

Dispossession of a Duke

(House Morten Book 1)

An Unofficial Battletech Novel

Written by

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Prologue

April 7, 2988

Federated Suns

Crucis March

New Avalon

Stephan Morten walked into the audience chamber of First Prince Andrew Davion with an expression on his face that was a mix of sullen and fury. He'd been summoned to New Avalon from his lifelong home of Neubenn only months after his father had died in an unexpected dropship accident. No foul play had been discovered, though the charred remnants of the atmospherically burned dropship didn't leave much to work with in the shallow crater it had created just shy of the main spaceport.

Duke Von Morten was the fifth in succession to hold rulership on Neubenn, and Stephan had assumed he was being summoned by Davion to officially become the 6th Duke in his family line...but as of 20 minutes ago, the First Prince's Vizier had informed him he was not here to be appointed as his father's replacement...but rather to be dispossessed and offered some form of compensation.

The shock of it had still not worn off, but Stephan knew to keep it internalized. 'Whatever emotions you were feeling,' his father had once said, 'keep them hidden inside unless you *want* others to see them.'

So it was with a not quite bland facial expression that Stephan Morten walked up to a standing position a few meters away from Andrew Davion, the man who was dispossessing him of his family lineage, and bowed courteously...though minus an inch or two. He couldn't completely pretend everything was normal without turning his own mind insane.

When he rose, he locked eyes with Andrew Davion a moment before speaking.

“Stephan Morten, Acting Duke of Neubenn, reporting as summoned,” he said, trying to keep any emotion out of his voice.

Andrew shared a glance with his Vizier, a man named Goolio something, Stephan hadn’t mentally noted it as he usually did, and the pair had some sort of unspoken communication that lasted a few seconds. Besides them, there were a pair of guards standing behind the elevated desk upon which Davion was seated at, and probably a few more hidden behind the elaborate curtains trailing down from the ceiling like crimson waterfalls on either side of the large room. But the air of the place was that of emptiness. This chamber was built for spectacle, not small discussions.

“I knew your father...fairly well,” the First Prince said amicably, “and it pains me to have to do what I am about to do, but I cannot make you the next Duke of Neubenn.”

Stephan remained silent.

Andrew sighed. “Politics. Always present and always a pain in the ass. You have my leave to speak freely. Vent, if you will. I owe you that much at least.”

“Why?” Stephan said simply.

“What I am about to tell you does not leave this room,” Davion said, his eyes losing their compassion for a moment.

“Understood.”

“There is a swap of some small worlds about to take place along the Draconis Combine border. We get some we want, they get some they want, and the new alignment will make the region around Brusett all the more stable for both sides. We may war upon each other later in other areas, but there are too many systems easily clutched with a half-hearted effort to effectively protect the entire border. This exchange will play a small part in minimizing that problem.”

“Neubenn is not on the Dracos border.”

“No, and it’s not involved in the exchange. I’d never give up a world that industrialized. But I’m having to dispossess

other noble families in the exchange, and as such I have to reshuffle the deck across the Federated Suns to make it work. When your father died, it created an opportunity I can't afford to pass up. Technically I'm not dispossessing you, for you have not officially been installed, but in truth I am dispossessing your family, and for that I want to compensate you somehow. Your father took Neubenn from a mediocre world and turned it into a growing powerhouse. One I have to trade away to make this deal work without starting a rebellion in the process."

"Are we to lose all our landholds?"

"Having two major noble families inhabiting the same planet is a recipe for disaster and revenge. You are losing all assigned landholds, plus I am officially buying all your personal property from you at 120% estimated value, and I assure you that estimation is on the ample side. Your family will not lose its wealth, and I am ready to increase it in a manner of your choosing in exchange for this unwarranted affront. Your family has been steadfast in support of mine, and in promoting civilization in general. I do not like doing this to you," the First Prince repeated.

"Who are we being replaced with?" Stephan asked, resigned that he could not change this.

"House Derren," Davion said, seeing the flinch on the 34 year old's face. "Do you have history with them?"

"Philosophical only. They've been making a good attempt to run their duchies into the ground."

"So I've been told. They've claimed it was lack of necessary resources. Now that I'm giving them a prime world, they have to legitimately maintain it...or I will dispossess them, permanently. If they succeed, they will become an asset. If they fail, I can rid the Federated Suns of their influence. Wheels within wheels, I'm afraid."

"When is this to take place?"

"You will not be returning home. I'm sorry, but your trip here was your final one. Arrangements will be made for your family to travel, at my expense, where you like. There will be no

shenanigans by House Derren. I'm paying personal attention to this."

Stephan chewed the inside of his cheek as he fought to find an appropriate response.

"Spit it out, son," Andrew pressed. "I'm hating myself enough for doing this. Might as well air it out for both our sakes."

"You're rewarding those greedy, incompetent bastards and dispossessing a family that has soundly supported you and this realm over more than two centuries!"

"I am, reluctantly."

"How can you expect to maintain cohesion if you betray the tenets of trust and loyalty? Not that I'm threatening it, but this is how rebellions are born."

"You're not returning to Neubenn to preclude any such rebellion, but the truth of the matter is, as well off as your House is, House Derren is far larger and more powerful. I need to take them out or reform them, and this grand exchange with the Draconis Combine gives me an opportunity to do that, and reshuffle other pieces on the board you don't need to know about. If it works, we'll be more stable afterward in a multitude of ways. But I didn't just bring you here to explain this. I brought you here to discuss ample compensation. I have a number of smaller worlds in need of competent leadership. Any of the dozen of them are yours for the claiming...along with additional resources to help you start building as your forebearers did. Or if you want, I can gift you a couple hundred mechs to replace what you're leaving behind on Neubenn and you can pursue the life of a mercenary, seeing as how I'm told you're also a fair mechwarrior. Or you can buy land on New Avalon. I'll arrange it. Tell me what you want, and if it's within reason, I'll grant it. For your father's sake."

"Why is my father more important than my grandfather, or great grandfather? They've all helped build up our...former home," Stephan said, biting at the words as they came out.

"I don't know the others you speak of, but I know what your father did. He was one of the few voices in my ear telling me to build faster than I fought. That the long game would be won through infrastructure and agriculture. 'Mechs and mechwarriors have to be fed and otherwise supplied, and if not..."

"...your enemy wins by default," Stephan finished the well-familiar quote.

Andrew nodded. "He was doing that on Neubenn so well it was making other noble families jealous...especially when I rubbed their noses in it and demanded they do better on the economic front. Few took the example, I'm afraid. Stubbornness is one thing nobles have an abundance of. Shame is sometimes a way to confront it. Needless to say, I wish I had 100 more like him, but now I have none. And bluntly, I have no guarantee you have even a tenth of his skill, which makes you the disposable card in this shuffling game. For you father's sake I wish that wasn't so, but it is what it is. Now, focus forward and tell me what life you would envision for yourself beyond Neubenn."

After all his family had built up over the years...

"I want out," Stephan said flatly.

The First Prince frowned. "What do you mean by that?"

"I want out of this mess. Out of politics. Out of power games where your friends have to be sacrificed to appease your enemies. I don't want to start building again on a small world, only to have it taken away from my children or grandchildren by one of yours later on."

"And from your perspective, what would that mean? If it's a large sum of pounds or C-bills, that's easy to manage."

"My family are fighters, yes, but primarily builders. We see all that has been lost since the fall of the Star League, and how nobody seems to care about losing even more. We should be advancing civilization rather than playing tug of war over the scraps."

"Your father said as much to me on many such visits."

"If you truly want to honor his legacy, give me a chance to fully pursue it."

Davion squinted slightly. "Go on."

"May I ask an impertinent question?"

"Please do," he urged.

"Why is everyone so obsessed with the Inner Sphere when there are many barely habited or completely uninhabited worlds in the Periphery to draw natural resources from?"

"Some efforts have been made to civilize those areas, but as you well know, a small world doesn't become large and industrialized simply for the asking. The majority of Humanity is here, in the Inner Sphere. That's what we have to protect."

"So why aren't all the Great Houses pushing outwards to get more natural resources to increase your powerbase here?"

"Because if we so much as blink and give our neighbors an opportunity to invade, they will. It's a constant game of brinksmanship with Houses that cannot be trusted."

"My grandfather once said," Stephan recounted, pushing the acceptability of the situation a bit, "that House Davion was worth helping because they at least did a little more than pay lip service to protecting and advancing civilization, while the other Houses didn't even pretend to. That's why we've been loyal to you."

"Because your ultimate goal is to prevent another collapse," Davion said, having been privy to a similar conversation with his father. "And you think the Periphery holds the answer to this?"

"If my family is to build...to survive not just the wars and famines, but the politics, we need to get away from it. We need to put our fate in our own hands and disappear until we are strong enough to make a difference."

"What is it you want?"

"Independence while still maintaining ties to the Federated Suns and to your family. Enough resources and mechs to travel somewhere into the Periphery and carve out a piece of civilization from the barbery and unchallenged nature out there. To slowly build it up into a House of our own. Not in competition with yours, but as a silent backer off in no-man's

land where the rest of the Inner Sphere won't even notice. I want to build up a world as my father and his father did. I want to get it to the point where we can produce Star League level technology again, including jumpships. One war where the current conventions are ignored and we'd lose so many jumpships half the Inner Sphere would be marooned in their own systems...and nobody seems to give a damn about it!" he ended with a yell he had not intended.

He sighed as the First Prince said nothing, then continued on in a more proper tone.

"Give me independence from your control, your taxes, your politics, and let me loyally build for you...off the books...an extension of the Federated Suns that will be owned by my family in such a way that it could never be disposed short of losing to an invading force. I want out of politics."

"It sounds like you want in, just at the top of the heap where no one can betray you as I am doing," Davion admitted.

"Yes. And I also want the tech to build that which virtually no one else can build. Even if I have to sit on the blueprints for 50 years until I can get a shipyard large enough to build them up and running, I want to produce jumpships and everything else down the Federated Suns tech tree...as well as work on a few improvements along the way."

"And you want to start by taking away some tiny worlds from bandits and pirate kings?"

"Or setting up on uninhabited ones, yes. I do not see it as being peaceful out there, but I would be punching down rather than dealing with families more powerful than my own."

Davion glanced at his Vizier again. "How much?"

"A supply line would have to be established. That would be the greatest cost. No less than three jumpships running continually. More if he goes so deep he travels off the map."

"Commissioned or bought?"

"Commissioned and rotated out," the Vizier said, thinking quickly, "if he wishes to remain mostly anonymous."

"Your troops on Neubenn cannot go with you," Davion cautioned. "You'll have to use mercenaries or assemble your

own force. I can't lend you my troops, or mechs, but I can arrange to purchase secondhand units on the market in decent condition. Your family knows how to do the rest with refurbishment, I assume?"

"Are you actually considering this?" Stephan asked.

"Your father and I talked about a great many things I could never do. Building more jumpships was one of them. I can't afford, nor can the Federated Suns afford to build a brand new planet from scratch up to a level that could produce jumpships. I barely have the ability to enough build new ones as it is, and those are contracts with independent corporations...but if I can plant your family as a seed out there in the wilderness where you can grow and research and develop mostly unmolested by Inner Sphere politics and wars...then it's an investment I think I would like to make. Not just because of your father, but because of what your father was capable of. If he taught you half of what he knew, that's enough to give this experiment a chance of success."

"What do you wish out of it?" Stephan asked respectfully, but not wanting anything left unsaid that could come back to bite him later.

"Build," Davion said simply. "It's what your family is good at. And maybe someday in the distant future, your family will save mine if the endless wars here don't work out in our favor. I'll give you the promise of an active supply line, fed by my House, for the next 50 years. After that you're on your own, but by then you should have commercial ties to the Federated Suns already well established. Create your own pocket of civilization out there with my thanks and my apologies. Will this opportunity make up for what I'm taking away?"

"If it is honorably discharged, then yes."

"A notable caveat. I appreciate your attention to detail, and for giving me an opportunity to go to bed tonight with a slightly less convoluted conscience. But I expect that, sometime after I'm gone, your family will be producing jumpships, mechs, and everything else out there quietly that my family can then buy. I consider this also to be a protection of my future lineage.

Build what is not there, and create something worthy of this realm.”

Davion straightened slightly behind his desk. “Though there will be no public record of it, I hereby elevate your family to a measure of peerdom. Hence forth you will be known as House Morten, our independent Periphery neighbor and close ally with a shared economy and privileges of passage equal to our own citizens, etc, etc...we’ll figure out the rest of the paperwork later. My point is, I’m recognizing your independence from my command at this point. You are no longer one of my subjects, but a peer. A very, very tiny peer,” he added. “How large your powerbase grows is going to be dependent on how much of your father’s skill you’ve inherited.”

“I accept the challenge and the peerdom. I would ask that all necessary blueprints be given now, rather than wait until later when one of your heirs might have a change of heart on the matter.”

“All will be done now, and I will put it in ironclad that the 50-year window be financially respected. But as you are clearly aware, I cannot control people from beyond the grave. But as long as I live, this deal will be honored in the fullest. If it is to survive beyond us, then you must build the power to keep it in the face of future generations who might think otherwise.”

Stephan nodded. “While I don’t like losing our world, I think the trade for our freedom and the ability to build unhindered are something my father would have approved of. We will preserve and expand the light of civilization into the Periphery.”

“Lest it should be extinguished here again,” Davion added. “Where do you want to start this incursion into the barbaric beyond?”

“I don’t know,” Stephan admitted. “I’ve never truly thought it through before now.”

Davion raised a hand and snapped his fingers, with an unseen attendant running out from the shadows behind him to stand at his side.

“Bring us a map of the Periphery along with any and all intelligence we have on what’s out there...”

1

January 18, 2989

Federated Suns

Crucis March

Cholis

"This is it," the real estate agent said grandly as he led Stephan and Roger, his bodyguard, up the curving staircase to the front door of the mansion he'd just bought sight unseen. "I told you. Immaculate condition. I hope you'll be pleased with it, Lord Morten," he said as he used the keycard and swung the large double doors wide open with an extra hand flourish as the main hall came into view.

"Thank you, Mr. Frantz," he said, looking forward but not yet stepping in. "We can find our way from here."

"Is there anything else I can help you with?" he pressed.

"One mansion is enough for now," Stephan said flatly, so the realtor wasn't sure if he was joking or serious.

"I'm available whenever you need me," he said, handing Stephan the keycard. "The codes for every building, including the guest house, are on there, and there's a recoder with extra keycards in the main study so you can adjust them as you like," he said with a tip of his broad rimmed hat that matched his grey business suit appropriately.

Stephan took the card, then the local realtor scurried away, now a fairly rich man given his percentage on the 73 million C-bill mansion that had sat on the market for 32 years for lack of a buyer. No one else on Cholis had the money to buy it, other than perhaps Duke Thorsen, and it wasn't like the planet had anything on it worthy of outside investment other than scenery and peace and quiet. The planet had a population of 1.3 million, and the nearest neighbor was some 8 kilometers

away, with the nearest town another 18 beyond that. The main city of Brinestorm was some 128 kilometers away, which was where he had arrived on the Davion dropship that had brought him and Roger here ahead of the rest of his family.

"Well," Stephan said after the realtor was out of earshot and heading back to the city in a car that looked to not care for the dirt roads that had led them out here. "This is it."

"Any port in a storm, Steph," Roger said without using his title...for he never had since his father had assigned him as his protector at the age of 16. He'd become more like a big brother eleven years his senior and had traveled out to New Avalon with him onboard their dropship before the bad news had broken. Everyone else there had gone back carrying orders from Stephan, but Roger had refused to leave his charge alone and in the care of Davion hands. The two of them had remained to work out the details of the 'compensation' before heading out to Cholis as the vanguard of the many to come from House Morten.

They both walked inside to a fully furnished living area that could easily hold 20-30 guests, with hallways heading off in two directions that led to a complex that could easily hold upwards of 50 residents, with several out buildings that could be converted in a pinch to hold more. His family was going to be arriving, hopefully, with around 500 people, so he had to get as much conversion work done ahead of time, for he didn't want any of them to have to find accommodations in the city.

"What do you want to get rid of first?" Stephan joked, seeing the furnishings that he knew his mother would hate with a passion.

"I'd say nothing until we can order replacements," he answered practically, putting a hand on the Lord's shoulder. "It's a start."

"Yes it is," he agreed, poking a finger into one of the orange/white chair cushions experimentally. "And at least nobody can take this one away from us...unless Davion has a change of heart."

"We're out on the edge of nowhere, Steph. Davion doesn't care about Cholis. I doubt he'd even miss the tax revenue if it suddenly disappeared."

"His auditors would. They're very thorough," he said from experience dealing with them on Neubenn.

"I'm surprised this place even has a HPG relay," Roger said as he sat down on one of four couches in the room and put his feet up on the accompanying low glass table as he let out a sigh of relief after the long and bumpy ride here in an offroad truck they'd bought upon landing to carry the few belongings and supplies they had with them. Most of Stephan's personal stuff was still back on Neubenn.

"It's one of the reasons why I chose this planet. I'll need it to start making the purchases we need and recruiting offworld personnel. Damn Davion for not letting me bring our own people out here."

"Duke Nosebleed will need all the help he can get," Roger said irreverently, referencing Norvin Derren's height, at 6'8", but with such a slender build he looked like a stiff wind would knock him over...which had happened more than once, according to the tabloids at least. One such occasion had resulted in a nosebleed, and the name had henceforth stuck. "The First Prince can't let him have any excuses for screwing up the planet, now can he?"

"We're going to have to train everyone," Stephan said, leaning against a bar top that had racks full of various forms of alcohol fully stocked. Too bad his family didn't drink. He was almost tempted to right now.

"We know how to do that."

"Our trainers aren't coming with us."

"We have all the files and curriculum House Morten has built up, and enough brain trust in family members to get the ball rolling. It will take time, but this isn't a death blow."

"Feels close enough."

Roger frowned at him. "What's eating at you? Or, maybe I should say, what's *new* that's eating at you?"

"I've exiled my own family to the backwater. Now that we're here...I finally know what backwater means."

"So what's the first step?"

Stephan glanced at him, knowing it was a goad to get him out of his depression. But even knowing that, it still helped. "Tomorrow the Davion rep will be here. Today...I guess we just explore and get something to eat. You're cooking."

"We probably better not leave the doors open," Roger said, hopping up to attend to it himself. "Who knows what kind of wildlife might wander in."

"Better than townsfolk," Stephan said, pushing the second door aside before Roger could get to it as he headed back outside. "Let's get the unpacking done first."

The next morning like clockwork a convoy of civilian hovercrafts meandered down the valley road, just above the swollen Nigalle River from the previous evening's downpour that had relented to persistent but light rain this morning. Mud flipped up where the leading chains hit the 'road,' but otherwise the 6 hovercrafts were unmolested, all bearing the insignia of House Davion.

Stephan Morten was waiting under the cover of a side entrance that had an elegant wrap-around porch as the vehicles came past the 'fence' of large shrubbery and into a vehicle foyer, large enough to hold twice their number, that circled a fountain statue in the center that was being flooded by the persistent rain. That water didn't result in mud, for as soon as one got past the evergreen bushes they were on top of ferrocrete that had decorative inlays visible in reflected sunlight that right now appeared as equally dull and gray as the rest of the 'side' entrance.

Uniformed men scurried out of the lead vehicles, taking up a defensive perimeter except for one, which held up an umbrella for a woman who exited the extra-length hovercraft that was apparently the local back road version of a limo. She walked on booted heels that came up to her knees, and above that was a trim but long skirt accented by a flowery top that

looked to be incompatible with even a few drops of rain. Her attendant fought hard to keep any off her, but in the end of the short hike up to the porch, the rain won out.

"Lord Morten?" she asked, knowing what he looked like already from study, but feeling the need to be polite and not assume he would always answer his own door.

"I am," Stephan said, letting her inside a single door and out of the humid air beyond as two of her guards flanked the door outside. A third tried to follow her in, but a simple and firm hand signal from the woman waved him off and he remained outside with the others.

"Thank you for agreeing to see me so soon after arrival," she said, looking around at the empty room and the pile of orange cushions stacked up against one wall as the present furniture all seemed to be monochromatic, with whites mostly, but also some black cushions that didn't quite seem to fit the furniture frames. "I hope I'm not intruding as you get settled in."

"There's only the two of us here, so not much intruding to do," he said, gesturing for her to sit opposite him across a circular table that was business-like, yet could equally have doubled as a place to play a hand of cards. "The sooner we can get working on offworld orders, the better."

"That's one of the many reasons I'm here, Lord Morten. My name is Carroll Davion, and before you ask, I'm 121st in the line of succession...meaning I don't have a snowball's chance in hell of ever becoming First Prince. I work for the benefit of my House, though, and for the Federated Suns. My name, as well as my appointment here as Ambassador at Large, is expected to open a lot of doors and cut through any red tape that you might need. My uncle...extended uncle anyway...wants you to succeed, and knows that delays can be the death of any operation. I'm here to minimize or destroy any that come your way. I understand you already made jumpship purchases while on New Avalon?"

"Yes, but it will be some time before they arrive. Some had to finish out existing contracts first. I have a lot of things I

need on planet, and a great deal many beyond. First priority is getting this estate into some semblance of order before my family arrives. That means construction crews to renovate the existing buildings and to add more. I also need a dropship landing platform with support services established further down the valley. These are my two top priorities. I can't begin bringing in a lot of new personnel until I have room to quarter them."

"Local apartments are out of the question for your workers, I take it?"

"If I have to, but ideally I want everyone within the boundaries of the embassy estate."

"I can put you in touch with the local craftsmen's guild. Renovation work I can assume can take place rather fast. New buildings though...I have no idea what they're capable of or what projects they're currently on. Would you like me to set up some meetings for you?"

"The sooner the better," he said as Roger walked into the room behind him but didn't say a word as he took a chair on the couch.

"My bodyguard," Stephan said, having heard him enter.

"Well, I'm glad you're not alone. Will you be needing to hire private security?"

"I will handle that on my own. I'd prefer not to have a large number of Davion agents in my personal staff," he floated boldly.

"None will be mine," she said just as bold. "My instructions are quite clear. Keep an eye on you, but not interfere or infiltrate. Your message said there was a guest house for me to use?"

Stephan pointed off to his left. "About 80 meters that way. I don't want any of your people anywhere else on the estate at any time."

"Agreed," she said simply, folding her fingers in front of her. "I'm honestly not here to cause problems, though I doubt you'll take my word for it. You're probably still quite mad about everything that has happened."

"It cannot be undone, so I've put it behind me."

"Eyes forward then. How can I be of help today?"

"In addition to construction concerns, I need to hire staff. I don't know what talent pool there is here, and I'd rather not have to guess and waste time if I do have to look offworld."

"I can have my staff look into it and get you an appraisal if you tell me what you're looking for?"

"Everything."

Carroll smiled. "Of course. I apologize for such a dumb question. You came here with a couple suitcases, I believe?"

"Three actually."

"I arrived here a little over a month ago. Duke Thorsen was quite surprised by my arrival. I didn't explain much to him. I thought it'd be best if you two had a private meeting, but if you want me there to explain anything I'm always available. I am curious, however. This new fiefdom you are going to put together in the Periphery. Do you have a name for it yet, or do you want me to continue referring to you as House Morten?"

"Far too early to worry about naming something that doesn't yet exist."

"And you? Should I address you as Lord or First Lord?"

"Stephan will do. If I got you stuck on the edge of nowhere, at least we can be on a first name basis."

Carroll smiled. "It is a little different than I'm accustomed to, but I wasn't exactly forced to come. I rather like the potential of this assignment, and I admire your creativity in crafting it on what had to be very short notice."

"Keep your people where they belong and don't play any tricks," Stephan warned, "and we'll get along just fine."

"After what's happened to you, I know better than to poke an open wound," she said, standing up abruptly. "If there's nothing more you need, I'll see to settling into the guest house?"

"It's unlocked."

"Nice meeting you, Stephan Morten," she said, promptly exiting as she felt her welcome evaporating by the second. After she left, Roger huffed.

“Annoying little twit. Why didn’t you make her stay in the city?”

“This way if I need something I’ll always know where she is. And since we don’t have any security with us, might as well have the Davion goons here to scare away the locals.”

“It’s going to be hard to vet the locals. Might be better to hire security from offworld.”

“Don’t worry about security right now. Just get me a decent cook and house staff.”

“Am I that bad?”

“Compared to what we’re both used to, yes. Compared to ration bars, no. But the closer we can make this feel to home the better. I don’t want you cooking for Mother when she arrives.”

“Absolutely not,” Roger said, knowing of her penchant for quality in such matters of household affairs. “Cooks on the top of my list then.”

“See if you can do something fast. Duke Thorsen will be here in three days. He called when you were off hiking. Find anything interesting?”

“The terrain is interesting. It’ll need a lot of extra work though, building on mostly inclines, even if they’re subtle. That river though could be a concern if it ever floods higher. Not for the house, but for other stuff we build.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. See if we can have an appropriate meal for the Duke when he arrives.”

“Worried about first impressions?”

“I have no idea what he’s like, other than a formal general, but it is a long trip out here and etiquette demands we offer him something better than ration bars...”

3 days later...

Another convoy of vehicles made their way out and down the valley House Morten now owned. In fact they owned two, coming to a total of 198 square kilometers of untouched wilderness with a tiny square of civilization carved out of it for

the mansion that was originally built to be the retirement home of an industrial titan who had had his fill of urban landscapes. Once he had died, his family wanted nothing to do with the planet and had simply put the estate up for sale and left it that way until Stephan had bought it...along with the extra land that he'd need for other purposes.

The Duke had approved that purchase, which otherwise wasn't for sale in any market. Most of the planet was owned by the duchy and thus under the Duke's control...rather than one of his own personal possessions. If he was replaced, the new Duke would inherit it, much as had happened with Neubenn. Only the personal proper of House Morten had been bought by House Davion. The rest of it belonged to the duchy and was now the temporary property of House Derren.

The sale of a piece of Duchy land to a private owner had to be approved by the Duke, but when it came to wilderness nobody really cared for nobody was making any backdoor profit off it. Still, it had been a generous first step in their soon to be relationship that Stephan was glad for. Especially that since the sale was finalized, the land no longer fell under the Duke's domain...or tax sphere.

What House Morten owned here was officially designated as an embassy of an entity foreign to and unbound by the laws of the Federated Suns. It was the first little piece of their new fiefdom, and would serve as the training ground and springboard for the servants of House Morten...all of whom had been required to remain on Neubenn rather than travel with the family here.

So it was on his own soil that Stephan waited under a clear day's sun, yet chilly breeze as the Duke's envoy arrived...though it only contained four vehicles, two of which were hovercraft armed with machine gun turrets on the back. Even on a backwater world like this, off in the wilderness, people would still try to take pot shots at nobility, he guessed. Some things never changed.

The Duke walked out wearing a modest uniform. Only a few medals attached from his military days in the Federated

Suns Armed Forces. He'd gotten this duchy as a reward for long and loyal service and moved his entire family out here some 18 years ago. Beyond that, Stephan knew nothing about the man as he stood before his ornate double doors wearing the traditional cape/jacket that active members of House Morten used in lieu of a business suit and tie. The jacket was normal and form fitting until it came to the waist, then it flayed out slightly to wrap around into what almost looked like a dress, but with the straight lines and black with gold trim that designated it as man's clothing. A seam opened down the middle of the front allowing his legs to move forward, and as he walked a few steps to greet the Duke the air pulled the rest back into a subtle cape's flourish behind him.

"Lord Morten," the Duke said, extending his hand as if they'd known each other for years.

"Duke Thorsen," he said, accepting the modestly strong grip from the graying man who kept his hair cut military short beneath a simple cap that tilted to the right side. "I'm glad you could meet with me so soon."

"Not at all," the Duke said with a wave of his hand. "You're the most important thing to happen to this planet since I was installed. I would have been here sooner, but I wanted to give you time to settle in."

"Not much settling I can do before my family arrives, but we're managing," Stephan said as he led the former General inside and past the main living area to a dining hall just beyond that had a long rectangular table already set up with a wide array of food items on serving trays. "I took the liberty of having lunch put on. I hope there's something here that you find edible."

"Smells quite good, thank you. Shall we sit and eat, or talk and eat at the same time? I may be a Duke but my manners have been said to be wanting in some areas."

"I can multitask," Stephan said, sitting down at the right side of the table with the head chair missing so the pair could be seated across from each other on an even standing. He

grabbed his plate and began scooping on a pile of mashed potatoes, which prompted the Duke to begin the same.

"I had heard your House didn't eat meat," he said amicably as he studied the various foods. "You look healthy enough to me, but the military swears you can't get enough protein without it."

"It takes a bit of mixing and matching foods, but it's all here before you if you know the chemistry of it. Our troops didn't have to fight any wars, but their health records were measurably better once we got them away from eating corpse."

"Really?" the Duke said, genuinely curious. "No fainting spells?"

"Not once we got the recipes worked out appropriately. After that it was relatively easy to mass produce. And the food keeps longer than corpse anyway. A bit of civilization advancement over nature, as it were."

The Duke took ample amounts of potatoes, peas, ventara root cubes, then paused over some long tubes.

"What are these called?"

Stephan smiled. "Doguls. They're basically a tastier version of a nutrient bar. Pair those with apples or other fruit and you've basically got all the nutrients you need to live for months."

Thorsen speared a pair of them onto his plate then sat down before biting off the end of one of them, then looking up with an approving gesture.

"Taste is far better than I expected. I'd swear there was meat in there somewhere."

"High protein and fat count. That's what your taste buds register, not where they come from," Stephan said before eating a few more bites. "How is this planet's food supply?"

"Tolerable," the Duke grumbled. "We have to grow basically everything here due to the lack of a regular supply line from the interior. We only get a handful of jumpships coming in every year, and those merchants usually charge 5 times what it's worth back on the larger worlds. That's the only reason they

bother to come this far out. But getting chocolate is worth it. Nobody grows the beans here.”

“So you haven’t spoken to the Davion rep?”

“We’ve spoken a few times. Floated something vague about some economic boons coming this way along with your arrival but wouldn’t go into details.”

“A new trade route is being opened up and is coming here with regular jumpship runs, empty or full...for the next 50 years anyway.”

The Duke’s fork stopped halfway to his mouth as the shock hit him. He gradually lowered it to his plate before fixing Stephan with a serious glare.

“I’d prefer a blunt answer to this next question, however uncomfortable it might be. Are you here to replace me?”

“No,” Stephan said, shaking his head furiously. “After what just happened to me, I’d never even think of dispossessing someone of their world unless they were some form of villain abusing their people. No, Duke. I’m not a threat to your duchy. But like me, the First Prince can choose to take it from you at any time he wishes. That’s not why I’m here.”

“Why exactly are you here, then? This tax haven your estate is being put into under some ‘embassy’ clause befuddles me. It’s outside my jurisdiction yet within my duchy. I thought maybe you were being slow walked in to replace me. Nothing else makes sense.”

“Do you know what happened to me?”

“Carroll Davion told me you were dispossessed of your duchy and were moving your family out here to get away from the politics elsewhere. She didn’t say more than that.”

“I was dispossessed because I’m young and not my father, but only to make room for a more powerful House that the First Prince needed to move around from other worlds. He ripped my family from everything we’d built to deliver it to someone who is probably going to run it into the ground...all because of politics. I’d never do that to you, but the Davions would if they had reason to. I’m here because I’ve struck a deal

with the First Prince to get out of the Inner Sphere. I intend to build a new fiefdom in the Periphery, integrated with the Federated Suns but not legally part of it. My House is now independent with the First Prince's approval and support. He's running a trade route out to a planet of my choice that will then continue on into the Periphery to locations that I claim in the future. He's promised this for the next 50 years, but I am beyond his authority now. Hence the embassy label on my holdings here."

"Damnation..." the Duke said, leaning back in his chair. "That's the craziest thing I've ever heard."

"I'm going to utilize what you've got on this world in terms of personnel and resources, but I know I'm going to have to order and hire a lot from offworld. That will all be coming here on the trade route jumpships, but they're not just for me. They're for anyone to use with business purposes. My position here is being officially kept off the books, but word will spread eventually. If you're savvy, you should be able to utilize the new trade route to help with problems here."

"Problems?" the Duke said, his eyebrows raising slightly.

Stephan waved the comment off. "No offense intended, Duke, but my family has been dealing with the dilemma of tax withering for so long it's easy for me to spot, and most of the smaller outer planets in the Federated Suns are suffering from it. There comes a point, mathematically speaking, when the taxes going out to New Avalon exceed the new revenue coming in and a planet begins to wither up as the money simply is drained out of it. When the Davions squeeze hard enough, there's nothing a planet can do except hang on and hope they loosen their tax grip...or start using the black market and doing as much as possible off the books, as many of the smaller worlds do."

"Never," the Duke said firmly. "I've been by the book my entire life, and I'm certainly not going to start cheating now that the First Prince has installed me here. That said, Cholis was in economic decline when I arrived and I haven't been able to

do much to blunt it since. Problems we do have, I'll admit. So am I to get this straight...you're going to use this estate as a sort of base of operations to launch military campaigns out into the Periphery?"

"I'm a long way from doing that at the moment, but essentially yes. It's also to allow some of my family a place to live in the Federated Suns who don't wish to brave the darkness out there. I'm not exactly sure how bad it will be, but at the minimum it's what we'd call a 'fixer upper.'"

"I've heard stories that it's quite bad, and the last time we were raided was 6 years ago. My militia couldn't hold them back and they emptied most of the spaceport of its cargo then left. We haven't had much worth stealing since then. Am I to assume you'll be bringing in a mech force to this estate?"

"I have to buy one first, but yes. I'm forbidden from returning to Neubenn, sending messages, and the only people I can bring with me are family members...and House Davion is transporting them personally out here to arrive in a matter of months, hopefully no more than a year's time. I'm the advance team and I need to get as much built up here as I can, but none of our highly trained personnel can come with them, nor can I request that they come. They all have to remain so Duke Derren has a full hand to start his new rule. I have to build everything from scratch except the brain trust within my family."

"How large is your family?"

"I'm not sure how many of the passives want to leave Neubenn, but I'm expecting around 500 or so."

"Passives?" the Duke asked curiously.

"My family long ago chose to become a mix of monarchy and meritocracy. Being born into the family line is just the ticket in the door. If you want to go your own way, you're supported and allowed to do whatever you want. Service to the House is not required, but if you desire it you must pass a series of tests after a lengthy amount of training. I became an active member of the House at age 19. The active members all have a duty to do, and we divide up our House into various Lordships. I'm the First Lord because I oversee everything, but

we have a Lord of Military Operations, Lord of Logistics, etc. My sister is actually two years older than me, but she did not want to be First Lord. She found the quiet power and responsibility of maintaining supply lines was her preferred niche, and she's damn good at it. I've got her and others to lead from the top, but all the middle and lower ranks have been completely denied to me."

The Duke blew out a long breath. "That's quite a mission profile you've got before you."

"Hanging over my head like a Regiment of battlemechs held up by only a string," Stephan admitted. "If I can't make this work, my House is effectively ended. House Davion bought up all the personal land holdings, corporate shares, etc my family held on Neubenn. We've been completely liquidated, and aside from this estate, we have nothing except a very large bank account to our name."

"So not just deposed, but banished?"

"The First Prince doesn't want any resistance to the new Duke."

"Did you offend him in some way?"

Stephan laughed, humorlessly. "He praised my family for the good work we've done, indicating that we'd done a little too well and created something of value he could trade off. He was sympathetic enough to offer compensation...hence this deal I've struck with him, but he definitely rewards those who screw up more than those who serve faithfully. I had never thought it would go to these lengths, though. I went to New Avalon expecting to be appointed Duke in my father's place, then found out I was being dispossessed, spent a month with the First Prince and his people arranging this deal, then came out here. That's been my year so far."

The Duke was left shaking his head. "Your reward for success was being removed?"

"I was young, inexperienced, and unproven. Had my father still lived he never would have been removed. But I'm the new guy and expendable...along with my family. When he offered compensation I tried to figure out how I could escape

this happening again, and the Periphery was the only answer I had.”

“In charge of your own fate then?”

“Unless he changes his mind and sends an army of battlemechs to take it from me. But first I have to build it. Legally though, my House is now independent, and we won’t be paying a single C-bill in taxes to New Avalon or you, but you’ll still get the benefit of our money being infused into Cholis’s economy.”

“And I look forward to that, Lord Morten. What do you see this new trade route also bringing?”

“Eventually you’ll be the link between my fiefdom and the Federated Suns. Crossroads are always an opportunity for commerce. Until then, you’ll have far cheaper shipping costs for things like chocolate.”

“Economics isn’t my strong suit. Military affairs are, and as it is I only have 10 mechs in my infantry. I can’t afford more than that, and they’re there mostly to scare off the smaller raiders. A larger group comes in and I lose half my mechs and have to buy more from offworld. No production facilities here, I’m afraid. Are you going to have a defense force for your embassy?”

“Of course, and we’ll also help defend the planet when it’s raided. We’re not here to separate ourselves from your people, we’re here to integrate and be friendly neighbors. But as it stands, I don’t even have my personal mech with me. It belongs to Neubenn. And it’ll be some time before I even get a few mechs bought and sent here, and then I have to get them refurbished up to our standards, and I’ll need techs and facilities for that, which will also have to be built here. I’m afraid I’m going to be pulling heavily on your construction industry for at least the next few years.”

“They can use the money, and if they don’t feel like working their asses off for it, let me know and I’ll kick them where it counts.”

“I’ve already purchased a number of jumpships and dropships that will be delivered after my family arrives. I don’t

have dates yet, but it'll be a while. The largest of those will be carrying some 200 used mechs obtained from places you don't even want to know about. Davion is gifting me them as a replacement for the forces I'm having to leave behind on Neubenn, but he can't give me new purchases without drawing attention, and I will have no mechwarriors to pilot them. In the meantime I plan on buying a few of my own and getting them here to cover the estate. I don't even have a security detail at the moment, and I'm counting on the backwater geography of Cholis as my only defense against unwanted attention."

"200?" the Duke asked, his eyes widening.

"Crappy mechs that will have to be rebuilt, most likely, but yes. We kept a standing army of 220 front line mechs ready and able at all times on Neubenn...despite some people saying it was overkill. Counting reserve mechs and trainers, we had between 280 and 340 during my years in service, which included a quasi-mercenary force that we loaned out to Federated Suns worlds that were getting raided or looked to be in jeopardy from the Dracos in order to give some of our people combat experience. I have none, but I've been subjected to lengthy war games along with the rest of our forces. Most of which are deemed 'green' for lack of blooding by offworlders."

"Neubenn not a hotspot for raids, I take it?"

"Geographically far enough from the Dracos border to not interest them yet, and too well built up for raids, though occasionally an idiot will try."

"Nice problem to have...and a splendidly sized force for a militia."

"Our family has a motto. 'Don't take what you can't hold.' As it is, I can't hold more than a cup of coffee at the moment, and it is thoroughly disconcerting."

"My security force is already screening the road leading up here to keep away the press and tourists wanting to snap photos of you, but I'll provide anything else you need in the interim. Just ask."

"Does everyone drive here?" Stephan asked. "I thought you would have flown out?"

"I don't possess a single Vtol on this world," Thorsen said embarrassedly. "An extended Company of mechs is the best I can do, and I've had to fight for that. There were only two on planet when I arrived here, and I had to dispossess both mechwarriors on the grounds of drunken incompetence within the first three months. How soon can you get a few mechs and mechwarriors hired?"

"If I wanted to bring in mercenaries it would be faster, but I prefer not to. I would hope to have at least a Company operational within 2 years and scale up fast after that."

"Then my mission is to keep the raiders off you for two years," the former General said, thinking hard.

"Technically that's not your job."

"It's my world, and even if you're not within my legal domain you're within my protective umbrella. Don't ever think otherwise."

"Well then, in that case you can call me Stephan," he said, dropping his fork gently to the plate and extending his hand across the table and over top the bowl of peas.

"Harris," the Duke replied, taking the informal offer of friendship in an eager grip. "And I think this planet is going to be very interesting in the coming years if we both can hold it. I expect once word gets out that you're here along with a lot of resources, the raiders might up their target evaluation of Cholis."

"Quite possibly, or some other noble families looking to cash in or cause trouble. I guess we're whistling through the graveyard for a while until I can get a firm foothold established."

"Not really," the Duke said, sitting back in his chair with his shoulders seeming to have grown several inches during the conversation. "They'd have to find it on a map first. I think anonymity will serve you well against domestic concerns. But these raiders have spies, and when they see a cargo of value they tend to show up at exactly the wrong time."

"Well then, we'll have to be a bit more devious, won't we?" Stephan said with his first genuine smile in months.

2

November 3, 2989

Federated Suns

Crusis March

Cholis

Morten Estate

10 months later...

Word that a Davion jumpship had arrived insystem hit the local news faster than the Duke could send official word to Stephan's comms office. From the ID he knew it was the promised arrival of his family, and given the distance to the Nadir Jump point where it had entered, it would be a 3 or 4 day trip by dropship to get here.

The Morten Estate didn't have a comms dish of sufficient power to reach that far, so he had to route everything through the Duke, including a request that the two dropships incoming land on a grassy plain at his estate, near to which a half completed ferrocrete pad was still under construction. After a back and forth argument over two days, including the Duke throwing his muscle around, the Captains of the dropships outright refused to land at anything other than a full-fledged spaceport, and even denied a very generous commission to make the short hop out to the Morten Estate to deliver his family directly.

One of the Captains said he was a civilian transport, not military, and would never see an inch of mud on his landing struts...along with a lot of other blustering jargon. These were both House Davion Captains, and apparently they were as prim and cocky as their reputation suggested, and no local Duke and exiled noble were going to give them orders or bribes.

Thorsen was quite put out and immediately arranged a convoy with traffic control priority to take the Morten family and all their belongings straight to the Estate...which was where Stephan was waiting for them amongst the construction crews racing to get the four new buildings surrounding the mansion fit enough to live in. Their basic ferrocrete structure was in place...for he flat out refused to use wood frame structures even if they were faster to put up...but the interiors were bare with the electrical only partially installed despite the crews working night shifts ever since the jumpship arrived.

And to make matters worse, the expected 500 head count has expanded to some 736...for his mother had decided to use the already established adoption process to bring more people into the House in order to get them out here. It was an old custom where House Morten would recognize loyalty and skill more than their own bloodline, and the new adoptee would be treated exactly as all the other House members, including their own offspring.

He guessed that was what was required to get the Davions to bring them along...despite the fact that such adoptions had to have the First Lord's signature on them to make them legit.

He guessed his mother had done some signature forgery and backdating to make it all work. It wouldn't be the first time, but he wasn't going to complain about it. Not when they'd have a few more people from Neubenn to help them build here, but he hadn't yet gotten a complete manifest, and the message from his mother simply said to wait and she'd explain in person.

Which meant keep it off the comm channels, so there was some sneaking going on, and he wasn't about to interfere with the Davion people around watching.

So he stood amongst the hustle and bustle of the construction crews as they were also putting on the foundations for other buildings, expanding the basic road into offshoots, one of which led several kilometers down the valley to the location for the dropship pad that hadn't been ready in time.

Everything was a jumbled mess, but Stephan was suppressing a quiet smile. House Morten was finally here, which meant he and Roger, along with their now 28 person staff, would no longer be carrying the torch of civilization on their own out in this raw Cholis wilderness that was more a work site than a home.

But as they say, home is where the family is, and as he saw the first of the lead convoy vehicles coming up the long dirt road and flickering in and out of the gaps between the trees that lined it, the sense of being exiled to the middle of nowhere began to abate quickly.

The first truck was a three-parter, joined by two flexible ties, and with huge wheels that were eating up the bumps in the road with ease. The lead cab looked to be for passengers, while the box-like compartments behind were clearly cargo. Stephan didn't see the second vehicle behind them, so the spacing mustn't have been very tight. That, or someone wanted to get here ahead of the others.

Right on cue, as it stopped at the main gate unsure where else to park, a figure in a cape/jacket identical to the one Stephan wore jumped out of one of the doors and jogged over to him, her tightly braided blonde ponytail bobbing gently against her back as she came up to him and wrapped him in a firm hug as the other occupants slowly began to spill out.

"I thought you'd be first in line," he said into sister's shoulder as neither one wanted to let go after only a few seconds.

"I had the convoy keep back a ways before I could get a head for what we were dealing with," she said, finally pulling back and looking him over, putting a hand against the size of his face as if measuring his sanity. "How bad are you?"

"Davion made it clear I can't go back, so it's eyes forward now. I'm keeping it together," he said, finally cracking a tear as a pair rolled down her own face.

"That arrogant bastard," she said, hugging him again quickly before getting to business. "I pulled as much data as I

could on the way in. The place looks small, but I can see you're already adding to it."

"I expected 500," he defended lightly.

"Well, Mother had other ideas. Do you have any portable shelters?"

"Just a warehouse of camping tents I had hoped we wouldn't need. The local construction crews aren't exactly what we're used to, and I had hoped we'd have another couple months. But still, I'm glad you're here now. It's been rather empty."

"Staff?"

"Bare bones, but we found a decent cook."

"Chef Talonson is one of the extras we adopted," Sarah Mortenson said with a smirk.

"Don't fire this one," he warned. "She's not in his class, but she picked up our recipe book rather fast. Work her in somewhere."

"Done. Do you mind if I take over here?" she asked, gesturing back to the crew of family members waiting near the truck not seeming to know what to do."

"Be my guest, Lord Morten."

Sarah turned around, walked three steps away, then belted out a string of orders that got the group moving. Four went back to start unloading the cargo, while two more ran towards the house, both of which were barely chest high and stopped to give Stephan a quick hug.

"Hey, no fraternizing with the First Lord," Sarah scolded them. "You're on a work detail, now move it!"

Stephan winked at both of his nieces, then silently pointed inside. They ran off eagerly to take an assessment of the rooms as per Sarah's orders, for both of them held a touchpad in each hand to start taking tallies of furniture and tagging waypoints for the cargo crews to begin an orderly process of unpacking all their belongings.

"How much did they let you bring?"

"Nothing large," she said, standing watch and mentally sizing up the estate for herself. "We were more concerned about people. They sold almost everything out from under us."

"I know. Total liquidization of all assets. Andrew didn't want us having any ties left on Neubenn."

"Grandfather stayed behind," she said, shocking him for a moment.

"They let him?"

"They don't know. We had to use a body double. He refused to leave, plus cited he'd probably never survive the high gs of dropship travel."

"Keep your voice down. We have a Davion Ambassador at Large occupying the guest house."

She frowned at him and he just rolled his eyes. "She's useful at cutting red tape and getting orders out. It also lets Andrew keep tabs on his investment out here."

Sarah stepped back to within a foot of him and lowered her voice. "I thought we were independent?"

"We are, but I wanted to maintain links to the Federated Suns. We need their economy, and this embassy. Legally, they can't give us orders here, nor Duke Thorsen, though he and I are getting along quite well."

"Embassy, huh?" Sarah said, thinking that through. "Taxes?"

"None. This is our *comfortable* base of operations," he said, stressing the word. "Those of us who don't want to go out into the barbaric should be able to make a life for themselves here. I didn't want to yank them completely out of the loop."

"They wouldn't give me any figures. How much did we end up with?" she asked, being the head of logistics for House Morten. She was always running the numbers.

"All said and done, we ended up with a war chest of 158.6 billion C-bills," Stephan said, adding in the '.6' because he knew she'd ask if he was rounding if he didn't.

"No pounds?" she asked, citing the currency of the Federated Suns. "Prince Andy really is giving us the boot."

"With all the purchases I've made, it's down to 117.3," he said quickly, drawing a stern look from her that said 'what the hell have you been spending it on?' "I placed a lot of orders on New Avalon, and have been working the local Comstar hub so hard I'm sure I'm funding half their payroll with outgoing messages. Most of the stuff, and people, haven't arrived yet."

"Such as?" she said with a glare.

"I've bought jumpships."

"How many?"

"Four," he said, seeing her star laser bolts at him.

"41 billion on four jumpships?" she said, her voice raising without her even realizing it, but Stephan just gave her a wry smile and leaned in a little closer, enough that he could feel her somewhat pounding breath on his face. He knew the typical *Merchant*-class ran from 0.5 to 2 billion, used and depending on customizations, and had expected her numerically calibrated head to explode. In fact, she was doing a good job of keeping the supernova contained right now.

"I had a chance to obtain a Sequoia-1," he said whisper quiet.

Her jaw dropped. "How the hell did you..." she said, thinking hard. "Agrocom?"

Stephan nodded. The multi-planet corporation had been involved in a large scandal recently, with it going into limited bankruptcy.

"They put two Sequoias up for sale, and with Andrew feeling sorry for us I got him to buy one of them, then turn around and sell it to us at cost. It'll be a few years before it can get here, but I thought it was a long term investment we shouldn't pass up."

"How much?"

"32.1 billion."

"That's damn cheap. Those things are virtually never for sale. House Davion must have got a discount!"

"I don't care how, it's ours now. Feel better?"

Sarah blew out a long breath, with her lips quibbling a little as if a child blowing bubbles. "It'll be useless in the near

term, but long term...yeah, you did good brother. And I hadn't really expected to have over 100 billion to work with anyway."

"Where is Grandfather staying?"

"With Baron Vitron, of course," she said, citing his lifelong friend. "He's just an anonymous house guest and going to stay there for however many years he has left."

Sarah dug something out of a hidden pocket and held it up in front of him.

"He said his goodbyes to all of us, then we used a double on the trip over so Davion would think he was still with us. He said to give this to you. I haven't read it."

Stephan took the datacard and made it disappear into one of his own pockets with the skill of a practiced magician as the first of the boxes made its way past him and into the house. He nodded to more of his extended family as they passed, with the two younger girls directing them to where they needed to go.

"So what are we looking at here?"

"Not very many assets on world," Stephan said, clapping another nephew on the shoulder as he passed. "This estate has enough wildness with it to build up the basic infrastructure we need without prying eyes on us."

"I thought the prying eyes were here already?"

"They're banished to the guest house only, and the road. The Ambassador at Large is Carroll Davion, and her name has already been useful in expediting shipments here."

Sarah's eyes flared, and he could see she was hating the Davions for what they'd done as much as him.

"Mixed bag," Stephan said. "Andrew has given us a window of opportunity if we can grab it."

"First name basis now?" she mocked.

"Not to his face, no. I don't think I'll ever see him again anyway. I've got his mouthpiece of a niece to talk through. We've got a new trade route opening up to here, at his expense, and a stipend of 50 million every year for 50 years. After that both go away, but if we get enough economic pull the trade route might stick on its own accord. He didn't send us out here

to fail. He's gambling that we will succeed. I think father had a far deeper relationship with him than we were ever told about."

"What's he get out of it, other than us out the door?"

"For your ears only, sister," he said, leaning in to whisper. "I don't know how. Maybe he was feeling really guilty at the time, but I got the blueprints to Star League-era equipment out of him, the entire Federated Suns tech tree, for us to build and, one day down the road, sell equipment back to him. All the way up through mechs and to jumpships."

He pulled back, seeing the shock in her eyes.

"Are you serious?"

"I didn't expect him to give it to me. When he did I just ran with it."

"So he wants us to sell him stuff while he goes around blowing factories up that otherwise could have produced it?"

