

Burgess Hill
Abbeville, Cruicis March
Federated Suns
12 December 3072

One of the many oddities that Sandra Blackmore had noticed about her so-called commander, Levisha Towne, was that she never did anything by halves. When she'd suggested that she and Sandra needed a private meeting, she simply assumed that the woman wanted to talk in their shared bunkroom onboard the *Una von Rayxe*.

Instead, they'd left the dropship and then even the spaceport, and driven for over an hour in a shabby old rental car that was not only clearly ICE-driven, but seemed to be more made of rust than anything else. It was only after they'd reached the spaceport proper – which was little more than a flat open expanse of concrete and a few tin sheds – that she'd even known what planet they were on.

Not that she knew anything about Burgess Hill to begin with, but Levisha had assured her that they were in the FedSuns outback, for what that was worth. True, after months of fugitive running, Sandra wouldn't have cared if they'd landed in the Devil's armpit if it meant getting off of that damn ship. And, in spite of Levisha's buoyant mood and the warm climate, Sandra knew that the situation was dire.

"You'll love this place, I promise." Levisha spoke as the pair of them pulled into a dusty little town which seemed to be little more than a few buildings clinging to the side of a hill. "Tourist guide reckons it may be the best cheap eat on the whole planet."

"Compared to what?" Sandra asked as the car pulled up, the pair of them hopping out of it. "I figure there's a sandwich shop in the terminal and maybe – just maybe – some good ol' boy's backyard barbeque out there otherwise."

Levisha laughed as they headed in, Sandra casting her critical eye over the place and then the pair of them. It was a hotel, cheap and while not shabby it instead spoke of primitive construction, backwards even by the standards of a backwards planet. (which she figured to be somewhere equivalent to the late 20th century). It wasn't run-down or shabby, just... backwards.

As they stepped into the dining room (wooden floor, mismatching chairs and linoleum tables) Sandra also couldn't help but notice how out of place she and Levisha were. While her plain clothes fit in, her scars and eyepatch were impossible to hide. Of course, given that Levisha had opted for a bright, floral-print shirt and had maintained her trashy holovid vampire looks, she also realized that she was by far the less conspicuous of the two.

"So what's this about?" She asked as they took their seats. "I mean, beyond the fact that we are utterly tooled." It wasn't one of her exaggerations either. As they stood, the so-called Mimetic Badarses seemed to have lost everything.

"The tourist guide recommends the pork steak." Levisha simply replied as she looked over her menu. "Bad news goes better on a full stomach."

Sandra couldn't argue; placing her order she waited patiently for the waitress to leave. "So you picked this world for it being the last place anyone would think to look?"

“Especially as we’re not very well-liked in the Concordat at the moment.” Levisha finished.

“Mad cow guys. What are you going to do?”

Levisha gave one of her too-toothy grins. “So let’s start with the cold hard facts.” She began as their drinks arrived. “At present, we have six BattleMechs. However, of them, Bob’s *Fireball* is a wreck and will take resources we do not have to rebuild it. It’s better as scrap.”

“It’s a *Fireball*. Case proven.” Sandra shot back.

“Harsh but fair.” Levisha shrugged. “Now the next thing is something that, frankly, we’ve done our best to hide and confuse.”

“Infantry.”

“Yep.” Levisha nodded.

“So what do we have? I’ve been guessing at something resembling a battalion myself.”

“Something like that.” The other woman agreed. “Call it a mix of regular infantry and Battle Armour, but even then that’s limited.” Levisha explained as she took a sip on her drink. “Most of the infantry teams are specialized and limited in their use. Snipers, SWAT troops, Helipack extraction teams, rock-climbers, data-miners, spacemen... All good in their given fields.”

“But arse-worthless on an open battlefield.” Sandra finished. “Which is what we’re running the risk of right now.”

“Exactly. Which brings me to the next stage, being what resources we have access to otherwise.”

“Let me guess – bog all.”

Levisha gave a short smile. “Yes. I’m going to be blunt here and not mess about. I made an assumption and that assumption was incorrect, and that’s what got us into this mess.” It was a rare moment of frankness from her, one that was even more surprising against her usual behavior. On any given day, Levisha seemed to revel in acting like she knew something that nobody else did, but wasn’t going to tell. And it was the truth.

“But you also assumed that those tools would not – should not – have that information.” Sandra countered. “I’m guessing that there’s something else afoot here.”

There was a short and frank nod. “We had contingencies in place in the advent of an invasion of Galatea, yes.” Levisha confirmed Sandra’s unspoken suspicion. “There’s a number of different scenarios, but the gist of it is simple; if it looks like we’re being deliberately targeted, those plans swing into action.”

“Which would be...”

“We erase all our computer cores.” Levisha began. “And not just erase; they’d be triple-reformatted, each

time fed a series of nasty and unique viruses that would corrupt the data even further. Then, time permitting, the cores themselves would be physically destroyed.” She was looking Sandra right in the eye, her tone earnest and honest, which only added weight to her words.

“We would also destroy all physical files and records, ensuring that there was no loose information as well as no digital backups that could be reconstructed. The next priority would be to destroy any physical evidence, such as memorabilia and personal possessions – anything that could be used to trace back to the individual members. Then, finally, if the worst comes to the worst, we’d blow the place, bringing it all down.”

“Except that didn’t happen.” Sandra stated.

“Clearly.”

“So what do they have?”

Levisha visibly winced. “Well, we know they have the locations of our bolt-holes. What we saw was a deliberately targeted attack; they knew not only which world to go to but which individual town to attack.”

“And how’d they pick that one bolt-hole?” Sandra asked. “I mean, it’s a frelling big sphere and all.”

“Well, they likely made an assumption based on our coming back from Cow Guy Land and looking at what’d be the nearest one... but the fact is they probably also pulled records of the transport companies we do deal with to get us around.”

“Yeah, that’d make me just a bit paranoid.” Sandra paused a moment as the waitress returned, placing down several bowls of sides and condiments, followed by her shockingly large pork steak. “Wow.” Was all she could manage, the pessimistic tone of the conversation blown away. “This thing’s the size of a Chaos March nation.”

“Enjoy.” Levisha simply replied. “As for me, I’m trying to decide if the mis-matched plates are a deliberate part of the atmosphere or just the way things are done around here.”

“Speaking of which, I assume that you chose this place because it isn’t on the rat-hole list.” Sandra carved off a stupidly thick chunk. “mm, this is good. And cheap.”

“That and I thought you’d like the lunch.”

“True, true.” Sandra nodded. “Right then. So we assume they have, what, everything, right? Our names, our backgrounds, service records, all that sort of crap.”

“As well as the potential recruits we’d been eyeballing.” Levisha added. “We keep a file on those we’re looking at; after all, that’s how we found you.”

“So what, we assume they’re all felled up as well?”

“That would be fair.” Levisha agreed. “So we don’t have any potential new recruits either, at least, not in

the short term. Long term we may get lucky, though we can also pool what we have to see who can be cross-skilled and the like.”

“Lynn’s a passable ‘Mech pilot.” Sandra added. “When she’s sober. Which is virtually never.”

“That’s the sort of thing we’re looking for.” Levisha agreed. “Of course, first thing we need to do is figure our next move. It won’t be easy given that they likely know everything about us.”

“So then, getting back to the contingencies, any idea what the frell could have happened to them to leave us in this mess?”

“My best guess is that the Word got a man inside.” She explained. “They managed to turn or subvert one of our people or even replace them. That would explain why our so-called secure files were anything but.”

“Given that it was the Word who came after us on Mara, I think those are safe bets. Frelling robes get everywhere, it seems.” She shook her head. “I’m guessing those freaky-arse ‘Mechs that tried to plough us down – and did a great job of it too, I might just add – were the same ones that have been reported in all those strange Robe attacks.”

“It does seem to be the case. Elezha has been souring for information and running comparisons, but as yet, we know very, very little about them.”

“I wonder if they’re connected to those tooled-up Cyborgs the robes have been using.”

Levisha paused a moment, as if considering her next words very carefully. “I would suspect so. I’d need to look at the battlefield intel, but I suspect those ‘Mechs and the Cyborgs belong to specific Word units, possibly one of their more outré factions.” Her words were careful and measured.

“Makes sense.” Sandra agreed as she spooned some of the sauce onto her plate. “Tell you what, one thing that I noticed that’s unusual even by our standards. Those Cyborgs, whoever or whatever they are, have her scared. I don’t just mean in a ‘killer cyborgs out to kill me’ way; any sane person would be scared by that. Frell it, the idea scares the living crap out of me on a daily basis.”

