

THE BITTER TASTE OF HOPE

PART TWO

Steven Mohan, Jr.

**Maelstrom, *Swing Circle Spaceport*
Swing Circle, New Port Royal
Tortuga Dominions, Periphery
28 February 3066**

Tracy Malfont had always found hope to be a cruel suitor, constantly promising better things in its beguiling voice, only to disappear at the worst possible moment, leaving her frustrated and bereft. When that happened, her stomach dropped and she realized she'd done it again.

This time she wasn't quite there.

Yet.

Malfont stared at Castor's tactical schematic projected on the far bulkhead, her gaze drifting over the jumble of icons and arrows and objectives, not quite able to believe any of it was real. Castor had depicted a three-pronged 'Mech assault backed by supporting fire from a couple of Manticores. Each of the three lances was marked with a red triangle and a name. Castor's lance was in the center; Thomas, the former Smoke Jaguar, on his left; and Sakutaro Ishihara on his right. All very nice.

Except they only had the one lance groundside.

Colorado Henderson shifted in his seat and shared a skeptical look with Comfort Sawyer. She was a beautiful woman with skin the rich color of freshly-cut cedar and long, silky black hair. Comfort was a good MechWarrior, but she was no schemer. She usually ended up following the strongest personality in the room and right now that was Henderson.

Unless Malfont decided differently.

Malfont leaned forward. "Just where are the other two lances coming from?"

"They'll be along when they're needed," said Castor mildly.

"From where?" snapped Henderson. "From a pirate point? The Tortugans have a *Union* sitting at the nearest pirate point. We're not going to take them by surprise."

Castor opened his mouth, but Henderson cut him off. "And even if we somehow got the other two lances down, so what?"

Standard doctrine says the attacker needs three to one numerical superiority. At best, we're even." He stood and stalked towards the schematic. "But we're not really even, are we?" He pointed at the seven DropShips distributed throughout various parts of the spaceport, each one marked with the colors of a different pirate band.

"If we even get close to winning, the Tortugans will simply enlist the help of the 'Mechs hiding on these ships," said Henderson.

"They don't have any loyalty to the Dominions," snapped Castor.

"But it's their goods that are being traded in the Bazaar. And the Fusilier commander will promise them a cut of our equipment once we're defeated. There's no way this can work."

"Except we will attack on the second day," said Castor.

Malfont blinked. "Excuse me?"

"What!?" snapped Henderson. "By the end of the first day a third of the trade goods will be gone."

Castor gestured at the wall. "And perhaps some of these DropShips with them. So we will have less opposition."

"It's crazy," snarled Henderson.

"Which is precisely why it will work," said Castor. "No one's expecting it."

Henderson snorted and stalked out of the room, slamming the hatch behind him. Sawyer scrambled to follow.

Castor stood there, eyes wide, jaw hanging slackly open and suddenly Malfont realized he was totally at sea. Caught in a trap of his own making and her along with him. And who could be surprised? For all his royal blood, Castor was nothing more than an English teacher, after all. Malfont felt her stomach drop. Once again she'd bet on the wrong horse.

Once again she'd fallen prey to that merry trickster named Hope.

***New Monster Wildlands
Outside of Safi, Harira
Federated Commonwealth
2 September 3055***

Second Company, Second Lance was on routine patrol in the forest a good twenty, thirty clicks beyond the city. Tracy Malfont (she'd given up her married name when she'd given up Duncan Garner) pushed her *Javelin* into a walk. She was moving along the edge of the forest, just above the river. She was up ahead of the rest of the lance about six clicks, but then she was a scout and that's what scouts did.

Her neck hurt from the long patrol. She stopped for a moment and stretched luxuriously. She closed her eyes and imagined the back rub she'd get from Sam after the patrol, felt him kneading the tight muscles of her neck, her shoulders, moving down to her back...

It was a delicious fantasy, but she and Sam had to be careful. Her divorce wasn't final yet and Harira was a conservative world. She didn't need a scandal, especially after her run-in with Sonders.

Still it was wonderful to remember the feel of his warm hands tracing the curves of her body, the taste of him on her lips, the press of his body on hers—

Her fantasy was interrupted by the sudden warble of an alarm signaling that someone had locked fire control radar on her 'Mech. Malfont's eyes flew open.

She flashed on a humanoid 'Mech, painted black with a touch of shocking blue—the colors of Fuchida's Fusiliers. The 'Mech's hands ended in gun barrels rather than hands. Probably an *Enforcer*. She watched the medium 'Mech raise its right arm.

Just as the autocannon fire hammered into her chest, knocking her backwards.

She took a step back to keep from falling.

And fired a pair of lasers at the pirate. Emerald fire scoured paint off the other 'Mech's chest and melted some of the underlying armor. She quickly side-stepped to the right, narrowly avoiding the spear of ruby light from the large laser that was the *Enforcer's* left arm.

"I am under attack," shouted Malfont over the lance's tactical channel. "Need immediate assistance."

"Coming," answered Sam. "Sitrep."

Coming. She did the math in her head. She was about six clicks away from the rest of the lance. Sam's *Thunderbolt* was the slowest. Say he could do forty kph in the heavy forest, that put help about nine minutes out.

The *Enforcer* stalked towards her, its lasers setting fire to the thick bracken that grew in the shade of the great trees.

Nine minutes.

