

ROBOTECH

Objective: Reflex Point

Book One: Roll Call

by

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Fifth Edition

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Though much is taken, much abides; and though
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are-
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

-Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Ulysses

To Jim Luceno, for his friendship, support, and encouragement.

Episode One:

Disaster

“We solemnly swear to uphold the principles of freedom and liberty and to protect with our lives the Earth and its people, and all mankind, from all aggression and oppression, from within and without.”

-Robotech Expeditionary Force Oath.

*No, not all these, thrice gorgeous ceremony,
Not all these, laid in bed majestic,
Can sleep so soundly as the wretched slave,
Who with body filled and vacant mind
Gets him to rest. . .*

-Henry V, IV, i.

12 September 2042

“Commander Austin,” cried the alternate defense controller of the battlecruiser *Valiant* with all the dulcet tonality of a red-alert siren. “Am I blind, or does the flight plan you filed really say that Lieutenant Ducasse is piloting your ship?”

Michael awoke from his nap. Casually, his eyes wandered over the vidcom screen to the plane’s pilot, who was handling herself admirably, considering her relative inexperience.

“You’re not blind. She’s certified with a Class A trainee’s rating, which authorizes her to fly an Alpha in all non-combat situations. I certified her myself; it’s all on record. And she’s also off-duty for the next 15 hours, and her departure has been cleared with Command Duty Officer Luo,” Michael replied, somewhat annoyed at the sudden intrusion. The dream he’d been enjoying was just getting good.

“Then may I ask why you’re flying a trainer? If you really just require transit to the *De Ruyter*, then why not take a shuttlecraft?” she demanded, even more impatient than usual. “This is rather unorthodox! I’m not really sure it’s permissible under flight regulations.”

“Yeah, and I’m not really the ship’s CAG officer; I’m really Tarzan, lord of the jungle,” he intoned sarcastically. “I decide what is and is not against regulations when it comes to the combat aircraft stationed aboard this vessel, and until someone else occupies

my post, I'll thank you to remember that, Lieutenant. Austin out!"

Michael slouched back and reflected for a moment. At twenty-seven he'd already reached the rank of full Commander in the REF Navy, an achievement almost unparalleled amongst his colleagues. With the promotion that had given him that rank eighteen months ago had also come his current billeting. Michael was the Commander Air Group of the two-hundred and sixteen Navy fighters assigned to *Valiant*, as well as commanding a number of recon vessels and Horizont troop drop-shuttles, effectively putting him on equal footing with the ship's captain, Commodore Alan Buxley. When he was being considered for this job, it didn't hurt that he'd almost single-handedly carried the day during the Battle of Pontis 4 and saved the badly-damaged cruiser from the Invid attack force that had caught *Valiant* unawares; for that action he'd received the Titanium Medal of Valor, the highest award given by the Robotech Expeditionary Force to its soldiers. He was rightfully proud of that accomplishment, especially under the personal circumstances under which it was achieved.

Of course, though his position came with a fair amount of power and prestige, it was not without its price. Firstly, he found himself in ever more frequent conflict with the Air Force fighter pilots and the Army Destroid drivers and their superiors over everything from hangar space to who did and did not go on Combat Air Patrols. He'd nurtured good relations with the Planetary Forces in the past, but things were getting strained, especially with the mission ahead. Everyone wanted to be the first to see some action on the upcoming mission, and it was Michael's job to see that their enthusiasm didn't reduce their effectiveness in battle.

Secondly, being the Commander Air Group pretty much ended his career as a fighter pilot, which was his only true joy in life. He was just too important to join the other pilots in combat.

Commander Austin was tall, just a shade over six feet, a trait he'd inherited from his father. In keeping with the fashion of fighter jocks dating more than a decade before, he wore his hair long in back, with long bangs over his ears, and the whole mop was dyed a dark blue. The effect was to make him appear taller at first glance, and the choice of colored dye alluded to that used by the ace pilot of the previous generation, Michael's godfather of sorts, Maximillian Sterling.

"How am I doing, Michael?" asked the flame-red haired girl in the student seat.

"Any worse, and the Invid will promote you," Michael replied teasingly. In reality, she was almost as good as he had been with the same number of logged flight hours.

Jeanne laughed at the taunt, craned her head around, stuck out her tongue, and bestowed upon her superior officer a loud, decidedly un-feminine, and definitely un-

military raspberry.

Michael chuckled and shook his head. “We’re out of *Valiant’s* sensor range, and we’re an hour’s flight until we get into the range of *De Ruyter’s* sensors. Convert to Battloid while I punch up the simulation on the plane’s computer,” Austin said cheerfully. *And good luck, Jeanne.*

The fighter plane stirred and, like some dormant creature prodded into action, creaked with annoyance at the strain. Then came into play the hybrid genius of human know-how and the assimilated Tirolian technology called *zorlev’dri*, known to humankind by the somewhat misleading name ‘Robotech’. Without further delay, a multitude of servos and motors neatly reconfigured the VAF-6T Alpha Trainer into a nine-meter tall battlesuit. It bristled with sixty Hammerhead short range missiles and carried an 80mm EP-13 tri-barreled beam-gun pod in its monstrous metal-ceramic alloyed hand.

Jeanne guided the Battloid to a landing on a small moon of the near-by gas giant while the simulation came on line. Michael programmed a small garrison of Invid troopers in the scenario, and unleashed the images onto Jeanne’s cockpit scanners and visual screens. The Enhanced Video Emulator computer system installed in this trainer was perhaps as good as the simulators on the mainframe hook-ups on the large ships with regard to the sheer accuracy of the simulated combat environment. But this one was superior in that the pilot actually got the feel of the Battloid’s response time to its pilot’s commands.

“Here goes,” she cried as she proceeded to beat everything the simulator pitted against her. The performance was exceptional; Michael had barely done better **his** third time in the actual plane.

There’s hope for her yet! Michael conceded to himself. “Better, Jeanne, but you’re still reacting slowly to multiple threats, and that’ll get you killed in real combat. You’ve got to learn to take care of one, and then move on to the next without hesitation. But other than that, you did great. I look forward to our next session. Take her in, Lieutenant.”

Jeanne glowed noticeably as she eased the plane away from the moon’s surface. Converting back to fighter mode, she veered toward the *De Ruyter* and her escorts.

Lieutenant Jeanette Ducasse was the Chief Defense Controller on the *Valiant* and third in command of the Situation Room, answering only to the Commander of Military Operations, General Anthony Richardson, and the ship’s Commander Air Group, namely Michael. The *Xerxes*-class cruisers, of which *Valiant* was the third to be commissioned, not only served as a heavily-armed ship-of-the-line and as a command carrier for three Naval Air wings, but also as a transport vessel for six Air Force groups and an Army division. Jeanne’s responsibility was to direct the planes in defending *Valiant*, while

coordinating the *Valiant's* Naval fighter planes with the vast complement of Richardson's Planetary Forces stationed onboard the ship and those dozens more assigned to the other ships in *Valiant's* battle-group. It also fell to her to assist in any number of the details of battle, from directing intelligence fly-bys to assigning close air support for ground units to advising *Valiant's* and her escorts' gunners how best to suppress enemy craft and installations. All of these were jobs for which her innate tactical genius was perfectly suited. She was so talented in her performance thus far that on her twentieth birthday there was already talk of soon promoting her to the rank of Lieutenant Commander and sending her to Ship's Operations School.

But this was not the life she wanted. Her dream was to live like those whose lives were lost or saved on her every decision. The responsibility of those men and women's lives was too much for her to handle; she longed to fight in their battles with them, to live and die with these people she had come to respect and revere.

The difficult part of this was the fact that her father was the Commandant of the REF Military Academy, and the last thing he wanted to see was his only child in the thick of battle. So he had denied her application to pilot's school, and she didn't dare go over his head by formally accusing him of a conflict of interest; he was still her father. Since she got her commission, her requests for a transfer were always rejected; she was just too valuable where she was. That's where Michael came in. As the ship's Commander Air Group, he could train and certify new pilots at his discretion, and could pull a lot of strings with command to get her the transfer, if that's what she decided she still wanted. As for Michael, it was a chance to get back some of what he'd lost since he stopped flying combat missions and started piloting a desk. And it was a chance to smooth things out between himself and Jeanne. He had cut her off two years ago, and had only renewed contact well after Jeanne was transferred back from the destroyer *Glaive-guisarme* to assume her post here just over six months ago. It would have been just too difficult to continue dealing with her only on a professional basis, especially with all the past they had between them. Besides, the way things had been going, Michael needed someone to talk to, and Jeanne had at least sensed that much.

The Alpha came on approach to the second of Mars Fleet's three battle-groups, and Michael took the opportunity to marvel at this impressive arsenal. Leading the forces was the *Xerxes*-class heavy cruiser *De Ruyter*, constructed in the Yirrbist system at the Karbarran Shipyards. The massive rectangular-shaped ship was seven hundred meters long, and her flanks boasted six quick-launch bays. Each bay was capable of launching around twenty-five Battloid Alphas in mere seconds, in addition to the main bay that was hidden by an armored door. In front of these raised launchers were four torpedo tubes for

use against other capital ships. The dorsal and ventral surfaces were adorned with a total of fourteen mammoth ship-to-ship guns, each capable of inflicting tremendous damage on any target in its beam's path. A large command citadel was placed off-center on the topside, the bridge and command decks sitting atop the summit of this structure.

Alongside *De Ruyter* gracefully cruised several *Katana*-class destroyers. The vessel was shaped not unlike a hundred and eighty meter-long anaconda, its belly distended by some gargantuan meal, on whose underside was attached a three-barreled heavy cannon in front of a large hangar bay. The score of remaining craft were the Horizont dropships, essentially huge transatmospheric airplanes with a wingspan of some seventy meters, carrying two troop bunkers, each capable of carrying an infantry company or a two armor platoons, like giant ordinance pods, in addition to a squad of Marines in the aircraft's neck. *Valiant*, and the third ship in the group, *Grant*, both boasted a similar escort, and though the three battle-groups together made the smallest independent fleet in the REF, they were more than capable of handling themselves in nearly any situation.

The trainer assumed the half-robot, half-fighter plane Guardian mode and landed in the cruiser's lower bay on a VTOL pad. The canopy opened, and Michael escorted his *protégé* from the plane to the Supply Officer's desk, where Chief Petty Officer Flannagan had already begun to prepare the requisition papers needed to fill the reaction-mass tanks on Jeanne's plane for the trip home.

"You're doing much better. I'll prepare the usual report for you to read by, say, 1200 hours tomorrow. Hey, here's a thought! Since we'll both still be off-duty when I get done here, let's go do something. Dinner at 'Windows' around 2100 or so for that birthday dinner I promised you?"

"Sounds good. I'll meet you back at *Valiant*?"

"I'll pick you up at your quarters. See you then."

* * *

"Commander Michael Austin, reporting as ordered, sir!" Michael said with a smile as he marched into the General's office. His eyes met upon a female figure in the uniform of a REF Air Force Lieutenant General, seated behind a desk with her back to him. Michael had caught her gazing out a porthole on the far wall.

"And late, as usual. Playing flight instructor with Ducasse's daughter again, I assume."

Michael approached her desk, and replied, "Better late than never, sir. And as always, you assume correctly."

Mary turned to face him and laughed. General Vandenberg was an attractive, slim woman in her late forties, with flowing blonde hair and deep brown eyes. “Come here, you insubordinate bastard,” she said warmly, catching Michael in a strong embrace. He kissed her on the cheek, and she released him from the hug, indicating for him to sit with her on a couch in the corner of the office.

“Jesus, Michael, every time I see you, you look more and more like your father. If you’d just lose the hair, you’d be the spitting image.”

“And you’re looking as fantastic as ever, Mary. So, what did you want to talk to me about?”

“What, no small talk? Michael, we haven’t seen much of each other since Chrysid-2, and that’s not from my want of trying. I want to know how you’ve been, what you’ve been up to. For starters, how are things with Vikki? Are you still engaged?”

“No, *mother*,” Michael groaned sarcastically. “Not anymore.”

“What happened? You two looked so committed.”

“It’s, um. . .” Michael hesitated, and cast his eyes to the porthole into the emptiness of interplanetary space. “. . . a long story. I’ll explain what happened as soon as I figure it out for myself. Suffice it to say she walked out on me. What about you?”

“Same as ever. It’s hard to pick up guys at the usual hang-outs when you’re a three-star General. Not that anyone’s managed to capture my interest anyway,” Mary replied, a smirk across her lips. “So, how are you enjoying your new job?”

“It’s an important responsibility,” Michael responded emotionlessly. “I’m honored to have been picked for the position, and I hope to discharge my duties to the extent of my ability.”

“You hate it,” Mary asserted.

“With a passion,” Michael groaned. “I haven’t flown my own ship in combat once since I got promoted. What I wouldn’t give for the days of the SDF-1 or the old wet Navy. . .”

“Funny, but I thought you’d feel like that. What would you say if I told you that you could get to fly your own ship again? Only this one would have a crew of more than just one. . .”

“Go on.”

“Commodore Hasan is due for a promotion in eighteen months, and he plans to retire on his Admiral’s pension to his wife’s estate on Tirol. His XO, Commander Dylan, has already been promised the *Yamato*, as soon as she’s made space-worthy and commissioned, so you’re next for the job. I can see to it that *De Ruyter* is your ship.”

“Come on! There’s got to be twenty destroyer captains bucking for the job!”

“You’d be surprised. Over half of those to whom we’ve offered the command of a cruiser have refused because they were too attached to their destroyers and their crews; and frankly, having served on the *Claymore* and having seen the kind of close-knit team one gets on a destroyer, I can understand why. Besides, you have friends upstairs. And I’m one of them. The Commander Planetary Detachment gets a lot of say as to who gets picked when his or her ship gets a new captain; the fact that the I’m Air Force and the captain Navy isn’t particularly important. Both Sterlings have recommended you, and even Fleet Admiral Hayes-Hunter is pulling for you.”

“I don’t want the job if the reason I’ve been offered it is because you people have played favorites and politics.”

“You know that’s not it. You’re being considered because you lead people well and command their loyalty and respect. You have a quick mind, and never underestimate the enemy. You’re being chosen for your ability - politics and favorites just got your foot in the door. Mind you, you’re still very young, so don’t expect to go around leading fleets or anything. But if you want it, the command will be yours.”

“My own command,” Michael mused. “I admit, it’s attractive. It’s not quite like being a fighter pilot-”

“Face it, Michael,” Mary admonished. “You’ll never do that again, not like before. Hell, I’m surprised Richardson is letting you lead the recon mission and the preliminary assault on Earth. What did you do to get that? Threaten to resign?”

“That, and take half the Mars Fleet’s squadron leaders with me. But you’re right about my flying. After this mission, I might as well forget it.” Michael stroked his chin, and turned to thought for a few moments. “I get to pick my own first officer?”

“Yes. And after her promotion comes through in a few weeks, Jeanne can then spend eighteen months as a Lieutenant Commander on *Valiant*, and then you can get her promoted again, if she’s who you’re thinking of.”

Michael nodded. “I’ll think about it.”

Mary took Michael’s hands in hers and squeezed gently. “It’ll also be good to work with you again. I’ve really missed having you around as much as when you were in Phoenix squadron on the *Claymore*.”

“Mary, you know I . . .” Michael began.

“For once in your life, Michael, keep quiet. I’ve worried about you. Ever since Dahlori-4, you haven’t quite been the same.”

“I really had to grow up after that.”

“I know. I was fifteen years old when the Zentraedi bombarded Earth, and I still have nightmares about it. If it weren’t for your father, God bless his soul, I wouldn’t have

made it. And you haven't had that kind of support around here, except for Vikki."

"I get by. Though it's not easy, sometimes."

"I know, Michael. And I've felt guilty for not having been able to be around more than I was. I mean, I owe you that much - I owe your father that much. And a lot of the time I end up wishing things had ended up differently between myself and Thomas, because I would have been proud of a son like you. I know he would have been."

* * *

Michael sauntered up to the gray plastisteel sliding door to Jeanne's quarters, wearing some of his most comfortable jeans and a short-sleeved pullover, his hair wet from the shower he'd taken only a few minutes before. He'd stayed on *De Ruyter* longer than he'd planned, and was hoping Jeanne wouldn't be overly upset by his delay.

Jeanne's door opened, and to his surprise, she was wearing a stunning strapless evening dress and high heels, and even the normally indifferent Austin took notice. "Happy two-zero," Michael said, leaning over to kiss her on the cheek.

"Nice visit?" she asked.

"Yeah. It was. I have the feeling the both of us are going to be spending a lot more time on that ship. . ." Michael smiled. "I'll explain later."

"While you're at it, you can explain why you didn't bother to dress up for me," she teased.

Michael led her up to the observation deck atop the citadel, which served as a privately run restaurant for officers only, called 'Windows'. The observation deck afforded its visitors an excellent view of the spectacular starscape, and the ceiling faced the swirling gas giant called Jupiter, its prominent red storm clearly in view as the ship passed in low orbit.

"We're here," he announced.

The pair gawked at the planetary marvel for a moment. Seeing it again caused Michael to reflect upon why his mother had left Earth in the first place, taking him with her. Twenty years ago, it had been the mission of the REF to locate the homeworld of the Robotech Masters and to prevent a second Robotech war by peaceful negotiations. But the race they had encountered on the Masters' homeworld, Tirol, was not the Tirolians; but rather an occupying force left by the Masters' ancient enemies, a race called the Invid. The Masters themselves had already left for Earth, hoping to recover the last reserves of the protoculture hidden aboard Zor's ship, which had crashed there in 1999. Stranded on Tirol, the REF had not counted on the arrival of the Sentinels' ship *Farrago* and the request

of its crew of six alien races - a request originally meant for their Tirolian governors - for aid in liberating their worlds from the oppressive hand of the Invid Regent. In a gesture of goodwill, the REF gave the assistance to these worlds. This began a war that lasted for five years before the Sentinels' worlds were freed, the Invid homeworld taken, and its despot killed, bringing this vast conquered realm, born out of the ashes of the Tirolian Mercantile Empire, to an early end. Yet the fight continued, at first due to a traitor's ambition and lust for power, and then after the human armies discovered that several hundred Invid outposts remained in the Galaxy, still doing the bidding of their dead king. Furthermore, nine years ago, the *Marcus Antonius* returned from her mission to assist Earth's defense, her crew telling the REF of how humanity had fought the Robotech Masters over the protoculture reserves until both civilizations had toppled, and how Earth's shattered governments feared that the Invid would somehow find the protoculture and its progenitor, the plant from the Invid's homeworld known as the Flower of Life. If the flower was found, Earth feared, the Invid would send an occupying force to take Earth, and the weakened Armies of the Southern Cross couldn't hold out long. But there was no longer a fleet with which to fight. So over the next decade, as the Karbarran shipyards produced a vast armada for the humans, the Robotech Expeditionary Force mopped up the Invid outposts amidst the stars, realizing that their world was now likely to be an Invid slave colony, processing protoculture energy cells for the surviving contingents of this formidable foe. With the energy, the Invid could rebuild and become a threat again. And there was the minor issue of reclaiming humanity's birth-world. So Admiral Hunter assembled the First Fleet, named after Mars, and dispatched it to try the Invid outpost's strength. That was why *Valiant*, *Grant*, and *De Ruyter* were here.

Inside the restaurant, Michael and Jeanne were met by one of the younger pilots under Michael's command, Lieutenant (JG) Yatsumoto, who was employed here as a waiter during his off-hours.

The place was filled to capacity on this night, as most of the lower-ranking officers had been paid today, and they were intent on blowing off some steam before the upcoming offensive. Besides, the whole fleet would go on yellow-alert the next morning because of its proximity to Earth, and that would leave no time for leisure. So in this lull before battle, many were in the mood to indulge themselves with the stronger drinks this place had to offer. The bar stools were all taken, and most of the tables were likewise occupied. A round of raucous laughter burst out from a group of Beta fighter pilots to the left of the trio.

Let them have their fun, Michael thought. *They'll need it on recon tomorrow.*

"How's your evening been, boss?" Yatsumoto said to Michael, procuring their menus. "And a good evening to you, Miss Ducasse."

I remember being on his sort of pay, Michael reminisced. *No wonder he's doing a little extra.* "I'm doing fine, Shoji. Table for two."

"Done, Sir."

Yatsumoto led the pair to a table in the corner of this thirteen hundred square meter deck, one that looked right out to one of Jupiter's multitude of moons, the name of which Michael couldn't remember. A sulfurous plume was rising from a volcano on the pocked orange surface, and the ship was just close enough for the spectacular sight to be visible.

"Someone will be with you shortly," Yatsumoto informed them before leaving.

Jeanne sat down while Michael stood by the window looking out.

"What's on your mind, Michael?" Jeanne asked. "You're too quiet. Usually you're as loud and obnoxious as you can be."

"I've never been on Earth," Michael said. "My mother moved to the Robotech Factory just before I was born, and then we went with the REF. In my seven years in the military, of all the planets I've visited or fought on, I've never seen my homeworld. Strange, isn't it?"

"We're almost all in the same boat. I wasn't even born until a week after the *Farrago* appeared in Tirol-space."

"I wonder what it's like. . ."

"You'll see soon enough. Now sit down and let's order ourselves something to eat."

Michael complied with Jeanne's request and took a seat.

A few moments of strained silence ensued before a waitress appeared. During her duty hours Stacey worked the engineering deck as an Engineer's Mate, maintaining the massive sublight drives of this seven million ton craft. "Can I get you and the birthday girl - I mean, 'the Lieutenant', something to drink?" the young woman asked him fondly.

"I'll go with an ale, Stacey. Jeanne?"

"Bring me a hot tea - Earl Gray. I'm working the Sit room tomorrow, and regulations are regulations. And thanks, Stacey."

"I'll be back with your drinks in a moment. Excuse me, sirs," the waitress said before slipping away.

"I'm curious, Michael," Jeanne began. "Why is it that you are on a first-name basis with every attractive woman on this ship, regardless of rank or department?"

"Lucky, I guess. Hey, I didn't expect an inquisition tonight."

Jeanne chuckled lightly, and commented, "Never mind. Tonight, you're mine and mine alone."

"I live but to serve," Michael teased, bowing slightly. "However, I think that

'mine' may be a little strong of a word."

"A girl can hope, can't she?" Jeanne shifted in her chair slightly. "It's been really great working with you; almost a dream come true. You can't believe how ecstatic I was when you made CAG officer. I couldn't wait to see you again. All I had left of you were the birthday presents you had sent me over the years."

"Those first couple of months were pretty awkward, huh?" Michael commented. "It was definitely more awkward than working with a total stranger; I do that all the time. It's pretty hard to avoid someone when she's your immediate subordinate."

"Well, I tried my best to be in the way-" Jeanne demurred.

"And you succeeded!" Michael laughed. "I still can't get you out of my hair!"

"You could if you'd cut that rat's nest once in a while!" Jeanne jested. "Besides, I got what I wanted; you let down your guard and let me in again. May I ask why?"

"Other than your persistence?" Michael asked.

"You still came to me, all on your own."

Michael leaned back and stroked his chin. "I really can't say. I kept sending you birthday-presents to let you know I was still thinking of you, despite the . . . disagreements we've had. Things also got a lot more complicated for me recently, and I've just wanted someone to be around. I'm just sorry it took me two whole months to admit it."

Jeanne smiled. "Well, just being my friend again is the best birthday present you've gotten me yet."

* * *

Soon after dinner, an internal turbolift took them to the lowest level on the citadel, and it was a brief walk to the two-room apartment Jeanne had received as part of her position's privileges. The conversation centered around Michael's visit to the *De Ruyter*, and General Vandenberg's offer.

"So you don't believe her. . ." Jeanne asked Michael, with concern in her voice.

"Mary means well, but I don't think for a minute that I'm being considered for my ability. I just don't have the experience. I've never served as a bridge officer before. As the CAG, I have to be fully qualified as a bridge command officer, in case of emergency or the loss of the Captain and First and Second Officers. Hell, I even aced the proficiency exam. I know a fair amount about ship's ops, but not enough to be more qualified than someone who's done time on a bridge."

"So why do you think you're being considered?"

"You've been following the Plenipotentiary Council debates?"

“I avoid it; I hate politics. It’s so depressing.”

“Something’s rotten in the REF, and the stench is just beginning to be noticeable. There’s a struggle for power quietly going on under everyone’s noses. The Council and the General Staff are dividing into two camps, on the issue of what to do over all the worlds we liberated from the Regent’s Invid. General Peckenham’s camp wants to keep Tirol and Karbarra under direct REF administration, and set up all the other worlds as dependent satellite territories of Earth - when we finally liberate it. He and his people believe that the only way to ensure our security is to control all the resources in the Galaxy we can get our hands on, and keep total control of the space-lanes, since we’ll be the last major star-faring race left. Admiral Hayes-Hunter and her people favor a decentralized republican confederation, with each world remaining sovereign, and they want to focus the resources on reconstruction. A lot of folks in Peckenham’s camp think the Hunters lost connection to Earth, and have gone native on Tirol. But then, nobody really trusts Peckenham, because he used to be Edwards’ favorite son, until he refused to mutiny with him, back in ‘30.”

“So what does this have to do with anything?” Jeanne asked.

“Well, if you were trying to take over the REF from the inside, or to keep it from being taken over, what positions would you want to have in the hands of people you can count on?”

“Well, I’d pack the Plenipotentiary Council, the General Staff, and the Admiralty.”

“So you’ve got control of the brains. Where do you get the muscle?” Michael asked.

“The Commanders Planetary Detachment. . . and the captains of all the cruisers, battleships, and battlefortresses,” Jeanne said, a glimmer of recognition appearing on her face.

“Bingo. Less than two hundred positions in total. Keep your people in them, and you control the Expeditionary Force. Lose them to the other side, and you’re effectively shut out. The Hayes-Hunter camp knows they can count on my support. There are my personal ties to Max and Miriya Sterling, and to Mary Vandenberg. And there’s the fact that I’ve always kept my distance from Peckenham. I have no love for his hard-line right-wing politics, or his unabashed xenophobia. Finally, there’s the history between my parents and Peckenham - that’s more than enough to keep us enemies. Mary and the rest know if push comes to shove, they can count on my support against him.”

“You think it’s coming to that. . . a civil war?”

“Not any time soon. But the seeds have been planted. We only have to wait to see what gets reaped,” Michael said, shaking his head. They had just arrived at Jeanne’s quarters, and she was beginning to type in the code to unlock the door.

“It was a great evening, Michael,” Jeanne said suddenly. The conversation’s content had begun to unnerve her.

“If so, it was because my companion was so charming, and she forced me to rise to the occasion,” Michael replied coyly.

Jeanne lightly punched him in the gut, laughing. “You old smoothie!” She opened the door, and turned to Michael, saying, “Care to come in? I’ve got some Rilacian daelred-berry wine - 2021 vintage.”

“So, ‘regulations are regulations’, hunh?” Michael said slyly.

“We can’t have people see me merrily drinking in public if I’m to be first officer of the *De Ruyter*, can we? What’ll it do to my reputation?”

“Same thing as having people see you invite your future captain to your room for a drink, I suspect. . .” Michael muttered.

Once inside the room, Jeanne watched as Michael cased the place. A lot less sterile than his own quarters, it was filled with paintings, artwork and the like (some of which were originally his; Jeanne was quick to borrow and reluctant to return). One wall had a slide-away panel to reveal a recessed mini-kitchen like the one in his room. There was a fairly plush couch, and two nice chairs sat on either side of a Garudan th’aeg-wood bookcase. This was what caught Michael’s attention; indeed, he examined it so intently that he failed to hear Jeanne excuse herself for the bathroom.

One shelf brought back a lot of memories for him. On it rested a sleek Praxian crossbow, given him three years ago by the Praxian Warrior-Queen Gnea, in gratitude and respect for escorting her damaged shuttle from behind Invid lines. Beside it was the giant ruby he’d gotten for a steal from a Spherisian merchant on Haydon IV in the Briz’dziki system. There also lay the diamond-like insect shell he’d come across a year ago on Chrysid-2 during a raid on the Invid outpost there. Even the gold necklace he’d given Jeanne on her seventeenth birthday was on the shelf. The necklace was displayed on another of his gifts to her: the seventy-five year old leather-bound copy of the Fitzgerald translation of the *Aeneid* his father had loved so much. All of this was arranged like a shrine, all surrounding the photo of Jeanne and himself taken two and a half years ago, the day she got her commission. *This must be her ‘Michael Austin’ shelf. It’s nice to know I’m appreciated.*

Jeanne returned, and upon hearing her footsteps, Michael said softly, without turning to face her, “I remember all this stuff.”

Jeanne said nothing, but simply embraced Michael from behind, and then whispered, “Let’s go into the bedroom, Michael, for a little captain-to-first officer conference. . .”

Michael turned to face her, and just the instant that his mind registered that she was only wearing a loosely-tied bathrobe, she pulled Michael's head down and kissed him hard.

Michael began to feel his reason dulling, his resolve weakening. *Just like two years ago, and she still hasn't learned. I have to stop this, but. . . she's so beautiful.*

Michael returned the embrace and the kiss as well. How he wanted only to tear the robe off her body, carry her into the adjacent bedroom and make love to her like he'd dreamed of doing hundreds of times in the last four years. He kissed her on the neck once more before pushing her back. "No, Jeanne. It didn't work two years ago, and it won't work now."

"Damn it, Michael, when do I get my chance with you?"

"Since when were people taking numbers? Jeanne, I've been through a lot recently. I'm not ready to dive in again."

"Michael, I love you. I've loved you for seven years now, since I was old enough to be able to love, with almost nothing in return from you."

"You've always had my friendship. . ." Michael retorted.

"And it's meant the world to me. But I want more. Well, if it was my age that was holding you back before, then don't let it now. I think you've given me more than an ample chance to grow up. I know you have a lot of things you need to work through. But I want to go through whatever it is with you. Lord knows, I can take it. Considering how long as I've had feelings for you that you haven't reciprocated, I think I can be called a paragon of patience. And I know you have feelings for me too, beyond the goddamned annoying big-brother act you always put on when you catch yourself starting to get sweet on me. I still remember the park outside Tiresia where we had that picnic. I know you had been drinking. But, as they say, *in vino, veritas.*" Jeanne paused and breathed in deeply. "Michael, you're the most important thing in the world to me, and you're the only person I've ever wanted to be with. Don't turn your back on all that there is and can be between us just because you have second thoughts. Don't let conscience make a coward out of you."

"Things have changed a lot for me since the old days. I had to spend a lot of time putting myself back together after Dahlori-4, and a lot of my support has just slipped out from under me recently. Forgive me if I'm not ready to risk leaning on someone else just yet. The answer is 'no'."

"No, never?" Jeanne asked.

"Just 'no' for now. And don't push it. It just doesn't feel right. If it happens between us, it happens. But I guarantee it won't be now. If you try, you'll just push me away again."

Jeanne shook her head in silent frustration.

“Now I really ought to go. . .”

“Michael. . . at least stay tonight and keep me company. You’re the only real friend I have on this ship, and I don’t want to end my birthday alone. It would really mean a lot to me.”

“Do you promise no monkey business?”

“I promise, as much as I’d like otherwise.”

“At least we’re honest. All right, I’ll stay. Come on, I’m tired. That pre-offensive recon tomorrow’s going to sap my strength right out. Let’s get some sleep before then.”

Jeanne smiled and dragged his reluctant form into the bedroom by the arm.

* * *

Michael awoke a bit disoriented to the noise of the unfamiliar alarm clock. He put aside the discomfort of having slept half-dressed, and sat up in bed. Jeanne, whose head had been resting on his bare chest, was already going for the ‘snooze’ button when Michael told her, “I’ll hurry with my shower so I can get out of here. I still need to suit up before I go on call, you know.”

Jeanne nodded, and watched Michael get out of bed and head for the bathroom. He shut the door behind him, and the sound of a torrent of water accompanied the steam that drifted out from the crack underneath the door. Jeanne got up and stretched. She had worn Michael’s pull-over during the night, but changed to her bath robe, so he could put it back on before he left for his flightsuit locker. Singing a Beatles song softly to herself, she started brewing coffee for both of them, and placed four breakfast pastries in the mini-kitchen’s microwave.

Michael soon emerged from the bathroom, still dripping, and sat down on the couch. Jeanne brought him his coffee and rolls, kissing him on the cheek as she did so.

“And a good morning to you, kiddo,” Michael smiled.

“How long do you have before you’ve got to go?” Jeanne asked.

“Not long enough to chat. I have to be suited up and in my plane in fifteen minutes.”

“Well you better get out of here. Don’t want you in trouble on my account.”

“Right. By the way, the coffee is superb. Gotta go.” Michael stood up, set the cup on a table, and turned to leave.

“When do I get to spend some time with you again?” Jeanne asked.

“I don’t know. If they send the Naval Air people planetside with the Air Force

planes during the offensive, then it could be a while. I guess it depends on how the attack goes.”

“Well, I’ll get to talk to you at least when I work my console.”

“I look forward to it,” Michael said, smiling.

Michael pulled his shirt on, and opened the door. When he was halfway out it, Jeanne said, “Thanks for staying the night, Michael.”

Michael turned around. “Thanks for convincing me to stay. Catch ya later.”

The door slid shut, and Jeanne started getting herself ready to go work the Situation room during the patrol.

* * *

Jeanne stood silently on the command deck, surrounded by Richardson’s staff. General Richardson was not yet himself there. “Any sign of Commander Austin yet?” she asked her communications officer nervously.

“No, Lieutenant Ducasse. He’s twenty minutes overdue. In fact, none of his squad has reported since they penetrated this system’s asteroid field. And because of the asteroids, we still can’t get a sensor fix on them.”

Jeanne responded, “Perhaps they have found something and are maintaining radio silence because of this. Continue monitoring, Ensign.”

“Yes sir.”

At this point, a tall weary-looking man stepped on the command deck, escorted by the ship’s captain, Commodore Buxley.

“Update me on the situation, Miss Ducasse,” General Richardson, Mars Fleet’s Commander of Military Operations, ordered.

“Sir, we just heard from *Grant*. She and her battle-group arrived safely in Mars-space and have re-established the hyperspace relays on Phobos. Captain Bhattacharya will be joining us in the attack from around the dark side of Earth’s moon. Austin’s recon has gone silent in the asteroid field. We’re waiting on communication from them, sir, and as per regulations, if we do not hear anything, I’m dispatching a recon plane in thirty-eight more minutes.”

“As you were then. I wonder what’s happened to them.”

A tense silence on the Situation room ensued until the awaited call arrived not three seconds after the squad reappeared on radar. “Austin here,” said the familiar voice. “Sorry I’m late, but we just found what was left of the Robotech Factory Satellite. . . Space Station Liberty, that is. The installation had been attacked by Invid. I went to radio silence

on the off-hand chance that the attackers were still lurking about. When we went inside, we discovered that the backup computer was still marginally operational, and learned several things from the computer's files." Michael paused for a moment, and added, "There were no survivors."

"Join us in the conference room on Citadel deck two for a debriefing the instant you get out of your flightsuit," Richardson told Michael. "Commodore," the General told the ship's captain, "Let's get ready for him."

"Coming home. Jeanne, give us a bay to land in," Michael said.

"Viking One, you are clear to land in bay three. Decelerate to landing velocity and convert to Guardian mode."

"Roger, control. Vikings, let's take 'em in."

* * *

Michael didn't like debriefings, and this one was no better. All too often, he would find his observations dismissed and his recommendations ignored by men who had spent less time in the field than he. Austin had learned a lot with four and a half years and nineteen major offensives under his belt, and he knew that he was not as naive as some of his seniors (especially those not in the Navy) made him out to be. But he never stopped voicing his opinions, feeling that it best served the interests of his men. But Richardson was better than most. Even the personal grudge he held against Austin didn't seem to stop him from listening to what he had to say. Michael cleared his mind and began:

"Records from the satellite indicated that the crew manning it had space-folded the factory into the asteroid belt after the REF left in 2022. They also indicate that the Robotech Masters did indeed wage war with the Southern Cross from early 2029 to late 2030, ending with the collapse of the Robotech Masters' civilization due to protoculture depletion and the near-toppling of the Earth's reconstruction governments. The computer files also indicate that the Flower of Life was spread all over Earth during the final battle of this war, and in May of 2033 the Invid arrived, attacking the Factory Satellite and its escort of Zentraedi reserve vessels with a force estimated to be around sixty thousand scout and shock troop mecha. What this information would indicate is that the Invid are here in numbers far greater than we expected. Until now, liberal estimates of the total Invid strength on Earth have been eighty thousand mecha. I doubt they would have risked such a large percentage of that occupation force on the Satellite, no matter how strategic a target it was, **even** if they thought it still belonged to the Robotech Masters. Remember, they still needed to hold

and control Earth. Based on their previous deployment patterns, I would estimate that the Invid forces on Earth number in excess of five million.”

“But remember that the satellite was capable of constructing both warships and mecha,” Colonel Ivanov, one of the General’s aides, interrupted. “I think it’s likely that they did risk that large a fraction of their troops to destroy it. Besides, Commander, we found only four million troops on their homeworld. Don’t tell us that they keep a larger military presence on Earth than they did on Optera. The Regent obviously overextended his empire considering the numbers of his troops. I think we should proceed assuming the original estimate, perhaps as much as fifty percent higher. But no more.”

“What about the evidence that the Regent didn’t even know the Earth’s location?” Michael objected. “We could be dealing with a different Invid faction here. I don’t need to remind you of Dr. Eldridge’s hypothesis comparing the Invid migration cycles to that of Terran bees and termites - that it is the mature queen that leaves the hive with her entourage, and not the junior one. The Regis we encountered on Optera would be only barely adult. If this is the “true” Regis of Tirolian accounts, then she should be a lot more powerful and experienced than. . .”

“With all due respect to Dr. Eldridge, his theories have not been accepted beyond his own lab. Dr. Lang assures us that the Regis that barely escaped from Optera is **this** Regis. As for the Regent, we never got to interrogate him. How could we make the assumption that he and his queen didn’t know about Earth, when you yourself saw the dead hulks of their mecha in the belt? We observed the Regis fleeing Optera with a force estimated at fifty to a hundred thousand troops plus inorganics. It’s only safe to assume that they immediately set out for Earth. It was a large enough attack force to overwhelm what was left of the Southern Cross, and to set up shop. In all likelihood, the highest authority on the planet will be a living computer, and we’ve learned those things’ tactics.”

“But I don’t believe-” Michael began.

“Intelligence will do a follow-up before the attack, Commander. Do you have anything else to report?” Richardson asked.

“No, Sir. That’s all the investigating I could do before I had to report back,” Michael responded wearily.

“Very good, Commander Austin. You’re dismissed.”

Michael stepped silently out of the briefing room, his sapphire-blue eyes avoiding the stares of his superiors watching him leave. *Idiots. Idiots all. How can they simply ignore the observations of an officer with my experience when so many lives are at stake?* Michael turned languidly for the turbolift to his room, ordering the elevator to take him to his level, his mind turning deeper inward in thought. *I knew the others wouldn’t listen, but*

*the General? Does he really resent me so terribly much, as to let his anger convince him that what went on with me and Vikki mean a damn where my job is concerned? How can he hold me solely responsible for **that** anyway? And what about my men? Like lambs to the slaughter.*

Michael returned to the flight decks for a few hours, going over the planes with the maintenance crews on the finer details of the battle preparations. Many of his pilots were also there, checking out their birds one last time before the battle. He then went to his office, to produce his written report on the mission, a tedious task at best. Michael finished up, and returned to his quarters, only to find Jeanne standing there at the door; apparently she'd been there a while, because she was hanging her head with her eyes closed, and she didn't seem to notice Michael's approach. "How long have been you waiting for me?" he asked emotionlessly.

"Huh. . . what? Oh, you. Around a half an hour. I just finished up from my shift from the Situation Room. I was wondering if you wanted to talk a bit."

"I can't talk for long. You don't look too terribly awake right now, and I could use a bit of rest myself," he snorted, entering the room, and allowing her to follow. "You kept me talking almost to oh-three hundred hours."

"I don't get you all to myself very often," she smiled, taking a seat on the bed in the two-room living quarters. "I try to make the best of it when I get that rare opportunity." Jeanne paused for a moment, and asked softly, "What's wrong, Michael? You're really cold today, and it doesn't sound like fatigue to me."

"The General and his wolves ate me alive earlier." *Should I tell her my anxieties about this mission? No, she'd only worry. Maybe I **am** wrong anyway.*

"Bad debriefing, then?"

"I've had worse, but I can't remember when," Michael groaned.

"Don't mind the General. He's been a bit nasty since his daughter requested a transfer to the Tirol before we made ready to fold to the Sol system." Jeanne knew Michael used to be involved with Victoria Richardson - she just didn't know if she wanted to bring it up.

"I've noticed," Michael interjected. "Still, this is an important mission, and I don't appreciate being ignored."

"Do you want me to stay to chat?" Jeanne asked.

