

**DECISION
AT ACAMAR**

by Kevin Killiany

Badlands, Marsa Plateau
Acamar
Chaos March
10 October 3066

Jake slammed against the harness as his whole world lurched to the right. Damage alarms he could do nothing about shrilled for attention. PPC to the leg—not enough to bring his *Grasshopper* down, but enough to give him a limp.

Some long range missiles would be good about now.

He checked the magazine. Still empty.

Something clipped his left knee actuator, hard, and he almost went down. Would have gone down if that had been the right again.

The acrid/sweet scent of coolant teased the edge of his senses. He hoped that was his imagination. Otherwise there was a leak somewhere not showing up on his damage schematics. Could be nothing. Could blow at the next big heat spike.

I'm the biggest thing out here and they're picking me to shreds.

Whoever they were.

Sensor readings showed a lance of medium 'Mechs. Half generic, since he couldn't get hard data. There must be metal filings of some sort in the purple smoke their guests had filled the valley with.

Good tone on a *Vindicator* dead ahead almost caught Jake by surprise. He took the shot full torso, his large laser and the brace of mediums flash-burning their way through the haze. Solid hits, all three. The forty-five ton 'Mech staggered under the sudden loss of armor and—yes!—the right arm hung by myomer cables, its PPC dangling harmlessly.

Jake's momentary flush of victory evaporated in the staccato clang of AC fire along the left torso of his machine. He snapped off a return shot with his left arm's medium laser, but if he hit anything other than smoke and hillside there was no sign.

"Smoke's clearing," Clint's voice crackled over Jake's headphones. "I'm getting some sensors back."

"Copy that," Jake replied. His own sensors were showing increasingly accurate reads. But not, for some reason, one hundred percent. Whatever the metal was in that smoke it must have done some sort of damage to the sensor array. However, even impaired they gave good numbers on the bogie 'Mechs—showed them moving off.

Six moving off, he amended, including the *Vindicator* whose arm he'd severed. One, an *Enforcer*, moved at a shuffle that indicated a damaged knee actuator. An enemy *Centurion* and another *Vindicator* were salvage.

"Form up people."

His machines were all moving, though some, like his, had new limbs.

Two lances of mediums had come against his mixed company and not only hurt them, had gotten away with only two—two-and-a-half if you counted the walking wounded—casualties.

Yeah, we're out of missiles, but purple smoke or no we should have had those guys.

Worse, the bogies were pulling back to resupply, maybe even meet up with reinforcements, while his guys...

They were going to make it—he was fairly sure they'd almost flanked the enemy's position outside the city—but it was costing them. Maybe too much. Part of that was his fault...

No, all of that was his fault. He'd given the order to give up their strong point and try to meet up with the government forces in Kalskag.

But the situation, the predicament that caused Jake to give that order, that had been Sorenson's fault. And the planetary militia. And the Rebels. And the Stones. And Peregrine and his precious Hussars.

With a name like Peregrine he didn't have the two cents to call them the Falcons? Man with no imagination shouldn't be in command.

None of the other merc units had been any good.

When the invaders had hit, Sorensen had called them all in. The mountains above Kalskag were a natural strong point. They could have held the mines for weeks, made it too expensive for the enemy to hold Acamar. But none of the other merc units had come.

And a week ago Sorensen had forgotten his own plan. Let himself be lured into hunting an enemy that seemed oblivious.

Kinda like you let yourself get lured into making a break for the capital.

Jake shook away the phantoms and focused on his sensors. No point in wasting energy on the dead. He had nine men left, and his job was to get them to the government militia's stronghold in one piece. Right now all his screens gave him were ghosts, but that didn't matter. The enemy was out there. He just had to be sure he saw them in time to do some good.

Peregrine's Hussars Command Center
Flat, Acamar
Chaos March
02 October 3066

Captain Ariel Peregrine looked across the tarmac at her BattleMech gleaming in the watery winter sunlight of Acamar and thought of her father.

She couldn't not think of her father whenever she saw it from a distance. The *Huron Warrior* had been a special order, a new variant straight from Hollis. A HUR-W0-R4Q, it carried twenty-four rounds for its massive Grizzard 210 Gauss rifle. Her father had traded a double heat sink for that extra ton of ammunition, but the ten that remained were enough for almost any situation.

He'd been proud of that BattleMech, with its stately fan of highly sensitive sensors spreading from shoulder to shoulder behind the cockpit. And he'd been pleased the quartermaster had painted its broad shoulders with his colonel's epaulets.

"The Colonel"—that's how she thought of her 'Mech.

Because it was *her* 'Mech. Her father had never piloted it. A stroke had robbed her father of the ability to ever pilot a 'Mech again before he'd taken final delivery.

So she, a lieutenant then, had been the first to impress her mind to the neurocircuits of the new green and gold BattleMech with the colonel's epaulets. With her father looking on from his motorized chair and the solemn approval of the assembled Peregrine's Hussars, she'd taken it through its paces. On a sunny day not unlike this one, on a world orbiting a star you couldn't see from here, proud and excited and grieving.

Ariel blinked fiercely until the sting left her eyes.

Turning back to the Command Center entrance, she checked her reflection in the glass before opening the door. No redness to her eyes and her dark complexion masked the hot flush she felt in her cheeks. As she stepped across the threshold, she returned the duty sergeant's salute before doffing her cap and entering the inner door.

The ops room wasn't dark, but the subdued light after the bright sun made her pause by the door while her eyes adjusted. There

were a half dozen techs in the room, manning stations around the wall that monitored radio traffic and distant sensor arrays—the tie-ins to planetary defense had been provided by the Acamar Planetary Militia, their clients.

The center of the room was dominated by a holodisplay table around which a few officers were now gathered, greenly illuminated by the projected map.

“Captain,” Major Dixon glanced up from the holodisplay table. “We may have a situation.”

Ariel nodded to Captain Carter as she took her place by the table. Carter commanded Charlie Company, an exercise in alliteration if ever there was one, while she commanded Baker. Major Dixon, who had refused to assume the rank of colonel when her father had passed away, commanded Able Company and the regiment as a whole.

Dixon had made it clear, privately, after her father’s funeral that he considered himself her regent, guiding the Hussars until she was ready to assume command. He’d also made it clear that she was being held to the highest standard and that command would not devolve to her until she had demonstrated she was ready and able to continue the tradition her father had established.

Ariel glanced at the map, expecting to see some movement of the various mercenary forces diagramed. Instead, the west coast of Katenga from Flat north past the spaceport to the planetary capital of Kalskag was laid out. East of the coastal plain were the “badlands,” more properly the Marsa Plateau, thousands of square kilometers that looked at this scale like a crumpled paper maze of arroyos and canyons. Beyond the badlands, at the eastern edge of the display, were the Marsa Mountains, source of Acamar’s mineral wealth.

“Three DropShips are in final approach to Acamar,” Major Dixon said, startling Ariel out of her study of the terrain. “They had friendly transponder codes, but they’ve had apparent difficulty understanding traffic control’s instructions and are coming straight in rather than taking their place in the orbital queue.

“APM pickets, those sensor platforms they have stashed in the asteroid belt, gave those three a careful going over at range,” Dixon cocked an eyebrow. “Got readings on an *Overlord* and two *Unions* where the transponders said three *Mules* should be.”

"Pirates?" Carter asked.

"Let's hope so."

Dixon adjusted the controls and the strongholds of each of the mining families, with their private mercenary forces indicated, were illuminated.

"Problem is..." the major let his voice trail off.

"No single target big enough for such a force," Ariel provided. "And the wrong sort of DropShips for transporting spoils."

"Invasion," Carter said.

"Looks like it," Dixon agreed. "We're going with defense plan alpha. The Footmen and 'Mech companies Baker and Charlie are tasked with defending Flat."

The Footmen don't have armor, much less anti-'Mech weapons.

As captain of Baker, the city's defense would fall to Ariel. She'd be sure the Hussar's infantry didn't find themselves facing anything they weren't equipped to handle.

