

DETERMINATION AT WALLIS

by Kevin Killiany

*Chaos Irregulars
First Deployment
Part 2*

**Karst Highland Jungle, Wallis
Principality of Regulus
Free Worlds League
25 February 3067**

Reema Chowla was dead.

The tree branch whipped past Jake's cockpit, falling away in the darkness.

"Go, go, go!" Jake shouted into the mic. "Proctor, all speed to base. Now!"

If the infantryman acknowledged the order, Jake didn't hear.

Another branch rang against the *Grasshopper's* head. Normally his seventy-ton BattleMech pushed through trees without a thought, but in this jungle tree trunks could be twenty meters around and the branches as thick as 'Mech legs.



At the top of the arc, he began to fall.

Reema—

The road had cut through the shoulder of the mountain, a raw face of clay and rock, towering thirty meters to their right. Reema had been first, scouring the night with her sensors, he in the middle and the Packrat following behind.

"Oh!" Reema had shouted, turning. "Trap!"

She had begun running, her *Mongoose* picking up speed. Then the base of the cliff face had exploded outward in a series of charges. Faster than it took to say, the wall of clay and earth had simply slumped, covering the road.

Crushing the *Mongoose*.

Jake was alive because he'd jumped.

Weapons lock alarm.

He kicked his legs left, using the last gasp of thrust to shove him off his arc. The foliage around him shredded in a swarm of near misses. A hundred-meter hardwood took a Gauss slug in the trunk.

Thermal trails vectored the shooter. Snapping his head right, Jake launched a flight of LRMs at the heat-haloed shape in the darkness before he had a hard lock. Even as the missiles left their tubes, he jumped. Tilted forward to escape the canopy of branches—a dim lattice of phosphor green in the night scope—he leapt for higher ground, trying to get above his attacker.

Attackers.

A second 'Mech jumped, its heat trail a converging arc. Jake cursed as his computer tagged the hostile icon as an *Emperor*. Ninety tons of very serious assault machine. What was it doing outside of Capellan space?

Jake feathered his left jump jet, turning in the air. He was going to land rough, but he was going to land first. If he got position before he hit...

The impact slammed him against his harness. He tasted blood, but his lasers were on target. Good tone. He fired. Polarizers snapped in as all five of his lasers found their mark, boring into the right side and shoulder of the descending 'Mech.

Only the *Emperor's* right arm bore, with too many variables for the LB-10x autocannon to lock quickly enough. The large laser flared and gouts of steam erupted from the soggy loam at Jake's feet.

Missiles cycled and locked, Jake fired a volley the instant the *Emperor* touched down. His weapons lock alarm squealed as the assault 'Mech's autocannons lined up.

With a quick glance at heat gauges hovering near red, Jake bent his *Grasshopper* as low as it would go and scrambled for the cover of a limestone jut. The soft rock dissolved in a hail of cannon fire. Jake kept moving.

Where was the first 'Mech? The *Grasshopper's* sensors gave him nothing. He hoped the delay meant the 'Mech was busy pursuing

the Packrat. If the 'Mech jockey hadn't taken the long range patrol vehicle out in the first shot, he would never catch it.

As if in answer, the other 'Mech broke cover, jumping to head off Jake's escape.

Highlander.

Moving as quickly as possible through the phosphor-on-black jungle, Jake circled back, trying for a course parallel to the service road. Heading for the high ground only made sense if he was going to fight, and there was no win in pitting a seventy-ton *Grasshopper* against a brace of ninety-ton brawlers. His only hope of getting out of this alive was staying ahead of them long enough to get back to the Irregulars.

The *Emperor* jumped, closing the gap. The *Highlander* rose again; vectored to cut him off. With their heavy missile and cannon load-ups, the assault 'Mechs could jump all day without worrying about heat. His *Grasshopper* had more jump than the heavier machines, and he was faster, but he couldn't use either advantage on this jungle covered mountainside. Especially when he had to go around trees they could push through.

Jake hairpinned back, running for the cut they'd tried to collapse on him. If he could clear the morass covering the road and get down to the relatively flat streambed beyond, he might outrun his attackers.

The branches thinned above and his heat read green. Jake hit the pedals, launching into a long, flat downhill trajectory across the ghostly treescape with "bad landing" written all over it. A flight of *Highlander* LRMs flashed overhead, where a sane 'Mech jockey would have been. He hit the sloping ground, the soft loam slipping beneath his 'Mech's feet. He leaned hard, working the sticks as the gyro fought to keep the *Grasshopper* moving.

Barely balanced, not set, he stomped the pedals again. His 'Mech lifted before either enemy could lock on. He was going to make the near edge of the clearing, just above the landslide that had almost buried him. Had buried Reema. A short, dangerous run over open ground and another jump should carry him to the arroyo. Once in the riverbed he was gone.

Thermal flare in the shadows of the jungle to the left of the clearing. Thermal flare right, and heavy metal moving.

It's a whole damn lance of these bastards!

Two *Emperors* that had lain doggo in the shadows, their reactors banked, stepped into the clearing as his *Grasshopper* arced down, helpless in the grip of physics. He twisted for position, turning his 'Mech's torso left and its head right.

The landing rocked, but he fought the stumble. Firing before his machine was stable, he fed the *Emperor* on the right a medium laser and a flight of LRMs. The one on the left got his full torso and left arm, a large laser and three mediums.

In trade he took the full output of four autocannons, the *Grasshopper* thundering like a kettledrum with the impacts.

He kept his machine moving, shuffling, trying to keep it between them so friendly fire problems would limit their shots.

There would be no effort to capture, no chance of surrender and ransom. If Reema hadn't spotted the trap and made them spring it early, these guys would have killed them all and made it look like an accident. Whoever they were, they were making sure there would be no witnesses.

Too close for LRMs to arm, he fired as fast as his lasers would cycle, damning the heat gauges. The wireframe lit up like a Christmas tree, flashing damage reports with every impact.

A ground thud vibrating up through his couch told him one of his pursuers had landed behind him. Probably the *Highlander*—it had been closer. He wasn't going to make the arroyo. He primed the eject. If he could make the trees...

With a scream of tortured metal the 'Mech's left ankle actuator went out. He barely kept his balance as the limb froze.

Not in the back.

Shuffling his right foot, he pivoted about the axle of his rigid leg, turning to face the attackers just as the third *Emperor* landed. The twisted ankle assembly snapped, his left leg buckling forward onto its knee. But Jake kept the *Grasshopper* upright, its right leg splayed out to the side, and leveled both arms at the four assault 'Mechs ranged against him.

The flash of his lasers was lost in a wall of oncoming fire.

Port City, Wallis
Principality of Regulus
Free Worlds League
11 February 3067

Captain Ariel Peregrine, co-commander of the Chaos Irregulars, decided she could get used to the eastern coast of Julia. Compared to the jungle-choked southwestern region, it was magnificent.

Here the continental plate was colliding violently with the ocean's bed, the one tectonic plate thrusting up and over the other at a geologic hyperspeed in the neighborhood of a centimeter a year. The result was a wild and ragged coast of majestic mountains tumbling abruptly—and she imagined sometimes literally—into an emerald sea. Holovid-perfect scenery.

Port City, the planetary capital, straddled the great Bora River in a crescent shape that followed the edge of the deep-water bay. Ariel had glimpsed it briefly when the Chaos Irregulars had arrived on planet, nearly a month ago, but since then her time had been spent almost exclusively on site at Ronin, Incorporated's light Gauss rifle plant in Karst. Now she and Captain Jacoam were spending a day traveling back at the invitation of the Planetary Director.

As their civilian STOL approached from the south, flying shoulder-high to the great mountains as it followed the coast, Ariel could see the towers of seven suspension bridges spanning the kilometers-wide Bora. The mountains fell away westward, and she could trace the tidal pull of Wallis' lone and massive moon by how far the distinctive silver of vegetation adapted to the brackish water of the estuary cut into the deep bluegreen foliage of the Bora Valley.

"I don't think I've ever seen that many boats in one place," Jacoam broke into her thoughts from his seat across the aisle.

Looking diagonally ahead through a window on his side of the plane, Ariel saw Bora Bay was dotted with hundreds of brightly colored sails, vibrant in the bright sunlight. The white vees of crisscrossing wakes pointed to the streamlined shapes of a dozen variety of power craft weaving their way through the flotillas of sailing vessels.

"With these mountains, water traffic along the coast makes sense," she commented.

Jacoam didn't quite sigh, but as he continued to watch the boats below his body language indicated she'd missed the point of his comment.

Ariel couldn't imagine why he found the spectacle of people forced to risk their lives on open water so entertaining. There was a lot about her co-commander's thinking that still eluded her.

Though she had to admit his sense of public relations was spot on. When they'd taken up residence in Karst—a factory town several thousand kilometers to the southwest of Port City—a few weeks ago, Jacoam had quickly determined they were going to spend a lot more time interacting with the local civilians than they were with the distant planetary militia.

Seeing Ronin, while restoring their own facilities quickly, had made no effort to help the civilians with collateral damage from the pirate raids, Jacoam had begun a program of community service; supporting citizen restoration efforts without taking over. He'd also instituted a policy of buying all supplies from local sources at retail.

At first she had questioned the wisdom of both these policies. Conventional wisdom held increased interactions with the natives increased the chances of a security leak. But by the second week the citizens of the isolated town were greeting the Irregulars with smiles and waves. By the third, local merchants were offering discounts. And, as Ariel was pleased to have figured out without Jacoam explaining, the Irregulars had become familiar enough with the pulse of the town that any change would be immediately apparent.

Ariel and Jacoam had continued the policy of civilian relations by purchasing tickets on the lone independent commercial carrier that served Karst. The short take-off and lander, apparently a standard for smaller markets, was a twin-engine propeller craft. Instead of the straight flight from Karst to Port City a Ronin VTOL would have made, the sturdy little plane had made a hop over the coastal mountains to Petersburg, the commercial carrier's hub, where it had refueled for the longer flight northward along the ocean's edge. Ariel calculated the roundabout itinerary added nearly two hours to their travel time. But based on response to Jacoam's other policies in Karst, she was sure the investment would somehow pay off in the long run.

Port City—Ariel could not remember if this was the fourth or fifth "Port City" she had visited on various worlds—was clean and airy.