"Sorry, Jeanne, but I've got to get some sleep. I have to fly for real tomorrow, and out there, tired equals dead. You really ought to do the same, you know."

"If you insist. Good night, then, Michael."

"Sleep well, Jeanne."

Jeanne started to turn for the door, and then added, “Come back to me in one piece, flyboy. For my sake.”

Michael smiled. “I’m coming back in one piece. . . for **my** sake!” Jeanne laughed as the door slid shut.

* * *

What seemed to be only a few minutes later, Jeanne awoke to the yellow-alert announcements that rang all over the ship. *The ship must have folded to the rendez-vous point on the dark side of Earth’s moon already.* It had taken her the first fifteen years of her life to learn to sleep through a hyperspace fold and this was one skill she fully appreciated. Wasting no time in bed wishing that the offensive were tomorrow, she leapt up, threw on her duty uniform and made for the command deck. *I’ve got to get the first squadrons out there as a probe force, and since the idiots who designed these ships didn’t grace us with enough AA cannon, the rest of the planes have to go up too.*

The Situation Room was already buzzing with activity when she arrived. Without a word, Jeanne relieved her alternate and took control of the fleet’s offensive prowess. “Lieutenant Reichmann, I want a full status report of the squadrons’ readiness. Lt. Mitchell, contact the rest of the fleet and tell them to execute their pre-designated orders. Make sure *Grant* and her battle-group are in position. Get *De Ruyter* to move in on a course parallel to ours. And tell the *Halberd* to get out of the way of our topside guns, and to join the dropships *Copperhead*, *Hyena*, and *Falcon* to provide fire support for them. Ensign Chaffee, give me a full sensor scan of Earth, highlighting the Invid hive complexes, especially their Reflex Point. Try to estimate their troop capability and command structure as best you can. And someone tell fire control to work out those damn bugs in the main gun. They didn’t upgrade *Valiant* with a Reflex Cannon to go unused because it doesn’t work,” Jeanne barked in one breath.

“Doing all right?” General Richardson asked of Jeanne, tapping her softly on the shoulder.

“Yes, sir. We’re as ready as we’ll ever get.”

“Good. Get the fighters through pre-flight as soon as we can, because if Austin is right, and he’s never been wrong, we’ll need all twelve hundred of our planes in the air fast.”

“Yes, sir!”

* * *

Michael had been trying to get his squadron members assembled into a group in the ready room for a game of cards before the upcoming offensive. “What’s up, Commander,” Lieutenant Trent, one of Michael’s pilots asked coolly. “You look zonked.”

“I’ve had less than my quota of sleep the last couple of nights,” responded Michael. “But I’ll be okay when we go up.”

“I dropped by your room early yesterday morning, Commander, and you weren’t there. If I remember correctly you were with Lieutenant Ducasse the night before,” Lieutenant (JG) Yatsumoto declared victoriously.

“So, boss, does this mean another kill marker on your plane?” another asked.

“The CAG scores another kill!” exclaimed a fourth. “Splash one skirt - a heat-seeker right up the tail-pipe!”

Michael’s face began to turn red with embarrassment, a truly rare occurrence for him, and he stammered, “Trust me, guys, nothing happened.”

Yatsumoto laughed, saying, “We know you too well to believe that, Commander.”

Michael’s face suddenly changed from the red of shame to the red of anger, as he growled, “Believe it, **Ensign** Yatsumoto.”

“Nothing happened, like the Commander said,” Yatsumoto conceded.

“Very good, Lieutenant.”

* * *

General Richardson surveyed the Situation Room crew. They had, for the most part, been the same crew that had worked the last half-dozen engagements against the Invid, all with a fantastic degree of success. And this offensive wasn’t supposed to be any different. *Then, damn it, why does this one bother me so much more.*

The normally comforting hum of the room fell to dead silence for a moment, as the announcement from the bridge, located one level higher than the Sit room on the citadel, came over the intercom: “Entering Earth orbit at thirty thousand kilometers and holding.”

“No activity on the radar here,” Mitchell announced mechanically. “Furthermore, I’m not receiving any response to our hails on the planet, from Point K or anywhere else.

“Not on my console,” Jeanne contradicted. “I’ve got a fix on two-dozen large craft heading our way. They’re not responding to our challenges. Chaffee, get me the results of that sensor scan I ordered. Now!”

“Enemy ships identified, Lieutenant,” Reichmann declared. They’re standard Invid

troop carriers, code-name Mollusk. Each has an estimated three hundred Invid Scouts equipped with the standard extra-atmospheric boosters. Point of origin is the Great Lakes sector of North America.”

Ensign Chaffee cried out, “Sensors identify nearly thirty Invid hives in this hemisphere alone, and - get this - a royal hive at the assault force’s point of departure. It’s **bigger** than the one we fought on Optera itself; this must be their Reflex Point. Invid occupation force now estimated to be over twenty million world-wide.”

“Other ships requesting orders, General,” Mitchell said. “*De Ruyter* tells us she’s ready to go.”

The General silently reviewed the orders Admiral Hunter had given him weeks before, and said, “Attack with first wing, immediately. Tell Commander Gardner to have *Muskrat* take the lead. Have the Horizons drop their Legios escort and have them form the first line of defense. All turrets sight the enemy ships and fire when ready. Pinpoint Barriers up and damage control crews on standby. Ladies and Gentlemen, I fear we have stumbled upon the **original** Invid Regis, and God help us all if so.”

Reichmann, a young blonde who was being groomed for Jeanne’s job suddenly exclaimed, “Several Mollusks have survived our initial salvo. They’ve opened up and are releasing their mecha. Three minutes to contact.”

“This is it, then. Ducasse, tell the fighters to move.”

“Yes, Sir!” Jeanne patched into the pilots’ ready rooms and announced, “All Veritech pilots, we are on combat alert! All planes scramble, all planes scramble! Centurion and Mamluk squadrons will remain to cover the *Valiant*. The rest will fly with Austin’s Vikings. Repeat: Battle stations, all hands to battle stations! We are on red alert!”

Michael was just zipping up his flight suit, and had already begun to don his armor. Not that it would help him much if his plane took a direct hit, but it might save him from shrapnel and sudden decompression. Some consolation. He hurried his squadron members along to the bay and soon was at his plane. His eyes watched as the plane’s technician closed a panel on the bright blue VAF-06C Alpha Fighter. From above, the plane looked somewhat like the old Soviet MiG-29 and was almost the same size, except that the plane had its tails on raised rhombic boxes that made up the arms in Battloid mode. Underneath, the plane was much more angular than conventional airplanes’ aerodynamic designs - a necessity to accommodate the transformation capabilities of the Robotech mecha. The plane’s two mighty engines made up for this deficit, and as the plane’s designers, Dr. Lang and Dr. Burke, so fondly reminded everyone, with a powerful enough engine, a brick could be made to fly. The accommodations to make it operate in space were subtler; auxiliary thrusters under the tails, two VTOL thrusters underneath, and a dozen hidden

directional thrust ports made this plane work in a vacuum, and with the help of these, it left the old pre-unification Harriers far behind in maneuverability.

“You finished with the tune-up, Bob?” Michael asked of the technician.

“Yes, Sir! The baby’s completely loaded and the engines are roaring like tigers.”

“Good job.”

Jeanne’s voice came over the intercom and announced again, “All Veritechs launch.”

“Well, Commander Austin, good luck and good hunting.”

“Thanks, and I’ll see you on Earth. Now clear this bay,” Michael said. The technician took his leave, ordering the other mechanics to leave the fighter bay, while Michael closed the cockpit and announced into the tac-net, “This is Commander Austin of the 8th Naval Air Group, Mars Division. Condition is green and we’re go for launch, tower.”

The massive plastisteel armored bay doors opened, revealing the vast diamond studded velvety fabric of space, to his lower right floated the blue-green emerald his father had called home. Jeanne announced, “Bay three open, Commander. You’re cleared for disembarkment.”

“Bring them home safe,” Richardson urged over the tac-net. “And Godspeed.”

“Roger, control. Okay, boys, our engines are at max. power and the party’s getting started without us, so let’s move out!”

On that command, Michael pushed the engines to full throttle, and the plane lifted free of the artificial gravity of the bay and sped out into space, followed by several dozen others, adjusting their courses to fly alongside the dropships and the capital ships, speeding past the half-mile long *Valiant* in an instant.

“Viking squadron, this isn’t going to be pretty, so keep one eye on the HUD and your finger on the trigger. Pre-arm all warheads on command. . . Now!” Michael barked to his pilots.

“Roger!” they all shouted in unison.

Michael’s squadron formed a loose diamond in front of the fleet, joining up with the planes in the twenty-first under Lieutenant Commander Scott Bernard. Michael pondered after receiving a cold military greeting from his old friend, *Did that prank really pull us so far apart, so that we can’t even speak to each other? A damned shame.*

Michael fixed his mind on the thousand red deaths that raced towards him at increasing velocity: Invid Scouts, twelve foot tall suits of robotic armor that resembled giant quadruped lobsters, armed with two rapid-fire plasma dischargers recessed on the one-eyed monstrosity’s shoulders. The verbal component of the word for this mecha in the

Invid language was *ligaa* - but Michael couldn't care less. This was his element, and he surrendered himself to the fury inside him and mercilessly slew his foe with every radar lock-on, knowing full well that, given the opportunity, the swarming horde of Invid would do the same to him.

The number of Invid troop carriers increased to over three dozen in the *Valiant's* sector of the battle. In the first few minutes of the fray, the Veritech formations, in sixty groups consisting of three squadrons of seven planes each, closed in on the Invid forces, opening missile fire as soon as they were in tracking range. The Invid, unfazed by the initial losses on their side, bore down on the planes to make full use of their own superior close-range combat abilities. In seconds, the Invid had closed within five hundred meters or less from the Human mecha, themselves making a valiant stand in Battloid mode, and opened a full barrage, matching the REF planes' speeds and trajectories. The first few minutes of this tactic wreaked havoc on the Alphas, many of whom were incinerated by plasma globes or were ripped open by the ceramic-metal composite blades on the Invid power armors' claws. Worse yet, before the Alphas could regroup and make their attack effective, their line had been broken, and while fresh mecha from Earth replenished the Invid that were pinning down the fighters, those that had broken through were now laying deadly siege to the capital ships, which, without any appreciable AA cannon, were now desperately outmatched. The Horizons tried to break out of the trap by making planet-fall, only to face a new wave of enemy units during atmospheric entry.

In all the offensives Jeanne had ever lived through, ten minutes of battle would seem like but mere seconds, with the flush of victory compressing the events of battle into glorious infinitesimals. But today, Jeanne felt the cosmos move in slow motion. At her console, she saw every evasive action of friendly or hostile craft, every volley of fire exchanged; heard every death-cry in agonizingly vivid horror on the tac-net. And as heavily armed as these giant leviathans were, they could not stop the onslaught of innumerable Invid as every moment brought another mollusk-ship into the battle, helping the deadly swarm of red metallic-armored wasps increase a thousand every fifteen seconds. Despite the big guns from warships, the Invid wreaked havoc with the REF fleet. "General, we've lost seventeen dropships and four destroyers so far. Our barrier systems have just collapsed. We can't hold out much longer," she screamed.

"Damn." General Richardson thought for a moment, then turned to Mitchell at the communications console. "Tell Vandenberg to get some fire support for the dropships. Those Cyclone-armed troops are cannon fodder anywhere but on the ground, and we need to take the fight to the planet."

"I'm trying to reach General Vandenberg, but the *De Ruyter's* Sit-room isn't

responding,” Mitchell said nervously. “In fact, I can’t raise anyone on the *De Ruyter* at all. She looks dead in space, and initial sensor readings show her about to blow.”

“Scan for escape pods and reroute *De Ruyter*’s fighters to Jeanne’s console. And where the hell is *Grant*? Why hasn’t she joined the battle?” Richardson paused to examine a status console, and ordered, “Get that main gun ready to fire, and aim it at their royal hive!”

“Incoming Kamikaze run! It’s past our barrier, and is on its way for the Citadel!” Reichmann interrupted at the top of her voice.

Jeanne immediately activated the “Clear Citadel” alarm and started to run for the corridor that would lead her to the safety of the lower decks. Mitchell was already ahead of her, and was heading for the corridor, while all the others were hurriedly scrambling after them.

Jeanne knew only one thing: whoever did not escape the command deck before the Invid craft hit - or even worse, God forbid, ripped open the hull with its gigantic claws, climbed in, and self-destructed - would die one of many horrible potential deaths. She desperately tried to run for the door, and in terror, her legs failed her as in a nightmare, causing her to fall on the deck face first. She remembered hearing Mitchell yell, “Give me your hand!”, and Reichmann lamenting to the General, “We’ll never make it out, Sir!” Then a tremendous shudder rocked the deck as something massive slammed into the armored hull at incredible velocity, and the concussion from an explosion knocked her and Mitchell into the corridor. Something sharp hit her in the head and leg, and she winced as her hair and thigh began to feel wet, just as the wind from the decompression picked up. Mitchell was holding onto a guard rail with one hand, and Jeanne with another, and cried, “Dear God, they’re all being blown into space!” Jeanne looked back to see the emergency decompression door seal off the small hallway, and then suddenly her world was painted black.

* * *

The Viking squadron had been routed and decimated in the previous minutes, and Michael had been wondering, *What’s wrong with De Ruyter? She’s not supporting our fighters with her cannon. What’s Vandenberg think she’s doing? And where’s the rest of the fleet?*

Michael swallowed the artificial air of his cockpit’s life-support systems and executed a sudden reverse. *Yatsumoto, Trent, Ollmann, all the men I’d served with for half a decade - all dead.* Michael switched on the tac-net and ordered, “This is Group Commander Austin. All Veritechs that are still out there, get back to the nearest capital ship

and divert any hostiles from attacking them. I'm going back to *Valiant* - she's taking too much heavy fire. What's left of Viking squadron, follow me in!"

The Veritech Alpha fighter adjusted its trajectory, and Austin set his sights on his home ship. *De Ruyter* was beginning to break up now, and, half-way through the process of disintegration, one of the reflex engines in the ship overloaded, setting off a tremendous explosion in the normally silent vacuum. *De Ruyter gone too - I hope Vandenberg made it out all right*, Michael thought. Michael banked the plane off to an angle to intercept the two Iiga scouts coming on an attack run for the destroyer *Glaive-guisarme* and pumped a salvo of SRMs from his Beta fighter booster into the offending targets. *Out of missiles in the Beta*, he thought. *Better stick to cannon, in case I need the Alpha's missiles*. He disengaged the Beta booster, telling its pilot to cover him as well as possible, and went on approach for the *Valiant*. Swinging around the Citadel looking for a bay, he observed the gaping hole in the command deck. He could see as well that *Valiant* was losing her orbit fairly rapidly because of the repeated kamikaze collisions, and as he came in on final approach from behind, he could see that two of the four engines were out, with another glowing only faintly.

One of the bays was still open, and Michael decelerated his plane as it entered the lifeless dock, and instantly set down in Guardian mode. The plane's cockpit opened on his command, and he clumsily plodded in his flightsuit to close the bay doors and put some atmosphere into the hangar.

Michael briefly pondered his next move. Both the situation room and main bridge were total losses, and he wondered if he should assume command in the emergency bridge and try to get the situation under control. As he began to make his way from the hangar, he heard the computer alarm announce, "Reflex engine four will overload in twelve minutes. All hands evacuate!" Without further delay, Michael entered his command code and punched the **ABANDON SHIP** alarm on the first intercom he encountered, and headed for the escape pods, asking any of the fleeing crew that he encountered if they'd seen Lt. Ducasse.

Michael was starting for the citadel when Lt. Mitchell accosted him, yelling, "I tried to get her, but I couldn't manage the weight!" as he showed Michael his shrapnel-mangled arm. "Lt. Ducasse is in the Sit Room entrance corridor."

"Thanks, Joseph. Get to the escape pod," Michael ordered as he made for the tall stairwell that would carry him up the ship's decks to the smashed command tower.

Seconds later, he felt the sudden shudder as another Invid scout loosed strafing fire onto the crippled ship, forcing Michael to grip hard onto the railing, lest he be knocked down a flight of stairs. Michael picked up his pace as the normal lighting failed, and the

ship's batteries activated the red emergency lighting. "Reflex Engine four will detonate in ten minutes, thirty seconds," came over the intercom in the computer's emotionless voice, the moment Michael opened the hatch to the command deck's access corridor.

Jeanne was lying unconscious in a heap on the floor, small puddles of blood pooling around her right leg and forehead. Large pieces of debris were strewn all over the hallway, but the emergency decompression door seemed sturdy and intact. "Typical," Michael mused as he heaved the injured girl onto his shoulder.

Nine and a half minutes to get her to my plane and get out. Not much of a margin, Michael thought as he began to run down the stairs back to the flight deck where he'd landed his plane. Things outside were quieter now - no explosions or concussion from fire - and Michael guessed that the Invid had recognized the *Valiant* as dead in space, and were concentrating on the other targets, like the destroyers and dropships that were making a fighting retreat to the Moonbase Luna.

"My dad's *Aeneid*!" Michael exclaimed suddenly as was about to leave the lower decks of the Citadel. He cursed himself for having forgotten the relic, and gently set Jeanne down in the stairwell and ran back up to level three for Jeanne's room. *Plenty of time,* he assured himself half-heartedly while forcing the door to Jeanne's room open. *No time to look for a bag or anything,* he reasoned as he dashed for the bedroom, yanking a sheet off the bed and heading for Jeanne's bookcase. Michael haphazardly dumped the contents onto the spread-out sheet, along with that of the "Michael Austin" shelf, and tied up the corners, heaving it on his shoulder and returning to the stairwell. *Four minutes still,* he thought as he picked Jeanne up again and hobbled awkwardly down the stairs.

The hangar was completely deserted, and Michael's plane was the only one left, crouching in the aquiline Guardian mode beside the closed bay doors. Michael lifted Jeanne and their bag of memories into the cockpit and then climbed up himself, activating the plane's two monstrous engines. Michael pulled the canopy to, and tried to activate the bay doors by remote, but to no avail. *Damn door's stuck. And me with only four salvos of missiles left.*

He converted the mecha to Battloid mode, clutching Jeanne tighter to him so as to prevent her from being crushed by the rearrangement of the Alpha's cockpit. Michael had the Battloid drop the almost spent EP-13 gun pod it was holding, and grabbed two more from the near-by supply racks and mounted them on the mecha's hardpoints. *I've got to get out before this thing blows,* Michael reasoned. *Just fifty seconds.*

Michael's Battloid stood straight, and two panels on each of his Battloid's arms hinged open, revealing the last twenty of Michael's sixty inboard missiles. *All safeties removed and warheads armed. Hope I can blow this door off its hinges.* Michael snorted,

and hit the fire button on his control panel. The missiles sped out of the arms, slamming through the bay door's structural supports and knocking the huge plastisteel panel into space.

Michael guided the Veritech out of the burning wreck, activating the thrusters on the Battloid's feet to propel the mecha out of the doomed ship and into the fray still taking place in orbit. Michael converted back into Fighter mode, clutching Jeanne close to him to keep her from being crushed as the pilot's seat rotated forward from facing a screen inside the mecha to looking out the canopy, which was revealed as the Veritech's nose section swung from behind the Battloid into place.

He kicked the engines to full power, trying to clear the *Valiant's* vicinity before she exploded while they were still too close. In his head, Michael counted down, thinking, *She'll go any second now. . .*

A few moments later, the mirrors on the canopy lit up in a blinding flash as the *Valiant's* aft section disintegrated, shattering the rest of the ship into molten rubble. Michael veered off to intercept a squadron of Invid that were trying to cut him off, firing both cannons simultaneously into their formation.

If I stay up here much longer, I'm dead. I've got to land soon! Michael broke off from the combat and into the atmosphere. Jeanne was stirring now, and mumbled something about her head.

"Welcome back to life," Michael said, kissing her on the head; clotting blood smeared on his cheek.

"Where am I. . . Michael?" Jeanne groaned.

"We're headed for the planet's surface, Jeanne. Invid massacred the fleet. I only saw a couple of fighters make it down." Thankfully, Bernard's was one of them.

"You saved me?"

"You'd 've done the same, kid. I brought something for you," he said, indicating the bag.

"Why did you save this?" Jeanne asked, digging through the books and artifacts she revered. "Why not your own?"

"These things aren't just yours; they're **ours**, all we have left of our pasts. Now shut up and let me land," Michael replied. He was entering the atmosphere too fast, and he had no margin to slow down, with the Invid on his tail. At this speed, he'd cripple the fighter. *No choice. Forced landing it is.*

Michael frowned as the plane began to heat up in the atmosphere.

Episode Two:

Roll Call

“The resistance movement, if that’s what one would call it, failed to make any significant contributions to Mars Division offensive. Some major reasons behind the resistance’s limited role in the Mars Fleet attack were for one, the near total lack of any communication between those on Earth and the fleet, and also the lack of any potency within the resistance movement. After I was forced down, I vowed I’d have that changed by the time another offensive was executed.”

-From the memoirs of Admiral Michael Austin.

14 September 2042

The frigid morning wind took flight from the shadows of the forested Styrian alpine valley below and carried on its wings a warning of impending doom. And as the wind rushed in Milo Swift’s weathered face, he became aware of this nebulous sense of dread. He had heard rumors of the REF coming to reclaim the Earth from its alien landlords through various resistance networks - the most outlandish tale being that REF Marines had set down in huge numbers in distant South America around six months ago - but nothing was really credible.

Today. It’s going to happen today.

But Milo’s fighting days were well behind him now. He had destroyed his life and most of this destruction was due to senseless, futile wars - or from trying to profit from them. Now the disillusioned recluse was nothing but a spectator, if he was even that.

Well, I’d better go secure the cave and check the traps, just in case, Milo ruminated.

Milo shielded his eyes from the morning sun and scanned the panorama of the forest. All seemed quiet, but Milo’s instinct suggested strongly that this serenity wouldn’t last for long. He scurried back into the cave and grabbed a small backpack, into which he slipped a sheathed bowie knife. Checking his traps took the better part of the morning and yielded little bounty. He decided to check again at sundown.

Afterwards, Milo slid into his lawn chair, feeling another fit of depression coming on. Was it the sense of loyalty that urged him to throw his expertise in with the resistance forces that had him feeling so disconsolate? After all, Milo couldn’t deny that there would

always be a part of him that loved to fight; an innate, primal desire to destroy that for all he knew had been encoded in his very genes. Some said it set him apart from the rest of mankind. But he thought such a trait insured his membership in the race he'd tried so hard to leave behind.

He stood up and stretched his long arms, feeling several vertebrae realign themselves in his spine. Milo loomed well over six feet tall and imposingly carried his two hundred and seventy pound frame. His hair, the color of gun metal, hung limply below the nape of his neck. His skin fell somewhere between well-tanned and light brown - one of the few features he'd inherited from the grandfather who raised him. His eyes reflected the shadowy canopy of the pine forest he inhabited. His face bore the scars of wars previously lost, and solemn wrinkles that exaggerated his age. Now, reflecting on the thirty-eight years Milo had inhabited this universe, he could find no reason to continue living. But he hadn't found any reason to give it up, either. That left him in this nowhere land, a beautiful forest that even the Invid had yet to violate with their presence. Milo lived off the land, and the remains of the hovertank he'd once piloted.

His abode was the cavity formed by the impact of his disabled mecha into the sloping facade of the tall hill. The protoculture generator had malfunctioned and was of no use to him, but the gutted frame of the mecha served as a support for the cave ceiling and partitioned off a small chamber that one might call a room. Milo's inventive mind had conjured up a crude distillery from the refrigeration unit aboard the hovertank. And the rot-gut liquor it produced fetched a decent price in Bruck, whenever he chose to give his solitude respite to barter booze for supplies and fuel cells.

And it was a near festive occasion when the notorious Mountain Guardian ventured into town for the feel of a woman's touch and the superficial warmth of human companionship. The retired mercenary's well-deserved reputation preceded him in that region: so much so that villagers would frequently leave tributes for him to keep the Invid away. What most of the superstitious townsfolk didn't know was even if he had the power to chase the Invid off, it's unlikely he'd have bothered to. Apparently, the Invid weren't interested in the village either, making the townsfolk's misunderstanding reasonable.

Milo languidly entered his shelter and emerged with a half-empty bottle of his homemade alcohol. He ripped out the stopper and drank a good quantity of the bourbon before easing back into his lawn chair. Milo found himself needing a stiff belt regularly to numb his guilty conscience and to convince himself that all his misfortunes were unjustly levied upon him. He resigned himself to the conviction that his life would be better if he went down quietly. But no matter how hard he tried to douse that fire inside his breast, Milo couldn't ever drown it.

Christine. . . You'll never know how much it hurt to watch you die. To watch all I ever wanted destroyed, and to be powerless to prevent it. I only wish I could hold you one more time.

A rebellious tear slid down Milo's face, but before it could be followed by an onrush of sorrow, Milo noticed that the serenity of the forest's landscape had been tarnished by a black column of smoke descending from the heavens to the valley below. His keen eyesight was little good at this distance, so Milo darted inside his cave for a pair of high-powered binoculars. He concentrated on the contrail, and though he could barely make out the Alpha fighter, it was there, coming across the clear blue sky gliding to its resting place to the northwest. There were no parachutes visible, but Milo was dead sure that the pilot or pilots were trying to ride the plane to the ground. The plane disappeared amidst the green canopy of trees, with dark plumes of smoke rising up angrily into the afternoon sky.

"Mon dieu!" Milo cried as he stared at the plane. *Could be some survivors*, he thought. *Or if not, maybe some machinery I could use back here. Better hurry, though. Invid'll be by to check out the crash site*, Milo decided, as he hurriedly threw on some jeans and flannel shirt, and a black overcoat for the ride. He stamped out the stub of a cigarette under his heavy boot, checked the firearm in his holster, and mounted the VR-041F Cyclone parked at the base of the hill.

Milo started the engine, half aware that its protoculture emissions would lead the Invid to his destination, if they weren't already there. He revved the engine hard with an anticipation that he now found a bit uncomfortable.

* * *

"I'd better break out that emergency vehicle," Michael groaned to his ruined Alpha and to Jeanne, who was silently looking on. He stared glumly at the smoking wreckage for a moment. It was like watching a good friend die slowly and painfully, but he couldn't remain in mourning too long.

He moved aside a battered panel beside a **NO STEP** sign and sequentially pressed a series of buttons. A larger panel slid back, and a cubic mechanism with two wheels jutting from its rear eased upwards toward Austin. He dragged the cumbersome device away from the wrecked Alpha to a clear spot and pressed a button on it, causing it to promptly unfold into a motorcycle. Undoing a latch on a metallic box magnetically attached to the rear wheel cover of the VR-052 armored Cyclone, he extricated a bulky suit of battle armor, and happily discarded his old flight suit.

Michael's donning of the armor was interrupted by the noisy droning of another Cyclone engine nearing them. Michael had no trouble spotting the visitor, and from the looks of it, the rider was moving at breakneck speed. A wake of dust shot from the nearing Cyclone's rear tire, and it soon bolted into the perimeter of the smoking ruins of the Alpha fighter. The Cyclone skidded to a grinding halt inches from the pair.

The rider flung his helmet off and scrutinized the couple. Her uniform and his armor were variants of those he'd seen worn by the 3rd REF Planetary Corps, which had arrived to bolster Earth's forces just before the end of the Second Robotech War. The presence of a downed Alpha fighter further suggested that the pair was indeed a part of a REF offensive.

The male was a physically impressive specimen, and his lively eyes sparkled with a confidence and friendliness that eased Milo's suspicions. The man looked a bit drained, but all in all, seemed unscathed from the forced landing. Milo looked closely at the markings on his battle armor's shoulders, and although he knew little of how rank insignia went in the REF Navy, it appeared the fighter pilot before him was up in the brass, maybe an O-4 or O-5. His eye wandered to the side of the plane's cockpit; he couldn't even begin to count the kill-markers painted there. This man was definitely an ace.

The girl was a bit more banged up. A head bandage did little to conceal the gashes on her forehead, although they appeared to control the bleeding. She also sported various other bumps and bruises. Nor did her beauty escape Milo's trained eye.

"Anybody hurt?" Milo demanded. He turned his gaze to Jeanne, who shifted nervously under his watch.

"Well, she's a little scratched up, but we're fine. Thanks anyway." Michael extended his hand, and waited for the stranger to take it up. Milo took it up hesitantly, and shook it lightly, noting the strength of Austin's vise-like grip.

"I'm Commander Michael Austin, 8th Naval Air Group, Mars Fleet, REF. This is Lt. Jeanne Ducasse, defense coordinator of the battlecruiser *Valiant*. Our fleet was dispatched as a forward offensive against the Invid. It was. . . destroyed in low orbit. We barely made it out alive."

Yeah, yeah, yeah. This isn't a social call. I'd better get these war babies away from here, Milo decided. "Follow me, if you want stay that way."

"Right. I'll set the self-destruct on the plane for a fifteen minute delay." Michael pressed a series of buttons on a panel to the right of the pilot's seat, and quickly grabbed his survival gear and the sack of memorabilia stowed in the rear of the cockpit. He stashed it into the storage compartments of the readied vehicle, and helped Jeanne on the rear of the seat. "Let's move," he shouted before taking off after Milo's Cyclone.

The pair of Cyclone riders soon came upon the secluded site of Milo's cave. Michael examined the skeletal remains of the hovertank that had lanced the side of the hill, and the sheltered lean-to at the entrance to the shallow cave that seemed to have swallowed this mecha. He wondered if Jeanne and he would have been better off staying with the Alpha.

They parked at the base of the hill, and negotiated the small inclining ledge that led to the entrance. It was here that Milo deemed it necessary to part their company for a short while.

"I've got to check on dinner, so make yourselves at home. I'll be back soon," Milo informed them tersely, before bounding down the ledge and entering the thick forest.

Nice guy, Michael glumly thought.

Michael and Jeanne cased the place. It was apparent that the hovertank mecha couldn't be repaired. Most of its important components lay in stacks of machinery around the unnatural shelter. The only interesting apparatus was the purring distillery, which took Michael the better part of three minutes to scrutinize. The hollow interior of the hovertank served as a room of sorts. Jeanne immediately went for a swaying rope hammock and was soon rocked into a light slumber.

Michael wasn't done with his room search. On the wall opposite the hammock was a dusty shelf with numerous odds and ends scattered haphazardly on its wooden planks. On one end of this shelf was a tarnished silver picture frame, face down. Michael turned it over, and through the cracked glass of its other side, he marveled at the blonde-haired, green eyed beauty that was caged in this glass-and-metal prison. In the lower right-hand corner of the picture was written: "I'm yours forever, Milo. . . Christine".

Michael returned the frame to its original position, and moved onto the room's other offerings. A rusty metal storage box groaned when Michael dragged it from its resting place. He opened it with a moderate amount of anticipation; however, the box held nothing but an outdated yet clean Southern Cross enlisted man's uniform; the name-tag read "Swift", and the insignia was for a private in the Alpha Tactical Armored Corps, the elite front-line units of the Southern Cross. Michael carefully refolded the uniform and set it back into place and then turned his attentions to the wounded girl that slept peacefully nearby.

"What a dump! First the Invid and now this. When she recovers, first thing I'm doing is getting us to a town, any town," he murmured with determination.

* * *

Four Armored Scouts stalked through the thick native vegetation, tracking down fading protoculture emissions from stationary Robotech mecha positioned about fifteen hundred meters due west of the Invid assault force.

The leader of the quartet had first picked up the emissions from a close fly-by over the smoking wreck of a downed fighter from the invading REF forces. After submitting a detailed report to the regional hive, the Armored Scout was given three subordinates and ordered to seek and destroy the rebels, detected by the tell-tale sign of the protoculture emissions heading away from the craft. A quick and efficient victory might even be rewarded with a higher position in the Invid hierarchy.

The lead trooper's appetite for battle was whetted with anticipation, so much so that she was careless, in not picking up the lone human following them as they made their way through the thicket, towards the hill. Once she had breached the clearing before the hill, and glanced at the two Cyclones, she formulated her tactics.

This is the source of the protoculture emissions. Units two and four, concentrate fire on the aperture; prevent the rebels from reaching their mecha. Unit three, we will destroy the Robotech mecha. Eliminate all resistance, the leader telepathically goaded the other three.

The twelve foot tall bipedal war machines straightened up. The crustacean-like vehicles were similar to the ones that fought the REF in space, but they lacked the bulbous booster pack and sported two over-sized hydraulically driven legs. *Prepare to fire,* the leader commanded, as the two lethal plasma cannons atop each began to glow.

The Invid weren't the only ones ready for a fight. Michael had heard their approach, and roused Jeanne.

While attaching a collimating barrel and powered stock to his Gallant particle gun, for the extra punch needed to penetrate even the weaker portions of the Invid Scouts' armor, Michael shouted out to Jeanne, "How the hell did they find us?"

"I don't know," Jeanne replied. "If they saw us by the fighter, why didn't they attack then?"

Peering from a hole in the wall of Milo's shelter, Austin waited until he had a clear shot of one of the targets' vulnerable optics suites, aimed, and pulled the trigger.

A flash burst from Michael's gun, lancing the metallic sensor sphere and overpenetrating into the pilot's compartment. The Invid pilot's snail-like head exploded as the beam evaporated the tissue it pierced, and its mecha sprayed a green mix of Invid blood and nutrient fluid before collapsing backwards and falling to the ground. Michael shouted in triumph, and took cover.

The surviving three Invid then began to shower the shelter walls with annihilation

discs, causing the cave to shake violently. Thick columns of dust descended from the cave ceiling, and Michael and Jeanne were soon covered by a layer of dirt and small debris.

“Over here!” Milo shouted at the Invid from the tree-line. He steadied his laser pistol and fired, briefly drawing their attention away from his home. One of the Invid turned toward him, and the cannons atop it again began to glow. Milo fired at the mecha’s weak spot, and the Invid trooper collapsed, oozing green fluid through the shattered eye. Seeing their comrade fall, the two other Invid turned and began to unleash a hailstorm of plasma disks at the retreating Swift.

“This is crazy!” Milo exclaimed as he strode back toward the dark forest under an intense bombardment, weaving his way between the incessant explosions. *Why do I want to get myself killed over such crummy odds?* he asked himself.

Back in the cave, Michael tossed Jeanne his rifle. “Cover me while I try to make it to my Cyclone,” he ordered. Jeanne nodded, checked the beam gun’s power level, and looked out a crack in the wall for targets, while Michael dashed out the entrance to the cave to his Cyclone, parked at the base of the hill.

Michael hurriedly strapped on his battle armor, relieved to see that the aliens had failed in their attempts to kill the stranger that had given them shelter. He glanced back at the Hovertank. Jeanne’s fire had drawn one of the mecha’s attention back to the cave, and she had come under heavy fire. Swearing, he hopped on the Cyclone and conjured it to life.

Swift had found himself pinned down on the edge of the forest; neither he nor the Invid harrying him could get a clear shot at the other, and tree trunks splintered and caught flame in the cross-fire. Volley after volley was exchanged to no avail.

Jeanne’s fire-fight was just as intense; she and the other remaining Armored Scout were practically ionizing the air with the intensity of their exchange. Jeanne felt a sudden tremor - the thick wall of the hovel, made from the Hovertank’s thick armor, had finally given way under the relentless pounding of the Invid weapons. Milo’s whiskey-still toppled over in the blast, spilling distilled alcohol and the fuel oil that ran the still all over the floor. Jeanne saw the potential for disaster and began to run for the entrance, but a second shot from the Invid ignited the volatile liquids, and the place went up in a tremendous explosion, catapulting Jeanne out of the shelter and throwing her hard to the ground outside.

Milo gaped in horror as he watched his home blow into pieces. A fireball roared out of the cave, and subsided just as quickly as it had appeared. Just as the dust was about to settle, Michael burst onto the scene from around the back of the hill. Milo found himself watching a miraculous transformation, and smiled in grim satisfaction. The armored rider

and his Cyclone accelerated toward the remaining pair of Invid crab-like mecha, when he saw Michael's motorcycle suddenly transform around Michael's body into a small battlesuit. Milo let out a gruff cheer, and hit the ground for cover.

This one's for Valiant, Michael thought as he leveled his right arm and watched two Scorpion mini-missiles rocket forth from the forearm launchers. Only the charred husk of the Armored Scout remained after Michael's first salvo found its mark.

The sole Invid Armored Scout, realizing that the tide of battle was going against it, chose to flee and possibly bring back reinforcements to subdue these persistent rebels. And it probably would have done just that had not another onslaught of missiles pinned it on the ground, dismembering one of its huge legs and disabling its main thruster.

It was forced to fight, damaged as it was. Propped on an arm and its remaining leg, the Invid Scout lashed out with return fire of plasma globes, plowing into the hillside behind Michael. As he elevated the Cyclone away from the debris, Michael caught the full fury of a round with the emptied launcher on his armored left wheel cover, blowing it to tiny molten fragments.

Got careless, Michael realized. The blast had heated up his forearm armor considerably, and he winced in pain as he popped the quick-release button and shed the unit. But he wouldn't let himself be careless twice. He took up the Cyclone's 60mm beam cannon from its mounting point on the shoulder, and easily dispatched the last Invid mecha.

Only well after the smoke sifted away from the recent scene of battle did Milo finally emerge from the shelter he'd found behind a thick-trunked pine. Austin had already run to Jeanne's side, and was tending to both her new and old wounds, when he saw Milo scurry up the ledge to his shattered home.

"Michael. . ." Jeanne was coming to. She tossed uneasily in his arms, as if she was having some vague nightmare. Her eyes barely opened and she offered up a strained smile to her concerned C.O.

"Don't try and exert yourself, Jeanne. You took a nasty blow on your head. Ran out of bandages for all the scrapes you've got, but don't worry. I'll come up with something." And as Michael continued to assure Jeanne that they'd be all right, that in the morning the both of them would journey into the nearest town, Jeanne shut her eyes, her body exhausted from the events of the day.

Milo shuffled out of the cave with a discouraged look painted across his grizzled features. He was still a bit dazed by it all, and he barely managed to stagger down the ledge without falling. After Milo negotiated the tricky descent, he went over to Austin's motorcycle, and began to examine it closely, displaying a look of admiration for the

machine before him.

“Damned impressive machine. Pity I can’t manage to get mine to transform,” he told Michael. “I’ve been trying for years, and no go.”

“Tell you what; I’ll take a look at it for you if you help me move my friend here.” Michael said convincingly as he motioned to Jeanne.

“Better move your wheels as well; the Invid might be knockin’ on what’s left of my door pretty soon,” Milo suggested, as they carried Jeanne’s form into the neighboring forest.

There was lots of work to be done before the sun went down. Michael moved both of the Cyclones to the campsite they made a mile deep into the forest. He also gathered firewood, and lit up a blaze to keep them warm through the night ahead. Milo went back to his home to scavenge all he could. This included several blankets, some of Milo’s clothes, including his old Southern Cross uniform, a few bottles of his homemade liquor, and his revered harmonica. Milo checked the traps once more, and came back with dinner. Then, while watching the meat broil in the flames, Milo tended to Jeanne.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Michael accused. He glared angrily at Milo.

“Helping your friend. Now, shut up, Austin,” Milo responded abruptly. He placed a covering of some gray filmy substance in the girl’s wounds, undoing all of the field dressings that needed replacing. The spider webs soaked up all of the smeared blood, and allowed clotting to set in.

“Ever wonder why a spider is able to save its kills? Its webs keep the spoils of the hunt edible, by locking in the internal juices,” Milo explained.

“Spider webs!” Michael had heard of spiders, but had never seen one before.

“Hasn’t failed me yet; now make yourself useful, and hand me that bag,” Milo ordered.

“Amazing. . .” Michael gawked, appraising Milo’s handiwork. Milo slid a couple of roots into Jeanne’s mouth, and propped her head up on a rolled up blanket, while covering her form with another.

“That’ll get her through the night, unless, of course, you have any objections, Sir,” Milo intoned sarcastically.

“Look, I’ve had about enough of your attitude, mister!” Michael countered.

“Well, maybe I should thank you for leading the Invid to my doorstep and having them shoot up my home!” Milo screamed. “It’s not often I get company, but I certainly could have done without theirs. Next time you crash, I’ll make sure that I’m as far away as possible.”

“Well, sorry about that. . . But that doesn’t give you the right to treat us like

garbage. For crying out loud, you haven't even told me your name."

"You're REF. You'd better get used to the idea of being treated like garbage. Because a lot of people don't want your kind here. As far as a lot of us concerned, you people are responsible for letting the Invid take over in the first place, and now you're back to stir up trouble. And as for my name, you never asked."

"Well?" Michael prodded, "I'm asking now."

The tall quadroon snorted. "I'm Milo - Milo Swift. Now let's eat, before dinner gets cold."

All through dinner, a mixture of fresh hare and venison Milo had smoked earlier, Milo stared forlornly at the fire. He hardly touched his meal. His diet was mostly liquid by now; he had completely drained the bottle.

