

THE GHOSTS OF HESPERUS

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Melrose Valley, Hesperus II
Skye Province
Lyrn Alliance
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"Caught it right in the shin."

"Quiet."

"Sheared the leg off, a little above the ankle. It fell down the hill, almost rolled, bumping and scraping all the way. Shards of it are probably still lying here."

"Quiet!"

The lanky man blithely kept talking, his words cutting through the white mist of his breath. "He wheeled his arms as he fell, trying to regain balance or at least slow the fall, but a few tons of metal doesn't stop so easily, right? And it slid into a *Black Knight*. Holding his XO. Took him out. That changed the whole tide of battle, that's what I think. I think, from this point on the slope, if the *Black Knight* could have survived the hit, he'd be in great position. Could have lofted shots over the entire valley. But instead, one of his own men downed him."

The shorter, balding man straightened a few strands of hair while shaking his head. "You don't know what you're talking about."

Korwyn rolled her eyes, squatting over the grey razors and knifepoints that made up the rocky ground of Hesperus II. The surrounding stark mountains dwarfed her, dwarfed the enormous factory in the valley below her, dwarfed everything. She felt the tight fabric of her leggings stretch around her calves. This was only going to get louder. She tried to focus on the shattered terrain in front of her and shut out the two voices to her rear.

"Of course I do!" the lanky man said indignantly.



"No you don't," his companion replied. "First of all, you think a 'Mech works like a plane? Sitting up on high lofting shells at targets below?"

"They've got long-range weapons. When the situation is right, yes, that's exactly what they do."

"Yeah, but that's not how they really get you. That's not how they finish you off. They don't just sit back and wait. They come and get you."

Korwyn decided to try one more time. "Would the two of you *please*..."

Both men held up their hands defensively and fell silent. For two minutes. But at least when they started up again they kept their voices down.

"Anyway, the second problem is you don't know your history," the stouter man said. Korwyn searched for a name to go with the lumpy, pitted face—Edison? Anderson? It seemed like the kind of thing she should probably remember.

"I don't know my history?" the lanky man—Pollard, a name Korwyn knew too well—replied. "What do you think I'm doing here?"

"I'm actually not supposed to know what you're doing," Edison/Anderson said.

Pollard waved his hands, the moonlight reflected in the blue sleeves of his coat the only color against a background of tall, looming grey rock and black sky. "Yeah, yeah, it's all a big mystery. Look, I'm here because I know my history. I *know* about this planet. Kor's here for terrain, I'm here for history. So don't tell me I don't know what I know I know."

Edison/Anderson fell silent, leaning on the rusted speeder he'd used to take them to the valley, trying to parse Pollard's words. Korwyn enjoyed the quiet.

The land in front of her was unremittingly hostile. The fourteen battles fought here had scarred the earth more than cold winds and heavy rains could on their own. A bowl of mountains circled the lifeless valley, outsized spikes that made the buildings below look like toys. The valley floor was studded by outcroppings tall enough to make 'Mech navigation quirky but too short to provide decent cover. A single paved road, so dark it seemed to pull in blackness from the sky, wound to the greatest treasure on the

planet, one of the greatest treasures of the universe—Defiance Industries' 'Mech production facility. The massive building squatted heavily, emitting little light and less warmth. The visible walls, tanks, rocket launchers, and defensive encampments that lay thick around the square building sent the clearest possible message to potential visitors. The building was why so many armies found their way here; the thorny hedge of defenses was a significant reason all fourteen armies met only futility.

There would be a fifteenth try. Everyone suspected it, but only Korwyn and a select few others knew it for sure. And Korwyn and her talkative companions were here to assure this attempt succeeded where more than a dozen armies had failed.

"All right," she said, finalizing her notes on this section, scanning the nearly imperceptible differences between the places they had been and the places they still needed visit, trying to remember which way to travel next. "Let's move on."



"You can almost see them, can't you?" Pollard bounced from one foot to another. Black eyes trembled like wobbling marbles on either side of his narrow nose.

"I can't see anyone," Ellison (that, as it turned out, was his name) said flatly.

"You have no imagination. They're all around! Hell, I can *smell* them. Sulfur and phosphorous still swirling over their metal corpses."

When he said this, Korwyn could almost visualize the gases swirling up into the thin nostrils at the base of Pollard's hooked nose.

"That's just fumes from the factory," Ellison said.

Pollard paused for thought. "Maybe the problem is that you live with them. They're around you all the time, so you don't notice them any more."

