

# Episode Ten:

## Allegiance

*“Alliances were unstable. And the regional authorities formed them for self-serving purposes. Conspiracies with the Invid were quite common, and our enemy’s face was constantly changing, scheming.”*

-Lt. Milo Swift, Southern Cross (retired), June 18, 2048, on a New Detroit radio program.

21 March 2043

The camp perimeter howled eerily, buffeted by strong northern winds. Save for their incessant wailing, Milo heard nothing as he continued his vigil from the rear of the hovertransport. He would have been outside, but the kerosene stove was broken and the Hammond boy hadn’t gotten around to fixing it. Swift looked at the cards on the table and scowled; he was never any good at solitaire. His coffee cup was empty and he got up for a refill. Roger had started a fresh pot on the previous watch, but hadn’t left much of the liquid stimulant for Swift.

Milo frowned. *Where’s the coffee can! I’ve can never find anything in this floating junkheap!* After sifting through the cabinets, all he could find were a couple of tea bags that already been used but were probably going to be recycled for one more brew. Both coffee and tea were rarities nowadays; with the death of the trade routes to South America and India - and the general chaos in Africa, “mining” ruins was the main source for these and many other commodities. He checked the fridge, but all he found was the remains of a dinner that he’d missed. Milo checked his watch; it was time to make the rounds again. He slung on his shoulder holster and the accompanying Desert Eagle, fully loaded. He had given the Wolff 9mm to Blake, and kept his SAL-9 safely stowed, having run short on energy clips.

Swift slipped out the back and made a quick stealthy circuit of the array of tents. He thought he heard Austin stir from within the tent the Commander was sharing with him. Pike and Hammond lay motionless within their domed enclosure, the Southern Cross officer snoring distinctly. Milo smiled.

Next came the Alphas. The mecha were secure, but Milo stood by them for a good ten minutes before retracing his way back to the heart of the campsite. The wind was picking up, tossing his long gray mane about. Swift zipped up his jacket to his sternum and cupped his tingling hands around his mouth. Somewhere on that last supply run, he'd misplaced his gloves and sunglasses.

"Perimeter secure," Milo whispered to himself. He stalked back to his spot in the transport and resumed his card game. A cigarette helped to fritter away another half hour. He reached for card from the top of the deck and scowled at the Ace of Spades. His patience exhausted with solitaire, he reshuffled the deck and set it down beside the radio.

"Where's the volume on this box? Let's see what's coming down the old pipeline," Milo wondered aloud. Swift ended up tuning into harsh static but eventually homed on a common resistance network channel and eavesdropped on a fragmented communication. The signal was scrambled, and the words unintelligible, but Milo could hear a young woman's voice drone on for a while, and she was answered by the seemingly familiar speech of a man. Milo's face lost all color; "God! I know that voice!" The signal was weakening. Swift frantically tried to get it back, but couldn't. He was out the door in a flash, and shook Roger back to consciousness.

"Jesus Christ, Milo, you are certifiably crazy! I can't trace it. They've dropped out of contact!" Roger yielded. Now at the console in nothing but some longjohns and a robe, Roger craned his head back and gazed at the ceiling. "Well, I can't sleep now, Milo."

"Of course, not. You guzzled up all the damn coffee!" Milo reminded him and started toward the driver's cab. Roger got up to mull around his workbench. He sniffed, smelling Swift's cigarette smoke.

"Swift! How many times have I told you? No smoking in here!" Pike asserted firmly. He was still slowly boiling over Milo's unintended role in damaging the targeting computer when the group attacked and destroyed the Köln hive. A circuit card would have to be made and tested, and it had taken Roger the two weeks since to breakdown the prototype's design. Now he had to come up with replacement parts, synthesize them into the interface card, test it . . . *and keep Swift away from it from now on!* He turned his attention back to his work-bench, or he might have continued yelling at Swift when the private made a rather colorful gesture at Pike from the darkness.

