

JOURNAL OF A MECHWARRIOR

The Hysterical Adventures of Riana Klaue

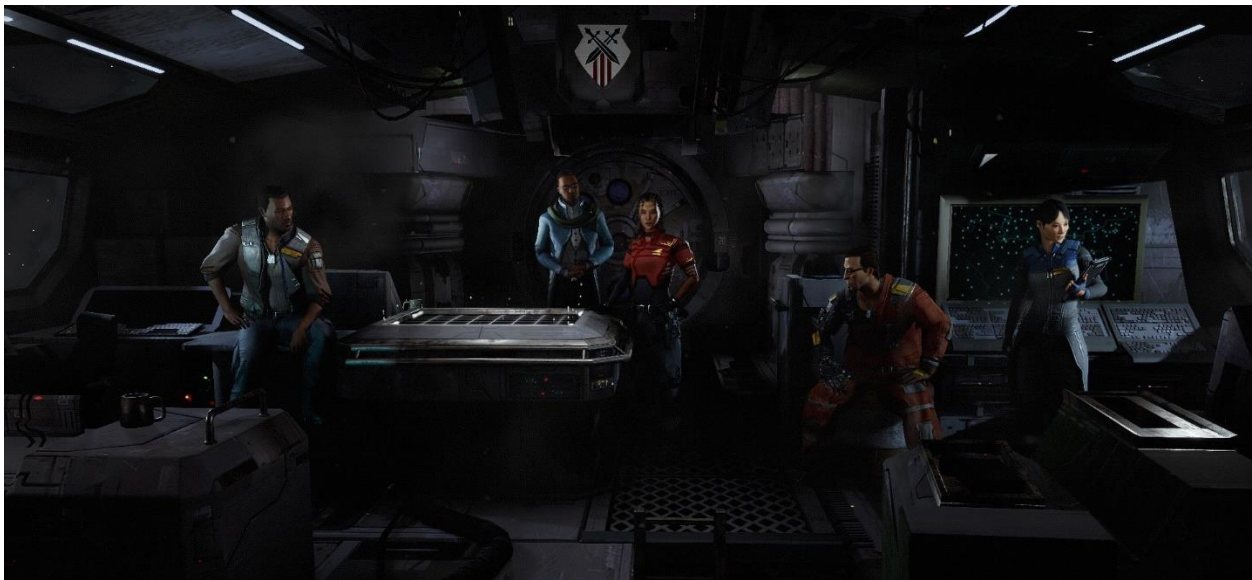
Part I

Failing my first campaign taught me a lot. My first character was Kenshiro "Secondlight" Uesugi, a noble (every character starts with this background) with roots in the Draconis Combine, a Japanese culture-dominated state known for its militarism. I had a pretty ideal start with him but I wasn't the leader of our little mercenary band for long before I bankrupted the company. I made a classic video gamer mistake: I tried to be perfectly prepared. Battletech isn't like that at all. Battletech is a game about living on the ragged edge, one step away from disaster, trying to make the best 'bad' decision you can to keep your company from the jaws of its creditors. It wasn't long before our dropship got repossessed and once that happens...

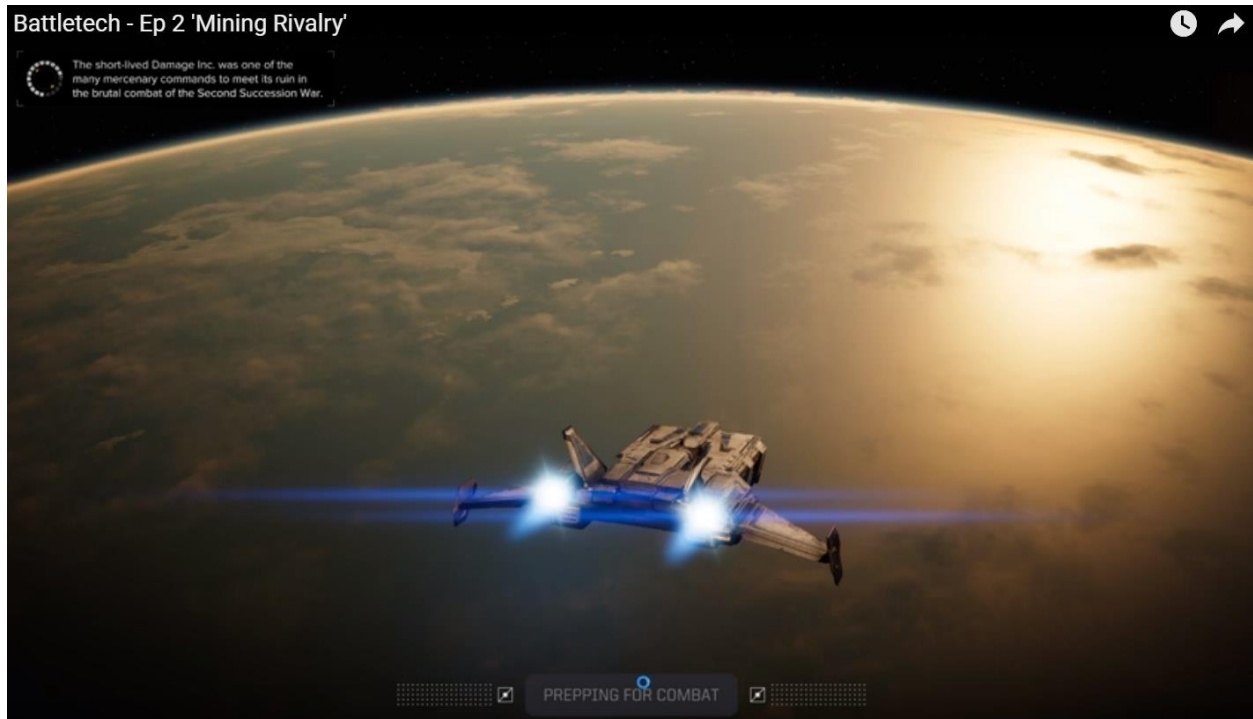


I restarted with Riana "Hysteria" Klaue. Riana grew up in the Rimward Periphery, an area of space rife with bandits and after her exile from her noble family that's what she became: a pirate. It was one of these pirate raids-gone-wrong when she was found by Raju "Mastiff" Montgomery, a veteran of the Third Succession War and former Master-at-Arms of House Klaue... Riana's trainer in her youth. He was working for the Royal House Arano in the Aurigan Coalition and that's where he brought her. After a "reformatory" period Riana was lifted to the Royal Guard, assigned to Lady Kamea Arano, heir to the Aurigan Coalition. When High Lord Tamati Arano passed Riana was tasked with escorting Lady Arano to her coronation. Of course this is when her uncle staged a coup. This *is* Battletech, after all, and it has been compared to Game of Thrones in space! The betrayal was pretty in depth; the enemy

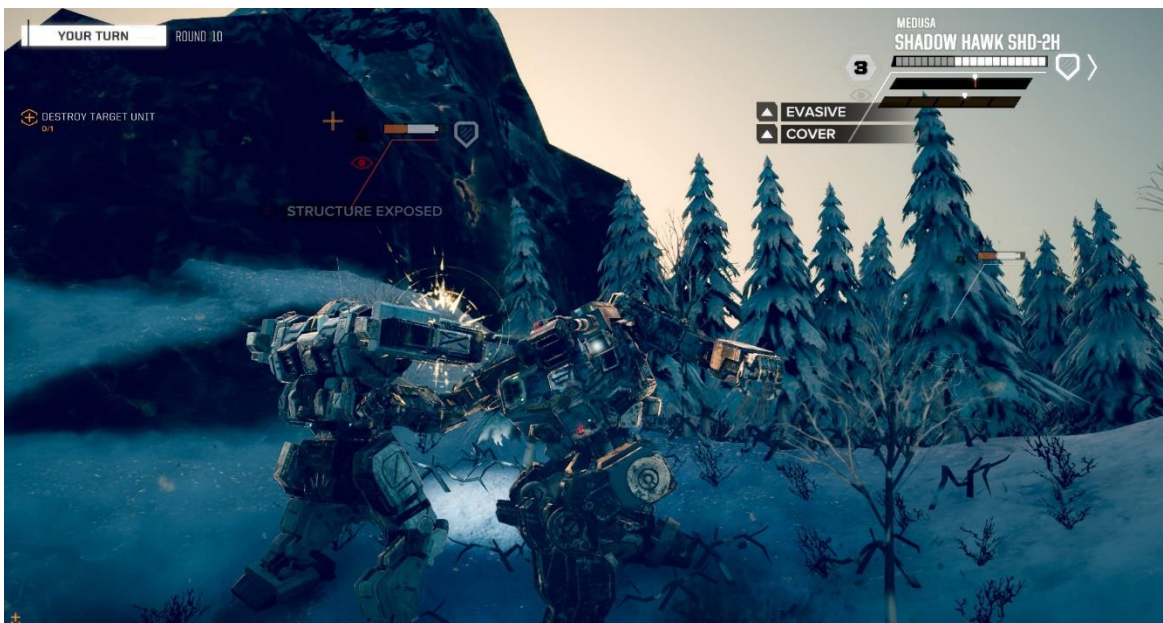
was entrenched within the Royal Guard and before long the mission became "help Lady Arano escape" with only Mastiff, Arano, and Hysteria herself battling their way to a dropship. Early in the engagement Mastiff's left arm got blown off his Centurion mech, forcing the most capable mechwarrior I had into a support role. Suddenly Hysteria's Blackjack was taking a *lot* of fire, being forced into the lead, but Lady Arano was a capable pilot herself and before long we managed to make it to the dropship. I should say that losing Mastiff as a lead warrior changed this inaugural battle *dramatically*. Whereas Secondlight had little trouble, Hysteria made it out by the skin of her teeth. Shit happened and before long Hysteria was forced to eject; her pilot compartment being launched into orbit to await recovery. Sadly things did not go according to plan. Hysteria was rescued by a band of mercenaries on retainer by House Arano but also suddenly found herself friendless and unemployed. 🙄



The mercs, Markham's Marauders, had recently lost their commander who was on the planet's surface when the coup took place. With no one really willing to step into place, and with Hysteria's noble background, it wasn't long before she was elected leader of the band. With this promotion I renamed the company to simply "Mjolnir" and the game skipped forward three years in time to what should have been a relatively simple mission: a group of miners had been forced out by another company and hired us to retake their mining platforms. All we had to do was hit the turret generator at Site A to disable the enemy turrets and then hit the security building at Site B, taking out any resistance we met along the way. Easy right?



Nope. It wasn't easy! Hysteria had an easier go of it than Secondlight did. As Uesugi this is really the mission where I lost... only I didn't realize it til later! The massive damage I suffered on this mission (due to a premature approach and a prolonged battle with said turrets) and the subsequent repairs are what would eventually bankrupt Secondlight. So with Hysteria I was *much* more cautious. Still things went awry, as things are wont to do. Hysteria's Blackjack was really the only mech to suffer serious damage but that damage was suffered to the *head*. The head being where the pilots compartment is! She soldiered through it and we finished the mission but Riana herself would be sidelined with injury... for **69 days**.



I had to assign a different pilot to Hysteria's Blackjack, which means my main character is going to miss out on a lot of this early game XP that should be building her up! However, I got pretty lucky with the next mission. There was a local contract so I didn't have to travel (Jumpships are expensive taxis that carry your dropship from system to system) and all I needed to do was fend off a band of pirates Seven Samurai-style from a local government military base. Also the planet was cold... very cold, which is good... *very* good for heat-intensive mechs. Basically whereas Secondlight dealt with a shit-ton of desert planets during his short tenure Hysteria's band got to go weapons-free on these pirates. I opted to let them come to me, posting up two long-range mechs on the base itself and hiding two in the thick tree cover as the unwitting enemy approached. With the first salvo I blew an arm off the pirate mech and destroyed one of their tanks. The rest was mopped up pretty easily, even though the pirates pulled off a successful pincer maneuver; coming up and over the mountains to the west of the base. I managed to use my light mech's jump jets to smash an enemy tank, willfully dealing damage to its legs, but that would be the only damage I took during the course of the mission.



Battletech tanks and ground vehicles in their original, tabletop form.

Then I got lucky again: another local contract on the same icy world escorting a government convoy and protecting them from an anticipated rebel assault. After dropping into an active combat scenario and fending off an enemy mech and several support vehicles handily the escort raced out to their rendezvous point with my Lance flanking them the whole way. The whole

mission went off flawlessly and I managed to get them to extraction before the enemy could even reach us. With success behind us now came the secondary part of the mission: did I want to go for more money by wiping out the late-coming rebel forces? Hell yes I did! I hid three mechs in forest cover and sent my sniper up a mountain as an enemy mech and 4 ground support vehicles attempted to set up an ambush on the other side of the mountain pass. It was a game of chicken; neither side willing to spring the trap. This suited me fine because it gave Glitch, my sniper, plenty of time to get into position. Then I tasked Medusa, piloting Hysteria's Blackjack, to act as a decoy; moving into full exposure. I picked a spot far from the pass and the enemy mech took the bait, coming around from the side and over a mountain to fire a Particle Projection Cannon (sniper) at my mech but the Blackjack's evasion (a combat condition affected by your movement) proved high enough to allow the messy shot to miss.

It was all timed *perfectly*. Immediately the Blackjack returned fire as both my Shadowhawk and Locust burst from cover. The enemy Centurion was suddenly missing an arm and most of its armor, the internal systems taking a beating as well. With three mechs exposed the enemy ground support raced into the pass... and into the waiting sights of my Vindicator sniper, waiting patiently atop the peaks. Within two rounds the enemy mech and three support vehicles were toast, leaving one rebel tank trying to flee up a mountainside at long range... but not long enough. What's the old adage about snipers? "If you run you'll only die tired?" Yeah, that's it. A flawless mission! No appreciable damage. On that mission alone, with the bonuses for wiping out the enemy, I made over 353 *thousand* C-Bills. That put my cash on hand, after just two independent missions, at over 1.2 million! (By contrast at this point poor Secondlight was struggling to make a 225k loan payment.)

At the point I'm at now we've just been offered a shadowy off-the-books mission. This was the mission that Secondlight was about to deploy on when the repo man came to collect his due, so I'm doing *loads* better. Hysteria still has a month on her recovery time but with travel to the new Jumpship and then to the new system she should be able to get back in action within a mission or two. I can definitely say this much: I *love* Battletech. The strategy, interpersonal interactions, and the GoT level drama between Great Houses all draws me in perfectly. With any luck I'll update this journal more. I hope you guys enjoy it.



Part II

"We are *already* in orbit around Bellerophon!" Darius protested.

"I know but the Detroit job has travel pay *included*!" Riana countered.

"So?"

"So does our mysterious benefactor on Bellerophon!"

"We are already *here* at Bellerophon!" Darius reiterated.

"Listen;" Riana had that piratical grin that spread across her face whenever she contemplated mischief, "if we let the client in Detroit pay our way there then Bellerophon will pay our way back! It's practically free money!"

Darius let his face fall into his hand. "Hysteria," he began, "that will add *weeks* to our meeting with the Bellerophon client! Who's to say the client will still even *be* here!?"

"She asked for Mjolnir by name, Darius," Riana shrugged, "she'll wait."

"She's Canopian elite!" the XO was beginning to get irate, "she isn't *used* to waiting! Besides, did you notice anything in particular about the Detroit job?"

"What?" Riana asked defensively, "Local government wants us to take down an enemy Lance that's doing exercises in its territory. It's a milk run... and it pays well! More than the Bellerophon meeting!"

"That 'enemy Lance' is Canopian!!" Oliveira shouted. "What if word gets back to her that she had to wait a month on us because we were in Detroit attacking a Magistracy Lance??"

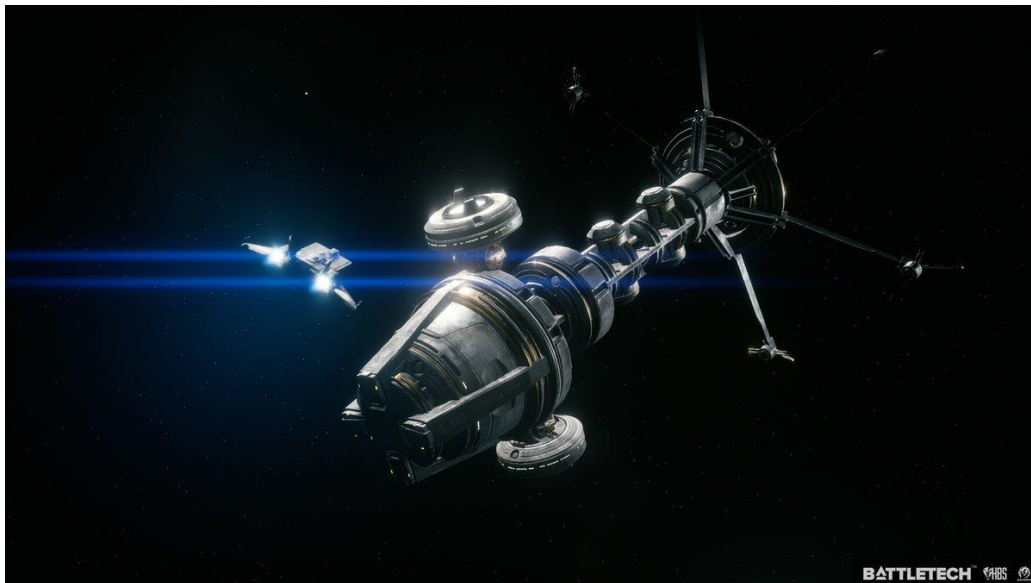
"Well, the Detroit job *still* pays more..."

At least that was the conversation in my head canon! But that's also what happened. The off-the-books job turned out to be on Bellerophon; the same icy world that my last two missions had been on. I was already in orbit. But when I checked the contracts there sat the job in Detroit. *Travel pay included* it said. The mystery client offered 33k for a meeting but Detroit offered a *base pay* of 187k. Add in bonuses and one job could offset the upcoming interest payments on our loans *and* payroll. Plus the Bellerophon job included travel expenses as well. There was simply no other alternative as I saw it. (Plus it helps that this is a video game and the story mission would wait as long as I wanted it to!)



A Leopard-class dropship with a Catapult Mech for scale.

So off we flew in our Leopard dropship for a rendezvous with the Jumpship to Detroit. It took about 5 days to get out to the jumpship and dock and it was another two days before the scheduled jump. During which time Yang, our mechanic, finished the repairs on the Spider light mech that Dekker had damaged when he decided to go all Super Mario on that Scorpion light assault vehicle in the "Seven Samurai" mission. That gave me a little time to look over the refit options before we got to Detroit. I really wanted to outfit the Locust light mech with a flamer unit but we were too far out to shop and besides; flamers cost 22k but if I could find one as salvage on the battlefield...



The Leopard approaching the Jumpship

The jump was instantaneous but it took another 5 days or so to reach Detroit orbit. I had decided by that time that there was really nothing to refit on the mechs themselves. I had plenty of leftover medium lasers, SRMS, and even a 3-ton long range laser but my tonnage was evened out nicely already. Besides, why rock the boat? The Lance was pulling off near-flawless missions (except for Dekker's antics) and this mission was a milk run anyway.



A PPC-armed Medium-class Centurion CN9-AL Mech in the colors of the 2nd Magistracy Highlanders

The local government was the client and they were chaffed due to military maneuvers being conducted in their sovereign territory by a single Lance belonging to the Magistracy of Canopus. The Magistracy is a matriarchal interstellar nation ruled by House Centrella. Typically seen as a progressive state where personal freedom extends so far that all consensual acts are legal. Detroit sat in the Victoria Commonality of the Rimward Periphery... belonging to the Capellan Confederation; the youngest of the successor states. With a heavy Russo-Chinese influences the authoritarian House Liao makes a perfect foil to the Canopian

central doctrines of freedom of expression so I suspect the Lance is here testing the waters... and creating ripples for a local government that wants no part of House Liao's inevitable response. So they need them gone... discreetly and with an air of plausible deniability.

Enter mercenaries.

The A.O. terrain could be classified as Highlands; dense forest cover and sharp topography consisting of hills and mountains. When we arrived the area was being buffeted by a sandstorm blown in from a neighboring region so visibility was low, making our approach undetected. Darius set a marker on the location of the Lance from orbit and Behemoth, Glitch, Dekker, and Medusa deployed in the same configuration as our first mission on Bellerophon, with Dekker back in his Spider. I, as Hysteria, still had 27 days to go in recovery so I supervised from the Leopard. The local government had an outpost directly ahead of us and the enemy Lance was somewhere in the forest beyond. First I used the Vindicator's jump jets to get Glitch into an elevated sniping position, sending Behemoth in the Shadowhawk and Medusa in my Blackjack into protective flanking positions on either side of the outpost. Dekker moved his Spider through the forest to approach the Lance and get a fix on their location.



Glitch's PPC-armed Medium-class Vindicator VND-1R mech (LRM-5 visible)

It didn't take long for them to pop up on sensors... or for us to pop up on theirs. The Lance was pathetic; a single Locust and three support vehicles. The light mech moved swiftly to engage Dekker only to catch a full blast from Glitch's Particle Projector Cannon (PPC) and a salvo of LRM-5 long range missiles. The attack was enough to knock the Locust off its feet with heavy damage, making it easy prey for the Spider's dual Medium Lasers. As the Galleon support vehicles came racing in they caught ballistic attacks from Medusa and Behemoth, weakening their armor, but they were supported by a Manticore heavy tank. That's when Dekker, the idiot, raced forward with a melee attack (to be fair, I did this, but you know... head canon) on the tank. He took it out in a single attack but the Galleon was now able to swing around him and attack his rear, punching through the weaker armor there to do internal system damage! The final Galleon fell to a single PPC strike from Glitch and Behemoth made short work of the offending enemy with her 3-ton laser cannon but here we were, at the end of the easiest mission to date, with *more* expensive Spider repairs!!! Thanks Dekker!



Dekker's Light-class Spider SDR-5V with jump jets engaged (The one he keeps breaking!)

Well, at least it will give Yang something to work on while we travel back to the jumpship for our rendezvous with our mysterious benefactor on Bellerophon!

Part III



By the time I got back to Bellerophon and my mysterious benefactor I pretty much knew what was going on. I had done a handful of *very* successful missions and I had developed strategies, based on what kind of mission I was engaging in, to limit damage to my Mechs or to my team. Destroy the base missions were some of my favorites. I could just post up somewhere far out of range and send Dekker in the Locust ahead just enough to get a Sensor Lock then unload mounds of LRMs (Long Range Missiles) until it was safe to approach. But I could also use variants of that strategy in Destroy the Enemy Lance missions or just about any mission where I was the aggressor. Escort missions or Defend missions were a little more complicated but nothing was really super dangerous for me except for Destroy the Convoy missions, which has an unpredictability to them that often led to costly repairs. Anyway, after following a job back to Bellerophon I finally decided to check out this Benefactor mission. Enter Lady Centrella, one of the ruling family members of the Magistracy of Canopus. Important woman, *rich* woman. She was offering an obscene amount of money for, basically, the impossible. Travel to a pirate-infested moon and get a 200-year-old derelict ship working again.



I was excited. This would be my first lunar terrain mission! The most hostile environment in the game, where heat dissipation was a major concern. I was feeling ready for the challenge, confident from my string of victories. I was ready... or so I thought. But before I tell you about that I should go back a little, into the game's story. If you're planning to play yourself beware: mild spoilers ahead. I say mild because even the pre-release materials contained these spoilers but, ultimately, it didn't really spoil anything for me. But to be fair not everyone immerses like I do! Anyway, here we go:

So I told you before that my 2nd character, Riana "Hysteria" Klaue, was an exiled noble who turned to piracy. Except for the noble part that's the path I chose: Exile and Pirate. I was still found by my old mentor, Sir Raju, and inducted into the House Arano Royal Guard.



That's Lady Kamea Arano; heir to the Aurigan Coalition who was deposed in a violent coup led by her uncle on her coronation day. I and Sir Raju were responsible for her that day but she was betrayed so thoroughly by her warmongering uncle that, in the days leading up to the coup, he had ordered maintenance on the Royal Guard's mechs in order to sabotage them. So in the battle to escape I managed to get her to her ship but my own Mech was shut down remotely, giving Riana just enough time to punch out and eject into orbit. I wasn't there when Sir Raju made his last stand, his cored-out Mech being found by my newfound mercenary allies later, but I was able to see the news footage from Coromodir of Lady Arano's dropship being shot out of the sky and exploding, Challenger-like, in the air. In my head canon Riana had gone from worthy, to pirate, to worthy, to worthless. So that's where I was in immersion when the game truly opened, 3 years after the deaths of Raju and Kamea when Riana was settling into her role as leader of the small mercenary company called Mjolnir.

Getting back to it, the environment of the moon was spectacular. That's the Argo, the derelict, sitting in the background. I was hoping for microgravity as well but I suppose it could be a large moon... still it was a fascinating place to battle in... and battle I did. The moon was the home and base of one Grim Sybil, a pirate lord with a nasty reputation. She had two radar emplacements that needed destroying before Sumire could bring in Lady Centrella's team of engineers to try and get the wreck off the ground. Those radar towers were guarded by batteries of turrets and numerous small tank and assault vehicles, as well as a few light Mechs. The heat restrictions were stifling so, in the process, I took a lot of damage.



Still the visuals were stunning. After a protracted battle I managed to take out the radar towers and move up to the Argo itself, standing guard while Centrella's marines and engineers moved into the Argo to clear out pirates and try to get the ship's reactor started again. It was during this time that Grim Sybil showed up in a *heavy* Mech along with 2 light Mechs, a medium Mech, and

3 or 4 support vehicles! I mentioned that I had already taken a pounding, right? I had Glitch in her Vindicator acting as my sniper and major damage dealer. Her spotter was Dekker in the Locust and together they formed the core of my typical strategy; Dekker would use the light Mech's maneuverability and speed to get a Sensor Lock and draw fire, allowing Glitch to take her shots. Protecting Dekker was Behemoth in her Shadowhawk. At 55 tons the Shadowhawk was a front line fighter; able to dish out and take mountains of damage. Typically, I used Hysteria's Blackjack to act as auxiliary fire but the BJ-1 was out for repairs so Hysteria was piloting a Firestarter; a light Mech with an emphasis on Flamers, which were very useful in this environment. But my normal strategy wouldn't work here... we were in a crater; essentially backed into a corner by Sybil and her pirates. It was a long, drawn out fight. Glitch took a *ton* of damage, to the point that her Vindicator's leg was totally immobile; she could barely move. The Firestarter was trashed too, still mobile but with so much damage that I ended up scrapping it. The Vindicator should have been scrapped as well but I opted to pay over 100k in repairs because of how central to my usual strategy the sniper Mech had become. In the end however, and by the skin of our teeth, we were successful.

Seeing the Argo rise was a moment of joy for me. Not just because the mission was complete and we were about to get a 1.5 million payday, but because I knew (because of those minor spoilers) that we would eventually get the Argo as a dropship, expanding my Mechbay and crew space and hopefully getting us out from under the crushing loan payments of the Leopard! In all that excitement I had forgotten the *other* minor spoiler. As our crew entered the Argo to meet with the holographic image of Lady Centrella again she introduced us to our *true* employer...



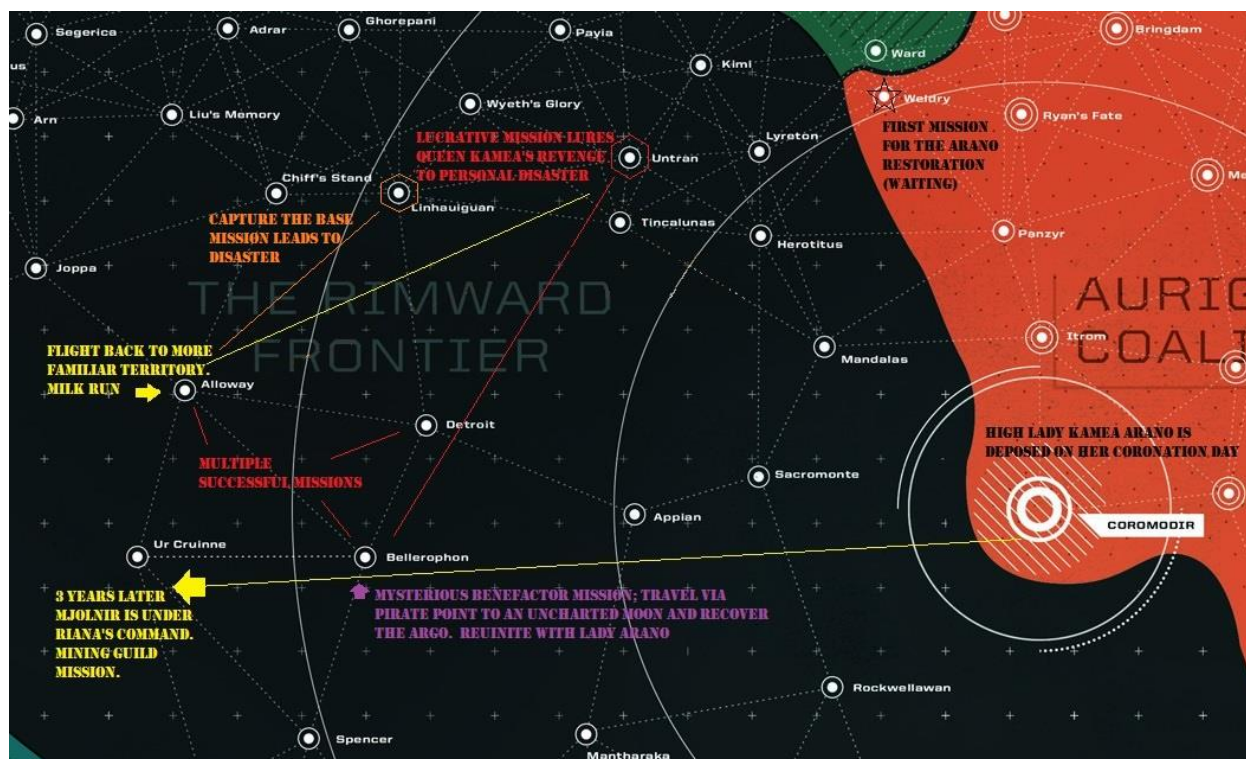
She was *alive*! I had totally forgotten. Harebrained Schemes had foolishly let this moment be spoiled a long time ago in the pre-game materials but, since I had forgotten, the moment still had power for me. Riana wasn't worthless anymore and, what's more, I didn't even have to be a mercenary. Well, at least I didn't have to act like one. I pledged my company to her cause, the Arano Restoration, and renamed the company from Mjolnir to Queen Kamea's Revenge. In return Lady Arano bought all of our debt; releasing us from our travel restrictions. We could now go to more than three systems to take jobs!

For now, at least, High Lady Arano is taking the Argo and going her own way, leaving me to my own devices for a while. I took a few shady missions with high paydays, including a couple working for the unsavory House Liao (The Capellan Confederation; the Sino-Soviets) doing such questionable things as helping them kidnap scientists! But now the first mission from Lady Arano has appeared: opening hostilities against her uncle's Aurigan Directorate. It seems like the Canopians are more than happy to bankroll Lady Arano's restoration because her authoritarian uncle is inflaming tensions between the Federated Suns and the Free Worlds League.. and nobody wants another system wide war.

Well...



Part IV



Disaster struck Queen Kamea's Revenge. Enticed to Untran via a combination of overconfidence and the powerful lure of money I accepted a contract to intercept and destroy a convoy, which happens to be my least favorite mission. The money was too good to pass up, or so I thought, so even though most of my Mechs was undergoing massive repairs I set off for Untran. When I arrived I only had three working Mechs, the rest still undergoing major repairs from the battle on the pirate moon against Grim Sybil. I had two options: First, I could wait about a month in orbit. That would give me the time needed to field a full Lance but if I did that I would end up having to make payroll for a month with zero income. Option two was riskier; take on my most difficult mission to date on a mission type I was not fond of with only three Mechs and no sniper... so a stand up fight where I was outnumbered.

I chose poorly and I paid a heavy price.

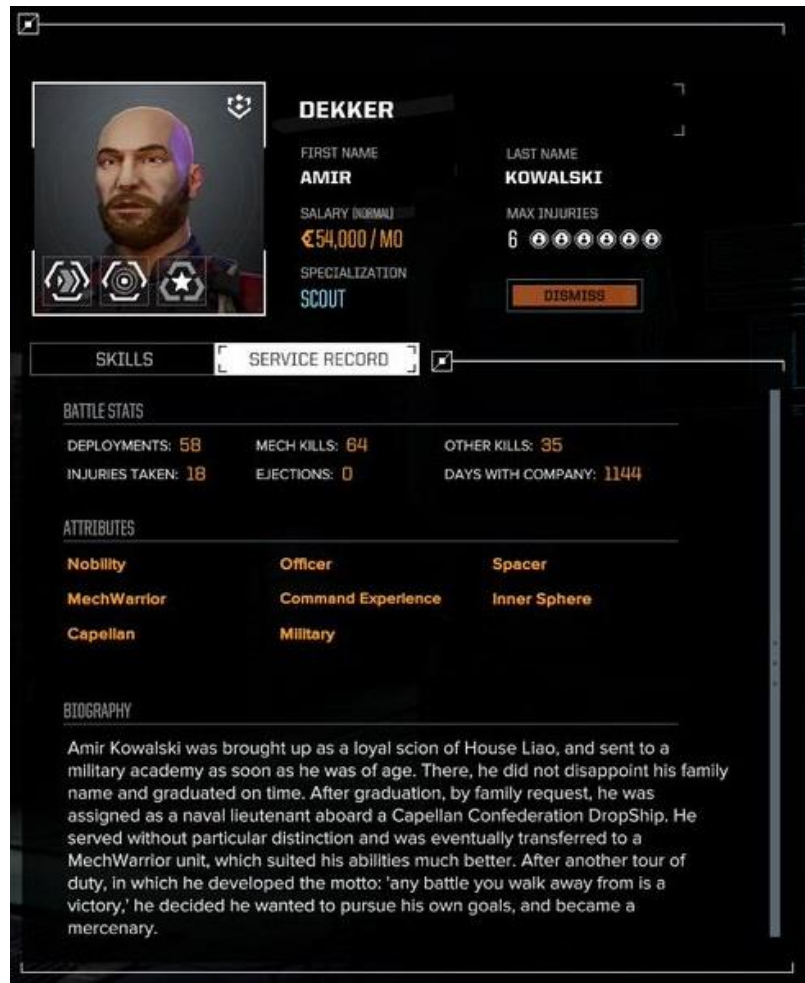
I *told* myself that if things went sideways I would bug out. I knew I was outnumbered and my enemy would be well equipped and in good repair. But when I landed on Untran, a Martian environment with cover-granting dust storms *at night* I thought to myself "I can handle this." My confidence brimmed as I blew an arm off of an enemy Firestarter. Dekker, piloting Behemoth's Shadowhawk, had nailed a called shot on the opening salvo. Hysteria, hiding in a dust storm, also landed solid hits with her Blackjack. I had posted Behemoth farther back on the battlefield, hiding behind cover in the massive Centurion. Insurance if the convoy sped past us. When the enemy Spider rushed up I wasn't concerned; the Firestarter was all but trashed and

the convoy was just pulling into view. They all targeted Dekker with medium lasers but the Shadowhawk was a beast of a Mech, designed to take a ton of damage. We ignored the convoy even as a salvo of LRMs came in from behind the hill: other enemies yet to appear.

When the enemy Cicada appeared at the top of the hill I was concerned; I had never seen one of these before, but the Firestarter and the Spider were both dead and the convoy was in range so I had Hysteria unload on it and I scored some pretty significant hits, so I wasn't too concerned. But then the Cicada hit Hysteria Center Torso (CT) with a large laser and *destroyed* the CT. A Mech cannot operate with a destroyed CT, the whole thing collapses. Hysteria was incapacitated. Normally this means the pilot's life is in danger, but with Hysteria being my main character I knew she *couldn't* die. Realistically this right here counted as 'things going sideways.' A freak lucky shot that took out one of my three Mechs *should* have caused me to call for an extraction. I had killed at least one enemy, it would count as a *Good Faith Withdrawal* so my reputation would not take a hit and I would get part of my pay. In hindsight it would have saved me a *lot*.

That is not what I did.

Instead I tasked Dekker with stomping the convoy and moved Behemoth up in the Centurion, focusing fire on the Cicada even as an enemy Shadowhawk rounded the corner. Together, fighting back to back, Dekker and Behemoth took out most of the convoy and the Cicada and were just *killing* the Shadowhawk. Things looked okay, even though Dekker's Shadowhawk had taken a lot of damage. I sent Behemoth after the last vehicle in the convoy and had Dekker attempt a melee strike against the enemy Shadowhawk. I *should* have had Behemoth, the better pilot and better at hand-to-hand, who was also in the *bigger Mech* attempt the melee strike. The enemy still stood. 'No matter,' I thought, 'I can double team him next round.' The enemy fired his jump jets and brought all 55 *tons* down on Dekker's Shadowhawk. It's a risky move, it causes damage to the Mech pulling this tactic, but it *destroyed* my Shadowhawk. Behemoth brought the enemy down the next round and we got full pay but Dekker... was dead.



There's a [Reddit page](#) for people to tell stories about how Dekker died. Goodness knows in my head canon he and Riana had disputes often. I liked to blame Dekker for my impatience but, in his role as Glitch's spotter, he had really grown... and I had grown fond of him. When we recovered his Mech every part except for the head had been completely destroyed: both legs, both arms, both shoulders, and the center torso. With the head intact that means that Dekker died from exposure to the cold, unbreathable atmosphere of Untran. So basically the worst way possible.

This was sobering to say the least. I had felt a little invincible until now; like maybe I could keep everyone alive, despite how frequent Mechwarrior deaths are supposed to be. I tucked tail and ran... all the way back to Alloway. My prized Shadowhawk, a bonus for being a backer on Kickstarter, was trashed. I scrapped it for over 400k C-Bills, in an effort to soak up some of the monetary damage I had suffered. The Centurion? Missing an arm and a shoulder: 200k in repairs. The Blackjack? Nearly 100k. Hysteria was now out of the fight for 109 days, I had no working Mechs except for a Locust Light Mech, and money was hemorrhaging. Oh and Dekker was dead. I spent some time in orbit around Alloway, long enough to bring a Commando Light Mech out of storage and finish repairs on the Vindicator sniper, and then I sent Big Sly, Glitch, and Medusa on a milk run attack-the-base mission. It went off well and I was hoping for more milk runs back in my more familiar part of space but alas... there was none.

There *was* a mission on Tincalunas: it was a "capture the base" mission. Sounded easy. The Commando was a sniper as well so if the Locust spotted I could rain death from afar. My Centurion was mostly repaired. I could field a full Lance. No risk right? Never mind the difficulty rating being equal to the ill-fated mission on Untran, *this* mission would be an easy payday.

I was supposed to occupy an empty base and hold it. The enemy was only three Mechs; a Vindicator and two Shadowhawks. Everything sounded good; with a little luck I could recover enough scrap to make a new Shadowhawk! Some early solid hits on the Vindicator led me to feel pretty confident... until that armless, refuse-to-die Vindicator kicked the CT out of my Locust. Big Sly wasn't my favorite Mechwarrior, he was a backer on Kickstarter who paid 1000 dollars to get his likeness in the game. His voice was a little annoying, even when he said the endearing phrase "I'm your spaniel" when you gave him commands. I was now facing the very likely possibility that he was also dead.

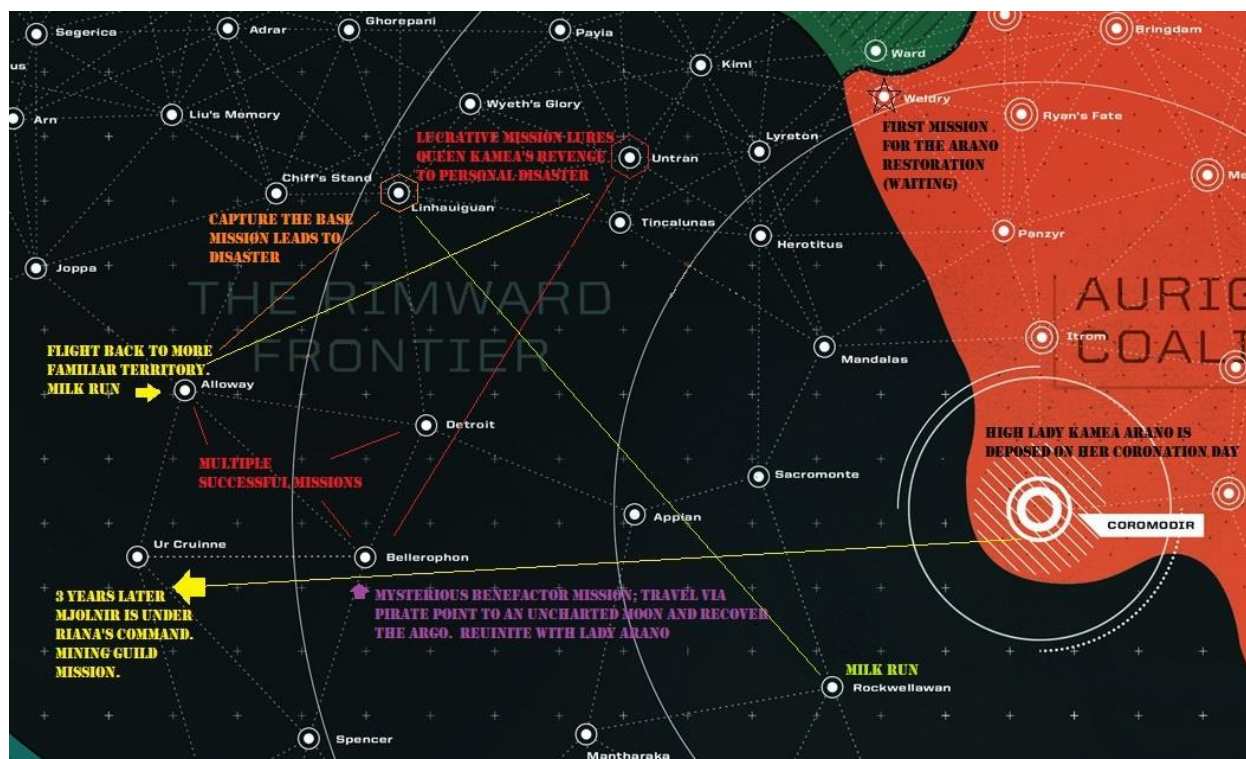
The two Shadowhawks were nearly undamaged and that stupid Vindicator just refused to die. My two snipers waged a guerrilla campaign, splitting up and trying to target both the Vindicator (WHY WON'T YOU DIE???) and at least one Shadowhawk at the same time. This would be another example of things going sideways, but I needed *someone* to die so I could get a Good Faith Withdrawal. Believe it or not that first death would be a Shadowhawk. By the time he fell his partner Shadowhawk was also heavily damaged, thanks mostly to Behemoth in her damaged Centurion, punching it to death. Then that god damn Vindicator came up from behind and *kicked the CT* out of my Centurion.

When Behemoth fell something snapped inside me. How *dare* these Capellan ass wipes kill *two* of my Mechwarriors!?? I raged, I sniped, and finally I prevailed; taking out first that goddamned Vindicator and then finally the other Shadowhawk. In the end that mission cost the life of Behemoth, took Big Sly out for 109 days (thank God I didn't lose two,) and left the Commando and the Centurion out of commission for the next month or more.



So that's me... out on the raggedy edge. I'm holding together my crew with duct tape and bailing wire; bleeding money with no Mechs, no pilots, and no milk runs in sight. I took on a new pilot; a guy with a thick Eastern European accent callsign Vamp. He may not know what he's getting in to.

Part V



As I sat in orbit around Linhauguan, taking stock of all the damage, I realized it was worse than I thought. My repair schedule was sitting at 47 days and even though I had four auxiliary Mechs ready to go they were mostly Light Class and I was down one pilot. I had just hired Vamp, a straight Rookie with no outstanding features, but I was forced to go back to the Hiring Hall and recruit Panda. They could have been carbon copies, statistically, they all could, but I chose Panda because of her Periphery background: she grew up in the same region as Riana so I figured in a straight popularity contest she would choose someone she could identify with.

I spent over a month in orbit, repairing Mechs critical to the mission at hand; hunting down an injured, but experienced Lance. The pay was good, and would offset my wasted month with a little left over. I had Glitch and her Vindicator and a brand new Shadowhawk I had managed to slap together from parts. I put Vamp in that. Panda got to pilot the Blackjack which left Medusa in a Commando Light Class Mech. The latter was literally nothing more than a long range missile platform; I had sacrificed armor and guns to load it to the gills with missiles and my plan was to have Medusa hide far behind enemy lines and just use Sensor Lock and rain death from afar.

The terrain was remarkable for the imposing feature of Mt. Everest. Seriously this mountain was HUGE and it stood between us and our prey... or possibly predators considering how things had gone recently. The Blackjack was not outfitted for ranged combat... at all. Boasting an impressive array of Short Range Missiles (SRMs,) Medium and Large Lasers, and even a Browning machine gun it could lob *nothing* over that mountain. The Commando, of course ran ahead to scout but the path up the mountain was steep and long. The new Shadowhawk featured

the same load out as the one I scrapped so it, at least, had Long Range Missiles (LRMs) and Glitch's Vindicator had both LRMs and the trusty PPC sniper canon. By the time the Commando neared the top the enemy appeared on long range sensors... which meant they saw us as well. Medusa established a Sensor Lock which allowed Vamp to fire the Shadowhawk's LRMs but both he and Panda were still pretty far from the top, and it would take a few rounds to get there. Glitch fired her Jump Jets and reached the top, enabling her to target the first enemy ... a heavy class Jagermech.



The Jagermech

Looking like a bad guy from a Godzilla film, the Jagermech was massive... but damaged. Glitch let loose with everything she could; a called shot to a vulnerable shoulder area, and scored a critical hit! The Jagermech's left arm fell away, taking with it the armament there, but now an enemy Jenner moved into view. The Jenner JR7-D is a fast cavalry striker; a heavily-armed bastard cousin to the Locust. They tend to carry a lot of energy weapons and run hot, but we

were in a Polar environment. It unloaded what it could on Glitch even as a third enemy appeared on long range sensors.

Medusa had switched from Sensor support to firing all missiles at the Jagermech. In fact, the heavy Mech drew all of my fire even as the enemy focused on dismantling Glitch's Vindicator. Panda, in the Blackjack, was still trying to get to the summit, sprinting to try and appear as a distraction lest the enemy tear apart my valuable sniper. Glitch relocated to a forested ridge near the extreme summit, granting her a little cover from enemy fire while increasing her to-hit bonus for height advantage, but the Jenner D was bearing down on her; with every closing meter able to fire more lasers. Finally, Panda reached the top, the enemy Jenner coming into her sights, and she let loose an impressive full barrage that tore apart the Jenner's left side; blasting off some of the laser cannons there. Just then the final enemy, a GRF-1N Griffin, came into range.



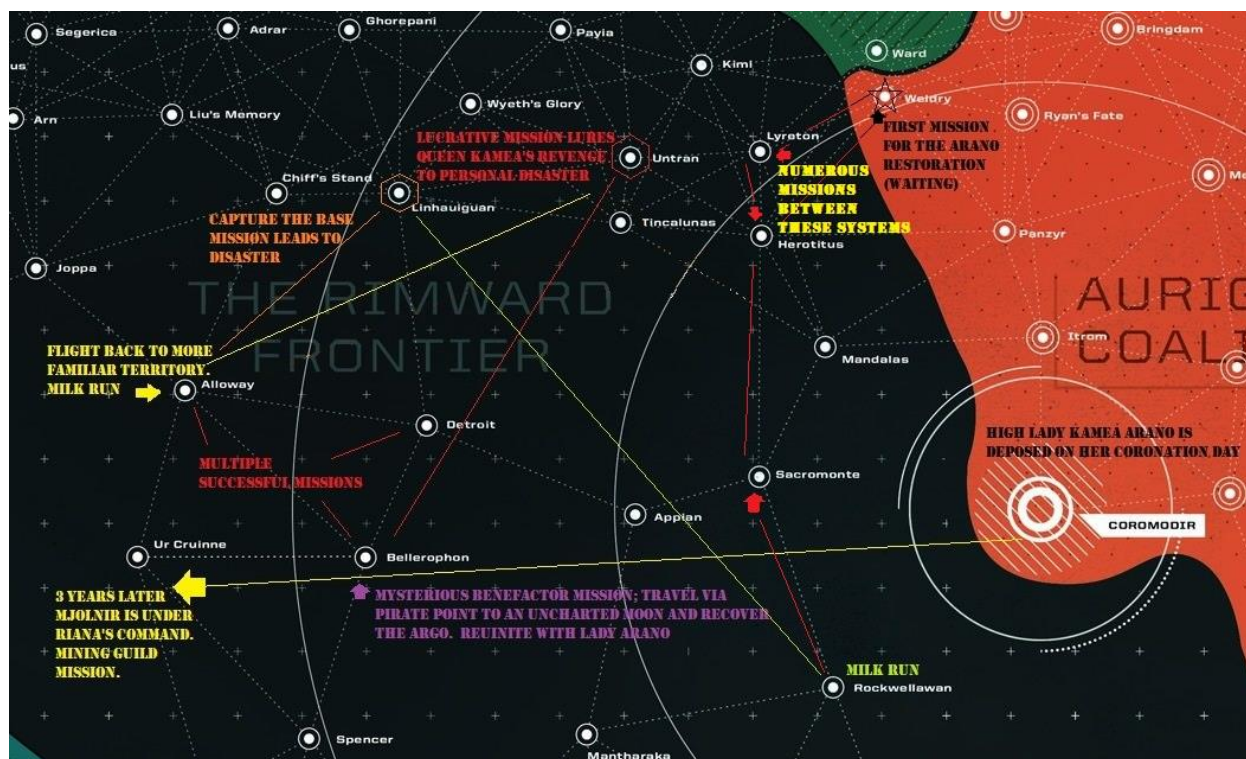
The Griffin Sniper and Fire Support Medium Class Mech

The Griffin presented a pretty sizable threat; armed with a PPC and a huge battery of missiles I knew I couldn't leave Glitch in the open any more. I risked one more attack, a called shot to the Griffin's PPC cannon. It hit and diminished its capacity for damage, but failed to destroy it. At the same time Vamp crested the summit and opened up on the Jagermech, blowing off its other arm. The heavy Mech was shredded and largely harmless at range but it started moving forward threateningly; a melee attack from this monstrosity would be devastating. Still, though, Panda kept the Jenner D in her sights, advancing and unleashing another full barrage that melted armor and tore into critical systems. The Jenner wouldn't be able to ignore her for long. While Medusa continued his largely ineffectual missile barrages Glitch fired her jump jets and fled behind the cover of the mountain, firing her LRM's at the Griffin from the mountain path, but back at the summit Panda rushed the damaged Jenner and kicked the CT out of it, taking down the first enemy. Both Vamp and Medusa turned their fire on the Griffin, ignoring the handicapped Jagermech for the time being. As the heavy Mech approached all units concentrated fire on the Griffin, but it was Panda with a flanking maneuver that landed the deadly salvo, unleashing all weapons at close range. However now the Jagermech was getting close. Luckily Vamp got the initiative and with a mighty punch dropped the monster in its tracks. There were more repairs than I would have liked to the Vindicator, but overall we came through that mission with flying colors. Still though, we were hurting and I needed a milk run. I paid 150,000 C-Bills for transport to the distant, wealthy planet of Rockwellawan.



Sure enough I found one, a simple Destroy the Base mission, and as a bonus Hysteria was now back in action. I ordered a complete retrofit of my devastated Centurion, being forced to replace an arm, CT, shoulder, and both legs. It was expensive; nearly 300k in repairs. To help balance it out I sold the Commando. I took to the planet with the Vindicator, a brand new Jenner I put together from parts, Hysteria in her Blackjack, and Panda driving the Panther Light Mech as an auxiliary sniper. There wasn't much to say about this mission other than it was the first repeated map I've seen in quite a bit of play time, which is impressive. Total milk run, no damage at all. I've still got over a month to go on the Centurion retrofit so I've accepted what looks to be another easy job on Sacromonte. With a few more of these under my belt I'll finally feel ready to hit Weldry and open hostilities against the Aurigan Directorate.

Part VI



Steadily I have been getting better at this. Before missions with a Difficulty Rating of two or higher were invitations to death and bankruptcy, now they are manageable. My trip to Sacromonte was not worth mention; another milk run, but when I picked up a job on Herotitus from the local government to eliminate some House Liao holdouts from a previous war I knew I would be in for a fight. It was a full Lance of experienced vets in well-maintained Mechs. Apparently they had not gotten the message that their war was over and continued to harass shipping in the area. I took Glitch and her Vindicator, Big Sly in the Centurion, Medusa in the Jenner, and Hysteria piloted her Blackjack. This was a stand-up drag-out fight and I gave heavy consideration to withdrawing, but I toughed it out. The price was pretty high though; Hysteria all but sacrificed herself to give her team the chance to take these guys out; and the cost was a totally ruined Blackjack and another 70 days out of action. Glitch's Vindicator lost its legs too after a Jump Jet attack of desperation. With heavy damage to the Jenner and Centurion as well I wound up taking numerous missions between Herotitus, Weldry, and Lyreton; basically any low difficulty missions I could find; most of which were ironically for House Liao.



The Cappellan Confederation, as I have mentioned in this journal before, is a Sino-Russo socialist state ruled by a single autocrat traditionally from House Liao. They are noted for their Soviet-style "win at any cost" attitude and do not shy away from overt illegal acts to further their interests... with deniable assets, of course, which is what my company is. I never really meant to get in bed with the Space Soviets, but they tend to offer plentiful good-paying jobs in this region of space so, despite my intentions, I was soon pretty well respected by House Liao. Among my many exploits I have stolen payroll, abducted scientists, even protected a pirate leader who had turned herself in to Cappellan authorities against a populace howling for vengeance in the form of a lynching. Interspersed with these missions I have also worked with the governments that the Confederation oppresses to take out Cappellan assets. Hey, I don't discriminate; if you have the money I can bring the pain.

About the second mission I had on Herotitus Panda had straight up missed a total of 4 PPC shots with inexplicably high percentages to hit. I casually dumped her ass at the Hiring Hall and picked up this guy. Call sign Jester, he is another of the Kickstarter backers who laid down a thousand dollars to get their likeness in the game. Jeremiah Bloodstone aspires to have his own mercenary company one day, as his father did, but first he seeks experience at the merc life. So far he's proven to be a great pilot at the Jenner D. It has led to strife between him and Medusa in my head canon, as both are capable scouts and I swap them up often.

Somewhere along the way I realized that the Level 2 missions were becoming milk runs for me. The missions themselves weren't getting easier, but I was starting to get better at tactics like obscuring line of sight by hiding Mechs behind terrain, opting to take missile shots from cover instead of exposing myself to danger for a direct attack, and most importantly I've learned to right click enemy Mechs to note *where* on the Mech they are carrying their ammo and then targeting it with a called shot. This last one, alone, has led to some extraordinary success stories, taking out even Medium Class Mechs in a single, strategic shot when their ammo supply of SRMs explodes and take out the Center Torso at the same time! I've also started targeting enemy legs at every opportunity; there's often less armor there and even if I can't follow the attack up right away a good leg strike often causes the Mech to fall, scrapping his upcoming turn and crippling his mobility. The Called Shot ability, earned with Morale on the field, has really become a saving grace. Enemy tearing stuff up with a PPC? Simply target it with a Called Shot and all he'll have left to throw at you is harsh language.



In the midst of these missions I noticed one from the Arano Restoration. I've been avoiding the story mission to open hostilities against House Espinoza and their Aurigan Directorate; I just wanted to get a little more comfortable with the flow of battles so that I didn't have such monstrous repair bills! But this mission was to take out a Directorate Communications Installation in advance of future important missions. In my head canon it was perfect; this would be my final mission before the story mission.

The A.O. was Badlands, not optimal for heat dispersion, but luckily there was a large body of water approaching the Com center. A Directorate Locust spotted us earlier than I would have liked but a Called Shot from Medusa's PPC in the Panther directly to his SRM ammo blasted his CT in a single hit. Reinforcements rushed forward but a second Locust met the same fate from Glitch's PPC! The combination of Hysteria in the Shadowhawk and Vamp in the Centurion was too much for the two light vehicles and remaining Commando. The Directorate's forces were gone and only the base and its turrets remained. This mission was turning into a milk run. I got Glitch in an elevated position and advanced my other forces, using Medusa to Sensor Lock the turrets and hit them from afar. This was made especially easy with the Centurion's newest weapon, an AC/20++ Kali Yama (An upgraded version of the best Auto Cannon; think ballistic sniper cannon) which could just about one shot every turret in range. Just then the Directorate landed reinforcements right behind Glitch.

I've built Glitch's Vindicator as an extreme long range sniper. Rarely does she engage directly with enemies and almost never do they get behind her. Many of my Mechs I've increased armor on; hell the Centurion only has two weapons on it, the rest is armor and bad intentions! But not the rear of the Vindicator, so suddenly having a Locust and five light vehicles behind her was a bit of a problem. In the past I might have swiveled her around, especially since my other units were so far ahead of Glitch and not able to respond directly. But after their opening salvo opened her armor and hit critical systems inside I chose to fire her Jump Jets and run, relocating her behind terrain to prevent any more direct fire. Then, instead of making an attack with her missiles against an enemy she could see I chose to Sensor Lock the Locust. The allowed the rest of my Lance to make attacks that knocked it out of commission before it even got the chance to move again. The vehicles were mopped up pretty easily once Hysteria and Vamp got into position and the base went down easily after that. All in all, aside from from Left Torso damage, the whole thing was a milk run.

"Restoration Actual to Revenge, come in. The signal just went dark. Report. "

"Revenge. Target eliminated."

"Casualties?"

"Negative. Minor repairs. Should be all green within a week."

"Good work, Hysteria. This is it - our first strike against my uncle's Directorate. Our first step toward justice. While I lead the Restoration Army against Weldry's primary spaceport, you will launch a sneak attack against the Icebox and liberate it. I know that you can do this, Commander. We can do this. Together."

"Revenge is yours, my Lady. Our time has come."

Part VII



"Weldry," Lord Madeira began, "one of the most notorious hellholes in the Aurigan Reach. Everything about this place is hostile to human life, and for the past four years Espinosa has used it as a dumping ground for his political enemies."

Beside him Lady Arano looked uncomfortable, looking down and away as she added: "The Directorate has a prison complex on the planet's surface. The inmates call it the Icebox." Hysteria and the rest of Queen Kamea's Revenge looked on as the screen displayed an impressive complex with thick, high walls, numerous turret emplacements, and a hostile tundra environment.

"Looks Taurean," Riana commented.

"It is," Sumire offered, "or at least it's inspired by Taurean architecture," she pointed to the reinforced walls, "you will either go over or around that; the gates can be taken down but not those walls."

"Wow," Riana purred, "your uncle really goes all out. I've spent time in an Aurigan prison before; it was no holiday but this place is beyond the pale."

"It's a holding facility for political prisoners," Lord Madeira continued, "including high-value hostages. Members of the Founding Families; spouses, sons, and daughters." He turned and gazed at Revenge's commander over his glasses, "If we liberate the prison and set them free we will break Espinosa's leverage over the Founding Houses. The political map will change *overnight*."

"We don't know what the Directorate has been doing to our people in there," Kamea looked up and let her eyes drift to each person in turn as she spoke, "but we have to set them free. Not just for political gain, but because they're *our* people."

"You have an army now, my lady," Riana folded her arms, "what do you need *us* for?"

"Subtle, decisive action," Kamea's tone was straightforward, devoid of any emotion save for determination, "I will lead the army in an all-out assault on the Directorate's primary spaceport. After I've drawn their attention you will sneak in, attack the Icebox, and liberate it."

She clenched her fists as she spoke. Riana could not help but admire her poise and grace most days but, right now, she admired the fire that burned in her eyes. It was clear that Kamea Arano was as much a student of Sir Raju as she was. 'The Princess and the Pirate,' Riana thought to herself, failing to hide a mischievous smile, '*how scandalous.*'

"We'll set my uncle's hostages free and put the Founding Families in our debt, all in one fell swoop!" Lady Arano resumed her military, ramrod-straight pose, her arms folded behind her back, and left her gaze on Commander Klaue. It took Riana a moment to realize she had stopped speaking.

"In my experience," she started, shaking herself from her reverie, "operations of this scale rarely go according to plan."

"I know, Riana," Lady Arano looked down demurely, "and that is one of the major reasons why I need you on this drop. You adapted to the chaos of the battlefield on Coromodir," she looked back up at her former Royal Guard pensively, "I'll be counting on you to do the same here."

'I'm *such* a sucker,' Riana thought, suppressing a blush, although she couldn't tell if Lady Arano's influence was a remnant of the duty she felt to Sir Raju or if it was something else...

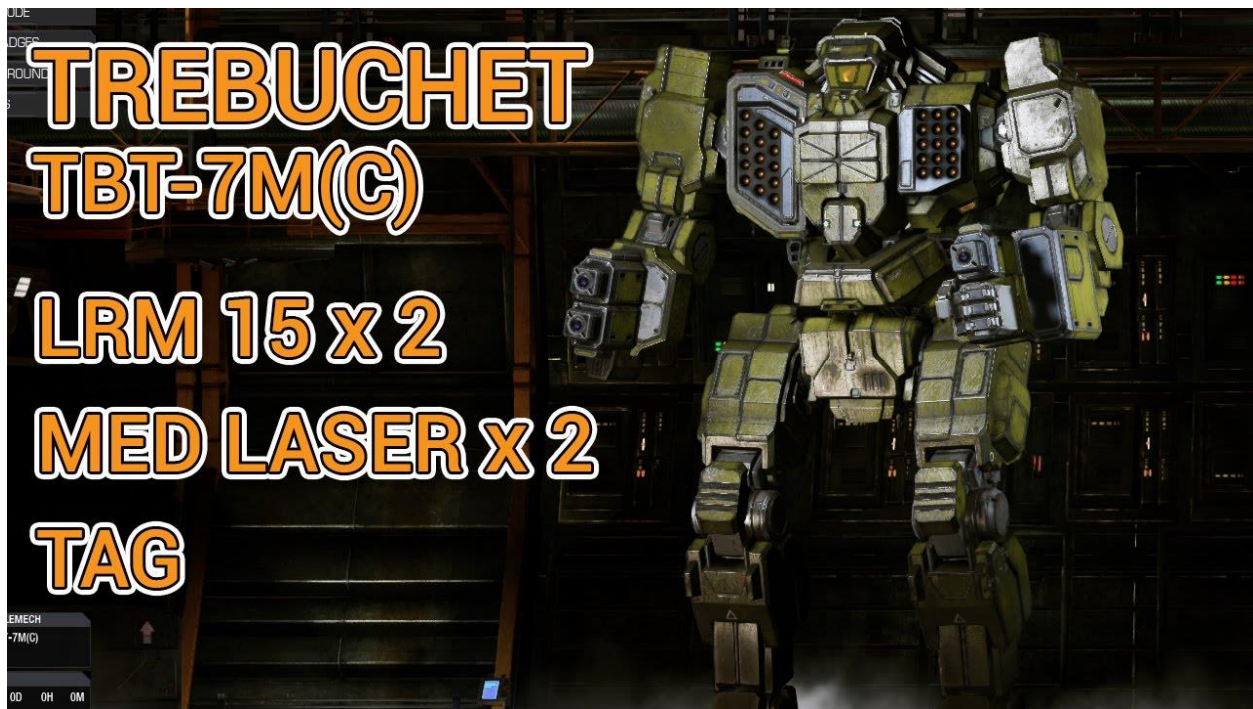
"I'll remain in radio contact with you after you hit the ground," Kamea's tone had shifted once more; hard, determined, professional, "Good Hunting, Hysteria, give my uncle's troops the hell that they have earned. After the Directorate presence on the surface has been crushed and the Icebox has been liberated, we'll regroup to celebrate our victory."



The Liberation of Weldry is an important story mission that I had been putting off for more than a year in game time. First I had to get my legs under me, so to speak, but now I felt confident enough to attempt the mission and, at the same time, really open the game up. Weldry is a tundra environment so heat was not much of a concern. Hysteria took her Blackjack, freshly repaired after its near-total destruction, Glitch in the Vindicator for sniper support, Big Sly in the Shadowhawk, and Vamp in the super-armored Centurion. I decided to forego my normal strategy and leave the light Mechs out of it since this was a prison break, and besides both Glitch and Big Sly could use Sensor Lock if I needed it.

The approach to the prison was divided. Atop the bluff in front of me were two turret generators. Firing her Jump Jets Glitch took up position to deal with them while Big Sly broke right and Hysteria and Vamp went left. Unprotected, soon the generators sent plumes of smoke into the sky and radar signatures of approaching vehicles left the prison gates to investigate. It didn't take them long to pick up Hysteria's Blackjack on their radar and open fire. She returned fire with that new AC/20++ Kali Yama auto cannon and obliterated one. The battle was brief, with my units holding position and letting the enemy come to us. On occasion one would get a Sensor Lock, enabling the turrets to fire. Hysteria took the most fire and, before long, her armor had taken a pretty big hit. Obstensibly she returned fire each time, taking out three turrets in the process as Vamp mopped up the vehicles to the west and the combination of Glitch and Big Sly handled the east. Blowing the front gate was a piece of cake and as Glitch mounted the wall with her Jump Jets, the other three entered the prison to free the prisoners.

Wouldn't you know that the Warden had a Lance in reserve that no one knew about?



Out poured a Jenner D, a Centurion, a Jagermech, and a Trebuchet (pictured above.) Glitch fired first; an Alpha Strike (all weapons) called shot to the CT of the Jenner (where he kept his SRM ammo) which resulted in a detonation and destruction of the Jenner. Good start! But that's about where my luck ended. The enemy, taking note of Hysteria's mangled armor, focused all remaining fire on the Blackjack. Even as I backed away I well knew that the AC/20 she carried would be critical to taking down the powerful enemy Lance. It wouldn't matter though, before Hysteria could sufficiently withdraw direct attacks from the Jagermech's paired AC/5s and AC/2s blew out her CT and the Blackjack was suddenly scrap again. From this point I was in trouble: Glitch was in a good elevated spot but without a direct line of fire, leaving her to only use her LRMs. With Hysteria out of the picture Big Sly would be their natural next target, the versatile Shadowhawk he piloted was not nearly as heavily armored as the Centurion. In an effort to draw them off Vamp charged into the fray, striking at the rear armor of the Jagermech, but the enemy wasn't taking the bait. Big Sly had to flee behind cover and keep moving and, when they couldn't hit him directly, the enemy started to work on Vamp's impressive armor.



Just then a section of the north wall dropped under bombardment from the air and through the breach charged none other than [High Lady Kamea Arano](#)! She tore into the Jagermech's side, forcing the enemy to reposition... into the line of direct fire from Glitch. Reeling from that hit the Jagermech was in no condition to sustain a desperate Alpha Strike from Big Sly's Shadowhawk, slipping from cover and blowing the Heavy Mech's CT. At the same time the battle of the Centurions ended in Vamp's favor, brought low by a melee strike. Now four Mechs closed in on the Trebuchet, who honestly survived on luck for a lot longer than he was entitled to. At last an AC/5 shot from Big Sly brought him down and the prison was ours. We set about freeing the prisoners when we made a terrible discovery. Not only the rampant abuse and torture that the Directorate inflicted on its own people, but something personally far worse...



He was *here*. All this time, these last four years, we thought Sir Raju "Mastiff" Montgomery was dead, killed in action on Coromodir. But now we found the awful, awful truth. Sir Raju had survived as well... and had languished in the Icebox the victim of Victoria Espinosa, Kamea's power-mad cousin who had promised revenge upon him for Kamea's refusal to bow down. Now it was too late. Now it was like he was dead all over again. Riana had suffered his loss four years ago when Markham's Marauders had found his cored out Mech on the battlefield, but now it was fresh... raw.

It was for Kamea as well.

Raju had been a father-figure to both women. He had taught both how to pilot Mechs. And now here he lay, his corpse, tortured to death by Espinosa and their Directorate.

The Directorate. Created and led by Kamea's uncle. Backed by Lord Madeira's family. An authoritarian regime that brutalizes, tortures, and murders its own people. While the people in Coromodir live in luxury at the Aurigan Reach's expense, too comfortable to question the Directorate's tactics, the rest of High Lady Arano's people suffer. Solemnly, Lady Arano asked for the people, her army, the mercenaries of Revenge, and the people freed from the Icebox to assemble.



People of the Aurigan Reach -

I am Kamea Arano, and I have failed you.

For four long years Director Espinosa has imprisoned, and starved, and murdered our people.

And where was I?

Hiding in a palace, light-years away.

Building support.

Planning.

While the Directorate's secret police turned neighbor against neighbor,
made your loved ones disappear,
conscripted your children.
I wasn't here. I didn't know.



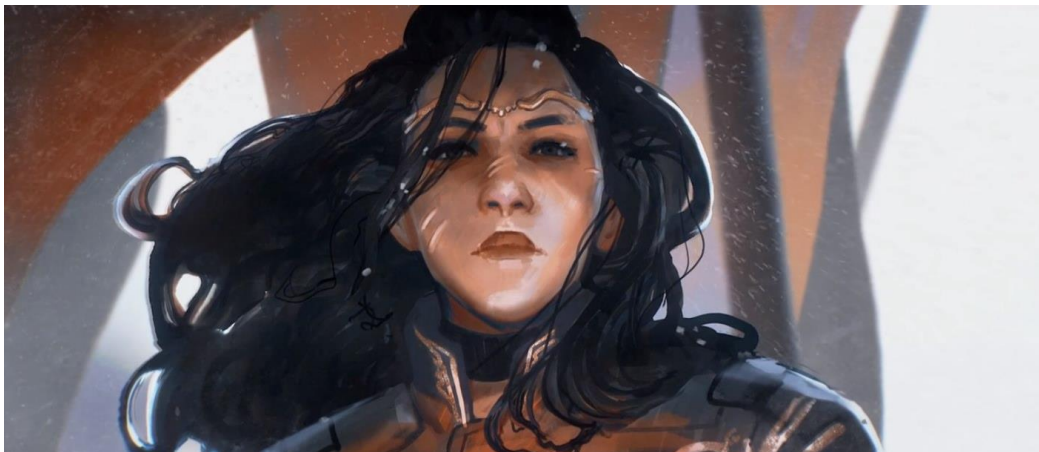
The crimes that I have witnessed here today are unforgivable.
No doubt Director Espinosa believes that the ends justify the means.
That the Aurigan Reach has been made... "strong."
Well, I say that strength built on fear is brittle,
The Directorate is a paper tiger and I declare this Restoration today,
to rally the **true** strength of our people - Our resilience.



Let Weldry be a call to arms - join us and together we will liberate the Founding Houses
and retake Coromodir.

Not because it is my birthright,
But because the Directorate's crimes against you,
the Aurigan People,
will no longer be tolerated!

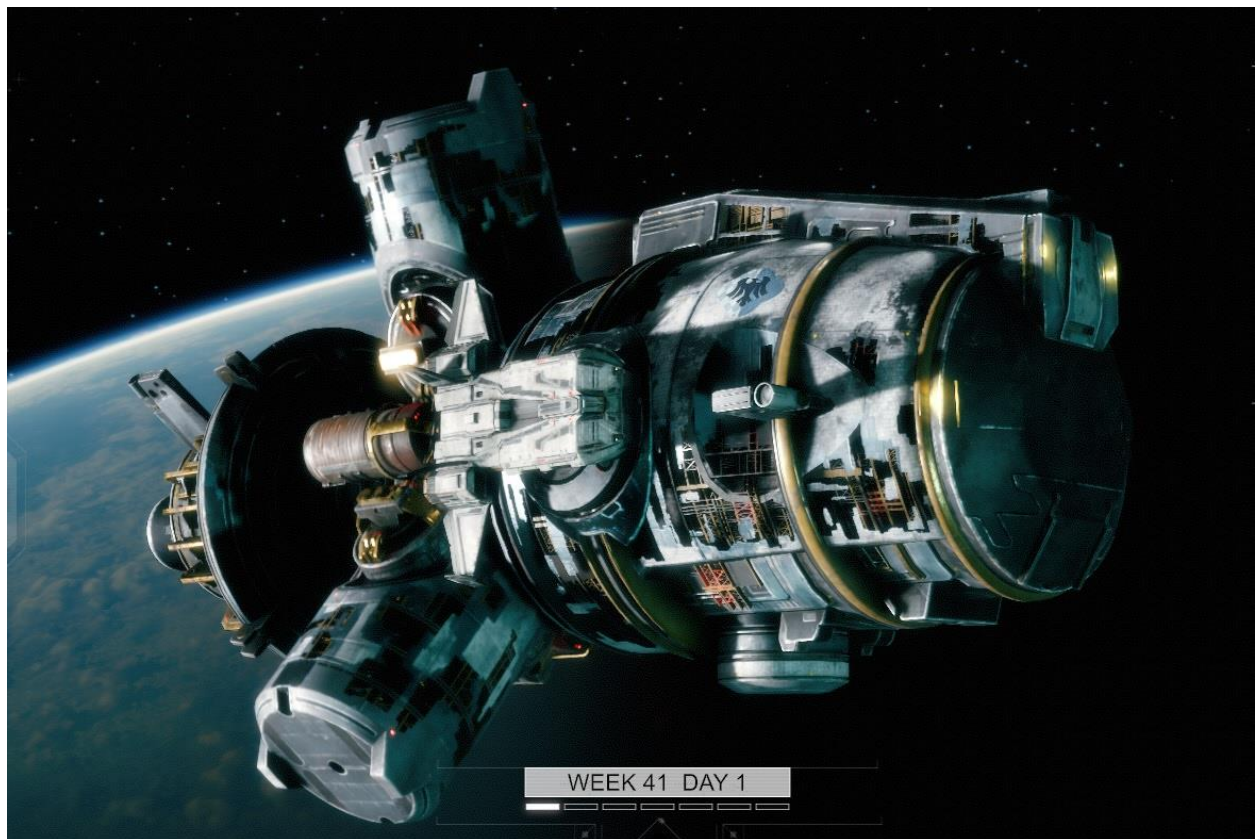
THAT is what I fight for -
and I vow to fight for your freedoms to my dying breath!



Part VIII

The aftermath of Weldry had a big effect on Lady Arano. She realized that the struggle against the Directorate was about more than just symbols; it was a desperate struggle against a ruthless, authoritarian regime that was casual with torture and democide. As such she decided that the Argo would serve the Restoration better in action.

