

Last Stand

(House Morten Book 2)

An Unofficial Battletech Novel

Written by

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It had been eleven years since House Morten had been dispossessed of their duchy on Neubenn and sent out to Cholis to begin creating a periphery realm, and the last four years after annexing the planet of Foniss and the abnormally high industry there, including a full blown mech factory, things had gotten even more hectic for the First Lord.

Stephan sat in his office, going over stacks of paperwork that he had opted for instead of always reading off a glowing screen, whether it be holo or a touchpad. Too much eye strain added up, and he'd even had to request off-white paper to reduce the lesser eye strain of reading it as he and the other 7 Lords of House Morten had more and more work thrust upon them as the Morten Protectorate expanded by leaps and bounds.

They were never fully ready for it, and despite the urge to just turtle up and stop tapping into their warchest so heavily...for it was now under 40 billion after starting out at 158 when he left New Avalon...he knew opportunities and people's lives hung in the balance, and he didn't like the idea of either being wasted by being too conservative.

But what had really put him in a pinch was the taking of Foniss...and not because of that planet's 17 million population. It was the deal he had struck with the Red Baron's subordinates to split up the rest of the holdings. He'd deliberately chosen the

smallest of them, but there were 5 more systems that were supposed to be his that he wasn't ready to annex.

In the months after peace had finally settled on Cholis, he'd had jumpships sent out with armed emissaries on them to survey the situation as well as inform the local Red Baron units of the new order of things. Stephan hadn't gone personally, but he'd heard the results were a mixed bag of some people wanting to accept the new leadership of House Morten and others that had to be either physically removed or shot dead when they found out they were no longer going to be able to abuse, rape, and rob the local population.

It had been messy, but over with quickly once the emissaries arrived, with the rest of the locals falling into line as they always had under the Red Barron's people. But garrisoning those worlds meant him devoting a Company of mechs to each, which he wasn't ready to do. So the 5 systems hung out there exposed for a quite a while before House Morten officially annexed them.

Fortunately no one knew of the lapse, or no one was brave enough to exploit it, and those systems kept operating as if nothing had happened.

The first of them didn't actually require Stephen to send any mechs, because the planets there were lifeless. The colony of 80,000 people was in the system's asteroid belt, carved into a series of the larger rocks as they were gradually hollowed out over more than 160 years of operation, and the field was so dense with resources that they had barely been able to scratch at it all that time, and during the negotiations with the two Red Barron lieutenants who had unwittingly revealed its location as well as several other worlds when they were divvying up the holdings, Stephan had held his poker face well, allowing the two largest planets to go to the others while his first pick was this asteroid field base, for he knew based on even the limited system data he had seen before him that it was quite lucrative as is.

Let House Morten get to it with a proper mining team and Inner Sphere top of the line equipment, and it would become even more so.

And he didn't have to defend it with a mech Company, because there was no ground to walk on. The planetoids that the colonial bays had been built into barely counted as that, and while gravitationally rounded in the slightest, their surface gravity had been less than 0.08g...and that was before the largest of them been hollowed out, lowering it even further.

What Stephan needed was a pocket warship to guard the asteroid field and/or the jump points. Rannel had come through with her amazing group of techs that she'd cobbled together from hires across the Inner Sphere, and they'd retrofitted one of the captured Mules with a small gravity disc where the cargo bay used to be. That would allow the crew to remain in it for months on end without having to deal with the withering effects of weightlessness.

Dropships didn't have a gravity disc because they were almost always under thrust, accelerating away from an arrival point or flipping over and decelerating, so they had a gravity-like effect from the constant acceleration. Jumpships, warships, space tugs, etc did not have that luxury, so all of the responsibly built ones had at least a small area that spun to create artificial gravity that the crew could at least sleep and eat inside, even if they worked in 0g.

The problem with this colony was they had no gravity discs, and the people living here were in 0g constantly...including some children that had been born here.

He couldn't take them away and put them on a planet. It would literally crush them. So he'd had to dip into the Morten warchest again, on top of the dropship conversion, to retrofit one of the big hollow asteroids with a prefab gravity disc hauled out there in pieces, then installed in a hangar bay the miners didn't want to lose...but House Morten was not going to allow the 0g conditions to stand, and everyone was going to be using it for at least an hour a day as they gradually got their bodies reaccustomed to the gravity crush, with their muscles and

bones adapting by adding strength and more materials due to the stress.

Take someone who had lived their entire life in a 0g environment and put them on a thrusting dropship and their bones would literally snap for lack of structural strength.

Thankfully that nightmare had come and past within the first two years, and now the Webo colony had two pocket warships of House Morten manufacture guarding it, along with some new mining tugs that had been hauled in by some jumpship hires that were larger than anything Stephen currently possessed. For you had to have a larger jump field to carry ships that couldn't be fit inside a hangar bay, and mining tugs usually qualified in that regard.

But that colony in the renamed Kilo system was living up to the inference and delivering not just kilos, but tons of valuable raw materials...however, the region around the Webo 6 habitat was a field that contained deposits of uranium that had long ago been stabilized by bleeding out the excess radiation gradually over time. The entire field barely registered anything on a radiation meter, which had made it hard to find in the first place.

But when it came to depleted uranium, it was the go-to material for constructing armor-piercing warheads for autocannons of all sizes and was more valuable than gold per kilogram in the war-heavy Inner Sphere always needing to replenish their supplies.

The Kilo Mining Corporation...which House Morten had rebranded the company that they now owned...had been doing good before, and while it had initially been a money pit to get it refurbished up to his family's minimal standards, it was now the most lucrative business asset within the Morten Protectorate and the pocket warships had already been needed, turning off no less than 6 unwanted dropship arrivals that had attempted to strongarm their way into the asteroid field.

The thing was, a pocket warship wasn't designed to carry cargo, and even with a gravity disc eating up a lot of that cargo space, the rest was used for more fuel capacity, some

additional engines, more weapons, and a lot more armor plating that the additional engines easily compensated for.

That meant while they looked like regular dropships from the outside, they could easily take on four times their number and end up the victor, which two of the interlopers made them prove. House Morten had picked up the remnants of three broken dropships after those battles, though with only a fraction of the crews still alive.

Stephan and Vander had talked about adding at least a small detachment of aerospace fighters there, perhaps along with another pocket warship conversion, but nothing was planned as yet. Their resources were being stretched between not just these 5 new acquisitions, but to 7 other planets they'd picked up in the past four years, and there weren't nearly enough aerospace fighter squadrons available to garrison a fifth of their worlds, let alone all of them.

Part of the problem was the Federated Suns markets didn't have enough fighters available for sale, and rather than start looking at other models from other realms, they'd been having the consolidated and rebranded 'Morten Arms Consortium' start an aerospace fighter line from scratch.

That new Consortium included the mech factory, the vtol and tank factories, plus 5 others that the Red Barron had picked up from his victims that produced either components of weapon systems or things that were needed, like small personnel weapons or shock absorbers for wheeled vehicles. Now all of the various military or military-related industries were under the same name and management, and were completely owned by House Morten.

Since Stephan already had the blueprints to the Centurion, Sparrowhawk, and Stuka that the Federated Suns exclusively used they had what they needed, but getting a production line up and running was a pain in the ass even for the mechs, let alone an entirely different type of product.

Sarah was ambitious though, and in addition to her overseeing the Morten Arms Consortium, she had also started 'Flight Systems Unlimited' on Drymo, which was their attempt

to step up from dropship conversions and start building them from scratch as well, and Stephan had more than 40 different blueprints to work with ranging from the smaller, aero-like dropships to the largest possible monstrosities capable of landing on a planet and taking off again.

But they didn't all use the same parts, so Flight Systems Unlimited was going to have to buy, or eventually make, everything needed, and with Drymo producing a lot of raw materials for export it made sense to put the new factory there to save on shipping costs.

That factory had cost them just shy of 3 billion to get up and running, but Stephan had agreed that it was necessary to their long term ambitions of not having to rely on the Inner Sphere markets having what they needed available for sale...though at the moment those markets were what was sustaining them.

The other four planets House Morten had got from the Red Barron organization were a mix. Two were simply colony worlds that had 300,000 and 450,000 people on them respectively, 'Lopo' and 'Gromo,' and there were no exports coming out of them except those people. The Red Barron had been harvesting them slowly to put into the local slave markets, which House Morten put a stop to immediately, and the next planet he sent Grady to invade had been the location of the slave market the Red Barron had been selling his 'produce' in.

It hadn't belong to him, and now 'Bahab' belong to House Morten with a population of 3.8 million of its own and a lot of wrecked buildings that housed industries far more grotesque than slavery. Vander had gone on that particular expedition to deal with things, and he'd reported back to Stephan that it made Foniss look like paradise in comparison.

Still, the majority of the unsavory industries had been shut down and others seized by House Morten when they were owned by the same bad characters...who had either fled, been killed, or captured. Stephen had had to authorize a dip into the warchest again to build a full-fledged prison there to handle all the riffraff they were collecting, but at present Viceroy Stan,

one of his younger brothers, had the planet and system under nominal control and each updated report he was getting from him showed things gradually improving.

Grady hadn't stayed with the full Battalion garrison force Vander had stationed there, but rather was kept on Cholis until there was a need for another invasion. Stephan didn't want to waste him on garrison duty, but as it was he was rarely at the Estate, for the more their map of the region expanded the more pirates, bandits, warlords, and other scumbags they found that needed dealt with immediately...though in truth there were far more than House Morten could deal with immediately, so Stephen now kept a waiting list titled 'TBI' which stood for 'To Be Invaded,' and even today he'd added another system to the list after getting back a report from one of their scouting jumpships that were continuing to confirm map locations or exploring new stars to see what was in between the ones they already held.

That left two more planets from the Red Barron to deal with, though in truth it was actually 3, because one of the two systems had two inhabited worlds in it. That system, which Stephan didn't rename, was called Tronkiss, and the two worlds out of the 19 present around the massive blue star that were inhabited *had* been renamed to Insen and Prolit after two very famous fictional dogs from Neubenn literature.

Insen had a population of 120,000 centered around a fishing industry on the edge of a series of large lakes, but the planet had no actual oceans. Dealing with that was a challenge Stephan had decided to take on during the meeting with the Red Barron lieutenants, because none of the Morten Protectorate worlds were going to be selling or eating meat once they got the food markets reworked, and Insen was entirely based on meat production, albeit that from fish rather than land animals.

But the seas there were also high in deuterium...which was what basic fusion reactors used as fuel. The more advanced ones could make it work with regular water, but they were far and few between in the Inner Sphere. Almost every mech fusion

reactor ran on deuterium, which was an isotope of hydrogen...which was most easily available from water. Any body of water would usually have molecules in it that had an extra neutron, which is what created an isotope. For some reason Insen had a higher concentration than others, and there was already a small deuterium extraction facility nestled in with the fishing communities that Stephen wanted to grab immediately.

When he'd showed Sarah she had actually patted him on the back for that find...then punched him in the side when she realized it was some 6 jumps away from Foniss and that was going to overextend their already overextended supply lines, for while they now had a total of 23 jumpships to their name...not counting the *Stars' Herald*...keeping people and cargo moving between their worlds was not possible without the addition of hired contracts and merchants passing through for their own business endeavors.

The last of the 5 planets he'd picked up in that meeting had been a volcanic world with a tiny colony on it. It was a hazardous atmosphere, which meant you couldn't go outside without wearing a full space suit...and one rated for high heat at that. But on that world was another lucrative pickup he'd grabbed...also because it had such a low population and he didn't want to overextend to too many mouths to feed during that selection meeting...but the lucrative part came from the mining of things that originated very deep in a planet's molten layers...such as diamonds.

It was a diamond mine, primarily, along with a few other oddities, and Stephan didn't want it for the jewelry market. Diamonds were used to make drill heads because the drill head had to be harder than the rock it was drilling into or it wouldn't work. Diamond was about as hard as it got, and Sarah was going to couple this mine with another money pit of a brand new drill bit factory located elsewhere, but she hadn't gotten around to it yet. Right now they were selling the diamonds and had already recouped their investment on the

renamed 'Hotspot' to bring its facilities up to safety and living standards.

It was one of the few acquisitions that was now paying for itself. Everything else was either breaking even...if they were lucky...or continuing to drain the warchest.

The other planets they'd picked up had all been conquests, the largest of which had a population that dwarfed Foniss's 17 million. The warlord by the name of King Cobra had been ruling over the planet, and was in fact a lineage...but his military forces were ones that were out and about causing all kinds of havoc further away from the Federated Suns' border. The King Cobra didn't take other worlds, only raided them to bring back valuable goods and slaves to a world now renamed 'Codan' that had a total population of 327 million...of which, 47 million were slaves.

His military forces had been pathetic, though, as most of the so-called warlords' were. Codan was a large agricultural exporter and roundly a primitive planet save for Cobra City where his family and cohorts lived. Everything else was tropical or savannah subsistence towns. They kept the planet poor and uneducated, taking most of the harvests and selling them to other planets that unfortunately sent their own jumpships and dropships to Codan to pick up the cargos, for House Morten had only 'inherited' two jumpships when they had taken the planet 7 months ago.

Grady had just gotten back from that mission to spend a few months here, retooling his existing mech force with new purchases and a few new mechs to come off their own production lines...which currently included the original Wasps, two converted lines of Phoenix Hawks, and a brand new line of the assault-class Victor mechs.

Stephan had a stack of requests on his desk for that new mech variant alone, for as soon as word got around that the Morten Arms Consortium had started to produce assault mechs, new customers arrived by the dozens and all wanted to get pre-orders in no matter if they had to wait years to get delivery.

He hadn't agreed to any yet, and instead had been auctioning off the first few Victors to come off that line...aside from the ones he gave to Grady...and each of them was starting off at what would have been normal sale price back in the Inner Sphere. By the time each auction was over, they would end up selling for 5-12 times that price.

Stephan had been kicking Sarah in the butt to expand those damn factories as fast as possible, for he had no idea how much more interest there would be in the assault mechs. He'd expected less customers, given that most of the Wasps were going out to planets and organizations that were on small budgets. Now they had somehow started to attract interested parties with a lot more money to spend, and Stephan wanted to rake that in as much as possible to start refilling the warchest as it continued to get sucked lower and lower with new projects.

The other 5 worlds they'd picked up from the scallywags out here were Yennwen, Venso, Chitti, Alar, and Hoppenstop, ranging from 6 million in the case of Venso to 98 million at Alar. All together now, the Morten Protectorate had a combined population of 538 million...about 1/6th of what the planet Neubann had...at least when House Morten had been running it. He tried not to keep tabs on it, but news kept reaching him about the state of affairs back there, recently with an economic recession due to House Derren's meddling. What the population was now he didn't know, but he wouldn't be surprised to start seeing its 3.2 billion slowly tick downward.

His planets here were in far worse shape though, but on the upswing. The saving grace of these largest acquisitions had been some intelligence gathering beforehand. There were other worlds out there with larger populations than Foniss that needed rescuing, but their economies were so bad it would bankrupt House Morten if they tried. Stephen hated doing it, but he had to pass those over and only pick on the bandits that had planets that could sustain themselves, as these five all could. That's the only reason why the First Lord's population explosion had been possible.

All of those worlds would eventually contribute to the warchest and numerous other attributes of their brand new realm, but it would be a long time in coming. Right now he just needed them to self-sustain while their Viceroys and Counts began making small changes. That was part of the bluff of it all. He could take worlds, but not rework them very fast unless he had a large amount of C-bills to infuse into them...and when it came to a world with a population of 50,000 he could do that. But the larger worlds were an entirely different matter, and those would have to slowly progress the way House Morten had slowly built up their former duchy of Neubenn long ago.

The main focus now was securing the worlds and holding them, after which every day that passed would see progress rather than regression, and Stephan was just glad they were able to procure enough mechs to field a combined army of 528 at last count, though they were all spread across the 17 star systems they now possessed (counting Cholis)...with Grady having left three weeks ago to go potentially add number 18 from a pirate's den they'd finally been able to approximate the location of.

Tracking jumpships was thought to be impossible, but in truth if you were close enough in your own jumpship when someone else jumped, your own jump drive would get hit with hyperspace 'waves' for a few seconds. A savvy engineer could work out from those waves which general direction the other jumpship had traveled, but only if you were at the same jump point. If you were at the Zenith jump point atop a star and they were at the Nadir below it, you wouldn't be able to pick up anything without special sensors that Stephan hadn't even known existed. Due to the lostech blueprints he'd gotten from the First Prince, he now knew that the Star League apparently could track jumpships from further away, and with more accuracy.

Rannel had told him the designs were so advanced she couldn't promise to figure out how to build them if he gave her 50 years to work on it, but she did offer him some basic understanding of how they worked. And from that they were

able to put some basic sensors on a few of their own jumpships as prototypes that would help narrow down the direction-finding effect that most of the Inner Sphere didn't even know existed.

His noble family had not, and he wondered just how many others in the Federated Suns knew about it...though from his growing Periphery sources, and documentation taken from the bandits he was capturing...some of them *did* know and used the effect to follow ships they intended to hit. If those ships were only going to inhabited systems, that narrowed down the possibilities greatly from the roughly 30% possibility the jump waves gave those savvy engineers who knew how to look for it.

Within a 30 lightyear radius, you would have hundreds, if not thousands of possible stars to jump to...but if only 4 or 5 of those were inhabited, well, the regular cargo traffic was always going to those, so if a pirate jumpship saw which direction you were jumping and could narrow it down further, he'd know exactly which 1 or 2 you were headed to...while at the same time, after hitting that jumpship, the pirate could jump out to any of the uninhabited systems and essentially get lost in the haystack.

Rannel's basic sensors had reduced that 30% field down to about 18%...which meant if you had 1000 stars in jumping range and the pirate jumped out of the same jump point your ship was sitting at, you had a cone of probability that would include about 180 stars.

That was nowhere near good enough to actually track someone with, but from what Rannel had told him, if one of the Star League's jumpships with the best sensors had been in the same jump point, they could have actually detected the *entry* waves at the other end of the journey, knowing which system the other jumpship had came out of...though not which jumppoint.

Stephen really wanted one of those sensors, but if anyone in the Inner Sphere had them, they weren't bragging about it, and they couldn't replicate them. As it was, most jumpships operating today had been built during the Star

League, and none of them had the sensor package, advanced or limited, so he wondered what special operations the Star League had reserved them for...and how exactly had House Davion come across the ancient blueprints for them when they didn't have any for the HPG network that Stephen also really wanted for his realm.

But right now, he was having to rely on couriers for all his information...and despite that, some of the pirate raids had been near jumpships that Stephen had begged or bribed for their engineering logs. He didn't tell them why, but he had gathered enough information to do some guesswork as to where this particular pirate, known as Captain Sheridan, was operating out of.

Had Captain Sheridan been making a double jump to his destination House Morten never would have a chance of finding him, but he'd been hitting shipping within a 30 lightyear radius frequently, which had led some people to believe he was in a particular area anyway, but there were far too many systems to search and too few people with jumpships that would actually incur the expense of such an expedition.

Stephen probably wouldn't have to worry about incorporating another big population this time, if Grady was able to find him, for all the known inhabited systems to traders in that area had already been searched. That suggested a hide-away somewhere, or maybe even a planetless system where the pirate kept his ship. Either way, it was one problem spot on the map that needed to be eliminated, and Stephan was glad he had the resources to even mount an operation like this because they were the dominate power in the region. Back in the Federated Suns, House Morten had been one of the smaller big dogs, while the Davions were always the dominant one in the pack and no one could really do anything without their say so.

But today...or more accurately April 5th, with the news only arriving out on Cholis now...that pack had lost its leader. Word had reached the news service here an hour ago that First Prince Andrew Davion had died of 'natural causes'...which could mean anything from a heart attack to an accident or an

assassination that the Davion's didn't want to admit to. But regardless, the man with whom he had struck the deal with to bring his family out here...the very same man that had also dispossessed him...was now dead and his 18 year old son Ian Davion was now the ruler of the Federated Suns' over 500 star systems and hundreds of billions of people.

There was no way he was ready for it. Stephen remembered what it had been like taking over when his own father unexpectedly died...and that was only one world, a large one at that, but far less than the entire Federated Suns. He hadn't expected Andrew to die this soon, and doubted anyone else had. This was a shock to everyone, and hopefully Ian would be so busy he wouldn't have a chance to rethink his father's deal with Stephan.

With any luck he'd not even notice any of Carroll Davion's reports passing across his proverbial desk...but his advisors would, and what would they counsel him to do? Honor the deal? Sever the trade route that had organically grown to some 12 jumpships from the original 3, for he knew House Davion was making money on each one they commissioned to run the line from New Avalon out to Foniss. Would they throw that away to sever ties? Would they deny any economic link to the Federated Suns or try and kick him off Cholis entirely? Would Ian send an army of mechs out here to conquer the Morten Protectorate and make it a new addition to the Federated Suns?

Some of those things seemed wild, and the most probably outcome was that the status quo would remain, but even Andrew Davion had warned him that his heirs might not follow the deal he'd made with House Morten, so Stephen didn't honestly know what to expect. Whatever the case was, they'd just entered a new era for the Federated Suns.

The rule of First Prince Ian Davion...and whether that was going to be good news or bad Stephen didn't know, but his gut told him it would be a problem eventually. Hopefully not right now with his forces and resources so extended across this piece of the Periphery.

He also wondered what the Draconis Combine would do, given that their arch nemesis was now being led by an 18 year old.

Stephen was just glad he was on the other side of the Federated Suns and away from whatever 'testing' of the new leader's reign might be forthcoming.

The door to his office swung open without a knock, and he turned to see his sister standing there, but not Sarah. It was Susan.

"What does this mean for us?" she asked pointedly, still wearing what looked like a costume from one of her theatrical performances in Cholis's growing arts community.

"Nothing right now," Stephan said, taking a break from the paperwork for a moment and sighing. "Could be trouble later, but right now Ian has so much in the Federated Suns to worry about he probably doesn't even realize we exist."

"What happens if he cancels the deal?"

"He can't cancel it, only renege."

"Can he make us go back?" she asked bluntly.

"No," he told his sister, who was a passive member of the family and not knowledgeable about matters of state. "He can't make us do anything short of sending an army of battletechs larger than ours. And if he did that he'd have to pull them out of somewhere else and that would cause trouble there."

"What about mercenaries? Could he send them against us?" she asked a far more adroit question than he'd expected of his baby sister that was only last month 19.

"Possibly," he admitted. "Don't worry about it too much. Vander and I have us well protected here."

"I didn't expect him to die so soon," she said, visibly flustered. "How does this change our status?"

"At the moment, it changes nothing," he said, standing up and placing his hands on her shoulders as he looked into her dark green eyes. "If he wants to cause some trouble later, we'll be ready for it."

"Is Carroll going to be called back?"

"I don't know," he said, knowing the two of them had actually become close friends ever since Stephan had given Carroll permission to move about the Estate...just not any of her guards. "She can stay here if she wants, but she's a Davion. This isn't her home, and if Ian wants to replace her, that's up to him."

"Can't you make her stay?" Susan demanded.

Stephan smiled. "I'm afraid it doesn't work that way, Suzy. They're still the dominant House, and we don't have much leverage left in the Inner Sphere. We've got way more than they do in the Periphery, but not back home."

"This is home," she reminded him, and to be fair she'd lived here longer than on Neubenn. "Please find a way for her to stay. She likes it here too."

"Why don't you ask her about it. She'd know better than me. She probably already knew Andrew died before the media got wind of it."

"If she did she didn't tell me."

"She's not going to tell you everything," Stephan said as his sister's face scrunched up uncomfortably.

"She tells me more than you."

"I doubt that. Most of what she has to say is business related, and I'm pretty sure you don't talk about that stuff."

"There's more than business," she reminded him.

"You can keep the gossip. I don't want it," he said, steering her towards the door.

"You're kicking me out?" Susan objected.

"Did you come here for something other than Carroll?"

She spun around and faced him, though she had to look up a good five inches to do it. "What happens to this family is my business too."

"Carroll isn't part of this family."

"Well...she feels like it. You could marry her, then she could stay," Susan pointed out with eager eyes.

Stephan laughed once. "In your dreams."

"Why not? You've already got all the kids you want, and she does like you," his sister said, referencing Stephan's 12

children. Given that the dating scene on Cholis was but a mere drop in the bucket compared to what it had been on Neubenn, he didn't really have many options, nor did the rest of his family for that matter. And knowing that they were going to need a lot more Mortens going forward to administer all of their growing list of planets, he'd opted to use surrogates.

He'd actually held a public competition in the form of physical fitness and skill games, with the winner being granted the surrogacy. They'd get a one night stand with him, carry his child through birth, then their job would be done. A group of nannies would raise the child and the mother would have nothing to do with them from there on. They would not become part of House Morten, but they would be financially taken care of for the rest of their life...amicably so.

The competition he'd expected to be mainly from women on Cholis, but it had attracted enough attention to draw in many others from the Morten Protectorate and beyond. There'd been women who had traveled here to compete from more than 8 different worlds in the Federated Suns and even a few from other Periphery states.

But rather than reward one winner, he'd chosen the top 10 and over the course of a month had impregnated them all. Two of them ended up with twins, so as of 3 months ago, he'd gone from having no children to 12 over the course of 17 days as they were all born almost simultaneously. He'd held all of them before turning them over to the nannies, but in truth he wouldn't have much contact with them until they were old enough to talk...though Susan and several other family members were already making themselves better acquainted with his children than he was.

He'd chosen the letter 'T' for his children, and since they had all been born so close together he wasn't considering any of them to be the eldest the way Sarah was in his family, a good two years older than him. His new lot of Mortens were Travis, Tina, Tom, Trip, Taryn, Tam, Tim, Tovi, Tiki, Theresa, Tony, and Thad...and they wouldn't be contributing to the active ranks for at least another 15 years, but one had to get started early on

such things, and he'd preferred to just get it out of the way all at once, because it didn't look like he was going to be falling in love anytime soon.

Some of his family members who were also having trouble finding dates had ended up getting some of the lucky losers, and as a result another five babies had been born into House Morten in the past months. Cory, Dan, Erin, Matt, and Kim, all from his various cousins. His own brother Sam had actually started dating one of the contestants and ended up marrying her 5 months ago. So Bri Morten was now part of the family...a passive part...while the 'winner' was only a surrogate and now a past memory for Stephan.

She was nice, as were the others, but he didn't click with any of them other than in the biological sense. It was a way for them to gain some fame and be set for life financially, and they all knew that. Still, they'd opted for a one night stand rather than artificial insemination, for it was their own genetics being used rather than someone else's, and apparently Stephan was handsome enough to be a prize in his own right...or maybe they'd been hoping for more than a one night stand.

Either way, it had worked for him and some of his family members, despite the dating situation being so grim here, and ever since the competition both he and other eligible bachelors were receiving a lot of solicitations from other noble families' single daughters, celebrities, and whatnot from across the Federated Suns. So others were hopeful that the promise of finding that significant someone wasn't a doomed cause out here, and weren't quite ready to start marrying second cousins yet.

But according to Susan, she had plenty of attention from the local men, though he'd heard different from the other single House Morten women...all due to the fact of the small planet and their limited ability to comingle with others out here in the Estate far away from the city. His mother had appointed herself queen of matchmaking long ago, but even she was finding it difficult to find good lifelong pairings rather than the

typical marriage of political convenience most noble houses utilized far too often.

"I don't care if Ian granted me Neubenn as a wedding gift," Stephan said firmly. "There is no way in hell I'd ever marry a Davion."

"Because they took Neubenn from us?"

"That's at the top of a very long list of reasons."

"But wouldn't giving it back negate that point?"

Stephan frowned at her. "Will you please pick either the smart little sister or the little ditzy know-nothing? You keep bouncing back and forth between them and I have trouble knowing which I'm talking to."

She punched him in the gut with all the force of leaf, then stared up at him defiantly. "Carroll is nice."

"I'm glad you're friends with her, but forget the marriage thing. It'll never happen with me. Try one of your other brothers."

"But wouldn't that stop any problems with Ian?" she said, back to the smart little sister.

Stephan held silent for a minute. "Have you ever heard the story of the scorpion and the wolf?"

"Many times," she said, rolling her eyes. "Carroll is not a scorpion going to sting you."

"House Davion is. You can never fully trust them. I know you were probably too young to understand when we lost Neubenn, and while I do like Carroll better than the rest of them, she's going to look out for the best interests of her House over our own. That could mean one day we wake up and suddenly we're not friendly neighbors, but enemies."

"She wouldn't do that."

"What if she was ordered to?"

Susan considered that for a moment. "She'd be conflicted, but she wouldn't stab us in the back."

"She may be picking up some of our good habits living out here, but don't assume it carries back to New Avalon."

"I want her to stay and I want this new Ian guy to be a friend. Why is that so hard to achieve?"

"Because other people don't want to be reasonable."

"An alliance should be in their best economic interest."

"True," he gave her credit, "but a lot of times noble families don't know how to do basic math, and they're more concerned with public appearance and ego. A lot of families have been destroyed that way."

"What do you mean, 'destroyed?'"

"I mean they don't just lose their duchy, but their money and all their possessions. They cease to be a noble family, or even a rich family, if they don't manage their holdings well. You don't have to worry about that with us anymore."

"And what about Ian Davion?"

"I'll deal with him when the time arrives. Right now he's going to be far too busy to worry about the Periphery with the other Great Houses breathing down his neck."

"Do you think we're in the clear then?"

Stephan considered for a moment. "I don't know. We'll have to play it by ear...and by we, I mean those of us who actually work rather than play dress-up."

"This is why you can't find a date," she said, poking him in the chest. "You never let anybody get to know you with all your constant work."

"That comes with being the First Lord. There's never a time I'm not working."

"Father managed somehow."

"I know. But we're not on Neubenn anymore and all my previous prospects are now out of reach. I have my heirs now, so there's no need to look for love."

"You'd rather look at mechs."

"They are a lot more faithful."

Susan made a rude sound, as if her teenage self was somehow an expert on such matters. "Boys and their toys."

"That's why boys make the best mechwarriors," he said, spinning her around and gently shoving her out of his office and closing the door before she could respond...

2

July 8, 2999

Federated Suns

Crusis March

Cholis

Morten Estate

Stephan watched out the window of the conference room as a dropship landed further off down the valley...for it wasn't one of theirs. It belonged to House Jerrast, whom the First Lord had known very little about until he asked Sarah about the request they'd made to travel out to Cholis to discuss business opportunities in the Morten Protectorate.

She'd given him the 'stupid brother' look and explained that House Jerrast was probably the second most powerful House in the Federated Suns economically...but they didn't hold any Duchies, which was probably why Stephan had never heard of them. They did have a Baronship in a city on New Avalon and another on New Sirtis, but they controlled no worlds on their own, and Sarah said it was rumored that was by their own choosing. They wanted to pursue economic power rather than politic power, though the two were never completely separate.

Still, they wanted to avoid any spitting wars between who got to give the orders and quietly worked their way into major asset holdings wherever they saw value...and if they saw value out here with House Morten, she assured him others would follow in their wake.

So he'd granted their request for a full diplomatic engagement between the two Houses, with the Jerrast delegation being led by the brother of the head of their House. As soon as the dropship set down, they'd be escorted here to begin telling Stephan whatever it was they were interested in

but unwilling to say across Comstar's interstellar communications network.

Stephan waited with Paul and Sarah at a rectangular table that doubled as a monolith, for its base was made of polished granite and completely hid their legs from view. An arced table had been arranged before them with additional chairs in rows behind it for however many people House Jerrast brought, and when the doors opened up he saw a full phalanx of people in high end civilian clothes enter while two of Roger's now professional bodyguard unit stood on either side of the room silently, as if blending into the wall decorations that consisted of statues, curtains, artwork, and even a pair of small creek-like fountains that broke up the echoey silence whenever the large room was dead quiet.

This place was built for such gatherings, and rarely used by House Morten. Stephan liked talking to Carroll or other individual representatives in his office, but he didn't feel that would have been appropriate in this case given the questionable circumstances for these talks, so they'd used the 'Diplomatic Hall,' as they called it.

Kleev Jerrast walked in almost last and took the center seat at the Arc as several of his staff pulled out clear plastic sheets of documents, maps, and what looked like charts as far as Stephen could tell from his position across the 4 meter gap between tables. The man had no official title, nor did his brother as the head of the House the way House Morten did, and Sarah assured him that was yet another way for them to keep a lower profile in the Federate Suns to help hide their economic largess.

"Welcome," Stephan said before the assembly had fully got all its stacks of documents arranged to its liking.

"First Lord," Kleev said with a slight bow of his head. "My apologies for not being any more clear with our intent on coming here, and thank you for having us. In our experience many business deals have been lost due to competition getting wind of them and sprinting ahead to grab opportunities, so we prefer to discuss things in person, and House Jerrast believes

your new Morten Protectorate offers a great many opportunities for mutual wealth generation."

"I like the word *mutual*," Stephan said amicably.

Kleev smiled slightly. "Let me make introductions first. On my left is Aeryn DeGast, Ishi Keeri, and Francine Jerrast. On my right is Herrold Jerrast, Orro DuMonte, and Sander Steiner."

That last name brought Paul's head up, and Kleev nodded. "Yes, he is related to House Steiner, but far off the succession line and married to my cousin."

"Does your House have assets in the Lyran Commonwealth?"

"We have assets everywhere we find an opportunity for respectable business relations. We find that economics is a far more binding language than politics, and the more the Great Houses interlink economies the more stable all the realms become, but the majority of our holdings are in the Federated Suns, and we would never compromise its integrity in any foreign dealings...which brings us to you, who are said to be independent and yet also part of the Federated Suns economy with full rights and privileges, yet outside the legal system?"

"True," Stephan admitted.

"Is this temporary or permanent?"

"Permanent. If Ian Davion wishes to reverse his father's actions, he'll have to use his armies to do it. We are beyond House Davion's control now, but we remain on good terms with them."

"So we heard, though the whims of a new First Prince can never be truly predicted," he cautioned. "Frankly, we were surprised when Andrew Davion granted your House independence. It was...unexpected, as was your removal from Neubenn."

Stephan leaned forward in his chair slightly. "I prefer blunt conversations, Mr. Jerrast, so let me start by saying this. We're out here because Andrew wanted to offer compensation for removing us from Neubenn. He did so citing no fault of our own, only politics. I wanted away from politics, and the only place to go to do that was the Periphery. I have no aspirations

of going back to Neubenn or anywhere else in the Federated Suns. We're committed to expanding deeper into the Periphery and we do so based on our own designs, not the designs of House Davion or anyone else in the Federated Suns."

"Thank you, that clears up many questions," Kleev said, glancing to his side for a moment. "Such an endeavor must be quite costly, and we're willing to help subsidize it in exchange for long term investments."

"Such as?" Sarah broke in.

"We see many opportunities in your growing realm, but we'd like to begin with the brand new colony you've created called Polvice. We understand you are selling small tracts of land there to raise capital?"

"We're selling them to colonists," Paul clarified.

"Nothing large enough to truly compensate for the costs, just a starting point for independent businesses to start popping up on their own merits where applicable."

"We would like to request a much larger purchase of land," Kleev said, raising a finger and one of his staff members seated behind him rose and he handed her several sheets of the plastic paper...which the staffer then walked around the edge of the rounded table and set before Stephan.

"These are several potential areas we've identified suitable for textile crops. We'd like to establish both the agricultural base and the industrial facilities to create finished garments en mass, not just for sale to your realm, but also for export back into the Federated Suns."

Stephan glanced at the areas indicated, then passed the highlighted maps over to Paul.

"The native workforce is extremely limited at the moment," Stephan cautioned.

"We would import our own workforce, then supplement with the locals already there."

Sarah raised an eyebrow. "That's a lot of jumpship traffic."

"We have a large fleet of commercial vessels to accommodate such endeavors."

"2,300 square kilometers?" Paul said after looking at four different potential sites House Jerrast had identified.

"We wish to purchase now what will be necessary later. As I said, this is a long term investment, and untouched land is hard to come by on civilized planets."

"As are reasonable tax structures," Aeryn Degast said from beside him. "Is the 5% revenue tax truly permanent?"

"It is," Paul confirmed.

"And with no other taxes to be added later."

"You sound surprised?"

"I know that was the tax structure you used on Neubenn, but I would have assumed you needed to generate a lot more revenue out here to cover expenses and would have had a multi-layered tax system in place to compensate."

"We stick with what works, and have found that predictability benefits business more than increased revenue streams," Paul said fluidly, as if he was making a point but wanting to be very gentle about it. Stephan could see he was a little intimidated by the economic portfolio of House Jerrast. How was it the First Lord had never even heard their name before now?

"As such," Kleeve continued, "we'd like to get a number of different investments set up while land and other opportunities are available, and before the bidding wars break out."

"Bidding wars?" Stephan inquired.

"What you are offering here is a slap in the face to the way House Davion runs the Federated Suns. On Neubenn you still had to pay their taxes, even if the planetary ones were reasonable. Out here you are your own entity, so there is only one tax domain, correct?"

"Correct," Paul answered before Stephan could.

"Many Houses and corporations will want to build here and not there as a result. At present few know of your worlds. We discovered them because we follow the movement of work forces and have seen a drain from the surrounding areas, particularly in skilled labor. Unemployment on many of your

neighbors had disappeared, as have a small amount of their population. We investigated and discovered you were the reason. A very fortuitous discovery, we hope, for we'd like to get established here before others do."

"And pick the best spots?" Stephan asked.

"It pays to be first, though I understand you not wanting to offer up all land on the colony at the same time. Prices will undoubtedly go up, and divvying it out slowly is by far the best monetary policy you could implement if not for your current need to expand infrastructure on Polvice and elsewhere, which I heard you are quite good at doing."

"And quite fast," Orro DuMonte added. "It must be a significant drain on your financial resources despite the lucrative sales from the mech factory you acquired."

"You've done your homework, I see," Stephan said neutrally as he passed the map from Paul to Sarah.

"And we're prepared to pay a large amount to obtain one of those tracts of land...or perhaps another of equal size if it's in a better location for your future colony planning."

"How much?" Sarah asked pointedly.

"We believe 7 billion Pounds to be a fair amount."

Stephan raised an eyebrow, and he could sense Sarah and Paul both stiffen beside him in surprise.

"I'm not the logistics or economics Lord," he said, "but that seems like an awfully large amount for empty land."

"Seven billion on New Avalon would barely buy 5 square kilometers," Kleev pointed out. "If we could go back in time and purchase the land there before it was developed, I believe you can understand the wealth that would have generated. We're wagering on Polvice growing to prominence, perhaps not as large as New Avalon, but enough to make the 7 billion seem inconsequential later. House Jerrast has the finances and foresight to pursue such lengthy endeavors that others either cannot see or cannot afford."

"You're playing a very long game," Sarah noted appreciably.

“Quite so, and we believe your realm is ripe with opportunity. If we’re wrong and you fold up as so many other Periphery realms have done in the past, we lost our investment. We’re betting your House has staying power after what you were able to do with Neubenn. That planet’s success is among the best credentials possible when we look to engage in such long term investments.”

“Thank you,” Stephan replied to the compliment. “So exactly how rich are you?”

Sarah gave him a quick sideways glare, and he was sure she would have kicked him under the table if their chairs had been a bit closer together.

“I’m not sure how to categorize that,” Kleev said, blinking in surprise.

“Are you as rich as the Davions?”

“Liquid assets, land, company holdings, ships...there’s a lot of ways to assess value. It’s not something you can simply put a fixed monetary value on.”

“When we left Neubenn it wasn’t by choice,” Stephan explained. “House Davion forcibly bought out all of our possessions, corporate holdings, and investments. They put a number on it quite easily, and had the resources to do it themselves rather than bothering with the Federated Suns monetary infrastructure. I’ll admit, I didn’t even know your House existed until my sister informed me of my stupidity, because I kept track of Houses based on the Duchies they held and you have none. So I’m curious to know just how rich of a House we’re speaking to now?”

“We typically don’t like to brag about our holdings,” Kleev said diplomatically.

“But we have more than the Davions,” Aeryn said bluntly, “though we’re not going to put a figure on it.”

“So that brings up an issue my fellow Lords have probably not considered in light of your reputation,” Stephan said warily. “You have no leadership in the Federated Suns without Duchies. No worlds to call your own. I’m wondering if

you see the Morten Protectorate as an opportunity to gain some?"

Sarah and Paul's eyes shifted from slightly embarrassed to steely when he mentioned that, for they had not been aware of that potential angle. And such things were exactly what the First Lord was meant to worry about so they didn't have to and could focus on their specialties.

"I can promise you," Kleev said graciously, "that we have no intention of ruling any worlds, either officially or unofficially, and seek to establish a business partnership with your House, not to seek any Duchies with you, nor to potentially one day supplant you. We are not in competition with House Davion and we have no wish to even appear to be."

"So this is just about money then?"

"More than that. It's about maintaining intact supply lines, and your worlds are far from the borders of the Great Houses that could see war disrupt or destroy those supply lines. We wish a safe place to put down roots that will provide additional stability to the rest of our holdings in the Inner Sphere during future wars and the fallout from them. The Morten Protectorate seems to be the most logical and lucrative place to do that."

"Why not the Taurian Concordat? They're larger and more established."

"We have a few assets there," Kleev admitted, "but the business environment is nowhere near as friendly as the one you are creating here. While they do still have large tracts of land in their many colonies available, they are not a realm on the rise. Quite frankly, they are stagnant, and if they should ever begin to grow again we will utilize our existing holdings there and expand on them, but frankly no one predicts them to be a rising star again. They are simply too content with the status quo, whereas you are out hunting pirates and warlords, freeing worlds from their grasp, and expanding civilization out into the proverbial darkness. We would much rather make a large scale investment with such a House, and the sooner we do, the more financially better it would be for both of us."

"There are still many risks," Stephan cautioned, despite him liking what he was hearing.

"There always are, no matter where you invest. Nowhere is safe from war and economic calamity, but there are safer bets than others, and we see this as a safe bet for the long term. I am frankly surprised the Davions have not invested in more than the trade route jumpships at this point...or do you have existing projects in the works for them?"

"None," Stephan admitted.

"Perplexing," Kleeve said, glancing to his right as if in silent counsel. "They are usually savvy investors, and if they started this endeavor by sending you out here..."

"They helped us out the door," Sarah clarified. "The endeavoring has been all our own making. We inform them of some of it, but not all. Frankly I'm still pissed at losing Neubenn, and I think they're glad we're out of their way. We have no business contacts with them at all, and I don't anticipate any in the future."

"Very interesting," Kleeve said, then Aeryn spoke again from behind an ornate blue neck scarf that came up nearly all the way to her chin.

"They are not as savvy as us when it comes to economics, but they are more savvy when it comes to military affairs, so we do not dispute their ruling the Federated Suns. But this wouldn't be the first time we've beat them to a deal. We just expected one to already be in place since they were the ones who sent you out here."

"We're on our own," Sarah answered bluntly. "And the more interior sources of goods we can generate the better, because I'm having to rely far too heavily on the Federated Suns markets to get what we need...garments included. However, how they are produced can vary wildly, and if you're looking for an environment conducive to quasi-slave labor, this is not it."

Kleeve shook his head fervently. "Perish the thought. A healthy and happy workforce is a productive workforce...so long as you can avoid unionization. Do you have any regulations regarding that?"

"If you studied us on Neubenn, you'd know the answer to that is no," Paul interjected.

"Good...and we did study you there. We just didn't know how many policies would carry over here."

"We stick with what works," Stephan said with a touch of pride. "If your workers want to strike, that's between you and them. We don't get involved."

"Are you planning on opening up a line of work mechs?" Ishi Kerri asked.

"Not at the moment," Stephan said with a frown. "We're making so much on the military ones I don't know why we'd switch over production."

"Would you have any objection to us building work mechs?"

Sarah raised an eyebrow. "On this parcel of land or another one?"

"Another one," Kleev cut back in. "We'd agree to leave military production to your factory, unless you wanted more in the marketplace?"

Stephan and Paul exchanged glances, but it was the First Lord that spoke.

"Would your mechs be licensed?"

"Of course. We always go through the proper channels."

"Our mechs are not, so we can't sell directly to the Federated Suns. We've no limit of other customers, so it's not really an issue, but if you wanted to produce licensed military mechs for sale back into the Federated Suns market, we could arrange for you to set up a factory to do so, if we were partners in that factory. Say a 20% stake?"

"Forty," Sarah amended, "and we'd give the factory the necessary land cost free."

"On Polvice or elsewhere?" Ishi asked.

"Where would you prefer?" Paul asked.

"Your colony on Drymo would be the logistically logical place if enough habitation can be erected."

“We can handle that,” Paul promised, glancing at Stephan with a subtle nod.

“House Jerrast,” the First Lord said somewhat dramatically, “Welcome to the Morten Protectorate. I think we’re going to be able to do a lot of business together...and I’m already liking you more than the Davions. What other projects did you have in mind for our realm?”

3

July 17, 2999

Periphery

Unnamed System

Unknown Planet

Hunting pirates was hard, and Captain Sheridan was one of the better ones, in Grady's estimation. The Mech Commander sat inside the cockpit of his *BattleMaster*-class mech within the very tight confines of the dropship *Teal Egg* as it descended through the humid air of a small moon orbiting a purple/blue gas giant, ready to take the field and storm the recently discovered pirate's base while his flotilla of jumpships sat at the Nadir jump point alongside Captain Sheridan's own *Star Lord*-class jumpship, the *Mighty Saber*...which was now House Morten property.

When Lord Vander had sent him out on this mission to hunt the pirate, he'd known it was going to be a long shot. Pirates are notorious for not using regular jump lanes as merchants did, and there were so many stars within 30 light years it was almost impossible to know where they were coming from or going to, but he'd been given vectors from Captain Sheridan's previous hits in the same area and they'd been narrowing down the possibilities. When those dropped to about 30, Grady had been sent out with 12 jumpships under his command, with 6 of those being scout vessels with the dropships necessary to survey and catalog new systems.

So Grady was technically doing Stephan a favor as well, adding more systems to his map, as they hunted for Captain Sheridan's base of operations...assuming he had any. If a pirate wanted to live on his ship all the time, then they'd be virtually impossible to find and catch, but other than the crazy ass

lifelong spacers, everyone wanted to feel real gravity and dirt under their boots at least *some* of the time, and it had been said that most pirates had a hideaway somewhere off the charts to lay low, or at least to stash their loot and prisoners, if they took any of the latter.

That was the main difference between warlords and pirates. Warlords took planets, pirates took ships, and raiders would hit planets, steal their stuff, then vanish, so technically they could be sent by warlords or pirates or your friendly neighboring planet. But anyone who properly went by the title of 'pirate' was in the business of hitting ships, and Captain Sheridan was anything if not a proper pirate.

He had gotten very good at grabbing dropships, for he'd sit and wait until they were partway through their trip either from a planet or to a planet before he'd hit them...but he wasn't too predictable about it. Anywhere from orbit to jump point he was known to jump them, and he did so with a pair of modified *Mule*-class dropships that had enough extra armament and armor to almost be considered pocket warships. They also moved damn fast, meaning their crews were risking extreme damage to their bodies by the high g acceleration as they chased down and engaged their target dropships.

A lot simply surrendered, but those that didn't were blasted open in most cases, then what was left of them was slowly towed by one of the two 'Reapers' back to his jumpship...which carried six dropship slots in it, and he always had at least one open for his prize. Damaged or intact, they'd attach it to the *Mighty Sword* and off they'd go to who knows where.

He was even credited at sitting at a distant planet's pirate jump point and monitoring a planet for when they sent out heavily laden dropships with precious cargos, then he'd jump from the planet to the star's jump point just before the dropships got there, pop out his two reapers, and he'd get the dropships and maybe the jumpship as well, but it was rumored he sold those larger ships as fast as he took them, either not

trusting his crew to operate independently of his command or just wanting the fat payday from stealing a jumpship.

So Grady had been jumping his flotilla to the first of the unexplored stars thought to maybe contain the pirate base, and when it came up empty he used it as his own base of operations sending out the scout ships with batteries charged to six of the nearby ones. If they encountered any trouble or saw any sign of this pirate or another, they were to jump right back here. If not, they'd continue to do a 3 week survey of the system so it could be considered to be 'fully charted' from then on out for House Morten's maps.

That meant Grady had done a lot of waiting as those ships went out and came back three weeks later...then they recharged and went out again...and came back again. But the third out, one came back some 8 hours later, having left its scout dropship behind, to report that while they had arrived at the Zenith jump point, the dropship, enroute to a planet, had been able to look back and see a jumpship at the Nadir point.

A *Star Lord*-class jumpship, though the dropship was too far away to see any surface details on it.

Grady's flotilla had then jumped in immediately, leaving behind the scout jumpship at the 'base camp' to unfurl its sails and start recharging to follow them back in 6 days or so. But his six other jumpships popped into the Nadir jump point only a few hundred thousand kilometers away from the spread sails of the *Might Sword*...meaning it must have arrived here recently, otherwise it would have recharged by now, and when you were dealing with a modified *Star Lord* that had been upgraded with batteries...the same way all House Morten jumpships had been...it would take at least twice as long as usual to fill both the capacitor and those batteries.

So it was possible the *Mighty Sword* had enough charge to jump out, but they'd still have to retract their sails first...and by the time Grady got there, they were already in the process of pulling them in.

Fortunately he had some of House Morten's new Navy personnel with him, along with two *real* pocket warships along

with 12 other regular dropships to deal with the reapers...but they hadn't been there. The jumpship was all by itself, with the dropships having gone down to the moon. After Captain Nehder's boarding parties burned their way through one of the docking ports and forcibly mated the converted *Mule-class Red Mushroom* to the *Mighty Sword*, he'd reported that they barely had a skeleton crew aboard...only six people. Everyone else was down on the moon partying after their latest heist.

So that was the end of the *Mighty Sword's* pirating days, but after they had got close enough to the moon and spotted the location of the base did they see some 37 dropships spread out across two valleys around a proper dropship pad nestled up against the side of a mountain. Some of the dropships were visibly broken, others had pieces of the hull missing, and if even half of them were partially operational, Grady was going to have his hands full.

But both of the reapers were sitting on the pads just in front of the entrance to the base that looked to be sheltered in a small ravine further up in the mountains. It was going to be close quarters combat there, and a hell of a climb through the trees...and when he said *through* the trees that's what he meant, because there had been no major roads or clearings noticeable before they hit atmosphere.

They were going to have to set down some 21 kilometers away in the closest clearing and march their way there...then do something that mechwarriors hated doing.

Taking on grounded dropships.

And the two reapers had extra weaponry on them, enough to hunt other dropships, so this was going to be an interesting mission despite the fact that the pirates had nowhere to run to now that he had their one and only jumpship. They were cornered rats, and they'd not only refused to surrender, they wouldn't even respond to his messages.

That meant it was to be a fight then, perhaps a last stand for Captain Sheridan, and it was Grady's job to make sure that last stand didn't cost House Morten a lot of mechs and mechwarriors.

When they finally settled onto the weak gravity of the moon...only 0.8g...Grady was first out of the dropship, stepping onto the damp, dark soil and sinking in nearly a foot as he walked clear of the ramp as the rest of the Battalion he'd brought with him for this pirate hunting adventure followed him out. They began to pile up in a cluster on the north side of the *Overlord*-class dropship while a Mule landed just to the south as the other dropships, including the scout that had been left behind in the system briefly, were holding in orbit of the moon until he called them down.

The *Tan Pumpkin* set down while the mechs were still spilling out into the small clearing, but Grady ordered eight of them...those with the flattest backs on them...to head over to the troop carrier that had Colonel Zephram's assault teams inside along with a host of ground vehicles that would be of no use here. But a seldom used technique in the Inner Sphere that House Morten had adopted and made its own...called a 'backpack'...was standard issue equipment for their ground units, and they carried them instead of the mechs in most cases. Occasionally you'd see some onboard mech dropships anyway, but the ground pounders were obligated to crate along the equipment just in case it was needed.

And this was a perfect example of how you'd never know what you'd need until you got on site. The forest here had no roads in it, save for the two valleys that led up to the pirate base. Taking those roads would mean the Battalion would have to walk past all those questionable dropships before they could even get up to the two reapers that were guarding the base like pit bulls. Grady wasn't going to go that way, so the only other options was through the trees. If they weren't too large the mechs could knock them over, but that didn't exactly plow a smooth road for land vehicles, and all the downed lumber and stumps would block even hovercraft from getting through.

So they were going to use the backpacks to get at least some of the Colonel's men up to the base, and they were going to ride on the back of the mechs in what was little more than waterproof and fire resistant tents equipped with seats and

seatbelts inside them that would be mounted on the back of the mechs where there were no heat sinks...or if there were, the mech would have to deactivate those sinks, otherwise they'd cook the troops.

Each backpack could carry between 4 and 16 men, depending on the size of the mech, and Grady wanted to get at least 60 men up there with him without turning too many of his Battalion into walking transports. While the Colonel saw to getting the assigned mechs outfitted with the backpacks, Grady started the long, slow process of pushing his way through the trees, trying not to use his weapons as much as possible, and hoping the wildlife would get the hell out of the way long before he could step on them...though if they lived in the trees, that would be problematic, but there was no way he was taking his mechs through that dropship gauntlet. He was going to go through the forest all the way up to the last bit of those roads as they led up to the main landing pad that had both of the reapers on it.

And it was going to take hours to get there, so there was no point in waiting on the backpacks. Those mechs could catch up easy enough following the trail he was starting to blaze.

His BattleMaster had two hands, but the right one was connected to a PPC that was detachable in an emergency, sort of like a handgun that the mech carried. If he hit a certain button explosive bolts would detach and it would drop away, allowing him to use both hands...but he didn't want to lose that PPC now, so he used it as a pry bar while making the most out of his left hand as he peeled back the tops of the trees to wedge his mech between them, snapping them off lower to the ground when the gap was too small. He tossed the trees to the side as much as he could, having called up other mechs with hands to follow right behind him and clear more of the path.

They were having to take down some extra trees to do it, as well as picking up the litter from Grady, but after they got down to the fourth mech in the long single file line that was forming, the rest didn't have anything to do except shuffle walk

forward and not trip on the stumps that were too big to crush into the soil.

It took over half an hour before all 36 mechs were on the path, with the 8 that were carrying the ground troops bringing up the rear, followed by two others at the tail end just in case someone came up at them from behind, but they hadn't seen any sign of enemy mechs or aerial craft. Still, it paid to be prepared, so the troops were sandwiched between armored torsos ahead of and behind them as they rode the bumpy journey strapped into well cushioned chairs that left their legs dangling inside of the tents.

Other versions of the backpacks that House Morten built included solid walls, heated or air conditioned, and even a few with armor plating on them, or specialized gear to make them a sort of mobile headquarters. Grady didn't have any of that specialized stuff with him, just the tent versions that were easy to pack away in large duffle bags and keep with you for a rainy day, for rarely did mechs ever carry troops into battle, but the terrain here required it.

The Colonel was riding with them, while most of his troops were still back in the dropship. Grady didn't begrudge him that, and he'd come to rely on the man and his growing TOA...Tactical Operations Army...that was getting better by the year. They were being trained and groomed as an offensive force, while House Morten was likewise developing troops for garrison duty, known as the Home Guard, or HGs for short, though many likewise referred to 'HG' as 'Hold your Ground,' which fit the billing perfectly.

House Morten believed that you couldn't train people to do both offense and defense when it came to infantry, so they were splitting up the tasks. Walking silent patrols and looking for an attack without staying on high alert constantly or getting bored and slouching off your duty was not as simple as just following orders. It required a middle of the line alertness that offensive troops couldn't handle. They were either ready to go in blazing or mentally checked out. Stephen had told him that he wanted worlds so heavily fortified that few would dare

attack them directly, meaning they'd either be left alone or indirect methods of warfare would be used. And it was primarily those indirect methods that he wanted the HGs on alert for while they'd maintain a group of TOA on every planet in training mode in case they'd be needed for regular combat, or to counterattack any landing force.

Right now the HGs were barely in existence on paper, but the TOA was a legit army...though still small in number. And Grady was going to need them to help take those dropships without totally destroying them.

His BattleMaster continued to lead the line, even though he had the other mechs behind him trade off so none of them got too tired working the mechanical hands. It wasn't something they were trained to do much of, let alone for this length of time, but he didn't want anyone else taking the lead. He couldn't really see ahead of him, for most of the trees were as tall or taller than his mech, but when they were moving up and over the last ridge before they got to the pirate hideout, he paused to get a good view after hacking a few out of the way on the descent below him.

