

Solaris City, Greyland
Solaris VII
Bolan Province, Lyran Commonwealth
6 October 3133

Much like the rest of Solaris City's Montenegro district, the Black Eagle was shabby and run down, the bar's entrance being marked by a flickering sign whose title, printed in both English and Russian, was barely legible under the grime and peeling paint. *And even then, this is far from the worst place I've ever been in*, Antonin Rybak told himself as he stepped inside, heading down the stairs to the bar room.

The interior lived up to the promise of the street entrance. Poorly lit by flickering lights, there was an air of neglect around the place. Battered and worn furniture on a carpet that had been irreparably stained by drink and who knew what else topped off with tarnished fittings and, just to complete the set, a cracked mirror behind the bar itself. The few patrons kept to themselves, hunched over their drinks, the conversation non-existent.

One of them caught his eye, however; a large, burly woman seated at the bar, a bottle in hand. Rather than being absorbed in her drink, she was instead watching the flickering trivid screen over the bar. A quick glance at her back conformed what he needed to know; short, scruffy black hair, her muscular body was only partially hidden by a sleeveless vest adorned with a fur collar. Lurid, bright green tattoos adorned her arms, almost looking like the enhanced imaging patterns on a Clan warrior.

He sat himself next to her, one design in particular catching his eye; an angular skull, a slogan written beneath it in Cyrillic text. "You never change, do you, Sveta?" He began, casually eyeing her.

She glanced back at him, regarding the man with an impassive face for the moment. "And I was hoping that you would, Antonin." The woman finally spoke, a thick accent colouring her words.

He shrugged. "So what is a contender like you doing in such a classy place as this?"

"It has atmosphere." She replied with a shrug. "A certain charm that you are not getting in many other places around here, no? And besides, here in place like this, nobody is likely to be bothering me." She emphasised the last words, a hint of anger in them.

Antonin gave a small chuckle. "A subtle hint, maybe?"

"Maybe." Sveta shot back. "I am taking a guess as to why you are here, Antonin. You are seeing crisis; HPGs gone, your beloved Republic falling into anarchy, and you are thinking of, shall we say, getting the band back together." She filled the shot glass in front of her, and took a swig. "And, naturally, you are coming for me."

"You got that much right, Sveta." He admitted.

"So why now?" She continued. "I am thinking that, maybe, you had some other little operation maybe. One that did not go well. And, as always, you are needing someone to clean up your mess."

"No. This is a one-shot deal. I am after a specific objective. When I get that, no more." There was no point in hiding his reason to be here, given that she had guessed it already. "I won't even need you for a while; just be ready to come when I need you."

"Aha. So I and Dead Master are now your dogs, is that it?" She shook her head, the slightest hint of anger in her green eyes. "So I have to ask you, Antonin, why would I run off from here on some crazy errand for you? After all, your coming in here with chicken feet does not make for a compelling argument."

"I won't try to appeal to your better nature; you don't have one." He stated earnestly. "Nor will I appeal

to a sense of duty, as I know you have lack that as well. Instead I offer you money and, of course, the chance to make useful contacts who could get you jobs away from here.” He looked around the room again. “You can’t have helped but notice that Solaris City is swimming with recruiters right now; you can’t throw a dead Yak without hitting one.”

She laughed loudly at the last comment, then shook her head. “So you think I could be a gunslinger then? Why would I be wanting that, as I have fantastic job right now.”

“Oh come on.” He shook his head. “You are a contender, yes, but let’s face it, you are all the talent that Dark Empire actually has left. Cedric’s a goon; you know it, I know it and everyone in the Sphere knows it. You’re carrying him on your back for very little benefit.”

“And he does have very unfortunate hair.” She added.

“Beyond that, this season is a disaster and everyone knows it. Broadcasting revenues are through the floor as there’s no HPG network to sell on to. Bootleg tapes are constituting the bulk of the trade right now, with none of that going back to your pockets. And nobody’s coming to Solaris for the games. The ship I came in on was just me, a half dozen mercenary recruiters and a tape trader.” He continued. “So what is keeping you here?”

“Maybe it is the quality of the opposition.” She offered. “Have you thought, perhaps, that I am just in it for the fights?”

“Come with me and you’ll have more people to-“

“Aha; and my next opponent appears.” Sveta cut him off, glancing up at the trivid screen.

Antonin looked up, the screen showing a grizzled warrior on the screen, standing in front of a lime green and lemon yellow *Marauder II*. “Despite what most people think, being a MechWarrior is not an easy life.” He began. “And fighting for glory in the arenas is a dangerous business. That’s why I make sure that, even in the heat of battle, I’m as comfortable as I can be. That’s why I use Zengapain.”

The view focused on the tube in his hand, the bright purple and green logo clear. “Zengapain guarantees relief from even the most personal of pains, and its new formula is now more effective against Tigratch.”

The shot cut back to the man, a forced grin on his face. “Be a champion. Use Zengapain!”

Antonin raised an incredulous brow. “That’s your next opponent? A burnt-out hack who endorses rectal cream?”

She laughed. “Can you offer better?”

He grinned back in reply. “I can. You’d be working with people who you know can handle themselves in a fight and dealing with some of the most dangerous, lethal and unpredictable opponents that you have ever seen. We’re not talking play-warriors here, we’re talking merciless killers, Sveta. The sort you used to fight.”

The hulking woman nodded her head. “A real fight...” She held up her glass, studying it intently. “Very well then, you shall have me and Dead Master for whatever it is you need us for. But if you are lying to me, Ponytail, if you are leading me on, then I will kill you.” The narrowed eyes and stern face told him that it was no idle threat. Experience told him that she would do it too.

**Gold Road, the Field of Giants,
Tigress, Prefecture IV**

Republic of the Sphere

28 April 3134

Some days, Juanita Kwan reflected, it was just too easy.

With the main body of their forces off fighting on Northwind (and, it was rumoured, Terra), the Steel Wolves had left only a skeleton force to guard their capitol world of Tigress and the stockpiles of parts and munitions they had left there in reserve. Centred around the capitol of Four Cities, the Wolves' forces were dedicated to defending their military supplies as well as the civilian industries that they had converted over to military uses. Well dug-in, the forces would have been hard to dislodge in an invasion, and well prepared against even a raid.

However, information revealed that the forces on-world included members of the now disbanded and disgraced Frostwolf cluster, the same unit that the Band of Five had defeated on Mara. That had been Juanita's way in, the avenue she'd shamelessly manipulated to their advantage. The information that she'd been provided with, including false MRBC credentials, had worked perfectly.

A lone bounty hunter had turned up on the world, looking to provide information to the Steel Wolves in exchange for an alliance so they could collect on a prize. One of the Wolf Star Commanders, an over-enthusiastic blonde woman with a penchant for speaking nonsense about 'Wolf Spirits' had eagerly listened as the bounty hunter explained that Goren Bulgarin, the so-called "Butcher of Frostwolf Village" was travelling to Tigress at the head of a raiding force.

At the urging of that one Star Commander, the Wolves had formed up an expeditionary force to take down the 'Butcher', the bounty hunter in amongst them so that she could claim her prize. While there was some muttering about siding with a *dezgra* mercenary, the opportunity for the former Frostwolves to avenge themselves and regain some of their lost honour was too much for them to pass up. The burning resentment at being left out of the assault on Terra only added fuel to the fire.

As soon as they'd confirmed that the Raider force was on-world, the Steel Wolves, along with their new-found ally had set out, leaving their posts to march on the landing site. Their force amounted to an under-strength cluster; a Star of Mechs alongside trinaries of tanks and conventional infantry, about equal to the force that the raiders had put down on-world. However, the Wolves would have the advantage of surprise and the local terrain.

Or so they thought. The Wolves had been surprised when they'd walked into a well-staged ambush, and even more so when the bounty hunter's *Wolverine* had opened up on them from behind. And she couldn't help but feel a little bit of satisfaction as her 'Mech's twin PPCs bit into a smaller *Arctic Fox*'s rear, gouging through the armour and structure. Smoke pouring from its gored flank, the wounded BattleMech collapsed to the ground, spot fires starting where burning debris fell.

"One Wolf down and burning!" Juanita called over the comms channel. "I serve them up, you take them out."

A fleet-footed *Targe* sprinted past her, a blur of brown and silver as it tried to cut through the raider lines. As it did, a burst of cannon fire from Nero's *Centurion* raked its side, shredding armour and staggering the 'Mech. The humanoid machine walked forwards, a volley of missiles from its chest launcher adding to the damage done to its smaller foe. "Nice work there, Chica" Nero called out over the comms channel as his 'Mech bore down on the wounded Wolf. "Remind me to thank you after"

Missiles from an Ares tank peppered her *Wolverine*'s flank, scoring armour but not doing too much else. Wheeling around, she opened up on the vehicle, the particle cannons spitting blue fire at it and scoring armour off its sloped bow. A volley of missiles added to the damage done, one of the warheads bursting against the ferroglass canopy, cracking it but not breaching. The tank backedpedalled, a squad of battle armoured soldiers moving up to support it.

Firing her jets, Juanita leaped away from the oncoming force, keeping her distance as she glanced around the battlefield. While she knew her 'Mech was powerful, her own background told her never to

ignore the threat that infantry represented. After all, that was how she'd gotten a BattleMech in the first place. As she leaped, she spied another 'Mech, a *Sun Cobra* advancing on a wolf *Hatchetman*.

"You boys wanted the Butcher of Frostwolf Village?" She called out. "You got him." Underscoring the point, the *Sun Cobra* opened fire, a pair of Gauss slugs pummeling the axe-wielding BattleMech, driving it to a knee. As she came down, Juanita added her own fire, shots ripping into the *Hatchetman*'s flank, black smoke billowing from the gaping rents in its side. "Of course, what are you gonna do about him now that you have him?"

This had been her life for the last six or so months, a soldier of the Band of Five. She had been engaged in operations across several different worlds, serving to follow the Band's agenda – whatever that was. In most cases, she'd acted as a scout, probing enemy defences and finding weaknesses, then serving to disrupt those forces present before the Band were committed to battle. Chaos and confusion were her weapons, ones that she wielded with skilled precision.

They'd given her pretty broad discretion to do what she needed to accomplish her goals, albeit under the supervision of the scarred woman – all these months and Juanita didn't even have her first name – who seemed to be able to provide her with all she needed. In one case, that leeway had been valuable. The enemy force on-world had been stronger than anticipated, and she had seen no way to tip the scales. She'd called off the attack, then managed to escape off-world. And while the operation had been aborted, it had been a small cost to pay by comparison.

It'd still earned her a lot of respect from her peers, as well as a hefty bonus in her pay. It was part of a pattern that had been good to her, giving her all that she wanted. *Wealth, power, prestige and a BattleMech. Perfect.*

"Despoiler company, close the trap" Goren growled over the command channel as he continued to pummel his opponent. Two flights of missiles from a Glory fire support tank sailed overhead, pummeling the Ares as it tried to move forward to support the wounded *Hatchetman*. Explosions erupted across the tank, ripping through its armour and blasting one of its treads apart. The infantry around it scattered, wary of the fire from the larger tank.

The Despoilers were an armoured company, raised from soldiers recruited from the prison raid on Fletcher. Juanita had worked alongside them often since then, the troops performing remarkably well given their origins. She'd noted the rivalry between them and Kirstin Ross' Defiler company, an urge for each to prove that they were better than the others. Some days, she could have sworn that they were being egged on by someone else.

Wheeling around, she spied a group of Wolf soldiers nearby, using the long grass and rocks to advance. "PBIs advancing on our left!" She called out over the command channel as several small missiles streaked past her 'Mech. One of them burst in the air over its shoulder, spraying the ground behind her with flaming goo. "Some of them have infernos, so watch it!"

"Pin them down, Ravager Four." Bulgarin replied. "Despoiler Lead, get someone over there."

She charged forward, opening up on a Bandit Hovertank in amongst the infantry, her shots narrowly missing the vehicle. However, that in and of itself was enough to give it pause, the hovertank braking off and peeling away from her, spraying missiles in its wake. Quickly flipping targets, she opened up on an infantry platoon with the Small Pulse Laser that, at some point in the past, had replaced the *Wolverine*'s C3 slave. This had a more immediate effect, several soldiers falling.

Seeing a raider VV1 Ranger IFV approaching her position, she wheeled around, again glancing over the battlefield. The Band's forces were giving better than they got, the Wolves desperately trying to regain their ground. One 'Mech caught her eye, the *Rakshasa* piloted by the Star Commander who had been responsible for the situation. While not their leader, she was still clearly a big name within the unit. Pushing the throttle open, she charged towards the enemy 'Mech, looking to cut the Wolf warrior down to size.

Only she found that it wasn't needed. A half-dozen brilliant red beams stabbed at the 'Mech, ripping armour away from it and sending it staggering back. The last of them sliced through its right arm, tearing away the pair of lasers mounted at its end. While the attack was devastating, what she knew was more important was its source, a single looming *Black Knight* walking towards the *Rakshasa*, all but ignoring the enemy pilot's return fire.

TF Allen, its MechWarrior, was probably the best pilot in the unit; certainly the sheer intimidating presence of the man seemed to be able to win battles on its own. Masked and faceless, the man rarely spoke and tended to vanish for long periods at a time. Rumour had it that he was actually one of the Band of Five's leaders or an agent of them; certainly nobody knew what was hidden behind his mask.

And Juanita owed him. The man had gotten her into the Band, protected her from harm and, most importantly, hidden her past from those who might dig into it. Under his care, she'd thrived. Without it, she'd be dead fast. It was something she harboured no illusions about, a sobering fact that was just as much motivation to succeed as any money.

Instead, she turned towards the *Targe* that Nowen had been engaging, her 'Mech closing down on the battered 'Mech. She triggered the PPCs and missiles, shots lashing through the side of the BattleMech and ripping into its interior. The 'Mech's core burst white-hot on her thermal display, before it abruptly died, its reactor crashing off-line to prevent detonation. Momentum carried it forward, its wedge-shaped nose ploughing into the ground. "That's two for me!" She called over the open channel.

"Vulching doesn't count, chica." Nero playfully shot back.

"Can it you two." Bulgarin cut them off. "Defiler lead has secured the objective; they're loading now. We have to hold the Wolves for another minute or two then disengage."

And that was the beauty of it; all this was a grandiose distraction while their real objective, the Wolves' supplies and munitions, were being plundered for all they were worth. She couldn't help but grin to herself as she wheeled around, advancing on a Wolf *Harvester* supported by a squad of Longinus Battle Armour. "Hold them? I think we can finish them before that."

**Dropship *Achenar Provider*, outbound
Tigress System, Prefecture IV
Republic of the Sphere
29 April 3134**

Free from the planet, and from any signs of pursuit by the Steel Wolf fighters, the *Achenar Provider* had stopped accelerating, conserving fuel as it coasted towards its rendezvous with their jumpship. For the most part, the crew of raiders onboard were in celebratory moods. They had pulled off their operation well, netting a good deal of stolen material from the Steel Wolf caches on-world while sustaining only light casualties. That they'd also managed to take a good deal of salvage from the Wolf forces was a bonus.

A second element has also served as a morale booster to the crew; their trap had been so successful because of the Band of Five's reputation. The Wolves had been lured out by the prospect of facing the infamous marauders who had defeated them in past. That they had become so infamous that their name alone was enough to provoke a reaction had many of its soldiers celebrating their success, revelling in the knowledge of how feared and reviled they had become.

However, not all of those on board were entirely happy with the situation. As he stalked the corridors of the ship, Nero Nowen's mind was running through a number of matters that were concerning him. He was trying his best not to let it show, something that was aided by the environment. After all, it was hard to do an angry stomp in microgravity.

He'd headed down to the bowels of the ship, his destination a small side-room off its cavernous cargo bays. Making sure he wasn't seen, he headed in, shutting the door behind him. It was only after he was certain that the room was secure that he spoke up. "We need to talk, now." He began, his tone stern and demanding in stark contrast to his normally casual approach.

"About what?" TF Allen replied, the masked man seemingly glaring at him despite having no visible eyes.

"About the lack of progress." He spat back. "Oh come on, Allen, you know what I mean. Look at us, man. Look at what we have."

"I am aware of what we have." The response was flat and impassive despite Nero's clear anger.

"Are you? Are you sure of that?" He shot back. "Because it seems to me that we're damn well not using it." He waved one hand, as if he was holding an invisible file. "We have a tank company that answers to you. We have enough blackmail material to put a huge pile of people under our thumbs. We have your damn rank and position, which you still now won't explain fully to me. And, above all else, we have that damn girl of yours, our secret weapon that we could use to screw so many people over with."

"Your point?"

"My point is that we should be in charge of this damn group by now. Instead, I'm still just some 'Mech-jockey who gets a pat on the head whenever he gets a kill. Your little pet is getting all the glory and fat cash bonuses while I'm left playing the part of the drug-addled idiot."

"And you will keep playing that part." Allen stated, remaining flat.

"Until when? Until Stone comes back? Until I die of old age? Or until I OD myself to keep the act up?" He sneered. "Give me a damn answer."

"Until the time is right."

"And when will that be? Well?"

"Things are at a critical juncture. I cannot say exactly when, but soon."

"Can't or won't?" He snapped. "You've gotten so damned good at hiding things that you're now hiding from me. What are you afraid of, Allen? What's happened to you?"

"Nothing's happened." The man replied. "I'm the as when you met me. Nothing has changed between us at all."

"Yeah..." Nero shook his head and smirked. "Go back to that. Instant attraction...I must have been lucky or stupid. Or both."

"It's a fact, Nero. Nothing has changed; I feel the same way about you now as I did back then. All I ask is that you be patient with me and bide your time. When we are ready, when all is in place, we will both have all we desire."