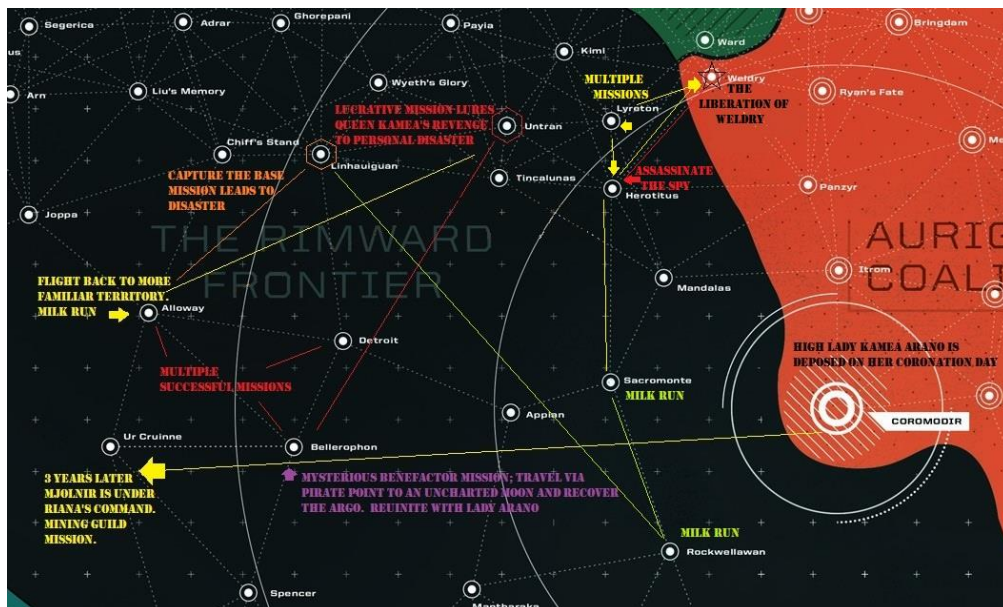
The Argo was one of two prototypes of a "mobile space station" created by the Star League (The closest thing the Battletech universe has to the Old Republic. It lasted from 2571-2765. Presently, in my game, it is 3026) over 200 years ago. This particular Argo crashed on the moon Axylus and ended up being used as the base for the pirate Grim Sybil (the other was dismantled for parts) but after the mission to raise it again Lady Arano *had* intended to keep it as her flagship; a symbol of prosperity to come. After Weldry she gave it to us, preferring to solidify our relationship and turn us into more of an assault force for the Restoration than a simple mercenary band. (We can still, of course, take mercenary jobs.)



As you can see it is a bit of a fixer-upper. Dr. Farah Murad got it off of Axylus, a miracle feat after being a derelict for 200 plus years, and High Lady Arano assigned the engineer to our crew, freeing Yang up to concentrate only on Mechs. It is spacious and features the ability to be expanded with improved facilities; including multiple Mech bays, expanded crew quarters, recreational areas, an improved med-bay, training modules, and the ability to improve the power and drive systems to decrease travel time (personally I *need* the travel time for repairs and

A close-up portrait of a woman with dark hair, wearing a dark hooded jacket with a red lining. She is looking slightly to the right with a subtle smile. The background is plain white.

Hysteria ended up being sidelined for about three months due to injuries suffered at the Icebox and the Blackjack was totaled *again*. Lady Arano paid us over 1.5 million for the prison break so I ordered it repaired (it is, after all, Riana's ancestral Mech) but when repairs were complete I stripped it and put it into storage. It was time for Hysteria to graduate to a new Mech, one with better armor. After the battle I managed to salvage the complete chassis of the Heavy-Class Jagermech so I set about making a new Mech for our intrepid leader. Due to her habit of acting as a bullet sponge (since she cannot actually die in combat) I took my treasured AC/20++ Kali Yama (the only piece of equipment from the Blackjack to survive) and put it on one arm, keeping the AC/5 on the other, and installed multiple ammo sources. That's all for weaponry. The rest is armor. TONS of armor. I plan to buy some heavy Jump Jets to help with mobility but, for now, I mean for the Jagermech to be a literal tank. I had a few repairs to make so I needed a little time and some more money (despite the fact that, at nearly 7 million, I am doing better financially than I ever have.) I found a mission on Herotitus to assassinate a Canopian spy; with a 22-day travel time that means that by the time I get there I should be shiny to take the mission.



The A.O. is badlands, so I'll need to watch my heat dispersion. I set down with Glitch in her Vindicator, Big Sly in the Shadowhawk, Vamp in the Centurion, and Jester in the Jenner running scout. I've only ever done one assassinate mission and the target gave me a hell of a time so I was hoping this one might be different, maybe in a ground vehicle due to the one and a half rating. No such luck. For all intents and purposes the target was *expecting* me; not two rounds after my arrival a semi-circle of enemy Mechs closed in around me. A Locust wandered too close and received a rough welcome from Glitch's PPC and Big Sly's AC/5. The still left me with 3 enemies; a pesky Panther and its persistent PPC, a flanking Centurion, and a Shadowhawk, sitting at range and peppering me with missiles. It wasn't long before Glitch was forced to flee her perch and seek cover and Jester was driven into hiding after taking some internal damage from the Panther/Shadowhawk combo. I noticed that I was also taking long range missile fire from an as-yet unseen unit; my target. I was hoping he was in a vehicle!



Typical badlands environment

I had maneuvered my Centurion around to intercept the flanking Centurion, all behind cover of a big rock that originally served as Glitch's perch. She now fled the Centurion as Big Sly tried to single-handedly handle the Panther/S-hawk combo with poor results. He was shedding armor like a snake skin as Vamp polished off the enemy Cent but now there was a problem: Vamps over-armored Cent had *no* Jump Jets. Big Sly was going to have to hold the line until Vamp could *walk* back around the big rock. Before he could make it there the enemy S-hawk punched through Sly's armor and into the critical systems within. Firing his Jump Jets Sly fled behind the big rock just as Vamp rounded the corner. He was looking to take some heavy damage from the Panther's PPC until Jenner broke from cover with an Alpha Strike and took off the Panther's right arm. What remained couldn't stand against the Cent's AC/5. With only the enemy Shadowhawk

remaining the team all emerged from cover and laid him down. All that remained now was to find our elusive target.



We eventually found the target, hiding in a ravine in an Umbra Shadowhawk just firing *oodles* of missiles at us. Vamp made the approach, his armor able to take the pounding, while Jester flanked to the south and kept a Sensor Lock on him. Both Glitch and Sly, neither able to take much more of a pounding, moved to a bluff in the northwest, mounted it, and started hammering the target long distance. A target that just so happened to be armored like a turtle. He took an incredible pounding, to the point that even with a lame leg and using his Jump Jets to maneuver, he was still standing. Finally, we got a warning from Darius that he was making a break for it. I *had* to take him down now. Jester approached, unleashing an Alpha Strike in the Jenner D. Then both Glitch and Sly hit him with another one from on high. This was enough to ruin his stability and cause him to fall in the river, which opened up his damaged CT to a Called Shot from Vamp's last round of AC/5. It was enough and the target was finally down.

It was a rough one. Both Sly and Glitch are out for a month on injury, but other than some structural damage on the Jenner the rest were only minor repairs. So, overall, not that bad but here's the thing: this was *supposed* to be a milk run. It had a difficulty rating of 1 when I took it, rose to 1 1/2 by the time I arrived, and behaved like a 2! Right now I plan to shop a little, perhaps pick up another high quality weapon, and then probably take a job from another system, giving me time to make repairs. Once Hysteria is back I will probably move ahead with the next Restoration mission. Director Espinosa and his daughter Victoria have made this personal and I don't think I can stomach their Directorate much longer.

Part IX



Riana lay in the bed in the Medbay of the *Argo*. The room was cavernous compared to the *Leopard* and it made her feel alone in the small hours of the 'night' but she couldn't sleep anymore so she was pleasantly surprised when Yang Virtanen knocked softly and entered the room. "Nice digs," he said with a smirk as he came fully into view, "mind if I come in?"

"Glad for it, actually," Riana smiled, "just coming out of another drug-induced stupor to a shocking amount of pain. I could use the distraction."

"You okay, boss?" Yang asked with genuine concern.

"I'm fine," she lied, "how's my Blackjack?"

"Doing about as well as you, from the looks of it," the native Capellan approached her bedside and placed his hand on the rail, "she's a near total loss, Commander; both legs, the CT, practically all of the torso... left arm too."

"What about the AC/20?" Riana asked. She had only recently paid over 300 thousand C-Bills for the Kali Yama and the thought of losing it pained her.

"It survived," Yang smiled, "right arm intact."

"Oh, good," Riana breathed a sigh of relief, "How long will it take to fix her up again?"

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about," Yang began with a sigh. He knew she wouldn't like this, "I think we should scrap her."

"Yang, could you maybe share the drugs a little?" Her expression blended between sarcasm and annoyance, "I'm in pain here and it's making me hear things."

"I'm serious, Riana," the MechTech was insistent, "the damn thing is gonna get you killed. This is the *third* time you've totaled that Mech and ended up in Medbay for an extended stay."

"I wouldn't be much of a leader if I wasn't out in front," she half-growled.

"Yeah, I'm getting that from you," Yang countered, "so that's why I'm telling you to let the Blackjack go."

"And *I'm* telling *you* go jump out an airlock," she snarled, "Fix my Blackjack, Chief. That's the end of this conversation."

"No it isn't, Riana," Yang said with his characteristic steely determination, "I want you to listen to me. How bad is it this time? Broken femur? Shattered hip? I heard you ruptured a kidney."

"Spleen," she corrected him.

"Took a lot of shrapnel too," Yang continued, "and the skin grafts from the burns this time took eight hours, even with the *Argo's* fancy new equipment."

"Fix my Mech, Chief," Riana narrowed her eyes, "that's your *job*."

"You know what else is my job?" his tone was full of indignant dismissal, "Keeping my Mechwarriors alive. I can't do that if you insist on charging headlong into battle with a severe armor deficiency and a gun that's too big for your Mech!"

"If I have to get up out of this bed..." she let the threat hang but her knuckles went white on the rails of the bed.

"I have an alternative," Yang released the rail and took a step back, "and I want you to actually listen to me. Alright?"

Riana let herself relax, her head sinking into the pillow. "Better make it good, Yang."



The MechTech looked around and found a wheeled stool, sliding it over and taking a seat next to her bed. "Lady Arano was generous with the Weldry salvage," he began, "I got the complete chassis of that JM6-S Jagermech. It's not all that dissimilar to your Blackjack. Think of it like a distant, heavier cousin."

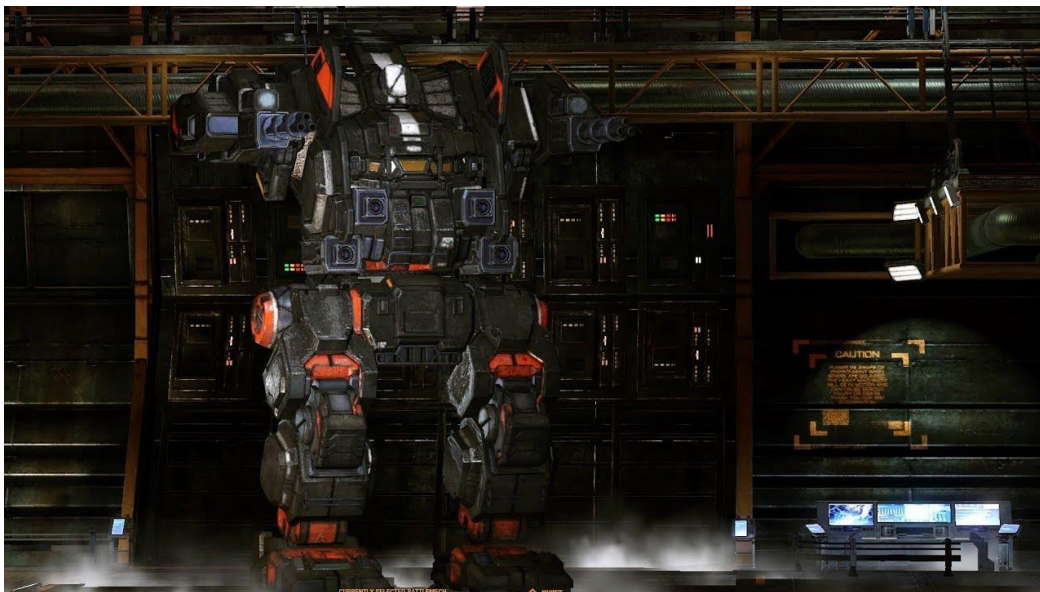
"A Jagermech?" Riana raised one eyebrow, "That's your solution? It's a long range sniper. Sports twin AC/2s and twin AC/5s, right? With Medium lasers for close targets?" She blew out a raspberry as she cut her eyes away, "Your solution is to put me at distance, eh? In a Heavy-Class at that."

"I thought you'd say that," Yang interrupted her, "so I've come up with a solution I think you may like..." She didn't speak but turned her attention back to him so he continued, "What if I strip all of that off and slap the Kali Yama to the right arm? I can leave the AC/5 on the left but everything else goes. No AC/2s, no lasers. Not much need for Heat Sinks. The only other piece of equipment is a heavy Jump Jet for mobility."

"Jagermechs are lightly armored for their tonnage," Hysteria shook her head, "and bigger Mechs are more expensive to fix. Just patch up my Blackjack..."

"Not *this* Jagermech," he shook his head, cutting her off, "I plan to load three or four separate AC/20 ammo feeds to various locations and everything else? Armor. Tons of armor. I'm gonna put as much armor on this Mech as it can hold," he reached out with his meat hand and gripped hers, "whatever it takes to keep you out of *here*."

"I'd rather be in here than at another funeral, Yang," she said softly, the memory of Dekker and Behemoth tearing at her, "and I'm not going to stop until those Espinosa bastards pay for what they did to Sir Raju!" He squeezed her hand as she tightened her own grip, fighting back fresh tears.



"I know you won't," Yang said with a sigh, "that's why I want you in this Mech. You're gonna be a walking tank, Riana, literally. That AC/20 was way too big for the Blackjack, but the Jagermech can handle it, easy. With the expanded ammo and the AC/5 in reserve you shouldn't have to worry about running out. If it becomes an issue I can always find *some* place for a laser mount."

"What about close quarters?" she turned to ask, "What am I supposed to use, harsh language?"

"Ha!" the Tech laughed, "Half of your damage comes from melee anyway! You like to get up close and kick the hell out of your enemies, I know you!" He released her hand and leaned back in the chair, smirking at her, "Do you know how many times I've had to fix cracks in the cockpit from where you headbutt people? At least with *this* Mech you've got some serious tonnage behind your strikes, not to mention armor."

"Alright, fine," she relented, "but fix my Blackjack." He started to protest but she kept going: "We can put it in storage but I can't bear to scrap her. She's my family's ancestral Mech..." then she muttered "and I stole her fair and square."

"Is *that* your attachment to this ancient piece of junk?" Yang snorted in derision, "I didn't realize *my lady* had such a sentimental attachment..."

"Stow it, Chief," she cut her eyes at him, "and spare me your Capellan attitude; I'm as noble as you are now and you know it!"

"Didn't stop you from stooping and bowing before the High Lady, now did it?" Yang regretted it the moment it slipped his lips but the old vet was too stubborn to change course.

"Oh, I'm *sorry*," her voice practically dripped with sarcasm, "I forgot that Comrade Virtanen trusts *no* noble, even one who was so generous with the Weldry salvage!" She pulled herself up in the bed, her face flush and her hackles raised, "*Lady* Arano is no mere noble to me, Yang, and if you can't remember that you're welcome to make Mandalas your port-of-call when we arrive!"

"And what exactly is she to you, Commander?" Yang folded his arms, metal over flesh, "Not that I care how you look at her but you've gone out of your way to lay down for her like a good dog! When you were elected captain of the Marauders you didn't hear a peep when you decided to change the company name to Mjolnir, it was a good strong name, but I've gotta say *Queen Kamea's Revenge*? Really? We are *mercenaries*, Riana, and you've turned us soldiers!"

"Is the money not good enough, Yang?" she shot back, "We took one and a half million from the Axylus mission and, correct me if I'm wrong, at least that much *again* after Weldry!" She pointed at him accusingly, "when I took the helm, no, when you guys *forced* me to take command, we were up to our eyeballs in debt! For three long years we lived hand-to-

mouth, one step ahead of our creditors! Do you think I knew anything about how to run a company? Me? A *pirate*? Do you know how many insufferable lectures I had to sit through with Darius, how many time Sumire complained about the banks and the payments on the *Leopard*? One point five *million* Yang!! Twice! Yeah, I renamed the company to Queen Kamea's Revenge! She's our goddamn sponsor!! And not to mention it's *my* revenge as well! That bitch murdered Sir Raju! The man was like a father to me! More than my actual father ever was!" Tears streamed down her face at this point but the angry flush in her cheeks threatened to turn them to steam. "He pulled me out of the wreck of my Blackjack on Bringdam, Yang, my *enemy*! I thought for sure I would be gibbeted in Coromodir, hung for my crimes, but what did he do? He *believed* in me! He *remembered* me! He *spoke* for me and after I did my time he convinced *Lady* Arano that I was worthy enough to be in *her* guard! Is that how I look at her, Yang? Maybe like I *owe* her something??" She twisted around and swung her legs off the bed, one still in a full cast. "I'm sitting here, in this *goddamn* bed, and his loss is as fresh to her as it is to me. We lost him *twice*!! She walked in to find him like that, *she did*! While I was being medevaced off of Weldry with the goddamn Mech *you* won't fix she had that scar we share torn open fresh! And I wasn't there for her!!" She buckled as she tried to stand, falling back to the bed as he moved to help her. She pushed him away violently, "Get the fuck off me!" Her eyes hardened to the point that Yang felt like she hated him. "You don't know a fucking thing about me but you're going to sit here and preach to me while I'm laid up in here like this?"

"I'm sorry, all right?" Yang put his hands up and backed away, "I'll fix it, and you're right. I don't know much about you and I let my mouth run about shit I know nothing about," her chest heaved as she glared at him but he continued, "I told you about my time with the 1st Battalion, I told you about what happened on St. Loris. The highborn always play at war but it's the common man who pays the toll," he held up his cybernetic arm in illustration, "so maybe I *am* suspicious at the notion of joining the Restoration to put Kamea Arano back on her rightful throne. I've been used and thrown away before, Riana. I know you have this connection to her through Sir Raju and all but I *don't* have that." He spread his arms out; "this right here is all I have. A ship and a crew and Mechs to work on."

"Who gave us the *Argo*, Yang?" Riana growled. Her anger was ebbing but was still present.

"She did," he answered, then he corrected: "Lady Arano did... *High Lady*. I get it. She's our benefactor, and you're right: the pay is good. It's really, really good. I worry too much."

"You do,"

"I do," he sighed as he eased back down on the stool, confident at last that she wouldn't try to stand again, "look, I'm sorry I pissed you off. No hard feelings, okay? I want you to recover and this isn't helping."

"Relax, Yang," she took a deep breath, "I'm a pirate; I love to fight. Beats the hell out of just staring at the walls and focusing on how much I hurt!" She extended her fist which Yang met with his own.

"Why don't you tell me about that?" he asked, "It would pass the time."

"What are you now, my therapist?" she scoffed, "Mind your business. Fix my Mech!"

"I'm your friend," he countered, "and I'm sitting right here. It's my break so talk to me."

"Pssht," she looked away out the window, "it's a past life. What's to tell?"

"Well you could start by explaining how a highborn noble became a pirate," the MechTech suggested, "That'd be interesting."

"How long until we reach the Jumpship?" she asked absently, still looking out the window.

"Five days, Commander," Yang took off his glasses and produced a cloth from his coveralls, "fine. If you don't want to tell me I guess, I'll head back to the bay and get started on..."

"House Klaue is originally from the Rimward Periphery," she began, still looking away, "a little shithole called McEvan's Sacrifice but we moved to Artru when I was a baby." Yang quickly cleaned his glasses and leaned back but he dared not interrupt her. "From what I heard my father won our estate in a game of cards. It was a step up; a chance for us to approach respectability," she cut a glance over at Yang and half-chuckled, "we were little more than bandit lords! I mean we *had* a noble name but before Artru that was about it. On Artru we had lands, we had servants... nothing at all like Coromodir, of course, but it was... palatial, and as I grew up the profits from the plantation started to earn my father the grudging respect of the other nobles, and it enabled him to hire Sir Raju." She wiped at her tear-stained eyes as she spoke of Mastiff. "He taught me how to be a Mech pilot. We only had my father's Blackjack but with Sir Raju's guidance it wasn't long before it felt like it was mine." She looked over at Yang, "I cried for days when he left. We'd had a bad harvest and my father needed to make cuts to payroll. He tried to soften the blow by saying I'd learned all I needed and I could defend our lands now but the truth is my father was... distant." She rolled her eyes and looked away again, "it's a common theme amongst nobility; parents don't raise their kids, the nannies and the finishing schools do. So that's what *he* did, he enrolled me in St. Regis' School of Excellence. It was the *proper* thing to do. In one week I lost Sir Raju and my home. St. Regis was like a prison to me, and I suppose that's where things went awry."

"Awry?" Yang asked.

"My father expected me to return home a proper lady, another step towards the validity he craved, but I... well I was a bit of a disappointment."

"How so?"

"I had... experiences at St. Regis," she turned and looked him in the eye, challenging him silently to judge her, "I was a woman now with all the power and vulnerabilities that entailed. It was a messy affair but let's just say I awakened, sexually. Much to the dismay of my father."

"I suspect that is hard for any father to come to grips with," Yang offered.

"I was a whore, Yang," she said matter-of-factly, "no need to sugarcoat it. I knew what I was doing. I enjoyed it. Men, women, nobles, commoners," she laughed, "groups of both. It was only a matter of time before he couldn't bear the shame of it anymore. I was exiled; good of the family he said. My mother let it happen too. He wouldn't let me 'drag the Klaue name through mud any longer,' end quote." Her exaggerated imitation of her father's voice was meant to be amusing but Yang was speechless. "I had nothing. He wouldn't give me anything. Told me to find a brothel. At the time I was *so* bitter about it but now? Heh, what else *could* he say? Anyway, all I really had was Sir Raju's training so I found a dropship pilot, slept with him, and had him help me steal my father's Mech and get it off world. I figured he left me with only two ways to make a living; on my back or in a cockpit and I could make more money in a Mech than in a brothel."

"Can't blame you," Yang offered but Riana noticed his slight blush. It amused her.

"I went back to McEvan's Sacrifice and fell in with a pirate crew. 'Revan's Raiders.' And man, did we raid. I did all kinds of horrible things, Yang, and I dodged death more times than I could count. Not that it mattered to me; I was drunk or high for most of it. Thing about piracy though is it's mostly about being in the right place at the right time and projecting the right amount of force. You commit a few atrocities and soon your reputation precedes you; merchants and depots will just roll over for you like a good dog. You always pick one or two of them and rough them up, maybe kill one as needed, just to cement your rep. Otherwise your next job is harder."

"Riana," Yang spoke softly and looked at the floor, "most of our work is taking out pirate crews..."

"Oh, I know," she said dismissively, "they're asking for it. *I* was asking for it. I think some part of me wanted to die. I was worthless, you know? Exiled, lost my family, my home... I wanted to go out in a blaze of glory. I thought I would on Bringdam. Aurigan forces were waiting for us. Old Revan made a classic mistake; he hit the system once too often, got greedy. So there was Sir Raju, waiting for us. I didn't know it was him at the time, of course, but he recognized the Blackjack. He was careful to take out the legs." She looked down for a moment, wistfully, "Revan and his crew were all wiped out, like playthings tossed away, and all I could do was rage from inside my cockpit, my Blackjack prone on the ground. I waited for him to do it, I waited for him to stomp my core out, but when the ground units arrived and they cut me out of my Mech I figured that was the end for me. I wouldn't get my blaze of glory, instead I'd get hung and my body would be strung up for others to see; 'Pirates ye be warned' and all that. Instead Sir Raju was there when they got it open." She laughed. "Oh, the face I must have made! All that fight, it all drained out of me the moment I saw him! They yanked me out and cuffed me and I was just too dumbfounded to speak!" She stared off in space for a minute and

then continued: "I spent thirteen months in an Aurigan prison on Coromodir and he came to see me every week. Kept telling me he knew I was better than that." She looked Yang in the eye, her own eyes misting over again, "He never stopped believing in me. Not once! Even when the magistrate wanted to execute me for my crimes he fought for me. Stood up to High Lord Tamati and flat out told him that if he executed me the he would leave the Aurigan Reach forever. He *insisted* that Lady Kamea meet me, treated us like his own daughters, and when he felt like I was remorseful enough he got them to commute my sentence and release me. Told them that if they put me in her Royal Guard he would keep an eye on me. Sir Raju gave me a chance; you see? He took me from worthless and he made me worthy. And Kamea made it all possible by accepting me as her guard."

Yang sat in silence as she spoke, mostly looking at the floor. "That's an incredible story. I mean, I knew you were a noble-turned-pirate-turned-Mechwarrior but I had no idea."

"Why would you?" she shook her head, "When I joined you guys I was pretty well lost. I *acted* like a pirate. I don't understand why in the 'verse you'd pick me as a leader, I just wanted to pilot a Mech and try to die again. Sir Raju was dead, Kamea was dead, my legitimacy was dead..." she dropped her head and looked at her hands, "Shit, Yang, I finally understand why my father was so consumed with the other nobles' recognition; I wanted it too. I wanted *somebody* to see me as something besides a whore or a pirate. I *liked* being in the Royal Guard. I loved Kamea,"

"You *still* love Kamea," Yang quipped.

"Shh!" she cut her eyes at him, "Anyway it's taken me some time to fall into this role as a mercenary captain. I didn't know what I was doing at first."

"You got that right,"

"Alright smartass,"

"Joke!" he held his hands up, "I'm joking! Please continue."

"As I was saying I was pretty lost at first," she looked away again, "I didn't know what I was doing and it cost Miranda and Amir their lives."

"You can't bear that cross alone," Yang reached out to her again, "both of those missions you were out of action. Dekker and Behemoth were experienced pilots and sometimes even the best of us..." he choked up and looked down as he spoke about his friends, "it just happens. It happens to the best of us. It's nobody's fault. We all know the risks."

Riana took a deep breath and wiped her eyes as a nurse entered the room. "Commander!" she exclaimed, "You should be resting!"

"I couldn't sleep," Hysteria offered, "Yang was keeping me company."

"You're due for more pain meds," the nurse said, moving to the other side of the bed, "they're going to knock you out and you need to sleep! I'm going to have to ask you to leave, Chief."

"That's okay," he said, getting up awkwardly, dabbing at his eyes as he did, "I've got a ton of work to do repairing a Mech that *ought* to be scrapped..."

"Stow it!" Riana warned.

"... *and* I have to mount a fourteen ton gun to the arm of an over-armored Jagermech so our intrepid leader here can stop getting blown up so much."

"Chief," Riana reached out for Yang's hand again, "thank you."

The Mechtch's composure shook and his lip quivered as he gripped her hand and squeezed, hard. "You got it boss. You get your ass well. I'll get that Blackjack fixed up and in storage." He offered her a smile and turned to leave as the nurse inserted the needle into her drip.

"I'll be here," she called to him just as the woozy rush of the pain meds took effect, "come back anytime."



THE RIMWARD FRONTIER

AURIGAN COALITION

CORMODIR

MISSION LOCATIONS:

- FLIGHT BACK TO MORE FAMILIAR TERRITORY. MILK RUN** (Yellow arrow pointing to Alloway)
- MULTIPLE SUCCESSFUL MISSIONS** (Red text near Ur Cruinne)
- 3 YEARS LATER MJOLNIR IS UNDER RIANA'S COMMAND. MINING GUILD MISSION.** (Yellow arrow pointing to Ur Cruinne)
- MYSTERIOUS BENEFACTOR MISSION; TRAVEL VIA PIRATE PORT TO AN UNCHARTED MOON AND RECOVER THE ARGO. REUNITE WITH LADY ARANO** (Purple arrow pointing to Bellerophon)
- CAPTURE THE BASE MISSION LEADS TO DISASTER** (Red text near Linhaulguan)
- BAD FAITH WITHDRAWAL** (Red text near Linhaulguan)
- LUCRATIVE MISSION LURES QUEEN KAMEA'S REVENGE TO PERSONAL DISASTER** (Red text near Linhaulguan)
- PRESENT LOCATION** (Yellow text near Untran)
- MILK RUN SERIES** (Yellow text near Tincalunas)
- MULTIPLE MISSIONS** (Yellow text near Lyraton)
- ASSASSINATE THE SPY** (Red text near Herotitus)
- THE DEAD EYE AFFAIR** (Yellow text near Mandalas)
- MILK RUN** (Yellow text near Sacromonte)
- MILK RUN** (Yellow text near Rockwellawan)
- THE LIBERATION OF WELDRI** (Yellow text near Weldry)
- HIGH LADY KAMEA ARANO IS DEPOSED ON HER CORONATION DAY** (Red text near Coromodir)

PLANETS: Segerice, Adrar, Ghorepani, Payla, Kimi, Ward, Bringham, Weldry, Ryan's Fate, Penzyr, Itrom, Mandalas, Herotitus, Lyraton, Untran, Tincalunas, Linhaulguan, Chiff's Stand, Liu's Memory, Arn, Joppa, Alloway, Detroit, Bellerophon, Ur Cruinne, Applan, Sacromonte, Rockwellawan, Mantharaka, Spencer.

Chris "Deadeye" Winzar is another Backer. No frills here, other than an initial 4 rating in Gunnery. The price was reasonable; I could hire him for just 29k. If I liked his performance I could keep him on, at just 30k a month he was very reasonable... but that's mostly because he was a total blank slate. Still though, a possible decent sniper in the future. I fielded Glitch, Jester, and Vamp in the Vindicator, Jenner, and Centurion respectively and I let Deadeye take the Shadowhawk. It is a good all-around Mech with a nice mix of armor, long, and short range weaponry. The mission went off well, with the initial takedown of OpFor (Opposing Forces) handled very well, despite a very stubborn Panther that just refused to die. Deadeye took the brunt of the enemy's attacks so when we started the actual escort he was missing a good-sized chunk of it. Still I had good positioning. No enemy contacts on the way to the rendezvous site, and then:

Darius' voice was full of static as it came over the radio. "Enemy contacts bearing South/Southeast. Multiple bogies inbound."

"Is no big deal," Vamp responded coolly, "ve anticipated zis." He flipped the manual activation switch on his LRM bank and cycled power to the ammo feed.

"All Lance, report positions." Hysteria's voice flooded the cockpit. Vamp could tell she was still hurting. The Commander was stubbornly insistent about being 'clear' and in command, despite her injuries. That meant no meds.

"CC, standing by, South/Southeast of RV." he replied.

"Cav, standing by," Jester spoke next, "Direct South of the RV with Height advantage. Searching for Sensor Lock."

"Foxtrot Sierra, standing by," next came Glitch's overly chipper voice, "West/Southwest in cover. Waiting on Jester's lock."

"Deadeye, standing by," the Rookie clearly didn't remember his designation, "I'm, uh, at the top of the hill."

"Skirmish," Hysteria provided, "I want you in cover. You're missing too much armor."

"I'm next to a big rock," the Rookie offered, "I'll move behind it once we have the enemy in sight."

Vamp shook his head. "Vas I zis bad?" he asked after switching his Com over to Actual.

"Just about," came Hysteria's reply, "but we needed you so I put up with it."

"Sensor Lock," Jester's voice came over Main, "I'm counting five incoming at a sprint."

"So desperate to stop zis shipment," Vamp mused as he looked to his left at the HFORS display, "A Firestarter? In zis heat? Commander zis should be priority target."

"Agreed," Hysteria confirmed, "All Lance Weapons Free..."

"Hang on Commander," Glitch's voice was punctuated by the thunderclap of her PPC. As Vamp looked at the readout on his HFORS it scrambled and disappeared. "Free headshots!" Glitch said triumphantly, "Come and get 'em while they're hot!"



Okay, so it's not *really* Glitch, but it's still a pretty nice sketch.

"Good shot, Glitch!" Hysteria praised, "All Lance hold position and let them come to you."

"I got a Commando coming in my sights!" Deadeye exclaimed. Vamp physically turned his head as the Shadowhawk thundered up next to him, "Taking an Alpha Strike!" The report of the Mech's AC/5 vibrated Vamp's entire cockpit just before the noise of his full LRM battery firing set his ears to ringing. Vamp turned back to see the enemy Commando's right arm separate at the shoulder.

"Confirmed dismemberment," Vamp reported, "good shot, Rookie, but watch your spacing!" He moved his Centurion forward as the remaining three OpFor came into view, "Commander I'm looking at Locust, Enforcer, and Trebuchet."

"Glitch, take out the Locust," Hysteria commanded, "Jester, the Commando is yours," her tone shifted to one of anger, "Deadeye get my goddamn Shadowhawk behind cover!"

"Roger, boss," Deadeye responded as Vamp readied his own Alpha Strike.

"Targeting ze Enforcer, Commander," he said as he squeezed the trigger at the same time he fired his LRMs, "all weapons, fire."

"Watch your heat, Vamp," she cautioned him, "Advance into the water. I'd rather have them pounding on your armor than..."

"I got incoming, Commander!" Deadeye suddenly yelled, "Full compliment! I'm taking damage!" Sure enough the scans showed that the Trebuchet had launched all of its missiles at the Shadowhawk. More to the point the Commando had beached and was now firing all of its remaining lasers at the Rookie as well as the Locust, firing from the safety of the water just before Glitch's PPC hit its CT and detonated its SRM ammo.

"Locust down, Commander," Glitch reported.

"Good work," Hysteria replied, "Deadeye... status!"

"That last shot went internal, Commander," the Rookie said dejectedly, "I've taken structural damage."

Just then Jester cut the tension, "The Leopard is away, Commander, escort complete. Repositioning for attack," a few moments later he spoke again, "Commando down. Two bogies remaining."

"Committing to an Alpha Strike on Enforcer," Deadeye's voice shocked the rest of the Lance, "Bingo! Enforcer has lost its footing, the Mech is prone, repeat the Mech is prone."

Hysteria's voice dripped venom. "Glitch target the Enforcer's CT, Vamp engage the Trebuchet, and *Deadeye*?" the air was pregnant with anticipation, "Deadeye get my *fucking Mech* on the OTHER SIDE OF THE GODDAMN HILL!!!"

"Taking fire!!! Taking fire from the Tre..." the Rookie started but Hysteria cut him off.

"Fire your Jump Jets and get behind the hill!!!" Back onboard the *Argo Riana*'s knuckles went white as she gripped the microphone and saliva frothed as she spoke. "Deadeye, I swear to Christ if you lose a piece of my Shadowhawk I will *personally* put you out of my misery!"

"Riana, calm down," Darius counseled, his gaze moving up from the holographic display, "you're going to end up rupturing something again."

"ACKNOWLEDGE!!" she screamed.

"Firing Jump Jets," the Rookie's voice sounded deflated, "I'm behind the hill Commander, like you wanted. I've taken heavy structural damage but all systems are intact."

Just then Vamp's voice interrupted, "Commander ze last enemy unit is down. Only light damage to Lance. Mission complete."

"Stay put," Sumire's voice came across the radio next, "I'm inbound to your location for EV."

Hysteria switched her Com to the Leopard, "Sumire, this is Actual."

"Go ahead Actual," the pilot's voice came back.

"Get all assets loaded and then leave Deadeye on the surface."

"Actual, repeat?" Sumire sounded confused, "Am I reading you right that you want to leave one of our Mechwarriors behind?"

"He's not one of ours," Hysteria replied coldly, "he's paid up, he's a temp, and this planet has a Hiring Hall. Understood?"

"了解," she replied, "you're the boss."

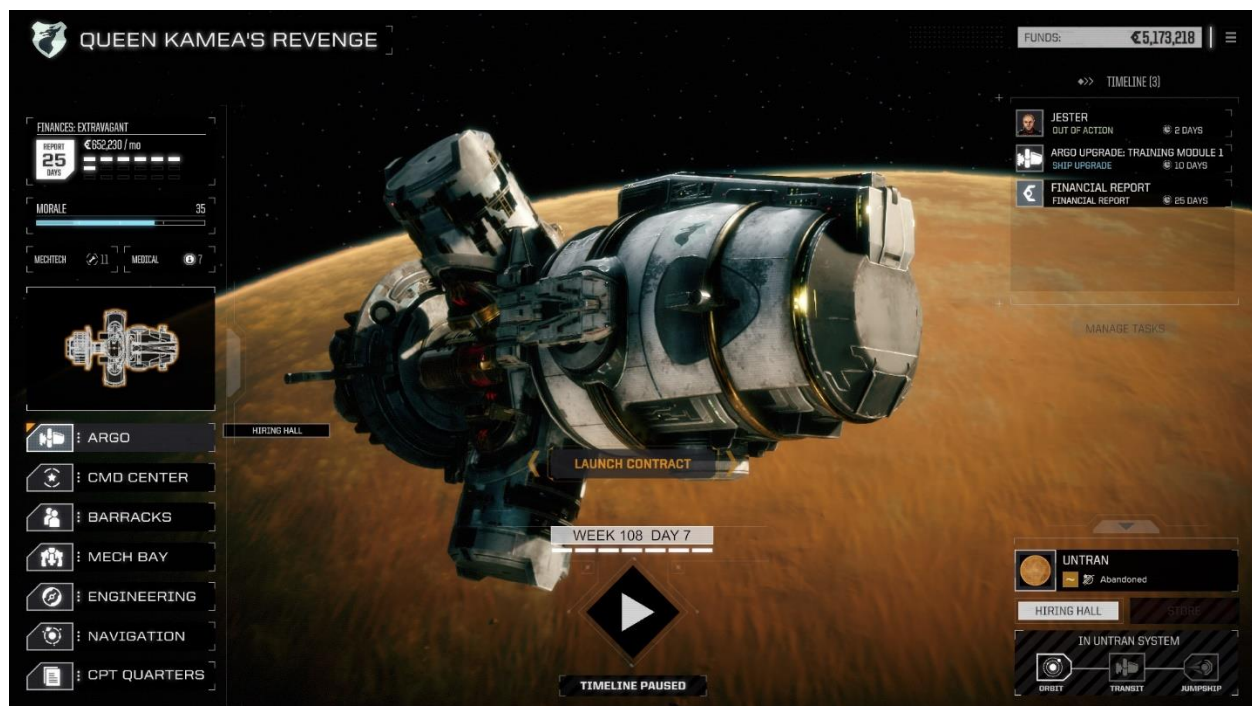
So, yeah, Deadeye was a short-timer. In truth though the damage to the Shadowhawk wasn't that bad. By the time we got to our next mission, an Assassination at Linhauiguan, everyone (except Riana) was healed and all the Mechs were in good repair and ready to go. So it *should* have been a pretty easy mission... It wasn't. Remember how a lot of my early troubles came from things going sideways and me being too stubborn to Withdraw? So that was happening again. I set down with Vamp in the Cent, Jester in the Jenner, Glitch with the Vindy (Vindicator in Glitch parlance,) and Medusa driving his old Spider. I had only recently brought this one out of storage. I traded its twin mediums for one large laser and planned to use it to establish sensor locks and generally harass at a distance. When his right arm was *immediately* blown off I realized I had made a tactical error. The enemy was numerous, something like two full Lances (that would be 8 Mechs) and several support vehicles, and they were closing in all around us. We had lost all advantage. The Jenner took structural damage next so now I had 2 light Mechs just trying to keep away, which left me with a Sniper and a heavily-armored Centurion vs at least 10-12 enemies. Them's not good odds. It didn't take long before OpFor began to focus on Glitch, even though I was running Vamp into the fray trying to draw attention.

In Battletech there are two kinds of Withdrawals. One is the good kind; you complete one or more tasks and you are free to bug out. You won't get your full pay but hey, you can save a ton on Mech repairs and, um, lives. The other kind are Bad Faith Withdrawals. This is what happens when you do not manage to complete any objectives, such as was my status when Glitch got knocked prone and injured. In a Bad Faith Withdrawal you not only get zero pay but your reputation with the Mercenaries' Guild and whoever you're working for takes a hit. The moment Medusa's Spider lost an arm I made two decisions: first was to scrap that crappy Spider but just after that was to Withdraw. But I wanted to at least withdraw in good faith. But when Glitch went down all of that went out the window. Glitch is my best Gunner. With an 8 in Gunnery and the special ability Breaching Shot (Attacks with a single weapon ignore COVER and GUARDED on the target) she was simply too valuable to lose. Not to mention with only Vamp in a Mech that was in any condition to fight I threw up my hands and pulled my team out. It was the right call, Rep or no Rep.

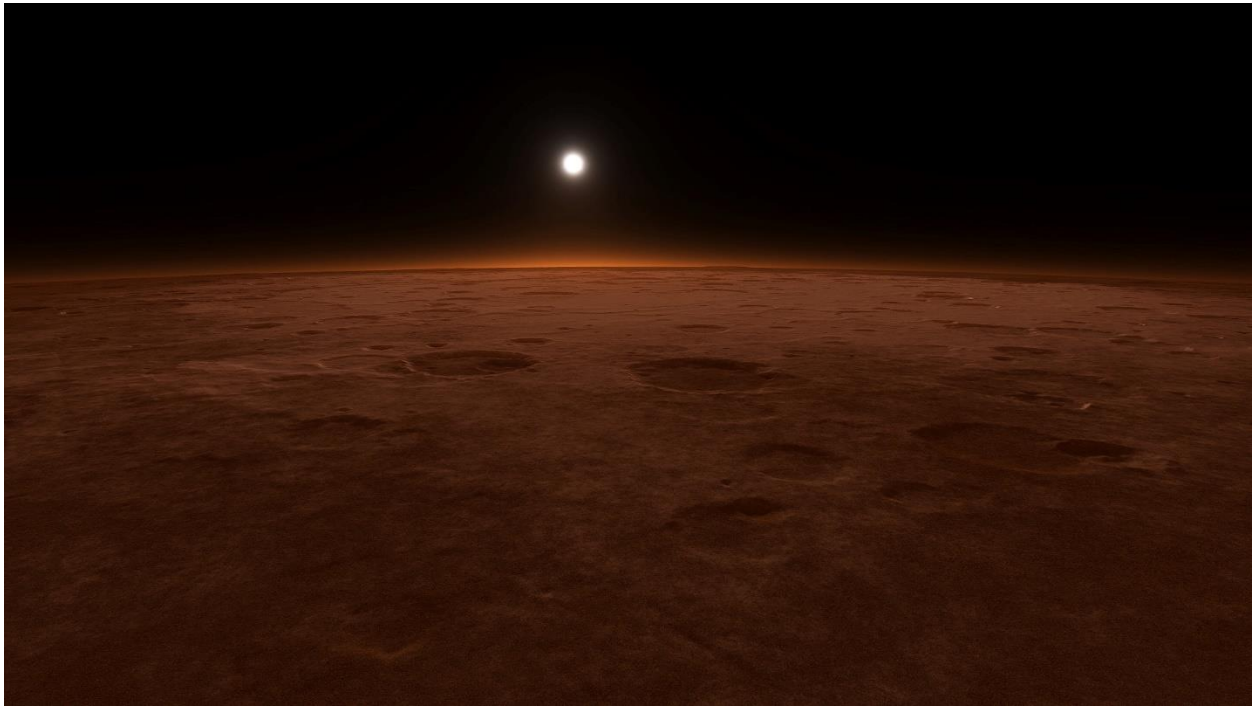
I moved the team to Tincalunas, drawn by the promise of a Milk Run, and what I actually got was a series of 4 good-paying Milk Runs. It gave my team time to heal up and get repaired and I also got to field Hysteria in her new Jagermech finally! The mission was a simple stand up fight, Lance vs. Lance, but the difference was the enemy was 3 Commando Light Mechs and one Light Class Panther sniper and I took a Centurion, a Jenner, a Shadowhawk, and the Jagermech. With Sly on one hill in the S-Hawk and Hysteria on another in the Heavy I moved Vamp's Cent forward to draw fire and left Jester's Jenner in the woods to establish Sensor Locks. Sly took out the CT *and* head of one Commando in a single shot, so yes.. milk run... big time. But the real test here was 'how is Hysteria going to perform in the Jagermech?' I got my answer promptly when I used her multi-target ability to lock on to both remaining Commandos at the same time. One took a shot from her AC/5 and the other from her beloved AC/20++ Kali Yama. BOOM. Both Mechs destroyed... in a single shot.

So yeah, she likes it.

Presently I'm in orbit around Untran. Untran is the Bad Place. Dekker died here. I've been subconsciously avoiding missions here ever since but I'm on the way to liberate Panzyr for the Restoration and I couldn't resist a little side-piece for a solid 800k C-Bills. The mission is a Difficulty 2 and I can field 2 1/2 easy. With any luck the Jagermech will make a big difference to my luck on this unlucky world.



Part XI



"Goddammit!" Hysteria swore. The heat from the Cicada's large laser superheated the cockpit of her Blackjack as it tore into the Mech's CT, "AHHH!" she screamed as the detonation of the servos inside the center torso sent shockwaves through her cockpit. Blisters that had formed all along her legs from the laser's heat were now torn apart as shrapnel from the CT explosion erupted beneath her. She shrieked as her equilibrium swirled, the 45 ton, 40-foot-tall Mech was no longer able to support itself with its CT destroyed and it careened over and impacted the dusty surface of Untran as the dust storm swirled around her. The impact shattered bones, one of her ribs punctured a lung and she gasped as her emergency O2 supply kicked on. The BJ-1's cockpit had an emergency pressure loss system that could inject ablator silicone resin foam into breaches smaller than half a meter and, fortunately, that was all that had formed beneath her in the cockpit. It would preserve what heat she had in the cabin for a few hours at least, protecting her from Untran's martian-like atmosphere.

Impossibly, she was still conscious. Her Com was full of static interspersed with calls of 'Commander' and requests for her status but with her punctured lung it was all she could do to keep breathing. She willed herself to control it; the pain, her inhalation rate... all was critical now. She was hurt, badly. In a situation like this she *should* be dead, she knew it, and the truth was she might still be. Lying prone with her Lance badly outnumbered she was still a target on the ground. The explosion that ripped apart her CT had knocked her GM 180 fusion engine offline so she had no power whatsoever beyond the emergency battery backup that now powered her life support and her Com.

She turned her head to the right, her right eye stinging as a rivulet of blood trailed down her forehead into it. Keeping it closed she could still see Dekker with her left as he stomped on a

Striker medium fire support vehicle with the Shadowhawk. She grinned a lop-sided grin as Behemoth appeared at his side in the Centurion, firing her weapons in the direction of the Mech that had felled her. 'We're still in the fight,' she thought to herself even as she could make out Darius on the Com calling for a withdrawal. "No," she keyed up, her voice a haggard and hoarse whisper, full of fluid and pain, "we're too close. There's only two vehicles left... in convoy."

"Hysteria!" Behemoth's voice blared across her Com, "The Commander's alive! We've got to get her out of there!"

"Do the job," Dekker commanded even as he stomped on a Galleon light tank, "we mop these bastards up and then we get out of here!"

Hysteria let her eyes close. She could count on Dekker to keep a level head. Out of all of the company's Mechwarriors she knew Amir to be focused; not as emotional as Glitch nor as protective as Behemoth. Certainly more capable than Medusa. The Capellan was a former naval lieutenant and a veteran and he lived by a personal motto of 'any battle you can walk away from is a victory.' She could relax knowing that Dekker would do all he could to survive. If the Lance needed to withdraw she could count on his judgement over Behemoth's overprotective instincts. 'It's funny,' she thought to herself, 'the very qualities that caused us to butt heads early on are the same ones that will now keep me alive.' For a long while she just focused on trying to breathe. The pain in her lungs went electric every time she took a breath and drowned out the pain in her legs, her back, and her head. Sir Raju had taught her a kind of meditation to perform when in a downed Mech, a way to turn inward on yourself to keep panic and heart rate down, and she relied on that now. A lower heart rate meant slowed bleeding, slower breathing meant less O2 consumption. She was out of the battle but not the fight; times like this were the most dangerous for a Mechwarrior... a fight for life itself.

Her left eye opened again as a shadow fell across her cockpit, the right eye was now crusted and scabbed over. First she noticed the temperature drop as the enemy Shadowhawk that loomed over her blocked out the light and heat of Untran's star. For a moment she thought this was it; her last moment. She anticipated the enemy Mech would raise its leg and stomp out the head of her Blackjack, but then she noticed its back was to her. Her iris contracted as the Shadowhawk jolted from a melee blow, forcing it to the side and allowing the star's light to wash over her once more. Dekker, in their own Shadowhawk, had just connected with a powerful strike. Pieces of the Mech flew out in Untran's lower gravity an exaggerated distance. She coughed and tasted blood as she tried to smile. 'Just one more shot, Dekker,' she said to herself mentally, 'one more like that and he's done.' Then suddenly the enemy fired his jump jets, throwing Untran's fine, sandy soil all over her cockpit. The 55 ton Mech arced into the air above Amir's Shadowhawk.

Then it cut its thrust.

Hysteria's heart rate spiked as the Mech began to fall back towards the planet's surface. She screamed, as much as she could, as its feet tore through Dekker's shoulder, CT, and on to crush and mangle its legs. A series of explosions went off as Dekker's Shadowhawk collapsed backwards, sailing down to Untran's surface. She vomited blood into her mask from

the effort of screaming and was forced to tear it off, trying to clear her airway with what little O2 remained in the cockpit. She became aware of the ice crystals forming on the ferro-glass of her cockpit as Untran's unforgiving cold sapped the remaining heat. Getting her mask back on as quickly as she could she switched her Com to the Shadowhawk. "Dekker!" she wheezed, "Amir, come in! Can you hear me?" All that came back above the static interference caused by the star's unfiltered radiation could best be described as a wheezing gasp for air combined with a guttural noise born of pure terror.



Riana shot bolt upright in her bunk, her hand going to her chest. Her heart was pounding and her left lung, the one punctured on Untran, ached. She closed her eyes, trying to banish the memory of Dekker's death from her mind even as she suppressed tears. 'If I had only let them withdraw when Darius called for it,' she mentally flogged herself for the thousandth time. Her agony was interrupted by the cheerful two-tone alert of an incoming Com.

"Commander," Sumire's voice called her to open her eyes and look to the left, at the *Argo's* Com screen. The pilot's scarred but pretty face appeared on the bluish green, lined display, "We're entering orbit around Untran."

"Thank you," she closed her eyes again, her hand still rubbing her chest. 'We're back,' she thought, 'to the one place in the 'verse I never wanted to return to.'

"It's presently oh-six-thirty," Sumire continued, "Darius has set briefing for oh-eight-hundred with the intention of operation dust-off by eleven-hundred hours," she paused and cocked her

head, concern entering her voice, "should I have him push it back?"

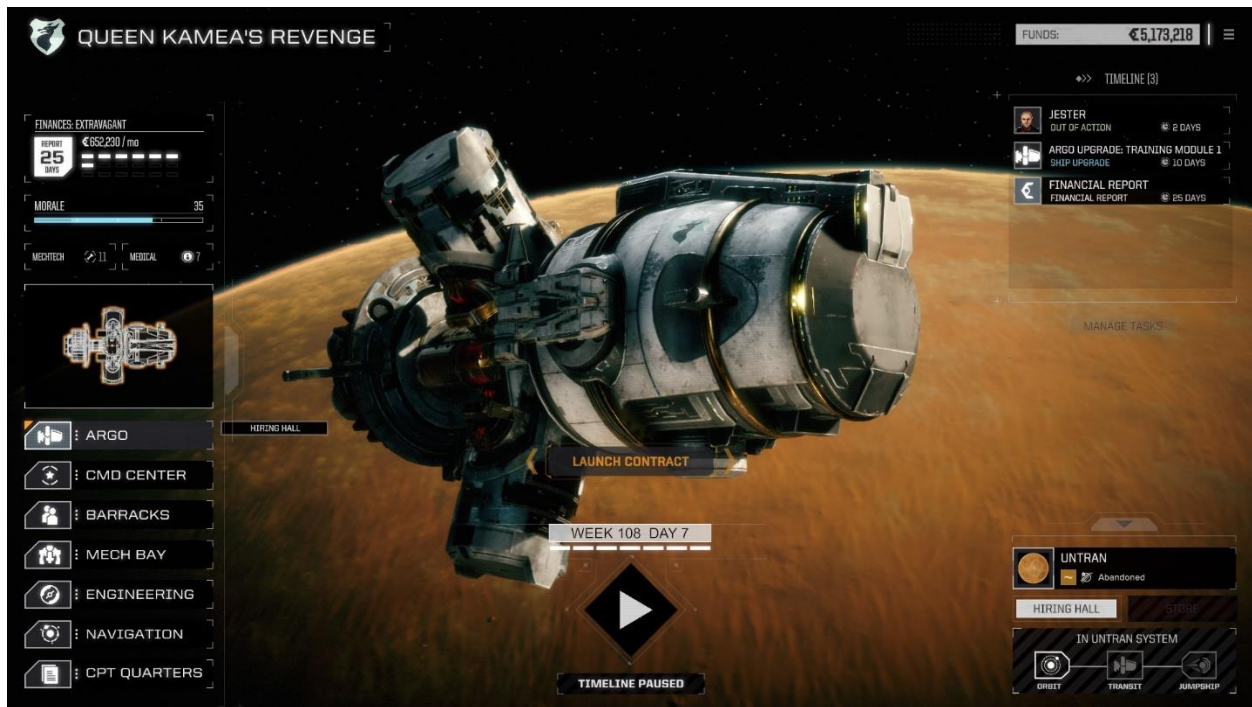
"No," she looked across the room out the window; Untran's rusty expanse filled a portion of it now as the *Argo* entered high orbit, "I'll be on time."

"You don't have to deploy on this one," the pilot offered, "everyone but Jester is clear. Mohammed can take your place."

"To hell with that," she snorted derisively as she whipped the covers off of her, "I owe this planet an ass-kicking and I plan to do it from inside the Jager."

"Roger that," came Sumire's reply. She knew better than to try to argue with the former pirate, "I'll alert madam Liao of our arrival and planned Op start."

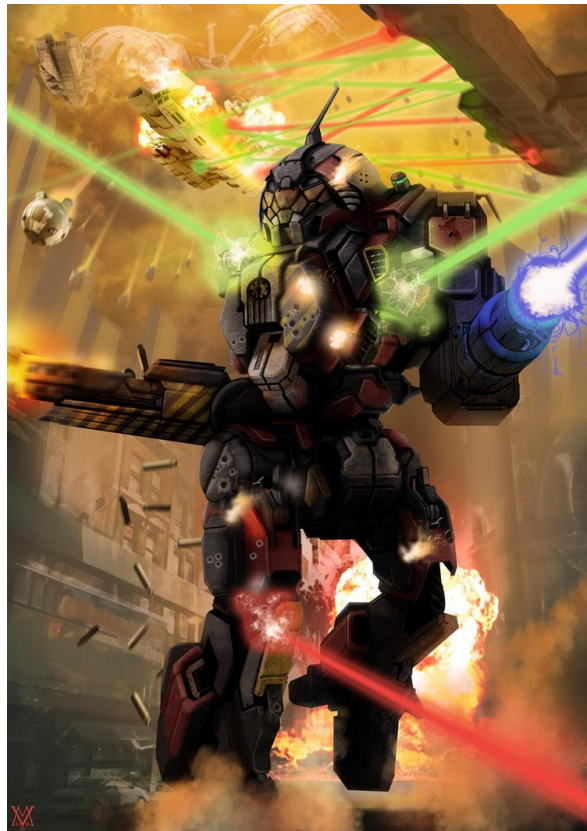
"See you on deck," Riana said dismissively as she switched off the Com. She crossed the room, the cold metal stinging her bare feet, as she collected her dropsuit and headed for the shower. "This one's for you, Amir," she said with icy determination, "and this time everyone is walking away."



For those of you that pay close attention (which is probably no one) I made a mistake in yesterday's journal when I said that Untran was where Behemoth died. It wasn't. That was Linhaiguan on a Capture the Base mission. I have since corrected that. Rather Untran is where everyone's favorite death occurred... it is where Queen Kamea's Revenge lost Dekker. I remarked on it back in Journal Entry 4; Dekker died when an enemy fired their Jump Jets and stomped him. I speculated at the time: "*When we recovered his Mech every part except for the*

head had been completely destroyed: both legs, both arms, both shoulders, and the center torso. With the head intact that means that Dekker died from exposure to the cold, unbreathable atmosphere of Untran. So basically the worst way possible." In my head canon Riana and Dekker butted heads a lot in the beginning but, after a while, he really became one of the most reliable members of my Lance. His loss was the first I suffered and it impacted me more than I expected. But, still, no save scumming. I want this story to play out to its natural conclusion.

Back to the mission at hand. I had taken a job for House Liao to secure a base and forcibly conscript the 'pirate' scientists inside, escorting the convoy to the extraction and protecting it along the way. By this time, I've done this 'type' of mission a dozen times at least for the Capellans, basically a standard escort. I was fielding some pretty heavy metal; the Jagermech, the Centurion, the Shadowhawk... I opted to try out the new Enforcer that Yang had slapped together and I put Medusa in that. The Op started on the rim of a sizable crater with the facility sitting on the crown of a hill. The enemy ran into the crater from both sides, begging to be targets. They fell easily enough, most to single shots from various sizes of Auto Cannons. By this point Hysteria had earned enough points to unlock the Breaching Shot ability as well, which made her AC/20, AC/5 combos all the deadlier, especially when paired with the multi-target ability as each individual shot counted for a single weapon activation, allowing both shots to ignore Cover and Guarded statuses.



A dramatic action shot of an ENF-4R Enforcer Medium-Class Mech.

After wiping out the initial Lance I moved Big Sly in the Shadowhawk up to the top of the hill to trigger the escort. From his perch on high he could cover the entire valley and the extraction point. Reflecting it would have been the perfect place for Glitch and her Vindy but I had elected to let her sit this one out. Medusa in the Enforcer led the convoy down the eastern slope while Vamp in the Centurion walked the western slope just in case they came in from that direction. Hysteria's Jagermech I left in the crater under the cover of a dust storm. From there the range of her AC/5 could hit just about anything and whatever wandered closer would be fodder for the Kali Yama. When the enemy appeared they came from the south, moving down the hill rapidly. It was a full lance of 2 Commandos, a Locust, and one Panther, a popular configuration among pirates in this area of space. The first objective was clear the moment the Panther fired his PPC and missed one of the convoy's vehicles. That was handled by Sly with a called shot to the Panther's right arm. The combo of the AC/10 and the LRMs was enough to blow the arm and its cannon right off. The next threat was the Locust, breaking right around an outcrop of rock and getting close to range of the convoy. A single shot from Hysteria's AC/20++ was enough to both announce her presence and take out the Light Mech. Her second shot tagged one of the Commandos, taking out a left arm in the process, and somehow caused her to draw *all* of the fire for the rest of the mission.

While the rest of the Lance worked at scrapping the remaining two Commandos and the Panther the OpFor focused *all* fire on Hysteria... and wouldn't you know it, hit her in the head. They failed to cut through the copious amounts of armor Yang installed, although they did manage to remove most of it, but the big consolation prize for these losers was they knocked Hysteria out of action, again, for 17 days.

"You alright boss?" Yang asked, ducking into the Medbay as a duo of nurses fussed over Riana.

"I'm fine, Chief," Riana replied as she slapped at the nurses, "just a concussion and a few stitches."

"We're more concerned about the damage you may have done internally!" one nurse countered, "You've only just healed!"

"Yeah, Chief," Riana teased, "I thought you wanted to keep me out of here!"

"I'm gonna blame pilot error," Yang quipped as Riana gasped in mock-offense, "the armor did its job. It was just a lucky shot those bastards got. The point is ..."

"Everyone came home," Riana finished his sentence, "we returned to Untran and everyone came home."

"Right, Yang concluded, "hey, uh, I'm gonna go oversee the team repairing your armor. Darius says there's another fat contract waiting on this hellhole and I figured..."

"Commander Klaue isn't going anywhere," the head nurse turned and glared at both Yang and Riana in turn, "not for at least two and a half weeks! Those are doctor's orders!"

Riana ignored them. "Tell Darius I'll be up there as soon as the hens have settled," she met the head nurse's indignant gaze with a smirk, "I suppose Sly can deploy in my Jager if it comes to that but, so long as we're here, there's no reason to turn down a good opportunity."

"Aye, aye, Cap'n," Yang nodded before turning, "See you topside."

For a moment Riana said nothing, just lying back and letting the nurse finish her stitches, but then she muttered; "Thank you, Amir,"

"Hmm? the nurse turned her attention from the stitches, "did you say something Commander?"

"Everyone came home," she replied softly, just staring out into space, "I'd call that a win."

"Any one you can walk away from, sir." the nurse replied, going back to her work.

Riana's eyes widened as they locked onto the nurse, "Indeed," she smiled, a feeling of warmth moving through her, "Any one you can walk away from," she said, *'and I'm still standing.'*



Seemed appropriate on the 2nd anniversary of Harambe's death

Part XII



"Welcome to Panzyr, Commander Klaue," Lord Madeira began, "Lady Arano and the Restoration Army are already fighting on the planet's surface and have been for weeks."

"She could have called us earlier," Riana said poutingly, "we were on Untran just doing missions for the Capellans and the local government," she smirked, "playing both sides."

"Which is literally a mercenary's *job*, Boss," Yang muttered, "Lady Arano has an *army*, you know, for actual *war-fighting*." Riana turned her head and stuck her tongue out at him, childishly.

"Ahem," Lord Madeira cleared his throat and continued, "With the aid of House Decimis' ground support facilities, Ms. Meyer will carry your lance through Panzyr's orbital debris field and drop you on the surface."

"You feeling okay with this, Sumire?" Hysteria dropped her playful tone. The debris field was no laughing matter; a holdover from the Amaris Civil War that ended the Star League it was the remains of a great battle that happened in orbit over Panzyr. A dense field of particulate material and wreckage that tested even the best of pilots... and ended many who underestimated it.

"Oh, yeah, Commander, no sweat," the pilot said dismissively, "With the kind of navigation support I'll be getting from ground control? I could take us through the field with my eyes closed."

"Would very much prefer them open, *thank you*," Big Sly muttered from his corner in the room.

"Let's keep going," Hysteria ignored him, "What happens after we're on the surface?"

"Lady Arano wants your lance behind enemy lines," Madeira continued, "while she leads from the front, you will harass the Directorate's supply train and target valuable military hardware. She already has a target list drawn up for you."

"Shiny!" Glitch chirped, her pervasive sunny attitude drawing an annoyed glare from Medusa.

"Hold that thought," the deflated tone of Sumire's voice heralded bad news, "Lord Madeira, Commander, I'm getting a tight-beam communication from the planet's surface. It's Lady Arano, and it looks urgent." The room grew pensive as looks were exchanged. "I'm putting it on-screen now." The Holo-table flickered and the blue-tinged, scan-lined image of High Lady Kamea Arano appeared.



"Hysteria," she began, her features softening slightly at the sight of her former Royal Guard, "You couldn't have arrived at a better time... our forces on the surface desperately need your help."

Riana's pulse quickened but she suppressed a smile, aware of Yang's eyes upon her. 'Not giving you the satisfaction, old man,' she thought as the faintest hint of a grin pulled at her right cheek, "Revenge is yours, my Lady. How can we help?"

"With the support of House Decimis we're making our final push against the Directorate's last major stronghold," the Lady's voice was full of pride as she spoke, "Our forces are fully committed to the attack, and we're pushing them back... but the Directorate just seized control of Panzyr's only remaining spaceport," her voice took on a deadly serious tone, "with it they will be able to call down reinforcements at will."

An amplified silence raced around the room. Yang rested his face in his meat hand as Sumire rolled her eyes and tilted her head back, her mouth hanging agape. Suddenly Medusa let out an audible groan. "Is..." Glitch's voice broke the silence further and she recoiled and paused as the others turned to look at her, "*I take it that's a bad thing?*" she asked sheepishly.

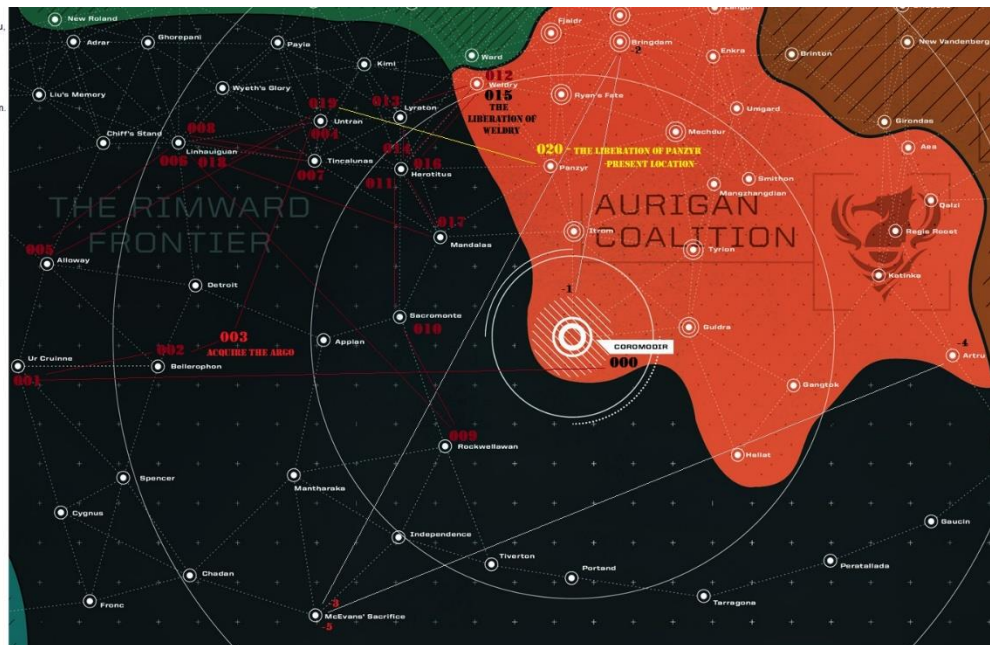
"I need someone to take the spaceport's control tower *away* from them," Lady Arano continued, "Hysteria, that someone is going to have to be you."

"And we are more than happy to help," Riana answered, spreading her arms to indicate her company, "but if they have control of the dropship control center what does this mean for *us*?"

"This means that Ms. Meyer will need to carry you through the debris field unassisted," Kamea answered gravely, "I hope that her skills are up to the task."

"Well," Sumire said with a sigh of exasperation, "*this* day just got more interesting."

-5- Riana Klaus is born on McEvan's Sacrifice.
-4- Klaus Family moves to Artru. Riana trains under Sir Raji, gets exiled, and steals her father's Blackjack.
-3- Riana joins the pirate gang Revan's Raiders.
-2- Revan's Raiders wiped out by Sir Raji, Riana captured.
-1- Riana pardoned and accepted as Royal Guard.
000 - Kamea Arano is depressed on her Coronation Day.
001 - 3 years later Merc company Mjolnir is under Riana's Command working between Alloway, Detroit, and Bellerophon.
002 - Meeting with mysterious benefactor.
003 - Mjolnir acquires the Argo for Lady Arano, reforms as Queen Kamea's Revenge.
004 - Dekker dies on a mission to stop a caravan. Hysteria severely wounded.
005 - Milk run.
006 - Behemoth dies on a capture the base mission.
007 - Series of Milk Runs.
008 - Hired Vamp and Panda. Everest mission.
009 - Milk Run. Hysteria back in action.
010 - Milk run.
011 - Hired Jester, fired Panda.
012 - Mission to take our Directorate Communications.
013/014 - Milk Runs.
015 - THE LIBERATION OF WELDORY / The Argo is gifted to Queen Kamea's Revenge.
016 - Assassinate the Spy mission.
017 - The Deadeye Affair.
018 - Bad Faith Withdrawal.
019 - The Return to Untran.
020 - THE LIBERATION OF PANZYR



Such was our introduction to the critical story mission Liberation: Panzyr. I was excited to see how the game might handle Sumire's approach through the debris field but it was all left to the imagination. We deployed in a polar environment; Hysteria in the Jagermech, Sly in the Shadowhawk, Glitch in her Vindy, and Medusa was piloting the Jenner due to Jester recovering from minor injuries suffered on subsequent missions on Untran before we headed for Panzyr. The lance was outfitted for long-range combat, as usual, so you can imagine my shock and stress when two objectives appeared: DESTROY THE GARRISON UNITS *6 rounds remain*, and DESTROY THE DROPSHIP CONTROL CENTER BEFORE THE ADV CORONACH ARRIVES *15 rounds remain*.

Great. Timed objectives. No leisurely approach from great distance for me. As I moved forward to the garrison I was met with 5 vehicle signatures. I had Medusa Sensor Lock one of them... a 60-ton vehicle. For reference that is *heavier* than the Shadowhawk! "*Commander, I'm seeing Directorate SRM carriers on radar,*" Kamea's transmission interrupted, "*Recommend*

engaging them at long range- they'll take you apart if you let them get close." A quick look at the sensor scan revealed the ugly truth of that statement: these bastards were sporting *10 SRM-6s*. (Short Range Missiles; volleys of 6) That's a potential of 800 damage in a single strike; enough to nearly destroy any Mech on the field, not to mention enough Stability damage to knock just about any Mech off its feet in one volley. I took another look at that timer: 6 rounds? Seemed an awful short time to wipe out 5 vehicles. I wondered if the 15 round mission timer would hold until it was done?

The answer was no. Although I managed to take out the SRM carrier with a single, well-place shot from the Vindy's PPC the other 4 vehicles raced up and let fly with their payloads. There were 2 Bulldog heavy tanks, also 60 tons (which it turns out is about the weight of an M1A1) and a Striker fast assault vehicle as well. and they all unloaded... at Medusa in the Jenner. This stripped armor from his left side with startling efficiency and even punched through to do structural damage as well. Very quickly I relocated the Jenner and brought up Big Sly in the Shadowhawk to take his place. Hysteria's monster cannons (AC/5 for range and that AC/20++ Kali Yama) nailed two shots deep into the armor of the Bulldogs but they persisted, even when they also took fire from Sly, but Glitch managed to take out the Striker with a combination PPC/LRM shot.

Just then the second SRM carrier appeared from the right (east) and fired an ENORMOUS amount of short range missiles into Sly's Shadowhawk. Thank god he divided his assault, also sending missiles after the Jenner and the Jagermech because what *did* hit the Shadowhawk removed *most* of his armor... in one shot. Unfortunately for him (and fortunately for me) the SRM carrier was now in range of Hysteria's guns so, with rapidity, he was no longer a concern. One more Bulldog fell as well as I sent the Jenner to stomp the remaining one, which he did, but it *lived*. Fortunately, Sly got another turn before he could retaliate and another AC/5 shot proved too much. The Garrison was ours, with *1 round to spare*. That meant that there were only 10 rounds to get to the Dropship Control Center... and it was *far* away.

Fortunately, House Decimis had my back. They took control of the Garrison's turrets and turned them on the Directorate forces. This was *not* as effective as one might hope. These turrets had Stormtrooper targeting, let me tell you. So now I've got Glitch on a hill overlooking the spaceport, sniping away, my Jenner cowering behind cover trying to establish locks, Sly *also* hiding on the hill just firing at what he can since he's missing most of his armor, and Hysteria lumbering ahead trying to get close enough to get into range for her AC/20 but not close enough to be the sole target for 6 angry Mechs. I did 3 rounds of this, dealing damage but not destroying anyone, until I was reminded: the *ADV Coronach* is still enroute. Looking up I had 6 rounds remaining. Just 6 and virtually *no progress*. I *had* to have a plan.

"Medusa," Hysteria's voice came over a direct encrypted channel.

"Go, boss," he responded.

"I need you to head around north," she began, "full sprint. The *Coronach* is almost through the debris field and if it makes landfall..."

"Hysteria, that's a suicide run," Mohammed's voice crackled, "I'm sitting bingo armor on my port side; if they *hit* me..." he let his point hang.

"They have to hit you first," she reassured him, "the Jenner's the fastest Mech we have. *I* can't make it in time, and Sly and Glitch are behind me. You're our only hope, Medusa. You're the Restoration's only hope."

"To hell with all that," he countered, "I don't wanna die for a cause, Riana!"

"You're a *Mechwarrior*, Benitez," Hysteria hissed, "that's what you *are*. You're also a mercenary and under *my* command!" She paused to fire her Kali Yama at the enemy Jenner, boldly limping towards her despite heavy damage. The impact was enough to blow the CT apart and finally put an end to the stubborn unit. "I'll be your diversion, Medusa, now get your ass to that control tower before the *Coronach* dumps two *more* lances on top of us and you really do wind up dead!" 'Or before I kill you myself,' she thought to herself.

"Roger that," Medusa relented, kicking the Jenner into gear and racing from cover, "moving full throttle."



A Jenner D on the move

With no real choice left to me I routed Medusa's Jenner north, just as the enemy was funneling up the hill to engage the rest of us. He had all of 5 rounds to get there *and* destroy the tower. To provide a distraction I marched Hysteria's Jagermech forward, directly at 6 enemy Mechs. It was time to test Yang's armor. I destroyed the enemy Jenner with a blast from the AC/20 (which,

honestly, can rock 110 immediate damage into anything it hits) but the Hunchback and the Dragon noticed Medusa's flight. The Dragon launching missiles and the Hunchback firing lasers they turned to attack him, but his speed lent him maximum evasion and moving through the forest gave him cover; not a single shot hit. Still though, that hunchback sported an AC/20 as well... if it got even a single hit against Medusa's exposed left side he was done for.

What happened after that was a stroke of great fortune. Their attention on Medusa, I was able to march Hysteria right up to them, Sly down the mountain within AC/5 range, and Glitch remained on her perch, taking single Breach shots with her PPC. Add to that the turrets still under Decimis control and suddenly I had a real chance to pull this off. Right away the Trebuchet moved itself in front of the Dragon, preventing Hysteria from going both barrels on him, so she went AC/20 on the Treb instead, taking him out. Her secondary AC/5 shot took the arm off the Cent and Glitch put an end to the Panther's right arm, where its PPC was. I was *very* lucky when Sly manage to knock the Dragon prone, causing him to miss his turn and giving my Jenner a chance to advance unmolested. My luck continued the next round when the Panther was finished by turret fire and Hysteria caught the Dragon on the ground, putting an end to his CT with the AC/20. That left only the Cent (not a real concern) and the Hunchback, who was converging on the Jenner's anticipated route.

Medusa raced out into the open. He could get to the dropship control center the next round, just two rounds before the *Coronach* arrived, *if* he could survive the alpha strike from the Hunchback. Glitch and Sly got missile shots at him, but neither was enough to take him out. I held my breath as he fired up his AC/20 and two medium lasers. The AC shot missed, thanks to evasion, but the lasers hit. They tore through more armor and structure but, somehow, the Jenner pulled through and charged up the hill into the protected alcove around the control tower.

The Jenner slid to a halt just outside of the dropship control center, liquid slag dripping from its left side. Inside the control tower Medusa could see the astonished faces staring, mouths open, at the JR7-D bristling with four intact one-ton lasers just as the SRM launcher bay in its Center Torso snapped open. Medusa slid his thumb along a row of switches, the red 'Armed' lights illuminating his cockpit as he took hold of the control stick and wrapped his finger around the trigger. "Cav to Heavy," he began, going out over the main channel, "in position for Alpha Strike."

"Good job, Medusa," Hysteria's voice came back, full of satisfaction, "light 'em up!"

He squeezed the trigger and four emerald rays of death issued from the damaged Mech, punching into the control tower just before the modified SRM-6 poured missiles into the aperture they created. A series of light flashes and smoke and debris exploded out from the building just before the entire structure collapsed under its own weight.

