

ENCOUNTER AT EL GIZA

by Kevin Killiany

Plains of Al Jizah, El Giza
Mosiro Archipelago
17 May 3067

"Thermal contact!" Lieutenant Dora Campbell's voice barked from the scanner's speaker, flat and tinny in the cramped turret. Jake Jacoam stepped up the gain as the *Vulcan* pilot read out her location.

"Got those coordinates, Teddi?"

Below and between his knees, the back of Sergeant Theodora Yannis' head nodded. She swung their J. Edgar through a tight arc and gunned the accelerator.

The hover tank's ICE wound to high pitch, the phantom knocking Silverlake could never find ratcheting to frantic staccato. The roar of the fans rose above the engines as the tank surged forward, flattening the two-meter-high heather in its wake.

The hover tank broke from the high grass into the broad double circle of bare earth surrounding the two Mosiro University DropShips. A sharp jig carried them past a tank trailer, one of several the DropShip crews had used to spread defoliants. The fans kicked up clouds of dust and chaff as Teddi grabbed extra speed over the open ground. The twenty-five ton hover tank couldn't boost to its full one-fifty-plus kph over the undulating plain, but Teddi thrived on pushing it to the edge of stability.

The comm chatter spilled from the speaker sharp with tension. Jake wished he could talk to the 'Mech pilots instead of just listen, but realized he had nothing useful to say. They already knew more than he did.

First Alpha Lance, already prepping in the shadow of the transports to take second watch, scrambled to join First Gamma. First Beta, which had had third watch, would be in the sack. So would Second Company; they'd just come off twelve hours of night maneuvers.

Farther away to their left, the square shape of New Mumbai stood out sharply against the rolling prairie land. Invisible at this distance were the temporary buildings surrounding Mosiro University's excavation site.

"Scuttlebug to Beetles," Jake said into his helmet mic. He quickly advised the two other tanks, which lacked his command scanner, of the situation as J. Edgar plunged back into the high grasses.

"Dig perimeter, best speed," he concluded. "Let Captain Peregrine know you're there."

Barns and Trace acknowledged. It would be long minutes before they got there—the Vedettes could make about seventy-five kph over the undulating prairie—but Peregrine Junior might appreciate having a couple of medium tanks in the hole. If they got there in time.

"Teddi."

The driver nodded again and angled the hover tank into a shallow arc that would place them between the University expedition they were protecting and whatever was advancing on One Gamma Lance. Her record said she had driven transports before being drafted into the Irregular's infant armor platoon. Watching the purple prairie flash past, Jake suspected the solidly-built sergeant was a frustrated aerospace fighter pilot.

"*Madre di Dios!*" Alejandro Fuentes' voice cut through the general chatter on the scanner.

"I see them," Clint acknowledged.

"But sensors don't," the *Hussar* pilot responded. "I can't get a weapons lock."

"Malfunction?"

"Then I got it, too," Dora Campbell cut in. "Computers can't ID, targeting can't lock."

Jake cursed under his breath. The turret of the J. Edgar was less than knee-high on his old *Grasshopper*. He was used to a commanding view of the battlefield. Down here in the grass, rolls of earth a BattleMech could traverse without breaking stride cut him off from the unfolding situation.

"One Gamma Able to command," Clint broadcast. "Four unknown medium 'Mechs, no visible markings. Grid piper-four-two, vector incoming, closing at seven-zero kph, estimate thirteen minutes to perimeter."

"Thermals in the grass," Campbell's voice was calm. "We got infantry, too."

Jake nodded to himself. Campbell's *Vulcan* was well able to defend itself against most infantry threats. In this grassland, a 'Mech with a flamer had little to fear from ground troops.

"One Gamma Able to command," Clint repeated. "Respond."

Jake kicked the scanner's gain to maximum, but heard nothing but static on the general channel. He keyed his mic.

"Mierda!"

"Scramble, Dro," Clint ordered. "It's got your number."

Before Jake could ask, Fuentes' *Hussar* crested the rise ahead, sidestepping just in time to miss the speeding hover tank. Two beams, large lasers from the look of them, slashed through the space the 'Mech would have occupied if Fuentes hadn't swerved.

Teddi kicked the throttle, throwing the J. Edgar over the low ridge in a belly-dropping leap.

A broad-shouldered 'Mech Jake had never seen before was descending the next roll of prairie, bearing down on them at speed. Forty, maybe fifty tons, he estimated—flat and low with large lasers at either end.

Laid out like a Bushwacker's third cousin.

The tank's targeting system didn't stand a chance against ECM that blinded BattleMechs. Estimating combined speed at two hundred clicks, Jake sighted visually on the sandy-tan bogie and touched off the short-range missiles.

Taking that as her cue, Teddi swung the tank through a skittering arc, out of the 'Mech's path.

What the hell is that thing?

Jake triggered the heavy machineguns, raking the forward-thrust cockpit in an effort to distract the 'Mech jockey. No hope of doing damage. Before the 'Mech disappeared from his ferroglass viewport, he saw three of the missiles fly uselessly wide and the fourth hit high on the left leg, just below the hip.

The strange 'Mech ignored them, continuing its pursuit of the fleeing *Hussar*.

"Sergeant."

"On it."

The arc became a loop and the hover tank flew after the mysterious BattleMech.

"Right up the arse, Teddi."

"Always a pleasure, sir," his driver replied.

Lining up on the heels of the retreating 'Mech, she stood on the accelerator. Jake's head snapped back as the J. Edgar leapt forward.

Overtaking at fifty or sixty kph relative, they were ascending the next rise before Jake was satisfied with their range. Close enough to count rivets, he jacked the SRM 2s to their maximum elevation and let fly.

He had a fleeting glimpse of the 'Mech's left foot as Teddi dodged just enough to pass at paint-scrape range.

"Break away," he ordered, cycling a fresh flight of missiles into the tubes.

The fans whined, the skirts spilling air as the tank spun through a hairpin one-eighty.

The targeting system was useless, the screens showing echoes and ghosts where the enemy 'Mech should be.

"Bring us up hull down on the next ridge," Jake said. "I want to have a look."

Teddi threw the tank over the low crest in another belly-dropping leap, then pulled it into a button-hook turn that slewed into a sideways stop. *Definitely aerospace.*

Jake undogged the top hatch and eased it up a few centimeters for a quick look. Pushing back his faceplate, he brought his field glasses to his eyes. Magnified to arm's length, the hide of the retreating 'Mech revealed two smoking scars below the backwards-hinged right knee assembly and a third low on the rear torso.

"Looks like—"

Pain seared through his skull. The sky beyond the 'Mech disappeared in a blinding flare. With a curse, he dropped the field glasses, tumbling back into his seat.

"What happened?"

"Flash blind," Jake answered, trying to keep it matter-of-fact. "Targeting get anything?"

He heard a series of clicks as the driver toggled through tactical screens that were normally his domain. White tinged with purple against his lids, the afterimage of the flash was spread across the horizon, with four streaks reaching up to the sky. Or down from it. *Orbital bombardment?* Nothing he knew burned like that.

"Something hot," Teddi said, "the whole prairie's on fire. Ground zero at—"

Her voice broke off.

Jake pushed against his eyes as though pressure would help his optic nerves recover faster and gave her time to process.

"Captain Jacoam," Teddi said at last, all bravado gone from her voice.

Her formality braced him.

"They took out the DropShips."

Civilian ships. Unarmed.

With Second Company on board.

Al-IIb, Mosiro
Mosiro Archipelago
04 April 3067

Captain Ariel Peregrine looked out over the forests and rivers of Mosiro.

The rivers were artful in the aesthetic precision of their curving courses. The forests seemed to form a patchwork, as well mannered as cultivated groves of hardwoods or fruit trees.

From behind her vantage point on the wall of the university enclave, Ariel could hear the muted thunder of the waterfalls that cascaded from the white cliffs that defined the northern edge of Al-IIb, just as the cliffs dropping away before her marked the city's southern extreme. She could hear the laughing voices of children calling to one another from beneath the canopies of flowering vines that festooned the hanging gardens suspended a hundred meters below. But she could see no one and the words were lost in the echoes and birdcalls.

The capital city of Mosiro stretched to her left and right behind her, following the serpentine curves of the nearly vertical Great Barrier. The ledge on which it was built varied in depth from one to three kilometers. White buildings of traditional Muslim architecture roofed with tiles of a dozen earth and sea tones, set off from the gleaming white cliff face by thick groves and vines and carpets of dark green foliage and unexpected explosions of color.

Ariel would have built the city at the top of the sheer cliffs, along the shore of the huge freshwater lake that fed the Al-IIb's dozen waterfalls. Or perhaps by the warm and tumultuous ocean that girdled the planet's equator. Halfway up a kilometers-tall cliff would never have occurred to her.

Though I'm glad it occurred to them. She inhaled deeply of the spicy-sweet scents rising from the hanging gardens. *This alone is worth the trip.*

"Yes."

Ariel started, stepping slightly away as she turned to face the man suddenly at her elbow.

"My apologies, Captain," Doctor Hannan, Director of History for the Mosiro University of Al-IIb, bowed a few degrees from the waist. "I had not meant to startle you."

"Yes, what, sir?" Ariel asked, thinking that a culture that favored soft slippers should require its citizens to wear bells.

"I was merely agreeing with your mood, which your enraptured gaze expressed so eloquently," the elderly academic indicated the view with a fluid gesture. "The view from Al-Ilb is what prompted my family to settle here nearly three centuries ago. I have taught at the University for half a dozen decades and visit this vantage almost daily. It never fails to enthrall."

Turning from her, the doctor looked out over the expanse and inhaled deeply, as though taking the world into his lungs.

After a moment Ariel realized he didn't intend to add more.

"If I'm imposing..."

"Nonsense," Hannan flashed a brief smile. "Beauty is not a finite commodity. It can be shared without loss."

From somewhere behind them a tenor voice, clear and reedy, carried through the air. Ariel did not understand the Arabic words, but she knew the call's intent. She shifted her weight uncomfortably as Hannan matter-of-factly unrolled a rectangle of thin fabric she hadn't realized he carried.

"Captain Peregrine," he said, not looking in her direction, "I am aware of the civil codes requiring all citizens and visitors to obey the Muezzin's call to prayer. However, I have always failed to see how forcing an unbeliever to go through motions that mean nothing to her honors God."