"Able remains mobile to attack as needed," Dixon concluded. "Detail your people. I'll coordinate the various company mercenary groups."

"Sir," Ariel said, unable to keep this objection to herself. "They've never responded well in the past. Shouldn't we focus all three companies on defending the city we're contracted to and allow the private armies to defend their various holdings?"

"They haven't responded, Captain, because it's important to a certain type of mercenary to appear independent," Dixon answered. "In the face of a real emergency, they'll do the right thing."

"Yes, sir," Ariel's tone was doubtful.

"Go get your people deployed," Dixon said. "I'll round up the cowboys."

***Landon Industries Refinery Complex
Marsa Mountains, Acamar
Chaos March
06 October 3066***

With a final blast of static, the radio died.

Jake toggled the switches, but every light showed green. The problem wasn't the equipment here in the command center. Force Commander Sorensen had stopped transmitting.

Abruptly.

In the middle of a firefight.

Jake glanced about the command center, not really seeing it. Around him noncoms and techs were busy loading consoles and computers into padded cases. Only the radio was untouched and that only because he was using it. In less than an hour this room would go back to being a commissary.

Baker Company was positioned to defend the sprawling ore refinery complex. Normally an installation like this would not be a primary target, but the mines were what made Acamar desirable. Their financial clout had made it independent for decades, in fact.

But now the rules were being broken by someone willing to use force to take the great mining and refining complexes. Mercenaries, though he didn't recognize their name, working for someone with deep enough pockets to rebuild the infrastructure once they had the world. A government. He'd bet the Feds, with some holy rationalization about why it was for their own good, but it could as easily be the Cappies or even the League.

Didn't really matter.

Sorensen's Strikers had been hired to protect Landon Industries. And from the silence of the radio, it was beginning to look like Able Company had been lost doing just that.

Well, technically, the Force Commander had made a foray in strength, not really a defensive move. But he'd thought he'd seen an opportunity to hit the enemy in their support infrastructure, tear out a piece of their ability to wage war. That might have come more under the heading of defending Acamar as a whole rather

than the interests of their client, but it had been too good an opportunity to pass up.

Way too good. Jake had told the boss it looked too easy; recommended a scout lance check it out. But Sorensen said all that would do was tip off the enemy that their drawers were down.

He had taken a recon lance with him. Reema—Sergeant Chowla—had been his forward eyes. But he'd gone in force with the best they had and—Jake toggled the switches again—apparently fallen right into a trap.

Stepping away from the radio, Jake gestured for the techs to pack it up.

He followed two troopers guiding a dolly into the courtyard as he considered his options.

The sky was grey and overcast with patches of scud chasing each other just above the refinery's cooling towers. Jake hunched his shoulders more against the lowering ceiling of lead than the cold. The wind was damp, a contrast to the dry, crackling cold that had blown streamers of dust-like snow into every crack and crevice of the complex for the last few weeks. He didn't need the weather reports to know a different sort of storm was coming. Winter going out with one last ice storm.

He glanced about at the men and women loading the last of the Strikers' equipment into vehicles. Sergeant Major Pauls, a pillar of calm in the center of apparent chaos, directed traffic, not once looking at the noteputer tucked under his arm. He'd been doing his job for longer than Jake had been breathing; he needed no advice from his XO.

A couple of hover tanks would be nice.

Then again, probably not. Against 'Mechs they'd only give the convoy a false sense of security.

Jake glanced around the bustling yard. Reema had told him that was a tell with him. Some people frowned when they thought; he boxed the compass like he was scanning for bogies. He'd wondered if that made him look indecisive, but she told him it let the men know he was weighing all the options before he moved.

Right now in his mind he was seeing beyond the walls of the refinery complex. To the west the tableland dropped off in a series of hills and ravines toward Kalskag, the planetary capital. If

Acamar could be said to have a planetary capital. The central government was so weak they'd had to hire mercenaries to bolster their militia. Just like the major families had hired mercs to protect their companies.

To the south, directly ahead of him, was a straight shot to the DropShip field. The spaceport was centrally located for the refineries rather than the city—minerals, not tourists, being Acamar's primary concern.

That's where the enemy was, to the west and south. And where Sorensen had gone, following the ravines down to an "unguarded" supply nexus, hoping to hit them hard before they turned their attention from the capital to the refineries and mines and towns of the hill country.

Sorensen had reported solid readings on sixteen 'Mechs, and ghosts on maybe a dozen more. Something had been jamming his scanners. Reema would have been able to cut through whatever it was, but she hadn't made a sound. Either something had blocked her transmissions, possible in these metal-heavy hills, or she'd gone down in the first volley.

Jake shook his head, bringing his thoughts back to the situation at hand.

When Sorensen's Strikers had signed on with Landon Industries, the only thing they'd been led to expect was trouble from the other houses on Acamar and maybe a little pirate activity. That had to be all their employers were expecting, or they'd have hired an outfit a lot bigger than the Strikers. Which meant good faith. Even though a planetary invasion was nothing like they'd expected, the contract was valid. And it didn't say anything about the Strikers packing up and going home if big boys came to play.

It didn't say anything about sitting like lumps and waiting to be demolished, either.

Hugging the perimeter of the refinery complex close to his left, the steep west face of the mountains jutted an abrupt kilometer into the sky, while behind him the ore road followed a more gradual grade up to the mines. That was their fallback position, the first hole Landon Industries had dug into Acamar. A played-out mine, the cavern was defensible, immune to air attack and practically undetectable through meters of metal ore deposits too thin to mine but thick enough to block most sensors.

Most sensors.

Jake glanced around again—not seeing through the walls this time, actually looking at the activity swarming the courtyard. Techs and soldiers, very few soldiers and a lot of techs, dodged round him as they carried crates and cases to waiting vehicles.

The road to the spaceport passed by Landontown, the not overly imaginative name for the worker's community. A few thousand dwellings, a dozen shopping centers, restaurants, and entertainment complexes; it wasn't a military target. Nor was the Agrodome, the series of enclosed and covered fields and orchards that stretched from the town's eastern limit to the base of the mountains. The only way to grow crops on this frozen world.

What he wanted to do was go get Sorensen and Reema and the rest. But that wasn't possible. Not with what they had left.

A company, a light company with Reema out there, wasn't going to hold this position against the battalion that was likely heading this way. If they tried, the attackers would flatten the complex. That would cost their employer billions even if all the workers escaped.

It felt like a rationalization, but it was sound tactics. The best way to defend the place was to move off. Fight, but take the fight away from here.

And what was true about defending a refinery was true about defending his support personnel.

"Pauls," Jake called the Sergeant Major over. "Everything loaded up tight?"

"Ready to bug out when you give the word," the older man answered. "Though I don't think we can make the hills before that blow hits."

"You're not going to the hills," Jake said. "Take everything—and that means everything and everyone not driving a 'Mech—to the Landontown Agrodome."

"What the hell are we supposed to do there?"

"Get inside," Jake said. "It's big enough for twenty times what we have."

"But those things are off limits, Jake," Pauls protested. "These people need their food."

He was right, of course. On a barren world like Acamar, agrodomes were as inviolate as space habitats. The civilian workers lived off their produce, wouldn't survive without them. Turning an agrodome into a strong point was unthinkable.

"Get inside," he repeated. "Keep off the crops. Spread out so you're not one big lump. Power down everything. Not even a campfire. It's warm enough to keep you alive and you've got MREs to last until doomsday."

"But Cap—"

"As of right now I'm officially making you noncombatants," Jake cut him off. "I want all weapons broken down and secured. If the enemy discovers you, surrender immediately. Do not try to escape, do not fight."

Pauls' mouth snapped shut. He stared at Jake in mute betrayal.

"Look," Jake said more gently. "It's the only way I can think of to get our people out of this in one piece. If you get in there before the storm hits, the ice will cover your tracks and the agrodome will mask your body heat. Monitor the radios, see how things fall out. If we're not around when the dust settles..."

He shrugged. If the Strikers weren't around—and they both knew Jake's orders meant he didn't expect them to be—it was going to be up to Pauls to figure the next move.

