

Unknown Location
Unknown System
Word of Blake Protectorate?
Unknown Date

For Sandra, the worst part of her imprisonment was simply not knowing what was going on.

She was in a small, bare cell, the only furnishings being a simple bunk, a toilet and a sink. There was one light and a door, but no other features to suggest where she was. She'd assumed that she was still on the same planet, but the truth was she had no way to tell that either. There were no windows, while the room's cool temperature suggested that it was underground, which further confused the passage of time.

Sandra hadn't even been led to this cell, rather woken up in it. A quick self-inspection (one that was complicated by not having a mirror) told her that she'd been stripped of her makeup and prosthetics. Her captors had provided her with a plain, simple jumpsuit to wear and, as a token gesture of comfort, an eyepatch, but that was it.

Food was delivered through a slot in the base of the door. There had been no communication from outside when it arrived to tell her who was bringing it, and only a small tap to say when they were retrieving her tray. Even that hadn't helped. Attempts to track time had simply told Sandra that the meals were coming at irregular intervals, and the time between delivery and retrieval was also random.

In short, they don't give me anything to tell me how long I've been here, she'd concluded. By my figuring, this is three days since I woke up here, and god alone knows how long since they put me under in the first place.

She had no clue if there were any other members of her team here, even. *Disarming Elezha would take a long time and a lot of work, but then the damn Robes are the masters of freaky cyborg tech. They probably know more about what's in her than we do actually. Of course, she's probably freaking out herself. Whatever it is about the toasters that she doesn't like isn't going to be helped by being stuck on a planet full of them.*

And then...

She snarled at herself again, realising that she was deliberately letting her mind wander. As much as she was trying to focus on her situation and devising a way out of here, she couldn't. Every time, she came back to the same point, the reason why she was in here to begin with. Sandra couldn't put it aside as much as she wanted (*no*, she corrected, *needed*) to.

Damn it.

She flopped back onto her bunk, her good eye staring up at the ceiling. She didn't know if she was counting cracks or trying to make a structural assessment or figuring a way she could blow the roof off with the power of her mind. All she knew was that she had to think of something, no, anything else rather than that one *thing*.

No, that's the worst part, she realised. That I'm less worried about myself or any other members of my

team then I am about where one of them might be. She sighed to herself. And what I'm going to do to them if I ever catch them.

Reg nodded to Lynne as she stepped into the ruined building that had become their shelter, the technician stamping her feet and rubbing her hands together in front of their small campfire. "So what do we have?"

"Ain't no change on the last few days." She replied, shivering. "The bunkers are locked down tight an' they have guards on all the droppers around the place. I know they've evacuated the ones we came in on, but they're still guardin' them no less."

"Hmmm..." Reg tapped the small fragment of concrete he had in his hand against a slab of fallen wall. The ancient building they'd taken refuge in was neither comfortable nor warm, but it had provided them with some degree of shelter and certainly protection from the Word's patrols. "And the other Union?"

She shook her head. "Still shut up. Robes don't wanna let anyone off of there if y'all ask me."

"Site security." Reg spoke up. "You minimise the number of bodies in transit to keep the headcounts low. They're locking up both our people and the VV guys, so they are trying to keep the Defiants separate while they sort things out."

"And that means they know we're out here." Jake grimly added. "They probably found that dead body or ran a headcount or the like and came up short one tech and two MechWarriors. That's going to be enough to set off alarm bells."

"But they don't know about our secret weapon." Reg spoke up. "Which is a bonus." He glanced up to the top of the roofless building where the newest member of their team, Victoria Hagen, was perched. She'd been there for hours, her rifle pointed out over the vast expanse of the ancient drop-port.

"Yeah, well I'd feel a bit better if we knew about it." Jake muttered. "No offence, Vic, but none of us have ever heard of you before."

"An' if y'all escaped Reg's notice, that's big." Lynne helpfully added.

"You're not meant to." Hagen simply replied, not moving in the slightest. "I'm a ghost, even in a unit of ghosts. My job is to provide clean and neat solutions for awkward problems. One squeeze of the trigger and... piyong. It's gone."

"And where'd you come from anyway?" He continued.

"Right, this is the part where I tell you about all the crazy awesome things I did before I was recruited." Hagen continued. "Like fighting dinosaurs on the moon or stuff like that."

"So why are you here?" Reg asked. "You said something about a contingency plan..."

"Ayup." Victoria agreed, again not moving or even glancing away. "Sandra told me that she expected this

op to go bad. She just didn't know how bad. Of course, I can't say why because... well, that'd be telling."

"And then I got lucky and found out that..." Reg shook his head. "Let's just say that I'm glad I got out when I did and grabbed you along the way."

"Yeah." Jake nodded, then glanced at Lynne.

"Wha?" She asked. "I jus' needed to smoke an' have a pee." The technician glanced around again. "Shoulda bought more than one cig with me too. Could use one right now."

"So then what's your plan, Vic?" Jake asked.

"Don't have one." She admitted. "One-Eye threw me out here because she wanted a spare and couldn't trust anyone else to not be compromised. Though I guess that you three also qualify for that now."

"Well that's just great." Jake muttered. "So now instead of Word deathcamps, we get to freeze to death on this rock."

"I could provide a mercy kill but..." Hagen trailed off. "Waste of good bullets."

"Fantastic. You're insane, you know that?"

"Probably."

Jake glanced back at Reg, who was instead trying to 'draw' on the fallen wall with his concrete. It was slow going, but as near as he could tell, Reg was trying to build a map of the area. "Something on your mind?"

"Sort of." Reg admitted. "See, I'm thinking that getting into that bunker is our first goal."

"Makes sense." Lynne nodded. "They dragged our people into there an' all. Took the VV guys two, minus a few what got brewed up." While nobody knew for certain, it looked like there had been a fire or something within the dropship they'd arrived on. "Then they started unloadin' yer 'Mechs too."

"Definitely not good." Jake grimaced.

"I'll say." Lynne nodded. "I got a sensitive maintenance routine what needs to be followed right or else stuff gets messed up. Also, I had a beer stash in one of 'em. Nobody gets my beer."

"I like the way you think." Hagen smirked.

"Right. So let's assume that dropper is no longer useful." Reg crossed it off his map. "We have no idea of its interior condition, which means that we shouldn't use it as a way out. We don't want to get there only to find that the bridge is burned out of the like."

"So we try and get the Defiants' *Union* instead." Jake offered. "Little bit of Grand Theft Dropship."

"Something like that... though that's stage three." Reg noted. "Stage two is clearly 'rescue our guys.'"

"But that depends on stage one." Jake countered. "And we don't have a way to get to stage one."

"Actually..." Reg tapped his map. "I have an idea."

Both Lynne and Jake looked at him. "Well?" He asked.

Now it was Reg's turn to grin. "Lynne, that may have been the best-timed smoke and toilet break in the history of humanity, as it's given me just what I need."

"I like the sound of this plan already." Victoria commented from her perch.

It hadn't taken much for Sandra to figure that all the recording gear she'd been given as a part of her disguise had been removed. What did surprise her was that she still had her two artificial fingers. Either the Word had failed to notice them (Something she figured to be incredibly unlikely) or they felt that they were harmless. Either way, it was a small relief knowing that she still had them.

Of course, having all my fingers while still being stuck in a concrete hellhole is not that much of a bonus. It means that I'm merely at the same standing as anyone else in a concrete hellhole with all their fingers.

Her contemplation was shaken by a loud rattle on her door. "Move to the back of the cell." A voice on the other side demanded. Between the door and the obvious modulation, she couldn't identify it, but also had no doubts that it would be wise to do as ordered. *Play it smart, Sandra. Don't lash out, don't try something stupid and don't be a tool. Use this as a chance to learn more.* She saw the slot in the door was open, but there was no way of telling what was on the other side.

She did as commanded, pressing her back to the far wall. Moments later came the clatter of locks (*More than one*, Sandra noted. *Not taking any chances here*) followed by the door opening with a reluctant creak of under-used hinges. Sandra tensed up, ready for whatever might come through the door. *After all, they could have decided that I was no longer necessary to them.*

Even then, she was surprised as Ogel stepped into the room.

"Well." She managed, blinking as she did. "Okay, you got me."

"I'd apologise for the accommodations, Ms Blackmore, but we both know why you're here."

"Fair." She managed. "Though I'm also gonna apologise for not cleaning up the place or myself. Wasn't expecting company." She hadn't bathed since getting into the cell, and save for a few brief experiments with the sink, not had much of a chance to even wash. She tilted her head, trying to glance past Ogel.

"In case you were wondering, that's Smasher outside." Ogel offered. "The same agent that so effortlessly disabled you the last time we met."

"Well that's okay then." She shrugged. "And he's under orders to do that and worse if I try anything stupid, right?"

"You'd notice that in order to shoot you, he'd have to go through me." Ogel simply stated. "Both of us are aware of this. I will also point out that my modifications include self-destruct charges in case you were entertaining any thoughts of using me as a hostage or a shield."

"You'd still be dead." Sandra offered.

"I would." He agreed. "And so would you. And more to the point, you would have sealed the fate of your men with such an action." His icy demeanour gave the slightest crack, the smallest tug of a smile at the corner of his mouth. "And despite all that, Towne would still be alive."

Sandra visibly winced. *Okay, he got me there.* He'd taken the one thing that she'd been trying to avoid thinking about it and stabbed her with it straight away. "So we're both agreed that I won't do anything dumb. What the fuck do you want then, Robe?"

He didn't rise to her quips either. "To make you an offer, Ms Blackmore", he simply stated, his posture and tone neutral. "I meant what I said about you making an impressive *Manei*."

"You flatterer." She shot back.

"I'm not just referring to your looks, although there is a certain fierce strength to them." He continued. "Rather, I'm referring to your skills and capabilities, Ms Blackmore. You're a very capable MechWarrior, a budding commander, a skilled tactician and an excellent investigator. Not to mention rather skilled with a gun." He looked her in the eye. "I've seen the footage from your operations."