"Right." Nero shook his head. "You better be on the level here. Because I'm getting sick of waiting."

"I am. When the time is right, Nero." He gave the smallest of nods, acknowledging his partner's words. "Trust me."

Stone City, Clauisa

Oliver, Prefecture VIII
Republic of the Sphere
1 May 3134

Antonin patiently waited in the meeting room, watching the Trivid screen as the news update played. With the HPG network down, news took time to spread across the Republic, let alone the rest of the Inner Sphere. However, despite that, there were still items of interest to be seen. One item in particular grabbed his attention as the screen changed to the image of a serious-looking man, his dirty brown hair tied up into a tight topknot.

“Governor Aaron Sandoval again repeated his call for the raider group known as the Band of Five to be outlawed” the newscaster’s voice over began as Sandoval spoke on-screen. “Citing numerous acts of violence and crimes against humanity allegedly perpetrated by the group, he called for the Republic to take steps against what he described as ‘a terrorist organisation’.”

The scene changed to grainy field footage of a blue-and-tan *Centurion* fighting alongside a squad of battlesuits, snow and rocks surrounding them. “Despite this, the Band of Five’s assisting the Republic in the defence of Terra from the Steel Wolves has raised questions as to the group’s true motives.” A plasma shot from the *Centurion* slammed into a brown and silver *Pack Hunter*, searing armour off its side.

Yes, they saved Terra, but why? He thought to himself as he fingered the datastick in his pocket, the one that had been so useful to his plan so far. *What are they getting out of this?*

“Are we going to be long?” Sveta’s voice interrupted his train of thought. Glancing over his shoulder, he could see the woman pacing the room like a caged lion that was waiting for an opportunity to strike. “What are they doing?”

“Patience.” He replied, still thumbing the datastick. “This is not easy for either of them. Both of them have a lot more on the line then either of us does, and you know it.”

“*Da*, but I still do not like waiting.” She continued. “Why bother calling me now? Why not wait until this is all in place?”

“Because it would take time to get a message to Solaris and get you and your ‘Mech back, then get everything together.” He simply explained. “This is simply the easiest way to do it.”

She grinned back at him. “Damn you and your logic. Always being reasonable.”

“Someone has to be.” He playfully shot back, which promoted a round of raucous laughter from the woman.

“You have a point.” She conceded. “Very well then; we wait.” She glanced over at the trivid screen, the display showing images of fresh fighting in other parts of the Republic. “Busy universe, huh? So much for Stone’s peace.”

Maybe I can do a little bit to change that. He thought to himself, continuing to thumb the datastick. *Maybe.*

A knock at the door interrupted his thoughts, Antonin quickly standing as it opened. “Well?” He began as a woman stepped into the room, closing the door behind her. “How did it go?”

Even if she hadn’t been wearing her uniform, Alexa Shepard’s bearing was unmistakable. While only of average height and build, she carried herself with a straight-backed air of authority and discipline, one that made her military background clear. It was further reinforced by her narrow face and sharp features, with ice-blue eyes and hair in a ruler-straight, shoulder-length square cut.

The only thing that detracted from the image was the jagged scar that ran down the right side of her face, one that stood in stark contrast to the rest of her clean-cut, almost spotless presentation.

"It was not easy." She began, her tone clean and crisp. "However, I was able to convince him to do what we needed. His aid did not come cheap, but the authority of my office, combined with the information you provided to me—" Alexa gave the slightest of nods to him. "—was enough to sell him on the task at hand. He's given me his word that he'll be on his way as soon as possible. At this point, our plan is good to go."

"Thank you, Lady Shepard." Antonin gave the slightest of bows. "Your aid has been invaluable so far."

"You can dispense with the title, Antonin." The Republic Knight replied. "We've known each other far too long to stand on formalities."

"And I would not have addressed you as such anyway." Sveta added, glancing over at her. The two could not have made for a more stark contrast, Antonin noted. Alexa's polished and precise bearing against Sveta's rough edges and scruffy presentation had always made for an amusing image, especially in past.

"Of course not. You never were ones for rules, or procedures."

Sveta laughed. "You never change, you know that?" She shook her head. "I was not surprised that you became a Knight, you know? You have that nice, clean nature that looks so good on the recruitment posters." Despite her words, her voice spoke of respect for the other woman.

"I do my best, which is not easy, all things considered." Alexa simply replied. "Personally, I don't know what was the bigger stretch; my talking him into betraying a trusted employer, or Antonin talking me into this plan in the first place."

"I appreciate your help, Alexa." He simply said, his tone honest.

"Don't think I'm doing this for you, though. I'm doing this for the Republic. And if this goes badly, I know that I will have to answer for it."

"No need to." Antonin stated. "It's my arse in the sling if this screws up, not yours. But if it does work out, we'll be in the clean and nobody will be any the wiser, just like the good old days."

"The good old days..." The knight rubbed her scar with one finger. "I suppose that's why he chose you for this job as well, Sveta?"

The larger woman shrugged. "Maybe. Or maybe I am the only person who will still talk to him." She narrowed her eyes. "Did you try to contact anyone else, then?"

"No HPG network makes it harder than you'd think. I simply went for the person I knew would be easiest to find." He admitted.

"And a Knight to add weight to your plan." Alexa finished.

"That too." He nodded. "And besides, last time we did this, it all worked out. Everyone got what they wanted — more or less."

Shepard gave him the quickest of glances. "Very well then. Although I wish I could know more about your source."

"Sorry." He admitted. "At this point, I think that it's best that nobody knows who they are." *For all of us, especially me.*

**Killosh Industries Compound, Vidya
Bharat, Prefecture IV
Republic of the Sphere
23 May 3134**

As she woke, Juanita glanced over at the form lying next to her in her bunk, recognising the tangle of blond hair with Nero Nowen. With the slightest of regretful moans, she lifted the sheet, matching the tattoos on his back with her own memories of the man, as well as confirming that both of them were, indeed, naked.

Which means that last night really did happen. Fantastic.

She'd been hoping that she'd imagined it all, or it had all been a dream bought on by too much drinking. That was, in turn fuelled not by the regret over what they did, but the fact that it had been so incredibly disappointing. Not just 'fantasy she'd held for years but it hadn't lived up to' disappointing, but 'really bad sex any way you look at it' disappointing.

Well, what's done is done. No regrets, just move on.

She quietly clambered out of bed, dressing and collecting her satchel as she went, figuring that Nero would be out for a long time anyway. Despite having made it big and had more money to waste in the last few months then she could have imagined, for some reason, Juanita kept coming back to streetwear she'd always preferred. True, a lot of it was now designer label stuff, but the look had remained largely unchanged.

Juanita grabbed a quick bite to eat at the cafeteria, keeping a careful eye, as always, as to who was around. Despite being with the Band of Five for over six months now, she'd made relatively few acquaintances from their ranks. While, yes, she had become popular due to her actions and the success they'd bought, there were only a couple of people who she was on a first-name basis with. One of which was still probably dreaming of bizarre fantasies where he was the sex god he claimed to be.

Dismissing the thought, she stepped outside, her pack with her. Bulgarin had not listed any specific activities for the day, which meant that they were largely free for now. However, for the most part, their movements were still restricted. As she'd expected, the presence of the force encamped in the Killosh industries compound was a secret, one that few people on the world were aware of outside of the factory grounds. *Makes you wonder how many strings were pulled to make it happen.*

It was that fact which made the two figures she spied stand out even more then they should have. A pair of men, both middle-aged and of obvious Asian decent, they wore sharp, Han-inspired suits that matched their serious demeanours. That the pair of them were clearly looking around at the men and machines present meant that they couldn't have been simply visiting businessmen, as it was obvious that they were aware of all that was going on.

What made things even more complicated was the trio of figures accompanying them. A pair of armed soldiers followed them, wearing padded body armour and carrying top-of-the line assault rifles, their blue uniforms were rather starkly neat and professional compared to what she saw out of the Band's forces. *Not locals then either*, she added before eyeballing the woman leading them, obviously their guide. Despite the fact that they were clad in an incredibly expensive suit and matching dark glasses, it was obviously Blackrock, the sniper acting as if this came naturally to her.

What's she doing showing around a pair of guys who look like my dad? She wondered, the expressions of stoic silence in the face of obvious distaste the men wore reminding her uncomfortably of the last conversation she'd had with her father. *Or, for that matter, any conversation we had.* It also made her remember that she had to finish off her latest letter home, but for the moment, she had something more interesting on her mind.

She kept an eye on them, casually moving in amongst the other soldiers present while watching the small group move around. The presence of assault rifles was enough to keep a fair cordon around the two suits, allowing them to take a look at, apparently, whatever they wanted. To her surprise, that included the bays where their BattleMechs were kept, the pair showing a lot of interest in the collection of machines present.

It was not too long afterwards that she was forced to give up watching them, their group entering a building that she knew was being used as their field command centre. The pair of armed guards on the doors was enough to tell her that she shouldn't even bother trying to press her luck. *Still, it makes one wonder what's going on here.*

"Fascinating show, wasn't it?"

Juanita turned around to see the scarred woman, the one who had recruited her and been the closest thing she had to a friend within the Band, standing behind her. "Thought you'd be there." She casually replied. "spose you can't tell me what that's all about, right?"

"Sorry. Rules and all." She shrugged dismissively. "But I'll say that I had a hand in making it happen."

Juanita knew not to press the issue. "So now you're out of the loop?"

"They have more important people to meet than me. I'm just a recruiter." It was also a blatant lie, but one they both accepted. Either way, it told Juanita that, whatever the pair were involved in, it went far over her head. "Though I'll guess that we'll be seeing more work really soon."

"Figures. Probably should make the most of the downtime then."

The woman smiled. "I was thinking of hitting the beach myself. Nice day for it."

Juanita smiled at the thought. "Sounds great. Gimme a few to finish up my latest letter home and I'll be there."

They had their day-off routine down to an art now; they met in the car park and tossed each other something. Juanita's was always a datastick with her latest letter to be sent on; she had no idea if they were even reaching their destination and she certainly didn't expect a reply if they were, but it didn't hurt to try.

In return, the woman would throw her a fat envelope stuffed with C-Bills, one that was supplementing what she was making as a field agent and MechWarrior. The result was that she was rather liberally rolling in cash. Even after blowing huge sums on self-indulgent spending (her car being one of the most visible beneficiaries) she was still, to the best of her figuring, the wealthiest she'd ever been in her life.

From there, they'd pick a destination and drive. While they didn't race like they had on Mara, there was always a degree of friendly competition between the pair of them, each one of them doing their best to out-perform the other. It had become its own little celebration of their mutual likes of fast cars, driving dangerously and, amusingly, loud music, the scarred woman having finally won out in imposing her musical tastes.

And after last night, I don't think I ever want to hear Death to the Reverse Side again. The music wasn't all that was crap about them. A part of her was feeling foolish for ever liking Nero in the first place. Sure, he was one of only two people in the Band who were actively nice to her, and he certainly didn't seem to have an ulterior motive for doing such. Still, crap sex was crap sex, and certainly his drug-addled smirking act was definitely wearing thin. *Makes me wonder how he keeps his 'Mech.*

The thought was driven from her mind as their cars arrived at the beach, a brilliant strip of white sand stretching out to meet a mixture of blue ocean and white surf. Between the vista before her and the

clear blue sky above, the scene might as well have come straight off of a postcard or a holovid ad. "Nice." She managed as she clambered from the Phoenix, casually throwing off her shirt and shorts. She was rather fond of her swimsuit, a racy two-piece she'd picked up while on a spending spree. *The more you pay, the less you get.*

"Thought you'd like it." The woman continued, unbuttoning her own shirt. "I like to come here myself when I get a chance. Since most of the creeps aren't allowed off the reservation, it means I get some privacy and to relax every now and then."

Juanita nodded in agreement, then whistled loudly. "Damn, that's some crazy ink." Her eyes were drawn to the patterns tattooed across the woman's arms, ones she'd only seen in part before only to find they were far more extensive than she had imagined. Crawling across her shoulders, they met in the middle of her back, crawling up to her neck and down her spine, a mess of ornate patterns and swirls that followed no real order or plan.

"What can I say? The first one was the obligatory teenage screw-up. It went wild from there." She shrugged. "Kind of surprised you don't have any yourself."

"Could never pick one I liked or come up with a design on my own." Juanita casually replied. "And I figured I'd probably get bored of it anyway."

"Fair enough then." She commented as she walked towards the beach, towel in hand.

"Hey, I don't have tats, you don't drink." Juanita continued, waking alongside her. "There's a few more things we don't have in common."

"What makes you think I don't drink?"

"Because I've never seen you touch a drop of booze ever."

"Ah, but maybe I drink when you're not around."

"Naw." She shook her head. "You're out with a friend having a good time and watching them chug back the cold ones by the caseload. Nobody, but nobody, would do that and not swing back at least one of their own unless they were a complete teetotaler. Thus, you don't drink."

"Well observed." The woman nodded. "You got one up on me."

"All I got on you, miss no first name." It was a small victory, but she over-played it, grinning like an idiot. "And I bet there's nobody who could – or would – tell me it anyway."

She nodded. "So how are things going for you?" her tone was surprisingly serious compared to their prior levity. "I mean, are things shaping up how you were expecting them to?"

Juanita looked around the beach, as if waiting for some sign or signal; a tiny part of her imagined that Blackrock was lurking in the distance, ready to eliminate her if she gave the wrong answer. *You're paranoid, that's what you are.* "Truth? Yeah, it's pretty good." She confirmed as she began walking again. "I get a 'Mech and a heap of cash, and people look up to me and know not to screw with me. I get to be number one. What more could I want?"

"Don't mind what you do?"

"I mind the people more than anything else. But then, I knew what made up this group when I got into it, so I can't really complain there. I mean, it's not I'm unfamiliar with hanging around criminals by any stretch, but this is a lot more intense than I expected."

"People either sink or swim around here." The woman confirmed.

"Yeah. I got assets that keep me above water, so that helps. I mean, it's not like it's bad or anything, but I just don't like the people. Though money and 'Mech trumps all that so it equals out." She grinned. "But if you gave me a choice, I'd happily keep the axe murderers for what it's gotten me."

"I see." She seemed to nod, as if she was confirming something to herself. "And any specific people that stick out?"

"Well start with the boss... Bulgarin seems to respect me, given what I do and what I've gotten him. However, I don't think he likes me, but then I don't think that he likes anybody. Man seems to be permanently grumpy about something." She began, counting off on her fingers as she talked. "Ross also seems to appreciate what I do, but she seems to hate my guts for no real reason. Probably a MechWarrior versus tanker thing."

"That's about it." The woman confirmed. "Though Ross is a professional. You don't need to worry about her not liking you. She won't ever take it beyond a personal level and won't stick you for her own reasons. And besides, she feels that way about all MechWarriors."

"Good to know." She continued. "Then there's Nero... man, I really don't know why I liked the guy. I mean, he acts all friendly and the like, and certainly he's stuck up for me and been helping me out a lot but... he's still going on like this is one big joke, like he's on tour still and this is a part of his act. He's probably stoned half the time and drunk most of the rest. And he keeps trying to get into my pants."

"Has he?"

"Well..." She turned away for a moment, realising that it was as much a conformation as anything else.

"It happens" She was rather dismissive. "You've been a fan of his for years, and now you're sharing a room with him. And besides, odds are on he probably wouldn't remember it anyway." The woman casually rubbed her scar. "We all make mistakes."

Juanita raised a brow for a moment at the last remark, wondering what the woman meant by it. *Was that a conscious gesture on her part, as if to tell me that she's screwed up as well? Or is it a simple reflex?* She looked towards the beach for a moment. *You tell me nothing, but are you telling me something now? Or hiding even more than usual.*

"So how about Allen?" She spoke up. "After all, he's why you're here. When I called you in, he could have just as easily had you taken out for being a threat."

"True that." Juanita stopped, putting down her towel. "He's definitely looking out for me, that much is clear. He's made me well aware that I'm working for him and not the Band, but at the same time, that I'm getting so much out of it. And he's also given me plenty of incentive both to do well, but also not to screw up."

"So how do you feel about him as a person?"

"He scares the crap out of me." She admitted, her tone frank.

"Means you're still human." The woman finished. "Surf looks great, doesn't it?"

It was a hint, but she didn't need much encouragement. Dropping what she had, Juanita walked towards the water, picking up speed as she went before all but jumping in. While it was a warm day, the temperature of the ocean hit her as she dipped below the surface, refreshing in its coolness. After the heat of piloting a BattleMech in combat, she'd learned to appreciate anything that allowed her to cool off, and this was as good as any.

She swam out, the feeling of the water and the effort of swimming soon displacing her concern over

what she'd said to her friend. All of a sudden none of them mattered; not, Nero, not Bulgarin or even Allen. Instead there was the simple joy of swimming and relaxing, of not having to fight or infiltrate, to con, to worry about keeping secrets or anything. And as much as she liked piloting a BattleMech – and she couldn't think why anyone wouldn't – this was a simpler, more basic form of enjoyment, one that was hard to refuse the lure of.

And so she swam, diving in and out of the surf, making her attempts to catch waves and ride them or simply bob up and down in place. She lost track of how long she was out there, but also found that she didn't care.

As she came up from being dumped by another wave, something caught her eye. The scarred woman was standing at the water's edge, waving to her. *Something's up*. She swam back in, moving as fast as she could to get back to the beach, all but running once she could. As she approached, she saw the expression on the woman's face, one of deliberate concern. "What is it?"

"Just got a call from HQ. Something important has come up that they need me for right away."

"Bad?"

The woman nodded. "Could be. You better head on back with me. Sorry to cut your beach holiday short, but we might have a new job already."

