

ENDGAME AT ENGADINE

Kevin Killiany

Part One

Burnis, Elume
Melissia Theater, Lyran Alliance
14 October 3067

Jake stomped the jump pedals, rotating the tillers as acceleration slammed him into the command couch. The pinewoods dropped away, some of the saplings bursting aflame in the jump jets' backwash.

Around him the thirty-five ton *Spector* responded with reflexes his beloved *Grasshopper* could never have matched. Rotating as it rose, the gyro compensated as Jake raised its arms to target the heavy BattleMech that had almost ended his day.

No good tone, the enemy heavy was sporting the same Guardian electronic countermeasures suite that made his *Spector* hard to hit. But the phased array sensors cut through most of the hash; the targeting readout gave him an eighty percent chance of hitting.

Jake fired. And cursed as the scrub oaks and brush covering the empty patch of hillside charred instantly to ash beneath the converging beams of his large and medium lasers. A resin-rich pine the other 'Mech had knocked over burst into flame; a torch threatening the rest of the piney wood.

The heavy was airborne, lifting with surprising speed. Intellectually, Jake knew the other pilot had anticipated his shot and jumped before he'd fired, but it was hard to shake the illusion of the heavy dodging the laser beams en route. Reading the jump jet thermals and plasma volume, his sensor array predicted the seventy-five ton BattleMech would fly one-twenty to one-fifty meters.

"Practically a damn LAM."

The *Spector* reached its apogee and Jake rotated the machine again. He was going to come down about sixty meters ahead of his pursuer. Not enough to make much difference in these open woods. Particularly if the soft sand turned his touchdown into a tumbling crash. Time to watch his landing and trust the Guardian ECM to—

An explosion rocked his 'Mech, the hammer-like *clang* deafening through his neurohelmet. Jake resisted the urge to yank the tiller, easing the joystick against the spin as the gyro fought gravity for control of the falling BattleMech.

Wire frame and idiot lights reported a hit high on the left hip, some armor lost and collateral damage to the left torso jump jet. Landing was going to be rough, but not dangerous.

He was dimly aware of a dozen smoke trails beyond his canopy; missiles that had missed spiraling away. Unable to get a lock, the other jockey had fired a spread along the *Spector's* probable arc. Sound tactics, if you had the missiles to spare.

Speaking of which...

The targeting computer had recorded twenty medium-range missiles, only one of which had hit. Taken with the other machine's jump and mass, the missile count convinced his computer the BattleMech it could only approximately see was a *Thanatos*.

The *Spector* landed on the downward slope of a low sand hill. Jake anticipated, beating the gyro to the punch getting a leg forward, turning what could have been a stumble into a forward run. The *Thanatos* would come down on the other side of the ridge, out of sight. Not that the low fold of sand—or the widely spaced softwoods—provided much of an obstacle.

"Ancient dune topography" the data file had called these woods. No ocean anywhere on the area maps, though. Jake would have happily traded the tree-covered former dunes for craggy, ore-rich mountains to obscure his trail.

Not that sensors did either 'Mech jockey much good. Their identical Guardian suites—his had recognized a brother unit's signature—made active weapons locks almost impossible. His sensors apparently had an edge, but that was precious little help under the circumstances. Any shots they traded would be manually aimed—which gave a decided advantage to the heavy 'Mech's ability to lay down spreads of missiles instead of narrow laser beams.

At the bottom of the hill, Jake turned left; heading north. With the soft sand and pine needles shifting under his light 'Mech's feet, he didn't dare push the *Spector* to its full one hundred and eighteen kilometers per hour. And shoving through the heavier softwoods would take more time—and potentially cause more damage—than stepping around them.

Shutting down his active arrays to reduce the *Spector's* electronic signature, Jake eased the throttle forward. The light BattleMech made a broken-field run along the base of the low ridge, dodging

obstacles with a grace his seventy-ton *Grasshopper* could never have matched.

Of course, my Grasshopper wouldn't have been running from a Thanatos.

With one jump jet out, his *Spector's* jump range was limited to one hundred and sixty meters—only a handful more than the bogey on his tail. If he was going to get away, it was going to be ground speed that made the difference.

As if to punctuate the thought, a copse of pines directly ahead exploded in gouts of flaming resin and steam. Lasers.

Jake fought the reflex to jump. His hunch was confirmed a half second later as a flight of missiles sliced through the space his rising 'Mech would have occupied.

As the last of the medium-range missiles passed, Jake stomped his pedals.

The *Spector* rose on its four remaining jets, tilting right to carry it over the next ridge. Jake couldn't see the heavy 'Mech on his three-sixty, but he knew approximately where it was from the direction of fire. He would hit just beyond the crest and reverse, running south toward the rest of his people.

The *Thanatos* probably would not jump, expecting Jake to target his pursuer in the air. That would give Jake time for a second jump and—checking his heat readings—a third before the pirate figured out what was up.

Passive sensor alarms bleeped as the *Spector* peaked. Thermal signatures on the far side of the ridge crest ahead.

As gravity pulled his 'Mech down, Jake slapped the active sensor toggle, setting them to scan ahead. No ECM suites here. The sensors promptly identified a brace of *Merlins*—rugged, sixty-ton workhorses popular all along the Periphery.

One was north of Jake's landing zone, too far to away to be a threat. The second was due west and barely close enough to be a danger, particularly since it could jump nearly as far as Jake's wounded *Spector*. However, both were slow on the ground—probably doubly so in the shifting sand of the piney woods. A good sprint south before his second jump and he'd be away from them.

Thermal flare to the south, arcing upwards just as Jake dropped below tree level. His sensors pegged the jumping 'Mech as an antique *Chameleon* in original configuration. Three centuries ago it had been a trainer at some academy. The jockey of a machine like that was either a tyro who couldn't do better or a seasoned pro in his favorite set-up. Either way, the fifty-tonner was nearly as fast as his *Spector* and—though lightly armed compared to the *Thanatos* and the *Merlins*—his match in a firefight.

If it got close enough to see him.

Jake cut right again, going for the high ground where the trees were thinner. If he could sprint past the oncoming *Chameleon* while the *Thanatos* was still making its way through the woods choking the shallow valley—

Thermal flare rising above the ridge. Parsing the conflicting ECM readings, his targeting computer tentatively identified the *Thanatos*, predicting it would land three hundred meters above and ahead of him.

Thermal flare to the north. The far *Merlin* was trying to close the gap. Checking his tactical display, Jake realized the distant 'Mech still posed no threat.

The three BattleMechs closing in would blast his *Spector* to scrap long before it arrived.

DropShip Clermont
Khartoum system
Coventry Province, Lyran Alliance
02 September 3067

Jake leaned back in his chair—or tried to, it was bolted to the floor—and frowned at the contract on the noteputer.

Will, actually. Last will and testament of Grainger Christian, killed in action on Saravan when he inexplicably climbed out of his BattleMech in a combat zone.

The DropShip's braking burn as it approached Khartoum's nadir jump point recharging station created the illusion of near normal gravity. Not that Jake cared about gravity, but it was good to see Ariel comfortable. His co-commander did not like zero-gee in the least. And when she was putting up with something she did not like, people around her usually found themselves putting up with Peregrine Junior.

This afternoon, thanks to the ersatz gravity, the final go-over of the Chaos Irregulars' budget and inventory had been conducted in relative peace. The fact the numbers Pauls had been showing them were good helped the mood.

Khartoum, just a name on a star chart before they'd arrived, was a minor center of trade well used to meeting the needs of mercenary units. And they'd used the four days between being deposited by the Simson's DropShip and being picked up by their new employer wisely. Between off-loading the BattleMechs into their temporary hangar and loading them aboard the *Clermont*, Silverlake and his crew had refurbished, refit, repaired, or replaced every piece of equipment in the Irregulars inventory. Every able-bodied member of the command, from Peregrine Junior down, had taken a turn in the round-the-clock maintenance.

Jake had not found his new 'Mech with any of the dealers who catered to the mercenary trade, but what he'd seen of the market was encouraging. There were a lot of second string and salvage BattleMechs available, and more arriving every day—a windfall of units all over the Inner Sphere standing down from Civil War levels. He'd been tempted by a beautiful *Grasshopper* 5-J, but though he liked the SRM/2's close-in punch, he wasn't sure it was worth the loss of the LRM/5. And he did not like trading the two torso-mounted medium lasers

for the anti-missile system and extended-range upgrade for the large laser.

If there had been a pristine 5-H available at that price....

And pristine was a key factor. Between his salvage cheque (reimbursed by Giovanni before they'd lifted from Noisiel) and the value of the Star League-era *Crockett* parts salvaged from El Giza, he had nearly enough capital to take his pick of BattleMechs without having to settle for a fixer-upper.

Silverlake had been in his element bartering the esoteric parts he'd accumulated for the Irregulars' 'Mech customizing shop on Noisiel for more useful items. When purchases were unavoidable, Giovanni Simson's up-front payment on the ill-fated mission to Saravan gave them plenty of room to negotiate.

Their chief engineer had acquired a central transfer assembly needed to make their *Swiftwind* scout car—originally assembled from parts scavenged from hulks abandoned in a junkyard on Wallis—mobile. However, he was particularly pleased with a sophisticated six-tube ATM system with complete ammo feed assembly and control module.

The only drawback to the purchase was the unit did not fit any 'Mech the Irregulars currently fielded. Silverlake was sure adapting Marcus Green's *Raijin* was possible, but couldn't get the MechWarrior to agree. Green maintained the loss of his hyper-reliable Holly six-rack—not to mention the collateral reductions of his armor and ammo—was in no way an "upgrade."

