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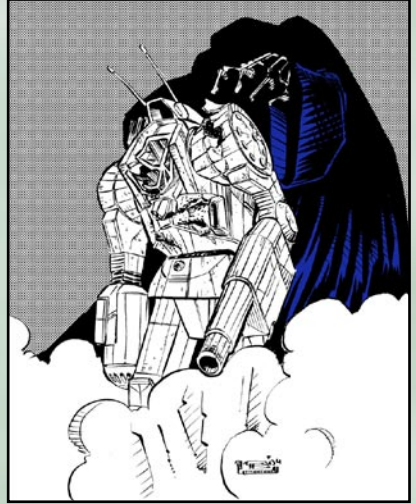
DAMAGE CONTROL

by Ilsa J. Bick



**Scorpius Planus, Thuban
Bolan Province
Lyran Alliance
9 September 3064**

There was a muffled roar as heavy cannon fire punched the sky, like the distant growl of thunder. An instant later, the floor of the medical Quonset twitched and jumped under her boots, and Dr. Elizabeth Trainer felt her heart slam into her throat. A steely talon of panic dug into her chest and she clutched at the edges of the chair where she sat. *Relax. They're still more than twenty clicks away.* She dragged in a deep, calming breath, and instantly regretted it. The Quonset's cooling units were going full blast, but the air was heavy with ash and *the stench of rancid sweat, rotten eggs, and something sweet and burnt.* It reminded Trainer of pork roasted on a spit, drizzling juices into sputtering flames that licked along the meat.



But she knew the smell wasn't pork.

The front lines were to the east, on the black basalt expanse of the Scorpion Plains that spread around the base of Scorpius Mons, Thuban's highest volcano. The Plains—a vast, ruined landscape of lava hummocks—were riddled with steam plumes and sulfur vents. And that's where the soldiers and BattleMechs of the Twenty-Third Arcturan Guard were fighting and dying in a battle against their brothers, the warriors of the Eleventh Arcturan Guard. It was a battle that Trainer could smell and hear and feel but, mercifully, not see because she was so afraid that Jonathan might be there, in the thick of it.

Oh, God, please keep him safe...

A man's voice—tremulous and very frightened—cut into her thoughts. "I... I don't know what happened. It was as if I'd been airdropped into hell."

Trainer blinked back to attention. The MechWarrior was perched on the edge of a cot, his head bowed. His right knee jiggled up and down like a piston. Trainer sat on a chair she'd pulled around to the captain's cot. There were no offices in the Quonset, and so a psychiatrist had to make do. Now, she crossed her right leg over her left, and clasped her hands over her knees. "I know it's hard, Captain Stanton," she said, keeping her voice as calm as she could even though she felt a slick of clammy perspiration along the back of her neck. "But you'll be better off if you talk about it. I know that talking makes it more real..."

"Christ, yes," said Stanton, jerking his face up in a sudden, spastic movement. His eyes locked onto hers. His eyes were very blue, like Jonathan's: the color of sky on a cloudless afternoon. But that's where the resemblance ended.

Stanton had been found, unresponsive and nearly catatonic, in the cockpit of his *Zeus*, a kilometer from their unit. Medications—not many, because she wanted him lucid—had relaxed him, and he was looking a little more... human. Not like the frightened animal they'd found. Still, there were purple smudges under his eyes that gave him a haunted, wild look. The med techs had stripped him out of his battle gear, and she saw that his cammie tee was sopping wet with sweat, the fabric clinging like a second skin to the muscles of his chest. A cigarette he'd lit but not smoked was tweezed between the first and second fingers of his right hand. White curls of smoke spiraled from the tip in sinuous ribbons.

Grimacing, Stanton screwed his eyes shut and slapped the palm of his left hand against his forehead. "It's like, they're pictures... they're here, in my head, right behind my eyes, and when I talk about it, I see it. I smell it, and I can't move, I can't..."

"Stanton." Trainer took her hand and gently pulled Stanton's arm away from his face. She could feel him shake. "Captain, open your eyes, and look at me." She waited until Stanton did and then she tightened her grip on his forearm. She had to appeal to honor and duty; she had to inject the sense of his importance into his psyche like a hallucinogenic drug. Manipulative? Of course, but this was civil war.

"Stop." She drilled him with a look. "Stop. This. Right now. You understand me? You pilot a goddamn *Zeus*. You're a *warrior*. Shakes or not, you've been trained to do a job, and, by God, you're going to do it. Because we need you, Captain. You can't afford the luxury of withdrawing from the fight."

"Luxury." Stanton's chin quivered, and she saw the shine of sudden tears in his eyes. "Don't you think I know that?" he said, and she heard his shame. Stanton looked away, then seemed to remember the cigarette in his hand. He sucked greedily; the tip glowed hot red and, in another moment, twin streamers of blue-gray smoke jetted from his nostrils.