Just then the lance's radios picked up a transmission; "Ground control, this is the *Coronach*, we've lost you!" the static transmission was interspersed with loud clangs and noises that could only be debris impacting the dropship, "Nav support is offline! Where are the damned tugs?" Desperation sounded in the voice on the radio as the clanging sounds grew louder, competing with alarm klaxons.

"Without ground support their dropships won't be able to make planetfall," Kamea's satisfied voice came over the lance channel, "they'll be torn to pieces if they try. Congratulations, Hysteria, Panzyr is as good as ours!"

Mopping up the remainder was no problem at all. The Hunchback fell to a combo of turret fire and Glitch's PPC while the one-armed Cent met the business end of the Kali Yama. Post-mission Kamea came aboard and congratulated us all again when we were suddenly informed that, during her study and repair of the Argo, Dr. Murad had discovered an encrypted data archive being Star League-era encryption no one really knew how to open it, but fortunately Kamea had someone in mind; Lord Simon Karosas, House Arano's Chief Technologist whose family lives on occupied Smithon. It would appear the Restoration has its next target but, until then, time to look for new contracts.



Part XIII



The bass reverberated down the hallway as Sumire and Vamp followed Riana down the hallway. "Commander," the pilot began, "are you *sure* this is the way? It sounds more like a..." they rounded the corner as the hallway opened up into a large room, complete with an elevated walkway, a sea of tables, and even a dancer-filled stage, "... bar." Sumire's tone fell flat and her expression sank, "Riana, you *said* we were checking out the Hiring Hall, though I don't know *why*."

"Relax, Su-chan," Riana teased playfully, spinning about and spreading her arms as she continued into the large club, "this *is* a hiring hall... *and* a bar. The *best* kind of hiring hall! And you know I just like to look; never hurts to see who's available."

"Ooo, dancers," Vamp purred behind them, "Kommander, if is alright..."

"Go, have fun," Riana smiled, "Su-chan and I will grab a drink and check out who's on offer."

"Stop calling me that," Sumire narrowed her eyes, "this trip is *already* a waste of time! We have enough pilots as it is not to mention," she lifted her ever-present datapad and began to tap on it, "we are twenty-two days out from our next financial report which, I might add, is when we have to *pay* for your extravagant expenses!"

"Su, we just *got* paid," Riana said dismissively, turning and leading the reluctant pilot deeper into the room, "One-point-seven mil, if you recall."

"One-point-seven mil that you've already spent!!" Meyer raised her voice to be heard over the thumping bass, "You can't count money that you no longer *have*, Riana!"

"I didn't *spend*, it, Su-chan," Riana countered, working her way through the festive crowd, "I *invested* it. The repaired power conduits allowed for six more Mech bays to be brought online, which is an *investment*, Su, not to mention that will bring more automated systems online, making Yang's job easier."

"Six more Mech cubicles means more Mechs brought out of storage," Sumire shot back, shoving a patron out of her way, "more Mechs brought out of storage means more maintenance, *that* means more expenses on the Financial Report!"

"Besides," Riana continued undeterred, "I only *invested* nine-hundred K that still leaves..." she paused to count in her head, pulling up her hand and rhythmically closing fingers into a fist, "... a lot of the initial one-point-seven... so relax! Let's have a drink! Have some fun!"

"When we do the financials we're looking at nearly, if not more than, seven-hundred thousand!" Sumire's hand shot out and grabbed Riana by the arm, pulling her attention to her physically, "Principle, interest, and payroll! That makes our monthly profit only one hundred thousand!"

Riana smirked, pulling her arm away. "Profit, Sumire," she took her hands and patted both of Meyer's shoulders, as if to reassure her, "Might I remind you we're still sitting on seven million? That's a lot better that we were managing before we started working with the Restoration, back when we were afraid the Leopard was going to be repossessed. Yeah, so I decided to spend a little extravagantly this month, *Revenge* has earned it; we could all use a little reward and as long as these fat Restoration paydays are on the horizon I can't see any harm, so relax, will ya?"



"We spent extravagantly *last* month too," Meyer deadpanned, "six hundred-sixty five thousand, Riana. Biggest payroll I've ever had to put together... that was *eight* days ago!"

"Maybe I should hire someone to do payroll," Riana thought aloud, one hand moving to her chin, "I mean if it stresses you out..."

"*You* stress me out!" Sumire stomped one foot. It was a cute, pouty action that unintentionally endeared the pilot all the more to Riana, the opposite reaction she was going for.

"Look, Riana reached out and put a hand on her shoulder as the two arrived at one of the bars in the expansive club, "*That's* the real reason why we're here. I want you to relax, have a good time. That was an incredible piece of flying you did back in the debris field, navigating that *unassisted*? The stuff of legend, Su. I wanna show my gratitude," she turned her attention as a husky bartender leaned in close to get their order, "Gimmie a PPC, a Kerensky Sour," she paused and looked back at Sumire before finishing, "and two Marik Gunfighters."

"You want to show your gratitude by getting me *drunk*?" Sumire exclaimed in disbelief, "There's four shots of pure grain alcohol in a PPC!"

"And blue curaçao," Riana shrugged, "besides, that's for me."

"I've got to fly us back to the *Argo* tonight!" Her face reddened.

"Su, relax," Riana's flared her eyes as she put her arm all the way around the pilot, "please. Let's just have a good time for a while, okay? The whole planet is celebrating tonight," she held up both arms and shimmied her hips as she added: "Party on Panzyr! It wouldn't have happened without *you*. Just... let go, tonight. You said yourself you could fly that field blind with the nav-aid from the tower."

"The tower that Medusa leveled?" Sumire shot back, "I had to come in via the southern hemi, that's why flight time took so long. Besides, blind and drunk are two different things!"

"Not for long!" Riana squeaked as the bartender delivered their drinks. She quickly lifted the glass of clear blue liquid as she slid the orangeish sour towards the pilot, "What should we toast to?" she asked with girlish enthusiasm.

"A short night?" Su offered dourly.

"Not a chance in hell," Riana lifted the right corner of her mouth in a lop-sided grin, "TO SUMIRE MEYER!" she intoned loud enough to draw attention, "HERE'S TO THE PILOT THAT FLEW THE FIELD UNASSISTED AND LIBERATED PANZYR!"

The toast drew raucous cheers from the inebriated crowd, most of whom now craned their necks to get a look at this hitherto unknown hero, as Sumire's entire face turned beet-red. She tilted back and shot her entire drink in one gulp, as if she could swallow her embarrassment whole like a snake, meanwhile Riana mounted a stool, placing one foot on the bar, and pointed to draw further attention to the shrinking pilot. After the bartender shooed her down and the general din returned to normal Sumire hissed under her breath: "I hate you."

"Here," Riana ignored the comment, if she heard it at all, and handed her a second drink, snatching its twin from the bar. Sumire looked down into the murky, brownish liquid, catching the sickly sweet scent of licorice emanating from it, "Let's grab a table, are you hungry?"

"What's in this?" she asked, crinkling her nose.

"Alcohol," Riana offered helpfully, "C'mon, let's find a quieter spot."

"Does that exist here?" Sumire asked incredulously.

"Not really," she grabbed the pilot by the hand, almost causing her to drop her datapad which she quickly tucked under her arm with her glass gripped in her teeth while the Commander pulled her through the club to a darker corner where she'd spied Vamp earlier.

"What are you looking for?" Sumire asked after a few minutes of fruitless searching, the burly pilot was nowhere to be found.

"A place to sit," Riana mused, pausing to look around. She was sure she had seen Vamp come this way... or was it the other way? She shrugged, her eyes settling on a gruff, dangerous-looking man with black hair and a goatee. 'Maybe it was him I saw?' she wondered to herself, realizing that, from a distance, the man resembled Vamp.



"You gotta problem?" the man growled out in a thick Solaran accent, one eye squinting down as he fixed the women with a smoldering glare.

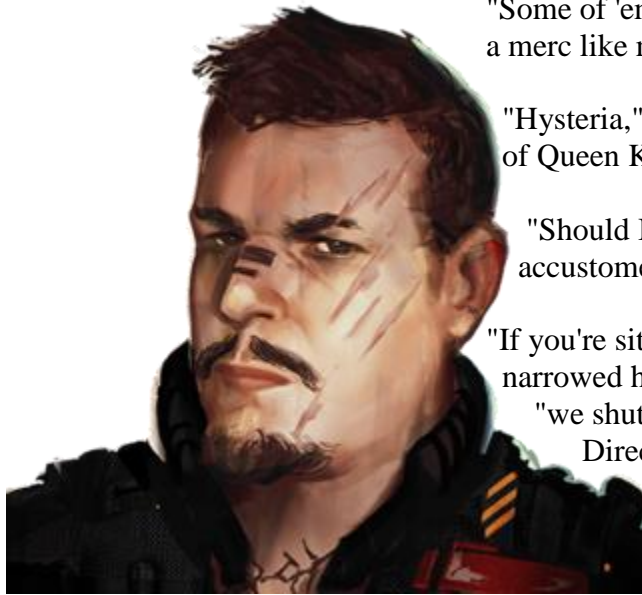
"Yeah," Riana returned coolly, "need a place to sit. This spot taken?" Sumire gasped, physically pulling against the Commander in resistance but the ex-pirate wouldn't budge.

"Heh," the Solaran snorted, "I look like I own the joint? Yous free to sit where yous like."

"Thank you," Riana pulled a chair out, intending to offer it to the pilot but Sumire skittered to her left, away from the man, and took the seat next to her. The Commander shifted, as if she always intended to take the seat, and slid into it, lifting her glass as a salutation, "Riana, Riana Klaue. This is Sumire Meyer."

"Todd Ryia," the man lifted a glass of clear spirits, its accompanying bottle sitting nearby, "nice ribbons," he traced two fingers down the right side of his face, under his eye, indicating the position of her scars, "you get those in a Battlemech?"

"Mmm," she nodded, letting her fingers on her left hand rake gently across the side of her face, "Is that where you got yours?"



"Some of 'em," he nodded, "Callsign Death Crusade. You a merc like me?"

"Hysteria," she lifted her chin confidently, "Commander of Queen Kamea's Revenge. Maybe you've heard of us?"

"Should I have?" he asked nonchalantly, clearly accustomed to the banter and swagger of Mechwarriors.

"If you're sitting on Panzyr tonight, probably," she narrowed her eyes and let a sly grin splay across her face, "we shut down the last spaceport and cut off the Directorate reinforcements. Just might say we won the day."

"I *might* say you're the reason I'm stuck here!" He took a drink from his glass, never

breaking eye contact with her, "I was gonna leave this rock today, look for work in a quieter corner of space."

"Why?" Riana lifted a hand, palm-up, imploringly, "I mean, not to beleaguer the point, but you're a mercenary, right? Why didn't you sign up with the Directorate?"

"Cause I got this policy, see? I never work for *assholes*," she grinned as he spoke, "these Directorate mooks are out here making people's lives miserable, the whole Aurigan Reach is run like a prison camp!"

"So what *are* you doing here?" Sumire cut in, her curiosity overriding her better judgment, "If you're a merc in Directorate space you *had* to be looking for a job. What changed your mind?"

"I wasn't looking for a job," he shook his head, "I was looking for a girl," then a moment later he corrected; "a woman. Came here following a lead and got stuck here when the Directorate shut down civvie travel after the Restoration landed. Been stuck here for weeks. I was *hoping* I could get out tonight but turns out some *chooch* blew up the control tower!" He glared at Riana accusingly.

"Oh, *Todd*," Riana purred, "didn't you know that chasing women can cause some *inconvenience*?"

"Yeah, it's real funny," he filled his glass from the bottle once more, "and the best part of the joke is you're stuck here with me!"

"I'm not stuck anywhere," Riana cut her eyes over to Sumire, "Su-chan here navigated the debris field *unassisted* to drop us for our op, how did you think we got down?"

"Hysteria, why are you bringing me into this?" the pilot squeaked.

"In fact," Riana continued, "I don't see how *you're* stuck either, all a pilot has to do is cut around the southern hemisphere; you can avoid the whole field. Sure it takes a little longer, and it's out of the way..."

"And a *lot* more expensive," Death Krusade growled, "atmo travel chews up fuel. Those costs get passed along!"

"But I'm sure the Restoration will have a control tower up, if they don't already." Riana finished her drink along with her point.

"And it's priority service only," the merc snarled, "Restoration business and all. Civvies gotta wait."

"So let me get this straight," Riana looked over at Sumire's barely touched glass and, with a nod from the pilot, gave herself permission to drink from it, "you're mad at *us* for ending Directorate occupation of Panzyr because we took a job to shut down the spaceport and, thus, stop reinforcements from dragging this battle out several *more* weeks. Is that right?"

"Something like that," Death Krusade took another drink as well.

"Looking for work?" she lifted one eyebrow, Sumire's drink in her hand.

"Riana! Can I talk to you?" Sumire pulled at her arm.

"You offering me a job?" His tone piqued and he sat up straight in his chair, "What kind of Mech?"

"Got a Hunchback my Mechtech just slapped together," she tilted her head as she spoke, "practically new."

"Riana!" Sumire snapped, pinching the inside of her biceps hard, "*Now!*" Refusing to release the pincer-grip on the tender meat of her arm, the pilot physically hauled Riana away from the table and closer to one of the smaller bars in the club.



"Ow, ow, ow!" Riana finally jerked away, "Damn, you've got nails! What the hell..."

"What did we *just* talk about??" Sumire pointed at her accusingly.

"That you need to relax?" Riana offered.

"That *you're* bleeding money out of the company at an alarming rate!" she hissed, "We don't *need* another pilot! We've got Medusa, Jester, Vamp, Sly, Glitch, *and* you! Six Mech bays, six pilots!" She jerked an arm over in Death Krusade's direction and pointed at him, "We only ever field four in a lance so why in the hell do we want an added expense??"

"But we're about to have *twelve* Mechs bays," Riana reminded her gently, "and doesn't he just *seem* like the kind of person to pilot a Hunchback?"

"Rrrrargh!" the pilot growled, "Can you at least *try* to think about the upcoming financials??"

"Su, look," Riana scooped an arm around her and lightly guided her back towards the table, "let's give him a shot. Sure, maybe he'll be a short-timer like Deadeye or Panda or... that guy, what was his name?"

"Hibagon?" she offered.

"Hibagon! That's the guy!" Riana looked wistful, "Poor Hibagon. He was a good guy! I wish we could have afforded to keep him on... I swear if we ever meet him again..."

"Riana," Sumire snarled, "I don't think we can afford to keep *this* guy on!"

"Time will tell," Riana relented, "but I *like* him. I wanna give him a shot, besides... we kinda *owe* him."

"That's bullshit and you know it," the pilot cut her eyes at him, "if you bought that sob story we can just give him a lift to our next job!"

"Well," the Commander began, but just then a very drunken Vamp emerged from the crowd.

"Дами!" he exclaimed, spreading his arms far apart, "Oh, my friends... how I have missed you!" He stumbled into them and laid a sweaty arm over both womens' shoulders.

"How much did you drink??" Sumire pulled away from him, noting the sweat stains in his armpits. Without her support his weight shifted to Riana, who struggled to keep him up.

"Just a glass or two," he slurred, "zis place is amazing! Ze women here are," he hiccuped as he brought his fingers to his lips and Riana noticed for the first time the lipstick on his neck.

"He's drugged," she lowered her brow.

"You took drugs??" Sumire gasped and put her hands on her hips.

"He didn't *take* drugs, he was *given* drugs," Riana corrected, "common scam. Pimps send their girls out to drug Mechwarriors on shore leave, in the hopes of lifting a significant amount out of their wallet."

"They think *Mechwarriors* are rich?" Sumire asked, dubiously.

"It's a glamorous life," Riana said sarcastically as Vamp started to fade, his eyes fluttered and his solid frame began to slide down to the floor, "So... you wanna carry him or can I hire the guy?" He slipped from her grasp and hit the floor, hard. His head echoing with a wet-sounding thud.

"He looks... heavy," Meyer said as the two just stared at him on the floor.

"Yep," Riana nodded, "*can I hire the guy?*" she repeated.

All right," Sumire relented with a sigh, arms akimbo, "you win. Hire the guy."

"Yay!" Riana clapped her hands together in glee, spinning on her heel and rushing back to Death Krusade.

Sumire sighed. "Yeah," she looked at the unconscious Vamp at her feet, a line of drool running down his cheek, "I really *do* need to relax."



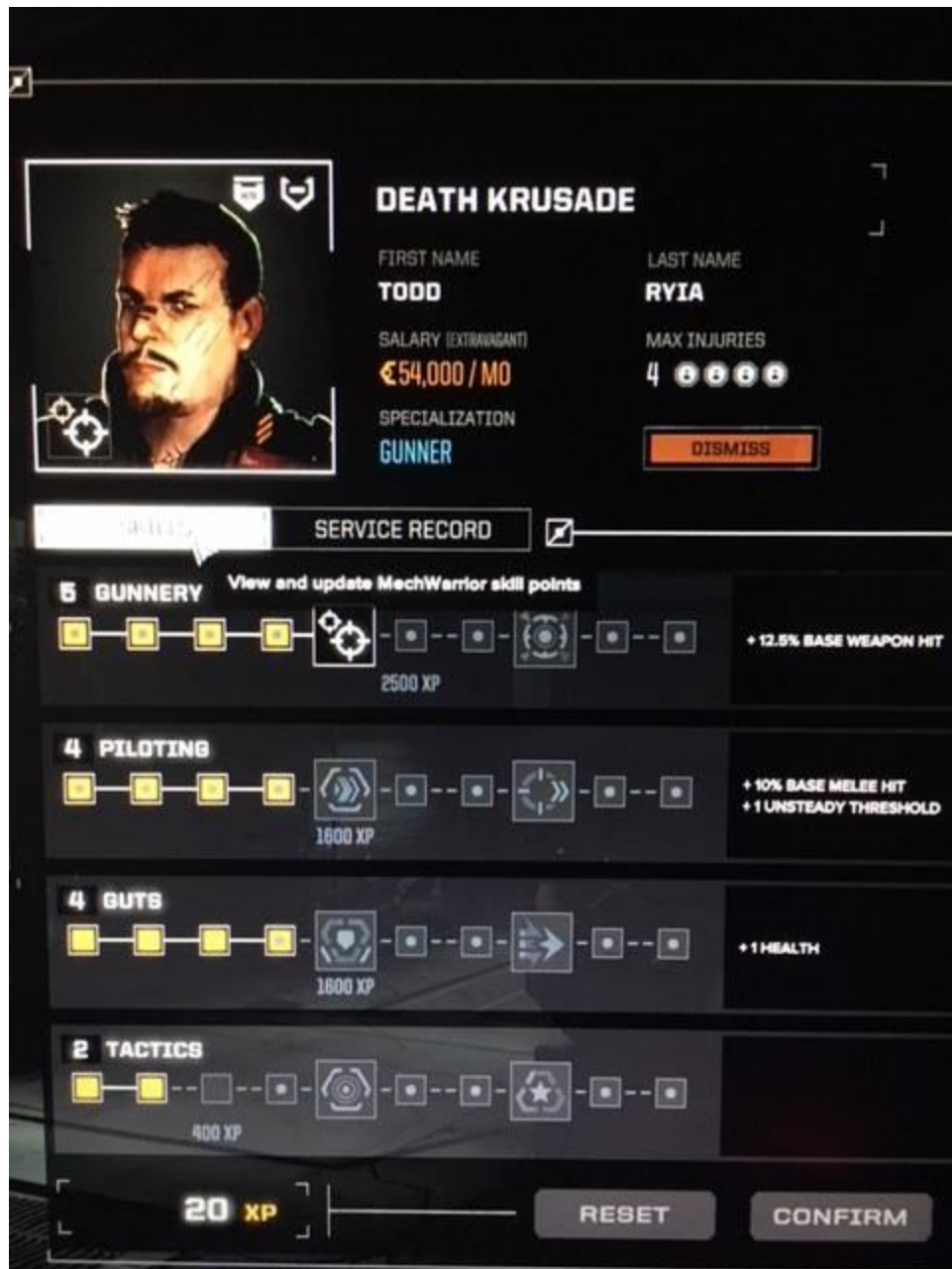
Part XIV




Meet the Hunchback HBK-4G. Yeah, this was the Mech that gave me so much trouble on Panzyr, targeting and pursuing Medusa in the Jenner. I didn't include it in the entry but after Medusa dropped the control tower this sonovabitch managed to nail him in the left side once more, blowing off the Jenner's left arm and the two Medium Lasers there. I had opted for selecting just one piece of salvage from that mission, putting all of my financial eggs in this basket. The last entry was correct: I had already chosen Extravagant Expenses the month before and the 1.7 million windfall from Panzyr enticed me to do it again. I picked a piece of the Dragon Mech (1 of 3) and the game automatically gave me 3 pieces of the Hunchback, so yay! Brand new Mech. The Hunchback is a Medium-Class Mech that behaves like a Heavy. At 50 tons it is technically smaller than the Shadowhawk but it is built entirely around the AC/20 primary weapon it carries. They tossed in a pair of Medium Lasers but that. is. it.

I tend to assign my crew a 'main' Mech to pilot. Hysteria had her Blackjack until she moved to the Jagermech, Big Sly took over from Behemoth (R.I.P) in the Shadowhawk, Jester has the Jenner, Glitch has her Vindy, and Vamp? Everyone's favorite Ukrainian party-boy works it in his over-armored Centurion. Medusa? He's my floater. His original Spider Mech proved to be weaksauce so now he mostly spars with Jester over the Jenner but I'll put him in whatever Mech is available since he has pretty good all-around stats.

I *should* have given Medusa the Hunchback, that would have been fair, but instead I took a liking to Death Krusade and his Jersey accent. When I met him he looked like this:



54k a month is a pretty steep fee for a guy I really don't need and those initial stats aren't too much to love either, especially since Hysteria and Glitch, my two main shooters, have an 8 where he has a 5. Plus, there was the matter of the 64k initial hiring fee too, (man, this guy was confident of his skill,) but when I dug into his enigmatic backstory... well, just have a look:



DEATH KRUSADE

FIRST NAME

TODD





LAST NAME

RYIA

SALARY (EXTRAVAGANT)

€54,000 / MO

MAX INJURIES

4    


SPECIALIZATION

GUNNER

DISMISS

SKILLS

SERVICE RECORD



Periphery

Solaris Gladiator

Command Experience

Dependable

Military

BIOGRAPHY

While Todd Ryla was born in the Outworld Alliance, his blue-collar family immigrated to Solaris VII in his early childhood. Raised among tradesmen working among the residents of Solaris VII, he developed early a jaundiced eye toward the gladiatorial industry.

When he was an adult, he enlisted in one of the local security firms., first as a beat officer and then as a detective. After some time, he was invited to join the Solaris PD special forces unit. He became intimately familiar with the dark side of the gladiatorial industry as well as the inside of a 'Mech.

He lived for his work, for the sense that he was accomplishing something. Until one day he was set on the task of tracking down the person behind a series of brutal murders that led across the International Zone. Through the whole damn city, and through a sordid story that had, at its heart, a betrayed warrior princess with eyes like cinders, and ended with a mercenary DropShip returning to the sky.

Todd's jurisdiction ended there. Unless she returned, he had other cases to solve. But somehow, he couldn't let go. The purity of the girl in the holovid haunted him. He had to follow her, find her, hear her story for himself. He had to find the lies, or accept his own failure.

So now... well, he's been in 'hot pursuit' for a few years now, working hard on finding her. But she's too smart to use her gladiatorial name as a mercenary, and his holo-vid of her was stolen a year ago, so he's not quite sure he'd recognize her anymore, but.... she's out there. Somewhere. And maybe, if he finds her, he'll finally be able to sleep peacefully again. Meanwhile... he has to eat.

He was also a Kickstarter Backer, like Big Sly, Jester, and even ol' Deadeye so in a moment of impulse buying I hired him; he looked like a good Hunchback pilot, I thought, and off I went on the first of two missions with the same goal: to root out a stubborn Directorate Lance that just didn't know when to lay down arms.

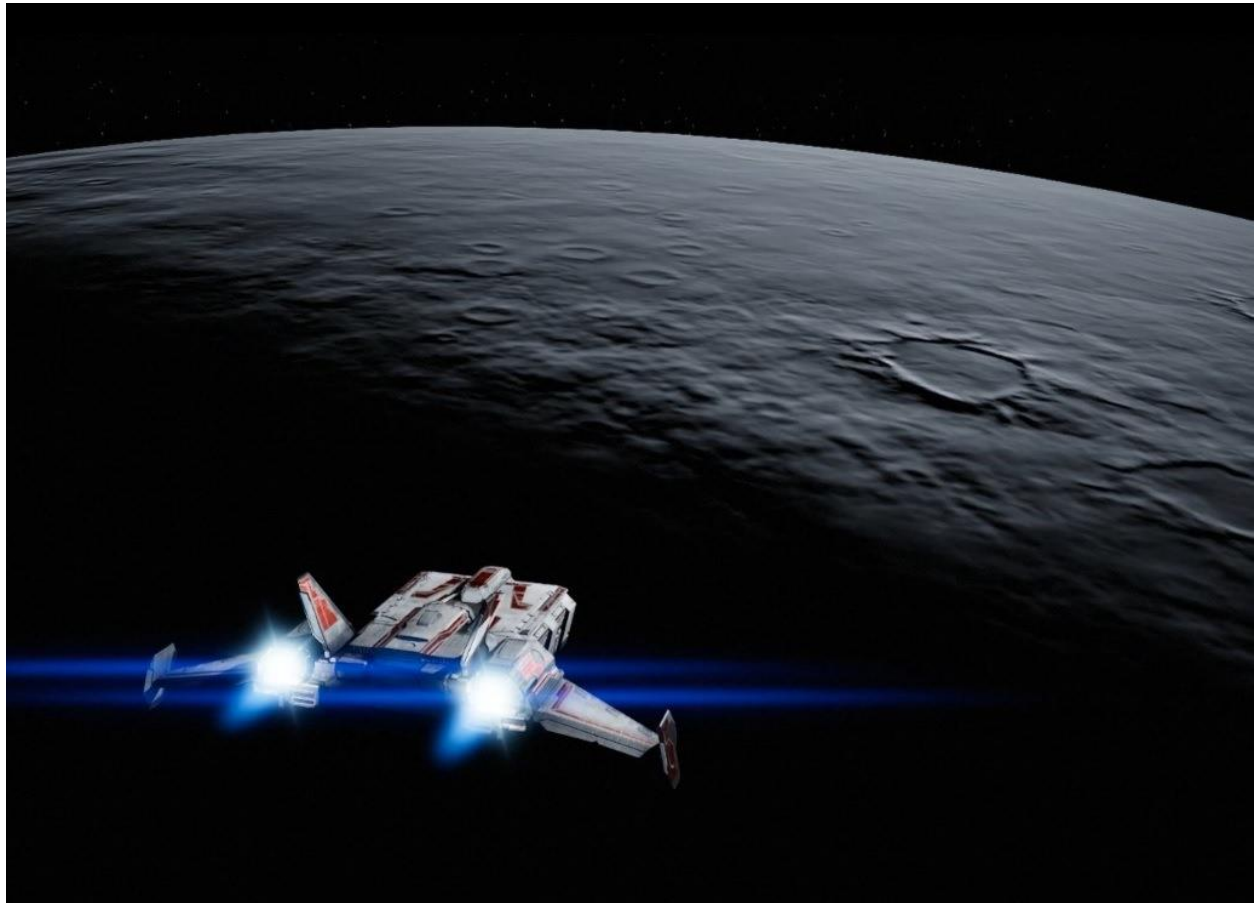
The first operation I landed with Hysteria in her Jager, Jester in the Jenner, Vamp in the Centurion, and Death Krusade in the Hunchback. One of the first things I realized is that the Hunch is slow, mega-slow, and it can do very little with Jester's Sensor Lock. It, much like how I envision Kru's attitude, is in-your-face up close and personal. Sticking to the cover of the trees I let the enemy Lance come to me... and dismantled it. One by one they came into the firing arcs of 3 AC/20 autocannons. It was a thing of beauty.

I fielded the same team for the second mission. This time I started at the base of a hill and the enemy was on top, so I had to work my way up but it didn't prove to be much trouble. Since Vamp's Cent and Hysteria's Jager both have advanced AC/20s I was giving thought to *how* I wanted to outfit the Hunch. It seems appropriate that it should keep the AC/20, so I'm considering a different layout for the Centurion since Hysteria would *never* part with that Kali Yama. I'm thinking about stripping off those Medium Lasers and replacing them with a good set of LRM launchers. I haven't decided yet but I know, given Kru's attitude in my head canon, that I'm gonna need more armor!

For now, I'm leaving Panzyr and heading back to Herotitus. A lot of the missions here sit at 3 or 3.5 difficulty and the most I can field is 2.5. So I'll slum around the old neighborhoods a bit, pad that nest egg so Su-chan can calm her tits a bit, and then give one of these higher missions a try. Lady Arano's next mission just popped up as I got to the jumpship to Herotitus so I can't afford to mess around for long.



Part XV



"Sixty seconds until periapsis orbital insertion," Sumire's voice came across the radio as Hysteria and her lance went through their final startup checklists, "we are in the pipe, five-by-five. Touchdown in the A.O. in approximately five minutes." "Final prep, people," Hysteria keyed up as she primed the Magna 260 Fusion Engine in her Jagermech, monitoring the reading on the GCF ignition panel and watching the Lorentz field for fluctuations, "I want a clean deployment. We don't know how hot the A.O. is going to be." She listened as Vamp, Jester, and Death Krusade all acknowledged. "Local government says all they've got is a single Lance," Darius came over the channel from his position in briefing aboard the *Argo*, "but you should keep your eyes out for reinforcements. Sacromonte is an subterranean colony due to the lunar terrain and lack of atmo so there's no possible way the local authorities can monitor the entire surface. Outside of a handful of automated monitoring stations a place like this is a pirate's playground." "Think about who you're talking to," Riana smirked as she opened conduits to the ambulatory circuit, feeling the Heavy Mech shiver to life. "I don't think I have to remind you to be careful out there," Darius came back, "keep your masks on and make sure those emergency O2 circulators have enough charge." "Yes, mom," Hysteria slipped her mask on and adjusted the straps. "How much trouble we expecting, here?" Death Krusade asked with a suspicious tone, "I thought this was some two-bit pirate outfit; probably a couple 'o Light Mechs, maybe a few vehicles..." "Doesn't hurt to expect trouble, Kru," Hysteria answered, "I'd rather roll over a handful of Locusts with extreme prejudice than get sandwiched between two lances of Dragons

and Cataphrachs." "Good point," the Solaran acknowledged. "Don't worry, Kru," Riana assured him, "you'll get your chance to test out that new Federated AC/20 Yang installed," "My AC/20," Vamp pouted, "You'll get more range with the AC/10 anyway, Vamp, so zip it," Hysteria cut him off, "and both of you should be able to make good use of the Flamers he installed in this environment, so get up close and personal. You've now got tons of armor to play with." "Red line," Sumire interrupted, "three minutes to deployment," everyone could feel Sacromonte's gravity begin to pull at them as the pilot guided the Leopard closer to the surface, "spooling power to the umbilicals," she added as she flipped a series of switches in the cockpit, green lights illuminating as she went, "gravity's light but don't get sick!" Hysteria's Mech shuddered as the Umbilical Deployment Arm calibrated for her adjusted weight. In a deployment to a potentially hot zone it just made more sense to use the UDA than to rely on the Mechs walking off the Leopard, a parked dropship was too tempting of a target. "Jester I want a standard run-up," she went across the radio, "don't wait for us. Just get that first Sensor Lock and then find cover. Can't have you trading in a vacuum." "Copy that, boss," Jester replied with his characteristic professionalism, "I'll keep my eye on my sinks." Suddenly Hysteria's Mech jerked upwards as the UDA lifted it clear of the deck and moved it closer to the door. "Jesus," Jester exclaimed, "you might give us a warning next time, Meyer!" "Sorry," her reply was quiet and distracted as she kept one eye on the terrain racing underneath them and the other on the PFD, counting off the clicks to their A.O. "The pirate lance should be just north of the A.O.," Darius offered, "but our scans are clear. Could be they're too small to pick up or they could be hidden." "The *Argo's* a big ship," Lord Madeira cut in, "with no atmosphere or cloud cover it's entirely possible they could have spotted our passage in orbit." "Or the local government might not be the *only* ones with sensors in place," Riana suggested, "Keep in mind Sacromonte serves as a critical shipping and travel link between the Aurigan region and the Magistracy. Trade, both legal and otherwise, thrives here." "Tell me again the fuckin' reason why the locals can't handle these pirates?" Kru asked. "Who gives a shit?" Hysteria countered, "It's half a mil for us." "Locals want to project 'overwhelming military force,'" Darius offered helpfully, "and since they lack an overwhelming military..." "They hire us," Vamp finished his sentence, "We can do overwhelming military presence, easy." "Thirty seconds," Sumire cut in. She flipped four switches and, in the bay, the red light above the doors turned green. "Prepare for combat deployment." "Do *not* arm weapons systems until we are on the surface," Hysteria reminded them. She braced herself, taking hold of the cage harness and letting the Alignment Control System handle touchdown as the Leopard pulled up sharply, the ventral thrusters firing and arresting the dropship's speed in moments. "If you have any lunch, lose it now!" she quipped, the G-forces pressing her up against the cage as the ship lurched level again just before the doors fired open. The UDA accelerated her Mech, firing it over the lunar terrain before the movement slammed to a halt, just past the door, and detached. For just a moment the 65-ton Mech was in freefall prior to the feet impacting the surface of Sacromonte, the ACS automatically adjusting for the Battlemech's balance. "Clear!" Hysteria shouted as she released her grip and took hold of the controls, righting the Jagermech manually as the Leopard fired its thrusters, kicking up a maelstrom of particulate dust as it lifted from the surface, doors closing as it took off at a 45° angle.



"Actual, package is delivered," she said as she accelerated into the void above, "Envoy is clear and standing by."

"Sound off!" Hysteria commanded as she powered up her auto-cannons.

"Cav, good to go," Jester said as the Jenner roared by her heading north/northwest at a full sprint, "board is green and sensors coming online."

"CC ready," Vamp was next, "all systems go."

"Assault, ready to rock," Kru said with confidence, "time to see what this baby can really do!"

"Zat baby fit really well on my Centurion," Vamp jeered.

"Stow it," Hysteria warned as she turned her Mech to follow Jester's lead, "I've got rear, you two watch our flanks. Their drop zone was near the ended of a large crater and the lance advanced towards the edge with Jester in the lead. There was a roughly smooth path leading up to the lip of the crater and soon Jester passed out of sight. "Cav, report," Hysteria said as the rest of the lance hurried to keep up, "sitrep."

"Commander," Darius' voice cut in, "we're picking up multiple signatures coming in north/northwest. You're heading right for them."

"I've got one on my screen," Jester reported, "establishing sensor lock... got 'em. Looks like a Spider."

"Izzat all?" Kru snorted, "I'll break right, you go left."

"Okie-dokie," Vamp replied cheerfully.

"Don't get cocky," Hysteria reminded them, but then added, "and try to save me some!"

"Here they come," Jester spoke next, "Commander new bogies; I've got a second Spider and something else coming in fast from the northwest."

"Big deal," Kru said dismissively, "see? A trio of Light Mechs. I told yous," he grinned as the first Spider came into view, it was moving fast. "Taking an Alpha Strike," he said as he fired the massive AC/20 on his right shoulder, followed by an extended burst from the medium laser on his left arm. The auto-cannon shot sailed wide, the smaller Mech racing ahead of it, but the experienced pilot tracked the enemy for the duration of the laser burst." Dammit," he cursed, "fast lil' bastards, aren't they?"

"He's mine," Vamp swore, firing his AC/10. The shot took off the Spider's left arm at the shoulder just before his salvo of SRMs crashed into it. The Mech stumbled, but managed to keep its feet, "persistent, aren't you?" he asked as the one-armed Spider fired its medium lasers at Jester's position.

"Hey!" Jester exclaimed, "Commander I'm taking fire from the left *and* the right here! Other contact is a Locust and..." he paused, his HFORS display reading multiple incoming foxes, "quaternary contact! Inbound IDF! Taking evasive action!"

"Get out of there, Cav," Hysteria ordered as she finally mounted the crater's edge. She locked in her first target, the one-armed Spider, and then sighted her AC/20 on the second Spider, "Heavy; shot one," the Kali Yama fired but the shot passed right behind the racing Spider, blowing the lunar terrain into the sky where the debris hung lazily in the low G, "shit!" she cursed, swiveling the Jager's torso to line up her AC/5 on the one-armed Spider, "Heavy; shot two," the auto-cannon tore into the Light Mech, ripping apart its left torso and sending the Spider skidding to its right.

"Good shot," Jester offered as he pulled alongside Hysteria's left, just coming into her peripheral, "let's try mine!" He lit up an Alpha Strike; four medium laser blasts and the accompanying SRM volley all tore into the damaged Mech and blew apart its Center Torso. Pieces were already exploding when the missile rain began to impact. "Heh, heh," he chuckled, "Tango down."

"Watch your heat," Hysteria reminded him, taking note of the Locust coming in from the left, "Assault?" her voiced piqued, as if to inquire if he saw the approach.

"I got the other Spider," came Kru's reply, his AC/20 and laser firing into the Light Mech just after it finished firing its twin lasers into Vamp's Cent, "Take that, you mook pirate scum!"

"Zanks," Vamp said as he strode forward and laid into the Spider with a big left hook. The Mech had already been stumbling to its right when the blow connected, throwing it off balance. Just then Vamp activated his new flamer, dousing the Spider in a jet of flaming liquid. Vamp laughed as the Mech stumbled to keep its footing. "Look, he's dancing!" he joked, "Oh zis one is on *fire*!"

"Taking fire again, Commander," Jester reported, as the Locust kept him in its sights, "re-positioning."

"Let's see if I can get his attention," Hysteria swiveled and fired with her AC/20. The impact hit the Mech's CT and it slid backwards from the impact but, somehow, kept on its feet, a cloud of slagged armor marking where it once stood. "Tough little bastards," she admitted in frustration.

"I'm still taking ID fire," Jester called, his Mech dashing through a hail of missiles, sliding to a stop to the right rear of the Locust, "Guess I'll take it out on this guy!" He lit up for another Alpha Strike, blasting apart the recently damaged Locust as the temperature alarm sounded in his cockpit.

"Find somewhere and cool off," Hysteria ordered, "and get far enough away that those missiles won't be able to lock on you."

"Roger that," he replied as he moved the Jenner north, "I'm low on armor as it is. They keep hitting structure."

"We're here to *make* money, not spend it on repairs," she reminded him as she watched Kru and Vamp take turns pummeling the Spider with melee attacks.

"Rrraah!" Kru yelled as his Hunchback's punch tore through the Light Mech's left torso, ripping off the arm in a dramatic shower of parts, "and then you get some of this!" he continued, igniting his flamer just after Vamp's kick dislocated the Spider's right knee. The Cent's flamer fired as well as both Mechs followed the Spider's descent to the ground, scorching it until its entire frame glowed red hot.

"Commander, contacts to the south," Darius interrupted, "I'm reading four signatures, heading for the same path you took."

"Cav, get me a sensor lock," Hysteria began as she spun her Mech around, "Assault, you're with me; let's roll out the welcome mat!"

"You've got three vehicles," Jester reported, "two 60-ton and one 35. Looks like a Locust inbound as well. Sensor locked."



"I can't get him from here," Hysteria reported, taking up a position with a good view of the access to the top of the crater, "but I can wait..." She didn't have to wait long until the first vehicle, a 60-ton Bulldog heavy tank, rolled into view, "Hello baby," she smiled as she squeezed off a burst from her Kali Yama. It streaked towards the tank, already in bad repair, and tore through it. Tank and soil exploded into the sky in an eruption of evaporating fire.

"Heh, the next guy in line just crapped his pants!" Kru chuckled as he raced past her at full sprint, taking up a similar, but closer position. "Come to daddy," he sang as he waited for the next pirate to appear.

Meanwhile Vamp clanged his Cent's arms together as he waited patiently for the Spider to climb back to its feet. No doubt its internal systems were ravaged by the overheating and the Light Mech struggled to stand on its ruined right leg. "Are you feeling better?" he asked as he wound up for another big hit, "zat's good because I owe you one!" The Cent's right fist connected with the still-glowing metal of the Spider's CT and punched right through it. Red hot fragments exploded out of the Mech's back and trailed after the strike as the rest of the Spider collapsed into scrap. "Another Tango down, Kommander," he reported, do you zink zere will be some left for me?" He turned as he watched the Jenner approach a vantage high atop the crater's lip; Jester trying to get a firing arc on the enemy below.

"It doesn't look like it," Kru said, his shot destroying a Striker in a single hit even as Hysteria's fire finished a second Bulldog, "except for the Locust it looks like we're done here and that yellow bastard just turned tail and ran!"

"Don't worry," Hysteria began, "there's nowhere he can run! Heavy to Envoy; you feel like a little hunting?"

Before Sumire could answer Jester's voice flooded the channel; "DEATH FROM ABOVE!!!"

"Cav, what the actual fuck!" Hysteria gasped as she watched the Jenner fire its jump jets and arc from the top of a 60 meter drop before cutting thrust and falling, feet first, right *through* the fleeing Locust. The Light Mech exploded all around the Jenner as it struggled to keep its feet. The metal of the legs bent and fractured as pieces of armor flayed off of it as they struggled to hold up the 35-ton weight, the head of the Mech coming dangerously close to the ground. "Jester!" she screamed, "Are you okay??"

"I'm okay," he came back after a tense moment, "little shook up... did you *see* that?"

"Yeah I saw it!" Hysteria snapped, "Jester, those Mechs cost *money*!"

"I know, boss," he admitted, "but I can't let Vamp and Death Krusade do *all* the crazy shit!"

"Heavy to Actual," Hysteria's voice was full of irritation, "mission complete. Damage to the lance... negligible, except for the Jenner which appears to have lost a contest between the pirates and its pilot as to who could do the most damage!!"

"Guess we'll have to invite Jester to our next *discussion* about the financials," Sumire's voice came over the radio as the Leopard swung into view, leveling out and sitting down inside the crater.

"I hope it was worth it, Jester," Hysteria began as the lance trundled back towards the drop ship, "because you just volunteered for Yang's crew *all the way to Smithon*!"

"Did anyone at least catch that on holovid?" Jester asked.

"Are you kidding me?" Death Krusade laughed, "I'm gonna upload that shit to to the Darwin Awards *tonight*!"

"Then yeah," Jester grinned, "*it was worth it.*"



Part XVI



Liberate: Smithon began kind of low-key. No sooner than I'd arrive in orbit I was tasked to deploy; no cut-scenes, no meeting... just a mini-briefing on the way down:

"The Restoration army is engaged in a battle of attrition against Directorate forces," Kamea's voice was distorted as it came across the radio, "and our ground forces need resupply if they're going to prevail. To that end I'm sending you to capture a Directorate munitions dump. Eliminate their defenses and prevent them from getting away with the munitions; our support staff will handle the rest."

"Zings must be grim," Vamp offered, "if zey are in such hurry."

"We are definitely on a timetable here," Darius said, still aboard the *Argo*, "the Restoration Army's been locked in a stalemate with the Directorate for a few days now. In the end it's gonna come down to whichever side has the most ammo, so let's make sure it's ours."

"What's our sitrep look like?" Hysteria asked as she spun up her Jager's reactor. She didn't like how quickly this was moving. The *Argo* had only just entered orbit around Smithon when they got word to deploy immediately for long range skirmish and that Lady Arano would be in touch on their way down. "I'd kinda like to know what we're jumping in to."

"Can't say much until we're on site," Darius responded, "all we can say for certain is that it's a munitions facility and it will probably be heavily guarded. Watch your ass out there."

"I feel like I'm in someone else's living room," Medusa complained. Yang had pulled the Enforcer he was piloting out of storage. The ENF-4R sported a big AC/10 but the MechTech had installed dual medium lasers on the other side, "I could have just brought Sly's Shadowhawk, you know."

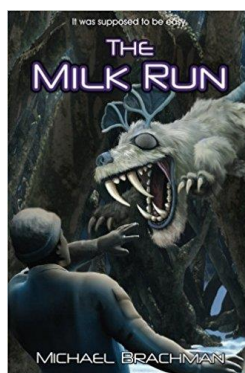
"I thought about it," Hysteria admitted, "but I also figured we'd give the Enforcer a fair shake; see how you like it."

"What's our game plan, boss?" Glitch's cheery voice chirped over the com, "I admit I'm kinda nervous on this one."

"Lady Arano said they will try to make a break for it with the munitions," Hysteria came back, "Glitch I want you and Medusa to prevent that. Vamp and I will stage a primary assault since we have the most armor. Once you insure they don't escape you can move to a support fire role."



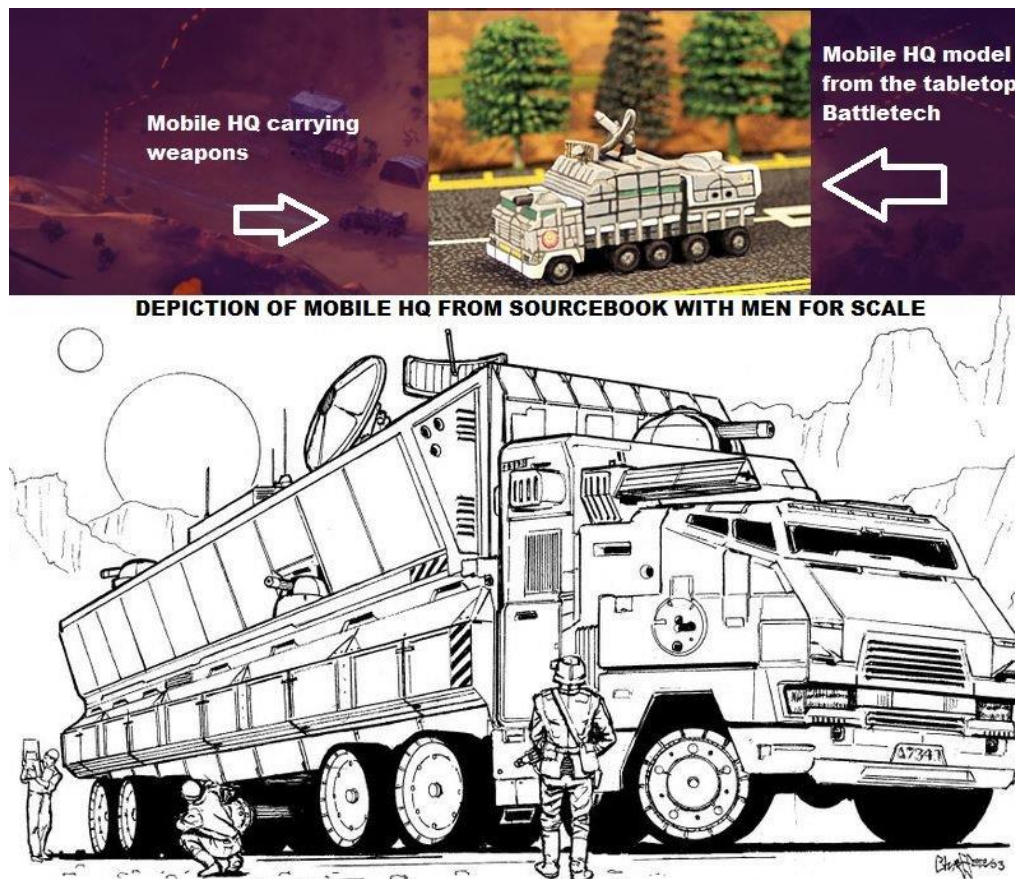
That sounded good, didn't it? Pretty strategic. The layout is right above; seemed pretty easy, to be honest. Strike from an elevated position, plenty of cover. This was going to be a milk run, I was sure of it. Practically relaxing. Why, I might even have time between rounds to sit back and read a book...



See that was before I hit the ground and saw the listed objectives: DESTROY THE GARRISON UNITS (0/8,) SAVE SIX AMMO CRATES, and SAVE THREE AMMO CRATES. 'Hmm?' I thought, 'Whassat? 0/8? There's *two* full lances here? Ah, must be a horde of Light Mechs.' After all, I reasoned, this is only a difficult 2 mission. And, yeah, there was a Locust, and a Spider, and a Firestarter... oh and a Panther, you know the Light Mech with the PPC sniper cannon? There was also a Jenner, a Griffin, and a Shadowhawk so that's 5 lights and 2 mediums and, oh, what's that in the distance? A Dragon. You remember the Mech that looks like a cramping Metal Gear? Yeah, he's here too. Oh and 5 turrets. FIVE of them, including sniper turrets firing dual PPC shots. And missiles, *oodles* of missiles.

Okay, so this would be a bit of a challenge right? But still, difficulty 2. No problem. No sooner than I'd landed did the first Directorate transport try to run with the weapons. I quickly tasked Glitch and Medusa to rush to the left to catch it. There was a turret and a Spider in the way. No biggie; I fired Glitch's jump jets and got her in a position that overlooked the entire facility even as Medusa came around the side and took out the turret. Things are going great! Glitch's Vindy took some big hits though; the Spider hit me and then a rain of missiles came in from multiple unseen sources: other turrets and Mechs. I had just made Glitch their *only* target. 'Well,' I thought, 'it's alright cause she's about to take out this transport.'

THIS transport:



That's a pretty big vehicle. Readings showed it at 25 tons, about the same as a Scorpion Light Tank and about 10 tons less than a Striker Assault Vehicle, which I routinely take out with PPC shots. So I have Glitch line up a single shot, with Breaching Shot bonuses, and let fly.

I *might* have scratched the paint. I task Medusa with sprinting after it as I try to move Glitch behind cover. He gets a shot as its speeding away; Alpha Strike... an AC/10 plus 2 medium lasers. I have *still* barely nicked this thing! That's when I realized these Mad Max supertrucks have about as much armor all over them as Vamp's Centurion does on its center torso! At this point there is *no* catching this, not unless I just sprint down the road after it and let every single turret light up the Enforcer. But I barely have time to think about that: the rest of my lance is getting *chewed* up by sensor-locked missile fire coming from the turrets!

Reasoning that I have to do *something* about the turrets I march Vamp's Cent down the hill and into the water, a godsend on this hot-ass desert map. I follow him with Hysteria's Jager, using his proximity to take out a LRM turret, but now that Vamp is out in the open *all 8 Mechs* converge on him. At this point I have yet to kill *any* of the enemy lances. The Spider has some pretty gnarly damage, running around armless and shit, but it is still harassing Vamp. And the Locust? Well Vamp helpfully missed him, wasting a shot that could have been made against another turret. Glitch and Medusa are sticking to the plan, trying to lay fire on the second Mobile HQ so I can't count on them, but Vamp is taking a *lot* of fire... from everything the enemy has. Suddenly he's down, his stability spent and there's just too many enemies still on the field to ignore. So I do what I said I wouldn't do: I target a stack of ammo crates.



Now *that's* a big explosion. I caught *three* of them in it and it destroyed all three! The Griffin, the Locust, and the Firestarter... all gone in an instant. I was starting to understand why this mission, by far the hardest I think I've had, had only a 2 difficulty rating. The crates were *devastating*. But

before I could get Vamp back on his feet enemy fire destroyed his right arm, his right torso, and just about depleted the last of his CT armor. I got lucky; he survived the salvo only just because I had managed to eliminate three at once, but now he was all but spent. His auto-cannon was gone; all he had left were missiles. I might have risked him if I could have gotten him to cover but his right leg was also scrapped... he could stand, but not really move. For the first time in a mission, I did the unthinkable:

"Vamp!!!" Hysteria screamed into her com as the fire enveloping the downed Centurion mushroomed into the sky and the pieces of the Mech rained down, "Leonard, goddammit, answer me!!"

"Zat hurt, Kommander," his strained voice crackled over the com, his main antenna array was heavily damaged, "But I am still here," his Centurion struggled to its feet, the right leg sparking and sending electric arcs down to the water he was standing in. Hysteria gasped as he tried to turn to his right: the leg threatened to buckle and the arm and right torso were completely gone; she could *see* his cockpit. "I still have armor on my left," he began, "I can target one of ze ammo crates..."

"Punch out," she said, her voice shaking, "eject. You've done enough." Her mind raced back to Coromodir, on the day that Lady Arano was deposed. "*Hysteria*," Sir Raju's voice echoed in her mind, "*I want you to eject, now. Punch out. You're no good to anybody in a broken Mech and I won't let you die today!*"

"Kommander," Vamp protested, "Glitch is bingo armor! If I eject zen you have only two..."

"That's an order, Vamp!" she snapped, "Do it NOW!"

"Зрозумів, Kommander," Vamp replied. Moments later the head of his Centurion was torn open by rocket charges and Vamp, enclosed in his ejection capsule, was launched free. Hysteria knew what he was experiencing; an excess of 4Gs as the capsule rocketed into space.

"Actual," she said into her com, "one for recovery. You got his transponder?"

"We're on it, Commander," Darius' reassuring voice came back, "you stay on task!"

So that was that; I was now down one bullet sponge and there were a cornucopia of bullets left to soak! I called Medusa back over to help mop up, leaving only Glitch to ineffectually harass the fleeing Mobile Headquarters. (Spoiler alert: they got away.) Medusa's Enforcer managed to kill the Jenner and chased down the Spider... until the Dragon arrived. Suddenly he was sandwiched between the Spider, the Dragon, and the Shadowhawk and they literally tore him apart. Within a round he was down, missing both arms, his right *and* left torso, and without working legs. He was literally waiting to die. Meanwhile the Panther and the sniper turret were just taking the Jagermech apart, piece by piece. Without recourse I targeted a second ammo crate with her AC/5, blowing two turrets and the Panther sky high.

Miraculously, Medusa got another turn. I ejected him as well, even from the prone position. It was now just Hysteria and Glitch and Glitch was far afield and could take one, maybe two shots at most. The plan that formed was reckless and dangerous, and it was one that *only* Hysteria could pull off: to lure the remaining enemies to an ammo crate and let Glitch blow us *all* to kingdom come. Hysteria's status as the main character prevented her from dying in battle, I knew this, so it would work. It would *cost* me greatly though; there wasn't enough armor left on the Jager to prevent its destruction and replacing all of its parts would probably cost me half a million, easy. Fortunately, however, it didn't come to that. The Spider finally fell to a shot from Glitch even as Hysteria kicked the CT out of the Shadowhawk. I was on my way to the nearby ammo crates when I made that attack and the Dragon helpfully repositioned *right next to them* for his next shot. Glitch blew them but the damned thing was *still standing*. So he got a face-full of AC/20 and AC/5 and that was enough to FINALLY bring him down.



And indeed it was. The Enforcer was a total loss; it just wasn't worth repairing. (And boy was Sly glad Medusa didn't take the Shadowhawk!) The Cent's repairs were surprisingly manageable but Vamp and Medusa would go out on medical for over 72 days due to their injuries and Glitch was out for 30! Not stopping the weapons transport hurt my pay, a lot, and with only 5 crates of ammo left my mission total was just over half a million, down from the 1.7 I had been expecting. I had lived it up on the way to this mission, with generous compensation and loan payments, expecting a 2 difficulty story mission to go well. It did not. And it was not about to get better.



See that crochitty old man? That's Lord Karosas. He's the guy we need to open that archive we found in the *Argo*'s computers. He's also the rightful ruler of Smithon, the place we just liberated. He's *also* the father of the guy we liberated from prison on Weldry. You'd expect him to be grateful, right? He wasn't. In a rather realistic twist he was *pissed*. Pissed about his daughter's death fighting in defense of Lady Arano, pissed about Lady Arano's flight into exile, pissed even that his son was essentially broken by his time in prison and the torture he was subjected to: he didn't lay it out specifically but it kind of sounded like:



At any rate he wasn't ready to join us... yet. He was very bitter and angry about Kamea's abandonment and he demanded that *we*, her favored mercenaries, do a mission for him and destroy a dropship that he suspected of smuggling arms for the Directorate. I, clearly, wasn't

ready. I needed time to heal and make repairs and come to terms with the fact that my extravagant spending on the *Argo* and payroll had caught up with me. I was now bleeding funds at an alarming rate, not getting the payday I had planned for. So, for the time being, I headed off to greener pastures, i.e. lower difficulty missions. I needed a few milk runs to help offset the hole in my wallet, and I probably need a few heavier Mechs as well... if I can afford them. Til then Yang and his crew will be putting in some overtime.



Part XVII



"Hey there fellas," the holographic image turned and acknowledged the mercs gathered around her, "whaddya boys do around here for fun?"

"Poker," Maximus Jaeger grunted with a grin, eyeing the hologram up and down.

"Well deal me in," she purred, "it looks like we have a *full house*."

"Here's to the hole that never heals!" Marlboro Mickens lifted his mug in toast.

"No matter how many times you lick it!" Falco Bronson's hand passed through the hologram's rear as she spun on him in mock indignation.

"*How* do you watch this shit?" Sumire let her face fall into her right hand, "It's like I can *feel* my brain leaking."

"This is high cinema!" Death Krusade leaned back and gestured to the projection, popcorn flying from his mouth as he spoke, "This is the best of independent Holovid production in all the Periphery! An Aurigan classic!"

"Sure," Hysteria reasoned, "so long as you discount budget, writing, *talent*..."

"Hey!" Kru twisted around to glare at Riana, his eyes first falling on her foot resting on the back of his chair, "Yous can keep that Inner Sphere megacorp bullshit they churn out," he turned and

elbowed Vamp, sitting next to him, before shifting his gaze back to Riana behind him, "Wes guys here can appreciate the finer nuances of a masterwork show like *MERCENARIES*!"

"Oo, look!" Vamp excitedly slapped Kru on the shoulder as the Holovid exploded into violence... again, "Ze Lazer Kobras has found zem again!"

"The *Lazer Kobras*," Sumire groaned, still not looking up, "Commander have I thanked you yet for *not* naming us something stupid?"

"Naw, she just named us a sentence!" Kru didn't turn around as he and Vamp bounced in their seats watching Captain Jaeger and Marlboro return fire at Brom Bonehammer and his nefarious crew, even as an errant laser blast blew apart the bottle that Falco had turned up and was drinking from, "Hey! Not the hooch!" he yelled at the projection.

"They can't hear you, *Todd*!" Riana reached up with her foot and pushed Kru's head, prompting him to spin around and cut her a dirty look.

"It's *not* a sentence!" the pilot gritted her teeth and looked up at the ceiling in frustration, her hands shooting out to either side, fingers splayed, "Auughh! I can't take it anymore!" She got up, retrieving her datapad from the seat next to her, "I'm gonna go check the ND, make sure we're on course."

"You vill miss ze best part!" Vamp protested, glancing over at her and indicating the action in front of them, "Zey are about to learn zey both verk for ze *same* employer!"

The pilot hung her head, "I don't know what's worse; that you actually watch this shit or that you've actually watched this shit *more than once*..."

"It's not like we exactly have a *huge* chip stack to choose from," Medusa offered, but his eyes were still on the action.

Sumire cut her eyes over to Darius, who held his hands up, deflecting responsibility, "I blame you for this," she growled.

"It was a *random* draw!" he protested with a chuckle.

"I can actually *hear* them getting stupider," she said flatly, "whatever. I'll be on the bridge." With that she spun on her heel and headed for the door. Glitch popped up behind her.

"Hang on and I'll come with!" Her tone was cheery as usual, "You could use the company and I'd like to learn more about the *Argo* anyway!"

"You've had enough mindless masculinity for one night too?" Su quipped with a warm smile, grateful for her camaraderie.

"Nah," Glitch smiled, "I've just seen this episode a few times too." Sumire's expression deflated as she rolled her eyes and turned to leave.

"See?" Kru called after them, "The lady has *fine* tastes! Refined-like!"

"Don't go!" Vamp called just as the door slid shut, "Zey are about to assault Doktor Oblivion's Star Acropolis... togezher!"

Such is how I imagined *Holovid night*, one of the random events, might go. Both Vamp and Death Crusade got High Spirits for a month from the event, giving them a bonus to morale, although I cannot imagine Sumire going in for a lowbrow classic like *MERCENARIES*! We were on our way to Mehdur, another system in the Aurigan Reach now under the Restoration's control. I had found a job to locate and take out a Directorate propagandist who was stirring up trouble on the planet. I had already taken a couple of small jobs on Smithon itself, ostensibly difficulty 2 jobs, but they were low pay and the damage repairs to Kru's Hunchback and Sly's Shadowhawk ate up virtually all of the profit. One of my extravagant expenses was an improved Medbay so by the time we arrived Vamp's injuries should be healed but my savings in the last two months had dwindled from nearly eight million to just under five... I needed the milk runs for profit, but Assassination missions usually proffered good salvage. Against my better judgement I opted to be able to select 3 pieces of salvage, which dropped my profit down to less than 400k. I was practically doing this job for free in the hopes of getting a complete frame of a decent, hopefully heavy, Mech.

Alas it was not to be. The lance protecting this propagandist was light to say the least. A Firestarter, two Locusts, and a Striker assault vehicle. The map was a repeat of the same map when I assaulted the Directorate's communications headquarters on Weldry; large lake, rising steep terrain to the left, and a sheer cliff wall to the right. I sent Glitch and Hysteria up the left since preemptively; expecting heavier resistance, while Vamp and Jester moved towards the shore. Within 3 or 4 rounds the Opfor lance was gone; all I had left to do was find and destroy the propagandist. Jester moved up in the Jenner and got a Sensor Lock. A Blackjack! I had never seen one other than Hysteria's ancestral Mech. This was *not* the kind of Mech I was looking for, however. I maneuvered Hysteria and Glitch and managed to take the right arm off before Vamp could even get a clear shot but then we got the notification that the propagandist was about to run. "No worries," I thought, "I'll have a round or two to finish 'em off." Then the escape location appeared: right *next* to the propagandist. I got ONE more action before she did; Jester in the Jenner. I moved up and took an Alpha Strike (I had just used all of our morale for called shots trying to detonate the SRM ammo) but it wasn't enough. She escaped. I made 78k from that job and got a complete *Locust* from it. For the record I have THREE Locusts in storage already. So that sucked ass. But there was another job on Mehdur; another Assassination. This time it was a Directorate Mechwarrior that refused to lay down arms. Didn't know what he was in but the Difficulty was just 2 1/2. I negotiated a 600k fee, foregoing the option of selecting *any* salvage, and set off with Hysteria, Sly, Glitch, and Vamp.



How I imagine the Leopard's cockpit might look; Sumire's lair.

The map was actually another recycle (I knew this would happen eventually. I am still shocked at how long it took to really start noticing recycled maps!) so I knew the terrain. We were set down in a forest and the map was more or less divided by a mountain ridge. You could cross over it to a certain point. It looked like the majority of Opfor was on the western side so I sent Vamp and Hysteria to deal with them while Glitch sought the high point and Sly broke east to hunt the main target. Mostly I stuck to the cover of the trees and tried to bait the enemy to come to me but they were clever; they had the same idea. Without the Jenner to establish sensor locks we spent a few rounds locked in stalemate. Eventually a Panther appeared to the north. At first I presumed *this* was our target. Panthers have that pesky PPC so I broke Hysteria from cover and headed up the mountain ridge; her big AC/20 could make short work of the Panther. That was enough to draw out a Spider from the west as well as an SRM carrier. Vamp traded fire with them, alone, in the forest as Glitch still tried to achieve her perch.

It wasn't long before I got another sensor trace from the *real* target; a Griffin. (DAMN! I could have used one of these!) By this point Hysteria was over the ridge and on her way around even as Sly's Shadowhawk was unloading on the Panther. Meanwhile the Panther, Spider, and SRM carrier were all laying into Vamp's Cent and he was starting to get chewed up. "That's alright," I thought as I fired the jump jets on the Vindy, "now Glitch has a full view of the entire battlefield!"



The interior of a Vindicator as seen in the Mechwarrior series

Yep, Glitch had a full 360 panorama all right. She could see *all* of the enemy lance... and they could see her. The SRM carrier got stomped by Vamp but the untouched Shadowhawk now rounded the corner and fired at the Vindy. So did the Panther. So did the Griffin. In a single round they tore her up so bad I made her jump down and hide! Meanwhile Vamp went melee with the Spider and the Shadowhawk at the same time and Sly managed to blow the left arm off the Griffin while Hysteria did the same to the Panther's right; taking out that PPC. It was a rough fight for Vamp; I was afraid they would tear off an arm again, but in the end he prevailed; destroying both the Spider and the Shadowhawk by himself but taking a good amount of structural damage in the process. With only the diminished Panther and the Griffin left Glitch mounted her perch again, taking a shot with the Vindy's PPC at the Griffin... a shot that I *thought* might finish him. It did not. Instead the Panther fired its lasers and the Griffin unloaded on Glitch, knocking her prone after destroying her right arm (and her PPC.) Well, this was unexpected! I again concentrated fire on the Griffin but it managed to survive yet another round and both it *and* the Panther took shots on Glitch's downed Vindy. Boom, there went the left arm. Boom, there went the left and right torso. By the time Glitch could stand she had no weapons, no jump jets, and was nothing more than a sitting duck. Fearing the consequences of another lucky enemy strike I ordered her to eject, blowing the head of the Vindy as well. The Griffin followed shortly and Sly ended up kicking the Panther to death but when I got back to the *Argo*, there was bad news.

There just wasn't enough of the Vindicator to salvage. A Leg and a heavily damaged CT. That is *all* I had of it. Glitch herself was out, probably 2 months, badly injured but the Vindy, her beloved Vindy? Replacing all of the parts and repairing was going to cost somewhere in the range of 600-700 thousand, maybe more. Repairs on the Cent were needed as well but the Vindy's repair bill alone would eat up all of the mission's profit and then some. And my savings

sat at a meager 4.7 million. With a heavy heart, the kind reserved for Mechwarrior death, I let the Vindicator slip away... and scrapped her. I knew Glitch wouldn't be happy at the loss of her Vindy, but at the same time I needed a heavier lance... and Panzyr was selling Dragon parts. I *had* two Dragon parts.



Glitch's trademark PPC will fit on the Dragon... so will a mighty LRM 20 launcher. I could also up the armor on it to help keep her safe but not unless I lowered it somewhere else. I chose her left side; all her weapons were on the right so a lightly armored left side wasn't *too* bad, right? Time will tell. For now, I need a few *more* milk runs...

... and maybe a few more Holovid nights.



Part XVIII



ANVELT

ENTERING ORBIT - FIRST MOON OF SMITHON

"Entering high orbit around Anvelt," Sumire's voice came across the ship's com as Riana made her way to the *Argo's* CIC followed by Darius, "we're receiving a hail from the *ARS Revanche*."

"She's here already," Riana raised her eyebrows and turned to Darius.

"I imagine she's been placating Lord Karosas for some time now," the XO offered, "our... *diversions* have probably not been well-received."

"That's why we left Lord Madeira," Riana countered, "I hope she hasn't had to babysit him all this time."

"He *hates* Lord Madeira," Darius reminded her, "but I imagine they've both had their hands full." They stepped through the door leading into the ship's CIC and while Darius moved over to the Holotable, Riana stepped over to the com.

"Su, we're in the CIC," she used a channel directly to the *Argo's* bridge, "should we meet you in the Leopard?"

"Negative," she replied, "High Lady Arano and Lord Madeira are already en route to us. It seems we're on a bit of a timetable."

Riana sighed. "How tight?"

"The dropship Lord Karosas mentioned apparently made berth on the surface approximately an hour ago," the pilot explained, "but this is just a refueling stop. They anticipate the entire process to be complete in less than an hour so if you want to go ahead and select your lance I'll get with Yang and start getting them loaded."

"Damn, that's close," she snarled, "any advice from her on what to expect?"

"Negative, Commander," Sumire said, "but the target is a Union-class dropship and this is a military refueling depot. I would recommend a long range heavy lance."

Riana leaned against the wall with her forearm for a moment, hanging her head, and then she pressed the intercom again, "Load my Jager, the Hunch, the Cent, and Glitch's new Dragon. I'm on my way to the auxiliary docking collar to receive Lady Arano."

"了解," Sumire responded as Riana closed the channel and turned to leave.

"Darius, call down to the lounge and have Todd, Leonard, and Jess suit up for deployment then meet us here... double time."

"You got it," the XO nodded as the display on the Holotable flickered to life, depicting the moon and the *Argo's* position in high orbit.

Riana dashed off at a trot, heading past the Mech Bay. 'I bet she'll be surprised to see it,' she thought, 'now that Dr. Murad has it all fixed up!' She wound her way through the *Argo's* hallways, her mind lingering on Kamea. Smithon had been such a rush she really didn't have any time to talk to her and Lord Karosas' attitude had put a damper on everything. She was certain that the five weeks she had *Queen Kamea's Revenge* repairing, refitting, and scrambling for low-intensity contracts had been a strain on that relationship so she hoped that Lady Arano was in good spirits. 'It couldn't be helped,' she reasoned in her mind, 'deploying in the state we were in would have been immediate failure.' At least that's what she would say if it came up. She had just entered the docking compartment when the *Argo* jerked from impact. Riana's eyes widened as her hands went out to the walls to steady herself. "Coming in a little hot, aren't you?" she asked aloud as the noise of the docking clamps reverberated through the ship.

"Commander," Sumire's voice came over the com, "the Lady and her entourage have just arrived."

"No shit," Riana mumbled to herself as she entered the room at the end of the compartment where the airlock was. Going to a panel on the wall she engaged the seal and input the manual clearance for the door, pressing the com before she took a step back. "I'm in place, Su. You can give them the go..."



Before she could finish her sentence the actuators on the door rotated and the airlock door began to swing open, "...ahead," Riana's voice trailed as she released the com button and skipped to the left to center herself in the room, coming to parade rest as High Lady Arano and Lord Madeira appeared on the other side. She was still dressed casually in a tank top and jacket; her face and chest spattered with hydraulic fluid from where she had been in the bay overseeing the final adjustments on Glitch's new Heavy-Class DRG-1N. At her insistence Yang's crew had armed it with a PPC and a sizable LRM 20 array of rockets. They'd had to drastically reduce armor on the Mech's right side to afford for the correct tonnage and the stabilizers had been giving them trouble. Since it was all her idea Yang had challenged her to figure out how to calibrate the stabilizers so that was exactly what she had been doing... right up until their arrival when Darius had come to get her. "My lady," she began with a short bow, self-conscious about her appearance, "welcome aboard..."

"Forgive me, Riana," Kamea began in a serious tone as she strode forward with a purpose, "but we've little time for pleasantries. Your target is on the ground and we've got to get you there as quickly as possible."

"Understood," she nodded, turning to lead the way, "as always, *Revenge* is yours, My Lady."

"Today you are Lord Karosas'," she corrected her, "and you are *very* late." The comment and tone were frosty enough to silence Riana as she led them quickly back to the CIC. As they moved swiftly through the *Argo* Jester appeared, emerging from the kitchen with a bagel and a steaming cup of coffee but an icy glare from Riana saw him quickly retreat the way he came. They swept into the CIC just behind Dr. Murad. She scooted out of the way, surprised by their rapid approach. Darius was still there awaiting them.

"Yang and Sumire are on their way," the XO offered, "the MechTechs are loading the Leopard as we speak and the Mechwarriors you selected should be here shortly."

"My gratitude for your expediency," Lady Arano nodded as she and Lord Madeira approached the Holotable, "Lord Karosas challenged my authority, and he was right to do so," her voice was filled with shame, a remnant from her flight and exile, "his daughter died in my name. We're going to do what we can to earn his help and support. That means destroying the *Newgrange*, a smuggling ship that has been running weapons to the Directorate."

"Wait a minute," Darius interrupted her, "*Newgrange*? That sounds familiar."

"I'll explain in a moment," the Lady said as Sumire rushed into the room, bowing in apology. Yang followed behind a few moments later.

"The rest of the lance is on the way," Yang spoke to Riana as he arrived, "and my guys should have you loaded in twenty minutes, tops. I've promised them a round of Triple F burgers and a case of Timbiqui Dark the moment we run across it."

"That's fine," she cut her eyes at him, "you can spend *your* pay however *you* like." He narrowed his eyes in response and pursed his lips but said nothing more. "My Lady," she addressed Kamea directly, "it isn't necessary to wait for the lance. I can brief them on the way down."



"I can brief them myself," Kamea looked up at her and their eyes locked, briefly. Riana looked away, subconsciously. "I'll be your voice on the com for this drop, Commander. I'll be running this Op from your CIC. In fact, if I had my Kintaro aboard the *Revanche* I would go with you," she allowed a small smile to escape before she continued, "but I do not, so let's get this done. As you've heard House Karosas has suffered greatly at the hands of the Directorate. We can't change

that, but we can show Lord Karosas that we're his allies and that our word can be trusted." She looked over at Dr. Farad, standing to her right, "We need his help with our data archive, yes, but that isn't why I agreed to this mission; if we are to prevail against the Directorate I must unite the Founding Houses under the Restoration's banner," she looked up as Glitch darted in the room, taking a quiet corner spot behind Riana, with Vamp and Death Krusade hovering in the doorway, "Without their support we will have no way to replace our losses."

"Understood, Lady Arano," Darius spoke for the group, "Let's get into the specifics about this job he's given us; I seem to remember something about a dropship?"

"She's called the *Newgrange*," she continued, moving around the Holotable and letting her fingers trace its edge, "She's a transport vessel, ostensibly civilian, named for an old line of Yardships,"

"I *knew* I'd heard that name before," Darius let his fingers touch his chin, "the Star League's biggest mobile repair and refit support ships. Two million tons and over two kilometers long."

"Well, this one is a standard thirty-six-hundred-ton Union-class dropship," Lord Madeira corrected, "it is only named in honor of the old Yardships."

"The *Newgrange* has been certified for commercial flight in the Directorate, the Capellan Confederation, and the Taurian Concordat," Kamea looked around the room at everyone in attendance, "In all other ways she's completely unremarkable... at least that's what her official paperwork says."

"I take it Lord Karosas disagrees with that official paperwork?" Hysteria folded her arms, covering her stained tank top. She was still insecure about her appearance.

"That's right," she nodded, "he claims that the *Newgrange* is running weapons into the Aurigan Reach to supply the Directorate's war effort. Her crew has been using an old commercial port on Anvelt to fuel up between trips."

"Wait," Sumire raised her hand, "I thought your people said this was a military refueling depot," she looked over at Riana for confirmation, "I'm pretty sure you said..."

"It is now," Lord Madeira answered, "as Lady Arano was saying it is an *old* commercial port. Recent scans, taken today, show it defended by a light lance with multiple turrets on site and a military sub-station just a few clicks away," he pushed his glasses up on the bridge of his nose, "once hostilities start they can have reinforcements on site in a matter of minutes."

"Pretty well protected for a commercial port," Death Krusade snorted derisively.

"Ships like this one could help to explain the Directorate's unexpected strength of arms," Kamea continued, "It is in our interest to destroy it. According to the intel we've been given the *Newgrange* is carrying more armor than any Union-class dropship has a right to. Attacking her directly will be a waste of time."

"If is civilian zen why does it need all zis armor?" Vamp reasoned, looking at Kru for affirmation. The stocky Solaran nodded in agreement and folded his arms, "Zat alone is suspicious."

