never had any respect for money, it runs through my fingers like water but anything above 10,000 seems abstract in my mind. 20 million was just---stupid. I couldn't see me living past the first million.

Well maybe that's a good thing...

The walk to the Bone Crushers' stable was a blessedly short one. The withdrawal from the tranquilizers I had popped like jellybeans during the transit was getting near crippling at times. At one point during the march I blacked out, coming to as I was a scant few meters from plunging headfirst into a filthy canal.

Traveling along a reinforced ferrocrete road top that all 'Mech traffic in the city was restricted too I came to the decision that Galatea was a toilet. A toilet that could go either way; it could keep getting filthier and filthier until nobody wanted near it or it could be cleaned up nicely and be made into a relatively comforting place to sit down and relax on. Its streets were dirty and strewn with trash and car hulks and its buildings were all dingy and showing, the signs of advanced urban decay especially with graffiti marking all walls large enough to hold some would be artist's ghetto street name. It all got me to wondering: was Galatea like this because nobody really wanted to come here or was it because it was like this did everybody avoid it?

Moot point really...

The Bone Crushers' stable turned out to be a worn out, tall warehouse with a poorly modified entrance big enough to allow 'Mechs to enter and attached one story structures serving as barracks and headquarters offices. It fit into the "it's shitty but with a coat of paint and some nice curtains it will be great" category. The kind of thing amateurs or transient units would operate out of. You'd never see the Grey Death Legion or the Light Horse in a crap hole like this one.

Inside it wasn't much better. You see, in the military you learn to distinguish the wheat from the chaff or the shit from the cream if you prefer with great speed. You have to. The last thing you want to do is start thinking that you can rely on somebody who is a total idiot or more interested in looking good than actually doing good and I am very good at telling the difference. Truth's section, although a motley collection at best made me feel comfortable. Their 'Mechs were worn and looked like they had been in a few scrapes but all in all they were serviceable and the people who were operating them

seemed competent. Here, in the headquarters I was getting the impression that I had been with the best the Bonecrushers BattleMech Battalion had to offer.

Let me explain: When you're with a military unit you expect there to be a certain amount of equipment laying about. Generators, trucks, an APC or two and so on and so on. How much almost always depends on the size of the unit. The Bonecrushers were supposed to be a 'Mech battalion, or that is how Truth described it to me anyway, and from what I could see they didn't have enough equipment around to support a scout 'Mech lance as far as I was concerned anyway. I was beginning to think that Truth was right that Colonel whathisface had gone broke after all.

Goddamn! My heart was beating so fast by time I moved into the 'Mech bay I thought it was going to leap out of my chest and skitter down the street like a scalded cat and my vision was warping in and out of focus so fast that I was feeling space sick in spades. Holy crap! No wonder people stayed hooked on those things. The withdrawals were frickin evil.

"Is he okay?" I heard Truth ask somebody I couldn't see.

A second voice answered, "Yeah, from the looks of it he'll be okay. He should see a doctor though. He's got some classic overload symptoms."

"Well, keep him together until I can figure out what to do with him, okay?"

The second voice cursed, "You know how much I despise this fuckin guy?"

Truth's voice came back carrying a sorrowful tone, "Most everybody does Clyde but I need him."

A light burning my eyes jarred me into consciousness. I didn't recall going to sleep so I was surprised to say the least.

"Huh? Whatthefhell! Where am I?" I stammered as confusion flooded my brain and made try to run. A pair of hands held me down and ordered to stand fast. Appealing to the primordial part of my brain that responds to orders instantly and unable to fight off whoever was keeping me in place I laid still as directed. Not moving to try and escape I started feeling the cold metal plates of my 'Mech's cockpit floor beneath me and relaxed and labored to see past the nearly blinding light before me and made out the darkened features of our medic. Frowning at me as usual he clicked of his light and checked the read out on his hand-held body monitor he had wired to me he growled, "So what's up with all these scotch containers and," he shook my bottle of tranquilizers at me, "this crap? I'm reading it in your system at levels that are above and beyond acceptable levels."

Caught like a rat in a trap I said, "Well, to be totally honest with you, I don't travel well in space. It makes me nuts; I thought to make everybody's life easier I'd keep myself subdued and out of your way."

"Hmmp! I wondered what was going on with you." Holding the bottle in front of me he shook it like a magic talisman, the remaining pills rattling like magic beans. "How many did you take for how long and how much booze did you consume?"

"Let me see, I was drunk when we lifted off and I took one caplet every 24 hours and it was a 30 day trip so-----."

"So you were hammered the whole time. Are you still taking them?"

“Oh hell no!” I exclaimed. Those things are awful, hell you can have them for your kit.”

He shoved the bottle into a coat pocket and in a surprisingly firm voice said, “Here’s the deal. Everyday you come to me for scans and blood work. These things have an awful reputation for their addictive qualities and you’re gonna need help staying off them.”

You coulda slapped me with a cold Mackerel and not shocked me as much as Clyde’s declaration that he was going to help me.

“Why?”

“Why what?” He snapped.

“Don’t be dumb.” I snapped back. I hate it when people do that; get involved in a fairly serious topic and suddenly play dumb to get out of talking about it. “You hate my guts like every other damned person around here and knowing that I want to know why in the name of Jerome Blake’s purple spotted knickers you would go out of your way to help me.”

Clyde’s ebony features creased, turning from smooth, shiny black to rumped with dark lines criss-crossing his face in agitation, “Don’t even try to get me wrong MechWarrior. I have no use for you. I think you’re an abomination in general, but! I’ve seen what you can do when you get mad and the mere fact that you went to such drastic measures to try and keep your violent tendencies under control makes me grateful. Grateful that I didn’t have to spend a month stitching people together or keeping watch on you while you were chained up in the ship’s brig. So to show my gratitude I am going to help you. Just don’t start thinking that we’re friends.”

I laughed bitterly at his unneeded decree of maintained disgust and wobbling to my feet and I clapped him on the shoulder I reassured him that there was no way in the 9 rings of hell that I could ever make that mistake.

My portion of the Bonecrushers had all parked their ’Mechs and gone off to--- wherever they felt they needed to go, leaving me to my own devices. That suited me fine. I wanted some time to look around, get a feel for the unit and all.

I wasn’t impressed. They looked nice; good paint schemes, glossy finishes, all welds ground smooth and everything. Parade quality finishes one and all---from a distance. They made our section look like piss-poor relations from the periphery coming for a visit with their scarred armor, weather worn paint and coolant leaks. Except mine that is. Not that I’m bragging but mine had no leaks, clean welds and well mated armor plates, not to mention no leaks—oh wait, I said that already--- anyway that’s just me. I drink, I fight or I turn wrench. That lifestyle makes for a clean ’Mech.

I went to the far side of the bay and took a close look at a *Hunchback* stooped over in the shadows and it was just as I thought. While it looked good with its red on black paint scheme it was a ruse. The paint was a cheap enamel that did what they call “fish eyeing” on many of its surfaces. “Fish eyeing” is when the paint is laid down and for some reason it won’t lay flat and pushes away from something beneath it and creates an ovoid shaped shallow spot that resembles a fish eye. Hence the term “fish eye.” Now what in the name of Kerensky’s bionic bladder does this have to do with BattleMechs you ask? Well it’s an indicator that whoever was in charge of painting them was more interested in getting them covered than doing it well. BattleMech paint is kind of special. It has chemical

properties that bond to the metal and don't allow biological or chemical warfare components to adhere to it which is actually a byproduct of its need to be invented in the first place. BattleMech armor is obviously designed to withstand abuse that goes beyond anything reasonable or rational and its molecular structure is such that just any old paint you have lying about won't stick to it worth a damn.

Back to the point here; using a 2 stage primer and Bell's Blue Label epoxy you can paint anything on a 'Mech and it will look fine. Use some crap you got laying around or that you bought on the cheap you'll get "fish eyes", runs, drips and a finish that might, if you're lucky stick around for a bout 6 months before it flakes off. That's if you don't take them out and expose them to the harsh elements like rain, wind and sun. Gunfire? Lasers? Well, 6 minutes is what I would guess, then its bare metal. So now you ask, "Lem, what kind of person uses the wrong material to paint his BattleMech?"

"Well," I say in a comforting, fatherly voice, "The kind of person who does that is either poor or an ignorant tight ass who doesn't want to spend any more than he absolutely has to. Now being that we have a complicated two tone paint scheme, complete with accent stripes and chest art I'd say he or she for that fact is a tight ass because all the labor involved in the paint designs I'm seeing means it was done by guys on the payroll and not by contractors who specialize and cost lots of money. Logic being this: if I got men on the payroll not doing anything and my 'Mechs need painting might as well make them do it with this cheap shit I bought at surplus mart.

So here I am doing the math, Truth says he thinks he's been sold out, meaning the Bone Crushers have gone bankrupt for the most part or so he feels. I'm looking at a 'Mech that has a paint scheme that would cost at least 2 thousand C-bills to be done properly by a skilled craftsman that looks like its been done with "Kidz Brand" safety paints and will probably wash off in the rain and as I pan the 'Mech bay it looks like all the 'Mechs that live here on Galetea have the same no quality finish. Hmmmm, looks like my man Truth is right. This idiot is probably dressing up all his gear and anything he can't sell out the back door for cash he's dressing up to try and get top money for at the creditor's foreclosure auction.

Oy! He's a sneaky shit this one is...

So I wandered around, weaving through the offices, the rec room and past the arms room and nobody said a damn thing to me. I couldn't help but laugh at them all as I did. Every time I walked past someone I had never seen before who didn't bother to confront me I broke out in fits of quiet laughter. I was pretty sure that any other "military" organization in the known worlds would have had several concerned professional soldiers beating the ever-loving crap outta me and then ceremoniously chaining me to a pole and interrogating me with a cattle prod as to why I, a total stranger, was wandering around their company area unescorted, going into spaces that contain sensitive documents the female latrine and peering into the arms room like a tourist on parade.

Yup, idiots one and all.

Disgusted with them all I walked back into the administration office, pushing past a clerk who sputtered in protest to a vis-phone and hailed a Yellow Hack to get me out of there. 5 minutes later the Hack rumbled to a stop in front of the building. Sitting down on its torn, stinking upholstery I said, "I need a drink, matter of fact man, I need several."

With a wave of my hand I commanded the mousy hack driver to take me to where they make magic.

The man was right on the money. He dropped me at a topless place that boasted 'Mech simulators and nude dancing in flashing neon colored lamps. Reaching for the door handle I saw that it was covered in that black grime that accumulates on unwashed touch surfaces after months of heavy traffic. Inside was more of the same. The servers were way past their prime with their nipples pointing down instead of out and their lumpy butts squeezing out of their too small G-strings like the bumpy-chunky school-dough. Up close they were worse. Weathered women who had smoked and drank too much for too long, their faces that were years ago tolerable were now long and haggard looking. I thanked the maker that the lights were dim and the bar open. I don't think I would be able to enjoy myself looking at saggy breasts and lumpy butts without alcohol. Right now I just wanted a nasty assed bartender who was just plain old ugly and not counting on tips. I wasn't disappointed either. Wow! The guy behind the bar looked like someone had shaved an Orangutan, dressed it in a tattered T-shirt and put it to work.

Perfect...

The damned withdrawals had screwed up my system good because before I knew what was happening I was getting drug out of a different Yellow Hack by its cursing driver and dumped like a sack of crap on the cold ground.

“Lem! Lem! Are you okay? Say something.”

Aw damn, that's twice in 24 or so hours that I blacked out. What's happening to me anyway? Am I going soft? “Yeah, yeah, yeah. I'm awake.” I said. Sitting up I looked around wondering where I was. To my surprise I was in the street out in front of the battalion area and I had an audience. Standing in the doorway to the Mechbay, trying to keep dry---. Keep dry? Shiznit! I held out my hand and looked around. It was raining to beat hell. I laughed out loud. This was a first. I had never slept in and through a rain shower before. Looking up to see who had woke me I was greeted by a soaking wet vision of loveliness. Rena. Rena in baggy sweat clothes with her hair plastered flat on her face and head and rivulets of rainwater and sweat streaming down her face. She even smelled beautiful. I smiled up at her and declared, “You get better looking everyday.” And in the same breath asked, “Did you know that?” She blushed despite herself and reached down to help me up.

“Thanks.”

I pushed past the crowd at the door who parted like I was a plague carrier, their faces displaying shock and outright disgust with me. I guess they couldn't believe that not only did Rena know me but that I was also somehow associated with them. I heard one of them say, “He's the one. He drives the *Hatamoto*.” To which another voice added, “Oh yeah, Rory told me about him. He's real bad news.”

Ahhh good old Rory. As soon as the opportunity rises I'm going to maim him good. I'm thinking a hand or arm or maybe I'll shove his head into a bucket of lye and blind his dumb ass. Stupid jerk like him will love trying to learn to read Braille.

I smelled coffee and followed my nose into the admin office and just like I thought I would I found Truth next to it guzzling it out of his dirty cup. Seeing me he nearly choked on a mouthful but covered it nicely by taking a cup from the windowsill behind

him and pouring me a cup. "Here," he said. "Take this. I should have guessed that the wino in the gutter was you."

Accepting the cup I slurped at it enjoying how the hot fluid cut the crud layer out of my mouth and made my tongue start working again. "So, where did everybody go yesterday?"

Smiling over his cup at me he winked conspiratorially and said, "To go and get drunk and laid I assume. Hell, you're the one who looks like something the cat dragged in. Where did you go?" Looking at my dripping clothes I couldn't help but laugh at myself. "Couldn't tell you."

The rest of the morning was spent in one of those tragically stupid military limbo scenarios: A bunch of people who have really have nothing to do but are afraid to make a command decision to tell everybody to get lost for the day because they were loafing about picking their asses and doing absolutely fuckin nothing useful. But! Because they are chickenshit or generally stupid they do nothing. The enlisted guys crawl around scrubbing every visible nail head or scraping floor wax out of crevices, to make sure that the 9th coat of floor wax they're putting down shines nicely, and the MechWarriors and officers sit around drinking coffee and gossiping like a bunch of nasty housewives. Me you ask? I said to hell with it and left to find a bottle and a good strip show.

I came back after lunch half motored but in a good mood and just in time to see my mech get defiled. I was following the wall, heading towards my 'Mech, just to make sure it was okay, when I heard Rory say, "I wouldn't do that if I were you."

"Well, it's a good thing you aren't me then isn't it?" a snide voice replied.