"More like sell to future generations of Davions. He knows this is going to take a long time to pay dividends to the Federated Suns. Maybe he expects us to fail and just wants to let us play, but I'd bet part of him, because of father, thinks we might make good out here and wants to cover that eventuality."

"He gave us Star League blueprints?" she whispered, still not believing it.

"There's even a Sequoia-4 in them. I didn't even know those existed."

"They don't," she assured him. "Is it something his people were trying to come up with?"

"No, I looked these over dozens of times. A good chunk of the stuff is straight out of the Star League era, plus other additions. They've been sitting on a lot and he said he gave us all of it. I tend to believe him, but keep this to yourself. Don't even tell Mother."

"You're a better negotiator than I thought, brother."

"I had no time to plan. He said he wanted to compensate us for the loss and I just started spitballing. He offered us another world of our choosing...small ones, but if he can dispossess us of Neubenn..."

“...he or his heirs can take anything away, except if we’re independent.”

“He can use battlemechs to take that away,” Stephan pointed out, “so if we’re really going to be free, not just in a legal sense, we’re going to have to earn it the hard way. But I don’t want to make an enemy out of him, or the Federated Suns. We’re supposed to be a seed that could grow into a moderately sized ally, one with economic power forefront.”

“So he can buy what he otherwise can’t produce much of?”

“I don’t think the Dracos can get out here to blow up factories, do you?”

“If they wanted to, they’d find a way.”

“Which is why all of this is off the books. He assured me censors were going to prevent news of where we disappeared to from getting out for as long as possible. We set up here, then disappear into the Periphery before anyone catches wind of it...with his plausible deniability intact.”

“Still, I can’t believe he let us off the reigns and made all of these arrangements when we had nothing to bargain with.”

“Again, father’s influence I imagine. So he’s a frenemy, not an enemy. Don’t let the Davions here get the impression they’re the latter.”

Sarah huffed as the moving teams came back out to grab more boxes. “It’ll take a while before I’m willing to believe that. They stole everything from us.”

“And gave something back. A lot back, actually, contingent on us making use of it. As I said, it’s a seed he’s planted. An independent seed that, if it grows large enough, he won’t be able to control.”

“So that’s the game then. Hope he ignores us long enough to make our own way out there? Assuming he doesn’t want to expand the Federated Suns further using us to do the dirty work for him?”

“If he does, he made a very bad choice giving us those blueprints. I’m not worried about him reneging on the deal. It’s

his heirs that might. It's hard to say right now, but here's hoping for his long reign."

"I won't say it, but I see your point. Alright, the rest can wait for later. I have to keep things organized here or this is going to turn into a mess," she said as the second vehicle in the convoy was audibly approaching down the road, but not yet in sight. "I'll let you meet and greet while I get to work."

"Glad to let you," he said with honest relief.

"You said the cook's decent?"

"There's a table with food already on it for you guys to snack on during the unloading."

"Thanks for thinking ahead there. We haven't eaten since we hit atmosphere."

"I'm not terrible at logistics, you know."

Sarah smirked. "Yes you are. Compared to me, at least. Go say hello. Mother is in the third car."

His older sister disappeared inside the house in a flash, now on mission and at her usual breakneck work pace. She'd get things squared away here as best they could with the lack of space currently available, but the idea of some of them having to sleep in tents was...well, it was better than not having his family here. And now that his older sister was on top of it, it was time to find his other 7 siblings and Mother, not to mention see how many useful personnel she'd managed to conscript into the family at the last moment.

"No Grady?" Stephan asked hours later after everything had settled down and the 8 Lords of House Morten were unceremoniously sitting around a campfire as the mansion had become far too claustrophobic to work in. A lot of the kids had volunteered for the tents, while everyone else was setting up on portable beds in large rooms as if they were a barracks, with several areas designated as 'free zones' for people to mingle in and get some work done. The rest were outside on the terraces or taking walks around the few paths Roger had managed to cut in the grounds.

Everyone was adapting, and frankly glad to be off the dropships that were even more claustrophobic, but this was still going to take some time to get used to and the less people in the mansion the better.

"We couldn't risk anyone high profile," Vander Morten, Lord of Military Operations said reluctantly. He wasn't a sibling, but one of his 6 uncles, and twenty six years his senior. "Grady is as high as you get. Taking the best mechwarrior off world would never have passed the Davions' notice."

"Shit," Stephan said, knowing that was one more close friend he was losing to the eviction. When he'd heard people had been adopted, Grady would have been the most likely candidate, so he'd hoped without getting around to checking until now.

"And we can't call them here later?" Paul Morten, Lord of Economics Management asked.

"I can't even send messages back, though I suppose if they find their own way here that's not something the Davions can stop. But no one knows where we are and they're going to keep a tight lid on it."

"They can't keep rumors from spreading. The traders will see, especially with all the orders you've put in," Kevin Morten, Lord of Training, said flippantly.

"They can try, but yeah, eventually word will get back. In ten years from now, and even if they found out, how many could afford to get out here? I'd like to put something clandestine together to facilitate that, but at this point I think we just have to cut our losses and recruit new people. The fate of Neubenn is out of our hands. I only hope the First Prince keeps his word about nailing House Derren into their grave if they mess it up."

"Then he moves some other morons in to replace them," Sarah scoffed.

"I've had a long time to think this through," Stephan said, poking the fire with a stick to reposition a log for better surface area over the flames. "Bad things are probably going to happen back there, to people that are under our

protection...but we no longer have the ability to protect them. It was taken from us. It goes against my instinct, but I think we just have to mentally let them go. Their fate is out of our hands unless they suddenly show up at our doorstep, and trying to have Grandfather orchestrate something could put him at risk, so that's out of the question."

"That doesn't sound like you," Jared Morten, Lord of Agriculture and the oldest of anyone in the circle at 67 years old said with a warning in his voice.

"No," Stephan said, holding up the datacard that Grandfather had sent for him. "It's what I was told to do. And frankly, it's the decision I'd come to already, though now I can stop hating myself for it. This House keeps what we hold, and now we have to admit we no longer hold anything on Neubenn. Not even Grandfather. His fate is his own now, and he's officially renounced his family name so we get it through our heads to forget about him. Our future is in the Periphery, and we're not supposed to waste time worrying about Neubenn or the Inner Sphere. That was his last and firm order to this House."

"I hate to say it, but Grandfather is right," Sarah said, throwing something into the fire rather hard as her emotions boiled into visibility as usual...which made her a very poor diplomat when she was pissed about something. "We need firm ground to rebuild on, and anything in the Inner Sphere can be yanked away from us. This Estate has to be looked at as transitional, even if we're legally independent. We have to back up that independence with a real economy and military. Real leverage enough to protect us against another backstab. This far out, I doubt they'd bother to send too many troops to do it, so the distance should protect us if we can get dug in firmly enough."

"My thoughts exactly, but stop worrying about the First Prince. He didn't send us out here to fail, so as long as he's around let's just assume we're not going to see Federated Suns troops or mercenary units knocking on our doorstep. There's a lot of smaller threats than can squash us easily until we get

some mechs here, and right now our economy is being funded totally out of our bank account. We have to start generating income, so the sooner we can get out there the better. I've already hired three expedition teams to survey systems known and unknown. The first passed through here a month ago, the other two haven't come through yet. The one that did is the short mission, the other two are longer. Within 13 months we should have the surveys from 8 worlds close to here in the Periphery. Five are mapped, three are not. Hopefully there's something there we can start with. Until then, we work on building up this Estate and training new recruits for...everything."

"I've got three trainers with me," Kevin said, "and we're lucky to have nabbed them into the family. We're going to have to train a training staff before we can even get to new recruits."

"Let's just officially call this operation 'Pain In The Royal Ass,'" Stephan said, summing up his feelings on the matter. "And I think the only way out of this mess is to dig ourselves out of it as fast as possible. I have the feeling if we delay, if we do anything other than build at a breakneck pace, an unpleasant fate is going to catch up to us."

"Logistically you're right," Sarah agreed. "But you're worried about someone other than House Davion coming after us, aren't you?"

"I don't know," he admitted, "and that's what scares me the most. If Father was assassinated, we still don't know who did it. And if he wasn't, I'm stuck chasing paranoid thoughts forever without any way of finding out for sure. We're exposed out here."

"Maybe that's part of the reason why the First Prince wanted everything kept hushed up," Rannel Morten, Lord of Technology...also unofficially referred to as 'TechLord'...said as she looked up from the touchpad that had been consuming every hour of her day after Stephan had given it to her. "This data is exposed as long as we are."

"What data?" Vichni Morten, Lord of Natural Resources...aka the 'catch all' Lord...asked with a frown.

“Something I was able to negotiate for,” Stephan answered, glancing around to make sure there was no one else nearby. “Technical blueprints for everything the Federated Suns has, a lot of which isn’t in production and is Star League era.”

Vander had a spit take from the thermos he was drinking something fruity out of as it missed Sarah’s head by a few inches, close enough for her to smell the strawberry in it.

“He gave you what?” he whispered.

“I know why these aren’t in production,” Rannel said, biting her index fingernail for a moment, a sign that she was about to comment on something she didn’t fully understand.

“Give me the bad news,” Stephan moaned.

“It’s not bad, just complicated. First off, not everything is here. I mean, not everything the Star League had, so this isn’t a master copy of their tech tree. If I had to guess, a lot of these files were individually recovered and put together in this collection. It’s still damn impressive, and I’ve learned more in the past 6 hours than I have in the past 6 years, but these advanced blueprints are full of holes...no, that’s not the right word. Everything is described here, but it’s like putting together a piece of furniture following an instruction manual. It shows you exactly where to put the screws and how many of them there are...but if you don’t know what a screw is, or how to get one...let alone build one...you can’t build what’s in the blueprints.”

“So we’re missing the screws?” Stephan asked.

“It’s small stuff, really. Pieces of it exist in legacy works still in operation. We could theoretically pull those parts and put them in to fill the gaps, but we can’t manufacture them. Either we don’t know how to build the screws, or we do but we don’t know how to fabricate them. There’s a highly complex alloy detailed here for mech mynomer fibers, but the tolerances in the mixture are so precise I don’t think there’s a single metalworks in the Inner Sphere that can get the ratios precise enough. We know exactly what needs to be done, based on these,” she said, gesturing with the glowing touchpad, the only other illumination aside from the campfire and distant Estate

lights, "but if we don't have the industrial capability to put it together, we can't produce anything from it."

"So it's a trojan horse?" Vander asked.

"No, no," Rannel said, shaking her head furiously.

"These are precious, and one day when we figure out how to make the 'screws' we can recover this lostech. As it is, there's more than just Star League tech in here. There's all the present day stuff, and we know how to make the 'screws' for those, even if some of it requires very expensive production facilities located only in a few places across the Federated Suns, but I can guarantee you that if we sold this on the black market, we'd rake in trillions of pounds from corporations drooling over this tech. Davion must be spooning it out in little pieces to certain industries to keep them loyal to him."

"And yet he gave it all to us?" Paul said disbelievingly.

"There has to be more to this than you've told us, Steph."

"I know there's more than Andrew told me, and I think there was something between him and Father that Father never told us. I suggested getting the specs to make jumpships and other big ticket items, but I never mentioned lostech."

"Internal Davion politics?" Sarah speculated.

"We're out of the loop here," Stephan corrected her.

"And he wants us to stay out. That's the whole point of this operation."

"Then he wants a copy of the lostech outside of the Inner Sphere for some reason," Ranna noted the obvious. "The question is, why?"

"Maybe he thinks we can unlock it?" Sarah guessed.

"Maybe he thinks it will be destroyed," Vander amended. "If another big war is coming and the Federated Suns is vulnerable...as you inferred earlier...maybe he doesn't want it lost again."

"Regardless, we've been given a hot potato, the only protection for it is that nobody knows we have it or where we are," Vichni said. "That's either insanely wise or recklessly crazy...and since he's giving it to the people he just backstabbed, I'm inclined to go with crazy."

"He's not crazy," Stephan said, putting an end to that line of thought. "But I think he is losing control and desperate for a way to stabilize matters. Maybe he sees something coming that we don't."

"That doesn't explain why he made this deal on a whim," Sarah pointed out. "Maybe buying some of the stuff we build later doesn't explain it."

"So that's part of it?" Vander asked.

"He said he saw us as an investment," Stephan said, finding it easier to think when he had the other 7 brains of the family leadership throwing out ideas simultaneously. "Not for the short term, but for his heirs, hoping we'd have their back some day in the future."

"With or without a knife in it?" Vichni said, slamming a fist down on his own knee as the pent-up anger over their dispossession was still fresh as ever.

"I don't think we're ever going to know," Kevin said, leaning forward closer to the fire as if his mind was made up. "We know what was done to us. We know the chance we've been given, and the bewildering lostech blueprints we have...which are legit, I assume?" he said getting an emphatic nod from Rannel. "While I would like to know as much as anyone what's really going on, I think we should focus on getting out into the Periphery and not look back. If someone is going to try to mess with us, they'll have to do it out here. The stronger we get...coupled with the distances involved...will give us the protection we need. Wondering what the First Prince is up to is, at this point, wasted energy."

"How can you not wonder?" Sarah asked.

"I already did. I don't have to keep wondering. We've got a mountain of work to do just to survive out here as more than tourists or locals. That I can analyze, attack, and overcome. Chasing mysteries back in the Inner Sphere that we've left behind and won't be returning to is next to impossible, so why waste the effort?"

"We don't have the Neubenn Intelligence Corps to work on finding anything out anyway," Stephan said, forcing himself

to agree with Kevin. "So if we're not going to solve this riddle, let's just play dead as far as the other Houses and realms know...as the First Prince wants us to do...and build quietly and quickly before someone realizes what we've got."

"That's dependent on the First Prince's security in giving it to you," Paul reminded him. "There could have been a leak already."

"Possibly, but I'm not worried about that for some reason," he said, knowing that was strange given how paranoid he was feeling about everything else. "He assigned us one of his fellow Davions as go-between..."

"...and spy," Vander added.

"And spy, but one in the open whose access we can control. Once we move into the Periphery, she doesn't come with us. She stays right here. So unless they can get moles amongst our people, we're in the clear once we get out there."

"But we still have to defend this embassy? Rannel asked, glancing up from the touchpad for a brief moment. "Or are we ditching it as soon as possible?"

"No, we're holding this as our connection to the Federated Suns. We're not enemies, we're allies. Andrew made that clear to me. A link is intended, and this planet is going to be that link, even later on."

"But everything else?" Vichni asked.

"Everything else will be outside his view. I've got scouting and survey teams commissioned to check out not only some of the known Periphery systems, but also some of the unknown. If one of the latter is valuable, we'll literally be off the Federated Suns' map."

"They'll just track the trade routes we set up," Paul said, throwing cold water on the idea. "We can't actually hide out there if he wants to find us. Not without breaking ties and going really far out."

"We don't have the resources to do that," Sarah said dismissively. "Not even close."

"We don't even have rooms yet," Vander pointed out.

"Alright," Stephan said, coming to a decision. "Unless information lands in our lap about whatever is really going on back there, we follow Grandfather's advice and just turn our back on it and focus forward. If it comes out here, we'll figure it out and deal with it then. As of now, we're on the edge of nowhere and hardly anyone *wants* to come out here. Assuming we're going to be left alone for the next decade, what are your thoughts about our prospects?"

"That all depends on what's out there," Paul pointed out. "And we're not going to know anything for at least 13 months?"

"Nope."

"Well then, I guess we work on integrating ourselves into the local economy and building up our Estate and workforce. The big decisions will have to wait for later."

"Easy for you to say," Kevin disagreed. "I've got all the big decisions right now."

"None of us is on vacation," Sarah sniped.

Paul held up his hands in surrender. "All I mean to say is that the future of our House is not going to be decided in the next 3 days. We've got work to do, but it's not going to be consuming every hour of the day. So let's just take a breather, start putting the first few pieces in place, and feel this out as we go. Other than Stephan, we're all suffering the effects of dropship travel, and I for one need to breathe something other than stale, recycled air for a while before I get my full sanity back."

"Among other things," Kevin said, citing the lingering wounds done to the family.

"Immediate work first," Stephan said, "but as we wait for stuff to get delivered, let's try and organize some recreational activities for the House. Get out into nature as groups and do some bonding and healing before we end up stretched across multiple star systems."

"That will be something new for us," Sarah noted. "We've always been in comms range of each other."

"I hadn't even thought about that," Rannel said. "How do we make that work?"

"I've had some thoughts, but nothing concrete yet," Stephan said. "It's one of those things we don't have to worry about for years, so we can get back to it later. For now, we're all here...at least all that are coming...and if this House is going to survive, we need to get our feet on solid ground once again."

"It's felt like an earthquake ever since we got the news from New Avalon," Vichni said.

"And it's going to take a while for us to adjust," Kevin continued. "Who do you want seeing to these recreational activities?"

"I'm sure Mother will handle it best," Sarah said before Stephan could even utter a syllable, but he just nodded in agreement.

"I haven't sat around a campfire since I was in my teens," Rannel said, finally shutting off her touchpad and leaving her face lit only by the orange firelight. "Somehow it's starting to eat away the pain and loss."

"Back to basics," Kevin said, having been around many campfires taking trainees through various wilderness exercises. "It's a good choice of a world to reset ourselves on, and I like this Estate. The land, anyway. It feels like a fresh start."

"But the manor decorations are *horrid*," Vichni burst forth with a laugh to follow.

Stephan only smiled. "You should have seen the stuff we threw out before you got here..."

3

Seven months later the first of the jumpships that Stephan had purchased finally arrived, carrying with it some of the smaller items he'd ordered from offworld and arranged to be picked up enroute. The crew of the soon to be renamed *Merchant*-class jumpship had been hired by a professional broker in the Defiance System, along with crews for the two *Union*-class dropships that he'd also bought along with it. Altogether, the jumpship and the two dropships had a combined cargo capacity of a little over 2,100 tons, for these Unions were not configured to haul mechs, but cargo.

When it came to transporting goods from one system to another, 2,100 tons was pathetically small, which is why trade routes typically saw a lot of these vessels moving about, along with larger versions of jumpships that had more carry capacity. As it was, once refitted to haul mechs, the pair of Unions would be able to transport and service 12 mechs each, meaning two Companies that he didn't presently have. Onboard however, stored in cargo crates, were supposed to be a pair of mechs along with a host of supplies to upgrade them and the mech bay in the Estate that currently consisted of a few large tents.

At least both dropships were able to land at the Estate, with two pads fully constructed and a third in the works. Stephan and Sarah both went to meet and interview the dropship Captains in person. They'd been hired on a provisional two year contract, but it would be up to House Morten if they were to retain them beyond it, and having to hire people blind over the HPG net was not something either of them liked to do.

Jumpships and dropships...the civilian models anyway...fell under the Lord of Logistics department, and Sarah would be traveling with one of the dropships, the newly

renamed *Golden Pearl*, up to the also renamed jumpship, the *Alpha Strider*, to repeat the process with the jumpship's crew.

However Stephan was glad to avoid the trip to the Zenith jump point, his main focus after finishing with the *Red Pearl*'s crew assessment was helping Vander unpack the pair of mechs. By the time he got there, the Centurion had already been unboxed and hoisted into position via a crane into a makeshift gantry set around the back and both sides of it...though it was still standing on grass that hadn't completely died yet from lack of sun.

"Good to have at least something," Vander said as his recently acquired techs were already working on tearing off the armor and every other removeable part so they could begin the overhaul necessary to bring it up to House Morten standards. The Neubenn militia had more than 20 Centurions in its ranks, so the design was a familiar and reliable one that Vander could simply pull up the record of previous modifications they'd used rather than trying to have to customize something on an unfamiliar design.

"Even if it's just a toy at this point, I agree," Stephan said, standing a few meters away from the two giant metal feet, glancing up to make sure the crane still had a hold on it in case the grass and dirt weren't firm enough to keep it steady. "Is everything there?"

"We weren't cheated, if that's what you mean. But this baby has had a hard life by the looks of it, and she needs a good makeover. The techs I've got should be able to handle it, though it's gonna be slow going given what we've got to work with."

"There should be some equipment to help with that."

"Already got it, but it's not stuff we can set up here in the grass. It's going to have to wait until we get a proper mech bay built. But I should have this one up and walking around within a few days. The fusion core is completely empty, but we were prepared for that."

"The Duke has offered the use of his facilities. Are we going to need them?"

"If you're in a rush, yes. But we can handle this on our own. The pieces of a decent tech unit are coming together here. Most of them, though, have never worked on anything other than industrial mechs, but that mastertech you brought in from Alcyone is worth the cost it took to get him here," the Lord of Military Operations said in a whisper. "Just don't let him know that. He's already far too arrogant."

"Good to hear," Stephan said, looking up at the Centurion. "The first part," he amended.

"Been too long out of the seat?"

"Until just now I would have said no. You?"

"It's weird finally having one that we actually own. I always assumed the others were ours, but they went with the duchy. This one belongs to the House now, and if someone wants it they're going to have to pry it out of our hands the old fashioned way."

"Let's hope not," Stephan said, thumbing back towards the other unopened crate in the large tent. "What about the Hunchback?"

"Don't have enough crew or workspace to handle both at the same time. She'll just sit there until later, unfortunately. Thought you'd prefer the Centurion first?"

"You thought right," Stephan said, for it was one of the three mech variants he was moderately good with. The Hunchback was not one he had ever rode in, but its urban style fighting was better suited for defending the Estate's growing number of buildings and other infrastructure. "Do we have what we need for the face shields?"

"Yeah, Sarah took care of it. But Killis hates the idea of it. Rambled on with the usual drivel about no mechwarrrior would be willing to pilot it. Nothing we haven't heard before. He'll get it done within the month."

"I still want to take her out before then. Nobody should be shooting at us here...yet."

"We've got the patrol trails already cut. You can take a nice hike in her in a few days. I'll wait for the Hunchback."

"You claiming it?"

"No, but I wouldn't mind breaking her in. I like the design...just not the combat profile. At least not out in the open. Should work well in the forest."

"Well, until we get a real pilot for her, consider her temporarily yours. But this one is definitely mine," he said, eyeing the Centurion. "Mine, mine, mine."

"Rank has its privileges," Vander noted, staring up at the cockpit appreciatively.

"Occasionally yes," Stephan agreed. And this was one of those times.

4 months later...

Stephan climbed the Centurion over the peak of the mountain ridge that bisected the Embassy Estate, pausing at the top of the dirt trail near an observation tower that was unmanned, but yet another recent construction in the ever growing enterprises of House Morten. After relying exclusively on hired labor, they'd successfully recruited a small construction crew of their own and were using them...in addition to local companies...to continue to expand their base of operations to now 18 buildings, not counting small stuff like this tower.

It was made of wood and some metal sheeting for a roof, and the very definition of 'temporary,' but when it was House Morten doing it, even the temporary stuff had to be top notch in design and execution. Meaning the tower's base had a small barracks, restroom, kitchenette, and comms room, the latter of which hadn't received any equipment yet.

His parked Centurion stood almost as tall as the tower, and both had magnificent views of the two valleys that he now owned, which ran northwest to southeast. The manor and the rest of the residential buildings were at the bottom of the western valley, a few kilometers up from where it met a larger river that doubled as a lake at some points. The road to the rest of civilization on this planet headed east after it came out of the valley, but kept more than two kilometers away from the

Nigalle River, named after one of the first settlers on this planet. If Stephan had owned it, it would have been renamed by now.

With all the division within the Inner Sphere, unity...wherever you could find it...was at a premium, and his House had long ago set as one of their primary goals to keep the House together. They taught their children from a very young age that they should quest for more power as a group rather than individuals. It was both the honorable way, and they'd probably have a better chance of success than trying to step on each other as they played the age old noble game of power-grabbing.

Little things like names, the Mortens had learned, made a difference. For example, all 9 of his parent's children had names starting with the letter 'S.' Sarah was the oldest, then Stephan, then Siri, and Sonna, and Stan, etc. It was a family tradition that their various cousins also held to, which immediately created a sense of unity...and unit designation...when you heard one of their names. But they all carried the name of Morten unless they went passive. If they did, it wouldn't affect them or their children or their grandchildren. But if none of them chose to serve in an active function, the family benefits...and the family name...ended with the great grandchildren. They'd take the name of the spouse, and there would end that noble lineage.

Which meant House Morten kept its family tree neatly trimmed, and it applied the same precision and forethought to other endeavors beyond just naming. Still, the two valleys here had been named for clarity sake. He had just come from the one with the manor in it, which designated as 'Home Valley' while the one he was looking out into now was 'Prime Valley.' There wasn't any plans to buy more land and expand here, otherwise they would have gone with another name. They were certainly going to fill both up with buildings, training grounds, and maybe a small factory or two other than the mech bay facilities, which were intact enough to shelter their now 6 battlmechs, didn't have the full support buildings attached yet.

Those were to include a fabrications facility for small machine parts and even a casting dome where they would fabricate and pour new armored plates. But what they had here now was enough to get all 6 mechs inside, with the other four still undergoing rework. Only the Centurion and Hunchback were operation, but he feared the others would be ready long before their new crew of trainees, most of whom were failing pathetically in the two simulators Kevin had acquired as he started the House Morten Training Academy out of a simple ferrocrete warehouse with makeshift living facilities inside.

Some of the 16 trainees were raw recruits from Cholis. Others were brought in from offworld military academies not located too far away. They weren't top of the line schools, but he said they were decent enough to lay a baseline for the training he would be giving them. But even then he could only get some of the mid-level students there to sign on and come all the way out here, so he wasn't quite working with the bottom of the barrel, but he was definitely in the lower half of it.

Stephan sighed, looking out on Prime Valley through a camera viewscreen. It didn't have quite the same majestic feeling of seeing it with your own eyes, but after several tragic events in the House's history with mechwarriors being killed by lucky or even precise cockpit shots, they'd decided to put armor over them and rely on multiple cameras mounted on the exterior to replace the view.

Most mechwarriors hated the idea, which was one of many reasons why Kevin was recruiting newbs who didn't know any better, and many refused to get into a cockpit they could not see out of naturally. But to Stephan's upper right was a caged button. Pull the cage off it and one press would ignite small charges that would blow the attachments for the armor off and it would slide down revealing the original cockpit window...in case every single one of the cameras went offline.

Stephan had been piloting mechs this way his whole life and hadn't known anything else. In training when they were taught to fight without the armor plating...just in case...he felt naked and exposed to random chance for his survival rather

than his skill. Whatever dulling of perceptual awareness other mechwarriors claimed came from the camera views, he agreed that it was worth it if it saved a single mechwarrior from a wasteful, unlucky hit death.

The 'face shields' were something the Neubenn militia had been mocked for, but his House didn't care. Having a weak spot on a mech was just not good tactics, and this way, at least they'd have protection until all the cameras were destroyed. Then it would be back to 'normal' anyway.

Stephan was about to start heading down the steep trail into Prime when he caught a glimpse of the Hunchback on his rear view camera, which was a secondary screen put down to his lower left that he could look at in a glance. He flicked on his radar and immediately got the confirmation ping, assuming it was Vander, but he'd thought he was going to be helping with the mechwarrior instruction today...namely by beating up the kids in the simulators.

"Vander, you give them the day off or something?" he asked, opening a mech to mech line with the touch of a preset button.

"No laddie, he's back with your recruits," a very familiar voice said.

Stephan keyed for an ID from the mech data, but it didn't show the pilot logged into the computer. The instantaneous ping should have resulted in an update from any of their own mechs.

"Say again, Hunchback?"

"Are you saying you don't recognize me accent?"

Stephan couldn't believe it. "Grady!"

"Who else?"

"How did you get here?"

"Came to your big house and Vander said you were out walking about aimlessly trying to find your purpose in life and that I should introduce myself personally."

Stephan spun and walked the Centurion back down Home Valley's hillside until he came within 20 meters of the Hunchback. "Why aren't you still on Neubenn?"

“Not welcome there anymore, laddie. Me and at least three of the others sent messages to ya, but got no response. Comstar said they’d been delivered, so we weren’t sure what to make of it.”

“How’d you know where to send them?”

“Oh, it was within the first year that one of the tabloids ran a story about you being exiled to some rock called Cholis, but nobody was sure if it was true or not until NeuNews confirmed it a few weeks later. So we wanted to see if you were in need of some slightly used militia out here. I dare to ask how welcome I am here?”

“Dumbest question you’ve ever asked you dirty old beard face.”

“Hey, I’m not that old laddie.”

“I never got your messages,” Stephan said, icily angry for a moment before mentally checking it away as something to handle later. “But even if I did, I’m not allowed to send anything back to Neubenn and I’m not allowed to recruit from any of my former forces. How did you get leave to come out here?” he asked suspiciously.

“Leave? Ha. After I didn’t follow orders as precisely as they liked they suspended me, then demoted me, and at that point I saw the writing on the wall and resigned. Two months later the entire militia was ‘reorganized’ for cost savings and some 40% were kicked out. Happened to be the lads who didn’t take to the new Duke.”

“A loyalty purge?” Stephan asked, his anger coming through crystal clear over the comm.

“Not officially, but somehow they also blacklisted everyone, so most of us couldn’t even get worthwhile jobs in the civilian sector despite the fact businesses used to be clamoring for us to get out and take a big signing bonus with them. Now they won’t touch us, and the boys have been doing grunge work wherever they can find it. I was paying the bills hauling fabric to and from a dress shop in a cargo sled, and I was lucky. Most of the fellas couldn’t even get that.”

“Son of a bitch,” Stephan whispered, but loud enough that his friend could still hear. “I had no idea.”

“I figured you didn’t, but with you being kicked out of Neubenn like you were, I wasn’t sure if you wanted to have anything to do with your old lads, so I volunteered to come out here and see for meself. We pooled our money to buy the one-way fare. If that new trade route hadn’t magically appeared, I wouldn’t have been able to afford to come half this far. You’re out here in the boonies for sure, laddie.”

“By design. Unless you fervently reject it, you’re hired effective immediately.”

“Well...if you insist and all. What about the other lads?”

“I’ll figure out something. There’s a Davion living in my guest house that I’m about to strangle. They were not supposed to block messages coming here, and the whole point of us being removed so completely was so House Derren would have all of you to work with. I shouldn’t say I’m surprised, but I am. I thought he’d play nice for a while because the First Prince was looking over his shoulder.”

“I can’t speak to any of that. I just know, if you’re willing, there’s a lot of mechwarriors, aerobrats, and groundpounders who could be of use to you out here, even a lot of the techs got axed. What exactly are you doing out here, Stephan?”

“Getting set up to go warlord and pirate hunting,” he said with a smirk. “And we’re taking scalps.”

Grady made a noise of confusion somewhere between a grunt and a hiccup. “What do ya mean ‘scalps?’”

“Planets. We’re taking their planets and keeping them. Not for the Federated Suns, but for ourselves. We’re going into the Periphery to create an independent state, and even have the First Prince’s limited help to do it. That new trade route you came on was his doing.”

“Are...are you serious? I thought he was the vilest of the vile for deposing you?”

“He didn’t give me a choice, but he offered compensation and we worked this deal out.”

“And you’re going pirate hunting with two mechs and a bunch of kids that even Sarah could take down?”

Stephan cringed. Sarah had gone through mechwarrior training...the basics anyway...and was just as bad at it as Grady made it sound. But to tell the truth, she could have taken all 16 of these trainees single handedly right now, for they could barely keep their simulated mechs walking in a straight line and look at the radar at the same time.

“Baby steps, Grady. Baby steps.”

“That’s a lot of steps if you ask me.”

“It is. Good thing we just got you to add to the mix. At least now I’ve got one legit mechwarrior in the barn.”

“It tis good to feel appreciated again.”

“Is House Derren wrecking everything else too?”

“No, not from what I could tell. Everything seemed the same except for the militia...but maybe that’s just me not being kept informed. It all happened real sudden like after the news broke where you were, but they were going to run me out anyway.”

“They didn’t appreciate your flexibility in interpreting orders?”

“Exactly,” Grady said, with Stephan knowing precisely what that meant. The man had a knack for seeing what other people didn’t, and he was not the type to blindly follow stupid orders. Give him a little leeway in them, and he was among the best in the Inner Sphere. Driving him out of the militia was yet another typical, bone-headed move by people who saw blind obedience as the only way to fight battles. The concept of ‘adaptability’ or ‘improvisation’ went right over their heads. All they saw were ego and command position.

House Derren was destroying Neubenn already...just like he’d told the First Prince they would.

“Have you had anything to eat yet?”

“I did grab a snack on the way through your big house.”

“Good. Then let’s walk the perimeter while I cool off a little and you tell me everything that’s been going on back

home. Then I'll go visit the Davion and try to let her breathe enough to get a few answers out of her."

4

October 12, 2990

Federated Suns

Crusis March

Cholis

Morten Estate Guest House

"This was not part of the deal!" Stephan yelled, banging his fist down on the edge of the desk where he sat across from Carroll Davion.

"How do you know for sure?" she asked.

"I've got one of my former mechwarrriors sitting in my house right now telling me everything. He got all the way out here to see for himself why I wasn't returning any messages."

"You're not allowed to."

Stephan banged the table again as he half stood up.

"But I never received them! There is no ban of anything coming out of Neubenn. That wasn't part of the deal!"

"Anything and everything involving your family and this 'deal' has to go through me. Those are my uncle's words and orders. I did not order a ban of any type of messages, and he would not do so without informing me."

"Then who did?" Stephan asked icily.

Carroll stared at him for a long moment. "I'll need to confirm your man's story."

"Not good enough," Stephan said, shaking his head. "He also tells me House Derren has blacklisted all the men he fired. They can't even get civilian jobs worth a damn. He's basically told them to go crawl under a rock and die somewhere out of sight! They may not have a month or two for you to figure this out. I want to pay their passage here *immediately*."

"You're not allowed to recruit from the militia," she reiterated.

"They're not in the militia anymore. I'm not talking about the ones still in, I'm talking about the ones that are out. That doesn't violate the spirit of the deal."

"We didn't want them resigning to follow you out here either," she said, leaning back in her chair with an unpleasant look on her face. "But we strictly told House Darren there would be no loyalty purges. We got you completely out of there so there wouldn't be a need."

"Apparently he didn't listen."

"That's immensely stupid of him."

"Immense stupidity is their calling card," Stephan said, forcing his voice into the calmer tones.

"This is supposed to be a clean break. How did your man even find you out here?"

"The news agencies back on Neubenn found out where we'd gone and made it public."

Carroll put her face into her hand. "Cameron's bones..."

"I don't care about your censorship failure. I care about those men. I can use them out here, so it's a win/win. Derren doesn't want them around and I do. And this needs to be done yesterday."

"If..." she stressed, "I entertain this notion. It will have to be done quietly. They just get on a dropship and disappear. No news stories, no testimonials on the way out. They just vanish."

"I've put Neubenn behind me," he said honestly. "I'm not going to make a play there. It's Andrew's responsibility now. But these men sought me out on their own volition, and I'm not turning my back on them."

"I have no visibility on Neubenn. You're my assignment. But if everything you say is true, dealing with this fast is the best of my bad options. I assume sending your man back with a satchel of C-bills is too slow?"

"I want them on jumpships within 2 weeks, if not sooner. For all I know some are committing suicide right now

rather than live on the streets homeless because they can't get work as a pariah."

"You'd think businesses loyal to your family would have hired them," she commented, staring at the ceiling as she thought quickly.

"So would I. But that begs the question what kind of threats House Derren has made to enforce this blacklist."

"That's someone else's problem to deal with, but I'll pass the word along and make sure my uncle hears of it. You still can't send messages back to Neubenn, but I can. Do you have a list of names?"

"No, but several of my guys there know how to make the contacts. They're waiting to hear back from the messenger."

"Can you give me one of their names? One that could coordinate all of this to your liking?"

"Scott Callison. He was a mechwarrior in the militia. Should be easy enough to locate."

"I don't want you or your man sending any messages back to Neubenn from here. I'll handle this personally, including the funding. Your hands stay completely off this. Agreed?"

"As long as it gets done...and fast. Agreed."

"With one favor," she added quickly. "If any reporters track you down out here, you give them the cold shoulder."

"As I said, I'm not looking at Neubenn anymore. If I don't focus on the Periphery I'll drive myself crazy imagining how badly the new Duke is ruining the planet. Letting it go is the only way I can stay sane."

"Until it lands in your lap again," she said, leaning back in her cushioned chair that rose a full foot above her head. "I admit, this is not of your doing and in no way your fault. I'll clean it up on this end. What happens with Neubenn and Derren is beyond me though."

"Their families come with them," he reminded her so there would be no 'mistake' later.

"Of course."

"Then if you'll excuse me," he said, standing up. "I'll let you get to work on it while I go and visit the Comstar Rep. They have some explaining to do with the missing messages."

"I said I'll take care of it."

Stephan shook his head. "I'm an independent nation. Comstar is independent. A message for me going through them shouldn't be able to be blocked by a Davion order or request."

"I see your point. I'll find out who did it on our end and let you know. I'm not going to stand for someone overstepping their authority and interfering with my mission."

"Focus on getting my men here. The ban is immaterial, especially when I couldn't trust that you were telling me the truth anyway."

"I haven't lied to you yet."

"What are you waiting for?"

"You to lie to me first. If you don't, I prefer operating on an honest footing."

"Get my men out here now. All of them," Stephan said, turning and walking out of her office with light steps that belied how angry he was.

Carroll let him get out of the guest house entirely before bringing up a monitor behind her desk and calling the Comstar Office.

"Ambassador Davion, how may we be of service today," the receptionist asked.

"I need to send a pair of priority messages. One to Neubenn, and the other to New Avalon..."

The discussion with the Comstar Rep went about as expected. They denied knowing anything about a ban and were adamant that those messages, if blocked, had never reached the Cholis facility...which may well have been true, for a few weeks later Carroll asked for a meeting with him and said they'd found the 'rat' that had ordered it.

Duke Derren.

Apparently he'd plied Comstar to block any outgoing messages routed to House Morten, and for some reason they'd

agreed. The First Prince had gotten involved personally and finally the truth...maybe...had come out, and Comstar admitted to knowing about the ban Andrew had placed on Stephan sending messages back to Neubenn, so when the Duke asked them to block outgoing ones they thought it was perfectly reasonable and apologized profusely about the misunderstanding.

It was a known secret that Comstar eavesdropped on all messages going through their interstellar communications network...and short of sending a courier like Grady, it was the only option for fast messages between star systems. They had a monopoly, and while they assured everyone they'd never interfere in the privacy of the messages, that was one of the oldest and boldest lies in the Inner Sphere. If they had the *ability* to look, you knew they were going to, and while they didn't cite the source of their information regarding the ban on House Morten sending messages back home, only a drunken fool wouldn't be able to read between the lines.

Still, as a form of apology, the local Comstar office granted his House a permanent 10% discount on all future messages...and given that he was still their number one traffic customer on Cholis, it was probably more about keeping his business than trying to legitimately make amends.

As for his men, it had been two months and he was still waiting. He knew they couldn't get out here that fast, but every time a jumpship came into the system he hoped it would be at least some of them showing up. Carroll had said arrangements and connections had been made...to his designated man's satisfaction...and that they were in transit in multiple jumpships that would arrive at varying times. Not Davion ones, but regular traffic ending up on the new trade route that started in New Avalon, passed through June, and now ran all the way out here until House Morten directed the Ambassador at Large where to extend it further into the Periphery.

To that end, one jumpship had arrived 4 days ago, and now Stephan and the other 7 Lords were seated around a conference table in their manor as the leader of the first survey

team loaded his data into a flat screen that occupied the majority of one wall of the room. Nigel Ferris had three of his assistants with him, all seated in chairs near the door and out of the way as he stood before his employers to give the results of his search.

“As I said in my brief message upon arrival, we encountered no hostilities whatsoever,” he said, highlighting the 8 systems he had searched. Five of which had already been on the Federated Sun’s map, and three that had not been, making those true gambles. The majority of the stars within the region the Federated Suns dominated were *not* inhabited, nor claimed by House Davion as part of their realm. Most were worthless other than transition points between others. Some didn’t even warrant that and were never visited after an initial survey team had reported back there was nothing of interest there.

These systems were where bandits, renegades, and all manner of black market activities could take place, even next to New Avalon. The gap between stars was so great that each one was its own little universe and the neighbors didn’t really matter aside from the jumpship traffic. If there wasn’t something of value there to be had or lived on, it was simply ignored.

The further toward the Periphery you got, the more of those anonymous dots between the valuable ones became blank slates. No survey teams had gone to them, and beyond the general border of the Federated Suns and into the Periphery, the number of scouted systems dropped off sharply, for there were times when scouts would go out...and never come back. Which made Mr. Ferris’s line of business very dangerous. And with that danger, it became very *expensive*.

Only those with deep pockets, usually mega corporations, would even bother looking at uncharted systems when they had solid business opportunities in known ones with defense forces to keep the bandits at bay. But greed often prompted exploration, and occasionally one hit paydirt, but there was a long track of failures to go along with the few

successes. And if the Great Houses weren't interested in footing the expense of exploring and mapping, then few others would step in to fill the gap.

"Let me start with the least valuable first," Nigel said, indicating a system that was 38 lightyears from Cholis, putting it two jumps away. "Star Chart Number 86247, number 6 on your assigned list. No previous surveys on record. We found nothing but the star and a large nebula of hydrogen feeding into it. No planets, moons, or even asteroids. No sign of artificial habitation or gas mining, and with these low density levels, mining a nebula for hydrogen would be extremely wasteful. A gas giant would be a far better option, but if there's one forming in that mess, it's not large enough to produce enough of a gravity tug to notice. Sometimes these pan out, but I'm afraid this one is a total bust unless you're looking for a safe pass through system, which this would qualify as."

"One down," Paul Morten scoffed, sitting back in his chair with his fingers steepled in front of him. He'd been hoping for at least something inhabited that he could open up limited economic ties with.

"Then we have the Tianis Cho System. Already on the map, but with no apparent updates in the past 52 years. Two small but habitable planets with six airless moons between them, plus four gas giants further out with nothing but asteroid-sized rocks in orbit. With a maximum of one month in each designated system we were not able to inspect those rocks, or all of the moons. We had to pick and choose and guess, and given the settlement on the surface we decide to start there."

The Survey Chief had been adjusting the screen to show pictures of both systems taken from the dropship's perspective, but now he switched to ones on the ground that were tagged as Tianis 2 that showed more than a large settlement. It was an outright city.

"Size indicates it could hold a population of around 60 to 70 thousand," Nigel said remorsefully. "But we couldn't find a single person alive down there. It's completely dead. No sign of combat damage other than some small arms fire, but there are

unburied skeletons in odd places. I've seen this before, unfortunately. If I had to guess, this is another failed colonization attempt that starved itself to death for some reason or another."

He shifted through multiple photos, none of which showed the skeletons, but the buildings were falling apart...some were totally down in a heap, but it looked more like storm damage than explosions.

"Weather?" Rannel Morten asked.

"We weren't there long enough to witness it, but the atmosphere is conducive to major wind storms. The land is barely arable. We see here," he said, skipping ahead to a different set of pictures, "the remnants of some farms, but not enough to feed a settlement of this size. They had to be importing almost everything they ate. Then as things do, something changed and the imports probably stopped...and there's nothing left to eat."

"What business were they doing there?" Sarah Morten asked.

"Vice, it seems," the surveyor said with a shrug. "We found no mines, no factories, nothing that could produce anything. But lots of casinos, joy houses, bars, some opulent houses, garages that have been stripped bare but probably held some expensive landcraft. There's even a small lake on the north end that had docks for water craft. This was a resort, probably off the books for some of the corporate crowd wanting to bypass someone's laws they didn't like. You might be able to find out who previously owned it, but we didn't have time. We did a brief mineral survey of both planets, finding nothing of merit though there are some basic ores to be had. Nothing worthy of the expense of getting it out and shipped back to civilization...but I say that with a huge caveat. A planet is far too large to survey with a crew 100 times this size and 100 months to work with. All I can tell you is where we drilled and what was out in the open to see. Other than the settlement, nothing of value sticks out, and it looks like looters have been here since and taken away anything of technological value."

"That's two down," Vander Morten said, taking up the count.

"At the least our House map has information the Federated Suns does not," Vichni Morten said, eyeing Nigel. "Isn't that right?"

He bowed slightly. "I was hired by you, and if you do not wish this information spread to others it is your choice."

"There's no point in hiding it," Stephan interjected. "Not unless there's something valuable we want to get to first."

"Is there?" Sarah asked pointedly rather than waiting.

"If you will be patient, I want to be thorough in this. Yes, there is value out there. This next uncharted system, Number 86110, has a temperate climate, breathable atmosphere, and indigenous plant life," he said, bringing up the picture of a world almost totally encapsulated in ice except for the equatorial region where there was a somewhat wide strip of brown with specs of green in it.

"That's better," Vander commented.

"There's enough minerals in the ground to maybe break even on a mining operation, but that's not its obvious value. The ice caps are water-based, and the plant life has generated soils alive with bacteria and nutrients useful for agricultural exploits. Furthermore, the equator has no mountain ranges. There are some on the planet, but buried under the ice. I would say this world, with some serious investment, could be an agricultural exporter...in my humble opinion. We saw no signs of settlement, past or present."

"We'll put that one down as a maybe," Stephan said.

"Next?"

"Hayden 8. It was populated as of 37 years ago at last report, and while diminished it is still populated. Approximately 30,000 people based around what I would guess to be some sort of precious jewels mining operation...but we couldn't get close enough to find out because they denied us permission to land."

"Then what's your guess based off of?" Rannel asked.

“Geology and some of our long ranged scans from orbit. The shipping apparatus they had at their single spaceport isn’t built for ore. Whatever they’re mining, it’s small and probably valuable. Could be some rare metals, but I’d say it’s fairly safe to say gemstones of some nature given the old lava flow they’re situated on. The pressures down deep have a tendency to form them, then they come up top with the volcanic activity...which appears to be long since dormant.”

“Anything else there?” Stephan asked.

“Two more planets, both airless, no visible signs of valuable resources. We took a sample of one of them and, unless you’re wanting to make ferrocrete, I don’t think you’ll find much there.”

“Then that’s number three in the trash bin,” Vichni stated.

Vander held up a hand. “Do you know who was operating there?”

“They didn’t identify themselves, nor did we see any dropships or jumpships in the system. I simply didn’t want to press my luck and pry.”

“Wise call.”

“Next,” Stephan said.

“The Isotrol System. No planets, but a known asteroid belt encompassing three different gas giants that are all taking bites out of it. Hard to say who might be out there hiding in all of it, but there is a lot of metallic content in the rock. We took a few samples and were even able to grab this,” he said, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a small rock which he set on the curved conference table in front of Stephan.

He picked up the thumb-sized lump. “Gold?”

“Yes. The asteroids are widely scattered, but if you wanted to make a go of it, I’d say there’s profit to be made there from at least 10 different resources worth far more than their shipping weight.”

“And no one has found it?” Paul asked skeptically.

“We didn’t pick up any transmissions or see any ships. I can’t promise you there aren’t a hundred different mining

operations out there that don't want to be noticed, but typically if you have a large corporate interest, they leave a locator beacon on for incoming ships to find."

"Sounds a little too convenient," Vander said.

"Put that one down also as a maybe," Stephan said, knowing they'd have to go in with a heavy aerospace force to defend any mining operations there, and currently they had exactly 0 of those assets. "Next."

"Arios Tremgata. Recent timestamp of 12 years ago, and still with the Fash'ka controlling AT 6. They've got some 300 to 350 thousand people there pursuing a mix of industries."

"Fash'ka?" Sarah asked.

"Periphery state," Paul said, already having investigated them. "A small one. They've got 6 known systems."

"I state this as valuable, not only for the current settlement, but because we focused our survey efforts on AT 3. It's got no atmosphere at all, but the metal in the crust was visible from orbit. High concentrations of Palladium, Nickle, and even some Uranium signatures once we got down there to take a closer look. The Fash'ka don't own the planet...at least, not as far as having anything on it or in orbit."

"I might be able to work something out there," Paul said, knowing he'd have to get some sort of diplomatic relations with the Fash'ka going even if they only wanted to offer to sell stuff to them. It wasn't so far out merchant ships from the Federated Suns wouldn't be sniffing out there for opportunity, but if they chose to extend the trade route out to them, they could undercut their inflated prices and get some economic activity going almost immediately.

"Put that one down as 'pursue later,' Stephan said.

"Two to go."

"Jennis 4, not updated in over 120 years. Habitable moon orbiting a big sand dune of a planet. No signs of habitation, heavily forested with a number of large lakes. Decent mineral and metal deposits. A bit of everything, you might say, but with nothing that stands out as a potential investment unless you're looking to settle down someplace."

"Apparently no one has," Jared said. "What's the soil like?"

"Depleted. Most of it is in the trees at this point. And we saw signs of several large predators."

"How big?" Vander asked.

"Vehicle sized."

"Put that down as another maybe," Stephan said.

"And I saved the best for last," Nigel said, adjusting the screen to show a barren planet, reddish purple in color, that didn't look to have a single hill on it, let alone a mountain. "This is the third uncharted system you had on your list. Four planets, three of which are gas giants. This one, however, has an abandoned mining station on it. Old, and everything was neatly removed. So I think it was most likely corporate work. The veins of iron they were working on did not run out. They simply closed up shop and left, but were careful to remove all indications of who might have been running it."

"That means it's abandoned rather than just abandoned," Paul noted the legal distinction, indicating that it wasn't just something left there that the owners would want back later when it was convenient. It was completely wiped, therefore they weren't coming back and didn't want anyone to know they were ever there. That meant it was up for grabs.

"We did a survey around this area to see how widespread the deposits were, and they're not just widespread but fairly diverse. This site would be far more easy to mine than the asteroids in the Isotrol System and it has a breathable atmosphere, though a bit on the thick side. The largest problem is that there isn't a lick of water on the planet, so you'll need breath masks if you don't want to dehydrate yourself with every breath you take."

"Temperature?" Vichni asked, for mining fell under the Lord of Natural Resources domain.

"When we were there, it was 14C at it's highest, and there's very little tilt to the planet. Day cycle is 13 hours."

"High magnetic field then," Rannel guessed.

"Above average, yes. Typically a planet doesn't spin that fast unless there is one."

"Volcanic activity?"

"Nothing that we could see that was active, but the top layer of the planet...or at least at the mine...appears to be solidified. Dig down 15 to 20 meters and the rock gets much softer."

"Sounds like a candidate for a strip mine," Vichni asked, seeing that the previous miners had not used that technique.

"I would think so, but there are multiple ways of getting at the deposits, which look to have never been touched except for this one site. In my opinion, it's the best location for a financial investment by your House. I hope this information is useful to you."

"It is," Stephan confirmed. "What are your future plans?"

"Heading back to Stryborn, unless you wish to entertain another contract?"

"Actually I would. Give me a few days to pick locations?"

"Take your time. My dropship will be at the spaceport for at least three weeks giving my team some shore leave. All the data and details I did not mention are on the datacards in this box," he said, extending an arm to hand it to Stephan. "If you need anything clarified, don't hesitate to call me anytime we're still on planet."

"Thank you, Mr. Ferris. That will be all for today."

Nigel nodded and quietly walked out of his room along with his assistants, heading back to the waiting car outside that had brought them here from Brinestorm. Stephan waited until they were out of the room and could see them walking across the foyer out the window before speaking.

