COCKROACHES

Jason M. Hardy

BATTLECORPS

Blackjack, Antallos
15 November 3065

The engine labored. Pwyll could feel the heat washing off of it. Or, at least, he thought he could.

"They're gaining," he said.

Vessla leaned forward until her chest was on top of the steering column, as if her weight on the skimmer would make it go faster.

"At least they don't have long-range weapons," Thurl said from the backseat. "They did, we'd be dead by now."

"That's something," Pwyll said. He checked a side mirror, but all he could see behind his vehicle was a thick cloud of dust. The raiders, whoever they were, were back there, too, but for now they were out of sight.

"Sera, got a distance estimate for me?" Pwyll asked.

"Twenty kilometers," she said.

"Can we expect anyone in Blackjack to send out some help?"

Sera just snorted.

"What's to stop them from shooting us down once they get to Blackjack?" Thurl asked, panic creeping into his voice. "If they want to get us, they'll get us, since no one in the damn town's going to stop them. We're dead even if we make it there!"

"Naw," Pwyll said. "They know they get too close, people will be looking to shoot them down and harvest their vehicle's parts just like they want to harvest ours. We get there, we'll be safe."

"If you think being surrounded by a couple thousand murderous thugs holding themselves in a stalemate is safe," Sera said.

Pwyll shrugged. "Safer than we are now."

Vessla, still leaning on the steering column, was moving her mouth, but no sound emerged. Pwyll tried to read her lips but he couldn't make out anything.

"What is it?" he said.

"Nothing," she said, her voice raspy. "I've got nothing. No defense measures. No armor. No ammo. Nothing but my driving skill."

"Won't that be enough?"

Vessla's eyes narrowed, but she didn't bother to look at Pwyll. "Tough to outmaneuver a laser," she said.

Pwyll silently conceded she had a point, but he didn't say so out loud. "Then you just have to be sure they don't get a good shot off," he said.

"Oh," she said. "That's all, huh?" She glared ahead and kept moving her mouth, but she had reverted back to silence.

Pwyll shrugged. In ten minutes or so he'd either be safe or dead. Either way, the situation would be resolved.

Vessla suddenly jerked the steering wheel and the skimmer turned sharply left. Pwyll was pressed up against the passenger-side door, and he could hear the skirt of the skimmer skidding lightly over the dusty ground as they lunged to the side. If they leaned too far, they'd lose their cushion of air and stall on the ground. It would only take a brief moment to reestablish the cushion and get moving again, but they didn't have even a brief moment to spare.

He saw a line of small explosions hit the dust to his right. The line moved toward him, closing fast.

"Vessla…" he said.

"I know." She straightened the wheel, knuckles white as the skimmer fishtailed. More drift, more dust, then the skimmer righted itself and launched forward.

"Laser beam to our left," Sera said calmly.

"Everybody stop telling me things!" Vessla shouted, sweat running down her face like little streams on a bare granite rock. "I *know*!"

Pwyll scanned the horizon, hoping to see the silhouette of the low buildings of Blackjack in front of the red setting sun. He saw only parched earth.

Vessla made another move, a gentle tug on the wheel. The skimmer held its line easily, angling right.

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Metal rang behind them, peppering the skimmer's rear. Thurl flinched, his jowls bouncing for several seconds after the metal's impact. Sera didn't move.

"They're shuffling," Vessla said. "Rearranging themselves to get behind us. I bought us about ninety seconds."

"How much more time do we need?" Pwyll asked.

"Six minutes."

"And if we move back to the left?"

"The one with the laser will be waiting for us."

"Oh."

"It's just a race now."

Two minutes passed. No more damage to the car. A laser shot came from behind, passing to their left again. Pwyll waited for a second shot, a better-aimed one. It didn't come.

"What are they waiting for?"

"Who cares?"

Behind Pwyll, Sera slowly raised her hand, like she was selecting a pastry in a bakery. "Blackjack," she said.

Pwyll squinted. It was there. Small buildings, low shadows. A town made mostly of tin and plywood.

"Cloud to the left," Sera said.

"Rain?" Pwyll asked.

"Dust," Sera said.

Pwyll looked. It was there all right. Something was moving outside of the town. Looked like it was coming closer to them.

"Head toward the cloud," Pwyll said.

"That might give the laser a clean shot at us," Vessla said.

"Head toward it anyway."

"Could be someone who wants us dead as much as the raiders do."

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"Just do it!"

Vessla turned the skimmer to the left. In the back seat, Thurl and Sera ducked.

The laser fired, streaking into the back of the skimmer. Wind howled through a new hole in the top of the rear window and the roof. But nothing critical was hit and Thurl and Sera were safe on the floor. Could be worse.

Except the vehicle was less aerodynamic now and was dropping speed. Not much, but even a small drop was too much.

On the plus side, whatever was kicking up the dust in front of them was approaching quickly. Maybe the people in front of them would be able to kill them quicker than the people in back.

Sera and Thurl remained on the floor as a few machine gun rounds peppered the back of the car, drilling a few new holes near the melted section of the windshield. Pwyll slumped down in his seat so he'd at least be making a token effort at staying alive.

"The vehicles ahead of us are closing fast," Vessla reported.

"Have you tried to raise them on the comm?" Pwyll asked.

"Have you heard me say anything?"

"Well maybe you should try."

Vessla tried a few of the more common channels and got no response until a pair of beams from the vehicles in front of them passed to their left.