There was a sharp tang carried on the fitful winds whipping across the tarmac as they made their way from the plane to the terminal building. Herbal, she decided, not chemical, but beyond that she couldn't place it.

As the food locker of Wallis, Port City was the only urban center not dominated by manufacturing weapons, vehicles, or equipment for Ronin. The bulk of its industry focused on packaging and distributing the produce of the farms and ranches covering the upper plains just beyond the valley.

The air terminal was like any other on a thousand different worlds. High ceilinged and open for easy observation, dotted with shops, artificial plants and food kiosks. Ariel caught herself wondering who was responsible for decorating the place in manic-depressive blue and dead fish belly white. Four hours in a propeller plane had affected her mood more than she'd realized.

A few green uniforms accented with gold piping among the blue-grey of civilian security along the wide concourse caught Ariel's eye. Wallis Planetary Militia, she realized. Not many, but a few augmenting local peacekeepers. That militia presence was light at the airport was not a mystery; most would be stationed near the lone spaceport and at other key points of planetary defense. What was interesting was that there were any at all.

The Ronin representative had described the Wallis Planetary Militia as a mixed reinforced battalion. It was actually four full companies, two each of armor and infantry and one demi-company of six BattleMechs.

Those few BattleMechs said the most about Wallis's relationship to the rest of the Principality of Regulus and the Free Worlds League as a whole. Their heaviest machines were two *Chameleons*, hand-me-down 7Vs from a Free Worlds League training academy, while the other four were older-design light and medium machines suited to close combat. On a planet where both *Marauders* and *Warhammers* were produced—Ariel was still kicking herself for forgetting Ronin made anything other than machineguns—it seemed odd the local militia had neither machine.

She and Lieutenant Davis had said as much their first day on planet.

"You forget," Jacoam had said. "We're on Wallis."

"So?"

"So they have a long history of independent thinking," the Free Worlds League native had explained. "The sort most folks label as rebellious.

"Forty years ago the local militia threw a company of the First Regular Hussars off the planet; took the FWLM nearly a year to take it back," Jake had shrugged. "Wallis militia hasn't been trusted with their own weapons, much less 'Mechs, until maybe a decade ago. I'd be surprised if they've been guarding the planet on their own for over a year. The LCCC would make sure the militia had enough modern firepower to defend Wallis against raiders until the cavalry arrives. But no way they're going to allow enough heavy ordnance for them to let any ambitions get beyond that.

"You said there was a lance of heavy 'Mechs on site?" Jacoam had smiled a crooked smile. "Guaranteed they're Ronin, Incorporated's private property."

Ariel was inclined to ignore the militiamen watching them so closely, but Jacoam made a point of acknowledging each with a nod. No smiles, just professional courtesy. Trusting his social, or strategic, sensibilities, she followed suit. By her count about a third responded.

As the chauffeured ground car provided by the office of the Planetary Director made its way along the causeway connecting the airport to the city proper, Ariel could see the jutting headland that framed the northern end of the bay. The extensive estate of the Marquis de Wallis, its white marble walls fairly glowing in the sunlight, sprawled along its crest. The planetary information file did not include Jacoam's history lesson, leaving the casual tourist to wonder why the local nobility was excluded from administering the world that bore their family name.

The office of the Planetary Director was palatial. The peach colored walls of the high ceilinged chamber were frescoed with abstract patterns, and Moorish arches opened onto a wide balcony. Ariel noted the panoramic view of the city. The bay beyond was framed by foliage placed to block any view of the northern headland.

Tindale, the Planetary Director, was a portly man of imposing height whose thinning hair swept neatly across his bald pate. His eyes, beneath thick and upswept brows, were an improbable shade of blue and Ariel had the impression his cherubic face was accustomed to smiling.

Not so Winthrop. The Colonel of the Wallis Planetary Militia was as thin as Tindale was wide. His eyes, deep set on either side of his narrow nose, shifted from one to the other and back like gun turrets trying to cover two targets.

Initial pleasantries out of the way, the director had his two guests ensconced in wing-backed chairs facing his desk, while Winthrop sat in a more utilitarian seat to his left. Ariel was aware of the herbal scent on the cool breeze from the open balcony and the cry of some shore bird beyond.

A steward entered, carrying a tray laden with canapés, which he offered first to Ariel, then to Jacoam. Hungry from the long flight, she did not hesitate to place half a dozen of the more interesting on the little plate provided. Jacoam easily doubled her number. Winthrop followed suit, his expression coming close to a smile as he made his selection from the tray.

A second steward bore a tray with four fluted glasses and a bottle of amber wine.

"I think you'll enjoy this," Tindale assured his guests as he watched his man prize the cork from the bottle. "This is a recent vintage we're quite proud of, from the Frijon region."

Ariel had no idea where the Frijon region was and concluded it was beyond tactical range of the Ronin plant at Karst.

The wine itself was tart with a fruity aftertaste that suited the canapés well. As she focused on not wolfing down her food, Ariel wished she'd snagged a half dozen more.

Her fears of starvation were allayed moments later, however. As they made polite conversation about travel and local climate, a platter of sweetmeats was placed on the table between their chairs and the wine glasses refilled.

Their host seemed particularly interested in their observations of the golden auroras of the Wallis system. Actually great bands of dust and debris that filled the elliptic lens, the auroras filled the morning and evening skies with gossamer sheets of glittering light that seemed almost artificial. He explained what a hazard to navigation they were. Though so diffuse as to be effectively immaterial, their metallic content made instrumentation unreliable.

Ariel refrained from sharing the Chaos Irregulars' own experience with sensor-clouding fogs of metallic mist. She nodded her agreement with Jacoam's description of how dramatic the phenomenon

had appeared from the observation deck of the DropShip as they had made their way in from the jump point. Beautiful as it was, the potential cumulative damage from millions of micro impacts with the particle clouds had added a few days to their inward journey.

Tindale had nodded in sympathy with that last, explaining that emergency rescue vessels stood by at both zenith and nadir jump points. Ariel was unclear as to exactly why they were there, but accepted the information without bringing up her own unfamiliarity with the dangers of JumpShip and DropShip navigation.

It wasn't until the last of the servitors left, closing the double doors of the office behind her, that Tindale brought the conversation around to more immediate concerns.

"What is the disposition of your forces here on Wallis?" he asked, the bald question couched in pleasantly conversational tones.

"We're positioned in and around Karst," Jacoam answered promptly, "Deployed to defend the city and the Ronin light Gauss rifle plant from attack."

"Is defending the city part of your contract?" Winthrop's voice held more edge than the director's.

"Not really," Jacoam admitted. "But, given its proximity, including it in our defensive perimeter seemed practical."

Winthrop grunted.

Ariel didn't blame him. The plant's location near the city did make defending both possible, but no tactician would mistake increasing their area of responsibility fivefold for a practical decision.

"You seem unusually forthcoming on the terms of what should be a private contract."

"The contract is publicly registered in the Hiring Hall on Outreach," Jacoam countered. "We have no problem discussing matters of public record, nor—with the exception of tactical information—any of our actions here on Wallis."

"We do not have immediate access to the public registry on Outreach," Tindale said, his statement an invitation.

"Raiders have hit Ronin's plant at Karst three times in the last year," Jake said. "They lost several weeks' production and the town itself was damaged. Our task is to ensure it doesn't happen again."

"So your job, as it were, is to sit tight at Karst, deterring any hostile visitors?"

Something in the director's tone pricked Ariel's ears. Suspicion? Hostility?

"Essentially."

"No provision for visiting other Ronin plants on Wallis?" Tindale pressed. "Perhaps establishing protective garrisons in other cities?"

"Ah." Jacoam visibly relaxed. "I can assure you, Mister Director, nothing in our contract in any way involves interfering with civil affairs on Wallis."

This was about their history of rebellion, Ariel realized. The local people must regard the FWLM garrisons defending Wallis as offworld occupation forces. They'd suspected the Irregulars had been hired by Ronin to keep an eye on *them*. That explained the cold stares of the militiamen.

"Our contract stipulates we protect the light Gauss rifle plant," she said, adding what little weight her own word might carry to Jacoam's assurances. "Though there is provision for the Chaos Irregulars to take part in any off-world pirate hunts, there is no mention of other Ronin plants on Wallis, nor any other location on your world."

"Off-world pirate hunts?" The colonel seemed surprised at the suggestion.

"Yes, sir," she confirmed. "Though we lack our own ships, we have some experience in that area."

Jacoam nodded, his face poker straight. Their experiences with pirates had been as members of separate commands, before the formation of the Irregulars. To date the Chaos Irregulars hadn't faced any adversary as a unit, something she didn't want to advertise.

"Perhaps you would be willing to share any insights you may have on the pirate raids?" she asked, moving on before the colonel pressed for details. "Anything that might help us defend Karst against the next attack would be appreciated."

The two Wallis natives regarded their visitors for a long minute without speaking. The colonel seemed to reach some sort of decision.

"Mister Director, with your permission—"

"Just press the button, Chuck," said Tindale.

Without comment, Winthrop pressed a control on the arm of his chair and the lights dimmed.

The sunlight from the arched windows did not reach the director's desk directly, but the ambient light made the holographic projection that appeared above the director's desk ghostly. It took Ariel a heart-beat to recognize the translucent golden globe with a fiery spark at its center as a representation of the dust-choked Wallis system.

"Each raid has coincided with the arrival of a commercial JumpShip," Winthrop said in briefing tones, confirming the information Ronin had provided. "Usually when other JumpShips are already on station and several DropShips are en route."

JumpShips appeared around the zenith and nadir charging station with their attendant rescue vessels as a dozen DropShips wove their way through the dust clouds to Wallis. None of the images were to scale, of course, or everything but the primary would have been invisible. Each of the ships was larger than the sun, while Wallis dominated the image.

When the overlapping vectors of their approaching DropShips were at their most complex, a red point of light Ariel surmised represented an attack began flashing on Wallis. The attacks were timed for when traffic conditions made it most difficult to determine the ship from which they'd originated. Someone clearly had a thoroughly detailed knowledge of DropShip operations in the Wallis system. Her suspicion of an inside job, which had arisen when Colonel Olstein had first proposed this mission back on Outreach, seemed confirmed.

The animation stopped and replayed from the beginning.