Jake suspected the engineer missed putting together one-off customs for the Noisiel Games more than he would admit.

In any event Silverlake had made a strong enough case for the ATM's eventual utility—if only as a future trade item—that Ariel had approved the substantial investment.

Silverlake had been reporting all 'Mechs battle-ready—with a few upgrades along the way—and all vehicles fully operational when Reema had come into the cabin Jake and Ariel had taken as their ward room. She handed a data crystal to Sergeant-Major Pauls, then taken a seat across the table from the two captains.

She met Jake's smile with an oddly blank expression. Combined with her not sitting beside him, it set off his internal alarms.

Jake missed the tail end of Silverlake's summary as he ran a quick inventory of past actions to try and pin down exactly where he'd screwed up. He came up blank and tentatively identified the source of her mood as something on the data crystal rather than himself—a theory supported by Pauls's grunt as he'd read the data on his noteputer.

After Silverlake had left, Pauls passed his 'puter over to Jake.

Now, with three pairs of eyes watching him, Jake read down through a standard-issue last will and testament form, wondering what had caused Reema's stare and Pauls's grunt.

He found it buried on screen three.

"Christian left you his *Spector*?"

Reema nodded.

"Any idea why?"

From the corner of his eye Jake caught Ariel's glare, but watched Reema.

"We knew each other," Reema answered, her voice flat. "We had... history."

"Before?"

"That pretty much goes with history," Reema's voice took on an edge of annoyance. The first animation she'd shown since coming in.

"When before?" Jake pressed. "You mean before the Chaos Irregulars."

"Before the Strikers."

"Christian's record with the Hussars was exemplary," Peregrine Junior—not Ariel—spoke before Jake could. The words were directed at Reema, but the tone—and repeated glare—were aimed at Jake. "And complete. He never spent time away from the unit."

Reema turned a shoulder to Jake to face his co-commander more squarely.

"He had that *Spector* when he applied, didn't he?" she asked.

"Yes" Ariel acknowledged. "With authenticated provenance."

"It's his 'Mech," Reema assured them. "He earned it. He just lets—let—people assume it was a gift from Colonel Storm."

"You're telling us that isn't so."

Reema shook her head.

"I helped him get it."

"How?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Lieutenant, if it affects the operations or safety of the Chaos Irregulars—"

"Captain," Reema cut Peregrine Junior off.

Jake hadn't thought that could be done.

"Anything that could hurt the outfit, you'd know immediately," Reema's voice was hard; not confrontational, but brooking no rebuttal. "The contract's confidentiality clause limits what I can say otherwise."

Peregrine Junior held the lieutenant's eye for a long three count, then nodded, accepting the professional answer.

Pursuing his own line of thought, Jake tried to remember any indication that Reema had known Christian. The two had never socialized and seldom spoke outside the requirements of duty; he couldn't recall her ever being more than lukewarm toward the other MechWarrior. In fact, now that he was thinking of it, she had been downright short tempered whenever the other scout was mentioned. Almost as though...

"When you say history," he said, trying to sound casual, "do you mean just getting the 'Mech together history or history history?"

"Oh."

Jake jumped at Peregrine Junior calling him by name.

"That," she said when she was sure she had his full attention, "is the most stupidly male thing I have ever heard you say."

"You haven't listened long enough," Reema said dryly.

No comeback for that.

Jake frowned at the noteputer again. No mention at all of Christian's family in the will. The *Spector* to Reema, all savings, possessions, and back pay to the general survivors' fund. A man with no history outside the Irregulars.

How had Reema come by the will? And why had she been holding it until now? Though he didn't think she had. By her affect this was news to her, too.

He wanted to ask, but questions about the man were tripping mines. Maybe another tack....

"So what are you going to do with the *Mongoose*?" he asked.

"Keep it." Reema sounded surprised he'd asked. "I'm a *Mongoose* jockey."

"But the *Spector* has stealth armor, top of the line ECM, and a large laser," Jake kept his voice light. He knew enough to spot he was on the verge of another tactical error, but couldn't quite make out the trip wire. "It may not be quite as fast as the *Mongoose*, but it jumps."

"My only ride is that *Mongoose*," Reema snapped. "You like the *Spector* so much, you keep it."

Whoops.

"That's not what I meant."

"It doesn't matter," Reema said, rising. "Captain Peregrine and Sergeant-Major Pauls are my witnesses. The *Spector* is yours."

"The Chaos Irregulars will purchase the *Spector* from you," Peregrine Junior countered.

"We don't have the budget," Reema pointed out. She didn't sit, but she didn't leave, either.

"Granted," Peregrine Junior glanced across at Pauls. "But if you are willing to accept an 'as able' payment schedule, Mr. Pauls can draw up a contract giving you an off-the-top percentage of all contracts and doubling your existing prize percentage until fair market value is reached."

Jake nodded confirmation, though no one was looking his way. It was a standard arrangement, no special consideration on either side. Professional. Just the right note to strike at this moment.

On the other hand, his negotiating instincts had not been good this afternoon.

Some of the tension left Reema's body.

"Done," she said.

Jake kept the relieved grin from his face, nodding solemnly. He was glad Peregrine Junior had enough respect for his self-control left to not have fired him a warning glance.

After Pauls and Reema had left to codify the contract, Jake braced himself for the Peregrine assault. Instead, the recruiting poster disappeared, visibly folded away as Ariel resumed command. He could never figure out how she did that.

"How old was Reema when you met her?" Ariel asked out of left field.

"I don't know," Jake shrugged. "I don't know how old she is now."

Ariel cocked an incredulous eyebrow, but let it pass.

"Did you assume she'd led a cloistered existence before she met you?" she asked. Then, before he could answer: "Or did you, knowing you would someday want to make her your life partner, keep yourself a virgin?"

Jake kept his mouth shut.

"I will not pretend I am in any way qualified to give advice on personal relationships," Ariel said, heading off an argument Jake had no intention of raising. "But the prohibition against personal relationships in a combat unit predates recorded history—and what just happened is an example of why it's a good idea."

She paused, obviously anticipating a protest, but Jake found no fault with her argument.

"Oh, so far you've just been a jerk," Ariel shook her head. "But if you don't get a grip there's a chance you'll do some real damage to both your relationship with Reema and your ability to give Lieutenant Chowla orders."

Again she paused.

Jake let the silence stretch.

Accepting that Jake had no intention of rebutting, she pulled her noteputer to her and tapped the screen to life.

"We are going up against unknown pirates and our MechWarrior with the most experience in anti-pirate work is out of a 'Mech," she said briskly; Ariel being businesslike, not Peregrine Junior. "Given that you're not likely to find one of your own before we engage, which of the machines we have free would you like?"

"Medicos are proud of the work they did with Albert's arm," Jake said. "If we get to a world with the med technology to do the nerve work, he's likely to get a full prosthetic. He'll be wanting back into his *Valkyrie*."

"That leaves Dwight's old *Enforcer*."

Dwight Martin had been part of the First Company's Alpha Lance. He'd been killed on El Giza along with five others fighting crack Capellan Warrior House MechWarriors. His family had wanted no part of his salvaged *Enforcer*, taking its value in cash.

"You're forgetting the *Spector*."

Jake actually had forgotten the *Spector*, not relating it to the discussion at hand. And now that he was reminded of it, he found he didn't like the idea.

"I don't really think that's the best option," he said.

This time Ariel raised both eyebrows.

"As you pointed out, it's twice as fast as the *Enforcer*, jumps nearly twice as far, has stealth technology, and mounts a sensor array second only to the *Mongoose*, and then just barely," Ariel ticked off the features in rapid succession. "The only thing you lose is the autocannon, but you gain two medium lasers—a fair trade; particularly when you consider they need no ammo and don't have recoil."

"We're not going to be fighting in zero-gee," Jake pointed out. Why that myth about pirate hunting persisted...

"You're rated expert in null-gee combat," Ariel countered, as though that were relevant.

"In my *Grasshopper*," Jake said. "Twice the mass. Whole different physics."

"Size is not important," Ariel dismissed the objection with a wave.

Jake bit his tongue.

“Having you in anything less than the best BattleMech available could cost us lives,” Ariel said. “Are you going to accept that fact? Or is this one of those situations where we have to call in Chowla and Davis to tell us which one of us is being an ass?”

JumpShip Sanibel
Swartklip zenith recharge station
16 September 3067

Jake would have pulled himself up the ladder into the zero gravity of the hub, but Ariel headed for the elevator. The small car was designed to give passengers time to adjust to the loss of gravity and took nearly a minute to rise sixty meters.

Jake pushed off the doorframe, launching himself toward the handhold on the far wall. Catching the loop by the through corridor that led toward the bow, he grinned back at Ariel as she made her way around the wall, moving grimly from one tightly held hand-hold to the next.

He'd seen some would-be spacers try swimming from point to point, only to need rescue. Air wasn't thick enough to swim in, the kicks and arm swings spacers used in moving from place to place did not propel them forward. The motions imparted spin or minutely altered the dynamics of their trajectory.

"You should try jumping," he urged when she reached him.

"There's a reason I did not have breakfast before making this trek," she answered. "I jump and you get clean up duty."

"Mind your grip there," Jake advised.

"Thought so."

As they neared officer country, Jake kept pace with Ariel; presenting a unified front even if it doubled his travel time to the captain's ready room.

The *Sanibel* was an ancient *Tramp*-class JumpShip. An imposing vessel, nearly the size of a *Star Lord*—though it could accommodate only three DropShips—and heavily armed by civilian standards. The gentry ruling Main Street, Engadine, Elume, and Swartklip had formed a four-planet cooperative and retained the JumpShip to carry the Irregulars wherever their pirate hunt led them.

