

CROSSROADS AT OUTREACH

by Kevin Killiany

(Story Two of the Chaos Irregulars)

Proving Grounds
Outreach
Chaos March
18 November 3066

Jake timed his jump to land a half heartbeat after the *Guillotine* and about sixty meters behind. The enemy 'Mech was intent on flanking Peregrine Junior and hadn't noticed Jake's stalking *Grasshopper*.

As he came down, the cliff face rising to his left reminded Jake of the Acamar Badlands. But where those dark cliffs had hemmed him in narrow valleys beneath a winter overcast, the red face of this mesa threw back the summer sun with enough heat to fog the IR sensors.

Jake shook off memories of blinded sensors and snow and focused on coming down in one piece. The *Guillotine* had jumped to a narrow band of leveled gravel between the face of the mesa and the escarpment of eroded rubble tumbling down the last dozen meters to the plain. Bringing his seventy-ton 'Mech down on a loose and slanting surface was hard enough. Coming down firing was going to take all his—

Alarms blared. Weapons lock.

The *Grasshopper* came down hard, its right foot slipping. Jake compensated, righting his machine even as he scanned for his attacker.

A *Black Knight*, cool in the shadow of an upthrust rock behind and to his right. Like it had been there a while. Waiting for him.

Hard on the heels of that realization came the image in his targeting reticule. Not the gunmetal grey back of the *Guillotine* he'd expected, but a broadsword and bronze shield and the full array of the heavy 'Mech's weapons. His prey had turned in place while he'd been fighting for footing. Only possible that fast if he'd been expecting Jake.

Set up!

Vectored a hundred and twenty degrees apart, they had him pinned against a cliff face.

Damndamndamn—

A second weapons lock alarm squealed even as the *Grasshopper* rocked in response to a PPC bolt from the *Black Knight*.

Not waiting for a good tone, Jake unleashed his torso lasers at the *Guillotine*. The left side medium laser's beam went wide, but computers registered solid hits with his large laser and right medium just as the other launched its short range missiles.

The enemy 'Mech pivoted slightly with the impact, the flight of missiles wasting themselves against the cliff face. As its left arm ER large laser came up, Jake leaned back and stomped his pedals.

He'd meant to jump backwards and to the right, directly toward the *Black Knight*. His rising trajectory would make it difficult for the larger 'Mech to target him while he added friendly fire concerns to the *Guillotine*'s targeting solutions.

But the escarpment, crumbling beneath the thrust of his jets, threw him off balance. The *Grasshopper* tilted right, launching itself in a flat trajectory over the plain.

Jake forgot his intended parting shot at the *Guillotine* as he and the gyro fought physics in the hope of bringing the *Grasshopper* down in one piece.

--damndamndamndamndamndamndamn--

***University District
Harlech, Outreach
Chaos March
14 November 3066***

The cab was stationary, which suited Captain Ariel Peregrine just fine. She'd allowed for traffic, knowing the streets around Outreach University were nearly always jammed at midday.

Ariel picked out familiar buildings, noticing a cafe frequented by students had once again changed its name. She tried to let the sense of coming home wash over her, wash away the stress of the last weeks.

And Outreach was home, or as much like home as any world had ever been. She'd spent her childhood in a modest house at the foot of Harlech Heights, not far enough up to be considered prime real estate, but high enough to have a view of the city. She and her mother and brother. After so many years she was finally reaching the point where she could remember them without the stab of grief. But she had no interest in visiting the hills above Harlech.

When Ariel thought of Outreach as home, it was the University and the district surrounding it that came to mind. She had spent six years of her life in and around University City. She'd earned her undergraduate degree in military science and history, then continued to live in campus housing while completing every course offered by the Wolf Dragoon's Outreach Mercenary Training Command.

The cab lurched forward with traffic, covering another block and a half before the flow once again inexplicably stopped. If time had been a factor, Ariel would have gotten out and walked. But it was important that she appear confident, cool and professional. While she still might appear confident after sprinting a dozen blocks in the November heat, cool would have definitely been lost and, in all probability, professional with it.

Not that she felt professional in a dress uniform shorn of it's Peregrine's Hussars' insignia. She didn't feel right wearing the familiar shield and lance, wouldn't wear it until the Hussars again reformed into a fighting force of which her father would have been proud. And as yet she and Captain Jacoam had not agreed on a unit insignia for the Chaos Irregulars.

No surprise there.

The cab moved forward a dozen meters and stopped.

Ariel leaned away from the window, realizing the sun's warmth was making her drowsy. She forced her eyes wide a few times, not actually rubbing them. A dress uniform, even a dress uniform without unit insignia, precluded eye rubbing and yawning. Tapping the passenger compartment environmental controls in front of her, she set the air temperature to sixteen.

The cabbie, in shirt-sleeves appropriate to the weather, raised the glass partition between them without comment.

Ariel had to admit Jacoam's technical people—their technical people now—were every bit as good as he had promised. Between their abilities and Jacoam's skill at bartering for new and needed equipment, all twenty-five Chaos Irregular BattleMechs were in perfect working order. No mean feat, given the time and circumstances.

Of course, they were all in the dark flat grey of primer base coat. Jacoam had, predictably, wanted to paint them all in variations of camouflage. She'd pointed out trying to disguise a ten-meter-tall, walking weapons platform with daubs of paint had never been effective, particularly against modern targeting sensors. Far more useful was a uniform paint scheme that would serve to identify their disparate BattleMechs as being united in a cohesive fighting force.

The upshot had been twenty-five BattleMechs in charcoal primer drilling in group maneuvers on the open practice fields.

Predictably, the former Strikers moved with nothing like the precision of the Hussars. And in the first days the evident familiarity between Striker officers and noncoms—the lack of discipline, call it what it was—had almost destroyed their unit. The level of carping and complaining Jacoam had allowed was inexcusable.

Fortunately, Jacoam had sorted it out before it came to a head. Not by appealing to any sense of professionalism, of course. He'd pointed out that venting and balking during exercises on the open fields, when they were under the eyes of prospective employers, hurt their chances of getting good job offers.

The Footmen, the infantry of the former Hussars, or rather the twenty-nine survivors of the defense of Flat, were having no trouble integrating with their counterparts. If Sergeant Proxton's private reports were to be believed.

According to Proxton, the former Strikers were oriented more toward general combat while the Footmen were skilled in security and anti-smuggling; a lot of mutual instruction was going on. In any case, the ninety-eight men of the new unit called themselves an augmented company and seemed to be functioning well.

Which was a very good thing, considering the intense evaluation all of them would be going through in less than a week. They were a new unit on Outreach and even Jacoam had understood the importance of earning as high a rating as possible from Wolf's Dragoons—or, more properly, the Mercenary Review and Bonding Commission. While evidently familiar with finding work through the bars and grapevines of TempTown, Jacoam knew better than to underestimate the value of entrée to the Hiring Hall.

The cab moved forward again, breaking into her thoughts. The walls of the University rose ahead and the cabbie circled left, heading toward Lakefront Drive and the north campus entrance.

Ariel made a last tactile inspection, preparatory to getting out. All buttons fastened, all service ribbons present and correct, captain's bars in place; her fingers hesitated over the sleeve bare of patch. As satisfied as she was going to be, Ariel prepared payment as the cab slid into a vacant slot along the taxi row.

