

# Episode Six:

## Schwarzwald

*“The surviving Mars Division personnel roamed from town to town, as virtual outcasts. A majority of the revitalized resistance was tracked down by bounty hunters, Invid sympathizers, or scavengers and didn’t last long on the hostile planet. But a handful of these groups actually began to make their presence felt, scoring minor victories on remote Invid outposts and challenging Invid patrol-strength forces. The evolution of these bands was crucial to what later was to come in the war.”*

-A. Thonon, Seeds of Liberation

7 November 2042

“Thanks again for helping out here, Laurie,” the doctor repeated. The level of gratitude he’d expressed was well out of proportion with the assistance she had so far lent, though it was consistent with the glances he had been stealing of her posterior - and Laurie was beginning to wonder if another motive wasn’t at work.

“Really, it was no trouble, Peter,” she replied in British-accented German. Laurie lifted the last box of antibiotics out of her plane, and began carrying it to the clinic. The plague was just arriving in Ulm, and they were ready to fight it - scavengers and gangs and Invid be damned. “It’s a welcome respite from my day job.”

Citizens of the once-prosperous city, much reduced in size and splendor over the last thirty-five years, began to line up for their treatment. Laurie would first screen those who really were sick from those who were merely suffering from hysterics, and ask a few routine questions about their health, sanitation, family, and the like. Those deemed truly ill were then passed on to the physician. As far as everyone could tell, this disease had taken a predominantly pneumonic form, and its airborne transmission was making it difficult to control.

But by the end of the day, the groundwork had been laid, and it was beginning to be clear that the deadly infection would leave only minimal damage here. Soon she would be able to move on.

Half an hour after sunset, Laurie found herself with the medical staff of the local

clinic, taking in dinner. The evening's fare was unpretentious: Wienerschnitzel and German potatoes, with healthy helpings all around, and more than a little of the local brew.

"So, Laurie, how long have you been in the resistance? Fighters like yours don't grow on trees," asked Peter Eckles, the youngest of the staff physicians, with a fawning glance indubitably cast her way.

*He's too pimply. And even I could take him in a fight,* Laurie thought, looking askance at her admirer. "A couple of years. I just came upon the fighter recently." Laurie turned to her plate, and began cutting off another bite of the steak. "Though I've been pretty much out of the movement for a while. Too many incompetents and bandits dress up as freedom fighters and give the cause a bad name." Laurie turned away from the conversation, and gulped down some of her dinner.

"We had some really amiable soldiers pass through week before last. They brought enough of the tetracycline to get us through until you could be sent with a bigger shipment from the 'Lady'," added one of the older doctors: an elderly woman Laurie only knew as Doktor Pozsgay, apparently a refugee from the current Hungarian regime. "They didn't seem like incompetents or bandits."

*Here's what I came for,* Laurie thought. "Oh, really?"

"Yes. It was a man and young woman - I think they were from the Expeditionary Fleet, and they were later joined by a tall dark man and a shorter fellow, both of whom I think used to be in the Southern Cross."

"Soldiers?" Laurie asked in mock surprise. "We don't see too many of those in the movement. They tend to stay away from the irregulars and keep to themselves a lot." Laurie gauged the reaction of her hosts, trying to determine how much she should reveal, and how much she should keep to herself. "Those of them that are still around, that is."

"Well, these four were very professional. They came in and out of town for a few days, and helped out here a little bit, traded for some supplies, and the like. I've met a lot of resistance fighters, and - present company excluded, of course," Peter said, "they could all stand to learn a lot about community relations from these people."

Laurie nodded. "So when did they leave?"

"A week ago," Doktor Pozsgay replied. "They headed on west, as I recall."

"What a shame," Laurie replied, returning to her meal. "I would have liked to have met them."

\* \* \*

The Danube river was now a common, if unappreciated, sight to the now well-rested resistance forces led by Commander Austin. He knew that the Invid were still scouring the countryside, looking for his group and any others that might oppose them, after what had recently transpired in New Munich. It was only a matter of time before they tracked the resistance group down. The luxuriant Black Forest was a natural sanctuary; but for how long? He had no other choice; the group had to make a move and risk detection by the Invid.

His troubled brow and burdened shoulders made empty the practiced smile he issued to his friend and subordinate, Lt. Jeanne Ducasse. He didn't have any more answers for her, only brooding silence. He stepped up to the river and watched the currents slide by playfully. The sunlight streamed in and shimmered on the turbulent water. The Danube seemed to go on forever.

Jeanne stood by his side. She wanted to tell Austin that the others believed in him; but even she had her doubts. Michael's gift for flying was divine. But that was the one constant in his life. Everything else was earned. Michael had already had the respect of his peers, but he was still trying to gain their trust and their faith. Jeanne knew Austin was silently torturing himself over this decision; he always had in the past.

Jeanne broke the void of silence between the two of them. "I think we should risk a move. . ." It was more a murmur than anything else. She wondered if Austin had heard it at all. He made no reaction or acknowledgment of her opinion. *It's no use. He's off in his own world.* Sighing softly, she left him.

Austin looked up to the sky for a inspiration. The Commander knew what the group really needed was another plane. It was a stroke of luck and determination that had brought the first the Alpha fighter to them. If they had another plane for Jeanne, then encountering the peripheral Invid forces now threatening them would be no problem, and the unit would still be small enough not to attract significantly more attention. He clasped his hands behind his back and walked deliberately along the river bank. Further downstream he could hear Swift enjoying the cold water.

Another thing that bothered Austin was the fact that resistance frequencies on the radio had been deathly quiet. It only confirmed his worst fears. He squatted down and scooped up a handful of the rich dark soil and watched it filter through his hands. *It's a no win situation,* Austin thought glumly.

He heard a voice shout out amidst this natural serenity. Roger made a general announcement concerning lunch. Michael ignored it; he was too wound-up to keep down a meal. He could see Swift skulking towards the hovertransport wearing nothing but a pair of ragged cutoffs, and his characteristic bandanna, despite the chill in the air. Milo

was dripping wet, but looked quite refreshed from his swim. Michael had half a mind to ask Swift's viewpoint on the matter, but something in his heart told him that this was one choice he'd make alone.

"We move out," he said aloud. There was no logic behind his reasoning, except for the fact that he couldn't force his group to wait around here like hunted animals. He wouldn't be imprisoned by this vague and overwhelming fear. *But we can wait until tomorrow. I know that Pike mentioned tuning the Alpha today. I wouldn't want to take it up without his seal of approval; I could wind up dead.* He neared the rear of the transport and heard Ducasse and Pike talking within. He stepped inside and poured himself a cup of coffee. Immediately, the tone of their conversation changed when they knew of his presence.

"We're moving out as soon as possible. I can't stand waiting and doing nothing. If luck is with us, we'll encounter maybe an patrol and nothing more."

Roger assured, "I'll have the Alpha ready for action by tomorrow. It's the best I can do." He excused himself from the others. Michael could hear him drag out the tool caddie from the darkness in the cargo hold.

"Well, Commander, this is sudden," Jeanne's concerned voice erupted. "Pike's going to be up all night again."

"I don't think he really minds all that much, other than the sleep he'll lose. Sometimes, I feel that he'd rather spend time with the Alpha than with any of us."

"You're the same way. You've told me so many times before. Flying is like some kind of escape for you," Jeanne commented. Austin smiled sheepishly at her observation. "Well, I'll tell Milo of your decision, Michael."

"No, I'll do it. Where is the old boy, anyway?" Michael joked.

"He just picked up lunch and headed back out into the woods somewhere. He showed up around breakfast and packed up some of his traps. I can only assume that he hasn't caught anything. He didn't look to happy," Jeanne explained.

"Something happened to him in New Munich. He was stinking drunk that night when they met up with us out of town, remember?" Jeanne nodded in reply. Michael continued, "He's clammed up. And normally, I wouldn't worry, but he hasn't been drinking since then either."

"He's out of booze. He also slept under the stars last night; had a spot picked out up by the river. All he did was star-gaze and play his harmonica. Maybe he'll open up to you." Jeanne nudged Austin optimistically.