Several kilometers away, on the far side of the valley near the top, another smaller valley intersected, and right in front of that overtop a small river was a flat landing pad holding the two reapers. Behind them were a few buildings that were visible, while the rest were obscured to the left by the small valley. The walk up to the landing pad was covered in trees as well, but the river made a bit of a road up to them. He could take that instead of intersecting the two roads that were coming from the north and south, and while others would probably be yelling for the faster route up there he wasn't going to fall for that trap. At least one of the reapers could fire down that river's path, and if you got close enough both could. He wanted to come up from the side so they'd only have to assault one reaper at a time, which meant more tree plowing to get over there. He simply had to choose coming in from the north or south, as he was currently sitting due west of the pirate's den.

He opted for north, and angled slightly that way as he trudged downhill, using his momentum in some cases to help knock over some of the thicker trees.

"Watch your spacing," he warned. "This ground is slicker than it looks. And none of you had better start a domino shitstorm behind me."

"You're getting tired boss," Chandler Trendill said, fifth in line behind him. "How about you let one of us do some pushing?"

"Are you calling me old, laddie?"

"No, just tired. These armatures do a number on your hand."

Grady paused for a moment and looked down at his own left hand, encased in what looked like a short tube that had a glove inside that caused the mech's hand to mimic his own...except there was a decent amount of resistance to his finger movements, meaning it did tire out your hand muscles pretty fast.

"Are you volunteering?"

"Actually, I was going to volunteer Beck. He's been riding back here easy."

Grady laughed. "You don't get to volunteer others. And I'd rather deal with a fatigued arm myself than worry about you guys cramping up and shooting something you shouldn't be by accident. I want those dropships disabled, not destroyed. So you and Beck keep riding back there. I'll be good to the finish."

"You could just let one of us somersault down the hillside and save us some time," Chandler joked.

"That be just a lame excuse for tripping," Grady warned, taking the most of the small break while he had it, then he started pulling trees aside again. "And you wouldn't get as far as you think, even if the angle was twice this steep."

"Alright, I'll shut up."

"When do you ever shut up?" Grady said mirthfully, but the truth was he *was* getting tired. But him tired was still more effective than one of them at full strength...and he didn't want any of them getting killed because *they* were tired.

So he pushed on slowly down the valley until they got to the main river. Forging it wasn't too difficult, for it was only a meter or two deep, plus a little mud that didn't slow them down too much. Then it was back to climbing through the trees until they eventually came up about a kilometer and a half north of the base and intercepted a cut and smoothed out dirt road.

Grady walked out into it, looking both ways and seeing nothing. To the left it slowly descended into the valley where part of the captured dropships were, though he couldn't see them from here. Still too many trees and too much distance. To the right was more trees, and the road zigzagged ever so slightly, so he couldn't get direct line of sight to the first dropship, though he could glimpse a tiny bit of its huge round shape if he stood at the right angle.

It was going to be a march slightly uphill, but with no more trees in the way that was going to be a luxury except for the width. They needed to go up two by two, and it was going to be a tight fit.

"Alright, laddies, this is it. Clear walking from here, but we need to stay two abreast at all times. Don't let them have a single target to hit. Go slow enough you don't get caught up on a tree branch, and remember the drill. If we don't do this smart we're losing a lot of mechs."

He waited until an 80-ton Zeus walked up beside him and nearly rubbed shoulders. They walked a few hundred meters down the road then stopped, letting the others gradually get out of the trail and form up, with the backpackers stopping at the rear and spilling out their troops onto the ground via extendable ladders. They were close enough to the base they could walk from here on in...plus, Grady wanted to use all 36 mechs to spread out the damage.

When they got in formation, 18 rows of two each and a mix of heavies, assaults, and four Phoenix Hawks which were towards the back and paired off with a heavier mech each, Grady started walking them up the gradual hillside and waiting for the treeline to clear. They'd be firing uphill slightly, meaning some of the weaponry on the top of the dropships couldn't

depress to shoot them as well as if they were on flat ground...which was a small advantage...but when they got within 300 meters of the edge of the ferrocrete platform a silvery blur shot out through the trees and bounced off the chest of his BattleMaster.

The gauss rifle ball had been slowed down enough by tree trunks that it just deflected off the mech rather than doing any damage, making Grady wonder if they'd even been aiming at him specifically, because there was no way that had traveled a straight line to get here.

Another one came through, and fires started ahead of them as lasers were blasting into the trees. Apparently the dropships were not going to wait for the mechs to show up right in front of them, so they were mowing down the trees themselves and hoping to get something through.

"Steady laddies," he said, marching forward slowly. "We need our pacing slow enough to make this work. Don't charge them. Make sure you get good, steady shots at their weapons. Nothing rushed. Your armor can hold up long enough to take a few seconds extra," he said as his wingman got hit with what looked like a piece of a large laser shot that made it through the trees.

They endured more of this partial fire, starting to get a little armor chipped off in the process, but that's why Grady wanted two assault mechs to go first so they could soak up the initial damage.

Then a gauss rifle ball came through and hit him at near full speed, cracking his armor on his left leg and making his mech studder step into the trees on the left. The Zeus waited for him to get back into line, then they continued to walk up and into the clearing as they got hit by a mix of Medium lasers, Large lasers, and one Gauss Rifle launcher...but all the other weaponry on the dropship couldn't swing around to shoot them unless they spread out around the dropship and attacked it from all sides.

They were *not* going to do that. Morten tactical training made it clear how to assault a grounded dropship, and they

were about to run that play out of the playbook against what was essentially an over-armed version of the standard Mule...which had less standard weaponry than most dropships anyway given its civilian build, despite its larger size.

Grady and the Zeus walked out of the trees and up the few steps further where the trees had long ago been cleared around the ferrocrete pad. When they got up on top of it, they were already losing armor at a heavy rate as a few other dropship weapons came into the line of fire, but both mechs weathered it as they stood still for a moment on the level footing and aimed at a particular weapons battery sticking out of small gaps in the thick armor plating.

Grady fired all his weapons at a Medium laser blister over a range of about 250 meters, standing still to target a stationary target. Tired as he was, there was no way he was missing that.

The laser and part of the armor plating around it was damaged, just as he was soon to be if he just stood here and took more hits...but as per the tactic, he and the Zeus simply moved to the side...him to the left and the Zeus to the right...and stood there firing again once their weapons recharged as the next two mechs in line walked between them and fired their weapons.

Once they got off an alpha strike...which was the term most mechwarriors used for button mashing every weapon you had at the same time...they too walked sideways, and one of them came in front of Grady, blocking his firing line of sight, but also blocking the dropship from continuing to shoot up his mech. The guy ahead was now taking the hits while Grady just stood there and waited.

Pair by pair the mechs came up, fired a calm Alpha Strike at one of the dropship's batteries, then moved aside and let the next pair come up. When the entire line had come through, Grady and the Zeus moved back together and followed them as the entire column kept getting closer and closer to the dropship.

By the time Grady got back to the front, most of the weapons on this side were already destroyed. He fired at the one of the remaining Medium lasers, taking a little more damage to his chest plates that were already glowing orange on the indicator screen, then he had another mech in front of him again blocking him against the rest of the incoming fire.

Soon, there was nothing left to shoot at and the entire column just stopped.

"Backtrack," he ordered, with all the mechs doing an about face, spinning in place, then they started marching back towards the road...but before they could get there a Large laser shot them from the edge of the dropship, barely able to rotate around far enough to target them near the edge of the pad, but it couldn't get them in closer to it.

The mechs within range turned and fired, spreading out a little bit, which drew another autocannon into the fight. Grady kept his men more or less on the same ground they had entered on, but were now extending it out into a wider area and picking off the weapons that were coming into range one or two at a time using the mechs that had been damaged the least...which was not his.

Normally they would have continued around the dropship plucking everything off, but the other reaper was there on the far side, currently blocked by this fat dropship, and thanks to their ace in the hole, all he had to do was get a path up to the dropship clear.

When it was, and flanked by mechs on either side looking to draw fire themselves and finally getting none, Colonel Zephram and his men ran up the safe zone in a two by two formation that mimicked what the mechs had just used as Grady moved up to the closed hatch on this side of the dropship and began firing his four forward Medium lasers one at a time at a precise point on the seam of the door, melting/blasting a hole in it that he then used his sore left hand to operate his mech's paint-scraped but otherwise intact metallic hand to poke through the hole and wrap his fingers around the far side...then he pulled.

He had to tug several times before the weak claps holding the ramp/door in place finally broke. They were there to keep the door sealed against the weather and the void of space, but the force he was pulling with was enough to actually bend them out of shape until they popped open...then he pulled the ramp down to the ground as his mech took a lot of small arms fire from inside.

"Don't be stupid," he said over the external mic.
"Surrender and you'll live to see tomorrow."

The fire kept coming, so with a shake of his head Grady stepped up onto the ramp and swept the interior of the smaller than normal cargo bay of the Mule with his pair of machine guns, tearing through bodies all over the place that didn't have enough cover...and those that did he used his Medium lasers carefully, for they still wanted to capture this dropship.

The resistance quickly died out, but no one was standing up and surrendering.

Grady backed off the ramp and to the side.

"Colonel, it's all yours."

"Thank you, Commander," Zephram replied over the comm as his soldiers raced up the ramp and into the war zone wearing newly manufactured full body armor painted in dull gray with red and silver trim. Their leading element carried with them four 'Blankets,' behind which the others ran. Grady heard a few shots ring out, then all was quiet as the Morten TOA started to make their way through the rest of the dropship.

It took longer than Grady had thought before he heard back, but he and his mechwarriors were glad for the break to just sit there for a while after hours of walking...all safely protected from the other reaper because this one was blocking for them.

"Weapons secured," Zephram reported. "We're making secondary sweeps to find any cave dwellers, but all the critical systems are under guard, including the bridge. You're clear to engage."

"Nice work, Colonel. We'll be needing you again shortly."

“We’ll tag and bag ‘em before you get done,” he promised.

Grady switched back to the Battalion comm channel.
“Alright, laddies. Time for the second one. Anyone other than the Phoenix Hawks who has their armor in the green, get to the front of the line...”

4

September 28, 2999

Federated Suns

Crucis March

Cholis

Morten Estate

Stephan had just gotten done with his morning workouts...the first of which had been a 4 mile run, the second a calisthenics obstacle course, and the third had been in his Centurion, and not in the simulator. He'd taken the real thing out for a few laps of the Estate grounds, walking across dirt trails as well as paved roads, and engaging in a little live fire practice at a range on the north end of Prime Valley.

That all left him feeling blissfully tired as he sank into his office's chair ready to get to the administrative work of being head of a Periphery state. He opened up his holographic message folder, with it displaying all the recent messages he'd received to his First Lord's mailbox in the Comstar network. Those messages people had to pay to send, so he always viewed them himself while there was another folder for local communications that his staff sifted through to see if there was anything he should deal with. Occasionally there was, but most of it was people giving their feedback on what they thought he was doing, offering suggestions, their services, or asking questions that they had no right to expect him to answer personally...and that was just from the Cholis population.

Normally people didn't pay Comstar to send such drivel, but occasionally they did. Still, he was surprised when the glowing message bin appeared over the stacks of paper documents on his desk indicating that he had 1,093 new messages since he had last checked yesterday.

That was a new record, but things had been like this ever since House Jerrast had made public their series of business deals inside the Morten Protectorate. It's not like they could have hidden it if they wanted to, for they had to move large chunks of their people and equipment to begin construction of their new facilities, and that meant jumpship reroutes as well, but still, while Stephan knew it would attract more attention to his office, he hadn't expected this.

He'd been getting an average of 30 or so messages a day from various people throughout the Federated Suns before this deal had gone public, now he was averaging over 700, and most of them were legit contacts.

The First Lord began to scroll through, looking at the message headers and immediately sending some that appeared to be disgruntled individuals to his comm staff for them to read and determine if there was anything important in them. The rest he began working through himself, finding yet again more business contacts being made. He shuffled some of those directly to Paul to handle, but pulled up one that was from a small House situated in the Lyran Commonwealth down near Terra and not that far from the Federated Suns.

He'd never heard of it before, but they were seeking to form an alliance with the Morten Protectorate via a marriage proposal from the head of House Liopold's oldest daughter...and along with the message came a portfolio of pictures. The first few were quite regal and stunning, followed by several nude pictures that were just as tastefully done revealing her true assets.

"The odds of her having the brains to match that body are next to none," he said regretfully, for she was easily a 10, then he deleted the message and moved on, not bothering to waste time and money responding in the negative.

He also had a number of mercenary units offering their services...it looked like three today, despite the fact that his House notoriously did not hire mercenaries. He kept expecting the word to get around eventually, but apparently that was going to take longer than expected.

Stephan went to delete those, but the name of one caught his eye. The Northwind Highlanders. They were about as elite as there was amongst the mercenary ranks, and the header didn't say the typical 'Services Available' or 'Open for Contract,' rather it said 'Seeking Information.'

He pulled it up and read through the medium-length message, for Comstar charged by the data byte, and the more wordy you were the more it cost you. Hence these sorts of things were usually short solicitations.

But to his surprise, they were not offering their services...actually they were, but they stated they knew he didn't hire mercenaries but if he ever needed some extra firepower on his warlord hunts they would most likely have some small units available. No, the main purpose of this message was to inquire about the possibility of sending some of their people to the Morten Academy to train in their methods of mech combat.

Stephan raised an eyebrow. So far the Morten Academy was only to train his own people, they weren't taking in outsiders in as a paid service, and he wasn't sure if he wanted to start that or not, though some of his mechwarriors had already been lured away by mercenary units with big signing bonuses to get them, so it wasn't as if House Morten tactics were going to be kept a state secret. He just wasn't sure if he wanted to be training mercenaries or anyone else, though it did offer up a lot of interesting possibilities.

As he took a few moments to think that through, a priority message popped up amongst the others. It was from Carroll Davion, and it was untitled, but with an attachment.

He opened it, finding it simply read 'I'm so sorry.'

Stephan frowned and opened the attachment, which was a video file from New Avalon. First Prince Ian Davion in an official ceremony.

He watched through it, not seeing anything of relevance at first, then the First Prince brought up someone before him who bowed. He took out a sword and 'knighted' them as the new Duke of Armington...which was one of Cholis's neighboring

planets. Duke Bennison was a friend of his, and Armington was one of the worlds he'd sold mechs to on the cheap to help them with bandits.

Stephan watched on and it got worse. Three other worlds in his immediate area were also getting new Dukes installed...all of which were his friends. The last of which was Duke Thorsen.

"Shit," Stephan said, finishing watching the ceremony to see how many others were being changed. Two more were, but they were on the other side of the Federated Suns. Ian was replacing 6 Dukes in total, as was his legal right as First Prince, but this was not normal. Dukes that had no families would be replaced when they died or retired, and those that were being punished for dereliction of duty were often removed, but everyone else inherited their positions and the First Prince just rubber stamped the lineage replacements. He'd usually have a ceremony on New Avalon during the transition...such as the one Stephan had *thought* he was going to when he left Neubenn for the last time...but that was primary for appearance sake, as well as for the First Prince to actually meet his Dukes in person and establish a relationship there.

Stephen knew more about the four worlds that were affected here than probably Ian did, and he knew those four Dukes had not done anything to warrant their replacements...nor had they died, which meant they were being dispossessed without cause, and it was apparent as to why.

Stephan had trade relations with all of them, plus another 17 planets in the Edgeward Alpha Combat Zone and other neighboring areas of the Crucis March, but he'd only sold mechs to three of them...plus the repaired Atlas he'd given Duke Thorsen for his 80th birthday a year and a half ago.

All four of those Dukes were the ones being removed because of their association with him...and there wasn't a damn thing he could do to stop it.

He pounded the top of his desk with his fist as he got up and rushed out, heading into Brinestorm with his security

detachment racing to keep pace with him as he headed for Duke Thorsen's Duchy estate.

When he got to the door the guards there let him enter without incident, with his own standing outside and chatting with their counterparts, for Stephen had been here often, and Thorsen at his Estate just as much.

He was met at the door by Sandra Timmis, one of the Duke's aides, and the look on her face told him that they'd already been informed as well.

"He's in his study," Sandra said as he heard faint crying from further into the house. "Mena is taking it harder than he is. That Davion bitch just left."

"Did she give a reason?"

"No. Nothing at all. The First Prince just decreed it and didn't even have the decency to tell him before appointing someone else," she said, swiping away a sniffle of her own. "When the new Duke gets here in three months, he's to turn over command and then...nothing. He's just invisible after that to that 19 year-old clown! At least they gave you something. He's not getting any compensation. Not even a pension beyond his military one."

Stephan put a hand on her shoulder for a moment, knowing there was nothing he could say that would make it any better, then walked on in and went to the former General's study. He knocked lightly, then entered without waiting for an answer to find Harris standing in front of the fireplace staring into the flickering flames.

The Duke glanced over his shoulder irritably, but when he saw who it was his expression softened.

"I know you know exactly how this feels," he said, walking a few steps and sitting down in a small cushioned chair still facing the fireplace.

Stephan came over and sat down in its twin, with both of them looking into the flames rather than each other.

"You know why he's doing it."

"I don't blame you for a second, Stephen...and I don't care what the others might say. You've done nothing wrong out here and everything right. Now you're being punished for it."

"You far more than me."

"Ian doesn't care about me. I'm just a pawn being used to rein you in. This House Alliz, do you know them?"

"Not personally, but I believe they're associated with House Derren."

Thorsen's eyebrows lifted up slightly as a new piece of the puzzle fell into place. "So they'll be here to harass you, no doubt."

"I can handle that."

"But you shouldn't have to!" Harris bellowed, slamming his arm down on the padded armrest. "You've been helping to secure the outer worlds of the Federated Suns more than Ian or his father ever did. They should be pinning a medal on you, for god's sake!"

"I'm not worried about me right now. The four of you are being dispossessed."

Harris waved off the thought. "Don't concern yourself with me. While I expected to live out my remaining years here, the First Prince has the right to reassign us wherever he wishes whether I like it or not. I know my duty, but he's acting in direct contradiction to his father's orders interfering with you."

"That's his legal prerogative as well," Stephen noted.

"There's a damn lot more than legality at stake here, Stephen. The Federated Suns cannot be held together by some words on a piece of paper. If Ian doesn't hold to the deals his father made, he's going to start ripping apart our foundations. You can't lead men into battle because the law told them to, you have to gain their trust, and this sort of thing cuts that camaraderie off at the legs. You're supposed to be an unofficial extension of the Federated Suns out here, and now Ian is treating you like a foreigner with hostile intent."

"He's also cutting off four loyal Dukes just to do it. I know there's no just cause for removing any of you...and trash

that bit about him having the legal right to remove you. It doesn't work that way."

"No?"

"Being a noble family is not just about having a position and resources that the commoners don't. It's about looking out for the best interests of not just yourself and your family, but for others. That's what being *noble* means. We place ourselves in harm's way to deal with problems and threats that others can't. That the average man and woman has no chance of defeating, or even surviving. Being a noble family is about work and responsibility, with very little of it being privilege. I was taught very early that being a leader was 1% privilege and 99% responsibility, and if you didn't hold up the 99 you didn't get the one. Ian isn't holding up his responsibility, so he doesn't get the privilege of plucking out Dukes and replacing them for no reason. Everything a noble family does has a reason behind it, and the reason is the legitimacy. Laws without reasons have no legitimacy either. Ian is doing this because he can currently get away with it. If he was removing Dukes from some of the larger worlds, a civil war would have already broken out regardless of his so-called 'legal right' to do it. And I'm of half a mind to veto his decision anyway."

"I appreciate the thought, but you know you can't do that...at least not for very long. Ian would send one or more of his Divisions to retake these worlds and put an end to your Protectorate. No, there's nothing you can do to stop this, only delay it. And I won't have you jeopardizing what you've built only to delay it a year or so at the cost of your mechwarriors lives, and many others. No, get that thought out of your mind entirely. It isn't feasible."

"Just because it isn't feasible in the long term doesn't mean I don't have to consider it," Stephan said, leaning forward to put his elbows on his knees and getting his face a little closer to the fire. "I just hate sitting by and doing nothing in the face of an injustice like this. He's not just dispossessing you of the Duchy, but he's taking away your hopes of establishing a House of your own."

“That was a failed mission already, Stephan,” Harris admitted. “Of my three sons, two are dead, and the third hasn’t been here for more than the one time you met him. I’ve got four surviving grandchildren, three of which I was forbidden to see by their mother who blames the military for my son’s death, and they grew up hating me, so my new great grandchildren I’ll probably never lay eyes on a picture of, let alone meet. My last hope was my other granddaughter, and she is currently on New Avalon at the Albion Military Academy trying to become a mechwarrior. I was going to give her the Atlas as an inheritance if I could coax her out here into my militia for a year or two to spend some time with me, but now even that is no longer an option. The First Prince didn’t kill my dream of a noble family, Stephan. It was dead on arrival.”

“Many noble families have failed,” Stephan said regretfully, “because they lost their position or resources. You can’t help others without them, but the heart of a noble family is the responsibility and duty to help uplift and shield others, and you pass muster on that, Harris, while a lot of other so-called noble families don’t.”

“But like you said, it takes resources, which my family has never personally had,” Thorsen said. “It was just this Duchy and the potential to grow it and establish my own House. I can’t do that without family members that want to come out here and help me do it, and the closest one was Jarred. His wife would never allow it, but I also got word he’s finally got the funding to open up some type of corporation on New Syrtis, and he can’t leave that behind. You may be able to bat around 80 million Pounds like its lunch money, but raising that much from investors is a hard pull. Even if I wanted to, he’s got better prospects on his own than him coming out here and trying to put down new roots.”

“I didn’t know he was that well off,” Stephan said, having had previous conversations about his children and grandchildren from time to time.

“He wasn’t, but he finally pulled this deal together and is committed to making it work. Something in the telecom

sector. I don't begrudge him that, even if it wasn't what I had originally hoped for."

Stephen grew silent for a long moment, staring at a spot on the floor in front of the fire.

"What's wrong?" Harris asked, but Steven held up a finger for a moment and just continued to think...then a small smile started to tug at his lips.

"I know that look," Harris said. "Don't try anything that's going to get the First Prince any more involved."

Stephan sat straight up, then almost as an afterthought leaned back in the chair comfortably as he continued to look at the Duke. "You know, being a noble family isn't something that the First Prince can bestow upon you. It's more like a calling one has to rise to. Yes, one needs resources and position to have any effect, but when I came out here it was just me and Roger and a big bank account. I was still a noble even without my position, as was my family, even if you ignore the money. Tell me, Harris. Can I appoint a new General from someone who has never had any military training?"

"I suppose he could, though I don't know why he would want to."

"And in legal terms, that General would be legit...but as soon as he got on the battlefield, it would become obvious that the First Prince didn't have the power to make someone a General, because it's more than just position. It's skills, knowledge, experience, intuition, and a lot of other stuff you can't bestow on someone. When he appointed you Duke, you had no knowledge of how to carry out the position, but you've learned a great deal over your years here. I've seen it, and Cholis's population has doubled, and its economy quadrupled under you rule."

"Most of that is due to your presence, to be fair," Thorsen objected.

Stephan shook off the notion. "That has to do with the rate of growth. I'm talking about the skills to make it grow. To protect the people and give them a better quality of life, more opportunities, etc. You may not have had those skills when you

were given the position, but you have them now. And Ian taking away the position does not remove the skills any more than you're no longer being in the military deprives you of being a General. Once a General, always a General, and the same can be said of a noble family, even if one loses their position and resources."

"The way a General loses them when he retires," Thorsen thought carefully. "What's your point?"

"My point is you *are* a noble House now, just one with its wings clipped. Andrew put you in the position where you could become one and you did so, now it is beyond Ian's power to take that status away so long as you don't surrender it."

The Duke bristled at the word 'surrender.' "I don't see how I have much choice in the matter."

"Noble families aren't governed by a set of rules. There are things in common, to be sure, but we customize our own Houses as we see fit. You can do the same."

"My 'House' is going to die along with me without heirs, even if I retained this Duchy."

"Not necessarily," Stephan said with a smirk. "Our House, along with a few others, have incorporated an adoption policy so we can bring in worthy people into the family and bloodline outside of marriage. You could do the same."

"Adopt children? At my age?"

"Not children. I'm thinking about people you can trust. People who are loyal to you more than your own offspring. I'm thinking about your soon to be unemployed staff."

Thorsen cringed. "I hadn't even thought about what was going to happen to them. What you told me about your loyal people on Neubenn...is that going to happen here as well?"

"Possibly, but not if you adopt your staff into House Thorsen."

"But I don't have a Duchy anymore. I couldn't pay to house them on my own, and what good will it do for us to be a House without the money or position to, as you put it, look after others?"

"You gave me an idea."

Harris's eyebrows frowned. "A good idea or a bad one?"

"I brought my family here with the benefit of generations of other Mortens figuring out solutions to seemingly unsolvable problems. We've essentially got a manual written that is very useful in a lot of situations...but it's not complete, and it was written for dealing with a Duchy on a single world...now we're an independent state with multiple worlds, so we're still having to learn a lot on the go and add to that manual. I just invented another piece. How would you like a job?"

"Doing what? You don't use Duchies, and I'm too old to be leading troops. Frankly, I'm too old to do much of anything at this point."

"Bullshit. I have a job for you, possibly one of the most important of your life...but you can't do it alone. It would require you building a House. I need House Thorsen to fill a position in the Morten Protectorate. An Earldom."

The old General considered for a moment, then decided to just listen. "Go on."

"All of our worlds are led by members of my family. But leadership comes in different ways, and with every new planet I add our numbers get stretched thinner."

"Hence your new twelve children."

"Yes, but even as we increase our numbers, there is still a lot of work to do, and we'll be rotating between worlds so we don't develop any of the factionalism that is ripping apart the Federated Suns. We all live in the same place, which will eventually be our capitol but for right now is our Estate here. That means our children grow up together, and after every assignment running a planet they transition back here to be part of the family again, and they do not return to the world they previously ruled. That is an advantage in some ways but a disadvantage in another. The Earldom will help negate that disadvantage by always being on the same world, but they will have no legal or military power. They will be able to give no

orders whatsoever. Instead, they will lead through economic power.”

“I think it’s necessary to state my skills in that regard are limited.”

“They’re adequate, or I would not be giving you this offer.”

“Only because of the great assistance Paul has given me over the years.”

“You’ve learned well enough, now hush and let me finish. None of the worlds I’ve taken is very well off, and the economies need ramped up at the minimum, if not the plugging of some very big holes. The Earldom would do this, because it would essentially be a megacorporation assigned to one planet, owned by House Morten, but run by an Earl. If the economy was lacking something, say, trash collection services, the Earldom would start a company to offer that. If there was a monopoly that was charging huge prices for something that the people could hardly afford to pay, the Earldom would start a competing company and break the monopoly without the Viceroy having to pass a law to prevent it.”

“Economic warfare,” Harris said, approvingly.

“Economic stewardship,” Stephen countered. “Like tending a garden. You pluck some things that are not in the right place, and plant others. The Lord of Economics Management would still run the economies and set all regulations. The Earldom would exist within the free market economies we’re using...because I will not use a command economy like others have. It just doesn’t work well enough, though the free market has its own problems. Part of the job of the Earldom would be to correct these problems in a non-governmental way. It would be extremely difficult and complicated, because you couldn’t give anyone orders. You’d have to engage in, as you said, economic warfare in order to stabilize and grow the local economies similar to how you’ve been doing on Cholis.”

"After you told me to ignore military affairs since you'd got that covered," Harris said suspiciously. "Have you been working on this for a while?"

"Honestly no, It just popped into my head when you mentioned your son's business venture."

"Just like that? A moment ago?"

"That's usually how inspiration works, Harris. The Earldom would come with its own estate, just like a Duchy, but control of the world would still be left to the Viceroy. Your children would have to come live with us after the age of 12 in order to be trained in our ways, because all the Earldoms would have to operate to our standards and not engage in any nefarious business practices. So your children would spend their teenage years with us learning and getting certified...those that wanted to anyway, it wouldn't be mandatory, but your House would have to maintain at least one certified individual in order to maintain the Earldom. You and your staff would be exempt from this, but going forward it would be the rule. As long as you stayed within the box we define, and maintain at least one person with Earldom credentials, your family would keep the position on a hereditary basis forever on one world, much how a Duchy *should* be run."

"Assuming my staff would even want to become part of my House," Thorsen said, his eyes glittering now rather than sullen.

"Easy enough to find out. And even though Sarah is going to hate me for this, I'll grant your Earldom 2 billion C-bills to get started, but after that you're on your own. You'll have to make profit and grow your holdings in order to expand them, but your first priority is not maximum profit, it's stabilizing the economy and developing it to help the populace. You'd be more of a benefactor than a businessman, but you wouldn't be receiving any taxes or other monetary funds from us. You get the 2 billion up front and then you have to swim on your own. It would be a lot bigger challenge than taking on a Duchy that is already established and funded by external means. A lot bigger responsibility than you currently have here on Cholis. And the

profits the Earldom does make would be split, 80% remaining in the Earldom for expansions and other use, 10% going to House Morten, and the remaining 10% going to the Earl's House, so the more you grow the Earldom, the richer your own family gets...and even if I were to dispossess you of the Earldom one day, your personal finances would be independently yours and you'd always have the means to carry on the mission of a noble house even without the position."

"And you came up with all this just sitting here?"

"The job of a head of state is to either come up with good ideas or collect them from others. This one I came up with on my own after the nudge you gave me."

"This isn't just another Duchy you're offering, this is a campaign waging economic warfare, with the stakes being the livelihoods of the people on the planet in question."

"If you want to put it that way, yes. And since the Mortens will be rotating in and out, the Earldom becomes even more the glue that holds the planet together since you will be staying there permanently."

"Obviously it won't be Cholis. What world were you thinking about?"

"What one do you want? I plan on creating other Earldoms now that I've just invented it, but yours would be the first so you can have your pick."

"I take it this is about getting work done rather than a perk of our friendship?"

"More work than you can imagine, my friend."

"Good," he said, sitting up straighter in his chair. "Then I want the hardest assignment you've got. Put me where you need me the most."

"That would be the big one, then, and the one with the worst problems."

"The slaves?"

"Yes. Even with 2 billion, there's no way you could create jobs for even a tiny fraction of them. Dealing with them is the Viceroy's problem. You just chip away at any little hole in the planet you can and find a way to fill it, or upgrade

something else. Be a force for installing and growing civilization. That's your orders. House Thorsen will come up with its own battle plan."

"House Thorsen...I do like the sound of that. Coden it is then, and you're right that this is bigger than this Duchy and any mission I ever led as a General, and that's saying something given my history. Coden..." he said thoughtfully, "...after I turn over possession of Cholis, and assuming I can actually adopt enough people to form a legitimate House."

"Then I suggest you get to work and start asking them...oh, and one more thing. A suggestion only. How you run your own House is your prerogative, but it would be wise for you to lay down some ground rules similar to how new recruits are dealt with in the military. Record some instructional videos explaining to them, in your own words, what your House will stand for and how it will operate. That way generations down the line will still be receiving their marching orders from you long after you're gone. You're not just the first in your new House, you're the founding member. Crafting your House is more than just recruiting people and reproducing. It's a whole other responsibility separate from the Earldom."

Harris nodded. "I understand."

"Still think there's nothing left to do with your remaining years?" Stephan asked sarcastically.

"I don't know how many I've got left, but I feel they're going to be the most important. You have more than my thanks, Stephan."

"This is how realms are supposed to operate, Harris. Building bonds of trust. This is an investment for the future as much as it is a way to flip my middle finger at Ian and counter his dispossession of you."

"Are you going to extend the same offer to the others?"

Stephan bit his lip. "I don't know. I haven't actually had time to think that through."

Thorsen stood up and extended his hand. "I accept your offer."

Stephen stood and took it. "Congratulations, Earl Thorsen. Welcome to the Periphery party."

5

October 19, 1999

Federated Suns

Crucis March

Cholis

Morten Estate

Rannel Morten was over in Prime Valley, which after 10 years of construction was showing less and less forest. One of the buildings that had replaced more land area than the mansion was a new one of hers. It was just a big warehouse inside of which she'd been working on phase 2 of a new prototype. 83% of that warehouse was full of a latticework of equipment she'd never used before...because the material it was made of was something that her department had tried and failed to produce in even limited quantities until 8 months ago.

Nathan Holcomb had actually stumbled onto a backwards ass way to produce one of the materials present in jump drives. It was so inefficient it could never be used in factory production...at least not without some major modification...but it allowed the Lord of Technology to produce a material called Zaxite that was critical for part of the process of breaking through into hyperspace and sending a ship in through that gap.

It couldn't do it on its own, but it was part of 4 components that, when working together, produced the effect. Rannel knew about that only in theory, not application, for they were still so far away from producing jump drives of their own it wanted to make her pull her graying hair out.

Check that. It gave her a second reason to pull her gray hairs out, hoping to give the follicles a reboot when they had to regrow. Sometimes that worked, but she was losing the war and

before long was just going to start dying it...and then still plucking some of the ones that showed their malfunctioning roots.

Jump drives were one of the hardest technologies to create, and aside from an elite group of corporations, nobody could do it. They were that close to losing the ability to travel between stars if the existing jumpships broke down or were destroyed. The fact that her department, after some 57 years of existence, still hadn't figured out how to make them was embarrassing...but also a testament to how intricate this technology was.

Created by Stephan's grandfather, the Lord of Technology position had originally been to oversee techs and construction projects, but he wanted a more clandestine second purpose to it, one that was emblazoned on the archway to every lab they possessed, both here and back on Neubenn...assuming those buildings still existed. It read 'Write me a manual so that, with my wits and a sharp knife, I can go out into the forest and recreate civilization.'

Rannel hadn't been there when it had been created, but she'd been involved, if not leading the division of House Morten, for most of its existence. She was 62 years old now, and to her hilarious realization so long ago, that mandate had been taken literally, for within what was called the 'Morten Tech Tree' was many, many pages about how to build basic technology with nothing but a pocketknife and the natural resources found in the forest.

Things like using that knife to cut a branch, then trimming that branch to fit a stone. And wrapping cut vines around that stone to secure it to the branch, making a crude hammer. With that hammer you then could crush things more effectively, such as small rocks into smaller rock. When some of those broke along a jagged edge, you could then create larger, but crude cutting tools than your knife. On and on it went, detailing how to make better and better tools all starting with that pocketknife...which was a Morten production that had a screwdriver, magnifying glass, and several other things built into

it, making it a multitool that was in every survival kit their House had ever made.

Nowadays though, her techs didn't work on more primitive stuff. Those pages had already been written and refined pretty well, though someone in their off time may come up with a new wrinkle they'd add later. No, what Rannel was working on, and had been working on back in Neubenn was an insurance policy against another dark age. Her division had been tasked with reverse engineering products available on the free market that were not produced on Neubenn. That way, if the imports suddenly dried up, they'd have the technical knowledge to start new industries there to replace them rather than having to go without.

The Morten Tech Tree was a very long manual at this point, but the number of stuff not in it far eclipsed what was. Her job was to add to it, slow or fast, and let each generation contribute more to the puzzle of how to restart civilization from scratch one day. She'd had no idea how valuable what her family had already created would be in trying to build a realm out here in the Periphery from scratch.

Though they'd had far more than a pocketknife to start with.

Rannel had more than 120 research projects ongoing, with a staff of 88 people doing those full time and another 3,918 techs working on other things, like typical maintenance to forging replacement armor plates for the battlemechs in lieu of a corporate factory to do so. That was one of the things on Sarah's 'to-build' list, but their money only went so far and the Lord of Logistics had to prioritize, so Rannel's people were still forging armor plates for mechs that couldn't get fitted ones over the free or black markets.

So Rannel had her hands in all kinds of things going on constantly, but this building was one of her attempts to add something new to their tech tree. When pirate hunting had started to become a hot topic, as opposed to removing warlords who camped out on planets that did not move, they needed a way to track them. Rannel had researched existing methods, all

of which were poor to non-existent, but had helped get their jumpship engineers used to monitoring their drives for the rare opportunity when another ship jumped out of the same jump point as they were at. Studying that data, she could narrow down the possibilities of where they had went, and right now Grady was out on one such hunt, but by taking a group of scout ships with him to search an area that *might* have a pirate base in it if that pirate was only hitting ships within 30 lightyears of his den.

Assuming he even had a den. If he lived on the jumpship then there would be no way to pin him down.

But there were more pirates out there besides Captain Sheridan, and Rannel wanted to improve on that general direction the engineers could pick up with a sensor. She wasn't hopeful of getting it too precise, but anything better than the current 30% would be worth the effort and dramatically reduce the number of systems they had to search.

She'd accomplished that already, creating a modification attached to the jump engines that could reduce the probable locations down to 18%, but that had given her another idea. This 'static' on the engines was what she'd been working on, and using what little public research was available on the subject, and realized that what was happening was that when a ship torn into or out of hyperspace there was a ripple formed that spread out in all directions, diminishing as it went. That ripple had a tiny effect on the jump drives of nearby ships, hence the momentary static. It was possible if another jumpship entered at the exact same time there might be an issue, but she had no way to test that theory. Regardless, the odds of that happening were almost zero, and the static seemed to have no lingering effect on the drives, and she'd studied several to be sure.

Zanxite was what she'd learned, through process of elimination, was affected by these ripples. So after House Morten had learned to create Zanxite, for you couldn't buy it and they weren't going to strip down an existing jump drive to get some, she'd been able to experiment with building a

receiver to detect these waves when they occurred. It was a little more complicated than just hooking up a bunch of Zanxite to a monitor, but not much more than that at present. Her team had successfully created a sensor that could do more than just register static, and when placing it onboard a dropship near the regular traffic going in and out of Cholis, she'd begun to collect data.

She'd moved that dropship further and further out, determining what kind of range it would have...then she had this warehouse built to produce one large enough that she hoped it would be able to detect these faint ripples all the way out at the planet. Producing the Zanxite had taken a lot of effort and resources, but they were getting less inefficient at it as they worked...which was another little addition to the Morten Tech Tree. Every process upgrade they made went into a new page in those volumes for others to use later, but Rannel was more impressed with the results of this building, for when she'd filled up 57% of it with the latticework of Zanxite alloy rods, she'd been able to start picking up the 'static' from jumpships arriving or leaving.

Now they'd gotten it up to 73% full, and she was able to read the jumps as well as if she had the dropship sitting half a light minute out of the jump point. She called this project 'Doorbell,' for now the Morten Estate could learn of any jumpship arrivals without having to rely on orbital satellites, but the size of this sensor was a monstrosity, and while Rannel had no idea how they could shrink the design...well, that's how science worked. You kept fiddling around with stuff until you accidentally made discoveries, and there was no way to know if or when that would happen.

So while she was interested in miniaturizing it to help track pirates, there was no use for that here. They'd have to be sitting at the jump point to get an idea of where they were going. Observing from the planet gave them next to zero clue of a vector. All it did was announce their arrival, but as she'd been studying the effect on the Zanxite latticework, she'd noticed that not every jumpship produced the same effect. Some were

more intense waves than others, and Rannel had started collecting data.

Enough data to now be able to guess at what type of jumpship it was, not based on mass or shape, but by what caliber of jump drive it had. The newer models made less of a splash in hyperspace, so based off the intensity and the distance to the jump point...which altered slightly with planetary orbit...she had a better than 50/50 chance at guessing what class they were. And when it came to their own jumpships, she'd been trying to identify individual ones of identical class, working on the theory that the waves might be slightly different with each individual ship.

During all this she'd also noticed that there were variances, not just in intensity, but something else that she called 'flavor' for lack of a better term, and it was with that flavor she was trying to catalog House Morten's various jumpships during their normal transit in and out. Her guessing rate there was only at 23%, but given the number of ships they had of equal class, that was better than statistical average.

But the real quest she was interested in now...or rather, more interested than others, because a lot interested her...was to find a way to produce a ripple without sending a jumpship through hyperspace. After she'd got the warehouse up to 64% full, she'd started picking up a tiny bit of static not associated with jumpship arrivals, and she'd eventually figured out it was from the Cholis HPG terminal. Whenever they sent a message, it disrupted hyperspace...which wasn't unexpected, for the 'H' stood for Hyperspace in HPG, but how they worked was probably the most classified secret in the galaxy, and Comstar alone held that secret.

If any of the Great Houses tried to poke into one of their facilities and have a look around, they'd black out their communications across their realm, and the threat of doing that was what kept their hands off the Comstar facilities. Too much relied on those relays, and Comstar was committed to protecting the technology, and their monopoly. But since there was a station here on Cholis, and now that Rannel had a sensor

that could pick up something from it, she was eager to learn all she could.

And if she could somehow find a way to create a pulse rather than just listen in, then at the minimum she could rig up a morse code system for a ship at a jump point to talk to the planet with almost no signal lag. She theorized if you could get a big enough pulse, or a sensitive enough sensor, you might even be able to create a ripple that could travel between stars. She didn't think that was how the Comstar system worked, because the ripples coming off the station in the nearby city were too inconsequential. She figured they were just a side effect, but an interesting one at that.

As she was monitoring the system and reviewing logs of previous recordings trying to piece together patterns, another jumpship arrived. She stopped what she was doing and analyzed the pulse her building-sized sensor had picked up, trying to guess the class.

She was fairly sure it was a *Merchant*-class jumpship, but as to its 'flavor' it looked like it could be one of theirs, but she couldn't honestly say for sure. Once she'd filled this building with more latticework and got a clearer signal, she hoped she'd be able to differentiate them, but right now all she could make out was the class...and even that she wasn't sure of, so she waited for the signal from the satellites monitoring jump point traffic to send its lightspeed transmission out to Cholis, which would take several minutes.

But after only three she got another pulse on the sensor, meaning a second jumpship had arrived, and it too looked like it was a Merchant. But the third another 3 minutes later was not, and she could tell it was a *Liberty*-class, for the ripples those old jump drives made were huge in comparison to the newer models.

Two Merchants and a Liberty? That had to be Grady's fleet coming back from pirate hunting. And she hoped he'd had some success. If not, he'd at least have a boatload of data for her to analyze on their own jumpship transitions and maybe something else try to pin down the location even more.

But when they got their first transmission from Grady a few hours later, it said simply to speak to him in person when he got down to the planet and nothing more.

And Rannel knew that could *not* be good news.

The Lord of Technology waited along with the other Lords for Stephan to arrive. He was more than an hour late at a meeting he had called himself after meeting Grady at the dropship pad. Then he'd stormed off with the Mech Commander in tow and disappeared into his office. A message had told them to meet in the manor's conference room, and the seven Lords were still here wondering what kind of shit had hit the fan this time, for Stephan was rarely so tight-lipped about anything.

When he finally arrived his face was gaunt, and his eyes red, but he moved with his normal grace and most people might not have noticed the difference, but Rannel and the others could tell something was very wrong.

"Sorry I'm late," he said, taking his seat beside the others in the semi-circle of table/desks that allowed them all to see each other's faces along with visitors, but there was no one else here besides the 8 Lords of House Morten. "I had some speed reading to do."

"The mission was a success," Vander said, having already talked to the mechwarriors that had arrived. "Is this about the prisoners?"

"Partially," Stephan said, running his fingers through his short hair slowly. "We have a big problem. And if we were House Davion those prisoners probably would have been spaced on the way back here."

"I thought they were the pirate's prisoners," Sarah said, having been scrounging up as much scuttlebutt from the people coming off the dropships as she could while Stephan and Grady were unavailable.

"They are. All the pirates died fighting or killed themselves to avoid capture. These prisoners were being held for ransom or used as servants in their base...which Grady tells

me is more luxurious than anything we've got here, and on an uninhabited moon. He left a couple dropships and a Company of mechs behind not knowing what we'd want to do with it, but that's not the issue. He emptied the treasure rooms of everything he thought was valuable and brought it back, though he could have missed something."

"Spit it out already," Kevin urged.

"Grady, through sheer luck, caught the pirates with their pants down. They'd just come off another successful raid and had landed on their moon with a captured dropship, their two reapers, and all their men save six that they left on their jumpship as a skeleton crew. They were partying hard when Grady found them, and the jumpship was still recharging. It had no chance to jump out before they boarded it, and the six men onboard were either sleeping or drunk, because they weren't even waiting at the airlock when our boarding team cut its way in. There was still a firefight and all six made sure they'd either keep the ship or die trying, but we got it."

"Why isn't it here?" Sarah asked, knowing it hadn't arrived with their flotilla.

"It's parked in M47," he said, referencing the list of explored worlds in their 'zone of influence' that they'd just stared numbering for their own ease based on the order of survey. "Captain Brandi's idea, and a good one. We can't let anyone know we've got it."

"Again, why?" Sarah pressed.

Stephan looked her straight in the eyes, and she could see legitimate fear mixed with anger in his.

"Because it's Comstar."

"What?" Paul asked before the others could say anything.

"Captain Sheridan is Comstar...or was. The ship is an exploration vessel, one of apparently many they've got quietly searching the Periphery and beyond. Grady found a log book the Captain kept for his heirs, detailing everything so when they took over for him they'd know what they were getting into. He and a portion of the explorer ship's crew decided to go pirate

and killed the others after successfully finding a Star League research laboratory that they'd been sent to locate and sanitize. Instead, Captain Sheridan...which is not his real name...looted the facility and then told Comstar they'd have to buy the tech back from him, which they did. And then they started a nice little business arrangement between the two of them. Those prisoners are not all Captain Sheridan's prisoners. Some are Comstar political prisoners he has been hiding away for them."

"Holy shit," Bindi Morten said, the new 37 year old Lord of Agriculture that had replaced Jared Morten when he'd decided to take oversight of Coden's massive agricultural resources as his personal project, for its success or failure was going to determine the future of the House's agricultural potential for the next 100 years at the minimum. Bindi now technically oversaw him...though not really...but was in charge of coordinating all agricultural projects across all worlds. All 7 of the secondary Lords were, like the First Lord, multitaskers, just subset into their own divisions.

"What did you mean by 'sanitizing?'" Rannel asked, picking up on his earlier statement.

"Comstar apparently is under standing orders not to let any Star League technology fall into anyone's hands but its own. If they can't recover it, they destroy it. And the Captain's log book includes stories from before his time on the explorer ship, indicating that Comstar has teams that actively sabotage research in the Inner Sphere to prevent anyone from catching up with what Comstar has."

"Pyrotechnics?" Rannel asked, dripping pure hatred with each syllable.

Stephen was taken aback for a moment, then nodded. "I hadn't even thought about that, but maybe so."

"What Pyrotechnics?" Vander asked.

"Our failures," Rannel said sharply. "Research projects gone so awry they caught the building on fire. Now I'm wondering how many of those were really our fault."

"I was wondering why you hadn't burned down anything out here yet," Vichni said in an attempt at lightening the mood.

"It gets worse," Stephan interjected. "First, Grady went and checked out the location of this Star League facility on his way back. There's nothing there but an empty building. The explorer ship did a good job scrubbing it clean. But in his log book, the Captain indicates that if Comstar ever catches them, they will kill them at the minimum. Not just because they went rogue, but because they have their ship...and on that ship is a mobile HPG that they cannot let fall into anyone's hands or it will break their monopoly."

"Which we now have?" Vander asked for clarification.

"Yes. And we have a bunch of prisoners that are not supposed to exist. If we return them home, Comstar will know where they came from and they'll know we took down the pirate that has their ship and their HPG. What do you think happens then?"

"We could give it back," Sarah said with a shrug.

"Easiest way to get off their shit list, and maybe get a bounty from them while we're at it."

"Or we could sell it to the Davions and let them play with Comstar," Paul added, but Stephan was shaking his head.

"No. I read through the entire log before I came here. That's why I'm so late. You don't understand how Comstar thinks. They're fanatics, according to Sheridan, and highly immoral. If we even got a look at the HPG, what do you think they'd do to Rannel's people? Just let them live with that knowledge?"

"You're saying they'll go scorched earth?" Vander asked.

"They have to, because they already have. I get the impression from the log that the Inner Sphere would have already caught up to Star League technology if not for their quest to hunt all the remaining pieces down and destroy them. It's making me rethink why Andrew Davion gave me the bits and pieces his House had put together over the years. He probably

couldn't even research them without Comstar sabotaging his efforts, but we haven't been messed with out here and Rannel has already figured out some of the missing 'screws.'"

"Some small ones," she amended. "But I always wondered why the Federated Suns didn't have a whole division working on this faster than we could."

"And almost nobody has research and development," Vichni added. "When we added it, it was seen as stupid. Whatever the Star League had made was the only way to do it, so everyone just wanted to find bits and pieces of that technology rather than trying to build anything new of their own. Almost no other House has an active research division. It's just taboo thinking, and Comstar may be responsible for that as well."

"Captain Sheridan referred to them as the 6th Great House, because they plan to restart the Star League under their own direction, they're just not using armies of battlemechs to do it, but they do have agents everywhere doing clandestine work. And that's just the part that Sheridan knew about."

"What was his name?" Bindi asked.

"He never gives it, and tells his children not to ask. He wants them aware of the danger they live under day to day and why they can't show themselves around anyone else. It's a moot point now, because his children died alongside him, but he was adamant that Comstar would be out to get them by any means possible, and were only cooperating with him in order to keep him from trying to sell the HPG to one of the Great Houses. And he was milking that blackmail to no end."

"Leave the Davions out of it," Vander suggested.

"They'll only find a way to make this worse, and if they've successfully kept the Federated Suns from researching the lostech files they'd picked up before Comstar could get to them, then they probably have the leverage to get Ian Davion to invade us and wipe us off the map for plausibly deniable reasons. There is no way to stop a Great House from pursuing lostech any other way. Do you have any idea how important it is in mech combat? I can't even believe what I'm hearing. Nobody

would sit on that unless someone had a gun pointed at their head.”

“Blacking out the HPG network is that gun,” Paul said, mentally running through the commerce ramifications. “Not just during a war to shift the tide to your enemy, but a total shutdown would ruin every economy in the Inner Sphere. And Comstar is getting filthy wealthy with their monopoly, so they can probably buy as much support within each House as they can blackmail. I agree, leave the Davions out of this.”

“Oh, and did I mention,” Stephan added with a cruel smile. “That one of the political prisoners is a close friend of Chancellor Maximilian of the Capellan Confederation?”

Everyone’s jaw dropped in the intervening silence.

“Yeah, exactly. That alone is going to piss off the Davions if we send him back and get so much as a thank you card from them.”

“Does he know who kidnapped him?” Vander asked cautiously.

“Grady doesn’t think so, but I’ve got Roger starting interviews with all of them. Until we decide what to do, they’re going to be our prisoners under House arrest, and frankly I don’t know how we can dodge this shitstorm unless we do something we’d never do.”

“Like kill them all and deny they ever existed,” Sarah said, knowing that the Davions might do that, and the Liaos, and Kuritas wouldn’t even hesitate.

“Which is not an option,” Stephan said unnecessarily just to get it out of the way. “I need options that don’t paint a bullseye on us.”

“We go loud or we go silent,” Vichni argued. “The middle ground doesn’t help us.”

“If we let Rannel figure out how the HPG works,” Sarah said, thinking out loud, and spread those designs to all the Great Houses, they’d be on our side. What would Comstar do then?”

“Captain Sheridan would say they’d get their bloody revenge sooner than yesterday,” Stephan said dryly. “They wouldn’t just leave us alone.”

"And if we stay silent?"

"Comstar will know once we start sending the prisoners home, because they organized some of their captures, if not did the capturing themselves. Comstar was also acting as neutral arbiter between the 'pirate' and the families that were having to pay the ransoms."

"Shit," Vander said, lightly pounding the table with his fist. "They control the Mercenary Review Board too. We're going to have attacks on our worlds as soon as they find out what we've got. If they can't get the HPG eliminated and Rannel's data deleted, they'll just hammer us with anonymous contracts until the Morten Protectorate is eliminated...all with plausible deniability."

"So they *do* have battlemechs," Stephan said. "Just not ones they're responsible for."

"So this means war," Kevin said evenly.

"It means all kind of nastiness that I can't even guess at," Stephan clarified. "When you read the Captain's log you'll understand. They believe they own Humanity and they're willing to do anything morally objectionable to rule it in order to 'save it,' and maintaining their monopoly over Star League technology is their top priority. They're going to come for us, someday, somehow, and we need to decide how we're going to deal with this before we start releasing those prisoners."

"Can we handle mercenaries?" Kevin asked Vander.

"To a point. But the attrition will wear us down, and if our worlds are plagued with attacks that do damage, even if we win, we're not going to be a friendly business environment and the line of corporations wanting to move in here will dry up in a hurry. But as for keeping worlds, unless they send some heavy hitters, we can hold them off...at a cost."

"If they've got as much influence everywhere as you're suggesting," Sarah added. "They could blacklist us from buying goods in the Federated Suns. We'd still have the black market, but we'd be isolated economically even if Ian doesn't pull the plug on our cross-border traffic. This could get very bad, very fast."

“Which is why we need a plan,” Stephan said, leaning forward on his elbows. “The interviews are going to take a few weeks. After that, we need to start arranging for people to return *without* them sending messages through Comstar. Maybe we’ll get lucky and they won’t notice them popping back up.”

“Fat chance of that,” Bindi said after blowing a raspberry on her lips.

“Whatever we do,” Rannel said firmly, “I need to get on that ship ASAP to see what we’ve actually got.”

Stephan nodded. “I’ll send you and a team out tomorrow.”

6

October 28, 2999

Federated Suns

Crucis March

Cholis

Morten Estate

Taran Lee sat behind a table in the interrogation room again, though to be fair there was hardly any 'interrogation' happening, at least as far as he understood the word. All they'd been doing was asking him questions. Either they were warming up to the coercion part, or these people didn't understand the first thing about squeezing information out of a subject.

He wasn't cuffed, but he'd been placed on house arrest ever since getting off the damn dropship. Taran hadn't even been able to speak with the other prisoners. He'd been kept in comfortable isolation the past 8...or was it 9 days? He couldn't remember, and didn't bother to try at this point. His mind was already slipping, and had been for some time now, but he'd started to feel a little better since getting back on solid ground again. And at least the food here was much better than the pirates had given him.

Actually, the meals on the dropship had been better. The food here was excellent, despite the lack of meat. What civilized society didn't serve meat? Regardless, the past few days had been almost restful, and aside from the nightmares, he was waking up well to find himself away from Captain Sheridan.

But where he was and what was going to happen to him was a mystery. He'd been asked questions, while his own had not been answered, since arriving on this planet. The only thing

his new captors had told him was that he had been rescued by House Morten.

He'd never heard of them, and aside from a few brief interactions onboard their jumpship, he hadn't seen what their people were like or who they were affiliated with, but it was clear they knew no Chinese whatsoever, for all his interrogations were in English.

The solid door cracked open again, and in walked the man he had seen on three different days. Security Chief Penstrife, or so he claimed. He was all muscle and his accent smelled of the Federated Suns, but he wouldn't divulge any information to Taran. He kept wanting to know more about the pirates and how he had been captured, nothing about the Capellan Confederation or Maximilian Liao, which was odd.

But today someone else walked in behind him. Someone dressed far better.

"Good morning," the man said, sitting down across the table from Taran as Penstrife stood beside the table watchfully. Clearly he was guarding this man in case he lunged over the table to do him harm. That meant he was more than just an interrogator. Finally he was getting to someone in charge.

"Do you have a name?"

"Stephan Morten. I'm head of state for the Morten Protectorate and also First Lord of House Morten."

"Which faction does your House serve?" Taran demanded.

"Not the Capellans," Stephan quipped. "We were originally part of the Federated Suns, then we got politically burnt and relocated to the Periphery. We have a love/hate relationship with the Davions, and you're currently in our embassy estate on their border world of Cholis, but I can assure you that we're not turning you over to them. Rather, we intend to send you home."

"I've never heard of Cholis either."

"Outer edge of the Crucis March. I assume you've heard of that?"

"Don't be patronizing, young man."

"Don't be grumpy, old man. We saved you, after all. Isn't that worth a little gratitude?"

"I'm still a prisoner, am I not?"

Stephan winced. "Sort of. But I didn't think you'd just want to walk out on a Davion world either. Or was I wrong?"

"I haven't even been allowed to walk outside to see the sunlight."

"There's a reason for that, and it involves your capture. You still have no idea who took you?"

"As I told your man here, I went to sleep one night with a lovely young lady and woke up with a bag over my head and my wrists and feet bound. I know nothing."