A stream of heavy metal slashed through the forest, stripping bark from trees, ripping off branches, searching for her BattleMech.

Damn. Needed to buy time.

Her radio crackled and Sam's insistent voice filled her cockpit. "Sergeant, report your situation."

She moved right, twisting out the path of the oncoming *Enforcer*.

"Wait one," she snapped.

The *Enforcer's* autocannon raked Malfont's left hip, shattering armor and sending it raining down into the woods. She turned towards the river and hit her jump jets, launched the *Javelin* into the sky.

It was a risky maneuver, but she was outclassed by the *Enforcer* and it didn't help that she'd let him get in the first shot.

She careened toward a cottonwood, popped off her right bank of jets for a second and just managed to brush by the tree, taking half its branches with her. A scarlet blast of light fired the tree as she whipped past.

She tucked into a crouch and dropped down onto the river bank.

Then straightened up and turned.

"Sweet mother of God," she whispered.

"What is it, Sergeant?" asked Sam.

A force of 'Mechs were moving down the riverbank, maybe six or eight, all painted black with shocking blue trim. She picked out a *Dervish* and a *JagerMech* and a *Charger*. Way too much weight for her to handle.

She speared the lead *Panther* with emerald fire, aiming for the knees. Maybe if she could knock down the 'Mech on point she could slow the rest of the column.

"Two One, this is Two Four. I got one mike mike on the rise above the river and major force moving along the riverbanks, over."

She back-stepped down the bank, trading fire with the *Panther*.

"Say number and composition of major force, over," said Sam.

"Maybe six or eight, lima mike to alpha mike. I will draw them south along the river. Recommend you move north, turn, and hit them in the rear."

"Acknowledged, Sergeant. ETA seven minutes. Out."

Out.

That one word said it all. She was on her own for seven minutes. Sweat trickled down the side of her face. Had she really only managed to burn two minutes?

She hit the *Panther* again and the light 'Mech stumbled and fell.

The *Charger* stepped right past the fallen 'Mech and fired its lasers at her. So much for using the *Panther* to slow down the rest of the column.

Malfont gritted her teeth. If Sam and the lance were going to hit these guys in the back, she had to draw them *south* and she'd barely moved a hundred meters from her original posit.

Her cockpit temperature spiked as the *Charger* splashed monochromatic light over her chest. She rode out the assault and then she pivoted on her right foot and pushed the *Javelin* into a lope, the best she could do over the uncertain terrain.

She ducked past a bend in the river, buying herself a few seconds. Ordinarily, she could've outrun a *Charger* easily, but the loose alluvial rocks were slowing her down.

Where the hell was Sam?

She was moving towards him, so he shouldn't be too far out. She clung to that thought as she followed the riverbed through a curve to the left.

And ran into a long straight-away, three hundred meters at least. She pushed her speed up a little. Had to make it to the next bend in the river.

She was halfway to her goal when the *Charger* appeared behind her, with a straight shot at her back. The warble of an alarm told her he had her in his gunsights. She hit her jump jets, trying to throw off his firing solution.

She glanced at her rear monitor as her *Javelin* descended through its arc.

She saw a flash of emerald light as the *Charger* fired its quintet of lasers.

The massive 'Mech's assault shook her just as she descended, savagely tearing her balance from her. She came crashing down in a bone-jarring fall that smashed her against her couch.

Her last thought as darkness swept down upon her was that Sam never came.

**Maelstrom, *Swing Circle Spaceport*
Swing Circle, New Port Royal
Tortuga Dominions, Periphery
1 March 3066**

Malfont sat in her small stateroom trying to think of a way to convince Castor to abort this op. After witnessing the meeting with Ox, she was afraid to even bring it up. Castor wouldn't listen to her. And the result was likely to be as big a disaster as that meeting was.

There was a rap on the hatch.

She looked up. "Come."

The door opened and Colorado Henderson stepped inside, closed the hatch softly behind him.

He looked at her and she looked at him.

"This is never going to work," he said softly.

She sighed deeply. "I suppose you have an alternative."

Henderson leaned against the hatch; there wasn't much room in the small space. "Assuming that the other two lances actually show up, we let them press the attack. We find a reason to hang back, not leave the spaceport. The fact that your boyfriend blew the meeting with the deck master should help us there."

Malfont clenched her jaw, but said nothing.

"We embark the *Maelstrom* and go. This is our DropShip, Tracy. I've already talked to Captain Vincent. He's onboard."

"And what if the other two lances *don't* show?"

"Then it's three against one." Henderson's voice was flat and merciless.

Malfont didn't like it, but it was the only way out of the box. The only question was why she hadn't seen it before. Why Henderson had to think of it.

And the answer, of course, was that she'd been blinded by hope.

She looked up at Henderson and their eyes met. He raised an eyebrow and she nodded.

And that was all that needed to be said.

***Battalion Conference Room, Safi Militia Base
Safi, Harira
Federated Commonwealth
12 September 3055***

Everything about Room 62A terrified Malfont. It was an immense space with perfect acoustics, so that even a cleared throat or the scrape of a chair was magnified into something immense and menacing. But in this place of perfect sound there was nothing but a measured, malevolent silence—the weight of judgment hanging heavily above her suspended on an invisible thread.

Seconds from crashing down.