"It does back up Lord Karosas claim," Glitch offered, "but there's no way our lance can take out a Union-class with armor before it takes off."

"Thankfully, Lord Madeira has found us an alternative approach." Lady Arano concluded, turning to the Lord, "Alexander?"



"Thank you, my Lady," Lord Madeira stepped forward and pushed his glasses back into position, allowing his hands to come together in front of him as he spoke, "The Anvelt fueling station was designed for civilian use. It isn't a hardened target and its components cannot withstand a sustained attack. If we go in while the *Newgrange* is refueling and blow the station's primary fuel reservoir her armor won't count for much," a smile crept across both Vamp and Kru's faces as they bumped their fists together in camaraderie, "the resulting explosion will smash her like an egg."

"You're *sure* that Lord Karosas is telling the truth?" Riana asked in an uncharacteristically meek voice, "It would be a disaster if we took out a civilian dropship."

"A *lot* of innocent people can fit on a Union," Glitch added, wrapping her arms around herself from the thought.

"From my own study of the *Newgrange* and the situation on Anvelt, I am convinced that Lord Karosas is telling us the truth," Lord Madeira continued, "there is something deeply suspicious about this ship. She isn't the commercial transport she pretends to be."

"Vague assurances aren't enough, Lady Arano," the tone in Riana's voice signaled to her crew that something was really bothering her, "I need to *know* that there aren't any innocent people on that ship."

"There's almost always *some* collateral damage," Riana did not turn around as Death Krusade spoke, instead her face darkened and her gaze tilted slightly towards the floor, "I mean, youse can't make an omelette..."

"*Not* helping," Vamp put a hand on Kru's shoulder, detecting his Commander's deteriorating mood.

"I'm no more eager for unnecessary bloodshed than you are, Riana," Lady Arano interjected, her soft tone and gaze halting Hysteria's descent, "I hope you know me well enough to recognize that."

"Of course," her voice shifted to one of atonement, "I would never insinuate, it's just that..."

"If we can raise the *Newgrange* on the com I will offer her captain a chance to surrender," Kamea's posture straightened, as if often did when she made vows or pledges, "I'd rather take prisoners than fill graves..." she turned her head to the right and looked down, "the Reach has seen too much death already."

"Hang on a second, boss," Yang spoke, turning directly to face Riana, "If this job were as easy as blowing up a fuel tank then Karosas would've done it himself already." He cast a suspicious eye back at the High Lady and her lordly companion, "So what's the catch? I mean why send *us* after such an easy target? Something here smells dirty."

"A need for deniable assets?" Sumire reasoned, "Could it be that he's playing the Arano Restoration? Some sort of personal revenge?"

Kamea stepped forward, her posture ramrod straight. Her voice carried a hard edge. "Lord Karosas sent the last remnants of his personal guard after the *Newgrange* two weeks ago while *you* were recuperating. A lance of hardened Mechwarriors," she looked around the room, her cimmerian gaze challenging any to dispute her again, "they were summarily destroyed; a complete loss. There were *no* survivors." Yang and Sumire withered under her hard glare as she came to her conclusion.

"Sounds like an unusually heavy security detail for a smuggling operation," Riana mused, "you'd think if this is supposed to be such a secret that a surprise attack by a veteran lance would have had more success."

"Not to mention," Yang dared to speak again, his eyes resembling those of a scolded dog that was not sorry for stealing food, "he just made our job harder; they're *going* to be expecting another attack."

"I guess that's why they have a lance and turrets at a civilian depot," Sumire surmised, "can we be sure this is still a soft target?"

"If they plan to harden it," Lord Madeira spoke, "the crews are not on site yet. Reasonably they would have to send for one from Directorate space, which would be complicated by the Restoration's control of Smithon's system."



"That means the lance and turrets were in place *before* Lord Karosas' attack," Darius reasoned, leaning forward to look at Yang, "though I suppose it's possible there was more than a single lance when he attacked."

"It's bizarre, I agree," Kamea's tone put an end to the speculation, "but we only have Lord Karosas' word to go on and he didn't personally witness what happened."

"That'll have to do," Hysteria nodded in agreement, "what's the sitrep, my Lady?"

"We should approach this drop with an abundance of caution," she turned to the Holotable as Lord Madeira displayed the blueish-tinged image of the Union-class dropship parked at the refueling depot. The terrain looked sharp and jagged but there appeared to be a decent approach from the southeast. "Bring the strongest lance you can field and keep your eyes open while you're on the moon's surface," she turned and made eye contact with Riana, "and I'd recommend bringing a heat-efficient lance, if possible. Anvelt's atmosphere and climate will quickly overwhelm your heat sinks if you're not careful."

"Vat kind of terrain do we look at?" Vamp asked from the back of the room.

"From the scans, Martian," Sumire referred to her datapad, "expect low visibility, obscured sunlight, frequent dust storms, and rough terrain."

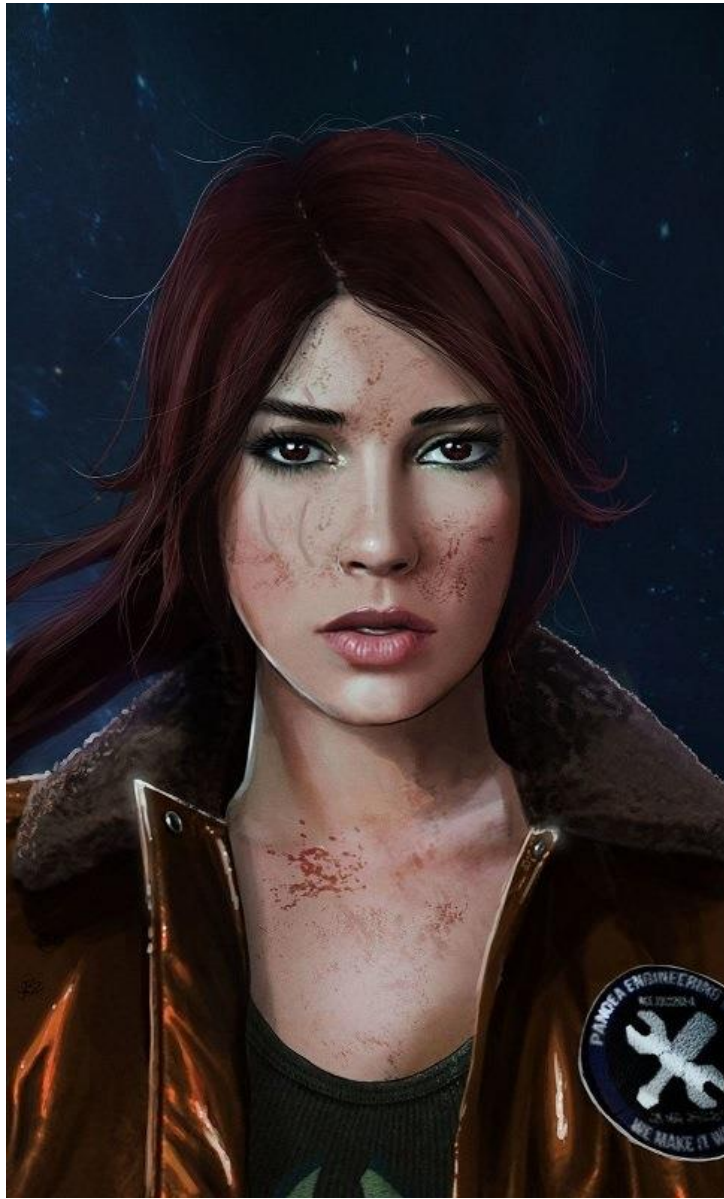
"You heard her, people," Darius clapped his hands together, "nothing we haven't handled before," he met Hysteria's eyes and he could tell Dekker's death was on her mind; Anvelt's environment was very similar to Untran's, "Keep your eyes open for the *Newgrange's* security detail and be ready for the fight when it arrives. I'll be rooting for you from here."

"Chief, I need you to light a fire under the asses of your people," Riana said, beckoning him to rise, "if the Leopard isn't loaded yet then make it so," she pointed at him, "and make promises out of your own pocket!"

"Commander," Darius interjected, "I should mention that Lord Karosas is offering over two million for this job..."

"Burgers and beer for everyone," she corrected herself to Yang's delight; a smile splayed across his face as he rushed out of the room, "I wanna be on the ground in thirty minutes or less!" She turned and pointed to Sumire, "Spool up the Lep; the second we're on board I want to be underway," she spun as the pilot nodded and exited the CIC, "Vamp, Kru, Glitch get your shit and get in your pits. I'll be there shortly and I'd *better* be the last aboard," she turned to leave but stopped and looked over her shoulder, "if you'll excuse me, my Lady, I've still got to get dressed," she smiled warmly at her, "I'll be counting on you from up here." Kamea nodded as Riana rushed out of the room.

The *Argo* was suddenly awash with activity. As she raced past the Mech Bay she could see the Techs scrambling about; everyone busy as they moved the final Mech, the Dragon, to the elevator. The loading process was not without danger and rushing the movement of a 65-ton Battlemech was never casual, but she had no time to stop to admire their work. She slipped into Alpha Pod with its comfortable gravity and headed for her bunk, remembering all too late that she had sent her dropsuit for cleaning. Cursing she spun around and raced back to the laundry, at the head of the pod, and slid the door open. The laundromat was small and unstaffed at the moment. Neglecting to hit the lights she tore through the polywrapped items searching for hers, holding them up in turn to try and see in the dark. Finally finding it she ripped the wrapping open and grabbed her suit, rushing out the door and almost slamming headfirst into Lady Arano. "Ah!" she exclaimed, her back slamming against the door frame she dropped the suit on the floor in shock, "My Lady! You surprised me! What are you doing here?"



Hysteria: Riana Annika Klaue

"I... wanted to see you," Lady Arano began softly, taking a step back and brushing her hair from her eyes, "before the drop."

"Me?" her heart rate quickened and her mind whirled, "What for?" She winced after she spoke the words; 'how foolish I sound,' she thought.

"This mission," Kamea began, "I want you to be careful. I know your lance ran into a lot of trouble on Smithon," she looked down as she spoke, "two of your team almost got killed... because of me."

"My Lady," subconsciously Riana began to reach out to her, but she stopped herself, "don't. It's not *your* fault. We're mercenaries, Mechwarriors! I mean it comes with the territory..."

"This incident with Lord Karosas," she continued, "I feel like I'm having *you* pay for *my* mistakes..."

"You didn't make a mistake," Riana said defiantly, "you did exactly what Sir Raju told you to do! What good would it have done Lord Karosas or anyone else if you'd been captured or killed on Coromodir?? You survived, to fight another day, and by doing so you gave Karosas and every other Founding House a chance... a chance they wouldn't have if you'd remained!"

"I mean, I keep asking these things of you and your team," she shook her head, "I know you're mercenaries now and I know it's your job and maybe I shouldn't feel this way because Lord Karosas *is* paying you and you *do* take other contracts besides mine but... this particular mission; he insisted it be *you*. Not the Restoration Army, which I would have gladly committed to this cause, but for some reason he wanted *you* to do it; to take down the *Newgrange* and..."

"My Lady..." Riana muttered under her breath as she spoke. Her eyes were fixed now on Kamea's lips as they formed her words, occasionally flitting up to her dark eyes or the scars that ran across the bridge of her nose. In a moment of impulsiveness Riana found herself moving forward. Going in, uninvited, for a kiss. Her eyes began to close as she neared her but, suddenly, Lady Arano pulled backwards.

"Commander Klaue!" she exclaimed, her eyes widening.

Riana shut her eyes tightly and froze. 'Goddammit,' she grimaced as she waited for Lady Arano to continue, fixed in shame as she mentally berated herself for misreading the signs.

"Riana," when she spoke Kamea's voice was gentle. Hysteria flinched as she felt Lady Arano place a hand on her shoulder. Slowly she opened her eyes, her eyebrows pinched together and her lips pursed in a blend of horror, humiliation, and remorse. "I am flattered," Kamea smiled, "truly I am. But I am also at war; not only for my throne and my birthright but also for my people," Riana's expression faded as she sank back into the wall, a hollow smile and a nod veiling the numbness she suddenly felt, "I cannot, in any good conscious, think about such matters until my uncle's Directorate has fallen." Her hand moved to Hysteria's chin, preventing her from lowering her gaze. "I hope you can understand."

"Forgive me," she murmured, dipping into a squat to retrieve her dropsuit, "I... should go. My lance is waiting and if we're going to catch the *Newgrange* we need to launch immediately."

"Yes, of course," Kamea nodded, "I'll.. head back to the CIC," she offered Hysteria another warm smile but the Commander found herself unable to respond, "I'll see you on the comms?"

"Yeah," Riana flashed a lop-sided grin as Lady Arano turned to leave, exiting the pod. Solemnly she headed back to her bunk, resisting the urge to throw herself in it, and changed.

Part XIX



Anvelt's atmosphere was thicker than most Martian-class environments, and that made for a lot of chop. Riana's shoulders were beginning to bruise as she was constantly thrown against her harness and her head had bounced off the padding of the cage numerous times but she paid little notice to either. 'So stupid,' she continued to berate herself, replaying the incident in Alpha Pod in her head over and over again, 'why did I do that??' She had known for a long time that Yang was right about her feelings; her admiration of Kamea Arano went far beyond gratitude or loyalty. Maybe it started that way, when she was part of her Royal Guard, but the palpable relief she felt after Axylus when Lady Arano was revealed as their mysterious employer... the racing of her heart when she found out she was alive; she should have known then. Or the way she clung to her every word after Weldry and how her speech affected her; moving her almost to tears. Here she was, a former pirate... a mercenary, but Yang was right: she followed Kamea about as if she were still in her Guard, as if she were a lovesick child. "Idiot," she gritted her teeth as she fought back tears, squeezing the cage so hard she imagined the metal might buckle under her grip, "I'm *such* an idiot!" She struggled to make sense of it, her feelings. 'Is this... *love*?' she grimaced. She had no idea; she'd never been in love before so she had no idea *what* it felt like. She'd been through hordes of *lovers*, but she was always in control. This did *not* feel like control.

"Boss?" Death Krusade's voice came across her direct com, "You okay? Youse awful quiet."

"Sorry," she switched her com directly to his Hunchback, "just lost in thought... trying not to bite off my tongue in this turbulence."

"Yeah, okay," the Solaran offered in reply, "it's just that you're usually more... animated than this."

"I'll be fine, Kru," she said unconvincingly, "thanks. I just wanna get on the ground and kill something."

"I'm down for that!" he responded with a chuckle.

Suddenly Lady Arano's voice came across the primary channel: "There's a lot of activity on the ground, Commander..." the interference of Anvelt's atmosphere and the Leopard's speed gave her voice a tinny, distorted quality, "it looks like the *Newgrange* is being prepped for launch. You're going to have a tight timetable to get in there and blow the station's fuel reservoir before it lifts off."

"If they're in launch prep they're be disconnecting from the fuel pumps soon, if they haven't already," Glitch mused, "if we can't hit 'em with a chain reaction will the explosion be big enough to destroy her?"

"Even disconnected a detonation of the fuel reserves should be powerful enough to tear through that armor, breach the hull, and ignite their own fuel tanks," Lord Madeira answered her, "but that's only if we can catch her on the ground. If she gets airborne before it blows then she'll be able to escape into orbit with negligible damage."

"Don't vorry," Vamp interjected, his voice brimming with confidence, "ve vill take zem vith surprise. Zey probably watch ze army vith spies. Is vhy mercenary company is best for the job."

"It isn't the surprise we're concerned about," Glitch reminded him, "it's getting to them before they launch!"

"Any chatter on their comms?" Hysteria asked, trying to shake off her inner turmoil and get her head in the game.

"Nothing out of the ordinary," Darius replied, "if they've picked up the Leopard they don't seem to be in a panic about it."

"We're under their radar," Sumire cut in, "I've been keeping us as low as possible to keep from alarming them. Thirty seconds to combat deployment." The light above the doors suddenly shifted to green.

"I'm seeing turret emplacements and light BattleMech activity on the ground, but it appears that the security detail we were warned about is off-site... for now," Lady Arano offered, "After the drop Sumire will circle back and monitor sensors for any sign of incoming dropships."

"If I see anything, Commander, you'll be the first to know," the pilot said reassuringly, "but I'd advise you to be wary of the secondary landing pad on the ridge above the depot; if I

were dropping a defensive lance that's where I'd do it." The Leopard pulled up sharply and banked right before leveling out. The doors shot open and the ship's UDA extended, the four Mechs racing along the rail before coming to a sudden, jarring halt at the end. "Good hunting," Sumire offered as the UDA's umbilical detached and the lance fell the short distance to the surface. She turned and lifted away, going low over the terrain as she returned the way she had come. "Actual, package is delivered." She said as the Leopard disappeared back into the storm.



"Well, they were right about low visibility," Glitch quipped as the rusty particulate sand whipped across the ferro-glass of her cockpit, I hope sensor readings are accurate because I won't be hitting anything at distance without 'em!" She rotated frequencies on her HFORS, "Commander, it's probably best to run PhLAS infrared on this one."

"Speaking of infrared watch your heat, Foxtrot Sierra," Hysteria reminded her, "this is your Dragon's first operational run so don't forget; it doesn't have as many sinks as the Vindicator did,"

"Awww," Glitch whined, "Vindy..."

"And to accommodate that sweet new LRM 20 it sports it practically has no armor on the right side," she continued, "so I want you to keep your distance and pick your shots."

"You betcha," the sniper responded, "but it's gonna take some time to feel at home in here."

"What's the plan, boss?" Death Krusade asked.

"You three break left and see if you can get close enough to attract the light lance's attention," she ordered, "if we can bottleneck them in that pass you can make short work of them."

"Vat about you, Kommander?" Vamp asked.

"I'll go right," she said, "orbital scans show it as an elevated position overlooking the depot. If you can draw their fire I may be able to blow this thing before they even know I'm here."

"Shouldn't I do that?" Glitch asked, "I've got better range with the PPC!"

"Yeah, and no armor on the right," Hysteria reminded her, "if reinforcements come in at that secondary landing pad I've got a better chance to take them on than you do. You've got your orders, people, now move out!" She shifted her Jagermech and moved away from the lance, grateful to be on her own, despite the relative danger that presented. Smithon's star was now well-above the horizon, increasing visibility somewhat, but she was still having a problem focusing.



"Contact," Glitch reported, "I got a Commando approaching. He's sensor locked!"

"Then let's give 'em a warm welcome, eh?" Death Krusade chuckled as he headed down the incline towards the light Mech, "Youse stay up there on the left," he said to Glitch, "and CC take the ridge to the right. We'll flank this asshole before he knows what him 'em!"

"Attention incoming BattleMechs!" a new voice broadcast over all open channels, "Identify yourselves! You are approaching a civilian refueling depot with a ship in port. I repeat; identify yourselves and intentions, this is a..."

"Youse wanna see my identification?" Kru interrupted him over the open com, "How's *this* for identification!" He opened fire with his AC/20, followed by a laser strike, directly into the center torso of the Commando but, before he could respond, the head of the Mech exploded and it careened over backwards.

"BOOM!" Vamp's voice filled the Op channel, "Headshot, baby. Zere's no koming back from zat!"

"Commander, I've got a sensor trace on a turret," Glitch said, her HFORS displaying it in a staticy mess, "looks to be at the bottom of the hill."

"Hold position and let them come to you," Hysteria commanded as another turret appeared on her scans, "I've got one here too so there might be a generator nearby." She targeted the turret

and fired with both auto cannons, destroying it in one salvo. She came to a ledge and, sure enough, there was a turret generator below. She could also see the hulking form of the *Newgrange* docked ahead of her.

"Holding position," Death Krusade offered a sitrep, "there's a dust devil straight ahead so we're gonna wait til they come out of it. I've got cover behind a rock and CC's outta sight but it sure would be nice if that turret went bye-bye before they get a sensor lock on us." Just as he finished his sentence the turret in question exploded.

"Happy now?" Hysteria's voice was smug, but distracted, "I've got a visual on the refueling station but I'm gonna have to get closer."

"Toldja I shoulda gone right!" Glitch engaged her precision reticule and lined up a shot at a Panther that had emerged from the storm. Firing her PPC she blew off the right arm from the Light Mech, including *its* PPC, "Ha!" she exclaimed, "can't do much without that!"

"Kommander," Vamp began, "Ve have two more bogeys; a Shadowhawk and a Wolverine," no sooner had he said that than the Shadowhawk's leg buckled after taking a shot from the Hunch, "Vait, ze Shadowhawk is down!"

"This is like shooting fish in a barrel!" Kru laughed, shrugging off laser attacks from the Panther and the Wolverine.

Hysteria was heading down the hill, standing among the wreckage of the turret generator, when she spied the secondary landing pad. 'No doubt the call has been made,' she thought, 'they're gonna land here and if I keep moving they'll catch me alone and from behind.' She spun her Mech around and headed back up the hill. "Change of plans," she announced, "I'm setting a trap. CC, what's your status?"

"Is going vell," he replied as the Shadowhawk struggled back to its feet just to have Kru blow its right arm off, "ve should have Opfor taken care of in few minutes."

"Good, I need you to finish up and then take the shot." She said as she made it back to the top of the hill and moved behind cover.

"You vant *me* to take ze shot?" Vamp was shocked.

"You want *him* to take the shot?" Glitch's voice was full of confusion as she fired on the Panther, knocking out its CT and destroying it.

"You got it," Hysteria confirmed, "Fox you go ahead and start en route to me. I want you in cover behind this peak. You're gonna be LRM support."

"What are youse planning?" Kru asked just as Vamp blew the CT out of the Shadowhawk, "Ohh, nice *freaking* shot!"



"Ze vay is almost clear, Kommander," he reported, "just one left."

"Good," Hysteria replied as Glitch began to move towards the jagged mountain peak that she'd indicated, "I trust you boys can handle one little Wolvie. Now get out there, take him out, and blow that fuel depot... and I want to make sure they *see* you do it."

"Commander!" Lady Arano's voice came across the channel, "I don't know what you're playing at but that dropship is about to take off! You *have* to stop it!"

"I've got a Leopard moving in on your position Commander," Sumire interrupted, "their transponder is Directorate. Judging by the markings it's a House Espinoza ship."

"Espinoza??" Any lingering conflict from the Alpha Pod incident in Hysteria's mind evaporated, "Vamp, Kru, in firing position... now!"

"You got it, Kommander," suddenly Vamp's Centurion turned and sprinted out into the open, past the Wolverine, and closer to the fuel pumping station, "Vatch my back!"

"I got you, pal," Death Krusade watched as the Wolverine couldn't resist the target and turned in behind him, firing a full complement of SRMs at his rear as well as his AC/5 and laser. The Cent's full sprint caused the auto cannon and the laser to miss but several of the missiles exploded off of the armor. But the Wolverine hadn't considered the Hunchback lurking inside the dust devil. Death Krusade surged forward, locking on with his AC/20 and his medium laser. "Eat this you mook!" he said as the auto cannon ripped through the center torso, the Mech suffering a series of auxiliary explosions. "You're all clear buddy," he yelled through the com, "now let's blow this sonuvabitch!"

Vamp slid to a halt and fired his AC/10, striking the station and causing a minor explosion. Fire

and smoke started to emerge. Suddenly the comms crackled to life. "This is the captain of the *Newgrange*... hold your fire, damn it! We are a *civilian* transport, not a military dropship!"

"I know what you are," Kamea's voice came across the com hard and commanding, "Power down your engines and surrender or your ship will be destroyed."

"I can't do that!" the captain's voice was full of panic, "I repeat, hold your fire! There are unarmed people on this vessel! We've got a hold full of passengers, non-combatants, and you'll be murdering them if you destroy that tank!"

"I already know what your ship is carrying," Lady Arano's tone hadn't changed, "and it *isn't* civilians! Captain, I'm giving you one last chance to surrender... if you refuse what happens next will be on *your* head, not mine."

Hysteria listened to the exchange tensely. Something was still bothering her about this whole situation. "Hold your fire," she went across Vamp's direct com, "let's hope he shuts it down."

"Listen to reason and power down," Kamea repeated, "*NOW*."

"They've cut the com feed, Lady Arano!" Sumire came across the Op channel, "And I'm picking up increased activity on my sensors... they're making a run for it!"

"Then they've left us no choice," Kamea said resolutely, "Commander, give the order! We're blowing the fuel reservoir!" There was a long moment of silence as Hysteria's thumb hovered over the com button. She closed her eyes as she remembered another dropship, long ago, and Revan's command for her to fire. She clenched her teeth and gritted them, as if speaking might actually cause her pain. "Commander!" Lady Arano repeated, "Let's do what we came here for! Take that dropship out!" In her mind Hysteria recalled her horror from long ago; when she was sober enough to realize that the spectacular destruction of that ship had heralded the deaths of two hundred sixty-seven souls, families, that were just fleeing pirates.

'*And you killed them all!*' she grimaced in physical pain as she stifled an inner howl of regret.

"The *Newgrange* is almost ready for takeoff!" Now Kamea's voice sounded full of panic, "Riana!! Destroy that ship before it's too late!"

"Kommander!" Vamp yelled into the Op channel as Death Krusade pulled alongside him, "Vat are your orders? Should I shoot?"

"*Riana?*" a new voice purred over the open comms, a sultry, cruel voice... one that evoked old memories, "I remember you well; the late Raju Montgomery held you in *such* high esteem... and now I find you here, serving my exiled cousin. Where *is* she hiding, I wonder?"

"Leopard touchdown!" Sumire reported, "Combat deployment! It's a heavy lance!"

"Victoria!?" Lady Arano exclaimed, "If I'd known that we'd find *you* here I'd have taken the field myself!"

"A pity you didn't," Victoria Espinosa retorted, "we could have ended this war here and now. I suppose I'll have to content myself with your prized mercenaries! Watch as I tear them to shreds!"

"Victoria??" A white-hot rage lit inside of Hysteria. She was *here*. Sir Raju's murderer, Lady Arano's betrayer. She pressed the comms button; "Glitch, Vamp, Kru..." her expression hardened, her brows lowered, and her next words came out as a throaty growl; "*open fire*."

The AC/20 and AC/10 fired simultaneously, slamming heavy rounds into the fueling station just before the salvo of twenty missiles rained onto it. The *Newgrange* detached the fuel pump just moments before the explosion but it was too late; with a seismic detonation both the fueling station and the Union-class dropship erupted. The inner explosions of the *Newgrange* contained by her heavy armor, plates were blown off in and fire erupted in spaces as the dropship sank, collapsing in on itself as the dust of Anvelt heralded the massive shockwave that threatened to bowl over half of her lance.

"You fool!!!" Victoria screeched, "Do you have any idea what you've done!?? You'll pay for that with your lives, mercenary filth!"

"Stay visible but stay out of range," Hysteria said with a cold calmness that was unnerving to hear over the Op channel, "let her come to you."

"Easy for you to say!" Kru shot back, "that looks like a Firestarter, a Centurion, a Dragon, *and* a Catapult! Where are *you* gonna be?"

"In a few minutes," Hysteria began, "deep, *deep* up Lady Espinosa's rancid ass."

Part XX



"You fool!!!" Victoria screeched, "Do you have any idea what you've done!?? You'll pay for that with your lives, mercenary filth!"

"My lady," a voice came over her direct com, "there's a Hunchback and a Centurion but I'm also picking up a sensor trace at ten o'clock; two signals, they're big... 65-tons."

"Still seething Lady Espinosa switched her comms to their own encrypted Op channel; "Forward!" she roared, "I don't know which one she's in but take out that peasant scum first!"

"But, my lady," the other voice dared to protest, "what about the other contacts?"

"We will deal with them in time," Victoria hissed, "Firelock! Hammer! Double-time! Close that distance! Apex," she grinned as the Centurion and the Firestarter sprinted ahead, "tap into the depot defenses and see if you can't get us some goddamn turret support!"

From her position on the ridge all Hysteria had on her HFORS were sensor traces. "C'mon, go for it you bitch," she mumbled to herself before opening the Op channel, "Vamp, Kru... you guys got anything?"

"Negative visual," Vamp replied, "but I have sensor trace on a 35-ton inbound with purpose."

"Get in cover," she reminded them, "use the dust devils."

"Commander," Lady Arano's voice came over the channel, "there's still a turret and its generator to the northwest. Don't let your team get caught between it and my cousin's lance."

"Good idea," Hysteria nodded to herself, "Kru, take out the generator."

"You got it, boss," he turned his Hunch and headed into a dust devil, just inside the range to hit the generator, "I just hope they don't light up my ass while my back is turned!"

"Acceptable risk," she joked.

"Visual contact on Firestarter," Vamp reported.

"Keep your distance," Riana reminded him, "I want to make sure you have their *full* attention."

"Commander," Glitch was technically closer to the action, nestled against the highest peak in the area, "you want me to hit the firebug with a volley?"

"Negative," Hysteria responded coolly, "just sit where you are and don't move. I don't want *any* distractions."

"One in sight, my Lady," Firelock reported, "a Centurion... heavily modified. It's packed with a ton of armor but a lot of it is missing."

"That could be *her*," Victoria purred, "destroy it!"

"As you command!" Firelock opened fire with the Firestarter's twin medium lasers, boring them into Vamp's Cent.

"Kommander!" he called out, "I am taking fire; that shot got internal!"

"I got you, pal," Kru called, the burning wreckage of the turret generator behind him as he emerged from the dust devil to get within range, "Eat shit you bastard!" he screamed as he unloaded his AC/20 and medium laser into the Firestarter.

"Firelock's taking damage," Hammer's burly voice went over the Epinosa Op channel, "but I've got a line on that enemy Centurion... going for an Alpha Strike!" He fired his AC/10 and both lasers followed by a volley of long range missiles. The impact sent a plume of armor shrapnel into the air but the missiles tripped up the fleeing Mech. "He's going down," Hammer reported, "my Lady, you want me to hit him while he's prone?"

"Ignore him," Victoria commanded, "focus on the Hunchback. Apex can handle what's left of the Centurion!"

"Zat hurt, Kommander," Vamp's voice was unsteady.

"Get your ass up, Mechwarrior, and get in cover!" Hysteria commanded, "Kru, how's your armor holding up?"

"Good for now," he said as he moved his Hunch to the right, cutting off direct line-of-sight to Vamp's downed Mech, "but I sure could use that big surprise you're planning! I'm practically one-on-four out here!"

"Now?" Glitch asked, her voice nervous and impatient."

"Hold position," Hysteria said, watching her HFORS as Vamp got back to his feet and moved into another dust devil, "don't fire until I tell you to."

"Hysteria," Lady Arano's voice was full of concern, "they're getting shot up down there; what are you doing?"

"They have armor for a reason," Riana said dismissively, "c'mon, show yourself you *bitch*," she said to herself as the Dragon popped up on her HFORS.

"The enemy Centurion has moved out of range," Apex reported as she turned her guns on the Hunchback. Firelock had just finished her attack on it, the armor still glowing in places.

"Focus all fire on that mercenary!" Victoria squealed with glee, firing both of her PPC cannons. One hit the Hunchback directly in the head but the other missed.

"Detecting MechWarrior injury!" Darius came over the com, "Death Crusade! Are you alright! That was a straight shot to the cockpit!"

Kru shook his head, a rivulet of blood running down into his eye. He was taking fire from the Centurion and the Dragon, blowing off armor at an alarming rate, but what concerned him most was the melted state of his ferro-glass. "I can't take another shot like that!" he winced. There were blisters on his face from the heat generated by the PPC strike, "Armor on the head is toast, Commander, I'm looking through bathroom glass up here! I sure would like that big surprise now!" He maneuvered his Hunch to the left, getting behind the Firestarter and unloading on its rear, including his own flamer unit. "Let's see how youse like it!" But the flames would go unnoticed; the CT was already blown by the close-range auto cannon strike.

"Firelock!!" Victoria screamed, switching to the open comms, "You will *not* defeat us! I will *break* you, mercenary scum!"

"Firing all weapons," Vamp's voice came across the Op channel as his Alpha Strike tore into the opposing Centurion. It was standing on rocky ground as it was and the Mech struggled to keep its feet, "is still up Kommander."

"Glitch," Hysteria began, "send a volley to that enemy Cent... see if we can't compel him to take a nap!"

"You betcha, Commander!" she said cheerfully as a hail of twenty long range missiles arced over the peak and rained down all over Hammer's Centurion.

"My Lady!" he cried out, "Taking IDF! I'm going down!" The Cent's foot slipped out on the unstable terrain and the Mech went down hard.

"Rrrargh!" Victoria roared, moving her Catapult even closer, coming into visual range, "I'll finish you both *myself*!" She fired two more shots, this time at Vamp's Cent. One impacted his right arm, blowing it, and his AC/10, off.

"Identity confirmed!" Kamea's voice came over the com as the CPLT-K2 popped up on the HFORS, "That's Victoria's Catapult!"

"Glitch," a deliberate smile spread across Hysteria's face, "disarm that bitch!"

"Squee!" she responded as the Dragon shifted from cover and took careful aim at Victoria's right arm, "You're not the *only* one with a big gun!"



Lady Espinosa's expression changed to one of shock as she looked to her right and watched as her PPC began to glow under the beam weapon's assault. Suddenly it exploded, the impact tearing off the right arm of her Mech and shredding her right torso. The shock of it threw her head into the left side of her cage and, for a moment, she saw stars. "I will make you *suffer* before you die!" she screamed as the Hunchback unloaded into Apex's Dragon. She had spotted the enemy Dragon, perched high above, but then more movement caught her eye; a Jagermech moved right up to the edge, the flash of a muzzle preceded another impact. "Oof!" she muttered as her Mech struggled to keep its footing.

"That's one for you," Hysteria grinned as she fired her Kali Yama into the left side of Apex's Dragon, unbalancing it on the same rough terrain as the downed Centurion, "and one for you. Hey, Kru!" she called out, "Did someone order the cavalry?"

"You're damn right I did!" the Solaran exclaimed as the enemy Cent made it back to its feet and fired on him, "That shot went internal!"

"You will leave him alone!" Vamp cried as his Cent raced towards the enemy. Lacking his auto cannon now he instead fired the jets on his left arm mod. His rocket punch carried his left fist right through Hammer's CT, effectively tearing the Mech to pieces.

"Hammer!" Victoria could hardly believe her eyes, "I will *kill* you, mercenary!" She moved her Catapult forward as Glitch's Dragon fired on her counterpart, a full combo of PPC and LRM 20 that unbalanced it so badly that Apex toppled over. "What the fuck is wrong with you???" she screamed into her com, "Get up!!! They're *only* mercenaries!!" She targeted Vamp's Centurion with her remaining PPC, a powerful shot that blew his leg out from under him. "Do I have to kill *all* of them??"

"I'm sorry, my Lady!" Apex's voice was near breathless as she suffered an AC/20 shot from the Hunchback, "I'm trying to... AHHHHH!!!" Suddenly her mic went dead as a hail of missiles rained down on her, blowing apart her center and left torso.

"You're *useless*!" Victoria spit, switching back to the open com, "You're going to pay, Riana, you're going to pay for each and every one of them!! Where are you, you filthy pirate??"

"Right behind you," Hysteria responded in a predatory hiss, her Jagermech emerging from the burning wreckage of the turret generator she had blown earlier. She fired her AC/5 into the rear of Victoria's center torso, "that was for betraying Lady Arano," she growled as she lined up the sights on her AC/20, "and this is for Sir Raju you goddamn bitch!" She pulled the trigger forcefully as the massive auto cannon fired. Its rounds tore into Victoria's CT and set off a chain reaction in her Magna 260 engine; explosions tearing through the Mech and sending it careening to the ground.

"No!!!" she screamed as her comms filled with static, "It's not possible! I can still win this!" Then her Mech impacted the ground and she went silent, her ejection pod firing all too late and sending her skittering across the ground instead of in orbit.

"Mission successful, Commander! Nicely done!" Lady Arano's voice flooded the comms, "Doctor Murad, does the *Argo* have an empty storeroom that could serve as a makeshift brig?"

"I'm sure that something could be arranged, Lady Arano," the engineer replied.

"Then arrange it," Kamea said triumphantly, "and get a lock on Lady Espinosa's ejection pod. She's coming with us."

"The fuck she is," Riana replied, navigating her Jagermech towards the smoking pod, "*if* she's alive then I can fix that." She brought up her targeting reticule and synchronized her cannons for an Alpha Strike.

"Stand down, Hysteria," Lady Arano commanded, "that's an order. I'm taking her prisoner."

"Sorry, Actual," she closed one eye, "must be some interference. It sounded like you said 'you may fire when ready.'"

"Riana, that's my cousin!" her statement caused Hysteria to open both eyes in disbelief, "I am *ordering* you to take her into custody!"

"Your *cousin*?" she parroted incredulously, "Are you fucking joking? My Lady, she helped usurp your throne, tried to kill you, and *did* kill Sir Raju!! This bitch deserves to die!!"

"She does, Riana," Kamea admitted, her tone softening, "but it *must* come as justice, not revenge! We take her prisoner and then, when my restoration is complete, she stands trial before the Founding Houses for her crimes."

"That's bullshit, you know why? Because there *is* no justice, my Lady," her blood was beginning to boil now, "justice would see me hung for my crimes but instead I got pardoned... I got pardoned because Sir Raju Montgomery, the Mastiff himself, spoke for me and saw a use for me! Where's the *justice* in that, huh? I killed hundreds of people during my time as a pirate, Kamea, *I* deserve to die! But here I am, your left arm carefully concealed behind your back *always* ready to wield the dagger in your service! Well I don't *want* justice for Sir Raju... I want *revenge*! I named my damn company for your revenge and now you'll deny me? Me??? Sir Raju was like a father to me!!"

"He was to me as well," Lady Arano began, but Riana cut her off.

"No!!" she screamed, tears now streaming down her face, "No, you *had* a father!! Lord Tamati was a good man, but *my* father? *My* father threw me away! Everyone saw me as trash... *except* Sir Raju!! And now you want me to just stand by while this bitch gets a comfy cell? She *tortured* him... for *years*!" She steeled her nerve for the words that came next for she knew full well the power they had: "While *you* were hiding in a palace, light-years away, Victoria-goddamn-Espinoza, your *cousin*, was torturing Sir Raju to death!! I can NOT stand by while she lives, I WILL not!!!"

"I don't see you as trash, Riana," Kamea chose her words very carefully, "and it hurts me that you think I would *ever* pardon Victoria for what she has done. No, she deserves the shame of being imprisoned. She deserves the humiliation of standing before the Founding Houses while they list out every crime she committed, *including* the tragedy of what she did to Sir Raju," she took a deep breath, acutely aware of Darius' eyes upon her as she spoke into the com, "she is *guilty* of these crimes, Hysteria. She will be *found* guilty... and *when* she is I will sentence her to death. You have my vow on that. Now please," her voice took on a gentle, submissive quality, "please stand aside and let the recovery team do its job. You performed perfectly and I was wrong to ever doubt you. You're *better* than Victoria Espinosa. Don't grant her the mercy of a quick death today."

"Rrrraaaaahhh!!!!" Riana grabbed her control stick and swiveled her Mech, opening fire with both cannons into the burning wreckage of the *Newgrange*. She screamed herself hoarse, agony and pain flooding her voice as she emptied both auto cannons until the ammo alarms triggered and the only sounds in her cockpit besides her ragged breathing were from the cannons spinning as impotently as her rage.



"Boss!" she suddenly became aware of Kru's voice over her direct channel, "Riana! Hey! It's over!" She realized he was panting too and wondered how long she'd been standing there, consumed with rage. "It's done, girl. The recovery team is here. Let's get back to the Lep and get home, a'ight?"

"Yeah," her voice cracked and her throat was sore. She wiped her nose on her sleeve and then her eyes, '*God, fuck this day,*' she thought to herself before switching her com to a direct link with the *Argo*, "Actual?" she began.

"You made the right choice, Hysteria," Lady Arano's voice was reassuring, "and I thank you for it."

Her thumb hovered over the button. 'I'm *so* sorry,' she thought, as she struggled to put it into words, 'I'm so sorry for what I said,' but when she pressed the button all that would come out was: "Time will tell, my Lady," her eyes fixed on the recovery team's Leopard as it landed near Espinosa's ejection pod, "but I know I won't have any rest until that woman is dead," and then in her mind she added: 'and *I'm* the one who pulled the trigger.'

"I'm sorry for your pain, Riana," Lady Arano replied, making her feel all the more guilty, "join me back in the CIC where we can interrogate my cousin... together."

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Hysteria was silent for the trip back to the *Argo*. She resisted Glitch's cheer and Vamp's camaraderie. She shrugged off Kru's concern and Sumire's inquisitiveness. She said nothing when Yang was there to greet her when she emerged from her Mech and went directly to the showers, not even bothering to debrief with Darius and the others as was custom. She leaned against the wall with both hands in the shower and let the water go cold, raising goosebumps all over her body as she hung her head down and watched the water drip from her auburn hair. Inside there was nothing but turmoil; shame, rage, indignation, humiliation, defiance, love, hate... all swirled into a black spiral that dragged her into depths of self-loathing and regret. She wanted nothing more, nothing in this universe, than to quietly go to the makeshift cell where Victoria Espinosa was and then put her out the airlock but, coming in a close second, there was the desire to follow her out. 'Fuck this, fuck this, fuck this!' she thought as she hammered her knuckles into the stainless steel wall of the *Argo* until they were bloody, 'What good is it to have a heart when *this* is the result?' She turned and put her back to the wall, sliding down until she sat on the floor and pulled her knees together, burying her face as the cold water continued to rain over her.

:

The Holotable flickered and, suddenly, the image of a bedraggled Victoria Espinosa appeared. She stared out from under lowered brow, defiant even now. "Victoria," Kamea Arano stood next to the table, an air of supremacy in her voice, "I've been waiting almost six years for this moment," she paced around the Holotable, both women firing icicles of hate at each other, "are you enjoying your cell? I had it assembled just for you."



"Gloat all you like, cousin," her voice was tinged with pain but Lady Espinosa refused to show any weakness, "Your victory will be short-lived. Your pathetic little army may have carried you this far, but if you think that you can challenge the core systems then you're sadly mistaken! Our glorious army will grind your Restoration to a bloody pulp!"

"Save me the lecture and just tell me what you were doing on Anvelt," Lady Arano continued, "your father rules the Directorate. You should be in a tower somewhere, surrounded by simpering sycophants, not on a dusty little moon guarding a smuggling ship."

"*Smuggling ship?*" Victoria snorted derisively, "Is *that* what Karosas thought the *Newgrange* was? Is *that* what he told you??" Riana exchanged a concerned look with Glitch, who was standing next to her, but said nothing. "Oh you poor, dear fool! I would tell you what you've done, but I don't want to spoil the surprise!" An unnerving smile spread across her face, deliberately, to the point that none could decide if she were lying just to get under their skin. "You'll find out soon enough..." she purred.

"I can tell you what the *Newgrange* is now," Riana growled, "it's a smoldering heap of scrap metal. Good job protecting her, by the way. I can see why you rely on deception because your other skills are... *lacking*."

"Sooner or later we'll face off again, *Riana*," Victoria said in a mocking tone before it shifted into pure vehemence, "and when that day comes I will shear your cockpit in two!"

"You worthless cunt," Hysteria snarled as she strode forwards, "you owe your pathetic life to Lady Arano! If she hadn't requested you alive there wouldn't be enough of your biological material left to fill a shot glass! I hope we face off again, *Vickie*, because if we do I'll *tear* your face off with my goddamn bare hands!"

"Ooo," Espinosa smiled, pleased that she had riled her up, "I can see why you like her, cousin... so much fire, so much passion," she looked directly at Riana, "it's a shame that you *abandoned* Sir Raju and *ran away* from me on Coromodir, you would have found it *so* much more satisfying to be *my* dog rather than Kamea's!"

"Victoria, I loved you like a sister," Lady Arano stepped in front of Riana as Yang pulled her to the side, "and you *betrayed* me. Your father held the knife to my back but it was *you* that pushed it in. I need to understand why."

"Aww, are you looking for a way to forgive me?" she smothered a laugh and then her face hardened, "If you'd ever really listened to him you'd already know. He tried to teach you, cousin, to set you on the path to strength and prosperity, but you spat on his efforts and forced his hand... and mine along with it!"

"Forced your hand?" Lady Arano responded with incredulity, "Mastiff is *dead* because of you! Our *mentor*, the man who taught you to pilot a Mech and you put him in a camp and left him to rot!" Her own composure threatened to break as the image of Sir Raju, lifeless, flashed again before her eyes. "*Thousands* of Aurigan dead lie piled at your feet!"

"The price of strength, cousin!" Victoria snapped, "And our nation's strength! For the glory of the Reach I'd pay it a hundred times over!"

"You're confusing wanton cruelty with strength," Lord Madeira interrupted, giving Lady Arano a break, "They aren't the same thing; the destruction of your lance should have taught you that."

"Little Lord Madeira," Victoria clucked her tongue, "Still my cousin's favorite pet I see," she let a snug smile splay across her face as her eyes cut over to Riana, "well maybe *second* favorite now. Hmph, I wonder if that pretty jaw of yours is as fragile as it looks," she licked her bloodied and cracked lips, "One of these days we'll have to find out."

"After what you did to Raju Montgomery I should have you vented into space!" Hysteria tore free from Yang's metal grip and moved directly in front of the hologram, "In fact I still may do it. You'd best sleep lightly, Vickie, I wouldn't want you to miss your final moments, gasping for air in the cold vacuum of space!"

"If you were *allowed* to kill me I'd be dead already, dog!" Victoria retorted, "You speak as if you had any power at all, little pirate, but rest assured my time here will be all too brief... and once I'm free there will be a reckoning," she leaned forward and snarled, "and then our teacher's death will look mild by comparison!"

"You will do nothing but rot in your cage!" Kamea stood beside Riana this time, placing a reassuring hand on her arm, "Your story is over, Victoria, you've lost."

"Is that what you think?" she sneered, "Do you honestly believe my father hasn't planned for this? My capture means nothing! The jaws of our trap are already closing about your neck but you're just too blind to see it!"

"You talk like a cartoon villain," Glitch interjected, "has anyone ever told you that?"

"You mock me at your peril, mercenary!" she spit, "My father bends *everyone* to his will, the Periphery nations, the Successor States, everyone! You don't know what *I've done* for our people, the *sacrifices* I've had to make... you understand nothing and you never will!!"

Riana folded her arms and slowly pulled up one corner of her mouth in a smile. "Sounds like maybe he bent you *over* his will. Are there Holovids of this?" she turned her head to Yang, "Hey, write that down, we'll search the HPG net for it later; *Daddy Does Vickie...*"

"You've already lost this war, cousin!" she screeched, all composure now gone, "You'll die screaming... you all will!! And your Restoration will die with you!!"

"Ooo, so much fire, so much passion," Riana cut an amused glance over at Lady Arano who met it blankly, "maybe I touched a nerve?"

"I've heard enough," she turned her back on the Holotable, "Mr. Oliveira, cut off her com." Her raging image flickered and then disappeared.

"What do you want done with her, Lady Arano?" Darius asked, "The *Argo* isn't a prison... she can't stay here."

"Nonsense," Riana said seductively, "of *course* she can."

"No, she *can't*," Kamea cut her eyes at Riana, "Lord Karosas lost a daughter on Weldry and we weren't there to help him. I cannot undo that wrong but I *can* give him justice. We will transfer Lady Victoria into his custody, to be held until I say otherwise."

"I don't think that's a good idea, my Lady," Riana began, "with all due respect Smithon has already fallen to Directorate forces once; leaving Espinosa in his care is an invitation for a rescue attempt as there is still Directorate activity all over the planet!"

"I don't have a better alternative, Riana!" Lady Arano snapped, "I am *trying* to conduct a war here and I need somewhere to put a high-value prisoner until it is concluded!" She stormed up and got into the Commander's face, putting a finger up and pointing at her; "You've made it *abundantly* clear that I cannot count on you for this, nor should I! Lord Karosas is in need of redress and the offering of Lady Espinosa shows both trust and reconciliation! I *need* his backing, more than I need the approval of a mercenary for a decision that has nothing to do with her!" Her eyes were smoldering, filled with pent up anger, and just challenging Riana to try and retort.

"Yeah, I get it," she responded, a stone façade over her face like a mask prevented her emotions from rising, "as you wish, my *Lady*."

"That's your call, Lady Arano," Darius interjected, attempting to relieve tension, "We'll set course for Smithon when we're ready," he clapped his hands together and stood up, moving over and in between Riana and Kamea, "Conversation's over, people, let's get back to work." He had barely finished speaking when Lady Arano swept past him, followed quickly by a flustered Lord Madeira. Yang and Sumire also made for the exit and Glitch ducked out, but Hysteria stood like a statue and tried to control her breathing. Darius reached out and touched her arm, "You okay?" he asked with concern.

"Just fuck off, Darius!" she snapped as he backed away and held up both hands.

"I'm just trying to help!" he offered but she spun on her heel and stormed by the shocked Chief MechTech and Pilot.

She stomped her way through the *Argo's* halls, her mood darkening with every single step, past Alpha Pod and all the way to Beta Pod. It had been recently repaired by Dr. Murad and featured a new hydroponic garden, a library, and even a gymnasium but she headed for the extended crew quarters, which were unused. It was dark inside and the compartment was completely bare, having no reason to be anything but that way. She punched the metal wall three, four times... until her knuckles ached from stress fractures and blood marred the surface but that did little to sate her anger. She spun and kicked the wall, a bunk, and even pounded against the view port, as if to rage at the stars, until she heard the clank of metal-on-metal. She turned around, her teeth bared, to find Yang standing in the doorway. "What do you want??" she snapped.

"I came to check on you, boss," he said evenly, "we're all on your side, you know. We'd all like to vent that bitch into space, but it isn't our call, right?" He approached slowly, as if moving towards a wild animal, "It's been a heckuva day. Wanna talk about it?"

"**Fuck this day!!**" she yelled, and punched the metal wall hard. "Ow!" she pulled her hand back and cradled it in her other one.

"Careful," the Chief held up his cybernetic arm, "you wanna end up looking like me?" He smiled disarmingly.

"*Please* just fuck off, Yang!" she stooped over in pain, she'd almost certainly fractured her fifth metacarpal with that last strike, "I just can't handle it right now!"

"Yeah, boss," Yang said smoothly, still approaching with his hands where she could see them, "I can see that. So why not let me help, eh? I can help you shoulder this," he patted his cybernetic arm, "even got a sturdy metal shoulder!"

"Yang, please," she stood there, holding her hand, as agony threatened to overtake her, *just go away.*"

"Yeah," he said as he eased his arm around her and pulled her to him before guiding the both of them into a seated position on the bunk nearby, "not gonna do that so why don't we just sit here for a while?" The warmth of his arm, of his torso, flooded into her and the dam broke. She turned and buried her face in his oil-stained coveralls and howled, muffling it with his chest, but howled for all she was worth. Her arms went around him, hugging him close with her fingers digging into his flesh as she released all of her anger and pain into him. For his part Yang said nothing, merely stroking her hair as she got it out, until all that remained were halting gasps as she tried to recover. "There you go," he said reassuringly, "that's better; come on back to me." She pulled her face up, red and moist with tears... a head-sized wet spot on his coveralls. "Now you don't owe me anything," he began, "but if you'd *like* to talk then I'm all ears," he rested his hand on her shoulder and tilted his head to one side, "what's bothering you?"

"Chief," she sniffled, her voice weak and vulnerable, "you were right... you were right about me."

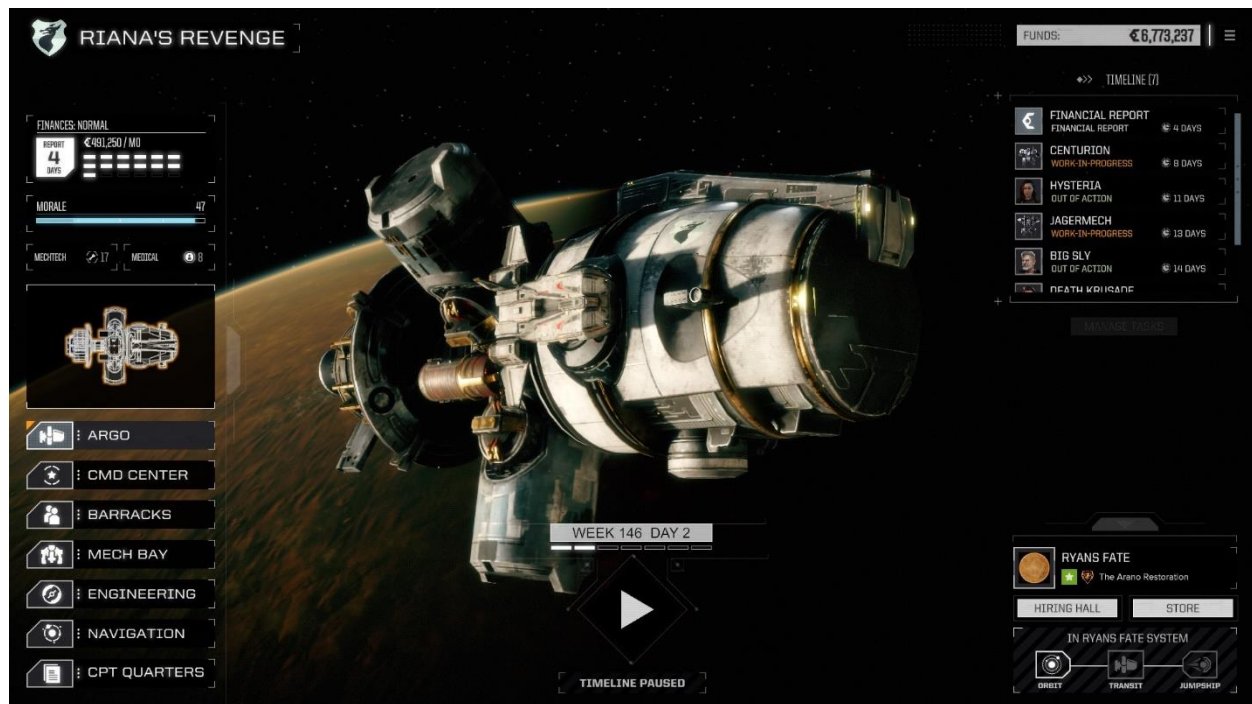
"Mmm hmm," he nodded, "this is more about Kamea than anything else, isn't it?"

"I changed my mind," she cast her eyes down to one side, "I don't want to talk," she moved in for another hug, "I just want you to shut up and hold me for a while."

"That's my job," he said, letting his arm drape over her again, "you break it and I fix it. You just take all the time you need."

"Thanks, Chief," she said, her voice muffled by his chest, "you're the best."

Part XXI



"Actual," Sumire's voice came across the comms, "package delivered." The Leopard banked and lifted away, leaving the lance on the ground. Ryan's Fate was a hot, arid world with a single, shallow, briny sea, that survived on flood farming in the brief rainy seasons, and mining high-quality crystals and fissionable materials from the extensive caverns that honeycombed the planet's surface.

"Okay, Commander," Darius' voice was clear; the cloudless sky above the desert making for little interference, "the base should be just ahead. At the moment it appears to be unoccupied but we've already picked up the Directorate lance in the area and there's no doubt they're inbound as well. We need to get there first and secure it and then prepare to defend it."

"We're on it," Hysteria winced as she released the comms button, her right hand was still wrapped in a compression brace but the fracture wasn't bad enough to require anything more, "alright people, you heard the man, double-time to the A.O."

"You got it!" Glitch's cheery reply was cut short as Vamp's Centurion moved in front of her, "Hey, watch it ya big lug!"

"Zere's plenty of time to move in front of you," he teased, "is not exactly as fast as your old Mech."

"Aw," Glitch's tone dropped, "Vindy..."

"This thing is so strange," Big Sly was piloting Kru's Hunchback while the Solaran was

still recovering from his close call on Anvelt, "tell me again why I couldn't just bring the Hawk?"

"I wanted the big guns," Hysteria responded matter-of-factly as she brought up the rear, "the last time we did a mission like this you nearly died." She omitted the part where Behemoth actually *did* die but it was on everyone's mind.

"Well at least the cockpit is practically new," Sly continued, "they even managed to get that cheese smell out."

"Be nice," Hysteria warned him, "or I'll tell him you said that."

"He's actually here in CIC," Darius smirked, "worried that you'll mess up his baby... I don't really feel comfortable repeating what he's saying."

"Get your ass to bed, Kru," Hysteria chastised him, "if you're so worried about your Mech then I'd rather have *you* in it."

"He's, uh, he's still here." Darius reported.

"Figured," Riana sighed, "base in sight." Sure enough there was a small military outpost ahead, abandoned at the moment but it would be considerably more trouble with a Directorate lance embedded in it. It was nestled against a high ridge but otherwise there was little in the way of cover.

"Not a very good place to put base," Vamp observed, "is completely blind to ze ozer side."

"Fox I want you inside the base," Hysteria ordered, "use the buildings for cover. Everyone else up the ridge; we'll have the best view from up there."

"I'm not sure this lumbering turd will make it *up* to the ridge," Sly quipped.

"Stow it, Assault," Hysteria ordered, "last thing I need is *two* Mechwarriors out on medical."

"As if!" Sly laughed.

"Commander I got contact!" Glitch interrupted, "Sensor traces on the other side of the ridge! They're about to get the drop on us!"

"Well, that's just great!" She took up position just to the south of the base and turned towards the ridge, "Looks like this will be an uphill battle, people, quite literally!"

Honestly the only reason I dared to take another Defend the Base mission was simply because it was the lowest difficulty at 3 1/2! I routinely avoid these missions after the sound ass-kicking I suffered back when Behemoth died and Big Sly was taken out of commission but, for some reason, the game seems to think that I am fine to handle difficulty 4-4 1/2 missions now, despite only being able to field a solid 3 myself. Literally every mission in Restoration space is either at or above my level! This one would be no different: they had a Dragon that mounted the ridge long before I could get there as well as a Panther, a Quickdraw, a Wolverine, and a dreaded LRM Carrier.

On a side note you might have noticed in the picture that the name of the company has changed again. Following the drama of Anvelt and the spat between Kamea and Riana I felt a name change was in order:



"Another name change, boss?" Yang asked. The rest of the crew were dispersing after she had revealed the change during the hastily called meeting but the Chief remained behind, "Nothing against the new name, I like it, but if we're gonna maintain a reputation we need to pick one and stick with it."

"No more changes after this one, Chief," she offered him a soft smile, "at least not until everyone has had enough of me and mutinies."

"Not to pry," the Capellan began, one hand over his head and resting on the nape of his neck nervously, "but the war ain't over... are you planning on ditching the Restoration, cause a Merc can make a lot of money in a war..."

"Not at all, Yang," she shook her head, "I'm as determined as ever to see Lady Arano on her rightful throne but I'm also thinking of the future, you know, *Queen Kamea's Revenge* wouldn't make a whole lot of sense after the war."

"Uh, huh," he smirked at her, "and this has *nothing* to do with a certain ex-pirate and her tragic crush, would it?"

"First of all, Chief, fuck you," she extended her middle finger to put an exclamation on the point, "and secondly if the Lady desires justice... let her have it. *I* still want revenge."

"Fair enough," Yang smiled, "but still, for the record, I like it a *lot* better!"



House Arano

As you can see I kept the actual logo, which is a clear derivative of House Arano's logo, and I also retain Kamea's personal red and gold color scheme to my Mechs as well, but I figured that as Riana comes into her own as a veteran mercenary captain the name ought to reflect her a bit more, as well as plan for the post-storyline game as well.

Back to the mission it did not go overly well. With elevation comes better precision and they wailed on me hard. Vamp made it up the ridge and dealt a bit of hand-to-hand damage with his new arm mod but my major concern was that LRM carrier; it was dealing a ton of damage to me. With Sly flanking with the Hunch, Glitch hiding in the base, and Hysteria trying desperately to get to the top of the ridge to use her big, expensive gun I just didn't have a lot of options to stop its assault. Vamp was taking a lot of damage, sandwiched between the lingering Dragon and the Quickdraw. Nearly all the damage I had done to the carrier came from Glitch's missile salvos. I had taken care of the Wolvie and the Panther, and the Quickdraw was hurting, but with both the Hunch and the Jager still below the ridgeline I was having trouble using their AC/20s. So then this happened:

"Vamp, gimme a sitrep!" Hysteria was almost to the top of the ridge, but she had been trading with the Dragon; trying desperately to keep its attention off of the heavily damaged Centurion. She was missing the left arm of her Mech, her AC/5 lost in the battle, "you okay up there?"

"Busy at the moment, Kommander," he said, his Mech under a hail of short range missiles fired from the Quickdraw, "but would be much appreciated if you could help."

"Sly, report," Hysteria fired at the enemy Dragon, finally taking off its AC/20.

"Almost there," he said, firing an Alpha Strike into the rear of the Quickdraw, "dammit! Target is still up."

"LRM wagon is pulled up to range," Glitch cut in as she fired yet another salvo at it, "how much can this damn thing take??"

Darius came across the Jager's direct channel; "Hysteria, that Cent can't take anymore. He's practically bingo armor and has sustained major critical damage to his internal systems... if he takes another big hit he's done for."

"Vamp, punch out," Hysteria ordered.

"Kommander, if I punch out zey will be able to regroup..."

"That's an order, CC, punch out now," she reiterated.

Inside his cockpit, the ferro-glass cracked and melted in places, Vamp flipped the protective shield over the eject system up but motion outside his Mech caught his eye. The 60-ton Long Range Missile Carrier pulled into view. He hesitated. His HFORS showed it to be heavily damaged but if it got off another full volley... both Hysteria's Jagermech and the Hunchback were already in trouble. An Alpha Strike could finish them off and without his Cent... He seized his control stick and swiveled, charging directly at the LRM Carrier and lifting his foot. "MECHWARRIORS!" he bellowed as he brought down his 50-ton weight in leverage against the top of the vehicle, "RALLY AND FIGHT! VE VILL VIN ZIS DAY AND OUR NAMES VILL BE REMEMBERED!" The LRM Carrier exploded around his leg but the Centurion remained steady. "He vill not be a bother any longer, Kommander!"

Hysteria gasped as the enemy Dragon turned away from the ridge, finally allowing her to ascend the hill. She moved up as fast as she could but as she reached the top she was just in time to witness the Dragon rear back and sweep its left arm *through* Vamp's Centurion. In a massive explosion his Center and Right Torso was turned to scrap, his LRM launcher and ammo exploding in a massive fireball as his Mech sailed down face first to the desert floor. "LEONARD!!!!" she screamed, seizing her stick and firing her Kali Yama. The Dragon shuddered as its CT finally buckled; the Mech crashing down beside Vamp's Mech, "Actual get the Medbay prepped immediately!! Sumire get your ass over here *now*!"

"Is the A.O. clear?" came the pilot's response.

"That's a negative, Envoy," Darius cut in, "hold position."

"Belay that!" Riana's voice was frantic, "Vamp's down, Su, get your ass en route right fucking now!"

"Negative, Commander," Sumire's voice was calm and measured, "I can't risk the Leopard. You have to clear the A.O."

"Goddammit!!" she marched her Mech straight at the downed Centurion but swiveled and fired a shot at the Quickdraw, blowing off an arm, "Shit!! Sly!"

"I'm your spaniel," he answered, finally mounting the ridge and firing an Alpha Strike, including flamer, at point blank range into the Quickdraw, ending it, "Tango down, the A.O. is

clear. Get your ass over here, the Commander is out of her Mech, I repeat, Hysteria is..." he paused, "hysterical."

"Riana dropped the last twelve feet to the dunes, the electric agony shooting through her right hand didn't even enter her mind as she raced towards the burning wreckage of Vamp's Cent. "LEONARD!!" she screamed as she approached as close as she could to his cored-out Mech, "NO!" she moved around, away from where his center torso should be and worked her way through the smoldering remains of his right torso. The heat was intense but she could see the cockpit from where she was. It appeared to still be intact. Braving the temperatures, she forced her way through and pulled at the emergency hatch, breaching the cockpit manually. A blast of hot air and steam escaped, taking her breath away, but when it cleared she saw him hanging from his seat, still held in place by his cage, one hand dripping blood onto the sizzling ferro-glass. "Leonard!" she exclaimed, ducking inside and pulling at the cage's release. The metal was very hot and her hands burned but she paid it no heed, suffering through it until the cage opened and his full weight dangled only from his harness. "Hang on, Vamp," she said, pulling a blade from its sheathe on her right leg and slicing through the straps, "I've got you big guy!" She struggled as his weight slumped into her. She pulled at him, trying to keep his face from hitting the hot glass or metal, as she dragged him away from the burning wreckage of his BattleMech. She pulled and strained as she tugged him clear just as the dust began to roil around them as Sumire put the Leopard down nearby. She slipped and went down on her rear, still cradling Vamp's motionless form as Duncan ran up next to her, "Check his pulse," she panted, "is he alive?"

"Oh!" Sly exclaimed as he reached in and pressed his fingers to Vamp's bloodied, blistered neck, "I've got one!" he exclaimed, "it's weak but he's still with us!"

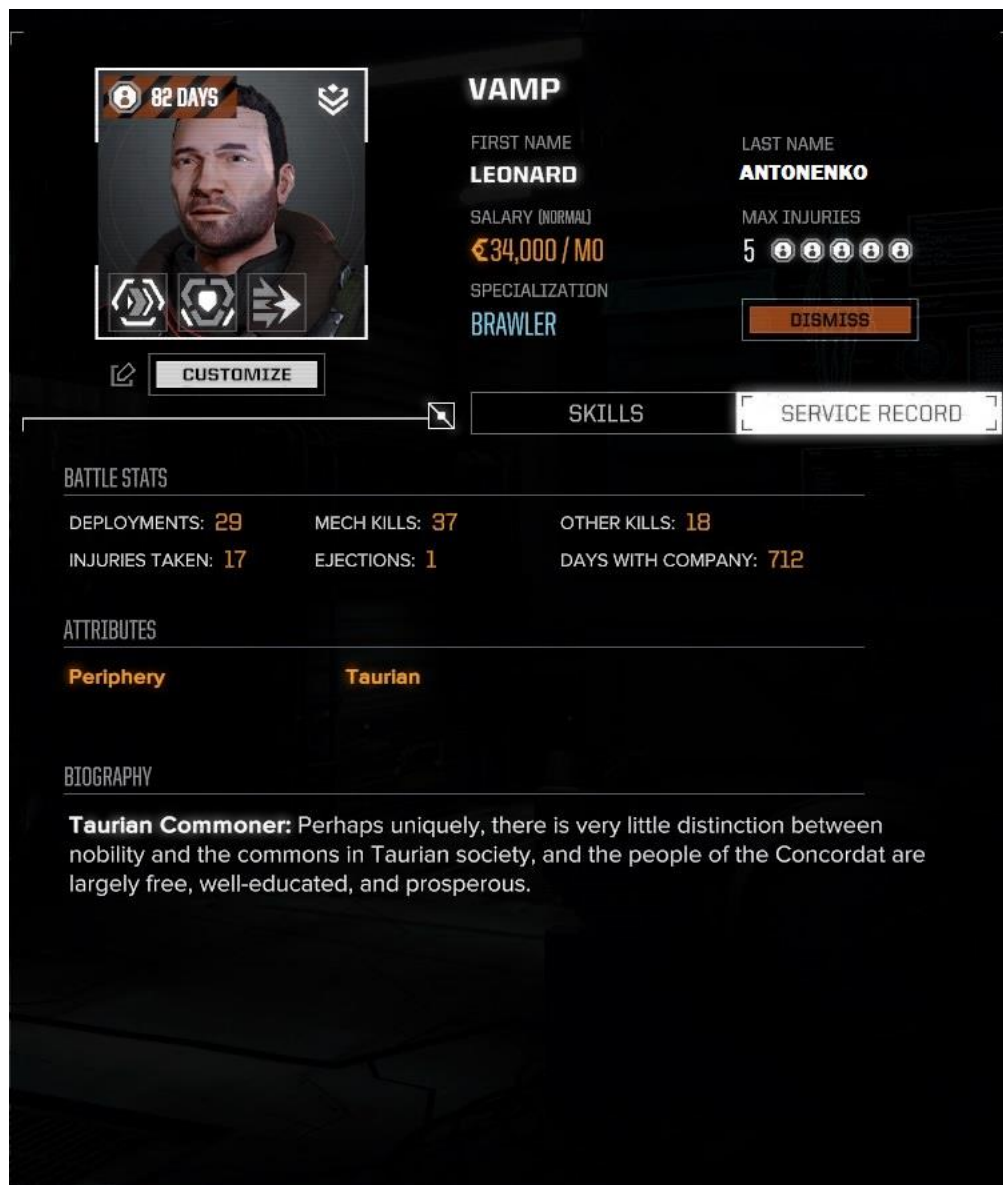
"Actual," Riana pressed her personal com into her throat, hoping the background roar of the burning Mech wouldn't drown her out, "we're coming in hot. The Mechs can wait," she looked up at Duncan, "help me get him into the Lep then stand by with Glitch just in case there's more."

"Riana, you're hurt," he nodded at her hands, "you're gonna need my help."

"Not once he's loaded!" she snapped, "God! Can you just listen to me?!"

"Okay," he relented, "you're the boss," he hefted Vamp's full weight across his shoulders and headed towards the Leopard with Riana close behind. They moved up the open doors into the bay where Sly laid him down as gently as he could, Riana maneuvering beneath him to cradle his head. Sly began to tear at his dropsuit, using his own blade to cut strips to fashion tourniquets, "I don't know, Riana," he said somberly, "there's a *lot* of blood. He caught a lot of shrapnel when his CT exploded."


"Su, we're on... go," she said into her comm, shooing Duncan back off the Leopard as the doors began to raise. She stroked his bloodied face and smoothed his hair as the dropship lifted sharply into the air, "hang in there, you stupid cossack," she said, fighting back tears, "don't you leave me."






Of all my Mechwarriors Vamp is perhaps the most disposable. He's the only one not classed a Ronin (unique starting Mechwarriors) or a Kickstarter backer. He was just a regular dude I hired to fill a vacancy that I kept on because I liked his accent yet the thought of losing him actually caused me to consider breaking my vow and reloading the previous save. Fortunately, he *did* survive, but at 82 days out he took the crown of longest and most severe injury. Vamp's noble sacrifice was bound to end in tragedy, it practically *had* to, but if I had ejected him there was a real chance the LRM Carrier could have taken out a second Mech. With 37 kills Vamp is second only to Riana (45) so he is basically my MVP but in terms of head canon he is also one of Riana's most trusted companions. He is reliability personified.

But on the topic of the Mercenaries of *Riana's Revenge* I don't think I've ever explicitly laid out who's who. So here we go. First there's our heroine, Riana Klaue:

11 DAYS



CUSTOMIZE

HYSTERIA

FIRST NAME

RIANA

LAST NAME

KLAUE

SALARY (NORMAL)

SPECIALIZATION

LANCER

MAX INJURIES

5

SKILLS

SERVICE RECORD

BATTLE STATS

DEPLOYMENTS: 34

MECH KILLS: 45

OTHER KILLS: 34

INJURIES TAKEN: 26

EJECTIONS: 0

DAYS WITH COMPANY: 1016

ATTRIBUTES

Exile

Noble Family

Periphery Ancestry

Space Pirate

BIOGRAPHY

Decades ago, your family came to the Aurigan Reach from the Rimward Periphery. There is no easy way to characterize MechWarriors hailing from the Rimward Periphery - they can be anything from petty thugs to ruthless tacticians to skilled and honorable warriors. The Periphery is the galaxy's frontier, and petty politics and piracy rule the region.

Once the promising young scion of your family, you committed an unforgivable transgression and were sentenced to life in exile. You stole away with the family's ancestral Blackjack and set off to find a new life to call your own.

Tired of living under the authority of others, you fell in with a local pirate gang in the Rimward Periphery. It was an unruly crew, but an effective one - roaming the Periphery afforded your outfit with a steady supply of poorly defended merchant caravans and supply depots to prey upon. While raids did occasionally devolve into combat, you quickly learned that successful piracy is mostly about being in the right place, at the right time, with the right threats and a good show of force.

Then my remaining "Ronin" Medusa and Glitch:



CUSTOMIZE

MEDUSA

FIRST NAME

MOHAMMED

SALARY (NORMAL)

€39,000 / MO

SPECIALIZATION

PILOT

LAST NAME

BENITEZ

MAX INJURIES

4

DISMISS

SKILLS

SERVICE RECORD

BATTLE STATS

DEPLOYMENTS: **30**

MECH KILLS: **27**

OTHER KILLS: **12**

INJURIES TAKEN: **9**

EJECTIONS: **1**

DAYS WITH COMPANY: **1016**

ATTRIBUTES

Aurigan

Cautious

MechWarrior

Military


Officer

Periphery


Technician

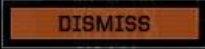

BIOGRAPHY

Mohammed Benitez was born on one of Mechdur's lunar colonies and subsequently traveled with his prospector parents all over the system before moving to Katinka. There he attended a local technical school to augment the knowledge he'd picked up while growing up. He spent some time working as a tech on his parents' IndustrialMechs. Eventually, craving more excitement, he hitched a ride on a mercenary DropShip, where he soon talked his way into a BattleMech cockpit. He's never looked back.



GLITCH
FIRST NAME
JESSICA
SALARY (NORMAL)
€42,000 / MO
SPECIALIZATION
SHARPSHOOTER

LAST NAME
CHERNOVSKAYA
MAX INJURIES
4 



SKILLS

SERVICE RECORD

BATTLE STATS

DEPLOYMENTS: 47	MECH KILLS: 26	OTHER KILLS: 40
INJURIES TAKEN: 17	EJECTIONS: 1	DAYS WITH COMPANY: 1016

ATTRIBUTES

Brave	Criminal	Federal
Inner Sphere		

BIOGRAPHY

Jessica Chernovskaya had a peaceful and ordinary middle-class childhood in the heart of the Federated Suns. But even in the heart of civilization, you're not safe from a glitch. It was a garbled bioscan that got Jessica committed to a maximum security prison and changed her life. After ten years, her case was re-opened, the evidence re-examined, and her name cleared, but it was far too late for the kid Glitch had been. She'd learned skills on the inside, and she applied them on the outside. Killing for money is surprisingly easy and lucrative, and elite killers can command high prices for their discretion and effectiveness.

The rest of my crew are all Kickstarter backers; in order of acquisition:



CUSTOMIZE

BIG SLY

FIRST NAME

DUNCAN

SALARY (NORMAL)

€42,000 / MO

SPECIALIZATION

STRIKER

LAST NAME

BRONSKI

MAX INJURIES

4    

DISMISS

SKILLS

SERVICE RECORD

BATTLE STATS

DEPLOYMENTS: 28

MECH KILLS: 25

OTHER KILLS: 24

INJURIES TAKEN: 18

EJECTIONS: 0

DAYS WITH COMPANY: 954

ATTRIBUTES

Athletic

Command Experience

Leaguer

MechWarrior

Merchant

Military

BIOGRAPHY

Duncan Bronski claims he was born an old man. The son of working class parents in the Duchy of Oriente while it was still part of the Free Worlds League, he grew up knowing the value of hard, skilled work. He earned excellent marks in his primary schooling, and his references all commented on his maturity and responsibility. Despite this, he was refused entrance to the Princefield Military Academy. His family, his planet, his entire Duchy lacked the status to compel Princefield to accept him. Hard work was valuable, but not to the elite.