"We found you a couple hundred light years away on an uninhabited world the pirate Captain Sheridan was using as his person den. We'd been hunting him for a while because he's been hijacking dropships and jumpships in our new area of influence. We didn't expect to find you or any other political prisoners, but we did learn who it was that most likely captured you, or at least had a hand in it, and that's why you're being kept out of sight at the moment."

"The Davions of course."

"No," Stephan said firmly. "It was Comstar."

Taran's face scrunched up in confusion, then a look of understanding washed over him, but he wasn't about to explain anything to Mr. Morten.

"And you don't want them to know that you stumbled onto me?"

"Not yet, anyway. You deserve to get home, so we're going to make sure you get there regardless, but we can't just send a message via Comstar to get someone to come pick you up. You might not make it back in that case."

"I suppose not."

"So I'm arranging for two of my jumpships to carry all the former prisoners back to their former homes, but in your case I won't be sending you to Sian. My jumpship would most likely be impounded and my crew tortured to death because of our association with the Davions. So no, we're going to drop you

on one of your outer worlds and let you make your way from there. Comstar shouldn't even be looking for you yet, because we aren't announcing the takedown of the pirates. So as far as they know, you're still their prisoner."

"And what would you like in compensation for this service to the Confederation?"

Now it was Steven that frowned. "Nothing. Ian Davion is a teenage brat with a temper at this point, and any 'compensation' from your realm could cause trouble for me. We're independent, and his father recognized that independence, but Ian doesn't seem to care for it and I don't want to give him any excuses for trying to take over my worlds."

"Then why not just kill me and spare yourself the trouble?"

"Because unlike House Liao and House Davion, we have scruples. We don't just kill people because they're inconvenient."

"Given my current situation I won't argue the point."

"I know your Chancellor would in my place, but that's why you're the bad guys...though I'm not naïve enough to believe everything I hear from the Davion propaganda machine. And because I know you'll be questioned when you go back, let me explain this to you. We're not a subsidiary of the Federated Suns, and my military is not going to help Ian invade your realm, nor are we going to defend his. The only exception would be if you hit some of our neighboring systems. We might intervene to help them, but the rest of the Federated Suns is not our concern. We're not taking sides. We just ask you to leave us and our neighbors alone. Can you give that message to Maximilian when you see him again?"

"I can," Taran said simply, starting to feel more like an ambassador than a prisoner again. And if Comstar really was behind his abduction, he was going to have a long chat with his former pupil concerning that fact when he got back to Sian.

"It'll be a few more days before your dropship leaves. I apologize for the lack of sunshine until then, but there's a Comstar facility on this planet plus who knows how many

Davion spies keeping an eye on us. I'd rather they not have any additional chances to snap a picture of you on one of our terraces."

"I understand the politics of the situation quite well, thank you."

"No, you don't," Stephan said ominously as he stood up from the table. "But just so you know, Captain Sheridan and all of his pirates died fighting rather than be captured. Comstar no longer has his services because of us, and whatever blackmail they were trying to accomplish with you is about to be undone when you return. And I do believe they're the type to hold grudges."

"I'd be more worried about that rat on the Federated Suns throne."

"I worry about him too. I'll have my tailors create you some more appropriate clothing before we return you home. It wouldn't do for your people to shoot you thinking you were a Davion agent, after all."

Taran didn't get a chance to reply, for the slippery little man left the room as he was uttering his last words, so he looked up at the Security Chief.

"Back to my cell then?"

"Back to your quarters," he said, indicating for Taran to get up. "Our cells are nowhere near as nice, but if you'd like to visit one for the remainder of your stay, I can arrange it."

Taran huffed, but didn't otherwise respond as he was led back to a secure facility via an underground tunnel to the dormitory where he had been kept since arrival on this world, whatever it was they had called it. Some backwater spec that probably wasn't even worth invading.

When he was let inside the door it closed and locked behind him, then Taran went and sat down next to the false window that mimicked sunlight behind a translucent panel and began tapping his long fingernails on the table as he started thinking hard about Comstar's complicity in this and how best to address the situation with the Chancellor when he returned.

There had to be a price paid, otherwise the Capellan Confederation was nothing more than lapdogs to those technocrats. But if they shut off their comm relays it would leave them wide open to another Davion incursion, or the Free Worlds League taking a bite out of their territory, so it would have to be some far more subtle means of revenge.

And that would have to take careful planning and forethought. Fortunately, it looked like he was going to have weeks, if not months of jumpship travel ahead of him to work this out. He'd have a plan in place to present to the Chancellor when he arrived back on their capitol...quietly. It wouldn't do for Comstar to pick him up again on the way there, so he'd need to travel unnoticed.

That would take even more time, but he wasn't willing to risk getting captured again. He was fortunate to be alive, let alone about to be returned home. He didn't know who this House Morten was, but he was about to owe them a very large debt...if they indeed did return him. He'd believe it when it actually happened. Not before.

Rannel Morten had spent most of the past few days floating in Og as she studied the Hyperpulse Generator onboard the pirate ship while 8 of her best techs scoured the ship looking at other systems as well as the 'booty' that Grady had brought back that was stashed in the cargo hold.

Rannel didn't like being in Og for long, but she had no choice. The HPG wasn't located in the gravity disc inside the ship, but in its own special compartment back in the engineering sections that were all Og, and what she was learning about the device, from physical inspections to running through the digital manual, was rather shocking.

First, there was an enormous amount of EMP shielding around the device. Enough to blunt the EMP from a nuke. Why that would be necessary she didn't understand until the basic function of the mysterious HPG technology was finally revealed.

It didn't send a transmission through hyperspace like she'd guessed. Instead, it created an *artificial jump point* and

sent a signal through it the same way you'd send a ship. Rannel didn't even think it was possible to create an artificial jump point, nor had any idea to even go about it inside a gravity well, but the Star League had found a way and Comstar had inherited that technology.

The EMP was a result of essentially tearing a jump point into a magnetic field where one didn't belong. Ships coming and going from the natural jump points above and below a star were doing so because of the unique shape of the magnetic field pulling in at those two points. Technically, if you got far enough away from a star, or planet, all the empty space between them was also a 'jump point,' except it would do you no good because the starlight out there was so weak it would take months or years to gradually soak up enough to make another jump. Decades even if you got really far out from a star system.

So the Zenith and Nadir jump points were by far the closest you could get to a star to recharge your jump drives using your solar sails. Now, a ship could recharge using a fusion reactor or, if they had batteries already charged, hop out into no-man's land and then make a second jump, so going beyond the jump points wasn't exactly the realm of impossibility with regards to jumpship travel, but there was a very good reason the Zenith and Nadir jump points were always used except by those tactically brilliant or suicidally crazy.

Both the magnetic field and the gravity fields of stars and planets acted like an insulating coating preventing jump drives from tearing a hole into hyperspace, so you had to get to where it was really really thin to do it. The Star League had found a way to do it where it was thick, and it required an enormous amount of power. Far too much to send a ship through, but if all they were sending was a little bit of comms radiation, they had enough power to be able to make it work.

But tearing that hole in the magnetic field created distortions...hence the EMP. That meant that every Comstar station on a planet was a big electromagnetic bomb going off each time they transmitted something into hyperspace, and

without that shielding in place, every system they had would be fried, as well as the surrounding cities.

Rannel knew immediately it could be used as a weapon if someone wanted, which was probably item #12 on Comstar's list of reasons not to let anyone else know how these damn things worked. And the small amount of 'static' that Project Doorbell was picking up was the hyperspace fallout from tearing a tiny hole into an artificial jump point.

And to think about it, if they maintained the jump point constantly...which they would have to do, otherwise transmissions would be picked up by the entire planet if they emerged from the Zenith or Nadir points...then they were essentially providing power to weaken the region but not breach it, the same way jumpships went to a weak region to do their breaching into hyperspace.

So it had to be the breaches themselves that created the EMP...which meant incoming signals looking for that artificial jump point would also create the disruption centered at each Comstar facility.

But not on this ship. The device was not active, nor had been for a very long time...which made sense. You had to know the location of a jump point in order to fling yourself, or a packet of energy, towards it and hope to get close enough to get sucked into the weak point. Miss, and you'd emerge at the next closest 'weak' zone...which was usually the edge of a star system beyond the orbit of all the planets where the stellar radiation was likewise weak as hell. If you emerged intact, which all ships did not, you'd have to wait a very long time to get enough energy to jump back in, even to the nearby star.

If you didn't have enough food to wait that out, you were screwed.

So transmitting a signal to a roaming ship was impossible. The ship itself would have to transmit first to a known location, giving its own location, then establish a ping relationship and hold position for the duration of whatever transfer of data would be taking place. So the pirate Captain couldn't be tracked by Comstar, but he could contact them

anytime he was in range of a planet that had a HPG relay on it, and according to the transmission logs, that's exactly what he was doing to arrange pickup and transfer of prisoners, as well as getting paid in hard currency and valuable materials of small weight, like gemstones and precious metals.

Rannel had been told there was a room full of the stuff taken from the planet, but she hadn't bothered to look at it yet. This technology was worth far more than money, and she'd spent every hour aside from sleeping and eating in with the equipment learning how it functioned.

As well as learning about the communications back and forth between the pirate and his former employers. The comm log of such transmissions had never been deleted, going all the way back to the start of this ship's exploration mission.

She'd flipped through those pages briefly, finding nothing of real interest to her at the moment, so she'd passed them on to another of her staff to go through carefully and make duplicates of to take back to Stephan. Others were documenting the upgrades to the ship that Comstar had made...or perhaps other ships had lost over time since the fall of the Star League. Either way, there were other tidbits of technology here that were of value, but Rannel was focused on the big prize right now and was pouring through a virtual schematic in the diagnostics program when Vendan Morten floated up behind her.

He was twelve years older than her, and a brother to Stephan's father who had never really found a niche in the House for himself, so he'd become a floater between the various divisions and had volunteered to come help unlock the secrets of this ship given his few years already spent helping out the research and development wing of their tech division.

"Rannel, we need you to come look at something," he said after placing a hand on her shoulder to get her attention from the screenlock she was in.

"There's lots of things I need to see...later," she admonished him with a casual look, then her eyes went back to the screen.

"That's why they sent me," he said with a smirk. "They didn't want to piss you off."

She frowned, both at being interrupted and by the inference that she was somehow cranky. "Meaning what?"

"Meaning you've got a mental death grip on this thing and you're barely sleeping at all. I'm family, so they figured I should be the one to pry you away from it."

"I'm fine, Vendan. I learned long ago how to press the edge without stepping over it. I'm not even taking any caffeine at the moment."

"The chance to study an HPG is probably more addictive," the older Morten said, undeterred. "Chance found something that he couldn't identify, and neither can anyone else. It's got Star League markings on it, but none of us know what it is or what it does. It's also not part of the ship. It was stashed with the pirate's personal treasures."

"And you think it's more important than an HPG?" she challenged. "Why can't it wait until later?"

"Because the comm logs that Anders has been going over indicate that Comstar has found several other devices like this and that there are standing orders to destroy them whenever they're found."

Rannel raised an eyebrow. "Really? What did they call it?"

"Item 11832."

"How revealing," she said with a sigh. "Alright, I'll take a look."

"Thank you," he said patronizingly.

"I'm not cranky," she said, pushing off the console and floating towards the door frame behind her.

"I never said it."

"You were thinking it."

"I was thinking you were like a little kid with your favorite new toy you didn't want to let go of to get in the bath."

"You're right," she said, pulling herself around and through the doorway into the corridor. "You're lucky you are

family, or I'd find something nasty for you to work on for the next week."

Vendan smiled and shot ahead of her, then led the way to the gravity disc in the ship and the room where they had been doing inventory on the loot. Rannel's legs welcomed the gravity as she saw stacks of money, of various types, next to more unruly piles of it that had yet to be counted. The room was a mix of order and disorder, and by the size of the amounts she was seeing, the pirate had made himself filthy rich.

"Here," Chance Yui said, standing next to a table with an innocuous black box laid on top of it. Aside from the Star League emblem, otherwise known as the 'Cameron Star,' molded into the cover, it had no markings or identification on it at all.

Rannel stepped up and quickly found the latches on either side and tilted up the protective covering to find a control board with built-in mini-screen on the left side, but no obvious power button.

She fiddled around with it for a few minutes, then found a hidden panel that opened up to reveal a thick key on a stretchable cord. She pulled it out and slid it into the matching slot on the lower right hand side of the control board.

When she did the whole board rose up, tilting at an angle with the far side rising and the lower side coming up a mere inch as all the buttons and screen lit up. Rannel's mouth slowly hung open in a curious look as she read the various indicators and played with a few buttons.

"You were right," she finally said. "I'm a cranky old witch with screen lock. This was worth interrupting me."

"Do you know what it is?" Vendan asked.

"If you're asking if I've seen or heard of something like this before, the answer is no. But this control panel is very familiar. Anyone care to take a guess," she said, stepping backward for a moment so the now six other people in the room looking over her shoulder could see it.

"Doorbell," Shio Drennan said, his jaw dropping as well.

"Bingo," Rannel said dryly. "It's some kind of very advanced version of it. And as of now none of you are to do

anything more than lay eyes on it. It was turned off for a reason, and its function may interfere with the HPG, or vice versa, so we're not going to risk damaging either one. I want this...black box...taken back to Cholis," she said, stopping herself as she realized it might interfere, or even be detectable, by the Comstar HPG there. "No, I need this taken to Drymo and stored in an ultra-secure area until I can..."

Vendan coughing slightly caused her to stop.

"Fine. Vendan will take Chance and the black box to Drymo and start figuring it out. Just don't break it or blow it up. And I want a detailed preliminary report by the time I get there. Send the jumpship back here once you arrive."

"Thank you for sharing," Vendan said sarcastically.

"Now you can get back to your big toy."

Rannel smirked, then looked at Chance. "Good find."

"Thank you," the young man said as she walked over to the stacks of gold and silver coins, picking up one of the latter and tossing it to him.

"Finder's fee," Rannel said, with him suddenly smiling ear to ear. "If anyone else finds something like this, just come tell me. I'm not that mean."

"You haven't had any coffee in three days," another tech said in a meek voice.

"Young lady, coffee is not required to be nice, and we're not on the clock here, so I prefer not to use it as a crutch until I need to."

"Maybe one cup would help," Vendan said innocently.

She mock glared at him. "Don't you have somewhere to be right now?"

"Come on, rich boy," he said to Chance as he stepped towards the door. "We've been dismissed."

Rannel pulled the key out of the device and resealed the cover, then handed it to the discoverer who quickly shuffled out the door along with Vendan.

"Do I really get that cranky?" she asked the youngest in the group, a 23 year old non-Morten who she'd hired from one of their new Academy offshoots on Foniss.

“No, ma’am. You just don’t like getting interrupted when you’re focused on something.”

“Who does?” she countered, glancing around the room of un-itemized loot. “As you were people. I’ll be getting that cup of coffee, then returning to my lair.”

7

December 13, 2999

Federated Suns

Crucis March

Cholis

Brinestorm Spaceport

Stephan stood on the tarmac as the dropship carrying the new Duke Nevil Alliz and his family set down. Soon to be ex-Duke Thorsen was standing further ahead of him, adamant that he carry through the last of his duties as was expected of him. He stood with several of his staff and bodyguards at the end of a phalanx of militia troops belonging to the Duchy, at the head of which were two Urbanmechs standing facing each other, both trailing banners from their outside arms that moved gently in the wind, displaying the flags of the Federated Suns and the planetary Duchy of Cholis.

The First Lord had his own security with him...far more than Thorsen had...which amounted to a small army of plain clothes guards, all of which were keeping a respectful distance from the ceremony about to take place.

When the dropship finally settled in and got around to lowering one of its ramps, a phalanx of well-dressed people walked out in good order following a single individual wearing a military style uniform, but not one from the Federated Suns Armed Forces.

Duke Thorsen wore something similar, but of a different make, reflecting his military service as there was no official uniform for a Duke, so he'd made one for himself. Apparently Duke Alliz had done so as well, for he'd previously been a Colonel in the military and only pulled off active duty to be made Duke of Cholis.

Meaning he was a rookie as ever much there was one with regards to planetary management.

Crowds were gathered as well, but held back a considerable distance with roped off areas. Stephan's people were allowed inside though, as were several other notables, including Carroll Davion with her own small posse standing even further back than Stephan's.

Alliz came up the length of red carpet laid out starting where the mechs stood and extending all through the honor guard to a small octagon of equally red carpet where Thorsen waited, standing straight and proper as always on one half of that octagon with a flagpole on the edges where the carpet met the bare ferrocrete of the tarmac. So he was surrounded by banners of the Federated Suns that he had given so many years of his life to, and which had just deposed him, as he waited to officially turn over control of the planet to his successor.

There was also a camera crew there, made as innocuous as possible on the outskirts of the proceedings, that had a good line of sight as Alliz walked up and took his place opposite Thorsen.

"Welcome to Cholis," the current Duke said amicably.

"Good to finally meet you, General," Alliz said, already having dismissed Thorsen's Duchy title. "Thank you for staying for an official handover."

"I know my duty, Colonel," Thorsen said, likewise using their former military titles. "Per the orders of the First Prince of the Federated Suns, Ian Davion, I hereby turn control of the Duchy of Cholis over to House Alliz," he said, standing even straighter and unnecessarily saluting.

"I acknowledge the transfer," Alliz said, returning the salute. "You are relieved."

"I stand relieved," Thorsen said, lowering his hand and extending it to the new Duke, with Alliz shaking it amicably.

Once they got plenty of camera shots in and the two men began to chit chat about various things, Stephan began walking up towards the pair, drawing a glare from Alliz.

"What is he doing here?"

"Don't be rude," Thorsen said, suddenly using his military voice as he would had the former Colonel been his subordinate. "He's here to welcome you."

"He has no official standing here."

"Out here on the edge of the Periphery, the number of mechs you have is all the standing that truly matters. And his have been scaring off the raiders. We haven't had a single incident in years."

"That's irrelevant," Alliz said as Stephan finally walked up onto the octagon as if he was meant to be a part of the ceremony.

"Greetings, Duke," Stephan said.

"Mr. Morten," Alliz said stiffly. "Henceforth you and your people are no longer allowed to leave your embassy grounds without prior permission, and any dropship wishing to leave or arrive on the planet must coordinate with my spaceport control tower. Is that clear?"

"Ridiculous," Thorsen said, but Alliz simply held a hand towards him as if he was no longer involved in the conversation.

"Nice to meet you too," Stephan deflected casually.

"But as to your order, I'm going to assume you haven't been briefed on the situation here."

"I was briefed by Ian Davion himself."

"Then you're aware of the treaty?"

Duke Alliz hesitated a moment. "I was told of no treaty. The First Prince believes you've overstepped the gracious amount of latitude allowed your House, and I have been ordered to rein you in. From now on, everything that happens outside your embassy will be routed through my office, is that clear?"

"No," Stephan said flatly, then remained silent.

"No what? Are you refusing to comply with my orders?"

"I'm going to cut you a break, Duke, because you are new here, and I doubt the First Prince had enough time in his schedule to fully bring you up to speed. I know how much of a work load a Head of State has," he said, obviously referring to himself, "and I can imagine how much heavier it is for the First

Prince. So let me inform you of the fact that a decade ago there was a secret treaty signed between my House and First Prince Andrew Davion. It guaranteed freedom of trade and freedom of movement for myself and my people equivalent as if we were citizens of the Federated Suns...which we are not. I do not answer to the First Prince. My House was given independence, sanctioned by the treaty, and such independence is not revokable. Furthermore, I have a direct liaison with the First Prince in the form of his cousin, Ambassador-at-Large Carroll Davion, whom I suggest you consult with concerning treaty matters and anything else involving the Davions. If there were a change in the treaty status, she would be the one telling me, not you. Hence, you do not have the authority to confine us to the embassy or tell my dropships they have to wait in line. You control this spaceport, of course, but not mine."

"I'm aware of no treaty," Alliz said, though his facial gestures indicated he no longer felt on solid ground. "And my authority on this planet comes directly from the First Prince."

"And only the First Prince can repudiate a treaty. A Duke cannot," Stephan lectured. "You are new to this line of work, and it is quite complicated, so I'll just assume you came here unprepared. If you're going to 'rein me in,' you're going to have to do it in a way that doesn't step on the treaty terms."

"Does the treaty allow you to involve yourself in official Duchy ceremonies?"

"No, it does not."

"Then kindly leave, or stand behind the ropes like the rest of the crowd."

Stephen sighed. "We don't have to be enemies, Duke Alliz."

"I will not share control of my Duchy with anyone, Mr. Morten."

"It's First Lord, actually. And you're addressing the Head of State of a Periphery realm that has the resources to squash you like a bug if ever need be. I know your appointment is straight out of the military, but for your sake I'd recommend some political training. There are other people in the Federated

Suns who don't take well to such blatant speech. I for one, however, welcome it, and you've made it abundantly clear you intend for us to be, at the minimum, adversaries. If you change your mind about that, you'll find I make friends quite easily."

"Do I have to order the guards to remove you?"

Stephan stared at him a moment longer. "As I said, I'm cutting you a break right now. But from a former Colonel, I would have hoped for better situational awareness."

"Duke," Thorsen said, forcing himself back into the conversation. "His number of security personnel outnumber yours three to one."

Alliz looked around for the first time, taking in the situation. He'd assumed all those men were his own.

"Never the less, you are not welcome here. Withdraw your men and yourself from the ceremony."

"I can't do that unless you're finished with Duke Thorsen," Stephen said, intentionally using his former title.

"I said *leave*, man, how is that not clear?" Alliz said, clearly losing his temper.

"You said to remove my people. And as of now, since Duke Thorsen no longer is in command of this Duchy, he has a new job and works for me. So he is officially now one of my people."

Alliz turned his head to Thorsen, and the look of 'traitor' was clearly spelled out on it as, like a ghost behind them all, Carroll Davion had slowly been creeping forward unnoticed.

"If you will allow me a moment," Thorsen said, unbuttoning his military-style jacket and pulling it off. He neatly folded it, then handed it to one of his staff behind him, taking in turn the new gold/green jacket and pulling it on. The clothing was, in a fashion sense, a considerable upgrade, bringing him on par, if not better than Alliz's own jacket, while still maintaining the military sensibility of it with a lot more ornamental 'bling' added with intricate scrolling down the sleeves flowing from shoulder boards polished to an almost-reflective sheen, but somehow they defied physics and didn't become mirrors in the heavy sunlight coming from the bright blue sky overhead.

When finished, Thorsen turned away from Alliz, now ignoring him entirely, and saluted Stephan.

“Earl Thorsen, reporting for duty, sir.”

Stephan returned the salute properly, also ignoring the new Duke. “The Federated Suns’ loss is our gain. Welcome to the Morten Protectorate, Earl. Your dropship is waiting at your convenience.”

“Earl of what?” Alliz asked, but Thorsen stepped towards Stephan with his staff trailing him closely as the two men left the red octagon and headed back to the bulk of his security detachment.

Duke Alliz, now fully red in the face realizing that the cameras were still rolling through all of that, was about to bellow something out as a firm hand grasped his arm from behind. He turned to look into the face of the blonde woman there that was staring daggers at him.

“Do not say anything else to them,” she all but whispered, making sure her head was turned away from the camera, “or about them until I have a chance to fully brief you on the situation.”

“I have my orders from the First Prince,” he said stiffly, but she drove her fingers into his arm hard enough to get his attention.

“You are a Duke of a minor world stepping into matters you have not been briefed on. I am a Davion, and you will not make this ceremony any more of a disaster than it already is. The handover is complete, now address the crowd as expected and begin moving in, but do not mention the Mortens or Thorsen in any way. Is that clear?” she whispered icily.

“As you wish,” he whispered back, and she released his arm as he moved towards the nearby podium at the far end of the octagon opposite the mechs that allowed him to look out across the tarmac. As he began to speak what was clearly a rehearsed statement, Carroll stood off to the side out of view as she watched Stephan and Thorsen move off, with their security phalanx wrapping around them as they cleared the area,

heading back to a series of vehicles that would take them to the Estate.

And part of her ached to be going with them and starting to work through this mess rather than standing beside this idiot. At least she wouldn't be in any of the holocom replays of the speech as a backdrop, for she made sure to stand off to the side behind several other people.

Why did Ian have to send someone this politically incompetent?

She knew the reason was he didn't understand anything outside the military, and to him a Colonel was to be more trustworthy than a seasoned politician. He did want the Mortens reined in, but he had *not* canceled the treaty between them, and this oaf of a Colonel had almost started an incident if he was going to do what she thought he was when she grabbed him.

Thankfully Stephan had handled the situation perfectly, but she knew there was only so far he would allow himself to be pushed around before he laid down the law. And out here, battlemechs were the law, no matter what New Avalon thought. And the few that the Cholis militia had were pathetic in comparison to the well-armed and equipped two Regiments that House Morten had on planet at the moment, though those numbers were always shifting as she politely tried to snoop and keep track of their visible assets.

This deal was in the best interest of both the Federated Suns and House Morten, and she hoped she could use this idiot's foot in the mouth first moment here to wake some of Ian's advisors up, for she no longer had a direct line of communication with him. That had been quietly nixed after he had been installed as First Prince. Now, all her communication had to go through intermediaries, but even those should see how poorly handled this was.

But the part about Thorsen becoming an Earl in the Protectorate had been a shock to her...and on a personal level it was a pleasant one...but to New Avalon it would be seen as a thumb in the eye to Ian, which it was, after all.

Carroll silently cursed. This job was getting messier by the day, and even if she could pull this idiot Duke back into line, she didn't know how long it would be before someone convinced Ian to nullify the deal entirely. She had to make sure that didn't happen, and maybe...just maybe...the political clusterfuck that had just went down would be of use to her within her own House, for they'd completely went over her head with regards to replacing Thorsen. She hadn't been consulted at all, only informed after the fact, and she hadn't even been in contact with Alliz prior to her grabbing his arm. She'd been cut out of the process entirely. Maybe now they'll wake up to the fact that that had been a horrible idea given the 'accident that was waiting to happen' new Duke of Cholis.

"I didn't expect it to go down like that," Thorsen said, sitting beside Stephan in the armored car that the two of them shared with Roger and five other security guards, though the three of them were alone in the rear compartment. "But I will admit, it felt good cutting ties publicly and doing it right in front of his face after what he pulled. I can't believe a Colonel would ever be that disrespectful to the head of a noble House."

"Unless he was told to be," Stephan said, leaning back in the deep cushions and realizing he was going to have a handful with this guy more so than he had originally expected.

"Even so, there's standing protocol to follow, and the entire planet was probably watching. And any news involving you makes its way further into the Federated Suns. I can't believe what just happened. Trying to ground your dropships! The absurdity is unprofessional. How exactly did he plan on enforcing that order? Does he not know what military assets he has here? How can he not?"

"He's just a barking dog, Harris. If Carroll doesn't rein *him* in, I will eventually. Don't concern yourself with it...but do remember it. I keep wanting to hope the Davions will come around and eventually end up as real allies, but every time I let myself hope for a change I get smacked in the face. I thought this guy would at least be neutral given his family's status, but it

looks like Ian just chose him out of the army to cause me trouble.”

“That’s my take as well,” Thorsen said, troubled.

“Somehow I can’t believe I faithfully devoted so many years to these people.”

“No more,” Stephan said, placing a hand on his arm.

“But things are going to get worse.”

“I’m with you to the end, no matter what, Stephan.

Yours, at last, is a cause I can support without reservations. Did you hear from the other Dukes?”

“Yes. They all turned down the landholds for their own reasons,” the First Lord said, having offered them estates of their own rather than Earldoms. “They either don’t want to piss off Ian any further, or they have other assets in the Inner Sphere to go to. Duke Meirne is returning to Solaris, and his love for the Davions is now at less than zero. I’m actually glad they all turned down the offer.”

“Too bad, you could have used his family’s assets in recruiting for the new battlemech school.”

“I considered that, but we can establish our own street cred. We already did, somehow, with the Highlanders. But you’re out of military affairs now, Earl. You’ve got another mountain of responsibility on your shoulders with long term implications. Focus on that and leave Comstar to me unless they show up on your front porch,” he said, referencing the fact that Thorsen was bringing his Atlas with him to Coden, along with intending to purchase other mechs later out of his new House’s future profits to form a House-protection lance for his new estate that was already under construction. But the Atlas itself was worth a lance of medium mechs, so they’d have a guard dog there already, assuming he’d have a pilot for it standing by.”

“Not much on Coden other than farms for them to hit. It’s your mech factory that they’ll be after, along with any other sources of income. I’m well familiar with the kind of terroristic raids you’re likely to suffer. They’re hard to intercept, Stephan.”

"I know. We're already planning contingencies. Hopefully we've got another few months before Comstar even realizes their pirate captain is no longer available."

"It boggles the mind to think what they're capable of. At least I'll be where the action is rather than rotting away in some retirement community in the Federated Suns."

"The sooner I can get you working the better. Are all your people ready to move?"

"All 26 members of House Thorsen, including myself, are ready to board immediately. Our gear has already been transferred, yes?" he said, glancing at Roger, who'd had it clear security checks first.

"You're good to go," he confirmed.

"Then, unfortunately, this may be the last time we see each other again," Stephan said, looking at the unexpected friend and colleague he had found out here. "I don't think I'll be visiting Coden for business, and..."

"...you'll be too busy fighting a war for any social calls. I fully understand, Stephan, and I not only accept it but embrace it. I'm deploying on a mission. This is not unfamiliar to me," he said with a smirk.

"Treat it as such. Our new realm has so many holes in it that a well-equipped enemy could exploit, the faster we can plug even the smallest of them the better, and more than half our population is on Coden. They're not much of an asset at this point. Start changing that for me."

"If you can hold the military line, we'll make sure to secure and grow the breadbasket. Just remember, whatever comes out here to hit you, you'll still have the shorter supply lines, and they won't have the Comstar net to use. Both are opportunities I'd love to exploit in your situation. I envy you the challenges ahead, but I'm content with the non-military ones you've left to me. They're a suitable retirement," he joked, "while at the same time being critical to support your armies down the road. Work worthy of an old General like myself. I thank you again for doing this."

"It's not just generosity, you know."

“That’s why I’m grateful for it. You’re not pandering to me, you’re actually putting me to work, and it’s more important than anything I was able to do here on Cholis. Plus, you’ve given Mena and me a House of our own, with ‘family’ that actually likes and respects us. I can’t explain how important that is.”

“Just make sure to keep the Atlas in House Thorsen. Let your granddaughter earn her own way.”

“Unless she chooses to come out here, she’ll have to. I’m done with the Inner Sphere, effective immediately. While there are a great many people there who need help, the powers that be are getting in the way of doing that. I always suspected it, but it’s become quite clear as of today. I’m embarrassed that man was ever in the armed forces.”

“I’ve had a long time to think over this,” Stephan said as Roger listened into an earpiece for any sign of movement around the small convoy of vehicles that could signal a threat, “and I’ve come to the conclusion that the Inner Sphere is a trap. The only way to fix everything there would require a powerbase larger than the Federated Suns, because as soon as you rise to prominence the jackals start to come for you. The higher you rise, the more they try to take you down. It’s like a baited trap, and the only way to beat it is to not engage. The problem is, that means leaving people you could help without that help, and that’s not something I can do.”

“So what’s your solution?”

“Make a lifeboat out in the Periphery that those people at least have a small chance of making it to. We’re going to hold our ground here and fortify it, and if another dark age comes we’ll be in a position to go in and do things right. But short of that, we have to stay out of the Inner Sphere, as much as I hate it. And both you and I are now responsible for making that lifeboat as big as possible. Jumpships can only carry so many people, but we need to always be able to accommodate refugees.”

“You’re thinking rather far ahead, past the immediate problems with Comstar.”

"That's part of the job of a leader, Earl. You've gotta be thinking 20 years into the future at all times."

"That's a new skill I'll have to develop. Normally it's months down the road, though Cholis gave me a bit of practice with years. Decades is another matter entirely."

"We can't let what we've claimed as our own fail because we're reaching for too much in the Inner Sphere. There will always be 'one more planet' to save, and if we pursue that moving target we'll wear ourselves thin. That's why I'm making the decision to annex nothing beyond Cholis. We can help in other ways, but even if worlds abandon the Federated Suns and ask to join, we won't take them. We'll take them under our wing and help them remain independent, but we won't annex them. It's a decision I hate, but one I need to make now rather than later when we might have a bunch of needy hands reaching out."

"You really think we're close to another dark age?"

"Technically we're not out of the current one, and if Comstar has its way, I think they want us to backslide to the point they appear as our benevolent gods."

"That's an infuriating and horrific prospect. That they'd actually cause populations to suffer in order to push an agenda."

"Welcome to Inner Sphere Politics 101, where the rulers rarely do what's best for those they rule. And those of us who do get booted out of the club."

"I'd rather be part of your club, thank you. Have any currently independent worlds approached you about joining?"

"There's been a little nibbling, but no formal offers. Quite a few worlds in the Taurian Concordat within a couple jumps of here have been in contact. They don't get any real support from their capitol, and a lot of their colonies out here from a hundred years ago have gone extinct. I've had my scouts check out some of those systems, and the settlements are there, but falling apart and without a single survivor. Frankly, my opinion of House Calderon is lower than the Davions. I think

Ian would at least have enough pride not to let dots on his map just wink out."

"The Taurians are beyond Cholis. Would you accept them?"

"It doesn't break my rule, but right now we're spread out too much as it is. We need as many mechs per planet as possible, and adding new planets stretches that out."

"What about your warlord hunt?"

"Temporarily suspended until we see what Comstar does."

"A pity. There's a great many people out there that already owe you their livelihoods, and probably a lot more that need your help. But I understand the strategic quagmire you're in. How many mechs do you have available?"

"Line units...668 at last count. Actually mechs, 762, with a few more coming off the assembly lines every month devoted to us rather than our customers. We've bought up as many from the Inner Sphere as we could over the past few months."

"More than six Regiments," Thorsen said with a satisfied nod. "There won't be very many mercenary units that can stand up to that kind of strength. Their only hope would be to whittle you down with continuous assaults, but as long as you have your mech factory, you can replace everything you lose."

"That's the plan, as well as getting a few more full battlemech lines going rather than just replacement parts. Vander and I have agreed we need 7 base models for our military, and anything beyond that is superfluous."

"May I ask which ones?"

"Phoenix Hawk, Enforcer, Centurion, Rifleman, Warhammer, Victor, and Awesome."

"No JagerMech?"

"The Rifleman is a better platform. Unlike your former employer, we're not autocannon fanatics. And with so many widespread worlds, the less autocannon and missile rounds we have to resupply the better we're outfitted for long, grueling holds. We're predominantly a laser-based military structure."

"I didn't realize you had made a conscious decision to do that, but it makes perfect sense. Though, since you do have the facilities to produce ammunition, I thought you'd make more use of it."

"Situational use, yes. But we're not going to fall into the trap of relying on it. We also don't make all types of rounds, at present, though we're working to change that."

"Your forces are going to take an inordinate pounding in just about every exchange in the beginning," Harris warned.

"That's why we're running heavy and assault mechs mostly," he said as they finally got outside of the city limits and were humming down the soon to be dirt road out to the Estate.

"The cost of that has to be enormous."

"It is," Stephan admitted, "but the more inhouse services we can do ourself the price comes down. Replacement parts are rather cheap when we're making them for ourselves rather than having to buy them. The same goes for pretty much everything else. Remember that when you're setting up your business ventures. The more they overlap the cheaper they'll be."

"Quite right," he said as a random thought suddenly came to mind. "Are you still doing the fireworks?"

"Damn, I don't think the Duke will let me now. It'll just have to be at the Estate."

"That's a shame," Thorsen said, having looked forward to every New Years when House Morten would foot the bill for a large fireworks show over Brinestorm.

"Do you want to hang around for it? Your ETA is entirely up to you."

The new Earl shook his head. "I'll miss it, but I know my duty, and I'll not be wasting any of the days I have left in me. My place is on Coden now, but don't let him give you any guff about airspace issues."

"You really think I would?"

"No," Harris said with a laugh. "But I think he'll try every trick in the book to harass you."

“Hopefully Carroll can pull him into line. If not, he’ll learn one way or another that I don’t take orders from him.”

“Hopefully for his sake, he learns soon,” Harris said with a sign. “I also don’t want to have to watch as he makes changes to my former Duchy...possibly for the worse.”

“I’ll make sure people have an out if they want to leave,” Stephan promised.

“But you couldn’t do that for Neubenn, could you?”

“No. I couldn’t.”

8

December 31, 2999

Federated Suns

Crucis March

Cholis

Brinestorm

Carroll Davion milled in the crowd at the Duke's estate, having been invited to attend the Millennial celebration that House Alliz had somehow thrown together after canceling the yearly affair sponsored by the Mortens. She and the other guests stood on the grass in the courtyard sipping alcoholic drinks of a large variety, and at least the Duke had brought a proper liquor cabinet with him from his visit to New Avalon...which seemed to be making him quite popular amongst his guests right now.

There were a couple hundred of them smashed into an area that would be hard to comfortably suit half that number, but brushing elbows with other people on New Year's Eve was part of the Federated Suns' custom that hadn't been lost on the edge of the Periphery. Carroll glanced up at the countdown clock suspended on a tower so all could see it, noting they only had two minutes and twelve seconds left until midnight...which was local midnight, for all the planets were in different positions and setting the clocks to one unified time wasn't reasonable for such occasions, though they still kept their calendar synced across the lightyears.

As she walked around aimlessly, trying to make polite conversation and do her diplomatic duty, she kept wondering what was going on at the Estate, for they were still going to have a very big party there...one that she was missing out on do

to this tiny affair. Tiny in size and scope and company, but at least it did have alcohol.

"Excuse me," a man said, coming through the crowd to face her with an ingratiating smile. "I don't believe we've been introduced yet. My name is Henry Alliz. The Duke is my cousin."

"Hello, Henry," Carroll said with a practiced smile she could whip out even when she was bored to tears...which wasn't far from her current mood. "Carrol Davion."

"That I know," he said with a chuckle. "We're honored to have a member of House Davion at our party. I hope you enjoy the fireworks."

"Fireworks?" she asked skeptically. "How did you get any? They aren't made on Cholis."

"We brought the very finest with us from New Avalon anticipating the celebrations. All of Brinestorm is in for a treat."

"Very thoughtful after your cousin canceled the expected ones."

Henry waved off the insult. "My cousin was the last person in our House ever expected to be appointed to a political position of any kind. I still don't know what possessed Ian to give him this Duchy, but I can assure you the rest of House Alliz is taking this matter seriously and intend to care for this Duchy as it deserves. This is not a figurehead appointment as far as we are concerned."

"Such high praise for your cousin. He must be quite flattered."

"He's a military brat, pure and simple. That talk you had with him opened his eyes to his, say, inadequacies. He won't be speaking again in public without thorough coaching."

"Out here on the edge of civilization, having a military brat as Duke isn't the worst thing. His predecessor was as well and he adjusted over time to become quite competent. I'm sure the First Prince had good reasons for appointing him."

"Unfortunately I know my cousin quite well. I assure you, there are no good reasons," Henry said with laugh that got half of one out of Carroll as the last few seconds ticked off the

clock. "If I may be so bold, would it create an incident if I stole a traditional midnight's kiss from a Davion?"

Carroll frowned at him, then stole a glance around seeing that all eyes were on the clock and not them. "Seeing as how I don't think I'll be around for the next one, I'll permit it," she said a moment before a loud gong sounded and the fireworks immediately started to shoot into the sky from nearby.

Henry leaned in and gave her a light kiss on the lips, then pulled back so to not indulge. "Happy New Millennium, Ambassador."

"The same to you," she said, raising her half-filled glass in salute, then washing it down as the fireworks continued to go off in intricate patterns noting their quality...all the while, over the horizon she could see just a touch of colored blasts rising far higher into the sky, enough that Brinestorm could see them over the kilometers of distance separating city from Estate.

That was the Morten party, and when it came to displays of dominance, it seemed Stephan did indeed have the bigger stick...by a wide margin.

Carroll stayed at the Duke's party for another twenty minutes, after which the fireworks ended and everyone started to depart. She took the long drive back to the Estate with her chauffeur seeming to hit every bump in the road on the way...but then again, she was probably more drunk than she realized.

What was in that wine anyway? They must have distilled a whole vineyard to get her this drunk after two small glasses.

By the time she returned to the Estate her head was pounding...only for her to realize when she opened the door that it was the fireworks outside that were still going on with repetitive booms that were vibrating the glass as much as her head.

She looked at her watch, seeing it was 2:16 am. Normally they cut off these things at 2.

Carroll decided to go up to the main house rather than her guest suite and went in...with the security guards knowing

her by sight and not bothering to even acknowledge her as they scanned the perimeter with their eyes seemingly extra hard given that their ears were distracted.

And probably numb at this point if this had been going on since midnight.

Carroll made her way through the house, which was seemingly deserted, and up to the roof terrace on top, finding a host of familiar faces that she easily blended in with, no faking required here.

Stephan found her a few minutes later and pulled her off to the side near the railing. "You're drunk."

"I am not...that much," she said with a giggle. "It was the one thing the Duke's party had that yours does not. I still wish I'd been here though. How much longer are those damn fireworks going to last?"

"You don't like them?"

"They're the biggest I've ever seen, and loudest. I like them all right."

"They're going to keep going nonstop until daybreak."

Carroll's eyes widened. "Seriously?"

"This only happens once in a thousand years, my dumb little Davion. Why not make it memorable?"

She pointed a finger at him. "You're only saying that because I'm drunk."

"Drunk is the equivalent of dumb," he pointed out.

"Don't use such big words around a drunk woman," she said, overplaying it a bit. She still had her wits about her, even if they were dulled a bit. "And you showed up the Duke quite well. We could see your display from his Estate."

"He's the one that canceled the fireworks."

"He brought his own."

"Did he?"

"You didn't know?"

"I didn't. At least the people in the city got something then," he said, his voice extra loud to be heard over the constant booms.

"I even got a kiss from his cousin at midnight."

"But not him?"

"No. That would have been inappropriate with his wife. His cousin isn't married."

"Well then, if you'll allow me, considering your drunk and I can't think straight with all this noise, to maintain my one-upmanship?"

"A Morten kiss a Davion?" she asked, mock shocked. "I think the planet would crack in two, but you're welcome to find out."

Stephan bent down to kiss her lightly, but she wrapped a hand around his head and held him firm, making it last far longer than expected. When she finally came up for air he was just shaking his head and smirking.

"You are so drunk right now."

"Then you better find me some caffeine if I'm going to last until morning. Fortunately I'm my own boss and can sleep in as long as I want."

"These people have an understanding boss as well," Stephan said, grabbing her by the elbow and guiding her through the crowd towards their non-alcoholic beverage center and picking out the highest caffeine content drink they had...called Fizzalicious...and cracked open the can for her.

"You'll regret this tomorrow, but it'll help keep you awake for the next few hours."

Carroll took the can and spilled a little on her dress, but seemed to ignore it as she gulped a third of it down. "Tastes horrible."

"You've still got alcohol on your pallet. The combination is probably horrible."

"So you're saying the answer is to wash it down?" she asked, not waiting for an answer before gulping the rest of it and spilling quite a bit more on her face in the process.

Stephan grabbed a napkin from the nearby table and wiped it off her, taking some makeup along with it. "You are truly pathetic right now."

She belched, suddenly embarrassed, then started laughing so hard multiple people began looking, because the closest ones could hear her over the fireworks.

Stephan shook his head and pointed down slightly at hers. "This is why we banned alcohol."

Susan emerged out of the sea of bodies like a shark moving through a school of fish and caught Carroll up in a big hug.

"You made it after all!"

"I didn't realize it was going on until morning."

"It is?" Susan asked, looking to Stephan.

"For the big kids anyway. It's about your bedtime, isn't it?" he mocked.

She stuck out her tongue at him and turned back to Carroll. "Did he give you a kiss yet? He's already handed out a dozen or more."

"I got mine," Carroll said with a smile. "I hope you don't have any camera crews around."

"Nope," Stephan said. "This is a private party for the Estate. No media allowed anywhere."

"As it should be," the Ambassador said, finding a bin under the table to throw away her empty can as she grabbed a new one, popped the lid open, and started guzzling.

"Taste any better now?"

She nodded, still drinking.

Steven turned to Susan who was smiling ear to ear. "She is going to be in pain the likes of which you have no idea of in 12 hours. I'm assigning you as nursemaid."

"What about my bedtime?" she scoffed.

"You can have a sleepover at her place. Or keep her here. I'm serious, Suzy."

"Looking after my best interests?" Carroll interrupted, but Stephan ignored her.

"Got it, Captain," Susan said, stepping arm to arm with her fellow blonde and saluting.

"Enjoy yourself," Stephan said to Carroll, then pointed at her can. "Don't drink more than 3 of those. Better to stop after that one. I learned the hard way a long time ago."

Carroll glanced at Susan. "I'll have to confer with my escort on that one. I'm starting to like the taste now."

Stephan leaned down and kissed Susan on the forehead, then whispered in her ear.

"Don't let her fall over the railing. You're not used to being around drunk people. They lose their balance very easily."

"She's safe with me," Susan promised, then Stephan nodded at Carroll and meandered away to speak with someone else. After he got out of earshot Susan turned her eyes back on Carroll excitedly.

"Did he really kiss you?"

"His idea too."

"Yes!" she said with a small fist pump.

"Yes what?"

"Oh, nothing. Nothing at all."

Carroll stared at her for a long moment. "Do we need to have a talk about Davion/Morten political reality again?"

"No, I memorized it the first thirteen times," she complained. "He doesn't kiss people he hates. Trust me."

"It's just a tradition, Susan."

"If...you...say...so..." she all but sang as she wobbled to and fro.

"You are impossible," Carroll said, grabbing hold of her arm. "Does this party have anything more than fireworks?"

"You know it does."

"Then guide me, oh wise one, for I have succumbed to the evils of alcohol and can trust my judgement no longer."

"Then let's start with the hayride," Susan said, steering her away from the beverage table, but not before she snagged a third Fizzalicious to take with her.

"You have hay?"

"It's just a saying. Poor farmers probably used hay. We have seats, and you can't hear yourself anywhere over the ride

through the paths. The fireworks are launching from everywhere.”

“Who needs to talk. Let’s party!”

“My god, you are drunk aren’t you?” Susan said, now just beginning to catch on...

9

January 30, 3000

Capellan Confederation

Sian Commonality

Yuris

Outskirts of Sogal

The *Viridian Egg* landed on the planet of Yuris without permission, ignoring all comms from the Capellan military command in the city of Kikril, and the traffic control systems from the main spaceport. The Morten Protectorate dropship wasn't heading there, though, and it wasn't running any IFF to let them know who it was, so from the Capellan point of view it was an unknown jumpship coming into the system and landing an unknown dropship on their surface.

In other words, it was probably smugglers or an armed invasion by mercenaries or raiders.

The defending mechs on the planet were nowhere near the city of Sogal though, so the *Overlord*-class dropship was able to beat them there and land outside the city even as another dropship from Kikril was taking off to hot drop mechs near their location...but it wasn't going to get there in time, for as soon as the *Viridian Egg* landed it took off again, just pausing long enough to lower its ramp and allow a single individual to step off and walk far enough away not to get caught in the engine wash.

Taran Lee watched from the nearby forest, dressed in regal robes mimicking well the tailoring of high end Capellan noble fashion, as the Morten dropship lifted off, having actually done as they'd promised and returned him to a Confederation world.

Part of him couldn't believe it, and another part of him knew his journey was not yet over. He had to get back to the capitol world of Sian without Comstar becoming aware of it, otherwise he'd probably end up dead on the way there.

Taran walked away from the clearing through the woods, not minding the mud on his boots as it was Capellan mud and a free man's problem to deal with. He walked for several hours through the night, having no trouble navigating due to the pair of well-lit moons in the sky, until he came to the main road that ran between Sogal and the capital of this border world. The fact that House Morten could run him to ground and get away with it displayed how poorly defended it was, but if the Davions wanted to take it he hoped the garrison would at least put up a good fight. He was tired of losing worlds to them, and knew Maximilian felt the same way.

He started walking towards the capital along the edge of the road, but it wasn't long before a patrol car stopped him. After a harsh exchange of words...primarily from him to the disbelieving officer who finally accepted that he was a noble who outranked him...he was given a ride into the capital and straight to Duke Harken's palace, with orders to deliver him there through a back entrance and to do so before the sun rose.

It took considerably more talking at the gates than should have been necessary, but as he later found out the Capellans believed he had died some two years ago, with a massive state funeral broadcast to all the worlds. He was touched at the effort, but knew it to be a rallying point against the Davions who had been laid the blame for his death.

Normally he would have accepted that without issue, but it seemed that either an assumption was made or that Comstar wanted them to think it was the Davions to cover their own abductions...for now he was sure there had been others, or perhaps assassinations, to push their varying agendas. He had an idea what one of those might be, but sensed that he was just a part of a massive plot to control politics in the Inner Sphere. One that Comstar had done well to hide up until now.

Which was another reason that he would not make it back to Sian alive if they discovered him here.

Once he was allowed inside and the Duke was rudely woken up, Taran made him see who he was and underscored the importance of secrecy...with the threat of reprisals if he didn't keep a lid on this. Transport was arranged on a regular jumpship route that would eventually get him back to Sian within a few months, and he'd travel as a commoner so not to draw attention. Papers were made up to give him the cover story, as well as appropriate clothing and personal items to match, including a Sto'shani that was posing as his wife.

The Sto'shani were highly coveted across the Confederation, for they were trained from birth to be skilled in many areas beyond mere consorts. Philosophy, science, combat, computer hacking...you name it and they probably had some skill training for it. All of them were girls, and beauties at that, which were purchased for enormous amounts of money to the Houses that sponsored and raised them.

Duke Harken had two as his mistresses in addition to his own wife, and he'd gladly donated one of them to serve as cover, and as a bodyguard, for Taran on his trip to Sian. She'd also make for some pleasant diversion on the way there, for in addition to their practical skills, they were also well schooled in the sexual arts.

Within three weeks he was onboard a dropship again with Mui Ni on his arm at all times, close enough that he could occasionally feel the knife blade she had stashed within her left sleeve as they made only minimal conversation with the other passengers. He let her do most of the talking, and she was quite skilled at it, leaving him the gruff silent type, which was a role he could perform without much effort, for he had no wish to converse with the commoners onboard the ship...

Coden had but one true city, and it was not where Stephan had chosen to build Harris's estate. Instead, he'd given him a huge tract of land carved out of three different neighboring plantations' fields and had built a magnificent

series of buildings upon it, including a single dropship pad that he and his House were delivered to upon arrival at the planet that would become their new Earldom, in an economic sense at least.

Viceroy Uni, one of Stephan's very far flung cousins in their family tree, had control of the mech garrison here and was entrusted with securing the planet as if it was her duchy, but she would only be here for a maximum of 10 years before another Morten would cycle in and replace her. House Thorsen, on the other hand, would be here permanently, and he knew they were the ones responsible for laying the foundation of a growing and vibrant planet similar to the way House Morten had reinvigorated Neubenn when they'd taken control of it.

Harris had had a lot of long conversations with Stephan concerning that lately, with his new family members sitting in and taking a lot of notes. He had tried to learn everything he could from the Mortens to get as big of a head start as possible, but now it was up to his House to develop on their own from here.

The dropship, a *Union*-class, was also now the possession of House Thorsen, and it had been renamed *Hammer* at Stephan's order. From now on out though, anything his House bought would have to be given appropriate names by him...which he was horrible at, so he'd deferred that duty to Cora as the chief 'namer' in the House, and her first task was to name the estate.

She'd asked him to give her a few days to look around first before deciding on something.

They walked up to the front doors as a group, met by a pair of security guards placed there by the Mortens to look after the brand new estate until they arrived. When they opened the front doors off the expansive patio that was located between the main house and the drop pad, the smell of fresh paint was easy to detect. He'd been assured the place would be finished by the time they arrived, and it looked like the construction crew had barely met that timeline.

"Impressive," he commented, staring up at the high ceilings and wide hallways that split in three directions from the garage-sized foyer they were now standing in.

"This is more extravagant than the Morten's palace," Mena said, walking beside him and looking around in awe.

"They didn't build that one, they just bought it," Harris reminded her. "And then they had to build a lot of housing quickly to hold the rest of their family. I think this is more their preferred style of architecture, and if I know Stephan well enough, the outer walls will be at least a meter thick of ferrocrete."

"We need to find the security office," Martha said, business as usual. This wasn't a pleasure trip for any of them, for they were well used to keeping matters of state for Harris and letting him deal with the major issues at his leisure.

"Third door on the left, Ma'am," one of the security guards said.

"Thank you," the diminutive woman replied, flicking a lock of loose brown hair out of her glasses. The humidity outside had already messed with her hairspray's effectiveness. "Earl, feel free to explore. We'll get things set up properly."

"Thank you, Martha. This is all your home as well from now on. Choose the bedrooms you like and move right on in," he said, taking Mena's hand and walking forward while his posse spread out in every which direction in the huge place. He and his wife walked silently, taking in the splendor as Harris was mentally mapping out the place as if he planned to assault it later, until they came to a plaza with a glass roof on it and a greenhouse full of trees...most of which were small and in pots, but there were several full grown varieties that Stephan must have had transplanted here from elsewhere on the planet.

"My god, Harris."

"I know. Better than we deserve," he said as they took a break from the long walk out from the drop pad...given that their House didn't own any land vehicles yet...and sat down on a bench underneath one of the adult trees and the shade it provided. "We have a large responsibility here, and only a few

years to make good on it. The rest of them will have to carry on after us and repay the Mortens for all this. It's our job to make sure House Thorsen gets established properly."

"Our big kids you mean."

"Yes, something like that."

"And I thought the palace on Cholis was the moment when we had arrived in the noble world."

"Apparently there are nobles, and then there are nobles...and then there are the Mortens."

"Does this make it all worth it?" she asked, looking into his old, tired eyes that were seeing more light in them than they had previously.

"Do you even need to ask?"

"Duty, Harris. It consumes you."

"Yes, dear. But my duty to the Federated Suns was completed honorably, despite the circumstances. I consider it a closed matter. My duty is now to House Morten and helping them build this infantile Morten Protectorate. This isn't a safe and stable world. It's primitive and was ruled by repressive thugs. It's our job to help civilize it, and I take that duty as importantly as any military command I was blessed to have."

"So then...after unpacking, where do you start?"

"We have to make purchases for our own House, and those items will be repaid out of our earnings later. Then we have to figure out where we can best get a foothold in the economy immediately, and start constructing corporations."

"And you know how to do that?"

"Not really. But we have a team now to figure it out, and a few Mortens on planet to ask for advice whenever we need it."

"But not Stephan," she pointed out.

"No, not Stephan. I will miss his company, and you will miss Elena's," he said, referencing the First Lord's mother.

"Duty," she repeated. "It takes us away from friends and family, but now we have a new duty that is all about family. I appreciate the irony in that. And it was no accident either. Stephan made it that way on purpose."

"Off the top of his head at that. The kid is a genius, Mena, and the rest of his family is damn impressive. Andrew Davion must have been the biggest fool ever to remove them from their Duchy."

"Water under the bridge now, and I think they're better off for it, even if Neubenn isn't."

"True," he said as she stood up and dragged him by the hand to his feet. "Rested enough?"

"We have more of our new house to see, and I'll be camping out in here plenty of time later. We'll need to add a few tables, though."

"Start making a list. There's not a lot of stuff we can buy here other than from the Morten store. We'll have to order from off world or make anything else ourselves."

"Coffee, Harris," she insisted as they started walking. "We must start growing coffee. Civilization can't survive properly without it, and Stephan gave us plenty of land to work with."

"Coffee growing and refining might be a good business, but not the first. The locals aren't exactly in a position to buy much of it. They need basic resources and services now, but we'll add coffee production later."

"What about exporting it?" she pressed.

"The people here need products, my dear. Exports are not the duty we've been given."

"But in order to bring currency into the planet, you need exports. Can't you do that with coffee?"

"Luxuries later, my dear. And if the Mortens want coffee grown on this planet, they have plenty of fields of their own to do it. If we want to add a special variety later, we can do it ourselves. Right now we need to establish services like ferrocrete construction, plumbing, electrical, landline communications, road paving...stuff you've probably taken for granted on Cholis."

"Is it really that bad here?"