"You firing us, Jake?"

"What? And give you a loophole for disobeying orders?" Jake shook his head. "Right now the right thing to do is save our people. They deserve it. That's an order, Sergeant Major."

Pauls stood for another frozen moment, then pulled himself to attention. Ramrod tall he brought his hand up, blade straight, fingertips to brow.

Jake hadn't seen that since... Never. Coming to attention, he solemnly returned Pauls' salute.

With a final nod and a glance at the making storm, Pauls turned to organize the retreat.

***Badlands, Marsa Plateau
Acamar
Chaos March
11 October 3066***

The attack had come as Ariel's company entered a narrow valley. Sensors had shown the way ahead clear. Or, rather, as clear as they could tell through the echoes and shadows of the ore-rich hills.

The badlands surrounding Kalskag were a maze of arroyos and canyons with occasional open valleys. Easily—and usually—traversed by air. However, Baker Company of Peregrine's Hussars didn't have a planetmover to lift them over. And they avoided the open valleys for the same reason they eschewed the roads that followed the high ground of this eroded tableland: Navigating the washes, no matter how frustrating, was better than being an easy target for the battalion that was hunting them.

Baker Company had been at the northern perimeter of Flat, dug in to block what scouts and intel said was the Ranger's planned attack route into the city. Whether intel had been wrong or Olson had changed his mind at the last moment didn't matter. Either way, they'd been thirteen clicks out of position when Charlie Company had been overrun from the east and Central Command fell.

Now two battalions of the invading force were between her single company and the city they had been hired to defend. Not to mention any repair and resupply.

A couple of probing forays had proven the straight way home would get them killed, so Ariel had led Baker Company out into the foothills. There were several hundred kilometers of these badlands, soft stone and clay filled with traces of iron and other metals, stretching between the mountains and the coastal plain. If they could find their way through, they might be able to join forces with the Acamar Planetary Militia at Kalskag.

The mercenary units hired by the various corporations had been useless. They'd refused to obey orders from the government, denying the state of emergency superceded their contracts. Standing alone, refusing to even help each other, the private armies had fallen one by one to Olson's Rangers defending property precious to their masters.

Stupidity like that gave mercenaries a bad name.

But what could you expect from hired help who called themselves marauders and strikers and raiders? More like pirates than professional soldiers. Or children playing at trivid adventures.

Ariel shook her head.

United, even a bunch of hired guns acting out childhood fantasies could have turned back the invasion. Taken all together, the private mercenary forces, the government's militia and her father's Peregrine Hussars outnumbered Olson's Rangers nearly three to one.

Instead, Olson had taken down the commercial units piecemeal.

Major Dixon and Able Company had been lost trying to coordinate with the Rebel Raiders protecting the Brynd Industrial Complex. It had been a straightforward move, tactically sound, for him to hit Olson's rear as they focused on their assault. But when the two battalions of Olson's Rangers turned to meet the Hussars, the Rebels had stayed put behind their walls. Instead of helping, they'd taken a breather to rearm and repair, getting ready for the moment Olson turned his attention back to them.

Lot of good it did them. Scuttlebutt was no survivors.

Now the Hussars, what was left of them, were scattered. Unless something changed soon, they were about to suffer the same fate as the commercial hired guns. But as professional soldiers, they were giving a better account of themselves.

Or they were before Olson and his Rangers outflanked them at Flat. Now, as nearly as she could tell from the frantic radio traffic before the tac channels went silent, Carter and Charlie Company were gone, the Footmen were scattered, squads fighting for individual survival, and all of the Hussars' support personnel were in enemy hands.

Which had left her and one company working their way up the foothills toward Kalskag, on the lookout for any surviving mercenary units that might want to rethink their earlier non-cooperation along the way. They might not be able to mount a viable planetary defense, but if the Hussars could hook up with the government's forces, she was willing to bet they put together a force big enough to stay alive until relief arrived.

Though where relief was going to come from in the Chaos March was anyone's guess.

Her own hope was the FedCom, or more properly, as her father would say, the FedSuns. Olson's Rangers were in the employ of either the Capellans or the Free Worlds League. Perhaps both. Neither state would hesitate to repeat their treachery of attacking while Prince Victor was fighting to protect the realm. Either way, an invasion like this was bound to bring some response. The trick was staying alive for the weeks or months it might take for them to get here.

Of course, Olson and his Rangers had to be just as aware they only had that short operations window for totally crushing all planetary forces. Not just for strategic reasons.

If they could present themselves as solely in charge of Acamar, they'd have grounds—shaky grounds, but grounds—for presenting themselves as defending the world against Prince Victor's aggression. It would be a sham, of course, but it could cloud things politically and, if she was any judge of Liao's and Marik's conniving, give them a pretext for sending in their regular forces.

Perhaps it had been her speculations that distracted her; her mind on the past and future when it should have been hyper-focused on the here and now. Or perhaps the Rangers were just that good at stealth.

In either case, the first warning the Hussars had was a barrage of smoke canisters.

Ariel's impression, admittedly clouded by surprise, was of a dozen volleys falling only seconds apart. Perhaps a hundred smoke bombs all told, delivered in less than a minute, filling the valley with a metallic purple haze that robbed them of their eyes and their sensors.

Then the shallow valley had filled with Ranger 'Mechs.

A company, perhaps more, of medium 'Mechs had seemed to rise up out of the ground. Not jumping, though they were jump capable; the dense fog made landing too uncertain. But they moved with a speed and surety that told Ariel they could see much better than the Hussars.

Sensors calibrated to ignore the smoke?

Whatever the reason, only the Hussar's discipline kept the attack from becoming a rout. The lances formed in open fours protecting each others' backs as they returned fire.

For all their mobility, the Rangers didn't seem anxious to press the attack. Their tactic of choice seemed to be for individuals and pairs to dodge in quickly, fire a few salvos and fade back.

And their fire wasn't effective. Though they scored a half dozen hits for every one the Hussar's landed, they never concentrated their fire on a single target. It was as though they were spreading the damage as widely as possible throughout her company.

Ariel had the impression they were acting as picadors in a bull fight, keeping the quarry occupied and wearing it down until the toreador was ready to strike the killing blow. Well, she wasn't going to hold still while the Rangers' reinforcements got into position.

"Any pattern?" she asked her lance leaders. "Any thin side to the circle?"

"West-northwest," Davis replied. "I'm making out a defile they don't seem to have covered."

"Baker Company," Ariel said over all-call, "Rotate formation left sixty degrees. Alpha lance taking point, we're moving west-northwest."

A series of acknowledging clicks and the twelve 'Mechs moved as one. Ariel felt a small surge of pride at their discipline under fire.

Relying on her *Huron Warrior's* superior sensors even in this soup—particularly in this soup—Ariel took the lead, pulling a little ahead of her lance as she probed the opening in the valley wall ahead.

A communication light flashed on her radio. Someone was broadcasting on one of the Hussars' frequencies. Not unheard of, there were only so many to go around. That's why all transmissions were encrypted. She dialed over to the active channel.

"—*Huron Warrior, Huron Warrior,*," an unfamiliar voice crackled in her headphones.

Status board said the message was broadcasting in the clear. Someone who didn't know their codes was trying to contact her. The Rangers? That didn't seem likely.

Whoever it was must be searching the spectrum, trying each frequency in an effort to find one she'd respond to. If they'd intercepted any of her traffic, the call would have been coming over one of the channels she'd been using.

If I just stay quiet, they'll move on.

"Go ahead," she said aloud, hoping it wasn't a mistake.

"Be advised," the strange voice was female, with an accent Ariel couldn't place, "Three medium bogies at one-twenty meters bearing three-four-oh."

Ariel scanned in the indicated direction, her sensors fighting their way through the metalized fog. An outcrop of iron-rich rock. Anything could be behind it. Was her mysterious informant saving her from a trap or tricking her into not taking an open door?

"Identify," she ordered.

"Tally one standard-issue *Blackjack* and two *Vindicators*, one AC-equipped," came the instant reply.