In retaliation, he anonymously drew caricatures of many of the figures associated with the school that had rejected him, and the local net went wild over them. When offended nobles started sending investigators to find out who had mocked them, Duncan quickly enlisted, reasoning correctly that it was the best place to hide in plain sight.

In basic training, nobody cared about his cartoons as long as he did as ordered. They cared even less when he volunteered for anti-'Mech and insurgency training. Once again, he was in a place where hard work mattered, and soon he was assigned to SAFE, the Free Worlds League intelligence arm. They found his artistic skills and the keen perception that went with them quite useful. He did not, of course, make a name for himself, because his work was never signed, but even after he was injured and transferred back home again, some of his cartoons were used as an unofficial currency among the members of the Analysis Branch.

He remained on his home planet until it was attacked and annexed by the Capellan Confederation. After escaping the invasion with his family and seeing them resettled elsewhere in the Duchy, he made his way to Galatea to earn a living as a mercenary. He still draws his cartoons, still never signs them, but the junior pilots and crew who receive one after a blunder know exactly who they come from and, if they're smart, they treasure them.



JESTER

FIRST NAME

JEREMIAH

SALARY (NORMAL)

€40,000 / MO

SPECIALIZATION

TACTICIAN

LAST NAME

BLOODSTONE

MAX INJURIES

4

DISMISS

CUSTOMIZE

SKILLS

SERVICE RECORD

BATTLE STATS

DEPLOYMENTS: **22**

MECH KILLS: **16**

OTHER KILLS: **7**

INJURIES TAKEN: **1**

EJECTIONS: **0**

DAYS WITH COMPANY: **639**

ATTRIBUTES

Command Experience

Lyrans

MechWarrior

Merchant

Military

BIOGRAPHY

A good father always wants his son to live his own life, not repeat his father's mistakes. But Jeremy Bloodstone couldn't bear to send his infant son away after his wife died. The child grew to adolescence under the watchful eye of his father's mercenary company, permanently stationed on The Edge, in service to the Lyrans Commonwealth.

Finally, when young Jeremiah was 15, and talking about formally joining his father's unit, the elder Bloodstone did what he knew he should have done years ago. He sent his son away, spending his life savings to enroll him in the Blackjack School of Conflict and qualify him for a commission in the LCAF.

Jeremiah excelled at Blackjack, bonding easily with his fellow cadets, many of whom came from similar circumstances. His quick wit, humor and love of practical jokes earned him the nickname 'Jester' amongst friends. Upon graduation Jeremiah earned his commission and was assigned to oversee the training of green units on Hesperus II, site of Defiance Industries.

Eventually, he saw real combat, when the Free Worlds League attacked Hesperus II. His unit successfully repelled the invasion and as a reward, he was transferred to a BattleMech unit. He continued serving for another five years, until he received word that his father had been killed in action, still on assignment on The Edge. His father's company, the family that had raised him, had been scattered and killed.

As soon as his tour was up, he left the LCAF and headed first to The Edge, and then to the Periphery, tracking down what remained of his father's company. He hopes to one day bring them back together again under a new banner, and meanwhile, he works and networks, just like his father did before he built his own company.



CUSTOMIZE

DEATH KRUSADE

FIRST NAME

TODD

SALARY (NORMAL)

€34,000 / MO

SPECIALIZATION

GUNNER

LAST NAME

RYIA

MAX INJURIES

4

DISMISS

SKILLS

SERVICE RECORD

BATTLE STATS

DEPLOYMENTS: **9**

MECH KILLS: **7**

OTHER KILLS: **9**

INJURIES TAKEN: **2**

EJECTIONS: **0**

DAYS WITH COMPANY: **236**

ATTRIBUTES

Command Experience

Dependable

Military

Periphery

Solaris Gladiator

BIOGRAPHY

While Todd Ryia was born in the Outworld Alliance, his blue-collar family immigrated to Solaris VII in his early childhood. Raised among tradesmen working among the residents of Solaris VII, he developed early a jaundiced eye toward the gladiatorial industry.

When he was an adult, he enlisted in one of the local security firms., first as a beat officer and then as a detective. After some time, he was invited to join the Solaris PD special forces unit. He became intimately familiar with the dark side of the gladiatorial industry as well as the inside of a 'Mech.

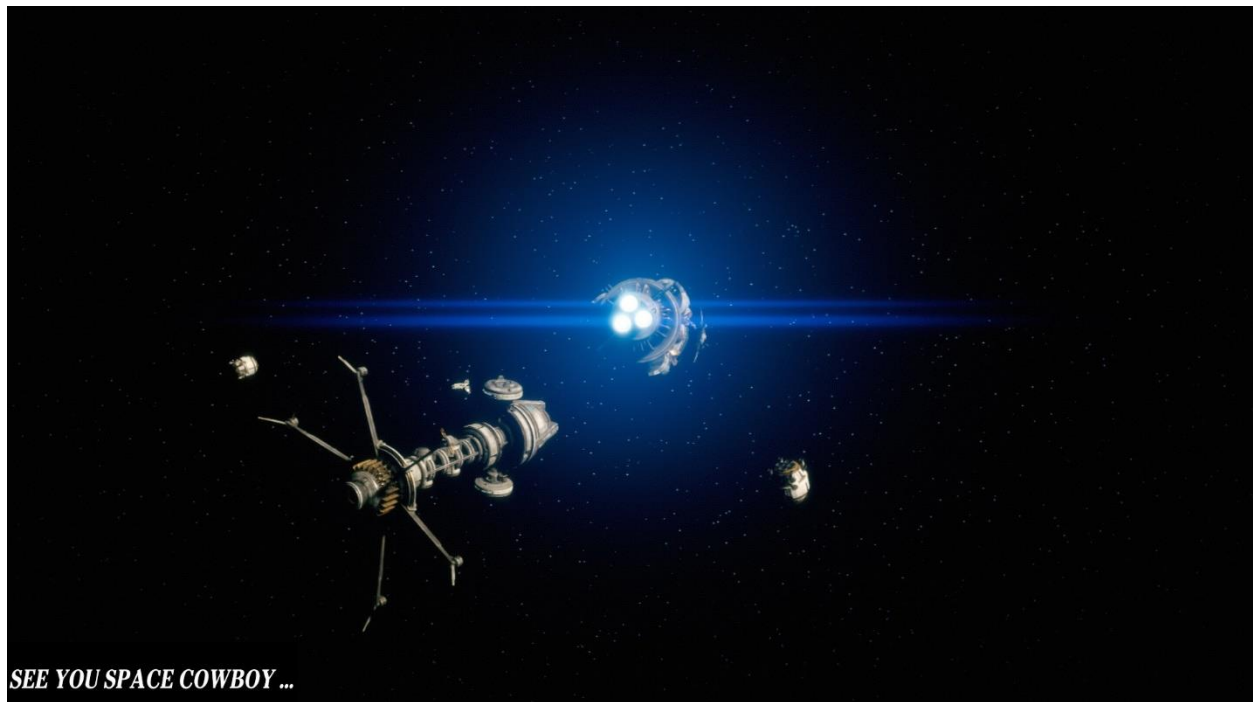
He lived for his work, for the sense that he was accomplishing something. Until one day he was set on the task of tracking down the person behind a series of brutal murders that led across the International Zone. Through the whole damn city, and through a sordid story that had, at its heart, a betrayed warrior princess with eyes like cinders, and ended with a mercenary DropShip returning to the sky.

Todd's jurisdiction ended there. Unless she returned, he had other cases to solve. But somehow, he couldn't let go. The purity of the girl in the holovid haunted him. He had to follow her, find her, hear her story for himself. He had to find the lies, or accept his own failure.

So now... well, he's been in 'hot pursuit' for a few years now, working hard on finding her. But she's too smart to use her gladiatorial name as a mercenary, and his holo-vid of her was stolen a year ago, so he's not quite sure he'd recognize her anymore, but.... she's out there. Somewhere. And maybe, if he finds her, he'll finally be able to sleep peacefully again. Meanwhile... he has to eat.

So that rounds out the team... for now. I keep bleeding money trying to find work that won't result in someone's death, but I fear that may be unavoidable in the near future. With so many injured and so many repairs from the last two missions I have resolved to take a little break from the war for a while and I ponied up about 160k just to travel out to Detroit and look for a few milk runs. Maybe I can stem the hemorrhaging of my bank account and even earn enough to buy another heavy Mech to increase my chances of surviving these higher difficulty missions.

Just wanted to acknowledge all of you who are reading, enjoying, or even commenting on these journal entries. Thank you. I really appreciate it. This exercise has definitely increased my enjoyment of BattleTech immensely. I was also a Kickstarter backer so I've been waiting for this game for a long time but, despite lots of tabletop role-playing game experience, I had never played BattleTech or MechWarrior until this game. In writing out my adventures here it has really helped me learn a lot about the universe and immerse into the story and the characters. So if you're taking this journey with me, again, thank you. Until next time;



SEE YOU SPACE COWBOY ...

Part XXII

"If I'm being honest," Doctor Foster looked over his glasses, his gray eyes piercing into Riana's, "it doesn't look good. By every metric he should be dead; multiple burns, contusions, multiple shrapnel injuries to the soft tissues including an open calcaneal fracture with a posteromedial stellate wound, numerous compound fractures, complete subluxation of all tarsometatarsal joints... it will be a miracle if he walks again, let alone pilots a BattleMech."

"C'mon, doc," Riana proffered a false smile, "didn't I have it worse?"

"Not as bad as this," Doctor Foster shook his head, "there is evidence of second and even third degree burns inside his lungs. I've never had to graft lung tissue before. In my professional opinion he needs to be transported to a trauma center somewhere inside of Federated Suns space. Injuries of this magnitude ought to be treated by a team of specialists, not a lone doctor and a team of MedTechs and nurses on a mercenary vessel in the middle of a war!"

"Doc, that would cost millions," Riana looked past the doctor at Vamp's unmoving form on the table, "and months of travel. He'll be dead by then."

"He may be dead now," Foster countered, "technically speaking. I cannot guarantee any recovery at this point. He will require multiple surgeries, cloned tissue grafts... if he weren't already in a coma I would medically induce one. The damage is just so great, Commander Klaue, I need you to understand that he could go at literally any moment."

"Well, the Argo's facilities will certainly help," her eyes were filled with concern, "won't they?"

Foster removed his glasses and reached out to her, placing a hand on her shoulder. "There's a lot here, technologically, that we're still figuring out, in all honesty I could use a bigger staff, but we're going to do everything we can. I just want to make sure you realize that any, any recovery at this point will be a blessing."

"I believe in you, doc," Riana looked past him at Vamp once more, "you've saved my ass several times. Just... do what you can, okay? Leonard is a good friend and a great Mechwarrior," her eyes moistened as she spoke, "he sacrificed himself to save us; he knew he couldn't take another hit but he risked it anyway."

"I promise you I will do everything in my power, okay?" he leaned in to get her attention back, "but right now you can't do any good around here. I will update you as soon as anything changes."

"How long..." she caught herself, "if he were to recover, fully I hope... how long do you think it would take?"

Doctor Foster sighed. "I can't say, Riana. Really the only reason he lives at all is because he's one tough son of a bitch; all of you Mechwarriors are." She looked at him pleadingly until his expression deflated, "Best case scenario, including all the advanced tech we have at our disposal and the best possible patient response? Four months. *Minimum*. If it were up to me I'd keep him in here a year or two at least."

"Okay," she nodded slowly, "okay."

"Now get out of here. Let him rest and let me and my team come up with a treatment plan," he physically turned her around and hurried her towards the door, "do something constructive. Find us a new contract and get your mind out of MedBay."

:

Kru's eyes snapped open and he scanned the room. He couldn't see anything but he felt sure he heard something. 'Probably just someone going to the toilet,' he thought, letting his eyes slowly close again. They were in transit to rendezvous with a jump ship that would take them to Weldry on a multi-jump, month-long voyage back to Detroit. He didn't agree with it, but Riana had been adamant that the company needed a break and some milk runs, so they were leaving the front to go look for what the Solaran considered throwaway work. His thoughts lingered on the Commander; he'd never seen her so upset as he had the last few days. 'Really since Anvelt,' he thought, but her visceral reaction to Vamp's injuries struck him as odd. 'He wouldn't be the first Mechwarrior lost, that's for sure,' he reasoned. Everyone knew the story of how Dekker and

Behemoth died, for that matter everyone knew that just being a Mech pilot was deadly work and that every drop could be your last. 'Are they banging?' he wondered. He was pretty close to Leo, as he called him. 'Surely he woulda said something,' he thought, 'there no way he coulda kept quiet about that!' His mind wandered as he involuntarily pictured the two of them together and he tossed and turned in his bunk, trying to banish the thought. He'd been with the company for about seven months so far and he thought he had everyone pretty well pegged; Medusa had that little side piece MechTech, he was almost certain Jester was tapping one of the janitorial staff, Glitch was a free spirit but covered her tracks so well he couldn't say anything for sure, Sly... well Sly was working hard on Sumire but she hadn't shown any interest. But Leo? As far as he knew Leo wasn't skeeving on anybody. He was friendly with everyone, spent a lot of time around both Riana and Jessica, but even to Kru's detective sensibilities he'd never made a move on either of them, nor vice versa. "Ah, great," he groaned, opening his eyes and staring at the ceiling, "now I can't fucking sleep for wondering who's fucking!"

"Keep your porno dreams to yourself!" Glitch's voice came from below as she kicked the bunk above her with her foot.

"You just wish youse was in 'em!" he countered, but Jess just rolled over and didn't respond. "Bah," he mumbled as he got up and climbed out of his bunk.

"Where are you going?" Glitch asked half-asleep, her eyes still closed; then one opened mischievously, "Gonna go rub one out?"

"You wanna help??" he snapped sarcastically, "Here I am trying to get my mind offa stuff like that... Ima go walk the parapet for a while, try to get sleepy again."

"Walk the parapet," Glitch giggled, "that's a funny name for it."

"Ahhh," he turned and threw his hands up at her, "shaddup, youse." He turned and walked away from the housing unit and exited Alpha Pod. He didn't have a destination in mind, 'Maybe I'll just sit in the Observation Deck for a while.' He was walking by the MechBay when a glint caught his eye. He paused and looked inside. The cargo bay was empty; with such a long trip ahead of them Yang refused to run around-the-clock shifts, so nobody should be inside but the former detective could see someone sitting on the walkway, their back to the door. He

started to turn and leave, after all it wasn't any of his business, when he caught the glint again; the bay lights playing off of a glass bottle. "I bet I know who that is," he grumbled as he quietly slipped into the bay.



"Hooooomeee, is the Regiment, across the sea of staaaars..." Riana sang as she sat on the catwalk, her legs dangling out over the edge and her left arm resting on the lower part of the handrail, "They cannot take our home from us, our home is where we are!"

"With brothers under arms we share," Kru lent his gravelly voice as he reached the top of the stairs, causing her head to snap around in surprise, "a bond that draws us where?"

"Hooooomeee, is the Regiment, across the sea of staaaars!" they sang in unison as he drew near and placed his arms akimbo, staring down at her, "Heh," she snorted, her eyes drooped as she hoisted the bottle in salute, "you don't sing half bad... how'dju know this song?"

"What fuckin' merc don't know *Home is the Regiment*?" he laughed, grabbing the outstretched bottle and examining the label, "Rockwellawan Rye? Commander, you been holding out on us?"

"Yep," Riana slurred, folding her arms and resting them on the rail in front of her, "have a drink, Kru. Then have a seat... or fuck off, whichever."

"Such a generous invitation," he grinned, "how could I refuse?" He sat down next to her and let his legs hang out in the open air, tilting the bottle back and wincing as the whiskey burned a path down his throat. "This is the real stuff, all right," he examined the bottle, now three quarters empty, "you drink all of this?"

"It's *my* whiskey, *Todd*," she snatched the bottle back out of his hand, "so yes... but not all of it *tonight*," she took another swig and promptly belched, "I haven't been here that long."

"So what's eatin' ya?" he asked, "sitting in here all alone..."

"Never needed much of a reason to drink alone," she took another slug before passing the bottle back to him, "but this isn't the first time I've been up here. I like it, you know? Something about just sitting here with the Mechs... but only when the techs are gone. It's peaceful."

"Yeah, it is," he took another swig, "so I guess it was youse who got up; I knew I felt someone move past."

"Been driving a heavy too long," she smirked, retrieving the bottle, "my stealth is slipping."

"Bah, I could hear a cat walk past," he bragged, "I was Solaris PD; Special Forces. Tracking down mooks what wanna sneak was my specialty."

"I'm a mook, am I?" she pulled the bottle away from his waiting grasp and held it teasingly far from him, "I'm a mook with some whiskey!" She took another draught out of turn before grinning and finally returning the bottle to him.

"Eh, gimmie that!" he said, victorious at last, "If youse don't slow it down I'll have to carry you back to your bunk!"

"Promises, promises!" she said with half-lidded eyes and a mock sultry tone, "Are you always so smooth with the ladies or maybe just with the drunk ones?"

"If *you're* making a pass at *me* then maybe *I* need a little more to drink!" Now it was his opportunity to drink out of turn, holding back her flailing assault with his right hand as he guzzled the bottle in his left.

"It's not like were near Rockwellawan to stop by and get more!" she protested as he finally relinquished the bottle.

"No," he conceded, "but that's where we're headed, right?" he turned serious as he gazed out at the empty bay, "So what's the deal? Isn't Detroit a little beneath us at this point? What about Artru and this Castle Nautilus? Shouldn't we be heading to that before anyone in the Directorate stumbles onto it?"

Immediately Riana's playful mood died. She stared straight ahead and let the bottle in her right hand dangle loosely over the edge. True to his vow Lord Karosas had provided a way to decrypt the LosTech drive that Dr. Murad had stumbled onto; an ancient Star League Defense Force decryption device. It had been discovered by Lord Tamati and given to Karosas for safekeeping. Now returned to the rightful heir it revealed the stunning contents of the drive: a map of the Periphery from the SLDF days, detailing military installations, fortifications, no-fly zones, the whole nine yards. Of greatest interest was the presence of a hitherto unknown Outpost Castle constructed in the Reach by the Star League: Castle Nautilus, on Artru. Hidden for centuries from prying eyes, the find was something Lord Madeira believed could help balance out the disparity in firepower between the Restoration and the Directorate. Sumire was against it; superstitious that any LosTech would bring misfortune, but the reality of Star League-era BattleMechs was too tempting. Riana, in a moment of boldness in the presence of Lady Arano, had readily agreed to the treasure hunt... on Artru.

"Whatsamatter?" Kru noticed her sudden discomfort. "Is this cause of Vamp? Don't worry about Leo, he's a tough guy. He'll pull through this, I know..."

"It's not Vamp," Riana's voice was quiet; subdued, "well, it's not *all* Vamp. I'm worried about him, sure, and I *do* wanna take a break from the war until he's better, but that's not my only reason to delay the trip to Castle Nautilus."

"What is it then?" he asked. She hesitated to answer but Kru was patient; a skill acquired during his career.

"Artru is where my father lives," she looked down, "where *both* my parents live."

"Your parents live on *Artru*?" Kru asked, confused, "Isn't that whole world nothing more than a frozen mine? Hostile to life?"

"My father owns an estate on one of the orbital habs," she clarified, "he won it in a card game and we moved there when I was a kid."

"Izzat a *bad* thing?" Kru's confusion continued, "I mean it sounds like a chance to get some shore leave; an estate?"

"I was banished, Kru," she said, taking another drink, "so I stole our ancestral Mech and turned pirate."

"I can *not* pretend to be surprised," he deadpanned.

"Don't be a dick," she cut her eyes at him, finally passing the bottle, "it's been over a decade since I've been home. Knowing my father, he still owns it; there's no way he wouldn't bow and scrape to the Directorate to keep his lands. There's probably a bounty on my head there."

"Ah, no shore leave then," he turned the bottle up, "well if he's on a hab there's no reason we would ever run into 'im, right? This Outpost Castle is on the surface. Say, isn't Darius from Artru as well?"

"Yeah, I think," she shrugged, accepting the whiskey once again, "to be honest nobody knows about my past 'cept you and Yang. I've never told anybody else."

"*I'm* playing second fiddle to *Yang*?" he mocked indignation, pressing his palm to his heart, "And here I thought we made a connection."

"Anyway," she pursed her lips before pressing the bottle to them again, "this break is as much for me as it is for Leonard and the rest of you; Artru isn't a place I'd ever planned to return to."

"Oh, honey," he said as he called for another drink, "I wouldn't worry about it; your dad'll probably never even know we're there. We can't risk the Directorate finding out about us in their space so Su's gonna play it real cool, y'know? Stealth mode."

"*I'll* know," she countered morosely, "it's not really him that I'm worried about, shit at this point I would even return the Blackjack if I had the chance, it's more that... well that's a past life. I left it behind. Going back there is gonna dredge up some old ghosts."

"We'll be there together," he put an arm around her, "all of us. You'll see. Me, you, Leo... we got this. The only ghosts at Artru is gonna be us: we'll slip in, hit the castle, and make off with some sweet, sweet Mechs before those goons even know we're there."

"Heh," she smiled, snuggling up closer to him, "you *are* smooth..." she said under her breath.

"What'd you say?" he looked down at her, preparing to chide her for mumbling when she lifted her head and kissed him. The attack was sudden and he was caught completely by surprise as her warm lips connected with his. She sucked his bottom lip into her mouth; in shock his eyes widened and he pulled away, putting a small amount of space between them. "Riana!" he exclaimed.

"Looks like this mook managed to sneak one by you after all, *Special Forces*..." she purred, moving towards him by pulling her legs up and approaching him on all fours.

"Hang on a minute," he protested, setting the bottle down and holding up both hands, "if this is gonna happen I gotta know it isn't just the whiskey talking."

"Who cares if it is?" she pulled up on her haunches next to him, her hands reaching past his defenses.

"*I* care!" he caught her hands and pulled them away, "This is the kinda complication that ruins business; all around! If *I* sleep with the boss do you realize how everybody else is gonna look at me?"

"What about how *I* am looking at you right now?" she said, batting her bedroom eyes.

"You're drunk," he said with finality.

"Yes I am," she shot back, frustrated at his resistance, "but I am *still* trying to get laid, Todd!"

"I can't do this," he shook his head, "it's like taking advantage of youse. You're gonna regret it..."

"*You're* gonna regret it!" her right hand shot out and grabbed him by the collar, "Todd Ryia I am a grown woman and the only person here taking advantage is *me*. All I am trying to do is lose myself in a little pleasure for a little while to take my mind off the fact that one of my best friends may never *walk* again, let alone pilot a Mech, and our next big mission will see us return to *motherfucking* Artru! Now you've been a solid friend these last seven months and I'm not gonna lie; I *like* you. You're strong, you're confident, you're handsome, and your fucking scars turn me on but if you think, for even just one minute, that this is the doorway to a serious relationship then you're drunker than I am! I value discretion in this *just* as much as *you* do and all I want right now is *sex*. So you need to ask yourself, *Special Forces*: are you up for this mission or was your plan just to drink my whiskey and toddle off to bed??"

For a moment Kru just stared at her, slack-jawed-wheels spinning, then slowly he closed his mouth and his shocked eyes solidified into the confidence she was looking for. She couldn't hide the grin as he surged forwards into her, their writhing forms melding onto the catwalk in the darkened, empty MechBay.

:



Glitch clutched at her throat and made a choking sound. As the rest of the crew watched angry red welts appeared on her face. "Jess??" Riana exclaimed, moving to her side, "Jess, are you okay?"

Her struggle for breath was her only response as she spit out the remainder of the colorful fruit. "My throat," she rasped, clawing at her neck with her fingers, "I can't breathe!"

"Get the MedTechs!" Riana ordered angrily, but Jester was frozen in place. All around him the crew scrambled but he was rooted to one spot, staring in horror at what was unfolding. "She's going into anaphylactic shock," Riana said as she used her forearm to clear the table, easing Glitch up and onto the table and turning her onto her left side to help keep her airway open, "get some epinephrine! Where the fuck are those MedTechs??" A few tense minutes later the techs arrived and administered the shot. Within a few seconds Glitch's airway opened again and she gulped in mouthfuls of air. All around the cafeteria the crew pushed their trays away, the undulating, multi-colored fruits on them remaining untouched.

:

"How was I supposed to know?" Jester protested, "the guy at the market said they were a delicacy! He didn't say *anything* about how to prepare them!" he changed tack and pointed a finger at Riana and Darius accusingly, "*You* were the one who gave the go ahead to pass them out to the crew!"

"This isn't really about the fruit incident, Jeremiah," Riana sighed, "that was an accident and Glitch is recovering. This is more about *you*."

"What about me?" he asked, defensively.

"Lately it's like you're jinxed," she began, "the mission on Kimi..."

"Was *not* my fault!" he protested, "I did *my* part! I got the scientists *and* the tech out in one piece!"

"You also gave away our position prematurely," Riana growled, "which has become habit as of late!"

"The resulting destruction and repairs ate heavily into our pay," Darius glanced down at the datapad in his hand, "we went into the red on that mission; like we paid to be there."

"Not to mention Sly and Vamp's injuries," Riana glowered at him, "this was Leonard's first mission back. It was *supposed* to be a milk run..."

"You can't blame me for that," Jester stood his ground, "missions go sideways all the time!"

"Missions do," she nodded in agreement, "so they damn well don't need the help of an overzealous Jenner pilot running ahead and alerting *three* full lances to our presence!" Her voice raised in anger, she stood up and met his defiant gaze, "we were lucky to get out without any casualties!"

"*Still* not my fault!" he yelled back at her.

"Well what about dereliction of duty?" she sneered at him, "you've turned down two missions since the fruit incident..."

"From the sound of it that's no skin off *your* nose!" he shot back.

"Actually not at all!" she confirmed, "Medusa did fantastically in the Jenner; he's gotten good enough that he can lock a sensor trace and *then* move out of the way! That tactic alone saves us money! I'm starting to wonder what we pay you for?"

"Well it's certainly not enough to stand here and listen to this shit!" his face reddened, "Look, my father ran his *own* mercenary company and that's what I'm gonna do some day! Looks like maybe that day is now!"

"We wish you the best of luck in your future endeavors," Darius said smoothly, "I'll have Ms. Meyer drop you at the local Hiring Hall."

:

"You didn't have to *fire* him," Glitch lowered her head in guilt.

"It *wasn't* because of the fruit," Riana reiterated.

"Mr. Bloodstone came to a mutual agreement with *Riana's Revenge*," Darius interjected, leaning against the holotable, "it was time for him to pursue other interests."

"I get it," Kru offered, "we're all mercenaries... professionals. Even I plan to move on someday."

"I don't like it," Vamp shook his head, "Jester was like family. Vat could be so bad to make him go? Vat about ze Jenner?"

"I'll pilot the Jenner from now on," Medusa answered, "I was always better at it anyway."

"I kinda liked the little guy," Sly shrugged, "but I gotta admit: Kimi was a rookie mistake."

"A rookie mistake that cost us almost six hundred grand in repairs," Darius added, "not to mention injuries."

"That's bullshit and you know it!" Yang said angrily, his arms folded, "Fucking shit happens! It's

impossible to lay the blame for one bad mission at any single mechwarrior's feet!"

"Yang, it's like he was jinxed," Sumire withered under his glare as he turned to face her, "I mean the guy..."

"Had a string of bad luck??" Yang finished her sentence, "And we *fired* him for that??"

"Yang, we didn't *fire* him," Riana stepped into the center of the room, "at least we didn't get the chance to. We called him in to talk about his shortcomings and, yeah it got a little heated. By the end of the conversation it was *his* decision to part ways."

"His *shortcomings*... hehe," Sly snickered to himself.

"You think this is funny??" Yang screamed at him, pointing with his cybernetic arm.

"Chief, that's enough!" Darius pushed off of the holotable, "Employment is at the discretion of the Commander and First Officer! Jester was becoming a drain on company finances and Riana and I discussed it and came to the conclusion that Mr. Bloodstone needed to either shape up or ship out! He appears to have preferred the latter. That is the *end* of the discussion!"

"Like hell it is!" Yang, too, stood up, "Jester *bled* with us! He deserved better than to be cast out over a few mistakes and a case of food allergies!"

"Look," Kru began, the timber of his voice calling attention from everyone except the XO and the Chief; still staring each other down, "I'm afraid we have a more pressing problem," he walked over to the center of the CIC and stepped in between Oliveira and Virtanen, "while I, too, liked Jeremiah there's an angle to this youse guys may not have considered."

"Yeah?" Yang was still snarling, "What's that?"

"There exists a possibility that we all just got played," he let that thought hang for a moment before he continued, "think about it; Jester's big goal is to captain his own merc company, right? That's his dream."

"Yeah, so?" Yang snarled.

"Ve all have dreams, right?" Vamp added.

"Yeah, sure," Kru shrugged, turning and gazing around the room, "but starting your own company is crazy expensive. He couldn't have made enough working with us to buy more than maybe one medium-class Mech. That's great for a freelancer looking to *join* a merc company, but if he's gonna *start* one he's gonna need more mechs... now I wonder where he might find some of those? Hmm..."

Riana looked over at Darius. In unison they both exclaimed: "Fuck!"

"What?" Glitch asked, genuinely confused.

"Ze outpost castle," Vamp's expression changed to one of shock, "he wouldn't..."

"Oh, he *would*," Kru nodded, "even if he just planned to sell the *location* of the castle and just use the money to buy mechs, what do you think a Star League-era Outpost Castle just brimming with tech is worth? What would it be worth *to the Directorate*?"

"That *motherfucker*..." Riana's face contorted in rage as she looked over at Darius, "so *that's* why he had the defenses turned up to eleven!"

"We've got to get to Artru," Darius looked over at Sumire who seemed to pale as he spoke, "we need to set course *now*."

"Surely he wouldn't do this," Yang's anger deflated as he considered the possibility, "he was like a part of our family."

"People will do all sorts of nasty things for money," Kru shrugged, "especially if it leads to realizing their dreams of power."

"And that goes double for short-man syndrome," despite his comment Sly appeared dead serious, "I don't think we can take the chance."

"I *know* the Arano Restoration can't take that chance," Lord Madeira said as he walked into the CIC, "my sincerest apologies for eavesdropping, I know this was an internal matter, but I was coming to see if you were finished when I overheard; we can *not* take this risk. All allusions to the character of Jeremiah Bloodstone aside I *must* insist we set our course now." He turned to regard Riana directly. "High Lady Arano has indulged your need for recuperation with exceeding patience but you agreed to the mission to take Castle Nautilus. Now that one of your crew has departed with the knowledge of the location of the castle this *must* be our priority."

"I am inclined to agree. Contact Lady Arano and inform her we will be en route," Riana turned to Sumire, who was practically cringing, "set our course for Artru."

"Commander," she started, clearly uncomfortable, "I would just like to reiterate my stark opposition to any plan involving meddling with LosTech."

"Noted," Riana replied gruffly, "contact a jumpship and set course. You have your orders."

"了解," she sighed, turning to leave the CIC.

"Any other questions concerning Jester?" Riana looked around the room, "Good. This matter is closed. It's gonna be a long trip," she turned to Yang, who looked positively miserable, "have your crew prep for inspection tomorrow. I want to go over possible refits before we arrive."

"You got it, boss," he said somberly as he headed out of the room.

"Mechwarriors," she glanced around at Kru, Sly, Glitch, and Medusa, "I want you all to put in at least thirty hours on the simulators on the way there. I do *not* want to be caught lacking; Artru is *deep* inside Directorate space on a hostile, polar world. Vamp, Glitch; you two first, I want you to get started. Medusa, Kru; you two catch some R&R while you have the chance."

"Shouldn't we train as a full Lance?" Glitch raised her hand.

"Later," Riana said dismissively, "chances are conditions will be low visibility. I'd rather prepare for the possibility of separation."

"You got it," she slapped Vamp playfully on the shoulder, near a large new scar, "c'mon big guy. Let's get to it!"

"I'm gonna call down to the Hiring Hall," Darius said as he walked past her, "see if Jester has registered. If he's there we may have gotten lucky but if he's really planning something we may need to talk to Dr. Murad about squeezing a little more out of the *Argo's* power conduits or possibly upgrading the drive system."

"Do it," she nodded as he exited the room. She watched as Medusa slipped out of the room quietly, 'probably headed for the MechBay,' she grinned, 'got to see his lady friend before Yang pulls everyone for inspection.'

"So, uh," Kru walked up next to her, one hand running through his hair as he spoke, "I might have laid in on a little thick about Jester," he admitted, "it's just things was turning kinda ugly and I wanted to help youse out."

"No, that's okay," she said, a lop-sided grin pulling at her lip, "why don't you head down to the gym in Beta Pod. I'm planning a surprise inspection of the showers there and I might need your... *assistance*."





ARTRU

ENTERING ORBIT - DEEP IN DIRECTORATE SPACE

The last two weeks had been tense for Hysteria. They had rendezvoused with the *ARS Revanche* and the *ARS Delfinas*, along with five supply ships provided by Lord Karosas, above Smithon. While the *Delfinas* and its fleet would accompany them High Lady Arano transferred aboard the *Argo* directly, intending to join them for the mission to take Castle Nautilus. It was not that long ago that such an arrangement would have thrilled and excited Riana beyond measure, to be so close to Kamea for so long, but in the wake of their dispute over Victoria Espinosa and complicated by her failed attempt at kissing her coupled with the secret tryst with Death Krusade she had instead felt nothing but stress.

And Yang had noticed.

“There’s nothing to tell,” she insisted, working her way around the MechTech, “I’m not avoiding anybody.”

“You literally just avoided me,” he turned to follow her, “literally *and* figuratively if you count the fact that you won’t talk to me.”

“You don’t count!” she snapped.

“Wow,” his voice flattened, “thanks for that.”

“That’s not what I meant!” she countered, turning around to look at him, “I mean I am *not* avoiding Lady Arano! That’s who we’re talking about!”

“You have barely spoken a word to her since she came aboard,” Yang reminded her, “and you always seem to find a reason to leave when she enters a room. That is *very* out of character for you.”

“I am on my way to talk with her right now!” Riana protested, “What do you call that?”

“Briefing?” Yang answered sardonically, “We’re already *here*, at Artru!”

“Has it occurred to you that I was *banished* from Artru, Yang?” she narrowed her eyes at him, “Honestly I can’t think of a place in the ‘verse I’d rather not be than right *here*.”

“Is that how you’re going to play this?” he asked, lifting one eyebrow, “*Daddy issues?*”

“Fuck you, Yang,” she pushed her middle finger close to his face, “You have no idea what this is like for me.”

“Riana,” he gently pushed her hand to the side, “come on... it’s *me*. It’s not like I tell anybody about the stuff you say. You’ve got me worried is all. Ever since Weldry your heart has practically pounded out of your chest in Kamea Arano’s presence; now you’ve been on the same ship with her for two weeks and you won’t so much as give her the time of day. What gives?”

Hysteria sighed, a pensive look crossing her features as she pursed her lips in frustration. “It’s *complicated*, Yang.”

“Fixing Mechs is complicated, Riana,” Yang folded his arms, “talking is rather simple.”

“Can this shit wait?” she asked, spreading her arms wide, “Can you maybe put a pin in this curiosity? We are about to go down to the surface of a frozen hellhole and try to break in to a Star League-era Outpost Castle and I would kind of like to *not* be an emotional mess, okay?”

“You already *are* an emotional mess, *Hysteria*,” Yang countered, “I’m *trying* to untangle that mess.”

“No,” she shot back, “you are fishing for secrets, Yang Virtanen!” She shook her finger in his face and fixed him with an angry stare. “Do you realize you may have invented a lot of this drama in your head? I never actually *admitted* to this crush you assume!”

“Oh,” he snorted, arms still folded, “it’s like *that*, is it?” he deflected her gaze with a knowing smirk, “alright then; who is it?”

“What?” she asked, genuinely confused, “Who?”

“Who’d you replace her with?” Yang let a bemused smile creep across his face, “This is *classic* rebound; your crush didn’t work out so you’ve picked the low-hanging fruit. Are you going to tell me who it is or do I have to figure that out on my own?”

“I...” Riana began, subconsciously blushing as she looked around, finally snatching up a nearby wrench, “I am gonna shove this so *far* up your ass...” Yang began to chuckle, his face split by a smile, “sideways, motherfucker!” she jiggled the comically large wrench as Yang bent over, laughter spilling out so freely that she couldn’t help but join in, “It’s not gonna be funny, Chief, when you have to fart to unscrew shit!” Now they were both fully laughing, Yang reaching up to put a hand on her shoulder to steady himself. “Yang,” she began after they caught their breath, “are we done with this for now?”

“Yeah, we’re done,” he straightened up, wiping at his eyes, “*for now*. But I’ve got my eye on you.”

“Honey, *all* eyes are on me,” she mocked a sexy pose, now let’s get this treasure hunt underway, shall we?” She turned and confidently led the way towards the CIC but her mind was racing; Yang now *knew* something was up. He’d be snooping and watching her like a hawk. ‘I’m gonna have to distance myself from Todd,’ she thought. The idea wasn’t terribly disappointing, she realized, in fact she’d grown somewhat weary of all the sneaking around. She was more concerned that he might have grown attached and that a purposeful insertion of space between them might lead to hurt feelings. When they arrived the CIC was practically full. Darius, Lord Madeira, Sumire, and Dr. Murad were all in their usual places but also crowded into the room were Medusa, Glitch, Big Sly, Vamp, and Death Krusade. The latter smiled at her as she entered but Riana failed to notice; her attention was drawn to the figure of Kamea Arano, standing proud and straight in the center of the room near the holotable. Their eyes met briefly and Riana thought, just for a moment, that she saw pain in them but if it was there it was melted away quickly.



“Good, we can begin,” she intoned, her voice all business as Yang slid over to his usual spot. She let her gaze fall to her right as Lord Madeira brought up an image of the frozen world they were now orbiting. “There it is; Artru,” she let it sink in for a moment: they were deep in Directorate territory, alone and vulnerable on a desperate mission to raid a Star League-era castle, “a more foreboding hunk of ice I’ve never seen.” Riana detected a mix of disdain and fear in her voice and immediately felt a sense of shame. She had grown up with the frozen landscape of Artru below her and, when she felt temerarious, would wind her way down into the bowels of the hab with a telescope and try to spot mining vehicles and structures on the surface, always imagining that she could make out actual people there. For her, a child, Artru seemed like the ultimate adventure. She had often imagined what it would be like to be on the surface, exploring. She had heard of how inhospitable the planet was but, from fifteen-hundred miles above it, it looked rather peaceful. Soon she would *finally* be on Artru’s surface, a childhood fantasy, but to hear the disgust in Kamea’s voice made her feel both embarrassment and a little angry. “You were born in this system, were you not,” Riana’s eyes widened and her head snapped up but then Lady Arano added, “Mr. Olveira?”

“Yes, Lady Arano,” Darius answered as Riana tried to cover her shocked reaction with a yawn, “I grew up on Nassau Heights, one of the orbital hab stations above the planet’s surface.”

‘Nassau Heights,’ she thought, nodding to herself imperceptibly, it was one of the larger commercial stations; a major import/export hub with corporate executive residences at the top and a stratified hierarchy existing underneath. She had spoken with Darius before and knew his family lived on Deck 28, just two levels from the bottom. Escaping the life of a deckhand is what drove him to become a MechWarrior. ‘Compared to Nassau Heights,’ she mused, ‘my father’s little plantation is a speck.’

“Nobody makes landfall except for the surface mining teams,” Darius added, “and they only stay for month-long shifts. It’s too dangerous for permanent habitation.”

“Vhat is so dangerous about it?” Vamp asked. He was still in a full leg brace but otherwise had responded to Dr. Foster’s treatment excellently with a prognosis that would see him fit to return to duty in the near future.

“Mostly it’s the temperature,” Darius offered, “average surface conditions barely creep above two hundred kelvin,” he paused when he noticed Kru’s confused stare, “that’s about a hundred degrees below.”

“Below... *zero*?” Kru asked.

“Temperatures like that, a human can survive for about three to five minutes,” Sumire said.

“Three to five?” Glitch’s voice piqued with curiosity and concern.

“It depends on how long you can hold your breath,” the pilot explained, “breathing at temps like that can do serious lung damage. The thin tissue in your lungs will freeze solid with every breath. Pretty soon the action of breathing itself will cause the frozen tissue to crack and leave fatal tears... even if you warm right back up you’ll have collapsed lungs that won’t be able to hold air.”

“That’s not even considering the wind,” Darius interjected, “gusts on the surface can drop that another fifty degrees in a matter of seconds.”

“I remember an old folk story that originated with those mining teams...” Lady Arano touched her chin with her left hand, “my father shared it with me when I was young. ‘The Locura’ I think it was called.” Darius rolled his eyes. “If memory serves it was about an ill wind that would howl through the canyons, killing engines and scrambling computers. The stuff of nightmares on such an inhospitable world.”

“Yes, Lady Arano, it’s a gremlin story...something the miners can blame when they pass out drunk with the headlights running,” Darius said sardonically, “*The Locura killed my engine, I barely got out alive!*” He snorted derisively, “Not our proudest achievement, as a culture, but apparently it gets around.”

“Any *real* threats down there?” Kru asked.

“Not unless you get out of your BattleMech,” Darius answered, “I wouldn’t recommend that, by the way, for all the reasons Sumire illustrated.”

“How likely are we to run into those surface miners you mentioned?” Sly raised his hand, “Wouldn’t do to have a bunch of civvies piling into the castle behind us.”

“Don’t worry, you won’t,” Darius assured him, “not where you’ll be dropping. Surface teams tend to cluster around the rocky outcrops that ring the planet’s equator. That’s where you find all the really good stuff; the platinum, the ruthenium, the rarer exotics. You’ll be well clear of the mining zones.”

“Not a great vacation spot, got it.” Riana spoke for the first time, her arms folded and frustration evident in her tone, “Let’s continue on.”

“Well,” Darius hesitated, taken aback by her abrupt mood, “as you know House Karosas has provided us with five supply ships to carry whatever we find on the surface. Captain Grigas of the *ARS Delfinas* will serve as our point of contact for the fleet.” He motioned to Farah standing behind him, “After Dr. Murad finishes interfacing with the Castle’s computer she’ll pop the doors and we’ll run a threat assessment. Then, if everything looks clear, we’ll have Sumire set you down on the ground.”

“Hey guys,” Sumire was looking at her datapad, “I hate to interrupt but I’ve got a sensor blip on my screen. It’s a dropship, can’t make out what kind.” The room grew appropriately quiet as all eyes turned to the pilot. “She’s heading for the planet’s surface. Looks like her point

of origin was Artru's second moon."

"Miners?" Medusa asked.

"That's... strange," Darius stood up, a look of intensity in his eyes, "Artru's moons are uninhabited."

"Sure 'bout that?" Glitch asked, "I mean a lot can change in the time you been away."

"And we're looking at some pretty compelling evidence that *someone* was on that moon!" Sly added.

"Is that a Directorate ship?" Darius asked, moving over to stand next to Sumire and catch a glance at her datapad.

"Still too far out to say," she pointed at the pad, allowing him to look, "at their current rate of speed it'll be at least an hour before I can give you a positive I.D."

"We can't wait for a threat assessment," Riana unfolded her arms and placed them on her hips, "If we're going to do this then now's the time."

"You're right," Lady Arano nodded, "the last thing we need is a Directorate patrol dropping on top of us while we're loading the armory." She looked around at the others, "If we act quickly we stand a chance of getting in and out clean. We don't have time to play this safe so we're dropping *now*. I want our Mechs on the ground when the doors open. I'll inform Captain Grigas of the change."

"*Our* Mechs?" Lord Madeira stammered, "You can't go down there in person, Kamea... and certainly not before we know it's safe!" He shuffled around to her left, a look of grave concern in his eyes, "You're the leader of the Restoration! We can't afford to lose you on a salvage operation!"

"It's *her* call, Lord Madeira," Riana growled, "Not yours."

“Thank you, Hysteria,” she proffered a genuine smile at Riana, full of warmth, “and this isn’t just about salvage, Alexander... you know that! My father spent the last half of his life dreaming of the *Argo* and her secrets. This is one of those secrets. I will see this through, for him and for myself.”

“As... as you wish, my lady,” Lord Madeira deflated. He had known her long enough to understand the finality of her tone.

“Now,” Kamea continued, “it will take time and expertise to get whatever BattleMechs we find in the Castle’s armory up and running again. Lord Karosas sent us a recovery team and I want our best MechTech on the ground leading them,” she turned to Yang, who was visibly surprised, “That’s you, Mr. Virtanen. You’ll be riding with me.”

Yang’s gaze shifted between both Lady Arano and Riana. “You can’t be serious,” he said flatly, but one look in Kamea’s eyes and the unyielding nod of Hysteria told him all he needed to know, “Guess I’ll go warm up the rumble seat,” he said pensively, “y’know the only other time I’ve sat in one of those things was on St. Loris... and I got my arm blown clean off for my trouble!”

“Here’s hoping that you don’t go two for two,” Darius jested, “good luck down there, all. I’ll be keeping an eye on you from up here.” He turned to Riana, “I need to know who’s going so I can call down to the bay and get the Leopard loaded.”

“We’re not expecting any real trouble, provided we can get in and out before that dropship arrives,” Riana thought for a moment before turning to her right, “Leonard, you think you can drive your Cent with that brace?”

“Can do, Kommander,” he smiled, “I’ve been stir crazy for months now!”

“Riana, you know Dr. Foster won’t approve of that,” Darius scolded.

“Dr. Foster is not a Mechwarrior,” Riana said dismissively, “this is a low intensity mission and a good chance for Vamp to get back into practice. He’s been sidelined for over three months now. Think of it as therapy.”

“Alright,” her XO relented, “but when time comes *you’re* going to deal with him, not me.” She nodded. “Okay; one more spot. Who’s it gonna be?”

She turned and considered for a moment. Kru was already smiling and pushed himself off the wall, moving towards her. “Sly,” she said, meeting Kru’s shocked gaze, “I want you in the Quickdraw for this one.”

“Not the Shadowhawk?” he asked, oblivious to Kru’s bewilderment.

“No, the QD is a laser-intensive Mech,” she continued, “and a heavy. If something *does* happen Artru will be the perfect place for it.”

“You’re the boss, boss.” Sly saluted and got up, turning and almost bumping into Kru, who was still standing slack-jawed. “Heh,” Sly snorted as he dodged left, then right, “care to dance?” he asked with a chuckle before he slipped around him and left the room.

“Alright Darius, I leave it in your hands,” Riana turned and walked right past Kru, “Suchan, you know the drill. We’re on a tight timetable here.” Death Krusade angled himself so that she couldn’t exit the room without passing by him but just as she turned towards him...

“Hysteria,” Lady Arano called, “can we talk?”

Riana froze and made direct eye contact with Kru, who merely sighed with resignation and turned around to leave. “Of course, my lady,” she said as she turned back to the holotable. All around them the crew filed out of the CIC, Lord Madeira last, until eventually it was only Riana and Kamea left. “How may I serve you, my lady?” she asked, coming to parade rest with her hands clasped behind her back.

“Please stop,” Kamea said in a low voice, reaching out with her right hand to touch Riana’s shoulder, “I know you’re cross with me and I understand why but you’ve barely said a word to me since I came aboard,” she looked directly into Riana’s eyes, her own misting over, “I cannot bear this. You’re like a sister to me.”

“A sister...” Riana choked down the emotions that threatened to well up, tilted her head, flared her eyes, and focused only on being denied revenge, “Lady *Espinosa*... was like a sister to you, my lady. I was your Royal Guard; the direct subordinate of Sir Raju Montgomery, whom your *cousin* murdered.”

“Riana, please...” a tear suddenly formed and slid down her cheek.

Frozen in place, her muscles tensed and still at parade rest, Hysteria narrowed her eyes. “I wonder if Sir Raju ever uttered the word ‘please’ back on Weldry,” she hissed.

Slowly Kamea lowered her arm, followed by her head. “That’s not fair,” she sobbed quietly for a moment and then lifted her flooded eyes, “that’s *not* fair! I *have* to be a beacon of justice, Riana! I cannot emulate my uncle!” An angry look washed across her face and her dark eyes burned with righteous indignation, “If I am to *restore* the rule of law I must *exemplify* the rule of law! Do you think I don’t want to kill her for what she did?” she snarled the question and came almost nose to nose with the ex-pirate, “She *betrayed* me, Riana! She betrayed me and stole my throne on my coronation day! She’s murdered *countless* Aurigan people, even members of our own family, and yes... she tortured and murdered Sir Raju!” Her voice dropped to a hiss as she spoke her next words: “And I *hope* you’re not insinuating that I did not love Sir Raju, nor care to avenge his death! I considered *you* a sister because I considered Sir Raju a second father!” Both women glared at each other now, each trying to hold back a tsunami of emotion whilst appearing fierce. “I want you to hear this *loud and clear*, Riana Klaue, because I will *not* say it again... this is the *last* time you get to use Sir Raju’s name or my own words against me. Do you understand? I have been exceedingly patient with you because I know you’re hurting and I know that *I* hurt you but you need to realize that we are in this *together*. If you want to take revenge for Sir Raju and the Aurigan people on my uncle and his Directorate then I need you to be my friend and ally, not a vengeful pirate!”

“Understood, *my lady*,” Riana stared right through her with a military-like thousand yard look in her eyes, “permission to prepare for the op, *my lady*.”

The sarcastic tone and her refusal to back down worked a charm of rage on Kamea. She slapped Riana on her left cheek, just hard enough to shock her, but the ex-pirate refused to move. She regained composure almost immediately and maintained her stare. Lady Arano snarled, her nose crinkling. She suppressed the desire to strike her again and, instead, seized her head with both hands and suddenly pulled her face forward until their lips came together. All stoicism immediately dissipated in Riana as Kamea forcefully kissed her, her tongue seeking out its companion. Riana’s knees threatened to buckle and her arms involuntarily wrapped around Lady Arano as Kamea pressed her chest forwards, tilting the former pirate off balance. Time seemed to stop as the kiss lingered and Riana’s head spun as she felt herself sink to the floor. When she regained her wits she was on her knees at Kamea’s feet, the High Lady towering over her in a position of dominant confidence, looking down the bridge of her nose at the Commander. “You are *dismissed*,” she purred, stepping over Riana on the way to the door, “I’ll see you on deck.”



ARTRU

Planet's Surface - near Castle Nautilus

The snow swirled as the Leopard backed away into the sky leaving four BattleMechs; Kamea's Kintaro, Vamp's Centurion, Hysteria's Jagermech, and the Quickdraw piloted by Big Sly. As the DropShip arced away into the sky Sumire's voice came across the Op channel: "Good luck down there, all. I'll be cruising in the upper atmosphere and monitoring your progress, just in case."

"Roger that, Ms. Meyer," Kamea replied, "Dr. Murad, have you had any luck connecting with Castle Nautilus' computer?"

"Already on top of it, Lady Arano," Farah responded from her place in engineering aboard the *Argo*, "The handshake is already established and I have command-line access. Door control is being a little finicky though."

"Work fast, Doc," Yang spoke from his position behind Kamea, "Riding in this rumble seat is like sitting on a jackhammer... in a sauna... on the sun. And Lady Arano's piloting is... aggressive."

"Would you prefer I cracked a window?" Kamea asked him sarcastically.

“Not really,” Yang answered, “I’m pretty sure all my sweat would immediately freeze and I’d be sitting on a buttsicle, but would it hurt to turn down the heat just a little bit?”

“Poor you,” Dr. Murad interrupted, unable to hear their in-cockpit conversation, “not to worry though, I think I’ve found a workaround for the problem. Get walking toward the main door and I’ll have them open by the time you get there.”

“Understood, doctor,” Kamea ignored Yang’s request, “do whatever you have to do. Lady Arano out.”

“You know, you might wanna use a code name or something for the radio traffic,” the MechTech offered, “you never know who might be listening.”

“Sound advice,” Lady Arano admitted advancing her Kintaro through the driving cold, “but other than our uninvited guests on approach who is out there to hear?”

“Does it matter?” Yang asked, “Ideally we’re in and out of this thing before anybody even *thinks* we might be here. Leaving a calling card would be outright foolish.” He absentmindedly looked around the cockpit, touching various knobs and controls within reach. “When we’re deployed Riana always uses codes based on roles; like CC for ‘Close Combat’ or Foxtrot Sierra for ‘Fire Support,’ we try never to use our names or what kind of Mech we’re driving.”

“Seems silly,” Kamea said dismissively, “your MechWarriors all use callsigns anyway. What’s the purpose of further obfuscation?”

“Let’s take Anvelt for example,” he explained, “if Lady Espinoza had heard ‘Hysteria’ over the comms don’t you think they would have directed all fire towards her?”

“Anvelt was tactical brilliance,” Kamea admitted, “but all that went over an open channel. Our Op channel is secured and encoded; a direct tight-beam signal between us,” she turned slightly to look over her shoulder at the MechTech, “even if our inbound intruders pick up our signal it would take days and quite a bit of luck to decode it.”

“Thing about people,” Yang stared out the small port window to his left, “we’re creatures of habit. Especially in stressful situations, if you can learn to do it the safe way, the *right* way then you don’t have to worry about slip-ups when it really counts.”

“Okay Chief,” Kamea chuckled, “you win. You’re absolutely right,” she keyed her mic, “All Lance switch to code designations for the remainder of mission.” She turned and looked back over her shoulder as the rest of the team acknowledged and grinned at Yang. “Is that better?”

“Yes, my lady,” Yang fidgeted in his seat, “that’s at least one less thing to worry about.”

“Okay,” Dr. Murad’s voice cut in, “the standard approach isn’t working; I’m inputting a valid ID but, for some reason, the door won’t budge.”

“That’s disconcerting,” Kamea replied, “what are we going to do?”

“I think I’ve found a work-around though,” Farah answered, “It’ll just be another moment...”

“Hey, uh, Lady Arano?” Yang began, wiping the back of his sweaty neck with a rag he kept in his pocket, “Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?”

“Is this really the time, Chief?” Kamea asked.

“Forgive me,” he mumbled, “I just don’t usually have time alone with you,” his eyes widened and he straightened in the rumble seat, “That came out wrong! That isn’t what this is about!”

Kamea giggled, “Relax, Chief Virtanen. Ask your question then.”

“Have you,” he began, pausing for a moment and searching for a better approach, “These past two weeks... they’ve been pretty tense, huh?”

Kamea sighed. “That they have been, Chief.”

“Listen, it probably isn’t my place to say and feel free to tell me to mind my own business,” he began, “but don’t take Riana’s attitude too hard. She’s been going through a lot and there’s probably a lot of stuff that you don’t know...”

‘There’s probably a lot of stuff that *you* don’t know,’ Kamea thought to herself.

“... but she’s actually completely dedicated to your Restoration.” Yang continued, “And I mean that. Sure she may have a bit of a checkered past but she’s completely devoted to you... to your cause... the Restoration, I mean.” Yang blushed unintentionally.

“I’ve never doubted her a moment,” Kamea interjected, “and I admire your loyalty to her. You care for her a great deal, don’t you Chief?”

“Hell yeah I do,” Yang answered immediately, “she brought this company back from the brink of ruin after we lost Commander Markham when the Capital District got bombed. I’ve watched her grow from this morose, near-suicidal pilot to a capable mercenary commander.” Yang’s tone was honest, if not a bit indignant, “We’re a family, my lady, no doubt. She’d put her life on the line for any one of us and we’d do the same. She’d do it for you too,” he paused a moment and then added, “and not just because you pay her.”

Kamea smiled. “I believe that, Chief Virtanen, I do. Sir Raju spoke very highly of her character when he suggested I take her into my guard and she hasn’t disappointed me.” Her smile faded as her thoughts drifted back to her coronation day. “She could have turned on me, after all she *was* a pirate at one point, but she stood with me and Sir Raju against impossible odds... never wavering.”

“I understand why you didn’t let her have her revenge,” Yang said softly, “just... be gentle with her. She’s got a lot of emotional baggage to unpack. She needs to avenge Sir Raju. If Lady Espinoza doesn’t face justice or gets off light then she’ll never be able to accept it or grow past this trauma.”

“I suppose she earned the callsign ‘Hysteria’ for a reason,” Kamea quipped.

“Heh,” Yang chuckled, “the *Hysteria* is the name of the Leopard that Sumire pilots.”

“Are you kidding me?” Kamea exclaimed, turning to look back at him.

“Serious as can be,” he laughed, “we haven’t had the heart to tell her.”

“She doesn’t *know*?” Kamea smiled, her mouth open wide.

“Nope, not yet,” Yang said, “one day the bank may call in the note on *Hysteria* and she’s gonna be so confused.”

“Aaaaaand I’ve got it,” Dr. Murad’s voice came over the channel again, “Okay, hang on a second. I’m going to try something.”

Suddenly a squelch of static burst across the comms. “Dr. Murad, what did you do?!” Darius’ voice was full of static, “The lights are flickering... my screen is dead...” His voice was suddenly cut off as the entire com went to white noise.

“Dr. Murad?” Kamea inquired, pressing the com, “Mr. Oliveira? Can anybody hear me?”

“We’ve got you,” Sly replied for the team.

“I can’t go direct with Actual,” Hysteria spoke for the first time, “Envoy, can you read us?”

“I can hear you,” Su’s voice lent them a measure of reassurance, “but the whole *Argo*’s gone dark! I’m not picking up a drive signature either... whatever Farah just did it must’ve knocked out her engines!”

“This is bad, bad,” Yang shifted nervously in the rumble seat, “if her engines sputtered before she died they could be in a decaying orbit!”

“We may need to abort,” Kamea admitted, “our priority has to be the *Argo*. We may need to get you back up to her...”

“Worry about it later!” Yang exclaimed, pointing past her head, “Those vents, in the rock! They’re spilling out drones!” He grabbed his headset and keyed his mic, “Be careful of

those things; they're armed to the teeth and coming in fast! And there are probably more where they came from!"

"Shit just got real, people," Hysteria's voice was cool and calculating as she assumed command, "Whatever Dr. Murad did it's on her to fix it. Our priority is to get to those doors and protect Phoenix... at all costs. Understood?"

"Are those SLDF drones??" Sly exclaimed, "They still work??"

"Don't really want to stick around and find out," Hysteria moved her Jager out in front, "now MOVE!" As the Lance moved to obey radar signatures began to appear, tallying no less than half a dozen drones. "Striker can you get a sensor lock and get a feel for what we're up against?" No sooner had she spoken than two PPC blasts came streaking in, narrowly missing Vamp's Cent in the lead, but pelting it with long range missiles all the same.

"Oh that's bad," Sly reported, "that damn thing is eighty tons and has almost as much armor as I do!"

"Stay on mission," Hysteria commanded, swiveling her Jager around to attack position, "I've got the rear." She fired an alpha strike at the heavy drone that just took a shot at them. The AC/20 impacted first, tearing through the thing's armor, and the AC/10 managed to get internal, destroying the drone. "Well, this might not be as bad as I thought!"

"Revenge, don't get cocky," Kamea reminded her, "just get to the doors and we can lay down suppressing fire until Actual gets them open!"

"I can take the hits," Hysteria reassured her as a hail of pain streaked towards her. PPC shots, lasers, AC rounds, and a storm of missiles rained down on her, shredding armor and threatening to unbalance her.

"She needs help," Sly turned to attack position, lighting up one of the drones but failing to destroy it.

"Zere's only five of zem," Vamp turned his Centurion around, "to ze Kommander!"

Kamea turned as well, all of them ignoring Hysteria's pleas to continue to the door. The drones turned their guns on the rest of the lance, focusing especially on the two lighter Mechs; Kamea's Kintaro and Vamp's Cent. "We can't stay out here in the open!" Yang protested, "If we don't find harder cover we're gonna get swamped! So what's the plan?"

"Fall back and find an extraction point," Sumire's voice came over the Comms, "I'm getting you the hell out of there!"

"No!" Kamea protested, "We have to push forward to the doors; our only way out of this is through them. Dr. Murad *will* fix this; believe it!"

"But Phoenix," Su began, "the Lance has already lost a ton of armor..."

"She's right, Envoy," Yang cut in, "an Outpost Castle like Nautilus could bring down a dozen Leopards; probably all at the same time. If you try to extract us it'll blow you out of the sky. Instead try to get to Actual and find out what the hell is going on! If it really is gonna crash they will need emergency evac!"

"Damn it!" Sumire cursed, "you're right. Stay alive down there! I'll keep trying to get Farah on the comms. Worst case scenario I can get a lot of people out on the Leopard... I just hope it doesn't come to that."

"Do that!" Yang swiveled to get a better look out of the cockpit, "For now we've got to get our heads back in the game!" Within a few moments only one heavy drone remained... and it was at distance.

"Everyone, fall back!" Hysteria ordered, "I will post up here and wait until it gets into range."

"Zat monster has two PPCs," Vamp warned her.

"I know, CC," Hysteria said as she lined up a shot from her AC/10, "I just need him to get in range of the Kaliyama and his ass is mine!"

"Hysteria," Kamea's voice was full of concern, "let him come to us. Take cover back here by the door, there's no need to stand in the open."

“I’ve got this, Phoenix,” she said as she lined up her shot and waited for it to approach, “I’ll take it out and be to you in a second... *trust me.*”

“Let her do it,” Yang counseled off the air, “this is her way of trying to make things right with you. She wants to protect you, to defend you...”

‘She wants to love you,’ both of them thought at the same time. “Alright, Chief,” Kamea said, reluctantly taking cover near the door, “everyone, get in cover, just in case.”

The moment the heavy drone pulled into range Hysteria let another dual AC/20-AC/10 strike fly. It was overkill, but effective. “Tango down,” she grinned with satisfaction, “Alright, I’m coming to you. Hold position.” But no sooner had the words escaped her lips than the vents opened once more.

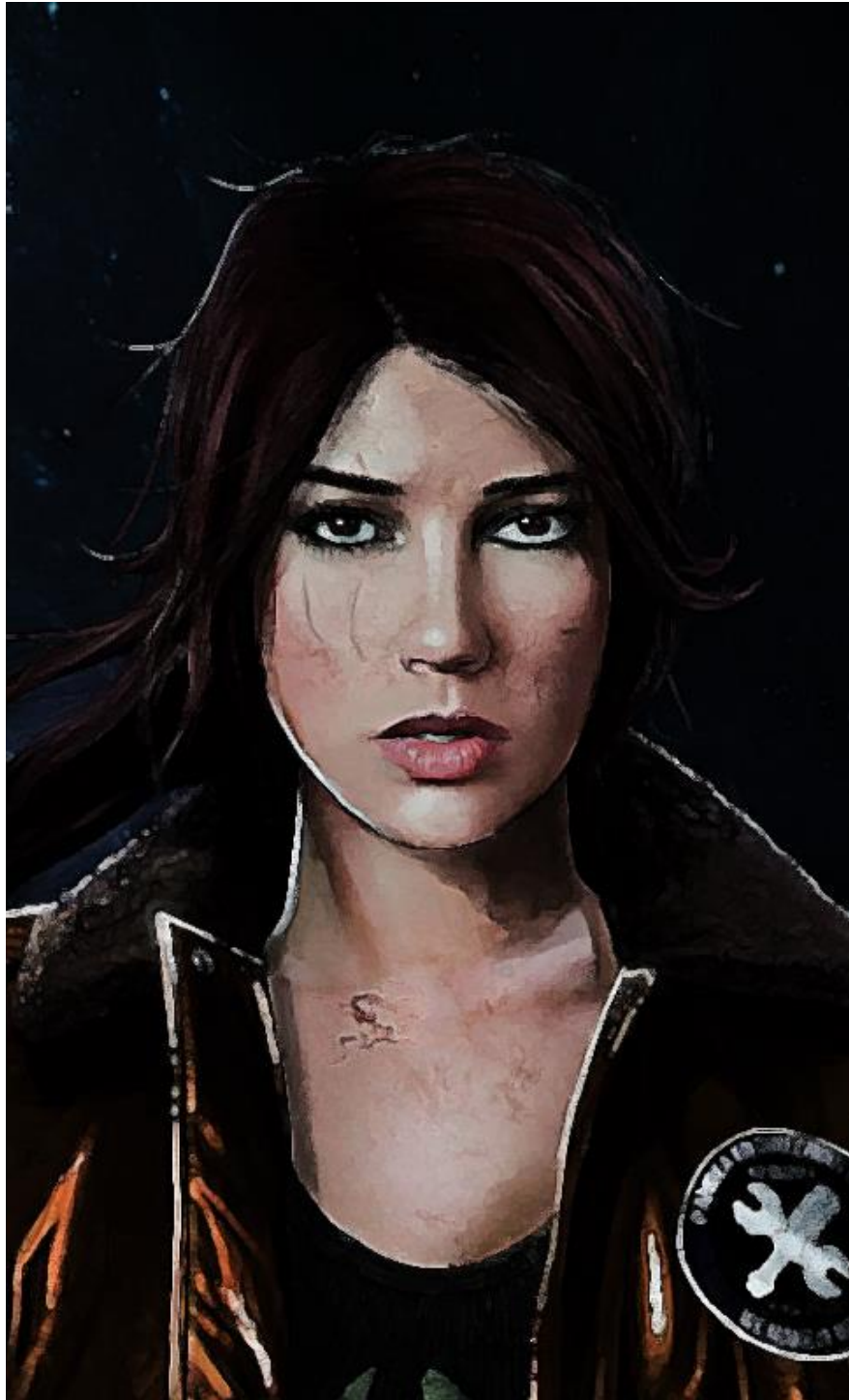
“Look, over there!” Yang cried out as the pillars they were hiding behind began to shift and move, “The damned castle is activating turrets!!”

“Commander there’s a shitload of new drone activity erupting out of those vents,” Sly warned, even as he repositioned away from the turret that emerged next to him, “you’ve got to get out of there... NOW!”

“I see it,” Hysteria grimaced. Her ammo count was starting to dwindle and the armor on her entire torso and arms was almost entirely gone, yet out from the vents new enemies flooded. In moments another half dozen drones were bearing down on her, “Take out those turrets!” she commanded, spinning around, “I’m coming in full sprint!”

“Roger zat, Kommander!” Vamp backed away and leveled one turret. Across the field from him Sly struggled to take down another. “We are getting zem clear now.”

“Hurry home, Hysteria,” Kamea turned and fired at an elevated turret above the door, “it’s getting cold out.”



“As you command, my lady,” Hysteria’s voice practically purred, “*Revenge is yours.*” Suddenly her Jagermech jolted followed by an ear-splitting report. Alarms went off all around her cockpit as the reactor beneath her *exploded*. All around her shrapnel erupted through the

cockpit and before she could get her wits about her, her Mech sailed, face first, to the planet's surface.

"COMMANDER!!!" Sly screamed, torn between rushing to her aid and finishing off the turrets, "Phoenix, she's down... she's down hard!"

"Hysteria!!" there was a desperation in her voice as Kamea roughly shifted her Mech around one hundred-eighty degrees and took off at a sprint, throwing Yang back hard into his seat, "Get those turrets down I'm going to get her!" Despite collective protests of 'My lady' Kamea silenced them with: "That's an order!" as she continued to charge, headlong, into fire.

"Phoenix, I'm reading bingo life support," Sly said grimly, finally eliminating one turret and turning on the final one, "if she's still alive she's gonna freeze to death if we don't get her out of there!"

"Finish up and then move to cover me!" Kamea commanded as Yang pointed out six incoming bogeys. She switched over to her direct channel with the Jager, "Riana!! Riana, my god, are you there? Can you hear me?!"

"Here," came a weak reply, full of static, "busted up good. It's so cold."

"Thank god!" Kamea exclaimed, sliding to a halt just in front of the ruined Jagermech, "Can you get out or do I need to come get you?"

"Caught a lot of shrapnel," Riana struggled with her harness, "but the impact knocked out my ferro-glass entirely. I can crawl out."

"Well hurry up!" Yang yelled, no longer able to contain himself, "we're still under heavy fire!" He started to fumble with his own harness, "Open up, I'm going after her."

Kamea guided her Kintaro into a near-squatting position, "This is going to be cold, Chief, you sure you don't want me to get her?"

"You hold off those drones," Yang squeezed next to the pilot's seat, ready to move with a purpose, "she'll never make this climb on her own and I can move faster with this cybernetic arm."

“Go get my girl, Chief,” Kamea’s eyes were misted, catching the MechTech off-guard, “she *can*’t die here!”

“As you command,” he nodded resolutely, taking a deep breath as Kamea opened the front of the Kintaro. Without fear he leaped out, using his mechanical arm to slow his descent, sparks flying off as his hand slid down the structure of the BattleMech. He landed in the snow and immediately sank to his waist, charging ahead anyway. As he approached he saw Riana emerge from the Jager. She was clearly disoriented and the rivulet of blood running down her face crystallized before his eyes. She stumbled forwards and inhaled, her hands immediately going to her throat as the pain of the frozen air sent daggers of pain down her windpipe. Yang threw himself forwards, practically bulldozing through the snow as explosions and lasers flew all around them. He finally got close enough to grab her, wrapping his natural arm around her as he turned and raced back though the path he’d made. The heat from a missile impact against the Kintaro’s torso was both welcoming and worrisome until Yang realized that Kamea had resealed her cockpit after he jumped out. “Hold on tight,” he said with the last of his air, trying to slowly inhale another breath but the stinging pain of it was almost unbearable. Reaching as high as he dared he jerked both of them upwards as Kamea opened the cockpit once more. Together they leapt up to the top of the Mech’s knee and he grabbed for another handhold, pulling them up to the landing created by the open pilot’s bay.

“Riana!!” Kamea cried as Yang pulled both of them up. She began to unbuckle her harness but Yang waved her off so instead she waited, impotently, as the MechTech squeezed by her, towing Hysteria behind him so that he could cradle her in his lap. She turned and reached out to the mercenary commander but, for her part, Riana was in shock and unresponsive. Her eyes were glazed and she struggled weakly for breath.

“Close up and get us out of here!” Yang said in a hoarse voice, his face pale and covered in frost. Kamea turned and moved to close the hatch but gasped at the incoming salvo of missiles streaking towards them.

“Oh shit!” she exclaimed, grabbing the stick and swiveling to the right just as the first of the missiles impacted.

“PHOENIX!!!” Sly screamed as he charged towards the fray. As he watched the entire front of the Kintaro was covered in a fiery explosion and the Mech pitched backwards, crashing down to the ground on its back. “LADY ARANO!!!” he cried, “LADY ARANO!! CAN YOU HEAR ME??!!”



ARTRU

Planet's Surface - Outside Castle Nautilus

That was pretty dramatic, wasn't it? I'm sure some of you wonder how much of this is purely invented just for the story but I can assure you; everything described in-mission is based around actual events. Naturally the tale is driven by my own personal head-canon, including all the inter-personal relationships, but when it comes to actual events... You see Hysteria really was bringing up the rear. I waited on that final drone to get into range, never expecting a half dozen more to flood out. So when they did I was well and truly screwed. Sprinting back I didn't quite make it before they took the Jager out. At that point it was partially due to my head-canon that I selected Kamea to move to the actual spot where Riana lay to try and hold off the enemy; in a desperate situation like that leaving a pilot down would be a death sentence, right? Even though Riana cannot die due to her status as the main character. I could have focused all remaining fire on the turrets and just waited out the slowly approaching drones, but I also knew I would be missile fodder if I did that. Vamp's Cent was missing an arm and Sly's Quickdraw was about to lose one. Kamea's Kintaro was the only Mech I had that had relatively little damage, so there was a practical reason on top of the emotional one: I needed a decoy.

Vamp's Cent, even one-armed, was pretty effective at knocking out those turrets. The Quickdraw was *not*. As a result the Kintaro was forced to stand and trade for longer than I would have liked and became the main target of 6 drones' worth of missiles. In addition to all the armor she was shedding it wasn't long before she was unbalanced and knocked flat on her ass. Which appears to be where we last left our heroes...

"Phoenix!!" Sly slid to a stop just to the right of her fallen Mech, firing a salvo at the closest drone, "Phoenix do you copy?!"

"I am enroute," Vamp's voice sounded strained, "ze turrets took off an arm but I still have my weapons."

“Don’t get dead,” Sly warned as he took the brunt of the incoming drone fire, “which may be a pretty tall order...” he added as fresh alarms went off all around his cockpit.

Inside the Kintaro the lights were just coming back on as the Mech’s systems completed rebooting. Kamea reached forward and silenced numerous alarms and flipped various switches as she felt the Kintaro shudder to life beneath her. “That’s my good girl,” she murmured as the comfortable vibration of her sticks indicated the return of control.

“Thank God,” Yang said from the rumble seat, Hysteria’s unconscious form cradled against his body, “get us the fuck out of here! We’re sitting ducks!”

“Working on it, Chief,” she said as her coms suddenly came back to life; repeated hails from Sly getting increasingly desperate, “Phoenix online,” she called, “the impact forced a reactor reboot; fail-safe disconnected it to minimize damage. We took a hit but we’re all okay,” she planted an arm and started to push herself back to her feet, “all three of us,” she added to the others’ relief.

“Hysteria’s alive?” Vamp’s voice queried as he raced past the rising Kintaro and stomped on one of the drones, “Zank goodness!”

“Phoenix, we’ve got to get...” Sly was cut off as his right arm exploded at the shoulder, the detonation nearly sending his Mech crashing into hers, “Oh boy, that hurt,” he said as he staggered on his feet.

“You’re both missing arms!” Kamea exclaimed, “Double time! Get into cover near the doors! Go, go, go!” She gasped as she looked at her HFORS display of Vamp’s ravaged Centurion. It had no armor, seemingly anywhere, and the damage was critical virtually everywhere. “How is he even piloting that?” she asked out loud.

“Leonard’s got nine lives,” Yang offered, “but by my count he’s now in debt for about 13!”

“I can see that,” she moved the Kintaro forward, falling in directly behind the fleeing Centurion to provide cover... and took two salvos of drone attacks for her trouble. New alarms went off.

“Our rear armor!” Yang exclaimed.

“I see it, Chief,” she cut him off as all three Mechs sprinted for the door. Suddenly her com flared to life with static.

“...ady Arano? Lady Arano, do you read me?” It was Darius’ voice.

“Darius!” she exclaimed, unable to hide the relief in her voice, “Thank the gods! Tell me what’s going on up there!”

“Doc Murad must’ve poked her nose into something she shouldn’t have,” he spoke through heavy static, barely readable, “Everything’s going haywire up here... Doc’s putting out literal fires as we speak.”

“XO you listen to me!” Yang wrestled his headset back on, “You tell Doc Murad that if she doesn’t get these doors open right *fucking* now, Lady Arano is *dead*. We *all* are! Hysteria is down, out of commission and probably bleeding internally. We’ve got three Mechs and four arms, do you understand? If those doors don’t open inside of thirty seconds we are all well and truly fucked!”

“I’m well aware of that, Yang!” Farah’s voice now was barely audible above the static, “Working on it now... just... out a little longer... working... it...”

“We’ve lost contact again,” Sumire’s transmission was much clearer, “Keep yourselves alive! I’ll call out new contacts as I see ‘em.”