Sensing a response was not required, Ariel bowed her head and moved a few steps away to offer an extra measure of privacy for the man's prayers.

For the last two days, as the university's history department had made final preparations for its dig on El Giza, she'd been trapped in public a half dozen times when the Muezzin's call had brought everyone around her to their knees. She hadn't been able to pray along, of course. What she knew of Islam wouldn't cover half a noteputer screen and she understood the Arabic language even less.

However, she had thought more about faith during her brief stay on Mosiro than she had since her father had died. Maybe that's what the planetary church government—at the moment the body's name escaped her—had had in mind when they made the law.

Today, however, with the afternoon sun slanting across the spectacular fields and the Chaos Irregulars' current employer murmuring intently, she thought about the mission.

The nearby world of El Giza had been established by First Lord Nicholas Cameron as one of the Star League's commerce centers over four centuries ago. Located on what had then been the border between the two states, the Star League's El Giza mint had produced the currency for both the Capellan Confederation and the Free Worlds League. It had been a political and commercial nexus. Merchants, politicians and corporations had traveled from across half the League to trade commodities, technologies, and influence.

Of course, the Star League hadn't depended on everyone's goodwill and respect for the best interests of the whole to protect El Giza. There had been a massive SLDF base in place to keep everyone honest.

That deterrent, and the world it had protected, had fallen in the First Succession War. Recognized as a valuable prize by all sides, the world changed hands violently a dozen times in as many years before the Free Worlds League had been able to make its claim permanent.

By then El Giza was a smoking ruin. The SLDF base was destroyed. The cities, which had been centers of learning, entertainment, and technology, were looted—often razed to the ground to deny advancing enemies what little assets they retained.

In the long years since the First Succession War, El Giza's few survivors had rebuilt their world as best they could. After nearly three hundred years, they were still struggling to be self-supporting, wearily resenting the treasure hunters they could not stop.

Now the University of Al-Ilb had discovered records that might indicate a repository of cultural information in one of the ruined cities of El Giza. It was a prize of interest only to scholars, but they feared any expedition to El Giza was likely to excite potentially dangerous interest.

Ariel suspected pilferage and looting would be a greater problem than a hostile military action. Anyone familiar with El Giza's history would know there was nothing of tactical or technical value left to plunder. She expected their infantry to be of more use than their BattleMechs.

Having evidently finished his prayers, Professor Hannan rerolled his mat unhurriedly and turned to smile at Ariel.

"If you would be so kind as to accompany me," he said as she rose, "we can discuss the final arrangements for our expedition."

Ariel smiled slightly at the Mosiroan's implication that they were equal partners in the venture. Reluctantly turning her back on the breathtaking vista, she followed Hannan toward his office.



"I suppose this stuff is familiar," Jake said, swatting the dust from his knees as he regained his feet.

"My people are Sikh," Reema reminded him, tugging her family jacket into place.

"Right," he said, trying to remember if he'd ever known that. "I suppose Lieutenant Christian would have to be a Christian."

"You'd have to ask him," Reema's tone was shorter than usual.

Jake credited her mood to her mending injuries. Though he had shed his casts and she her body brace, both he and his sergeant were still stiff from wounds neither one of them should have survived.

All around them along the narrow street people were rising from prayer, exchanging smiles and chattering. The scene had more sense of shared community than he was used to seeing on an urban street.

There might be something to this state religion thing. Not that he gave much thought to absolutes. His own prayers, usually uttered when death was imminent, were more general "to whom it may concern" broadcasts than attempts to communicate with a specific deity. But the evident goodwill and camaraderie shared by the citizens of Al-Ilb indicated there might be a practical upside to religious faith.

The narrow street they followed would have been an alley by the standards of most planetary capitals, but space was at a premium in the narrow city built along the face of a cliff. Most vehicular traffic flowed through tunnels carved into the stone edifice rising

abruptly to his left. From this perspective the white wall seemed to lean slightly out over the busy market district.

A side street even narrower than the one they'd been following led to a high-ceilinged shallow cave, about a hundred meters long and thirty deep, carved into the cliff. In the open shade were dozens of kiosks, many with small fires. Not as colorful as the ones crowding the sunny streets, these booths appeared cobbled together from whatever mismatched materials had come to hand. Items ranging from handmade clothing to used machine parts in varying states of wear were laid out in display, while curtained partitions hinted at more exclusive merchandise available if one were to inquire correctly.

The fires were not for warmth. Coffees, teas, stews of various descriptions and what appeared to be rodents roasted whole were all available for the discerning palate. Or the desperately hungry.

Half a dozen tunnels branched out from the shallow cave, disappearing into the living stone of the cliff. With ledge space at a premium, the slums of Al-Ilb were inside the mountain. Which made a sort of sense, Jake thought. Especially if the tunnels had been dug to quarry stone for the city's buildings. A lot of viable living space close at hand that no one wanted. Probably free for the individual or group strong enough to hold it.

There were dozens of hand-lettered signs framing each of the tunnels. A few were in Arabic, but others were in Chinese ideograms, or in Cyrillic. Only one language used the Roman alphabet—one Jake didn't recognize.

As Reema studied the signs, he studied the crowds around them. As offworlders, the two of them attracted a good bit of attention. However, he judged none of the eyes turned their way held more than natural curiosity, and no one was making an effort to ignore them.

Jake was not surprised to see a man no taller than Reema in Chaos Irregulars blacks emerging from one of the curtained booths. Darryl Silverlake put something that looked electronic to Jake's untrained eye in an already loaded pack carried by one of his techs, before sauntering toward the captain.

"Good hunting?" Jake asked the Chaos Irregulars' chief engineer.

"Better 'n I expected," Silverlake drawled, brushing a hand through his shock of black hair. "Not as good as I'd hoped."

"About par?"

"About par."

"This one," pronounced Reema, pointing.

Jake looked at the signs framing the indicated tunnel. The Roman language he didn't recognize.

"You read El Gizian?" he guessed.

"French," Reema clarified. "Yes. The shop we're looking for is down here."

"How far?"

"It doesn't say."

Jake nodded to Silverlake before following Reema through the crowd. With a sketchy salute, the engineer resumed his hunt, laden techs in tow.

The tunnel was wider than any of the streets they'd seen in the city and something kept the air moving briskly. The wind in Jake's face smelled of people, machines, and cooking, but didn't stink the way he'd expected.

Nor was it dark. Light panels provided an early morning twilight: bright enough to see, yet dim enough to obscure detail.

The crowds from the market in the shallow cave extended down the tunnel. He saw little of the good humor and camaraderie he had seen on the streets. These people's ancestors had come to Mosiro as refugees nearly three centuries before and never been integrated into the culture of their capital world. Marginalized, they looked out for each other, but didn't have the resources to embrace strangers unconditionally.

Jake understood this; the natural watchfulness of the residents washed over him unremarked. What he looked for was the sharper attention, the figure that turned away when he glanced toward it, someone moving contrary to the currents, or who was given as wide a berth as he and Reema were.

Nothing seemed out of place. Which didn't mean everything was safe. He continued to scan as he followed Reema.

The sergeant turned abruptly through a beaded curtain into an irregular room dotted with small, round tables, their electric can-

dles adding a warm glow to the twilight. The walls were hung with tapestries that concealed the rough stone, while self-contained fountains burbled incongruously in two of the corners. Perhaps a dozen patrons sat at tables while servitors moved back and forth between them and a bank of samovars. A tea room.

A heavysset man, perhaps a decade older than Jake, smiled broadly and waved them over to his table by one of the corner fountains. Jake was aware of his sergeant assessing the room as he followed her toward their contact.

The tapestries, the noise of the fountains and the open arrangement of the tables made eavesdropping impossible. Just as it would be impossible to conceal that they were meeting. Hence the big smile and wave, he realized, smiling broadly in his turn.

Let the record show this is a harmless meeting between friends.

Jake adjusted his chair before he sat, making sure his sight lines covered the arc of room Reema's did not, while she exchanged phrases with the large man in what he assumed was French.

"Of course I speak English," the man smiled even more broadly, nodding to Jake. "It is, after all, the *lingua franca* of the Free Worlds League."

He chuckled at his own joke.

A waitress appeared and, after asking their permission, their host ordered for them. They exchanged pleasantries about each other's general health and well-being until the waitress returned with steaming cups of tea and disappeared again.

"Mr. Cabot, you were recommended to us as a source on all things El Giza," Jake opened.

"The university expedition," Cabot nodded. "Your lovely commander has already made a good impression on everyone involved."

Jake let the implication he worked for Peregrine Junior slide. It was a natural assumption. She had taken the lead in discussions, being more comfortable with the eggheads conducting the mission.

Plus, she piloted a BattleMech.

Jake sipped his tea. Sweet, with a tang he couldn't decide was spicy or fruity. He could imagine it being refreshing over ice on a

summer day. But hot, in a windowless room beneath a mountain, he found it cloying.

"We know the university's assessment of what we're likely to expect," he said. "What's your take on the situation?"

"There are those who resent other worlds spending large amounts of money to search for treasures of those who died long ago," the big man shrugged, "but spend nothing to alleviate the poverty and suffering of those who live today."

"I thought the university paid for the right to dig."

"They did," Cabot agreed. "And those who were bribed are very grateful. The rest, however, tend to be resentful."

"Violently resentful?"

"From our cousins, theft of things they need to survive," the big man sipped his tea. "Perhaps vandalism of things they don't."

Jake nodded. Ariel had told him some at the university feared a BattleMech-equipped defense force would provoke the natives to violence. The professor leading the expedition, however, thought the protection was worth the risk.

"You specify your cousins," he said. "There are other players on the field?"

Cabot smiled broadly again, as though Jake had done something clever.

"There are always other players," he acknowledged.

Jake said nothing, trusting Reema to cover the room as he kept his eyes steady on the big man.

"El Giza was originally settled by Islamic separatists who, at the peak of the world's glory, were a small and angry minority," Cabot said at last. "Cameron made their home a center of power against their will. The secularization of El Giza forced the spiritual center of the region to move here to Mosiro."

Jake nodded, as though acknowledging known information. He'd heard none of this before and could appreciate how this varied history could complicate issues. Old grudges died hard. He'd have Davis and Pauls dig up what they could on El Giza's social situation.