"Honestly, I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Right here. Right *here!*" Pollard pointed at a slope, a gentle decline, running down from bumpy foothills that appeared to be large

mounds of rubble. "Look, there's a few Eridani 'Mechs, every last one of them with their bland olive camouflage, fleeing out of the mountains, Marik troops on their tail. The Light Horse forces are wounded and outnumbered, gyros damaged so they're stumbling over *pebbles*. They're on empty."

"Mmmm hmmm."

"Now, don't get me wrong. Just getting into the valley wouldn't have guaranteed a Marik victory. They might not have even made it to the Defiance plant. Still, they would have had a huge foothold, a chance to gather themselves."

Ellison gave a moment's thought to living under Marik rule, but gave up when he couldn't honestly say how it might have made his life different.

"But then the artillery fires up. The Marik forces had completely overlooked the guns hidden in the crags *there* and *there*." His arm jabbed out again, one to the east, the other to the north, indicating steep rock walls near the slope upon which they stood. "They blistered the 'Mechs, sending them scrambling, and by the time they figured out what was going on the crippled Light Horses were on top of them. Look, there, right there, that's where a *Cyclops*, laser damaged beyond repair, fell on a *Stalker* and just pummeled it into the ground, beat it to smithereens *right here*."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I *know*. Can't you see it? Can't you *hear* it, the metal crunching and screeching, the pilot yelling into his radio for help?"

"I don't hear anything."

"I do," Pollard said stubbornly. "It's all around us."

Korwyn finally broke in. "What are we supposed to be taking away from this story?"

Pollard held up one finger. "First, watch for hidden artillery." A second finger rose. "Second, proceed into the valley slowly." A third. "Finally, strafe our approach unmercifully before we move in, bomb anyone in there to hell."

Korwyn snorted. "I need history to tell me *that*?"



"Do they even use wheels on this godforsaken planet?"

"Of course," Ellison replied, and Korwyn thought she heard a note of offense in his voice.

"Not here."

Ellison shrugged. "Not on this exact spot. But trucks go back and forth from the factory all the time, the guards patrol in skimmers. You've seen the road, haven't you? And besides, for the most part the terrain's just rough, not impassable."

Pollard grunted. "It's hell, only cold." He glanced toward Ellison. "No offense."

"None taken. Please, feel free to continue insulting my home as you prepare to blow it to smithereens."

Korwyn reluctantly glanced up from her surveying. Ellison's voice was advancing beyond customary agitation. She might need to pay attention.

Pollard had turned to face Ellison directly, arms flapping like a descending vulture as he talked. "As I prepare to blow it to smithereens? Aren't you helping? Aren't we preparing to blow your planet to smithereens?"

Ellison didn't respond. Pollard turned to Korwyn. "How well was this guy vetted?"

"Normal process," she said, letting her mirrored eyeshades make her look steadier than she felt.

"Are we sure he's okay?"

"As sure as we are about anyone else we work with."

Ellison broke in. "You're here, on planet, with me. You're already in the middle of your job. Shouldn't you have worried about me being clear a while back?"

"Maybe. But if I want to worry about it now, I'm going to worry about it now," Pollard said with a regal air.

"You're doing it half-assed."

Pollard smiled, cocking his head to one side. "Really?"

"Thinking I might be a double agent because I like my home? Because I don't want a part of it blown up? How simplistic can you get?"

"It happens."

"It's not happening now. People far above you cleared me. I'm cleared. Say what you want to say."

"What I want to say is you're helping your home planet fall. To lose a battle for the first time ever. It's going to suffer, and that'll be your fault."

"My fault?"

"Your fault."

"Not the fault of the aeros dropping the bombs, the 'Mechs firing the lasers, the troopers throwing the grenades? Not the fault of the generals giving them their marching orders?" Ellison clipped his words, biting each one off sharply.

Pollard waved his right arm in broad circles. "This is what I've been telling you!" Breath rushed from his mouth in rapid puffs. "They're all secondary. What we do, right here, is the main thing. We say where to drop the bombs. We tell them when to pull the trigger. We're in charge."

"You feel pretty good about yourself, don't you?" Korwyn was relieved to hear a little bit of calm mockery return to Ellison's voice. His face, though, remained knotted.

Pollard shrugged. "I'm honest."

"He's an egotist," Korwyn said.

Pollard didn't so much as look at her. "She's new. She doesn't understand. When the regiment comes down..."

"Pollard!"

Pollard finally glanced at Korwyn, surprised at the vehemence in her voice. "What?"

"Battle plans are classified!"

"Yes. And?"

"That means not giving out information about the size of the force."

"What? Oh, all I said was 'regiment.' That doesn't mean there'll only be one, that just means there will be at least one and I don't think that's news to anyone."

"Still. You're talking too much. Information's going to slip out. And that's what you're saying is so important, right?"