"He'll talk when he's good and ready, and not a moment sooner." Michael started away.

\* \* \*

Austin cut a trail to the Danube; he could hear Swift's unmistakable grunt keep a steady cadence. Milo had certainly picked a secluded area; Austin saw his things scattered at the base a huge tree trunk that rose up higher than the others. Sunlight pierced through in clusters, but the area was mostly dark. The smell of the forest was exhilarating; Michael took in the intoxicating odor and marveled at the unspoiled majesty before him.

The grunts were getting louder; Austin homed in on them and eventually found Swift. Milo's back was bare, his shirt lay on the ground. Swift hung by his knees from a thick twisting branch of a leafy tree. Michael watched Swift labor through a set of fifty inverted sit-ups.

"Gee, Swift, you don't think you're going too easy on yourself, there? Only fifty reps?" Michael joked as Milo's form hung limply from the branch. Milo squinted at Austin in disbelief. "We're moving out tomorrow, Private," Austin added after a pause.

"Fine; anything else?"

"Yeah - don't fall and hurt yourself."

\* \* \*

"Do you see 'em?" Hans intoned. He had the hammer of his pistol cocked, and aimed for the red-head's skull. He was the leader and knew that the others were waiting for his orders. The new boys were nervous but ready to strike.

His second nodded spastically and grunted to two other scavengers to break off from the main force and track down the leader. They scampered away deeper into the dark forest armed with guns and intended to kill. Hans waited for several moments before ordering the remaining scavengers to move in on the unsuspecting pair of Pike and Ducasse. Hans' subordinates closed off any escape routes and positioned themselves for the ambush.

"Take cover, Pike!" Jeanne screeched as the shots came raining down. Heavy fire had her pinned behind natural cover; she'd lost track of Pike in the chaos that ensued. Ducasse heard rustling sounds behind her and moved to counter. Unfortunately, she reacted too late. A sharp blow met the base of her skull and her world collapsed into an overwhelming blackness.

Pike heard the Lieutenant's desperate warning and fought valiantly, but he was no

expert in hand to hand combat and was hopelessly outnumbered. He was easily beaten into incoherence. Hans had his men tie up the two resistance fighters with rope. They dangled from a sturdy branch in semi-consciousness, confused at the present state of events.

Jeanne focused her thoughts. She instinctively knew that Commander Austin had heard the shots; he and Swift would be on their way. The attackers seemed confident of an easy victory, and were now worrying about the spoils of the mission: the mecha and possibly any pleasure they could extract from her in this condition. She could see the depravity in Hans's blue eyes. "We'll earn a pretty penny for this job," he said in English, almost as much to Jeanne as to the others. Hans holstered his weapon and stepped away, making a brief report in his native tongue to persons unknown into his small field radio. Returning to his female captive, he said, "But what says we can't have a little fun before we get our bounty?" Jeanne's eyes narrowed. *He's going first.*

She squirmed uneasily and swung erratically like a human pendulum. Hans gripped her cruelly and feasted his eyes on her; she met his lusty advances with an unwilling grimace. When Hans tried forcing himself on her, she rammed her left knee into his abdomen. Stunned, Hans dropped the radio set, which shattered on a rock on the leaf-cluttered ground.

"You bitch!" Hans drew his pistol and slammed the butt across her fair-skinned face. She flinched at the pain; but managed to spit defiantly in Hans' cold eyes. She could offer up no resistance and Hans knew it. He smiled like some carnivorous beast readying for the kill. She could see Hans reach for her clothing and closed her eyes. *Michael, where are you?*

\* \* \*

"Alright boys!" a voice warned from the trees, "Reach for the skies!" Two men stepped out from the shadows with weapons aimed at Swift and Austin and gave the threat substance. Milo hung upside-down like a bat; but didn't seem all that unsettled, until he heard gunfire from the main campsite. He flinched at the echoing report of small-arms fire. Austin, on the other hand, stood rock-steady.

Austin took a hard look at Swift's countenance since only Swift had a direct view of their attackers. *Not good.* Milo jerked his head slightly to his shirt that lay on the ground nearby; from where he stood, Austin could see the gleam of the SAL-9's barrel. Austin nodded lightly in comprehension. Milo smiled.

"Help your friend down - slowly," was the order Austin heard. When Swift was

safely on the ground, Austin reached for the flannel shirt that lay in a wrinkled mass at the base of the tree.

“Now!” the Commander whispered harshly. Swift dove for the ground as Michael grabbed the concealed firearm, wheeled around, and fired twice. Both shots were kills. Swift stopped for moments to examine Austin’s handiwork while Austin charged back to the main campsite. Milo loped quietly behind.

Austin winced as he heard Milo slide in quietly beside him. They still had the element of surprise with them. Austin noted five of the still unsuspecting ambushers at within the camp perimeter. Two were marveling at the Alpha fighter, while the rest were hovering about Lt. Ducasse. Both Milo and Michael could see that Jeanne’s clothing was shredded.

Michael’s eyes narrowed. Milo was almost expecting some sort of vengeful bluster, but Michael kept his rage silent. “You take out the two by the Alpha.” Austin aimed the laser pistol at the base of Hans’s neck. He was just waiting until Milo sneaked into position. *Good! Swift’s ready!*

One ragged scavenger sat listlessly on a fallen tree trunk. His automatic rifle was propped up against the log, and he casually reached into his shirt pocket for a pack of cigarettes, totally unaware of Swift’s presence. Milo stealthily clasped the scrawny exposed neck within his large hands and snapped it efficiently. The body slumped away from Milo’s deadly grasp.

“Siggi? Was that you?” Milo sensed the fear in this other voice. He heard footsteps skulk around the rear of the Alpha. He could see a weapon being raised. Instinctively, Swift yanked out his bowie knife from its boot sheath and launched it at the figure sneaking around the Alpha’s wing. The blade lanced the target’s carotid artery and imbedded itself in the victim’s neck. In his death throes, the fatally wounded scavenger loosed his entire magazine of ammunition. It rang out like thunder and almost made Austin miss when he pulled the SAL-9’s trigger - almost.

Hans fell forward as the shot sliced into his back; Ducasse built up her momentum and on the downswing she slammed her body into Hans. He tumbled away from the collision with the human wrecking ball. Austin approached and severed the rope that had held Jeanne, gently helping her to the ground. Swift dealt with the two remaining scavengers and had them disarmed and neutralized in thirty seconds.

“Jeanne? Did they-” Michael asked angrily.

“No,” Jeanne answered. “I’m alive and kicking.” She slung a ripped strap over her exposed shoulder. Hans was still alive, but the wound was mortal. Austin cut Pike down and roused him to consciousness, noting the deep gash on the Captain’s forehead.

“Jeanne, take Pike inside,” Austin decreed.

Milo hoisted the prisoners up on the branch and took a gratuitous jab at Hans. Michael lurked around behind him, hesitant to ask Milo to do as unpleasant task as he had in mind. The three remaining scavengers were quickly hung upside-down. They were scared and disoriented; Hans’ blood ran from his lips and nostrils and was soaked up by the parched dark earth.

“Sympathizers, do you think?” Milo whispered.

“I don’t know. Make them talk, Swift,” Michael said harshly.

Milo’s brows raised in doubt. “Even if it kills them?”

“If you kill anyone, make it the leader. He’ll die anyway, but his men don’t necessarily know that. Is that a problem for you?”

“I gave up satisfying my conscience years ago, Commander. What about you?” Milo said in a monotone voice.

“I’ll worry about my conscience tonight, Swift. Now, are you going to do this, or do I-” Michael began.

“You?” Milo laughed. He couldn’t imagine Austin playing the part of an enforcer. “Get me a piece of pipe out of the hovertransport and thirty minutes, and tell the others to ignore anything they hear,” Milo blurted out.

Moments later, Swift fondled the pipe in the cupped palm of his left hand. When he was sure of his isolation with the prisoners, he began talking, “Boys, it seems your leader here is in pretty bad shape. Now, if I take a swing at him, chances are, he’ll be dead. It’s a shame, too; there’s no need for him to suffer. . . Just tell me what I want to know and we’ll get along fine.”

