

THE BITTER TASTE OF HOPE

PART ONE

Steven Mohan, Jr.

Swing Circle Spaceport
Swing Circle, New Port Royal
Tortuga Dominions, Periphery
27 February 3066

Tracy Malfont's life had been an endless flight from fear and betrayal, a desperate journey through darkness that lately looked like it was going to end on this rancid backwater world, cut short for no reason other than that her new boss coveted a pile of crap that wasn't even worth stealing, let alone dying for.

She folded her arms across her ample chest and leaned against the hull of *Maelstrom*, her *Leopard*-class DropShip. There was little to see: the gray commercial terminal to the north and, to the south, the dark ferrocrete tarmac giving way to chain-link and scrub brush at the spaceport's edge. They had been berthed away from the other DropShips and most especially away from the Bazaar.

No doubt Simonian put them there on purpose, the bastard, just to guarantee a visit from her. Well, she'd dressed for the occasion: tight jeans, black leather jacket, a white cotton tee with the frilly push-up number underneath that provided lift without covering up anything perky, a combination she privately called The Floor Model.

(Hey, boys, anyone up for a test drive?)

She closed her eyes (God she was tired) but it didn't do any good. Without sight, her world became the sharp smell of metal and lube oil, the faint hum of the *Leopard's* shore services hookup, the sticky sweat that glued her shirt to her breasts.

It was too damn hot for the jacket, but so what? Simonian liked leather and it was his appetites she was working to satisfy. Her only concession to comfort was her ash-blond hair pulled up into a tight ponytail and she'd only allowed herself *that* indulgence because she knew the Deck Officer's eyes wouldn't travel any farther north than her chest.

"Ready to go?" asked a deep voice.

"Just waiting on you, boss," Malfont said without opening her eyes.

Castor cleared his throat impatiently.

She sighed and looked over at him.

Mark Castor-Davion wore a pair of ship's coveralls, faded olive green, frayed at the sleeves, with a dark patch of hydraulic fluid at the left hip.

All of it for nothing.

Malfont could've taught Castor a thing or two about playing a part (if he would've listened). Whatever anyone might think, Malfont wasn't a whore, but she believed she was when she slipped into *The Floor Model*, because *believing* was what made her character come alive.

It was obvious that Castor didn't believe he was the DropShip's chief engineer. It was too easy to see the nobility in him. She saw it in his straight back, in the steady gaze of his watery blue eyes, in the black hair cut short and parted neatly on the left.

He looked every bit the baron's brother that he was.

And you just didn't find many people like that in the Periphery.

"You should stay," she said.

"We've been over this," he said tightly.

"These people know me. You..." Her voice trailed off.

Castor said nothing, but his mouth formed into a hard line that meant, "We can argue about it until the heat death of the universe, but I'm not changing my mind."

"Fine," Malfont muttered. "Your call."

He nodded. "That's right."

She scowled, shoved her hands in her pocket, pushing the jacket flaps back.

Castor glanced at her chest and grimaced, then looked quickly away. Not so fast that she didn't see it, though.

Well, to hell with him.

Yeah, it was a sleazy outfit, but sleazy would get them what they wanted out of Deck Master Ox Simonian and she wouldn't have to screw anyone or kill anyone. Based on Malfont's life experience that was a pretty good deal.

So it would take more than the scorn of His Imperial Davion Majesty to change the way she did things. Speaking of which...

"They don't have any love for House Davion in the Dominions. We should admit who you are up front."

Castor snorted. "He'll dig into my identity and find out I'm a disgraced Davion associating with a known pirate. Should be enough cover."

"He'll think you're an MIIO operative here to puzzle out who has been raiding the border worlds."

"No," said Castor, "he'll think I'm here to rob the Bazaar."

"Yeah, well, since we *are* here to rob the Bazaar, don't you think that just might be a bit of a problem?"

But Castor just gave her a look that let her know she'd lost this argument, too.

Malfont clenched her jaw and turned away from him, took a few steps and a few deep breaths. She was about ten seconds from telling him to go to hell and walking right out.

But something stopped her.

The thought that he might just pull it off.

Sure Castor was crazy, stone crazy, *the lights are on, but no one's fucking home* crazy, but maybe, just maybe he was a mad genius. Look at the way he'd run circles around them all on Randis—and not just her crew either, but the Brotherhood, too. If there was someone who could rip off the Tortuga Bazaar, it just might be Mark Castor-Davion.

She shook her head.

That was her big problem: hope.

Stupid, shitty hope.

How many bad guys had she gone running after, hoping this one, *this one*, would be the one to lead her out of the darkness. Only it never turned out that way, did it?

