

**Stormhead, Temptation,
Loubrg, Alarion Provence
Lyran Alliance
12 February 3074**

"You know." Levisha began as she sat at the table, smiling at the three already present. "I've wondered why you like to meet at Tharonjas."

"Bacon." Sandra admitted with a smile.

"No sense of sentimentality over it being where we first met?" She asked.

Sandra shrugged, then glanced at Elezha and Reg. "Maybe some brand loyalty." She admitted.

"The Jihad has been terrible for Tharonjas." Reg explained. "All seven of its biggest branches destroyed, as well as at least five of the lucrative Solaris City locations. Though I heard the Montenegro District Bacon Wagon was still on the loose."

That warranted a small laugh. "So you said you had something for me." She continued, looking over the four of them. "A follow-up from the last operation."

"True." Elezha nodded, then glanced at Reg. "A name mentioned by Crenshaw just before his inconvenient demise."

"Ogel." Levisha nodded.

"A name we first encountered during operation VOLCANO." Reg agreed. "From the communication that we took from the pirate records, mentioning operation ARASAKA. We took that and went looking from there."

"Any results?" Levisha seemed genuinely curious, pausing only as a waitress arrived with three meals.

"Some." Reg nodded. "The name 'Ogel' cropped up in the contract negotiation of a number of the Word's merc units." He pulled out a small notebook and began running his finger down the page. "Morgan's Black Hands were one of them, which nicely ties in with ARASAKA. Similarly the Miljavo cavaliers were another."

"That explains a lot." Levisha nodded.

"Interestingly enough, the Cavaliers, a unit known for being 'good guys' started getting a lot rougher and dirtier after they were signed." Sandra added. "Makes me suspect that some tool had something on them that was enough to turn them really nasty really quickly."

"Fascinating. Do you have a full list?" Levisha asked, casually stealing a chip from Reg's plate.

"Partial." He nodded. "Besides the two I mentioned, there's also a smattering of lower-tier units; the Blackguards, the Bloody Eye, Harmon's Hellhounds, the Redrock Raiders, Valeria Victrix and Zandar's Cannons, but they might not be the limit of it. The only big-time unit that I can attach to the name are King's Tigers."

"So in short, a mess of ugly, nasty tools who aren't afraid to kick puppies for a paycheck." Sandra

explained.

"And that's not including units that might have been signed earlier before the Jihad during the Word's shell game period." Reg leaned in closer. "See, the story I heard was that a lot of the 'random' damage in Waco's Harlech rampage wasn't so 'random' after all. Somebody was taking advantage of the situation to strike at specific targets and disguise the damage done. Of course, since all those involved in the rampage are dead and the Word torched the planet, it's hard to prove."

"The burnt ruins of a riot. Worst crime scene ever." Sandra nodded.

"So these... dogs of Ogel's," Levisha continued, listening intently to every word even as she pilfered more from other plates. "Is there any connection between them?"

"None we've found beyond a tendency for them to disappear for random periods." Elezha explained. "For example, the Crimson Blades simply up and vanished from the protectorate in mid 3072. There are some third-hand reports of them being destroyed in an attack on a Falcon OZ world, but given how tight the information control is in Clan Space right now, I couldn't guarantee a thing."

"Likewise, the Bloody Eye vanished from sight for some six months in mid '67." Reg continued. "And that's a unit which already has a questionable origin, having apparently appeared out of nowhere in the early sixties."

"The same sort of pattern recurs across all of these units." Eleza added. "Most recently, King's Tigers and the Redrock raiders dropped out of sight for about three months each before reappearing on Symokov, and in the company of our associates, the Miljavo Cavaliers no less."

"Interesting. Do you think that this 'Ogel' is using them as a part of some plan?" She asked.

Reg was about to speak, but Elezha cut him off. "Delusional theories about ancient conspiracies aside, it is a possibility. We would, however, need to figure out what it is, and where they're going to."

"After all, when we caught the Black Hands during ARASAKA, they had just come back from a year's disappearance, and were trying to nuke Taygeta." Sandra noted. "So yeah, finding out what those tools are up to helps."

"Now do we know anything about this 'Ogel' themselves?" She asked, curious.

"Sadly, not much that we were able to find." Elezha admitted. "There were a few fleeting references, but nothing tangible. The only solid one was a news article from Gibson dated 3064." She tapped the side of her head a moment, likely scrolling through data on a screen only she could see. "There was an incident where somebody kidnapped Kristina Hopewell, a holofilm actress who had begun to get some League-wide recognition"

"She made several sci-fi tearjerker romances." Reg noted.

"Actually there's some fascinating material in there, but that's by the by." Elezha continued. "Ogel lead a force that freed Hopewell from her captor, but not before she lost both eyes. Of course, this being the Free Worlds League, that killed her career right there and then."

"Yeah, I have no idea about that at all." Sandra muttered, rubbing the scars under her right

eyesocket.

“So that’s something.” Levisha admitted. “Anything else?”

“Little to go on; the information I found mentioned that he was formerly of the Com Guard and had been wounded in action fighting the Clans.” Elezha explained. “It’s possible, then, that he is one of those... things.” The mixture of fear and distaste in her voice was pretty clear as she spoke.

What is it about the Manei Domeni that frightens you? Sandra asked herself. It’s not just the usual ‘freakish cyborgs that are going to kill us all’ fear, is it? You afraid of what they are, or because they’re so much like you?

“Well this is all very, very useful information.” Levisha noted. “And very helpful too. Unfortunately, our friends were not very happy about Crenshaw’s unexpected demise, and they are looking for a result.”

“And our coming back with a pile of new tools while starting a riot on a Word planet isn’t good enough for them?” Sandra shot back.

“It isn’t when it doesn’t include the objective they were after.” She simply replied. “And that’s what annoys them.” Levisha smiled again. “Speaking of which, shouldn’t you be helping to integrate the new recruits?”

“I took a working lunch to meet you and the detectives.” Sandra shrugged it off. “So they’ve largely been left to Jake’s tender mercies.”

That produced a small laugh. “Well in that case I’m sure he’ll get results – one way or another.” She stood, nodding to the three of them. “Thank you all. The work you’ve done is invaluable. Not just for me, not just for the unit, but potentially for all of us.”

Two hours later and after a quick stop-off along the way, Levisha was across the city inside the StarCorps offices, striding through them like she owned the place. Dressed in a black and red suit, complete with silk tie, she looked for all the world like a high-powered executive and certainly acted the part. Save for the odd sideways glance, nobody questioned her presence, which was exactly how she liked it.

Her aura of icy calm and control didn’t waver a bit as she approached one man who was waiting for her outside a meeting room. A touch on the short side and of a stocky build, he was an otherwise missable man with a vague hint of Asian descent, dressed in a nicely anonymous middle-management suit. Only his eyes betrayed him, eyes that right now were narrowed in some rather well-suppressed anger.

Exactly as I had expected, Levisha told herself with a small smile. *Which means that my detectives’ hard work is going to be worth an awful lot to me in very soon.*

“So good of you to join me, Ms Towne.” He began, a small note of frustration in his voice as he opened the door, leading her into a large meeting room that was currently vacant.

“It’s a pleasure, Mister Watanabe.” She simply replied with a warm smile instead of one of her usual

smug or toothy grins. “And may I thank you again for the generous treatment that you have shown my people, especially the recent donations of equipment. I can assure you now that we are putting those to the best possible use.”

“That’s exactly what I wanted to talk about, Ms Towne.” He cut her off, clearly a little annoyed at her attitude and rubbing his face in it. “It’s regarding the arrangement between your people and my company.”

She nodded. “Understandable, but I thought that we had a working agreement. You would provide us with what we need, and in return, we would use our unique skills and talents against our mutual enemies, with the added advantage of giving you a force with no overt connections to your company.”

“That’s the point.” Watanabe replied. “So far, we have done a fantastic job of footing the bill for you, but we are also yet to see any return on our investment.” He was looking her in the eye now, focused and determined, something that very few managed. “Operation TIN CITY yielded us exactly nothing for all that time and effort. All it gave us were two worlds where the Word of Blake weren’t, which isn’t exactly useful.”

“To be fair, it’s not like we would have known that until we went there. On the other hand, I can also understand that it was not the best use of resources.” She was making a play of conceding to his comments while standing her ground. “On the other hand, operation ZEN CUSTARD was a success.”

“It was a success in that you got what you wanted and we started an insurrection on a world that, all things being equal, is not that important to the war effort.” He countered. “However, the main objective, the one that we gave you, was not achieved.”

“There was the intervention of an outside force.” Levisha calmly explained, remaining flat and level in the face of Watanabe’s clear frustration.

“Which, given what you sold me on, your force should have been able to deal with.” He cut back.

“It was an unexpected situation. Even then, it appears that the loss of the primary target was purely by accident.”

“Be that as it may, this has not worked out as we had hoped.” He continued. “And I now have to front up to my department and justify everything that we have spent so far for very little yield. That is why I asked to meet you, Ms Towne. I was hoping that you could give me something – anything – that could justify your continued employment”

Inwardly she was grinning broadly, but her face was remaining calm. *That was just what I wanted to hear. I can give you what I want, and you’ll thank me for it while being convinced that it was entirely your own idea.*

“We do have something.” She spoke up, handing him a datapad. “My own people have been chasing a lead for some time, one that we think is rather important.”

“What’s this?” He asked as he thumbed through the list.

“A list of Word-aligned mercenaries.” Levisha explained. “Ones that seem to have been disappearing from sight and then cropping up again in odd places, as if they were following some larger plan that

we were unaware of.”

“Interesting.” He nodded, more than a little fascination in his voice. “Three of these units were recently involved in an attack on a mercenary unit we employ and were working very closely with the Word of Blake Militia.”

Which matches with what I found, she nodded to herself. And now you want to know why and want to know what they’re planning, and you especially want to know where they’re vanishing off to. Anyone would. There is a mystery here, and you want, no need, to solve it, to find the full story that’s hiding from you.