"Three hundred years ago, El Giza boasted thriving communities representing all of the known states. Terra, the Rim Worlds Republic, even the Draconis Combine," Cabot drained his cup. "But the single biggest segment of the population was Capellan."

"Capellan?"

"El Giza was a border world," Cabot reminded him. "You noticed the many signs in Russian and Chinese?"

Jake nodded.

"Refugees from El Giza who consider themselves Capellan are a large part of our community," Cabot sighed and raised his empty cup toward the waiters idling by the samovars. "Their presence is the rationale for not incorporating us into Mosiro's mainstream."

"You are all marginalized?" Reema asked.

"Individuals succeed," Cabot acknowledged, nodding his head in thanks as a fresh cup of tea replaced his old. "Particularly those whose ancestors had the foresight to arrive with money. But as a people..."

His gesture indicated the warren of former quarries beyond the tea room.

"So there could be any number of local groups with their own agendas," Jake said, bringing the conversation back on track. "People who might violently object to the expedition."

"I wouldn't expect them to be organized or particularly destructive," Cabot said, pausing to blow gently on his steaming tea. "The leveling factor on El Giza is poverty. Theft will be the greatest concern."

"Pirates?" Jake asked. "Treasure hunters?"

"Most such ventures approach from Kwamashu," Cabot shrugged, dismissing the prospect. "However, centuries of failure have managed to teach them the futility of picking over bones the sun has already bleached."

Plains of Al Jizah, El Giza
Mosiro Archipelago
02 May 3067

"First a jungle that's cold," Lieutenant Avery Clint said, gazing out over the rolling plain of purple heather stretching to the horizon. "Now an Arab world that's not a desert."

Lieutenant Dora Campbell's chuckle came clearly over his headphones, though her *Vulcan* was kilometers away at the far end of the sweep.

"Need to assign a detail to ensuring worlds comply with your preconceptions," she said.

"On the other hand," Fuentes put in, "every world has some desert somewhere. Maybe DropShip navigation was off."

"Good point, Alejandro," Clint conceded. "Extend your sweep until you find desert. We'll wait here."

His answer was a quick phrase in Spanish that did not sound complimentary.

"Last transmission garbled, Dro."

"As always," Fuentes answered. His *Hussar's* sophisticated Ranger communication system had failed decades before and he'd never managed to scrape together—or hold on to—the c-notes to replace it. There was nothing wrong with the conventional Garret system the 'Mech now mounted, but the lost ability to intercept and jam enemy broadcasts at range was a source of bitter humor.

"Grid Mamba seven clear," Marion reported. "Moving to grid Mamba eight."

"Acknowledged, One Gamma Boxer," Clint said, glancing at his three-sixty to confirm her *Centurion's* location to his left. Lieutenant Gabrielle Marion was a former Peregrine's Hussar and had still not adapted to the informality of the Strikers.

Chaos Irregulars, now, Clint reminded himself.

Clint paused in his own patrol, watching the icons in his three-sixty as his lance executed their patrol patterns. There was no doubt Marion was all but examining each blade of the two-meter-high

heather while Fuentes and Campbell were covering their assigned areas with more open—and not always concentric—loops.

“One Gamma Charlie, One Gamma Dogtrot, tighten up,” he said.

The two acknowledged, following protocols. His use of call signs tacitly put an end to the casual chatter. For the next half-hour their channels were silent except for the periodic announcement of a cleared grid.

Patrolling what appeared to be empty plains was not a complete waste of time. The flatness was an illusion caused by the lack of landmarks and dense heather, in some places knee-high on his *Quickdraw*, that blended a dozen eye-confusing shades of purple, grey and green. While it was unlikely a vehicle could approach the perimeter unseen, it was possible. And a regiment of infantry could be hidden in the tall heather, invisible until a ‘Mech was right on top of them.

And infantry, or at least local troublemakers on foot, was about all they could expect.

Intel had been right that they’d be unpopular. Their one foray into a nearby town for some R and R had been a notable failure. The natives were decidedly not friendly. Not that there had been any violence. On the contrary, except for the occasional rude gesture, the locals hadn’t even acknowledged the off-duty Irregulars were even there. However, whenever they’d entered a bar or restaurant, it had suddenly been closing time; all of the patrons filing out in an orderly manner as the proprietors shut off the lights and invited them to leave. Not the evening they’d had in mind.

From the looks of things, being ignored by disgruntled locals was the biggest danger they faced. More than enough for a light company of BattleMechs to handle.

First Company, having been safely garrisoning the Karst light Gauss rifle plant when Second Company tangled with the lance of assault ‘Mechs on Willis, was handling patrol duties on El Giza. The civilian DropShip the university had provided lacked proper ‘Mech bays. Though carefully secured, the BattleMechs had traveled as cargo, which meant Silverlake and his boys didn’t get a chance to do a proper job of getting Second Company’s ‘Mech’s back up to speed.

Now that the DropShip was down, sitting squatly in the center of a charred and defoliated circle of former heather, Silverlake had

converted the holds to repair hangers. Though it was mostly a case of completing work begun on Wallis, after two weeks the meticulous engineer had still not cleared all of Second Company for duty.

With Jake out of the saddle—*temporarily*—command of First Company had somehow bypassed Jarmae and fallen on his shoulders. Not that Clint minded, exactly, but he was more comfortable leaving the decisions and discipline to others.

Clint called a reverse and the four BattleMechs jogged back toward their respective start points, following variations of their original search patterns—Fuentes in his *Hussar* moving twice as fast as any of the others. Reversing at random intervals was intended to throw off anyone trying to time the pattern of their rounds.

At the start point, they each resumed normal walking speed and more detailed scans, continuing in the direction opposite their original patrols. Knowing thieves smuggling equipment out of the work site were more likely than hostiles sneaking in, the BattleMechs ran their sensors across the terrain between them and the dig as often as they swept the outer perimeter.

Finding nothing was good news only if they knew for certain there was nothing there to find.

At least they knew Jake wasn't planning any surprise tests of their readiness. The captain had placed himself in command of the Chaos Irregulars tank corps: two Vedettes and an ICE-powered J. Edgar, compliments of Ronin's vehicle boneyard on Wallis. There were no trained armor crews on the Irregulars' roster, so Jake and those infantrymen interested in diversifying their skill sets were teaching themselves the basics of tank warfare in the open plains beyond the DropShips. They weren't firing live rounds, of course, but Clint's long scans showed heavy metal moving through apparently random turns and dashes as they tested their skill and the limits of their vehicles.

There was a Swiftwind scout car parked in the shadow of the DropShip, wanting only a transfer gear assembly for its central pair of drive wheels to make it ready to augment the Packrat on long-range patrol duties. Unlike the *Hussar*, its communication and sensor systems were fully operational—though they were re-fabricated from parts taken from half a dozen wrecks—and once it was mobile the car would be a real asset.

"Thermal contacts!" Campbell's sharp voice cut through Clint's thoughts. "Grid Tango niner, bearing—"

She broke off as a herd of local impala broke cover. The highly-figured prong horns cleared the meters-high heather in graceful arcs as they bound for safety.

"Too bad your machineguns don't do single shots," Clint said into the embarrassed silence. "You could bag us some venison for dinner."

***New Mumbai dig
Plains of Al Jizah, El Giza
Mosiro Archipelago
06 May 3067***

Jake made his way up Main Street toward the command center. About ten meters wide, Main Street was faced on either side by the double rows of prefabricated huts. Beyond them, more randomly placed, was an assortment of large tents for housing everything from large artifacts to local labor.

The Irregulars had not been consulted about location of the command center. It had been placed, with the logic of civil servants and academicians, adjacent to the archeologists' headquarters near the entrance to the dig itself. Certainly a position of respect, but it was as far from the infantry tents, DropShips, 'Mechs and anything else it was supposed to be the center of as possible.

It's also an uncomfortable hike from the vehicle parking area for a MechWarrior with a bum leg who is feeling his age.

All vehicles were parked in a sentry-guarded area over a kilometer from the dig. Professor Hannan had been concerned the vibrations caused by heavy vehicles would damage the ruins further. Which struck Jake as a little obsessive, since they were already ruins to begin with.

He was not looking forward to the long walk back after wandering through the dig to see whatever it was Darryl Silverlake wanted to show them.

Ariel was waiting for him by the entrance of the command center—hut, really—one of the local boys in tow.

"Who's your friend?" he asked when he was in comfortable earshot.

"Micah," Ariel introduced the boy.

Or not so much a boy, Jake amended. Sixteen, maybe seventeen years old, with skin tanned by the sun and steady brown eyes beneath a mop of black hair. It was his height, or lack of it, and slight build that made him seem years younger.

"Radios have been interfering with equipment they're using to scan for electronics," Ariel explained. "Micah is one of our new cadre of messengers."

Trying out a few of the Arabic phrases he'd been struggling to master, Jake greeted the young man and inquired after his health.

The boy stared at him blankly for a moment, then nodded once, uncertainly.

"I sure hope I said what I thought I said," Jake murmured to Ariel.

"I beg your pardon," Micah answered in faintly accented English. "It was difficult for me to understand your words."

"My accent off?"

"Perhaps," the young man responded, looking more a boy in his embarrassment.

"Best I stick to English, then," Jake decided.

"Professor Hannan hired the runners from a sort of youth commune," Ariel said. "They have no families and support themselves by helping out where they can."

Jake did not comment that helping themselves to other's possessions would be an integral part of any pack of refugees' self-sufficiency program. Simple enough matter to have the sentries pay particular attention to their comings and goings.

"Have you spoken to Chowla?" Ariel asked.

"Nope. Joint effort, unified front, just as you recommended," Jake said. "Why?"

Ariel nodded down Main Street and Jake turned to look back along the way he had come.

In the middle distance Reema sauntered, hands deep in the pockets of her family jacket. Invisible if you weren't looking for it—and hard to see if you were—was the tiny side-to-side bob of her head. Even at ease, her scout reflexes had her scanning every side street she passed.

"Now rather than later?" Jake suggested.

"I'd suggest going inside," Ariel murmured, "but it would look like we were running away."