Then Rory laughed a guttural, vicious chuckle and said, "Just remember that I told you that you were making a mistake and that you're gonna be one sorry sonofabitch---." I came around Truth's *Caesar* in time to catch Rory's eye who quickly finished his sentence and smiled wide. "Real soon."

Hearing him offer such prophetic words and seeing the other guys sitting on some crates looking over at my 'Mech and smiling like hungry vultures got me curious to say the least. Then I saw it. Some guy in coveralls had stripped the wire seal off my *Hatamoto's* right ankle service panel and was poking around. My eyes must have gotten as big as wheel covers because Rory about shit himself laughing at me.

I darted forward and grabbed the dirty bastard with one hand and the broken seal with the other and threw him to the ground as hard as I could and kicked him in the gut. The air rushed from his lungs as my size 11 buried itself in his solar plexus and took his breath away. Before he got a breath in I grabbed him again and with both hands, threw him against my 'Mech and shoved the seal in his face. "Do you know what this is?!" I yelled, my face only a centimeter or two from his. "Do you?"

"A s-s--seal." He gasped.

"That's right meatstick. A seal." I curled my hands into his coveralls bunching them tight across his chest. "I put these on my 'Mech to keep jackasses like you out of it."

Getting his breath back he straightened his spine up and struggled against my grip, grabbing my wrist and trying to twist free.

"I'm the battalion maintenance chief. I have the right to inspect any 'Mech in the unit at any time dammit."

I cuffed him across the head, knocking his hat off. "Oh yeah idiot? Well then you should know that I'm not in your unit and this 'Mech is private, not unit property. So

unless you're admitting to being a goddamn moron who doesn't know bullshit from a Blake sermon you were snooping. Not to mention I heard Rory tell you not to do it which also means you don't listen at all. So, just to make sure we are crystal clear here: if I ever catch you or anybody else touching my 'Mech without my permission I will cut your hands off with a steel hack, blind you with an ultra-violet sealer and feed your balls to a pig!"

When I let go of the chief and shoved him away from my 'Mech I heard Rory say, "I told you so chief. I told you so."

I installed fresh seals and prepared myself for what was to come. By roughing up the chief I had just fired the first shot in a new war. They had been ignoring me trying to figure out what my status within the unit was and now that I had just roughed up their head wrench I labeled myself a rebel and now they (the Bonecrushers in general) were all going to have to decide what side of the line they were going to be on. The "I hate Lem side" or the "I don't hate Lem side." This was going to be tough because in just the 2 days we've been here I could already feel the tension between Truth's section and the Home-guard boys and girls. Truth's being the rough and tumble section that had always been deployed on their own and were righteously indignant about being left to the wolves all the time and then the rest of the unit with their brightly painted 'Mechs and clean uniforms that looked like new issue. So me bouncing the chief around has not only pushed the wedge further into the rift and if the unit is solvent made my chances of being hired on significantly smaller but probably started a small civil war.

Oh well...

No seriously though, I know I'm laughing at me too. I must be getting soft or worse yet! Growing some kind of conscience? No, that can't be it because I really didn't care about anybody here, there or anywhere. Well, with the exception of Truth. For some damned reason I can't fathom I have this strange desire to be helpful to him and that alone has really tempered my behaviors as of late. I can't ever remember being so easy to deal with, not to mention worried about social conditions around me.

As I predicted the once empty glances in my directions turned venomous and hateful, not only to me but to our section as a whole, with the exception of Carter that is. He was welcomed back with open arms, especially when they heard that I had tried my very hardest to dismantle him. He sat with them in the recreation room, his abdominal muscles rippling like gentle waves, telling them all about how screwed up we are. The good news was the Chief walked the other way every time he saw me coming at him. I guess he had gotten my meaning. But our section retaliated in our own way too. They wouldn't let anybody but Rory and our organic techs work on their 'Mechs and they refused to participate in any functions that required us to share the same air as the Home-guard and Dessie had started picking fights with any of them she saw.

Truth responded to this in his usual fashion. He ordered us to stay away from each other and he ordered Dessie to stay in the Mechbay during duty hours unless she had an escort, which turned out to be me. He said that seeing how I started this shit I should have to smell it the most which made Dessie's eyes glow in that scary kind of way and makes my stomach burn.

By the third day of sitting around doing nothing I cornered Truth and asked what the hell was going on. He said that the Colonel had gone on "holiday" and that he would be

back on Thursday. “There is going to be a dinner party and reception that night. So get your dress mess uniform put together.”

Dress mess? What was he? High? Even if I had them I wouldn't put them on for these assholes. Don't get me wrong here. I got enough awards for valor and combat action to make my Combine duds look very nice. Matter of fact I have put several higher ranking officers to shame on many an occasion but seeing how I got ejected from the combine I don't wear them and won't ever again. I have no house allegiance and merc uniforms are generally worthless unless you're in the Grey Death Legion or the Wolf's Dragoons or some other large and respected outfit like that. A unit like this one is right up there with the 33rd Centauri rock throwers or the Lost Asteroid Belt Defenders or any other small time shit unit. Bypassing that subject altogether I said, “So what do you hear about the unit?”

Truth took the detour and said, “I called the bank and found out that he mortgaged the 'Mechs recently, within the last 180 days or so.”

“Explains the paint. I bet the maintenance records are falsified too.” He nodded his agreement. “Yeah, he's been shorting us on everything for years, payroll vouchers, supplies, the works. I'm guessing that he's been using us to pad his retirement accounts. I'm going to call the insurance carriers and ask about his claim history. See if he's been making claims on our supply and freight losses.”

I was getting a bit confused trying to reconcile that the Colonel—goddamn what is his name anyway?!?!--had been keeping Truth and his section forward deployed and undersupplied for all this time and redirecting funds that he was supposed to be getting to other places and then arranging for supplies to disappear in transit so he could write claim on them to his insurance carriers as thefts and be reimbursed. It all made sense as far as crooked schemes go. “What have these home-guard clowns been doing all this time? That is the part I don't get. Have they been content to sit on their asses and do nothing? I'd go apeshit living like that, not to mention they have to know you've been getting shafted all along but what is their motivation?”

“High turnover rate.” He replied blankly. “Besides the Maintenance Chief, me, and Wilma there is only 1 MechWarrior that has been here for more than 2 years. Most everybody that has signed on has been paid minimum salary and moved on. That's the beauty of dispossessed MechWarriors. They'll sign with anybody to get in a 'Mech.”

I laughed, knowing exactly how they felt. You'd run with the devil to get in the cockpit. “Okay, I can get with that and here and now he has 'Mechs in a stable that look good and run but are basically crap and hires losers to man the rosters, pays them squat until they quit. Meanwhile he uses you to make him money. Wow. That is really dirty. Even in my book”

Truth sighed, looking forlorn and damned miserable. He was obviously struggling with the reality of having been played for a chump for all these years. “Lem,” he said, “it wasn't always like this. There was a time when he was a good man. He and I have been in some scraps before that have left me scared pale white and needing clean underwear. I think that he got used to making money without having to fight for it.”

I gave him my own sad smile and my opinion. “Truth, you're a good man and to tell you honestly I like you as much as I humanly can but that is going to be your undoing. The mere fact that you have tolerated me as long as you have means to me that you struggle to find the good in everybody no matter what. This guy has taken you for a ride,

regardless how much dirt you chewed in the past. He's forsaken you and left you to fight and die while he's collected the money." I refilled my cup and dropped sugar into it. "Hell if he had kept you supplied like he was supposed to it would be different but he didn't and that is criminal neglect. I've seen better men literally lose their heads for offenses like that." Reassuringly I said, "I'll leave you to your devices my good man because mine aren't worth a shit." and left.

I was almost out the door when I realized I still didn't know the colonel's name. "Hey boss what is----."

Dessie appeared at that same moment and grabbed my arm and pulling on me said, "I gotta go to the potty daddy. You gotta escort me cuz I'm such a bad girl. Oh! And stand close to the door, I had the bean soup and I'm gonna play you a song."

Gads...

The party was at the colonel's private residence that surprisingly enough was in a private, gated community development. After the armed security guards okayed my Yellow Hack to enter I told the driver to take the scenic route. I wanted to see what Hadjari's blood had helped pay for. I wasn't disappointed either. They were all masterpieces of modern architecture with clean, sleek lines, slate tile roofs and beautifully manicured lawns and gardens. If I had any taste at all I would live in a place like this.

The driver announced "We're here." and eased the hack to the curb. I was very surprised. The colonel's house was quite the contrast to all of his neighbors. Instead of slanting roofs and clean angles his was gothic looking and 3 stories tall and looked like a Davion fortress. Up close I could see that most of the front was in fact carved stone not the pseudo stuff used in modern construction and the front doors were monolithic. Huge! Two stories at least and stained red so heavily they looked black in the faint mood lights of the entranceway.

I know what you're thinking too. Just how stupid is this guy? Really. Who in their right mind does such a poor job of milking a military unit, No! A mercenary unit! of its cash and supplies spends all his time poor mouthing how broke they are and holds a party in a house so ostentatious that Lyran merchant would be jealous. It could only be worse if he had C-bills falling out of his pockets and was drinking out of Hadjari's skull while he talked to us.

I spit a wad of phlegm on his door and kicked it three times to announce myself. A homogenous looking female domestic dressed in black formal serving wear appeared, accepted my invitation and led me through the friggin castle to where the party was. Now I'm no interior designer, hell, I think that oiled canvas and raw lumber is a good look, but this place was just ignorant. He had tapestries hanging on the walls, battered, dark furniture everywhere and second-rate bazaar decorations strewn about to add color. Now, you ask, what does this mean? Well it means this: he spent all his money on this damned house and he can't afford to furnish it with equally nice pieces. So he's trying to bullshit his way by making the place look like a medieval fortress inside as well as out but it was all half assed looking. The tapestries weren't silk, they didn't shine like real silk tapestries do and, stopping to heft the corner of a table, it was light, probably an inexpensive pine or fir hybrid. It's official, the guy is a liar and a thief.

“Ahhh dammit Lem.” Truth moaned at me.

“What! They’re clean.” I said gesturing at my coveralls.

“You know its dress mess tonight. I told you personally.”

“You know that the only uniform I have is the St. Ives one I wore for a bit and you sure as hell don’t want to know where that one came from.”

“With all the money you have you could have bought a house uniform downtown.”

“I have no house Boss and I’m not a signed MechWarrior for you yet.” Burying my hands into my pockets I shoved my pointer finger through a hole and wiggled it at him. “I can leave if you’d like. I found a nudie bar downtown that’s dark and full of ugly women that I like a lot.”

He was strongly considering letting me disappear when a dapper man with steel gray hair, plucked eyebrows and yellow lens, wraparound sport glasses appeared with an honest-to-goodness trophy wife, complete with augmented breasts that a midget gymnast team could do a floor routine on holding his arm. Sandy blonde hair, deep blue eyes, which I doubted were real and a trim waist that could make a priest forget his vows.

“Thrash,” he practically shouted, making him cringe involuntarily. “Who in Blake’s blood is this?” He eyed me and my permanently oil stained coveralls up and down curiously. I could tell he was teetering on the edge of having me thrown out. I was hoping he’d chuck me out the door like yesterday’s garbage so I could get to some serious drinking in.

Truth’s shoulders slumped in defeat, “This is the MechWarrior I picked up on Warlock, remember? I told you about him.”

I thrust my hand out and grabbed his, “Lem, Lem Podaka, and you are?”

His expression shifted from offended to incredulous when I asked him for his name, probably not believing that anybody could not know his name.

He recovered nicely by coming to attention and clicking his heels together audibly and stating, as if for the record, Colonel Kylie “Stormwind” Kavanagh at your service and this is my wife---.”

Catching sight of someone pouring drinks across the room I tuned him out and asked brusquely, “Is that the bar over there?”

“Why yes it is. Why don’t you---.”

“Bartender, double scotch, neat and a Vodka chill.” My mouth watered as I watched the bartender pour the amber fluid into a lead crystal tumbler and set it before me. Without a moment’s hesitation I snapped it up and downed it in one gulp. It wasn’t bad stuff. It burned more than I thought it would considering where I was but in a way it made sense. I mean here this guy was living in this huge house that had to cost a lot to build and he’s filled it with bargain furniture because he’s broke. Must be the same with the booze too. He either can’t afford or probably doesn’t know how the wealthy live and what they do. But as I scanned the room to take in faces, I could see that his woman did. She had the look. That look of subtle, but undeniable arrogance that rich people have and can’t hide even when they go slumming. It’s a look that takes a lifetime to lose if you want to blend in or a day to acquire if you’ve spent your every waking moment wishing

for more; she had it in spades. You could tell by looking at her that she was convinced that she was better than every last one of us. The way she tilted her head when she politely chuckled at our stupid MechWarrior jokes or clucked her tongue at our crass manners thinking of us more as precocious pets than people.

I finished the Vodka as fast as I did the scotch and catching the bartender's eye I said, "Again" and moved to the end of the bar nearest the wall. Standing in the middle is rude. Real boozers stay to the ends so everybody can get their refills faster and nobody will think to say excuse me or just plain talk to you and interrupt your alcohol intake

The dining room was just cold and openly hostile with both teams staying well away from each other. Truth's bad boys and girls stayed close to the door, hoping against hope that the hurting will be over soon and the home guard crew congregated near the huge windows that overlooked the estates gardens eyeing them like dogs that had snuck in and were trying to piss on **their** bushes.

Gonna be a long night...

Looking charming in her Combine dress uniform Dessie sidled up next to me and said, "Asshole."

"Go to hell bitch."

Unfazed she kept ragging me. "I shoulda known that you'd come in coveralls or something stupid. Shoulda known." The bartender approached and tried to flirt with her as she ordered some kind of fruity drink that earned him a dirty look instead of the smile he was hoping for. Running a finger around the rim of her glass she said, "We were all trying to figure out what house you're from today. Each of us bet 5 C-bills. I had you pegged for Capellan. Wilma said you were probably a refugee from the Rim Commonality or some splinter segment of the League."

"Hmm." I worked on my second Vodka Chill.

"Well, what is it?"

"What is what?"

"Oh you know damned well what Lem." She stood on her toes to try and look me in the eyes and demanded, "Tell me where you're from."

Slugging down the last bit of my drink I sat the empty glass down with a slight bang and with more than just a bit of anger and indignity I bitched at her, "You know for a bunch of people who admit to collectively hating me you sure want to know a lot about me." I bent down to get level with her and delivered my one and only official background statement. "I don't have a house anymore. Do you understand? If you are so fired up to discover my mysterious past hire an investigator but don't pretend that you actually give a shit about me and are curious and want to bond with me. You've all already shown me what you are all about."