On occasion, there were moments that Goren Bulgarin wished that he *wasn't* in a position of power and authority, that, instead, he was just a MechWarrior. Usually these came when Allen was 'suggesting' a new plan to him and he knew that he had to agree with the masked man's words, regardless of how he felt. It was at those moments that he realised just how fleeting his position was, how in the end, he was only there because he was useful to someone else.

This wasn't like that, but, in many ways, he wished that it was Allen telling him what to do right now. That way he'd at least have some certainty as to what was going on.

"Vandar." He began, looking at the short, heavyset man across the room, the only other person present in his office right now. "Tell me exactly what this is all about, and don't leave anything out."

Vandar Xiaphos nodded to him, stepping up to the table and placing a small projector on it. "Trust me, Bulgarin, I wouldn't have rushed here if it wasn't important. I just lost out on what could be the find of my lifetime, and I think you need to know why."

He nodded carefully as he listened to the mercenary commander. Xiaphos had arrived on-planet in a shuttle mere hours ago, and had been rushed here by VTOL as soon as he was down. The man wouldn't reveal why he'd suddenly travelled halfway across the Republic, only saying that it was vitally important, and that he needed to speak to whoever was in charge – which was, supposedly, Goren.

Today was, of course, the perfect day for this to happen. They had very important visitors on site, ones who were fully aware of who the Band of Five were and what they were doing on-site. While no words had been said, Goren knew where the men had come from and why Blackrock was ensuring that their every request was met. To make matters worse, TF Allen was absent, the mysterious man apparently dealing with those higher up the food chain than him. Thus it had fallen to him, Goren Bulgarin, to get the truth behind the mercenary's urgent errand.

The situation was eased by the fact that he had worked for Xiaphos in the past and that he knew the man well. It was probably, he reflected, the reason why they'd come here first. Despite the fact that Goren was a criminal, a raider, a killer and a member of what amounted to a professional terrorist organisation, he was also a person that Vander could trust.

"We were following up a lead on Van Diemen IV." The mercenary commander began, pressing several

keys on the projector. "We had begun a dig in the Burine region where my sources had placed a stash of Blakeist weapons and artefacts, stuff that could be very valuable not only due to their historical value, but also their utility in the current climate."

Goren nodded, following his meaning while considering the implications. "So what happened?"

The projector started up, displaying a map of the region. "We found something all right. But it wasn't what we expected at all. It was a lot more." Several red blotches appeared on the map, the rotating diagram indicating underground regions. "The place underwent a big mining boom in the late 30th century before collapsing a few decades in. We figured that the good stuff would be hidden in the caves. What we found, on the other hand..."

Another button brought up several images, depicting monolithic concrete walls and industrial equipment. "These images were taken by one of our initial exploratory probes. While they're pretty crappy, you get the idea." Another one came up, depicting heavy industrial frames and rigs, ones similar in configuration to those found in the Killosh Industries factories.

"Is this..." He trailed off as the full implication of what he was seeing dawned.

"Aye." Xiaphos nodded. "Take a look."

Another image depicted a BattleMech part-concealed in a frame, clearly only partially complete. The machine was rather striking and unusual, with a broad, flat torso consisting of swept-back angular plates, as well as one visible arm, its sleek frame ending with a nimble three-fingered claw. Most striking, however, was another view of the torso; where the BattleMech's head should have been was, instead, a gaping hollow, one that looked like it would be suited for installing a weapon.

"Celestial." He whispered, a mixture of awe and terror in his voice. While he was born well after the Jihad, Goren had seen pictures and read stories of what the Word had done. The Celestial Omnimechs, piloted by their elite cyborg soldiers, horrors that were more man than machine, were probably the most visual, most striking image of their terror. They were supposed to be extinct, but if what the image was showing him was true...

"A secret robe factory." Xiaphos muttered back. "What we thought was a storehouse turned out to be a damn factory. The value of that is... immeasurable."

Goren gave a nodding reply as his mind ran through the scenarios. Having a BattleMech factory would be an immeasurable gain in and of itself, but one capable of building such advanced units? "Do you have any idea of what state it's in?"

"Wish I could say." The mercenary shook his head. "This is what we could see from our initial probing of the site. Our guess is that the robes mothballed it in a hurry and deliberately concealed it when they abandoned the world. Maybe they planned to take it back, or maybe they had some nefarious long-term plan. All I can say is that we found it first."

"But something went wrong, I assume. Otherwise you wouldn't be here giving me a sketchy report."

"Aye." Xiaphos glanced up at the raider. "Not too long after we cracked the site, a RAF force, headed up by a damn Knight marched onto the site. Seems someone else knew about the site, and the Republic wasn't ready to let us walk off with the tech. And, as much as I'd have loved to pick the place over for all it was worth, the situation was against us."

He gave a slow shake of his head. "Prefecture VII close to the core, the Republic's pretty strong. The Knight made it clear that they were here on the Exarch's orders to seize the site and all that was present. We were given a choice; either vacate or be forced off. And while we might have been able to handle those guys in a fight, I know implications when I see them."

"Strip you of your MRBC rating, have you labelled as outlaws." Goren finished. "You'd be blacklisted

and never be able to get legit work again.”

“Too much of a price to pay.” Vander agreed. “We took precautions; I had my men collapse the entrance to the facility that we found, which means that it’s gonna take the Republic – or anyone else – a while to get in and strip the joint. Also, we took all our material with us, so they don’t have its exact size or location. Which brings me to the real reason I’m here.”

“You figured that if you couldn’t have what was in there, you could at least screw the Republic over for taking it from you.” Bulgarin stated.

“Aye, that is true.” Xiaphios agreed, offering the smallest of smiles. “I figured that an old member of my unit would like to know about this, one who has provided me with plenty of work and a few shots at relics on the side. So if I can’t have it, I figured that he could.” Vander rubbed his thick beard for a moment. “And while I know you’d love a BattleMech factory, I’m sure that you couldn’t care less about, say, any robe relics that may be there.”

“Vandar, if this is what it looks like, I will make sure that you can have all the robe artefacts you want.” He stated. “I’m going to need everything you had-“

“-and you shall have it-“

“-and I’ll put this to the bosses.” *Allen will want this, I can tell. And maybe, just maybe, I can get out from under his thumb.* “But the value of what you’ve shown me here...”

“Yeah.” The mercenary finished. “Just wish I could be there to see what you find.”

Goren gave a small nod of acknowledgement, his mind busy racing through the possibilities. It was almost too much to think about; a secret factory, one that they could take and make their own. Being Allen’s fall guy was a small price to pay for what this represented; all his regrets about his position and how he had earned it were swept aside, replaced with a sudden, burning desire to find, and take, whatever was in there.

Rather than the blaring metal or thirteen-hundred year old pop songs she preferred to listen to as she drove, the Scarred Woman had kept things on the quiet during her ride back to the Killos industries compound. When Juanita had managed to pull level with her car, she’d briefly glimpsed her on a headset, talking to unseen parties while driving, a look of obvious concern on her face. And while Juanita hadn’t been able to catch exactly what the woman had been saying, it was clear that whatever it was, the matter was of the utmost importance.

So much so that she can’t tell me, Juanita figured, knowing full well that, despite her position as a MechWarrior, she was still just a low-ranking soldier. *Of course, it’s not like she tells me anything anyway,* she added, a stark acknowledgment of how little she knew about her friend. *I mean, Allen will probably pull me aside, give me some special plan for what he wants me to do and all, so I get more that way. Still would be nice to know something every now and then though.*

She gave up trying to listen in or follow what was going on, instead dropping back and being content to follow the other car for the moment. Again, her friend wasn’t even trying to race; in fact, she was being surprisingly cautious given her usual love of friendly competition. *Must be serious.* Juanita threw open the volume of her car stereo to full, a selection of Warhorse tracks cued up; however, even after a few minutes she found that she was still driven to distraction by the situation. *Damn it, I so need to know what all this is about right now.*

They reached the compound, the scarred woman all but leaping out of her car as soon as she was stopped. “With me.” She stated as soon as Juanita had clambered from her Phoenix, her tone making it sound more like a command than anything else. “I’m going to find out what’s going on, and I want you with me. It could be very important to both of us.”

Both of us? She wondered as she followed the other woman into the compound. *Or all of us? Is she talking about her and me or the Band of Five as a whole?* She glanced around, noting more of the blue-clad soldiers she'd seen earlier. *Wonder where they came from.* Wary eyes watched the rooftops, in case Blackrock was there, trading her sharp suit for a sniper rifle.

"There." The woman spoke up, indicating towards an entrance, the same one she'd seen the sniper and her guests step into. Another man was emerging, short and solidly built, with a thick, curly black beard. She recognised him quickly, Vander Xiaphos, a mercenary commander that the Band had worked with before. He'd been in charge of the battle of Frostwolf Village, the first she'd been a part of as a member of the Band of Five.

So what's he doing here? This some new mission or what? She asked herself as the pair of them advanced towards him. For his part, the mercenary looked over to them, nodding in recognition towards the scarred woman. *And why am I not surprised that they know each other? Damn it, woman, you are well connected, aren't you?*

"Vandar." She began leaning close to the man in an almost conspiratorial way. "Is what I'm hearing true?"

He glanced over in her direction. "Can we talk?"

"She's good." The scarred woman nodded. "I vouch for her."

"And you've done me well in past." He shot back. "You've never steered me wrong."

"And you got me where I am today." She replied. "You know I'd never betray that trust."

So what is going on here? Juanita asked herself. *Because this isn't just two old friends saying hello.*

"Right then." He nodded. "What you've heard is true. I found a BattleMech factory, and I've handed what I have over to your boss. He was going to tell Allen and the others, but you will have to take it by force. The Republic doesn't like mercenaries digging for restricted technologies"

Juanita swallowed loudly, her mind reeling at the possibilities of what he had just said. However, she kept quiet, wanting to learn more about what was going on, not willing to risk interrupting the pair of them.

"What are we talking about here?" The woman asked.

"Subterranean, Hidden and forgotten. Robe." He simply stated. "Everything I could have wanted, really."

"Robe?" She narrowed her eyes. "Is this for real?"

Xiaphos sighed. "Remember the Tomb of Saint Offel? You were on that dig" He asked, looking at her. "It's every bit the find that one was."

"I see." The woman nodded slowly.

"I've given you all I can." The mercenary finished. "Bulgarin has all the info. No offence, but I want to get moving before Republic Intel can place me here, breaking in on their little scam." He offered her a small smile. "I wish you all the best, both of you. You're going to need it."

"Thanks."

He turned to Juanita. "I wish we could have met under better circumstances. If you are good enough to earn her trust, then you are a rare person indeed." He gave the smallest of nods, before turning to

leave.

In the distance, Juanita could hear the sound of a helicopter warming up, presumably Xiaphos' ride out of there. *Well that was very weird*, she thought to herself, glancing over at her companion. The woman was watching him, determination clear in her eyes. *So what's going on here? What aren't they telling me, besides everything?*

Nero had been disappointed when he woke up to find Juanita gone. A part of him figured that she just needed some air after the best screw of her life, but another part was a little apprehensive about matters. After all, while it had been fun (and damn it if she wasn't everything he'd hoped for and then some!) there were certain people that wouldn't be happy to find out what the pair of them had done last night.

After a search, he'd given up looking for her, figuring that she'd gone out for another day trip. He couldn't fault her for that; after all, he got to sneak off the reservation as well, and he was sure that he was having more fun on his expeditions than she was. Instead, he'd been focused more on the on-site visitors that were being shown around. He had a pretty good idea who they were and why they were here, but also knew that Allen would tell him afterwards.

And just when he thought that would be dull, then something big had happened. A helicopter had flown in, resulting in a clamp-down of sorts. There were guards all over the place, and not just the regular thugs that the Band employed. These were professional soldiers, ones who were more than just criminals with guns and bad intentions. He'd seen them before, and knew that if they were out in force, then something big was going on.

He'd chased down Barry Mangonel, sending the former cop off to track down more information on what was going on. Again, he could have waited to find out, but this was something big, something that was happening right now; asking Allen later would be no good to him and reduce the opportunities available. Besides, deep down, there was a burning curiosity that needed to be sated immediately.

The first big hint had come when he'd seen Vander Xiaphos on-site, the mercenary apparently leaving after a briefing. If he was just taking off, then the odds were that he wasn't setting up another contract or planning another operation. *Of course, what it could mean was that he's found something big, and wants us to know it.* He grinned as his mind ran over the thoughts. *And whatever it is, Allen will know, which means I will as well.*

Keeping a low profile, he watched the man with eager anticipation, only to have it vanish as a pair of women approached him, both of which he instantly recognised. He could see the scarred woman talking with Xiaphos, something that he'd expected given their mutual past and her often acting as a liaison. What annoyed him was that Kwan was also listening in on the conversation – clearly she was deemed important enough to know straight away about whatever was going on.

And yet I'm not. It burned him to think that, to know that she was getting an advantage on him. To make it worse, it was far from the first time it had happened. She was Allen's favourite, no doubt about it. She'd done so much for him, won battles and twisted the odds. He'd benefitted, of course, riding the coat-tails of Allen's success, but it was clear that the masked man found her more useful than he was.

Damn it. What happened to us? It was like he'd told Allen on the *Achenar Provider*; they were wasting their opportunities. *No, that's not it. He has a new toy, one that's far more useful to him than I am. As long as she's there, I'm just along for the ride. Damn it, everything was going well until she showed up.* He snarled quietly, watching the three of them talk. *Would have been better if Allen had killed her on Mizar. We'd still have Bulgarin as a figurehead, but without her to screw it all up.*

An idea formed in his mind, one that was enough to give him pause. *Hey chica, consider yourself*

lucky that you got to bang me when you had the chance. Because pretty soon, you ain't gonna be any use to anyone.

Juanita hadn't been able to get an ear in on what had happened behind the scenes. She figured that the Scarred Woman, Allen and Bulgarin had put together an assessment of the information they'd been handed and were working on a plan to take the factory, something that she wouldn't have been involved with. However, at the same time, she figured that it was more than likely that she and Blackrock would be dropped on-world in advance to help soften things up as they often did.

Out of curiosity, Juanita had read up on the 'Saint Offel' that Xiaphos had mentioned. He was an obscure early 23rd century religious figure, one whose sainthood wasn't widely recognised. Xiaphos' team had found his tomb a couple of years before the Blackout, which was considered to be a big deal in very limited circles. Certainly from what she knew of the man, it didn't seem to be the sort of thing he'd be chasing after. And a BattleMech factory was a far bigger find than some musty tomb.

Archaeologists. Go figure. She wanted to dismiss her concerns, but a tiny part of her refused to be quiet and shut up about it.

Regardless, it was a welcome break from a rather tense night. While she'd kept a lid on what she'd heard, there were more than a few rumours flying around the compound about what had been going on. The presence of the first set of visitors was fuel enough, but the swarms of armed soldiers that had deployed across the compound only added to the stories going around. She still wasn't sure what to make of them. Clearly professional soldiers, they carried themselves more like regular army than corporate security, while their equipment only emphasised the point.

So it was with some relief that they were called to a meeting the next morning, even if the room was full of hushed whispers and murmurs. A glance at Bulgarin told her even more; he was clearly tired, the bags under his eyes making it clear that their commander hadn't slept much, if at all. *I guess he was up planning and talking with the higher-ups all night*, she figured. *Don't blame him.*

Allen was also present, but if the masked man showed no signs of the same stress that Bulgarin was under. Instead, he was standing straight, arms crossed and apparently looming over the rest of the room as he always did. *Like I could tell. He could be asleep in there*, she ruefully added as she glanced around the room, eyes taking in the others present and measuring responses.

Blackrock was there, looking her usual trim, calm and professional self, although the dark glases she wore could have been hiding any signs of exhaustion. Even after months of working alongside her on infiltration missions, Juanita still didn't know much about the sniper. It was clear that there was still more to her than she was letting on, but that didn't tell her anything. *She was with some of the blue-clad soldiers earlier. I wonder if she's connected to them. Maybe she is one of them.*

There was no sign of the Scarred Woman, of course. It would have been more surprising if she was there.

Other faces in the crowd were the usual ones she'd come to expect in the operations she'd undertaken for the Band of Five. Nass Tshuma seemed to have reigned in his usual look of pent-up rage for the moment, instead apparently aware of just how important this situation. "Large Sarge" Roscoe was by him, showing a definite interest in what was going on, while Kirsten Ross was acting with a professional detachment, her face an unreadable mask.

Next to her was Rudolph Kundrea, the commander of Despoiler Company. One of the inmates of the Fletcher prison liberated during her first Band of Five operation, he had shown considerable skill as an armoured commander, enough to see him rapidly rise within the Band's ranks. She'd gathered that he was one of the 'bosses' within the prison, and that had translated well. She'd also seen the man talking offside with Allen, making her wonder if his rise to power wasn't aided by other means.

He and Ross had a distinct rivalry going, one that she could understand the origins of. She was a professional soldier, he was a prison thug made good, and they were of the same rank, so it seemed inevitable. Despite that, a tiny part of her wondered if there wasn't something more at play, or if someone had been deliberately encouraging the pair.

"Right." Goren began. "You've probably heard a lot of crap by now. It's all true." His eyes glared out over the assembled crowds as he let his words sink in. "We got a tipoff on a BattleMech factory, hidden on Van Diemen IV. We have to be fast about this; the Republic is aware it's there and have sent a Knight to take over the site. Hopefully, we can get there before they drop any other forces on-world or, even worse, someone else finds out about this."

"This is not going to be our normal sort of op. No prepping the ground, no taking out defenders ahead of the assault. We don't have time to waste; instead, we'll be going in hard and fast, hitting them hard before they can get too much off-world."

That's a surprise, she thought. A quick look around the room told her that others were thinking the same thing. Blackrock, however, had remained level, presumably being in on this from the beginning.