“This definitely bears further investigation.” He finally spoke up, his anger gone and replaced with concern, his eyes flickering back and forth between the figures on the screen as he searched for the pattern to what he was seeing. “We need to find out why they have been doing what they have, and where they’re going.”

Of course you do. You see a threat and you want to end it. It wouldn’t have looked better if I’d manufactured the evidence myself.

“I’ll take this to my department, but there’s definitely something here.” He finally spoke.

“Agreed there.” She nodded. “And if I may be so bold, I think that you’re onto something here. These units, whatever the connection between them is, clearly are a part of something bigger.”

“Everything the Word does is a part of something bigger.” He commented, more than a little distracted as he glanced at the pad again. “Wheels within wheels and all that.”

“The secret is to find that big picture, the overall view that only they can see.” She smiled. “And I think that we may have found a way towards that.”

“Agreed. Leave this with me, and we’ll put something together. I don’t mind saying this, Ms Towne, but it looks like you’ve finally given us what we were asking for.”

“I’m glad I could help.” She replied with a smile. *Because when you look at what’s there, and fail to notice what I left off, you’ll come to the conclusion that I want, and you’ll know what to do next.*

And that will be just what I want.

**Starcorps Proving Grounds, Temptation,
Loubrg, Alarion Provence
Lyran Alliance
21 February 3074**

A burst of flame launched the *Phoenix Hawk* into the air, its jump jets allowing the ‘Mech to sail forwards a quarter of a kilometre before landing gracefully near a stand of trees. Glancing back, it waved its hand to signal to a *Stealth*, the slender ‘Mech pausing a moment before sprinting forwards, stopping near a ruined building.

The *Hawk* looked back at its comrade a moment, then immediately vaulted forwards as a

heavyweight *Thanatos* surged forwards, missiles rippling from its arm-mounted launcher while lasers leaped forwards, only to ineffectually slice through the space where the smaller 'Mech had been.

"Juarez, get over here!" The *Hawk's* pilot called out as he snapped back, the arm-mounted PPC spitting man-made lightning at its blocky opponent. The shot narrowly missed the *Thanatos* as it span around to track its opponent, breaking into a run to close the distance. "I need support, now!"

"Quit yer belly achin' ya daft lily-livered pansy!" Another voice added as a *Warhammer* charged forwards, thundering towards the heavy 'Mech. "And get over here before I have ta come over there and smash ya daft head in, ya daft bugger!" The *Thanatos*, clearly wary of the newcomer, pulled back, scattering fire at the *Warhammer* as it did.

"Give me a moment, Shamus!" The *Stealth's* pilot yelled out. "I'm not-"

"Are we clear are aren't we, ya daft bludger?" Was the angry, demanding reply. "Are you gonna do your bloody job or what?"

"You're clear!" The *Stealth's* pilot shouted out, half out of confirmation and half frustration. "Just, give me a moment and-"

The trees behind his 'Mech rustled for a moment as a newcomer stepped out, the leering, predatory form of a *Werewolf*. The 'Mech's laser lashed the *Stealth's* rear with searing red bolts, while missiles splattered against it, detonating in clouds of colourful dye.

"Wha?" He began, turning before his 'Mech locked into place.

"Randall Juarez, you are out!" Sandra shouted from the cockpit of her *Thor*. She didn't need to shout, as her message would have been heard by all those present over the command channel. It just made her feel good. "Remain in your 'Mech and think about just how badly you've tooled up." It was a harsh but fair way to put it.

"But I-"

"Quit yer whining ya scrawny little pansy!" McLumpher shouted out as his *Warhammer* continued to advance, swinging its torso around to glance at the *Werewolf* as the slender 'Mech fell back into the woods. "Its yer own damn fault ya got nailed!" The *Thanatos* hopped back again, taking cover behind a part-collapsed building as the *Warhammer* continued its advance. "Now just shut up an' let the actual men do the damn work!"

As the *Warhammer* stepped around from the side of the building, a squad of Standard Battle Suits leaped from hiding, grabbing onto its legs before jumping away seconds later. "What in the - oh no." McLumpher managed before paint bombs went off all over the *Warhammer's* legs, simulating the team's satchel charges. The massive 'Mech stumbled as its actuators shut down to simulate damage.

"Well that's just great!" He cursed. "Randall, if you'd done yer damned job instead o' mewlin' fer ya mum's tit ya woulda spotted them and- crap!" The *Warhammer* stumbled as the *Thanatos* battered it with weapons fire, simulated lasers dancing over its hull while missiles detonated in harmless if colourful bursts. More shouting, most of it incomprehensible, issued forth from the 'Mech as more systems shut down to simulate damage.

The *Phoenix Hawk* leaped over the *Thanatos*, landing behind it and again opening up with its PPC,

the simulated bolt crackling over the 'Mech's rear flank. A splash of red fire decorated the *Hawk's* side as a *Spector* leaped out of cover, closing in on the larger 'Mech. "Now, now boys. Can't let you have all the fun." A playful woman's voice cut in as it landed, sandwiching the *Hawk* in between it and the *Thanatos*. "I've got this, Jim. You look after our surly friend."

As the *Hawk* took off again, the smaller 'Mech right behind it, the *Thanatos* turned back to the *Wahammer*. "As much as I've relished this little game, it's time to end it." The pilot commented as he broke into a run, turning faster than the damaged *Warhammer* could follow before again opening fire on its opponent, battering it with missiles and lasers.

Sandra checked on the status board, watching the *Warhammer's* armour erode under the assault and comparing it to the *Thanatos*. While McLumpher was managing to do some damage in return, he was fighting a losing battle against a more mobile opponent who hadn't been hampered with a bad leg.

"How's it going up there?" Levisha's voice cut into her thoughts, distracting her from the mock battle in progress.

"Fan-frelling-tastic." She replied. "Half of these guys are completely bat-arse crazy and the other half are useless tools who don't know their dates from their elbows. And it's not that easy to tell which is which."

"Sounds fun." Levisha replied. "That's why you're in charge of this project; you're the one who's not afraid to say what needs to be said and crush their dreams."

"And fuel my reactor with their tears." She finished. "So what's up? This a social call?"

"Not as such. I've just gotten a job from our friendly sponsors. I need you to put me together a viable team."

"Well crap on a crap cracker." Sandra muttered. "I mean, some of these poor toolbags have been on ice for six years, and it's not like a lot of them were prime material to begin with."

"Well, recruiting from there was your idea." Levisha seemed altogether too smug.

"And the fact that I came up with it should have told you how dumb it was." She replied. "I'll call the tools in and deliver the good news myself."

A few minutes later she was standing at the foot of her *Thor*, looking over four of the MechWarriors involved in the day's battle. They were a diverse bunch to say the least, but it was also what she had come to expect in this job. "All right kids, listen up. This is what we pulled you out of prison and made you a generous job offer and subjected you to a brutal training regimen for. We have a job, and I have to pick which of you tools gets to go."

Levisha had needed six MechWarriors to bring the unit up to full operational strength, as well as reserves. Sandra had been given the fantastic task of picking those six, and that had been running the candidates through a series of exercises to see just how well they would perform. Half the potentials hadn't even made it this far, and most of those that were left would be placed into reserve against future horrific turnover rates.

For their parts, those present were more than a little excited by this, and weren't afraid to show it.

"Right. So here's the deal. Shamus McLumpher, you're in with the *Warhammer*."

"About bloody time." Shamus shot back. A big man thick-set and heavily built, his face was dominated by a thick beard and a broad, much broken nose. He had a short temper and a love of violence, but also had shown a good ability to direct it.

"Jim Wrylock, you get the *Thanatos*."

"Excellent." Jim managed with a grin. Only a hair shorter and smaller than Shamus, the man's most distinctive feature was a massive chin and a grin that spoke of incredible smugness. At least, unlike with Levisha, Sandra was pretty sure that the man was just a jerk. But he was also a talented jerk, so she could live with that.

"Jaman al Hillah, you get to keep the *Phoenix Hawk*."

"Thank you." He replied with a small bow. Slender with coffee-coloured skin and a goatee beard that he'd managed to keep immaculate despite years in prison, Jaman was level-headed and driven for the most part, and possessed of impeccable manners and class. As a result, his habit of bouncing his 'Mech around the proving grounds like a spastic pinball on speed came as a surprise.

"And as much as it pains me to say this, Lily Quesh, you're in with the *Spector*."

"Well thank you, Ms Blackmore." She replied, smiling ever so slightly. "So nice to be recognised."

Sandra didn't like Lily, and a good chunk of that was her looks. Generously endowed and attractive, she seemed to get around wearing as little as she could without attracting an indecency charge while doing her best to be the centre of attention. The other reason was that she was also a good pilot and Sandra had no reason to deny her beyond not liking her and rumours that she'd already slept her way through half of the other recruits.

"And Randall... you're scrubbed."

"What?" Randall Juarez almost exploded in reply. Handsome and as sophisticated looking as one could be after years in prison, he had started out promisingly enough, but had quickly plateaued and begun to fall off. "Why am I scrubbed?"

"Because you're a useless pile of bollocks, ya daft pansy bugger." Shamus shot back.

"Hey, that's not fair and you know it!" Juarez snapped at the far larger man. "Ambushing me with the *Werewolf* wasn't fair and-

"And the bloody robes ain't gonna fight fair either, ya twit." Shamus snapped back.

"You would be an idiot to assume that they would." Jim added, grinning in anticipation of whatever came next and the fact that it'd be happening to somebody else.

"And in this line of work, you have to be ready for anything." Sandra finished. "The point is, Juarez, that you were standing there like a stunned mullet while McLumpher and al Hillah were pulling their weight. On a real battlefield, you'd have been deader than a dead dog's date."

