

Episode Four:

Evasive Actions

“With that new piece of mecha I was so familiar with, for the first time, our group finally seemed to have a chance. But as an Alpha is a great asset to any combat team, it is also a great liability. Countless hours were spent loading, servicing, and scavenging for that damned plane. If we hadn’t needed it so much, I would just have let the Invid destroy it, and never bother with ever loading missiles into the thing again. . .”

-from the journals of Admiral Austin

5 October 2042

Billowing tentacles of thick, black smoke rose up from the ground, impairing Swift’s vision. All he could discern through the thickening veil of haze was the ominous outline of the munitions shed; the last barrage had done little to it, and it still stood. The same could not be said for the lone soldier trying to weave his way to its entrance. His throat and nose burned, and his green eyes watered profusely. The overwhelmed resistance fighter was gulping more smoke than air with every breath, and he could not keep his legs steady from the aftershocks of the strafing runs. It was a minor miracle that Swift shot back at all. His feeble attempt at retaliation only caused more approaching mecha to home in on his presence below and join the *Iigaa* already in the fray.

Milo staggered blindly through the thickening gray, hoping to duck inside the unscathed shed before successive onslaughts of plasma discs drenched the pockmarked street. Another barrage of incoming fire tore into the littered road before him. The subsequent series of concussions knocked Milo off balance once more, and thrust him airborne. He slammed into an imposing pile of rubble, and his battered body erupted with pain.

Milo stared up groggily at the flitting Invid. About half of the mecha seemed to be circling back for the kill, but Swift’s eyes traced the paths of the other Invid mecha that broke away from the formation. He guessed that the redeployment was due to the greater threat of the Alpha fighter. For whatever reason, this change gave him the time

needed to reach the shed.

Your prey is trapped inside that structure. Surround it and eliminate the rebel, the Invid commander telepathically ordered the Scouts.

The four *Iigaa* pilots that remained were eager to comply. Their plasma cannons unleashed a hail of searing discs that shredded the walls, and sent the roof and its supports up in a storm of fiery splinters. The source of the protoculture emissions stopped and the *Iigaa* gloated in silence over their apparent victory. Two more *Iigaa* were recalled to confront the Robotech fighter, as its human pilot had been cutting into the ranks of the raiding party with disturbing efficiency.

The hatch leading to the underground shelter of the munitions shed creaked open and Milo ominously rose up, silently climbed the rungs of the ladder, and steadied an RL-6 hand-held rocket launcher on his shoulder. He targeted the *Iigaa* closest to him and fired. His eyes tracked the path of the projectile as it flew into the Armored Scout's torso.

Bull's eye! The remaining *Iigaa* staggered, jolted by explosion of its companion. Milo fired the launcher again; the rocket-propelled grenade fizzled and jammed in the launcher's feed mechanism. Milo cursed, and threw the launcher to the ground.

My kingdom for a Cyclone, he thought. Swift retreated, but sporadically continued to turn back and fire his SAL-9 behind him. The pilot alerted its superior of the sudden turn of events.

Track the impudent fool! Finish him, the Invid leader angrily answered her subordinate. The lone pilot, made even more green with embarrassment, respectfully raised its mecha's claw and set out after the cunning human.

The *Iigaa's* thrusters fired and it darted after its prey. Weaving in and out of the debris piles, the Armored Scout finally found the source of the emissions. The mecha's optical scanner easily spotted the pilot's weapon as it lay in the withering grasp of a skeletal human, who lay face down on the asphalt. The confused pilot circled in for a closer look, and when his suspicions were eased, he set the mecha down on its massive legs. It all seemed so strange.

There were other defunct Robotech mecha in the vicinity, mostly ruined fighter planes, except for the mecha nearest the body. It appeared to be some sort of wheeled ground transport.

Milo's hands fumbled with the two wires, and it took him precious seconds before he could mash them together between his thumb and forefinger. Milo wasted a glance on the interior of the eighteen-wheeler's cab. The seat cushions were burned, and all that remained were the springs and the blackened metal frame. Much of the dashboard circuitry was exposed in a massive tangle of wires.

Must be hurt worse than I thought, Milo scowled in pain. His left arm, which held the wires, quaked in a sudden spasm. With his other good arm, Swift took the safety off his Wolff 9mm, just in case the truck didn't start. His molars ground at the wires' insulation, and exposed more of the metal filaments. The wires sparked, but the engine failed to turn over. *Jesus, I hope there are more than fumes in the damned tank!*

The Invid cautiously began to approach the truck, possibly sensing that something was amiss. Although the Invid pilot had problems with depth perception, he was quite capable of discerning the human's outline moving within the confines of the antiquated transport mecha.

"Come here, you gruesome son of a bitch," Milo challenged. The mecha pilot seemed to respond, inching closer to the ancient vehicle. Milo sprayed the area in front of the cab with a wild burst from his pistol, after which he ducked back down and reloaded the clip. The mecha flinched, its Invid pilot relying on his reflexes to bring the *Iigaa's* right claw up and successfully deflect the shots.

The pilot lashed out, slamming the mecha's left claw into the cab, and hurling Milo backwards. Swift reached back for his pistol, and climbed down through a cubbyhole in the cab's rear.

"Use only in case of emergency," the sign over the rear exit had read. Milo looked at the *Iigaa*; its claw had apparently stuck in the cab, and the pilot attempting to wrench it free. *I guess this qualifies*. The mecha pilot swiped at Milo with his free claw when he saw Swift emerge from underneath the truck with his weapon primed. Milo jammed the pistol into the sensor eye, and unloaded the magazine, shattering the visual sensor pod and piercing the cockpit. The pilot gasped, and expired from multiple shrapnel and bullet wounds.

These Invid sure do make a mess when they kick off, Milo noted. He was trying his best to avoid the shower of green odorous fluid fountaining out of the mecha.

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It sure feels nice to be back in a cockpit again. The decreasing ranks of the Invid contingent had yet to catch Austin off guard. With the aid of his mecha's GU-13 gun pod, Austin's Battloid had easily dispatched eight *Iigaa* and several of the heavier *Gurab* Invid.

A slight lapse in the battle afforded Michael the time to scan the HUD and confirm his weapons status. In all this frenzied skirmishing, the Commander had lost track of the number of missiles he'd depleted. He silently chastised himself for using the

Hammerheads first. Missiles were scarce on this planet, and it wouldn't be long before the stockpile of SRMs he and Milo had found would be gone. What then? *Plenty left. . . for now.* Soon the on-board computer reported a malfunction in the cockpit's cooling systems. *Jesus, Milo, I thought you **fixed** the life support.*

His radar confirmed that two more targets had joined the Invid ranks. *Time to end this little game.* Michael brought his 35mm gun pod to bear on a congested Invid formation at three o'clock and cut loose with satisfactory results. Only three Invid pilots were able to avoid Austin's sudden attack, and they scrambled madly for some maneuvering room.

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God! What a stench! Milo's face crinkled in disgust as he looked at his soaked clothes. He wriggled out from under the truck and dusted himself off. Thick green fluid dribbled down his shirt's sleeve and formed a noxious looking puddle at the heels of his boots. Milo took out a red bandanna and wiped clear his hand and neck of the viscous liquid.