“Well, hope was nice while it lasted,” Sly quipped, taking cover behind one of the turret pedestals nearest the doors, “I’ve still got a bit of armor on my left side but I’m most worried about those missiles.”

“I’m bingo armor,” Vamp offered, “everywhere.” He took cover behind the other pedestal near the door, “I can still target with LRMs but if I take anozer hit I am toast.”

“Stay in cover,” Kamea said, moving behind one of the forward pedestals, “There’s only five of them left and the lead two are missing a lot of armor. We still have a fighting chance.”

“Heads up,” Sumire’s voice came over the comms once more, “You’ve got more of those little bastards coming in from the vents in the rock!”

“Greeeaaaat,” Sly moaned in exasperation, “if we live through this I wonder if they need more staff in the cafeteria?”

“I have a plan,” Vamp interjected.

“No heroics from you,” Kamea chastised him, “if I let you die Hysteria will never let me live it down!”

“Heroics is vat I do,” he responded with a dangerously serious tone, “if I don’t zen Hysteria and you may die.”

“Vamp, old buddy,” Sly began, “what are you doing?”

“I absolutely *forbid* it,” Kamea said forcefully, “whatever *it* is!”

“Zen if I live you must punish me,” he said ominously, “I am ze fastest and only I can pull zis off!” Suddenly he sprinted from cover and raced across the field, moving as fast as his Cent could go. Predictably the drones all targeted him and opened fire. “Now!” he screamed, bolts of energy narrowly missing him as missiles exploded all around him, “Use zis distraction! Kill as many of ze bastards as you can!”

“You wild and crazy fuck,” Sly chuckled, breaking cover and lighting up the closest drone with an Alpha Strike, “*Home is the Regiment, the price of glory high!*” he sang loudly as the drone exploded into shrapnel.

The shock of the maneuver behind her, Kamea swiveled out and targeted the next closest, “*We stand with brothers at our sides,*” she began to sing but soon she was joined by Yang and Vamp as well, “*to pay the price and die!*”

“*Ze blood of comrades cries to us,*” Vamp bellowed as he turned and sprinted back towards his original cover. A salvo of missiles caught him in his right shoulder, taking off his arm in a violent explosion but still he charged ahead, “*long after glory’s past...*” he continued.

“Home is the Regiment, across the sea of stars!” Kamea screamed it now, at the top of her lungs, as Sly took cover and fired LRMs but she stood, defiantly, unloading on a doomed drone as a fresh wave of attackers appeared on her screen. Suddenly her left shoulder was hit and the battery of SRMs there detonated. “Oh!” she exclaimed, moving quickly to keep her feet even as she tried to shake off the effects of her head being slammed into the cage.

“Lady Arano!” Yang yelled behind her, his voice ringing in her ears. He yelled something else too but she couldn’t make it out.

“She’s in trouble,” Vamp said over the open com, “I am going back out...”

“IDENTIFIER CODE: ACCEPTED. AUTOMATED DEFENSES DISENGAGED. WELCOME, ARGO.”

“Is that?” Sly began, but Kamea’s voice cut him off.

“Thank the gods for that!” she stood her ground tentatively as the approaching drones’ guns went silent, “Dr. Murad, I need a status report; what the hell is going on up there? What did you let loose on my ship??”

“I,” she stammered, “I don’t know. Something they were researching there. It’s malicious code of some kind. I think I inadvertently let it out of quarantine.” Her transmission was still full of static.

“Yeah,” Yang chimed in, “and you tripped an alarm while you were at it!”

“Look,” she snapped defensively, “the good news is that I’ve got it contained. Ninety percent certain. But it’s caused a *lot* of damage up here...” the transmission fell to static before picking up again, “communications... patchy... main drive... off-line... we’re floating dead in space. Lots of superficial damage too...” suddenly she was lost in static again.

“Envoy,” Kamea called, “see if you can work a relay; try and clean up her signal and give it a boost.”

“I’m already doing that,” Sumire responded, “but hang on; let me try something.”

“Anyway I’m working on it,” Farah’s transmission cleared significantly, but it was still filled with white noise, “but I could use more hands on deck... anyone who can follow basic instructions will do... *Argo*... enormous ship and that code made... absolute mess of her.”

“Understood,” Kamea replied, “Envoy, I need you to fetch our people; everyone but Yang and myself. Get Hysteria to medbay and everybody else to wherever Dr. Murad needs them.”

“了解, 女王様,” Sumire began, “I’ll be there in a moment. Tell the lance to prepare for extraction.”

“Uh, Lady Arano,” Yang said once they were off the air, “what are *we* doing?”

“What we came here for,” she replied coolly, moving her one-armed Kintaro towards the now-open doors, “we’re going inside. I didn’t bring us all this way to leave empty-handed.” She keyed her com on the fleet channel, “Phoenix to *Delfinas* Actual.”

“This is *Delfinas*, standing by,” came the reply, “What are your commands, my lady?”

“Captain Grigas,” she said with relief upon hearing his voice, “are you and your ship ready?”

“Aye, my lady,” he replied with confidence, “The *Delfinas* is fully loaded and ready to drop.”

“Good,” she said; her own confidence returning in a great swell, “Meet us at the north entrance... and hurry. We don’t have much time before our unwelcome guests arrive.”

“Affirmative,” he responded, “recovery team inbound. House Karosas is proud to serve the Restoration, my lady.”

“Thank you, Captain,” she turned her head, “Ready yourself, Chief Virtanen. We’re going to make sure Hysteria gets evaced and then I’m taking us inside.”

Part XXVI

So, it's been a long time! I haven't stopped playing, but I did run into quite a bit of trouble. I bought and installed the Year Pass to get access to the DLC but, for whatever reason, it deleted my save files. All of them. All of my progress with Riana... gone! But as attached as any of you might be to this story... so am I. So I restarted the whole thing, aiming to recreate the situation as best I can by the point we left off. So parts are easy; I recreated Riana pretty easily and building Vamp was also a cinch since I could customize him. But others, namely all the Kickstarter backers, I've had to search for. Since the last game update it seems like the chance to encounter these Backer Pilots has been drastically lessened, but we'll get into that trouble soon. First I thought I'd like to close out what was happening in the story. The aftermath of Artru was not pleasant for the members of Riana's Revenge. The SLDF drones kicked my ass! The Escape portion of the mission was a LOT easier, even if I only manage to extract two of the Mechs. Even though the real threat was the financial and logistical conditions the company faced following the events of Anvelt I was also staring down something like 110+ days without Riana due to her injuries. So I figure it's a good time to explore the drama a little more...

"How is she?" Sly asked, the bloody bandage wrapped around his head obscured his left eye but he was at least moving around.

"Hurt," Yang began in a raspy voice, "bad." He turned his head back towards the metal chamber where Hysteria lay. "Exposure to Artru's cold ravaged her lungs and she's got frostbite all over. Not to mention the injuries she sustained when her reactor exploded. Doc said her lower extremities are shredded, it was a miracle that she walked out of her Mech. Fractures all along her spine too where the explosion forced her up against her cage; both clavicles broken... her legs are practically webbed with fractures."

"Damn," Sly slumped in his wheelchair before reaching out and placing a hand on Yang's shoulder, "how are you doing?"

"My throat's sore but I'll be fine," the MechTech said dismissively, "I just hope this was all worth it," he shifted in his seat to be able to look at Sly directly, "I don't think I can save the Jager. No one should have been able to climb out of that carnage. You're hurt, Vamp's hurt, the QD is practically a total loss, the Cent is trash..." he let it sink in a moment before continuing, "At this point we have Glitch, Kru, and Medusa available to drive the Vindy, the Hunch, the Dragon, and a Jenner." He spread his arms and let them fall, "that's it."

"Aren't you forgetting that Highlander that Lady Arano gave us?" Sly asked.

“Oh, yeah,” Yang looked slightly down and to the left, “so that’s five BattleMechs and three pilots.”

“Doc wants me out for a month,” Duncan began, “but maybe we can persuade him to shave off a couple of weeks. Either that or we just take it easy for a while...”

“We can’t afford to take it easy,” Yang shook his head, “we’ve been running on fumes lately, even with the Restoration’s fat paydays.” He looked directly at Duncan as he spoke, “putting the Cent back together from practically scrap, along with the exorbitant repairs on the Jager and the Quickdraw last time left us dangerously close to broke. The pay we’ve earned will get us back to Smithon but we’re gonna need a job, like right away.”

“Okay,” Duncan reasoned, “If we send down Glitch’s Dragon, Kru in the Hunch, and you put Mohammed in the HL then they ought to be okay for a milk run or three.”

“That’s the problem,” Yang looked back at the hyperbaric chamber where Riana lay, “we haven’t had a milk run in a long time. Seems like every world we hit is full of war, especially in Aurigan space.” He turned back to Sly once more, “I cannot, as your Chief MechTech, greenlight an under-tonnage lance of three Mechs into the kinds of combat we’ve been seeing the last few months, I just can’t allow it.”

“Well, then maybe we head back out into the Frontier for a while,” Sly offered, “we’ve done it plenty of times in the past...”

“Yeah, how’d that go the last few times?” Yang challenged him, sounding angrier than he’d intended, “we burned up a lot of cash and for what? To burn up even more in repairs and injuries? The milk runs are gone, Big Sly. This whole region of space is about to explode and we’re stuck right in the middle of it!”

“Typically, that’s a pretty good place for a merc crew to be,” Duncan offered a sardonic smile.

“Well, not this crew,” Yang deflated visibly and turned to look back at Hysteria’s chamber, “Revenge is hanging by a thread. Darius and Su are about to pull their hair out worrying about payroll and loan payments. If we don’t take a job at Smithon we’re not gonna make the next financials.”

“Hey,” a knock at the door interrupted them, “can I come in?” Death Krusade entered the darkened room as the two turned to regard him. “Is this a bad time?”

“Come on in,” Duncan motioned for him to come closer after swiveling his chair, “we’re just talking about our impending unemployment.”

“Oh, is that all?” Todd asked sarcastically, “how’s our girl?”

“Not good,” Yang shook his head, “doc’s got her doing HBOT right now, trying to help her body fix the tissue damage to her lungs. The cold slowed her blood loss, at least, and he got all her lacerations patched up but it remains to be seen if he can fix all the damage to her spine; gonna have to wait til after the lung thing pans out.”

“May have to swap ‘em for cloned ones,” Kru offered.

“Takes time to grow them,” Yang countered dejectedly, “time she may not have. She’s on a rebreather in there.”

“She flatlined during evac,” Sly added softly, “MedTechs got her back.”

“Jesus,” Todd unfolded his arms, the look of concern clear on his face, “is you serious?”

“Sly nodded slowly, “in the two and a half years I’ve known her I’ve never seen her give up,” he looked at Todd solemnly, “she gave up on the ride back.”

“And nobody thought to tell us?!” Todd demanded, angrily.

“Darius wanted to keep it tight,” Duncan replied, “I knew because I was still conscious but Vamp was out. Sumire and Jessica found out once we docked, you know how Glitch insists to be there to meet everyone returning. They were still working on her when we got back.”

“What’s the doc say about her recovery?” Kru asked, still feeling offended as he moved closer to the hyperbaric chamber.

“That she’s lucky to even be here,” Yang answered, “or rather that we’re lucky to have her... for a little while.”

“A little while?!?” Kru’s voice carried through the whole MedBay, “The fuck you mean ‘a little while?’ Is she dying?!?”

“Forgive Yang,” Sly said dismissively, “he’s feeling a little melodramatic. What he meant to say was it’s too early to tell.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?!?” Kru’s hackles were still raised.

“Settle,” Yang lowered his brow, “Leonard’s in here too. Doc has him sedated but he’s in terrible shape... again.” He let his head hang down as he rested his elbows on his knees. “Said he can’t do this too many more times. His body just can’t take the cumulative stress.”

“Doc set my recovery at over a month,” Duncan spoke in a calm, measured voice, “Vamp’s probably looking at three or four months but Riana?” he looked over at the chamber, “earliest estimate he could give us is seven to nine months... if her lungs pull through.” He chuckled a little, glancing back at Kru, “the enemy can’t kill her but her goddamn home planet might.”

“She told me once she used to dream of going down there,” Yang was still staring at the floor, speaking in an absent-minded tone, “to Artru.” He jerked and looked between the two of them, as if he just realized he was speaking, “Said that, as a kid, she used to stare at the surface from her father’s hab and just imagine the adventure of being down there, exploring.” Neither of the MechWarriors spoke so he continued, his eyes becoming watery, “No fucking way her childhood dream kills her... no way. It can’t happen, it can’t...”

“It’s not gonna happen,” Kru said with determination, “she’ll be back on her feet, you’ll see, she’s the toughest badass I know and I know a LOT of badasses!” He walked over to the hyperbaric chamber and looked at her unconscious form inside; all manner of tubes were going to and from her, a rebreather was strapped to her face, and most of her body was covered in anti-bac bandages. “Any lesser MechWarrior would have died, but not this badass. This badass got the fuck up and walked out of her burning Mech, broke legs and all, and took a deep breath of frozen air.” He paused and looked back at Yang and Sly, “And she’s still here, she’s STILL fucking here! Maybe she needs a little help, maybe she needs a little time, but mark my words: she’ll be back in her Mech before long.” Kru’s own eyes were beginning to mist over but he willed it to stop; he was still guilt-ridden about not going down to Artru with her. He’d promised, they’d promised each other, but when Kamea decided to go it was him that she decided to bump.

‘Why?’ he thought to himself, ‘Why’d you go and do a thing like that? I was supposed to be there, watching your back, that’s where I belonged.’

“Does Lady Arano know?” Sly broke the silence, talking to Yang.

“Know what?” the MechTech asked.

“Y’know,” Duncan began, looking down as he said the words, “that Riana died.”

“Gods, no,” Yang shook his head and then looked down as well, “I’m sure as shit not gonna tell her, but then again I didn’t know until I was covered in centuries-old grease and oil trying to get that Atlas running.”

“Who told you?” Sly asked.

“Glitch called me,” Yang answered, “after she’d stabilized. Said she didn’t wanna worry me... here I was trying to get three-hundred-year-old Mechs running and...”

“Why would it matter?” Kru asked himself out loud, his brain slowly making a connection.

“What’s that?” Duncan asked.

“Why would it matter if Kamea Arano knew that Riana almost died,” he looked up at Sly and Yang, “I mean we’re just mercs, right? Why wouldn’t you tell her, Yang?”

Yang didn’t say a word.

“She’s our captain,” Sly reasoned, “and she’s got a personal connection to Lady Arano; they both trained under Sir Raju. They’re like sisters, sorta. After losing Raju like that...”

Kru’s mind whirled a mile-a-minute; he’d assumed that night on the catwalk that she’d been mostly upset about Vamp but now his mind recalled that fight she’d had with Lady Arano over Victoria Espinosa.

“Plus,” Sly continued, “if something happened to her and we elected a new captain that’s no guarantee that Revenge would still act as her personal mercenaries. She and the Canopians invested a lot into this company, bought a lot of debt. That gives her a pretty big interest in the whole operation. As I understand it Lady Arano asked for Riana personally so if she finds out she’s hanging onto life by a thread, well, that’d be a pretty big distraction for someone trying to win a war, dontcha think?”

But Kru wasn’t listening; instead he was remembering about how Hysteria had avoided both him and Lady Arano for the two weeks they had all been together on the Argo prior to Artru, and then the mission itself... how she’d chosen Sly to go over him... “She didn’t want us together...” he said under his breath. He looked back at Yang, an expression of surprise on his face, only to find the MechTech’s eyes wide in response.

“What?” Sly asked, “What’d you say? I didn’t hear that.”

“She’s our employer,” Yang recovered quickly, his poker-face in place, “there’s no need to worry her, it might shake her faith in our company if I told her about Riana.” His brow lowered once more and his next words were spoken as a command; “Forget it.”

‘to be honest nobody knows about my past ‘cept you and Yang,’ Riana’s voice echoed in his head. He lifted his chin and kept his eyes locked on the MechTech’s inscrutable mask. “Yeah, okay,” he said at length, “makes sense.” ‘She confides in him,’ he thought, ‘but he didn’t know about us.’ The pieces began to fall in place as the Solaran kept his gaze on Yang. ‘But he knows other secrets...’

“Your eyes stuck?” Yang challenged him.

“Nah, just tired,” Kru rubbed at the bridge of his nose, “I think I’m gonna turn in. Youse let me know if you need a break. I’ll sit with her.”

“Thanks,” Yang grumbled, “I’ve got this for now.” His unfriendly stare followed the MechWarrior around the corner and out of MedBay. ‘It’s him, it’s gotta be,’ he thought to himself, ‘what the fuck does she see in him?’

“Um,” Sly interrupted his angry glare with a goofy wave, “what the fuck just happened?”

:

Well that was dramatic! This all has to go somewhere, right? Preferably before anyone important to the drama dies! Anyway, the situation was indeed bleak. For whatever reason milk runs had become scarce and even 2 and 3 skull missions were turning out more like 4s or 5s. I was being consistently outnumbered, outflanked, and generally just bleeding money. My repair costs and medical times were through the roof so, by the time I got back to Smithon, I had to start doing some missions... even if people died. Well, if people are gonna die anyway...

“We can’t do it,” Darius shook his head resolutely, “Yang is right. We can’t take a job under tonnage. The rating on all of these requires a full lance, minimum, and even then we may be in for a helluva fight.”

“If we don’t take one we won’t make the loans,” Sumire reminded him, “we just don’t have time to try another system!” She punched in some numbers on her datapad, “even if we hop over to Mechdur that’s a Thirty-K expense and, by the time we arrive, the payment is due; they’ll repossess the Leopard and we won’t have any way to ferry our lance to the surface!”

“I will not be responsible for sending our pilots to their death!!” Darius yelled at her, the holotable flickering as if it registered his anger.

“The company cannot survive if we don’t make money!” Su yelled back at him.

“Well, do you have a solution??” Darius snapped, “Because unless you do...”

“We sell,” Yang offered, “I’ve got lasers, missile racks, a TON of heat sinks...”

“We can sell scrap, sure,” Sumire cut him off, “how long will that keep us afloat?”

“At least until Sly is released for duty,” Darius countered.

“What then?” she snarled, “We sell it all until there’s nothing left? We’re a mercenary company, we can’t keep avoiding this!” She stomped one foot, angrily, “Can you sell Seven-Hundred K worth? Because that’s what these jobs are averaging! Just one will make financials, payroll and payments, we have to try!”

“I can sell enough to get us through one payment,” Yang sighed, “and we can cut rations and pay for a month, but after that...” he looked over at Darius, “she’s right. We have to find something.”

“We jump back out to Detroit,” Darius began.

“Detroit is over a month away!” Su yelled, pointing to her pad, “Financials will be due again!”

“The last time we jumped out to the Frontier it cost us money,” Yang reminded him.

“Then we go system-to-system,” Darius was getting angry, “until we find something we can take!”

“Notice anything funny about our luck lately?” Sly asked from his wheelchair, “Like how maybe we haven’t really had any?”

“We’ve had plenty of bad luck,” Glitch offered cheerfully before she thought about what she’d said, “er, oh... never mind.”

“I’m with Meyer,” Medusa said gruffly, “we’ve gotta take a job... besides, we all know the risks.”

“There’s no way we can let this company fold while Riana is out,” Kru nodded beside him, “we can do this.”

“Okay, fine,” Darius stood ramrod straight, looking down his nose at them, “let’s say you do all survive. Maybe you even get off light on injuries,” he stalked around the holotable to stand right in front of them, “what if that’s because we’re forced to withdraw, take a fraction of the pay? How much do you think repairs will be? We have five working Mechs now, can we do this again with just two?”

“We need a full lance,” Yang let his face fall into his hand, “otherwise we’re not gonna pull this off. Three Mechs just can’t handle the projected OpFor on this job. You’ll get overwhelmed and either get routed or get dead.”

“Then let’s hire someone,” Sly offered, drawing looks from all around the room, “What? There’s a hiring hall here on Smithon, let’s go down and hire someone to pilot a fourth Mech. Easy.”

“Your plan is to increase payroll?” Darius asked incredulously.

“Yes,” Sly nodded, “Yes it is. That is my plan,” he looked around at everyone else in the room, “that is exactly what Riana would do too. You all know I’m right!”

“He is right,” Sumire spoke, causing Darius to whirl around and Yang to lift his head, “he’s right; that is precisely what Riana would do,” she clarified.

“You were just complaining about a Thirty-K jump and you want to spend forty or fifty on hiring someone new?” the XO asked.

“If we pay for a jump to a new system there’s no guaranteed return,” the pilot reasoned, “but if we take on a new MechWarrior, even if just for one mission, we could make Seven-Hundred K.”

“That’s a pretty big ‘if,’” Darius snarled.

“Lot smaller than a blind jump,” Sly countered, “plus, not to be a bastard, but if he dies on mission we don’t have to fire him!” The withering stares from around the room prompted him to add: “What? I’m just saying…”

“It’s not a good idea,” Yang sat up and placed his hands on his knees, “but it’s better than any other one we’ve had.”

“Jobs like these,” Kru nodded at the holotable’s display of what was on offer through the Mercenary Board, “might be a good idea to hire two,” now Darius spun back around, disbelieving, “and keep ‘em at least until Riana is back on her feet.”

“We’ll have a lot more injuries,” Su tapped on her datapad once more, “having two in reserve would help us keep lances in the field, provided the Chief’s crew can keep the repairs timely.”

“Might I remind you that hiring is at the discretion of the Commander and the First Officer?” Darius now looked indignant.

“So go hire some people,” Kru suggested, “the Commander is indisposed, I guess that makes this your responsibility.”

“I’ll go with you,” Sly offered, “but you may have to wheel me in.”

“Nah, I got this,” Kru stepped forwards, “I got a pretty good idea of what the Commander looks for in a MechWarrior. I’ll pick ‘em out and you interview ‘em and we’ll get a couple of guys to help out til we get back on our feet.”

For a moment Darius just stood there, as if unsure what to say, then he sighed and turned towards Sumire. “Tell me we can afford this.”

“We don’t have a choice,” she shrugged her shoulders, “it’s either hire some temps and do some jobs or fold.”

“Oh! I have a good idea!” Glitch jumped up and held her hand in the air, “What if we asked Lady Arano for some more money until...”

“NO!!!” came the unified response.

:

I was mentioning the challenge of regaining the same Backer Pilots. The first I came across was a guy named Corsair. His ex-pirate background appealed so I scooped him up, figuring that he would probably die at some point. But he hasn’t. I’m getting close to where I was now (about to redo the Anvelt mission) so I figured I’d better think up a reason for him to be part of the group. I had to alter .json files to actually find and hire Sly and Kru again, but I got ‘em finally. Last but not least was a pilot I actually picked up after Artru but hadn’t gotten a chance to write about before the files were lost...

“Okay, so whaddya youse think?” Kru leaned in close to Darius in the crowded hall, both of them keeping eyes on the man still seated at the table. He was in his mid-thirties, with a military haircut hidden under a cap and dark sunglasses, even indoors.

“I’ve heard that name before,” Darius had his arms folded, “Corsair... he’s an ex-pirate,” he snarled that last word.

“Yeah?” Kru hissed sarcastically, “So’s Riana. I also heard this was the guy what fucked Dame Trevaline’s operation in Tortuga!”

“Another reason not to hire him,” Darius countered, “the last thing we need is a vengeful pirate queen on our tail!”

“Look,” Kru was losing patience, “the guy says he doesn’t want a fixed contract... month-to-month. He’s fucking perfect.”

“He is far from perfect,” Darius turned his head and looked directly into Todd’s eyes.

“He’s perfect as fodder, wouldn’t you say?” Kru shifted tactics, “The guy wants to be a part-timer. Let him take fucking point. If he gets hurt, we dump him at the nearest hall and hire someone else. For now, he has what we need; skills and flexibility.”

Darius sighed, “I guess I can’t argue with that. How much does he want, again?”

“Does it matter?” Kru asked, but he quickly surmised that the XO was serious, “Fifty-four down and Forty-K a month if he stays. It’s a pretty standard setup.”

“All right,” Darius finally unfolded his arms and pushed away from where he had been leaning on the wall, “we’ll give him a shot, but if stuff starts coming up missing...”

“I’ll put him out the airlock myself,” Kru finished as the pair of them walked back to the table and took seats opposite the man called Corsair.

“So, uh, mister...” Darius fished for his real name.

“Nick,” the man nodded, “Christoph Nick but nobody calls me that,” he reached up and lowered the glasses until his eyes were barely visible, “just call me Corsair.” He punctuated this by pushing the glasses back up the bridge of his nose.

“Right,” Darius’ tone was cold, “Mr. Nick, you understand that if you accept this offer...”

“Corsair,” he corrected again.

“... if you accept this offer you will travel with Riana’s Revenge to whichever systems and planets we decide to take work at,” Kru’s attention was drawn away from Darius’ spiel as a rather rough-looking woman paused mid-stride as she was passing the table and looked right at them. The sides of her head were shaved and she had the scars of a MechWarrior, some of them fresh. Kru met her stare with a challenge in his eyes and she lifted one corner of her mouth and took four steps backwards to lean against one of the bars in the hall, tilting back her drink as she continued to watch the table with interest. Kru eventually turned his attention back to the business at hand. “...medical expenses provided, for injuries sustained on deployments of course, but employment is at the discretion of the Commander and the XO and may be terminated at any time, for any reason. Does all of this sound acceptable to you?”

“Yeah, sure,” Corsair nodded, tilting his chair back slightly, “only I ain’t signing anything.” He nodded at both men with a smirk of his own, “my employment is at my discretion too. I’ll leave if and when I’m ready to, at any time, for any reason.”

“That is acceptable,” Darius tried to appear non-plussed, “now you may not have an assigned Mech but we do have several available at the moment...”

“I’ve got a Kintaro,” Corsair revealed, “it’s mine but so long as I’m employed I expect you to keep her armed and in repair.”

“A KTO-18 is a good Mech!” Kru said excitedly, turning to Darius, “a solid fifty-five tonner! That’s what Kamea drives.”

“What she used to drive,” Darius reminded him in a hiss, “it’s a beast, all right, but it runs hot. Can you manage it? Doesn’t do me a lot of good to field a Mech that has to spend all its time venting heat.”

“She’s a custom job,” Corsair lifted his chin as he spoke, “extra armor, axed the LRMs, and a custom built coolant vent. Trust me, old man, she’ll go toe-to-toe with any foe til the battle’s won and the crying’s done. It comes to a fight; you want Corsair on your side.”

“Cute tagline,” Darius rolled his eyes as Kru fixed him with a pensive stare, “you’re hired. The Leopard is on pad nine, look for the red and gold. Go ahead and get your Mech loaded.”

“Aye, aye,” Corsair gave a mock salute and stood up, drifting away through the crowd.

“I do not like him,” Darius confirmed once he was out of earshot.

“Ah, he wasn’t so bad,” Kru said, mostly to annoy the XO, “youse gotta expect a certain level of sass from any decent MechWarrior.”

“And he was the best you could find?” Darius asked with exasperation, “I think we’ve wasted enough time.”

“That’s still only one,” Kru reminded him, “most everyone else was wet behind the ears but...”

“You guys hiring?” a new voice drew their attention. It was the woman from earlier, with the sides of her head shaved. She stood in front of the table now, drink in hand and a smirk on her face.

“Youse a pilot?” Kru asked. Something about this woman bothered him but he couldn’t figure out what.

“I’m a MechWarrior,” she countered, dropping the smirk, “and a goddamn good one.”

“Sit,” Darius bade her. He also didn’t care for her but his patience for this trip was rapidly expiring, “what kind of experience do you have?”

“A lot out here in the Reach,” she answered unhelpfully, “mostly in a Dragon.”

“Hmm, we have a Dragon,” Darius muttered, referring to Glitch’s heavily modified DRG-1N that Hysteria and Yang built as an armored sniper, “but we’d have to adjust armaments to get it back to something you might know how to use.”

“Who’d you work for?” Kru asked suspiciously. There was so much about this woman that unsettled him, from her attitude to her hairstyle to even her garish eyeshadow everything about her screamed ‘pirate.’

“I’m a freelancer,” she said in a guarded tone, “Say, what’s the name of your outfit anyway?”

“Who’d you freelance for?” Kru demanded, cutting off Darius before he could speak, “Youse a pirate?”

“Ha!” she laughed, “That’s rich coming from a guy who just hired fucking Corsair!”

“Answer the question,” Darius demanded, “are you a pirate?”

“Fuck no I’m not a pirate,” she dropped her laughter immediately, looking offended that he’d asked, “I was raised in a merc crew, Bledy’s Band by name, but I’ve been on my own since I was eighteen.”

“Who’d you work for recently?” Kru persisted.

“Various employers,” she leaned across the table, “not all of whom want to be named.”

“Do you have your own Mech?” the XO asked.

“Not anymore,” she shook her head, “but I can pilot just about anything.”

“What happened to it?” Kru prodded.

“Rival merc company fragged it,” she said defensively, “left me for dead. So, here I am looking for work. If possible I’d like to make enough to be able to buy my own again, at which point I’m

in the wind. No offense to you and your lifestyle, but I tend to play by my own rules and I like the privacy. I'm not looking for a permanent gig."

"Excuse us a moment," Darius got up and motioned for Kru to follow him back to where they contemplated Corsair. Once there he leaned close, "What do you think?"

"She's far from perfect," Kru paraphrased.

"She's confident," Darius noted.

"She's arrogant," Kru said dismissively.

"You gotta expect a certain level of sass from any decent MechWarrior..."

"Cute," Kru grimaced.

"Turnabout is fair play," Darius lifted both eyebrows and tilted his head, "besides... she can always take point."

"Fair," Kru admitted, "alright let's do this." The two of them approached the table once more, sitting across from her.

"Now, Ms..." Darius once again fished for a name.

"Real names are trouble," the woman countered, "got no use for 'em," a serpentine smile splayed along her face as she spoke, "but I'm sure you established this with Corsair."

"Youse work together before?" Kru asked.

"Nah," she shook her head, "never met him before I landed on Smithon, but I've heard about his reputation," she grinned as she looked back at Darius, "I don't believe you ever told me what company you represent."

“Riana’s Revenge,” Darius confirmed, “but if you’re gonna work for us then I’m going to have to...”

“Riana,” the woman purred, “is that your Commander? Is she here?” she looked around the hall.

“She’s out on medical at the moment,” Darius revealed, “I’m Darius Oliveira, company First Officer. What do I call you?”

“I’m so sorry to hear that,” the woman said with a twinge of remorse, “call me... Apex.” Darius continued on, delivering his spiel, but the woman called Apex was no longer listening. Instead she was remembering; remembering Anvelt... when Riana’s Revenge blew apart her Dragon and captured her employer: Victoria Espinosa. Darius droned on about benefits and liabilities but Apex simply licked her lips; “Riana,” she mumbled beneath her breath, “I can’t wait to meet you.”

Part XXVII

Still haven't gotten to play much more, so I'm not caught up yet. Today's journal entry is more about making dramatic connections. If any of you wonder, the game and the missions I play are still the core of what happens here. Very little is purely invented for this story outside of the interpersonal drama. If a Mech is damaged or lost that's because it happened in my game. Same goes if someone dies or gets fired; it is what happened in my game. So this is more head-canon than actual invented story, I suppose. Still I enjoy the interpersonal drama every bit as much as the missions! My favorite is probably still the Panzyr bar scene when Riana met Death Krusade! Anyway, today's entry is a mishmash of missions from the replay and drama from the main storyline.

The MechBay rumbled as teams of MechTechs raced around securing the returning lance. The leopard had just been unloaded and now large machinery moved the BattleMechs around the bay and secured them in place as automated catwalks moved into position for pilot extraction. Yang walked along one of these now, approaching the new Trebuchet as the docking clamps locked into place. He looked out across the bay and grimaced when he realized that Medusa's Panther had, once again, lost its right arm and the large twin lasers he'd installed. Each one was five tons and had a capacity of 570 Megajoules per impact. He shook his head as the Trebuchet's cockpit began to open and yelled across the bay; "They don't grow in the garden, Benitez!!" Medusa, who was already climbing out of the damaged Panther, held his head in one hand and lifted his middle finger in salute at the Chief in response with the other.

"Go easy on him," Kru said as he lifted his cage and unbuckled his harness, "he took a lot of fire this drop."

"This was supposed to be a pretty straightforward mission," Yang said as he hoisted himself up the ladder and leaned in and helped Kru disentangle himself, "target was supposed to be some mid-level politician."

"Oh, he was," the Solaran confirmed, "in a shiny, brand-new CRB-27!" he growled, as he climbed down, "and his Directorate bodyguards had a Kintaro, a Vindicator, and one of those Commando missile-boats!"

"Is that was got him?" Yang asked, looking at the damage to the Panther's right side as they both moved around in front of the TBT-5N.

"Nah," Kru unzipped his dropsuit and leaned back against the rail, his back to the bay, "the KTO did while he was trying to take off the Vindicator's PPC. That Vindy was a real bitch, I tell ya."

“How’d she do?” the Chief asked.

Kru shrugged and pursed his lips, “S’alright. She’s got a lot of missiles, puts a lot of hurt out, but I’m just used to getting more up close and personal, y’know?”

“Not the Trebby,” Yang pointed down the catwalk where the Hunchback was just opening up, “I meant her.” Both men watched as Apex lifted her cage, a MechTech leaning in to assist in her extraction.

“I don’t like her driving my Hunch,” Kru spit on the catwalk, “but Darius made a good call.”

“What do you mean?” Yang asked.

“I’m good at multi-targeting,” Kru nodded, “I can paint-n’-spray with the best of ‘em, so dishing out banks of LRMs is null sweat, but her,” he lifted his chin in her direction, “she’s focused. Her ability to call her shot is right up there with Glitch, maybe better. Having someone with that surgical shot ability firing an AC/20 is a good thing, probably saved our asses.”

“Hmm,” Yang grunted. He didn’t like her or her creepy obsession with Riana. Since she came aboard he’d started to spend even more time in MedBay, especially now that Hysteria was out of the hyperbaric chamber, just to make sure someone was always with her. He’d caught her lurking too many times already.

“She’s fast too,” Kru admitted with a snort, “faster than me. It’s like she was made for a heavier Mech, so I may not like giving up my ride, but Darius made a good call.”

“How’s her teamwork?” Yang placed his hands on his hips, watching her as she chatted with the MechTech before breaking away and walking towards them.

“She’s good,” Kru admitted, “follows orders pretty well. She’s not afraid to get out in front and take fire,” he looked to the left and then back right, lowering his voice as she got closer, “I still don’t like the bitch but on a lance she’s solid.”

“That’s a helluva ride, DK,” Apex said over the din as she got close enough to be heard, “I’m loving that gun.”

“Look, just call me Kru,” he shifted his gaze back to her, “everybody else does.”

“Yeah,” she flashed a crooked grin as she stopped in front of the two men, “hey, Chief, the Hunch pulls a little to the right. It gets worse at acceleration. I figure, maybe, the port lateral gyro needs adjusting. About 5-to-5.8% should help compensate for the weight of that autocannon.”

“How about you drive the Mechs and leave the maintenance to me?” Yang’s tone darkened as he stepped forwards into her personal space, “4Gs will always have a tug to the right because of the fourteen-ton cannon on the shoulder!”

“Of course they will,” Apex said defensively, “but a small adjustment would help compensate for the increased gravity on a world like this,” she stood her ground, tilting her head slightly left, “Mechdur is rocking 1.6 Gs so your fourteen-ton gun is now plus one-thousand-six-hundred-eighty pounds. With an adjustment in the 5% range to the gyro you can bring the center back into balance,” she snorted and looked over at Kru, “honestly, I expected a crew that regularly fields an HBK-4G to already know about gravitational compensation!”

“Of course we know about gravitational compensation!!” Yang’s face flushed red, “Are you trying to tell me that...”

“Someone on your team missed it, Chief,” Apex’s face split with an infuriatingly smug grin, “go check it yourself; port lateral is set to 1G... you missed it.”

Yang’s face solidified into a mask of fury as he pushed her to the side and stormed towards the Techs currently working on the Hunch. Kru watched absentmindedly as he exploded on the two Techs running post-diagnostics as Apex moved up beside him and leaned back against the rail as well. “You’d do well not to piss him off,” he warned her as he turned to look at her, “and give him a little more respect too. Chief’s been doing this a long time.”

“Coulda fooled me,” Apex said, unzipping her dropsuit and pulling out a crumpled pack of cigarettes from within, “missing GC is a rookie mistake. I had to compensate that whole mission; had to lean in to enemy fire,” she tapped out a cigarette and then offered the pack to Kru, “that’s the kind of shit that gets MechWarriors killed, y’know?”

“You can’t smoke in here!” Kru pushed off the rail and snatched the unlit cigarette from her mouth, “There’s all kinds of fumes in the bay!”

“Is everyone on this boat so uptight?” she snarled as she grabbed the cigarette back, returning it to her pack, “Hell, my last Chief used to smoke while he worked on the Mechs!”

“Yeah?” Kru nodded his head in a standoffish manner, “Well, Chief Virtanen runs a pretty tight operation,”

“Except when it comes to basic safety protocols...” Apex countered under her breath.

“You want off this boat?” now the Solaran raised his voice, “We’ve got our roster pretty much healed up now so you just say the word and I’ll have Ms. Meyer drop your ass at the local hiring hall!”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Didn’t figure you were in charge, Kru,” she began, “but before you show me all of your ass, why don’t you wait and see if I’m right or not about that gyro, hmm?” She lifted the pack to her mouth and pulled a cigarette out with her lips, producing a lighter as she slid the pack back in her dropsuit. “You know I’m right about this; not performing GC on high-gravity world is dangerous. What if it’d been you in the Hunch, huh? You’re her regular pilot. What if it’d been you whose life had been put at risk, think you’d be a little pissed? Now, I didn’t say a cross fucking word when I told him to check it, it was his choice to get all bent about a mere pilot offering a MechTech advice, but you know what?” She lifted her lighter, ignited it, and lit her cigarette, taking a long drag before continuing, “I don’t give a shit. I’m a MechWarrior. I’ve run with dozens of crews and this one won’t be my last, so I don’t need you to like me, either of you. I just need you to not get me killed,” she exhaled the smoke directly at his face, “think you can handle that?”

“Get the fuck outta the bay with that,” he waved at the smoke floating languidly between them.

“I’m gone,” she lifted her eyebrows, the cigarette dangling loosely in her lips as she shouldered her way past him and headed down the catwalk towards the exit. Kru watched her go, the anger still eating at him, until she was finally out of the bay. Then he turned and walked over to where Yang was, inspecting the Hunch. “Yo,” he said in greeting as the Chief turned his head and then backed down the ladder, “what’s the situation?”

“I hate to admit it,” Yang began, “but she’s right. My team missed the gravitational calibration.”

“Shit,” Kru looked away, down and to the left, “I guess that makes us the assholes, eh?”

“I guess it does,” the Chief admitted, “I’ll have to fire someone over this. That’s a big increase in weight on the right side. If this gun had been on the arm the damn Mech would have toppled over the first hit it took on the left side.”

“She ran that whole op unbalanced,” Kru said aloud, “not a single one of us noticed and she never complained.”

Yang inhaled deeply and then let out a tremendous sigh. “Fuck!” he swore, “I’m gonna hate this apology.”

“She still a bitch,” Kru folded his arms.

“Yeah,” the Chief let his head hang, “but she’s a professional who knew what she was talking about,” he looked back up at the Solaran, “she had a right to be a bitch.”

:

Yang knocked softly at the door, waiting for a response. When none came he turned his head slightly. “She must be asleep,” he said to Apex, who was right behind him, “maybe we ought to come back.”

“We should at least check on her,” she reached past Yang and pushed the door open, “besides... I hear all these stories. I’d at least like to know what my Commander looks like.”

“Well, she may not want you to see her like this!” he protested.

“You promised me, Chief,” Apex reminded him, “don’t tell me your apology wasn’t sincere.”

“I know I promised you!” Yang rationalized, “But this just might not be the best time, we should come back when she’s...”

“C’me in,” Riana’s voice called weakly, “don’cha know hanging b’out in doors iz rude?”

Yang exhaled as he moved into the room, the new pilot trailing him. “You sound like you’re feeling no pain,” he opened.

“N’sense!” Riana was pale and heavy-lidded, the meds were obviously in full effect, “Jus’ cause I’m high don’ mean I ain’t hurtin!”

“It’s good to hear your voice,” the Chief admitted, “even if you are blitzed!”

“M’back hurts, Chief,” she slurred in response.

“Yeah, doc’s had to do some bone grafts,” he informed her, “you banged up your spine pretty good, but he says he doesn’t think you’ll need any reinforcements. The cloned tissue ought to take nicely.”

“Th’top partomy chest hurts too...” her eyelids fluttered as she struggled against the drugs to stay awake.

“That’s just broken bones,” he told her, “fractures. They’ll heal fine on their own but it will take time.”

“Wh’re’s Kamea?” a goofy smile spread across her face as she thought about Lady Arano.

“She’s fine,” he reassured her, “waiting for you to get better, I’m sure...”

“Y’know, Kammie’s kinda cute!” she giggled.

“That she is,” Yang slid to the right, revealing Apex standing behind him. The pilot wore an unfriendly expression, staring down at Riana as if assessing an enemy, “I brought someone who’d like to meet you.”

Riana squinted, trying to place her face as Apex proffered a serpentine smile. “Huzzat?” she managed.

“This is Apex,” Yang introduced her, “one of two new pilots we took on at Smithon.”

“Did s’mone die?” she looked over at Yang, confused.

“We were really hurting there for a while,” the Chief explained, “no one died but we nearly went bankrupt!” He chuckled to himself nervously, but when she didn’t laugh he continued, “Apex here has helped us out over the last few weeks. She’s a good MechWarrior, a damn good one,” he looked over at her, “really knows her shit.”

“Oh, tha’s good,” Riana began to fade, “iss good t’meet’ cha.”

“I’ve wanted to meet you for a long time, Riana,” Apex purred, “I’ve heard so much about you.” She waited for a response but Hysteria was unconscious again.

“She’s out,” Yang confirmed, “she probably won’t remember this at all.”

“That’s okay,” Apex studied her; she seemed so weak and vulnerable, not at all what she’d pictured. ‘This is the MechWarrior that took down Victoria Espinosa?’ she asked herself silently, “I just wanted to meet her.”

“Well, you may need a do-over,” Yang chuckled, “but for now you may as well let her sleep.”

“I can stay with her,” Apex paced around to the other side of her bed, “you know, in case she comes to.”

“No, that’s not a good idea,” the Chief deterred her, “when the meds wear off she’s going to be in a lot of pain, not the best time to see an unfamiliar face.” He had a flash of concern, thinking to himself how much she looked like a predator. “You can go back to quarters; I’ll stay with her a while.”

Apex let her gaze linger on Hysteria’s sleeping form a while longer, then she shifted her eyes to the Chief. “Alright,” she acquiesced, recognizing his determination and distrust, “if you need anything you know where to find me.”

“Thanks,” he grunted as she passed by him and closed the door to the room behind her. Yang sighed and let his head drop. He’d eaten a lot of crow apologizing to Apex for the goof with the Hunchback and he was trying his best to give her a fair shake, even going so far as bringing her with him to see Riana, but something about her still gave him a deep sense of unease. “Just who the hell are you?” he wondered aloud, “maybe it’s time we found out.” He pulled out his communicator and punched in an ID code. Moments later Lord Madeira’s face appeared.

“Chief,” he began, “what can I do for you?”

“I need some background research on someone,” he began, “and you seem like just the person to ask.”

“Intelligence gathering is not really my forte,” Lord Madeira admitted, “but go ahead; I know some people who might be able to help.”



KIMI II

The Aurigan Reach

"I want this one clean and by the numbers," Hysteria said as the Leopard lifted away into the sky, a maelstrom of snow and ice particles swirling in her wash, "our target is considered an assassin by the Theocracy, and his crew are Taurian mercs. I suspect we're in for a bit of a surprise." She felt the HGN-732B shudder to life beneath her. The Highlander was a relic; a museum piece from the Star League era, but Yang assured her the Assault Mech was terrifyingly formidable and an excellent replacement for the Jagermech she'd lost back on Artru. Although she liked the inclusion of the Gauss Rifle, the rare piece of LosTech did cause her more anxiety than the threat of losing her Kali Yama used to.

"This should be a milk run," Apex countered from her seat in the Hunchback 4P, "according to the MRB rating." Her tone was cocksure; in the months during Riana's recovery she'd proven her deadly marksmanship time and again. There were even betting pools aboard the Argo now for who was a better sniper shot; her or Glitch. Recently, Apex was winning.

"Don't get overconfident," Kru warned her, "we all know the MRB rating isn't gospel." He moved the Thunderbolt SE forwards, heading for a small, wooded overlook. The TDR-5SE was a long-range missile boat and, ever since they acquired it at the Outpost Castle, Kru had been its pilot. He was still very mistrustful of Apex; she had this weird obsession with Riana that just made him uncomfortable. '*Riana*,' he thought, wistfully, '*Why won't you just tell me?*' Ever since he'd put the pieces together and figured out that Riana was pining for Lady Arano he'd felt a bit... used. As a grown man he was well able to handle being a side thing, even a one-night stand, but what rubbed him the wrong way was the secrecy

of it all and Yang's overprotective attitude. Since the incident in the MedBay he'd not had more than a few minutes alone with Riana, even when she was convalescing, without Yang hovering nearby.

"Is okay," Vamp chuckled inside the refitted Banshee 3E Assault Mech that Yang had spruced up for him. Sporting an insane amount of armor, two rocket-fired arm modifications, and a battery of flamers, the Banshee had been kitted out with Vamp's melee skills in mind. "Whatever zey throw at us, just get me *close*."

The team advanced, with the smaller Hunch taking the lead. Vamp broke to the left of the hill that Kru was ascending but Riana, in the Highlander, ambled slowly behind. She liked to consider this Mech a 'finisher' of sorts. Vamp, with all his excessive armor, was usually bait while Apex would play the harasser. Kru provided long range support and, by the time the Highlander got to the AO, it was time to mop up. "I've got contacts," Apex reported as she moved past the hill at full throttle, counting two to the northwest. One's a vehicle."

"Use caution," Hysteria warned her, "get in cover and paint me a target."

"I'm heading for cover now," Apex reported as she moved across open ground, "first target coming online now."

"You're out in the open," Kru warned her, locking onto the Shadowhawk that popped up on his screen, "let Assault take the lead!"

"Relax," she waved off his concern, "the Hunch has the armor to take it." Just then a cavalcade of warning light appears in her cockpit. "Looks like they've got a sensor lock on me."

"Leave ze reckless driving to me!" Vamp yelled as he surged ahead at full throttle, racing at the Shadowhawk. "Kommander, I've got a trace on another vehicle and it looks like zis one is a Manticore."

"Take a walk on him," Riana confirmed. She was still far from the battle but she could see the LRMs sailing through the sky from both the north and the east. "Skirmish, you've got incoming... a *lot* of incoming!"

"I see 'em!" Apex leaned back in the cage as the first volley of missiles hit her at full sprint. The Hunch wobbled on its feet, trying to compensate when the second volley impacted. Her momentum faltered as she regained control. "I lost a bit of armor but I'm okay," she reported just as another impact from the Shadowhawk's AC 10 hit her. "They're really gunning for me!" she said, but instead of resuming her speed she slowed and swiveled, lining up her precision mount for an Alpha Strike at the Hawk's left shoulder and the cannon mounted there. "Let's see how *you* like it!" She squeezed the trigger and the massive battery of medium and heavy lasers fired. "Ha!" she said with triumph as the Hawk's shoulder exploded, dislodging its right arm in the process, "How'd you like *those* Christmas lights?"

"Apex, brace!" Kru yelled as more missiles raced in from the west, "you gotta *lot* more incoming!" But it was too late; a hail of LRMs from an unseen carrier rained down on the Hunch. She was still moving at a

jog as they hit but when her laser array *detonated* the entire Mech became unbalanced and she went down. "Apex!!" Kru yelled, targeting the LRM carrier for a full volley, "You alright?"

"Zat's Corsair's favorite Mech!" Vamp reminded her.

"That hurt," she groaned, "Commander, I lost my weapons system. All I have is one medium laser on my left arm!"

"Get to your feet and fall back," Riana commanded, using the targeting data to fire her Long Twenties on the LRM carrier, "I want you in cover and using sensor lock *only*; Vamp, get your ass out in the open and tango with that Manticore!"

"You got it, boss," Apex grunted, trying to get the Hunch to respond. Just then, however, another volley of missiles rained in from the north and east. "Commander, I'm gonna get hit again. Bracing for impact!"

"The rest of the team watched as the missiles tore the downed Hunch apart. Both legs flew off and the left arm was thrown clear but when her CT detonated the terrified horror in her scream curdled their blood.

"Apex!!" Riana called to her, but the Hunch's com was dead. She tore her attention away long enough to fire an Alpha Strike at the Shadowhawk, the Gauss Rifle punching a deadly hole in its CT.

"Zat was a terrible hit," Vamp said as he crushed the Manticore underfoot, "I don't know if she survived zat."

"Commander," Kru interrupted, "I've got a trace in the east; looks like it might be our target... and there's a Trebby inbound from the north."

"Vamp, take out the Trebby on your way to intercept," Riana began, "Kru; get your ass to Apex and get her out." She fired another volley of her LRM 20s at the enemy carrier, putting an end to it. "I'm moving full throttle to intercept; if we don't hit this guy hard he'll rabbit."

"Commander," Kru began as diplomatically as he could, "with all due respect; if you take me outta this fight now, the target *will* rabbit... and he'll get away. If we're gonna take this mook down we're gonna need to target the legs to prevent him from running." He took a deep breath. "I know you don't know her well, but Apex is a merc, the real deal... she'll understand."

"I don't like losing people," Riana gritted her teeth, "even part-timers. Get to the Hunch, Fire Support; that's an order."

"Understood," Kru acknowledged, "I'll move to her location and lay eyes. Get me some targeting data so we can trip this bastard up!" He switched coms; "Envoy, spool up a medical evac. I'm gonna clear your LZ, come in low from the west, say again, slow and low from the west, you copy?"

"了解," Sumire replied, "I'm en route but if the AO is still hot I'm gonna be a big, low-flying target up here."

"Don't worry," Vamp reassured her, punching through the Trebuchet's CT, his armor smoking and dented but still holding strong, "by ze time you get here ze target vill be on his back!"

"We're on the clock, people," Hysteria reminded them, let's take this bastard down!"

:



I ended up getting a Grasshopper (above) from the assassin! I heavy Mech designed to be a "hunter" of lighter Mechs. I managed to kit it out as a replacement 'Vindy' for Glitch, making her useful as a PP-Wielding sniper once more! Speaking of Apex, she really is the apex sniper in my group now, when it comes to single targeting of a part that just has to be hit, I can count on her. But the drama I've been building up with her is going to have to go somewhere. Speaking of drama:

:

"Unsalvagable??" Corsair exclaimed, looking at the ruins of the Hunchback 4P on the bay floor, "Oh man! I *liked* that Mech!"

"Hysteria says it will cost too much to replace the parts," Yang shrugged, "I agree."

"Man, I let her drive *my* Hunch one time!"

"Relax," Kru said as he approached the pair, "she'll survive, by the way. I can tell youse guys were worried..." the sarcasm hung thick in the air.

"Stow it, Kru," Yang barked at him, "nobody here wishes her ill will."

"Really?" Death Krusade chuckled, leaning back against the rail and taking a swig of his canned drink, "You sure about that?"

"Take off, Chris," Yang said dismissively to Corsair. The command in his voice was undeniable.

"You got it, Chief." He mock saluted and turned on his heel, happy to be away from Yang's foul mood.

"You gotta problem?" Kru folded his arms, sitting his drink on the rail.

"Yeah, I got a problem," Yang moved up into Kru's space, near nose-to-nose, "it's about six feet and twenty of mind-your-own-fucking-business!"

"I know you're looking out for her," Kru cut to the chase, "and you got eyes on her for the same reason I do; something don't sit right about Apex. She's got this weird obsession about Riana."

"Maybe it's not as weird as *yours*!" Yang countered, his hackles still raised.

"Yeah, you're real protective of her," Kru said, still as cool as ice, "and you protect her secrets too, even the ones she keeps from you. So what is it then?" he held one hand up, inquisitively, "Is it a paternal longing or are you just hoping that, one day, she'll realize what a *good man* you are?"

"You motherfucker!!" Yang seized Kru's shirt in his mechanical arm and pulled him up to his toes, shaking him violently.

"Careful, Chief," Kru cautioned him, "everybody's watching here."

Yang paused, scanning the area to see if anyone had, indeed, seen his outburst. He released Death Krusade and took a step back. "What the fuck do you want, *Todd*?"

"I want the same thing you want, Yang," Kru replied, straightening out his clothes and brushing off, "I want her to be safe. She's a remarkable woman and, I admit, I got feelings for her. That's why I can't stay."

"Wait," the Chief's expression washed over with confusion, "What?"

"My plan was never to find a permanent home here," he explained, "maybe you don't know, but I was a detective back on Solaris. I was working a case..." he let his gaze drift to the side for a moment, "suffice to say I got things left undone. I still have a woman to find and, no matter how I feel about her, Riana ain't her."

"What... what are you going to do?" Yang asked, his anger evaporating, "This is gonna hit her like an AC shot."

"Yeah, I know," he nodded his head and looked down, "and to be honest, if she felt the same way then

maybe I'd stay... but I know who has her heart, and I can't compete with that!"

"Well," Yang began, his own head and heart confused now, "don't be too hasty. I'm not really sure that can go *anywhere*. I mean, she's *royalty*."

"Eh, that's above my paygrade, Chief," Todd shook his head and grinned, "I'm just a common grunt, I can't get entangled with nobility... I'd just drag her down."

"Kru," Yang began, "I'm... I'm sorry, maybe I misjudged you."

"Nah, Chief," he put a hand on Yang's shoulder, "I'm just a Merc. A Mechwarrior, like Apex. I go from job to job so I can eat, you know? Now maybe it's time for me to move on, but you... you gotta keep on looking out for her. That woman, Apex, I know there's something funny about her. I can't say what but..."

"Two sets of eyes and better than one," Yang cut him off, "you don't have to go."

"No," Kru shook his head, "I really do."

Yang looked down, ashamed of how he'd been treating Kru lately. "Why?" he asked.

"Because, my friend," Kru nodded almost imperceptibly, "if I don't go now, then I might never leave."

:

Riana was in her quarters when a soft knock called her attention. "Come in," she called, turning just as Death Crusade entered the room.

"You got a minute?" he asked, standing in the doorway.

"Hmm," she smirked, her lips pulling up in one corner, "finally managed to slip away and make some time for lil' ol' me, huh?"

"I wish it was like that," Kru said as he moved into the room, letting the door shut behind him. "Commander, I got an offer from another company." Riana's smile disappeared. "The Gray Death Legion," he continued, "Their CO, Grayson Carlyle, is paying top dollar for mercs. He's even offering a kickback to any company he poaches from... it's a hundred thousand C-bills."

"Poaches," she echoed, wrapping her arms around her chest, "That's unusual." She turned and pulled up an image of Carlyle on the compad. "That's a pretty famous outfit. I hear they call him a tactical genius."

"Yeah, he's got something of a pedigree, I suppose," Kru admitted, "to be honest, there's no shortage of professional mercs who'd love to get into the Gray Death Legion."

"Professionals like you, I suppose," her tone chilled as she looked back up at him. "Go on."

"Carlyle's something else," Kru spoke with excitement in his voice, "I played his message over and over. The way he talks... I know he could really shake up the galaxy... and I wanna be part of that." He smiled at her bitter-sweetly, "But this crew is like my family and leaving... well, leaving ain't so easy. Leaving *you* ain't so easy."

"But you'd do it," she said flatly.

"Riana," Kru looked at her plaintively, "You and I both know what this was; you're a great commander and a wonderful friend. When we're together, it's like..." he paused, "it's like love... but it ain't. And you know it ain't because you don't love me." She opened her mouth to speak but then he added: "You're in love with someone else, someone beautiful. Someone who deserves your love more than I do and, no matter what I do, I'm never gonna be able to replace her."

Riana deflated. She hated to lose Kru, but how could she deny what he'd said? He was a diversion at best; a placeholder for a dream that might never come true. "I... I'm sorry," she looked down at the floor, "I didn't mean to lie to you."

"You never did," he smiled warmly at her as he lifted her chin with his hand, "I'm a *detective*, remember? How long did you really think you'd hide it from me?"

She returned his smile and caressed his hand in her own. "I'm really gonna miss you, fucker." They both chuckled. "You sound really fired up. This isn't easy to say, but you should take Carlyle's offer. Hell, you can keep the kickback for yourself. You've earned it." She took a step back and presented her hand to shake.

Kru took her hand but then, unexpectedly, pulled her into an embrace. "I won't forget you, any of youse. Commander, you taught me everything I know about leadership." When he pulled back his eyes were moist and tears ran down her cheeks. "And you *know* we can throw a *killer* party with this cash! With your permission, of course!

"Granted," she smiled at him, drying her eyes, "let's go inform the crew; we're gonna have an unforgettable night that no one will be able to remember!"

"I can drink to that!" he wrapped an arm around her as they headed for the door together.

"One condition," Riana grinned up at him.

"Name it." He said.

"Tonight, after the party," she bit her lower lip, "you're gonna love me *apocalyptic*."

"Like it was the last night in the Universe!" he grinned back.



Apex lingered in the door of the gymnasium of Gamma Pod. In the reduced gravity of the *Argo*, it was imperative to keep a healthy level of exercise. It was late. The *Argo* was still set to North-West Hemi Universal, a standard when a vessel was underway, although once they docked with the Jump Ship *Darius* liked to reset to whatever local time they were headed to, to reduce jet lag and all. Still, however, there were about a half-dozen people in the gym, mostly MechTechs coming off B-Shift. They handled most of the heavy grunt work on the Mechs, structural repair and armor replacement. Only BACOM worked C-Shift, doing the fine motor and electronic work and running diagnostics. Just about everybody else was in their bunk, especially the MechWarriors, but Apex liked the quiet of the *Argo* at this hour, and better yet she hated crowds, but tonight she had ulterior motives.

Riana was here.

Slithering into the gym, Apex stalked closer to the commander, paying no heed to the sweaty Techs she passed. Riana was working the resistance bench, pressing a hydraulic bar just below neck level. She could see the readout from here; it was set to 73 kg but at about 1.2 standard gravity. Apex grinned; if that gravity adjustment just *happened* to get bumped a little higher, maybe to about 3.0, that 73 kg would very rapidly become 217. The commander was athletic, strong for her build, but hydraulic resistance like that would crush a collar bone and choke the life out of her. Apex licked her lips. 'Revenge, ironically,' she thought, 'will be *mine*.'

Duncan's com beeped. He rolled in his bunk and groaned. Sleep had just taken him. He reached for the button and Lord Madeira's face appeared in the static. "Wasn't expecting to dream about nobility," he quipped, "so I presume this is important."

"Sly, I can't raise Chief Virtanen," he adjusted his glasses as he spoke, "and I have something I feel is rather critical."

"Uhh," Sly slumped back into his pillow, "he probably turned his com off. He was busy on B-Shift working on that heap of slag that Vamp turned the Banshee into. Can this wait until morning?"

"I don't think it should," Lord Madeira shook his head, "he asked me to gather some intel on someone, on someone who's on this boat. Well, I did and the results are a little... concerning."

"So buzz Hysteria," Sly complained, "why'd you call me?"

"Riana isn't answering either," he said with a grave tone, "and the intel indicates she could be in danger."

"Did you try Kru?" the MechWarrior felt slumber's call pulling him back down into the deep.

"Kru's gone, remember?" Lord Madeira cocked his head, "Duncan, wake up. I need you to focus. I'm all the way up here in CIC. Do you know where Riana is?"

"All right, all right, I'm up," he pulled himself up in the bunk, swallowing a complaint about how nobody ever bothers Glitch with stuff like this, "I think she's in the gym. She's been hitting it hard since Kru left," he swung his feet off the bunk to come in contact with the *Argo's* cold, metal floor. 'Just about as hard as Kru's leaving hit her,' he thought.

"Go check on her, please," Lord Madeira lowered his voice, "*this is about Apex.*"

Duncan's eyes steeled and he stood up, wearing only his sleep pants, "Keep trying the Chief," he said as he started heading towards Gamma Pod, "and start a security detail that way, just in case."

:



Apex watched one of the last MechTechs in the room nervously from the corner of her eye as she halfheartedly fiddled with the machine in front of her. 'Once he's gone,' she thought, 'I'll move on Riana,' she looked back at the commander, who was still working the resistance bench. She wondered to herself how long she could keep that up, she'd already been doing it nonstop for ten minutes. 'Maybe,' she mused, 'I should bump it up to 4.0.'

At a sound, her head snapped back, expectantly, but instead of the final MechTech leaving it was Big Sly entering the room. "Yo, Riana!!" he called, causing her to let the bar rise and pull herself up into a sitting position. Apex silently cursed. "I thought I might find you here, oh *hey Apex*," he waved at her, his shirtless dad-bod rippling from the effort, "I didn't expect to see you here."

"Fuck off, Sly," Apex grumbled, pulling at the machine she was seated at, "I'm *always* in here at night."

"Ha!" Duncan laughed loudly, "Never can tell *where* you're going to be!" he walked past her just as Apex noticed two security personnel loitering by the doorway.

"What's up, Sly?" Riana asked, rubbing away the sweat with a towel.

"Mads needs you in CIC," Sly pointed with his thumb over his shoulder, "some urgent Restoration shit. When he couldn't get you he buzzed me."

"Now?" she sounded puzzled, "We're enroute to Smithon already, we can't get there any faster."

"Right?" Sly chuckled, "I dunno, something-something, Lady Arano..."

"I'll head that way," she sighed as she pulled herself upright, "it must be pretty important to warrant a call at *this* time of night."

"Yeah, that's probably a good idea," Duncan nodded, arms akimbo. Suddenly he felt a chill over his naked torso and he looked down, then back up... uncomfortably.

Riana took a long swig of water from her bottle and then tossed her towel over her shoulder, starting to move forward. "You coming with?"

"Pssh!" Duncan smirked, goofily, "And appear before the nobility dressed like this??"

"Sly," Riana cocked an eyebrow, "*I* was a noble."

"*Past tense*," he pointed out with an exaggerated wag of his finger, "a very important distinction." She rolled her eyes and swept past him, giving a curious glance at the security guards at the door before exiting the room. Sly lingered a moment and then started to follow.

"Are we having trust issues," Apex let the weights she was pulling fall with a crash and turned towards him, "*again?*"

"Not at all," Sly turned on his heel, "are we acting guilty, *again?*"

"Guilty of what?!" she stood up and surged towards him, "I've been a rock-solid member of this team since I came on board *and* I'm the best goddamn sniper you have! I *volunteered* to drive the Orion and run recon while the rest of you sit in big, shiny Assault Mechs and yet, *even now*, I am subjected to mistrust and scorn... you ran down here in your pajamas with *security* in tow, what about that... *Sly?*"

"*That*," he pointed two index fingers at the guards, "is a coincidence... shoo!" he waved his hands at the guards, "Shoo! But this hostility... honestly, it's not working. It's like you have this giant, Riana-shaped chip on your shoulder," he flailed his hands about, as if describing the dimensions of the chip, "is there anything you'd like to open up about?"

"I think I'll turn in," Apex growled, noting security's remaining presence, "before I open up your lying *face*."

:



"I hope you found something *good*." Yang yawned as he joined Riana in CIC along with Lord Madeira, Darius, and Sumire.

"If it were good, I doubt we'd be here in the wee hours," Su was already sipping her coffee. The rendezvous with the Jump Ship *Excelsior* was in less than an hour so she wouldn't be able to go back to sleep.

"I do apologize for the urgency of this," Lord Madeira began, "but the Chief asked me to look into Apex's background and when I got the results I didn't feel like it should wait.

"Chief, you did what?" Riana looked confused, glancing back at Darius, "Didn't you and Kru vet her and Corsair when you hired them?"

"We conducted interviews, yes," Darius nodded, "but I'm as confused as you are. What's going on here, Yang?"

"There was some, uh, suspicious activity," Yang began, "both Kru and I agreed: something was off about Apex and her obsession with you."

"An *obsession*?" Riana was even more confused, "Why is this the first I'm hearing of this? I haven't noticed any obsession."

"She was attached to you like a shadow while you were recovering," Yang revealed, "so much so that I made sure Kru, Sly, or myself was sitting with you at all times."

"Seems like something you might have wanted to bring up to the rest of us!" Darius scolded him.

"I wanted to be sure," Yang said defensively, "we couldn't put our finger on it and we didn't wanna jump to conclusions. I mean, we've been making a name for ourselves out here, making a lot of money too. I wanted to be sure that she wasn't just starstruck or something."

"MechWarriors aren't really known for being fanboys," Sumire interjected, taking a sip of her coffee.

"That's why I said it was *off*," the Chief explained, "anyway, I asked Lord Madeira to look into her and see what he could find."

"And what *did* you find?" Riana lifted an eyebrow, her arms folded in annoyance.

"At first it seemed like nothing," Alexander admitted, "that's why it took so long. Farida Lamb, aka Apex, Periphery... born on Katinka right here in Aurigan space. Thirty years old, but didn't hire out as a merc until Espinosa's coup," the lord closed one digital file with a swipe of his hand and then opened another one, "but then my contact found this, weeks later. It seems there's *another* MechWarrior that goes by the handle Apex. Also Periphery, twenty-eight years old, did time in a prison on Bellerophon for assault and manslaughter before signing on with Bledy's Band..."

"The merc outfit," Darius stood from where he was leaning on the bulkhead, "she said she practically grew up with them.

"They were in Aurigan space on Coronation Day," Lord Madeira turned to Riana, "took part in the pacification of military bases on Tyrion. Heavy losses that day, what was left of them got absorbed into Victoria Espinosa's *personal guard*."

Riana let her face fall into her hand. "What?"

"Used to pilot a Dragon," Lord Madeira continued, "missing-in-action, presumed dead on *Anvelt*..." Alexander swiped the file closed, "... the day we destroyed the *Newgrange*. Her name's Jordan, Jordan Preda. Her family's minor Capellan nobility. She's an outcast after her arrest."

"Son-of-a-bitch!" Yang cursed, "I knew it!"

"So we smoked her on Anvelt?" Darius asked, "And she *survived*? That's a Martian atmosphere. I'm almost certain we pulled parts off of that Dragon."

"She probably slipped out in a pressure suit while we were occupied with Victoria," Su offered, "sheltered in the port until we left."

"So, what are we going to do?" Darius asked.

"I say we put her out the goddamn airlock!" Yang jumped to his feet.

"Now, hold on a minute," Darius counseled, "she hasn't actually *done* anything yet."

"Yet!!" Yang snapped, "she's dogged Riana's steps the entire time she's been here! Probably just *waiting* to put one in the back of her head!"

"She's had chances," Su shrugged, "she's dropped with Riana several times."

"On a bunch of milk runs!" the Chief countered, "everything was by-the-numbers, there was no chance to pop her without being noticed!"

"It's possible that you're reading too much into this," Lord Madeira cautioned, "she *is* a mercenary, remember? Maybe it's not personal at all."

"Well, maybe it is!" Yang growled, "It is really worth taking that chance?"

"Is it worth murdering a crew member?" Sumire shot back, "I'm with his lordship and Darius on this one; she hasn't actually *done* anything yet."

"You haven't seen how suspicious she's been acting!" the Chief said, defensively.

"And why's that, Chief?" Riana lifted her head, "Is that because *you* didn't tell anyone?"

"I wasn't the only one!" he countered, "Kru agreed with me!"

"Well, Kru isn't here anymore," Riana said with finality, "but I'm inclined to agree with Yang; by not disclosing that she was in a crew that we took out, well, that's *very* suspicious."

"I would just like to point out," Darius began, "that she's been a pretty reliable MechWarrior. She doesn't shy away from a fight, she's a damn good shot..."

"She's pretty damn expensive," Su was looking at her datapad.

"We can't just do nothing." Yang folded his arms.

"We won't," Riana said, "Su, you'd better head to the bridge. We should be in range to make contact with the *Excelsior*. Right now, we do the job," she looked around at her companions, "business as usual. Lady Arano needs us to defend the evacuation of Smithon from the Taurean invasion and we need to have our head in the game."

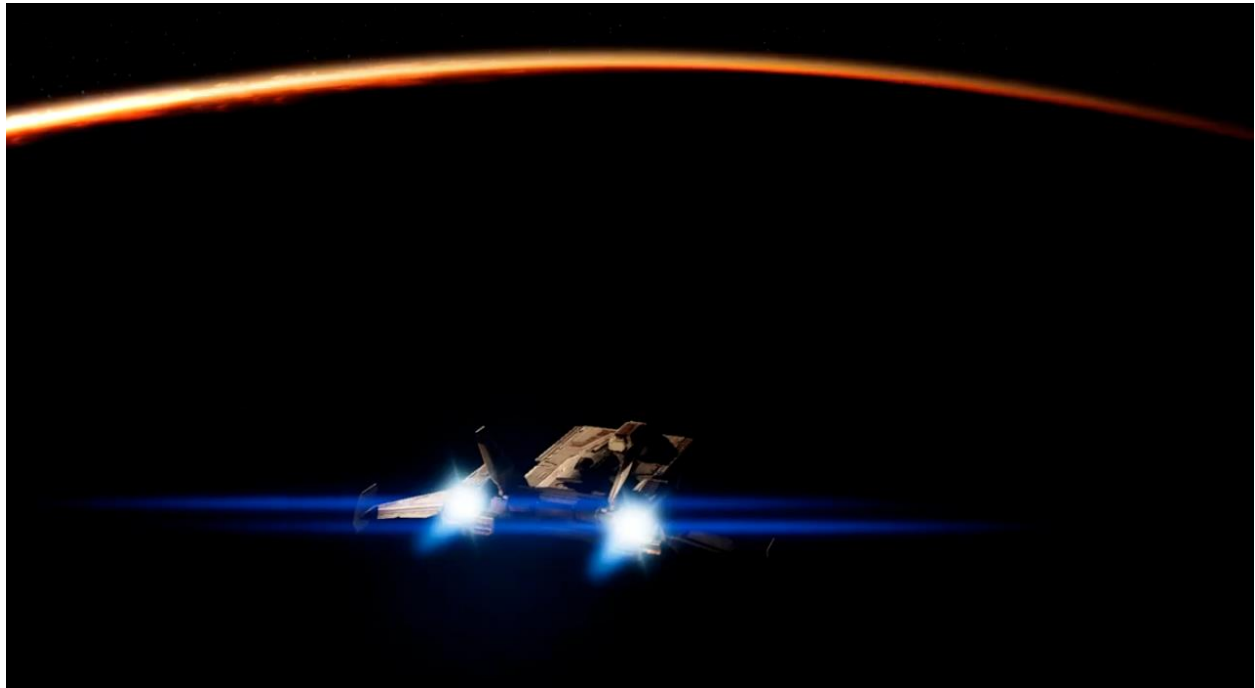
"Okay," Yang nodded, "You want me to have her in sims while you're gone, just so she's not suspicious?"

"No Chief," Riana shook her head, "she'll be in the Orion. She's going *with* me."

"I'm not so sure that's a good idea," Darius said as Yang's jaw dropped, "just because she hasn't taken a shot at you yet doesn't mean that she won't, especially during the chaos of a full-scale evacuation."

"She might be waiting for a moment *just* like that!" Yang protested.

"I'd rather keep a potential enemy where I can see her," Riana explained, "besides, Lord Madeira is right: She's a mercenary. If she's a *professional* then she deserves a chance to preserve her honor, and there's no better place to prove it than on the battlefield."



SMITHON
0520 HOURS IN THE LOCAL

The *Hysteria* shook in the atmospheric tides as the DropShip entered the upper Thermosphere of Smithon. In the cockpit, Sumire held the stick steady with her left hand while her right flipped switches to engage various stabilizers. She keyed the com: "Entering atmospheric flight. On the ground in five. Final checklists, prepare for Combat Insertion." The MechBay was suddenly awash in red light as four BattleMechs whirred to life. Hysteria was in the Highlander, Vamp in his Banshee, and Big Sly was piloting the Thunderbolt, but even as they ran through their final checklists all of them kept an eye on the Orion on the monitor, parked next to Hysteria's Mech. The Coms monitor in each flared to life with Lady Arano's image.

"In the wake of Commodore Ostergaard's initial attack, Taurian BattleMechs have continued to wreak havoc on the general population," she began, transmission lines recycling her moving image, "We have DropShips en route to evacuate as many refugees as they can carry, but the Taurians will target them if they get the chance. I need you to deny them that opportunity. Operation *Valiant Restraint* begins at Oh-Five-Thirty. I need *Revenge* in place to provide cover for those DropShips before that time." Kamea took a deep breath in the image, "This is their darkest hour, Commander. If I cannot stop this invasion at least I can help these people get to safety. These are non-combatants, Hysteria, women and children fleeing for their lives. Once more you will play a critical role. I and the Restoration are in your debt."

The image shifted and Darius appeared on the monitor. "If Ostergaard were pulling this shit anywhere but the Reach, the whole Inner Sphere would be screaming about war crimes," Darius snarled, "We can't let the Taurians get away with what they're doing here, Commander," his lip curled into an angry half-smile, "Punish them for it!"

Doctor Murad's image flashed up next: "Fardock spaceport is small," she began, "it only has three, small landing pads, just big enough for Leopards. There are already several hundred refugees on site, sheltering inside the port, but the Taurians have already gotten a fix on their location and the Mechs are on their way to eliminate them. Since they haven't faced much opposition in this genocidal campaign, expect them to be fully armored but, by the same token, I wouldn't anticipate any class larger than Heavy. Civvie targets rarely shoot back, and what's left of Restoration resistance is tied up in the capital, so I doubt they'll be expecting your Lance." She scrolled through a datapad she carried until she pulled up technical readouts, "The biggest issue I see is the proximity of the fuel tanks to the actual pads. Each one is spider-webbed with fuel lines and, even though the DropShips won't be hooking up, each line is fully charged. If they target the tanks they will ignite those lines and the entire pad will blow: Leopard, refugees, and all."

"Greeaaat," Sly's voice wafted over the coms.

"You'll have to draw their fire," Darius counseled, "we have the element of surprise; they aren't expecting any defenders. With any luck, that will give them pause..."

"It won't," Sumire interjected, "Taurians believe hard, and none harder than the military. They get full citizenship in exchange for four years of service, and all the benefits that go with it. They'll see our presence as a challenge; both to their honor and to their very freedom," she paused for a moment, "in their minds they aren't killing civilians, but terrorists. The wounded heal and return to the fight, the old teach the young how to kill, and the women bear the children, children that grow up to try and take away their freedoms. That makes *all* of them valid targets. They won't hesitate."

"It's an efficient way to see the enemy," Apex purred, "leave none alive to seek revenge."

"It iz ze truth," Vamp's voice was subdued, "Ve Taurians see ze Concordant as ze beacon of freedom and justice in ze galaxy. We are ze best; anyone who opposes us must hate freedom."

"Well, they're definitely gonna hate my Kali Yama," Hysteria quipped as she primed the ammo feed for the AC/20, "I've got a bone to pick with Ostergaard anyway, showing up when he did on Artru. He's lucky I was out of it then, because I can't *wait* to meet him now!" She finished her checklist. "Envoy, time?"