"I wasn't feeling well!" He protested. "Ever since I got out of prison-"

"You passed the medical." Sandra shot back. "Now if there is a problem, then you should go see the doc and let him probe you. Otherwise, quit making excuses. You screwed up and you have to deal with it. You're still on the standby list, so maybe you can use the chance to get your arse in gear and stop blowing goats on the battlefield. Got it?"

"I-"

"Got it?" She glared right at him, her one eye managing to glare down his two."

"Yes." He managed

"Right. Report back to barracks; while I'm gone, Sergeant Moreno is in charge. Any problems and you take it up with her." Levisha had gone the extra mile for this project, finding and recruiting a still-living former Badarse to the team. From what Sandra had gathered, those were about as rare as it came. "The rest of you get your stuff. And if you have anything on your bucket lists, now's the time to think about getting it done."

**Jumpship *Xim the Despot*,
Jump Point, Alioth System, Skye Province
Lyran Alliance
9 March 3074**

As near as Sandra could tell, while the mimetic Badarses had routinely turned over membership in past, there were only a few times when they'd had such a large influx of new members in such short order. This had, in turn, resulted in a few changes to their operational procedures from what she was used to.

For example, right now, rather than having a few people cramped into the *Una Von Rayxe's* briefing room as had been their standard procedure for years, they were instead meeting in the situation room onboard one of their Jumpships. The room itself was packed; between a dozen MechWarriors, two pilots, every Infantry officer and more than a few individual squad commanders there were a lot of bodies present. And of those, a shockingly high number were new recruits.

And that was not the limit of the changes. Sandra had been promoted, bumped up to commanding her own lance. The reasoning was simple; she had a lot of experience with the unit as a whole, she was among their best pilots and had the added advantage of not having been in prison for the last few years. It also meant that she was no longer sharing a ship with Levisha, something she was unsure about. *After all, it means I'm no longer able to keep an eye on her.*

The woman in question stepped up to the head of the room, giving a nod and smile to those present. "Before we begin, I'd like to say a big hello to all of you, both fresh faces and familiar ones and welcome you all on board. This is a relaunch of such for us, and I'd like to thank all of you for being a part of it."

"This is operation ENCLAVE TOWER; for those of you new to us, it's the sort of operation that is our food and drink, so you had better get used to it." She smiled, her comments producing a small ripple of comments and laughter from the crowd. "It's also unusual as our opponents have given us the

opportunity to take advantage of one of their mistakes.”

Now Sandra was interested. This operation had only come into being after the evidence that Reg and Elezha had dug up, following their own investigations into the force that had been hunting them. *Presumably, then, this op is based on that intel. What did you do, Levisha, con StarCorps into paying you to do what you wanted?*

The main display started on a planetary map. “This is Graham IV; once a shining jewel in the Hegemony’s crown, it was put to the torch by Amaris and left to wither during the Succession Wars. Almost all of its cities were destroyed during the coup and, as a result, it’s population mainly dwell in a pair of orbital habitats.” The map was highlighting the ruins of various cities (numerous) and those still inhabited (very few). “The Graham IV Protectorate Militia is largely focused on protecting those habitats, the few remaining planet-side cities and the world’s few extant resources.”

And now she gave one of her toothy, all-knowing grins. “But not our objective.”

The display changed again, the map zooming in on a specific area while bringing up troop listings. “Zandar’s Cannons are a mercenary unit employed by the Word.” She explained, Sandra’s ears perking up at the name. “They are a mixed battalion of ‘Mechs and heavy tanks, backed up by an extensive artillery battery, the latter of which is possibly what they’re best known for. Accurate and sustained bombardments of targets before their own forces advance.”

And they’re also one of the names on Reg’s list, she noted. Interesting. Where are you going with this?

“The mistake comes in their specific assignment.” The map stopped over what looked like a massive crater lake, dotted with islands and ringed with jumbled, uneven terrain. “The Cannons are currently assigned to a garrison near the former planetary capitol of DeKirk city, now a gigantic toxic sinkhole and lake with very little of any value.”

“And in terrain like that, their heavy armour and artillery are both going to be useless.” Sandra spoke up, nodding as she figured the situation. “The tools have handicapped themselves guarding something that has next to no actual value.”

“Exactly!” Levisha beamed. “Ten points to the girl with the eyepatch.” That bought another laugh as the display continued to change. “Now it is possible that there’s something in the ruins of the Mitchell Vehicles factories or even the DeKirk aerospace research that they feel is worth protecting, but it means that they’re in a situation where they can’t effectively use their forces.”

“Mebbe they got some salvage from the Dragoons an’ are tryin’ tae pull together a *Shogun* line.” McLumpher spoke up. “Tae factory were there originally.”

“DeKirk Aerospace was a massive R&D facility.” Reg added, turning to the new recruit. “The SLDF had stuff going on there that we can only imagine. I heard that-”

“The speculation can wait.” Levisha wisely cut off Reg. “The point is that they’ve handicapped themselves guarding a mostly useless objective while being isolated from the rest of the on-world forces. This brings us to our objective.”

The display changed again, bringing up a series of headshots of a single man. Heavysset, olive-skinned and with a thick beard, Sandra didn’t recognise him immediately. *But he’s our objective, and whoever*

he is, he's vital to Levisha.

"Gene Zandar here is the leader and founder of the cannons." Levisha explained. "There's a bit about his background and the like, but the main point is that we want him alive. There are three main reasons; the first is to perform a decapitation strike aimed at cutting the unit off, lessening its value to the Word. We don't have the strength to take them out in one fell swoop, but we can put them in a situation where they'll have to take time to recover and replace him."

"The second is to send a message to the Word's other mercenaries that their leaders are not safe, and sooner or later, somebody will be after them." She continued. "Think of it as an extension of the MRBC's bounty policy. We're just being a bit more pro-active about it."

And I know the third, and it's the one that is the most important to you, Sandra assessed.

"The third is information." Levisha finished, confirming Sandra's suspicion. "We want him alive so that we can harvest information from him and find out more about the Word and their operations. So far in this war, there has been a shortage of high-ranking Word prisoners, either mercenaries or Robes proper. It's about time we changed that."

And hopefully discover the secret that they've been hiding, and where these mystery mercenaries have been running off too. It's something that's going to help all of us fighting the Word, which is how you sold it. Sandra nodded to Levisha. *But is it for all of us or just your own ends?*

Crater Command Post

Graham IV

Word of Blake Protectorate

15 March 3074

Saying that Gene Zandar hated his assignment would be an understatement. There were no words for how he felt about Graham IV and the fact that his unit was assigned there. It was not one thing about the world, but simply everything that seemed to come together to one bile-filled whole that permeated everything it touched. "Anything?" He asked a communications technician as he stomped into the command centre, glancing around the undersized room as if begging for relief.

To Mercenaries, a garrison contract was a mixed blessing. They rarely paid well, but at the same time they usually amounted to soft duty for easy money. Unless the world was right on the frontlines, the odds were that such an assignment could pass without a unit ever seeing action. Graham IV, deep in the heart of the protectorate and closer to Terra than any hostile power, was such a case. However, their assignment here was anything but relaxing.

Rather than being in one of the planet's few surviving cities, the Cannons had been assigned to a small command post near the massive festering pit that had once been the planet's capital. Gene had no idea why given that there was nothing of any value there, only that their employer had ordered it. Once there, he'd discovered that the 'command post' was actually a converted fallout shelter that had been long abandoned and that it was hundreds of kilometres in any direction to any other signs of civilisation. That the ground was a mixture of forest, swamp and rubble that meant that the Cannons' armour was all but useless hadn't helped. Nor was the toxic taint still lingering in the atmosphere which meant that time outside had to be limited and accompanied by a breather.

The result was he and his men cooped up in a tiny, claustrophobic concrete coffin, doing nothing for months on end with little incentive other than a pay check at the end. Outside was no better, with the landscape dominated by the crumbling ruins of ancient buildings that would creak and moan in the night.

"Nothing sir." The technician managed. "All quiet."

Of course it bloody well is. There's nothing on this tomb that's worth our time and my bloody sanity. He turned around, stomping around the room as if by his fuming presence he could make something – anything – happen to change his situation. Ideally he'd like to see a Word liaison call up, apologise profusely for the assignment and offer a hefty wad of cash as compensation. *About as much chance as my bloody well sprouting fairy wings and flying off,* he mentally noted.

"Let me know if the situation changes." He simply replied, storming out of the room before anybody could reply. *I know that it won't,* he added, snarling inwardly at the sheer level of frustration he was feeling right now. Moving through the command post, he headed up to the small hangar bay where the Cannons' 'Mechs were stored, desperate to blow off some steam.

Much like everything else in this bleak concrete hellhole, the 'Mech bay was undersized and only barely adequate for the Cannons' needs. Even with one lance out on patrol (less because they were expecting enemy contact and more out of giving them something to do) the bay was only barely big enough for his force, yet another thing that counted against this miserable hellhole. The other bays, where their armour and artillery were kept, weren't too much better.

He stopped by the feet of his *Thunder*, glancing up at the heavy BattleMech. Its weaponry had been fully upgraded as a gift from their employers, something that at the time, Zandar had been rather grateful for. *Guess that was the price of a new set of guns, huh? Have to sit in a bloody toxic swamp for months on end.* Grunting to himself, Zandar clambered up the access ladder to the 'Mech's head, looking across the bay.

That Ogel guy sold me good. He ruefully admitted to himself. *And it's not like I'd live terribly long if I decided to change my bloody mind, would it?* The MRBC's bounties on the heads of those Mercs that worked for the Word was a great disincentive towards any thoughts of defection, as was the thought of what the Word might do otherwise. *And I wouldn't want to mess with those bloody tin-plated monsters.*

He was about to head back down and find something else to vent his frustration on when his personal communicator beeped. Sighing, he answered it. "Zandar here. What do you want?"