According to the historical plaque mounted in the passengers' common area of the grav deck, the *Sanibel* had been part of the colonization of over a dozen worlds in the Timbuktu and Melissia regions. None of the planet names were significant to Jake.

What had been significant was the speed with which the *Mule*-class *Clermont* had made the journey from Khartoum to Howick, where the *Sanibel* had picked it up for the final jump to Swartklip. Three jumps in six days was a personal record; he doubted military couriers moved that swiftly.

Eloquent testimony to the effort and expense their employers were willing to invest in solving their pirate problems. Useful intel.

Two men—clothed in turbans, widely bloused shirts and trousers cinched at wrists and ankles—stood against one wall of the corridor ahead. Which in zero-g meant they were tethered to the bulkhead. They were posted at either side of the hatch leading into the *Sanibel*'s wardroom, which had become the situation room for the duration of the pirate hunt.

The door guards weren't part of the *Sanibel*'s crew, of course. They were part of the honor guard brought by Sir Guydell Daniel—eldest son and heir apparent to Engadine's Lord President Alistar Daniel. Sir Guydell's *Seeker*-class DropShip—with the improbable name of *Rooter*—had docked with the *Sanibel* as soon as the JumpShip had arrived at Swartklip.

The young Daniel bore a letter of marque from his father saying he and his troops of unspecified number and composition were at the disposal of the Chaos Irregulars in their quest for the pirates. However, Sir Guydell clearly believed he was the pirate hunter and the Chaos Irregulars supporting players who were quite likely to be unnecessary to his mission.

So far he'd had the wit to not try issuing orders, but to date that was his only display of good personal judgment.

Jake knew it was not the guards' fault they worked for an idiot. They had to be aware of how ridiculous they looked providing "security" while tied to the wall.

Ariel nodded to each formally before making her methodical way through the hatch. Jake was careful to keep any trace of pity from his expression as he repeated her gesture.

It took considerably more effort for him to extend the same professional courtesy to Sir Guydell. In fact Jake had trouble taking the man seriously at all. From the young noble's waxed and pointed beard to the flowing robes of state cinched tightly about his pear-shaped form, every aspect of the man bordered on caricature.

Jake managed a curt nod that went unreturned.

No doubt he assumed I was bowing.

Dismissing the brightly colored balloon pinned to the wall, Jake smiled and nodded to the master of the *Sanibel* with genuine respect.

Anton Kaiman was clearly a man who had lived his life in space. Though evidently older than most, his dancer's body had aged without lines, making it impossible to judge if he was sixty or eighty. More to the point, he was obviously a man who was exactly where he wanted to be doing what he wanted to do.

At the moment he was floating. Lightly tethered to a web chair, he listened as his passengers discussed the mission while keeping a fond eye on the repeater screens that kept him apprised of the situation on the bridge.

Though the Main Street region was coreward of his usual routes, Captain Kaiman had developed detailed personal charts over a lifetime in space—no doubt building on personal charts he'd inherited from his predecessor. He'd made copies of those star charts that might prove relevant to the mission available to the pirate hunters.

Studying them with Ariel, Jake had been impressed. The holos-images not only located the worldless suns in the region—stars not listed on the commercial or political maps where JumpShips could recharge—but provided detailed information on radiation, recharge times and possible asteroid resources for each. Decades of pragmatic experience made matter-of-factly available.

Very professional.

Also a professional—or at least a career soldier—was Hauptmann Erich Danaldo, Main Street's contribution to the pirate-hunting force. Only a single company of battlesuited infantry, but—having observed some of their zero-gee exercises—Jake was confident they knew what being in combat was all about.

The interests of the other two worlds making up the consortium that had hired the Irregulars were represented by Administrator Verna Parlane, manager of Swartklip's extensive repair yards. Though the system was usually dismissed as a backwater by both the major ship lines and the military, its orbital network of repair and refitting facilities made Swartklip the major hub of local JumpShip traffic.

A severe woman in a no-nonsense jumpsuit, Parlane did not comport herself as the manager of what was essentially a system-wide service station. In fact, she was the only one present who'd brought an assistant—a square-jawed, blonde fellow with a noteputer and a comm headset. At the moment the headset was dark and secured around his neck, but Jake bet that outside this secure meeting he kept her in constant contact with every orbiting repair yard.

Swartklip's military resources were committed to defending the drydocks and orbital warehouses. A prudent strategy in the short term. Though Swartklip would not be actively involved in the pirate hunt itself, from what Jake could parse they were the biggest investor.

Elume, according to the background briefing that had accompanied the job offer, was a protectorate of Swartklip. Beyond that, the Irregulars had little information. Ariel's theory—supported by Pauls' analysis of the few hard data available—was the agricultural world was a vassal state—economically, industrially and militarily dependent on Swartklip.

Other than food, Elume's primary export seemed to be accountants. Indirect anecdotal evidence indicated the people of Elume were known for their thrift and attention to detail, making them popular choices for dead-end middle management positions. Whatever their resources, the world apparently lacked the wherewithal to contribute directly to the pirate hunt; simply naming Parlane as their proxy in all decisions.

The moment the steward—having distributed bulbs of coffee and fruit drink—had sealed the hatch behind him, Sir Guydell aimed a remote control at the holographic globe of stars suspended in the center of the ward room. The star chart trebled in size as the scale adjusted to a level he evidently found comfortable. A numbered star system—one without planets—began to pulse an angry red.

"The pirates' lair is located *here*," Guydell Daniel said. He spoke as though briefing Jake and Ariel on their assignments.

Which was probably what he thought he was doing, Jake thought. Nothing summed up the Lyran mindset more succinctly than an untalented and ill-informed noble assuming he was in charge simply because his mum had the wit to lay down for the right offer. Training, experience, skill, intelligence—none of that mattered when weighed in the balance against random chance and a titled bestowed so many generations ago no one knew who had earned it or why.

Recognizing his prejudice for what it was, Jake reined in. Rejecting the young noble's argument simply because a young noble had made it was every bit as stupid as DNA-powered arrogance.

Forcing down his natural dislike for the man, Jake considered the point on its merits. The sun was worldless—thus not on the standard navigation charts—and nearly central to the four inhabited systems; the combination gave its selection a sort of sense, but it had no other features to recommend it. And the raids had not been evenly distributed among the worlds, which argued against it.

"That position is not obvious," Hauptmann Danaldo said, saving Jake the trouble. "Or even likely."

He glanced around, making sure he had the ship's master and both of the Chaos Irregulars co-commanders' attention—and permission—before continuing.

"Where their staging area is or is not is not as important as determining a pattern to their attacks," he said. "We need to anticipate and respond, not react after the fact."

Competent, Jake thought, but a reactive rather than a proactive response. However ...

"Perhaps a two-pronged attack," Jake said aloud. "We have the resources. One to seek out where the pirates are coming from, the other to prepare a trap where they are likely to strike next."

Jake felt Ariel stir beside him, and saw Kaiman's eyes flick to her sharply. But she said nothing and the *Sanibel's* master apparently lost interest.

"Their last raid was against Engadine," Sir Guydell said. "We proved no easy target and they withdrew in disarray."

"Elume has little of value," Danaldo said, ignoring the noble's misrepresentation. "Early raids against them were for industrial equipment they were importing. Still crated, it never made it beyond the DropPort. Now there's nothing but farms and the factories the equipment was supposed to go in."

"Factories," Ariel echoed. "Were they developing any sort of military production?"

"Farm equipment," Parlane's assistant spoke up. He glanced at his employer for permission before continuing. "We've begun

developing our virgin territories. Given the scope of the project, building our own equipment made more economic sense than importing.”

Jake gave points to Ariel and Pauls. The Swartklip administrator had an assistant so far down on the food chain he didn’t rate an introduction and the man’s one contribution—given only with permission—was about the economics of agriculture. That ten-second interjection confirmed all of their suppositions.

“Which leaves Swartklip or Main Street,” Jake said, filing the Elume situation for later consideration. “Given the heavy traffic in and out of here and the Swartklip Planetary Militia’s heavy presence on all shipyard facilities, Main Street looks more likely.”

“Particularly given the materiel we’re importing,” Danaldo said. “After the Ninth pulled out, Morrison’s Extractors hit us hard. Lost a lot of industrial ‘Mechs—mining and lumber. With the war, getting replacements to us was way down on the priority list.”

Jake nodded. This—like the more accurate account of the pirates’ devastating raid on Engadine—was familiar information, but he played it as though hearing it for the first time.

He glanced at Ariel. His co-commander’s face was thoughtful. Turning to face him, she arched the eyebrow away from their audience. He could never manage the one-eyebrow trick. He could, however, wink. He winked the eye only she could see.

She nodded. Acknowledging she would back whatever he had in mind.

“I think I see where you are going with this,” she said aloud, setting up his play.

The kid is developing skills.

“Captain Kaiman, is the *Sanibel*’s third docking ring committed?”

“Not at the moment.”

“Hauptmann Danaldo,” Jake said, turning to the other officer. “Am I correct in understanding the IndustrialMechs are inbound now?”

The Main Street officer considered, then seemed to realize his pause answered the question.

"The JumpShip to carry them to Main Street arrived two days ago," he said. "The JumpShip bringing them here is scheduled to arrive before it recharges."

Parlane looked to her assistant, who nodded without speaking, evidently confirming the information.

"It would have been wise to keep all parties involved in combating these pirates informed of such shipments," Sir Guydell said, frowning. "To lose a dozen IndustrialMechs because you failed to take basic precautions would be grossly negligent."

