

# **THE TOP OF THE SCRAP HEAP**

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The legs didn't look right. They were too thin, and the metal was clearly recycled. It hadn't even been properly melted down and remanufactured—instead, it looked like scrap metal had been chopped into pieces that just might fit on the leg and then welded into the appropriate spot.

"Did someone just weld scrap metal onto the legs?" Jacobs demanded.

Murphy threw the machine a sideways glance. "No. No, of course not."

Jacobs stepped closer so she could see the dents and pockmarks. "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely."

She moved away from the machine and shook her head. "They're not going to like this."

"Who?"

"Nobody!" she said. "Nobody who sees it is going to like it."

"Why not?" Murphy asked. "It moves. It shoots. It'll easily cut through regular infantry and it'll make quick work of most vehicles. It'll do what a 'Mech is supposed to do. What won't they like??"

Jacobs considered the machine again, with its three cockpit windows and its shoulder-mounted launchers. Her eyes kept falling to those woeful legs.

"Will it trip the minute it goes off-road?" she asked. "Will it break its legs when it goes into a run?"

"It's a 'Mech," Murphy insisted. "It will do what a 'Mech is supposed to do. It'll work better than it looks."

"It had better," Jacobs said.

## 18 September 2783

Alliance Defenders Limited was not part of the Outworlds Alliance military, but sometimes the generals liked to pretend it was. General Bashere had been paying particularly close attention to the progress of ADL's 'Mech project, so naturally he was on hand when the machine took its first steps.

"It looks wobbly," he said gruffly as the machine stepped gingerly across the rocky ground of the training area. "Is it wobbly?"

"Not especially, sir, no," Jacobs said, hoping she sounded believable. "The pilot just needs some time to become acclimated to the machine."

"Hmmm," Bashere said, and Jacobs thought he did not sound convinced. The general watched the *Locust* make its way across the field for a few more minutes.

"How comparable is this to an Inner Sphere *Locust*?" he finally asked.

"Very comparable," Jacobs said. "The armor might have a little more scrap on it than an Inner Sphere machine would have, but inside she's top of the line." She paused, then threw out her next remark like it was a throwaway observation. "Well, the targeting computer is different."

She hoped Bashere would simply let the comment slide. He didn't.

"How different?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Not very. It's primarily a software issue. I'm sure your aware of the difficulty in dealing with military software and the draconian measures nations take to keep it from being exported across international boundaries."

"I know the problems," Bashere said gruffly. "I want to know how well you overcame them."

"Quite well, quite well," Jacobs said brightly. "Through our people's ingenuity and a fair amount of reverse engineering, we have assembled a fine facsimile of Inner Sphere software."

"'Reverse engineering'?" Bashere asked. "We haven't captured any Inner Sphere 'Mechs. What are you reverse engineering from?"

Jacobs hesitated. "A 'Mech from some pirates. A sizeable group operating near the Federated Suns border."

"A *pirate* 'Mech?" Bashere exclaimed. "Good hell, Jacobs, we don't know *where* their machinery came from! We don't know what those people have done to it! And *that's* what we're basing our targeting system on?"

"Well, sir, in the end, I think you'll agree that it's a sensible thing to do. After all, the comm system and much of the firing controls are also based on pirate designs, so using the targeting software the pirates use is a good way to ensure that everything will ..."

"Firing and comm are pirate designs too?" Bashere shouted. "A minute ago you were telling me these were virtually Inner Sphere 'Mechs. Now you're telling me there mostly pirate machines?"

"No! No, no, far from it. There are also parts from the Tortuga Dominions."

"*The Tortuga Dominions!*" Bashere yelled. Jacobs efforts to calm him were having the opposite effect. "They *are* pirates! The only difference between the Tortugans and most pirates is the pirates have better tech! This so-called 'Mech might as well be held together with *chewing gum!*" Bashere threw the binoculars he was holding to the ground. They splintered while Jacobs reflexively jumped backward.