“But you think it’s more, don’t you?” Levisha’s tone was curious now, but again contained that hint that she already knew the answer, and was wondering if Sandra had reached the same conclusion.

Or if I know something I shouldn’t, Sandra mentally added before replying. “Now she’s what I’d call a freaky cyborg, don’t get me wrong. It’s half the fact that she’s engineered to look ‘normal’ while her tech is cutting edge stuff, half the fact that she acts so detached like she’s not even human. Throw in that whole ‘ascendant’ thing she talks about and that she calls herself a technological therapod or somesuch... yeah, that girl ain’t right, no questions asked.”

Levisha simply nodded. “Go on.”

“Now those Robe ‘borgs, whatever they are, sort of are the opposite. The few pics I’ve seen – and all of them look like someone’s last known photo, just to underlie the point – suggest that they’re all freaky-arse killing machines designed to look as inhuman as possible. And something about that, well it

scares her to death on a deep, fundamental, horrific level. At a best guess, I'd say that they're from mutually opposing philosophies of turning yourself into a freaky-arse half machine person, and that hers is fundamentally incompatible with theirs." She took another bite of her steak. "This is good stuff."

"Interesting ideas." Levisha nodded. "If we knew more about those Cyborgs--"

"Or Elezha herself, for that matter--"

"--we'd be able to get to the source of this. However, for the moment, I don't want to risk alienating one of our few remaining assets." She finished.

"Right." Sandra nodded. "Which brings me to my original point. There's a reason why you wanted this one-to-one with me, and I know it's not my devastating good looks."

Levisha laughed, then smiled, her serious tone not matching her expression. "What I said on Taygeta still remains true, Sandra. In fact, now more so than ever given that our leadership has been removed and we have no resources other than three ships and those on board them. As such, you are now an officer, Sandra. And we're going to need your help now more than ever."

She narrowed her eye. "You put me on the spot when we're in the crap. How... generous of you."

"Sandra, this isn't just an impulse or me looking for a way to shift the blame." Levisha continued, dropping her 'smiley' act. "You are a master of improvisation, of working with minimal resources and managing to make it out of the worst alive. And, right now, that's what we need."

As much as I'd like to pretend she's flattering me, it's the truth, Sandra admitted to herself. Still not sure if I like it, but it's there regardless. "So you want me to take this crap-heap and make gold from it."

This bought back the vampire smile. "That's what I wanted to hear."

Sandra nodded. "Right. This isn't gonna be easy, but I think I can make it work. I have a loose idea, but I'm gonna need access to whatever info you were able to salvage."

"So it seems that a certain freaky cyborg has been 'borrowing' information from our computers for years." Levisha simply replied. "I think it's about time that we see what she has to tell us."

If you had tried to think of the most unlikely pair of partners within the Mimetic Badarses' ranks, the team of Elezha Karoly and Reginald Lewis would not be too hard to go past. Reg was an investigator, but one who was obsessed with bizarre and often nonsensical conspiracies, and would find them in the most unlikely of places. It had been joked that he could find an ancient secret hidden at a pre-school picnic. However, his deductive skills were such that if he did, he'd reach the wrong conclusion.

On the other hand, Elezha herself was a living, breathing secret, one that offered no real explanation. An incredibly sophisticated and unusual cyborg whose exact capabilities were unknown by anyone save for herself, there were only a handful of people in the entire Inner Sphere who knew who she was and

where she had come from. Anyone who had met her would have immediately guessed that she was hiding something, but at the same time, they would have no idea what it was.

For his part, Reg had put forward several theories. Elehza knew that they were wrong, but she'd never actually told him that. Of course, anyone who knew Reg would also know that any theory of his was wrong. But the man could find evidence.

That was why the pair of them were currently cooped up together in a hotel room near the drop-port, pouring over information. Before she had departed for her visit to Taurus for her last overhaul, Elehza had taken copies of a lot of their records and other materials at Levisha's suggestion. She hadn't questioned it at the time, but now she was glad for her commander's decision in light of the events that had occurred.

One could almost think that Levisha had expected the Word to deliberately target them. Which meant that Reg hadn't even considered the matter.

Now the pair of them were pouring over their records, comparing information and trying to find something – anything – that could help the unit out of its current situation. It seemed like they were clutching at straws, but in truth, it wasn't like they had very many options otherwise. This backwoods haven could only last them so long before someone found them and reported them. And then their few options would become none.

"I knew there was something about the Word." Reg announced to nobody in particular as he walked across the room, reading through screens of information on his noteputer. "Something dark and ancient at their heart, something more than just being members of Comstar who liked the old ways." He turned around to look at her. "No, Jerome Blake hid something when he created Comstar, something deep within the order, so deep that not even they knew it. But, for some reason, we found out."

"Reg, focus." Elezha simply commented for the dozenth time since they had begun. She was sitting cross-legged on the bed, innumerable panels on her arms open with cables snaking out of them and hooked into several different devices. Right now, she suspected that her body had more computing power than the rest of the planet, and nobody outside of a select few would have ever guessed it.

"Right, you're right." He agreed, looking back at her. "Feed me that mission list again. There's a pattern forming here, but I just can't see it yet." He gave his broad china rub as he dismissively waved his noteputer. "It's right under my nose too."

Besides his inability to focus and his wild guessing, there was something else that Elezha didn't like about Reg. When they saw her in a clearly part-human, part-mechanical state like this, most people found her to be unsettling to say the least. They would try to avoid her, turn the other way and not ask questions. It was something that she actively encouraged, as it served as a way to avoid questions. Nobody wants to talk to someone they find disquieting just to look at.

Reg, on the other hand, seemed not to notice the fact that she was a normal-looking woman who happened to have computer parts spilling out of her. When it did register, he'd oft ask some complete nonsense question and then move on. She couldn't discourage him, which meant that in this partnership, they'd be equals, a situation she was not used to.

"It's yours." She simply replied, not even hitting a button. "Though I still fail to see what this list has to do with anything."

"This list is the key, I can tell." He stated. "We have an unbroken three-hundred year history. In that time, given our line of work, we're bound to have made some enemies. The secret is to find who those enemies were." He began scrolling through files. "First one on the list is operation ROCKY ROAD, which was directed at Armaris remnants on Rocky."

"How very original." She simply stated, not even looking at him. Instead, her eyes were flitting between several different screens showing lists of numbers and personnel files. "Reg, maybe we should focus on the here and now, rather than the distant past."

"Nonsense; I know there's something in here." He shook his head. "Go back, look for the secrets there. I suspect that whatever it is the Word has against us lies in there."

Elehza didn't even roll her eyes, instead concentrating on financial statements. Far more practical.

"Operation TITAN BURNOUT on planet Bob." He continued, reading through the list, skipping at random. "Operation MIFFED KITTEN on Zara. Operation LIBRARY TOWER on Herakleion. Operation SLASH LIGER on Kannon. Operation THUNDER THIGHS on Beta Regulus. Operation KNEEL BEFORE on New Huston. Operation TROUSER FERRET on Brownsville. Operation RED MOON on Lyreton. Operation SODA MACHINE on Waycross. Operation PET ROCK on Chennai. There is a pattern here. I can sense it."

"Reg--"

"Those are just some of the oldest operations. I mean, there's plenty of others over the years. Alarion, Circinus, Buenos Ares, Galax, Radstat, Lopez, An Ting, Odessa, Paradise, Vanata... I just can't find the pattern." He shook his head. "It is in there. It is staring at me. I just wish I knew what it was."

Elezha bought up several more sheets of information, glancing over them. "Odd. I can't seem to find Herakleion..." She gave it a moment's thought as if to entertain Reg then went back to her own thoughts.

"What do you mean, you can't find it?" He asked.

"That's just it. There's no records of the world in here."

Reg rushed over, all but shoving her aside. "Bring up the others I mentioned."

She began to cycle through worlds on her screen. "This is interesting." She muttered. "Very interesting. Reg, for once, I think you may actually have found something useful."

"Well thanks I- " Reg paused. "Hey!"

Elehza tapped her throat. "Lynn, I need a favour." She spoke up without taking her eyes off the screen. There was a pause, which Reg simply assumed was Lynn's reply that only the Cyborg could hear. "No, not like that, and you know you'll never get to take a look." There was a brief, exasperated sigh. "Get me an atlas. Yes, a book not an assault 'Mech."