"Inside these walls, no. Beyond them, I'm afraid so. We're a bright spot of civilization amongst the dark jungle of the

Periphery, and we have to start trimming back that jungle. You work on making our new family feel at home and leave the outside stuff to me.”

“I still want a coffee company,” she said as they walked out the far door of the greenhouse into even more splendor that was a massive pool room with three different areas connected by small waterways and waterfalls.

“If you can find some capable gardeners to hire, we’ll start growing enough for our House to use immediately,” he offered.

“Deal,” she said, feeling the cool yet humid air of the water in here soak into her nose and lungs. “I feel 10 years younger already.”

“I know what you mean,” he said as they skirted the exterior of the largest pool enroute to the next section of the palace to see what else Stephan had built for House Thorsen.

And from the looks of it, he expected their House to grow by leaps and bounds, not just in population, but in responsibility...for this was no play house. This was the command center for a noble family with responsibilities that matched the elegance. They were to become the economic protectors for this planet, and they already had over 300 million people in need of true civilization being brought to them.

That’s what he saw here. A reminder of his grandiose duty. A duty that could only be accomplished by a grandiose House that was still in its infancy. And his new heirs were going to need all the instruction and experience he could pass onto them. He’d been using the downtime during their jumpship travel here, some 5 jumps out from Cholis, to work on legacy recordings for not just the current members of his House but their future offspring. It was a start, and a solid one at that, but he had to train these people into an effective unit while Mena made that unit feel comfortable and loved at the same time.

A House was different than a military command. It was hereditary and civilian, but he had already seen how the Mortens handled it, and their example would not be lost on him.

He had so much to do, and now that he was finally here, it was time to start laying down roots and establishing a proper beachhead into this campaign. He had a planet to economically conquer, and he was going to need a much larger army to do it than he currently had.

First order of business, take care of his current troops.
Second...start recruiting.

10

February 15, 3000

Federated Suns

Crusis March

Cholis

Morten Estate

“Thank you for meeting with me,” Mr. Frennis said, nodding before the seated Stephan and Sarah in the otherwise empty conference room. “I hope we can come to some beneficial agreements.”

“Likewise,” Sarah said neutrally. “Let’s start with what you’re offering.”

The tall and very thin man spread his arms wide. “Many things. I’m essentially a multi-tasking financial broker with contacts in the Federated Suns, Capellan Confederation, and Free Worlds League. The Cross Borders Guild that I’m a part of and representing as a whole here, would like to spread our territory to include yours for all our many services, including currency exchange. I have it from a number of sources in the Periphery that the MP is quickly becoming the standard outside the Taurian Concordat. You have a banking system in place, correct?”

“We do,” Sarah answered while Stephan mildly listened.

“But you do not have Comstar relays to facilitate transfers,” Frennis pointed out. “We can assist you with this. Some of our dropships are mobile banks that make prescheduled rounds between systems. It allows for both electronic and physical currency to move through systems outside Comstar...which is preferable to many of our clients who wish something more stable than the ad hoc trading in the black market. And if you’ll forgive the intrusion, we have also

noticed that you have been withdrawing heavy amounts of currency from a number of Federated Suns banks over the past few months, as well as buying gold and other precious metals. Our sources suggest you are planning an expansion of your own banking system throughout the Periphery where the Federated Suns system cannot reach. Are our sources correct?"

"How are you privy to private banking records?"

Stephan interjected.

Frennis shrugged. "We're not, but when large shipments of currency are ordered to a spaceport it gets noticed, as does the dropship that takes them. Savvy investors watch such traffic and can glean certain things without having the banks actually reveal anything. We speculate you've been pulling out several billion in hard currency, and maybe another billion in gold from at least three systems."

"Considerably more than that," Sarah confirmed. "If we're to establish ourselves as a legitimate state, we can't be handcuffed to New Avalon accounts."

"Of course not. Is it also true that you're tying your MP to some sort of physical standard?"

"Gold, silver, and diamonds," Sarah stated boldly.

"Enough to cover all the physical currency we've coined to date and will continue to coin in the future."

"Are you utilizing paper money?"

"No, we're not. We prefer something heavy and harder to steal in bulk."

Frennis smiled. "A psychological aspect that is not to be ignored, nor burned in the case of paper currency. As you begin to operate more and more with MPs and less with C-bills and Pounds, we can soak up those other currencies for you and recycle them elsewhere. I don't believe there's a sizeable bank on Cholis that can handle such things."

"There's not," Sarah conceded. "How large is your jumpship fleet?"

"We're a guild, so we don't have a rigid command structure like a military or corporate fleet, but we have upwards of 200 jumpships roaming the three Great Realms and pieces of

the Periphery from the Magistracy of Canopolis to the Outworlds Alliance.”

“But not the Draconis Combine or Lyran Commonwealth?” Stephan asked.

“No,” Frennis said regretfully. “Neither of those states tolerates our presence, nor does Terra. We’re too fringe for their tastes.”

“Then I’m surprised the Davions tolerate you.”

“They don’t sanction us anymore than the other two Great Houses do, but they do look the other way and allow us to interact with some of their regional banking affiliates in their more backward territories. Same banking systems, mind you, but different branches that already deal with less savory clients.”

“Are you saying your guild is unsavory?” Sarah asked.

“Not at all, but we pride ourselves on giving a bit of reliability to populations of humanity that live in unsavory areas, and we would highly prefer if our guild could be officially recognized by your fast growing realm.”

“That may cause you some problems with your other clients,” Stephan warned.

“No more than our ships traveling back and forth across the Federated Suns and Capellan borders. The Capellans especially are tricky to deal with, but if you find the right niche, and the right people, you can make a steady profit trading with them. And others can as well, with plausible deniability as it’s our guild that’s actually doing the trading and not those in political office that would suffer the consequences of such things.”

“Aside from banking services...” Sarah prompted.

“We carry all manner of goods on our ships, but only high value items. We don’t have bulk shipping capability for things like food and clothing...unless they’re so badly needed it becomes cost effective to carry them. Some designer clothing is inherently, but we focus on small items of great value. Currency being one of them, precious metals in coin form or not. Technology, databases...we even have a small competing

communications wing with Comstar, albeit on a much slower basis, but in the Periphery where Comstar has to carry messages by ship as we do, we offer an alternative to their monopoly. In the Inner Sphere, we offer a more clandestine transmission method when needed, as well as personnel transport for high valued customers."

"Slave trade?" Sarah inquired neutrally.

Frennis shook his head in the negative. "That's one cargo we do not carry, nor do we carry hostages or prisoners. Only willing passengers that pay well enough to warrant their weight. Mostly we carry high quality goods that aren't available outside the high population worlds, including mechs and mech parts. Seeing as how you're a supplier of such things, we'd be interested in setting up a standard contract for periodic pickups."

"I'm sure you would," Sarah said with a smile. "Do you know the kind of prices we're getting for them out here?"

"Much higher than you'd get near Terra, I can assure you. It's the people who can't garner the status to buy the factory-produced mechs that pay a hefty sum to gain older ones. We have noticed the prices you are charging for the brand new ones, and while it is higher than standard out here, it's not unexpected given the appetite and lack of supply in the Periphery."

"Our waiting list is also a kilometer long. What would justify you bumping ahead on that list?"

"A long term contract and relationship to cover many economic aspects. We also offer clandestine diplomatic courier service using sealed containers that even we cannot breach. You and your intended recipient are given keys that you customize, and inserting a wrong key will destroy the box. We simply carry the boxes and drop them off when we make our rounds, or if the price is high enough, we take a direct route to speed up delivery."

"Do you see a lot of business in that regard?"

"Very much so, though most such transfers avoid the capitol. It's typically Dukes or CEOs that want to converse with

each other, or with other groups that shall be left nameless. The type of things that they wouldn't want the Davions or others knowing about should Comstar take a peek at standard HPG communications. We can't match their speed in the Inner Sphere, but we can make sure the messages are not read by anyone, ourselves included."

"Comstar says the same thing," Stephan noted.

"Comstar uses electronic messages. Such things are always visible to one with the computer skills and access necessary to read them. A sealed box with an internal explosive powerful enough to destroy the contents but not anything else cannot be hacked. People have long ago traded privacy for speed, but sometimes privacy is more important. We have a good reputation amongst our clients, but most will not admit they are clients when you speak to them, so we have to prove ourselves to every new customer, as we will have to prove ourselves to you. Doubt is expected."

"Do you have ships running to the Taurians?"

"A few, but their economy is very strange and offers little opportunity for trade. They expect each of their worlds to be self-sufficient and only really offer mutual protection against attack. There is business occurring there, do not get me wrong, but nothing to warrant more than an occasional contact with our ships."

"Do you utilize your diplomatic service with them?"

"Any guild member can run messages without informing the others, so I can't personally answer that question, for my few ships have not traveled there."

"How would you get a message from me to them, then?"

"We'd pass the diplomatic boxes off from ship to ship and it would eventually get to one that does travel there."

"So your ships do cross paths with each other?" Sarah asked.

"We trade amongst each other in order to get a good array of products to offer our clients, otherwise each ship would only have cargos of a large amount of a few select items."

"How do you interact with your client planets? Just land a dropship and advertise your services?"

"Typically no, though that may be the case when visiting some very small worlds. Usually we establish a beachhead of sorts. A person or building where we have an emissary that takes orders and messages, then when one of our ships arrive they make the necessary contacts quietly. If you would do us the honor of officially sanctioning our services we would prefer to establish a permanent emporium on at least one of your worlds."

"Though it's not fully in effect on every world yet, we have a ban on all corpse products, food and otherwise. This would have to be respected," Sarah warned.

"We can adjust to whatever requirements you have."

"If you do want an official relationship with the Morten Protectorate, it will mean you cannot have any *unofficial* ones on the side."

"Set your terms and we will hold to them so long as they are not economically unreasonable."

"Then let's start with this," Sarah said, leaning forward slightly behind the elevated table as Frennis stood before them resplendent in a merchant's garb that included an over robe that imbued an immediate sense of wealth to anyone whose eyes crossed him. "Your commerce, as far as goods, will be restricted to our House only. Messages and currency exchange you're free to offer to our citizens, as well as personnel transport."

"What of full banking services?"

"Allowed. Do you have any other services to offer?"

"A catalog of contacts for making the right introductions to the right people in the right places for things we do not offer ourselves."

"Contact service you can offer our people. But your goods all go through me, and we'll buy what we want to add to the Morten Emporium," Sarah said, citing the name for the planetary stores they'd established on just about every world

they'd claimed that brought in various goods not available locally. "I'll not have you undercutting us."

"We don't seek to hurt your profit margins, rather expand upon them by offering items you may not already have available, or perhaps not enough of said items available. And we'd much prefer to do business with a single bulk buyer than adhoc individual customers anyway."

Sarah turned to look at Stephan. "He's saying all the right things," she said noncommittally.

"Why now?" Stephan asked Frennis.

"We're a cautious lot. A few years ago you didn't have a single planet to your name, now you have more than a dozen. We weren't sure if you were some Davion operation or, frankly, warlords yourselves. Time was taken to analyze the situation, and once we were satisfied you were legitimate businessmen, we began making inquiries. We are glad that you finally responded and agreed to this meeting."

"We had to do some checking too," Stephan mimicked. "You wouldn't believe the number of solicitations we've been receiving."

"Your reputation is growing fast in certain circles, to be sure, and not just because of your possession of a mech factory."

"Well then," Sarah said, tapping a finger on the table. "Let's see your list of available goods..."

Kevin Morten had thought he was done with most of the hard work. He'd rebuilt the Morten Academy from the base curriculum they'd brought with them from Neubenn, added to it in a few ways, and got most of the various disciplines into active programs. He had also got branches of the Academy established on Foniss and Polvice, essentially pasting and copying what he had built in their Embassy Estate and adding some things not needed on Cholis, like police force training.

Those two schools, simply known as the Foniss Branch and Polvice Branch of the Morten Academy, were functioning well now. Land had been allocated for a much larger campus

down the road, but current construction had been complete enough to begin several programs badly needed on both worlds. Programs that kept people there rather than having to transport them via jumpship to Cholis and further clog the Estate grounds with more buildings. They were quickly running out of room for everything they needed, and Stephan had agreed that there would come a time to move the Morten Academy main campus off Cholis.

Ideally it would be located on their capitol...but they hadn't chosen a system yet. Stephan had more and more survey ships going out to collect data on what was around them, but that sweet spot that he was looking for hadn't been found. There were many planets that *could* become their capitol if they wanted to capture them, or a few that could be colonized to that end, but he wasn't satisfied with any of them.

So today Kevin Morten was standing near the Tarmac of the pirate base they'd captured as one of their dropships arrived, having come from Foniss. The location of this system was being kept secret, though for how long that would last he didn't know, but the planet had been named 'Forge' and aptly so, for it was to become the permanent home of the Morten Academy's elite programs, including their mech training operations.

The pirate base was, to put it simply, absolutely fabulous with regards to what they needed to start the Academy. It was all here, including the housing for the staff and students, and Kevin had assigned himself as Chancellor in order to do the yet more hard work of scaling it up into what they needed...but as far as starting points went, this was a damn luxurious one. However bad Captain Sheridan might have treated people, he had a good eye for architecture, and the small street of buildings that curved off to the left out of view behind Kevin definitely caught the eye of the first class of students as they got off the dropship.

They were a mix...some were those that otherwise would have been trained on Cholis and were simply shifting

here to free up space...and the rest were outsiders who were paying House Morten to teach them how to be mechwarriors.

Some 13 of the 32 foreign students came from the Northwind Highlanders mercenary unit, while the others were a mix of different types of dreamers. Some hadn't made the cut for other mech schools, some were locals that didn't want to travel into the Inner Sphere due to the many rumors, and true stories, about the depravity there. And some came from other mercenary units, usually the kids of the mechwarriors or their techs who they didn't have the time or skills to train themselves.

The program was brand new, and he was surprised they had attracted this much attention already. Paul apparently knew how to market it, and while the fees weren't extravagant for what was going to be a 6 month introductory program, they were, as of this moment, making some money.

Still, the cost of setting up here, with some 50 new simulators that came from Morten Arms Consortium, wasn't nothing. In fact, Sarah had got so tired trying to buy and get simulators shipped out from the Inner Sphere to fill all the mech bays on every planet they were taking, that she'd dipped into the warchest and created a division of M.A.C. to build simulators of their own. Doing that was not easy, nor was any of the other new projects assigned to M.A.C. or other startup companies, but the hard work on this one was over, for the Simulated Warfare Division was producing the simulators nonstop and storing the excess in warehouses to be used later.

Now was that later, so he'd been able to get 50 full scale mech simulators moved here a few weeks ago along with the final elements of the expedition team that was converting the pirate base into an Academy...as well as beginning construction on a base camp some 140 kilometers to the northeast that would end up training their own people in techniques that would never be available to foreigners.

That was one of his headache projects for later, but right now the public wing of the Morten Academy was open to basic mechwarrior training, and the crop of recruits from the

Northwind Highlanders looked even younger than he'd expected. All were at least 14 years old, on file anyway, but they had definitely sent him a bunch of kids rather than young adults to train.

Which made sense. They were on a long term contract with the Capellan Confederation, and that probably didn't put them in too good of graces when it came to applying at Federated Suns mechwarrior schools. They could train their own people, of course, and most of the larger mercenary units did just that, but what they had wanted...and what Stephan had negotiated...was a program that could take raw recruits with no training or potential whatsoever, and give them the basic skills necessary as a foundation for whatever unit training they'd offer them later.

It was both an insult and a compliment at the same time, suggesting that House Morten could offer good, solid training, but wasn't really suited for the more advanced stuff...like, say, assaulting worlds. That was not going to be part of the public Morten Academy curriculum, but it seemed the Northwind Highlanders were more interested in their basic garrisoning skills. This 6 month program wouldn't include that, and was really just a testbed to see how the Highlanders felt about the results before they started to put together anything more advanced, but the fact that others were interested in this bare bones program had truly surprised him.

Apparently good education, even for the ever popular mechwarrior profession, was at a premium, and there just weren't that many mechwarriors schools available to handle all the interest from the kids that had wealthy enough parents to subsidize their dreams of glory.

The Morten Academy didn't charge its recruits anything...ever. So this was new ground for Kevin, as well as knowing that the students would leave here and go elsewhere rather than into service for House Morten. With that point in mind, he was going to be very conscious about what to teach and what not to teach, and the 24 older individuals coming

down the ramp amongst the recruits were already seasoned mechwarriors here to start amping up their training.

The quality level of the Morten Mech Army was low at this point...even Grady conceded that. They'd been getting people up to a minimum level then shoving them into mechs in large numbers in order to hold worlds they were taking, then continuing their training in the field largely with the COF missions. But they needed better training, longer training, and that's something that had to be done over the course of years rather than months. And while Kevin was going to be overseeing the basics with the foreigners, he was going to be hammering these 24 mechwarriors with a wide range of simulated, and later real, mech missions designed to start weeding out the weak from the strong, and to start making the weak into the strong.

It was a work in progress, because never before had House Morten had mechwarriors with as much combat experience as they now had...though back in the day they had some 200 mechwarriors with an average experience level of over two decades. Now, they were taking almost everyone they could that wanted to become a mechwarrior. Soon that was going to have to change, not because of a lack of mechs to fill, but because they needed to require more training and higher skill levels before putting someone into an actual mech. And they needed a world where those hopefuls could go and spend several years training.

The Estate was not the place for that. But eventually Forge would be. He just had a lot of building to do here, with 'Ravine Haven' being the good foundation on which to start living and working out of as he started to build up this otherwise uninhabited moon that had a decent 0.8gs to it, which gave him a good hop in his step as he walked forward with his hands clasped behind his back as he watched the training staff start issuing orders to everyone to form lines and come to attention...with those who didn't understand what that meant being schooled on the spot. When they were finished and he had three rows before him, Kevin finally began to speak.

“Welcome to the first class of the Morten Combat Arts Battlemech School. Right now you’re a mix of current mechwarriors and recruits, but you’ll be living together and using the same simulators until we get additional facilities built. To the new recruits from outside the Morten Protectorate, I welcome you. My name is Kevin Morten. I am the Lord of Training for House Morten and will be serving as your Chancellor at this academy. You are the first class, so you are smaller than those that will come after you, but the training will be the same. It is based off the training that House Morten mechwarriors have received for generations, and has been well refined to suit any type of person. Whether you’re enroute to becoming the next Solaris Champion or just want to be able to pilot a mech for bragging’s sake, it doesn’t matter. We train you at your own rate, slow learners and fast ones. While this initial course is set at 6 months for simplicity sake, our own recruits take as long as needed to gain the required skills, after which they become mechwarriors in our employ.”

“You will not be in our employ, so we will train you as far as we can in 6 months. As long as you bring the work ethic, we’ll get you the results. But make no mistake...this is not a social environment. You’re not here to have fun or pick up dates. This is about learning skills that could mean the difference between life or death. If you want something safer, wait until we offer an accounting course. Battlemechs go where the danger is the deepest, and I will not tolerate students who do not take the training seriously. There are no distractions on this planet, for there are no other people on this planet besides those in this Academy and our own garrison force defending this moon should any raiders stop by to visit. If you cannot focus here, I doubt you will be able to do so elsewhere. I don’t care how many mistakes you make. Mistakes are to be learned from. It’s the people who refuse to learn that will be booted out of this program. Never quit learning, and we’ll never quit on you. Sergeant?”

"Sir," a man said, stepping forward in a red/gray uniform that looked more like camouflage for the forest than ceremonial dress.

"Take the new recruits on a jog. I'll handle the current mechwarriors."

"Yes, sir," the Sergeant said, then began issuing calm orders that rose in volume when various individuals weren't listening too clearly. Soon the 32 kids ranging from 14 to 19 in age were in split into two lines that were running side by side with some 8 training staff swarming over them as grumbling began to break out about not being dressed for this and having to start right off the dropship after going through the 3gs of deceleration through the atmosphere.

What they didn't realize was, after a few miles of running through forest trails, they would be coming to a river that they'd have to cross in the nude. They'd have to ditch their civilian clothes on one side, putting them and everything else they had on them into canisters...which was also a good way to do a non-invasive strip search to see if they were carrying any contraband...then they'd have to swim across the river to the far side where they'd get a pair of sandals.

After that, they'd have to trek through the forest on a scavenger hunt, picking up additional pieces of clothing along the way, having to earn each of them, before they'd end up at a series of field tents. They wouldn't be spending the night in the luxurious dormitories, nor the next day as they would have to trek through even more forest to claim their final prize...a form-fitted neurohelmet custom built here in a workshop based on the scans taken back on Foniss where the recruits had gathered for this trip.

The helmets were already made, for the sizes had been transmitted as soon as the jumpship arrived in this system. Once they had them, and their academy uniforms, they could begin the training program. Those who balked at getting nude and crossing the river would be camping out on that side of it in tents until they found the courage to disrobe and brave the not so warm water. The trainers knew to be patient, and that this

first step was going to be a huge one for some of them...particularly the few girls in this class...but some people took a while to get over that first step, and then the learning would begin. Others would just dive in, then get stuck on something else later.

Everyone learned at their own rate, and Kevin wanted a big psychological hurdle thrown at them up front. They'd know immediately this was not an academic school. Mechs fought outdoors, not indoors, and they were going to get acclimated to the outdoors right off the bat. And since this was the first class in this program, nobody had gone through it before to potential warn them what to expect. For this wasn't how the Mortens had handled new recruits in the past.

And it wouldn't be anywhere else in the Academy Branches. But on Forge, he'd decided, everything was going to be taken to the next level. Including the bare bones basics of learning how to walk and shoot straight in a mech, with this preface being to get them used to being outside the mech in case they ever need to eject and have to survive on foot. Some mechwarriors, he knew, would not eject and would die fighting in their machines. He didn't want that, so these new recruits were getting the 'survive without your mech' lesson first.

Especially when a lot of mechwarriors wore very little clothing in the cockpit anyway to deal with the heat. That needed to change, and would if Rannel had any say in it, creating better and better cooling vests, but Kevin needed to train these people to fight and survive with less than optimal equipment. And when you didn't have a cooling vest, or not a very good one, stripping down in the cockpit as much as you were comfortable with was one way to minimize the excess heat you had to endure.

So starting them off by running through the forest nude would make being naked in the cockpit seem like a luxury...which was also how they'd start off their simulator training. They'd have to earn sandals and other pieces of clothing by completing stages of their training, then choose how

much to wear later on based on experience rather than social phobias.

It wouldn't be the lessons they were expecting to learn here, but necessary ones. This was basic training, and there were a lot of very basic things a lot of people overlooked or just skipped. Kevin had designed this program to hit as many of those as possible...and since they were on an uninhabited planet, they couldn't go storming out the front door in a quitting rage.

They'd either embrace the challenge or sit on the near side of the river living in tents for the next 6 months. And if it took 5 months for one or two individuals to finally summon up the courage to disrobe and swim a river, then he considered it time well spent for those people. For if they couldn't overcome such a small thing, they had no business being in the cockpit of a war machine that literally determined the fate of other people.

He knew he'd be accused of being a hard ass...but this was a military program, so the Highlanders couldn't really complain, could they? As for the spoiled brats that wanted to become mech warriors, this would be a good dose of reality, as well as a check to see how badly they wanted it.

Kevin let them get a head start, telling the veterans where they needed to go to get settled in, then he took a short cut to the river crossing, climbing a tower and using a handlebar to slide over the water on a suspended wire to a position on the other side with an identical tower leading the other way. It wasn't near enough to the recruits' crossing for a proper view, but another closer tower had been set up that he got to a few minutes before the column of sweat-soaked kids finally got to the shore and were allowed to rest, with most plopping down on the sand that Kevin had brought there to give them a nice wide clearing.

He climbed a ladder and got up into the observation tower that was poking just above the tree canopies, then used a pair of binoculars already left there to observe what happened. The Sergeant was explaining life to them, and when he gestured

to the nearby canisters that would be taking their clothing he saw horrified expressions on many of them, which made him smile.

“You want to kill people in a mech, but you can’t handle the horror of being seen naked. Welcome to reality, rookies.”

The explaining went on for several minutes, then he saw two of the older boys walk over to the canisters and start getting undressed. They hit the river almost at the same time, with one of the staff grabbing one by an arm and making him wait until the other was halfway across. No point in letting them get within arms reach of one another and maybe making each other drown. Kevin had a rescue team hidden nearby in case anyone got swept down river or needed resuscitated. There wasn’t much cause for concern, because the river wasn’t swollen and it was rather calm, yet wide at this point. But when you were dealing with water there was always a chance of drowning, and he’d be remiss if he didn’t take precautions.

But dealing with risk was part of being a mechwarrior, so if they couldn’t handle the very real fear of maybe drowning, then that was one more reason they had no business behind any kind of weapon. Let alone one that could raze cities singlehandedly if the pilot felt like it.

Kevin saw the first boy cross and get his sandals. To his credit he didn’t hesitate, slipping them on then heading off on a well-groomed path alone. It would be almost impossible to get lost, but Kevin had a few staff out monitoring the routes anyway. What was common sense for the trained was often inexplicable to the young, and he’d seen full grown adults not understand how to follow a path due to the fact they’d never been on dirt before other than in a city park.

After the second boy got going and the far side of the river was empty, a few more got brave enough to follow...then the cascade of peer pressure kicked in and there was a line of nude kids waiting to swim across one by one...though to be more accurate it was walk across, because the river at this point was barely a meter deep.

But after they made it across and got going, there was a small group actively arguing with the Sergeant...and all 5 of them were girls.

That was one less than Kevin had, so he did a quick look through the group on the far side...some of which were down on their hands and knees shaking from either the cold water or the stress of the situation...and he found the girl grabbing her sandals and charging off into the forest.

"Good for her," Kevin said to himself as the situation became clear when the 5 remaining girls walked to the edge of the clearing and began unpacking tents that they would have to set up if they were not going to cross.

That meant they were balking, and it would probably be at least a day or more before they changed their minds. The Sergeant left two other men behind to see to them, then ran down the shore to get to the zip line and came across, then ran off along another trail that would catch him up to the zigzagging course the recruits were having to travel to claim the bits and pieces of their academy gear.

He'd be at the encampment before the first of them arrived, but Kevin's first tally was in.

27 who chose to embrace the challenge, 5 who were balking.

He was not going to go talk to the 5. At least not for a few weeks. They needed to sit and stare at that river as they worked this through their own minds. If they didn't find the courage within themselves to do it after that, then he'd go do some coaching, but it was better for them to get over this themselves if at all possible.

The basic rule of Forge was this. If you never quit, it would never quit on you. But if you were to succeed, you would have to prove your worth via many tests. And eventually, House Morten's mechwarriors would be held to the same standard. Right now, though, they needed as many as they could get in the cockpits and he was letting Grady handle them after passing them through the Estate training program.

What Kevin was building here was for the future. But whether or not they had a future was up to Stephan, Vander, Grady, and the others. And while there were two Companies of mechs here to guard the moon, he hoped it would remain blissfully undiscovered by everyone else when the shooting started.

And with what he'd personally read in Captain Sheridan's log book, he didn't think this was going to go down any other way.

11

April 29, 3000
Federated Suns
Crusis March
Cholis
Morten Estate

It was early morning, and Stephan had just finished an 8 kilometer run out through the trails of the Estate grounds. That left his legs thoroughly tired and ready for more desk work as he sat down after a long shower and a good breakfast, bringing a cup of coffee along with him to his office.

On his terminal were updates from the Estate, a new packet of information from Polvice that had come in with a jumpship that had arrived some 7 hours ago, a backlog of pending tasks to deal with in the Morten Protectorate that, when completed would have to go out in other diplomatic 'pouches' on their jumpships, and last but hardly least, another stack of messages coming in through Comstar from across the Federated Suns and beyond.

He pulled up the latter first, running his eyes down the headers and seeing yet another cancellation order. He clicked on it and read through briefly. Doonerdyne Mechanics had flagged their order of replacement Vtol parts for five different models as 'delayed,' citing they didn't know when a current backlog of orders would allow the Morten order to be shipped out.

That was the 7th order from a large corporation that had been delayed or outright canceled in the past month, and it was becoming clear that the first salvo in the war against Comstar had already been fired. Delays and cancellations did happen, of course, but they were rare...especially with the

larger corporations...but these, coupled with the fact that one of Sarah's New Avalon brokers had informed her he would no longer be offering his services, clearly showed Comstar was using its influence to start cutting off supply lines to House Morten, though jumpship traffic wasn't altering and the smaller dealers hadn't reported any 'snafus' yet.

This had been expected, but now that it was starting to happen it sent a chill down Stephan's spine. The power of Comstar had always been tossed around as a theoretical threat, but now it was starting to become real.

A blinking button on his desk indicated the comms room wanted to speak with him, and he pressed it without hesitation. "Yes?"

"We have an urgent call from Precentor Cholis. He's been asking to speak with you for the past two hours."

"Put him through to my office," Stephan said, composing his face into as neutral an expression as he could. It looked like the hammer was about to fall.

A video screen opposite the First Lord's desk flickered into life and he was looking at the face of the man in charge of the Comstar compound on Cholis, which his title reflected.

"First Lord, my apologies, but there is an urgent matter I need to speak to you about."

"What is it?"

"I can't say over the comm. We need to speak face to face."

Stephan frowned, reacting as he would have reacted had he not known certain information. "Concerning what subject?"

"I can't say. It's so sensitive we have to speak in person, and I've cleared my schedule for today to deal with this matter. Please come to the compound as soon as you're available."

"Precentor," Stephen said with a slight trace of amusement. "I can assure you my schedule is far denser than yours. If you have something so important we can't discuss it now, then come out to my Estate and I'll find some time to speak with you."

The Precentor hesitated for a split second, the disappointment a mere flash, but Stephan caught it just before the man bowed his head. "Of course. Given the sensitivity in this matter I will come immediately if that is acceptable?"

Stephan glanced at something to his side, as if checking his scheduled appointments...though he already knew what they were. "Before 10:00 am if possible."

"I will take a Vtol and be there well before then. Thank you, First Lord."

The comm cut off and Stephan leaned back in his chair for a moment in silence, then put a call through to Roger's office...which immediately redirected him to the headset his Security Chief always wore when moving around.

"Here," he said via audio.

"The shit is about to hit the fan. The Comstar Precentor is coming here immediately via Vtol. Clear him with the security patrols and take precautions with anything they might have with them. He says he has an urgent matter to discuss with me."

"We'll be ready. I'll have him set down on pad 7 then walk, unless you want to meet him somewhere other than your office?"

"Diplomatic Hall. And get a hidden surveillance system in there on the double. I want to record this conversation."

"Audio or video?"

"Both. And assume he has some gizmo to detect such things."

"I've got some low tech bugs that are placement only, no signals. We just pick them up afterwards and review. They're pretty much jamming proof, unless he brings an EMP in with him."

"Hurry, it won't take him long to get here by air."

"On it now," Roger said, cutting off as Stephan stood up, grabbed his cup of coffee, then headed for the Diplomatic Hall that was in another building.

"First Lord Morten," the Precentor said, his white robes trailing behind him slightly as he walked quickly across the large chamber to where Stephan stood in front of the curved, elevated table/desk rather than sitting behind it. His bodyguards were outside, as were the Precentor's, leaving only the two men in the empty chamber. "I highly apologize for this."

"Oh?" Stephan said as the man finally stopped two meters in front of him.

"A few hours ago I got a directive to put a block on all communications to and from your account. I immediately sought verification of the order, demanding an explanation. I got the verification, but there was no explanation offered. As of now, your services with Comstar are suspended indefinitely."

Stephan let his face show the real anger he was feeling. "What the fuck is going on?"

"I honestly have no idea."

"Bullshit," Stephan said, putting his hands on his hips. "This is the only facility that my House transmits through. If there was an issue, it would have occurred on this end, which means you would be the one asking for or implementing the ban...which I thought you guys didn't do, as a matter of course?"

"We don't," the Precentor said, clearly uncomfortable. "We pride ourselves on open and free communications. Unless you attacked or otherwise interfered with one of our facilities...which you have not done here...there should be no justification for this. The order came directly from Terra, and I can't do anything more than ask them for clarification. They've already refused to offer that clarification and have confirmed the order, which I must implement. I have no choice in the matter."

"This is the second time Comstar has interfered with my House," Stephan said, pointing an accusing finger at the aging man who had a short beard as white as his robes.

"I am aware," he said amicably, "but that was not this station's doing either. Do you have any knowledge of what's going on?"

"You're putting a ban on my communications and you're claiming you don't even know why!" Stephan said, almost yelling. "What kind of shabby organization are you guys running?"

"Our organization is quite professional...usually," he amended in light of the obvious fact of the current problem. "I've never seen an order like this before."

"The Davions?" Stephan guessed.

"No. We do not take orders from House Davion or anyone else."

"Your man on Neubenn did."

"That was...well, yes, you are correct. That never should have happened and we got the situation rectified. I want to rectify this, but my hands are tied. I don't even know who to contact to try and figure it out. Have any of your jumpships interacted with Comstar? Perhaps on one of their cargo missions further into the Inner Sphere that would not involve this station?"

"You banned my account, correct?"

"The ban is for all accounts involving the Morten Protectorate, I'm afraid."

"So this is a direct attack on the realm, not me personally."

"I apologize, First Lord. I have no idea what is going on."

"And you expect me to? It's your god damn organization. Do you have any idea how much we rely on equipment bought in the Federated Suns? How many people we're recruiting from them? Without Comstar services that grinds to a halt!"

"I am quite aware of the effect a comms blackout can have on an economy. We're taught never to take such steps quickly or capriciously...yet that appears to be what is happening now. I have no explanation to offer."

"You said the order came from Terra?"

"It did. Our central office. I'm afraid they have no wish to explain themselves."

"This is the Davions," Stephan said, doing a fair bit of acting. "And you're their dirty work for them. Economic warfare with plausible deniability."

"We are not," the Precentor said firmly.

"How can you be sure if you don't know the reason?"

"Because the only reason we would ever engage in a blackout was if the person or persons involved had violated our trust. Do you have military forces on any other world that has one of our facilities?"

"No. Cholis is our only link into your network. That's why I chose this planet in the first place."

"Then is it possible your people have done something without your knowledge elsewhere?"

"Like what? Send an unflattering message about Ian Davion through your network?"

"The Davions are not privy to private messages, nor do we screen them for content. Whatever you or others have to say about the Davions is beneath a software blind that we cannot see, and even if we did do you think we would create an incident of this magnitude over a few insults?"

"You're the one implementing the ban. You're the one supposed to know the reason for it, damn it. And you're asking me to tell you!"

"You're our primary customer on Cholis! Do you think I want to lose your business? Do you think I want to sully our reputation like this? I literally do not know what to do about this, but it cannot stand."

"Are you the one implementing the block on the system, or just informing of it?"

"I was ordered to do it from here."

"Then refuse to until Terra explains the order."

"I would be removed from my position if I did so."

"For protecting the good name of Comstar in the face of an obvious error?"

"That's why I sought verification. But when it came back confirmed, my hands became tied. All I was able to do during the interim was download the new messages that came in for

you. There were four of them over those few hours. Since I didn't receive the confirmation until afterwards, I'm treating the order as not in full affect until I got the confirmation," he said, pulling out a small datachip. "That's all the leeway I have, First Lord. I'm sorry. These are the last messages."

"Is one of them from Terra explaining this?" he said, taking the chip out of the man's clammy hand.

"No. Such things are for the local Precentor to deal with. I just don't know how to deal with this."

"How about you contact the Primus directly?" Stephan suggested. "This is a matter of an entire Periphery state being blocked. That should weigh heavily enough to rise to his attention."

"If you wish to compose a message directed to Primus Rusenstein, I will send it," he said, making it clear that he was taking some personal risk in the matter. "But I cannot guarantee a response."

"It's your organization's responsibility to explain yourselves," Stephan said icily. "It's not mine to figure out what's going on. You contact the Primus or anyone else you need to. Every day this block is in place it hurts my House. This is a defacto attack against my realm, no matter how much you apologize for it. Whoever put you up to this is essentially declaring war...and the least you can do is tell me who it is."

"We do not work for any House or realm."

"Then Comstar is doing it for your own reasons."

"We would not."

"What other possibilities are there?"

"That one of your people did something somewhere else. Not on Cholis, because I would be the one reporting the infraction. You must have done something to warrant this?"

"And what would warrant Terra not informing you of the reason?" Stephan asked skeptically. "Seriously. If I caused this, they'd tell you. They're blacking you out as well, and I find that hard to believe."

"As do I. What is it that your people did?"

"If you cannot cite an infraction, stop assuming there is one!" Stephan said, actually yelling this time. "Of all the arrogant bullshit I've heard over the years, this tops the cake! You're penalizing me for doing something you supposedly don't even know about, and are asking me to rat myself out to help you understand what's going on? And suppose for a moment this isn't the Davions' doing. What are they going to say when they find out you've severed communications between my realm and theirs? Do you think they're just going to take your innocent 'I don't know' at face value?"

"You still have your diplomatic liaison to work through," Precentor Cholis pointed out. "We're not blocking her."

"We have a standing treaty with the Federated Suns, which states we're to have free access to their economy, and they to ours. You're blocking their ability to interact with ours, thus this is a defacto ban on them as well. How do you intend to explain that?"

"No Federated Suns account has been blocked," the Precentor said, looking like he'd been caught off guard for a moment.

"My Estate here is part of the Federated Suns, a diplomatic embassy, which technically means it still belongs to the Duchy here and is just on loan to me from a legal standpoint. So you *are* blocking a Federated Suns account, the same way as if you blocked the Capellan embassy on New Syrtis. You're not just interfering with my Protectorate, you're interfering with Federated Suns business. How do you think they'll respond to that?"

"They won't dare touch any of our stations," the Precentor said defiantly.

"Plausible deniability," Stephan said firmly. "I don't even have to speak with them about this matter, and I can take down your Cholis station myself and keep their hands clean of it," he said, seeing a horrified expression on the Precentor's face...a little too horrified, as if he was acting as well.

“What are you going to do?” Stephan continued. “Ban our Comstar services? You’ve already done that, now you have no leverage left.”

“Our facility is well defended. You wouldn’t risk it.”

“How about you go back and get some answers so we can avoid that eventuality.”

“Are you trying to blackmail me?”

“Just remember, you started this. You can end it as well. This is all on Comstar.”

“A service disruption does not justify an attack on our compound.”

“Is this a disruption, or is it permanent?”

“I don’t know.”

“Which makes you the front guy. The real people responsible for this are hiding behind you. I have to hold your organization responsible as a group for its actions, and seeing as how I’m losing money and opportunities with every day that passes, I’m not going to be tricked by your assertions of innocence. Maybe you really don’t know what’s going on. If that’s the case, you’re being used as a pawn.”

“Do not touch our facility, Morten, or you will pay the price for it,” the Precentor warned.

“I thought I already was paying the price for it?”

The Precentor looked to the side for a moment, staring at the floor as he composed himself, then looked back up at Stephan. “This is our responsibility, and if you have done something to warrant this it’s our job to cite the reason for the ban. I will press my superiors on this matter.”

“Do that. And also remind them, this is the only Comstar station in my realm. We don’t rely on your services anywhere else, so you don’t have the leverage on us like you do the Federated Suns. And if you black them out, your leverage on them disappears. It’s a bluff that works both ways, and your superiors just told you to call that bluff. But I can guarantee you I’m holding more cards on this planet than Comstar is, so if it comes to shooting, I’ll win. Your bosses have just made a very bad move.”

"Yes they have," the Precentor agreed. "Please do not make an equally bad one yourself while I try to fix this," he said, spinning around and storming out of the Diplomatic Hall as fast as he could reasonably walk.

After he was gone a bit Roger came in, seeing Stephan holding up a data chip.

"They've banned all our communications, but offered me the last few messages that came through as a consolation prize," he said, handing it to his longtime friend. "Have your code monkeys check it thoroughly. The Precentor put on a good performance, but he was fishing for information, and if I had accepted his invitation to come to their compound, I expect I'd be an unwilling guest of theirs for a while."

"They wouldn't be able to keep you there," Roger promised. "What now?"

"I didn't reveal anything, and made it seem that I suspect the Davions are twisting their arm to do this. I don't think they know what we've got, but they know we've got something and they're deliberately isolating us."

"That doesn't solve their problem."

"No, it doesn't. I half expected a bribe from him, but it seems clear they're not going to admit to any malfeasance involving Captain Sheridan. They're going to eliminate the problem and deny it ever existed."

"That means actual war. They can't starve us out by cutting transmissions or stop jumpships from moving."

"No, they can't. Their best hope is to get the Davions to destroy us for them, but that would take some explaining to do, and I get the feeling they want this kept as quiet as possible."

"Mercenaries then?"

Stephan nodded. "They're probably already on their way."

Carroll Davion was sitting in her office when Stephan came in abruptly, but her guards didn't stop him. They never did, per her standing order ever since he'd given her access to his house and grounds.

"That's not good," she said, looking up at him.

"What isn't?"

"The expression on your face."

"Good guess. Comstar just blacked us out."

"What!" she said, knowing immediately what kind of shitstorm that would cause.

"They refused to give any reason, only citing the order came from Terra and the local Precentor has no idea what's going on. It's all bullshit, for reasons I'm not going to tell you for your own sake. But I need you to make something clear to Ian. Comstar is about to wage a war against my House, and yours needs to stay out of it."

"Explain," she said firmly, standing up behind her desk.

"We're already getting cancellations of orders from major suppliers...Comstar's influence, no doubt. Now this blackout. I suspect we're going to start getting hit by mercenaries under Comstar's employ very soon, because we discovered a dirty little secret of theirs in the Periphery and now that they know that we know, they have to erase us. And I don't want Ian doing their work for them under some other notion. You need to warn him of any attempt on their part to push him into starting a fight, and they might already be doing it. And you need to send a courier back, otherwise that message will probably never reach Ian."

Carroll's stare became icy. "They wouldn't dare block our transmissions. I can't believe that they'd block yours. What exactly did you find?"

"I can't tell you that. It would make matters worse."

"How worse?"

"I've discovered that Comstar has been infiltrating all the Great Houses to exert influence. If you knew what I knew, Ian would probably have them all executed and they'd retaliate in ways beyond shutting down interstellar communications. So no, keep House Davion out of this. We'll fight this war on our own."

"Not good enough," she said, sitting down and using a keyboard to the side of her main desk on a secondary table. "If you've been blacked out the Precentor owes me answers."

"He's on his way back to his compound right now. We just had it out face to face."

"You hit him?" she asked, head swiveling away from the computer screen to glare at him.

"No. Just threatened."

"Him or his facility?"

"His facility."

"Don't you dare," she warned, bringing up the comms channels and sending a message to the Comstar front desk. "Let me try and diffuse this situation. If you attack a Comstar facility on one of our worlds, that's all Ian needs as an excuse to launch a military campaign. You'd be playing right into their hands."

"I agree," he said, making her turn around again, this time in confusion. "In fact, I think that was what he was trying to get me to do. I played along, but I have no intention of hitting that facility unless they start grabbing some of my people as hostages."

"If they do that they'll have problems with us," she said, suddenly getting an automated response from Comstar indicating that they were having technical difficulties and their services would be offline until they were fixed.

"No," she said, pulling up a different screen and attempted to compose a message to be sent offworld via Comstar...but she got a similar error prompt there.

"They just shut down everything," she said, and he could see the panic in her eyes. "I can't get a message to them, or out of the system. They're citing 'technical difficulties.'"

"Damn," Stephan said, realizing that they were escalating this even faster than he'd expected.

"What the hell did you find them doing out there?"

"Taking political prisoners, for starters," Stephan said, glancing at her in a way that she knew meant she was also at risk. "We recovered them and sent them home. That's the only way Comstar knows we know. They should have got back a few

months ago. Long enough to be noticed and for Comstar to figure out who rescued them.”

“You hit one of their facilities in the Periphery?” she asked, not believing it.

“We took down a pirate that was keeping the prisoners on ice for them. We’ve been expecting a response this like ever since. They have to silence us.”

“Everyone takes prisoners,” she said, despite the fact that she knew that alone would cause a major stir back on New Avalon. “What else is going on?”

“That’s as much as I’m going to say, Carroll. The rest is stuff they want hidden even worse.”

“Involving my House?”

“Involving all the Great Houses.”

“Damn it, Stephan, just tell me.”

“If I do, I’ll have the other Great Houses trying to destroy me as well. Comstar is problematic enough. Better to let them think they can handle this low key.”

“What the hell does that mean? Why would we...” she said, trailing off as a thought occurred to her. “You’re saying they’re going to make you into the next Aramis and rally the Inner Sphere into destroying you? Stephan, you only have a handful of systems. You’re no threat to us, let alone the others.”

“Stop asking questions, Carroll. I won’t answer them.”

“What good is a liaison then?”

“You make sure Ian knows there isn’t a comms breakdown because of me, and make sure the Duke doesn’t take Comstar’s side.”

“Shit,” she said, looking back at the error message on the interstellar communications terminal. “It’ll take a couple months to get anything back to Ian...assuming it even gets to him. You’re saying we’ve been infiltrated?”

“To some extent, yes. I can’t say exactly how.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

“Can’t on this one. They’ve just put a lot of strings in place they can pull when needed. And you’re a witness to

what's happening here. They may try to grab you and blame it on me, so I suggest you don't leave the estate for a while."

"Hold on," she said, pulling up another prompt and getting a message through to the Duke's office. A few minutes later and his face appeared on the screen, with Stephan out of camera view.

"Ambassador," he said graciously. "How can I assist you?"

"Comstar just blocked the Morten's access to their services, now I'm receiving an error message when I try to talk to them or send something back to New Avalon. Are you also blocked?"

The Duke frowned. "One moment."

Carroll waited patiently, then Alliz came back into view. "I can't connect either. What's going on?"

"I don't know, but this isn't an accident. They've deliberately shut down communications to probably the entire planet except themselves, and I can't tell New Avalon about it until I can send a courier on the next jumpship."

"The next scheduled arrival is in two weeks or so," the Duke said off the top of his head. "Are we in some sort of danger? Deliberately cutting off communications is usually a prelude to an attack."

"I was wondering the same thing. I suggest you put the militia on alert and have the police put a restricted zone around the Comstar complex. Tell people it's a precaution in case their machinery malfunctions in a destructive way, but don't let any foot traffic in there, in or out, until I say otherwise."

"You want me to constrict their movements?" he said, aghast.

"They have aircraft to come and go as they like. Just shut down the walkways and roads as a safety procedure. There could be toxic leakage if some of their exotic machinery breaks."

The Duke nodded. "I understand that. But what's really going on?"

"They wouldn't even respond to me to explain," she admitted. "Whatever is going on, it's not good."

"Is this Morten sabotage?"

"No. I keep a close eye on them," she said without glancing Stephan's direction. "This is Comstar's doing, and I've never heard of anything like this happening on any other Federated Suns world, so it's unprecedented and potentially dangerous. They should be coming to either you or me and explaining. The fact that they're not is troubling."

"Quite so. Is there anything else you'd like me to do?"

"Let me know if there's any unusual jumpship activity."

He nodded, but didn't say anything further, and Carroll cut the comm.

"Comstar has more military equipment in their compound than the Duke does, even if they don't have mechs. They've got a small army of security personnel, and the perimeter walls have turrets that can stand up against the militia, but that's not what I'm worried about."

"If they start doing clandestine operations the police can't stop them," Stephan said, almost reading her thoughts.

"Exactly. And if they are sending mercenaries to hit you, they can't have me as a witness, or the Duke. That's the only thing I can think of. A blackout doesn't help any other way than a temporary measure."

"Unless they're trying to fake an attack by us on the facility," Stephan pointed out.

"Again, I'm a witness."

"So stay put, princess," Stephan said, as he spun around. "They're not going to get to you here."

On his way back to the main house Roger caught up with him. "It was loaded with malware," he said simply. "The kind that dissects computer systems from the inside out."

Stephan sighed, looking down at the pavement under his feet as the sun outside baked down on top of them. "So much for the Precentor being an unwitting pawn. They also just took down interstellar communications for the rest of the planet, citing technical problems."

Roger stiffened.

“I know, I know,” Stephan said, walking back into the house, expecting hostile jumpships to arrive sometime in the near future.

12

June 3, 3000

Morten Protectorate

Chitti

Jenki

Karren Simkins was one of the few female mechwarrriors in the Morten Mech Army. Less than 6% of them were, for a variety of reasons, most notably women in general wanted to have babies...while Karren wanted to shoot people. Living the domestic life would have been a prison for her, so she'd taken her chance when House Morten put out an open invitation for *anyone* to train to become a mech warrior when they'd taken over Foniss 5 years ago.

She'd been taken off her homeworld to their Embassy Estate in the Federated Suns and spent more than the next year trying to do what others had done in less than 6 months. Karren was not a natural mechwarrrior, but she was determined and would not quit as several others had. Eventually she improved her skills enough to qualify for the active roster, officially becoming a mech warrior and immediately undergoing *more* simulator training as she waited for a mission.

Her first one had been garrison duty on a world called Turnix, spending some 6 months there, then she'd been sent back to the Morten estate for more training, then sent out again, this time to a hellish world called Hotspot to garrison it for another 6 months stint. She'd gone on two other garrison missions, each without any sign of raiders or other trouble, before having been posted to Chitti for the same garrison duties.

Each mission had her paired with different House Morten mechwarrriors, so with each rotation she was making

new acquaintances and a few new friends. She didn't feel like an outsider anymore after having gone through her second mission, and now she was one of the 'old guys' from the point of view of the younger recruits fresh out of their training.

Her scores on the COF were better than theirs...barely...but with all the downtime during garrison duty, she and the other mechwarriors would train in unit drills in the simulators, do real patrols and some live fire drills where applicable, and then spend the rest of their time working on the COF to improve their individual skills.

And she was getting better. Slowly. Like turtle slow, but then again, the symbol of the Morten Protectorate was a turtle shell, and one of her instructors had pointed that out to her, saying it didn't matter how many years you spent training, it mattered what your skills were the day you went into combat, and that she could outperform the most promising mechwarrior that practically knew how to pilot since birth if she gradually accumulated the same skills over the course of her life and then got paired up with that mechwarrior on his first mission.

The COF was pretty much proving that point true, and it was how everyone was basing their social positions within the units. Nobody tried to dual fight with people to prove how good they were anymore. That was seen as foolish. Morten mechwarriors were not here to spar, they were here to accomplish missions...and those missions would have a wide variety of requirements beyond mere dueling.

COF mission #31 was a dueling mission, so you got to practice that there against a simulated series of opponents. You had to take down the first mech to pass it, but then a second would arrive and you'd have to fight it out with whatever armor and weapons you had left. Karren had taken down the first mech after a lot of trying, establishing a score for that mission, but she hadn't been able to take down two in a row. Not yet anyway. It was something she and a lot of other mechwarriors were working on, with the highest score on #31 belonging to their Mech Commander.

He'd taken down 7, somehow, before being destroyed.

So dueling was just one skill of many, and you were judged by how good you were across the board, especially since the House Morten mechwarriors almost always fought as a team.

As they would be doing today, for right now she was sitting in a Warhammer inside a dropship doing a quick hop and drop from their mech bay on the planet to a nearby city where an invading dropship had landed some 8 minutes ago.

Jenki was one of the smaller cities on Chitti, which had a population of 28 million...which was a bit larger than her homeworld. The invaders, who had not identified themselves, were not heading to the mech bay or nearby spaceport in the central city of Habalak, so her Company of mechs had to load up and chase after them while another Company was doing the same elsewhere. The enemy had brought two dropships down from the star, and they were splitting up and heading to what targets she didn't know, but they were *not* coming here to directly engage the planetary defenders.

Karren was strapped into her cockpit seat, but kept her helmet off as she grit her teeth fighting against the high gs the dropship was pulling in order to get them up and over to the landing zone...which would be near to wherever the invaders landed. They were probably mercenaries and not raiders, but there was no way to tell at this point.

She felt the last of the high gs...more than 5 at some points given this dropship had been modified for speed to target operations...diminish as the dropship slowed to land, setting down with a thud as she was able to see through a remote camera link the view outside. They were in an urban area.

Karren pulled her helmet on and waited for orders as the single available ramp immediately began to lower, which was visible to her far right in the confined nook her mech was held in. The techs immediately began removing the restraints on it as she powered up the reactor to full.

"The enemy looks to be going for the Arjcor Manufacturing facility," her Company Commander said over the

comm as his mech began walking out first. She was number 7 in order, based on their COF scores, and they always exited in order to avoid pileups in the tight confines of the reduced-sized dropship bay, which was still fully loaded with 12 mechs. "Single file run to the site, get there with all speed. Civilian casualties already reported. We'll group up when we're there."

"Shit," she said, waiting impatiently for the other 6 heavy mechs ahead of her to pull out of their niches and head for the ramp. She followed as soon as she could, staring at the back of another Warhammer piloted by Leon Kline as it walked off the ramp ahead of her just as she put her first metal foot on it and accelerated going down. Her Warhammer took off running at its top speed of 64 kph across the now torn up grass of a city park where the dropship had set down, then turned to follow Kline onto a road with cars swerving onto side streets to get out of the path of the mechs as they headed for the smoke climbing into the sky a few kilometers to the east.

The enemy dropship was located on the other side of the manufacturing facility, so if this was a run and gun on multiple targets, they'd hopefully meet the enemy mechs head on rather than chasing their heels the whole way.

"ID on the dropship and mechs indicates they're Markinson's Brigands, so we're dealing with mercenaries that probably have a lot of combat experience," Commander Jorginson warned. "Expect a nasty fight. They're in medium mechs, but it looks like we've got equal numbers. Force a fight as soon as possible. They're torching the plant."

"Come on, come on, come on," Karren urged her mech to move faster as it plodded down the streets, leaving shallow indents on the not-so-thick pavement. These bastards were shooting up helpless people. Let them try another mech and see how they liked it.

Ahead of her she saw weaponsfire as the Commander got within range of one of them, and on her tracking screen situated on the right side of her control board she saw twelve dots of her own Company's mechs illuminated on a map of the city. The first red dot...which were Morten colors...was near an

enemy blue dot...which immediately started moving the opposite direction.

"They're running!" he said. "Chase them all the way back to the dropship if we have to, but get them away from the factory. Henry, take the long way around."

"Copy that," the third mech in line said as it broke at the corner of the manufacturing complex and began to work his way around the far side. He'd pick up any other mechs over there that weren't running yet, but the other 11 mechs seemed to be chasing the one in sight, which was now joined by two others that turned from shooting into the block-like buildings and ripping them apart and fired a few shots at the Commander's Rifleman before turning tail and running as well.

Jorginson was firing back though, and he was racking up hits on the last mech in line until it passed by another and a fresh one became the one in his targets. Nobody else had a clear shot as they zigzagged their way through the streets towards the enemy dropship zone, then a few more dots appeared on her screen.

"Split up and engage. Sanders and Vik with me, everyone else turn back and nail the trailers."

Karren immediately slowed her mech to a stop, then pivoted around in the tight streets to avoid hitting the nearby buildings and started to head the other way as Henry had flushed out three of them on the far side of the complex. They had a chance to intercept, but these lighter mechs had a slight speed advantage in some cases. Mediums could usually outrun heavies, but not by much...and with the city streets being the only options to get back to their dropship, it meant the Morten Company had a good chance of cutting them off or making them divert away from their ride out of here.

As long as one of her mechs had the enemy in sight their dot would stay on the screen. Get out of sight and it would disappear. She could guess where they were headed, but there were several street options to take in the grid-like pattern, so she was running her Warhammer up a middle one waiting for them to turn to the right and cross her path, for they were two

blocks to her left and at least one block ahead. Her fellow mechwarriors were getting split up now as they took different routes to try and close in, as the three enemy mechs were doing the same, and eventually one of their Shadow Hawks passed across an open intersection before her in the blink of an eye.

Karren snapped off a single shot with one of her PPCs and nothing else, knowing they were inside a city and any misses could hit civilians in the buildings or on the streets. The bolt of energy clipped the shoulder of the mercenary, but then it was gone from view running to the right faster than her mech could move.

When she turned the corner, however, it was still in range and had very little maneuvering room, making some 86 kph and weaving ever so slightly, but it wasn't enough to keep her from unloading on its rear armor with her other PPC and her two medium lasers.

Armor plates exploded off the back of it, then when her other PPC recharged she took the very easy shot and expanded on one of the existing holes, seeing a gout of fire shoot back out and spray armor bits with it...but the mech continued to run forward and was still gaining distance.