Hope.

She spat on the tarmac.

On the other hand it was hope that had kept her looking for something better.

Hope that kept her alive.

She sucked in a deep breath and turned back, only to discover that Castor had turned his back on *her* and was already walking away. Which was how Tracy Malfont found herself running after the mysterious Mark Castor so she wouldn't be late to the meeting she actually didn't want to go to and would most likely get her killed.

Fucking mad genius.

***New Monster Wildlands
Outside of Safi, Harira
Federated Commonwealth
18 July 3054***

Sergeant Tracy Garner of the Harira Militia stalked her *Javelin* out of the draw canyon where she and Aiken had holed up. And why not? After all, she was the scout, a designation which meant the soldier who sticks her head up and gets it shot off so the officers know where to point the guns.

She faced a difficult landscape, mountain foothills covered by a heavy evergreen forest, tall enough to hide a 'Mech and thick enough to swallow a thermal signature. Then there was the iron ore deposits that were jacking with her MAD gear. Oh, and if she *did* stumble into the adversary forces, she couldn't even use her jump jets to escape, not over heavily-wooded, uneven ground.

Great.

She glanced down at her topo map. The Monster River was a quarter-klick east. The map showed it as a fat blue line winding through the hills, but she knew it had been a long, dry summer and the water level was way down. If she were careful she might be able to move along the river's shore. It was a good move for two reasons. One, because Captain Frank Sonders wouldn't expect it and two, because she wouldn't give up her posit by pushing through the trees.

She twisted right to scan the area and sucked in a startled breath. For an instant the universe was a flare of incandescent white light, a nova centered in her chest, and then the brilliance faded to a dull, red agony that traced the curve of her ribs like an electric current running through a copper wire.

And suddenly she was breathing again, a harsh ragged sound that pulsed in time to the pain.

Her radio crackled with Aiken's contempt. "Planning to get a move on any time soon, Garner?"

She wiped tears from her eyes with the back of her hand. *Damn it, Tracy, you are a MechWarrior. Focus on the mission.*

She held her breath and pressed the transmit button. "Gonna get right on that, el tee," she said in her best smart-ass noncom.

She released the button and gasped.

“Yeah, well, see that you do.”

“Yes, *sir*,” she muttered and pushed the *Javelin* into a light walk, choosing a path where the trees were thinnest.

“Keep it together, keep it together,” she sang under her breath, a little mantra to hold back the pain.

Hold back the memory.

Battalion was running two-on-twos today and it was her bad luck that she’d drawn Aiken as a partner and worse luck that they’d drawn the unit’s exec, Frank Sonders, and his good buddy Ahmed Belkaziz as opponents.

No, not luck.

That really wasn’t the right word. Sonders had put her and Aiken together because they were both screw-ups. And he’d elected to fight them because he didn’t want to have to risk fighting a decent team.

It wasn’t really fair, but no point in complaining.

Real combat was seldom fair.

So she was expected to lose. OK. No big. She might’ve run into that situation once or twice before. Didn’t mean she had to roll over and take it.

Not at all.

She saw flashes of gray-green through the trees, capped with frothy white where a jagged rock poked through the Monster’s turbulent surface. And she was picking up the sound of flowing water on her external speakers.

She pushed between a pair of cottonwoods and looked down.

The river was running low, just as she’d suspected, bordered on both sides by a narrow ribbon of smooth gray stones. The Monster was only five or six meters wide and couldn’t be more than three meters at its deepest. She could walk the river’s course, even walk the river if she had to.

If she could get down, past the two-meter drop.

Two meters. Six feet. Not very far unless you’re talking about moving thirty tons and your ribs feel like they’re made out of razor wire.

So turn back, Tracy, she thought. Go lose like a good little girl.

She drew a deep breath, crouched.

And then jumped.

It was more of a hop really and at the last moment she tapped her jump jets. Even as she did it she could tell it was a brilliant maneuver, almost perfect.

But she still hit with a non-zero velocity.

Someone thrust a jagged blade into her gut and the world grayed out.

She awoke with the bright, fluttery panic of someone who's fallen asleep behind the wheel. She thrust her right leg forward.

And somehow caught herself before she fell.

She stood there for a moment, legs splayed, breathing hard, face sheened with cold sweat.

Slowly she gathered her jangled nerves together.

Took a step forward. Felt the rocks slide under her 'Mech's weight, the sudden slipping motion instantly translated to the corset of agony she wore under her skin.

She gritted her teeth and took another step.

She was moving. Each step was a brutal act of will, but she was *moving*.