The room was furnished with hard, wooden chairs laid out in neat rows with no allowance for any imperfection. A single large table draped in green cloth rested near the far wall, the trio of officers behind it as hard and wooden as the chairs upon which they sat. All save for Captain Sonders, whose lips twitched with a smile he was trying to hide from his fellow board members.

But none of that was the worst part, not Sonders, not even the sword laid out on the green table, carefully pointed away from her. No, nothing in the room scared her more than the man sitting in the witness chair.

Sam.

He sat ramrod straight, face stiff, eyes locked straight ahead, unable to spare anything for Malfont.

Not even the courtesy of a glance.

From her left, Malfont heard the sound of a chair being pushed back and the grunt that accompanied a man rising from the table. He was *small*. Everything about the JAG officer was small—his thin, cadaverous frame, his sallow skin, the little hands that reached up to adjust his glasses, a small, bookish man with nothing big about him.

Except his voice.

“Leftenant Aiken,” said the lawyer and his voice rolled through the makeshift courtroom, an expertly wielded weapon as deadly as anything Malfont had ever faced on the battlefield.

Deadlier, because this weapon she didn't know how to counter.

He moved across the room as he spoke. "This court martial has heard how Sergeant *Garner*—" (he put a little twist into the word to remind everyone that she was still a married woman, a married woman cheating on her husband) "—engaged the pirates. We have seen the evidence of that engagement in the grave damage done to her BattleMech's armor." He stopped. "Her BattleMech's rear armor."

He started moving again. "Sergeant Garner's after action report indicates that she was attempting to draw the pirates south so you could engage their rear. Is this in fact what happened, Lieutenant Aiken?"

Sam licked his lips. "No, sir."

Malfont's breath caught in her chest.

"Perhaps you could suggest an alternative explanation for that day's events," said the JAG.

"It wasn't her fault," said Sam rapidly, "she just—"

The JAG held up one of his little hands. "Please, Lieutenant," he said in his booming voice. "Just tell us what happened."

"She was terrified," said Sam. "Obviously terrified. I could hear it in her voice."

And Malfont heard her voice again, from the recording taken from Sam's cockpit recorder that they'd played earlier, heard herself saying *Sweet mother of God*.

"She wasn't able to give me a clear sitrep."

"Sergeant, report your situation."

"Wait one."

"She must've turned and fled."

"She *claimed* that you were supposed to back her up," said the JAG.

And that's all it was—a claim—because Sam's recorder didn't include a record of her suggested battle plan and hers had been damaged in the crash.

Sam shrugged helplessly. "We weren't sure where she was..."

"And when you did arrive at her original position, there was no enemy force."

Sam shook his head, cast his eyes down. "She didn't stand to hold them."

"Isn't it true," asked the JAG, "that your lance were the last defenders between the pirates and the city?"

Sam raised his head. "Yessir."

The JAG's great voice dipped low, so that Malfont had to strain to hear it. "And how many people died in the raid on Safi, Leftenant?"

"Two hundred fourteen."

"Two hundred fourteen," repeated the JAG in a horrified whisper, drawing the number out forever.

And right then Malfont knew it was over. She'd been condemned by her commander and her lover. She didn't have to wait to see which way the sword would point after the board met. It was over.

And the hell of it was, Sam was the real coward. Sam who hadn't dared face a superior pirate force, Sam who'd run away and passed the blame to her. Sam who'd lied in open court to save himself.

This was the man she'd let herself fall for.

And during it all, during his testimony and the questions asked by her lawyer and even when Sam rose stiffly to his feet to stride out of the court room, he had never once looked at her. Not *once*.

She had been truly and utterly betrayed by a man for whom she would've sacrificed her very life.

If only he'd asked.

Maelstrom, Swing Circle Spaceport
Swing Circle, New Port Royal
Tortuga Dominions, Periphery
2 March 3066

Malfont was standing on the DropShip's bridge when it happened. It was zero five hundred and dark out, but Castor still had made them get up the hour before and don their cooling vests. Ordinarily, she would've waited for battle in the cockpit of her *Quickdraw*, but since she didn't really expect anything to happen she made her way to the *Maelstrom*'s bridge.

So she stood there, alone with the bored deck officer, sipping a cup of bad coffee, staring out into the darkness.

The radio crackled. The ship was guarding the New Port Royal command frequency and Malfont expected some routine report or instruction from the spaceport. Instead she heard the confused shouts of men and women all talking over each other. She turned to look at the radio, a wave of ice suddenly seeping through her gut. She knew that sound.

It was the sound of combat.

A flash of light split the night, the violet whip crack of a PPC bolt, west-southwest, maybe two clicks out.

She slammed the coffee down. "*Deck officer,*" she shouted. "Move your primary telescope to three three five relative and tie into the main screen."

"But, I—"

"*Do it,*" she snapped.

She had to know what was really happening.

Tense seconds ticked by, punctuated by the flash of killing light. In the direction of the Bazaar.

The screen flickered. For a moment she wasn't sure if the telescope was tied in because all she saw was a black screen.

Then an emerald beam of light seared the screen.

In that flash of light she saw all she needed to see. Smashed landing lights and a *Union* with its landing ramps deployed, 'Mechs stalking out of the DropShip.

One of them a *Stormcrow* marked with a wicked, curved blade.
A khopesh.

Malfont pulled her personal comm out, pressed a button. Raised it to her lips. "Henderson."