"I meant," Ariel made no effort to keep the edge out of her voice. "Identify yourself."

"On your three!"

The urgent voice had Ariel rotating right, her Gauss rifle tracking before the words fully registered.

An Enforcer.

She had a momentary impression of one beam of watery sunlight somehow piercing the artificial fog bank to glitter off its canopy before it fired.

A hammer-blow *clang* deafened her as her *Huron Warrior* rocked under the impact. Her sensors flickered dark then rebooted immediately, though it would be precious seconds before she could use them. Ariel realized the left side of her sensor array had taken a direct hit. If she'd still been facing forward, that would have been her cockpit.

She shuffle stepped-right, a snap shot from her torso-mounted medium pulse laser buying time as she brought her left arm's laser to bear. Trying to use the Gauss rifle before the sensor array was fully back would only waste a round she didn't want to spare.

Luck gave her a hit, low on the *Enforcer's* torso. No real damage, but enough to send his second cannon shot wide.

Her large laser's beam went high, but by then her sensor array was back online. Status board showed the damaged section had

been cut out of the circuit; what remained was reading sixty percent operational. Enough for the targeting system.

Heat spiked and alarms sounded as the *Enforcer's* large laser hit her solidly in the chest. Ignoring both, she brought her Gauss rifle to bear.

Fresh alarms warned her belatedly of the enemy's weapons lock as her own targeting sensors gave her good tone.

"Aim high."

Ariel hesitated a half-heartbeat at the stranger's voice.

From her left, just beyond her target, an unfamiliar 'Mech, barely half the mass of the *Enforcer*, streaked down the slope. Facing an enemy with both main weapons trained on her, she wished the newcomer luck and pressed the trigger.

The stranger didn't break stride. Even as Ariel's Gauss slug tore into the *Enforcer's* left shoulder and her large laser melted armor across its chest, the light 'Mech fired. Two laser beams, a medium from the torso and a small from the head, converged on the underside of the enemy's right shoulder joint.

At a full run.

A glance at her sensors confirmed the mystery 'Mech was making sixty-seven kilometers per hour over broken ground when it double-tapped the ammo feed for the *Enforcer's* autocannon. Ariel felt her jaw loosen as the computer IDed the machine. She glanced back to her viewscreen in time to see it twist at the torso and repeat the trick, firing sideways up into the larger 'Mech's armpit as it passed only a few dozen meters behind.

The *Enforcer* dropped its right arm, the autocannon useless. Turning, it broke into a shuffling run—her computer indicated an eighty percent likelihood of a damaged knee actuator—as it put as much distance as it could between itself and the *Huron Warrior*.



Ignoring the fleeing enemy, Ariel keyed her radio to all call.

"Baker Company, be advised we have a *Mongoose*, repeat, *Mongoose* on the field," she broadcast. "I get no TFF and suspect radio damage, but she is a friendly."

"That's what that was," said someone.

Ariel felt her lips twitch at the MechWarrior's tone. She'd never seen a *Mongoose* outside a museum herself; there could not be many still in service.

"Keep an ear on tac-com-seven," she said. "If she gives you targeting info, trust it."

"She can see in this soup?" That was Davis.

"Apparently."

Well enough to save me.

"Think she's got some sort of old school sensors?" Davis cut through her thoughts.

"Speculate later, Lieutenant," Ariel replied, pulling her own mind back to the moment.

Pulling up the rest of her lance, Ariel flushed the mediums waiting in ambush. The Ranger 'Mechs faded away rather than slug it out. With only a few shots that looked more like cover fire than anything else to Ariel, they jumped for higher ground.

"Do we follow?"

"Negative. That looks like what they want us to do," Ariel answered. "We'll take the route they were blocking. There's got to be a reason they don't want us going that way."

"Unless *that* is what they want us to think."

"You're overthinking the problem, Davis."

Twice pilots relayed intel on enemy movements preceded by "*Mongoose* says" but except for a few ghost sightings, she was apparently staying out of direct combat as much as possible. Sound tactics for a damaged museum piece.

Not that there was much combat now that the haze was settling out. Once the Hussars broke through the arroyo they'd been blocking into an open valley, the Rangers seemed content to pull

back out of range and wait for the next chance to use their smoke-screen attack.

The only way Ariel could see to avoid that sensor-blinding haze was to either move out onto the flat coastal plain or up into the mountains. Both options would take her farther from Kalskag and leave her people exposed. Neither choice was good with an undetermined number of enemy 'Mechs hunting them. Best to keep her forces in the relative safety of the arroyos and try to stay one step ahead of the Rangers.

However, that wasn't what the *Mongoose* was doing, Ariel realized. It had run downhill to attack the *Enforcer*. The small 'Mech must be keeping to the high ground, running the ridges and staying above the smoke to act as spotter.

Only...

That didn't make sense. The haze blocked sensors. It should block from above as effectively as it did at ground level. It might just be the ancient 'Mech's superior tech, but Ariel couldn't shake the feeling she was missing something.

On the heels of her thought, the *Mongoose* broke cover, coming towards her down a rubble-strewn slope about half a klick ahead. The purple-grey dust coating the small 'Mech gave it a level of concealment the generic camouflage paint scheme underneath never could have. For the most part it looked as though it had been carved from the rocks around them.

What were those creatures formed from earth? Golems?

The effect was ruined by sunlight glinting off an area of shiny metal that spread across the right side of the 'Mech's head and extended down to the shoulder. As though the *Mongoose* had been struck by a water cannon that blasted the dust away.

Ariel could see the snapped radio mast, bent back double on itself, in the center of the splash zone. She tried to assess the extent of the older machine's damage, but her sensors refused to give her more than approximate readings.

"Friends ahead," the *Mongoose* pilot's voice crackled faintly in her headphones when the 'Mech was about two hundred meters distant. "I've got them on sensors, but I can't hear them and they can't hear me."

"Who are they?"

"Sorensen's Strikers."

Sounds like a disgruntled labor union.

"Two companies 'Mechs, light company infantry," Davis supplied. "Protecting Landon Industries refinery and mines above Kalskag."

"One company of 'Mechs now," the *Mongoose* pilot's voice was flat. "Force Commander Sorensen and Able Company were lost five days ago."

"How do I call the ones up ahead?" Ariel asked, keeping her voice business crisp.

If they were between Kalskag and the Landon refinery, they were too far north. Not by much, but still too far. She didn't like not being where she thought she was.

Switching to the frequency the *Mongoose* pilot provided, she broadcast a narrow beam up valley: "Sorensen's Strikers, this is Peregrine's Hussars. We have one of your number with us, but her radio is out. Suggest we meet to coordinate efforts."

"Our position is defensible," a man's voice, rough with fatigue, answered. "Why don't you join us?"

More 'Mechs carved from stone.

Three dust-covered heavy 'Mechs, a *Grasshopper* and a pair of *Quickdraws*, one with a brace of medium lasers where its long range missile launcher should have been, were ranged against the side of a box canyon that opened off the valley. The late afternoon sun, striking them almost horizontally, cast their shadows back against the rock face as though they were physically connected to, growing out of, the eroded stone.

Five other 'Mechs—her clouded sensors refused to identify them beyond another light and four mediums—held positions farther down the valley, apparently guarding another approach.

Setting her own pickets, Ariel led Davis and the *Mongoose* into the box canyon. As she drew close she saw the hatches open on the *Grasshopper* and laser-equipped *Quickdraw*, their chain ladders dangling.

Then she saw the fourth 'Mech, a Ranger *Vindicator* with one arm dangling by a few myomer cables, backed into a narrow crevasse. It was far enough in that the sunlight struck only its dangling arm covered in grime and reflected bright highlights off its

gleaming head. The rest was hidden in shadow. An hour later and the abandoned 'Mech—for it clearly was abandoned—would have been invisible.

"Let's get out and meet our new friends," she said to Davis on their secure channel.

"I don't like it, Captain."