“Go to hell!” Hans managed to gasp.

“By all means, you first!” Milo swung the pipe into Hans’s chest. He swung back and forth; his body shuddered and wheezed one final time before expiring. “Yer out,” Milo added curtly. “Now, who’s next at bat?”

“Kiss my-” another began.

Milo cracked the pipe against the offending scavenger’s right kneecap. The scavenger groaned in pain.

“That’s strike one, sonny. One more wisecrack and you’ll have a matching set of those.” Swift pointed to the bloody knee he’d caused. “Now, let’s be nice, shall we?”

“I ain’t-” Milo cut the victim off again with a swing at the other knee. He smiled when he heard the tortured scavenger scream aloud in anguish.

“See what you’ve made me do?” Milo complained. “I didn’t want to do this; I would have let you off with some bruised ribs, if you’d told me what I’d wanted to know

in the first place.”

“Please. . .” the other scavenger gasped. “What do you want to know?”

*Damn. They don't build 'em like they used to; this guy caved in before I even got to him.* Milo smiled in satisfaction.

“How'd you find us?” Milo began.

\* \* \*

Austin immediately pulled Swift aside when Milo stepped into the hovertransport. “Did they talk?”

“They screamed a little before they told me anything thing useful. It seems somebody hired these fools to track us down and either capture or kill us - for a reward. They were just a bunch of amateurs, scavengers, and bandits, in over their head.”

“What the hell? A reward?” Michael stepped back, stunned. “I thought we were keeping a low profile!”

“It seems someone doesn't want us wandering around making trouble with the Invid. That, or they want our hardware. Who knows? Unfortunately, Hans was the last one of them who knew who we were supposed to be delivered to, and well, he didn't pull through. . . His lackeys just knew that we were wanted, and in my opinion, the asking price was an insult.”

“We'll have to be more careful about going into towns from now on. But I want to find out who's put a price on our heads.”

Milo shrugged. “They also know that the Invid are to the east of here.”

“Not anymore,” Michael countered. “Radio transmission came in from another resistance unit. They're in the Black Forest, to the north of us. They're putting up a good fight against an Invid patrol, but they're outgunned and inexperienced.”

“You can't get up there in time?” Milo questioned.

“Pike's still whipping my bird into shape. Even if I could, I'd be the only plane there. They're down to Cyclones only now; apparently they lost their Hovertank when the fight began. It's only a matter of time before the Invid finish them. It galls the hell out of me, but I can't do a damned thing.”

\* \* \*

The horde of *Iigaa* had done their job; the rebels were vanquished, the survivors dispersed harmlessly into the woods, and their Robotech mecha charred and useless to

any scavengers.

*You have served the Regis well. Although I know of more human resistance forces to the south, I can see that your ranks have been weakened. Return to the hive for further debriefing procedures.*

The lead *Iigaa* started away from the scene of carnage and arced toward the regional hive in the west. The surviving other Invid mecha ordered to this assignment flared their thrusters and started after the lone *Iigaa* and charged straight ahead into the burnt orange sunset.

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Of the two dozen men that had once fought in Johann's resistance band, now only five remained - and they had only survived by shedding their mecha and equipment and running into the Black Forest as their comrades were cut down by the incessant hail of Invid weapons fire.

Johann was a tall, limber man in his thirties. His brown hair dripped with sweat and was matted with leaves, and his body-armor showed signs of age and some neglect. Cursing, he stormed around the hollow where his fellow survivors were gasping for breath.

"Do you think they're still coming?" Gunther, a blond-haired boy around eighteen and the youngest in the group, asked nervously. "I think we should keep moving, in case they come looking for us!"

"They're not coming for us, you idiot!" Martin, the most senior surviving member behind Johann exclaimed. "Why would they bother? We're not worth chasing anymore!"

Johann cut Martin off. "Martin, that's enough. I think we all know-"

"You promised us three more Cyclones and an Alpha! You said putting out that bounty was a sure thing. 'They're just a bunch of army jarheads', you said. Well, we sure could have used an Alpha an hour ago!" Friedrich, a middle-aged man who had been with the group nearly as long as Martin, exclaimed.

"Shut up, all of you!" Johann exclaimed.

"You're the one who gave **our** plane to that blonde slut, to get her into the sack with you," Martin accused. "And then she flies off with it! We lose almost all of our men and mecha, and all you give us is empty promises! We've lost our Cyclones, we've lost our Hovertank, your woman stole our Alpha, and most of us are dead. You call that leadership? I say we get us a new leader!"

Johann drew his pistol and fired a shot, just missing Martin's head. Martin froze

in fear, while the others began to reach for their own weapons.

“This is what they want us to do! Don’t you think that the governments and the Invid are hoping that the movement will kill itself, so the Invid and their stooges can have free rein, and so Saxony can keep grabbing land under the pretense of preparing to fight the aliens? We are the only thing keeping the Invid from completely running Earth over. And you two have the gall to show disloyalty now?”

Martin remained silent as Johann reholstered his weapon. “As for Mason,” Johann continued, “she got the plane because she was the best pilot. How was I supposed to know that she would lose her stomach about requisitioning supplies?”

Johann took a deep breath. “What do we have left? I need a status report on all our remaining gear. Now.” The results were not encouraging: an RL-6 rocket-launcher with four rounds of ammo, three assault rifles and Johann’s Mars Gallant particle beam gun, each with around a hundred rounds available, maps, three days food and water for all of them, a short-range field radio, and a wide-dispersal bio-emulator - a device designed to imitate the emissions of a protoculture engine to fool Invid sensors. That, and the clothes on their backs. “Okay, here’s what we do. Hans radioed me the coordinates of that gang of military idiots stirring up unneeded trouble with the Invid. I haven’t heard back from him, but let’s assume that they’ve already taken possession of the mecha. If they have, fine. We meet them, dispose of Hans’ gang, take the hardware, and start over. If not, we do their job for them.”

The only reply Johann received from the others was a set of icy stares.

“Let’s move!”

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“Build a raft?” Austin chortled. He propped his hand up against the weapons console of the transport. He couldn’t see any benefit from it. “We’d be moving at a snail’s pace,” he said, suppressing his dismay.

“I have just three words for you, unbeliever: we’ll save protoculture,” Milo countered.

“Now wait a minute, guys. Milo, you’re serious about this, aren’t you? Okay. . . How do you propose that we make it upstream? We all know the Danube flows in the wrong direction.”

“The hovertransport would have no problem towing it; besides, we won’t have far to go before we get to the Rhine, and that flows in the right direction. The only hang-ups would be in its construction,” Roger said objectively. “Well, that, and transferring the raft

across land to the Rhine, assuming the canal's not usable. But even that won't be too much of a problem for the scheme I've been thinking of," he added as an unnoticed afterthought.

"Michael, it would enable us to move around without attracting too much attention to ourselves," Jeanne agreed.

"Okay," Michael said thoughtfully. "Are you suggesting we just chop down a bunch of trees and lash 'em together?"

"We only have green wood, Commander," Roger replied. "We have to displace enough water for both the Alpha's **and** the raft's weight. Do the math. . ."

Michael nodded. "Well, even if we use something with a density of nearly zero, that's still displacing eighteen tons of water, or about eighteen cubic meters of raft under water. What were you going to suggest?" he asked.

"Well, I was thinking along the lines of a cross between a pontoon and a ski. I can fasten a reinforced block of styrofoam or aerogel onto each landing gear - from what I remember of the ground pressure of each of the wheels, the front gear'll see 4 cubic meters, and the rear two seven each, or thereabouts. I'll shape it like a keel, for stability and better water flow, on the front. . ." Roger took out a piece of paper, and began to sketch his creation for Michael. "The rear'll have to have wider structures. Otherwise, as you can see, the draft will be too big, and we can't get even close to shallow water. I'll make two keels like the front gear, jutting out from each in behind will be an additional cubic meter and a half of foam."