The armored *Gurab's* pilot examined the scene below. The sweet taste of success that she had eagerly anticipated was quickly turning sour. *I've underestimated the insurgent's capabilities. But before I retreat, I shall have the satisfaction of eliminating **that** human myself.* Her gaze focused on the battle-weary figure walking away from the scene.

The mecha set down a hundred or so meters in front of Milo. Its plasma cannon nozzles began to glow intensely. Milo took immediate notice of this, falling back to the safety of the truck. The *Gurab* responded by hurling streams of fiery discs at the fleeing target. Its pilot made the equivalent of a smile on its membranous snout as it anticipated the impending demise of the human amid a thunderous upheaval of fragments.

Milo dragged his body forward, and then gingerly hoisted his bleeding form back into the eighteen-wheeler's driver's seat. His attacker was closing in; Milo could easily make out its lurking shadow as it scanned for and tracked the trail of blood he had shed.

Swift searched frantically for the ignition wiring. His bloodied left arm snatched the wiring out from its nest of circuitry. With the limited dexterity he had left, Milo strangled the necessary wires in his sticky grip, and simultaneously uttered a desperate prayer. The truck had failed to respond only minutes before, but this time, Swift's luck had changed for the better. He even managed a smile on his pain-riddled face as he heard the engine cough, sputter precariously and finally rumble to life.

This duel has grown tiresome, human. The Invid pilot watched the husk of her subordinate collapse as the transport reversed. From what she could make out through her limited optical sensor, the vehicle had two segments; the first appeared to house the engine and navigation systems, and the second, which several times greater than the first in length, appeared to be a cargo hold. *Let this metal chariot be your tomb, human.*

Releasing the clutch, shifting gears, and flooring the accelerator was no easy feat for Swift, but he accomplished it in one jerking motion which sent his gun rattling under his seat. The truck was picking up speed, and Milo steered it for a head on collision with the Invid mecha.

The *Gurab*'s thrusters catapulted it towards the antiquated Terran vehicle. Its pilot resumed firing, concentrating most of her barrage on the narrowing distance that separated the two craft. Milo's ride started getting bumpy as the explosions from the Invid cannons shredded the ground, and buffeted the cab in their aftershocks. Waves of dust splashed into the cab, blurring his vision.

The steering wheel spun wildly around, and the truck soon followed. Half-way through the vicious skid, the truck jolted solidly. Swift's body was hurled forward, and his stomach slammed into the huge steering wheel and column. His head snapped up against the dashboard, and he rolled away in pain. All the Invid pilot could do was raise its mecha's claws up to bear the brunt of the impact with the trailer. One of the *Gurab*'s goliath legs was ripped off, and the pilot felt her mecha hurtle madly out of control. She flailed the mecha's claws in panic, and braced herself for the impact.

Swift slid back into the driver's seat and quickly downshifted gears. The truck came to a screeching halt, amid a cloud of dust and smoke. He retrieved his machine pistol, and cautiously craned his head out of the truck's side window. There it was, tumbling wildly in the ruins of this sector of the military installation. . . minus one leg.

The metal cage rolled to a stop, its bloodied pilot taking time recover from her duel. Her dazed mind received several calls of distress from her subordinates, who were having even more difficulty in neutralizing the airborne opponent. Her mecha rose up, balancing on its one intact leg and the opposite claw.

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They're pulling back. . . I wonder why, Michael ruminated. He converted the Alpha back to Guardian mode and came in for a landing. He'd successfully completed another mission, but this time, there wasn't the reassuring voice of the defense controller to congratulate him on his work. Michael spotted the crumpled remains of the munitions

shed, and noted the damaged mecha there as he set the Alpha down, and commenced his search for Swift.

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Milo had dragged his body down from the cab, and struggled to his feet. His steady hands raised his firearm and Milo's blurring vision attempted to target the damaged *Gurab* and its battered pilot. Seconds elapsed before his eyes focused on the purple outline; it was plenty of time for the Invid pilot to lash out with a plasma barrage and finish off Swift forever. But the leader of the raiding party remained motionless, transfixed by what she beheld. At first, she thought she'd surely killed her opponent, but she saw him emerge from the vehicle and attempt to bring her mecha in his sights. *Incredible, still he resists!* She targeted the human one final time, and primed her weapons; the fierce bloodlust that coursed through her veins would soon be quenched. The visual sensor responded to her immediate command to magnify the picture of her prey. The view-screen displayed his rugged features, and soon focused in on his green eyes. She blinked and looked away, only to cast her gaze back at the human. His green orbs seemed to look right through her. Her limbs trembled, and she hesitated for moments, before canceling her order to fire. Only now, did she decide recall her scattered forces. The taste of her own blood seemed only to sharpen her sense of failure. *We can do no more here*, she called to her troops. *Form a protective escort for me. We must return to the hive, and report.*

Milo felt his legs quake. He tumbled to the ground, and watched the pistol clatter out of his grasp. The conscious world collapsed in around him; he knew he'd lost too much blood. Unseen by him was the *Gurab* pilot's nod of respect, before it thrust off the ground to fall in with its escort.

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"Milo? Oh shit, you're a mess," Michael grumbled. He'd just begun to see to the Private's wounds, using mostly field dressings, and now thought about moving Swift back to the remains of the munitions shed. "I shouldn't have left him alone for this long," Michael complained to himself.

Milo groaned lightly as Austin picked up and carried the uncooperative weight back with him. Michael set Swift aside and checked on his condition from time to time. The Commander spent the rest of the night loading up all the crates of ammo for the gun

pod and the racks of missiles for the Alpha, packs of medical supplies, and cases of the armor piercing mini-missiles for the Cyclones. He'd also decided on packing up the tool caddie both of them had used to resurrect the Alpha fighter. Pike might have further use for it in the future.

Austin now kept a careful watch over Swift, who remained motionless. Austin changed the dressing on Swift's forehead; Milo appeared to be running a slight fever. *I was hoping to move out tonight, but I guess it'll have to wait until Milo regains some of his strength.*

* * *

"Roger, where are we going?" Jeanne shouted over the headset radio. Roger was hell-bent for the north, and had for the most part ignored her cries. Jeanne gripped her handlebars tightly in frustration, swerving around a huge pot-hole on the decrepit road.

"Passau," he finally replied.

"Why are we going there?" Jeanne demanded, trying to keep up. Again, her Cyclone was well behind his, and he seemed to show no signs of slowing.

"A hunch," Roger replied. His Cyclone skidded to a stop overlooking a small valley near banks of the Salzach river. Jeanne eventually caught up, and she dismounted, abruptly yanking off her helmet.

"Roger, you know something. Tell me, damn it. I'm not going to be kept in the dark on this."

"All right." Roger extracted a thirty-five year-old map from the Cyclone's storage compartment, and spread it out over the seat. "Here we are. Passau is a good ninety miles to the north of here. That's the general direction the villagers were headed."

"How do you know that they were going to Passau? Why not Salzburg? That's closer," Jeanne replied.

"You mean the Salzachkrater See - that's what the Salzburg area's called now, thanks to the Zentraedi. No, it's probably Passau."

"Is Passau still inhabited?"