"We just got an alert from aerospace command." The voice on the communicator sounded more than a little surprised as he spoke. "A quartet of Dropships just swung around the moons and past the habitats, likely coming in from a pirate point."

"So what's that bloody well got to do with us?" He asked. "Not like we're sitting on anything they're bloody well after."

"That's the thing." The Tech replied. "While it's too early to say for sure, it seems that they're headed towards us."

That was a surprise, and yet at the same time, a relief. "Right. Keep your eyes on the situation. If they come round here, whoever they are, I see no reason why we shouldn't bloody well deal with them

ourselves.” After months of sitting around in a claustrophobic hole in the ground guarding a toxic hole in the ground, Gene had realised that at this point, he just wanted to hit something. *And whoever these buggers are, they just volunteered.*

“Given that they’re in the field at the moment, should I inform-“

“Yeah.” He cut the tech off. “Tell her highness that we’ve got company too. I suspect that she’ll get her nose out of joint if we don’t.” *Though it’d serve you right if whoever it bloody well was dropped right on your dainty little head, princess.* The thought did manage to elicit a smile. After so long on-world, was be amusing to think that one of the people who put him in this situation might come out worse for it.

DeKirk Ruins

A lone *Pinto* VTOL flew over the tangled and overgrown mess that once was a thriving metropolis, now little more than crumbling ruins and water-filled craters. Out here there was little more than wreckage and wildlife, the survivors of the city having abandoned the polluted and irradiated ruins of the city long ago. To most people, there was nothing here of any value, and certainly nothing worth risking the hazards of the fallen city for.

Eloise was not most people.

She stood in the *Pinto*’s spacious infantry bay, inside her Purifier Battlesuit save for the helmet, watching the passing ruins through the windows. The rest of her squad had already been individually dropped off at different locations across the city, with her, their leader, the last remaining. Her face seemed out of place next to the bulk of the suit, long and thin with fine features, a fringe of ash-blond hair draped over her left eye.

“We’re over the site now.” The pilot’s voice reported over her suit’s communicator as the craft came to a halt, slowly descending. Nodding to the sole technician in the bay, she quietly waited for him to place the helmet on her suit, a moment of blackness before the optic systems and other sensors came on-line. A checklist of systems cycled across the heads-up display confirming that everything was operational, including the portable PPC on its weapon mount.

There was a small bump as the *Pinto* touched down, the bay doors opening as the clamps holding her suit in place disengaged. A quick thumbs-up from the tech was all she needed, Eloise stepping forward out of the craft, armoured feet touching down on the soft, marshy ground. A moment later, the Purifier’s mimetic camouflage system activated, the flat black of its armour shimmering and fading to a facsimile of the world around it.

The *Pinto* lifted off behind the suit, Eloise heading out on foot for the moment with the suit’s armour changing with its movement. Checking her displays, Eloise confirmed that she was clear of the VTOL before firing the suit’s jets, the Purifier leaping through the air and diving into a rubble-strewn sinkhole. Landing on a ledge, itself once a part of a larger building, it then took off again, heading deeper into the ruins.

Near the base of the crater she found what she was looking for, a subterranean passageway, its entrance now exposed if half-choked with rubble. A few minutes work with the Purifier’s claw cleared the entranceway, the suit stepping into the ruined passageway. Optical sensors showed the

passageway to be mostly clear, while audio picked up the creak of the ancient structure. Between the narrow hallway and the questionable state of the structure, Eloise instantly knew that the suit couldn't go any further.

Quick commands disengaged the main torso harness, the top half of the suit's chest swinging upwards as its systems disengaged and locked into place, potentially allowing the suit to be reboarded and reactivated at a moment's notice. Its operator clambered out, her slender, long-legged and graceful figure complimenting her features.

Her limbs stood out in the darkness, emanating a soft red light from what could be mistaken from some sort of exotic, skin-tight bodysuit. Tapping the side of her head, she whispered a quiet message. "I'm inside the facility. Abandoning the suit and continuing on foot."

Heading deeper into the ruins, what little light there was from outside faded into darkness, the red from Eloise's limbs taking its place. The result was an eerie feeling, the red washing over the mixture of bare concrete and wrecked technology. Rusted and twisted pipes, clumps of exposed and long-dead wiring and other such detritus spoke of both the devastation inflicted on the site and the centuries that had passed since. "Structure appears sound but the equipment is damaged. Still searching for the objective inside."

She pried open a half-closed door, peering up and down. "Elevator shaft; most above this is gone, below we have only one door several floors below. Debris at the bottom of the shaft is likely the lift itself. Headed down." There was no sign of the cable, nor of any handholds that she could use to climb with. She wasn't concerned, merely flexing her fingers before beginning her decent into the shaft.

The lower doors took more effort to pry open before succumbing, Eloise swinging inside as soon as there was enough gap to get through. "Inside the lower chamber." She continued as she looked around, no light save for what was coming off her limbs. "Facility seems to be intact down here. No signs of damage to the structure or equipment is apparent." Around her were rows of computer banks, silent monoliths lining the darkened halls. "No power apparent."

One terminal at the end of the room caught her eye, matching up with the data she had on the facility. "Terminal likely has a solid state data core powered by a small fusion battery. Unless there was damage to the power supply when they bombed DeKirk then everything should be intact, which means that I have reached my objective. Now assuming that they didn't purge the data before..." The terminal came on, running through a power-up sequence before halting at authentication. *Now for the easy part.*

She again flexed her fingers, the ends splitting and opening to reveal several different leads before plugging them into the terminal. Within an instant she was through authentication, her eyes flicking across the screen as data began streaming through her, copying into internal storage. Information flew across the screen, Eloise singling out individual files as they scrolled by. *Perfect.*

Disconnecting from the system, she headed back towards the exit. "I have the objective." She continued, glancing up at the shaft. Different fingers extended, claws sprouting from them while others emerged from her feet. "Exiting now and requesting pickup."

Climbing back up and out was an arduous process, each move carefully measured. It would do her no good to have recovered the objective only to slip and fall down an elevator shaft and lose it along with her life. Instead, Eloise opted for a cautious and steady approach, knowing full well that she had

all the time in the world. Graham IV was a low-priority target for raiders at the best of times, and nobody would be interested in the polluted crater that was DeKirk.

Reaching the top of the shaft and clambering out, she headed back towards the entrance, finding her Purifier suit exactly where she'd left it. Reboarding it was a simple matter, one that she'd done numerous times, but even then there was a certain feeling of satisfaction to it. Her limbs connected to the suit's modified systems, diagnostics running across her eyes as the suit powered back on. Nodding to herself, she activated the internal communicator. "This is Runner Lead to Recogniser Five. I have the objective, requesting pickup."

There was a pause before the reply. "Understood; be advised that space traffic control has detected inbound unidentified ships, assumed hostile. Tracking has them headed towards the DeKirk crater."

Eloise took a moment to swear under her breath before continuing. "Understood" There were a number of contingencies that she could bring into play, all ones that she was willing to use if needs be. The data she carried was far more valuable than the body carrying it, and she would do whatever it took to ensure that it reached its objective.

Even if she didn't live to do such.

DeKirk Forest

The approach to DeKirk had gone well, especially given how many risks they'd taken in getting there. Jumping in from a hazardous, close-in pirate point, the badarses two rental jumpships had managed to drop them off about as close to the planet as they could get while remaining undetected. Swinging low around Graham IV's sole moon, scooting past the orbital habitats that housed the bulk of its population and then diving low onto the planet had given them minimal exposure, a fact that was helped by their dashing towards a largely unpopulated and abandoned sector of the world.

The three 'Mech carriers; the two familiar *Leopards* and a brand-new *Aurora*, had flown low over the forest, dropping their cargoes before heading off to what passed for an LZ. The rest of the Mimetic Badarses, a full company for the first time in years, had made it down in one piece, their 'Mechs gathered up in the overgrown forest.

From the ground, Sandra was beginning to really understand what was going on with the world, and why their objective seemed so unlikely. From their air there had been what seemed to be rocky outcroppings between the trees had in fact been the remnants of buildings, which only made her wonder even more why the Word had sent a unit to garrison the area. *But then, asking 'Why the Word anything' is a path that can only lead to madness*, she told herself.

The company had grouped up and then allowed their Battle Armour elements to join up, the smaller machines staying in formation with their larger brethren. Most of their conventional infantry assets were in reserve for the op; the area around the ruins was still tainted with toxins and more than a little background radiation, making the area hazardous and again making Sandra question the 'whys' of this whole mess.

Their plan was simple enough; approach as quietly as they could and try to lure Zandar out of hiding, then take him out. The former part was helped by the broken terrain they were approaching over, a combination of ruins and forest, that lead to short sight-lines and poor identification beyond running

up to your enemy's face. Whatever it was that Zandar was protecting (something that she was sure Reg would blather about at length given half a chance), he'd want to engage potential attackers to keep them away from it or, at the very least, be ordered to do such by whoever had sent him to this radioactive hellhole.

The secret was not being found; it was just making sure that it was the right time to be found.

Their advance had been largely silent, with 'Mech arm gestures and the odd order communicated via loudspeaker, keeping communications traffic to a minimum. The rest of the time it was as quiet as the march of twelve metal behemoths could be, a fact aided by their remote location. With nothing out here worth protecting, the DeKirk crater lacked a lot of the infrastructure that normally would pose a risk in an operation like this; no remote sensors, no regular patrols, no random sightings by civilians that gave the whole game away in advance.

Which is why there was a fair amount of surprise when a VTOL buzzed straight overhead.

"Incoming!" Bob called out, his *Locust* on the far flank of their advance. "Single craft, headed straight for us!"

"Poop bum fart!" Was the best Sandra could manage to convey her frustration.

"Bring it down, now!" Levisha called back. Discovery at this point was not a part of their plan, which meant that the VTOL was now a threat out of all proportion to its capabilities. The skies lit up as 'Mechs opened fire, lasers and cannons reaching out to swat at the fast-moving craft.