"Look," said Stanton. He swung his head back, and she saw that while the tears were still there, he'd regained some of his self-control. *Good, she thought. Got him crying. Halfway there. Now, got to pace this just right.*

"I...," he said again, his voice clogged with emotion. "I don't expect you to understand. But these were... are my friends, and the simple fact is that we've never been trained for... for this."

"You're a soldier."

"Sure, but trained for a real war, not this! I haven't been trained to fight, to... kill my friends, my... damn it," he said, and now a single tear crawled down his left cheek. Stanton's face was still grimy with black ash from the battlefield, and the tear left a solitary, white track. "That's our sister regiment, the Golden Lions, out there. Doctor, I trained with some of them. I know who they... what their *faces* look like inside those machines. Those are people in there."

Oh, my darling Jonathan, are you out there, are you safe? "We all know people, Captain," said Trainer, keeping her voice as steady as she could. *Focus, focus on the mission!* Her heart felt as if a fist had grabbed hold and squeezed. "We all have friends... and now it's hard, but they'll kill us if we don't kill them first. They're the enemy."

"But they're not," said Stanton. His lips were shivering so much that when he took another pull from his cigarette, the tip bobbed up and down. "They're still the same people. It's the damn politics that have changed, that's all. This isn't a war about principles; there's nothing just about it. It's simply killing."

"And that's why you froze?" Trainer asked, choosing another tack. They could discuss the illegitimacy of a civil war all day and, while she agreed, they'd get nowhere. "That's why you ran? That's why you left your infantrymen to fend for themselves?"

"I..." Stanton's mouth opened but nothing more came. After a few seconds, he scrubbed his lips with the flat of his left hand. He

looked away, but not before she saw the emotions chase across his face: fear, shame. Despair. "I'm tired," he said, finally. "I want to be left alone for a little while. Please."

"You know I can't do that."

"Please." Stanton's expression was fierce, and she saw that his left hand was fisted, the skin over his knuckles white from tension. "Just for a little while." And then, in a low murmur: "You don't know what I've done."

"And what have you done, Stanton?" When he didn't respond, she touched his shoulder. He flinched. "What have you done?"

"No." He seemed to shrivel into himself. "No, I can't. Not... not now. I don't," he pressed his fists to his temples. "I don't want to think!"

"About what?"

"No, please, can't you leave me in peace? Please, just go away," Stanton whispered. His eyes snapped shut then bugged open, as if he couldn't stand what was in the darkness before his eyes. "Please."

Trainer debated then pushed up from her chair. She felt as if she were very close to getting at the terrors bouncing around in Stanton's mind. But while she had to wiggle into his head and twist his thoughts to serve the mission, she couldn't afford to break him. "All right, Captain. But be very clear about this. My job is to get you back to duty, pronto. Yours is to fight. Everything else—love, friendship, compassion—is a secondary consideration. Hell, they're not even on the damn list."

They locked gazes for a few seconds. Then, Stanton said, "I was wrong about one thing. You know what I said before? About it being like hell?" He dropped his cigarette, then crushed the smoldering butt against the concrete floor with the heavy wedge of a MechWarrior boot. "It was worse."

"Your hell's inside you, Stanton, and you'll beat it," Trainer said, unsure if she believed this. "You're going to go out there and fight... and you're going to be fine."

As she turned to go, Stanton said, "I want to ask you a question."

She looked back. "Go ahead."

"How can you do this?"

“Do what?”

“This.” Stanton looked around at the cots, the other soldiers. Men, women. “How can you stand to look me in the eye and assure me that all’s right with the world when tomorrow I might destroy someone who was...” He broke off, sucked in a breath, then said, “When tomorrow I might be dying in a pool of my own blood... and all because of you.”

For a moment, Trainer didn’t know what to say. If she were truthful, she wondered this herself. She cleared her throat. “I’m just doing my job,” she said. It was like a mantra that kept her sane. “Now... you get some rest. You’ll be fine, Captain, you’ll see.”

Stanton stared at her for a long moment. “That’s so easy for you to say.”



She left the usual orders for Stanton with the nurses: clean clothes, a hot meal. A mild sedative and some rest. She debated about ordering a stronger medication but decided against it. Better to let Stanton grapple with his demons with a clear head than with a mind fogged by drugs.

At the door, she stopped and glanced back down the long stretch of cots in the Quonset. *Only five days of fighting, and we’re jam-packed and just getting worse.* The Quonset was ten meters wide by forty meters deep and filled with a double row of cots, one row to a side. The fresh arrivals, those med-evaced from the front lines, lay on their cots, hands folded over their chests, and stared at nothing. There were empty beds, but that didn’t mean she didn’t have patients. Those soldiers who had been on-site for more than twelve hours were put to work: cooking, hauling supplies, cleaning. They were kept on-site for thirty-six hours, perhaps forty-eight. Then they were sent back to fight.