"Yeah, about that." Sandra winced. "See, I'm just not that fond of the idea of ripping out huge chunks of perfectly good flesh and replacing it with bits of machinery for poops and giggles. I'm rather fond of my perfectly good flesh, as battered as it may be."

"Understandable, but consider this." Ogel replied. "You have already qualified, in a way."

"How so? I must admit, I don't love Blake with all my heart."

"I mean the sacrifice of flesh." He explained. "You did not give of your eye or hand voluntarily, Ms Blackmore. This is the same as all of us. My first sacrifice was an eye, like yours, bought in the defence of humanity." He tapped the side of his head, by the blank red optic that covered one eyesocket.

"That doesn't mean we're anything alike." Sandra shot back. "We both got tooled up, yeah, but I didn't turn myself into a machine afterwards. I'm not so tooled up in the head as to think that getting maimed was a gift from God or Blake or whatever else."

"Very true. And yet, you freely associate yourself with a woman who maimed herself." Ogel continued. "Your cyborg colleague chose to become what she is now. She excised four perfectly healthy limbs, two eyes and numerous other parts of her body not because of injuries or some cause, but because she wanted to. It's something to consider before you condemn us."

Misdirection? She asked herself. *I mean, I still have no idea how Elezha ended up like she is now. For all I know, he could be right.* Sandra gave herself a small, angry snarl. *Don't let him distract you.* "I don't care

what she did to herself. I'm not like her, and I'm certainly not like you, Robe."

"True that." Ogel nodded. "However, let me leave you with something else we have in common."

"Being what?" her words dripped with obvious disbelief.

"We were both manipulated, used and betrayed by the same woman." Ogel stated as he backed out of the cell. "Consider that."

When Reg had outlined his plan, Lynne had instantly approved of it. Not only did it make sense and give them the opening they needed, but her part in it would be childishly easy to accomplish. Plus it was the sort of thing she'd have thought of anyway, which was just a bonus.

The hardest part for her was getting into the mercenary *Union*, a fact not made easier by its sitting out in the open with very little cover and being surrounded by Word guards. A number of options had come to mind, but all of them required one of two things. The first was access to more equipment than they had, and the second was an enemy not inclined to shoot first and interrogate the survivors later.

Fortunately, Victoria had provided her with a solution. A wonderfully aimed bullet had very precisely missed a guard, instead ricocheting harmlessly off the ground near him while being just loud enough for him to hear. And, as such, while he was looking away to figure out what was going on, Lynne had managed to sneak past, taking advantage of the distraction and what little cover was available. *Takes a lotta skill to miss that well*, she told herself as she reached the ship. *Now for my part.*

A quick assessment by her and Reg had suggested that the Dropship was your basic mercenary *Union*; old, badly maintained and full of secondary systems that would be a jury-rigged mess that were on the verge of breakdown. It was a calculated risk, both of them knowing full well that battered-looking hulls that hid shiny new interiors were far from unheard of. If that was the case, then they would be sunk right out the door.

Fortunately, as Lynne wriggled her way inside the ship (Using the same poorly-known route that she'd used to get out of the *Illyricum*) she'd found that it was just as expected. The bowels of the craft were a nightmare of half-repaired, half-run-down, patched and bypassed parts, ones that had been given enough work to make them functional again while spending as little time or money on them as was needed. *It's like every old Union ever. Probably smells like total ass in the crew quarters too.*

Finding out that a part of the ship had been converted to an infantry transport only helped her plan. *More people, more stress on the systems, more jury-rigging and improvisation. It's like they want an accident to happen. 'sides, it's gonna make the next part a huge bunch easier to boot.*

She'd been smart enough to bring her tools with her when she'd ducked out of the ship, something that everyone had simply passed off as a combination of a typical tech's overprotective nature and her own eccentricities. Regardless of reason, it was paying off now as Lynne went to work, efficiently dismantling and then rebuilding systems, a definite plan in mind. *Easy as. I could do this blind drunk, and it wouldn't be the first time either.*

After seeing the capture and evacuation of both dropships they'd come in on, it was agreed that the Defiants' *Union* represented their best way off the world. It was a challenge for Lynne, as it meant that she had to do enough damage for their plan to work, but not enough so that the ship would be unable to lift off or a danger once in space. *An' you're the master of messing stuff up*, Lynne told herself as she very specifically re-routed, disabled or modified systems. *And there ain't nothing like a good poopspllosion to motivate people.*

The truth was, Lynne liked using it as a way in. Nobody wanted to deal with the potential embarrassment and nobody asked too many questions, rather being content to let her do whatever she needed to do in order to avoid raw sewage flooding all over them. Besides, saying 'poopspllosion' or variations thereof always made her giggle.

All righty. Time to make people wanna get off of a Dropper.

Ogel had let Sandra sit, provided her with fresh water and been content to close the cell door behind him, leaving the pair of them with all the privacy that she could have asked for. Normally, this would be suicidal, but Sandra had no doubt as to why the Word agent was feeling so secure and confident. *You have no idea what sort of mods he has*, she assessed. *For all you know, he could disembowel you before you even got near him.*

Besides, he's made it clear that he could just as easily blow himself up, and wouldn't mind doing it either. Right now, my getting exploded isn't going to help anyone. That had led to one other conclusion. *But letting him talk could.*

It just annoyed her that, for the moment, the only valid plan seemed to be to play his game.

"So Towne tooled over both of us." Sandra simply began. "I'm not surprised at all."

"You shouldn't be." He agreed. "Manipulating others is her specialty, after all. I am afraid to say that we both have been her victims."

"Ah, but you said that you taught her." Sandra shot back before taking a sip from her bottle.

"That is true, although I'll admit now that she probably had a natural talent for doing such long before I met her." Ogel agreed, with a hint of regret in his voice. "All I did was refine her skills and give her direction."

"So what was she? Another freaky cyborg like you?"

"Blessed Blake, no." He shook his head. "She was a ROM agent, one with a lot of raw talent and a certain... I could almost say enjoyment of her work. I first met her on blessed Terra after we liberated it from the heretics, and helped give her purpose and direction."

"So in short, she was already a raving sociopath. All you did was make her better at it." Sandra shrugged. "It does make sense that she was one of your ROMs though." She could see Ogel wince at her misuse of the terminology, which bought a small smile to her lips. "She's professionally trained and knows her way

around a BattleMech to begin with. Somebody had to teach her all that.”

“And she took to it with a natural grace.” He agreed. “Very soon, she was one of my best operatives, pulling off tasks that would have seemed impossible and generating amazing results.”

“Don’t care to share what any of those were?” Sandra needled.

Ogel gave a small smile. “A good try, Ms Blackmore, but no.”

She shrugged. “Couldn’t hurt to ask.”

“I understand your curiosity though. You’ve been working for her for some eight years now, and yet I can imagine that you know very little about her.”

“She has terrible taste in tattoos.” Sandra offered. “But otherwise, not much.”

“I would imagine that she likes to evade the issue.” Ogel added. “Suffice to say that she used me in much the same way that she used you. After a number of successes, I sent her on one operation that she should have been able to handle, and instead she was supposedly killed. You can imagine my surprise when I found that she was alive and well and working for a different organisation under a new name.”

“I’ll bet.” *Admit it, as much as you don’t want to believe a word this tool is spouting, this makes too much sense.* She took another swing of water, trying to mask her concern. *See what he has to say. Let him talk.* “So then, what, you started tracking her again?”

“I did, yes. In my attempts to follow her tail, I did discover a few surprising things.” Ogel explained. “It would appear that Ms Towne, as she was now calling herself, had been very busy. However it was that she had come into contact with your organisation, she had done it well before her decision to leave my service, and certainly she had done a fantastic job of laying the groundwork for her defection.”

“How so?”

“Assassination, subversion, seduction, manipulation.” He continued, his face impassive as he spoke. “She manipulated and controlled those in charge to ensure that she would be accepted without question.”

Which fits with what Elisa said, Sandra noted, worried about how much sense Ogel was making. *When Levisha was bought in, she bypassed the normal recruitment procedures, instead joining the unit no questions asked. If she’d arranged things behind the scenes to her advantage, it’d explain a lot.* She was trying her best not to get angry, and it wasn’t easy. *The damn dogmatic cyborg is right or, at the very least, close enough to the truth that it hurts.*

“So here’s the big question, smiley.” She scratched her scars, eyeing Ogel’s own artificial optic. “Why?”

“Because, as always, she is following her own agenda.” Ogel simply stated. “And, as she did with me, she is doing her best to make sure that her goals are well disguised and appear to be serving a greater cause.”

“How so?”

Ogel's impassive face cracked into a small, but appreciative smile. "On Graham IV, what was your team there for?"

It should be a secret, but the aftermath of that battle isn't in doubt. They'll know what we did anyway. "We were extracting one of your Hounds, one that we thought would be vulnerable."

"And yet, you also just happened to stumble over some of my own *Manei* operatives." Ogel countered. "A coincidence, don't you think?"

"Could be."

"What about on Bharat?" He continued. "Again, you went after my Hounds, but didn't you find the reaction to be a bit odd? Dropping another regiment of troops onto you might be seen as overkill."

"Maybe you just wanted us dead." Sandra shot back.

"Or maybe your strike there was not as diversionary as you thought." He shook his head. "Again, you happened to hit a world where my units were present, seemingly coincidentally stumbling over another one of my own operations."

Two for two.

"Do you remember your first mission you undertook for the organisation?" Ogel asked. "Hunting pirates in Taurian space does seem to be almost a waste of your unit's resources, doesn't it?"

"It was also the first time that I saw one of your freaky cyborgs." Sandra noted. "I remember that because the tool immolated himself in front of me."

"And yet, there was no evidence of our involvement before that, was there?" he asked.

There wasn't. Sandra mentally agreed. *And yet, your name was on a message we recovered in the aftermath.*

And then again on Fletcher, she added. Supposedly, StarCorps wanted us to extract the prison's commander. When I confronted him, said commander mentioned you by name, Ogel. And who told us that StarCorps wanted him? Levisha.