Reg looked over at her, only to receive an angry glare and back off. "Specifically, can you get me a physical one and the older the better. For once, I'm not in a mood to trust my own data."

"What can I do?" Reg asked.

"Keep reading." She replied, her tone having suddenly switched from frustrated to determined. "Anything that you find could be useful. Anything."

Several long and tense hours passed, the pair of them continuing to pour over information. Elezha had been strangely content to let Reg take the lead, a fact that she found surprising in and of itself, but still nothing compared to the fact that the man might actually have a point. Putting aside her own feelings, she had focused on the information at hand, pouring over every operational file, every battle report, every win and loss, every casualty. There was a mountain of information here, daunting to approach but at the same time, one she knew she had to conquer.

Who are these people? She asked herself as she looked over each new file. *What did I get myself into?* Each new bit of information was building a picture for her, one that she was almost terrified by. *This is older, deeper than I thought. What happened? Did at some point in our past we make an enemy that waited centuries to strike back? Did we discover something that was never meant to be known?*

A knock at the door interrupted her train of thought. Before she could say a thing, Reg was on his feet, his back to the wall, a pistol in his hand. She was amazed at how fast he had moved, his speed and reactions belying his bulk. "Who is it?" Reg asked, his tone fast to the point of being urgent.

"It's me, Lynn." The voice on the other side replied.

"How do I know it's you?" She was fascinated by this sudden change of tone, amazed at the sudden degree of paranoia Reg was displaying.

There was a pause before Lynn finally spoke again. "Well hell, I dunno." Her tone was frank. "Uh... I had beans for breakfast. Does that count?"

Because only Lynn would use a lack of proof as proof. She turned to Reg, who nodded in reply.

"Right. Be quick." He opened the door, all but shoving the woman into the room before slamming it shut and locking it behind him. There was no question as to the identity; between her scruffy, unkempt hair, her tattered and stained clothes and the colourful tattoos along her arms, Lynn was pretty unmistakable. More interesting was the large, hard-bound book she carried in her hand.

"So I got y'all an atlas like ya asked." The tech began as she dumped the book on the table. "Local library had one, but wouldn't lend it out. But they also had problems with their generator, so I did 'em a deal, swapped 'em a loan for fixin' it." She whistled and shook her head. "Them guys got ripped. Any idiot coulda done what I did in five minutes. But I made it seem like a big deal so they'd be real grateful and all, even if all I did was hit a few things and put back a couple of cans. Still, it works"

"Nice work." Reg commented as he looked over the book, Lynn having flopped into a chair and was now fanning herself with a sheath of papers. "*New Avalon Times Atlas*, 2775 edition and in passable shape

too." He glanced back to his cyborg companion. "This what you wanted?"

"Fantastic." Elezha walked over to the table, flipping through pages. The book was worn and clearly had seen a lot of use, with smudges, wrinkled or frayed pages and loose bindings. However, it seemed intact and whole, which was a good start. "There's going to be a map of the entire Sphere here. That's enough for me to work from."

"I'm surprised that a place like this has a three hundred year-old book." Reg commented.

"In the Fedsuns outback, they don't throw nothing away until it's completely broke." Lynn spoke up. "Old book like that's gonna see lots of use still and ain't gonna be replaced till it falls apart. Me? I could use a beer. Got any Pharaoh lager in the fridge?"

Shaking her head for the moment, Elezha found the page she was after, opening up to a colourful map of the Inner Sphere. "Six great houses. Four major periphery states. The Star League"

"An' no clans or Space Romans." Lynn helpfully added.

"So what I'm going to do..." She placed her noteputer by the book, adjusting the display. "I'm going to place an overlay of a current map of the Inner Sphere." She simply explained as the system worked, bringing up the request. "And now, we compare."

"You never really appreciate how big the Rim Worlds Republic was." Reg commented as he looked over the composite map. "Or how small the Combine was either."

"So begin listing those worlds for me, Reg; the ones that caught your eye."

He paused a moment, his face screwed up in concentration. "Rocky."

"Hegemony world; famously wiped out in the First Succession War." She shot back. "One of the very first to go."

"Right then... Zara."

Her eyes scanned over the page. "It's on the 2775 map in the Free Worlds League, but not the modern one. I can only assume that it was also depopulated."

"How about Chennai?"

There was another quick scan of the map. "Cappelán Confederation, in what they called their Andurien Commonality. Gone now."

"Hmm... Waycross?"

"Fedsuns, and right next to Kentares IV during the League. Missing now."

"And a good guess as to what happened." Reg continued. "Kanon?"

"The capitol of the Kanon Shire in the Lyrn Commonwealth..." She nodded. "No trace of the world, nor the entire Shire today."

"I sense a pattern here." Reg seemed eager now, despite the implications of what he was saying. "How about Herakleion?"

"Hmm..." Elezha poured over the map, eyes scanning every last name, then quickly comparing to her digital overlay. "That's odd."

"What's so odd?"

"I can't find it." She simply stated. "There's no trace of the world on this map."

"What do you mean?" Reg leaned over her shoulder. "It's not there?"

"No." She reaffirmed. "There's no world by that name, not in the Inner Sphere and not in the near Periphery. Which means one of two things." She paused a moment to consider her next words. "The first is that the world was re-named at some point between the fall of the Star League and the present day; however, as there is no 'Herakleion' on the current map, that is odd, unless it was renamed again or reverted to an older name... or was wiped out at some point after it was re-named."

"And the second..." Reg swallowed loudly. "Is that it does not exist."

"How could it not exist?" Elezha countered. "That does not make any sense."

"But it would if you were trying to hide something!" Reg enthusiastically countered. "Somebody didn't want Herakleion to be found, so they 'vanished' it off of the map. Now as to who and why... hmm." He pulled up some other pages. "Maybe it was home to something sensitive and thus was too valuable to let anyone discover. Maybe it was home to a conclave of the Immortals, and they made it disappear just like they did South Yemen."

"Maybe you are over-thinking matters." She finally managed, knowing that Reg was about to launch into one of his tirades and looking for a way to get him back on track. "What happened with operation LIBRARY TOWER anyway?"

"Let's see..." He looked over the information. "Operation LIBRARY TOWER. That's odd."

"What is?"

"There's no record of the team sent there or the mission details." Reg began. "None beyond mentions of an allocation of assets, but no details of what those assets might be. Now if you ask me, it could be-

"Stick to the facts, Reg."

"-gotcha." He backed down from what she knew would be another tangential ramble. "The contractor, as always, remains classified. Now, as to the outcome..." he fumbled through several more screens. "Ah. Another problem."

"Another problem?" She asked, her tone apprehensive. "Was the mission a failure?" She knew it would be. Everyone knew there was no such thing as aliens. However, Reg's tone suggested something more than just that. "What happened?"

"The team disappeared." He finished, the fear evident in his voice.

"What do you mean?"

"Just that. They reported a successful arrival in-system, and then nothing further was heard from them." He glanced over the file. "They made no further check-ins, they failed to meet at any pre-arranged rendezvous points and none of the team ever resurfaced. They simply fell off of the face of the universe."

"Was there ever any efforts to locate them?"

"Well..." Reg ran his eyes over the pages. "At the time, we were in the throws of the first Succession War and things were not going well. Just after LIBRARY TOWER's team missed their first check-in, a good chunk of the unit got fried by a nuke in operation, uh, MANGO SMOOTHIE. Given the losses they'd suffered, the leading body chose not to further over-extend and exacerbate the situation even further. By the time they were able to make up losses, the decision was made to close LIBRARY TOWER and move on."

"Because at the time, it seemed like an acceptable loss..."

"...and because Herakleon's non-existence, for some reason, wasn't an issue at the time either." He finished. "But I think that we may just have found something."

"Right." She nodded. "Reg, give me everything we have on that one op. Info on the operatives who were sent there, info on the objective, as much as you can on--"

An urgent knock on the door cut her off, Reg again springing into action faster than she would have imagined possible from him. What was just as interesting was the speed at which Lynn joined him, her own weapon at the ready. "Who is it?"

"It's me, Jake!" The voice on the other side replied. "Let me in!"

"How do I know it's you?" Reg asked, nodding towards Elezha. Silently, she began to pack up her equipment, realizing what he was saying.

"Reg, it's me, damn it!" The voice shot back. "Let me in, you paranoid fatarse before I kick your damn teeth in!"

"Jake." Elezha said.

"Jake." Lynn replied with a nod.