Pollard grudgingly fell silent. For an hour, Korwyn listened to the wind carving into the rocks' hollow scars.



"You'll get a lot of people telling you that that point, the south pass, was where the sixth battle was won."

The landscape had gradually gotten Pollard talking again, first in grunts as he pointed to interesting coves or ledges, then in increasing detail as the ghosts he saw reminded him of story after story. Korwyn, at first glance, couldn't tell what made the south pass different from any of the other minor gaps leading into the valley. Same rocks. Same desolation. Same sensation of walking on an overgrown meteorite in airless space.

"No one's ever told me that," Ellison said. He reclined on the hood of the speeder, clearly ready to escort the visitors back to their shuttle. Being out in this barren valley under the endless mountain shadows was oppressive even for a native.

"I'm telling you, me, right now. I'm telling you that people say that. That's where the defenders, the Force of Last Resort, sprang their ambush, where the House Kurita troops were routed."

"Okay."

"No, not okay. It's not right. That's not where the battle was won, not really."

Conversation paused. Pollard looked back and forth from Korwyn to Ellison, his bushy eyebrows twitching. Korwyn ignored him. Ellison shifted, and the speeder groaned beneath him. Neither of them spoke.

"Let me tell you where it was won," Pollard finally said. "And where it was lost." He pointed to the sky. "It was lost up there." He pointed to the ground. "It was won right here."

"Right here? On this spot?" Ellison growled. "What the hell happened here?"

Pollard rolled his eyes. "Not *here* here. Not on this *spot*. This planet. On the ground. They won it here before a shot was fired. And the Combine lost it at the same time."

Ellison, at this point, knew where Pollard was trying to go. He rolled his eyes. "Planning," he said, hoping the cue might push the other man along a little bit faster.

"Yes. I've said it before, I'll say it again. Planning, *intelligence*, wins battles."

Ellison feigned astonishment. "Does that mean you're planning a battle?"

"Shut up," Pollard said, picking up steam. "The best MechWarrior in the world can't win a battle when the planning, when the information is bad. Can you imagine trying to land here without a detailed terrain map? Can you imagine not knowing where an ambush might be waiting and walking right into it? That's the sixth battle for you. The Combine troops never found out their enemy had increased their numbers, never knew where the additional troops were being positioned. So they lost. The Force of Last Resort knew where the Kuritans would be coming from, knew where to place their blows. So they won."

"These warriors, they get all the glory, but they do nothing! They push a few buttons, twiddle a few knobs, and suddenly they're the saviors of the galaxy! And us? We're nothing. No one knows our names. But planets rise or fall because of what we do."

"There's that healthy self-esteem again," Ellison said.

"Are you quite done?" Korwyn snapped at both of them, but mainly at Pollard.

Pollard's hand shot out like a wind-blown tree branch, jabbing toward Korwyn. "You're *doing* the job, and you don't even know how important it is! You're deciding the course of history, right here! Right now! Don't you feel the weight?"

"Yes! That's why I'm working instead of talking."

Pollard tilted his head, as if briefly considering whether Korwyn had a point. Then he spoke again. "The job lies in understanding the history, which is what I'm talking about. Understanding how those other fourteen armies failed."

"And you have that understanding?" Ellison asked.

"Yes!" Pollard yelled, his voice carrying far across the thin air. "Haven't you been *listening*? Look, take this spot right here. Tenth battle. Third Succession War. House Kurita running rampant all over, closing on the valley here, and Lyran reinforcements are half a planet away."

"Let me guess," Ellison said. "The Lyrans held them off."

Pollard's eyes flared, his arms waved, and he skittered on the rocks like a 'Mech with bad gyros. "Yes, yes, yes, but how? That's the question. Look, look, look, you have to look at the valley. Do you see it?"

Korwyn gave up trying to concentrate. Pollard was clearly too agitated. She placed her hands, covered in black gloves, on her hips.

"Yes, we see the valley," she said in the most soothing tones she could muster.

"Okay. So. You're close to getting into the valley, but you haven't broken through the final line yet. You know reinforcements are coming, and you have time to position yourself before they arrive. What do you do?"

"Seize the high ground," Ellison said in bored tones.

"Seize the... WHAT?" Pollard roared. "How do you think the reinforcements are getting here? Subway? They're coming from above! Seize the high ground and you're just waiting for the Lyrans to drop on your head."

"Didn't the Kuritan troops have their own air support?" Ellison asked, and Korwyn thought she heard a note of genuine interest in his voice.

"Yes, of course, but you still don't want your troops and 'Mechs sitting out in the open, waiting to draw fire," Pollard said.