"So exactly what do you do out here?" Michael inquired between bites. He looked up at the stranger, awaiting some kind of response.

"Oh, I just hang out. Don't do much. Get drunk, get sober, and then get drunk again." Milo raised the bottle to his lips. "It's a living."

"Doesn't sound very productive."

"Who can be productive in a world like this? What's left of it, that is. Besides, what I used to like to do for a living had a limited clientele. And I left that kind of life behind. Been relatively good for three years." Milo raised the bottle to Michael in a silent toast.

"You're not ex-resistance, are you?" Michael pondered.

Milo swallowed, and looked at Michael with hostile eyes. "Well, I guess the answer is both yes and no. What's it to you?"

"I was hoping to link up with the resistance forces against the Invid. And if you were resistance. . ." Michael trailed off.

"That's a laugh. There aren't any real resistance forces anymore; Invid took care of that a few years ago. Now, most people don't care if the Invid continue ruling; they're too worried about surviving from day to day," Milo explained. "Present company included."

"Hmm. . . Well, I'm afraid my job description doesn't leave me much choice in the matter. So if you would kindly tell me just where we are on this God-forsaken mud-ball, Lt. Ducasse and I will make tracks for the nearest town in the morning. And we'll be out of your life for good, Swift."

Milo informed him of the lack of any possibility of finding help in the nearest inhabited town: Bruck an der Murz. With that in mind, Michael had decided on not including it in his search for soldiers to join him. Its stock consisted of poor farmers now, and were not likely to be the kind of men he needed. Michael stored this away conclusion and concentrated on the stranger with him.

“I noted that you have a Southern Cross uniform. Is it yours, or does it belong to a relative?”

Milo was taken off guard, but after a moment of contemplation, his surprise mounted into silent annoyance. “It’s mine.”

“So you are in the ‘Cross, Private Swift.” Michael straightened up. Milo secretly wondered if the Commander expected some sort of salute.

“No, there isn’t any Southern Cross left, Austin. Now, how can I be a good little soldier boy when there are no fat smug generals to bravely sacrifice my life for me?” Milo challenged.

Michael sighed disconsolately at the man keeping him company by the dwindling fire. He couldn’t help feeling sorry for his obnoxious associate. But entwined with that pity was an equal amount of fury directed at Milo. What was it about Swift that angered Austin? Was it his casual disregard for everything around him, or was it the way Swift was quick to complain, but slow to try to change what he could? Michael couldn’t pinpoint it, but whatever it was, he despised it. He was comforted in the fact that he didn’t have to talk to Swift for the rest of his stay.

Milo was snoring soundly to the crackle of a flashing fire when Austin glanced his way one last time. Michael rolled over on his side, and dragged the blanket up to his shoulders. Hopefully, the last twenty-four hours would not be reenacted in his dreams.

* * *

“Umm. . . What smells so good?” Jeanne demanded as she crawled out into the sunlight.

“Last night’s dinner. It’ll be a while before it’s warm again. So, how are you doing?” Michael asked, stirring the coals of the small fire with a long stick.

“I’ve been better. I’m starving, I smell as bad as a wild trahl, my leg and forehead feel like hell, and I’m stiff as a board, not necessarily in that order. So for starters, would you give me a back rub before I eat?”

“Of course. They didn’t call me magic fingers for no reason,” Michael explained as he massaged the kink from Jeanne’s back.

Yeah, I know all about your reputation, Jeanne reminded herself.

“There’s a stream about a five minutes walk to the west of here, if you want to wash up. The water’s nice, if a tad chilly,” Michael promised.

“Would you mind keeping it quiet around here. People are trying to get some sleep,” Milo groaned.

Well, well, sleeping beauty has arisen, Michael mused.

“When are you people leaving, anyway?” Milo inquired, as he snuggled back under his blanket.

“Don’t worry, we’ll be out of your hair soon enough. Just go back to sleep and when you wake up, we won’t be here,” Michael said in disgust.

Milo snorted before dozing off. He was hoping to sleep off the hangover he’d acquired from last night.

Michael packed up all his gear, and had begun to break camp when Jeanne returned, seemingly refreshed from her morning constitutional. Michael checked, cleaned, and rebandaged her wounds, while she sat, silently enduring the pain and discomfort.

“Breakfast ready yet?” Jeanne queried. Michael motioned to the food placed on a tray. *Great! It’s perfect.* Jeanne hungrily devoured the fare, leaving Michael to handle the rest of the chores.

“What about him?” Jeanne asked Austin, crinkling her brow in Milo’s direction. She moved closer to Swift, who was snoring noticeably.

“What about him?! He wants to stay.”

“I don’t know about you, but if I were going to lead a resistance outfit I’d jump at the opportunity to recruit someone like him. He’s Southern Cross material. His hovertank shows that he must have some familiarity with mecha, and he can obviously handle a gun. He knows the area, and he’s got decent wilderness survival skills. And we can’t get too picky with the help we scrape up,” Jeanne explained, looking intently at the hibernating Swift.

“I don’t know. I seriously don’t think he can handle something like a Cyclone. He drinks too much. He’s got an attitude, and no regard for rank,” Michael contradicted.

“You’ve seen worse. You’ve commanded worse. Shouldn’t be too hard for a badass, no-nonsense officer like yourself to whip this lout into shape,” Jeanne wheedled, trying to appeal to Michael’s ego.

“Shit, Jeanne, I’m a CAG officer, not a drill instructor,” Michael responded, frustrated. “When I get people, they’re already well-trained, well-disciplined, and well-motivated. I don’t want to try to baby-sit this grunt!” Michael paused, and paced around the campsite for a few moments. “Hell, what’ve I got to lose? Now, how are you feeling now?”

“Not bad, Michael. I actually slept well for the first time in several nights. Was that your doing?”

“No, our mutual friend resorted to his bag of tricks. At first, I was a tad skeptical of his backwoods M.D., but then again most of our drugs are derived from plants like these.

Just don't ask about the spider webs."

"It worked, didn't it?" Milo's voice erupted from under the folds of his blanket. After several moments of tossing and turning, he crawled out, stretched his arms, and rubbed his eyes.

"How long have you been awake?" Jeanne grilled him.

"Long enough to hear everything." Milo started off to the river, shielding his eyes from the intense sun. As his figure was engulfed by the surrounding forest, he whistled the tune to an old child's tune, interjected with the sole verse: "Pop goes the migraine".

"Well, are you going to join us or not?" Austin yelled at the expanse of trees before him.

* * *

Bruck an der Murz was soon only a passing memory in the mind of Commander Michael Austin by the time he lead their motorcycles into what was left of the city of Vienna. Beautiful streets and magnificent churches had once abounded in the hub of central Europe, but what they now beheld was more like a refugee camp. All the grandeur of the city had been incinerated during the first Robotech war by the powerful Zentraedi reflex cannons. The remainder was now an immense slum, much like many gang-ruled towns on the war-devastated planet. Caught between the pro-Invid regime in Hungary, and the gang warfare in Bavaria, what was left of Austria was made into a no-man's land.

Malnourished children frequently met the gaze of the three riders only to scurry for safety as the motorcycles darted by. Occasionally, the trio viewed clots of refugees in front of dilapidated shanties frittering away time. Only Milo was consciously aware of the suspicious gazes that followed them as they weaved deeper into the debris-filled network of streets.

What a damned shame. Milo silently mourned for the people here as the motorcycles escaped the inner city. It was now a three mile radius crater with a shanty town deposited in the hole in the ground. The threesome cleared the rim of the crater. Austin searched for a suitable inn to stay the night.

"Right. First order of business is to find someone to fix our Cyclones," Austin announced. Michael eased his motorcycle to a halt in front of an innocuous-looking wooden inn.

"I think I have a lead for you. But I hope you children have the money, 'cause I'm broke," Milo informed the others.

Michael nodded. "Some gold from my plane's survival pack."

“Good,” Milo snorted. “Commander, if you’ll go in there and stake us out some rooms, I’ll secure the mecha for the night. Can’t be too careful in this city.”

Milo watched Austin and Ducasse disappear into the building. He dragged the cycles around back and hid them under some rubble against the wall, and set up two shaped-charge antipersonnel mines facing away from the bikes, the same sentry system he used on his own hovel while away. *There. Anyone messes with these babies, and he’s in for a rude surprise.*

“Please! Please! I didn’t see anything!” a frightened voice cried in German from the dark alleyway nearby. Milo heard it and moved closer to get a better look.

In the darkness, Milo perceived a scrawny brat, much taller than the child he was hassling, grab the quivering boy by his collar. The attacker was flanked by two adolescent hulks. They remained motionless and silent and seemed content to let the leader bully the youngster.

“That doesn’t matter. . .” he snarled as he whipped out a switchblade, “Let’s find out how much you’ll talk when I take your tongue out!”

Milo caught most of the dialogue and decided to take matters into his own hands. He stepped out to face the gang, grumbling in their native tongue, “Didn’t your momma tell you not to play with knives?”

“What! Look, you’d better just walk away, and maybe we won’t come after you, stranger,” the gang leader challenged in an broken voice. He forced the boy down to the hard ground. The child wriggled away to safety.

“You guys better have more than just those little things if you want to take me.” Milo’s warning was immediately followed by a thundering punch at the diminutive leader. His punch catapulted the victim into the arms of the other two.

“Man, let’s teach Grandpa here who runs this town!” The gang advanced, revealing their weapons. The fracas would have to be confined to the not-so-fine arts of bludgeoning and knife fighting. That suited Milo just fine.

The two muscle men converged around Swift. They were large brutes, but Milo still had a good three inches on the tallest of the lot. Milo inhaled deeply and shifted the weight of his body to the balls of his feet.

He reacted well to the knife thrown his way. And although he’d stepped out of harm’s reach, Milo drifted straight into a punch meant for his jaw, and barely managed to roll with the impact. He’d lost his bearings and glanced around with quiet desperation. From his blind side, Milo heard the heavy grating of metal on metal. A sturdy length chain wrapped itself around Milo’s forearm. They’d done quite a bit the first time around. Now they’d try to go for the kill.

So far the fight had been one-sided, but Milo was ready to rectify that situation. He yanked heartily at the chain, hoisting himself to his feet. With a single kick, he smashed the jaw of a second boy, and then Milo swung his chained arm around, slamming one of the others into the wall of a near-by building. Milo wrapped the chain around its wielder's neck and drove the bulbous skull into wall several times until he heard a crack; the dim light shielded Milo's eyes from seeing the hideous graffiti of blood the thug left there.

The knife slash cutting deeply into his shoulder served as a painful reminder to him that his work was not done. Milo extricated his arm from the chain, and eyeballed the lone attacker. The boy lunged with his knife again, but failed to connect. Swift grabbed the forearm, and stripped it of the knife. He wrenched the leader's arm around and slung him to the ground like a sack of grain. From there, it was a simple task to beat his attacker senseless.

"Now, you boys better be good, or I might have to oblige you again!" Milo snarled at the stunned leader who lay groaning on the ground. Milo left him with a kick to the abdomen.

The child tugged at Milo's arm, the one attached to his wounded shoulder. Milo wheeled around and almost decked the kid out of instinct. He was still jumpy.

"Is there anything I can do to repay you?" the boy whined.

"Who. . . who were those scum?" Milo gasped. He'd started back to the inn, and the boy clung to his side.

"Local trash; they work for Rimmler in Neumünchen. They tip off the Invid about local resistance groups and loyalists from the Alliance in exchange for protoculture. I caught them doing it, so they wanted me out of the way."

"You're a brave kid."

"Thanks, Mister. But still, you saved my life. Is there anything I can do to help you?"

"Ever hear of a Roger Pike?"

* * *

As they drove through the streets of the burnt-out city, Milo's mind was reeling with the instructions on piloting the Cyclone armor Michael had given him. *It's not that different from a hovertank. BA switch for transformation, a retinal sensor in the helmet for target selection and to open up and close the targetscope and to fire the on-board weapons. The jets are directed and missiles launched by voice command. Seemed easy enough. And with the jet boosters, the pilot is freed of the ground somewhat, and even jumps over thirty*

feet were not unheard of. A nice machine, and a lot more versatile those clunky old Veritech Hover tanks. Now all I got to do is get it to work.

“Here we are,” the boy answered. A gigantic forty-five foot-long hovertransport was parked next to a shop which was burdened with the bilingual sign: Pikes Reparierhandlung - Pike’s Repairs.

“Herr Pike,” cried the boy. “There are some people here who want to see you! They’re REF-soldiers.” He waited for a moment more, and then called out again. “*Herr Pike? Ich denke daß sie zum Widerstand gehören. Machen Sie schnell, bitte!*”

A gruff voice emerged from the building, saying, “*Ruhe, Jakob!* Do you want everyone in the neighborhood to hear?” A medium-sized, brown-haired man in his mid-forties stepped out of the repair shop, his face showing the signs of age, his vast mop of hair beginning to thin. A sudden flash of recognition on Swift’s face told Jeanne that, somehow, Milo had met the man before. But Milo failed to smile when the trim man began to speak, his richly Austrian accent instantly metamorphosing into a pleasant Southern drawl. “Hello, Swift. Been keeping out of trouble?”

“Not any more than usual, Captain,” Milo replied.

The man smiled at the remainder of the group, and announced, “Howdy, I’m Captain Roger Pike, 18th ATAC, Southern Cross. Jakob tells me you’re resistance. Well, come on in.” Roger turned to the boy and admonished him in German. “Jakob, your mother’s been worried sick about you. Get home right now, *du Lump!*”

“*Wiederseh’n,*” cried the boy as he dashed home.

“*Tschüs, Jakob.*” Pike waved.

Once inside the shop, Pike had all the others sit around a small wooden table, and introduce themselves. While Jeanne and Roger were exchanging pleasantries, Michael leaned over to Milo, and asked, “I gather you know this guy.”

“I served under him in the Southern Cross. Twice, actually. I was in his unit when the E.B.S.I.S. attacked, and then when the Invid invaded.” Milo turned to his former commander, “I heard you were still around. What happened to the unit?”

“The rest of the company fought on until we were massacred at Prague. Our-”

“Look, I hate to interrupt up this reunion,” Michael cut in, “but I’ve got business with you, Captain Pike. I’ve got a damaged GR-97 missile launcher that isn’t getting any younger, as well as a demolished front wheel cover, for the Battler type. Milo’s got a Blowsperior-type Cyclone with what looks to be a burned-out transformation circuit. While I’m at it, I’d like you to find a Cyclone for Jeanne, if that’s possible.”

“I’ll see to the damage on yours - could probably fix it tonight. If your guess is right about the Blowsperior’s damage, I can have that fixed in twenty minutes, but then I

have to calibrate it for Swift's height and build. I've also got a damaged VR-038T Bartley Cyclone, complete with CVR-3F armor and an EP-40 particle cannon. But it's in terrible shape, and I've got a way to go before it is in working condition," Roger explained. "Picked it up off of a scavenger who-

"Great!" Jeanne interjected shrilly. She wouldn't be left out of any of the action in the future.

"With your Southern Cross combat experience, and all, and the fact that you're going to help us without question give me the feeling you've no love for our landlords. . . So why aren't you in the resistance, Pike?" Michael asked.

"Who says I'm not?" Roger asked.

"Your settled lifestyle does," Michael replied.

Roger laughed. "I never was a good fighter. I was really a mecha engineer - my support company was rated most efficient in the corps. But as the war against the Robotech Masters dragged on, and after it was over, command yanked all the officers they could spare and put them into squadrons with little more than raw recruits. After my Hovertank company was finally defeated by the Invid, I wandered for a bit, and decided to stay away from fighting for a while. Besides, I do my part. I'm always on the look-out for mecha I can recondition and pass on to you people. Resistance fighters sneak their equipment in here, and I discretely fix it, no questions asked, no fee charged. And when you settle in one place for long, you can't let your sympathies be known, or one night you'll just suddenly disappear. So I front as a humble repairman, fixing whatever bits of technology the people around here still have: portable generators, tractors, whatever."

"How would you like to join up with us? We could use an technician for the hardware we have, and if we manage to acquire more."

"Well, my first instinct is to say no. But Rimmler's people have been snooping around a lot, and I think they may suspect I'm fixing mecha for the resistance. And my meeting with you won't help any. Your visit may have made me a marked man."

"I could order you," Michael added.

"But you won't. I can see that about you." Roger stood up, and begin to pace about the shop. "All right. You want a mecha engineer? You got a mecha engineer. But I have three rules. First, no one touches the mecha without my permission. I like fixing things right, and I don't like fixing things twice."

"I don't have a problem with that."

"Second, no banditry. I know even having to say it may sound offensive, but you wouldn't believe how many self-proclaimed resistance fighters oppress the people as badly as the Invid do. If we get supplies from the locals, we pay for them, in gold or in trade."

“No quarrel here.”

“Third, if I decide I want out, you’ll let me go without a fight. Okay?” Michael nodded. “Good. Do I have the job?”

“You’re hired, Pike.” Michael extended his hand to congratulate the newest member.

“Great! I’ll pack up, and we can leave tomorrow,” Roger promised.

The trio shook hands with Pike and parted his company. The sooner Pike got started on the repair work, the better. Pike disappeared back into the back of his workshop to begin.

“That was almost too easy,” Michael said.

Milo shook his head. “He’s on the level. I can vouch for him, whatever my word’s worth to you. I’ve heard more about his activities during the occupation than he knows, and I had a hunch he was just looking for an excuse to get back into the thick of things. Pike just has a way of getting dragged out of his comfortable garage. He’s just stopped fighting it.”

“If you say so,” Michael responded. Once within the environs of the quaint inn, Michael announced to his companions that he’d be turning in for the evening, and recommended that they did the same. If Swift hadn’t known better, he would have sworn that Austin had just issued him an order.

“Join me for a drink,” Milo begged Jeanne.

“I’m not thirsty. But I will keep you company for a bit,” Jeanne offered softly. Jeanne and Milo descended slowly and selected a small table in the small restaurant on the inn’s ground floor. Milo poured himself a stiff one and gulped it down in one huge swallow.

“What do you think of our new recruit?” Jeanne settled back in her chair. Her hands nervously fondled the silverware placed on the table.

“Maybe it’s best to formulate your own opinions on the man.”

Jeanne shrugged her shoulders and, changing the subject, said, “Michael told me that you ran into a little trouble last night. Is that shoulder injury a souvenir?”

Milo downed another glass. He blinked his eyes and cleared his throat. “Nothing a little time off can’t mend.”

Milo began to ramble about his past, and Jeanne listened attentively, occasionally pausing to straighten out her flowing hair or to check the time on her digital chronometer. In the next few hours, he covered bleary memories of his days as a hovertank pilot in the Alpha Tactical Armored Corps and a brief stint with the GMP, through his period as a mercenary and his involvement with the resistance against the occupation, to his present

status as a melancholic recluse. As the narrative progressed chronologically, Jeanne noticed that Milo's stories were becoming more incoherent and vague, but whether this was due to the alcohol or to something else, she wouldn't speculate. She lamented the fact that Milo did not mention his reasons for joining her and Austin. By the time she found the courage to ask, she was disappointed to discover that Milo's reply made little sense.

"I think you'd better get some sleep," Jeanne announced, hoping to coerce Milo to turn in for the night. She tried to stifle a yawn, but it nevertheless emerged from behind her closed fist.

"I'm going to stay down here a little longer." Milo shakily poured the last contents of the bottle he'd brought with him into the shot glass the bartender had provided. Jeanne frowned as she walked out of the restaurant. Milo's squinting eyes trailed Jeanne up the stairs that adjoined the dimly lit lobby, and he sat inertly in his chair, staring blankly at the wall front of him until sleep's oblivion replaced the bottle's.

* * *

The promising sunshine of a bright, crisp morning greeted a refreshed Michael Austin. He dressed as quietly as possible in order not to disturb his slumbering roommate. Austin had decided the previous night to head on over to Pike's repair shop early so he might help with repairs and start packing away some of Pike's belongings for the trip ahead.

He cast a parting glance at Swift. Austin had gone downstairs last night at midnight to check on his Dionysian companion, and when he caught sight of Milo slumped over, face down on the table, Michael smugly carried the bulky Swift back to the room they were sharing. He had been compassionate enough to throw a blanket over Milo's snoring form before returning to his own bed. Austin quietly shut the door on his way out.

He strolled by the room in which Jeanne had slept, and stopped to knock. "Anybody up?"

"Yeah, come on in, Michael." Jeanne chirped cheerfully. Michael was relieved that he hadn't woken her up.

As he stepped inside, Michael saw Jeanne's slender form enveloped in a navy blue teri-cloth towel.

"Morning, Jeanne. I'd appreciate it greatly if you'd do a small favor for me."

"Well, sure," she chirped back. She was dripping from head to toe, with little rivulets of water breaking up and recombining on the glossy surface of her fair skin. She moved over to her uniform, which lay draped across the back of the only chair in this

room.

“I had to retrieve Milo last night. Would you check on him, his wound, and his hangover? Oh, and if you can corral him down to Pike’s place by noon, I’d be eternally indebted.”

“We’ll be there.”

“Good. I’m heading over right now.” Michael let himself out, and started down the hallway for the stairs.

* * *

A soft continuous rapping of Jeanne’s knuckles on the door startled Milo from his slumber. He semi-consciously groaned. Jeanne construed that as permission to enter, so she did, quietly shutting the door behind her. She brought a small plate of breakfast in her hand and she gently set on the bedside table.

The aroma of the fresh fruits and cheeses lured Milo to turn over and open his eyes. He quickly recoiled at the morning sunlight, yanking the covers back over his head.

“Good morning.” Jeanne’s voice was bubbling with enthusiasm, and the hungover Swift was in too much agony to tolerate cheerfulness. His piercing scowl was all the greeting Jeanne received.

“Where’s Austin?” Milo pointed at the Commander’s made bed. But in doing so, he winced noticeably.

“He went on ahead to Pike’s repair shop. Let me have a look at that wrapping around your shoulder.” Jeanne waited until Swift rolled over on his stomach, before attending to him. “You’ve got quite an assortment of scars and the like,” was Jeanne’s observation from scanning Milo’s back.

“My body’s seen a lot of wear and tear, and maybe the warranty’s run out. But it’ll still get a lot more miles before it’s ready for the scrapyard.” He reached over to the plate and grabbed a piece of cheese. It looked a bit dried out and he warily sniffed it.

“Go ahead. It’s really quite good.” Jeanne had finished checking up on his wound. Milo scooped up the plate and ravenously inhaled the hearty portions of bread, cheese, and muesli. “I’m going back to my room; we’re supposed to meet Michael at noon. Think you’ll be alive by then?” Jeanne teased.

“Hmm. . .” Milo slid out of bed and sidled down the hall to the bathroom without responding. It would feel good to have hot water clear his pores and make his skin tingle. He climbed into the bath Jeanne had asked the innkeeper’s wife to draw for him minutes before, and breathed out heavily as the scalding water soothed his aches. Before long, the

water was cold, and Milo reluctantly climbed out and dried himself off.

He eyeballed his appearance in the mirror. His metallic hair had lost its luster, and now it hung lifelessly, covering his nape and most of his ears. He ran a comb through it and wrapped a bandanna around the top of his head. Milo stared vacantly at the figure on the other side of the mirror. The facial hair which he'd tried so hard to cultivate was but a thin layer of stubble. With a full beard, Milo was sure he'd appear quite distinguished. But Heaven had not granted this wish, and there was little he could do about it.

"It's going to be a long day."

* * *

Pike's shop was the scene of much activity, as well-wishers shuffled in and out bidding Roger farewell. Milo and Jeanne spied Austin going toward the parked hovertransport, his arms full of spare parts and supplies.

Milo parked the Cyclone and headed over to Austin. Roger must have seen Milo while talking with a group of locals, because he waved a hearty greeting to the lumbering giant. Jeanne joined Roger and his little group.

Milo approached the hovertransport. It was immense, almost fifteen yards long with armored plating and what Milo guessed to be some heavy weaponry on top, hidden under a protective gray tarp. Milo gave the hull a solid slap. He was much taken with the vehicle.

"Pretty impressive, isn't it?" Michael stashed the last of Pike's gear into the rear of the transport. He emerged from it, and joined Milo. "Well, we're almost ready to leave. He's fixed our Cyclones."

"Except mine," Jeanne added.

"Right. Jeanne, you'll ride with Roger in the hovertransport. Another thing I just remembered. Missiles are extremely rare. Use them only when necessary; if you can, use energy weapons instead, do. Okay suit up and move out!"

The four would-be guerrillas donned their battle armor and powered up their mecha. Their convoy finally got rolling, pushing its way through the outer reaches of the city. These thinly populated slums were even worse than those situated within the crater that engulfed most of old Vienna. Jeanne examined the environment, pelted by the numerous stares of hatred and suspicion the rebel caravan received as it left the outer city behind.

Sad. These people are too scared to fight. And without help- Jeanne's thought was rudely interrupted by a row of explosions that Roger did his best to avoid. He swerved

wildly to his left, jerking the transport around roughly. The convoy had already split up its ranks.

Out of the corner of her eye, Jeanne saw Michael, well on his way to completing the metamorphosis from a motorcycle to a staunchly armored battlesuit.

A squadron of *Gurab* Shock troopers rose from behind a crumbling building and hovered momentarily, while their leader telepathically relayed the strategy to each trooper. The general populace in the immediate area fled, running helter-skelter for cover.

Milo was foolishly charging the pack of death looming before them.

“Not here!” Michael’s voice ordered on his radio. “All we’ll do is wreck the city!”

“No great loss. Most of it’s already gone to the dogs.”

“Cut out the social commentary and just do it.” Michael kicked in more power to his boosters and fled the scene of battle, silently hoping the Invid wouldn’t follow.

The squadron of Invid closed, slowly increasing their altitude to get a better view of the human rebels. They fired ahead of them to try to anticipate their movement. Michael gunned the Cyclone armor’s jets, to lift him up to fifteen meters. When one of the Shock troopers was right above the rubble-strewn street, the target scope emerged from the Cyclone armor’s shoulder, and Michael fired two shots from his hand-held heavy pulse cannon into the Invid’s torso. The violet Invid battlesuit listed, and then fell to the ground, crashing harmlessly into the broken road seconds after the hovertransport had passed. Michael smiled smugly, and then turned back toward the group.

“How do they keep finding us?” Jeanne demanded in frustration.

“Protoculture sensors,” Roger replied, evading as best he could in the enormous hovertransport. “Round about six years ago they first started installing them on mecha.”

“Well, that’s just dandy,” Michael said, overhearing the exchange on his radio. “I’d like to thank you and Milo for informing me in advance!”

Milo’s inventive mind had already devised a snappy come-back to Michael’s sarcasm, but he decided to hold his tongue. . . this time.

The caravan had just made it out of the city, the thirteen remaining Invid behind them in close pursuit. They fired only sporadically now as they broke up to surround the humans. The leader of the Invid group was a worker-caste Invid piloting a light-weight *Iigaa* Armored Scout mecha; with its relatively sensitive sensory equipment she could better control the battle. The subordinates were all of the less intelligent warrior-caste, in the twenty foot tall purple *Gurabs*, mounting as armament an eight-foot long heavy plasma cannon on either side of its one-eyed crab-like body. The arms and legs of this mecha were more massive as well, and it was as dangerous in close combat with the claws as it was at long range with the guns. Only the gross inaccuracy of the warrior-caste Invid pilots’ fire

kept Michael and his companions from being killed outright.

Once outside of the city, Milo engaged his Cyclone's transformation sequence and readied his Sal-9 and opened fire on his pursuers. Michael motioned the hovertransport to get out of the way of the engagement and joined Milo in firing at the Invid.

"There are too many of them," Milo cried over the radio while evading the Invid cannons. "I've got to use my missiles."

Michael had just downed a trooper and hesitated before replying, "Go ahead, but make it a good one!"

Michael saw Milo's helmet nod, and Milo hovered into position in front of the largest single concentration of Invid mecha. Milo's eyes drifted to the corner of his field of view, ordering the target scope to come out of its housing; it quickly settled in front of his helmet. Two armor plates on the chest of his Blowsperior Cyclone opened to reveal two sets of six Recluse mini-missiles. Milo concentrated and the twelve rocket-propelled grenades in the chest launcher leapt out of their housings and spiraled into the Invid formation. In two seconds, four of the Invid had collapsed onto the ground, and the survivors were regrouping for a counterattack.

"Good job, Swift. Now that some of the heat is off, let's-" Michael began.

Roger's voice interrupted over the radio, saying, "Commander, come and pull the tarp off the transport's roof. We can give you fire support."

Milo's mind recalled the massive bulges atop the vehicle, and quickly suggested, "Commander, you keep them pinned down; I'll do it."

Michael grunted in agreement as he put a sizable dent in one of the Troopers' armor.

After Roger radioed his message, Jeanne ran to a compartment in the middle of the hovertransport and was powering up the heavy weapon systems. Milo got the canvas sheet off the vehicle's roof and revealed a turreted double-barreled plasma gun and a smaller M-235 rapid-fire laser cannon towards the transport's rear. Roger stopped the transport and made for a ladder, emerging on the roof through a hatch soon after Jeanne had fired her first few shots from the turret's control console.

With the added firepower, it was short work to drive the remaining Invid off, their lead Armored Scout retreating with the five Shock Troopers that remained. Michael converted his battle armor back into a cycle and surveyed the battlesite. Husks of downed Invid shock troopers littered the razed and cratered field, some oozing their pilots' thick green blood.

"Not bad, kids," the Commander stated. "But we're running low on power and ammo. We'll have to salvage downed ships on the way."

Milo cleared his throat and said, "So where to next?"

Michael wiped the sweat from his forehead and looked toward the shadowy peaks in the distance. "West-south-west. There's something I want to check out in the mountains. Can you take us to Innsbruck, Roger?"

Roger nodded.

"Good," Michael added.

"And after that, oh fearless leader?" Milo jeered in a tone that straddled the border between playfulness and insubordination.

"Beats me. I don't live on this planet," Michael replied curtly.

"You do now," Milo smugly retorted.

Episode Three:

Salvage Yard

“Resistance groups had many means of acquiring weapons. There still was quite a highly developed underground market, if the groups could establish contact. But often, such dealings left the groups exposed to the agents of Invid-sympathizing police states. Instead, many groups relied on the fine art of scavenging mecha parts, weapons, and other supplies from ancient battle sites to consolidate their firepower into a force worthy enough to challenge the Invid.”

-Fleet Admiral Austin, as a guest lecturer for a course on modern history at the University at New Detroit.

1 October 2042

“I hope the resistance network in Neumünchen can help us,” Roger stated. He eased the hovertransport forward into the clearing, a campsite with a freshwater stream within earshot and with a natural protective canopy formed by the trees, and halted the vehicle.

As Roger walked through cargo hold of the transport, he heard Swift sarcastically growl back, “We’ll be lucky if we get the time of day from the locals.” Roger helped Michael and Jeanne unload the gear stowed away in the transport’s rear hold. Per Austin’s orders, Jeanne took off to scout the perimeter.

The camp was established in short order near enough to the village of Innsbruck, with Milo and Michael sharing one tent, Jeanne having one all to herself, and Roger occupying the transport. Milo volunteered his culinary skills for the evening, offering up a very spicy kind of stew, served over rice.

“What do you call it?” Michael said, in between gasps. He immediately took a few sips from his canteen.

“Fishhead Surprise,” Milo answered teasingly. He gave Jeanne a hearty helping of the meal.

“I hesitate to ask what the surprise is,” Jeanne said, trying to put it nicely.

“Looks like sort of a freshwater-fish gumbo to me,” Roger surmised. It seemed that only he and Milo appreciated the culinary concoction.

Well into dinner, Michael looked up from his meal, and said solemnly, “Now would someone explain to me these mecha-mounted protoculture sensors. I know all about the hive sensors, but this must be something new.”

Roger nodded. “The first units built into the mecha seem to have gone on in around 2035. They got upgraded two years ago, and make it damned near impossible to use any moving or unauthorized protoculture source around here without the Invid sweeping down on you in a minute.”

“What are their capabilities?” Jeanne asked. “Range, sensitivity, that sort of thing.”

Roger cleared his throat, and thought for a moment. “With the newest sets, the Scouts seem to be able to detect a Veritech Fighter out to around twenty kilometers and a Hovertank out to half that. They’ll pick up a Cyclone as far as a kilometer, and a protoculture-powered handgun out to a hundred and fifty meters. The Troopers’ sets work out to only a third of these ranges, but they like to deploy a Scout among a group of Troopers. On top of that, up close, they can even use the sensors for targeting in the dark or behind cover. To top it all off, the hive sensors are a lot more sensitive than they used to be.”

“That complicates things. The Invid fighting for the Regent don’t have anything like this, and it’ll make it really difficult to operate around here,” Michael noted. The others nodded, and dinner continued in silence.

Jeanne handled the after-dinner detail, and Roger unraveled a folding chair next to the fire. He’d volunteered for the first watch that night. He sat down in the chair, stoked the angry coals of the fire, and began his watch.

* * *

Michael opened his eyes and watched the stream’s tranquil water flow by, and felt a certain degree of envy. He rose, and started back to the battered tent he was sharing with Milo.

“You know, Austin, I’ve been giving it some thought,” Milo’s voice intoned. Austin could plainly see Milo’s dark form emerge from the shadows just as Swift lit up a cigarette.

“Just how long have you been watching me?” Austin inquired impassively.

“Ease up, boss. . . I’ve only been here for a few minutes. You must not have heard me over the sound of the water. By the way, what language was that. . . prayer in? Tibetan?”

“Sanskrit,” Michael replied. “It’s called the Heart Sutra. It helps me clear my

mind.”

“I see. Just don’t ask me to sit like that. I’ll lose all the circulation to my legs. Anyway, back to the matter at hand. The Invid haven’t been in our neck of the woods for quite some time.”

“We’ve been patrolling.”

“I know. But if we head on up to that base you wanted to see, we’d best not do it on the Cyclones,” Milo advised, after letting out a steady stream of smoke from his nostrils.

“Yeah, it could be an ambush, which would explain why the Invid haven’t bothered us on our patrols. Your point is well taken. But we’ve got to reach it,” Austin reminded Milo.

“What is so damned important about this base? We can get all the supplies we need in Neumünchen,” Milo demanded, pointing his flaming cigarette at Austin.

“You don’t understand. Back during the Sentinels’ War, we realized that the Robotech Masters were on the way to Earth. We hadn’t heard from the *Hannibal* in a while, and then the distress call from Space Station Liberty got through, and we were afraid that the Southern Cross was in trouble. So the 3rd REF Planetary Corps set off with a fleet led by the *Marcus Antonius* to reinforce the Southern Cross.”

“Yeah; I remember watching that on TV when they arrived,” Milo added. “Just after that the Southern Cross and REF troops linked up for a massive attack on the Masters, and inserted the 15th ATAC into one of their Motherships. . .”

“Well, the plan was to set up a number of secluded bases around the world. Point F on the Alaskan coast, Point G in southern Florida, and Point H in the Texas panhandle were to be established by 11th REF Armored division, the ‘Wolfpack’. Point I in the Crimea, and the one I’m interested in - Point J in Southern Austria, in the mountains near Gries-am-Brenner - were to be built by the 27th Mechanized, the ‘Werewolves’. The 5th Air Force Division’s planes, pilots, and maintenance personnel would be divided among the bases. That comes to about 390 Veritech fighters, 140 Destroids, 1000 Cyclones and 2500 personnel per base.” A sly smile of comprehension made Milo’s visage appear diabolic as Austin went on explaining, “We were hoping to link up with them for our offensive, but we got no word from any of the bases, so we suspected that the Invid had successfully neutralized them all. It must have been some fight though, and I’d say that the Invid lost at least fifty thousand troopers destroying all the bases.”

As a Southern Cross soldier and a resistance fighter, Milo had heard of the five major bases. But no hard details had made his way. The magnitude of what Austin had said became even more clear to him.

“Okay, I’ll get you there,” Milo promised. The cigarette tumbled from his lips, its smoldering butt falling on the ground. Milo squashed it thoroughly.

“How?” Michael said. He shuddered at the thought of a grueling hike to the base.

“Trust me,” Milo entreated as he urged his suspicious commander back to the confines of the camp.

* * *

Milo staggered out of the tent into the streaming sunlight. He spent his first few moments of this day unsuccessfully trying to warm himself up. *Winter’s coming hard and early this year.* He poured some coffee into a large cup and made his way to the others who were already up and ready to carry out Austin’s orders, with one notable exception.

“Michael, I feel I should come along,” Jeanne reasoned. “The more people there, the more thoroughly we can search the place.”

“Sorry, honey, but Michael’s right this time. Because if we don’t make it back, you have to make it to Neumünchen and possibly join up with another group. Besides which, I already have watch out for his butt, I don’t think I could do the same for you,” Milo interjected coolly.

“What?!” Jeanne yelled back at Swift.

Roger’s face had shown a gentlemanly smile, but that quickly mutated into a snicker. He knew what came next.

“I rather think I’m the one whose going to be watching over your *wounded* shoulder, Swift,” Michael said, laughing lightly.

“And the next time you call me *honey*, you’ll end up back in Vienna - singing soprano in their boys’ choir!” Jeanne threatened in an icy tone. Milo gurgled in his coffee cup, as Jeanne excused herself from the trio of men.

“Uh, Swift, there remains one small problem, unless you came up with a brainstorm last night. Just how are we planning on getting there? There is the small issue of the mountains.”

“Very simple. We’ll ski there, if the weather ain’t too bad.”

“Ski? It’s been years since I’ve done that, and I never was much good; besides, we don’t have any skis or poles,” Austin protested. “And will there be any snow yet?”

“I’m sure Roger can rectify the former situation, can’t you, Rog?” Milo inquired. “I’m thinking of the cross-country sort of ski, of course.”

“Let’s see, yeah, I figure we can pick some up at one of the near-by villages. I can have everything by noon, eleven if all goes well,” said Roger, his estimate meeting Milo’s

approval. The stalwart Captain hurried off to start his hovertransport to begin the search. Austin, however, still entertained his doubts.

“As for the snow,” Milo explained, “the glaciers have been growing ever since the Zentraedi Holocaust, what with all that dust in the upper atmosphere. That won’t be a problem. Besides, you’re a smart fellow. You’ll pick it right up like a pro.”

“Well, if you can do it, I’m sure I can handle it.”

“And you’re such a modest lad, too,” Milo quipped.

* * *

Michael and Milo lowered their goggles, as they trudged up the icy trail to the peak of this smaller mountain. The winds screamed about their well protected heads with such force that only through shouting was communication possible. The lowering sun crowned the summit the party hoped to surmount, as the mountain now appeared to don a veil of gold.

“We’re making good time!” Austin observed, cupping his hands together and hoping his voice would reach Milo’s ears. Milo simply looked at the lagging Commander, and shrugged his massive shoulders, knowing that Austin had said something, but not knowing exactly what it was. He motioned Austin to take the point for the next stretch of the journey, and the slightly winded REF fighter pilot was more than happy to oblige.

The sun was swallowed up by a wave of clouds that scudded across the Alpine mountains and blended into their majestic snow-capped peaks, indicating nightfall was not far behind. The winds were whipping defiantly at their prey, luring the party to continue the dangerous ascent. With nightfall, came reduced visibility. Any mistake at this altitude, with such inclement conditions, could easily result in a quick but painful death. That same thought drove Michael to scan the environs for a cave to settle in for the night.

Around a treacherous bend of the trail that Austin was blazing, one could faintly discern the half mile remaining, and the outline of the jagged peak in the blackening night. Austin pulled Swift aside and they both ducked into a snow-lipped cave entrance, the winds howling loudly and angrily as the twosome retreated from them.

Michael dumped his pack on the hard ground, and his exhausted body soon followed as he let it collapse against the back wall of the newly found haven. Milo had a fire alive in moments and the both of them quickly jockeyed for comfortable spots around its radius of heat. Michael unrolled his insulated sleeping bag, and flattened out the lumps from it.

The Commander dug into the survival rations he’d brought along, his mind

brooding on a premonition that resurfaced from its depths. Milo was already bundling up for the night, he'd screwed shut the small canteen of sipping whiskey and set it aside.

"The storm is hitting us hard," Milo noted from his supine vantage point. The snow was piling up around the divot in the mountain side. "We'll have to dig our way out in the morning, if this keeps up."

"Didn't think I'd be this tired," Michael yawned. "But this thin air, it's really got to me."

"Yeah, I noticed that you lagged behind most all the way up here, 'cept when you took the lead," Milo said in a critical tone.

"Not all of us are blessed with all the constitution and charm of a mountain, um. . ." He hesitated; Earth's fauna were rather unfamiliar to him.

"Goat?" Milo prompted.

"Yes, a mountain **goat**," Michael said, his face easing into a casual smile. Michael slid into his bag, and set his Gallant H-90 on the ground. His eyes peered cautiously out of the cave entrance for the longest time, failing to discern anything from the cascade of snowflakes.