It lines up far too neatly to be a coincidence, and I don't like it. She glared back at Ogel. *It's all making a worrying amount of sense.* "So what you're saying is that she's been waging her own little war against you and using us as the foot soldiers." Sandra concluded. "And ensuring that the objectives are nicely obscured so that we never know exactly what's going on."

"That is correct, yes." The cyborg nodded. "I would suspect that, should you do an audit of your own people, you'd find a few names that don't appear otherwise; assets that exist to ensure that her goals are met."

You're trying to make me paranoid, aren't you? Sandra considered. *But then, given that I'm also*

employing a supposedly non-existent member of the team, it again makes sense.

“So what was her goal here?” Sandra asked. “You’ve likely guessed the like that she fed us that dragged us here, but what do you think was the real objective?”

Ogel tapped his chin with an obviously artificial hand. “Given her past, I suspect that Towne was aiming to engineer an apocalyptic conflict that would destroy or deplete both your forces and ours, and in effect covering her tracks. She would likely fake her own death, one way or another, and then emerge in the aftermath with a new identity.”

“Just like the last time she ‘died’, right?”

“Exactly.” Ogel nodded, and then paused. He tapped his ear a moment, looking away from her before turning back. “And now, if you’ll excuse me, Ms Blackmore, I have other matters to attend to. I’d like to continue our conversation later, however.”

“I look forward to it,” she replied as the cell door opened, Sandra noting the hulking cyborg trooper waiting outside. She finished off her water as the cell door shut and locked, mulling over the conversation in her mind. *I have no reason to trust, you, Robe. Everything you say could be a lie, aimed to get me off-balance or play some sort of convoluted trust game to get me to cough up the goods. You’re the enemy, after all, and it’s in your best interests to wring out every scrap of intel you can get.*

But yet, everything he says also makes perfect sense. She growled to herself as she looked around the bare cell for the thousandth time. *Somebody’s been using you to further their own aims. The question is who?*

Lynne’s tampering had gone off perfectly. On cue, a series of warning alarms had gone off onboard the mercenary *Union*, indicating a cascading series of system failures in progress. There had been a frantic flurry of messages going back and forth between the Defiants and ground control, informing them of the situation and the risks involved and what might happen, followed by a general evacuation alarm.

The result was a moment of barely-controlled chaos as a tidal wave of scared, angry, cabin fever-touched and now suddenly quite cold mercenaries, technicians, support personnel and dropship crew had flooded out of the ship, almost inundating the Word’s perimeter security. It was easy enough to slip a pair of extra bodies into the mass, Red and Jake easily disguising themselves among the mass of humanity and hooking up with a just as disguised Lynne.

“Messin’ with the drains works every time.” She grinned to Jake, her voice barely audible over the Defiant Officers and Word troops shouting at each other and the assembled troops to try and maintain order.

“And the ship can take off again, right?” Jake shot back.

“Oh hells yeah.” She nodded enthusiastically. “I messed it up but good in there, but made it look a heckuva lot worse then it actually is. They’re gonna go bug-ass crazy tryin’ to figure out what I gone and done in there though, which will buy us a lotta time.” There was a hint of pride in her voice, clear

satisfaction in her work.

“You.” Reg began. “Are a genius, you know that?”

“Aw, shucks.”

After a lot of shouting, some agreement had been reached to move the stranded Defiants into shelter inside the Word’s ground facilities. From what he’d gathered, Jake assumed that this would have been their normal arrangement, but they had been, instead, left stranded on their dropship. *Probably left in the lurch by whatever the hell it is that Ogel was up to*, he considered. *Which makes getting in there even more important.*

The three of them continued as faces in the crowd, rugged up and making sure not to attract attention as they marched. On occasion, Jake glanced around, taking in their surroundings or looking for any changes in the situation. Nothing seemed out of place; the two Valeria Victrix dropships remaining where they had been, the other Word troops remaining at their post. *And no signs of Hagen either*, he noted. *I can only assume that she’s still watching over us.*

That had been the plan, at least, but right now Jake was not in a trusting mood. *She said she was Sandra’s contingency, but then, why didn’t Sandra tell anyone else? Even Reg was taken by surprise and he’s a practicing paranoid. Too many damn secrets for my taste.* He glanced at his long-time lancemate. *And what Reg discovered only adds a new layer of secrets to that.*

Victoria had been left with Reg’s noteputer and his discovery. If something happened to the three of them, a real possibility given what they were about to do, she was to find some way out with it. Jake had seen her and Reg in a whispered conversation, presumably imparting instructions that he was not privy to. *Just how many people here have secrets any way? Am I the only one of us on the level?*

Ahead of him, Lynne was scratching her rear as she walked. *Never mind.* It was strangely comforting to know that she, at least, was on the level. *So while everyone else is plotting, we at least can talk cars.* He couldn’t help but notice the bum she was scratching while he was supposed to be keeping an eye on the situation. *Maybe we will do that some time later... assuming we get out of here first.*

The queue narrowed, being fed into an underground bunker entrance, different to the one the prisoners from the *Illyricum* had entered. *Hopefully they’re connected. If not, we’re in a world of trouble*, he told himself as he stepped inside, following the direction of travel. Shouted instructions were coming from the Wobbie troopers, directing them to temporary barracks where they would wait for further instructions. At least one person called back to say that they already knew where to go, which helped a little.

So we were on the mark about that much. So far, so good.

It wasn’t that hard to slip away from the pack, using the subterranean maze of the bunker complex as a way of breaking contact for long enough. It took a lot of tense waiting and plenty of patience, but eventually the three of them were away and quietly holed up in what seemed to be a run-down corner of the complex, the rooms dark and musty.

“No toasters in among the guards.” He noted as the trio took stock of their situation. “Maybe they’re too

busy dealing with our people or don't consider the Defiants to be worth their time."

"Sounds 'bout right." Lynne nodded. "This place is plenty run down, and trust me, I know run down."

"I'm thinking this is an old SLDF base." Reg offered. "Maybe built secretly inside the borders of one of the Great Houses so they could watch what was going on and do what they needed to. It was a base like this that they used to assassinate--"

"Later." Jake hissed as he cut Reg off. "Right now, we need to find our people, get them out and, if possible, blow this place up." He glanced between the pair of them. "We have no idea of the layout, the place is crawling with Robes and Toasters, the objectives could be anywhere or dead already and w're outnumbered a bajillion to three. Any suggestions?"

"None." Reg admitted. "But I'm working ideas now."

"Me either", Lynne added. "Still, gotta say one thing."

"What?"

She grinned. "A bajillion to three? I like them there odds."

Jake smiled back in spite of himself. "Yeah, me too."

Lynne proved to be as adept at fixing things on the fly as she was at breaking them. They'd located some isolated parts of the complex's feeds, allowing her to tap into them. The result was that not only did Reg have partial access to the internal computer systems, but they also had communications. Jake had been very impressed with how well they'd pulled it off, especially given that Lynne seemed to be only working off whatever scraps she had at hand.

"Good news." Reg began, hunched over a pocket noteputer. "As near as I can tell, the bulk of our people are secured in a large holding facility a few levels down in this complex. The numbers are loose, but at a guess I'd say that they took the bulk of the personnel alive and have kept them such since."

"Makes me wonder why." Jake commented. "Given how hard they've been trying to kill us and all."

"Maybe pumpin' em for info and stuff." Lynne suggested. "I mean, heck, we got a lotta secrets. I'm just a grease monkey and I know a lot of stuff, fer example."

"It makes sense to me." Reg agreed. "Which makes me wonder what else has been through this complex over time, and how long the Word has been using it. If they had some place they could 'disappear' people to en masse, it would explain a lot."

"Like what?" Lynne asked.

"Well, there's Clinton's--"

“Don’t encourage him.” Jake snapped. “You said the bulk of them. What do you mean by that?”

“Well!” Reg seemed to be almost excited. “See, it seems that several of our people were tagged as ‘high priority’ prisoners, and have been moved to a separate wing even further down, including one who is in a secure medical bay. Now I have no idea who they are; they’re tagged with ID numbers only and I haven’t cracked the code on those yet, but given that they came in at the same time as the others, it’s fair to say that they’re also ours.”

“And could be valuable even if they’re not.” Jake added. “If the world is keeping them secure, then it would be in our best interests to get them out, no matter what.”

“Sounds ‘bout right to me.” Lynne nodded. “So here’s the big ol’ question. How in the heck are we gonna do all this?”

Jake continued to analyse the situation, pouring over the blueprints. *The place is too small, its hallways to cramped and narrow for us to sneak around. We have a couple of pistols, but that’s not going to help much in a firefight, especially not once the damned freaks get involved.* And then he smirked to himself.

“You have yerself an idea, doncha?” Lynne asked.

“Vaguely.” He nodded. “Reg, how are your break-and-enter skills?”

“Best way in when they don’t want you there.” He replied.

“Lynne, how destructive can you get with what we have on hand? I don’t mean system disruptions, fake alarms and the like. I mean actual damage?”

“Gimme a bit of time an’ I can make something go bang.” She offered. “Would help if I had a drink, but...”

“Right. Here’s what we’ll do.” He glanced between his two partners. “First thing, Reg, you need to get her some booze...”

The emergency on board the Defiants’ dropship had been enough to draw Ogel away from his business and into the bunker’s command centre. His questioning of Blackmore, as interesting as it was, would wait while he dealt with the more immediate problems at hand. Given what he’d been through to get to this point, he was not one to leave anything to risk. *These people have a history of slipping through my grasp. I’ll not let them do that now.*

“We still have the dropship contained for now.” A technician began as he entered. “There’s no immediate signs of risk, but the readings their crew were getting were not encouraging. While it may not explode, the vessel might be grounded and uninhabitable if the predictions are correct.”

Ogel looked over the readouts. “Interesting. A cascading system failure across a number of key life-support systems.” There was a small whirr-click of his *true* eye as it recorded all he saw. “Eminently possible with an older, poorly maintained *Union* too. It is also nicely coincidental, don’t you think?”

"Unions do have a history of system failure." The technician offered. "Those who do not properly respect and understand technology often fail to use it in a fitting manner. While allies of Blake, those mercenaries do not fully embrace his ways."