"Damn! Why are you such a bastard Lem?"

I burst out in laughter so loud that everybody in the room stopped cold to see what I was braying about. "Dessie, you are last person in the known planetary realm who should be talking about being a bastard. If you were a man you'd be a bigger one than me. Shit Oh Dear! People friggin turn around and go the other way when they see you coming at them." I slapped the bar and laughed harder, "You know what? You should just shut the hell up before you embarrass yourself---even more."

I kept scanning the room to take in the colors. Dessie's bleached white tunic with its blaze orange sleeve stripes fairly glowed in the faux lamplight while the Purples of Wilma's Free World's League and Rory's Steiner blue set faded into the shadows. Everybody else seemed to be favoring the red and blue uniform issued by the Bonecrusher's supply room, which looked just like the ones the Kell Hounds wore. I was losing respect by the bucketful tonight. Then I saw Rena. Cripes! She could make anything look good I swear. Her hair was up in a neat bun that left wispy strands loose to hang on the sides near her cheekbones to frame her face and in the pseudo torchlight her skin glowed, radiant and her eyes shone like flickering gems. Frickin incredible. I will take that image to my grave with me knowing that was the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. I knew that I wasn't the only man or woman to think that too. Several of the wives grabbed their husbands or gave them a none too gently kick in the shins when they felt she was getting too much of their husband's attention.

Truth and Colonel Kavanagh spent much of the evening together, talking about nothing and after dinner, which turned out to be some rather generic tasting beef dish that everybody consumed in silence over venomous glances, they left to speak in private but not before Colonel Kavanagh whispered something into his wife's ear that made her look directly at me. Turning my back to the room I nodded to the bartender, who by now was amazed that I was still standing after having put away enough to get a blue rhino drunk as a skunk, and waited for what I knew was coming.

I smelled her first. Her scent was a combination of Jasmine and designer soaps and they were thrilling. Not as thrilling as Rena on that rainy day in the car but pretty damned close though. She ordered a glass of wine and as she waited she looked at me and said, "You're Lem right?"

Trying not to be rude and not to make it obvious I wanted to carry her off over my shoulder and do disgusting things with her on a bed covered in gun oil and short lengths of rope I kept my pornographic thoughts to myself and nodded, offering only grunted, "Uh huh."

"How long have you been in the unit?"

Not facing her yet I said, "Bout 4 or 5 months I guess."

"Is that so? Do you like it?"

"It will do."

She was foundering and she knew it. I could see out the corner of my eye that her forehead had wrinkled faintly in consternation as her feminine wiles misfired on me. She was so used to having men fall all over themselves to please her hoping that she'll flash a winning smile their way that having a man not even make eye contact with her much less talk openly was a new experience. I laughed like a wild man inside because having people ignore me was an everyday thing and I was used to it. When your family acts like your invisible as a kid your soul gets callused fast; not to mention that my general dislike for women as a species makes it easy to be rude, crude, disrespectful and just generally hateful all the way around to any and all split-tails so ignoring her was second nature.

I knew "The Colonel" had sent her to "chat" with me and pry any information she could from my alcohol basted brain. He had to know by now about all the salvage money I had made, maybe not the exact amount but I'm sure Truth had to explain what had

happened to the *Marauder*. 75 tons of bipedal war machine doesn't just disappear and I figured between whatever contacts he had with the other merc units and Comstar here locally he knew full well I had made a tidy sum on the sale and---

Hey! That's right! I'm rich now.

Holy shit...

Anyway, being that he's obviously a money grubbing sonofabiscuiteater with furniture to buy and boobs to pay for he's probably trying to figure out how much I actually have and how he can his hands on it.

Sad part is if he owned a bar he'd get it all if he'd let me drink for free until I die.

So anyway, she chatted and smiled and blathered and got little more than grunts and short, polite replies that were of no use and eventually turned to leave but stopped as Rena approached the bar from behind me. I didn't see her but rather sensed her coming and when her personal scent hit me my spine went ramrod straight.

Faint, like gardenias on the wind it drifted into my nose and made my heart skip a beat and then flutter crazily in my chest and make my mouth go dry. When she stopped next to me I wanted to circle my arms around her and hold her close and bury my face in her neck and stay there forever. With her I could almost imagine seeing something worth living for. Instead of grabbing her and begging her to take me in like a stray dog I nodded politely and said nothing. In turn she nodded at me and smiled gently at the bartender and asked him for some red wine. When I saw her smile at him and how it reached her eyes, making gentle wrinkles that upturned like the corners of her mouth I hated him. I wanted to kill him in the worst possible way. I imagined myself leaping across the bar and thrusting my thumbs into his eyes and brain then hooking them around and trying to rip his nose off from the inside.

Oh shit!

I broke out of my fantasy and closed my eyes tight, hoping against hope that I hadn't actually acted on impulse.

Holding my eyes tight I listened for screams and waited for hands to grab me and drag me away or beat me into submission. When nothing happened I eased my eyes open and heaved a sigh of relief. Don't get me wrong here; I couldn't have cared less if I had actually mauled the guy and killed him but I didn't want Rena to see me come unfastened like that because---. Because I really did want her to think that I was better than we all knew I was and know I am. Damn! When I'm around her I want to be a better man and if I wanted to live I would want to be like her and liked by her and its because of that I didn't want to go nuts on the guy and give her any cause to think less of me than she already did. I couldn't take it.

She didn't say anything to me when she left but she made eye contact with me and I felt a spark of some kind that made my heart soar and my mind get hazy with something akin to happiness but not the regular kind that I feel when I drink or make a kill, no, it was soft and overwhelming all at once and I can't remember ever feeling it before but I can assure that I will never forget it.

HAH! You stupid ass! Grandpa yelled. His voice cutting through my brain like a rusty shard of steel. *You just keep dreaming little man. You'll burn in hell with us before she even thinks to piss on you.* I shuddered violently as his insult tore my mind apart and stole

my brief flash of happiness from me. Nearly falling off my stool I flipped a 20 onto the bar and bolted for the door leaving Mrs. Kavanagh in mid sentence.

I barely made it outside before the tears blurred my vision and a horrible sobbing ache formed in my throat. I sprinted down the driveway. I had to get away from this place before they saw me being weak. MechWarriors can accept nearly any individual's quirks, neurosis, and social infirmities but they cannot abide any form of weakness because it scares them. Hell! It scares me to see it in anybody and to have it myself makes me feel like the man my family thinks I am: worthless.

I hired a hack to take me downtown and drive as fast as he could to the nearest drinking bar. By drinking bar I mean a bar that caters to alcoholics not food or dance or any other lighthearted waste of energy. He dropped me at a place called Krell's sip shack.

Perfect!

It was dark and I could smell the bathroom from the front door and in the alley paralleling it I could hear somebody puking their guts out and moaning drunkenly, promising something to someone if they would just let them stop wasting the booze they had spent the last of their money on.

Nobody turned to look at me when I entered they just sat on their stools and stared at their glasses wishing with droopy faces and baggy eyes that their glasses held just a bit more so they could hurt just a bit less.

I sat next to some old guy whose clothes were threadbare and had that shine that they get when they are lived in instead of worn. His shirt was faded green and two sizes too big and bloused all puffy like at his wrists where the cuffs were safety pinned together to keep his hands exposed. He reached for his drink and as he did his hand quaked and some of the amber fluid spilled out and wet the bar down, its liquid essence making darker spots on the faded wood. Gulping the drink as fast as he could he set the glass down and using his fingers he tried to mop up the booze he spilled and licking it off his fingers he gave off one of those sighs that made you feel that he was exhaling his will to live and wishing he could just die and be done with it all.

I felt an instant bond with him. Here, wearing filthy clothes and smelling like foot and ass was a kindred soul. A man who longs for something that he can't reach.

The bartender, another heartless professional poison dealer with a grim face and blank, pitiless eyes appeared before me, his pale skin shining yellow in the nicotine stained lamps behind the bar. "What?"

I nearly snarled at him, my mind connecting him to all of the miseries in life. "Two bottles of 100 proof."

"Let's see it."

I flipped a fifty onto the bar. "There."

Nodding his approval, as if I needed it, he retrieved two bottles from below the bar and set them down with a clunk. Ignoring him I clapped the old man next to me on the shoulder and said, "C'mon old timer. Let's go drink." I knew this guy would follow me to hell itself if I had a bottle to offer him but that was okay because I would too some days. His wrinkled, grey face broke into a craggy brown-toothed smile and without a word he slipped off his stool and followed me out the door.

I woke up next to barracks fire door located on the backside of the building. The birds were singing in the dawn light and I felt pretty damned good too. I tromped around to the Mechbay entrance and bumped into Dessie and Truth who were dressed in shorts, light shirts and running shoes. “Good morning.” I offered.

“Oh hey Lem-----.”

“Holy crap! What happened to you?” Truth grabbed my head and pivoted it down to look at the top of it.

“What? What’s going on?”

Dessie laughed at me. “Dumbass, you got yer pointy head caved in, that’s what happened.”

Still looking down I reached up and gently touch my head and feeling dried, blood matted hair I snorted in surprise. “Hmmp. Well, I don’t feel it. Must be fine.”

Releasing my head Truth shook his head ruefully and looking at me like a disappointed father he changed the subject saying, “Come see me after you get cleaned up. We need to talk.”

Dessie giggled and viciously stabbed her finger into my wounded scalp and called me a dumbass once more; her stiff fingered jab sent a bolt of pain through my skull and into my shoes and made me gasp in pain. Jerking my head back reflexively I reached out and tried to punch her in the mouth but she easily ducked out of the way and darted out the door, laughing her way into the morning sun.

Truth laid down a document protector down on his desk and gesturing for me to take the chair opposite him said, “It’s official. The Bonecrushers are no more. The auction is set for Tuesday next.”

“Not like you didn’t know already, but who all is going?”

“Looks like everybody but me, Dessie, Carter and you.”

“No shit?”

“No shit.”

“Wow, from company to light lance. Sucky.” I skidded my chair closer and flipped the document protector open and started scanning the TO&E (table of organizational equipment) and stabbed at the support equipment heading, “He’s a friggin thief straight up.” Sliding a finger down the column I pointed out needlessly that he didn’t have enough equipment currently to support a truck stop much less a combat unit. Then I cross-referenced that information with Truth’s personal records he had in his noteputer.

“See here? Most of this big money equipment you listed in your files here is gone. He had to have sold it off before the creditors moved in to shut him down.” Laughing cynically I said, “I bet if you check the records hard enough you’ll see all the MechWarriors and soldiers in your section that have died were carrying big life insurance policies made payable to him.”

Truth’s expression sank and at that moment he looked a lot older, he had obviously resigned himself to the fact that his “old friend” was just another snake in the grass and had been leaving his ass out to hang intentionally for Blake only knew how long all the while waiting to cash in on his demise. The lines around his eyes sagged, reflecting the sadness he was feeling. It must suck to have someone you once considered your friend turn out to be a deceitful bitch who has been using you like a condom for many, many years: screwing other people and using you to protect himself and then when he gets his

payoff throwing you away. He deflected that statement with a deep breath and a wave of his hand saying, “Whatever. What I would like to do is this: Let Carter go off and sell his young ass to someone else, keep Dessie, maybe buy another ’Mech and then you and me, her and whoever go and hire out as a heavy lance.”

“What about Wilma?” I asked.

“She told me last night’s that she’s done. She figured Colonel Kavanagh for a double dealer when she met him and tailored her contract accordingly. The *Kraken* is hers and she is going home.”

“What about her ’Mech? Is she selling it?”

“Not here, she’s already said that much. She’s too smart. She’s from a pretty remote planet, Broken Wheel I think so I’m guessing she’ll take it home and sell it there for a lot more than she’d get here.”

I agreed, “Yeah, won’t get much here for it.” Had to hand it to her, I would have sold it to make sure I had drinking money for the trip home, but we all know that.

Don’t we?

Truth smiled, a sort of a dream-like affair, his eyes looking at something only they could see. “Yeah, she’s a tough old bird and I’m going to miss her but we all gotta call it quits some time.” Slapping at the documents he jolted the discussion back on track. “I want to buy the Bonecrushers’ license and let the creditors have the rest. Our MRBC rating is good. We’re listed as B- reliable and that would do more for us than starting new.”

“Okay.” How much for the license? I caught myself thinking about a bottle of rum I had in my room and shook my head to clear it from my mind’s eye.

“Won’t be very much. Probably no more than 100,000 C-bills.”

I was losing it. I could hear him talking but I wasn’t listening because this kind of talk bores me to tears. I couldn’t really care less about licenses and all of the crap that goes along with the MRBC (mercenary review and bonding commission) rating system. It was just administrative bullshit designed to inspire headaches and ass kissing in my opinion. Unable to hide my disinterest in the mundane gook he was talking about any longer, plus I wanted to have a drink, I pulled out my noteputer, laid on the desk next to him and said, “Go to my personal section enter “Liver Disease” into the security folder and use it to make all of your transfers. Take what you need.”

With more than a curious look he picked it up did as I instructed and when he saw how much was available his eyebrows nearly jumped off his bald head and stuck to the ceiling when he saw how much was there. He shut it down quickly and pocketed the device. Once it was out of sight he asked me if I was sure about it. I leaned the chair back on two legs thinking about how rum warms my belly and makes my teeth itch, “Sure I’m sure. I’ll probably drink it all away anyway.”

“Okay. I’ll do it. What do you think about the ’Mechs here?”

“Not much honestly. The *Hunchback*’s AC/20 is shot out. The bore is almost totally smooth. So if you’re thinking of it as a heavy hitter you’re wasting your time. Getting the bore replaced is too spendy when you consider how much it’s likely to go for at auction. The rest from what I can tell are tired; needing overhauls at the very least but if you stuck a gun to my head and made me pick one I’d say get the *Dragon*. Its all lasers and most of its parts are still widely available and it **appears** to be clean. But I could be wrong and it could be as big a pile as the others.”

“What about the *Orion*?”

“What about it?” Goddamn! I need a drink.

“Stop being an idiot Lem. What do you think about it?”

“I already told what I think about the 'Mechs here man. But if you want to speak specifically about it I will: I wouldn't want it if I had the choice. I'm sure it's probably in better shape than the rest being as it's Colonel dipshit's and all but I think they are over rated, ponderous and draw way too much fire because commander's favor them so much. A stupid vanity mech, just like the Clan Mad Cat.” I scratched my two days worth of stubble vigorously and lamented. “Worst thing Kerensky ever did was drive one of those. Made them too popular. Besides, statistically speaking, it's a mediocre 'Mech on a good day and its AC/20 is probably as worthless as the *Hunchback*'s. So save our money. I wouldn't want to buy any of the 'Mechs here because I'm certain all of their maintenance records are false and they'd probably explode in a million pieces when you fired them up and your buddy proly has a hidden insurance policy paying out to him for anybody who dies in them.”