"Any ID?" Somebody called as Sandra pushed forward, looking for a better shot at the target. The glimpses of sky through the trees weren't helping much, while the marker on her tactical display was veering wildly across the sky to evade their fire.

"Pinto!" Reg shouted back. "Word or allied Mercs."

Jake's *Rampage* shoved forward, the LBX cannon in its arm filling the air with fragments, shredding foliage as it went. Sandra heard at least one explosion before catching the smallest glimpse of the craft spiralling downwards, flames billowing from its rotors.

"After it." Levisha ordered. "Make sure they can't report back."

The cargo clamps holding Eloise's Purifier in place had worked miracles, keeping her suit upright and in position as the *Pinto* had crashed down through the trees and into the ground. She'd been shaken around inside it and could taste blood inside her mouth, but had otherwise seemingly come out alive and more-or-less unharmed. A quick diagnostic check showed that both the Purifier suit and her own limbs and other internal systems were unharmed.

"Report." She called into her communicator, with quick replies coming in the form of more status reports, all more or less clear. A quick glance around, however, told her that they were the lucky ones; the *Pinto's* bay was a mess, and she had no doubts that it had fared about the best of any part of the VTOL.

"We're down, but it's not good." The pilot confirmed. "The frame's badly damaged and the main

rotor's disabled, so there's no chance of moving at all."

And no way for me to get my cargo back save for on foot. Eloise noted. "Understood. We will split up and deliver the objective. You will cover us."

"Blessed Blake's will be done." The pilot replied, calm in the face of the orders he'd been given. A single crippled, immobilised VTOL would be destroyed in an instant by a BattleMech force and he knew it. Eloise had just ordered the crew into a suicidal action.

But they know the value of this operation, she added as her suit released from the clamps and then climbed out of the wrecked craft. From the outside, it looked even worse with the tailboom bent out of shape and the canopy glass shattered. All of a sudden, she wondered why she hadn't heard anything from the co-pilot or gunner.

As soon as the rest of the squad were free she sent a quick series of commands, redistributing her digital prize among the rest of the squad. It was a simple insurance policy, making sure that even if only one of them made it back then the objective would be secured. She also knew enough that none of her men would be taken alive. 'Destroy the data and yourself if capture is imminent' had been a part of their orders, after all.

"Peace of Blake be with you." She spoke back to the VTOL crew before setting off, her Purifier shimmering and blending into its surroundings as the suit headed out on foot. Locators showed the locations of her squadmates, fanning out and vanishing into the forest.

In the distance she heard a report of weapons fire and then an explosion. There was no cries of distress, no calls for help, no please for mercy or surrender. The *Pinto's* crew had sold themselves bravely, leaving behind no evidence of their mission or cargo, no clue that the true objectives were escaping into the ruins as they spoke.

Her only hope was that they had managed to get off a message warning of the attackers and their location. As much as she wanted to, Eloise couldn't risk breaking radio silence and risking being discovered. *Our attackers never identified themselves and I saw little beyond laser fire. However, I have an idea who they may be.*

Which means that either this is an incredible opportunity, or that this whole operation is doomed.

Ahead lay a section of exposed tunnel, a part of DeKirk's ancient subway system. Eloise had mapped out parts of it during prior attempts to locate her objective, and as such, knew that it'd go some way to getting her to her objective. As she headed inside she killed all but the most minimal of lighting, the Purifier blending in to the dark surroundings. Silent save for the footfalls of metal boots on the ancient ferrocrete floor, she continued towards her objective with single-minded determination.

The incident with the *Pinto* had been enough to breathe an air of caution into the Badarses' approach. They had no idea if the enemy crew had managed to contact anyone about their presence, and the fact that they had died when the craft exploded meant that there was no way to be certain. Levisha had decided to press on regardless, figuring that one way or another they'd be making contact with the Cannons soon enough.

As they'd gotten closer towards what had been the centre of DeKirk the forest had thinned out, replaced with larger buildings, albeit ones in no better shape for the centuries of abuse and neglect. Levisha had headed off with her makeshift recon lance, Bob and two of the new recruits with her, both to seek out the enemy and get a better lie of the land. In a situation like this, it was useful to know what was going on. *This place could be one huge death-trap. Potholes, unstable rubble, concealed deadfalls... again, I wonder what goat-licking bogtool would want anything out of this place.*

"We have a site." Levisha spoke up, braving radio chatter. "Sending you the grid ref now."

Sandra still had no idea how she'd ended up second in command, but she also knew that there was no sense in fighting over it. Signalling to the remaining 'Mechs, she lead them further into the ruins, following what passed for the roads as she surveyed the area around her. *Yeah, there's nobody in this frelling graveyard, I know. But it can't damn well hurt to be sure.* The encounter with the lone VTOL and its fiery demise had left a bad taste in her mouth for a number of reasons, and she was wary of any other surprises. *Great, now I'm thinking like a frelling officer too.*

The *Thor* halted as it reached the designated meeting, Levisha's *Goshawk* already there along with the three other 'Mechs. "Nice hole in the world you've found yourself." She managed as she looked around, surveying the area from her 'Mech's cockpit. While the ruined buildings and rubble-choked streets didn't look too much different from anywhere she'd seen so far, it was one side of the potential battlefield that caught her interest.

Everything simply ended, dropping off in a mixture of broken ferrocrete, steel frames and other assorted detritus to a massive sinkhole. The water filling it was an unpleasant, soupy green that suggested that it was anything but healthy, while she also had no doubt that the sloping sides were both soft and treacherous.

"I figure it's pretty much perfect." Levisha offered, sounding for all the world like she was looking at a home inspection rather than a toxic wasteland that was soon to be a battlefield. "Yourself?"

The *Thor*'s torso rotated some more as Sandra looked around. "I'm sold. We'll get set up here; you and yours go get their attention." It struck Sandra moments after she'd spoken that she had just given Levisha an order. There was a pause as she waited for the reply.

Instead the *Goshawk*'s alien, three-eyed head gave the slightest of bows. "Of course. See you soon." The slender 'Mech turned and began walking away, several others joining it.

Well that was weird, even for her. Sandra shrugged, and then looked back over the rest of the company, as well as the gathered battle armoured troops. "All right you bunch of tools, you know the plan. Let's get to work; with some luck, we might just make it out of here alive."

Gene Zandar's *Thunder* stomped through the ruined city, the other members of his lance around it. Internally he was fuming, seething with the anger that came from the degree of contempt that he'd been shown. *Of course the bloody robes knew that they were coming before we did. Of course they were going to be all pissy and demanding about it. Bloody princess is probably laughing at us right now while doing her bloody metal nails.*

The Princess herself hadn't been in attendance during his brief burst of communication with their

liaisons; instead, he'd been fobbed off by some lower-ranking snot, Fujisawa or something, who'd told his men to do their job with an attitude that was somewhere between dismissive and insulting. However, he also knew that he had a job to do, and pissing and whining about it would not help anything. *Last thing I want to do is give the bloody robes an excuse. Good thing they're paying me a fortune for this, otherwise I'd crap a brick at the first bloody one of them I came across. After this bloody war is over, I'm never doing a bloody robe job again.*

At the very least, whatever bloody idiots have come down here have got to be as miserable as I am. They're gonna hate the place more, and won't have had the time to bloody well get used to it. That bought a small smile to his face as he thought about taking out his frustrations on them. *Wouldn't be the first time a prisoner of mine's had a small accident or two.*

"Big Gun this is Winchester Lead." The voice of his scout lance commander caught his attention, refocusing him. "We have contact with hostile 'Mechs. Returning fire." There was a crackle on the line, the sounds of cockpit alarms in the background.

And now the stupid buggers show themselves. "Roger that, Winchester lead. I have your position."

"Enemy units are breaking off." Winchester lead cut back. "Trying to escape."

"Maintain contact Winchester lead!" He called out, a sense of urgency in his voice. "Do not lose contact; once those buggers break off they could be anywhere in this god-damned hellhole!"

"Understood." More weapons fire filled the background noise. "We show three, no four Battlemechs, mix of light and medium types. In pursuit now."

"All units!" Zandar shouted over the command channel. "Form up on me, and run those bloody buggers into the ground!" The *Thunder* powered forwards, the others in its lance managing to keep up with the powerful 'Mech's advance. His status board showed him that all of the 'Mechs in Winchester were still up and running, their enemies apparently more interested in running than standing and fighting.

Fine then. We'll bring the bloody fight to them.

Minutes passed with little more than positional updates from the recon lance as they maintained pursuit. They'd eyeballed the 'Mechs in the enemy force; of them only one stood out in the form of a *Goshawk*. The presence of the Clan-built 'Mech was odd but not to him immediately a cause for alarm. *They probably sold their bloody sisters to a bloody Diamond Shark for that. I seen plenty of mercs with bloody Clanner tech, like-*

"Taking fire!" A cry from Winchester lead grabbed his attention. "Enemy forces, count at least eight 'Mechs, possibly more, mediums and heavies!"

"Pull back!" He shouted out, knowing full well that the lighter 'Mechs would not hold up under intense fire. "Keep eyes on the enemy but don't get your bloody heads shot off! We'll be with you soon!"

Gene opened his *Thunder's* throttle all the way, the hum of the reactor increasing as the huge 'Mech powered forwards through the ruins. *Right, Princess. Whoever these idiots are, they and you are gonna see how a real warrior fights.* All his anger, rage and frustration at his assignment were boiling over, and he now had a convenient target for it. "Give 'em hell, Cannons! Blast 'em and leave nothing

standing!”