Long-winded, but a fair summary of a likely scenario, he considered. "Of course, a full evacuation of the ship would provide a good cover for anyone looking to infiltrate our facilities here." Ogel considered, his *true* hand tapping on the edge of the console. "Order a headcount among the evacuees to ensure that nothing is amiss, and make sure that they are securely locked down. I do not want any 'strays' wandering where they should not be."

"Understood." The technician nodded, sending orders through to the security in charge of holding the mercenaries.

In the meantime, Ogel himself had pulled up a file, analysing a different set of personnel lists. The information they had recovered from the Galatea facility was complete, but it was also a number of years old and didn't reflect losses since then. Correlating known dead against the prisoner list helped a little, with only three names coming up. *Jake Peloquin and Reginald Lewis, MechWarriors. Lynne Street James, technician.*

The simple fact that they were a part of this unit made them dangerous, but he knew enough to list all three as high-profile threats. *Lewis is an expert investigator who's only weakness is the conclusions he reaches. Peloquin has shown a degree of determination and bravery that borders on fanaticism. And James was able to elude my men on Taurus and escape with a valuable asset.* That gave him pause. *And a skilled technician could easily sabotage a dropship if given the chance.*

Ogel looked over the monitors running security feeds from the accommodation block, his *true* eye comparing images to records. Every face in the crowd was instantly scanned and correlated, compared to what was on file, the identities fed directly back to him. It was ingenious technology, a gift from his Master and the blessed Blake, one that had aided his role as his hand so many times in past. Even if now it was coming up with nothing unexpected, it still was useful.

Nothing immediate, but that does not rule anything else out. He stopped to consider matters, examining all the evidence at hand. *They will want to release their compatriots, obviously, and ideally do as much damage to our operations and facilities here as possible. Given their past motives, our datacore will also be an objective of theirs, one that will likely take precedence over all else. And while they are outnumbered, that does not make them any less dangerous.*

So what would I do in their situation?

He tapped his chin with his *true* hand, considering the options that they would have, the courses of actions that they would take. *Lewis and Peloquin's skills were well documented. James is a wildcard, one who's full abilities remain unknown.* Her file was short, indicating that she'd been found on a minor Periphery world and 'recruited' after assisting the organisation in its operations there. By all accounts, she was a semi-literate, uneducated backwoods hick who had a knack for machinery and terrible personal hygiene.

And yet, the person who found her and recruited her is enough to make her conspicuous.

He stepped back over to the technician. "I want a full lockdown and security detail on all our cleaning supplies." Ogel ordered. "And I want everything accounted for."

"I understand our situation but... cleaning supplies? I do not see the connection to the heretic escapees."

"Blake's will moves in mysterious ways." Ogel stated. "But sometimes, so to do the enemies of his divine plan. Just send the order." As the technician keyed commands and spoke, Ogel went back to watching the monitors, eyes, both flesh and true, keen for anything that might be out of place. *Eloise could have spotted anything wrong in an instant. However, she has far more critical duties elsewhere.*

That Ogel had pulled this operation off with so few of his men had been a coup, but it had also left him vulnerable in case something like this happened. And while the staff in the facility here were loyal beyond question and well-trained and well-equipped for what they needed to do, they were still *frails*, so fragile and vulnerable.

And so, when the first alarms went off, he was not surprised by the cries of alarm that rang out across the command centre. Eyes instead darted between monitors, noting fires and their locations. *Of course, it makes perfect sense*, he considered. *Very well done.*

"I want complete lockdown on the mercenary quarters." Ogel began. "Send fire-fighting crews to the affected areas, but I don't want anyone to leave that block."

"But what about the Defiants?" Somebody spoke up. "There are fires in their quarters, and if they can't get out--"

"Then they sacrifice themselves for Blake's will." He finished. "Now do it."

As alarms went off inside the bunker complex, the reaction inside the mercenary quarters was one of panic. Having already just escaped a seemingly doomed ship, the Defiants were far from settled when the first flames erupted. Within moments, fear had taken hold, coupled with the feeling of having merely traded one certain death for another. Groups had surged for whatever exits were available, a human tide that pushed against the Word's lockdown.

Nobody had really thought about what was happening, what had caused these fires or where they were going, only that they had to get away from certain death. Even among experienced soldiers fear had taken hold, with few liking the ideas of being incinerated en masse inside a cramped underground room. And so while one group were running towards the prison block, they had no idea that they were being quietly directed – or that not all of them were who they seemed. The only goals were to get away from the fires and into safety.

The Word guards outside the door, both regular soldiers rather than Manei Domeni cyborgs, were caught short by the screaming mass of stampeding humanity. Cries to halt were ignored, and a burst of warning gunfire only seemed to spur them on. Within moments, both guards were down, their weapons taken and the Defiants hammering on the prison block's doors in order to get inside.

And in among all that, one of the Defiants, a tall, powerfully built man, was shouting the loudest, driving on the others while cursing the Word and their decision to ally with them. Those present were listening to him as they shouted, giving him and the immovable mass that was the door all their attention. They certainly didn't notice the fat man and the scruffy, tattooed woman among them who were quietly working the door.

And then it gave, swinging open under the pressure of the human bodies pressed on it and the desperation fuelling them, aided of course by the damage done to it by the pair. The Defiants poured into the prison wing to cries of alarm from the Word soldiers inside followed by calls to stand down. For an instant, it seemed like some degree of order and discipline might take over and clam the situation down.

Of course, when somebody opened fire, even if the bullets went harmlessly into the ceiling, it was enough to set things off again. There were accusations that the Word were trying to kill the Defiants, and counter-accusations of rebellion or sabotage, resulting in the entrance of the prison wing quickly turning into a pitched firefight between the two groups.

In short, just how Jake, Reg and Lynne had planned it.

Jake pushed towards the commander's office, a stolen assault rifle in hand. Keeping his head down, he'd been firing short bursts on occasion to keep the Word troopers at bay. If any of the Defiants had noticed him, they seemed to have mistaken him for one of theirs or were simply too busy to care about who he was. Either way, he had an opportunity and was ready to take it.

The office door yielded quickly, Jake half-charging, half stumbling in as he went. More shots rang out as the officer inside, a short, dark-skinned woman, opened fire on him in response. Diving to one side, Jake felt a sharp tearing pain in one shoulder as he went, searing through him. Ignoring it for the moment, he rolled over and replied with his stolen rifle, the last of its magazine hitting her chest. There was a spray of blood, and then she vanished behind her desk.

Rolling over to crouch next to a bookcase, he listened for a moment for anything that might tell him what was going on. He could hear shouting, gunfire and alarms, but they were all coming from outside. So *she's down*, he hazarded, slowly advancing towards the desk in a crouch, wishing he had a spare magazine for the rifle. *I had better be right...*

The commander lay there, sightlessly staring up at the ceiling, her discarded machine pistol nearby. Ignoring her for the moment, Jake took the gun and glanced back. "Reg!" He yelled. "Get in here, now!"

Moments later his compatriot entered, diving into the office without a hint of grace or poise. "What do you need?" He asked.

"You'd know more about this than me." Jake shot back. "Is there a way to get everyone out of a prison in a hurry?"

"There's often a master release for emergencies, like the place being on fire. So sort of like what we've already done" Reg replied. "Hold on..." With almost no regard, he quickly frisked the dead body before

extracting a set of keycards. "Aha."

"Do you need a code?" Jake asked, realising that he might have just killed the person he was after.

"This sort of thing's usually designed to be used in the advent of a catastrophic system failure. We're talking loss of power or orbital bombardment or similar, so they're going to be either an independent power source or purely mechanical. Just... let me do my thing, okay?"

"Right." Jake glanced outside, quickly taking in the situation. The Defiants were being pushed back, fear and anger faltering in the face of the number of dead bodies lying on the floor and taking the fight out of them. Lynne was behind a fallen table, taking the occasional pot-shot with a pistol, but mostly taking cover. "How much longer?"

"Worried about the Defiants?" Reg asked from behind the commander's desk. "I mean, we did just trick them into starting a riot after trying to set them on fire."

"They're Ogel's hounds." He spat. "Far as I'm concerned, they deserve each other. I'm more worried about our own arses here."

"Good to know!" Reg keenly replied. "Okay, give me a moment..."

More alarms added to the cacophony outside, followed by the mechanical clank of doors opening and more than a few angry voices. Risking it, Jake glanced back outside to see men and women pouring out of the cells, gaining their bearings fast enough to see the Word guards that had been their captors until a few moments ago.

Guards that they were now behind.

Days of pent-up anger and resentment exploded outwards as the prisoners fell on the guards, overwhelming them with a mass of bodies. A few of the soldiers responded, turning to face the new threat and managing to squeeze off a few shots, only to be fallen upon by the oncoming horde. Massively outnumbered and surrounded, the results were inevitable.

For their part, the surviving Defiants seemed to lose the will to fight upon seeing what they were facing and just how outnumbered they were. A few 'gentle suggestions' had seen them surrender and turn over what weapons they had.

The good news, Jake realised, was that he could spot most of the faces in the crowd of escapees as he came out to greet them. There were a few bruises and the like, but save for the poor few who had been first in the wave to reach the guards, those present seemed to be in good shape. "Okay, so what do we have?" He asked as he approached the collection of Mimetic Badarses, Red and Lynne behind him.

In reply they got a lot of murmuring and a few shouts. "Mostly accounted for." Ali Quarac finally spoke up. "We lost a few when they took the ship and a couple more here, but for the most part we're intact. Not too many weapons and only armoured with prison jumpsuits, though." He looked over them. "How did you escape?"

"Reg grabbed me before the Word stormed the ship." Jake admitted. "He figured this was a trap

moments before they sprung it.”

“An’ I just needed a smoke and a pee.” Lynne added.

“Don’t ask.” Jake shot back.

“Never do.” Quarac admitted. “There are still a few unaccounted for. Sandra and Elezha never reported back from their recon mission and were likely in here when the Word took us out. They also separated Trakker, Arugal and that cyborg doctor for whatever reason.”

“And Levisha?”

There was a pained silence. “Nobody’s seen her since we made planetfall.”