Damage control: If the term hadn’t been so accurate, she would’ve laughed because it sounded like something one did to fix a machine. But it was accurate because the military was a machine, and they—her patients, the ‘Mechs, her—were the cogs that made that machine go. Long ago, the armed forces on Terra had given what psychiatrists like her did the nickname three-hots-and-a-cot. Someone had figured out that the best way to treat combat fatigue was not to med-evac soldiers far from the front lines. Taking them away from the action was actually debilitating

and reinforced their sense of failure. The best option was to treat them as close to their fellow soldiers as possible, to keep them involved in doing a soldier's work while driving home, over and over again, that they had a duty to the other men and women who were doing their jobs. Oh, yes, fear was fine. Fear was normal and, in fact, it was abnormal not to be frightened out of your wits in battle because a man or woman had a pretty good chance of dying.

So, she acknowledged her patients' fears; she empathized with the sudden, sometimes shocking revelation of their own mortality—that they might be dancing on the razor's edge between life and death, a difference that could be erased in the blink of an eye. She helped them through all these things—with kind words or harshness when she had to, with rest, clean clothes, a hot meal. And then, she sent a soldier back out to fight, and maybe die.

She despised what she'd become. The perversity of what she did. Every minute of it.

Trainer pushed out of the Quonset and into a blistering hot late afternoon at the lip of the Scorpion Plains. There was that constant pulsing roar of autocannons, and the vibrations from the battle were so much stronger outside that she felt them shiver up her boots and into her calves and thighs. The med unit was close enough for her to see the tiny hump of the mountain rising to the east. As she scanned the misty summit, she caught glimpses of the insect-like figures of BattleMechs boiling over the black rock, like ants dislodged from a hill.

She felt her blood chill in her veins. She hadn't been able to make out any 'Mechs on the summit yesterday, but their presence confirmed her worst fears. The Eleventh, led by Colonel Linda McDonald, was continuing *its* relentless advance. The Twenty-Third was low on 'Mechs, and that was why even a single soldier like Stanton was so vitally important.

She turned her back on the volcano and stared out past the small village of Quonsets and tents to the middle distance. Not an inspiring sight: More lava flows marked here and there by spiked stands of silver swords, the only plants that could survive on the lava field. The sun was very hot—it hadn't rained on the Scorpion Plains for almost a month—and her body responded to the sudden change in temperature by popping out little beads of sweat that trickled between her shoulders and wet the pits of her arms. The stench of battle was so much stronger out here, she could taste it: ash and grit and something oily. She made a face, spat out a gob of gray-tinged saliva. She was tempted to go back into

the Quonset, or maybe head over to her quarters and duck into someplace relatively cool. But she had a lot of work to do—the soldiers just kept coming—and then there was the medical unit’s general briefing for later that evening. She really didn’t have the luxury of time.

Luxury. That’s what Stanton had said. What had made a battle-hardened man like Stanton crack? Trainer fished out a packet of cigarettes from her left breast pocket. She rarely smoked and thought it was a filthy habit. But smoking helped mask the taste of death in her mouth. She lit the cigarette, then smoked for a few moments, staring at and thinking of nothing, letting her mind drift the way the smoke billowed then dispersed on the wind. But then her restless thoughts settled on Jonathan.

Her vision suddenly blurred as the tears came. Stanton was the trigger, probably. They had the same eyes... Most days she was able to clamp down on anything to do with Jonathan, although the nights were hard. She sucked on her cigarette, savored the burn a moment, and then let the smoke go. Her left hand inched to her neck, and to a length of gold chain pooling in the hollow of her throat. She ran her fingers over the chain and felt how the gold was warm from her skin, then let her fingers trail over the pendant: a diamond in the shape of a single tear.

She remembered when he’d given her the necklace: five months ago in April, not long after the disastrous campaign at Tikonov where Victor’s forces were forced back into Lyran space. She remembered hearing the sizzle of rain against stone outside their window. A light breeze fluttered the curtains, and she smelled water and wet leaves. They made slow, lingering love, taking their time, delighting in the taste and feel of one another. The sheets felt cool, and in the dim light of a single candle, Jonathan’s skin glowed a rich warm amber.

“I have something for you,” he said *and* fastened the chain around her neck. The diamond caught the light, like a tiny comet. He touched the diamond with his finger then pressed his lips to the dome of her right breast, then her left, and then, last of all, her lips. “A diamond lasts forever, and so will my love for you,” he murmured. “I want you to remember that, Liz, no matter what.”