"Not as bad as I feared," he said, leaning forward. "Is that mine as easy a grab as I'm thinking it is?"

Vichni had already dug into the box that was being passed around and was reviewing the data on the unknown planet when he asked.

“At a glance I’d say I’m interested in it, but we’d have to get our own team down there to do a good survey. Problem is we don’t have a team yet. If I had to guess, this was a tax evasion operation that some exec started, and probably another exec shut down later. The Davions can’t track what they don’t see being mined, and if they sell to the black market they can make a lot of profit.”

“Why not just officially open it up?” Sarah asked.

“Their business license on New Avalon prevents them from having any of these ‘dark’ operations outside of the Federated Suns. If it was discovered, there would be penalties, fees, sanctions, and maybe even the revocation of their license...which would end all their legitimate enterprises in bankruptcy.”

“He’s right,” Paul agreed. “It’s risky, and some execs just don’t want to take the risk.”

“I’m more worried about something having gone wrong with the mine that made it unwanted,” Stephan said.

“If the planet is that well off in deposits,” Rannel chimed in, “this one mine wouldn’t matter.”

“I need to hire an exploratory mining crew,” Vichni said, holding a fist to his lips as he thought hard, “and get out there to see what the case is personally.”

Stephan waved that off. “Not until we have the ability to protect you. That means at least an armed dropship and a couple of mechs for a scouting mission. If we do plan on staying there, I want a Company at the minimum. We’re not there yet.”

“It’s only one jump away,” Vichni lightly argued.

“It’s our top priority then, but I’m more interested in getting food production going. Out here food can be worth far more than gold as a trading commodity. This ice cap world interests me in that regard.”

“Same here,” Jared said. “If we want to set up on both, that’s even more mech guards we don’t have yet, so I suggest we don’t spread ourselves too thin.”

“Agreed. We can follow up on some of this other stuff down the road, but for now, Jared and Vichni, start recruiting who you need and Kevin...”

“I know, I know. Start another wing of the Academy,” he said, knowing that his Academy was only warehouses at the moment, and consisted of future mechwarriors and construction teams. “Can I at least wait until we get at least one proper building set up in Prime first?”

“Schedule as you like. Just get it in the queue. We’ve got two potential planetary acquisitions now. Let’s take this by the book our House wrote, but the sooner we have a world to our own name, the sooner we can get to actually being a Periphery nation rather than just pretending it on paper.”

“Does Davion get these?” Sarah asked, holding up one of the data cards.

“Let’s sit on them for a few years first, but after that, yes.”

Sarah sighed. “You’re no fun.”

“Assuming our militia actually gets here,” he amended coldly. “If they don’t, all bets are off regarding our responsibilities to the First Prince.”

5

December 17, 2990

Federated Suns

Crusis March

Cholis

Morten Estate

By now every jumpship that came into the system Stephan expected to be carrying his men, but every time so far he had been wrong. However, when the latest arrived, it didn't respond to inquiries from Cholis...and immediately deployed two *Union*-class dropships toward the planet that also did not respond.

After a day of no comms, Stephan finally got a call from Duke Thorsen.

"Stephan, I'm afraid I need to ask you for a big favor," the man's image said on the screen in the First Lord's new office, built in a rounded tower three stories high that now connected to the northern section of the mansion.

"Raiders then?"

"At this point I don't know what else it would be. They never announce themselves on arrival, and I doubt it's just a comm problem or something else explainable. I've got no way to prevent them from landing, and when they do they'll blow through my light mechs. They have to know what I've got here, but if they're only sending two dropships they might not know that you have any. You never brought them in through the spaceport, did you?"

"No, I had all deliveries come straight here once our pads were built. But two Unions can carry two full Companies."

"Not if they want to steal the iron ingots currently in the spaceport warehouse. Insterion Mining has been storing them

up for the past 6 years, and they're supposed to go out on the next scheduled jumpship arrival. Then these bastards show up at exactly the wrong time. I tell you, it's no coincidence! They have a spy here, I'm sure of it. And if they do, there's no way they can know what you've got. They have to have room in those dropships to take the ore back up with them. No way they've got two Companies in there."

"There's a slight possibility they are here for me," Stephan noted.

"I doubt it, but you'll have our support if they are," the Duke said, letting the silence hang for a moment.

"Quit your worrying, Harris," Stephan said in a friendly and familiar manner, breaking the ice. "Of course we'll help. But if you're right about them not knowing about our mechs, then I don't want them to notice until after they land. We'll wait until we're sure of where they're heading, then I'll get a dropship over near the spaceport a few minutes behind them. I don't want to risk landing inside their weapons range."

"The south of the spaceport is open grasslands. If they land inside, you can put down there, but every time we've been hit the bandits have landed in that field and attacked from the exterior."

"Same bandits each time?"

"Not always, but they always take the same approach. We've no way to ID those dropships or jumpships, but I think they've made a grave miscalculation this time."

"Two Companies would be a fair fight...unless they brought a lot of heavies."

"I'd guess one or two tops. They'll be mostly mediums and lights, which is enough to run over my light Company, if you even want to call it that. It's undersized and four of my mechs are Urbanmechs, which aren't bad around the buildings, but if we have to fight in the grass they won't be able to keep up. And if they land their dropships right in the spaceport, I can't take on two of them. I just don't have the tonnage to stand up to that slugging match. If they want, the bandits might even be able to

just steal the ingots under the threat of those guns and try to force us to fight them within the dropships' range.

"Can you move the ingots before they land?"

"Where to?"

"Put them on the landing pads. Make them land out in the grass."

The Duke looked thoughtful for the moment. "Make them take us out, or we can snipe them as they're trying to pick up the cargo. I like that move. It will also make it look like we're conceding the cargo."

"I don't want to scare them off," Stephan said, the look in his eye one the former General knew well. "I want to trap them and force a fight, preferably away from their dropships. Then I want them running away in retreat. They need to get stung hard enough they won't try coming back again."

"Agreed. I'll keep my mechs in and around the spaceport and try to get them to fight on the edge of it. You land outside and try to flank them. Just make sure you're not late. Their typical attitude is to just barge in and run people over because they know they have a mismatch, and I've only got two medium laser defense turrets at the spaceport."

"I didn't know you had any."

"I've had a little more tax revenue the past year," he said with a smirk. "It's not much in the way of defense, but they've got more armor on them than any of my mechs. I don't like being a sitting duck for these bandits."

"You're just the bait this time, Harris. Try to delay them once you're engaged."

"Thank you, Stephan. I know there's no way to repay you for this."

"Just being a good neighbor, my friend. And I dislike bandits as much as you do."

"You've never been on the receiving end to really know."

"No I haven't," he admitted, "and I don't plan to be this time either..."

Two days later...

"Stephan..." Vander said, standing in the Estate's mech bay as the First Lord arrived in a pair of shorts and a T-shirt at the foot of his Centurion.

"We only have two real mechwarriors here," he said, giving his uncle a 'I'll have none of it' look. "And aside from you, everyone else in the House qualified to even sit in one hasn't done so since before we left Neubenn. Grady's got the trainees up to a point I think they'd be better than they'd be."

"Still, I've got Frank, Cait, and Anders ready to strap into the backup mechs if needed. They'd do better than the worst of the trainees. That's where you should be too. You're too damn valuable to risk on the front lines."

"They're bandits, not the Dracos, and I'm not going to let some trainee get smoked because I'm too cowardly to do the job I've trained for."

Vander smiled. "Just playing devil's advocate. We've got plenty of Mortens to replace you with, after all."

Stephan had gotten up two rungs of the gantry's ladder, then glared back at him. "Sure you don't want to come along?"

"If you need a second wave I'll be there with the has-beens," he said, referencing the 4 Hunchbacks they had out of the total 16 mechs that wouldn't fit on a single dropship, but were instead standing watch at the Estate in case fighting somehow shifted over there or someone took advantage of the coming battle to do something unpleasant here.

"You're not a has-been," Stephan said, climbing again. "But the others deserve that."

"Just let Grady draw the majority of the fire...please."

Stephan got to the top of the gantry and began walking around to the easier access to the Centurion's cockpit. "I know, I know. He's been in a real battle and I haven't."

"About to fix that, aren't you...First Lord?" Vander half mocked.

"It's probably the only time I'm going to be needed," he said, with a tech standing by the open mech hatch.

“Good luck, sir. Give em hell.”

He silently clapped the man on the shoulder as he passed, then climbed into the cockpit and sat down in the single seat. There was enough room to squeeze one more person in in a pinch, but part of that was taken up by a small satchel of emergency gear that he could grab if needed. It wouldn't eject with his seat if it came to that, but it was rather cold outside right now...just above freezing...and if his mech went down with him still in it, he'd at least be grateful for the warm clothing in the bundle.

As it was, he was underdressed for a reason. The excess heat the mech would produce from its weapons, movements, and taking hits from the enemy would raise the temperature in the cockpit to extreme levels if not for the heat sinks that were basically super-charged air conditioners, not just for him but the equipment as well. Get the heat too high and things would malfunction on their own...not to mention kill him before or after he passed out.

Bottom line was, one way or another he was going to sweat profusely, and while he didn't want to pilot the mech naked, the shorts and T-shirt were an in between compromise over which he slid a cooling vest tied into a panel by a series of tubes that would circulate and pull heat directly away from his center of mass. It felt chilly as he turned it on, but it would auto-regulate so it didn't turn him into a popsicle while he waited for combat.

“You ready for this, laddie?” he heard a voice over the comm that was already open to their Company's command channel.

“I'm just here to shoot, Grady. You're calling the shots.”

“Well, first rule is don't 'shoot Grady,’” he joked.

“Second is get your ass moving. Those dropships are coming in hotter than expected and none of us are in ours yet.”

Stephan slid on his neurohelmet, making limited mental connection with the mech so it could use his own sense of balance, along with several gyroscopes that he was powering up now along with the rest of the battle machine, to allow the

otherwise stiff-looking hunk of metal to move around as if it was a limited extension of his own body. He still had to maneuver it using hand controls, but they included several options to allow him to move the mech's hand and handless arm around like clubs or to stomp or kick something with his beefy metal legs. Otherwise, the mech's steps were auto-controlled with his subconscious brain adding the adjustments necessary to keep standing and shuffle around as needed.

Which meant you didn't want to be standing anywhere near the feet when a mech was powered up. They could step on you without even trying to, because the pilot wasn't manually doing the stepping in most cases.

"Moving as ordered," Stephan said as he saw Grady already heading out of the mech bay ahead of the 10 trainees he'd selected who were also climbing into their mechs. His friend was in a heavy Crusader that outmassed his own Centurion 65 to 50 tons, but the movement speeds were comparable, so after he logged his ID into the already unlocked combat computer, he got moving and was able to keep pace third in line as a trainee by the name of Azerton slid out ahead of him in an even larger 75 ton Orion.

The idea was, put the kids in the bigger mechs that could just stand still and shoot if they had to. Grady said to leave the maneuvering to him and Stephan, which was why the First Lord hadn't claimed one of the heavies for himself. He was comfortable with a Centurion. The trainees were comfortable in *nothing* right now...while Grady seemed to fly like a bird no matter what type of mech he strapped himself into.

Speaking of which, Stephan kept his straps loose for the moment, not wanting them to dig into his skin as they were only walking over to one of their parked dropships and moving onboard. The Orion in front of him was managing to walk in a straight line at least and not hit any of the structures they were passing by like an army of weaving ants.

Progress...but can they shoot straight under pressure?

Twelve mechs marched in a line towards the dropship as the incoming two were just beginning to hit the upper

atmosphere. Grady was right. They were coming in extra hot, and if they didn't move their asses they were going to get to the party late...

The dropships were identified halfway down, based on their markings, as belonging to the Red Baron. Stephan almost laughed when he heard the name. How many Red Barons were there in the Inner Sphere? A dozen or more at least. It was such an old and overused name he was surprised an egotistical bandit wouldn't try something a little more original...but then again, if you were trying to usurp someone else's reputation, originality wouldn't work very well.

Regardless, the name Red Baron implied a force to be reckoned with, and as Stephan sat strapped into his Centurion as it was likewise strapped into a holding frame inside the *Red Pearl* as it launched from the Estate, the Duke informed him that this wasn't a typical bandit, but a known warlord in the Periphery that had hit a number of other small systems in the Federated Suns, but had never been here before. He guessed the cargo, being more valuable than anything they'd ever had sitting in a warehouse, had been enough for this Red Baron to come out and get it. Or who knew, maybe these scumbags took turns hitting systems.

Whatever the case, the *Red Pearl* lifted off and made a short hop over to Brinestorm, with Stephan able to watch from a camera view in his cockpit the landing the Red Barron made in the grassland well south of the spaceport via the city's camera mounts that the Duke was feeding him and Vander, who was also on a separate channel tied in to him and Grady only, while Stephan had one going straight to the Duke that he could toggle through with a series of buttons on his dashboard.

"Right where we want them," the Duke said approvingly. "Where are you going to set down?"

"Just to the west, outside their dropships' range. Hold your position and we'll come to you," he said, waiting for a ramp to come down on the enemy's sphere-like ships that were identical to his own at a glance, but the weaponry they carried

may very well be different. He wanted to see how many mechs they'd actually brought.

The *Red Pearl* had already hit the peak of her trajectory and was on her way down before he finally got his first remote peak of the enemy as a 45 ton Blackjack walked down resplendent in a crude mix of red and black paint with a tiny Red Baron's cross emblazoned on the shoulder. It was heavier than anything the Duke possessed, but had inferior firepower to his own Centurion.

Next came a pair of 45 ton Phoenix Hawks, followed by their own 50 ton Centurion.

A medium lance, on its own enough to tear through the light mechs defending the spaceport if the pilots were any damn good. If not, the Duke's forces might have a chance.

But then one of the boarding ramps on the second dropship lowered, and out came a flood of 20 ton Wasps. He counted 5 in total, followed up by another Blackjack and three Javelins...one of which did a faceplant as it came down the ramp, perhaps unaccustomed to the 1.1g of gravity on Cholis. That mech design was always heavy on the front side, but no seasoned pilot should have fallen.

Maybe they're drunk at that, or they've got some rookies too? Either way, that's 13 mechs and not the 24 I had worried about. The Duke called it right.

The Javelin behind it managed to stop before it ran over its twin as it got back to its feet, then they quickly hurried up and formed into the right flank of the long line the Red Baron was making, with his all-medium lance taking the center and the Wasps on the left flank. They took a while to form up then started walking for about 300 meters before stopping as the House Morten dropship came down 3 kilometers to their west in a roar of thrust slowing the descent of the fat dropship as it skillfully landed in the grass, easily visible over the uncluttered distance between them as the city of Brinestorm rose up on the other side of the spaceport to the north.

"Alright, laddies," Grady said to the Company and the dropship Captain simultaneously. "Everyone stays put except

the First Lord and meself. We're going out the side so they can't see what we've got inside. Hopefully they'll think we're just a couple of old geezers with some lovely ladies we've been carefully spit-shining for the past decade coming to help the Duke. Let's see if we can bait them our way. Captain, lower the northern ramp if you would please."

Without a word of reply the large piece of the ship on one side cracked open and began to fold down into a ramp that led out into the grasslands...which were already on fire due to the dropship's landing. Some of the smoke blew up into the hold, but it looked like it wasn't going to spread very far.

"After you," Grady said, with Stephan walking his Centurion out and feeling the claustrophobic nature of the cramped dropship bay open up, as did his vision across the grasslands. He could see for dozens of kilometers to the east and south, along with the two 'ticks' of the enemy dropships planted over to his east and the tiny mechs standing out between them and the city.

He immediately began running his mech mostly parallel to them, but at a slight angle to the northeast and closer, heading for the spaceport to meet up with the Duke's defense Company. Grady's Crusader followed him step for step 30 meters behind him, allowing the Red Baron to see that the mech out-classed everything they had brought to the field.

Nothing happened for several minutes as they worked to cross the gap, getting halfway there when the enemy forces suddenly wheeled to the left and charged for both of them...intending to force a fight 13 vs 2 and take away the advantage of Grady's heavy mech.

"Aye, they took the bait. Pull a little more west, Stephan. We don't want them getting to us too soon."

"Make sure you time it right," he warned. He didn't want to get caught by their faster Wasps and forced to fight or run with them nipping at him from behind. If he stayed to fight, the others would catch up pretty fast.

The Duke broke in over his channel. "Stephan, do you want us coming out to you?"

“Not yet. We need them well away from their dropships. When I say so, try and get behind them and slow them down. Don’t stand your ground and die, but delay them.”

“As you bring the hammer.”

“Hopefully,” he said, watching the 5 Wasps sprint ahead of the medium mechs like a pack of bloodhounds with the pair of Phoenix Hawks trailing a little further behind, almost as if they were a little too good to keep company with the light mechs despite their similar speed.

Fortunately the Wasps had no long range weaponry. Only a medium laser and an SRM-2, but they could move at a maximum of 95kph while his Centurion topped out at 64kph, meaning there was no way to avoid them if they wanted the fight, and his own dropship was too far away now to run to the cover of, and the spaceport was nearly just as far away.

“Now laddies,” Grady announced. “Out here on the double. No formations, just run towards us and shoot anything that comes within range. Mind the friendly fire though.”

“We keep running or start shooting?” Stephan asked.

“Running. Don’t know how long it will be before they notice. Every meter this way benefits us. Pull more west again, but keep getting closer to the spaceport.”

“You think they’re that dumb?” he said as the first of the reinforcements stepped down off the *Red Pearl* and headed towards them...a Blackjack of their own, followed by two more Centurions, then a Phoenix Hawk, then another Centurion, but the Red Baron mechs didn’t seem to notice, and the first of the enemy Wasps got within firing range of Stephan and fired its medium laser into his mech’s right arm. A moment later it got hit from the left and was knocked clean over by Grady’s missile barrage, a combination of SRMs and LRMs fired at close range, which managed to mostly hit. He peppered another with his medium lasers and machine guns as the little pack split apart and ran around the side of the two larger mechs, chipping away at their armor as they both zigzagged to keep moving and target the smaller mechs.

“Now Harris,” Stephan said to the Duke on their private comm channel, seeing the dots on his radar within the spaceport almost immediately start moving.

“It’s gonna get hot here, laddie,” Grady said, crossing in front of the Centurion as Stephan stopped to line up a shot with his autocannon. The experienced mechwarrior kept his mech on the run, circling around in such a way that the enemy didn’t know which way he was going to go next. “Stay behind me and pick at what you can, but start shuffling back towards our Company. I don’t think these bandits have noticed they’re a wee bit outgunned yet.”

“On it,” Stephan said, shooting at a Wasp with his medium lasers but holding back on his autocannon for fear of missing again. They were moving too damn fast, and he’d only hit with the lasers 3 out of the last 5 shots. He paused for a moment and launched a round of his LRM-10 at one of the approaching Phoenix Hawks, satisfied to see it not dodge at all and just take them to the face as his own armor started to get chewed off on a spot on his back that the Wasps seemed to be favoring as they circled around from different angles, meaning he could never get them all in front of him at the same time.

Even the one that had been knocked down was back up on its feet and shooting again.

“Victor, focus all your missiles on one of the mediums. Ignore the lights,” Grady said to the 85 ton Longbow that was now trotting its way across the grass towards them as a lance of their Phoenix Hawks had already raced past it, moving virtually as fast as the Wasps, but each doubling up their mass at 45 tons and sporting a large laser.

The House Morten recon pack was a clear mismatch against the Red Baron’s, but it was the Longbow that was really going to mess things up once it got within missile range, for it was their single Assault Mech, carrying 2 LRM-20s with another pair of LRM-5s for good measure. It was basically a walking missile turret, and Grady had both him and Stephan angling back towards it rather than the spaceport.

The First Lord...whom the enemy could not know was the pilot...was taking the majority of the fire from the Wasps and starting to get his armor wore down in multiple spots, with the indicator for the patch on his back sitting in yellow for what felt like an eternity as he couldn't avoid their swarm fire, even as Grady nailed one with his medium lasers and blew through the already weakened armor into the interior, lighting off its stored missiles in an explosion that knocked it sideways as the pilot ejected. Rather than going up, he shot over the ground and skipped on it multiple times before finally coming to a halt.

Stephan didn't want a closer look, knowing the pilot was dead and probably missing several limbs from the multiple impacts.

Suddenly the swarm of Wasps disappeared as they took off running back towards their dropships along with the rest of their mechs, apparently having seen their mistake as the rest of the Morten Company was heading towards them, and the friendly Phoenix Hawks were outright racing to get to Grady...but another sharp-eyed command had him turn them towards the enemy dropships and race laterally alongside the retreating mechs, moving faster than they could, to a waypoint that the old mechwarrior put down for them.

Stephan sent his Centurion after its twin, with them both sprinting at full speed in the same direction. He was out of weapons range though, as was Grady for the most part, but the Wasps were not sticking with their companions and trying to distract the trailing mechs to give them a head start. All of them were just shooting off towards the safety of their dropships, essentially leaving their companions behind in an 'every man for himself' chaotic retreat.

The Duke's four Wasps and two sensor-neutered Ostscouts got in their way through, engaging the heavier mechs with no caution and making them choose between stopping to swat them down or keep running...while the four Urbanmechs futilely chased after the fight at half their speed, never going to catch up unless the enemy turned around and decided to slug it out.

Instead they chose to run, but not straight...weaving this way and that, peppering the spaceport defenders with a few shots as they tried to scramble around them, but the 6 light mechs kept getting in their way and making them zigzag more.

Grady got another launch of LRMs off at one of the Blackjacks, but it was the Longbow that came in at an angle and just got within extreme range thanks to the delay and launched a full volley against the Centurion, for the Red Baron Phoenix Hawks had left it and the pair of Blackjacks in the rear, and the smaller mechs from both the Morten Company and the Duke's Company were picking them apart from behind.

That damage, when combined with the LRMs from the Longbow, didn't even give the pilot time to eject. The Centurion got hit in the rear with such force than it tripped forward, smashing down into the grass and tearing right through it, plowing a short trench in the dirt as if digging its own grave.

"Phoenix hawks, break off," Grady warned. "You're almost in range of their dropships. Don't a cross that line," he said, toggling his own command controls within his Crusader and marking the outer boundary for the long range defenses that were presumed to be on the dropships.

To emphasize that point, a gaunt rifle ball flashed past one of them near the knees, impacting the ground a few hundred meters on past, but so far out they didn't have any real chance of accuracy. But even a lucky shot from one of those massive metal balls could do a lot of damage.

"Hit the BlackJacks!" Grady yelled, and with about half his mechs in range, and 6 of the Duke's, the two didn't make it much further. One's fusion reactor overloaded and exploded the body of the mech, throwing shrapnel everywhere that hit three of the allied mechs. The other one did an expert job of leaning forward while ejecting, which put his trajectory towards the safety of the dropships. His chute opened well inside the defense perimeter and he floated on down beyond the gaggle of mechs all stopping outside the closer dropship's firing range.

The Duke broke in again on his channel. "Do you want to make a run at one of them?"

"Not worth the damage," Stephan said, watching the remaining mechs limp their way back onboard the nearest one. "Neither of us lost a man today. That might change if we push our advantage. I've got a lot of rookie mechwarriors anyway, and I'll take the win as is if you don't mind."

"Completely your call, Stephan. All my people did was use the open shots you gave us."

"Would have been a lot messier without them."

"Stephan," Grady said, not realizing he was already in a private conversation. "That Centurion has puked up a little of mechwarrior that's running hard across the grass."

The Duke didn't hear that, but continued on saying something as Stephan turned down the volume so he could hear Grady, then turned it back up as he switched his mic so both of them could hear him, but only Grady could hear the Duke and not vice versa.

"Harris, there's a survivor out here. Do you mind if we claim him?"

"All yours, my friend. Same goes for the salvage."

"Thanks, but this trash is on your lawn," he said jokingly. "You pick it up."

"You are too damn gracious for a noble," the Duke complained. "You're not even going to charge me a fuel fee, are you?"

"You're confusing us with bean counters. Rich guys have the luxury of being nice and not worrying about what stuff costs."

"I guess not all Dukes are equal then, because I'm already running the figures in my head for what it would cost on the upkeep for that one Blackjack that ejected a bit early."

"I hope it's recoverable," Stephan said, walking his Centurion in the direction of the man running slowly against the metallic giants with Grady already pacing beside him. "If you'll excuse me, I need to see to our soon to be prisoner."

"Do you need someone to come and pick him up?"

"Thanks, but I've got it covered," he said as the first of the dropships lifted off. "Actually, it looks like I might have two

prisoners after this. They're leaving the closer one behind," he said, seeing the rocket flare on the second one ignite a few moments later.

"If you need any more assistance, just ask. I'll keep my mechs on site until I can get a recovery team out there. Thorsen out."

"Grady?"

"I got all that. I already called Roger in. Would you mind tracking down the other guy and making sure he doesn't dive into a hole somewhere?"

"Yours not surrendering?"

"He just turned towards town when his ride disappeared, but nay, he's not stopping."

"Maybe he can't understand your accent."

"I used the ol gun barrel version. Probably thinks he's a gonner either way."

"Alright, stay on him. I'll find the other guy," he said, noticing a pair of fast moving dots on radar that would be the hover bikes they'd brought along with them so they could retrieve any of their own personnel that had to eject. Thankfully the battle had been entirely one sided.

Stephan glanced at his rear armor reading, seeing it in the light red.

Damn Wasps.

6

Stephan stayed strapped in for the short ride in the dropship back to the Estate, then walked his mech out 5th in line as the victorious Company headed back to the mechbay. He had the most damage of them all, for the Wasps had rightly gone for the smaller of the two mechs than try and pound against the heavy in the pair, but it wasn't anything the techs couldn't fix in a matter of hours.

At the end of his trek he spun his back around and stepped backwards, careful of the distance to the gantry as he heard a cloud *klang* from elsewhere. He froze his Centurion for a moment, thinking he'd done it, but looked over and saw the massive Longbow had run into its own gantry trying to back.

Fortunately Chief Tech Killis Hargove had anticipated the problem and had his tech crews far away from any potential accidents, with them only coming up to the mechs that were already standing in place and powering down. The Longbow eventually righted itself, shuffling in place for several long moments, then it too shut down as Grady came in last and slid into his berth so silky smooth it made even Stephan cringe in jealousy.

By the time he got his cooling vest unplugged, his neurohelmet off, and had crawled out of the cockpit to get a hit of cold air against his still sweaty body, Grady was already calling the rest of the mechwarriors over to him atop the main gantry that the other two spurs led to, in the center of the blocky 'U' shape they formed. He waved Stephan over as well.

"Alright, laddies, listen up. You've just been through your first real battle, and you survived it. Congratulations. You're mechwarriors now, albeit bad ones," he said, glaring at them. "I'm not gonna lie to you. If this had been an even fight, I

wouldn't be talking to half of you right now for sure. It's an accomplishment, but don't let it go to your heads."

"What I do want to hammer into yer little skulls is the fact that mismatched battles like this are what we want. We don't want to test our skills in an even fight. We're not going into battle to do that. You're not doing it to get paid either. You're a part of House Morten now, and while your pulses are still raised and adrenaline is lingering in your veins, I want you to know what that means. We didn't have to fight. We could have just let them hit the spaceport. It wasn't our job to defend it. We don't own this planet. This isn't our duchy. We could have just sat here and watched as that light militia Company got obliterated or was forced to run and let the bandits take whatever they wanted, hoping they didn't also knock down a few city blocks for the fun of it."

"But that's not going to happen around House Morten. We *interfere*," he said, emphasizing the word. "We intervene. We stick our nose in other people's business when there's a righteous fight to be had. We're protectors, not predators. And we don't give a damn about politics or economics or religion or tradition. None of that matters when it comes up against doing the right thing. We did the right thing today, laddies. Remember that feel. It's the lifeblood of House Morten. I remember the first time I felt it. I joined House Morten when I was only 26 years old, but that was after spending some 6 years as a mercenary," he told them for the first time. "We fought to get paid, some to get glory, some to prove themselves. It was never about doing the right thing. Something about that bothered me. Assaulting some factory or military base simply because we were told to...to get a pay check," he said, eyeing them in a way they knew that would be unacceptable behavior.

"I didn't know better back then, except the pit of me stomach never feeling quite right. When I had a chance to sign on with a big name House that never did anything other than defensive assignments...which many a mercenary mocked...I still didn't understand until I was assigned to help another world. It wasn't even House Morten's. It was a small noble family on a

world much like this one. We had a unit that would go out and help where we expected there to be fights. To both give the House Militia real battle experience, and to help those that the ol Davions and other major Houses didn't care about too much."

"The first time I defended one of those worlds against a mercenary unit sent by who knows to attack the major corporation on the planet. The one that was feeding most people with their paychecks and that the planet relied upon to survive. When we fought those mercenaries...and it was a rough fight because they underestimated us 'pacifist' House Mortens...that pit in me stomach unclenched and blossomed into the light of righteousness. We were doing the right thing, they were doing the wrong thing, and it felt so damn good. It felt the way it was supposed to feel. That day, I knew I'd never leave House Morten. Because that's the way *all* their fights are. Even the losses, few as they have been. Why we fight matters more than anything. More than who ends up winning."

"We fight to protect, not to plunder, and not to prove who is the better mechwarrior. So whenever we can get a lopsided fight, we're gonna take it, laddies. It's not a sign of weakness or cowardness. It's us doing our job and not messing around. If you want to prove how good you are, you do it in a simulator. When you're in a real mech's cockpit going into battle where you and your fellow laddies might not come back, you can't afford to have an ego. But you can have pride. Pride in that you're fighting the righteous fight. And I can tell you from experience, that kind of pride is more powerful than an ego could ever hope to be."

"You had a righteous battle today, laddies. Be proud of that and continue to learn and grow. Increase the mismatch, not just in mechs, but in skills as well. Get it as lopsided in your favor as possible. That's how we protect people. If we're weaker than the bad guys, then bad...nay, horrible stuff happens. Atrocities are the norm in the Inner Sphere. House Morten is one of the few specks of light in the whole mess, and it's our job to spread that light. The people at the spaceport and the militia

mechwarriors, plus many a people in the city are alive and safe right now because of us. How many we'll never know. But if we weren't there today, it would have been dark. Very dark, even if just for one person. We are the light that fights back the darkness that is forever trying to crush our civilization. That battle never ends, but there are victories and defeats happening every damn day. Today was victory, but don't let that be a cause for partying. Nay. Realize how much further we have to go, and let today be a relief instead."

"A relief that none of our people died. A relief that the spaceport and the militia still stand. You weren't ready for this, but because of the mismatch an atrocity was avoided. Now that you've had a taste of the real thing, let that remind you to keep learning, keep growing, and do so as fast as you can, or some of the future battles might be even ones, or even ones where we're at a disadvantage. You can't change that in the moment, but you can change it in the past. Today is tomorrow's past. So be proud of what you've done today. Get some food and some rest. Training continues tomorrow and I better not find any of you with even a whiff of partying on your breath," he said, knowing that every now and then some of the newer members of House Morten tried to sneak alcohol in from any of the neighboring towns, despite it not being allowed on the Estate or in the stomachs of anyone who worked here.

"House Morten," Nathan Chadwich said, raising his arm in the air. He'd been the pilot of the Longbow.

The others raised their fists and repeated it as a chant, with Grady joining in and eventually all eyes turning to Stephan...who let them finish, then raised his own hand fist clenched, and repeated it one time.

"House Morten," he said calmly, yet loudly, as if affirming their claim, which they immediately repeated him in a unified roar.

"Dismissed," Grady bellowed, with all the mostly shorter mechwarriors scurrying off across the catwalk to the door that led further into the mechbay base.

"I didn't realize you were a speech-maker."

"They needed to hear it," Grady said, stroking his brown/red beard ominously. "But we won because those bastards had no clue we were even on the planet. It's no secret anymore."

"No, it's not. It'll not just hit the local news, but it'll probably make it all the way back to Neubenn. At least in the tabloids."

"What are you going to do with the prisoners?"

Stephan blew out a deep breath. "Have a chat and see how it goes."

"Mind if I tag along?"

"We both need a shower first. Roger's taking them to the security office. Glad we put a few cells in there just in case."

"When do you figure on heading over?"

"Give me a couple hours then meet me there. The sight of your grizzly face might convince them to talk."

"That's 'manly face,' laddie. If you ever stopped shaving so damn close, you might look like one too instead of passing for one of the taller trainees."

"How'd I do today?"

"You got focused instead of me, and they didn't take you down. I'd say that's good enough. I was surprised they pressed so far with our mechs coming out of the dropship in plain sight. Worst case of tunnel vision I ever did see. How'd your first real fight feel?"

"Like I was about to go down to some ankle biters."

"Trick is to zig and zag so they don't know where to position themselves. When they reverse direction, that's when you get a quick decent shot."

"I didn't land a single autocannon."

"I saw some laser hits that weren't mine."

"I missed a lot."

"So it wasn't as pretty as you imagined?"

Stephan smiled sheepishly. "I've done better in training matches."

"Bandits have a different way of thinking about combat. Sometimes it helps them, other times it burns them. They're

predators. You're a defender and you got swarmed, but you didn't crumble. If you hadn't been there, they could have focused all the fire on me. That could have been tricky. You took most of the hits for the both of us."

Stephan smirked. "Is that why you wanted me in the smaller mech?"

"I wanted you in a familiar one. You didn't stand still and shoot in circles like a trainee would. I have no complaints about your performance. But if you were expecting to pilot as well as me..."

Stephan held up his hands in surrender. "Ego busted, and replaced with a healthy dose of reality. I hope the same is true for them."

"I don't think most of them took any damage. That's another reason I wanted to lecture them a bit. Can't let them think they've got some immunity shield protecting them."

"At least they didn't chase them into the dropship's fire zone," Stephan said with a cringe.

"Aye, there's that. Good foundation though for their future. Let's take the victory for what it is and move on. Two hours you said?"

"Two hours," Stephan confirmed, walking the opposite way the trainees had went. He was going to shower back in his quarters rather than here.

When he got to the security office on the Estate...one now run by Roger since he'd been promoted from his personal bodyguard to Chief of Security for the entire Estate...he found the two prisoners being held in different cells. One was furious at having been left behind and was spilling her guts on the Red Baron. The other wasn't saying a word.

Stephan listened from a nearby office with a link into both cells as Vander questioned the woman, Sandra Hachney, who had been within minutes of reaching the dropships and out of reach of the House Morten mechs when they had simply ignored her and lifted off anyway. Roger was with the other prisoner, the one from the downed Centurion that wouldn't

stop running even when a battlemech stomped nearby ordering him to. Stephan wasn't surprised that that kind of man would refuse to divulge information, and after calling Vander out for a moment to speak with him about the woman, Stephan opened the door and walked into the holding cell for the man, finding a small table with the mechwarrior handcuffed to the center of it, and Roger sitting on the opposite side along with two security guards flanking either wall.

His friend wasn't taking any chances, it seemed.

All eyes turned to him, wearing casual clothing rather than his typical cape/suit, as he brought a chair in with him and sat it down next to Roger, who scooted over a bit to make room.

"And what are you, his assistant?" the man scoffed.

"Come to put a few lumps in me, or are you the needle guy?"

Stephan raised an eyebrow, looking over at Roger. "Do I look that buff?"

"Never," the Security Chief said, his own arms twice the size of Stephan's.

"Are you drunk, Mr. Keev?" the First Lord asked.

"Don't call me 'Mr.' anything. My name is Arne. Use it."

"Why is it you think you're in a position to be giving orders, Arne?"

"I may have lost everything, but you'll never take my pride," he said, pounding his bound fists on the table for emphasis.

"What pride is there working for bandits?"

"What pride is there working for the Davions?" he countered.

"Damn," Stephan said, looking to Roger again. "I'm starting to like this guy already."

All he got was a huff out of his friend whose eyes rarely left Keev and did not seem to be in a joking mood. Roger really was taking his new role seriously. A bit too seriously.

"Right now Sandra is spilling her guts," Stephan offered.

"Hachney got caught too?" Keev asked.

"Four of your mechs went down. Two dead, two surviving. She was on foot a couple of minutes away from your dropships when they just abandoned her. We probably could have taken at least one of them, but didn't feel like running the gauntlet to do it. She ejected and landed within their firing range. She was home free, but they left her anyway. So she's telling us everything she can about them. We're going to let her go," he said, drawing a raised eyebrow from Roger, who otherwise remained silent, "in exchange for the information. First jumpship out she'll be on, because I don't think the Duke is in too good of a mood when it comes to bandits, which means you're lucky I convinced him to let us pick you up."

"Kid, who exactly do you think you are?"

"You guys were chasing a Crusader and a Centurion. I was in the Centurion, he was in the Crusader," Stephan said, thumbing backwards to the door where Grady had quietly slithered in to stand in the open doorjamb. "My name is Stephan Morten. I'm the current leader of House Morten."

"Never heard of it," Keev said dismissively.

"Make sense. Otherwise you should have known we had mechs on the planet. You guys walked into a hell of a trap. This Red Baron must have been pissed at losing four mechs."

"He doesn't know about it yet, but he'll be more than pissed."

"So he wasn't here today?"

Keev laughed hard, making it sound almost genuine.

"He's too important to waste his time on a little raid like this...but he'll avenge the loss. You can mark my words on that. There'll be payback coming."

"And a rescue for you?"

"No," Keev said, more willing to talk with a mechwarrior than the Security Chief who'd knocked him unconscious out in the grass fields. "I'm dispossessed now, and he doesn't give a shit about me or Sandra. When he comes back, he'll torch your little city to make a point."

"I assume he has a lot more mechs then?"

"That I'll tell you. Yes, he has a lot more than a Company. He personally has a big Atlas when he wants to get involved, and he's not some little bandit. He's a warlord who owns a number of planets. That's all I'm going to tell you about my employer."

"If he's not coming from you, doesn't that make him your former employer?"

"Doesn't matter. I'm no rat."

"Why didn't your mechs see mine coming off the dropship and turn and run when you had the chance?"

"We were trying to get you two before you got to the spaceport. We didn't know you had any more on the dropship. Smart bit of strategy there."

"Thank you. Now what are we supposed to do with you?"

He pulled his hands up a couple of inches, as high as they would go, and clanked the chains on his cuffs. "Not like I have much say in it."

"Was that Centurion yours or the Red Baron's?"

"It was mine," he said, with Stephan seeing the same feeling of dispossession burning inside him underneath the fear of captivity.

"You're lucky you're in House Morten custody. We're a civilized House, so there's not going to be any beatings or torture to get information. We simply ask, make deals, and if you don't want to give then that's the end of it."

"You're just going to let me walk out the front door then?" he scoffed.

"If I was cruel I might. The Duke's people would pick you up, and considering he's a former General, he might not be so nice to his prisoners."

"I'd still like to take my chances, if it's all the same with you."

"It's not. When we take someone prisoner, you become our responsibility. That's why we're taking Sandra to another system in exchange for the information she is giving us."

"I won't rat out," Keev reiterated.

"Then answer this one question. Why join a warlord instead of a mercenary unit?"

"Pay is better," he said flatly.

"How much better?"

"We get a cut of every raid we're on. Mercs only get paid salaries and small bonuses."

"But you get to steal stuff, so the pay is better?"

"Exactly."

"And where's your money now?"

Keev's expression went from bad to horrific. "It'll probably be looted with them assuming I'm dead."

"Nice friends you've got."

"I never said they were friends. I just don't rat out my employer, that's all."

"Any family?"

"Out here? Are you kidding? Families are for settlers, and bandits pick the settlers dry. I prefer being higher up the food chain."

"And now you're at the bottom of it, dispossessed, and handcuffed inside a cell," Stephan said, leaning forward and resting his elbows on the table. "How would you like a job?"

Roger's head swung around as if it was on a swivel, but to his credit he didn't voice his strong objection in front of the prisoner.

"You're looking to hire then?"

"Special situation. Those mechs that followed us out of the dropship were piloted by trainees, and right now they're not very good. But tonnage matters and we could have stomped on you just the same if you hadn't run, but we might have lost a few of them in the process, so I'm glad you did. Only me and Grady here have any experience was mechwarriors. And since you've got experience playing villain, how about you do so again in the simulators? Make my trainees pay for every mistake, expose every weakness, and humiliate them over and over until they learn what not to do?"

"Does it get me out of this cell?"

"We'll find you better accommodations, but you'll still be on house arrest for 2 years, after which, if there are no problems, you'll receive backpay for those two years and a paid ticket off world to get you out of the Duke's reach. I know it's not the same as being in a real mech, but a simulator is far better than this cell. And way better than whatever the Duke would do to you. If he's nice you might get 10 years in one of his prisons."

"Or I can rat out the Red Baron and go free now?"

"That option is still on the table."

"I'd only have to surrender my honor for it," he said angrily, and Stephan's frown deepened almost to match his.

"There is no honor in what you were doing here, Arne. My House is honor-bound to stop units like the Red Baron's from looting and destroying cities."

"The honor is in piloting a mech and being loyal to my employer. Beyond that I don't care much what the mission is."

"Unfortunately that's an attitude we find a lot with mercenaries. Which is why we don't hire them and instead raise our own forces, instilling in them a true sense of honor so we can expect a certain code of conduct out of them. Now, do you want to take one of the two deals I've offered, or just sit in this cell and think about it for a few weeks?"

"I'm no rat," he said for the third time. "But if you want me to shoot up your boys in the sims, make it one year and we've got a deal."

"Three years," Stephan countered, "but each victory you have subtracts a week."

Keey considered that for a moment. "How often do I get a chance to fight?"

Stephan turned around and looked at Grady questioningly.

"I can't say for sure how good he is, seeing as how it was mostly running he was doing today, but I can work him into the simulator at least once, maybe twice a day."

"So you're saying, if my math is right, that I could be out of here in a few months if I have an impressive win streak?"

"If you're that good," Grady replied before Stephan could. "The trainees are getting better every week."

"What's the pay like?"

"30 C-bills a day, plus 5 for every mech you take down."

"You sound like you've hired mercs before."

"I'm just a good deal maker, Arne. Do we have one?"

"House arrest, you said?"

"You shot at my people in battle. It's not like we can actually trust you."

"As I said, I'm loyal to my employers. If I'm working for you...even in the sims...you'll get no trouble from me. After it's over, where do you send me?"

"Anywhere in the Federated Suns this side of June," Stephan said, referencing the planet rather than the month.

"What about the Taurians?"

"If that's where you want to go, I can arrange it."

"Just asking to see what my options were, but I didn't catch your name the first time."

"Stephan Morten."

"Mr. Morten, I accept your deal," he said amicably, then turned to face Roger. "Now get these damn cuffs off me."

Roger pulled something under the table and the chain to the cuffs released, allowing him to pick his hands up, but they were still linked together.

"That's all you're getting for now," Roger said, unamused in the slightest as Stephan stood up.

"We'll make arrangements for some proper living quarters. Until then, you're stuck here I'm afraid. Try and escape, or go anywhere you're not told to go, and the deal is voided. Clear?"

"Crystal, sir," he said, standing up with a hitch.

Stephan's eyes narrowed. "Are you wounded, Arne?"

"I didn't surrender," was all he said.

"I took him down rather hard," Roger admitted. "He still had a pistol."

"Well, we only hand out pain killers in extreme situations. But I'll have a medtech check you out a little later. Until then, you're just going to have to suffer through it."

"I'm fine, sir."

"Good," Stephan said, turning around and walking out with Grady. Roger signaled the two guards to come with him into the outer chamber and he locked the solid door behind him, allowing them to see Keev through a one-way glass window, but he couldn't see or hear them.

"Are you crazy?" Roger finally said.

"Aye, he is," Grady answered first. "Crazy like a fox. I can use that bastard well in the simulators...and if he doesn't put in a good show, he doesn't get paid as much, and he's stuck here longer. That was masterful work my friend."

"Thank you," Stephan said, looking back at Roger. "I'm better at deal making than mech piloting, apparently."

"He's going to be a constant nightmare for me."

"You said you were bored. I just gave you some legit security duty to do."

"I'd rather chase down birds on the motion sensors than keep this time bomb inside the Estate."

"He's not going to have a weapon, or be near one. He's not going to be able to walk around. We're going to get him some quarters...or maybe build some special ones...and he doesn't leave them except for simulator work. His meals get delivered to him."

"No physical training?" Roger argued, knowing that was cruel to do to a person in a box. Even a nice apartment-sized one."

"Get him a treadmill for now and we're reassess in a month. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough, but my men are still green and one slip up could see somebody dead if he's holding a big ass grudge after getting shot out of his mech."

"Double the guard of greenies so one will counter another's mistake. If they can't handle holding an

untrustworthy employee, how are they supposed to deal with armed enemies?"

"It's just not something I'd planned for, Steph. And if I screw up..."

"I'm making the decision for you. If it blows up, it's my fault. But if he won't rat out the Red Baron, I think if he's working for us he'll apply the same standard."

"Gut feeling?"

"And a gamble," he admitted. "But I don't just want to lock him in a cell for years or hand him over to the Duke for even worse."

"We could just cut him loose somewhere else."

"I'm not feeling that charitable," Stephan said, remembering the armor damage to his Centurion's back from the Wasps and maybe a laser shot from this guy. It had been so chaotic he couldn't tell where every missile and lance of energy was coming from.

"If I had someone competent I'd promote them and go back to being your bodyguard."

"Don't really need one sitting in the Estate almost every day. Keep it safe, and I'll be safe."

"It was easier when I reported to your father."

"Easier is boring," he reminded his friend. "Time to stretch your abilities a little."

He punched Roger in the shoulder softly, his way of saying 'bye,' and placed a hand on Grady's shoulder as he passed.

"You get him to work in the simulators as soon as possible. Let our trainees see what would have happened in an even fight in case some of them are getting delusions of grandeur."

"Might thoughts exactly. Consider it done."

"Carry on, fellas," Stephan said, heading out of the small security complex into the cool air as he walked across the growing number of sidewalks in the valley, heading back to his own office to get some more planning work done. He couldn't sleep yet, but give him another hour or two to work the rest of

the adrenaline out from his first live mech combat and he was sure he was going to sleep for a solid 12 hours straight, and intended to clear his morning schedule to accommodate just that.

7

March 2, 2991

Federated Suns

Crusis March

Cholis

Brinestorm Spaceport

It'd been 5 months Stephan had been waiting for his people to arrive, for a journey that should have been able to take place in less than two if all factors were favorable give the new direct trade route from New Avalon, out through the regional capital of June in the Edgeward Alpha Combat Theatre, which was just the fancy name for the piece of the Crucis march that Cholis existed in, and currently ending here before the jumpships cycled back to go the other way, picking up supplies and people as they went.

Neubenn was on the other side of New Avalon, closer to the Draconis Combine border but not that close. Regular transit from there to New Avalon, then out to Cholis would be about 4 months, but part of him had hoped House Davion would pull some strings to get them out here faster by using jumpships left in place and fully charged that could pick up a dropship from another jumpship just arrived and move it along without having to wait to recharge the jump drives.

It was commonly referred to as a 'command circuit,' but there were many civilian counterparts as well, speeding up transit for special cargos while others had to wait. That made it impossible for him to get an expected arrival date, for he'd been given no information on how they would be transported here, leaving him waiting, guessing, and hoping.

While he had waited the second survey team had reported back. They'd gone out further, hitting a lot of known

systems to update them as well as Stephan picking a few uncharted ones at random hoping to get some good finds. This batch he'd got none, only some partials that, with some work, could be made useful...much like the first batch, only this list was quite a bit longer, for they had been out exploring deeper.

He did not reup their contract, rather paying the final amount for services rendered, as he would be doing for the other two teams still out. The only reason he'd rehired the first team was because he hadn't yet assembled his own. That wasn't the case any longer, and one of his now 3 privately owned jumpships was out doing additional scouting of the systems around the one that contained the planet with the two massive ice caps and the habitable zone sandwiched in between them.

He'd named the planet and system Polvice...which was a combination of 'polar' and 'vice grip,' the meaning of which was obvious when anyone looked at a picture of the planet. Polvice was to be their first major acquisition, sitting some 42 light years from Cholis, meaning that was two jumps away. All three of the jumpships he now had were equipped with battery upgrades that allowed them to make double jumps after sitting long enough to charge both the capacitors for the jump drive and the batteries. It didn't actually save any travel time unless you had been sitting around doing nothing for a long time anyway, but it would allow the 'frog hop' from one safe system to another with an hour or so downtime in one of the many systems in between that they could pass through.

Those 'in between' systems, usually uninhabited or even without planets at all, were what the *Beta Strider* was out mapping. If he could find one that he could set up a base of operations on he'd be happy, because he didn't like the idea of sending civilian ships through systems where they could be hit near the jump points by pirates without local defense to assist them. Thought at the moment, he still didn't have any aerospace assets or naval vessels other than armed dropships, so it was a moot point for the near future, but he was always planning for down the road.

Alpha Strider was at Polvice right now with their own planetary survey team doing a more in-depth analysis of what was there and what was the best location to begin putting down roots. He didn't expect them back for months more, and the same went for *Gamma Strider* that was soon to jump to the uninhabited system with the abandoned mine on it. A pair of dropships with a mining/survey crew on them had lifted off two hours ago and were making their way out to the Zenith jump point where Gamma waited. Then they'd be making the single jump necessary to get to the newly named 'Drymo' system, which was also the name of the planet.

Stephan didn't like obviously humorous names, which was why he altered this one from 'Dry Mouth' down to 'Drymo.' People would eventually figure it out, but to a newcomer just looking on a map it would just be another serious name along with the rest...though some people in the past had named planets and systems ridiculous stuff like 'A Place' and other unimaginative crap that didn't do them justice.

Polvice and Drymo were soon to be the first two planets owned by House Morten, but there was a lot of prep work that had to be done first before he was going to move a single person in to either of them.

But today his thoughts of those two workloads...and money pits that were sucking even more funds out of their war chest...were put aside when another jumpship entered the system and identified itself as an unscheduled arrival, which meant it wasn't one of the jumpships tasks to run up and down the trade route from New Avalon.

And onboard this jumpship were a portion of his people from Neubenn.

It wasn't just them, but other cargo and personnel as well, so they weren't going to be setting down at the Estate...which was why Stephan arranged to be in Brinestorm when the pair of larger *Overlord*-class dropships set down and waited a hell of a long time to finally lower their boarding ramps.

While he waited along with Carroll and his team of bodyguards that Roger had insisted go with him at all times he stepped a foot outside the Estate, including the Security Chief himself, a motorcade that was a mix of government cars and equipment haulers drove up and parked a respectful distance away from House Morten's own vehicles. Out of one of the government ones Duke Thorsen emerged and walked across the ferrocrete tarmac towards the First Lord with a spry gait for someone of his 73 years of age.

Well, at least for someone outside House Morten anyway.

"Stephan," he greeted with a firm handshake.

"Harris. I didn't expect you here."

"I know your people from Neubenn are onboard, but I've also got a representative to meet. Baron Klix has been sent to negotiate on behalf of Duke Brennard of Metarisk."

Stephan frowned. Metarisk was another small world three jumps away, but with about double the population of Cholis. Enough, apparently, to also have a Baron in it. "Baron of what?"

"An airless moon they've been slowly colonizing."

"What's he supposed to negotiate?"

Thorsen smiled. "Seems the trade route out here is finally coming through with that economic surge your companion there promised," he said, referencing Carroll who was standing on the far side of Stephan.