Karren kept up as much as she could, but her medium lasers were starting to get less effective as she fired them again before the mech turned another corner and got out of her line of sight. She kept running straight, however, heading towards the dropship that she knew it would eventually head back towards.

She ignored the other mechs and went straight towards it, coming out near a parking complex that had scattered cars everywhere, and a *Union*-class dropship sitting in the middle of the paved area, but with no cars underneath it. The engines must have blown them aside prior to landing.

Karren put two PPC shots into it, then moved backwards around the corner of a building as return laser shots peppered her mech and some hit the nearby structures.

"Damn it," she said, knowing there were probably people in there.

“Karren, heads up!” Henry said, with her seeing a blue dot pop out onto the street behind her some 300 meters away.

She spun her mech around and blocked the center of the street, then carefully fired both her medium and small lasers at it before it turned to the side and disappeared the same way the other one had went as she ran forward chasing after it. She got to the intersection before Henry did, and slowed as much as needed to make the turn...then fired both PPCs into the 35 ton Panther that added to damage already done.

The mech exploded, with one arm flying into an apartment building and the rest of the mech face planting into the street.

Karren stayed back for a moment, wondering if the fusion core was going to breach. When it didn't, she walked her Warhammer up to it and looked for signs of movement.

“If you're still alive in there, open up and come on out,” she said, over both the comm and the external speakers.

The top of the mech's head moved, with the hatch tilting open and puking out a man and a decent amount of smoke onto the street...with the man immediately starting to run towards one of the nearby buildings.

“Shit,” she said, holding her fire so not to blow up the building itself. “Commander, I've got an enemy mechwarrior loose on the street. He just ran into a building.”

“Stay put and watch the street, then find the police channel and have them come get him.”

“Do you need help with the dropship?”

“No. Do not shoot it when it gets into the air. I don't want it crashing back down onto any buildings.”

“Understood,” Karren said, seeing it lift off a few minutes later and rush into the sky heading for orbit.

The police vehicles came into view not long after it got out of weapons range of the surface, and Karren began walking her mech back towards their own dropship, finding that they'd also bagged the Shadow Hawk she'd damaged earlier. Twelve enemy mechs had hit the Arjcor factory, but only 10 had made

it out. She hoped they'd been paid well for the strike, because replacement mechs were not cheap...or so she'd heard. Did these mercenaries expect to hit the factory and get out without the Morten mechs responding so fast? If so, they'd made a serious miscalculation.

That said, as she walked her Warhammer back past the manufacturing complex Karren could see the significant damage done. Fuel tanks had been set ablaze, whole sections of the facility were shot up enough they'd have to be replaced rather than repaired, but the agromech production complex was so large they'd only been able to hit about a tenth of it. The rest was untouched.

So it wasn't exactly a complete loss for the mercenaries.

People had started to wander out into the streets, as had more vehicles on the ones that weren't clogged with debris...all of which immediately turned around and got out of her mech's way as the Morten Company rendezvoused back at their dropship and slowly climbed onboard for the hop back to their mech bay.

Or not.

"Back inside the dropship now!" the Commander ordered. "The other mercenary unit isn't running. They're playing cat and mouse around the Lake Hindri docks and already took down one of our mechs. We're going directly for their dropship."

"Hell yeah!" Karren said, but not over the comm, as her Warhammer sped up a bit as she headed to the open ramp and took her turn getting back inside. A few minutes later the clamps tightened over her mech and the dropship lifted off for another fast hop and drop to a location some 2,400 kilometers away...

Two days later a pair of jumpships entered the Nadir jump point of the Polvice system, finding a *Mule*-class dropship waiting near their position. Four dropships disembarked and began heading for the distant planet, with the jumpships utilizing their charged batteries and jumping back out

again...with a pre-arranged rendezvous set for a few weeks later.

“Looks like this is the real thing,” Captain Vodo said to his crew. “Sound acceleration alarm.”

All the decks within the dropship, including the spinning gravity disc, got 15 seconds of warning to get themselves situated someplace safe, or at least oriented correctly, before the converted pocket warship began accelerating at some 3gs toward the track of the four dropships, intent on rendezvousing with them at an angle as they likewise continued to accelerate.

But the *Jade Mushroom* had a head start, for it was sitting between the jump point’s center where the enemy had arrived and the planet, meaning they had to pass by it at least once even if they accelerated to crazy speeds that he would not subject his own ship to. They could handle 3g for a short duration, but the engines could take them up to 6gs at maximum burn on low fuel, and 4.5g with full fuel tanks.

A standard *Mule*-class dropship had a maximum thrust of 2.5g, but a pocket warship needed to be able to go faster than that, so the engines had been reworked, as had the structural components within the ship. Sometimes mercenaries also reworked their dropships for more speed to outrun pursuit, and the *Union*-class dropships that they had were also supposed to have a top acceleration of 2.5g...but at the moment they were burning at 1.7g, probably not too concerned since they had a 4 vs 1 matchup ahead of them, despite the Mule’s greater size.

But if they were running standard weapons on those Unions, Captain Vodo was confident he could at least knock out one of them. A Mule was a much older dropship type, and while considerably fatter than a Union, its weapon load was less than half and it carried less armor. The Mule was considered a ‘civilian’ craft, while a Union was designated as a military mech carrier...though Unions were also the bread and butter of dropships and had multiple configurations for civilian use as well.

But the larger hull size of the Mule had allowed House Morten to rework the interior, not for cargo carrying, but to make a tiny warship out of it. And it now carried more armor than those 4 unions combined, with about half their total weaponry...and it had the engines of a racehorse.

What it didn't have was much of anything else. No aerospace fighter berths on this one, though other Morten designs had them. It didn't have any cargo space, and barely had room for a small boarding/rescue shuttle. This ship was designed as a jump point bully, and it only seemed fair that Captain Vodo warn the intruders what they were up against.

"Attention unidentified dropships. You are entering a restricted system with assumed hostile intent. This is Captain Vodo of the Morten Protectorate warship Jade Mushroom. Cut your thrust and open your comms. I'd prefer not to have to gut a dropship in the vacuum of space, but I will if I have to. Unless you've heavily modified your engines, you're not going to outrun us," he said, strain in his voice lessening as their acceleration pulled back as they began to match courses and let the mercenaries catch up to them at a reasonable speed.

"Mule dropship," a gruff voice replied back. "Stay out of our way if you want to live. We're not here for you."

"May I ask who you are?"

"We're the Yellow Jackals and we've been hired to hit the planet. Stay out of our way and we'll ignore you."

"My job is to get in your way," Captain Vodo said amicably. "Did your employer neglect to mention this system had a pair of pocket warships defending it?" he asked, referencing the other one at the Zenith jump point.

"A Mule with upgraded engines hardly counts as a warship," the mercenary said mockingly, "even if you put some extra weapons on it. I'd prefer to land without a scratch and settle this with mechs, so just stay out of our way and we won't have to gut you. Fair enough?"

"I'm afraid not. We have our duty, and I can't promise I'll be able to take out only your engines. But I *can* guarantee

that I'll take down at least one of your dropships before you hit the planet."

The mercenary laughed. "You're welcome to try."

The comm shut off, and Captain Vodo shook his head normally as the thrust dipped to under 1.5gs and kept falling as they matched tracks. "Well, I tried. Adjust course to hit the rear ship, and try for engines only."

It took another 8 minutes before the *Jade Mushroom* slid in at an angle to the four Yellow Jackals as they were accelerating faster than warship was now, essentially passing them on the 'road' to the planet as the Morten dropship slid in from the side ahead of them at a slower speed but still outside weapons range. They pulled in directly behind them, then accelerated at 3gs again until they caught up and started shooting at the trailing ship with a barrage of missiles designed to stay out of the fiery cone of exhaust and angle in at the last moment towards the engines from the side.

As soon as the missiles hit, the other three dropships cut their thrust and began to turn around, bringing the bulk of their weaponry into range as the targeted dropship continue to accelerate through the middle of them.

"Take us around the outside, David. We're not going through that gauntlet."

"Yes, sir," the helmsman said, altering thrust to the right to slip around the single Union on that side of the pack.

"Target weapon systems only for now, engine shots preferred when you get the chance," Captain Vodo said as a PPC blast hit his ship and destroyed a bit of their armor as 3 of his own fired back at the Union in question. "I want prisoners. Slow to match with target and slug it out until I give the word, then prepare to accelerate hard towards the planet."

His crew waited stoically as they slowed and just exchanged fire with the enemy dropship as the three others tried to maneuver around to get into weapons range. By the time they did and the Captain ordered the *Jade Mushroom* to shoot off outside of their weapons range, one entire side of the

enemy Union was blackened with damaged hull plates and multiple holes in it where weapons batteries had been.

"They're venting atmosphere, but not much,"

Lieutenant Killman said at the sensor station. "I think they locked down in time."

"Engines?"

"Still functional."

"Alright then," he said, seeing the other three ships form a line ahead of the damaged one. "Bring us around behind them again, then close to weapons range on the closest one."

"They're all in approximately the same spot, Captain. Which one do you want?"

"Go with the left one. And bring our opposite batteries into alignment this time. Keep our damaged hull plates away from them."

The *Jade Mushroom* came back in again, this time much faster, and the Captain made a firing pass rather than slugging it out, losing one large laser battery this time to the combined mercenary firepower, but they managed to take out half of the target's medium lasers and two of its large lasers while eating missile fire from all four ships.

He activated the comm again. "Yellow Jackals, time to rethink your position. By now you see we clearly outgun any one of you, and our hull armor is thicker. You can't run from us either. Stand down and we won't force a surrender. You can just wait here until your jumpship returns and go home."

In reply, the four Unions turned towards Polvice and started accelerating that way again.

The Captain buried his face in his hand, pinching the bridge of his nose for a long moment of silence as the crew waited for his next order. When his face came up, it was rigid.

"Which of the two ships has the most hull damage?" he asked.

"This one," the sensor officer said, indicating the one in the middle left position as they flew in a horizontal line together. "They put both damaged ones in the middle."

“Gentlemen, if we let those ships land on the planet, we put a lot of other people in jeopardy. If they won’t back down and we can’t get in close to disable them without getting our own ship shot to hell, then we have to crack an egg. Target the intact one on the left. Make a firing run, then flip over and decelerate hard to bring us into slugging position. All batteries are to target the same location. Punch a hole into their cargo bay.”

“We’ll get it done,” Lieutenant Vickers said, in charge of fire control, as he tagged the spot on the enemy ship he wanted hit, knowing that he might have to alter it if the ship rolled or otherwise tried to evade.

The *Jade Mushroom* accelerated back up to 3gs...with the helmsman knowing never to exceed that thrust unless specifically ordered to by the Captain...and quickly caught back up to the group as weaponsfire from all 5 dropships crisscrossed the rapidly closing space. The upgraded mule then flipped over, showing the enemy its engines briefly as it slid by and slowed ahead of them...now facing their engines with its forward hull as they started to flip over themselves, not having expected the hard braking maneuver.

In that delay, the pocket warship opened up with all batteries in range, including a full missile barrage as its armor took damage from the 4 Unions...and punched a hole right through one of the 4 mech bay doors as the dropship tried to swivel to spread out the damage, but the Morten gunners adjusted their firing to keep hammering the same spot until it finally gave out, with the ship immediately listing as the atmosphere exploded out the hole like thrust from an engine.

“Get us clear,” the Captain ordered, “continue to return fire.”

The *Jade Mushroom* lost another two laser batteries in the exchange and more outer hull plates, but the extra thickness was protecting them. Captain Vodo was about to try and talk some sense into them again when the other three dropships suddenly split up, accelerating at their top speed of 2.5gs in wildly different directions that he knew would

eventually all turn back towards the planet...giving them three different targets to chase rather than a unified one.

Meaning they'd conceded losing at least one dropship, maybe two, but they intended to get the others to ground rather than surrendering them all.

"Hail the damaged one."

An angry voice came through this time, but Vodo didn't think all the anger was directed at him.

"Hold your fire. We surrender," he said, biting out the last word with difficulty.

"They left you behind," Vodo said simply. "You should have taken my offer and all left intact."

"What now?" the enemy Captain demanded.

"What's your ship's status?"

"We've got air up here, but the cargo bay is depressurized and the control lines to our engines are not responding. We've got thrusters working, but that's it."

"Kill your list with them and stay put. If you've got life support enough to last, sit tight until we get another dropship up here. If not, get in your escape pods and we'll pick you up now."

"You can have the mercenaries," the man said, nearly spitting the word. "My crew will remain onboard."

"You're not part of their unit?"

"No. We're an independent contractor...or were."

"We'll sort the fate of your ship out later. Get the mercenaries into the pods and you just float here until we send someone back for you. Clear?"

"Crystal."

"And no delays. We still have to chase your friends."

"They're not associated with us, so I don't care. The mercenaries will be off the ship as soon as I can arrange it."

"If they don't go, I can poke another hole in the hull."

"They'll go if I have to use my sidearm. Prepare to pick up lifeboats."

A few minutes later, as promised, the first of the lifeboats shot off from the hull of the damaged ship, followed

by 3 others out of the 7 total the dropship carried. The *Jade Mushroom* maneuvered to dock with each, then had the crewmembers that were dual trained as infantry take the mercenaries from the dock to the brig one at a time, disarming those that had thought they could maybe take over the ship from within.

Fighting in zero g was quite different than on the ground, and the few skirmishes that took place ended up with wounded mercenaries and nothing else. The others divorced themselves from any notions of taking over the pocket warship and floated through the hallways under guard without any further issue, then were stuffed inside tiny isolation cells designed for just such a situation.

With no space station built near the jump points, the pocket warships had to be little islands of their own out here, and if they were to board ships they needed someplace to stick prisoners. They had room for some 28 prisoners, unless they doubled them up in the cells, but out of this wounded dropship they only pulled 19...12 mechwarriors and 7 support staff.

"Captain, is that all of them?" Vodo asked over the audio link.

"It is now. The others died when the cargo bay depressurized."

"I see," he said as the lifeboats drifted away from his ship. "Is your situation stable?"

"It appears to be. We have three lifeboats remaining if it's not."

"Hold tight for now. We'll be in touch later."

"We're not going anywhere."

"What is your name, Captain?"

"Jared Chordive."

"Captain Chordive, thank you for being reasonable."

"I didn't have much choice in the matter."

"True, but that doesn't stop some people from being obstinate, and you could have played for more time to let the other dropships get a bigger head start."

"They're not my concern, my crew is."

"Did you lose any of them?"

"Two."

"My apologies, Captain. But I'm afraid this is what sometimes happens when you work with mercenaries. They're loyal to themselves and their employer, not so much their rides. We'll speak again later," he said, signaling to cut the comm. "Put us on the most direct line to Polvice and accelerate to 3g for ten minutes, then back off to 1g and give me intercept points."

The Captain sat in his chair at a weird angle, for the gravity disc was still spinning from their brief respite as they accelerated. Going beyond 3g would require them to stop it entirely, but it had been designed to stay active during straight line thrust, though they'd had to deactivate it during combat or otherwise the gyroscopic action would never have allowed them to flip heads for tails in any appreciable amount of time.

That wasn't needed now, so they began accelerating at 3g as the Captain suffered through it in his now reclined chair in silence, not trying to speak or monitor anything. When it finally abated he felt fatigued, but not injured. However, if those other dropships continued at 2.5 g for a considerably longer amount of time, their crews might be.

"Where do we stand?" he asked, with the spin of the gravity disc having slowed to almost nothing at this point, and all the stations on the bridge swiveled to use the constant thrust as gravity instead.

"We can intercept the closest one in 2 hours and 23 minutes if we maintain 3gs Captain, or less if they continue their course and slow down. If not, we're not going to catch them, even with the angle difference, with anything less than 1.9g all the way to the planet."

"They're playing a one-upmanship game," he announced to the crew. "They'll hold 2.5gs as long as we will. We can catch them if we want, but we'll have to damage ourselves in the process. They'd rather be damaged than caught in space."

"Captain, we can intercept in less than an hour at 4gs."

“If that was down to a few minutes I’d consider it, but no. They got their head start and they’ll run it all the way to the planet. We’ll follow them in and hold in orbit. We’ll catch at least one on the way out and the *Golden Mushroom* can intercept the others on the way back to the star. At best they’ll get one dropship out, but if Captain Billings scares off their jumpship when it comes back, none of them will be leaving. Inform our sister ship when we clear the star and send a message to Polvice letting them know we’ve got prisoners and they’ve got three dropships incoming with Yellow Jackals.”

13

June 14, 3000
Federated Suns
Crusis March
Cholis
Morten Estate

A month and a half had passed since the Comstar facility had gone offline, and in that month and a half not a single person had emerged from their compound or answered a single message, not just from Stephan, but from anyone outside the facility they controlled on the north side of Brinestorm. Even Duke Alliz was chaffing enough under the current situation to see himself as an ally with House Morten on this, for Comstar's behavior was far beyond acceptable.

They'd essentially cut off Cholis from communications with the rest of the Federated Suns, with their only explanation being an automated message indicating an ongoing technical problem.

Then there had been a missing jumpship. One of the regular ones House Davion had scheduled on this trade route. It had been due 13 days ago and never showed, though other ones were still coming and going, and on those messages were being sent out via courier packages that most jumpships carried. They'd get paid a small fee to take messages with them from system to system, particularly when operating outside the Comstar network, but so far Stephan hadn't received any messages from the rest of his systems indicating any problems.

The trouble was, he knew that didn't mean a damn thing given how long it took to carry the messages across multiple jumps. Drymo was just right next door, and he'd had one of the four jumpships stationed here waiting for new orders

to do a hop over there and check on them...but there were no issues there yet. He didn't want to just send all four out in case he needed them for some other purpose, so he'd just have to wait and hope the precautions they'd taken on the other worlds would hold up to whatever was going to happen.

He'd thought something would have happened before now, on Cholis at least. The communications going down and staying down meant *something* was going to happen, and if it was an attack on his mech factory on Foniss or other worlds, well, they wouldn't want word of that getting out, but what did they expect to do about the Duke and Ambassador? They could get messages back to New Avalon the slow way, which suggested that Comstar was going to do something soon.

And yet here he waited and waited, with nothing happening.

Protests had started to break out around the Comstar compound. Most people didn't use their services, but they got news from them, and the blackout was getting more and more upsetting to the locals...as was Comstar's refusal to explain anything.

And then, jumpships started entering the system...

"Five *Merchant*-class military conversions," Vander said at a breakfast table where he, Stephan, Grady, and Commodore Itomo sat, though there was no meal there yet. It was 5:38am and the cooks were only now starting to wake up and get the Morten palace kitchen going. "And one *Star Lord*-class carrying a medium grade warship with it," the Lord of Military Operations said, placing several satellite photos on the table that he'd just printed off. Everyone else was still asleep, with only these three having been woken by Vander this early.

Stephan's face narrowed. "Can you make out the type?"

"It's not a dropship conversion. This is custom made navy equipment, and there appears to be no aerofighter bays on it...at least not the side we're able to see. Gun placements suggest anti-ship...and orbital bombardment capability."

Stephan looked at the photo of the ship. It was long and brick-like for the most part. Not the smooth features of a dropship that expected to pass through an atmosphere. It was smaller than the old Star League warships that were also jumpships, and this one obviously wasn't big enough to be a surviving warship from that era...and with it being carried by the Star Lord it obviously had no jump drive of its own. It was a system defense warship, smaller than the ones they had on Neubenn that were too big to be carried between systems, but it would gun down any of their pocket warships in no time at all.

"We can handle it," Commodore Itomo said, who Vander had personally recruited from the mercenary ranks to train their naval officers. He'd formerly been part of the Draconis Combine's navy until he'd refused to follow an order to bombard a city from orbit. Rather than commit seppuku and give himself an 'honorable' death, he'd fled and took his considerable skills to the few mercenary units that possessed warships. He'd been there for three years before House Morten had convinced him to accept their hire.

"How do you figure that?" Vander asked, surprised.

"I'm referring to the warship only," he said. "If they use the dropships in concert, that changes things, but if they're full of mechs I don't think they'll want to take them into naval combat. We've got enough dropships and pocket warships to handle that full warship. We'd lose most of them in the fight, but we'd keep possession of orbit and force a ground fight."

"13 dropships?" Stephan asked for confirmation.

"Yes. The Star Lord only carried three others. The warship blocked two additional docking ports. All are Unions save for four Overlords. If they've got fighters with them, there can't be that many. Six per Overlord, and two per Union if the Unions even bother carrying them. Usually those bays are hard sealed and used for additional cargo to support the mechs."

"42 fighters maximum," Stephan counted. "Still more than we've got here."

"I'd be surprised if they had half that," Itomo declared. "I know this unit. The warship is to make sure they can land

their mechs. They don't use aerospace fighters for anything other than ground support ops."

"Lion's Teeth Legion," Vander said, handing Stephan a dossier on them. "Not quite top tier, but just below it. They're rumored to have three Regiments, and they could have two of them in those dropships. *Orange Mushroom* is pacing them just ahead of their path, and *Teal* is burning hard from the Zenith point to get here ahead of them."

"Why isn't *Orange* harassing the jumpships?"

"It was, but I called it back. They've got at least a squadron of fighters based on the jumpships, plus some defense cannons directly mounted on them. We can take one of them for sure, but the mercenaries didn't seem to care enough to leave any dropships in support, and I figured we needed everything we've got here to deal with that warship."

"How fast is that thing?" Stephan asked Itomo.

"I'd guess no faster than 1.5g. Standard dropships can outrun it. It's meant to hold ground, not chase."

"Four days," Vander said, already having done the math. "It's holding at 1.2 right now and the dropships are staying with it."

"If you can keep that warship at bay," Grady said stoically, "they can't take the Estate with two Regiments. It'll be nasty fighting, but they don't have a chance."

"So what's the plan?" Stephan asked out loud as he looked at the pictures of the dropships escorting the warship. "Do they expect to bombard the Estate? Land their mechs and take us on the ground? I know we haven't been obvious with what we've got to defend here with, but we can't exactly hide our dropship fleet sitting on pads out in the open. Did they do their math wrong?"

"It could just be a softening attack for other mercenaries to finish the job later," Itomo pointed out.

"Would the mercenaries sign off on that?" Grady questioned. "They want to make money, not get their unit half wiped out."

"Depends on what they're being paid," Vander offered, "and what they've been told."

"Are they messing with our jumpships?"

Vander shook his head. "They didn't even twitch in their direction. And with full capacitors ours can jump out before anyone can mess with them, that warship included. And they've got standing orders to do so. Don't worry about them."

"How dangerous is that warship going to be to our fighters?"

Itomo stiffened. "Based off these photos, I'd say considerable. I recommend you keep the fighters in reserve and let me handle this with the dropships. Only launch them in response to the enemy's own fighters."

"Shouldn't we get as many guns as possible on that warship?"

"If you equip them with naval lasers, the amount of damage they will do will be negligible to anything other than opposing aerospace fighters. If you equip them for ground ops, those weapons will have considerably more effect on the warship...but it will require them to get so close these mercenary gunners will have too easy of shots, and if enemy fighters engage them and they're equipped for naval combat, they can keep outside our fighter's range and safely rack up hits. This warship is meant to defend against fighters and dropships, and will excel at both. Better to save the fighters and have them go after the dropships or screen against the other fighters."

"And if they sent everything at once?"

"Then we would have a pyrrhic victory at best, but I would have all ships focus fire on the warship only. If it has a single naval-grade laser battery operational afterward, it can target this Estate from orbit. That is the primary threat there. And I would suggest they do not know how many upgrades we've made to our dropships. I highly doubt they even know about our missile boats. They probably believe they can win against a mix of military and civilian dropships."

"If we hadn't made any upgrades at all, what then?"

"We could hurt the warship, but we could not stop it short of kamikaze attacks. And to get the necessary speed for such an intercept, they would have to have a long approach vector that would easily be identified beforehand and evaded. Lesser collisions will do damage, of course, but any naval officer worthy of commanding a warship will know how to avoid such a trap. If they do not know of our upgrades, it would appear they would win a hard fought space battle against our dropships, or an easier one if they include their own dropships...which would jeopardize their mech forces."

"Why do they need the mechs if they're just going to bombard us from space?" Grady asked.

All three sets of eyes turned to him, then glanced at each other.

"A good point," Vander said, thinking hard. "This is Comstar's doing. What's their endgame here? They obviously don't want anyone reporting what's going to take place, but what stops Carroll or the Duke from filing a report the slow way, or whenever Comstar brings their facility back online?"

"They want prisoners," Stephan finally said. "They need to know what we know, and if they just destroy everything from space they'll never know."

"So the warship blows through our dropships in space," Grady said, playing this out. "Then they land their mechs and use the warship's mighty weapons as fire support? Hitting the mech bays or any of our mechs that decide to stand still a wee bit too long?"

"You're right, there's something else going on here," Vander said. "I can't see what though."

"Dastardly deeds done in the dark," Itomo said ominously. "Whatever they intend to do, they do not want the Federated Suns or the rest of the Inner Sphere to know of it. Then they can create whatever cover story they wish afterwards."

"I agree," Stephan said with a nod. "So the first piece of this drama happens in space? We send our dropships up and wait for them, or go after them further out?"

"Wait for them," Vander answered. "If they get low enough to bombard us, we can fire the extra anti-ship missiles from the surface as a last resort."

"No," Itomo said firmly. "We cannot let them get close enough to fire a single weapon onto the surface. They may choose to do so, taking damage in the process, then withdrawal. We cannot use the Estate as a lure. We must keep them out of low orbit and force a fight above it."

"That's what I meant," Vander explained. "I just didn't want to hit them two days out and give them two days to repair damage before they got within range of the surface if we lost."

"Do you want to launch them now or wait until they're a few hours out?" Stephan asked.

"Better to wait until the last minute and see what they do first," Vander said after glancing at Otomo. "I don't think we're going to be able to scare them off with a line of dropships in orbit."

"Is there anything else we can do over the next 3 and a half days to prepare?"

"Plenty on the ground," Grady said, leaning back in his seat and glancing towards the kitchen as a loud 'bang' sounded from a dropped metallic something or other out of sight.

"We empty the holds on the civilian dropships," Itomo said, ticking items off on his fingers. "And install as many missile mods as we can inside. Then we open the doors to space at maximum range, launch the missiles, then close the doors before engaging with conventional weapons. We also weld every armor plate we have available onto the ships whether they fit or not. With empty holds, they can handle the extra weight and lift off slower than normal to accommodate for the atmospheric friction."

"We also," Itomo went on, "need to equip a pair for rescue operations in the aftermath with additional lifeboats and spacesuits. I suggest we commandeer the three at the Brinestorm spaceport for that duty."

Stephan raised an eyebrow, then glanced at Vander, who shrugged.

"If the shit is going to hit the fan, it may not just hit us. They might be targets anyway. If we use them for rescue ops, that frees up more of our ships to fight, but we'd need our own crews onboard. Hell, for all we know they might side with the mercenaries and start shooting at us. We need to deal with them and the militia now rather than later."

"I'll handle both," Stephan said with a nod. "You get the modifications going on our own dropships immediately."

"Commodore?" Vander asked.

"I'll see to it myself," he said, standing up from the table with a nod of respect to each, then he hurried off into the early morning sunrise just beginning to peek some light into the sky.

"Grady, what can we do down here?" Stephan asked.

"It depends whether they intend to hit us or the spaceport," he said, gesturing with his hands.

"Why would they go for the spaceport?"

"Why leave witnesses?" Grady countered.

Stephan had a sinking feeling in his stomach. "They blacked out everyone, including the Duke."

"Me thoughts exactly. I've heard stories of a few other times mercenaries didn't play nice. Scorched earth, I think is the term. And Cholis doesn't have that many people."

"Shit," Vander said, cursing himself for not seeing it sooner. "That's what they need the mechs for. To clean up what the warship doesn't hit."

"Aye, it might just be that...or they have some other game they're playing. What do you want us to do if they hit the spaceport?"

"If they come down to the surface, we hit them no matter where they land," Stephan said flatly.

Grady nodded. "That'll be difficult if we don't have any dropships available."

"Damn it, he's right," Vander said, cupping his head in his hand. "This is going to get dicey if we can't move troops around very fast. We need to preposition some in or near the city. These mercs have multiple ways they can get at us, and we can't defend against all of them at the same time. We have to

pick and choose priorities, and they can alter their tactics based on what they see us do here.”

“The city means nothing if they can’t take this Estate,” Stephan reminded them both. “This is still their primary objective. Assume that sooner or later, if they can’t use the warship, they will assault here in force. Set up as many traps as you can, and we’ll deal with the city as we can later.”

“I’d still like to have troops further out,” Grady added, “for flanking purposes. Maybe even take down their dropships after they land. Put them on the defensive a bit. I don’t want to get all our mechs bottled up here and having to wait turns to take shots.”

“You two figure out the defense plan. I’ll see about the Duke and the dropships. If Itomo can’t keep that warship at bay, I don’t think we’ll be doing anything more than evacuating who we can.”

“Assuming we still have dropships left to work with,” Vander added.

“We’ve got more coming regardless,” Stephan reminded him. “Set up some evac points into the wilderness. Hide them well, with emergency supplies.”

“We already have.”

“Add some more, further out. If the warship parks over the Estate, get them outside its firing range.”

“Good idea,” Vander said morosely, “but it’s just a delaying tactic. If we can’t stop that warship here, they can go around to all our other worlds and just repeat the tactic.”

“They’ll be branded butchers regardless,” Grady noted. “So why stop at one planet?”

“This is why we need warships of our own,” Stephan said, feeling like they’d run out of time far sooner than he’d expected. “Big ones.”

“There aren’t many mercenary units that have these,” Vander reminded him. “If we can take this one down, others might not even try.”

“Well, there’s a little hope then,” Stephan said dryly as one of the cooks came out into the dining area and placed a

fresh pot of coffee on the wall-mounted self-serve area. "We need to do every little thing we can the next four days that might make a difference...but it can wait until after breakfast. Let people sleep another hour or two."

"Except the techs," Grady reminded him.

"Techs are used to pulling all-nighters," Vander reminded him. "They'd rather have less sleep than less work time to mount that armor and missiles. I'm just glad we've kept a stockpile of both."

Stephan got up and went to get some coffee, resigning himself to an uncertain future. There were too many variables in place to start making guesses, and they wouldn't know exactly how the Lion's Teeth Legion were going to play this until they got a lot closer.

"Admiral," Korra Venni said with a nod of her head as she walked onto the bridge of the *Lion's Den* fresh out of the shower. Thankfully they still had some deceleration to do, otherwise she'd have missed it when the gravity effect shut off and so did the shower facilities outside the gravity disc that housed the command staff, though it wasn't spinning now as she'd climbed up a ladder well to get to it.

"Miss Venni," Admiral Neeva replied courteously. "I was about to call you."

"I know how to read a clock," she said, glancing at the display screen that showed a very large green/white planet before her with a haze of exhaust thrust distorting the picture ever so slightly.

"The Mortens have assembled their dropships to meet us, as expected. The count is higher than you reported, though. They have 28 awaiting us."

"Is that a problem, Admiral?"

"More difficulty, but not a mission problem. However, the one that beat us here from the other jump point showed better engine capacity than expected. It's possible they've reconfigured it with more weapons as well. How thorough was your analysis?"

"As thorough as it can be," she said, shooting him back a hard stare. "What's your point?"

"His point," another voice said, arriving just behind them both, "is that you didn't hire us to fight a fair fight, and if more and more 'surprises' keep popping up, that's just what we may have."

Venni turned to face the Colonel of the Lion's Teeth. "That almost sounds like cowardice, Colonel. I can assure you that I'm not paying these rates for anything less than the professionalism I was promised."

"And we were promised good intel," Colonel Keller countered deftly, then turned to the Admiral. "How do we look?"

"I don't think we have to risk the dropships yet. Better to make them choose and split their forces."

"How many pocket warships do they have?"

The Admiral frowned. "Miss Venni's information didn't say anything about pocket warships."

"Rumor has though. If we split up, we have to keep them off our dropships. Can you identify dropship conversions from this range?"

The Admiral shook his head. "No. Even at close range it is hard to tell until they start firing or maneuvering. The two they had at the star might be pocket warships, but we're not racing them to the planet so we haven't gotten a good idea of just how fast their engines are."

"Fast ships won't help against the warship," the Colonel noted, "but if they can run down our dropships while landing, that's a problem I do not want to have. We need to identify which are which before we split up."

"We have the two from the star tagged and can consider them as such," the Admiral offered, "but there's no way to tell about the others until we get a lot closer."

The Colonel scratched the stubble on his chin for a moment. "Then have the dropships fall back. When they split on their entry vector we can see who the Mortens chase. If it's us,

they land unopposed. If they chase them, we can divert to group up again."

"The numbers are not so accommodating if we want the dropships close enough to assist us if needed."

"Do it," the Colonel ordered.

"Yes, sir," the Admiral said, glancing at their employer one last time with unkind eyes before issuing a string of commands to both the warship's crew, which doubled as fleet command for the mercenary unit, and the accompanying dropships.

14

June 17, 3000
Federated Suns
Crusis March
Cholis
Morten Estate

Commodore Itoro launched in the last dropship, coming up to join the others in the *Azure Pearl* that had only moments ago had the last of the extra armor plates welded to it in a second skin that was decidedly ugly and bumpy. The plates had not been meant for dropships, but anything that soaked up additional weaponsfire in space would be useful. Itoro sat in a seat on the bridge, strapped in as the dropship lifted off at a painfully slow pace to reduce drag on the jagged edges so they wouldn't rip some of the plates off before they made it to orbit.

By the time he got there, the other 27 dropships were holding in geosynch orbit over the estate far from where the warship would need to be in order to bombard it from space. Based off the irregular production of warships nowadays, there were no classes of ship. All were custom jobs, because 'standard' warships were what was known to exist in the Star League days, and nobody could build those anymore.

But there were a few shipyards capable of very ingenious designs, and even without the naval grade lasers that the more fearsome warships held, the ones that were equipped with a lot of conventional weaponry and thick armor were trouble as well. Those, however, could not bombard a planet except with rail guns, and the accuracy of those fired 100 kilometers away was not good. The only ships capable of precision planetary bombardment were those with naval grade lasers or super expensive guided missiles that he hadn't seen

outside of the Draconic Combine. And those were usually reserved for nuclear weapons, which even fewer people possessed today.

Unfortunately for House Morten, the enemy warship here *did* have naval grade lasers...four of them...that were powerful enough to reach the surface with widespread damage enough to destroy armor on a mech, and since they'd hit in a cone wider than the mech, it would be virtually an instant takedown of any light or medium that got hit, and extensive damage to the heavies and assaults. Plus, if the cockpit had windows facing upwards as well as front, that could be an instant kill right there.

And as for buildings that didn't have armor, those four lasers could, over time, destroy every standing building on the planet. It wouldn't happen fast, but without being able to fight back, the warship could just sit in low orbit as long as it had fuel for station keeping or keep making laps and firing each time it passed by, though the accuracy of those shots would be lessened.

It couldn't rain down an immense amount of firepower all at once, thankfully. The Star League versions could, Itomo knew, but none of them were known to have survived to date, and their naval grade lasers were considerably stronger. But the ones that had been resurrected in present day were still strong enough to punch through the hull plating on a civilian dropship in a single shot. Making this Lion's Teeth Legion warship a shark among the naval fish.

But what caused it problems was when the hull armor was thick enough that it took two shots *in the same spot* to get through. That meant their aiming had to be precise, and if the dropship was situated where it could rotate the damaged portion around to the far side after taking a hit, suddenly the warship would have to make half a dozen, if not more shots to take down a dropship.

That changed the battle from a killing frenzy to a fair fight. Then add additional weaponry to the dropships and suddenly the almighty warship was at a disadvantage. Itomo

was not on the strongest of the dropships, but rather one of the weakest he was going to use as his flagship that was going to hang back and offer missile support...though with the range of those naval lasers there was no true 'safe' place to be anywhere near the battlefield.

He'd already given his ships...including the 6 pocket warships that had two specially designed missile boats amongst them...orders to aim for the naval lasers above all else. If they could take out one of those quickly, it would improve the survival rate of the dropships immensely, though the warship was also covered in conventional weaponry as well, and its armor was thicker than any of theirs, he would assume. The weak points were where the weapons were located, for they couldn't hide them behind hull plates when using them, and it looked like these naval lasers hadn't even been designed to do that at all, for they were sticking out into space from the moment they arrived in the system.

Itomo's flagship got to the geosync point just as the enemy fleet began to break apart, with their dropships moving to the side and backwards as the warship powered ahead directly towards them.

"Commodore," another Captain spoke into the open line between all the ships that Itomo mandated be kept open on the receiving end at all times. "If they keep moving on their current track, they'll split past us and get down to the surface."

"I'm aware of the obvious, Captain Jeeter. Our primary objective is to prevent orbital bombardment, and we can't do that if we split our ships up. We have to stay with the warship, and if their dropships are not going to be part of that fight, so much the better for us. Let the mechs deal with the mechs."

The Commodore changed to a different, unencrypted frequency and hailed the mercenaries. "This is Commodore Yoshi Ito of the Morten Protectorate Naval Fleet. I believe introductions are in order before we begin battle."

A long air gap followed, but eventually there was a response.

"This is Admiral Francis Neeva of the Lion's Teeth Legion warship *Lion's Den*. I'm surprised to find you here, Itoro."

"Likewise," he said, knowing the names and units of all the mercenaries that were known to field warships, as well as those commanders of warships in the Great Houses navies. Not much naval combat happened in the Inner Sphere, and with the priority given to mech combat only the largest powers had combat navies designed to do more than haul mechs around safely in. As it was, there was a lot of down time as a naval commander, and one of the going pastimes was to study up on other commanders in case you ever had the opportunity to face them in combat where every little tactical advantage might tip the scales of an even fight.

"Last I heard you were with the Eternal Sword," Neeva said, referencing an even larger mercenary unit than the Lion's Teeth Legion.

"I was, but I got tired of commanding an assault dropship group. House Morten made me a much better offer, and I've been tasked with designing and building for them a proper defense fleet. Your attack comes sooner than I had hoped, but no matter. I have enough force to stop you."

"Do you? Should I keep my dropships with me then?"

"If you intend to force this fight I would recommend it, but it will not guarantee you victory."

"By my math I won't need them, unless you've done some modifying?"

"Do you expect me to build a navy with mere cargo vessels, Neeva?" Itoro said with some disgust. "Of course I have been modifying ships. And while I envy you your current command, it will not be enough to break my line. We will destroy you, and you will destroy most, but not all of my vessels. Is this advantageous to either of us?"

"Are you suggesting that we just turn around and leave?"

"If you do not wish to seriously damage your organization, that is exactly what you should do. You do not

have the firepower to get past me here, Admiral. This attack was not well planned.”

“Well, *Commodore*,” he said, stressing the inferior title, “should we call this a stalemate then and let the mechs decide this on the ground? I notice you’re not moving to intercept them.”

“I have enough force to destroy your warship, Admiral. I won’t if I split my forces,” Itomo said honestly. “If I may ask, what is your objective here?”

“I’m afraid that’s confidential information.”

“Are you aware that the Comstar facility is currently offline citing ‘technical difficulties’ and has been for nearly two months? I find that coincidence to be something less than genuine. And in such a blackout situation, one should expect fell deeds to occur. So I ask again, what is your objective here, Admiral?”

“You will find out when we take it. I am, however, content with getting my dropships to the surface unmolested. I will not force an attack on your fleet so long as they are ignored. We can watch the mechs battle it out on the surface to determine the winner.”

“Very reasonable, Admiral. Do not cross our current line or attempt to slip around to the other side of the planet.”

“If I may, I don’t wish to burn any unnecessary fuel, so I’ll just slip into geosync 200 kilometers beside you and hold there. Is that acceptable?”

“It is. Have a pleasant morning, Admiral.”

“Likewise, Commodore.”

Admiral Neeva cut the comm, glad to avoid a fight he knew he couldn’t win, then found Miss Venni staring lasers at him.

“What the hell was that!” she demanded.

“Civilized warfare,” he replied firmly.

“Attack them, damn it!”

“If we do, this ship will be destroyed. Itomo is no fool, and any chance we had of sloppy marksmanship or fleeing ships

went out the window the moment I learned he was commanding their fleet. Why was that not in the intelligence information you provided?" he all but snarled.

"Enough," the Colonel said, raising a hand as he gently stepped between them. "Admiral, part of our mission requires orbital bombardment. We have to break their lines."

"I was told this was to be a surface engagement and all I had to do was make sure the mechs got safely to ground. I've just done that."

"There is more to this mission that you were not made aware of for security reasons. It requires orbital bombardment," he said sternly. "Now find a way to beat him."

"We would have to lose the mechs in many of those dropships to even have a chance. This warship cannot take that fleet alone. I guarantee you Itoro was not bluffing. Those ships are modified for naval combat."

"They look like a junk heap," Venni said, disgusted with the Admiral's reticence.

"Those are adhoc armor plates added at the last moment most likely to the civilian transports that happened to be on the planet when we arrived," the Admiral lectured her, and the Colonel, who was being far too stingy with information. "The others most likely have double the armor plating as standard, plus who knows how many weapons modifications. If I assault that line without our dropships, we will die. I cannot make it any more plain than that."

"You're guessing," Venni said, looking to the Colonel. "You have a contract to fulfill. Now do it!"

"And you promised us accurate information," Keller said, defending the Admiral for a brief moment. "You should have informed us of the commanding officer, as well as any modifications they made to their dropships."

"Would you like their fingerprints as well?" she mocked.

"We cannot guarantee victory without sufficient information!" the Admiral said, beginning to lose his temper.

"You're just a coward," Venni spat, turning to the Colonel. "Relieve him of command and get this started."

“Colonel, we can beat them,” Commander Chester said from a nearby console. “The Admiral gave us what we needed when he negotiated that safe landing. Once we offload the mechs the dropships can return to us and then we can engage the enemy fleet at our full strength. It will only be a few hours delay.”

“That would give us, maybe, an even fight,” Admiral Neeva warned. “But with Itoro here, I still give the advantage to them. He will ram us if there is no other option. He’s a Drac, and where loyalty is concerned he will gladly give his life to attain victory. Even low speed collisions with those dropships will damage us. We’re only five or six times their size. Tonnage wise they out mass us considerably, and we can’t evade them all, especially if they have modified engines. Even if I’m wrong, a victory here will destroy almost our entire fleet, and they will make sure this warship is destroyed first. Itoro was kicked out of the DCMS for refusing to bombard the civilians in a city. His honor will demand he stops us from doing the same here, and he just inferred that he expects us to do just that. We can’t win this with what we have, Colonel.”

“Commander?” Keller said, looking to the side.

“It’ll be rough, sir, but we have the firepower advantage. We’ll pull through.”

The Admiral spun on a swivel and glared at his XO. “How dare you say that when we don’t know what weapons those dropships have!”

“Admiral,” Keller said in too calm of a voice. “You’re relieved. Now clear the bridge under your own power or I’ll have security drag you off it.”

The Admiral refused to move and locked eyes with Keller. “You’re going to get everyone killed.”

“And you’re spooked at seeing an old war legend past his prime. Get out.”

The Admiral waited a handful of seconds more, then turned and walked off the bridge without another word.

“Commander, you’re now in charge of the fleet. Win this battle and you’re promoted to Admiral. Lose it, and you’re out of the Legion. Am I clear?”

“Completely, sir,” Chester said, quickly taking the Admiral’s vacant chair.

Vander stood in the Estate’s war room...a place they’d only had meetings in up until this point, but one they’d built in the case of an assault on the House Morten home. It was below ground, buried under meters of ferrocrete and then meters more of soil that had trees growing out of them, but it had comm lines connecting it to every other building that were likewise buried, so taking out some transmission antennas couldn’t blind them.

They also had several of those dish-sized antenna linked in so they could communicate with the line of ships in orbit that were at the geosynch point...which meant an orbit that lasted a full day rather than a few hours just skimming over the atmosphere. That kept the dropships directly overhead, but far away from the planet. The enemy warship was now parked beside them, but slightly to the side, locking into its position as well from the planet’s point of view, but in truth all those ships were moving quite fast to the side to fight off the planet’s gravity as their ‘fall’ matched the curve of the planet and they appeared to go nowhere, just running laps around it that matched the speed of its rotation.

That put the warship far beyond bombardment range, and it looked like the little naval truce was going to cancel each side out in this engagement without loss of equipment. That sort of thing wasn’t uncommon with professional soldiers, especially naval ones, which left the enemy’s 13 dropships heading down to the planet from another angle, with Vander and Stephan watching to see where they were going to set down.

Grady was already out in the field, along with several other units that had been prepositioned away from the Estate. Without any dropships available to hot drop units around the

surface, the mechs would have to walk everywhere, and the city was hours away from the Estate even for the Phoenix Hawks. If the Lion's Teeth Legion landed directly on or near the Estate, the five Companies already deployed in the field would come back, possibly flanking the enemy if they had a good line of attack.

If the enemy instead landed near the city, or on the opposite side of it, those Companies could harass either their landing zone or their units, drawing them back towards the Estate or just playing with them until the rest of their 249 mechs arrived. That was a little better than two Regiments that House Morten had to work with here, though some of those would be remaining in the Estate itself for base defense and turret support.

The Estate also had bunkers for people to get down into rather than get shot at in their normal buildings or running around on the surface. Stephan hadn't ordered them in there yet. It was still too early for that, but as he watched the landing track of the group of dropships, noting that they weren't splitting up to different locations, he realized the mercenaries were not going to assault the Estate directly.

They were landing on the far side of Brinestorm.

"That's an odd play if they're here to come after us," Vander said, rubbing his chin.

"Let's see how many they have first," Stephan offered. "Maybe they don't want to fight our turrets simultaneously."

"We can just sit and wait for them to come...unless they expect us to do the Duke's dirty work for him and defend the city. Comstar has to know we're not on good terms with him."

"Get them walking anyway. We can always bait them back here."

"Narrow road," he reminded Stephan. "Maybe they're hoping for a big battle in the grasslands rather than up here in the forest. Or maybe they just didn't want to burn out a landing zone into the trees."

Stephan watched in silence as the dropships landed and started to spew out their mechs and vehicles, counting. They

had several supply trucks, 8 tanks, and 12 hovercraft along with the mechs, which eventually came out to be 218 in number, all of which were moving out away from the dropships and assembling into Companies and Lances on the grasslands while the tanks and hovercraft appeared to be guarding a makeshift camp the trucks were setting up about a kilometer south of the landed dropships.

“Why out there?” Stephan asked.

“Makes no sense to me,” Vander said, squinting at the visuals they were getting from their orbital satellites and the pair of Sparrowhawk aerospace fighters out in the area getting much closer pictures. So far no aerospace fighters from the Lion’s Teeth had deployed from their dropships...not that they’d have had anywhere to land. The smart play would have been to keep one dropship in low orbit to allow them to launch from, then come back, refuel and rearm, then go back down again repeatedly until they got possession of a landing strip on the planet.

The only one that existed belonged to House Morten, for there was only one city on the planet and no need of an airstrip. The mercenaries could, using dozers, create a makeshift one on the grassy plains, but he hadn’t seen any construction equipment show up yet on the orbital scans...which were just sensitive enough to be able to make out individual mechs and guess at their make from above. Seeing people was harder, but still doable if the satellite was at the right angle. They had 8 in orbit that would pass over the city and the Estate continuously, keeping one or two in range at all times.

No one else had gone to the bother of putting satellites into orbit of Cholis, or at the jump points, so if the Lion’s Teeth weren’t going to bring their warship in any closer, and they didn’t have any aerospace assets on the planet, then they were essentially operating this ground op blind from above.

“You think all their birds are back with the jumpships?” Vander asked.

"It's starting to look like it. What are they playing at? Did they not have any idea what we had here? I thought Comstar had better surveillance of our operations than that."

"I assumed so as well. Maybe they were expecting the warship to make up for it," he said as one of the mercenary dropships began to lift off again. "Wait a second. That could be their bird nest."

Stephan saw it was one of their four *Overlord*-class dropships, and knew the basic design came equipped with room for 6 aerospace fighters in one bay that had two egress doors. They'd have to refuel there or they'd fall out of the sky eventually, for they had to continually burn their engines in atmosphere, unlike in space where they could just sit and coast for hours or days if need be.

Then a *Union*-class dropship lifted off as well, followed by another, and another.

"Are they doing what I'm thinking they're doing?" Stephan asked.

"They're all lifting," Vander said after about half of them had touched off and were headed back into space. "They're not going to honor the truce. They need them to assault our dropships, but now they're lighter and they don't have to risk the mechs. Itomo got played."

"He had to try. I don't fault him for that."

"Nor do I," Vander said as another two lifted off. "But when they meet up..."

"Apparently he already knows," Stephan said as their dropships in geosynch orbit suddenly started accelerating towards the mercenary warship. "He's going to fight before they get there."

"There's nothing we can do to help him from down here, so let's take advantage of this," Vander said, partially gut clenched at what was about to happen in space, but also knowing that the enemy's mechs had no fire support any longer from the dropships. "They've also got no air assets whatsoever."

"How's it look?" another voice asked over the comm.

"Weird, Grady," Vander replied. "They've got two Regiments of mechs and a small group of support vehicles, but no birds and they just took their dropships away to go fight in space."

"Permission to engage then?"

"How?" Stephan asked. "They're all clumped up and you don't have the numbers."

"I'm not trying to be a fool here, Stephan, I just want to start whittling them down a wee bit."

"They've got mediums and lights that you can't run away from," Vander reminded him as the view on the aerial map changed. "Hold on a minute."

A camera view from one of the Sparrowhawks showed a line of mechs heading to the north while two columns were headed west towards the city.

"They're splitting up, Grady. Main group is heading right for the city, the other is circling around to the North."

"Where are their tanks?"

"Encampment here," Vander said, marking the spot on the map and transmitting it out to Grady's command mech.

"I think I'd like to go have a visit with their rear guard. How many mechs are they leaving there?"

"None. Just the tanks and hovercraft. They have a few trucks setting up tents."

"Maybe we can get them to break up their main group again. Are the rest of the laddies on the way?"

"Just heading there now," Vander said. "Where do you want them?"

No voice reply came, but Grady highlighted four different spots around the city, with those dots appearing on the war room's main map.

"It's your call, Grady," Vander said. "Start harassing if you like, just don't get caught out."

"Watch my back, for me. This is going to get distractful."

"Distractful?" Stephan repeated. "Never heard that word before."

"Did you understand the meaning?"

"Yeah."

"Then you've got a new word in your vocabulary."

"I suppose I do. Be mindful of your surroundings.

They've got some other angle here, I can feel it."

"Did you make up that word as well?"

"Which one?"

"Mindful."

Stephan smiled at Vander. "No, Grady. I didn't make up that word. It's been around a long time."

"Sounds kind of like the same thing. A full mind is a distracted one."

"True," Vander said as he saw Grady's Company start moving out of the camo blind they'd created for them in the ravine due south of the city. They started walking east, well below where the enemy mechs were heading, and intended to come up on the base camp from the south as well. "ETA looks like about 15 minutes before the first group gets to the city."

"And our laddies?"

"You've got three hours to play before they get there."

"Can they see the other advance teams from their position?"

"I doubt it. They're down to line of sight unless they have spies in the city or the Comstar complex."

"What are the militia doing?"

"Still sitting at the spaceport."

"Move Alpha and Beta teams around the city to the North, and Delta to the South, but keep Delta off the grass. I'm guessing they brought a lot of missile mechs...am I right?"

"We're still taking tallies now, but it looks like they're predominantly mediums. About two thirds, actually. They're set up like raiders, so be careful not to get swarmed," Stephan warned.

"They've got no chance against us once we group up," Grady said, his voice sounding perplexed. "Are they here for the city?"

"If they hit the city first, the militia will just wear them down a bit before they hit us," Vander interjected. "But maybe they're counting on that drawing us out."

"Either way, gotta play the game to see what they do. I'll poke the bee hive for ya. They'll have about a ten minute walk back if they want to chase us, and that'll delay whatever they're going to do in the city."

"If they want the city, they're going to get it," Stephan said sadly. "We can't get there in time to stop them from wrecking it if that's their aim."

"Move Gamma inside, and maybe you can bait them through the city back to our laddies coming up the road."

"We're going to wait and see what they do first," Vander argued. "If they attack, we'll send them in."

"What else are they going to do?" Grady scoffed. "Play hopscotch on the spaceport tarmac?"

"Can you actually do that in a mech?"

"Aye, you can if you're good at it," Grady said evenly. "The techs hate it though. Rubs the leg joints in all kinds of unexpected ways and you end up falling half the time."

"Why did I never hear about that?"

"Didn't want rookies trying it and face planting."

"Are you being serious or not? I can't tell."

"Serious, laddie, but it takes jump jets...usually."

Stephan looked at Vander, who shrugged. "I've never heard of it."

"I'll show you some other time," Grady promised, hitting his jump jets to hop over a large boulder in the mostly dry ravine in his Victor as the rest of his Command Company chose to run around it. Ten of them were Victors, with two Riflemen for anti-air support that they were apparently not going to need today. "How soon could we see those dropships coming back down?"

"If they do it will most likely be in pieces," Stephan said as he witnessed the first exchange of weaponsfire in orbit, with the long naval lasers on the warship getting in a few shots on his dropships from outside their weapon ranges as they burned

hard to close the distance. None blew apart or deviated course, so the extra armor they'd added to them before launch must have held up, but other than that he couldn't tell what was happening up there, because they weren't linked into their telemetry the same way they were for the mechs. All they had with the fleet was comms, and Itomo wasn't talking to them right now.

Yet the comm channels were full of orders going out, which Vander was half listening to in one earpiece.

Several minutes later Grady and his Epsilon Command Company finally pulled out of the ravine and moved up over some sandy hills with a scattering of scrub trees, finally coming into view of the distant camp. From their position they could also see the city and the distant mechs approaching it, but there was no way they could get back here in time to help.

Grady ignored what was happening everywhere else at the moment and began running his Victory up to its maximum 64 kph along with the other mechs following just behind him, attracting the attention of the tanks and hovercraft immediately, with the latter zooming out towards them more than twice as fast.

The Mech Commander nailed one with a large laser at nearly 500 meters while the others raced in and past his mech, firing on it with a combination of machine guns and SRMs. The tanks, further ahead and not moving nearly as fast fired PPCs that did a lot more damage.

"Tanks first," he ordered. "Ignore the skuttle bugs."

He took the first hit, then the Victors and Riflemans killed half the tanks in their first salvos, with the rest peeling off and heading in multiple directions...everywhere except back to their camp, which Grady kept walking up to while ordering the other mechs to fan out and engage anyone that was shooting at them.

"Attention Lion's Teeth mercenaries," Grady said over his mech's loud speaker. "If you want to live, move away from your trucks and equipment stacks out into the open with your hands raised, and walk towards the North...now!"

Little scurrying techs and other personnel started popping out of everywhere, cowering under the guns of his Victor as he continued to walk right into the middle of their camp. He waited there like a statue of imminent death until everyone was away and grouped to the north, then casually dipped down the left arm of his mech and toppled the nearest tent. He walked over to the other five already set up and did likewise, finding there was nothing much inside them. The equipment stacks were nearby, having been offloaded from the dropships and brought here by the trucks.

They contained food, more tents, replacement armor patches, plus the ever so valuable missile and autocannon replacement ammunition.

Grady stepped away from those and turned and fired his pair of large lasers at them off sequence, letting them recharge and doing so again and again until he destroyed all the crates, then he roasted the trucks too before finally looking back towards the distant city.

"Camp destroyed," he said, walking his mech away towards the west with his Company following and just leaving the prisoners standing in the grass perplexed and glad to be alive. "They won't be reloading expendables in this engagement."

"Good work," Vander said. "One more little wrinkle to add. The northern force has moved to the Comstar compound...and is attacking it."

15

Company Commander Jules Lenning was sitting in his Warhammer as it navigated the edge of Brinestorm's outer buildings and the forest that had been irregularly cut around it. To the south there were grasslands, but the north was part of a forest that stretched thousands of miles and the city had been built on the edge of it. There was a considerable amount of farmland to the east with good water, but go south and it got dry, leaving only prairie grasses and poor soil.

So walking his Company around the buildings did not leave a clear path when there were large trees jutting out into the mowed areas. Sometimes the gaps were only a few meters, and he had to push through the trees to avoid taking a detour into the city streets. That kept his Alpha Company, and Beta behind it, narrowed down to single file as they repositioned to the northern side as the mercenaries came in along the southeast.