"Guess that's all they've got to say to us," Pwyll said.

Vessla shook her head. "If they'd wanted to hit us, they would have. They didn't."

Pwyll shrugged. "Okay. Drive on."

He could see the vehicles in front of them now, four of them, all bigger than Pwyll's skimmer, all with oversized wheels rolling across the dust. And in unison, all four of them fired weapons, four lasers, two autocannons between them. The beams and bullets all passed wide of Pwyll's skimmer, scattering the raiders in back.

Pwyll sat up a little straighter. "Maybe you're right," he said to Vessla. "I just hope their aim's good."

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"Should I move aside?" Vessla asked. "Give them room to fire?"

"No," Pwyll said with a careless wave of his hand. "Just keep heading straight."

"Did you ever think that being a commander with a death wish might hurt the morale of your people?" Vessla said, not bothering to hide the bitterness in her voice.

"I don't have a death wish," Pwyll said. "If I did, we'd all be dead already. Long ago."

"If you say so," Vessla said. She kept the car straight.

Fire poured out from in front and in back of them. The two forces battled while Pwyll and his small band slipped through the middle of the fight.

Pwyll saw quick movements out of the corner of his eye. He turned to Vessla and saw her jerking the steering wheel one way, then the other, a series of rapid tugs so fast they had little effect on the skimmer's actual motion.

"Trying to steer around the bullets?" he asked.

She didn't glance at him. "Instinct," she said. "Bullets fly, I try to avoid them."

"Okay," Pwyll said.

Then there were two more vehicles in front of them backing up the original four. Their lasers fired red, beaming toward the raiders, and in a moment the raiders must have realized it was over and the piece of scrap metal Pwyll's band was riding in was going to escape their grasp. They turned, and the dust cloud that had been approaching Pwyll's rear faded to the east.

"Slow down," Pwyll said, but Vessla was a step ahead of him. The six vehicles that had come to their rescue had formed themselves into an impromptu blockade. Pwyll didn't mind stopping for his rescuers.

The car stopped. Pwyll thought about getting out, but he decided he'd be more comfortable sitting.

The six vehicles that had rescued them stopped too, and the door of a Darter popped open. A large man with tall black boots stomped out of the car, feet thudding as he walked toward Pwyll. He had long dark hair, most of it pulled into a tail in back with a

few loose strands hanging by the side of his face. A black goatee framed his scowl.

He stopped five meters short of the skimmer.

"Pwyll Lankarr?"

Pwyll opened his door but didn't get up.

"Yeah?"

"I've got something for you. Something you're going to need real soon."

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It was beautiful and horrible at the same time. A triangular torso on two long, powerful legs. Four lasers on the left arm, a hatchet on the right. Could something that weighed thirty tons look agile and lithe? To Pwyll, the *Scarabus* standing in front of him did.

But then there was the horrible part. The blast mark that had melted the end of one of the small lasers. The tragic gouge in the left shin. The holes that made the 'Mech look like it was holding a slice of Swiss cheese instead of a hatchet. And the head... 'Mechs couldn't generate scar tissue, but this one sure looked like it had. The cockpit and surrounding metal were lumpy, scored, rough. The ferroglass windows bubbled in a few places. When the man with the black hair (whose name turned out to be Houston Blunt) showed him the 'Mech, he shortened its name, calling it a *Scar*, and the name seemed appropriate.

"I heard your name," Blunt said. "Heard what you were looking for. People said you have cash." He paused. "You have cash?"

Pwyll nodded.

"Here it is, then. In your price range. You won't find anything near this level of tech for what you're offering. Thing moves across the battlefield like a jackrabbit."

"How many of its lasers actually work?"

Blunt hesitated. "One," he said.

"Small or medium?"

"Small. But it's got the hatchet. Hatchet always works."

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Pwyll took a few steps forward. "Looks like it'll shatter first time I swing it."

"Find some scrap metal, melt it down, squeeze it in. Easy fix."

Pwyll looked it over a little more. He wished he, or someone else in his crew, knew 'Mechs well enough to make a skilled appraisal of what he was looking at. But he'd ridden a *Locust* a couple times during his academy days, which made him the most experienced 'Mech jockey of the four surviving members of the Death's Head Mercenary Corps.

He made a few circuits around the *Scar*, putting an index finger on his lips so he'd look thoughtful. Then he stopped.

"Okay," he said. "Looks nice. I'll think about it. Get back to you."

Blunt smiled. "I'd think about it quick. If I were you."

Pwyll raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

"Because I saw that skimmer you rode into town on. That's not going to be enough for what's coming."

"What's coming?"

"Galton Hackett."

"Who?"

"Galton Hackett."

"Never..." Pwyll suddenly stood up straighter. "Oh," he said. "Ohhhhhhhhh."

Blunt nodded. "So you want the machine?"

Pwyll gave the *Scar* one last glance. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah, I guess I'd better."

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"Who?"

"Galton Hackett."

"Should I know who that is?" Thurl asked. He stood next to Sera in a grimy garage as Vessla lay under the skimmer and cursed.

"Yeah," Pwyll said.

"Assuming you ever listened when Mackie talked," Sera added.

"Let's say I didn't," Thurl said. "What'd I miss?"

"Remember Mackie's ComStar friend? The one who loaned Mackie a bunch of cash and a hovercar and set us up on Halfway even though we weren't even a real unit?"

"That's Hackett?"