"Not anymore, as far as I know. But it was, until right before the Invid invasion. Passau was one of the few medium-sized cities in the area that came out of the Zentraedi bombardment totally unscathed. Because of that, the UEG reconstruction government cut down the Neuberger forest just to the south of town and settled it as a refugee camp. Most of the townsfolk were involved in relief efforts for entire region. I hear things got pretty crowded there; I know a similar camp my parents were at near Waco was awful. Jeanne,

you have no idea what these refugee camps were like. The Zentraedi only killed eighty percent of the world's population in their bombardment. Two-thirds of those that survived died within two years of famine and disease. The UEG resettlement camps were overflowing with filthy, malnourished, and sick people cramped into terrible conditions - but cramping them together was the only way people originally spread out over such a huge area could be fed."

"I had no idea. . ." Jeanne muttered. The older personnel in the REF never talked of their experiences during and immediately after the bombardment of Earth; and now she was beginning to really appreciate why.

"Anyway, there was a medical clinic to the south of town; right in the middle of where they stuck the refugees. It wasn't huge, but over the years, it expanded and became the best-equipped in the region. Even after New Munich and New Vienna were built and the refugees were resettled there, the hospital still served the whole countryside. Eventually, the Southern Cross took over the buildings built for the refugees, and turned them into a boot camp for their European recruits; and the clinic became the local military hospital. A lot of local divisional military administrative offices were moved there as well. I was stationed at the Passau base for several months training new officers after the war with the Robotech Masters."

"So what happened to the town?" Jeanne asked.

"One of the splinter governments, the E.B.S.I.S., disputed the United Earth Government's claims to the region, and hit the town with a rocket-delivered tac-nuke in a preemptive strike; just three months after I had been reassigned to the Baden A.T.A.C. base. Similar weapons fired at Neumünchen and a couple of other cities were successfully destroyed by anti-missile batteries. The U.E.G. and the E.B.S.I.S. then formally declared war against each other, and twelve days later, the Invid arrived, putting an immediate end to it all."

"So what does all this have to do with the plague? Were they trying to reach the hospital?"

"That's my guess," Roger replied. "I'm assuming that they were well-stocked on antibiotics there. There were frequent outbreaks of cholera and all sorts of other bacterial epidemics during the reconstruction; not surprisingly, considering the conditions at the camps. If the hospital's still standing, and it hasn't been thoroughly looted, then there'll be enough antibiotics stored in there to cure entire cities of the plague." Roger folded up the map, and stored it away.

"What are the chances there'll be something intact?"

"Hmmm. . ." Roger's eyes narrowed in thought. "The city was hit with an

airburst, which then turned into a firestorm. It was a dirty bomb, and so everyone who survived the blast got the hell out pretty quickly, but my guess is that the radiation'll be at tolerable levels by now. There won't be a crater, but everything was probably flattened and burned for miles around, the hospital included. But a lot of the stores were probably kept in the basement. We won't know until we go and take a look."

"Then what the hell are we waiting for?" Jeanne demanded, placing her helmet back on and heading for her vehicle.

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The broken road had eventually led to a large crater-lake, surrounded by the shells of burnt-out buildings, shops, and houses. Roger had led Jeanne around the eastern perimeter of the lake, and continued his journey northward, past the shattered ruins of the outer regions of what had once been Salzburg. Roger then veered away from the Inn river and headed north-north-east, explaining to Jeanne that he was trying to cut some time off their journey by bypassing a westwardly kink in the river. A little more than an hour later, they had rejoined the Inn and were cruising at top speed down an old Austrian autobahn.

"The autobahn crosses the river about 3 miles south of the town of Schärding. That'll be in about five minutes or so," Roger told Jeanne, as he noticed an old dilapidated sign reading, "Grenze: 10km".

Jeanne watched the scenery roll past. Many buildings were intact, but there was a total absence of people in the area. It was almost ghost-like in its desolation. Homes stood with doors still agape, and Jeanne couldn't tell if it was from abandonment or looting. *They must have fled the radiation*, Jeanne surmised. *And they never came back*. The Geiger counter on her Cyclone's control panel was already beginning to read appreciable but still safe levels above background, even after a decade.

"Damn," she heard Roger cry, as he looked past the long-abandoned border crossing they were fast approaching.

"What?" she began to ask; and then she saw: the bridge across the Inn was out. Someone had bombed it, perhaps as much as a decade ago. "Do we jump it?" she asked.

"The river looks to be about 300 yards wide here. We'd have to go to Battloid mode and fly over it, and you know what that kind of energy consumption does to our protoculture signature. No, we'll cross over to the road that runs along this side of the river. We can cross in Schärding, and if the bridge is out there, the river'll at least be narrower."

Roger veered off to the right, and soon was on an old scenic road, smaller than the

autobahn, and in worse condition. Jeanne tried her best to follow, but was having trouble keeping up again. After a few minutes of trying to negotiate the pot-holes, she finally caught up to Roger, who had once again stopped. Jeanne looked about, and there were a large number of people, perhaps a hundred and fifty, assembled near the entrance to an old abbey. The structures themselves seemed to date to the Hapsburg era, and were still in fair shape. Some of the people were milling in and about the baroque (*or was it rococco?* Jeanne asked herself) cathedral attached to the left side of the abbey, apparently having stopped off to offer their hopes and prayers. Roger dismounted, and began to approach several of them. Jeanne lingered behind, speaking no German, and watched the interchange. The people shrunk back from Roger at first, but he shouted assurances, and several came forward and spoke to him.

After about five minutes of conversation, Roger waved the people good-bye and returned to Jeanne.

“What’s going on?” Jeanne asked.

“I was right,” Roger replied. “These people are from the Radstadt and Schladming areas. It seems the town doctor has indeed found medical supplies in the hospital in Passau. The townsfolk have decided to go ahead and meet her there. I told them about the others, and offered to protect them, if the choppers come back.”

“Good idea. Are we going to escort them, or go on up ahead?”

“They told us to go on up ahead. We’ve only got about five miles to go, as the crow flies. They should be joining us in less than three hours.”

“Are there many sick?”

Roger looked to the ground. “Yeah. Almost all of them.”

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Roger negotiated the last few bends in the road on the way to the former Southern Cross Military Hospital, past shattered recruit billets and flattened two-story office buildings on the east side of the Neuberger road. Towards the northern end of the base, he veered right into the hospital entrance, Jeanne following close behind.

The pair found themselves looking into a large hospital complex, consisting of approximately ten buildings, with the main building at the center. Many of the smaller buildings had burned to the ground, but the largest was pretty much intact, though the upper few floors had collapsed and the exterior of the building had been charred by fire. Roger dismounted the Cyclone and began to approach the building, when Jeanne called after him, “Roger, take a look at this,” indicating her Cyclone’s control panel. The

onboard particle counter was already indicating dangerous levels.

“Jesus! We’re getting almost a tenth of a REM every day we stay here. And that’s after eight years! What did they dope that bomb with?” Roger exclaimed.

“And my radiation detector’s not even particularly sensitive to neutrons. No wonder no one’s reoccupied the site.”

“Yeah. Well, we’ll be safe for a while, though. Our armor’ll stop the charged particles, at least. Come on,” he told Jeanne.

The pair began to approach the door of the hospital, when they found themselves confronted by a figure brandishing an assault rifle. “Halt!” a tall raven-haired woman in her early forties cried. “Stay where you are,” she ordered in German.

Roger stretched out his arms. “Don’t shoot,” he replied. “We mean you no harm.” Roger removed his riding helmet, and smiled. “My name is Roger Pike, formerly of the Southern Cross. I assume you’re Frau Doktor Stern?”