Michael scratched his chin in approval. "Okay, I've got two questions. How do we get these things on the gear in the first place, and do we have some sort of way to get to and from the plane and the hovertransport?"

"Well, we attach the flotation devices to the gear while you're in Guardian mode - I'll disable the fail-safes on the landing gear so you can still deploy them in that mode, and then once we're attached up, you take off, switch to Fighter mode, and vertically land in the water. I was thinking of trailing a supply platform - wooden planks on styrofoam - around the plane's dedicated floatation units." He drew a sketch of a small rectangular raft, with three holes in a triangular pattern, indicating where the landing gear would go. "All you have to do is make sure you've landed in between the holes. We'll lash it to the cable connecting the front gear to the hovertransport, and you'll be able to get to and from the plane. With the platform," Roger said, hastily adding it to the sketch, "we can clear some of the stuff out of the back of the hovertransport and use the transport for some living space. It'll also allow us to put a tarp over the plane and have a chance of hiding what it is from prying eyes. Granted, we'll all have to pack it up and hit the bank if

a storm starts brewing. But I don't really expect that at this time of the year."

"Why not just make a standard raft this way, without separate provisions for the plane?" Michael asked skeptically.

"Strength. Without major reinforcement, the raft'll snap when you land on it, and making it strong enough to hold a plane gets us back to our weight problem."

"How about quick disconnects, in case I have to take the plane into battle? And how about obstacles to navigation?"

"I'm working on it. Give me a few hours, and I'll have an answer."

"Okay, I say go for it," Michael suggested. "You have any leads on where to find the materials we need? Last I heard, expanded polystyrene didn't grow on trees."

"I have a few ideas. Boat docks, for one," Roger suggested, "often used styrofoam blocks underneath wooden superstructures. Building the aluminum framework will be a problem too, but I think I can handle it. I might have to make another trip into Ulm."

"All right. Get the materials to make two full sets; I have the feeling it'll take more than one try to get this right."

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The business in assembling the raft and the three 'fins' for the Alpha's landing gear took longer than Roger had hoped, and Michael made his annoyance clear. It was two days into the endeavor, and they had yet to field-test the contraption, which had been mostly assembled, but still had a rough unfinished look about it.

Still, the heavy workload had lifted everyone's spirits, as idleness was transmuted to purpose. Michael and Jeanne had taken some time out to take a walk together - something Jeanne had been agitating Michael to do for days - and that left Roger and Milo time to settle down for the evening before they returned.

"I'm famished, guys. What's for dinner?" Lt. Ducasse asked as she towed her face down after a quick splash with some soap and warm water.

"I didn't have any luck with my traps today," Milo said.

"Actually, I've taken the liberty of making something," Pike answered. "It's an old recipe passed down from generation to generation in the Pike family. Almost like a family heirloom."

"Yeah, what is it?" Milo asked. Pike ushered the others into the dark recesses of the rear hold of the transport. Their nostrils hungrily soaked in the pungent aroma of genuine Texas chili. Roger proudly doled out bowls of chili to the hungry audience.

"Looks like some kind of stew," Jeanne said objectively.

“Just try it,” Roger urged.

“Smells divine,” Austin complimented. He was the first to bring a spoonful up to his lips. “Wow! This stuff is hot!” Austin started coughing immediately after swallowing. He quickly quenched the fire in his throat with a quart of ice cold water.

“Chili, huh?” Milo said. He was the next to try Roger’s creation. He could feel its warmth trickle down his throat and spread throughout his torso. Milo started clearing his throat. “It’s not for the faint of heart, Jeanne,” he warned.

Jeanne tried a spoonful of her helping. She seemed to genuinely like the meal, and went back for seconds. Roger was a little disappointed that the men didn’t do the same.

When Swift saw Jeanne go back for more, he muttered to Austin, “She’s one brave lady, Commander.” Michael just smiled.

After the meal, Roger regaled Jeanne and Michael with stories of his childhood and they seemed genuinely interested in his background. Roger for his part was a decent raconteur, but he did tend to ramble. Eventually, Swift got up to leave, and headed for the unfinished raft, taking a seat and watching the lazy river drift by.

“You’re getting soft in your old age, Swift.” Austin now stood behind Milo. “I felt certain that you’d execute them. . . the scavengers, that is. Instead you stick ‘em on an inflatable boat and let ‘em drift downriver.” He waited for some response. In the two days since the attack, the two men had not discussed the captives’ disposition.

“Before I latched on with Pike, Jeanne, and you, I probably would have. But maybe now I’m starting to listen my conscience. But if they’d done anything to Jeanne-” Milo reasoned.

“You’d have waited your turn, Private. After all, rank does have its privileges,” Austin shot in. The comment drew a wry smile from Milo.

“How’s Jeanne taking this, anyway?”

“Like you said, Milo, that’s one brave lady.”

Milo nodded slowly. “Well, let’s head on back to work. I know we’ve lost Roger’s services for the night; he’s working on the Alpha fighter, so that means there’s more left for the rest of us. And it won’t get done by itself.”

\* \* \*

The midnight hour was quiet and still with only regular murmur of the distant Danube to keep Jeanne company. She’d volunteered for the night’s watch, partly because she knew Pike would be too engrossed in tinkering with the Alpha tonight to worry about the security of the camp perimeter. The raft had been completed and more importantly,

the finished product met with Austin's approval. Michael wanted to delay testing the raft until morning, and that would give Roger more time to work on the plane itself anyway.

Jeanne nestled closer to the portable heater when she heard the distant howls of the night winds. She took another sip from her coffee and opened up her diary to the next clear page. The heater was putting out enough light for Jeanne to continue her next entry.

*Dear diary, my stay on this planet hasn't been uneventful. Very recently, our group passed through two cities that seem to be coping with the Invid occupation quite well. I think we might have helped to stave off an epidemic. Unfortunately, most of the locals would have nothing to do with us. We were able to acquire protoculture, however. We had our first run-in with scavengers today. It got very nasty. I was almost. . . I can't write the word down.* Jeanne's hand trembled as she put the pen down. She closed the book and got up. Maybe the full realization of what almost happened earlier had set in; she never remembered feeling so helpless, and angry. Jeanne tried so hard to put it out of her mind, but it would go away. She heard Milo's harmonica wailing from the river's edge.

"I wonder what he's doing up this late?" Jeanne mumbled. She was determined to find out. Besides, anything was better than being a slave to her thoughts. Jeanne easily found Swift and knelt down next to him.

"Where'd you get the bottle?" Jeanne questioned. She knew that Milo's own supply was gone.

"It's Hans'. I figured he wouldn't be needing it." Milo gulped down some of its contents. "Do you want some?"

"No, I don't drink liquor."

"I know. But after what happened today, I thought-" Milo began.

"I don't hide from my problems behind a veil of alcohol, Milo."

Milo said nothing.

"I'm sorry, Milo," Jeanne said softly.

"Why should you apologize, Jeanne? You know you're right. I depend on this stuff to struggle through each day. As much as I con myself into thinking that I don't need it, the cold hard facts are that I need this to make it. It desensitizes me, allows me to ignore this putrid hellhole I call home. Because for ten years, I've had to look at jaundiced eyes, at maimed people crawling on the roads, at petty feuds between local strongmen causing pointless wars when they should all be working together against our common enemy. If I thought about it too much I'm sure I'd go nuts; the booze keeps me from thinking about these things. Sometimes I still go nuts. Dammit, I know I'm hiding behind this. I have to, because I still remember how this planet used to be! It was a

wonderful place to live, not perfect, but. . .”

“That doesn’t justify-”

“No. But you knows what happen when the booze dries up? I feel anger; that’s all I can feel anymore. Blind, murderous rage. And I don’t want to live like that; I’d rather be numb.”

“Milo, you don’t need to live like this. You can’t afford to, not for much longer,” Jeanne consoled. “Now, quit this babbling, and get some rest. I’m sure it’ll be a busy day for us tomorrow.”