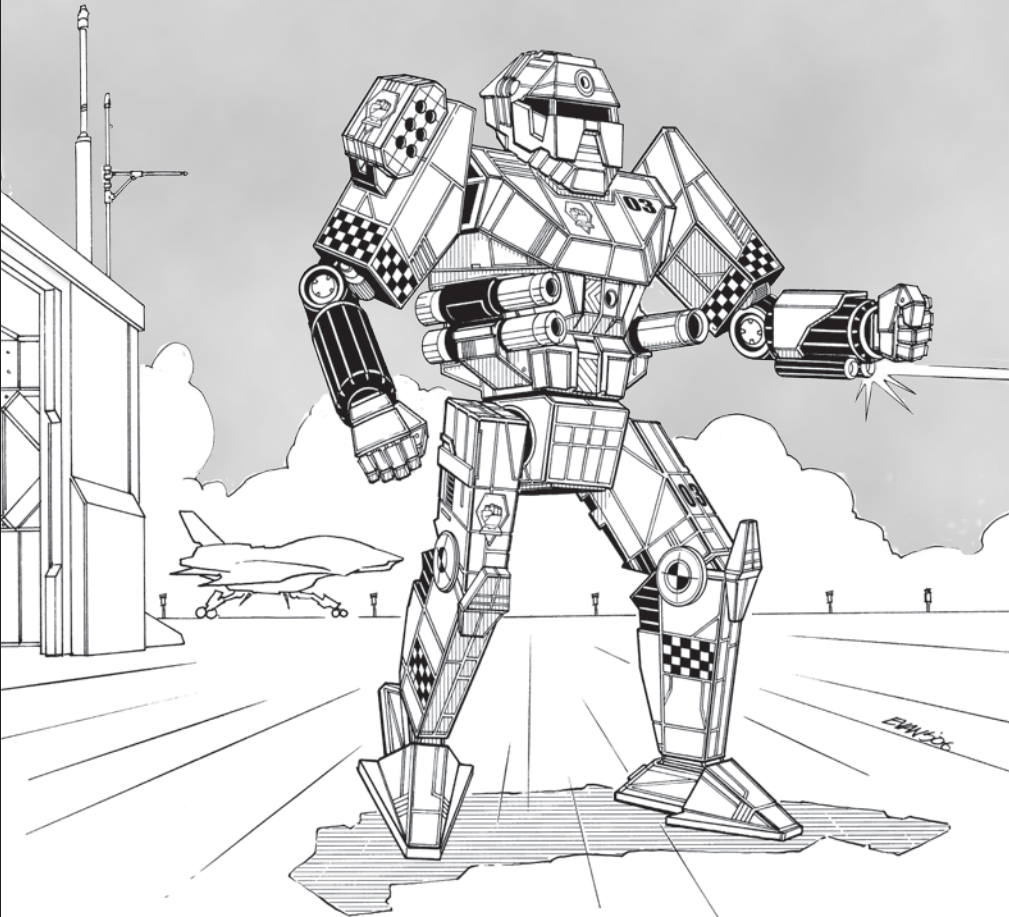
"Yes?"

"The other two lances are deploying."

"It doesn't matter, Tracy," said Henderson. "Changes nothing."

But Malfont looked out at the flickering lights in the night and wasn't so sure.

But before she could say anything, Castor's voice erupted from the 1MC: "*All MechWarriors to their 'Mechs.*"



Swing Circle Spaceport

Swing Circle, New Port Royal

The purple sky was shot-through with streaks of amber and orange and gold in the east before Castor's lance took the field, the sun rising on what would most likely be the last day of Malfont's life.

Castor was out first, his fearsome *Banshee* painted a lustrous black. Malfont followed in her leopard-spotted *Quickdraw*, then Comfort in the mirror gold *Wasp*, and Henderson last in his *Centurion*, painted with the stripes of a Lionfish.

Malfont's radio crackled as they debarked. "Remember the plan," said Henderson over a special encrypted channel available only to her Black Scarabs.

"Stay away from the Bazaar," said Malfont.

"That's affirm," said Comfort.

Castor's massive *Banshee* turned to look back at Malfont, its demonic face staring at her *Quickdraw*. She had a bad moment as she flashed back to Randis, when Castor's 'Mech had stood over her shattered cockpit ready to kill her in an instant.

"Time to move out," Castor snapped. He stalked toward the low-slung ferrocrete box that was the port's commercial terminal.

"What's he doing?" asked Henderson over their secret comms channel.

"Aren't we going to attack the Bazaar?" asked Malfont over the lance's channel.

The mad English teacher chuckled. "Whatever gave you *that* idea?" Then he stepped past the building's edge.



The DropShips were right where they were supposed to be, which would have been the first break of the op, if some damned fool hadn't gotten to the *Mule*'s guns early.

Mark Castor-Davion stalked his massive *Banshee* past the long-slung ferrocrete box that was the port's commercial terminal and

just had time to ID the targets: *Mule* at three five zero and 200 meters, *Union* at zero four zero and 400, and the *Overlord* at three three five and half a klick.

The second *Mule* was off to the right.

We caught 'em on the ground, Castor thought. *Now if we can just keep them there.*

And then he saw the bright flash of weapons fire coming from the *Mule's* starboard quarter. *Missile launch.*

Two seconds: one, two, and Castor's *Banshee* staggered under the hammer blow of a full flight of LRMs. Lucky for him he was too close for the warheads to arm.