"Instead, we will be dropping our 'Mechs on-world. They will establish a beachhead, allowing us to land the main body of our force once it is secure." He looked over the assembled group. "Ravager and Reaper lances will be leading; Nass, I've arranged to have Al-Ashrayaf reassigned to your lance for this operation."

Eight BattleMechs. This is big. Again, a glance around told her that others were thinking the same thing.

"A third lance will be packed in with the tanks and infantry, made up of Industrials." He continued. Allen leaned closer to the man, presumably to whisper something in his ear. Whatever it was, Goren's face made it clear that he didn't like it, but seemed to accept it before going on. "Additionally, we will have Incinerator wing providing aerospace cover for us during the drop and on the ground."

Juanita's mind ran the numbers, quickly figuring that this was the largest Band of Five assault force she had seen or been a part of. *Yeah, this is real urgent.*

"I want all forces ready for loading and departure by no later than 1600 hours." Bulgarin continued. "This is important and I will not tolerate a moment's delay. I'll need to speak to individual officers before we go, and you do not want to miss this. Any mistakes, I will find who is responsible and kill them myself. Now go."

Juanita stood, headed towards the door. There was a lot that she needed to do, and very little time to do it in. However, as she moved to go, she felt a hand on her shoulder. "Move it or lose it, creep." She snarled, without even turning back. When nothing changed, she glanced back at whoever it was, anger building "I said... oh."

"I need to speak to you." Allen replied, his blank helmet yielding no explanation. "Now."

As soon as he was out the door, Nero Nowen broke away from the pack, looking for a single figure in amongst the teeming masses. The situation had changed out of all proportion to his expectations, but at the same time, he was more than willing to take advantage of it. *Allen will ensure that whatever's in there goes to us first.* He thought to himself as he sought out a face in the crowd. *That much I don't have to worry about. Instead I need to make sure it's just ours and nobody else's.*

He spotted the man he was after, Barry Mangonel, a MechWarrior in the loosest sense of the term who normally was a part of Tshuma's Reaper lance. However, whereas Nero's *Centurion* was a born and bred combat machine, Mangonel piloted a modified *Copper SecurityMech*, a glorified Industrial that existed mainly to worry unarmed rioters.

"Barry!" He began, his tone friendly and approachable. "Just the man I was after."

"What do you want?" Mangonel asked, more than a little nervous tension in his voice. Since Nero had first met him, the former Policeman had lost a lot of weight, and his brown hair was now streaked with grey. And Nero had been the reason why.

"I need a favour from you, Barry." Nero continued, acting for all the world like he was the man's best friend.

"Not the corset again." He replied, his words expectant and apprehensive as a result. "It chafes me."

"Oh no, not that." Nero shook his head. "At least, not this time. No, it's something else I want of you, Barry." He put his arm around the other man's shoulder, giving him a friendly smile. "And I know you want to help me, of course."

"Of course." Mangonel nodded, sweat beading his brow.

"Remember that evidence you found on Tshuma, and how you thought it'd be a laugh to influence Bulgarin's trial with it?" He began, looking over the man.

"I do." There was another nervous nod in confirmation. Barry had found that his immediate commander had a taste for women's underwear, and had tried to blackmail him with this fact. Nero had found out, and used that knowledge as leverage against him, trapping the Blackmailer in his own web of influence.

"Right. Now what I need you to do is leak another bit to Nass. Maybe a nice lacy bra, or some slinky panties, or some nice silk stockings. Something that he'd like, you know?" Barry nodded nervously. "But the thing is, I want you to screw it up and make it known who sent it."

"But I—"

"Shh, let me finish, Barry." Nero continued. "You see, I want it to seem like Kwan, Allen's little pet, is the one behind it. I want her to take the rap and suffer the consequences that Nass will be willing to unleash on her. I mean, he's going to be so mad that he's not going to care what Allen thinks, he's just going to want her dead in as painful a way as possible. Got that?"

"Not going to be easy." Barry shook his head. "But doable."

"You're the bent cop, Barry. You're probably a master of faking evidence."

"Well... yes." He admitted.

"See?" Nero gave another board grin. "So remember, make it look like Juanita has been raiding his panty drawer, or else you'll be the one bent over the barrel, not her." He finished, taking his arm off his shoulder. "I know I can count on you, Barry. Don't let me down."

As he walked away, he reflected on the irony of the scam; stuffing Barry in a corset when he was blackmailing somebody else over their cross-dressing habit. However, as amusing as it was, he also wanted the man to have as free a reign as possible to do what he needed. *So enjoy your last days in the limelight, chica. The main act's back, and I'm not going to play backup to anyone any more.*

One relief that Bob Sawyer had felt over his months of imprisonment was the simple fact that he was still alive. It meant that either someone felt he still had some value, or they'd simply forgotten about his existence and were feeding him out of habit. It was a situation that he could live with, as it simply meant that he was most likely going to live, albeit in captivity, for a while to come.

So when someone threw open the door, he was somewhat surprised and disappointed at the same time. It meant that someone still had plans for him, which would almost certainly bode poorly for his continued health.

“Out.” A voice commanded. “Now.”

Sawyer stood and stretched, stepping outside his tiny cell for the first time in what seemed like an eternity. Any pleasure he may have felt immediately died at the sight of the two men waiting by the door; Goren Bulgarin and “Sarge” Roscoe. “So what is this?” He asked, his tone showing a hint of contempt. “Did you need this cell for someone else and decide to kill me to make room?” It was a mixture of jest and a desire to get a serious answer to what he considered a likely scenario.

“Hardly, but you’re going to wish yourself dead anyway.” Bulgarin shot back. “You’ve been reinstated, Sawyer. You’ll be a grunt, a common soldier with no rank, no privileges, nothing. And you’ll be under my command.”

“I see. And my role?”

“There’s a crappy old *Harvester* waiting for you.” He continued. “It’s a rusted hunk of junk that hasn’t been modified and is going to be little more than a death-trap on the battlefield. But it’s yours, so you had better get used to it.”

“An execution by any other name then.” Sawyer observed. “I’d ask why this course of action, but I have a good idea. And I won’t fool myself as to my value here. I am a dead man, after all.”

“Got that right. But before we go, one thing.” Goren replied, nodding to Roscoe. The larger man took his place behind Sawyer, meaty hands wrapped around his arms. “Months ago, you decided that Roscoe got to deal with me. Now I’m not the type to fob off my work. I do it myself.”

He swung forwards, his fist slamming into Sawyer’s stomach. The force of the blow drove into him, pain shooting through his body as a second hit drove the air from his lungs. He wanted to double over, to clutch himself in pain, but Sarge’s grip held him tight, allowing Bulgarin to land blow after blow on his chest and face.

After some time, the assault ended. He had no idea how long, his mind lost in a haze of pain. All he could feel was the wet glob of spit as it hit his swollen cheek. “Now get yourself cleaned up, Soldier.” Goren snarled. “You’ve got a job to do.”

Burine District
Van Diemen IV, Prefecture VII
Republic of the Sphere
14 June 3134

As soon as she’d arrived on-world, Knight Alexa Shepard had set up her command post in the Brunie district at the approximate site of the dig. She’d done such out of a simple prioritisation of targets; despite being a former Blakeist Protectorate and, further back, Terran Hegemony world, Van Diemen IV had very little of any interest to most would-be attackers. At present, the only reason anyone would have to attack the world was there, so it made sense to position her forces to deal with that potential threat.

Not that she had much to work with at present. As suspected, the militia force was sorely under-equipped and under-manned, having no BattleMechs and minimal Aerospace assets to their name. Being deep in what was one of the most peaceful prefectures and not having any priority targets meant that funding the militia was well down the priority list. However, she also had to make do with those assets. She’d only bought herself, her BattleMech and her support personnel. It was all

that the Republic could spare at the moment.

And if we don't stop the violence now, we may not even have that. Despite the lack of HPG network, she'd heard reports of the recent Cappelán invasion in Prefecture V. This was no mere incursion, but rather a full-fledged effort to reclaim worlds lost to the Republic decades ago. *We cannot afford distractions at this point. Hopefully what happens here will eliminate some of those problems.*

She paced the length of the Praetorian Mobile Headquarters' command centre, eyes on the communications technicians and their equipment. An hour ago, satellites had reported the event she had been expecting since she arrived on-world, the shockwaves and disruptions from a jumpship entering the system at a pirate point.

Due to the nature of the K-F drive and its operations it was impossible to sneak into a solar system that had even the most minimal of warning systems. However, use of a pirate point could not only lengthen the time needed to confirm an arrival, but also made movements harder to predict and forces harder to identify. And, of course, it also reduced the transit times from the jump point to the planet, giving the defenders less time to respond.

Now she was waiting the second part, the identity of the intruding ship. Despite the stress of the situation, she'd managed to keep her composure, her uniform and appearance impeccably neat and parade-ground perfect. *I just wish that I could get that information now and stop waiting. There's too much riding on this to have any uncertainty.*

"Lady Shepard!" A communications technician spoke up. "I've received a signal from a satellite; we have transponder IDs on the ships."

Ships? She asked herself as she walked towards the console. *Intel was expecting only one.* "What do we have, soldier?" Alexa asked as she leaned over his shoulder.

"Invader-Class Xim the Despot and Merchant-class Twilight Runner." He spoke up. "They're both in our records."

I was expecting one or the other, but not both. She ran the numbers through her head. *Five dropships, which could have any combination of forces. A lot bigger than we had hoped for.* "Understood. Keep monitoring the situation, and let me know the instant that anything changes."

She turned away from the console, walking back through the Mobile HQ to the commander's office. Not bothering to announce her presence, she stepped in to the room. "Major Odatta." She began. "They've arrived, just as we suspected."

"I see." Odatta replied, nervously glancing up from his personal computer. A slim and nervous man, his face was dominated by thick glasses and a pencil-thin moustache. The commander of the militia battalion she had commandeered, the man's record showed him to be an efficient organiser and skilled at logistics, but having no real combat experience. Instead, he'd risen on his ability to run a tight ship. That was an asset during peacetime, but those days had passed. "What do they have?"

"Their force composition is unclear as yet, but they have two jumpships." Alexa stated, not holding back. "So they've bought a larger force than I expected."

"I see." He nodded, trying badly to hide his clear apprehension. "Do you think that you can handle them then?"

I hope so, she thought to herself. Even with her preparation, there were still a lot of variables that she couldn't account for at this point, too many unknowns to deal with. However, she had not gotten to where she was now by avoiding conflict, and couldn't hope to help the Republic by backing down. *And at this point, there is no turning back, regardless of what they bring. All we can do is fight to the best of our ability.*

"I can." She finished. "Major, I am formally taking charge of your forces and placing them under my command. From here on in, I will be in charge of this operation." *And taking responsibility for whatever happens.*

**Dropship *Southern Sun*, Inbound
Van Diemen System, Prefecture VII
Republic of the Sphere
17 June 3134**

The *Aurora*-class *Southern Sun* burned towards Van Diemen IV, the leader of a three-ship pack. Having detached from the *Xim the Despot* following the in-system jump, it and two other ships, a *Leopard* and a similar *Leopard CV* had formed the vanguard of the Band of Five's attack force. While they carried only a small portion of the overall attack force, their heavy armament and specific payloads made them far better to lead the attack than the larger and slower *Mules* that comprised the rest of the fleet.

An alarm rang out within the ship, followed by a broadcast announcing that enemy fighters had been detected and were inbound. A brief order from Bulgarin had sent the Mechwariorors to their machines, completing the final pre-drop checklists before their 'Mechs were encased in the armoured cocoons that would be their only protection from the heat of re-entry, as well as weapons fire from any aircraft on the way down.

From what Juanita had seen, their invasion force should have aerospace superiority over the planetary defenders, but she still couldn't help but feel nervous. During the drop, her 'Mech would be little more than a target, with no capacity to manoeuvre or defend itself, a situation that she didn't relish. It was one of the numerous risks involved with a combat drop like this.

Of course, what was really bothering her was the simple fact that it was her first ever atmospheric drop. She'd gone through the procedure innumerable times in the simulators, knew what to do and what to expect and had the whole thing explained endlessly. It didn't make it any less terrifying, the idea of dropping out into space and plummeting through the atmosphere before landing under the power of her Jump Jets. Never mind that any one of a zillion things that could possibly go wrong would see her burn up or splattered across the scenery.

"Ravager lance, report in." Bulgarin's voice came over the channel, driving away her concerns. Moments later, Allen and then Nero gave affirmatives, indicating that all was ready.

"Ravager Four; all systems green." She finally spoke up, still a hint of tension in her voice.

"Understood. Standby for go to drop."

There was nothing to do but wait now, trapped inside the BattleMech which, in turn, was trapped inside the drop capsule. Juanita could feel the dropship manoeuvring, her stomach lurching as it turned towards its goal. *Not to mention how much else is riding on this*, she reflected. *Yeah, like I need to worry about more things that can go wrong, especially with what's going to happen once I get down there.*

Finally, the words she had been both hoping for and dreading came over the comms channel. "This is *Southern Sun* control. You are go for drop."

There was the briefest of jolts as the encapsulated *Wolverine* was loaded into place, followed by a sudden, lurching slam of momentum as it was dropped into space, the planet's gravity taking control of the BattleMech and pulling it down towards the unforgiving surface below. Juanita was slammed back, her stomach lurching as if it wanted to leap out her throat and beat her face in. She could feel the restraints on her command couch digging into her skin as the BattleMech continued to fall, diving ever downwards.

She could feel the heat coming in from re-entry, the cockpit heating up as the friction from the atmosphere warmed the capsule and all inside it. Combined with the momentum of the drop, the inside of the *Wolverine* had been turned into her own private little hell where she would either be roasted alive or crushed to death. Gritting her teeth, she simply rode with it, keeping her eyes on the status monitors at all times. Despite all that her body was telling her to the contrary, her status boards were telling her that everything was green and within expectations. *Good to know.*

After a terrifying eternity, the heat dropped off, allowing her a moment's comfort. Then the capsule's retros fired to slow her decent, again slamming her back into the command chair, rattling her teeth with the hammer-blow of the braking. "Ravager lead to all units." She could hear Goren's voice over the communicator, the sound the first indication she had that there was a world outside her since she had stepped into the 'Mech. "Be ready to separate on my mark."

Giving a mutter of acknowledgment, she reached towards a switch on the control console, finger hovering over it. "Three, two, one." The raider's gruff voice counted down. "Mark." She flicked the switch, a shudder running through the BattleMech as the capsule detached and fell away, leaving the *Wolverine* open to the outside world, brilliant blue sky flooding in through the front viewscreen.

Momentarily taken aback by the glare from the world outside, Juanita blinked, clearing her eyes before daring to take a look around her. A glance showed her Nero's *Centurion* directly ahead, the humanoid machine plummeting with all the grace of a thrown rock. To one side, Bulgarin's *Sun Cobra* dropped alongside her, the 'Mech's cannon arms outstretched. And to the other was Allen's *Black Knight*, the 'Mech seemingly not so much falling but trying to defy gravity, as if the pilot's sheer force of will could keep it up. In the distance she could see four other figures, the 'Mechs of Tsuma's lance, also plummeting with them.

And below was a stark sandy yellow expanse, dotted by the darker reds of rocks and the occasional green patch, as well as a blue, serpentine river that cut across the plain as it rapidly rose up to meet her. *Not reassuring to see it like that at all.*

Eyes back to her heads-up display, she could see the altitude descending rapidly as the *Wolverine* continued to plummet earthwards. Waiting for the right moment, she stomped on the footpedal controls with every ounce of force she could muster, firing the BattleMech's Improved Jump Jets. Usually used to propel the 'Mech short distances over broken terrain, at this altitude they served instead to slow its decent. After a short burn, she released the pedal, letting the jets recharge before slamming them again. The display said she was already slowing, the 'Mech's plummet more controlled then before.

Around her she could see the other 'Mechs of the lance doing the same, bursts from their jets or the disposable jump packs they were equipped with serving to control their drop like she was. *So far, so good*, she thought to herself, concentrating on the altimeter and controlled firing of the jets. *Almost there...*

And then with one final burst of thrust, the 'Mech hit the ground, the impact jarring her body as it did. A sudden shooting pain in her mouth combined with the slaty taste gave it just that extra blow, as if the 'Mech was determined to remind her of what it had just been through. Again she heard Bulgarin's voice calling out for a status report, with two immediate all-clear replies. Running her eyes over the status board, she saw that her 'Mech was down in one piece as well. "Ravager Four, all clear."

Not bad for my first drop. 'course, that's the easy part.

"Alright, you know the plan." Bulgarin continued. "We advance to the target grid, keeping our eyes open for trouble. Reapers two and three are with me; Ravagers three and four are with Tsuma. Now get moving."

Chiming in with the chorus of replies, Juanita drove her 'Mech over towards Tsuma's *Crusader*, Nero's *Centurion* alongside her. Glancing back, she could see the *Black Knight* and *Sun Cobra*

turning, heading off across the rolling desert hills. *Well, guess now I just have to wait. Allen will let me know when we're all good.*

"Right people, listen up!" Tshuma shouted. "We will be shadowing the first group along the river valley; use jets only when you need to, and be ready to go on my mark. Anyone screw up – and I don't care who's damn lance you're in – you answer to me. Now move!" The *Crusader* burst into a run, vaulting down into the river valley and disappearing from sight.

She glanced back at the *Centurion* as she followed Nass' lead, her 'Mech jumping down behind the heavier machine. *We're in now. No turning back, no matter what.*

Burine District, Van Diemen IV

"Well?" Shepard asked as she watched the displays, noting the flow of information coming in from the various sources deployed. Reports had placed a much larger aerospace contingent than expected above the world, allowing the lead dropships to drop their BattleMech forces unharmed. "What's their status?"