Milo smiled weakly, not that Ducasse could have seen it. He grunted ever so slightly as his maneuvered his inebriated form into the sleeping bag and uttered something inaudible. Jeanne rose up, and stood over him. She started to walk away only when she was confident that Swift was almost asleep. His mumbling ceased, and once again the Danube sang its sweet song to Ducasse’s ears.

\* \* \*

“Gunther, I want an ETA for those coordinates. Now!” Johann bellowed. “I haven’t heard back from Hans, and I don’t like it. The last communiqué said that they’d secured the camp. . .” It was already past midnight, and they’d been marching for several days straight. Through the forest, they’d barely made a total of fifty miles.

“I thought you said that at last word, they were only about to move in,” Martin jeered.

“I disclose information to you people on a need to know basis. At that time, you didn’t need to know.”

“A farmer!” Martin declared under his breath, but still loud enough for the others to hear. “I could have been a farmer. Good, solid rock-of-the-Earth sort of profession. Or maybe a mechanic. Anything in the world. And I end up with this. . .”

“Shut up!” Johann declared.

“Sir,” Gunther added tentatively. “At our current rate, we’ll reach their camp in another twenty-four hours, assuming we camp for six hours-”

“We’re not stopping. Time is of the essence; we’re marching straight through until we get there, with a fifteen-minute break every two hours,” Johann replied. “We should get there by late this afternoon.”

\* \* \*

Jeanne saw Milo wince as the hovertransport fans roared to life. Compared to the

thunderous clamor raised by the engines on an Alpha, the transport's fans were fairly unobtrusive. But on this morning, and not unexpectedly, Milo was showing all the familiar signs of a five-star hangover. He peered suspiciously as the raft was dragged out onto the river currents by the transport.

"No signs of water leakage," Jeanne observed.

"I just hope it'll support the Alpha's weight," Milo said skeptically.

"Here's the Commander now," Jeanne said. Her eyes followed the Alpha as Austin brought it above the raft and gently eased the plane down, masterfully manipulating the plane's VTOL abilities. The raft bobbed fiercely under the pressure of the Alpha's thrusters but eventually settled down. Milo was silently triumphant as the raft appeared to be holding together. Austin emerged from the cockpit and scampered off the Alpha. The hovertransport was now brought back over land.

Austin stayed on the raft and covered up a good portion of the Alpha with a tarpaulin. He set about to securing the Alpha while the others broke down the camp.

"Let's move," Michael ordered when he saw that Swift and Ducasse were done loading all the gear up. Roger had been busy rigging up a serviceable rope bridge from the rear of the transport's doors to the raft itself. Although Pike claimed the cabled walkway would support the weight of all of them at once, both Swift and Austin were hesitant to try it out. Eventually, Roger showed them both up, as he trudged across the bridge to the raft and back to the rear of the transport's hold where the others stood. That's when they all discovered the bridge's one flaw.

"You can't close this left door completely," Austin pointed out.

Roger let out a disgruntled sigh, and marched up to the forward cab. He'd take the first shift of driving up the river.

\* \* \*

"Well, where the hell are they?" Martin asked. "Are you sure these are the right coordinates?" It was two hours before sunset, and all parties were exhausted after their long forced trek.

"This is where Hans told me." Johann circled around the remains of the camp, abandoned - as far as he could tell - at most a couple of hours before. There was no trace of the vehicles he'd hoped to find. "They were here, and Hans was supposed to move in."

"Maybe Hans back-stabbed us," Gunther suggested.

Martin continued to circle the area, and finally turned up five bodies, covered by a tarp some hundred yards away from the abandoned camp. "Looks more like Hans was as

sloppy as his employer,” the embittered subordinate said. The corpses were a number of anonymous men; two were shot by a beam gun, another sported a slashed throat, and a fourth a broken neck. None of them fit the soldiers’ descriptions, and beside their bodies lay Hans himself. “Well, what do we do now, oh fearless leader?”

Johann was beginning to seethe with rage. “Martin, if I hear one more remark out of you-”

“You people are pathetic,” they heard a woman’s sarcastic voice intone. A shapely blond-haired woman in battle-armor emerged from the woods, pointing an assault rifle in their direction. “I thought stealing from villagers and conscripting their sons against their will was bad. But hiring goons to kill other resistance fighters so you can take their mecha? That takes the cake. Considering all of this, I’m not surprised you’re squabbling among yourselves.”

“Laurie?” Johann said in a tone he hoped would convey pleasant surprise, affection, and concern. “Laurie, dear! Thank God, I was so worried!”

“Save it, Johann. I don’t buy it anymore. You can still manipulate these people, despite what you’ve put them through, but I see right through you. Your aura of charm and infallibility’s fallen away, and all that’s left is a pathetic little worm, reduced to hiring thugs to murder freedom fighters for his supplies.”

“They’re not part of the movement, Laurie,” Johann insisted. “They’re not interested in fighting for **our** goals, only expanding their own power. Where’s the plane?”

“Not far. And it’s rigged to blow with a proximity fuse, and only I know the remote code that disarms it. So don’t even think about it.” Laurie looked around the band, and laughed. “So this is all that’s left? I heard you crying for help over the resistance networks, but of course, I wasn’t going to answer. No one in the movement was. Because you people are a cancer.” Laurie noticed one of the men - Friedrich - trying to drift outside of her peripheral vision. She made sure to keep track of his movements, just in case he tried something. “And the sooner you’re out of business, the sooner we can restore some credibility to the movement.”

“They don’t understand. They don’t realize the sacrifices we all have to make if we want to beat the Invid. The neo-feudal lords and the soldiers are just scrambling for whatever they can grab. The villagers are selfish and short-sighted, even though we’re doing all this for them. I thought you of all people would understand,” Johann replied.

“I understand just fine,” Laurie said. “And that’s why I left. But I see what I came for is no longer here, so if you’ll excuse me. . .”

“We can’t do that, Laurie,” Johann warned. “That’s our plane, and you’re going

to give it back to us.”

“Or?” Laurie asked. “Are you going to murder me too?” Laurie glanced over to Martin, and laughed. “Martin, are you still following this bastard? After all he’s put you and your men through? Tell me, when was the last time you attacked an Invid installation? When was the last time you passed intelligence along to the network? When was the last time you attacked the Invid, instead of letting them attack you?”

Johann cast an uneasy glance to his second, and then to Friedrich, who was still circling around, trying to get in a position where Laurie was being targeted from two directions. “Friedrich, shoot her! That’s an order!”

Martin shouted his own order. “Stand down, Friedrich. Or I’ll shoot you!” Friedrich looked from Martin to Johann and back, and lowered his weapon. Martin scowled, and looked intently at Laurie. “For the first time since I’ve had the displeasure of meeting you, Mason, you’ve finally begun to make sense.”

“Martin!” Johann shouted.

“Shut the hell up,” Martin said. “Gunther, relieve Johann of his gun. I’m taking charge of this group now. Johann, you’ve run this unit into the ground. I’m sick of you and your asinine soapbox.”

All eyes turned to Gunther, who was hesitating. “I . . .” he began.

“Now!” Martin ordered.

Johann, carefully monitoring the stand-off, decided he had to make a move. He reached to his side for his weapon, but was instantly cut down by fire from both Laurie’s and Martin’s weapons. Johann fell to his knees, gasping, and collapsed backward, onto his pack.

“Is he dead?” Martin asked. Gunther approached and checked Johann’s pulse, and nodded. “Aw, hell. Men, take his weapon and search the pack.” Martin turned back to Laurie, who had slung her rifle over her shoulder. “Well, at least you were here at the end, Mason. I didn’t figure you would come back at all.”

“I didn’t. I’m looking for those soldiers, too. Just call it fate that I stumbled back onto what was left of the ‘Fighting Tigers’.”

“Don’t think this means I like you, Mason.” Martin added. “You’re still a tramp, and I don’t like the way you went over my head to try to control the group by slinking your way into Johann’s bunk. But, then again, you saw through him first - I’ve got to give you that much credit.”