"Ain't anything out there, Austin. Give it a rest," Milo decided, as he'd already scanned the entrance. His slurring voice continued, "The Invid won't come and play, 'specially in this weather. They can barely shoot straight under perfect conditions. Anyway, betcha two rounds in the next bar we hit, that they're concentrating their mecha around that base."

"I have never let my guard down before, Milo. And I'm not about to start now," Michael said in a subdued murmur.

"Never give an inch, huh, Austin," Milo grumbled. "Can't wait to mix it up again with the Invid, though. Our last tangle with the Invid really got my blood flowing," he said excitedly.

"Your blood spewing on the ground is the last thing this outfit needs. So don't do anything stupid. Besides, I'm sure a troublemaker like you could find another way to get your juices flowing," Michael hinted.

"Like that redhead back at camp," Milo blurted out.

Michael's face crinkled into a hard stare as he rolled over to face Milo. "Don't you even think of-" Michael couldn't finish his threat.

"Is she spoken for, Commander? She'd mentioned there was a little history between you two, but now you were 'just friends'."

"We're more than friends, but not lovers, Swift. All I know that she's too good for a one-nighter. And if you so much as lay one finger on her without honorable intentions,

You'll wish you were never born," Michael warned.

Not quite lovers. With a reaction like that, I can't help but wonder, Milo thought as he shut his eyes and shifted in his bed roll.

"So, what's Europe like? What can I expect to see around here?" Michael abruptly asked. "I need to know what I'm dealing with if I'm going to operate a resistance outfit here."

"Not much anymore. The east's all pretty much either wasteland, completely unorganized, or run by people who rule with the Invid's blessing. The west was putting up a strong front against the Invid. Especially Saxony and the German Principalities. But that came to an end a few years ago. Saxony's leadership were assassinated by agents working for the pro-Invid regime in the Netherlands, and its armies and those of its allies were routed by the Invid when the new leaders tried to launch an offensive they were completely unprepared for. If you're looking for allies, try France, Provence-Languedoc, or maybe Catalonia. They were sympathetic to Saxony's alliance, but didn't commit heavily, and weren't so severely punished by the Invid. I've heard that Saxony's recovering, but I'll bet a bottle of whiskey they won't have enough of an army to beat a Boy Scout troop." Milo stretched, and asked, "So what are your plans? What do you think we can really accomplish against the Invid?"

"In the short term, not a lot. All I can expect to do is harass them a little, and stay alive. But in about two years the full fleet will be up and ready for action. We've got six more cruisers, three more battlefortresses, and dozens of destroyers still in the shipyards, and the mecha factories are in full production of Alphas, Cyclones, and a new design or two. So in a little over a year, maybe sooner if they can step up the production schedule, we'll have the bulk of the REF coming. And anything we can do on the ground to help them will be essential to their success, so we need to link up with other resistance groups so they'll be able to do their part. We have to keep the Invid fighting on as many fronts as possible, so our cruisers can take up position unthreatened by their Armored Scouts and bombard the hives from orbit. Then they drop the troops and mop up."

"Well, I guess that means we'll have a busy day ahead of us tomorrow," Milo snorted. "We wouldn't want to let the fleet down, would we?"

* * *

Jeanne had the camp all to herself. It was just after the sunrise now, and Roger was busy fixing the two of them breakfast. For her part, Jeanne offered to help, but Pike politely declined. It was just as well, she surmised, as it allowed her time to add an entry to

her diary, saved from the *Valiant's* destruction by Michael's last-minute efforts.

She cleared away an inviting spot at the shaded base of a sturdy pine, and opened up the book that held her most private thoughts. Jeanne looked forward to this. After all, her last entry was several days before the doomed Mars Division invasion of the Earth, and her whole world had been uprooted since then.

Dear diary,

Since our last conversation so much has happened. I remember being so optimistic about the offensive. Our assault against the Invid was a fiasco from the very beginning. I guess we can chalk that up to misinformation. I don't think anyone had a clue as to the actual numbers of the enemy stationed here on Earth. No one, except Michael. So many lives were destroyed in a matter of moments. No matter what we tried, nothing worked.

A few of us escaped. I have Michael to thank for being alive. I guess he still cares for me, no matter how fervently he tries to cast it in terms of fraternity or friendship. We've begun to put together a resistance group, with Michael leading, of course. They're not bad people, I guess. Roger is friendly enough, and quite a skilled bio-maintenance engineer to boot. His hovertransport is truly a gift from above. But, we're all hoping to find some Alphas soon. We've already run into Invid patrols, and are barely managing to fend them off with our two. . . working. . . Cyclones.

*Michael is on a mission in the very hopes of fulfilling that need. He and our other recruit, a Private Milo Swift, started off for the Alps, to scout out the base near Innsbruck. Maybe they'll find something useful. They've maintained radio silence, so I have no word on their status. I hope Mi-. . . I hope **they're** all right. I can only sit here and slowly go out of my mind.*

I guess I'm still making my mind up about Milo Swift. Somewhere in those reflective green eyes, is a vulnerable man, just like any other. . . Just like Michael. But he's decided shut himself off from everybody. I know there is a girl in his past. But I don't have the nerve to ask him about it. Maybe he's talked to Michael about it? Anyway, because of this, Milo drinks constantly. I can see that it's taken its toll on him. But we can't help him if he doesn't want it. I just hope that he doesn't let it interfere with his responsibility to us. The cause comes first, and Michael won't have it any other way.

Michael still won't open up to me. I wish he would; things could be so much better between us. I know he still cares, but he keeps submerging those feelings behind a wall of military propriety. I can only hope.

I'll have to continue this entry at a later time; I think Roger's almost finished with breakfast. I can smell it already.

* * *

A mournful wailing was Milo's greeting to the crisp morning, his harmonica desolately echoing forever. It was well into Milo's third song of passionate blue notes before Michael dragged his head out of his sleeping bag.

"Stop playing, Milo," Michael requested, as the song struck a disturbing chord somewhere deep in Michael's soul. "Or pick something a little less depressing."

"I don't do requests," Milo replied, putting away the instrument.

Michael ignored the remark and stamped his boots as he began to clear the snow from the cave entrance. It took the Commander several minutes to break down all his belongings and pack up. When Michael was finally ready to push off, he noticed that Milo was already on the move, scampering up the remaining furlong to breach the summit.

Milo slid his boots onto the skis, latching them into place. He grimaced in annoyance when he stabbed the powdery snow with his poles. Roger had made them a little too short. But it was nothing an experienced skier such as Swift couldn't compensate for. He adjusted the goggles so that they fit snugly on his face, and he looked over his shoulder to make sure Austin was still on his way, which he was. Milo thrust his poles into the newly fallen snow and charged off down the slope.

They were able to ignore the pangs of hunger and fatigue, but Michael's spirits were low. The pair had found no sign of the military installation they sought, and they'd already traversed three mountain slopes. The sun had shone brightly all day, but a worried Austin watched it begin its decent into the west, while he wolfed down an energy bar. Milo made better use of his time, panning the valley below with Michael's pair of high-powered binoculars.

Michael noticed a sudden smile on Milo's face spill out, becoming wider. "Did you find something, Milo?" Michael asked.

Milo's only response was to bolt off down the hill, slamming his poles into the snow as he went. He cleared a snow bank and was well out of Austin's sight before Michael started out after him.

* * *

"Breakfast! Come and get it!" Roger's voice called from near the camp's stove. Jeanne joined him, stepping away from the hovertransport into the pristine morning light. Pike continued, "After we eat, I'll finish up the major repairs on your Cyclone. That should

take all of today. We can do the adjustments tomorrow. Then I'll show you how it operates, you know, how to activate the jets and target scope." Roger smiled, and offered Jeanne a plate of fried eggs and smoked sausage. Jeanne sniffed it heartily, and began to eat.

"Sure beats survival rations," she laughed as she sat in a camp stool, fork in one hand, plate in the other.

Roger sat next to her quietly, and, contemplating his own plate, commented, "This is nothing compared to what I used to get at home. Back in Texas, I remember, my grandmother used to fix us the most delicious meals. . . that was during the reconstruction."

"Texas, huh? Michael's father was raised there. He supposedly wandered into Houston a day or so after the Holocaust. Or so Michael tells me."

"You mean Major Thomas Austin? The pilot. . ."

"-Who took out a Zentraedi Monitor with a single squadron of fighters. Michael worships him. He was a rare type of man, and Michael's driving himself to the edge to imitate him," Jeanne interrupted.

"He is a world-class hero, you know. Do you know what he was like?" Roger asked.

Jeanne sighed as she put aside her empty plate. "Michael doesn't talk much about him, except in cryptic monologues from time to time. He's most free late at night, if you can get him alone. . ." Jeanne stood up and stretched. ". . . and drunk," she added teasingly. "All I know is that he fathered the man that I love, and that's enough to earn my admiration."

Roger smiled a little uncomfortably, owing to Jeanne's admission, and set down his plate. "Well, I'd best get to work."

* * *

The snow-bitten pair arrived to a scene of utter carnage and devastation, which even the fury of last night's snowstorm couldn't camouflage. Many of the buildings had been razed down to their concrete foundations, and often only a small section of wall signified that a building had once been erected on the very same spot. Twisted sculptures of blackened mecha and their components dominated the piles of rubble that loomed as monuments of war to all these forgotten warriors. The streets were strewn with sections of concrete slabs, contorted metal paneling, and a carpet of glass shards.

The cause of this atrocity was also well represented by the dormant husks of the

malignant reddish *Iigaa* with their stiffened claws grasping at unseen prey. The purple *Gurab* stood frozen in a menacing stances, guardians of this icy tomb. For as far as Michael and Milo could see, all they beheld was death and devastation, because for every few Invid war machine accounted for, it was easy to spot dozens of frozen corpses, desiccated over the last decade by the icy cold of the mountains.

“Over there, Milo.” Michael stretched out his index finger, pointing to a building barely erect amidst its fallen neighbors. Milo’s eyes widened in surprise and in suspicion. “Let’s check it out.” Michael broke out into an eager trot; he was extremely anxious to examine the interior.

They entered the building through its creaking door. The structure’s frame rattled defiantly in the slight wind that presently caressed the abandoned base, and the floorboards moaned with Michael’s and Milo’s every footstep. Michael had stopped pacing about the small and empty munitions shed, and was tugging at something on the floor unseen by Swift. A massive ‘THUD’ erupted as a hatch door on the floor was thrown open.

“A scavenger’s paradise,” Michael assessed of the underground chamber. Swift warily followed him down the stairs. They gazed in wild wonder at the racks of missiles adorning one of the walls. A neatly arranged configuration of protoculture canisters was quickly moved up to the ground level of the munitions shed.

“Let’s see what we have here. . . Recluse RPGs, 35mm ammo for the GU-13 gun pod, and most importantly protoculture, nine canisters of it,” Michael said as he surveyed the newly-found booty. Milo was shifting his weight nervously as his green eyes darted about the abandoned base. “Crates of Hammerhead SRMs too.”

“This is too easy,” Milo decided, fondling a Wolff 9mm machine pistol he’d seen lying on the floor. “I bet all this stuff was planted here. But when will they come back?”

“I don’t recall ever having seen the Invid planting anything. Maybe they never found this stuff,” Austin offered.

“Or maybe they didn’t think anyone would make it here. It was a treacherous climb. That means that they’ll be patrolling the lowlands,” Milo reasoned.

“It also means one of their parties will find Jeanne and Roger very soon, Milo. So we’d best forget about getting any sleep tonight and get to work. After all, it’d be a shame to let all this hardware go to waste.” Michael scooped up a couple of grenades in one palm, and exited the shed to begin his search for other supplies. And so it went. Michael darted from pile to pile, evaluating what was salvageable, and what was merely high-tech junk. He cleared away the skeletons, charred metal plates, and destroyed Alpha components, and suspended his survey of the available resources well into the early morning hours of the cold, clear, star-filled night.

Austin could see his breath in front of his face as he trudged back to the munitions shed to get Milo's aid in the search. Milo was busy cleaning up the machine pistol that he'd lifted off of one of the dead inhabitants of this base. He raised his head when Austin rushed in.

"I'd really appreciate a little help out there," Michael said as angry wisps of hot breath escaped from his lips. "I've located an intact Alpha, except for most of the right arm, which is missing. I've pretty much cleared the debris from it, but I need your help."

"What we need are tools to patch the plane back together, and while you were so busy, I took care of that." Milo said hoarsely. Milo took hold of a small portable trolley, wheeling it out towards the fighter. Michael emerged from the munitions shed with two four-packs of protoculture canisters and a one-gallon jug of heavy water and led Swift to the derelict Alpha fighter.

To overcome the black shroud of the night, Michael placed a circle of flares about the damaged plane and that would have to serve as illumination for the few hours of darkness that remained before sunrise. The Alpha fighter lurked over the humans in its vulture-like Guardian mode; its cockpit was stained with a copious amount of dried human blood, and the pilot's spall-studded body clung to the HUD and the front console of the plane. The canopy showed many cracks, but was not shattered. Another noticeable fault of the mecha was that its right arm was blown off at the elbow servos. Structural damage was evident to the fuselage, but Michael wasn't too worried about that problem.

"Sensor pod looks intact," Michael pointed out. "I've already found a canopy we can use, Milo. If you could attach it, I'll get started on everything else."

In the time it took for Milo to replace the old canopy, Michael cleaned up the cockpit, heaving the dead body over the side, and fastening on a new ejection seat. Austin had already inserted in the protoculture canisters into the Alpha and had poured the heavy water into the fusion reactors' fuel tanks. He then began to examine some fissures he'd noticed by the intakes, located on the plane's underside.

"All done up here, Commander," Milo cried as he put down the welder. Michael looked up at the cockpit, giving Milo the thumbs-up signal.

Milo clambered down and joined Austin. "Right, I'm going to fire it up, and get a list of all the malfunctions the Alpha's computer can come up with," said Michael. "I know we've been at this all night, but I doubt we've even scratched the surface."

Milo cleared the area, preferring to watch Austin from a safe distance. Michael climbed up into the cockpit; the canopy jerked shut. After going through the preflight sequence, he ran a diagnostics check on all the systems of the plane, courtesy of the inboard combat computer. The circuitry of the front console crackled while obeying

Austin's preliminary commands. He frowned in dismay at the results of the damage report coming on line: the side hatch of the nose gear was damaged, two missile bays were non-operative, and life support was malfunctioning. This would be a massive undertaking, indeed.

Well, at least the computer works, Michael thought optimistically.

Austin converted the resurrected Alpha Guardian into its imposing Battloid mode. It issued forth a series of earsplitting creaks as it transformed, and towered above everything in sight as the first pink wave of dawn appeared on the eastern mountains. Through Michael's use of the foot pedals, which he noted also needed to be looked into, the Battloid limped out of the illuminating ring of red flares and over to another mound of rubble. Michael could see Swift relocating all the heavy equipment to this new theater of operations. The servos in the Battloid's legs whined as it bent down and reached into the rubble at its feet. The left arm of the Battloid grasped a large metal limb, a right arm from another Alpha that had been blown off with part of the shoulder and whose hand also held a gun pod.

Milo detached the damaged upper arm from the Alpha and removed the bit of shoulder from the new arm. They went about hooking up the shoulder servos to the torso, although it took them much longer than they expected. Nonetheless, the Alpha's tactical computer persistently displayed a glitch in one of the electrical systems on the limb. Milo dragged Austin over to recheck the connections.

"I don't know why the computer's acknowledging a problem with your hook-up. I don't see anything wrong with it."

"Maybe the computer's messed up," Milo pondered.

"Great! That's the one thing I thought was working on this junk heap. I guess Roger will attend to the computer when we get back," Michael conceded. "Well, take a look at the missile bays after I convert the Alpha back into Guardian mode. I'll be working on the landing gear hatch," Michael said.

Michael and Milo toiled on the Alpha fighter through the sunrise, and worked non-stop through the afternoon. Milo struggled with the missile bays, and he had to manually open the bay doors because the accompanying relay switch circuitry had shorted and burned out. Michael slaved on the hydraulics of the landing gear, a frustrating task that exhausted practically all of his reservoir of patience.

"Damn it! Why can't I figure this out?" Michael cursed. He put his implements down and stepped away from the massive bulk of the fighter that loomed before him.

"I'm done with the missile bays, Commander." Milo's voice announced. Swift uneasily skittered off the Alpha's massive engines, and plopped down in front of Austin.

Milo wiped the rivulets of sweat from his rugged face, and lit up a cigarette.

“Right. Load up the missiles, and then start in on the life support. It looks like a broken pump; that should be easy enough,” Michael estimated. He snatched up the cigarette Milo held out for him.

“Let’s take a breather, boss,” Milo suggested. “This plane ain’t going anywhere.”

“Well,” Michael hesitated, pausing long enough to inhale, “you go ahead, Milo. Get a few a hours of sleep. I’ve made other plans,” he rasped.

Milo shrugged his shoulders, and skulked away; his eyes were already shut by the time he entered the munitions shed. His massive frame curled up on the spread out sleeping bag, and the rush of a haunting breeze was his only other companion as he drifted off into a deep slumber.

* * *

“Jeanne!” Roger’s voice called out.

“Yes, Roger?” Jeanne finished dousing the breakfast fire, and turned her attentions to Pike, who was heaving a Cyclone out into the open, all the while grumbling about a bad back. He set it down before Jeanne, and awaited her approval, before continuing on.

“Is it ready?” Jeanne screeched joyfully. Her stretched smile went from ear to ear. Roger had worked all day yesterday and well into the night on the vehicle, and Jeanne appreciated the effort.

“Yes, I’ve almost finished. Could you put on the armor? I’ve got a few adjustments I need to make in Cyclone armor mode.”

Jeanne put on her battle armor, different from the male version in size, width, and the shape of the chest plate, all for obvious reasons. The shoulder armor on the Cyclone itself was different, being rounded instead of edged, and without the heavy pauldrons covering the upper arms that served as handle covers in motorbike mode. Jeanne looked at the Robotech Cyclone’s only armament: a powerful EP-40 particle beam cannon on the right front wheel cover. She climbed on, charged it up, and changed it to the battlesuit form. She stood patiently as Roger repaired, modified and adjusted for what seemed like hours.

“How long will it be, Roger?” Jeanne impatiently asked.

“Almost done. I just have to realign the transfiguration systems. They’re running a bit slow. I’ll adjust the timing on the. . .”

“Spare me the details,” Jeanne joked. She hesitated, and found that she had to force herself to speak up. “Do you think Michael and Milo are okay? They’ve been gone a long

time, and. . . do you think anything's happened to them?"

Roger muttered something to himself, ". . . and then attach this jet booster to the wheel. . . darned thing's jammed again. . . Okay, to the torso harness. . . Did you say something, Jeanne?"

"No. . . Nothing important." Jeanne lost herself in thought. She couldn't help but wonder how Michael and Milo were faring out there in the mountains. Then she began to perceive a low sound, far in the distance. Several seconds later, her ears perked up. "Roger. . ." she began.

"Now that I heard," Roger shouted. The thumping of helicopter rotors over the tree-line was growing ever louder, ever closer. Soon several aircraft became distinct, sounding like a whole battle formation. "We don't know if they're friendly or not. Let's get that camo net over the hovertransport and take cover!"

Jeanne complied quickly and shed her Cyclone armor. As soon as they had the moved the hovertransport closer to the trees and had camouflaged as well as could be expected considering its size, they took shelter under a tree, and waited. Soon, high overhead, five attack choppers flew in from the north-west. Roger held a rugged pair of Southern Cross issue binoculars to his eyes and swore. "Looks like a mix of Commancheros and old Mil-24 Hinds. And they're armed to the teeth. Shit! I wonder what's going down."

"Let's follow them," Jeanne suggested.

"Are you crazy? Michael and Milo wanted us to wait here."

"Look, Roger, you effectively out-rank me, so I can't order you. But don't you think this sort of thing is strange and deserves gathering some intelligence on?"

Roger paused briefly in thought, and then swore. "Damn it. Okay. I'll take Milo's Cyclone, you take yours; it's as good as it'll ever get. I keep a spare transformation chip calibrated for my height somewhere, so making Milo's fit me shouldn't be too much trouble."

"Right. Let's get the gear we'll need and follow 'em."

Roger watched as Jeanne dashed back for the hovertransport. "Women. They'll be the death of me, you know," he told himself before rushing off to join her.

* * *

A sudden stamping of tired feet awoke Swift from his rest, and in a dreary state, he instinctively yanked out his sidearm and focused in on what turned out to be Austin's pensive face. Milo put the safety on his handgun, and stuffed it back into its holster.

Michael sat down in lotus-style in front of the salvaged portable heater that was the centerpiece of these close quarters.

“Jumpy, aren’t you?” Michael asked.

“Only before my morning coffee. . . What time is it?” Milo demanded, his eyes squinting out into the twilight.

“Let’s see. . . Around nineteen hundred hours.” Michael fished through the various articles in his pack. His hands emerged with a sealed bag of photopasteurized food.

“I slept all day? Why didn’t you wake me up?” Milo groaned as he heard his spine pop back into place. Milo went for his almost empty canteen of liquor.

“No use in waking you up, when I could do the repair work myself. At least I finished up,” Austin said between mouthfuls of rations.

“Great, Commander. . . Here have some of this, it’ll make your meal go down smoother,” Milo offered politely. Austin stomached a few sips of the harsh-tasting alcohol before relinquishing the bottle. “So do we fire up the Alpha in the morning, and head on back to Roger and Jeanne?”

“I’ll worry about that later, Milo. Right now, I just want to bask in the glory of what was accomplished today. It’ll really make a big difference having an Alpha around, and more importantly a pilot like myself. Changes the whole scope of what we can take out. Instead of struggling to force an Invid patrol to retreat like before, now our unit will do away with a patrol strength party in five or ten minutes. Why, if we can come across another Alpha and a pilot for it, Milo, I’d even consider taking on a small hive,” Michael said grandiosely.

“Commander, you must be some kind of pilot,” Milo murmured.

“I’ve worked very hard to become so. Milo, I’m going to be perfectly honest here. From the first time I ever sat in a plane’s cockpit, I knew I was meant to be there. Flying came naturally; I never had to work too hard at it. I guess I inherited the talents, instinct, and sharp reflexes from my parents. . .”

“Parents. . .” Milo pondered. “As in Thomas Austin? **The** Thomas Austin?”

“My dad. Never knew him, though.”

“Impressive.”

“But anyway Milo, when I get in a cockpit, I get a feeling, a sensation of ultimate freedom. I get away from everyone, all the rules, my responsibilities, and when I look out, it’s like I have a universe all to my own,” Michael expounded. “What about you, Milo? Have you ever felt you were chosen to do something?”

“Nope. I’ve managed to do nothing in my life but destroy. Lives, property, souls, everything. All I can do is tear things down.”

“I always pitied destruction. It seems so empty. As a kid I loved to create things - I had this huge set of those toy plastic building blocks - but it always hurt to tear them down. So I never did. They just fell apart or were destroyed by others.”

“So then what’s a creative boy like you doing in the service?”

“I was born there. I had no choice. And everyone expects me to live up to my father, to be a great war hero like him. And just what do you have against the men and women of the military, anyway?” Michael challenged.

“Nothing, if you can let old men in sequestered conference rooms play God with your lives. . . I don’t know about the REF, but you wouldn’t believe how many times Supreme Commander Leonard and his idiot staff sent good men and women to die in hopeless gestures, without proper numbers, support, or resources. It’s like the man would bang his head against a wall, and when it started to really hurt, he took that as a sign to bang even harder. That’s how he ran the war against the Robotech Masters, and that’s why when the Invid came, there was nothing left to defend Earth with. Tell me something, Commander; if you’d had your way would you have gone through with the Mars Division offensive?” Milo asked openly.

“No,” Michael whispered softly. It was clear Milo had made his point. “I wanted to stop it, to keep a distance from Earth to harass the Invid and gain reconnaissance while the rest of the fleet could be made ready. I knew that the Invid were here in far greater numbers than top brass ever imagined. No one believed me. They were so eager for victory that they never really considered the possibility of defeat.”

“I have no problem with the backbone of the military: the soldiers and the field officers. It’s just that the military is the only thing more efficient at destruction than anything else to hit this planet. . . Other than the Zentraedi.”

“Your point is taken, Milo, but the military’s intent isn’t to destroy everything in it’s path. The REF was supposed to be a peace envoy, until the Invid attacked us. Thousands of soldiers lost their lives bringing liberty to dozens of occupied worlds, and when we try to free our own planet, this is the thanks we get,” Michael said.

“Then maybe you shouldn’t have left Earth in the first place,” Milo chimed back. “If you hadn’t, maybe the Invid wouldn’t have the run of it.”

Michael shrugged, and looked away.

* * *

Jeanne watched as Roger’s Cyclone disappeared over a small hill. Without much riding experience, she found herself often falling behind, and trying to negotiate the patches

of scrub that littered their path didn't make things any easier. The helicopters were long out of sight, but they were running with radar at full strength, and were easy to track with the Cyclones' passive sensors. They had hovered in one place for several minutes, and then had moved off at full speed out of their mecha's range.

Eventually Jeanne caught up to Roger, who had stopped near where their prey had tarried earlier, and looked over a grizzly scene. "Jeanne, close and seal your helmet and switch on the air filter," she heard Roger say over the headset radio. "You can't breathe the air down there."

Jeanne complied, feeling the Cyclone helmet's neck seal inflating, pressing tightly against her larynx. She spied down into the small valley they overlooked.

Almost two hundred recently dead corpses lay strewn in the field. They were surrounded by wagons and gear, as if the whole group were refugees of some sort. There were also signs of a panic, and Jeanne noticed a thin greenish haze clung tightly to the valley floor, floating over the bodies. She turned to Roger, but he anticipated her question.

"Chlorine. They saturated the whole valley with the stuff. Some son of a bitch gassed these poor people," he said in disgust.

"The choppers?"

"Right. What I want to know is why. Come on, if you think you can take it."

Roger led Jeanne down carefully down into the valley. Men and women of all ages lay about, contorted in utter agony, bloody tissue coughed from their lungs lying in pools in front of their faces. Even children lay there, their faces frozen in their last dying screams. Jeanne suddenly began to feel extremely ill.

"These people were going somewhere. Look; the whole village was fleeing something," Roger said, examining some of the bodies more closely.

"I wonder what. And why would anyone want to kill them? And who'd want to do it?" Jeanne asked.

Roger looked at an open patch of skin on one of the victims. "I don't know who. But I think I know why. These people were dead already. Look," he said, pointing to an older man's arm.

Jeanne looked closely; several buboes were apparent on the man's flesh.

"Look around," Roger said. "Several of them have it."

"Plague carriers?"

"Plague carriers. I've heard it's made a comeback in some areas in the east, but I had no idea it had made it this far west; someone didn't want to risk their coming into town."

"Were they fleeing the plague?" Jeanne asked.

“I doubt it; if they were, they’d have left their sick behind. Maybe they were running **to** something, not away from it.”

“Where?”

“Let’s find out. Follow me.”

* * *

Austin had taken over from Milo, relieving Swift from a boring four-hour watch. Austin’s six hour vigil was rolling along very slowly and very uneventfully. During the watch, the only sounds that disturbed the stillness of the night was Swift’s dream-induced gibberish. Michael would frequently glance in the direction of the Alpha fighter to assure himself it was still present. The blackness of night cloaked the Alpha fighter so well that Michael actually paced the distance between the plane and the munitions shed to physically touch the plane.

“Just you and me, sweet thing,” Michael promised. He lovingly stroked the Alpha’s underbelly, and decided on continuing his watch from atop its wings.

Dawn was only a thousand rambling thoughts away for Michael. He pondered his predicament with Jeanne. He knew maintaining an veneer of professionalism in front of her and in front of the group would be quite a test of his character. On the ship, he could always isolate himself from Jeanne, and there were always other women. But now, the situation favored Jeanne because he would have to confront her every day. Every single day.

Morning spilled through the Alps, as the atmosphere absorbed nourishing sunlight and the veil of blackness withered away, yielding to the white-specked blue of another day. Michael slid off the Alpha and stretched his arms out before the burning orb that capped the most prominent mountain to the east.

“Well, I’d better rouse Swift,” Michael said. He ducked his head into the entrance, and scowled at the snoring mass at his feet, and at its accompanying uncorked canteen of liquor.

“Good morning, Private. I trust you slept well,” Michael said with exaggerated volume. “We’ve got work to do, so get moving.”

Milo reluctantly crawled out of the sleeping bag, and stretched his neck a few times, trying to work out the crick he’d put in it during the night. Austin took this time to quell the dissonant grumbling in his stomach by devouring another granola bar. Michael considered opening up some of his irradiated self-contained rations, but Milo was already heaving some of the supplies out of the shed.

* * *

Our most recent patrols failed to confirm the presence of the Robotech dissidents. Therefore, it is plausible that they have already reached the abandoned Robotech stronghold and are attempting to acquire mecha and weapons. Our duty is to vanquish the opposition at all costs. Show no regard for the existing structures or other potential humans on the premises. Serve the Regis well, the leader of the raiding party telepathically relayed to her accompanying cluster of eighteen *Iigaa* and six *Gurab* mecha.

The raiding party streamed over the serene white slopes of the mountains, some skimming low enough to kick up a plume of snow as the mecha past over. The armored purplish *Gurab* in the lead locked onto the base and deployed its subordinates, all the while bearing down on the coordinates of faint protoculture emissions.

Points of lights winked to life from the cannon housing atop the leader's mecha's torso. The adolescent sub-queen in command found the scent of battle intoxicating; it had whipped the whole raiding party into a blind frenzy, and it was a major motivation behind the leader's first strafing run.

* * *

"Jesus, will you look at that!" Milo gasped in shock. The malignant swarm of *Invid* mecha had caught him by surprise, both from their numbers and strength. Michael was already up in the cockpit, yelling at Swift to find some cover. The Alpha fighter's engines whined to life; Michael wasted no time in taking off, and rising up to meet the oncoming wave of the enemy.

The ground shuddered with explosions, sending Swift sprawling toward the munitions shed. The world spun wildly for Milo, as a threesome of reddish *Iigaa* delighted in plastering the environs with a continuous stream of cannon fire.

If I can just make it to the shed. Milo desperately scrambled back to his feet. He still brandished his trusty guns, but the situation called for a little more firepower. Another upheaval ensued, raining debris all over the munitions shed. He judiciously glanced over his shoulder only to spy the trio bearing down hard and fast to deliver another devastating barrage.

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.

* * *

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.

* * *

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.

* * *

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.

* * *

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.

* * *

"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.

* * *

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.”

* * *

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.

* * *

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.”

Episode Five:

Out on the Town

“In the post invasion society that remained, the lofty moral standards that humanity once vainly boasted had deteriorated. The family unit was all but gone; the Invid upheld the what little social structure remained. Laws were twisted by the strong to prey on the weak and ignorant, the overwhelming majority of the human population.”

-From Ennis Caulfield's The Shadow of the Flower

20 October 2042

Austin looked warily at the others as they assembled before him for the group meeting. Sadly, the morning sun was unable to breach the threatening steel-gray of the clouds. The campsite remained drenched in shadow as Michael's subordinates gathered around the rear of the camouflaged Alpha fighter. Roger's eyes jumped quickly at the distant rumble of thunder. The carpet of fallen leaves and pine needles skirted away as a gentle rush of wind whistled through the camp perimeter. Jeanne looked away from the sky hoping to find a measure of comfort in Michael's words.

Milo lingered by the newly acquired Alpha. It rested majestically under a canopy of sturdy, leafy trees. After Roger had let anyone go near the winged beauty, Michael began camouflaging the Alpha under a huge web-like conglomeration of branches, hemp, and the natural vegetation. Now, Milo looked at it, squinting slightly. He could barely make out the contours of the plane underneath its natural blanket; and he was standing a mere ten yards from it.

“Okay,” Michael addressed the group, interrupting Milo's examination of the Alpha, “We have virulent and penicillin-resistant strain of plague, encroaching the New Munich area. We have more than enough medical supplies to combat the disease for ourselves and we can possibly trade some the antibiotics to the locals for information or maybe even some protoculture. What do you think?” Michael asked.

“I think that we should try to relieve some of the suffering for these people, no matter what. I wouldn't count on getting any help from them, though,” Jeanne said. “Besides, what we can do is small potatoes compared to the shipment from Passau that'll

be arriving soon.”

“It’s a lost cause, Austin. We try and help these poor saps, and we risk exposing ourselves to Invid symps and the Invid. There are always other means to get information and supplies. Although I know the black market is always a risky proposition at best, we can deal with that element if necessary,” Milo slurred. Michael could detect the familiar odor on his breath; Swift had been drinking. That would likely explain why Milo’s lack of charitable sentiment.

Roger was quick to disagree, “Swift may feel comfortable considering dealing with the black market, but I’m certainly not. I think if we deal with them, we’re sure to expose ourselves, and possibly the Alpha. We can’t let that happen.”

Michael took it all in and remained silent. He weighed all the opinions equally, and decided on the group’s course of action. “Sorry Swift, I tend to agree with the others. I know the supplies we have won’t do much for this epidemic; but it’s a start. Right now, I’d like to stay away from the market. Word could get around about our group, and then it’d be harder to acquire supplies from here on out,” Michael said in an even tone.

Apparently, his judgment would stand unquestioned. Swift brooded in silence, taking time to light up a cigarette. He remained unconvinced, but the final decision had been made by the Commander. Austin covered the distance separating himself and Pike.

Roger had an easy smile etched on his face. He effortlessly packed away the last of the supplies still littering the secluded campsite: the tool caddie, a portable heater, and the neatly packaged dome tent that he shared with the Commander. Austin watched him secure the transport’s rear cargo doors and recollected Roger’s flurry of activity in the two weeks after Austin brought back the salvaged Alpha fighter.

Roger had lovingly slaved over the damaged plane, protecting it from curious eyes. He demanded total isolation from the rest of the group, emerging infrequently to eat or nap. Often, Pike would let a noncommittal groan size up his progress, and then remained silent. The only formed words coming from his mouth during this time were angrily directed to the fighter. Eventually, he began to make headway on the list of problems he encountered after churning through numerous diagnostic runs on the Alpha’s computer. One by one, they disappeared from his lists, and Roger finally emerged the victor in his personal war. Everyone knew he’d finished from the beaming smile on his face when he joined them around the heater for leftovers, two days ago.

“Michael,” Jeanne’s voice called out, alerting him to the present. “We’re ready to move out of here.” The Lieutenant skirted up the platform and slid gracefully into the passenger seat of the transport’s cab. She rolled down the glass window and leaned out the aperture.

“You three go on ahead. I’ll delay my departure by two hours. I’ll just improve on our camouflage; I’m still not set on leaving the plane here. I know how persistent scavengers can be,” Michael announced. Jeanne lost her smile. Then Michael gave her his patented hard stare: *That’s an order.*

Jeanne rolled up her window in anger and turned to Roger who was just strapping himself in for the trek to New Munich. “Let’s get out of here,” she said with disgust dripping from her acrid voice.

Roger nodded quietly. He sensed what had happened and knew of the underlying conflict brewing within this young unit. He primed the fan motors which responded by whirring to life and heaving the massive vehicle off its support struts, which retracted into their housings. Michael swore he heard the transport groan as it started away. He watched it weave a path through the clump of trees and soon could only hear the fans, until those too were but a memory. Milo was now by his side.

“That means you too, Private!” Austin barked.

Milo rewrapped the bandanna around his forehead. The remains of his spent cigarette were pulverized under his mud coated boot heel. He squinted at Michael. “Just finishing up my stick,” Milo said in a raspy voice. Michael grumbled unhappily. Milo was soon out of the Commander’s field of view. Michael set about attending to the Alpha fighter.

Milo soon caught up with the transport and was now riding point. He maintained radio silence, but never strayed more than half a mile ahead of the lumbering beast. His mind still buzzed with the familiar after-effects of distilled liquor he worshipped. *Or was that the engine?* Still, he could sense the charged-up energy in the air between Austin and him. *Come to think of it, the boss’s been quite on edge for the last week. So’s Roger. The damn plane. . . More trouble than it’s worth. I’d kill to see the look on their faces if the plane was actually stolen.* He smiled.

The sun had broken through the veil of gray and it seemed that the threat of rain had been averted for now. He looked over his shoulder and saw the intense bright spot of the transport climbing down into the little valley Swift had just traversed. *Not far now.* Swift saw a fallen hand-painted road sign. Surprisingly, it wasn’t in German: New Munich 23 km. He sped up slightly, the Cyclone shook some as it satisfied his lust for speed. He disappeared from Roger’s view.

* * *

“What the hell is that fool up to now!” Roger’s exasperated voice spat out as Milo

sped out in front of them. It was the first sentence he'd uttered since they'd left Austin back in the forest campsite. He tried to match Milo's increase in speed. "Damn idiot!" Roger sputtered in a thick accent.

Jeanne was silent, she kept staring out the window, watching the changing scenery. But her confused thoughts were focused on Michael. *Why do I put up with his childishness? If he thinks he can treat me like that and chalk it up to military protocol, he can just go to hell.*

Roger noted her seething glare. "A penny for your thoughts."

"Oh, it's nothing." Jeanne dismissed Pike's concern.

Roger nodded. "Sure it is," he said with a hint of sarcasm.

"It is me, or we are ready to slit each others throats? I mean Michael and you are haggling over the Alpha fighter, and I get to be his whipping post."

"First off, Jeanne, the Commander and I have an understanding about the Alpha. It's his plane when it's airborne, on the ground it's my responsibility. That's why I was recruited. As for Michael, he is placing himself under a lot of pressure. But that's what happens in a leadership role."

"Hmmm." Jeanne could see his point. She slumped back in her chair and closed her eyes. Maybe a short nap would douse her lit fuse. *Thank you, Roger.*

"We're almost there, Jeanne. By the time you open your eyes again, we'll be in the city. Hey, what's this? Milo's stopped." Roger's eyes narrowed on the pockmarked trail that might be described as a road. He could see Swift on the other side of a cracked concrete bridge that arched over a carved out riverbed. Murky dark water flowed southward as the rivulet twisted out of sight. Pike noted the collection of huts, wooden shacks, and other deteriorating living quarters just on the far side of the bridge. There appeared to be scant vegetation, only a smattering of scrawny trees whose roots clung to the barren ground on the gully's border. The hovertransport loped across the bridge, and Roger woke Ducasse up.

Jeanne stared bleary-eyed at the scene unfolding before her. As Roger eased the transport towards Milo, she looked around in amazement. *Not a soul in sight. I wonder what happened?*

Swift saw them and waved nonchalantly. He waited for Roger and Jeanne to disembark from the transport, before offering up an explanation. All he had to do was lead them to the ancient well that was the focal point of this town. Jeanne's face lost its color; Roger turned his eyes away and forced himself not to get sick. At least fifteen bodies, all of different ages, complexions, and builds were deposited around the well, staring vacantly at the burning sun. Milo walked over and prodded one of the corpses with a nearby termite-

infested two by four.

“Looks like this village has been hit by the disease. This ain’t all the people here. The rest must have cleared out, packed up for the city,” Milo said. He quickly backed away from the well. “They left the sick here to die.”

“My God. . . I can’t believe it’s spread this far already.” Pike uttered. He was clearly moved. “Nobody deserves to die like this, sick and abandoned.”

Milo circled the well once and looked at all the dead. “Come on, Swift. There’s nothing we can do for them now,” Roger consoled, pulling Milo away from the well. “Let’s head on out of here, maybe we’ll catch up to the rest of the villagers on the way to the city.”

“Unlikely, they’re probably in the city spreading the disease,” Milo mumbled to himself.

The caravan cleared out of the town, leaving its deceased to wither away in the sun. Scavengers would soon descend upon the village, and Milo, Roger, and Jeanne wanted to be as far away from that hamlet as possible. The remainder of the journey was fairly uneventful, although the nearer they ventured toward the city the more frequently they saw the charred sculptures of useless Robotech and Invid mecha rusted over and cracked from age and the elements. As the kilometers disappeared, the vegetation and signs of civilization increased. The threesome passed a horse-drawn wooden cart ridden by an old man and woman. Its cargo was several crates of vegetables. Roger surmised that they probably decided to barter them for other necessities. *Everyone has a reason for going to the city.* More and more, Roger and Jeanne looked out the window to see someone’s home which was often a decrepit shack with emaciated farm animals lingering nearby.

The road divided: one way lead to nowhere, or so it seemed as the worn artery continued on south. The course Milo and Roger chose after Milo badgered a villager for directions was the well traveled path continuing northward. Milo slid in alongside the transport as they came to the outer limits of New Munich.

The outskirts were a dense belt of the shacks and hovels that served many purposes. Most of the people dwelling here used the sturdy but plain looking buildings as shops and eateries. Often the owners of these places kept a small room in the back for the family. The resistance fighters were met with a flurry of activity. People haggled over items in the open air markets. Hawkers yelled straining to have their strangled cries heard above the din of the customers and the animals in the streets. People darted across the congested streets without warning weaving their ways through the onslaught of animal drawn carts and carriages, and the other vehicles that were all moving at a snails pace through the choked streets. The Cyclone and the hovertransport endured five kilometers of this chaos

until Milo noted the familiar signs of an inner city.