"Not broadcasting the particulars of a valuable shipment *is* a basic precaution," Jake answered before the bristling Danaldo could respond. "However, now that we do know about it, I suggest we use the information to trap the pirates."

"How?"

"Substitute the *Clermont* for the DropShip carrying the IndustrialMechs," Jake said. "When the pirates try to grab it, they'll find themselves facing the Chaos Irregulars. We should make short work of their raiding force."

He indicated the space around them with a wave of his hand.

"We can't make the switch here at Swartkilp; too many witnesses," he explained. "But if we take the other DropShip aboard the *Sanibel*, we can simply drop the *Clermont* in its place at Main Street."

"Where will our IndustiralMechs be?" Danaldo asked.

"Engadine should be safe," Jake answered. "The pirates are unlikely to go back there."

"We'll send a small force of our own people with them just in case, of course. To augment Engadine's planetary militia should the pirates surprise us."

"I did not come all this way just to go home and watch someone else's merchandise," Sir Guydell snapped. "These pirates have ravaged our planet. Honor demands the Daniels—and the Engadine Militia—will be in on the kill."

"Destroying the raiding party will not be the kill," Jake said, not pointing out that 'all this way' was a single jump from the noble's home system. "Only the destruction of their base will accomplish that."

He indicated the star system still pulsing in the center of the holographic chart.

"While we engage their raiders, you and your force will capture their lightly defended home base," he explained. "That will be the blow that matters; the significant victory."

Sir Guydell scowled at the pulsing red star system. His thick lips pursed, thrusting out then pulling in rhythmically as he thought.

"Your plan is flawed," he said at last. "It assumes the pirates will wait meekly by while the *Sanibel* transports the IndustrialMechs to Engadine, then jumps from there to their home system."

"I think it takes into account how long it will take information of the IndustrialMechs' arrival to reach them," Jake let a defensive note creep into his voice.

"Sir Guydell has a point, Major Jacoam," Ariel said, using the honorary shipboard promotion. There was only one "Captain" on any ship. "Your plan will only work with a second JumpShip."

"We don't have the budget for that," Jake said. "Better to break the operation into two phases. Destroy the raiding force, then clean out their den."

"That would also free up Sir Guydell's forces to guard the IndustrialMechs while we engage the pirates," Ariel agreed. "I am not comfortable with splitting the Irregulars when facing an unknown enemy."

"No."

Ariel and Jake faced the Engadine noble.

"I will not be relegated to a supporting position by—"

He stopped himself, which surprised Jake. He had a small bet as to what descriptor the noble had been about to assign the Irregulars.

"We have the resources to hire a second JumpShip," Sir Guydell went on more calmly. "The *Rooter* could strike the pirates' home system while your forces wait in hiding."

Jake shook his head doubtfully.

"Finding another JumpShip on such short notice..."

"I believe I can help there," Captain Kaiman spoke up. "The master of the *Captiva*, another *Tramp*-class JumpShip, is a personal friend.

"In her most recent communiqué, she told me the *Captiva* is currently between runs, having just undergone minor repairs at the Canal shipyards," he smiled and nodded to the Engadine noble. "I am sure Captain McAllister would be more than happy to transport the *Rooter*.

"There are few things she hates more than new pirates moving into our area."



"What did you notice?"

Captain Jacoam had saved his traditional debriefing opener until they were back in their office aboard the *Clermont* and he'd triggered the white noise generator.

Ariel didn't blame him. The one time her co-commander had let his mistrust of employers slide, the Chaos Irregulars had nearly been destroyed. Only an honorable Warrior House's refusal to eradicate a defeated opponent had saved them.

Ariel fastened her lap strap, securing herself to a chair before answering. A glance at the chronometer confirmed it was another forty-eight minutes before she could safely take another vertigo pill.

She had hoped to return to the *Sanibel's* grav deck, but Jacoam had pushed past it. He'd had no intention of discussing strategy in public.

He hung in the air, waiting with blank patience as she tested each buckle and apparently oblivious to the fact that he was slowly pinwheeling.

He's doing that on purpose, damn him.

Shoving that insight aside she considered the question—familiar since Wallis.

"Sir Gwydell—either the Daniel family is dangerously inbred or he's putting on an act," she said. "He knew all about the Main Street shipment—including the fact it included a dozen 'Mechs—

and once he heard we were planning on sitting tight and waiting for the pirates to come to us he was as anxious to get away from us as you were to get rid of him."

Jacoam nodded, though given his ninety-degree relative rotation it took her mind a moment to identify the gesture.

"And what's the plan?" he asked.

"Deliver the IndustrialMechs safely to Main Street, probably with a highly visible token force," she said readily. "And set a nasty trap at Engadine."

Again Jacoam nodded—the upside-down motion more easily recognizable.

Ariel glanced at the chronometer. Forty-seven minutes.

"No doubt the details of our little confab were broadcast the moment our friend was aboard the *Rooter*," he said. "Who would name a military DropShip after a truffle pig anyway?"

"Truffle pig?" Ariel asked. "A Rooter is a hunter who takes part in the Rooting. That's an annual hunt on Engadine to control the nolan population."

"And nolan are...?"

"You didn't read up on these worlds at all, did you?"

Jacoam shrugged sideways. The motion accelerated his spin.

"Economics, military assets, tactical stuff," he said. "Didn't check out the local fauna. I take it the nolan is a nasty?"

"Humanoid, three meters tall, clawed, fanged, and poisonous," Ariel said. "On Engadine, Rooters are real tough guys."

"Stop!"

Without asking what he was to stop, Jacoam snagged a hand strap and halted his spin in a relatively upright position.

"No matter what the name means," he said, "No-p taught me any heavily armed military vessel in the hands of an unregulated individual is cause for concern."

Ariel nodded at the reference to Giovanni Simson. She was not sure if the wave of unease resulted from the ill-considered gesture or the thought of the rogue scion of the Simson industrial empire.

Probably a bit of both.

The *Hamilcar* owner had tricked them into holding off a company of Word of Blake militia while he raided his own family's coffers; then abandoned them mid-mission. But not before he had convinced Ariel that the two of them had a future together. Her plan of action if—when—she found Giovanni Simson again changed with her mood.

With an effort she pulled her mind back to the situation at hand.

The *Rooter* was registered as belonging to the Daniel family, not the government of Engadine. Adding to the potential cause for worry, the notoriously flexible *Seeker* could be configured to carry a dozen different combinations of troops and ordnance—ranging from aerospace fighters to BattleMechs. The Ducal heir had been quite pointed in not telling the Irregulars what assets he had brought along.

"While we're on the subject of ship's names," she said. "There's another bet we may be missing. According to the commemorative plaque in the passenger area, the *Sanibel* is one of a run of *Tramp*-class JumpShips that were used in the colonization of much of what is now the Melissia and Timbuktu theaters."

"I saw that," Jacoam said. "The *Sanibel* is over two hundred years old. So what?"

"It's sister ships were the *Canaveral*, *Largo*, *Key West*, and *Captiva*," Ariel said. "All but the *Largo* and *Sanibel* are cited as lost. What are the odds on Captain Kaiman's friend commanding a *Tramp* with the same name as a lost ship with that much history? Shipbuilders tend to be pretty superstitious about things like that."

"Maybe someone not afraid to use a famous name," Jacoam said. "Or maybe the ship's not so lost. It's hard to imagine Kaiman being casual about it if that was the case, but you might be on to something. I'll put Pauls on it. If there's anything to find, he'll find it."

"That by itself wouldn't have tripped your wire," he added. "What makes you think Kaiman may not be on the level?"

"I'm not sure," Ariel admitted. "But something seems a little off."

"That's enough for me," Jacoam said. "I'll add him to the watch list."

“Who else is on your list?” Ariel asked.

“Everyone but Danaldo,” Jake said. “So I’m watching him particularly closely.”

Ariel smiled, remembering not to nod, and glanced at the chronometer. Forty-two minutes.

JumpShip Sanibel
Swartklip zenith recharge station
17 September 3067

Reema Chowla reached back and up, snagging the irregular projection with the tips of her three longest fingers. Pulling, then pushing off too hard—the warning twinge shot up through her elbow and along her triceps—she redirected her flight. Forty-degree course change and a burst of speed. She didn't waste energy trying to kick the wall. Correcting for the gross motion would cost her more momentum than she would gain.

Arcing through free air far from handholds, she stretched one arm over her head, along her flight path, and swung the other through a long sweep. The sort of motion holovids called swimming through the air. In fact she was imparting spin, rotating along her long axis to get a panoramic view of the exercise hold.

On every side fabric and metal shapes projected from the walls. Varying in size from barely enough to cling to enough to shroud a light 'Mech, they were temporary structures, portable features to alter the "terrain" of the null-gee combat chamber. Of the cargo hold being used as a null-gee combat chamber.

A half dozen inflated survival tents floated aimlessly—ersatz asteroids to complete the illusion of space combat. Not that anyone ever actually fought under these conditions.

According to the signs by the hatch, this hold was usually a small craft bay. Reema kept her mind away from the thought that one of these apparently solid walls could swing open to space with the press of a button and focused on locating the opposition. Or rather, enticing the opposing team into locating themselves.

Her partner, Jarmae Heather, was a dozen meters away, scurrying crab-like from cover to cover along what Reema's eyes said should be the ceiling. There were no magnetic surfaces and no hook-and-pile grabber pads allowed; the other MechWarrior was keeping to cover with fingertips and toes on the uneven bulkhead.

Flash of motion.

Reema tucked her knees up into her chest, taking the uncontrolled spin as fair trade for becoming a smaller—and erratic—target. Head down, she didn't see where the paintball went, beyond the fact it missed.