"Enemy 'Mechs are on the ground." The tech replied. "They're at grid F11F, headed west-south-west."

"Hmm..." She bought up a map of the region, examining it and the features present, eyes drawing lines of likely travel. Behind her, she glanced Major Odatta approaching, a look of obvious concern on his face. "They're likely headed here; Launceston. It's an abandoned mining town which would likely give them the open, reinforced concrete areas they'd want to put those *Mules* down. They can also use the buildings for cover."

"The area's largely abandoned." Odatta offered. "We're not likely to have civilians in the area at all."

"Good." She nodded. "Dispatch a recon company here; I want to at least take a look at what we're up against first. I'm not expecting to take any of them out, but if we can slow them, that would help." Alexa turned back to look over a display of their immediate surroundings. "We can't be any more prepared here, but anything that costs them time and resources helps."

"Understood. I'll dispatch a team immediately." He finished, giving her a crisp salute.

She returned it before stepping away, headed outside of the Praetorian to take a look around at the setup. The empty buildings of the abandoned town formed an almost protective cordon around the command vehicle, while olive-drab Militia tanks were scattered in amongst them. However, the most striking sight was a single BattleMech, a boxy torso and drooping arms atop backwards-cantered legs, the machine painted flat black save for a single, bright red arm.

Alexa looked up at the *Avatar*, her BattleMech, as if for reassurance before keying her personal communicator. "This is Shepard." She began. "They're down. Operation RED HAND has commenced."

So far, Goren Bulgarin reflected as his *Sun Cobra* barrelled forward over the desert hills, everything seemed to be going according to plan. Despite his concerns, they had managed to put down the initial strike force safely with no resistance from the local defenders during the drop. Nothing had gone wrong on the way down, with all eight BattleMechs making safe landings, and now the two lances were in motion following the plan that he had worked out.

And yet, despite all that, he still had his misgivings. A large part of it was due to the way that this plan had been thrown together based entirely on Xiaphos' information. As expected, the Band of Five's leaders had eaten it up, acting as swiftly as possible to secure the lucrative prize that had been

dangled in front of him. On paper, it looked too good to be true, a BattleMech factory, and one that contained lost treasures of the Word no less.

However, he trusted Xiaphos; after all, he had no reason not to. He'd worked for the Mercenary in past before the HPG Blackout and had known him to be honest in his dealings with his trusted allies. Furthermore, Allen had backed him up on the plan, seemingly approving of the idea of taking the factory. At that point, there was no point to further arguments. The masked man's word was law, and he had no grounds to debate. Allen wasn't the type to act rashly or on impulse, so by his approval of the plan, it had to be sound.

And yet... He glanced over at the *Black Knight* as it ran alongside his 'Mech. He had his doubts, but knew that he had no grounds to express them. Goren knew that his future depended entirely on the masked man's whim, and that he had no options but to comply with whatever he wanted. Even if that meant releasing his one-time commander and rival from captivity and giving him a position, even as cannon-fodder, in the operation.

I just wish I knew why.

"Contact!" Francis Strucker's voice called out over the command channel. His *Fenris* was ahead of the two heavier 'Mechs, its speed and Active Probe making it an ideal forward scout. "Multiple inbound vehicles, looks like fast hovers and light scouts."

Scouting force, as expected. "Roger that." He replied, quickly glancing over his tactical map. The river to the south would serve to nicely limit their mobility, making it harder for the enemy force to manoeuvre and encircle his position. A single bridge provided the only crossing that they would be able to use, even then it would be so small as to severely impede the flow of their units. "Ravager lance, hold tight to the river; maintain formation and let them come to us."

This much, at least, would not need the masked man's approval; Allen seemed to be content to leave the tactics to him. *Probably the only reason that he keeps me around. That and the fact that he can blame me should something go wrong.* It was the one sobering thought to his success in the last few months, that it had come only because someone else had been guiding him. *Was that it, then? Did Sawyer outlive his usefulness? Did you bring him along as a contingency?*

He drove those thoughts from his mind as Strucker reported engagement, a quick glance revealing the *Fenris* opening up with its extended-range particle cannon, brilliant azure lighting stabbing out at the oncoming force. Several long-range missiles flew back in reply, peppering the ground around the medium 'Mech but not doing any damage. Following instructions, Strucker pulled back, the *Fenris* twisting its torso to follow its targets as it wheeled around towards Goren's position.

As he'd hoped, the oncoming militia force had chosen to follow the lead, hovercraft and light armour surging forwards, long-range weapons fire filling the air. Several missiles hit home, lightly peppering armour but not doing any real damage. Strucker fired back again, the PPC narrowly missing an oncoming Fox armoured car. A moment later, a similar beam from Allen's 'Mech struck home, flaying armour off the small hovercraft, causing it to swerve as its crew fought for control.

Good opening, he thought to himself, quietly waiting before opening up with his own Gauss Rifles. As tempting as it was to cut loose with the massive cannons, his limited ammunition supply for his sole weapons encouraged him to conserve shots for the moment. Once the distance closed, he'd be free to open up, knowing that the cannons could pulverise smaller craft with a single hit. Instead, he pulled back, cutting towards the river while keeping his guns tracking on the oncoming force.

The rest of his lance, not so constrained, were letting loose with their own weapons. The heaviest 'Mech in their force, Allen's *Black Knight* was drawing the most attention from the enemy force, but also proving to be the most dangerous. Lasers lashed out from the heavy 'Mech, the combination of pilot skill and targeting computer proving to be remarkably capable against their fleet foes.

"VTOLs inbound" Strucker called out as he drew in closer to the rest of the force. "Coming in from the

south.”

Over the river. Won't mater anyway. “Understood. Fall back to the river, keep your backs to it.” He called out, watching the tactical display for the positions of the forces. A Bellona tank darted forward, opening fire on his machine as it did, the laser and missiles scoring armour from the ‘Mech’s front. As it tried to peel away, he responded, the twin gauss cannons spitting silvery metal slugs at the fleet tank. The first slammed into its side, pulverising armour, while the second pummelled its turret, slewing the main cannon with the force of the blow. Wounded, the hovercraft swerved away, trying to keep its distance.

Goren took his eyes off it for an instant, glancing at the tactical display. His lance were together, the enemy force bearing down on them and the river. *Good.* “Reaper lance, this is Ravager Actual. Move in now!”

Behind him, a quartet of BattleMechs crested the top of the river valley, soaring over the ridgeline on pillars of searing nuclear flame. Missiles leaped from Tsuma’s *Crusader* as it reached the peak of its flight, pummelling a Demon tank and ripping one of its wheels from its body. Moments later, a hail of cannon fire from the *Centurion* joined it, sawing into the wounded vehicle and ripping it apart.

Allowing himself a small smile, he pushed the throttle forward, the *Sun Cobra* breaking into a run as the other ‘Mechs came down behind it. The targeting computer lined up a shot on a Militia JES Missile Carrier, the hovercraft desperately trying to wheel around to get out of his way. The first shot slammed into the tank’s bow, shearing off armour and smashing the forward skirt. The second struck even harder, smashing one of the drive fans on the craft’s back.

The loud wail of a warning siren caught his attention, a glance at his monitors showing Goren a *Cavalry* attack VTOL closing in from behind. The craft’s front end blossomed with fire, missiles leaping forward to rip into the armour of his ‘Mech’s back. Despite the reduced protection, the *Sun Cobra* remained defiantly intact under the assault, its armour savaged but not breached.

A moment later, a pair of brilliant blue PPC bolts speared the craft, gouging armour from its flank. As it wobbled uncertainly under the assault, a flight of missiles added to the damage, the craft spinning as the pilot struggled to keep it under control. Glancing at Kwan’s *Wolverine*, he could see that she had the craft well in hand. Even as a *Mantis* joined its colleague, he wasn’t concerned, the light craft making a probing stab with its lasers before peeling away.

Pushing forwards, he saw Stradley’s *Stinger* barrel past him, two flights of rockets leaping from the light ‘Mech’s chest to rip into a VV1 Ranger IFV, the warheads ripping armour off its side. Before it could get any further Stradley followed up, the Medium laser stabbing through the ruined armour to gouge at its structure, black smoke billowing from the wounded tank as it wheeled around. Rather than trying to fight, it instead chose to run, its wheels kicking up clouds of dust as it accelerated away from its attacker.

Looking around, he could see similar scenes repeated across the battlefield; the *Cavalry* down and burning while the *Mantis* chose to try and break away from return fire. A Pegasus, both of its launchers wrecked, braking off from the *Centurion*. Allen and Tshuma’s ‘Mechs slowly advancing, a small field of burning tank husks around them.

The enemy scout force was clearly outmatched, its commander doing the wise thing and choosing to abandon the fight rather than wasting more men and equipment. It was sending a clear message, telling him one thing, what he wanted to hear the most.

“Ravager Two, contact the *Achenar Provider*.” He began over a secure channel to the *Black Knight*. “Tell them that we have made contact with the enemy and driven them back. Advise they are green for landing.”

This world and its secrets will be ours, he confidently told himself, any doubts driven away by the victory. *And nothing can take that from us.*

Shepard sighed as she heard confirmed the disengage order, watching the icons on the screen with status updates. *Eight BattleMechs*, she thought to herself, *plus Stone alone knows what else onboard those two Mules. And they'll be down with nothing to slow them.*

"Contact me immediately when you get any further updates." She said to Odatta, glancing back at the Militia commander. "I've got things to deal with here."

Again stepping outside, she headed over to her *Avatar*, as if to seek shelter under the massive war machine. "They've got a far larger force than we expected." She spoke into her personal communicator, her tone level and professional. "And they're coming down unimpeded."

"No choice but to proceed." The voice on the other end replied, its tone cautiously neutral.

"Agreed. Hopefully, our preparations will be enough."

"They will be." The voice seemed reassuring now. "They have to be."

Burine District
Van Diemen IV, Prefecture VII
Republic of the Sphere
19 June 3134

The defeat by the river had apparently been discouragement enough for the militia forces. There had been no further contact as the two Mech lances had pushed forward, reaching their objective quickly afterwards. An abandoned mining town, it had been easy to secure the site while waiting for the two *Mule*-class dropships to land. Even then, the light damage they had suffered meant that they were hardly vulnerable while waiting.

Unloading had begun once both the *Achenar Provider* and the *Bountiful Feast* were down, the only real delay being the time needed to patch armour and reload ammunition for their BattleMechs. Juanita had watched the process intently, studying every detail of the operation with considerable interest. While she'd seen this plenty of times by now, this time was more important than ever before. So much was riding on it, and she wanted to see every part of it, to know every last detail of what was happening.

She wasn't the only one. There was a definite intensity amongst the warriors present, a degree of focus and drive that she hadn't seen before. Bulgarin was probably the most obvious of them, his face a mask of stern drive and determination, watching every little movement for the slightest mistake or misstep. Juanita knew he had a lot riding on this operation, and she could understand why he was so driven. Wisely, she chose to keep her distance from the man. *No sense in risking everything on a silly mistake right now.*

There was one exception, of course. TF Allen remained his usual impassive self, simply watching operations from behind his mask, all-seeing in spite of his seeming lack of eyes.

Their force had been mustered just before dawn, Bulgarin giving a short, angry speech to motivate his troops, spurring them on with promises of the power and wealth that their objective would bring them. It was crude but effective, appealing to the base desires of the men he commanded, fully aware of what it was that motivated them onwards. It had gone down well, his replies being hungry shouts from the gathered soldiers.

But what was, at least to her eyes, even more impressive was simply the force in motion, marching on their objective. While they were using a road as the centre of their advance and a broad guide, the

force had simply spread out, no subtlety or stealth in its approach. There was no need for it in this case, instead a show of strength was just as potent, their force intimidating in its size.

A company of 'Mechs made up the centre of their formation. Eight of them were true BattleMechs, a display of power that nothing on the planet could match. The other four were Industrials, bought along to further bulk out and augment their ranks. Juanita noted with some amusement that one of the machines was the modified *Lumberjack* she had stolen on Mara, a move that had seen her recruited into the Band of Five. However, she felt no attachment to the machine. She was a real MechWarrior now; one with a real BattleMech.

Another one of them caught her eye, however. A *Harvester* AgroMech, the machine had not been modified to carry weapons, rather being only 'armed' in the loosest sense of the word with its combine. While she could see that it was a 'whatever's available' 'Mech bought along for numbers, what she found more interesting was its pilot. She had seen him in amongst the crowd, a quiet and intense, slender man who wore glasses. He'd seemed out of place enough, but what was more striking was how he hadn't been caught up in the excitement of the moment, instead remaining in a simmering silence.

Driving the thought from her mind, she focused on the situation at hand. Eyes swept over the edges of the formation again, quickly glancing over Defiler and Despoiler companies as they took the flanks of their force. Smaller hovercraft darted ahead of the formation, searching for enemy defences, while their infantry followed behind.

A rusted roadsign indicated that they were close. Reports began to come in of the deserted mine and town that had concealed the treasure that they sought. They also confirmed the presence of their enemies, the Van Diemen militia dug in around the town. Mostly tanks, they reported infantry and battle armour, as well as several ConstructionMechs that were being used to excavate the site but just as easily could be pressed into battle.

There was also a single BattleMech. While it was only one machine, Juanita knew that its pilot would be the Republic Knight that had been reported. By their simple presence, they were the biggest threat on-site, their skills, knowledge, tactics and experience being just as potent as their 'Mech.

"Target is confirmed." Bulgarin's voice crackled over the command channel. "Despoiler and Defiler companies will take the flanks and close in, we will be the centre of the assault. We will destroy them, and we will make this treasure ours. Now go!"

She threw a sideways glance at the *Black Knight* marching alongside her, before glancing ahead. *No turning back now.*

Alexa Shepard had placed herself at the head of the militia force, her *Avatar* the centre of their front line. Her presence there wasn't just to lead and to defeat her enemy, but to inspire her men, the ones whose lives were in her hands. To them, she was the Republic, the living embodiment of its strength and resolve, of Devlin Stone's dream.

A dream that she vowed would stand in the face of any opposition, even the storm of 'Mechs and tanks bearing down on her and her force. "All units, hold your ground for the moment." She stated, her voice flat and clam. "Be ready to disengage and fall back once enemy troops are committed. Do not allow yourselves to be drawn out." She'd set up her force as best she could on-site, giving them cover, limiting the enemy's options while allowing them to protect themselves. However, she was also ensuring that they would be able to fall back as needed.

And then the enemy came, angry red indicators swarming into her display. The *Avatar's* systems locked onto the closest opponent, a nimble Fox Armoured Car. The hovercraft, likely a probe, was speeding towards them, looking for an opening, one that she did not intend to give it. Guided by years of experience, her hands flew to the weapons controls, fingers over the trigger. The Fox dashed

across her HUD, a high-pitched tone indicating a missile lock.

She fired, two flights of missiles leaping from the *Avatar's* shoulders and streaking towards the fleet Fox. Most of the flight went wide, blasting into the ground around it, but several peppered its side. As it wheeled around, the crew desperately trying to avoid further damage, she opened fire with the twin PPCs that made up her 'Mech's arms, two bolts of brilliant blue lighting leaping out and slamming into the small craft, ripping through armour and structure. The craft erupted, billowing into flames as its wreckage spun out of control.

Around her, the militia tanks opened up, sending missiles and cannons at the initial probing force. The inexperience of their crews showed, relatively few shots making their mark. However, it was enough to slow them, light hovercraft scurrying away rather than risk meeting the fate of their compatriot. *And they continue to advance*, she observed, glancing down at her display. *They have nothing to fear. They know that they are holding the advantages.*

The enemy BattleMechs advanced, heavier machines towards the centre while lighter ones were fanning out in a miniature version of their larger overall formation. A *Black Knight* seemed to head up their force, its MechWarrior apparently confident enough in their 'Mech's power not to care for any sense of subtlety. The machine raised one arm, its own PPC lashing out at her 'Mech, the bolt only narrowly missing and instead ripping through a derelict house just behind her.

Backing up just a little, she replied in kind, LRMs and PPCs sending fire back at the enemy 'Mech. Small explosions rippled across its shoulders, while one of the PPCs reduced armour over its left arm to slag. If the attacks did any significant damage, the MechWarrior didn't let it show, his machine simply continuing to advance.

Glancing around, she saw a fleet-footed *Fenriss* printing forward, its PPC lashing out at a militia Winston tank, flaying armour off its turret. On the other side, a *Legionnaire* matched its pace, spraying cannon fire into a Kinnol. Reports were coming in from her forces, tank commanders engaging their enemies, holding their ground despite what they were facing. *They're good men*, she told herself, *and they need to keep it up for only a little longer.*

She continued to backpedal, another exchange of fire directed at the *Black Knight*, heat washing over Alexa as she let fly with her 'Mech's weaponry. Again, she scored only fleeting hits, not enough to even worry the other 'Mech. The PPC shot back, joined by two other lasers, ripping into her *Avatar's* side, shaking the seventy ton 'Mech. Stomping on the footpedals and shoving the controls, she fought to keep her 'Mech upright, resisting the force of the attack.

Allowing a moment, she glanced back at the display, looking again over the enemy force. Red triangles were closing in, the arms of their formations closing the circle as they pushed against the militia tanks. *Just as expected.*

"All units, this is Shepard," She called out over the command channel, her tone clear and focused. "Disengage and fall back towards the digsite." She opened up the throttle, the *Avatar* backpedalling, its bird-like legs giving it a considerable pace despite its bulk. Ignoring the PPCs for the moment, she sent more missiles at the *Black Knight*, choosing to keep the heat down. *Mobility is more important than firepower right now.*

The tactical display told her what she wanted to see; her troops were falling back, while the enemy were advancing, following them into the town and towards the open excavation. Nodding to herself, she switched channels for a moment.

