

REHAB

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***J.A. Outpost
Anywhere
Jade Falcon Occupation Zone
1 December 3068***

Come Hell's Horses or high water, Jarad was about to kick some serious butt. Not much else to do out here in the middle of nowhere. Of course, Anywhere couldn't really be considered nowhere. The planet had its own outpost manned by an entire Star from the illustrious Eleventh PGC, the best damn cluster in the Omega Galaxy (even if they rotated here from Bone Norman twice a year). Jarad himself would 'Mechstomp anyone who dared say otherwise.

Hell, he'd 'Mechstomp the entire universe—even though he'd never stomped a 'Mech before. Bombed plenty of 'em in his time. The air was his domain. Or had been. Bella was the first 'Mech he'd ever piloted. A damn fine ride—for a ProtoMech.

At least she would be if they ever got out of this blasted warehouse.

Maybe he should hurry things along, blow the place to smithereens...only that wouldn't work 'cause they were still inside...

Jarad giggled into his commlink. "Hey, Degra. What'd you pump me up with? Isss great!"

"A bit of this and a bit of that." Degra's high voice crackled in Jarad's ears. A coolness spread through his left arm and suddenly the world didn't look quite so bright. He turned to protest and bumped the scientist's head with his neurohelmet.

"Stop fooling around and concentrate," Degra said, his pointy-face stuck in its usual frown. The ladder clanked against the ProtoMech as he fiddled with the intravenous tube inserted through Jarad's body suit. The drugs pumped through it were supposed to keep Jarad in touch with the real world.

Jarad blinked, trying to clear the haze from his vision. Now his head felt like a friggin' furball and the inside of his suit was turning into a major heat sink.

"Uh, Degra..."

"Hold on a moment. I have one more minor adjustment to make."

Minor. Right. Why the hell'd he ever let Degra talk him into this "rehabilitation program" anyway? If he'd realized the crackpot scientist was gonna be messing around with his already-messed up head...

The coolness in his arm turned to burning fire. Suddenly the haze was gone and so were the fuzzies. A faint metallic taste lingered on his tongue, but Jarad could handle bad taste.

"That's more like it!" Jarad flexed his wrists and watched the gray and black body suit crinkle.

"Let us hope I have the proper mixture this time." The scientist settled back on his perch, looking like a grumpy Terran crow. "Are you ready to give it a go?"

"You bet your sweet patootie." Jarad activated his EI system. Let out a whoop as the warehouse around him came into sharp focus.

The scientist sure had an odd accumulation of "stuff." Degra had taken an abandoned supply warehouse big enough to store five light 'Mechs and filled a whole wall with shelves and work tables loaded with scavenged 'Mech parts. A hovertruck and hovercrane were parked along the other wall. The back corner held a heating unit that needed repair, but that didn't matter. Not now. Not when Jarad was finally seeing through the eyes of a 'Mech!

"Cool beans!"

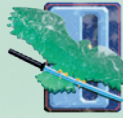
"Where did you acquire such a quaint expression?" Degra asked.

"Don't remember," Jarad replied. Unfortunately, he did remember, though he'd never admit it. Not to Degra. Not to anyone. The time he'd spent as a captive lingered like a nightmare in the back of Jarad's tangled mind.

A nightmare he'd worked for years to erase from memory and had succeeded.

Until a little "incident" turned all his mental control switches to "off." One of the hazards of being an aerospace pilot. It could have been worse. He could have turned into a homicidal maniac, or worse—a raving lunatic.

Degra gave a thumbs up, the hatch closed, and Jarad was on his own.



A vibrant pulsing filled the warehouse as the ProtoMech powered up. Degra D clenched his jaw and watched the *Erinyes* stretch to her full height.

Magnificent.

Without those stupid wings, the ProtoMech cut a much cleaner profile. Cutting down on tonnage and wind resistance should increase her cruising speed by at least a third.

Degra reconsidered—maybe not quite a third, considering the new supercharger clamped to her back. She had gained a bit of weight there, and a little bit more with the new weapon systems he had added.