"I don't make promises I can't keep, Duke," she said with a smirk.

Harris bowed his head kindly, then returned his attention to the real power on Cholis. "Baron Klix has been sent to negotiate some form of economic exchange that might create a spur off this trade line to his system. He's bringing with him several merchant guild representatives who would be willing to devote a jumpship to doing that. I'm going to have a handful coming to terms with them. Economics is not my specialty, after all, and my staff is limited given I've been putting most of my efforts into the militia."

"Would you find it offensive if I offered some help in that regard?"

"Never," Harris said, his eyes widening.

"When are these meetings to take place?"

"They're probably going to start sometime today, but I can push off anything official until tomorrow if need be."

"Do that, and I'll have Paul sit in on the meetings with you as an unofficial advisor as well as an official interested party to set in place some new market opportunities later."

"Oh? You have an interest in Metarisk?"

"This doesn't go beyond you...and you," he said, glancing at Carroll, who he knew would eventually report back to her Uncle on everything anyway, "but we're in the early process of acquiring a planet for the purpose of establishing mining exports. The surrounding systems would be the natural recipients of such resources if they want them, rather than sending cargo all the way across the Federated Suns. I also like to help strengthen my neighbors in the process, so Paul will begin laying the groundwork for that if an opportunity arises. Is that satisfactory?"

"Completely. Might I ask what planet?"

"Uninhabited system one jump from here that I've designated as Drymo."

"Will you be splitting your mech force then?"

Stephan smiled. "I've got more mechs on the way. I'll have at least a Regiment stationed on Cholis at all times to protect the Estate. I know better than to spread ourselves thin."

"A Regiment! Exactly how rich are you, Stephan?" he asked with a laugh.

"Less with each passing month," he answered soberly. "It'll be a while before we can get any exports coming out of Drymo. Until then I just have a series of money pits to work with."

"I know the feeling, believe me."

"You have tax revenue, Duke. I'd have to take someone's inhabited planet away from them to get that again."

"Then I don't have to worry about you taking mine, because there's not much of it," he said with a smile as the first of the passengers began to walk off the dropship. "Looks like the Baron has quite an entourage."

"Do you mind meeting him alone? I've got other business to attend to."

"Of course. I'll speak with you later," the Duke said, putting a hand on his shoulder for a moment before walking out to meet the arriving delegation.

Carroll waited until he was out of earshot before she spoke. "Are you burning through the stipend we're giving you?"

"Not entirely, but the more staff I hire the more drain there is. It's the larger purchases that are hurting at the moment. It'll be a while before we can reverse that, but we're in no financial trouble. It's just frustrating seeing so much red in the books right now without any taxes or sales to start making up for it."

"Tell me about this Drymo. You haven't mentioned it before?"

"We've had one survey done, and I'm sending out a more thorough one on those dropships we launched yesterday. It's barren with breathable air, but no moisture whatsoever so the miners will have to live inside domes or underground. Not a nice place to be, but it's fairly rich in a variety of resources. We found one abandoned mine, and while there was nothing left to identify the former owners, we're assuming it was an off the books corporate venture that got canceled," he said, feeling generous since news of his people arriving had got to him and she was proving to be more than just an apologetic mouthpiece for House Davion.

"Do you want me to add it to our charts, or sit on it a while until you get established?"

"The latter. The Red Baron is probably pissed off at us, and I don't want to advertise our soon to be operations there."

"Wise," she offered as they both saw the Duke meet up with the Baron and all manner of pointless gestures and words began to fly. Thankfully Stephan was too far away to hear any of

it as his eyes scanned the boarding ramp on the dropship for his people as a line of other passengers were beginning to depart.

"How long are you going to be stuck out here?" he asked out of the blue.

"Excuse me?" she asked, frowning.

"This assignment. You rarely leave the guest house, have no friends or family here. It must be more of a prison sentence than anything for you."

She shook her head firmly. "I'm not all that popular back home. My uncle did me a favor sending me out here. I get to be on the frontlines of something grand taking place. That makes it far more exciting for me than trading bullshit compliments like they're doing right now."

Stephan turned to look at her for a moment. "Oh?"

"I'm too blunt for delicate diplomatic work," she stated flatly. "And those are other people's words, not mine. Andrew appreciates bluntness where appropriate, and you seem to as well."

"In my limited experience," he said, cracking a joke about his own age, "I've found the people who are overly wordy without saying anything of real value are usually fakers trying to climb higher than they deserve based on appearance rather than substance."

"House Davion swims in people like that."

"Inside or outside?"

"Both, unfortunately, but everyone on the outside is always trying to pry something from us to advantage themselves. Your father was one of the few true friends Andrew had that he could trust wasn't playing an angle, and he wanted me to see if the trait bred true."

"Has it?"

She glanced up at him, brushing a lock of blonde hair aside that the windy day had dislodged from her tightly braided hair. "I've already reported back as much, even though I know you're not our greatest fans right now."

"If you got all my people out of Neubenn, I'm inclined to maybe like you a little bit."

“They’re not all on this jumpship,” she cautioned, “but I received word the final group departed 3 weeks ago. As far as the fired ones went. The others are still off limits to you, I’m afraid.”

“Most of me has forgotten about Neubenn, but once you accept responsibility for a planet and everyone on it, those are bonds that cannot be simply severed by an order or a choice. They linger.”

“You take that bond very seriously.”

“Others don’t take it serious enough, including your House.”

“I know,” she said simply. “Another reason why I like it out here. Both you and the Duke are no-nonsense people who actually care about this planet. It’s a refreshing change, even if I don’t have a social life to go with it.”

“I’m surprised you’re not married,” he said, drawing an unpleasant look from her. “Your last name is currency that many would wish to trade on.”

“I prefer trading it myself. And what about you? I thought it was customary for your family to have numerous children in each generation? You’ve 8 brothers and sisters, correct?”

“It’s also tradition that we do not start having children until we pass 30, so I’m not in any rush.”

“Why?”

“Kids don’t raise kids well. We believe a certain amount of life experience is necessary before you start raising the next generation.”

“Even your women?”

“Civilization allows people to remain healthier for longer, and when you tweak the food supply, indoor living conditions, physical and mental training, the reproductive window for women extends considerable. Even my sisters wait until they’re 30 before having kids...though many are married before that. Sarah has three children already, and if something should happen to me, they’d take over eventually. It doesn’t have to be my personal offspring. Our House is a family, in all

respects, and as long as there are some of the children who choose active service, the House continues. I don't even need to reproduce if I don't want to."

"It's the same with House Davion, except the shifts from one line to another are not usually chosen, but dictated by assassinations and other losses."

"That's the kind of uncivilized society I'm trying to get my House away from."

"By coming out into the barbaric Periphery?" she half mocked.

"We have no intention of leaving it in its current state."

"I know you don't, but it's still ironic."

"We get to call the shots out here," Stephan said with a smile as he finally began to see some familiar faces walking off the dropship. "And that makes all the difference. If you will excuse me, princess," he said sarcastically, but with a friendly vibe as he left her behind and walked forward, waving to get the attention of some of his fellow mechwarriors.

As soon as they saw him they started running over...which his security detail about went crazy over until Roger called them off...then the reunions started with one backslapping hug after another as some 30 or more old friends worked their way off both dropships and back into the House Morten extended family.

8

March 30, 2991

Federated Suns

Crusis March

Cholis

Morten Estate

Arne Keev had been a prisoner of House Morten for more than 3 months now, but in truth it felt like years. He was no longer living in a cell, thank god, but his quarters were still locked down. He lived next to the other mechwarriors in an apartment complex a few hundred meters from the primary mech bay, but with a guard stationed outside his door at all times and the window sealed shut. He received no guests, and had all meals delivered to him along with various packaged items in his kitchenette that he could snack on whenever he liked.

Honestly, these were far better accommodations than he'd had at any point in his 46 years of life, but the lack of alcohol had been driving him crazy. He'd thought the 23 pounds he'd lost had something to do with it, but the slightly ripped forearms he had to stare at daily said otherwise. He'd put on a fair amount of muscle since he'd got here, for he had nothing to do but work out and watch entertainment videos and news broadcasts.

And there was only so much news a warrior could take before their brain started to turn into goop.

But twice a day every day a security escort would come, knock on his door, and take him over to the academy building that housed the simulators and he'd get a chance to earn a reduced sentence as well as some C-bills. It was the only thing that kept him going with no alcohol, no women, and no real entertainment.

He barely recognized himself in the mirror after the withdrawal headaches went away. His face was trim, his muscles bulkier than they'd ever been before in his life, and the beer gut he'd carried since before he could remember had shrunk considerable due to all the treadmill work he'd been doing to make himself tired enough to sleep more of the hours between simulator sessions and make the days go faster.

And while there was no god damn meat, he had to admit the food was better here. Nothing rotted, badly mixed, or overcooked. He'd hated most of it early, but after getting used to the bland tastes and raw fruit, he'd actually started to like it. That's how far gone he was here, and when he was honest with himself, he wasn't sure how he was going to adapt when he got out...assuming the First Lord would hold up his end of the deal.

But he struck him as the honest type, though he had nothing but the one conversation to base that on. Yet, if you judged this noble family on their training sims, then they were ramrod straight stiff ass stuffy brats, for the kind of punishment he was laying down on their cadets was never-ending. He was actually terrorizing them...and enjoyed it! He wouldn't want to be in their shoes, or having to go through the monotonous trials he'd heard about. Those didn't have a live opponent in them, but were automated so they remained exactly the same each time. And when someone passed one, they had to do it over and over again until they got to a selected number before being allowed to move on.

Those would-be mechwarriors were being put through hell, and he was part of dishing it out to them. He was also seeing how rapidly they improved, and it was beginning to get harder and harder to beat up on the older ones, but fortunately in the last week a few brand new recruits had come in and they sucked bad. He was earning quite a few C-Bills off of those brats, while the others he was having to work hard to take down in a variety of mechs he had never piloted before.

That meant he had to learn as well...and given he had nothing else to do he was. Along with his 'entertainment' options in his quarters, there was an abundance of training

material, from which he was getting some of his weight lifting workouts, but it also had everything from aerofighter strategy, to infantry tactics, to mathematics...who would even need that other than techs...and there was a huge catalog of information regarding mechs, tactics, weapon systems, and the methodology of House Morten warfare.

And apparently some of their old militia from another planet had arrived to boost their ranks. He'd been paired with some of them to further terrorize the recruits, but had not been allowed to face any of them in simulated combat. That said, he could tell they were seasoned by the way they ripped through the trainees, and because he was on their 'side' in the training drills, he was linked into their comm chatter, so for once he could actually speak to someone other than his guards.

They already knew who he was and how he had gotten here, but since they hadn't been on planet at the time they didn't seem to have any hostility towards him. On the contrary, rather, they sort of took him under their wing...which was infuriating...and collaborated with him on how best to really teach the trainees the lesson of humility. It was in some of these sessions where the experienced mechwarriors had to take on superior numbers that he had grown to respect the House Morten militia. And since he'd already been studying their tactics, he was able to slip into their formations and understand their shorthand lingo regarding certain maneuvers.

When the trainees had numerical superiority, he had to work hard with the militia to win those team missions. And because every win chipped another week off his sentence, he put aside all his negative emotions and just focused on winning.

He wasn't sure when he had actually started to like these guys, but it hadn't taken very long. He actually felt more in place with them than he had the Red Baron's people, and that was confusing him greatly on what he would do once he eventually got out of here.

Other than get drunk and laid as soon as possible.

5 weeks later...

Stephan felt relief every time a jumpship would arrive with more of his people, but as he constantly monitored incoming jumpships, something else he'd been waiting for finally arrived.

And when it did, it sent everyone in the know on the planet into a jaw-dropping uproar.

"Are you serious?" Thorsen asked via the wall screen in Stephan's office.

"Quite. I bought it before I left New Avalon to come here. It's just taken all this time to cover the distance. She has horrible recharge times, Harris. Between 1-2 months and no batteries."

"I can't believe a Sequoia is going to be basing out of my system," he said, shaking his head in awe. "Do we even have enough cargo mass to justify that?"

"Nope," Stephan said honestly. "I bought her as an investment for future operations. Once we grow large enough, then she'll come into use. For now, she's just going to sit there until needed."

"Nobody is making new ones yet, right? Or did I miss a news update somewhere?"

"Still lostech," Stephan said, referring to advanced Star League equipment that the Inner Sphere hadn't yet relearned how to make, but they were still operating any number of lostech infrastructure, mechs, aerofighters, jumpships, etc that had escaped destruction thus far. And with the phobia of actually destroying jumpships and other things hard to make, the lostech *Sequoia*-class jumpships had been carefully preserved and protected over the past centuries, for only they had the size and cargo capacity to ship grain and other foodstuffs from the agro-heavy exporting worlds to other planets that desperately relied on their sustenance...of which there were a great many in the Federated Suns.

"How did you get your hands on one?"

"The First Prince pulled a few strings and bought an available one. Then he sold it to me at cost. I'm as surprised as you that I was able to get it."

"I doubt that," the Duke said with a chuckle. "I still can't believe that just jumped in."

"And inside it is a lot of stuff I've ordered that it's picked up along the way...including 200 promised mechs from House Davion in compensation for what my family wasn't able to take off Neubenn."

The Duke's jaw, already dropped at the arrival of the almost mythical Sequoia, nearly hit the floor with that last admission.

"They're all used," Stephan added, "and will need refitted, but with the arrival of some of my old militia, I don't think you're going to have to worry about the Red Baron or anyone else showing up here to cause trouble again."

"My boy, you're like the real life incarnation of Santa Claus as far as I'm concerned."

"And you're by far the most eager child to accept gifts. Most Dukes would see my good fortune as something to fear or something they could steal."

Harris's eyes stiffened slightly. "I was a General before I was a Duke, and part of me will forever be a General. Paranoia drives one to shoot at things that are harmless and gives your position away, so I know better than to imagine trouble where there is none. I wait and let trouble rear its ugly head before I worry about it."

"Quite pragmatic."

"The military usually is."

"Depends on which military you're talking about," Stephan amended. "And to that point, while I don't begrudge you increasing the size of your forces, might I suggest you spend some of your increasing tax trickle," he said, getting a chuckle out of the Duke, "on some domestic concerns."

"Such as?" he asked without any trace of resentment.

"Once we start opening up new worlds out there, people are going to want to come. At least, after we get some

proper cities established. People we invite...and people we don't...will show up here at Cholis, which will eventually become known as the doorway to House Morten. They'll sense opportunity and want to camp out here, so you might want to start pitching a few tents to rent them."

"Are you suggesting a surge in population growth?"

"I am."

"Music to my ears...but you're right about housing. We don't have much to go around now, as far as excess is concerned. How popular do you imagine we're going to get?"

"The trade route alone will bring with it attention. Me even more once people realize what we're up to out here. This is going to be a pass-through system, but I'd prefer if you made it more of a destination itself so people would understand they have to come here to ask permission to move further on."

"You want your privacy out there?"

"No such thing, but if they have a nice world here to wait on while they beg me to let them come, they'll camp out here rather than run their jumpships onto my front lawn and pull the old 'we have nowhere to go' routine."

"So my success here will benefit you as a kind of twin entity?"

"I'm not looking to pluck worlds away from the Federated Suns, and I want Cholis to be the best of neighbors, not as a tiny doormat, but as a worthy peer so we can have each other's backs whatever may come."

"I'm all ears," the Duke said, with his tone shift suggesting he sensed trouble.

Stephan sighed. Harris was a friend more than a Duke, and he'd been becoming something of a confidant as well. He'd tell him things he'd never mention to Carroll Davion...and she lived at his Estate.

"Maybe I'm being paranoid after getting dispossessed, but the history of the Inner Sphere is a long trail of back stabbings with little real loyalty. I'd say you're one of the exceptions. You'd never betray the Federated Suns, would you?"

"Not on my life."

"My independence comes from First Prince Andrew Davion. His heirs might not feel beholden to his promise."

"And the more developed Cholis is, it demonstrates you're not trying to take a piece out of their inheritance."

"Among other things."

"Let me clear something up for you, Stephan. If Andrew's heir comes here and orders me to command an army and invade your soon to be worlds...I won't do it. The First Prince made a deal with you, and lest there be some bad behavior on your part, I feel it's my duty to honor that deal on his behalf no matter what his children might have to say about it."

"That'll get you dispossessed faster than I was."

"You have to draw the line of honor somewhere, and you can't let others maneuver the line around to their liking. I hold the Cholis duchy as long as I maintain my honor. I will not hold it in any other manner."

"Lucky I picked you then, though to be honest, the fact this system actually has an HPG terminal was the major factor, along with a few other things. Guess Santa came to me early."

"Too much good luck for one planet?"

"I hope not. Right now most people still think this is the backwater."

"That's because it is," the Duke said with a smirk.

"Temporarily," Stephan amended. "I intend for it to become an oasis of civilization."

"And we're the doormat for this oasis?"

"Hopefully a really thick, impressive one," he said deadpan.

"Message received loud and clear. Leave planetary defense unofficially up to you and get to work building more infrastructure."

"More infrastructure, more people, more tax revenue. It's a snowball when you do it right."

"As I've been learning from Paul. Thanks again for sending him my way."

"He has little to do right now anyway. Keeps him in practice."

"Are you going to go visit your new acquisition?"

Stephan shook his head. "No, but Sarah is. If you want to disappear for a week or so, feel free to hitch a ride up."

"I wish I could, but you know well the work a Duke has to do...when he actually works and doesn't pawn it off on subordinates. But still, that's got to be an impressive sight up close, let alone on the inside."

"Don't worry, I'm sure Sarah will take plenty of pictures..."

After three days of nearly constant thrust at 1.2 g, the *Green Pearl* finally arrived at the Zenith jump point where the *Sequoia-1*-class jumpship was parked, but with two of its dropships detached and hovering closely nearby. Those would be the guardians, who not only were making room at a docking port on the otherwise filled ship, but were positioning themselves slightly away from the behemoth to get into better firing positions should they need to engage the approaching dropship.

The thick shaft of the jumpship stretched for more than 8 kilometers...more a space station than a ship, if you were being honest...but this was the smallest of the three types of *Sequoia*, not to mention the mysterious 4th found in the lostech blueprints entrusted to House Morten. But still, these vessels were in a league of their own, carrying the bulk of their cargo inside their hull and leaving only a pitiful amount in the holds of the attached 30 dropships.

Most jumpships were usually built for transport of dropships while the dropships held the cargo, but the reverse was true here. The dropships were merely the ferry boys to and from a planet, and given the vessel could hold almost a billion tons of supplies, it made Rannel's eyes bulge to actually see it out the viewscreen on the *Green Pearl*'s bridge as she and Sarah rode it up to meet the legacy crew that came with it.

The solar sails were already out, stretching from six huge pylons that had extruded from the sides of the main shaft and slowly flexed backwards to form the ribs of an umbrella, out of which the dozens of solar sails were extended, making them look like leaves on a tree branch.

She'd never seen a ship design more aptly named in her life.

The base of the 'tree trunk' was thicker than the rest, with the nose cone containing two huge rotating discs...but you couldn't see them, for they were hidden behind a carapace of armor that kept the moving sections concealed. It almost looked like there was a pot at the base of the tree into which it was planted, but she knew that pot contained hundreds of people, some of whom lived their entire lives on this ship. They would be born into the commanding family, serve onboard, and eventually die here, while the rest of the crew would sign on for extended tours of duty and then cycle out.

The commanding family of this vessel was the McFarlanes, and the ship itself was called the *Stars' Herald*. Stephan had decided not to rename this one, or replace the crew...otherwise they'd have to assault it with an army of infantry to take it away from the McFarlanes. They were as possessive of it as any legacy family, all of whom rivaled the Great Houses in the Inner Sphere with their claims to their heritage, despite the fact they didn't own the damn thing anymore, and never had.

But no point in rocking the boat unless there was a reason to, so Sarah and Rannel watched the station-sized ship grow and grow before they gently kissed up against it, a tiny squirrel grasping to the trunk of the massive tree, and docked just upwards of the 'pot' on the front end, taking the place of the last on a row of modified *Overlord*-class dropships that were a full 30% larger than standard.

When you had a lot of cargo to get onboard, the less week-long round trips you had to make the better.

This variant was often referred to as a 'tick-class,' but never on any official paperwork. Yet that's exactly what the

large white ovoid ships resembled stuck into the hull. Their smaller *Union*-class dropship seemed out of place nestling in next to them.

Once the *Green Pearl* was attached and everything secured, Sarah and Rannel took a boarding party through the airlock and were met by a detachment of armed guards stuck to the floor through either magnetic strips or Velcro, all with holstered rifles across their backs, standing at attention in the zero g hallway as a man in what looked like a civilian uniform waited at the far end of the columns.

Sarah climbed her way through using the handholds on the ceiling with Rannel following a few handholds behind as second position in a short train of ants making their way into the massive technological tree.

"Lords Morten, I presume," the man said with a firm expression that didn't belie any emotion.

"I'm Sarah Morten, Lord of Logistics for House Morten. Behind me is Rannel Morten, Lord of Technology."

"A pleasure to meet you both. As we discussed, there are to be no weapons brought onboard."

"We didn't bring any," she said, pushing off the ceiling slightly so her body essentially stood 'hanging' like a monkey to face him as she retained one of the handholds for balance. "And as we're about to discuss, you don't give us orders. Legacy or not, we own this jumpship now."

"The orders were not mine, but the Captain's," the man said dismissively. "You will need to discuss it with him. This way."

Sarah kept her mouth shut and just followed the man as he walked on the floor with little clicks while she had to pull along using the handholds for what seemed like forever before they came to an elevator.

"It will hold eight. The rest of your party will wait here, and I will stay with them," he said, opening the door to reveal another person inside. "She will escort you to the bridge."

Sarah, Rannel, and five of their staff members...four of whom were also family...pulled themselves into the lift before the doors closed.

"You'll want to get your feet like mine," the woman said in a much more friendly voice. "We're about to enter the artificial gravity."

Everyone swung around and hung with their feet down as the woman hit a button and lift began to move, shoving them towards the ceiling for a moment before they started to feel the slightest pull beneath their feet and to the side.

Sarah hand walked down the wall while the others half fell onto each other as everyone tried to swing to one side as the car moved out on the rotational cylinder. Once they got their feet on the floor they found the transition wasn't too difficult and managed to stay standing as the gravity increased to about half a g, then the movement of the lift stopped and the doors opened to another short corridor with four more guards standing outside two large double doors.

The woman walked out first as if everything was routine and Sarah followed, passing by the guards who followed them with their eyes but did not so much as move a muscle otherwise, and entered the large bridge complex that held some 30 people working, or at least sitting at, different stations.

"Captain, our guests," the woman said, gesturing to the man wearing an elegant hat that matched the white and gold uniforms everyone wore.

"Owners," Sarah corrected, taking none of the slight. "Captain McFarlane, I am Lord Sarah Morten, Lord of Logistics, and that happens to be the branch of our command that this ship now falls under. That makes me your boss."

"So it does," he said evenly, accepting her handshake. "Welcome onboard."

"Thank you. To say this is anything less than impressive would be a disservice, but what I cannot ignore is the guards. They're not ours, so they'll have to be swapped out."

"It is traditional for legacy families to have their own shipboard guards to ward off attempts to..."

“...dispossess you,” she finished abruptly. “If you want to continue commanding this ship, you’ll do so by integrating yourself into House Morten, not by standing apart. We’re not renting this ship, Captain, we bought it in a massive investment for future operations, and being born here doesn’t give any of you veto power over our decisions.”

The Captain locked eyes with her for a moment, but he didn’t share the same acid-like stares Sarah was noticing from the others.

“With an asset as valuable as this, we can’t afford to take chances, Lord Morten. If we let our guard down, a known dropship seized by unknown parties could come onboard, kill the crew, and steal the ship with far less expense than what you paid for it. Having security is essential to prevent such hijackings from happening again.”

Sarah raised an eyebrow, not just in response to that last statement but to his diplomatic skills. “It’s been seized before?”

“72 years ago it was taken for nearly 4 months by mercenaries before the Federated Suns sent in overwhelming force and took it back. We made changes after that to prevent it from happening again so easily.”

“Who hired the mercs?”

“There was no proof, but those of the crew that survived were convinced it was the Draconis Combine.”

“Where did they expect to run? This ship is so damn slow it can’t escape anywhere.”

“It made one jump beyond the recharge network, then the mercenaries abandoned it just prior to being assaulted by a Federated Suns fleet. They had their own jumpship waiting and successfully fled, but not before 72 of the crew died. It was seen as a harassing attack at the time, and it delayed the grain shipments to 3 planets long enough that malnutrition and food riots broke out on two of them.”

Sarah grimaced, knowing too well what it meant to have food shipments not arrive at your local stores on time. Most people didn’t keep a reserve in their homes and lived day

to day expecting it to be there. Starvation was an ugly, painful way to die, but it always came with riots first as people figured they had to do something to survive...or just had no inhibitions left knowing that they would.

"Captain McFarlane," she said stiffly. "I don't want to dispossess you. My family was recently dispossessed of the planet Neubenn, which has a population of 3.2 *billion*," she said, emphasizing the magnitude of that number. "But as we rebuild out here, I cannot allow *anything* to be unsecured. We are technically an independent Periphery state in the making, and we will never let what happened to us by dictatorial fiat happen again. Nor will we let this ship be stolen from us by any party, including her incumbent crew. Do you understand me?"

"As you said, we're too slow to run away, and we take our jobs quite seriously. There needs to be security here so your asset isn't stolen or disrupted. I have no problem with you bringing your own security as long as they are professional enough to do the job without incident. All it would take is one well trained saboteur to get onboard to destroy the entire ship," he said, malice in his voice. "No chance of that happening can be allowed."

"The entire ship?" Rannel asked, taking a step forward beside Sarah. "How is that possible unless the cargo is explosive? The mass is far too great for a reactor overload to destroy more than a small piece of it."

"A quirk of the jump drives, I'm afraid. This ship is far too big to operate on one, so links a series of them in concert. If not properly aligned, they will tear the ship apart traveling to the same destination a few tenths of a second in difference, or to entirely different locations. There are many safeguards in place to prevent this from accidentally happening, but if one knew how to bypass them, the ship would rip itself apart without any need for explosions."

"That is fascinating..." Rannel said before catching herself, "and horrifying. Has that ever occurred on other ships?"

"Not since the Star League prototype tests. Every *Sequoia*-class jumpship has operated perfectly since they were

commissioned, and I intend to keep it that way on *Stars' Herald*."

"As do I," Sarah said firmly, "which is why I am here to do a thorough review of all ship's functions and procedures, changing them as necessary to fit within House Morten standards. I can assure you that after all the C-Bills we spent on this beauty, we're not messing around either."

"Then we understand one another," the Captain said with a nod. "How long do you require for your assessment before we start loading cargo?"

Sarah winced slightly. "There won't be any cargo loading for some time, Captain. Our operations out here are just beginning, and this ship's usefulness will come later. For now, your orders are to sit in place and wait until called for. If you like, there's a nice planet down there to give your people some shore leave...something I think you rarely have the luxury of."

"Do you mean to say you are sidelining this ship?" the XO said, standing to the left of the Captain so far away that Sarah didn't even register him as part of the conversation.

"Temporarily yes," she said, matching his stare.

"What sort of duties," the Captain interjected before the XO could respond, "do you see us having once the lull ends?"

"We're on the edge of the Periphery, Captain. Food is even scarcer out here than in the Inner Sphere. You'll be feeding planets again, but first we have to get our agricultural production online. I'm afraid your cargo hold will not be full of anything for a very long time, but down the road it will be vital to colonizing a new swath of stars for Humanity and bringing civilization to those who have little of it now."

"We're pushing the edge of the map?" he said, surprised.

"Stars that are not on the Federated Suns' map, at least. Cholis is our base of operations as we expand outward, but we're not planning on moving you around until we get some aerofighters to cover you. As it is, we don't have more than a

few armed dropships within our navy, but that's changing soon."

"I saw the aerofighters on the manifest."

"They need to be refurbished and competent pilots trained or recruited. We are moving quite fast in our buildup, Captain, but we are barely at the beginning of our endeavors. Patience is needed, and I am serious about taking the opportunity for some shore leave. Make use of the luxury while you have it."

"I will consider that, Lord Morten. But first, would you like a tour or to get down to brass tacs?"

Sarah thumbed over her shoulder to Rannel. "She needs a tour, but I want to start running numbers with you. I'm the one that has to keep this beast supplied or *you* starve up here."

"Steven," the Captain said, gesturing to his XO. "Take the others on the tour. I'll take Lord Morten to my cabin and we'll begin crunching numbers."

"Yes, sir," he said reluctantly as he motioned to Rannel and the others to follow him off to the side towards another bridge exit. The Captain let them get started, then inclined a hand in the direction of a simple door not too far away.

"My office," he said, leading the way as the rest of the bridge crew stood like stunned statues not fully contemplating what had just happened.

9

June 3, 2991

Federated Suns

Crusis March

Cholis

Morten Estate

Stephan sat dripping a rivulet of sweat from under his neurohelmet that he ignored rather than swipe away. He was so close this time, he couldn't afford any mistakes as he fired his Phoenix Hawk's large laser ahead of him into a turret, then a few steps later fired his pair of medium lasers at the same target, taking out the weak armor plates and knocking out its offensive capability right before slamming down on the foot pedals in the cockpit and activating the mech's jump jets.

The humanoid mech lifted off the ground like a stiff long jumper, flying into the air on the short term lifting power of 6 jets built into the mech's back that gave it enough clearance to hop over the wall the turret and its twin were standing before, with him taking fire from the other one that further weakened his right leg.

He cut off the jets when he passed the wall, falling back down some twenty meters before slamming on the jets again to soften the landing. His weakened leg held and after some scrambling to keep from falling over, he pressed on running forward as he glanced to the left at the railway track that was still empty.

I'm further ahead this time. Can't waste it.

A blast from the right hit his mech in the side of the head, but didn't penetrate. He knew immediately it was a volley of SRMs from a wheeled launching vehicle that always popped out from behind that factory building. He was expecting it, and

knew better than to stop and engage. Instead he saved his lasers for the pair of Bulldog tanks that would be over the next hill and simply ran as fast as his medium mech could take him.

He would have usually taken his Centurion, but in this simulation only the Phoenix Hawk was allowed, and the need for speed indicated why. He was chasing a train...or rather, trying to get ahead of it while simultaneously engaging numerous small enemies along his path, including a pair of light mechs. He'd damaged one but simply ran past them both, having known from previous failures this afternoon that engaging them to take them down took too long and the slow moving train would escape him. He had to run and gun, and he knew Vander has put those mechs there to distract away from the actual mission.

Eyes focused on the top of the sandy hill he was now climbing, he knew he had to fire as soon as he saw the tops of the tanks or he'd get hit with their combined fire almost immediately. This was his sixth attempt at this simulation, and on the previous one he had tried to go right and run a circle around them using his mech's usually good speed, but it had taken too long and he'd taken damage from another Bulldog hiding out that way.

There was no good or easy way to run this gauntlet...at least, not as fast as you needed to in order to beat the train to the bridge in order to capture it. Last time he had got there first and blown the bridge, but the train couldn't slam on its brakes fast enough and careened into the gorge, ending the mission in failure just as he thought he'd won.

He'd immediately reupped the nearly half hour long mission to try again, intent on getting through it this time, but his forward armor plates were already in the red, and if he wasn't careful this final pair of Bulldogs was going to end him.

He knew he had a slim window of opportunity, for the tanks didn't fire as quickly as they could have. At least the simulation didn't have their gunners as top notch experts waiting expectantly. He'd have a chance to fire first if he was quick...but suddenly a thought occurred to him. That was

probably also bait programmed into the simulation. Instead, as soon as he saw the tippy top of the first tank crest the hill, he hit his jump jets again and sent the mech flying forward some 160 meters, barely skimming over the ground.

Shots were fired and hit him...in the lower portion of his torso and his mech's pelvis, but not the weakest spot just below his head on his chest. The sudden upward movement had thrown them off, and as they cycled their weaponry to fire again, he came crashing down onto the left one and smashed it under his mech's feet.

He fell off intentionally, sliding to the left and shuffling his feet fast enough not to tip over. As soon as he got a solid foot on the sand he twisted and fired all three of his lasers into the other Bulldog as it backed up and tried to put some distance between them...then skidded to a halt as it exploded under the precision fire that was more or less a lucky shot as Stephan kept shuffling to get the mech's other foot off the first tank.

The shuffling didn't stop, for as his leg came off and hit the sand he saw the massive damage the impact had done to it. It wasn't broken off...thankfully...but he did now have a serious limp and his speed was cut by more than half.

"Damn it," he said, turning away from the smoking ruins and limping as fast as he could onward.

There were no more enemies ahead, he knew, just the bridge he had to get to first. It was some 600 meters ahead, and he was moving at maybe 40 kilometers per hour. That was better than the train's 25, so he should be able to do this if he had enough of a head start.

He angled over toward the tracks as the arch-like supports overtop the gorge bridge grew larger ahead of him, glancing at his rear camera to try and spot the train.

It was there, small, but never the less coming. He didn't have much time, but he was here sooner than last time.

Step...limp...step..limp. He didn't dare try his jump jets again, for he knew another heavy landing would probably snap the leg off, so he just kept creeping his way forward until his large laser finally got in range and fired it off immediately into

one of the bridge beams, pausing slightly to do so to make sure he didn't miss.

Step...limp...step...limp.

He fired his medium lasers when they got in range, then his large laser again as he continued to get closer. There wasn't much on the bridge to shoot itself, just the metal beams sitting atop the tracks like two flat mountains sketched out in pencil...and he was approaching from the side, which gave him two little vertical lines to shoot at, each only a tenth the width of a mech, but he wasn't missing. He couldn't afford to now, and his slower speed helped...but the limp didn't.

Step...limp...fire...step...limp...fire.

"Come on. Come on," he said, willing the bridge to go already, but he knew it would take a lot more damage than the tanks to take out. He had to break the supports on both sides.

He finally stopped as he got within 50 meters of it, making his aiming easier, and kept pouring shots in as the train was now gaining ground on him rather than the other way around.

With a shriek of groaning metal the far side finally gave way in a chain reaction of other beams bending and breaking as they couldn't stand the pressure on their own.

And the entire bridge disconnected from the near side of the gorge and fell into it...hanging from the far side as it merely bent rather than broke.

Stephan turned his mech to look at the approaching train, which was also screeching as it slammed on its brakes now that it saw the bridge was out. He almost wanted to get up on the tracks and pushing with his mech's hands to slow it down...but he didn't have to. He could see he'd gotten the bridge down sooner than before, and with a little over 100 meters to spare the train came to a halt short of the gorge and a voice spoke over the open comm.

"Alpha Sigma Train surrenders to mech force," a dejected engineer said, and while still knowing it was just a recording, it made Stephan yelp out a shout of joy just before

the screens blanked and the words MISSION ACCOMPLISHED flared in vibrant green letters before him.

"Finally!" he said, disconnecting from his cooling vest and neurohelmet and climbing out of the simulator to find Vander and Kevin clapping at the bottom of the ladder he had to be careful not to slip on given his hands and bare feet were covered in sweat.

When he got to the bottom he grabbed the waiting towel and water bottle that were sitting on a bench next to his shoes and clothes, wiping his face, arms, and legs off before getting to the badly needed water.

"That is too hard for trainees," he commented before cracking open the seal on the bottle and downing several long gulps.

"You sure about that," Kevin said with a smirk, pointing up to a large board that was displaying his score in flashing lights while other scores were above and below it.

"What's that?"

"It's what we're calling the Legacy Board," Vander said as Stephan spotted the numerical rankings next to names and scores. His had a 1098 next to his name, while the top mark...no wonder...was Grady McCloud, with a score of 3491.

"What the hell?" he said, trying to figure out how anyone could have gotten through that faster. "Are we getting points for the tanks and turrets too?"

"For a lot of things," Vander explained. "But take a look at numbers 15 and 13."

Stephan found himself at #17 out of some 32 names. But the ones Vander had just...

"Oh you've got to be kidding me," he said, putting his hands on his hips and feeling his shorts squish with sweat as he recognized the name of two of their current batch of trainees...and not the people he'd gotten in from Neubenn. These were the real trainees.

"They've had a few more runs at this than you have," Kevin admitted. "And they didn't pass in their first 6 tries. Took

Sanderson 22 to get it, then he gradually improved his score to this.”

“The Legacy Board is going to record your best score...forever,” Vander said, glancing at Stephan as he angrily chugged down more water after some six hours straight in the simulator. He’d decided he wasn’t going to take any breaks until he finished this...and was glad he finally did, because he didn’t know if he had another quality run in him right now.

“You’ve been thinking again,” Stephan said, eyeing him.

“We all have,” Kevin said, admitting to their little conspiracy. “We didn’t want to bring you in on it until we had something solid to go on.”

“I’ve been working on this since before we left Neubenn, in bits and pieces,” Vander said with a shrug. “But I’ve had so much free time since we’ve got here I’ve really dug into it.”

“Then he asked me for some help and things started rolling,” Kevin added.

“The Legacy Board is to give our trainees and active military another bonding factor. We’ve got this run down exactly as we like it, so there will be no more tweaks...ever. Even as our training equipment improves and weapon breakthroughs occur, we’re keeping this exactly the same as a benchmark to be used through various generations...and it’s the first of dozens we’re working on.”

“We’re calling it the Cataclysm of Frustration,” Kevin said with a devious smile. “Understand why now?”

“Intimately,” he said, finishing off the water bottle and grabbing for a second. “You really think this is going to be good for the trainees?”

“Do you want weak graduates?” Kevin scoffed.

“No, but this is harder than anything you put me through when I was one,” he said, looking over at the older Vander.

“On purpose, but it’s not just for the trainees. It’s for the active duty as well, and the retired,” he said, pointing up at the Legacy Board. “See number 9.”

Stephan glanced back up there and saw the name 'Vander Morten,' but his score wasn't that much better, only 1273. Only Grady was above 2,000 at this point.

Stephan still hung his head in shame, but just laughed it off. "How many tries?"

"I stopped counting," Vander admitted. "Been working on this for months to get that score. But I do have an advantage in that I helped design it, so I know what traps not to fall into and what to shoot for more points."

"Well that makes me feel better," the First Lord said, taking a seat on the bench as he further scrutinized the list of names and scores. "Arne?"

"Yes, I figured we'd give him a shot at it," Vander said as Stephan spied the name on the #22 spot with a score of 823. "He's only allowed to try once a day, plus he doesn't get anything for this in terms of pay or sentence reduction, but he still likes to work at it on his free time."

"Not bad. How low of a score can you get and still stop the train?"

"Stopping the train without hitting anything else gets you a score of 001. If you don't stop the train, you didn't complete the mission. It's something designed to teach the trainees that the mission isn't always engaging the enemy."

"Noted," Stephan said, downing more water before putting away the second bottle that was now only a third full. "You said you were creating more of these?"

"Yes."

"This is based off an existing sim, isn't it? It seems familiar."

"Loosely," Kevin answered. "We went back through all the stuff our House had created in the past and borrowed heavily...then jacked it up."

"No shit."

"The point is," Vander added, "to give all our mechwarriors, no matter the experience level, something to work on. A common mission that a trainee and a 40 year veteran will have in common, because it will be the exact same

mission always. Same for the others once we get them tuned properly. I don't know what the final number will be."

"I suggest," Stephan said, liking this idea now that he'd gotten through the rite of passage, "that you only have 5 or so available to the trainees. Then once they graduate they can get access to the others. That way it won't seem like a thing just for kids."

Kevin arched an eyebrow. "I thought you said it was too hard for the kids?"

Vander held up a hand. "I see what he means. We don't want this viewed as the old guys trying to relive the glory days. We want this designed for the old guys so they keep progressing forward, not mentally taking a step backward."

"Bingo."

Kevin huffed. "I don't know why I didn't think of that."

"You hang out with the kids so much you start to think like them," Stephan mocked until he saw a frown cross Vander's face. "What is it?"

"We've been working on more than just this. I, for one, actually like living here...with the entire Morten family in one place. Back on Neubenn, even though we could communicate with each other, some of us lived on different continents. Now we're all in the same spot and it feels like a family vacation. I've discussed this with the others, and we don't want to go back to the way it was before."

"And it would be even more problematic," Kevin added, "when we're on different planets."

Stephan nodded, finally slipping on a pair of pants as his sweat soaked shorts and T-shirt started to chill in the colder air of the warehouse where the simulators were held, with multiple others in operation behind and in front of him, evident with a subtle hum of rotating parts or an occasional vibrating jolt mimicking some sort of collision or missile barrage hitting them.

"I've been worried about that too. You have a plan?"

"A partial one," Vander said. "We need a separate training academy for the Morten family, and we need to all live

in one big house, or a complex with multiple wings. Nothing more spread out than we have here, but the term 'palace' comes to mind."

"I thought we hated those?"

"Not one for others to look at or visit. A private one. We have to be bound together by more than just a common name. We need common life experiences, and the children especially need to grow up together rather than just meeting each other later as teenagers. We need a nest to incubate our eggs, and rehabilitate our lost birds that have been out in the field too long."

"We can't use the duchy system," Kevin said pointedly.

"It will divide us...or at least, future generations."

"When we have separate planets, what else can we use?" Stephan asked.

"A modified version. When we get Polvice and Drymo colonized, were you planning on assigning a Duke to each?"

"A Baron, actually. They're just going to be little settlements."

"Right," Kevin said sarcastically. "Bad idea."

"What's the better one?"

"We make it a term, and we double up."

Stephan frowned until Vander filled in the blanks. "Two Barons, each with a 10 year term offset so that one moves out 5 years after one moves in. That gives continuity to the leadership while not keeping any of us permanently away from our home base...which is this estate now, but if we ever find a suitable capitol later, we'll relocate there."

"Nobody owns any planets," Kevin said, "and all our children grow up together in the same spot. The Barons will have to be old enough that their children are already grown up and wouldn't be going with them anyway."

Stephan rubbed his chin. "You're going to be stepping on toes when you start changing stuff the previous guy did."

"That's why nobody ever cycles back to the same position," Vander said, having thought this through with the other Lords thoroughly. "After their term, they come back to

home base for at least two years. If they want to go back out again, they'll be sent somewhere else. Nobody can get too possessive of a world that way."

"Make it three people, and lose the Baron title then. We need something new."

Kevin frowned. "What's the third?"

"A two year stint as sort of an apprentice," Stephan said, thinking on the go. "Or maybe even have two or three apprentices. The more of the family we can keep together the better, and 10 years is a long damn time to be away."

"That would be 5 sets of new faces during that 10 years," Vander said, nodding his agreement. "And some of our family that would balk at 10 would be willing to go for 2, I think."

"What if it's just a moon? Do we sent another 4 or 5 of us there when we already have other family members on the planet?"

"I'd say rotate from the planet to the moon for the apprentices," Stephan added. "Here, let's just do this until we get formal names. A Duke runs a system with a 10 year term. His double is a Marquis that will become a Duke after 5 years when the other returns home. If there's a moon or second planet in the same system, it will have a Count on a 6 year stint. The apprentices will spend one year on the planet, the next year on the moon, or vice versa, and they will be referred to as Barons. Better names to be generated by Kevin later," he said, eyeing his older cousin. "Satisfactory?"

Kevin shrugged. "Sounds good, but if we end up with a lot of planets, we're going to need a lot more active Mortens," he said, eyeing the First Lord accusingly, "and you haven't added any yet."

"Not you too."

"Always me. You could at least put one on the board with a vassal," Kevin said, referring to the accepted practice of essentially hiring someone to give birth to offspring without any official or emotional relationship to the father.

"I'm busy," he said flatly. "Why don't you get Jenny to pump out another 6?"

"We've got the adoption protocol too," he deflected from talk of his wife, "which Aunt Helen just recently used."

"Technically I did that," Stephan said deadpan, referencing his mother forging his signature. "I just didn't realize I did it."

"Are we sure we're not going to have other noble families involved?"

Stephan cringed at Vander's question. "You're thinking ahead of me now, but I'm not sure I'd trust them. And if we're not owning planets individually, then we can't let other noble families do it either."

"And Cholis?" Kevin asked.

"Neighbors only," Stephan reiterated. "But I could see Harris's family working well with ours...if they kept close ties, which brings us back to Vander's idea of having everyone live together. No, we have to keep everything House Morten and make sure the glue holds us together or we'll end up just like the rest of the Inner Sphere after a few generations. If there are good people out there, even some good noble families, we can adopt them in. House Morten does not share power in...whatever we're going to call our realm. Do you guys have a working title for that yet?"

"Morten Protectorate," Kevin answered quickly, crushing any doubt that they wouldn't have one already thought up.

"Which kind of makes the point that it's our job to do the leading," Stephan agreed. "Don't make that official, but if nobody can come up with something better I'm happy with that. But we don't have anything to protect yet."

"Do you want someone assigned to the first construction teams, or are we just going with hires until we get established?" Vander asked, referencing the reconnaissance missions to both chosen planets that would be followed up immediately by work crews once they knew what was needed and where.

Stephan sighed. "You guys are making my head hurt."

"That's part of the big job," Vander half mocked.

The First Lord thought about it for a moment, then looked up at them both. "Do you really want to strand some of our family in prefab shelters on Drymo?"

"No," Vander said flatly.

"Then there's your answer."

"How about a Baron then...the new version?" Kevin asked. "Two year stints only until we get a good sized city built. It wouldn't be one of our younger members, as I think you were expecting the Barons to be, but one of us needs to be on each planet from the get go, don't you think?"

"So what, we draw straws?"

"Michael has already expressed some interest in getting involved in Drymo early," Vander noted, referring to his own son that was only 3 years younger than Stephan.

"I thought you just said no?"

"To prefab shelters. We need to build permanent ones immediately and let the work crews live off the dropships or what we can make livable in the existing buildings. And we need to construct the permanent ones underground with earthworks on top for both insulation and armor value. There will certainly be enough loose material once the miners start strip mining other locations, or even digging new shafts at the existing mine."

"Michael's idea?"

"Mostly. He's been working with Vichni on it. Get one proper living space set up, and we can spread out from there. I'm told the construction technique is already in our House's archives and easy to use. You just won't have any windows to look out of."

"Not that there's much to see anyway," Kevin added.

"So construction crews build cave number 1," Stephan said half serious, "then Michael goes in as our first ever Baron to run things for 2 years before cycling him back here?"

"And he could return later," Kevin added, "because he'd just be a Baron, which wouldn't count against him later being a Duke for 10 years if he really liked the planet."

"I'm going to have to strand a Company of mechwarriors with him."

"That, you might have to draw straws for," Vander said with a cringe. "But I agree. We can't have anything left unguarded, and a Lance might be enough for some raiders, but a Company at the minimum if the Red Baron is looking for some payback."

Stephan frowned, but he saw Kevin catch it too. "Should we have different colors of Baron?"

"One for each Lord," Kevin said, thinking hard. "But that would mean we'd need a lot more heirs for later."

"We'll need representatives in each system anyway," Vander said with a shrug. "I don't see why they shouldn't be Mortens as long as we have enough. And each Duke will essentially be a temporary First Lord in their system, so that would leave us with 7 different colors of Barons."

"We'd have to stick with Baron though and not some other name," Kevin said with a cringe.

"A bit of humor creates a unifying factor," Stephan said, quoting his grandfather Leon Morten, "while a lot creates chaos. Adding the colors to the Barons changes the title enough to suit me. So let's keep it and maybe work on the others."

"So what would Michael be then?" Vander asked.

"He's working with Vichni already, so whatever color we have for Natural Resources."

"Yellow," Kevin decided. "Red has to be for the military."

"No," Vander said firmly. "No Red Baron at all. Ignore that color, but claim the others. I want Gray to match the color of our mechs."

"Our mechs are gray?" Stephan asked.

"Oh, that's right," Kevin said sheepishly. "We were also discussing new colors for the Morten Protectorate. We thought

the background color should be gray...didn't come to a consensus on the main ones."

"How much planning have you guys been doing without me?"

"You said you were busy," his uncle mocked with a smirk.

"Mutinous scallywags," Stephan said, pulling on his shoes. "You're lucky I like you guys."

"Sarah's idea," Kevin deflected. "Take it up with her."

"Oh sure, *all* her idea?" he said, standing up after quickly tying the laces.

"Mostly," he amended.

"House Morten has always been blue and yellow," Stephan noted, as if he was letting it drift into the past. "But that was when we were part of the Federated Suns, so yeah, let's change the colors...and steal the red from the Red Baron."

"Red and Gray then?" Kevin asked.

"No. Red and Silver with a backdrop of Gray. I'm sure you've been working on a symbol too, right?"

"Kind of hard when we don't have a fixed name yet, but it's been discussed."

"And?"

"If we're not using letters in the design, we were thinking of a shell. Like a turtle shell."

"Don't take what you can't hold," Vander quoted the family motto. "Turtles aren't predators, but they've got about the best defense one can imagine."

"There are predators that eat turtles, you know," Stephan pointed out.

"No defense is absolute," the Lord of Military Operations reminded him.

"True," Stephan said, grabbing his soaked towel and dumping it in a nearby hamper for the academy staff to retrieve later. "Outline the shell in silver, and put a large red 'M' in the center, stylized as if it was a ruby. All that on a gray circle backdrop."

"Done," Vander said with a clap of the hands. "Now I can start getting our mechs painted accordingly."

"Just no public announcements please. It's embarrassing declaring ourselves a Periphery state when we have no Periphery holdings yet."

Kevin held up his hands defensively. "Estate only. Do you really think we're talking to anyone else?"

"All it takes is one reporter picking up on one rumor in one bar..."

"Good thing we don't allow anybody to go to bars," Vander said tongue in cheek, knowing damn well that when some of their people left the Estate that's exactly where they went...but they had to be clear of even the smell of alcohol when they got back or they'd regret it immediately.

"Right..." Stephan said, taking a few steps to leave then turning back and pointing up at the Legacy Board. "I like that. Have all of our mechwarriors run through it until they pass. And start working on something similar for the aerospace fighters."

"What aerospace fighters?" Kevin asked sarcastically, knowing that they had recruits coming in from other systems but none had arrived yet.

"Exactly. Get ahead of it," the still sweaty mechwarrior said as he walked off.

Kevin blew out an exasperated breath and he saw Vander chuckling. "Yes, I am the most overworked Lord right now, thank you very much. Enjoy your vacation while you've got it."

"When those mechs and our men started arriving, mine was over too, but I admit you've still got it rougher, but all your hard work is up front. You get to cruise later."

"How do I skip ahead to later?"

"Your problem, not mine. See you at dinner."

"If I can break away from all the work I've got, you mean," Kevin yelled after him.

"As if you ever miss out on food," he said, not even bothering to turn around and look at him as the sound of the trainees or former militia in the simulators behind him was all

that was left to drown out the silence in the still echo-y chamber.

“Brainpower takes a lot of glucose,” he whispered, rubbing a hand over his abdomen and feeling the six pack beneath, just in case it had dissolved on him without his realizing it. He’d been spending so many days working on computer screens and munching snacks he was surprised he still had it.

“Back to work,” he said to himself. “Work, work, work...”