Despite her low opinions of the new recruits, Sandra had been impressed by their ability to actually follow orders. Even after years of sitting in a prison and picking their noses, they hadn't decided to lash out at the first opportunity, rather being patient and holding back as per the plan. *Hell, if the first thing I'd had a chance to shoot at in years was a frelling toaster-loving merc, I'd be happy to blast the tool's face off to let of some steam.*

Instead they'd stayed back, offering the enemy recon lance very little fire and a chance to pull back and, more to the point, report their position to the enemy commander. Eyeballs on the targets, combined with the intel they'd received, had confirmed that this was the Cannons' recon lance, which meant that the real objective would already be on the way.

“And here they come.” Reg commented over the command channel, his *Uziel* still hidden in among the rubble, using its Beagle Probe to watch the area around it. Several other 'Mechs were lurking, most notably the *Werewolf*, waiting for the moment to strike. Battle Armour were among them, being held back to play their own role in what was to come.

“Wait for it.” Sandra muttered back as the Cannons' 'Mechs charged forwards, opening fire as they went. Cannon fragments pinged off the *Thor's* hull as Sandra fired back, lasers carving armour off of a *Hercules'* shoulder. “Let them in...” She backed up a little, adding to the idea of being surprised and out-numbered as those with her did the same. Her eye quickly danced to a tactical display, watching the advance of the enemy 'Mechs, and the position of one of them in particular.

Bingo.

“Ascendance Lead, light them up.” She quietly commanded. Moments later, the ground underneath the *Hercules* erupted, the Thunder LRMs buried there responding to a command from the hidden battle armour. She and Jake had emptied their ammo bins into the ground while waiting, setting up a field of mines just waiting for the command to detonate. And this was that moment.

More eruptions rocked the mercenary 'Mechs, several of them shaking or stumbling as the explosives ripped through their legs. She saw one machine, a dome-headed *Enfield*, stumble and collapse, while others were stumbling to stay upright. “All units, go, go, go!” Reversing her prior slow withdrawal, Sandra pushed forwards while other 'Mechs surged from cover to join her.

McLumpher and Wrylock surged ahead, the pair of them advancing on the *Hercules* that she had been sniping at earlier. PPC and missile fire racked the blocky 'Mech as the pair of them hammered into it. *So they can follow orders*, she told herself as she advanced with them, looking around for one particular 'Mech in among the enemy forces. *Now it's just up to me not to frel it all up.*

As if to oblige her, the *Thunder* continued to push forwards, its massive cannon swinging around and erupting in a stream of shells that chewed into the *Thantos'* side. The blocky 'Mech reeled under the attack, but quickly recovered, continuing its advance. Sandra took the cue, opening fire with her lasers on the *Thunder* as the pair of them closed.

Brilliant green beams arced out, two of them lancing into the Mercenary's side and slicing away armour. *That should get his attention at least*, she told herself as she closed in, turning as she did to arc away from the rest of her troops. *Yeah, come over here you big tool. Pick a fight with the single*

'Mech who's separated from the rest of her force and is busy giving you sass.

It was a similar plan to the one that she'd used against Crenshaw on Fletcher. *Only this time I have more contingencies and no goat-licker in a Mad Cat to tool it all up.*

Flipping a switch on the master control, she handed weapons control over to the Mechs 'Targeting computer, a coolie hat toggle biasing it towards the *Thunder's* right leg. Already weakened by the mines, the limb was a prime target for bringing down the 'Mech while leaving its pilot alive. Backing the *Thor* up, she fired again, lasers carving armour off the limb without snapping it.

Just keep your distance. The tool's got a big gun there, but it's also got sweet bog all reach.

As if he'd been reading her thoughts, Zandar pushed forwards, the massive cannon that made up his 'Mech's right arm belching rounds at her. Fragments of shell sandblasted the *Thor's* armour, while the trio of lasers in its chest spat angry red darts at her 'Mech. *Great. The tool got a weapons upgrade while he was there.*

Another warning caught her ears, moments before a flight of missiles peppered the ground around her 'Mech. Glancing over her display, Sandra saw the source of the assault. A quartet of VTOL gunships, smoke puffing from them as they sent more missile fire raining down around their foes. "Incoming choppers." She called out. "Looks like Zandar bought friends."

Practical experience told her that ingroing the VTOLs would not end well, especially not if they wanted to make a fast getaway later. Backing off further from the *Thunder*, hopefully outside the reach of its enhanced guns, Sandra swung around to open fire on the nearest of the craft. Lasers lanced out, savaging a *Warrior* gunship's side, the craft wobbling before spinning away.

"We'll deal with them." Levisha called back. "You worry about the objective."

Confident enough in her compatriots, Sandra turned back to Zandar, her *Thor* still backing up as its torso twisted to face the enemy 'Mech. As he came stomping forwards, she fired her jets, leaping out of the *Thunder's* way and weapons fire before returning her own. One beam struck home but it was enough, eating up the last of the armour before slicing into the metal bones beneath. The *Thunder* stumbled, Zandar barely keeping the 'Mech upright under the assault.

Yeah, every now and then being the crack shot with the Clantech 'Mech means I get the dirty job. Sandra told herself as she came down, breaking into a run as the *Thunder* picked itself up and continued its advance. "Okay, you're a determined tool, granted. Now do us a favour and fall over already."

She pulled back again, lashing the *Thunder* with more laser fire, only to have the shots go wide as the other 'Mech half charged, half limped forwards. More rounds from its cannon rocked the *Thor*, gouging chunks from its flank and arm as the shells pummelled the armour on the side. A glance at her status board showed that it was thinning rapidly.

Swearing to herself, she opened fire again, this time to a more dramatic result. Brilliant green beams ate through metal bones and myomers, sending rivers of molten metal and frayed musculature running to the ground. The battered limb buckled and then twisted before simply snapping mid-thigh, the huge 'Mech crashing to the ground.

"Objective is down!" She called out. "Ascendance team, go!"

The second stage of their plan involved retrieving Zandar from his 'Mech, something that was never easy under these conditions. However, between them, Sandra and Elezha had worked out something that should have the desired effect. As the *Thunder* struggled to rise, a squad of Kage suits sailed through the air before landing on the downed 'Mech's shoulders and head.

"We have this." Elezha called back. "You go help the others."

Glancing at her Tac display, Sandra quickly analysed the numbers. Wiping out the Cannons was never the objective; rather the goal was to extract the objective and get away fast. Any damage done to the Mercenaries was a bonus, but the longer the fight went, the harder it would be to extract themselves from it.

Pushing ahead, she targeted and opened fire on a mercenary *Rifleman*, weapons reaching out and stabbing into the side of the enemy 'Mech. Ahead she could get some idea of how the battle was progressing; a *Garm* down and burning while a *Valkyrie* was being harried by Qesh's *Spector*. Levisha leaping across the battlefield, peppering a wounded *Enfield* with fire. Shamus pummelling a *Hercules* with his PPCs.

So far so good, she told herself as she spared a glance back at the objective.

One of the Kage suits had reached the back of the *Thunder*'s head, its clawed hand reaching down for the cockpit hatch. As soon as it was open, the Suit would simply pull Zandar out of his 'Mech. Simple.

And then the Suit simply vanished in a metal blur before crashing to the ground a dozen meters away, reduced to a tangled mess of limbs and flesh, its torso shot right through. Sandra didn't even have time to register what had happened, only to mutter something about hoping that wasn't Elezha.

"I-" She was about to call out before more alarms went off, missiles pummelling her 'Mech before a PPC shot seared into its shoulder. She turned to the source, instantly recognising the machine and what it represented. The squat, board shape of a *Grigori* Celestial, its arms ending in bulky missile pods. In the distance she could see a second 'Mech in among the ruins, a taller *Deva* with a massive Gauss rifle replacing one arm.

"Robes!" She shouted out as the Kage suits scattered, leaping away from their fallen prey. "I make two heavy Celestials-" She stopped as the hiss and pop of static filled her ears, the command channel little more than noise.

"Ye daft buggers!" Shamus shouted out from his *Warhammer*. "We'll just foo-" A massive bulky form vaulted over a part-collapsed building, crashing down on top of his 'Mech. One clawed foot drove into the *Warhammer*'s cockpit, crushing it in a sickening pop of metal and glass. As the wrecked heavy 'Mech fell, the *Marauder II* stepped off its corpse, its alien body looming over all around it. "Surrender, frails." A hollow, echoing voice boomed from the cockpit. "Or end."

From the left, Hiro Fujisawa could be considered handsome with his classical Japanese features that made him look like a combine poster boy. The right side of his face, however, was another matter; a mess of burned flesh that divided almost perfectly down the middle, dominated by the simple red

lens that replaced his eye.

However, he wore those scars with pride. It was those injuries, no matter how horrific, that had lead him to his current position; a Manei Domeni, one of the Master's chosen few. And, if Hiro was an extension of his Master's will, then his *Marauder II* was the instrument of that divine purpose.

The huge 'Mech stepped off the mangled carcass of the *Warhammer*, gazing down on the 'Mechs before it. Both Zandar's troops and the mercenary attackers seemed to be both stunned and awed by his arrival, which was exactly how he had planned it. "Tuwile; secure Zandar." He spoke into the channel. "Tyssen, cover him. Ramirez, you and I shall end these frails."

He swung the *Marauder II* around, its trio Particle cannons unleashing a maelstrom of electric blue fire into a nearby *Stealth*. The shots ripped into the medium 'Mech's side, devouring structure and armour, sending the stump of its arm spinning away as the machine reeled under the impact.

As the *Stealth* fell, a *Hatchetman* stepped forward as if to protect its wounded comrade. "Futile" Hiro muttered as the mercenary opened fire, the cannon shells shrugged off by his 'Mech as if they were a light rain. Moments later a storm of brilliant red and blue laser and particle beam fire speared into the slender 'Mech.

The source of the assault revealed itself, Ramirez' *Ghurkha* charging forwards towards the wounded *Hatchetman*, steam billowing from the overheating 'Mech as it charged at well over a hundred kilometres per hour. The hunchbacked 'Mech swung its arm up into the *Hatchetman*, as if gut-punching it. Moments later, there was a hideous metallic screech as the *Gurkha's* concealed blade slid out, impaling the mercenary 'mech.