And she’d known at that moment what was going to happen. Still, she pulled him close. His skin was smooth from their love-making, and she inhaled musk, and the faintest hint of sweat. They were silent for a few moments. Then she said, “You’re going away, aren’t you? You’ve decided to...” She couldn’t say the word defect, not just then, so she didn’t.

He didn't answer at first, just traced the length of chain along her collarbone with a finger. Her eyes burning with unshed tears, she waited him out. "Yes," he said finally. "I'm sorry. But after Tikonov, the way the war is going... Liz, I don't think Victor's right. I've given it a lot of thought and I'm not sure his claim is... authentic."

"And Katherine's is?" She wanted to be angry. She wanted to shout and tell him that he'd lost his mind. But she couldn't do any of those things.

He'd sighed, then rolled onto his back. "I don't know anything anymore. But I have to do what's right, what *feels* right. This... the Twenty-Third, fighting for Victor... Liz, I can't stomach it. I can't pretend loyalty to a cause that I don't think is just."



She propped her head on her elbow so she could look into those intense blue eyes. "What about us, John? What am I supposed to do? Resign my commission? Report you?"

His eyes held hers. "You could. You know you could. I'll be a traitor."

"Terrific." She gave a bleak laugh. "They'll execute you and pin a medal on my chest. What kind of choice is that?"

"Then come with me," and then when she'd shaken her head, his hands gripped her biceps. "For God's sake, why stay? What's here for you?"

"My duty, John. My job. And I believe in Victor," she said. Her heart raced, but she kept her voice steady. "Besides, my oath is just as important as yours. You're not the only one with a conscience. I have to do what I think is right. Defection isn't, and there's no way you can make that choice right, not for me."

"And if the Eleventh and the Twenty-Third..." His voice was husky with emotion. "Liz, if it comes down to a fight, Lyran against Lyran, regiment against regiment...?"

"Then we do our jobs, John," she said. "We follow orders. We hope for the best."

"Oh, God," he said, pulling her down onto his chest. She nestled there, her ear pressed against his heart. She listened to its strong,

steady beat and, for the moment, felt her fears recede. His hands stroked her long blonde hair, the back of her head. "It won't come to that. I promise."

"You can't know that," she said, and now her tears came. "It's not your promise to make, John."

"I know." He lifted her face and framed it with his hands. "But this is, Liz. This is my promise to you." And then he'd kissed her fiercely, hungrily, his need flowing into her.

They hadn't spoken again after that for the rest of the night—at least, not in words. She'd fallen asleep in the circle of his arms but the next morning, when she woke, he was gone.

Only five months ago. She closed her finger around the diamond pendant and pressed it to her lips. *Love is forever, my darling; the war isn't.* But there was no end in sight, and now she was on one side, and Jonathan was on the other. Her gaze swung back to the distant mons, the tiny 'Mechs. She saw a plume of smoke rise, and the wind reached her; there was a sound of thunder, and she smelled ozone, vented coolant, and the stink of sulfur.

I wish it would rain. I wish it would rain and wash away all the blood and the stench, and then the world would be clean, and we could start again, forget this horror.

But it didn't rain. She really didn't expect it to. Trainer finished her cigarette, then let it fall to the hard earth, and ground it to dust beneath her boot.



"I won't kid you," said the colonel, looking at the various command staff assembled around the table. He wasn't a tall man and his scalp was capped with a shock of white, unruly hair that always seemed like it needed a good brushing. His gray eyes *sunk* into his face from too many hours tending patients, and he looked as if he hadn't slept in a month. "The situation's bad. Command hasn't been able to slow down McDonald's advance. There's a real, imminent danger of her people breaking through our front lines."

"Well, then we needed to start evacuating yesterday morning," said Dale Ramsey, who was seated next to Trainer. Ramsey was the unit's chief surgeon: a small, bantam-rooster of a man with a thatch of fiery red hair. "The OR's hopping. I can barely keep up, and my patients are packed tighter than sardines in post-op."

If you're really serious about evacuation, then we need to start sending people out now."

The colonel sighed. "I wish it *was* that simple. The reality is that Command won't spare us the transports because they're already in use." There was a general buzz of conversation around the table, and the colonel raised a hand. "Hold on, people. There's more. The scuttlebutt is that the retreat's already begun. Happened last night, under cover of darkness. A splinter of the Twenty-Third peeled off south, and they're about ten clicks away now and going fast. There's still a forward unit, a token force on the volcano spearheading the offensive against McDonald, but they're spread thin. And the bad news is we stay put, right smack dab in the middle."

"To fight another day?" asked Ramsey. His tone indicated just what he thought of that plan. "What, we're the bait? The sacrificial lambs?"