Then, somehow, Bashere got control of himself. His face lost its red color, his breathing evened. "Look, I know this isn't easy for you," he said. "I know the lack of government and popular support here makes your firm's progress difficult. The deck is stacked against you." He took a deep breath. "But we need better than this. This will not stand. I can give you six more months. If you cannot come up with something better than this—" he gestured contemptuously at the *Locust* "—I'll have to ask the Board of Directors to come up with someone who can.

He marched out. Jacobs thought about demonstrating the *Locust's* firepower by having it attack Bashere's motorcade, but then she decided the long-term effects of that decision would probably be unpleasant. Instead, she just watched him go.

## 19 September 2783

Jacobs glared at Murphy. "You're thinking about how well you'll get along with the new CEO, aren't you?"

"No!" Murphy said. "Of course not. I'm thinking about our problem."

"There's nothing to think about," Jacobs said. "We got our hands on the best materials that managed to leak into our godforsaken corner of the universe. It wasn't good enough. We're out of options. We can tinker with the *Locust* for six months, but in the end any improvements we make will not be enough. I'll be out of a job, and you'll be learning how to get along with a new boss."

"You're not sounding like yourself, chief. Where's the can-do spirit?"

"Facing reality," she said. "We wrestled with this project since I came on board, and in the end we came up with something that, between you and me, isn't as good as what most of the nearby pirates have." She shook her head. "It's what we get for playing by the rules. You can get tech a lot easier when you steal it."

"I suppose," Murphy said.

Jacobs drummed her fingers on her desk. She worked hard to keep her face expressionless, to do nothing to give any indication to Murphy of the idea that had just sprung, fully formed, into her head. It was simple. It was obvious. She couldn't understand why she hadn't thought of it before, why it wasn't the strategy she had pursued from the beginning.

Well, there was the chance of imprisonment or, if things went really downhill, execution. But what great business career progressed without some big risks?

**23 November 2783**

None of the business of this task could be conducted over comms, or in any of the places Jacobs normally found herself. She took a roundabout path to her destination, making a few false stops and starts before she finally arrived at a nondescript coffee shop on the city's west side. It had a brown awning, brown upholstery on the booths, brown tables, and brown floors. You could spill coffee practically anywhere and there would be a good chance no one would notice for days.

Jacobs tried to act normal even though her stomach was tied in knots. She could make decisions that would effect a large business and each of its hundreds of employees without a qualm, but this cloak-and-dagger stuff made her nervous. But if she wanted to keep making decisions at the head of her company, this was what she had to do.

"Irene!" a voice called out. A tall man in a long tan coat waved to her, sleeve flapping loosely. "Over here."

She responded to her code name with a smile and walked to the man's booth. "Hello, Jerry," she said, and exchanged a kiss on the cheek with him. "Thanks for meeting me here. Hungry?"

"Famished."

"Well, let's take a look at the menu and get some food."

She hadn't eaten in a coffee shop (or any restaurant without a decent wine list, for that matter) for years. That, plus the fact that she was wearing a green windbreaker from the back of her closet and had her hair in a pony tail, should go a long way to prevent her from being identified.

She and "Jerome" engaged in small talk for a few minutes as they waited for their food, then grew a little quieter as they took a few bites of their lunch. When they spoke again, Jacobs and Jerome made their voices quieter and quieter until they were ready to talk about the real purpose of their meeting.

"How did the initial contact go?" Jacobs asked.

"Perfect," Jerome said. "The information your military sources gave us was top notch—told us more about pirate gangs operating near Valasha than we'd been able to learn in years of recon. We narrowed it down to a few good candidates right off the bat



and looked for ways to make contact. A few of the bands had dissolved, or lost their leaders due to ... well, various circumstances, but we managed to make contact with representatives from two bands. The first one smelled something about the deal and decided to steer clear of us, but the second one couldn't resist the lure of the money we were waving in front of him."

Jacobs nodded. Most of the bait they had used was cash from her personal accounts—she had invested a lot in this project. "Is his band any good?" she asked.