If—*when* the Mercenary Review and Bonding Commission vetted the Chaos Irregulars for the Hiring Hall, she'd feel comfortable about approaching some of her father's old contacts. Today, however, she was seeking the counsel of an ally of her own.

Colonel Olstein had been her mentor at the University. But more than that, he had been a source of strength after the fire. Her father had been off-planet and the gruff support of the colonel, himself a widower, had enabled her to complete her freshman year. He'd also arranged for her to remain in the campus dormitories while attending the OMTC.

If Ariel could think of anyone as family outside of the Hussars, Colonel Olstein was it.

She gave her reflection a final inspection in the black polished granite framing the entrance to the history building. It wouldn't do to present herself in less than perfect condition.

***Inland South District
Harlech, Outreach
Chaos March
14 November 3066***

Jake pushed open the door and let the familiar sounds and scents of the bar roll over him.

"In or out," ordered a voice from the darkness.

Jake grinned and entered.

Behind him the door swung shut, banishing the light and noise of the noonday street. Or, more properly, alley.

The roof of the building that rose above the bar no doubt commanded an excellent view of Harlech's Interplanetary DropPort, and Herrera Drive, Harlech's north/south artery, was only a few blocks to the east. Though perhaps not impressive, it was still an excellent location for small to middling businesses engaged in import and export. However, with the exception of a select few, it was unlikely the tenants renting office suites realized a bar most would call a dive was accessible from a service alley that ran behind the building.

This one, O'Malley's, was one of a half dozen such along the northern edge of TempTown. Their locations allowed mercenaries to come "uptown" without leaving the TempTown for a noticeable length of time. They also allowed prospective employers new to the mercenary trade, who would not normally know their way around the mercenaries' enclave, to feel they were still on safe ground.

These bars weren't really secret. Only a fool didn't understand that Dragoon agents were always present. Jake wouldn't have been surprised to discover the Dragoons actually ran the ersatz dives.

Jake headed for the bar, an easy target in the gloom and ordered a pint of dark beer to nurse while waiting for his eyes to adjust.

After a moment, he could see that the man he'd come to meet was engaged in heads-together conversation with an elderly couple at a small table near the far wall. They were dressed in an off-world style Jake didn't recognize but looked expensive.

Content to wait his turn, Jake studied the room in the mirror over the bar and amused himself by sorting out the players.

The game here was a simple one. One nobody familiar with the business of hiring mercenaries ever took part in.

Play began when someone—a business, a small colony, whatever—who wasn't certain about how to contact mercenaries would pick up on the broad hints dropped by one of the select few import/export businesses above and ask for guidance. Usually they didn't think they could afford the prices of the top units at the Hiring Hall, or thought the jobs they had in mind might not be legitimate. Half the time they were wrong on both counts, but their newfound guides almost never explained that.

Instead, they'd usher the client to the secret bar. The decor, the lighting—or lack thereof—even several of the hired patrons, were intended to impress on prospective employers that they had entered a strange new world. Here a broker would listen to the neophyte employer's needs and negotiate a price. Once he was satisfied he'd levered every concession he could, the broker would collect as much of it as he could up front and tell them to wait for his call.

Then the broker would go down into TempTown and hire whomever he could to do the job for the smallest fraction of the price possible.

Jake had pretty well sorted the bar's population into actors hired to play mercenaries, brokers, and guys off the street who'd come in for drinks. He was just getting serious about guessing how many of each group really worked for the Dragoons when the couple rose from their conference with the broker.

The elderly pair didn't look like anyone who would need the services of mercenaries. Jake, who prided himself on his discerning eye, couldn't quite sort them out. For their part, with worried smiles and nervous glances in all directions, the two provided each other with close cover as they made their way to the door.

Jake ordered a fresh beer to give the broker time to enter all the specifics of the deal he'd just concluded into his noteputer, then made his leisurely way across the room.

"Clairmont," he greeted.

"Jake!" the heavy set man exclaimed as though just seeing him. "What brings you here? Join me, join me."

Jake slid into a wooden chair opposite Clairmont, absently noting it was still warm. There was a cluster of empty drink glasses in the center of the table and a single beer mug, half full, at Clairmont's elbow. No condensation on the mug. He'd been nursing that one a while. Jake reconsidered sipping his fresh beer and set it on the table.

"Just getting reacquainted with the neighborhood," Jake said. "Been doing some pretty intense training with our new outfit."

"Heard about Acamar," Clairmont shook his head sympathetically. "Shame about Sorensen."

"Yeah," Jake drew the word out.

Any details he offered about the general screw-up of leadership would be seen as excuses. Best to let the past bury the past and focus on where he was now.

The broker shifted his beer mug without actually lifting it.

Jake felt the muscles in his drinking arm twitch in response to the sound of mug on table, but he didn't reach for his own beer. He wasn't that easy to twist.

"The only good that came out of that mess," he said after a thoughtful pause, "was the Chaos Irregulars. That's the new outfit we've put together."

Clairmont nodded.

"Seen some numbers," he said obliquely.

It didn't surprise him Clairmont had seen scores from their practice runs. Jake would have bet he, and the other brokers, had access to daily spreadsheets on every trial by every unit on the open fields. The Irregulars numbers weren't where he wanted them, but he knew they were solid. Whatever else Peregrine Junior was, she was a good drill instructor.

What was significant was not that Clairmont had seen the stats, but his revealing he'd seen them. In fact, it signaled the successful conclusion of Jake's mission. He'd let the broker know the Irregulars were ready to take on contracts and the broker had let him know he was willing to talk to him pro to pro.

Jake cocked an eyebrow at the other man. He knew his shoulders had visibly relaxed and was letting Clairmont know he didn't mind the broker seeing the tell. He reached for his mug.

"You're getting evaluated at the end of the week," Clairmont observed just as the beer reached Jake's lips.

Ready for the question, Jake completed the swallow, neither too big nor too quick.

"Looking forward to that," he said, smiling easily. He didn't set the mug back down. "I expect we'll have some offers through the Hall in the next couple of weeks."

That last might have been thick, but he didn't want the broker to have any doubts about his confidence level.

"It was good to see you again, Clairmont," he said, rising. "But I've got some running to do."

"Keep in touch."

"You, too."

Draining his beer on the way to the bar, Jake decided the guy who looked like he was watching couldn't possibly be a Dragoon agent. Given someone to bet with, he'd have put his money on the bartender and the romantically inclined couple in the corner.

Grinning, he set his empty mug on the polished neomahogany counter top and headed back out into the sunshine.

***University District
Harlech, Outreach
Chaos March
14 November 3066***

"Sounds like a debacle." Colonel Olstein's voice was gruffly sympathetic, but there was no way to sugarcoat the words.

Ariel nodded. Her throat was tight, her eyes stinging. Physical reactions to her recounting the fall of Flat to her old mentor. Eighty percent of Peregrine's Hussars lost.

A debacle, yes; one she could blame on bad intel and pigheaded non-allies. But couldn't, especially knowing that four days of indecision on her part had prevented her taking her company to join up with the planetary militia and drive the invaders off. How many of her people could she have saved if she had those four days back?