"That's Hackett."

"So what's a ComStar acolyte doing on Antallos? There's not exactly a lot of tech here for him to safeguard."

"I don't know why he's here, but I heard he's not with ComStar anymore. Seems he might not have been authorized to do any of the things he did for us. His superiors didn't take it well."

"Oh," Thurl said. "I don't imagine he's too happy with us."

"Yeah."

"So what do we do?"

Pwyll shrugged. "Keep working the plan. I got us a 'Mech. I'm going to get familiar with it while you scrounge for parts and Vessla and Sera keep working on the car. Then we'll look to pull in a few more bodies to our crew."

"But what do we do about Hackett?"

"Nothing. I'm not going to be too worried about someone who may or may not want to come get me. If he wants to find me, he'll find me."

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Two days later Pwyll was drinking alone. He had nothing against the rest of his crew, but sometimes other people had an annoying way of disturbing the special relationship between a man and his liquor. Pwyll was gently nursing a shot of bourbon, getting ready to convince it to join its five siblings already sitting in his gut.

The door to the bar slid open with a quiet hiss. A man stood in the doorway, appearing as a silhouette as the bright daylight spilled into the dim tavern. He stood still for a moment, his head slowly turning as he scanned the bar, then he stomped in with a few heavy, deliberate steps.

The door closed behind him, and Pwyll got a better look at the man. He wore a long brown coat over a tan shirt and blue pants. His arms were at his sides but not limp, half-cocked like he was expecting to swing them at someone any second. His face was pear-shaped, with beady eyes sitting on a squashed nose. He glared at the room from beneath a black cap worn backwards.

"Lookin' for Pwyll Lankarr," the man said in a gravelly rumble.

The other customers looked back and forth at each other. Pwyll hadn't taken the time to introduce himself to anyone, so no one recognized his name. He could probably just sit still and ride this situation out.

But where would be the fun in that?

Pwyll leaned back and kicked his feet up on an empty chair at his table. He waved his hand quickly, two fingers extended. "You've found him."

The man's eyes narrowed to little more than a pair of black pupils. He slowly stalked toward Pwyll, not talking until he had stopped three meters away.

"Name's Galton Hackett," he said. "You and me got a score to settle."

"How do you figure?"

"You bungled it on Halfway. Got my friend Mackie killed. Made me look like an idiot for setting up your half-assed mercenary company. Forced me to become a two-bit mercenary. Like you."

"And you think that's all my fault?"

"You survived," Hackett said. "If you were doin' all you could for Mackie, you'd have died with him."

"I tried. Believe me."

"I don't care. You're alive, you're here, so we're going to settle business between the two of us."

"Okay," Pwyll said, maintaining his casual pose. "Should we step outside and beat the tar out of each other?"

"You're not getting off with just a beating," Hackett said. "You're not leaving this town alive."

"Mmm hmmm. Are you going to let me know how you're going to kill me, or is it going to be a surprise?"

Hackett was silent for a moment. "Mackie said you thought you were funny," he finally said.

"Not really. Not anymore."

"Be as funny as you want. Doesn't matter. Two days, the rest of my people get here. Then I'm coming after you. I just wanted you to know it was me who was going to be doing it."

"Well, you'll at least be doing the trying," Pwyll said.

Hackett didn't respond. He glared for a moment longer, then turned and stomped out of the bar without another word.

Pwyll wasn't scared. He wasn't nervous, he wasn't relieved, he wasn't jubilant, he wasn't sad. He wasn't anything. Just thirsty.

He sent the shot of bourbon to join its family.

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"Someone's going to kill me," he said as Sera banged the cooling metal into submission.

"Pretty much the fate that's waiting for all of us," Sera said. "Or did you find out something more specific?"

"Hackett," he said. "Galton Hackett and his friends are going to kill me tomorrow."

"How many friends does he have?"

"Don't know."

Sera had removed the *Scar*'s hatchet blade and she stood over it doing work that, in ideal circumstances, would be done by robots. But nothing on Antallos was ideal. The workshop was hot, the glow from the foundry illuminating the swirling dust that was inescapable in Blackjack. How the dust swirled, Pwyll didn't know, because he couldn't feel a breath of air in the room. Sweat ran in a steady stream down the back of his neck.

Sera pounded a few more times, then stepped back.

"Getting there," she said, rubbing her close-cropped black hair. "Another plug after this one, some sharpening, and this blade'll be in good shape."

"Good."

"So what's your plan?"

"Plan?"

"For not getting killed tomorrow."

"Oh. Yeah. That. I guess I should have a plan." Pwyll cocked his head.

"Yeah, you should. Put a role in it for me. I'm always up for helping you not get killed."

"Okay."

"And talk to Thurl and Vessla. Give them something to do, too."

"Okay."

Pwyll sat still, watching the dust, feeling his sweat.

"Talk to them *now*," Sera said.

"Right." Pwyll said, and he walked outside, where the air felt just as hot as it had been in the workshop and smelled like something nearby had died.

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When he found Thurl and Vessla, they were arguing, which was their normal state of affairs. But they seemed to have accepted the fact that fighting was just their way of relating to each other, so Pwyll had given up trying to get them to calm down.

"That's idiotic," Thurl said. "No one's going to sign up with us just because we've got a 'Mech. We have no *money*. No one's coming on board with us without that." He paused. "Hell, I'm thinking of jumping ship myself." He looked directly at Pwyll when he said that.