A powerful feeling rushed through Degra—the sweet feeling of success. Standing in front of him was proof the ProtoMechs were not inferior to their larger brethren. Once the Khan saw what Degra's upgraded design was capable of, she would bring the *Erinyes* production back on line.

She had to...and Etienne be damned!

The ProtoMech lurched toward the warehouse door, stumbled, and almost fell.

Degra keyed the commlink. "Idiot! I told you to concentrate."

If that fool of a pilot messed up, if Jarad turned out to be more goose than hawk, Degra would have his disgraced head on a platter. How in the world he had managed to get through training was a mystery Degra could not quite fathom.

"Don't get your panties in a bunch," Jarad said.

Degra's head started to pound. He had meticulously searched for a candidate to pilot his *Erinyes*, but failed aerospace pilots were difficult to come by. Then Jarad had shown up. No memory, or so he claimed. But a volunteer was a volunteer after all.

If Degra had thought the matter through more carefully, he would have realized that anyone who volunteered for duty on this planet had to be more than a little insane.

"You gonna open the door or what?"

Degra stalked over to a control panel beside his work table and jabbed the button marked “open.” At the far end of the warehouse, the main door reticulated upward. Icy wind sent snow swirling across the ferrocrete floor. Crisp air swept the comforting smell of oil and fuel from the warehouse—along with a majority of the heat.

“Hey, Degra. Wanna see me make a snow angel?”

Yes, Degra would definitely have preferred a different pilot for Bella’s maiden voyage.

Metal scraped as the ProtoMech moved one cautious step at a time. Jarad had done fairly well during the dry runs—the scientist reminded himself—when he could keep his mind on the job.

The ProtoMech strode without hesitation into the blowing snow.

“Remember to focus,” Degra yelled into the commlink. Then, as an afterthought, “and watch your language. One more contraction, and I will be forced to make your life more miserable than it already is.”

Interesting how a simple habit could move a nonviolent person such as himself to contemplate acts of torture.

Degra leaned against the doorway and tried to catch his breath. The storm was not supposed to be here until tomorrow. He could barely see the ProtoMech through the shifting snow. Half a klick already separated Bella from the warehouse; a few more steps and she would disappear altogether.

Maybe they should have waited until the weather cleared.

The ProtoMech moved gracefully across icy ground without any apparent loss of traction, evidence that the new, anti-slip soles were a worthwhile addition.

Degra blew on rapidly cooling fingers. A few more minutes outside would give him a chance to run a check on Bella’s survival systems. The vid feed would keep him connected to both ProtoMech and pilot...

“You expecting visitors?”

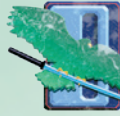
What little hair was on the back of Degra’s neck rose like a DropShip headed for space. The main outpost was located about five klicks north of the warehouse. Maybe the captain had finally

decided to check out Degra's project. "If you are worried about the infantrymen..."

"Not our guys I'm worried about."

"What?" Degra squinted uselessly into the blinding snow. Moisture dampened his palms in spite of the frigid cold.

"It's the other guys that've got me sweating pigs. No idea who they are. But we got a whole nest of 'em."



"Abort the exercise! Do you hear me, you sorry excuse for a pilot? Bring my ProtoMech back here."

Jarad ignored the voice screaming through the commlink. Like hell he'd abort. What better way to test-drive a war machine?

Scientists and techies were good for building things and putting pieces back together. That was their job.

It was his job—and Bella's—to knock the bad guys into oblivion.

Jarad let his body relax into the ProtoMech's rhythm. He saw through the howling snowstorm with startling clarity, and what he saw sent anger surging through his veins.

What looked like a *Dragon*—bearing no insignia Jarad recognized—was only twenty clicks from the outpost and closing fast, four suits of battle armor at its heels. Pirates? But could pirates have battle armor, even if they were inferior Spheroid designs?

A quick scan showed rapidly disappearing tracks leading down out of mountains barely tall enough to hide a DropShip behind. The pirates probably thought they could use the storm. Sneak up on the outpost and take it without even breaking a sweat.