As they stepped toward Reema, Micah moved as though to follow, but Jake caught his eye. Evidently realizing this moment did

not involve him, the native faded back toward the wall of the command hut.

At the sight of the approaching captains, Reema pulled her hands from her pockets and straightened, putting a more military strut in her stride. In step with Ariel on the dirt street, Jake shook off the feeling they should be wearing six-guns.

At the correct distance, Reema stopped, snapping the co-commanders a proper salute. Not like her at all. But neither were the new lieutenant's bars glinting at the collar of her field jacket.

"Medicos have cleared you for duty," Ariel said without preamble after returning the salute. "And Mr. Silverlake vets your *Mongoose* at one hundred percent. Are you ready to resume active service?"

"Yes, ma'am," Reema confirmed, a guarded look coming to her eye.

"Excellent," Ariel rolled ahead, nearly lapsing into Peregrine Junior. "Then effective immediately you are to assume command of Alpha Lance, First Company."

Reema turned startled eyes to Jake.

"Oh?"

Really should have talked this out with her ahead of time, Jake thought. What in hell made me think it would go smoother this way?

"Just while I'm detached," he said aloud, assuring her the situation was temporary. Or as temporary as he could make it.

"The posting is based on experience and record, not time in rank," Ariel explained the obvious. "We need our best in leadership positions."

"Yes, ma'am," Reema acknowledged the praise as though it were a demerit.

"We don't expect you to step in cold," Jake said. "Avery Clint will drill with you and your lance while you break in. Report to him to set up a schedule."

"Yes, sir," Reema said, voice crisp, repeating her salute. "Ma'am."

Jake stood by Ariel watched as the woman strode smartly toward the vehicle and 'Mech compound. He couldn't help but think the

marching Lieutenant First Class lacked the sauntering Sergeant's cocky grace.

"She did not desire command?" Micah asked.

Jake turned, startled the native youth had moved so close.

"She is a seventh generation MechWarrior," Ariel explained. "And for seven generations the MechWarriors in her family have been scouts who held the rank of sergeant."

Micah's eyes widened.

"Surely," he said, looking after Reema's distant figure with new respect, "to interfere with such a tradition would engender bad karma."

"It is a noble tradition," Ariel agreed. "But she is a valuable Warrior; one who should lead. To not allow her to reach her fullest potential would accrue more damaging karma, would it not?"

The native nodded, though Jake suspected the boy didn't wholly agree.

"Since when do Muslims worry about karma?" he asked.

Micah glanced up and down the dusty street, making sure here was no one within earshot.

"In this world," he said. "Not everyone who seems Muslim is Muslim."

Jake remembered the infidel ghetto carved into the cliffs of Al-Ilb and nodded.

Mosiro culture, and by extension culture here on El Giza, was not kind to nonbelievers. Jobs, housing, perhaps even food, might depend on the appearance of conformity.

The intolerance was difficult to reconcile with the open goodwill the people of Mosiro had shown toward each other. Strangers in the street were greeted as friends.

Perhaps Professor Hannan was a rebel of sorts. Ariel had said the Professor had criticized Mosiro's civil laws requiring nonbelievers to pray. Now it seemed he had gone out of his way to employ poor non-Muslims from among the locals. Sometimes, Jake knew, spiritual individuals found some way to atone for what they saw as cruelties committed in the name of their religion.



New Mumbai had not been a real city. It had been a production facility, the heart of J. F. Madan Productions, which three hundred years ago had been the largest single creator of holovids in this half of the Star League. The earthen wall surrounding New Mumbai formed a great hollow rectangle, kilometers on a side. Overgrown breaks in its symmetry testified at least a dozen treasure hunting parties had been over this ground before.

Now those breaks were guarded by the Chaos Irregular infantry. Jake knew they'd taken to calling themselves Footmen. Despite what he'd said about no carryovers from the old units, the name seemed to give them a sense of pride, so he'd let it ride.

The interior of the rectangle contained hundreds of structures, ranging from smaller mounds of dirt indicating—perhaps—collapsed buildings to half-buried villages to city streets to... Well, the area just inside the university's entrance to the site was a forest of artificial tree trunks, meters in diameter. Just beyond that was the entrance to an old-fashioned conventional aircraft hangar, though the building behind the facade had collapsed.

Turning a corner, Jake and Ariel, with Micah in tow, found themselves in the ruins of what appeared to be an industrial or warehouse district. Four blocks later, ancient brownstones, their first floors half buried in debris, rose around them.

In its day, El Giza had been the hub of over a hundred worlds spanning two nation states. A center of commerce, finance, military might and political power.

However, all but forgotten in the thirty-first century, in the minds of everyday people three hundred years ago El Giza had not been linked to commerce, politics or even the SLDF. The planet had been the entertainment capital of the quadrant, the heart of J. F. Madan Productions and home of recording artists and actors beloved throughout the Inner Sphere.

New Mumbai had produced hundreds of holovids each year. Madan's stock and trade had been historical epics, adventures, both military and exploratory, and multi-generational romances spanning a dozen worlds and generations. Most of Madan's holovids had been lost over time, but they were still the gold stan-

dard of accuracy and detail in bringing cultures and histories to life. As he stepped from city street to medieval courtyard, Jake couldn't help wondering how many legendary recordings he was strolling through.

All about them archeology students were sifting through piles of debris and refuse. More accurately, the students were supervising locals who did the actual work. They frequently stopped the workers, barking at them as though they should have known without being told, and recorded the location and placement of an object before ordering it moved. Occasionally a runner was given some item to carry out for assessment. One passed close to them, carrying what looked like a noteputer, though smaller than any Jake had seen. It looked broken.

"Aren't they going through junk other looters dropped?" Jake asked.

"Yes," Ariel confirmed. "Though I think they'd object to your use of 'other'. They're after things of historical value, which looters may not have recognized."

The University of Mosiro had presented their job as guarding an expedition looking for religious artifacts. Letting his gaze follow the lines of an ersatz mountain range above the scale model of a village, Jake tried to imagine what in the ruins of a holovid studio would qualify.

Darryl Silverlake was waiting for them by the double doors of what seemed to be a garage angling down into the ground. A university notice pasted to the nose of a gold and brown serpent painted on the wall declared the building had been inventoried and contained nothing of interest.

As usual, Darryl had a pair of techs in tow, though instead of backpacks these were armed with a noteputer and a holocamera. Also present was a youth very like Micah, though thinner and with a definite Capellan caste to his features.

Her features, Jake realized as they got closer.

When Silverlake introduced her as Esther, she nodded with a serious focus that somehow reminded Jake of Reema walking like a lieutenant. He couldn't help thinking that for a female orphan on a Muslim world, the little folds tilting her solemn eyes must be extra bricks on an already heavy burden. He decided not to try his luck with Arabic a second time, instead packing his smile with as much encouragement as he could.

As the chief engineer led the way into the building, Jake lagged a bit, delaying Ariel long enough to let the techs and two young natives precede them.

"Do we really need the escorts?" he asked, keeping his voice low. "Or are we really without comm in here?"

"It took the Footmen forty minutes to ground wire the sentry points," Ariel said. "There is no other viable military force on planet. No radios inside the dig site is not a significant impediment to our job and keeps the client happy."

Jake wasn't so sure, but he wasn't sure it was a big enough issue to argue about, either. Easier to let a few of the boys know they might forget to leave their comm units outside.

"Look familiar?" Silverlake asked as Ariel and Jake caught up.

He was standing by a two-D publicity poster depicting an ancient *Crocket* painted in a bold pattern of brown diamonds on gold. It was firing on both a garishly painted *Atlas* and a lance of aerospace fighters Jake couldn't identify.

"I've never seen these unit colors before," Ariel said.

"Never was such a unit," Silverlake answered, but volunteered no more information.

Looking more closely, Jake saw several small people, perhaps children, sheltering in the shadow of the *Crocket*. Their attackers were apparently terrible shots, for though it was surrounded by wreckage and burning buildings, there wasn't a mark on the BattleMech.

"The Immortal Warrior," he guessed.

"Close," the engineer grinned. "That's the personal BattleMech of the *Fer de Lance*."

"Spearhead?" Ariel asked. "Never heard of him."

"Her," Darryl corrected. "Two hundred and fifty years before the Immortal Warrior, she was the champion of the downtrodden and defender of the weak."

"How do you know that?"

"It's written across the bottom of the poster," Jake pointed out. "I'll have to warn Reema to keep her distance."

"What?"

"*Fer de lance*," Jake said. "She pilots a *Mongoose*."

Faced with six blank stares, he sighed. He hated explaining wise cracks, particularly bad ones. *Someday you'll learn.*

"Do you know what a mongoose is?" he asked.

"A twenty-five-ton—"

"Not the 'Mech, Darryl," Jake cut him off with a grin. "The animal the 'Mech is named after."

"A Terran rodent," Ariel said. "It eats large poisonous snakes."

"Right," Jake nodded, glad someone was following him. "From the Asian continent. It eats cobras."

Four of his audience nodded. The two native runners regarded him solemnly, as though awaiting further enlightenment.

"On ancient Terra, European colonists on the South American continent were plagued by the *fer de lance*," Jake went on, indicating the brown on gold pattern painted on the *Crocket*. "They thought importing the mongoose would solve their problem."

"Unfortunately, the cobra hunts by sight and raises its head high off the ground to visually triangulate its target before striking," Jake said. "The *fer de lance* is a pit viper that hunts by body heat and strikes parallel to the ground."

"The mongoose failed to adapt," Micah guessed.

Jake grinned at the boy.

"The mongoose became a staple of the *fer de lance* diet," he confirmed.

"Little danger of that happening to Lieutenant Chowla," Ariel pointed out.

"So," said Jake, changing the subject by turning to Darryl. "What has this holovid heroine to do with us?"

"Maybe nothing," Darryl shrugged, but Jake caught the gleam in his eye. "Maybe something, if you can make a case to the professor."

One of his techs started up a portable generator and the semi-underground building filled with pools of illumination as work

lights came on. Jake realized the space was as large as a commercial conventional aircraft hangar.

Darryl led the party down a ramp and across the expanse. Looking up, Jake could make out a grid work of pipes and catwalks above the glow of the work lights. Incongruous objects—trees, building facades, mysterious shapes and what appeared to be stuffed oxen—were suspended on wires in the gloom.