"Have you been outside this room since we came to Blackjack?" Vessla said, gesturing at the small bedroom with its stained bed linens and weathered bureau.

"Not much reason to go out," Thurl grunted.

"That's right. That's exactly right. This town's dirt-poor. No one has any money. So it's not like we have to compete with people who *have* money to get some people in our crew. We just have to convince them that they have a better chance of getting money if they come with us."

"And do they?"

"Hell yes. Just think about what we could earn on escort duty with the *Scar*, helping people shuttle from town to town. The mere sight of the 'Mech will scare off most raiders, and the hatchet will take care of the rest. We'll clean up!"

"Right. We'll get rich taking contracts from people with no money. Brilliant."

"We'll make *something*."

"And we'll be escorting pirates across a desert to protect them from raiders. Quite a career."

"It's better than…"

Pwyll decided at that point that Thurl and Vessla weren't going to stop arguing just because he arrived, so he had to intervene.

"All right, shut up for a minute," he said. "I'm going to say something, then you can go back to your discussion."

"Say it, then," Vessla said.

"Someone's going to try to kill me tomorrow."

"That's a shame," Thurl said, his round eyes showing no regret whatsoever.

"Yeah. Real sad." Vessla said.

"This Hackett character. He and a few friends are coming after me."

"Oh. Okay," Thurl said. "Well, good luck with that."

There was an uncomfortable silence.

"I thought…" Pwyll started. "I just thought, with what we've been through together and all, that you could help me out tomorrow. Help me, you know, stay alive."

"Is this Hackett guy going to come after me once you're dead?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Is this a paying job?"

Pwyll blinked. "No."

"Then I really don't see how it's worth my while to get involved."

"Well, we're all in this together…"

"Right. I don't recall being asked about coming to Antallos. I don't recall being asked about buying a 'Mech instead of using our money to register with a hiring hall, or just having us sign on with another group. No, you decided you were single-handedly going to keep the Death's Head Mercenary Corps alive. So, do it. Do it single-handedly."

Pwyll maybe could have argued some of Thurl's points, but he didn't feel like it. So he just nodded his head. "Okay," he said. He looked at Vessla.

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"Look, Thurl's being an ass," she said. "It's just the way it is. I want to help you, of course I do. So take my advice. Climb in the *Scar* and get out of town. You'll be able to stay a step ahead of Hackett and his friends for a while. We'll have time to work things here, then—get the car in shape, find a few new bodies, a few weapons. We'll let you know when you can come back, and then we'll take care of things."

"You want me to use the new 'Mech I just bought to run away?"

"The thing's got a single working laser and a perforated hatchet. Running's about all it's good for."

Pwyll shook his head. "No."

"That's just stupid!" Vessla said, her cheekbones sharpening to pinpoints, and Thurl nodded in agreement. "That machine's our future! You put it at risk, we're back down to nothing! You can't just go where your damned death wish is pushing you!"

"I don't have a death wish!" Pwyll said, surprised at his own anger.

"Yeah, well, you don't seem to have much of a living wish either. Look, you know I don't want you to get killed. But if I say I'll help you tomorrow, that's saying I'll help you do something wrong and stupid." She shook her head. "I won't do that."

Pwyll looked at the two of them. "So you're both out?" he said.

They both nodded.

"At least you finally agree on something," he said, then turned to leave.

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"I don't suppose you could hire someone to act as a bodyguard tomorrow," Sera said.

"Not unless they're willing to work for scrap metal." Pwyll, back in the workshop, fingered a steel ring that had been lying on the floor.

"So it's you and me," Sera said.

He looked at her. The dark smudges on her cheek, he thought, went well with her eyes.

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"You don't have to be involved in this," he said.

"Of course I don't. But I will be."

"You may just be getting yourself killed," he said.

"I've known that since the day I signed up. Look, either you're just going to accept the fact that I'm going to be there, or you will try to order me *not* to be there and I'll show up anyway. All roads lead to the same place, okay?"

Pwyll almost smiled. "Okay."

"So what's that plan?"

"Oh, right. The plan. There should be a plan." He sat silently and stared into space.

He heard Sera expel a breath and put a wrench down, banging it harder than she needed to.

"All right, listen to me," she said. "Now, I already said I'm in this no matter what, but it would help if I knew what you wanted the outcome to be. Do you want to live through this or not?"

Instinctively, Pwyll knew this was not the sort of question that was supposed to take a lot of thought. But Sera seemed to want a real answer, so he took the time to give her one. After a few minutes, he said "Yeah. Yeah, I guess I want to live through it."

"Why?"

He swallowed and looked around the workshop. "Seems like the thing to do," he said. "And if I let Hackett kill me, it'll be like admitting he was right. Like I really am to blame for Mackie being dead. And everything else."

"Okay, not the best answer in the world, but I suppose it's something. So how are you going to survive with what you have?"

It happened instinctively. Pwyll didn't will the gears of his mind into motion, but they started turning anyway. Even more remarkably, they caught hold of each other, teeth clacking together, generating actual thought in his brain. He could almost feel dust squirting out his ears as the gears spun faster.

"Recon," he said. "First thing is recon. I need to know what we're going to be up against."

"Okay then," Sera said, and made a shooing motion with her hands. "Go. Find out."

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Pwyll talked to a guy. That guy referred him to another guy who told him to talk to a certain man who let him know there was a woman he needed to talk to. The woman, who met him in the backroom that was much tidier and more comfortable than the greasy diner it hid behind, looked at him curiously when he told her his name.