Either Cherry or Andrews was in for a quick lecture after the match. If the shooter had waited a half second, Reema would have rotated a few more degrees away. The paintball's impact would have been her first warning she was being fired on.

On the heels of that thought was a faint tug at the shoulder of her jumpsuit.

Chin to her chest, she rolled her eyes to examine the epaulet. No paint smear. The glancing impact of the second shot had not been sufficient to burst the globule. She was still in the game.

The training pistols had twenty second trigger locks, which meant the second shot had been fired by the second opponent. Just as she was drawing their fire for Jars, they had coordinated their shots—the first to make her dodge, the second to hit her once she was committed to the evasive action and unable to respond.

No lecture necessary. But maybe a few extra sessions at the range for whoever had fired the second shot.

Unfurling from her tightly tumbling tuck, Reema grabbed the upper edge of a 'Mech-sized trapezoid. Fabric, not metal, it gave at her touch, over a meter pulling from the frame before it caught. Swinging through an awkward jackknife, Reema arrowed feet first into an inky patch of shadow.

And slammed into a black-painted surface two meters closer than she thought it was. Pain exploded in her ankle, shot up through to top of her head.

"Damndamndamndamndamn," Reema chanted under her breath.

One arm hooked through a loop of fabric tie-down, she curled into a ball and held the wounded ankle in both hands. It was tender, but not broken. A landing like that with gravity augmenting her momentum and she'd have been on her back for weeks. As it was she had several days of limited motion ahead.

She had nothing to splint the sprained joint, so she made a mental note not to bang it into anything and pulled herself hand-over-hand along the ridge of folding structures disguising the bulkhead. She kept to the tops of the forms, not being blatant about it, but remaining at least partially visible at all times. The limply trailing leg provided justification for her avoiding the confined spaces of proper cover.

"Damn!" Cherry's voice.

Reema deduced her partner had made a kill. Which meant the movement to her left had to be Tim Andrews. The *Assassin* pilot was still out of range for the pneumatic paint guns, but was closing quickly. He'd apparently given up on the stealth which had brought him so close in an effort to finish her quickly before going after Jars.

Which is one reason he'll never be a true scout.

To Andrews' own left, Jars broke cover with a triumphant cry. Her normally polished helmet of blonde hair was a wildly spiked cloud in the zero gravity, adding an air of dementia to her broad grin. Head and shoulders above a metal scaffolding, she snapped a left-hand shot that pasted a neon green streak across the bulkhead half a meter in front of her target.

Andrews grinned. With the twenty-second trigger lockout, Jars' gun was now useless. He took his time lining up on the still exposed *Quickdraw* pilot.

And took her second shot in the face.

"What the hell?" Andrews wiped at the gooey paint. "Bypassing the lock is a damn cheat."

Jarmae said nothing. One leg hooked around the scaffolding, she held up two pistols. Reema had both her empty hands raised by the time Andrews looked her way.

"The rules say each person is issued one gun," Jarmae said. "Nothing says they have to keep it."

"I was the flush, she was the kill," Reema added. "Old, old, trick."

"But a good one," said an unfamiliar voice.

Reema spun, strained fingers protesting as they anchored her sudden rotation. With an effort she smoothed her reflexive hapkido null-g *ja sae* into an attitude of polite interest. There would be no enemies aboard the *Sanibel*.

But *no one* snuck up on her, dammit.

This particular no one was an infantryman in unfamiliar grey and tan combat fatigues floating with the confidence of a lifetime's experience half a dozen meters out of reach. A blonde sergeant,

physically as imposing as Jake, and with a long-time tan on his neck and arms and his face burned chestnut brown. *Lots of time outdoors; lots of time in a space suit.*

With a toe push-off so gentle even Reema almost missed it, he drifted easily toward them. Against the spacer tan his sapphire eyes seemed to glow beneath silver-white brows. The effect was strangely artificial, like a mask

"Sergeant Tanner, Elume Planetary Militia, at your service," the stranger introduced himself with a holovid-star perfect smile. His eyes lit with the smile, shattering the mask effect.

Reema noted Sergeant Tanner, Elume Planetary Militia, was ignoring her—and Andrews and Cherry—to address Jarmae directly. She knew Jars had made the same realization when the senior lieutenant swept a free-floating strand of her blonde hair behind her ear. A futile gesture given that without gravity the rest of her mop still spiked in a dozen directions.

Tanner made a click deep in his throat and six other fatigued figures materialized from cover.

Reema caught herself checking escape routes and reined herself in. These were not enemies. She'd just let herself get spooked. Learning she'd spent ten minutes sharing a room with a squad of infantry and never suspected their presence sent her scout reflexes into panic mode.

"We were mid-exercise when you guys came in," Tanner explained to Jarmae as his men closed to comfortable speaking distance. "At the time, laying low and checking out your moves seemed like a good idea."

None of the other Elume militiamen had Tanner's physical presence, Reema saw, but all had the same hard-bodied build. Given their spacer tans and the unconscious grace of their movements in zero gravity, even with equal numbers the Irregulars would have been overmatched.

"We thought the bay was empty," Andrews stated the obvious after general greetings had been exchanged.

"Good," Tanner grinned, still looking at Jarmae. "We were working on stealth tactics."

"I'd say you were pretty good at them already," Jarmae grinned back. "Any critique on our performance?"

Just give him your cabin number, Jars.

"You fight like MechWarriors," Tanner said. "Too used to being invincible; not scared enough of what the other guy can do to you."

Reema noted Jarmae didn't seem to realize that hadn't been a compliment. Andrews and Cherry exchanged glances, but her smile didn't flicker. Of course, neither did Tanner's.

"How did a squad of Elume Militia end up aboard the *Sanibel*?" Reema asked.

Her sharp tone flicked Tanner's eyes her way. And Jar's, she saw from the corner of her own.

"There's a squad of us hitching a ride with the Engadine," Tanner explained. "We don't have much in the way of military, so it was easier for us to be plugged in wherever the other militias needed us. Support and the like."

"Support," Reema echoed.

"Okay, we're a recon unit," Tanner confessed, his easy smile returning. "The Daniel House Guards were light in that department, so they picked us up."

Reema filed the fact Sir Guydell had brought his family's personal guard for the pirate hunt as the conversation around her drifted into the general gossip that usually developed when members of two friendly but unfamiliar units met. She noted the general lack of tension. She was the only one jumpy—but she was the only one who'd fallen down on her job.

One of the Elume militiamen was looking her way as two of his buddies tag-teamed telling some war story to Cherry and Andrews. Seeing he'd caught her eye, he glanced at her ankle. Reema shook her head, declining the offer of first aid, and he returned his attention to the story.

Jars and Sergeant Hunk had drifted slightly away from center, their conversation more one-on-one.

Deciding to follow the Elume trooper's implied advice, Reema pulled herself toward the exit. She knew she'd pass the *Sanibel's* infirmary on her way back to the *Clermont*, but she wanted Irregular medicos to bind her injuries.

JumpShip Sanibel
Swartklip zenith recharge station
18 September 3067

"Come in, Major," Kaiman said when Jake stuck his head through the hatchway. "Always a pleasure."

Jake pulled himself the rest of the way into the cabin, somersaulting to hook a loop with a boot toe and orient himself with the same "up" as the *Sanibel's* master. The Captain's ready room was a true spacer's cabin, Jake saw. Every surface employed—work stations and repeater screens arrayed for easy access with no considerations for such dirtside conceits like "floor" and "ceiling."

Kaiman was tethered to a web chair opposite the entrance, looking a bit ghostly through the low-res hologlobe that filled the center of the cabin. Jake had no doubt the captain could see every data readout and screen from that position; the occasional flick of his eyes indicating nothing escaped his attention.

"I'd be interested to know how you insinuated your request to see me into the *Sanibel's* maintenance net," he said conversationally. "That circuit is supposed to be secure."

"Routing the secure comm net through a back-up maintenance circuit is a pretty standard dodge," Jake said. "I hacked in at a maintenance hub in the service tube just below the docking collar."

"No interruption in data flow, no missing or added packets other than your uncoded message," Kaiman confirmed. "And all security measures reset to within four decimal places. You evidently have a talent with secure comm systems."

Jake said nothing. He'd known his tap would be found as soon as his message entered the system, which was why he'd resecured the breach. That, and his prompt answer to Kaiman's challenge, established his professionalism more than anything he could say.

"Now that you have my undivided attention," Kaiman said. "What can I do for you?"

"It is possible we are missing a bet," Jake said. "And I wanted to see about covering it."

"Without involving our mutual employers and their allied forces," Kaiman nodded. It was not a question.

"Elume," Jake said. "They were the first ones hit, but they haven't been hit since."

"An agricultural world," Kaiman pointed out. "The manufacturing equipment was the only portable items of value."

"Even agricultural worlds have portable items of value," Jake said. "Piracy is all about supply and demand—and everything is in demand somewhere."

"Just so."

"So we have one showy hit on Elume to begin with, then nothing," Jake ticked the points off on his fingers. "We have no Elume assets of note hunting for the pirates, but there are small contingents of Elume forces attached to every unit engaged in the hunt and Elume middle management types embedded in every civil agency regulating commerce for the four systems."

"Interesting," Kaiman said, drawing out the word. His eyes were focused on some point in the middle distance.

"I had not connected those particular points," he said at last. "And I have been giving the problem of new pirates in this region considerable thought."

Jake didn't bother to explain how he'd acquired the habit of questioning employers.