They were seated in the colonel's office on the third floor of the history building. She in the deceptively comfortable leather chair designed to lull students into a false sense of ease, he in the more businesslike office chair behind the desk.

Ariel knew if she stood and turned her head to the right, she'd be able to just see Lake Kearny meeting the horizon over the University's wall. She had stood, staring at that view for what seemed like hours, in the days and weeks following the fire. Had it only been a decade?

Olstein's office wasn't as large as he deserved, but it was comfortable. He had a case of antique books, some of which she'd actually seen him read over the years; no doubt decreasing their value to collectors. On his walls were imitation antiques. Reproductions of ancient battle maps, with none of the forces or features labeled. At any time during an interview with the professor, a student could be expected to identify those forces, name the battle, identify what point in the battle was illustrated, and explain what happened next.

Today the one on the left, over the bookcase, was the Battle of Jutland, just after the German fleet turned. On the opposite wall, next to the one window with the view, was the Battle of North Point, War of 1812, just as the outnumbered American defenders surprised the British invaders with an unexpected sally.

Ariel doubted Olstein would hit her with a pop quiz, but it felt good to be prepared.

"I keep thinking," she began, her mind coming back to why she was here.

"And you will keep thinking until the day you die," the colonel cut her off, not unkindly. "It won't change a thing, but you'll do it. Every commander does and every commander should. It's how you prepare for next time.

"What could you have done differently?" He turned his palms up, revealing empty hands. "Perhaps nothing. Too much of what had to be done relied on forces you could not trust."

There wasn't much to say to that. Ariel nodded, trying to think how to bring the conversation around to where she wanted it.

"So what are your plans?" Colonel Olstein asked, doing half her work for her.

"I've retired the Hussars' name," she shrugged her left shoulder slightly to indicate the bare sleeve. "Temporarily. The long term objective is to rebuild a fighting force worthy of my father's legacy."

The colonel looked for a moment as if he were about to speak, then thought better of it. He inclined his head slightly for her to continue.

"Short term strategies for reaching that objective include forming a new unit," she said, leaning forward to place a data crystal on the desk.

"It combines the remnants of the Hussars with elements of another mercenary force that survived the debacle on Acamar," she added, deliberately using the colonel's word.

Ariel resisted the urge to stand and look out over the water while Olstein read the data file. She contented herself with reviewing the Battle of North Point. The British were about to be defeated by a smaller force employing unconventional tactics. She knew precisely how that felt. What would she have done differently in the British commander's position?

After a few minutes, Olstein grunted.

"An eclectic lot," he said. "And clearly Free World trained. Which means heavy emphasis on individual initiative and independent

thinking for small units. A philosophy consistent with their cultural values, but contrary to sound military organization."

Ariel had almost recited that last sentence along with him. It had been one of the colonel's more oft-repeated adages.

"You seem to have brought them along nicely," he added, shutting down the viewer. "When is your evaluation?"

As a newly formed unit, the Chaos Irregulars could technically be assigned a "Green" experience rating by default, one which would limit the job offers they would receive and the fees they could charge.

However, Wolf's Dragoons and the Mercenary Review and Bonding Commission understood when established units combined to form a new command, they did not lose all of their experience. Mercenaries in this position could request to submit themselves for evaluation—an intense process that began with a close inspection, included live fire exercises and ended with a simulated exercise against an opposing force of equal size and higher ranking.

The evaluation process was fiscally costly. The unit being evaluated was responsible for all expenses involved, which included reimbursing both the Dragoons for their inspectors' time and expertise and whatever fees the opposing force required. But if the evaluation resulted in a provisional "Regular" rating, the increased income would more than offset the investment.

"In four days," Ariel said. "We're going to make some decisions about our support assets this evening, then we have three days of coordinated drills laid on for final preparation."

"We," Olstein shook his head. "Examples of combined command working are few and far between, Ariel."

"Yes, sir, I know," she answered, feeling a slight flush at his unaccustomed use of her first name. "But it was the best option under the circumstances. I still believe it's viable, at least for the short term."

The moment she said the words, Ariel remembered the flat charcoal grey 'Mechs. She marveled at the conviction in her tone.

"Now I might believe you came to visit for old times' sake, and that you just happened to have a crystal full of data on this new unit you're putting together in your pocket," Colonel Olstein said.

"Many people have believed far stranger things. But I suspect there's a bit more involved."

Ariel smiled.

"After the evaluation—" she began and was surprised to see her old mentor relax slightly.

Had he actually suspected she might be here to ask for help with the ratings board? The shock of the thought stalled her for a moment.

"Our first job offers are not likely to be the most beneficial for my people," she went on. "In fact, there may be none for weeks or even months after our name is posted."

Olstein nodded, agreeing with the assessment.

"I was wondering if you'd be willing to familiarize yourself with the Irregulars, with what we have to offer," Ariel rushed a bit to get through the last. "And, if you're satisfied with our competence and if you feel it's appropriate, perhaps..."

"Put in a good word with a reputable employer?" the colonel finished. "I'd be delighted."

"Yes, sir," Ariel said, relief flushing her body. "Thank you, sir."

"If you have time," he said, rising, "Let me take you to lunch. You can explain to me how you came to be sharing command with the Free Worlds League."

***Free-Hire Quarter
Harlech, Outreach
Chaos March
14 November 3066***

Jake had splurged a little on the compound he'd rented for the Irregulars and, for once, Peregrine Junior had agreed. If the two units were going to get to know each other, figure out how to work as one, they were going to need some privacy and some elbow room.

Inside the high fence was a barracks designed to house about twenty percent more personnel than they had. In addition, they had an exercise yard to match, parking for transports so they wouldn't have to rely on the public shuttles to get to the practice fields, and a mess hall with a couple of general purpose rooms attached.

With an unlimited budget, Jake would have sprung for offices and a gym. On the other hand, they had free weights and mats they could use in the mess hall between meals and they really had no other plans for the general purpose rooms.

A holothheater would have been nice.

One of Peregrine Junior's alums was at the gate, so Jake had to stop and prove he matched his identification. That kind of behavior made sense guarding a client's valuable installation. Not here. With one of his own men at the gate, he would have been passed through with a wave.

But...

The Hussars had had a higher rating than the Strikers. From what he'd seen, they'd gotten better jobs and better pay, too.

By the time he was halfway to the mess hall, Jake decided maybe Peregrine Junior's behavior wasn't always crazy.

There were still a few men loitering in the mess hall as he passed through. Not many. Today was for R&R and, except for the few unlucky enough to pull duty, most of the Irregulars were taking advantage of the entertainments Harlech had to offer.

Jake also suspected some had done the math and figured out the Irregulars needed to trim some support personnel. He'd bet a few were taking advantage of the free time to preemptively scout out

potential employers. He wished them luck, it would make the decisions he—he and Peregrine Junior—had to make a little easier.

Reema separated herself from a group evidently playing some sort of board game and fell in step.

“Successful?”

“Clairmont didn’t offer us a million cold to field test a pleasure circus,” Jake answered. “But he’s accepted we’re players.”

“If we score high enough on the eval,” Reema said, holding the door for him to precede her into the short hall leading to the rooms being used for administration, “we might not need Clairmont.”