"And who is it you say you're looking for?" she asked, her short, wide face tilted to the left.

"The name I've got is Dusty Krale," Pwyll said.

"And you say you're Pwyll Lankarr."

"That's right."

"What, do you have a death wish or something?"

Pwyll really wished people would stop saying things like that, but he didn't comment on it. "I don't really need to meet with this Krale person. I'm just trying to find out a few things about him."

The woman shook her head. "Oh no, it's not for me to be telling anyone anything about Dusty." Then she clasped her hands, extended her index fingers, and placed them in front of her lips. "You want to know something about Dusty, you should ask him yourself. If I remember correctly… hold on just a moment, please."

Pwyll sat calmly in his soft burgundy chair while the woman called up something on her terminal.

"Let me see here… yes, yes, here it is. Looks like Dusty got into town early. He's holed up over at the Red Spruce. His contract's very specific—it's not in force until tomorrow. You track him down before midnight, he'll be under no obligation to kill you."

"And you think he'll talk to me?"

The woman shrugged. "Probably. Dusty's good people. Just head over to the Red Spruce—he'll probably be playing cards or something for a bit before he retires." She glanced at something else on her screen. "You've got ninety minutes before Dusty's

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contractually obligated to shoot you on sight."

Pwyll murmured his thanks, dropped a few bills on the woman's desk, and hurried away.

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Most of the gaming tables of the Red Spruce's annex room were empty. A few customers sat in front of holoslots, feeding coins into the machine and pulling on the levers whenever they could keep themselves from swaying back and forth on their stools for long enough. Their eyes didn't seem to be focused on the machines' displays, or on anything else for that matter.

One gaming table had people at six of the available eight slots, so Pwyll walked over to it. A burly security guard hovered near the table but never looked at the players, as if he was on strict orders to ignore anything that happened at that particular station. Looking at the rough nature of the six people around the table, Pwyll guessed the players would have been pretty successful at convincing just about anyone to leave them the hell alone.

Pwyll walked to the table and stood about a meter away from it, making sure he made eye contact with any of the players who happened to look up at him. Only two of them did.

After about five minutes, one of the people who hadn't looked up from his screen, a rangy man with a black leather cap tilted at a rakish angle, said "You playing or just staring?"

"I'm waiting," Pwyll said.

The man looked up. His eyes were pale grey, and if eyes were supposed to be windows to the soul, this man either had no soul or had managed to draw the curtains pretty well. "Waiting for what?" he said in a rasp.

"For a chance to talk to Dusty Krale. If one of you is him."

"Why should I talk to you?" the man in the cap said.

"Because I'm Pwyll Lankarr."

Krale shrugged and touched his screen a few times, placing a bet in whatever game it was he was playing. "So?"

"So you're going to try to kill me tomorrow, and I wanted to talk to you about it."

"Doesn't work," Krale said.

"What doesn't work?"

"The trick where you try to get me to get to know you so I won't kill you. Doesn't work."

"Of course it doesn't. You're a professional. I'd expect nothing less."

Krale bowed his head briefly in acknowledgement of the compliment. "So what'd you want to talk about?" Krale touched his screen again. The other five people around the table let loose a series of exasperated sighs, then collectively touched their screens to start a new round.

"Terms," Pwyll said.

"Terms?" Krale said, his eyes fixed on his screen. "Of what? Surrender? I'm not authorized to accept surrender from you."

"Of course not. And I'm not offering. No, I wanted to talk about the terms of your contract. Like how many guns you're bringing with you."

Krale shook his head. "You know I can't tell you anything like that.

"Okay. How about accepting better offers—is there any way to buy you out of a contract?"

Krale finally looked up again, a dry smile on his tight lips. "You have any money?"

"How much would you need?"

Krale looked Pwyll up and down, then dropped his eyes back to his screen. "More than it looks like you've got," he said. "Doesn't matter anyway. There's no buyout in the contract. And I honor my contracts."

Pwyll sighed to himself. Hackett apparently had found the one honorable mercenary left on Antallos.

"You like Hackett that much?" Pwyll asked.

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"Ain't a matter of liking or not liking," Krale said. "Business only." He glanced at a scratched silver chronometer on his wrist. "You've got half an hour before the contract kicks in."

"Hackett tell you why he wants me dead?"

"Nope."

"Would it matter?"

"Probably not. Everyone in a fight like this thinks they're right. Not my job to sort it out. Just do the job I'm hired to do."

"And the only thing that ends the contract…"

"Is death."

"Mine?"

"Pretty much." Krale shrugged. "Or mine, seeing as how I'm one of the contracting parties." He looked up again at Pwyll, a quick glance like the flicker of a snake's tongue. "Don't see that happening, though."

And there it was. In an instant, Pwyll had everything he needed to know. And he had twenty-eight minutes to spare.

"Okay," he said. "That's it, then. Thanks for your time."

Krale said nothing as Pwyll walked away, past the security guard who continued to pretend that Krale's table was completely empty.

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The Antallos sunrise was bloody, which is like saying water is wet. Every morning in Blackjack the red sun climbs over red dirt, and every morning brings the discovery of new bodies who didn't survive the night. Pwyll really wasn't sure how the town managed to survive the constant violence, but apparently enough new blood flowed into town to replace the old blood that continually trickled out.