Ariel glanced over at her co-commander and saw his eyes darting from point to point within the holoimage. She recognized what she called Jacoam's bug watch, the tell that his mind was racing, putting together details to form a whole. She was pleased she'd been a bit ahead of him on this one.

"Everything I've seen of the Wallis Planetary Militia indicates a high level of professionalism," she said, addressing Winthrop, "but we are here because Ronin had some concerns about the WPM's response time when their plant was attacked. Would you give me your thinking on that?"

"Ronin has plants all over Julia which produce everything from armor plate to heavy BattleMechs," Winthrop answered, nodding toward the holoimage.

The globe of the Wallis system was replaced with an image of the planet itself, which rotated until Julia, the only populated continent, was facing Ariel and Jacoam. Cities with unfamiliar names appeared as white circles. Most were clustered along the eastern coast, though a few dotted the great plains of the northwest. Only one, Karst, was in the rainforest choked highlands of the southwest. With the tap of another button, red "R"s appeared, no doubt demarking Ronin facilities, though they were not labeled. These, too, followed the coast and the major rivers, with only one far from the others in the jungle region of Karst.

"With so many targets available," Winthrop said, "some producing materiel more valuable than the light Gauss rifle, we strongly suspect these attacks on the most remote facility are actually diversionary. Their purpose is to draw our forces away from the real targets—most likely the BattleMech plants."

Ariel nodded, following his reasoning.

"Also," Tindale put in for the first time, "Ronin has given us to believe they have a lance of heavy BattleMechs, two *Warhammers* and two *Marauders*, guarding the plant and Karst."

Again Ariel nodded. The Chaos Irregulars had seen no sign of the heavy 'Mechs, but that was not information to be shared. With the mercenaries forbidden to enter the plant compound itself, it was reasonable to assume the machines were hidden in one of the anonymous buildings ready to engage any force that might fight its way past the Irregulars.

Jacoam asked a few questions, determining that the WPM had no solid intel on the composition of the raiding force, never having engaged it directly.

From there the conversation drifted back to social generalities. As she sneaked a few more sweetmeats onto her plate, Ariel reflected this public relations junket had gone very well indeed.



"Okay, what is it?" Ariel demanded.

Jacoam had been nearly silent the entire trip from Port City to Karst. She'd respected his evident preoccupation while they were in public, but now in the privacy of their shared office, she rounded on him.

On the second floor of the administrative building near the main gate of the compound provided by Ronin, the room looked like every other middle management office in the Inner Sphere. About five meters square, it held two desks, one couch, a situation table, and an assortment of artificial plants and mass-produced paintings. The single picture window offered a view of the factory complex that had brought them here against the backdrop of a jungle-covered peak.

"Communication is the key to joint command," Ariel prompted, quoting one of Jacoam's catchphrases.

Jacoam held up a cautionary hand without comment. Pulling a flat metal box about the size of a cigarette case from an inner pocket, he pressed the single button on one flat side. A small red diode lit as a thin whine at the edge of hearing set Ariel's teeth on edge.

A white noise generator, she realized. It wouldn't interfere with normal speech, but would render any mechanical listening device, whether transmitting or hardwired, useless.

Setting the jamming device on the corner of his desk, Jake scooped a throw pillow off the couch and perched one hip on the window sill. Placing the pillow between his shoulder and the pane, he leaned against it and casually crossed his arms. Anyone with a laser microphone hoping to record their conversation from the glass vibrating to their voices would be sadly disappointed.

"Should we speak in pig Latin?" Ariel asked. "In case there's someone with their ear to the wall?"

"Some things you just have to risk," Jake said. "But do me a favor and don't look toward the window when you speak. They can read lips."

"And just who is 'they'?"

"Probably no one," Jake admitted. "But why take chances?"

Ariel stifled a sigh.

Sorensen's Strikers had been a different sort of mercenary group than her father's Hussars. She suspected he had far more experi-

ence in dealing with underhanded adversaries—or even dishonest employers—than she. Whether these experiences had made him sensitive to possible deception or simply given him bad habits remained to be seen. Jake certainly seemed to be serious about the need for cloak and dagger precautions and for the moment that was good enough for her. Glancing about, she settled on one of the generic department store paintings.

“Care to tell me what this is all about?” she asked the painting.

“We won’t be getting any bonus money for off-world pirate hunts,” Jake said.

She snapped around to look at him. He was serious.

“Why do you say that?” she asked, not bothering to address the painting. Any unseen observers would have no trouble with her body language in any case.

“What did you notice about our Mr. Tindale?” Jake asked in apparent non sequitur. “Personally.”

Ariel felt her mouth twist.

She did not like what she thought of as Jake’s guessing games, but she realized they were a part of how he processed information. What had he called it back on Acamar? A parity check. He wanted to see how closely her thinking paralleled his.

She turned back to consider the painting.

“He’s still not sure of us,” she said. “Though he was a lot less suspicious by the end of the interview than he was at the beginning.

“Did you notice anything about the timing of the pirate raids?”

“As Ronin said, they coincide with the regularly scheduled commercial arrivals—” Ariel stopped.

The painting in front of her disappeared as she replayed Tindale’s holoivid of the Wallis system: The great globe of golden dust, the emergency vessels at both jump points, the intricate DropShip approaches...

“The raiders are based on planet.”

“Very good.”

The small flush of pride at Jacoam’s praise surprised her.

"The jump points are too closely monitored for pirates to piggy-back," she explained her logic, lest he think it had been a guess. "And the pirate points in this system are so choked with dust they're useless."

Ariel rose and strolled around the table. Coming to the wall a few meters from Jake, out of sight of the window, she crossed her arms in an echo of his casual pose, one shoulder to the plaster.

"Another rebellion?" she asked.

"If it is, the government isn't in on it," Jake pointed out. "The Director went out of his way to spell it out for us."

"And just because they're on planet now doesn't mean they were always here."

"Right," Jake agreed. "They could have arrived piecemeal—on commercial carriers, even—until they had their base established."

"So we've either got local rebels, working outside the government," Ariel summed up, "or off-world raiders with a local foothold."

"Given their evident 'Mech assets, I'm leaning toward off-worlders," Jake said. "But I'm keeping my mind open until all the facts are in."

"And you think Ronin knows all about this?"

"How long did it take us to figure it out?"

"So why do they have us watching the skies?"

Jake stood away from the window and began to pace. Ariel saw him remember the window and eavesdropping lasers after his second step. He casually returned to his vibration dampening pose.

"Same reason they tell us what buildings to guard, but not what's inside," he said. "We're hired guns. They're probably hoping that just by having us between whatever it is we're guarding and whoever it is wants to get at it, they've solved their problem."

"But if our simple presence is not a deterrent and the raiders hit again," Ariel said. "We'll be looking the wrong way. That could cost lives."

"Ronin either has a lot of respect for our ability to think on our feet," Jake said, "or us losing our lives is not a real problem for them."

Karst, Wallis
Principality of Regulus
Free Worlds League
17 February 3067

Ariel suspected Karst had been named by a geologist who either lacked imagination or had a rotten sense of humor. The small city was nestled among jagged limestone peaks in a region of meandering streams, deep lakes and frequent sinkholes.

As the warm, moist air from the equatorial sea rose on its way to the continent's central plateau, it cooled. About half its water vapor fell as rain along this wall of broken limestone hills, creating the Karst Highlands Jungle.

Which was a disconcerting misnomer, Ariel thought as she pulled her field parka more tightly about her.

A jungle should be tropical. A humid sweathouse, sweltering in the high thirties, with thick foliage that teamed with creatures of all descriptions.

The jungle around Karst did teem with life, a mind numbing proliferation of plants from tiny mosses to trees larger than most buildings provided food and habitat for thousands of species of birds and mammals she couldn't classify. And the humidity was certainly here. The nights were shrouded in mists and fog while every day began and ended in dismal drizzles. The watery sunshine of late morning filtering through the gaps above seemed unnatural.

But despite the visual, aromatic, and auditory evidence around her, Ariel would never mistake Karst for the tropics. Natives assured her that in the height of summer, the temperatures here seldom rose above twenty. And on this spring day, as she crunched her way along the gravel path, she doubted it had reached ten. If she didn't consider it a duty to support Jacoam as he presented the Chaos Irregulars to the Ronin inspector, she would have been inside with a hot tea.

Originally the Karst region had been mined for phosphates and quarried for limestone. Played out circular pit mines and hollow rectangles carved into the hillsides had been reclaimed by jungle decades ago.

One pit mine was now carpeted with junked ordnance; a boneyard. Most of the wrecks were tanks and transports, though the

partial remains of 'Mechs could be seen. Darryl Silverlake, their chief engineer, insisted one anonymous fuselage had been a *Lyonesse*. It was difficult to imagine how tens of thousands of tons of scrapped assets had come to be in an abandoned pit mine on Wallis, but like so much around the Karst facility, Ronin offered no explanation.

On the other side of the Ronin plant a quarry had been surrounded by a high wall. Vehicles, particularly tanks and 'Mechs, were dragged by Ronin tractors from the pit mine to the quarry, apparently for use as targets in live-fire tests of the light Gauss rifles.

The Irregulars were not permitted to examine the facility they were guarding too closely, nor did they have access to the firing range. But from what Ariel could observe of the damaged carcasses dragged to and from the quarry, the Ronin engineers were experimenting with developing different projectile designs for the LGR.

"That's solving a problem that doesn't exist," Jacoam had protested when she'd suggested it to him. "And creating a bunch you don't need."

"In what way?"

"Gauss projectiles are already balanced to give the best range for the mass," Jacoam held his hands apart, indicating a hypothetical Gauss rifle round. "Make it longer and thinner, or shorter and wider, and you degrade the range, the accuracy, even the amount of kinetic energy delivered to the target."

"What about a sabot round?" Ariel suggested. "A sharp, narrow, core of depleted uranium surrounded by nickel-iron? It would penetrate any armor."

"The Immortal Warrior and the Siege of the Saracens,'" Jacoam answered. "The same episode in which he used a polished metal medallion to deflect a hand laser. Not one of the best. The fourth Warrior was never as good as the second."

Ariel was glad her complexion hid her blush. She hadn't expected the Free Worlder to be familiar with what she'd always thought of as a legendary hero of Fed Suns holovids.