"Quite good," Jerome said. "They've started venturing into the Fed Suns more and more, where the spoils are much better but the risk is higher. They've got the skills, and they're getting to know the territory."

"Good," Jacobs said. She'd much rather give money to a band that wasn't actively raiding her own country. "When will they start?"

"Well, we have them interested," Jerome said, "but they're not fully on the hook yet. Our man in charge of the negotiations—" for deniability reasons, Jacobs didn't know this man's name —"is still meeting the various representatives of the band."

"Has he met with the leader yet?"

"No. Pirate leaders are reclusive, as you might expect. But our man tells me he's meeting with decision-makers, so he's optimistic."

"All right," Jacobs said, nodding her head. "I think we're getting somewhere."

**11 January 2784**

She ran, instinct pushing her forward. Part of her knew it wasn't good instinct, wasn't *smart* instinct, but it was all she had right now.

She grasped the handrail of the stairs and used it to pull herself around a bend as she jumped, passing over half a dozen steps in mid-air before she landed smoothly and kept running down. She heard footsteps and voices above her, and was pretty sure she heard voices below her as well.

"Stairwell B!" one voice said from above, echoing down loud and clear. "She's in stairwell B. Put a team at the base and send them up."

Clearly she couldn't stay here any longer. Really, she had nowhere to go. Any security team worth their salt would have sealed all of the building's exits before they came after her, so she was bound to run into them sooner or later. But it would be fun to see how long she could avoid them.

Well, maybe "fun" wasn't the right word.

She exited the stairwell on the third floor and ran over to stairwell C, figuring she'd take that down to the second floor and look for a window to jump out of. But when she pulled the door of the stairway open, she saw three long muzzles pointed at her.

"Freeze right there!"

Her completely illogical instincts told her not to freeze. She pivoted, ran back down the hallway, only to encounter half a dozen more gun-toting police officers. Finally, her instincts decided that now would be an appropriate time to surrender.

"Emma Jacobs?" one of the police said. "You're under arrest on charges of treason, piracy, and conspiracy against the Alliance ..."



**8 April 2784**

"You're not making any sense!" Brinson pounded the table. The plastic creaked.

Jacobs shrugged. "Maybe not," she said. "But you don't need to understand what I'm doing. You just have to follow my directions."

There wasn't enough room in the small cell for Brinson to pace. He could cross the entire room in five steps, so walking back and forth across it would quickly make him dizzy. He had to content himself with standing in place while bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet.

"For two months you had me in panic mode!" he exclaimed. "Looking into what kind of bargains you might make, investigating the judge's background, checking out prison facilities, everything! You were panicked about *everything*! And now you tell me that there's nothing to worry about?"

Jacobs sat back in her chair. Her prison haircut showed off her grey roots, and she was dressed in an ungainly olive jumpsuit, but she had recovered the bearing and command she had displayed before her arrest.

"That's right," she said. "There's nothing to worry about. Really, there's not much for you to do. Just make sure any trial proceedings get pushed beyond May 5th. Then come back here on the 5th, because I may need you to cover some of the finer legal points."

"Finer legal points of *what*?"

"That's my concern. You just make sure you're here."

Brinson stared at her wordlessly, then started shoving his notepad back into his case as he prepared to leave.

"Maybe it's not too late to work on an insanity plea," he muttered as a guard escorted him away from the cell.

## 5 May 2784

Brinson was surprised to see Velma Crawford arriving at the prison doors the same time he did.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

Her eyes widened. "What do you mean? Don't you know?"

"Don't I know what?"

"I'm here to meet with Jacobs. About her copping a plea."

"What?"

"I was told the message came from you!"

"I haven't heard anything about a plea," Brinson said. "There's no plea."

"What do you mean, there's no plea? What kind of game are you playing?"

"I'm not playing anything! Jacobs hasn't said anything about a plea! She's been acting like she's going to beat this thing!"