“Or he may con some rubes into paying us a lot more than a Hiring Hall bid,” Jake countered. “Good strategy means keeping all of your options open.”

Lieutenant Davis and Sergeant-Major Pauls sat on opposite sides of a table in the smaller of the two general purpose rooms. Their joint desk supported two computer terminals, a half dozen noteposters, even pads of paper covered with handwritten notes.

What caught Jake’s attention first, however, was the lieutenant’s hair. While the sides and back were still a dark brown, the top of his head was now a sunny blonde.

“You dyed your hair?”

Both men looked up from their work in surprise.

“Yes,” Davis acknowledged. “What do you think?”

Jake shrugged. “Suits you.”

Reema snorted.

“What?” Jake demanded.

“If the general public ever found out what hard-bitten mercenaries *really* talk about behind closed doors,” she said darkly, “it would make their blood run cold.”

Pauls laughed out loud.

“Okay,” Jake ignored the flush he felt. “What have you guys got?”

“A circular argument about the ‘Mechbuster, for one thing,” Pauls said.

"I didn't expect much when I first heard about it," Davis put in. "But whoever restored it for Sorensen did the job right. And I like that variant: four SRM6s with enough ammo for seven runs, plenty of fuel. If you're going to have a 'Mechbuster, that's the one to have."

"But it is only one," Pauls countered. "And, in its wonderful condition, it'd make an excellent barter piece."

"For what?" Jake asked. "A quarter of a 'Mech?"

"There are some VTOLs out there," Pauls answered, indicating the screen of his computer terminal. Jake couldn't see it, but assumed the Sergeant Major was tapped into some sort of trading area on the MercNet. "Being able to airlift infantry into a hot spot could be a real asset."

"If we had assault infantry," Davis said. "Which we don't. We're a light infantry best suited to security or constabulary duties."

"Yours were," Pauls pointed out. "Ours were more versatile. Saw a lot of field action."

"Now they're all ours," Jake nipped that line of argument in the bud. "So we have a mix of talents."

Both junior officers nodded, conceding the point.

"But we still have no battle armor, and we have no air cover for the VTOLs," Jake went on. "Unless you're talking assault VTOLs instead of transport. Otherwise, if we can't cover them, we're just asking to lose them."

Pauls took a deep breath as though preparing to rebut, then paused. Letting his breath out in a long sigh, he nodded, surrendering his position. Actually, his argument was a familiar one. Pauls had been badgering Sorensen about developing a better mix of vehicles ever since Jake could remember.

"On the other hand," Davis was saying. "Something able to move fast, hit behind enemy lines repeatedly and then withdraw, would be an asset whether we're attacking or defending a position."

"But you still have the cover problem," Pauls said. "There's a reason planes fight in pairs. The best use of that plane is trading it for something. There are a dozen things we need more than a single 'Mechbuster without a pilot."

"Agreed," said Ariel.

Jake jumped slightly. He hadn't heard his co-commander come in. He covered the spasm by extending it into a turn to grin at her.

"Perfect timing, Captain."

"Always, Captain," she responded.

About as big a joke as he'd ever heard from her. He noted she was in what he thought of as Ariel mode, almost lifelike. That would last until something happened that she didn't like, then Peregrine Junior—the refugee from a recruiting poster with a PPC up her butt—would resume command.

Technically, he supposed, he should be a force commander and Ariel/Peregrine Junior a major. However, the one point at which Free Worlds League and Federated Suns command structure coincided exactly was captain, so sticking to that rank pretty well summed up their relationship.

Neither one of them had brought up the issue of standardizing the rank tables within the Irregulars. That suited him fine; he liked things loose. But from what he'd seen of her, it wasn't like Peregrine Junior to not try and force all of his sergeants to become subalterns or some such nonsense. Not that she'd have much luck. If the issue ever came to a head, they'd probably have to go to Drac rankings as the only viable compromise. Or Clan.

Jake pulled his head back into the room in time to hear his co-commander ask about the unit insignia search. That was a priority. When they went public, the right unit sig could make or break deals.

Davis turned the monitor of his computer terminal so the others could see it. In the center of the white screen was a black spiky circle that did nothing for Jake. Definitely not a deal-maker.

"What's this?" he asked.

"It's the only symbol we could find for Chaos," Davis explained. "Eight arrows pointing out from a central wheel. It was designed by a twentieth century storyteller."

"Looks like an ugly flower of some sort," Ariel observed.

"Some neopagans blocked in the center wheel," Davis said. The circle became a solid black disk on the screen. "Their symbol for the spirit of chaos."

"Chaos has a spirit?" Reema asked.

"Neopagans," Davis repeated. "Anthropomorphizing. Logic was not an issue."

"Was that the best you could find?" Ariel asked.

"Actual pictures of chaos," Davis said, tapping some keys, "that is, computer generated fractal images, look like this."

"That's paisley," Jake identified. "That's a row of buttons. And that's, what? Something swirly."

"Nothing at all useful," Ariel sighed.

Davis put the neopagan image back on the screen.

"Which leaves us with the ugly flower here."

For a moment the five of them considered the screen. It occurred to Jake that this was one of the few times he'd seen the command staff so united.

"What if you expanded the central circle?" Reema asked, breaking his thought. "So it's right up under the arrow heads? Then make it white, to match the background..."

Davis complied.

"It's a circle of arrowheads," Jake said.

"Wait, I've got this idea in my head," Reema said. "Just trying to explain it."

Davis offered her the keyboard, but she waved it away.

"Can you make the cardinal arrowheads bigger?" she asked. "Not wider, but about twice as long..."

"I think I see what you're doing," Pauls said suddenly. "Tony, multiply the little arrowheads between the big ones. Make it three, and vary the sizes."

"Okay, good." Reema flashed Pauls a brief smile. "Now kind of flare them together."

The base arrowheads curved out slightly until they joined together to form a ring.

"It's a corona," Jake realized. "The ring of sunlight around a moon during an eclipse."

Peregrine Junior's glance let him know the explanation had been unnecessary.

"A black corona?" she asked Davis.

"I can reverse it."

A white corona burned in the center of the black screen.

"Silver," said Ariel. "Not metallic, no glitter, just the color."

"That's it," said Jake. "Very classy, very professional. Worth an extra three, four percent in asking price."

"Wait a minute," Ariel was frowning at the screen. "Davis, lighten the background up to about eighty percent black."

"Charcoal grey?" Jake asked. Then the penny dropped. "Primer coat?"

"Exactly."

"That is good," Jake acknowledged, looking at the silver corona on the charcoal field. "Simple, memorable, and it saves us ninety percent of the cost of painting our 'Mechs."

"Check to see if that's registered," Ariel ordered.

There was a tense minute as Davis scanned the Mercenary Registry.

"Nope," he said at last. "There's a couple in the neighborhood, but nothing close."

"File."

The lieutenant tapped a few keys.

"It's ours," he announced.

"Good work."

"Where on the 'Mech should the insignia be painted?" Pauls asked. He'd gone back to his own computer and had some sort of requisition form called up.

"Wherever the armor is thickest," Jake said. "The insignia is always easy to target."