"Think again, you morons." Easy enough to cut the attackers off. He might not have a full contingent of aerial bombs, but Bella was one kick-ass ProtoMech.

Victory was in the air. He could smell it.

Time to kick some *surat* butt.



Degra peered through the snow-encrusted windshield and goosed the hovertruck as hard as he dared. The truck slewed sideways down a snowy slope, then straightened out.

The monitor on the dash displayed two images: one of Jarad, lips spread in a feral grin; the other of a *Dragon* bearing down on the outpost. Jarad had Bella on a direct intercept course.

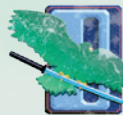
Degra ground his teeth. This was not good, not good at all. The *Erinyes* was a valuable prototype, not a play toy. This was her first field test.

He would not let it be her last.

“Meet me at the testing platform,” Degra said, maneuvering around an anonymous white lump. He took a deep breath to quiet the worms writhing in his stomach.

Snow slushed beneath the hovertruck as it slewed sideways off another snow bank. Degra clutched the wheel, corrected the slide, bit his lip until a metallic taste filled his mouth.

Only a few more clicks to his testing platform. Then he’d bring this so-called battle to an end.



The body suit’s cooling system seemed a bit off. Jarad made a mental note. He’d give Degra a glitch list after their little skirmish was over. No use getting the scientist any more agitated than he already was.

Nice that the ProtoMech moved like a second skin now that Jarad was used to the systems. All he had to do was start the motion, keep it firmly in his mind, and Bella did all the rest.

His head ached for some reason. He’d had the same kind of headaches as a pilot—just before he wacked out. But the drugs were supposed to take care of all that. Jarad ignored the pain and

concentrated on the *Dragon*. There had to be some way to distract that 'Mech.

Maybe it was time to try out Bella's new weapon.

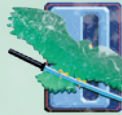
It took a couple of tries to get the rifle free of the powerpack—*has to be a better way to deploy it*—but finally the laser weapon sat stiffly in Bella's hands.

"Lock and load."

Jarad fired a pulsing burst of laser fire at the *Dragon's* cockpit. The shot skipped harmlessly over the 'Mech's shoulder. But it definitely caught the 'Mech's attention.

The *Dragon* turned towards the *Erinyes* while the battle armor stayed their course. Wind howled outside, hurling icy snow across Bella's face. Through the swirling snow, Jarad saw the *Dragon* pick up speed.

"Come on, baby," Jarad hummed. "Come to Mama."



Degra groaned. Unless he did something fast, both his rehabilitation projects would go up in a blaze of fire.

"Target his weak points," Degra commanded. "Knees, elbows..."

"Give me some credit, huh? I used to bomb these things with my eyes closed, remember?"

"Bombing targets from the air is not the same as..."

Laser fire pulsed from the prototype rifle in a spray of garish orange. Steam poured from pockmarked snow like tiny geysers.

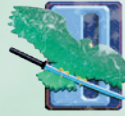
"Use the m-pods." Degra ground his teeth and veered off to the left.

"Um. M-pods. Right. Except I have to get how close to use *these* things?"

Doomed. Doomed, a tiny voice whispered in Degra's mind, but the scientist refused to give up. "Just do it!"

A huge, snow-covered hump blocked Degra's progress. He stopped the hovertruck and climbed from the cab.

Time for a little shoveling.



Bees swarmed in Jarad's skull—nasty, buzzy, sting-y bees. He squeezed his eyes tight together, felt his connection with the ProtoMech fade.

"No," Jarad muttered. "Not again."

Degra's wonder drugs must be wearing off. With a burst of raw willpower, Jarad compartmentalized the pain. He narrowed his focus. Brought the short-range missile on line.

Fired. It was just a distraction, but it would do. For now. Jarad clamped the rifle back on the powerpack; *absolutely have to make that easier.*

Jarad broke into a jog, ignoring the way each step seemed to pierce his brain with metal spikes.