“Yes. . .” she began. “What are you doing here?” she said, lowering her rifle. If these people had wanted to hurt her, they could have done so already.

“We need to talk. You and your people may be in danger. May we come inside?”

* * *

Roger had just finished recounting his tale of the attack helicopters and the gassed civilians they had encountered earlier, as they all sat around a table in the physician’s lounge on the first floor of the abandoned clinic. Judith Stern’s face twisted in shock and horror at the tale of the atrocity that had befallen her friends. “We assume they were trying to keep them from entering New Munich at any cost,” Roger told her.

Judith shook her head slightly. “I should have known,” she said in accented English, a gesture Jeanne appreciated. “I never should have let them try to meet me here,” she sighed. “I told them to wait until I returned, but they wouldn’t listen.”

“But the other group looked safe; they’ll be joining us shortly. I’ve already told them to beware.”

“It’s just so senseless,” the physician said softly. “But we must get back to the business at hand.”

“How did you know about this place?” Roger asked.

“I did my residency here, and then was a staff doctor for several years. After the bomb hit, I fled and settled in Austria. My family was hosted by the family of another doctor, and we settled down. When the plague came to our village, I tried the penicillin I had been growing on my own, but this bascillus seems to be a resistant strain. And then I

remembered that we evacuated Passau too fast to stop and collect the hospital's supplies, and then the Invid came right after that. So I thought that the city might have escaped looting because of the radiation, and came here. I discovered everything I could possibly ever need. Many of the stores are no longer usable, but the tetracycline and other antibiotics in powdered and tablet forms will last almost forever. And that's just what I need right now."

"Have you checked the City Hospital and St. Joseph's for more supplies?" Roger asked, indicating two other hospitals in the city. When her face showed surprise at his familiarity with the town, Roger added, "I was stationed here for a while myself, before the Invid came."

Judith nodded. "Yes, I checked. There is nothing left of the two buildings. Everything in the city-districts Heidenhof and Hackleberg was completely destroyed, and the rest of the city was badly damaged. I'm still shocked that this building is still standing. We were worried it would collapse before we'd evacuated all the patients."

Roger scratched his head, and asked, "So do you have any idea how this thing got started?"

Judith nodded. "Word from my colleagues east is that a cadre of Saxon special forces who were captured by Hungarian internal security caught it in a gulag from the other inmates, and when they staged an escape, they carried the plague with them. There are rumors that either the Invid's stooges in Budapest started the whole thing, but I don't believe it for a minute. That would be like cutting off your face to spite your nose."

Jeanne rose, and stretched, saying, "Well, is there anything we can do to help you here?"

Judith smiled, and nodded. "Certainly. Let's get started by preparing antibiotics into solutions."

* * *

The lead *Gurab* stepped out from the wall of shadows, her three subordinates cowering in respect as the organic computer pulsed mysteriously before them. The three *Iigaa* were summarily dismissed by the leader, who dismounted her damaged mecha and waited for the manifestation of the Regis to appear before it. Her Majesty was most displeased.

Two humans destroying twenty troopers, and damaging your mecha in the process? And only one with a Robotech mecha? I am most discouraged with your failure, even more so because you have been chosen to be my successor. You are removed from

active duty, and shall return to Reflex Point to await reassignment.

The sole listener nodded in acknowledgment, and marched away when the Regis so commanded. The Regis' manifestation watched her daughter exit, and thought, *These bands of insurgents prove more skilled, powerful, and resourceful than I ever would have suspected. We must begin immediate construction of the Genesis Pits, in order to find the most advanced evolutionary path for our species to take, so that we may rise to the greatness the Spirit of Light has promised our people.*

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The mid-afternoon sun found Judith, Roger and Jeanne distributing the medicine she had recovered from the hospital storerooms to her townsfolk. Dozens had lined up outside a tent they had erected near the entrance of the hospital, while others, already smarting from the needle in the arm, had wandered off to the dining tent, where several of the villagers had begun to brew some sort of thick stew for the others. Jeanne had the honor of bringing in fresh supplies and cots from the hospital proper for those needed to rest after the long journey, while Roger was given the responsibility of sorting out the supplies and helping Judith with each patient.

Judith was just beginning to examine one of villagers, a boy around twelve. Roger took the time to look her over. She was a full two inches taller than he, and was slim and shapely. Her face was comely, and in her deep brown eyes Roger saw a wealth of wisdom and compassion, completely focused on the ill child before her. Her long straight hair flowed well below her shoulders, and was as black as midnight. Roger couldn't help but be taken by her looks.

"So you used to be in the Southern Cross, you said? Most of the resistance I've met are irregulars, and they're as much bandits as they are anti-Invid guerrillas," she inquired suddenly.

"Yes, I was regular army. I used to be commander Company A, 18th Hovertank Battalion, Alpha Tactical Armored Corps. We were stationed out near Monument City during the war, and were transferred to Europe after it ended. I was in charge of a task force sent out to cut off the E.B.S.I.S. armor columns and catch them in a flanking action when the Invid arrived. We fought them for a while, but eventually the Invid caught up to us. Only ten of my men survived in all, and we all went our separate ways. You see, before I got stuck into a combat command because of the shortage of officers who could drive a Hovertank, I was in charge of a mecha maintenance battalion. I was always more comfortable as a mechanic than a soldier, so when the Invid dug in, I gave up fighting

and opened a repair shop in Vienna. I've had connections to the resistance, helping out whenever I could, but didn't think there was much I could do as long as the REF was away. Meeting Jeanne and Commander Austin changed everything. The fleet's coming back soon, and now there's a real urgency to keeping the Invid preoccupied."

Judith finished with this patient, and called for the next one. After a brief exchange with the elderly woman she was now examining, she briefly glanced at Roger and said, "Well, I appreciate yours and Jeanne's help; this would be a lot more difficult without it. And I don't mind having a little protection, either. If certain people found out how much antibiotic I have, they'll kill everyone in their path to get it."

"Just how much of this stuff **do** you have?" Roger asked.

"Enough to cure thirty thousand people of this damned disease. If properly distributed, that can almost stop the spread of the plague altogether. If we can confine it to where it's already hit, we can prevent a continent-wide disaster."

"So what are you going to do with it?" Roger asked.

"I'm taking a little more than half back with me east, and am going to try to stop it back there. I'm trading the rest to the more benevolent of the two gangsters that run Munich, the 'Lady'. Her people have traded with me in the past; bandages and glassware and other supplies for penicillin and some of the village's foodstuffs. In exchange for the tetracycline and syringes I've found here, she's agreed to provide my village with a small stipend in manufactured goods and fuel for five years - that's how valuable this medicine is to her. Her people are sending a truck day after tomorrow to pick it up. Once I've helped them with an initial inventory, her people will secure the hospital and search it from top to bottom for supplies they can use in addition to the antibiotics I found, and bring it all back to New Munich."

"You know, I admire you. It took a lot of guts for you to come out here and do what you've done, especially considering the risks."

"I'm a doctor. It's my duty to help these people. You're the one who doesn't have to be here."

"I'm a soldier," Roger replied. "It's my duty to help these people," he echoed. "You know, I have an idea. If you gave my people a small supply of the antibiotic, we could help distribute it. I have the feeling we'll be on the move a lot, and we're planning to head to New Munich soon. Besides, we're going to need some for ourselves."