"Left shoulder, right thigh," Peregrine Junior corrected, then turned to Jake. "Uniformity indicates professionalism."

"Routing the specs to the 'Mech garage now," Pauls said, tapping buttons on his own terminal.

One of the many local industries catering to Mercenaries was 'Mech painting. Half a dozen companies had license to do business in the secured garage area the Dragoons maintained near the practice fields. Having all mercenary 'Mech bays in a centralized location not only simplified security, it avoided the problem of mercenaries in 'Mechs wandering the streets of Harlech.

"Pay double for next day rush?" Pauls asked.

Good question. The Irregulars had been living well on the salvage they'd been able to claim from the Badlands of Acamar. A little too well. Jake had wanted to rebuild one of the *Vindicators*, tried to convince Peregrine Junior to replace that damned *Firestarter* with it, but she'd have nothing to do with parting with any of daddy dearest's original assets. Still, even with the salvage money, their pockets weren't infinitely deep.

"How soon without rush?" he asked.

"Three to six days."

"See if they can split the price on two days," Jake ordered, not looking to Peregrine Junior for confirmation. "If not, go for rush. We need to look right for the evaluation."

Davis nodded and tapped keys.

"Route a requisition to quartermaster supply," Peregrine Junior ordered when he looked up. "Send them particulars on our roster. Let's use some of that paint money we saved and order a full kit of fatigues, black, for everyone. No insignia."

"Wait a minute..." Jake began.

"Charcoal grey 'Mechs and vehicles with silver insignia," she pointed out. "Black fatigues will still create the impression of a cohesive whole. You understand the importance of image in marketing."

"Well, yeah," Jake agreed.

She had a point. At the same time the troubled expression on Reema's face caught his eye. This was not going to be as simple as Peregrine Junior expected. Not everyone was interested in marketing.

Turning his back slightly to Reema, he lowered his voice. "But everyone?"

"I know we're running about a hundred and thirty percent on the support personnel," Ariel said in her real voice, not Peregrine Junior's clipped cadence, and equally low. "But we can afford new fatigues. And another week's wages. Let's table personnel decisions until after the evaluation."

Proving Grounds
Outreach
Chaos March
18 November 3066

The knot in Ariel's stomach showed little sign of letting up.

The cockpit of her *Huron Warrior* was still cool; her cautious probe into the exercises area of operations had so far generated little heat. She knew that would change once contact was made.

She scanned the shadows ahead, where great boulders from the escarpment had tumbled almost to the edge of the woods, forming an improbable cairn. Probably constructed to make the terrain as complex as possible. There were a couple of pockets where a BattleMech that had been in position long enough with its reactor banked would be nearly invisible to both infrared and visual scans.

Visuals might be tricky as well. The Broadsword Legion's 'Mechs were painted a gunmetal grey; lighter than the Irregulars', but close enough that in the heat of battle friendly fire could be a danger.

Satisfied the shallow caves were empty, Ariel moved forward. She angled left to the open ground while Jacques circled to the right of the boulders, skirting the edge of the woods.

Ariel had originally offered the opposing force position to Smithson's Chinese Bandits. However, her father's old friend Colonel Gubser had confessed her unit wasn't yet up to giving the Chaos Irregulars a fair showing. Having lost eighty percent of the Hussars on Acamar, Ariel thought she had some sense of how Colonel Gubser must feel. Still, she had been free, fighting in her *Huron Warrior* when the Hussars had gone down. The colonel had been a prisoner, unable to lead or help as nearly her entire command was destroyed on Small World.

Ariel had been shocked by how diminished the older woman seemed.

Instead, their request for an opposing force had been taken up by the Broadsword Legion, a mixed regiment of former ComStar warriors who had resigned, taking their 'Mechs with them, when Prince Victor had become Precentor Martial. The Legion fielded heavier BattleMechs than the Chaos Irregulars, many of them equipped with improved communication, command, and control suites.

Interestingly for a battalion of ComStar veterans, the Broadsword Legion had not contested the default “Green” rating by requesting an evaluation. No doubt their reputation and their resources obviated the need.

Normally the Irregulars wouldn’t stand a chance against such a force. But as the Broadsword’s commander Colonel Marita had pointed out, it was unlikely the Irregulars would ever be hired to combat a regiment of technologically advanced heavy ‘Mechs. She’d assured them the company the Broadsword Legion provided for the evaluation exercise would be as closely matched to the Irregulars as possible.

Extrapolating from the stats on the Broadswords available on MercNet, Ariel and Captain Jacoam had concluded the Legion’s closest match would still outclass them in every dimension with the possible exception of speed. However, as Jacoam had pointed out, conducting themselves well against such a superior force, gaining even a partial victory, would carry more weight with the Mercenary Review and Bonding Commission than rolling over a lesser unit. They’d accepted the bid.

The evaluation exercise with which the MRBC had tasked the Chaos Irregulars required a company to penetrate an area held by a company of the Broadsword Legion and reach an assigned target with as many BattleMechs as possible in the allotted time. So that recon and intel assessment skills could also be evaluated, there would be three possible locations for the target within the operations area and not enough time to thoroughly scout before the company was committed.

Confident of Captain Jacoam and his force covering her left flank, Ariel bent the considerable scanners of her *Huron Warrior* ahead, prying information from the shadowed woods. Nothing. Something. At extreme range, heavy metal retreated away and to her left. Dropping back in front of the Chaos Irregulars’ advance. Without a word, she transmitted the data readout to her command.

With one day to practice before the evaluation, Jacoam had advocated borrowing a page from the Broadsword’s command structure. The Broadswords organized their companies into demi-companies of six ‘Mechs each. The demi-companies further divided into three combat pairs as the situation required. Since the former Strikers and Hussars had not yet fully integrated their fighting styles, he’d suggested they form their own demi-companies.

On the face of it Ariel had disliked the idea. It ran counter to the unity they'd been trying to establish. But she had to admit the unity was not yet seamless and the evaluation exercise was one place they did not want those seams to show.

They'd organized their two task forces—a designation Ariel had insisted on to avoid any implication of permanence to the arrangement—to each include scout, attack, and support elements, allowing them to function independently. Force One consisted of Lieutenant Grainger Christian in his *Specter* as recon, she in her *Huron Warrior*, Davis in his *Phoenix Hawk* and Jacques in his 7M *Trebuchet* as attack, and two slower mediums, a *Hunchback* and a *Whitworth*, trailing as support. Master Sergeant Chowla's *Mongoose* served recon for Force Two, while Jacoam in his *Grasshopper*, Clint in his 5A *Quickdraw* and Jarrae Heather in her *Quickdraw-4G* made up the attack element. Force Two's support included the most advanced 'Mech in the former Striker's arsenal, a DV-7D *Dervish*.

An hour before the exercise, they'd received their "intel" on the possible locations of the target and suspected distribution of defender forces. The terrain of the operations area progressed from a rocky fault region along its eastern border through a narrow and wooded river valley to a rolling plain in the west. There was a probable target location in each of these three main divisions.

The Chaos Irregulars were to approach from the north, determine which location held the target and attain it with as many 'Mechs as possible.