“What are you going to do now?” Laurie asked. Despite Martin’s feelings about her, she still respected him as a fellow resistance fighter.

“I’ll have to have a long talk with Lars, Gunther, and Friedrich. If we stick

together, we're going to have to start from scratch."

"Well, good luck," Laurie began as she began to edge toward her plane. "Whatever you decide to do."

"And you," Martin added, watching her walk away.

"Me? I'm going to start from scratch too," Martin heard Laurie reply, as she vanished into the woods.

"Sir," Lars shouted. "Most of Johann's gear is okay, except for the bio-emulator. It looks like it took a rifle round. The panel's all smashed."

"Leave it. That's thirty pounds of broken Invid-bait I don't want to have to hump. The rest we'll distribute among ourselves. Gunther, we need to get to Ulm. We'll march two more hours, and then we rest for the night. You people deserve it."

The ragged band of four men soon began to march south-south-eastward, traveling in complete silence. The abandoned camp was left silent again, guarded only by the corpses of six men and the bio-emulator, which, though its panel lights had been smashed out, was not only capable of working, but had been activated by the shot that had damaged it.

Several hundred miles away, both to the north and to the south-west, the sensors in two Invid hives detected a large, sudden, and anomalous signal, indicating a small force of Robotech mecha with active - and unauthorized - protoculture. The hive brains concluded that the second resistance group in the area had given itself away, and each hive ordered a complement of Troopers and Scouts to be detached to the area, to mete out swift and sudden punishment to the human rebels.

\* \* \*

"We've got radar contacts; lot's of 'em!" Swift gawked as his eyes soaked in all the data from the sensor displays aboard the transport. Milo was already charging off to the rear hold, hurriedly putting on his CVR-3 armor and awaiting Austin's orders. They were not long in coming.

"Roger, you're going ghost immediately after the Alpha's away. Shut everything down, Pike. The transport has no combat mobility with the raft attached to it and we can't afford to lose it. Jeanne, you're accompanying Private Swift. Take the Cyclones and set a position seven miles due north on the far bank. Be ready for anything, because this contingent is greater than the typical patrol strength forces we're used to fighting. I'm heading westward, and I'll circle around and charge them straight on. Milo, get that tarp off my plane!" Michael yelled.

“Keep your eyes open, flyboy,” Ducasse cautioned. Austin was already on the cable bridge working his way across to the raft. Jeanne rushed for her Cyclone armor, and pulled the groin harness into place when she heard the unmistakable roar of the Alpha’s engines shatter the energy-charged silence around her.

“This ain’t a fashion show, Jeanne. Get your tail out here!” Swift growled.

\* \* \*

Michael peered across the vast blue expanse before him. *Nothing yet.* All that caught his attention was a little settlement nestled in the lush forest below that welled forth from the edge the Danube. Michael began to circle back to begin his charge at the approaching enemy. His eyes bugged out when he glanced at the size of the Invid formation his radar screen displayed. *If this is what I’m up against, I wonder what the Cyclones will run into?* A visual close-up showed a cluster of Armored Scouts and a modest number of Shock Troopers .

“Oh, my God!” Michael gasped. He yanked the stick far back, almost ramming it into his crotch. The Alpha lurched up, spiraling throughout the tricky ascent; then Michael forced it back down looping behind the congested Invid formation and steadied himself for the attack. The targets acquired and in range, he fired continuously from the GU-13 gun pod.

Five Scouts plummeted away from their comrades towards certain doom below. Michael hastily converted the fighter to its monstrous Battloid form. The rest of the Invid efficiently surrounded the lone Alpha and began raining deadly plasma globes at him. Michael silently thanked the heavens for bestowing the Invid with such hideous aim.

“Okay, let’s see how you like this, you-” Michael began; but his attention was returned to the radar display where Michael spied another signal heading towards this aerial fray. “Not another group. . . This might take awhile.”

\* \* \*

The pair continued deeper into the forest, alert for any motion, when they rode into a clearing. Milo caught sight of a small movement, but casually dismissed it as inconsequential. Ducasse started to yell something to him when the earth erupted around them.

Milo grabbed the handlebars of his Cyclone as the explosions lifted him off his seat. He skidded and turned toward the source of the attack, when muzzles of twin

plasma cannons, gleaming sharp and lethal, slid smoothly into view, followed by their owner, an Armored Scout. His two companions followed suit, their huge guns locked onto Ducasse and Swift.

*Only three Scouts?* Milo smiled. *This'll be easy. So much for Michael's fears.* His hand moved over the conversion switch when Jeanne's startled "Damn!" came in over the comlink. Milo craned his head to see the malignant violet hue associated with the three Shock Troopers closing in from behind.

"They've cut off our escape route!" Jeanne yelled. Her voice was on the verge of panic.

"I wasn't planning on escaping. Let's get this party started, Jeanne," Milo urged.

Both of them hit the transformation switch and the cycles rose up to swallow them. The conversion was complete in a matter of seconds, just as the Shock Troopers moved in closer. The two jumped skyward as a plasma barrage shredded the ground beneath them. They'd again been spared, but they knew their luck wouldn't hold out much longer.

"I'll deal with the Shocks, Jeanne. You take out the Scouts," Milo decided.

"Right, and try to stay out of my way!" Jeanne whirled back to the Scouts, took aim at the rightmost one. The particle beam impaled the Invid mecha through its eye, slicing cleanly through the sensor cluster to destroy the pilot inside. The pilot's green blood welled up from the wound, and, with a piercing scream of grinding metallic joints, the mecha collapsed. Jeanne then laid down a pattern of fire above the other troopers, who leapt skyward. One careless mecha exploded in mid-air, its torso shredded by the blast. The other took the hit on its claw, locking it closed. Milo, meanwhile, had armed his own rockets and fired a salvo at the Invid. A Trooper was consumed in a flash of primal fire as the rocket struck home, but its companion leapt away, easily dodging the weapon intended for it.

The three remaining Invid mecha tried to regroup, and responded to the resistance. The lone Scout took a swipe with its functional claw, but Jeanne darted out of its reach, dancing on jets of flame just out of range. The Shock Troopers were far luckier, however, firing their plasma cannons at Swift. Milo hurdled over the red-hot spheres as they vaporized the ground beneath him. The smoke blinded him for moments, but part of the cloud cleared momentarily in time for him to see a pair of plasma balls come hurtling toward him. Milo threw himself into a frenzied roll to evade them.

He partially succeeded; the first of the two spheres sailed cleanly under him, though close enough for him to feel the heat on his lightly armored thighs. The second globe struck home, engulfing Milo's left arm. He had a brief lucid moment to realize his

condition before shock would overwhelm him.

“EYAAAGGGH!” he howled. He left forearm plate and GR-97 rocket launcher disintegrated; fortunately, they took most of the damage, but enough of the raw power burned through them to score crippling burns on Milo’s left limb and chest. His skin blistered and shriveled, leaving the muscle and nerve endings open to the air before they, too, were scorched beyond feeling. Mercifully, the nerves suffered enough damage to cease transmission of the pain he had felt only moments before. Milo caught the smell of roasted flesh, and turned his head to see the damage. He was spared the gruesome sight, though, as shock set in, and he lapsed into unconsciousness.

Jeanne turned in time to see Milo, his left arm smoldering and his left chest plate seared by the incredible heat, hit the ground. He didn’t move.

“Milo!?” Jeanne called. There was no response. “Milo?!?” She screamed it out this time. Still no answer. She increased her ocular magnification, and saw that Milo had begun to bleed profusely from the multiple wounds.

“You bastards!” she erupted. She loosed a volley at the Shock that had blasted Milo, who was now closing in to finish Swift off. Twin fireballs engulfed it, and the combined explosions shredded the alien mecha completely. A claw snapped less than a meter from her head, and she whipped around to see that she’d carelessly forgotten about the remaining injured Scout, which was now trying to smash her. She fired her EP-40 rifle repeatedly into the mecha; the shots left angry black scars as she worked her way up to the sensor orb. She drilled the pod, and watched the mecha tumble suddenly to the ground.