The buildings here were mostly brick, although they were also covered in a black filth. Most of them had signs in German and English that hung above the main entrances. The modes of travel were restricted to the few motorized vehicles that ran on ethanol or some other fuel and traffic was well regulated by street signs and lights. Milo knew this was contrary to the norm. In the other towns he'd rampaged through, the traffic lights never had been fixed. The streets here were relatively free of pedestrians and appeared rather clean, but were still cursed with frequent potholes.

Roger was the first to spot a decent-looking two-story establishment that overlooked this thoroughfare. He wedged the transport in between the inn and a fenced off plot that was now a weed infested park filled with piles of mecha parts. Milo slid the Cyclone off the main street and parked it next to the covered entrance of building. He went in through the swinging doors into the dim wood paneled foyer.

Nobody was manning the clerk desk behind which was a half open black stained door. The foyer had several other exits: one arch lead into a small restaurant on the first floor, a narrow staircase lead up to the second floor probably to the rooms, and there were several closed doors some of which were locked with padlocks. Milo drifted up to the desk, and leaned over. There were a few people enjoying the hazy ambiance of the nearby restaurant. The music of strained violins wafted through the restaurant and met his ears out here in the foyer. Roger and Jeanne straggled in five minutes later. Roger looked a little pale. Jeanne slipped an arm around Pike's waist to help him keep his balance. She looked around the foyer quickly.

"Has he got it?" Milo whispered at her.

"I don't know. The symptoms don't match. He is ill. Ten to one says it's food poisoning."

"Wonderful. That means I'll be spewing out my guts after a couple of hours," Milo spat back. He and Roger had shared the same meal earlier; Jeanne and Michael had declined, and opted for MRE rations.

"Well, I suggest you dispose of the rest of the left-overs from that 'Fishhead Surprise' crap, before that becomes a certainty," Jeanne replied.

Milo nodded, and lit up a cigarette. "Does Austin know where we are?"

Jeanne nodded. "We radioed him before we came inside. He'd just cleared the village. He should be here within an hour." Jeanne's voice trailed off when she saw the half-open door give way and a hefty tired man slide behind the counter. He met them with a questioning smile.

"Any rooms available?" Milo murmured. He dipped his cigarette in the ash

burdened tray on the desk. The man grunted which Milo interpreted affirmatively. "I want three rooms: one for the lady here, one for my friend with her. And I want a room with two beds in it. I'm meeting someone here: a young man with long dyed hair. When he arrives, please send him into the restaurant," Milo added.

An adolescent came out and snatched up a key ring that hung on a rusty nail imbedded the wall behind the hotel desk. He escorted Roger and Jeanne up to their rooms. Milo watched their forms disappear up the staircase. Milo lingered downstairs to finish his fuming cigarette. "We'll pay when we depart."

"No, you pay now. I've had too many customers skip out on me without paying," was the proprietor's unyielding answer.

"We don't have much money. As a matter of fact, I'm in town to scare up some funds," Milo stalled. He finished his cigarette and tossed the butt in the ceramic ashtray on the counter. "Perhaps we can pay you another way."

"How?" The man was definitely interested. His brow crinkled with curiosity.

"We're scavengers by profession. And we've come into some odds and ends that might be of use to a man like you."

"Exactly what is it you wish to trade?" the man replied.

"Medical supplies. Enough for you and your family. This stuff'll protect you against the pestilence cutting through here," Milo explained.

"Hmm. . . If you gave me a demonstration of the medicine's effectiveness then maybe something can be arranged."

"Hey look, if you don't want it cheap now, you'll be lucky to get any of it later. I'm dumping it on the market, and well you know how they'll exploit it. I can cut you in on it now." The man remained unconvinced. "As for its effectiveness, well, we three have taken it, and we've all been exposed to the disease. The man that we came in with had a really bad time of it a couple of days ago, then we found boxes of the stuff and all took the cure. He's walking now. He'll be cured within days," Milo replied. It was a lie, but he was betting he wouldn't be caught.

"Okay, you can stay," the man decided. "I want enough for my family, and as soon as possible."

"As soon as my friend shows up, send him in there, then I'll deliver on my promise. The disease is ravaging the outskirts already, so we're sitting on a gold mine. It won't be long before people start contracting it here in the inner city," Milo assumed.

"It's already here; my youngest has the symptoms. We're afraid to do anything. And the doctors we've seen haven't been able to do anything." A trace of desperation lingered in the man's last sentences.

“You’ll be fine. All of you,” Milo proclaimed. “Not a word of this to anyone.” Milo saw the man nod and then disappear through the door. The adolescent returned back down the staircase, stopping only moments in the presence of Milo’s hardened scowl. Milo turned away from the boy and marched off into the restaurant. He found the bar and ordered up a double of the house’s best.

* * *

Austin had no problems with following Ducasse’s directions through the city to the inn they’d selected. Sporting some loose-fitting pants and a sweater, it seemed that no one was too interested in his presence or appearance as he ventured through the crazed frenzy of the outer belts of the city. In short order, he was pulling up to the inn. It wasn’t too hard to spot. It was the only building in the inner city with a hovertransport off to the side. He parked next to Milo’s mecha and went up to the entrance.

Already, some of the neon lights were displaying their colored tubes to the oncoming sunset. It certainly looked different from watching the day come to a close in the hinterlands where the group had been for past month. He looked up at the display across the street. A movie theater. Its tower of neon light rose up above any of the neighboring buildings. Michael turned away from the hypnotizing radiance and rushed inside the inn. It wasn’t long before a burly man pointed him to the restaurant.

The restaurant wasn’t crowded at all. In fact, aside from Milo’s form hoisted up on a stool, a lone man hunched over the counter was the only other person in the room. Michael negotiated the sea of tables and chairs and pulled up a barstool next to Swift. Michael shook off the day’s long journey and ordered a beer. The barkeep, apparently the innkeeper’s brother-in-law, refilled Milo’s empty glass and left the two conspirators alone.

“I heard about Pike.” Austin took a gulp from his stein.

“Jeanne dropped by half an hour ago with a status report. Pike’s fine now. Looks like our suspicions were right. It was my cooking. He’s okay now. Even ordered something to eat. I think he’ll turn in though, maybe recharge his batteries for tomorrow.” Milo cocked his head back and let the whiskey trickle down his throat after which he placed the empty glass down on the nicked countertop. “You and I are sharing a room. And I planned to pay with some of the antibiotic we have. I know we’re pretty tapped out for cash. It’s all set with the innkeeper and his family.”

“Good thinking. I checked our protoculture canisters. We’re running incredibly low. Hopefully, we can trade for some canisters with the supplies we have,” Austin said in a concerned voice.

“I know. We’re always low on the stuff,” Milo said dryly. “Look, I’m going out tonight; I’ll need some funds.” Milo waved for a refill of his glass.

“What exactly do you plan to do with it? We’re not exactly rolling in gold bullion,” Michael replied warily. He turned his head to stare at Swift face to face.

“Do a little gambling. . . Fill up the coffers for the weeks ahead.” Milo continued, “I don’t know, maybe blow off a little steam. I know we’re all a little drained right now. Maybe a night out on the town would do me good.”

“Okay, I’ll endorse it, providing you try and keep out of trouble.” Michael intended his stern warning to be taken seriously, but Milo shrugged it off with a twitch of his massive shoulders. He started in on his new drink much to Austin’s displeasure.

Jeanne came into the restaurant and saw the two men up at the bar exchanging something. She noted that Swift hadn’t moved from the stool since her last visit which was over two hours ago. She was also angry at the fact that Austin hadn’t come up to her room and greeted her when he first arrived. *Why is he just ignoring me? What did I do to get him mad?* Michael yielded a nod of recognition in her direction and she took that as a cue to join them at the bar. She didn’t sit down.

“When did you get in, Commander?” she demanded coldly.

“Haven’t been here long, have I, Private?” Michael said, turning to Milo. Austin looked to Swift for verify his story. Milo nodded once. “We’re discussing the agenda for our stay in the city. Milo’s going to acquire more funds for the group. I’ve reviewed his plan, and have given it my approval. I just hope you don’t run into a bad streak of luck.” Michael smiled casually.

Milo motioned to his pistol. “That’s what this is for,” he replied, only half-joking.

“Jeanne, Milo tells me we owe the innkeeper some antibiotics for our stay here. Would you please get them from the transport, and see to the family immediately.” Michael’s voice was gentle enough to make the direct order sound like a personal request.

“Just thought you’d all like to know. Roger’s sleeping soundly. No signs of cramps and his fever’s abating. Well, I’ll leave you men to finish up what you were talking about.” Jeanne nodded and excused herself. She was soon out of sight.

“Commander, if I may be so bold, you are a consummate fool if you let her get away from you.”

“You let me worry about her,” Michael snorted. “As for you, if you get into trouble, find us if you need backup. I don’t want you injuring your ribs again; especially after they’ve just healed. The last thing we need is you inciting some kind of violence against us. Well, Milo, enjoy the free evening, and win us some money.” Austin nodded before he left. He wanted to see how Jeanne was progressing with her task. He also

wanted to apologize for all the anger he had thrown her way; it wasn't intended for her. *Maybe she already knows that. I could never stay angry at her beautiful face for too long.*

* * *

Milo exited discreetly from the restaurant just as a group of boisterous workers shuffled in and swallowed up a table in the center of the serving area. He saw Austin head upstairs and smiled with the satisfaction of setting things straight. At least Jeanne had a fighting chance in her attempts to claim Austin as her own, Swift had seen to it. Now, it was his turn to take up the gauntlet hurled before him, and fleece this town for every penny it could cough up. He walked out into the neon night and slid on his Cyclone. The barkeep recommended a place that was but three blocks away. She also mentioned that 'Lady's' had quite the notorious reputation of being connected heavily with the black market. It wasn't too long before Swift had tracked the place down and was squeezing his Cyclone in with the mass of other bikes huddled near the front entrance. He dusted off the night, and marched on up to the noisy entrance. The building itself didn't stand out from its neighboring counterparts; it was as grimy and old as the rest of the lot. Shingles had fallen to the ground and a dozen or so littered the front entrance. From the outside it appeared dangerous enough. Lurking near the entrance was a huge man by most standards. When compared with Milo, the bouncer was several inches shy, but more than made up for the difference with his bulk. He seemed to be in top condition as well. His sculpted form made Swift think about the consequences of a fight for a fleeting moment. *I could take him, if I had to. . .* His shaved head and toothy snarl reminded Milo of a watchdog of some sort; it also added to his menacing aura.

Milo brushed past him and soaked in the sights and sounds of all of mankind's vices that were on display here. He could here the raucous bantering that went on during games of chance and skill; the gambling hall was to the left and through a pair of cheap imitation Corinthian columns. Several staircases led to the floors above this pandemonium, and Swift noted prostitutes latching on to their customers for that hour; and eyed several such couples staggering upstairs. Right in front of him were a disorganized conglomeration of mismatched tables and chairs, mostly occupied by the impressive patronage of this pleasure house. Between two mammoth staircases was a highly polished bar that was also lined with customers and buzzing with heated discussions. Behind the counter and the teams of bartenders attending to the people was a beautiful array of glasses, hand-painted beer steins, and distinctive liquor bottles. Milo received a hard stare from the head barkeep, a stocky blond man with a ruddy complexion. He pushed his way past the hyperactive

dancers gyrating near the small stage in front. On stage, a synthesizer trio droned out a hard pulsing arrangement that throbbed painfully in Milo's ears.

Milo left the main hall behind him, venturing through the columns and down some polished staircases. Three chandeliers hung limply from the high dirty peeling ceiling and threw adequate light over the this casino. A huge smoky cloud lingered everywhere; even Swift coughed when he entered the dense thing. *Ventilation must be awful.* Milo smiled when he noticed a spot opening out at one of the outer tables.

* * *

Michael dried off his face with the plush hand towels provided by the inn. He looked around the room that he was sharing with Swift. Its furniture was old, but functional and sturdy looking. He walked up to the cracked mirror mounted on the wall space next to the closet's sliding doors, and quickly brushed back an unruly crop in his mane of dark hair. The only decoration in this room was an old acoustic six-string guitar whose strap hung on a hook in the wall. He reached for it and threw the strap around his broad shoulders.

Austin formed a few chords and strummed. *Needs to be tuned.* Austin twisted several pegs and tried it again. It sounded much better, more depth to the tone. *Now, how does that song go?* The notes came rushing forth from his mind, as his fingers darted across the frets to sculpt them.

Once upon a time a long long time ago
Wherever you would lead me I would surely follow
Girl you put me through some pain and misery
And now you are standing on my doorstep,
Telling how much you need me

Ain't nobody home

He found his song interrupted by a soft rapping came from his door. "It's open," he shouted, continuing to play the blues song, trying to perfect the arrangement. It was Jeanne who walked in on the balladeer. Michael stopped playing and set the guitar down gently. Jeanne looked disappointed; it showed on her face.

"Why did you stop playing?" Jeanne questioned. She closed the door, sat down on the bed, and began strumming the strings on the instrument.

"I'm out of practice. It's been a long time since I last picked up a six string,"

Michael lamented. He got up to look out the window and stared in silence at the night.

“I remember hearing your band play, Michael. You were very good. I also remember that you promised to show me how to play this thing.” Jeanne smiled affectionately.

“Well, I taught you how fly, didn’t I?” Austin’s joke elicited a controlled laugh from his companion. “How’s Pike?” Michael changed the subject; there was no need to dwell on the past anymore. He still had his back turned to her.

“He’s sleeping. Poor fella, he deserves the rest. It’s probably the first decent night’s sleep he’s had in two weeks,” Jeanne sympathetically evaluated.

“Hmmm. What about you? I hear I’ve exhausted your reservoir of patience.” Jeanne nodded, but said nothing. “Well, for that and all the other little things I’ve done or haven’t done, I’m truly sorry.” It sounded practiced enough to make Jeanne doubt its sincerity. But Jeanne was happy that she’d at least dragged an apology out of Austin. “And to make up for it, I’d like to take you out to dinner. So can we call a truce?” Michael turned around and smiled at Ducasse. His smile melted her heart, and she couldn’t refuse him this or anything else.

“Where do you want to go, Jeanne?” Michael grabbed a sturdy jacket and the last of the group’s funds.

“Well, we’re in the heart of Bavaria, so how about just a nice cozy Biergarten, for some Dunkelbräu, Bratwurst, and Sauerkraut?”

Michael scowled at the thought. “Next time I crash-land on Earth,” he muttered under his breath, “I’ll do it in Italy.”

* * *

“Jacks or better to open. Maximum bets of a hundred only. We don’t want anyone around here to go penniless.” A broad-shouldered man cheerfully slapped Swift on the back as the newest arrival sat down, and scanned his competition. Milo hacked a couple of times; there were two smokers hovering around the table, one of which was puffing contentedly on a pungent cigar.

To Milo’s left was a white-haired man with sharp blue eyes which nothing escaped. He wore an open necked sweater and loose fitting pants. His face was a cold stone wall etched with wrinkles, showing not the slightest glimmer of emotion.

The next player was a nervous wisp of a man; he smiled uneasily and always ran his index finger around the rim of his drinking glass which was periodically refilled at the end of several rounds. He had a large pile of winnings in front of him and it appeared to

Milo that luck was with this gambler tonight.

Sitting directly across from Swift was a bearded man. He tended to stroke it when his mind was engaged in some deep thought. Milo would remember him as the man who never blinked, as he rarely did. His eyes would stare at the pot on the table, and he rarely looked up.

And finally completing the circle around the table was a woman. She was a gorgeous bleached-blonde in a skin-tight black jumpsuit that hugged her voluptuous body closely. Her eyes were a sparkling brown and it was obvious to Milo that her features weren't strictly Germanic; he guessed some of her family had come over the Alps from the wastelands of Lombardy or Venice after the Holocaust. Nevertheless, she used her disarming smile to her own advantage. Occasionally, she would theatrically toss her hair back.

"Right, now you people be nice to our visitor. I'm going upstairs." The man whom Milo replaced smiled at the others as he wandered away.

"Let the games begin," the lady proclaimed. She dealt out the cards gracefully. It was a real effort for Swift to keep his eyes on the cards in front of him and his mind on the task at hand.

These guys look like real pros; could be a long night. Swift fondled his cards and then peered around for any initial reaction. The face of stone looked comatose. And the bearded man stroked his thick beard pensively. Milo couldn't bring himself to look at the lady.

"I'll open for fifteen," Milo began.

The others all stayed in their hands and went along with Milo as he gently coaxed the others to throw their money into the ever increasing pot. Finally, the dealer called. Milo had been nursing three kings all along and won. Stone face had three of a kind also; but showed no disappointment at his loss. The majority of the others had two pairs. And so went the course of the evening. Milo started off well. He won a most of the initial rounds and built up quite a stack of winnings, but then his luck went sour and his mind moved on to other aspects of the game. He stole glances of the beautiful woman immediately to his right; and he even sensed that she willingly encouraged it.

Three hours later he'd lost almost half his winnings. A decent hand hadn't landed in his lap for ages and he sensed that the others had figured his strategy out: when he upped the stakes the others called immediately. He ordered a stiff drink; maybe that would help him to regroup. Now the bearded man was the big winner with Stoneface not too far behind. Milo and the other two brought up the rear. Swift began to bluff increasingly and though he lost even more money, he felt the tactic was a worthy one.

Set these chumps up for when I do have a really good hand and take it all home. It's got to be soon, though; I'm running out of money. The next deal was on its way. Milo forced his face to lose all expression when he picked up his cards. Three sevens and an ace kicker. Milo kept the trio and dumped the ace and the two of hearts he'd drawn. Their replacements fluttered to the felt covered table and Swift reached for them, one at a time. He'd drawn another seven. Four of a kind. The odds were staggering against drawing such a hand, but Milo didn't care; he had the winning hand. *Now comes the hard part. To drive this pot sky high, I'll have to be extra careful.*

Milo had a little luck in his favor. All of the others had admirable hands. Stoneface and the bearded man each had a three of kind. The lady had played herself into a straight. And the other player had a full house. All were willing to raise the stakes. The play continued as the bets escalated. Finally the bearded man called, and everyone proudly laid their cards out for all to see. Milo smiled diabolically as he thrust his cards down. Stone face gurgled; Milo had broken him. The bearded man was also tapped out. They got up to leave and the other man joined them after offering to buy the next round of drinks.

"Not bad," a sultry voice crooned. Milo looked at the blonde. "Must be over twenty two hundred in that stack. How are you going to spend it all?" She gracefully slid out of her seat and looked him over.

I could have her if I wanted. She's making a play for me. Maybe later. Milo scooped up his winnings and started away silently. He'd built up a mighty thirst that had to be quenched.

"So you're the strong, silent type, huh?"

Milo stopped. "You've got style, lady. The way you distracted all the men at that table, you'd have won, if I didn't roll into town."

"You're good enough to make a living at this. You'd make at least as much as I do. If you're still around here later, we can pick up this conversation where we left off; but for now, I've got another commitment to uphold. I'm sure we could find plenty of amusing ways to celebrate your big night out." She smiled suggestively at Swift. He understood her meaning. Milo watched her cut a slinky path through to a mammoth staircase leading up and saw her svelte form mingle in with the crowd lingering on the steps. She disappeared from his view.

* * *

"Damnit, Cipolla, I was told you were a man who could get things done!" Rimpler shouted, slamming his fist on his desk.

“And you told me you had good intelligence that the hospital was unguarded. You were wrong, **sir**. We were outmatched; Cyclones are too small and agile to attack with helicopters,” an aging Sicilian replied, standing at attention before him.

“Some mercenary!”

Cipolla scowled. “I lost a lot of good men and equipment in that fight. I won’t have their-”

“Save it. As of now, you are dismissed. As per our agreement, your failure has resulted in the forfeiture of the half of your fee to be received upon completion of the mission. You have one day to leave the city.”

“And how do you expect to capture this stock of medical supplies, if you need it so much?”

Rimmler laughed. “There is an adage: ‘If you want it done right, you have to do it yourself.’ My men are intercepting the shipment as it arrives in town. But that’s no longer your concern. Go back to Mecklenberg. Tell von Königslöw I have no more use for you. I have a new man on loan from Arnhem on the job.”

Cipolla saluted, and marched stiffly out of the room.

* * *

Swift had been asking questions of the regulars still loitering about the bar past the witching hour. Most of them were tight-lipped; but some interesting tidbits of information came his way when Swift offered to buy a drink or two. Alcohol was always a safe bet to bypass the silent treatment. He’d learned of the local political situation brewing in the inner city. The outer city slums were ruled by impotent street gangs able only to dominate several streets at a time. They posed no threat the dueling factions of the inner city.

The first man of power was called Rimmler. His enemies called him many other things, but were unable to stop his reign over the heart of the city. He was a direct pawn of the Invid, and, in return for his services, the Regis allocated a certain percentage of the area’s protoculture stock for his own use. He provided tight security for several of the Invid’s interests in New Munich with no questions asked. Under his charge was the region’s main protoculture warehouse where canisters of the fuel were kept in transit to other destinations, all controlled by the organic computer that ran the control systems of the warehouse and the Urban Enforcers that roamed the perimeter of its enclosing fence.

The only real threat to his tyranny over New Munich’s inner city was the ‘Lady.’ Not many knew her real identity; and her loyal following made it extremely difficult for Rimmler to bend her under his will. Although the Lady was deeply involved in criminal

endeavors, she did try to look out for the well-being of the average worker. Often, she doled out medical supplies and food to the outer city slums. Her ranks of followers increased monthly. Many had claimed to see her, but often those sightings were more myth than fact. She encouraged her low profile; it made assassination attempts against her being amazingly difficult to complete.

As Swift sat down at the bar, his mind deliberated on the golden opportunity before him. *This female racketeer could be the answer to our problems. We could work out a simple trade: supplies for protoculture and information. I'd have to run it by the Commander; but I don't think he'd object. Then again, she's black market. And the others in the group are a little edgy about dealing with that complication. If I could only track her down and have a little chat with her. . .*

"Need a refill?" the bartender prodded. Milo pushed his glass up to the bottleneck and watched the alcohol cascade into bottom of his glass.

"You seem like someone who'd know about the comings and goings of this joint." Milo waited for some reaction. Nothing. "Well, just for the record, tell your employer I've got some medical supplies. It's the Lady's for a price," Milo hinted.

"I'll see that she gets the message, stranger. I hope for your sake you're not bluffing. If you cross her up, you'll be needing that gun of yours to make it out of this town alive," the man threatened.

"I don't doubt it, bub," Swift muttered as he brought the glass up to his lips.

"Anything else?" The man started to move away back to the beckoning customers clamoring for his attention.

"Yeah. I want a girl for the night and some of your finest whiskey - scotch, if you've got it," Milo slurred.

"Go up to room sixteen. Someone will be with you soon. And please do enjoy yourself," the bartender smiled, handing Milo his drink.

"I'll keep that in mind."

* * *

"Are you turning in, Michael?" Jeanne asked sweetly. They stood outside the door to his room. Michael fondled the room keys and poked them into the lock. He flung the door open and marched inside; Jeanne followed in his wake. Austin opened the window and heard the silence of the city night. Jeanne promptly flopped down on Milo's bed and tucked her legs behind her.

"Nope. . . I'm not really tired. But if I'm going to check on the Alpha tomorrow,

I'll have to start out early. I want to make it back here in the afternoon. Actually, maybe I should send Pike out there." He turned to his bed and took up the guitar. Jeanne smiled appreciatively; Austin was going to play for her. The notes came from his voice and guitar, the song from his heart:

Watching girls go passing by
 It ain't the latest thing
 I'm just standing in a doorway
 I'm just trying to make some sense
 Out of these girls passing by
 The tales they tell of men
 I'm not waiting on a lady
 I'm just waiting on a friend

A smile relieves a heart that grieves
 Remember what I said
 I'm not waiting on a lady
 I'm just waiting on a friend
 I'm not waiting on a lady
 I'm just waiting on a friend

Don't need a whore
 Don't need no booze
 Don't need a virgin priest
 But I need someone I can cry to
 I need someone to protect

Ooh, making love and breaking hearts
 It is a game for youth
 But I'm not waiting on a lady
 I'm just waiting on a friend

"Michael, that was wonderful. . . I've never been serenaded before," Jeanne stammered. She was positively aglow. "It's a beautiful ballad. Who wrote it?"

"It's pretty old. The guys who wrote and performed it were named Mick Jagger and Keith Richards - their band was called the Rolling Stones. My voice wasn't hitting the high notes like I used to be able to." Michael propped the guitar up against the nearest wall. He was done for the night. "I'm getting up at nine hundred hours in case you're interested in have breakfast with me in the morning, Lieutenant." Austin smiled graciously. Jeanne blew him a goodnight kiss and silently shut the door behind as she started down the hall to her own room.

Sweet dreams, Jeanne.

Milo warily entered the unlocked room. No expense had been spared. The furniture consisted of a plush brass bed and a lone sturdy looking dresser. The bedroom also had an adjoining cramped bathroom, which had the hot water already in the tub. *Kinda upclass for a hooker. Normally, they're lucky if they get a mattress in good condition and a clean pair of sheets. I must say that the Lady knows how to take care of her people.*

Milo slid off his gun holster and tossed it on the bed. His boots came next; he wrenched them free from his sore feet and went to the bathroom. A quick soak wouldn't hurt. It was his time anyway. The hot water washed the grime and pollution of the city off his ragged form. He removed the bandages from his bare but scarred chest and tossed them aside. Swift stood there dripping in satisfaction as the steam flooded the rest of the bedroom. He heard a timid knocking at the door and soft footsteps ensue. Someone was in the room. Milo wrapped a thick towel around his muscular body and peered outside.

The girl had her back turned to him; she was slender and short almost to the point of being petite. Curly locks of her luxuriant hair draped itself over her delicate shoulders. She stood frozen like a statue; almost afraid to move. She seemed to be captivated with Milo's laser pistol and holster and tentatively reached out for the firearm.

"Well, hello there." Milo stepped out into the bedroom. She jerked her hand back and slowly turned around. *She's just a child! There's no way she's even twenty years old. Look at her; she's trembling. She must be so terrified.* "What's your name, lovely lady?"

"Gabrielle," she said in a trembling voice.

Sweet angel Gabrielle. "You're new at this aren't you?" Milo saw her venturing closer to him. Her blue eyes looked up demurely at Swift; tears were welling up in her ducts.

"I know what to do, sir. If you'll just relax and let me take care of everything." She said it in broken phrases and struggled to keep her composure. She reached up to Milo and stroked his bare chest. Swift's eyebrows raised slightly as her hands traversed his hardened physique. She did notice his numerous collection of scars and would ask him about them later. Hopefully, she'd have her courage up by then.

Milo grabbed her hands and wrenched them from his body. She started trembling again. She pulled away confused. "Why did you do that? Didn't you like it? Don't you like me?" she pleaded.

"I tell you what, Gabrielle. I'm just in the mood for a really good rub-down. That's the only reason I hired out a girl," Milo explained.

"No," Gabrielle shook her head in disbelief. "When you saw me, I could tell I wasn't what you wanted. You wanted someone older; I'll be just as good as them, mister. I promise."

“Why are you doing this, Gabrielle? I’m giving you an easy way out. Do you really want to do this for a living?”

“It’s all I have left, mister; my father died of the disease and the others didn’t want to take care of me. It’s the only way for me to survive. The other girls say it gets easier after the first time. That you just try and block out the shame; and then pretty soon you forget to feel the shame. Then it just becomes a job.”

“You mean you’ve never. . .” Milo couldn’t finish the sentence. She nodded slightly. Milo took up her face in his hands and kissed her on the forehead. “I’m truly sorry that this is what you have to do. But for tonight, you won’t have to do anything for me but give me a good rubdown. I’ll pay the full fee; nobody has to know the difference. Think you can live with it, Gabrielle?” Milo demanded.

She smiled and motioned to Swift to lie down on the bed. Milo was about to stretch out on the bed, when the door burst open and several armed intruders rushed into the room. Milo didn’t even bother to try for his gun; he raised his hands up and sat up in the bed. Gabrielle was curled up in a sobbing mass at the foot of the bed. Two rough looking characters dragged her away. Four other men still remained; all were armed with shotguns and automatic pistols - no energy weapons. They stepped aside and two women marched into the room.

One Milo already knew. She was the blonde at the card game. She still had on the same jumpsuit, the only addition to which was a menacing firearm aimed at Milo. Her companion was in a regal evening gown and was slightly older, but still was quite attractive. Milo would have guessed her to be in her mid forties. And there was a definite family resemblance between the two.

“This is the one who’s been asking all the questions. I don’t think he’s one of Rimmler’s men, but. . .” the blonde Milo recognized insisted. “He also has something that might be of interest to us, sister.”

“Yes, I know about that! Take him out back and work him over; find out what he wants and then kill him. He’s a loose end Rimmler can use against us,” the older woman barked.

“Do I have a say in this, ladies?” Milo interjected. The blonde was silent. Her older sister flashed hatred at Swift. “Well, I guess not; let me go slip into something more comfortable. . . like a coffin.” Swift went to the bathroom to put on his clothes for what he surely thought would be the final time. When he was forced to emerge from the cubicle like bathroom, Milo was still buttoning on his shirt. He watched with great displeasure as the thugs took away his beloved SAL-9. They forced him through the hallway and to the back entrance.

* * *

“Call ‘em in, Dieter!” Rimmler’s men started spraying the back alley with bullets the minute the back door creaked open. The truck driver was skewered by several of the armor-piercing projectiles and tumbled to the ground. His blood-soaked shirt was soon drenched in mud as well. The truck’s other passenger was pinned behind the wheeled transport, and couldn’t unload his ammo at the unseen ambushers. His eyes flinched as he saw a pair of bright headlights appear at the entrance to the alley. He brought his machine pistol up and trained his sights on the windshield of the oncoming car bolting towards him and the truck. He rolled under the truck before the car plowed into the back of it. He could hear people getting out of the car and the disturbing crackle of more gunfire.

The second Swift stepped out into the night he heard shots. He instinctively hit the floor and hoped nobody noticed him trying to find cover. The blonde and her loyal following were open targets; but they soon found cover and concentrated on Rimmler’s men who’d come in by the car. Soon more of the Lady’s reinforcements arrived and had Rimmler’s men pinned. From then on it was a simple matter to pick them off, one by one. The victory was not without losses though. All told, the Lady’s remaining forces retrieved five of their corpses from the darkened alleyway. Swift was dragged back into the building and taken to a well guarded room.

The blonde threw him on the floor and then trailed in after him. Her sister cast a disapproving look at Milo and got up from her chair. The blonde began, “Rimmler’s getting closer and closer every time. His men killed five of ours, before we ran them off, sister. They also got to the truck.” That bit of bad news elicited a deep frown from the elder sister.

“Damn that Rimmler! It’s time we upped the ante, and I don’t care how many mercenaries he hires - Cipolla, Kane, whoever! Next time, we attack the warehouse. The Invid will retaliate against him and he’ll lose his hold over this town.” She pointed a crooked finger at Swift, who had been listening rather intently at the previous monologue. “I thought we decided to kill him.”

“Why? He’s not one of Rimmler’s men. He didn’t try anything unusual in the shootout. He was as scared as the rest of us,” the blonde said defensively.

“He hustled us out of over twenty two hundred; it’s our house policy to eliminate unfair gaming. . .”

“I was to blame for that. I let him take advantage of us.”

“Okay. . .” the elder sister mused. “It seems the Lady is in quite the forgiving mood

tonight, so you can walk away. . . minus your winnings. . . And it would be in your best interest to stay away from here for the duration of your stay.”

“You’re cool ones, I’ll grant you that,” Milo muttered.

“Sister, about what he can offer us,” the blonde whispered.

Her sister nodded in comprehension. “I believe you claimed to have something to offer us in exchange for the Lady letting you go free.”

“You must think I’m stupid. There is no Lady; she’s a fiction. She can be either you or your sister. You two run the Lady’s enterprises in New Munich. That’s why Rimmler hasn’t won yet. If he kills one of you, there’s the other one to contend with, isn’t there?” Milo alleged.

“Perhaps we should just kill him,” the blonde threatened.

“What would be the point?” Milo began. “You could never get your hands on the medical supplies from Passau’s hospital you desperately need. That’s what was in the truck outside, wasn’t it?”

“You’re very astute, mister-” the elder sister searched for a name.

“Swift!”

“Milo Swift?” the blonde asked in surprise. She looked at him in disbelief. “We have heard of you, mercenary. You must be getting old - letting yourself get captured this easily.” Milo shrugged. “And yes. That truck was filled with medical supplies.”

“So here’s my suggestion, ladies. We trade you our antibiotics for protoculture canisters and the money. No one gets hurt and you save your city without Rimmler ever being the wiser.”

“We’ll let you keep the money; but we can’t supply the canisters. Rimmler controls the distribution of protoculture in this area.”

“That’s why you want to take out the warehouse - to make Rimmler lose favor with the Invid. It’s a very ambitious goal, ladies. I hope for this city’s sake that it works.” Milo was standing now and straightening out his collar in a nearby mirror. “What security systems does Rimmler employ for the warehouse?”

“Conventional. . . ground level infrared cameras and motion detectors. Anyone can bypass those. The real problem is what’s on the inside,” the blonde elaborated. “There’s a small matter of the Enforcers and whatever else the Invid have left in there.”

“Are there any blueprints of the city block containing the warehouse? Any schematics of the underground rail system that once ran underneath this part of the city?” Milo asked.

“Yes, we have access to those, why?” the elder lady queried.

“Here’s a compromise to our deal. I’ll take out the warehouse, no questions asked.

I keep all the protocluture I can steal from there and you get those plans for me. It's still an even swap for the supplies and money."

"It seems fair, Swift," they chimed in unison.

"Oh! I have one more condition; I paid for a girl, named Gabrielle. She's a poor young thing. . . totally lost in this world. She's working for you as a prostitute. It would be-" Swift began.

"We'll get her back for you, Swift. On the house," the blonde promised.

"No. . . See to it that she doesn't have to live this way; surely you two rumored Samaritans can find some other line of work for her in your organization. She's just a girl," Milo said.

"It's done. . ." the older one promised. "I assume it's up to us to deal with Rimmler's retaliation when you fulfill your end of the deal, Mr. Swift?" Milo affirmed with silence. "Here's your weapon. . . Use it well, Swift."

Milo nodded and mumbled a farewell to the elder lady. The blonde followed him as he headed down the hall. He could smell her perfume and it drove him wild. He did his best to keep his mind on business end of the arrangement .

"You know, it wasn't easy to convince my sister to let you live," she started up. Milo stop walking.

"I almost wonder why you did it, Miss-" Milo said trying to sound charming.

"My name's Cassandre. . . my sister's called Fiona," she interjected. "I did it because I was pretty sure you were resistance. Rimmler may be a notorious Invid sympathizer by the nature of their affiliation, but our outfit is sympathetic to the resistance. We don't overtly support the movement. We can't, not with Rimmler watching us so closely. But our loyalty lies with the network; and we pass on useful information to them when we can. What tipped me off was your gun. Generally, only resistance personnel have nerve to openly carry beam guns. I assume you have mecha and that's why you need the canisters," she continued.

"Now, it's my turn to say you're very astute, Cassandre." Milo worded his compliment carefully. She still was a very dangerous lady and one not to be trifled with lightly.

"Thank you. Fiona and I've agreed that we make the straight switch tonight. I've got the money," she said, producing a bag of small gold coins.

"Let's do it." Milo led her outside to his Cyclone. They immediately picked up the black two door sedan with tinted windows parked on the opposite side of the street. Milo assumed it was Rimmler's men. Cassandre substantiated his suspicions. Milo revved the Cyclone to life.

“Hopefully, they’ll keep their distance; if not, the ride might get rough,” Milo said. He eased the mecha out into the deserted street. The car followed.

“It’s a hit squad. Let’s roll. Swift, draw them away from here; there are too many people still in the place.” Milo nodded in comprehension and sped away.

The Cyclone bolted down the street and the sedan followed in its wake. Cassandre ordered Swift to make a variety of turns; he was soon completely lost. The sedan windows lowered and gun barrels peered out targeting the resistance fighter and his beautiful passenger. Bullets streamed forth as the deafening rattle caused Cassandre initially to wince. Milo was doing his best to avoid the hail of bullets as they dove into the road. One of the bullets nicked his rear lights. Cassandre unloaded her clip of ammo in the windshield of the pursuing sedan. *No luck.*

“The car’s been reinforced with armor, Swift!” she yelled in Milo’s ears desperately. Milo couldn’t hear her. But he sensed things were getting worse. Something ricocheted off his front wheel cover. He made a hard right turn, and hoped to lose Rimmler’s men. He could hear the car screech to a stop; or was that Cassandre’s voice yelling at him because he’d just turned into a dead end? He didn’t have time to sort that out now; his options were limited, he could hear the car turning around and doubling back. The only other vehicle in this side street was a huge truck with cargo doors open. Milo revved the Cyclone.

“Swift, you’re certifiably crazy. You’re not going to do what I think you are!” she yelled in his ringing ears. He bolted toward the truck and jumped into its rear hold. Cassandre quickly leaped off the Cyclone and slammed the doors shut. Soon, they could hear the car tearing into the alley; it immediately screeched to a grinding halt. Rimmler’s men scrambled out. One of them barked orders to the others to find the Cyclone. He sent some men to the next street over and waited.

Meanwhile, inside the semi’s trailer, Cassandre was enraged. She slugged Swift’s shoulder in playful anger. Milo was more concerned with putting on his body armor after retrieving it from the mecha’s storage compartments. He pulled on the leg struts and thigh plates and made sure they fit snugly. Next came the chest plating and forearm protection, and finally the groin harness.

“Okay, give me some room and start praying.” Milo waited until he heard the men rendezvous back at the car. Doors were opening and shutting. *NOW!!* Milo aimed his pistol and shot the hinges off the tail doors. They fell harshly on the sedan, almost crushing the car’s passengers as the metal slabs forced the car roof to collapse.

The Cyclone roared off, leaping from one of the doors. Shouts of confusion and fear came from within the car. In midair, Milo flipped the switch on the handlebars marked

B/A, engaging the stunning transformation. The front of the Cyclone separated into two halves and attached to his massive shoulders, while the front wheel covers hoisted upwards and slid onto his forearm plates. The engine grill collapsed and folded backwards, sliding him into the bike's frame, which then locked onto the body armor. Meanwhile, the leg armor telescoped out at the toe and the ankle, making him six inches taller. Finally, the rear wheel covers fastened on the thigh armor as the back of the Cyclone shot upwards and the tires swung into position and jets extended from the wheels. He landed with a solid THUD on the street behind the parked car.

Milo spun around. With but a flashing thought of hatred and a single word, Milo caused the targeting sensor clip to swing out of its housing and lock on the car. Two chest plates yawned open; revealing a deadly arrangement of canister missiles. *On target!* Milo fired, and the two rockets plunged into the car, sending it up in an eruption of fire and death.

Cassandre timidly stepped out, scrambling away from the burning wreckage. She was in awe; she stared at the fire for minutes, before Swift persuaded her to come away. The ride back to the inn was a long silent trek; Swift pulled up next to the black shadowy mass of the hovertransport. Cassandre examined it as best she could in the dark. She was clearly impressed.

"Are you in charge of this group?" she asked.

"Nope. You're about to meet the top man, so be nice," Swift quipped informally, and led Cassandre up the stairs, knocking softly at Austin's room's door. No answer. He tried again.

"Jeanne! Is that you?" a muffled and angry voice spat back.

"Open up, Commander," Milo listlessly requested. The door creaked open and Michael groped around for the light switch. Milo introduced Cassandre to Austin and explained the agreement to the Commander.

"You've gone and done it again, Swift," Austin growled. He'd have to wait until Milo's companion had left before really chewing him out. Milo had directly disobeyed his wishes and involved the group with the black market.

"It's a fair deal," Cassandre lobbied.

"Just how much did you win?" Austin demanded.

"He swindled the Lady out of twenty-two hundred in gold," Cassandre insisted. She was a little angry at Michael's resistance.

"Alright. . ." Austin yielded. "I'll help set the raid up," he said in a tired voice. Milo nodded to Cassandre and she promptly handed over the money to Austin.

"I'd rather use Pike on this run, Austin. Nothing personal; I thought maybe he'd

like to see a little more action,” Milo suggested. Austin grumbled his approval and bade his visitors farewell. He turned in for the night and suggested Swift do the same. Milo just slammed the door on his way out.

“Right! Let’s get you the stuff,” Milo huffed as he started downstairs.

Outside, under the diamond-studded tapestry of the night, Milo presented her with the supplies; it was a small matter for Cassandre to get the Lady’s headquarters to arrange for transportation from the inn to a safe location. They waited for a truck to come by and load the supplies in its rear. The truck lumbered away down the shadowy street.