He had just braced himself when the DropShip's medium lasers opened up. Scarlet fire washed over his forward armor and tell-tales blinked from green to yellow. Castor, acting on pure instinct, fired his torso-mounted PPCs as he stepped back behind the cover of the terminal.

He flashed up a quick still from his gun cams, took a run at BDA. A black scorch marked the *Mule's* armor five meters forward of one of the lasers, but the other was a charred, smoking wreckage.

Not bad for firing blind.



"Blake's blood," shouted Henderson, *"he's engaging the Mule."* Malfont heard the panic in his voice. The *fear.*

"Wait. That doesn't—" Comfort stopped abruptly. *"That doesn't make any sense."*

And it didn't. The *Mule* already had off-loaded all of her trade goods and she was of little military value. Malfont frowned, thinking, *What are you doing, Castor?*



Castor's satisfaction was quickly dashed by Sakutaro Ishihara's grim voice.

"Red One, this is Red Two. I've got visual on bad guys. I count eight 'Mechs, some Fusiliers from the housing facility to the north-east, some debarking Lady Death's *Union*, over."

Castor gritted his teeth. "We've got to put them down quickly."

"Hai," said the former Combine officer.

Ishihara's and his lances were working their way around the massive warehouse a klick to the west. The plan was for Castor's lance to secure the *Mule* while Ishihara gained position at the building's northern edge. The rest of Red Khopesh was ripping apart the planetary capital in an attempt to draw off as many of the Tortuga Fusiliers as possible.

At the right moment Ishihara's lance would charge east and Castor's would charge north, converging on the *Overlord* from multiple bearings in order to minimize the amount of concentrated fire the immense DropShip could bring to bear.

It was a lovely plan.

Only one problem.

The Fusiliers hadn't fallen for it.

Time to improvise.

"Red Three, Red One. I am in need of your special talents, Star Commander."

"Go ahead, Red One." There was no doubt in the voice of Star Commander Thomas, formerly of Clan Smoke Jaguar, but the boy still sounded impossibly young.

He's not a boy, Castor reminded himself. He's a killing machine.

"Disengage and move your lance north and west at best possible speed. Your objective is the Death's Consorts *Union*. Take down any unfriendlies you encounter."

"Aye, sir," snapped Thomas. "Red Three, out."

There. That would give the Fusilier 'Mechs something to think about.

Now to do something about that friggin' *Mule*.



Castor's *Banshee* moved up to the edge of the terminal, firing at the *Mule*. Malfont edged up behind him, trying to figure out what in Blake's name was going on. She looked left and saw the towering ovoid shape of the *Overlord* in the distance. Looked right and saw the other *Mule*.

Just in time to see a Freedom 900 hover jeep dart out of the DropShip.

Malfont blinked. What the hell?

The vehicle spun away from the *Mule*, racing for the east end of the terminal. It was quickly followed by several more jeeps emerging from vessel, but these vehicles just *stopped*, as if they had no concern for the battle raging all around them.

"This doesn't make any sense," Colorado shouted over their private encrypted link.

He was right. It didn't make any sense.

And then it did.

"Castor has a *Mule*," Malfont whispered to herself.

"He's gone insane," Comfort howled.

"No," said Malfont. "You're just thinking like a pirate. And Castor's not a pirate."

"What is he then?" demanded Henderson.

An avenging angel, she thought. She wheeled, sprinted away from the terminal, suddenly understanding everything. Why Castor had bungled the meeting with Simonian. Why he'd proposed an attack that couldn't possibly work. What the jeep was for.

"Tracy," Henderson shouted, "what are you doing?"

"*Shut up*," she snarled. She stalked her 'Mech toward the *Maelstrom*, just swinging wide enough that she could see the DropShip's hidden side.

And the empty hover jeep parked next to one of the access ramps.

"Henderson, this is Vincent." The panicked voice cut into the Scarab link, confirming her worst fears. "We're under attack, some kinda spec ops team. At least four of my people are down—"

Henderson cut in, talking right over him. "What the hell are you—"

"—hold the engine room. We've barricaded the bridge, but they're cutting through the bulkhead. No wait—"

Malfont heard the deadly hum of a needler and then the line went dead.



"Castor, this is Riston," said the deep voice over Castor's private channel. "Objective is secured."

That report brought a grim smile to Castor's lips. "Excellent work, Lieutenant. Tell Captain Wong to standby for lift orders."

"That's affirm, sir. Riston, out."

Castor reached forward to make another very important call.



"We gotta get out of here. Gotta get *out*. Head back to the *Leopard*." Comfort had completely lost it. She didn't seem to realize there wasn't a *Leopard* to go back to.

Henderson was completely silent, making Malfont wonder if he was thinking or if he'd shut down altogether. She wasn't sure which one would be worse.

Right then Castor's black *Banshee* stepped around the terminal's corner.

One look at that demonic face was enough to send a shiver of dread down Malfont's spine. Despite the warmth of her cockpit she felt cold. The mad genius had been there all along.

And he was pissed.

"Listen up," Castor snarled over the common channel. "I don't have any more time to screw with you people. By now you know I've taken down the *Maelstrom*. You *will* follow my orders or I will leave you to pirate justice on this godforsaken world. Clear?"