"The reason every Gauss rifle in the Sphere doesn't fire sabot rounds is the same as why BattleMechs don't carry mirror shields to fend off lasers," Jacoam was saying. "It's bad science. The density differential between the core and the casing would shred the round before it left the barrel."

"Since when have you been a weapons expert?" she asked.

"Since April of 3065," Jacoam grinned. "Which is when Sorensen tried to commission a small-time munitions maker to outfit him with some sabot Gauss slugs based on that episode."

Ariel held Jacoam's eye for a long moment, but could not tell if the blonde giant was kidding.

Whatever the reason for Ronin's vehicle graveyard and shooting range, the presence of all that heavy metal added a layer of difficulty to their guard duty. Though their sensors had no trouble with the limestone terrain or the dense rainforest, the tremendous number of potential targets confused the tactical situation. Particularly since the hulks routinely moved from pit to quarry were often left somewhere between the two for no apparent reason, or the piles in the pit rearranged as techs searched for a particular type of armor or vehicle profile to target.

The Irregulars had been getting in a little live-fire practice of their own. Refining their skills at separating the dead hulks confusing the landscape from hostile units using them for cover, both here in the junkyard and on obstacle courses Jacoam had set up in the jungle. There was always some form of training going on.

Coming in sight of Jacoam towering beside a dark haired man who really was wearing a business suit in the middle of the frigid jungle, Ariel straightened from her heat-conserving hunch. She kept herself at a steady parade walk as she crossed what the Irregulars called their parade ground, eyeing the well-turned out troops beyond the two men.

Standardizing the command structure had not been as difficult as Ariel had anticipated. She'd simply instructed her former left-entrants to answer to "lieutenant." Jacoam had met her half way by summarily promoting all sergeants piloting 'Mechs to lieutenant, junior grade.

The exception, of course, was Chowla. Ariel could imagine the *Mongoose* pilot commanding an RCT and still insisting on her sergeant's stripes. With twenty-five 'Mechs it was easy enough to designate her an independent scout and keep the kinks out of the chain of command. If being the lowest ranking MechWarrior fazed Chowla at all, she gave no sign. She promptly obeyed the orders of any officer with the nerve to give her one.

Lance structure remained fluid as she and Jacoam experimented with combinations, trying to find the right mix of personalities and

firepower. Again their divergent philosophies had led to conflict. Jacoam favored specialized lances, each organized to do a specific job as a unit. Ariel preferred to have each lance be as balanced as possible and thus more adaptable to a variety of situations.

They had compromised. To a degree.

Acknowledging that his most qualified officers piloted heavies, Jacoam had broken up his heavy lance, making Lieutenants Heather and Clint leaders of First Company's Beta and Gamma lances.

Ariel in her turn had conceded Jacoam's argument for developing what he called a "smash and grab" unit: a lance organized to make quick, independent forays into hostile territories for recon or quick raid missions. She'd given up Davis, her right hand since she'd led her first lance, to command the specialized lance. After days of interviews and evaluations, he'd tapped Grainger Christian, Troy Truman, and Cynthia Josepha "CJ" Cherry for his team. Ariel thought the combination of *Phoenix Hawk*, *Spector*, *Dervish*, and *Firestarter* managed to satisfy her sense of balance and Jacoam's fondness for special-purpose lances quite nicely.

The four of them had been training together for the past two weeks. Yesterday had been spent on an extended round of "find the Chowla" in the lower piedmont region and swamps below Karst. Davis had pronounced himself well pleased with their performance and even Sergeant Chowla had expressed grudging approval of Christian, the only member of the team to actually "tag" her.



"As you can see," Jacoam said an hour later, pointing to an instrument display bolted to the gutted control panel of the antique tank, "the passive sensors respond to an incoming vehicle and trigger the active array. This in turn pings the target, showing up on its sensors as a targeting system."

"Not very original," sniffed Walters, the Ronin suit reviewing their defenses.

The four of them, Jacoam, Ariel, Walters, and a tech whose name eluded Ariel, were jammed into the crew section of a tread-

less Bulldog. The review of the standing BattleMechs and infantry had been mercifully brief and Captain Jacoam was now showing some of their more esoteric defenses.

"Not at all original," Jacoam grinned easily, patting the bulkhead. "Any incoming seeing this setup will be ninety percent certain they're dummies.

"But that ten percent doubt can divide their attention, throw their timing that much off."

Walters snorted, clearly not convinced, and pulled himself out of the turret.

Jacoam followed, still glib as a used ground car salesman about the extent of their preparations.

Ariel nodded to the technician as she reached for the ladder, then paused. The screens and dial faces set into the rusted panel at the technician's elbow were clean. Leaning closer in the dim light she saw at least one of them was new.

She glanced again at the tech, whose eyebrows were now raised in a near comic expression of desperate innocence.

"These systems are live, aren't they?" she demanded.

The tech took a quick inventory of exits.

"Some of them," he admitted.

"Is this tank operational?"

"No, ma'am, not this one," the tech answered. "Not all the way."

"Not all the way?"

"We've got turret rotation and weapons elevation," the young man said, forgetting his fear as he pointed to the relevant controls. "Left SRM rack is a goner, but we've trued up the right. Found a barrel assembly for the right side AC/2. That's going on in a couple of days. Nights."

"And what do you intend to do with an immobile Bulldog with one four-rack and one AC/2?"

"Surprise the hell out of somebody," the tech grinned. "There's an escape hatch and tunnel out the bottom. One salvo, two if there's time, then out."

"How many surprises like this do we have?"

"Not too many," the tech rubbed the side of his jaw. "All the ones we show the Ronin suits are dummies are really live. Three or four others. We got turrets and at least one gun each. No mobility. Yet. The great thing about ICEs is, if you find enough parts you can make them work."

Ariel cocked an eyebrow at the younger man.

"What you're telling me is, if we're stationed here long enough, you'll add a company of armor to our roster."

"Doing our best, ma'am," the tech grinned. Then honesty overtook him. "From what I've seen of these hulks, ma'am, we'll be lucky to get a light platoon."

A light platoon? Then she remembered in the Free Worlds League Military a platoon was up to six vehicles; a light platoon must be what she considered a platoon: four tanks. The technical crew thought they could cobble together four functional tanks from the boneyard and add them to the Irregulars' inventory without Ronin noticing. She had no idea how realistic that plan was, but it had Captain Jacoam written all over it.

Ariel nodded solemnly.

"Carry on."

Karst, Wallis
Principality of Regulus
Free Worlds League
25 February 3067

"You're working late."

Sergeant Major Pauls looked up at the sound of Ariel's voice. He was seated at his terminal in the ops office, his exclusive domain now that the initial restructuring was complete. Davis had returned to the cockpit of his *Phoenix Hawk*. He habitually worked second watch since, as he'd pointed out, everyone he might need to talk to is awake at some point on the second.

But now it was 22:00, and finding the efficient sergeant major still at his desk two hours after shift was unusual enough to warrant comment.

"Port City HPG just forwarded our squeal from Outreach," he explained. "Thought I'd get it broken down and distributed tonight, save me rushing in the morning."

"Anything interesting?"

"Two offers to buy the 'Mechbuster, neither one near our asking price," Pauls read from his terminal. "Three applications from 'Mechbuster pilots with attached references."

"Anything interesting?" Ariel repeated.

Pauls smiled and paged through several screens.

"The Chinese Bandits say thanks for the tech personnel we loaned them," he said. "Colonel Gubser adds she's offered them permanent positions at more than we pay, but they insist they're Chaos Irregulars looking forward to being reattached."

"Tell her... No, I'll send her a note."

"Job offers," he tapped his monitor. "Highest pay offer is the Marian Hegemony."

Ariel shook her head. It might be profitable, but the idea of working for pirates didn't interest her.

"Another—" Pauls read from a new screen. "That's odd."

"What?"

"The Ludwigshafen job offer is back."

"The job's still open?"

"No, ma'am," Pauls rotated his screen so she could read the notice. "Same job, but new bid date and the offer's up twenty percent."

"The same job open again three months later," Ariel's eyes narrowed in thought. "Anyone from Outreach would have just had time to take a good look and turn it down. But if they hired someone closer..."

"See if you can find out if anyone took it," she told Pauls, "and whether they survived their failure."

"You're not interested in taking it?"

"We'll probably be here for months," Ariel pointed out. "I'm just interested in what happened. If the coin had flipped the other way, that would have been us."

Pauls chuckled. Opening a screen he entered an inquiry to be routed back to their rep on Outreach with the outgoing packet.

"Got a local message from what appears to be a conservation group," Pauls pulled up another screen. "They ask we not fire weapons in the rainforest, but restrict our practice fire to the quarry areas."

"You're kidding."

"I'm not."

Ariel nodded. The sergeant major wouldn't have mentioned the message at all if he'd thought it was spurious. Someone was calling their attention to the jungle, but whether it was to warn them of something or to trick them into looking the wrong way wasn't clear. It was the sort of circular thinking puzzle Jacoam loved.

However, her co-commander was currently engaged in something else he also loved. He in his *Grasshopper*, Sergeant Chowla in her *Mongoose* and Sergeant Proctor and a squad of infantry in the Irregulars' sole Packrat were playing aggressors. At some point this evening, the defensive perimeter was going to be probed.

Ariel suspected the aggressor missions served a second purpose.

Captain Jacoam had been searching for the truth behind Ronin's story ever since their meeting with Winthrop and Tindale. She had no doubt he and his scouts were spending their hours beyond sensor range on some deep recon of the jungle. Or rainforest, as the ecologists' communiqué called it.

"What is the difference between a rainforest and a jungle?" she asked Pauls.

"Situational vocabulary."

"How do you figure?"

"A rainforest is a dense biome thick with diverse life forms which can be harvested," the sergeant major explained. His tone told her she was not the first to bring up the subject. "A jungle is a dense biome thick with diverse life forms that's between you and whatever you want."

"So the original inhabitants who named this place the Highland Jungle..."

"Were mining phosphates and quarrying the limestone," Pauls nodded. "Nowadays it's wood products and pharmaceuticals that fuel the local economy. Hence, the jungle has become a rainforest."

"So someone might have a legitimate reason to ask us not to burn the place down?"

"Someone with the comm savvy to attach a local message to our HPG download?" Pauls frowned. "Maybe."