At floor level, they wound through a warren of storage containers, moveable facades and set pieces. Beyond the physical sets was an open semicircle, dozens of meters across. The wall defining the arc was a pale, featureless grey, stretching up to the catwalks above.

"Projection area?" Ariel guessed.

"Probably," Darryl answered, giving the open space a casual glance. No area devoid of technology was of much interest to him.

Intrigued, Jake slowed. Hologrid production hadn't changed in centuries. When an authentic locale on a distant world was called for, computerized trivid projectors, drawing on specifications from the studio's database, created it. With their exhaustively detailed files on the minutiae of a hundred worlds, the set designers could replicate—or create—any setting they wanted in a projection area like this one.

Somehow, he'd expected a bit of that magic to linger. But it was just a bare floor, a blank wall, and dozens of brackets that three hundred years ago might have held holorecorders or trivid projectors. Darryl had been right to pass through without a glance.

Jake gave Micah, who had paused with him, a rueful smile and lengthened his stride to catch up with the others. He found them by a wall of bins filled with a mad variety of lamps, furniture, personal items, tools and weapons.

"These are all fake," Darryl said, rapping the protruding butt of an assault rifle. The plastic *thunked* hollowly.

"But," he stopped at the end of the towering rack, "*this* is real."

The slight engineer grinned and made a broad sweep of his arm, indicating the officers should proceed him around the corner.

Jake sensed Peregrine Junior stiffening beside him. She hated displays like this. He shifted his weight slightly, nudging her with

his elbow and reminding her it wouldn't kill her to play along. She didn't acknowledge the touch, but she did step forward.

Together, the two captains rounded the corner...

Jake's heart leapt.

Dazzling in the work lights, a great golden crest arched above an angular cockpit and unshrouded missile launchers were leveled at them from the towering shoulder assemblies of a *Crocket*—the *Crocket*—the one from the publicity poster in the entrance.

Then Jake realized the BattleMech's arms were missing. And that the autocannon was at eye level because there was no bottom half to the machine. The torso's pivot ring was resting directly on the floor.

"You brought us here for another mock-up?" he asked, his voice harsher than he'd meant.

At the corner of his eye, he thought he saw Ariel glance his way in surprise. He didn't return the look; wasn't going to admit that for half a heartbeat he'd thought Darryl had found him a BattleMech.

"Nope," said Darryl, apparently oblivious to Jake's tone.

Moving to one of the stands of work lights, he pulled a lamp down to use as a pointer.

"The missiles are wooden," he said, illuminating each missile rack in turn. "And some moron clogged the autocannon's bearings with a centimeter of that gold glitter paint."

Jake opened his mouth, then shut it, mindful of Micah and Esther standing in respectful attendance.

The *missiles* were wooden. The Holly launchers were real? And there was a real autocannon under the shell of lacquered paint?

"Inside, this guy's got no magazines," Darryl continued the inventory, moving the light across the BattleMech as though it could somehow show them the interior through the armor. "Buncha junk in the reactor housing—can't tell if it's storage or trash—and a machine for blowing smoke out the joints sits where the gyro should be."

Past the pool of light illuminating the 'Mech's torso, Jake saw two pillars of dark gold.

"Are those...?"

"Yep, both legs," Darryl confirmed, swinging the lamp toward them. At the edge of the worklight's range the beam still revealed the entire lower assembly of the *Crocket*. "No myomer and somebody borrowed the guts on that left knee actuator, but the hips work. They probably wheeled them in for scenes of her climbing in or out of her 'Mech."

He aimed the work light toward the ceiling.

"Haven't figured out how to bring the arms down, yet."

Jake followed the worklight's beam up and saw two massive cylinders glinting goldily among the overhead catwalks. That made sense from a holovid-making standpoint, he guessed. Keep them out of the way when recording the MechWarrior in her cockpit, lower them in when the shot required seeing the large lasers in action. He wondered if they were the old Blankenburgs—*nobody* had those any more.

New Mumbai had been about entertainment and illusion. Looters wouldn't be looking for military hardware. They'd grabbed the things they knew were valuable, like the holovid equipment, and assumed everything else was fake.

As had the university students who'd signed off on the building.

No wonder Darryl was pleased with himself. To find a BattleMech—most of a BattleMech—after hundreds of others had missed it surely gladdened the artful scavenger's soul.

"Not exactly complete," Jake observed dryly.

"Sure it is," Darryl protested. "Just add myomer, wiring yokes, actuator assemblies and half a hundred parts I don't think they make anymore."

Jake made a show of patting his pockets. When he turned up empty hands, Darryl grinned.

"But that's not what I wanted to show you," the engineer said, turning the work light on a ravaged console near the wall of bins. "*This* is what I wanted to show you."

At first Jake thought it was another set piece, then realized it was a working control center. Or had been at one time. Severed wires and gaping holes testified that looters had already taken everything of value.

Everything of value they recognized, Jake amended.

He slid his eyes toward the two young natives, watching everything as they waited for a message to carry. Chances were those long-gone looters had been their ancestors. In spirit, if not in fact. He was willing to bet Micah and Esther were learning a lot about the value of things they'd been overlooking. No doubt whatever the university didn't take would soon turn up on the black market.

Jake hoped they got top credit. It wasn't these kids' fault their world had been raped a hundred times over. They deserved any good that came their way.

"This guy in the middle must have been the director, controlling which recorder saw what" the engineer was explaining to Ariel when Jake resumed paying attention. "And the guy on the right ran the trivid projectors to put the 'Mech anywhere they wanted it to be."

Jake wondered how Darryl had deduced that, not that he doubted the conclusion. Little more than the metal frame remained of the control centers.

"But this guy over here," Darryl indicated the left-hand console, "might be useful."

Coming on the heels of dismissing the 'Mech chassis as not worth the trouble, that was a significant statement. Jake studied the gutted panel, but beyond the sense the holes where the monitors had been looked familiar he could tell nothing.

Beside him, Peregrine Junior made an exasperated sound.

"Enlighten us, Sergeant," she said crisply.

"The *Crocket* was originally a training 'Mech," Darryl said, wisely switching to report mode. "This is a standard SLDF simulator control console; it would make the screens in the cockpit show whatever the operator wants."

"You're saying this *Crocket* is a trainer?" Peregrine Junior's voice was flat.

"Yes ma'am," Darryl nodded. "Which isn't too strange, considering."

Aware the native runners could see his profile, Jake carefully raised one eyebrow in polite interest.

"Big SLDF bases like the one down the road included training cadres," the engineer explained. "When these holovids were being made, the *Crocket* wasn't a frontline BattleMech."

"You're suggesting that when the biggest holovid studio on a hundred worlds wanted a real BattleMech," Peregrine Junior said with a note of disapproval, "the commander of the SLDF base loaned them a trainer?"

"It would be cheap public relations," Jake pointed out. "Loan them a trainer he doesn't need for their Immortal Warrior and the SLDF becomes a hero."

And from the looks of things, the tech in charge of prepping it for the loan thought disabling the weapons in place was easier than removing and storing them.

"All onboard systems are complete and original issue," Darryl said confirming what Jake suspected. Rumor was some new nav and targeting systems were as good as twenty-eighth-century Scope 30 TTS, but he doubted it.

"Using a trainer would reduce wear and tear on our machines," Peregrine Junior said thoughtfully. "Maybe we could offer to save the university some money by taking it in lieu of a portion of our payment."

"We can bring it up at our next meeting with the Professor," Jake said, not fully convinced. "We'll see what he says."

With Micah and Esther following at a pace behind, Jake refrained from whistling as they made their way back into the sunlight. Darryl may not have found him his 'Mech, but between this find and Ronin's credits for his lost *Grasshopper*, he'd have his pick of the best Outreach had to offer.

Plains of Al Jizah, El Giza
Mosiro Archipelago
09 May 3067

"Tighten up, Lieutenant Chowla," Clint said over the command channel, watching the icons on his heads-up.

"Aye, sir."

On the screen, the 'Mechs of One Alpha drew closer together, narrowing the gaps in their sweep.

Chowla wore her *Mongoose* like a set of clothes. And her situational awareness on the field had earned her a reputation for having second sight among the Strikers. But she had a scout mentality: she was used to independent thinking and to acting on her own. Which meant she expected her lance to know what needed to be done without instructions.

And this was the wrong lance for that.

Heather's Beta Lance was all former Strikers, long used to working together. He'd known Fuentes and Campbell for years, only Marion was new to the group. But Alpha Lance was all former Hussars, used to having every step spelled out. Pretty useful for coordination under fire, but...

It happened again. Chowla veered a few degrees to check a hol-low the sweep was bypassing and the other three did not adjust to cover the gap she'd made.

Clint sighed and scratched at the narrow strip of neck he could reach past the neurohelmet.

Chowla had been a sergeant last week, but the former Hussars didn't have a problem taking orders from her. As Albert Whuang, the *Valkyrie* pilot, had pointed out, Chowla had saved their asses on Acamar. They were glad to have her head their lance. If only she'd give the sort of orders they understood.

"Lieutenant," he said on the command channel as the gap continued to grow. Then: "Chowla."

"Sir?"

"Check your lance."

"Damn."

"Form them up, Lieutenant," he said, kicking his *Quickdraw* into a walk.

"Go easy, love," Dora said over their private channel.

"No worries," Clint grinned in the direction of her *Vulcan*.

His partner's 'Mech stood like a scarecrow on the rise that separated the training area from the dig. No need in letting their employers see how badly they needed practice.

Alpha Lance was drawn up in a line. Their flat charcoal grey paint made them look like stone statues knee deep in waving heather.

If he hadn't known their organization, Clint would have pegged Martin as the leader. His *Enforcer* dominated the group. Not that Daniel's *Blackjack* wasn't a serious machine—it just didn't have the presence of the *Enforcer*. Coming on this lance in combat, he'd divide his fire between those two, leaving the lightweight *Valkyrie* and flyweight *Mongoose* to either wait their turns or run for their lives.

Which wasn't a bad thing.

A *Mongoose*, even a *Mongoose* with Chowla in it, wasn't a serious threat to a *Quickdraw*. But as the leader of a lance, being ignored by attackers going for bigger game would enable her to coordinate her lance without the distraction of dodging fire. A real advantage. *If* she could get the hang of directing her lance.