"Red line," the pilot's voice flooded the coms, "three minutes to deployment."

"We using the UDAs?" Sly asked, referring to the umbilical deployment arms.

"Negative," Sumire replied, "I'm showing all green in the drop zone."

"You heard her," Hysteria confirmed, "doors down, cocks out. We move with a purpose, people. I want CC central, Skirmish you've got Pad Charlie, Fire Support's on Bravo. I'll take Alpha. First sign of a Taurian Mech you light it up, but don't stray far, that goes especially for you Vamp! I can't spare anyone to come to your rescue!"

"Da, Kommander," he replied, "You vill never let me live zat down, vill you?"

"Sly, you focus support on Apex," she ignored him, "Vamp and I have the tonnage to handle ourselves."

"I can pull my own weight!" Apex protested.

"If OpFor comes in from the direction of town," Hysteria began, "then Charlie will be the clear target. Everything else goes through an Assault Mech," she smirked, "it's nothing personal, Apex, but you're front line in the smallest Mech."

"Thirty seconds," Sumire interrupted as the red light above the doors turned green. "Prepare for deployment." The G-Forces pulled at them as the Leopard reared back, thrusters firing as swirling eddies of sand and dust heralded the DropShip's arrival at Fardock. Expertly, Su let the Leopard's nose fall level to the ground and she pulled the release on the doors. The *Hysteria's* sides split open as four doors became ramps and the Lance shivered to life, charging down the ramps and into the central area of the spaceport.



"Sound off!" Hysteria commanded as she swiveled her Highlander to keep Apex's Orion in view.

"Clear on this side," Sly called.

"We're all green, Envoy," Hysteria repeated, locking Apex's position on her HUD, "get clear. Actual, inform *Delfinas* that Operation *Valiant Restraint* is go and they can start their descent. Let's get these people out of here."

Lady Arano's voice crackled over the coms. "The Spaceport in front of you is packed wall-to-wall with civilians, most of them refugees from the capital," static shot through the transmission as the sounds of explosions filled the background, "The Taurians have been targeting them as enemy combatants and I need your help to keep those people safe until we can evac them to safety. We're trying to hold their focus here but there's at least one Lance tasked with wiping these people out. We have three of the late Lord Karosas' DropShips en route to assist with the evacuation, expect the captain of each vessel to call in on approach. You'll need to keep the enemy's eyes on you and *away* from the docking pads. Any hostiles you fail to engage will almost certainly target the fuel tanks; if they manage to detonate one the resulting explosions will wipe out everything nearby: DropShips, refugees, you name it."

"We've got the schematics, my Lady," Hysteria reassured her, "*Revenge* is yours. Just make sure you get out of the capital in one piece."

"Good luck Commander," Kamea's image gave her a warm smile, "the Taurians aren't going to make this easy. Protect our ships. Help them get our people home safe."

"Alright, MechWarriors," Hysteria said with a commanding voice, "get to your deployments. We've already got incoming on sensors." Sure enough, the first wave of Taurians were converging on the spaceport.

"I'm reading three thirty-fives, a sixty-five and a, oh," Sumire called out the incoming tonnage from her stratospheric observation post, "Commander you've got an eighty-five Assault Class inbound."

"So much for nothing above a Heavy," Apex grumbled, "thanks, Farah."

"It doesn't matter," Vamp chuckled, "iz only one of zem. I guess zey are in for bigger surprise, da?"

"Skirmish, get us a Sensor Lock on the closest." Hysteria ordered.

"It's a JR7-D," Apex reported, "should be coming in visual right about now. You want me to reposition?"

"Negative," Hysteria replied, "Foxtrot Sierra, call the ball. Let 'em know we're home."

"Roger that, prepping the welcome wagon," Sly flipped the switches to arm both banks of LRMs as he locked in Apex's sensor data, "all eyes on you, Jenner... all missiles too!" The Thunderbolt was shrouded in smoke as thirty long range missiles arced into the air.

"Second Jenner inbound," Vamp reported as the first Jenner staggered under the volley, "Who am I shooting at?"

"Go ahead and hit the second target," Hysteria said as she locked and fired her own LRMs at the original target, "I want their attention on us, not the fuel pods."

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I was originally concerned that this mission would be near-impossible to complete perfectly. Defending 3 pads with just 4 Mechs seemed like a big challenge and, at first, it looked like I would be correct. While Vamp needed little help controlling the central approach with his Banshee, a beast I'd outfitted with 2 Medium Lasers, a fuckton of Flamers, and Arm Mods on both arms, along with full heavy armor, my bigger concern was Pad Charlie. Apex's Orion was not the monstrosity that either Assault Mech was. I also made a strategic error in replacing the Highlander's Gauss Cannon with the AC/20+++ Kali Yama, in that I no longer had a long range death gun. When wave two emerged over Alpha, Hysteria was unable to take out the Light Mechs in a single volley of her LRM5s, leaving me scrambling to get closer while they pounded

the fuel tank. Eventually, however, she managed to mop them up, but it was at Apex's expense. The Orion took several heavy shots from the Panther's PPC and Vamp, scrambling about with little-to-no long range attacks, was really unable to help. Especially when the Battlemaster decided to focus on her. Sly, in the Thunderbolt (which I'd outfitted as a missile boat) was trying to wear down his armor but the Assault Mech had it for days, resisting both Vamp's punches and using his own fists when the flamers caused him to overheat. Shepherd One was finally away, freeing up Hysteria to charge to the rescue, when Apex faced the grim reality that, if I was gonna stop them from blowing Pad Charlie's fuel tank, she was going to have to make a sacrifice.

:

Flames were erupting from the pod as Apex's Orion limped towards it. Her left leg had already been taken out by the Battlemaster's attack before Vamp managed to draw his attention back into a giant-robo punchfest. The Panther that had set it alight was perched on the hill beyond Shepherd Three, preparing to fire again, even as another JR7-D was racing towards the pad. She could hear the panicked calls from the Leopard's captain and the shrill, terrified voices of the people packing into its hold over the open coms channel. "I'm gonna need a little fire support over here!" she cried, silencing the open coms channel to drown out the voices. She checked her AC/10, it was in bad shape. 'Another hit or two,' she thought, 'and the whole arm is coming off.' She'd missed her chance at taking a shot at Riana when the commander'd fired her jump jets to get closer to that Locust. Moments later the Battlemaster had swept her leg and she went down hard. She was unbalanced now, the leg more like a crutch than a limb at this point.

"Negative, I say again, negative," Sly's voice responded, "Bravo is under heavy fire."

"If you don't fire on that Panther then Charlie's gonna blow!" Apex shrieked, still moving towards the Panther. She was close to the burning pod now, well within the blast radius. 'If this thing goes up,' her mind raced, 'then I'm gonna go up with it!'

"Skirmish," came Hysteria's voice, eerily calm amid the chaos, "you need to get clear. If they blow the fuel your Mech is too damaged to sustain the blast."

"You can't leave those people to die, Commander!" Kamea's voice called over the coms.

"I can't make it to her in time, Phoenix," Riana replied, "and I don't want to lose one of my crew when they're going to blow it anyway." She switched her com to a direct link with the Orion: "Get out of there, Jordan. You've done all that you can."

Apex's eyes grew wide as she heard her name. 'She knows,' she thought as the bright light of the burning pod filled her cockpit, "How the fuck does she know?!" she said aloud, "Goddammit..." she lowered her gaze, glaring at the Panther through angry brows. 'I could turn around, take my shot at her as she approached,' she reasoned. She shook her head. There was no way the Orion's AC/10 could pierce her armor, even with a straight head shot. Riana had piled on armor to the Highlander, making it a damage sponge. 'Even if I get clear, even if I take the shot,' her gaze panned over to Vamp's Banshee, standing over the smoking wreckage of the Battlemaster. "Fuck it," she engaged her Targeting Assist and aimed at the Panther's right arm as she took up a position directly in front of the burning fuel pod.

"Skirmish," Riana called as she charged across the port, "withdraw. That's an order. I can't get to you."

"She's holding position," Vamp said with astonishment, kicking his Mech into gear and firing at the approaching Jenner with his lasers, "she's right in front of the pod, blocking ze shot!"

"Every one of you can kiss my ass," Apex said as she took the shot, taking the Panther's arm and attached PPC off at the shoulder, "you all think you know everything about me? Well, try this; I will *not* let these people die," she swiveled her Orion back around to face down the Jenner just as he initiated his Alpha Strike, "if these Taurian tit-suckers wanna kill these people they're gonna have to go *through* me!" The Jenner's array of lasers tore into her Center Torso and, immediately, the ambient temperature inside jumped up thirty degrees. Electronics began to spark and erupt as metal turned red-hot, slag dripping from the wounded Mech. "Witness this, motherfuckers!" Apex screamed just before her CT exploded, the reactor overheating and detonating. The Orion crumpled into a heap just in front of the burning fuel tank that she protected.



Apex swallowed, her throat feeling as dry as the sand on Smithon. Consciousness returned slowly as she smacked her lips, trying to generate enough saliva to moisten her mouth. Suddenly, she felt the pain and groaned. Her eyes adjusted and she realized she was staring at the ceiling of the Hospital bay on the *Argo*. "Great," she wheezed. She hurt all over, but especially her lower back, legs, and left shoulder. She rolled her head from left to right, trying to work through the pain, when she saw the shock of reddish-brown hair lying next to her. Riana, seated in a chair next to her bed and face down on her mattress, was asleep. "Are you fucking serious?" she let her head sink back into the pillow.

"How are we feeling?" a nurse asked as he approached her bedside, his right hand checking the readout on her vitals.

"Like shit," Apex grumbled, "and parched." She looked up at him as he tapped on his datapad. "How long have I been out?"

"The better part of a week," the nurse shone a bright light into her eyes, checking for dilation reaction, "and she's been here with you almost the entire time. The doctor actually ordered her to her own bunk yesterday... but we see how well she follows his advice."

"Why?" Apex mostly asked herself, her gaze drifting back to the Commander.

"Because you're a hero," Riana said, slowly lifting her head, "you saved three dozen *families*, Jordan. You didn't have to; I ordered you to withdraw, but you sacrificed yourself to save those people."

"I didn't do it for *you*, Riana," Apex growled.

"That doesn't matter," Hysteria shook her head, waving the nurse away, "you did the *right* thing."

"I really don't give a fuck what you think!" Apex turned her head away from the Commander.

"I know," Riana acknowledged, "I know you joined us for revenge. I know I probably killed your friends on Anvelt. I don't know if you have some misguided loyalty to Victoria Espinosa..."

"Fuck her and fuck you too!" Apex snapped, her eyes rimming with moisture, "Firelock and Hammer were the only two family I had left!! Everyone else died on Tyrion!"

"Bledy's Band," Riana echoed as Apex's face turned bright red, "how big was your company?"

"We had two and a half Lances," she grumbled, turning her head and wiping at her eyes, "but we lost nearly everyone in the assault on the Arano bases." She chuckled to herself, "I guess that makes us enemies."

"It doesn't have to," Riana reached out and placed a hand on Jordan's leg. She reacted with visceral disgust. "You're a mercenary, I get that. Tyrion was just a job. A job that went sideways. People died, people you cared about."

"They were my *family*!" Apex hissed.

"Kind of like how *Revenge* is my family," Riana nodded. "I was a noble too, on Artru. Well, above Artru. Just like you I fucked up and got outcast, but *unlike* you I turned pirate." She held Apex's green eyes in a rock-solid mahogany gaze. "There was a time, Jordan, where I was in nearly the same position you were just in on Smithon, only I *fired* on those people. Where you *saved* families, I..." her eyes filled with tears, "I *killed* them. I have excuses, plenty of reasons I could give as to *why* I did it, but the ultimate truth of it is: I did it. So maybe I deserve your hatred. Maybe I deserve death. The gods know I'm trying to make up for it! That's why I want you to know something; Jordan... after what you did... you're *my* hero."

"Oh, fuck you Riana!" Apex snarled, jerking her leg until she moved her hand, "Don't fucking patronize me! I came here to *kill* you, okay? I came here to avenge Garrett and Luke! If I'd had a clean shot at you on Pad Alpha I'd have taken it, all right? Am I *still* your fucking hero??"

"Yes, you are. You know why?" Riana tilted her head in accentuation of her incoming point, "because you *could* have taken me out on pad Alpha."

"No, I couldn't!" Apex shouted, "The best I could have done was dent the back of the Highlander's head!"

"No," Riana countered softly, "you could have targeted the fuel tank." She let it sink in for a moment. "If I'd have been caught in that blast the enemy could have finished me and you could have played it off as a missed shot."

"If I'd done that I would have killed a hundred innocents just to get to you," Apex narrowed her eyes.

"That's why you're my hero," Riana smiled at her, "because, if I'd been in your position... I might have *taken* the shot."

"So what now?" Apex sneered, "You could have just stomped out my core. 'Oops,' right? Why bring me back? Why nurse me back to health? You know I want revenge, what's your plan? Wanna *court martial* me? I'm sure Kamea Arano would give that to you if you asked, especially if you tell her what we did on Tyrion and who I worked for! You could have yourself a good, old-fashioned hanging! I bet Sly and Yang would even offer to tie the noose!"

"I don't want that, Jordan," Riana shook her head, "Look, I can't bring your friends back. Garrett and Luke, right? I'm sorry that happened, but believe me: it wasn't personal, anymore than *any* of these missions are. I can't give you your family back, but I can promise you a place in *this* one."

"Ha!" Apex laughed.

"Or not," Riana continued, "I'm sorry you didn't get your revenge. You can walk, you can sign back on with the Directorate if it makes you feel better, or..." she let it hang a moment, "or you can stay with us, fight beside us, and *when* this war is over I'll give you a duel... if you still want it." She held Apex's stunned gaze for a moment, nodding her head, "That's the best I can do."

Apex just stared at her for a long moment before letting her chin fall to her chest. "Goddammit," she mumbled, "goddamn *you*."

"I'm pretty sure He already has." Riana grinned.

"All right," Apex sighed, "alright, fine. Fine, you win!" She fixed her with an emerald glare. "I accept that what you did was without malice. I get that it was just business. I *might* even take you up on that duel one day," she began to nod herself as Riana's lop-sided grin grew, "and I *acknowledge* that maybe, just maybe, my grudge belongs with Espinosa, and not you. She was the one who hired a merc outfit to pacify a fully armed and outfitted military garrison and then scooped up the survivors." She lifted her arm weakly for a fist bump. "No promises, and I may kill you in your sleep if you piss me off!"

"Fair enough!" Riana smiled as she extended her knuckles.

"You're fucking persuasive," Apex snarled.

"I know!" Riana said cheerfully, standing up.

"Get the fuck out!" Apex finally returned her smile, "Don't come back without whiskey."





Typically, Riana didn't spend a lot of time in the Captain's Quarters. Normally she preferred to stay with or near the crew, but following the destruction of Castle Gallas and Lord Madeira's departure for Guldra she just didn't feel like socializing. The raid on Itrom's refineries was a complete success; they managed to seize all three without Directorate forces destroying them. The supplies gained were a valuable boon for the Restoration and it allowed for the liberation of Itrom, but the Directorate's fuel-air bomb destroyed the castle and Lady Samantha Gallas along with it, but not before she revealed that the evidence the Restoration needed to call off the Taurian dogs lay in the Madeira Archives. Riana's mind raced, if the Taurians ceased support for the Directorate, then Kamea had a real chance to win this war. 'What then?' she wondered to herself. No doubt Lady Arano would take her rightful place on Coromodir's throne but 'what about me,' she wondered, 'do I just keep on being a mercenary?' She realized that she'd never really thought that far ahead. 'When I started this journey,' she mused as she poured herself another shot of rye, 'I was just looking for a way to die.' She picked up the shot glass and swirled the amber liquid inside. 'Since Kamea returned all I've tried to do was get close to her, to serve her. How can I do that as a mercenary? I could stay with her, but in what capacity?' She drained the glass just as a knock sounded at her door. 'Can we ever be what I hope for?' She put the glass back on the table as she swiveled her chair around. "Enter," she called.

The door opened to reveal Medusa, bandaged from his injuries and looking perturbed. "We need to talk," he said ominously.

‘Oh good,’ she snarled involuntarily, ‘this sounds like just what I need.’ She motioned for him to enter. “Come in,” she beckoned, “what’s on your mind?”

“Commander,” he began, looking around nervously as if he didn’t know how to begin, “about Itrom...”

“What about Itrom?” she interrupted, “It was a perfect mission. We captured all three objectives, took no casualties, and we made out with a nice profit. Do you have an issue with any of that?”

“Yeah, actually, I do.” Now it was his turn to scowl. The bandage wrapped around his head was stained with his blood, an injury he suffered on mission when his cockpit was hit and his head was slammed into the cage. “You say there were no casualties, but I was almost one!”

“You’re a MechWarrior,” she countered dismissively as she poured another shot, “every mission could be your last.”

“Especially if your commander sends you out in a goddamn Cicada as bait!!” he barked, drawing an angry glare from her.

“You were Recon, Benitez,” she reminded him, “a specialty of yours.”

“That was Dekker’s specialty!” he snapped.

“It became yours after he died,” she set the bottle down hard as a punctuation on her point, “a role you haven’t performed very much, I might add.”

“Yeah?” she growled, “it’s not me who decides who’s on mission and who’s on the bench!”

“What’s your point, Mohammed?” Riana asked sourly as she tossed back another shot.

“That hit I took,” he began, “that was only because you ordered me out into the open! I was supposed to be targeting! Sensor Lock! The whole point of Recon is battlefield intel, you can’t put me into a glass Mech and then have me lead the charge!”

“The Cicada is trash, I’ll give you that,” Riana conceded, “but we *had* to act fast. If we gave them the chance they were going to blow the refinery. I’d rather have them target a fast-moving diversion than blow the refinery before we could bring the big guns.”

“A diversion??” Medusa exclaimed, disbelieving, “Is that all I am to you? What the hell happened to you, Riana? You used to *care* about us! We were a family!”

“We’re still a family, Benitez,” she said as she poured yet another, “but we’re also a company. You’re a skilled pilot, Medusa, I counted on your evasive capabilities and look: here you are.”

“Yeah, here I am. No thanks to you!” he snapped, “There was a time when you wouldn’t have made that call. A time when you wouldn’t have thrown one of us into harm’s way just for a client.”

“The Restoration is *not* just a client!” she stood up abruptly, still holding the shot glass.

“And why is that, huh?” he challenged her, “Did you forget that we’re *mercenaries*? We’re not soldiers, Riana! It isn’t our job to die for ideals! We fight for *money*!”

“Which is something that the Restoration gives us quite a lot of!” she refused to back down, standing nose to nose with him.

“Well, we’ve got a lot of it now, don’t we?” he spread his arms wide before relenting and turned away from her, pacing in a circle until he was a comfortable few feet from her again. “I heard from Sumire that we’ve got over twenty-four *million*.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” she confirmed, “what of it? You think it’s cheap to run this ship, to pay these salaries? To keep all these Mechs in repair? The Restoration pays well, Medusa, war is big profit for mercenaries, but all of this... it isn’t cheap.”

“You’re too close to this,” he pointed a finger at her, accusingly, “you’re emotionally involved. This shit with Victoria Espinosa, with *Kamea Arano*... you’re putting all of it before us! You’ve changed, Hysteria. You’ve gone cold. You don’t see us as people anymore, we’re more like, like tools. Tools that you can use to get your personal revenge or impress your *girlfriend*.”

Although her initial impulse was to slap him, the drink in her hand caused her to change course so she tossed the liquid in his face instead. “*High Lady Arano*,” she corrected him, “who is the very reason we *have* twenty-four million, idiot!” She spun on her heel and slammed the glass on the table. “Is that *all*?” she hissed.

Medusa wiped at his face with his hand. “Yeah, that’s all. That’s all I can take,” he pulled up his shirt and dried his face more, “I’m out. You can drop me at the next planet. I’m done.”

“You *quitting*, Benitez?” she asked in a mocking tone, “How’d you expect this to go; you come in here, throw a tantrum, and we just head back out to Detroit and barely scrape by... with only the Leopard? The *Argo* belongs to Lady Arano, remember?”

“It isn’t the same,” Medusa shook his head, “yeah, we used to struggle. We struggled under Commander Markham and we struggled under you. We were always just one payment away from doom, but there was warmth, Riana. We struggled *together*.” He looked at her with disgust.

“Now we just struggle for *you*, or for whoever is pulling your strings!” She fixed him with a hateful glare but he continued: “You’ve been like a machine, ever since Kru left. Like you’re just... cold. Like we don’t mean anything anymore.”

“When I first joined up,” she started, “you were the one complaining that I was nothing but a pirate, remember? I was a ‘loose cannon,’ I was ‘chaotic,’ and now your issue is that, what, I’m too much like a tactical military leader?” She prowled around him like a panther, “I made a call, Mohammed. I sent you into harm’s way to save an objective because I believed there was a high chance that you would come out of it *alive*. Turns out, it was a good call. We captured all three refineries, which netted us a nice little bonus to our pay. I relied on my estimation of your skill, that you were capable of the task I had given you... turns out, you were. If you have an issue with my leadership, with my tactical decisions, then maybe it’s best if you *do* leave.”

“This isn’t up for debate,” he revealed, “my mind was made up before I walked in here. When I took that hit my helmet was shattered and my cockpit was venting. I was losing air and pressure and I was still under fire.” He glowered at her beneath lowered brows as he hissed the next words: “I *listened* to Amir die, just like that. His atmo venting into a vacuum. That isn’t a good death, Riana. Behemoth got taken out, sure that was quick, but Dekker died *horribly*.”

“Do you think that I don’t think about that?” she challenged him, “I listened to it too; that’s not fair!”

“When I first talked my way into becoming a MechWarrior I knew the dangers,” he looked down as he spoke, “I knew people died... often. We lost a few with Markham before you came along. When I left Katinka I was looking for excitement, but now?” He looked her straight in the eyes, “Now I just wanna belong again. You’ve kept me on the sidelines for months, Riana. Kept me out of action. At first it pissed me off, but after Itrom I think maybe it’s time for me to let go, to let all of this go. I had a good run, and it’s not often that MechWarriors retire, you know? I’ve still got things I want to do with my life, I still want a family. Hell, with this war going on I haven’t heard from my parents in so long.”

“That’s *why* we’re fighting,” she placed a hand on his shoulder, tentatively, “as someone from the Reach, you’ve got a lot invested in seeing Lady Arano back on her throne too.”

“Don’t try that on me,” he shrugged her off, “my mind is made up. I’m sorry if I came on strong; I’m mad, mad as hell that you put the mission before the lives of your crew, but at the end of the day I’m done. I don’t have any more left to give to *Revenge*.”

Riana sighed, “Fine,” she walked back around to her desk and sat down, “we’re en route to Weldry to hit a pirate supply train for Restoration officials. As soon as we make orbit we can drop you there, if you’d like.”

“With a generous severance, I hope?” he asked.

“You’ve been sitting on your ass, collecting pay for six months,” she looked at him coldly, “I’d say you’ve already gotten it.”



:

My decision to divest myself from Medusa was a purely financial one. I wasn’t using him, ever. In truth, it had probably been longer than 6 in-game months. He was a backup to a backup: Corsair was an excellent pilot for hot Mechs, equipped with the Coolant Vent ability, and with Glitch and Apex rotating as snipers I had plenty of other options for Sensor Locks. Really, that left Sly as my alternate; an almost redundant fifth wheel, but Sly had oodles of personality as compared to Medusa so I dropped him at Weldry.

Oh, and Cicadas *do* suck. I sold that piece of junk.

:



Riana retched into the toilet for the third time, her forehead beaded in sweat. ‘What the hell is wrong with me?’ she wondered as her stomach tied itself into knots. ‘*maybe you’re nervous for the upcoming fight,*’ the little voice of her personal doubt taunted her. She forced such weak thoughts down as she flushed the toilet and moved to the sink, cupping handfuls of water to wash away the taste of her failed breakfast. She was splashing water on her face when there was a soft knock on the door. She looked up just as Glitch entered the restroom.

“Hey you,” she began, “you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she said dismissively, “just... nauseous.”

“Yeah, I kinda noticed,” Jess smiled disarmingly, “sorta everybody did.”

“Great,” she mumbled, turning the water off and running her wet hands through her hair, slicking it back against her head. Her exit from the Mess had been... dramatic. She almost didn’t make it in time.

“We’ll be at Panzyr in a few hours,” Glitch began, “maybe you ought to sit this one out?”

“I’ll be fine,” she tried to shrug off her concern as a new wave of nausea washed over her, “ugh.”

“Look, I’ll pilot the Highlander. I can lead the team; I’ve done it plenty of times before. I’m good at multi-targeting, so I’ll be a good sub,” she said reassuringly, “Apex can take the Battlemaster, Corsair in the Grasshopper, and Vamp can play defense in the Banshee. Plus, we’ll have the support of House Decimis. It’ll be fine.”

“I just need a few hours...” Riana began but the nausea rushed up once more, sending her back to the toilet. She retched repeatedly as Glitch moved in behind her to hold her hair back.

“Riana,” she softly began, “how long has this been going on?”

“A few days,” she wiped at her mouth with her sleeve, panting slightly, “I don’t know what this is.”

“I might,” Jess knelt beside her, “have you been to see the doc?”

“No,” Riana leaned her head back, letting it rest against the wall, “believe it or not, I’ve had worse hangovers than this.”

“Mmm,” Glitch didn’t sound convinced, “How long has it been since Kru left?” She asked.

“I dunno,” Riana shook her head from side to side, “about a month. Why?”

“Mmm hmm,” Glitch nodded, “are you late?”

“Late for what?” Riana looked at Glitch, confused for a moment, but her raised eyebrows and expectant look caused a whole new wave of nausea, “Oh, God!”

“Ooookay,” Glitch moved in to hold her hair once more, “guess that answered that!”

:

Riana sat in her office in the dark, the only light coming from her powered-down console. The green glow of the standby light reflected off the bottle of Rockwellan Rye on the desk and her eyes focused on the reflection absently as she traced the contours of the trigger of the Hawk-Eagle auto-pistol in her lap. Her worst fears were confirmed easily enough; she was already five weeks along.

Nothing in her entire life had ever terrified her more.

Her hand drifted from the sidearm to the bottle as she wrestled with her demons. ‘I don’t have time for this,’ she thought, her fingers caressing the bottle, so familiar. ‘I *can*’t,’ she told herself, her grip beginning to form on the bottle, ‘this just isn’t *me*. It isn’t for me. This *can*’t be for me.’ She dropped her feet from the desk and reached for the cork with her other hand, the pistol still resting in her lap, ‘This can’t be *happening* to me.’ She pulled the cork free and filled the glass on the table, replacing the bottle as her hand moved to the glass. Her left hand rested on the pistol again as her right began to move the glass to her lips. Her hand trembled, the shaking causing the whiskey to slosh about.

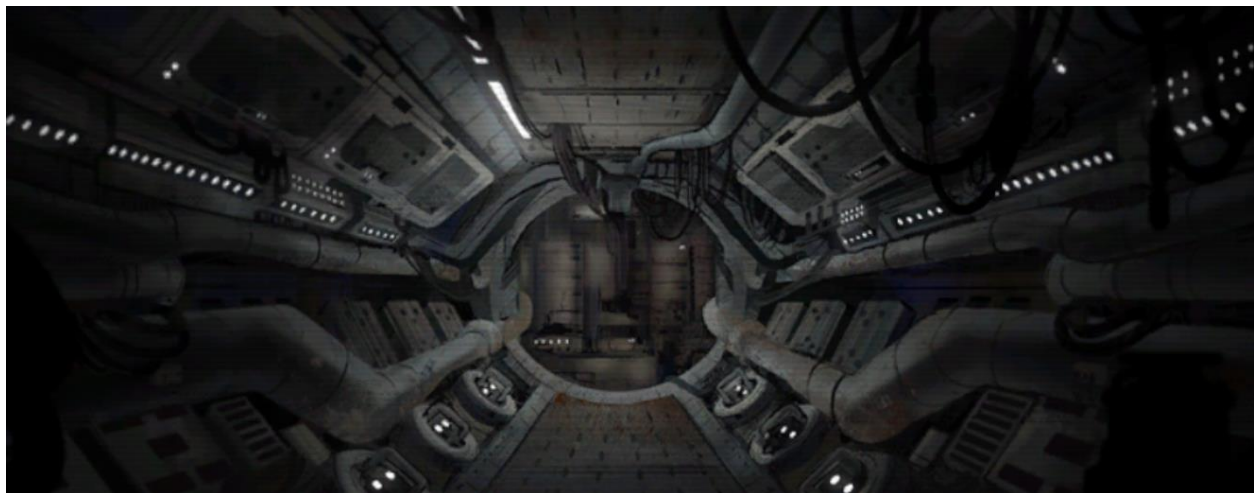
“Rraaagh!!” she screamed as she tossed the glass against the door, shattering it. Immediately her right hand seized the pistol and her grip went white-knuckled. She stood suddenly, left hand wrapped around the pistol’s barrel and right index finger on the trigger. She squeezed the barrel

as hard as she could before the gun flew to the right, shattering the bottle on her desk as it passed through it. “GODDAMMIT!!!” she slammed the auto-pistol down flat on the desk, hard enough to leave a dent, before leaving it there and pulling at her hair. “Why??” she growled to herself, “Why now? Why the hell did this have to happen *now*?” She released her hair and looked back down at the gun on her desk before sweeping it away across the room, almost wishing it would go off. It didn’t.

“I don’t understand,” she mumbled to herself, her arms wrapping around her torso and coming to rest on her shoulders as she looked up at the ceiling, “this shouldn’t even be a question. This isn’t even a debate!” Glitch had informed her of a doctor she knew about on Mechdur, ‘discreet,’ she promised. Her younger self wouldn’t have hesitated. ‘*You shouldn’t hesitate now,*’ her personal doubt was growing, ‘*why* am I hesitating?’ “Why?” her resolve began to crack as the tears came. She collapsed back into her chair once more, her hands moving from her shoulders to wrap protectively around her abdomen. ‘Why is this so *hard*?’

Outside her door, unbeknownst to Riana, Glitch withdrew her hand where it had been poised to knock. She hung her head and frowned. Thus far, only her and the doctor knew and Riana had sworn them both to secrecy, under threat of immense violence. Jessica started to walk forward, changed her mind, and then reached for the door but she paused at the steady sound of soft sobs coming from within. She turned and quietly padded down the hallway, determined instead to insure that she had this time alone.

This wasn’t an easy decision to make.



Part XXXII



"Commander?" Dr. Murad asked tentatively, finding Riana's hiding place in engineering, "Are you alright? I've been searching for you."

In her niche, Riana sighed as she rested her chin on her knees. "You, or everybody on the ship?"

"Well, the others are looking too," Farah offered a soft smile, "but I don't think anyone expected to find you down here."

"Ah," Riana grinned, "so you'd given up?"

"Hardly." the chief engineer smiled, "Based on the search pattern and your absence in common locations, statistically, this was the most likely spot."

"You used *math* to find me," Riana deadpanned, rolling her eyes in the process, "figures."

"Heh," Farah chuckled, "*figures*. Good pun." Riana groaned and laid her face on her knees. "Hold on a moment," Farah drifted away, leaving Riana in her niche. Subconsciously, she scooted back a little farther, wedged between bulkheads near Farah's main work station. The constant hum and drone of the *Argo's* drive core was soothing to her and, with her knees pulled up against her chest, she just felt safe here... and sleepy. Her head resting on her knees, she was nearly unconscious when she heard her name again. "Riana," Farah called, "here. I made you my specialty: fesenjan." She held out a steaming bowl as she squatted down. "Come, eat."

Riana started to complain that she wasn't hungry, but the rich, pungent smell called out to her. Almost reluctantly, she reached out and cupped the warm bowl in her hands. "This smells delicious," she said, drawing in the scent, "what's in it?"

"It's Persian pomegranate/walnut chicken stew," she smiled, "my Baba Joon used to make it for me when I was a child. Making it is one of the ways I honor my heritage."

"It's gud," Riana managed to say through a hot mouthful before swallowing, "really good. Do you have a kitchen down here?"

"You caught me," she chuckled in response, "it's prepackaged. But, if we can find the right ingredients planetside, I can make you the real thing."

"Mmm," Riana tapped her feet happily as she wolfed down the stew, "I'll have Darius find us a stop with a full market that has the ingredients. Just make me a list."

"فهمیدی," she replied, then quickly translated, "you got it." She allowed Riana to eat in silence for a few moments then she spoke: "So, would you like to tell me what it is that you're hiding from?"

"People," Riana replied flatly, "thought that was obvious."

"You know what I mean," Farah scolded her.

"We've still got two days to Guldra," Riana explained, scraping up the last of the fesenjan with her spoon, "and I just want to be alone sometimes. Is that too much to ask?"

"Commander Klaue," Dr. Murad fixed her with a piercing gaze, "I have *two* doctorates and the mental faculties to get a two-century year old derelict not only to fly, but to purr like a kitten. I can tell what's about to break on this ship just by listening to the hum of the drive core. In addition to that, I grew up chatting with pilgrims from all over the Commonwealth aboard my grandfather's DropShip as we ferried them to and from Dar-es-Salaam. Do you really believe that I cannot tell when something is wrong?" Riana got quiet, passing the bowl back to Farah but not responding. "Everyone is worried about you. You have not been acting like yourself. You keep yourself cooped up in your quarters, you've been letting Glitch take the lead on every mission we..."

"Jess is a great MechWarrior and a good leader!" Riana protested.

"I never said she wasn't," Farah shook her head, "but you aren't even sitting in Ops during the mission."

"My pilots can handle a milk run or two without me!" the Commander snapped.

"In all the time we've worked together," Dr. Murad began, "you have either led the mission or directed it from Ops. *Every* time. You are almost always in the center of every event on ship, social, outgoing, you are the heart of our family..." she reached out to her, her hand resting lightly on her shin, "... and now you are hurting. Let us help you, عزيزم. You do not have to suffer alone."

"It's none of your business," Riana said grumpily, but she did not shy away from her touch.

"It *is* our business," Farah's eyes pleaded, "you are our Commander. You lead us in battle, you lead our lives aboard this ship... we *need* you. Please, let us help you."

"You wouldn't understand," Riana was dismissive in her tone and she turned her eyes to the side, indicating that the conversation was over.

"Did I ever tell you that I was married?" Farah began, withdrawing her hand but remaining at the entrance to her niche. Shocked, Riana turned her head to look at her again. "Ever see the show *Uncle Heiner's Experiment World*? That's my husband. That show was what got me into science! Ah, I was young and naive. Stupid, if I'm being honest. As it turns out, a chain-smoking nihilist teaching children how to make IEDs is a poor choice for a husband..."

"What does this have to do with anything?" Riana growled, just wanting to be left alone.

"I was pregnant when I left him," Farah said soberly, shocking Riana again.

"Jessica, you *bitch*." Hysteria hissed.

"She didn't breathe a word," Farah countered, "Two doctorates, mechanical genius, people-person... add to that your morning sickness, sudden depression, and withdrawal not to mention your newfound sobriety."

"Really?" Riana cocked an eyebrow, "You monitor my drinking too?"

"I'm an observant Muslim," she shrugged, "I don't try to force my lifestyle on anyone but I still *notice* when someone does something forbidden to me."

"Great," the Commander mumbled, "how many other people know?"

"Know or suspect?" Farah asked, almost rhetorically, "Based on what you've said I'd say three of us know... a great deal more suspect."

"Wonderful," Riana glowered at a spot on the floor, processing. After a moment her eyes tracked up again to meet Farah's. "What'd you do?"

"I had an abortion," Dr. Murad said plainly, "I was about to start classes at University Atreus, with plans to do my post-grad work at Sian University. I didn't have time to become a mother, plus if Heiner knew he had a child I would *never* be able to get him out of my life." She looked in Riana's eyes and held her gaze with her next words: "It was the hardest decision I've ever had to make, but it was the *right* one." Then she looked down and away before adding: "And I will regret it for as long as I live."

"So," Riana quietly began, "if you had it to do over again, would you still go through with it?"

"I would," Farah's eyes moistened, "even though it hurts. It is *my* burden, *my* sin. One day, I hope to meet my child in Paradise. There, I will ask for forgiveness."

"I don't know what to do," Riana admitted, "I know what I *should* do. I can't be a mother and a mercenary at the same time and, unlike you, I don't really have any other skills."

"Do you think that Todd knows?" Farah wiped her eyes.

"God, does everybody know about that?" Riana shook her head.

"He loves you," Farah smiled at her warmly, "I believe if he knew, he would return to you."

"He has a life too," Riana picked at the toe of her shoe as she talked, "he was searching for someone, something to do with a case he worked as a detective. I don't think it would be fair to drag him back into a responsibility he didn't want or ask for."

"I don't think it would be fair to keep it from him," Farah scolded, "he seemed like a good man. If you choose to keep this child, then he should also have the choice to be a part of its life."

The tears suddenly welled up in her and Riana buried her face again. "Why did this have to happen? I was ready for anything, *anything*... anything but this."

"Do you love him?" Farah asked, reaching out for her and taking her hand.

"No," Riana said as she lifted her head, tears staining her cheeks, "I mean I do... just not... not like that."

"عزيزم, you need to decide what *Riana* wants to do with this," she squeezed her hand, reassuringly, "I can tell you about my experience, but I cannot make this decision for you. Just know that, whatever you choose, we are all behind you. We all support you. If you choose to terminate this pregnancy, I will cry *with* you. If you choose to keep this child, then we will make it work... as a *family*." She shook Riana's hand slightly and smiled at her, "It would not be the first child to grow up on a DropShip!"

Riana sniffled, "You're pretty smart."

"I know," Farah smirked, "would you like some more time alone?"

"Don't know what good it would do me," she gave Farah a lop-sided grin, "sooner or later you'd just math your way back to me and lecture me again!"

"If you needed one," Farah tilted her head in acknowledgement.

"No, you're right," Riana began to squirm her way out of her hidey-hole, "I need to get out in front of this. I need to *own* it. I got myself into this mess and now I've got to deal with it."

"That sounds more like the Riana Klaue I know!" Farah rose to her feet and helped the Commander squeeze out.

Riana stretched to her full height, coming up on her tip-toes as she reached above her in a full-body stretch. "Okay," She said as she relaxed once more, "now for the hard part."

"I will be right beside you if you need me," Farah wrapped an arm around her, "are you frightened?"

"Terrified," Riana answered, "but I know if I can survive this I can survive *anything*."

"Together." Dr. Murad reminded her as the pair drifted away and out of engineering.



Part XXXIII



"Thank you all for coming," Riana began in a small voice, "I wanted to make sure that all of you knew what was going on before I address this with the rest of the crew."

"What *is* going on?" Darius asked, looking around the Captain's Quarters, "We usually have meetings in Ops."

"I know," she nodded, "but due to the nature of this announcement I thought it might be better to meet in a more private setting."

"Are you okay?" Sumire asked with concern.

"Yeah, I'm okay," Riana lifted one corner of her lips slightly. It seemed every woman aboard knew about her condition before she did.

"You've had everyone scared shitless, boss," Yang rubbed at his chin thoughtfully, "acting odd, disappearing like that, and there's a pretty nasty rumor swirling around."

"About that," Riana sighed. 'Nasty?' she thought before continuing, "I... I don't know how to say this so I just will; I'm pregnant."

At her confession Darius' jaw dropped open and Yang's eyes widened significantly. Sumire's face was unchanged; either she already suspected or she was being her usual, unflappable self. "P..pregnant?" Yang blubbered, "It's *true*?"

"It's true," Riana nodded, "Kru's the father."

"That son of a..." Yang's face began to twist.

"Riana," Darius interrupted, "We're two days out from Guldra. The end of the war is in sight! How, how are you *pregnant*?"

"Well, when a boy and a girl like each other," she began.

"Be serious!" he snapped at her, raising his voice, "If this intel is legit then the Taurians will be out of the war! That will open a path directly to Coromodir. Do you think Espinosa will just lay down and submit?? The fighting will be furious, heavier than anything we've seen before!"

"Darius, please," Riana's eyes were pleading, "it's taking everything I have to try and face this head on. If you think I haven't thought about that..."

"She knows what's at stake," Dr. Murad stepped forward, "and she remains devoted to this company and the Arano Restoration."

"Well, that's good," Yang said with some exasperation, "so what's next?"

Sumire started tapping at her datapad, "We're already committed to the operation at Guldra. With any luck we can extract Lord Madeira quietly and without incident. The closest friendly planet with the necessary medical facilities is on Itrom but it will be at least two weeks before we can make it there. I can go ahead and schedule you an appointment but I need to know how far along you are, we may be cutting it close." She turned and looked at Darius. "We should consult Dr. Foster and see if maybe he can perform the procedure. I know it's a little outside what he's accustomed to, but if he can..."

"I'm keeping it," Riana said quietly, causing a gasp to ripple around the room.

"Excuse me, you're *what*?" Yang leaned in closer, thinking that perhaps he misheard her.

"I've decided to keep it," Riana said, a little stronger now, despite the stares, "I am going to keep my baby."

"Riana..." Glitch was clearly surprised, as was everyone in the room save for Farah, "you *do* know what that means, right?"

"I do," Riana nodded, "it won't be easy, but since when have I *ever* decided to do things the easy way?"

"Hysteria, this won't just be difficult," Darius began, "it's gonna be near-impossible. You can't raise a baby on a mercenary ship in the middle of a *war*."

"Well, we'd better win this war quickly," she said resolutely.

"You can't raise a baby on a *mercenary ship*," Yang added, "period!"

"Watch me," she glared at him, "my mind is made up."

"Commander," Su began with a diplomatic tone, "I think the concern here is not just for the complexities of raising a baby and being a MechWarrior at the same time, but also about your health," she hugged her datapad close to her chest, subconsciously, as she spoke, "there have been many times when you've sustained life-threatening injuries. You even died once! If you're going through with this pregnancy, then we'll have to take you off of rotation."

"Jess or Duncan can take the lead on the missions," Darius rubbed at the stubble on his chin thoughtfully, "and you could still run the ops through the command interface module, though I recommend we hire a new alternate."

"Somebody needs to contact Kru," Yang rested his head in his hand, overwhelmed with everything that was happening, "I suppose he could come back and..."

"I am still the Commander of *Revenge*," Hysteria reminded them, "and I will be the one to decide when it's best for me to pass operational command."

"But, if you keep piloting the risk of a miscarriage shoots up," Farah sounded concerned for the first time, "even if you manage to come through the missions without injuries just the impact of battle could..."

"That's also my decision to make," Riana turned and looked her in the eyes, "none of this was planned. None of this was *supposed* to happen, but it did." She let her gaze sweep around the room to meet all the stunned eyes of her comrades, "most of my life has been rudderless. Ever since St. Regis, I just haven't really felt like I was in control. I didn't want to go to a boarding school, but there I was. I didn't want to get disowned, or join a band of pirates, or wind up in jail. I never planned to join Kamea's guard, or even this company. I certainly never asked to lead it! All of these things just happened to me. This pregnancy just happened to me. Gods, as much of a slut as I was at St. Regis you'd think this would have happened before now!" She took a small step backwards but bumped into Dr. Murad, who put an arm around her. Then Jessica slid in on the other side and also put her arm around her. "I know what I *should* do," she continued, looking down as she did, "I mean, it's a no-brainer, right? I *should* either abort this pregnancy and keep being a MechWarrior *or* I should commit to motherhood and stay aboard the *Argo*, but if I do either of those things then I feel like I am still letting fate just guide me around by the nose." She looked back up, determination in her eyes, "so this time *I* am making the choice. I *choose* to keep this baby, and yet I also *choose* to keep taking the field. I understand the risks involved in this. I fully realize that if I do this then I may miscarry and lose the baby, but this is still *my* choice. I wasn't ready for this, and I spent a few days coming to terms with what all of this means. So I choose to be Mother *and* MechWarrior and if it's not meant to be... so be it. It's *my* decision and I stand by it, and another thing; *nobody* contacts Kru until this baby is either born or I get too pregnant to fit in my Mech," she looked down at the floor again, "there's no reason for two of us to live with this uncertainty."

Everyone just stood in silence for a moment, unsure of what to say. Glitch and Dr. Murad flanked her, supporting her, but Darius, Yang, and Sumire looked less convinced. "I... don't know what to say," Darius began, "I don't think I agree with your decision, but I agree it is yours to make."

"I think it is reckless and stupid," Su's eyes hardened, "it is also selfish, immature, and more than a little arrogant." Then she flashed a mischievous smile, "So, you know, typical Hysteria."

"Well, I don't think this is funny," Yang looked deflated, "Su was absolutely right when she talked about your injuries. Do you have any idea how much cloned tissue and bone you have in you now? Not even considering a miscarriage, I don't think you realize what pregnancy can do to your body. You're not just at risk of losing the baby, you're at higher risk of injury and death in

this state!" He looked around the room at the others with a scolding glare, "I realize the general consensus here is that this is all your decision but you know what else is a personal decision? Suicide. Because that's akin to what you're talking about!" He pointed his cybernetic thumb at his chest as he spoke. "Commander, it is my *job* to keep my MechWarriors alive! I work my ass off to do just that, but a complication like pregnancy I can't prepare for!"

"I know, Chief," Riana said somberly, "and I'm sorry to put you in that position," she swept forward, first placing a hand on his chest and then melting into his reluctant embrace, "You've been there for me so many times and I've always been able to rely on your strength. I know what I'm asking of you, and what I've done, has hurt you and I'm so sorry for that. I understand if you do not approve of my decision and I won't be offended if you choose not to work on my Mech."

"Goddammit, Riana," Chief Virtanen's eyes filled with tears as he gave in to her embrace and returned it fully, "You *know* I can't do that!"

"I know," Riana said, tears streaming down her cheeks as well, "and I'm sorry, for everything." Their embrace lingered as the other crew members inched forwards. "I love you, Chief," Riana said as the others joined the embrace, "I love all of you. You're *all* my family."



In Orbit
Guldra

"Commander," Darius turned towards Riana from where he was monitoring the Coms, "We're picking up a transmission on the Restoration distress frequency. The time stamps is marked a couple of hours ago..." his shoulders sagged slightly as he added, "it's from Lord Madeira."

Riana and Kamea exchanged worried glances, "Put it up," Riana commanded, as Farah slid to the side to make room for her. A scan-lined image of Lord Madeira appeared above the holotable. He looked disheveled and sweaty, and he panted as he spoke. "Kamea," he breathed, "by the time you receive this message, I'll have been captured." He looked around him nervously and there was a crash in the distance, "I've got hostiles closing in all around me as I'm recording this and my escort is already dead. I don't know how much time I have left." Another loud crash preceded a frightened jolt in his demeanor and he looked back with desperation. "Listen," he said pushing his glasses up, "the evidence is hidden in a dead drop. It was the best I could do, given the circumstances," they could now hear yelling in the background; commands for him to surrender, "Go to my grandfather's monument," he spoke quickly and in a quiet tone, "You remember; the place where we laid him to rest in the mountains. The Directorate paved it over and built a structure right over top of it. Look there, and you'll find what you need." The sudden sound of splintering hardwood caused Kamea to jump and the sounds of angry shouting filled the recording. "I'm out of time," his eyes pleaded as he spoke, "I pray that I see you again, but if I don't... I *need* you to win this war. Do whatever you have to do, just finish it! Not for me, but for our people!" From the sounds the door was no longer an obstacle, "Goodbye, my lady," Alexander smiled and the image suddenly blurred, clearing again at Lord Madeira's shoe. Behind

it they could see many feet approaching quickly. Suddenly Lord Madeira's shoe lifted and then the image shifted to static. The recording ended.

"The bastards took him," Riana spoke first, her voice a growl. She turned towards Darius, "Start putting together a rescue team..."

"Leave space for me," Kamea spoke with determination, "I'm coming with you." She swept around the holotable and looked around the room, "First, we recover Alexander. Then we focus on picking up the evidence and getting the hell off of Guldra."

"I've got Lord Madeira's subdermal transponder signal on my screen," Sumire revealed, tapping at her datapad, "they're moving him... probably in an APC."

"If we launch in Mechs now," Corsair added, " we may be able to catch up to it."

"Then we'd better get moving," Riana turned to Yang, "load up my Highlander, the Grasshopper, and the Banshee," she pointed across the room, "Corsair you're in the GHR; I need you as fast attack and possible evac. If we catch up to it, Lord Madeira rides with you..."

"Belay that," Kamea stepped forwards and stood at parade rest, "Alexander will be with me, in the Atlas. Your man can focus on recovering the intel."

"Understood," Corsair nodded, "if the site is up a mountainside then the Hopper has the mobility to get to it."

"And enough lasers to ruin just about any OpFor's day!" Sly chuckled.

"Commander," Darius began, "maybe it's better if someone drops in your place, you know, because of your *condition*?" Riana shot him a look that could slag armor.

"What condition?" Kamea asked.

"I'm fine, XO," Hysteria hissed, "fully recovered, and I have no time for any overprotective bullshit, do you understand?"

"Roger that," Darius sighed.

"Vamp," Hysteria turned, "your job is the complete safety of High Lady Arano. You'll cover her while she extracts Lord Madeira. I want you to stay on her, don't get drawn away." She placed her hands on her hips, "I'll handle cleanup; anything that doesn't get fragged by your initial shots will have ninety tons of Highlander to deal with!"

"You got it, Kommander," Vamp saluted.

"Time is of the essence, people," Kamea now moved to the center of the room, "We *must* retrieve the evidence and we *will* bring Lord Madeira home. We have his transponder coordinates, and we know he's on the move. We make planetfall, rescue Alexander, and recover the evidence he risked his life to bring us," she lifted her right arm and clenched her fist tightly, snarling the next words, "and we will bring *ruin* to anyone who stand in our way!"

"Move!" Riana barked, sending people scattering, "Su keep tabs on that signal. I want to know if he stops," she walked over to the wall and activated the ship's Com, "Attention! This is Commander Klaue. All hands *not* prepping for this drop report to the Mech bay to assist the Techs in loading the Leopard."

"Riana," Kamea said softly, reaching out and placing a hand on her shoulder, "do you have a moment?"

"*Revenge* is yours, my lady," she turned and assumed parade rest, "as am I."

"Are you really alright?" her hand hesitated, as if she prevented herself from moving it to Riana's cheek, "If you're not one hundred percent then I am well-capable of leading..."

"I'm good to go, my lady," Riana nodded resolutely, "and I wouldn't miss this. Lord Madeira is on my crew and we don't leave our people behind."

"I understand," Kamea smiled at her, warmly, "but if you have time when we return, could we..."

"Anything for you, my lady," Riana broke parade rest and dared to place a hand on Kamea's arm, "now let's go get our man."

:

Let me just take a moment to explain how I write these up. I play a mission at home, then some time later while I'm at work I will cue up a video on youtube as a reminder of how the mission went and write the narrative of the Journal. But this time something *very* odd happened. Maybe it's because I am so far behind in finishing the Campaign (I got this at launch and I just completed the mission Liberate: Tyrlon last week) that there has been some update to the game, but I started off on the *left* side of the Refueling Depot and, by the time I arrived, Lord Madeira's signal was stationary *inside* the Depot. All of the videos reference a *different* mission than the one I played in which the team comes in from the *right* and attacks a convoy. That DID NOT HAPPEN in my game. Instead we started very close to the Depot and faced off against a Lance of Mechs before learning that Lord Madeira was in Victoria's clutches. She was also *not* on site. The intel was on the hill, and Corsair in the GHR recovered it pretty easily, then we fought our way to the extract point. I have *no* idea why my mission was so different from virtually every one I've seen a video of. (Now I wish I'd captured it myself!) Overall the mission wasn't that much of a challenge; OpFor all but ignored Kamea in favor of targeting Vamp, who drives my mostly hand-to-hand Banshee.

Honestly, the mission the others played looked like more fun than the one I did!

:

"What is this, cousin," Victoria's cruel tone filled the open channel, "you're *running*? Leaving little Lord Madeira behind? Why, I thought you would do *anything* for each other!" She cackled villainously, "He's willing to *die* for you!"

"I *will* take him back from you, Victoria!" Kamea's voice shook as the doors to the Leopard fired open and the Lance charged aboard, "personally!"

"I look forward to it, Kamea" Victoria purred, "In the interim, know that your *dearest* friend will languish as I languished in Lord Karosa's dungeons. I will make him *suffer* in your stead!"

"I know what I'm abandoning him to," she swallowed hard as the doors raised and the Leopard lifted into the air, "so does he. Alexander is more courageous than either of us, Victoria, and if you hurt him *I will kill you myself*, I swear on my father's name!"



The trip back was utterly silent and uncomfortable. Even Glitch, who often met them cheerily upon their return, was quiet and morose. Immediately, they headed back to the Ops Center. Farah worked diligently at the archive as Kamea stood, red-eyed, near the holotable. "Dr. Murad," Kamea said after a period of tense silence, "have you gotten that archive cracked open?" the exasperation and stress of Alexander's loss filled her voice, "I want to know what's inside and I want to know *now*!"

"Give her a few," Riana counseled, "she's working as fast as she can." Kamea glared daggers at her but held her tongue, only tapping her finger impatiently.

"There," Farah finally announced, "I just finished cracking the encryption. There's... there's a lot here; ledgers, spreadsheets, cost analyses... and a single Holo file."

"I recognize the coding on that file!" Kamea exclaimed, "My father authorized his archivists in House Madeira to install a Holo-recording system in Arano palace before his death, in order to preserve an ongoing record of important diplomatic events," she looked up at Riana with excitement, "the system must still be active... and Alexander's family had access to it!"

"Throw it up on screen, Farah." Riana ordered. Farah acknowledged and, suddenly, an image of Santiago Espinosa appeared on the holotable.

"... I understand your hesitancy, daughter," he began in his typical cruel voice, "it's a difficult thing, what I'm asking you to do, but this galaxy is a hard and uncaring place. If our Directorate is to thrive, we must be even harder!"

The image shifted and Victoria came into view. "I have no qualms about killing for the greater glory of the Directorate, father, but this..." she looked down in an uncharacteristic moment of doubt, "Please help me understand. Show me the wisdom in carrying out this attack, because I cannot see it myself!"

The group listened with rising tension as Director Espinosa laid out a plan to attack a port city and set up a cold war conflict between the Protectorate and the Federated Suns. The entire attack plan, his reasoning, and Victoria's reluctant part. "We've got them," Lady Arano said under her breath, "by all the gods, we've *got* them!"

"It doesn't even matter what's in the rest of this archive," Darius stared wide-eyed at the recording, "this will turn the Taurians against the Directorate! Protector Calderon will want Espinosa's head on a plate!"

A slow, wicked smile spread across Riana's face as she raised her head. "Then let's go serve it to them!"

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"Lady Arano!" Riana rushed towards the airlock just as Kamea was going through to get back to her Leopard, "Wait a moment, please!"

Kamea signaled her pilot to go ahead and prepare as she turned to meet her, "What is it, Hysteria?"

"My lady," Riana said, out of breath from running. One hand slipped around her abdomen as she fought a rising wave of nausea, "you said before the mission that you wanted to speak about something."

"I'm sorry, Riana," she reached out with a hand and gently let it brush against her cheek before it came to rest on her shoulder, "but it will have to wait. I have much to do to get this intel to the Taurians and we have to marshal our forces to liberate Tyrlon. I'll need you there, Hysteria. House Parata will be key to our final push to Coromodir."

Riana visibly deflated. "I understand my lady. *Revenge* is yours."

"Yes," she said almost absentmindedly, letting her hand once again caress Riana's cheek, which promptly blushed, "you and your company have done so much for the Restoration. Believe me when I say that I couldn't have done this without you." She offered a soft smile and leaned in to kiss her on the other cheek. "Thank you."

"I am yours, my lady," Riana breathed, her knees weak as all of her tactile senses focused on the lingering warmth left on her cheek by Lady Arano's lips. Kamea just smiled again before disappearing through the airlock. As soon as the door closed Riana leaned back against the wall, her heart pounding. Her mind filled with thoughts, racing through a hundred possibilities following the war...

And then she vomited on the floor.



The *Argo's* interior rumbled with the firing of her main engines as the ship decelerated for orbital insertion around the arid, but agricultural, world of Tyrlon V. It was one of two habitable planets in the system, the other being the actual seat of House Parata, but this was their breadbasket with farms clustered around the rivers and floodplains. It was also where the vast majority of the Directorate's DropShips were presently parked, resupplying from those farms. "An Army's biggest foe isn't the Enemy," Riana mumbled as she studied the image of the planet on the HoloTable, "but it's own stomach."

"Hmm?" Darius looked up from his terminal, "What's that?"

"Just something Sir Raju used to say," Hysteria replied before making eye contact with him, "Darius, if he were here this war would have been over in six months."

"I believe it," the XO nodded, "the man was a consummate professional; a strategic mind. Commander Markum had complete confidence in his abilities. Said we could always count on his tactics," he looked up with a grin, "and he didn't say that about anybody else, either!"

"I can't believe this stroke of luck," Riana mused, "why have so many in one place at one time?"

"Overconfidence," Darius shook his head, "it's a noble thing... no offense," he adjusted his terminal and brought up new points on the display, "Espinosa feels invincible, and it's not without reason. Field intelligence suggests the spaceport is protected by three major gun batteries. With the heavy cloud cover orbital targeting is sketchy so an attack on Tyrlon is going to be peppered with flak on the way down. Any DropForce is going to be halved by the time they hit the ground and the local garrison is supported by heavy mortars. Director Espinosa knows that any Restoration assault on Tyrlon will result in such heavy losses that continued resistance would be improbable. High Lady Arano just wouldn't be *able* to continue fighting, especially to take Coromodir. An assault on Tyrlon is effective suicide for the Restoration."

"Which is where *we* come in," Riana purred.

"Expendable assets," Darius smirked.

"We're mercs," Riana shrugged, "that's the nature of the game."

"And the gamble is that Sumire is a good enough pilot to get the Leopard down without those batteries detecting us." The XO tilted his head as he talked, a hint of doubt emerging.

"The pilot who navigated the Panzyr debris field *unassisted*?" Hysteria cocked an eyebrow, playfully, "Relax, Dare, those clouds don't *just* hide the guns... they'll hide *us* too."

"Even if they do," Darius sounded worried, "those guns won't be undefended. This isn't like Itrom; as soon as you get close, the whole *planet* will know you're there."

"We're *always* outnumbered," Hysteria said dismissively, "but I doubt OpFor will be anything to write home about; most of the garrison will be at the spaceport. They'd be fools to abandon it. So all we're going to have to deal with is a few Lances dedicated to protecting the guns, and since they don't see a lot of action I'm willing to bet they aren't in the best kept repair."

"Yeah," Darius admitted, "but don't forget about those mortars..."

"Say what you mean," Riana stood and turned to face him fully, folding her arms, "spit it out, I don't have time to play word games, XO."

"You don't need to be going on this Drop." Darius stood and aped her stance, folding his own arms. "We've got five healthy MechWarriors on staff besides you and they are *paid* to pilot BattleMechs."

"Are you going to do this every time?" Riana asked with disgust.

"Yeah, I might," Darius fired back.

"I thought you said this was *my* decision to make?" She challenged him.

"It *is* your decision," the XO admitted, "but I don't have to agree with it! Even from a business point of view, why keep so many pilots on staff if you're going to go on every drop?"

"If I fire some people will you shut up?" she asked with exasperation.

"Probably not," he shook his head, "because Yang's right. This is all an unnecessary risk to your health."

"I thought I explained this all last time," she sighed, "I'm going to see this war through to the end, to the end or until I can't fit in the cage. I'm not going to let you or Yang or *anybody* else make this choice for me so get the fuck over it, Dare, and this had better be the last time we have this conversation!"

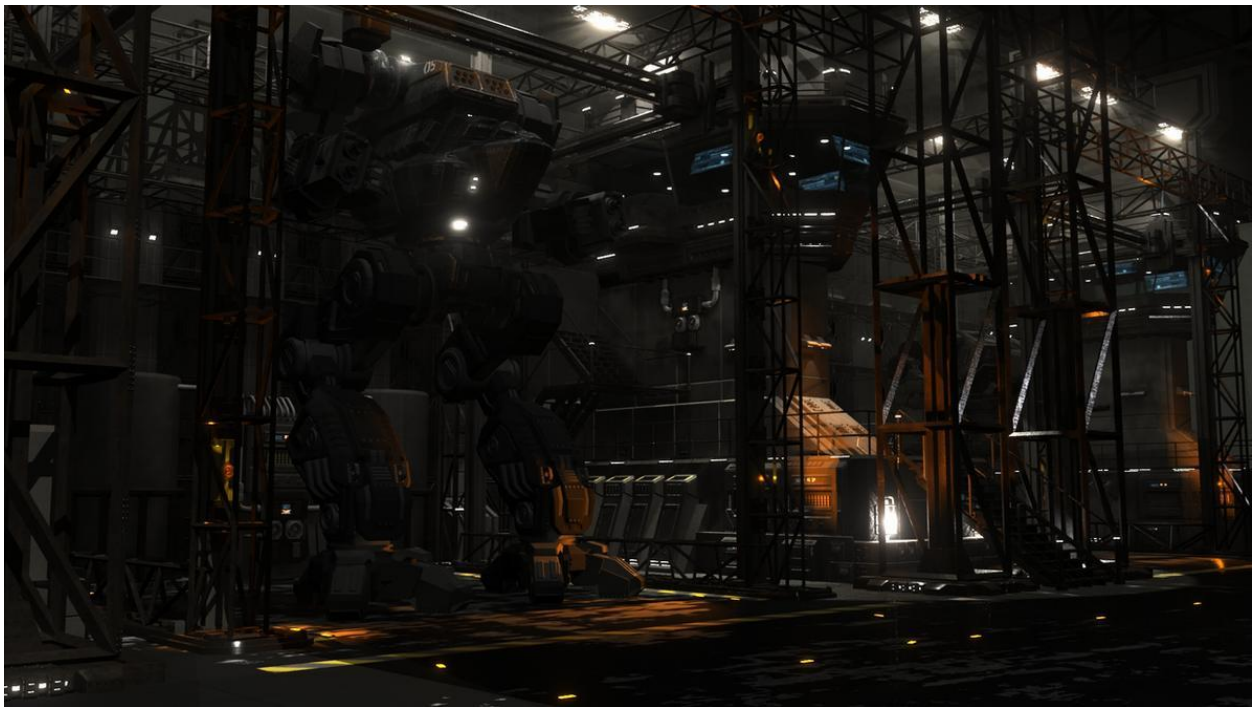
"I can't make promises, Ri," Darius shook his head, "I know you don't like to talk about it but we're *family*, you know?" he chuckled a little, "Us Artru kids gotta stick together."

The comment broke the tension and Riana felt a smile creep over her face. It was ridiculous, of course, that someone from a private plantation and someone who grew up on Deck 28 of Nassau Heights shared *anything* other than the name of the planet that their Habs orbited. "All right, Dare, I get it," she chuckled back, "but look: I'll be in the Highlander bringing up the rear. I'm there as clean up so the Lance can keep moving, they're going to be the ones taking most of the risk," she paused as he nodded, seemingly accepting her reasoning, "but seriously," she added, "if you don't drop all this worry... *I'll cut you.*"

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This was actually a pretty fun battle. With the targets being the gennies that power the guns OpFor was pretty ineffective against Vamp's CQC oriented Banshee, Corsair's fast-moving Grasshopper, and Glitch's multi-targeting with the Archer. Anything that survived their encounter with those three didn't have much left for Riana's AC/20+++ Kaliyama. Pretty much by design the Lance moved from Alpha to Bravo first, but Hysteria, in her role, got separated from the group pretty early. As the Lance sped up the mountain to take out Bravo, Hysteria's Highlander marched up the main road towards Charlie. This had a divisive effect on the OpFor; they just didn't seem to know who to target! Clearly Vamp's full-speed blitzkrieg was concerning, and whenever he got in range he became to focal target, but Riana was able to perform fire support from below with her LRM's and the AC/10 I slapped on the other arm. She took a LOT of fire, though. The enemy always had a height advantage on her and, at one point, I worried she might lose a limb. Her armor held out though, and as a distraction she provided a *lot* of prey for the Grasshopper and Corsair's Alpha Strikes. In all, I really couldn't have asked for a better performance. Zero casualties, pretty minimal damage. Mostly all I lost was armor and ammo.

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The Highlander shook as the docking clamps secured it in place. Riana paused with her hand on the cockpit release lever. She could already see both Darius *and* Yang standing on the catwalk outside. She let out a deep sigh. "Great..." she pulled the lever. The Highlander's cockpit opened and, as she continued to power down her reactor, the MechTechs leaned in to unfasten her cage, extracting her from the HGN-732B. As the buckles fell away and she gained the ability to stand

up she could see Darius and Yang, both with their arms folded, staring up at her. 'Here we go,' she thought, but just then Yang unfolded his arms and began to clang his metal palm onto the rail of the catwalk, rhythmically. Before she could ask what was going on Darius joined him, slowly clapping his hands together. Within moments the MechBay of the *Argo* was filled with thunderous applause as the Techs cleared the way for her to move down the ladder as the staff and pilots of *Riana's Revenge* cheered with wild abandon. Hysteria blushed as she made her way down the ladder only to be scooped up by Sly the moment her feet touched the catwalk. "Let go of me, dummy!" she struggled as he swung her around and deposited her into a group that consisted of Apex, Dr. Murad, and about a dozen more Argo crew that didn't really belong in the MechBay. "What's going on?" she asked, the smile infectious spreading across her face as Darius and Yang forced their way through the crowd.

"Lady Arano reports that occupation of the spaceport is a success!" Darius yelled over the din, "We did it, Commander... the Directorate fleet is grounded here at Tyrlon. The road to the capital lies open!"

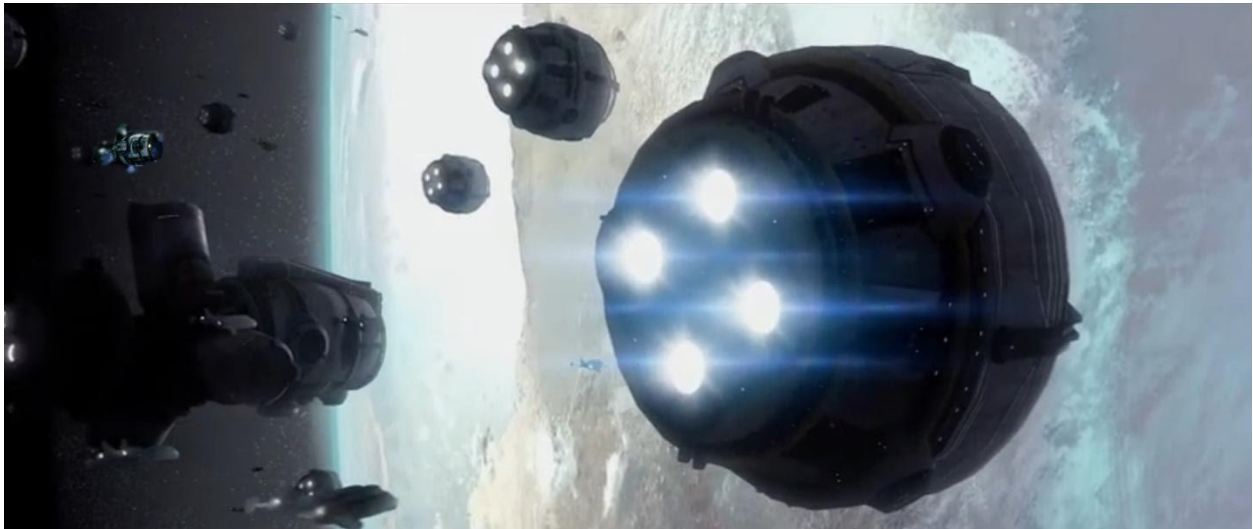
"Nothing can stop us now!" Sly grabbed her shoulders from behind, bouncing excitedly, "The Taurians are out of the war and the Director doesn't have enough boats left to fish with, let alone move troops!"

"That was very brave of you," Yang said, more somberly, as he approached and put a hand on her arm. He indicated the slagged armor, exposed structure, and overall ruin that covered her Mech, "your diversion enabled the Lance to hit all three generators in rapid succession. You didn't just save your team, you no doubt saved *thousands* of Restoration soldiers on approach."

I couldn't have done it without you, Chief," she smiled at him, relieved that she wasn't in for a lecture, "if I didn't have you to keep me alive out there my antics would have gotten me killed a long time ago!" He scooped her up in a big hug as the cheering continued throughout the bay until the Coms tone sounded.

"Attention! May I have your attention please," it was Sumire's voice echoing through the Argo, "All Command staff, MechWarriors, and senior officers report to the galley immediately... this Timbiqui Dark isn't going to drink itself!" Another general cheer went up as Apex slid up next to Riana.

"Don't worry boss," she winked, "I'll drink your share."



- Coromodir -
Capital of the Aurigan Reach
Seat of the Directorate

The Holotable crackled to life as the image of Santiago Espinosa, tinged blue and rippling with scan lines, appeared above the surface. His cruel face split in an insincere smile as he spoke. "Kamea," he purred, "Welcome home. We haven't spoken face-to-face since your father's funeral." Riana bristled at the comment but Lady Arano kept her face an inscrutable mask as she waited for him to speak again. "Strange, isn't it?" he continued, "For all the time we've been at fighting each other, for all of our struggles these last few years, we haven't actually *talked* until now."

Riana opened her mouth to speak, her lips curled back in anger, but an almost imperceptible gesture from Kamea gave her pause. "I am not hear to talk with you, Uncle," her voice carried cold and clear, "I am here to demand your surrender."

"Then I'm afraid you'll walk away from this parlay disappointed," Espinosa shook his head in feigned regret, "did I teach you nothing, Kamea? The endgame is a time for negotiation, not demands."

"I learned a lot about betrayal and treason from you," Riana interjected but Kamea silenced her again with a raised hand.

"I remember your lessons well enough Uncle," Lady Arano sneered subconsciously as she spoke, "if our positions were reversed you would attack without hesitation or mercy!" Santiago granted

her a small smile and an approving glint shone in his eyes. "The Founding Houses have rallied behind me," Kamea continued, lifting her chin triumphantly, "you are outnumbered and you have nowhere left to turn. Aside from a single hostage, you have *nothing* to negotiate with."

"A single hostage?" Santiago stifled a chuckle, "He's your dearest friend! Surely he means more to you than *nothing*."

"Alexander means a great deal to me," she admitted, "but I would sacrifice *any* one person, even myself, for the good of the Reach." She stiffened her posture and stood at parade rest, looking her nose down at him. "You are defeated, Uncle. Concede!"

Any semblance of friendliness or mirth vanished from Espinosa's face as his stance stiffened as well. "I've heard your proposal and now you will hear mine;" he hissed, "You will leave this system in my hands and establish your power base elsewhere. *I* will rule Coromodir and I will hold your friend to ensure your good behavior! You will agree to these terms or you will *die*."

"*I* will die?" Now it was Kamea's turn to suppress a laugh, "Your words are mere air, Uncle! You have nothing left to threaten me with."

"So you believed when you moved on Castle Nautilus," Santiago crooned, so you thought when you destroyed the *Newgrange*!"

"You're bluffing," Kamea growled, "and I am willing to wager my life on it! My DropShips are already making their descent as we speak... I'll see you on the field of battle!"

"Yes," Espinosa let the word leak out in a malicious hiss, "I suppose you will." Suddenly his image disappeared.

"If he won't surrender," Riana began, her eyes lifting to Kamea, "good. Let it be his funeral!"

"And it may be Alexander's as well..." Kamea's spirit lowered visibly for a moment, "but there's nothing we can do about that now. We cannot delay the attack." She turned and took a few steps into the center of the room before spinning around and letting her gaze sweep across the room; Darius, Farah, Riana, Apex, Glitch, Corsair, Vamp, Big Sly, Yang, and Sumire. Gone was the image of loss, replaced by iron resolve. "You all heard my uncle's demands. He made them *knowing* I'd refuse. I think that he's stalling... but I do not know what for, and that's what worries me. So I have decided to take that option away from him. Darius! Raise the Founding

Houses on the comms. Tell them that I am ordering them to drop, *all* of our companies, our entire fleet... everything we have. As always, I will lead them from the front. We are taking Coromodir, and we are doing it now."

"Hot fucking damn!" Apex grinned, clapping her hands together.

"Hysteria," at her callsign Riana stiffened, "I want you to remain at the ready until I call for you. Prepare your Lance and await my signal."

"Revenge is yours, my lady," Hysteria bowed her head as, next to her, Apex folded her arms in a pouting fashion.

"We are going to *crush* what remains of my uncle's Directorate," Lady Arano continued, "With your company's help, I will retake the throne stolen from me and, come hell or high water, we *will* rescue Lord Madeira... I swear it on my father's name!"

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The battle was fully involved when the open comms flared to life in Kamea's Atlas. Through its crackle and the concussions of warfare she could identify Concordant Commodore Samuel Ostergaard's voice. "You should have listened to your uncle, Lady Arano. We have unfinished business, you and I..."

Aboard the *Argo* Darius hit the ship's comms and fed the transmission live through the bay where the Lance was loading the Leopard. "Riana!" he called, "Live feed! It's Ostergaard! He's broadcasting on the open comms!"

"The *Iberia* still carries a full compliment of BattleMechs," the Commodore continued, "plus enough firepower to level a city! Now know this: it is too late to withdraw your forces! When I reach Coromodir I will drown your Restoration in a sea of fire!! Every dog in Arano colors will die! You took my son from me, Kamea. *My* hope for the future died with him... now I'm killing *yours*."

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"Report!" Riana ordered as she stormed back into operations, already in her DropSuit.

"Well, Boss," Yang began, following her inside, "things look pretty grim, but hey! At least we've figured out what Espinosa's secret weapon is."

"Thanks for that ray of sunshine, Chief," Darius retorted sarcastically, "The *Iberia* is closing fast on Coromodir. They'll be in position to rain death on the Restoration long before they can withdraw.

"The transmission that was sent," Farah began, "did any of you see the wall behind Ostergaard? There were burn marks, bullet holes... his sailors must have tried to seize the bridge."

"If zere vas a mutiny attempt aboard ze *Iberia* zen it failed," Vamp said with dejection, "no doubt he's defying Taurean orders. He's gone rogue."

"As unhinged as Ostergaard is," Sumire offered, "he's right; it is too late for Lady Arano to withdraw the Restoration forces without the Directorate cutting them to ribbons, and nothing we have aboard the *Argo* can stop a Fortress-class Dropship."

"At least, not through conventional means," Dr. Murad said thoughtfully.

"Then we'll have to be unconventional," Riana cracked a smile, "what's up, doc?"

"We're going to use the Locura," she returned Riana's grin.

"The *hell* did you just say??" Darius exclaimed.

"Nuh-uh, No way!" Sumire stomped her foot, "Doctor, that code *completely screwed us* at Castle Nautilus! It nearly detonated our fuel tanks! It is too dangerous to go tinkering around with, we can't..."

"We don't have a choice!" Farah snapped, "It is the closest thing we have to a weapon that could destroy that ship! Lady Arano is engaged on the surface, if the *Iberia* gets within range they are doomed, and she committed the entire fleet to this attack!"