She turned to face the last adversary, a Shock Trooper. It fired first at the still motionless human on the floor of the forest. Both hurried shots went wild, and Milo remained untouched. Jeanne grimly pointed her weapon at the Invid. With one shot the mecha was annihilated completely, with pieces of armor flying everywhere. Though Ducasse had staved off the Invid, she now had another crisis to face.

Jeanne leapt to Milo’s side. His wounds had finally stopped bleeding, but the substantial pool of red being soaked up by the dark earth told her that he’d lost critical amounts of blood. She shed her Cyclone and took a closer look at Milo’s injuries and frowned at what she saw.

\* \* \*

Michael had gone on evasive maneuvers and somehow managed to escape the Invid cannon fire unscathed. But the blasts were striking much closer to home and

eventually he knew he'd take damage. Austin fired the gun pod continuously, but with the frantic desperation of a cornered mouse. He only managed to nick a Shock Trooper on its enormous claw.

Suddenly, from out of the clouds, a red Alpha, presently in Guardian mode, swooped in and began blasting away at the Invid ranks. The casualties were a Shock Trooper, which exploded immediately, and two cherry-colored Scouts that tumbled away from the formation. The Guardian slammed into the back of the Shock trooper that Austin had already hit once. It splintered apart like a rotted section of wood from the impact of the thunderous collision.

Austin heard a voice, definitely female and distinctly British, make itself heard above the static-filled radio channel, "Get back to back. We'll let 'em have it with our Hammerheads!"

Austin complied; his Battloid hovered ever nearer to the red Alpha. The pilot of the red mecha converted her Guardian to its vaguely humanoid form and took up a position behind Austin

*They're readying for another charge. We'll have to wait until they get closer,* he cautioned himself.

"Now!" Austin screamed.

The hundred and twenty combined missiles obliterated the remaining thirty-odd Invid mecha in an instant of red billowing light, leaving Austin and his unknown benefactor in the red Alpha at the center of a fiery sphere. Both marveled at the awesome spectacle that engulfed them. Michael said nothing to the stranger who'd probably saved his life with her timely arrival. He, instead, checked out damage reports from the combat computer onboard. *Incredible! This baby held together.*

The stranger broke the silence, "Looks like I showed up just in time. The name's Mason."

"Thanks for the assist, Mason. Commander Michael Austin, Eighth Naval Air Group, Mars Fleet, REF. Well, I'd love to stay and chat, but I'd better get back to the others. Since I was attacked, it's a sure bet that they were ambushed too," Austin explained.

"Just lead the way, Austin!"

Michael didn't like the way she pronounced his name. It was almost as though she was mocking him. He converted his Alpha to its fighter mode and streaked to a rendezvous with the others, the red Alpha keeping pace.

\* \* \*

Ducasse decided against moving Swift. His arm was so badly injured, she knew she'd only worsen matters if she attempted to get back to the transport. But at the same time, she knew she had to do something; she couldn't just stand by helplessly and watch the life seep out of his scorched and useless limb. She felt so small and impotent, there was nothing she could do to ease his pain. She'd also radioed to Austin, so now all she could do was wait patiently.

"He's going to die, all I can do is apply pressure."

Milo faded in and out of consciousness, but he was swept away on waves of delirium. Jeanne admired Milo's stamina, but now, even she entertained hopes that Swift would go down quietly. She couldn't stomach the sight of his pain for much longer.

\* \* \*

Milo's world was memories away from the clearing where his battered body now rested precariously clinging to life. He felt a strong refreshing summer breeze caress him; and bring to him the promise a brand new day. His heart was full of love, and of the dreams he'd envisioned, dreams that were centered around the young lady who stood next him. Milo gently brushed back her blond hair and gazed into those hazel eyes which he found divinely compelling. His voice was laced with a tenderness that Jeanne found frighteningly strange.

"Come on, Christine, I'll only be gone a couple of months on maneuvers. When I finish my tour in Europe, I'll get reassigned here. And after you graduate, we'll get married - a huge wedding with all the trimmings," Milo said excitedly.

He clasped the girl in his arms held her close, never wanting to let her go. They kissed and she lay her head on his chest.

"I'll miss you," she sighed.

\* \* \*

The muffled roar of the Alpha's met Ducasse's ears, but she stayed by her fallen comrade's side. Michael was the first out, he hurried to Swift's side and quickly checked Milo's pulse. He tried his best to hide his concern, but Jeanne saw through him. A blonde woman arrived on the scene soon after Michael with an old Southern Cross issue field medical kit. She shoed the Commander and Lieutenant away and began to attend to the wounded soldier before her.

“Pulse fading. . . He’s going into arrest. . .” She scrambled to remove the Cyclone and body armor. “Dammit, he’s lost too much blood. . . No! I’ve lost his pulse. Austin, get back to my Alpha, I’ve got a portable EKG and paddles. Move it!” She screamed. Laurie ripped off the rest of Milo’s shirt and began CPR. Milo remained motionless.

“Breathe, you bastard! You’re not checking out on me just yet!” Laurie challenged ferociously. Michael returned with the apparatus, the female medic had requested. “Austin, I’ll need your help. Monitor the EKG. Lady, you can tell me when the paddles are ready to discharge.”

Austin and Ducasse worked feverishly. Jeanne gave the newcomer the signal to send a surge of electricity through the paddles onto Swift’s chest. Milo’s torso shot up momentarily.

“Nothing,” Austin gurgled. *We’ve lost him.*

“Clear,” Jeanne mumbled.

“Breathe!” Laurie slapped Swift’s face with her open hand, before sending another stream of electricity through his blood covered chest. Milo’s body shuddered again. Laurie repositioned the paddles for the next attempt. Michael glanced at the readout and smiled.

“We’ve got him,” he exclaimed. Milo was breathing under his own power.

“Pulse, weak, but getting stronger,” Laurie said coldly. Jeanne wondered if the moment had any affect on the medic at all. But if it did, Jeanne couldn’t tell. Laurie’s supple shoulders slumped, and all the tension poured out of her slender frame. “Your friend here is either very lucky, or very determined. He was gone for two minutes. But he’s back, now.”

“I’ve never seen. . .” Jeanne began, but the proper words escaped her.

“Routine procedure; but it doesn’t always work. One of the first things a nurse learns in basic training,” Laurie finally showed a smile. “Look, he’s not out of the woods, yet. I’ve got to get him patched up. It’s too risky to move him in this condition.”

“Right,” Michael replied. He activated the link in his helmet to his plane’s radio, which boosted his signal. “Pike, we need the hovertransport here stat for medevac. Milo’s down. I’m activating the Alpha’s beacon; ride it here.”

“I copy,” he heard Roger say.

“How bad is he?” Austin asked, turning back to Laurie.

“Oh Christ!” she moaned upon a closer glance at Milo’s wounds. “First, this bleeding.” Laurie whipped out a red canister and sprayed its contents liberally over Milo’s burnt arm and shoulder. It fizzled noisily when it came in contact with Swift’s darkened skin. In actuality, she went on to explain, the drug radically accelerated the

blood clotting processes of the body. She then applied a local anesthetic and antiseptic to the wounds. “You sure this guy can handle that Cyclone? He really got clobbered this time.”

“He’s good enough; how is he?” Michael inquired.

“This will hold for a while.” She gently applied grafted strips of bio-flesh onto his limb before wrapping the whole thing up in bandages. “I’ve put synth-flesh on his arm; we’ll know in a couple of days if it takes. One thing about the Masters: they advanced medicine about twenty years with their knowledge of cloning. It’s because of their work that we were able to discover what synth-flesh could do; and it gives your friend here a chance to regain at least the use of his limb within three weeks. I can’t do anything for his nerve damage, but I’m hoping that most of the damage was to the sensory and not motor nerves. I’d like to get some blood back into his system, I’ll need a donor.”

“No need to look any further.” Jeanne announced, volunteering for the transfusion, “I’m Swift’s type: B negative.” Jeanne rolled up her arm. “I’ve got plenty to spare.”