"Neither do I, Lieutenant," Ariel replied as she undid her five-point harness and twisted to reach the snow parka in its storage compartment. "But I'm not going to sit in here to talk to people on the ground."

Ariel hadn't realized how much the cockpit of her *Huron Warrior* had come to stink over the last four days until the first blast of cold fresh air hit her. She was tempted to open her parka and let the chill breeze blow over her body as well, but she knew frigid air on sweat was a quick road to hypothermia. Or worse.

She decided to follow the example of the Striker MechWarriors and leave the hatch opened wide to air the cockpit out in her absence.

As she lowered her ladder, she saw the *Mongoose* pilot, already on the ground, running to the figures standing at the feet of the abandoned *Vindicator*. The taller—a man with the blonde build of a trivid Viking, Ariel saw as he swept back his parka hood—took a few steps toward the running pilot and stopped.

She expected the two to embrace, but the pilot stopped, perhaps a hand's breadth closer than protocol would dictate. Ariel couldn't hear what they were saying, of course, but from the blonde giant's expression and the tension in their body language, it was clear this was not a simple subordinate reporting to her superior.

She glanced across at Davis securing his ladder and saw him shake his head. Her lieutenant was as disgusted as she at the lack of professionalism.

The climb down stretched muscles cramped from too long in the couch and she was grateful for every ache and pain. The freshening breeze at ground level and the crunch of the gritty, granular snow beneath her feet seemed to revitalize her as she and Davis approached the blonde giant.

The trivid Viking effect was heightened up close by his too long hair blowing in the breeze and the week-old stubble of beard. She

didn't need to glance at Davis to know his brown hair was neatly trimmed, his mustache razor straight.

Showers may be hard to come by in a BattleMech, but there was no trick to staying well groomed. In her own case it was only a matter of tightly braided cornrows gathered at the nape of her neck. As for Davis, the electric shaver predated space flight.

Very few people—and from what she'd seen it was clear Sorensen's Strikers were not among that few—appreciated the importance of a professional warrior appearing, well, professional at all times. A professional appearance assured the client he had hired the best available, let potential adversaries know they were serious in their commitment and made a difference in how the warrior saw himself.

It was also clear from the trivid Viking's weary expression that the message of professionalism was completely lost on him.

"Captain Jacoam, Sorensen's Strikers," he introduced himself when they were within comfortable earshot. Then he nodded to the sharp featured MechWarrior still near the *Vindicator*. "Lieutenant Clint. You've met Sergeant Reema Chowla."

For the first time Ariel took a close look at the *Mongoose* pilot and saw a young woman perhaps half a meter shorter than her captain with skin a few shades lighter than her own. Taking in her brown eyes and dark hair worn in a thick braid, Ariel realized the accent she hadn't been able to place was Hindi. As the Strikers clearly used Free World League ranking, Chowla's master sergeant's stripes made her roughly equal to a lieutenant.

"Captain Peregrine, Lieutenant Davis, Peregrine's Hussars," Ariel responded.

"Any relation to *the* Peregrine of Peregrine's Hussars?"

Always the first question.

"He was my father," she said. "He passed away four years ago."

"That explains it."

"Explains what?" Ariel asked, knowing the answer. *Always the first assumption.*

"How a girl of—what? twenty-five?—ended up being a captain and driving a beautiful new 'Mech."

Ariel was aware of Davis beside her, balanced in case trouble ensued, but unsurprised and unworried. He'd been witness to this conversation a dozen times over.

"I have the 'Mech because it was my father's," she said evenly. "I have my rank because I earned it."

Captain Jacoam did not actually shrug.

"You in command of the Hussars now?" he asked.

"No. Major Dixon has overall command—" Ariel stopped abruptly.

Jacoam nodded.

"I'm in pretty much the same position myself." He made a sketchy gesture that indicated the whole valley. "I currently have overall command of the Strikers which, as a fighting force, consists of eight—nine 'Mechs, now. We've also got two crippled 'Mechs and assorted noncombatants stashed in various hidey-holes."

"There may be other assets elsewhere," Ariel replied. "But at the moment the Hussars have one full company that I know of."

Jacoam nodded again.

"Reema here tells me you can fight."

Ariel glanced at the sergeant who met her gaze levelly.

"I can say unequivocally that Master Sergeant Chowla can also fight."

"Good," said Jacoam. "We like each other. What do you make of this?" He indicated the abandoned *Vindicator*.

"Any idea why it was abandoned?" Ariel asked, looking up at the medium 'Mech.

"Two ruptured heat sinks and badly fractured reactor insulation," Jacoam said, pointing. "No hard radiation, of course, but the thing's a furnace."

Once he pointed it out, Ariel realized the warmth she'd thought was the sun reflecting off the cliff face was in fact radiating from the machine.

"It hasn't been here long."

"No," Jacoam agreed. "I was wondering if it looked familiar to you."

"It's a *Vindicator*," Ariel said. "Perhaps the most common single design in Capellan space. Certainly not a rarity in the Chaos March."

"Yeah, but look at this one."

Ariel did, for several seconds, taking in every detail.

"It has no identifying marks," she said at last. "And its armor has been field patched, more than once, recently and hastily."

"That's what I was thinking," Jacoam cocked his head in her direction. "Does that suggest anything to you?"

"That it's a front line medium 'Mech engaged in the invasion of Acamar," she said, weary of his posturing. "Why don't you just lay out whatever it is you're thinking and stop playing guessing games?"

"Because I want to see if another commander, using logic, comes to the same conclusion," Jacoam's tone matched hers. "It's not a guessing game, it's a parity check."

Ariel stood her ground. She was aware of the air getting colder, though it was still just over an hour until sunset. Either the breeze had shifted or the *Vindicator* was cooling.

"Okay," Jacoam said at last. "Do you know anything about this outfit we're fighting? How big they are?"

"Olson's Rangers are a regiment, maybe a reinforced regiment," Davis answered. "They field light and medium 'Mechs, mostly of Capellan manufacture, and are known for hit-and-run tactics."

"How many of these Rangers hit Flat?"

"Two battalions."

"There you go," said Jacoam, nodding. "That's what it is."

"That's what *what* is?" Ariel asked.

"Two battalions hit Flat and one hit Kalskag," Jacoam said. "So who are we fighting?"

Ariel and Davis exchanged glances.

"If they are in fact a reinforced regiment," Davis answered, "We could be dealing with the fourth battalion."

"Maybe, maybe," said Jacoam. "That's been what I was thinking. Only I wasn't thinking, I was reacting."

He paused for a moment, obviously expecting the two of them to follow along. Glancing at Master Sergeant Chowla, Ariel saw she was equally puzzled by her captain's logic.

"Our tactics—and I'm betting yours, too—have been based on the assumption we're evading and circumventing a larger force," Jacoam said. "But look at their tactics: They lob smoke bombs on us, hit us fast, then withdraw. What does that look like?"

The light dawned.

"A smaller force harrying a larger one," Ariel said.

"These guys don't have a whole extra battalion," Jacoam said. "They sent a company—maybe sixteen 'Mechs, tops—of mobile mediums out here to keep us busy. They're all unmarked so we don't realize we're seeing the same ones over and over."

"Definitely heavy support vehicles," Davis added. "So they can reload and repair quickly."

"*Maybe* some artillery to lob the smoke," Jacoam said. "Though I'm guessing infantry mortars or they'd be hitting us with something heavier than smoke."

"How do the support vehicles get around so quickly?" Ariel asked.

"Roads," Chowla answered. "We're avoiding them, but there's no reason they'd have to."

Ariel nodded, the pieces of the last four days falling into place.

"They wouldn't have to know where we are all the time," she said. "Just place pickets along the routes to Kalskag. If we head the right way, all they have to do is hit us to turn us around, then leave us alone to wander in circles."

"Right," Jacoam agreed. "They've got Kalskag bottled, but they can't take it with one battalion. They just need to keep us from hooking up with the government militia while their main force finishes off Flat and works its way up the coast to Kalskag."

"What do you recommend?" Ariel asked.