“Now what, Cassandre?”

“Let’s head on back to the Lady’s place.”

“That’s right! I remember you promising me to help celebrate my sweeping victory at the tables tonight,” Milo reminded her.

“And just what did you have in mind?”

* * *

The lighting in the room was a subtle glow that accentuated the sensual figure of Cassandre. She was in a robe that stopped at mid-thigh. Her blonde hair cascaded onto her shoulders. She moved over to a small table and poured out two glasses of red wine. Milo emerged from the adjoining bathroom; he was still wearing his fatigues. She handed him a glass and proceeded to make a toast.

“Here’s to a wonderful night; to what will be and what could have been if the circumstances were different.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Milo said as he raised his glass to hers. There was a budding concern in his heart for her. He shrugged off the second thoughts welling up in his conscience. He’d begun to care for Cassandre and didn’t want to this meeting to tainted with a night of pointless sex. *She’s a good person and doesn’t deserve to be used like this.* He took a healthy gulp and set the glass aside. But it had been so long since he’d been held by a woman, so many long and lonely nights. He stood there with a passive and confused look on his face. Cassandre was surprised that Milo hadn’t forced the issue.

I thought I’d given him enough signals. It’s not like I didn’t make my intentions clear beforehand. She decided to initiate the action. She ran her hands through his hair and then cupped his face and brought down to hers. Her lips were warm and full on Milo’s.

“I don’t think we-” Milo tried to back away.

“Don’t think; just let it happen, Milo.” Her siren like voice had broken Milo’s resolve, and he found himself pulling her closer.

Cassandre unbuttoned his shirt one button at a time; when she'd slipped his shirt off from chest, she undid his belt buckle and eased his pants off his legs. She threw open her robe and enveloped his body in its silky folds. Milo guided her to the bed and gently they melted into each others arms. And when their energy was consumed and the feelings all spent, they fell back exhausted into each others arms, overcome by the pleasure they'd shared.

Milo drifted off to sleep; his limbs snaked around Cassandre's dormant body as it glistened. He could feel the warmth of her being as he unconsciously pulled her closer to him. And in the silence of the twilight, Milo Swift, for a few precious hours, experienced a strange peace and fulfillment that made the pain of the last ten empty years disappear.

* * *

Morning had broken. The news of the night's violent events had spread through the inner city like wildfire. The rumor mill was already spreading around Rimmler's threats at retaliation and the promise of bloodshed in the days ahead. None of the charged atmosphere of the city streets had penetrated Austin's somber-looking face. He was deep in thought on the dawn of the new day. Before him, his healthy helping of breakfast lay almost untouched.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Pike approaching the table. Pike looked well; the color had returned to his cheeks and his stride was confident and steady. He greeted his Commander with a smile and a cup of tea in his hand. Pike took a seat. "I talked with some of the locals earlier. It seems that Milo may have stuck his nose in where it didn't belong. Several people reported sightings of a Cyclone engaging in combat. I sure hope it's still in one piece."

"Milo went and got us involved in the black market. He must be caught in the middle of one their power struggles. He's risked our exposure. But he may also have found us a way to acquire protoculture," Austin elaborated. He looked directly at Pike. "He's planning a hit and run mission on the protoculture warehouse at the heart of New Munich. As far as I know, it's only guarded with Urban Enforcers. Far less than a hive strength complement. The Invid don't expect must trouble from these locals; they're too busy fighting it out amongst themselves. But a two-man assault force could breach the defenses--"

"You want me to accompany Swift?" Roger protested.

"Hey, it's either that or go check on the Alpha; that'll be an all-day affair," Michael replied. "He requested you; he wants you on this mission. And I can see no reason why

you shouldn't take it." Michael saw Ducasse at the front of the restaurant. She started to the men.

"Right, Commander. I'll do it." Pike's voice didn't hide his annoyance very well. "Where is Swift anyway?" Austin shrugged his shoulders and turned his attentions to Jeanne.

* * *

"**Christine!**" Milo screamed in anguish. His arms stiffened up in panic. Cassandre sat up in bed, startled and confused. She shook him to consciousness; and Milo rewarded her by smiling at her bleary-eyed and disoriented. She stroked her long hair and then leaned over and kissed Swift ardently on this lips.

"Bad dream, huh? I've had a few of those. . ." she consoled. Milo ran his sweaty palms through his hair. She slid out of bed and slipped on her robe which had somehow found its way to the floor during the night. "Who's this Christine you were screaming about, anyway?" Cassandre asked casually. She was heading for the bathroom.

Milo blinked at the question. *It must have been a nightmare. Sure felt real.* "Nobody that concerns you, Cassandre," Milo grumbled. His voice sounded harsh and unfeeling; Cassandre immediately picked up this sudden change and left the matter alone.

"Join me in the bath, Milo?" she asked. "There's plenty of water to go around."

"Ladies first," Milo replied feebly. "Wake me up when they draw me some fresh water, will you?" Milo fell back down into the soft pillow and dozed off.

When he awoke, she was leaning over him clothed in only a tightly wrapped towel. Swift had half a mind to rip it off and give in to the obvious temptation. Cassandre's glowing smile was all the consent Swift needed, but they both had more pressing issues which needed immediate attention. He had to concentrate on fulfilling his end of the agreement with Cassandre and Fiona; and Cassandre had to meet with some of the organization's lower operatives and discuss the threat of retaliation against the Lady's people by Rimmler and his men. Swift was also aware that he was late for his meeting with Austin to formulate a plan to steal canisters from the Invid's warehouse. Swift rose out of bed wrapping a bedspread around his waist.

"Swift, we have to talk," Cassandre said seriously. She didn't want discuss last night, but the air had to clear between them. Milo's concerned look told her that she had his full attention. "What happened last night was a beautiful thing; much more than the typical one night stand. We both know that. But as much as I'd like it to be otherwise there can never be anymore between us."

Milo nodded in agreement. “In the space of less than a day, I’ve come to care for you very deeply. But what happened here was just something that two lonely and frightened people made together. But it wasn’t love; maybe it could be. But we don’t have time to find out, do we?” Milo questioned sadly.

“No we don’t. Why don’t you bathe? I’ll order you some breakfast and send out for those plans. And please be careful tonight.” She kissed him once more. “I won’t be here when you get dressed, so I guess this is good-bye.”

“No it’s not; meet me at midnight at the theater across from where I’m supposed to be staying. I’ll be in the foyer. Then we can say our good-byes.” Milo started for the bathroom.

* * *

“So let me get this straight. Milo, you’re saying that we approach the warehouse via this underground rail network. We emerge behind this deserted building, scale it, and rope onto the warehouse roof from above.” Roger soaked in the plan while running his hands across the wrinkled blueprints.

“Once we’re on the warehouse roof, it’s an easy matter to break in through the ventilation ducts and get as much stuff as we can before I blow the place into the night sky. We avoid all of Rimmler’s security by going over it.”

“Sounds simple enough,” Pike agreed.

“Maybe too simple,” Jeanne cautioned.

They all looked to Austin for the final approval. He deliberated on the plan and on what could go wrong; but in the end he nodded affirmatively. He had only one question. “Are your black market friends providing any support?”

“Nope, we’re on our own,” Milo said gravely.

* * *

It was sometime before midnight, but in this dank dark tunnel day and night had no meaning. Both men were sweating profusely as the underground rail tunnels were as hot as a blast furnace. Roger kept grumbling under his breath as they trekked toward their destination. Roger shone his light in a sweeping motion in front of him and was sure that the floor was moving.

“Here it is!” Milo exclaimed triumphantly.

“What are you doing?” Roger hissed. He saw Swift take out one of the cobalt

limpet mines in his duffel bag and plant it near the ceiling of this main tunnel. Swift set the timer. He started up another tunnel that rose to street level. The entrance was barricaded off by a huge scrap heap; but Swift and Pike snaked their way through to the surface.

“This is to cover our escape. The Invid are a gullible lot. If they see an explosion and the subsequent cave-in, they’ll assume the worst.” Milo seemed very confident. They froze dead in their tracks. Someone or something was approaching. Pike and Swift scrambled for cover. They could only watch in fear as a mecha, an Enforcer skulked by and disappeared around the bend.

Roger looked at Swift with a pained look on his face. “I thought they were restricted to the warehouse grounds.”

“Those things can go damn well where they want; they do rule the planet. . .” Milo muttered as he prepared to scale the walls with his length of climbing rope. “Maybe they suspect something’s going to happen.”

“Great!” Roger waited for Milo’s signal before he started up to the roof. The city certainly looked breathtaking from this bird’s eye view. Again, an Enforcer rounded the building. From this height they looked small to Roger, but he knew that they weren’t. They were the smallest of all Invid mecha, but still stood almost half again as tall a human. Usually, they served as a policing force in major cities, and as hive guards.

Milo set his duffel bag down; it not only contained the other nine mines but it held his SAL-9 which he now took out. Roger checked his MG H-90 one last time. All was in order.

Milo heaved the rope across the wide abyss separating the protoculture warehouse from their vantage point. They flinched when they heard the grappling hook clang noisily on the warehouse’s roof. “Dammit! At least, it caught a hold of something.” Milo tested it, just to be sure. He motioned for Roger to go first, after he secured this end of the rope.

Roger slid on the rope and eased down towards the protoculture warehouse. Below him, he could see the large shadow of an Enforcer as it patrolled the grounds, but it didn’t notice the human dangling on the rope fifty feet above it. Milo had seen it as well; he waited for the Roger to get his bearings and for the Invid mecha to move away. He yanked on the rope; it still remained taut and secure. Swift pushed off from the roof’s edge and started down towards the warehouse. In short order he was with Pike.

“That was close, Swift. The Enforcer is back.” Roger pointed into the darkness below. Milo could see nothing; but he could definitely hear the mecha trudge its way to the enclosing fence. They all seemed to be following a predetermined pattern and had little cause to deviate from it. Milo smiled. He and Pike hadn’t been spotted.

Milo tugged at a rusted over ventilation grill and it groaned defiantly refusing to

come out of its molded duct housing. “Maybe we’d better try another one. This one is stuck on tight.” Swift moved over the next duct cover and pulled it free from the shaft aperture.

Pike probed the darkness of the ventilation shaft with his light.

“Can’t make out anything.”

Milo secured a drop line and started down. “There’s only one way to find out,” he uttered. For moments Roger heard or saw nothing; he only felt the line snap suddenly. Then it went limp.

“Milo,” he whispered down the shaft. No answer; it was doubtful that Swift could have heard him anyway. *Now what!* The line jerked again in Roger’s grasp. *He’s okay; That must be the signal!* Roger crawled into the vent clinging tightly to the rope and started to work his way into the dark depths below. When he reached the end, he felt a pair of hands reach for his legs and help him down.

“We struck it rich, Rog,” Milo rasped ecstatically. With the moonlight illuminating the gigantic storage room, Pike gawked at the neatly configured racks of protoculture containers. It was a veritable gold mine. Milo had already filled his duffel bag with as many as it would hold; he urged Pike to do the same.

If only I had my hovertransport, Roger mused. Out of the corner of his eye, Pike could see Milo carefully activating the last of the cobalt mines he’d planted in this huge room. *We don’t want to be here when those things go off,* Pike mused.

“Are you done, yet?” Milo snapped. Roger nodded his head after squeezing two more canisters in his pack. “Right! Let’s-” Milo couldn’t finish his sentence.

They could hear the heavy footsteps of an Enforcer entering the chamber. Swift and Pike tried to stop breathing; Roger was within the mecha’s shadow. He was close enough to touch it. *My rifle!* The Enforcer slowly scanned the area. It immediately noticed a hole in the chamber’s ceiling and the rope hanging down. It took a step toward the oddity and felt the MG H-90 crunch under its weight.

Intruders! Milo’s Sal-9 pierced the shadows of the moonlight and the sensor pod of the Enforcer before it could act on the thought. The pilot inside was mortally wounded and the mecha leaked its notorious dark fluid everywhere. It staggered to a pile of neatly arranged canisters and brought the whole collection down on its husk.

“Change in plans, Roger! Move it,” Swift yelled desperately. Roger was eager to comply; he started up the rope hurriedly. Milo waited until he could hear the reinforcements coming before he shot at a mine he’d placed near the far end of this holding area. Swift struggled up the rope; he could feel the heat from below. *They must all be going off. Hope I can make it.* When he emerged on the warehouse roof, he saw Pike inching his way

toward the roof of the deserted building. *Good!* A violent explosion rocked the roof; Milo hit the deck. He could feel the heat pouring out of all the vents. *The protoculture canisters must've ignited!* Roger was clear; Milo could see him wave his hands across from the rooftop. *My turn.* Milo started grunting his way across. Another explosion; the fire was raging out of control on the roof. The rope bounced several times before Milo dared to move any further. *Oh no! Not the Enforcers!*

The Invid mecha still intact scrambled out of the warehouse and easily spotted the human snaking his way across the night sky with the added illumination of the raging blaze. He had almost reached safety; only ten feet separated him from the rooftop. They bolted after the saboteurs; the Invid brain in charge to the Enforcers knew of the situation and was sending reinforcements to the problem area. A final earth-shaking upheaval of fire shot through the charred warehouse into the turbulent night.

Milo felt the rope lose its support; he fell suddenly and slammed solidly into the third story of the deserted building. *Fire must have burnt through the rope I'd attached to the pipe.* The duffel bag remained snugly strapped on to his shoulder; but he dangled precariously twenty feet above the debris filled street.

“Swift don't stop to take in the view; get your tail up here,” Roger yelled.

“Scratch that! I'll rendezvous with you at the tunnel! Get clear of here, Captain!” Milo ordered. He looked up and saw Pike was gone. *Good!* It was impossible for Swift to get to the street before the Enforcers could get to him. And if he tried for the roof, they'd eventually get to him. *The building, it's my only chance,* Milo realized. He swung to his left like a human pendulum and crashed through a cracked window on his final pass. Milo stayed still; he could hear the Enforcers landing on the rooftop. He didn't dare look out the window; he was sure they were circling the building on the street level also. *I hope Roger makes it; he's only got two minutes.* Milo glanced at his chronometer in the flash of the roaring fire. He decided to sit tight.

* * *

Pike was already in the tunnel; he worried about Swift. There had been no sign of Milo since Roger had left him hanging from the deserted building. The whole mission had gone sour; this wasn't the way things had been planned out. Pike couldn't go back out there; the Enforcers were roaming the streets and alleyways. If they found anyone out there now, those unfortunates were going to be killed. *Invid retaliation at its best.* Pike could only delay for a few more seconds; he had to be well clear of this entrance when the mine went off. Pike started away; the others wouldn't be happy at the news. When Pike was

safely out of harm's reach, he heard the mines rumble loudly. The tunnel was filled with smoke and debris. *There's no way for Milo to get back to us!* Roger thought grimly.

* * *

Milo rubbed his side. *My ribs are sore; probably bruised, but not broken. Pike's home free by now! The Invid are sure to investigate the explosion site; and when that happens, I'll just slip off quietly into the night.*

There was silence on the street below and from the roof above. Milo started down the nearby staircase to the first floor. He sneaked out the door leading into the street and looked back cautiously. *Damn! Rimmler's men.* Milo spotted a limo easing down the street away from him; but it pulled to a stop. It started to turn around. Milo began trotting; when he heard the tires squeal he broke out into a full stride. Swift raced around the next corner and had no cover to hide behind. Most of the buildings here were razed down to their foundations. The limousine roared threateningly in the background. Milo planted his feet firmly in the middle of this street; he whipped out his SAL-9 and waited.

"Nothing's gonna save you now," Milo vowed. The sleek dark shape of the limousine whipped around the corner to face Swift. Milo fired continuously at the engine grill as the car closed the gap. When the car was three hundred feet away the grill caught fire. His last shots blew off the front tires; the driver lost control and the car careened off the road and flipped over three times. It rested on its dented roof; the underbelly was aflame.

* * *

Roger was hovering outside his hovertransport. The last of his gear was aboard and he'd radioed Austin and Ducasse that he'd be setting out for the new campsite soon. He had mentioned the fact that Milo and he had been split up; but he didn't word his report in such a way as to alarm the others. He just explained it had been a slight change in plans. *If they only knew.*

The Commander and Lieutenant decided to journey together to retrieve the Alpha after they had planned the strategy for the protoculture raid. From there, the twosome decided returning to New Munich was a waste of time and resources; it made better sense to have Pike and Swift to rejoin them after the successful completion of the mission. Austin and Ducasse had journeyed the rest of the day westward and elected to set up camp one hundred and seventy-five kilometers from the city, upriver of the village of Sigmaringen-

an-der-Donau, stopping in Ulm along the way to drop off a shipment of antibiotic at Cassandre's request. The vegetation there was much more plentiful, as they were close to the edge of the fabled Black Forest, and thought it a perfect place to take stock of the situation. There they would wait for the others to arrive.

* * *

Milo hid in the shadows as best he could. By now the threat of the Invid had disappeared; and he hadn't seen any more of Rimmmler's men. Both forces had other concerns now. He could see the tall neon spire of the theater from this street corner and he started towards it. He walked past the inn and could see the transport. No one was near it. He guessed that Pike was in the building having one final meal for the road.

What am I going to say to her? Is there anything to say? Milo brooded at the gloomy prospect of a long emotional farewell. He forced his way through the revolving doors and waited. Swift shut his eyes and played back the soft memories of the night before. The whining of the revolving doors brought him to the present.

"Fiona?" Milo blurted out in surprise. She wore a long trench coat. It had a noticeable bulge in its side. Her face was somber and eyes moist with tears. "Where's Cassandre?"

"Rimmmler's retaliated. . . We never knew what hit us, Swift. But he paid with his life, I saw to that. . . After the fight, my sister was shot. A sniper's bullet hit her in the back. . ." Her voice admirably hid the grief she felt.

"She's dead. . ." Milo couldn't believe his own voice. He cupped his tired face in his hands. Milo couldn't offer any words of comfort, nor would he listen to any.

"She told me to tell you that you were wrong when you said it wasn't love. . . And that she loved you. . . I'm so sorry, Swift. . . She's in a better place now." Fiona waited for some response.

"Just go, please." Milo's whole being was numb.

Fiona added, "Gabrielle's waiting out in the car. She'd like to thank you."

"No. Take her away."

Fiona left.

* * *

When Pike left the inn for the last time, he'd given up all hope on seeing Milo alive. That despair quickly evaporated when he noticed Swift's mecha was gone from its spot.

He rushed back to the transport to check if Milo had radioed in his position, only to find the inebriated Swift in the passenger seat of the cab.

“Milo, you made it out!” Pike exclaimed triumphantly. He started the transport’s fans and pulled out into the deserted street. “I was worried there for a bit!” He glanced backwards to confirm that the Cyclone was indeed stowed in the transport’s cargo area. It was.

Milo blew into an empty liquor bottle. It was the last of his supply. He staggered to the rear hold to look for more; but came back empty handed.

“I’m soooo sorry mon capitane. . .” Milo slurred. “Are we moving? Are we-” Milo collapsed in the passenger seated and tilted his head to the window. The inner city, Fiona’s domain, passed before his dreary eyes. *I guess the hardest good-byes are the ones we never get to say.*

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.

* * *

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!"

* * *

"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 flotation 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.”

* * *

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 he 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 shooed 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 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.”

Episode Seven: Reminiscences

*“Cold natures have only recollections; tender natures
have remembrances...”*

-Mme. de Krüdener

*“He is that fallen lance that lies as hurled,
That lies unlifted now; come dew, come rust,
But still lies pointed as it plowed the dust.
If we who sight along it round the world,
See nothing worthy to have been its mark,
It is because like men we look too near,
Forgetting that as fitted to the sphere,
Our missiles always make too short an arc.
They fall, they rip the grass, they intersect
The curve of the earth, and striking, break their own;
They make us cringe for the metal-point on stone.
But this we know, the obstacle that checked
And tripped the body, shot the spirit on
Further than target ever showed or shone.”*

-Robert Frost

3 August 2032

Roger looked at his face in the glass; oblong and worried, it stared back at him. His friend was late...Really late. In another minute, Roger was considering settling up his tab and leaving. His face returned to the neatly arranged stack of profiles out on the table for his perusal. He looked around the rather active cantina, until his worried face recognized the blank stare of his friend as Darwin sauntered through the front door.

Darwin was a tall, lanky man with prominent features. His closely cropped brown hair was showing flecks of gray around the temples. Darwin marched up to Pike who rose up and offered his hand.

“That ain’t getting it done, Rog.” Darwin snagged Pike’s frame in a sincere bear hug, leaving Roger quite unnerved.

“I’ve ordered your whiskey neat, Darwin. Just to speed things up,” Pike gasped as he struggled to put the air back in his lungs.

Darwin's form settled into the other chair assigned to their corner table of this coastal Texan establishment. He spied his childhood friend with reassuring eyes, but said nothing.

Pike initiated the conversation; "I was beginning to think you wouldn't show, Darwin."

"Well, I had to swap out my free weekend to get clear of tonight's shift. But you're worth it, Pike! I can't believe that the Southern Cross has given you a combat assignment. Roger, what did they tell up in Denver?" Darwin inquired.

"Goddamn E.B.S.I.S. is wreaking havoc with our European theater. We're suffering mass defections, to the point that anyone who's capable of piloting hovertanks is being assigned to one, and being sent over there. Personally, I don't think command gives a rat's ass about the qualifications of their mecha pilots. Supreme Command seems intent putting as much out there as possible, regardless of the consequences," Pike admitted. Their drinks arrived and the pair raised their glasses to each other.

"Would have been nice if you could stretch your stay 'til the weekend, Rog," Darwin confided.

"I agree. Hell, I had to pull a fast one just to routed through here before I shipped out. I was supposed to go out sooner; but I insisted on psych profiles of those assigned to my H-tank squad. That bought me a few days, because they had to be compiled from multiple sources. It served to be a suitable stall tactic that allowed me to put my affairs in order before shipping off."

"And-"

"And. . . I want to know what the hell I've got under me. They have given me a bunch of raw recruits running around in big machinery, and I get to command this mish-mash. I've got no combat training. Heck! My piloting skills come from my necessary familiarity in **fixing** a hovertank. The crash courses in Denver help, but I'm just a glorified mechanic, Darwin! Luckily, the same cannot be said for my charges. Most of them have got the appropriate background, but there are a few strange ones. This guy, for instance," Roger said, pushing the rather thick profile of a less-than-innocuous man named Milo Swift before Darwin for the latter's benefit. "He was busted for dereliction of duty, stripped of rank for being involved in a smuggling operation which funneled out supplies from one of our repositories. Apparently there's more to it than just that - most of the details are still under seal. His reward for his efforts was the stockade for a short term, which was supposed to get him to turn the rest of the ring..."

"Wow! It took a whole detail to take this guy down...He attempted one escape on a prisoner transfer...Ah, an A.T.A.C man, count yourself lucky..." Darwin said in praise,

after briefly glancing at the particulars on the profile documents before him. He returned it to Pike.

“Yeah, a real choir boy, Darwin. But the ASC needing bodies, it seems a waste to let someone like this rot away under the auspices of the GMP. At least that’s what High Command thinks, and so his sentence was commuted, and he has been reassigned to me. He said all the right things at the last disciplinary hearing, but it’s like the wolf being sent to serve with the sheep. I’ll do what I can with this mess. Hopefully, we’ll get to march in a couple of parades or something like that. I’m not even entertaining the thought of leading these guys into battle!” Roger took a sip of his drink.

“You’re not the only one going across the pond, Pike. I’ll be there in two months. But first I get to distinct pleasure of having some mucky-muck Major named Satori brainwash us for six weeks in committing ourselves to the higher standards of the GMP,” Darwin said.

Roger met his acerbic remarks with a smile. His friend was in rare form. Pike never understood why Darwin had opted for the GMP, as opposed to the more conventional units of the Robotech Defense Forces. Darwin had his own reasons - which was the one thing he had not revealed to Pike, but this assignment seemed to suit him.

“All this movement with no apparent rhyme or reason! It bugs the heck outta me, Darwin!”

“Join the club, Rog!” Darwin snapped. But when he failed to draw a smile from Roger, Darwin offered, “Listen, if I find out anything in my world, and if I can get it to you, I will.”

“I know you will, Darwin,” Pike said softly.

“Let’s not get maudlin, Rog. However, if you’re leaving Texas permanently, I believe you’re entitled to one farewell dinner in the presence of a friend,” Darwin stated.

“Well, you’ll have to do, Darwin. Is the steak any good?”

“Better stick to their Migas, Rog. Anything else is a crap shoot!”

“Done.”

* * *

“Pike, are you in here?” Darwin’s voice trumpeted. His lone figure was slowly moving into the vehicle bay, here on the outskirts of Prague. Tracking his friend down to this little backwater installation had taken the better part of the morning. But amid the bustling, totally oblivious technicians carrying parts and tools from this end of the large

repair facility to the array of transports lined up in odd collections deeper within, he had failed to spot his friend.

He heard footsteps behind him, and a voice gruffly demand for his authorization in practiced German. Darwin mechanically turned around to inform him that a member of the GMP could damn well go wherever he pleased.

“Pike!” Darwin said aghast. Roger’s fatigues and face were covered in grease and dust.

Roger’s smile slowly cracked open, “Not bad for only being here for a couple of months.”

“I’ll say. You fooled me,” Darwin replied.

“What brings you down to little ol’ me, my friend.” Pike ushered his friend outside away from the keenly interested glances of the other mechanics, who were already jumping to conclusions about Pike. So much for him having a friendly round or two with the pit crew after his shift. But this was Darwin, and he was Pike’s friend long before he donned the uniform of the GMP.

“I’m looking for one of your men. That Milo Swift fella,” Darwin said.

“Well, the men are all on weekend leave. I would be, too, but I decided to spend it here as a favor to this unit. They’re undermanned, behind schedule, and I could use the extra bread. My men aren’t due to report until Monday, James,” Roger said.

“Yes, I was able to get that information from Base control. But I was hoping he’d talk to you about where he might be spending his days.”

“What’s this about?”

“He’s got an interesting little history, your man Swift. With his past, he made certain associations . . . acquired certain confidences. His name has come up in an operation that we’ve got going. Swift might be privy to background information which could help in establishing contacts with the other side,” Darwin was being uncharacteristically evasive. Pike didn’t like that, and his smile disappeared.

“Look, I just got him. I didn’t bring up his record. I didn’t ask why he spent time in the stockade, or any of that. I was told that while it was sensitive information, I didn’t need access to it to make him a soldier under me. I know the charges, I know the punishment, but I don’t know any of the details. The man’s got good field experience, and a nice little mean streak in him that I don’t think he picked up from enforcing village curfews!”

“Well, all that is true. But we could still use him...” Darwin lingered. Pike was getting angry at where this discussion was leading. “Roger, I’m only telling you this off

the record, so to speak. But your Mr. Swift was demoted from Sergeant to Private. He got caught in a bad little scam!”

“Old news. I showed **you** his psych record, remember?”

“Listen, he’s not our only link, but right now, I’d trust his word over what else we’ve got cooking on this caper!” James explained.

“Darwin, I am not going to roll over one of my men, not even for you! You want him, you have to pull him out through official channels!” Roger asserted.

“Easy, Rog,” Darwin cautioned, trying to stem the damage. “We don’t have to have him. I was just hoping-”

“Sorry to disappoint you, Darwin. He came here expressing enough of a desire to start anew. I’m going to give him that opportunity. If you want to reel him in, do it officially. Of course, the minute you call him in, he’s marked as an informer, and they’ll turn him out, won’t they?”

“You’re right,” his friend conceded. “Okay, we won’t go down this road again, Rog.”

“Right then,” Roger said. “I was just about to knock off for lunch. You interested?” Roger uttered while heading to one of smaller buildings to clean up.

* * *

It had been a long time since Pike had last heard from Darwin; the latter had not been able to get much leave. During their infrequent conversations, James kept talking about a smuggling operation that he was working on, and getting close to breaking wide open. Captain Pike was kept busy, too. His group was undergoing the usual ramp up of military exercises, training, and the sort. At first, Roger worried about this constant activity: why train, unless his men were being trained for some particular enemy? But when no concrete confirmation came from up above, Pike assumed it was just to keep the men sharp, and to chase away the boredom. It had been a splendid summer, one in which Roger had been able to parlay a few favors and connections into a two week long leave which Pike spent mostly along the Mediterranean trying to forget about the bothers of his command. It had been two weeks too long, as when he got back, there were several terse messages from Darwin that demanded his immediate attention.

He was due by the week’s end to expedite that previously discussed ‘official business’.

Milo sauntered towards the aroma of food with the rest of the squad. He joined the throbbing collection of famished soldiers doing their best to form a line just past the

entrance to the mess hall. In their illustrious leader's absence, the second in command put the squad through their paces, but at night, gave the troops free reign. Swift took full advantage, spending most of his down time in a couple of floating poker games, and sneaking back into the base in the dead of night. He was careful, and worse yet, he was winning so the lure of easy money was too much for him to resist. But after about a week and a half, the regulars had figured him out, and took him for a decent chunk of his winnings. Swift took the hint, and bailed out in a game two nights ago, remembering the adage: 'If you can't spot the sucker at the table in the first twenty minutes, it's you!' His booty was still enough to get him a decent pair of jeans, and two bottles of eighteen-year-old single malt, some special ammo, and cigarettes to last him for two weeks.

The meal was uninspiring, but it fit the bill; his stomach quit grumbling after he forced down a pound of the daily fare. He was still trying to shake of the memories of the last game when his green eyes caught a glimpse of Captain Pike striding through the mess hall past the inquisitive stares of those already seated. Milo was getting up to dump the remainder of his repast. *That's right, he got in recently. Booth said that he checked in sometime last night. Looks like he picked up a healthy tan during his recent stint of R & R.*

"Private!" Roger called out to him. Swift hadn't thought of Pike as a shouter, but his noise carried quite well over the din of the cafeteria. Milo looked in his superior's direction, and frowned slightly. He was scraping the last of the leftovers off his plate into one of a collection of garbage cans, after which he placed the tray on the already leaning stack. Pike was flanked by two GMP operatives. One was a close personal friend of Pike's adorned with the rank of Sergeant, and the other needed no introduction to Private Milo Swift: Major Nova Satori.

This doesn't look good, Swift assessed.

Roger whispered something to Darwin and approached Milo alone.

Milo saluted. Pike was never one for the military theatrics, but in front of other attending brass, Swift put on the appropriate show. He was already in hot water, why drag a decent man like Pike into this mire?

"I thought we were done with this mess, Captain," Milo whined to Pike.

"Me, too."

Pike and his charge made their way back to the GMP operatives under the curious stares of those assembled in the mess hall. The necessary introductions were made between the GMP contingent and the Southern Cross soldiers; Milo flashed a look of acknowledgment in Nova's direction, but it hardly registered. She waved the collection of men to the vehicle waiting outside and they were off.

Pike and Swift were immediately taken to the GMP offices in Passau. Satori and Darwin said nothing. James didn't dare show any display of friendship towards Roger in front of his ranking officer. Even though she had the body of a heartbreaker, she was branded the classic "cold fish" by those who worked with her, and those who had been victimized by her 'damn the consequences' methods. Darwin was driving, and throwing the offhand glance at his rear passengers, Pike and Swift. Pike had an unwavering frown etched on his face during the entire two-hour drive, while Milo was checking out Satori's delicate features and pondering his souring fortunes.

She may be cold, but she sure looks soft, Swift mused as his eyes narrowed. They were entering the complex of buildings that the GMP used as regional headquarters. The minute the car stopped, they were met by a detail of GMP guards that funneled the foursome into one of the smaller non-descript buildings of the complex.

Satori wordlessly parted company while Darwin led Pike and Swift into a small room that was locked from the outside once they entered. Swift looked around. There was an overhead light, and on the wall ahead of Milo, a mirror, which Milo and Pike had guessed to be a one-way mirror.

"Private, you have not been formally arrested or charged, and your record will indicate that you've cooperated with this GMP investigation so far. Is that understood?" Darwin recited. He motioned for Pike and Swift to take some chairs, and pointed out a container of iced-water and some nearby glasses for their collective consumption. Roger poured himself a tall glassful to quench the dry sensation creeping up the back of his throat. He could feel his skin crawl. Private Swift seemed to be much more at ease with this sort of thing, and didn't display the same signs of apprehension even though he had much more at stake.

Swift asked, "Can I smoke?"

Darwin nodded.

Milo lit up a cigarette, and boldly demanded, "Why is Captain Pike here?"

"Regulations, Private. If you fail to answer any question put forth to you, Captain Pike can inform you of all of your options and more importantly, of **our** options..."

Milo cast a dubious glance at the mirror, and then a pensive glance at Roger, before stating, "Sergeant Darwin, let's cut to the chase."

"Excuse me?"

"Major Satori, come out from that mirror, and deal with me face to face. Amateur hour is over!" Milo declared.

Roger leaned towards Swift and whispered harshly into his ear, "What the hell's gotten into you, Swift? Cut out the lip, or they'll toss you into the slammer for this kind of insubordination! Satori's known as a hard-liner."

"I know what I'm doing, Captain. They want me hear for a reason, and it's not to rot my fighting days in jail!" Milo murmured back.

"Fine. Darwin, he's all yours," Roger said. "He's officially refused my presence in an advisory capacity at this inquiry. Please be sure to make a note of that in your formal reports."

"Understood, Captain. You can wait for your man--"

"No thanks, I'll check out some wheels. I've got work to do," Roger explained before leaving Milo alone with Darwin.

"Good, now it's just me and you..."

"And me!" Satori said upon making her entrance into the small room. Milo scrutinized her from head toe. The surly Private was curious about the woman who fostered such a harsh reputation throughout the ranks of the GMP and the Southern Cross. She quickly took up a seat at the well-worn rectangular table, placed a small folder on the table within arm's reach, and poured herself some water from the glass pitcher.

"Sergeant, you can leave us alone," she suggested, although it sounded to Milo like an order. Darwin nodded. She was the ranking officer, heading the GMP's efforts on this matter.

"Well, I'll be seeing you," Milo quipped, "And I'm sure you'll be seeing me from the other side of that mirror."

Darwin paused and gave Milo a calculating stare before leaving. The door slammed shut.

"Private, was that really necessary?" Satori asked.

"No, but it felt good."

Nova buried her smile deep down, but she found herself admiring this Private's chutzpah. "Do you have any idea why we pulled you in?" Nova demanded.

"This wouldn't have anything to do with my sealed records that you've somehow managed to obtain, now would it? How many arms did you have to break to get your claws on those?" Milo motioned to the folder on the table.

"Ah, a two-parter. Very well, Private, I'll indulge you. First off, yes, it does, and secondly, not that many," she said before pausing for a sip from her glass. *In fact, it was some of the best sex I've had in a long time.* She resumed the grilling, "What do you know about your former commanding officer, Colonel Thomas?"

“I know he should have taken that desk job High Command offered him, and I know that if I ever see him again, he’s catching my best haymaker.”

Satori wasn’t buying, and quickly shot back, “Oh, spare us the ‘poor me’ routine, Private. You were plenty gray enough in Thomas’ eyes for him to set you up as a scapegoat. Water under the bridge. Our current problem is that he’s been missing for two weeks. Nobody can account for his whereabouts.”

“Doesn’t surprise me.”

Nova frowned, “Come again?”

“Here, you smoke?” Milo said offering Nova Satori a cigarette. He lit it for her and pulled back.

“Turkish...” she assessed. “That must have been some poker game, Private.”

Milo nodded, unhappy with the knowledge that he’d been under surveillance, and replied, “Small Fry. The day the GMP starts busting floaters up is the day I **do** go over to the other side.”

“And I’ll be right by you, Swift. No, I pick my battles, and this is one I aim to win. Now you can either help me, or get caught up in the backwash. What’s it going to be?”

Milo nodded. It was time to spill the beans, but not without knowing just a little bit more. “What did you get from the sealed records?”

“Let’s see...Back in your old A.T.A.C. unit, most of the crew were connected to a smuggling ring. Eventually, the GMP got wind of it during an already pending investigation. A lot of the big fish were snagged, but Thomas eluded us. The investigation got ugly; there were too many names dropped. . . like yours. But from my glance of the overall record, the assembled evidence seems to indicate that Thomas might have been integral to it all. The GMP leaned on you and even locked your sorry ass up for three months, but to your credit or stupidity, you didn’t crack, so we couldn’t make any of it stick against you or Thomas. He was transferred to a back-line unit, and you were demoted from Sergeant, and sent here with your respective records expunged. Both sets of records were sealed.”

“Close enough for spit,” Milo assessed. “It’s a shame you weren’t heading that one up. Things might have turned up differently.”

“I was involved in it, Private. But I was not the lead dog, and you know what they say about that.” Satori confessed. She took a long drag from her cigarette, and seemed to be enjoying it.

“Scenery never changes, eh?” Milo offered.

“Not, at least, until a moose called the Robotech Masters tramples the dogs ahead of you. Now I’m the head bitch in charge, and it’s my turn to do this the way it should have been done in the first place. So I want the truth about Thomas.”

“You’re not going to like the truth, Major,” Milo warned. He was stalling.

“We are a shy one aren’t we, Private? Fine, I’ll start us off with my pet theory. The ring decided that he was a liability and now that he was out of the spotlight, they decided to liquidate him. It was time to tie up a loose end, so to speak,” Nova guessed.

Milo shook his head. “I wish it were that simple. He’s with E.B.S.I.S. now. He’s probably defected over to other side and is enjoying their version of the good life. They put too much time and effort into Thomas just to have him killed. Even if his cover was blown here with the Cross, he is still of use to them. That’s who was footing his bill. He spied for them; the smuggling stuff was just for money. For his vodka habit, he joked once. I happened to have overheard one of his transmissions back to them, although I was tipsy at the time. But I do remember what I heard, Major. He’s E.B.S.I.S.”

Nova was silent for the longest time waiting for the gravity of his accusation to hit home before she could bring herself to repeat Milo’s assertion, “E.B.S.I.S. you say.”

Milo nodded.

“They still might have killed him,” Nova proposed. “You were in on it, maybe someone else found out about his moonlighting?”

“That’s your department, folks. Dirt gathering,” Milo pointed out. “I just knew what I knew, and didn’t go around comparing notes with everyone else in the unit. That’s a sure way to quietly disappear. Sure, I did some unauthorized requisitioning of unit supplies, but most everyone in under his command had their hand in the cookie jar. Those sealed records will indicate that much. But only when I found out about Thomas’s ties to E.B.S.I.S. is when it hit the fan. I could feel myself being singled out for more dangerous assignments. Things definitely changed after that, including our unit’s friendly fire incident, which is when the GMP opened up a general review.”

“This sounds like a red herring, Private,” Nova replied. She tapped out some ashes off her cancer stick. “Thomas was dirty, but-”

“If this was a run of the mill smuggling outfit, the GMP wouldn’t need my help. He would have turned up by now. Either dead or rich. You do the math, ma’am,” Swift countered in a voice that almost dared his inquisitor to believe otherwise.

“Okay, you’ve given us more to go on than I’d hoped. This does force me to concentrate our efforts in an entirely different direction, so I’ll need some time to figure out if your telling the truth. Although, our voice analyzer seems to indicate that you are on the up and up,” Nova recounted, as she looked down at her watch, which had a red LED

discreetly flashing out code. "I think it's best that we keep here you overnight in one of our security cells. We'll inform Pike that we need to your presence for one more session," Nova announced.

"One more session?" Milo asked.

"I've got some more questions on your sealed records, Private. Background material I want to get straight before I push on with this investigation. But I'm due for a meeting with a High Command liaison within the hour. Sgt. Darwin will see to your accommodations. If you'll excuse me..."

Swift nodded, "Then I'm not under arrest."

"No, not yet," Satori admitted before leaving.

* * *

Darwin drove up to the base feeling that he owed Roger an explanation, one that he'd have to offer over dinner and at a place that had cloth napkins. Darwin didn't relish the long drive back to Pike's base, but could see why Satori didn't want to release Swift after this first session. *A mess of unnecessary drive time. After all, she's bound to grill him first thing in the morning.* Darwin was also fuming mad at Swift for requesting for Satori directly, and casting him aside as her mere lackey. He would have broken the Private given some more time. His anger was slightly mollified when he had the distinct pleasure of locking Swift up in a holding cell for his overnight stay before setting off for his dinner engagement with Roger.

Roger was waiting in the Officer's lounge, along with two nurses, a blonde for Darwin, and a red-head for the Captain. They were new to the base infirmary on rotations from the London installation. Darwin strode in and was surprised to see them there, but maybe it was a good thing after all. Introductions were made, and Pike tapped his watch as a silent cue to his friend that they were running behind. It was a short drive to town and to the restaurant of choice. Pike and Darwin escorted the ladies inside, and the foursome was quickly directed to a table next to a large window overlooking a small plaza with a fountain.