Not looking good. “There’s a second cell block further down.” Jake stated. “If they’re anywhere, they’re going to be in there.” He didn’t need to say that he was heading there himself for Quarac to understand what came next.

“I’ve got experience with this sort of fighting. Let me and a squad of my men come with you.”

Jake nodded with a small smile. “Nobody I’d rather have with me in a fight like this.”

Quarac turned around. “The rest of you are to try to get to one of the ‘Mech bays.” He yelled out. “They took our machines from the ship, and we’re going to need them to get out of here.”

“I’ll go with y’all.” Lynne offered. “See what I can get going.”

“Reg?”

“Nuh-uh.” He shook his head. “You might need a lock picked, a cell opened or an ancient conspiracy exposed.”

“Fair.” Jake finished. “All right, people. We have comrades to save and toasters to kill. So let’s get on with it!”

When the second alert had gone up, the Word’s security forces in the ‘Mech bay had been prepared and ready to go, acting on well-rehearsed contingency plans against insurrection and infiltration. As one of the few entirely above-ground structures and needing by design to have a large open area, the bay was considered one of the most vulnerable points for a potential attack or infiltration. Its contents, their value and the damage they could do further underscored the need to make sure it was protected at all costs. Even on a dead world, one supposedly long abandoned and vanished from the maps, there was no room for complacency.

So while the Technical crews were rounded up and secured, troops moved to cover the entrances from both inside and out. The main hanger door was the single biggest vulnerable point; even when shut it still represented a potential entry point. Even a small portion of its width was enough to admit a man,

after all.

The first trooper to reach the door control called out, receiving an affirmative reply to shut the doors. Before he could begin, however, he simply keeled over, a small red spurt emerging from his chest. His death was not immediately registered, those around him more concerned with taking up other stations and locking down the bay. It was only after somebody noticed that the door was still open that his dead body was spotted.

A cry of alarm went out, only to be silenced moments later by another shot. More warnings followed, troops scattering away from anywhere visible to the open doorways while trying to find cover. Another soldier dropped and then a third, the unseen attacker clearly taking the opportunity to do as much damage as they could while there were still targets at hand. The need to protect the bay was weighed against avoiding being struck down by the unseen attacker, the latter clearly taking priority.

So when one of the interior doors came down, a mob of armed and dangerous prisoners emerging through it, the forces inside were ill-prepared to handle them. Rather than being contained, the rioting escapees surged forwards, numbers and concentrated firepower pushing back the Word's forces.

"Secure as much as you can!" Lynne shouted out as she pushed in with the other attackers, armed with a pistol and having no authority save for her not having been captured beforehand. "Get 'em off of the 'Mechs an' don't let 'em do anything to 'em!" As she emerged, she could see a mixture of designs in the bay, all sporting a variety of different markings and colour schemes.

However, it was a trio of very distinct machines that grabbed her eye; a blocky *Thor*, the slender *Goshawk* next to it and the lupine *Werewolf* that finished the trio. "Bingo!" She called out, instantly recognising their captured BattleMechs. Due to their original infiltration plan, the Badarses had only bought a few, jump-capable 'Mechs with them, with the premise being that they would appropriate Valeria Victrix's 'Mechs as needed. Now it meant that Lynne had priority targets to deal with.

"As soon as they're clear, I want Techs on every 'Mech to get 'em prepped!" She continued as her forces fanned out, pushing back the surviving Word troops. She was no battlefield commander by any stretch, but here in a 'Mech bay, she was calling the shots. "Clean an' reboot neurhelmet codes if y'all have to, but I need 'em working ASAP! Avoid any obvious Word 'Mechs; if they got that crazy Vee-Dee-Enn-Eye stuff goin', then we ain't gonna be able to use 'em, no matter what."

And a heavy Clantech Omni is gonna be the best weapon we can get, she mentally noted as she headed for the *Thor*. *Jus' hope that we can get ourselves the right MechWarrior to go with it.*

Gunfire burst out as she approached, Lynne quickly ducking back behind another 'Mech's leg as shots went off around her. Glancing over, she could see a Word trooper hiding between the *Thor*'s legs, an assault rifle in his hands. Quickly she spun around, squeezing off a couple of shots before ducking back behind cover, hearing nothing that indicated that she'd hit her mark.

Holding her breath, she hazarded a glance back only to be rewarded with another burst of fire. Cursing loudly, Lynne span back behind cover as shots bounced off the leg's side around her. "Dammit, I'm pinned down here!" She called out. "Got some ass stickin' to the *Thor*!"

She glanced around again, pistol at the ready, only to find the Word trooper with his rifle out. For a

moment, she was caught out, blanking for an instant before collecting herself. She tried to fire, knowing full well that her opponent would do the same.

Instead, he simply keeled over, a neat hole through his helmet and forehead.

“Just a little hello from your guardian angel.” Victoria’s voice chimed in her earpiece. “Piyong.”

“Freaky kind of an angel.” She muttered, glancing outside.

Jake’s strike force had armed themselves with weapons taken both from the fallen guards and the prison armoury, forming themselves up into a makeshift team. He’d been happy to let Quarac take the lead, the infantry officer clearly ready for this sort of fighting and having commented at his own experiences with prison riots (“Usually stopping them, not being a part of them”). With Reg providing directions, their team had set out further into the depths of the subterranean complex, their objective clear.

Despite the blaring alarms and the chaos caused so far, there had been very little opposition en-route. Reg had seemed upbeat about this, until Quarac pointed out that, more likely, the Word forces were falling back to the detention facility to consolidate their forces there. It was a grim fact, one that nobody could offer an alternative to. However, that also made them no less determined to see it through and liberate their captured colleagues.

The “or die trying” qualifier was an unspoken given.

Confiscated breaching charges had been used on the door, the Word’s troops having apparently considered killing their own prisoners a distinct possibility. After a few shouts, the hallway was filled with smoke and noise as the door was blown back. “Go!” Someone – Jake thought it was Quarac – shouted. “Move, now!”

The first wave of solders went in with confiscated riot shields up, greeted by a hail of gunfire from within. Shots came back in reply, the exchange of fire roaring and echoing within the enclosed concrete room as the makeshift team continued its advance. As the assault force poured in, its members spread out, providing a widening wall of fire to assault the Word troops.

Shots of alarm came back, mixing in with the gunfire as the defenders began to fall back, faced with the tidal wave of troops coming through the door. While in the second row, Jake didn’t have the best view of what was going on and was less aiming as he was firing indiscriminately in the direction of the enemy, something that seemed to be achieving results.

The volume of shouting continued, someone clearly trying to collect some sense of order in the confused mess that the room had become. The attacking phalanx halted as the fire continued, but between bodies and shields, Jake could see less enemy soldiers and more dead bodies.

Another order came, calling for troops to spread out and continue the advance. Jake stuck with Quarac, Reg behind the pair of them, as they headed across the room, now moving with more speed and mobility. As he moved, Jake could see a smattering of Word troops falling back under gunfire, clearly abandoning their positions in the facility. *This is easier than I thought*, he considered as he fired off a

short burst at one trooper, the shots narrowly missing them as they fell back into a doorway. *Are they giving up already? Do we outnumber them that much?*

"All clear!" Quarac shouted out, his breath ragged as he spoke. "No signs of further hostiles." A chorus of replies came from the other survivors of the makeshift squad, echoing their leader's words.

"That was less than I expected." Reg commented.

"Maybe they're too busy with containing the Defiants and all the fires we started." Jake shot back. "Or trying to head off Lynne's forces. She has the majority with her, after all."

"Either way, I'm just glad we're clear." Reg agreed. "Okay people! Split up and go through the cells. Whoever's in here, we want them out!"

Jake headed to the nearest cell, his rifle at the ready despite the supposedly secure room. *Never assume that we're in the clear, never assume that there aren't reinforcements on the way*, he considered as he looked around, assessing the situation. *Or that whoever's in that cell is going to be glad to see you. Not everyone who hates the Word gets along after all.*

Great, he added. *I sound like Reg.*

Reaching the door, he slid open the small metal eyeslot, glancing inside. What he saw was a glimpse of a figure, pressed back to the wall in an effort to get as much cover as they could and potentially ambush an attacker. He got the slightest hint of a bright prison jumpsuit as well as a shaggy mane of dark hair. "Sandra?" He cautiously asked, ready for the worst.

"Get me out of here, you tool." The voice inside shot back; not angry or demanding but simply stating fact.

"Couldn't be anyone else." He finished as he unlocked the door, carefully opening it with his rifle out, just in case there was anything amiss. Inside, instead, he saw his commander, looking not too worse for wear. Tired, yes, but otherwise her normal, scruffy and angry self.

"Nice to see you." She managed, sounding genuinely appreciative as she stepped out of the cell. "You here alone?"

"I came with Reg and Quarac." He replied. "We've got most of the team out already, and Lynne's trying to secure us an escape route." Jake looked her in the eye as she nodded. "We had some help from your friend."

"Hagen." Sandra stated. "I sent her out figuring that this was going to go completely arse-up at the first chance. I just didn't figure how badly we'd been tooled up the date."

"When were you going to tell us that you had a crazy sniper on your personal paycheck?" Jake continued, a hint of anger in his words.

"When I was sure that keeping her a secret was no longer possible." Sandra admitted. "But if she's the reason why you're here now..."

"Yeah, true." Jake wasn't happy with the answer, even if it was painfully honest. "I'm glad you did."

"I didn't like this op one bit." Sandra stated as she left the cell, joining the rest of the squad. "I assumed the worst and took precautions against it. Turns out I was right." Somebody had handed her a pair of confiscated pistols, Sandra casually accepting them. "Reg, Quarac. Good to see you both."

"Thanks boss." Reg beamed. "I uh—"

"No hugs." Sandra cut him off. "Not while we're both armed, at least." She smiled a little and turned around. "Who did we get out so far?"

"That would be us." Bradley Trakker stepped forward, helped by one of Quarac's men. The infantry commander had seen better days, the right side of his face one gigantic, ugly purple bruise, while his eye was swollen shut. Behind him was another man who had fashioned a makeshift mask out of his bedclothes, but his glare made it clear that it was Arugal.