He hadn't gone to bed, hadn't slept. He didn't want Hackett or Krale to get the jump on him. He'd spent a few hours briefing Sera on his plan and making last-minute repairs to the *Scar* while Sera kept an eye out for Hackett and his killers, then he'd climbed into the 'Mech and given himself a crash course in how to pilot the

thing. He'd remembered just enough from the academy to get the thing moving and keep it upright (thanking his lucky stars continually that there were such things as gyroscopes), then he'd moved to the outskirts of town to practice running.

The first jogging steps he'd taken made him nervous—the machine felt unsteady, and all he could think of were the tragic gouges in the *Scar*'s legs. What if a single jostle took out his knee? Where would he be then? But the machine held together and didn't fall over, so Pwyll gently pushed it to go faster and faster. He got it above 100 kph and felt comfortable and balanced, but moving beyond that threatened his stability. He edged it toward 115, 120, and felt like a single turn would be enough to topple him at that speed. He hoped that would be fast enough.

By the time the sun rose, Pwyll was back in town, treading slowly through the streets of Blackjack, raising dust with every thirty-ton stomp. No one seemed to care much about his presence—pedestrians and the few other vehicles shunted their way around him without a glance in his direction. They might have figured that a fight was brewing, but that was nothing new.

Pwyll walked by the inn where he'd talked to Thurl and Vessla. He didn't figure either of them were there. He didn't know where they'd gone—hiding out somewhere, nice and safe, away from him. He couldn't say he blamed them, and he really didn't have any equipment to offer them if they'd decided to join him. Still, their absence left him with a bitter taste.

He checked his tracking system to see if anything was showing up. The display was blank. He hit it. It stayed blank. Either Hackett, Krale, and company weren't out yet, or they were jamming his equipment pretty well, or the tracking system was broken.

That's a lot of options. He hoped his backup tracking system turned out to be more useful.

At that moment, the backup system—Sera driving around in the skimmer—radioed in.

"I don't have anything yet. Maybe they saw you running around all night and got scared."

"Maybe," Pwyll said. "Keep looking. We'll see them soon enough."

From his cockpit, Pwyll could see over most of the squat buildings of Blackjack—he should be able to get a visual on any other

'Mech the moment it reared its head—unless it was a quad or something. He didn't see anything except for leaking water cisterns and thick tar spread on weatherworn shingles.

"I don't think they're in town," Pwyll said. "They must've been storing their 'Mechs or vehicles or whatever they're going to use to kill me somewhere out of town."

"So this group approaching from the south could be them?"

Pwyll looked at his sensor. It showed nothing. "Sure. Could be."

"Eight vehicles altogether. They're coming in pretty fast. Fanning out. They'll probably try to keep you from fleeing."

"Do they have anyone to the north?"

"Not that I'm seeing yet, no."

He might be able to make a getaway. He should at least have enough speed. There was always the possibility that they'd left something to the north—reinforcements, an artillery bunker, whatever—but it might be easier than dealing with the eight whatevers coming from the south.

But he wasn't going anywhere. If he wanted to run, the time for that was well past. He was commander of the Death Head Mercenary Corps, which now featured an actual working 'Mech, and from this point on the DHMC wasn't running from anything.

New policies were really easy to make, Pwyll thought, *for a group consisting of two people*.

"They're spread out pretty well now," Sera said over the comm. "They've got a two kilometer line, a little wider than the town."

"What are they?"

"Mostly tanks. Looks like maybe three 'Mechs. Can't tell what they are yet."

"Any of the 'Mechs hanging back at all?"

"No. They're in an even line."

So much for Pwyll's first theory. He'd hoped Hackett would hide behind Krale's people, making it easy to identify him. But Hackett wasn't showing his hand that easily.

That's okay, Pwyll thought. That's why he had a Plan B. And even a C.

"I'm going to get in position now," he said to Sera. "Keep me updated and keep yourself out of trouble."

"Yes, sir," Sera said.

Pwyll walked to the tallest building in town, the four-story city hall (currently used as a combination flea market and flophouse). He stood with the building to his south and waited.

"They're slowing," she said. "I'm pretty sure they see you. They're in a bit of an arc now, each of them about, oh, let's say a kilometer and a half from you."

Damn, Pwyll thought. They were going to come in all at once. What happened to the time-honored holovid approach of the bad guys sending in their troops one person at a time?

"What's directly to my south?"

"'Mech," Sera said. "Medium size."

"Okay." Pwyll took a deep breath and stepped out from the shelter of the town hall.

The red sun cast long shadows across the cracked street. Dust stirred in light swirls near doorways and corners. Pwyll stepped as lightly as a thirty-ton machine could.

He saw his opponent immediately, dully gleaming as it walked north. Like his *Scar*, it had a hatchet on its right arm. It had a forward-thrust cockpit with what looked like grimacing teeth below it. A *Nightsky* if Pwyll didn't miss his guess—a machine with about fifty percent more armor than he had and, if even half its lasers were working, way more firepower. A shootout with this thing would be over very quickly.

Pwyll stepped out into the street in front of the *Nightsky*, stepping slowly, raising dust with each deliberate footstep. The *Nightsky* slowed as well, its arms hanging at its sides. It didn't need them—the machine could fire from its torso or head at any moment. Pwyll gritted his teeth as he took a few more steps forward.