The colonel bobbed his head. "That's about the size of it. We run for it, and the Eleventh might suspect that we're not throwing all our man- and firepower at them here. Call it a diversionary last stand. We've got lots of wounded, plus anyone we can get well enough to send back to the forward line, so we can keep things looking pretty darned busy. By the time the Eleventh gets here and figures out that *we're* not actually shooting, Command's betting that we'll have bought the splinter group time. So, in the end, Command will have conserved their healthiest soldiers and gotten them the hell out of here."

"While we do what?" asked Trainer.

"Our jobs," said the colonel. "No matter what, we've got to stay put. We've got patients to tend to who can't be moved. They need us."

"We need back-up," Ramsey said. "And some firepower would be nice. I don't much like the idea of defending my patients with a laser pistol, or serving as target practice for some *Banshee*. And what about that nice big *Zeus*? We've got all that power out there and no one here qualified to pilot it. Are you telling me Command's going to leave it behind?" When the colonel nodded, Ramsey blew out in exasperation. "Well, Christ Almighty, then how about sending a MechWarrior our way?"

"No can do. In a more normal war, where we had a bit more time, didn't have to cut and run, what with Command trying to cover

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Victor's tracks, maybe. Hell," the colonel exhaled a laugh, "can't believe I even said that. Whatever flavor war you call it a soldier ends up just as dead. Anyway, I can't argue with you, Ramsey. 'Mechs are damn valuable, we all know that. But Command's pulling out so fast they can't even spare time to button their flies, much less hustle a pilot our way. And you, Ramsey, will defend your patients with your trusty laser pistol *only* if you are fired upon. No one engages *anyone* except in defense of a patient, got it?" The colonel gave each of the medical staff a hard stare. "I know this is a tough one to swallow, but you'll do your jobs, I know that. Now, everybody, go get some sleep. Dismissed," he said, and then added, "All except you, Major Trainer. The rest of you can go."

Ramsey shot her a look with raised eyebrows. Trainer responded with a slight hike of her shoulders. The colonel waited until the others had filed out, then closed the door to the command conference room.

"Sir?" she said, standing with her hands clasped behind her back. Not quite at attention, but not at ease either.

The colonel waved a hand. "Sit back down, Liz," he said, sliding into a chair himself. She did. He gave a slight groan. "God, I'm getting too old for this. Okay, Liz," he *rubbed at his face*, "I'm going to give it to you straight. We're going to lose this in a big way. My own assessment. Command thinks they can salvage something? Christ, they're dreaming. This won't be the last stand, but it's probably the second-to-last."

She'd half expected this, but now that the words had been said—really out in the open—she felt her heart go numb and a feeling of something cold as glacial ice settle into the pit of her stomach. "If that's true, why are we staying? Why not say to hell with it and evacuate now?"

"Because we haven't gotten the go-ahead, for one, but that's not a real reason. Hell, I'd move us in a heartbeat if I could, but we don't have the people-movers, nothing that can really get us out of here, pronto, and I'm not leaving one of our patients behind."

"What about DropShips?"

"Already asked, already declined." He chafed his biceps with both hands. "I think that the simple truth of the matter is that if these soldiers are too banged up to fight, then Command's going to call it a loss and keep on going."

"So we're written off? But what about our patients? They're not statistics. They're men and women!"

"They're casualties, Liz. We all are. It's damage control, pure and simple. You want to stop hemorrhaging, you got to control whatever's bleeding you dry. Well, we're bleeding out men and materiel on this offensive. Command's not going to pour more resources into this end of the Twenty-Third, that's all there is to it. They've calculated the odds and figured it's better to cut their losses."

"And leave us behind, with nowhere to go," said Trainer, bitterly.

"Like I said, chances are McDonald's forces are going to march in here and take us all prisoner. Good for our patients, bad for us, but at least we'll be alive. That's something." The colonel screwed up his features. "But there's one more thing, Liz. I need you to get *your* patients up and out."

"Out? You mean, as in back to the front lines? But you just said..."

"We need to maintain the illusion that we're making a fight of it. Pull out too many people, and McDonald, she'll figure it out and you can bet she'll come running. Never met the woman myself, but she's got a rep, and on the basis of what's flowing down that volcano, I believe what I hear," said the colonel. He sighed, shook his head. "It's hell; I know, Liz. I don't like it, but I can't argue with it. Look, those boys and girls out there, *your* patients, they're Command's best shot."

"They're convenient cannon fodder is what you mean," said Trainer. Her voice was saturated with disgust. "Colonel, you're ordering me to send those men and women off to die—in order to *prolong a battle that we're going to lose eventually anyway.*"

The colonel ducked his head in agreement. "I wish I could say it was otherwise, Liz. But I need you to do this. Ramsey, his patients are too damn banged up to help Command any. But yours can. You just got to push them a little faster."