"Somebody didn't like you." Sandra whistled.

"The Word somehow got it into their head that I was a MIIO agent." Trakker offered. "And were determined to beat the truth out of me."

"Nasty." She winced. "Gonna be okay?"

"Given time, rest and getting away from here, I think so." He simply stated. "I'm sure I can be ricking my neck in a backpack-worn death-trap in no time."

"That's the spirit." Reg cheerfully agreed. For his part, Arugal had said nothing, not that anyone had really expected him to otherwise.

"Got another!" One of the troopers called out as he approached, leading a nervous-looking, thin man with him. While he wasn't apparently injured, the man was clearly agitated, glancing around at those around him as if he was expecting the worst at any moment. "Any ideas who he is?"

"Not me." Jake admitted, then glanced around. "Reg?"

"I recognise him." Red nodded. "Doctor Lopez, right? You're a sort of friend of Elezha's. Sort of."

"Y-yes." Lopez stammered. "They-they bought me in here to look after her after... after they captured her and took the ship." He continued to nervously glance around, his eyes darting from door to door. "They wanted me to, well, to look at her and... and to explain how her augmentations worked."

"Ogel said something about Elezha." Sandra spoke up. "Do you know where she is?"

"Y-yes." He nodded. "There's a lab nearby. I-I worked on her there and... I'm so sorry." He seemed to be on the verge of tears now.

"Well?" Jake asked. "I'm not the kind to leave a man behind, but at the same time, we have to keep

moving. I don't want the Word to pin us in one place.

"We're getting Elezha." Sandra stated. "No questions."

"Understood." Quarac replied. "All right, men. On my lead; Lopez will give us directions. Make sure that the wounded are protected at all times."

"You up for this, Sandra?" Jake asked as he reloaded his rifle.

"After spending the last few days in here, I'm happy to murder every last Robe on whatever the frell planet this is." Sandra simply replied. "Besides, there's one Robe in particular I want to have a word with."

"Understood." He wasn't going to press the issue, but at the same time, there was something that Jake noticed. Between those recovered so far and the team member they were still short one person. *Where the hell is Levisha?* He asked himself, glancing at Sandra again. *And is it that I don't want the answer?*

The lab, as it turned out wasn't that far away; a short run from the 'special' detention facility that was again surprisingly free of opposition. That in and of itself should have been a relief, but instead Sandra was still worried. *There's got to be more Word goons in here, she told herself. Even if Ogel's running things from a command centre, there's still that monster that stopped Elezha and I dead.*

Of course, that was another concern. When she'd last seen Elezha, the Cyborg operative had been carted off, almost paralysed with fear. Whatever it was about the Manei Domeni that she disliked, she was now stuck in a situation where she would have been surrounded with them. That she'd been carted off to a lab can't have helped, nor the fact that Lopez had been 'working' on her, whatever the hell that meant.

Her assault force burst into the lab, shouts coming from across the room as she, Quarc and Jake all drew weapons, assessing the situation. There were several people in the room; researchers and technicians, all clearly non-combatants and all clearly afraid of what was going on. "Don't shoot!" One of them, a nervous-looking woman who's dishevelled hair framed a mess of freckles, called out. "Please, don't shoot!"

"Cover them!" Quarac ordered to his squad, the men fanning out with ordered precision as they began herding the newfound prisoners. "You three, go find our girl. Then we're getting out of here."

Sandra nodded, looking around the room. Most of it was a common space, mainly made up of workstations and equipment racks, but there were several more annexes attached to it. "She's gonna be in one of these." Sandra commented. "Split up and search 'em, and let us know if you find anything."

"Maybe we should take these Robe boffins with us." Reg added. "They could know a lot of useful things."

"They could be bullet sponges if the crap hits the fan." Jake shot back.

Sandra wanted to say something back, but she let it slip, instead focusing on the task at hand. *He's angry, and I don't blame him. Even then, I wouldn't put it past the damned Robes to shoot at their own people*

in the name of both stopping us and ensuring no leaks. They're pragmatic crazy Technophile cyborgs.

She pulled open a door, her weapons out and at the ready for whatever would be inside, willing to shoot first and ask questions later if needs be. Instead, she was genuinely surprised by what she found within.

Elezha was seated in the middle room; stripped to her bra and briefs, her makeup and wig removed. What was even more startling were her limbs. Rather than the elaborately made-up prosthesis she had been wearing, or the normally flawless concealed ones she normally used, she had instead been equipped with a quartet of dull, metallic limbs that ended in chunky fingers and flat, toeless feet.

That her eyes were covered with a pair of clearly artificial lenses that looked more like goggles than anything else didn't help one bit.

"Oh, hi Sandra." She began with almost casual disinterest, as if they were meeting for a business lunch. "How's it going?"

Sandra blinked as she put her guns away, carefully approaching the cyborg. "I'm... good. You?"

Elezha glanced around for a moment. "Well, I've been trapped inside a self-imposed nightmare scenario surrounded by the very creatures that I fear with every fibre of my being and I was apparently betrayed by someone that I otherwise implicitly trusted and have spent the last few days being 'disassembled' by technicians with no idea of what they're doing with the parts they're taking away." Her voice was wavering towards the end, more than a little stammer in it, but her lack of eyes made her hard to read.

"Come on." Sandra offered as a reassurance. "We're getting you out of here."

"You'll need to switch me on." Elezha offered. "These limbs are kept powered off for the most part."

Sandra glanced over a nearby console, noting that there were several cables plugged into the Cyborg's prosthetics. "It's... odd that they'd give you any at all." A quick scan told her what she needed, several switches powering on Elezha's limbs.

"It's a form of elaborate psychological torture." She replied as she stiffly stood. "You're not a cyborg, Sandra, so you wouldn't understand."

"I-"

"Two mechanical fingers don't count." Elezha snapped. "Best I can put it is that it'd be like if your limbs were numb all the time, and you could barely use them. That's what these... things feel like."

"Nasty." She glanced back. "Lopez is with us."

That bought on a small smile. "They forced him to help them dismantle me." Elezha added as she stepped out into the main lab. "I could tell that he was under duress when they did it. He was probably as scared as I was." Even then, Sandra noted that Lopez was deliberately avoiding meeting Elezha's eye.

Guilt, or is he as freaked out by what they did as she is?

"Sandra, over here!" Jake called out, interrupting her thoughts. "You're going to want to see this." Leaving Elezha to her awkward reunion, Sandra joined him across the room at another one of the annexes, glancing inside, not knowing what to expect. *But after what happened with Elezha, it can't be any more surprising*, she assured herself.

She was wrong.

Even before seeing the seated woman's face, Sandra knew who she was; the bright red forelocks and jet-black hair was unmistakable. What surprised Sandra, however, was just how bad Levisha looked as she turned her head up, managing an awkward, and clearly nervous smile. Gone was her combination of over the top sex appeal and smug self-assurance, leaving a decidedly different image in its wake.

Her prison suit was battered and torn, matching the bruising on her face and split lip. Her hair was a scruffy mess, her left eye bloodshot and, perhaps unsurprisingly, a flat hazel instead of its usual bright red. The right side of her face, however, was bandaged, spots of blood on the wrappings.

That she was bound hand and foot was in many ways the only unsurprising thing about her appearance.

"Sandra." Levisha croaked. "I-"

"Give me a reason!" Sandra snapped back, drawing her gun and levelling it at the captive woman's head. "Give me one damned reason why I don't shoot you here and now."

Levisha looked up nervously, showing something that Sandra had never seen before from the woman. *Fear*. Even at her worst, Levisha had radiated a supreme confidence, an aura of collected control, as if everything that occurred was because she wanted it to happen.

Now, here she was, stripped of all that. Defenceless, helpless and without a single ally to back her up or take the fall for her. Jake hadn't said a word when Sandra had pulled her gun, something that spoke volumes in and of itself. Levisha had been put in a situation that she had no control over, no way out of, and no reserve plan for.

Sandra cocked her pistol.

"Take me with you." Levisha croaked out, her voice dry and weak. "I... I have information. Lots of it. I can tell you... things that will be useful when we escape." Her words were coming fast, with more than a little desperation now.

"Why not tell me here?" Sandra snapped. "Why should I let you leave this room alive?"

"We don't have time." Levisha managed. "I don't know how many Word soldiers you've killed so far, but I know there are at least three Manei on-site. Unless you've killed all of them, Ogel included, then they will be coming after you. After us."

"She's got a point." Jake bitterly snarled, clearly not happy about it. "Sandra, we can't linger here any longer."

"Right." She stepped back, glancing at her compatriot. "Jake, cut her loose. But..." Sandra tapped her

right cheek, rubbing the scar under her eyepatch. "You try to tool me or anyone else here over, Levisha, and whatever they did to your damned face will be mild by comparison. Got it?"

The response was a simple, mute nod as she stood, rubbing her bruised and chafed wrists. Even then, Sandra swore that Levisha was shorter than she remembered. "I'll... I'll make this up to you, I promise."

"That's a pile of raxx crap and you know it." She simply stated as she headed out to the main room. "Okay, everyone!" Sandra called out. "We're getting out of here. Round up the boffins and bring them with us. Quarac, you have the lead. I'll over her." Sandra put as much distain as she could into the word, shooting Levisha an angry sideways glare.

"You heard her!" Quarac called out as he turned back to the female technician, looming over her as she nervously tried not to look at him. "You are all coming with us. Stay calm, follow orders and do what we say and you won't get hurt. Do you all understand?"

There was a chorus of replies before he turned back. "Right then! Viper squad, on-" His order cut off, replaced with a small, surprised gurgle as a blade ripped out of his chest, having gone through his back. As it slowly retracted, he slumped forwards, crashing to the floor.

"In Blake's Blessed name!" The mousy technician called out, the blade protruding from her forearm slick with Quarac's blood. "Kill them all!"

In order to bait the trap, Ogel had sent the majority of his forces away. Christina had done a good show of destroying one of the Hounds on Imbross while concealing her true motivations, but it had needed the majority of his force to prove the point. As such, he was left with only a handful of his fellow Hands to deal with contingencies.