Carefully, Reg opened the door, only to be all but run over by Jake as he stormed into the room. "We have to go, now." He began as he slammed a pile of papers down onto the table. "Pack up all your crap and get the hell out of here."

“Why?” Reg finally managed as he closed the door. “What’s going on?”

“Take a look.” He indicated to the pile of papers. “I found these being distributed around the spaceport.”

Warily, Elezha stood and walked over to the stack he’d indicated to. Even a glance told her what she needed to know without reading the text on the pages. Rather, the photos of herself, Reg, Jake, Lynn and other familiar faces, all ripped straight from their own personnel files. The large c-bill amounts at the base of the page merely underscored the point.

“We go.” She stated. “Now.”

In spite of the rather dire nature of their discussion, Sandra had actually quite enjoyed their lunch. Certainly it was the best backwoods hotel lunchroom she’d ever been to, and there was no arguing with the dropship-sized portions. It meant that, at the very least, she could go back to fretting over the situation on a full stomach and at least go into the certainty of being doomed without being hungry later.

Good times.

“Hopefully, Reg and Elezha will have found something.” Levisha commented as the pair of them stepped outside. “They’re both very thorough, and very good at what they do.”

“Even if they are both complete weirdoes.” Sandra added. “And that’s assuming that Elezha didn’t just snap and kill Reg on the spot, which is something I wouldn’t rule out. Frelled if I know how I haven’t yet.”

“And to think, it was those skills – and his craziness – which let me find him in the first place.” Levisha playfully commented. “And was why I recruited him as well. The ‘Mech was a bonus.”

“Lovely... hold on.” Something had caught her eye as she stepped out from the hotel; specifically, the black sedan parked across the street. Even though they were on a backwater world on the other side of human space to her origin, Sandra’s background was enough to tell her what an unmarked police groundcar looked like.

Her suspicions were confirmed moments later as a pair of men approached. Burley, unkempt and wearing the cheapest suits that department standards would let them get away with. One of them, bearing the almost obligatory cop moustache, flashed a badge. “Louis Dupree, Abbeville federal police. I was hoping that we could have a quick word.” His partner patted their pocket, making his obvious concealed gun even more so.

Planetary police. Not good. Sandra sized up the two of them, figuring that there were almost certainly more around the place. *This isn’t just a random passing sweep; no, this is targeted. They knew we were here already. Hell, I wouldn’t be surprised if both of this place’s MIIO goons were on-site too.* A quick glance at Levisha showed that the other woman wasn’t betraying even the slightest hint of apprehension, but a small nod told her that, likely, they were thinking the same thing.

“Officer Dupree, whatever this is about, I assure you that you will have my complete cooperation.”

Levisha replied, her tone clam and upbeat. "Anything I can do to help my local police."

Sandra's eye cast around the area, looking over windows and shopfronts, searching for any other officers who may be on-site. She wouldn't be surprised to find the local sheriff's department out in force, looming nearby with orders to shoot like crazy if anyone even thought of doing anything funny. *Outback world. Every man and his dog has a shotgun or six within reach.*

"I'll ask the pair of you to hand over your weapons, please." Dupree continued. "People out here may not have your big-planet sensibilities, and I wouldn't want something to happen." His tone made it clear that it wasn't a request. It also told Sandra that this was not a friendly conversation.

With a nod to Levisha, Sandra opened her coat, indicating the weapons inside. "Fair enough then. Wouldn't want some tool getting the wrong idea and starting a bloodbath, huh?" She slowly reached for her gun. "I'll get everything back when we're done with our little chat, of course."

"Of course."

She knew that they were in a bad position, likely surrounded and definitely outnumbered. Starting a fight now would likely only get the pair of them killed, as well as a number of locals who she suspected bore no active malice towards them, but were rather simply doing their job as well. She'd been in their situation in past, and knew what the two suits before her were thinking. *No shootouts, no heroics, nobody getting hurt, no putting my life on the line for a lousy pension plan, no paperwork to fill out at the end of the day.* What really worried her was why they were after the pair of them. *Unless the Word has circulated our info already, and marked us as dangerous fugitives...*

...in that case, we really are tooled.

Which is when she heard the roar of an engine being pushed to its limits, the sound of crunching gravel and a distant shout of alarm. She, as well as the two officers, glanced around for the source of the noise, Sandra registering it just fast enough to shout out, then leap out of the way. Moments later, a bettered sedan skidded through the space where she and Levisha had been, separating the pair of them while sending the suits scurrying for cover.

"Get in!" She heard a familiar voice shout out as she picked herself up off the ground. "Now!"

The car's passenger-side door was open, Jake behind the wheel and yelling. With a speed and grace that suggested that she had expected this, Levisha scurried around, all but vaulting into the car. It was also all the incentive Sandra needed, springing into her bid for freedom.

The wall next to her head spat splinters as a bullet slammed into it, Sandra pausing in her run as she frantically looked around. "Get out of the car now!" Dupree called out, his tone angry and demanding. "Or I will shoot!"

She glanced at Jake, and then at the two suits. "Go, now!" Sandra simply called out.

"But-" he shot back, only to be cut off

"Now!" She repeated. "You said I'd need to make hard choices, and this is one. Get going!"

It took a small nod from Levisha to reassure him that this was the right decision, but Jake seemed to get the idea. With a screech of tires, the car took off, kicking up a storm of gravel as it did. Sandra momentarily forgotten, the suits turned towards the fleeing vehicle, Dupree shouting a barely-heard warning before opening fire.

That was just the opening she needed. Sandra ran at the distracted fed, crashing into him with all her strength, bearing him to the ground. "I don't want to hurt you, tool, so make this easy on both of us!" She grunted as she grabbed at his weapon arm, knees and elbows jabbing at the man as he tried to wriggle free of her. His partner spun around pistol leveled at the pair of them, his hands clearly trembling.

Guy's probably never fired his gun in the field. I can use that. She slammed her opponent's hand into the ground, driving it into the gravel then grinding it as she put her weight on his hand, the cry of pain all she needed. A powerful slam, followed by a second one was enough to get him to drop the gun, giving her all she needed. Springing up, she launched herself through a knee to his stomach, scooping up his pistol as he writhed on the ground.

"Drop it, kid." She shouted at the other agent. "It's not worth getting shot at over a cheap suit." Right there and then, she was hoping that the combination of gun, scars, eyepatch and coat would make her look terrifying enough to listen or, at the very least, moderately intimidating enough for him to pause and consider his life decisions. Slowly, carefully, he dropped his gun onto the gravel. "Now slide it over here." She continued. "Don't be a dead hero; we've got enough of those already."

Again he nodded to her, the weapon crunching on the gravel as it moved before stopping dead at her feet. Slowly and carefully, she picked it up, keeping her own gun trained on the man. "Good job, kid." She managed. "You'll live a long and happy life at this rate."

"You're surrounded, you know." He stammered back, trying his best to remain confident, but not having much luck. "You'll never get away from here. You should have just made it simple and surrendered then."

"Probably." Sandra replied. "But then, if I did the smart thing in life, then I wouldn't be here now. Nor would I do this." And then, before he could say or do anything else, she ran.

"Not that I don't appreciate the bail-out, Jake." Levisha began as she pressed herself into the passenger seat of the battered sedan. "But I would appreciate knowing what's going on now that we've turned a stop-and-search into a shooting war."

"There were wanted posters up for us at the spaceport." He simply shot back, handing her a scrunched-up piece of folded paper while not taking his eyes off of the road. "I collected up Jake and Elezha before the local cops got to them; they're hopefully keeping a low profile."

"Reg is surprisingly good at that when he needs to be." She simply stated as she unfolded the sheet of paper. "Well this isn't good; the image is taken straight from our files... and I never liked that photo anyway." Levisha gave a dismissive sigh. "So the locals were tipped off, it seems."

"Right; we can fight over if the Word knew we were here or just were sending this to every planet they could later." Jake continued. "Problem is, the local authorities moved fast. They've got the *Una* locked down and the crew in detention last I heard, which means that they also have our 'Mechs and our route off-planet. We're gonna have to figure a way to--"

The car shook, Levisha shoved forward, then springing back into her seat with violent force. "What was that?" She asked, glancing around.

"We're being chased; they're trying to drive us off of the road." He simply stated, his tone rather cool and collected despite the situation. "Hold on!" With a violent yank, he twisted the wheel to one side, the car veering off across the middle of the road. A moment later, there was another impact, albeit much softer, as their pursuer clipped the back of the car.