"How fast?"

"I want them out day after tomorrow."

"The eleventh." Trainer exhaled. "That's fast. Some of them only came in this afternoon."

"I know that. And there's one more thing. Stanton: It'd be real nice if you could get him up and moving back to the front line. Shame to see a 'Mechs just sitting and it's no use to us, anyway. Might just give McDonald's forces the wrong idea."

"You mean that we might put up a fight." Trainer gnawed on her lower lip, then shook her head. "The problem is I don't think he can. A lot of those kids, probably I can get them out. But something's really got Stanton by the throat."

"Something you can medicate?"

"It's not that type of sickness. Anyway, any medication that strong, and you can forget his being able to walk, much less pilot anything. Stanton's got a... soul sickness."



She was dismissed a short time after. It was a moonless night, and she almost didn't see Ramsey waiting for her outside. He peeled away from the side of the command Quonset. "Well?"

Trainer jammed her hands in her cammie trouser pockets and shivered. The desert cooled off at night. "It's bad."

"Hell. Got a smoke?"

"Sure," said Trainer, taking out her pack and tapping out a cigarette. There was a small metallic snick of a lighter, and then she saw Ramsey's face, a ruddy mask, as if a switch had been thrown by the tiny flame as he lit up. His face was lost in darkness again as he cut the lighter. "That stuff'll kill you," she said, tucking her pack back into her breast pocket.

"Hunh. Sound medical advice," Ramsey said, around his cigarette. A puff of smoke shot out of the corner of his mouth. "That is, if our brothers and sisters of the Eleventh don't first." He inhaled, held it, then blew out. Trainer's nose tingled with the scent of burned tobacco. "What's the story?"

She told him. When she finished, Ramsey was silent, and in the darkness, she saw only the orange glow of his cigarette, and to the west, the sparkle of weapons' fire. She heard Ramsey drag in a breath then say, "Things must be worse than bad."

"I'd say so." She turned back to Ramsey. "You going to fight?"

"You mean, defend my patients with my trusty pistol? I don't know. We pick up a weapon, then we're fair game."

"And if we don't, then we get to trust Lady Luck." Trainer sighed. "You think we're going to get out of this?"

"As in with our skins?" Ramsey flicked his cigarette into the darkness. The small orange dot arced like a tiny meteor and disappeared. He blew out a streamer of smoke. "I think the answer's pretty obvious, don't you?"



The next afternoon *dark clouds gathered* on the horizon, beyond the mountain. Maybe some rain, finally.

She sat across from Stanton who was huddled on his cot. Stanton looked like crap. He was unshaven, and his steely-gray hair was mussed. The nurses said that he'd been restless during the night and unable to settle down, even with a sedative. He'd been given a fresh change of uniform, but he hadn't washed and his clothes smelled sour. His eyes were staring at some spot on the floor in front of her boots.

Sighing, she put her hands on her knees. "Captain, you can stay mum for as long as you like. But I can sit here, too, because that's my job. Now, that means if you won't talk to me, then you're giving me no choice." Empty threats, she knew. She had no intention of drugging him. What purpose would it serve? But she had to try.

"You have a choice," said Stanton, suddenly. His gaze crawled up to her face. "You're just choosing one way over another."

Good, keep him talking. Better to fight than sit and stare. "Oh? Tell me my choices, Captain."

Stanton exhaled a laugh that was mainly air. His lips were cracked. "You could leave me alone. You could walk away. You don't want to know what's inside in my head, Doctor." His bloodshot eyes roved away a second, then returned. "You just don't."

"You don't know that. I'd like you to trust me."

"Why?"

"Because I can help."

"How?"

"Well, by talking, I think you'll feel better and . . ."

"Listen to yourself." Stanton's lips widened into a strange grin. "You're such a hypocrite. At least, I'm honest about my kind of killing. I get into my 'Mechs . I blast someone to hell before he can blast me. But you." His gaze clicked down to her boots then back to her face. "You call yourself a doctor, but you're just a killer. You pull the trigger every time you send one of us back to fight."

Trainer felt herself flush. "We're not talking about my job," she said. She licked her lips. "We're talking about..."

"Killing," said Stanton. "We're talking about what you do. We're talking about what I've done."

Trainer keyed in on the words. "What you've done. You've said that before. You said that I didn't know what you'd done. What would happen if I did know, Captain?"

"I don't know." Stanton looked askance. Trainer saw the small muscles working along his jaw. "Maybe it's more that if I say it, out loud, it becomes real. Not that you can judge me any more than I hate myself."

Trainer sensed she was close to something. "Why? Why do you hate yourself, Captain? What have you done that's so terrible?"