Truth didn't have the opportunity to reply to my acidic narrative because Colonel Kavanagh suddenly appeared in his doorway. I could tell by his eyes and the way they broadcasted psychological death rays at me that he'd heard most of what I'd said and I couldn't have cared less. He was a thieving shitbag and he knew it too. He just didn't want to have anybody say it out loud because he knew it was a shitty thing to do. In short, he was worthless now to us and to everybody.

He had traded his honor for gold...

Not to say I wouldn't do it too but then again I have never tried to fool anybody into thinking I'm an honorable man much less a worthwhile person.

“Thrash old man,” he said, trying to sound jovial and gentlemanly. His surgically emplaced dimples tucked deep into his cheeks, making pits that looked like darkened caves on his face he said instead of reassuring features of a healthy, hearty smile, “Come down to my office so we can take care of some business.”

“Be there in a minute Kylie. Lem and I are dotting some I's and crossing our Tees.”

I smirked when he said that because the Colonel's eyes got hard and his surgically implanted smile from around his eyes. I guessed he wasn't used to waiting for anybody in this, his tiny fiefdom. He was losing it soon and I think it had just dawned on him too and I was pretty sure he didn't like it. “Well, carry on then. Just don't take too long old man.”

“Seeya Kylie,” I said in a patronizing tone. One that I hoped relayed the impression that he was now officially in charge of 2 things: Jack and Shit and Jack is off planet today.

“You shouldn't talk to him like that Lem.”

I felt my anger spike and refused to keep it hidden, “Hey Thrash, no offense to you here but I don't know enough dirty words to accurately describe him and what he's done to you and everybody else here and for that he can go to hell. You,” I pointed at him accusingly, “can be sympathetic and understanding and sensitive because you're that kind of man. Me? I'm an unsympathetic asshole remember? And in my book he's worse than me because he's trying to hide it.” I lowered my voice to keep my next statement

confidential, “Just so you know---if I get the chance I’m going screw him up but tight. So if he’s got any brains at all he’ll lay low until one of us leaves Galatea.” My booze lust had made me cranky and I was getting worse by the second, I was actually contemplating rolling up Truth’s document pile into a nice tight cylinder and grabbing good old Kylie “Stormwind” Kavanagh by his aerodynamic hair style and cramming them down his throat and choking him with it until he was very, very dead. Of course if I did that then everybody would get mad at me and I’d probably go to prison, not executed like I’d want and things would just get complicated. So instead of killing the thief I shoved away from Truth’s desk and stomped off to find my bottle.

I could actually hear it calling me, “Lem, Lem---come and drink me. I love you Lem. I need you...I flew into my room, yanked open my sock drawer, snatched it up and gulped at the square bottle like a starving calf.

A voice from my open door said, “That stuff is going to kill you if you keep at it like that.”

I did a double take when I saw that it was Rena. She never talks to me unless she has to. Corking the bottle, I asked, “When?” my voice feeling and moving slow and tired like cooling tar but not from the booze more likely life itself.

“When what?”

“When will I die?”

“Depends on you I guess.”

“Ahh. I see. Well something has got to get me soon. This life is more than I can handle most days.

“Is that what this is all about Lem?”

I laughed sardonically. “Of course it is Rena. You’re smart, you should know this already.”

Her beautiful eyes faded slightly as she looked at me and I felt dirty because of it. “You know Lem you should really try to find out what it is you’re supposed to learn here before you move on.”

I flopped down on my bed, farting on my pillow as I landed. “Move on?” I asked.

“Yes, before **you** move on.” She emphasized “you”.

“Excuse me if I seem brusque or ill mannered here but just exactly how do you know anybody moves on?”

This time she smiled. She smiled knowingly; like a grade school teacher does when a child asks a question that all adults know the answer to and when you’re little and you see that they know it without even thinking about it, it makes you feel safe.

“I’ve been there Lem.”

I sat bolt upright and gaped at her. She’s been there? Blake’s Blood! I was stunned. How could she go and then comeback? How could she stay here? How could anybody want to stay here for that fact?!! “When?”

“Two years ago.” She opened her windbreaker and lifted up her shirt, exposing a horrid series of gashes just under her right breast. I was appalled at their coarse, dark pink texture and how they had burned through her tattoos. To me she was a work of art, from head to foot and any injury however slight was a desecration. I went to touch them, to feel them and take away any pain they might still hold but stopped myself. I wasn’t

worthy enough to touch her. Looking up at her I asked her in a hopeful voice, “What was it like? Was it quiet and peaceful? Was there anything at all? Or was it oblivion?”

Lowering her shirt she shook her head in a sorrowful way, “Lem, it was awful. When I died I hadn’t been living a life worth discussing,” She gestured at her tattoos, a subtle indication that she had some affiliation with the Yakuza or other criminal organization that associates itself with body modification. “I screamed in terror at what was laying before me Lem. I begged and cried for the chance to make amends because I hadn’t believed there was something besides the life I was living at the time. I was fortunate.” She reached out and cupped my chin in her hand and with her touch my entire body tingled as if I was bathed in static electricity. “Lem, I don’t wish that on anyone. Especially you. You have the ability to make choices Lem. You need to think about them and where you want to be when you die. You may not like this life but the next may be worse by far more than you can imagine.”

Colonel Kavanagh held formation that morning at 10 AM and standing before his troops and MechWarriors resplendent in his red and blue striped dress uniform, head held high, chin thrust out screwed them all. “Bonecrushers.” He announced in the late morning sun. “It is my sad duty to inform you all that the Bonecrushers BattleMech Company has been declared financially bankrupt by its creditors and as such all of its equipment and resources shall be liquidated by its lien holders to recoup as much in lost funds as they can.”

I wasn’t officially part of the unit and as such I was standing off to one side and behind the unit as they faced Kavanagh and I was having a hard time stifling my urge to laugh out loud but when what he told them finally sunk in and they all sagged and cried out at once I lost it. I darted into the Mechbay, which in hindsight I realize was a bad choice, and guffawed horribly, snorting and cackling all at once which echoed inside the Mechbay like a three car accident.

Ooops...

The now unemployed Bonecrushers didn’t even wait for the no longer in command Colonel Kylie “Stormwind” Kavanagh to dismiss them before they broke ranks and in a fitting and proper display of respect for their former commanding officer went to empty their wall lockers and go job hunting, leaving him standing there by himself in the Mechbay parking area.

30 minutes later a van full of bank representatives and private security guards slid up to the front curb and unceremoniously took charge of the last physical remains of the Bonecrushers Mercenary Combat Support Force. Dessie and I watched them go. In ones and twos they did the duffle bag drag out the door the only difference being that Carter loaded his into his ’Mech and tromped out and galloped down the street while the others walked or took hired hacks off to parts unknown. Rena was the last and my heart sank as she turned left out the door and disappeared from sight. I was genuinely sad to see her go. I had never before encountered anybody who made me feel insignificant in a good way and inspired me to think about becoming a person worth knowing. I was going to truly miss her.

By 13:30 hours it was all done. The home guard was gone, Carter was down the road, Wilma had her liftoff date set and her 'Mech securely warehoused and the bank took every last thing they could get their hands on. The bastards even took the soap from the men's room.

I wandered around the offices looking at the square clean spots that appear on walls when picture frames are taken down after years of hanging in the same place. I thought to myself: Is this what happens when you die? Is all that is left behind to mark your passing a clean spot on the planet you were occupying? I remember whenever one of my relatives died the rest of us would appear a few days later as if there was an unspoken agreement and dispose of the things the dead one owned. And there were the same clean spots on the wall and the same stains on the counter by where the coffee dispenser sat and the very same dirty stripe down the centers of all the carpets. Is that all we are? Clean spots waiting to appear or a dirty stripe waiting to be discovered?

Truth's office was the only one still furnished; he bought all of his furniture with his own money and had kept the receipts to prove it and in there he, Dessie and I sat in rather distraught silence. Well they were distraught. I was bored and uncomfortable. I had no nostalgic memories to wallow in. I had only those memories we created together on Warlock and they weren't all that great in my opinion. Some awesome drinking binges though.

Unable to stand it any longer I blared, "Alright goddammit! Slam the coffin shut or jump the fuck in. We need to move on."

"I suppose your right." Truth said.

"Jackass." Dessie's insulting me being her way of agreeing with me. I think...

"So where do we stand?" She asked.

"Well, we got the Bonecrusher's license paid for and transferred. They listed it as a change of command-slash-buyout instead of a bankruptcy, so we shouldn't suffer any ill effects from the credit proceedings." Then he said as if it was an afterthought, "I had to pay the bank extra for that favor though."

I made a sour face, "Figures. Nothing for free."

"Nope. Never."

Leaning forward she cradled her face in her hands on the corner of his desk and peering up angelically and in a demure voice purred, "So when do I get to kill people again?"

Forward we went. Drunk, sober, hungover and or in pain we reconstituted the Bonecrushers. We purchased some of their old equipment at the auction, paying less for it than what it was have cost to release the lien Colonel Bonehead had on it, and sought out some deals from units who were as equally screwed as we had been.

In a surprise occurrence Rory showed up, answering the ad we had placed at the hiring hall advertising three technician openings. I was in charge of filling the positions so when he showed up I asked him point blank: "If you hate me so much why in the hell are you here now?"

Scratching his shaggy black beard with dirty fingernails he concentrated as hard as he could for a bit and finally said, "I thought so too Lem. I mean I think yer a real pecker fer

sure but you know you never once doubted my skills and you were always there to lend a hand when we needed it. Lots more than I can say about lotsa guys I worked with and liked. I mean yeah, yer a boozehound fer sure and truthfully, once I got past the fact you didn't want nobody messin with yer 'Mech and then seein you slap the chief around the other day made it all seem okay. You treat everybody the same and whenever I didn't know sumptin you always took time to show me and you made sure I learned it proper and you didn't make me feel like shit for it."

I offered Rory my hand and said, "Welcome back." He accepted it and gave it an honest shake and replied, "Good to be back." Then I made my first command decision and said, "Find two more guys that can work unsupervised and hire them on."

We skipped hiring a medic, a cook or a clerk and a jerk. Hardest part was finding a MechWarrior with his or her own ride that wasn't totally hashed. After interviewing 9 prospective candidates I came to the decision that most MechWarriors up for hire were either dispossessed, willing to rape their grandmothers to get into a 'Mech again or washouts and losers from the local gladiatorial games; booted out onto the street after their 'Mech was too hammered to fight with again and too expensive to repair by thieving stable owners. BattleMech gladiatorial games were the leading cause of wretched applicants and beat machines. The best I had found after a week was a guy who owned a beat up *Shootist*. His 'Mech **only** needed 3 heat sinks 60% of its armor replaced and he wanted a signing bonus. I laughed at him and told him to get the hell out of my office. I did meet a couple of guys in a bar I liked who admitted to being dispossessed but had a good attitude about it. I was just about to just bite the bullet and buy a 'Mech or two just to get the guys but they signed with some outfit called Marion's Misfits.

Too slow...

I met Truth at Krell's and sliding into a booth near the rear I set two beers down and grumped at him "Basically man it looks like we're gonna have to buy a 'Mech and put one of these slugs in it because other than Carter nobody I've met has a 'Mech worth the powder its gonna take to blow it to hell." Truth's nose wrinkled at the offensive "Hot Piss" smell churning out of the bathrooms but took the beer I offered him. "Is Dessie meeting us here?" I asked, "I told Pete the septic guy all about her. He thinks he's in love already."

Truth scanned the bar, grimacing at its moldy walls and rotting carpets "You're a classy guy Lem. Did you find this place or did it follow you home?"

"Nah, I passed out in a cab and this is where he threw me out." He stared at me with a blank expression on his face. Unable to tell if I was serious or not he moved past the subject, not wanting to know the truth I think. I know it sounds absurd but in some way I think that my rampant boozing disappoints him. "Anyway, any luck with jobs?"

"Some. But it appears that our former CO made a good name for himself with many of the local employers."

I drank my beer down in three swallows and waved the bartender for another. "Uh-oh, that doesn't sound good."

"No it's not actually, especially after his failure to fulfill his contract with the Capellans on Warlock." He leaned back on the tattered brown cushion and fingered his beer mug. "Right now his name is synonymous with shit and according to the rule of

“Guilt by Association” so is ours. Trouble is he kept me gone so much that not many people here know me and I wasn’t ever able to develop many contacts of my own. Hell, half the doors I knock on close as fast they opened when they find out who I’m with.”

I laughed out loud a bit which annoyed Truth, making him frown deep and hard. “We should have renamed and gotten our own license.”

Still wearing a sour face he snapped, “Woulda, coulda, shoulda. I shoulda paid attention in school, I coulda been a data sampler, if I had know I was gonna get shafted by my old buddie I woulda killed him myself.”

“Relax boss, it’ll pan out. It always does. What we can try is----.”

“HOLY SWEET MOTHER OF BLAKE! What is that goddamned reek! Lem! LEM are you in this crap hole!”

Ahhh, there’s Dessie now, of course everybody was staring at her as she hollered her fool head off which I’m certain made her tingle all over, narcissists are like that but that’s unimportant. I stood up so she could see me. “Over here Dessie, oh and bring some beers, we’re empty.” I made a motion to a lumpy character wearing a weeks worth of beard and pants so dirty they reflected the sunlight streaming in on them. Barely able to keep his head still he looked at me. I pointed at Dessie and nodded. He smiled, showing grey gums and black teeth. “Oh and there is someone here I want you to meet.” I plopped back down into my seat and smiled in smug satisfaction. Pete was going to love her.”

Truth said matter of factly, “You know she’s gonna beat the hell out of both of you for this.”

The last thing I expected was a civil war. Of all the stupid, wasteful expenditures of men and machines civil wars are the worst. They are always caused by two or three people who just can’t let it go and do what’s best for everybody. I had heard the rumblings before while on Warlock, catching snippets of news here and there but it seemed so far away and surreal that I didn’t really take it to heart, not to mention I’m from the Draconis Combine where shit like that doesn’t happen. The Coordinator and his DEST agents are quick to stifle entire families that incite unrest. Think I’m kidding? Try it. You’ll be lucky if you’re a slave when they’re done. Most likely you’ll be tossed into a hole along with your kids and their cousins and buried. I’ve heard that they go as far as to expunge names from video-com directories and delete anything that has your name in it. But that aint so with the Federated Commonwealth. Too much freedom of speech, too many human rights and too many fools with opinions that nobody should know about.