An arc of electric blue streamed from the *Dragon's* right arm. Jarad dodged right, letting the PPC fire pass harmlessly to his left. The 'Mech pilot was using his sensors, but his aim was off.

Pirate indeed.

Jarad swung Bella into a collision course with the 'Mech. The *Dragon* fired again, plowing a glowing furrow through the snow at Bella's heels. Jarad passed the *Dragon* at a thundering run. Fired off the m-pods.

The ProtoMech rocked forward as shrapnel went flying past.

"Perfect." The commlink crackled. "Now get yourself out of harm's way."

Jarad took a quick look at the *Dragon* wobbling behind him. The m-pods hadn't taken the leg completely off, but it had definitely crippled the 'Mech.

Suddenly the world spun and Bella went down hard on one knee. The impact sent pain shooting through Jarad's leg. He checked his sensors, but there was no sign of a hit.

"Stay down." Degra commanded. The commlink went silent.

Stay down? Like a damned sitting target? Jarad glanced at the testing platform a couple of clicks away. The scientist had uncovered what looked like five or six dismembered 'Mech arms.

Jarad sighed, pulled the rifle free once again, and dropped the ProtoMech flat on her stomach. Somehow the world smelled worse down here. Maybe it was just the fear oozing from his pores.

"Target the canopy," Degra ordered.

A small squeeze on the trigger lit the *Dragon's* cockpit with a miniscule red dot. Suddenly, the snow around the testing platform exploded, catapulting a missile into the air.

Jarad couldn't believe his eyes. Talk about recycling. Degra had somehow transformed old 'Mech parts into catapults...

The *Dragon* rocked backward as the missile exploded against the cockpit nose.

"Again!" shouted Degra. Blood pulsing in his ears, Jarad aimed, made a slight adjustment. Held...

The *Dragon* jiggled sideways at the last minute. The missile caught the left shoulder and exploded. Not a standard short- or long-range missile at all...what were they?

Jarad closed his eyes. Opened them.

The *Dragon* was on the run, only he wasn't running away. He was headed straight toward Bella.

"Again!" Degra ordered.

Jarad took a deep breath and focused. Normal cockpit noises—light hums and whirs along with the occasional clicks—all faded.

An easy squeeze on the trigger sent laser light pulsing through the *Dragon's* canopy. Light that was followed seconds later by a missile.

This time the missile found its target.

The explosion shook the ground and sent pieces of shrapnel flying through the air with clumps of frozen snow.

Jarad stayed face down, frozen in pain. He forced himself to feel—the command seat holding him close, the sweat tickling in-

side his body suit—anything to stay in the here and now. Carefully, Jarad turned his head. Bella turned with him.

“Better late than never,” Degra’s voice crackled in Jarad’s ear. He raised his head, found scientist and hovertruck parked in front of Bella’s nose.

A quick survey of the terrain showed the *Dragon* down and the battle armor tangling with Jade Falcon Elementals. Jade Falcon appeared to be winning.

Jarad moaned and maneuvered Bella into a sitting position. “Don’t blame me. I’m only the test pilot.”

His whole body ached and his head felt like someone’d used it for an exercise ball, but hey, they were all still alive and kicking.

Not bad for a worthless ProtoMech and an out-of-commission aerospace jock.

“If you can get your hands on another one of these babies,” Jarad said as he carefully maneuvered Bella to her feet. “I know a pilot we can probably bring on board. He’s not as nutty as me, but I’m sure you won’t hold that against him.”

Degra climbed in the cab and slammed the hovertruck door. “There is another.”

Jarad laughed. “How’d you get to be a scientist anyway? You pay somebody off?”

“I beg your pardon...”

“Come on now, don’t get your panties all bunched up again.” Jarad headed back toward the warehouse. “I was just having some fun. I think you got something here, Degra, old boy. We get enough of these things together and the Khan will have to take notice.”

The hovertruck followed in silence. Then Degra said. “I will agree to your proposal—with one condition: you watch...”

“...my language.” Jarad laughed. “It is a deal. Now come on. We got some rehabilitating to do.”