"This makes *no* sense," Crawford said, but her words drowned out by the sound of a man yelling.

"Mr. Brinson!" the man said. "Ms. Crawford! Hello! Wait one moment, please?"

Brinson and Crawford exchanged glances.

"Do you know this person?" Crawford asked.

"No idea," he said.

The man buttoned his suit jacket as he slowed to a walk and approached the two attorneys. "Good morning! Thank you both for being here. My name is Caleb Murphy, I'm an associate of Emma Jacobs. She asked me to meet you here."

"She asked you to ..." Brinson said. "We're supposed to meet *her*. Not her *associate*."

"Yes, of course," Murphy said, taking no offense. "But if you wait a moment, you'll see why she asked you here."

"Wait?" Crawford asked. "For what? How long?"

At that moment, sirens and alarms erupted across the prison campus. Guards rushed to their stations, while two of them hurriedly pushed Crawford, Brinson, and Murphy inside the main building.

"The wait won't be long," Murphy said, speaking calmly even though he had to yell over the sound of the alarms.

The wait took exactly 17 minutes. Brinson and Crawford tried to pry more information out of Murphy, but the man had become closed mouthed. They also tried to get in to see Jacobs, only to be told repeatedly that the entire complex had been locked down. Then, at the 17-minute mark of their wait, a barrel-chested man holding a large sidearm strode to them.

"You three Brinson, Crawford, and Murphy?"

"Yes," Murphy said, while Brinson and Crawford exchanged glances.

"You're all coming with me."

He led them out a back door and into an armored vehicle. They drove outside the prison's perimeter, staying within 10 meters of the wall at all times. At the north side of the wall, the guard who had fetched them stopped the vehicle and pointed into the distance.

"Can you tell me what that is?"

Brinson squinted. There was something on the horizon, but he couldn't make it out. It gleamed in the morning sun.

"We have the pilot on the comm," the guard said. "He's asking for you. We've told him not to move but, between you and me, we don't have the firepower to enforce that."

As if on cue, the gleaming object shot into the air and flew toward them. It landed maybe two kilometers away from them then continued forward on the ground. Brinson could see it clearer as it approached. It was a generally humanoid shape, a triangle mounted atop two long legs with arms poking out of the broad top. One of the arms was holding an enormous gun, which was pointed at the vehicle Brinson was in. He didn't like the sight at all.

The vehicle's comm crackled to life. "Do you have Brinson and Crawford with you?"

Murphy, sitting next to the driver's seat, replied. "This is Murphy. Yeah, we've got them."

"Good," the voice at the other end of the comm said. "Listen carefully. What you are looking at is a *Stinger*. This particular one is a Federated Suns model, captured completely intact. It is the most powerful weapon in the entire Outworlds Alliance. By far. And it is the possession of Emma Jacobs. She may decide to reverse-engineer it and help us build more while also preserving as much of it as possible for service. She may decide to have it scrapped. Or she might scrap it after blowing up your vehicle and much of the prison behind you. It all depends on her mood."

Brinson smiled. He leaned back. He saw it now. It might take a bit, but he knew what was going to happen.

Crawford wasn't near as sanguine. "This is ridiculous! We're being *threatened*! By a machine Jacobs undoubtedly got through *piracy*, which is why she's in jail in the first place! Does she think this is going to *help* anything?"

"I'm not at liberty to say what my client thinks," Brinson said. "All I can do is reiterate what the mysterious pilot said—he is sitting in the cockpit of the most powerful weapon in the Outworlds Alliance. Machines like that don't appear here every day."

"She can do what she wants with it," Crawford fumed. "She can blow me to kingdom come, I don't care. She is not going to force her way out of jail like this! Justice is not to be trifled with like this!"

Crawford protested for a while longer. She protested while the guard took them back to the prison under the *Stinger's* watchful gaze. She protested until she was out of Brinson's earshot, and Brinson guessed she kept on protesting for the next three days, right up until the time Emma Jacobs was released and reinstated as the head of Allied Defenders Limited.