Milo almost walked right into Lt. Ducasse when he stormed out. He smiled although she couldn't see it, "A quiet watch, Jeanne, although there was some activity on the radio. I'll fill you and the Commander in on it after I catch forty winks." And with that he was gone.

Jeanne checked the time. It would be light soon, and she knew Austin would be up momentarily. He had confided to her in wanting to do a quick recon of the territory to the north. The group's constant patrolling since the hive had fallen pointed out, after a brief flurry of patrols and recriminations from mecha stationed at more distant hives, that the Invid presence in the area of the Rhinelands had been distinctly diminished. Jeanne made a quick tour of the campgrounds and ventured out to the Alphas. She thrust aside the camouflage net and shone a flashlight on Michael's Alpha.

"Someday soon, I'll have one," Jeanne promised herself forebodingly, "Then I can really make a difference around here." She cut the beam off and then glanced at Mason's mecha, and dwelled for a moment on its pilot. *What does he see in you that he doesn't see in me?*

"Lieutenant!" Michael said crisply. "I see you're hard at it. I'm going up, and I'll relay my position at 0600." Michael started dragging the net down and motioned to Jeanne to get clear.

"Better make it coded, Commander. Swift monitored radio activity overnight!" Jeanne warned. She was heeding Austin's request and starting back to the transport.

"Friendly or unfriendly?" Austin asked. The canopy was open and Austin settled in for his equivalent of a morning walk. He strapped himself in was ready to lift off.

"Who can tell nowadays!" Jeanne remarked.

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Austin stared at the midday sun awash in a sea of light blue. The day was warming up, which Austin found mildly surprising, mainly because of the recent trends toward cooler weather for the past two weeks. He'd ordered everyone to tear down the camp and prepare for a long day trek northward. Pike was within earshot, and Austin called him near.

"Roger, when are we going to be ready to move out? I don't want us dawdling just because we're lying low. Get to it, and tell Ducasse I want to see her," Michael bristled. He'd encountered enough of Pike's irritability earlier in the day, and his was the general mood of the camp. When there was no enemy breathing down their necks, the group wavered between cycles of emotional exhaustion and channeled bloodlust. As an afterthought he inquired, "You're close to the Hammond boy; how do you think he's adapting to our unique and charming lifestyle?"

“It’s been a little rough on him. We’ve placed so much responsibility on him. He a kid in a man’s body. But he’s a quick study; he’ll adapt,” Roger said before hurrying away.

Austin was soon inside his tent breaking things down, and packing all his things into a ragged duffel bag. Jeanne leaned inside the tent and waited for some kind of acknowledgment from Austin. None came.

“You wanted to see me?” she reminded him.

“I’m thinking of moving the group due north; where would that put us?” Austin asked. By now both he and Ducasse were outside the tent, in the process of disassembling it.

“We’d be in the Barony of Arnhem or skirting along its border with the German principalities. From what I’ve heard about Arnhem, we’re going to be in up to our ears in trouble. Baron Snoek is anti-resistance, and is likely to have ties to the Invid. Supposedly, he’s been hoarding mecha and turning over resistance groups to the Invid or killing them with his mercenaries if it serves his purposes. It might not be prudent to move into his territory until we make contact with another group already there.”

“Where did you get all this background information from, Jeanne?” Michael asked. He didn’t think Ducasse could have gotten such a thorough insight from just the knowledge possessed by Swift or Pike.

“On our last supply drop a week ago; one of the men we made the exchange with had just gotten clear of Arnhem and was due to catch up with an arms shipment headed for Berlin. In his words, Arnhem was like some sort of police-state. The locals are scared to death,” Jeanne explained. Her listener showed no signs of discouragement at the report.

“Right. Jeanne, grab a hold of my gear and stow it in the Alpha. I’m going to tell Pike of our travel plans,” Austin relayed. “And try to brief me on the intelligence you’ve gathered a little more regularly, if it’s not too much trouble.”

“Yes Sir!” Jeanne replied. Michael was being cold, and it annoyed her. However, since there was nothing she could do about it, she saluted and asked to be dismissed.