"Find a road; get to Kalskag," Jacoam said. "Capturing that resupply convoy of theirs would be nice, but don't waste time looking

for it. We've given them four days they don't deserve and we need to get them back."

"One problem," said Davis. "They've damaged our sensors—some of us are nearly blind—we may not be able to navigate or defend ourselves effectively."

"But their 'Mechs can see," Jacoam said. "There has to be a reason they can shoot better and move faster than we can in that soup. We just need to figure that out."

"Not just in the soup," Davis countered. "Our sensors are seriously degraded. Something in that smoke, probably the metal filings, have somehow damaged our sensor arrays. If we're going to take the battle to them, we're going to need better eyes."

"Wipers don't do much against the dust," Jacoam said. "But if we get our viewscreens clear, we can rely on our own eyes for the close in work. Sensors will be enough to tell us something's out there, even if they can't be sure what."

"In that case, we'll have to wait until daylight," Ariel pointed out. "It will be dark in about an hour."

"We can't afford another night."

"We don't have a choice," Ariel snapped. "This isn't some trivd adventure where your 'Mechs gain special powers because your cause is just. These are machines and they are damaged and taking them into combat without sensors in the dark is suicide."

"I have sensors," Sergeant Chowla spoke up in the ensuing silence.

"I meant to ask," said Davis quickly, pulling the conversation farther away from confrontation. "Your Beagle Probe is still working?"

"The full suite," Chowla shrugged. "A near miss with an AC took out my radio, nearly took my head, but I never lost my sensors."

Ariel looked up at the *Mongoose*. From this angle the broken antenna was just apparent, and she could see the shiny area that had been washed clean. The *Mongoose* must have been under an overhang when the cannon missed her. The concussion could have knocked loose a small avalanche to wash away the dust.

But...

"Jake!" an unfamiliar voice broke her thought. "I've got it!"

Clint, the Striker lieutenant who hadn't spoken, brushed past Ariel to stride purposefully toward his *Quickdraw*. Pulling off his gauntlet, he looked back at the group, his hatchet face split with a grin of triumph.

"Watch," he said, and extended his bare hand to the metal.

Pop!

Ariel's laser hand twitched reflexively.

Clint hopped back from the 'Mech, flapping his bare hand.

"Should have thought that through," he said at last.

No one had to ask him what he meant, Ariel knew the others were as transfixed as she by the half-meter circle of shiny metal on the side of the *Quickdraw's* foot.

"Static electricity," she said.

"And radioactive dust," Davis finished. "Our sensors aren't damaged, they're blinded by radiation."

"How did you figure that out?" Jacoam asked.

"The *Vindicator's* head is shiny," Clint answered. "Reema's machine is shiny where the broken antenna feed is hitting the armor. Both have sensors."

"A trickle charge to cancel the static," Davis said. "That would keep their sensor arrays clear."

"Any mention of Olson's outfit pulling this particular stunt in their dossier?" Jacoam asked.

"No, but I doubt they've ever done it before," Davis said. "You'd need the arid cold of a place like Acamar to build up enough static charge. They probably discovered the effect completely by accident."

"You tell your people, I'll tell mine," Jacoam said to Ariel. "It's what? A five minute job to run a line from some peanut light they don't need to the base of their sensor array?"

"At most," Ariel agreed.

If my system hadn't automatically cut power to the damaged sensors ...

She let the thought drop.

"The main Landontown/Kalskag highway bridges the other end of this valley, about four klicks north," Jacoam was saying. "As soon as you're ready to roll, my heavies will take point and we'll blast a straight shot into the city."

"That's assuming their other two battalions haven't arrived from Flat," Ariel said. "And that all they have really are lights and mediums, *and* that they are not already massed at one place—like the most probable approach—ready to meet you."

"You've got a better idea?"

"Several," Ariel assured him. "But in the interests of saving time, I suggest we take the main highway only as far as the first interchange—I take it you have a map?"

Jacoam didn't bother to answer, his mouth a hard line.

"From that point we should take secondary roads, working our way around to the north, the side opposite the reinforcements' probable route, and make our way into the city from there."

"If we attack from the outside while the militia attacks from the city—"

"We don't have the reserves," Ariel pointed out. "We will do the government troops—and the people of Acamar—the most good if we arrive in one piece and ready to be a help instead of a burden."



Jacoam let out a long breath. For a moment he glanced about, as though counting insects. Sergeant Chowla, on the other hand, regarded Ariel with eyes like twin lasers.

Better not make any sudden moves.

"You're right," Jacoam said at last. "We'll do it your way. Heavies still take lead."

"Of course."

Kalskag, Acamar
Chaos March
12 October 3066

Four days of running battle. Or maybe a dozen skirmishes. It depended on whether you counted the two ends of a lull as two separate fights. That's what listening to Peregrine had gotten him.

Only not Peregrine. According to his daughter, Peregrine'd been dead for years. The guy he'd been calling Peregrine had been the old man's former XO.

He and Baker Company had waited out the ice storm in the mouth of the mines just as they'd planned. But waiting meant thinking, and the more he'd thought, the more hiding out didn't make sense.

If these guys—Olson's Raiders, Peregrine Junior's answer man had called them—were the first wave of an invasion, waiting for the dust to settle just meant waiting until whoever the new owners were got good and established. So when the ice storm ended, not knowing Peregrine was dead and not knowing who it was they were fighting, Jake had lead his boys down out of the mountains to try and link up with the planetary militia.

And had been wandering around the badlands ever since.

Since his missiles had run out the second day, he'd had plenty of time to wonder if perhaps he should have brought along at least one ammo carrier. But the same rationale that guided his choice at the refinery complex still held. Nothing that couldn't defend itself needed to be out here.

It didn't help to know abandoning the refinery hadn't done any good. The invaders had taken it out anyway, defenders or no. Apparently raw ore was good enough for their masters, and civilian losses an acceptable price for taking the planet.

Fortunately, from all he could tell from the few civilian radio broadcasts he'd picked up, Landontown and the agrodomes had been spared. Apparently, whoever was coming wanted the workers alive and needed to eat as much as the natives did.

And whoever was coming was about to find out Acamar wasn't going to be the walk-through they'd expected.

His *Grasshopper*'s sensors raked through the night, separating the chaff of background noise from the grains of information in the predawn darkness.

Metal ahead, and heat, a lot of it, at extreme range.

"We may have their field repair operation up ahead," he broadcast back to Peregrine Junior.

"Confirmed," was all she said.

Even though she was behind him and half of them were out of commission, the sensors on her *Huron Warrior* had a lot longer reach than his *Grasshopper*.

"Suggest we barrel right into them," he said. "They don't know we're coming, they don't know we can see, and they don't know we've teamed up."

Peregrine Junior surprised him.

"Agreed," she said. Then reverted: "But remember the goal is to break through and join up with the planetary militia. Don't waste time chasing down secondary targets."

"Do tell," he replied before switching to Baker Company's all call. "At the run. Attack."

In a dozen strides his *Grasshopper* was charging down the broad highway at sixty kilometers an hour. Clint and Garner held their *Quickdraws* back, matching speed as the rest of the company surged behind them.

The Rangers saw them coming. The heat readings dropped abruptly as they turned off their welding arcs. Other heat sources, 'Mechs coming to life, vehicle engines moving low to the ground...

"Move left," Peregrine Junior ordered.

Without a word, Jake shifted to the left side of the causeway, Clint and Garner following suit.

The *Huron Warrior* pulled even with them, then ahead, its Gauss rifle extended before it.

"Stick with her," Jake said, and the two *Quickdraws* sped up to pace the smaller machine.

Suddenly the road ahead blossomed in a false dawn, a column of fiery smoke boiling into the sky.

"Munitions truck," Jake said, not caring his microphone picked up his words. "I got empty missile racks and she blows up the munitions truck."

Clint laughed.

Then the battle was joined. Jake's restored sensors told him five *Vindicators*, two *Blackjacks* and an *Enforcer* with a ruined right knee actuator were all that stood in the way of twenty-three charging 'Mechs.