And suddenly Malfont was back on Randis, on fire as he bent the delicate bones in her wrist almost to the breaking point. Back on

Randis, as his *Banshee* stood over her smashed cockpit, her life a hair trigger from its end.

Malfont's mouth was bone dry, but she managed to choke out, "What do you want?"

But Castor didn't answer her. He just turned and sprinted back towards the *Mule*.

After a second she followed.



Castor selected the command channel. "Infantry, hold back. You will proceed on my order only." This was one of those rare instances where the 'Mechs were here to support the ground-pounders rather than the other way around. "Command Lance, we will charge the *Mule* on my mark. Malfont and Henderson go left and spread out, but keep off the port quarter. No need to take any more fire than we have to. Comfort and I will go right. Nail her guns and no need to be pretty about it. Goal is fire suppression, people. Questions?"

Henderson began, "I don't think we should—"

"Good," Castor snapped. "Go, go, *go*."

He charged past the terminal and moved right, firing his PPCs as he went. Comfort followed right behind him in her *Wasp*.

Malfont jumped her *Quickdraw* and came down pouring laser fire into the *Mule's* aft Autocannon/5.

It took a full twenty seconds before Henderson moved in to back her up.

Castor clenched his jaw, but he didn't have time to worry about that now. Comfort was pouring laser fire into the starboard aft SRM launcher, so he targeted the medium laser and took it out with a double PPC blast.

"All secure left," reported Malfont.

A gout of orange flame erupted from the *Mule's* LRM ports. "All secure right," said Comfort.

He stalked his *Banshee* right to the edge of the DropShip's hull. He saw a *Spider* painted black with shocking blue trim, the Fusilier

insignia—a pair of loaded dice in a golden goblet—prominent on its fuselage. Castor fired, lasers this time, splashing emerald fire across one of the light 'Mech's legs.

The skittering mechanism drew back, like a roach startled by the flick of a light switch.

That's when the other shoe dropped. Castor felt the low-frequency vibration through the ferrocrete and his *Banshee's* legs. It was the *thrum* of massive power. He wheeled around.

The *Mule* was retracting her cargo ramps. The 'Ship's captain had obviously begun the immediate launch procedure.

Castor was about to lose his cover.

"Infantry forward, *now*."

Castor stalked toward the nearest cargo ramp and grabbed it. For a moment he struggled against the DropShip's winches as he tried to hold and the *Mule* tried to pull.

Then he jerked the ramp right and heard the satisfying screech of gears grinding themselves into scrap.

The ramp jammed right where it was.

Which ought to give the *Mule's* captain something to think about. The big commercial DropShip had a well-known design flaw. *Mules* that tried to take off without fully stowing their cargo ramps had the unfortunate tendency to blow up.

The thrum of the engines suddenly shifted down. The *Mule's* captain was reconsidering his options.

Castor stalked left and stopped at the next cargo hatch. He ripped into the roll-up door, tearing it loose.

"Castor, what do you think you're doing?" Henderson demanded.

Castor fired his lasers into the cargo bay. Turned to see half-a-dozen soldiers in a motley collection of mismatched power armor leaping out of hover jeeps and running forward. Two were in Inner Sphere Standard, another in a Gray Death Scout, a fourth in some kind of unholy amalgamation of three different kinds of armor. There was even a Clan Elemental. Behind them was a second squad, this one without armor.

Castor crouched and laid his *Banshee's* right hand flat on the deck, palm up. The dozen soldiers stepped aboard.

He stood and slowly turned toward the hatch, careful not to drop anyone. He placed his hand inside the damaged hatch and the soldiers scrambled off. The armored troops went first, disappearing into the DropShip's dark interior.

"What do you want with a damned *Mule*?" Henderson barked.

"Just to borrow her guns for a while," said Castor. "Now. Shut. Up."

He switched frequencies, dialed in Captain Tsung's private channel. "Two objectives. Keep the *Mule* from lifting and capture her guns."

One of the soldiers turned and looked up at him, the tiny figure framed by the broken hatch. "Want us to make the Fusiliers' life hell?"

"That's affirm."

The tiny soldier saluted and disappeared inside.

His radio crackled. "Red One, Red Two."

"Go ahead, Sakutaro."

"Mark, we're in position. I'm seeing lift indications on the *Overlord*."

Dammit. That meant it was now or never.

Castor edged left until the *Overlord* came into view. The *Mule* was a commercial DropShip, lightly armed. Not so, an *Overlord*. He licked his lips. Maybe three hundred meters. A twenty second sprint into the teeth of the monster's guns while taking sustained fire on his right flank from at least two lances of enemy 'Mechs.

Disastrous odds.

If they could take out the 'Mechs, the odds might improve from disastrous to merely very bad.

Castor took another step left, trying for a better view of the enemy 'Mechs.

Right then the *Overlord's* guns opened up. The impact of multiple lasers slicing into the ferrocrete tarmac knocked Castor's

Banshee off-balance. He staggered backwards, eyes locked on the smoking, five-meter crater the *Overlord* had just burned into the ferrocrete.

Damn.

Safe behind the *Mule*, Castor closed his eyes and took a deep, shaky breath. He'd hoped they wouldn't have to charge into those guns. Against that massive firepower they'd take fifty percent casualties.

If they were lucky.

Castor had spent the better part of his adult life as an English professor, but he'd grown up as a Davion on Lee. He'd received enough military training to know that what separated brilliant battlefield commanders from their peers wasn't careful planning. Any idiot could lay out a sensible plan.