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Laurie held Milo’s arm under the probing glare of the fluorescent lamp. She tried to hide her disappointment. She watched Milo wince as she rotated his wrist slightly. Laurie dispensed another shot into Milo’s arm, and started redoing the dressing.

"I don't like the way the synth-flesh is healing. It's grown substantially weaker since the last examination. I just gave you a booster. But I don't think it'll help. None of the other dosages have been effective. You're going to need the services of a real doctor; one who has experience in bio-genetic reconstruction. And soon," Laurie urged with a sense of desperation that wasn't usually exhibited by the hard-nosed Brit.

"Can I still arm-wrestle?" Milo spat out jokingly, trying to add a little levity to the examination. "That bad?" He looked at it, and tried flexing it.

"You see? Your motion is almost forced; and the more we try and let it heal, the more the limb will atrophy." Laurie had moved away to pack up her medical kit.

"Well, it's not that simple, blondie. We can't just stroll into the next town and ask if there is a an unemployed bio-gen engineer who'd like to patch up my wing for free. Those kind of skills and that kind of knowledge are viewed with suspicion, and anyone asking about it is usually identified as being resistance or Tirolian," Milo explained. "I can't put my well-being ahead of the group."

"He's right, Laurie," Austin seconded. He'd been listening in on the whole conversation and moved into their field of view. "We've regained an aura of anonymity by lying low and biding our time. I'd hate to have unwanted attention thrown our way again because of Swift's condition."

"Listen, blondie, it's not all that bad," Milo assured her. He tried flexing his right arm again.

"In two weeks, we're talking permanent loss of use of the arm; maybe even gangrene and amputation," Laurie warned. "I've run out of magic tricks, Michael. And I don't normally push the panic button, but this is serious."

"Well, I guess we can start by issuing guarded inquiries across the resistance network," Austin conceded. Laurie, ever the cool-headed braggart, didn't usually allow herself emotional displays in front of the others like she was letting herself do now; so the situation had to be grave, Michael reasoned.

"Okay, but the clock is running. I don't want to have start calling this big lummo 'lefty!' Swift, I'm going to finish wrapping your arm up, and I want you to make sure to stay on the tetracycline, and stay out of direct sunlight. If you don't take the medicine, the plasti-flesh will never have a chance to take, and you're looking at a secondary infection to boot. There, that'll do it. You get your shirt back on, and head back to your tent; I've got something I need to discuss with Commander Austin. Michael, let's step outside the tent for a little privacy," Laurie suggested. Her wink at Austin did not go unnoticed.

Within five minutes they were past the Alphas and locked in an embrace. Michael's keen mind tried to remind him that he'd ordered the group to move out within

the hour and that he should be somewhere else overseeing the operation, but Laurie had him enthralled. His senses were drowning in her scent, her touch, her warmth. His hand went for the back of her blouse and with a practiced ease began to undo the clasps running along the spine. Mason was eagerly responding in kind, her hands swimming through his hair.

“Commander! Laurie!” Blake’s voice trumpeted through the stillness. He was at the Alphas, scanning for them. Laurie emerged first, slightly flushed, but Blake took no notice.

“What’s up kiddo?” Laurie asked. She quickly smoothed out the wrinkles in her blouse. Satisfied with that, she moved to her Alpha fighter. Blake followed.

“Jeanne said the group’s all set to move out,” Blake informed her.

“Well, then I guess you’d better find Austin and tell him,” she suggested. She was already scaling up the Alpha and sliding to the cockpit.

“He’s not here with you?” Blake asked.

“He was; but left me about five minutes ago. He should already be back with the others,” Laurie explained. “Now you better get clear while I fire up the engines, Blake.”

*Good stall, Laurie. These little romantic interludes are getting dangerous. I can’t risk destroying the group dynamics over a fling like this. If Jeanne gets wind of this. . . Well, I don’t have a whole ship on which I can hide from her, now!* Michael quickly and silently retreated to the hovertransport and emerged from behind the Cyclones.