"But you don't want to be low, waiting for the defenders to roll grenades down a hill at you," Ellison countered.

"Right. Which leaves you the middle. Especially if you can find some concealed ledges or shallow caves."

"So they go to the middle. So what?" Ellison rolled his right foot back and forth, rumbling over the speeder's front.

"So it takes time. You can't keep accurate charts of these crags—with the wind, rain, ice, avalanches, and all those other battles, the landscape's always changing. Every time you dig in, you have to explore the land anew."

"Which is why you're here."

"Which is why *she's* here," Pollard corrected, pointing at Korwyn. "I'm the big-picture man."

"Uh-huh."

"So the Combine knows the reinforcements are half a planet away, scrambling around their camp like dung beetles, and with the time it will take for them to get mobilized and cross the planet, they won't arrive for a good two days."

"I'm with you," Ellison said, though his closed eyes suggested he may have been lying.

"But word gets back to the Lyrans. They hear that the Combine thinks they have two days to dig in. So they don't pack. They dive into their ships and get moving double-time, or triple-time. They order up some supplies from near the plant—they'll meet the supplies near this valley, and re-up there, to replace everything they left behind."

Ellison made some noise between a grunt and a yawn.

"End result? They get here in 30 hours. The Combine's not ready—they didn't get any info on how the Lyrans were reacting. The Lyrans had intelligence, you see, and—"

"—the Combine didn't. We got it," Ellison said.

"Again, intelligence won the day."

Ellison shook his head. "You act like war is black and white, like you have information or you don't, and the people with more automatically win."

"That's exactly what I'm saying. It *is* black and white. No grey." Pollard, unaccountably, started giggling. "Well, maybe there'll be a little grey. Soon enough. We think."

"Pollard!"

Ellison sat up, suddenly interested. "What is he talking about?"

"Nothing!" Korwyn said, but Pollard was already talking.

"Shade of grey no one likes to see. Best guess is they might play a role in the battle."

"All right, *shut up!* God, how did you *ever* get security clearance?"

Pollard held up his hands placatingly. "All right, all right, I'm done."

"Honestly, for someone going on and on about the value of intelligence, you're pretty stupid."

Ellison chuckled at that, but Pollard's face drained of color.

"I don't believe anything I said stooped to the level of personal insult."

Korwyn bit back a stinging reply, took a deep breath, and did her best end the conversation. "You're right. I apologize. Let's finish up, okay?"

"Fine with me," Pollard said, and sulked in blessed silence for the remainder of the time on the planet.



Pollard hadn't talked enough to convince Korwyn, but he'd said enough to make her want to *believe* he was right. He presented an appealingly simple view of combat—the side with the best intelligence, the best information, wins. All the other elements—the mechanical breakdowns, human bravery and cowardice, the improvisation of a brilliant commander, the flounderings of a dullard—are taken out of the equation. Information wins, pure and simple.

She was in a DropShip high above Hesperus now, breathing cleaner, fresher air than any she'd encountered during planetfall. The endless hum of power and engines around her were a comfort after the distant howl of Hesperus' winds.

Her noteputer glowed softly, providing most of the illumination for the bare white square that served as both her desk and her private dining table. All the data was entered, everything was ready. It only needed to be sent.

If Pollard was right—he wasn't; she'd seen enough combat to know he wasn't—but if he was, she was about to win the fifteenth battle of Hesperus. She was going to make two transmissions. The first would go through official channels, a brief report on her survey attached to Pollard's strategic assessment. Then, simultaneously, she'd send a second transmission, burying a short burst of code in the mass of the larger transmission, hoping no one would notice it was flying off at a slightly different angle than the first transmission. This report would tell what she gleaned from Pollard's ramblings, what she could tell about his planning. She thought about attaching Ellison's name to it (or, to be more precise, his code name), but she didn't know enough about him to be sure a frame-up would stick. And she liked him for arguing with Pollard.

This was why she'd been placed here. A dozen long years among the rebels of Skye, waiting for this opportunity, and it finally came. The big one. The one that might make them finally pull her out. Or kill her. Either would be okay with her about now, as long as she was done.

Her second transmission would pass through a few hands until it was several steps removed from her. She hoped it could never be traced back—but even if it could, even if they rooted her out for what she was about to do, it needed to be sent. Trading herself for the possible salvation of Hesperus was a trade she'd make any day, any time.

The invasion would come. The defenders, if everything worked, would know at least a little about what was coming. They'd bend, Korwyn knew. There was no way they wouldn't, given what she knew about the oncoming force. But if Pollard was at all right, her information would keep the defenders from breaking, and they'd join the ghosts of fourteen other battles in keeping invaders away.

The End