"This is Sheapard. We are go for RED HAND. Repeat, we are go."

Juanita pushed the *Wolverine* forward, the fifty-five ton 'Mech surging ahead into the town. Around her, tanks and Battle Armour were joining her and the others, driving on the objective that was so

tantalisingly close. Despite the temptation, however, sense was still guiding their forces, infantry screening the heavier units as they advanced. Even in a small town like this, enemy infantry or battle armour forces could pose a significant threat to the largest of 'Mechs or tanks.

A quick glance down at her display marked key units, keeping track of them as they pushed forward towards the objectives. *You better be ready, Zoom-Zoom.* She told herself as Nero's *Centurion* pushed past her 'Mech, the machine bearing down on an enemy tank. *Just sit tight, stay calm and stay focused.*

"Hey Chica!" Nero called out over the communicator, the roar of his autocannon audible in the background. "Up for another contest?"

"Always." She shot back, mentally adding a quiet *jerk*. Charging forwards, she fired the jump jets, her *Wolverine* vaulting over a row of abandoned warehouses. A warning siren told her of an enemy presence moments before a burst of cannon fire ripped through the air where she had been. Glancing down, she spotted a Partisan Air Defence Tank, its cannons spitting out shells at her as it tried to track her 'Mech.

The *Wolverine* landed in a crouch, Juanita twisting the torso around and opening fire with the twin PPCs that made up the 'Mech's right arm. The same speed that had saved her from the tank had also done a good job of throwing her off, however, the shots crackling past the tank before blasting through a warehouse wall.

No time to dance, she told herself, glancing down at her monitor again. Leaving the lumbering tank in her wake, she fired the jets again, leaping back towards the centre of the town. Below she could see signs of the conflict, the tan and blue raiders pushing forward as their olive-drab opponents pushed back, several tanks already down and burning. As she landed, a blur of motion caught her eye, the *Legionnaire* charging forward, its cannon spitting fire.

A shower of wood splinters was the only warning as the silvery ball of a Gauss Rifle round shot out from one of the buildings, slamming into the knee of the advancing *Legionnaire*. The medium 'Mech reeled as the blow crushed armour and metal bones, twisting the leg at an awkward angle and driving it down. As it struggled to rise, the rest of the building's front exploded outwards, the 'Mech concealed within it bursting free from its hiding place.

Juanita had believed that a BattleMech could no longer awe her. After all, she was a MechWarrior now, one who controlled one of the titanic metal avatars of war. However, as she saw the titanic form that burst forth from the building, she couldn't help but feel a little fear at what emerged.

The towering humanoid machine seemed to loom over all around it, its armour painted a stark black save for a few vibrant green highlights; missile ports dotted its broad chest, while a crown of spikes jutted from one of its massive shoulders. A fearsome, three-fingered claw of a hand drew back and slammed down on the *Legionnaire*, crushing metal armour and structure in a titanic hammer blow. And above all that loomed its face, a stark, bone-white, skull-like mask that watched the battlefield with the visage of an angry death god.

A second blow from the *Atlas* drove into the smaller 'Mech's back, the bulky laser on its arm discharging in a brilliant red, point-blank burst through the 'Mech's structure. The *Legionnaire*, once a potent war machine, collapsed like a puppet who's strings had been cut, the struggles of it trying to rise the only indication that the 'Mech was even still functional. *What...* she began, then shook her head. *You're a damn soldier now, Zoom-Zoom. Unexpected stuff happens all the time on the battlefield. You deal with it.*

The wounded *Legionnaire*, back on its feet, sent a burst of fire at the lumbering *Atlas*, several shots striking its stark black armour to seemingly no effect. In response, the 'Mech opened up with the launchers in its chest, missiles peppering its smaller foe. Not bothering to watch the outcome, Juniata stomped the jets again, leaping away from the titanic avatar of war as it bore down on its target.

And as she rose, a second 'Mech caught her eyes, an almost gaudy bright red and purple *Phoenix Hawk IIC* leaping forward, its chest erupting as three score missiles leaped out, consuming a raider Kinnol in a cloud of explosions. Her flight took her behind a building before she could see the outcome of the clash, but it was pretty foregone to her eyes. Instead, she glanced around over the Band of Five line, catching sight of the still-advancing *Black Knight*.

"Okay, this just got a lot more complicated."

"It's a damn trap!" Bulgarin shouted over the communicator, his voice furious with thwarted ambition. "Of course it damn well is! Something like this? Of course the damn Republic would do something like this. There's probably a damnable Paladin here too"

TF Allen continued to push his *Black Knight* forward, the heavy footfalls of the machine crushing the pavement underneath it. "The objective is still there, Bulgarin." He stated, his voice as impassive as always. "We can still take it."

"In case that damn helmet of yours is tinted too dark, there's a pair of damnable assault 'Mechs out there." He shot back. "Or didn't you notice?"

"I did. But there are only two of them." He flatly replied, no hint of emotion in his voice. "We outnumber our enemies, and our troops are better than the militia. They are but metal; their pilots are flesh and blood. They can be destroyed."

"And are you going to do that?"

"I will. And you will continue the assault, Bulgarin. You can either face their 'Mechs, or you can answer to me. Against them, you have a chance for survival."

Allen waited patiently for the man's reply, knowing full well what he would say. Bulgarin was in a no-win situation, caught between two options and trying to decide which was the worse of them. To Allen, it didn't matter. Either Bulgarin would do what was expected of him, or someone else would.

"Very well then." His voice was resentful despite his acceptance. "We fight." There would be no witty retort, no damning statement of reluctance, just a simple commitment.

Allen closed the channel, then flicked over to a separate, private command circuit. "The time is now. Salt the earth"

Before he any sort of response could arrive, he closed the channel. The recipient knew what to do, and, like Bulgarin, knew they had no option. Now he had to fulfil his part.

The *Black Knight* pushed forward, the huge machine storming into the ruined town as the battle continued to unfold around it. A quick examination of his tactical display gave him the position of the target he had sought, one that, for the moment, was more important than the others. In a way, the militia's tactical withdrawal had aided him, clearing a path for him to reach his objective. Icons for the newly arrived *Atlas* and *Phoenix Hawk IIC* were present, however, for the moment they were engaged.

Perfect.

Ahead was the humanoid form of Nero's *Centurion*, the 'Mech advancing as it sprayed fire from its autocannon. Despite what had happened, he knew that Nero would be sticking to the plan, possibly more driven than anyone else. The rockstar turned MechWarrior was Allen's partner in more ways than one, knowing the masked man more than anyone else ever would. Likewise, Allen knew him, and how driven and determined he could be.

Nero wanted that factory for himself, and the pair of them had taken steps to ensure that it would be *theirs*. Not the Band of Fives, not the Republics, but under their own control. A little thing like an ambush by a pair of assault 'Mechs would be nothing to him; instead, this was the accumulation of everything they had worked towards for the better part of the last two years. Joining the Band of Five, building their network of unwitting agents, raising an armoured company that was loyal to them before anyone else. This factory would be the final step.

Allen opened fire, a half-dozen brilliant red beams leaping from the *Black Knight's* chest and arms, precision-guided by both his own skill and the 'Mech's targeting computer. They gorged through the *Centurion's* rear, incinerating armour and structure before ripping into the fragile systems at the 'Mech's heart. Its chest erupting into brilliant golden flames, the *Centurion* staggered, then crashed to the ground, a pillar of black smoke billowing out of the ruined 'Mech.

Immediately, Allen saw a message light come on. He ignored it, knowing who would be and what they wanted. Instead, he opened up a different command channel, one he had not needed before today. "This is Ravager Two to Despoiler Lead." His gravelly voice betrayed no hint of emotion or of what he was about to say. "Bulgarin and Defiler Company have betrayed us to the Republic and sold us out. Show them the price of treachery. Leave nothing standing."

Goren was damned if he retreated, and damned if he pressed the assault, and he knew it. The arrival of the two new BattleMechs had changed everything, twisting his careful plan into an unrecognisable nightmare, one that Allen had made clear that he had no choice but to delve deeper into. *We can still take the objective; we can still make that factory ours.* It was a reassurance that became a mantra, driving him onwards. The prize was still there, however he would need to fight for it, harder than he had ever fought before.

He triggered his gauss rifles, the twin cannons sending out a pair of slugs into the side of a Winston combat vehicle, pulverising its side armour and drilling into the structure. Before he could verify his condition, Ross's voice cut in on the command channel, grabbing Goren's attention. "Commander, we've come under fire from Despoiler company!"

"What?" He snapped, pulling his *Sun Cobra* away from the Winston, a volley of missiles slamming into the 'Mech's broad shoulders as it ran. Despite being rocked by the impacts, a glance was enough to tell him that the armour hadn't been breached. "Is it isolated?"

"No. I'm getting reports from across the entire company, Commander; as far as I can tell, they're-" A muffled explosion cut her off for a moment. "-they're trying to take us out."

He glanced at his tactical display for a moment, the icons indicating the presence of the two companies. Formerly separated into pincers, Defiler and Despoiler companies should have closed to form up. What he was now seeing was a mess of overlapping symbols, the two companies deeply entwined with not only the Republic troops but each other as well. *So what is this? Another stage to their trap?*

Go to the head. Find out what's going on. Goren opened a command link to Kundrea's tank, only to find the channel blocked. *He's cut off his company, so I can't recall them or order them to stand down, or, at the very least, try and sway his subordinates. This has been well planned.* Shaking his head, he re-opened the link to Ross, only to be greeted with a hiss of static. *Now they're jamming us. What else-*

Shots ripped into the back of the *Sun Cobra*, the massive BattleMech stumbling as alarms went off in the cockpit, indicating that its flimsy rear armour had been penetrated. The 'Mech stumbled forward, Goren fighting the machine to stay upright. An arm lashed out, the weapon barrel spearing through a roof to serve as a prop, giving him precious seconds to regain control of the 'Mech.

"I knew it was you." He snarled as he bought the *Sun Cobra* around to face its attacker. "Just like it

was on Imbross. Allen can't shield you now, girl. I'm going to do what I should have months ago." Juanita Kwan, the woman who had been so much a part of his return to glory after his disgrace, the weapon that had bought him the victories he had needed, and a knife poised at his throat for so long. All of a sudden, everything made sense. This trap was her work, done on a far grander scale than ever before.

The *Wolverine* stood there, its weapons levelled at his 'Mech, leaving no illusions as to what had happened. "My biggest regret wasn't my defeat, girl. It was letting you live. It won't happen again."

Juanita watched as the *Sun Cobra* came around, the broad BattleMech wounded but still standing despite her assault. "Yeah, it was me." She shot back. "I always wondered weather it was that you didn't care as long as I kept bringing you victories, or if it was Allen holding you back. Either way, it doesn't matter now." She snapped as she ran at her former commander's 'Mech, firing the jump jets again to leap to one side.

She triggered the weapons, lashing out at the BattleMech as it stood its ground, torso twisting to track her flight. The two PPCs flayed armour off the chest, while missiles peppered the side, gouging into the thin armour. Goren's 'Mech was rocked back on its heels, but refused to fall, instead standing its ground in defiance of her efforts.

The other 'Mech returned fire with its two Gauss Rifles, the weapons slinging shots at her *Wolverine*. One of them went wide, the other slammed into the 'Mech's left shoulder, shattering armour with an ear-splitting crash that sent it staggering back. The BattleMech wavered, but managed to remain upright despite the force of the blow.

He can out-shoot you any day of the week, but his armour is pissweak and you can out-manoeuvre him easily. Use that, Zoom-Zoom. You were the queen of running away. She stomped the jets again, leaping past the *Sun Cobra* and twisting in flight. *Gotcha*, she added as she twisted her 'Mech's torso to follow Bulgarin, again opening fire with the mix of PPCs, lasers and missiles it carried.

This time the results were more appreciable. The PPCs slagged armour off one arm, while the head-mounted laser went wide. More importantly, the missiles peeled through the *Sun Cobra*'s side, eating into the now-exposed structure. A blossom of heat erupted on Juanita's display, showing that her weapons had cracked the 'Mech's engine shielding.

Advantage mi- she began, but was cut off as the *Cobra* swung around, again opening fire. This time, slugs from both cannons slammed into the *Wolverine*'s flanks, smashing the 'Mech with sledgehammer-like force, slamming it out of the air. Juanita experienced the briefest instant of free-fall before the *Wolverine* smashed through a building, crushing it into debris. The impact slammed Juanita against the seat, her head bashing into the neurohelmet as it was pushed into the command couch.

Her head swam as she tasted blood in her mouth, her ears ringing with the impact. Blinking, she tried to clear her vision, desperately glancing over the status boards. *Where is he?* She asked herself, grabbing ahold of the controls and trying to push the *Wolverine* upright. *Damn it, a fifty-five ton 'Mech doesn't just disappear like that.*

The short screech of an alarm was all she got before the *Wolverine* was rocked by another pair of shots, the Gauss Rifle rounds slamming into the 'Mech's body again. The force of the blows threw her back again as alarms went off inside the cockpit, indicator lights flashing on in dangerous red as systems were crushed by the assault, while a surge of heat slammed into her as one of the rounds cracked the reactor shielding.

"Yeah, this is a lot like Imbross." Bulgarin spoke up over the command channel as his *Sun Cobra* advanced. "You shot me in the back and I showed you the consequences of your actions. Of course, back then, you had a friend to save your worthless skin." The 'Mech stopped short of hers, raising one of its armoured feet. "Think that's going to happen this time? Or are you out of friends, girl?"

"Shut up." It was all she could manage as her own 'Mech's leg lashed out, catching the *Sun Cobra*'s as it descended and batting it aside. Overbalanced by the impact, the *Cobra* teetered, then collapsed sideways as she rolled her 'Mech out of its way, clumsily bringing it to its feet. "You know what, Bulgarin?" She shot back as she bought it upright. "I don't need anyone. I do what I want, and nobody – especially not you – will stop me"

Juanita triggered her weapons again, missiles and lasers slashing into the *Sun Cobra* at near point-blank range, tearing into the 'Mech as it struggled to rise. The force of the impacts threw the 'Mech, one of its Gauss Rifles firing off a shot that swept far wide of her, obliterating a small building instead. In spite of her assault, the 'Mech made it to its feet, swaying uncertainly as if drunk.

"But you needed me. All your plans depended on me doing what I do best" She shot back. "And without me? Hell, you can just crawl back to whatever hole she found you in, Goren. If your buddies let you live that long" The PPCs spat blue lighting, one of the bolts tearing into the hole in the 'Mech's arm and striking the weapon inside it. The gauss rifle detonated, an explosion of crackling blue lighting consuming the 'Mech's arm, reducing it to splinters of metal.

She could hear Bulgarin screaming over the communicator, the feedback from the Neurohelmet frying him inside the cockpit. Ignoring it, she opened up with the other weapons, shots pummeling the wounded 'Mech. Missiles found the gaps her earlier attacks had made, explosions ripping into the 'Mech from within. Smoke and flames leaped from the holes in its chest, the *Sun Cobra* staggering backwards, before collapsing on its ruined side.

Juanita wanted to make some pithy remark or put-down; instead, she simply gasped for breath as she warily watched the fallen BattleMech, checking to make sure that it was really down, that Bulgarin wasn't just faking to escape or, worse still, shoot her in the back. Even more importantly, she wanted to make sure that the man didn't escape, crawling from the cockpit to find a way back to his forces.

An alarm from the 'Mechs' tactical display caught her attention, followed by the high pitched warning of a missile lock. Spinning the *Wolverine* around, she saw her would be attacker, a bright red and purple *Phoenix Hawk IIC* landing behind her, its weapons bays open. "Crap!" She shouted out, hammering her communicator as she raised the 'Mech's battered arms in a gesture of surrender. "Ponytail! It's me in the *Wolvie*!"

"Juanita?" Antonin's voice was clear as the *Hawk* waited, its missiles still clearly at the ready.

"Yeah." She managed. "Look, it's complicated, but me and the *Black Knight* are on your side."

Despite the Band of Five arriving with a larger force than she had expected, things were going surprisingly well for Alexa Shepard. Her tactical had shown her that the enemy force were thrown by the arrival of the two new BattleMechs, their companies going from controlled formations into disorganised messes in seconds. Symbols were already blinking off, with at least two of the enemy BattleMechs already showing as out of action.

The advantage was hers; now she had to push it. Confident, she pushed the *Avatar* forward, the seventy-ton BattleMech advancing through the ruined town to bear down on a raider Typhoon tank. Her hands squeezed the triggers on her fire control, twin bolts of brilliant blue energy leaping from the *Avatar*'s arms, searing through the hull of the enemy tank, ripping one of its drive wheels apart.

Desperately trying to escape despite the damage, the Typhoon limped away, pulling heavily on its still-functioning wheels while bringing the turret around. The twin LB-X cannons spat rounds at the *Avatar*, fragments of shot scoring armour off its torso and arms, but not penetrating. Ignoring the damage for the moment, Alexa opened up with the launchers in the 'Mech's chest, SRMs tearing into the tank's damaged side.

"Alexa!" Antonin's voice cut into the channel. "Something big has come up."

"What is it?" She shot back, a sudden note of caution in her voice. *Everything is going well. I do not need an unexpected complication.* Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the Typhoon limping away, managing to move despite the damage. Pulling the *Avatar's* torso around, she opened fire again, the twin beams narrowly missing the fleeing tank.

"Two of their MechWarriors are looking to defect." Antonin continued. "The ones in the *Wolverine* and *Black Knight*. Furthermore, their forces are apparently at odds with each other."

It was perfect – too perfect. She wanted to believe it, but sense and reason demanded proof before making a jump. *But then, I've gone with Antonin on less in past.* "Your source is reliable?"