Milo approached his mecha. “Say the word, chief,” he said gruffly. Milo snapped on the CVR-3 armor and scrutinized the Commander. “You’re looking kind of drained, Michael. Are those early morning patrols getting to you?”

“Maybe.” Michael was trying to be evasive. “If Jeanne’s gone over the travel route with you, why don’t you run point for us? Stay about a half mile ahead of the transport. Keep the chatter across the tac-net minimal, say a status report every hour. I want Jeanne riding in the cab; if we need her Cyclone, she can get out the back. Since we no longer have the rafts with us, we have to assume that the Invid will be more likely to respond to us.” Michael scratched his stubbly chin, and added, “Time’s a’ wastin’. Get a move on, Swift.”

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“So anyway, sometimes my father would get information from the unlikeliest of sources. At first, we tried using carrier pigeons to deliver messages; but when winter came, they ended up on someone’s dinner table. Then we were given a pig that a local

farmer had grown attached to, so much so that he couldn't bear to slaughter it. It would have fetched him a handsome price at the meat market. So anyway, this pig had been taught to do certain tricks. You know, snort at strangers, herd chickens, and he even liked Bach. So we taught him to be a messenger to a cluster of nearby villages and towns. He'd be wearing both a pouch and a transmitter when he went. I mean, who would suspect a pig of being involved with resistance? It worked great for a year, until one day Arnold, that was his name (honest), was blindsided by a motorcycle sidecar. We got the package back, and I must say that Arnold sure turned out to be some fine German sausage. My father wept all during the first meal," Blake smiled. They were buying it. *Good thing Laurie isn't here to set me straight.* . . Blake mused contentedly.

"You're joking!" Jeanne said in disbelief.

"No I'm not. He was delicious!" Blake affirmed. *Hook, line, and sinker!* he thought.

"Mmm. . . sausage," Roger said quietly; his mind wandering off elsewhere. He motioned to Jeanne for some coffee, hot and black, the way he liked it. Jeanne retrieved the can from where Roger had hidden it from Milo. "Blake, did you have a chance to check my wiring schematics for the targeting card?"

"Yes, you might have a loading problem, Roger. But I won't know until I can test it for you. But I'd get spare processors, and A to D converters just in case. Do you have any idea how your going to get those components?"

"Not a clue, son. But something will turn up; it always does." Roger assured. Jeanne was back with the coffee and handed it to Roger, who had just resumed the previous topic. "I remember having a parrot when I was your age, Blake. Big red Macaw, actually. Boy, you could never say anything in front of that bird. Of course, we had to leave it behind when we moved," Roger said in his rich drawl.

"I was never one for pets, myself," Jeanne remembered with a trace of sadness. "Being brought up in a military family excluded me from a conventional childhood. I never made too many friends or had any pets, because my father was always being posted somewhere new. . . We had to be able to pick up and leave at a moment's notice, and I've spent most of my life on an REF ship. I almost got a trahl once, though; it's a common pet throughout the Robotech Masters' empire. Real cute, actually. But that's when I got my first posting on the destroyer *Claymore*, and it wasn't allowed."

"Similar thing here. We're all used to drifting," Roger concluded.

"For some of us that's about all we can hope for," Jeanne added.

“Isn’t Milo due for a report?” Blake asked. His eyes shifted to the road. Somewhere up ahead of them on the barren flatland, Blake thought he could make out the Cyclone rider. But he was mistaken.

“No, not yet.” Jeanne answered. “However, I do think that our air support should have radioed in their position. I don’t like being left in the dark.”

“Why so edgy, Jeanne? Do you think we’ll have visitors?”

“I can’t say. I just can’t remember the last time we made a move during daylight. Austin assures me that it was safe, but. . .” she continued, hedging.

“Relax-” Blake began confidently.

“Listen up, kid! If anyone does that around here, they end up dead. This isn’t some kind of European vacation we’re taking here. If some of us are called upon to make life and death decisions while the rest are trying to decide what to have for breakfast, somebody’s not going to come out alive! You could be here one day and a bitter memory a week from now, so ease up on the machismo!” Jeanne reminded him. “When I get suspicious, it’s with good reason.” She excused herself and went back to don her suit of Cyclone-compatible armor.