“Okay,” Laurie unwrapped some tubing from her medical kit. “This might feel funny at first. If you start to feel faint, let me know. You probably shouldn’t donate more than a pint or two at your size.” The blonde medic inserted the tubing into Jeanne’s arm and secured it. Laurie checked Milo’s vital signs again: pulse strong, and breathing regular. “Take it easy,” Laurie said, cautioning Jeanne. “I’m filling your friend here with antibiotics. We wouldn’t want to deal with secondary infections while he’s this weak.”

“Can you spare a moment,” Michael asked Laurie.

“A moment; the transfusion will take some time.”

Austin pulled the newest recruit away from Swift and Ducasse. He led her to her crimson and white Alpha, and helped her put away the medical kit, and EKG machine within the mecha’s storage area. She slid the panel shut.

“You’re a lady with many talents, Miss Mason.”

“Laurie,” she said, smiling. Something about her reminded Michael of someone else, her face, her demeanor, even the fact that she was a nurse; but he pushed the thought from his mind.

“You’ve saved Swift’s life, you came to my aid, and you did both with equal skill and determination. I’d consider it an honor if you’d join up with us,” Michael offered.

“Commander, it would serve both our purposes if I did; but I don’t want to jump into anything. How good are your people?” she asked bluntly.

“All have had extensive military experience, and can handle mecha. They all believe in this mission, and that’s all I can ask from them.”

“Does that include Swift? He got his clock cleaned today.”

“I stand by the people I’ve chosen, Mason. And they stand by me. We all share a common purpose; that’s what drew us together. All of us are very good at what we do, and we’re all willing to make sacrifices. I thought you might feel the same way, but I maybe I was wrong!” Austin started to walk away.

“Wait, Commander. . . I didn’t mean anything. It’s just that I was making sure that this outfit is serious about challenging the Invid; and I can plainly see that it is. I didn’t mean to belittle the others. It’s just that I’ve joined up with groups before, and have been very much disappointed.”

Michael turned back to face her. “Apology accepted. Are you in?”

“Yeah, I’m in.”

\* \* \*

“Roger, may I introduce Laurie Mason, our newest recruit,” Michael’s voice bubbled over. “Her Alpha fighter is in serious need of your attention. Take a look at it, as soon as possible.”

Roger nodded at the Commander, and then presented the newcomer with an ingratiating smile. His eyes studied Mason: she was very attractive, a classic blonde-haired beauty with hazel eyes. She stood about five feet five inches tall, and carried herself with a certain stateliness that surprised the Captain. She extended her hand out as an offer of friendship, and felt Pike tug at it as if it were some kind of lever. *He’s suspicious of me. . .*

“Good to have you aboard, Mason. I look forward to working with you,” Roger said with the trace of a rich drawl that Mason had heard once before. It was characteristic of inhabitants of the southern regions of the pre-UEG nation called the United States. Mason’s analytical mind found her surmising that Pike was originally from Texas or Louisiana. She filed this information away for possible later use, and concentrated on responding to Pike.

“The Commander told me that you’re a bio-maintenance engineer, Captain. You’ll probably spend days getting my Alpha into fighting condition, I’m afraid that I’ve neglected it for too long,” she admitted with a trace of guilt.

“Commander, how are the others?” Roger asked.

“Jeanne’s fine; but Milo took a direct hit. He sustained serious injuries from burns and shrapnel,” Michael recounted.

“How serious?”

“We had to re-start his heart. We’re going to set up a tent for Swift, and Jeanne’s promised to take first watch over him. I’ve looked at his Cyclone, Pike. It needs a new rocket launcher, and the forearm and chest armor were shredded. He’s very lucky to be alive.”

“Well, I guess I can start on that first, Michael. That’ll give you time to build another raft for Mason’s Alpha. I suggest you start on it immediately, since there’s not much daylight left,” Pike warned.

“Raft?” Mason was puzzled.

“Yeah, a raft. It’ll allow us to travel without giving our position away to the Invid. And we save proticulture, since we don’t have to use the planes as much,” Austin explained.

“Very ingenious,” Mason commented. “You must have thought of this, Commander.”

“As much as I’d like to take the credit, I can’t. It was Swift’s idea. So you see, he’s more than just a pretty face, Mason.”

“Right.”

“Let’s get started,” Austin ordered.

\* \* \*

Jeanne hovered over Milo’s sedate form. His body was practically swallowed up by the thermally insulated sleeping bag. The biting evening cold couldn’t touch Swift as he continued his drug-sustained slumber in the synthetic cocoon. Jeanne was contemplating bundling up for the night as well; with the velvet shroud of night closing fast there was no other outlet for her boredom.

She informed Laurie of her intentions, and the newcomer promised to periodically check on her compatriot. Winding her way to her own tent, she spread out the bedroll, slipped in it, and zipped herself up snugly.

*You were clinically dead, Milo. . . I watched the life pour out of you, and watched you gasp your last gasp. Then I saw Laurie bring you back. I wonder how it felt? What kind of sensations does a person experience while dying?* She turned her mind’s eye away from Swift and closed her eyes, forcing her thoughts in another direction.

\* \* \*

Midnight found Michael and Laurie standing around the components for the

second raft which was to be the semi-permanent home of her red Alpha fighter. Both passengers could see that shadowy mass of the hovertransport's open bay in the glow of a portable heater that Pike had placed in it. Every now and then, they'd see his silhouette emerge from underneath the left wing of Mason's mecha and trek back into the rear hold of Pike's vehicle.

"Mason, you're a formidable addition to my group. With another Alpha, we have enough firepower to take out a small hive, if the circumstances are in our favor," Michael said.

"Commander, I'll make a deal with you. Since I'm signing on here permanently, why don't you call me Laurie," she offered.

"Only if you call me by my given name, Michael."

"Michael Austin. Sounds like the name of a swashbuckling hero type in a bad sci-fi novel. But, if you insist-" Laurie continued.

"Must you always provide a running commentary on everything," Michael grumbled.

"Don't get defensive, Michael; I just call 'em like I see 'em," she admitted. Laurie efficiently put her hair back in a long ponytail. She retrieved a small leather satchel from her mecha, and started away. "Where do I bunk up, Michael?"

"You can share Jeanne's tent." Michael decided. "I suggest that you get plenty of rest, Laurie; tomorrow's a big day. We have to clear out at the break of dawn; I doubt the Invid will let the trail go cold for much longer."

\* \* \*

Milo awoke screaming. His voice howled in the early dawn, as his body stiffened in panic. Sweat laced his pain riddled face, and he thrashed about in blind fear at an unseen enemy. His eyes narrowed on a shadow moving over him. Swift groggily lunged at it and began choking the attacker, then all went black.

An acrid smell singed his nostrils and his eyes creaked open.

"Milo!" Jeanne gasped. She had awakened early, and relieved Laurie of her watch over him.

"Ducasse?" Milo replied in an even weaker voice. He tried to get up, but the drugs and exhaustion were too much. "The Invid?"

"Gone. . . but they did quite a number on you, Milo. Try not to strain yourself."

Jeanne forced some water down Swift's lips. "You must have had another nightmare, Milo."

"Oww. . ." Milo moaned as he tried inhaling. "My whole side hurts like hell; damn bandages itch like the devil!"

"How's your arm?"

"My arm? I don't feel any pain. Wait a second! I don't feel anything at all. . . Jeanne! What happened out there?" Milo's voice was laced with fear.

"Swift, you sustained serious nerve and muscle damage to your left arm. You lost blood and I donated two pints and you. . ." Jeanne couldn't finish her tale.

"What happened, Lieutenant?" Milo asked.

"You died, Milo."

"Come again?"

"Your heart stopped beating, Swift. We had to restart it!" Jeanne spat out angrily.

Milo was silent, he instinctively put his good hand over his bandaged chest, rubbed it and smiled. Jeanne gave him some more water and the burning sensation in his throat was alleviated somewhat.

"Milo," Jeanne broke out in a half-sob, "It's so good to have you back and in one piece!" She robustly hugged him only to pull away when he groaned in pain. "More or less."