And then she saw something up ahead, a flicker of motion just around a bend in the river's course.

She froze.

A falling tree.

And the telltale glint of metal.

She flashed on something blocky and massive moving her way.

Sonders' Thunderbolt.

Should've guessed.

In a forest environment, the sound of falling trees was as likely to give away a MechWarrior as anything else. Why not slip along

the forest's edge where the tree cover would be lighter? A 'Mech would make faster progress with less chance of discovery.

Not as good as actually moving down the river basin itself, but then his heavy outweighed Garner's *Javelin* by thirty-five tons and had no jump jets. That two-meter step would be risky for a big 'Mech. Too risky for a training exercise.

She took a careful step backwards, behind the bow in the river, buying herself a few more seconds.

She heard the sound of another tree crashing down.

He still had no idea she was here.

But that advantage would only last seconds. Surely his attention was focused along what he thought was the most likely threat vector—the forest—or Sonders would have seen her on IR by now. But in a second he was going to arc around the bow and be right on top of her. No time to get behind him and hit the *Thunderbolt's* vulnerable rear armor. No margin for breaking EMCON to contact Lieutenant Aiken.

She'd get the first shot, but all she had was four medium lasers, not much against a monster like that heavy.

Gonna give up, Tracy?

No! If all she had was four mediums she'd just have to make them count.

Just like always.

She reached down, tied all four lasers into her primary trigger.

The sound of the heavy's massive footfalls reverberated through the air. She felt the bass blow of one of those great blocks coming down, felt it in the back of her teeth. She sucked in a deep breath.

And sprinted forward.

Pain lanced through her chest, but somehow she fought it back.

Planted a massive foot.

Pivoted.

And caught Sonders in mid-step.

She pulled into her trigger, flooding his left knee with emerald fire. It was an exercise, so each laser was set at one-tenth power, but together they added up to almost half-power.

She saw armor melt and start to run from the vulnerable knee joint.

Heard Sonders cursing over the general channel.

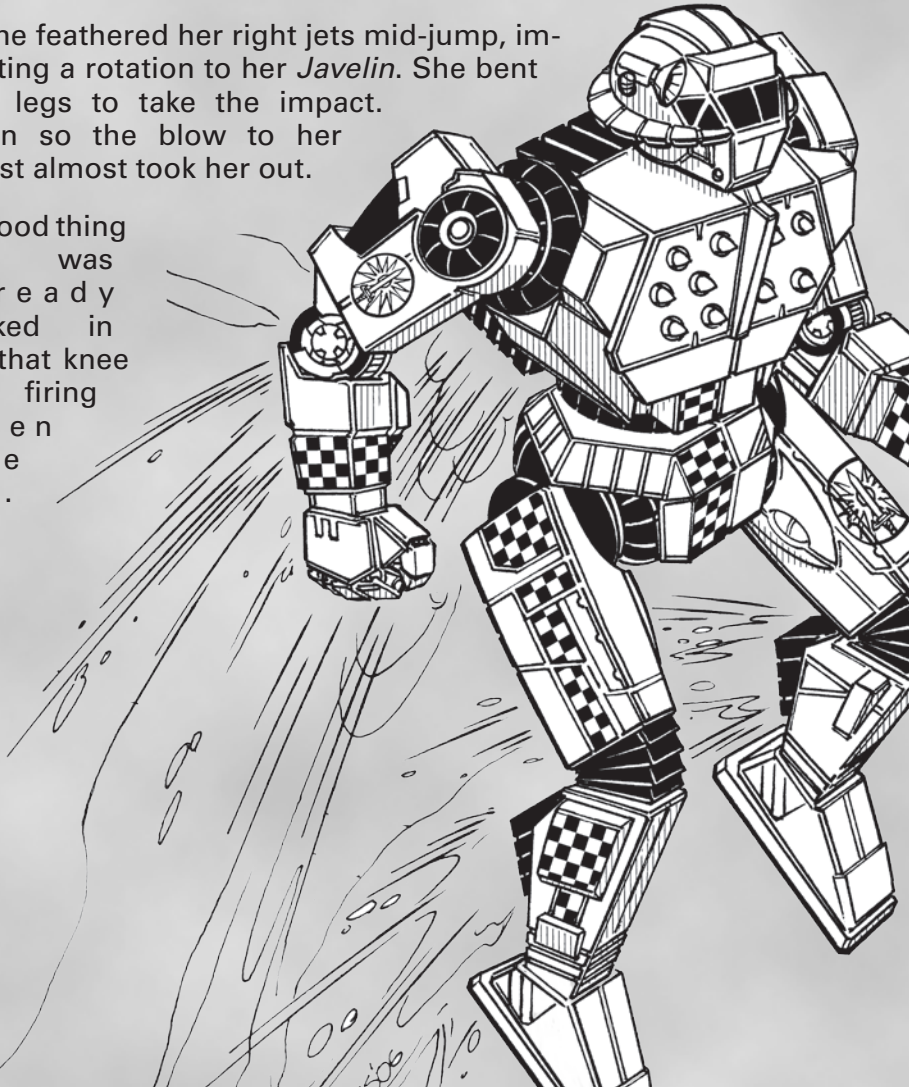
She cut fire, pivoted, and hit her jump jets all in one fluid motion.