From their MercNet data file, they knew the Broadsword Legion, with its balance toward hard-hitting but slower 'Mechs, preferred urban combat settings. Lacking an urban option, it was likely they'd select either the rocky, broken terrain of the cliff region or the heavy woods along the river and avoid the plain. In fact, both she and Captain Jacoam strongly suspected the easternmost location.

They'd decided to make their initial approach along the eastern rim of the river valley, essentially splitting the difference between the eastern and central locations. Force One moved along the eastern edge of the valley, skirting the dense forest, while Force Two stayed slightly farther east, probing the broken land at the base of the fault cliff.

At the last moment Ariel had split her attack element, pairing Davis and his *Phoenix Hawk* with Christian's *Specter* and assign-

ing them the western rim of the narrow river valley. The two would be dangerously far from support, if they got in trouble only their speed and mobility would keep them alive. But with the future of her command riding on this engagement, she'd be a fool not to have the best eyes available looking west. Just in case.

"Recon two: contact," Master Sergeant Chowla's voice broke into her thoughts over the company-wide channel. "Tally two: one *Thug*, one *Cestus*; map grid Quebec seventeen."

The *Thug* was Legion commander Colonel Marita's BattleMech. The *Cestus* was one of the smallest 'Mechs the Broadwords fielded, but it was a heavy hitter perfectly adapted for fighting in broken terrain. That both should be just this side of the eastern location pretty well pointed an arrow directly at their objective.

"*Cestus* attempting to engage," Chowla reported. "Evading."

Ariel wished the master sergeant luck. With three times the mass of a *Mongoose* and proportionally ungodly firepower, the *Cestus* was a formidable hunter. Particularly in the rocky terrain near the cliff base, where the *Mongoose* could not make full use of its speed. It would take all of Chowla's purported prowess to stay alive even minutes against such a hunter.

Of course it would be Chowla who found the target location and engaged the opposing commander. She's already caught the attention of the MRBC evaluators.

The physical inspection of the Chaos Irregulars' BattleMechs and vehicles had been flawless. The one boast of Captain Jacoam's she would never question was the proficiency of his—of their—tech and support personnel.

Only Sergeant Chowla had presented a problem. But that potential disaster had turned out...odd.

As the inspectors had made a final review of the company of Irregulars that would be taking part in the exercise, Ariel had been horrified to see Chowla standing beside her *Mongoose* without the black field jacket she'd been issued. Instead she'd worn the olive drab costume she always affected, adorned with campaign ribbons she could not possibly have earned, over her shorts and cooling vest.

Of course the Dragoon inspector had stopped in front of Chowla. He'd glanced up at the *Mongoose*, then back down to the diminutive master sergeant.

For her part, Chowla held her position. Ramrod straight at attention, she stared fixedly at some point in the middle distance.

Ariel couldn't see his face, but the Dragoon inspector clearly made a point of reading Chowla's name from her jacket. He seemed to make some sort of mental note before he moved on.

A step behind him, Ariel made a mental note of her own.

Chowla's dead-ahead stare hadn't flickered when she passed.

"Two Alpha to One Alpha," Captain Jacoam's voice came over the command channel. "You've picked up a shadow. *Guillotine* on your eight o'clock. Attack Two moving to intercept."

"Broadwords work in pairs," she reminded her co-commander.

"Nothing else moving," Jacoam answered. If he resented her pointing out common knowledge it didn't show in his voice. "They know we know they like pairs. May be using individual snipers to throw us off."

Ariel was unconvinced, but let it ride. She ordered her support to move closer.

"One Alpha to Recon One," Ariel broadcast on their frequency. "See anything, Mr. Christian?"

"Nothing moving, One Alpha," Christian responded. "Possible heavy metal stationary at extreme range to the west."

That would coincide with the westernmost target option.

Broadsword command at the eastern location. Defenders of the central location pulling back and to the east as they advanced. Possible western defenders not moving and an apparent pincer action—never mind Jacoam's belief it's a single 'Mech—closing from the east, trying to drive them west. If there'd been any doubt...

"Damn!" Captain Jacoam's voice broke into her thoughts. "Target the *Black Knight*!"

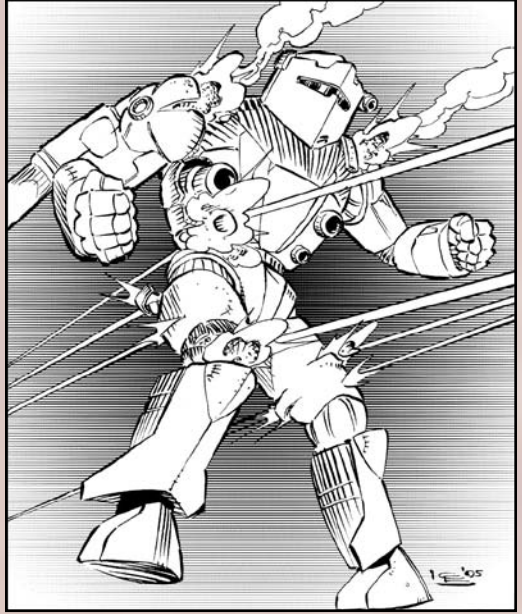
Black Knight?

"On it," replied the *Dervish* pilot. Truman? Troutman? Ariel couldn't remember.

On her screen she spotted Jacoam's *Grasshopper* on her left flank, facing away. The status readout indicated he'd already taken several hits and somehow ruined his left knee actuator.

He was firing his full torso, his favorite close-range punch, at the base of what looked to Ariel to be a pillar of basalt thrusting up out of the ground. At nearly the same instant a volley of long-range missiles, fired with remarkable accuracy by the *Dervish* at extreme range, rained down on the same spot.

Painted thermally by Jacoam's lasers and literally by marker-loaded missiles, a *Black Knight* suddenly stood out clearly against the shadow of the rock outcropping.



Jacoam fired his own LRMs, though the range was so close Ariel was surprised the warheads had time to arm before striking. All five of the missiles found their target.

But even as they landed, the *Black Knight* unleashed its PPC and both large lasers, hitting Jacoam's *Grasshopper* solidly. Ariel's hands spasmed on her own safety-locked fire controls in sympathetic reflex. Jacoam's status readout went black.

The *Black Knight* victory was short-lived. Rounding the outcropping from either side, Clint and Heather bracketed the heavy 'Mech with combined laser fire. Having already absorbed the punishment of over twenty missiles and the *Grasshopper's* lasers, its status readout went black under the onslaught of six medium lasers at near contact range.

Ariel's attention snapped from the stricken *Black Knight* to the top of the escarpment skirting the mesa as jump jets flared. Sensors identified a *Guillotine* inbound; thirty seconds to weapons range based on current course and speed.

If she remained stationary, which she had no intention of doing.

"Support Two, form on Support One," she ordered as she began moving. "Attack Two, vector south for meet-up grid Mamba fourteen."

A straight drive east southeast would take the Irregulars to the target. No doubt the bulk of the Broadsword forces would try to prevent them, but if she formed the fastest 'Mechs into a swift assault lance...

"Recon One to One Alpha," Lieutenant Christian's voice was crisp efficiency. "Lance heavy metal, extreme range west, Domino fourteen, in motion north northeast."