"That's not too bad of an idea. How does this sound? I can give you an eighth of what I was planning to bring back east with me, and you can distribute it where you feel it's needed. The hardest part about this is getting the medicine where it's needed."

"Well, I'm sure my boss would be happy for us to do anything we can to help

out.”

* * *

Milo yelled unintelligibly as he regained consciousness. His body stiffened as he rose up to one knee, his clammy hands balled into fists. A cold bead of sweat trickled down his cheekbone, and his eyes narrowed as they adjusted to the darkness. His panting eased into more regular sighs when he finally recognized Austin’s questioning face.

“Bad dream?” Austin’s voice intoned.

“The worst. . . God, I feel awful.” Milo groaned. He sat with his legs crossed, and quickly scrutinized the dressings on his body. “Hand me my pack, will ya?” Austin complied. Milo fished through his pack, and found a small leather pouch. He reached inside it, and retrieved a small bundle of roots. He placed a small root in his mouth, and slowly chewed it.

“Well, you’re all smiles tonight. How many did you kill?” Milo inquired. The end of the root stuck out of the side of his mouth perched securely between his lips.

“Around twenty. And you?”

“What does it look like. . .” Milo grinned. “No really, maybe three.”

“The hard way,” Michael smiled.

“Dead is dead.”

Michael nodded in agreement. “Well, you’re too weak to move now, so we’ll head out in the morning. I can’t wait to see the look Jeanne’s face when I set this baby down.” Michael motioned to the Alpha.

“How did it respond?” Milo coughed.

“Well, except for the **life support**, everything was fine,” Michael replied. He reached into his backpack and retrieved an unopened pack of cigarettes. His hands cupped around the lighter’s flame, and the end of the rod between his lips caught fire.

“Hey! You were supposed to fix the damned life support, remember?” Milo shouted. Michael only shrugged.

“You forgot this,” Michael said as he presented Swift with the Private’s trusted SAL-9 that he had lost earlier in the fight. Milo took up the pistol in his hand and smiled with deep satisfaction.

“Thanks. Good friends like this are hard to find,” Milo explained after stashing the gun next to his newly-found Wolff 9mm. “I assume you’ve loaded up all the supplies. How long d’ya think they’ll last, Commander?”

“Not long enough, Milo. Not long enough. But if we can restrict our use of the

Alpha to strictly combat and minimal patrolling, it would help in our conservation efforts.” Michael put out his cigarette.

The black expanse of the night sky was filled with the infinite arrangement of stars. Moonbeams from the orb colored the harsh slopes of the mountains in a spectrum of grays. The subsiding winds had a harsh bite to them that only seasoned soldiers such as Austin and Swift could enjoy.

Michael slid into his thermally insulated sleeping bag and closed his eyes on what had been a very active day for him. Milo got out his harmonica, wiped the dust from it, and began to play.

“Hope ya don’t mind, Commander,” Milo said, sounding apologetic.

“It’s all right. It might even help me to sleep faster,” Michael replied. He rolled over to look up at Milo, who was now sitting cross-legged on the ground. Milo began playing a soft, slow ballad. Emotion rang clear in every note, and it was easy to see this tune meant something special to Milo. Half-way through the second stanza, Milo pulled the harmonica from his lips.

“Why did you stop, Milo? It was a nice song,” his listener protested.

“It was our song, and I can’t bring myself to play it, even after all these years,” Milo whispered. His finger brushed away the lone tear rolling down his cheek.

“Who was she, that girl in the picture back at your place?” Austin inquired.

Milo was silent for a moment. He put down the harmonica; he wasn’t going to be playing it anymore tonight. He didn’t feel like talking either, but sooner or later they would come to know.

“She was everything pure and decent left in this world, and I loved her with all my heart. I never trusted anyone before, not like that, anyway. But with Christine, it was different. Did you ever find someone like that, Michael?” Milo asked candidly.

Michael was silent.

“If you ever do, don’t let go. It gets very lonely in a world where you can’t trust anyone.”

“I know,” Michael said softly. *I know.*

“Well, I’m hitting the sack. This stuff is starting to take affect,” Milo announced.

Michael nodded. He closed his eyes and thought deeply about Milo’s words of wisdom. The night winds were picking up; their howling replaced Milo’s tune as the lullaby seducing Austin to sleep.

* * *

Roger sat in his tent, leafing through the Cyclone repair manual he'd brought along in one of the Cyclone's storage compartments. The battery-powered lantern provided a stark light to read by, and Roger could hear the indistinct murmur of several conversations outside the tent. Most of the villagers had turned in for the evening, but a few still lingered about, taking in the night air.

Roger had earlier noticed that the protoculture cells on Milo's Cyclone were running down faster than they should, and figured there was a problem in the electrical systems. He'd work it out eventually, but this new REF mecha really wasn't his area of expertise.

"Ah, what I wouldn't give to fix up an old Hovertank once again," he said to himself, putting the book on the ground next to his cot, and reaching for the glass of wine he'd poured himself. "Or an Alpha fighter. That'd be a real challenge."

Roger heard the sound of footsteps approaching the entrance to his tent, and before long, Judith's head popped through the opening. "Mind if I come in, Captain?" she asked in her native tongue.

"No, not at all. I was just having some of the wine you gave me. It's very good. Would you like to join me for a bottle?" Roger replied.

"What hospitality," she teased, producing her own glass, and a second bottle. "For later on - we may run out!"

Roger laughed. "So what's on your mind, Frau Doktor Stern?"

"*Bitte, nicht sietzen!* Just call me 'Judith'. There's no point to formalities in this day and age. There are too few people left on the planet to worry about such nonsense."

"Well then, I'm just 'Roger'. I never really was comfortable with the whole military rank thing. I'm a master mechanic, that's all," he replied cheerfully. "Think of me as a mecha doctor."

"At least your patients don't complain as loudly as mine. And yours never ask for a second opinion." Judith sat down on the floor across from Roger's cot and held out her glass, which Roger filled.

"Ah, but your patients often get better on their own," Roger jested, carefully pouring the wine.

Judith smiled and raised her glass, looking through the red liquid, and savored the bouquet. "Definitely one of the area's best wines, don't you think?"

"Far better than the vintages out of Vienna, at least the ones I know."

Judith took a sip of the wine, and said, "So where are you from, originally? From your English I'd guess it would be somewhere in the Southern U.S."

"Yep, Texas, born 'n' raised," he answered in English. Reverting back to German,

he added, "I was born in San Antonio, and didn't leave the state until I enlisted. I was stationed here just after the destruction of Monument City. I'd taken German in high school, but ten years here's refined it a bit. If it weren't this 'hankering'," he started, slipping into English for the single word, "for Mexican food and the hill country, Hell, I'd almost feel like a native. Still, there's a part of me that misses going down to a restaurant on the river walk for some mole poblano, seeing the Alamo in the corner of your eye every couple of days as you drive past, or hopping up to New Braunfels to do a little river-rafting, like I used to do as a kid. They tell me that home's where you hang your hat - I guess mine'll always be a Stetson," Roger reminisced; of course Judith would never have to know that he'd never really worn a cowboy hat in his life, excepting an old oil-stained ballcap with the logo of the **Dallas** Cowboys. "So where are you from, originally?"