"Bad?" She asked, trying to size up the opponent. It was a black sedan, likely the same one they'd seen back at the hotel, one that was noticeably larger than Jake's stolen ride. (Levisha had simply assumed that as she doubted Jake would have a car like this by choice)

"They're in a stock governmental Alex-S; heavy body, good grunt under the hood and built for shoving." He explained with another swerve, this time narrowly avoiding an oncoming car, then just as quickly dodging another attack from their pursuer. "You get them all over the place out here."

"And your assessment of the situation?"

"They're bigger, heavier and might even be faster, and can take far more of a beating than this plastic crapbox." He shot back. "Doesn't seem to have an interceptor engine, which is a small blessing. One thing they don't have, though."

"Which is?"

"Me driving." Jake managed a broad grin, his voice betraying confidence in the face. "I can make this pile of crap do things that suit-monkey couldn't dream of." As if to underscore his point, he swerved the vehicle sharply again, the pursuing sedan sliding into the space where they once were. Not willing to give them a chance, Jake slammed the accelerator down, his car stepping ahead of its would-be attacker.

"Good to know." Levisha's usual confidence was returning, making it clear just how much faith she had in him. "You and Lynne should race some time?"

"Lynne?" He gave a derisive snort. "Lynne's a great tech, but she's still just a grease monkey. I'd blow her away if we tried it."

The reply was an upbeat laugh. "Good to know my life's in such good hands then." She offered him a warm smile. "Thanks for coming to save me, Jake."

"Don't thank me yet." He simply replied, although his voice betrayed his confidence. "First we've got to get away from this guy. Then feel free to knock me out."

"Oh, you know I will." Her tone was almost playful now. "Hold on, got a call." Levisha tapped her ear, activating the small communicator hidden in there. "White Stig; what's your status?"

"Black Stig here." Sandra replied, yelling to overcome the high-pitched whine of an engine. "I managed to steal a dirt bike and make a break for it. I'm headed overland towards the spaceport."

"Negative on that, Black Stig." She countered. "Locals have secured our ship and have it in lockdown."

"Well tool." There was pause, Sandra's end of the link quiet save for the engine. "Right. I think I have a plan. Can you meet me there?"

"Rig Stig and I are being pursued now--"

"How can you be in a frelling car chase when there are three cars on the damn planet?"

Levisha laughed in spite of herself. "I'm confident that he can handle it." She simply replied. "We will pick up Fat Stig and Ascendance Actual and rendezvous near the port... and Lynne too. Can you come up with something by then?" She was clinging onto her seat, trying desperately to anchor herself against the

"Well since we're tooled if we don't, I suppose I should think fast." Sandra finished.

"Atta girl. I knew I could count on you." She smirked. "Though I'm gonna take some of the blame, as I picked this planet." Levisha shrugged. "Should have gone to Humansville after all."

"I'll chew you out over it later." Sandra managed over the bike's engine. "For now, I'll concentrate on staying alive."

"Understood, and out." Levisha finished, only to have her conversation further punctuated by another jostle from the pursuing car. "Anything we can do about him?" She asked, her tone earnest and forward rather than pleading or demanding.

"Just sit back and watch." He grinned back. "And hold onto your seat, babe. This is gonna get rough."

With that moment's warming, he again violently swerved the car, the sounds of loose gravel under the wheels far from encouraging to her ears. Thrown against the side wall, it was all Levisha could do to keep a straight face as their car seemed to slide wildly out of control on the rough road. However, for his part, Jake was focused, his eyes locked straight ahead as he held the wheel with an iron grip. *I might have actually underestimated him*, she thought to herself, a small smile returning to her face.

Glancing back, she could see the other car violently swerve to get away from theirs as it's river desperately fought to avoid a collision. And then, as abruptly as he'd started, Jake yanked the wheel again, throwing them back on-course as the police sedan shot past them.

"Now you're mine." Jake's voice had a confident tone to it as he hammered down the accelerator, shooting forward to catch up with their would-be pursuer. "And I play for keeps."

"Nice." Levisha whistled. "Turn the situation to your advantage."

"Trust me, I was just looking for the chance." He offered. "No backwoods tractor driver can touch me,

but it helps if I don't kill us both trying. Now as tight as I hope you're hanging on, I advise you to hang on tighter." Their car surged forwards, closing the distance again, before slamming into the back of its opponent, again throwing Levisha forward in spite of her best efforts. The other driver, however, seemed to be less prepared for this development than she was, swerving across the road from the impact.

"Yeah, that's the stuff!" Jake didn't even seem to have noticed the jolt, instead having a hungry, almost predatory look in his eyes. "Nobody drives me off the road. Nobody."

Levisha knew how far he could take that sort of sentiment. In the early days of the FedCom civil war, Jake had been a professional racer. A rampaging 'Mech had crashed through the course where he was competing, killing dozens but, more to the point, running him off the track. That one act had given him the motivation he'd needed to fight against Katherine Steiner-Davion's rule, which had, by various means, bought him to the Mimetic Badarses.

And now she was beginning to get a first-hand appreciation of just how determined the man could be.

Another jolt ran through the car as it slammed into its one-time attacker, the other vehicle wavering across the road as its driver fought to keep it under control. However, Jake was not going to relent, pushing forward, shoving his car into the side of the other one. One nudge became a second, then a third, and then finally a solid hit on the car's side that shook Levisha against the restraints as she heard something crack and rattle.

However, for all that, she could see the results of his attack. The other car skidded, then spun across the road, a brief glimpse of its driver showing that he was panicking as he fought with the wheel. Instead, the car kicked up clouds of dirt and gravel as it slipped, then slammed into a guard rail on the other side of the road.

"Impressive." She managed.

"Like I said, I'm the best." Jake simply replied. "Now let's get our damn ship back."

For some reason, Sandra wasn't surprised at the number of fresh dents in Jake's car when it pulled up. He'd clearly evaded his pursuer, and the pair of them were alive and more-or-less well, which was all that she decided that needed to know. Deep down, Sandra had more than a little sympathy for the local cops (and certainly more than she spared for, well, most people) and knew that they were likely just doing their job with few questions as to why anyone wanted these people captured or killed.

The group had met up in a ramshackle, run-down barn, not too far from the outer perimeter of the drop-port, Reg, Elezha and Lynne seeming to have made it there fine. "So, what do we have?" Sandra asked as she stepped in, glancing over the collected crew.

"Well, Elezha and I think we've found a lead." Reg began, his tone excited in spite of the situation.

"Well, it was Reg, really." The cyborg replied. "He found the thread and tugged at it. I just pressed a few buttons to get an answer."

"She's too kind. The point is that we think we know--"

"Reg, Elezha, that's all well and nice." Sandra cut them off. "But I meant to say, what the hell do we have on the situation right here and now."

"Oh!" Elezha stammered. "Well--"

"That is--"

"We were looking at--"

"We haven't checked." Lynne finally spoke up. "We were waitin' on y'all to get back. And 'sides, what they found was kinda cool an' all, so I was happy to let 'em keep postlatin' theories and the like." Her tone was its usual mixture of frankness and plain-faced stupidity, which gave Sandra no reason to doubt what she was saying.

"Right then." She muttered to herself. "Let's see what we're dealing with."

Fortunately, between the six of them, they'd been smart enough to bring some equipment with them when they had disembarked. Clambering up to the top of the barn, Sandra surveyed the drop-port with a pair of binoculars, taking in the sights and considering her options. The *Una Von Rayxe* was clearly visible as it sat on the landing field, smaller figures milling around it. While she couldn't make them out clearly, scale told her that they were men on foot, likely members of the Burgess Hill planetary militia. *Likely poorly trained but with a lot of experience in backwoods hunting and the like and armed with assault rifles. Minimal threat to a 'Mech – except said 'Mechs are on the ship. Tool.*

The wide, flat and open expanse of concrete provided almost no cover for an approach, meaning that any attempt to get to the ship would likely be spotted. Considering her options, Sandra continued to scan around the field, hopeful for something else that might be of some use. The terminal buildings in the distance didn't provide her with much, being little more than rough collection of crude structures that looked like they had been intended to be temporary until more permanent ones were built and had stayed that way for a few centuries. *Not useful either, as there's still far too much open space.*

A pair of patrol cars doing circuits of the field didn't offer too many alternatives, neither did a pair of *Mules* in the middle distance. One of them looked barely spaceworthy, and she had no doubt that both of them were also guarded against someone considering them a softer target. *Not that we'd want to, either.*

"Where did you say they were keeping the crew?" Sandra casually asked.