Stomping down hard, he fired his jump jets, leaping through the oily smoke of the burning munitions truck to land only a few meters behind the fleeing *Enforcer*. Not waiting for good tone, he fired his full torso, his large laser and two mediums gouging into the lower back of the smaller machine.

The *Enforcer* fell forward, flailing wildly as its gyroscope assembly tore itself apart.

Scanning for his second target, Jake found none. The broken bodies of 'Mechs and three burning trucks were all that remained of the Ranger force that had harried his men across the badlands.

"Think they got a message off?" Peregrine Junior asked.

"Of course they got a message off," Jake replied. "We're fast, but we're not that fast."

"Secondary roads, then."

"As per plan," Jake agreed. "Two clicks up, take a right."

Content to let the smaller machine take point, Jake took up station in the center of the line, probing ahead and to the right. Odds were long he'd see anything on the side road at this range, but he was feeling lucky.

Three hours later, he still felt lucky. Of course, he also felt bone weary, and gritty, and the taste in his mouth was more than his lukewarm water supply could wash away.

The first rays of dawn were lighting the sky over the Marsa range and they hadn't seen hide nor hair of Olson's Rangers since their one-minute fire fight.

What they could see, looking south from the edge of the Marsa tablelands, was Kalskag. Or, more precisely, the collection of lavender and grey shadows that would resolve itself into Kalskag as

soon as the sun cleared the mountains. They planned on being well on their way into the city by then.

"Straight across the plain won't work," Peregrine Junior was saying.

"We'd be bugs on a plate," he agreed. "Which leaves either cutting back and following the bed of the Antituck River or pushing on and coming in along the coast."

He knew which he'd do, but he didn't voice it. He was curious to see if Peregrine Junior would make the opposite choice before she knew what his was.

"The beach," she cost him his bet with himself by picking the option he liked. "They won't expect us to go that far past the city before doubling back."

"Sounds good to—"

"Captain!" a voice he didn't recognize cut him off.

"What?" he and Peregrine Junior asked as one.

Looking up, Jake saw four points of light, blinding against the cobalt of the pre-dawn western sky. DropShips coming in low, at an angle that would bring them down on the coastal plain outside Kalskag, not the spaceport.

"Cavalry," he said. "We finally get our act together and the cavalry arrives. Where were you guys when we needed you?"

"Captain Jacoam," Peregrine Junior said. "You're broadcasting."

Jake bit back his retort. Did she really think he didn't realize their people could hear him? One more thing she could file under "conduct unbecoming," he guessed.

Field Command Center
First Cunningham's Commandos
Kalskag, Acamar
Chaos March
14 October 3066

"The long and the short of it is we don't want you here," Major Arsinius Foyer said flatly.

Ariel couldn't fault him there. Any objective account of either the Hussars' or the Strikers' actions from the moment the invasion began made both units look like bumbling amateurs.

Which, compared to this group, we are.

Captain Jacoam's "cavalry" had turned out to be the First Regiment of Cunningham's Commandos. The crack mercenary unit had been dispatched from Zurich by Duke Michael Hasek himself. Their response time had been phenomenal. Though it wasn't discussed, Ariel suspected they'd used a close-orbit pirate point to get here so quickly.

The dawn attack they'd witnessed had landed squarely in the center of Olson's entire regiment, minus the lances they'd left searching what was left of Flat for Hussar survivors and the company she and Jacoam had dispatched in the badlands. Nearly half the Rangers had died or been captured in the first few hours. The rest had scattered. Some, Ariel didn't know how many, had made it to the spaceport and gotten off planet in one of their DropShips. Whether they'd make it to the jump point or not was still open to conjecture.

The Commandos had been able to confirm that all of the Strikers' 'Mechs, save those with Captain Jacoam, had been destroyed. Their noncommittal response to the discovery Strikers' support personnel had survived the invasion unscathed spoke volumes about their opinion of Jacoam's methods.

Two weeks ago, Ariel might have agreed with them. Now she was not so sure. She certainly would have traded the Commandos' disapproval for the lives of her people.

All of the Hussars' technical and support personnel, nearly one hundred people, were MIA. Whether killed or captured wasn't clear, but Olson's treatment of Flat was regarded as a war crime

by the Commandos; Ariel wasn't holding out much hope. Enough Footmen had survived, hiding and sniping from cover, to form a platoon. But nearly sixty good men and women were confirmed dead. Of Charlie Company only two 'Mechs remained, and then only because extensive damage had caused each to go to ground.

Factor in lost vehicles, equipment and supplies, and the Hussars had lost eighty percent of their assets, eighty percent of their people, to a series of blunders and bad decisions.

When the messenger from the Commandos' commander had come, requesting the presence of both her and her XO, she'd had to fight down the dread they were going to commandeer the Hussar's 'Mechs and leave her and her people dispossessed and stranded on Acamar. Colonel Longstreet certainly had that authority and, given the mess he'd found, could very well have the inclination.

Jacoam and Chowla had joined Ariel and Davis as they were escorted through unfamiliar streets to the Commandos' command center. The Striker Captain was wearing an open duty jacket with sleeves removed over an olive drab tee shirt and an infantry trooper's field pants. Only the captain's bars pinned incorrectly at his field jacket's collar identified him as anything other than a refugee from a surplus store. The sergeant wore a field jacket of ancient cut decorated with service bars from a dozen campaigns she could not possibly have been involved with over a similar shirt and pants.

Aren't these people ever out of costume? Ariel had wondered, absently tugging the hem of her own neatly pressed field jacket to be sure it hung straight. *And to bring a sergeant as his XO?*

The two captains had exchanged nods before being led through the last series of turns and corridors to this windowless meeting room. Beyond the simple oval table and a dozen straight backed chairs, there were no furnishings.

"Might as well get comfortable," Captain Jacoam said, taking the central seat along one long side of the oval. "Priorities the way they are, we might be in for a long wait."

Sergeant Chowla had, of course, sat down immediately.

Ariel took a long moment to decide Jacoam's logic made sense and that no good was served by not sitting while they waited. She sat opposite Jacoam. Davis followed suit.

The hour they'd waited had passed in near silence. Beyond initial inquiries about the condition of the other's command and brief expressions of satisfaction with their own people, neither captain had anything to say.

The carpet was a medium grey with flecks of reddish brown. The same reddish brown was used in the woodwork that accented the pale blue walls. Ariel decided the Commandos had appropriated the office complex of one of Acamar's corporate giants. She just couldn't see anything to indicate which one.

At last the door had opened and Ariel had moved smoothly to her feet, not too hasty, and come to attention, confident that Davis mirrored her position.

She was surprised to see Jacoam and Chowla rise as quickly on their side of the table. Not attention, exactly, but clearly a show of respect.

The Commandos' officer, Major Foyer, had told them to take their seats, reviewed with them their respective rosters and materiel inventories, then told them they were being deported.

With their 'Mechs.

Ariel had almost whooped.

"There is a captured Ranger DropShip at the space port," Major Foyer was saying as Ariel came down off her initial rush at not being dispossessed. "Wait here while orders are cut. Once you have your hold and berth assignments, you'll have until 0900 local tomorrow morning to get aboard and squared away."

"Where are you sending us?" Jacoam asked.

"You'll be transported to Outreach," the Major said. "The Colonel wants you out of our area of operation, but he knows you'll need to find work."

"Yes, sir," Jacoam grinned. "Thank you, sir."

So he was as scared as I was.

Ariel rose with the others as the major took his leave and promised along with Jacoam to stay put until a corporal returned with their marching orders. She even grinned back at Chowla as the four took their seats.

The tension was definitely out of the room.

To be replaced almost immediately by concerns of a different sort as Ariel began sorting through her father's old friends, wondering who she could contact. Her people were going to need work, and soon.

"Well?" Jacoam asked after a long minute's silence.

Ariel wasn't in the mood for one of his guessing games.

"Well what?"

The big man paused, as if trying to figure out if she was joking or not, then glanced over at his sergeant. Chowla shrugged eloquently and nodded toward Ariel, prompting her commander to continue.