And now that the situation had exploded out of control, he needed every asset that he could. Letting the infiltrators enter the research lab was a calculated risk, one that had allowed him time to marshal his forces to make a decisive strike. The frails sacrificed so far had been a part of that equation, expendable assets whose role had been to slow them down while gathering intel on their strength.

Of course, that he'd had a wolf in sheep's clothing among the lab personnel hadn't hurt either. Rosse had kept him up to date on the situation, and he in turn had let her know when to shed her mask and activate.

No sooner had Quarac's body hit the floor than Ogel's team were through the door, weapons fire pouring into the room. There had been the briefest flash of metal as Rosse had dived for cover, leaving the mercenaries to face the brunt of his assault force. And, while they were mostly frails, the sheer presence of Smasher leant them a deadly weight.

The massive Zombie operative proved his worth straight away, simply walking into the room without the slightest hint of concern for his own health. While not clad in his usual Tengu battlesuit, his combination of body armour and enhancements made him into a living weapon, something that no more Frail could match.

The machine gun bolted to his right arm proved the point, roaring to life as it spat rounds into the crowd of would-be escapees. Several troopers quickly went down in a hail of blood and bullets as the others scattered, seeking whatever cover they could. There wasn't a hint of concern for the technicians in the room as he fired, at least one of them dying to Smasher's assault. Anyone who was of any real value had been moved long ago.

A soldier replied, shots striking Smasher's arm and side, giving the cyborg a moment's pause – but nothing else. Without reply, he turned to face the would-be attacker, another burst of fire silencing them.

Rosse sprang back into action, the Ghost operative leaping out of nowhere to slice at another trooper, ripping through his arm in a bloody trail. As he screamed out in pain and terror, Blackmore turned to face him, opening fire with her own weapons. Rosse was already on the move, vaulting away behind a workstation faster than the one-eyed mercenary could follow.

And I know enough to know how good she is, Ogel added.

The wounded soldier tried to collect himself, only to be put down by a laser through the forehead. Above, Plokyden crouched in among the superstructure, her laser rifle sighted on the enemy force, her position all but invisible unless one knew where to look.

The rest of Ogel's squad advanced behind Smasher, their rifles levelled as they used the massive cyborg as a mobile shield. With him ahead, Rosse behind and Plokyden above, the survivors would have nowhere to go.

"Surrender now." Ogel simply demanded. "Throw down your guns and give up, or else you will be killed. Blake's Mercy is infinite, but only to those who willingly embrace it."

In his head he was assessing the situation, planning on the likely outcomes. *Blackmore, for all her stubbornness and determination, is no fool. She knows how badly outmatched she is, and knows that the odds of a successful escape would be slim. She might offer Towne to me as a bargaining chip; a shrewd but pointless move.*

Peloquin is strong-willed; possibly more so than she is. However, he is also a realist. For all his bravado, he knows that he cannot take on Smasher and survive, especially not in the face of our numbers. Conversely, Lewis is no fighter and he knows it.

And Karoly, potentially their most powerful weapon, is too afraid of us, too afraid of what she could become, to do anything.

There was a tense silence as his troops halted, weapons posed at the small core of survivors. "There is no need for anyone else to die." He stated, narrowing his still-flesh eye while the *true* one clicked into place, surveying the gathered escapees.

One of them spoke up. "We will not surrender to you. Instead, we will fight. And, at the end of the day, we will win." It was the sort of futile, defiant speech that he'd heard before, but even now Ogel was surprised, given both the resolve in the words and who was speaking.

“And you will have to come through me first.” Elezha finished as she stood, staring straight at him.

One thing that Sandra had learned was that, in this job, things could change fast. The Word’s surprise attack had left her and the others pinned down and in a seemingly hopeless situation. They held all the cards and were in a position to make demands. And while there was that part of Sandra who figured that Ogel still wanted her and a few others alive, there was that sinking feeling that they’d also crossed the line into ‘too risky to keep’.

What she hadn’t expected was Elezha’s reaction. The girl was, simply put, terrified of the Manei Domenei. She should have been curled up in a little cybernetic ball as she had before. Instead, she was standing defiant, slowly approaching the Word force.

And while his half-machine face made him hard to read, it seemed that Ogel was surprised by this as she was.

“I will not surrender to you.” She continued as she slowly advanced. “You and your monsters have no power over me. And I will not be held by you again.”

She wasn’t sure, but from where Sandra was, it seemed like the Word troops were reluctant to respond. *Why?* She asked herself as she glanced around, noting both the sniper and the blade-wielding infiltrator, both of which were on standby for orders, but both seemed to be more than a little confused. *What is it? Do they want her alive for some reason? Is there some secret she possesses that they can’t just pull out of her prosthetics?*

But then, isn’t that all of us?

Sandra had heard stories that the MDs were able to communicate silently, secret messages sent from their cybernetics to each other’s minds. If that was the case, she imagined that right now there was a flurry of secret communications going on, each one trying to figure what to do next.

Elezha made that decision for them.

The cyborg’s slow, deliberate pace suddenly shifted, turning into a blindingly fast run as she threw herself at the massive Word soldier. Her metal shoulder rammed into his weapon arm, battering the weapon aside as she struck with a frightening amount of speed, managing to stagger the massive soldier in place for a moment as her hand dug into the barrel.

He recovered, swinging around with his other arm, the massive club-like limb coming down towards her back. Instead of connecting, however, it instead found her other arm, the metal limb buckling but holding, the damage sickening even when one knew it was mechanical. For her part, Elezha didn’t seem to flinch, keeping her grip on the machine gun arm, slowly pushing it aside as, at the same time, the massive cyborg tried to keep the pressure up on her.

And then she moved, letting the arm come down on her while pushing on the weapon, using the cyborg’s strength against him. The machine gun roared to life, shots spraying from the barrel, ripping into the wall and the air around it in a hail of indiscriminate gunfire. Soldiers on both sides of the battle

ducked for cover rather than risk being struck by a stray round.

But one of them was. Sandra saw Ogel reel back, suddenly collapsing. She had no idea what had happened, but she was not going to pass up the opportunity.

“Everybody! Now!” While she was speaking she opened fire on the sniper, sending rounds into the scaffolding around them. She couldn’t tell if they had been hit or not, but it was enough to send them scurrying back. A roar of gunfire came from nearby as somebody span around, spraying an assault rifle at the infiltrator.

The massive cyborg recovered fast, battering Elezha aside before swinging at her again, his thick arm crushing her own in a sickening mass of metal and parts. As she went down, he raised his foot to stomp her, only to take several rounds across his torso. They didn’t stop him; in fact, they didn’t seem to even slow him down, but it gave Elezha the chance to scurry away.

“We need to get Ogel!” Levisha shouted, her tone demanding in a way that was at odds with her dishevelled appearance. “We can end this now!”

For a second, Sandra wanted to agree with her, spinning around to open fire on the cybernetic monster. More rounds hit his shoulder, seemingly ignored by the massive trooper. Instead, he fell back, but not because of the fire he was facing. *No, he’s protecting his commander*, Sandra considered. *Daring us to come at him, to throw ourselves at his strength.*

She glanced around. *And we can’t take him. He knows it.* Instead she opened up at the conventional troops, keeping them down as Elezha stumbled back to their line. Battered and bruised, her right arm was hanging limply at her side, looking like a ragged BattleMech limb rather than something found on a human. *Doesn’t make it any less painful.*

“We’re pulling back!” Sandra commanded. “Everyone, to the ‘Mech bay now!”

“But Ogel-“ Levisha cut in.

“God damn it!” Sandra shouted in her face. “Just do it!”

Levisha managed a blank, one-eyed stare for a moment, shocked by the thought that someone wouldn’t do what she said. “O-oh ye-es. Of course.” She stammered.

“Right!” Sandra squeezed off another shot as she headed for the door. “We’re getting out of this alive, no matter what.”

The main ‘Mech Bay had turned into a bloody battlefield as Word troopers had poured on in, supplemented by mercenaries that were more human shields than anything else. The mercenary forces had breached the door, taking the first wave of counter-fire as the Badarses forces had held their ground.

In the middle of the gunfight, Lynne and a handful of other technicians had done their best to prep usable BattleMechs as a way out, clearing codes and resetting Neurohelmets to make them immediately

ready to go. A handful of the 'Mechs were powering up now as Mechwarriors boarded them, but there were still a lot of key personnel missing.

Lynne had a few close calls herself, but each time a Word soldier had come too near to her for comfort, they'd been picked off by unerringly accurate sniper fire. *Ain't got a clue who Vic there is or where in the heck she's from, but I ain't gonna say no to the help*, Lynne considered as she continued her work, sweat beading her brow as she tried to smash her way through the Word's security codes. *Damn Robes ain't gonna make this easy for us, no matter what.*

Outside, the men of the Brickmen combat engineering team were busy setting up explosives around the bay, rigging a way to cover their escape. Other soldiers had planted charges on the 'Mechs they weren't taking, disabling or at least damaging anything that they weren't taking.

All they needed now was to wait, something that was not going to be easy. Time was not on their side, with more Word troopers joining the fray, ones who were better equipped and in better condition than their ad-hoc squads. "We need to go!" Someone, possibly Phantom Spaceman, called into what passed for their command network. "We're not going to be able to hold them too much longer."

"We wait fer Sandra and the others!" Lynne cut off as she hammered a series of commands into a console, muttering under her breath as she did. "We ain't gonna leave them behind!" She slammed the console, half out of frustration and half as a way of forcing the system. It seemed to work.

"We're going to be leaving more dead than those coming if we don't act now."

"An' we're not gonna leave our most important assets behind!" Lynne all but shouted. "They got our commander, our second and a buncha other important guys to the Word."

There was an angry silence in reply, something that wasn't much of a good sign to Lynne. *Come on, Sandra. I can't keep stallin' fer ya too much longer.* In her head, Lynne knew what Phantom Spaceman (or whoever it was) had been right, and they were well past the stage of losing more people than they were waiting on. However, she also couldn't argue with her gut feeling and her knowledge of their value.