"On the *UVR* itself." Reg offered from below. "I looked over the information on the posters whoever set them up--"

"The robes." Several people chimed in at once, as if to cut Reg off from his own postulation.

--did point out that we're very dangerous and desperate people. I suspect they don't want to move the crew until they're sure that none of them are concealing weapons, are freaky cyborgs – no offence."

"None taken" Elezha's tone was remarkably casual.

"Or that we didn't rig the ship to blow." He finished. "Of course, they may have moved them since we turned up..."

"Risk I'm gonna have to take. Sandra commented as her eye passed over the equipment hangers. "You got a map of the drop port there? Preferably one that's got everything labeled?"

"I copied one from the local InterWeb." Elezha offered. "Plus a rather complete inventory of the port and its equipment. There's very little here; they don't have any LoaderMechs, for example, and only a few industrial Exoskeletons to aid in moving heavy cargo."

Sandra climbed down from her viewpoint on the roof. "I'm surprised this planet even has an InterWeb."

The cyborg shrugged. "Mainly it's there to list what you're not allowed to bring through customs and a list of local hotels and tourist traps. Nothing actually useful to us, mind you." A few swift keystrokes had it bought up on-screen, Elezha handing her noteputer over to Sandra.

"Better than nothing." Sandra commented as she flicked through pages and images. "Hmm, this has potential."

"What do you have?" Levisha asked, her tone curious.

Sandra had been wondering why their leader hadn't spoken up or offered anything so far. *Maybe she wants to see what I can do and is treating this like a test. Or maybe she's genuinely out of ideas herself.* Pausing a moment, she flicked back a few pages as an idea began to form. *Or maybe Levisha's shaken up from riding with Jake. I can't say that I'd blame her.*

"So, are we screwed yet?" Jake asked.

"Depends." Sandra finished. "Can you or Lynne drive a Ground Tug?"

"In my sleep." Jake replied with a derisive snort.

"Upside down and under water." Lynne added, as if to one-up the first reply. "Ain't nothing I can't drive."

"Awesome." Sandra finished. "Because I have an idea."

Ground Tugs were a part and parcel of Drop-port operations across the Inner Sphere and beyond, something that was simply assumed to be there. Once unloaded from a dropship, Bulk cargo needed to be moved, and there were few better ways to do such than with a heavy-duty tracked vehicle towing a train of cargo wagons behind it. Slow and rugged, the typical ground tug was built for power and ruggedness, not good looks.

They also had the advantage of being a part of the "background noise" of a drop-port, something that was just generally assumed to be there and, for the most part, ignored unless one was lumbering

towards you. Far less flashy than even a LoaderMech, most people wouldn't really care about a ground tug. Certainly, at least at first, the planetary militia infantry guarding the grounded dropship *Una Von Rayxe* didn't really pay much attention to the two vehicles moving in the distance.

It was only after somebody noticed that both of them were headed towards this one dropship that anyone raised the issue. Comms chatter flew back and forth as there were calls to see if anyone had authorized the vehicles, if there was an order to unload the ship and its crew, what was to be the disposition of the 'Mechs onboard and wild rumours about the fugitive MechWarriors that were still being pursued, costing precious time that allowed the two tugs to get closer.

Finally, the confirmation came back that the 'Mechs were not being unloaded at this point and, in fact, there was no call for the ground tugs to be out there, sending another round of requests flying back and forth. This yielded something else important – that the Ground Tug hanger wasn't responding. At that point, attempts to hail the two tugs also failed, both by radio and simply shouting at them.

Which was pretty much what Sandra had planned on.

"Floor it, Lynn." She eagerly commented from the cabin of one of the two massive tracked vehicles, looking ahead at the dropship and the troops milling around it. "Or, as best you can in this tub."

"Better hold on," Lynne shot back, an eager grin on her face that matched the enthusiasm in her voice. "We'll be reachin' speeds of three!"

There was a lurch as the Ground Tug accelerated (in a relative sense of the word) the engine roaring as it did. Clearly enjoying herself, Lynn hammered the horn, a loud bellow echoing out over the concourse. Moments later, it was replied with one from Jake's tug, the tracked vehicle crawling forwards to match course with Lynne's. "Woo-hoo!" She called out, all but jumping out of her seat. "This was an awesome plan of yers, ya know that?"

It's almost like they're racing... in the same way that glaciers do. Sandra gave a small smile, looking over the assembled troops in front of them. "Don't get too cocky. We're not home free yet." Glancing across the cabin, she could see Reg trying to press himself into the seat, clutching the materials he'd been working on to him for dear life. *Can't blame him either.* Whatever he and Elezha had found was big, but it would also have to wait.

Even over the roar of the engine, she could hear shouts coming from the soldiers on the ground as they called for the crews of the two crawlers to stand down. She'd figured that this would happen, which was all a part of her plan. Frankly, she was just glad that they'd taken as long as they had to get a response from the defending troops, who were clearly more than a little rusty and unprepared for something like this. *I'd love to see what's going on behind the scenes and what exactly is motivating them to go to these lengths. On the other hand, I'd also prefer to get clean away.*

"This is where it gets bumpy, kids" She commented, then picked up her communicator. "Black Stig to Rig Stig; you are go for assault."

"Awesome." Jake's voice shot back. "I've got the right."

"Roger that. We'll take left." Sandra confirmed with a nod to Lynn. "Let us know once you're on board or

if anything goes wrong.”

“Fat chance of that. With me behind the wheel, everything will turn out fine.”

“Yeah, unless I beat y’all there.” Lynne added, a competitive tone colouring her response.

“As if”

“Can it you two.” Sandra cut them both off. “Let’s just worry about not dying first. The dick-waving contest can wait”

The two tugs continued their seemingly inevitable march forward, the soldiers before them forming up as if to discourage the two monstrous machines. Sandra could hear what they were shouting, their demands to stand down and warnings that they would open fire. It was what she had anticipated, and why she’d come up with the plan in the first place.

A metallic rattle caught her attention as shots bounced off the thick hide of the Ground Tug. The vehicles were built to deal with the hazards of their work and to survive such things as massive cargo crates falling on them, collisions with parked dropships and the like. Small arms fire would rattle them, but not be enough to kill them before they reached their goal – or at least, Sandra hoped so.

Glancing out the cabin window, she could see the shots hitting Jake’s crawler, marking its hull but not appearing to do much damage for the moment. However, she also knew all too well that such damage could quickly add up – and speed and mobility were not on their side. They did have other advantages that they could use in their favour, though, ones that had been a part of Sandra’s plan.

One of them came into play as Lynn’s ground tug reached the first rank of troopers who had been firing at it. Given a choice between risking getting run over by a massive tracked transport, the soldiers chose to break and flee, scattering before the lumbering behemoth. It was only a short respite from the fire, but it was also a welcome one. “We’re good. Turn us!”

At Sandra’s order, Lynn threw the massive vehicle around, the treads shuddering on the concrete as it twisted on the spot before accelerating (for want of a better term) away. Jake’s unit did the same, cutting across the bow of the parked dropship before vanishing behind its far side. If he was following her orders, he’d be pressing the tug as close to the hull of the ship as he could, just as Lynne was doing now. Not only would it reduce the amount of exposure, but it would be the start of the next stage of their plan.

The *Leopard*-class dropship had two small crew-access hatches on either side of the bow, just ahead of the main ‘Mech bay. These were the only way for the crew to enter or exit the ship when it was grounded, and, as such, were key to what she was intending. Lynne’s crawler stopped as close to the hatch as she could get it, Sandra swinging open the door to bang against the ship’s hull. “Right. Ready to over-ride?”

“Gimme a sec!” Lynne shot back, shouting over the sound of gunfire as she reached for a toolbox behind her seat. “All set!”

Gingerly, Sandra stepped back, letting Lynne clamber over the seats and work her magic on the

hatchway. "How's it going?" She asked, glancing at Reg as the large man tried to squeeze himself into as small a space as possible.

"What I'm doin' here is delicate rocket surgery." Lynne muttered as she went to work, fumbling with the lock. "They build these things to stop ya from accidentally getting' in or out... an' I can't blow it if we wanna take off again."

"That's nice, Lynne, but—" Sandra was cut off as one of the windows shattered, glass fragments scattering across the cabin. "We are kinda being shot at here."