"That's because these are not pirates," he said instead. "I've done some checking. Elume started out as an isolationist agro colony, but underestimated the tech they'd need. Swartklip became their company store, trading minimal tech for food. The profits all went one way until Swartklip pretty much owned Elume."

"Wouldn't that model suggest Elume's manufacturing equipment was stolen by Swartklip?" Kaiman asked. "Or at least someone opposed to their economic independence?"

Jake held up a finger, letting the JumpShip captain know he would come back to that point.

"In the last few generations, Elume had been selling food to Main Street and Engadine," he said. "After Main Street got hit so hard a few years ago, they've become dependent on Elume to supply food more cheaply than they can grow their own. And Elume has been steadily expanding their farms."

"They must be selling their produce at a loss." Kaiman's eyes narrowed. "But in exchange they're making their neighbors completely dependent on them for food."

"Engadine not so much," Jake said. "But Main Street would be hurt and Swartklip crippled if the Elume food train stopped."

"But to benefit from the dependency they've fostered, they must be industrially self-sustaining—and able to defend themselves," Kaiman said. "Otherwise the other worlds would answer any threat by simply taking what they wanted. Or imposing sanctions of their own."

Jake spread his hands, palms up, inviting Kaiman to fill in the final links in the chain that had led him to Elume.

"The initial raid established they were helpless victims," the spacer said. "And publicly cost them their only chance to develop their own industry. All subsequent raids have taken materiel they need from the other worlds, plus high-ticket items to finance purchases elsewhere."

"Well thought out. You've covered all the bases." Kaiman frowned. "Except perhaps where they acquired the assets to conduct these raids."

"Mercenaries," Jake answered promptly. "We're not the only hired guns in the region and yours is not the only JumpShip available for charter."

Kaiman opened his mouth as though about to disagree, but snapped it abruptly shut again.

Jake could see the wheels turning as the old spacer sorted through his knowledge of ships in the region—and which masters would accept a mission of this type. He liked watching professional competence in action, and Kaiman had been a JumpShip captain—maybe even captain of the *Sanibel*—longer than he'd been alive.

"No one local," the captain said at last, not explaining what he considered 'local'. "But there are some on the spinward routes, back toward the New Capetown and Santana runs, who might take on that sort of work."

"Elume has strong ties to New Capetown," Jake said. "It was colonized by a splinter of the same group."

"That explains all the blond hair."

Jake frowned, but the old spacer did not elaborate on his comment.

"What do you propose?" Kaiman asked instead.

"Since everyone already knows the shipment of IndustrialMechs is going to Engadine and the Main Street shipment is a trap, make Engadine the trap."

"Send the 'Mechs to Main Street?"

"No. Too many people would have to be involved to make the double switch work," Jake said. "Send the 'Mechs to Engadine. Just use them to bait the real trap."

"Since Main Street has militia in place and whatever Engadine assets Sir Guydell has brought along will be out hunting pirates, leaving a large portion of the Irregulars on guard will make sense."

Kaiman nodded.

"That will address the raiding party," he said. "The mercenaries you postulate. What do you propose to do about your Elume theory?"

"Jump route from Swartklip is Elume, Main Street, then Engadine, right?"

"That's the standard route," Kaiman said. "Or if you'd rather give your forces time to entrench on Engadine, we could go there first by way of Neerabup and Willunga."

"No," Jake waved the suggestion away. "We need the Elume observers to confirm the dummy delivery to Main Street first."

"Ah."

Jake's ears pricked at the spacer's tone. It occurred to him the suggestion of the Neerabup route had been the captain's idea of a joke and Jake taking it seriously amused him.

"My question is," he pressed on, "can you drop a scout lance at Elume—get them to the planet—without anyone noticing?"

"One scout lance?"

"Island continent of Burnis," Jake said. "Sand. No farms and uninhabited. A fast scout lance could quarter it in a few weeks. By

the time the raiders are dealt with and the bulk of the Irregulars arrive, we'll have the pirate base inventoried down to the last case of toilet paper."

Kaiman nodded, accepting Jake's tactical assessment.

"So in essence you are asking me to get you on the surface of Elume without anyone on Elume or aboard the *Sanibel* being any the wiser."

"Can you do it?"

"My knowledge of smuggling is limited to theory," the spacer pursed his lips, considering. "Still.

"Let me discuss this with the master of the *Captiva*. I think something might be managed."

JumpShip Sanibel
Main Street nadir recharge station
26 September 3067

"Any questions, Lieutenant Heather?" Ariel asked. "Lieutenant Yannis?"

"Make two platoons of infantry, a few dozen support personnel and three tanks look like a battalion," Yannis answered. Her shrug lifted her to the extent of the loose strap tethering her to the bulkead. "Not a problem."

The sight of the heavysset woman bobbing like a balloon threw Ariel's stomach into revolt. She hoped her battle to subdue the insurrection wasn't obvious.

Yannis—newly promoted after her performance on Saravan and El Giza—had what Ariel thought of as the Jacoam stamp. Her co-commander favored initiative and competence—qualities he seemed to think precluded adherence to strict observance of conventions. Many of the officers and noncoms who served under him had an informality, almost a familiarity, when speaking to superior officers. Only their quick obedience and decisive action in the field made the attitude tolerable.

Lieutenant Heather was also a former Sorensen's Striker, but had a firmer grasp of protocols. She nodded once, acknowledging Ariel's question.

"First Beta lance will be fine, Captain," she said. "Good hunting on Engadine."

Ariel saw Yannis pause before entering the tube to the *Clermont* to exchange a few words and a quick embrace with Darryl Silverlake. The woman of near Elemental proportions and the slight engineer made an odd couple, but even at this range their affection was obvious.

As had been Heather's when she'd bid farewell to her new Elume sergeant as the militiaman left with the *Rooter*. Or Truman and Davis when her former right-hand man had been dropped with Jacoam on Elume. Her co-commander and Reema Chowla had made no public display, of course, but if Ariel was any judge of body language, Jacoam had gone a long way toward repairing the damage he'd done to their relationship.

The Colonel would have shot officers who behaved this way, Ariel thought as she pulled her way back toward the gravity deck. We're a traveling soap opera.

Traveling was the key, she realized.

The Chaos Irregulars had no roots. Without a home world to return to, a community to which they could belong, the Irregulars would never be completely whole. Their loved ones—those few they had—were on Outreach; her home world and the home world of her father's Hussars. It would violate their agreement with the Ka—with the pirates of unknown origin—to establish a base there.

The top of one of the many radiant ladders leading down to the gravity deck swung by. Ariel let it go. The rubber rollers rumbled as the ring rotated, the heavy skirts gasketing the seam swished and rustled together. The ball bearings far beneath the rubber rollers—or was it outside the rollers from this perspective?—were silent. Which was a good thing. Grinding ball bearings on a turning wheel this size...

Ariel shied away from the thought of a gyro wheel hundreds of meters in diameter flying apart. The massive JumpShip around her would splinter like matchwood.

At last she saw the elevator rotating toward her, seeming to descend from her right. Steeling her nerves, she caught one of the passing tether lines. With a jerk that would have dislocated her shoulder if she'd been rooted in gravity, the hand line pulled her into the gravity ring's rotation. She began working her way grimly toward the elevator.

A home world provided a larger social context for a mercenary command. Without this context, without ongoing interaction with a world beyond the barracks, the Irregulars would cease to be a purely fighting force and *become* the community. A stunted, in-grown community.

Liaisons like the ones she saw forming and rivalries that had not yet surfaced and hundreds of other personal interactions would erode their cohesion. Decisions would become matters of personality and personal loyalty and not of chain of command or the best interests—the survival—of the whole.

The informality Jacoam tolerated—encouraged—only accelerated this process.

She had been lax. She had allowed his early successes in uniting the disparate remnants into a working unit persuade her informality was acceptable in a fighting force. Perhaps it was, up to a point. But beyond that point it was destructive—and she was seeing signs they had passed that point. She had not drawn the line soon enough. Now she was going to have to hike out—to use one of Jacoam’s sailing analogies—throw her weight as far as she could in the other direction to try and muscle the Irregulars back onto the proper course.

But the course change would be temporary unless and until they established a home base. Stability came through context.

But where? Outreach was, well, out of reach. And Noisiel was more a circus than a home. Galatea? What she knew of that arid mercenary hub made her suspect the Irregulars would find little stability or supporting community there.

Perhaps a world in the Periphery. One with sufficient tech and reason to welcome a mercenary command that would keep them free of pirates. The community relationship they had begun to form with Karst on Wallis was a good model. If the Irregulars could do the same on a border world, they could bring out their technical and support personnel—currently on loan to Colonel Gubser and her Smithson’s Chinese Bandits—along with family members still on Outreach. With a solid base there was no reason they couldn’t go about building the Chaos Irregulars up to a full battalion. Carefully, of course. No need to rush things.

She made a mental note to set Davis on researching star systems. The spinward section of the Melissia Theater, or the Timbuktu Theater. Perhaps even down into Free Worlds League space. Jacoam certainly seemed familiar with that region.

Thinking of her co-commander reminded her that she wouldn’t be asking Davis to do anything for several weeks. The man who had been her right hand since she’d first mounted a ‘Mech was back on Elume scouting for secret bases.

More to the point, with Jacoam’s ad hoc lance on Elume and Heather’s lance on Main Street, she was down to a light company. Minimal resources with which to face a pirate raiding party of unknown composition.