"End these invaders!" Hiro commanded to Zandar's men. "Leave nothing standing!"

"Crap on a crap cracker!" Sandra called out as her wounded *Thor* came around, the lasers spitting fire at the *Grigori*. At the same time, it twisted and moved with a fluid grace, seemingly more agile and mobile than a heavy 'Mech should be. The lasers lightly scored its flank, burning away armour before the alien machine returned fire.

More missiles battered the *Thor* while the PPC that replaced the 'Mech's head stabbed into her flank. Alarms went off as green spray gushed from the wound, heat sinks coming on red on Sandra's status board. Moments later, a Gauss Rifle shot slammed into the *Thor's* knee, twisting the limb and setting off more alarms. She kept the *Thor* upright, continuing to circle as the *Grigori* followed her, the *Deva* continuing to loom in the middle distance.

The tools are between us and Zandar, she noted. Anyone tries to go and grab him, the pair of them hammer them. They probably don't need him alive, but keeping him out of our hands is a bonus. The only good part was that it hadn't been Elezha who had been shot through by a Gauss rifle round; a small comfort at best. *And if I call in the backup plan, they'd still be coming under fire on the way in and out.*

She kept moving, trying to find some cover from the sniper in the *Deva*, knowing full well that their C3 systems made the distance largely irrelevant. At the same time, she was doing her best to keep Zandar's downed 'Mech in contention, something that was not going to be easy.

She and the *Grigori* exchanged fire again, the Word 'Mech getting the worse of the deal as lasers continued to strip armour from it. However, Sandra also knew that it was fresh while she was wounded from the prior engagement, and that alone would favour the Robe. "If anyone gets this, I need help over here." She called out, hoping to get something through the enemy jamming. "The objective is in jeopardy."

Looking around, she could see that it was a long shot at best. Jake and Wrylok were tied up, the *Rampage* and *Thanatos* under fire from the mercenary *Hercules* and *Rifleman*, with the bulk of the *Marauder II* backing them up. Levisha' *Goshawk* was doing its best to keep the *Ghurkha* pinned down, but was also taking fire from a mercenary *Centurion* to boot. *Outnumbered is never a good place to be, especially not when it involves the damn toasters.*

The *Thor* continued to turn, Sandra ignoring the warnings for the moment as she continued to focus on the *Grigori*. More missiles pummelled her 'Mech, the heat in the cockpit continuing to rise as another couple of heat sinks ruptured under the assault. Her own lasers were enough to savage armour off the Celestial's legs and side, wounding the Word 'Mech but not putting it down.

Abruptly, blue PPC fire lashed the side of the side of the *Grigori*, the word 'Mech stumbling for a moment as al Hillah's *Phoenix Hawk* sailed towards it. "Go!" He called out as the medium 'Mech landed next to its alien-looking target. "I have this!" The *Hawk* lashed out with one long leg, the foot catching the *Grigori* behind the knee and causing it to stumble.

Outmassed, outgunned... you're one brave guy, you know that? She nodded back as she pushed the *Thor* forwards, the machine complaining through a cacophony of warnings and alarms. "Annihilator flight, we have an opening. Extract the target, now!" Her sights dropped onto the *Deva*, a quartet of lasers stabbing into the blocky machine's heart. It recoiled under the impact, its own gauss rifle shot going wide of her oncoming 'Mech.

The *Deva* wasn't done yet, a trio of PPCs lashing out to at her as she stepped over the *Thunder's* fallen form. More red lights came on as the armour on her arms was stripped back, the *Thor* reeling but not falling in reply. Glancing back, however, she could see that she'd done her work.

As the *Grigori* tried to follow the fast-moving *Phoenix Hawk*, what seemed to be a swarm of outsized insects dropped out of the sky onto the fallen *Thunder*. Sandra knew what they were; Annihilator team, a squad of soldiers equipped with VTOL flight packs and specialised in one role – extraction. Content to let them do their work, she turned back to the *Deva*, opening fire again.

The exchange favoured her this time, albeit for a moment. Lasers lashed the *Deva*, devouring the armour over its hips and flank, sending the 'Mech reeling. As it fell, the pilot opened up again, the Gauss Rifle finding its mark on Sandra's 'Mech. More alarms went off as the slug pulverised the left arm, snapping bones and crushing one of the lasers there. Sparing it only the slightest of glances, Sandra kept pushing forward.

As the *Deva* struggled to rise, more diminutive figures emerged from the shadows. "We have him." Elezha's voice came over the communicator, bringing a sense of relief with it. The trio of Kage suits latched onto the Word machine as it struggled to rise, clawing at its wounded hip. A muffled explosion went off in the darkness, the 'Mech lurching and then collapsing, its leg splayed out at an awkward angle.

"Objective secure." A voice came over the channel. "Evac is go on your signal."

Sandra swung the *Thor* around, her sights dropping on the *Grigori*. The Word pilot had realised what was going on, and had in turn decided that swatting the infantry before they could make their escape. "No you don't!" She called out, opening up with her remaining weapons at the same time as al Hillah did. The results were dramatic, fire ripping into the *Grigori's* side, one of its boxy missile launchers blowing apart. Unbalanced by the loss, the 'Mech swayed and crashed to the ground.

"Go, now!" She called out, the swarm of infantry not wasting their time in taking off, buzzing away before any other units could open up on them. "Annihilators are clear." She confirmed. "I have an exit route." A few more shots kept the *Grigori* down as it struggled to rise.

"Understood." Levisha shot back. "We're trying to get clear here, but the Word are being most persistent."

A glance at her display confirmed Levisha's statement; three of the Badarses' BattleMechs were down, while the bulk of the mercenaries were still upright. More worryingly, the massive *Marauder II* represented an obstacle that could not be easily ignored, its firepower enough to fell their machines while its mobility was worryingly good for its size. The only good point was that the Cannons' gunships were all either destroyed or had already fled the battlefield.

"I got us a plan!" Jake called out as his battered *Rampage* moved through the rubble, pummelling the *Hercules* with cannon and laser fire. "Can you give me some cover?"

"Easily." Sandra called back, contributing her own weapons to the assault on the mercenary 'Mech. Shots gobbled up the armour on its side and arm, eating into the systems underneath. Staggering, the *Hercules* remained standing, but its MechWarrior was clearly put off by the assault. The scarred *Rifleman* stepped forwards, its cannons shooting fire at Sandra in reply. "Okay, they're mad. Do what you have to."

The *Rampage* pushed forwards, the bulky, eighty five ton 'Mech taking off with a startling amount of speed. Barging straight past the *Hercules* and *Rifleman*, it instead ran straight at the massive *Marauder*, hurling forwards at over eighty kilometres per hour. "Okay robe!" Jake shouted out over the PA system as shots danced around his 'Mech. "Let's do this!"

Too late the *Marauder II's* pilot realised what was going on and tried to turn away from Jake's charge. It was for nothing, the blocky *Rampage* slamming right into the larger 'Mech's body, mass and momentum forcing it backwards. As its weight shifted, the ancient concrete ledge behind the assault 'Mech crumbled and collapsed, sending the *Marauder* crashing over the edge of the crater rim.

Sandra couldn't see what happened after the massive 'Mech disappeared from view, but she had a good enough idea of what was going on. Being trapped in a hundred tons of free-falling metal was not going to be a pleasant experience, no matter who you were.

"That's our opening!" Levisha called out, her *Goshawk* putting fire into a mercenary *Blackjack*, shots slicing through its side. "Everybody, pull back, now!"

Between the damage done to the two Celestials and Jake's shoving their apparent commander off a cliff, the Mimetic Badarses had made a largely clean getaway. A few units, most notably the *Ghurkha*, had harried them as they left, but the volume of return fire it had been taking was enough to persuade it to give up the chase.

Their dropships were at the expected rendezvous, hurriedly loading the retreating 'Mechs as they arrived. There had been less sorting of who was in what lance or which ship and more a desire to just get everyone on-board quickly and then away from the world. The knowledge that there were Manei Domeni forces on-planet who in turn might send reinforcements or resort to more extreme measures to prevent their escape only added to that sense of urgency.

Besides which, throw another couple of nukes on this world and nobody would notice the difference, Sandra dryly thought as her battered *Thor* clambered onto the dropship.

Moments later they were away, the craft boosting into orbit before heading back to their pirate jump-point. Both their jumships were equipped with Lithium-Fusion batteries and would be ready to go as soon as the ships were back.

Clambering out of her 'Mech, Sandra noted that she'd ended up on the same ship as Levisha. The other woman had greeted her warmly, looking irritatingly good despite having crawled out of a BattleMech cockpit. "We got the objective." She practically beamed. "Gene Zandar is secured in the *Winged Minibus*' brig, and ready to be handed over to our employers. Not too shabby."

"Yeah, and we only lost two people doing it." Sandra muttered.

"Which for the Badarses is a good record, remember?" She noted. "Given how much we lost last time we ran into a pack of Celestials, we got off surprisingly well. Yes, we lost three 'Mechs and a suit, but we got out with the objective. And by the time we were done, there's going to be a lot more damage."

"What do you mean?" Sandra sounded confused.

"Somebody paid a little visit to the Cannons command bunker while we were busy scalping their leader as a contingency against him not coming out to play." She explained while looking over her nails, examining them with false interest. "Clearly they didn't find Zandar, but they did find a lot of artillery ammunition that was otherwise going to waste."

"Ouch." Sandra managed. "Well I guess we can call it a frelling victory for all its worth."

"Something wrong, Sandra?" Levisha asked, sounding genuinely curious rather than her usual needling.

"After all that, I'm still bothered by what happened with that *Pinto*." She replied. "The crew chose to stay in their chopper and shoot at us, knowing full well that we'd shoot back. They didn't have a chance, yet they got themselves killed for nothing."