For a moment, she didn't think he would answer. And then his face quivered, and broke apart, and he was crying from what she knew was an awful, limitless grief.

An overwhelming feeling of compassion for the man washed over her. Tears stung her eyes, and she blinked the tears back. "Captain," she said. She put her hand on his knee, just the slightest touch. "Captain, tell me."

"I..." Stanton said, his chest heaving, his voice hitching, "I... I killed... I killed the enemy."

"But, Captain, you... you were just doing your job."

"No," said Stanton, and the haunted look of loss and misery in his eyes would stay with her for the rest of her life. "No. Not when it's... your daughter."

No. She was prepared for anything but not this. *Brother against brother. Father against daughter. And Jonathan against...* Horror left her numb and speechless, and she could only watch Stanton weep out his grief and loss. A little while later, she ordered

sedation for Stanton, and then she left the Quonset. She couldn't bear anymore.

That evening, at dusk, she stared at the volcano. The flow of casualties had diminished—either because they were getting luckier, or there were no more soldiers to kill. The clouds were closer now, and there were lightening-like tracers of weapons fire all along the near slopes of the volcano, as if a swarm of fireflies had gotten loose.

McDonald was coming. And if Jonathan *was* with his regiment? Or if he lay dead on the battlefield? How would she know? She felt helpless and so small she wanted to curl up into a little ball and hide.

Stanton's *Zeus* stood a kilometer from the camp: a brooding, hulking, silent machine.



No casualties arrived the next morning. The bank of clouds that Trainer had seen advancing the day before filled the sky. Their underbellies were heavy and gray. By ten, McDonald's forces were spreading across the Plains, like a wall of advancing water: two *Banshees*, a *Berserker*, and lastly, a *King Crab*. Foot soldiers and armored tanks milled around the legs of the 'Mechs.

The camp had a deserted feel to it. The patients they couldn't move were gathered into three Quonsets. Sidearms were distributed. Trainer put hers in a desk drawer. Ramsey strapped his holster around his waist. Trainer arched an eyebrow when she saw that. "I thought you didn't want to get shot at."

Ramsey shrugged. "Never hurts to be prepared."

They stood together, watching the machines and soldiers come. Trainer craned her neck. "I don't see any of our 'Mechs."

"That's because there are none left," said Ramsey. He turned aside and spat. "Hell." And then he shaded his eyes; it wasn't very bright out, but the gleam of the diffuse light of the morning off the advancing 'Mechs set up a white glare. "Oh, Jesus."

"What?" Trainer squinted. "What is it?"

Ramsey pointed. "Look."

Trainer's gaze followed in the direction he indicated, and then she gasped. "Oh, my God."

It was Stanton, sprinting for his 'Mechs, too far away for anyone to stop him.

"Stanton!" Trainer screamed. *They'll think we're going to put up a fight!* "Stanton, stop! It's too late for that! Not now, *not now!*"

But either Stanton couldn't hear, or didn't care, because in a few moments, he disappeared into the bowels of his *Zeus*. Trainer waited in an agony of suspense through a minute, then two. There was a loud whirr, and then the *Zeus* quivered to life.

Horrified, Trainer watched the huge machine's cockpit pivot in a *hot start* protest of metal and gears. Its huge legs creaked, then pedaled in a backward walk. It lumbered around to face the oncoming army, its arms up and extended. There was a flash, and then Trainer was nearly blinded by a ruby-red blaze of laser fire from the *Zeus's* left torso. The laser ripped across the right leg of the nearest *Banshee*. There was that peculiar shriek metal makes when it's being torn in two, and a smell of ozone in the air, and then the *Zeus* followed with another sizzle of laser fire that cut a swath across the *Banshee's* chest. Caught off-guard, the *Banshee* teetered back and slouched right, its weight buckling its damaged right leg. But then there was a high hum, and Trainer watched as the *Berserker* put on speed and flew forward, its massive titanium hatchet upraised.

"Run!" Ramsey shouted.

Trainer felt as if she'd been jolted awake. She spun on her heel just as the *Berserker* reached the *Zeus*. A lance of laser fire from the *Zeus* went wide, and then the *Berserker's* hatchet came smashing down, caving in the *Zeus's* right shoulder with the first blow.

Suddenly, there were shouts; medical and support personnel went flying off in all directions; and the air was filled with laser and weapons fire from the advancing soldiers. Slugs whistled by her ears. *My God, McDonald thinks it's a trap, that we're trying to trick them!* Trainer's burning lungs pulled in air that was choked with smoke and the scent of burning flesh, and she sprinted for the far side of the camp, aiming for the relative safety of the medical Quonset.