"Jules," Vander's voice said into his helmet.

"Here boss."

"The northern component of the Lion's Teeth is assaulting the Comstar compound."

"What?"

"I know, it makes no sense unless they're hitting their own facility in order to blame it on us later. I have no doubt they're willing to sacrifice their own people if it helps their agenda. Get there double time and engage them while they're busy with the Comstar turrets and tanks and do what you can. You'll be outnumbered three to one, but they're mostly mediums and lights. They're keeping their heavier mechs to the south and some are turning back to chase Grady. Don't make a last stand up there, but swat as many of them as you can. If you

accidentally save the Comstar compound, I won't hold it against you."

"Copy that," he said, increasing his mech's pace to a run and barreling into a set of trees with his left arm PPC barrel held up like a shield that knocked them over. "Alpha Company, we're late to a fight. Move it!"

Commodore Itoro watched as another of his dropships got split in two by an internal explosion...probably the H2 tanks were breached, and they had additional armor plating encapsulating them so such a thing *would not* happen, but the naval grade lasers provided such a strong punch that if they found a hole in the outer armor, they could go through the tank armor without much effort and explosively mix it with oxygen from the dropship's internal atmosphere.

One of those four massively powerful lasers was now offline. Itoro had his dropships surrounding the warship, but only on the top side. The blocky vessel that didn't have a single curve in its construction was actually shaped like a rainbow so that it could wrap itself around a jumpship's hull and still stay within the hyperspace bubble. So from the front it looked like a fat curve comprised of blocky extensions here and there, but from the top and sides it still looked like a gigantic brick.

But the curve meant the underside of that brick had a cavity in it, and within that cavity were two of the naval grade lasers. They could not be targeted from the sides, only the front or back...or directly from underneath since space didn't have any 'ground' to it. The two on the top side, however, could fire to cover the flanks of the ship as well.

It was one of those two that had been taken out...on the port flank, and Itomo had all his ships firing on the area of the hull where the other one was on the starboard. As it was, only one naval laser was firing at his fleet right now, because the warship's curved structure didn't allow the ones on the underside to shoot at his ships that were clustered above it.

The *Lion's Den* kept shifting, however, to bring the other two into range...meaning Itoro's fleet had to keep dancing

around it to stay on target and out of the line of fire of the other two as the remaining naval grade laser continued to punch holes in his dropships that he had spinning in place to make it difficult to line up two shots in the same position.

But the warship had plenty of other weaponry on it. Regular lasers, PPCs, missile launchers, and autocannons. Those were damaging the hulls of the dropships in many places, enough that when the naval laser got around to them they had plenty of spots to shoot to go the rest of the way through.

That alone didn't mean the dropships would explode, and a lot were fighting with decompressed bays from such holes, but a shot to the upper portions where the bridge was immediately put a dropship out of the fight, and two of his ships were already drifting helplessly as the two previously-avoided naval lasers on the warship rotated around and took aim at them for sport since they had nothing else to shoot at the moment.

Eventually, though, his ships landed enough firepower on the area of the second naval laser that some of it hit square on and knocked it out...at which point the warship stopped rotating to try and shake the 'fleas' off its back, and just accelerated hard towards its own approaching dropships.

And it was in that moment that Itoro knew he had his chance.

He ordered his ships to stay on the topside of it, and all of them had better acceleration than the warship...except some of the damaged ones that limped behind. His original 28 dropships were now down to 21, and of those 4 were slow to follow.

That gave him 17 keeping pace with the *Lion's Den* and hammering its topside, trading weaponsfire with the conventional batteries as he ordered his ships to not try and pluck off those weapons, but to hit the engine compartment that the warship was so graciously showing them with no further maneuvering.

Admiral Neeva must have lost his mind. This was as rookie a maneuver as you could get. They were running for help

and ignoring the fact that the battle was still continuing. At the minimum they should have been spinning on their axis to spread out the damage and make his dropships continue to move around to stay out of the two remaining big guns' firing arcs. But no. They were effectively just sitting there thrusting hard to get closer to the 13 dropships that were still some 10+ minutes away.

Ito knew he could not take mercy on them. Any delay would allow their reinforcements to catch up in time to assist the warship. He had to take it out now, and the first step was to take out its engine vents...and the next would be to penetrate into its own fuel tanks, get through the supplemental armor there, and use its own fuel as a weapon against it.

He didn't have the big naval lasers to do it, but he had enough dropships...some with extra weaponry on them in case of the pocket warships...to chew on through, despite the fact that all the supplemental missiles had already been fired to take out the first naval grade laser.

Admiral Neeva didn't know what to do. He found himself wandering the hallways of the warship he'd just been dispossessed of as he both heard and felt the incoming hits. There was no artificial gravity in this part of the ship, so he was bouncing off walls as the ship maneuvered this way and that...then something horrific happened.

The ship stopped maneuvering and artificial gravity suddenly pulled him down to the deck...meaning the warship was thrusting forward in a straight line at maximum acceleration. He could tell by the pull on his body.

But the incoming blasts were still ongoing.

Commander Chester had lost his god damn mind!

There was no way the *Lion's Den* could chase down fleeing dropships. It didn't have the speed. So the only reason they would be running in a straight line was to flee, probably in the direction of their own dropships.

And he knew, in that moment, that not only his own career was over, but that this ship was going to be destroyed.

The former Admiral ran through the decks, climbing ladders to get 'higher' in the ship...which actually meant more forward...until he got further away from the explosions on the hull. That told him the upper side was getting hammered more than the underside, so he headed for one of the lifeboats on the underside and was thankful that he didn't run into a decompressed area, either locked down or one in the making.

He pulled the emergency handle and the airlock door opened. He climbed through and sealed it behind him, then slid through the already open second door into the lifeboat itself and into the pilot's seat.

The inner door sealed at the press of a button, and he turned his head to visually confirm it had not gotten jammed. The green indicator light over it confirmed a good seal, and the one next to it that was blue indicated that the door was also locked, so no accidental leaning on the handle could jar it open.

Neeva executed the launch program, and explosive bolts on the ship's outer hull blew away the armor covering the lifeboat and created a pathway into space that he could see out of a very thick and narrow viewport ahead of him.

A few moments later he hit the launch button, visually confirming there was no debris in the way...and the fact that the ship was not twisting made the launch even easier. The lifeboat was shot out on a compressed gas cannon, getting it enough initial momentum to clear the ship and drift 'down' away from the ship.

Fortunately Neeva had ended up in one of the few *Life Raft*-class lifeboats the warship carried, and he used its thrusters to twist it around so he could look backwards...where he saw the swarm of Morten dropships hammering the top side near the engine compartment with no response from the helmsman to try and shake them off. That made the shots they were firing into it damn easy to aim, while all the Morten dropships were moving about and spinning on their axes so the active guns on the topside of the warship could not hit the same spot twice without very good aiming, and then not at all as those spots rotated around to face away from the warship.

This was even worse than he feared, and as his lifeboat drifted further away, the warship continued to thrust on, moving it to his left and quickly shrinking it to a dot. Neeva didn't activate his emergency beacon just yet, but he did turn on his radar...seeing half-destroyed dropships in the other direction.

He had a lifeboat that was empty save for him. The least he could do was see if there were any survivors out there that he could pick up...because he wasn't worried that the mercenaries would come back to shoot their lifeboats. He doubted they would have a chance to...and as he maneuvered the lifeboat on the proper trajectory and used some of his limited fuel to thrust in their direction on a gentle course that would take more than half an hour to reach the debris field, he spun back around and coasted backwards for a while, watching the distant specs and trying to glean any knowledge of what was happening to his former ship.

He couldn't make out anything at this range, but his radar could, and he saw the dropships coming up from Cholis were getting close to an intercept.

And then the *Lion's Den* exploded...which he *could* see with his own eyes.

Itoro would win the day with his remaining dropships, and the mechs on the surface would no longer have any way off the planet. They were trapped down there, and for their sake, he hoped they could win and hold out the months it would take for one of their jumpships watching from the star to leave, travel back to their landhold on Woodbine, and return here with more dropships to either resupply or evacuate them.

Though if the Mortens held on to enough of their own dropships by the end of this fight, it was going to be doubtful that the Lion's Teeth Legion would even be able to get relief dropships to the surface again without a naval fight first.

Neeva activated the comm on the standard emergency channel and started picking up a little chatter from the shattered dropships ahead. There were lifeboats out there too, thankfully, but some of the dropships that had been torn apart

still had their bridges intact, apparently, and he tried for nearly 6 minutes to contact one on a standard channel before giving up. Either the transmitter wasn't working or they were ignoring him.

He used the radar on the Life Raft to find one of the drifting Morten standard lifeboats that had no thrusters. Only a gyroscope to stabilize them from twisting end over end as they floated helplessly wherever they drifted. He saw a few of the smaller Escape Pods maneuvering on their thrusters, and they were actually equipped to survive reentry to a planet. His Life Raft was *not* designed for that, but as a sort of command and control center for survivors with enhanced thrusters so he could find and attach to standard lifeboats and group them together.

He had room for four people in here, while standard lifeboats held six, and Neeva headed for the closest Morten one at a crawl. By the time he got there the naval battle behind him was long over, with the results unknown, but these lifeboats were drifting further and further away from the debris field, and keeping them closer to the semi-intact dropships, the better chance there would be of them getting picked up.

He maneuvered alongside his target, using as little thrust as possible, then docked with it. He tried the comm again, getting nothing, so he just let whoever was in there sit rather than opening the airlock, and used his thrusters to pull them both in the direction of another wayward lifeboat.

They'd get there eventually some hours later, losing any chance of intercepting others that were now far too out of range. He used another of the four docking ports on the Life Raft to mate with the second lifeboat then activated his emergency beacon and just sat there. Opening up the airlock would be a good way to get himself killed when they saw his Lion's Teeth uniform, but the three lifeboats stuck together would make it easier for the surviving Morten dropships to collect their two, and with them they'd also pick him up.

He just hoped they weren't the vengeful sort.

When Commander Lenning finally got eyes on the Comstar compound, it was through a gap between the trees ahead and the city buildings on the right. The walled compound was actually set partially inside the city, with about 3/4ths of it sticking out into a piece of the forest to the north that had been carved out of the trees. But around that walled compound was 120 meters of paved tarmac that he walked his Warhammer out onto and immediately got hit by a pair of Lion's Teeth mechs that turned away from a growing hole in the perimeter wall to shoot at the newcomers.

Lenning walked left, clearing the way for the rest of Alpha Company to follow him out, and torso twisted back right, firing both PPCs on the 40 ton Vulcan that hit him with an underpowered AC2, then the Shadow Hawk beside it hit him with a larger AC5 burst, which was five mass units of rounds fired in rapid succession as opposed to two. Depending on the type of autocannon, that could be fired in a single high caliber round or a stream of smaller ones. Either way, the kinetic impact totaled the same after 10 seconds, which is how they were rated.

The Vulcan immediately turned and ran back towards the other mercenary mechs that had gotten stretched out around the perimeter of the base, while the Shadow Hawk stood its ground. Whether that was because the pilot was gutsy or didn't realize his buddy had left, but by the time the four heavy mech in Alpha Company came into view he should have already been sprinting away from them.

Instead he tried to zigzag backwards, firing as he went. All that did was delay him enough that the Rifleman and Warhammer behind Lenning's own stayed in range long enough to smoke him. The damage done in exchange was minimal to his mechs, and the Shadow Hawk crumped into a slouching pile billowing smoke as the cockpit opened up and the pilot climbed out in a hurry. He dropped to the ground, probably breaking his leg in the process, then rolled around to put out the flames on the back of his jacket as Alpha Company walked on either side of him and his mech, firing into the distance at the Vulcan and

the scattering of mechs beyond it that were just starting to become aware of their presence rather than the Comstar defense turrets and brave infantry that were popping missiles over the walls at the mechs seemingly at random.

Lenning continued firing with his PPCs down the 'trench' to his right that headed back deeper into the city, with three other mechs coming up alongside him in a line. They worked their way forward, meeting the lighter resistance and hammering them hard. Some got away, some didn't, then when the four mechs' forward armor started to get a little chewed up, they stopped and let the four behind them take the lead as they fell back to become the third row.

They didn't break that formation until they got to the corner of the Comstar compound box, in front of which was a huge number of mechs heading their way from the east.

Alpha Company retreated backwards behind cover and spread out, with Beta Company coming up behind them, and waiting around the corner for the mercenaries to come, then pounded each mech as it turned the corner. Nine of them went down before the other mercenaries took the cue not to poke out around the edge.

"Aaron, pop up and see what's cooking."

"On it," he said, walking his Victor up near the Comstar wall and hitting his jump jets. He didn't go in any direction, simply up and down, but it was enough to get his cockpit above the wall and able to look inside as well as down the other paved lane outside it.

"They're starting to break through the wall. Hammering a gate I think. They've got a Company or two knotted up waiting for us ahead of that."

"Guys in the green up front," he ordered. "When we go, get twenty meters past the corner along the wall and stop. Everyone else fill in the line heading perpendicular to that wall. I want us stretched all the way to the city buildings before we start advancing. As many lines of fire as we can get on these guys. Lennox, you're the first guy around the corner."

“Yippie,” he said deadpan, stepping up almost to the opening. “Say when.”

He waited for the other mechs to shuffle around a bit, as if they were all stepping up to a cross country start line. “Go,” he said, surging his mech forward as well.

One by one they emerged around the corner and started taking fire, with Lennox hugging the wall closely and stopping as he opened up on the closest mechs. Then Bradley did the same on his shoulder...and Harold...and Markinson. All 12 of Alpha Company’s mechs started firing the moment they each got into position, then when they were shoulder to shoulder in a straight line, Lenning ordered them to start marching forward at 20 kph as Beta Company circled around them and dove through the outside gap on the ferrocrete one or two at a time sprinting ahead along the city buildings and throwing in their firepower without getting in front of Alpha Company’s firing lane.

The medium and light mechs held their ground for about twenty seconds, then began retreating after a few of them went down and the Morten mechs seemed to keep increasing in number. They pushed them back near a smoking turret they’d taken down, with one of the little infantry guys popping up over the wall and firing a shoulder-mounted SRM at Lennox.

The mechwarrior turned to face the wall and activated his external speaker at maximum volume, which was still hard to hear over the roar of weaponsfire.

“Do not shoot my mech you dipshits! We’re here to take down the mercenaries, not you.”

Whether they heard him or no one else was brave enough to poke up over the wall, no more missiles came their way, but a few more did from further ahead as Markinson’s mech seemed to become the mutual target of the Lion’s Teeth, with most of their firepower now focused on him.

“Slide behind Harold, Marky.”

He didn’t respond, but his smoking mech stopped walking then turned to the side as its left arm was hit so bad it

broke and was dangling from the shoulder joint before he got cover behind the line.

The mercenaries didn't have time to coordinate fire again on Alpha Company, for by this time Beta had gotten so far ahead they were actually flanking them on the run and started taking down the corner of the loose Lion's Teeth formation.

At which point, they all turned and ran as fast as they could.

"Full speed, Alpha," Lenning said, but the gap was already increasing and continued to do so. They got a few more mechs, and Beta even more than that, but the mercenaries had the faster mechs and they eventually got out of range and off the Comstar compound, heading around the safety of the city edge probably headed back to join up with their heavier mechs to the south.

"Vander, are they all gone?"

"Looks like it. I'm not seeing anything on the north, west, or east side beyond the walls."

"You want us to hold here?"

"No. Keep going east and Grady will circle back around to you. He's heading north with a pack on his tail."

"What are the rest of the mercenaries up to?"

"Grocery shopping," Vander said heavily. "We can't do anything about them until the rest of our mechs show up."

"How bad?"

"The spaceport is trashed and what's left of the militia is running back to Delta. Apparently they had orders to stand their ground no matter what. The smart ones contacted us and we're adopting them effective immediately."

"That bastard of a Duke."

"Save it for later. At this rate he might not even survive."

"Are they torching buildings?"

"Everything they come across," Vander said heavily. "I don't think they want any witnesses left alive."

Polly Vren launched from the Morten airstrip just before the main body of mechs made it to the city in her Centurion aerospace fighter and did a few laps around the Estate grounds while the rest of her squadron got into the air...then they headed as a group at high speed towards the battle, having been ordered to hold back until now.

They were only the Ardent Falcons, for all the other aerospace fighters in the Morten Protectorate were off guarding other planets. That meant 14 fighters, for added to the squadron were two 100 ton Stukas that out-massed every mech on the ground. Her 30 ton Centurion was a lot more maneuverable, but didn't have nearly as much firepower. Fortunately the mercenaries hadn't brought any aerospace fighters of their own to ground, so the only incoming fire they had to worry about was from the mechs...who would hopefully be so distracted with the Morten mechs that they'd not even notice the fighters and give them easy strafing runs.

That's why they'd been held back until now, but with the green light given they were ordered to the north of the city away from the soon to be brawl to the south, with orders to assist the three Companies up there that were already down 5 mechs.

"Single file strafing runs by flights. Stukas are free for all," Squadron Leader Dan Trevor ordered just as the weaponsfire on the horizon became visible.

"Flight three, behind me by numbers," Polly said, being the third flight leader, officially labeled Ardent 9, with the others being Ardent 10, 11, and 12. She saw the others forming up and knew to take the starboard position in the squadron, then picked a heavy Crusader that was trailing behind the other mercs as Commander Grady had his three Companies moving constantly to the northeast, drawing out the enemy lines.

"Thank you, Grady," Polly whispered, because it made the spacing between them larger and easier to isolate the target mech. "Going for the Crusader," she told her flight, getting a bit lower to the ground then discharging all three of her Medium Lasers into the back of the mech as she flashed past and turned

south, banking back around the way they had come to set up for another pass on the rear armor of the enemy mechs.

It took her about 20 seconds to do so, with her hanging around another 8 so her flight could catch up to her, then she went back in on the Crusader and hit it again as it stupidly just kept walking towards the other mechs and exposing its back armor...then again, the fighters could circle around from any direction to get behind it, so it didn't really have any recourse except to turn into them and shoot back.

It didn't do that, but a laser flashed so close to Polly after she passed it that her entire body convulsed once in shock, then she was hard banking away and weaving back and forth hoping to avoid another shot to *her* backside.

When she got clear and circled around, she saw the Crusader standing still and gushing smoke as a parachute above it slowly sank towards the ground nearby.

"First kill, flight," she congratulated them. "Let's go get another one."

Zax Bilby was strapped into his pilot's seat in the cockpit of one of House Morten's attack helicopters as 38 others cruised over the treetops enroute to the fight breaking out to the southwest of Brinestorm. His orders were simple. Stay along the edges and snipe targets of opportunity with his missile launchers, but not to get in close and try to hit anything with his machine guns. The mechs needed as much additional firepower as possible, but VTOLs didn't carry the armor plating that aerospace fighters did, and they pretty much went down with a single shot from a mech laser.

His VTOL was better suited for anti-infantry missions and non-lethal support roles, but it had the firepower to smoke small tanks one on one, just not mechs. He'd gotten a long lecture before they'd boarded their craft while watching the bits and pieces of live footage they were getting from the front lines. Their VTOL commander, Colonel Tarney, had got to the point of yelling trying to impress on Zax and the others that one wrong move around that many mechs would end them in an

instant. House Morten needed them alive and their craft intact, not more junk on the battlefield to clean up later. For this mission they were mobile missile turrets and nothing else. He didn't want anyone going off on their own trying to do more than that.

Some of the other guys' attack helicopters did have a small laser in the front, and there would probably be times when they were tempted to get in closer and use it. The Colonel was flat out ordering them not to. The battlefield was going to be chaotic enough that maneuvering their 4+ squadrons with enough room to evade as necessary was going to be a headache. Each 8 chopper squadron liked to keep close to each other so they could see out the side of their cockpits where they were and didn't have to rely on radar, but with as many dots on the screen to his lower left as there were now just from the helicopters, it already felt cramped, and they hadn't even caught up to the last of the mechs getting to the big melee fight ahead.

But they were moving much faster, which was why they had been held back to leave as the last combat troops heading towards the city. When Zax finally got close enough to see explosions of light and smoke on the horizon, his adrenaline started to spike even before the Colonel's voice came over his noise-dampening headset, for the choppers' rotors were so damn loud you couldn't hear a fucking thing without the ear protection.

"Steel Hornets," he said from a transport chopper trailing them that he was using as a mobile HQ rather than piloting one of the attack helicopters himself, "swing up around the north flank. Iron Hornets, northwest. Silver Hornets, west flank, and Gold Hornets...I want you to move as far south as you can then swing up around and try to hit some of them from behind coming from the southeast. Move it, or you'll be late. Don't get close enough for them to take any shots at you until you're in position."

"Let's move it, Goldies," Squadron leader Jason Tallo said, tilting his chopper to the right with the other 7, including

Zax, following in turn. They became a long line of gray objects skirting across the horizon until they left the tree cover behind, then they looked like the Hornets that were their namesake, collecting into a closer packed group as they flew as fast as they could to get all the way around the perimeter of the nasty fight that was going down.

The Colonel was right. Mechs were down everywhere, from both sides, and if they didn't hurry opportunities would be lost to take some of the mercenaries out before they could do more damage to the Morten mechs.

They eventually got all the way behind the enemy lines, seeing some mechs fleeing to the far east. Tallo told them to ignore those...they weren't shooting the Morten mechs at the moment, and they needed to trim down the incoming firepower as much as they could, so they came up behind some of the larger mercenary mechs and targeted them from 800 meters out, which was the approximate range limit of the LRMs.

Zax combined his missiles with three of his squadronmates' on an 80 ton Zeus assault mech, while the other four targeted a 65 ton Thunderbolt. The Zeus kept firing forward, ignoring the attack helicopters, but the Thunderbolt did not. It spun around and launched a flight of LRM 15s at the choppers.

"Machine guns!" Tallo yelled, and as Zax saw the missiles heading for him or the chopper to his right, he pointed the pair of machine guns in the general direction and fired even as he drifted his chopper to the left at the last moment.

With 8 helicopters firing a total of 16 machine guns, they were able to hit 6 of the 15 missiles and knock them out, but the rest came in at their target...and Zax got hit by three of them.

Two hit the rotors and shredded them, but the third hit the right side of his chopper midway back and blew through the light armor plating enough to send shrapnel into the innards. It missed his cockpit, but his chopper fell from the sky and hard landed on its left side some 20 meters down.

Zax got slammed into the side of his padded pilot's chair enough that he could feel the metal frame underneath the padding on his shoulder...which broke, then the hull of the chopper continued to roll until it was upside down and he was hanging by his safety straps.

He wanted to swear, but his mouth was bloody and he was just having a hard time breathing. He smelled smoke, but couldn't see or feel any fire, but there was no way to raise the cockpit with the ground pinning it in place above his inverted head.

Once his head stopped ringing he released the straps and fell 'up' onto the reinforced glass that was an extra 4 inches thick in the Morten version of the attack helicopters. He could see through it fine out the front, but his sidearm wasn't going to be able to shoot through it and get him out. Fortunately the designers had prepared for this situation, because there was an emergency escape hatch in the floor that he got to work on. It wasn't as simple a matter as pulling a handle, but he eventually removed the clasps on it and jerked hard.

It didn't budge at first, then he took advantage of it being above him rather than below and hung from it, jerking his weight around until it finally pulled free. He grabbed a survival bag from a side compartment and started to climb out, burning his hand as soon as he placed it on the outside hull.

"Shit," he said, rubbing it on his pant leg again and again trying to get the pain to go away. When it did, he pulled on his pilot's gloves that he never wore when he needed a light feel on the joystick, then gingerly tried again. They held up against the heat long enough, so he climbed up, dragging his pack behind him, then stepped off the edge and dropped to the charred grass all around the chopper.

He was standing inside a ring of fire, for the crash had ignited the grass and it was spreading out around him. Zax let it get a bit further, coughing through the thin smoke in the center, then saw it die down in one spot and ran off through that gap, getting further away as more missiles were raining out of the other helicopters towards the mechs.

They had to be almost out by now, and would be heading back to the Estate to rearm and return, assuming there were any mechs left by that point to fire at.

His squadron ignored him on the ground, and that was for the best. Trying to climb in behind one of them in the cockpit was doable, but you had to be a contortionist, and he didn't feel like putting himself in a position to get shot down a second time when he couldn't be behind the stick, so he just started walking further to the south to find a gentle hillside to camp out on as he watched the battle taking place about a mile away.

He didn't want to be in their retreat path, for sure, but there was a line of damaged mechs heading back due east towards where their landing zone had been, so he didn't think there was any issue with him camping out here until it was over.

Zax sat down, and when he did his shoulder remembered that it was broken. How did he climb out with it this bad?

Maybe it was just torn rather than broken, but 'broken' felt like the right word. His head was also aching, probably a concussion, but his right arm was fine and he used it to start tearing into the survival pack and found some pain killer pills along with a bottle of water. He had to have the water, for he couldn't have swallowed them without it, and after he got two down he just sat there, with his body waking up to the damage more and more with each passing moment, as well over 300 mechs tore into each other ahead of him.

He sat there for a few minutes, then a bright light hit his eyes and his face got very hot. He twisted to the side, covering his eyes with his arm too late, and tried to blink away the laser glare.

"Stupid!" he cursed himself, then was overjoyed when he could vaguely see the ground beneath him...meaning his eyes hadn't been burnt out by the 'spit' from one of the mechs' lasers that had made it all the way out to his position.

It was then he realized he was still wearing his helmet. He hadn't even noticed it there, and the visor that came down

to his nose had probably just saved his eyes. The rest of his face and neck...the only exposed skin on his fully suited body...felt like it had instantly got sunburnt, and the grass he sat on was smoking slightly. Cooked enough to sizzle but not quite enough to catch flame.

Zax grabbed up his pack and hobbled over the shallow hillside and lay down there, his eyes still overloaded and carrying an afterimage of red light. The grass, he could tell in his peripheral vision, was not scorched on this side...line of sight, after all...so as long as he lay down there and was below the crest of the shallow hill, he couldn't get hit again.

Unless a mech came this way and stepped on him, or an errant missile landed nearby.

Zax laid face down into the ground, keeping his helmet on, and just waited it out as his eyes slowly recovered. The Colonel would have scolded him for being stupid enough to sightsee this close to laser combat where every miss kept going until it hit something. He was just glad it had spread out enough, and ionized enough gas molecules enroute, not to fry him on the spot.

Bit by bit his vision slowly returned, and by the time the sound of combat was gone the glowing spot in his vision had reduced down to a much smaller dot, giving him back more and more vision.

He eventually crawled up the hill until his helmet poked over the top, trying to see who had won...and found a carpet of destroyed or partially destroyed mechs everywhere. The few that were still walking around were Morten ones, and while he had to tilt his eyes to the side in order to see forward, he noticed a lot more further to the east and heading that way.

He crawled back and pulled out the emergency radio in the pack, then started broadcasting an automated pickup call as he laid down, glad that the pain in his shoulder was diminishing rather than increasing, and just closed his eyes, suddenly very tired...but still seeing the light show even behind his shut lids.

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Grady's mech was shot to hell, but he was still in the fight. His right arm Large Laser was toast, leaving him with the other one in his left side and a couple of mediums in the left torso. His armor status showed plates in yellow, orange, and red, and one of his jump jets was out, meaning if he used them he'd lift off balance and tip. He could adjust for that, but only gain a half distance hop at best, though his fuel for them was also low.

Of the three Companies' 36 mechs that were now under his command, only 26 were still operational, and most of those had significant damage as they walked to the south away from what had been their primary engagement zone as the Lion's Teeth Legion Companies they'd sent after him had gotten chewed to pieces in a mix of a tonnage mismatch and a bag of tactics Grady had pulled out that the mercenaries could not handle, more for the most part.

The enemy had had numbers on him though, and that's where most of the damage had come from. Medium mechs could take down heavies and assaults if there were more of them, and it looked like there had been at least five Companies dispatched to come after him or after the Comstar base. The two fights had ended up grouped together, and all but a few of those 60 mechs were down.

The rest had ran, using their superior speed, for none of the House Morten medium mechs were in Grady's three Companies at the moment. They were back at the main brawl that Vander was reporting in every now and then. Grady would check with him when he got a moment's break, but otherwise the Lord of Military Operations knew better than to try and chat with him during a fight.

Right now that battle appeared to be over, with the survivors fleeing back east to where their base camp had been. They probably didn't even know it was destroyed at this point, and Grady wasn't going to let them regroup and maybe kill another one or two of his mechs, so he was bringing what was left of his three Companies in on top of the retreating line from the north and challenging them to either stand down, power down, and disembark their mechs...or engage them, and most of their war machines looked just as bad as Grady's did.

Only he was in an assault mech and the ones coming out of the fight were mediums and lights.

A group of Phoenix Hawks that registered as House Morten on the IFF pings were coming up from the south in a pincher move, and their speed was far greater than any of Grady's mechs could match, but the Lion's Teeth wounded mechs did not stop, and instead tried to run straight through the two closing claws.

It was only then that Grady saw it. Three dropships were coming down to the east...and two were slowing. Another one was angling to the north and trailing a massive amount of smoke, going too fast to stop now. The Mech Commander winced as he saw it hit in the distance and explode in the farm belt region northeast of the city. It took several seconds for the shockwave to actually hit his mech, but it rattled it none the less as the other two, also smoking, set down under power...with the Lion's Teeth Legion mechs running as hard towards them as they could.

Even damaged, they were still faster than Grady's Companies, but not faster than the Phoenix Hawks.

Grady shot a passing Blackjack that was no faster than his Victor with burst from his Large Laser, but his mediums were out of range. He hit it in the left shoulder, severing the already damaged arm that dropped to the ground and caught a bit of grass on fire. It didn't spread much, but there were little fires all across the horizon from burning bits of mech and errant laser blasts. Smoke was everywhere and drifting to the west, leaving Grady's field of view mostly unobstructed.

He kept walking his mech forward into the flow, cutting off the other fleers who, for the most part, wanted no fight with the wall of Victors and Riflemans and Warhammers now crossing in front of them, and they finally heeded the calls to surrender, stopping their mechs where they were and powering down their fusion reactors.

The others the Phoenix Hawks chased after, nailing several from behind and making the takedowns before the rest got back to their dropships and clustered around the base of them, for no ramps were lowering to let them onboard.

"Vander, what's going on upstairs?"

"A bloodbath, but it's over now. Those dropships that came down near you are the last they have. Everything else was destroyed, and they took more than half of ours with them."

"What about that warship?"

"Spacejunk."

"Itomo came through then. Good for him."

"His dropship got hit," Vander said solemnly. "If he survived, he's off comm."

"Damn it all," Grady said, not wanting to ask the next question either. "How many of our laddies did we lose?"

"If you mean mechs, 68 are down. I don't know yet how many mechwarriors survived. Add in the choppers, birds, and dropships, we're looking at maybe 300 or more dead. And that's not even counting the people in the city."

"What about the city?"

"They were taking down buildings for the fun of it. The whole southeast corner was turned into rubble before our main force arrived. They came out to the plains to fight, though. So the damage in there is all their doing."

"I have surrendering mechs out here. Can you get some security vehicles to pick up the mechwarriors?"

"As soon as they finish near the city they'll be out to you."

"What do you want to do about the two dropships?"

“Don’t engage. They have nowhere to go. If they lift they’ll be destroyed by what’s left of our fleet. Just let them sit for now. I’m seeing about 20 or so mechs with them.”

“Yeah. Some of the little buggers got past us. Orders?”

“Stay with the surrendering mechs so they don’t get any ideas until our hovercraft get out there to take possession. After that, we’re setting up a mobile repair base to the south of the main battlefield. Our dropships are busy picking up lifeboats and dealing with their own damage.”

“For future reference,” Grady added. “The energy-only packages we’re running were the right call. A lot of these mercenaries were operating with empty loads on half their weapons by the time we got to them. It was worth the tradeoff.”

“Says somebody sitting in an assault mech,” Vander pointed out, given that the autocannons and missiles gave mechs a much larger initial punch before they ran out of ammunition.

“Aye. How many little mechs did we lose?”

“About half. They didn’t fight stupidly, there were just so many enemies that poking around the edges got nasty when they were noticed.”

“If I’d known they were going to hit the city, I’d have got more mechs in position earlier,” he said, slamming a fist down against his right leg. “What in the blazes was their objective anyway?”

“Hard to say. We’ll have to ask them once we get the prisoners rounded up.”

“Is Stephan there?”

“No. He’s heading out to you on a chopper and taking command of the field base. He just had it out with the Duke over the comm. The bastard thinks he’s laying claim to the salvage and has ordered our mechs back to the Estate despite the fact the mercenaries were only 6 blocks away from burning his palace to the ground before we showed up. Didn’t even bother to say ‘thank you.’ Oh, and two of the militia mechs survived and are now working for us effective immediately after

the Duke told them to stand their ground and die at the spaceport.”

“The Davions sure know how to pick ‘em,” Grady said, choosing to let Stephan get angry at that and deal with his own problems. “Do you want me to try to negotiate with the dropships, or have you found a commanding officer out there somewhere?”

“Everything is still a mess and we’re just starting to pick up the pieces. Keep an eye on their active mechs and just make sure they stay near the dropships. Stephan or I will deal with the Captains when they feel like talking. Right now they’re not.”

“Copy that,” Grady said, twisting his Victor around and surveying the battlefield. “Phoenix hawks,” he said on the open comm because he didn’t know which Company they had come from. “Head on back and provide security for the field base we’re about to set up to the south. I’ll worry about the dropships.”

“On the way, Grady,” Arne Keev said as the group of scrawny mechs started to dart their way across the grasslands. “Bye the way, your mech looks like shit. I hope the Comstar base looks just as bad.”

“Unfortunately no. And I would call you a little mercenary shit right now, but after today I don’t think that applies anymore.”

“After today, I have an equal hatred for mercenaries. Thanks for not stepping on me out here way back when.”

“This isn’t over yet. Not until every one of those enemy mechs and prisoners is secured. Consider it a live battlefield as long as those dropships are here too.”

“I’m no rookie. We’ll stay on task.”

“Good,” Grady said, cutting him off. That man always annoyed him. And he hoped Stephan wouldn’t be adopting any Lion’s Teeth mechwarriors after all of this was sorted out. He’d rather deal with bringing raw recruits up to standards than converting mercenary trash. Though in the case of Keev, he couldn’t really complain. Stephan had made a good call on that one, but he still didn’t like the guy.

The *Azure Pearl* had been taken out, not with a hit from the big guns on the warship, but with a lot of the 'smaller' guns on the Lion's Teeth Legion dropships. It had taken a few hits from the warship's regular weaponry, then got pounded so bad in the second wave of fighting that both the floor and the ceiling of the bridge compartment had blown through from different sides, making a porcupine lattice of broken beams puncturing work stations and crisscrossing with each other on one side while the rest had been spared the explosive damage, but not the gradual decompression.

Dropship hulls...at least the Morten conversions anyway...had an insulating gel placed just inside the outer layer. It helped keep heat in or out, but it was also designed to expand in near vacuum. So if there were small holes made they would seal up on their own. The 'Self Sealing Gel' was damn expensive, but building quality equipment always was, and in the almost brand new Flight Systems Unlimited corporation on Drymo every dropship blueprint they used had the gel included as standard equipment.

Thankfully the *Azure Pearl*, which had been purchased secondhand, had been upgraded with the gel and a few other small changes when they'd overhauled it. But the holes tore into the ship now were too large for the gel to seal. It had only slowed the leak, with the bridge now down to .6 atmospheres of pressure...though other decks had none at all.

Yoshi Itomo was still on the bridge, unconscious and pinned beneath a bulkhead when a rescue crew forced open the bridge door and floated inside through a temporary airlock made of little more than some thick plastic and instant adhesive to fit it around the door frame...which meant the other side was completely without air.

Four people were still alive on the bridge, and the crew quickly gave them spare envirosuits that they pulled on with a hurry and sealed up, then were able to breath normally inside them as they were ushered through the airlock one at a time and back through the confines of the ship to a breach point in

the hull where a rope was attached. It crossed through the vacuum of space to the nearby *Hazel Egg's* blasted open aerofighter bay door. The dropship had other visible damage, but no gaping holes in it other than that bay, through which the line had been attached and more suited individuals were coming out and over to the flagship, hand walking along the rope on the 'top' side while the evacuees were doing the same underneath.

When the rescue crews got the last of the bridge crew off, they checked the two bodies that were visible just in case. The one that was free floating was Lieutenant Henderson...who was missing one half of his head. The other was the Commodore with his arm impaled with a bulkhead pinning his body to the floor.

But when they check for life signs, they found he wasn't quite dead yet and tried to free him from the bulkhead as they placed a portable breath mask over his face, but that would only work so long. Decompression would destroy the body even if you had air in your lungs, and as it was his skin was starting to redden as the blood began to push outward through it as the air pressure diminished more and more.

The rescue crews tried to pry the bulkhead off him enough to pull him free, but it wouldn't budge. They got a cutting torch and started to work through it, but the air was dropping too low and one of the emergency medics pointed to his arm, with them noticing that it was smashed down to a thickness of less than an inch.

"The bone has to be crushed," the medic said over the comm between the suits. "Even if we get the bulkhead off him, he'll lose the arm. We can't repair crushed bone, and he's going to die from decompression anyway. We need to sever the arm now," he said gravely.

"With this?" the guy with the torch asked, aghast.

The medic pulled out a syringe from a briefcase-like medical kit and injected the already unconscious Itomo with as strong a sedative as he could risk, then he looked up at the torch wielder.

"Make it a fast, throughout cut. Then I'll cap the stub. Hinni," he said to another of the rescue crew. "Pull the suit onto his legs and as far up as you can."

"You want me to burn the Commodore?" the torch wielder asked a second time.

"If we leave him here a few more minutes he'll die, and his arm is already a loss. We have to do this to save him. Give me the torch if you won't."

"You don't know how to use it," the engineer said grimly, setting himself over the Commodore with it unlit, then put the end down right next to the bulkhead where the arm was pinned underneath. "It should cut easy enough. Tell me when."

The medic waited until Hinni had got the suit on the body as far as she could without getting the material close to the arm and torch. "Now!"

The engineer lit the high powered emergency plasma torch and cut through the Commodore's arm as close to the metal as possible to preserve as much of it as he could. Four seconds later it was over and they were pulling the body into the suit, with a white patch of cloth with some sort of goo applied to the charred stump of an arm before the pressure suit went over it and was sealed up.

When it was, the missing right arm inflated anyway, making it look like the Commodore was intact as they hauled him out the airlock, across the rope, and into the aerofighter bay where another temporary airlock let them enter the otherwise intact *Overlord*-class dropship and float the unconscious fleet commander to the medical room where they hooked him up to as much life support equipment as they had available, not sure whether he'd hang on long enough to get him and the other wounded back down to the surface or not.

Three days later Stephan was sitting at a table inside one of 16 tents set up to the south of the city with the carcasses of the mechs still situated in between them and the rubble field that had once been the spaceport and the surrounding buildings. The largest three tents were tall enough to hold

mobile mech bay equipment also flown in from the Estate, inside of which the intact mechs were getting field repairs made...removing dangling limbs, replacing armor plating, cutting free damaged weapons and replacing a few, otherwise leaving those cavities empty.

The mechs that weren't limping but heavily damaged were sent walking back to the Estate, but they still had to keep a good number of them here because of the two dropships and the surviving mercenary mechs stationed around them. But sitting before him now at a fold-out table, was one of several individuals recovered from an escape pod that had made it all the way down to the surface. Several had made it down, actually, with many more still waiting in orbit to be picked up, including the lifeboats that could not reenter atmosphere without burning up, for they weren't designed for it.

The few escape pods that had come down had calculated their orbit well enough to have them fall near the battlefield...except they didn't have the maneuvering capability to fly on the way down, and four of them had landed within a radius of 230 km of the dropships. Stephan's people had picked them up and brought them here...including Colonel Keller, the commander of the entire Lion's Teeth Legion, who was trying to get back to the mechs on the ground to take command.

Only he didn't realize the extent of the rout that had taken place until he'd been brought to the field tents and could see with his own eyes the carnage that had taken place to the north.

And yet, he still wouldn't order the dropships to surrender.

"Make me a better offer," Keller said, sitting with his arms crossed over his chest next to two of his men, and in a far better mood than Stephan despite the fact that he had lost and the First Lord had won...but then again, mercenaries thought everyone was expendable, and House Morten definitely did not tolerate that mindset.

"What options do you think you have, Colonel?"
Stephan ground out, with Roger and six other men standing

around the table with the three mercenaries seated at it in cuffs. The others had been put into the two tents set off to the side of the camp that were holding the enemy survivors that weren't badly wounded. Those were already flown off to the Brinestorm hospital that Stephan had commandeered over the Duke's objection to reserve his own medical staff for his people's needs. The locals could deal with the mercenaries until his own people ran out of wounded to treat.

"You'll lose more mechs assaulting the dropships. I can spare you that."

"You just killed more than 120 of my men...with another 18 that may or may not live out the month. And you have the gall to sit here and dictate terms to me? You're a dishonorable piece of shit who not only killed my people in combat, but murdered who knows how many people in the city. Even for a mercenary, that's lower than low, and you expect that you're somehow going to get out of this and continue to be a mercenary? No, Colonel. Your future is in a prison cell."

"I'd have expected you to be a little more understanding since we were the ones who lost, Lord Morten."

"I'm not."

"And I'm not going to make it easy for you to take our remaining dropships and mechs. If you won't negotiate, you'll have to bleed for it."

"You're not bluffing your way out of this."

"Who's bluffing? I've got nothing left to lose, and you want me to give you those dropships and mechs for free? You're crazy."

"And you're counting on our good nature not to just shoot you."

"I did my research."

"And what exactly were your orders?"

"That's confidential, Lord Morten. I'm sure you can understand that."

"You think this is a game," Stephan said, anger dripping from his voice. "You were sent here to kill me and my family, and probably everyone in the city, and you want to sit here and

treat this like a game? Very well, Colonel. We'll play your game," he said deadpan, pulling out surveillance photos of the Nadir jump point.

He pushed them in front of the mercenary leader, with all three people staring at pictures of the 6 jumpships sitting at the star.

"How long do you think they're going to wait for you?" Stephan asked.

"As long as necessary," Keller said firmly. "We're not in a rush."

"But they will leave eventually, especially considering they don't know that you survived. Someone else will take command and start to rebuild your Legion while you and the others here will be sitting in prison cells for the rest of your lives, or perhaps marooned in a penal colony. Either way, you have no hope of ever being a mercenary again unless you can strike a deal with me. And for your sake, I still have a little bit of negotiating savvy underneath my lingering rage."

"I don't understand."

Stephan pointed at the jumpships. "I want two of them."

The Colonel frowned hard. "Absolutely not!"

"Then your prison cell awaits. Or do you expect they'll launch a raid to free you? Our information says you brought about 2/3rds of your mechs on this assault. Even if they risked the other third in a follow-up, it would not be successful. They might not even make it to ground without your warship providing cover. And do you really think that they'd even want to try after this debacle? From a mercenary perspective, what loyalty are they going to have to a failed...and now assumed dead commanding officer?"

"Unless you execute us, I'm still alive and still in command."

"They don't know that, and I'm not obliged to tell them that you survived. And even if I did, odds say they'd just cut their losses and start to rebuild without you. Depending on what your mission actually was, they can go collect their payoff

and write off the heavy losses as due to your failed decision making. I don't really see any case where they want you back, let alone have the ability to get you back in command. So I'll ask again. How long will those jumpships wait before they consider everyone that came down here a lost cause?"

"There won't be any pay for them to collect," the Colonel said, with the first sign of real fear visible in his eyes. "Our employer came with us. She died onboard the *Lion's Den*. All we got out of this was the down payment."

"Then why do you feel the need to keep the details confidential?"

He glanced to the man on his left for a moment, then nodded. "You make a good point. We were hired because we had a warship capable of orbital bombardment. We were supposed to gain control of orbit and target key buildings on the planet. The mechs would then land and destroy everything else. No survivors. The employer was strict on that."

"Who?"

"Anonymous. We were contacted through a broker and the employer sent their representative. Name was Korra Venni. I did some checking, but she's not listed anywhere, so I assume it was a cover. The promised pay was excellent, so I didn't ask too many questions."

"How much?"

"2.3 billion C-bills, but the information she gave us on you was wrong. It indicated less dropships and less mechs."

"And no aerial assets," the mechwarrior Captain that was now his ranking aid added.

"Then you were set up," Stephan said frankly.

"Why do you say that?" the third man wearing a naval uniform asked, drawing a sneer from the Colonel.

"Because we've had birds in the air over Cholis for years. It's been no secret, and even the laziest reconnaissance couldn't have missed them."

"Why would someone set us up?" Keller demanded.

"If my information is correct, there are only a handful of mercenary units larger than yours, and of those, there's less than 5 that have warships."

"Four, unless you count pocket warships," the Colonel corrected him.

"I'm not. I think your employer had better information about us, and they saw that no mercenary unit would be able to beat us here at our stronghold. So they needed to do something we couldn't defend against...orbital bombardment. But they had to convince you to come, and an even fight isn't very profitable when you lose most of your equipment and troops. So they probably told you what you wanted to hear...that you had an advantage that you could exploit, and while the fighting would get a bit hard, you'd win the day and earn your pay. And that might have come close to being true if you'd maintained your warship, but the ground fighting still would have been hell because we would never have grouped up enough to get picked off with orbital bombardment."

"You mean to say they threw us at you hoping to get lucky?"

"Or to wear us down so the next mercenary unit could finish the job."

The Colonel frowned. "Is there another on the way?"

"Speculation only. But we're considerably weaker now, so other mercenary units smaller than yours can now have a go at us. You see how that works, Colonel?"

"I'm starting to."

"I know who your employer is," Stephan said flatly. "But for your sake it's probably better you don't know. Let's just say that they're one of the major players in the Inner Sphere."

"Who else has that kind of money to throw around?"

"A lot of noble families do, actually. Tell me, how much did that warship cost you?"

The Colonel squirmed in his seat for a moment. "It was a custom job built 70 years ago. It was worth 8 billion on the black market."

"And you risked it to get a payday of 2.3 billion?"

"You weren't supposed to have more than 16 dropships, and nothing was said about them being upgraded into pocket warships. How many did you have?"

"You don't need to know that to pass on to the next guys to take a swing at us," Stephan said, leaning back in his seat and trying to slip into negotiation mode better, but the anger was still there eating away at his skull the longer he stared at this amoral man. "But the point is, you were sent here to be expendable, and your employer knew you'd never risk your warship if they told you what we actually had waiting for it. But they wanted us damaged, and taken out if you got lucky, and they got the damaged part. And it seems they don't even have to pay you what they owe."

"We'll be appealing that with the MRB," he growled. "We didn't achieve all objectives, but we did enough to warrant at least partial payment."

"But it's still nowhere near enough to cover your losses even if they release the full payment. And they probably won't release anything if you're not alive to argue the point. You've been played, Colonel. Played by people that are just as ruthless and dishonorable as you are, and I don't think they're finished with me yet, so I'm willing to make a deal to put us in a better position going forward. If not for that, you'd never see your freedom again."

"And you think that freedom is worth two jumpships?"

"What does that matter to you?"

"Two jumpships, modified as ours are, are worth nearly a billion on their own."

"What good is that if you're staring at the walls of a cell? You have only one path to return to the mercenary profession, and I'm willing to bet that lifestyle is worth more to you than all 6 of your jumpships...and all I'm demanding is two of them. You and your men will be released, you return beaten and humiliated, but you still have a stronger mech force in reserve than most mercenary units out there, and four jumpships to your name...assuming they're not hired contracts?"

"No, they're all ours."

"So you see, you can rebuild from this...but not as a prisoner. And sooner or later those jumpships will leave, and someone else will take command and start rebuilding, forgetting about you and all your captured people here. They'll just write you off as combat losses.

"Let's negotiate something more reasonable," the Colonel said, crossing his fingers as he placed his cuffed hands on the tabletop.

"Cold blooded murderers don't get to claim the title of 'reasonable,'" Stephan said icily.

The Colonel pulled his hands back and they disappeared in his lap beneath the tabletop. "I don't particularly like leveling cities, but I'd be a fool to pass up a billion C-bill job, let alone two, because of some civilian bloodshed. It's a hard business we're in, but we're generally nicer about it than an occupying army. This was just one of those rare cases when total destruction was demanded."

"You could have passed on it."

"Honor doesn't buy mechs. And since you're asking, we were also offered all the loot we could get out of the city and your Estate afterwards. So depending on the rumors, that 2.3 billion could have ended up being a lot more."

"Sifting through the rubble afterwards?"

"No. Your place was going to be spared damage. The employer was going to bring in their own team to look for files or something after the battles were over and the population was exterminated. Everything else, including the mech salvage, was to be ours."

"And look how it actually turned out?"

The Colonel grimaced, having got caught up in his original dreams of riches for a moment despite the stark reality of his current situation. "Point taken."

"You keep the two dropships on the ground here, and the mechs surrounding them. We send you and the other prisoners back up on them, or give you a ride if there are too many to fit. You transfer control of two jumpships to us, then

your dropships are allowed to dock with your others and you leave. I'd take all 6 if I could with my remaining dropships, but they've had enough time to recharge and would just jump out if we approached them. So I'm not getting any of them without brokering a deal. That's the only reason we're talking now. I'd be doing the galaxy a favor by getting you and your men out of the game."

"We'd just be replaced by others less skilled. Power vacuums are always short lived."

"Yes, they are. But I doubt your warship is going to be replaced anytime soon."

"We hardly used it anyway. It was more of a status symbol," he deflected, drawing a harsh glare from the naval officer.

"Do we have a deal?"

The Colonel considered for a moment. "I suppose I should know when I'm beaten. The Legion will live on, despite our losses, and it needs me in command, otherwise it might fly apart in ten different pieces with most of our command staff dead or captured. You have a deal."

"One other thing," Stephan added. "You have to get rid of any notions of payback here. You will not take any other contracts against us, nor pursue any unpaid military action against any world in the Morten Protectorate. You just write this off as a debacle, return to the Inner Sphere, and never come back."

"I wasn't planning on it anyway. I never want to see the Periphery again."

"Say the words," Stephan pressed.

"I agree to all provisions, with one addendum."

The First Lord just stared at him for a moment saying nothing.

"You keep this sack of shit here," he said, gesturing with his head to the naval officer. "He's no longer part of the Legion."

Stephan looked at the graying man, then pointed at him. "You stay. You two, will be taken to your dropships. Do not

lift off until given clearance to, and my pocket warships will escort you to the jump point. Any funny business, and they'll rip your ships to shreds."

"I'll make sure the jumpship Captains learn about the transfer after being boarded," Keller promised.

"Make this a smooth transition, or I may rethink the deal entirely."

"It's a fair deal. I won't break it," he said standing up with his hands cuffed together, same as the Captain beside him, as Roger's people led them out of the tent.

"Explain that," Stephan said to the naval officer.

"My name is Francis Neeva, and I was an Admiral in the Lion's Teeth Legion in command of the warship you destroyed until the Colonel relieved me of command just prior to the battle."

"For what reason?"

"I refused to attack into a mismatch. I had also made an agreement with Commodore Ito to let the outcome be determined by the ground fighting, and I did not want to break my word. Even if I did, I did not like our odds with our dropships included. My XO didn't agree, and told the Colonel we could win. He relieved me, and you saw the results. I got into a lifeboat and jumped ship once the fighting got heavy."

"That explains a number of things," Stephan said evenly.

"I was not told about the orbital bombardment until we were at the planet. I thought this was a regular escort mission."

"And what would you have done if my ships hadn't blocked you from it?"

"I guess we'll never know now."

"Evasive."

"What do you want me to say? Yes, I would have to to keep my position...or no, I wouldn't have, and gotten relieved or shot for it? I know Itomo had to face that choice, and I did not expect it would be dumped in my lap here without warning."

"You will remain a prisoner for the time being," Stephan said, standing up. "I'll figure out what to do with you later."

"Is it possible for me to speak with Itomo? I owe him an explanation at the minimum."

"He's barely alive in a hospital. Even if he makes it, he won't be speaking to anyone for a long time."

Neeva slouched visibly. "Damn that Colonel."

"You should choose your employers more carefully."

The former Admiral's head came up. "It's no better in the Lyran fleet where I came from. If you can direct me to an honorable command anywhere in the Inner Sphere, please do so. I don't think one exists, mercenary or otherwise."

"One does exist," Stephan said grimly. "And the saddest thing of all is you don't even realize it."

With a wave of his hand Neeva was escorted out a different direction as the First Lord turned around and drew another cup of coffee out of a portable machine as different people came in. His this time, and they sat down at the table with touchpads out and reports to give...

17

June 25, 3000
Federated Suns
Crusis March
Cholis System
Nadir Jump Point

Captain Varendra watched from the bridge of the *Purple Mushroom* via a wall screen as he sat within the rotating gravity disc that had been added to the reworked *Mule*-class dropship as an unaugmented Morten *Union*-class docked with the first of the two jumpships the mercenaries were supposed to be turning over to them. The two patched up Lion's Teeth *Overlord*-class dropships were waiting further off, packed to nearly full with mechwarrriors and recovered naval crew that badly needed to get to the jumpships to spread out, but until Captain Varendra gave them the go ahead they didn't dare move to any of the other 5 jumpships waiting near, but not too near each other.

The big one in the center of the formation was *Star Lord*-class, and had carried the now destroyed warship here. It was a pity the First Lord hadn't gotten the mercenaries to give them that one, but two *Merchant*-class jumpships was nothing to disregard, especially ones that had been upgraded with batteries to allow a second emergency jump if needed. They were essential if you were going into enemy territory and not planning on sticking around, and as such almost every well-off military unit using them had paid the high price for the upgrade while common traders preferred the cargo space the batteries would occupy.

The current Morten fleet of jumpships had 23, plus the Sequoia that was presently sitting at Drymo sucking up exports,

so adding two more Merchants to the fleet was significant, and Stephan had impressed on him in a private conversation to make sure the mercenaries didn't pull any tricks...and if they did, to shoot up as much of their stuff as possible before they jumped out.

But right now all 6 of their jumpships were here, plus two more Morten jumpships sitting some 410,000 kilometers away on the 'upside' of the jump point center. The mercenary mechs were on the 'downside,' which meant the way gravity pulled you once you entered since a jump point wasn't in an orbit and you'd start moving immediately upon arriving. Normally ships let themselves be dragged downside a certain distance before engaging their station-keeping engines to clear the center of the zone where almost all jumpships entered, but the Morten jumpships had kept well clear of the mercenaries and had been gaining distance away from them ever since they'd arrived, ready to jump out of the system if need be if the mercenaries came their way.

But they hadn't, and the jumpships were just sitting there staring at each other over a great distance as the first handover began taking place. Captain Varendra would not have wanted to be the ship's Captain that was getting the boot, for the entire crew was being swapped out and would be taken over to the Star Lord shortly by the Morten dropship, then the process would be repeated with the second Merchant.

It didn't take long before the *Hazel Pearl* detached and started moving towards the large mercenary ship, and almost immediately the Captain got a signal from the Merchant.

"How do things look?" he asked the image of Captain Longton when it appeared on a smaller screen on the console before him.

"Nothing obviously wrong, but I've got our boys going over everything with a magnifying class. Unless there are stowaways, all the mercs are off the ship...which I believe now gets rechristened as the *Far Strider*?"

"Affirmative. The other will be the *Very Far Strider*," Varendra said deadpan.

It took Captain Mattis a moment to catch the joke, then he laughed unguardedly. "Are we allowed to complain about the choice of names?"

"Not when they come from the boss."

"What is the other one going to be called?"

"*Horizon Strider*, I believe."

"Well, the names are what we make them, I guess," Mattis said with a shrug. "I'm just glad to get a ship of my own. The advancement potential of the Morten Protectorate is quite astounding. I'd still have been a Major back in the AFFS by this point at best, with another 10 years minimum before I had a chance of commanding a military dropship, let alone a jumpship. The scuttlebutt is we're converting them all into Jolly Rogers. Is that true?"

Varenda nodded. "At least minimal weapons added to all jumpships. I have no idea when you'll get any upgrades. What does yours have on it now?"