"My parents were living in Tel Aviv when I was born, but they moved to Berlin when I was eight, because my father was offered a professorial position at the Berlinisches Polytechnikum. I stayed in Berlin until I got my medical degree, and then my husband and I moved to New Munich. I did a year of residency at the clinic they had just built there."

"Husband?" Roger inquired.

"Benjamin. We met in college, and married just after graduation. In '27 our daughter Ruth was born. After I came off maternity leave in '28 I was transferred to this hospital, and I had to commute. . . Benjamin was killed in '29 when Bioroids attacked New Munich, just after Unification Day."

"I remember hearing about that attack; they hit Monument City and Tokyo at the same time." Roger looked to the ground. "And Ruth? Where is she?" Roger asked.

"She died of thyroid cancer in two years after we were evacuated from Passau. I'm certain it was from the fallout from the bomb. One of the doctors in the hospital had relatives in Austria, and since he was going to stay with them, and we didn't have a place to go, he offered to let us live with his family. We both did everything we could for Ruth, but with what little we had at our disposal. . ."

"I'm so sorry," Roger said, looking to the ground.

"Don't be. It's been a long time. Eventually, Dieter - the doctor who had hosted us - died, and I was left as his village's only physician." Judith paused, and took a deep draught of the wine. "Still, I've never felt like I fit in with the others; I've always been something of an outsider. Ever since Ruth died, things have been a little lonely for me. How about you? Are you married?"

"Heck, I hardly ever even dated. I was always spending all my time tinkering with

things. I was seeing someone in the corps for a while, but that ended when I got transferred to Europe. I've been here for ten years, but I've been something of an outsider too, and really haven't met anyone special."

"That's too bad. You're a really sweet man."

Roger smiled. "So they tell me. But, heck, I'm no catch. I'm only one-seventy centimeters tall, I'm not really too good-looking, and I've got all the personality of a fence-post. Nope, when it comes to the fireworks of romance, I'm a dud."

"Why do you say that? You're gentle and charming, and have a good sense of humor. I look at you and see a man worth taking a long second look at."

Roger's heart jumped, not completely certain what she was getting at. "If that's the case, then why am I still alone?"

"Maybe you just haven't found the right woman," Judith suggested.

"I wouldn't begin to know where to look," Roger said, draining his glass. Judith opened the second bottle, and refilled it for him.

"She could be anywhere, and if you don't start looking, you could miss her. You never know; she could be sitting right under your nose."

"At the moment, **you're** sitting right under my nose," Roger coyly replied.

"I am, aren't I? How peculiar," she teased, setting down her glass. Judith rose, and approached Roger's cot. She leaned close to him, and kissed him softly on the lips. "Are you going to let yourself miss her?"

Roger rose and embraced her, and they kissed again, this time more deeply. "Are you offering to spend the night?"

Judith silenced him by putting a finger to his lips, and lowered the lamp's light.

* * *

Storm clouds loomed ominously over the Alpha fighter and its two guardians. Austin and Swift had secured the last of the supplies, all of which had been loaded into the truck trailer. Milo had welded a steel plate to cover up the gaping hole left by the collision with the Invid trooper. Michael secured hoisting cables around the trailer and commenced the hook-up to the Alpha Guardian, which was poised to the left of the trailer.

It all looks sturdy enough. I just hope my calculations accounting for stress and wind resistance are correct. Or Milo and the supplies will be crushed upon impact.

"Milo, are you all done? We'd better head out, I don't like the looks of those clouds, and I don't want to get caught in another storm. Especially with all this precious

cargo.” Down below, Milo nodded slightly, fondling a grenade he had extracted from the stores of equipment.

Michael ordered Milo inside the trailer and locked it from the outside. He climbed to the Guardian using one of the hoisting cables, and settled into the cockpit. A quick check of all systems revealed no problems. *Good.*

Milo sat down burying his face down between his knees when he heard the Guardian’s engines whine to life. The trailer rocked gently as Milo felt it rise into the morning sky. A series of tired groans emanated from the trailer as the Alpha rose up to a suitable cruising altitude.

“Well, at least everything is staying in place, except my stomach.” Milo evaluated, sticking the grenade in one of the pockets of his BDU trousers.

Michael looked out upon the barrier of mountains passing below, giving way to the green splotches of the forests. Austin could go all the way back to the original camp, but at the risk of inviting a stray Invid patrol to investigate. Instead, he decided to set down at some intermediary point in the afternoon, and continue the return flight home the next day.

“Michael, could you slow down? I think I’m going to hurl all over the place,” Milo groaned into his radio.

“Sorry, but if I do, I’d stall out, and up here, you’d be the first to feel it. Anyway, we won’t be airborne for too long, ‘cause we can’t risk detection, especially since we’ve got this cargo,” Michael’s voice crackled on Swift’s hand-held receiver. “Just sit tight and find an air-sickness bag.”

* * *

Roger and Judith emerged from the tent that had been set up for feeding the villagers, both laughing. “I can’t believe you told him that,” Roger exclaimed.

“Well, he was only the hospital director; it’s not like he was anyone **important.**” Judith replied. “But that was the last time he made comments like that behind my back, I can assure you.”

Roger led her to the shade of a tree, and they both sat, holding hands. “So when are you planning to head back home? You can’t keep your people in the city much longer, not with the radiation.”

“A day or two. I want them to get some of their strength back. And I want time for the Lady’s courier to return to pick up the antibiotics I’m giving her. Why, are you trying to get rid of me?” she teased.

“Far be it for me. . .” Roger laughed, leaning closer to her. Judith clutched Roger’s hand tightly, and they kissed. Roger pulled back, and ran his fingers through Judith’s long, black hair. “Judith, I-”

“Roger!” Jeanne urgently shouted from across the camp. Roger abruptly rose, and waved at her.

“Over here, Jeanne.”

“Roger, the helicopters are back. They’re circling around the city!” she continued.

Roger glared down at his lover and barked, “Judith, get your people into the hospital basement, and do it quickly. They may try to use gas again. Find someplace well-sealed, and stay there.”

“What are you and Jeanne going to do?”

“It looks like we’ll have to fight them. Now move!”

Roger began to run to his Cyclone just as the rhythmic throbbing of the rotors became audible. Jeanne was already suited up, and was checking her Cyclone’s radar for the location and range to the targets.

“How many?” Roger asked her over the commotion caused by the villagers dashing for the near-by hospital building.

“All of ‘em, it looks like.”

“Damn,” Roger swore. “All right, remember that the armor on both the Commancheros and the Hinds is very tough, and not a whole lot of the internal space is taken up by crucial machinery; there’s a lot of troop space in there. Go for the engine or the tail rotor; that’ll be your best bet.”

“Anything else?”

“Yeah. Don’t let ‘em hit you. The light cannon will, at the very least, knock you on your ass, and if your helmet or arm is hit, it’s all over. Each ship has over 60 rockets with a full combat load, so keep moving, and don’t give them a fixed target. All it takes is a single rocket, and Michael’ll be writing your eulogy! Cyclones aren’t made for that kind of pounding.”

“How comforting,” Jeanne said as she mounted her Cyclone, and revved up the engines.