Just as Sonders' SRMs smashed into the place she'd been standing.

If she let him bring his weapons to bear this fight would be over before it began.

She feathered her right jets mid-jump, imparting a rotation to her *Javelin*. She bent her legs to take the impact. Even so the blow to her chest almost took her out.

Good thing she was already locked in on that knee and firing when she hit.



Somehow she rode out the hammer blow of pain, clinging to her primary trigger like a life preserver, holding the shot until a blast furnace washed over her body and the shrill cry of her heat alarm echoed through her cockpit.

She glanced up and the cold shock of horror flashed through her body, somehow even worse than the pain.

As she realized just what she'd done.

Her shot had been spot on, dead center, broken ribs and all. She'd caught Sonders in the already damaged left knee. He was in the middle of a turn, fury and haste stealing away his natural balance, and she'd hit him in the knee. His exercise computer must've simulated the damage by locking the knee at the exact worst possible time

All this Garner understood in a split-second.

As sixty-five tons of BattleMech toppled towards her.

There was no time, no time to cry out, no time even for her heart to beat once more, before the *Thunderbolt* smashed into her and her world became violent ringing sound, like being inside a thunderclap, and then the actinic flare of her ribs stole her breath away and painted the universe such a bright white that it had no choice but to burn down to black.

Swing Circle Spaceport
New Port Royal
Tortuga Dominions, Periphery
27 February 3066

The west corner of the commercial terminal was a suite of glass-walled offices. Malfont and Castor passed the walk in silence until they reached the corner office. Someone had stenciled “Deck Officer Oximan Simonian” on the door in gold paint that had been inexpertly edged in black.

Malfont leaned toward Castor and said, “Remember. *I* do all the talking.”

“Just don’t forget to ask for a berth in the southwestern quadrant,” he snapped.

“Keep your voice down,” Malfont hissed. “Look, I’ll do the best I can, but you need to be *quiet*.”

Castor didn’t say anything, but his mouth formed that tight little line again.

Figuring that was probably the best she was going to get, Malfont pushed through the door.

The room she stepped into was a dank pit, despite the golden sunlight filtering through the large glass window that formed its southern wall. Malfont wasn’t big on *feng shui* or interior design, but she was absolutely certain the room picked up its dark nature from its lone inhabitant.

Sitting behind a desk piled high with papers was a swarthy man pushing two meters. And if he were pushing two meters, 150 kilos was a distant memory. Malfont got the impression that he never left the office, partly because this was the only place she’d ever encountered him, but mostly because she couldn’t imagine any practical way for him to fit his enormous bulk through the door’s frame.

He looked up at her and a yellow smile split his round, bald head. “Tracy.”

Malfont drew a deep breath of air that tasted of stale BO and placed her hand at the base of her neck, drawing Simonian’s beady black eyes to the place where they both wanted them to go. “Ox. So good to see you again.”

The way he leered at her she knew this was going to be easy.

Until she heard Castor say, "We'd like to ask for a favor."

Simonian's eyes jerked up and left, his attention suddenly focused not on Malfont's breasts but on the mysterious stranger that she'd hoped he wouldn't even notice.

"And who might you be?" asked the deck master, his voice rolling out of his massive chest as hard and dangerous as Caribbean rum.

Out of the corner of her eye Malfont saw Castor flash Simonian an arctic smile, the same smile she'd first seen when he seated himself next to her in the bar on Randis. She'd stuck her knife tip in his side and somehow he'd still managed to disarm her, nearly breaking her hand in the process.

Didn't he understand that tactic wasn't going to work here?

These people weren't pirates trying to blend in with polite society. Here in the Dominions the pirates *were* the society and the polite part was a non-starter.

"Well?" said Simonian and now there was a hint of impatience in his voice.

"Chief engineer," said Castor in a resolute voice that made it perfectly obvious that was the last thing he was.

"Hey, Ox," said Malfont quickly, trying to jerk the conversation back from the disastrous turn it had taken. "I was hoping we could get a better berth."