Ariel filed the question for later brainstorming with Jacoam.

"What are the odds on tonight's assault?" she asked, changing the subject.

"Usually with Chowla on offense, nobody bets defense," Pauls said. "But tonight Smash and Grab is on static defense, so there's even money."

"Which side did you bet on?"

"I've known Sergeant Chowla a long time."

"Too late to bet now?" Ariel asked.

"Betting closed with the watch change," Pauls replied. Then the captain's too-innocent tone registered. "Why?"

Instead of answering, Ariel picked up the communicator handset and keyed the hangar. Ignoring Pauls' stunned expression, she ordered her *Huron Warrior* prepped.

"Changing the teams after betting's closed is against the rules," Pauls protested.

"Gambling is against regulations," Ariel countered. "You can't break one rule then protest if someone else breaks another."

Leaving the fuming Pauls, she strolled down the corridor toward the communications center. Knowing Jacoam, she estimated she had at least an hour before making her unscheduled addition to patrol duty.

Music.

Ariel paused, one step inside the comm center, and listened. A wistful tune, simple, on a woodwind instrument she did not recognize.

Evidently sensing her presence, the sergeant of the watch reached to shut off the speaker.

"Leave it, Sergeant Gomez."

Gomez turned his head, not taking his eyes from the repeater screens, but acknowledging her presence. As a courtesy, Ariel stepped forward, to the edge of his field of vision. Letting him know she was neither watching him nor seeking his attention.

The eight repeater screens of the watch console displayed the sensor readouts of the eight BattleMechs currently on patrol. Reading labels, Ariel could see Lieutenant Heather's lance, One Beta on the roster, was on active patrol while Davis', Two Beta when people remembered not to call it Smash and Grab, held position at the designated strong point. Ideally, each 'Mech should have two others in sight at all times, but the realities of the jungle meant they often saw only one. Or none.

The music was coming from one of the stationary 'Mechs, obviously. No one had yet devised a way to pilot a BattleMech hands free. Ariel suspected every mercenary command had at least one MechWarrior who serenaded himself and whoever wanted to tune in on the housekeeping channel and listen through the predawn hours of night watch.

Leftenant Amy Sisson of Peregrine's Hussar's Charlie Company had played the harmonica, a traditional favorite.

Listening now to the unknown woodwind, Ariel was transported back to her old *Centurion*. A lieutenant sitting long night watches, eyes sharp on her sensor display as Amy's harmonica played softly in the cockpit speakers.

And Leisner.

Her father had sent three lances, heavy with young lieutenants in need of seasoning, to some godforsaken world to baby-sit a mining complex only the employer thought was worth attacking. Amy had just finished playing something Ariel remembered only as beautiful, and the four of them had been sitting in their cockpits, staring past their reflections into the darkness just letting the mood linger.

Then Bill had drawn in a long, noisy breath and started a recorded tuba solo.

Ariel smiled at the memory, glad she could. Lieutenants Leisner and Sisson had died fighting Olsen's Rangers on Acamar. Bill had fallen with Major Dixon outside the walls of the Brynd Industrial Complex, while the Rebel Raiders they'd come to rescue looked on. Amy was among the Hussars who had disappeared after the Rangers overran the city of Flat.

"What is that?" asked a voice in the silence.

Davis, Ariel realized. Just as she realized the music had ended while she'd been lost in memory.

"Just something I made up," answered a voice Ariel almost identified. "It's sort of inspired by Celtic folk ballads. I call it 'Too Long in a Standing *Dervish*'."

Truman, Ariel remembered. A sharp-featured whippet of a man able to lay down LRM fire support with uncanny accuracy.

"I meant," Davis was saying, "What is that instrument? I've been trying to place it."

"It's a fipple flute."

Ariel glanced at the duty sergeant. Gomez met her eye and nodded once.

"You made that up," Davis challenged.

"A fipple flute," Truman insisted. "Is a flute with a fipple. Look it up."

Leaning past Sergeant Gomez, Ariel keyed the microphone.

"Gentlemen, I enjoy the music," she said. "But chatter takes too much attention away from your sensors."

Quick "yes, ma'ams" acknowledged the implied order.

There was a long moment of silence. Then someone began to whistle tunelessly.

Ariel shook her head, not really begrudging the sentries their light moods.

"One Beta Charlie to Comm Central!" a tenor voice sharp with tension cut through the whistling. "Incoming vehicle, tally one unidentified, on service road one-niner, two clicks. Approaching at speed."

Glancing at the repeater screens, Ariel saw One Beta Charlie was labeled "Can Do." It took her a heartbeat to place Lieutenant Gendou Knepper, late of Sorenson's Strikers, piloting a *Panther* 10K.

Davis and Christian were already vectoring to support the slower *Panther*. Cherry and Truman edged out from the perimeter, widening their firing arcs as the rest of One Beta moved to cover the holes in the defensive line.

"Ping it," Ariel ordered.

"TFF reads our Packrat," Knepper replied immediately. "No radio confirm. No change in vector."

Ariel's first thought was a patrol in trouble. But the warning message Pauls had just read to her suggested a darker possibility.

"Be ready to bring it down," Ariel ordered.

She longed to run to her own 'Mech, to get out there to see what was going on first hand. But if anyone was going to fire on the Irregulars' own Packrat, she had to be the one to give the order.

"Two Beta Dogtrot," Christian's voice cut in on the general channel. "I have visual. Sergeant Proctor is in the upper hatch. He is signing all clear. Vehicle slowing. There is fire damage, comm and sensor array is gone."

Ariel let the tension out with a long breath.

"Hold positions, watch the woods," she ordered. "I'm en route."

Glancing down at Gomez, she saw the sergeant already had his finger on the all-call.

"Scramble," she confirmed. "Defense Two until we know what's going on."



The side of the mountain had swallowed the road.

The maps called this stretch of trail unused, but it was packed hard and wide enough for three of Proctor's Packrats to travel abreast. Here the engineers had decided against another switch-back and carved a cut through the shoulder of the ridge. A great wall of stratified clay and earth and rubble, thirty meters high, had risen to the right. Now the slope dipped, falling off suddenly into a fan of rubble and clay that covered the road.

Surveying the damage, Ariel could see how the shaped charges had been placed to bring the wall, no doubt heavy with rain, down on the road. More significantly, the metal retaining bulwarks showed clearly on her sensors. They'd been removed and were now stacked in a gulley below the service road, covered with vegetation. This had not been a hastily set trap.

She didn't need her sensors to see the semisolid slough of clay and gravel filling the cut wouldn't support the weight of her *Huron Warrior*. The lower slope of the hill was solid enough, if she needed to pass. Or she could backtrack to before the cut and climb the steep slope to the right. But it would be slow going, forcing her way through the heavy vegetation in the dark. Especially while scanning for more booby traps.

"Mister Davis."

"Christian, on me," Davis said. "Go for the right ridge, looks like there's been some fire."

The two medium 'Mechs arced into the air, a tricky night maneuver in the overhung jungle. Christian took his lighter *Spector* slightly higher and to the right. Ariel noted his left arm was extended, ready to bathe his landing area in medium laser fire while his large laser was angled slightly to the right. Davis mirrored the

position, covering the LZ and the slope to their left. At the right edge of her canopy, she could just see Truman had the LRMs of his *Dervish* unshrouded, ready to rain LRMs on anything that showed its head. She didn't need to turn to know Cherry was behind her, scanning their flanks with her Beagle.

Very good team, Davis, she thought. I held you back too long.

"Right," Davis said. Ariel jumped. "Looks like a major battle up here, maybe an hour ago."

"Big footprints," Christian observed. "Assault 'Mech?"

"Ground's too shot up to tell much," Davis said. "Need to get a team up here in daylight to sort it out."

"*Grasshopper* down," Christian reported.

Ariel didn't ask if it was Jacoam's.

"Head took a heavy hit," Christian's voice was flat. "Ground char looks like they lasered the cockpit after the machine was down."

Ariel felt her blood run cold. Even in war there were rules, conduct that separated warriors from savages. You did not kill a MechWarrior when his machine was already out of the fight.

"I'm checking it out."

"Permission to leave your 'Mech granted," Davis said dryly.

"Yes, sir." Christian's voice was still flat. He was clearly in no mood to even recognize the correction implied by the slight sarcasm.

"Watch the heat," Davis added. "I'm reading fractures in the reactor housing."

"Is there danger the missiles will cook off?" Ariel asked.

"No," Davis answered, but didn't explain farther.

"The hatch was blown." Christian's words had a tinny sound and Ariel realized he was using a handset slaved to his cockpit radio. "But the couch frame is still anchored."

Ariel listened to her heartbeat.

"Lot of char, lot of ash," Christian reported at last. "Anything not metal is gone. No sign of the captain."

"Understood, Lieutenant," Ariel answered. "Get back in your 'Mech. Any sign of Sergeant Chowla?"

"If they were on the road when the trap was sprung," Davis said. "She's probably right in front of you."

Ariel kicked herself mentally and focused her sensors on the mudslide filling the cut.

Heavy metal, flat. Eighteen meters in and eight meters under. How much did that mud weigh? Too much for the *Mongoose* to overcome, apparently. Enough to crush it? That could depend on how fast the wall was moving when it hit her.

"Peregrine to Chowla," she said into her mic, fighting the reflex to shout. "Chowla, respond."

Nothing.

"Reema, are you with us?"

Adjusting her sensors, Ariel probed the mass of earth. It was no use—beyond confirming a 'Mech was beneath the mud, her instruments could tell her nothing. She opened the command channel.

"Peregrine to base."

"Base here." Gomez was still on duty.

"We need ..."

Ariel stopped.

They still didn't know who or what was in the jungle. Without reliable intel on their location and composition of their adversaries, ordering out a rescue team was irresponsible. Whatever Chowla's condition, she was going to have to wait until it was safe to dig her out.

"Ronin comm," Ariel said as though that completed her interrupted thought. "Advise them of the situation and ask for intel.

"Advise Two Alpha to join me this locale soonest," she added. "Base, go to Defense three."

She wanted her people in their machines, weapons hot. Ready. For whatever was about to happen.

Karst Highland Jungle, Wallis
Principality of Regulus
Free Worlds League
26 February 3067

Damn Ronin, damn Ronin, damn Ronin.