After several minutes of circling, the helicopters finally broke into the clearing, following the main road into the hospital compound. Their appearance sent the refugees into a frenzy, screaming and running for the hospital entrance. Both of the Commancheros and one of the Hinds swung around to face the fleeing villagers, and unleashed their machine-guns and auto-cannon into the crowd. The first shots killed eighteen people, and others hit the ground in terror. The attack choppers then veered off

behind the complex to reconnoiter the area and to get into position for another strafing run. The remaining two Hinds seemed to be looking for a place to land, near where the medicine tarp had been established.

“Roger, we’ve got to take out those choppers!” Jeanne shouted, watching the carnage. She gunned the Cyclone, and launched into the air, transforming it into Battloid mode in mid-jump. Roger followed soon after, and the pair floated around the back side of the main building to try to engage the enemy.

“Holy shit!” Roger exclaimed, as the trio of gunships bore down upon them. She and Roger were knocked the ground from the rotors’ backwash, but Jeanne rolled and rose quickly, targeting the Hind’s tail rotor with her particle beam gun as it pulled into a steep climb. “Take this!” she shouted, as she fired a full burst into the offending vehicle. The tail blew apart, and the helicopter began to spin wildly out of control, slamming into the ground in an enormous fireball. The pilots of the two Commancheros, seeing their escort’s demise, veered around the corner of the building to get out of the Cyclones’ line of fire.

“One down,” Jeanne gloated.

“Jesus, Jeanne, where are the other Hinds?” Roger shouted, frantically looking around him.

“I don’t know. It looked like they were trying to set down.”

“Shit! Hurry, go check on ‘em. I’ll take care of the others!”

* * *

Meanwhile, the refugees had finally managed to all make it inside the hospital building, ushered in by Judith, who had retrieved her assault rifle, and was standing guard by the door. She looked out the shattered windows of the hospital lobby to see two helicopters land not far from the entrance. An armored door slid open on both craft, and a squad of a dozen armed men in camouflage emerged from each of the two vehicles. The troops immediately began making a bull-run for the hospital doors, as the helicopters lifted up again to rejoin the fray.

Judith swore. “Here goes my Hippocratic oath!” she muttered as she unloaded the thirty rounds in her rifle’s magazine in the direction of the first squad. From what she could see, six men were hit, and the others dove to the ground to avoid the fire.

One of the soldiers pointed to the building, shouted something at one of his subordinates in what Judith took to be Italian, and ducked back down. She watched as another of the soldiers crawled forward on his elbows a few yards, and emerged with

what looked to be some sort of giant-sized revolver. A sudden panic took her, and she began to run for the stairs, just as the first of three grenades went through the entrance to the building, sending fire, fragments, and shrapnel throughout the lobby. Judith fell to the ground in pain; she'd been hit in the shoulder by a piece of flying debris, and she could feel her clothing become moist from her blood.

Jeanne was alerted by the sound of the grenades, and watched the two helicopters rise. She targeted the engine of the nearer one, and fired repeatedly. The helicopter's engine caught fire, and it exploded in mid-air. The second Hind spun around, and began to fire a storm of anti-tank rockets in Jeanne's direction. "Yikes!" she screamed, activating her Cyclone's thrusters and heading into a full retreat before the explosions.

* * *

Roger had taken to the air, the fact that his protocluture levels were already dangerously low filed away in the back of his head, and was engaging in a low-altitude dog-fight with the two Commancheros. They were both trying to get a lock on him with their terminally-guided rockets, but he was proving too agile for them. Roger targeted the second Commanchero's engine with the plasma missiles mounted on his Cyclone's forearm. When he got a positive lock, he fired, and two rockets sped out, screaming toward the side of the craft. The pilot of the helicopter caught sight of the incoming fire, and turned to veer out of the projectiles' path, just enough for the missiles to strike one of the three starboard rocket stations on the gunship's false wing instead of the main rotor. All three pods on that side of the aircraft detonated, and the helicopter was rocked by the explosion, sending it careening into the ground. Before he could revel in his accomplishment, Roger came under fire from the lead Commanchero's smaller machine-gun emplacement. Roger clung very close to the ground, and with tracers whizzing past him, dove for cover behind one of the smaller buildings in the complex.

* * *

Judith staggered to her feet. Though her wound was serious, it was not life-threatening, however much it limited her mobility. She could hear the troops storming through the doors and making sure the lobby was secure, as she staggered down the stairs to the basement where her townsfolk were hiding. One of the men of the village relieved her of her rifle, reloaded the magazine with a hundred-round drum, and waited at the foot of the stairs. Soon, she could hear the gunfire from a pitched battle in the stairwell,

waiting as a young woman pulled the small chunk of wood out of her shoulder, swab it with antiseptic, and bandage it. Judith closed her eyes, and found herself praying that Roger and Jeanne came to their rescue before the soldiers managed to break through the guard at the door, or choose to use grenades again to eliminate resistance.

* * *

“Where did she go?” the Hind pilot demanded of his gunner. He had pursued her behind the main hospital building, and then somehow she had vanished.

“Unit three, respond,” the pilot heard over the radio.

“Yes, Colonel Cipolla?”

“We’ve lost units two and five. What’s your status?”

“Unit four is down, and I’m in pursuit of a hostile. Insertion team is in the building.”

“Negative. We’re pulling back - the insertion team is encountering heavy resistance and has lost sixteen men. One of the Cyclones - the Bartley model - made it into the building and is cutting our men down like paper dolls. I want you to land, and get them out of there!”

“Roger that, Colonel. We are returning to drop-off point,” the pilot replied. *So that’s where that bitch got to*, he thought as he turned the Hind around.

The gunner’s panicked voice suddenly erupted over the radio, and then something heavy hit the front of the helicopter. “What the hell!” the pilot shouted as he saw the male Cyclone pilot clutching the front of the Hind by the canopy. A crooked smile was visible through Roger’s face-plate as the Cyclone’s two chest-plates opened to reveal a dozen rocket-propelled grenades - pointing right at the helicopter pilot.

“Happy landings!” Roger shouted as he pushed off from the helicopter and launched his payload into the vehicle’s interior, slowly jetting himself to the ground. He watched with satisfaction as the chopper’s front section exploded, and the burning wreck slammed into the hard earth below.

* * *

It took Jeanne all of three minutes to finish off the troopers in the lobby, and she began to survey the damage. When assured that it was all over, the refugees began to filter out of the basement and mill around the still-fresh battle site. Judith, still smarting from her wounded shoulder, immediately began to check the fallen enemy soldiers, while

others brought in the townsfolk cut down by the choppers' initial attack.

Roger and Jeanne quickly surveyed the area, to make certain it was completely secure, and to check for survivors in the destroyed enemy helicopters. There were none.

The situation back at the hospital was similar. All of the attackers were dead, and only two of the villagers were still living when Judith got to them, but even they couldn't be saved. The only thing that could be done was to try to ease their pain. In all, the brief battle had claimed fifty lives, friend and foe.

Roger had shed his Cyclone and armor, and approached her. "Why?" she asked. "Who were these people?"

Roger looked around. "From the uniforms and equipment I figure they were mercenaries. My guess is that someone's on to your deal with the 'Lady', like Rimmler. The antibiotics are a gold-mine, and Rimmler or anyone else could sell them for a premium, as well as making sure that they, and not their competitors, are effectively immune to the plague. Frankly, I'd bet the 'Lady' is thinking the same thing; she just decided to trade you for it, rather than kill you."