Eyewitness reports varied, but the pirates fielded between a demi-company and a company of fast mediums. Solid recordings were sparse—their ability to avoid sensors dovetailed with Jake’s

theory about the “pirates” being part of the coalition—but *Merlins* and *Lineholders* had been documented. Reliable, low maintenance BattleMechs, well suited to protracted service far from tech support. Popular with both Periphery planetary militias and pirates

If their misdirection was effective, the pirates would believe the bulk of the Irregulars were on Main Street and expect at most a single lance on Engadine. They would most likely come in force—quickly overwhelming a limited defense was always the safest tactic. At least two lances—perhaps a whole company. Against an Irregulars force of nine BattleMechs, two platoons of infantry, and assorted support working in concert with whatever assets the Engadine Planetary Militia could spare.

Close odds, but doable—particularly if they kept the advantage of surprise.

If everything went according to plan, the raiding force would be quickly neutralized and the Irregulars—with the support of the Engadine Planetary Militia—would be on their way to relieve Captain Jacoam on Elume.

Ariel would have been more comforted by her prediction if she could remember a single instance of an Irregulars mission going according to plan.

Wisdom, Engadine
Melissia Theater, Lyran Alliance
01 October 3067

"We undertook this mission with the understanding we would have a free hand," Ariel said, careful to keep the balance between forceful and insubordinate when addressing a representative of their employers. "There was no mention of additional military involvement. At this particularly critical stage of the operation, their presence is not only unwarranted but unwise."

She, flanked by Lieutenants Chowla and Cherry, faced Colonel Effram Daniel—younger brother of Sir Guydell Daniel and commander of the Engadine Planetary Militia—in a small meeting room a flight of stairs above the lobby of the DropPort's spartan passenger terminal. The overhead lights were incandescent, their pale yellow glow contrasting with the flat white snow glare from the wide window.

Beyond the beak-like nose and heavy brow, Effram Daniel bore little resemblance to his brother. He was taller, more slender, and carried himself with the formal bearing of a trained soldier. His fatigues, as heavily bloused as those Ariel had seen on the *Sanibel*, was both neatly creased and comfortably worn—a working soldier's uniform.

However, Colonel Daniel's apparent competence did not change the fact they had a problem—one Ariel suspected was not going to be resolved to her liking.

In their focus on the pirates, neither she nor Jacoam had taken the local calendars into account. The Rooting—the annual hunt to curb the nolan population—was just getting under way. Hunters from as far away as Kowloon and Tsarahavana were already on Engadine when the *Sanibel* had arrived in system, and a dozen idle DropShips now squatted in docking cradles within easy striking distance of their cargo of IndustrialMechs.

Worse, there were hundreds of heavily armed hunting parties wandering freely about the area the Irregulars were supposed to secure, awaiting the drawing that would determine their hunting range. Though the civilian grade hunting rifles could not match military weapons' rates of fire, their range and knock-down power would make them dangerous even to troops in flak gear.

Nor were the hunters overgunned for the game they were after.

Nolan could have been the model for the legendary yeti of Terra. Three meters tall with four arms that ended in razor-sharp claws, the leathery beasts were poisonous, vicious, and persistent. Their dense, mottled hide gave them a chameleon-like ability to blend with any cover and they were consummate ambush hunters.

Early settlers had believed nolans had limited telepathic ability—that the animals could project fear and confusion, driving their prey into a panic before attacking, or influence an adversary into not seeing them even in the open. The truth proved even more insidious: Nolans were nearly as intelligent as Terran dolphins; their ability to evade and attack relied on mind games, not mental powers. They enjoyed setting traps and hunted humans for sport.

Why the Daniel family didn't just blast their highland habitat to glass was beyond Ariel.

"It is only natural that elite infantry scout/sniper teams also make the best Rooter teams," Daniel had explained. "Tradition holds that as three hunters can be overcome by a single nolan's charge. Though some daredevils hunt in groups of four, the military seven-person squad was the most common model for Rooter teams."

All perfectly reasonable, Ariel had to admit. But it did not change the fact that among the—possibly—neutral hunting parties Main Street, Swartzklip, and Elume were each represented by a platoon or more of their best ground troops.

"Captain, the equivalent of an augmented company representing the combined forces of three worlds does not constitute a significant military presence," Colonel Daniel waved aside her repeated protest with brittle patience. "In fact, despite their small size, I would think these units of elite infantry constitute an asset."

Ariel kept her mouth shut. The colonel was unaware of their insider theory and she meant to keep it that way. Unfortunately, that made her demand that anyone from Elume, Swartzklip or Main Street be kept out of the operation sound petulant.

But she could see no way to responsibly retreat from her position. Even without the threat of possible duplicity on the part of some members of the consortium that had hired the Irregulars, the presence of so many ships and uncontrolled military—and paramilitary, and civilian—troops made the situation untenable.

"Captain," Cherry spoke up before she could renew her argument. "Perhaps this can be used to our advantage."

Ariel tried not to look as though her lieutenant had sprouted horns.

"How so, Lieutenant?" she asked levelly.

"Colonel Daniel, is it possible to isolate Engadine from anything off planet?" Cherry asked. "I mean block radio traffic, not the HPG."

"Blanket the entire world?" Daniel asked, considering. "Not completely. But we can certainly white out the inhabited continents. Why?"

"May I suggest we begin offloading the IndustrialMechs and make initial preparations for their defense," Cherry spared Ariel a glance before refocusing on the Colonel. "Then order all other DropShips into orbit and jam communications."

Reema Chowla chuckled. Ariel didn't, quite, but her estimation of Lieutenant Cherry went up another notch.

Colonel Daniel glanced at the two, aware he was a step behind.

"What good would this do?" he asked.

"The moment all observers are gone and any on-world agents can no longer get a message out," Cherry said, "rearrange the set-up."

Ariel saw a corner of the Colonel's mouth twitch as he caught the joke.

"So the pirates think we are idiots for letting outsiders see what we have planned," he said. "And get taken by surprise when things are not as they expected."

"Very clever indeed, Lieutenant."

He gave Ariel a clear *Why didn't you think of that?* glance before smiling more broadly at Lieutenant Cherry.

"Have you given some thought as to how the actual trap will work?" he asked.

Ariel thought the young lieutenant grew a centimeter.

"Not in detail," she said, smiling back. "But in broad strokes, yes, I think I have an idea."

Am I the only one who sees covert romance in every exchange around me?

Ariel glanced at Reema and met a cocked eyebrow.

Nope.

"Lieutenant," she said, a bit more sharply than she'd meant to.

Two pairs of eyes focused on her.

"What are these broad strokes?"

"Duck blinds," Cherry said. "Part of it, anyway. Strong points disguised as innocent sheds. Also, we should appear out of place."

"Ah!" Colonel Daniel's tone was appreciative. "You are surmising observers among the Rooters—observers who could inform incoming pirates that the situation had changed. They would also report our defenders lax, enticing the raiders to take chances we can exploit."

"I like how your lieutenant thinks."

He smiled broadly at Cherry for a moment, then turned a more serious expression to Ariel.

"And I have an addition to her cunning plan," he said. "Colonels Howetzer, Friedrich, and Owyang of Main Street, Elume, and Swartklip are here for the Rooting. It would suit both our ruse and their understandable need to be involved with the command of this operation if you, Captain, were to accompany them to the hunting lodge."

Ariel drew a breath, but Daniel raised his hand before she could protest.

"You would be close enough to return to the DropPort in minutes," he said. He turned his smile on for Cherry, adding: "I'm sure the lieutenant will be quite effective in making sure all is ready here."

Cherry smiled back before looking to Ariel.

"I trust your judgment, Lieutenant," Ariel hoped she didn't bear down too hard on the warning. "Why don't you walk Colonel Daniel through your general plan while I see about the logistics of the first phase?"

Cherry nodded, acknowledging Ariel's keep-him-busy-so-I-can-work message—and perhaps the one about using her judgment—then turned back to the Colonel.

“Colonel Daniel, is there a map of the DropPort area nearby?”

Ariel didn't leave immediately after the pair, instead turning toward the broad window. In the middle distance massive cinder block warehouses loomed brooding hills, thickly covered with snow. The ferrocrete that stretched from the passenger terminal to the warehouses then out into a contained expanse holding a dozen DropShips was a patchwork of pristine white crisscrossed by filthy bands of churned slush.

“I've been thinking of Wallis, Lieutenant,” Ariel said.

Reema moved to stand beside her and looked out over the icy DropPort, then up to the snow-covered mountains dense with timber beyond.

“I see what you mean,” she said flatly.

“I meant,” Ariel said, allowing herself half a smile, “I was thinking about the possibility the raiders have on-planet resources. If Oh's theory is right, this isn't a sudden thing.”

“Something close by,” Reema said, picking up the thread. “Not underfoot, but able to support a raid on the DropPort.”

“And small enough to have plausibly arrived with the DropShips,” Ariel added. “If an RCT popped out of the woodwork every time there was a raid, Engadine PM would be going through these hills piecemeal.”

“Building an effective hideout with no one noticing takes time,” Reema pointed out. “Would the mercenaries have been on retainer that long?”

“The mercenaries wouldn't have built whatever hidey-hole they're using.”

Reema nodded.

“While I am up in the mountains wasting time and Lieutenant Cherry uses her newfound diplomatic skills to coordinate setting up our little reception,” Ariel said, “I'd like you to be doing a bit of extended recon. I'll leave the parameters to you.”

Reema nodded again, her eyes tracing the steep mountain slopes with new interest.

Burnis, Elume
Melissia Theater, Lyran Alliance
12 October 3067

Jake could not remember ever having the smallest 'Mech on the field on a combat mission. He'd always favored heavies—had never piloted anything under sixty tons for longer than he needed to become proficient.