"Yeah, yeah, I know!" She gave a dismissive wave. "Gods, this would be so much easier if I had a beer or two."

Sandra had never understood it, but Lynne seemed to actually work better drunk. "You can raid the ship's bar fridge once we're in." She checked her watch, then activated her communicator. "Black Stig here. We're in place and trying to gain access now. What's your status?"

"White Stig here." Levisha calmly replied, despite the gunfire in the background. "Ascendance Lead is working the lock now. I'm amazed by just what she keeps in her arms. It's quite—"

"Don't wannathinkaboutit." Sandra cut her off. "I've got... Lynne... working the lock now. Let us know when you're good."

"Hmm... we should get her a code-name as well." Levisha commented. "She seems to do a lot of field ops for a tech."

"Yeah, well, we'll worry about that later." Sandra replied. "Right now, we have other things to deal with, like not getting shot."

"Oh, all right." Levisha dismissively finished "But let's think about it."

Sighing and trying her best not to scream, Sandra instead concentrated on the situation, glancing at the soldiers outside. To her dismay, several of them had stopped shooting and were now cautiously approaching the tug and its bullet-ridden side door. "Tool. How much longer, Lynne?"

"Nearly got it!" She called back. "Just gimme a minute more!"

"We don't have a frelling minute..." Sandra shook her head. "Stuff it. I gotta keep us alive, as always. Time for some more suicidal bravery." Spinning around, she pressed her back to the cabin wall. "Once again, I stick my neck out to protect us from people who aren't smart enough to check their benefits package. Great."

With a lightning-fast move, she turned, reaching out the window with a pistol in each hand, opening fire at the soldiers on the ground. Only a couple of shots, only a tiny window of exposure, and then she was back behind cover. She could hear cries of alarm, soldiers pulling back, apparently unaware that there was somebody inside there who might be armed.

Then, with a silent prayer to whatever god may be listening, she turned again, sending more shots flying

out into the distance. She wasn't shooting to kill; she wasn't even really shooting at anyone, but rather she was aiming to keep heads down and buy time. Mercifully, it seemed to be working. "Just a little longer..."

"I'm in!" Lynne called out. "I got it!"

"Awesome." Sandra managed without a hint of enthusiasm. "White Stig, we're good. How's things on your end?"

"We're ready to go." Levisha simply replied.

"Right then." Sandra commented. "On three, we open the hatches and go all in." She glanced over at Reg, who nodded back, and Lynne who gave a big thumbs-up. "Ready? One, two, three!"

The hatch swung open, Sandra vaulting over Lynne to be the first in the door. As soon as it was open, she heard a shout of alarm, a soldier raising his gun to face them. She was faster, the butt of her pistol hitting him in the face, sending him reeling back. A moment later, Lynne added her own thick-soled boot to the injury, slamming his head against the metal bulkhead behind him and sending him slumping to the floor.

"Black Stig here. Our side is secure."

"White Stig; ours is clear too."

"Right." Sandra muttered. "Let's get these tools off of our ship."

The battle had been a short one, the soldiers onboard being scattered and quickly over-powered by Sandra's impromptu team. There had been no casualties on either side save for a few injuries, largely inflicted on troops who had tried to be brave. The crew of the *Una Von Rayxe*, as well as the other technicians and the members of Ascendance squad were all accounted for and more-or-less unharmed.

A quick round of negotiation with the local authorities had gone well; in exchange for letting the ship go, the locals would not try to intercept it or make any further efforts to detain it. As a bonus, not only did they get their men back, but the *Una's* weapons would not be turned on the drop-port to incinerate everything around it. Sandra had been only bluffing when she'd made that demand, but her tone left very little room for doubt.

Minutes later, the ship was free of the atmosphere, burning towards its rendezvous at the system's jump point. Eyes were open for any attempt to intercept, but it seemed that the planetary militia weren't wanting to take any further risks and were, rather, happy to let them go instead of escalating a situation that had already spiraled out of control.

Instead, Sandra and Levisha had called a meeting in the *Una Von Rayxe's* briefing room to assess the situation. It was largely unpleasant, reiterating the 'we're so screwed' facts that Levisha had given her only a few short hours ago. There had been one bright light in the darkness however, and that was Reg and Elezha's theory they were working on; as wild as it was, it still represented something tangible. Now they needed something to do with it.

"As we stand, we have just about nothing." Levisha stated. "What we need now, more than ever, is a backer."

"Which won't be easy with our faces on every wanted poster from here to Pobluso." Jake cut in. "We're not going to be popular."

"Welcome to my life." Sandra added dryly.

"Now before everyone gets to upset, there is one option." Levisha spoke up. "I can trace the money back on one of our backers, and we may yet be able to use that." There was a smug grin on her face, something that Sandra took as a good sign.

"I take it I'm not going to like it." Sandra simply replied, an apprehensive tone in her voice.

"Of course not. So I say we take it."

"Why not?" She finished. "Either way, we're equally tooled; might as well make it on our own terms."

Farrah
Crofton, Cruicis March
Federated Suns
11 February 3073

As one of the largest companies in the Inner Sphere, StarCorps had plenty of ways to 'lose' employees from its official rosters. There were people who did important jobs for the company who were field away as administrative assistants and the like, entirely forgettable and anonymous within their ranks. These were the kinds who were employed in high-risk activities on behalf of the company that were best handled anonymously and, if needed, could be made to disappear if things went bad. After all, who would think that the copy boy was the one who had hired a mercenary band.

Taro Watanabe was one such person. He'd been moved across the Sphere from one branch to another as needed, making deals with "outside consultants" to further the company's goals. While he'd spent a lot of time working out of branches on Galatea and Outreach, he had a tendency to show up where and when the company needed him.

And even then, even by the shady standards of his operations, Taro was more than just that. He was a member of a special group within the company, one that directed operations that went beyond even the normally grey area of corporate-hired mercenary forces. His group answered to very few within the StarCorps empire; in fact, they were some of the few who could go directly to the company's *real* owner.

So when he'd gotten a high-priority message from above with certain flags on it had shown, he'd been first to be called in. What was even more interesting was a second message that had come with it, one that had come from outside StarCorps and yet was directed to him specifically. That somebody knew who he was proved to be interesting enough, but combined with the message from his 'departmental head', he'd

been willing to stick his neck out on this one. And so, as such, he was willing to stick his neck out, and agree to the anonymous sender's request for a meeting.

And then they'd laid out their final surprise; rather than some dingy run-down hole or anonymous seedy dive as would normally be the case, they'd chosen a slightly upmarket bar and grill in the middle of Farrah's business district, something that made him even more curious.

As he headed to the rendezvous – in the middle of lunch hour, no less, Taro ran through the situation in his head. Whoever he was meeting was clearly confident that he was willing to listen to what they had to offer, or were desperate to make a deal. Stepping into the place, he couldn't help but notice just how crowded it was, an interesting change from the norm. Maybe whoever it was preferred the anonymity of a crowd after all.

A discrete nod of the head sent him to the table he was after, and also shattered all his impressions about what he was dealing with. Two of those waiting for him at the table would have stood out anywhere, which made it clear that anonymity wasn't their goal.

"Mister Watanabe. A pleasure to meet you." The woman extending her hand would have stood out just about anywhere; between her black and red hair, red eyes and overly-elaborate black and red dress, she looked like a Holofilm vampire. "Please, join us. I hear that the burgers here are just delightful."

The woman next to her gave him a nod that suggested it would be a good idea. Her scars and eyepatch made it clear that arguing with her would not be a good idea. By comparison, the other two seemed positively tame; a brown-haired woman who seemed to be trying to sink into her seat and a somewhat overweight man who was watching him with an intensity that belied his otherwise missable features.

"Of course." Watanabe sat as he tried to assess the situation and figure just how many other plants there were in the room. Immediately he spotted a couple at another table, a burly man and a tattooed woman who gave him a sidelong glance. Looking out the front window he could make out a courier waiting with a sports ATV who also seemed to be taking glances inside. *Well and truly surrounded, and that's only the ones I've made.* "You have me at a disadvantage, ms..."

"Oh, I'm sure you know who we are." The Vamp shot back, her tone still friendly and engaging despite her implied menace. "A man in your position would know... things like that." She gave a pleasant smile, one that suggested that she knew a lot more than she was letting on, and wanted him to know that too.

"Touche." He raised his hands. "No sense in hiding it then. I guess you know exactly who I am and what it is I do too. I can also assume that you have something that you can offer me beyond just simply showing up here."