"Copy that," Ariel answered. "Make best time to meet up main force grid..." she computed vectors and terrain quickly, "Mamba fifteen."

"One Beta to One Alpha," Davis's voice cut in. "Captain, check west bogie vector."

Ariel scrolled the terrain screen west and overlaid Christian's data on the four Broadsword BattleMechs' position and motion. They weren't heading to intercept. They were moving to close behind the Irregular force. That didn't make sense. Unless...

"Recon Two to Two Alpha!"

Ariel tabled her shock that Chowla was alive.

"Go, Recon Two."

"Grid Rodeo nineteen is empty," Chowla reported, static washing over her voice in waves. "Repeat: No joy eastern target."

"Chaos Irregulars, wheel right," Ariel ordered. "Attack Two, redirect. Form on Attack One best time."

Which meant they'd have to roll over the *Guillotine* closing from the same direction.

The Broadsword Legion wouldn't have invested so much in convincing the Irregulars the target was in the eastern location if it was in the relatively close river valley option. That left only one place, the one they'd been—predictably, she now realized—dismissing from the start.

On her screen she saw the *Guillotine* turning to meet the unexpected challenge from behind. From what she'd seen, the brace of *Quickdraws* needed no help from the rest of the company. She put them from her mind and focused on the next move.

Now it was a race. And the Broadswords, intent on luring the Irregulars into their trap and a heartbeat fast in tripping it shut,

were out of position. Quickly marshalling her assets, Ariel fired a string of commands, reshaping her force to take the western objective before the heavier force could correct their mistake.

Something new stirred in her, something she hadn't felt since the frozen wastes of Acamar. It took her a moment to recognize it as hope.

***Free-Hire Quarter
Harlech, Outreach
Chaos March
20 November 3066***

Ariel quickened her pace as she crossed the tarmac of the vehicle parking area.

If she'd known Colonel Olstein had been planning to visit the compound, she would have donned her dress uniform. Then she remembered she didn't have a dress uniform.

Her old Peregrine's Hussars green and gold had been fine last week, before the Chaos Irregulars had decided on their own colors. Until they decided on a dress uniform as well, black fatigues were going to have to do. She hoped they presented a professional and businesslike air.

Unlike Master Sergeant Chowla.

Ariel saw the woman, still wearing her olive drab costume over her issue black shirt and trousers, checking in with the sentry, her back to Colonel Olstein standing only a few meters away.

Evidently Chowla saw her as well, though she didn't look in Ariel's direction. Receiving her ID back from the sentry, she headed for the parked transports, a path that would keep her as far from her captain as possible while crossing the open area.

And of course Colonel Olstein was looking after the fleeing sergeant, his head cocked slightly to one side, when Ariel arrived.

"Did your sergeant wear that jacket during the formal inspection?" he asked after they'd exchanged greetings.

"Yes," Ariel answered simply as she conducted her visitor toward the mess hall and the ad hoc command offices.

She chose not to go into how Captain Jacoam had prevented her from reprimanding Chowla. Had told her he would publicly refute her if she tried. Willing to split the command, split the unit before it had fully formed, simply to protect a subordinate he was involved with. It had horrified Ariel, still did, and put Jacoam's commitment to the Irregulars in question.

But that was an in-house issue. She would never breathe a word of it to anyone outside the Chaos Irregulars. Not even Colonel Olstein.

She realized she'd missed what he'd just said.

"I'm sorry?"

"I said a family jacket like that is an arcane tradition—I've seen only a few score, and none in the last decade. I imagine it would carry weight with Wolf's Dragoons," Olstein repeated. "I'm sure it's not the original, but they respect a tradition like that."

Ariel's mind skidded.

"Master Sergeant Chowla pilots a *Mongoose*," Ariel said, something of a non sequitur, but as close to a relevant response to her mentor's remark as she could muster.

"Then, if I counted those ribbons correctly," Olstein said, nodding as she held the door to the building for him. "She's the seventh generation of Chowla to be its pilot."

Ariel lost the colonel's next sentence to shock.

That olive drab jacket wasn't a costume; it was a family memorial. Why the hell hadn't Jacoam explained that instead of making his grandstand scene about splitting the command?

Because he thought I knew full well what it was, she realized with her next step. He assumed I just didn't give a damn because Chowla wasn't a Hussar.

They were going to have to work on their communication skills.

"...Chowla," Olstein was saying. "I'll check the University data files. In seven generations there should be some record."

"Let me know what you find out," Ariel said, indicating the door to her office. Or her office as long as Pauls and Davis stayed busy elsewhere. She suspected they would until either Colonel Olstein left or she called them in.

"One thing I found out this morning was a new unit posted to the Hiring Hall," Olstein said, taking the proffered chair. "Mixed light battalion, provisionally regular and reliable with Dragoon rating of C. Very well done, Captain."

"Thank you, sir," Ariel said, taking her own—Davis's—chair. "But it wasn't a solo effort."

"Come now, I saw the raw data," Olstein waved her modesty away. "I know the source of your Irregulars' new-found discipline."

"Well, sir, I disagree," she countered, glad her complexion concealed the pleased flush warming her face despite her words. "The Chaos Irregulars earned that ranking through the efforts of every member of the team."

Olstein nodded, once, conceding the discussion without changing his position.

"Do you suppose your mixed light battalion would be interested in some work inside the Free Worlds League?" he asked.

"The Free Worlds League?" Ariel was taken slightly aback. Given Olstein's opinion of the FWL military—so like her father's—it had never occurred to her he'd bring her a job offer from that quarter.

"A corporate contract, not state," Olstein was saying. "Ronin, Incorporated. Their plant on Wallis manufactures a very reliable, very accurate light Gauss rifle."

Ariel nodded; she was familiar with the weapon. On the other hand, she'd never heard of Ronin producing anything but machine guns. When had that bit of diversification come about?

"And they have no security?" she asked, focusing on the potential job.

"Irian Security has allocated a single lance of heavy 'Mechs," Olstein answered. "And there's a battalion of Marik Militia on planet. But the Ronin plant has still been subject to pirate raids."

"Pirate raids?" Ariel couldn't keep the surprise from her voice. "Plural?"

Olstein nodded.

Repeated successful pirate raids with a battalion already on planetary garrison implied the defenders' communications were compromised. Or the defending force itself. "Damage from the last raid held up production for several weeks," he said. "They want to have their own military force in place. Their hope is its very presence will prevent trouble, but if trouble arrives they want enough firepower to defend themselves without waiting for the militia."

Ariel nodded.

"Now if all your Irregulars do is garrison the production facility, you will be paid standard scale wages," her mentor added. "But if you chose to hunt down the pirates and perhaps make puni-

tive raids, Ronin Incorporated is willing to pay substantial prize money.”

“The Chaos Irregulars lack both DropShips and JumpShips,” Ariel pointed out.

“For hunting pirates,” Olstein said, “Ronin would supply both.”

Ariel nodded again, thoughtfully.

“I’ll have to talk with my people,” she said at last.

***Inland South District
Harlech, Outreach
Chaos March
20 November 3066***

"What you got?" Jake asked baldly.

Clairmont chuckled as though the MechWarrior had made a small joke and adjusted the position of his beer mug.