“Don’t ride her like that, boy. She’ll chew you up and spit you back out in the blink of an eye,” Roger chided.

“Thanks for the advice, Roger. Now get your mind back to driving,” Blake said. The transport lurched slightly when it cleared a small hill and Milo was still nowhere in sight.

“Okay, we’ve let Swift stay silent long enough. It’s nearing sundown, we’ve crossed the border and I need to start scouting around for a place for the Alphas to set down,” Roger said more to himself than to either Blake or Jeanne.

The heavy footfalls of Jeanne’s body armor against the hovertransport floor made Hammond flinch. She thrust her torso and head inside the driving cab and gazed intently. Roger slowed to a halt. An overturned horsecart blocked the road. Pike could have just as easily maneuvered the transport around it, but watched for a few moments as the owner tried to upright it.

“Let’s help ‘em out, Jeanne.”

“It can’t hurt.”

Roger approached the man, who recoiled in fear when Jeanne clanked out the back and into the open. He knew that they were not to be associated with. Roger tried to work him over for information, but the man would answer only with irregular Dutch cursing. He tried to chase Blake away with a rake, and even waved it threateningly in Jeanne’s direction. Ducasse ignored it.

“He didn’t think too highly of us, did he?” Jeanne asked, once back in the cab with her comrades. She’d shed the armor after Milo and Michael had both checked in within five minutes of each other. Blake had taken the call.

“Milo says he’s found us someone who’ll let us stay in her barn, if we transport supplies for her to Arnhem. Plenty of room, no questions asked. Alphas are on route already,” Blake shouted from the back. “I’ve got directions.”

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“How did you run into her?” Michael asked Swift. “She’s a real charmer.” Austin had returned from the cottage back to the barn where they had been promised refuge. His motioned Swift over to his Alpha.

“Reminds me of my aunt. Couldn’t slide anything by her, either,” Milo said. “Actually, I almost hit her seeing-eye dog with my Cyclone on the way in.”

“Yes. She let me have an earful all the time I was there,” Austin said. He removed his personal baggage from the Alpha’s storage compartment. Both planes were set down in with the shadows that the barn’s structure threw to the ground. The hovertransport and Milo’s Cyclone were in the barn, taking up most of the room. It would have made more sense to all concerned to put the fighters in the barn; but only one would fit, and the Commander wanted the mecha deployed quickly in case of an attack. Thus they remained outside, suitably camouflaged.

The farm was on the fringes of Arnhem, and their hostess assured them of some degree of privacy when Austin met with her earlier this afternoon. Of course, they would have to do their part in remaining inconspicuous once in the heart of the town.

The stillness of twilight was upon Austin’s band of travelers. Tired eyes would close occasionally, while Roger who was unusually talkative tonight, retold some older war stories. He was in rare form tonight, but most everyone’s fatigue got the better of them. His audience left him one by one, until only Michael was left.

“I’ll take first watch Roger, you look road-weary. Are you planning to go into town tomorrow?” Austin inquired. He had a coffee mug in one hand. Roger went to lock up the rear barn doors. Michael trailed slightly behind him.

“Yes, I was planning to rent out our hostess’ set of wheels; a team of horses and cart. I’ll take Blake and maybe Swift as well, just in case we need muscle. Why attract attention with the transport? Besides, it’ll probably help us blend in; I hear only the Baron’s people get any ethanol and nobody is allowed to operate protoculture-based

machines. I'll have Milo box up his Cyclone, just as a precaution. We don't know what kind of cargo we're supposed to transport for that kindly old woman," Roger said tersely.

Michael returned to the stove and settled down for the watch. Roger excused himself for the night and Austin was left alone with his thoughts. He took a sip from his coffee and shifted his weight, propping his back up against a support beam. Michael thought about his predicament with Mason. He tried to recall how he had gotten himself into this mess, but the memory escaped him. It had all gone so fast.