Ariel rushed the descent, letting her *Huron Warrior* slide the last few meters of clayey loam to the road above the cut. Beyond Chowla's buried form.

Second Company was formed on her, Beta lance on point, her own Alpha lance around her and Gamma lance close behind. Twelve lights and mediums against a known lance of assaults and God knew what else. Ronin didn't tell them there was a second target—didn't even call them until their precious lance of *Marauders* and *Warhammers* was being overrun.

The raiders had known all about the Irregulars, that was sure. The trap Chowla and Jacoam had sprung was meant to catch the entire relief force. Why one or more of the assault 'Mechs had been at the trap was a mystery, unless they'd had to come by it from wherever their base was. Whatever the case, they'd gone straight from there to Ronin's secret lab. Or not so secret.

Winthrop had been half right. The attacks on the Karst plant had been a ploy, but not to pull the WPM out of position. The object was to see what Ronin moved to protect when they thought they were under attack. What had they done? Called in a third-string mercenary unit to cover the Karst LGR plant and moved their lance of elite heavies to what the maps said was an abandoned stone-cutting facility. Very smart.

Their call for help had come in just as she was asking what the hell was going on.

But just because Ronin thought the real attack was under way on the mountain, she couldn't leave Karst undefended. The raiders had proven on their last raid they were willing to attack civilian targets to draw defenders out of position. She'd left Lieutenant Heather in command of what was left of First Company deployed to protect the city.

"Lance reports two down," the nasal voice of the Ronin communications supervisor grated in her ear. "That's two Ronin machines down. Enemy force is one *Highlander* 732 and three 6A *Emperors*."

"Is that the same force that attacked before?" Ariel demanded.

Silence.

"Ronin Comm," she repeated. "Do the hostiles have other 'Mechs?"

"Not that we are aware."

Can't tell the half-truths from the lies without a score card.

Night vision made the road ahead a silver ribbon in the darkness while sensors probed the night far beyond her sight. No heavy metal. No booby traps. Just hundreds of tiny heat signatures as forest creatures scrambled to get out of the way of the charging BattleMechs.

"Ronin lance reports hostile infantry has taken building," the nasal voice informed her.

"You never mentioned infantry," Ariel pointed out.

Silence.

Of course she'd known there was infantry. You didn't use assault 'Mechs to plant shaped charges. Still, it would have been nice for their employers to warn them what they were up against.

"Mercenaries, this is Walters," said a new voice. Walters, she remembered, was the Ronin suit who had not been impressed with their defenses. "You've been given the identities of the hostile machines. Do not fire on any machines other than the three *Emperors* and the *Highlander*. Specifically, do not fire on any *Warhammers* of unusual profile. If they try to escape you are to contain them without damaging them."

"Irregulars," Ariel said flatly. "Anything targets you, take it out."

"Do not—" Walters began, then evidently thought better of it.

Ahead the night lit up in flames. A sapling, some brush flared with fire. Then four human shapes, soaked with burning fuel, broke cover. Throwing themselves on the clay of the road, they rolled, trying to smother the flames. Cherry ended their agony with a burst of machinegun fire.

"There are some mines up here," she reported.

"Clear them."

Second Company held position, careful not to bunch into a single target, as the *Firestarter* scorched the roadbed, cooking off the lightly covered mines.

Moments later they were out of the jungle. A clearing, over a klick across, sloped gently down to their left, while ahead was another quarry and a "stonecutting facility" that looked like nothing so much as a 'Mech hangar.

The ground was scarred and torn. The smoldering ruin of two BattleMechs, a *Marauder* and a *Warhammer*, Ariel saw, stood out starkly in the fading moonlight.

Dawn was arriving. Above the ridgeline, the eastern sky began to sparkle with the first hint of the morning auroras.

Half a klick ahead and to the right, two *Emperors* could be seen pumping fire into a rocky escarpment. A pretty clear indication of where the remaining Ronin 'Mechs had sought cover.

The *Highlander* was by the hangar, just turning to meet them as the Irregulars fanned into the clearing. She saw the assault 'Mech's right-arm Gauss rifle hung at a useless angle. Good to know the Ronin lance had done more than be targets.

The third *Emperor*...

Talbot's *Griffin* stumbled as twin bursts of autocannon fire ripped from the darkness of the jungle. She kept her feet, barely, and pivoted to return fire. Her PPC bolt arced a vivid blue into the shadows.

Ariel's own right arm was up, her sensors catching the heat flare as the pilot of the hidden 'Mech brought its reactor up to full cook. Her Gauss slug tore the air dangerously close to Talbot's shoulder and buried itself in the assault 'Mech's chest.

The *Emperor* returned fire, dividing its laser strikes between Talbot and Ariel.

"Gamma lance, Alpha Charlie, engage *Highlander*," Ariel ordered. "Gamma Charlie, on me."

Best to send the *Whitworth* to trade long-range fire and keep the *Hunchback* where the enemy was already on top of them.

"Beta lance, support Ronin 'Mechs."

From the corner of her eye, Ariel saw Gamma lance moving to intercept the approaching *Highlander* while Beta angled toward the two *Emperors*.

They'd get to the hangar when they got to the hangar.

M'Bala, still on the road, unleashed his AC/20, shredding the underbrush and tearing into the *Enforcer* from hip to shoulder. At almost the same instant Carson's Ultra AC/5 scored across its upper chest, just below the cockpit. The huge machine staggered, recovered, raised its arm—

Again Talbot's PPC arced through the darkness. Blue fire clawing at the jagged edges of the damaged armor.

The *Emperor* jumped. Up and over. Ariel tracked it with her Gauss rifle, but couldn't get a lock.

The massive 'Mech turned in the air, coming down facing its tormentors. Talbot was closest, but the pilot had evidently parsed Ariel was in command. Both large lasers and one of the torso mediums lashed out at her *Huron Warrior*. A solid hit to the chest sloughed armor away and the left edge of her sensor array flared to vapor.

One torso laser meant damage. Ariel targeted the assault 'Mech's broad chest with her Gauss rifle and large laser, pouring death into the wound.

Ariel's heads up showed M'Bala shuffling his *Hunchback* right, moving for a clear shot. In front of her she could see Carson dodge left with his *Hermes II*, clearly going for the damaged area under the *Enforcer's* right arm.

The range was too close for her LRMs, but Talbot cut loose with both lasers and her PPC. Ariel knew the woman had to be roasting inside her machine, but she kept up the energy barrage, worrying the same area Ariel had hit.

Ariel saw Carson dodge in close. Despite his Ultra's range he seemed bent on counting coup on the assault 'Mech.

Snapping its right arm out and down, the *Emperor* taught Carson the error of close attack with an AC/10 blast that stripped the armor from the smaller 'Mech's legs. The large laser followed, boiling through the smaller machine's right thigh and bringing it to the ground.

M'Bala's AC/20 roared and the armor along the *Emperor's* extended arm and shoulder pocked and shattered. The arm dropped uselessly to the assault 'Mech's side. Its left arm was still good, its left torso laser still functional, but instead of firing, the raider jumped away; up and back, toward the hangar.

"Carson?"

"I'm good. Pick me up on your way back."

In the grey light as dawn chased away the aurora, Ariel could see their wounded *Emperor* jump again, still moving toward the hangar.

If whatever the raiders are after is in there, they must be about to bust it out.

To her right Beta lance was engaging an *Emperor*. She did a double take. One *Emperor* was down. A *Warhammer* had crawled out of the rocks, one arm sheared away and the other dangling uselessly, but it was gamely adding its torso lasers to the attack.

A *Marauder*, evidently in better shape, was moving to intercept the *Emperor* headed for the hangar.

In the middle distance Jacques in his *Trebuchet*, Leitch's *Centurion* and Mendel's *Whitworth* were trading missiles with the *Highlander*. Andrews' *Assassin* was down.

"Two Gamma Baker, status?" Ariel queried

No answer.

"M'Bala, Talbot, on Beta," Ariel ordered accelerating to a run toward the *Highlander*. "Leitch, Mendel, support Ronin *Marauder*."

As Ariel closed on the *Highlander*, movement at the hangar caught her eye. The doors blasted open, thrown from their hinges by a charging 'Mech. The machine stopped, framed in the doorway. Her computer balked at identifying the newcomer, and she didn't blame it. She could see what it had been, but what it was now was a mystery. The strange 'Mech swung to its right, the long barrel of its shoulder weapon tracking Leitch.

Weapons lock alarm.

Explosions blossomed across her chest, throwing her speeding 'Mech off its stride. The *Huron Warrior* stumbled, throwing her against the harness. She leaned, pulling on the controls, fighting for balance...



"No sudden moves."

The erstwhile 'Mech jacker froze, one knee on the edge of the service platform. Slowly, keeping his open hands in sight, he pulled his other foot from the top rung of the access ladder then paused, half crouched, watching Jake.

Jake was used to having the size advantage, but even crouched over it was clear the newcomer was at least a dozen centimeters taller than he was and a good ten kilos of muscle heavier. He hoped the bigger man would buy the bluff of the expended laser in his grip. The 'Mech jacker's companions had not been hospitable about letting Jake into the research hanger.

"Nice and slowly, now—"

Leaping forward like a frog, the raider planted his hands two meters in front of Jake and spun. It was an awkward-looking round-off, but before Jake realized what was happening, the pirate drove his heels into his left thigh.

Pain spiked from his knee to his scalp. He managed, just, to pivot away without breaking the joint. The useless laser spun from his numb fingers.

Clinging to balance, Jake danced lightly to his right, hoping his bounce hid the pain stabbing up from his left knee with every step. A duller ache radiated from the center of his back and a ghost of numbness flowing down from his elbow warned him not to depend on his left hand's strength. He'd done more fighting and running and falling in the last six hours than in the previous six years and was beginning to suspect he was getting too old for this.

Rolling out of his frog kick, the big man came up from the ground with all of his weight behind a smashing roundhouse.

Jake almost thanked him.

The edge of Jake's hand met the back of his fist, deflecting the force of the blow away and down as he rolled his hand to grip the wrist. He brought his left hand up, catching the other man below the shoulder blade. Turning at the waist, he let himself fall away, pivoting, and leveraged his weight into the attacker's momentum.