And they got better at understanding the orders she gave. It was a two-way street.

Clint had no doubt the unit would come together, given enough time. Which was why it was a goddess send the Irregulars were on this babysitting mission. With any luck, the vacation would last until Alpha Lance grew into something that might have a chance of surviving a firefight.

**New Mumbai dig
Plains of Al Jizah, El Giza
Mosiro Archipelago
17 May 3067**

"How goes the war, Sergeant Tucker?"

"Well as can be expected, ma'am," answered the sentry from his perch overlooking the approach.

Ariel was glad she'd remembered the former Striker's name without effort. She was even more pleased her attempt at emulating Captain Jacoam's informal style seemed to have gone over well.

She knew from her coursework at Wolf's Dragoon's Outreach Mercenary Training Command that camaraderie—if managed without overstepping command protocols—could be effective in knitting a diverse group into a cohesive unit. However, she'd always found the practice difficult to implement.

Exhausted from a night of maneuvers with Second Company, she found the victory refreshing.

Though the night exercises had been rejuvenating in their own way. There had been some delay to the repairs while the Irregulars got their new *Crocket* trainer crated and stowed. (*Strange to be on a mission where battle-ready 'Mechs were a lower priority than securing trade goods.*) But two days ago Darryl Silverlake had certified Second Company's 'Mechs up and running. As she was now coming to expect of the engineer and his crew, last night's evaluation showed every machine exceeding specs.

Pausing by the entrance to the dig, she watched the activity along Main Street. With no technology other than a few anonymous computer cases carried by workers, the scene could have been from any frontier settlement in the last twelve hundred years. The effect was heightened by the patches of prairie, visible between the buildings, stretching to the horizon. All that was needed to complete the scene was a lone eagle circling in the evening sky.

Except El Giza doesn't have flying birds. We'll have to pull a computer sim up from files.

She realized she could not think of a compelling reason to enter the command hut. She'd planned on reviewing the weekly update on jobs posted at the Outreach Hiring Hall, but with their current

open-ended mission showing no signs of wrapping up—thank God the university was picking up the tab on their hired DropShip—there wasn't much point.

The natives of El Giza, with the exception of the orphans from the youth camp and the construction workers the university had hired, seemed content to express their dislike of archeologists by ignoring New Mumbai. Security dealt with the few inevitable attempts at pilferage, her involvement restricted to reading the daily reports.

Captain Jacoam was working with the Footmen—and she was gratified the infantry had decided to perpetuate the name—to develop their armor assets, such as they were. And Lieutenant Clint reported the integration of Alpha Lance was going as expected. She hoped that situation would improve, but there was really no reason for her to become involved.

There were no other 'Mechs on planet, no DropShips on approach, no real news—threatening or otherwise. It might just be her time would be better spent returning to the DropShip and getting some of that shut-eye she'd ordered for Second Company. There was really nothing else for her to do.

"Captain Peregrine?"

Except amuse the natives by standing in the sun staring blankly at nothing for ten minutes.

"Yes, Micah?"

The young man's concerned expression eased somewhat at her smile.

"Doctor Hannan told me to tell you it is very important for you to enter the command center," the runner said earnestly. "At once."

Ariel couldn't imagine what would cause the faultlessly civil professor to send her what was essentially an order. It was his right as their employer, of course, but...

"Thank you, Micah," she said, hoping her mind skid hadn't been too obvious.

The young man bowed slightly at the waist before turning to walk briskly toward the dig.

Ariel tugged the hem of her field jacket to settle it squarely before stepping off to the command hut a dozen meters away.

Worst case scenario, an off duty drunk and disorderly upset the locals.

Two steps inside the command hut she realized how wrong that prediction had been.

**Plains of Al Jizah, El Giza
Mosiro Archipelago
17 May 3067**

Four tan raiders—unmarked medium 'Mechs, broad as crabs and fast. Like nothing Avery Clint had ever seen.

Like nothing his targeting system could see.

What the hell are those things?

Clint tabled the useless question as he focused on keeping alive.

The raiders had popped out of a narrow dip, almost a slit, in what had looked like flat prairie. Folks back home called that a ha-ha, a fold in the earth you couldn't see until you were right on top of it.



Nothing funny about nightmare 'Mechs out of nowhere tearing into your people without warning.

Two had targeted Fuentes, raking his *Hussar's* top-mounted large laser with four of their own. His 'Mech was disarmed and venting oily smoke before he got off a shot.

Dro had done the only thing a *Hussar* pilot could do under the circumstances. He took to his heels, running for the DropShips and the cover of Alpha lance, already moving up to support.

One of the raiders slowed to a walk. The other continued to give chase, though it apparently couldn't match the speed of even a wounded *Hussar*.

Not that Clint or anyone else had stood around watching this exchange. He'd caught it on his three-sixty while dodging the large laser of another raider. What saved him was the bogie dividing its attention, and firepower, between Clint and Dora. The bolt that singed past his canopy was meant to keep him off balance while her *Vulcan* took the other large laser and two mediums.

Clint's cursed his targeting computer as it insisted there was nothing to shoot at.

"Had partial lock," Marion reported. "Lost it. This is some sort of stealth armor."

"Move back," Clint ordered. "Maybe a range limit. Use your LRMs."

Whatever she might have said was lost in a bubbling hiss of white noise.

Clint clicked through the tac channels, the only change was the pitch of the hiss. All their field channels were jammed.

If there was a range limit to the raider's stealth armor, only Marion's *Centurion* could exploit it. With six medium lasers, Clint's 5K *Quickdraw* was inside their ECM and weapons range for the duration.

The raider he couldn't hit gave Dora a full barrage, staggering the *Vulcan* as armor flowed. Evidently deciding she was out of action, it turned its attention on Clint.

Knowing he didn't have the speed, but hoping the raider wouldn't expect the move, Clint pushed his 'Mech to a full run, going for the cover of a low ridge.

Two large lasers tore into the right side of his 'Mech on the third stride. Armor boiled and the sixty-ton machine staggered at the sudden loss of armor.

Sidestepping, Clint twisted the torso left, bringing the *Quickdraw's* rear lasers to bear, and fired, targeting visually. A glancing hit refracting off the raider, a clean miss, and what looked like a startled sideways lurch.

"Forgot I had those?" Clint asked the image on his screen.

The weapons lock alarm sounded. Stomping down with both feet, Clint jumped his BattleMech up and back, toward the bogie.

Don't have the ankles for a Highlander, but I've got twenty tons on you.

White light flooded the cockpit as the sky exploded.

Clint threw his arm across his eyes, feeling the *Quickdraw* arms jerk in sympathy with the hand snatched from their controls. Not enough to affect trajectory, the cant came too close to the ground

for the gyro to compensate. The impact was off center, missing the enemy 'Mech as it scuttled out of the way. Damage alarms blared. The right ankle actuator was flexed past tolerance. It didn't fail, but it wouldn't survive another jump. Maybe not another step.

Lovely.

Clint fired all four forward lasers at the raider, directly in front of him and still turning back from its lunge to escape being crushed. Four hits, solid this time. Not enough to stop the smaller machine, but definitely damaging.

Not waiting to complete its turn, the raider swung the near large laser toward him. The beam gouged along the *Quickdraw's* rotor ring, threatening the upper body's mobility. Or the gyro, if it burned through.

With no way to get away, Clint lunged awkwardly toward the stranger, the damaged ankle assembly bowing dangerously outward. He brought the 'Mech's arm up, aiming a left-handed hammer blow at the forward-thrust cockpit.

The 'Mech twisted away, taking the blow on its left laser assembly, then sprinted for safety. Unable to keep up, Clint fired another salvo from his forward lasers. All shots went wide of a target his computer said did not exist.

The raider evidently decided the wounded *Quickdraw* was not an immediate danger. Turning a shoulder to Clint, the 'Mech took up position just beyond range of his medium lasers on the lower slope of another roll of earth.

The scarecrow shape of Dora's *Vulcan* rose above the ridge, its lower third concealed by heavy heather. The machine seemed immobile, its large laser all but hanging free of the torso. With the raider's ECM between them, he couldn't assess her damage, but it was clear the raider thought her a null threat.

A shoulder to each of them, the demon 'Mech was facing the direction of the DropShips.

The direction the giant flash had come from, now that Clint thought about it. His sensors, fuzzed by the raider's ECM, showed no radiation, but heat. A prairie fire, kilometers wide.

He hoped the defoliated buffer zones the DropShip captains had insisted on had protected the vessels from the fire. No sign of them through the heat.

And no sign of Alpha Lance, either, which should have been on them by now. Unless Chowla had realized he and Dora were bait and was waiting for support. Second Company would be here as fast as they shook off the sleep. ECM or no, even with comm jammed, this lance of raiders was about to be terminally out massed and outgunned.

Just hang on 'til the cavalry gets here.

On his three-sixty he saw Marion seemed to be doing some good against her dance partner. The raider had a distinct limp and was not moving as quickly as its brothers.

The 'Mech that had chased Fuentes was shooting at something on the ground. Had the *Hussar* gone down?

The second was backing toward the firefight, which spoke volumes of the pilot's confidence in the ECM suite. All his attention was focused on the direction of the DropShips, the most likely approach of Alpha Lance.

"You there, love?"

"Dora!"

"Their jam is channel-specific," Dora said. "C-notes to beans one of the local grave robbers checked out the command hut radio. They don't have our private line."

"Any thoughts about these jokers?"

"Something new," Dora stated the obvious. "But the way they move, time of their shots—there's a definite heat-up/cool-down rhythm going."

Clint replayed the fire exchanges in his mind.

"They got heat problems," Clint agreed. "How can we use that?"

"Maybe if you chase this one my way before he's chilled, I could hit it with my flamer," Dora suggested. "My gyro's hanging by a thread—I can *hear* the thing—I've been trying to think of something special to do before it shreds."

Clint's targeting computer pinged Daniel's *Blackjack* and Martin's *Enforcer* as the brace jumped a roll of prairie.

The raider watching the approach fired as they were in the air. Both Irregulars 'Mechs took hits from the large lasers.

That's good shooting.

When they hit the ground, Martin cut left, firing a running shot from his own extended range laser that went wide. The slower *Blackjack* used its one advantage and leapt a second time, vectoring slightly to the right.