"The same one that fed us all the information to set up this op." He shot back, his voice sincere. *But then, he's good at faking. It's his job.* "They've just taken out what appears to be the enemy commander, Alexa. You have to believe me."

"All right." She nodded, glancing over her tactical. The Typhoon had taken advantage of her momentary distraction, using it to crawl behind a part-wrecked building. While it was annoying to have lost track of the tank, she'd gained so much more.

Switching over the communicator to the command circuit, she opened a link to all of the forces under her command. "This is Lady Shepard to all units. Two enemy 'Mechs, a *Wolverine* and a *Black Knight* have chosen to side with the Republic against these raiders. Do not fire upon them unless they fire first." *You had better be right on this,* she mentally added, knowing full well that she wanted it to be the truth. It wasn't just the tactical advantage that was inspiring her, however.

She suspected that the two raiders were merely opportunists, looking for a way out or a better deal. However, there was that tiny part of her, deep down, that wanted to believe they had deeper motivations. *To do what is right at a time like this, when the Republic is besieged by enemies within and without. It would be nice to hope for, at least.*

"What is this?" Sveta asked as Dead Master, her fearsome black and green *Atlas* charged down a street at full speed. Even those used to BattleMechs would have to find the sight of a hundred tons of metal moving at over sixty kilometres per hour an impressive sight; the *Atlas's* bulk and intimidating skull-like faceplate only made it more so. "Ponytail has some new surprises up his sleeve?"

"That's what it seems." Shepard replied, her voice crackling with static. "I should have expected something like this."

"Da" she added as the 'Mech stepped over the hulk of a wrecked Militia Behemoth tank, turning to face its attacker. "But then, when has Ponytail ever been entirely on the level with us?" Her opponent, a modified *Lumberjack* mining 'Mech tried to back off, the two launchers that had replaced its skip levelling at her 'Mech before erupting into plumes of fire and smoke as it spat missiles at her 'Mech.

She didn't care, pushing the *Atlas* forward, the missiles washing over its broad torso like a summer rain. "Very rarely." Shepard admitted. "He's never steered us wrong in past-" the channel dissolved into static as Sveta opened fire, the 'Mech's Gauss Rifle spitting a hypervelocity slug at the *Lumberjack*, while its arm-mounted lasers added brilliant red beams to the assault. The rifle ripped through the 'Mech's side, ripping apart one of the two launchers in a shower of parts.

"Even if your face is saying otherwise." Sveta added with a cocky grin, imagining the look of annoyance on the Knight's face. Alexa was a good person, but she got way too tight at times. *And she was a lot more fun before she was a Knight.* "So do we know who are the good raiders and the bad ones?"

The *Lumberjack* backed off, the gaping wounds in its chest making it clear that the machine was badly damaged – but not enough for her tastes. “We don’t” Alexa admitted as the *Atlas* charged forwards again, bearing down on its victim. “The two ‘Mechs are the only actual defectors. The others – chiefly their armour, it would seem - are fighting us and each other.”

“So no good or bad – we just make them dead.” The *Atlas*’ chest spat out two flights of missiles, the warheads battering the *Lumberjack* and further tearing into its armour. The machine reeled, but managed to remain standing under the assault. “Sounds good to me.”

“Although, obviously-“ Shepard began before being cut off.

“Moment,” Sveta shot back as her tactical display spotted another ‘Mech approaching, the *Legionnaire* that had escaped her before. “My little *Likho* has returned” As the *Atlas* powered forward, she spun around the torso, dropping her sights onto the oncoming BattleMech before opening fire. Heat slammed into her as she did, the MechWarrior ignoring it for the moment, instead continuing her relentless assault.

One of the lasers tracked wide, while the second gouged into one of the hunchbacked ‘Mech’s blocky arms. The Gauss Rifle did the most damage, however, slamming into an already damaged leg, smashing in the knee and causing the ‘Mech to pitch forward. As it toppled, its rotary autocannon roared to life, the MechWarrior and targeting computer doing their best to fight the ‘Mech’s momentum. Rounds traced across the ground, throwing up puffs of dirt and concrete before carving into the *Atlas*’ leg, sawing into the armour to little effect.

Grinning confidently, Sveta pushed Dead Master forward, the *Atlas* slowing as the heat took its toll on the ‘Mech’s systems, but still bringing it forward. The *Legionnaire* struggled to rise, its MechWarrior clearly realising he was outmatched and not getting any support from the *Lumberjack*, the latter of which was using the chance to escape. Instead, its knee gave way, the ‘Mech stumbling again.

“Allow me and Dead Master to deliver a message to you!” She shouted out as she closed in, again hammering her triggers. Streak SRMs joined the Gauss Rifle in pummelling the BattleMech, tearing into its body, ripping away masses of armour and eating into the structure. “You are a threat to this Republic, this great dream of peace!”

Again the rotary autocannon roared, rounds finding their mark as the massive ‘Mech closed to near point-blank range. A hail of bullets washed over the *Atlas*, tearing into the armour but yet not stopping the massive BattleMech’s advance. Even as she could hear the reverberations of the rounds echoing through her cockpit, Sveta continued the assault.

“And as such, you will be destroyed!” She pushed on the controls, Dead Maser’s systems translating both actions and Neural Impulses into movement. With frightening speed for such a monstrous machine, the dark *Atlas* raised one fist, then slammed it into the ‘Mechs’ side, crushing exposed structure with a tortured screaming of metal. The thick fingers dug in, holding the wounded *Legionnaire* in place as the other fist drew back.

“*Атлас любит ударить!*” The ‘Mech slammed down, the three-fingered claw driving into the *Legionnaire*’s boxy head, crushing the cockpit and the MechWarrior inside. Then, with a simple flick, the ‘Mech discarded its defeated opponent like a piece of refuse.

“Sorry, you were saying?” Sveta finally spoke up.

“...try to take some prisoners, okay?” Shepard finished with a sigh. “I’d like to find out something from them besides what I can gleam from sifting through their remains”

A glance at his tac screen told Allen all that he needed to know. The Band of Five’s force had

degenerated into chaos, Defiler and Despoiler companies engaged in a clash with each other that would likely result in close to mutual destruction. The infantry, less compromised than the armour, were struggling to hold their ground, many units going for cover and trying to sort out what exactly was happening.

That left the BattleMechs on-field, with many of them still fighting. The confusion caused by the lack of leadership would occupy their time, but sooner or later someone would take control of the situation and try to sort things out. However, it would be prudent to sort a few things out now and ensure an outcome more directly to his liking.

A glance at his tac display revealed the location of one of the Band's 'Mechs, still labelled as a friendly to him and broadcasting its ID. It was one of his priority targets, one that he was legitimately surprised had lived that long. It was a loose end that would need tying up, one he intended to make sure would be appropriately dealt with.

"Hey." The communicator crackled, Kwan's voice coming through. "I told the Republic guys that you were on their side. They shouldn't shoot at you now."

"Good work. Is your target down?"

"He is, yeah." She nodded. "Hey, now-" He closed the channel, cutting her off and putting her concerns out of his mind. There were other things that needed to be dealt with right now, ones that he would prefer to do without any distraction. Wheeling the bulky *Black Knight* around, he pushed it into a run, the heavy 'Mech striding forward with a determined pace. A glance at the display showed Republic units – still tagged in hostile red – still locked in combat with their raider opponents. They were irrelevant for the moment, Allen more focused on his target.

Another indicator entered the display, a 'friendly' BattleMech moving at speed. Francis Strucker's *Fenris* sprinted forward, then stopped abruptly as the MechWarrior saw the machine before him.

"Allen, good to see you." Strucker's voice came over the communications channel, his tone exasperated. A quick check of the display showed that the smaller 'Mech had suffered armour damage, but nothing threatening as yet. "There appears to have been some confusion as to what's going on around here. Furthermore, Commander Bulgarin appears to be out of action."

Allen said nothing, the *Black Knight* simply continuing to advance on the smaller Mech.

"I was thinking that, with Bulgarin indisposed, that would make you the field commander here." Strucker continued, regaining something of his composure. "And if he is out permanently, then you'd probably end up taking over this little show. I mean, after all, it's clear that you're the power behind the throne anyway. But regardless, I want to say that I've always supported you, Allen, and that you can be assured that my loyalty is unquestionable."

Allen hammered the trigger, lasers leaping out from the *Black Knight's* weapons and sawing through the *Fenris's* right leg, ripping the limb in half. Deprived of support, the forty-five ton machine crashed to the ground, crashing into the dirt.

"You shot me!" Strucker cried out, his civility disintegrating into an almost girlish wail of distress. "You actually shot me! I can't believe that you'd do that!"

"You cannot believe that someone would stab you in the back before you could do it first?" Allen shot back, the *Black Knight* stopping over the crippled 'Mech. "Or that someone wouldn't believe a word of your false earnestly?" The 'Mech raised one foot, then slammed it down on the *Fenris's* back, smashing through armour and structure with a thunderous crash. "You are a worm, Strucker. A wretched, contemptible little worm." The foot came down again, digging further into the 'Mech's spine, crushing through the structure and digging into its core systems. The 'Mech spasmed, then locked up, its Gyro reduced to wreckage.

Allen glanced down at the 'Mech as he wrenched the *Knight's* foot free, trailing battered components behind it. Stepping back, he looked over the tactical, growling as he realised that his intended target was on the move and, more to the point, getting away. A brief moment of anger, one outburst of pent-up rage had almost cost him his objective, giving them a chance at respite.

One he did not intend to let his target exploit any longer.

He wheeled the *Black Knight* around, pushing the throttle open and leaving the fallen machine behind, a flick of the switch cutting off Strucker's whimpering and pleas. Instead, he concentrated on getting to his target, only giving sporadic glances at the tac display. There was so much at risk here, and he wanted to ensure that everything was neatly sewn up.

A missile lock grabbed his attention, driving objectives from his mind and replacing them with hard realities. Moments later, two flights of LRMs struck the *Black Knight*, peppering its armour but not penetrating for the moment. Swinging the 'Mech's torso around, Allen instantly identified the source of the attack, a blue and tan *Crusader* that was barrelling towards his 'Mech, smoke wafting from its missile launchers.

"Ya know, I have been waitin' a long time for this." Nass Tshuma began as his 'Mech charged forward. "I have been wantin' to have a chance to lay into ya since I first met ya. And now... well you gone and given me all the excuses I need. Out here, yo mask, yo rank and all you supposed influence ain't gonna save ya. Just you and me, boy. You and me." The *Crusader* opened up, lasers and missiles leaping at the *Black Knight*. Warheads slammed into the *Knight*, ripping more armour from the flanks, but failing to penetrate its thick hide, while the lasers sliced armour from the machine's legs.

Standing his ground, Allen replied with his 'Mech's lasers, giving back better than he got. A half-dozen ruby red beams scored across the *Crusader's* broad chest and shoulders, gouging into its armour but yet failing to stop the oncoming machine. Ignoring the waste heat being dumped into the cockpit, feeling it even through the MechWarrior combat suit's systems, he pushed the 'Mech onwards, twisting its torso to track its attacker.

The pair of them opened up on each other again, Allen being momentarily faster than Tshuma. Again lasers pumped out searing red beams, ripping into the *Crusader's* body and slicing through its armour. One beam sawed into the 'Mech's arm, slicing through artificial muscle bundles and mechanical actuators. The limb twitched and shook as the beams ate into its support, sending the missiles launched from it flying wide.

Despite that, the rest of the assault hit home, the missiles gobbling up more armour over the *Black Knight's* flank, while the laser cut into its chest. However, the real damage was done by the Heavy Gauss Rifle, the weapon slamming into the *Black Knight's* left arm, smashing the limb to metal fragments. The force of the blow spun the 'Mech around, Allen fought with the controls to keep the 'Mech up - and lost, the huge machine slamming into the ground.

"Oh yeeeeeeeah," Allen heard Nass slurring over the command channel, his ears ringing with the impacts. "You know what, this is gonna be just too good. I jus' gotta decide if I stomp your 'Mech's head in first, or pull off your mask out of curiosity's sake. Course, I can do that off of your corpse, boy." The *Crusader* stepped forwards, only to have its side peppered by a handful of missiles.

The 'Mech turned, facing the *Wolverine* that was charging towards it. "Now this is good. I get to take care of you and your girlie at the same time." The *Crusader* wheeled around, sending a flight of missiles at the oncoming medium 'Mech. Most of the flight went wide, but a couple of warheads ground into the 'Mech's battered leg.

Ingoing the damage, the *Wolverine* continued to charge forwards, its twin PPCs flaring with blue energy as they fired on the heavier 'Mech. One of the beams cut into the *Crusader's* damaged arm, ripping into the LRM launcher, reducing it to molten slag. Seemingly ignoring the damage, the *Crusader* returned fire with its remaining weapons, with only a few missiles hitting home.

Which meant that Tshuma hadn't seen Allen stand. The heat slammed him with almost physical force as he triggered the *Knight's* remaining weapons, unleashing a brilliant storm of blue and red energy on the *Crusader*. The PPC flayed into the 'Mech's torso, vaporising armour and incinerating the structure underneath, while lasers chewed through the 'Mech's side, finishing the job begun by the earlier assaults. The last remnants of the arm dripped away in molten globs, followed by the wreckage of what had once been its Gauss Rifle ammunition.

"Think you're the boss now?" Kwan shot over the channel, her voice cocky. "Well?"

Still upright despite the assault, the *Crusader* searched around, the ragged remnants of its armour still steaming from the assault. Then, without another word, the 'Mech fired its jump jets, leaping back behind a warehouse, vanishing out of sight.

"Come on!" Juanita called out. "We can still get him."

"No." Allen shot back. "There are other things I need to do first." He spun the 'Mech around, looking over his tactical display. The target had vanished, but hopefully, they would still have their transponders live and allow him to track them that way. "But... thank you."

He could almost see the grin on Juanita's face. "Hey, you got me into this. I got you out of it, so that has to count for something. Though afterwards, there's someone I gotta introduce you to."

"Keep moving!" Kirsten Ross shouted at her driver, as if by command alone she could coax more speed from her Carnivore tank. "Don't stop, ever."

She'd seen everything come apart around her, the way that a near-perfect plan had degenerated into total chaos. The arrival of the two BattleMechs had thrown things, but shouldn't have been unrecoverable. After all, it was still just two machines, and yet everyone had acted like an entire regiment had dropped on them. It one of those facts that she despised, the way that BattleMechs commanded fear and respect out of proportion to their actual abilities to the point where the presence of even one was seen as world-changing.

But what had thrown her was when Despoiler Company had opened up on hers, the sudden and unprovoked assault from their supposed comrades in arms. While she had little love for Rudolph Kundrea, the company's commander, she didn't think that their rivalry would go this far. Hopefully, a member of his company would survive the chaos of the battle, allowing her to question him as to their motives.

However, that would have to wait. The Carnivore tore across the dusty streets, kicking up dirt and concrete chips in its wake as it barrelled along at over sixty kilometres an hour. Hitting a sharp turn with practiced ease, the driver bought the tank around with no loss of momentum, continuing along a row of low warehouses, the buildings affording the tank cover where a BattleMech would remain exposed.

Darting past the burning hulk of Carlotta's Vedette, Kirsten checked her tactical display. She'd hurriedly re-designated the members of Despoiler company as hostiles, and now one of them was coming up. Kundrea's Glory fire support tank had taken up station in the middle of an open lot, where it would be able to use its long-ranged weapons to maximum effect.

"Drive!" She shouted. "Get as close to him as possible. Go!" The Carnivore leaped forward like a wild beast, bearing down on the other tank, its treads eating up the distance between the two. As they closed, the Glory's turret swivelled around to face the oncoming tank, Kundrea's gunners clearly practiced and ready.

Hers, of course, were better. The LB-X cannon barked, scattering shell fragments across the back and

sides of the tank, while the two pulse lasers spat out swarms of green darts, melting armour off the rear. The Glory replied, but speed and position were on Kirsten's side. Two flights of missiles flew past her tank, the Carnivore too close for their tracking systems to accurately lock on to. The rotary cannon in the turret opened up, spraying rounds at her, with several chewing into the tank's front.

"Break now!" She yelled out, the Carnivore suddenly wheeling around as the wounded Glory sluggishly moved to follow it, its dragging pace suggesting damage to its treads. As the driver continued his turn, the hull was rattled by small arms fire, the sounds of bullets bouncing off the hull being enough to grab her attention.

"Infantry on our flank." A report came in, followed by the chatter of one of the side-mounted machine guns. "Suppressing."

Ignoring them for the moment, Kirsten focused on the heavier Glory, watching as the broadside of the tank drifted into the centre of her sights. The main gun roared again, rounds smashing into both the treads and the turret ring, while the lasers capitalised on the damage, melting away much of the remaining protection on the side. *Now I have you.*

"Captain Ross." A voice began over her command channel, one that was surprisingly level and calm despite the situation. It was also one she recognised, but had not heard in months – not since the debacle on Mizar.

"What are you doing here?" She quickly replied, keeping one eye on the position of the enemy tank as her Carnivore continued to move.

"That's not important right now." The voice continued. "This battle is lost. Our forces have been lead into a trap and manipulated into fighting each other by one of our own."

"Allen." She spat. She had no evidence to prove it, but it simply made sense. She'd never trusted the man, both because of the mystery that he had deliberately cloaked himself in and his being a MechWarrior, using the two together to shield him from any questions of his actions or motivations.

"We cannot win this. I need you to save what we have, Ross. Call off our forces, beat a retreat back to the dropships. We can fight another day."

It galled her to retreat, but she also knew it was the truth. *And I have now a pair of scapegoats for when we get out of this.* "All units!" She shouted into the channel. "Break off the engagement and fall back to the LZ!" She had no idea if the members of Despoiler Company had heard her order, nor did she care. At the very least, they would buy a modicum of time for her unit.