His gaze shifted right again, but bad news, his eyes were on her face, not points south.

"I'm here looking for a spare engine for the *Maelstrom*. No doubt the bastards with the transport concession are going to charge me an arm and a leg to haul it all the way out to our current berth. I was hoping for something in the southwest quadrant."

Near the Bazaar, she didn't say.

The massive pirate shifted in his seat. "Of course, there would be a substantial fee for any berth reassignment."

"Of course," said Malfont easily.

The man's beady eyes shifted left to the mercifully silent Castor and then back to her. Simonian was obviously thinking.

The Periphery between the Taurian Concordat and the Outworlds Alliance was more or less a whole lot of nothing. There were some who picked out a meager living preying on (mostly) FedRat worlds, but even pirates needed a market to trade what they didn't need for what they desperately did need.

And so there was the Port Royal Bazaar.

The scum of the spinward periphery came to the Dominions to trade. Right now the Swing Circle Spaceport was dotted with DropShips. Malfont had noticed a couple *Mules*, a *Union*, even an *Overlord* north of the terminal, three more *Unions* near the Bazaar.

And some of those vessels had to have 'Mechs in them.

So what Simonian was asking himself was did he want to move a potential raiding party closer to its target.

The big pirate frowned. "I'm afraid I just don't have anything in the southwest quadrant. But I might be able to find something for you north and west of the terminal. Ought to save you something on transport." He licked his lips. "We could meet later. To discuss it."

Malfont's blood froze. So she was going to have to screw someone, after all.

All because Castor couldn't keep his mouth shut.

"Well," she said, trying to sound alluring rather than horrified, "I'm sure that could be—"

"*Absolutely not*," Castor snapped. He stepped forward, jabbed a finger at Simonian. "I insist you give us a spot in the southwest quadrant."

The self-satisfied leer on Simonian's face disappeared in an instant, replaced by frozen fury. He and Malfont knew the truth even if Castor did not. Simonian might be a two-bit pirate, but here he was the power and they needed something he had. "I think this meeting is over," said the deck master coldly.

"Ox—" Malfont began, but he flashed her a look that said, "Don't even try," and her jaws clacked shut around the rest.

For a second there was silence in the office.

Except for the sound of the door opening and Castor striding out.

Malfont turned and followed him. He was walking fast so she had to scramble to catch up. She was furious, so it wasn't hard.

How could he be so brilliant one moment and so incredibly stupid the next? All by himself he'd blown the whole deal and now they were going to have to fight their way over an extra two, three clicks of hostile territory because of it.

When she drew within a half-meter she grabbed his arm. "What the *hell* was that?"

He turned to face her, said nothing.

Her voice dropped a couple notches in volume, but didn't lose anything in intensity. "I don't care where you were born or what your real name is. Your lineage doesn't give you command here, Mr. Davion. Do you understand?"

He looked at her, face blank, making her feel like a bug caught out in the middle of his kitchen floor after he'd flicked on the light. Yeah, she knew that look. She'd seen it before.

Then he looked away. "I want you and Henderson to reconnoiter the Bazaar. You have twenty-four hours. Report to me tomorrow with your tactical assessment and recommendations."

Then, without another word, he turned and stalked off, leaving Malfont standing there with her mouth open, wondering what she'd gotten herself into.

***New Monster Wildlands
Outside of Safi, Harira
Federated Commonwealth
18 July 3054***

'Mech pilots had a saying: any fall you can walk away from is a good one.

Yeah, right.

It took all of Garner's strength to reach up and pull open her hatch. She jerked the heavy metal door down, then her muscles contracted around her ribs, and her world went black.

When she came to again, there was a face outlined in the hatch's frame.

It was Lieutenant Samuel Aiken, the screw-up. Her two-on-tvos partner. He was on the short side (though not for a MechWarrior) and he wore his blond hair below his ears and feathered back in what some of the crew cut officers referred to dismissively as a "Hollywood Cut."

His pale eyebrows knitted together in concern. "You okay?"

For a second she considered brazening it out, but she honestly didn't think she could haul herself out of the hatch. She licked her lips. "My ribs. I—I think I might've hit my ribs in the fall."

He frowned, reached down into her cockpit. "What if I help you?"

She looked up at his outstretched arms. She didn't know if she could do it, but the less people that knew about her ribs the better. "Sure." She clasped his hands. He yanked and she scrambled up.

Reality tunneled and went gray, but somehow she held it together. He laid her out on the side of the fallen *Javelin's* head.

It occurred to her that an observer might see her laying down half-naked for a man. It wasn't like that at all, of course, but still. She shivered. Glanced around. Duncan could *not* find out about this.