"Wow, it's beautiful!" Sylvia Jansen, the fetching blonde, exclaimed.

"I've seen better," the auburn-haired Rhea McConnell quickly countered.

"Come on, let's take a closer look!" Sylvia's giddy voice exhorted.

"You ladies, get a head start, we'll wait for the drinks, and bring them out to you," Darwin gallantly offered.

Rhea eyed Captain Pike who nodded in compliance. She shrugged her shoulders, and said, "Just some house white wine for me, Captain."

“It’s done, Miss McConnell. I don’t stand on formalities, off-base, I’m Roger.”

“And I’m Rhea.”

Their companions strode out to the fountain by means of a side entrance of slightly open French doors. From here Darwin could see Sylvia toss a few coins into the fountain.

“Where’d you drag these two up from, Roger?” he quipped.

“You disapprove?” Roger asked.

“No. I was hoping to clear the air about this afternoon, that’s all.”

“So, talk. How long is Swift under arrest, and any word on sentence recommendations?” Pike asked already assuming that Swift was looking at serious jail time. He could see the drinks being assembled at the bar. Whiskey for Darwin, a Vodka and tonic for him, champagne for Sylvia, and a Chardonnay for his dinner companion.

“He’s still skating free. She just didn’t want to release him. Another Q&A session tomorrow,” Darwin explained. “Listen, I didn’t want to pull him in, but all our other leads crumbled, Roger. Thomas just up and disappeared on us. We were going to try and work him over first, but Milo’s the only loose thread left hanging. Nova wants this any way she can get it.”

“Still, all this goes on my record, too.”

“I came to you earlier, remember? You picked him over me,” Darwin reminded him.

“True enough. I guess that’s why he decided to fly solo earlier today,” Pike said. “He didn’t tell me to get out in so many words, but I could take a hint. He didn’t want to see me trampled alongside him, if it came to that. The man gets himself into a mess, feels like he has to get himself out of it alone.”

“Yeah, faults and all, I’ve gotta respect him for that. I think Satori does, too,” Darwin said in hushed tones.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“She likes what he’s told her so far. He handled himself well in front of her, like he’s used to swimming with the big fish. You’re right about that mean-streak of his,” Darwin announced. “He just might walk away from this and live to tell you about it all.”

“I don’t want to know anything,” Roger professed.

The drinks were delivered to the table, and Roger and James rose up.

* * *

Milo checked his gun out at the firing range and shot through a full clip before pausing to go over his target sheet. Most the puncture marks were arrayed along the outer

third of the target's black torso outline. Milo popped off his headphones and put the gun down.

"Could use some more range time!" a familiar voice evaluated.

"I'll take it, Major Satori," Milo said. "I was wondering how long it would take for someone to figure out I was missing from my cell. Security is looser than a town whore in this place!"

"I saw your handiwork with the locks. I guess Darwin didn't search you for your tools before tossing you inside. Still it's a hard lock to pick from the inside. But I can see that you've had practice..." Satori noted.

"Enough to know that security should have been tighter in my building. I know which way the wind is blowing, Major. If you wanted to use me as bait, you should have asked!" Milo said while reloading his weapon.

"Touché," Satori nodded in his direction. "A shot in the dark, Private. No need to get your feathers ruffled. Besides, I have every confidence in your abilities, Swift. I'm sure you would deal with the situation."

Swift nodded in her direction. He reset a fresh target sheet in his alley, and engaged the pulley system to set it back into position before demanding, "You still carry that butterfly knife on your left shin?"

"Very few people know about that, Private," Nova said. But she quickly unsheathed the weapon while demanding, "How did you come to find out about that?"

Milo looked at her and answered, "You've been scouted out by the fringe element, Major. You're not the only one who keeps dossiers and profiles. They know all about you. They even considered recruiting you until they realized you just screwed the pooch on that Zor Prime assignment and weren't playing for the Masters like a lot of folks thought. Still, the bad guys are very good at marking a target's habits. Heck, they might even know what color underwear you're wearing today."

She handed him the knife grudgingly. She didn't like the fact that somewhere out there was a file all about her floating around, youthful mistakes and all, for anyone to see for the right price. "'Screwed the pooch', did I?"

"No offense, but everyone knew. Angie Dante from the 15th told me all about it. Live and learn, eh Major? Actually, I kind of like knowing you make mistakes. As professional as you act, it's nice to know I'm dealing with a human being. Speaking of that, hear from Captain Brown much?"

Nova shook her head. "Dennis and I have an . . . arrangement. We don't talk much, because he doesn't approve of my line of work. But next time he calls, I'll send your

regards.” Nova looked at the butterfly now in Milo’s hand, and added, “Giving up on the gun, en?”

Milo shook his head. He unfolded the knife, rolled up his right sleeve to the elbow and made three cuts on his forearm. Milo watched with a sort of morbid fascination as the blood welled up from the gashes, before repositioning the earphones on his head. Satori reached for a pair to shield her eardrums, and quickly slammed them onto her head. Milo fired. Ten shots from his Weasel, hitting the ankles, knees, wrists, elbows, heart, and the forehead dead center.

“Execution style...” Satori commented. There was definitely more to him than met the eye.

“One thing, I will credit Colonel Thomas with teaching me: pain should be used to increase one’s performance. . . in the field. Took that to heart, I did. I don’t get into the flow of a combat situation until I get cut up myself.” Milo handed the Major his sidearm, and went to reclaim his target sheet from the far end of his range alley. He came back silently pleased with his results as he held up the punctured sheet to the ambient fluorescent lighting.

“This isn’t a standard issue Weasel, Private,” Satori commented after examining the weapon. “What is this? 40 caliber?”

“Close - it’s rechambered for the old hot FBI 10mm ammo” Milo contradicted. He reclaimed his sidearm from the GMP officer and holstered it.

“Little men usually hide behind big guns.”

“Yes, but they live a little longer...Especially with all these Clones, and micronized Zentraedi running around, I like to have something that packs a little more punch,” Milo commented.

“Those wars are over, Private,” Satori reminded him.

“Yeah, but sometimes, both parties seem to forget that,” Milo retorted. He was analyzing his self-inflicted wounds, and looking around for a first aid kit. The intermittent bleeding needed to be stopped.

Nova must have picked up on his thoughts as she informed him, “I’ve got a kit in my quarters. Let’s get you patched up. Have you eaten yet?”

“Nope, I bolted before the evening meal was delivered,” Milo admitted.

“It’s a good thing. We can swing by the Officer’s club,” Nova suggested.

“Uh, Major, I haven’t even been an NCO for some time. . .”

“Don’t worry, they’ll see that you’re with me and leave us alone.”

Milo nodded, and followed behind Nova as she led the way through the myriad of corridors.

* * *

Roger had just set himself down in his favorite chair, and reached back over his shoulder to turn his reading light. He looked around at his rather Spartan quarters until his eyes settled on the integrated stereo unit deposited on an overturned cardboard box. He grabbed the nearby remote and punched up some jazz to take the edge off his melancholy. Only Darwin's brief greeting, an automated message from High Command, and a rambling snippet from one of his cousins from the North American continent were the only messages Pike had received on this day. Even Rhea had forgotten about him.

"What a way to spend a birthday," Roger moped as he picked up an updated technical manual, and started perusing it. Pike mumbled to himself, as he read. He heard a light rapping at his door. Roger put the book down, and looked at himself in the mirror. He looked presentable enough, even though he wasn't in uniform. Roger cracked open the door, and peered out.

"Evening, Captain Pike," Milo announced.

"Private, is there something I can do for you?" Pike demanded.

"No, sir," Milo admitted. "It's just that, well... the other men have hired out a stripper for your evening's entertainment, so try and act surprised. Word of your birthday leaked out, and I guess they just wanted to show how much they appreciate your command. I just wanted to beat the frenzied crowd, which should be showing up here at the bottom of the hour, to give you this." Milo handed his commander a small bottle.

"30 year old single malt!" Roger said. "I'm not even going to ask how you got your paws on this." He eyed the bottle, and held it up to the light. The amber hue of the liquid within evoked a discreet smile from him.

"Good, because right now, someone at Division Command is absolutely livid over its departure. Enjoy it while you can, Captain."

"Come on in, Swift."

"Sir?" Milo asked.

"It's my birthday, and if you think I'm having a dram of this beauty alone, you're crazy!"

Milo looked at his watch. He had a poker game to get to, but he had time for just a quick one, and affirmed to Pike, "You're on, Captain."

"Out there, I'm Captain. In here, I'm Roger."

Roger procured two clean glasses, and handed one to Swift. He opened up the bottle, and poured a healthy amount out for both imbibers.

“Here’s to peace!” Roger toasted.

Milo raised his glass to Roger’s, and they clinked.

“That’s really smooth, Milo,” Roger appraised after letting its provocative scent engulf his nostrils and swallowing some of the rare nectar. He felt its warmth spread from the back of his throat downward. Milo downed his helping quickly, and nodded.

“Well, Roger, if you’ll excuse me, I must be going. I’ve got a previous commitment to uphold.”

Roger looked up at him and cautioned, “Just don’t do anything stupid at the table, Milo.”

Swift nodded, saying in parting, “I’ll try not to, Captain.”

As Milo left Captain Pike and his birthday gift alone, Swift saw some of his company coming up the corridor. Milo smiled as ducked out a side doorway into the night.

Happy Birthday, Captain.

* * *

Months cycled by, and this overcast March day found Captain Pike addressing his assembled crew. Orders had come down from Denver. For some reason, Supreme Command wanted an around the clock state of combat readiness. Their unit was schedule for a patrol along the disputed border with E.B.S.I.S. and the likelihood of combat was staring Roger squarely in the face. Pike looked over the collection of mostly untested soldiers glistening like statues in their polished battle armor and the ASC Captain nodded pensively. His mind was going over which Hovertanks would take point should an engagement with E.B.S.I.S. actually take place, and what maneuvers he’d favor over others. He said a few cautionary words about the perils of battle, and then made use of a tired joke just to relieve the tenseness pouring out through the assembled formation of combat neophytes. Swift’s veteran presence would have been just the tonic to soothe the restlessness running rampant throughout his squadron, and Roger found himself looking for Milo’s hardened stare. Then he remembered that he’d already sent the Private and a green second Lieutenant as part of an advance force to check out some suspicious activity on the outskirts of Baden. They were to work in concert with the forces stationed at the base. And it had been good to get Milo out of his hair for this time, to let someone other ranking officer worry over Milo’s various failings in terms of military conduct. Milo’s series of interrogations with the GMP had somehow affected his standing here in the squad, and on a personal note, he had noted that the Private was spending much of his off-duty time in the company of riff-raff and within arm’s reach of a bottle. Swift hadn’t said

much after his encounter with the GMP, but perhaps he was just following orders. He just tried to go about his business. But even if he did get into trouble, Milo felt like he had at least one friend at the GMP in Satori who would be willing to overlook his burgeoning list of small offenses. Pike was glad to have all of Darwin's recent visits to the base be more along social lines. He shook away all these tangents running through his mind, and the Captain gathered himself to focus on the moment. He flashed them one last look of confidence and was about to give the order to mount up, when he heard Darwin's voice call out from the other side of the mecha repository, "Captain Pike!"

Roger nodded in recognition, and abandoned his soldiers after uttering, "At ease, men."

"What's going on?" he snapped at Darwin.

"Swift here?"

"I thought he was through with you guys?" Pike replied.

"He is; listen, Satori ran a night sweep last against some supply raiders working the borders, and brought back several corpses. We think one of them might be Thomas. We need him to make a positive identification. Swift is the closest person from his former unit that could possibly verify that it's Colonel Thomas..." Darwin explained.

"What about his military and civilian records?" Roger protested.

"Thomas wiped himself from all Southern Cross files before defecting. . . It's like he didn't even exist. Very professional work!"

"Wow! Then all this was a deliberate operation to pull Thomas in from out of the cold?" Roger commented.

"Looks that way," James concurred. "So where is Swift?"

"He is patrolling around the Baden base, getting use to that territory and checking out some reports of activity in that region," Roger informed. "He's not due back for a few days..."

"Baden, you say...This can't wait that long. I'll have the body in question sent down there and meet it. Tell Swift to expect me."

"Anything else, James?" Roger asked.

"Yeah...Friend to friend, and way off the record. I think I know why we're on a heightened state of combat readiness," Darwin offered. He motioned for Pike to follow him out to his dormant hovercycle parked nearby. Roger followed stiffly, his ASC battle armor crunching solidly onto the paved surface of the asphalt parking area. He undid his helmet and was holding it at his side.

"What's up?"

"We've got word that there's another alien race with designs on this planet."

“What?”

“Unconfirmed reports. . . High Command is looking into it,” Darwin said in hushed tones.

“Are they hostile?” Roger asked.

“Don’t know. But based on what our Clone and Zentraedi contacts have told us, I won’t hold out hope for a this lull to continue. Besides, with Supreme Commander having us crow about like this, I’m sure he is looking to pick a fight with whoever shows up on our doorstep!”

“Who all knows about this?” Roger asked. He was still in a state of shock.

“Just a select few in High Command, and through her web of contacts, Nova...” Darwin said, “And now, you and I. And that’s the way it will stay. Panic will do little good here. You keep this to yourself, Roger.”

Roger drew a heavy breath and nodded. “Any word on how soon?”

“Fresh information, Rog. High Command is optimistically hoping that nothing happens until the end of this year. Maybe it can lead to some cooperative agreement with E.B.S.I.S.”

“I can’t see them going that route,” Roger offered. “I just can’t believe it. Thanks, James. And don’t worry, I’ll get word to Swift.”

“Hey, before I forget, Sylvia wants to know if you’re bringing over anyone next weekend. What should I tell her?”

“I’m flying solo. Rhea officially dumped me. What can I say? I just wasn’t her cup of tea,” Roger explained as he donned his helmet.

“Just you then. We’ll make do, Roger.”

James hopped upon his hovercycle, and took one last look at Captain Pike.

“Good-bye, Roger. I’ll see you soon.”

Pike nodded and replied, “Be careful, Darwin. That area’s not safe, and I don’t want to have to call Sylvia with bad news.”

“It won’t happen to me, Roger. I promise. Next week, then. And bring a smile with you,” Darwin quipped as he took in Pike’s dour countenance. He saluted Pike before heading off.

Pike walked back towards the hangar.

* * *

Pike was going over the biweekly mecha inspection results at the small office allotted to him by Base Command when he heard a knock on his door. Swift staggered in

and feebly saluted. He was reeking of liquor, and his uniform looked like it had been slept in for the night. Roger rose up and circled away from his desk to face his slouching Private.

“What the hell’s gotten into you, Swift?” Roger demanded. “You missed today’s mecha inspection, which you’ve failed. I checked out your tank. I’m surprised the damn thing is still in one piece! I’ve given you some latitude under my watch up until now, but that is all over. I like your presence in my outfit, but I don’t play favorites! I can’t afford anymore screw-ups from you. This one is going on your record, and your next indiscretion will put you in the tank for a week. Are we clear, Private!”

“Crystal, Captain.” Milo saluted, and made a move to leave.

“Wait a sec! I’m not done here! I’ve discerned a pattern of behavior here that I don’t like. Change it! I will no longer turn a blind eye to your off-duty escapades, so keep your nose clean. You’re a soldier first, Private. And we’ll need you soon enough. . .”

Milo stiffened up. He hadn’t been paying much mind to Pike’s calculated ranting, but this caught his attention. “What’s that s’posed to mean?”

“Forget you heard that last part. Freudian slip.”

“It can’t be E.B.S.I.S. because they’re still recovering from the winter, Captain,” Milo said. His wheels were spinning.

“That’s enough, Private,” Roger said.

“Clones? Zentraedi?” Swift asked.

“Dismissed!” Roger replied trying to stonewall him.

“I’ll find out. . . eventually, Captain.” Milo threatened.

“I don’t doubt it, Milo. But there’s not a whole lot that you could do about it even if you did, Private. Letting my troops in on the story would only cause undue panic, and High Command would come down on you so hard, you wouldn’t know what hit you. I wouldn’t back you up on this; you’d be alone. Facing an enemy that we know next to nothing about, a race that is part myth is going to difficult enough. What good would it do to spook my men? I’ll need you when the shit hits the fan. You’ve seen more action than most of the NCOs and Louies under me. They’re all green, enlisted after the Masters were defeated. And no amount of simulations is going to get them battle ready. But you, you **saw** action. I know you were up to your neck in Bioroids...”

“Don’t worry. I won’t miss this for the world,” Milo countered with a hard edge in his voice. There was more anger underneath this veneer of toughness. Roger nodded knowing that his point had struck home.

“No, I won’t let you. There’s another incentive for you stay good, Swift,” Roger announced.

“My lucky day.”

“Satori’s been asking about you, wondering if you’d consider a transfer to go work for the GMP under her...”

“I’ll consider it. Did the Major say when she’d like her answer?”

“ASAP, but I know that she’s stateside until the end of April. So it’ll keep until then, Milo. You must have made quite an impression on her when she was heading up that whole Thomas inquiry,” Roger surmised.

“We get along for the same reason sharks don’t eat lawyers - professional courtesy,” Milo replied. “And we’ll just leave it at that.”

Roger’s brown widened in surprise, and he grinned, “I underestimated you, Swift. When you were transferred to me, I just thought you were a petty criminal. Seems you’ve got a little of the Gestapo in you after all.”

“We all have our calling.” Milo said quietly.

“Make sure this really is yours before you jump off that ledge, Private. Dismissed.”

Milo saluted to the best of his current faculties before walking out.

* * *

Roger floored the jeep up to the SC affiliated hospital and skidded it a harsh stop. He jumped from it and dashed inside. His heart was pumping and his mind was racing.

He can’t die! He can’t die!

He was ushered to the room where Darwin lay after the Sergeant’s hasty transfer from the ambulance, but when he crossed the door’s threshold and peered behind the screen cordoning off Darwin’s bed from the casual observer, he could see the medical technicians slowly pulling a sheet over Darwin’s exposed torso and unplugging him from the various machines. Sylvia was crying at the side of the bed; she latched on Darwin’s still and bloodied chest one last time.

“Hold it, fellas,” Pike said. “I just want a look at him.”

Pike stepped up to the bed and looked at Darwin’s face. His eyes were wide open with terror and surprise. Roger reached up to that face and brushed back its tangle of blood matted hair away. The face was silent now, peaceful, no longer concerned with the fate of this fractured world. Pike yearned for the one that shared so many laughs with Pike, the one that had looked at Roger with the admiration that a younger has for an older brother. Roger unconsciously found his other hand falling on Sylvia’s left shoulder. He could feel her shoulder shaking as her sobbing amplified. Roger shut Darwin’s eyes, and pulled the sheet completely over the torso.

“Excuse me, sir,” another voice delicately whispered, “Are you his next of kin? Could you possibly sign off on some papers.”

Roger shook his head. “He has a Great Aunt in Cuero, Texas, stateside. That’s the person you’d have to contact. Of course, his CO also has the authorization to-”

“And that is...” the doctor lingered on the question.

“Major Nova Satori of the GMP,” Roger said coldly.

“Thank you, Captain.”

The hospital personnel vacated the room to allow Pike to get Sylvia composed enough to face the light of day. Roger wordlessly helped Sylvia to her feet, and tightened his hold her shoulder. “Sylvia, let’s get you out of here. I’ll handle everything. Did he ever say where?”

Sylvia just shook her and said, “Roger, I don’t want to think about that right now. Would you just take me home...”

“Sure, Sylvia. Sure...”

* * *

Swift was under his tank trying to track down the source of a stubborn oil leak. Five hours of concentrated but fruitless effort on his part had him staring at a solitary sunset on a Saturday. Most of the men were off-base, granted on last week-end of leave. Pike had rescinded Swift’s privileges, and Milo was none to happy about that, but there were plenty of things to do here on base after he got through with this ordeal. Swift’s ears perked up. He heard footsteps. A man’s footsteps.

“Swift, are you still under there?” Pike’s voice demanded. “That oil leak?”

“Yup.”

“Where are you?”

“Almost to the distributor. . . Working my way back to it, point-by-point.”

“Good. You shouldn’t have to go past it. If you do, come get me, and I’ll crawl under this baby with you.”

“Understood, sir.”

“And when you’re through, stop by my quarters. I want to talk to you. . . in private.”

“Yessir,” Swift acknowledged.

Roger marched away to the cafeteria to put down a solitary meal of week long left-overs, swill that the men were smart enough to avoid during the week, and then endured a short walk to his quarters. He checked his answering machine for any messages. *Nothing!*

Roger put on some Brubeck, poured himself some of the single malt in a lead crystal highball, and slumped back down in his favorite chair. He stared at the wall in front of him. His mind chronicled each and every moment he had shared with Darwin, from the time he traded his first peanut and jelly sandwich for Darwin's tuna at lunch in the fourth grade, to the summer they endured fifty miles of the southern end of the Continental Divide trail in Southern New Mexico, to the time Darwin set him up with his first lay (some brunette performance artist), to the time they opened up and read their respective acceptance letters into the Academy as commissioned officers, to the time that Darwin and he spent two weeks down on Baja watching the sun come up and go down through bloodshot eyes, to the time that he and Darwin got thrown in jail during Academy for public intoxication at the end of a college football game, to the time that he met Darwin in a small Texas cantina to tell his friend that he was shipping out to Europe, to the time where Darwin took Pike out to lunch to talk about one of his men, to the time that Darwin gave Pike a ring to keep for Sylvia, to the time he said good-bye to Darwin for the last time. His grief and fatigue caved in his already weary eyelids.

Roger stirred slightly to the sound of a knock on the front door to his quarters.

"Captain!" Swift's voice erupted from outside. Upon the lack of answer, Milo shrugged his shoulders and started to move away from the doorway. After all, the lights were dim, and he heard 'soft' music." Milo came to the erroneous conclusion that Captain Pike had found another alternative for tonight. Milo shrugged his massive shoulders and took a few steps towards the elevator when his uncanny hearing detected a door opening.

"Come on in, Private," Roger's slightly tired voice enjoined.

Milo hesitated silently wondering what he'd interrupted. "I can come back later, Captain. . . if I'm-

"Now's fine, Private. Come on in," Roger informed. "I'd just dozed off."

Milo entered the bleak quarters, and looked around. Not much had changed since the last time he'd seen the place, on Roger's birthday. Milo's eyes widened when he spied the bottle of scotch Swift had presented to Pike for that occasion. Milo shut the door behind him, but didn't take a seat. He leaned his considerable bulk against one bare wall, and asked, "What's up? Captain?"

"Nova's in town, and wants her answer. . . And before you tell her, there is something I want tell you," Roger spoke as he handed Milo a glass of scotch. "Ultimately, I want you to go work for Satori for entirely selfish reasons."

Milo sipped while asking, "Why's that? To get rid o' me, once and for all?"

"No. You didn't know Sgt. Darwin like I did. I don't have many friends in this world, but he was the dearest one of them. He was just months away from getting married,

and his intended is carrying his child. They deserve closure, and God help for saying this, but I want vengeance for his death. I'm not satisfied with the answers I'm getting from the GMP about what they plan to do about it, and I don't even think that anyone there cares about his death, except for Satori. And even she's about ready to let go of it!" Roger snarled back.

"When I find them, what then?"

Roger looked at Milo's emerald eyes coldly, and said nothing. But Swift knew what he meant.

"I'll think about it, Captain."

"She's in town, at the inn. Rented out a room for the week. Check out a hovercycle, and go meet her. I've reinstated your leave privileges for tonight. Check in with me tomorrow. Got it?" Roger demanded.

Milo nodded, knocked back the last of his scotch, and asked, "Roger, you're sure about this?"

"I can't get by it, Milo. I want satisfaction..."

"Understood, Captain."

Milo shut the door behind him.

* * *

Milo found the inn with no trouble and parked the hovercycle out back. He could see Nova's vehicle on the far side of the lot, shiny and black with a fresh coat of wax. Swift looked at it for a moment before entering through the service entrance to the kitchen in back. His face was familiar enough to draw a few frowns from the staff, and the night manager was about to show him the door, when he whispered that he was here on business, and not 'to play.' They still didn't seem totally convinced until he mentioned that he was looking for Major Satori of the GMP. That hushed up everyone.

The head waiter took him to her rather crowded table, and left Milo there to hover over her shoulder. She was arm-wrestling some lean Corporal of Spanish descent. Milo could see the veins on her forehead pop out as she strained to force his arm down to the table's surface.

He cursed something in his native tongue, before ordering a round for everyone present.

"Who's next?" Satori challenged.

The collection of low-ranking officers looked at her with some consternation. She'd taken each one of them on and emerged victoriously. She had no takers. One by one they shuffled up to the bar, and abandoned her to Milo.

"I see Pike finally gave you up," Nova said.

"Depends..."

"On what?"

Milo and Nova were interrupted by someone bringing forth two frosty mugs with a good heads. She flashed the Corporal look that said she wanted some privacy, and he slunk back to the bar.

Milo took a sip and replied, "What am I in for?"

"It'll be a rough ride out there."

"So was the stockades," Milo said.

"Look, I know you had no love for Darwin, but he was one of my best. I want you on this case."

"Understood, ma'am."

"You need a room?"

"Nope. I'll head on back. I've got a big day tomorrow. When do I formally report?" Milo inquired.

"Three days."

* * *

"Come on, guys, we move out in ten," Roger yelled. Klaxons rang all throughout the A.T.A.C base where Roger's company was stationed. Only hours before, near-by Passau had been destroyed by a tac-nuke, and the call came in from command that the E.B.S.I.S. tanks were already rolling all across Europe towards the pro-unification lands in the west. Several enemy divisions, Roger had been told, were mere hours from their own position. "We don't have all day people!" War had broken out again, but this time it was man against man. There was no place for delusions about a humanity united anymore - greed and pride and the hunger for power had shattered Earth, and the last bastion of unity, the Armies of the Southern Cross, were preparing to launch to stop that fracture from growing, and if not to restore unity, at least to try to impose hegemony.

Roger stopped for a moment and allowed himself to be distracted by the bustle of his tankers and their maintenance crews about the hanger, distracted enough not to notice at first the tall dark man step through the hangar door, a duffel bag slung across one shoulder. The man stopped in the middle of the bay, and only then caught Roger's eye.

“Swift?” Roger asked.

Milo nodded.

“I suppose you can’t tell me anything about it, can you?”

Milo shook his head.

“So why’d you come back?”

“It’s war. The GMP has enough folks digging dirt right now. I’m more useful here, even if I am AWOL from ‘em. Got a spare tank?”

Roger swore, and turned his back on Swift. “Number six’s pilot’s out with a broken leg. Get in your armor - you have five minutes!”

Less than two weeks later, fire once again rained down from Earth’s sky, ending the war between the E.B.S.I.S. and Earth’s united government. The Invid had come.

* * *

22 November 2042

A brief respite in Michael Austin’s group’s travels found them on the banks of the Rhine. Most of the group had wandered away from the dinner fire despite the autumn chill creeping over them, and were off occupying themselves with their own pursuits. Michael and Laurie had wandered off together, laughing like a pair of high school students experiencing their first crush; and crushed was precisely Jeanne’s reaction to the instant friendship that had bloomed between the pair. Her reaction was to sulk in her tent, reading one of the books Roger had acquired in a small town to which they’d recently traveled to barter for supplies.

The only ones remaining around the fire were Roger and Milo. The larger man puffed on a cigarette he held in the hand on his good arm, while tenderly nursing the other. Roger was preparing to store the rest of the jambalaya he’d tossed together for dinner.

Milo broke the silence, and looked over his shoulder at Laurie and Michael, chatting off in the distance. “Boy, those two hit it right off, didn’t they?”

Roger grunted his assent. “One hot-shot pilot to another. I think they’re all the same person, sometimes, just dressed up in different outfits.”

“So how’s that new fighter coming along, Captain Pike?” Milo asked. “Worked those damned bugs out of it yet?”

“Most of ‘em. And it’s just ‘Roger’, Milo. The Southern Cross is gone. And you have forgotten protocol for everyone else, and I don’t blame you. No need to try to get back into the habit of it on my behalf.”

“Fair enough. Of course, what with the Southern Cross being gone and all, I suppose that means their secrets are gone too, eh?”

A long silence swept over the two, and Roger sat back in his chair, and took a long hard look at Milo.”

“It’s been eight and a half years, Milo. I don’t need to know who killed Darwin. I don’t need to know why. I don’t need to know any of the details or any other bullshit about that. It’s all useless detail, clutter I don’t want filling my brain now or ever.”

“Fair enough,” Milo conceded.

“All I need to know is this: did you get the bastard who did it?”

Milo took a long drag on his cigarette, and let his gaze wander off in the distance. After a few moments, his eyes met Roger’s, and his brow furrowed slightly.

“I got him.”

Episode Eight:

Video Melee

“The occupation of the bounty hunter regained a certain degree of popularity during the many years of the Invid occupation, as the occupying armies were more than eager to hire human agents to help them locate and eliminate the troublesome resistance forces.”

-“Inside an Invid Sympathizer’s Mind”, *The Forgotten Warriors*, June 2054, p.35, the official periodical of the veteran resistance forces and their families.

18 December 2042

A broad expanse of the river Rhine’s waters effortlessly bore the weight of the seventy-ton flotilla of rafts that gently glided northward on the river’s back. Occasionally, a tributary or the remains of a canal would appear, but for the most part, the scenery rolled by, revealing the shattered ruins of this once highly populated and industrialized area of Germany.

Milo sat alone atop the hovertransport glumly nursing his injured arm, occasionally catching bits of the raucous game of poker going on underneath him. A peal of Michael’s laughter woke him from his daze.

“Well, when you’re good, you’re good. But I guess I’ll settle for lucky,” was what Michael had said. *How dull*, Milo thought. *What’s the use of gambling, if there’s no risk? Not when Jeanne can do it for me.*

Milo peered out from under the tarp that concealed the hovertransport’s plasma cannon. The rain was picking up in strength, droplets bouncing and spraying Milo’s face, and little rivulets flowed off the roof into the water below.

Something wasn’t right. *Cassandra said. . .* Milo cursed. The thought was diverted by an image of her beautiful face. *Damn it Milo, concentrate. She’s gone. Fiona mentioned Kane. I thought I’d taken care of that bastard years ago. Seems he’s still around. Good old Nightstalker. If so, he’s probably. . .* Milo considered the possibility, and he didn’t like it. Two Alpha fighters and three cyclones might be weapons enough for an Invid patrol, but a man, *if you could call him that*, like Kane? *A knife to the throat or a bullet in the back of the head is a pretty pathetic way to check out.*

Inside the hovertransport, Michael folded. Still cheerful from the small party thrown by the group nearly a week ago in honor of her twenty-seventh birthday, Laurie called, hoping to carry the round with her two pair. Jeanne smiled innocently, laying a full house out on the small card-table. She laughed softly and collected the pot of lemon drops and other assorted candies. "If you're a good boy, I might share," she teased, looking at Michael.

The commander only stroked his chin. His stubble was getting a little long, and he'd have to take the time to shave it off. *Though I've always wondered what I'd look like in a beard*, he thought.

Laurie broke the silence. "Sorry, guys, but this is getting a tad boring. Must be the rain. Got anything good to read?"

"The *Aeneid*, and a bunch of technical manuals. Take your pick," Michael replied.

"The technical specs it is," Laurie replied, rummaging through the storage area. Michael nodded, and headed for the cab to talk to Roger, but not after raiding the group's mini-refrigerator and taking the last leftover piece of the cake they'd gotten for Laurie's twenty-ninth birthday a week ago.

Jeanne watched Laurie for a moment, and then headed for the topside porthole. Milo'd appreciate part of her winnings - he *had* marked the cards for her. She chuckled faintly as she popped a candy in her mouth and headed up the ladder.

* * *

A lone figure waited quietly on a hill overlooking the Rhine, a pair of binoculars in his hands. He could readily make out the hovertransport and the two rafts behind it. The rafts seemed to be carrying something very heavy, but they were covered by tarps. From the shape of the bulges underneath, he guessed they were a couple of fighter planes. Another tarp partially covered the hovertransport. A hatch on the roof opened, and a red-headed girl emerged, carrying a bag in her left hand. She slid under the tarp and proceeded to talk to a man whose body had been formerly hidden in the shadows. The observer raised his sniper rifle and brought the man into his sights. Milo Swift was a marked man, and soon the Mountain Guardian would guard no more. *Not now. It's too soon. I want him to know what hit him.* The assassin smiled. *Your turn is next, old friend. But that'll have to wait 'till I get the Baron to pay up for the Hammond job.* He watched the hovertransport gently glide by. He had no idea of its destination, but a rig like that would be easy enough to find again. The man started his motorcycle and began to drive away.

* * *

“Afternoon, Milo,” Jeanne said, smiling profusely.

“You got my candy?” Milo asked.

Jeanne opened the bag and gave half its contents to Milo. Milo looked at it nonchalantly and tossed a chocolate in his mouth.

“You’ve been quiet lately. I came up to see if you wanted any company,” she said to him softly. Milo looked at the girl and shrugged.

She might be nosy, but at least she’s easy enough to get along with. Not like Mason, Milo thought.

“I’m just watching the world go by. You don’t think I could have a drink?” Milo asked.

“Laurie says no, but. . .”

“When I want her opinion, I’ll ask her.”

Jeanne made a half-smile, and gave Milo his flask. It was mostly empty, but enough for a good draught remained. Milo gulped it down.

“Let’s talk,” Jeanne suggested.

“About what?”

“I don’t know. Anything. This rain is depressing.”

* * *

The battle-weary Invid trooper cautiously entered the central chamber of the isolated hive, built high in the Swiss Alps. She was only just returning from mop-up operations that had eliminated four bands of resistance fighters, and had lost very few of her squad in the process. These fighters were not as equipped or skilled as those she had met at the old military base, but she was more experienced than she had been at that battle. The hive brain echoed with the telepathic voice of her mother, the Regis, and soon her form began to appear before her.

My daughter, you have done well in safeguarding our new world from these primitives, and you have acquitted yourself well since your earlier failures. You are my chosen, my royal daughter; you are my successor-to-be, once you have learned enough, and you must continue the fight to preserve the Invid race. Come forward child, the Regis said. The shock trooper, with considerable trepidation, moved forward.

It is time for you to become a leader amongst your people, and to do so you must wear armor appropriate to your station. A bolt of light emerged from the floor and engulfed

the purple battle suit. The metal dissolved into light, transmutating and reforming around the hovering pilot into a new, more imposing shape. *Behold the Gamo!* The Regis proclaimed. When the light faded, a larger blue-and-white mecha appeared. Its arms were more cylindrical, with smaller claws, but its back was adorned by a mammoth horseshoe-shaped beam-gun platform; on either end were white emitters. A pair of plasma cannons were hidden beneath the single eye. The pilot caused the mecha to bow to her queen, turn around and face her subordinates.

Lihra wouldn't forget the face of the human that had humiliated her one of this world's lunar cycles ago, and she was going to exact her revenge, no matter how long it took for her to find him.

* * *

"And then Roger sent us on a recon patrol. . ." Milo continued. Jeanne was only half-listening as she closed her eyes and listened to the rain splashing on the hovertransport roof.

"We went to a hill about ten miles south of the base," Milo continued. "Then a bunch of Invid ambushed us. I was scouting the area east of the main group at the time, but I could see clear enough that there were at least two hundred Invid to our ten tanks. I radioed Pike to tell him to keep the main group clear, because they weren't ready for that kind of a fight. The other guys were all being killed, and while I tried to make it back to them, an Invid Shock Trooper hit my tank. I tried to jump backwards in Guardian mode to avoid the next shot, but I ended up slamming into the hill. I was knocked out, and the mecha's protoculture generator was destroyed, so the Invid ignored me from then on."

Milo fell silent and looked off into the distance. Jeanne put a hand on his shoulder reassuringly and started for the hatch. It was raining harder now.

"Get Michael up here," Milo said to her. "There's something I need to tell him."

* * *

Milo had fallen asleep between the time Jeanne left him and returned with Michael. Michael squatted under the tarp across from him and looked over Swift. The injury had taken a lot of the fire out of Milo's personality, probably for the better. Michael nudged him and he awoke.

"You wanted to see me?" Michael asked. Milo looked suspiciously over Michael's shoulder at Jeanne, still timidly lurking behind him. "If you can say it to me, then you can

say it in front of her,” Michael reassured.

Milo remained quiet for a moment, and then spoke. “I haven’t told anyone about this, but it affects all of you, so I guess it’s time to break the silence.” Milo’s eyes shifted from Jeanne to Michael. “I’m a hunted man.”

“Hunted?” Jeanne asked. “Aren’t we all? That ‘Wanted’ poster we learned about five weeks ago was for all of us.”

“No, not by those amateurs. By a professional hit-man. Well, at least he used to be a ‘man’. Ever hear of the *Nous-gran’diel*?”

“Shit!” Michael interjected.

“What’s a *Nous-gran’diel*?” Jeanne asked.

Michael’s face was sullen and serious, his brows crinkling in intense thought. “I’m not surprised you haven’t heard of them,” he said to her. “Very few people have, and it’s top secret. I never told you about the time my plane crashed on Dahlori-4 back when I was twenty-four, in Phoenix Squadron.”

“Yes you did,” Jeanne replied. “You were shot down while on patrol near where a band of rogue Zentraedi had set up a base and had to survive for four weeks on the planet before you were rescued.”

“I didn’t tell you everything,” Michael insisted. “While I was there, the Zentraedi commander sent a *Nous-gran’diel* to hunt me down and kill me before I gave away the position of their base. I had hoped I’d put that month of my life behind me.”

“But what are they?” Jeanne repeated.

“You know how the Zentraedi can reconstruct a person’s body in a protoculture chamber, taking him from 35 feet tall, with all the necessary bone and muscle and circulatory structures for a creature that large, and creating a new body for him indistinguishable from a human or Tirolian?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Well, the *Nous-gran’diel* are micronized Zentraedi produced in a special protoculture chamber, and there are very few of them ever made; in fact the chamber that produces them can only be used once, and then it self-destructs. Their senses are enhanced, they are made more agile, stronger, more quick-witted. They are the perfect hunters and assassins, designed to go after well-guarded targets and kill them. They are damned near invincible, and I hope you never meet one. The reason there are so few of them is that even the Robotech Elders were scared that an ambitious Tiresian Senator or Zentraedi commander might get ideas of using one against them.” Michael turned to Milo. “What wasp’s nest did you stir up to get a *Nous-gran’diel* after you? I didn’t know that there were any on Earth.”

Milo scratched his chin. “His name’s Kane. That could be either a Zentraedi or human name, but from the way he acts, he was originally human, or part human. My guess is he found a *Nous-gran’diel* protoculture chamber in the ruins of a Zentraedi cruiser, somehow figured out what it was, and used it on himself. We’ll never know. His fighting style indicates he’s studied Ninjutsu or something like that, and, damn is he fast. Nowadays, he’s a first-rate, world-class hit-man. I know him because he was hired to kill someone I was hired to protect. He succeeded, but I hunted him down. Almost killed him, too. But he’s a slippery bastard.”

“You have reason to suspect that he’s on your trail again?” Michael asked.

“Just a hunch. Don’t tell the others; they’d only worry.” Milo replied.

“Agreed. Keep your eyes open. If you see anything unusual, tell me immediately. We’ll talk about this later,” Michael ordered.

Milo nodded, and Michael took that as his cue to leave. Jeanne followed him back into the hovertransport. As soon as the hatch was closed, she asked, “On Dahlori-4, you got away, didn’t you? He must not have found you.”

“Who says **she** didn’t find me?” Michael said sternly. From his demeanor, Jeanne could see that this conversation was over.

* * *

Michael had found his way onto a chair across from Laurie, and the two had been carrying on an animated conversation for several hours. Michael recounted his tale of the battle at Chrysid-2 and some of the battle maneuvers that had saved his neck against the Regent’s hordes and had earned him his current rank of Commander. Throughout the telling, Laurie was enraptured in the story, eyes never blinking. Finally, he finished, and asked her, “So where does a medic learn to fly an Alpha? Especially as well as you did the other day?”

Laurie leaned back in her chair and replied, “An old RDF Colonel taught me on a simulator, after the invasion. He was a bit of a focal point for the resistance around Bonn, and still is, as far as I know. His name is Joss Bland-Hammond, originally from the Manchester RDF Base. At some point, I decided to put his teaching to work, and left Bonn to join a resistance outfit. Their leader was killed in an intrigue involving the former Duke of Saxony, and since I was the only one who knew how to fly, I was given the plane. Problem was, the guy who replaced him as leader was more interested in being a highwayman than resistance against the Invid, so I left. I floated from group to group, until I ran into you.”

“Is this Joss Hammond still in business?” Michael asked. “The more regulars we can get help from, the better.”

“I think so. He lost his right leg against the Zentraedi and his heart isn’t what it used to be, so he doesn’t actually go out and fight anymore. He and his Zentraedi wife spent most of their efforts training people, fixing their mecha, running guns, gathering intelligence, and so forth. His front is an electronics store in Bonn. If he’s still in operation, he’ll be there. We may want to stop there anyway, because we’ll either need to bypass or destroy the hive west of Cologne if we want to get anywhere.”