The ersatz dive was pretty much as Jake had left it a week ago. The same paid regulars were in place and the same bored bartender had pulled his pint of dark. New this week was a small knot of tourists nervously enjoying their brush with the dark side of Outreach.

The romantic couple had been replaced with an obese man who appeared to be asleep.

Jake took a swallow of beer and waited a three count. Then he shifted his weight to rise.

"Someone was impressed with your evaluation," Clairmont said.

Jake settled back in his chair.

"A lot of folks are," he said.

Clairmont chuckled again. Evidently Jake was a funny guy.

But the Chaos Irregulars had gotten seven BattleMechs to the objective. In the process they'd destroyed two of the Broadsword's heavies and crippled two more, a respectable trade for the loss of one heavy, his, and three mediums. Not to mention proving to the world they had a *Mongoose* jockey who could make a fool of a *Cestus* using cover that would make an infantry trooper despair.

"Someone is interested in forming a private reinforced battalion," Clairmont said casually.

Jake took a thoughtful pull on his beer to cover his shock. Who would need a reinforced battalion? One of the worlds in the Chaos March was his first guess, though nothing said the someone was local. A corporation? He let the thought go and just looked expectantly at Clairmont.

"It's a daunting goal, of course," the broker said. "But they are willing to invest, heavily, in creating a substantial fighting force of their own."

"How?"

"By cherry picking talented lances and individuals from TempTown," Clairmont answered as though it were obvious. "And assembling their own unit."

"Can't cherry pick anyone from the Irregulars."

"They were thinking of cherry picking all of the Irregulars," Clairmont surprised Jake by actually knocking back a swallow of beer. "They need a solid core to build on and they liked your performance on the proving grounds."

Not my performance, Jake thought.

Instead he said: "Sounds like a long-term project."

"They're looking to their long game," Clairmont conceded. "Several months, perhaps a year, of bringing in new lances and molding them all into a new whole."

"The leadership of this solid core would lead this reinforced battalion or whatever it is?"

"That goes without saying."

Jake shook his head.

"Sounds like a lot of training and drilling," he observed. "Not to mention babysitting."

"There would be occasional missions to bloody the unit," Clairmont said. "But, yes, the bulk of the time would be spent here on Outreach. However, the funds will be available for extensive refurbishing and upgrading of equipment."

"Ah."

Jake sat and thought, nursing his bear.

Clairmont seemed to be checking appointments on his noteputer.

New blood to the Irregulars wasn't as big a draw as it might have been, given their size. The Irregulars were really all new blood at this point. But more 'Mechs would keep his support techs employed. Their techs were good enough Clairmont's offer

of refurbishment carried little weight. However, upgrades were a different matter entirely. You could never have enough upgrades.

On the other hand, bloodying sorties notwithstanding, it sounded like a long and dull duty. At least until the private army was ready to move toward whatever objective the client had in mind.

That last could be a sticking point, one Jake would nail down before commitment. But first:

“What kind of money we talking?”

“Scale,” Clairmont held up a hand at Jake’s snort. “Plus twenty percent, plus all the new equipment and weapons upgrades you can make a case for.”

Jake shifted his weight to rise again.

“I’ll have to talk to my people,” he said.

Clairmont shrugged slightly.

“The offer’s on the table for twenty-four hours,” he said. “After that the employers will be looking for someone more decisive.”

**Free-Hire Quarter
Harlech, Outreach
Chaos March
20 November 3066**

A civilian taxi was pulling away from the compound gate as Jake strolled up, an officer in a uniform he didn't recognize in the back. Ariel, not Peregrine Junior, was standing by the sentry box, looking as pleased with herself as he'd ever seen.

"Interesting visit?" he asked.

"Very," she confirmed. "We need to talk."

Jake suspected from the glint in her eye she had news very similar to his. *When it rains...*

As they crossed the mess hall, Reema rose from a solitary table and moved to intercept. Ariel ceded command to Peregrine Junior at the sight of her. Jake could see her spine straighten as the PPC slid into place. For her part, Reema fell silently in step on his opposite side.

As they reached the door to the back rooms, Peregrine Junior's hand shot ahead, beating Reema's to the knob. Without a word she pulled the door open and came to full attention, eyes front.

What the hell?

Whatever it was, Reema got it. She brought herself to full attention and stepped smartly through the door.

Jake waited a moment, but Peregrine Junior showed no sign of moving. With a slight shrug to no one in particular, he followed his sergeant into the office area.

"Ever hear of Ludwigshafen?" Davis asked as Ariel shut the door.

"Something like a Bratwurst?" Jake asked.

Davis and Pauls had wasted no time in reclaiming their workspace once Ariel had shown her guest out. Jake could see Pauls was organizing individual performance reports into a spreadsheet, while Davis appeared to be jacked into the Hiring Hall's news net.

"It's a world in the Lyran Alliance," Davis said, tilting his computer screen to the others. "Backside of their Coventry Province. They just offered us a job."

Jake read the screen, Ariel at his elbow. The initial credit amounts were high, but otherwise it looked like a standard opening offer for a planetary defense gig—not unlike the ink that had landed them on Acamar. Until he got to the paragraph about "possible sorties to other worlds" and saw the bonus money involved. Triple anything he'd ever worked for.

"Pull up a map," he ordered.

Pauls left his station and joined the others as the holoinage of an unfamiliar star field filled the screen.

"Brooloo, Gatineu, Mississauga," he read. "Nothing rings a bell."

"New Capetown." Peregrine Junior's voice held a bitter edge.

Jake grunted noncommittally. The name, like all the others, meant nothing to him.

"Master Sergeant," Jake was startled by his co-commander's strange mix of Peregrine Junior and Ariel's voices. "Your family saw service against the Lyrans. Can you tell us anything about this region?"

"We never got that far in, ma'am."

Ma'am?

Jake filed speculation under "do later" and focused on the job offer.

"It's a cinch the real job's the raids, whatever they are," he said.

"Price is enough to overcome most objections," Davis observed. "While the fact that it's routed to us means it's something more experienced units would turn down."

"Maybe have already turned down," Pauls agreed.

"Or," Reema said. "They want a unit no one has heard about—make sure the locals don't know what to expect."

The five studied the incommunicative star field for a moment.

"Our first job offer," Davis said.

"Second," countered Ariel.

"Third," Jake said and turned to Reema.

The master sergeant shrugged, spreading her empty hands.

"It looks," said Ariel, hooking a chair with her foot and pulling it to her, "as though we have a decision to make."

THE CHOICES:

1. Remain on Outreach and become the core, and leaders, of a new and larger force. This will involve extensive training and several small scale sorties to nearby objectives. Benefits include steady pay for little danger; upgraded equipment, vehicles and weapons systems; leadership of a larger force.
2. Defend Ronin Incorporated's Light Gauss Rifle Plant on Wallis. This would involve garrison duty and one or more pirate hunting missions. Benefits include base pay but potential high pay and bonuses for successful anti-pirate missions. Also, having a premier weapons manufacturer grateful to you can open the door to greater opportunity.
3. Garrison Ludwigshafen and take part in possibly very lucrative raids against an unknown target. Benefits include very high pay and bonuses.

For more information on voting for the Chaos Irregulars next contract, [click here](#).