"We're clear!" She continued as she clambered out of the cockpit, the sound of gunfire and shouting obvious to her ears. "Got ourselves a usable *Uziel* to go!" Swinging out, she was ready to climb down the 'Mech and move on to the next one, when something else grabbed her attention. There was some disruption to the Word's forces, something breaking up the rear ranks of her lines. Even though she couldn't make out the faces over the crowds and the chaos, she also could get a good idea who it was.

"Guys, I think our friends are here. Everyone, get ready to saddle up an' get on out."

The bay was a mess, made more so by the group of Word soldiers that Sandra had to push through to get in. The enemy line had quickly buckled and given way, the combination of Robe and surviving Mercenary troops not wanting to be caught between two forces, parting to let them through. Sandra had continued to fire regardless, hoping to keep the pressure up for long enough to make her getaway.

Making matters worse, she knew that there would be reinforcements on the way. The survivors of Ogel's

ambush would manage to regain their composure sooner or later, and would definitely be in pursuit. A trio of killer cyborgs would make things a lot harder and could be enough to end this breakout on the spot if given the chance.

In the bay, however, she could see that things were not the best either. In spite of the array of BattleMechs, the most obvious thing going on around her was the continual gunfight, with dead and wounded from both sides strewn across the bay.

"Hey Sandra!" Looking up, she saw Lynne waving to her from the cockpit of Reg's *Uziel*. "We gotta bunch of 'Mechs ready to go. Just hop on in an' be ready to get the hell out."

"Thanks!" She yelled back, as she glanced around. Levisha was right behind her, the woman still unarmed but seemingly willing to follow Sandra along. There were others around, either headed to 'Mechs or covering those who were. "Al Hillah! Can you take the *Goshawk*?"

"I will!" The slender man called back as he belted across the floor, heading for what was normally Levisha's 'Mech.

"Reg, take Elezha with you." Sandra continued. "Make sure that she gets out okay."

"Understood." He agreed, nodding to her. "Ready to go."

"Anything to get out of here." She managed a small nod, nervously glancing around. "Though I'll need a hand up, sorry." Her burst of courage and self-sacrifice from before had clearly been a temporary one, but there was no denying what Elezha had achieved

"Not a problem." Reg smiled as he took her good hand in his, heading off towards his 'Mech.

"Jake, there's a *Battlemaster* over there with your name on it. Grab Lynne and go; I want to make sure she gets out of here." Jake gave her a small nod before he took off. "Arugal..." Sandra glimpsed over her shoulder, only to see that the hooded man was already en route to his *Werewolf*.

"And you're with me." She turned back to Levisha. The only reply was an accepting nod.

That was good enough for Sandra, the pair of them making her way towards the blocky *Thor*. The path seemed to be clear, the Word soldiers concentrated towards the back and sides of the bay rather than around the 'Mechs for some reason, but right now she wasn't going to argue.

"Hey boss." A voice spoke up in her earpiece, one that immediately made some sense of the lack of opposition. "It's me."

"Yeah, Vic, I know." She hissed. "What do you want?"

"You remember that other contingency plan we discussed?" Victoria continued. "The one that I wasn't allowed to tell anyone else about?"

"I do."

"Well, want me to do it? I got a clean shot."

Sandra glanced back at Levisha for a second. "No. Stand down for now and try to get to that *Union* out there."

"Kay. You ruin all my fun." Hagen finished with more than a little disappointment in her voice.

"Right." Sandra turned back to Levisha. "I don't trust you and I sure as hell don't like you. But, for now, and against my better judgement, you're alive." She gestured with her pistol towards the other woman's face. "Try anything, and I'll fix that problem."

Giving Levisha only a moment to respond, Sandra began clambering up the *Thor's* access ladders, headed towards its dome-like cockpit. Inside was a Neurohelmet, one that looked to have been already set up for her and connected into the system. *No cooling vest though. This thing's going to be an oven if we get into a fight.* Peeling back the top of her prison jumpsuit, Sandra strapped herself in to the command couch, prepping the 'Mech's systems.

Levisha wordlessly climbed in behind her, taking her spot in the rumble seat in the back of the cockpit. Closing the canopy, Sandra donned the Neurohelmet, wincing for a moment as she waited for the system to activate. *Or short out and fry my brain. Here's hoping that Lynne's work when sober and being shot at is up to scratch.*

Instead the *Thor* powered on, going through a pre-flight checklist with a series of green responses, indicating that all was well. *So more or less how I left it, I guess.* Gently opening up the throttle, Sandra stepped the 'Mech forward, the heavy war machine easing out of its bay into the middle of the bay. Others joined it as more 'Mechs shuffled into motion. "Okay people!" She shouted out over the PA. "The plan is simple; we make a dash for the *Union* out there. So start getting the hell out, already!"

The troops on the ground began to separate and disengage as the surviving mercenaries headed for the main bay door, shots still flying back and forth between them and their adversaries. Several of the BattleMechs opened up with smaller weapons, machine guns decimating the ranks of the Word soldiers and forcing them back.

Sandra continued forward, her *Thor* advancing out of the bay as the vanguard of their force, her eye on the displays for any signs of an enemy response. Ahead lay the *Union* that Lynne had evacuated, their ticket off the world. As tempting as it was to break into a run, Sandra also knew that the bulk of their force were still on foot, and, as such, she couldn't afford to outpace them.

Instead, she let the human tide surge past her 'Mech, a motley collection of fighters clad in prison suits and armed with whatever came to hand. Keeping an eye on them, she joined the others in opening fire, sending shots into the 'Mech bay in order to keep the enemy forces down. The result wasn't what she expected; with a parked *Warhammer* suddenly buckling at the knee, then keeling forwards, despite not being anywhere near the shots. A *Hatchetman* joined it a moment later, falling as enemy forces scattered away from it.

"What the hell?" Sandra asked.

"A little ol' parting gift from Steve's Brickmen." Lynne replied over their channel. "Kind of a 'thank y'all' to

the Word for their generous hospitality.”

“Nice.” Sandra commented as more explosions erupted around the bay, the building itself beginning to collapse as the Word troops scattered. “Right let’s get out of here. Anyone know how to pilot a Dropship?”

He saw a star field; a thousand tiny flickering lights against the inky darkness. At the centre was a single star, shining brightly then all the others.

And then, suddenly, it was extinguished. The others around it followed, the blackness swallowing all in its wake. Only a few stars remained, isolated and alone in the void.

“Percentor Ogel?”

He blinked awake, sitting up and quickly assessing their surroundings. He was in a medical bay, the details matching to what he remembered of the last facility he was in. Rosse was near him, a clear look of concern on her artificially reconstructed face.

“How long was I out?” He asked.

“About two hours.” She admitted. “Your injury-“

“-is irrelevant now. Where are they?”

“They escaped.” She admitted. “Took a dropship off-world. We’ve sent our limited aerospace assets after them, but the chance of actually stopping them is low.”

“Understood.” Ogel stood, swaying a little. Pressing his flesh hand to his forehead, he could feel the bandages there. “Losses?”

“Mostly among the frailts.” She admitted. “The Defiants and our security forces tried to stop the escape, but were unsuccessful. The mercenaries destroyed the main ‘Mech bay to cover their escape.”

“I see.” He assessed. “And our troops?”

“Plokhyden and I are unharmed and ready for your orders.” She gave a small bow. “Smasher suffered some damage in the fight and is undergoing repairs now.”

“Very well. Send an order out to all hands to initiate operation BLACKROCK MOUNTAIN.” He stepped past her, headed to the facility’s command centre.

“I see.” She bowed again. “Peace of Blake be with you.”

“And with you too.” Ogel finished as he mentally composed a second message, one that he stored away. When he reached a working HPG, no matter where, the message would be reactivated and sent, hidden in among the other traffic as was the Word’s standard procedure. Once loosed, it would find Eloise, no

matter where she was, and give her new orders.

Initiate POGATA SUNSET. To anyone else, even Ogel's own Hands, it was meaningless. But to her, it would explain everything.

Dropship *Freemarch* Outbound, Unknown System

Despite the damage that Lynne had apparently done to the *Union*, it was easy to make flyable again. Most of it had involved simply tripping systems and generating false alarms, with enough noise and effects to make it seem convincing. And while the flight crew they'd put together weren't the best ever, they were enough to get them off the world and headed back towards the Jumpship that had bought them here in the first place.

What they'd do when they got there was another matter, but for now they had a few days to plan that through.

"We're still running numbers on casualties, but it's not pretty." Reg admitted to Sandra as the pair of them stepped into the ship's briefing room, several others gathered with them. "We could be looking at as many as a quarter of our infantry dead or wounded, and a lot of teams have lost cohesion as a result. We lost three MechWarriors, and that's not including Qesh who it seems was a Word plant all along. And Elezha's out until we can get her new limbs and a healthy dose of therapy."

He winced a little. "That girl's not in a good place right now. I mean, Doc Lopez is helping and all, but yeah, I'm worried that she could be out for good."

"So in short, DEEP BLACK was a total arse-up." Sandra finished.

"Um, pretty much." Reg reluctantly agreed. "No nice way to put it."

"Right." She shook her head. "We'll get back to Loburg and try to pull our arses back together. We'll need to dip into the recruit pool, but that's been getting worryingly shallow of late. Of course, that still leaves one other big problem that we have to deal with."

That big problem stood in the middle of the room, the crowd parting from around them as Sandra stepped into it. Levisha was alone, isolated and surrounded, and clearly lacking in any of her usual boundless smug confidence. Instead, she almost looked afraid as Sandra approached her.

"Sandra." She began. "I wanted to thank you for--"

She was cut off by a strong, swift punch from Sandra, one that sent her recoiling back and stumbling down to one knee. Slowly turning back, she spat out a glob of blood, looking up at Sandra with her one good eye. "I deserve that." Levisha simply stated.

"And a lot worse." Sandra replied as she grabbed her, hauling the other woman to her feet. "And now, you are going to tell me the truth, Levisha, or whoever the hell you are. Because, right now, I'm very

short on good reasons for why I don't just kill you myself."