"The way I see it," Jacoam said, "We can let these guys haul us back to Outreach as is. But then what? We knock on doors, hang out in bars and generally waste our time until somebody decides to hire us on. Then we have to work our way back up through the ranks of some new outfit."

Ariel nodded. Though she evidently had better contacts, or at least a more organized plan for finding a new unit willing to take her and her people on, Jacoam's assessment of their future was accurate.

"Or..."

Ariel sat up straighter as she suddenly realized where the other mercenary was going. She was aware of Davis looking at her in surprise, a beat or two slow on the uptake.

"We combine assets," Jacoam spread his hands. "Present ourselves as a new outfit, and go looking for our own contracts."

Ariel stared blankly at his vacuous grin for a moment as she gathered her wits.

"Outfit?" she said at last, anger boiling through. "My people may form a viable fighting force, but your ragtag group of clowns almost got us all killed."

"What almost got us killed, Captain, was your commander—" the flat of an upraised hand blocked her response—"and mine acting like asses. If they'd worked together, these bully boys would never have had to come in and save our butts."

"If Sorensen had followed orders—"

"Stow it."

For a moment their glares locked. If Ariel hadn't promised Foyer she'd wait here for orders, she would have left; returned to her command.

As it was, she sat, rigid. And thought.

"Neither one of us is responsible for the mess we found ourselves in," Jacoam said, surprising her with how closely his thoughts shadowed hers. "Only how we played the game we were handed."

Almost despite herself, Ariel nodded; once.

"All things considered, your people weren't half bad out there," Jacoam added.

"I was surprised by your performance as well, Captain Jacoam."

"First, I'm going to let that slide," Jacoam said, "Because I didn't expect your pretty boys to be worth a piss, either. Second, call me Jake."

"All right, Jake," from the corner of her eye she could see Davis match her pose as she leaned back. Unified front.

The pair across from them presented a different image. Jacoam—Jake—smiling grimly, in his element making a deal. But his Sergeant Chowla shifted her bright eyes from Ariel to Davis and back, ready to pounce at the first wrong move. Terrier personality.

Or a mongoose.

"Just so we're clear," she said to Jake. "Why don't you spell out what you're proposing?"

"You've got fourteen BattleMechs, we've got eleven," he said. "Combined, that's a pretty potent force."

"Not all of ours—or yours, as I understand it—are ready for combat," Ariel pointed out. "For whatever reason, we've both taken some heavy damage."

"That's true now," Jake answered, "But with our techs on it, we'll be battle ready before the first contract comes in."

Ariel exchanged glances with Davis.

"So figure between us," Jake was saying, "We've got twenty-five 'Mechs and a plane..."

"Wait," Ariel broke in. "You had aerospace assets and didn't use them?"

"No," Jake said. "We have a plane, singular. A 'Mechbuster Sorensen bought surplus. It's old, but in good shape; everything works."

"Why didn't you use it?" Ariel pressed. "Granted, one 'Mechbuster isn't much, but you could have—"

"No pilot."

"What?"

"No pilot," Jake repeated. "Sorensen got the plane, fixed it up, then took this gig," He shrugged expansively. "It's in storage on Outreach."

Typical. I can't believe I almost considered going into business with these people.

"Along with that hardware," Jake was saying, "We have enough security and tech people to support a heavy battalion, along with more vehicles and spare parts than we need," Jake paused. "Now there's something I never thought I'd hear myself say."

This time Ariel did not look at Davis. Their lack of technical personnel and support assets would put them at the mercy of whoever employed them for repair and resupply. Not a good bargaining position.

"As I understand it," she said, testing Jake's argument, "many of those parts are for 'Mechs you no longer have. And I doubt you have supplies for our machines."

"Barter," said Jake. "We're going to Outreach."

Ariel nodded, conceding the point.

Against her will she found herself again considering the other mercenary's words.

All that was left of her father's Hussars was little more than a company of badly mauled BattleMechs. Even with the people she knew, the contacts her father had made over the years, finding work—good work at a price her people deserved—was going to be hard.

True, there was a war on and war always meant work for mercenaries. But it also meant dozens, if not hundreds, of bloody

remnants like her own competing for those jobs. Bidding wars that would lead to dead ends like Acamar all over again.

As much as she hated it, Jake's offer was beginning to look like the best deal she'd be able to make for her people.

"Saying we take you on..." she began.

"Oh, no," Jake cut her off. "We don't work for you and you don't work for us. There's no Hussars and no Strikers. This is going to have to be a new outfit. We're not going to carry the stink of this place with us."

Ariel started to protest, then stopped herself. She wasn't so sure a name change would rid them of the stigma of Acamar, but she could see his point. Until her father's Hussars were again a force to be respected, it might be a good idea for them to remain incognito.

"All right," she said. "This new group, whatever we call it, who's in command?"

"We are."

"Shared command? That's nonsense."

"Maybe," Jake conceded. "But maybe after we've done this awhile things will shake themselves out. In the meantime, it's a sure bet you won't take orders from me and you're smart enough not to try and issue your own."

"Okay," Ariel challenged. "But in this meantime of yours, how do you propose we divide command?"

Jake shrugged. "Sixty-sixty?"

Ariel snorted.

"You trust your man Davis, or he wouldn't be here," Jake said. "Sergeant Chowla keeps a clear head when hell is breaking loose. We both know what we're doing, but there're bound to be things we do different."

There's an understatement.

"When that happens, we meet, we work things out," Jake was saying. "If we still don't see eye to eye, Davis tells you if you're being a prig, Chowla tells me if I've got my head up my ass. We get all this hammered out before we get into combat."

Despite herself she started to see how this might work. Not in the long term, of course, unless Jake and his ragtag band of trivid characters was willing to come up to anything like professional standards. But in the short run, it might just be the best way to get her MechWarriors' machines back into fighting trim and maybe hire on a few technical specialists and security personnel along the way.

Not that she'd ever break contract, or leave without offering the former Strikers a chance to serve under her command. But whatever deal was struck here was strictly for the short term. Her father's Hussars—her Hussars—would see action again.

In the meantime...

"So what do you propose we call this new unit we're forming?"

Jake took a breath.

"Wait." This time it was her palm cutting him off. "Before you say a word, nothing with renegades, or raiders, or crusaders, or any other colorful appellation. Something professional that lets our employers and our adversaries know exactly what they're getting into."

"We're supposed to be mercenaries," Jake protested. "Not a law firm. We need a name that shows we mean business."

"Precisely."

"Twenty-five 'Mechs, mostly mediums and lights," Davis spoke for the first time since Foyer had left. "A light regiment, hussar class. We could build on that."

"Build what?" Jake demanded. "We're not using 'hussar' and no one is going to take a fighting force with 'light' in its name seriously."

"Sword of Light," said Davis instantly. "Deneb Light Cavalry."

"Elite RCTs," Jake said. "No one is going to mistake us for one of them."

"Point taken," Ariel conceded. "As long as you take the point that a professional combat force does not rely on catchy nicknames. A no-nonsense declaration of who and what we are tells everyone we're all business and can back it up."

"Maybe," Jake's tone was doubtful. "But what exactly are we?"

Ariel thought for a moment, toting their combined assets. Only one came to mind.

"We're irregulars," she said.

"Okay," Jake drew out the word, his eyes moving about the room.

You can almost hear the wheels turning. What does he see? Cockroaches?

Suddenly the little sergeant laughed, a single bell-like "ha!"

For a giddy second Ariel thought Chowla had overheard the cockroach remark.

I've got to stop that.

"Where are we?" Chowla asked.

"Acamar," Jake answered. "But we don't want..."

"And where is Acamar?"

"The Chaos March," Davis answered.

"So it's a no-brainer," the woman's grin was radiant.

"I'm afraid you've lost me, Sergeant," Ariel said, knowing she spoke for the other two.

"We're an irregular unit born in the Chaos March," Sergeant Chowla spread her hands, palms up, revealing the obvious.

"We're the Chaos Irregulars."

The End...
(for now)

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