"I hate to say it," Yang began, " but Doc Murad's right. If we can't do something to stop him, Ostergaard will put an end to the Restoration," he looked over at Riana forlornly, "and to Lady Arano herself."

"Do you really think we can use it?" Glitch asked, clearly scared of the implication, "Do you really think it will work?"

"Yes, I believe it will," Farah nodded confidently, "Even if it doesn't destroy the *Iberia* it will cripple her long enough to take her out of the fight, but that code is a science experiment... not a weapon."

"The hell it isn't!" Darius stood up, "It nearly killed us all!"

"*That* was the science experiment," Farah said ominously, "wait til you see the weapon."

"Can you do it?" Riana asked, "Can you do it in time?"

"I think I can modify it, but there will be risks... I can't offer any guarantees."

"If you want to commit suicide then I can just put the *Argo* in the *Iberia's* path!!" Su snapped, "Commander this can *not* be the option! I can take the Leopard to the surface and evacuate Lady Arano, then we can regroup..."

"If we don't do this then Ostergaard wipes out the Restoration with impunity," Riana said with gravity, "There won't be a regrouping and you know it, there won't be anybody left. Lady Arano won't leave her forces to die, no, Kamea Arano will die... I can *not* let that happen."

"I'd imagined you'd feel that way. I will go ahead and get started." Farah began to leave but then paused, standing in front of a fuming Darius. "We're going to need a way to get the code onto Ostergaard's ship. I'd suggest taking over a ground-based comms array, something on a network that the *Iberia's* computer trusts."

"Wait a minute," Darius turned, his fingers moved to his chin as he was lost in thought for a moment, "There's a comm station on Lyris, the second moon. It was the system's primary

communications hub back when we fought the pirates on Fjaldr in '19, that's how we were able to get our reinforcements request to Sir Raju!"

"If the Directorate is still using it!" Sumire interjected, "That was thirteen years ago!"

"The Directorate didn't change much," Apex offered, shrugging off the glances she got, "when I worked for Lady Victoria she went on and on about how they 'repurposed' and 'upgraded' Arano installations. No reason to change what works, right? Just make it your own."

"Iz not uncommon at all," Vamp mused, "all you need do iz change flags, da? Like mercenaries!"

"You could use this station to transmit the Locura, then *destroy* it," Farah grinned at Sumire, "the control tower is automated, so there shouldn't be any collateral damage. You'd be killing two birds with one stone."

"I like how you think, doc," Yang smiled broadly, "I'll rig the explosives."

"We're likely to encounter heavy resistance when we touch down," Dr. Murad continued, "I'll see if I can find an engineering solution to help up deal with it... maybe my team could seize control of their turrets, make them fight for us for a change."

"I like friendly guns," Riana nodded, "Yang, you'd better have your guys get that rumble seat prepped... two of them if you're coming."

"If it's all the same, I may sit this one out," Yang said, "the last time I rode shotgun I nearly froze my lungs and *you* nearly died... I fear me-in-a-rumble-seat may be an albatross."

"I can do it," Farah offered, "I'm the best choice. I know how to prep the signal and I'm confident I can rig explosives; engineers sometimes destroy to create, remember?"

"This won't be a walk in the park, doc," Riana said with concern, "you sure you want to do this?"

"You're going, aren't you?" she raised her eyebrows, "then I am to!"

"Ri," Darius moved towards Riana, concern splashed across his face, "you're starting to show now. How far along are you?"

"Not having this conversation again, Dare," Riana's tone featured a warning, "if I can fit in the 'pit, I'm going. We haven't come this far for me to sit out the end of this war."

"You should probably bring a jump-capable Lance, Commander," Farah moved in beside Riana, turning her around and beginning to guide her out of CIC, "comm arrays like the one on Lyris tend to be housed on elevated platforms, lots of ramps and choke points."

Riana nodded, turning back to Darius. "Alert Lady Arano of our intentions. Tell her that it is vital that Ostergaard's attention remains fixed on the Restoration Army. I don't want him to realize what's going on on Lyris until it is far too late." She took a deep breath, a steel resolve forming in her eyes. "Tell her to move on Cordia City; accelerate her offensive into the capital... that should buy us all the time we need."

"I imagine she'll like that idea," Darius nodded, "all right! We've got a job to do, people... and it'll be the biggest challenge we've ever taken on! So put on your war faces and follow the Commander's lead; we've got a Fortress-class DropShip to crash!"

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The 'techs scurried like ants, getting Vamp's Banshee, Apex's Battlemaster, and Corsair's Grasshopper secured in the hold of the Leopard, along with Hysteria's Highlander and the assorted vehicles that Farah's team were going to use to get the turrets operational. Hysteria adjusted the harness across her lap, trying to insure that it would not constrict her belly during the operation. She fussed with the 'techs who worked on her, finally closing the cage as the 'techs cleared. Giving Yang a 'thumbs up' she hit the switch and closed the cockpit to the HGN-732B, listening to the satisfying sound of it hermetically sealing as the lights of the Assault Mech flared to life inside. Almost subconsciously she performed all the actions on her checklist at speed, as she looked up to her HUD and switched to the rear view. "How you doing back there, doc?"

"We haven't even left yet and I think I may be sick!" Farah chuckled in half-jest. "I don't know how you do this, mission after mission. I mean, I've been in warzones but never inside of a BattleMech before!"

"There's no safer place to be," Riana quipped.

"On the contrary," Dr. Murad shot back, "*everyone* shoots at the building-sized robot bristling with guns!"

"Yeah, but we shoot back!" she turned her head and smiled, then her face became serious. "Hey doc," she began quietly, "do you mind keeping it down for a minute or two?"

"Getting your head in the game?" Dr. Murad asked.

"No," Hysteria admitted, "I'm... I'm going to record a message... to Kru, so if you don't mind..."

"I'm not even here." Dr. Murad smiled warmly, closing her eyes as they could feel the Leopard detach from the Argo and fire her engines.

Riana keyed her comms to begin the recording and then took a deep breath. "To anyone who recovers this drive, this is a message from Lady Riana Annika Klaue of House Klaue on Avaloch, a private Hab in orbit around Artru, and Commander of Riana's Revenge, a Mercenary Company retained by the Arano Restoration to Todd Ryia, commoner of Solaris VII and member of the Solaris PD Special Forces Unit presently engaged with Carlyle's Gray Death Legion as a MechWarrior. If you are in possession of this drive, please see it delivered to him: Detective Todd "Death Krusade" Ryia of the Gray Death Company." She paused for a moment and took another deep breath before continuing.

"Kru," she began softly, "I hope you're alright. I know... I know *why* you left. I can't blame you, and I couldn't help it. I *wanted* to love you; you were great. Great to me, great as a MechWarrior. I could always count on you for anything. Hell, I can't do anything right! It's like I won't allow myself to be happy. I know... I *realize* that Kamea cannot love me the way I love her. She *can't*. She's a High Lady, a Queen for fuck's sake. She could never officially be with an ex-pirate mercenary with a very lurid past, but *you* could have." A tear rolled down her cheek as she looked at her belly, struggling to maintain her composure, "So, um, sort of a lot has happened since you left. You, heh you left something... by accident, and I'm too much of a coward to contact you and tell you about it! I will, I mean I mean to... *meant* too, because if you get this then I suppose I'm dead and so's the Restoration and none of this mattered at all." She struggled for the words between sobs now, her eyes filled with tears as she gestured left and right, trying to compose herself. "I'm sorry," she managed through the tears, "I'm sorry I drove you away, I'm sorry I was so selfish, so stupid!" She swallowed, forcing the emotion down to a manageable level. "Todd, I'm carrying your son. I'm carrying him right into a war. I carried both of us right into death and I did it for selfish reasons and I never told you about it and I'm *sorry*." She sniffed and wiped her eyes, defiance flaring in them. "I'm sorry but I *have* to do this. If you are watching this then I failed but if I *didn't* go... then I'd be dead anyway. Ostergaard and his Taureans are

going to kill everyone unless I stop him. Know that I died proud; proud to fight for what I believe in, proud to do the *right* thing, proud to have called you a companion and a lover," she paused, steeling her composure, "proud to carry *your* baby." She took another deep breath and smiled warmly. "Home is the Regiment, Kru, our family and our own! I love you, you big mook." With that she hit stop and let her head hang.

"That was very brave," Farah reached forward and put a hand on her shoulder. Riana reached up and their fingers intertwined. "Now you just need to say it to his face."

"I know," Riana exhaled, "I know. First, let's just get through this war!"

"And then?" Farah goaded.

"And then..." she paused again, "I need to speak to Kamea."

Part XXXVII



"I think I bit my tongue!" Doctor Murad exclaimed from her spot in the rumble seat of Hysteria's Highlander.

"Sorry about the rough landing, Farah," Sumire's voice crackled over the comm as the Leopard lifted away, "you okay in there?"

"Yeah, I'm alright," she touched the tip of her tongue with her fingers and checked for blood, "this rumble seat is even less comfortable than it looks, though."

"Tell me about it," Yang's voice now came through the comms, "did you find the care package I left in there for you?"

"Yes," she uprighted the package with her foot from her seat, "I'm just glad that landing didn't set them off! I'll use them to bring down the control tower after I've uploaded the Locura to the *Iberia*. Let's get moving, Commander, Lady Arano is counting on us."

"Everybody is counting on us," Hysteria corrected her, "all right, people. Target's dead ahead. Move in at speed and let's get this place secured! CE Teams, let the BattleMechs take the lead. We don't know what kind of resistance to expect so let us engage before you move in on those turrets." All four combat engineer teams acknowledged as the Lance surged forwards.

"I'm reading three, no four bogeys, dead ahead," Corsair called out as he moved his Grasshopper into the lead, "got a Vindy advancing, incoming fire!"

"Zat was a close one," Vamp called as a PPC shot sizzled past his Banshee, "Vy do ze always target me first?"

"I'm sure it has nothing to do with you piloting a 95-ton Assault Mech built to deliver pain?" Apex quipped, "Hell, I'd target you first too."

"Zat's fair," Vamp conceded, "Pain Delivery, en route; no shooting, just running!" He thrust his Mech into a headlong sprint, his favorite tactic, ignoring the volley of LRMs that exploded all around him, fired from an enemy Orion. "Watch it," he chastised, "you'll scratch ze paint."

Despite the Banshee's charge, Corsair pulled into the lead with his nimble Grasshopper. "Boss, we've got heavy shredder turrets."

"Do *not* engage," Hysteria reminded him, "leave them intact for the CE teams."

"I copy," he replied, calling up his targeting lens for a called shot to the Vindy's right shoulder, "let's see if I can do some damage to that PPC." He unleashed an Alpha Strike, slagging armor to the shoulder and revealing structure beneath even as another enemy Mech hit him with an LRM volley.

"Silly Jenner," Apex cooed, targeting the offending Mech, "your opponent today is *me*." She fired the Battlemaster's AC/5 and her Snub PPC, hammering the smaller Mech, meanwhile Vamp broke from his charge to take cover in the trees, targeting the Vindy that Corsair had struck, melting off more armor but failing to do any real structural damage. Just after his medium lasers impacted, four PPC shots from CE Team 4 streaked in, impairing the Vindy's sensors and accelerating the Mech's armor loss.

"Here comes the fun part, doc," Riana grinned as she advanced the Highlander and targeted the Vindy with her LRM 20, "let's see how well you shoot once we take that arm off!" The missiles arced into the sky and rained down on the weakened Vindicator, destroying the right arm and torso, rocking the enemy Mech.

"Taking turret fire," Apex reported as the shredder's rounds slammed into her right shoulder, "let's get these teams in place so we can silence those guns!"

"I second that!" Vamp echoed, taking fire from both a heavy laser turret and a shredder. Just then CE Team 1 streaked past Vamp in their Sleipnir APC, cutting the wheel hard and sliding into wooded cover behind the Vindicator. "Bold, zat one," Vamp said with admiration.

"Focus people," Hysteria admonished her Lance as Team 2 raced past her position, "they're doing their job, now let's make sure we do ours! Take out that Opfor, protect the teams!" Even as she spoke, the Vindy fled and turned its weapons on Team 2, albeit minus its trademark PPC.

"You heard the boss," Apex grinned as she followed closely behind Team 2's Sleipnir, and firing all weapons at the Jenner, taking off the left arm and torso, "Badass!" she said in satisfaction.

"Okay, it's official!" Farah winced as the Highlander received a pummeling by LRMs, "Rumble seats are a bad idea! And I don't like getting shot at, I really, *really* don't!" Ahead of them, Team 2's Sleipnir disappeared in a cloud of fire and explosions as an enemy Catapult opened up on them.

"Eyes on Team 2," Hysteria confirmed, "they lost a *lot* of armor but they're still in one piece." She pulled up her Multi-Targeting and directed her LRMs to the Orion while her AC/20, lasers, and infernos targeted the Jenner. "Let's see how *you* can handle *this*." The cockpit of the Mech was cacophonous as the 14-ton gun fired a burst, ripping *through* the Jenner's center torso and collapsing the Mech into burning salvage.

"Powering down enemy turrets, Commander," CE Team 1 came across the comms, to everyone's relief, "give us a moment and we'll rewrite their targeting protocols."

"Team 2 in position!" the second team called as their damaged Sleipnir pulled up to the tower, "Powering down now. Modification of protocols in progress."

"Let's keep 'em busy!" Apex said as she leveled a left hook with her Battlemaster into the right torso of the Catapult, exposing structure and tearing away armor.

"How's *this* for busy?" Corsair grinned as he pulled into a flanking position on the Orion, pulling up his lens for a targeted Alpha Strike on the Mech's head. The Grasshopper's laser suite was pinpoint accurate, melting armor and the ferro-glass of the cockpit, weakening it just enough that the volley of SRMs tore into it and detonated the Mech's head. "That's a kill!" he called out triumphantly.

"I've been waiting for you," Vamp positioned his Banshee behind the Vindy, who had just taken a shot at Team 1's Sleipnir. He keyed off his flamers, instead relying on the actuators of his Friedhof Hercules arm modification. Cocking back the left arm, the thrusters fired and the arm rocketed through the damaged Vindicator, tearing it to pieces as the GM 180 engine exploded around it. "Target eliminated," he reported.

"They're getting desperate," Apex commented as the Catapult broke away and fired missiles at Team 1's position. She repositioned and target locked the Mech's left leg, destroying it in an Alpha Strike. "Got past the armor," she said as the 65-ton Mech crashed to the ground, "I do believe you are proverbially *fucked*."

"Indeed," Corsair chimed in happily as his GHR-5H gleefully stomped through the Catapult's left torso, separating the arm just before unleashing an array of small laser fire. "Scored a critical hit, Commander."

"Let's heat zings up, shall ve?" Vamp moved up to the left of Corsair and fired a full salvo of lasers and flamers at the downed Mech, smiling at the resulting detonation of the enemy's reactor core. "Opfor eliminated, Kommander," he reported, "time to deliver ze package."

"Full speed ahead," she smiled over her shoulder at Farah, "you holding up okay?"

"I'm just glad that part is over!" she said with audible relief, "Let's get to that tower and bring that DropShip down!"

"Spread out, MechWarriors," Hysteria commanded as she raced towards the tower, "they had plenty of time to call for reinforcements. I want you entrenched and ready to receive visitors. Keep them *away* from the tower; this is the most critical part of the entire war."

"Alpha turrets are ours, Commander!" Team 1 reported.

"Bravo turrets belong to us!" Team 2 added.

"Everyone hold this base," Hysteria reiterated, "expect heavy resistance."

"Do you really think they will attack before we can get out of here?" Farah asked, concern evident.

"You let us worry about them," Riana said reassuringly, "you just focus on getting that transmission uploaded to the *Iberia's* computers." She halted the Highlander right in front of the doors and opened the cockpit, fresh air flooding inside alongside the bright mid-day light. "You're up," she said, taking a knee with the giant Mech, "watch your step and don't drop the care package!"

"If it survived Su's landing I don't think I have anything to worry about!" she joked, shouldering the bag.

"I can hear you," the pilot reminded them.

Dr. Murad struggled down the side of the Mech, dropping the last few feet to the ground and stumbling to keep her balance. She moved up to the door and tapped at the keypad. "It's locked!" she exclaimed.

"Let me try mine," Hysteria said, extending the Highlanders arm and a finger, pressing the door in until it caved under the strain. Farah nodded with a smile and ducked inside.

"All right, I'm inside," her voice came over the comms as Hysteria resealed her cockpit and stood up, "should take me a few minutes to find the array's control center, hook up the drive, and prep the system to transmit the Locura to the *Iberia*. On that note, I'm going radio silent for a bit. I need to concentrate while I work on this. I'll be in touch soon."

As if on cue Darius' voice overrode the comms. "Heads up Commander! We've got a Directorate Lance touching down!"

"That was fast," Riana grumbled as she turned to see the enemy Leopard landing *inside* the compound, "let's roll out the welcome mat!"

"I prefer the 'fuck you' mat," Apex quipped. Even as she spoke, the Leopard combat-dropped a full Lance and a Directorate Archer targeted and destroyed a Heavy Shredder turret. "Aw hell," she complained, "we didn't even get to *use* that one!"

"Commander!" Corsair called, "You've got incoming!"

"I see it," Hysteria swiveled and positioned herself protectively in front of the tower door, taking the brunt of the LRMs raining down at the tower, "they suspect something! Take these assholes down!" She gritted her teeth as the baby kicked her solidly in protest of all the jostling. "Yeah," she cooed under her breath, "they're pissing *me* off too!"

"I'm reading an Orion, and Archer, a Rifleman, and a Thunderbolt," Corsair reported as he targeted the Orion's head with a missile volley. He grimaced as the missiles struck home, but failed to penetrate the armor. "Oh well, can't have *all* the luck."

"They're wearing these turrets out, boss," Apex warned, just before tagging the Rifleman in the head with an autocannon/PPC combined attack.

"Better they focus on them than us," Hysteria commented, "move up! Flank them! Get behind them!"

As she spoke, Vamp sprinted across a raised platform, fired his jump jets, and landed right in front of the Directorate Thunderbolt, unleashing an Alpha Strike of combined lasers and flamers resulting in a variety of explosions as heatsinks melted and the Mech's SRM launcher deformed. "Structure exposed!" he called, "and I think it got a little hot in zere too!" Behind the Thunderbolt, the Archer's LRM ammo detonated under a PPC assault by CE Team 4, the torso

exploded and took off the left arm as well. "Ooo," Vamp chuckled, "I zink zat hit something good!" Moments later the Archer lost its *right* torso and arm under a sustained attack of missiles, lasers, and autocannons all fired from Hysteria's Highlander and the turrets.

"He's feeling that," Hysteria smirked.

Corsair repositioned his Grasshopper to the left of the Orion and targeted the head once more. This time the lasers penetrated and the head exploded, the Mech crumpling to the ground. "How many times is that gonna work!??!" he exclaimed.

"Don't get cocky," Hysteria warned as her HUD showed the destruction of the Archer at the hands of CE Team 3, "stay on task and don't let them sneak through!"

"Relax, Kommander," Vamp said as he continued bathing the Thunderbolt in flames, even as his HUD showed the Rifleman lost an arm to CE Team 4, "zis is a milk run. Ze var is as good as won." He chuckled as the Thunderbolt attacked with its own flamer and lasers. "You've got *nothing*!"

"We've got them cornered, Commander," Corsair added, deploying his coolant and targeting the Rifleman's CT, destroying the reactor and the Mech along with it, "I think this is all over but the crying!"

"Actual," Hysteria called, "tell me they're not getting any transmissions off the surface."

"We've jammed comms up pretty good," Darius replied, "and that Leopard came from the only station within response distance on the surface. I don't want to get overly optimistic, but I'd say you've got this."

"Annnnd, done!" Vamp said as he punched out the core of the Thunderbolt, "Opfor is down Kommander. Ve are clear!"

"Stay frosty!" Darius called just as the celebratory mood threatened to emerge, "Assault Mechs inbound! That Leopard was flying low but I've got a read on 'em now! They're right on top of you!"

"I knew it was too easy!" Hysteria cursed, "Rally up! Looks like the Leopard made two trips! Let's take 'em out before he can make a third!"

"Contact!" Corsair called, "Northeast side! They're on the ground!"

"We've lost another turret," Apex said grimly, "not much left to shoot at but us."

"I've got a Jagermech on scope," Corsair said, "Apex, go for the CT," he advised as he unleashed an Alpha Strike on it, "he's all warmed up for you."

"I'm on it," she lined up her targeting reticule on the center torso and fired her AC and snub PPC. The combination ripped through the Mech's armor like butter, still glowing hot from the Grasshopper's lasers. "Hostile removed!" she said with satisfaction.

"They still have a Battlemaster and a Banshee," Corsair confirmed, "heavy metal."

"A Banshee?" Vamp asked as he kicked his Mech into gear, sprinting up the platform, "I am offended! *I* drive the Banshee around here!"

"They just took out another turret," Hysteria pivoted, targeting a Jenner that just popped up on scope, "don't let them get through to the tower!" She hit it hard, armor panels and structure flying off under heavy assault. "Oh shit, what is *that*?" The shadow of a low-flying Leopard swept over the battlefield as it touched down just to the south. "Actual? We've got more hostiles that you missed?"

"It's me," Sumire's voice came across the comms, "Commander, Farah? we've got a problem. I have a squadron of Directorate aerospace fighters on radar... and they're headed our way."

"Dammit!" Darius cursed, "We need to clear out of here before they arrive! How much time have we got?"

"Not much," Su replied, "and they're carrying enough hardware to blow our Leopard to hell and back again. We need to go, *now*."

"I can do this!" Farah's voice came over the comm, hurried and full of exasperation, "Just keep them off of me! I only need a few more minutes!"

"You heard her," Hysteria said with renewed determination, "Doc's orders: frag and slag! Hold these bastards off and then let's get out of here!"

"Commander, we're under attack! They're..." the transmission turned to static as an explosion erupted from the northeast side of the complex.

"APC down, Commander," Corsair reported the news, "we've lost Team 1." He locked on to the Jenner and hit it with as much heat as he could, destroying the Mech's left leg and the CT. "Let Farah know I got the bastard."

As the Lances exchanged fire Sumire cut in on the comms. "Commander, I don't want to alarm anyone but I'm a sitting duck here on the ground and those fighters are coming in supersonic."

"Working on it, Envoy," she hit both remaining Mechs but the infernos left burning gel on the Banshee, which burned through enough of the Mech's armor that the LRMs found a way through. The Banshee's CT exploded just as Vamp was coming into range.

"Aw, Kommander..." he whined, "zat was supposed to be *mine*."

"We're on the clock here," she reminded the Lance, "we don't want to be here when those fighters start dropping ordinance! Wrap it up! Target that Battlemaster with everything you've got!"

"Light 'em up!" Apex yelled as a sustained assault erupted from the Lance, the remaining CE Teams, and the last three turrets. The Directorate Mech staggered backwards, firing ineffectively as Vamp's lasers melted the actuators in its left leg. It buckled and went down, hard.

"I got this!" Corsair said above the din, firing his jump jets and arcing his Grasshopper high into the sky. "DEATH FROM ABOVE!!!" he screamed as the Mech's feet tore through the prone Battlemaster's right *and* left torso, ripping off arms and leaving him straddling the downed enemy. He took a step back and fired all of his support lasers, slicing off the right leg and leaving the Directorate pilot injured and trapped in an armless, legless burning hulk. "Enemy down!" He called triumphantly.

Suddenly a new transmission came over the open comms. "Attention, forces of the Arano Restoration! This is Commodore Samuel Ostergaard, formerly of the Concord Navy. As of today, I no longer serve my country; I come to you as a grieving father, not a Taurean sailor. My actions are my own. In three minutes' time, my ship will enter weapons range of your position! At that time, your lives will come to an abrupt end. I suggest you pray to whatever gods..."

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Suddenly an alarm klaxon blared over him, followed by confused shouting and static. "Whoops," Riana smirked, "sounds like someone is having *technical difficulties*."

"We now interrupt this bloviant, tiresome monologue to bring you screams of 'what the fuck' and 'holy shit,'" Apex could barely contain a laugh, "brought to you by *Riana's Revenge*!"

"Farah!" Sumire practically yelled into the comms, "we are OUT OF TIME! Those fighters are coming within weapons range, I need you to come out of there NOW!"

"Remote tripper armed, explosives primed... I'm ready!" she responded, "I don't think I can get to you in time... Commander, get your team out of here!"

"Settle down, Doctor Dramatic," Hysteria's Highlander skidded to a stop in front of the tower door as she fired open the cockpit, "your chariot awaits. Now let's get the hell out of here!"

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"The *Iberia* is gone, Uncle," Kamea's voice carried triumphantly over the Comms as the MechWarriors of Riana's Revenge looked on in the *Argo's* CIC, watching her image shimmer above the holotable, "Ostergaard cannot help you and you have no more cards to play. For the good of our people, lay down your arms. You must end this. Order your troops to stand down."

"*Our* people," Espinosa's image looked tired and uncharacteristically subdued, "that's what this has always been about, you know? Had you only listened to me I would *never* have taken your throne. I didn't desire power for my own sake. My only concern was for the Reach... for its prosperity... its... enduring glory."

"And yet you reached for that glory on the backs of our people!" Kamea said indignantly, "This... *thing* that you've built... it isn't who we are. It isn't what my father wanted. It isn't what the people wanted. Your Directorate has fallen, Uncle. Clinging to it will not help the Reach."

"Nothing will help the Reach," Santiago said with disgust, "not anymore. This war has doomed us all. The realm *bleeds*, Kamea. We're weaker now than we've ever been and, soon enough, the sharks will begin to circle."

"Save it," Riana growled, "you sanctioned Mastiff Montgomery's death. I owe you a bullet for that."

"You cannot kill me, mercenary," Espinosa sneered, "if you do you'll turn me into a martyr and the Reach will never, ever be at peace." He shifted his focus back to Lady Arano. "Kamea, listen to me. Coromodir is yours. I will stand down, but you must take me alive. The realm will tear itself apart if you don't. We must bring the people together or else the other nations will devour us."

"NO!" Suddenly, the image of Victoria Espinosa appeared over the table, "Father, you *cannot* do this! The Reach depends on the Directorate for survival! For glory! You told me that if we fall the realm will die!"

"The Directorate has already fallen, Victoria!" Espinosa snapped, "We have lost. Continuing to fight would only cost more lives and ensure our destruction. Surely, I raised you with enough grace to know when you are defeated."

"Cost lives?" Victoria sneered, "*Cost lives??!* You ordered me to kill *eleven thousand people* on Perdition and *now* you care about bloodshed?? There is an *ocean* of blood on my hands, Father! Blood I spilled because *you told me* it was necessary! Necessary for our people! Necessary for the Reach!!"

"And it was," Santiago replied with a sign, "but our gambit has failed. It is over, Victoria. I know that it is hard to accept, but you *must* stand down. As your leader I *order* it... as your father I *command* it."

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"No, Father!" she slammed her fists down, "You may have gone craven, but I.. I am a *MechWarrior*! I will *die* before I concede defeat!" She turned her attention dismissively towards the left, "You want this world, Cousin? Come and fight me for it! Come and take it!! Your Lance against mine, at the tourney grounds. The contest that was denied us; you and me... to the *death* for the Reach!"

"Are you not *tired* of death, Cousin?" Kamea asked with a mixture of exhaustion and loathing, "Was the Perdition Massacre not enough for you?"

"I did that for the Reach!" Victoria shrieked, "For our *people*! It was *my* responsibility, but I didn't have a *choice*! You... You don't understand, you'll never understand! You're *weak*! Always, you must rely on the strength of others to fight your battles! So I will make things easy for you. You don't *have* to understand why I've done the things I've done. You only need to face me in the arena, where I will best you as I have *always* done... as I was *trained* to do!" She lifted her chin high and sneered down her nose. "You will give me what I demand or your dear Alexander will pay the price! My father was too weak to kill him, but I am not!" She breathed heavily, her anger barely contained. "Accept my challenge, Kamea, or I will grind him to pulp under my BattleMech's foot!"

"I pity you, Cousin," Kamea said in disgust, "you'll have your fight... and yours will be the last blood I spill in this war." She cut their feed and addressed Riana directly: "Prepare your MechWarriors, Hysteria. When I face my cousin in the arena I want you by my side. You've earned this."

"At last," Riana scowled, "but *this* time you will not stop me. *This* time Victoria Espinosa will *die*. Raju Montgomery will be *avenged*. Any objections?"

"None at all," Kamea shook her head resolutely, "Victoria has more than earned whatever punishment you care to dish out. Have your Lance meet me at the tourney grounds. It is long past time that we brought this war to an end."

"*Revenge* is yours, my lady," Hysteria bowed her head.

"No Riana," Kamea corrected, "Revenge will be *ours*."



Kamea Arano was adrift in the maelstrom of her feelings. The war was over. Her uncle had capitulated. Her throne was restored and her people safeguarded. Yet the cost of this success was too high, and the price had yet to be paid fully. She felt distant and removed as she watched the MechTechs of *Riana's Revenge* load the Leopard with her Atlas II, Hysteria's Highlander, Vamp's Banshee, and Corsair's Black Knight. This would be her Lance to face off against her mad cousin, Victoria Espinosa, in what would be the final conflict of this long, bloody civil war. In the balance hung the life of her friend and confidant, Alexander Madeira, who had believed in her even when she hadn't. Victoria might simply kill him, she certainly would if Kamea failed. In all their duels during their training under Sir Raju Montgomery, Victoria had always, *always*, come out on top. She had always beaten her. She could not afford to lose this time. She was the Countess of Coromodir, the High Lady of the Aurigan Reach. In all but name, a Queen of her people. But it all hung now on this one fight, this one duel. If she were to lose, the Arano Restoration was over. She had no heirs, no family remaining with a valid claim to the throne... other than her Uncle Santiago. If she failed, the Directorate would continue and the war was all for nothing. *'Why did I let myself get baited into this?'* she thought.

She looked up as someone approached; it was Hysteria. Lady Riana Annika Klaue of House Klaue; the disgraced and disowned noble-turned-pirate-turned-mercenary. She smiled hollowly

at her approach. Riana had served as her personal guard at the appointment of Sir Raju. In many ways she thought of the mercenary as her sister, of sorts. That made Riana's apparent feelings for her and her own tepid response feel all the more uncomfortable. Sometimes she daydreamed of what it would be like: to run away with Riana. To abdicate all of her responsibilities and live as the mercenary did, with freedom and passion... to move among the stars at her own whim, unbound to her destiny and birthright. No longer beholden to her people or her name or her duty to her lineage. She envied Riana, she envied the life that she could never have.

"My lady," Riana offered her a bow and a warm smile.

She continued to speak but Kamea was distracted, taking notice of her odd profile. 'Has she gained weight?' she wondered. Riana beamed. '*She's eager for revenge,*' she thought, '*practically glowing.*' It made sense; the mercenary had been laser-focused on avenging Sir Raju ever since Weldry. It seemed to be the only thing she loved more than... '*me,*' the word entered her head, louder than the other thoughts. She began to feel melancholic and offered Riana a bittersweet smile, forged by a mixture of wistful envy and compassionate pity. "Forgive me, Hysteria," she spoke haltingly when she noticed that Riana had stopped speaking, "I must have drifted off. What were you saying?"

"Just that the loading and rearming will take about half an hour or so," Riana repeated, "they're moving as fast as they can, patching up what they can, but we've got a little time. Can we talk?" she looked hopeful, "Privately?"

'I need her focused,' Lady Arano considered, *'everything is riding on this duel. I am depending on Hysteria's skill to carry the day.'* "I'm sorry," she said with sadness in her eyes, "but I need to get my own head in the game. I know you've waited for this moment for a long time, Riana, but this is precisely what I've been trying to avoid. Every death in the war has been a tragedy, and I've never cherished them even in combat, but the thought of killing Victoria, my *cousin*, really troubles me." She lowered her head, a tear rolling down her cheek. "What kind of leader am I that can't solve this without a fight to the death? *Should* I assume my throne? Do I *deserve* to if violence is the only answer I can find?"

"Then let me and my team handle this," Riana offered, "I can drive your Atlas. Victoria never has to know."

"It isn't about who pulls the trigger," Kamea wiped at her face, "it is about passing the sentence. It is *my* responsibility to face her because it is *my* failure to find a peaceful solution, besides," she took a deep breath and lifted her chin, "if she even suspects that I am not present she will kill Alexander. I cannot risk that."

"Kamea," Riana said softly, using her given name, "You are the greatest leader I have ever known. *I love you.* I would *die* for you," she reached out and touched her cheek in an outrageous show of familiarity, "everyone knows you have done *all* you could. You've tried again and again to end this conflict peacefully, to minimize death, but this isn't *your* call. Victoria demands death; hers or yours, and I mean to give it to her."

"Riana," Kamea said softly, her own hand raising and grasping Hysteria's. For a long moment she pressed both their hands to her cheek. She hadn't missed her veiled confession, and if she wasn't careful then Riana's thoughts would be on the future, *their* future, and not the fight at hand. '*What future?*' the depressing thought invaded her mind, shocking her with the realization that maybe she wanted this too. "There's no way..." she spoke under her breath.

"There's always a way," Riana smiled. She had heard her, despite Kamea's intent for it to be inaudible.

"I mean there's no *other* way," Lady Arano lied, "Victoria has Lord Madeira and she will never stand down." She sighed, allowing a coldness to flood her emotions, suppressing the other morose hauntings that filled her heart, "What she did on Perdition has broken her, and now we're going to end this." She looked up with as much indignation as she could muster, seeing the eager approval in the other woman's eyes, "in the way that is so nearly began: a duel. I will face off against my cousin in the Arano tourney grounds, and we will fight until one of us is dead."

"Take heart, my lady," Riana smiled, "you'll have to beat *me* to the kill!"

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The Leopard shook as it moved through the atmospheric chop on approach to the tourney grounds. Riana's Highlander was across from Kamea's Atlas and she looked at the BattleMech as she subconsciously went through her checklist, priming the HGN-732B's GM 270 Fusion Engine and feeling it's reassuring thrum as it roared to life. The direct com chirped to life as she made all her final preparations and Darius' face appeared.

"Lady Arano said it all, Riana," he began, "Go get justice for Raju Montgomery and Commander Markham and everybody else who died at the hands of House Espinosa! We'll be watching you from here."

"I'm gonna core that bitch's Mech, you watch me!" Riana snarled.

"Now don't get overconfident," her XO warned her, "Victoria's no slouch and she'll have a full Lance with her. Speaking of which, I want to ask you something," he looked around to make sure a certain someone wasn't listening, "why didn't you bring Apex? After everything we talked about..."

"That's why," she cut him off, "I trust Jordan... but I trust *you* more. If Apex really is playing the long game, then this duel is the perfect time to switch loyalties back, besides," she flipped a few overhead switches, bringing her guns online, "Christoph was a pirate... I was a pirate... I can trust pirates that stand to profit and I *know* that Victoria wouldn't stoop to hiring one, so I can be assured of his loyalty."

"Well, Apex is pissed off!" Darius raised both eyebrows, "She doesn't believe you trust her and she was looking to settle a score with Lady Espinosa over leaving her for dead on Anvelt."

"She'll get over it," Riana said dismissively, "or she won't. Wouldn't be the first MechWarrior to walk away from us."

"No," Darius said thoughtfully, "but she might be the most skilled. Nothing against Corsair, but Apex... well..."

"Look," Riana said with a tone of finality, "you were the one who kept warning me about trusting her too easily. If it were just *my* life at stake I'd have ignored you, but I can't focus on Victoria *and* worry about a Lancemate putting one in the back of Lady Arano's head at the same time." She got pensive for a moment and then spoke sincerely; "I had to make a choice, Darius, on what was more important and, to me, that's Kamea. Jordan's a great MechWarrior and I owe her my life, but she was on Lady Espinosa's Lance at Anvelt. I'm just not willing to take that kind of risk where Lady Arano is involved, even if it costs me Jordan's friendship."

"Fair enough," Darius conceded.

"Red Line," Sumire's voice came over the coms, "touchdown in thirty seconds, prepare for deployment."

"Man," Darius shook his head as he switched to open coms, "I hope this isn't a trap. If they open fire on the Leopard as you approach..."

"She won't," Lady Arano replied, "Victoria is overconfident. She believes she can beat me, she always has. If she can do this honorably she'll have a claim to the throne. She won't ambush us."

Darius switched back to direct coms with Riana. "I hope she's right."

"Victoria's not a pirate," Hysteria reminded him, "if it were me, I'd blow her out of the sky!"

"You're not a pirate anymore either!" Darius exclaimed.

"Maybe not," Riana shrugged, "but she *deserves* it."

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INCOMING TRANSMISSION

The open coms flared to life as Santiago Espinosa's face appeared, interrupting the tension as the two Lances stared each other down from across the tourney grounds. "Victoria!" he barked, "I need you to listen to me. The Directorate has fallen. Our armies have been routed, even as I speak Restoration forces are closing in on Cordia City." He let his head fall before raising it with a pleading expression on his features. "If you kill your cousin now the entire Reach will fall into anarchy!"

"And if Kamea wins the Reach is doomed anyway!" she snapped in retort, "You've been telling me that for *years* now! Was it all a lie, Father?"

"VICTORIA! This is NOT THE TIME for a DEBATE!" he roared at her, his face reddening with characteristic anger, "You will *attend* to my words and obey me, as you always have! I am your *father* and your *Director*! I ORDER you to STAND DOWN, for the good of the Reach!"

"You direct nothing," Victoria purred, "you said as much yourself. The Directorate is the Reach, Father, and I will *never* stop fighting for it. Wallow in your cowardice; I will win in spite of you, and once I have..." her eyes narrowed dangerously, "*I will be the Director.*"

"She's cut the line," Darius informed them, "you're gonna have to put her in the ground, Lady Arano... she's too far gone for this to end any other way."

Inside her Atlas, Kamea's heart was filled with sadness. She felt like this was her failure, all of this. '*I've let everybody down at every turn,*' she thought, '*my uncle, my cousin, my people,*' her head tilted down as she clenched her eyes to prevent the tears, '*Riana, Alexander...*' She longed to just walk away. To escape the battle aboard the Argo with Riana and just go... anywhere. Anywhere but here. "Father," she said to herself, "forgive my weakness. I could have done so much more to protect what you passed to me." She sniffed, fighting back tears, then she felt it; her resolve hardened. She was not the only ruler to feel the burden of ruling. "The weight of the crown is the hope of the people," she murmured. It was something her father, High Lord Tamati, had taught her years ago. "Forgive me, Father," she said as her eyes reddened, "I will not fail you, I will not fail the Reach!" She keyed the coms; "If that is her choice then so be it! I will do whatever I must to save Lord Madeira!" She kicked her Mech forward, standing out in front of her Lance, "Fall in on me, MechWarriors! We have one more wrong to right!"

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"Riana," Hysteria's direct com flared to life as she fell in behind Lady Arano. It was Jordan.

"I'm kinda busy at the moment, Apex," she said as they moved into the canyon that made up the Arano Tourney Grounds.

"I just wanna say that I'm fucking pissed at you," Apex said plainly, "you and I will have words when you get back but, for now, go put that bitch down.

"You got it," Riana smiled, " save some of that rye. We'll have a shot when I get back."

"I'll have a shot, preggo," Apex said, turning the actual bottle up and drinking it on screen, "you can watch! You just make sure you make it back... all of you. Including your parasite!"

Riana smirked. "Is that how it is?" Jordan nodded as she guzzled more of the whiskey. "We'll discuss that when I get back!

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The tourney grounds were a circular depression with a water-filled basin at its center. It helped with cooling the Mechs and allowed for fierce contests. In addition, there were several stone pillars that provided some form of cover. The Lance moved out into cover; with Kamea, Riana, and Vamp moving into wooded cover while Christoph moved his Black Knight behind a pillar.

"It took you long enough, Cousin," Victoria's hiss came across the open coms as her Lance emerged from the opposite side of the area, "I was beginning to think you'd turn tail and run... again."

"I am here for *you*, Victoria," Kamea replied, trying to hold back her emotions, "and the justice of House Arano rides with me!"

"How poetic!" Victoria snarled in amusement, "I have no justice for you. No flowery words, only pain and death and humiliation... with little Lord Maddie as your audience!" The sound that came through the coms next could best be described as a hungry, throaty growl, "I'm going to make him watch you die as I slowly smash my foot through your core and then I will grind him to paste on top of your ruins!"

"Let him go, Victoria!" Kamea demanded, thinking to herself how insane her cousin had become, "Now. It's me you want, he has nothing to do with this!"

"Quit wasting your breath, Kamea," Victoria's voice shuddered, "I took him from you because there is *nothing* you possess that I cannot take away! We've both waited for this moment long enough. Come, cousin, let's finish this!"

With that, a Cataphract emerged and fired on Corsair's position at an angle, clipping his left arm. In response he dashed to the next pillar. "I'll draw their fire," he told the Lance, "let's see if we can put a stop to this quickly." Despite his diversion, however, a Jagermech directed its substantial fire at the forest where the rest of the Lance hid.

"Vhy do ze always shoot at me?" Vamp quipped as the tree next to him exploded into splinters. He charged towards the Cataphract, keeping a large rock formation to his right, between him and the Jagermech.

"Come closer, dear Cousin," Victoria's unhinged hissing came across the open coms again, "Cloooooseeer..." Suddenly, Victoria's new Mech appeared from the fog; a 100-ton Kingcrab Assault Mech.

"Where the hell did she get that?!" Kamea exclaimed.

"She had to drive something," Riana quipped, "after we cored out her last Mech!"

The Kingcrab opened fire with a full salvo at Corsair's BL-6-KNT. "That hurt!" Corsair called, "she's melting my armor!"

"She won't be a problem for long," Riana moved her Highlander out into the water and brought up her targeting reticule, aiming for Victoria's center mass. Keying the open coms she added: "Oh Vicky, we've got some unfinished business!" Then she fired an Alpha Strike.

"That's it?" Victoria cackled, "That's all you can do??" Riana scowled as her sensors confirmed the small amount of damage the Assault Mech sustained. "Hysterrriaaaaa," Victoria's unhinged voice taunted, "time to plaaaaay..."

Just then an Awesome, the last of her Lance, unleashed an Alpha Strike at close range on Corsair's Mech. Bits of armor exploded off in every direction as melted armor hissed and smoked as it fell into the water. "They're stripping me clean, Commander!" He yelled.

"Hee hee!" Victoria squealed with delight, "Watch them die, Kamea, watch them all dii..."

Before she could finish, Lady Arano hit her from forested cover with twin ER L Lasers and an LRM 20. The Kingcrab shook under the impact and the Mech staggered, parts of it glowing an angry orange. "You should worry about yourself, Victoria!"

"No," Lady Espinosa growled, "I think perhaps I'll take away your favorite pet mercenary! Everyone, fire on the Highlander!" Immediately, the Cataphract complied, hitting Hysteria hard on her left side and moving into the water to cool off.

"Fuck that," Corsair surged ahead, heedless of the surrounding enemies, and targeted the Kingcrab, "Your opponent is me!"

"Corsair, no!" Even as she spoke the enemy Jagermech unloaded on her, stripping off armor that fell in piles of molten slag at her feet, "Don't stay out in the open! Find cover!"

Vamp moved his Banshee out into the open and hit the Cataphract from the right side with a full compliment of flamers and lasers. "I am turning on ze heat, Kommander!" he called as his displays showed the enemy heat levels raise near to critical.

"Send your lancemates to me, Kamea," Victoria purred, as she advanced with the Kingcrab, "and *watch*." Bringing up her targeting reticule she zeroed in on the center torso of Hysteria's Highlander. "A vision of your future, Cousin," she hissed as she fired, "you'll be joining her soon!"



Time seemed to stop as Kamea, Vamp, and Corsair watched as the Kingcrab's first AC/20 blast hit Hysteria's CT. The armor there exploded off, some vaporizing in a fine metal particulate cloud. That cloud erupted with a hole as the *second* AC/20 fired into the same spot, striking the Highlander's Fusion engine... and *igniting* it. The explosion ripped through the Mech, fire erupting from every possible crevice. The arms went slack and the legs buckled as it pitched over to the left, landing half in and half out of the water.

"RIANA!!!!!" Kamea felt her scream more than she heard it. She didn't feel anything *but* her scream. In fact, she didn't even feel like she was in her body anymore. Riana Klaue, Hysteria, the mercenary who had always managed to pulled off the most impossible, daring, stupid stunts now lay in that heap of burning slag. '*Nobody could survive that,*' she thought to herself as she stared at the black plume of smoke that mushroomed into the sky. From deep within, a primal scream built and built until it compelled her forward. "I'LL KILL YOU!!!" she heard herself roar, as she pushed the Atlas into a protective stance over the Highlander's burning hulk. She targeted Victoria's Mech and unleashed an alpha strike. "DIE!!!! DIE!!!!!!!" Her impact struck all over the Mech's surface but it hit something that exploded in her right torso. The Kingcrab rocked to the side as the shoulder exploded, throwing off the right arm and its terrifying weaponry. "Phoenix to Lance," she called over their direct coms, " cover me!" She hit her cockpit release and forced her cage up as she scrambled out of the cockpit and out of her Mech.

"Phoenix, get back in!" Corsair was screaming in her ear, "Lady Arano, get back in your fucking Mech NOW! Kamea, she's *gone*. Do you hear me?? Riana is *gone*!"

Kamea wasn't listening anymore. She fell the last ten feet to the water, pitching backwards onto her butt before rushing at the burning Mech. All around her the battle exploded and raged but she couldn't see it. Her vision was reduced to a pinprick; she *had* to get to the external eject. That was Riana's only hope. Ignoring calls from Darius, imploring what was happening, paying no heed to the hell exploding around her, her only focus was crossing the distance to the HGN-732B's head. She reached it after what seemed an eternity and pulled the orange, soft, metal

panel free disabling the safeties and pulling at the red-hot lever that *should* send Hysteria's capsule rocketing free of the burning wreck. She recoiled with the bone-jarring report of the rockets firing and the head exploding open but the capsule only went so far. The damage has been too much and it could not fire free of the wreck. She raced around to the door. If she could get it open, somehow get Riana *away* from the fire, maybe she could somehow summon the strength to hoist her into the Atlas. She pulled and pulled at the door but there was too much damage. The metal was losing its form; the door had *fused*. The only way to get Riana out would be to cut her out now. Screaming in frustration she clambered back up the leg of her Mech and got back in the cockpit, closing it and pulling up her HUDs. She ignored the damage alarms as she moved her Atlas' foot, causing waves of water to wash over the partially ejected capsule. This caused so much steam to rise that, for a moment, it obscured her and her Mech. She checked her internal status report. "Armor breached, internal damage..." she realized with some horror that her Atlas had been the primary target while she had been out of her Mech. She recalled the hellish explosions and deafening sounds as she had struggled to save Riana. She noticed Victoria move away from Corsair's Black Knight, turning to fire it with its remaining arm. The shot went wide but her flamers bathed the Mech.

"I can't take it!" Corsair's voice came across her coms, "The heat's too high! I've gotta shut down."

On the other side of the battlefield she saw Vamp's mighty Banshee punch the right arm off of the Jagermech before dousing it in flame. "I'm back," she announced, urging the Atlas into motion, "follow me... to victory!"

"Phoenix!" Vamp cried out in surprise, "Ve thought ve lost you,"

"I'm on my way," she said, moving deeper into the water to try and control the massive heat buildup she had from the attacks. Bringing up her multi-targeting she directed her pulse lasers and SRM batteries at the Jager, everything else went to Victoria; the AC/20, the ER lasers, and the full compliment of the Atlas' LRM suite. "Firing," she said as she squeezed the trigger. The Jager staggered under her assault but the AC/20 shot went wide. When the smoke from the missiles' explosion cleared in the hot air of the tourney grounds she could clearly see Victoria's Mech, unmoved. She didn't have much time to contemplate, however, as the Awesome's missiles rained into her right side. Undaunted, she moved ahead. "You're as much a victim as you are a murderer, Victoria," she said with venom, "you were raised to kill in your father's name."

"And you are a fool, Kammie," Victoria purred, " your father raised you to believe in some ridiculous fairytale... and you *still* believe it!"

"I don't know what I believe anymore," Kamea replied, her thoughts dwelling on the now-lost dream of escape with Riana, "but this madness must end. You wouldn't stop it, so I will. I will stop *you*." Her sentiment was cut off when an alpha strike by the Cataphract detonated her right shoulder. Klaxons screamed as the Mech's right arm, and all its weaponry, dropped to the ground.

"Hee, hee, hee," Victoria's sick laugh sounded barely contained, "soon your beliefs and intents will lie as dead as your pet mercenary. *Hysterical...* the irony is *delicious!*"

Her diatribe was cut short as Vamp's Banshee charged into her damaged right side, rocking her before he turned her Mech red with goutts of angry flame. "Vatch your starboard," Vamp quipped, "*my* Mech is barely scratched and I would just *love* to dance!"

Savagely, Victoria struck back, igniting her own flamers. "Two can play at that, cossack!"

"Kamea!!" Darius voice came across her coms, "get to cover! We *can't* lose you!"

She looked up and noticed the Cataphract advancing towards her. She was woozy, her vision swimming from that last blow. "I can't retreat," she said, "if I do they will crush Riana's capsule."

"They will do that if they *win*," Darius scolded her, "Look; this whole company is laying its life on the line for you, for the Reach! Riana believed in your dream! If you die here, if Victoria *wins*, then what was it all for? Now get to cover!"

"Okay," she said, turning to the left and moving towards the trees again, "okay, I understand. For Justice... FOR THE RESTORATION!" She moved in a full sprint, taking fire on her back but the trees prevented all of the missiles from striking home.

"Running away, Cousin??" Victoria laughed, a screeching, insane sound, "Again?? For the *Restoration?*"

"Vicky," an unfamiliar voice came across her coms. It was Corsair, now directly behind her. He brought up his reticule, locking all weapons on her CT from the rear. "While you were so busy focusing all of your Lance on your cousin you forgot one very important thing: "Never turn your back on a *pirate*." With a gentle tug he sent a full barrage of lasers and missiles into her unprotected six, grinning as he watched the armor fold and bend until, finally, the engine was exposed. The angry energy burned into the reactor until suddenly it began to explode, pieces flying off it it, starting a chain reaction... just as Hysteria's Highlander had.

"All... this death," static scrambled her voice as Victoria spoke over the open coms, "the coup, Perdition... Mastiff...all of it... for nothing."

"It was always for nothing, Victoria," Kamea said as Victoria's Kingcrab crumpled between the Banshee and Black Knight, "the Directorate was never going to attain the glory your father promised." Nothing came in reply but static, but then a wet cough could be heard, only to be followed by the agonizing screams of Victoria being burned alive. "Nearly all can stand adversity," she intoned as the horrid sounds subsided, " but if you want to test one's character... grant them power."

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After Victoria's fall, her Lance crumbled swiftly, their morale broken. It didn't hurt that Vamp's CQC-built Banshee was largely undamaged. They had all held their collective breath as Riana was cut from the melted wreckage of her capsule but none were prepared for the horrific scene that awaited them. Her left eye was ruined and she was covered in so much blood as to be nearly unidentifiable, but the most horrific sight was her legs. There were none. All that remained were blackened stumps of bone. Yet, somehow, her heart still beat. Kamea had clutched at Vamp as they evacuated her back to the *Argo*. "If she has any chance at all," Yang told her, "it is the medbay on that ship. Only Star League tech can save her now. The Chief had come down with the Leopard to oversee her extrication from the capsule but now he seemed shaken. "Kamea," he began gently, "we should talk... about Riana."

"Not now, Chief," she pushed him aside, "I need to address my people. The war is ended and I must be the leader they deserve." She looked over her shoulder as the Leopard with Riana rose into the sky, "there will be time for grief later."

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to be concluded in Journal of a MechWarrior, Part 39

Part XXXIX



"I began this Restoration because my birthright was stolen," Kamea's voice struggled not to crack as she addressed the masses in Cordia City, "and I wanted it back." Her tear-rimmed eyes scanned the throngs. Her people looked weary, some emaciated. All seemed happy to see her, though. "Not for you, not for the People of the Reach," she admitted, "but because it was *mine*. I wanted war for all the wrong reasons." She looked down with the admission, genuine shame weighing on her.



"But on Weldry," her tone changed, "I traded that naivete for a nobler purpose. Seeing my Peoples' suffering, with my *own* eyes, taught me *why*. Why we must fight, why *I* must fight. Filled with purpose I built this coalition, with the determination to defeat the Directorate. Full of righteousness, I *knew* what I was doing was right. But on Artru I found humility. Blinded by that

same righteousness, I was reckless in my pursuit of power, and it cost lives... it nearly cost my *own* life, and the lives of people I cared about." She paused, her thoughts on Riana who lay miles above in the *Argo's* Medbay; her life still in the balance. "My mistakes at Artru almost cost us the war." She cast her gaze across the crowds and lifted her chin. "On Guldra, I learned to steel my heart. I chose necessity over conscience... a choice that nearly broke me." She chanced a gaze to her right, where the battered form of Alexander Madeira stood, supported by Yang. He looked horrible, but he insisted to be here for this moment. "Finally on Coromodir, the world of my birth, I found resolve and, standing over my cousin's broken, burned body... victory. Only through these lessons, paid for in blood, did I become a ruler worthy of title. A High Lady deserving to sit on the Cormorant Throne: the Protector of Coromodir, the Sword of Restoration."



She paused again to allow the scattered cheers to subside. "But," she began, "But this question still plagues me: *Am I a hero?* Did I sacrifice too much at the Altar of Victory? So many have died, so many lives still hang in the balance. The final Blood Price has yet to be paid. Do my triumphs outweigh my sins?" She took a moment to compose herself. "War is a clash between Conscience and Necessity; an ocean of Chaos and bloody Compromise. War shapes History, but History chooses Heroes. Am I worthy of such an honor? I know people who are, some who have given their lives... some who still may." She looked down again, struggling for composure, before raising her head and saying in a clear voice: "Time and history will tell if I am deserving of that title. The only thing I can say to you, my People, as your High Lady is: Tonight the Reach is *Free*." The crowd exploded in raucous cheers and, in order to continue, she was forced to raise her voice. "Let History judge if the cost was too high. For now, let us celebrate our freedom... and bury our dead. We have much to rebuild, and we will. We will persevere. The Restoration is not yet complete. It falls to each of us to rebuild the Reach to its former glory... and beyond! Together, we will attain new heights and, never again, let us be divided into selfish, destructive conflict." She scanned the crowd once more, waiting for the cheers to die down, "an ancient

general once said, and I agree: *'It is well that War is so terrible, lest we grow too fond of it,'* and I will use every tool in my power, every skill, every trick... to maintain this peace."

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"How is she??" Yang exploded out of his seat outside the Medbay as Doctor Foster emerged. Behind him a haggard and exhausted Kamea Arano also rose, her energy and adrenaline long since spent. Lord Madeira was seated beside her but he only looked on in concern, unable to rise with his own power. The others in the room crowded forward as well; Apex, Sumire, Farah, Sly, Vamp, Glitch, Darius, Corsair... they had all come and waited, some for hours, as the intensive operation continued inside the surgical suite. High Lady Arano had commanded the finest surgeons on Coromodir to attend to Doctor Foster and assist in the efforts to save Riana.

"Well," the doctor said as he pulled off his mask and leaned against the wall, "that's one down... many more surgeries to go."

"Will she survive?" Kamea demanded.

"I don't know," Foster shook his head, "her trauma is staggering. Her legs, her pelvis... it's a total loss," he shook his head, "we may want to explore a cybernetic solution," he said, nodding towards Yang's arm and leg, "but even then, there's no telling what her body will and won't reject. Her left eye is gone, but that's manageable, her left arm will require cloned bone and muscle restorations, and some of her organs we can save and others we may be able to clone, but her uterus..." A gasp went through the air as the crew of the *Argo* covered their mouths in horror.

"Did it work?" Doctor Murad asked, "Were you able to save it?"

Kamea started to ask the obvious question when Doctor Foster continued; "The facilities on this ship are incredible," he admitted, "without them there would have been no way, but for now the uterus is stable inside the renascence tank, but I fear it will never be able to be restored to her body."

"And the embryo?" Farah asked.

"Embryo?" Kamea's shock was palpable.

"Intact," Doctor Foster said with relief, "it was a brilliant suggestion, Doctor Murad, to remove the whole organ and attempt to stabilize it in the tank. The fetal heartbeat is weak, but steady. If it survives, then the child is truly strong. When she got here we couldn't detect the heartbeat, but it was there. Faint, but there."

"Riana was pregnant??" Kamea paled as the rest of the crew turned and, almost in unison, nodded, "Who??"

"It's a long story," Farah moved forward and took the High Lady's hand, "and here is not the place for it."

"Why did no one ever tell me?!?" she demanded, taking a step back defensively, "You all let me field a pregnant woman in battle?!?"

"She insisted," Darius began to say.

"I don't give a damn about how insistent she was!" Kamea practically roared, "Do you not have a full crew?? If someone had told me, if any of you had the *courage* to tell me, I would have *ordered* her to remain on the ship!"

"We know," Yang said softly, "and so did Riana. That's why she commanded our silence." His eyes were watery as he spoke, "We love her too, Lady Arano, and we fought this battle; over and over again. Ultimately, she asked for us to respect *her*. Her choice. Maybe we made the wrong decision, but I get the feeling that if we'd told you and you'd ordered her to stand down... she would have aborted the baby."

"She wanted to take control of her life," Farah continued, "she said that her entire life felt like other people had made decisions for her, decisions that forced her hand... and that's how she felt about the decision to either stay on the ship or abort the fetus; like it wasn't her choice. She chose to go to war, pregnant, and let fate determine if she was meant to be a mother or not, instead of letting us pressure her into becoming one." She walked up to the seething High Lady and stood before her calmly. "If you want to be angry, if you want to punish someone... punish me. I was the first to support her decision. I played a role in convincing the others. Let this sin be mine, it isn't my first."

"Who is the father?" she demanded, "Who is the coward who let her do this?"

"He isn't here," Farah shook her head, "and he doesn't know. She wouldn't let us tell him. She didn't want him to suffer this burden until she knew if the baby was going to be born or not."

"Then it's time someone told him," she said coldly, "you will contact the father, *immediately*, and inform him of the situation involving Riana and *his* baby. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, mi'lady," the crew bowed their heads.

"Doctor Foster," she turned towards him, "Riana Klaue is now under *my* protection, and the *Argo* is *my* ship. Everyone who serves aboard it does so at *my* pleasure, am I clear?" she scanned the crew, "you are all dismissed for now. You are *not* to interfere with the doctors' work. If you do anything, or if I learn of any other misguided nonsense concerning Lady Klaue, then you will be *relieved* of duty and welcomed to enlist at the local hiring hall. Understood?"

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"My Lady," her attendant called, "a woman calling herself Doctor Murad is here to see you." Kamea was in her private chamber, or rather her *father's* private chamber. She had been... redecorating, much to the concern of her attendants who'd had to listen to the screams of rage

and crashing furniture from outside of the room as she ripped down and tore at all the 'additions' her uncle had made. The attendant chanced another knock, "My lady," Suddenly, Farah shouldered past her, turning the handle on the door and entering, unbidden. "Wait, you can't!"

Inside the room was a scene of carnage. Kamea had shredded her uncle's vain self-portraits and wrecked nearly every piece of furniture in the room, most all of it bearing the goat head crest of House Espinosa. Amid it all she sat, her dropsuit opened and her sweat-stained undershirt visible beneath. She was on the floor, for there was really nowhere else to sit now, and she had one elbow propped on one knee, her sweaty, dirty hair gripped in a fist on which her head rested. Her eyes stalked upwards and fixed on Doctor Murad, a festering anger dwelling there. "Leave us," she commanded in a growl, prompting the attendant's quick departure. Farah just stood quietly, hands folded in front of her, as the attendant resecured the door. For a long moment, the two women stared at each other and neither spoke. Finally, Kamea broke the silence. "What?" she grimaced, "Have you come to tell me that the father has been notified and is on his way? Because anything else may see you looking for a new employer."

"Lady Arano," Farah began softly, "can we please talk? There's so much you need to know."

Kamea chuckled, not out of humor but out of disbelief. "Really? I *need* to know? Like how I *needed* to know that my mercenary captain was *pregnant*? The woman I was selfishly *depending* on to carry the day?" She ground her teeth together and gnashed them at Farah as she spoke, "I called on her again and again for the *most* dangerous missions! It tracks that I couldn't count on *her* to tell me the truth, but damn it!! I thought better of you!! When I hired you to get the *Argo* running, when I *gave* you to *Riana's Revenge*, it was because I *trusted* you! I trusted you and Riana *needed* a steady, sound voice to countermand the chaos she wreathes herself in!"

"I know," Farah said softly, looking down at her feet.

"You do?? Well, that's just great, because you *failed* me, Doctor!" she climbed to her feet now, her stance loose and aggressive, "That woman was like a *sister* to me, we trained together! Sir Raju put Riana and I through *hell* to make sure we could handle it, and now she, she, she's *cut in half*!" Kamea paced like a panther around Farah, coiled for violence, "Did you ever think, anywhere in that *genius* brain of yours, that maybe allowing a pregnant woman to fight in a war was a bad idea??"

"Of course I did, my lady," she looked straight ahead, but then turned to meet her gaze. Her eyes shone with the same defiance that Kamea had seen in Riana's before, "and I and others tried to reason with her. Initially we assumed she would terminate the pregnancy, it was the only thing that made sense, but she surprised us all by deciding to keep it. Next we did as you would have, we tried to talk her out of combat; to direct missions from the CIC, but you know Riana, my lady, and you know how stubborn she is. She made her choice and we accepted it. Would you have taken it away from her?" she raised her eyebrows as Kamea struggled with the question. "She confided in me that others *always* made these choices for her; if you'd ordered her to stay on the *Argo* then you *know* she would have aborted the baby... a choice that *you* would have forced her to make."

"I..." Kamea began, "I would have wanted her safe,"

"So did we all," Farah continued, "but she's a MechWarrior. She risks her life with each and every drop. She's been injured countless times, even killed once by my count, but she is *still* a MechWarrior. What would you have her do? Would you take that away from her, that identity? What would that make her? Just a *woman*? Is that how you would have her feel?"

"That isn't fair," Kamea began to turn,

"Life isn't fair!" Farah snapped, grabbing her arm and forcing her to look at her, "Do you think this is what she wanted, to be pregnant? Lady Arano, she loved *you*. You are the only person she *wanted* to be with!"

"Well, *I* didn't get her pregnant!" she pulled away.

"Well, *you* never returned her affection either, did you?" she planted her feet in defiance, arms akimbo, "Is it so hard to fathom that she would be driven to seek comfort in the arms of another?"

"I couldn't," Kamea roared, "and you know that!! I had a war to lead, a million other things to carry... I didn't have time for love!"

"I know," Farah's tone cooled, "and *she* knew. But Home is the Regiment, remember? For all the MechWarriors out there in space, sometimes weeks between death-defying drops. It can get pretty lonely in the Black, and MechWarriors are a swaggering, sexy lot. So is it so hard to imagine that she, alone and rejected... possibly a little drunk, succumbed to the charms of someone who *wanted* her?"

Kamea deflated, sinking to the floor in a squat, her chin resting on her knees and tears streaking her face. "Who is it?" she asked, "Who was my surrogate, so to speak."

"Death Krusade," Farah sat down beside her, "Todd Ryia; a Solaran ex-detective that she picked up in a bar on Panzyr."

"Kru?" Kamea gasped, "Riana and... *him*?"

"There've been stranger matches," Farah tilted her head with a smirk, remembering her own husband, "but Kru was steady, reliable, and was always there for her. She counted on him, and he never let her down. So, I can see it. He's not a bad man."

"Where is he?" she asked.

"He left for the Gray Death Legion," she answered, "got poached by Grayson Carlyle."

"He felt that way about her and he *left*?" her anger swelled again.

"He was a detective, remember?" Farah reminded her, "he found out about *you*." Farah put an arm around her and pulled her close, "Riana admitted she didn't love him... she loved you, and he knew it. So, like a true gentleman, he moved out of the way. He never had any idea that she might be pregnant."

"He *is* a good man," Kamea admitted, "but he deserves to know." She looked at Farah almost pleading, "the baby, if it survives, deserves a father! Have you contacted him yet?"

"Not yet," Farah answered, "I wanted you to have the full story first." She drew close and looked in Lady Arano's eyes. "Riana wanted to bear this burden on her own. If we tell him now, with the baby's life in the balance, that would shift the burden to him, wouldn't it?"

"That's *his* choice, doctor," Kamea was resolute, "if it were me; I'd want to know."

"Then let's make the call," she smiled at her, "together."

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Thirteen Months Later...



"You made the liberation of the Aurigan Reach a reality," Kamea spoke in her most official voice before the hundreds gathered at the palace, "every trial I faced would have been my last without your skill on the battlefield," she smiled warmly as she spoke to Riana; standing before her at parade rest on mechanical legs with an eyepatch stylishly covering her left eye, "I don't know for certain if you fought for honor, or for the thrill of it, or for belief in my cause... or just for my money," a chuckled murmured through the assembly but Riana remained steadfast, her one good eye fixed on the High Lady, "but whether it was your noble heart or your mercenary mind, your actions gave us hope. *That* makes you a Hero in the eyes of History, and do you know what?" she smirked coyly, "it doesn't matter if *you* believe it or not. Others do. *I* do, as I

believed in the heroes of the stories my father told me, after all... when we are gone, stories are what remain."

She rose from her throne, all others falling to their knees, as she approached Riana. "Mercenary callsign: Hysteria, kneel before me." She winced as Riana attempted to comply, the servos in her legs whirring as she struggled to her knees in visible pain. As she got down, Lord Madeira approached from behind with a saber on a pillow and folded flag, presenting it for High Lady Arano to take. She grasped it in a gloved hand and lifted it to her face, the blade perpendicular, and nearly touched her nose with it. "For Valor in battle and unwavering Dedication to House Arano and the Aurigan Reach I hereby anoint you *Dame* Riana, Knight of the Reach," she lowered the blade first to one shoulder and then the other, "I also hereby restore your family name and title, Lady Riana Annika Klaue, noble of Coromodir. Since your family holds title to the hab in orbit of Artru, I grant you the the lands and estate of Cormorant Falls." She smiled warmly, bending down to help Riana to her feet, "Rise, Dame Riana, for I am not finished with you yet." Once she was back on her feet, Kamea turned once more to Lord Madeira and took from the pillow a medal. She extended it in her hands, allowing Riana to look at it before presenting it to the room, "I also honor you with the Cormorant Cross, the highest honor within my power to bestow," she affixed the medal to Riana, who stood ramrod straight, "and I have one more thing to ask of the brave mercenary-turned-knight who saved the Reach and the Restoration," she took both of Riana's hands in hers, causing Riana to jerk slightly and look at her directly in her eyes, "Dame Riana Klaue, Lady of Cormorant Falls, would you do Us the honor of becoming Our Master-at-Arms?" she smiled and struggled to keep back her tears as she spoke, "It is a position of Storied Honor, held once by the bravest and most noble MechWarrior I've had the honor to know; Sir Raju "Mastiff" Montgomery. It would be nearly impossible to fill his shoes, but I can think of none other worthy to try."

Riana looked terrified. A bead of sweat ran down her forehead. "M..my lady,"

Kamea smirked again and leaned in close, whispering so only she could hear: "*This is the part where you usually say: 'Revenge is yours.'*" She took a step back, hands still grasping Riana's, and said for all to hear: "Well, noble knight, what say you?"

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"You really put me on the spot," Riana growled as she filled first her glass, then Apex's.

"Well, I needed to make an impression," Kamea smiled warmly.

"I thought this was just some formality," Riana tilted back the shot in unison with Apex, then turned the shotglass upside down and slammed it on the table, "you could have warned me you were gonna call me 'dame.'"

"Hehe," Jordan grinned, "this dame's still got some spark in her!"

"Shut up!" Riana cut her eyes at her.

"I needed to make a statement," Kamea continued, now out of the formal dress that she'd worn, "that the Reach owed you a debt and that you were worthy of the title of Master-at-Arms," she paused as Alexander appeared and leaned in to kiss her cheek, "now there is no doubt."

"I dunno," Riana sighed, "I feel like you made this decision without me."

"I did," she admitted, holding out her glass for Riana to fill, "for the good of the Reach. From here you will train our MechWarriors and lead the defense of House Arano and Cordia City."

"You presume quite a bit, don't you?" Riana asked as she filled four glasses, including one for Lord Madeira.

"Okay," Kamea lifted both hands, swirling her drink in one before taking the shot, "you caught me: I just wanted to keep you close to me."

"Mmm, hmm," Riana answered, draining her own as the four slammed them down in unison, "I guessed there was some ulterior motive."

"So you'll do it, right?" Kamea continued, "I expect you to be at my right hand for this."

"I *said* I'd do it," she waved it off as Apex filled the glasses for another round, "but I don't know why you want me clanking around in a fancy dress."

"Because there is no one else worthy," she leaned forward and put a hand on Riana's, "no one else I'd want as my maid-of-honor."

"I'm hardly a maid," Riana blushed.

"You can say that again," Jordan chuckled as Riana elbowed her hard.

"I, uh," Riana began, "I'm going to head to the memorial later tonight. Would you..."

"I'll be there," Kamea nodded, "I wouldn't miss it."

"Good," Riana lowered her gaze, "he's starting to crawl around a bit... I figured it's time he met his father."

"To Todd Ryia," Kamea intoned as the others all raised their glass, "as good a man who has ever lived, as legendary a MechWarrior as we've ever deserved."

"To Kru!" Jordan followed, as all four of them drained their glasses and slammed them back on the table.

Riana looked forlorn. When she'd regained consciousness she'd first asked about Kamea, then the baby, but when she learned that Kru had died in combat on Caledonia, laying down his life to protect his lancemates, she had sunk back into a deep depression... one that clawed at her even

now. "So, this is life now, eh?" she mumbled, drawing attention, "the pampered life of a noble," she snorted, "all awards and tea parties."

"You've a funny idea of tea," Alexander said as he called for another round.

"That's enough," Kamea said, motioning for Apex to stop, "it looks like we have a visitor!"

Farah appeared carrying a seven-month old baby in her arms. His dark hair and piercing blue eyes flashed as they spied his mother. "I believe someone is ready to spend some quality time."

"C'mere you," Riana beckoned for him, her mood genuinely lightening, "c'mere my little *Warborn*."

"This is the only kid in the sphere who came factory-installed with a callsign!" Jordan joked.

"It may also be the most fitting I've ever heard," Alexander added.

"The way I see it," Riana began, "this boy has zero chance of being anything *but* a MechWarrior!"

"Considering who his parents are!" Kamea laughed, waving to the cooing infant, "but you really should call him by his proper name!"

"Oh I do," Riana grinned a lop-sided grin as she held her son aloft in the shining, afternoon light, "my glorious... *Raju*."

~Fin~

Epilogue



"He's late," Riana growled. She was much older and grayer now, and well-accustomed on getting around on her mechanical legs. She preferred a set with reversed knees which made her look far more intimidating, plus it enabled her to leap up the side of a Mech much more easily than with her old legs. The clawed toes of the legs scratched at the stone as she paced back and forth.

"Give him time," High Lady Arano counseled, "his unit just touched down an hour ago.

"Finally!" Riana exclaimed as the doors to the throne room opened and Lieutenant Raju Klaue

strode in, still in his dropsuit. He moved forward with military precision and saluted as he neared the throne, falling to one knee afterwards. "It's about time you arrived!" Riana snapped as High Lady Arano bid him to rise.

"Hello, Mother," he nodded in her direction, "nice to see you as well."

"Lieutenant Klaue," Kamea interrupted the terse reunion, "you have served the Aurigan Coalition for, what, four years now?"

"My Lady!" he snapped back to attention, "it has been my distinct honor to serve since my eighteenth birthday, my Lady!"

"As I understand it," she continued, "you have become quite an accomplished MechWarrior."

"Thank you, my Lady!" came his quick response.

"That is why I have decided to release you from my service, Lieutenant..." she smirked at him.

Raju looked confused. "My Lady, I do not understand. Have I offended you?"

"Not at all, Raju," she answered, dropping the formalities, "but your mother and I have decided..."

"My mother!?" he turned to her with a snarl, "what have you done, old woman!?"

"Keep your mouth shut!" she stormed up to him, staring him in the eye and daring him to slight her again.

"You would do well, young Raju, to remember to whom you speak," Kamea said dangerously, "I have decided to end your enlistment, I could just as easily strip your rank and set you to cleaning heads until you learn how to show the proper respect to your mother!"

"F..forgive me, mother, my Lady," Raju stammered, turning away from his mother's glare and returning to attention, "but may I ask why? What have I done to deserve this? I was planning to re-enlist and..."

"The Reach is at peace," Kamea said with a bored tone, "largely. There is little for a promising young Coalition soldier to do... but a *MechWarrior*..."

"I *am* a MechWarrior, my Lady," Raju insisted.

"And a damn good one," his mother stalked around him on clawed, metal legs, "one of the finest I've yet trained. So it is a shame to see such talent squandered here."

"Your mother and I have decided that you would best serve the Reach as a *Captain*, not a lieutenant." Kamea said.

"My Lady?" Raju tilted his head in confusion, "I am to be promoted?"

"In a sense: yes," Kamea acknowledged, "I grant you the use of the DropShip *Argo*. She was your mother's ship, and served her well."

"The derelict?" he asked, "the one in orbit since the end of the war?"

"The very one," Kamea nodded, "you shall helm your own mercenary company, but I will grant you a competent team," she turned her head, "send them in." One by one, they appeared: Sumire, Yang, Darius, and Doctor Murad. All were older, like Riana, but all still looked spry... except maybe for Yang, who had gained a bit of weight over the years.

"Uncle Yang," Raju began, "Aunt Su... what are you guys doing here?"

"They will help you get your company up and running, Raju," Riana answered, "I would trust no others."

"Mother," Raju turned back to her, "why are you doing this? I am happy to serve the Reach as a soldier."

"Because you need experience," Riana answered him, "and because it is your destiny. You are the son of MechWarriors, you were born to war, but here on Coromodir your skills will atrophy, so Kamea and I have decided that you will go to the stars."

"Coromodir is my *home*," he began in protest.

"*Home is the Regiment!*" she reached out and placed an arm on his shoulder, "And it is time you learned this. You will spend the next three years, minimum, at the helm of your own mercenary company. Take the contracts you want, get involved in the wars you want, and when your time is up... well, then it is up to you."

"I will accept you as a fully commissioned Captain in the army if that is what you choose," Kamea added, "or you may continue to forge your own legend. The choice will be yours."

"Mother," he turned to face her, "I..."

"Shh," she placed a finger to his lips, "you must do this. This is the last thing I will ever ask of you. Finish *this* mission, and I will accept you as the man you want to be. I taught you how to pilot a BattleMech, and the army taught you how to *obey*, but now I want you to learn one final thing, Raju, how to be your *own* man. Make your own decisions, your own mistakes," she pulled him close and let their foreheads touch, "make your father and I *proud*, son."

"Yes, Mother," he said finally, before turning and facing High Lady Arano once more, "yes my Lady, I understand and accept."

"Good," Kamea smiled, "now let's dispense with all this decorum... get up here and give your favorite aunt a hug!"