In the days before they had arrived at Bonn-Remagen, the hours the two of them spent together, away from the others, talking and laughing, seemed innocent enough. Michael even remembered telling himself at that date that he shouldn't get too deeply involved with her when she had begun to make her first overtures to him. He could remember the first time they had actually made love, while staying at Blake's during the winter. But somewhere there was a gap, where, in his mind at least, his friend had become his lover, where she managed to overcome his reluctance to that sort of thing, and for the life of him he couldn't remember it.

If it weren't for that uncertainty, the relationship might have seemed more comfortable to him, Jeanne's potential objections notwithstanding. But Michael had the distinct feeling that he was being led about by a leash, that he had become too passive in the relationship, and the feeling bugged him immensely.

Michael shook his head and pushed the thoughts from his mind. He returned to reality and heard Swift's harmonica wailing in the distance. Austin got up, and tracked Milo down; it wasn't too hard, as Swift's shadow was crisply outlined by the pale moonlight.

Milo's blues number ended when he saw Austin.

"Muddy Waters, isn't it? 'I'm Ready', if I remember correctly," Michael commented.

"Good. I don't expect too many people to remember the Blues in this day and age. You play the six-string, don't you? I think that's what Jeanne told me," replied Milo.

"Both six and twelve string. My mom taught me. She was semi-professional musician; but mostly had to give it up when she was transferred to the Robotech Factory and then to the SDF-3. She taught me everything I know."

"You don't talk about your mother much," Milo commented. "Why?" For once, he asked the question as if he gave a damn about the answer.

Michael looked up at the sky. "I never knew my father; he died before I was born. But Mom. . . She was something else. She was sweet, and strong, and brave, and really beautiful. She could answer every question you could think of without breaking a sweat.

She said that was Dad's doing; he got her interested in things like history and literature, and she passed that on to me. Mostly I remember her being lonely, very lonely. Sometimes, when I couldn't sleep, she'd come into my room and sing me a sad love song, but a lot of the time, I think she was really singing to herself. Then when I was barely thirteen years old, some guy in uniform came in to tell me that she'd been killed in action, liberating one of the Sentinels' homeworlds from the Invid. After the victory at Optera against the Invid Regent, Max and Miriya Sterling sort of took me under their wing, since Dad had served under them in '13, and Mom with them in the Sentinels, until I joined the Academy a couple years later, at Jeanne's father's urging. But I guess I can talk about Dad because he's only a distant image. Talking about Mom just reminds me of how alone I've been for the last fifteen years."

Milo smiled uneasily, and offered Michael a flask. "Care to forget your troubles, Milo Swift fashion?"

"Where'd you get the alcohol? From our last supply drop?" Michael asked, taking the flask unenthusiastically.

"Nope," replied Milo. "It's a sample from our hostess. Part of her cargo."

Austin examined the loaded down horsecart Milo was leaning against. Milo's Cyclone was also aboard. Austin's attention was drawn to the cargo. The neatly compact barrels were made of wood and had a small spigot on top of each. Austin's quick estimate of the shipment accounted for over seventy barrels.

"That sweet old lady?" Austin asked incredulously.

"Sweet old lady? She's a friggin' shine-runner, that's what she is. She keeps a loaded sawed-off shotgun by her rocking chair, and that 'seeing-eye' dog is three-quarters wolf!" Milo snapped.

Austin chuckled. "Well, is it any good?"

"See for yourself," Milo suggested.

Austin opened the flask, and imbibed. He gasped slightly. "Whoa, Silver! If I had germs in my mouth before, I don't now! What percent do you think this stuff is?"

"180 proof, at least. A little strong, even for my tastes." Milo laughed. "No wonder she's got rosy cheeks; she's been sampling her own goods."

Austin returned it, and hopped up on one of the wheels and looked up at the night sky. He seemed to lose himself in the complexity of the constellations.

"So anyway, where does a guy like you learn the Blues?" Michael asked quietly.