The *Scar*'s legs seemed to rattle as Pwyll stomped down the streets—probably all the scrap metal used to patch the thing up. A light wind kicked up, and tiny red whirlwinds danced between the towering 'Mechs. They were within a kilometer of each other, but neither had fired yet.

Pwyll knew why *he* hadn't fired yet, but he couldn't quite figure out what the *Nightsky* was up to. But he knew what he needed to know. This 'Mech was clearly willing to be the first to confront Pwyll, ready to take the worst the *Scar* could dish out.

Pwyll was pretty certain that meant Hackett wasn't the pilot.

He made his move without raising his arms. He stopped in the street, as if preparing for a dust-up, then, as quickly as he could, accelerated the sleek machine to his left.

The *Nightsky* fired, twin beams pulsing out of the torso, but the pilot's response was a hair slow. One blast missed entirely, the other caught Pwyll's hatchet arm, melting away plenty of Sera's last-minute repairs but doing little significant damage. Pwyll leaned on his controls to get the *Scar* moving forward, and he was quickly up to the 120 kph max that he felt comfortable with. Then he pushed it faster.

He imagined he could hear doors slamming outside as panicked townsfolk darted out of the way of the onrushing monster. He slowed down significantly to take a turn, knowing that cornering at full tilt on the dusty Blackjack roads would skid him over on his side, gyros or no gyros. When he was pointed north, he broke the *Scar* into a run again, and stunned himself by feeling something like joy as he left a trail of dust behind him.

"Operation Scarper is working perfectly so far," Sera said over the comm. "They've got nothing that can approach your speed. You've opened up a good gap."

"They revealing anything yet?"

"No. They're scattering like roaches in the light. Looking for a new formation so they can go get you."

"All right. Keep watching that *Nightsky*—he's not the one we want. Process of elimination, we'll eventually find out who it is."

"Roger, boss."

At his high speed, it didn't take Pwyll long to reach the outskirts of Blackjack. Even better, his balky sensors decided to start registering information, and they confirmed the basic information Sera had fed him. Two of Hackett's people were coming around on the west side of town, two on the east. The rest were coming in through the city streets. They clearly hoped to catch him in a pincer move—as long as he didn't just keep on running.

He wished he'd fought Hackett before. He'd have some idea about what the man wanted to do, how he'd approach the fight. Now all he could do was guess. But if that's what he had to do, that's what he'd do.

He studied his display for a few more seconds, watching for something, anything.

Then he remembered where City Hall stood, and he saw it. It was a moment of revelation, like staring at a chessboard and suddenly seeing a set of arrows pointing to exactly where the pieces planned to move. The units on the east and west would push him back into Blackjack, landing enough shots to soften him up but not enough to finish him off. Pwyll, desperate to escape the superior numbers, would be funneled into town, looking to get a clear shot off at any attacker he could. Only one of them would be pretty well sheltered by the city hall building. It would keep that building between itself and the *Scar*, waiting for the *Scar* to get close enough to level the killing blow. Then Hackett would step out and finish him off.

Well, no sense in wasting time with the preliminaries. Might as well jump to the ending.

He went south, back into Blackjack.

"I need a distraction," he said to Sera. "Near Cactus and Spur."

"You'll get all I've got," she said. "Oh, and I've got Krale's frequency when you're ready for it."

"You're beautiful."

"Yeah, yeah."

Pwyll kept moving, closing fast on the hired guns in front of him. He raised his left arm, knowing it wouldn't do much good but wanting to add at least a little firepower to the party. Then the street exploded.

It was mostly light, energy flashing from every direction, blasting through the streets, setting dry wood buildings ablaze, turning tin siding into shrapnel. A few autocannon rounds came through too, ripping the dilapidated materials that held Blackjack together. Pwyll kept racing ahead, firing his sole working laser ahead of him and raising his hatchet so that maybe he'd look fierce. Alarms rang all around him, but he didn't have the nerve to check the damage he'd suffered.

Then he slowed down. Laser fire, which had almost adjusted to his rapid speed, now flew well ahead of him. It wouldn't last long, though—soon he'd be a sitting duck.

It was a good thing the intersection of Cactus and Spur blew up when it did.

One minute a 'Mech and a tank were moving up Spur to intercept Pwyll, the next they were engulfed by flames and shrapnel, and by the detritus of buildings collapsing around them. Sera, who had jury-rigged a missile launcher onto the skimmer, had shot every bit of ammo she possessed in an effort to buy Pwyll a few seconds.

He charged forward into the burning intersection. The tank and 'Mech tried to turn on him, but Pwyll was too fast—and he had a hatchet. He caught the hired 'Mech solidly in the side, denting it nicely and ruining any chance it had of a clean shot. Then Pwyll was speeding away. Then he was gone.

"Nice work, Sera," he said. "I'm through. I think Hackett's near City Hall. He'll be waiting for me there. I'm gonna go get him."

"Near city hall?" Sera said. "I've seen that unit. That's a *Grim Reaper* hiding there."

It would have to be, Pwyll thought grimly. "Okay," he said aloud. "That's what I'll deal with, then." Only he had no idea how.

He had no advantages in this fight. Hackett had more armor, more weapons, more friends. The only thing Pwyll had was more speed, and that wasn't too useful anymore—if he just ran around, that would give the hired guns that much more of a chance to track him down.

He could think of only one thing to do, and it would do nothing to convince Sera that he didn't have a death wish.

"Sera, run down the *Grim Reaper*'s weapons for me," he said, surprised at his calm tone. "Especially the torso."