On Saravan, taking over this *Spector* had been an emergency decision in the heat of battle. He'd never expected to see the inside of this cockpit again. Much less spend two and a half weeks trooping through the wilderness shoulder high to every other 'Mech in his lance.

But small had been something of a theme for this mission. One lance was a small contingent to scout a planet. And the DropShip that had brought them to the surface had been tiny; a sphere perhaps thirty meters in diameter with four wedge-shaped 'Mech bays. The math of the angles told him there was a fifth bay, which implied a Star, but the design didn't *feel* Clan.

Davis had recognized the ship. Jake had seen the way his eyes lit up as they traced its lines. That meant old, and Star League.

Since no one seemed to notice it transferring from the *Captiva* to the *Sanibel*, or—more importantly—from the *Sanibel* to Elume, he had to assume it was flying without transponders. An old ship, rare enough to be new to Jake, with an apparent habit of moving without getting noticed...

Evidence indicated Captain Anton Kaiman knew a bit more about smuggling than he had let on.

Through the ferroglass canopy he saw the matte grey shape of the Irregular *Raijin* ease around a thick stand of softwood conifers. Time consuming, but sensible. No need to leave a trail of broken trees to announce a BattleMech had passed.

The *Spector's* preternatural sensor array filled his cockpit screens with more data than he needed. Among them the location of the two other 'Mechs of his deep recon lance advancing along the sandy riverbed on the other side of the tree-covered ridge to his left.

He watched the ridge tops on the theory that the pickets of any concealed base would be on the high ground. Green scanned

ahead along the shallow valley on the theory that the first theory might be wrong.

Jake was aware that for all its superior sensors and potent mix of lasers, his *Spector* was ten tons lighter—and a meter shorter—than Davis's *Phoenix Hawk*. And both machines were dwarfed by Talbot's *Griffin*. The wingless bird shape of Green's *Raijin* made its comparative mass less obvious, but at fifty tons it was second only to the *Griffin*.

Jake wondered if it was the diminutive size of his BattleMech that had his nerves on edge or the fact he'd never led these MechWarriors into combat. All three of them were former Hussars, their default mode the spit-and-polish discipline Peregrine Junior favored so much.

Formal military protocol was all well and good; it certainly saved everyone involved the bother of thinking. But in Jake's experience the rigid mindset got in the way when the fighting got heavy and every jockey had to think for himself to stay alive and get the job done.

Of course, Peregrine Junior's answer to that argument was that with proper discipline every MechWarrior would know what to do. Working together as part of a unified fighting force, they would each know their duties in any given situation—and be prepared to respond instantly to orders.

Jake's objection that it also limited the jockey's ability to adapt and improvise had fallen on deaf ears. Or not so deaf, he had to admit. Peregrine Junior had seen the wisdom of forming task forces for specific missions that fell outside the routine rather than trying to figure out which established lance came closest to matching the needed profile.

Fast, flexible, jumping 'Mechs able to operate independently and take care of themselves. That had been what this big game hunt on Elume called for. Which stripped Jake of his best scout in her jumpless *Mongoose* and teamed him with Davis, Talbot, and Green.

Davis was a known quantity, at least. They'd worked together enough for him to know how the man thought, and he'd seen him in combat on Outreach and Wallis. But neither experience translated directly into a working command relationship.

He'd also seen Talbot fight on Wallis. She'd kept a cool head under fire and gone toe-to-toe with a ninety-ton *Emperor*, giving much more than she'd got.

About Green he knew almost nothing beyond what was in his dossier. And Ariel's high assessment and his performance in training. The man had managed to be out of position every time the Irregulars had gone into action.

Jake didn't like the fact he found himself thinking about Green not having pulled anything more difficult than security in the last few months.

It really wasn't unusual for individual MechWarriors—even with a command that had seen more action than the Irregulars—to go for a year or more without firing a shot in combat. But Christian's odd behavior—behavior that had resulted in Jake piloting his *Spector* through the pine groves of Burnis—combined with his security phrase...

"Word of Blake, fund my path."

That security phrase—necessary to bring his *Spector's* systems online—was Christian's legacy. Jake now worried about a MechWarrior under his command who kept to himself and piloted a 'Mech favored by ComStar.

Jake's initial roster for this mission had included Andrews and his *Assassin* in place of Green. But Ariel had wisely pointed out that the forty-ton 'Mech—while nearly as fast and agile as the *Spector*—was too lightly armed to hold its own for any length of time. If Jake's theory were right and if the scouting mission were discovered, the lance would have to fight a running battle until the Irregulars could return.

If they could.

If Jake's theory were right, they might find themselves up against the full military resources of an entire planet.

Just us against the world...

As it crested a low hillock, the *Raijin* squatted.

Jake blinked.

With its bird-like legs folded up until they almost touched the external weapons pods, the BattleMech's torso was within a meter of the ground. Jake had never heard of that maneuver, but it

didn't take a genius to figure out the lowered mass of heavy metal would look a lot more like a medium tank than a 'Mech to long range scans.

Very useful trick.

"Heavy metal ahead," Green's baritone was hushed in Jake's headphones.

Why do we always whisper on the radio when we're sneaking up on people?

Jake halted his *Spector* without responding. Even on tight beam, anything he transmitted to Green would carry past him to whoever was on the other side of the hill. The odds on any hostiles monitoring the frequency the recon lance had selected were slim, but avoidable chances weren't worth taking.

The same principle kept him on passive sensors as he studied the low hill in the middle of the shallow valley. The rocky lump seemed incongruous with the rolling sand hills arrayed in long ridges, but he realized it could be—the word escaped him. Stuff from somewhere else left behind by a glacier. Whatever it was had enough metal in it to make it hard to see through. Inconvenient, but not in itself threatening.

He backed away from the hill until the *Raijin* was at the edge of his sensors' range. Then—gambling he was out of range of whatever scanners might be beyond the hill—he moved to his right, ascending the wooded slope that defined the valley. Once he was even with the top of the hillock, he eased forward, scanning the area Green had bird dogged.

Armor appeared at the edge of his screen. Two. Small. No fusion reactors. Scout cars or armored personnel carriers. A light patrol. And one not far from home, given the limited range of ICE engines.

At the moment they were stationary. No way to tell if they were on station or the crew was taking a leak. By themselves they were no threat to the BattleMechs, of course. But their radios were. If they broadcast unknown contacts—especially if that was the last broadcast they made—the Chaos Irregulars were in for a short and unhappy stay on beautiful Elume.

Jake clicked his radio once, paused a three count and clicked it twice.

There was no response, but he knew Davis and Talbot would reverse course. Below him, Green shuffled his *Raijin* back a dozen meters before bringing it fully erect and making his way back the way they had come.

Two stationary scout trucks did not a secret pirate base and weapons manufacturing complex make. However, the fact that they had found *something* where there should have been nothing was enough for him. They were on the right track. It was just a matter of time.

Qur'an Mountains
south of Wisdom, Engadine
Melissia Theater, Lyran Alliance
13 October 3067

Reema Chowla eased her *Mongoose* slowly back until the water flowed over her cockpit. Not quite enough. The water coursed and splashed around the lower edge of her double canopy, telling her the small laser that jutted beneath them was no doubt in clear view.

Waterfalls—particularly waterfalls framed by iron-stained rocks as this one was—were natural hiding places for BattleMechs. So natural, in fact, that any MechWarrior who'd survived basic training knew to scan them carefully. And most 'Mech jockeys also knew to avoid using them, because being caught standing in a rocky alcove with nowhere to go was a quick ticket to oblivion.

All of which meant there was a circular logic to using a waterfall for cover—the wisdom of the choice depending on how clever the MechWarriors on both sides of the water curtain thought they were more than any other factor.

What made this waterfall appeal to Reema was the fact it was too small. Anyone who had passed this way before would know there was no way for it to conceal a 'Mech.

And several someones had come passed this way in the past few months. Someones in BattleMechs of at least medium proportions, to judge by the scrapes and chips along the narrow defile leading from this upland valley.

She had made a thorough search of the tourist-bureau-perfect valley from the picturesque waterfall that fed the deep mountain lake to the whitewater cataract that drained it. She's found three collections of metal trash—including civilian-grade camping equipment and what looked to be the remains of an unlucky hunter, complete with bent and rusted hunting rifle—all at least a decade old.

More recent were the tracks in the softer soil below the defile. They indicated she was either on or very near a regular route in and out of the mountains less than an hour south of the DropPort.

But knowing about where the enemy probably was didn't fulfill her mission. Reema needed hard contact. And for that, she

needed to find a blind. For which this too-small waterfall would be perfect, if she could figure out a way to make it work.

Wireframe and her own senses confirmed that the iron-flecked granite was pressing against the back of her *Mongoose's* head and upper torso. However, there seemed to be ample space behind her from the waist down, and the water level behind the fall was above the 'Mech's backward-bending knees.

Standing in a stone niche with nowhere to go if she was discovered was stupid. Sitting in a stone niche—particularly in a BattleMech as ill-designed for sitting as a *Mongoose*—was suicidally stupid.

Carefully backing and filling, checking to be sure every move was undoable before she committed herself, Reema lowered her BattleMech until it was sitting chest deep in the water beneath the falls. Scooting back behind the curtain of water—the crumbling scrape telling her she was doing more damage to the granite than the stone was doing to her armor—Reema found she had enough room to bring both arms up without disturbing the flow.

With all of her weapons aimed through the narrow opening, Reema sat, letting the mountain stream cool her machine to match the background thermals. If she was discovered in this position, she wouldn't live long enough to regain her feet. But this position was her best chance of never being discovered at all. A coin toss, and one it was too late to reconsider.

Eyes on her passive sensors, she settled down to wait.

To be continued...