"That's terrible!" Judith sighed.

"That's urban mob warfare. I just hate that they had to drag it all the way out here and kill a bunch of innocent people. It also means you really aren't safe here anymore - one chopper got away, and they could bring back others."

* * *

Michael's feverish monologue, spiced up with wild gesticulation, had caused Milo to lose control and he was laughing so hard that his sides ached. But Austin went on with the story, ". . . and then, there was the time I was a partner in, by all accounts, the most evil practical joke in history. This friend of mine - the 'faux sensitive' type - had gained a somewhat presumptuous attachment to one of my ex-girlfriends, so when this guy got transferred to the *Valiant* this girl got hold of a good make-up kit and some putty, and she did this incredible imitation of bruises on her face and a black eye. My job was to boss her around in front of him, you know, yell at her and act like a total ass, so he would think that I was beating the hell out of her. Personally, I found the whole thing somewhat offensive, but it was all her idea."

"Too cruel. . . Did he say anything about it?" Milo asked.

"Not at first. He was acting real nervous, though, and said he was going out for some fresh air. When he came back, he found that my door was locked, and he could hear us shouting inside. Finally I made a sound like I'd slapped her, and he started banging on

the door, like he was coming to her rescue or something. She let him in, and curled up into a corner, and Mr. Brave Hero wandered in, terrified that he was next if he got involved. We finally gave in, and admitted that it was a show, but he wouldn't believe us, and even worse, the make-up wouldn't come off. . .”

Milo was suddenly somber, his face losing all expression, and his hand edging toward his SAL-9. “Shhh. . . Did you hear something?”

“No. . . What did you-” Across their camp, Michael saw some movement amidst the trees. He couldn't feel any wind, and slowly reached for his weapon. “Let's lead them away from the Alpha. Put out the fire. And don't go on line with your gun until you've got a perfect shot.” they heard the dull “THUD” of a mecha's foot on the ground. “Too soft for a Shock trooper. Has to be Scout. Two of 'em, maybe three. Let's get to forest.”

The two guerrillas raced into the inky black forest. Michael's voice broke the silence. “When I give the word, power up your pistol. Maybe they'll see the protoculture emissions.” Clouds rolled in, covering the sky and blotting out moon and starlight. “When you see the plasma cannons warm up, fire between and a little below. Then switch off and duck away.”

“Let's do it!”

“Spread out. . . **Now!**”

The two soldiers pressed a button on the side of each of their rifles. A panel lighted, indicating that the energy rifles were at full power. Acting upon a sudden noise behind him, Austin turned around and saw a pair of plasma cannons begin to glow. He took aim and fired. A miss. He shut off his rifle and jumped. *Can't find Milo.* Austin rolled away just in time to avoid being splintered like the tree behind him. *Try again.* He powered up. The characteristic glow of the plasma cannons appeared again, but this time, Michael hit his mark. The cannons dimmed, and he heard the dull crash of the Armored Scout collapsing. He turned around to find Milo, only to be surprised by another Armored Scout behind him.

“Right on target,” he muttered. “You, my friend, are dead!” Austin pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. “Out of power?” he wailed as the concussions from the Invid plasma cannons knocked him flat. He'd lost sight of Milo. *Their aim's getting better.* Michael got up and ran as fast as he could, but another explosion demolished the tree next to him and again sent him tumbling down.

Still, the Invid could not detect any more active protoculture emissions anywhere, nor could its inferior optical sensor find any trace of the humans. Assuming his job was finished, it fired its thrusters and flew away.

Elsewhere, Milo warmed up his weapon, expecting the trooper's plasma cannons

to appear. Waiting for something to happen, he panned around to see that the clouds had ceased to block out the moon, and in the moonlight, looming above him, menaced a lone Invid Armored Scout. Milo raised his SAL-9, but it was knocked from his grasp by the alien mecha's deft claw. *Why me?* he thought, stumbling backwards. The Invid worker, sitting inside the giant Armored Scout battlesuit, could finally see the troublesome Earthling. It gladly warmed its cannons to fire.

Milo desperately fished through his pockets, searching for the grenade he'd dropped in there earlier. He found it, his hand wrapping around its cold egg-like form. His index finger yanked out the pin and Milo hurled it at the trooper; the projectile landed atop the mecha with a soft clank and then detonated, sending the Invid craft falling backwards from the blast. It lay writhing its metal arms, unable to rise. Milo seized the moment by retrieving his firearm, hopping on top on the helpless giant and putting the pilot out its misery with a blast from his laser pistol. His shot pierced the sensor housings of the Scout, and a fountain of dark noxious fluid burst forth.

Not again. . . Milo lamented. His shredded clothing was totally bathed in the dark viscous fluid. After circling back around, Milo decided that the situation was under control.

"Eeehgh!" Michael snarled. "What a reek! Isn't this the second time?" Michael asked, pinching off his nose with his hand. "When we get back to camp, you take a bath and I'll burn the clothes. For now, just keep your distance."

* * *

Roger and Jeanne were almost finished in packing up their things, and were securing the boxes of medicine, syringes, and sterile solution they had been given to the rear of their Cyclones. Michael had contacted them earlier via radio to inform them of his impending return, and they were in somewhat of a hurry to meet him at the old campsite. Jeanne was just finishing up with her body armor, and was cleaning off the face-plate of her helmet, as Judith came out to meet them.

"Heading back already?" she asked.

Roger nodded. "My commander seems to have found a working Alpha fighter, and he's going to need me to fix it up for him. It's a dirty job. . ." Roger's voice trailed off, leaving a forced smile on his face. "Besides, the people the 'Lady' sent here should arrive soon, so you should be safe now."

"Jeanne, could you-" Judith began.

"Oh, yeah," Jeanne said. "I'm outta here," she smiled, leaving the two in relative

privacy.

A silence fell over Judith and Roger for a tense moment, and Judith looked to the ground. "I won't ask you to come back with me, as much as I want to. I know how important the movement is to you."

Roger scratched his head. "And how important your work is to you. I wish I knew what to say; I've never been good at this sort of thing."

"Say you'll find me when the war is over."

Roger smiled. "I think I can handle that." Judith drew close to him, and the two embraced tightly, ending their embrace with a long, passionate kiss.

"I've got to go," Roger whispered sadly.

* * *

Soon, Michael had set down the plane and the trailer, and was met by Jeanne and Roger as he opened the canopy.

"Where did you find this thing?" Jeanne eagerly inquired.

Michael gave her a toothy grin. "It followed us home; can we keep it? No, really, at the base. This baby was blown all to hell, missing an arm, and all that, but Milo and I patched it back together. We brought back spare parts and tools in the trailer, not to mention missiles for the plane and Cyclones."

"How about Protoculture?" Roger asked.

"We found nine canisters, one spare after getting the Alpha to half-power. We'll have to acquire ourselves some when we get to New Munich."

Michael climbed out of the cockpit and hopped to the ground. "C'mon. Swift's in the trailer. Roger, get the tool caddie from it and get to work on the Alpha. Jeanne, the rest of us will unload the supplies and stow them in the hovertransport, and while we're at it, you can bring me up to date on what went on in Passau. Let's move! I want to break camp before the Invid pick up our trail."