Mercenaries, from what I have seen so far, are as apolitical a group as any religious sect. I’ve been told that we mercs tend to adopt just enough interest in our paymaster’s theologies and end goals to keep ourselves in as many good graces as we can. This civil war though; this was beyond anything they would be allowed to stay neutral about.

Galatea is located in the Federated Commonwealth, more precisely it is in the Lyran Alliance’s half of the Commonwealth which automatically meant that you had to pick one side or the other. Pro Lyran or Pro Federated Suns. Even if your unit was comprised of refugees from the Capellan Confederation you had to choose and choices could dictate how the rest of your day was going to be spent.

In my humble opinion the war was going to accomplish nothing of real importance. It was destined to be a waste of life. Both sides were equally matched in men and material and the expenditures that were going to be needed for one to prevail would in the end leave the victor open to external attack from the other Houses or the Clans for that matter. Hell, if I were them I would wait for the war to end and then burn through the Lyran Alliance like a gas torch.

Truth's personal politics were going to be the deciding factor on Galatea though. Representatives from both houses were swarming all the merc units, trying to rally them around one flag or the other and ship them out as back-fill for their front line units. Even if they never fought they would at least be denied to the other side and so the old mercenary and gladiatorial world, once forgotten, became important again.

As for me? I was nearly foaming at the mouth. This was my opportunity! I knew that this was going to be my time. I was going to find my peace. True peace, not the alcohol induced stupor I had been basting in for all these months but the real, serene, restful peace that I'm sure only the dead enjoy.

I was driving Truth nuts too; everyday asking him what side he had chosen and when we were shipping and everyday he would shout at me to leave him the hell alone and go drink something, lay down in traffic for a nap or drown myself in a toilet or any other damned thing that would shut me the hell up.

A week later I was in a nudie bar, hoping that my waitresses with sagging breasts wouldn't accidentally dip one of her shriveled raisin looking nipples into the drink she was serving me when all hell broke loose.

A Comstar news report had cut across the daily broadcasted local chatter to announce that shots had been fired between a Federated Commonwealth and a Lyran Alliance aerospace unit and that both sides were blaming the other and all military units were on high alert.

As soon as the commentator spoke those words there was a loud hooray and hissing cat calls all at once and then the place exploded. Chairs, beer mugs and fists flew in all directions. I saw one female MechWarrior get hit square in the face with one of those big chrome plated napkin dispensers and go down and stay down. I tried to stay low and finish my drink, hoping that I wouldn't spill it during the fracas. Dodging a highball glass that had been thrown like a bullet at me I gulped my drink and started to get up to join in then I saw some guy stagger past me with a knife in his throat. His hands were soaked and dripping with his own blood and his eyes were bulging out in panic as he tottered and stumbled around and tried to staunch the blood flow. Just by looking at him I knew he was dead. He just didn't know it yet and despite the insanity around me I was mesmerized and watched him and as his eyes rolled back into his head his body fell to the floor limp.

Lucky bastard...

One guy I recognized from the pro Lyran camp came at me low and fast trying for a belly tackle. I side stepped him deftly and kicked him in his ass as hard as I could as he flew by, sending him out of control and flying at my table where he caught the edge of it on his nose. I smiled with a wide, lusty crescent as blood squirted out of it and sprayed the dirty plastic upholstery with gloopy red polka dots. When I saw that in the bar's dirty

light I felt my adrenal glands go wild and fill me with two overwhelming urges. The first was the urge to maim and rend flesh the other, oddly enough, to defecate.

I went with maim and rend...

The fight lasted god knows how long and broke up when the local constabulary blocked all the doors and sent their attack dogs in off leash. There is something about 10 or so 35-40 kilogram jet black Shepard attack dogs suddenly appearing and tearing the shit out of everybody moving that inspires you to freeze in place. One guy wasn't smart enough to figure that out though and tried to kick one of them as it came at him. He missed and before you could say "Oh shit!" he had three of them literally tearing his clothes and skin right off. The rest of us looked like we were frozen in time; one guy I could see was in mid swing and stopped cold like a museum statue. It was really pretty funny; his arm outstretched, his torso leaning forward and a scared shitless look plastered on his face.

When Truth and Dessie showed up to retrieve me from the lock up I had two fingers taped together, a bite mark on my cheek that was already infected and leaking puss down onto my neck, a broken tooth and two ribs that had to be fractured.

"You look like hell Lem."

I tried not to laugh when he said that but couldn't help it and nearly peed myself from the pulsing waves of burning pain that followed it. "You should see the other guy."

"We saw three of them on the coroner's slab."

"Three huh. I only saw one, the guy with the neck wound."

"Yup, three, your neck guy, some other yahoo got his head stove in and a woman the constables had to shoot when she took a weapon from one of their holsters."

All of this pissed Dessie off because she had declined my invitation to go out drinking and because of that decision she had missed all the fun. "Next time I'm going dammit all."

As the medical technicians at the hospital disinfected my face and repaired my tooth Truth made an announcement: "We're going to Ronel in 4 days to act as reinforcements for some Davion units there."

That made my night. I couldn't help but let out a guttural cheer, "Yeah!! Action finally."

I felt really good the next morning. There is something cathartic about a knock down, drag out, knife wielding brawl. I always feel clean and refreshed afterwards, even if I lose.

With pain patches on my taped up ribs we set about getting loaded and launch ready. Everything had to be loaded into our trucks and tied down so they couldn't float away in zero gravity and any accounts we had open had to be paid in full and closed; or so Truth said.

He can be such a baby about stuff like that...

We got it all put together rapidly and after that I was in hell. We had to wait for two days for our ship date and during those days Truth demanded that I stay sober, just in case he needed me to perform in an official capacity. I compromised rather than complied totally, drinking just enough to keep the spiders and snakes away but not enough to be able to sleep and because of that they came. Crawling in like a polluted, poisonous cloud

of radioactive fog, consuming everything, making it all dead and worthless and incapable of even serving as a warning to others.

I felt them coming and tried to focus on things that made me feel good. I thought of Rum and Whiskey and 170 proof vodka. I thought of all the MechWarriors that I had killed in battle and of Rena. How she had touched my face that day and told me that there were places to go when you die and the way she gave me that sideways look at the bar that night and how I felt something inside me melt whenever she was near me. That's when they assembled in force and lashed me with their insults and told me over and over again that I was stupid and worthless and a bloody crybaby and struck me with all of their slings and arrows that penetrate my soul to its quick.

Planetfall on Ronel was anticlimactic to say the least. Quite the contrary experience compared to the way the Davion cargo masters had stampeded us onto the DropShips back on Galatea, their caustic shouts and four lettered urgings got us crammed into the ovoid DropShips that crowded Galatea's antiquated landing fields. It was obvious that the Davion camp was under a great deal of pressure to remove any and all combat forces they could from the Steiner force commanders, leaving only Lyran loyalists on planet which in my way of thinking meant they were free to bomb the shit out of the place when the time came.

Ronel was a green planet, which was good. Green meant there would be no environment suits to be worn, no domes and no crappy light to infiltrate everything and make it look weird. I hate planets like that, Red Dwarfs especially, with their faint red rays that make everyone look sunburned and the way no vegetation can grow, sans indestructible lichens clinging to rocks frantically absorbing anything the pathetic, pygmy star can give it.

On Ronel we were ushered off the ships in a neat, organized wild assed hurry and as soon as the last crates were clear of the loading ramps the ships kicked in their fusion motors and tore off through the sky into space again.

A Davion liaison officer gathered us together in a huge tent and dressed in his best spurs and medals welcomed us to Ronel and in a very roundabout way informed us that we would be stationed here and housed in a tent city that was being erected as we spoke until they could figure out where to stick us. Gauging the looks on the faces of everybody around me I was pretty sure it was what we were all anticipating. Many of the men and women around me had that same desperate, hungry look in their eyes that I had before I found myself a BattleMech. They were willing to do anything to get back in the command seat again. They would lie, cheat, steal, kill by subterfuge and if need be commit mass murder and for some even genocide. Such was the lure of the BattleMech. A giant machine that can make an ordinary man or woman into a god; able to roam a planet and destroy almost anything at will. They were all here in this tent looking for their chance, their chance to not be human anymore, to be elevated above ordinary men again.

Standing on a hastily constructed stage the liaison officer ran his hands down the front of his tunic to straighten it and half shouted above the din of our assembled blabbering, "Can I have your attention again?" As we quieted down he thanked us and said, "Ladies and gentlemen we have a lot to do in a short time, okay? Okay in a nutshell here is what is going to happen: All of the functioning units are going to be integrated

into a single pool of reinforcements that we are going to use to fill depleted Davion front line units. All dispossessed MechWarriors are likewise going into a pool to have their skills assessed and be likewise farmed out to compatible units and 'Mechs. Now, as to how and when it's going to happen? Well, I don't have an answer yet so you'll just have to be patient." He gestured to an NCO that mounted the stage and stood next to him. "Sergeant Mossman and his section will officially register you here and direct you to your quarters. Thank you."

Looking up at me Dessie started bitching, "Crap! We bust ass to get here and we end up just sitting on our asses? We coulda done that on Galatea. Jackasses! Goddamned morons that's what they are!" Stomping her feet and moving in angry circles she continued to piss and moan until finally she kicked a folding chair across the tent and barked, "This is so goddamned typical." And spat onto the tent's wooden floor and stomped off in a huff, pushing everybody out of her way as she made for the exit. I felt the same way but as XO I couldn't say it.

Truth clapped me on the shoulder reassuringly and with more optimism than Dessie and I had combined said, "Relax scout. We'll only be here for a bit." Winking at me conspiratorially he guided me outside and when we were away from the crowd he added, "This is where that B minus rating we paid so much extra for is going to pay off." Panning his arm at the motley, disorganized mob around us, "These yuks are going to be cooling their heels for a light year but we, because we are a complete unit with a decent MRBC rating, are going to be out of here fast. You'll see."

He was right, Dessie had only gotten into two fights by the time we were called into the liaison's tent and offered three choices.

A kid about 14 or so had come skidding to a halt in front of Truth's tent and nearly falling on his ass in the mucky grass knocked on the exposed pole.

"Come." Truth called out to him.

The boy ducked in and said as politely as he could, "Sir, Hauptman Reyles wishes to speak with you and asks that you join him in the administrative tent before the hour is up."

I looked at my watch. It was 10 minutes to 2. I love the way these tin gods get off on making people jump through their asses. "Ahh, nothing like short notice eh?"

Ignoring me because he was rightfully tired of Dessie's and my near constant bitching he flipped the boy a coin and said to him, "Please report back that we are leaving now." The boy caught the coin on the fly and sprinted back the way he came.

Hauptman Reyles turned out to be a squat looking man with a couple of flabby chins, a prosthetic arm and a shit-load of decorations for valor. I squinted at a couple of them and nodded appreciatively when I saw they were straight leg infantry medals. I don't care what anybody says; infantry life sucks ass and anybody who could collect 4 rows of infantry awards and live to talk about it had nothing to prove to me. But we all know they go crunch like everybody else does when you step on them.

He gestured to some folding chairs behind us and as we unfolded them and took seats he said without introductions or preamble "Towne, Markab or Algot. Those are the

places we can best make use of you. But before you decide there is something I need to clarify. Are you a company or a lance?"

Sitting on the edge of his seat Truth's chair groaned and squeaked in faint protest. "We just reorganized so right now we're a lance of 3."

Reyles checked some box on some form he was looking at and nodded. "Okay, a lance of 3. Are you going to be adding a fourth?"

"You bet Hauptman, we have the money we just haven't been able to find a MechWarrior that we feel comfortable with that has his own 'Mech."

"Yeah," I added so I could feel important, "Galatea hasn't had much to offer lately."

Reyles looked up at me and gave me one of those looks you give to some idiot that has a stupid compulsive need to speak when nobody needs to. "Okay, well, if you add a fourth and make it a heavy we can open up some other contracts but being that you're listed as a medium weight unit you're stuck with the three I just offered."

We'll take Algot. Should be fine for us. Thank you Hauptman."

"Alright then. You ship in 4 days and just in case you get a fourth I'll slate your ship to have a bay open for up to a 80 ton 'Mech." He made another mark in his file folder and dropped into some unseen bin next to him and opened another. I stood to leave but had to ask a question: "If you thought we were a company why did you offer us the same contracts as a under-strength lance?"

Without a visible shred of malice he said, "I worked with your former commander once." Holding up his prosthetic arm he let his sleeve slide down exposing its tarnished collection of cables, servo motors and micro-circuitry "I got this because of him and his always missing Bonecrushers."

Wow, I thought. Small galaxy. Glad the guy is a professional. A jerk like me would drop them into a meat grinder for revenge.

Algot was another habitable world that had been turned from brown to green in the 600 years it had been settled. Orbital pictures showed huge swatches of green belts that stretched for thousand upon thousands of kilometers in all directions broken only by huge, blotchy patches of browns, tans and black. The background dossier Reyles had given us read that those blotches were called nomad zones and had yet to be fully terraformed. Historically speaking it was noted that many attacking units had landed there in those nomad zones and based their attacks from their arid, wide-open safety.

Under the strategic resources heading it had listed: none other than as a spinward side staging base, which had been done during the second and third succession wars. Economic assets: Hardwood exports, and iron ore foundries and processing plants and a spaceport big enough to support cargo exportation. The analyst's notes read: The planetary population has purposely avoided developing industrial assets that are considered worth fighting for. One councilman was quoted years ago, "We can't change where we are in space but we can sure control how good we look from orbit."

Okay, generic planet with clean air and good-sized cities and a forward thinking long-term oriented governing body. Meaning that they would and could very well be capable of sabotage, subterfuge and treachery to protect their planet and way of life. Translation to Lem speak: These bastards are perfect willing to screw anybody they need to keep the damage to their little planet to a minimum. I was already not liking the place and I had just started my deceleration burn.

Dr. Degroot held up his hand and said softly, "I think that this quite enough for today. I can see by your scans that we are coming to a place that creates a great deal of agitation for you and I would like some time to prepare your medication and make any neural adjustments."