The redirected energy of his lunge tumbled the raider through the air. He landed head down with a hollow thud and lay still against the railing.

Jake watched for a second, making sure the man was unconscious. Retrieving the pack with his neurohelmet, he turned to the second ladder for the final climb into the cockpit. An official looking sign was attached to the 'Mech's head, at eye level to anyone on the work platform: *Observe cautionary signs and use handrails at all times. By order of the Safety Marshal.*

A scrape of boot on metal gave him a half-second warning he'd been had. The pirate's bear hug crushed the breath from him before he could turn. The raider arched his back, raising Jake in the air, then slammed him into the railing of the catwalk.

His senses reeling, Jake caught the metal bar before he went over and twisted, breaking the bigger man's grip. Tossing his helmet to safety, he scrambled for distance, but his left knee buckled and he went down. Roaring in triumph, the pirate came at him, arms wide for another grab and throw.

Coming up on his hands and damaged left knee, Jake lashed out with his right leg, the from-the-hip sidekick connecting solidly with the raider's knee. The bigger man shrieked, stopping himself before his forward drive snapped the joint backward.

Getting his right foot back under him, Jake pushed off from the metal deck. Ignoring his body's protest, he drove a left mule kick to the raider's gut. His knee popped, driving an ice pick of pain into the base of his skull. But the kick doubled the raider over, and that was all he needed.

Grabbing a handful of air from somewhere near his heels, Jake put his whole body into a savage uppercut. He missed the raider's face, missed driving the shattered sinus bones back into his brain, but caught the big man's forehead square. He felt a knuckle pop.

Jake's back muscles spasmed, turning his pivoting recovery into a crab-like stumble. But he got his hands up, ready for the next assault...

He was alone on the catwalk.

Looking over the railing, Jake saw his opponent had belly flopped face first onto the concrete floor a half dozen meters below. The last uppercut must have flipped him over the rail.

Jake limped to the cockpit ladder again, then stopped, one hand on a rung, to gather his strength. He had no doubt the 'Mech jacker had a code cracking kit in his pack. But the pack was still strapped to the man in the red puddle and Jake was reasonably certain that if he went down after it he wouldn't have the strength to get back. He was going to have to take a chance on a 'Mech being tested by a bunch of engineers wouldn't be keyed to one brain pattern or voice print. Hopefully, in a place they thought too secret to be found in the first place, any security lockout would be something obvious.

The sound of heavy weapons fire echoed in from outside the hangar. Either Ronin's house guards had gotten their second wind or the Chaos Irregulars had arrived. He guessed the latter. And if they'd come with less than both companies against those assault 'Mechs—

Of course they'd come with less than both companies. As far as Peregrine Junior knew, the LGR plant and by extension the town were still their primary responsibility. She wouldn't leave them undefended.

If he was going to save the day, he needed a 'Mech around him.

Even an ugly 'Mech like this one.

"You are why *Warhammers* should never date *Hollanders*," he told the long barrel of the light Gauss rifle thrusting forward from the machine's right shoulder.

It was a sure bet a second 'Mech jacker was hacking his way into the other prototype in the next bay. Jake couldn't see how he was doing, which was a good thing as the steel wall kept the bad guy from seeing him as well. But he didn't have much time. Gritting his teeth against the pain, he hauled himself up the short ladder.

At the edge of the hatch was another sign, obviously an official notice prized from some pub or restaurant and neatly affixed to the armor: *Occupancy by more than 142 persons is prohibited. By order of the Safety Marshal.*

"God save me from comedic techs," Jake groaned. Then groaned again as he rolled through the hatch.

Twisting about in the confined cockpit, he scraped his hip on a metal box that had been spot welded to the right bulkhead. It had a single bright red button, a pair of what looked like thermostats, and a row of four toggles, each with its own black button. There

were groups of numbers handwritten on the powder grey casing next to three of the toggles. A simple data screen, now dark, had been bolted above the box.

There was no neurohelmet; no doubt the testers each carried their own. But the jack was standard, so there was nothing specialized to worry about. Settling his on his head, he jacked in. *Current.* Good, the system had juice. Jake saw there were connections for both the standard cooling vest and the full-body suits he'd heard about. He plugged his vest in, hoping the tape over the holes would hold.

He ran through a standard start-up sequence, bringing systems on-line one at a time. He was just starting to hope the test 'Mech didn't have a security protocol when the screens went dark. Jake pushed on a few levers to be sure, but everything was frozen. Except for the telltale saying the circuits had juice, the cockpit controls were inert. Made sense. He'd gotten just as far as a tech ordered to warm the machine up would have. Now the modified *Warhammer* had secured itself, waiting for its rightful pilot to take command.

Jake considered climbing out of the cockpit and going down for the code breaker. It wasn't worth it. Even if he did have the stamina to make the trip both ways, it was only a matter of time—minutes, probably—before the 'Mech jacker's buddies came to see what was taking so long.

He glanced around the confines of the cockpit. There might be something...

Another safety notice had been mounted above the ferroglass viewscreen: *Each employee must wash his hands with an approved sanitizing agent before returning to work. By order of the Safety Marshal.* One of these test jockeys must have worked his way through engineering school waiting tables.

Wait a minute.

"Each employee must wash his hands with an approved sanitizing agent before returning to work," he read aloud. Nothing. "By order of the Safety Marshal."

He felt the cold surge of coolant through his vest as the screens flickered to life.

"Now we're getting somewhere..."

The weapons status boards beeped for attention, indicators flashing. There was no alarm, explained by the hole in the bulkhead where the speaker should have been, but the wireframe diagnostic screen flashed an angry red.

"What the hell?"

Tapping contacts, he pulled up specific systems. The first thing that caught his eye was the manufacturer's glyph in the corner of every screen: StarCorps. This was not a Ronin *Warhammer*.

"Okay, okay, okay, slow down and think, Oh," Jake said to himself quietly, reading the wireframe more carefully. "What are we looking at? Endo steel frame? This has to be one of the eighth generation jobs. So why are all the lights red?"

Turning from the schematic, he began flipping through the weapons screens.

"Got triggers for small lasers, got no small lasers. Got trigger for SRM 6, got no missile launcher. Got no missiles, for that matter. Triggers for two PPCs—no, *ER* PPCs—those we got," he nodded to himself. "Two medium lasers, check."

He flipped through the screens again, glancing at the schematic as each system highlighted.

"They gutted you, ugly duckling," he said to the 'Mech. "Even took five heat sinks and some of your armor. They needed a lot of tonnage and torso space for something more than that stupid pipe on your shoulder."

Jake turned to the powder grey box on the bulkhead. "And I'll bet *this* is that."

The screen was now live, Ronin glyph in the corner. The horizontal tube at the top was clearly an icon for the light Gauss rifle, but the four columns of circles below it were a mystery.

Jake figured out quickly that flipping each of the four toggles on the box would make a corresponding column of eight circles glow. A different pair of numbers, one at each end of the LGR icon, appeared with each column. It wasn't until he twisted one of the rheostats and saw the numbers on the screen change that he figured out what he was looking at.

"I'll be damned. Peregrine Junior was right," he shook his head. "You're not just ugly, duckling, you're stupid. Ronin's trying to build a variable ordnance LGR."

The columns were magazines, eight rounds to a clip, and the current to the gun had to be adjusted for each type of ammo. Not just the total current, but the gradient from breech to muzzle. The penciled numbers all over the casing told him real life hadn't been matching the computer sims.

And an echoing crash told him the second prototype had broken its restraints.

"No fair," Jake muttered, bringing the targeting computer on-line. "You knew what you were doing."

The other *Warhammer*, long LGR giving it an unbalanced look, moved across the front of his bay. If the pilot looked toward Jake, he gave no sign. He certainly didn't see the body on the ground at the stationary machine's feet.

Instead, he moved toward the hangar doors.

"Can't let you leave, cousin," Jake said. Betting Ronin didn't want a hole in their experimental magazine, dropped the targeting reticle on the back of a retreating knee assembly.

And realized he had a problem.

ER PPCs were too much gun for the confined space of the hangar. At the same time, the medium lasers wouldn't bring the heavy 'Mech down fast enough to prevent its escape. That left...

With a curse, he turned to the powder grey box on the bulkhead.

The second *Warhammer* turned, keeping its long barrel out of the way, and slammed its left shoulder against the hangar doors. They popped free, peeling away from the frame like cardboard.

The first clip in the magazine showed full power numbers with no pencil marks next to the toggle. Standard ammo, then. Jake toggled the first clip and pressed the black button. One of the circles went dark and a glowing egg shape appeared in the rifle icon.

A glance at the doorway confirmed the other 'Mech had not left, but was holding position, evidently targeting something with its own LGR. It was probably waiting for Jake—or the 'Mech jacker who should have been where Jake was—to get going.

Confirming the numbers on the LGR status screen read full power, Jake put his palm over the red button and turned his attention

back to the other *Warhammer*. Letting the target float so there would be no warning of a weapons lock, he brought the reticle back down to the knee assembly.

The 'Mech in the doorway exploded.

Rather, Jake's stunned mind processed a moment later, the LGR on the 'Mech's shoulder exploded. It, and a section of the door-frame, had simply disappeared.

Along with the *Warhammer's* head.

Making no sudden moves, Jake slowly pulled his hand away from the LGR trigger.

In the grey dawnlight beyond the ruined *Warhammer*, Jake saw a *Huron Warrior* engulfed in flame as a flight of missiles detonated around it.

With a curse, Jake hit the throttle, stepping his ugly duckling forward. The service scaffolding fell away with a rending crash as he shuffled forward, picking up speed to shove the ruined hulk out of the doorway.

His job might be protecting this prototype, but his people were taking fire. The LGR was a wash, but he was in the mood to field test a pair of ER PPCs.

Karst, Wallis
Principality of Regulus
Free Worlds League
1 March 3067

"What did I miss?"

"Chess tournament," Jake slapped the cast on his leg with his good hand. "Peregrine plays rough."

"The way I got the story," Chowla countered, "you took out four assault 'Mechs with a hide-out laser."

"That is a base canard," Jake said, settling into the chair by the hospital bed. "It was a flechette gun."

"Ah."

Jake thought she smiled, but it was hard to tell with the bandages. Her face, what he could see of it, was mostly plum and blue, now. Much better than its earlier grey and black.