"Contact!" Her sensor tech interrupted, grabbing her attention. "*Phoenix Hawk IIC* approaching."

As good as an incentive as any. "Break contact with the Glory and fall back." She ordered, the tank spinning around before accelerating away, the turret still tracking the slow-moving tank, another round of cannon fire delivered to it for good measure.

Picking up her personal communicator, she opened a private channel, confident that her crew would be able to operate without her for the moment. "Commander Bulgarin, can you hear me?" She began, glancing over her tactical display. While he was a MechWarrior, Goren was also her commander and a comrade in arms, one that she still respected despite all else.

"I can." His voice came back, crackling with static.

"Where are you? I will pick you up so you can escape." While she could have arranged for any of the survivors to collect Goren, leaving him in the merciful hands of her underlings meant there was every risk of his having an 'accident' on the way back.

"Negative, Captain Ross. Make your retreat."

“But commander-“

“I am a dead man either way, Kirstin.” He replied, frankness clear in spite of the interference. “I lead this assault, and I will be made to answer for it. This way, at least, I may yet escape capture.”

“Understood.” She finished, offering a brief salute, then closed the channel. Glancing over her display again, she gave a quick run-down of the tank’s status before turning to the Driver. “Get us out of here, now. I don’t want to place myself in the hands of the Republic’s gentle mercies.” Her mind, however, cast back to that familiar voice and the questions that its presence raised. *What was Sawyer doing here?*

Dropship *Achenar Provider*, Outbound Van Diemen System

Sawyer’s words to Kirstin seemed to have had some effect. Her orders had been enough to pull her remaining troops away from the Republic forces and Despoiler Company, a ragged line of tanks, Mechs and infantry making a break for it across the desert. With Kundrea apparently dead, some of the Despoilers had decided to make a break for it and risk throwing themselves on the mercy of their comrades, perhaps hoping that they could claim it was their commander’s idea.

It had not been the easiest of flights. The Republic forces had given chase, with Allen’s ‘Mech being conspicuously amongst them. It was enough to tell those involved that the masked man had willingly lead them into a trap and probably engineered the fratricidal conflict that had crippled their assault. Ross had done her best to buy time for them, calling in every asset at her disposal.

It had worked, but at a cost. Three of the fighters of Incinerator flight lay scattered across the desert floor, felled by fire from the pursuing Republic forces. Their intervention had waylaid the militia troops and their BattleMechs long enough to load the surviving units onto their dropships and lift off. It was a defeat by any standard, but at the very least, they’d managed to salvage something from it.

The numbers were grim. Of the eight BattleMechs they’d landed with, only two had returned, Nass’ *Crusader* which was heavily damaged, and a *Stinger*. Only two of the Industrials had made it back as well, and one of those was practically a stumbling wreck. Less than half the tanks they had landed with had returned, while their infantry had come in dribs and drabs of broken platoons and Battlearmour squads.

And yet I managed to salvage that much, Bob Sawyer told himself as he stalked through the *Achenar Provider*, heading to the ship’s bridge. Ironically, his unmodified *Harvester* had served as a shield of sorts, the ‘Mech being a low priority target for the Republic forces. It had suffered some armour damage from small arms fire, the gore on its combine serving as a grisly reminder of how that encounter had come off.

It could have been a lot worse, he added, considering matters. Tshuma had inadvertently saved him when he had attacked Allen’s ‘Mech. Sawyer had no illusions that his former lieutenant had been aiming to eliminate him; in fact, it was likely that Allen had been the one who had ordered him released and placed on the battlefield in the first place, just so he could be a target. *And clean up anyone who Allen may have a grudge against.*

He reached the bridge, noting the others present beside the crew. Kirsten Ross, “Large Sarge” Roscoe and, unsurprisingly even if out of place, Blackrock. “We appear to be in the clear.” Ross began, glancing back at him. “No signs of pursuit from the planet at this point. Incinerator flight are still covering us, but I doubt the militia are going to push their luck any further.” The *Aurora* and two *Leopards* had both lifted off unloaded, acting more as super-sized escorts than dropships, providing a rather potent screen to any would-be attackers.

“Obviously, there’s going to be a lot of fallout from this. With Allen having apparently defected, Kundrea dead and Bulgarin... missing, it will take time.” Ross continued. “There’s no clear evidence of who was behind it, and the most likely suspects are beyond our reach, for now.”

“And you are leaderless.”

“Yes.” She admitted. “Your role in all this seems to have been largely incidental. Allen set you up to likely die with the rest of us. However, you had the presence of mind to try and order a retreat and save what you could. And while I don’t think anyone will ever forgive what happened on Mizar-“

“Which, after today, it could appear that Allen was behind as well-“ *He will make an excellent scapegoat. Clearly he was not intending to return.*

“-granted,” Ross finished. “There will be grounds for seeing you reinstated at least.” There was maybe the slightest hint of resent in her voice, even though practicality had won out over her own feelings.

“Understood.”

Ross turned to leave, giving him a quick salute. Roscoe only managed a sneer. Blackrock, on the other hand, paused as she stepped by him. “Something else in your favour.” She spoke up. “Allen had, in your absence, apparently recruited the agent who was behind the Mizar debacle into our ranks. With that out, it could be easy to absolve you of any responsibility. It won’t get you all those months back, but it might help.”

“Thank-“

“Although.” She cut him off. “Allen was *your* lieutenant, Bob, and it could be construed that he was acting on *your* orders. Just something to think about.” She shot him the briefest of smiles before leaving the bridge, the implications lingering long after her departure.

Having escaped his wrecked BattleMech, Nero Nowen had managed to join up with the rest of the Band of Five’s forces, finding his way back to their dropships. As they had retreated, he knew full well that they’d never be able to retrieve his *Centurion*; instead, the Mech would likely either be scrapped for parts or repaired and pressed into the Republic’s service. It was another blow, but in many ways, one that hurt less than the others he had suffered today.

Being dispossessed was a setback, a blow that a lesser man would have problems recovering from. He, at least, had options, ones that he could use to his favour to get out of the worst of this. With the information at his disposal, the assets he possessed, Nero could, at the very least, gain some leverage on getting his way back into the cockpit. That wasn’t the problem.

What had hurt was the way he’d lost it. Shot in the back by TF Allen, his partner and, making the blow hurt that much more, his lover. Ever since they’d met, the two of them had worked together, building up assets and support that would allow them to seize power, taking all they wanted for themselves and nobody else. He knew the man’s deepest secrets, well beyond just what lay behind the mask, as Allen had known all of his.

And yet, Allen had deliberately betrayed him. The man had chosen to throw away all they had worked for, all they had done to take a different course of action. What hurt even more was that he had taken *her* into his confidence, using *her* as his agent while abandoning him. Allen had made it clear to Nero that he had outlived his usefulness, and now had no value to him at all.

If I had any to begin with. How long was he using me? Nero fumed as he floated through the hallways of the massive ship. *Was there ever really anything between us, or was it another one of his damnable games? Or was everything fine until she came along and ruined it all?*

"Barry." He shouted, spying the former police officer across a hall. One arm was in a sling, while bandages covered the side of his face. "Get over here right now." His gentle cajoling had vanished, replaced with barely suppressed rage.

The cop floated over, apprehension clear in his expression. "I'm sorry I couldn't do what you wanted, Mister Nowen." He began, stammering as he spoke. "With this op and all, I didn't have the time. I was thinking that I could set her up to take the fall after we were done and--"

"Yeah, whatever Barry." Nowen cut him off. "Thing is, that doesn't matter anymore, in case your bloated arse hadn't noticed how badly it and everything else got shafted down there." He spat. "Thing is, Barry, I'm going to need more from you now. I'm going to need everything I can get, every last asset. I'm going to be screwing people so hard, doing everything I damn well can to get myself a new 'Mech. And I don't care what it takes, because you are going to be doing it all for me, got that?"

"I got that," he nodded frantically. "In fact, thing is, I kind of found something out, something big that I have to tell you." He glanced around. "But not here; somewhere private. It's that important."

Nero gave a twisted grin. "Atta boy, Barry." He leered. "Show me the way."

They headed down to the bowels of the ship's cargo bays, floating through the stowed 'Mechs and tanks that had been retrieved from the planet. Instead, they headed into a small side room, the same one, Nero noted, that he and Allen had their last argument in when leaving Tigress. *Ironic that*, he noted as he sealed the hatch behind him. "So what have you got for me, Barry."

"So it was you, ya long-haired fag." A voice began, one he didn't expect. Spinning around, Nero saw that there was someone else in the room, the looming form of Nass Tshuma, an angry snarl on his face.

"He's the one, Boss." Barry shot back, his nervous tone suddenly replaced with an oily confidence. "I did the work you wanted and traced it all back to him. He's the one who's been sending you those *packages*."

"Right." Tshuma stepped floated forward, cracking his knuckles. "Mister Nowen, you and me are gonna have a little word."

Burine District Van Diemen IV

When Antonin had put together his proposal, he'd been making a very big gamble. He had a good body of evidence from what he had hoped was a reliable source on the Band of Five group which had allowed both for the setup and an estimate of the force. He'd managed to convince a mercenary that he was sure they would trust to plant the bait, and he was pretty sure that they'd find the lure to be irresistible.

Where the gamble lay was in actually defeating the force. All the bait, all the planning and all the preparation and such would be for nothing if they couldn't defeat the enemy force. And while he had the utmost confidence in both Sveta and Alexa Shepard, the enemy's arriving with a larger force than anticipated had run the risk of turning all their clever planning around.

It had been even worse for him, however; a military defeat would have cost him far more than men and material. There would have been a lot of uncomfortable questions, followed by official investigations and the inevitable consequences. Those consequences would not have boded well for him.

As he looked over the train of prisoners that were being escorted away by the Militia troops, he

couldn't help but be amazed at how well things had ended up turning out. The sudden and unexpected betrayal of the Band of Five by two of their own had been enough to turn the battle around, especially after their two armour companies had engaged in a fratricidal battle, presumably spurred on by those two defectors.

But what he hadn't expected was who one of those would be.

"So." He began, glancing at Juanita. She was, in turn, watching the convoy of prisoners being escorted away, as if to check them off against faces she recognised. "First up, I wanted to thank you for the letters home to your mother. They were unexpected, especially after what you did."

She looked back at him. "Eh, it was nothing." Her tone was casual. "I had one of their own smuggling them out for me. The encryption keys you gave me back on Imbross meant that they'd never find them, even if they thought to look for 'em anyway. Which they wouldn't."

"Trusted agent?"

"Yeah." Juanita nodded.

"And you figured that we'd use that to put together something like this?" He raised a brow.

"Yep." She continued. "It weren't that hard to figure out that you'd be out to do something with them, Ponytail. Probably put together some sort of crazy op or stage an ambush or what have you. Either way, you'd be getting what you wanted out of me without my actually having to be there – or spend months posing as a dishwasher."

"True. And I thank you for that much. You gave me an opportunity that I couldn't have dreamed of, certainly not when I first employed you."

"When you picked me up the HPGs worked, the Republic was the land of peace and niceness and I would have never thought of riding a jumped-up Agromech into battle. Who could have expected any of what's happened since then?" it was a straightforward and honest statement, one that he couldn't help but agree with.

"I won't argue." He replied. "Though there were other events that I certainly hadn't expected. He was looking her in the eye now, showing just the slightest hint of disapproval. "When you pulled that stunt on Mara, I had no idea what you were doing."

"Yeah, well." She looked away, hands in her pockets as if she were hiding something from him. "I'd say that I was just following your orders and doing what you told me to; find the enemy, infiltrate them and bust their op wide open. But that'd be lying and you know I don't make excuses for myself."

It was a moment of frank honesty, one he hadn't expected from her. *Something's definitely changed about you*, he considered, looking over his one-time agent. *What have you been up to?* "So what was it then?"

"They gave me all that I wanted." She stated, her tone blunt. "Wealth, power and a Mech, Ponytail. Everything you promised, they delivered. It was too much to pass up."

"But yet you did."

"Yeah, well, things didn't work out as planned." She shot back. "And I wanted to get the hell out. Your op here gave me a chance, and I took it." Juanita gave a small smirk. "Oh, and your address on Towne's going to get another package dropped on it, one containing a car amongst other things. I saw no reason to leave all my cool stuff behind again."

He chose not to comment on the last matter, instead considering her alleged motivation. *You're still hiding something. For the moment, however, I can let it rest.* "Which brings me to another matter." He

changed the subject, looking over the two raider BattleMechs that, for the moment, were standing with his. His eyes followed down to the masked figure standing by the foot of the *Black Knight*, who was, apparently, watching the prisoner procession as well.

He'd recognised the figure – as much as was possible – from the intelligence he'd been provided with, both from official sources and Juanita. TF Allen, one of their big-shots and a man of mystery, he had chosen to throw in his lot with the Republic, and, near as Antonin could tell, was the mastermind behind the events that had delivered him his victory.

None of that changed the fact that Antonin knew nothing about him and, most likely, that wouldn't change. Allen had negotiated a complete pardon in exchange for not only what he had done, but also providing Shepard with a healthy dose of intel on the Band's inner workings. The Knight had agreed, if with obvious reservations.

"So he was behind this." Antonin continued, still watching the masked man. "No offence, Juanita, but are you sure we can trust him? He's not exactly giving me much to go on."

She nodded slowly. "Definitely, Ponytail. Definitely."

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Bharat, Prefecture IV
Republic of the Sphere
23 May 3134**

"So what do you want?" Juanita demanded as soon as the door was shut behind them. For some reason, the usual fear and awe of Allen had evaporated, replaced with a sudden urge for the truth. Given the fact that he held her life in his hands, it was a risky proposition.

"You have performed well for me so far." Allen replied, the blank faceplate looking straight at her. "Your skills have produced victories, providing us both with what we want. The next thing that I am going to demand of you is going to be a far greater risk than any before it."

She should have been intimidated by that revelation; instead, she grinned broadly. "I never back down from a challenge, maskman. Name it."

"You will be dropping on Van Diemen IV with the rest of us and fighting alongside us." The man explained. "When the time is right I will signal you. At that point, you will take out Bulgarin."

"Wait, what?" She blinked, completely at a loss at the unexpected turn of events.

"You heard me. Shoot him in the back on the battlefield, like you did back on Imbross." Allen's tone was stern, his words weighty. "I will be doing likewise to others at the same time."

"Fine, there are people you want dead, I get that." Juanita shot back. "But why this way? There are plenty of ways a guy can end up with a knife in the back around here. No need to risk flushing a battle, especially a damn important one like this. We take the factory fine, and then you can stick them and leave them in a ditch or whatever"

"There is no factory." Allen flatly stated.

"Wait, what?" She spluttered. "What, you're saying that this is a setup?"

"Yes, it is."

She shook her head. "Don't make no sense. I spoke to Xiaphos himself; he said it was genuine, like

the tomb of Saint Offel or something like that. Something else he found, anyway. How do you know it ain't?"

"Xiaphos was searching for the tomb of Saint Ogel, a Word of Blake figure. His informants deliberately confused the two to throw him off the track while they hid his real target. He found near-worthless relics instead of a Man—"

"Right, I get you." Juanita cut him off, something she would have never dreamed of doing otherwise. "So why not just say this and warn them off? Why leap into a trap and only make it worse?"

"Because the Band of Five has become something that I want no part of, and I know you will not either." He stated, cutting off any reply. "Our masters have allied us with the Cappelans, using us as their dogs and selling us out for promises of power."

Just like I did to Ponytail and so many others, she quietly admitted, seeing where he was going and remembering the suited men from the day before. "And this won't get us anywhere but dead." She finished. She could see the way that the Confederation would use them, both warriors and machines, and abandon them once they had outlived their worth. *And mercy is not a trait the Cappies pride themselves on.*

"Either we die as cannon fodder, or our masters make a bid for their own freedom that will involve sacrificing us." Allen continued, a small nod indicating that he agreed with her. "Neither are outcomes I wish to be a part of."

"Me either." She agreed, swallowing loudly as she considered his words. "And you want to settle scores before you go."

"As I know you want to as well."

"Right." Juanita nodded, mentally agreeing with him. *And he is right; I wouldn't want to see Bulgarin get out either way.* "And you want to get in good with whoever's on the other end, put on a show for them. It's a good story, Maskman, but I ain't buying it."

"What is it then?"

"Trust, maskman." She all but spat. "Oh, I know you gave me all I want, and I know that a stray word from you could see me gutted, filleted and turned into a jaunty hat before I know what's going on. But, frankly, maskman, I'm gonna need more than that before I piss away all I've worked for. And, frankly, it ain't easy to trust someone who's damn face I never see. I'm putting everything on the line here, so show me something that makes me believe it's worth it." There was no holding back now, with months of doubts and anger building up into a well-deserved outburst.

"You make a valid point, and I will not argue." He agreed. "Very well then, I will give you that which you wish." He turned his back to her, seemingly staring at the wall.

"What's this then?" She replied, her voice dripping sarcasm. "You give me a free chance to shoot you in the back? Or rather yergonna trust me not to leave and tell Bulgarin about all that's happened here?"

He didn't say anything in reply. Instead, gloved hands reached up to his neck, pressing concealed buttons around the base of the helmet. After a barely-audible beep of confirmation, he took hold of the helmet's base, lifting it off his head. Red hair, formally concealed inside fell loose around the suit's shoulders before the figure, helmet now held under one arm, turned back to face her.

"Oh." It was all Juanita could manage.

The woman grinned back in a confident unspoken reply, the expression twisting the scar that ran across her cheeks upwards in a way that mirrored her mouth. "So," she finally spoke, her voice

confident. "This good enough for you?"