I looked at a wall chronometer and got a shock. I had been talking for over three hours straight. Amazing. I had always loathed talking about myself and war stories aren't something I'm into; even drunk I am fairly closed mouth. Degroot leaned forward in his chair, his torso reminiscent of a falling tree. "Mr. Podaka, you seem like a very intelligent man, regardless of the façade you present." He spun his monitor around so I could see it with its 3-dimension image of my brain floating in electronic space all glowing in reds and greens and blues and yellows and reminding me of a circus clowns rainbow striped wig. With his knobby pointer finger he hit a button and in quick time it showed my brain's shifting color pattern and how they directly related to my emotional status and thinking centers. At one point he stopped the moving image at a point where my brain looked like it had been hit with a shotgun full of paint pellets, all around and in no particular order that were tiny blobs and points of red, blue, yellow and green. "This," He said pointing at the screen, "Is where a major portion of your issues lie. What we need to do is get this all stabilized and dispersed properly across your brain's function centers."

"How? Dare I ask?"

"Oh, don't worry Mr. Podaka. At the very most we'll insert some subcutaneous devices that will stabilize the electric field in your brain and create an orderly flow and proper dispersion of neuro-receptors across the board." I tried to suppress the shiver I got from the idea of him going into my skull and re-wiring it to suit his needs. I could imagine myself waking up thinking I'm a Taurian prostitute named Florence and that having men degrade me for money was a great way to pass time. Degroot smiled reassuringly and said, "Realx Mr. Podaka. If we were really here to completely re-program you I would never have let you wake up with your current identity in tact."

I had to hand it to him; in a sick way it did make sense and it was actually reassuring. "Okay Doctor. I'll play along, but you got to help me find out about my 'Mech and secure it if it needs it. My 'Mech is my life."

The giant stayed close to me as we walked down the carpeted hallways of the office level. I caught myself wondering how many people came here by choice and actually left as the same person they were upon entering these quiet, comfortable halls. For that matter how many people wound up here like me? Tied down, drugged or otherwise hogtied and out of their mind. How many people arrived here, received treatment they didn't want and left happy? I mean----I'm going to risk some introspection here so don't leave or flip past the page to a more interesting looking chapter-----. What I'm driving at is this: if a person is happy or well adjusted living within a particular psychosis or neurosis or plain old warped, alternate reality who are we to say that is wrong and make them change to suit us? If you want to take your clothes off at the bank or pluck hairs from your head and eat them or for that matter listen to the voices in your head that tell you to grab cats off the street in front of your home and shove them hissing and spitting into your freezer who

are we to say they shouldn't. Oh sure some would say that the absence of social control is the end result of an Anarchist's wet dream but happy is happy isn't it?

But I guess the counter argument is: if your too crazy to stand we (the general public) have the absolute right to modify your behavior(s) to a level that we can tolerate or incarcerate you so that we don't have to see you as a failure of our value system.

I guess that's why every hermit you meet is pretty much totally insane. They were smart enough at one time to realize that their behaviors were unacceptable and if they didn't want to be "modified" or slammed face down in a padded room they had better make their crazy asses as scarce as possible. Now me? I'm all about the voices in my head I know that, you know that by now and I'm sure after watching that colorized hurricane of a brain scan earlier Degroot knows it too. Now how to make those voices go away? I have always used drugs and alcohol to keep them at bay knowing full well that it was a stop gap measure that I was using to get me to the edge of the cliff I am wanting somebody to push me off of. So now I ask you---does this make me crazy? Crazy enough to warrant modification?

Shut up.

Like you know...

I prowled the day room after the man mountain checked me in with some other really muscular guys whose job it was to stand around with their bulging arms crossed at various locations across the floor. I was sure that I could take one of them, maybe two but the way the floor was designed all six would be on me too fast for me to make any real headway towards an escape.

I sat in a soft plastic chair, one of those kinds that you can spill any bodily fluid you like on and it will come clean with a quick squirt of a garden hose, and looked out the window. Focusing past the imbedded mesh I saw the garden below and thought of Rena. Don't ask me why either. I haven't the slightest idea why I fixate on her so damned much; its stupid and I know it.

An orderly gave me a disposable plate of soft finger foods and a paper type drink bag for lunch and I grumped. I had hoped they would give me something with enough tensile strength that I could fashion a weapon out of.

Dammit...

With no weapon forthcoming I settled into my chair and watched for patterns. Humans are creatures of habit and patterns are byproduct of that obviously so if I was going to get out I was going to have to find the patterns and devise ways to exploit them.

"Stupid little shit. Who asked you for anything? Huh? Just shut the hell up and go sit on the couch." Grandpa's voice was gravelly and bitter sounding and whenever I heard it I wanted to disappear, to anywhere, to heaven or hell or anyplace he wasn't and when I heard it cut through my brain I jolted awake and craved liquor. Nearly jumping out of my bed I ran into the wall that sectioned off my bathroom, splitting my lip as I hit it face first because I didn't remember where I was. Spitting blood I cursed at myself for being stupid and started pacing the short floor while holding my pajama sleeve to my bleeding lip. My heart was racing and my mind started literally brimming over with panic as I focused on how trapped I was. Trapped alone with them in my mind to run wild. Just like when I was a kid and I was left alone with them in their giant musty house filled with water stained

wooden floors sun faded furniture and windows so stained with nicotine that when you touched them your fingertips came away yellow and tasting sour.

They came at me like an *Atlas*. 100 tons of rage. I had been able to keep them away for so long that they were really mad, furious in fact. My grandfather led the charge with his dirty looks and his psyche shredding pale blue eyes that looked like pools of hate.

I was hiding under my bed, a blanket over my head crying and promising to be a good boy when my medical bracelet beeped and administered something. I was hoping it was poison, hell! I was hoping it was 'Mech coolant for that matter. A horrible painful death was preferable to what I was feeling right then and there.

And my lights dimmed out and blackness swallowed me.

I awoke in my bed and squinting against the morning sun beaming through my window wondering why my head was so cold. I placed my hands on my head and felt my cold scalp. Cold scalp? What the hell?

Shit! I'm bald. Bastards! They shaved my head. Uh-oh. What did he do to me? I flew upright in my bed and started recalling memories furiously, thinking that I might be able to detect any changes they may have made in me while I was out. I recited nursery rhymes and thought about all the things I used to find pleasurable and repulsive and on and on and on...

“So Mr. Podaka, how do you feel today?”

“Dirty doc. That’s how I feel: dirty. Like I need a shower a hug and a frickin rape counselor.”

Degroot’s face split into a wide smile and fell into laughter, his enormous jaw and beard rising and falling like pneumatic paper chopper. Wiping his eyes on his sleeves he gasped and sighed as his laughter ended, “Ahhh, my word Mr. Podaka. You do have a way of putting things.”

“Uh-huh, so anyway, what did you do to me?”

“Well, I didn’t do it, a colleague of mine did but that is neither here nor there. I had some micro-filaments installed to help increase the flow of electrical impulses to and from various brain centers.” He spun his monitor around so I could see it and adopted a concerned tone. “You see Mr. Podaka, you were in such a state the other night that I felt that it was necessary to do it without your permission. I was very afraid you were going to destroy yourself.”

I wanted to be mad at Degroot. Earlier I had fantasized about breaking his gawky, lanky arms and then ripping that monitor off his little table and caving his head in with it but for some reason I associated with my newly shaved head the idea wasn’t very appealing. Shit! I’m losing myself. “Honestly doctor I want to be mad at you but for some reason I can’t and I view that as a real transgression more than anything else so far.”

“I understand Mr. Podaka, but to be honest that is the medication that we have you on now not the surgical adjustments. What we did was really just clear the already existing pathways and create some new ones to make sure all of your neurotransmitters are able to get to where they need to be. Your base personality is the same I promise.” He held up a hand to forestall my reply and hit play. His monitor showed the usual hues in the usual

places and then they went friggin wild! Colors that had never been in one place before now filled entire regions, it reminded me of an infection racing through a septic wound.

Using a stylus Degroot pointed to part of the screen that was completely red and said, “This is rather remarkable Mr. Podaka, I’ve never seen this kind of activity in this portion of anybody’s brain during a sleep cycle before.” He fast-forwarded a bit, “Here is where you woke up and as you can see the portions of your brain that were over stimulated during your sleep are still active above and beyond normal and acceptable levels.” Putting his stylus away he rotated the screen back to where he alone could see it, “Those micro-filaments will prevent that from happening again. They will insure clear communication between brain centers from now on and rest assured that they are not capable making any adjustments to your brain at all.”

“So in other words you just installed new rain gutters.”

“Gutters,” he chuckled at my humor, “yes, for lack of a better phrase. New gutters.”

Okay, I decided I could live with new gutters. I was still pissed that I was operated on without my consent but after hearing that my not wanting to kill him was a result of medications my little bracelet was shooting me full of; not a result of a mechanical change in my very much self loved and loathed personality.

“So then Mr. Podaka, shall we continue from where you left off?”

“If you insist.” I didn’t hide the fact that I was very uncomfortable idea though.

We were met on the ground by two officers from a mercenary unit called Tiger Lance who resplendent in the same brand of worn coveralls I favor welcomed us and with little more than handshakes said our designated Mechbay was on the east side of the spaceport nearest the water treatment plant. Both guys were shitbags. I could tell by looking at them. The tall one had greased back hair and a thin mustache and a nervous twitch that caused him to swivel his head left and right every 15 or 20 seconds or so. The other guy was average in build and had silver hair and creepy eyes that were looking at everything in such a different way that he didn’t seem human.

The tall one shook hands with the Major, I didn’t take his offer and kept my hands inside my pockets which didn’t seem to bother him too much but earned me a disgruntled stare from mister goofy eyes. That is what I named them: Tall and mister goofy eyes. This was going to be fun; I could tell already that these knuckleheads were way too far out of orbit to be trusted any further than I could throw them.

Our bay was an old mobile DropShip repair hangar. Little more than a giant tin box with equally giant tracks on each corner that allowed the building to be driven where needed and parked over the top of a DropShip and all work crews to complete their tasks under cover and 24 hours a day. But looking at the tracks and the layers upon layers of rust on them; so deep it looked like baked on mud, I’d say that the building hadn’t moved in a century at the very least.

Inside was a similar story. Rust stains ran down the walls from rents and tears in the sheeting and looked like bloody stab wounds in nearly non-existent light and the ’Mechs. Oh the ’Mechs...

“We picked up the *Dragon* at auction before we left Galatea.” Tall boasted to us. I was just about to tell him whatever he paid for it was too much because we used to own the piece of shiznit when Truth kicked me in the back of the leg. “Oh damn. I’m sorry Lem.” He reached out and grabbed me by the shoulder and gave me a reassuring shake. Which was in fact camouflage for him to lean in close to my ear and growl, “Shut up.” All of which led me to think, “Damn, does he know me that well or what?”

By 1500 hours local time it was official. I hated Tiger Lance. They were germs. In the space of two hours they had eye-humped our ’Mechs, our maintenance gear and our female. The female I wasn’t worried about. Dessie reminds me of a Praying Mantis: she’ll probably kill anybody she mates with, if she doesn’t kill them before hand that is. But our gear? That’s personal, that’s off limits in my book.

By 1600 hours they were trying to get Rory to look at their ’Mechs and see if he could figure out some of their faults. Fuckin leeches. These guys were your typical slack-jawed losers who spend their careers garrisoning shithouse worlds where their lance of walking trashcans are the only real power the government can afford to show to the masses. They get by via half assed repairs and leeching whatever materials and support they can get their hands on or trick anybody out of.

I pulled Rory away from our old *Dragon* and handed him my seal crimping pliers. “What’s up?” He asked.

“These guys are leeches. I want you to safety seal all our ’Mechs and keep your truck combat locked. No equipment gets left out. Not even a spanner.”

“But----.”

“We can’t afford to support these guys and I can tell from here that they’ll steal us blind if we let them get too close. Now, as far as I’m concerned, you can help them all you want, just use their materials and parts.”

He agreed but I can tell he didn’t really like it. Tech guys are like that though. They like to help, to feel important and by helping them with all of their shitty ’Mechs he could feel like a god. All of which is fine, we all need that good feeling. I just don’t use my parts to do it.

I think the highlight of the day was when Dessie side kicked a guy named Pickering in the crotch and put his front teeth out for saying “I sure do like the cut of your gib” in the hallway leading to the admin offices and grabbed her butt in what he thought was a socially acceptable attempt at showing his appreciation of her body and his all consuming desire to mate with her. There was no way he could have known that Dessie had suffered from some “Bad Touching” in her life and that any attempt at physical contact without her permission is a fucking death sentence waiting to be carried out. By the time Truth, Rory and a guy from Tiger Lance named Emmersly pried her off of him her boot had already sent most of his teeth either down his throat or across the floor like bloody white pebbles and turned his crotch into blood pudding.

I was just glad it wasn’t me...

We had had about two weeks to get to know each other and train up a bit and just from our simulator sessions I could tell that Tiger Lance wasn’t anything close to a tiger. Matter of fact these guys weren’t even close to being a mangy assed alley cat. They were

Sallies. Little Sallies that gave ground faster than a Rasalhague facing a clanner. In every exercise we ran the moment they started taking damage they back-peddled, claiming it was a fighting retrograde operation. I called them chickenshits and told them to get their asses back to the line.

Then, as if things couldn't get worse, we got word from orbital operations that a Lyran task force was in system and on their way and would be on the ground in 8 days and Tiger Lance started collectively crapping their pants in force before our eyes. Each and every one of them looked like they were going to cry. I laughed at them and said they sold balls downtown and if they wanted they could each go buy some to have for the fight.

C'mon death. Bring it to me...

I bought the first round at the "Docking Port" which served as the officially licensed drinking establishment and over some weak, piss warm beer Truth, Dessie, Rory and I made our own plans; I should say they made plans for themselves. I had my own plan already, but we both know what it is so I'll just skip it for the sake of alacrity. Ha! I did it. I used Alacrity twice...

We, I mean they, decided that we would fight to 40 percent and retire from the field and accept conditions of surrender. "Besides," Truth pointed out, "The planetary council doesn't want us to fight a protracted battle here. They'd rather surrender."

Dessie, looking like someone's kid at the table rather than a MechWarrior took a surprisingly long pull off her beer and said what we were all thinking. "Hell, that's probably why they hired those Tiger Lance bitches anyway. They know they'll run like scalded dogs before they put up a man's fight."

Truth made a sour face at his beer and pushed it away and added his own thoughts. "Right, which is why we aren't taking any unneeded risks. We fight and win or surrender at 40 percent. Nothing more. I want the contract satisfied that is it."

Grabbing Truth's beer I slugged it down and waved for 3 more. "You know what we ought to do is rent some warehouses around town and load them with ammo and some precut armor panels."

"I'd like that a lot personally," Rory said. "It would make my job easier."