10

December 3, 2991

Federated Suns

Crusis March

Cholis

Morten Estate

Stephan looked over the reports on his office desk. The last of the hired survey teams had reported back, giving him a total of 103 newly scouted systems in the Morten Protectorate mapping database, but they hadn't deigned to deliver a briefing on the matter. Instead they'd just transmitted the data down to the planet and, after receiving it and asking a few follow up questions, the First Lord had released the last of their promised payment and they were now charging their jumpship's capacitors and batteries intending to get out of this system as fast as possible and onto their next employer.

The other Lords hadn't seen this yet, and he had been browsing through the results looking for any diamonds in the rough, when he'd come across a temperate planet previously not on the Federated Suns' charts that was inhabited by about 22,000 people the survey crew guessed.

And they were starving.

The Captain of the survey team had said they felt so bad for the people they left a few crates of supplies behind, but got off world as fast as they could for fear of a riot charging the jumpship and trying to get onboard. The settlers had nothing of value, the report detailed, and were largely agriculturally based with a defunct city, origin unknown, to the north of the farming settlements.

Something bad had happened there long ago and only the farmers seemed to have survived. The report indicated that

a merchant ship typically stopped by once every two or three years to sell them goods in exchange for grain, but this year the weather had turned horribly bad and the fields were soaked endlessly...making it impossible to plant, let alone grow crops in the swampy marsh that had resulted.

What little stockpiles the farmers had were almost gone, and it was another 8 months until the start of a very long growing season on a planet whose year was 2.1 times the standard. The farmers could typically get in 3 or 4 crops in the same fields before the mild winter arrived, but there was only time for one more crop this year, and the fields were still a mucky mess that the farmers were working anyway trying to get something in before their supplies ran out.

Those farmers that didn't have reserves were already dead or dying, with fighting going on over what food was left, and various families joining together for self-defense against those who had turned bandit to try and survive.

Stephan knew House Morten wasn't ready for this, but these people most likely wouldn't last the winter, and according to the survey team a fifth of the population was already dead.

"Shit," he whispered as he looked over every detail that had been cataloged, on both the people and the planet. It seemed to be a decent place to live, despite the numerous mountain ranges that ate up what would otherwise have been good large plains for growing grain, but nearly half the planet was land and the gravity was only .9g, which made it appear to be a good spot to put a colony.

Except for whoever had done so. Their city had failed and mostly been abandoned, and now most of the surviving farm communities were going to die unless someone did something fast.

Even in the Inner Sphere you'd see planets like this totally ignored even if they were next door to New Avalon. Apathy was rampant there, and it didn't get any better in the Periphery.

If he didn't do something, most likely no one else would.

A knock on his door brought his head up, then it opened on its own as Grady stepped in without waiting for permission.

Not like he needed it anyway. He was basically a part of the House already, just not in name...which he had adamantly claimed he did not want. He just wanted to sit in a mech and shoot things for the rest of his life, not jockey a desk...as Stephan was doing right now.

"More trouble?" Stephan asked, exasperated.

"Not exactly. What's wrong?"

"A nice little planet nobody knows about has about 20,000 starving farmers on it that will be dead in a matter of months unless someone intervenes. How's your day been?" he asked sarcastically.

"Not that bad. Do we have enough food to send them?"

"We'll have to buy it since we don't have our own agriculture yet, but with that small of a population I think we can squeeze Cholis for it. But I wasn't ready to start claiming inhabited planets yet. Particularly ones that bandits seem to frequent."

"You need me out there?" Grady asked, and Stephan was damn glad he and some 62 other mechwarriors from Neubenn were already here with mechs ready to use...for the most part.

"Yesterday."

"How spread out is the community?"

"Mostly farms, so it's stretched. There's one dead city a few people live in. Not much there, and the fields have been so wet they've turned into muck...hence the food shortage."

"Mechs handle muck just fine as long as it isn't more than a few feet deep. How many people do you want me to take?"

"I've only got one jumpship here...not counting the Sequoia...and this is a two jump journey so I can't send it without burning an extra month those people don't have. That means two dropships and whatever cargo we can get on the jumpship, which isn't much."

"Can we steal two of the Ovo's from the *Star's Herald*?"

"Ovo's?"

"Oversized Overlords," Grady explained. "It's what people have been calling them."

"I like that better than 'ticks,' but they have no weaponry on them. They're pure cargo ships maxed out for every ton they can carry."

"One and one then?"

Stephan nodded. "I'm just wishing we'd bought a *Merchant*-class with a modification to mount more than two...and I can't buy or rent any more jumpships in time. I already inquired of our survey team, but they said they don't do cargo work and I don't have any way to make them. We have to move now."

"If you can get an OVO loaded, I can get a Company put together fast enough. Are we dropping off supplies or intending to stay?"

"What happens if raiders come and steal the supplies a few weeks after you leave?"

Grady grimaced. "Right, laddie. I wasn't thinking."

"Which means I've also got to send construction crews and the whole damn show that I'm not set up to do yet. We're almost ready to launch the Drymo mission and now this hits me."

"Can you just divert those assets to the other planet?"

"No, I'm afraid not. A lot of it is mining gear and stuff to build habitats on a dry world underground."

"Mud," Grady reiterated. "How's that for irony?"

"If you ever find irony, shoot it for me. That's a standing order."

"So we just dive into this and I hold the planet while you figure out the other stuff?"

"While Sarah and I figure out the other stuff. But we've got to get the first shipment of food there fast."

"No problem on my end. I'll get enough volunteers without having to order it. We've lived off dropships before...or at least I have. Other than being cramped it's not that bad."

"We've got enough prefab shelter kits lying around that you'll have something more than that, but they'll have to come in the second run. You'll be alone on the planet without a jumpship."

"If you never see it, you hardly realize it be there anyway. Not a problem."

"Three days, four tops," Stephan said, knowing that's how long it would take one of the 'Ovo's' to get down here...and hopefully with supply trucks waiting to load it up if Sarah could work her magic with the Brinestorm merchants.

"Consider it done," he said with a nod as his beard bobbed slightly with the movement. "However, before you get moving on this, there is another matter at hand."

Stephan's eyes narrowed. "What?"

"Arne is about to reach his quota of weeks served."

"Already?"

"Yeah, the laddie is a little eager beaver. I asked him where he wanted to go afterwards, and he said he wanted to know if there was some employment with us available. He didn't care if it was grunge work, he just wants to stay. Go figure that."

"What do you think?"

"I think you should have a talk with him and figure it out yourself," Grady deflected. "I'm not suggesting it, and I'm not nixing it. I haven't seen any red flags personally, but he is a bandit after all."

"Give me an hour to get Sarah up to speed, then I'll meet you at his quarters...or is he in the simulators?"

"He'll be in his quarters by now. It's almost dinner time."

Stephan looked at the clock, belatedly realizing he'd been staring at these reports for three hours, then stood up and rushed out, carrying the one in question with him as he went to find Sarah, hoping she could pull off a small miracle.

Arne was eating his tray of hot food delivered by a guard when there was a knock on the door. He looked up

startled, because that had never happened before. There was always a knock at assigned times, for he'd never gotten a visitor and his schedule had never altered so much as five minutes.

The knock repeated again and he hurried to the door, not wanting to piss off whoever it was. He undid the bolt lock and opened it up to see the Mech Commander Gradir McCloud standing there with a stern look on his face.

"Yes sir?" Arne asked.

"You have company," he said, motioning Arne back as Security Chief Roger Penstrife followed him into the small living room, followed closely by First Lord Morten himself.

Arne Keev glanced around at the not so tidy quarters. "If I'd known I would have cleaned up first," he apologized.

"I've seen worse," Stephan said, pointing to the kitchen table. "Sit."

Stephan sat down opposite him while the other two men stood. Roger at his side with Grady walking around behind Arne and leaning against a wall so he could watch all three of them.

"Why do you want to stay?" the First Lord asked bluntly.

Arne had been expecting someone to ask him that, just not the head of House Morten.

"This is the most professional outfit I've ever seen. Even under house arrest you've given me better quarters than any of my former employers. Frankly, I don't want to go back to being a mercenary. I'd rather sweep floors here, if nothing else."

"You'd rather sweep my floors than pilot a mech again?"

"No, that's not what I meant. I don't have a mech anymore, and I don't think anybody is going to hire me to pilot theirs with a long list of more qualified candidates ahead of me. When my Centurion got trashed, that was the end of it. So all things being equal, I'd rather sweep floors in a place like this than live a less comfortable life elsewhere doing something I hated doing. At least here the location is good."

"And the simulator work?"

"I'd be happy to keep on doing it, if that's what you wanted of me."

"Better than sweeping floors?"

"Hell yes...sir."

"But you're still not willing to divulge information about the Red Baron?"

Keev tightened up so much it looked like his face was going to pop a blood vessel. "I mean no disrespect to you, sir, but I cannot betray a former employer. If there's one thing I have left it's that scrap of honor. I can't give it away. And if you become my new employer, I'd show you the same loyalty, sir."

"Then let's talk hypothetical, Arne. Say the Red Baron comes back here, and half of my mechwarriors are down sick and can't pilot, so I put some of the trainees and you into a mech to fill the slots. What happens then when it becomes current employer versus former employer? Where do your loyalties lie?"

"I said former for a reason, sir. When I was left here, my employment ended. I owe him nothing but my silence on his secrets. If I were to face off against him in one of your mechs, I'd do my damnest to kill him."

"Why?"

"My current employer takes priority, sir."

"But why kill him? Why not just defeat him or drive him off? Do you have something against him?"

"A great deal that I can't speak of, sir. But it's safe to say I never liked the man. I was just in it for the money."

Stephan's eyes glanced up to Grady, who just shrugged silently.

"Mr. Keev," Stephan said icily, forgoing his first name. "I'm about to give you a single shot at redemption. Waste it, and I'll boot you out the door so hard you won't feel the ground until you hit New Avalon. Is that clear?"

"Yes sir...I mean, no sir. I mean...what do you mean 'redemption?'"

"I have grunge work that needs done, and I'd like to spare my experienced warriors some of it if I can. I'm sending a

heavy Company of mechs plus two scouts to an uninhabited planet. It's got a breathable atmosphere but no water in it, so you have to wear breath masks or you'll quickly dehydrate. It's not a nice place to be, and you'll have to live off dropships until the construction crews get something suitable built for habitation, but it'll put you back in the cockpit of a mech again. Bad duty, but still duty. Interested?"

Keev stood up so fast and saluted he nearly knocked his chair over. "Wholeheartedly, sir. I won't let you down."

"I haven't even mentioned pay yet."

"I don't care if you pay me or not if I can get back in a mech again."

"Given how much this expedition is costing, I might hold you to that," Stephan said, standing up and gently returning the salute. "Welcome to the House Morten mech corps. You can take your meals with the others from now on, but Roger is going to show you where you're permitted to go and where you're not. We won't have a guard on you anymore, and if you wander where you're not supposed to be even once you're out. So don't go exploring."

"I won't, sir. I promise."

"I leave him in your hands," Stephan said as he glanced to Roger and walked out, with Grady staying behind to further help with the quick indoctrination lessons as he was now under his command.

Keev didn't waste time wondering what was going on. He had a chance to pilot a mech again! So he just dove in head first and didn't look back, listening and nodding and making sure to put to memory everything both of them said.

Tomorrow morning he wouldn't be in the simulators. He'd be tested in an actual Phoenix Hawk, weapons deactivated, and put through some maneuvering workouts on the trails here. Within a month he'd be on another planet helping to provide security for a colonization construction effort.

His entire universe had just flipped upside down. He just hoped he could land on his feet, especially after Grady said no alcohol was allowed for mechwarriors.

Being a mechwarrior trumps getting drunk any day...and I'm already sober. I just have to make sure I stay that way if someone puts a beer in front of me. But if I can't do that I don't deserve a mech again. Their mech, their rules.

But I'm back to being someone again, not just another spec in a crowd of millions of nobodies. And with this lot, I'm not just somebody, I'm a respectable somebody. Now that's a first. A noble family's personal militia. The pay must really suck.

As he'd told First Lord Morten, he didn't really care about that. Being in a mech was all that mattered. And being in a mech alongside others who he didn't have to worry about shooting in the back on purpose was going to be a luxury.

Grunge work? Hardly. This was paradise.

And even after Commander Grady and the Security Chief left, he still couldn't believe what had just happened.

Three days later...

"It's always like this," a tech said as he pulled a large cubical crate containing the Vtol pilot's gear on a motorized dolly across the tarmac towards the largest *Overlord*-class dropship Jasmine had ever seen. "People think it's all fun and games, endless training, no action...then bam!" he yelled, clapping a free hand on the side of the crate. "The action finds you and the Mortens don't waste any time chasing it."

"You've been with them a long time?" Jasmine Targen asked as she paced the tech on the long walk towards the massive egg-shaped dropship while a smaller *Union*-class was being loaded with mechs on a nearby pad.

"Forty two years," he said with pride. "I was left behind when they were kicked off Neubenn by that Davion ass hole, but they found a way to get us here...those that wanted to come. So I'm back at it again and loving every second I'm away from those damn Derrens. They're fucking ruining our old

planet, you know? They're not even wasting any time at it. Fired me and a bunch of the guys as soon as they had an excuse. Apparently our salaries cost too much. Irony has it, if they hadn't, I wouldn't have ended up here, so, sometimes trouble is a blessing I guess."

"I hope you're right about that," the Vtol pilot said, having been recruited off Chirikof at the promise of triple the pay she'd been getting there, but getting to Cholis only two weeks ago. A few simulator runs in that she was told she'd have to prove herself on to get active duty...and now she was being thrown into it before she'd even begun to pass their tests due to some emergency.

"Don't worry, lady. The Morten's never intentionally throw you into something expecting to lose people. They're careful that way, but when they see an opportunity to act they don't hold back. I just hope you've brought enough skills with you. I didn't even know we had any Vtols until the loading orders came."

"There are only six pilots in the training program, but I already know how to fly. I've been doing it for 18 years."

"Probably why they hired you then. Good timing, I guess."

"Yeah," she said, glancing back over her shoulder at an odd sound. A weird type of crane she'd never seen before, driving on some 8 wheels, had just risen up onto the pad carrying one of their helicopters in a semi-open crate. The rotors were off and stashed inside, along with what looked like padding at all the key points. "Why are our birds disassembled and boxed up?"

"Can't help it. We're got orders to load as many food crates as possible. Even one extra could save the lives of a small village for a week."

"What do you know about the mission? They didn't tell us jack squat."

"Starving planet, House Morten to the rescue...some things never change."

"They've done this before?"

"All the damn time, though this is the biggest rush job I've ever seen. Then again, we're all short staffed here. It takes times to build up a work force from scratch, you know."

"No I don't. I was just told the pay was good. I have no idea what's going on out here."

The tech smiled back at her. "Empire-building. House Morten has got a commission from the First Prince to come out to the Periphery and start claiming worlds for themselves...all independent like. You've signed on to a Periphery nation, believe it or not."

"How many planets do they have?" she asked, not really caring so long as the pay was good and she didn't get any shit duties...like being a bed warmer for a superior officer. That's the crap that had convinced her to go into the freelance market and get as far away from the Lyrans as possible.

"None. This is just their base of operations. Where you're going, might be the first. Don't know if this is a short rescue mission or they're moving in for keeps. I just know people are starving and you're delivering the supplies."

"Delivering?" she asked. "I thought we'd be flying cover?"

"Your birds have been fitted with wenchers and drop racks. You're going to be cargo delivering too. I'd bet my month's salary on it," he said as they finally got to the ramp and skittered up the side as a low platform vehicle inched its way up beside them carrying a stack of meter-wide crates filled with emergency ration bars."

"Please tell me they left us some weapons?"

The tech smiled again. "Always. The Mortens love weapons. They're just kinda particular about when you use them. But you always got em."

"Good," she said, following the tech to a lift on the side of the massive bay where a mountain of crates already existed...along with two more Vtols in crates, stacked up on top of each other. "You weren't kidding about tight packing."

"I never kid about my work," he said, pulling her gear crate onto the lift along with her and rising up slowly to the height of a catwalk that ringed the bay.

"Where are we going?"

"I'm taking you to your quarters, and your gear has to go with you," he said apologetically.

"Tight packing," she repeated, not looking forward to this dropship trip. "Do I report to someone or just go along for the ride?"

"Ops officer, name's Carrensky. He'll find you shortly. House Morten is a tidy lot. We don't lose track of people or cargo. You'll like it here...if you're not one of the blood thirsty types. They don't last long here."

"Why not?"

"The Mortens don't allow gratuitous killing. They're more the prisoner taking type."

"Well that's good to hear," she said, memories of missiles firing down on crowds flashing into her mind and then banished immediately. She'd put the past behind her and it needed to stay there.

"Here you are," he said, finding a crew compartment door that opened up into what looked like a barracks...packed tight with bunks and storage crates.

"Are you sure there's room?" she asked skeptically.

"You're the last in here, but there's room," he said, expertly maneuvering the dolly inside and finding a small space underneath the remaining open bunk to slip it under. A bunk that you had to use a short ladder to mount...though in zero g that wouldn't matter, but if they were going to pull more than 1 g getting out to the jump point, it could matter greatly with a misstep, fall, and broken bones.

"Gotta go, lady. Nice meeting you...and good luck."

"Thank you," she said, eyeing the other pilots she'd met before, all of them Vtol. She hadn't seen any aerospace pilots yet, or their fighters. Then again, they couldn't carry cargo while the Vtols could.

“The things I do for a paycheck,” she muttered, climbing up on the bunk and deciding to sit down and wait until this Carrensky found her...

5 days later...

The *Gamma Strider* came into the unnamed system around the second star’s Nadir jump point. It was a binary system, meaning two stars in the center that orbited around one another...which also meant 4 jump points to work with rather than two, and the ship’s Captain had chosen the larger of the pair, giving them more room to enter. As was customary, they emerged dead center in the zone, then allowed the jumpship to begin drifting down towards the star ever so slowly to move them out of the center in case another ship would arrive.

While it was unlikely that two ships would emerge in the exact same point, it had happened before, so prudence had you entered at the center then migrated towards the edges...though they could have come out at any point within the jump point zone. Targeting the exact location from lightyears away was not for the light-hearted, but hitting the exact center was the easiest jump possible. Two ships jumping in tandem was harder, because they had to NOT hit the center. A whole fleet jumping simultaneously was virtually unheard of except in Star League legend. Normally they’d come in one or two at a time, then drift away from center, clearing it for the next group to arrive a set number of minutes later.

And since they weren’t arriving with any orbital speed, the easiest way to clear the center was to just let the star’s gravity pull you rather than use the thrust engines to push you further away.

As it was, there was no arrival incident here, nor the previous system they’d entered mere hours before. Thanks to the batteries on the jump ship, they could actually make two jumps in sequence...something the Sequoias could not do...and

it had gotten the *Gamma Strider* here a grand total of 3 hours and 22 minutes after it had left Cholis.

The two dropships immediately disconnected and began thrusting towards the distant planet at 1.4 g...which was unusual for a Morten mission, but every day they could shave off the otherwise 13 day trip at 1 g thrust could save some more lives. So the crews had to suffer through the extra gravity created by the constant thrust, but the exchange was they'd be in space for almost 4 days less time.

Pushing the Human body beyond the norm was damaging, and while some missions for other Houses might see them pushing 2g...or even higher for some truly fanatical people...House Morten protocol was to keep it at or near 1g at all times.

But this was a time dependent emergency, so they were pushing the envelope a little...but wise enough not to push it too much.

Grady, riding in the *Golden Pearl*, was able to get some recent surface scans during the last day, with nothing to note of difference compared to the survey team scans. He chose an area of slightly higher elevation to the south of the center of the populated area, but a little north of the southernmost village. Most of the terrain was covered by farms, some small, some plantation-sized, and by the time the dropships had begun their descent into the atmosphere another front line had passed through, obscuring the surface with more clouds and more rain.

The dropships pushed through it easily enough, though he was sure he heard at least two lightning strikes on the hull that probably did armor damage, but everything inside was insulated so there was no loss of power or engine disruption. He stayed on the bridge as they set down on a hilltop that had been cleared of trees by farmers long ago...and in fact there was one house and barn a few hundred meters off. No doubt the occupants...if they still lived...were scared shitless as the two dropships came down on jets of fire that created steam clouds in the last few meters as they vaporized the water standing in a few small puddles on the hilltop.

Grady felt the ship list to the side as it landed, but the gear immediately compensated and evened it out. The hill's incline was gradual enough for the adjustment to happen, and he guessed the mud thickness up here would be less than elsewhere. He was glad he'd guessed right, for after that little adjustment the dropship held firm as the engines fully cut out.

It was night outside, and large flood lights illuminated the field they stood in...all of which was mud, no plants to speak of, but there was a small light on in the farm house, so somebody was apparently here.

"Start the unloading," he ordered the Captain. "Some of these people may not have many hours left in them, and we're not waiting til morning."

The next day, well past midday, Jared Simol Franson woke up from a nap in his rocking chair as an odd sound struck him. Malnourished and rationing what little food he had left, the 72 year old barely craned his neck up, not wanting to waste the energy checking on something that would be other than robbers. His livestock had already been stolen and killed, leaving him with only a cellar of beef jerky and some potatoes. The village shop had run out of food some two months ago, and his neighbors were stealing everything in sight to try and stay alive.

One of them lay dead out in his yard. He'd shot the kid when he'd tried breaking into his house, but he was too weak to do anything with the body other than drag it away from the broken window. But when Jared heard the sound of machines, he pried himself up out of the chair, dizziness forcing him to hold still for a few moments to get his balance, then he grabbed his shotgun and slowly walked to the door, opening it with stiff joints that ached more each day, and poked his head outside behind the barrel of his weapon.

He couldn't see anything on the road, but soon he realized the sound was coming from the air. And as if a huge bird passed over the treetops to the south, a helicopter like he hadn't seen since immigrating here came up over his house and

hovered there, blowing wind down that scattered what little hair he had left.

Jared had no idea who they were, but if they were going to assault his house, at least he'd die fighting. Maybe that'd be better than waiting until his food finally ran out.

The helicopter...which many people just referred to as a Vtol, but was actually a specific type of 'Vertical Take Off and Landing' vehicle...hovered in place, nearby the single large tree near his house, with his barren fields spread all around as a light rain continued to come down and soak them. But as he looked up, ready to take a shot back but not going to waste ammunition at this range if he could help it, he saw a side door open up and something was dropped out.

It was a small box with a parachute on it...which did little more than to slow it's fall...before it crashed down into the mud outside.

The door on the helicopter slammed shut and the Vtol turned and flew off to the northwest, causing Jared to wonder if he had just hallucinated the whole thing. *What the hell had just happened?*

He waited a long time for the sound to go away, and then waited even longer looking and listening for any of his neighbors. After a while, with nothing seeming to happen, he opened his door and walked out through the mud...taking small steps so he wouldn't slip again...and approached the box ready to shoot it if need be.

When he got up to it, he saw it was a crate with two latches on the front and an envelope taped to the top. He ignored that and undid one of the latches, finding it hurt his hands to do so, but he still had the strength left in them to pry it open...for it wasn't rusted shut like so many other things on his farm. When it made a loud pop he looked up and around, wondering if anyone had heard it. After a few minutes of gazing every which way, especially down the road, he went about popping open the second latch which freed the case top.

He lifted it up, shocked beyond all measure to see rows of ration bars sealed inside individual plastic wrappers next to a

line of bottles that contained colored water. Jared grabbed one of the bars, fiddling with the wrapper as his fingers were wet and it didn't want to tear open...so he just bit into the corner, tasting plastic and food so good he could have cried at once, but he didn't swallow. Instead he spit it into his hand and pulled the plastic off, then put the chunk of the ration bar back into his mouth and ate it.

His first instinct was to conserve, but he had a crate full of these bars, so he peeled off the now broken wrapper and nibbled away at it, feeling his stomach get so full he could barely finish it.

He had to get this crate inside the house *now* before someone else found it.

He shut the lid and lifted...to no avail. It was too damn heavy for his weak body. But as he tried to pull it, it moved a few inches. So he did that, over and over again, and halfway to the house the food must have finally got into his system, for his strength started to return and he could pull it a foot or two at a time, and continued to do so all the way through his front door, turning to shut and lock it after he hurried back to get his shot gun that he'd completely forgotten about.

He dropped into his rocking chair, not believing he'd had the strength to do that...but also not understanding where this had come from. These ration bars...he'd never seen them in a store...and who would be giving them to him? He didn't know anybody that would even give a damn.

His eyes returned to the crate that was now sitting beside his rocker, and he saw three sides of the envelope on top were taped. The fourth was held shut by a small metallic pin. It took him a moment to realize he had to bend the pin to open it, but when he did there were two pieces of paper inside. One had pictures, the other was a letter that read the following.

AS OF TODAY, HOUSE MORTEN IS CLAIMING DOMINION OVER THIS WORLD AND ITS POPULATION. WE WILL PROVIDE YOU WITH FOOD NOW, AND MUCH MORE LATER AS WE REBUILD THIS WORLD. WE DO NOT KNOW WHAT LED TO THIS

CATASTROPHE, AND ONLY RECENTLY DID WE EVEN LEARN THIS PLANET EXISTED.

YOU ARE NOW PART OF THE MORTEN PROTECTORATE, AND WHAT THAT MEANS IS NOT IMPORTANT AT THE MOMENT. GETTING EVERYONE FED IS. DO NOT FIGHT OVER THESE CRATES, SHARE THEM. THERE ARE MANY MORE COMING. WE HAVE FOOD ENOUGH FOR EVERYONE, AND WE WANT EVERY SINGLE PERSON STILL ALIVE TO BE REHABILITATED, BUT WE NEED HELP FINDING EVERYONE AND SPREADING THE WORD. IF YOU ARE ABLE TO HELP US WITH THIS TASK, PLEASE DO.

IF YOU ARE NOT, THEN KEEP YOURSELVES ALIVE UNTIL WE CAN ARRIVE THROUGH HONORABLE MEANS. A TRAGEDY LIKE THIS ONE BRINGS OUT THE WORST IN PEOPLE, AND WE DO NOT CARE WHAT HAS HAPPENED PREVIOUSLY. TODAY IS AN NEW DAY, AND THE ONLY COST FOR THESE RELIEF SUPPLIES IS THAT YOU FOREGO ANY VENGEANCE AGAINST YOUR FELLOW PEOPLE FOR WHAT MAY HAVE OCCURRED HERE. WE WANT EVERYONE TO LIVE, AND WE WILL JUDGE YOU ON HOW YOU BEHAVE TODAY GOING FORWARD. IF YOU WANT TO HATE OTHERS FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE FOR THINGS THAT HAVE HAPPENED, THEN DO SO, BUT DO NOT HARM THEM. EVERYONE IS UNDER OUR PROTECTION NOW, AND THESE FOOD SHIPMENTS SHOULD BE MORE VALUABLE TO YOU THAN YOUR VENGENACE.

IT WILL TAKE TIME FOR US TO TAKE FULL POSSESSION OF THE PLANET AND DEAL WITH ALL ITS PROBLEMS. FOR NOW, FOCUS ON THE FOOD AND HELPING EACH OTHER GET TO IT. THE ENCLOSED MAP SHOWS THE LOCATION OF OUR DROPSHIPS. HOT MEALS WILL BE WAITING FOR ANYONE WHO CAN ARRIVE THERE WHILE WE WILL CONTINUE TO DROP RELIEF CRATES TO THE PEOPLE WHO CANNOT TRAVEL.

PLEASE DO NOT SHOOT MY PEOPLE WHEN THEY ARRIVE TO DELIVER FOOD OR TAKE A CENSUS OF EVERYONE STILL ALIVE. THEY ARE FRIENDS HERE TO HELP YOU. IF YOU DO NOT BELIEVE THIS MESSAGE, THEN BELIEVE THE FOOD WE ARE GIVING YOU. FEAR, MISTRUST, AND DANGER ARE EVERYWHERE.

WE BRING THE POWER OF CIVILIZATION FROM OFFWORLD,
AND THAT POWER IS TO SAVE, REHABILITATED, AND UPLIFT.

THIS IS WHAT WE WILL DO HERE IN TIME. RIGHT NOW
JUST EAT AND HOLD ON. HELP IS ON THE WAY.

Paul Morten

**Lord of Economics Management For
House Morten and the Morten Protectorate**

Jared couldn't believe what he was reading. He had no idea who this Paul Morten was, or the Morten Protectorate, and right now he didn't care that they were here to probably steal his land. They'd just given him enough food to last for months.

He'd never expected anyone from offworld would come and help. The Taurian Concordat was so far away, he didn't think they'd ever help. Was this House Morten from there? Or was this Morten Protectorate another Periphery state?

Jared had no clue what was going on...but something *good* had finally happened. Whoever this new noble house was, they had his loyalty already. He didn't have very many years left of life in him anyway, and it looked like he wasn't going to end up starving to death now...which is more than he'd been hoping for, just trying to make it one more day at a time and hold onto what little he had.

He understood the warning in the message too. These Mortens didn't want people fighting over the new food or following up on vendettas. And as much as he'd like to end the entire Brady family for what they'd done to his wife, he wasn't going to do anything to offend the hand that was now feeding him.

And besides, vengeance wouldn't bring back the dead.

But if one of those bastards showed up at his door, he was going to shoot first. With any luck, he'd never see any of them again for however long he continued to live.

But he would live to see tomorrow. He could already feel it.

Jared decided to take the letter at its word and reached down to grab another ration bar...as well as one of the bottles. He opened it first and took a sip...finding it tasted like sugar, only better. He drank a quarter of it then put the cap back on, then nibbled on another ration bar for the next hour. His stomach had gotten so small it couldn't hold it all at once.

Then he drifted off to sleep in his rocking chair, and for the first time in a long time, he could actually dream again...as his shotgun hung across his lap, ready for action if need be to defend his new stash of food.

11

December 20, 2991

Periphery

Unknown Planet

Dropship site

Grady's Rifleman marched through the mud, grinding out a perimeter around the two dropships and the nearby farmhouse. He kept two mechs out and about at all times as people were walking or driving what few vehicles they had out to the three prefab structures House Morten had already set up at the base of the hill in one of the farmer's other fields...though he didn't object, for there was nothing but mud there as well, and the food he'd been given was well worth the inconvenience.

In one of those Quonset huts was a makeshift dining hall, with another one connected to it through a short umbilical that held the cooks and kitchen. Hot meals were being served nearly round the clock, and while the people couldn't take the food with them, many were making the pilgrimage daily with their families to fill up their stomachs.

The rain was gone today, with clear skies and a heat wave that made everything miserable with the moisture in the air. So far there had been no fighting here, and while Roger had sent some 40 of his security forces here to handle the feeding process, having two mechs out and walking about seemed to erode any chance of problems...as well as to indicate who was now in charge of the planet.

There were no other mechs here that he could tell, or anything more than some trucks or farm equipment that had some machine guns mounted on them. Nobody brought those close, for fear of upsetting the food bringers. Their jump ship

had already left after recharging, heading back to pick up two more dropships that would bring more prefab structures and food, but Paul Morten had come with Grady and was down there right now having a meeting with some of the larger land owners and what passed for a governor here. Most of whom looked quite healthy compared to the line of walking corpses that were coming to the landing zone.

The four Vtols they'd brought with them, flowing by pilots unknown to him that had arrived merely days before this mission had been executed, were still making runs out to far flung farms and villages, and their reserve of crates was diminishing fast...but he'd been told the Vtols were making second runs now, having found, marked, and delivered food to every location on the map that they could find.

The question was, how many mouths were there to actually feed and how long would what they have with them last, for there was nothing growing anywhere in the farms. The pilots had said the only fields with sprouts of green in them were currently underwater. The rains apparently would not stop, and the rivers here were beyond flood stage already, with those farms along them already destroyed, houses and fields alike.

Grady was glad he was just a mechwarrior. He envied Paul for his ability to handle such matters, but was glad his duties were limited to patrol and keeping possession of their new planet...which Paul had informed him would be called Turnix regardless of whatever name the locals used.

Which oddly the survey team had not been able to find out...

Paul Morten stood with his sandy blonde hair in stark contrast to his cape/jacket's deep black with red and silver trim as he raised a hand to settle down the 23 men assembled in folding chairs on the other side of a makeshift desk for him made out of a table, a thick canvas cloth covering it, and a somewhat more elegant backed chair...but this was as much field work as field work would ever get.

"I find it detestful," he said with a well-practiced command voice, "that you're bickering over the manner in which we are saving your lives. Your people out there are barely hanging onto life."

"They're fine now," one of the plantation owners by the name of Gomez said. "We're talking about the future. You can't just come in here and take over. We're members of the Taurian Concordat!"

"Are we?" another man said. "They never came to help us."

"Yes we are," Gomez reiterated. "And House Morten has no jurisdiction here to do any more than offer relief to the natural disaster we're undergoing."

"You ingrate!" someone else shouted, and Paul had to raise a hand again to get their attention.

"Explain something to me," he said, drawing the eyes of the few who wanted to keep arguing. "This is far away from any worlds known to be in the Taurian Concordat. What is the connection?"

"We're descended from their settlers," another man said calmly. "We're a colonial expansion."

"What ties do you have with them other than history?" Paul asked.

"We get one of their trade ships every few years," someone else scoffed.

"But why haven't they come to help you?" Paul pressed.

"Because we're unsanctioned," a booming voice said from the back row as a man with long white hair pulled back into a ponytail stood, with those around him immediately falling silent and Gomez glaring at him. "Our ancestors came out here far beyond the border to start their own world, but it was never officially made part of the Taurian Concordat."

"Damn you, Burt," Gomez all but snarled.

"We need the truth if we're going to forge a way forward with these people."

"What is your name?" Paul asked.

"I am Burt Zen, and I own a large farming complex to the northeast. The last time I saw mechs here were when bandits came and stole half my farming equipment. Can you put a stop to such things?"

"Easily."

"And what do we owe you for this?" he asked directly, all eyes turning to see Lord Morten's response.

"For the food...nothing. But the planet now belongs to us. All of it. We'll respect your property rights...so long as you don't lie and claim stuff you don't actually have a right to. We're not here to steal your land, but we do need you to make better use of it."

"For what purpose?" Burt said, eyes narrowing.

"We intend to vastly upgrade your planet. I don't know what happened to the ruined city, but we intend to build up this world far beyond what was here before."

"For what purpose?" he repeated in a civil tone.

"We're in the business of protecting and spreading civilization. Not just here, but to other planets as well. To do that, we're going to need agricultural exports so we can feed other starving planets. That..."

"You see!" another man said, standing up and shouting. "They're going to steal our crops for their own people!"

"Are you that dumb!" Paul yelled back, silencing everyone else. "You've got nothing to steal, and we're *giving* you food to keep you alive. If I wanted your land all I'd have to do is come back in a couple of years when you're all dead and take it then. We're here to help. Why can you not see that?"

"Because in our experience," Burt said while the other man remained standing, but was stammering as to what to say in response, "people don't help others without a motive. I assume there will be taxes?"

All eyes turned back to Paul, and most of them had fire behind those stares.

"My family learned long ago that taxation is something best left to the KISS method," he said, seeing no recognition of the acronym amongst the farmers. "It stands for 'Keep It Simple

Stupid,' so when it comes to taxes, unlike almost everyone else in the Inner Sphere and probably the Taurian Concordat as well, we have only one. A 5% revenue tax on businesses."

The older man's eyebrows raised. "Revenue? And not profit?"

"Revenue," Paul confirmed, seeing pure hate from some of their eyes despite the fact they were in fact saving their lives...or maybe not theirs so much as everyone else's. "Profit is very dicey as to the definition of it, and like I said, we keep it simple. However, we do not consider farmers to be businesses. Hence, we do not tax farmers."

Their eyes cooled somewhat, but suspicion was still running deep.

"You leave farmers completely untaxed?" Gomez asked.

Paul shrugged. "When you buy something from a merchant, the money you spend on it goes to them and they pay the tax. When their customers have more money because we're not taxing them, the merchants gets more sales...and then we get more tax because it's proportional. We use the taxes to defend the planet, build roads that are not made of dirt," he emphasized, given the mud strips that now crossed between the villages, "and a lot of other things that benefit everyone. You keep your land, you grow your crops, and we'll buy them from you if you want to sell at a fixed price. If you can get more for them elsewhere, you're free to do so. It'll be a free market, but one dominated by House Morten's purchasing power."

"What of a land tax?" Gomez asked.

"There will be none. Is there one currently?"

"There are no taxes currently," Burt said, a mix of pride and sorrow at that. "There's nobody to collect them, but there was previously a land tax."

"What happened?"

"War happened and our city was caught up in it. There wasn't much of a government left afterwards, and everything of value was carted off world by the victors. Endely was under the protection of one warlord when it began, and the others picked

it dry afterwards. I was 12 when it started. The farmers are the only ones who could survive afterward, and we've been picked at ever since, barely keeping enough food away from the bandits to feed everyone. Now this damn flooding won't stop and you show up. Don't mistake the ingratitude here. We are all very glad to see the food coming in. But we can't trust in good fortune. You must have some other agenda in play."

Paul reached down and pulled out a small bag from behind the table. It was barely a pouch, and he opened it, spilling a white grain on the covered tabletop.

"This is called Vristil. Ever heard of it?"

Heads that were glued to the grain shook in the negative.

"It prefers wet, even flooded ground so long as the water isn't too deep. If my information is right, you've got one more growing season left before winter sets in. As soon as your work crews get their strength back, I want you to start planting immediately. By hand if necessary. I've got another dropship coming soon with large amounts of this seed on it, but I've got some here now that can be planted as soon as you can get it out to your muddy fields."

"It grows in floods?" Gomez said, a screwy look on his face.

"It likes water. Lots of it, and it naturally pops up around lake shores. The Vristil is one of the ingredients in the food we are serving you in the other building. If you don't want to eat it yourself, we'll buy whatever you can grow before winter hits. After winter is over...and hopefully this rain is gone, we'll need you to start growing a long list of different grains, fruits, and vegetables. Importing this stuff from other planets is expensive, and the more of it we can grow here the better."

"And if the rains do not stop?" Burt asked.

"We work the problem," Paul stated flatly, not allowing any pessimism in his own voice. "Your fields can be terraced and drained to minimize the flooding in most locations. New ones can be carved out of the forests on higher elevation. Long term

work can be done to make the rain less of a problem. Do you expect it to never go away again?"

"At this point we don't know what to expect. This has never happened before in the history of this colony."

"We'll make it work, even if we have to grow some crops indoors."

"Indoors!" Gomez said with an angry laugh that others mimicked.

Paul stared right at him, but the disrespect in his mannerisms wouldn't wash away.

"Previous to our current mission, House Morten ran a world called Neubenn in the Federated Suns. It has a population of 3.2 billion people, and I can assure you we had many fields that were entirely indoors to grow special crops that would not match the outside environment. It is not a new practice, even if you've never personally heard of it. I imagine there are going to be a great many changes here that most of you have never conceived of before...but those changes are happening whether you like it or not. You can either fight us on this and lose...and in that case we may very well take your land...or you can say 'thank you' for saving your lives and work with us, getting rich in the process. Your choice."

"I thought you said you'd respect property rights," Burt reminded him darkly.

"We do...until someone starts shooting at my people. That hasn't happened yet, but if it does don't expect us to just shrug it off. We don't kill people to set an example. We don't torture either. But if any of you start misbehaving, I *will* take your land as punishment. We don't plan on building any prisons right now when we've got a long list of other priorities. And if your land is all you care about, then that's what I'm holding as collateral to ensure your good behavior."

"What do you consider good behavior?" Burt asked, his tone no longer friendly.

"Don't kill, don't blow stuff up, don't steal, don't rape, don't do all the long list of things the bandits usually would. You

can speak whatever words you want, I don't care. Just don't harm people. Is that simple enough?"

"It is...until there's a problem and a situation that was never mentioned that sees us lose our land."

"No rebellions, no murders, no theft, no beatings. Let's start with those four."

"And if one of my men does such things without my permission?"

"Turn him over to us."

"For execution?"

"House Morten does not execute prisoners. Ever."

"I still see plenty of wiggle room for you to come up with a reason to steal our land. You claim we misbehaved and just take it."

"If you want to be paranoid, fine. Go back to your farms and ignore everything I've said. But those mechs out there...they give me the power to do pretty much whatever we damn well please. I come here trying to help you people, and you're inferring I'm the bad guy. Well, we're not and we're not going to entertain any ideas that we are. What we are is in full control of this planet and you will live by our rules whether you like it or not. Do so, and you will keep your land. I cannot make it any clearer than that. Those of you who want to complain and accuse," Paul said, pointing to the door, "get out. Those who want to start planting crops, remain. I will work only with those who are willing. Not those who want to sabotage our efforts."

"And if we don't want to work with you," Burt asked, "the food goes away?"

"The cafeteria is right next door and it's open to everyone. Even the ungrateful brats I see before me now. That will not change. Go grab something to eat on your way out."

"Thank you, but I prefer our local cuisine," the elderly man said, turning and walking across the mostly empty building. As he did, about half the others got up to leave as well.

Paul let them go, then turned his attention to the ones who remained.

“Planting needs to begin immediately,” he said. “I’m told there’s a 72 day growth period until you can harvest. Who has the ability to start tomorrow?”

Four days later...

Arne walked his Phoenix Hawk down the *Ebony Pearl’s* boarding ramp and onto the red/purple sand of Drymo for the first time, seeing the desolation and lack of terrain in all directions. He was on a big rock of a planet, and he could see why other mechwarriors didn’t want to be here...but for him, this was the only place he wanted to be.

He moved his mech away and started to get some distance, having been ordered to establish a perimeter at two kilometers out as more of the bigger dropships came down around her from the Sequoia that had brought them here to land in a zone some 5 kilometers long and three wide just to the north of the abandoned mine. Arne was to patrol in a box two kilometers longer than that on either side, giving him a lot off running room to do as another Phoenix Hawk under the control of Niles Shander came out behind him and headed the opposite direction.

The heavy mechs were staying put for the moment unless a threat was found, but there was nothing out here to be threatening and no other jumpships were in the system. They were alone here with nothing but a few old buildings at the mine to keep them company...but inside the big dropships were construction crews, a lot of them. He’d heard the scuttlebutt about them draining almost all of Cholis’s construction work force to aid House Morten’s own in the preliminary work here. He wasn’t sure exactly what they were building, but they wanted it built fast, hence the extra help. And with all the cargo capacity in the Sequoia, they could bring in as many people and work mechs as they wanted while Arne and the heavy mech Company kept them safe from what, he didn’t know, but if the Red Baron was looking for some payback and found out about

this mission, he'd be ready to stand alongside the others and stop him.

That said, he didn't even know where this place was other than that it was one jump away from Cholis. He knew it was called Drymo, but it didn't show on any map he'd ever seen, so he doubted the Red Baron would be able to get any of his spies to tell him where it was. And when a jumpship left a system, they had dozens, if not hundreds of stars in range they could potentially jump to. So without a location, you were essentially lost in a haystack and unable to track.

Which meant this assignment was going to be boring...but he was in the cockpit of a mech again, and that was exciting enough for him. He was interested to see what they were going to build here, and how fast they could get it done, and he had the best seat in the house for it as he cruised his Phoenix Hawk over the crushed stone pebbles, avoiding a small boulder here and there, and took in the vast emptiness of the planet after having been confined to a dropship for days.

"Hello Drymo, wherever you are. We're going to get along just fine, you, me, and this little kitty kat of a mech," he said, patting the control console where there were no buttons as he let out a long sigh of relief after all he'd been through over the previous year. Now he was back in a mech...even if it was a scout mech...with live weapons. He'd gone from enemy to trusted employee, and he wasn't going to give House Morten any reason to rethink that decision. He had an in here, and he wasn't going to waste it. Most people didn't get a first chance at a real life, let alone a second, and he wasn't going to screw his up.

And the fact that this planet was named Drymo after he'd gone a year without a single beer...well that irony just cemented in him the need to fully let go of the past and embrace the future. A sober one, apparently, but recently he hadn't been thinking it was that bad.

"Mech or alcohol? I choose mech," he said, deciding not to even look for a beer if he ever had the chance to. That was in the past now, and this planet's name would be a constant

reminder of that until his subconscious finally let it go. And let go of the mercenary life. He was legit now, and while he didn't really understand what that meant, it felt good regardless.

And the mechwarrior Company he was attached to was actually giving him a chance rather than snubbing him...or worse as others had done in some of the outfits he'd been in...and he didn't even own this Phoenix Hawk. But then again, none of them owned their rides either, and that probably had a lot to do with the attitude difference.

"House Morten for keeps then," he told himself and the planet stretching out before him on the viewscreens...which had the actual cockpit windows covered...but even that didn't bother him now. He could see well enough, and what he saw looked and felt like freedom.

The freedom only a mechwarrior could experience, riding a walking war machine around a world dependent on you for protection...or suffering from your predation. Arne guessed the latter was a part of the past now as well, and protector it was from this point forward.

Odd, but he didn't dislike the sound of that as much as he once had.

And the patch on his jacket shoulder made it official, with the emblem of the Morten Protectorate declaring to all exactly what their mission was...protection. 'Don't take what you can't hold' was their motto, he'd been told, and he liked being one of those that was charged to *hold* it against whatever may come.

The Phoenix Hawk stomped on, laying down the first step of footprints that he and Niles would be pounding into a trail over the coming days. Predators protecting prey rather than stalking it as they marked their territory.

Yes, it felt good to be back in the saddle...and to be part of a real team this time. One with a fucking huge jumpship the likes of which he'd never seen before in his life...

12

March 21, 2992

Periphery

Turnix

Dropship site

In the three months that Paul had been here, living off his quarters in the *Emerald Egg*, things had changed drastically. Their jumpship had gone and back four times now, delivering another 8 dropships, only one of which was an Ovo like the *Emerald Egg*. The rest were Unions, and rather than just bringing more food, they had brought a little bit of everything.

The farmers who had agreed to work with The Lord of Economics Management were right now in the process of harvesting their crops...which had grown magnificently well despite the continual rains that were now downgraded to a cold daily drizzle that wouldn't allow the land to fully dry out. Everything was still mud, and the techs had stopped trying to wash off the mechs' feet when they came back into the dropship bay. Now they just swept up the mud after it dried and left the coating on the gray war machines, knowing they'd get a new layer the next time they stepped outside.

But while they had been busy doing nothing but patrolling, Paul had been an eager beaver. Once the food shipments out to people who needed it were mostly done, he had survey teams going around and counting the people, getting names and locations (in lieu of addresses for many of the far flung farms) and coming up with a full census of 19,371 people. While it was possible there were some stragglers out in the old city that didn't want to found, he was confident that all the homes had been visited, and that had only been due to how small this colony was on a very big planet. All contained within a

radius of some 80 kilometers of the center, which was nothing more than a geographic point as the old city occupied the north and the survivors had spread out south of it.

Once he had a census to work with, his first act was to secure property rights, and that meant ferreting out whose claim was real and who was trying to claim their dead neighbor's land as their own. He didn't have too much trouble doing that, for these people were very poor liars when he had aerial surveillance to work with assessing building and field locations. As well as the fact that many of their neighbors would rat out each other when they did lie in order to find favor in their new overlord's eyes...or whatever other motivations they might have.

Regardless, Paul worked to create a database, then claimed all the dead people's land and buildings for House Morten...which infuriated some of the larger land holders who'd hoped to scoop them up for themselves. All told, he now held the rights to some 8% of the colony by land, and a whopping 23% of all the buildings in the villages...some of which didn't consist of more than 4 or 5 establishments.

He didn't have people to occupy them all, so he set guard patrols to check in occasionally to make sure there weren't squatters...and to drive them off if there were. Eventually he chose 7 of the 'villages' to establish free cafeterias in using prefab structures, and it was to those all the foot traffic would come, because they were 'all you can eat' but you couldn't carry any out with you. If you wanted to establish a stockpile, you had to make your case to Paul, who was not doing weekly drops by chopper anymore except on special occasions.

He had inherited a grocery store in one of the more central villages, then bought up the other surrounding buildings from the owners...making them rich in the process to quell problems...then demolished the whole block within a day using construction mechs and debris trucks. In that new area he set up prefab buildings of numerous sizes and shapes, connected

most together with prefab tunnels, and got the first Morten store up and running within 6 weeks of arrival.

He knew this was going to be another money pit, especially when he announced that everyone on the census would be receiving a weekly stipend of MPs to spend at the store, which was the Morten Protectorate's new currency that they'd luckily been working on prior to this mess. They never officially said what it stood for, but since the letters matched their new Periphery state's name it just seemed natural. He knew it was more to do with the 'Morten Pound' than anything, but leaving it unsaid let people think what they'd like. Eventually it would just become known as the two letters and the reason wouldn't matter. But coming from the Federated Suns whose currency was the Pound, it was also a reminder to those in the know.

Whatever friendly relations they might or might not have with the Federated Suns, it had kicked them out of their home and Paul would never forgive them for that. So whatever the Federated Suns could do, House Morten could do better. They had their Pound, and now Paul and his family had theirs...and he was intent, in the long term, to make it the dominant currency of the Periphery, and a hedge for people in the Inner Sphere when disaster struck the Federated Suns and their Pound tanked.

Economic power was every bit as important as military power, and if they were going to survive out here it was going to be through both, and this was the first place they were introducing the MP...especially since the locals had been using tin tokens and otherwise bartering for everything. They didn't even have any Taurian money with them anymore, and apparently the merchant traders would only credit them some in exchange for grain and some woodworking products, particularly rustic furniture, that they could jack up the price on later as having come from 'remote locations' for the mystery appeal.

By giving everyone a stipend...and not a big one, just 20 MPs, which was about the equivalent of 4 C-Bills and far smaller

than the Federated Suns Pound...they would bring people from all across the widespread colony to spend the free money on supplies not available here, like toothbrushes, certain types of clothing, luxury items, anything plastic since the local blacksmiths were the closest thing they had to factories. Medical supplies, small kits anyway, were quite popular, but the point was to get some elements of civilization into these people's hands while drawing them to a single store that would establish the value of the MP...then Paul could pay people with it, just as he was doing with the first few bushels of the Vristil harvest.

They would then spend or save those to spend later at the store, or use to pay workers. A legitimate currency was essential for even a basic economy to form, and one was badly needed here.

Paul brought in offworlders, many hired in only the past few months and with only the barest of training in Kevin's academy, to run the store, for they had previous work experience doing so on Cholis or elsewhere. Also, the local population...after going through such horrific conditions...were not mentally stable enough to fill these posts. Seeing friends and family killed...and in some cases eaten...was not something you shook off quickly, and Paul needed to give these people stability. Seeing and interacting with people who had not gone through, or participated in, the horrors was the way to do that. He could integrate the locals into the workforce at a slower rate, doing the more menial jobs and working their way up.

He couldn't trust them to run anything right now, and knew disaster would loom if he tried.

Thankfully he'd been able to bring a treasure chest of physical MPs with him, already having been minted as an experiment on Cholis. They were basic iron alloys molded into square coins with the 'MP' in the turtle shell on the front, and denomination and serial number on the back. Each coin had a different number, so it wouldn't be painfully easy to make a cast and copy them. A layering system of alloys and a few other safety measures were added so it would be possible to spot bad

fakes later, but the metal wasn't worth enough on its own to be melted down and resold, so at least that wasn't a problem.