“I’d like to meet him. Whatever help he can give us will be absolutely priceless,” Michael said.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Laurie told him. “I’ll tell Roger where to turn off of the river.”

* * *

Michael looked out the hovertransport window at the village. *Three thousand people, maybe four, tops*, he thought as he stepped out.

“So this is Bonn?” Jeanne asked.

“Not really. The old city’s a ways to the north. In the last days of the Second Robotech War, the Robotech Masters used their reflex cannons on it. There’s nothing really left of the area. We’re closer to Remagen,” Roger replied.

“Oh.” Jeanne was used to the devastation of war, but still, she got a knot in her stomach that wouldn’t go away.

Milo was lagging behind, and Roger rushed back to help him along as Jeanne, Laurie, and Michael walked ahead, silently taking in the sights of this quaint but conquered town.

Laurie hurried them along a dark, lonely street and eventually dragged them into a small electronics shop. The door was unlocked, and inside the band saw a store littered with broken and disassembled electronic components. A boy of around sixteen, with slight build and pale complexion, unremarkable except for his long pale green hair, was soldering something as they entered.

Part Zentraedi, Michael thought. *Must be Colonel Hammond’s son*. This was confirmed as the boy got up and walked forward to greet his guests. On his left shirt pocket was stitched a name tag, reading in both Roman letters and the Tiresian demotic the name: Blake Hammond. *They must get Zentraedi customers here too*.

Blake immediately recognized Laurie, and rushed to give her a hug. “Laurie! I can’t

believe it's really you. How long has it been? Three years?"

"Yeah, three years. Boy, you've grown by leaps and bounds. Where are your mom and dad? These people are resistance, and they sure could use their help."

"Mom's in Ohlfantoma, and she's not coming back for a month or so. Dad's. . ."

Blake hesitated, and lowered his head.

"What's wrong, Blake? Is Joss okay?" Laurie pressed.

"He's dead. Someone broke into the bedroom upstairs at night three months ago and shot him. Mom's trying to hold together the Resistance's alliance with the clones in Brittany and the Zentraedi in England, but everything's falling apart now that Dad's gone." Blake composed himself. "I don't know if there's anything I can do for you."

"I'm really sorry about your dad, Blake." Michael said. "I'm Michael Austin, 8th Naval Air Group, Robotech Expeditionary Force. I suppose anything you can do for us will be more than enough. These are my associates, Jeanne Ducasse, Milo Swift, and Roger Pike," Michael said, pointing out the others.

"Why don't you take us downstairs, Blake. Let's show these people what your parents have accomplished in the last eight years." Laurie added. Blake nodded silently, and indicated for the others to follow him.

Blake accessed a secret panel in the wall, which slid back, opening to a stairwell leading downwards. The stairs ended with a door, which Blake unlocked and opened to reveal a vast basement. The north wall seemed to be some sort of command center. A field radio was located on a desk, above which was mounted a poster map of Europe, with all the major inhabited towns, political boundaries, wastelands, and most importantly, all the Invid hives on the continent clearly marked and concisely described. Several file cabinets were located near the desk, with labels on the drawers listed 'Intelligence', 'Service Manuals', and the like.

The west and south walls were stacked with ammunition, supplies, ration packages, and spare parts for both the Alpha fighter and the Cyclone, as well as for the old AJACS and Valkyrie series of fighters.

"I think I've died and gone to Heaven," Roger said, examining the setup. Michael noticed the east wall, where there seemed to be a mock-up of an Alpha-fighter cockpit, and what looked to him like an old video game. Michael smiled, recalling the day he met Jeanne and was recruited into the REF. Blake detected the object of Michael's attention, and said, "See that game! My father bought it from the arcade at Macross City before the SDF-1 was destroyed. It's the one Max and Miriya Sterling played when they met!"

The game was like a small table, with the screen forming its surface. Two sets of controls were placed opposite one another; this game was made for head to head play.

Michael knew the story behind the game well enough, but could hardly believe his ears. He carefully examined the game, and found a small placard with the pair's autographs inscribed on it. He recognized them; they were authentic. "This is incredible. This game is a part of history!" Michael said gleefully. "You guys should take a look at this," he told the others.

"You know the Sterlings, don't you, Michael?" Jeanne asked.

"Yeah. My dad was in Skull squadron for a year during the reconstruction. Max and Miriya used to check on me from time to time, to see how my mother and I were doing, and I spent a lot of time with them after my mother died. They told me about the game, but I didn't know it still existed!"

Laurie smiled and sat down at the game across from Michael. "I'll play you."

Michael looked at the controls, and smiled. "You're on. Let's start with level B. That should be a good warm-up."

The screen flickered on, and a gong appeared in the middle of the screen. Two caricatures of the singer Lynn Minmei in a Chinese dress appeared and struck the gong four times. Two Valkyrie-type veritech fighters swept in from opposite sides across the screen, leaving in their contrails, the word 'START'.

Two Guardian-mode Valkyries appeared on either end; Michael's was blue and Laurie's red. As the two fighters fired at each other, turrets from the sides of the screen blasted away at both planes, forcing both players to spend most of their time dodging. Finally, Laurie caught Michael off guard and blew his plane to bits. A Battloid appeared at the base of the screen in front of each player, as the word 'GREAT' passed before both contestants.

"Good shot, Laurie. Let's see how well you do on level A. That should be the clincher!" Michael laughed cheerfully.

"Are you sure you're familiar with the Valkyrie controls?" Laurie asked him. She didn't mind the idea of embarrassing the REF flyboy, but she wanted to make sure the match was a real test of his skills.

"Yeah. I flew an old VT-1 trainer a few times, but it was one of the late-block models with the refit cockpit. I've also spent some time in a Valkyrie simulator, though the Valkyries still in service are all with the Air Force. It's a real monster of a plane," Michael said, smiling. "But these controls look to be **really** simplified versions of the old Valkyrie set-up. Should be no problem."

"Well then, let's go!"

The screen printed the following message to both players:

PLEASE
CHALLENGE

LEVEL: **A**

fight!!

BATTLOID VALKYRIE

The image began to flash and then disappeared. The screen started to glow, and then expanded into a giant holographic hemisphere. Three-dimensional miniature pictures of Valkyrie Guardians descended and transformed into Battloid mode, one for each player. Michael cast a devilish grin over to Laurie as he gripped the throttle control. A five-note ascending tune played, and the game started.

Laurie pushed hard on the foot pedals and kicked her throttle to maximum. Her Battloid dove, aiming its gun pod at the opponent mecha, spiraling above hers. Michael weaved in and out to avoid the cannon, and got below her, trying to turn the tables. She spun toward his Battloid's back, but Michael sent his mecha to the top of the screen, laying out a suppressing fire. The video Valkyries continued to successfully evade each other's shots for the next two minutes or so.

She's good, thought Michael. Too good. I'll have to try the ol' Fokker's Fake!

Laurie responded to this most recent change of tactics by blowing the left leg off Michael's Battloid.

Damn. The Battloid's losing power, Michael thought.

Laurie fired at him again, as he charged toward her mecha. Michael managed to catch her off guard and put a dozen video rounds into her Battloid's right arm. The gun pod fell away, but she caught it in the Battloid's left hand. She directed the Battloid below and to the left of Michael's. Five minutes had now passed. Michael finally got her in his sights and fired. First, the head of Laurie's Battloid was destroyed, then its left arm, and finally Michael's shot found its mark in the Battloid's chest. The image of her mecha turned orange and crumbled to pieces.

The small crowd cheered. Even Laurie was impressed. She had played as well as she ever had and still he beat her.

"Well done," she told Michael.

"A new champion!" shouted Blake. "Just wait until Rich hears!" he cried as if he wanted the whole world to know. Something about this seemed to knock Laurie off balance, and she got up without a word and went upstairs.

Michael glanced at Blake. "What was that about? Who's this Rich?" he asked.

"My brother. I'm really not supposed to talk about it."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to pry," Michael told Blake. "You don't mind if we take some of this stuff with us, do you?" It would really help us against the Invid."

"No problem. That's what it's here for."

Michael looked at the others. "Good. You guys, go through this with Blake and decide what we can and can't use. I'll be back in a minute," he said as he bounded upstairs after Laurie.

He found her sitting outside the shop on a low wall, watching the sunset. The late autumn wind grazed Michael's cheeks and tossed his hair about. Laurie's back was turned to him, and she stared silently into the orange and red clouds. Michael sat next to her. "Is this seat taken?" he asked. No response came. "I know it's none of my business, but would you mind telling me what's up? I know it's not the game."

Laurie didn't even turn his way.

"If you ever want to talk about it, I'll be here to listen," Michael said. He leapt off the wall and started heading back.

"Thanks. . . Michael," Laurie whispered.

* * *

A dust-covered motorcycle rumbled through the streets of the village, attracting little attention. The man scanned the streets that ran perpendicular to the main artery of the town. He hadn't found what he'd come for. Not yet.

Maybe they didn't. . . Wait there it is. Sticking out like a sore thumb, the man mused, after spotting the hovertransport. And where the hovertransport was, Swift would be as well. Kane noted the location, and smiled. *Damn. This is the second job I've done here. Maybe I should just wait around this shop and let all my targets come to me.*

He parked his motorcycle behind one of the small buildings nearby, effectively concealing it from prying eyes.

"It's gonna be short and sweet, Mountain Guardian," he said softly, disappearing into the lengthening shadows.

* * *

Milo had just finished going through a set of boxes of mecha ammunition, cataloging the type and quantities of missiles, and some notes as to their condition. *Jeez,*

this is dull. A grumble in his stomach gained his undivided attention, and he shouted out, “Blake, you got anything to eat around here - snacks or something? I’m sort of hungry.”

Michael and Jeanne looked up from their tasks as Blake replied, “I have some cheese and bread. Will that do?”

“Yeah, it’ll do. You guys want some?” he asked the others. Michael nodded in the affirmative, and the rest of the group seconded his approval. “Right. I’ll get something to drink too,” Milo added. “Where’s the kitchen,” he asked Blake.

“Go up to the ground level, and into the back of the shop. There are some stairs that take you up to the loft. The kitchen’s the second door to the left.”

Milo nodded and disappeared up the wooden staircase leading out of the basement, turning round the corner to get to the back of the shop. On his way to the second floor, he admired the family portraits that hung on the wall alongside the staircase, now covered in a thin layer of dust. There were pictures of the Colonel and his striking Zentraedi wife, and their two young sons. Milo brushed the dust off of the last one. It showed Laurie, much younger and more attractive, standing beside a man Milo presumed from the other pictures to be Blake’s older brother. Cradled in Laurie’s arms, and apparently fidgeting in an attempt to avoid having her picture taken, was a little girl around two years of age. Milo dismissed the pictures and proceeded to the top of the stairs, leading to a long hallway that opened into a small living room. There were four doors along the hallway, and Milo started towards the one Blake had identified as the kitchen. The kitchen opened into the living room, and was well-stocked, and the icebox was full of sodas - where Blake got them was anybody’s guess. Milo grabbed sausages, some soft-ripened cheese and a soda for Blake, and closed the refrigerator. He then took a couple of loaves of bread from the pantry and a bottle of Liebfraumilch from a wine rack. *I think they’ll approve*, Milo thought. The group hadn’t had a really decent meal in days - just MRE rations. Milo put all of this, a plate, and several glasses on a tray, but after a moment’s hesitation, he put the tray down, noting what looked to be blood-stains in the shape of shoe-prints on the carpeting that had never seemed to have been completely washed out. They emerged from the door right across from the kitchen; it was locked, and this piqued his curiosity. He picked the lock. *Good to see I still got the touch.*

He flipped on the light switch. The bedroom contained a double bed against the far wall, with a night stand on either side. There was a large dresser on the same wall as the door, and a closet and gun cabinet to his left. He walked closer to the bed and one of the night stands. Everything seemed to be in order, except for the otherwise beige wall behind the night stand. *Definitely blood. . . that’s right. The old man must have bought it here.* he remembered. The brown stain was still visible, though most of it had been scrubbed away,

presumably by Blake's most diligent efforts. Milo looked at the windowpane next. It had been forced. He examined the headboard more closely, and found a bullet lodged in the hard wood. Milo went to one knee, took out his knife and tried to pry it out.

Suddenly, he heard Blake's voice scream, "What the hell are you doing in here!" Blake was more surprised than angry, and before he did anything rash, he stopped for a moment and realized just how big Milo really was.

"You know, you should of tried vinegar in the hall carpet; that might have gotten the stains out better than whatever you used," he said without getting up. "Say, your old man's been dead for what, a couple of months?"

Blake replied in the affirmative just as the bullet came loose. It was a large caliber round, probably a .45.

Milo got up and turned to the boy. "Don't tell me. You and your mom were both away, and when you came back, he was full of holes."

Blake nodded, and said, "You know something you're not telling me."

"A hunch. Your dad didn't ever make enemies with any of the neofeudal lords, like the Baron of Arnhem, did he?"

"I suppose so. Some of the local rulers get their power from the Invid, and Dad was well-known as a focal point for the resistance."

Milo scratched his chin. "Hmmm. Did you find anything unusual in here?" he asked.

Blake nodded, and opened a dresser drawer, reached in, and handed Milo four spent cartridges from an automatic pistol and a coin. The coin bore a skull-and-crossbones on one side and an etched number on the other: 87. Milo examined the cartridges; they were .45 Winchester Magnum rounds - real heavy firepower. "What a cocky bastard," Milo mused under his breath. "Rare round like this, and he doesn't even bother to collect his brass." Still, everything fit the pattern he'd seen before.

"Get the others. We need to talk." Milo ordered. Blake obeyed, and headed out of the room.

* * *

Michael was standing to the right of the stairwell, diligently continuing the task of taking the inventory of the underground storehouse, though Laurie, Jeanne, and Roger had quit in expectation of the forthcoming meal, and were waiting around a small card table in the center of the room. Michael then heard footsteps coming down the stairs, and guessed that Milo was returning with their food. He heard Roger shout out, "Need any help, Milo?"

and rush to the stairwell.

Michael heard a crash, and saw a darkly-clad figure leap out of the stairwell onto Roger, who fell to the ground clutching his abdomen, which was turning blood-red. The figure leapt away from Roger and headed toward the center of the room, right at the two women.

Austin leapt towards the man, hoping to cut him off. He heard Jeanne's voice shout out, "Watch out, Michael!" just as the figure slashed at him with his right arm; and Michael could see for the first time the steel claws attached to his forearms. *Nekode. . . Ninjutsu weapons*, Michael thought quickly.

His adrenaline was flowing in all its fury, and his instinct told him that this was the man Milo had talked about: Kane. The *Nous-gran'diel*. Michael blocked the attack with his left forearm, and struck back with a chestnut fist to his enemy's solar plexus. The enemy staggered, and Michael followed up with a circle kick to the head, calling out his distinctive *kiai*.

The enemy jumped backward, and steadied himself for another attack. Michael charged first, with a side kick to the abdomen, followed to two punches to the jaw. Kane replied with an elbow to the face, and as Michael stumbled backward, a kick to the jaw knocked Michael to the ground.

Kane closed in for the kill, claws ready to strike, when Michael rose again. Kane tried raking Michael with the claws, but Michael stepped aside, blocked with his right arm, and sent a two-finger strike into Kane's right kidney. Kane choked and backed off, producing a smoke bomb from some hidden pocket. Michael tried to jump him, but he cast it to the floor, and disappeared in a cloud of noxious fumes.

Michael then rushed upstairs, while Jeanne and Laurie tended to Roger, who was writhing in agony on the floor. He ran upstairs to find Blake cowering on the floor, but Kane was nowhere to be seen.

"You okay?" he asked Blake. Blake nodded.

"He pushed me aside, and headed out of the shop. I think he was hurt," Blake added.

"Where's Milo," Michael asked.

"Upstairs. He told me to bring you."

"Tell him to come downstairs. Roger's been hurt."

Blake nodded, and headed to the back of the shop. Jeanne then emerged from upstairs, running for the hovertransport. As she ran, she shouted, "I'm getting Laurie's med-kit from the transport!"

Michael shouted back, "Be careful. He may still be out there!" and headed back

downstairs. Laurie was tending to Roger's wounds: some nasty surface cuts to the stomach area and left shoulder.

"Is he okay?" Michael asked Laurie.

"Yeah, but he's going to need quite a few stitches. It could have been a lot worse. Those claws could have punctured his abdominal wall."

Michael patted Roger's head, and Roger nodded, and Michael walked across the room and sat down at the card table, deep in thought.

* * *

Michael had waited until Laurie was finished patching up Roger, and had pumped him full of pain-killers before he started the meeting. Roger, for his part, looked a little bleary-eyed, but was coherent enough to complain about the IV blood transfusion stuck into his wrist.

Milo sat at the table across from Michael. The others soon realized that they would be merely spectators in this affair.

"Well, it seems your Kane is indeed after you. I guess he didn't know you'd gone upstairs just now."

Milo nodded, and showed everyone the coin Blake had given him in Colonel Hammond's bedroom. "This is his trade mark. Each contract job gets a number, and he leaves the coin with the number on it when he's made the kill. Apparently, Blake's dad was number eighty-seven. I was to have been part of job thirty-one, and as far as I know, I'm the only one that has escaped him so far."

Jeanne chirped in, "So someone hired him to kill you? Why? I thought you were a hermit before you joined us."

"It's not that simple, Jeanne," Milo said. "I spent almost four years as a mercenary, hiring out for anyone that had the money. Got myself quite a reputation at it, too. But four years ago, I got a belly full of the fighting and killing, and went back to my old hovertank. Then one day this guy shows up looking for me. According to what he told me, the Count of Mecklenburg and the Baron of Arnhem, both Invid sympathizers, had formed an alliance against the Duke of Saxony. You see, Duke Gottfried von Schönberg was a really charismatic figure, and he had far-reaching ties to the resistance. His hope was to get the more neutral leaders, like the Chancellor of France, the Duke of Burgundy, and the Counts of Catalonia and Languedoc to join together, and eliminate all the regions with rulers whose power derived from the Invid, like Mecklenburg and the Netherlands, and pave the way to mount a general offensive to throw the Invid yoke off of Europe. His plan was working.

Bands of resistance fighters were beginning to look more like a regular army than a bunch of rag-tag guerrillas. He was getting support from as far away as the Grafts of Transylvania and Bohemia. Then the Baron of Arnhem hired Kane to kill von Schönberg. He would have been kill number thirteen, but his first attempt failed. They wanted me, or 'the Mountain Guardian' as I was known at the time, to hire on as von Schönberg's bodyguard. I agreed. My advance payment was to be a Cyclone he'd acquired from Wolff's expedition, but they never got around to training me to use it, since I was immediately put to work on the more dreary details of the Duke's personal security - and as I later discovered, the transformation circuit was burned out anyway. I wasn't on the job for three weeks when Kane ambushed us as we were on our way to a secret meeting in Prague. I was hit bad, and he managed to kill the Duke. He just came out of the blue and before we knew what was happening, the entire escort had been massacred."

"I was left for dead," Milo added, "but when I got back on my feet, I tracked the bastard down. He'd made a fool of me and killed the man I was hired to protect. I finally found him outside of Frankfurt's ruins. We had a terrible fight, and I thought I'd killed him, and went back to my hovertank to live in peace and quiet. Seems like I was wrong."

"So his fight with you is personal." Michael scratched his chin. "What happened to the Duke's alliance?" he asked.

Milo shook his head. "Von Schönberg's son managed to hold the alliance together, and launched the offensive anyway. The boy was well-meaning, but apparently a terrible general. As I'm sure Laurie and Roger could tell you, the Invid destroyed practically all vestiges of resistance on the continent. Only a few old RDF and Southern Crossers who'd been stationed in Europe before the occupation managed to hold out." Milo looked at Blake. "My guess is the Baron hired Kane to kill your dad because he was resistance and had ties to Saxony. The Baron is a crafty son of a bitch, and we'll have to get past his domains if we want to cross the Atlantic."

Michael paused for a moment, and surveyed the reactions of the others. Morale was obviously running a little low, and Michael had to do something about it. But Kane was his primary concern. There was no reason to suspect that he wouldn't come back until he'd killed Milo, taking out who knows how many of the others in the process. What's worse, he had seen the contents of the basement and knew of its existence. It wouldn't be long before the Baron's scavengers or even the Invid came to check this place out. Kane had to be dealt with, and soon, and they had to load up everything they could from the basement and leave. *Blake might even have to come with us*, he mused.

Michael's gaze returned to Milo, and he said, "What's this guy's usual technique?"

"Kane has an almost juvenile fascination with large-caliber weapons," Milo replied.

“The bigger the better. His sidearm is a LAR Grizzly in .45 Winchester Magnum, and he isn’t in the least bothered by the weight. His favorite rifle is the Weatherby 460 bolt-action, with laser target indicator and fourth generation Russian night-vision sights.”

“Weatherby 460? What’s that?” Laurie asked.

“African big game rifle; an Elephant Gun,” Michael replied. “If the angle of incidence is low enough, that thing can even punch through the armor on an Invid Armored Scout.” Michael’s attention once again returned to Milo. “What about the claws?”

“They must be new. I’ve only seen him use a machete in hand to hand, but as you saw, he’s trained in Asian martial arts. The machete’s how he killed the Duke and wounded me.”

“I want him taken out. He’s seen what’s in the basement, and has been following us for some time. Milo, where do you suggest we get started?”

“No offense, mon frère, but this is personal. I have to take him myself. I don’t doubt that you’d be able to help, but if we failed, he’d come back for both of us, assuming at least one of us is still alive. If I go alone, either way, he won’t bother us again. You may have embarrassed him just then, but his real fight’s with me.”

“Suit yourself. I’ll at least help you get ready. Jeanne, you, Blake, and Laurie start loading the hovertransport. Roger, you take it easy.”

* * *

Milo and Michael were going through the gun cabinet in Colonel Hammond’s bedroom looking for the appropriate arms for Milo. Michael had tossed an old breech-loading grenade launcher and several belts of ammo on the bed, planning to take them downstairs. “Glock 9mm,” Michael said, pulling the gun out of the cabinet. “That’s a nice one.”

“It doesn’t pack enough of a punch. Kane’s tissue repairs at a phenomenal rate, and he’s practically immune to shock. Shame I can’t use a Gallant.”

“Too dangerous. I don’t want the Invid breathing down our necks as well. How about this? Desert Eagle in .44 Magnum? That’s a match for his Grizzly.”

“I tell you what’d be really nice. A silencer. That’d help keep him guessing where I’m coming from.”

“I’ve got just the thing. Follow me,” Michael said, loading the last of the conventional guns and ammo into a bag and heading downstairs toward the hovertransport.

Back at the transport, Jeanne was standing guard, a H&K 33K assault rifle from upstairs leaning against her shoulder, while Blake and Laurie loaded the last pieces of

equipment into the hovertransport. They had managed to get a large supply of stores, parts, and weapons, and only the least useful things were left behind. Blake and Laurie had even managed to get the video game (at Blake's request), and there was still barely enough room to bring up the Alpha fighter simulator, but Michael's and Milo's help would be needed in carrying that up the stairs.

Michael tossed the bag of guns into a corner and pushed aside a box containing three suits of personal body armor, opening a trunk that had been hidden by other crates. He rummaged about in it, producing an odd-looking crossbow, with some sort of sight on it.

"A crossbow?" Milo asked as Michael handed it to him. The thing was well balanced, and he looked through the sight. Michael pressed a button on the side of the scope for Milo, and he could suddenly see the thermal gradients in the air and the warmth of Michael's body. *Infra-red imager too. . . Nice.*

"Not just any crossbow. This is a Praxian compound crossbow. It was given to me by a Praxian Warrior-queen for saving her life when she and several of her guard were trapped behind Invid lines, back around three and a half years ago. The quiver is mounted on top of the bow, holds twenty bolts, and automatically loads every time you cock the bow. The action is pump-style, like a shotgun, and though the draw strength is only ninety pounds, it fires at a force of 250 pounds. For accuracy, the bolts are rifled, and are forced through a ribbed ring to give them spin. Take good care of it, and it'll take good care of you. I had this one with me when I was on Dahlori-4, and it saved my life on several occasions."

Jeanne entered the hovertransport, and said, "Loading is almost finished. All we need is the simulator. By the way, why are we taking it?"

"To keep you up on the Alpha's controls and so I can work with you and Laurie on some of the finer points of aerial combat. Hell, if we come into possession of couple more Alphas, I might even give Milo here a crash course in it."

Milo scowled at the thought. He never did like heights.

"Milo, head on downstairs. I'll be with you in a minute." Milo nodded and left, crossbow in hand.

"Michael, what are we going to do about Blake?" Jeanne asked. "If Kane tells anyone about the weapons stash, he won't be safe here anymore, even after we've taken all the stuff. Shouldn't we take him with us?"

"I thought about that myself, but what can he do around here?"

"Well, he's a wiz at electronics. Even more so than Roger. He can help with the mecha."

“I’ll talk to him. I’m not comfortable having someone that young with us, but I can’t think of anything else to do.” Jeanne started to turn away, when Michael called out, “By the way, I was digging through the trunk of things I rescued from your room on the *Valiant*, and I found this.” Michael took out the gold necklace, and placed it on her neck. “It really looks good on you. I’ve never seen you wear it before.”

“That’s because you sent it to me when you weren’t speaking to me anymore, on my birthday. I never could bring myself to wear it, though I’m glad you sent it. I knew that at least you hadn’t forgotten me.”

“I never could,” Michael said smiling.

“Why did you really stop talking to me? Was it just because I tried to seduce you, or was it something else as well? If I remember correctly, it was less than a month after you were rescued from Dahlori-4. Was that it? What happened to you down there?”

“I have a really hard time talking about what happened down there, and I don’t think I’m ready to bring it all back up now. But let’s say that your stunt set off a lot of things that had been boiling over since I crashed there, and all you did was make it worse. You’ll remember that I was given a temporary psychological leave of absence for six months after I got back. You weren’t catching me at my best.”

Jeanne smiled and took Michael’s hand, squeezing it lightly. “Come on. Let’s finish the packing, and talk to Blake.”

* * *

Michael sat on the sofa, fidgeting and shifting his weight. Milo had been gone for less than an hour, but Michael just didn’t feel right in letting him go alone. *I doubt it’s started. Kane’ll probably toy with him a little first*, he thought, disconcerted by the whole sordid affair.

The others were also understandably apprehensive, but tried to make the best of it with a little conversation. Michael left Blake’s living room, and went for the kitchen, looking for something to drink.

Laurie was already there, opening another bottle of wine.

“I talked to Milo before he left,” Michael told her.

“What does he think of his chances?” Laurie asked.

“He wouldn’t say. He just suggested that if he’s not back by morning, he won’t be coming back.” Michael helped her with the cork, and gave the bottle to her. “I feel so helpless. I want to do something.”

Laurie looked at him intently, and said, “I don’t mean to sound heartless, but do

you really care what happens to Milo that much? I mean, what's he to you?"

"He's one of my men. I'd feel the same way if it was you and not Milo. You don't know what it's like to be hunted. I do."

"If he doesn't show up by morning?" Laurie asked.

"We give Blake Milo's Cyclone and move on." Michael leaned against a cabinet. "I know you don't think much of him, but something tells me that his role in all of this is bigger than it seems. It's that. . ."

"What?"

"It's as if I was meant to crash near his hovertank, that he was meant to join us. I get the feeling that he's something like a magnet, drawing something bigger than this war towards us, towards me."

"You sound like you believe in the Shaping."

"A lot of guys in the fleet buy into that, but not me. It's just hard for me to believe that there is some sort of will in the Flower of Life directing all this. It's much more complicated than that. No, not the Shaping; Samsara. . . causality."

Laurie smiled, and pulled Michael towards her, planting a passionate kiss on his lips. It bothered him. He hadn't felt that way in nearly six months.

"What was that for?"

"Good luck. If you're the man I think you are, you're going to go out and help him."

Michael nodded, and headed downstairs to the shop. Neatly stacked in a pile were the breast plate to his Cyclone armor, and the H&K 33K Jeanne had been brandishing earlier; all right where he'd left it. Michael donned the armor, just as Laurie and Jeanne joined him from upstairs.

"What do you think you're doing," Jeanne demanded.

"Don't you understand, Jeanne? He has to," replied Laurie. "This is who he is."

Michael looked at the two of them, but he couldn't think of anything to say. He took up the assault rifle in his right hand, and stepped out into the darkness.

Michael looked about for a moment, and began to walk away from the building. Shadows waxed and waned in the alleyways of the town, and every one of them could be Kane, lying in wait in the cold night. Michael was less than twenty-five yards away from Blake's home when he heard the almost imperceptible sound of the action of a bullet being chambered. Michael looked briefly at his own chest, and noticed a red dot reflecting faintly over his heart. *The laser sight!* Michael thought, and began to dive for cover. Then he felt fire in his chest, and a great force hurling him backward, followed an instant later with the report of a gunshot. Michael's knees crumpled beneath him and his eyes could see nothing

but darkness.

* * *

Night had descended on the small town several hours before, and Milo still had neither seen nor heard Kane, except for a single gunshot going off in the distance what must have been only forty-five minutes after he left Blake's shop. In all this time, there hadn't been the slightest sign of Kane. That's what unnerved Milo. Milo scanned the rooftops of the buildings across the street. He knew the Nightstalker, and he knew he would attack from above. Always had, always would. Milo thought it interesting that he'd only used the claws in his attack earlier today. *He wasn't counting on Michael. He wanted to use the claws on me.* Milo wondered how he would attack this time. With the rifle?

Nope. If that's what he wanted, I'd have been dead long ago. He wants to get up close. That's what he's waiting for. Hoping he can catch me off my guard, Milo thought.

His scan of the rooftops was fruitless. Had they been so good at avoiding each other that they just hadn't met, or had Milo slipped up and had Kane been watching him all this time? Milo stifled a yawn, and popped a stimulant in his mouth. This was his last one.

Milo waited patiently. Something had to give. . . It did, as Milo heard the hard scrape of a leather sole on a rooftop. Milo saw the infra-red signature in his scope, aimed, and fired. Milo heard the bolt strike something solid, and heard Kane swear as his rifle slid down the roof into the street, fifty feet in front of Milo. The crossbow bolt had stuck into the wooden stock. Milo ducked out of the way as the assassin leapt at him from the rooftops above, rolling to the ground and quickly springing to his feet.

Milo saw him in the pale moonlight. He was definitely bigger than Milo cared to remember. The claws looked rather nasty, and Milo noticed the handgun strapped to an ankle holster. Milo slung the crossbow on his back; they were too close for him to use it effectively. *He's just been toying with me so far.*

"It's been a long time, old friend. If I hadn't pulled a job for Rimmler to take out the 'Lady' down in New Munich, I'd have never known you were still alive! I'll have to fix that!" Kane took a swipe at Milo with the claws, but he managed to get out of the way. *Does he mean Cassandra? The bastard!*

"Who's your manicurist, Kane?" Milo taunted. He hoping his enemy would answer, having lost him again to the shadows.

"The gun's too easy and quick. That's how I knocked off your Navy buddy."
Michael? Jesus Christ! He's killed Michael, Milo thought sadly.

Kane continued, "These are removable, Swift, and I'm gonna leave them in your

gut.” he charged at Milo, driven by a wild unquenchable rage. Kane managed to catch Milo’s bandaged left arm. Blood soaked the bandages. Milo also felt the claws rip across his midsection. They had not cut deeply, but nevertheless bloodied him a bit further. Milo stumbled backwards into a wall, and fell to the ground. He lay there for a moment, and saw something of interest just within reach.

Kane approached for the kill, but Milo reemerged with a long piece of lead pipe, and swung it into the Nightstalker’s neck. “That was for the Duke!” Kane crumpled to the ground. “That one’s for Cassandre!” Milo hit him again in the chest. Kane was in bad shape, crumpled on all fours on the ground, wheezing faintly. Milo paused, and took aim at Kane’s head - he was eager to see if a *Nous-gran’diel* could recover from having his brains dashed out all over the street. “This is for Michael!” Milo swung, but Kane deflected the blow and slashed Milo in the abdomen again. More blood soaked his clothing as he began to turn and run away. Milo had to get out of there; to get some more room in which to fight.

* * *

Jeanne was watching over Michael when he awoke. “How long have I been out?” he asked. He was feeling nauseous and disoriented, and couldn’t even see clearly.

“Four hours. Laurie’s filled you with pain-killers and something to keep you from going into shock. Your chest was really badly bruised.”

“What happened? Where am I?”

“You’re on a cot in the electronics shop. You got shot in the chest. The bullet glanced off your armor, but you’re suffering from blunt trauma.” Michael’s eyes cleared long enough for him to see his breastplate in the room’s corner. A long, deep gouge had been cut into the armor. Jeanne continued, “You must have been turning when he fired, because the bullet’s AOI was high enough for it to glance. Otherwise, you’d have been a dead man.”

Michael sat up, though he really wanted to throw up. He composed himself as best as he could, and started for the stairs. Now more than ever, he knew he had to help Milo.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing? Lie back down; you’re hurt!” Jeanne ordered. Her voice was shrill and loud, but Michael did his best to ignore it. He managed to get half-way up the stairs before he first stumbled. He used the railing to pull himself back to his feet, and continued. By now, Laurie, upon hearing the commotion, began to come down stairs and saw her patient. Jeanne shouted out to her, “I think he’s delirious! I just can’t talk sense into him!”

Laurie took Michael's arm as he got to the top of the stairs. "Come on, Michael," she said. "Let's go lie down, okay?" Michael brushed her aside, and headed for Blake's father's room. The women followed him, shouting and cajoling for him to get some rest. Roger and Blake were attracted by the noise, and ran upstairs as well.

Michael opened the late Colonel's closet and pulled out a heavy leather jacket. It would be very cold out there. He put it on, and went for the bed. Jeanne was in the way, but he seemed to just look through her. There on the bed was the grenade launcher and ammo belt he'd left there earlier in the day. Jeanne saw him reach for the ammo belt.

"You're going back out there, aren't you? Jesus, Laurie, tell him he's in no condition to go back out there!"

"You really shouldn't go," Laurie enjoined. "Kane shot you because he wanted it to be a one-on-one with Milo! Michael, I understood before, but you're still dazed by the bullet!"

Michael slung the belt of 40mm grenades over the jacket and strapped it on like a bandoleer. He reached for the grenade launcher. He wouldn't even have to hit Kane with this weapon, just come close.

Laurie came up behind him and ran her fingers through his hair. "Jeanne's right, Michael. You can't fight like this. You'll never survive. And what about the mission? Without you, the mission fails! Just go back to bed. Milo can handle this on his own."

"Roger, stop him!" Jeanne shouted.

Michael headed for the door, but the stalwart Roger blocked his way. Michael stared into the smaller man's eyes, and without a word being exchanged, Roger understood. He stepped out of his leader's way. Michael exited the room, the two women still hot on his heels. Michael's footing had more or less returned, and the sick feeling in his gut had diminished. He stood before the door leading out of the shop as Jeanne and Laurie tried one last time to stop him.

"Michael, please don't do this," Jeanne said. "Please!"

Michael opened the breech on the gun and examined the barrel. He pulled a grenade from the bandoleer and slid it into the chamber, and jerked the grenade launcher up, slamming the breech shut. He mechanically turned his head to face the frantic women and sent them a stare that instantly quieted them.

"I'll be back."

* * *

"You ain't running away from me this time, Mountain Guardian," Milo heard from

behind him. Milo was half-running and half-limping, but the lead pipe had done its damage to Kane, and he was hurting as well. Every time Milo moved, the wounds opened again, and a little more blood leaked out.

He was going to nail me sooner or later, Milo thought. *I had only hoped it was later.* Milo limped into an abandoned warehouse. Its timbers were aging and termite-infested, and were generally rotten. He slowly crossed the threshold and climbed to the second floor on a set of creaky stairs near the wall across from the entrance, dropping the lead pipe at the foot of the stairwell. He reached the top very slowly, and hid behind some old rusted industrial equipment. Milo heard the crash of glass somewhere else on the floor. He cocked the crossbow, waiting for something to happen.

The Nightstalker leaped from another stack of machinery towards Milo's back, but Milo swung around, pointed his weapon and fired. The bolt went straight through Kane's abdomen, lancing his liver and a kidney before partially emerging out the other side. Milo rolled away, cocked and fired again as Kane was trying to get up again. This bolt pierced his back and went into his left lung, its tip lodging in the assassin's abdominal wall. Milo pulled his survival knife out of its sheath and stabbed deep into his ailing enemy's shoulder.

Kane collapsed onto the ground and lay still, blood pouring out of every wound. Milo slung the crossbow on his back and closed in on Kane, to make sure he was really dead this time.

Much to Milo's surprise, he wasn't. Kane reached around and cut a deep gash into Milo's chest with the claws on his left arm, and sliced into Milo's thigh with the other arm. Milo kicked Kane in the head, knocking him back down, and started to back off. He was leaving a thick trail of blood behind him as he went, knowing it would only be a matter of time before the Nightstalker was up and after him again. Milo headed for the stairs to the bottom floor of the building. *He'll have to use the stairs to follow me. I'll pop him when he comes down,* Milo thought. He staggered down the steps, hearing a horrible scream behind him. Kane had just pulled the knife out of his back. Milo took another few steps. Another scream. Kane had ripped a crossbow bolt out of his body. Milo could see the bottom of the stairwell. Suddenly a third scream emanated from upstairs. The last crossbow bolt was out of Kane's body. Milo felt a sudden sense of urgency, and tried to limp even faster. Suddenly, the step crumbled beneath him, and Milo's legs fell through the stairwell, and he was trapped. His right arm was jammed, and he couldn't get any leverage from it. And his left arm was bleeding, not to mention the damage done weeks ago by the Invid annihilation disk. *Never fails,* he thought. *The limb you need most is the one that's hurt.* Milo grimaced in pain as he tried to heave himself out of the jam. He heard the Nightstalker coming after

him. *Getting so close, I can smell you, Kane*, he thought as he managed to free himself. Milo smiled as he heard his arch-enemy cautiously step onto the staircase. When he heard Kane's foot hit the last step he grabbed it and pulled, throwing Kane onto the rubble-littered floor below. Milo leaped down after him, and took up the lead pipe he'd earlier left behind. Kane rose to his feet.

"You're good, Swift. Real Good."

Milo's thoughts darkened. *This son of a bitch never quits!* Kane leapt at him, claws slashing left and right, and Milo was hard pressed to duck them. He flailed Kane with the lead pipe over and over again, knocking Kane against the wall.

"If I go, I'll sure as hell take you with me," Kane vowed. Milo didn't waste his time with talk. He hit Kane twice more, and backed off, throwing away the pipe. Kane tried to get back onto his feet, but when he did, Milo fired the crossbow. The bolt punched into Kane's belly. Milo cocked and fired again. This time, the thick heavy arrow sank deep into Kane's chest, and Kane slumped to the ground. It was over. Milo limped toward the door across from the wall where the Nightstalker lay, and turned his back to Kane. After all these years he would never have to watch his back again. Milo sighed with relief, and stumbled forward.

Kane's still body stirred; his head rose and his eyes opened. Milo was getting away. Kane reached for his boot holster, extracted his Grizzly, and started to stand up as Milo was casually closing on the doorway. Kane righted himself, and pulled back the hammer. However many shots it took to kill Swift, he swore to himself he'd live just long enough to put them into his back. Milo was just outside the door, when he heard the hammer cock back. Milo instinctively turned around to see Kane pointing the gun at him.

"Say your prayers, Milo Swift!" Kane shouted, and brought the pistol to bear on Milo.

Milo suddenly felt a hand grab him and toss him out of Kane's sights and safely to the ground. Michael stepped past Milo and stood in the doorway, pointing the grenade launcher at the wall behind Kane and smiled. "Over here, *Nous-gran'diel!*"

Kane hesitated; he was sure he'd killed that man. "You're dead!" Kane insisted.

"You first!" Michael pulled the trigger, and a soft 'pop' emanated from the thump-gun. Before Kane could take aim at the new target, he felt the wall behind him explode in a fiery maelstrom, the concussion knocking the gun from his hand, and blowing the Nightstalker to the ground. The wall began to crumble, and the second floor and roof over that half of the building collapsed. Kane was instantly buried under a ton of debris.

Michael looked down at the ailing Milo. Milo was laughing, so hard that his injured sides really did hurt. Michael extended his hand, and Milo took it, doing his best to haul

himself off the ground. Michael put an arm around the injured comrade and steered him toward the electronics shop.

“Austin,” Milo said.

“Yeah, Swift?”

“You really look like shit.”

“You are certainly one to talk.”

“One more thing. . .” Milo added. “Remind me never to make fun of your punctuality. You just go right on showing up just in the nick of time.”

Michael laughed and said, “The girls are really worried. Let’s hurry back.”