"Make it happen then Rory. It'll be your show. Just make sure they can hold a standing 'Mech." Truth pointed to me after that and said, mainly for show because it was my job and I would anyway but being that Rory worked "for" me too, he said "Give him what he needs Lem."

I gave the old "official head nod" and laughed to myself as Rory beamed with pride. Give a guy a mission and he's as proud as can be and Rory was no exception.

While Rory ran around town caching ammo and supplies for us we tried to get Tiger Lance's commander to commit to support strategies and company level tactics but they had no real interest in them. I could read it in their eyes. I knew they were focusing on ways to save their slimy skins. I couldn't believe how transparent these guys were. They tried to hide it from us with some tough talk but it was all crap. I even told Truth that I was ready to kill them in their sleep and sell their 'Mechs as scrap just to get rid of the suspense of wondering when they were going to screw us.

“Don’t lose track of that readiness Lem. I’m about ready to get rid of them myself,” he agreed. “Between them and the planetary militia’s obvious desire to not get into any serious battles for this rock I am starting to believe we’re going to get humped hard and I want to get mine in while I can.”

I couldn’t help but look at him with an expression of pride and astonishment. Proud because he was starting to think like me and astonished that he did at all. I didn’t think he had it in him to be bitter and consider preemptive assaults on people and property a viable tactic like I do. But those feelings were brief and were followed by a measure of guilt. For some damned reason I started to feel responsible for his apparent break from his normally good natured and reasonable self.

At 1 day out PTC (planetary traffic control) called us and said that the attacking force was going to land close to if not right on the spaceport’s tarmac. “Cheeky bastards.” I said. “But I guess it’s better than having to go find them out in the nomad zones.” Neither Truth nor Dessie responded to my witticisms. Shutting off the com terminal Truth’s face looked ashen. I swiveled to look at Dessie then and realized that she too looked pale and consumed with the stare of the damned. The stare---that look men and women get when they are sure their fate is sealed; they were going to die and they knew it. I have waited for that to happen to me; to signal that this day was going to be the one. The one that kills me and sends my soul to somewhere but where I was and resigns my body to the crows and worms and wild dogs to recycle into scattered piles of runny shit across the countryside.

We sat in silence in the ramshackle office listening to some talk audio host blather about the fighting that had erupted in the territories that joined the Lyran Alliance with the old Federated Suns. “Both sides it appears want to control the most core-ward portions of space and keep themselves a foot hold in the Terran corridor.” he said. Like he knew anything of any importance. I was sure it was stupid sibling rivalry being acted upon on a stellar scale. I hoped that the whole family line died personally. All Davions and all Steiners dead, their names erased and forgotten for their crimes against humanity. Not that I cared about humanity as a whole. Humanity is like a viral infection on a galactic scale. We move out colonize, use, make waste, make war, make more waste and move on again when there is nothing left. Nothing can effectively destroy humanity now that we are spreading like a plague through space. Maybe if we were all on earth again we could be completely wiped out but not now. Definitely not now. We’re everywhere now and it’s too, too late.

Nobody slept much that night. We went out of our Mechbay and took up positions and waited quietly and watched the darkened sky. At 4am a glow appeared on the horizon. At 5am the glow had changed to ball of brilliant light cutting across the first faint light rays of false dawn. At 6am the ball stopped moving and settled directly above the spaceport and slowly grew larger until at 7:06 it became a DropShip with its engines burning furiously and sending down jagged pillars of fire below it.

At 7:16am, while just a scant few meters above the ground its giant clamshell doors opened and four ’Mechs leapt out and dropped to the ground to secure the landing zone

for their transport vehicle that landed in their midst with huge clouds of steam and fire that obscured everything around its ovoid body for nearly a half kilometer.

A message went out over the general channel announcing that all military forces were hereby ordered to stand down and prepare to receive orders from the Lyran force commander now on planet. Generic announcement that translates to: It's on!

I about flipped in my seat when I saw four blue triangles appear on my scanner and head right at the Lyran dropship. Tiger Lance! Those cowards were surrendering right away. Ha! What lowlife chickenshits!

"See that?" I asked everybody.

"I wonder what took 'em so long" Dessies's replied the acid in her voice dripping like cheap paint inside my helmet. "Not like any of them were men anyway."

"Alright everybody just shut-up and watch. I want to see what happens next." Truth pivoted his *Caesar* a bit to open his view up and together we zoomed in and watched as Tiger Lance surrendered without a shot.

Our attackers' support vehicles filed out of and I was quite surprised. They actually had two, count them, two Von Luckner tanks and a trio of old Galleons too. The Galleons weren't much of a threat on their own but those Von Luckners are full of piss and vinegar with their AC/20s, LRM and SRM launchers and Flamers to boot. Up close they could make you hate life and tear the hell out of a good paint job.

The tanks, their tracks squealing and creaking formed behind their BattleMech masters in a wide V formation and like dogs waited for their attack order.

They didn't have to wait long.

"Good day Sir or Ma'am. My name is Captain Otto Pickering commanding officer of the mercenary battlemech unit: Tiger Lance."

A husky woman's voice responded to Pickering's introduction. "Captain Pickering, I bid you a good day as well. Are you ready to commence operations?"

"No ma'am. Our contract specifically states that we are to receive maximum combat support before we engage in any combat operations and our employers have not, in our opinion, provided that kind of support and because of that we are entitled to find our contract null and void. We respectfully request permission to retire from the field."

What followed was a blur. Nearly every main weapon our opponents had discharged at once. PPCs, AC/20, 10s and 5s and SRMs struck Tiger Lance with brutal efficiency and when the smoke cleared those lucky bastards were dead, their 'Mechs fouling the air with burnt paint and propellant all laying face up from having been bowled over and their cockpits ruined.

"Permission granted Captain Pickering." Then she laughed and said, "What about you Bonecrushers? Do want to retire from the field too?"

Truth keyed his microphone, "I don't think so, especially if that's the way you process retirement requests."

"Only cowardly ones. I have had enough dealings with Tiger Lance to know what they are—I mean were all about. Killing them is the reason I took this job in the first place."

"Hmmm, I see. Well, now that you've said that out loud we both know that you're committed to the follow through."

Her glib reply left it very clear that she was already committed to executing us too, “I guess so, Major Truth. I guess so.”

“Lem take the *Zeus* out, Dessie—take that *Arctic Fox*. If it slips behind Lem while he’s going at that thing it will shred him good. I’ll try to keep the *Clint* and *Uziel* busy.”

“Hey boss,” I injected, “How about this—You give me 2 rounds into that *Zeus* and then you and Dessie and I will fight a retrograde back to the tank farm. All of the exposed pipes and close quarters will limit their ability to concentrate fire and keep their tanks from being able to get too close to us.”

The tank farm was a collection of hundreds of above ground pressure tanks used for holding hydrogen and pressurized oxygen and normal vessels used for liquid combustion engine fuels. Stray rounds in that area could mean an explosion that would shatter windows for 50 kilometers and destroy everything and everybody around. “Just to keep it interesting you know.”

“Sounds good.” Truth stepped out from behind the building he was hiding behind and together he and I walked towards the *Zeus*. Like the *Jenner* did on Warlock the *Arctic Fox* sprinted off to our left to flank us. I wasn’t too worried about the tanks; as long as I kept my distance their big-bore cannons couldn’t hurt me too badly. The *Zeus* and *Uziel* were the real bad boys on the scene but I knew how this woman fought already. Dirty. Just like me. Her tactic was to distract you with something and then make the killing attack while you weren’t looking. That is what the tanks were all about, they would come in from behind while you were fighting the ’Mechs and use their ACs to leg you or take the cockpit shot. Made sense to me because being a merc is all about salvage and legged ’Mechs or head shot ’Mechs are the best kind. So she would wait until the shooting started in earnest before letting her hounds off leash to bugger us from behind.

Both Truth and I entered the roadway leading to--. What’s-her-name

Anyway, we left from behind the buildings we were using as cover and each took a lane on the road top leading to the DropShip pad. Ahead of us they stood and waited with their silver and red paint jobs shining in the sun and a Lyran fist prominently displayed on their torsos. With the exception of the *Zeus* we had the range on them, provided of course that they had a stock weapon load. For all I knew they could be bristling with gauss rifles and ER-PPCs and Thunder LRMs that were going to shred us to shit any second.

“Boss, please don’t use that shitty gunnery you used on Warlock with that *Marauder*.”

“Shitty? What are you talking about?”

“What am I talking about? You couldn’t hit the side of a Mechbay that night.”

“You’re drunk again. My gunnery is great—it has to be with only 13 rounds.”

“Speaking of 13 rounds, is Rory in place?”

“Yeah. I marked off a rally point to him on the far side of the tank farm.”

When my targeting reticule went gold for my stock PPC Truth announced, “I’m ready.”

A sonic boom ripped the air apart as Truth's *Caesar* sent a gauss slug towards the slab sided *Zeus*. The 80 tonner's armor shattered and spalled in hundreds of places and sent fragments swirling through the air like metallic snow as the slug's kinetic energy shoved it backwards so hard it nearly toppled over completely from the heavy impact. I didn't wait to take my first shot. I had put my stock PPC on it and as soon as it stopped staggering backwards I let fly and blasted it too. The PPC bolt struck close to the same place Truth's slug had gone and invaded the cracks and fractures his shot had made and tried to use its hideous electrical properties to tear the metal plates apart forcibly and spill its mechanical guts onto the ground below it.

The *Zeus* was hurt. There was no doubt about that but I was sure that it was a sacrificial beast rather than a true fighter. The *Uziel* would be the commander's 'Mech. She was too deceptive a bitch to get into an assault 'Mech and take it on the chin like this guy was.

The tanks took off right about the same time I heard Dessie scream over the common channel, "Burn and DIE DAMN YOU!!!!!" Apparently she had caught up with the *Arctic Fox*; at least I guessed she had. As the tanks took off to try and slip behind us I pushed my throttle to the stops and lurched forward to take the attention off of Truth, he needed to get this second shot off and make it count. The *Zeus*, like my 'Mech, was too damned big to let live long. The *Clint* and *Uziel* split up, the *Clint* heading for the left and the *Uziel* backwards into the protective firing arc of their attending DropShip so instead of getting my over eager ass led by the nose into some naval lasers I slowed down and as Truth's second shot staggered the *Zeus* again, the screeching gauss slug slamming into its already fractured and burned armor, damaging it even more with his follow up shot. I fired a volley of inferno missiles at it and laughed as they splattered hellishly hot liquid plasma across its battered torso. One round splashed its gelatinous flames across its canopy screens and against better judgment I braved the DropShip weapons and closed in and put my armored fist through its cockpit screen.

You have to understand that in the world of MechWarriors deliberately killing the pilot is an act of savagery. It used to be that MechWarriors met out on the field of battle and trashed each other until they couldn't fight anymore and they surrendered, ejected, or died. But nobody who was a lady or a gentleman would deliberately aim for the cockpit in the hopes of killing them and taking their 'Mech as legal salvage. It just wasn't done. Only savages and pirates did things like that and those scoundrels were usually hung by their necks until dead when they were caught so they had nothing to lose anyway. But mercenaries, I have been told, almost always followed the Ares Convention, section c, sub-paragraph 23 regarding the laws of modern warfare to the Tee. They also tended to fight on a level that was regarded more as gunnery practice and training with live ammo, in other words, no animosity, no deliberate kills with the victor buying the first round at the bar. House armies were the killers. Their politics and ethnocentric views led to a more feverish fighting mantra.

Then the clans came...

Ahhhh, the Clans. Test tube babies from the outer reaches of time and space warriors whose sense of self had been carefully executed at birth without mercy. No mothers, no fathers, no love only anger and animosity towards anybody not born from the same genetic slop as them and an internal power structure that relied on savagery amongst

themselves with the largest and most violent cannibal becoming the leader. They were the ones who brought back the deliberate pilot kill.

The Jade Falcons particularly. They thrived on tearing open the cockpit of a fallen 'Mech and literally ripping the warrior from their seat and parading them about like a gutted trophy buck. It was their utter contempt for the Inner Sphere life and people that fueled this passion of theirs. Anybody who resisted their might was destroyed and thus it was with them it became just as common for us to deliberately kill opposing MechWarriors too, abandoning chivalry, mercy, and humanity. Lucky for me too...

Granted the Mercenary Review and Bonding Commission was probably the only thing that kept most merc units from doing it too much. A unit's overall rating relied on fulfilling contract obligations, battlefield conduct and its general moral mindset when dealing with prisoners and civilians alike. What that baritone voiced bitch did was execute a full lance of surrendering MechWarriors for salvage and kicks. She was a straight up murdering, black-hearted whore. Not that I wouldn't seriously considering doing the same myself. Hell! I had offered to kill those guys in their beds the day before but she, by killing them, set the tone for the battle and I wanted her to know that we give as good as we get. Who knows, if I let her live I might just ask her out.

"Now! Everybody head for the farm." Truth's excited voice ripped into my ear. With practiced movements I turned my 'Mech, boosted the throttle to max and turned down my headset volume and pointed myself towards the multi storied red and white striped fuel tanks to our right. In my compressed view I watched the *Clint* and *Uziel* gather around the fallen and still burning *Zeus* and laughed out over the common channel. Now she knew that we meant business too.

Technically they had us outnumbered 8 against 3 but in the tangled, criss-crossing maze of high pressure transfer pipes it made it more like 3 on 3. But as Dessie pointed out to us, "Yeah, this is a great place, as long as they don't get pissed and blow the entire thing on us."

"Details, details Dessie." Truth chided.

"So, do you think they'll actually come in here after us?" I asked.

"If they're stupid they will."

"Yeah, but stomping Tiger Lance wasn't stupid it----."

"It was a public service!" Dessie growled, cutting me off.

"So—now what?" I asked.

"Fucked if I know." The reply.

I flipped my brain into to overdrive and considered our position: we had range on them at best. My PPCs and Truth's Gauss were good solid hard-hitting weapons but she had the numbers and the big guns to back her up. We needed to trade space for time and make them come after us in a place that would let us wear them down.

"Okay boss, here's my idea. We pull out of the Farm and make tracks for the western drop pads and we'll use our range advantage there." I toggled my HUD to show the points on the map we had designated with Rory to re-arm points, choosing one near the western most edge of the pads close to the city's edge I said, "Have Rory meet us at point Mike to reload your Gauss and our SRMs if we need to."

I could picture Truth's forehead scrunching up, changing from as smooth as a baby's butt to as wrinkled as an old scrotum with worry as he chewed on my idea. But after a moment I heard the sigh associated with him having reached a difficult decision. "Alright, let's do it—and Lem; stay close. I don't think we can do this without you."