"Looks like they added a couple of AC 10s and a Large Laser, mech grade. Is that enough to count as a Jolly Roger or just a meteor shooter?" he asked, referring to the practice of making jumpships into quasi-warships by stacking weapons on them, despite the fact they weren't built for it and didn't have the reactor power necessary for a proper warship's arsenal. Everything a jumpship collected via the solar sails was saved for the jump engine...and you did *not* want to pick a fight with someone when your sails were out, so direct powering of weapons was not an option. And there was only so much you could store within batteries. Warships had large fusion reactors, the same as mechs, to supply a continual amount of power. Jumpships required one massive burst, too much for a fusion reactor to yield, but over the long haul the fusion reactor would put out more power. Hence the warships used those for weapons.

Which was also why warships were not made with jump drives...at least not since the Star League days, because the jump drive was so huge and ate up so much power, you didn't have room for a lot of other stuff...like real engines. All the

jumpships had was small engines capable of trolling them around a jump point and negating the star's pull. Mattis might finally have had a ship of his own, but it was basically a glorified space station that could move from system to system. Dropships were the ones that saw all the combat and strange new worlds they got to land on.

"Not enough to stop a standard Union from forcibly docking," Varendra said apologetically. "But enough to keep a few aerospace fighters away."

"I'll take what I can get then," he said, still impressed with his new command. "But we *are* going to have to redecorate."

"How bad is it?"

"I'll let you know after we get it cleaned. There's no trash laying around, but everything is dusty or grimy functional. No pride in their work, apparently."

"I hope the engines are better maintained."

"Same here," Mattis said as both Captains noticed an alert as a nearby flash of radiation occurred, marking the arrival of a new jumpship at the center point. It was a big one...a Leviathan that was some 760 meters long compared to the 320 of their newly acquired Merchants, and it also sported 8 docking ports instead of the Merchant's two.

Its IFF identified it as the *Carnal Supplicant*...which was a far worse name than the *Far Strider*...and it was the last of the regular trade route jumpships to pass through Cholis before they stopped coming. This one had gone out to Polvice, then Foniss, then headed back again currently carrying 6 dropships, one of which disengaged and started heading to the planet as a comm light flashed on Captain Varendra's terminal, indicating the receipt of a message packet using Morten codes.

"Hold a moment, we've got something."

"Bad news?" Mattis wondered, knowing that any jumpship passing between systems often carried messages for a small fee rather than having to send your own courier ships every time.

Varenda opened the packet and decrypted it, with his face going blank, then a satisfied nod.

"Polvice got hit too. Most of their mechs got to ground, but all 4 of their dropships were captured by the fleet. None of them made it out of the system. We lost 6 six mechs and two mechwarriors, but all of the mercenaries were taken down or captured onboard the dropships."

"Did we lose any birds?" Mattis asked, knowing there were 6 aerospace fighters stationed at Polvice.

"It doesn't mention any, so I assume no."

"Well, they did far better than we did here then."

"I wonder how many other systems got hit?" Varenda wondered, knowing the message packet was being transmitted broadly, and once it reached the planet Lords Stephan and Vander would get it without Varenda having to pass it on, but he made sure to transfer it into a secure file just in case with the press of a few buttons.

"Different mercenary unit too," he added, reading further into the details of the full mission report. "Smaller one. Didn't get the jumpships though. They had batteries and just jumped right back out. This was a raid."

"Looks like a full-blown war then," Mattis said reluctantly. "They're not going to stop because we held them there."

"No, I don't think so. Not if they're hitting elsewhere. They probably want the entire Protectorate destroyed."

"That's pretty much what Lord Vander said earlier."

"But why not combine that unit with this one and hit Cholis together for better effect?"

"Maybe they thought that warship would be enough to win it here."

"Or they're in a rush to take us down everywhere so we don't have anywhere to evacuate to."

"If that's the plan, they screwed up if Polvice held that easy."

"I agree. So does that mean they back off or send more?"

"I really want that Jolly Roger package added ASAP," Mattis reiterated.

"I don't blame you," Varena said, reading further...and seeing just how damn vital the pocket warships had been. Glorified shuttle pilots his ass! They'd taken out an entire dropship filled with battlemechs before it even reached the Polvice, then got the other three on the way out.

He hoped Lord Vander saw this and decided to build a lot more of them rather than more mechs. Get the navy strong enough and you wouldn't even have to fight on the ground. And after the costly battle with the Lion's Teeth warship that was now little more than a scrap heap waiting to be picked apart for salvage, he thought the Mortens would get the clue. And this report from Polvice should seal the deal.

Let others be mech glory hounds. It was the navy that determined the fate of planets. And with a big enough one, the Mortens could stop even the Federated Suns from landing its tens of thousands of mechs. It was the one giant weakness the Inner Sphere had...disrespecting the naval, and even aerial, components of warfare in favor of the mechs.

If the Morten Protectorate was going to survive past infancy, it was going to have to do it with naval power. They just needed a *lot* more of it, and in a hurry, for only four planets had pocket warships guarding their jump points and one asteroid field. That left 13 planets exposed.

If they could hold the new dropship factory on Drymo, it was going to be the key to building a proper fleet. For they had no capable shipyards yet that could construct a full warship. And fortunately, few in the Inner Sphere ever bothered to build them. Comstar had found one mercenary unit that had one. If they found another, and sent it here soon, they probably wouldn't be able to hold it off a second time.

Every day mattered now, and grabbing these two mercenary jumpships was a smart move by the First Lord. But it was the pocket warships they needed, and with the trade route apparently ending and other traffic starting to dry up, he didn't know how many weapon systems they could actually make on

their own right now. And you couldn't convert existing dropships into warships without procuring all that weaponry and spare parts.

Varenda was glad his *Hazel Mushroom* had come through the fighting without any hull breaches, though he'd lost several weapons in the fighting that couldn't be repaired. They'd have to be replaced with new ones from somewhere...but he had enough others online to smoke both of the mercenary dropships if need be before they could flee the system.

And so far they were just sitting there content as the second Morten dropship headed for the other Merchant jumpship they were about to claim. If everything went off without a hitch, this would be over within an hour and a half, and he'd be glad to see this mercenary scum leave the system with their tail tucked between their legs...

Carrol Davion had grabbed a ride up to the *Carnal Suppliant*, given the fact that it had been hired by House Davion to run this route and hadn't yet been called off, with a lighter load of cargo than expected. The shipments from Cholis that were going out to the Inner Sphere...mainly small items...had been destroyed at the spaceport when its warehouses had been hit. The larger ore canisters from the local mining company, as well as silos of Morten materials, had been spared for the most part, and only because the mercenaries had wanted to loot them later.

The Ambassador-at-Large had told Stephan Morten that she needed to go back to New Avalon and tell them what had happened here, for Comstar was still blocking all communications, making her entirely useless now that Stephan had completely stopped caring about protocol and was running the city while Duke Alliz sat and whined about it. A lot of people were homeless now that had survived the bloodbath, and the Duke had pretty much just shrugged it off without doing anything to help, still pissed that his militia survivors had ran...and now joined the Morten mech forces permanently. One

of them had gone on a public tirade excoriating the former Colonel for his lack of brains in ordering a group of light mechs to stand their ground against the mercenaries.

And for her part, she couldn't disagree. She'd never seen a worse Duke in her life, especially given that the Mortens had saved the city and his own ass. He was showing no gratitude at all, making demands he couldn't enforce...and for what? Did he expect a pat on the back from Ian after all of this?

Carroll rode the dropship with the ore cargo up to the jumpship, then suffered through the long process of heading back across the Inner Sphere. She transferred jumpships twice to try and speed things up when able, but it was still 4 months and 8 days before she was finally heading down to the surface of New Avalon in a dropship, landing near her parents' home in Westbridge, then having to travel overland another three hours to get to their estate.

She didn't contact anyone enroute, nor announce her arrival, not knowing who was going to block her access to Ian or help her. So she ended up on the doorstep of the home she'd grown up in, ringing the doorbell and setting herself for a reunion she didn't particularly want to have...but she had no one else to turn to that she could fully trust within House Davion.

A longtime servant answered, smiling widely as he recognized her.

"Carroll! Oh my dear, welcome back," Miles said, throwing the door open wide. "Where are your bags?"

She hefted the single suitcase in her left hand. "I had to travel light."

Miles took it from her immediately. "Come in, come in. Your mother is in the garden, I believe. Your father is away at the moment."

"Thanks," she said, already feeling the tension building as she headed through the 'small' estate given Davion standards, though it was quite large compared to other noble families' and dwarfed the original mansion the Mortens had bought. Her parents were part of the 'second circle' in House

Davion, meaning not part of the 'inner circle' that had direct access to the First Prince, but it meant they were well involved in any House Davion internal affairs, and while her father was the bloodline connection, her mother had worked her way into House politics quite well on her own.

Carroll found her in the central courtyard, bending over a fence as she discussed the proper way to plant something with one of the gardeners. Her daughter waited patiently until Nora Davion finally stood up and noticed her with a shock.

"Hello, mother."

"When did you get here?" she asked, almost at a loss of breath.

"I just arrived. I would have sent a message, but I couldn't risk it. Bad things are happening on Cholis, and Comstar is involved. I don't know how to get a report through to Ian without it being blocked. I need help," she said flatly.

Her mother hurried over to her and grabbed her by the elbow, dragging her out of the sunlight and back into the house, closing the door to the garden so they could speak in private.

"You shouldn't be here."

"I know you're still mad at me, but I had to..."

"No," Nora said in a hard voice. "It's not safe for you here. House Morten has become verboten."

Carroll's face screwed up. "Meaning what?"

"There's no such thing as House Morten as far as the Federated Suns is concerned. And if there isn't, how can there be a liaison officer to them?" she said, her voice dripping with lethal warning. "Your life was in danger the moment you came back here."

"From who?" she demanded.

"Our own House," Nora said with shame. "Your father and I know how to play the game, so we're fine. But you can't shut your goddamn mouth for ten seconds. You came back here to make a ruckus, didn't you?"

"Cholis was attacked, Mother. And Comstar shut down all communications. They're in on it."

"I don't want to hear it," she said, raising up a palm to her daughter's face. "Cholis doesn't exist anymore. No one will officially speak of it, and it's no longer on the map. The only ones who dare are the tabloids, citing the heroic death of House Morten as they protected the Duke long enough for him to make his escape and everyone else on the planet was killed by raiders. It's a ghost planet now and not worth recolonizing."

"That's bullshit!"

The palm came back up again. "I know it is. That's a plant. They wouldn't dare print anything given the current state of affairs. Everyone is playing along or they're disappearing. I've seen this happen twice before in my life. You don't ask questions, and if you do you're punished or disappeared yourself."

"Is this coming from Ian?" Carroll asked, not believing what she was hearing.

"Hardly," she said with a disappointed look at her daughter's lack of political acumen. "He's so young and inexperienced he doesn't know 10% of what's going on in his realm, and he won't until he grows up and takes control. Our House is running things, and a lot of things right under his nose. I don't have proof of what he knows, but I can bet you everything I own that he's not directing this. Someone wants the Mortens erased from history, and you're a living monument to their existence. Do you understand what I'm saying, daughter?" she scolded.

Carroll looked at her hard. "You're saying our own House is going to try to kill me."

"There, you do have a brain behind that mouth. So why did you come here?"

"Why do you think I knew any of this before coming!" she shouted back, not caring whether the servants heard her or not.

Her mother seemed taken aback for a moment, but just a moment. "I assumed you had been approached quietly and refused to cooperate."

"I got on the next available jumpship out of Cholis after the Lion's Teeth Legion attacked the planet with two Regiments and a warship, mother. They brought a fucking warship, and House Morten fought them off. It was no raiders. It was a hired contract, and Comstar hired them. They want House Morten dead because they found something on them in the Periphery. Stephan wouldn't tell me what it was, but it was related to pirates and political prisoners. Cholis isn't gone. They held, then I came here to report what I could, not through Comstar even if they unblocked communications, for they'd never let it through, or not let it through unaltered. I have a duty to report this to Ian."

"Oh my god!" her mother said, turning around and throwing her hands in the air making a full circle. "Your duty! They're going to kill you, Carroll. If Cholis is really still there, that makes this even worse. They have to clamp down hard on any news coming out of there, and you're the poster girl for House Morten."

"That doesn't relieve me of my duty. Ian has never taken me off the assignment...at least not before the blackout went into place."

"And you stupidly think that matters! Do you expect your assassin to present his credentials first?"

"Whose assassin?" a voice said from another room. Both women turned and saw her father walk in carrying a briefcase, which he dropped the moment he saw Carroll.

"Hello, father," she said in full sarcastic mode now. "Care to join in?"

"When did you get here?" he asked, his voice a whisper of its normal self.

"A few minutes ago."

"Then you've got a chance," he said, rushing off into another room without saying another word.

"You have no idea what you've gotten yourself into," her mother continued on without missing a step.

"What I've got myself into? You're blaming me for this? I'm just doing my job, for fuck's sake!"

"You don't *have* a job anymore. They don't inform you with a fair warning ahead of time, Carroll. When they need you gone, they just make you disappear."

"I know that happens to others, but how can that happen in our own House?"

"Because you're expendable. We all are at the end of the day. Even Ian."

"So who's running things then? Comstar?"

"Why should I have to explain this to you? How the hell could you ever have been chosen as an Ambassador without realizing how the power structure works."

"Maybe because I was chosen by the guy actually in power," she spat back. "If Ian isn't that guy now, who is?"

"The same power brokers there always are. It's not one person, it's always a group. We're a small part of that group, despite our connection to you, as long as we play along. You could too, backing up whatever cover story they want...but we know you won't. You'll insist on telling the truth."

"Comstar mercenaries were destroying a city in the Federated Suns," Carroll said icily, as if her mother was a child that needed her to speak slowly to understand, "before House Morten stepped in to stop it. I think that's something the First Prince deserves to know about, and I don't think he would want to hear a lie."

"You can't get to him, and even if you could it wouldn't matter. Forces are at work here, my dear little daughter, far stronger than I've ever seen before. You won't get the chance to know who is behind this before they take you out. That's how these things go down. It's not official in any way, but it's more potent than a decree from Ian. Can you understand that?"

"Sounds like treason to me."

"In a technical way it might be, but Ian can't rule until he learns how, so our House is doing it for him."

"Did you even get a reason why this is happening?"

Nora stared at her as if she were dumb. "Do you need to look up the definition of 'verboden?'"

"No honest person can ever accept that at face value."

"This isn't an honest House. None of the Great Houses are. We all live and breathe lies. It's our currency. Why are you so poor in it?"

"But you have to know they're lies," Carroll pressed, "otherwise you're just a dupe. What do you know about the behind the scenes here?"

"I know not to ask. It's that bad," she said, falling silent for a moment. "I can feel it."

"Governments are not run on feelings, mother."

"They're not run on honesty either."

"So what, they want me to lie about Cholis?"

"They want you gone, along with any and all ties to Cholis. They've taken it off the official map, Carroll. Does that not impress on you the seriousness of the matter?"

Carroll frowned. "I thought you meant that metaphorically."

"No, I didn't. It's no longer part of the Federated Suns, but there's no mention of when it stopped being a part of it. And the records of it previously existing are also disappearing. Cholis never happened. Anyone who says otherwise is going to get a visit, one way or another, from a censorship team. They either educate you on what not to say, or they take away your ability to speak entirely."

"Did one of them speak with you?"

"Not me. Your father."

Carroll's face went burnt red with anger. "They threatened him!"

"You really have no idea how this game works, do you? Despite everything we taught you!"

"I've been doing real work, mother," she said as her father came back into the hallway and grabbed her by the arm.

"Into my study."

She walked with him, then he shut the door on her mother and locked it.

"You should not be here."

"I had no way of knowing about any of this."

Her father shook his head. "I know. You weren't supposed to know. They probably hoped you were killed in the fighting."

"What do you know of it?"

"I know that if the planet really was dead, there wouldn't be any provisions on people going there. What actually happened?"

"Comstar. House Morten has something on them, and they're trying to wipe them out. They shut down the Cholis relay citing technical malfunctions for a couple months. It was still down when I left. I couldn't try to send a message through them even if it came back up. I had to come in person."

"And the planet?"

"Attacked, but House Morten defended and held."

"How many mechs attacked?"

"Two Regiments of mercenaries and a warship."

Her father blanched. "Where would mercenaries get a warship?"

"A few have them, not many. Only the larger groups. The warship was destroyed by a fleet of dropships. It was bad, but the mech forces fared better. House Morten still has at least a Regiment on planet, but they're getting hit on other worlds too. Polvice at least. There may be more that I didn't stick around long enough to learn about. Smaller attack, though, and they held."

"Do you know who hired them?"

"No proof, but it was Comstar. House Morten is certain of it."

"And what do they have on them?"

"He wouldn't say, but it involved a captured pirate that was holding political prisoners for them."

"For Comstar?"

"Yes."

"Was one of them a high ranking Capellan?"

"I have no idea. I didn't see them and he didn't name them."

"One we thought dead suddenly showed back up. A childhood tutor to Maximilian. And there have been a few other notable people of lesser stature coming back from the grave here and in the Free Worlds League. I was made aware of that before all this started to happen."

"What is happening, exactly?"

"Information purge. Something so critical it's being expunged using all measures possible. They will kill you if they know you're here. I'm surprised you made it this far."

"Because I know the truth?"

"And because they know you won't conceal it. But they'd probably kill you anyway to be on the safe side."

"They can't hide an entire planet, father. Jumpships will still come and go as long as he has a mech factory."

"Every new planet you charted is also being eliminated. There is no Morten Protectorate, at least not on New Avalon and anywhere official. People in the Periphery might not be shielded from it, but anywhere near polite society it simply doesn't exist. It can't exist. And anyone that breaches that unspoken rule will pay the price."

"Who is doing this? Does Comstar really control our House this much?"

"A mixed bag, as far as I've been able to tell, but I know not to press too far. I've never seen this tight a lid kept on things, even in war. They must have something huge on Comstar."

"So why aren't we worried about Comstar? They're a far bigger threat than the Mortens."

"Agreed. And some of us are. But we can't ask questions now. Somehow this has roots everywhere. If it is Comstar, we have to eliminate those roots, but it'll take time and there's no way to do it now. But I can promise you we're taking names and feeling around gently. This is not how our House behaves, Carroll. If we want to take out one of our own, there's a lot of talking that goes on first. This is a total blackout of information. That reeks of Comstar or another foreign entity."

"Is there any way to get my report to Ian?"

"Don't try. If he wants it, he can seek you out later.

Right now you have to keep that information alive by keeping yourself alive. There's a dropship lifting off from Haven's Ring in 72 minutes. My driver can get you there in 63. The Captain will get you off New Avalon and set you up with contacts to help get you further. You can't come back to this planet again. Ever."

Carroll felt her neck tightening. "Just like that?"

"If I'm going to keep my daughter alive, it has to be this way. I can't protect you here," he said, grabbing a small envelope filled with Pounds. "This is all the money I have in the house. You can't use your account, personal or professional, they'll track it. And I can't send you anything for the same reason."

She took the envelop and slid it inside her jacket.

"Thank you."

"It's not enough. I'm sorry I can't do more, but there's no time. They may already have someone coming for you. If you stay the night, I wouldn't guess you'd be free in the morning. And I don't want my daughter to die in an interrogation cell or any other way."

"I was just doing my job," she said, her lips quivering as the direness began to sink into her emotions now that she wasn't arguing with her mother.

"Andrew chose you well. If he was still alive, this would not be happening. Wherever you go, make a life for yourself. I can't know where or how," he said, wrapping her up in a big hug, then shoving her towards the door as he unlocked it.

Her mother was standing there holding a small box.

"Take this," she said, shoving it to her. "You'll need it."

Carroll pulled open the top and saw it full of her mother's jewelry...the most expensive pieces she had that were worth far more than the bills in her father's envelope.

"Go," her mother said, and Carroll saw a tear forming in one of her eyes before she turned and walked away.

Her father took her by the arm again and escorted her out. Not in a mean way, but making it clear she didn't have time

to dilly dally. Miles barely had time to grab her bag out of the guest room and give it back to her, making it just a few steps ahead of the driver to the vehicle garage.

“Go and don’t look back,” her father said. “It’s for the best...for you. And you can’t use your real name anymore. It’s a death sentence now.”

“Have the Davions...always been like this?” she asked as she opened the rear passenger door, emotion now flooding into her voice so much she could barely speak.

“I’ve never seen it this bad, but yes. We’ve never been better than this.”

“Then I don’t want the name anymore.”

“Find somewhere far away that you can prosper, my daughter. That’s my hope for you now.”

Carroll hugged him quickly one last time, then ducked into the luxury car and shut the door...with the driver immediately pulling out, already having been told where to go.

The now former Ambassador sank back into the seat cushions, not knowing what to do. They got four minutes into the trip and well outside the view of her family estate before she broken down sobbing behind the tinted glass barrier between her and the driver that at least gave her some measure of privacy.

18

August 31, 3000

Federated Suns

Crusis March

Cholis

Brinestorm Spaceport

Grady sat in the cockpit of a Warhammer on the edge of the still destroyed spaceport, but most of the tarmac was intact. Intact enough for dropships to land, but the service facilities were no longer there, and dropships needing fuel had to make a quick stop by the Estate to get that fuel given that the tanks at Brinestorm had all been detonated by, probably, deliberate mech fire during the mercenary attack.

Right now, though, there was a single dropship descending with enough fuel already onboard that it didn't need to top off, and Grady had it lightly targeted in his mental crosshairs, even while not directly pointing his mech's arms at it. Five days ago another jumpship had come into the system and, after seeing the pocket warship waiting for it, had reluctantly identified itself as belonging to House Davion and demanded access to the planet to pick up the Duke and his family.

Grady knew Carroll Davion had left about two months ago, so it was impossible for her to have gotten back to New Avalon in time for them to hear her report and send this jumpship back out. Even if it had been nearby and got a message passed through it by Comstar, it was unlikely that Carroll had made it back to the capitol yet riding the civilian routes. It had certainly taken *him* more than two months to get here from New Avalon, and Stephan had said she didn't want to

risk trying to speak to anyone about events here until she got back home, meaning she couldn't call for a special ride when that message had to go through Comstar relays.

So whatever the Davions were up to, it had been decided before Carroll had talked to them. Stephan had agreed to allow them to land while being escorted all the way in to the planet, but he had four Companies of Grady's mechs standing by just in case this was a double cross, for an Overlord could carry 36 mechs of its own and was well armed by military dropship standards.

So the Mech Commander waited. He waited through the landing. Waited as an army of vehicular transports rolled off and he dispatched some of his mechs to escort them to the palace. Then he waited even more while they packed, then eventually came back, loaded into the dropship again, then lifted off without incident.

At least, not until the Comstar facility started exploding to the north.

Grady immediately spun his mech around, seeing multiple explosions throwing flame and debris into the air beneath a Comstar dropship that had taken off at the same time as the Davion one. It was high enough now not to get hit, but it was clear the demolition charges were set to blow as soon as it departed.

"Damn them," he said, guessing several of the nearby buildings were getting torched as well, regardless of who might be in them. Maybe the outer wall would block some of it, but he guessed at least debris was raining down on the northern edge of the city. He wouldn't know until he got there to have a look for himself.

Coordinating with Vander and Stephan, his Companies split up and headed north while two remained to guard the spaceport that now, apparently, belonged to House Morten. No official transfer was given, Stephan told him, they were just evacuating the Duke and saying nothing else about it.

Meaning they were abandoning the planet, and apparently Comstar with them...but not before they destroyed

their precious HPG station and who knew what other advanced technology they had in there.

When Grady finally got to the area around the Comstar compound his jaw dropped. The outer wall was completely gone. Whatever they had used had been beyond military grade explosives. It was completely leveled...as were two city blocks nearby, with the third showing heavy damage.

Hundreds of people had just died needlessly in Brinestorm. A nice kick in the pants on the way out by Comstar with House Davion looking on without a word of explanation or apology.

Grady was back in the Estate a few days later when the Davion ship jumped out, essentially conceding the planet to them...which did not make one damn bit of sense to Grady after all the fuss Duke Alliz had made about them staying off his precious Federated Suns turf.

Stephan was just as shocked. He had not seen this coming in the least, expecting instead another invasion as reports slowly made their way back via courier ships owned by him or others, of some 7 different attacks on his worlds beyond Cholis...and yes, Cholis was now his, in its entirety, something he'd never truly expected to happen.

All the Morten Protectorate worlds had held, but there were lost mechs and a considerable amount of industrial damage on the worlds where the hired mercenaries were apparently targeting facilities only in quick hit and run missions. So far no world had been hit twice, but if they were attacking the likes of Alar and Polvice, it had to be in a long term agenda to hurt House Morten. They'd made an attempt to decapitate the House on Cholis and failed, but these other attacks had been happening concurrently, not in the aftermath, and he guessed their plan was to destroy their realm, even if by doing it with a thousand cuts rather than one masterstroke.

And if Stephan was right, it meant the attacks would keep coming nonstop on at least his smaller worlds. The pullout of Cholis had him scratching his head as to what their strategy

was. They were willing to attack with both Comstar and the Duke here the first time, would they really pull them out ahead of a second attack? Something else was going on, and Stephan didn't know what it was until another two months passed by, with another 4 harassing attacks being reported and a second on Chitti, which did not have any pocket warships guarding it.

Jumpship traffic to Cholis had slowed, but the independent traders were still passing through enroute to the Protectorate. With them came another *Merchant*-class ship that seemed innocuous, but attached to it was a House Jerrast Overlord that asked to come down to the planet in the Morten Estate.

Stephan was mildly surprised to see them arrive, and granted them permission to land with an even larger contingent of mechs present, plus defense turrets covering the Morten landing pads, but out of the ship walked a single individual only that was quickly brought to the Conference room and seated at a table facing the 6 Lords of House Morten that were currently on planet with Rannel and Kevin both missing on other assignments. That left Stephan, Sarah, Vander, Vichni, Paul and Bindi waiting in their seats as the member of House Jerrast took a long, deep breath after sitting down before finally speaking.

"Thank you for allowing me to talk to you. I had not know about the evacuation of the Duke, per se, or the Comstar withdraw before arriving. I would imagine you are all quite on edge here."

"Quite," Sarah echoed.

"Well, let me say that House Jerrast has been in a frenzy the past few months. We've been reorganizing via couriers and I've been tapped as your unofficial liaison officer. My name is Tanner Jerrast, and I'm the second cousin of Harm," he said, referencing the name of their House Leader. "Let me start off by saying that, unlike everyone else, we are not breaking off contact with House Morten. We've got enough clout to not be pushed around in such matters so long as we tread delicately, and we're not going to abandon our investments with you."

"Is that what's happening?" Stephan asked. "Without Comstar messaging I haven't exactly had any breaches of contracts coming through."

"Forgive me, let me start at the beginning," he said, folding his hands on the table before him. "There has been no order from the First Prince. No official regulations changes or laws added. Nothing has happened which forbids us from dealing with you. But as of now, the Federated Suns is ignoring your realm and your House. They are pretending it does not exist, and erasing you from the history books and map. Cholis is no longer listed as part of the Federated Suns and never was. Likewise, all your business contacts are being severed immediately for fear of punishment for anyone who doesn't follow along with the propaganda."

Sarah's jaw dropped, and Vichni just stared at Vander for a moment. Bindi looked on with concern, but not really seeing how bad that was concerning it didn't really affect her agricultural division much. Stephan, however, just leaned back in his chair, taking it in stride.

"Are you aware of who attacked us?"

"A mercenary unit called the Lion's Teeth, or so we heard through unofficial channels. No word of the attack is permitted in polite society, for this world does not exist."

"We have also been getting hit on other worlds by different mercenaries."

Tanner considered that for a moment. "Any successful?"

"We've held all worlds, but some of them were coming after civilian infrastructure and partially succeeded in that regard before we could drive them off."

"Then I would say my House's relationship with yours is contingent on you holding your worlds. If you can, then we wish to expand our business involvement."

Sarah frowned. "Why, if I might ask?"

"Things are not right in the Federated Suns, at the moment. And because no one is officially doing anything, we can legally interact with you all we like. We play by the rules,

but that doesn't mean we play the way House Davion wants us to. If they want to stop us trading and investing with you, they have to admit you exist first. So as long as we don't make public our connections, they can't do anything about it openly, and they wouldn't dare do anything privately."

"Why not privately?" Vander asked.

"We have a defacto deal with House Davion that keeps them in power in exchange for them staying out of our business. If they break it, they will imperil their own rule, for we can be Kingmakers if we wish to be. So they keep us on their side and happy. They can't cross us, and they won't even mention this incident as long as we don't flash it around in the public eye."

"So why help us?" Bindi asked.

"Your realm has the potential to make us a lot of money, as well as to diversify away from the Federated Suns should economic pressures internally hamper our ability to do lucrative business."

"Tax squeezing," Paul guessed.

"As long as your tax structure remains fixed, as you promised, we can maintain a significant financial power that they have no ability to weaken through regulation. Frankly, the inner workings of House Davion are a mess right now. Ian was not ready to take over for his father, and a lot of opportunistic factions are pushing for a lot of stuff to happen that they never would have had a chance doing under Andrew. What's occurring with your House is different though. It may not be coming from Ian, but it's powerful. More powerful than anything I've seen before in domestic politics. It's more like an edict from the Coordinator of the Draconis Combine. Nobody will dare oppose it for fear of their lives."

"It's Comstar's doing," Stephan said flatly. "They're hiring the mercenaries."

Tanner frowned. "Are you sure?"

"Quite sure."

"What do you have that they wish to purge this badly? And why would the Davions be complicit in this?"

"We uncovered a plot in the Periphery with a pirate who spilled the beans on many of Comstar's dirty deeds. They're highly active in all the Great Houses. Now we're seeing just how many strings they have within House Davion. I was waiting for Ian to send his military out here to squash us, but now I'm not so sure that is going to happen."

"It won't," Tanner said firmly. "That would require a huge mobilization. They are very adamant about making people forget you are even out here."

"So we die in the dark then?"

"Perhaps so. How many more of these mercenary attacks can you stand up to?"

"They took their best shot and missed here," Vander answered. "There aren't many units out there larger than the Lion's Teeth *were*. They lost nearly two Regiments here. If we have to deal with harassing attacks on our weak spots, the attrition will be worrisome, but they're not taking any planets from us without the Federated Suns military doing it for them."

"You have the resources for that kind of unlimited campaign?"

"We do," Stephan said flatly. "Personally, I'm surprised they didn't group more mercenaries together to hit us harder. But now they no longer have a Comstar facility here to spy on us with. They destroyed the equipment when they left with House Davion and the Duke."

"The tabloids say you died fighting in your Centurion, buying enough time for the Duke's family to evacuate the world and that your army was destroyed to the last mech in the effort."

Stephan smiled, but without any trace of humor in it. "As you can see, we're very much alive, and I did not fight in a mech. House Davion came afterwards and took the Duke and his family away, along with a Comstar dropship evacuating their personnel."

"Interesting," Tanner said, putting a finger to his lips as he thought. "They really want this kept quiet. You must have something huge on them. I can't believe they could even

convince the Davions to pluck an entire system off their map, though they're claiming its worthless now without any population. Still, this is an act of desperation. What are you planning to do to them?"

"Nothing," Stephan said simply. "It's what we *could* do that they're scared of."

"And it's not something you can blackmail them with?"

"No. They can't risk it surviving."

"Then that's why they're not making a propaganda war against your Protectorate and urging the Federated Suns to intervene. A reason would have to be given, and there would be time for you to unleash whatever it is you've got. They're clamping down so hard on information about you that anyone without personal knowledge of your House won't even know you exist within a decade...except those who do business out here. Is that to your advantage?"

"Very much so," Stephan agreed. "And far better an outcome than I had feared. I trust it's one you can make use of as well?"

Tanner smiled. "The Davions are not good in economics. They probably don't even recognize the potential they've created for both of us. If you'll permit it, I'll be staying here as the House ambassador and all Morten Protectorate business ventures will be mine to oversee. That way there won't be any major connection between the two pieces of our organization, and the money flow can be accomplished in hard currency to avoid tracing."

"I imagine," Paul added, "that your House's daily expenditures are large enough to hide your investment capital out here?"

"Indeed. And the Davion auditors have the brains of a street rat anyway."

Stephan exchanged glances with Sarah. "Not in our experience on Neubenn. They were quite efficient in sniffing out taxes owed."

"That was a Duchy, and a potential rival to their power. We don't collect taxes, only pay them, and we know what's

visible and not visible to them. You could buy a planet or two with what's not visible."

"I thought you followed the rules?" Vichni asked.

"The stuff that's not visible isn't covered by the rules, because the people who wrote the rules are not economically savvy. We've been navigating them for generations, which is how we've been able to prosper when so many others go bankrupt under the clumsy iron fist of the Davions' economic management. But that aside, we will have to alter our agreements with you somewhat," he said apologetically. "We cannot, without public scrutiny, recruit a large enough work force out of the Federated Suns to bring here. We'll have to recruit and train from your local populations, which will severely slow the implementation of new industry."

"Understandable," Paul allowed.

"However, we are proposing an immediately 2 billion Pound investment in your Morten Academy if you will be willing to create programs specifically tailored to our job requirements. It will be far cheaper than us setting up our own training schools, and much faster. Especially given that our mutual mech factory may be necessary to assist in your realm's security going forward."

"No sales to Federated Suns worlds now?" Sarah guessed.

"None directly, I'm afraid. But there are plenty of brokers that can be used. And we can't be cited for selling unlicensed mechs from a realm that doesn't exist, now can we?" Tanner said with a smile.

"Which means you no longer have to buy the licenses," Sarah said with an equally satisfied smirk.

"Silver linings everywhere, if you look for them."

"You may have trouble with Comstar," Stephan warned.

Tanner waved off the notion. "Business out here has to be run by jumpship couriers anyway. Any reports or merchandise I send back will be by the same method. What doesn't pass through their network is pretty much invisible to them. Such as the five offers I've brought with me from, shall

we say, nameless investors wanting to relocate assets out of the Federated Suns using us as a broker.”

“Explain that,” Paul demanded.

“We have associates in many places who can smell profit as well as us, and many of them watch what we do carefully. They’ve been watching your realm ever since we began interacting with it. And now that it is suddenly taken off the public maps...that got their attention louder than any public notice. They began inquiring through us what was going on. Once I report back that your realm is open for business, and there is a total blackout on such business happening, they will want to use that blackout for their own purposes. Whether they realize it or not, the Davions just created a gigantic tax haven for savvy businesses to operate within...and I seem to be the go-between, if you’ll allow it?”

“What’s your cut?” Sarah asked.

“Only one percent. We make better trading partners when we don’t get greedy.”

“You’re still running a risk,” Stephan pointed out, though he was sensing growing opportunity as well.

“Risk is the wallpaper of the Inner Sphere. No matter where you go, you can never take your eyes off it. We know what we’re doing, and we’re the only House with the power to make this happen. Anyone else would be strangled into submission. I trust this makes for a mutually beneficial relationship between our Houses?”

“If we can hold our worlds,” Stephan added.

“We’re willing to invest further on the gamble that you can and that First Prince Ian won’t change his mind and come out here after you directly, though he can always send mercenaries as well.”

“Mercenaries we can handle,” Vander said firmly.

“Then let’s start discussing where we can best infuse a large amount of capital in a very short amount of time...”

Commodore Itomo had wanted to die in battle, but when he had woken up in the medical facilities in the Morten

Estate he knew that he would not. His right arm was gone and the rest of his body hurt badly from the decompression he'd suffered, but with each day that passed progress was made.

It had taken him a month and a half before he could find the strength to walk again. At least he had lost an arm and not a leg. The arm would have been useful for paperwork sitting at a desk, but as long as he had both legs he could move around normally and still issue orders by voice, so in most regards the loss of his arm did little to hinder his performance.

And he had lost it in a victorious battle. In the end that was what allowed him to look down at his three-inch stump below the shoulder with pride now rather than horror. He...and a lot of other brave men...had kept the Morten Estate and all those within it from harm. House Morten itself would have been essentially destroyed had he failed. So after many mentally painful trips of logic around and around inside his head, he had finally accepted the loss and allowed himself to see the wound as a memento of by far the most notorious victory of his naval career...and one of the larger space battles occurring in the Inner Sphere over the past century.

Itomo had longed to be in such a battle...an honorable one that would determine the outcome of some great event. He'd almost given up hope on such things happening, for naval officers rarely saw combat anywhere unless a Great House was launching an invasion against another Great House's primary worlds and they needed to remove the impediments to landing their Regiments.

But to fight a warship designed to bombard a planet without even using mechs...that was a true naval threat, and one his fleet had stopped, though the cost had been much higher for others than for himself. Many were dead. Others were still in the hospital on much longer roads to recovery, if they would ever reach that end...but his doctors had never let their positivity slip, even when he thought his own would be impossible. They'd been proven correct when he had walked out under his own power and resumed his duties the following day.

The second attack on Cholis had come 7 months after the first, and by that time Itomo had not rebuilt much of the fleet. Sarah Morten had managed to get him one new pocket warship to replace the four that had been destroyed, and Rannel's techs had managed to repair one that had been heavily damaged. That left him with 5 this time rather than 8, and a total dropship count of 17 including the unaugmented ones that had been shifted here from elsewhere, either due to normal traffic transfers or on purpose.

When the four jumpships of Killmonger Incorporated arrived at the Zenith jump point he had the *Blue Mushroom* and *Neon Mushroom* waiting for them...but they couldn't engage, because this group of mercenaries had also brought a Reaper with them, which was naval slang for an assault dropship designed more for space combat than surface operations. It didn't have a gravity disc in it for extended missions in space. It was meant to escort dropships and to go after others, with acceleration almost as good as Itomo's own pocket warships.

They were predators, and with one amongst the twelve *Union*-class dropships, they couldn't fight that and hope to win more than a meager victory. They needed the other three at the Nadir jump point, so the Captains followed protocol and accelerated back towards the planet faster than the Unions could travel and Itomo recalled the other three pocket warships, picking a point well above the atmosphere to make their intercept.

The Reaper and Unions didn't slow to engage, and instead tried to run the blockade. Two of the pocket warships made stops, while the other three tangled with the Reaper long enough for the others to slip past and land. The Reaper followed them down, battered heavily, but still operational. It landed alongside one group of dropships while the others split up into two more groups.

One group landed to the east of Brinestorm, almost in the exact same place as the Lion's Teeth. The second landed north of the Estate in a small valley clearing. The third to the south of the Estate as one of the two intercepted dropships

impacted at full speed to the east above where the Comstar compound had been, refusing to be captured and trying for atmosphere without the necessary engine thrust. It landed with the power of a small nuke, but was far enough away from the city not to damage it, but many rural buildings got wrecked by the resulting shockwave as a massive wind gust knocked down trees for several miles in radius around the crash site.

The other dropship managed to save itself from the same fate by crawling into a low orbit on diminished engine power and surrendering. It took another 5 weeks before the mercenaries on the planet did the same, conducting some hit and run attempts on the Estate and city that resulted in a lot of forest chases that they were ill-equipped for. They did manage to down two of the Ardent Falcons as they sniped them from the air, but thankfully both pilots survived.

And once again, the mercenary Colonel confided in Stephan that they had not expected such resistance. They'd been told there was only one pocket warship here, and that their Reaper would be more than enough to hold it off. Once they came in and their hired jumpships left immediately thereafter to avoid becoming targets themselves, the Killmongers were committed and had no way to back out in the face of two...then five pocket warships.

They'd also been told the planet only had two Battalions of defenders, so once again Comstar had tricked a group of mercenaries into making a foolish assault in the hopes of damaging the planet further. That attack had cost the Mortens two aerospace fighters, six mechs, and significant damage to his warships and a dozen or more mechs. All in all it was minor, but added to what they'd lost before it wasn't insignificant.

The attacks elsewhere were having more effect, particularly in systems where there were no pocket warships to thin down the mercenary numbers before they made landfall. It was a numbers game now. How many mechs, aerospace fighters, Vtols, and dropships would they lose compared to how many new ones were coming online, and the same went for

pilots and crews. The Morten Academy was pumping out more and more recruits in all categories, but field experience was something you had to earn the hard way, which was why Itomo had pressed Stephan and Vander hard to let him use Francis Neeva.

Neither had wanted to, but given the loss of Itomo's arm they eventually caved to his wishes on the caveat that Neeva not be given any command role, so the Commodore had made him an advisor on his personal staff that was growing faster than their dropship fleet.

He now had 8 people working on current and future plans, refit work with the techs, experimental projects with the research and development people, coordinating with Morten Arms Consortium on which weapons they wanted available and which ones they did not. Itomo had been told to begin constructing a navy not just equal to, but superior to those of the Inner Sphere...which was a very tall order. Right now though, at least his command staff now fit the part.

Vander had wanted to promote him to Vice Admiral, but Itomo flat out refused, citing they didn't have the ships necessary to warrant that rank, no matter what his skills. So Commodore he remained until he decided they had grown enough to accept it...and unfortunately that day was going to be years off, for their dropship construction factory was still small and had to produce some civilian models for sale just to try and cover costs.

Their only shipyard for naval vessels that could not land on a planet was at Polvice, and thankfully it had been ignored in the to date *three* assaults there. Right now it was barely a frame with some cranes attached, but more was being added to it by hand from construction crews in space suits based off of dropships in orbit of the planet, but the cranes were now being damn helpful and speeding up the process by more than a factor of ten. That would continue to increase as more pieces of the shipyard began to help build itself, but the goal was not to produce warships with it. Rather, to start producing mining tugs

and other non-military craft that were meant to operate in space only.

Polvice would need a lot of those in orbit to start building space stations. Many planets didn't bother, but the plans for Polvice were along the lines of what they'd had on Neubenn...only without the high population. The ice caps squeezing the planet would never go away, so the thin band of habitable land around the equator would never hold 3 billion people unless they were jam-packed in there, and House Morten was not going to allow new construction to become that dense.

Still, they were going to do a lot of construction beyond the planet itself, and that was going to require craft that could fly within the system, and it was far more economical for those to be designed to operate in space only and not have to be aerodynamically designed to land on planets.

But once they got the initial shipyard up and running, they could at least repair damaged dropships there. And those that were too badly hit to even land either had to be patched up by hand until they were fit to set down, or they'd be parked in orbit and abandoned as space junk. So they needed at least one facility to do such repairs, for they had two such 'satellites' around Cholis right now that they didn't want to totally give up hope of repairing and three more partial dropships that they wanted to strip down and recycle the useful materials.

They also needed a repair station for that, otherwise they'd have to use crews in space suits and do it the very, very slow way. And they had no time for such things now as the Morten tech army worked to get additional armor and weapons on every civilian dropship they thought they could spare from cargo hauling duty to help bolster the naval defenses here and around other worlds. Even if they weren't proper pocket warships, an extra layer of hull armor would allow them to survive an otherwise 'even' fight against a dropship that was the same class as them.

"Yoshi," a voice said behind the Commodore as he sat at a conference table within the naval wing of the Morten

Estate...which had just been finished some three weeks ago in what they were calling 'Alpha Valley' now that they had no restrictions on building beyond their original borders. Technically all the land in the Duchy was now theirs...which meant almost the total landmass of the planet given there was only one small area that had been colonized aside from some remote mining and forestry stations elsewhere.

"Francis," the Commodore replied politely as his Strategic Analyst took a seat to his right with a stack of touchpads laid on the table. He had to have at least 8 of them, while Itomo was only using one to review the recent testing data on the refit engines on the *Black Diamond Egg*.

They both waited for the rest of the command staff to arrive, then when all 8 of his men were there the door was closed and they began updating the Commodore on various projects. They got through about 20 minutes of that before he raised a hand, silencing them all with that simple gesture, and looked down at the table thoughtfully.

"Perhaps we are approaching this wrongly."

Frowns were exchanged across the table, but it was Commander Garrison who spoke first.

"What specifically are you referring to?"

"All of it," the Commodore said, sweeping his one arm across the table and his entire staff. "We're trying to build a navy from the ground up to orbit while simultaneously defending the Morten Protectorate systems."

"Do we have another option?"

"If we know we're going to get continuously hit, perhaps we do."

Eyes were crossing everyone at the table, but no one, including Neeva, knew where he was going with this.

"Twice we have been hit here with naval assets, not just regular dropships. Instead of waiting for them to come to us, why not seek out these mercenaries and attempt to hire their naval assets only while we build our own."

"The First Lord will never allow that," Neeva said, speaking from experience. "He will never trust mercenaries."

"You led the enemy fleet here," Itomo clarified. "I'm talking about mercenaries that have not hit us yet. I believe he has several mechwarriors that gave up their mercenary ways to join our forces. You speak like he's unwilling to touch them at all."

"He won't go for it."

"Do we not currently have a school for mechwarriors that is training at least some mercenaries?"

"You're asking him to trust that the mercenaries won't turn on him inside his own systems."

"Ignore, for the moment, whether he and Vander would agree to it. If they did, how could it be of use?"

"Aerospace fighters," Lieutenant Commander Jorginson said immediately. "We don't have nearly enough as it is, and we've got none at the jump points. They can run down dropships a lot easier than our pocket warships can. Right now mercenaries know they can get at least some dropships to ground if they scramble past us. Aerospace fighters would diminish that greatly."

"He won't go for getting them killed," Commander Garrison said flatly.

"The fear factor alone would cause some of them to surrender," Jorginson argued. "And a lot of these smaller units are using hired dropships. Their Captains don't want them shot up, so if a few aerospace fighters are waiting for them, they may just turn around and leave."

"While your point is valid," Itomo offered, "I was thinking of more than fighters."

"Well," Garrison said with a shrug of his shoulders, "there are a lot of assault dropships out there that we could hire to set up on the surface, somewhere away from here and the city where they'd have gravity. Then they'd run up to orbit to intercept incoming dropships on the way here. Those Captains like doing that sort of work, because they hate cargo hauling."

"Make that item #1," Itomo said, glancing to his personal aide Ensign Beau Cardona. While Morten

mechwarriors had been given no ranks, nor their aerospace pilots, Itomo had insisted on using them for the naval forces and Vander had agreed given their wide-ranging crew assignments. A mechwarrior was a mechwarrior, after all, but a dropship crew was not simply interchangeable between various stations. An engine tech and a helmsman could not switch off like you were switching a mechwarrior between Companies. Therefore there had to be a hierarchy, though Kevin Morten had insisted that the ranks be tied to training, and that each successive rank hold a wider range of skills than those below them and not have promotion simply tied to length of service.

Recruits coming out of the Morten Academy were given the Ensign rank, then those that were trained to handle at least three stations, including command of a ship, were made Lieutenants. Lieutenant Commander and Commander followed, with Captain requiring an individual to be able to do every task on the ship at least moderately well, from piloting the ship, to repairing electronic equipment and loading cargo. Current Captains and crews, however, were spared this out of necessity until they sought a promotion.

Itomo held the Commodore rank because he had skills in multi-ship command, while ranks beyond that would be worked out later. Right now the structure they had created was solid, in his opinion, but still raw given that a lot of his people were brought over from other existing navies who did not do things in exactly the same way. In fact, all but Ensign Cardona in this room had experience in one of the Great House's navies.

"Number two would be a warship," Neeva said painfully. "It would cost a lot to rent, but..."

"No," Itomo said flatly. "The fear factor would be maximized, I admit, but a single warship can only be in one place at one time. It cannot stop a group of dropships that split up to get to a planet."

"But it can target those dropships once they land," Neeva differed. "Even if they get their mechs out, they'll be destroyed on the ground."

"True, but if they are aware of this they can do a hot drop a hundred meters over the surface with jump capable mechs or configure a release system for higher up. They'd never have to land. Furthermore, I know for a fact that there will not be a warship allowed in a position to bombard any Morten planet unless it is a Morten warship. We need to focus on pocket warships until we can build something ourselves that is larger. And remember, we have multiple planets to defend, so the cost of building one warship, when compared to the cost of ten pocket warships, must go to the ten until we provide adequate coverage across all worlds in the realm under our protection. Cholis is where the Morten family is, but it is not the whole of the Protectorate."

"What about the gravity disc from the *Lion's Den*?" Lieutenant Disher floated.

"What of it?" Neeva asked.

"It's mostly intact."

"Your point?" he reiterated.

"It gives us a head start on building a jump point defense station."

"Perhaps years into the future," Itomo said. "How many more attacks will there be in the interim?"

Disher seemed deflated. "You're right. We don't have the infrastructure we need. I just don't like seeing the pocket warships out there with nowhere to run to if they get in trouble. Nor can we launch any rescue operations if they have to jettison lifeboats. We need stations and a whole lot of other stuff to create a proper support network. I just thought we could skip ahead a little by repairing that gravity disc."

"We need time to build," Itomo agreed. "Is there a better way to buy us that time than hiring naval mercenaries? And if we do, that's less out there for Comstar to hire against us."

"It would be cheaper than building new dropships," Lieutenant Argen quipped.

"Initially," Neeva qualified. "Eventually it gets cheaper to build them ourselves. And most of us already know which

units to contact. It's not that long of a list unless we are including assault dropships."

"Item #2," Itomo added, "is locating Reapers or pocket warships for hire."

"What about jumpships with aerospace fighter squadrons based off of them?" Garrison suggested. "They'll have a gravity deck to support them for long stays."

"Make that item #3, contingent on those fighters being used against unaugmented dropships only. Item #4 is any units that we can hire to potentially capture incoming jumpships. The larger units are utilizing batteries to make a second jump out before we can get them, but not all the smaller ones are. Even a single jumpship capture would be worth the expense of the mercenaries."

"They might just keep it for themselves," Beau noted.

"Possibly," he admitted. "I want those four points explored in detail before I make my proposal to the First Lord..."

Carroll Davion had made it to the dropship her father had arranged to take her off world. It was heading for Markesan, and Captain Jenno gave her contact information for a man on Kestrel who could arrange for her a new identity. His dropship wasn't going there, but she could board another on Markesan and work her way there eventually. In the meantime, Jeeno gave her a pre-made false identity that would get her that far.

But when Carroll landed on Markesan she didn't book passage on the next flight out to Kestrel. Instead she took a hotel room and just sat for a week trying to figure out what to do...all the time reading every tabloid story she could find on House Morten. There were no official new sources about them at all, and the tabloids kept running the same approximate story.

Stephan Morten had died in his mech helping Duke Alliz escape the planet, and everyone else had died there to raiders. He was being hailed as a hero, but Carroll knew it was being put out so those with questions about his House's fate had

something to be satisfied with and would move their attention elsewhere. The lack of any official account was twofold. It denied anything happened there, and people who were looking would probably take the tabloid news as partially true, assuming the whole affair had been hushed up to avoid embarrassment on the part of the new First Prince who had, in fact, just lost an entire planet to raiders.

But a part of Carroll also wondered if there was an ounce of truth in it. Something else could have hit them after she left. If Comstar was truly that committed to eliminating whatever threat House Morten posed to them, then why wouldn't they follow it up with another assault? Had Stephen really died in the next one and this was the cover story. Was the entire Morten family on Cholis dead with the rest spread out across their other worlds next on the chopping block?

She had no way to know for sure, and with the trade route being canceled she had no way of getting back there either, especially since all 'legitimate' jumpship travel wouldn't be going to a point on the map that no longer existed. So what was she going to do?

She sat and thought, long and hard, but the crying had long since passed. Her family had betrayed her, even though her parents had done what they could to keep her alive. But her *House* was supposed to be her family, and whether it was their decision or they were merely going along with whatever Comstar wanted it didn't matter.

They'd betrayed her...and for what? She'd just been faithfully doing her duty. And more than that, they'd betrayed the Mortens. She didn't know if the mercenaries had been hired by her House or not at this point, but if they were involved in the coverup they had to know something about it...which meant they were condoning it and breaking the treaty that Stephan and Andrew had signed in secrecy.

But the secrecy part didn't matter. A treaty was a treaty, and her House was honor-bound to follow it, as was the Federated Suns. Cancelling the trade route alone violated that

treaty, not to mention pretending that it and the Mortens never existed at all.

Stephan had warned her this might happen, but she hadn't believed him. She had always assumed if she'd be loyal to the family, like her or not, they'd have her back because she was a Davion. That notion had exploded in her mind on the trip out to Markesan, and it left her with one thought that kept bouncing back to the foreground in her mind through the persistent haze of despair.

If that was the way the Davions truly were, then she no longer wanted the name, lineage, or any connection with them. And it seemed they wanted it that was as well, including her parents. Her father had said as much, though whether it was for his well being or hers, or both, she didn't know and no longer cared. When she'd left their home...her childhood home...it had been goodbye for the last time, not of her choice, but theirs and of House Davion.

And now it was time for Carroll to make that choice for herself. She'd overlooked Davion bad behavior all her life, hoping it was just a few bad apples souring the family history, but now the blindfold had been violently torn off and she could see the truth.

They were villains. Villains with a pleasant smile and a list of good deeds to hide the knife they kept concealed and ready to slit your throat with when the cameras turned away. She'd been born into an evil family, told they were actually the good guys, and while everyone else apparently had realized the truth early on and abandoned that lie, she had clung to it and refused to see them for what they really were. At least, refused to fully see them for what they were, because she *was* one of the good guys, and that was probably why the lie took such a strong hold on her as opposed to others.

Others that knew they were rotten to the core and didn't care. And they could probably sense the same in those around them. Maybe, after all this time, that explained why her own family didn't care much for her. She didn't stink of corruption. Maybe Andrew hadn't either...or maybe he had just

used her as a tool to deal with another noble family that could smell corruption a kilometer away because they had none in themselves.

Actually, now that she thought about it, that was probably exactly why he had done it. Dispossessing House Morten was corrupt, and there was no way she could believe...now...that Andrew wasn't. It was his decision, then he'd wisely placed her as a go-between to help calm down those who were raw from the betrayal and expecting more of it. Andrew knew she'd deal fairly with them. And she'd been useful to him. To House Davion. Now, she wasn't. She was in the way, so their true colors were showing through.

"No more," she said to herself, sitting on the end of the tall hotel bed and dangling her bare feet just above the floor as she stared at her toes...and for some reason they held more truth in them than she'd been able to gather up during the previous three and a half decades of her life. "Davion no more. I reject them, their House, their realm, their bloodline, and their methods," she said, feeling an ache in her chest as she said so, breaking the last internal loyalty she had to them. One that should never have been broken...and after that she was truly free.

Free and potentially hunted. But maybe if she stayed small no one would come after her. If she poked her head up they would. The look in her father's eyes had told her that much all too clearly.

Make that ex-father. She was dead to them now, so they might as well be dead to her as well.

The next day she went to scout out various pawn shops, eventually coming back to the one that looked the most legit with the cheapest bit of jewelry her ex-mother had given her...which was still immensely valuable, but the pawn shop didn't seem to care about its origins. They offered her half of what it would have cost in a high end store and she accepted without a word. Just a nod, then she was given a small cardboard box with the Pounds in it. Something that people wouldn't immediately think had money inside when they saw it.

After that she checked outgoing flights and two days later got on one headed for Kathil.

From there she went to New Syrtis and the easy travel ended. She had to wait months before finding passage to Midale, then she had to wait another 8 months before finally finding a jumpship that was going into the Taurian Concordat. With all the intervening stops of the regular trade routes she'd been riding rather than the faster direct ones, it had been a year and 6 months since her life had been wrecked and she had to flee New Avalon when she set down on Taurus, the capitol of the Concordat, and lost herself in the foot traffic. She ended up at another hotel using the name Susan Henderson...the sixth fake name in the list of identities that she'd concocted on the way out here. Unbeknown to her ex-father, she knew how to handle bureaucracy and forging documents was rather easy when one couldn't check up with other planets except in extreme circumstances using Comstar.

So if they looked legit, that's all that was required to get through 99% of security measures that were not locally verifiable...and passengers from other star systems fit into that category, few as they were compared to the natives that never left their worlds for lack of resources or cause.

Susan Henderson was how she had to conduct herself now, for the Taurian documents she'd received upon entry weren't of the same make as her Federated Suns ones, and she wasn't confident of her ability to forge new ones. But they accepted her information at face value, and now she had a colonist's ID that she could use on any of their worlds for official business...though most of their worlds were so low tech it was virtually worthless outside the Hyades Cluster where their most valuable planets were located.

Carroll found herself sitting on another bed, staring at her ever wise toes again and planning her next move. She knew there was at least limited trade going on between the Taurians and the Mortens. She just had to find it and purchase a ride, with her jewelry stash having been diminished only slightly. Her ex-mother had expensive taste, and it would last Carroll a long

time if she kept her lifestyle simple. The thought of her running out of money and having to take some menial job just to make enough money to buy food with scared her so much she made sure she was being frugal enough to live off the jewelry for at least a decade.