Right now they had a 1MP, 2MP, 5MP, 25MP, and a 100MP. Any exchanges larger than that could be handled with a handshake at this point, so Paul didn't request anything bigger to be made. He just needed more of these as fast as possible, and on the last dropship to arrive he'd gotten a shipping crate full of them, so he didn't have to worry about running out as more of the harvest began to come in.

Food items were continuing to arrive as well, but less ration bars and more ingredients, both of which were being sold in the store now, and when one of the locals approached him about opening up a bakery to make some items that were not being sold in the store or offered for free in the cafeterias, he'd asked her if she thought people would buy it when they could eat here for free.

She'd said people were so scared of starving again that they were smuggling small handfuls of food out of the cafeterias in their pockets, because most of them couldn't buy very much in the store without more MPs. But they could buy a loaf of bread and take it home with them, or some muffins or cookies or other short range food that would last a week or so, giving them some peace of mind instead of wondering whether their next meal would be there in town or not. Also, people eating only one meal a day or having to walk in twice or more, was not working well for many.

Paul had been giving ration bar crates to some of those people, but he agreed to help the old woman set up her bakery. She owned a building that had previously been such a baker, but Paul had visited it and saw how broken down it was. He instead decided to tear it down and put a much stronger prefab structure there...cost free...to get the woman's business up and running again.

And just in time for the Vristil harvest to come in.

The local grain milling people had mostly starved to death, and the ones that remained were not inclined to restart again, so Paul had established his own flour mill and began

sending all the Vristil there, hiring on some of the original owners with experience to work as laborers...which they agreed to do, minus the responsibility for anything, as long as it was a source of additional MPs beyond the tiny stipend.

That tiny stipend, however, lured a few hundred other people who had escaped the census into the open. Paul was just glad that more had survived, though he didn't want to know the details of how.

After the store opened there were meetings about the future development of the colony, and with them came the first edicts by the Mortens. There were no cattle left whatsoever. All had been killed and eaten, so that made the ban on meat products easy to implement. Though 'easy' didn't mean there wasn't complaining and some protesting, but after the food kept coming and the store opened up, there weren't that many people that wanted to argue with the Mortens. They were just glad to be alive and seeing their lives improving by the week in some cases.

The protests were a little more robust when he banned the sale of all alcohol products...until they realized that banning the sale wasn't punishable to the buyer...only the seller. So when the grain started growing again and people wanted to distill it on their own property and share with their buddies, there would be no issue. And if they wanted to sell it on the down low, then only the bootleggers would be culpable.

That, along with the legalization of prostitution so long as it was freelance and not organized, calmed things down quickly. Almost as fast, three different 'hotels' were set up to accommodate the freelancers. Thankfully Paul had a long family history of figuring out how to deal with such things, and a lot of the trial and error had been done and over with before he was born. Better to sanction potentially bad behavior into an acceptable box than ban it entirely and let it run rampant on the black market.

So long as someone wasn't forcing someone else to have sex, it was really no business of House Morten whether there was a money exchange involved or not. But if someone

was going to make a *business* out of it, then it would be House Morten's business. As it was, back on Neubenn, there were many surrogate arrangements for women to get pregnant with another woman's husband because she was no longer able to. That may or may not have involved sex, but it was actually seen as an honorable service to offer.

The 'hotels' here, however, didn't exactly have baby making in mind. Still, when they paid up, they did so using MPs, which helped to further cement the new currency and build the economy Paul was trying to craft from almost scratch.

Winter was almost here, though the first snow had not fallen. He didn't want to imagine how much would accumulate if these precipitation levels didn't decrease, but he'd already brought in some agricultural units that Jared had compiled and got them to work tilling the fields that he'd inherited from the dead previous owners. Once you got down through the layers of mud, there was actually soil beneath, and they were working to seed them with fertilizer and a fast growing grass to stabilize them during the winter and then till under in the spring as yet more natural fertilizer.

The men he had here already knew more about agriculture than all the locals combined, and the few who would admit that had already been hanging around, taking notes, and soaking up all the knowledge they could get...while the others stubbornly kept to their plantations and ate the relief food as well as their own storehouses as they waited for spring and hopefully decent planting conditions.

Whether they came around or not, they'd have to get involved in the economy he was building, for there was no other, and if the Taurian merchants came around he was going to intercept them and strike a deal if possible. If not, he wasn't going to let them rip off the locals anymore, and he wasn't sure if they'd even want the MPs or not. But after the starvation that had hit, nobody wanted to sell grain off world. Doing so had become a taboo, which Paul didn't fight, citing that all the Vristil would be used locally until they had so much they didn't know what to do with.

But today another pair of dropships had arrived to stay, as had all the others, providing the housing and resources badly needed to house everyone in the Morten Employ as more prefab structures were going up everywhere in the 7 villages he'd designated. He'd tried to keep the farmer's field intact that he was landing the dropships in, and had to move half of them a few kilometers to the west to make room. The cafeteria here had already been disassembled and moved, with him hoping to get a proper landing pad built within a year...but he had so much other stuff to do, he hadn't started building a single proper structure yet, using all prefabs because of the time savings.

Help was on the way though, for on one of these dropships came his two apprentices. Green Baron Aaron Morten, and Green Baron Avril Morten. Both were children of Vandi Morten, Paul's young aunt, and while they were only 24 and 22 respectively, their skill level was beyond anyone else he had here with regard to business and economics, and he was quite pleased to see them walk off the dropship and not cringe at the sight of the muddy planet.

He was also pleased to see them wearing their Baron's insignia on their collars in the form of small green pins. Theirs would be a two year stay here, and hopefully Paul would be gone long before that. He just had to make sure things got going and were stabilized before turning it over to them to manage. Until then, they were his two helpers and he was going to put them to work immediately helping him organize the even more employees spilling out behind them.

This planet was more of a money pit now than a mud pit, and that was saying something. Still, given time, that would turn around, but they had a lot of work and a lot of investment to put into it before that.

Nevertheless, some 19,000 people had been saved from starving to death. And while he couldn't do anything to help those who had died before they got here, he'd take this makeshift win for what it was worth, and turn it into a foundation to build something much better on.

It might be a small colony, but House Morten finally had an inhabited world to call its own...even if it was a fixer upper. A big fixer upper.

And with that, they were now a Periphery state in fact, not just in theory.

Never mind that the Estate had more people living on it now than this entire planet...but on the bright side, he'd be getting his first few MP back in taxes from the bakery.

He preferred to ignore that insignificant milestone and keep his thoughts focused on the distant future...and dragging this planet there as fast as possible.

Four months later Grady and half the mechwarriors were replaced with other members of the newly founded House Morten Military...no longer a militia...and Paul Morten rode back with them to Cholis on the same dropship, then found himself in a Lords meeting explaining what went on in full to the others for nearly an hour. In summary, everything was heading in the right direction and any signs of a rebellion were long gone as House Morten brought more and more pieces of civilization to the planet's population.

"So why Polvice then?" Sarah asked Stephan after Vander had suggested opening up Turnix to colonists from the Inner Sphere if it had so much land mass to work with, forested and mountainous as it might be, while Polvice was mostly covered in ice except for a desirable stretch of equator.

"Location," he said, activating a holoprojector they'd finally managed to acquire and zooming out their new little map to include all 4 points, with Cholis and the rest of the Inner Sphere on the far left, most of which was off the map. Drymo was tucked in near to Cholis, but Turnix and Polvice were much further away, though not close to each other. Turnix was off somewhat to the 'right' if you were standing on Cholis and looking out into the Periphery, in the direction of the Taurian Concordat, while Polvice was almost on a straight line away from the Inner Sphere.

“Turnix is still in the wedge,” Sarah argued. “Otherwise we never would have found it.”

Stephan shook his head. “It may very well become a hub later, but it’s not the spine I want. Polvice is, and we can start fresh there with no locals to worry about.”

“Most of the problems on Turnix are minor at this point,” Paul interjected. “I agree with Vander, we could open up colonization within a year or two. We’d just need to clear more land first.”

Stephan wasn’t having it. “Polvice,” he reiterated.

“There will be far more farming ground on Turnix than Polvice in the long run,” Jared pointed out.

“We have to be thinking short term, middle term, long term, and extremely long term,” the First Lord reminded them. “I don’t want all our worlds crammed up next to the Federated Suns border. We need to go out deeper...much deeper...and get all our valuable infrastructure built at least 5 jumps away from the border, if not 10. Andrew is not going to renege on the deal, but the Federated Suns might later, or the Capellans might take interest, or the entire Inner Sphere might suddenly want to pull all the Periphery states into a new Star League or some other nonsense to justify sending armies out here to conquer everything in sight. We need a spine of systems that can get to be self-sufficient, and sending that spine towards Turnix gets it too far away from where I want.”

“We haven’t searched very far beyond Polvice,” Vichni said, tapping a finger on the desk for emphasis. “We have no idea if there are good systems out there within 1 jump to link Polvice to, or are we using the 2 jump rule?”

“Preferably one, but Polvice suits our needs and there are still a lot of stars between here and there to search. Hopefully we’ll find something useful. Polvice is useful enough, and I want to cement that link in our chain...”

“Don’t you mean vertebra?” Sarah joked.

“Spine, chain, islands...call them what you want. They need to be capable of becoming self-sufficient...not just to survive, but to thrive...and we need them heading directly away.

Not towards our neighbors in the Periphery. We can add planets to the links in the chain as we go, but we need to get the first link. Cholis isn't it. Everything we're building here is going to be moved out there later and this will just remain a foothold linking us back to the Federated Suns. I'd rather get started building some stuff out there rather than squeezing it in here."

"Like another academy?" Kevin asked.

"Any self-sufficient world will have to have one. You've been complaining about the temporary facilities here. Why not get yourself a huge tract of land and lay out a proper one?"

"On Turnix?" he joked.

"No," Stephan said flatly. "Any of the locals worth training we can send away then bring back. Sarah's already ordered two more jumpships, and we can haul people around ourselves in small numbers. But I want a proper colony set up that we can tell the Davions to extend the trade route to. And that means a minimum of 100,000 in my book."

Rannel frowned. "If we can only carry a few hundred per dropship maximum..."

"Lots of trips," Stephan said simply. "And then the Davions and other merchants can foot the bill later."

"You're embarrassed of Turnix?" Vander asked.

Stephan rolled his eyes. "No, but it's not exactly a very good calling card right now. We can pay to bring in people we need, but in order to facilitate long term colonization we need people to be able to get here on their own. They can do that with the trade route. But we have to have something here they will want to come to. How many people want to come to Turnix, as it is now?"

Nobody answered, making his point for him.

"Polvice has to be built House Morten style, from the ground up. Enough that the people and ships that do come to visit will spread word of mouth how there's a Neubenn style planet out in the Periphery and they've got an open colonization platform."

"Not too open," Sarah cautioned.

"After the first 100,000 I don't care. Those people will set the mold. Right now all we have is a mini mold in the Estate here, and Turnix has more bad habits than good ones at this point. We can't wait to bring it around. We need a foothold outside the Federated Suns that is more than a money pit. We're still vulnerable here, though it's a far cry from where we were a few years ago. Nobody seems to care right now that we're here. Do any of you want to risk this House's lives on the dozens of nefarious powers in the Inner Sphere continuing not to care and ignoring us? The more power we create, the more attention we get. And if everything is right here in the Estate, all it will take is one large attack...hell, just a warship showing up and bombarding us into oblivion would do it. We still don't have any defense against that."

"Do you know something you haven't told us?" Vander asked.

"Sooner or later one of those Taurian traders is going to come back to Turnix and find that we've saved it...but it will also spread the news that we've taken it from them. However unofficial it was, that will probably make waves out here. House Morten isn't just camping out in exile, they're actively conquering systems. How would the press back home handle that?"

"They'd live on the story and rumor for months minimum," Kevin stated without hesitation.

"Carroll already told me that people in the know follow every move the Davions make, even low level ones like her. So we've already got eyes on us. We can't assume what we do won't get noticed from this point on. We're a long ways away from most of the troublemakers, but greed and jealousy have no bounds. And if our Father was assassinated, someone might be out to destroy our entire House now that we're no longer under the protection of the Federated Suns military."

"We are here," Paul noted. "But not at Turnix."

"On paper," Stephan reminded him. "No Federated Suns army is going to come to our defense on Cholis. What the

Duke has is all there is ever going to be. And at this point, we're protecting him."

"How much would it take to buy our own warship?"

Rannel asked.

"A lot," Sarah said, already having looked into it. "The problem is nobody is selling those used, at least not right now. And only the major powers are producing them new, which they keep for themselves. If we want one, we're going to have to refit an existing jumpship or build one from scratch."

"And we can't do either without a shipyard," Stephan continued. "We can turn Turnix into an agricultural exporter within a decade, correct?"

"Sooner than that given the small population we have to feed," Jared said, nodding.

"And Drymo will supply us with raw materials that we can then refine in factories to be built there as well. The products from both worlds we can ship to Polvice to accelerate its growth even further. We can't just nibble at the edges and take this slow. I keep getting the feeling we're playing with a sleeping monster that's going to wake up and take us out with a single bite before we can grow large enough to bite back. Am I alone in this?"

"Everything seems quiet to me," Vander said thoughtfully. "But there's usually a quiet before the storm, so that doesn't mean we're safe. Personally, I'm happy with the amazing progress we've made so far and I've got enough mechwarriors to defend us here and on all four worlds against anything the Periphery bandits can throw at us. I don't think anyone with an army large enough to remove us here would even care to do so right now."

"Sounds like you're jumping at shadows to me," Sarah said sympathetically. "If someone was gunning for us, they'd have taken us out before the mechs from Davion arrived. We're getting stronger by the week. They missed their best opportunity."

"And the Red Baron hasn't shown back up either," Vichni added. "No bandits have."

“For different reasons, I’m in agreement with Stephan,” Jared noted. “We’re still basically renters here. I for one would like to have a proper world of our own, and Drymo and Turnix are not it. While I’m not suggesting that we make Polvice into our capitol...and while I do like living on Cholis...having our family exposed here, all in one place within the Federated Suns is a lingering itch in my brain. We’re under their constant surveillance here, no doubt, and if we moved even some of us to Polvice, the Davion ambassador would remain here, correct?”

“Yes,” Stephan said firmly. “This is their connection point to us. Everything out there is our rules, and no ambassadors from the Inner Sphere will be allowed. Spies, however, amongst the colonists can’t be completely stopped. But with no HPG out there, it’ll be hard to get information back in a timely manner. It’s a cloak of invisibility that we don’t have here, even if there are some holes in the cloak.”

“We could sell land,” Paul said, thinking ahead. “Once we have Polvice up and running, we’d own all the land anyway. We sell it to various businesses and wealthy individuals and get some serious income for once.”

“After we make it valuable to people to come there,” Rannel added.

“After,” Paul confirmed. “And our single tax structure should entice quite a few large businesses if we have the population necessary to act as a work force already on planet.”

“Which means we need to colonize hard now,” Stephan reiterated. “Even if our ongoing surveys find something better right next door. I say we choose to make this a link in the chain regardless and push hard on it.”

“Agreed,” Sarah said with a reluctant sigh.

The others nodded, and Paul leaned back in his seat a bit. “That means prefab all the way for maximum speed, heavy food shipments that will have to come from somewhere other than Cholis, and a whole lot of equipment sent in with workers recruited or hired with existing experience.

"Our payroll gets bigger and bigger," Sarah noted with mild alarm.

"Colonists aren't on the payroll though," Paul said with a smile. "And if we offer indentured servitude slots, they'll be working for free for a few years to pay off their transit fees and in exchange for perks on planet. If you want to go big, fast, I can make it happen. But it's going to drain our war chest heavily over the next decade."

"That's what it's there for," Stephan scoffed.

"But it's not replenishing," Sarah countered. "How long before we could get a decent tax revenue out of Polvice?"

"If I could entice some corporations to move in, pretty damn fast. We just need a local populace and basic infrastructure. After that, two years and you'll see revenue coming in. But Drymo is going to be producing long before that."

"It already is," Vichni said with pride. "The mine is operational again, though not at full capacity. We're storing the raw ore there for the time being, but once we get a refinery up and running, you'll have ingots to start using or selling. Either way, it's a positive on the spread sheet."

"Minus all the production costs," Sarah added, "but it's good to see something giving back after all the expenditures we've been making."

"A local source of refined metals will make efforts to attract the large corporations even easier. I just don't see how you're going to get that many people there when we have nothing but a scout team on planet."

"Good weather and opportunities," Stephan said dryly. "How often do you get one of those, let alone two, out in the Periphery? Or even the outer Crucis March? Sell it well, but truthfully, and combined with our reputation the people will come if there are jumpships available. I'm going to send one of our new ones, when we get it, on a circuit around the nearby systems picking up colonists and the other one designated to run between here and Polvice nonstop. Our own little internal trade route, and with batteries they can make the double jump

in a matter of hours, so unless there's an ambush at the pass-through system, it'll be a safe connection."

"Where are we at on aerospace fighters?" Paul asked.

"Squadron in training," Vander said, frowning. "We've got twice that many fighters, but most need refitted. They're in worse shape than the mechs were."

"I saw one flying on the way in."

"One of the two that are fit to fight. I just have them doing some patrols to get flight hours in and show people that they're here. I haven't let them go up to orbit yet. We haven't been able to attract any notable pilots, just second stringers nobody wants to take into a mercenary unit and raw recruits. Kevin and I can mold them into a decent force, but it'll take time."

"More than I expected when I came back," Paul congratulated. "I assume the Duke is ok with them in his sky?"

"He's thrilled to have something in the air," Stephan said before Vander could answer. "He said his skies are our skies, so they're not limited to the Estate airspace."

"Nice to have friends, isn't it?" Vichni stated evenly.

"And I actually get the feeling he might not be playing us."

"Same here," Stephan confirmed. "He's still a General at heart and hasn't picked up a lot of the noble family bad habits yet. I'm not worried about him stabbing us in the back. But Davion can remove him whenever he wants to trade the position to someone else."

"Another reason you want to get to Polvice?" Rannel asked.

"Right now this is a sanctuary. A change in the Duke or a replacement of the Duke could turn it into a prison. The sooner we're truly on our own out here the better. And the first major step to doing that is Polvice."

Anna Fergusson was a welder, having learned the trade from her father on June, then getting into the field at 16...as soon as the Vendri Autoworks could legally hire her. She'd been making good money ever since, but had nearly been laid off a

year ago during cutbacks, and it was rumored even more were on the way...which had her looking for other opportunities on planet or off. Her 23 years of experience should have been enough to get her nearly any position she applied for, but when an economy shrunk there weren't going to be a lot of hires happening, so there was an exodus of skilled and semi-skilled labor heading to other worlds to find work where they could, when they could. Then when those companies went south they'd move again.

Anna had never had to do that before, but she'd seen the writing on the wall and knew she had to be proactive, otherwise she'd have to live off her savings and watch it dwindle, hoping for an upturn in the economy or seeing it diminish to the point where she'd have to take some worthless job just to buy enough food to eat.

So when a recruitment posting came across for an *unlimited* number of welders out in the Periphery, she immediately took notice. There was a brand new planet outside the Federated Suns that was being colonized by House Morten, and they were willing to pay her transit and double the money she'd been making here. And with it being 'unlimited' it meant she wouldn't have to compete against other people for the job. As long as she met the qualifications, it was hers.

Her father had retired 3 years ago, thankfully, but when she'd told him about Polvice he'd decided to 'unretire' immediately and go there with her, bringing her mom along too plus her aunt, who was a machinist and they were also being hired. Several other friends of the family got to talking, and given their prospects on June weren't that great, they all decided to go as a group of some 23 workers and 34 add-on family members.

They'd rode a dropship through several stops, then had to transfer from one jumpship to another before ending up in another dropship that took them out to their new home. The planet was mostly covered in ice, as she'd been told, but the equator was warm and green. She half expected it to be a lie and some dismal planet, but apparently the advertisements had

been spot on, and when they'd finally landed and got back into normal gravity, a wash of humid but welcoming air hit her as they were escorted off the dropship carrying everything they owned in duffle bags.

"Wow," she said, looking around at the city made up of prefab buildings, but with sidewalks and paved roads already installed. There were trees everywhere else, making it almost feel like the city had been cut out of forest strategically so that it didn't destroy it so much as incorporate itself into it. And most of those trees had a tropical vibe to them that she'd only seen in entertainment vids.

"Not bad, huh?" her father said, wrapping a hand around her left shoulder as they took in all in. "I don't think we'll ever see snow again here."

"This way," an escort said, motioning to her and the others.

"Come on," her father said, pushing her forward. "Don't want to make a bad impression the first day."

Some 82 colonists came off the dropship and moved in a double line out across the tarmac to the city streets, hopping across an intersection and down the sidewalks for what felt like forever, but it was only a few city blocks. There the escort led them into a massive prefab structure that appeared to be a box inside an arched tube, with narrow roadways darting underneath on either side of the box.

'Processing Building 07' was written on a large sign outside that came up out of trim, mowed grass...another good sign that things here were legit. Pound pinching scammers would never have bothered to mow it, or would have just paved it over.

When they got inside each person...even the children...were sent to their own clear booth where they got a quick medical exam and interview. Anna's lasted all of 8 minutes, then they were given an ID card and told to report to a far desk when their family members had all gotten through the first checkpoint.

That meant her group went through last, for everyone else was apparently single or in pairs. No other children were present that she'd noticed, and when her father led them all up to the desk they were given information pamphlets, keys, and a map showing them to their living quarters.

"It's a bit of a walk, but you can go now or wait about an hour for another shuttle to come in. Either way, House Morten welcomes you to Polvice."

"Thank you," Anna said, then moved out a rear exit with the rest of her family as another batch of new arrivals was just coming in the front and going through the start of their exams.

"I say we walk," her father said, with him being the oldest of them, which seemed to seal the decision. "I haven't seen this nice of weather in ages."

"You've never seen this nice of weather," her mother mumbled beside him carrying her own duffle, stuffed so full Anna didn't know how it wasn't ripping open.

"It's supposed to be like this year round," Anna added. "Which way, dad?"

He looked at the map. "That way two blocks, then twelve to the left. No way we can get lost."

"I hope not," her mom's voice said again, barely audible. She hadn't liked the idea of coming here, but Anna could tell on her face that she was impressed now, though she would never admit it to anyone, being the eternal pessimist.

They took it slow and enjoyed the sights, even as the duffles seemed to get heavier and heavier. They stopped twice to rest, once when a mech walked by down the street, stomping so hard on the pavement she was surprised it didn't break. And it wasn't a work mech, it was a military type, and she had no idea where it was going, but her dad said the map had the location of a mechbay marked about 18 kilometers to the south.

Still, the streets were mostly empty aside from a few cars and the occasional truck. The sidewalks less so, but it still felt fairly empty...like they were among the first to get here.

Eventually they got to their building, which was a shorter arched structure that appeared only three stories high

and had no roads going through it. The main door was just into a foyer, and from that was a long hallway leading to various rooms, or elevators that probably took you up to more rooms, but theirs were all located together on the main floor.

"Well, this is it," her father said, finding their little section and pulling out the key to his personal door. It worked and in he went as everyone else moved about to find theirs.

Anna got into hers without incident, finding a small living room attached to two bedrooms, a bathroom, miniscule kitchen without a proper stove, and what looked like a study with a flatscreen built into one wall above a desk that was likewise part of the wall and not moveable furniture.

It was more or less the same size as the apartment she'd been renting on June, but everything here was neat, tidy, and smelled brand new. And it was the smell above all that set this apart from her past home. Even making good money back there didn't mean you could live in a good neighborhood, and less bad had become 'good,' but this must have been what 'good' actually felt like.

Anna tossed her duffle onto the already made bed then found a couch in the living room to plop down onto, breathing heavily in the air conditioning and letting it soak into her heat-stressed and duffle-worn body. The information packet that she'd been given...and had been reading while they walked...said her work detail wouldn't be starting for another 8 days. So she was essentially on vacation until then, and the rent was prepaid by House Morten for the first 3 months. Another signing bonus for those willing to move out here.

And the basic food here was free, with a cafeteria located every few blocks or so in the residential areas of the city. She could eat there or buy stuff to bring back to her apartment, with her bank account on June already having been electronically transferred out here and converted into MPs...which were apparently the local currency...and there was an automated money changer in the foyer that they'd come through that would give her physical MPs if she wanted, but the

bank card she had would work just as well anywhere on the planet.

She wasn't getting any interest on her savings, though. The bank was just a place to store her money...another courtesy of House Morten...and wasn't involved in giving out loans. That also meant her money would always be there to take out later, which she guessed made up for the loss of interest.

Actually, the free food would make up for the loss and then some. Assuming it was edible. She'd have to find out later.

Right now, she was just going to unpack...sometime...and settle in along with her family and friends. This was a start of a new chapter in their lives, and as far as first impressions went, this was looking to be the best one yet...

13

May 1, 2994

Morten Protectorate

Drymo

Oasis

Arne waved goodbye to his tech friend who he'd just talked to for half an hour and leaned back in the soft couch cushions as he looked out the very thick windows of the Sky Pub...which was a joke in itself, given that the 'bar' was non-alcoholic. He held a somewhat warm, half drank insulated cup of coffee, and sucked down another couple swigs. He'd become addicted to it ever since having to give up alcohol, and he wasn't the only one. The 'pub' served a wide range of coffees, teas, fruit drinks, and even a rare glass of milk for a week or so after a jumpship arrival from Cholis. The planets were close enough that they could get the milk here before spoiling, and without having to freeze it, which was apparently a no-no for the pub.

Arne was tired from a two hour stint in the simulators, and given he didn't have any actual patrol duties for the day, he'd come up here to relax as most of the 7,000+ denizens of Drymo did sooner or later. It almost made the planet feel comfortable, but he knew that was a matter of point of view. When they'd first arrived they were living out of the dropships, cramped and claustrophobic, with their two simulators moved to one of the old mining buildings that had been repurposed to get some of the stuff off the dropships.

Then they'd got their first 'donut' built and moved in there. That's what they called them anyway. The construction crews had dug a huge trench in the ground almost half a kilometer wide and some 8 kilometers long. Just dug right into

the surface and piled up the rock in numerous mounds that had since disappeared into the 'sifters' the miners used to get valuable metals and other materials out of the jumble. The resulting left over 'sand' had been mounded up and kept nearby, for once the first trench had been dug, a large ferrocrete foundation had been put in along with numerous support pillars reinforcing an arched roof over the whole thing, making it look like a long donut half buried in the ground.

That arched roof had then been meticulously buried with all the sand. It had to be at least 20 meters deep at the top, if not more, and once the first one was complete they got all the workers out of it and had all the mechs walk up on top while the engineers tested for stability. As far as Arne knew, it was just a random hillside on a planet that had no such thing in sight. Once the green flag was given by the engineers, everyone living on the dozens of dropships moved in and that was the beginning of Oasis city.

Right now there were three long donuts completed, with a fourth under construction. Arne was looking out at the fourth right now, for the Sky Tower had been built between them all, dead center in the square the donuts were making, and high enough to see over their 7 story tall peaks and down onto the flat lands beyond. The desolate, dry flat lands were where he made his patrols once every three or four days, switching off with the other mechwarriors whether they had a recon mech or not.

Aside from some short range comm gear...which the tower was insulated against so it didn't fry the people in the pub with radiation...and some defensive LRMs in lieu of the aerospace fighters they still hadn't got yet, the tower was for civilian purposes, along with the other land space in between the donut square they had yet to build anything on except for the tower. The mounds made it feel like a fort, and Arne was up high enough to see outside the sand dune 'walls,' the last of which was still in the arched roof construction phase, with a mountain of waiting sand outside ready to cover it, with

occasional large dump trucks carrying more out from the strip mining operation further to the north.

The original mine was to the east and the spaceport was to the southeast. It was fully operational now with 6 landing pads and support buildings. Both it and the city were surrounded by a series of defense towers that out-armored their mechs. Another one was under construction on the north side of the city, but there were 5 already around the spaceport plus 3 more outside the donuts, each with crews of their own inside and buried tunnels leading out to them.

That duty, he thought, had to be more boring than walking patrols. At least in a mech he got to move and occasionally shoot a pile of rocks the techs graciously piled up like snowmen on occasion. He didn't waste any missiles on them...because he didn't have any. All the mechs here had been refitted with energy weapons only. That meant lasers and PPCs. They didn't even have any autocannons on them, but there was a reason for that.

The turrets had all the missiles, plus some autocannons and lasers. They even had some extended range missiles that were half again as long as regular ones...meaning they couldn't be fit into mech firing tubes...so the turrets could reach out and hit targets before they fell into weapons range of any potential attackers. The turrets also had an enormous amount of armor on them...but that made sense, given they couldn't dodge, evade, or twist an undamaged arm around to block a shot at a vulnerable chest plate.

Still, it seemed like overkill with a full Company of heavy and assault mechs guarding it, plus two recon medium Phoenix Hawks. But as was the Morten motto...don't take something unless you can hold it...and they seemed dead serious about holding this operation, which was pumping out refined metals from a small building at the original mine site. It was newly constructed, and a refining facility to process the ore, getting rid of the unwanted material and saving precious weight on the dropships when they shipped out the finished ingots back to Cholis on a bi-monthly basis now.

They were shipments worthy of being raided, but no one had so much as ducked into the system to take a look. Arne didn't think anyone knew where they were, but eventually word would leak out to the bandit spies. Wherever they saw valuable goods moving, they'd trace them back eventually, even if they had to make guesses and explore uncharted systems to find it. That's the way they worked, he knew, for he'd been one of them. Not a spy, but one of the raiding teams.

It had been three and a half years since Arne had been in the failed raid on Cholis, but it felt like a lifetime ago. So much had happened since, both to him and this planet that he was reluctantly starting to call home. All the other mechwarriors had been rotated out to other assignments, except for him. If that's what the First Lord had meant about sparing the others grunge work, then he was ok with it. This planet was on the rise, and he was content to ride that wave and see what became of it as long as he was still in the seat of a mech. And around here, those 14 men were the prima donnas, as it should be, and he didn't want to go back to being a nobody again.

Better king of an ant hill than servant in a mansion, someone has once said, and he agreed. But the way House Morten was handling its construction of the city, he might actually end up with both. The typical blocky, redundant 'squares only' architecture that almost everyone built with was absent here. Once you got inside the donuts there were huge open air spaces dotted with so many curves and alcoves and what looked like tree houses sticking out of every which space, his eyes didn't know how to define it the first time he moved in. There was even a river in one of them running half the length of it, starting at a waterfall and ending up in a pond with a walkway bridge over it...only for the water to be sucked into pipes and sent back to the waterfall.

It seemed they wanted the air in here to be quite moist to make up for what was missing outside, and the whole thing had a luxurious feel to it that was gradually filling in with more intricacy. There were even potted trees everywhere in the

commons areas, though none were more than two feet tall at this point, having been grown from seed brought here. He'd asked one of the techs planting them why put them here, and the tech had responded by saying that, in addition to ambiance, they were natural carbon scrubbers that didn't need power to work, making the air fresh in here without having to switch it out with the planetary air.

Then he'd asked about the light, which the trees would obviously need, and the tech said the big 'daylight' lamps in the ceiling that were calibrated to brighten and dim according to a schedule, had backup batteries for them, so if the main power generators went down people would still be able to see in what was a completely underground facility without a single window in it. That light would also keep the trees alive and recycling the air.

It seemed the Mortens thought strategically in everything they did, even city interior decorating, and this pub was no exception. The glass in the panoramic windows that stretched all the way around, giving it a rounded donut with a hole in the center feel, was reinforced. That 'hole' was where the well protected lifts were, as well as the pub and service areas. Everything else was tables, benches, and couches, giving people a view of the exterior that they could not get anywhere else, or view of various entertainment screens and even one local news station that had a one hour daily program looped all day long detailing news brought in by the last jumpship of events far from here. They'd shovel it out to you in pieces until the next update arrived so you'd get something new every day. Yet one more little upgrade to civilization here that House Morten kept adding at a rapid fire pace while keeping you safe from the outside environment.

The rest of the tower had windows, but not that many. There was actually supposed to be a fancy restaurant going in one level down, but aside from the 'in progress' sign on the locked doors, he hadn't seen anybody working inside yet. Likewise there was a lot of empty office space and other rooms down the length of the tower to the base, which was connected

via underground tunnels to the donuts...and those donuts were connected to the spaceport by other tunnels that had no mounds on them. They'd simply dug the trenches, built the tunnels, then buried them and smoothed it all out so you wouldn't even know anything was there.

Other than the miners, nobody drove anything on the surface aside from the mechwarriors. The lack of moisture in the air was too damn problematic, so the city was being built with all its roads underground for civilian traffic...which would also protect them from weaponsfire on the surface, just like the sand-covered donuts. Dirt and rock, it seemed, provided better protection than armor plating if you got it thick enough, and once again House Morten's strategic planning was visible for all to see, but few truly understood it.

He hadn't until it had been explained to him in a briefing session on how to defend the city if it was ever attacked. If they could keep people out of the spaceport and the other few entrances to the buried structures, they could walk on top of and fight over the civilians without worrying about hurting them. It was a very defensible setup that also hid how much was underground, with the exception of this Sky Tower...which was surrounded by the 'fort' walls except for the top that was peering over them.

And even if you stood on the top of one of the donuts, you wouldn't be in firing range of the tower. You'd have to come down into the square 'bowl' inside to attack it.

But Arne didn't come here to consider all that. He just came up here to chill with the other guys and get the view. He'd been right about the mechwarrior pay being shit. He'd actually made more as a prisoner...a lot more. No self-respecting freelance mercenary would ever sign on to an outfit like this without extenuating circumstances, such as his, but he'd quickly found out the House Morten secret for holding onto their experienced personnel.

He had no expenses to drain his paycheck.

His quarters were free, the food was free, he got clothing and personal items free from the 'mech store' which

wasn't even built yet and having to be run out of one of the dropships, but he got a stipend in that store for a lot of luxury stuff that would eventually end up in the mech bay living adjunct when it was built. The mech bay itself was done, for their war machines anyway, and was located right next to the spaceport, but the adjoining structures were still a work in progress. When they finished he'd be moving into quarters there, as would the mech store and an army of techs.

So aside from the coffee and other drinks he bought here, he had no expenses, and after two years on this rock his personal savings were fast catching up to what he'd left behind and had been undoubtably looted by his former associates by now. So it seemed one could get rich on such lousy pay as long as you didn't have any bills eating it up, and some of the old hands that had come here from Neubenn had told him stories of how after 20-25 years of service, there were people walking away to live the wealthy lifestyle...or semi-wealthy anyway...or go into business for themselves, or retire way early.

And that allowed House Morten to keep on a larger than normal militia back there. However, he'd heard some grumbling that the new aerjocks back on Cholis were being paid a fortune for their services, while the ones coming out of the academy were getting the bare bones treatment like the mechwarriors.

So it seemed that House Morten was willing to pay high salaries temporarily to get good people in, then grow their own batch of 'cheap' labor out of their academies...which is where all the Neubenn guys had come from. But apparently none of their aerjocks had come out here, so it left the Mortens having to hire in outsiders.

Which probably explained why there was no squadron here yet. And the turret missile launchers would provide good air cover so long as the mechs didn't stray too far from them. Still, it rankled a bit knowing those pilots were getting paid a fortune while the mechwarriors weren't. He had to remind himself how good he had it here, and then those thoughts would drift away.

He was actually *content*, for the love of god. That was something he'd never been able to say before in his life. He was content walking his Phoenix Hawk around in circles outside every few days and kicking his own ass in simulator training, a good part of which was what they were calling the Catalyst of Frustration. It now had 14 missions in it, and every now and then a new one would arrive. Arne was using a lot of his free time on them, as were some of the others now that they were up to 8 simulators from the original 2 that they'd brought here at the onset.

Arne had passed 9 of the 14 so far, and had gotten his first mission score up some 418 points by going back through it over and over again. Each mission had something different to it, a different skill set required, and since he hadn't gone through their academy he had been working on going through their training regimen here, starting with their recon mech program since that was what he was piloting.

He'd learned a damn lot from it since, as well as getting pointers from those who had done it more than a decade ago. He knew what his responsibilities in combat were now, and with a recon mech it was doing everything *except* standing toe to toe and slugging it out. A completely foreign strategy to everything he'd known as a mercenary, but when the House Morten Company worked together as a team, following their protocols, they were damn effective in the sims. It was a pity he'd never seen them fight in actual combat...and the rout on Cholis didn't count. They'd been suckered into a mismatch and fled...only he'd not been in a fast enough mech to get away back then.

He was in the fastest they had now, but he couldn't pilot it in the 'COF' missions except for one. Each mission had a specific mech and weapon loadout in it that you didn't get to customize, so you knew you were facing the exact same situation as you had before, and as had the other guys who were running it. The Legacy Board was actually being updated in 4 different star systems now, and jumpships would carry with them the most recent numbers.

In that way Arne and the other guys here were in a competition with the other mechwarriors on different planets as to who could climb the highest and fastest, though Mech Commander Grady back on Cholis still held the top slot in each mission by a huge margin. The guy was a marvel in the cockpit, though you wouldn't know it if you ever met him in person. He'd seemed to tolerate Arne more than like him, but the Company Commander here didn't hold his mercenary and pirate past against him.

It was odd how the Morten mechwarriors didn't have traditional ranks. Apparently they had them back on Neubenn, but not since coming out here. Chance Innit, their current Company Commander, had explained it to him shortly after he'd replaced the first one, Nathan Crenchaw, that Arne had arrived here with. He'd said all mechwarriors were meant to fight, not handle paperwork and administrative duties. And whether that fighting meant in the lead or as someone else's wingman, it didn't matter. They fought as a team and would have none of the stuffy rank issues that other militaries dealt with.

And the pay was all the same. Arne was getting exactly what Grady was...who refused to have anyone call him by his last name...so the focus was on building up your individual skills, and it seemed the COF was replacing the ranks. He'd passed 9 of them, while others in this Company had only passed 5. Those would be the trainees fresh out of the academy who hadn't had the chance to work on the others before, so in the skill department Arne kind of outranked them, and was proud his scores on the 'original 5' were still higher than theirs.

But that was because he'd been working on them for the past two years with a passion. It hadn't come easy, and grinding out a few more points now *was* a trial of frustration. He'd plateau'd on some of them, only to move on and work on others before coming back to try the ones he was stuck on. He also got advice...and gave a little...to the other mechwarriors as they all sought to climb higher rather than view each other as rivals to be kept down.

The teamwork here was beyond anything Arne had ever expected possible. But then again, he'd been working for a pirate, so he shouldn't have been too surprised a noble family's military had found a more professional way to handle things.

He'd been working on mission #7 an hour ago, getting no higher in score today, but trying out a new variation that had sort of worked, though he'd handled it sloppily. Once he got a few more runs at it and smoothed out, he thought his new 'hop and go' strategy would allow him to up his score by a chunk, but the 5 missions that he'd yet to pass were still eluding him by a kilometer. Each mission skillset was different, and he was having a damn hard time doing anything other than slugging it out or running and gunning. The stop and go combat just didn't seem to sink into his head. He felt like it should be one or the other, but the mechwarriors who had figured it out were soaring in the rankings.

Arne had learned so damn much over the past 3 years it was crazy. But how much more he had to learn was even crazier.

And the fact that he actually liked doing the COF missions was the craziest of them all. While the simulators produced heat to mimic what was in real mech combat, they couldn't cook you the same way for safety reasons. So he'd always get drenched in sweat, because his fire discipline was something else that was lacking, and #12 absolutely required it, but he wouldn't get so fatigued that he couldn't turn around and run three or four more, as he'd done today.

But after two hours of it, he was glad to come up to the Sky Pub, grab a coffee, and just sit down and relax. This was the good life, believe it or not, and the work crews out there were making it even better with every new bit of city they added to it.

Grunge work? Not anymore. He was living the life many would-be mechwarriors dreamed of, despite the lack of actual combat. Thought that didn't gnaw on him anymore. He'd seen more than most of the mechwarriors in his unit already, just not the righteous type. That still annoyed him. For he'd like to fight at least one battle for House Morten and see what this

'righteousness' that Commander Grady was always talking about felt like. Though there seemed little chance of that happening here.

A 'blip, blip, blip' news warning sounded on one of the nearby screens and Arne almost ignored it, but there was very rarely any actual fresh updates to the newsfeed that it was usually something having to do with Oasis, so he twisted around in his seat, sipping on his coffee again, and looked over at the flatscreen and the comms staff spokesperson doing the report.

"We have a new jumpship arrival," he said, which wasn't unusual and they always informed people when it happened, but the look on Trevor's face said this wasn't normal. "Two have arrived, side by side, and are deploying 4 jumpships heading towards the planet. There are no transmissions coming from any of the ships, but our jumppoint monitoring satellites were able to zoom in and pick up this image..."

The screen changed from the talking head to the side of one of the *Merchant*-class dropships and the cross-like logo emblazoned on it. It was hard to make out at the distance of the camera, but he had no trouble recognizing it.

The Red Baron's symbol.

He unconsciously squeezed his coffee cup so hard he crushed it, spilling what was left onto his lap and chair, but he hardly noticed. He just glared at the screen as it switched back to Trevor.

Arne knew four jumpships meant more than a standard raiding party. The Red Baron had probably pulled together every mech he could get his hands on, and was coming here to get some payback that he couldn't get on Cholis.

So much for Drymo being off the map. It looked like Arne was going to get his chance for righteous combat after all.

The comm staffer raised a hand as if to caution people. "Work details will continue as normal for the next 5 days. Based on their acceleration, we expect the dropships to get here in 6 days, at which time all work will halt and everyone will move to shelter locations while our military forces engage the attackers.

Until then, it's business as usual. We'll pass on any updates we get immediately."

Trevor's head disappeared, and the image of the Red Baron's jumpship came back up as a side bar while the regular news program resumed.

Four dropships. If he was wanting to loot the place at least two of them would be empty. But if this was revenge, he could have up to 48 mechs coming down, while the expanded Company only had 14. And there was no way to know exactly what the Red Baron was bringing to the party, numbers or tonnage wise, until they landed and walked off the dropships.

But he knew the Atlas would be there, and the Red Baron would be piloting it. He couldn't hope to go up against the Morten heavies and assault mechs without it.

The First Prince had asked him what he would do if he ever had to face off against the Red Baron's forces again, and his answer still held true.

Kill them...before they killed everyone else.

14

May 7, 2994

Morten Protectorate

Drymo

Oasis

Arne sat in his mech watching the dropships land a few kilometers away to the east of the spaceport, standing alongside Flynn Donegan in a matching Phoenix Hawk. Ahead of them was the line of heavy and assault mechs in the Company, all neatly in a row waiting for the Red Baron's forces to come to them. In the center was the assault lance, which meant mechs weighing 80-100 tons...which was a massive difference from his Phoenix Hawk's 45 tons...though technically it was down to 43 with all the rework that had been done to it.

The standard chassis had a Large laser in the right arm, Medium laser in both forearms, and machine guns in both arms fed by ammunition canisters in the chest. Those machine guns had been removed, as had the mech's jump jets and the fuel for those jump jets, which would have allowed the mech to hop some 180 meters...but he agreed with removing them here. There was no terrain to work with, and the mech was already faster than most at 97 kph, so it was definitely a runner and didn't need the jumping capability here.

Arne wasn't all that used to using them anyway, for his old Centurion wasn't designed for them. But this refit had, in addition to adding a face shield, removed the medium laser and hand from the left arm and put in something he'd never heard of before called a NARC. It wasn't a weapon at all, but an object that when launched would hit another mech and attach itself...unless it hit at a bad angle. He'd gotten practice out here doing just that to another mech with Flynn, for they'd both only

gotten that part of the refit done 5 months ago, and none of the other mechwarriors knew where the damn thing had come from, for it wasn't in use in the Inner Sphere as far as any of them could remember.

But he knew what it did. That little piece of technological 'gum,' if stuck on a mech, would send out a homing signal that missiles would head towards even if they didn't have a radar lock. That wasn't such a big deal if your mech had missiles, but if your fellow mechs had them and you stuck a NARC on somebody else, they could all just hit a preset button and fire in that direction, with all the missiles converging on that mech until the NARC was destroyed in the blasts.

Arne had four rounds crammed into the left arm...because they were too big to be fed into it from the chest...and the chest cavity that used to hold the machine gun ammo was now mostly wasted except for two more heat sinks they'd stuck in, which would let his heat heavy lasers fire a bit more often without overcooking his mech.

The problem was, when doing refits, the holes other weapons were designed to be mounted in were a specific shape designed to that weapon. It wasn't modular. So if you were going to swap out an autocannon and put in a laser, all that laser's equipment had to fit in the cavity of the autocannon. So what usually happened in these swap outs was you lost tonnage and equipment by putting in smaller stuff that would fit, then bracing it up with struts to keep it secure. A round peg in a square hole didn't fill the whole hole, after all.

So his Phoenix Hawk still had its main Large laser, but the rest of its weaponry had been diminished considerably in exchange for this NARC. He and Flynn both had them, so 8 little beacons in total to be used to home in the missiles that would be firing, not from the other mechs, but from the towers.

Recon mechs were not supposed to stand toe to toe, he reminded himself, they were for utility work, but this was a whole different type of recon work than he'd ever known about before...and he'd have to get within 100 meters of the target mech in order to get the NARC on it. Which was far closer than

he needed to be to hit with his Medium or Large laser. It was danger close, but that's why he'd been told they wanted them on the fastest mechs so they could scoot in and out during combat and attach the beacons.

Which meant Arne wasn't going to be doing much damage on his own, and that's why he was standing behind the line of mechs, almost as if the two medium Phoenix Hawks didn't even count in the coming battle.

All the mechs standing before him were refitted with less weaponry than they'd originally had except the Awesomes that were designed to be energy-only. Each of the assault mechs weighed 80 tons, carried 3 PPCs, a Small laser, and a battlefist on the left arm that was designed for punching mechs and destroying armor that way without damaging the hand too much. Other mechs with hands could do the same, but how long the hand would hold up was dependent on what you were punching. The battlefist was meant for fights at a range of 0 meters, while long range weapons like the PPCs and Large laser would get you out to the 500-600 meter range.

Most people would think that wasn't 'long' at all, and in truth you could still see the opposing mechs just fine to manually aim at them at that range. The truth about mech combat was it was a gruesome and personal affair, not the solitude of a sniper killing a man from two kilometers away with a slug rifle or high powered laser. Mechs carried such armor plating that the weapons designed to kill them *had* to be used up close. While you could build a laser the size of a house that could put a dot on a moon from the planet, there was no way you could get enough power there to do any damage.

And the only way a laser sniper rifle worked was if the person didn't have any armor on. Otherwise you'd have to use a slug rifle to get through it. Lasers fired in a straight line...in myth only. Take any civilian laser pointer, the type teachers like to use in class, and it looked precise, but shine it on a wall fifty meters away and the little dot would expand out so much you might not even be able to see it anymore.

Now try that with a mech's laser at 150 meters. The only way to get enough laser energy to destroy armor plating was to get a very concentrated amount into a small spot enough to not just heat it up, but to heat it up so much it couldn't bleed off into the rest of the armor fast enough, resulting in the target spot melting or, in extreme cases, exploding.

Spread out the same energy over 5 seconds instead of half a second, and the armor wouldn't be damaged. Just heated up, then it would cool on its own...or faster with heat sinks, which were just really high end air conditioners...and you'd end up with no damage. So the lasers, in order to damage armor, had to fire very fast with very large amounts of energy. Now try putting all that into a small box on a mech's arm and you suddenly started to see the limitations of laser weapons. You could accomplish the task at kilometers range, but you'd have to build a laser so big it was the size of a barn.

You could do that on warships, but not on mechs. So to try and cheat the physics, mech lasers were designed not like a flash light. You turn a flashlight on and the light spreads out in cone. Lasers were meant to be a straight line, but in truth it was just a narrower cone. Knowing you were going to lose concentrated damage with every meter the laser traveled, the engineers had decided to make an inverted cone...meaning most of the laser light would be aimed not straight forward, but in towards itself, making the beam shrink a little after it left the barrel.

This compensated for the natural spreading of light rays that didn't go exactly where they were supposed to, especially given that you had to create so many emitters within the barrel they couldn't just be at the far end. They had to be along the walls of the barrel and jammed in every which way you could get, then the reflective barrel would corral them all and send them in the approximate direction you wanted.

Get too many in there and the mirrors would melt, so it was always a game of 'how much can you fit' without blowing up or melting down the weapon. So when the laser energy left the end, it wasn't as neatly pointed as one could get with lower

power lasers...such as the building sized one that could put a spot on a moon. It was more of a firehose, and that fire hose...with an adjustment to the barrel...concentrated the beams in on each other just enough that you could get a conduit of damage past the barrel end that was the same as when it came out the barrel.

Technically the highest point of concentration would be further out, but there was leakage immediately, so it was impossible to know the sweet spot for each weapon unless you did extensive testing. But in general, a Small laser could get you 150-200 meters of damage sufficient to destroy armor plating. Beyond that the laser would widen and just sand off a little armor on the surface rather than penetrate. Go further and it would just apply heat. This non-damage effect was called 'spit,' and while only generating heat on mechs, it could wound or kill infantry if they weren't wearing protection. It could also start fires in dry areas just as easily as a missile exploding and throwing out burning shrapnel.

Mech warfare was messy, and the lasers were no exception. The bigger the laser, the more equipment it required, but that more equipment also offered more destructive power and more range. The PPCs worked a bit differently, as they were actually charged particles, but they likewise had range limits and would typically fly apart more than lasers would past their range.

All of this meant the defenders were going to have to get within 600 meters, and in some cases within 300 meters, for their weaponry to be effective against other mechs. And the Awesomes held the longer versions of said weaponry, in addition to mounting a huge bulk of armor that could take a hell of a beating. Not as much as one of the nearby defense turrets, but a lot, which was why they were center in the formation and flanked by two Victors that had been stripped down of their normal autocannon, a beefy AC-20, as well as their Short Range Missiles. Their Medium lasers had stayed, and then been added to with a pair of Large lasers.

In short, the mechs had been neutered in the swap out, but the pair of Victors still retained their jump jets, which were rare for an assault mech. So the two hoppers were flanking the Awesomes and making an impressive wall of armor blocking the warlord from the mining colony.

To either side was a heavy Lance, with four Riflemans on the left, and a Lance of two Orions, a Crusader, and a Jagermech on the right. All had non-laser weapons removed and Medium or Large lasers put in...no Smalls. The Company had been designed so it could fire support each other, and even another 50-100 meters of range went a long way in that department.

It was a damn impressive Company. Far more weapon and armor heavy than anything Arne had ever fought with or against in his mercenary career. The question was, what was the Red Baron bringing to bear against them?

They had to wait a while to find out, for the Red Baron's forces didn't immediately come out of their dropships. They waited more than two hours just sitting there, perhaps hoping the mechs would come out to them and they'd get to use the weaponry on their dropships to soften them up. But House Morten wasn't stupid. If the Red Baron wanted this planet, the attackers would have to come to them and fight in range of the defense turrets.

Eventually that's what happened, and all four dropships opened up their ramps at the same time and mechs began pouring out, with Arne immediately starting to take count.

Three, four, five... he counted silently, tagging the heavies he saw and recognized. He knew of 6 that the Red Baron had, but then a mech he didn't recognize came out and he had to do a check on his battle computer. It said it was a 60-ton Quickdraw, which put it at the bottom end of the heavy range.