What!?? He was kidding right? This was my golden opportunity to die. Outnumbered and isolated; the planetary government had already taken a neutral stance announcing that they would neither attack nor defend either force. It doesn't get any better than this! I mean Bloody Blake on a Big Bitch! Can't he see that I need this? I need relief from it all? Why can't--.

"Lem. I'm serious man. I need you to do this." This time he was using his tight beam communications array to keep the conversation private. "Lem---." He breathed deep and long, "I don't mind dying, I just don't want to do it here. I want it to be in my bed, in my sleep and with a 20 year old swim wear model, not on some planet full of pacifists." He pivoted his 'Mech to face mine to simulate a personal conversation face to face. "I know you want out. People that want to live aren't as self-destructive as you are and even though I wish it wasn't true—it is. I don't want to cheat you out of something you want but Dessie and I want to live through this as badly as you probably want to die, so I'm asking you as a friend---stay with us and help us because we need you more than we've ever needed anybody in our lives."

Shit!

Need? Let me tell you about need. When you're a kid you need a break, you need people to care, to accept you and make you feel worthwhile. You need people to take and interest in you so you don't have to find strangers to fill that void. You need medication and counseling to make the voices go away, you need hope but if you don't get it? You need to die. Die and hope with the last shred of faith that you possess that whatever lies ahead is better than what you have now. To be sure now, Rena's prophetic admission to me that there is a more terrible place than this one has me scared. Scared that my obvious attempts at suicide will earn me an eternity in hell; if that is what it is. But it's that last shred of hope that keeps me believing that it's either bliss or nothing at all.

Shit on a stick! I was so mad that my jaws were aching and through locked jaws I said, "No problem. I'll keep close."

Friends! Damn. I knew there was a reason that I didn't have any of those...

We bolted from the highly explosive cover of the tank farm and weaved through the corrugated steel and tan ferrocrete service buildings that littered the spaceport until we came to the western drop pads. There amongst nothing but painted lines and bilge pumpers we waited. We could see them forming up on our scanners in two nicely inverted Vees and come for us. Eventually I was able to zoom in close enough and through the rippling heat waves that emanated from the reinforced ground around us see them keeping a measured pace as they came at us, a slow easy gate that portrayed confidence.

Whatever...

I broadcasted on the general channel, "Cripes! Can you guys move any slower? I got a bottle in my room that I need to get to." Which reminded me: I grabbed one of my water bottles which was actually my dry gin and vermouth mixed with a lemon flavored

sports drink and took a hearty gulp, actually two. Two really long ones. I mean reeeaaallyyyyy long ones. Anyway, they didn't respond to my jibe. They were too busy playing psych-out, trying to make me feel like my death was approaching and there was nothing I could do about it.

I was bored out of my mind by the time they got close enough to worry about. I was tapping my fingers on my control panel to the beat of a civilian music station and trying to make my *Hatamoto* shuffle its feet like it was dancing and all kinds of other stupid crap. When my reticule turned gold, signaling that my Clan ER-PPC was locked onto the *Uziel* I told Dessie to crank up her flamer and create a horse shoe shaped crescent of fire around us to use as concealment and as she went to work I dropped to a kneeling position and put my reticule on the *Uziel*. Truth got the idea and knelt next to me, "Great idea Lem. If they can't see us they won't waste their missiles on us."

"That's right boss, not to mention, for them to see us they have to get in front of us and then we can't miss." My only concern was if Dessie could keep the wall of fire going long enough to stretch our advantage out. Venting plasma from her reactor was how her flamer worked and it would shut down and lock itself out if it tapped her reactor too hard. But all tactics are 50/50 for and against

The tanks along with the *Clint* and *Arctic Fox* led the way while baritone voiced broad held back a bit so she could use her PPC to its advantage, like us. But I had a surprise for her: my range was much farther than hers; good old clan tech, they may be evil bastards one and all but their weapons kick serious ass. But before we started on her we needed to get those Von Luckners out of our hair; their LRMs were what was going to tear us up. "Okay boss man," I said, "don't worry about the *Uziel*, she's just screwing around trying to worry us. She wants us to focus on her and forget about her tanks with their LRMs and AC/20s. As soon as they appear I want you to start hitting them at range. One shot each. I'll worry about everything else---Dessie, keep your eye out for the *Fox*. That little missile boat will ream our asses out but good if we lose track of it."

"Roger."

I watched Dessie spray fire around us, making the air a confusing mass of heat waves and dancing plasma born flames with blue and white cores that obscured everything around us. The first Von Luckner appeared in front of us and our scanners chirped its shrill warning of a missile lock and as its second bleep faded Truth's torso mounted gauss rifle sent a slug screaming right at it.

With a sonic boom the slug crossed the gap between us and rocked the heavy tank with enough force to break its track skirts and antenna arrays off and send them flying through the air as if they were so much garbage picked up by the wind. The crew was probably trying to find some clean underwear after that shot because the tank froze in place after the hit but before a second shot was made the other Von Luckner stopped in front of it to act as cover for their buddies and locked their salvo in and fired. I braced myself and Dessie, quick as a rabbit ducked behind me to try and save herself from being damaged by the missiles' high explosive charges. Not terribly accurate but enough hit me to make my HTAL grow polka dots and piss me off: I hate the way they make that "Bang!" sound and toss me around. I prefer a solid auto cannon hit, makes me feel like a man.

For his trouble Truth gave him his second of 13 onboard rounds and struck gold. The slug which was invisible to the naked eye hit the second tank right in the track and road wheel assembly and ripped them apart. I watched a single road wheel fly away like rocket into the now hazy horizon. Scanning my compressed view I watched Dessie laying down stream after stream of fire in an effort to keep us from being seen so easily. When the first tank pulled around the now mobility killed second tank Truth and I fired simultaneously. The heat in my cockpit jumped as my stock PPC struck the tank just micro-seconds ahead of Truth's third round: 10 left now.

That heavy sonofabitch literally jumped in the air a meter at least as its LRM rack exploded from an electrical overload and having Truth's round strike it on the bow. I was thinking that it might try to rip of a cannon shot at us but as it sat smoldering faintly something inside it went "pop" and the faint smoldering turned to serious burning and within 5 seconds the hatches snapped open and one figure scrambled out of the driver's compartment with his uniform burning. He didn't make it far. He danced and slapped at the flames feebly and by his fifth or sixth step he fell to the ground dead. That is the life of a tanker though: born to die by fire.

Lucky bastards...

"Here it comes Lem!" Dessie nearly shouted. I stood up and peering over the flames I saw it; the *Arctic Fox*. Squat and fast and loaded with Short Range Missiles a'plenty. I drove a *Jenner* for a long time so I knew what this guy was up to; he wanted to shred our rear armor and distract us, giving the main body a chance to get closer and use their heavy weapons on us.

I opened the circuit on my Clan ER PPC and waded through Dessie's fire wall. He would either haul ass back the way he came or try to get me into a circle of death and pummel me with volley after volley of missiles.

He came for me. Circle of death it is.

"Dessie?"

"Yeah."

"Stay close and be ready to hit this guy with a flamer shot."

"Do you want me to stop spraying it then?"

"No, keep it up. I want this guy to think he's got me all to himself. But you'll have to stay close to the rear to get it."

"K."

Truth broke in after that exchange. "How long you think that is going to take Lem?"

"A minute or three I think."

"Try to make it less okay? The Galleons and *Clint* are getting into weapons range."

"Okay." This was getting irritating. The old divide and conquer trick was stupid. I prefer a straight up fight to this shit any day.

I let the *Fox* come in and made intentionally clumsy moves to try and track him and lull him into thinking he was too fast for me. He bought it. Instead of trying to slide in at an oblique angle and take me from the flank he made a zig-zagging dash at me to close the distance and get a quick lock on. The first beep of my warning scanner beeped out shrill, like a canary getting crushed by a hammer and the second slowed and seemed to take forever to carry through and by the time it ended his launcher was hard at work and I was able to see each individual missile emerge from its cell with a puff of dirty grey

smoke and a gout of equally filthed flame and one at a time in slow motion they corkscrewed their way at me. I subconsciously pivoted my torso to present a narrow profile and as if he was standing still I hit him square on his pelvis with my stock PPC. The squat little 'Mech absorbed most of the shot and I saw it literally quiver as the electrical surge racked its systems and its MechWarrior and fell to the ground and slid across the reinforced drop pad in a shower of sparks.

"Dessie!" I barked. "Sic him!" I laughed as she cackled insanely and sprinted through the flames and doused the fallen 'Mech with plasma from her reactor. I made my way back to Truth's side and smiled inside my helmet as I listened to Dessie screech and curse at the *Arctic Fox* pilot. My heat spiked into the high yellow band as I crossed the fire trail again and stood next to Truth. Surveying the tarmac I could see one of the Von Luckners was out and the second was mobility killed, meaning it could fire but not move and the *Clint* with its 3 tank support section was getting close, the diesel internal combustion engines roaring wide open, leaving black smoke trails raising behind them like dirty black fingers pointing down at them from heaven.

"Dessie has the *Fox*, for now, you take the *Clint* and I'll take the tanks."

"Roger." We broke out of our firebox and sprinted at the approaching 'Mech and tanks. Truth didn't have hardly enough armor to take all those rigs on alone, hell I might not have enough I thought as I ran at them. All four had AC/10s and were capable of dealing some serious damage by their selves en-masse they could turn my 80 tons into a pile of recyclables most riki-tik. Never the less a head on charge is sometimes the only way to break up an assault like this one. I chose the lead tank and his wingman and fired my stock PPC and Inferno missiles. The Inferno missiles detonated all around the wingman's Galleon and bathed it in fire and as the plasma consumed all the oxygen around it in a superheated flash its engine died, stranding it in the fire to burn. The PPC scorched the paint off the lead man's vehicle and in a funny type of overload occurrence sent its turret spinning out of control for a moment making me giggle like an idiot for some reason. Crossing the distance to the out of control tank I leaned forward, grabbed the track skirts and heaved. Slowly the tank started to lift and as I shifted my balance to send it over I got hit from behind with a shot that made me literally piss my self.

I crashed down on top of the tank as my feet slid out from under me, crushing its suspension with a series of loud pops as its air bags popped and let the tank's belly plate drop to the ground with a bang, effectively freezing it where it was like a fat broad on a jelly roll.

You cannot believe how hard it is to get a 'Mech upright after it's fallen. I mean your literally hanging face down in your chair, the straps cutting into your shoulders your sense of balance totally distorted and believe you me, the inner ear is the most important part of 'Mech piloting, the static and dynamic balance messages are directly relayed through the neuro-helmet and into the gyro. If your balance is screwed so is your 'Mech. You have to try and get it upright with your arms enough to get your inner ear back into the game and then, with your ear working the balance, get your legs under you. It is the absolute most labor intensive aspect of piloting a 'Mech and I hate it. Hate it, hate it, hate it. Of course I'm very lazy too so that probably explains my feelings.

I hate to work, but that's why I don't have any kids either...

Struggling to get my awkward, 80 metallic ass upright I cursed at myself for thinking that the bitch in the *Uziel* would just stand there and let her subordinates do all the work. Tottering a bit when I was finally upright I looked at my HTAL and fumed; my rear armor had almost been completely blistered off and my under shorts were wet and warm and I felt like I was going to toss my breakfast all over my windscreen. “Damned PPCs.” I muttered. Watching my compressed view I saw her making tracks at us at top speed and I was impressed too. Those stupid looking things can really haul ass. Funny, all the time we had one in our section I never saw it using its speed to its advantage.

Anyway Truth is trying to keep the *Clint* at distance and the *Uziel* is coming at me, trying to see if it can hit me in the back again and the whole damned planet erupted on us. “Holy SHIT!!!!!!” I screamed and all I could see was ferrocrete erupting around me and smoke and rocks and I swear my 'Mech came off the ground and it all went black.

I woke up coughing and gagging on the ground. I tried to sit up but Rory and a medic were telling me to relax a second so they could check me out.

“What happened?” I asked.

“You guys were bombed.”

“Bombed? What the fuck are you talking about?”

Rory placed a hand on my shoulder and patted it and said, “One of the militia commanders was pro Davion and ordered some of his aircraft to help. Anyway, they thought they were hitting the attackers but instead of just them they got everybody.”

“Everybody! Shit. That was no accident.”

“Well, that’s what they’re calling it.”

“My ass.” I brushed their hands off me and forced myself to my feet. Reeling I leaned against my proned out 'Mech and willed my eyes to focus. Carnage was the only word that came to mind. All around me there was metal and hunks of ferrocrete with giant rusty stalks of rusted reinforcing bar jutting out laying everywhere I could see. There were some piles of smoking material that I could faintly see was one of the tanks, its barrel bent and pointing at the sky as black smoke boiled up around it. Then I saw Truth’s *Caesar*. It was face down on the ground, its legs missing and back ripped open. I grabbed at Rory and shook him, “Where are they Rory!?”

He couldn’t answer me, his answer caught in his throat. I was nearing a panic when he finally nodded at a refrigerated body van. I literally threw him to the ground as I bolted for the van. Ripping the door open I pushed past a woman in a rubberized suit and started ripping body bags open. Some I wouldn’t have been able to recognize if they were Truth and Dessie, they were burnt, mutilated and blown apart. One was a pile of parts with a scorched skull in the center of the pile. By the sixth bag I found them. Truth, his bald face and chest cherry red and blood leaking from his ears looking tired and worn and Dessie, beautiful Dessie with her perfect skin not perfect any more with half of her head pulped and one of her violet eyes closed serenely and the other dangling from its optic nerve parked in a puddle of pink shit.

Everybody bolted for cover as I threw the morgue attendant out the door and flung Truth and Dessie out behind her. I couldn’t believe this! Those fuckers cheated me! I wanted to die! He made me promise to live so he could live too and he didn’t he took my

death from me. I screamed in primal fury and kicked at their dead bodies viciously. “You bastards! You can’t leave me here alone goddamn you. I’m supposed to die. ARRHHH! I grabbed my hair and pulled great bloody shocks of it out of my scalp and fell on top of Truth and grabbed his shirt and shook him as hard as I could. When he didn’t wake up I slapped him back and forth across the face until my knuckles bled.

I switched to Dessie, stepping on her dangling eye as I tried to rouse her. I kicked at her, hearing her ribs crack with a wet snapping sound “You were supposed to live and take my ’Mech you bitch! Damn you—wake up!!!

I tried to catch my breath and slow my pulse down and looking up from my clenched fists I said, “And that is how I wound up here Doctor. I was betrayed by my friends my enemies and my allies.”

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