It had better not take that long to get back to the Morten Protectorate. But the question was, once she got there, would there be anything left for her to find?

And if there wasn't...what would she do then?

Her toes had no answer for that one, and she hoped they wouldn't be called upon to give one later. The Mortens were the only friends she had...the only real ones, and all her previous ones wouldn't even acknowledge she existed now. And if they did, they'd probably be 'contacted' by an enforcer one way or another to fix the problem.

Now that she was away from the Federated Suns she intended never to set foot there again except for Cholis. And even there she'd have to stay on the Morten Estate or risk an agent assassinating her in the city...assuming they cared that much. Everyone on Cholis already knew the truth, and she wondered how they planned to keep them all silent? Was the Comstar facility still claiming 'technical difficulties' after nearly two years?

Again, her toes had no answer for her, but they kept urgently reminding her to get closer and closer to the Morten Protectorate and figure out each piece along the way rather than sitting here and waiting for the whole grand plan of the universe to be revealed to her.

Apparently toes weren't designed to work that way. And after a year of talking to them more than any Human, she wondered how far from sanity she was straying...

19

August 3, 3002
Federated Suns
Draconis March
Neubenn
New Harkington

Niles Sharki was a businessman. He owned seven different retail stores in three cities on Neubenn and lived a very nice lifestyle while being lost in the crowd. The planet was so large and highly populated, even a rich man like Niles didn't attract attention outside his circle of friends and business associates. He was well placed, visible, and essentially anonymous.

He was also a Lyran intelligence agent.

He knew he wasn't exactly hiding. On Neubenn the various players from all the Great Houses knew where the others were located...unofficially, of course. It was common practice to have eyes and ears on all the major worlds, but on Neubenn there was a much more good-natured attitude towards the affair. They were welcome to look and listen as much as they wanted, just not take any interfering action. Even the Dracon Combine had a semi-public standing here in lieu of an actual embassy, in another city on the other side of the planet, but Niles knew who to contact if he needed to interact with them, and the same was true of the other powers.

So when his security team informed him there was a man here that wanted to talk to him about non-business affairs, it didn't surprise him. What did surprise him was that he was claiming to be a representative of the former Duke of Neubenn.

"Send him in," Niles said into his desktop microphone, then leaned back in his chair wondering what sort of trouble

had just ended up in his lap. For the past two years House Morten had become verboten on Neubenn...which was a very hard thing to accomplish given their lengthy rule here, which was made even the more iconic every time House Derren changed something for the worse. People wanted the Mortens back, but most of them had believed the story of the young Duke dying out on the edge of the Federated Suns to save another Duke from a raider attack that had wiped out the entire colony.

It was utter garbage. The Lyran Commonwealth had already determined House Morten was still there and now in complete control of the world they had previously been denizens of. What they hadn't figured out was why the Federated Suns had abandoned it and put forth this sham. Anyone even professionally asking about the Mortens was blacklisted on Neubenn, and he'd been told it was the same everywhere else in the Federated Suns. It was so bad here historical records were actually replacing Morten rule with House Derren. They were not just pretending they no longer existed, but that they had *never* existed. Whatever was going on it was unprecedented, and it looked like it was about to be dropped right into his lap.

A fit and trim young man was shown in, with two of his bodyguards staying in his office and flanking the door as it was shut behind them, just in case they would be needed.

"I have a letter from Stephan Morten that needs to be hand delivered to your Archon under maximum security," Shani Klean said bluntly, for he was originally from Neubenn and knew his way around the planet. The First Lord had also told him where to find the Lyran agent and what to expect, so he saw no point in pleasantries.

"You're risking your future even speaking that name here," Niles deflected.

"So I've noticed."

"How did you get here?"

"The slow way. By the time I get back, I'll have given up a year of my life to this mission. So please don't underestimate

the importance of this. Secrecy must be maintained, and if Comstar knew of the letter I hold, they would try to kill me or anyone else holding it. That is why I had to come in person and could not send a message through them."

"Comstar?" Niles said, frowning. "What do they have to do with this?"

"A great many things. We've been unofficially at war with them for the past two years. They keep sending mercenaries to break us, but we keep holding our worlds. Not one has fallen."

Niles leaned forward. "Tell me more."

"I have been given a letter," Shani said, carefully pulling it out of a vest pocket so not to be construed as a weapon. "It is meant to be hand delivered to your Archon with no one knowing of its existence before, during, or after arrival. It has been left unsealed so you can read it and realize its importance. I ask that after you do, you seal it and send it on its way by whatever means appropriate. It is not time sensitive, but it is critical that it reaches your Archon anonymously. You will understand when you read it."

"Give it to me," Niles said, with the Morten agent slowly handing it over as if it were a bomb about to go off.

He pulled four pieces of paper out of the pliable brown envelop and started reading. His interest was caught immediately by a wealth of information about what was happening out there, including the reason for the societal whitewash of any information about House Morten.

By the time he got to the second page, his jaw nearly hit the floor.

He read on, finishing all four pages, then, as calmly as possible, placed them back inside the envelope, though all four men in the room could see his hands shaking slightly.

"I trust you understand now?"

"I do," Niles said, pulling out a small rollbar from his desk. He pulled the plastic off the adhesive envelope strip and used the rollbar to smash it flat. No one could open it now

without having to tear open the envelope. "I cannot promise you when it will arrive, but we will make sure it does."

"No one can know of this," Shani reiterated. "Comstar has people in every Great House. If this goes through channels, they will find out. It must be placed directly into the Archon's hands without him or anyone else knowing its origin."

"I know what is required. You can be assured it will reach him quietly."

"Then my task is done. Good day."

"Good day," Niles said reflexively as the man turned around. He waved at his guards to show him out, but when they shut the door behind him he just stared at the envelope.

This was no bomb. It was a supernova that was about to go off.

He took the envelope and opened the bottom drawer of his desk, slid it in, then pretended like it didn't even exist. He couldn't do anything about it today, or the next. Anything to link the arrival of this man, who could have been noticed, to the movement of the envelope could tip off some as to its importance.

No, he had to move this slowly, which meant it wouldn't leave his office for some time. It would have to be smuggled from one side of the Inner Sphere to the other. Tharkad was so far away, and without Comstar he'd have to send this via courier, but he didn't dare risk their usual diplomatic pouches...nor could he route this through any of their other field offices in the Federated Suns. This had to go straight to the Archon, and thankfully there was an existing procedure to do just that. One that he'd never had cause to use before.

It was called ACN, and if one used it they were risking their career if the Archon didn't feel it was justified. There was also BLOT and HANDS for ultra-secret information, and he'd only used the third tier HANDS once...but this letter was, without a doubt, worthy of ACN. It was the kind of mission a lazy agent like him had only dreamed about. Something that could reshape the face of the Inner Sphere...or be lost in some alley if not properly handled.

His greatest moment, and he had to pretend nothing of importance had happened in this brief meeting. Not to any surveillance on this building, not to even his own staff. His guards knew that anything said in this office when they were present never happened, but there were some 18 other personnel here that were also on the Lyran payroll, and he couldn't risk informing any of them except the one needed to activate ACN.

He'd do that in...three days from now, just to be safe. Until then he had to sit on this and pray that the Morten agent hadn't been followed. He thought about sleeping in his office, then nixed the idea as another indicator that something unusual had happened. He'd lock his desk as usual...but do nothing out of the ordinary just in case someone had some unlikely links into this building, technological or otherwise. They swept it constantly to prevent such things, but there was always the possibility of a mole fouling things up...but then again, why bother with one on Neubenn? It was almost in the Crucis March and far too big to be conceivably hit by the Draconis Combine. The distance made it unavailable to the Capellans as well. It was a major world, but a boring one as far as Inner Sphere politics went, so it was unlikely to have any serious foreign power players present.

Which was probably why Stephan Morten had sent this here. Nobody would expect him to return, and as it was, it was out of the way if you were going to take a direct line from the Periphery to Tharkad. It would have made more sense to send a jumpship around the edge of the Inner Sphere and deliver it personally...but he knew why they couldn't, and he agreed this was by far the best way to handle matters, despite the process being painfully tedious.

Niles tried to push the subject out of his mind in time for his business meeting 23 minutes later, but he was sure he did a poor job of acting, for even his associate said something about his maybe not feeling well. He'd smiled and waved it off as a lack of proper sleep, but he knew he'd have to do better over the coming days.

Whether by skill or luck, the three days passed without incident, then a drop was scheduled for 8 days later, passing through the home of one of his staff, then moved by a sleeper agent with the morning garbage pickup to a park and left unattended under a rock by a lake for two days in a sealed plastic bag.

Nobody found it, for it was the kind of place nobody actually stepped and completely out in the open...but at night it was practically invisible from the busy walkways some 42 meters to the south. And it was there that the envelope was quietly collected and put into a foldout picture frame almost too big to carry.

The man who lugged it around became obvious to the crowd once he emerged into the night street lights again, hiding his prize in the open beneath a cheap movie poster that nobody would bother trying to steal from him.

He got into a car some 8 minutes later and drove for 6 hours before handing off the picture frame to a pawn shop. And from that pawn shop a courier agent collected it another 3 days later...absent the picture frame, for it was now inside a vase destined for an art gallery on New Avalon.

And from there the letter went, from one journey to the other, bouncing its way clandestinely across the Federated Suns, then cutting through the Capellan Confederation before a lengthy zig zag crossing of the Free Worlds League. After that it entered Lyran territory, but the same methods were used to safeguard it all the way to its destination in the palace.

There it bypassed the normal security that would have demanded it be opened and scanned. Very few people in the Lyran Intelligence Corps even knew of this backdoor way of getting messages to the Archon, and it was so rare that if it was ever used the agents inside the palace moved it along without question, fearing for either the life of the Archon or the life of the Lyran Commonwealth with regards to whatever information was in the message.

Alessandro Steiner was given the letter in his office bathroom of all places, for the agents could not delay once being handed it, not knowing if it was time sensitive.

The man in question waited outside while the miffed, half-naked Archon read it with half his face covered in shaving cream. He had a high level meeting with House Duron's matriarch in less than an hour and was intent on looking his best...with this interruption being the sort of thing he'd fire a servant for if he was in a bad mood, but the look on the agent's face told him of the importance of the message.

He tore open the folder and began reading the letter.

"Cameron's bones," he cursed in a whisper, a shiver running down his body. A dollop of shaving cream fell on the letter and he swiped it off, not caring where it landed. He read it through not once, but three times, trying to get a handle on this and how to proceed.

He stepped out of the bathroom and caught the eye of the guard. "Find Harkov and tell him to meet me in the tower in twenty minutes."

"Yes, your excellency," the agent said politely, then removed himself from the office as smooth as a gentle breeze.

Alessandro went back into the bathroom still holding the letter. He only reluctantly put it down on a nearby shelf as he grabbed a towel and cleaned the shaving cream off his now uneven stubble, but that didn't matter. He got dressed and hurried out of his office, informing his staff waiting outside that he'd been called away on urgent military affairs and that the Duron matriarch would have to wait.

There was always some military affair going on in the Inner Sphere, so it was an easy lie to make when he needed to disappear somewhere without letting anyone know why.

He passed through several hallways, giving his retainers the slip with a single glance they'd learned to interpret as 'don't bother me' and ended up in one of the palace's five small libraries that doubled as impromptu meeting centers. The one he entered was reserved for his personal use so no one was ever in it without his permission.

He pulled out a particularly dusty volume and the nearby bookcase moved out, revealing a hidden door that he slid through quickly before it automatically closed. Then the Archon took a flight of tight, twisting stairs up to a tower at the palace that appeared on none of the blueprints. It had no windows, and no visual outline against the sky, wedged between other actual towers, with this one being a secret from most of the security staff in the building.

Alessandro got there first, with his most trusted agent arriving two minutes later from a different entrance, with the two men taking up most of the air in the small room that could have fit four comfortably if needed, but no more.

The Archon handed him the letter and let the agent read it. To his satisfaction the man's always neutral eyes widened considerably. When he looked up at the ruler of the Lyran Commonwealth, Alessandro knew he also understood the implications of this.

"Tell them yes," he ordered.

"We won't be able to arrange this within the year," Harkov warned. "Not if we do it properly. It will probably have to be scheduled for at least 14 months from now."

"That long?"

Harkov nodded. "If we can't use Comstar, we'll have to travel all the way to the far Periphery to schedule this, then get the messenger back with the confirmation before one of your associates leaves. You can't go yourself, you know that?"

"I need to, but you're right. We'll have to arrange some excuse for another Steiner to go. I won't let anyone else handle this for us."

"If you'll allow me, I'll make this work quietly. You needn't be involved until I let you know what's required."

"Do what's necessary, but I don't want to lose this opportunity if Comstar or the Davions destroy them before we can get it!"

"I will move as fast as reasonable, but we can't risk tipping either of them off either."

"True, true. What do you need from me today?"

“Go back to your normal schedule before people start to notice something going on. I’ll handle everything.”

Alessandro grabbed Harkov by the right shoulder.
“Don’t mess this up.”

“We won’t,” he promised, then the Archon left the tower by his stairs and Harkov via his ladder holding the letter as he climbed down into the bowels of the palace that few outside the upper intelligence community even knew existed.

Rannel Morten had never been so busy in her life. In total, there were 16 new technologies discovered on the now renamed *Morten Sword* that her research division had to reverse engineer. Most were small stuff, but useful, in the jumpship’s systems. The two big ones were the Black Box project and the HPG.

She’d been working on everything in bits and pieces, but Stephan had made the Black Box her top priority. She’d finished with it some 8 months ago, knowing it still needed improvements made, but it was functional. Rannel left the tinkering up to others and had fully devoted herself to the HPG...which was by far the biggest, most dangerous project she’d ever been a part of.

And also the most frustrating, because the technology, as it turned out, was based off a jumpship’s jump drive...something that House Morten wasn’t currently set up to manufacture.

So she had to create her own little tech division to start building them, in prototypes anyway, just so they knew what the hell it was they were doing. Fortunately they had blueprints for jump drives, but the manufacturing process was something else entirely. Doing this had already been on her department’s to-do list for the future, but without a shipyard there was no point in building jump drives yet...until now when they needed that expertise.

Rannel’s team had produced 13 different jumpship drives...all of which were junk except for the last two, having broken or melted down during testing. It was very expensive

junk, but thankfully her Doorbell project had got them producing small amounts of Zanxite and they had gradually been collecting via market buys or, in the case of one small mine on Bahab, Germanium and Titanium to build a stockpile for down the road when they had planned on starting to build jumpships.

Those small stockpiles were what Rannel's techs were using to build the prototypes, then recycled the damaged materials to try again. Thankfully Neubenn had extensive recycling facilities given its population size, otherwise they'd have never been able to keep up with material demand, and that knowledge House Morten had brought with them for many high-end technologies that others would typically just dump into a hole in the ground then go buy new ones.

So much had been done over the past 2 years that Rannel's research division had mushroomed to 19 times its original size, and when it came to the HPG project, she had a section procuring or fabricating exotic materials like Zanxite, another fabricating components, a third recycling materials from trashed components, a fourth doing the actual experimentation of the jump drives trying to make a hop from System X's Nadir jump point to its Zenith one, and fifth one trying to put together what pieces of an HPG they could without the main components that they were waiting to construct after they understood how to build a basic jump drive, let alone the tiny one in the HPG that sent a radiation wave through hyperspace instead of a large chunk of matter.

So in essence, each HPG created an artificial jump point wherever it wanted, and sent a signal through to a regular jump point elsewhere, or another artificial one. The signal would pop back into realspace at that location and spread out just the same as it would from an antenna, meaning the Comstar Compounds were probably getting signals right inside their own artificial jump points and shielding those signals from anyone else receiving them...or getting them from the star for incoming transmissions while they were able to send out signals directly from their compound into a brief artificial jump point.

Those artificial jump points took a lot of power to maintain, though it was possible to keep one open momentarily to receive a direct signal if you knew when it was coming. How the Comstar Compounds were operating she didn't know, and furthermore, creating artificial jump points was a science above and beyond jump drives that Rannel wasn't going to try to copy anytime soon.

Strangely enough, the *Morten Sword* did have that capability despite the fact that it would never fly to anywhere other than a jump point. She expected the design of the HPG was standard enough they'd just copied it into the ship rather than making a scaled down model, but that scaled down model was exactly what she was going for. If they could 'jump out' a signal instead of a ship it would take far, far less energy to do it. And they could do so from one of their own ships, or even a space station situated in a jump point and achieve the same effect as doing it on a planet, plus the few minutes of time lag going out from the planet to the star and back again, but that was insignificant given the amount of data that could be passed through these HPG mini-jumps.

Her two prototypes of regular jump engines had both been tested successfully...in that they worked, but the first had suffered such damage in the process that a second had been built to try and mitigate the effects of impurities in the forging of certain alloys. The second did work, twice, before starting to have issues. Rannel had personally assigned herself to that part of the work crew, and was down in one of the zero g work areas of the *Morten Sword* as it sat in an uninhabited system known as 'System X' along with a few dropships left behind for her purposes. Those were being reconfigured into mobile factories, warehouses, and whatever else she needed to quietly work on this where no one would be the wiser.

"Message from Cholis," Lilly Nostrum said gently from behind Rannel, who looked up from the scope on a microanalyzer and the Titanium-Germanium alloy sample that was giving them so many problems.

She blinked twice, adjusting her eyes to a normal range of vision, and saw her assistant holding a printout. Rannel drifted away from the workstation and took it, then read the brief text message.

"Finally," she said, handing the paper back to Lilly. After an extensive search, Sarah had finally managed to recruit a senior engineer from Ioto Galactic Enterprises, one of the few corporations that produced the Kearny-Fuchida drives for the *Merchant*-class jumpships. She'd been asking for some experts to be hired so her team wouldn't have to learn this all from blueprints and trial and error. And the message said that Jernor Bilbring had just arrived on Cholis and would be getting to in System X within the next 4 weeks.

"I hope he knows something of value," Lilly said, taking the paper back from the Lord of Technology.

"He better," Rannel growled, heading back to her analyzer, "for what we're paying him."

"More than me?" the 5-foot nothing woman with arms the size of toothpicks joked.

"If you want a raise, figure out something I haven't yet."

"What if he can't?"

"Then you're going to see what I'm like when I get grumpy. Do you have any more irrelevant questions to ask, or are you building up to something else?"

"We need a planet," she said flatly.

"I know," Rannel agreed, adjusting the zoom function on her scope. "But we can make do without one for a while longer."

"No, Rannel," she said firmly. "You need to get us into real gravity now. We can't keep working in 0g and sleeping on a gravity disc. It's wearing everyone down, including you. We need a proper research base. We *needed* one 6 months ago."

"I didn't anticipate this many problems with the Germanium. I thought the Zanaxite would be the limiting factor."

"We can't wait until we work it out," Lilly pressed.

"You've got tunnel vision."

"When have I not?" Rannel countered, turning away from her work for a moment. "Do you have any idea how important this is?"

"Black box was important. This can wait a bit."

The older woman was going to argue that automatically, but then her voice caught in her throat. "We need every advantage we can get. And until we can get the HPG in the Morten Tech Tree we risk losing it all if this ship is destroyed or captured. We're not safe until then."

"Then get us an airless planet with 1g of gravity to work on it," she countered. "Some of the components need more room to be fabricated than a dropship can offer anyway. You're holding those people back by keeping us here, you know?"

Rannel held up a hand. "Fine. You're right. Send a message to Stephan that we need to advance to phase 3 as soon as possible. That way it's out of my distracted hands."

Lilly smiled. "Does that count as something you didn't know?"

Rannel scrunched up her face in a mocking way that wiggled her nose slightly. "Get out of here, child..."

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July 18, 3003

Morten Protectorate

Turnix

Redemption

Carroll walked off the Taurian dropship almost too relieved to move. She set foot on the ferrocrete pad, located in the center of the now rebuilt city named 'Redemption' that lie north of the main settlement that House Morten had inherited when they'd rescued this world from starvation.

Gone were the old buildings of the city. Deconstructed with new ones rising here and there around the four-pad spaceport. Right now the Taurian dropship was the only one here, and Carroll felt overwhelmed by the fact that Turnix and the Mortens were in fact still alive.

She carried a simple backpack now overtop of work clothes unbecoming a noble, and in that backpack were all the belongings she owned, including several pieces of jewelry that she hadn't had to sell yet, though the trip out from Taurus had cost her more than any other leg of her journey, for they weren't exactly selling tickets into the Morten Protectorate yet, so she'd had to bribe her way onto two different trade ships to get out here...but now that she was, it was worth the cost and then some.

Carroll was directed off the pad to a nearby terminal where she logged her Taurian ID and asked for a map of the planet. From there she started walking, seeing that everything was connected via new roads and personnel walkways. The former Ambassador could have waited for a bus, but felt compelled to keep moving and not stop, so she walked...and

walked...and walked for 7 hours before finally arriving at the gate to the Viceroy's palace.

She stood there for more than a minute before a guard on the interior of the thick rail-like fence spoke to her.

"Is there something you want, lady?"

"I need to speak to the Viceroy."

"You can contact his office through the Comms bureau two blocks that way," he said, pointing to the north, "and schedule an appointment."

"He'll want to see me now," she said, dropping her sullen, depressed tone that she'd used to avoid conversation with others for so long it had just become natural. Her former cadence came back, and her shoulders raised slightly. "Inform him Ambassador Carroll is here."

"Ambassador from where?"

"He'll know. We've met before."

"Listen, lady. There are procedures to follow. You don't just get to walk in."

"He'll allow it. All he has to hear is my name. Pass it along."

"Just like that?" the guard mocked.

Carroll reduced her voice to a whisper. "I'm trying to avoid attracting attention, but the longer I stand here on the street more people are going to notice. I've come from Taurus and have a private matter to discuss with Chad. Please give him my name and he will clear me to enter."

The guard didn't look convinced, but he made a quick call on the radio and waited for nearly two minutes before receiving back a reply. He didn't say anything, merely opening a sally port on the wall supporting the gate and motioned for her to come in.

Carroll was so relieved that worked that she audibly sighed as she slipped past the security barrier to the wide garden area that surrounded the palace.

"Follow that walkway," the guard said, now considerably more respectful.

Carroll didn't hesitate being this close to journey's end and barely noticed another guard pacing her all the way to the palace where a door opened and out rushed Chad Morten to meet her a dozen steps off the terraced entrance.

"It is you," he said disbelievingly. "How did you get here?"

"I've been on the run for two years," she said, then started to weep over top an otherwise straight face. "Am I still welcome here?"

"That's a dumb question," Chad said, grabbing her by the arm and pulling her towards the palace. "Who's chasing you?"

"House Davion," she said as they walked out of the evening early sunset and into a well-lit interior that was the typical Morten mix of high fashion and functionality.

"I wondered why you didn't use your last name," he said, glancing at her backpack. "Traveling light?"

"I didn't get a chance to pack properly when my parents kicked me off New Avalon to save my life."

"Sit down," he said, gesturing to a small table in the entry foyer underneath a potted tropic plant that was somehow giving 'shade' from the main lighting in a way that made it feel cozier than normal.

Carroll pulled off her backpack and set it beside her feet at the table as she sank down into the thin but cushioned chair. "I'm not a Davion any longer. They're pretending that House Morten doesn't exist. That it never existed. They've even taken you off the Federated Suns maps. And they can't have a Morten liaison officer running around as a visible counter to their lie. My ex-parents gave me money and shoved me out the door, telling me never to come back to New Avalon or I'd be killed. I've been trying to get back here ever since, but with the trade routes being canceled I had to come the long way through Taurus. I knew the Concordat had at least some trade relations with you. I didn't expect it to be this little, but I was still able to find a ship to get here eventually."

"Any close calls?"

Carroll shook her head. "No. Either they didn't care to chase me, or I was one step ahead of them. I knew if I made any public statements they'd be all over me, so I had to leave the Davion name behind and, frankly, I don't want it anymore. I'm just Carroll now, and that's a name I've not used since leaving New Avalon. I've been traveling under aliases."

"Well you're safe now," he said, placing a hand on hers. Despite their position difference, he was only 6 years younger than her and hadn't been around the Morten Estate for several years after taking up the Arka position on Turnix, and now the Viceroy spot as of 8 months ago.

"I'm glad you remembered me," she said honestly.

"Hard not to. I had a huge crush on you back in the day."

Her eyebrows raised. "Really?"

"To be fair, a lot of the junior branch of the family did after we found out you weren't the monster we expected. There's no way I'd forget you, even if I am now a father. Some childhood crushes you never forget."

"When did that happen?"

"Three years ago. The dating scene here was better for me than on Cholis and I found Kiera right away. We've got two kids now."

"I thought you had to go to the Estate with children?"

Chad nodded. "We should be there, but Stephan said I could remain here until my Viceroyship is over. The kids won't be old enough to really know the difference, and if one of these mercenaries gets lucky and hits the Estate...well...Stephan didn't want us all in one place anyway, so I got a special status due to the situation."

"How are things? Everyone in the Federated Suns thinks you're dead and Cholis is a wasteland. And the Taurians are buying the same thing except for the traders that know otherwise."

"That's just Comstar's cover story while they send half the mercenaries in the Inner Sphere after us, but we haven't lost a planet yet and they're getting desperate. Attacks are

coming more frequently, even here, but we've got things locked down better than at the beginning. I've even got a mercenary unit here doing traffic control at the star to help fill in some of our naval gaps until we can build enough of our own ships."

"How recently have you been hit?"

"3 months ago. We've been hit 7 times by small units.

The first three got to ground and got mauled by our mechs. The rest have been stopped at the jump points, either turned back or captured. The Gordon's Guards even grabbed me a jumpship a little over a year ago. Stupid mercs came in on one that didn't have batteries so it had to sit and recharge. Easiest capture I've ever heard about, and the dropships...I've picked up 8. As far as Turnix goes, we've captured more mechs than we've lost. It seems Comstar is lying to them about the defenses and just sending them against us unprepared hoping to whittle us down or maybe they really don't know what we've got here now. Regardless, the mercs are being sold out and we're still alive."

"Any big units like the Lion's Teeth?"

"Not a one," Chad said with a shake of his head. "I think they took their best shot first and when it missed they decided to keep constant pressure on us. We haven't been able to add any planets since you left, unless you count Cholis."

"What do you mean?"

"It's ours now. A Davion jumpship showed up and evacuated the Duke's family, and Comstar went with him before blowing up their compound and a good part of Brinestorm with it. They never came back or explained anything. Stephan just let them go and Cholis has been ours ever since. But he's not risking taking on any new worlds until he's sure we can protect them, so in that way Comstar is winning, but they're not trimming our current territory any."

"I guess that makes sense," Carroll said, slipping back into her old mindset far too easily. "They can't pretend Cholis doesn't exist if they're still getting tax money from it, but it's hard to believe they would give up an entire planet."

"It just goes to show you how much influence Comstar has with the Davions...well, not all of them obviously."

"I'm through with them," Carroll said flatly. "I'd like to work for your House now, if that's possible?"

"Is this the first planet of ours you got to?"

"It is."

"Then Stephan doesn't know you're here?"

"Nobody does. I just got off a dropship under a fake name."

"In that case I'll get a message to him, then we'll get you on the next available dropship...which will probably be in 4 months if you want to travel on one of ours. Some of the independent merchants could get you to Foniss faster, and then hitch a ride over to Cholis. The traffic between those two worlds is still pretty constant."

"Can't I travel with the message?" she asked, confused for a moment, then when Chad's face closed up her jaw dropped. "That's what all this is about! You have one of their HPGs?"

"Me and my big mouth," Chad grumbled.

"You really think I'd tell anyone at this point?"

"Save your questions for Stephan. We're not supposed to discuss it with anyone, but we have a limited form of interstellar communications. I can get a message to him faster than I can get you to him. That's all I'll say."

"And that's why they want you dead? You can break their monopoly!" she said in an excited whisper, not sure who else was in the palace that could overhear.

"Something like that. But I'm still surprised they would go after you. You didn't know anything."

"There is a huge cover-up going on, Chad. It's not a matter of whether I know something or not, it's that my existence threatened to undo the story they're telling. The entire population of Cholis was wiped out by raiders along with your entire House...but no one official will tell that story. Everyone is threatened into silence and only the tabloids tell it...but they're not doing it on their own, they're having their arm twisted hard. I've never seen anything like this before. They always run 10 different stories, sometimes the true ones. On

this there's just one and it's done. Someone wants House Morten erased from society."

"While they try to do it for real out here, and are failing badly. Maybe they rely on their compounds on every major world in the Inner Sphere to gather intelligence and they just don't have assets beyond that to get a good look at how we're defending ourselves, but they intentionally misled the Lion's Teeth as to what we had on Cholis in the beginning. I also don't think they want the mercenaries surviving to tell the tale of what's really going on out here."

Carroll thought about that for a moment. "They cause you some damage and eliminate the witnesses at the same time. What are you doing with the prisoners?"

"Stephan is dealing with that somehow. I'm just supposed to collect and transport them to Cholis periodically. I've got a prison facility built here to hold them until there's a ship available to carry them. I assume our other worlds have been instructed to build the same."

"I'm glad," she said, starting to cry again. "I was worried that at least some of you had been lost."

"We've lost personnel, but no Mortens as yet. As long as we can keep producing more mechs than they roast of ours, we'll stay ahead of the game. And with our hired mercenary units thinning the numbers that can get on planet, we're starting to pull ahead in the logistics game."

"I can't believe you guys are hiring mercenaries, but I guess it makes sense. Fight fire with fire."

"They're not allowed on the planet. They're just paid to intercept ships and get bonuses for captures, so they have a financial incentive to take people alive rather than blow them away. It's worked out well here, and I haven't heard of problems elsewhere, though we're still kind of in a black hole of information. Most of our updates still come through jumpships so everything is months delayed, but Stephan should know you're here in about 4 or 5 days, and within 10 we should hear back from him. My guess is he'll want you on Cholis as soon as possible."

"That's not an HPG then," she said, thinking hard. "But still impressive. And I won't ask."

"Thank you," Chad said, sizing her up. "You look a little haggard."

"I am very haggard," she admitted.

"Hungry?"

"Quite."

Chad stood up. "Come on. I'm here with three more Mortens and we'll all have dinner together and catch up. Would you like something more formal to wear?"

"I thought your family didn't really care?" she said, standing as well as she picked up the backpack and slung it over her shoulder playfully.

"We don't, but if I remember correctly you were a fashion hound."

"Fashion hounds stand out in a crowd," she noted. "But yes, I could use some new clothes if you have anything available."

"You forget we own our own line of stores, and even on little Turnix we have proper clothing and personal tailors. The people here badly needed them."

"Any chance I can find a hot bath before dinner?" she asked, feeling even scruffier than normal in the noble's presence after walking for so many hours. "I've been onboard a dropship for months."

"Yes of course," he said with a wry smile. "Though given my married status I'm not available to join you. However, I'm sure Danny and Darren would make themselves available to give you a good scrubbing."

"Careful," she said with a laugh. "I might be so worn out I'd agree to that."

Chad's smile faded and his eyes turned serious. "It's good to have you back."

"Up until now I wasn't sure if you'd want me back."

"Well, you are a blonde, and some things are just naturally hard to understand, I guess."

"Sarah is a blonde too, if I remember correctly."

"Right," he winced. "Don't tell her I said that."

"Find me a hot bath and I'll forget it quickly enough."

Chad half bowed and gestured to his left. "This way, my lady."

She started walking. "It's a good thing you are married. You've almost become charming."

"I've been well-coached, and it becomes much easier when you have absolutely no chance of success."

"You didn't before."

"I didn't know that before," he said, waving down one of the palace servants. "Take this very beautiful woman to the primary guest suite, and do not inform my wife she is here."

"Yes...sir," the servant said, getting a weird look on his face.

"Troublemaker," Carroll whispered, then followed the perplexed servant through the confines of the palace to a room befitting her former position.

Within ten minutes she was submerged in a hot bath and half asleep with tears of relief slowly rolling down her face as the ache that had been within her heart for the past two years was fading as fast as the ones in her travel weary body.

Four years. That's how long the war had been going on, and thankfully no one had found the location of Kevin's Forge. The only jumpships coming to the former pirate's den were their own, ferrying supplies and personnel out from Foniss only as he continued to build the Morten Academy Praxeum and the Morten C.A.B.S. that had, despite all indications to the contrary, started to receive more students rather than less the past two years.

Once the blackout happened and high society pretended the Mortens didn't exist, the number of mom's and dad's favorite sons and daughters coming to learn to be mechwarriors dropped off to almost nothing, with a few still arriving from the Periphery or other realms aside from the Federated Suns. There had, however, been a constant stream of would-be mercenaries wanting training they couldn't get

elsewhere, and the Northwind Highlanders had liked their initial test program enough to solidify a regular allotment of recruits for what they considered to be 'basic training.'

They'd also said it was the most complete basic training available anywhere, and some of the kids they'd sent out here had returned changed...for the better. After that a few more higher end mercenary units took notice, and despite the constant contracts to assault Morten worlds they kept sending students their way...with a proviso that any unit that took a contract against the Protectorate would be banned from *all* Morten services, including mech and parts sales.

The problem was mercenaries were everywhere in the Inner Sphere, with plenty of startup Lances ready to take over for larger units that fell to pieces. So even with a list of 'friendly' mercenaries that they were doing business with, that barely scratched the surface of the numbers that were available to come after them for Comstar's anonymous agents. And even when many of those units never returned, more kept coming...either because they were uninformed as to what was happening, or just desperate to get good paying contracts no matter what the mission was.

And after the first two years of the war had passed, apparently word had gotten around that this 'blank spot' on the map was where mercenary units came to die. In truth, the Mortens had a lot of prisoners they dealt with in different ways, and some units were in fact leaving either defeated or unable to get past the naval defenses at the jump points. But the reputation had only been solidified in the past two years as combined mercenary assaults started to happen, with two, three, or even four different mercenary units arriving at the same time and trying to sprint past the defenses so some of them could get down to the planet and cause havoc.

It turned out these mercs were being offered a fortune for a successful mission and enough were willing to take the gamble to put added pressure on House Morten. They were still losing mechs, factories, and aerospace fighters...but not many dropships. And their losses they were making up with their own

production, while Kevin quietly courted the advances from some of the larger mercenary units in the Inner Sphere as Foniss became something of a mercenary embassy planet with all the traffic coming to and from it, for both the CABS and the mech factory.

The Northwind Highlanders, primarily under contract to the Capellans to act as a quasi arm of their military, were also buying replacement parts and some new mechs from House Morten, and they were giving them a discount due to their friendly relations. A few other large units had been starting to send some raw recruits to CABS as well, and Kevin was beginning to offer them the same deal.

The more major units they took off the potential hiring card for Comstar, the less chance they'd have of breaking the defenses on any of their worlds. And sooner or later Comstar was going to have to either give up or do something far more drastic...for they weren't making any headway in their efforts to destroy House Morten. They were only keeping them bottled up on their current worlds and unable to expand, and he doubted that was their primary goal in all of this.

Right now Kevin lived on Forge, but remotely ran the adjunct on Foniss where all the applications and deal making for CABS was done. At present he had 328 students in four different programs...Basic Indoctrinary Training or BITs, Advanced Infantry Training or AITs, Garrison Tactical School or GiTS, and Field Technician Training or FITTs.

BITs and GiTS were both for mechwarriors, with GiTS teaching the art of defending worlds rather than conquering them. Kevin had made a choice not to offer the latter, for they didn't want to train would be raiders and other scallywags. They wanted to train honorable mechwarriors who then could choose another path, but at least their first few steps would be in the right direction.

AITs was technically for newbs as well, but it was a hard program that basically took infantrymen and put them through the basics all the way through the war manual up to taking down mechs with snares and other traps. Most people thought

infantry were next to useless in wars dominated by mechs, but any course offered by CABS was getting attention now, and Kevin was starting to get more recruits for AITs than any other program, simply because you needed a lot more people in infantry than you did in the mechwarrior ranks.

And mech units liked having infantry around who had been taught how to properly guard their mechs against sabotage or theft rather than only being schooled on launching assaults.

FiTTs was the newest addition, and designed to teach techs how to maintain mechs in the mechbay and in the field, and as soon as Kevin had opened up the first 30 slots they had been claimed by four different units within 18 hours. It had become a race to claim slots in CABS now, with mercenaries keeping a representative at or near the recruitment office on Foniss so they could grab what was arguably the best training available outside of the elite schools in the Inner Sphere that no mercenaries would ever be accepted into without a connection on the inside.

So Kevin was not only busy expanding his list of programs, he was busy expanding the campus, his staff, and the number of students he could handle while also building the Morten Academy Praxeum in a different location on the planet. This was the second level school that provided much more detailed and harder programs for people with intent to serve in the Morten Protectorate, while the Morten Academy Adjunct Schools were those copies of the facilities in the Estate that were now at least partially available on every planet in the Protectorate and training people locally for a number of posts without having to transport them via jumpship all the way back to Cholis.

But for advanced training in the field more than in the simulators or info terminals, the Praxeum had been devised by Kevin and others in his department. They had never had anything like it on Neubenn, so he was moving into untested waters now, but they needed higher level recruits available to their mechwarrior units and everything else rather than just

going for bare bones minimum that the Adjunct schools were designed for.

Though to be honest, the 'minimum' for House Morten was quite a bit higher than the 'maximum' for a lot of other training programs in the Federated Suns and elsewhere. But Kevin wanted to start grooming more Gradys, or at least getting closer to his level of skill, rather than just regular troops that they needed three or four of to outgun the more skilled opponents in the Inner Sphere.

And thankfully they did have those numbers in most of these engagements against the mercenaries, for some of them were damn good, but most were unruly, and even if they could be trusted they would not mesh well with the Morten troops. There was a camaraderie there formed by going through the same training programs and being Morten all the way through their career. In a few cases they'd accepted in former mercenaries...as Grady had once been...but it had not always gone smoothly so it was a seldom-used practice now no matter how good their skills.

Training them in CABS was one thing. But taking them into their own line units was quite another, which was a major reason Kevin was building two different schools here on Forge. One for their people, and one that would hopefully help to civilize everyone else in at least some small ways.

Kevin never would have expected the growth of CABS in the middle of a war...and the people who were coming here knew damn well it was a war, for even Foniss was getting hit with its now two Regiments of mechs protecting the factories on the planet and its mercenary-augmented naval defense at the jump points. That didn't keep some ambitious mercenaries from using pirate jump points or trying to run the gauntlet, so the mechs on the planet did see action, but unless someone big decided to hit here they were never going to take the planet or even smash the main factories...though there were more and more of them popping up in different locations on Foniss as Morten Arms Consortium continued to grow in size as fast as logistically possible.

There were far more jumpships coming in to Foniss than there were at Cholis, with an average of 1 every three days. They were a combination of traders, Morten vessels, and mercenaries looking to buy equipment or enroll in CABS. There were also a number of fairly high level brokers now living on Foniss despite the fact that there was no Comstar network out here to take orders through.

That hadn't stopped them though, and the Morten Bank was seeing record profits of its own in terms of short loans needed for the brokers and other well-established clients to buy stuff in the moment then pay for it months or even a year later when their hard currency arrived from the Inner Sphere after the final transactions had been made. Then add in all the actual banking practices that financial experts were sniffing out in the Protectorate that they couldn't get in the Federated Suns or elsewhere...particularly the tax free kind...and Foniss had accidentally become the financial hub of the Protectorate as well with their MP currency quickly being snatched up in physical coin as a hedge against other forms lowering in trading value or even as an investment now that it was becoming clear that the Protectorate was not going to fall to the mercenary attacks and that it was now the hot place to do business outside the bureaucracy-heavy Inner Sphere.

In fact, the Lord of Economics Management now had a sub-post that ran the Morten Bank, currently held by Hans Morten, and the financial power of the realm was growing by the month along with Kevin's school. He'd even heard that there were at least 5 Taurian worlds near them that were petitioning Stephan hard to let them join, tired of being all but ignored by House Calderon and let to thrive or die on their own unless they were invaded. Mutual defense pacts like the Concordat mostly was didn't care much about prosperity, and in addition to the Taurians there were also other worlds within the general borders of the Protectorate asking to join as well.

If it wasn't for these damn Comstar mercenaries they'd have twice the number of planets by now, but Kevin was glad they'd been able to hold on to what they had and they were

growing those worlds with every passing year. And the fact that they weren't folding to the pressure worried him, because it looked like the only way Comstar was going to be able to destroy them...for their efforts to cut off supplies from the Federated Suns had been effective, but nowhere near lethal to House Morten...was to convince House Davion or House Liao or House Marik or even House Kurita to invade them directly, for Comstar had no army of its own at present, and House Steiner, while being the furthest away, was soon to be out of their potential influence...

The Lyran jumpship *Steadfast* popped into the Zenith jump point of an uninhabited system just across the Lyran border into the Circinus Federation one jump away from the Commonwealth world of Poulsbo, but it hadn't come directly here. It had made three different jumps to otherwise uninhabited systems in the last 4 weeks and came into this one only reluctantly, expecting a trap.

But upon arrival there was only one other jumpship here...as planned...and its IFF was broadcasting the proper code on repeat.

"You owe me 100 kroner," Morgan Kell said to the man standing next to him on the bridge, located in the grav deck of the jumpship as opposed to one of the attached four dropships whose bridges were always in 0g unless under thrust.

"I'll pay up later," Arthur Luvon said warily as he looked at the *Invader*-class jumpship on the monitor. It was smaller than their *Star Lord*-class ship, but all three of its dropships were already deployed in a defensive perimeter around it, as if they were expecting a fight. "But I still don't like this."

"They're here regardless," Katrina Steiner said with her arms folded across her chest. "At least my uncle wasn't lying about this part."

"Could still be part of a trap," Arthur warned.

"If this was the trap," Morgan asked, "why would they have tried to kill her on Poulsbo?"

"Exactly," Katrina agreed. "It's far too ridiculous of bait to be anything other than real. And if they're still here that means Alessandro hasn't sent anyone else to take my place yet."

"We *are* five days early," Arthur pointed out.

"They've come all the way from the Periphery beyond the Federated Suns," Katrina said with a wave of her hand. "Do you really think they'd cut their travel time so close it would be to the day? Send the confirmation code," she ordered, then the threesome waited for the House Morten ship to respond.

They didn't have to wait long, for an image of a middle-aged woman appeared on the monitor who had hair as starkly blonde as Katrina's, but pulled back into a ponytail as opposed to the quirky pair of haphazard braids that Steiner was wearing.

"You're earlier than expected," she said pleasantly.

"We had some trouble on the way and weren't sure if you'd be here or not," Katrina said in a much more forceful manner. "Is the deal still on?"

"From our end it is. What kind of trouble?"

"Family trouble," she said dubiously. "You're deployed for combat."

"We've been under mercenary attack in the Protectorate for four straight years. It's force of habit at this point, but we're not expecting any visitors in this system. You're cleared to send one dropship over at your convenience."

"I look forward to meeting you...miss?"

"Carroll Morten."

"I'll see you soon, Carroll," Katrina said, signaling to the Captain to cut the comm.

"I still don't like it," Arthur said. "They could smoke us three dropships to one before the rest of ours could intervene."

"Worse," Morgan said as he leaned over the shoulder of a crewmember. "Those Mules look like they've been augmented into assault dropships. They're not taking any chances."

"Why would they with their cargo?" Katrina said dismissively and turned around, starting to walk off the bridge.

"Let's get this over with before any of my uncle's ships get here to take my place."

Two hours later the dropship *Darling Inheritance*, build specifically to haul around royals, docked with the *Happy Frog* and Katrina Steiner went onboard alone, leaving Arthur and Morgan behind in the dropship ready to call with a squad of troops at the tap of the emergency beacon in her pocket as she floated through the airlock.

Katrina was met by a nobody and guided through the ship to the gravity disc, getting a feeling for the deck again as she walked into a room that was empty save for three people. The woman she had spoken with and two overly large, muscular men that were obviously bodyguards. With them was a large table with a rectangular crate on top. Three more were stacked to the side.

"Miss Steiner," Carroll bowed her head slightly as she spoke the words. "It's a pleasure to meet someone as high stature as yourself."

"It was necessary given the subject matter," Katrina said, irritation in her voice despite her effort not to let it show. "My name is Katrina. You may use it, Carroll."

"Very well, Katrina. I have four replicas for you," she said, indicating the black crates.

"These?" she asked, raising an eyebrow. "How can it be so small?"

"I wondered the same myself, but these Black Boxes," she said, running her right hand across the top of the one on the table, "don't work on the same physics as the HPG system. They both operate in hyperspace, yes, but these create only a ripple effect. You can't carry much information with that, only enough for some lines of text or a single low-res picture, and it's not instantaneous. The signal travels approximately 10 light years per day. That said, it is remarkably compact."

"What's the power source?"

Carroll lifted up the black box on its edge and pulled open a small compartment, inside of which was a standard power cable coupling.

"You have to externally charge it, but any dropship mount will do. We recommend keeping them on dropships," the Morten said, laying the box back down gently. "There's a bit of static created whenever a jumpship comes or goes, and an even smaller amount from HPG terminals. If you want to send or receive the clearest signal, you need to be away from both."

Katrina walked up beside Carroll, but her eyes were on the device. "This doesn't look like Star League technology."

"The casing is different from the original, as is some of the parts, but they're all functional. We've tested them at a maximum range of 111 light years."

Katrina turned a wide-eyed glance at the woman. "Seriously?"

Carroll nodded. "It's not reliable that far, because of what we're calling 'hyperspace weather,' but they have worked at that distance. We recommend keeping it within 65 lightyears to be sure you don't get a garbled message, but you can send the same one multiple times at further distances and one will probably get through...only you have to wait at least an hour and a half in between transmissions," she said, pulling open the lid to reveal a small screen and lots of buttons and dials. She pointed to one indicator light.

"This will glow blue," she said, flipping the on-switch with her other hand, and as promised it lit up in the appropriate color, "when it's ready to transmit. Then the emitter gets overheated and this light will read yellow. Do not use it when it's yellow. Wait till it turns back blue. If it goes red, it means you've destroyed the transmitter."

"A single short message every two hours then?"

"Going out, yes. Receiving depends on how far distant it is. Do not try to send anything from ship to ship at the same jump point. Likewise, we cannot send a signal now with three other black boxes onboard. The pulse is like a radio wave, the further away from the source the weaker it gets. This close,

using one will fry the others, and the same thing can happen with two ships at the same jump point. The closest you want to use it safely is transmitting from the Zenith to the Nadir in the same system. That works fine. You can also use it to transmit from a jump point to a planet with almost no lag time."

"How is it encrypted?"

"It's not," Carroll said apologetically. "You can encode your messages however you like, but the pulse goes out in all directions. Anyone can pick it up with these devices. However, we have not detected anyone else using them out here aside from our own. We also know that Comstar has a standing order for its agents to obtain and destroy any of these Black Boxes they can find in old Star League caches. It's inferior to the HPGs, but they seem to want them eliminated rather than preserved for their use. I think it's unlikely they don't at least have a few around to listen in to see if anyone else has one, but fanatics often do strange things for lack of logical reasons, so it's possible they destroyed them all. I just wouldn't bet your realm on it."

"Fanatics?"

Carroll nodded. "We learned quite a lot about them from one of their own that turned pirate. That's where we obtained the original. He was supposed to destroy it but never did. He died fighting our troops, but he had a journal that was quite revealing. They are not neutral arbiters at all. They're fanatics that wish to reestablish the Star League under their own control, and they're using every irregular means at their disposal to do it."

"But what do you mean by fanatics? I've been called as much myself."

"Do you recite incantations over machinery, believing it will not function unless you do?"

"The ones I've met have been quite sane," she differed.

"The ones you and I have met are supposed to be viewed as they want them viewed. The inner workings of their organization are another matter entirely. They are sending endless waves of mercenaries against us trying to destroy the

threat to their monopoly, and if you do not guard these with extreme care they will destroy them. Much of the so-called 'industrial sabotage' taking place in the Inner Sphere is actually them. They do not want the technological dark age to end and are deliberately taking down any research activity that seeks to rediscover what was lost. They hoard it for themselves, and more than just HPGs and these Black Boxes. There's a lot more they are not telling people they have."

"And you haven't told me your terms yet," Katrina pointed out.

"A non-aggression pact, for starters. If Comstar can't take us out using mercenaries, the only other way is to get one of the Great Houses to do it for them. They've already arm twisted most respectable businessmen from denying us any sales in the Inner Sphere, and the Federated Suns has gone so far as to remove any mention of House Morten's existence, past and present. They even removed our systems from their maps, and Comstar as well. Cholis was a Federated Suns world that they abandoned because we have our embassy and operational headquarters there and they're denying it even exists now. Do not underestimate the influence Comstar has in the Inner Sphere, including your own House. They have done their best to wall us off, and then try to kill us in the dark. It's not working, so we assume they will try to get one of you to take us out for them. You are the farthest away and the least likely to be conscripted into this, but if it happens you must turn them down."

"That can't be all?"

"No, it's not. If one of the other Great Houses does invade us, you must *immediately*," Carroll said, stressing the word, "invade their systems closest to yours and force them to fight two wars at once. We do not believe we can survive against their full military might, but we may be able to survive against part of it. You're the backup plan if Comstar is able to twist one of their arms and convince them to invade us under who knows what concocted grounds. Without it, we have no chance if they go that far...and they will if they're able to. They

will stop at nothing to protect their monopoly, which is why you have to safeguard these in such a way that only a handful of people even know they exist. If you send them to one of your current research facilities, expect that facility to suffer a mysterious fire and be destroyed. They've done it before elsewhere, including, we believe, on our old research buildings back on Neubenn long before we came into possession of these. And back then we were just trying to make some small improvements in current technology."

"You're saying they want us as primitive as possible in order to yank around?"

Carroll nodded. "Yes, and not for good intentions either. They're sinister in a way that undercuts any sense of morality. Luckily, our realm didn't have any HPGs in it to begin with, except for the embassy on Cholis. When House Davion evacuated the Duke they took a Comstar dropship with them, then the facility exploded killing 683 people in the nearby city. They are soulless monsters bent on conquest every bit as much as the 5 Great Houses. They're just not using battlmechs to do it."

"So you consider House Steiner a soulless monster as well?" Katrina challenged.

"Not on Comstar's level, but none of the Great Houses have a great track record when it comes to being the good guys."

"Are we preferable to House Davion? I'm surprised you didn't strike a deal with them to keep them off your front porch? They'd be as interested in this as we are."

Carroll's face tightened up considerably. "I wasn't born a Morten. I was born Carroll Davion, then appointed as Ambassador-at-Large and liaison to House Morten by Andrew Davion. After he died Ian replaced him and everything went to hell. Comstar shut down communications for the Mortens, and then shortly thereafter shut it down completely on Cholis, which was followed by a large scale mercenary attack that aimed to destroy everyone on the planet. House Morten barely managed to hold off the invasion, which included a warship that

I'm told would have bombarded the planet had it not been stopped by our dropship fleet. We lost a lot that day, and I, as Ambassador, had no way to report in past the Comstar blackout, so I hopped on the next passing jumpship and traveled back to New Avalon."

"When I got there I knew my access to Ian would be blocked, so I went to my parents first...and they promptly kicked me off the planet saying I would be killed if I stayed. After all, how can there be a liaison to House Morten if House Morten never existed? I was 'inconvenient,' and because of that my own House was going to kill me. I spent two years on the run before finally making my way back to the Morten Protectorate. I had to go the long way through the Taurian Concordat since Comstar arranged to cancel the jumpship routes that had been going there previously, and thankfully House Morten not only gave me sanctuary, they also adopted me into their House, so I am a Davion no longer. This, as well as ten other equally valid reasons, are why House Morten will strike no deals with the Davions. I'm not claiming House Steiner is any better, but we're on opposite sides of the Inner Sphere and not likely to interact much, so this can be a mutually beneficial arrangement."

"From our end anyway," Katrina said, her own eyes hardening considerably as Carroll's story hit home given recent events. "You're wagering everything on a promise from us. What's to keep us from taking these Black Boxes and not honoring our part of the deal?"

"We're giving them *only* to you," Carroll emphasized, expecting this point to come up and glad that Katrina was being so blunt. "If you fail to counter-invade, we will make sure the other Great Houses that are not attacking us get a copy. You'll still be able to circumvent Comstar, but your advantage over the other Houses will be lost. Plus, what we're asking is also in your advantage, because you would probably see the distraction of our fall an opportunity to pick up a few more planets while our murderers are busy anyway. We just want to make sure you go in immediately, and with full force."

"I assume you also want diplomatic relations established so this arrangement can be leaked out as a deterrent?"

"No," Carroll said harshly. "The Federated Suns and Comstar ignoring that we exist has actually been beneficial for us. The longer they think there's a chance of their mercenaries getting the job done, the more we can prepare for something massive. They're not simply going to quit trying. They are adamant about technological suppression, and must be freaking out that we have this capability now. Publicly announcing a pact between us would draw more attention to the issue than they can afford. I have no idea how they would react, but it could prompt them to shut down communications across the entire Inner Sphere or do something else drastic. They're fanatics, and the best way to play this is to keep them guessing. We don't want them knowing about our deal and preparing for it either. If House Davion or Laio or the Free Worlds League attacks us, we want them to pay the price, and if they don't know you'll hit them hard at the same time they won't have units in place to defend their border worlds properly."

"You're playing a very dangerous game, Morten," Katrina said approvingly. "I hope you win."

"We either win or we are destroyed. There is no other option. Our existence can't be allowed given what we possess and what we know. And you are also going to be targeted if they learn we gave you this. Which is why this meeting never took place. If anyone has to know, tell them you found these Black Boxes in a Star League cache. That's where the Comstar pirate got his from. Leave us out of it entirely. Just make sure House Steiner honors the bargain no matter who is Archon. We learned the hard way that some agreements don't last through regal transitions."

"What else do you want from us?"

Carroll shook her head. "Nothing."

"Nothing?" Katrina said, shocked. "Not even shipments of arms or a big box of money? Those can be shipped quietly enough. You said you're at war."

"And one of our greatest weapons is that Comstar doesn't know exactly what we have or what we know. They're guessing, but if they have a Black Box receiver near our worlds then they know we have these. The less they know the better, so we intend to keep to our little black hole on the map. We just need a contingency plan in case we get hit by more than mercenaries. Fifty years from now we'll be able to stand on our own. But we have to get there first. Time is on our side currently, and we need to keep it that way."

"50 years and you'll be a match for the Great Houses?" Katrina asked skeptically.

"With the way you keep warring on each other, yes. The Periphery usually goes unnoticed anyway. And we're much better at defending worlds than taking them. Especially with the practice we're getting now. Industry wise, we'll keep expanding. House Morten is quite good at logistics, though with records being expunged hardly anyone knows that now. So the blackout works to our benefit in that way."

"You want to be ignored while you build, but Comstar won't allow it and keeps sending mercenaries after you?"

"They keep sending them to die by giving them inaccurate scouting information. It's almost as if they don't want them living as witnesses afterward, only doing damage to us before they're wiped out, and they've got the MRB to keep covering it up and recruiting as many as they need."

"They do, don't they?" Katrina said, not having realized that angle before now. "So in essence, they do have a mech army to draw on."

"But they don't have spy compounds on our worlds like they do yours," Carroll warned. "So not all of the miscalculations might be intentional."

Katrina thought about that, and though the notion of a united mercenary army toppling the LCAF seemed absurd, they were effectively launching a major invasion of a periphery state and no one in the Lyran Commonwealth had known about it until the Mortens had made contact. So maybe she was underestimating what Comstar was capable of.

“Are you sure you can hold against the mercenaries?”

“Fairly sure. And if we don’t, we want to make sure you have these to break their monopoly wide open at some point. Though for now I suggest you keep them secret, safe, and reserved for high level operations that they might try to black you out on. Remember, if they have receivers, they can see the messages you send even if they’re not sending any of their own. Also, remember to warn your techs that these are very delicate when disassembled. They will most likely break one or two of them trying to reverse engineer them. We’ve included an instruction manual and blueprints to help, but we’re giving you four expecting some will not survive the learning curve. After that, you should be able to produce your own in a few years time, if you can keep the secret that long.”

“Does Comstar have clandestine assault teams for such things?”

“Yes,” Carroll said without elaborating.

Katrina looked at the Black Box on the table, then at the other three stacked nearby, thinking for a long moment before turning back to the former Davion and extending her hand.

“We have a deal then. House Steiner will honor it no matter who is on the throne.”

Carroll shook her hand firmly. “And we were never here.”