Closing the gap was the wrong thing to do against the stealth armor; it put them inside the comm jam. Of course, unless Alpha lance stumbled onto his and Dora's off-the-books channel, there was no way for Clint to warn them.

That's why they went after Dro. An up-to-spec Hussar could've broken their jam.

The second raider tracked Martin, loping on an intercept course.

Clint swore. Though the raiders' ECM guarded the 'Mech, it couldn't disguise the laser as the *Enforcer* was TAG-ed.

Instantly the high heather covering the slope below Dora flowered into a dozen missiles, streaking toward Martin. The Irregular pilot doubled back, trying to throw off the incoming missiles, but it was useless. Balls of flame engulfed his 'Mech from knees to cockpit.

"Ah ha!" Dora cried in triumph.

The *Vulcan's* dangling arms came up. The flamer saturated the hillside with gouts of flaming plasma as the machine gun thrashed the ground cover, churning the woody sagebrush to splinters.

The raider between them at the base of the slope spun in place, bringing both large lasers to bear on Dora's 'Mech. The pilot aimed high—perhaps careful of the infantry, perhaps just going for the kill. Either way, the double beam splashed between the *Vulcan's* sloping shoulders, shearing the charred cockpit completely off.

With a strangled cry, Clint stepped his machine forward, the downhill slope wrenching his damaged actuator. He fired his lasers, all four shots going wide.

He was vaguely aware of a third flying shape, a jumping 'Mech joining the battle from the flank, but he didn't have the attention to spare. Focused on Dora's killer, he shuffled his damaged leg forward and fired. Three of his lasers speared the raider's upper carapace, spraying coolant and debris with the molten armor.

Target lock alarm: TAG. Missiles swarmed from the swale.



“Mech still with us, Sergeant?”

“Ignoring us, sir,” Theodora’s helmet vibrated against his. Despite her words, she threw the hover tank through another series of evasive jigs and turns. “How’s the turret?”

“I got wind on my back,” Jake answered. “Give us another klick and I’ll sit up and take a look.”

“Good thinking.”

His head was jammed between Teddi’s and his own left knee while his right knee was between his driver’s helmet and the bulkhead. He hoped Teddi could see her controls and the ground ahead well enough to drive. All he had was the north slope of her chest and her left forearm, with occasional glimpses of her knee as she worked the controls.

Under normal circumstances Sergeant Yannis would have joked about his position. Perhaps wishing she’d worn something with more cleavage for his benefit. But the loss of the DropShips had taken all the humor out of her.

The whistling wind tugged at the back of his jacket.

“Still no sign of pursuit,” Teddi said.

“By which you mean we’re still alive.”

“Aye.”

Jake sat up, surprised to discover the turret was still with them. Barely. It had been knocked free of its support collar and was tilted back against the rear deck, its weapons pointing uselessly at the sky. The whipping wind streamed through the gap between turret and pivot track, perhaps twenty centimeters at its widest point.

The tilted turret gave him pause. Lasers didn’t have that sort of physical impact. Then he realized the beams had cooked off the missiles already in the launchers. The tubes were designed to direct such a blast forward and out, saving the crew. Apparently it had worked, but with enough thrust to shove the turret off its mountings.

"Can you get us to the dig?"

"On it."

"Scuttlebug to Beetles," Jake said into his mic, wondering if the aerial was still attached. "Trace? Barns? You still with us?"

"Got us both," Barns answered. "But we don't have anyone. No sign of anyone, none of our people."

"They took out the DropShips," Jake said. No way to sugarcoat that.

He didn't bother to speculate about the mysterious flash. They'd no doubt seen it and their guesses would be as good as his.

"These guys are leaving no witnesses and taking no prisoners," he said into the silence on the tank channel. "Each of you grab a truck or transport, anything. Round up as many civilians as you can and bug for town."

Of course that plan depended on the raiders not wanting to level an entire town. It would be a balance between not letting witnesses to get away and not wanting tens of thousands of people see you killing the witnesses.

"You see any Footmen," he added, "tell them orders are clear all civilians from the target zone."

It was another seven minutes to the vehicle area. Seven minutes of listening to the static on the scanner and trying to pierce the wall of smoke and flame with eyes or sensors for any hope someone survived the DropShip blasts.

With a final slew of sprayed gravel, Teddi slid the J. Edgar to a stop. Before it had fully settled, she had her harness off and was undogging the driver's escape hatch. She wasn't even going to try to get her generous frame through the double twist of the canted turret. By the time Jake had scrambled free, she had a narrow flatbed rolling toward the dig entrance.

"See you in town, Sergeant," he shouted over the grind of gears.

"Last one buys drinks."

Jake stood for a moment, one hand on the torn metal of a ruined missile tube, and looked back over the prairie. The fire around the DropShips was a kilometer wide, but seemed somehow less intense, as though it was losing its first rush of life. Perhaps it had been fuel blazing and the natural heather didn't burn so freely.

More disturbing were the leaning columns of black smoke marking the 'Mech battle. If he had his *Grasshopper*... He'd do everything he could to save the civilians.

Which is what he was doing now.

Jumping down, he jogged past the first truck to a high-bodied transport. It was a civilian design he didn't recognize, but its high ground clearance looked a good bet for getting across the prairie. He tapped in the security override code and the engine barked and sputtered to life.

Once through the main entrance, he paused, considering his options. There were a dozen ways out, but odds were folks were already moving toward the ones closest to the town at the opposite end of New Mumbai. Trying to basketweave through the warren and find everyone would waste time, but the other trucks would have already cleared the straight routes.

He decided to split the difference and zigzag through the western section.

On his fourth luckless cast along a side street, Jake saw two figures with their backs to him, walking hand-in-hand, apparently oblivious to any danger. He shouted, but they were too far. He ground the unfamiliar gear box and accelerated after them, the high-wheeled truck bouncing wildly on the uneven street.

The two strollers, two kids, jumped for the shelter of a doorway as the truck bore down on them. Jake threw open the cab door and recognized Esther and Micah.

"Hurry," Jake said, extending a hand to Esther. "We've got to get you out of here."

"Why?" Micah asked.

"There are some very bad people on their way," Jake answered. "They don't care who they kill."

With a frightened glance at Micah, Esther grabbed Jake's hand in both of hers. He lifted the slender native girl into the truck easily, guiding her to the space behind the seats.

As he looked back to Micah, Jake felt Esther's hand cool on the back of his neck. He started to turn his head at the oddly familiar gesture, but froze as she lay the sharp edge of her dagger against his throat.

"We're not really so bad," Micah said.



Ariel looked up from her knees as the door opened.

She hadn't quite fallen asleep, but after the long night in her 'Mech, the forced inactivity, sitting on the sunlit bench in the closed room, made staying alert difficult. She'd caught herself dozing more than once. Each time she'd snatched her head upright, the same woman of indeterminate age had been sitting behind the desk, watching her impassively.

The desk was Sergeant-Major Pauls', though he was nowhere in sight. That had gotten her caught. No, her complacency and stupidity had gotten her caught.

But when she'd stepped across the threshold, her only thought on seeing the strange woman in Pauls' place had been to wonder where he was. Then she'd felt the blade at her throat and the tug of her sidearm being removed. Since then she'd sat, hands bound behind her. The bench had been pulled from the wall, positioned so she sat in the sun. Knowing the placement was intended to make it hard for her to stay awake did little to help her sleep-deprived mind fight the soporific effect.

This time, roused by the opening door, Ariel looked first at the small woman in the tan uniform still watching her, then up to see who had entered.

Esther. And Micah, of course.

Now dressed in the same featureless tan uniform as the woman behind the desk. Without a word, they each took an arm and lifted her to her feet. Not rough, but irresistible.

This close, Ariel could see their featureless uniforms were new. These people weren't bandits. They were members of a regular unit wearing unmarked clothes for a covert operation. This did not improve the situation.

Maintaining their silence, the two guided her to the back of a high-wheeled truck with an enclosed cargo compartment. They took the time to be sure she was propped securely next to Captain Jacoam before closing the doors.

It was dim, not dark, in the truck, a sort of grill around the top providing ventilation. It smelled of... clay, she guessed.

"What's going on?" Jacoam asked her, leaning close and keeping his voice low. As though that would foil any listening device in the noisy vehicle.

Ariel felt a little giddy at the futility of their situation.

"You know that scene in the holovids," she murmured, "where the bad guy has the hero at gunpoint and explains the whole scheme?"

"Yeah."

"It didn't happen."

Jake blinked at her. She'd expected one of his half grins at least, but he looked like she'd kicked him.

"Ariel," he said seriously. "They destroyed the DropShips. Our people are dead."

"No, they're not," she answered flatly.

"I saw the explosion, it nearly blinded me," Jake shook his head. "There's nothing left."

"There was a flash that lit up the command hut," Ariel said. "But after that they used our radio to talk to the ship. I recognized the captain's voice."

Jacoam's eyes began to quarter the dim interior of the truck. Ariel realized this was the first time she'd seen his "bug hunt" in weeks.

None of us has been thinking!

"The defoliant," he said. "The DropShip crews were manic about spreading enough to clear a municipal DropPort. They left tanks full of it sitting around."

"An explosive they detonated somehow—"

"Naval lasers?" Jacoam wondered aloud. "I think I saw streaks."

"Want to bet our people on board were told it had been a warning shot directed at the DropShip?" Ariel asked. "If they thought breaking out would get civilians killed, they'd sit tight and prepare to counterstrike when the enemy came in after them."

"Acamar all over again," Jacoam grunted. "Capellans tying us in knots with smoke and mirrors. When are we going to learn?"

"Olsen's Rangers weren't Capellans, they worked for the Capellans," Ariel corrected. "And what makes you think these are Capellans?"

"What makes you think they're not?"

Ariel thought through the evidence. Which consisted almost entirely of having no clue there was a problem until she was captured.

"One of the Warrior Houses, you think?" she asked at last.

"One of the Warrior House training cadres, most likely," Jacoam chuckled grimly.

The stench of burned vegetation filled the truck body, along with clouds of fine ash and soot. They were evidently traversing the torched area surrounding the "destroyed" DropShips. A metallic tang stung her eyes and nose.

"Magnesium," Captain Jacoam muttered. "Nothing but damn flash powder."