Aiken pushed aside her cooling vest, not quite enough to show off her breasts, but enough that he could see the ugly purple bruises that dotted her ribs. Bruises the size of a man's fist. The el tee's eyes widened. He looked up at her face. "Garner?" he whispered.

"I hurt my ribs in the fall," she said in a shaky voice.

Their eyes locked.

"Sergeant..."

"In the *fall*," she said firmly.

Aiken opened his mouth to say something else, but he was cut off by Sonders' bellow. "Is she up there? I want Garner down, *right now*."

Aiken grimaced. "Why don't you let me handle this?"

Garner started to move her shoulders in a shrug, but a sudden stab of pain stopped her short. "If you insist," she wheezed.

Aiken turned and leaned over the side of the *Javelin's* head. "Yes, she's up here, sir."

"Well, tell her to get her ass down."

"She's badly hurt, sir. Looks like she broke some ribs when your 'Mech fell on her."

Aiken turned back to her and winked.

Sonders' words were swallowed in a sputtering howl of fury.

"I think I'd better go down," said Garner.

Aiken flashed her a concerned smile. "Sure you're up to it?"

"Well, I don't want Sonders to break the rest of the ribs."

Aiken reached down and gently hauled her to her feet. He fished the chain-link ladder out of her cockpit and dropped it to the ground. Somehow she managed to climb down without passing out.

She found a very angry battalion exec at the bottom. Sonders was stocky and short, stringy white hair combed over a growing bald spot, a bristly mustache beneath his bulbous nose. His title of battalion exec was as fake as his hair. The Harira Planetary Militia called itself a battalion, but really it was just four lances divided into two understrength "companies."

Sonders' face was flushed bright red and he was so angry he was shaking. He jabbed an index finger in her face. "Just what the hell did you think you were doing, Sergeant?"

Garner took a step back. A good portion of the militia's command staff had gathered around the crash site. She glanced over at a tall man with chocolate-colored skin and arms folded across his slender chest. Major Robert Ndubi flashed her a grave look and Garner suddenly realized just how much trouble she was in. Ndubi was the battalion commander, a man of considerable presence. No one thought *his* title was fake. If she said the wrong thing, she could find herself out on her butt.

She swallowed painfully. "I'm not sure I understand, sir."

"You violated safety protocols, Garner," Sonders snapped. "You fired at my 'Mech, up on that ridge, causing me to fall." The exec pointed from the forest edge to his crippled *Thunderbolt*.

"I'm sorry, sir." Garner put all the contrition she could manage in her voice. "I'm not familiar with the exercise safety reg that prohibits a 'Mech from firing at another 'Mech on a rise."

"Don't play games with me," Sonders snarled. "I'm talking about Standing Order Fourteen: 'During an exercise, no MechWarrior will behave in any way that has the potential to cause an accident.'"

"And you're saying I did that?" said Garner carefully.

"You're bloody right," Sonders snapped. Flecks of his spittle hit her in the face. For a second, she thought he was going to hit her.

She gritted her teeth. *That* was not going to happen.

"Because I fired on an opponent in a precarious position?" she asked evenly.

"Exactly!" The word fairly exploded out of Sonders.

"Then didn't you violate Standing Order Fourteen by putting your 'Mech in that precarious position?" she asked sharply.

Somehow Sonders managed to flush an even brighter shade of red.

"Or are you saying that you took position on the ridge because you knew there was no way for an opponent to legally strike back at you during the exercise?"

Somebody in the crowd snickered.

Sonders' hands bunched into fists at his sides and he took a step forward and Garner was *sure* he was going to hit her. She took her

own step forward. She'd be damned if she was going to let a man hit her again. And suddenly Garner wasn't looking at the battalion exec any more.

She was staring at Duncan.

"Mr. Sonders," said Major Ndubi in a calm, clear voice that nevertheless commanded everyone's attention.

Sonders jerked around to look at his boss. "Sir, I—"

"Perhaps, Captain, we ought to recognize that Standard Order Fourteen is subject to some interpretation."

There was a warning in Ndubi's voice, a warning that if Sonders pushed the incident any further, he was going to lose, audience or no audience.

Sonders pressed his lips firmly together, turned to flash one more baleful look at Garner, then stalked off.

"Perhaps we should make certain the sergeant gets some medical attention," said Ndubi calmly, and just like that the crowd started to disperse.

Aiken touched her shoulder and flashed her a crooked smile. "See, I told you it would work out," he whispered in her ear.