She almost made it. Then, suddenly, she felt a blossom of pain bloom between her shoulders. Screaming, she staggered, and then another burst of weapons fire caught her in the back and

chewed her flesh. The force of the blow spun her around. She crumpled to the ground, blood gushing from wounds that had pierced her back and exited through her chest. In a few seconds, the front of her uniform was soggy with bright red blood.

Jonathan. With the last of her strength, she turned her face to the sky. Her vision was constricting now, the world shrinking down to a narrow pinpoint. She felt unbearably cold, and then she began to shake as her blood pumped out onto the dry, black, thirsty earth. She couldn't move. Even blinking was an effort. Her mind felt sluggish, as if she were winding down like an old clock whose gears had simply worn out. In a few seconds, and probably less, she knew that she would slip into a deep, long, dreamless sleep, and she wouldn't wake up.

The last thing she saw were the dark underbellies of the clouds, avatars of the approaching storm.



Colonel Linda McDonald's boots crunched over the ruins of the medical unit. She'd dismounted her *King Crab* as soon as she'd reached the medical complex. Anger boiled in her gut in counterpoint to the water bubbling in the steam vents beneath the black basalt plain. What a waste of lives! Even though she'd realized that the *Zeus* had been the only bit of 'Mechs' weaponry, it had taken her too many precious moments to relay orders. By then, the damage had been done.

She'd already made a survey of the casualties on the volcano itself, lumbering over the hardened lava flows in her *King Crab*. She'd picked her way over and around ruined bodies and machines on a battlefield, but that had been a real fight.

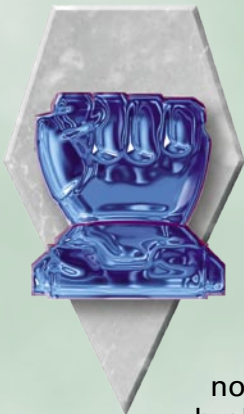
But not this. This was a massacre. McDonald's jaw firmed as her gaze swept over the debris and the broken, shattered corpses of patients and medical personnel flung into haphazard piles of bedding and bloodied bandages. Her people were already going through, recovering remains and zipping them away in black bags. There were some prisoners—patients, mainly, although she spotted one physician, male, red-haired, his uniform soaked with the blood of those he'd tried to save. But it looked to her as if the rest of the command personnel were dead; McDonald had already seen the body of the unit commander, a colonel she didn't know (a blessing), bundled away. Just beyond, and to the right, next to a smashed Quonset, was the body of another officer: a woman, her

long blonde hair dyed to rust with blood. A physician, from the look of her uniform.

She directed her gaze toward the destroyed *Zeus*. *The maniac who started this mess*. The 'Mechs lay on its side, the cockpit caved in and its belly ripped open by laser fire. God, if she'd only gotten control of the situation sooner, they might've been spared all this.

She heard the crunch of boots and turned to see one of her best pilots—the one who had piloted the *Berserker* that had destroyed the *Zeus*. “Peterson,” she said. “You have a report?”

Holding his neurohelmet under his left arm, Peterson, a swarthy man with intense blue eyes and black curly hair, saluted with his right. “We’ve secured a perimeter, Colonel. I think it was just this one 'Mechs. I’m sorry.”



“Not your fault. You were fired on; you returned fire. How were we supposed to know?” And then, because she couldn’t stand the taste of her own anger, she said, “God, what a waste! The Twenty-Third had to know that leaving their wounded...” She stopped when she saw that Peterson’s gaze had flickered right, toward the ruined Quonset. “Captain?”

She watched Peterson take a single, unsteady step forward, then two, like a BattleMech with a faulty gyro; his neurohelmet dropped, unnoticed, to the shattered earth; and then Peterson broke into a run.

“Captain?” she called again. “John?”

But Peterson didn’t stop. He reached the body and then stood there for a long moment, looking down at the woman. And then it was as if his strength gave way because he swayed and tottered. His knees folded, and he sagged to the earth. He gathered the body of the woman into his arms and then McDonald saw his shoulders begin to shiver.

She came up behind Peterson. “John,” she said, and put her hand on his shoulder. She felt a long shudder ripple through his body, and even though she couldn’t see his face, she knew that he was weeping.

“Oh, Liz,” she heard him say, his voice clogged with grief. “Oh, no.”

Understanding blazed through McDonald like a shaft of sun piercing thick clouds. *Dear God.* McDonald looked down at the woman in Peterson's arms. Her skin was white as marble, and her lips were parted slightly, as if she were about to speak. Her chest was shredded and so saturated with blood and gore that McDonald caught the odor of wet copper. Through the blood, she saw the sparkle of a diamond in the shape of a single tear.

Slowly, McDonald turned and walked away and gave Peterson the privacy of his grief.

Overhead, lightening flashed. There was a roll of thunder that echoed through the ruins and shook the ground. And then it began to rain.