Victory belonged to those who could think on their feet when the plan went to hell.

And the way to do that was to take whatever opening the enemy offered.

Castor sprinted right, heading *away* from the *Overlord's* overwhelming firepower. "Command Lance, follow me."

The *Spider* was back, cautiously creeping along the *Mule's* edge. The startled Fusilier pilot managed to get off a wild shot from his twin lasers, before Castor's assault 'Mech was on top on him.

Castor's eyes flickered down, caught a flash of silver where his earlier attack had burned the paint from the *Spider's* leg and melted the armor underneath. Acting on instinct, Castor balled his *Banshee's* right hand into a fist and smashed it into the damaged limb.

The *Spider's* leg snapped off and the unbalanced 'Mech toppled to the deck. Castor didn't even break stride, he was already moving around the crippled *Mule*. A quick glance at his rear monitor showed him that Malfont's *Quickdraw* had paused to finish off the *Spider*.

That made it seven to four, better odds than they'd get against the *Overlord*.

Castor moved right and flashed on a *Guillotine* and an *Assassin* near the *Mule*, looked like they were following the *Spider* around.

Beyond them on the tarmac were an *UrbanMech* and a *Whitworth*. A couple hundred meters away a massive *Cyclops* was descending the *Union's* cargo ramp. If Ishihara's estimate of two lances had been right there'd be one or two more hidden by the DropShip's bulk.

Castor laid a double PPC shot into the *Guillotine* and backed around the *Mule*.

"Castor, Tsung."

"Go ahead, Captain."

"We have secured the *Mule*. By the way, there's a *Charger* working his way around the DropShip to your left."

"Excellent work. First target is the *Charger*, followed by the *Guillotine*, and the *Cyclops*." Sudden inspiration hit. "And get me a lift status on that *Union*."

"Yessir."

Castor moved a bit further right and took a lick of fire for his trouble. He back-stepped, lashing out with his twin PPCs as he moved back into the *Mule's* shelter. As he moved out of danger, he caught sight of the culprit: a *Firestarter* painted bone gray with black trim. A dagger driven through a skull with red glowing eyes.

The emblem of Death's Consorts.

The light 'Mech didn't pursue. Apparently the pilot wasn't eager to get killed walking into a trap. Instead he was content to hold back and prevent Red Khopesh from threatening their DropShip, without actually jumping feet first into the fight.

Well, no one ever said Lady Death's people were stupid.

So his lance was fine—as long as they didn't come around the *Mule* and try to advance.

Great.

And right then, Castor got his next bit of bad news, carried to him through the soles of his feet.



Malfont felt the massive low-frequency vibration racing through the tarmac, felt it in the sway of her *Quickdraw*'s legs, felt it as a tremor in her bones.

Only one thing in human space could deliver that kind of force.

She side-stepped left, peering out from behind the shelter of the *Mule* and saw the *Overlord* lifting off. Molten orange exhaust gases poured out of the massive DropShip's main engines, pounding the tarmac and shaking the world. For an impossible second the *Overlord* just hovered there, a scant three, four meters off the deck, trapped in place as the DropShip's thrust perfectly balanced the downward acceleration of her 9700 tons.

And then the thrust got ahead of gravity and the monster began to move, slowly at first, and then faster and faster, until the massive DropShip was nothing more than a bright white line drawn across the cobalt sky.

So much for Castor's brilliant plan.

The *Overlord*'s berth was scorched black by the great ship's passage and the air was roiled by the heat of the lift-off, blurring reality.

Malfont blinked.

As she saw a quartet of heavy hitters racing through the blurry air left behind by the *Overlord*'s departure, led by an *Atlas* painted blood red.



The whole world was coming apart around him. Castor needed a break and dammit he needed it *now*.

Fortunately he got it.

He ducked around the right side of the *Mule* and saw that the *Firestarter* had been joined by the Consorts *Cyclops*. For a moment Castor's guts turned to ice as he stood facing the great machine not 200 meters from his position.

And then the assault 'Mech stumbled forward as a flight of missiles slammed into its rear. Castor looked right and saw Thomas's *Stormcrow* standing there with his lance in tow.

A grim smile touched Castor's lips. The odds were changing and not in the pirates' favor.

The Death's Consorts commander faced a dilemma. He could not take off without abandoning his 'Mechs in the field, but if he stayed he risked losing his DropShip. And if he tried to embark his 'Mechs, both they and the DropShip would be vulnerable.

And so the *Union* just sat there, waiting.

But as soon as the Death's Consorts commander realized he was outnumbered on the ground, he'd lift.

And if Castor waited too much longer, the Tortugans were going to finally apply enough force to bring this little party to an end.

Had to act now.

He selected the command channel. "Thomas, throw everything you can at the 'Mechs closest to the *Union*."

"Aff," said the former Smoke Jaguar.

"Red Two—" Castor began.

"Already on it, Mark," said Ishihara. "We're moving in on the *Union*'s left flank."

"Then I'll take right," said Castor. "Infantry follow the command lance, we'll lead you in."

And then Castor darted past the limn of the *Mule*, and charged right into the teeth of the DropShip's guns.



"My God," breathed Henderson over their private channel, "he can't be serious."

"You bloody well better believe he's serious," snapped Malfont. "And I don't doubt he'll leave your ass here if you don't follow him."