"Torso's mainly ammo. Most of the stuff you have to worry about is on the arms. Oh, but there's some LRMs on the body to worry about."

Pwyll smiled to himself. If this worked, the last thing Hackett would be doing was firing those LRMs. "Thanks. Get clear. Really clear. One way or another, this is over in just a couple of minutes."

"Okay. You gonna survive?"

"Tough to say," Pwyll said, and he let that be the end of the conversation.

He didn't have much time. He saw the city hall looming ahead of him, and he could see the bulky shoulders of the *Grim Reaper*—which were about as high as the muscle-bound machine's head—just above the building's roofline. It must have been squatting a little to stay concealed by the building.

The rest of Hackett's team was closing in, but Pwyll's speed and Sera's missile burst had bought him some time. Maybe even enough.

Pwyll charged around the building, leaning dangerously around the corners, feeling his feet skid but somehow staying under him. He didn't know how fast he was going—only that it was both too fast and not fast enough.

Then he was around the corner and the *Grim Reaper*, black as death, was waiting for him. Arms raised, a laser blast and a cluster of missiles fired at Pwyll. He swept his left arm in front of him, letting it catch the brunt of the laser blast and most of the missiles. Heat seared the arm, explosions ran up and down its length, and his internal monitor dutifully informed him that he no longer had a single working weapon. His torso was damaged, too—he was now barely more than a mobile heap of scrap metal.

But he was a heap of scrap metal that had descended on his enemy. He ran into the arms of the *Grim Reaper*, axe descending fast, slamming the cockpit of Hackett's machine. He hoped it would be a killing blow.

It wasn't. He saw some cracks in the ferroglass, but nothing more.

Pwyll pressed ahead, leaning into the *Grim Reaper*, flailing his arms to keep Hackett from using his arm-mounted weapons to get off a shot. Whenever he could, Pwyll leveled another blow on the cockpit, sometimes with the hatchet, sometimes with the warped piece of metal that had once held four lasers. The *Grim Reaper* staggered, the blows taking their toll. Hackett tried to push Pwyll away, but the *Scar*'s legs were always moving, churning forward, keeping him safe in the bigger 'Mech's grasp. He kept pounding, pounding, pounding, believing he might pull this off as long as Hackett didn't do something stupid like fire his LRMs.

That was when Hackett decided to fire his LRMs. They went no-where, essentially exploding in their launcher. For the first time, Pwyll and his machine staggered back as fire raced through his torso. He didn't know all the right technical terms, but something was wrong with his machine. His top half tilted dangerously to the left, and he staggered as if drunk. The *Grim Reaper* didn't look much better. It stood mostly still, maybe wobbling slightly, but not raising its arms, not moving to attack.

Pwyll knew he wouldn't be upright long, so he made his last move. With one mighty rotation of his control stick, he heaved the hatchet up again, bringing it directly down into the cockpit. It shattered in a very satisfying way, and the *Grim Reaper* did not move again.

Pwyll was falling. He couldn't move the *Scar*'s legs—he might not even have been attached to them. The top of the *Scar* fell to the ground with a thud, jarring Pwyll in his harness. Then he lay in his cockpit, looking up at the red sky.

He heard sounds. Beeps, alarms, that sort of thing. Something in his cockpit still worked, and it was telling him that things were desperately wrong with his machine. To his surprise, his sensors were one of the few things working. They were telling him that some of Hackett's hired guns were closing fast.

"Sera!" he croaked. "Frequency!"

She gave it to him.

"Krale!" Pwyll yelled. "Contract's void!"

There was quiet. Well, not exactly—alarms still sounded and all, but Pwyll was used to them now. But everything else was quiet. He didn't hear stomping footsteps. He didn't hear blasts, explo-sions, anything.

Krale's voice came over the comm, dry and dusty as it had been the night before. "Is that a fact?" he said.

"Death of one of the contracting parties," Pwyll said. "Hackett's dead. Contract's void."

There was a pause. Too long of a pause. Then Krale spoke again. "Damned if you ain't right."

Pwyll heard something. Footsteps. Heavy ones, coming closer. He couldn't turn his prone torso to see what was approaching, but then he didn't have to—the *Nightsky* lumbered into his view.

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"Should've shot you sooner," Krale said. "Gave you too much time to run around."

"Yeah. But what do you care? You get to keep what Hackett paid you. Plus who would you rather have dead, him or me?"

There was another impenetrable silence.

"Didn't like Hackett much," Krale said. "Don't really know you."

Pwyll, lying on his back, smiled. He was alive. And just as quickly as he'd planned his charge on Hackett's *Grim Reaper*, he'd come up with a new plan. Something to move the Death's Head Mercenary Corps ahead. And this time, charging straight into death didn't seem like it would be necessary.

What is Pwyll's plan?

1) Enlist Krale and his henchmen as the newest members of the DHMC and start providing escorts across the Antallos barrens.

2) Bring Krale in as new commander of the DHMC and do whatever Krale thinks is best.

3) Appeal to Thurl, Vessla, and Sera to help him take on Krale and relieve him of any money Hackett paid him.

4) Repair the *Scar* and leave Blackjack with Sera, looking for work elsewhere on Antallos.

5) Repair the *Scar* and leave Antallos entirely with Sera, looking for work on another mercenary haven (if you choose this option, feel free to specify the haven you'd like them to journey to).

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