Her five-point harness had snapped when the mountain swatted her 'Mech. Her face had been smashed against the ferroglass, but being knocked cold is what had saved her. Broken ribs had punctured one lung. If she'd shifted position, if the broken ribs had moved enough to allow bleeding, she would have drowned in minutes. But her one lung had kept working well enough to keep her alive. The medicos had kept her drugged asleep the last two days, making sure all their patches would hold before they let her move.

"Thinking of starting a new religion," Jake said. "Initiates have to spend an hour clinging to an *Emperor's* ankle assembly."

"Heard about that ride, too," Chowla said. "Reminded me of Odysseus hanging on to the belly of a goat."

"What?"

"Maybe it was a sheep," Chowla waved the point away. "How does this start a new religion?"

"Staring into the throat of a jump jet for an hour wondering if it's going to light off can be very..." he gestured vaguely. "Prayer inspiring."

"I'd think it'd be a purgative."

"That, too."

"Master Sergeant, good to see you well," Peregrine Junior stood in the door to the private room. With Ariel's eyes. Jake still couldn't get used to her blending modes like that.

"Although," his co-commander was saying, "I received notification of your recovery from Mr. Silverlake. Seems you were inquiring about your *Mongoose* before the medicos here even knew you were conscious."

"Priorities, ma'am."

"Understood." Peregrine Junior cocked her head at Jake. "Weren't you stationed in another ward?"

"Released on my own recognizance," Jake said, holding up a slip of paper.

Pauls appeared over Peregrine Junior's shoulder. He flashed Chowla a quick thumbs up.

"Captain?" he said, proffering a noteputer. "The information you wanted."

"Of course," she took the noteputer from him and keyed it on.

Surveying the situation, Pauls disappeared into the hallway and returned moments later with two wooden chairs. And Davis carrying his own chair.

Ariel—and it was Ariel, now—took a chair from Pauls without comment and spun it around one-handed, setting it next to Jake. Davis and Pauls took up station on the other side of Chowla's bed.

"Ronin has let us go," Ariel explained to Chowla. "With a bonus and glowing recommendation in exchange for our signed oath to never divulge what we saw here."

"What did we see here?" Chowla asked.

"The stupidest secret weapon imaginable," Jake answered promptly. "It is complex, it is fragile, it requires a 'Mech jockey to make six or seven decisions before he can fire it, and when he *does* pull the trigger, it explodes."

"Sounds Capellan."

"All we saw was an early test prototype," Ariel said.

"They needed *Warhammers* with endosteel frames to free up the tonnage," Davis put in. "So they borrowed a few StarCorps 8Ds."

"Which in turn brought StarCorps' covert goons over from Son Hoa to find out what was up," added Pauls. "Which explains those in-house assault 'Mechs. I'll bet there's no record of their production."

"Ronin engineers expect to have the weapon system simplified and stable within the next two to three years," Ariel recaptured the thread of the explanation. "They'll offer the variant on their own eight-series *Warhammers*."

"I've seen the beast," Jake said darkly, shaking his head. "Trust me: It will never be used on any battlefield in this universe."

"Which is not our concern," Ariel said. "Though who warned us about the watching the jungle is. There seems to be a player in all of this that we—and from what I can tell, Ronin and StarCorps—don't know about."

"Um," Jake rubbed the side of his jaw with his good hand. "That was me."

"You?" Peregrine Junior asked. "You sent us a warning about the 'Mechs in the jungle?"

"No. I found a leak in our communications security, so about a week ago I inserted a sleeper eco-freak rant about using weapons in the rainforest," Jake tucked his chin, looking at her from under his eyebrows. "I considered sending the joke about the farmer's son and the AgroMech salesman, but..."

Peregrine Junior took in a long breath. It was a struggle, Jake could see it, but Ariel won out.

"Next time," she said quietly. "Just tell us."

"What's on the 'puter?" Jake changed the subject.

"With the steering committee assembled?" Ariel asked, including Chowla, Davis and Pauls with a gesture. "What else? Job offers."

"Already?"

"Already, Sergeant. In fact," Ariel glanced at Jake. "StarCorps made an off-the-books offer. Seems they think we'd be good at

something called resource recovery. Mentioned Captain Jacoam specifically."

"How much?" Jake asked.

"I took the liberty of turning that one down."

"Ah. So. What's left?"

Ariel consulted the noteputer.

"Do you know anything about a world named Negushevo?" she asked.

"Rim Commonality, Free Worlds League, three or four jumps antispinward of here," Jake said, trying to ignore the itch under his cast. "Old school feudal, like all the Commonality. And, like most of the Commonality, used to be a favorite target of the Marians back in their pirate days."

"The Marian Hegemony are no longer pirates?" Ariel asked, looking to Davis for confirmation. "I'd heard their leaders excelled in piracy and conquest."

"Caesar Sean, a lot of the others, worked that way," Jake conceded. "Caesar Julius O'Reilly has been has been turning the Hegemony into a real government. Earning a lot of respect in the region."

"Interesting," Ariel said, tabbing through screens on the noteputer. "The Hegemony also made us an offer. Scale plus forty percent for planetary garrison with possible off-world missions. Trajkis," she stumbled slightly over the name, "in the Illyrian District."

Jake grunted.

"What did Negushevo want?" he asked.

Ariel tabbed back to the first screen and read for a moment.

"Their wording is convoluted, but it sounds like they want to probe a possible threat."

"The Marians?" Davis suggested.

"Perhaps not, in light of Captain Jacoam's information," Ariel punched a few keys. "One jump worlds are all Free Worlds League: Gatchina and the rest of the Rim Commonality: Lesnovo, Tohelet, Tematagi, and Campoleone."

"Nothing, Eighth Orloff Grenadiers, nothing, nothing," said Jake, ticking the worlds off on his fingers. "And a mix of old spacers and monks."

"You seem to know the region," Ariel said, cocking an eyebrow.

Jake ignored the invitation to explain why he knew the Periphery border. No need to share everything.

"My intel's a year, year and a half old," he said instead. "Davis, Pauls, see what you can dig up about the last year or two. Two worlds that close together worried about protecting themselves might be related."

"If the Negs want us to probe the Grenadiers, I vote we pass," said Chowla.

"At least until you're on your feet," Ariel agreed.

A joke. That was, what? Four in the last three months. Jake gripped the arm of the chair to steady himself.

"A university on Mosiro, in the Mosiro Archipelago is offering the same amount of money as Negushevo," Ariel read. "This is to provide security for a large archaeological dig on El Giza."

"El Giza?" Davis asked. "Wasn't that an old Star League border world?"

Ariel glanced at Jake, but he shrugged. The name meant little to him.

"It was the Star League mint for the Free Worlds League and the Capellan Confederation," Davis said. "And a Broker's Haven."

Realizing the others were looking at him blankly, Davis looked around, as if for some visual aid to make his point. Failing that, he went on:

"El Giza was a sort of free port and commerce center for the Star League. A lot of business, a lot of money, and a lot of trade," he waited for nods before continuing. "There was a big SLDF base on planet to keep everyone honest. Which meant, when the First Succession War broke out..."

"El Giza was a primary target," Pauls guessed.

"Pretty thoroughly pounded from all sides," Davis confirmed. "Which leads one to wonder what sort of archaeological dig would need a battalion of mercs for security?"

"A Star League cache," said Jake quietly. "Either commercial or military."

"But millions of treasure hunters must have been searching that world for centuries," Ariel pointed out. "If there was anything to find, they would have found it by now."

"Maybe," Chowla said, extending the word. "Maybe it *is* just an archaeological dig. Maybe they want protection because they're afraid people with guns are going to think they have directions to a cache."

"Possible," Ariel agreed. "But a battalion?"

"If they attract the right kind of bad guy," Jake pointed out, "They'll need a regiment."

"Any hazard bonus for combat?" Pauls asked.

"A good one," Ariel said, reading the screen. "The university has deep pockets."

"So we have garrison duty with probable raids," Jake said, ticking off his fingers again, "Probing, which means recon and probable raiding against someone else's garrison, and guarding a bunch of academics who just might be on the trail of a Star League cache?"

"The job description says the dig is for artifacts related to their religion," Ariel interjected.

"Whatever," Jake said. "That's what's on the table?"

"Those are the three top-money offers," Ariel agreed. "Unless you want to see if we can succeed where someone failed at Ludwigshafen?"

"Not until we know what happened and why," Jake said.

"Right," Ariel agreed, rising. "The DropShip we've booked makes planetfall in one week. We have until then to file a destination. Since you're not moving before then, Sergeant, I suggest we all meet back here in ninety-six hours and make a final decision."

Jake remained seated as the others left. Now that the energy of discussing the next mission was past, all he could do was stare at the slip of paper held loosely in the fingers of his good hand as it rested on his knee.

"That's not a medical release, is it, Oh?" Chowla asked quietly.

"You heard about my 'Mech?"

"Several times," she answered. "You're a local legend."

"Two Beta lance took out an *Emperor*," Jake said. "Blew it to scrap."

"I heard."

"Peregrine and I double-teamed the *Highlander*. Brought it down. It was a mess, but nothing Silverlake couldn't put back together."

"Silverlake told me how much work Second Company gave him," Chowla said. "He doesn't think any of them should be allowed to—"

Chowla stopped short. "Oh."

"Our contract wasn't for salvage," Jake said quietly. "It was for value. I'm not getting the *Highlander*. All I'm getting is this," he held up the slip of paper. "Hardcopy printout of a credit voucher for the fair market value of one-hundred-and-forty-year-old GHR-5H *Grasshopper*, minus the estimated value of various used parts the techs appropriated."

"Oh," Reema repeated, more softly.

"The upside is: They missed a good two-thirds of the stuff we took," Jake gave her a crooked smile. "The downside is: Wherever we go next, I'm going without a 'Mech."

The End



THE JOB OFFERS ARE:

1. Garrison the world of Trasjkis in the recently-conquered Illyria District of the Marian Hegemony.
2. Probe the military forces of a world or worlds that may be a threat to Negushevo, a world in the Rim Commonality at the Periphery border of the Free Worlds League.
3. Safeguard a major archaeological dig by a Mosiro university on El Giza in the Mosiro Archipelago, which may or may not be searching for a Star League cache.

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