"He can't—" began Comfort, but Malfont didn't stop to hear what she had to say.

She was already following Castor in.



Castor juked from side to side, firing as he ran, more to keep the enemy 'Mechs down than in an attempt to do any damage. The real problem wasn't the 'Mechs anyway.

It was the *Union*.

The *Union* was built to carry 'Mechs into battle and it was heavily armed. They were not running up on a lightly-armed *Mule* here. This was a deadly combatant.

So Castor ran through a hail of autocannon fire punctuated by emerald laser beams and the violet lightning bolts of particle projection cannons. He weaved through enemy 'Mechs, trying to make it harder for the *Union's* gunners to hit him.

He charged past the *Firestarter*.

Just as the light 'Mech collapsed under the misdirected fire of the *Union's* lasers.

Castor's armor flickered from green to yellow to red in seconds.

There was nothing to do for it but run.



Malfont hit her jump jets, then feathered them, jerking her *Quickdraw* to one side.

For an instant her eyes flickered left.

In time to see the golden head of Comfort's *Wasp* dissolve under the *Union's* massive firepower. The *Wasp* toppled forward, like a decapitated prisoner.

And the gunners sought out their next target.



Castor watched one of the jeeps erupt into an orange fireball, but the rest of them made it through and then his infantry was swarming up the *Union's* ramps.



And then somehow the rain of fire from the *Union* stopped. Malfont blinked, unsure of what was going to happen next.

“Well come *on*,” Castor shouted. “We don’t have all *damn* day.”

“But—” said Henderson.

“*Embark the Union*,” Castor roared.

Malfont glanced back. The *Maelstrom* was already lifting, as was the *Union* adorned with the Grizzly emblem.

Sure, she thought. She recognized this part of the game. Time to get out of Dodge.

***Captured Death's Consorts Union, Boosting
Toward Pirate Point
New Port Royal System
Tortuga Dominions, Periphery
2 March 3066***

She found Castor in the wardroom standing in front of the viewport, his back to the hatch, staring out at the stars. The officer's mess was a small space dominated by a laminate table whose designers had made a half-hearted attempt to make it look like real wood. The table was big enough to accommodate six people at a time. One of the chairs on the near side was tipped over, a dead woman sprawled on the deck, her life soaking into the beige carpet.

He must've heard the click of the hatch, because without turning, he said, "We're going into the jump point hot. You need to strap yourself in."

He was barely holding it together. Malfont could hear it in his voice.

"Sure," she said casually, "if you want to be alone with your new friend here, just say so."

That broke him. He bowed his head, but still did not turn. "I—" his voice cracked and he stopped. She heard him draw in a shuddery breath. "I gave the order. To kill—" He shook his head, drew another deep breath. "Kill everyone aboard."

"I hate to be the one to break this to you," she said gently, "but that's what pirates do."

He shook his head again, but said nothing else.

A moment of silence hung between them.

"I thought you would be on the bridge," she finally said.

"Better people than me are guiding this ship. Best thing I can do right now is stay out of their way."

"And you're not even curious?"

He shrugged. "We'll either live or we'll die."

And right now you don't really care which it is, she thought. She took a step into the wardroom and shut the hatch softly behind

her. "Let's make sure I have this all straight. You never planned to hit the Bazaar. That was just a diversion, for both my people and the Tortugans. You put the other two lances down in the Grizzly *Union* and put someone out in front who had done business with the Dominions before, just like you did with me and the *Maelstrom*."

"You're not the only pirate that's worked this corner of space."

"You wrecked my deal with Simonian because you didn't really want a slot in the southwest quadrant. You wanted to stay where you were, close to the real target: the *Overlord*."

"Yep," he said.

She shook her head. "Which is why you were willing to give up your *Mule* and the cargo on the Grizzly *Union*. Because you thought you were getting an *Overlord*."

"Sounds about right."

Her voice tightened. "And you put a strike team on my *ship*, killed four of my people, because you thought we would betray you."

He finally turned around, his gaze bright and cold. "You *did* betray me."

"Because you didn't tell us your *plan*," she snapped. "Because we thought you had gone crazy. We thought you were going to get us all killed."

She saw a muscle pulse in his cheek. "I don't have to tell you a *damn* thing."

Malfont took several deep breaths. "All right. You don't have to. But will you?"

Castor folded his arms across his chest.

"Why didn't you tell us about the plans to take the DropShip?"

Castor was a man, a sensitive man in unbelievable pain, but underneath all that there was a part of him that was cold and mechanical and it was this part of the man that raised an eyebrow and flashed her a look that said, "What a stupid question."

Malfont exhaled slowly. "You only trust two people in this entire force: Thomas and Ishihara."

"You're wrong. I only trust one: *me*. But I understand Thomas and Ishihara well enough to use them."

"Okay. So when do I get off probation?"

"When I understand you as well as I understand them."

She flashed him a crooked half-smile. "I'm not really that hard to understand."

"Really?" That eyebrow again.

"I'm the woman who always holds on to hope—even when she shouldn't."

Castor let out a little snort that might've been a dry chuckle, then he turned around again.

The captured *Union* buckled and shimmied as some distant enemy tried to take her out. Malfont took the force in her legs, swaying with the deck, not really worried. She had survived up until now. What else could the bastards do to her?

After a minute she went to stand by Mark Castor-Davion and together they watched the stars.