Somehow, despite the disaster her day had been, Garner felt a warm glow sweeping over her. She offered Aiken a shy smile and then he stepped away so the medic could look after her.

It wasn't until much later that she realized that during the confrontation with Sonders, he had said not a single word in her defense.

***Outside the Bazaar
Swing Circle, New Port Royal
Tortuga Dominions, Periphery
28 February 3066***

The great thing about the Bazaar was that it was surrounded by low, rolling hills. Even better, the Tortugans had cleared the forest that had grown on those hills to give themselves an unobstructed line of fire. So Malfont and her companion could look like they were having a picnic while they scoped out the site.

Colorado Henderson found a lovely spot that was in the shade of a natural hedge of bramble. He spread a bright red cloth on the ground, opening it with a snap of his wrists and then allowing it to billow and settle to the ground like a parachute.

Henderson was a lean man with a thick, black beard who habitually wore dark sunglasses and a royal blue ball cap pulled low over his head. He looked like a picnicker just about as much as Castor looked like a chief engineer. At least Malfont had taken the time to put on khaki shorts and a pink cotton blouse. Was she the only one who cared how this op went down?

She smoothed out the blanket and laid down on it, facing Henderson, propped up on an elbow.

Henderson reached into the wicker picnic basket and came away with a pair of binoculars, regular optical, not even enhanced. He pulled his glasses off and pressed the binos to his face.

“Jeez, think you could be a little more obvious?” she asked.

Henderson just grunted.

Malfont rolled her eyes. She turned to look at the Bazaar site. The grounds were arranged like an old county fair: several square kilometers of prefab aluminum buildings laid out in a rough grid. Each building contained a certain kind of trade good: livestock, rare wine, art, collectables, hovercars, spare 'Mech parts...

Basically anything that could be stolen.

Amongst the trade buildings there were concessions to service the Bazaar's patrons: food and drink, of course, but also everything from money changers to hookers. If it was available in the Periphery, the Bazaar sought to provide it—for a price, of course.

Surrounding it all was a three-meter ferrocrete wall topped with concertina wire. No serious obstacle to a serious assault force, it nevertheless deterred 99% of the potential thieves.

And the Tortuga Fusiliers picked up the other one percent.

She watched a flatbed truck with a 'Mech's leg pull up to a gate. The leg was nondescript except the pirate band who'd brought it to trade had marked it with the silhouette of a rearing grizzly. The truck's cab was painted black with a red and blue logo. One of the Dominion factions controlled transportation, so there was no chance to smuggle in a strike team or a bomb.

Maybe they could plant something...

That idea died as she watched a quartet of soldiers carefully inspect the truck. They pulled the driver out of the cab, checked under the hood, looked behind the wheels, spent a good fifteen, twenty minutes examining the leg.

Tomorrow the Bazaar was going to open for business and she had no idea how to take it down.

Malfont laid down on her back and draped an arm over her eyes to shield them from the sun. For the next half an hour, she dozed while Henderson watched.

She woke up when Henderson muttered under his breath, "This is bad."

"Really?" said Malfont without opening her eyes.

"I got a reinforced company, Tracy. Mostly heavies and mediums. Couple tanks behind revetments at each corner of the grounds. Infantry, too. By the way, the 'Mechs are passing by in random patrols. No pattern to work with. And that's just the stuff I can see."

"It does sound bad," said Malfont mildly.

"Your boyfriend's really jacked it up this time," said Henderson.

"He's not my boyfriend," Malfont growled.

Henderson snorted.

Malfont frowned, sat up. "Look, maybe he has an angle."

"An angle?" said Henderson, his voice rising. "Did you just say, 'Maybe he has an angle'?"

"All right," said Malfont, "listen—"

"No, *you* listen." Henderson was flushed, breathing hard, really angry. So this wasn't just him being difficult. "That's a pile of junk down there. Why risk our lives for that crap?"

"Oh, shut up, Colorado! I remember raids where you would've been overjoyed to get a tenth percent of what's down there."

"Yeah, but I didn't have to face a reinforced company to get it."

Malfont let go of an exasperated sigh. That's what it really came to, risk versus reward. And the hell of it was he was right.

"We used to have a nice deal on Randis, all upside," he said. "Our mercenary lance cased the planet and then our pirates came in and raided and no one was the wiser."

"Castor figured it out."

"Yes, your boyfriend figured it out."

Malfont's voice dropped to something low and dangerous. "You call him that one more time and I'm going pull out my blade and make that big mouth of yours a couple centimeters wider."