"The tool's smarter than he looks." The scarred woman commented, her voice suggesting that it was actually a compliment.

"Now now..." The Vamp countered. "Mr Watanabe, we're here to make you an offer. We will give you the exclusive services of an elite, highly-trained specialized mercenary force with unparalleled experience in covert operations, specifically asset and data retrieval as well as a broad range of knowledge on subjects that most people prefer they didn't know about." She shot a toothy grin. "Which is how we knew to contact you specifically, Mr Watanabe."

"I see. And what would you be asking for?"

"To get paid for starters." She stated. "And at a good rate. We'll also need headquarters and hanger facilities, as well as parts, supplies and equipment. We'll draw up a list."

"As well, we want asylum for a researcher who has been persecuted in his homeland for his political beliefs." The mousy-haired woman spoke up, breaking her self-imposed silence, her voice rather strong and determined in contrast to her unremarkable appearance.

"Also a bath. A long, hot bath." The scarred woman added. "And Fat Stig there wants nachos."

"That's not a demand, that's just what I'm ordering." He added. "Though you're paying. I haven't had a good nachos in ages"

If it was an attempt at humour, then Watanabe wasn't laughing. "You are asking a lot."

"We're in a precarious situation at the moment." The Vamp simply stated. "We've had a couple of setbacks that cost us a lot. That's why we've come to you."

"And what do we get in return?" He asked, keeping his tone neutral and businesslike.

"Besides all we mentioned, there's the big kicker." She nodded. "Two hundred and fifty years of secrets best left buried."

"Including ones the Word don't want you to know about." The fat man added. "Ones that they tried to wipe us out to hide. Ones that we'll gladly hand over – but only if you're happy to sign on the dotted line"

"Fat Stig speaks the truth." The Vamp added. "And we know how much the Word loves secrets."

"A fair point." Taro conceded. "And I suppose that if I don't agree, I get nothing."

"Not only do you get nothing, but you're still playing for our lunch." The one-eyed woman noted. "And trust me, we're all hungry. Even the plants in the room who are watching you."

"I see. It really isn't a choice, is it?"

"Glad to know you're thinking straight." The Vamp finished. "Consider this, Mister Watanabe; you're making an investment in the future of the Inner Sphere... and maybe, just maybe, discovering a bit of its past."

She'd played him well, he had to admit. After all, his job was all about secrets; keeping them, hiding them, acquiring them and, where needed, burying them. With what he knew of these people, he was about to come into the proverbial mother load of them. *And with an offer like that, how could I refuse? I suspect that this will make some people further up the chain rather interested.*

Perfectly Ordinary Derelict Factory
Galatea
Word of Blake Protectorate
15 February 3073

While he had spent very little time in it so far, Ogel had done a good job not only in taking control of the Mimetic Badarses' lair, but making it into his own. As quickly as his analysts had begun pulling apart all that been there before, he had others setting up what he needed to run operations.

He'd chosen the location for two reasons. The first was that it was on Galatea, which assisted in him in his ops, given that a lot of what he did was run through mercenary units. A lot of those had chosen to side with the Word during their invasion of the Mercenary's Star, either defecting wholesale or choosing to join the winning side mid-battle, and that wasn't counting the ones who had been planted on the ground before the invasion. All of those had given him a lot of material to work with, ones that he was glad to exploit.

However, that was not the only reason he'd chosen this specific location. Taking control of it sent a message, telling its former inhabitants that everything they had, everything they owned, everything they thought they controlled instead belonged to him. The place that had been their sanctum for centuries as no longer their own, but rather would be indelibly stamped with the presence of something else, something *alien* to them.

He'd picked one specific office to use as his own, one used by a member of the team who he was familiar with. *If she knew I was here, she would be disgusted*, he'd observed as he had taken up residence there. *Good.*

And even then, there were other, deeper reasons for what he'd done, ones that nobody but himself would be able to guess at.

What had happened on Mara had been a disappointment; he'd hoped to corner and destroy the unit there, but instead they had slipped through his grasp. The willingness of their dropship crew to sacrifice themselves had been a surprise, one that had cost him heavily. His prey had slipped through his grasp, and were now out there – somewhere – in the vastness of human space.

Standing, Ogel looked over the photoboard he'd had moved in here, studying the images. With their systems compromised, it had been easy to plunder their databanks for complete records of their operations, exposing a wealth of new information that had been hidden from so many for so long. *I wonder how many secrets they'd even hidden from their own people*, he thought to himself as he looked over older images, ones of people long dead, of places long lost. *So many operations that had been buried and expunged with no traces of their existence outside of a few indexes. So many names eliminated as if they had never existed.*

And one of them in particular...

A knock on the door bought him out of his reverie, turning as Agent Smasher entered. "The man who made all this possible." Ogel commented as he eyed the new arrival, his *true* eye clicking into focus. "I

see they gave you your original face back.”

Smasher managed a wry smile, his heavysset features and dark skin a sharp contrast to the image he’d worn when he infiltrated the facility. “I am reporting for duty, Sir.” He began, his tone belying his obvious amusement. “Now that I am... myself again, I am ready to serve the Blessed Blake’s will in any way you deem fit.”

“And I am glad for it.” Ogel replied, a hint of warmth in his tone. “Smasher, you did fantastic work for us. None of this would have happened without you and your actions, your masterful deception and betrayal. And those refugees are still none the wiser as to what happened.” It was an amusing thought to picture them grasping at straws as he figured just how compromised they were, just how much he had taken from them.

“I only wish I could have done more.” He countered. “If I had some way to lock them down, to ensure that they could not flee...”

“It was a risk.” Ogel stated. “Operation BLACK TERROR was formulated from what you gave us; there were no flaws with your intel or planning. Rather, it was an unexpected element that cost us the battle. Even then, they are wounded and depleted, with no more than five or six operational BattleMechs.” His still-human eye narrowed. “And they cannot run forever.”

“Still nothing, then?”

“No.” He shook his head. “We turned Callista upside-down, but it yielded no clues. Likewise, there has been no word from Pogata station.” He clasped his hands together behind his back, one flesh and blood, one true, as he spoke. “They cannot have gotten too far. We have a potential lead from Abbesville, which narrows matters even further. With that, we can close the noose. And then...” His face gave a small smile. “Then we can conclude matters.”

Smasher was about to speak up, when he was interrupted by another arrival. “Commander.” The woman began as she stepped into the room with a casual stride, offering a datapad. “The Blades are away as ordered, and I have the latest updated on the rest of your hounds.”

The ‘hounds’ were the mercenaries Ogel controlled, those that had served as the leg-men in his operations. They existed as assets to be used and discarded as needed, regardless of the cost in lives. This particular pack was one he did not expect to ever see again, regardless of if the mission was successful or not.

“Very good, Hopewell.” he replied as he took it. “As with Smasher, your work is always exemplary.”

She smiled back, a sweet smile that accented her looks. With her soft features and long, wavy blonde hair, Kristina Hopewell looked more like a model or actress than a member of the Word’s elite. It was only the black visor with its narrow red optics that sat where her eyes should have been which offset the image, being all the more stark for its presence. “I serve the Blessed Blake’s Will.” She simply stated.

Despite her background, he could hear the sincerity in her words. An actress before an incident with a deranged stalker, combined with the Free Worlds League’s nonsensical prejudices had ruined her career, she had managed to fit into an elite, secretive organization surprisingly well. She and Smasher were two

of his three best, people who were indispensable and, seemingly, infallible. The only reason the third was not here was simply because they were engaged in a long-term operation elsewhere – one that was close to yielding a result.

“Commander?” She spoke up. “You do seem distracted. I take it that the hunt has not gone well, then?”

“It is not that... rather...” He paused. “Close the door.”

With a simple nod, Kristina did such before returning to him. “Is this something we should know?”

“I think that it is fair that both of you know this.” Ogel stated, his tone blunt and direct. “You have worked so hard to this goal, so I think that it is time you realized what all this is about. You must also understand that none of this will ever go beyond this room – and that includes your own internal recordings.”

A pair of nods and quiet acknowledgements was the signal to continue. “As you have doubtless guessed, this operation goes beyond simply eliminating a threat to our Master’s vision. These mercenaries are not just a threat in the present, but have been one in past. They are the keepers of secrets close to our hearts, ones who have been privy to the Blessed Blake’s great works.”

Ogel looked over the pair of them before him. “This goes back nearly three centuries now, to an operation deliberately obscured from history on a world now long lost to us...”