Moments later they were dragged to their feet with the same inevitable support Micah and Esther had used by two new soldiers in brand new, unmarked uniforms. The two former messengers were also present, following at a respectful distance as their apparently senior colleagues provided close escort.

Ariel craned her head, looking in every direction at once as she and Jacoam were led up a loading ramp into the DropShip which had brought them to El Giza. She could see two charcoal-grey BattleMechs at the base of a cargo ramp. *First Beta*, she thought. There was no other sign of the rest of their command, no indication of their fate.

Their guides led them through the loading doors, where banks of fans kept the ash and dust from blowing into the ship, and down a short hall to an office-like cabin. She imagined the ship's cargo master usually sat behind the metal desk bolted to the deck, but now that seat was occupied by a man, perhaps in his thirties, who wore his plain uniform with absolute authority.

Professor Hannan was also present, standing to one side and looking more flustered than frightened at having been captured.

"I don't understand this," Hannan snapped at the man behind the desk as Ariel and Jacoam were guided into chairs. "There aren't to be any witnesses. You're supposed to kill them."

Okay, so not so captured.

Ariel realized Hannan had practically told her his ancestors had been El Giza refugees on the terrace of the university. What she'd taken for his tolerance of foreign sensibilities had been his disdain for Mosiro culture.

The merest flicker passed behind the seated officer's eyes at Hannan's words. Though the rest of his face revealed only serenity, Ariel had the impression this was a massive display of emotion. With no sign the professor had spoken, he looked to Micah.

"Your assessment?"

Micah blinked as though startled by the question, but recovered quickly.

"The capture of Captain Obadiah Jacoam was representative of the entire mercenary command, *lien-zhang*, " he reported, then froze as though realizing a mistake.

Lien-zhang was a Warrior House rank, Ariel knew—roughly equivalent to major. And their captors were making an effort not to advertise their nature. Micah—who was probably not named Micah—had made a beginner's slip. Jacoam was right, these were cadets.

The surreal effect of learning Captain Jacoam's first name from an apprentice Warrior House spy came perilously close to triggering a fit of giggles. Ariel fought her fatigued responses, struggling for focus.

"Confronted with an overwhelming adversary that fired on noncombatants," the young man resumed, "the soldiers put themselves at risk to move civilians out of danger."

The *lien-zhang* nodded as though the words confirmed something he already knew.

"A poorly disciplined mercenary unit of questionable history was selected with the expectation those who did not fight like a rabble and be easily slaughtered, would flee to become refugees on a world of refugees," he explained, looking at Ariel and Jacoam in turn. "We now find the behavior of your personnel presents us with a difficult question of balance."

"Balance?" Professor Hannan blurted. "You're talking *karma*?"

Again the flicker behind the *lien-zhang*'s eyes.

"In your family's long exile, *gong*," he asked quietly. "Were all aspects of courtesy forgotten?"

Frozen mid-retort, Hannan was clearly considering his own culture and his position in it. Relaxing from his argumentative stance, the professor bowed from the waist—a stiff and unpracticed gesture. Receiving a dismissing nod, he fled.

"Enough of your people have died," the *lien-zhang* said, looking from Ariel to Jacoam. "These are the conditions of your survival."

DropShip Drutt
El Giza system
20 May 3067

"Alejandro Fuentes, Dwight Martin, Chamos Daniels, Dora Campbell, and Avery Clint," Pauls read from his noteputer. "We've been given what's left of their 'Mechs as salvage, but..."

His voice trailed off.

The five of them, what Ariel had dubbed the steering committee, were gathered for the first time since the DropShip had lifted. The half-g of ship acceleration hardly held them in their chairs, but they all seemed to be barely holding their own against the pressure.

Neither Pauls nor Davis had been hurt, which seemed to embarrass them.

Pauls had been captured at laser-point by a messenger he'd thought for days was a twelve-year-old girl. Davis and his lance had helped the ship's crew barricade themselves out of harm's way, devising booby-traps to protect them, while the rest of Second Company and the Footmen aboard prepared to defend them against attackers, never realizing they were his captors.

The steering committee's enclave was on loan from their escorts, the officers and crew of the civilian DropShip *Drutt*, late in the service of the University of Mosiro at Al-IIb. It had been a junior officers' ward room, and was laid out in cramped efficiency. It would serve as the Chaos Irregulars administrative offices while en route to—

Well, that hadn't been decided.

"Any update on Albert Whuang?" Ariel asked.

"He'll live, but they couldn't save the arm."

A safe ejection doesn't mean a safe landing.

She glanced over at Lieutenant Chowla. Her first combat command and she'd lost her entire lance. She had a lot of long nights second-guessing her choices ahead of her. The smaller woman's face was ashen beneath the brown, her eyes glassy. She sat with her shoulder against Captain Jacoam, but didn't seem aware of him.

Six months ago, Ariel would have found the unprofessional display inexcusable. Now... She felt her mouth twist in a half smile. How many times had she heard her call Jacoam by the diminutive of his first name and not realized it?

"What the hell were those things?" Jacoam asked. Again.

"Something whoever put together the database we bought on Outreach never heard of," Davis said. "Apparently our information on Capellan 'Mechs is a couple of years old."

Ariel nodded. Updating their ordnance databases hadn't seemed a top priority before, but up-to-date 'Mech profiles might have saved a few lives on El Giza.

"Perhaps our hosts will be willing to sell—" her voice broke off. "Oh. My. God."

"What?" Jacoam asked. Even Chowla was looking at her.

"That's what this was all about," Ariel said. "Why we were guarding a stupid holovid studio and why a Capellan Warrior House—excuse me, pirate band of unknown origin—was willing to kill all of us to get at it."

Four blank stares regarded her. Ariel had a sudden insight into how Jake felt when he tried to explain one of his leaps of logic.

"What did Madan and New Mumbai produce?" she asked.

"Holovids," Pauls answered.

"Damn," said Jake. "Historical holovids. Military—"

"Known for their exhaustive research and attention to detail," finished Davis. "Damn!"

"Okay," said Chowla, drawing out the word. It was the first time in two days Ariel hadn't seen her eyes glassy. "You've got me. What does that mean?"

"It means that Professor Hannan somehow figured out that the Madan database was intact," Ariel explained. "Or in large enough pieces that it could be reassembled. He contacted our unknown bandits and they put together this charade. They were stripping every viable bit of data storage they could find."

"When they had what they'd come for, pirates attack, kill the mercenaries," she shrugged. "No one ever knows what happened."

"But why?"

"Madan had holovid recordings of military bases, industrial centers, libraries," Davis said. "Everything on a hundred worlds."

"Holovid studios have those now," Chowla pointed out.

"Not showing all of the SLDF bases in the twenty-eighth century," Ariel pointed out. "Or where to look for lost data caches like university research libraries."

"The ultimate treasure map," Pauls said.

"Not quite," Jacoam pointed out. "Ninety-nine percent—ninety-nine point nine nine nine percent—of the information is going to be useless. It'll take them years, maybe decades to mine the important bits."

"It probably took that long for Professor Hannan and the pirate band of unknown origin to put all this together," Ariel countered. "They're patient."

"And—because we're dealing with this pirate band of unknown origin and not the central government—honorable," Jacoam added. "Otherwise we'd all be dust."

"Okay," Davis broke the ensuing silence. "Where are we going?"

"Lyran space or Draconis," Ariel said. "As far coreward as we can get. Nowhere near Capellan space—not even a neighboring state."

"What about Outreach?"

"The Chinese Bandits will give our people a good home." Ariel's mouth twisted at the name of her life-long friend's outfit. "Nothing there is ours anymore."

"Which still leaves the question," Davis repeated. "Where are we going?"

"Ludwigshafen," said Pauls.

"You're kidding."

"Only partly," glancing to Ariel for permission, the Sergeant-Major keyed his noteputer, turning it so the others could see the screen. "What's not in the official job offer, and the reason no one is taking the job, is that the 'possible sorties' is actually a definite extraction mission."

"Given the location," said Jacoam, "that means a Clan-held world."

"No doubt. But it pays twice anything else we're ready for in our current condition," Ariel said. "Mission profile is right for a light, fast company."

"So the rest of us relax on the sunny beaches of Ludwig's house while you grab all the glory?" Jacoam asked, the first spark of his old humor she'd seen since the back of the truck. "What else have we got?"

"Planetary garrison for Meacham, which is here at the spinward edge of the Pandora Theater near the Free Rasalhague Republic," Pauls explained, indicating points on the tiny screen. "Reading between the lines local forces were stripped away for the civil war and they're afraid the neighbors—which include Clan Jade Falcon, the Republic, and even the Combine if you stretch it—have started to notice."

Ariel nodded. The high C-bill return of the extraction job would bring in money they needed, but only if it went well. If they fared against the Clan the way they had against the pirate band of unknown origin it could very well destroy them. On the other hand, triple-dealing deception was not a hallmark of the Clans.

"What about Noisiel?" Chowla asked suddenly.

"What?"

"Isn't that a gaming world in the Lyran Alliance?" asked Davis. "A sort of rural Solaris VII?"

"From what I heard on Outreach, it's also a local merc market, which means all the resources we'd need to rebuild," Chowla looked from one to the other. "We can get back into shape and get the straight skinny on jobs first hand without going through Outreach."

"You're talking about jobs the Hiring Hall wouldn't sanction?" Ariel asked.

"I'm not sure," Chowla admitted. "I'm just saying that going to Noisiel, we drop off everybody's radar," she indicated the ship around them with a jerk of her thumb, "and we find a good market for turning our salvage into cash."

She stumbled over the last phrase.

"A wide-open market for mercs means more chances for finding work fast," she shrugged. "Maybe take on a series of small jobs and build up our rep so we can start charging top dollar."

Ariel was about to veto the choice out of hand, but caught Jacoam's bug hunt. Her co-commander was considering the options.

"Okay, people," she said. "We're two days from the jump point. We have until then to tell our hosts where we are going."

"Let's meet back here in twenty-four hours and make a choice."

The End



THE JOB OFFERS ARE:

1. High risk, high pay extraction job, probably against the Clans.
2. A solid garrison job with low apparent risk and opportunity to rebuild.
3. A gaming world with potential for various small jobs as they rebuild.

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