"My granddad, Lawrence Benjamin Swift. He was an aspiring amateur musician in Memphis, before he got drafted into the war in 'Nam. Saw two tours there on the ground in the U.S. Marine Corps, and came back to the states with a Purple Heart in '69.

Got caught up in the anti-war protests after that; all the shit he'd seen over there made him more convinced than ever that the war had to end. After that, he was too heavily involved with the Civil Rights movement and politics to go back to music. Soon enough, the styles had moved on, and the Blues weren't fashionable anymore. So in '73 he settled down in southern California on an airplane assembly line and started the Swift tradition of marrying a woman of the 'wrong' race. Anyway, after the Robotech ship crashed in '99, he retired back to his hometown in Tennessee, and when I was six my parents sent me there to live with him during the Reconstruction, since they had to travel around a lot; but they got killed in the Malcontent Uprisings in '15, so he raised me as his own son. He'd blow the harp for me to make me laugh, and taught me how to play myself. Tough old crow, with a heart of gold, but we didn't part on the best of terms. I left home and enlisted in the Southern Cross in '23, and haven't heard from him since. That was nearly twenty years ago; he'd be ninety-four years old now, and I doubt he's still alive. Sort of reminds you of that old song: 'It's too late when we die to admit we don't see eye to eye'."

Milo took another drink from the flask and handed it back to Michael. "Seems we're more alike that we'd thought, Commander," he said, and fell silent.

"How's the arm?" Michael asked after a pause, not because he needed to know, but because needed a conversation opener and the silence that had fallen over the two unsettled him.

"It'll hold."

"Good. Pike is planning to take you into town tomorrow, maybe-" Austin began, handing the flask to his companion.

"Commander, you're stalling. Let's get past the fluff. What's really on your mind?" Milo demanded. He was now sitting cross-legged on the graveled pathway skirting the barn and surrounding field. He turned his eyes to the cottage, as the last of the lights were shut off.

"I've just been thinking about a few things. I'm looking for some direction," Austin mumbled.

"And you came to me?" Milo snorted. "I've been awash in this swill so long," he said, indicating the bottle, "my own compass is broken."

"I know. I guess I just want someone to listen to all these voices inside my head. Maybe someone could make sense of it all; I sure as hell can't."

"You're okay. . . you're still hearing voices, Michael. You're still trying to sift through the dilemmas. It'll come to you, don't try too hard. Besides, it only proves you're human."

Austin smiled at his companion and reached out to Milo for the flask. He took a drink and returned it.

“What are you doing out here?” Michael asked. Milo took a deep gulp from the flask before he replied.

“I’m a nocturnal creature, remember?” Milo said. He was up on his feet. “Got some stuff on my mind too.”

“Memories or dreams?” Austin guessed.

“Neither. Last night, I came in on the tail of a conversation on the radio. It was coded and ambiguous. But I swear I recognized the voice on the transmitting end. I just can’t put a name to that voice yet,” Milo said, scratching his head.

“It might be important; see what you can find out in town. Now, go and get some sleep. You’ve got a hard day tomorrow,” Austin suggested, although it could have just as easily been an order. He turned about, and left to resume his watch, fighting off the weariness induced by drink and exhaustion.

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“Look alive, men, we’ve got militia,” Roger said as he jerked back the reins. The marble white horses were restless under the gaze of the town militia men, snorting and stamping their hooves nervously. The soldiers sported blue-gray uniforms, patches on the shoulders and breast, and wore matching caps bearing the Baron’s insignia. Slung over each soldier’s shoulder was an assault rifle, a foreboding relic from the NATO era. Roger frowned. *Next time, I’ll bring Mason or Ducasse along. A pretty girl’s smile can go a long way to assuage suspicions.*

Blake looked around and whispered back to Milo, “Four in all, two approaching us.”

Milo nodded in comprehension. He had been riding in back on the end of the cart, pistol at the ready, to dissuade any scavenger who might try to raid their cargo. Swift hopped down when the guard worked his way down to the back. He had his pistol concealed but readily accessible, just in case. Swift’s smile looked like a sneer, and caused the Baron’s soldier to hesitate. His companion took a quick glance underneath the horsecart and surfaced with a satisfied look.