Henderson held his hands up. "All right, all right. Anyway your, uh, Castor ruined that for us. And for what? So we could go charging after the Clans. Man, talk about downside. And has it occurred to you that we're halfway across the Inner Sphere from the nearest Clan force? He needs transportation and here we are scoping out this stupid Bazaar."

Malfont remembered Castor talking about losing his wife and son on Edo. "He really does want to fight the Clans, Colorado."

Henderson shook his head. "Maybe that's what he tells himself. I think he wants to knock a few heads together until he feels better. That, that *English teacher* isn't going anywhere near a real Clanner."

Malfont drew a deep breath. "I think you're wrong about him."

Henderson's eyes bored into her for a second, then he nodded. "Okay. He's planning a company-sized assault, right?"

Malfont nodded.

"We got one lance on the *Maelstrom*: You, Castor, me, and Comfort."

“Yeah. So?”

“So where’s the other two lances?”

She sighed. “Obviously he’s going to bring them in.”

“Bring them in from where?”

When she didn’t answer immediately, Henderson pushed on. “Nearest pirate point is two days out and you’d better believe the Tortugans have it locked down.”

“Maybe one of the other DropShips belongs to him.”

Henderson scowled a “How can you be so stupid?” scowl. He pulled out a notebook and began sketching the spaceport. He pointed at the diagram. “Here’s the *Maelstrom*. The *Overlord* belongs to the Dominions and the *Union* to Lady Death. Ignore the *Mules* because they’re not ‘Mech carriers.

“We have three *Unions* in the southwest quadrant: one that belongs to *Shen-Sè*, one to Vance Rezak—”

“But you don’t know who’s behind the Grizzlies.”

“But the Tortugans do. They don’t do business with strangers.”

“Still—”

“They’ve been unloading goods for two days, most of it big-ticket stuff. They just off-loaded a ‘Mech’s leg.”

“I saw it,” said Malfont.

“You don’t deposit money in a bank before you rob it. If they were part of the attack force then Castor’s even stupider than I thought. There’s a good chance his own goods would be destroyed in the attack. Even if they weren’t, he’d have to transport and reload them before he could make his escape. And if something goes wrong he’d lose it all: their stuff *and* his stuff.” Henderson tapped the “X” that marked the position of the Grizzly *Union*. “Castor doesn’t have his other two lances here. Tracy, they’re not anywhere, except maybe his head. They can’t be.”

The torrent of words cut out and Henderson turned away to look out over the hills. “Maybe Mark Castor-Davion isn’t quite the genius he seemed to be back on Randis.”

Malfont thought about the incident with Simonian and felt a chill. It wouldn't be hard for Castor to get them all killed. Not hard at all. "What're you trying to say?" she asked tightly.

He turned to look at her and his hazel eyes were bright and cold. "I'm saying I've made a few contacts in Castor's organization, people who wonder if he's really the right man to lead them into the new year."

Malfont stared at Henderson for a long moment and then she slowly nodded. "Well, he did send us out here to make a tactical assessment, didn't he?"

Base Gym, Safi Militia Base
Safi, Harira
Federated Commonwealth
29 July 3054

When Garner came out of the base pool she found Aiken waiting there with a plain towel, still smelling of bleach. She accepted it and wiped her face, holding it to her chest so it hung down in front of her body. "Afternoon, sir. What're you doing here?" He was wearing his working uniform so she knew he hadn't just dropped by for a few laps.

"I came to see how you're doing." He glanced at her. "You look great." He shook his head. "The ribs, I mean. The ribs must be better."

Garner didn't look great. She was wearing a blocky dark blue one-piece and her hair was plastered to her head and she stank of chlorine, so she most certainly did *not* look great.

But her heart did a little flip anyway.

"Well, uh, thank you, Lieutenant."

He leaned a little closer and whispered, "Do you think the world would end if you called me Sam just this once?"

She smiled. "Thank you, Sam."

He smiled back at her, then something in his face clouded and he looked away. "Tracy, I..." He drew a deep breath. "I think you should tell someone about your husband."

The little joy building in Garner's heart died just like that. "I can't," she said, low and flat.

He caught her gaze. "You have to."

"I can't," she said trying to keep the desperation squeezing her heart out of her voice. "We've been together three years and... I just can't."

Aiken's eyes narrowed. "Three years. But—"

"I married him when I was sixteen."

"*Sixteen*," he whispered. "My God, so young. You couldn't know what you were getting."

“Oh, I knew.” Her voice was cold, drained of emotion. “He hit me a couple times when we were dating.”

“Then why—”

“What my father did to me was worse.”

He reached out, gently touched her face. “It doesn’t have to be like that.”

His hand was warm against her cheek. She reached up and covered his hand with hers.

It felt like going home.