"You should know enough about the Word to know that they're fanatics." Levisha countered. "That crew felt that what they were doing was right, regardless of how futile it might seem."

"Yeah, I know but..." She shrugged. "It seems pointless."

"What's the problem then?" Levisha managed a small smile. "Doesn't your cynical, hard-bitten worldview allow for the idea that people might genuinely believe in their actions?"

"Probably." She admitted. "Or maybe it's those Word tools shoving their dates into the fight that got

up my arse.”

Levisha seemed rather nonplussed about it. “We beat them, got the objective and made it out with most of our people alive. Isn’t that enough?”

“Could be. I still want to know what it was in that radioactive hellhole that the Word thought was worth a merc battalion and a lance of cyborg freaks to protect.”

That bought out a smile. “Well, maybe our guest will be kind enough to tell us.”

Facility AR-X9 Graham IV

Officially, AR-X9 was just another spot on the map in the wastelands around DeKirk city. Once an industrial facility, it was half buried in mud, leeching toxins into the ground around it from its ancient, rusted storage facilities. However, portions of the facility, remained safe from contamination through deliberate design.

Once it had been a part of an elaborate series of research facilities set up by the Star League underneath the city. Most of them had collapsed in part or in whole along with the DeKirk aerospace research facility, taking their secrets with them. AR-X9 was merely one of the few that had remained both standing and accessible, even if on contaminated ground.

And, since even the Graham IV government didn’t know that it existed, it made a perfect field base for Eloise’s expedition.

When she had returned to the facility she wasn’t sure what to expect. Certainly seeing the *Deva* on a recovery vehicle and the *Grigori* standing, albeit badly mangled was not a part of it. Their Mechwarriors stood nearby, clearly awaiting her return.

She wasted no time, clambering out of her Purifier suit and stalking towards the pair of them, the patterns on her limbs flaring an angry red. “What happened here?” She demanded.

Tyssen replied first. The shorter of the two, his slim face, long hair and lanky frame seemed a match for Eloise’s slender form. The two slitted red optics that replaced his eyes said otherwise. “It was them.” He simply explained. “Apparently they were here for Zandar.”

“I see.” She understood exactly who she meant. “And what happened then?”

“Fujisawa tried to head them off.” Tuwile explained. A massive man, his dark chocolate-coloured skin made the bright yellow of his replacement eyes even more stark. “However, their numbers were greater than expected.”

“Our intelligence suggested that they had six active BattleMechs.” Tyssen explained. “We counted at least twelve.”

She chewed her lip a moment, her one visible eye narrowing. “And where are they now?”

“Their dropships were tracked on a high-G burn off-world.” Tyssen continued. “But we have no

evidence that they were actually on-board.”

“And where are Ramirez and Fujisawa now?”

“Ramirez is still searching the area in case they left anyone behind.” Tuwile commented. “Fujisawa is trapped inside his ‘Mech. They pushed it off the edge of the crater.”

“We had hoped to send a recovery crew from Crater Command, but there has been an incident there as well.” Tyssen continued. “Apparently there was an explosion inside their magazine.”

“Of course there was.” She simply snapped, a quiet undertone of restrained rage in her voice. “Very well then. Load your ‘Mechs onto the ship. As soon as it looks like there’s a clear flight to orbit, we’re going. Contact the *Pogata Star* and tell them to be ready to jump” She turned, heading back to her office. “Order the techs to purge all information here. We’re done with this world.”

“What about Ramirez and Fujisawa? Or the rest of your squad?”

She glanced back at them. “If they’re not back by the time we’re ready, they stay here. This is too important to wait.”

**Stormhead, Temptation,
Loubrg, Alarion Provence
Lyrans Alliance
24April 3074**

The look on Levisha’s face as she addressed the rest of the meeting could be best described as ‘smug.’ The looks on the faces of Watanabe and his two associates was a lot less so.

“As my report details, we completed the assigned objective.” Levisha summarised. “Gene Zandar was extracted alive and detained by us. Once we have finalised the operation, including payment, he will be handed over to you.” She made sure to emphasise those conditions.

Watanabe leaned forwards, looking back at her, trying to meet her glare and failing. “And his status?” He finally asked.

“Quite talkative, actually.” She simply explained as she pressed a few buttons on a datapad. “We asked him a few questions en-route to pass the time. It was rather enlightening.”

A holographic miniature of Zandar sitting in a chair came up, the man hunched over and clearly cuffed to the table in front of him. “These are the edited highlights, the ones that were the most interesting.” She explained as the image animated.

“Why were you on Graham IV?” Levisha’s voice asked from off-screen.

“Because our bosses in the word put us there.” He replied. “They told us to go sit in a hole in the ground and do what they told us. We got no explanations, just a large paycheck.”

The image jumped a little. “What were the Word forces on the world doing there?” Levisha’s off-screen voice asked again.

"I don't know." Zandar admitted, sounding more than a little weary. "They were... they were looking for something, but I couldn't say what. There was one of them; we called her the Princess." The image jumped a fraction. "She was constantly off flying around that godforsaken crater for some reason or another."

"Was she off on one of these flights during the attack?"

"Yes."

Levisha paused the display. "Not too long after we departed the world, an unidentified *Leopard*-class dropship launched from somewhere near DeKirk. Either 'Princess' found what she was after or the Word chose to scrub the operation." A tap of the controls resumed play.

"Mister Zandar. Your unit vanished for a few months in 3071. When you returned, your unit was sporting new BattleMechs, new Vehicles and other upgrades." Levisha's voice continued. "Where were you?"

He paused a while, as if reluctant to reply. "I don't know."

"How can you not know where you were?" She asked.

"Our ships docked with a Word Jumper." He managed. "And it took us to some system that I didn't recognise. We landed outside some old city; it was half-buried in the snow and the buildings were run down, like nobody had been there in centuries. There were Robes there, and some other mercs as well. We were told that this world would be our new base of operations for the time begin."

"Did they tell you what world you were on?"

He paused again. "No. And we quickly learned not to ask."

"What was the purpose of this world?" She continued.

"This is where we trained, where we re-armed and where we got our new gear from the Robes." He continued. "There were other Mercs there too."

"Can you name any units?"

"The... they were called the Crimson Blades, or something to that effect."

The display paused again. "One of the units that we've been trying to track." Levisha finished. "So as you can see, Zandar had a lot to say, and gave us some rather interesting leads that we want to pursue." She smiled. "If the Word has a hidden base that it's staging mercenary operations from, then we want to shut it down."

The three suits exchanged glances before Watanabe spoke again. "Ms Towne, what would you need to track this world down?"

And that is exactly what I wanted to hear. Thank you Sandra for your thorough investigation and your pulling at threads. You made this all possible. She leaned back in her chair and smiled. "Well, I can think of a few things, both the material and in terms of objectives..."

Half an hour after she was out of her meeting, Levisha was across town, stepping into a specific apartment. "Well?" Its lone occupant, a tall, passably handsome man asked. "How did it go?"

Levisha grinned her broadest, toothiest grin. "Fantastic. StarCorps have pretty much given me carte blanche to go after what I want, as long as I can spin it into looking like it's what they want too."

He smiled as he took her hand. "Do they suspect a thing?"

She shook her head. "If they do, it's well hidden. I doubt that they know what's really going on, or the objective that I'm after."

He kissed her hand, his other arm wrapping around her waist and drawing her in close. "And your people?"

"There are one or two who may suspect what I'm really playing at." She admitted. "And of them, only one is really dangerous. The upside is, of course, she can take my place when all is said and done."

He nodded. "Worried that something might happen before you get to your objective?"

"No. At this stage, they want the same thing as I do, albeit for completely different reasons." She leaned close, kissing him on the lips. "And if all goes well, then they will never know the truth. As far as they'll be concerned, Levisha Towne will die a hero."

Perfectly Ordinary Derelict Factory
Galatea
Word of Blake Protectorate
29 April 3074

Eloise knew why her commander had chosen this one site to act as his command centre and base of operations. She didn't agree with his choices, but at the same time knew that it was not her place to debate them. Certainly she was not going to argue with the results, nor with what he had been able to accomplish from here.

"I'm glad to see you." Ogel began as she stepped into his office, a genuinely warm smile on his face. "Especially after what happened there."

"Demi-Percentor, I wish to apologise for my actions." She hastily replied. "Had I known the identity of the attackers, then I would have done more to deal with them. We could have ended their threat right there and then."

His reply was unexpected, a simple wave-off. "Do not doubt yourself, Eloise. You did the right thing in ensuring that you delivered the objective. While the presence of those mercenary intruders was an unexpected complication, you remained focused on delivering the result we sought." He gave her a small nod. "When the time is right, we will destroy them."

Standing, he waked over to her. "Now, with regards to PURPLE TIGRESS. I take it you have it with you

now?"

She nodded, opening her hand up. A small sphere of light appeared, data flowing across it as she looked down at it. "I have the data stored within me now."

"Excellent." Ogel nodded. "Download it into the systems, and then purge it. We cannot risk anything happening that might lead to discovery."

"I understand."

"Oh, and Eloise?" He noted as he turned back to his desk. "Tell nobody of what you found. Not even any of us."

That struck her as odd, but she simply nodded in reply. "Of course." As Ogel resumed his seat, she spoke again. "There was one other matter that we need to discuss. Gene Zandar was captured by the mercenaries; in fact, he seems to have been their objective. I take full responsibility for his capture"

"Do not worry about it."

She blinked again. "But he's been to-"

"I know." Ogel simply stated. "We'll give his second command of his unit, offer our condolences and a few new toys and a vague promise of rescue. It's enough to keep them happy."

"So you're not concerned?"

Ogel shook his head. "Our enemy will find what he knows to be minimal, but enticing at the same time. They will hunger for so much more, and when the time is right, they will come to us for it."