"Seven," he whispered, seeing the rare Catapult that Mark Denning piloted come walking out along with a huge number of medium mechs and what looked like a clown show as one of the dropships spilled out nothing but Wasps.

When everything was done, the dropships had been fully loaded. 12 mechs each, 48 in total...but some 27 of them were Wasps, and he knew why. The Red Baron's base of operations was a planet bigger than Cholis that he controlled, and on it was a mech factory that produced knockoff Wasps. They didn't have any licensing agreement, nor did they respect intellectual property rights out in the Periphery much. But at some point the designs had gotten out to someone with the money to build them, and the planet of Gregoria had been pumping them out for decades to all kinds of Periphery buyers, as well as some Inner Sphere types that wanted their purchases kept off the books.

And it was one of the major reasons the Red Baron was rich enough to field an army of this size, though it looked like he hadn't brought in any of his associates for this job. Only his own people, and that told Arne exactly what he was here for.

He was here for blood, and he didn't want anyone spilling it except him. This was payback for Cholis, pure and simple, and he wouldn't spoil it by bringing in a coalition of bandits, warlords, or other scum rats out here. This was going to be all him.

But he didn't have anywhere near the firepower to attack Cholis again. So he had apparently discovered Drymo and was throwing everything he had here, 48 mechs against the 14 defenders. And while Wasps weren't very big and weren't very well armed, all the little damage added up, and they could swarm a mech and take it down within 30 seconds if it got isolated out there.

Then last of all, coming down the ramp while the other mechs made a mess of what formations they were trying to get into, was the 100 ton Atlas assault mech. All of them had the Red Baron's symbol painted on them somewhere, but the Atlas had a huge version across the center looking like targeting cross hairs baiting his opponents to shoot him right in the chest...as if he'd just shrug off the damage with all that armor, and in most cases that's probably what would happen.

The Atlas carried autocannons that could knock a small to medium mech over with a single hit, and if his Phoenix Hawk took one of those, he'd either be badly damaged or dead. It was a beast of a war machine, but not very fast or maneuverable, and he knew what he needed to do even before the Company Commander laid it out for them then divvied up the comm channels to each Lance, with Arne having a private one with the other Phoenix Hawk. Commander Innit had them all keep the Company circuit open if he needed to use it, but otherwise he wanted silence so each Lance could talk to each other without having the noise from other people get in their way.

Arne also had options on his comm board to toggle any of the individual mechs out there to talk to them, and he likewise had his board set up so he'd immediately hear from any of them that wanted to talk to him without him having to respond to a blinking light. But unless someone needed to say something specific, it was just going to be him and Flynn...and they both were already headed different directions, as recon mechs should.

"I'm going for that Rifleman on the left," Flynn said as he walked his Phoenix Hawk a little further out behind their own Riflemen then stopped, almost hiding behind one of them. "How you doing?"

"I'm fine," he assured him. "I want to kill those bastards more than you do."

"Even though you know them?"

"Especially because I know them. And I know they're here not to take prisoners or cargo. They're here to make a point by killing us all. Probably the workers too since they know they can't keep the mines with reinforcements from Cholis one jump away."

"You really think this is supposed to be a slaughter?"

"I know it is. And I intend to kill as many of them first as I can. They're attacking us, right? That puts us on the moral high ground. They can turn and leave whenever they like."

"Damn straight. Don't step on any cockpits, but other than that, don't hold back."

"I wasn't planning to. Good luck, Flynn."

"Same to you, Arne. Remember, we gotta get in close to make these beepers stick."

"I know. I intend to," he said, walking his Phoenix Hawk off to the right and standing behind one of the Orions as the enemy finally started moving forward together, still kilometers away.

So they waited, standing and watching like statues, until the leading edge of the mediums and heavies got within 1200 meters. The Wasps were further up, but the turret gunners knew not to waste missiles on them at this range, so they waited for better targets then started launching the extra long missiles that had no extra explosives in them, only additional fuel to get the extra range.

Target locks were easy with the flat topography, and scores of missiles from the closest turret shot out, hammering a Centurion so hard it fell over backwards, causing a Shadow Hawk to stumble as it tried to keep from stepping on it.

But after they learned they were already in turret range, all the Red Baron's mechs increased to their maximum speed and charged forward, intent on closing the distance as fast as they could to their own missile range...except the Wasps and a trio of Phoenix Hawks. They didn't want to get out ahead of the others and get wasted, so they tucked it with the heavies while the Atlas got left in the back plodding along.

That was a mistake. They were already getting separated, and to his credit, Commander Innit didn't have the Company start charging towards them or stand still and wait.

He had them start ever so slowly walking backwards as the missiles began to rain down in both directions as the Red Baron mechs closed the gap and began firing their longest ranged weapons out near 800 meters distant.

Two defense turrets were now in range, and soon would be three if they kept backing up. The Awesomes started firing as soon as they could, along with the Victors, and the center Lance retreated the slowest, causing them to draw the leading fire rather than the heavies for a moment, then both

heavy Lances stepped forward while the assault lance was still creeping backwards, creating a bowl shape that pinned some six mechs inside...and the 12 defenders all concentrated their fire on those six, ignoring the rest as the Wasp swarms ran through, around, and in between the larger mechs, pecking at them wherever they had an opportunity.

Arne and Flynn were gone by that point, both sprinting away from battle to the sides and trying to get the Wasps to follow...which they did. Arne had four on him, but he was just as fast as them, and he led them in a weaving path that brought them in close to a turret as he took some shots to the back. Missiles from that turret were going out to the bigger mechs, but the lasers and autocannons on it nailed one of the Wasps that was so focused on Arne that he probably didn't even realize the turret had the additional weapons.

The Wasp had its legs cut off at the waist as the autocannon blew through what the lasers had just damaged, and the torso of the Wasp rolled across the sandy ground a few times before coming to a stop.

The other Wasps immediately tried to turn and run, getting outside the turret range, but one more didn't make it, and now Arne was chasing the other two, putting his Large laser to work and popping one in the back as the main melee beyond was a fireworks show he did not want to get in the middle of.

He stuck on the tail of the Wasp until it got too close to that mess, then he turned and ran away again...with no Wasps taking the bait and following him.

But that was the wrong move for them, because he took off running sideways from the battle, then after nearly a kilometer he turned and headed east towards the enemy dropships. He wasn't stupid enough to go out to that death trap, but he was watching closely to see if any Wasps turned back to chase after him.

None of them did. Mechs were going down everywhere, including one of their own Orions. He saw the cockpit ejection just before it exploded in what must have been a reactor overload from damage. He watched as Jennings sailed up over

the battle, nearly getting hit by friendly missiles from the turrets, then his shoot popped and he thankfully had the ability to steer with it. Most of the cheaper chutes did not, but House Morten didn't cut corners. He angled towards the edge of battle and hopefully would get clear, but Arne could only watch for so long as he got behind the enemy lines and turned left, running up to a direct position between the enemy mechs and the dropships.

Still nobody noticed him.

"NARC 1 is green," he heard Flynn say to the turret gunners. "Light it up."

Suddenly all the turrets in range...now three because the Morten Mechs were still slowly retreating into the edge of the spaceport...sent missiles to the same location, and nearly all of them hit...with an already damaged enemy Rifleman going down some 15 seconds later.

"My turn," he whispered, running his Phoenix Hawk up to maximum speed directly towards the trailing Atlas that still hadn't managed to get within weapons range yet...all due to its slow speed and the assault Lance's gradual retreat...which was already a tactical win for the defenders. The Red Baron was a warlord, not a strategic genius, and Arne hoped his full attention was on the battle ahead, for if he turned around and hit him, it was a 50/50 chance whether the Phoenix Hawk would survive to get out of weapons range again.

And he needed to get within 100 meters to fire the NARC.

He was running twice as fast as the Atlas, so he was able to close on it fairly quickly, but he had a problem. If he stuck the NARC on the back of the Atlas, all that bulk would shield the signal from getting to the turrets. They wouldn't be able to track it. So he either needed to put it on one of the arms or the front, and doing either would be suicide if the Atlas noticed him.

Then again, there was one more way...

Arne had his eyes glued to the steps of the biggest mech ever made in the Inner Sphere, trying to discern any movement change that might indicate it was going to turn

around. It could torso swing only so far, and if it started to go one direction he was going to dance around it to the other side...but it was paying no attention to him whatsoever as it finally got up within firing range of one of the Victors and let loose.

The Victor shook from the massive impact, but it didn't fall...only pieces did, of armor and the front of its right arm, which had already been damaged. The Victor ignored the Atlas, instead continuing to combine fire with his Lance-mates to take out another medium mech...then a few seconds later they hammered another, and another, with the kill count going up fast. If they instead focused on the Atlas, it would soak up so much of the damage that the enemy would eat them up while they were distracted.

Every medium mech that went down meant the total weapons firing back at them decreased. Shoot the Atlas, and those weapons would stay the same number for a long time. Mathematically the Company Commander was doing the right thing, but it had to take some real balls to stand up to the Atlas's hammering and keep ignoring it.

But that let Arne sneak right up behind the Atlas and fire the NARC up at an angle. The Atlas was moving in a straight line towards the Victor, not dodging much, so when Arne got within 50 meters of it, sweating profusely from the strain of being so close to death, he had a fairly easy shot.

He stuck it on the back of the Atlas's head, and to whoever had designed the damn thing, it stuck the first time and held tight.

"NARC 5 is Green," he announced. "When you see it, light it up."

Arne pulled his Phoenix Hawk back to 150 meters behind the Atlas...then started firing into its right leg.

The Red Baron had a choice. Turn around to fight and kill him...which would spare the assault mechs the damage and keep them alive battering the rest of the enemy force even longer...or he could ignore Arne and just let him chip away at the leg.

But when the Red Baron saw the damage warnings from an impetuous little mech daring to get up that close behind him, Arne knew what he'd do.

The Atlas stopped moving forward, coming to a halt, then shuffled its feet as it spun around to the right. Arne immediately started running left, making the turn take longer as three Wasps hit him from the side. He ignored them and took off sprinting as fast as his mechanical legs would go, increasing the range and hoping to get outside the autocannon's effective targeting before he was smoked.

And since the Wasps were there, he decided to run in amongst them.

One of them exploded as the Atlas missed him and shot one of its own...but then all the missiles that had to be held back to avoid friendly fire in the mech melee now had a solid targeting lock on the NARC beacon as the Atlas's head was pointed a different direction. The turrets fired the missiles up rather than out, with a huge parabolic arc to avoid the friendly mechs and not so friendly ones that were not their target.

Three towers combined their missile fire and it rained down on the Atlas's head and upper torso, pummeling it so hard the Red Baron forgot about Arne long enough for him to get away.

But the NARC was also destroyed in the blasts and the missiles stopped coming. Arne waited until the Atlas turned its attention back to the Victor it had been working on before...which was when Arne went right back in, ignoring his yellow armor indicators as another Wasp clung to his backside like a tick and chewed away at him.

He went right back up behind the Atlas and put another one on the mech's head, this time daring to do so from the side, but the Victor held the Red Baron's attention too much, and the NARC shot out and stuck like a mechanical ear on the side of the head, giving two of the turrets a signal to track while the third was blocked by the head itself.

"NARC 6 is green, light it up," he said, which was necessary in case he accidentally tagged a friendly mech. He had

no way to deactivate the NARC once it was launched, so the communication was necessary to clear the turrets to launch.

Another, smaller wave came in and piled up damage to the top of the Atlas again, but this time the plates didn't hold and some of the missiles got through.

The Atlas stopped firing and ground to a halt. A silent statue for what seemed like forever...then it gradually lost balance as the neurohelmet that had been stabilizing the movements was no longer there, and the big monster toppled over in slow motion and smashed face forward into the sand with such force it kicked up a cloud that held the other mechs.

"Eat that ass hole," Arne said, seeing his back armor turn to red as he pivoted around and took aim at the Wasp glued to his butt. Two good shots into it and it ran off...and good riddance. He wasn't going to chase it. He had two more NARCs to use if he could find something out there to hit...

Half the mechs were down on the ground, and as he heard Flynn call out another NARC on the Catapult, only one missile launcher responded with a few salvos then went silent.

They were out of missiles.

A waypoint lit up from the Commander, indicating that the mechs should fall back around the nearest turret...which still had lasers and autocannons...and make the enemy mechs fight it as well. Arne stayed behind the enemy lines, trying to shoot the remaining heavies in the back enough to get them to turn and chase him...which worked sometimes and he drew them a hundred or so meters away before they gave up and turned back.

Each time he did that he saved his fellow mechs from a few big salvos, but he didn't know if it was going to be enough. One of the Awesomes and the Victor that had been hit by the Atlas were now down, and the other two looked like crap. Arne had to keep bouncing around the perimeter and distracting or adding fire where he could. His remaining NARC's were useless unless the battle got near one of the further turrets that still had missiles.

He waited for that opportunity, knowing the other turrets also had some of the long range missiles in them. He chose a Centurion...identical to his old ride...that strayed a little too far, and tagged it on the right arm with another NARC.

30 seconds later it was on the ground in pieces thanks to a fresh salvo from the new turret.

He never got a chance to use his last one, for the enemy refused to drift any further, and the Wasp hoard decided to take on the single turret the Morten Mechs were gathered around. They chipped away at it like a swarm of termites as it swatted them down one at a time.

Arne could not believe how stupid a move that was. They should have gone after the mechs and ignored the tower, but apparently they couldn't handle such a big, immobile target firing at them...and what were probably a lot of inexperienced mech *pilots* grabbed from who knows where and shoved into production models sitting at the factory, chose the easy to hit target rather than the important ones.

Arne let them roast the tower slowly, which did eventually go down, as he helped the remaining heavies and one Awesome continue to chew up the mediums that were left. All of the Red Baron's heavies were down, but none of the mechs...aside from a pair of surviving Javelins that had run out of missiles and had to go back to the dropships to rearm...were retreating. They were standing toe to toe and slugging it out with the superior tonnage of the Morten mechs, all of which were damaged at this point, against some mediums that hadn't taken a hit yet.

Arne wished he had more weapons on his Phoenix Hawk, but the NARC had been worth it to take down the Red Baron and the biggest mech threat out here, but things did not look good as he saw Commander Innit use his Victor's jump jets to launch his one-armed mech into the air and come down on top of an undamaged Griffin that, like all the other Red Baron mechs, was out of missiles. Most autocannons were likewise running low or empty, and while the Morten mechs that were

still in the fight had lost limbs and some of their weapons, the lasers and PPCs didn't have an ammo limit.

This was by far the longest toe to toe battle Arne had ever been in, and it was beginning to take its toll on the enemy weapons. Even the Wasps were running out of SRMs, having wasted it on the turret that they finally managed to take down without an explosive finale, but as the Victor landed on and crushed the Griffin, its legs broke off and the Commander ejected at the last moment, sailing up into the air as a nearby Centurion tried to shoot him out of the sky as he began parachuting down.

Arne immediately ran over to and engaged that Centurion, making him choose...that's what recon mechs were designed to do a lot of...between the unarmed mechwarrior and the armed Phoenix Hawk. The Centurion did the only sensible thing and turned to fight Arne...who fortunately had most of his forward armor intact. It was his rear armor that was shot to hell.

If he ran by him he'd expose that armor, which meant this time he had to stand and fight it out, but he could still move sideways and torso twist faster than the Centurion could, and that allowed him to dance back and forth, making the other mechwarrior miss shots he normally would have hit, while Arne landed everything as the Centurion just stood in place and pivoted.

Another rookie mistake that he made him pay for with his life a few minutes later.

When he finally finished with the Centurion, he was breathing so hard from both the heat and the stress, that he had to force himself to rotate around and scan the battlefield. He'd taken several shots to the face shield, enough to crack it, and now he could see daylight out his cockpit just above the hanging vid screen in front of him...which still worked, meaning there was at least one camera on the exterior that hadn't been destroyed...but a penetration of that thick armor plate, had it been delivered to the canopy only...would have killed him.

The stupid face shield that made you feel like you were fighting inside a box, had already saved his life.

Chalk another one up to House Morten superior tactics.

He looked around, seeing only a few mechs still on their feet. The rest were strewn across what looked like a carpet of parts with Flynn's Phoenix Hawk engaging 6 of the Wasps alongside a Rifleman that was so full of holes he didn't know how it was still in the fight, but it still had at least one Large laser operating, and when it hit a Wasp and punched through to the reactor, blowing it up and knocking another Wasp out that was beside it, the last four decided they'd had enough and turned to run...one of which was limping so bad it didn't make its getaway, and Flynn ran it down and finished it.

Arne wanted to chase the other three, but he saw in the distance the pair of Javelins coming back again. They were armed only with missiles, but that wasn't a fight he was going to take on alone, so he let them go, staring out across the distance to see what they would do and ready to head towards one of the intact turrets for cover.

But when the three Wasps caught up to them, the five light mechs simply headed back to one of the dropships as the other three vessels immediately took off. The last Wasp was barely up the ramp before it started to close, then that Union launched with such a hurry he knew the crews didn't want to be anywhere near this system when help finally arrived...though it would probably be a month or two before anyone back on Cholis was informed of what had happened here.

Arne sighed, long and heavy, as his heat sinks gradually brought down the mech's internal temperature, including the cockpit, as he sat drenched in sweat far more than any simulator run he'd been doing. He reached down to a small compartment near the floor and pulled out an insulated container with two water bottles in it, finding them hot to the touch but not scalding despite the insulation.

He opened and downed one before he could even think about it, then held off on the second as he walked his mech around the graveyard, knowing that some mechs, while down, were not always out of the fight and could shoot you from a prone position. He had far more experience in actual combat

than any of the original Morten guys, and he wasn't going to get sloppy here as he scanned all the carcasses for heat signatures that would indicate an active fusion drive...and did find a few that were still operational...but the mechwarriors piloting them had already split.

And now that those mechwarriors didn't have a ride home, they were walking out into the clear amongst the rubble with their hands raised here and there as he saw some of his own people moving around as well. He studied them closely, knowing that some might be carrying pistols that could kill one of his own pilots, but nobody seemed to be interested in fighting any longer.

"Arne?" Flynn's voice broke through after a long period of silence.

"Still here."

"I just found the Commander's body. He ejected, but he didn't survive the landing."

"Damn," Arne whispered. "I've seen three of our guys out here. We need a vehicle to come pick them up before they dehydrate. Same with the enemy pilots," he said, refusing to call them mechwarriors.

"How do you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Not just step on them right now," Flynn said in a tortured voice.

"If House Morten did that, somebody would have stepped on me and I wouldn't be here," he said gravely. "Just push the thought aside and stick with the job at hand."

"There's no more mechs to fight."

"The job now is recovery of our people, and then the enemy. Our guys first. Wes?" he said, hitting another switch on his comm board for the Rifleman.

"His comms out. I already tried. Will you take command?"

"I guess I should then."

"Give me an order before I do something I shouldn't do," Flynn pleaded.

"Get over to the dead turret and see if you can spot anyone that needs peeled out. I hope they're all safely in the tunnel, but check anyway."

"Going now," Flynn said, coming within 5 meters of one of the enemy pilots with his hands raised...and to his credit, he didn't step on him. After that he was beyond any of them and the temptation to do so.

Arne adjusted his comm to the spaceport control center.

"This Arne Keev, acting field commander of the mech Company," he said slowly. "I need someone to get recovery vehicles and breath masks out here immediately for our people, and another set with security to pick up the enemy prisoners."

"Is the battlefield secure?" the person on the line asked.

"It's secure. Hurry before we lose any more of them."

"On it. But we could use some help locating them out there."

"I can direct the vehicles, just get them out here *now*," he said angrily, knowing how this dry air messed with a person's lungs, and these people were going to be dehydrated anyway from the cockpit heat.

It was only a matter of seconds after he bit out that last word that he saw a hovercraft dart out of one of the spaceport buildings and race towards the battlefield. It took a lot more time for three more to come out, meaning someone in there had been on the ball before he had called, but the rest hadn't been. Arne didn't have a comm channel for that specific vehicle, so he just used a broad comm and made contact, directing them towards their own mechwarriors.

Unfortunately he didn't need more than one vehicle for them. Only 5 were still alive. The other 6 either died in their mechs or didn't survive the ejection process. And two of the living ones were in bad condition, both with broken legs from hard landings.

Nobody had been able to crawl out of the downed mechs, and Arne had went around checking what was left of the cockpits to make sure no one was trapped inside.

He let the search teams do the same for the enemy mechs after the hand raising prisoners were assembled, cuffed, and put into breath masks. After that he walked his Phoenix Hawk back to the mech bay and into its niche, letting the techs get to work on the massive amount of damage it had taken, though it was nothing compared to the Rifleman that had already come back and was standing off to the right, weighing probably half of what it had at the start of the battle.

When Arne climbed out of the cockpit there was a group of techs waiting for him, and all of them took up a cheer. He frowned. How could they cheer when they'd lost so many of their own?

But they didn't stop for a long time. Not until he'd gotten out to them and they'd been able to shake his hand and pat him on the back, with several of them thanking him for saving the colony and their own lives. He didn't feel like a hero, but they were treating him like one. He felt like a survivor after a lost battle, though they had stopped the Red Baron's forces and retained possession of the planet, protected all these people, but the mech Company had been destroyed and half their people were dead.

"Back to work," a voice yelled, and the techs, still all smiles, eagerly got to work on his damaged Phoenix Hawk.

Arne turned to see Wes standing there, already dressed in different clothes with a bandage on his head. He saw him looking at it and glanced upwards appropriately.

"Face shield doesn't provide perfect protection," he noted, far more chipper than Arne felt. "Well done out there. I saw the NARC you stuck on the Atlas. That saved us, I think."

"Half of us are still dead," he argued lightly, but without any anger at Wes.

"7000 of us are alive because of us," he countered. "We're mechwarriors. This is part of the job, and when we're the defenders we don't get to choose the battle. And nobody attacks an opponent with less mechs than they think are necessary to win. I knew this was going to be bad as soon as they came into the system. The most important thing is we

won. We just lost some at the same time. Don't focus all your concentration on one of those two things."

"I've never fought beside mechwarriors that I cared about losing before. They were all mostly dicks."

"This was going to happen regardless of whether we fought back or not. Because we did, we minimized it. I think they underestimated the turrets. Probably didn't have good intel on how beefy we made them. Maybe they didn't even realize they were here. But they knew how many mechs we had, I can guarantee that. They thought they had us, but we proved the slightly better. The techs don't understand, so I don't begrudge their victory celebration. Just make sure you don't dwell too much on the reverse."

"If this is what a righteous fight feels like, I'm not so sure I like it. Our guys didn't deserve to die."

"You'll feel differently in a few days once it soaks in."

"Have you been through this before?"

Wes nodded. "I did a couple years in the Neubenn mercenary unit. We were hired out to planets that needed help and expected a fight. This makes my fourth battle, and by far the largest. In my second we lost two guys, and I was in a funk for days afterward, but once it passed I could look at what we'd saved and realize that if we hadn't been there at that time, things far more horrific would have occurred, and the same is true now. Look at them."

Arne turned to glance at the techs.

"If we'd lost, they'd be dead or enslaved. Or would the Red Baron have ignored them?"

"No, he was here for blood," Arne said, feeling the first slivers of what he guessed was righteousness seeping into his mind...though the darkness seemed to have to be pried open to let it through in Wes's words.

"Every one of our fellow Company mates lost is a defeat, but every life that we saved is a victory. We've got 7,000 or so victories here, not even counting all the equipment and material we saved. People think defenders have it easy...we don't, unless people attack stupidly without preparing for it, or

unless they have a death wish. Attackers have it far easier. We don't get a lot of action, but when we do, it's the big, heavy fights that we're supposed to lose. Every time we hold it's an upset. This was an upset today."

"We should have lost," Arne agreed. "They fought stupidly."

"If fighting in a mech was easy, everyone could do it. It takes a lot more skill than people think...and those Wasp pilots were as green as you can get. I'm going to let my emotions settle for a few days before speaking with them, but I'm interested in seeing who they are and where they came from."

"The Red Baron has a Wasp factory," Arne said, no longer feeling indebted to secrecy after what had happened...plus the Red Baron was dead. "I'm guessing he just grabbed people and stuffed them in the cockpits for this attack. I think that's every mech he had in his possession."

Wes nodded appreciatively. "So there's nothing left for his subordinates to take over?"

"Just more Wasps coming off the assembly line. Nothing to hit us with again unless other bandits want to join together with them...and they won't. This will scare them off once word spreads. They like to hit soft targets," he said as Flynn was walking over towards them, already changed as well, but with no bandages.

"Commander," he said, looking at Arne, who shrugged at Wes.

"Your comm was down."

"Fine with me," Wes said. "But I don't think we've got anything more to do until a relief Company gets here, and we have to send word back on the next dropship to get that. We'll be lucky if any of those mechs out there are salvageable enough to get back up and running before then, so I think we're mostly going to be lounge lizards until we get back to Cholis."

"You think they'll call us back?"

Wes nodded. "Back to heal, reset, and retool. Standard procedure."

"Even me?"

"Why not?"

"They didn't rotate me out before."

"Well, you're going back regardless. The unit is going back, and you're part of the unit. End of story."

"Technically I'm attached to the Company, not part of it."

"You are after today," Wes said firmly. "Plus Lord Vander is going to want all of us back so he can debrief us. Do you like it here or something?"

"I was getting used to it, but Cholis is a lot nicer."

"They won't leave us here. They know we just took a huge hit and they'll cycle us all back to get reassigned to other units as needed. This mission is over unless the Red Baron's people try anything else."

"They're as good as gone," Arne promised.

"Then you need to get a shower," he said, avoiding wrinkling his nose at what he too must have just smelled like.

"Then we'll meet you at the pub with the other guys that survived so we can talk this through and see if we can learn anything from it."

"That's also a tradition," Flynn noted.

"I know," Arne reminded him, for they had the same tradition after Lance exercises in the simulators.

"We'll have coffee waiting for you," Wes said, excusing himself and Flynn.

Arne stood there for a moment, watching the techs working on all three mechs across the very empty bay. A bay that would have been swarming with the Red Baron's people gunning down everyone in sight if they hadn't defeated them.

All these people, all this equipment, he thought to himself as he was kind of able to feel the results of the battle. Not stuff stolen, but stuff saved. People saved.

He glanced around, seeing no one watching him, and just stared out at the cavernous mech bay for several minutes soaking it in...and every minute that passed by he felt more like a victor.

“Righteousness,” he finally pronounced. “I could get used to this.”

15

June 14, 2994
Federated Suns
Cholis
Morten Estate

Rannel Morten was sitting in one of her now three labs built in their embassy holdings. The first was a tech lab, the second a med lab, and the third a chem lab, which she was sitting in now across the ridge from the mansion and connected to it via a paved road that climbed to the peak of Home Valley and descended down into Prime where the lab had been built.

In it they were working on a number of projects, fiddling with this and that to make it better, or trying to build something from blueprints obtained elsewhere. Sometimes they even tried to backwards engineer tech they obtained, and when it came down to materials analysis that went to the chem lab. She was working on different armor alloys at the moment, running through a virtual program on her computer screen trying to pick and paste molecules and atoms together into new configurations...all the while trying to figure out how she'd actually fabricate any of it.

It was an old habit she'd picked up when something was bothering her, and the news of the attack on Drymo was just such a thing. They'd taken enormous precautions to defend all their new systems, and it almost hadn't been enough. A major disaster had just been averted, and it had cost the lives of 6 mechwarriors, two of whom she'd known.

The plodding footsteps coming through the door told her it wasn't one of her staff, and the Lord of Technology looked up to find the Lord of Military Operations walking towards here.

"You heard?" Vander asked.

“Yes,” she said solemnly, spinning slightly in her chair to face him, but otherwise remained seated. “How close was it?”

“Could have gone their way if they’d planned better,” he admitted. “But we think that was every mech the Red Baron had in his possession. He went all in to try and teach us a lesson and missed by an inch...though he didn’t live through the first half of the battle.”

Vander pulled out a datachip and put it on her desk.

“What’s this?”

“Battle footage I’ve selectively edited. Your NARC beacon worked. Without it, we would have lost.”

“It made that much difference?”

He nodded. “Using it in conjunction with the turrets in a large battle such as we had was the perfect situation. They were able to launch missiles up and over our own mechs and they came down without any friendly fire. They took out the Red Baron’s Atlas early in the fight. It took two NARC beacons to the head of the mech to do it. Like I said, the missiles destroy the beacons, but the second time was enough to punch through into the cockpit.”

“They landed one on the head?” Rannel asked. “Twice?”

“An Atlas is so damn slow it’s easy to aim at, and the recon mechs were the right choice. They tagged it from the side and from behind. Then got its attention to turn around. I apologize for doubting its effectiveness.”

“You’re not the only one,” she said, referencing herself.

“I know you’ve been trying to make a contribution here with limited staff and nothing really to work on except the lostech database, but by taking down that Atlas alone it turned the battle, and it also helped take down two other heavy mechs.”

“Did the towers run out of missiles?”

“They did,” he said, referencing another conversation they’d had. “And while this was more like a perfect storm, I want you to keep refining it for base defense situations. Hopefully the battle footage will help.”

“But still not mech to mech?”

He shook his head. "It's still too damn big to hit smaller mechs with, and if they turn away the signal gets blocked. It's a bad weapon system that the turrets make viable if you can get a recon mech in close, and this battle was so large and confusing they were able to slip through. Three mechs survived to the end, and the recon mechs were two of them."

"If it worked," she hedged, "why hasn't anyone else used it for base defense? I didn't have to invent any new tech to get the blueprints finished. We just don't have the tech to make it as small as the Star League had it. Anyone can build it bigger like we did. Why has everyone forgotten about it?"

"Even if you had produced one at the original size, it's not a very useful weapon in most engagements. It's a tactical maneuver you'd be lucky to utilize one out of every ten battles in mech to mech combat. As for base defense, you gotta have the missile launchers to swarm them. They're expensive, and when the missiles destroy the NARC anyway..." he said, realizing he was criticizing again. "I'm surprised how well it worked. And if something isn't in vogue in the Inner Sphere, you're not going to see scrappy tech crews trying to patch one together when the mechwarriors won't want it. They want something that can do damage."

"And their Generals?" Rannel pressed.

Vander shrugged. "I would not have tried this if you hadn't kept pushing it. I guess they're as blind as I am. You've found a diamond in the rough and brought it back to life. Any large mechs trying to assault a force like ours will now have to consider themselves a big fat target. Almost better to use a larger force of smaller mechs. It's something I'm going to have to consider more going forward, but this time it worked and saved a lot of people's lives. Feel free to say 'I told you so.'"

"I didn't think it would be that effective," she said, waving off his prompt. "I never considered a mechwarrior being able to aim it well enough to stick it on the cockpit. Did it cover the view? No, you said it was a side hit."

"It adhered well, but a more nimble mech could have reached up and rubbed it off. I don't think the bastards that got tagged had any idea what it was."

Rannel blew out a breath. "Which means it gets less effective as word gets around."

"We're not spreading the word yet. We've got a Lords meeting tonight at 6, but I wanted you to get a chance to see this first. It's still a bad weapon because it's not reliable, but as far as a prototype goes, it works. So now you can try and refine it. Mission accomplished."

"Thank you. I'll let my team know, if that's alright?"

"Just don't let them share those images with the locals yet."

She looked at Vander, knowing him too well to dismiss that expression. "Are we going to hit them back?"

"That's what we're going to discuss. If the Red Baron is dead and his forces are down to five light mechs, there's a power vacuum that's going to be filled regardless of what we're going to do. If we move fast before any other bandit king or warlord knows it's there, well, we have an opportunity."

"I see. Do you need any more made?"

"Not for an assault, no. And until we get more missiles to Drymo, it's a moot point anyway. Just keep working on it from time to time. Its pocket value has already been proved."

She nodded and he left, with her pushing aside thoughts of what she was working on and inserted the data chip, eyes glued to the mech carnage as seen from multiple camera angles, none of them great, but Vander had already made editing marks to highlight certain things.

And like he said, it had worked...far better than she hoped. It was the lowest hanging fruit in the lostech database they'd gotten from the Federated Suns, and while she couldn't replicate the original blueprints, this oversized version was possible with existing tech. Part of her thought it would be stupid to try, because the Federated Suns and others must have worked it out already and found it pointless. But the battle

proved that the oversized launcher and oversized beacon could still function.

Rannel dove into it, wanting every bit analyzed before the Lords meeting so she'd have something to offer in the way of a tech assessment as to what worked well or what could be better.

Still, the sight of that Atlas going down to the NARC beacons and missile barrage chilled her. In the workshop they were just big kid toys, but out there they were doing massive amounts of damage. And in this case, that damage had protected others and took that monster mech out of the fight before it could kill their own.

And those Phoenix Hawk pilots were gutsy as hell for getting in so close. She had to find a way to increase the range of the launcher, even if by only a few more meters...

A month and a half had passed since word of the Red Barron attack had hit Cholis, and now Sarah stood on a third story deck of the mansion as she watched the last pair of dropships blasting off from the spaceport farther down Home Valley. Paul, Vander, and Stephan were onboard one of them, while the rest of their invasion force was already enroute to the four jumpships waiting there.

Sarah was staying here and continuing to procure mechs, aerospace fighters, dropships, and perhaps more jumpships as needed. Cholis didn't have a market for any of those, not even spare parts, so she was having to utilize the Comstar net and work through brokers. She had two in New Avalon, another in New Syrtis. Unfortunately, big purchases like she needed weren't just available in a store somewhere. People who owned stuff would put it up for sale in certain markets, and you'd have to wait to find someone with something you wanted...which meant she was always checking with her brokers to find updates, and when something new came across that they thought she'd be interested in, but hadn't specifically requested, she'd get a message telling her about it.

She really wanted a warship, but ever since coming out here she hadn't found one listed for more than a hot second. Two had come up and were snatched up by other parties before she could even put in a bid...and those weren't even in the Federated Suns. The next best option was to buy dropships that had been converted into mini warships...such as the *Stars' Herald* had two of to protect itself with...but even those were rarely up for sale, and getting a custom job done was usually two or three times the regular cost if you could find someone qualified to do it.

Getting Aerospace fighters had been a hassle as well, for they were nowhere near as plentiful as mechs in a society that largely dismissed anything other than the walking war machines as the true determination of power in the Inner Sphere. Vander had schooled her otherwise, and it was a standing priority for House Morten to build up as much naval and air power as possible. After all, if you could shoot down or capture enemy dropships heading to one of your planets before they got there, then the mechs didn't even need to fight.

Drymo hadn't had any air, aerospace, or naval defenses, and look at the mess that had turned into. Thankfully she'd found a few good contacts in the industry and had been able to purchase 14 Sparrowhawks that were brand new off the assembly line, not even field tested yet. And she'd only been able to do that because there were unscrupulous individuals that had already bought them from the factories on existing contracts that were willing to sell a few here and there at 3 times the purchase cost and pocket the extra money.

Sarah didn't care about the corruption in those militias and Federated Suns forces...she technically didn't even know where they were coming from, for a good broker always kept such things confidential...but he'd vouched for the equipment and he hadn't failed her yet, so they'd got crated up aerospace fighters that needed full servicing and breaking in, but that was actually less difficult than reworking used craft into Morten standards.

Another broker had managed to pick up a pair of Stukas in rough shape, but the aeroframe was still solid, so even though Sarah had to pay a fortune for replacement engines and other parts, they'd managed to pull together two of the heavy, 100 ton attack craft that were much slower, but far more armed and armored than the 30 ton Sparrowhawk.

The rest of what she'd managed to get were a collection of Centurions...not the mechs, but the aerospace fighters by the same name...that were very old and had been rebuilt many times by other parties. They were flight worthy, though, and Rannel's army of techs had eaten up all the new spare parts Sarah could collect from dozens of different vendors across the Federated Commonwealth, but House Morten now had two full squadrons of aerospace fighters considered to be in active service, and half of them were going with the invasion force onboard two of the regular Overlords she had also managed to acquire, which had docking bays already built to handle the aircraft.

If they were going to operate on planet, though, they'd have to find a runway, because aerospace fighters were not Vtols, and even if you had slingshots installed to launch them into the air while grounded, there was no way for them to land back inside. Still, better to have them with the invasion force to screen for their 8 dropships, two of which were rebuilt *Mule*-class behemoths that Sarah had managed to acquire, while the techs were still working on repurposing another 6.

Those she had not gotten through the normal channels. Rather a new broker had come to her from the Periphery offering some things not available in the Inner Sphere. And while the Mules made a *Union*-class dropship look small in comparison, they were more or less outdated and not as widely used in the Inner Sphere anymore as they'd once been.

But on the Periphery, apparently you could find a whole lot of strange stuff if you knew the right people, and she'd begun making contacts with some of them that smelled fresh C-bills from a noble house that was said to buying.

It was amazing how fast word of mouth spread out here despite the lack of interstellar communications. Comstar didn't have HPG relays out there, so you had to get word around the old-fashioned way...and apparently that wasn't as inefficient as she'd once thought.

Hopefully, though, word would not spread that House Morten was coming until after they had already got to Gregoria. Vander hadn't wanted to send a scouting mission there and ruin the surprise, so the only information they had on the planet was from the people they'd captured and a little gossip from traders who had passed through there before and were now poking their nose around Cholis. Stephan had paid some of them quite well for a few basic maps and tidbits of information, but as far as the Federated Suns was concerned the planet didn't exist, and the same went for most of the Periphery that had escaped their attention.

It was said the planet had between 10 and 20 million people on it...which would make it about 10 times the size of Cholis. The Red Baron had taken it some years ago from another warlord, and who knew what the history was before that. It was not supposed to be like Turnix, and was said to be stable enough to hold a mech factory, but Sarah still didn't like them going in there blind.

If the Red Baron's mech forces had been eliminated, then there shouldn't be much heavy fighting, but if the population didn't care for the change, well, there was a lot of other ways to kill people outside of full scale battle when you only had a few thousand on a planet full of millions. Taking control of it was going to be dicey, which is why they were sending their A-team in, and they'd probably be there for a couple of years minimum.

Sarah would get requisition requests and other messages sent back to her via jumpship courier, so she didn't need to be there...even though she wanted to be. House Morten had never been split between planets before, and this was one of the downsides of it. Leonard Morten, the previous Lord of Logistics who had stepped down from the head spot 12

years ago so she could take it and he could have more free time on his hands was also going with them to fill her role there, and she had no doubt that he wouldn't need her help. He still knew this job better than she did in some ways, and would take on special projects to free her up for the wider 'maintenance' duties.

In that way, active members of House Morten never truly retired. They just scaled back, and that let younger ones step up and get experience earlier than they would have otherwise...but it also meant the brain trust was not always the Lords themselves, but also their predecessors, and that brain trust was being tapped into heavily, for there were also 3 other former Lords going with them along with a slew of the new Barons they'd been minting.

Stephan wouldn't be alone there by a long shot, but the mansion was going to feel diminished without having them here to bump into from day to day.

But with any luck, this new planet wouldn't become a money pit for them, and would just be something they could slide into command of and start reworking, with a tax structure already in place. For if it wasn't, House Morten wasn't going to be able to carry it the way they'd been carrying Turnix and Polvice. Drymo was solidly in the green now, producing enough money via exports to cover the cost of the workforce...though it'd be a long time before they recouped their full investment there. A very long time, but the attack hadn't put them behind production schedule for more than a day, maybe two. None of the infrastructure had been hit, and that was a credit to their mechwarriors who had toed the line and took the damage themselves.

And the turrets, she had to remind herself. She had to get replacement weapons for the one that got destroyed, and she'd continue to have to buy everything they needed until House Morten got some weapon production factories up and running.

Which was why she was really interested in that mech factory. She just hoped it was still intact by the time Stephan got

there...and after whatever he had to do that was necessary to secure the planet.

16

September 7, 2994

Periphery

Gregoria System

Zenith Jump Point

Stephan floated on the bridge of one of the *Mule*-class dropships that had been hastily reconfigured into a mobile command post as the *Beta Strider* it was attached to popped into the enemy-held system third in line. Another 15 minutes later the *Alpha Strider* would follow, with the *Gamma Strider* and *Epsilon Strider* already here and headed in towards the star as they let gravity tug them that way until they reached the point they wanted to camp out at.

But the Morten Protectorate jumpships were not alone.

"Contact," the sensor officer on the *Mule*, which was named the *Violet Pumpkin*, called out as soon as the other jumpship showed up on his screens in addition to the two friendlies. "750,000 kilometers. Looks like a *Liberty*-class jumpship. No IFF beacon detected."

Stephan and Vander exchanged glances.

"Sails?" the Lord of Military Operations asked.

"Sails are deployed," the sensor officer confirmed.

Stephan turned to the dropship Captain, but he was busy talking on a headset. The First Lord waited until he finished, raising an eyebrow when the Captain turned around.

"Captain Mendi says they've already made contact with the ship and it was in the possession of the Red Baron, but there's been a civil war going on here between his lieutenants and they're just waiting to see who the victor will be."

"Mech fighting?" Vander interjected.

“He doesn’t know, but three different men are claiming the Red Baron’s mantle on the surface and trying to get his ship to accept their authority. He’s been laying low not wanting to get involved.”

“Has he begun to retract sails?” Stephan asked, knowing that was necessary before they could jump to another system.

“Negative,” Mendi said with a shake of his head. “He’s playing nice now that he knows who we are and what the Red Baron did to Drymo. I’m told he wants to speak with the senior officer about the possibility of signing on with us as a cargo hauler.”

“Get the Falcons into space,” Stephan said as he floated his way over to another terminal. “And get this Captain on the line.”

Polly Vren launched from the bay of the *Sapphire Egg* and directly into space, with no atmospheric or gravity tug on her ship to adjust to. Her *Centurion*-class aerospace fighter was painted a deep red with silver and gray highlights, with the Morten Protectorate symbol painted on both of the short wings sticking out of the sides of the cockpit that preceded the main wings further back. Those had the ends tipped in gray, making it look like they were half as long as they actually were. A little visual camouflage that might help in a battle if someone was coming at her from above or below on a planet, but in the dark of space even the gray looked bright enough to stick out.

She flew one of four Centurions in the squadron, the others were Sparrowhawks, but only half were onboard the same dropship. The other six were on another Overlord and likewise deploying, with their squadron leader Dan Trevor getting them all into formation after making a few swings around the allied *Merchant*-class jumpships before heading towards the much larger Liberty.

It was a very old jumpship design, and you’d be hard pressed to see one operating in the better regions of the Inner Sphere. The last to be produced had come off the lines in the

2550s, with much better jumpships built to replace them...but it still had 4 docking points for dropships compared to the Merchants' two, and at present there were dropships attached to only half of them, both of which were *Mule*-class.

Her squadron...the Ardent Falcons...accelerated easily in the vacuum of space and were halfway to their target after only 8 minutes, with Polly snugly fit into her pilot's seat with both chest and leg straps to hold her in place as she coasted in zero g before they'd get to the 'flip over' point where they'd have to start decelerating, else they'd fly right past the target jumpship, then Dan's voice came over their otherwise silent squadron comm line.

"Straight from Lord Vander's lips to my ears..." he said dramatically. "We're taking the jumpship, and they don't like it. Neutralize any weaponsfire you get from the dropships."

"Shit," she said without transmitting, using a touch screen to pull up information on the Mules. And just as she expected, they each had a lot more firepower than she did...assuming these hadn't been modified.

"Are we just going to run at them and see if they fire at us?" Prit Scurry asked.

"We're doing a flyby, but not so close that we're easy targets. We need to scan those dropships and the jumpship to see if they've added anything cute. We'll wait until our dropships catch up if we have to do any major slugging."

"I thought we were supposed to neutralize weapons fire?" Polly asked.

"Yes, but how we do it is the key. If they detach to fight us, it's worse. If they stay in place, the jumpship blocks a lot of their own weapons. They can't fire everything forward like we can, Polly. So if we start taking fire, we figure out which battery it is and align on a squadron run at that individual one to take it out. If the other guns don't fire back, we don't pluck their weapons off. That's what 'neutralizing incoming fire' means."

"Yes, sir," she said, still new at this. She'd flown commercial shuttles for 7 years before finding her way out to Cholis to enter their Academy. She'd graduated to flight

readiness on the Centurion 8 months ago and had been flying practice drills with the squadron ever since, but this was her first actual mission.

Instead of asking more questions she checked her rear radar, seeing the two overlords in the fleet starting to follow along with two more Unions.

Four dropships versus two, plus her squadron. Hopefully the jumpship crew would realize this was a fight they couldn't win, and unless they pulled that sail in...a lengthy and delicate procedure...they couldn't jump out before they got there even if their capacitors were full, and it was a safe bet they only had a partial charge, though that could still be enough to get them to the closest of nearby stars if they had enough to make the initial jump breach.

When they got to the deceleration burn Polly flipped her aerospace fighter over and slowed down, her back to the enemy, which still felt ridiculous compared to how the aerospace fighter operated in air, but physics were physics and she didn't have an engine sticking out her nose to do the slowing for her, just a medium laser mount that would do next to nothing when fired to slow her momentum, though technically even light had a tiny amount of mass.

She had two more, one on each wing, and while medium range on an aerospace fighter was considerably longer than on a mech, she still didn't want to get close to those enemy dropships. Their squadron leader had other plans though, and he took the first position in a wide 'V' formation as they buzzed the dropship at considerable speed that would make it hard to target them on anything except a straight shot, which he had them all moving up and down slightly to further complicate enemy line of sight.

The Ardent Falcons passed over the Liberty in a slow blur, not hearing anything in the vacuum of space except the vibration from their own engines.

"They didn't take the bait," Dan said, with the squadron following him through a U-turn as they flipped upward as one and reversed course, but technically they were still gaining

distance on the jumpship until their thrust counteracted their drift.

Space combat physics again...

"Hopefully that means they got the message. We're going back by once more, then we're going to escort the dropships in. Keep your eyes peeled in case they were just waiting to see what we did and want to take a shot at us on the second pass."

So it wasn't over yet, and Polly kept a too firm grip on the joystick until they made their second pass in the same manner of speed and altitude...and still no one fired on them.

She let out a breath she didn't realize she'd been holding, then Dan's voice broke into the silence again.

"Lord Vander says they've worked out a deal and they've agreed to surrender. Unless they renege, our part here is done. We keep our distance and stand by until our crews have control of the ship, then it's back to our birdie bunks. You'd be amazed what kind of negotiating power an aerospace squadron has."

Polly snorted a laugh. As far as her first mission was going, it was uneventful...but it sure didn't feel like it. Her hands were shaking slightly, and she knew it had to be the adrenaline from the fear of maybe getting shot at, but it sure felt real enough. She'd have to do better next time before someone *actually* fired at her...

Six days later all eight of the House Morten dropships were a day out of Gregoria, having left behind their own crew to run the jumpship and confining the prisoners to the two captured Mules to either be let go later in another system or on Gregoria after the fighting was over...all with a sizeable sum of money in their pocketbooks to make the transition to the next stage of their life easier.

It was a bribe, pure and simple, but House Morten had long ago learned how to bribe properly. You made it a mutually advantageous exchange, their services for your money. You didn't go back on a deal, or eliminate any loose ends, or ask

anyone to do anything immoral...though sometimes you did ask them to do unethical things, like violating their duty, but if they were willing to do that, then it was their personal choice to do so.

The captured jumpship crew was in a bad position, and had Stephan's people been other raiders they might have just killed or enslaved everyone onboard. So when everything washed out and the crew found a way that they could not only survive, but get a little bit wealthy in the process...well, greased palms worked wonders in many cases so long as the people expected you to hold up your end of the bargain or they had no choice but to take it, and this was probably the latter since House Morten was an unknown out here.

As for the money, it seemed there were no less than 5 different currencies in play on Gregoria, with the most elusive being C-bills that everyone wanted. So when he'd offered to pay them in that currency, it seemed to seal the deal. And as soon as the replacement crew for the jumpship got established and made sure it wasn't going to fly itself apart...which by the look of it, it might...they were heading back to Cholis for a refit while one of the Mules would stay here and one would go back.

Stephan hoped to have at least one spaceport on the planet secure before then.

Communications with Gregoria had been a mess on the way there, with time lagged messages making it even harder, but it seemed that the three contenders for the Red Baron's legacy were camped out in the three major cities, each with their own faction, and none of them would even speak to the First Lord directly, but they were happy to have an underling or two lecture them on how they had no right to be here, they had to stand down and surrender their ships immediately...yadda, yadda, yadda and more pointless driven. House Morten had the superior military force in the system, and as they pulled up more surveillance of the planet as they approached, they didn't see anything to contradict that.

There were no space stations, no dropships in orbit, no aerospace fighters in play. What was camped out on the surface

was another matter, but they'd already been using their telescopic lenses to try and spot the spaceports, and so far it looked like the pads were mostly empty...though the primary city had 16 pads and a tarmac that looked like it could hold another 8 dropships without dedicated support facilities.

That was too big for the economy that was expected here, even with the mech factory in the major city, which they called Nilhorn. Once they took it the renaming would begin, and Vander was suggesting they go straight for the reported Red Dragon palace in Nilhorn after they took the spaceport, and make it clear who was in charge now.

Stephan kept sending messages and getting lackeys to respond, or no response at all, until the head of the mech factory signaled them wanting to talk.

"I am First Lord Stephan Morten of House Morten and the Morten Protectorate, which this planet is shortly going to become a part of."

"I am Head Administrator of Locarh Fabrication, Lord Morten, and I would ask that whatever hostilities that are about to take place, please spare our factories. We prefer to be an intact prize to be won rather than combatants."

"Who owns your corporation?"

"The Red Baron currently does."

"The Red Baron is dead. He died assaulting one of my planets."

"So we have been told, but the Red Baron is not a single man. It is a title, and the next Red Baron will take the dead man's place, though there is some confusion over the chain of succession, because his designated heir also died in that failed attack."

"I assume the Red Baron did not create your factory?"

"We have many factories here, and no, it was originally found by the Klemmings noble family. The Crobnak Raiders seized this planet some time later and executed the family members, taking possession of it from them. Later on the first Red Baron defeated the Raiders and claimed the planet for himself. Ever since they have been in possession and we obey

them. If they managed to defeat you and retain the planet, we will continue to serve them. However, if you defeat them, well, I'd like to establish a relationship prior to the fighting starting," he said with a lag slight enough to be annoying.

"A wise move. You said factories in the plural. What do you have in addition to the mech factory?"

"We also produce a wide range of parts for many mechs, as well as build land vehicles and aircraft. We..." he continued as a pistol appeared behind him on the camera and suddenly the man's head exploded, blood coating the lens for a moment until a hand wiped it off and the executioner took the place of his victim.

"There will be no deals made. This planet and everything on it belongs to the Red Baron. You will land your dropships at the spaceport, then your people will walk out of them, unarmed, and surrender to the local authorities. Your jumpships are to..." he cut off as the screen blanked, and Stephan broke his anger-induced screen lock to see Vander's finger pressing the cancel button on the transmission.

"I think we've seen enough."

Stephan glared at the empty screen for almost a minute, thinking through his rage while Vander waited for him to say something.

"Why did he make the call with one of their people nearby?"

"He probably didn't realize it."

"But that bastard had to be in their facility. Which probably means they've got plants throughout the civilian infrastructure. At least at the higher levels."

"Which means we'll have some digging to do after we cut off the head of the snake."

"We don't know what we're getting into," Stephan warned.

"We know they can't stop two plus Battalions of mechs."

"But we don't have the manpower to pacify the populace if they're hostile, or being held hostage by a police

state. I expected the Red Baron's operation to be small and holding the planet under fear of what they could do. I agree we need to go straight at their strongest point and make it clear they can't stop us...but I want intel first," he said, bringing up a map of the planet that was being verified in chunks as they approached...though those chunks were not very detailed still being a day away from hitting atmosphere.

Stephan scanned the other cities beyond the major three, then pointed to the northernmost one that still counted as a city in his perspective. It had a guessed 500,000 to 700,000 in population, and was not one of the locations the would-be next Red Barons were set up in. It also did not have a spaceport, according to the traders they'd gotten some of this information from, but it did have an airstrip for on-planet commerce.

"Here. We take the airfield and give our Falcons someplace to land, and see what kind of a response we get from the Red Baron's people. We set up shop, get the lay of the land, then launch against the main spaceport when we're ready."

"I still prefer them not knowing what's coming. They'll be able to size us up if we disembark the mechs."

"We can keep some on the dropships unless they're needed. I really want our Falcons up and doing surveillance, and we need to talk to the locals and see if we can find some without an executioner looking over their backs."

"We don't have the troops to really settle in. This has to be a decapitation strike."

"I agree, but we need intel first. Not to protect the mechs, but to figure out what we need to seize and in what order. We also don't want them torching everything so we can't claim it."

"I did get that impression as well," Vander said, referencing the head shot. "You think we're biting off more than we can chew?"

"No. We just need to know how best to chew it...unless the population is fanatical to the point they're practically Dracos. If that's the case we need to know before we put

people out into positions where they could get assassinated around every street corner.”

“That’s why I want everything run out of this dropship and not one of their captured buildings,” Vander insisted. “A larger population doesn’t always mean a more civilized one.”

“And yet the head of the largest corporation just wanted to get the ball rolling for when we take over,” Stephan said, still trying to work through in his mind what he’d just witnessed without becoming jaded.

“They will probably have a survivor mentality, keeping their heads down and switching sides to whoever wins. Except the zealots, and if the head of the mech factory wasn’t a zealot, I wouldn’t assume the populace is going to have very many of them.”

“A few thousand scattered around can cause a lot of damage in the right places.”

“Nothing we can do about that right now. We have the heavy hammer, and we need to use it against the stuff they can’t move or hide. The spaceports and the palace.”

“Jedsen first,” Stephan said, referencing the northern city that was currently covered in a blanket of snow according to the most recent live images. Snow or glacier, he couldn’t tell at this point, but either way it was going to be cold...

They’d slowed their approach and made several orbits of the world picking up more detailed images of the entire planet before finally landing, not bothering to call the airfield operator for fear of another potential helper being executed, but began broadcasting multiple messages, first from orbit, and then more directed ones at Jedsen and the airfield itself, ordering all aircraft to stay on the ground else they’d be considered hostile...as well as ordering aircraft already in the air to either land or divert to other cities.

Stephan made a small speech to the planet, not knowing how many people would actually hear it, explaining what had happened on Drymo, the death of the Red Baron, and the announcement that House Morten was here to...as he put

it...claim pirate's rights, which meant that everything the Red Baron had now belonged to the man who killed him. He then went on to explain the Morten Protectorate and how this planet would become part of it and under his protection against other warlords and raiders...as well as providing an economic and travel link back to the Inner Sphere.

He didn't know if that would be a bonus or a problem, because some of the people they'd come into contact with in their business dealings in the Periphery had reported a dislike of the Inner Sphere...but the businessmen would understand the value of it, and he hoped to make it clear that it wasn't going to be business as usual. That when he replaced the Red Baron, the planet would become much more lucrative and prosperous.

And given that he was part of a noble family, that had a great deal more weight than coming from a glorified pirate like the Red Baron...whoever he actually was. More like a costume someone wore to claim control of a band of raiders.

The snow-covered airfield had three runways, one long and two medium poking off a central hangar complex. The runways themselves were clear, obviously having been plowed, but the snow cover appeared to be quite thick, and when the 8 dropships began landing on the 3rd runway near the hub and blocking it, they saw that the snow was actually more than 3 meters deep everywhere.

This wasn't just some snowfall. The city had to have been carved out of the landscape...or else the winters here were very aggressive when it came to precipitation.

The *Violet Pumpkin* that was operating as his command center was set down in the middle of the line of dropships, making the runway look extremely thin as its bulk was some 158 meters wide and the landing gear barely fit on the runway. Both the Unions and the Overlords they had with them were nowhere near as fat, but they still looked too big for where they were sitting, and it must have been an impressive and intimidating sight from the control tower that was shorter than all of them.

A heavy Lance of mechs came out of the *Emerald Egg* and began walking patrol around the buildings at the airfield, bypassing a few commercial planes that were sitting on a nearby taxi way. As the mechs presumably got everyone's attention, three hovercraft came out of the *Orange Pearl* and raced to the base of the control tower complex, which was actually two buildings with the tower standing beside and melded into the infrastructure.

Colonel Miles Zephram, one of the few infantry militiamen that had come out from Neubenn, had been in command of a training group on Cholis when the attack on Drymo had occurred. He'd been expected to start the creation of the House Morten Tactical Operations Army and have years to grow it, but life seldom gave you predictable timetables, and Vander had asked him to bring along as many of his recruits as he thought were combat ready, a few of whom had served in other militaries in the Inner Sphere, but most were just green kids wanting to become soldiers and had left their homes on dozens of Inner Sphere worlds for the chance to join the excitement of House Morten on Cholis.

Vander watched them approach uncontested and then spill out of their vehicles, breaching a door as he monitored their radio chatter on an earpiece that the rest of the command center crew wasn't privy to.

"Resistance," he noted for Stephan's sake. "Small arms...they're down. Tower control reached...no more hostiles. Tower secured, but the rest of the complex still has to be cleared..."

Colonel Zephram stood in the center of the control tower next to the four prisoners they'd taken as one of his men bound their hands in flimsy cuffs from a pouch on his pelt that could hold dozens of the devices. These four hadn't fought back and were probably non-combatants, but you could never be sure. Two other men had met them on the stairwell up, and the clear shield that he held in his left hand had several cracks in it from their slug thrower pistols.

Small caliber, not much penetration, but if it had hit his combat armor it would have broken through or nearly. The Colonel was encased head to toe in Neubenn militia armor that he'd smuggled with him to Cholis, as had several other people. It was custom crafted to fit his body exactly, and couldn't be given to others to wear anyway, so it had been destined to become junk under House Derren and the 'cost cutting' efforts had left everything so chaotic with the mass firings that nobody had even bothered to notice when he carted it and several other small items off as he left the base.

The armor had been specially created by a factory on Neubenn at House Morten's request...meaning the majority of his troops didn't have it. It was very good against laser pistols and rifles, and it would take two shots in the same spot to get through. Slug throwers had much more effect, and a single hit would break the affected area like dropping a glass mug on the ferrocrete, but he'd seen it slow down the bullets enough that they would only indent into a person, causing damage but not nearly as much as most of the kinetic force was absorbed in the pieces that would flake off and leave jagged edges behind.

It was by no means perfect protection, but against laser wielding foes it could make you feel invincible in short firefights. The shield he carried was a breaching shield, designed to absorb a lot more than his personal armor could, but it was heavy...too heavy to be carried around for very long, but when moving into tight confines that weight was a blessing as he had gone in first and absorbed the shots on the shield.

His men also had several of the breaching shields, known as 'blankets' because they covered you from neck to toe and were a little less than a meter wide, allowing you to get most of your body behind them. But their personal armor left a lot to be desired, though the fact they had any was due to Lord Rannel's frantic efforts prior to leaving to piece together protection from vests, helmets, and any other locally available purchases while molding the other pieces in their chem lab one at a time. As a result, his men had virtually head to toe protection except for a few spots around the armpits and

crotch, though there was a 'skirt' over top that looked dumb and made some extra noise, but would protect the exposed areas from anything other than a shot straight up from the floor below them.

The material was not as good as the Colonel's, which was another reason why he had gone in first, but there was no military presence in the tower. Just a couple of thugs with guns who now lay broken and bound on the other side of the room...for the Colonel had simply charged into them and beaten them into submission with his armored fists, knocking away their weapons and subduing them in a show of considerable skill.

He also didn't want the first lesson his greenies to learn was you always shot whoever was shooting at you. That could make them even more trigger happy than they already were.

"Jorgins, Nan, and Denning...stay here and hold this position. Do not let any of them up for any reason. I'll send someone to collect them shortly."

"Sir!" two of them shouted at the same time, the adrenaline pumping through their veins making their volume far louder than needed to be.

"Secure those pistols," he said, pointing to the pair he'd left on top of a table, then he led the rest of his 36 men off through the remainder of the complex, taking a few more prisoners but finding everything else deserted and seeing several bodies fleeing across the access road from the airfield towards the city, boxed between snow walls. There had to be at least a dozen of them.

"Facility secure," he reported to Vander. "Two hostile prisoners, 11 complacent. Requesting pickup and relocation immediately."

"On its way," the Lord said immediately. "Any problems?"

"No. They didn't intend to fight here. But the two thugs might be your enforcers. The rest of the people fled back towards the city on foot. Do you want them picked up?"

“Let them go. I need you to hold what we’ve got and clear all the hangars and aircraft.”

“Understood. Zephram out,” he said as he jogged back towards their initial entry doors carrying the heavy Blanket with him. “Next building,” he announced. “Same formation.”

17

September 18, 1994

Periphery

Gregoria

Jedsen Airfield

The past week and a half had gone by tediously, but also fast. Stephan was doing something almost constantly in conjunction with his own people or the locals...all of which came to him rather than the other way around. He wasn't sending anyone into the city aside from his mechs and the Colonel's strike teams, and they weren't staying put. Already they had found and eliminated three not-so-secret police stations and got into some quick by intense firefights there as they took them, cleared the buildings of all personnel, useful equipment, or databases...then they had the mechs surgically demolish each building into a pile of rubble then move on.

Stephan wanted a clear message sent. The Red Baron's enforcers could not stop House Morten, and House Morten was not simply stepping into their shoes. This was *real* change, and the people who had been taken to those stations for beatings and had lived through it should understand the significance of it...same went for the prison facility they'd just liberated two days ago, though there wasn't that many prisoners in it. Apparently most of the dissidents were executed, and only those they thought could be 'rehabilitated' were sent to the prison. If they survived, they'd be released eventually as an object lesson to the populace...or because they were too valuable to be killed, so there was a lot of rich people's kids, businessmen, and even a few of the Red Baron's own men that had fallen out of favor with him that all got summarily released.

As far as actual criminals went, the only ones in there were for petty crime. The more violent ones were either killed or recruited, and that was apparently standard practice across the planet. Why pay to feed people that were of no use to you for years on end?

Almost all of the newly freed prisoners required medical attention. The 'food' served to them was horrible, and malnutrition was causing as many deaths as disease, for even a mild virus became murderous when your body didn't have the fuel needed to fight it off. Paul had negotiated with one of the local hospitals to work for them after they'd taken down two of the enforcer dens, and all the people from the prison had went there while the prisoners taken by House Morten went to a series of prefab buildings set up on the large snowy areas between the air strips that had been carved back to allow some forgiveness of planes that might not hit the runway square on. Those strips of light snow had been expanded back by mechs cutting out chunks of the snow pack by hand in some cases, then using the airfield's own equipment to clear the more manageable piles. Into those slots a makeshift prison and hospital and warehouse complex was created, most of which was in anticipation of the two jumpships' return that Stephan had already sent back to Cholis for more supplies and personnel.

And all the while, none of the would-be warlords in the other cities even bothered to communicate with House Morten, let alone attack them, and Stephan was noting on the local media how they were seeing that as a sign of weakness. A foreign invader lands on the planet and the so-called 'rulers' didn't do anything to respond.

Though that was primarily from Jedsen's media. The others probably had enforcers breathing down their necks censoring what could be said, but any time any of the remaining ones in Jedsen poked up the Colonel would soon be there to follow. Most had gone to ground by now rather than continuing their terroristic duties, but the last of their police stations would end up being turned into rubble within the next two weeks,

essentially erasing their visible presence from the city that had roaming mech patrols going where they liked, and Vander made sure they went *everywhere* to make it clear who was in charge.

Aside from some small arms fire that appeared and disappeared quickly, the mechs were not interfered with and the local vehicle traffic gave them a wide berth, as did the civilians.

But there were problems. Shipping in and out of the city had been blocked in some cases, meaning exports weren't getting to the other cities and imports weren't coming in. Paul had taken over full control of the city government, kicking out the local governor and ruling council...those that had stuck around long enough to be found...and had immediately started trying to address the supply chain problems while keeping almost everything else in place. That meant all the tax revenue for the city was coming directly to him...and not to the Red Baron's palace.

Leonard Morten was working with what appeared to already be a large network of smugglers...and new ones suddenly popping up...to keep some necessary items flowing past the Red Baron blockades and checkpoints on the roadways...but there were so many ways in and out they couldn't effectively siege their own cities, and the holes that were left were enough for the 68 year old Logistics pro to begin working enough of his magic to keep the grocery stores stocked and fuel trucks rolling, but it was a work in progress, and whenever they got one thing semi-fixed something else would start running out and even with a number of businesses now openly helping them, it wasn't a great time to be living in the city.

Petty crime was up due to the lack of a police force, but the large scale stuff was still subdued out of fear of the mechs. That might change over time, but there were actually a lot of people emigrating to the northern city to get away from the Red Baron's people...and some of those brought resources and intel along with them.

The Red Baron's 'cult' extended across the planet, with a zealous and brutal ruling regime with tendrils everywhere that put down even the least bit of criticism of the rulership or a desire for change. It was classic fascism, not allowing even a differing opinion without consequences, but the Red Baron's people didn't actually make anything. They had to rely on the local population to do that, and if they squeezed too hard they'd kill their own economy.

Some bandits wouldn't care, but the Red Barons were apparently not so reckless. So they selectively used their brutality to keep the rest of the people in line through fear...and with millions of people essentially working for the Red Baron under crushing taxes and pathetic wages, he'd created a semi-slave population that unscrupulous corporations desired. Hence they'd built up a significant industrial complex beyond the mech factory alone.

And it had made the Red Baron organization extremely rich. Rich enough to field 48 mechs in their assault on Cholis, as well as having maybe a Company more on Gregoria, most of which were Wasps, but they'd seen at least one Shadow Hawk at the main spaceport out on patrol.

Vander was still itching to hit it, but Stephan kept delaying past the return of the jumpships as they brought four more dropships with them, including several officers from the Cholis police forces who'd volunteered to come here and start creating a new department. More recruits would come, Sarah's message had promised, but they'd have to come from offworld so it would take months more...but at least Stephan had something to work with other than his soldiers, which could provide security, but that wasn't the same thing as police work.

As it was, the sign of a few police officers nabbing some thieves robbing stores made it's rounds in the media, and suddenly things started to quiet down a little, but when they learned how many were actually here they'd probably escalate again.

Stephan had hoped taking over this planet wouldn't require reworking everything from the ground up, but when it

came to the police force there was no other choice. He was not going to employ the local thugs even if they wanted to switch sides, and the city would just have to suffer through the transition pains until a proper police force could be constituted.

But on the bright side, they were getting paid out of the tax money and not the Morten war chest.

The jumpships took approximately 11 weeks for a round trip, and while keeping one here at all times, Stephan sent the others back, including the captured Liberty, and all started making round trips bringing in more and more of their dropships, with the airfield becoming littered with them over the coming months while keeping the main runway intact for the Falcons and the sparse civilian flights, because the other cities were mostly not allowing the planes to come and go from Jedsen.

Stephan had kept them in the northern city some 7 months as they reworked it, with everything seeming so calm and predictable that it took the planet by shock when one day House Morten suddenly moved ten of their dropships over to the main city spaceport under cover of their aerospace squadron and all hell broke loose...

Chad Pergum sat in one of the gunner's seats controlling two of the *Violet Egg's* 6 PPCs as he fired as fast as the recharge on the massive weapon would allow into the side of a nearby *Union*-class dropship that was stupidly attacking them rather than heeding the order to stand down as they landed. The *Violet Egg* was already on the ground and hammering it with its massive amount of weaponry, but the crew of the Union didn't seem to care about the mismatch, and Chad was under orders to target their weapon systems only instead of whatever part of the armor plates were easiest to hit.

He was aiming for one of their own PPCs, and had hit near it twice so far, which was frustrating considering both ships were standing still only a few hundred meters apart, though there was another Union also firing at them from the east side, while this one was on the northwest. Chad's batteries couldn't

get hit from the east, so his weapons were safe from its fire, but he needed to take out the longer ranged weaponry on the Union before it got in any good hits on them, for it didn't seem to be in too bad of disrepair, and all of the standard weaponry appeared to be functioning.

As they fought it out, the other 9 Morten dropships assigned to this attack were landing all around them. The *Violet Egg* had been chosen to come down first, but it only had a minute and a half head start. Now the landing dropships were also adding their firepower, and soon the Union he was shooting at decided to take off before it was destroyed.

It got about 500 meters up into the air before its engines were shot out from underneath it by multiple dropships and a group of the Ardent Falcons whipping by so fast Chad didn't even see them...but he did see the 'hold fire for friendly aircraft' beacon light up on his targeting screen...then it disappeared just as fast, with him returning to fire one more shot before the Union started to reverse course due to the reality of physics, then the cease fire order came through and he watched in silence as the dropship fell back down and cracked open in a few places as it smashed into the landing pad's ferrocrete, sinking in it seemed, though it was hard to tell now that the landing gear were nowhere in view.

The return fire from the Union stopped...apparently they'd had enough or the power lines had been cut. Either way, he was no longer cleared to fire at it and turned his attention to the Vtols on the perimeter that were poking their noses in close enough to fire off LRMs then darting away while the Falcons were trying to clear the sky of them, but there were so many. They were coming out of what seemed like everywhere and showering his dropship with missiles.

But when the other dropships came down, they had more targets than they could handle, and the soft 'whumps' on the hull almost completely cut out as the combined assault force was starting to get control of the local airspace...though he saw one of the aerospace fighters go down under a lucky missile barrage from multiple helos. They didn't last long, and

soon they were flaming wreckage on the way down to the ground as the rest of the Falcons swooped in for vengeance, but the pilot had the last laugh as he floated down gently to the ground, having ejected soon enough to avoid the crash of his own fighter into one of the nearby city buildings that surrounded the massive spaceport that had been built almost in the center of the metropolis.

Chad didn't want to think about who might be in that building when it got hit, but they hadn't targeted it intentionally. And if these damn Red Baron zealots would just surrender, none of this would be necessary.

But they weren't, and House Morten was going to have to do this the hard way...but 26 minutes after the initial landing of the *Violet Egg*, the spaceport and the airspace over the city of Nilhorn was theirs, and mechs were already marching across the spaceport and ordering crews out of the other local dropships that had not fired on them. Their weapons had to be secured, but it looked like they didn't want any part of this fight.

And slowly, some 72 mechs...two Battalions exactly...strode out of the dropships and into the city, with most of them heading through the streets towards the Red Baron palace...

Grady walked his 70-ton Warhammer through the streets of Nilhorn, with not a person in sight. Apparently the fight at the spaceport had triggered a clearing of civilians all around it, including the usually crowded vehicular traffic. The roads were clear aside from parked cars, and he made sure not to step on them, not knowing who or what might be inside. If someone had left a dog inside while they were shopping, he definitely didn't want to squash it.

He walked at the head of a line of mechs meandering out from the spaceport, but taking a zigzag path so the Red Baron's forces couldn't predict their exact movements and set up an ambush. The Shadowhawk that had previously been guarding the spaceport had stupidly tried to engage the dropships as they landed and now lay broken on the tarmac. A

few Wasps had been spotted by aerial reconnaissance, along with some small tanks, but Grady had yet to encounter them.

He continued walking his heavy mech, which was outfitted in its original weapons package. 2 PPCs, 2 Medium lasers, 2 Small lasers, 2 machine guns, and an SRM-6. That made it good at street and infantry fighting, as well as being able to attack at range at the spaceport with the PPCs. The air continued to be clear as the Falcons kept watch, so he kept walking a path towards the palace, waiting to be attacked eventually.

His instincts were just as good as his reflexes, for as he passed a short skyscraper the building suddenly detonated and blew out across the street and into his mech, knocking it aside as he stumbled to keep it on its feet. Eventually his left gun-barrel arm hit the opposite building and he was able to right himself...but the detonated building was careening over onto the street and dropping boulder-sized rubble as it did.

Grady ran forward, knowing from past experience you couldn't backpedal as fast as accelerating. He hung close to the far building and ran, stepping on a parked car in the process, as dust and chunks of ferrocrate bounced all over, but he came out of the dust cloud as the waterfall-like roar of the bulk of the building came down behind him, smashing into the nearby one, then bending and just falling apart, smashing the area he had just run through with enough force to have pancaked and probably destroyed his mech had he hesitated. Or at the bare minimum he'd have been pinned inside waiting to be dug out.

"Commander Grady," Lord Vander's voice spoke evenly through the comm several moments later.

"Still here," he reported. "I didn't see any weaponsfire. They must have had a debt charge on the building."

"Not just one. They leveled a few dozen buildings creating a ring around the palace, and you've got tanks headed your way on the inside. Worry about them and I'll get help to you."

"How many?"

“Double digits. They’re coming out of parking garages all over, along with infantry.”

“Wonderful day for a fight,” he said mock cheerfully, though he was still rattled after almost being killed by that building. “Do you see any of those Wasps yet?”

“Not yet. But I’d guess they’re in there or fleeing, and the Falcons haven’t spotted them yet. If you can get to the palace grounds, I can get you some better air strikes against the tanks.”

“I copy,” Grady said, accelerating his mech again and taking the fastest route to the palace he could. He got up to almost it’s full speed before having to slow down and make a 90 degree turn at an intersection four blocks up, at which point he got hit by a tank’s autocannon that was barely 60 meters away.

Grady tipped down both PPCs and fired one at a time, finding the first shot was enough, and used the second on the tank second in line as four more were there, all aiming up at him and firing with their autocannons while some infantry on the sidewalks hit him with single SRMs.

His armor took the hits, and could take many more before he was in trouble, but he couldn’t let them whittle him down like this, so he fired his machine guns at the infantry and used his lasers on the third tank while his PPCs recharged. It was a blood bath for the defenders, but they held their ground and did what damage they could to him, then Grady stomped on over and through the remains of the tanks, allowing a few of their surviving crews a few seconds to further climb out and flee before he crushed what was left of their broken vehicles. If they weren’t actively shooting at him, he didn’t consider them to be a threat, and he also wasn’t going to waste a single second here while more tanks were probably moving to intercept him.

He ran down another block, then got snipped at off a side street as he passed through. He kept going one more before turning left again on a straight line to the palace some 8 blocks ahead.

And there were plenty of tanks in the way.

Grady kept running and gunning, not stopping to make sure every tank was taken out, and sidestepping some of them when there was enough room to do so, though he had to scrape his shoulder on the buildings twice to get through, but the tanks he didn't shoot with a PPC, when they spun around to target him, were shooting at his intact back armor rather than continuing to chip away at the front.

He destroyed another dozen plus, bypassing even more and not even bothering to hit the infantry with more than a scattering of machine gun fire when they were standing out in the street plain as day launching missiles at him from tri-pod mounted launchers. The guys with the shoulder-mounted version, well, let them try and catch up with him, for his mech could run far faster than they could.

His arms and legs took some hits from them, but they weren't able to reload before he got by...then he came up to an open area around the palace, which was set inside a giant roundabout, but guarded by a two-story high black iron fence that Grady just rammed into with his gun barrels held high, taking the impact on the mech's elbows and knees, then he was inside the parade-like grounds with...

His damage computer flashed a warning, indicating he had taken damage to his left arm, and his radar now picked up a Wasp coming out of a fire station garage. It hit him with both its single Medium laser and it's SRM-2, but it wasn't the only one in the garage. Two more came out behind it, as well as more missiles being fired from windows of the distant, but surrounding buildings.

Grady pivoted and pumped a laser shot into one such building within the palace compound itself, taking out a fixed missile launcher as he kept moving around, plucking the defenses within the palace that fired at him until he had made a circle around the complex, with one of the Wasps following him and the other two coming around the opposite side. Ignoring the outer building missile fire, he picked one of the Wasps ahead of him and opened up on it, landing everything as it just stood still next to a tree and fired back with its pathetic

weapons package even for a 20 ton mech. It was built for recon, not slugging matches against other light mechs, let alone a heavy, but every bit of damage they added further chipped away at Grady's armor.

The other Wasp pilot wasn't as stupid, hitting his jump jets and landing off to Grady's left, making him choose which target to hit and unable to quickly move back and forth. Grady finished the first Wasp with his second salvo, then continued to run forward, ignoring both the side Wasp and the one behind him as he struck out at the buildings ahead of him, tearing huge chunks out of them around the windows where the missiles were coming out. He silenced three more of those locations, then banked hard left, carving up divots in the manicured lawn as he came around on the leaper Wasp and unloaded on it as reconnaissance data from the Falcons pinged multiple tanks closing in.

Grady knew better than to just stand still and let them engage as they like, so he kept running through the Wasps, taking the one down and ignoring the other as he popped a couple tanks while taking a second lap around the complex.

"Incoming," one of the aerospace fighter pilots said over the comm, and a moment later he was buzzed by three of them as they targeted some of the tanks.

Grady reversed course, making his next predictable lap not happen, and turned back to hit the last Wasp...which chose to run instead. He hammered it in the back with a PPC, but it used its jump jets to get over the nearby trees and, with its land speed, quickly put distance between them and got around the edge of the palace and out of sight, so Grady turned back to more of the missile launcher positions in the nearby buildings as some of his chest plate indicators glowed yellow from the accruing damage.

But they wouldn't get much further as a House Morten Victor suddenly came out of a side street, with Grady knowing the mech must have spotted a low enough point in the rubble to use its jump jets to get over. It immediately started firing on the closest tanks, and Grady soon saw several of them just stop

in the middle of the grass or street and pop their tops with the crews running out, knowing they were essentially trapped inside the rubble ring and there was no way they were going to take down both mechs.

"Thanks, laddie," he said to Ollie Carson in the Victor.

"Sorry I'm late. How bad are you chewed up?"

"I'm fine," he said, taking another missile shot from a building, then he turned and smoked that window with one of his Medium lasers, ignoring what collateral damage might be done to people living there...but he couldn't just let them shoot at him with impunity. "But we got little missile buggers everywhere."

"What do we do with the empty tanks?"

"Leave them. Lord Vander might want them."

"Copy that. What about the palace?"

"It's not going anywhere. Find that Wasp," he said as the Falcons signaled they were coming in again...then a fusion reactor overload rocked the far side of the palace.

"I think that was the Wasp," Ollie said as Grady began running around, sniping a few missile popping windows as well as a tank that didn't feel like surrendering, before he got to visually confirm the third Wasp was down thanks to the friendly birds.

"Aye, it's down," he confirmed to Ollie as he kept going around and taking out any windows that dared shoot back, then he headed to the vehicle garage in the palace and used one of his Small lasers to cut open the thin doors and see what was inside.

"Bunch of luxury cars in the garage," Grady reported over the link to Vander. "No combat vehicles. Aside from some missile launching infantry that might be laying low, you're clear to land."

"Thank you, Grady. Good work. We're going to have to get mechs in and out via dropship. Their demolition barricade is too deep to dig a hole through quickly."

"Take your time. All I lost was a wee bit of armor. How are the rest of the lads doing?"

"Tanks versus mechs? Do you even need to ask?"

"Right then. What else do you need from me?"

"Just stand there and look pretty until the strike team arrives."

Grady frowned. "You know that's impossible, don't ya?"

"I was referring to the mech," he said, then Stephan's voice broke in on the same line. "Grady, do you see any sign of bolting?"

The Mech Commander scanned the ground again, at least what he could see on this side, for the palace rose higher than his mech was tall. "Nothing, Stephan. You think they aren't here?"

"I'm thinking something doesn't feel right, because they trapped themselves inside that ring."

"Last ditch effort of the hopeless?" Grady guessed.

"Or maybe a diversion while the top dogs slip away."

"Not unless they have underground tunnels leading out. Nothing is moving out here topside."

"Keep it that way. We'll know soon enough," the First Lord's voice said as a roar of engines suddenly caught Grady's ear. It wasn't the aerospace fighters this time, but a dropship coming down from a shot hop from the spaceport, and the *Teal Pearl* landed on the grass just inside the perimeter of the iron fence some 250 meters away from Grady's Warhammer.

Almost immediately after touching down a ramp lowered and a series of ground vehicles spilled out. Both hover and wheeled, they carried machine guns and troops, with most of them coming around to the garage entrance that Grady had opened up while one went to the main entrance cascade of shallow steps that led down to a pool with a statue of a nude goddess that was still spraying up plumes of decorative water out of her numerous hair braids.

Grady stayed put and became a statue as well, but one that deserved far more respect, as the strike teams went inside to find out what the situation really was...

"Empty?" Vander said over the video comm to Colonel Zephram, who was reporting from a captured communications room in the palace.

"Not a single person inside. Not even servants. We've cleared every room. It's a ghost town, and according to the comm logs, there hasn't been a transmission made from here in the past 5 weeks."

"They expected us a lot sooner," Stephan said to Vander.

"Any boobytraps?" Vander asked, still looking at the Colonel's face.

"Not that we've found, but we're still looking. Scanning crews are working on the walls. I need another 6 hours minimum before we can declare it safe for occupation."

"Are we keeping it?" Vander floated, this time looking to Stephan, who chewed his lower lip as he thought.

"Colonel, how's it look inside?"

"Ransacked, but structurally intact. A lot of it appears to be stone architecture rather than ferrocrete. Granite I'd guess. Not something we could tear down easily, and not something they could take down easily without some very large explosives. I think we can make use of it, if you want it, sir?"

"If it comes up clear we'll use it as a temporary base of operations. But I don't want so much as one hidden tunnel undiscovered that they can use to send an assassin in through later. Am I clear?"

"We'll be thorough," the Colonel promised. "But we also need to take possession of the surrounding buildings, and I don't have the manpower to do both simultaneously."

"Let the mechs deal with the snipers until you do. Focus on securing the palace interior."

"Yes, sirs. Will that be all?"

"Try to preserve all data you come across," Vander added.

"Copy that," he said.

5 hours later the Morten Protectorate flag was raised on the grounds just beyond the water fountain, with the Red

'M' emblazoned over the outlined silver turtle shell making it clear who the new rulers of the planet were.

18

February 17, 2995

Periphery

Gregoria

Nilhorn

Governor's palace

It had taken a few days to get the surrounding buildings clear of sniper nests, some of which had stayed quiet the entire firefight intent on hitting some valuable target later. Those didn't have missiles, but laser rifles calibrated for low level long range firing. The kind of which could have shot someone in an open palace window without trouble. And while it was impossible to prevent new snipers from coming in later without blocking off all the windows on the surrounding buildings, the palace had reinforced windows anyway, so there was simply a ground rule established that they were never to be opened.

Vander didn't let Stephan in until day 3, for they'd been worried about riots and endless hit and run attacks by Red Baron infantry...but to his surprise the populace was actually helping to rat out where the zealots were hiding as his mechs were out smashing more of the enforcer stations. With the media censorship now gone...for some of the Colonel's men had already visited their various headquarters...word of what was going on in Jedsen was working its way through to the people of Nilhorn, and every time one of the enforcer buildings were taken down large crowds would come out and cheer them on now that they no longer feared them, or at least no longer feared that it was impossible to oppose them and win.

Taking over the palace had made a big difference, as well as the news that the pretender had fled it weeks ago in secret.

As for the other two pretenders, Stephan made contact with them as soon as he got set up in the palace, and they were much more respectful this time. He also had them both in the same 3-way comm call.

"We had nothing to do with that attack," Zen Dilger said. "We are neutral parties in this. Dagger died, and rightly so, when he wrongly attacked you. You can't hold us responsible for his actions."

"I don't," Stephan said amicably. "But I am taking his possessions, and that means this entire planet. He didn't share anything with you, so I don't see how you're claiming to own anything?"

"Right of inheritance," Bob Vitti said from the other major city on the planet, called Menshi.

"You cannot inherit what I rightly claim," Stephan noted. "Nor can you take it by force. It simply comes down to this. I'm going to have full control of this planet eventually, and if I have to take it the hard way you're not going to profit from it. Cutting a deal is your only option."

"And we're willing to," Dilger said emphatically.

"You're not keeping control of Dhegan."

"Then what is there to negotiate? You're claiming everything the Red Baron had. Why shouldn't we make you work for it?"

"Maybe because you want to keep on breathing," Stephan said, irritably. Talking to these two was like playing a game of back and forth between reasonable and irrational. Maybe he had to act a little more pirate to get his point across. "Give me a reason I should allow either of you to live if you fight me tooth and nail to claim this entire planet?"

"What of the other planets?" Vitti deflected. "Are you claiming all of them?"

"None are nearly this size," Stephan said, noting some of the information he'd received on the Red Baron's full territory...except he wasn't sure if he'd gotten all of it or just pieces. But these two should know if they were highly enough placed in the organization. "And while I'll never condone bad

behavior...such as killing and abusing civilians...I'm willing to split the others with you in exchange for your cooperation."

Both their eyes perked up. "And what about Kline?"

"He's nowhere to be found so he's irrelevant. Unless you know where he is?"

"If I ever see him I'll put a laser shot in his eye," Vitti said angrily. "I was third in line of succession, which means I would inherit everything after both of those ahead of me died in the assault on Drymo. These two are usurpers."

Dilger sneered at the comment but didn't respond, sensing an opportunity to be rid of him with a potential split.

"Can you absorb what's left of his networks here?"

Stephan asked. "I don't want his people taking potshots at mine. I'd prefer to just get them all off the planet."

"Some will respond, especially if we tell everyone he's dead," Dilger said with a smirk. "And if he pokes his head out to say otherwise we, or you, can nail him. He's got no play anymore without the palace. He's irrelevant now. How would you like to split the organization?"

"Or would you like to take over as the new Red Baron?" Vitti floated. "I could agree to that."

Stephan shook his head. "The Red Baron organization has to come to an end...everywhere. But if you two wish to start your own...and make them respectable...then there's no reason for us to be enemies. If you continue to prey on the weak, I'll have to deal with you eventually, but I'm going to be so busy incorporating this planet into our holdings I won't be able to chase you guys down for some time even if you choose to remain bandits and thugs. I obviously want some of the other world holdings, but not all. Which ones do you want, and which ones are you willing to cede to me?"

After that the discussion changed into a business meeting, with them divulging 17 different planets...all of whom were not on the Inner Sphere map...with at least some cities or outposts under the Red Baron flag. Two were the size of Cholis, but most had less than 70,000 people on each. It seemed colonies out here usually didn't get much larger than that unless

they were a success, but the lure of freedom and making your own little empire held enough sway that many tried regardless of the difficulties. A lot died out, others limped on in small numbers, while a good number just stabilized as towns and outposts, finding at least one product of value to trade with others.

The two larger planets went to each of the other men, while Stephan claimed 5 of the smaller outposts. That left 6 apiece for his counterparts after some arguing between the two of them that Stephan eventually settled by picking for them the last 4 that were in dispute.

"And you promise to leave us alone?" Dilger pressed.
 "No retaliation?"

"I promised no retaliation for previous actions," Stephan said carefully. "If you do things in the future that I find distasteful, I will probably have to take some sort of action. If you mind your own business, take care of the worlds under your protection, and become a respectable governor...then I won't have any cause to invade. I can respect a governor as a neighbor, but not a pirate, bandit, or other form of thugs. Is that clear enough?"

"Crystal clear, Lord Morten," Dilger said, his tone immediately changing. "We'll give you no reason to even notice us."

"I notice starving populations," he added. "Better not have any of those."

"I'm a good manager," Dilger said with a look of mild disgust. "I wouldn't have risen as far as I have if I wasn't."

"I hope so. How long before you can clear out all your men?"

"As soon as you can clear our dropships to land," he said, referencing the now 4 jumpships sitting around the star waiting to figure out who was going to lead the Red Barons. Rather than seize them...which he couldn't really do with no dropships nearby, for they'd just jump out when they saw them approach...he'd decided to split those up as well as the other

planets, including the dropships that were attached to them and those few sitting at the spaceports of the other two major cities.

"I'll send word immediately acknowledging your command, but I'll need you to follow it up so they know it's legit. Better not tell them the organization is dead though. At least not until you're onboard. And you better pick new names for each of your new holdings. No more Red Barons. It would be too confusing."

"Yes it would," Vitti said, almost growling. "What about our money?"

Stephan frowned. "What money?"

"In the banks," he said as if the First Lord was stupid. "Are we splitting it?"

"Whatever banks on your worlds are your business. The banks here are mine. If you have a personal account here I'll respect it, but those belonging to the original Red Baron and his organization I'm keeping for myself."

"That's fair," Dilger said, wanting to get this over and out of here as fast as possible before the Mortens changed their mind and simply sent their mechs to dig him out.

"Take all your organization with you that wants to go. No moles or spies left behind. I want every trace of the Red Baron's organization to be a distant memory."

"My men obey me now. It won't be a problem. If you'll send that message promptly, Lord Morten, I will promptly leave your planet."

"I'll send it within the hour."

Dilger nodded with an overly fake smile. "Good day then," he said, with his part of the transmission ending.

"Will he honor the deal?" Stephan asked the less than happy Vitti.

"He won't stay here, that's for sure. He's scared and wanting to find any hole he can to hide in. You gave him too much."

"And you too little?"

"I have seniority."

“Had,” Stephan emphasized. “The Red Baron organization is now officially dead. All claims to it are dead. Your organization is brand new. Make of it what you honorably can.”

“I don’t like you,” the man said with a sneer. “But I can’t begrudge you payback after what happened. Most men would have taken it all and ground us into dust with the forces you’ve got. Why are you being so generous?”

“I want a smooth transition. Now both of you have something to lose if you don’t deliver it. Before, you had nothing to leverage.”

“And why do you care about a smooth transition? You’ll get the planet either way in the end.”

“Let’s just say I believe in giving people second chances. This is yours. I suggest you take it and run before lower level members of the Red Barons get ideas of claiming your planets for their own.”

“I see,” he said slowly. “Our business is concluded then?”

“It is.”

Vitti cut the comm without another word.

And within two days all of Dilger’s people were out of Dhegan. Vitti’s took longer, having to bring in some dropships to pick up his and all the other Red Barons left across the planet, but 13 days after they cut their deal, Gregoria was now theirs and uncontested, without a single act by an assassin, rebel, or saboteur to follow.

Stephan waited a few more days, then made his two public proclamations. One, was that the planet of Gregoria was to be renamed Foniss, which would be an indicator to all that a new era in the planet’s history was about to unfold and the scourge of the Red Baron would never return.

The second proclamation was to appoint Leonard Morten as Viceroy of the planet along with Chris Morten as Arka, second in command to the Viceroy, each of which would typically serve 10 year terms, but since this was just starting out, Leonard was going to serve the critical first 5 then pass it

over to Chris, whence a new Arka would come in to start their 10 years and end up as Viceroy after the first 5.

House Morten had decided that the leader of a planet or moon responsible only for that world was to be a Count, with a Viscount as their second. But when one was responsible for the security of the entire star system, including the jump points, Viceroy and Arka would be the designations.

Stephan, Paul, and Vander were going to be staying a while more as well, but eventually they'd all leave with several other Mortens coming in as Barons to assist the Viceroy and Arka, and who'd return back 'home' after two year terms.

Foniss wasn't going to become the Morten Protectorate capitol, and for the time being the embassy on Cholis was still their home. Stephan was going to wait until he found the perfect world for them, and while Foniss had great potential to grow beyond its current size, it didn't feel right, so he'd keep looking via scouting missions once he released the jumpships from troop courier duty on this mission, with more still needed to come in and help stabilize the planet in the form of police and security.

For while the Red Baron organization had folded, they never knew how few troops House Morten actually had at their disposal. If they'd known, they might have tried to hold out longer. That was Stephan's one bluff in this operation, and it had paid off. He needed to give Zephram time to train a proper army, and as it worked out, this should give him a small cadre with field experience...though there hadn't been any big firefights. Just smaller ones that had resulted in some injuries, but no deaths, thankfully.

Now Stephan had a planet with a population of 17.4 million people and an economy that badly needed work, but one that was already functioning and could be used to rework the planet using local tax money rather than pulling from their war chest...though slowly. Doing things fast would take a lot of money that Foniss didn't have, and Stephan had told Leonard to work with what he had here and take his time...which the old Logistics Lord took as an even bigger challenge of his skills.

His wife was going to be flown in to join him, but his kids were all well grown by this point. So he'd have a cadre of about half a dozen Morten family members living in the palace with him until they got around to building a new headquarters in a new city carved out of the wilderness in a different location. That way they could design everything they wanted there, and build it slowly, without having to waste valuable buildings here through demolitions.

As for the mech factory, production had never halted. Not for a day. While the fate of the planet was in question they kept right on working producing more Wasps and Wasp components, with their buyers waiting for things to calm down before coming in to collect their purchases.

And that factory now belonged to House Morten, along with many other businesses on the planet that the Red Baron had stolen from the previous owners. A few of them would be returned if the individuals or their families still lived, but the bloody takeover had left very few inheritors behind, so without having to steal any of them, the net worth of House Morten increased by an estimated 440 billion C-bills, which was more than four times what they had left in their war chest. Though most of this was not liquidated, so they couldn't just cash in a factory for the money without a seller willing to purchase it, but as of right now House Morten was more wealthy than they'd ever been on Nuebenn, for nearly all that wealthy had belonged to the duchy and was not part of the family's personal holdings.

"To the victor go the spoils," Stephan said months later when he returned to Cholis and walked into Carroll Davion's office and handed her a stack of old school paper folders with information on Foniss as well as Drymo, Polvice, and Turnix.

She eyed him curiously and pulled the top one off and flipped through it for a few seconds before looking back at him with a raised eyebrow. "What's with the paper?"

"Your eyes only," he said, sitting down in the guest's chair opposite her. "Report what you think is prudent back to Andrew, but the less that is known back there the better. I do, however, need to request an extension of the trade route," he

said, reaching down to a specific folder and pulling out a map. "Four jumps. Two to Polvice, and another two to Foniss, where I've acquired a population of 17 million that includes a mech factory that's been producing Wasps for generations."

"Mech factory?" she said, sitting up slightly.

"Unlicensed, I assume?"

"I wasn't going to check and announce it's existence to the Federated Suns legal system. We're outside their jurisdiction anyway. I was going through our list of buyers and some of them will not be getting future orders. They're the unsavory sort. Not all of them, just some. And while I do not want any Wasps in my own mech army..."

"Why not?"

"The Phoenix Hawk is all around superior, and we're looking into converting part of the factory to produce them eventually..."

"With a license?"

Stephan looked at her curiously. "Do you even know what was in the tech files Andrew gave me?"

"Not specifically."

"It's blueprints to everything the Federated Suns has, including almost every mech in existence. I've already got the blueprints for the Phoenix Hawk. Why would I bother trying to acquire a license to produce them?"

"So you could sell to the larger buyers that require it."

"Apparently there are a lot more buyers on the black market than you'd believe. What I wanted to ask is if I could get permission...underhanded as it might be...to sell some to your backwater planets if they want them. They can claim they were recovered as salvage from bandit raids on the paperwork and nobody will care. But I'd like to help strengthen some of my neighbors out here if I can. The legit ones, anyway."

"Which would also ingratiate them to you for the sales, if not the replacement parts," she said, her voice warning of danger.

"I'm not making a move to acquire any Federated Suns worlds," Stephan said firmly. "I shouldn't have to tell you that by this point."

"I know you better than my uncle does, though it's more his advisors that concern me. I'd suggest you arrange to sell the mechs through a third party. That way they still get there, but publicly you're not involved."

"And your people wouldn't notice?" he asked skeptically.

"What we know and what the populace of those planets know is a very different thing. You can ingratiate yourselves with their Dukes all you want, but if you start performing for their people it creates the potential for an uprising, as well as denigrates the Federated Suns."

"By pointing out how House Morten cares more about their safety than New Avalon does?" he said pointedly, knowing Carroll preferred such blunt honesty.

"Ruling hundreds of star systems full of billions of people is far harder than a few million on a world or two. We've got enough problems as it is."

"Which is why I want to help strengthen some of these worlds against bandit attack and prop up their Dukes...the ones I like anyway. And for the record, I now have 4 worlds," he said, tapping the stack of paper files.

"Are you going to give them a discount?"

"You should see the black market prices. I could charge them double the production costs and still have it be considered base value. I'll get Wasps and replacement parts into their hands at a cheaper price than they can buy new equipment from the legitimate sellers and transport it all the way out here. Plus, there's a long line for those new mechs, and the Dukes out here virtually never have a shot of acquiring anything new. They're lucky if they can afford used mechs, and I know some go to the black market when nothing else is available. I can help stabilize things a little bit while continuing to sell to the Periphery."

"Who have you been selling to out there?"

Stephan smiled. "I'm afraid that's confidential information."

"Anyone we need to worry about?"

"Those that are worrisome will not be allowed to place future orders. But when it comes to mercenaries, you never know if you'll be hiring them to attack your neighbors, or your neighbors will be hiring them to attack you. I'm only banning sales to the really nasty groups."

"Now you've got me curious of how much is really out there."

"A lot more than even I realized. I've included a partial map, but after taking Foniss I got a much wider one. Humanity has spread in bits and pieces everywhere while the major planets in the Inner Sphere ignore what's right next to them, let alone the Periphery. I shouldn't be so surprised, but I am. There's a lot more people out there than I thought. They're just not clustered together that much."

"Well, it looks like I've got some reading to do," she said, glancing at the files. "I'll be brief in my report, though, but it looks like you've obtained your first significant world. You're back in the game now."

"I came out here to leave the game behind," he reminded her.

She shook her head. "No, you came out here so you could play the game by your own rules."

"Did your uncle tell you that?"

"He did. And I haven't seen anything to prove him wrong. You're just not playing the game with the same objectives. Everyone else wants to dominate the Inner Sphere by claiming worlds. You want to claim worlds to protect civilization and Humanity, and you don't care whether that's in the Inner Sphere or not. You also know that if you go back in there, you're going to get burned by much larger players in the game. Do you mind if I give you some friendly advice?"

"Please do," he said sarcastically, but there was an element of friendship there rather than pure rivalry between their Houses.

"Never go back. I've seen what it's done to my House. We can never get ahead, and every victory we make is just enough to keep our head above water. We can't grow, we can't prosper, and we definitely cannot thrive. You're thriving out here, even when your power is so small. Stay out here and grow it, not so you can someday come back and make a difference in the Inner Sphere. Not so you can some day help out my House. Stay out here and make it your own, but never go back. It's a trap, Stephan. And it always will be, no matter how tempting it is to come in and save people. Don't leave for a while. Leave for good, and make sure your descendants understand that as well. Make an order of it, if you can."

He stared at her for a long moment before responding.

"I'd come to that conclusion already, but it's very odd to hear a Davion saying it. You live and breathe your quest to remake the Star League under your control."

"A pointless dream," she scoffed. "If it would have worked, the Star League never would have been torn apart in the first place. We're fighting to keep the Federated Suns intact, despite what others may think, and despite what we may say publicly. If we see an opportunity to go for it, sure, we will, but it's a quagmire and it's sucking the life out of my House. We spend as much time worrying about an uprising within the Federated Suns as we do an invasion. There are always rivals seeking to take your place."

"You almost sound jealous?"

"I am," she admitted. "You have a chance to leave it all behind and start fresh. Please don't throw that away by entertaining notions of going back to Neubenn or one day having your family take our place on New Avalon. It is a trap that nearly every noble family falls into. That's the game we play. You're playing another game. Don't get sucked back into the old one."

"I have no intention to. But that doesn't mean we can't help our neighbors short of conquering them. I won't allow my House to become apathetic to people sitting across an imaginary line in the stars."

"That compassion may come back to bite you some day. Use a third party for the mech sales, and it shouldn't be a problem. I'll explain it to my uncle, and he'll recognize it as part of his investment already paying off."

"And his advisors?"

"Are nothing more than conquest hungry hounds without even that much of a brain," she said angrily.

"And they don't like you?"

"Very few people in the inner circle like me. My uncle found a use that got me out of the way and helped him. I like the work, so it's win win, but I don't have more pull on him than they do. It's your deal you brokered with him that he cares about. I'm little more than a watchman."

"About to be replaced?" Stephan asked.

"No, thankfully. But others would if it was up to them. I don't play the inner House game very well."

"Neither do they," Stephan said, coming to her defense. "I've dealt with those type of people before, and they're almost always fakes. They trick you into thinking they're the ones who know how to play the game, but they don't. That's why they're so unstable and dishonorable that they usually bring down their own Houses eventually. Don't let them convince you that sanity is a vice."

"Sanity a vice. I like that. And sadly that's pretty much what they infer. Are you going to be able to start making replacement parts for other mechs?"

"Down the road, yes."

"Good."

Stephan frowned at her. "What's going on?"

"Just a feeling that this operation of yours is getting more unpopular back there. The less you rely on our supply lines the better. I won't say more than that."

"How can you know the scuttlebutt back there if you're here?"

"I had a friend come and visit while you were gone. She filled me in on a lot of things."

"Friend or superior?"

"In this position only my uncle is my superior, and that is not sitting well with others either. My cousin came, bringing a message from my mother on personal issues. But the scuttlebutt came here with her."

"You think they're going to break the deal?"

"Andrew won't," she said flatly, leaving the rest unsaid.

Stephan nodded. "But Andrew won't always be the First Prince."

"Must you be as blunt as me? You're making it hard to practice my subtlety."

"You don't need any in this job, because the job is to liaise with me."

She tapped on her desk a moment, as if making a decision, then committed to it.

"Andrew informed his heir, Ian, about this operation and it's importance. I'm told Ian didn't take to the idea very well. That might mean trouble. Ian is an up and coming mechwarrior and has no head for statecraft despite his many tutors."

"So we're on the clock?"

"Maybe, maybe not. He may honor his father's wishes and standing orders...or he may decide to go a different way when it's his time to rule. I hope he does the former."

"Hope is not a defense...but this isn't news to me," he said, drawing a surprised look from Carroll. "Andrew said he couldn't rule from the grave, and while I expect the deal to be honored, I don't expect it to be honored. We're on our own out here and have been from day one. Any help we've gotten from you I've counted as a bonus."

"Some days I hate being a Davion," she said, essentially admitting to treason with the way noble family politics held, "and there are days like today when I'm proud of it. My family sent you out here to do something grand. I hope we don't renege on it, but if we do, I want you to know I'm rooting for you."

"Thank you," he said, standing up slowly. "And if it ever comes to it, and you fall out of favor with the other Davions,

you can find a place in the Morten Protectorate. We take in all kinds of strays.”

“So I’ve begun to notice. Thanks all the same.”

“I mean it,” he said, walking toward the door. “If you stick up for us too much they’ll run a sword through you. I’ve still got the hole in me to prove it...”

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