The payload was supposed to be mineral water meant for the town infirmary, and Milo was ordered to provide the guard with a sample. The Baron exacted a heavy levy on spirits and alcohol, and didn’t appreciate the effect smuggling had on his coffers; not to mention the fact that drinking wasn’t all alcohol was good for. Milo put a barrel upright,

undid a spigot and watched with a satisfied grin as water came out. The guard gulped it and let out a sigh. *An old smuggler's trick: putting one dud amongst the payload. Use it for samples.* Milo put the barrel up. The guard was about to wave them by, when he spotted the boxy shape of the covered-up Cyclone. He wanted to peek under the tarpaulin.

Milo smiled, and in his best Dutch told the guard, "*Ga je gang!*" The soldier saw the Cyclone, and began to shout out to his squad when he felt a gun muzzle pressed hard into his back. "You didn't see anything, and you're going to escort us into town. Tell that to your men, that you'll be going with us. . ." Milo whispered, cocking back the hammer as quietly as he could.

The militiaman seemed ready to comply, but just as Milo started to let down his guard, the man spun around and tried to unsling his rifle, but Milo was faster. One shot to the head silenced him forever. Milo took aim at the other man. "We're blown, Pike! Get to the rendezvous, and radio Austin for support. I'm going to try and hold them off!"

Milo was rolling in the dirt with the second guard, who had already summoned a trio of reinforcements. Blake was firing wildly with the Wolff 9mm that Milo had given him, and his burst caught one soldier in the throat, shoulder, and heart, tossing a red mist into the air with each hit. Roger was trying to get control of the horses. He threw an over-the-shoulder glance and saw that Milo was in the thick of a good brawl and smiled, knowing that Milo was doing what he loved best: creating mayhem. He urged the horses coaxing every ounce of speed out of them as possible. Their cover blown, Roger decided to go well around the city itself to reach the forested region north of the town where the trade was supposed to take place.

Milo had rolled on top of the guard and looked at the fear in his eyes. His opponent couldn't have been more than eighteen or nineteen: an older version of Blake with a knife in his right hand. Milo slapped it away, and slammed his right fist through the boy's nose. He snapped the convulsing body's exposed neck. Before Milo knew it, he was set upon by two more uniformed militiamen.

Milo threw a left at the larger man. The punch had no power behind it and glanced off the man's abdomen. He backhanded Swift and cracked Milo's ribs with a good oak baton. The smaller guard tore out a tranquilizer gun and pumped two darts into Swift's thigh. Milo reached down and ripped them out, causing a gushing wound to soak his pants leg. Before the toxins began to take effect, he still managed to find the strength to empty the Desert Eagle into the larger man's chest, blowing four enormous holes in him and sending him flying across the street. The remaining guard whipped out his baton and hit the back of Milo's skull, and Milo collapsed in a heap on the ground.

\* \* \*

Roger had slowed the horses down as they entered the forest. Blake reloaded the Wolff and scanned his field of view, his eyes squinting at the shadows between trees. He was beginning to like gunplay. He had been taking target practice with Swift, and had even outshot him last time out.

“Right, we’re here,” Roger said sharply. “Now, let’s just go through the motions.” Roger pointed out the meeting place. When the cart slowed to a stop, Blake jumped down and did a quick check of the perimeter. It was dim and silent. Blake moved up to stroke the horses, who were whinnying nervously.

“That’s far enough!” a deep voice boomed. Both Pike and Hammond peered even more carefully into the darkness and looked for any signs of movement.

A lone man in a long black cloak totally enveloping his form emerged from behind a tree. Blake listened carefully and could a motor running, a vehicle motor. Blake moved behind cover, just in case this came to gunplay. Pike stepped up and brushed back his unruly hair.

“Where’s Swift?” the stranger asked in a voice even more gruff than the one Milo slid into on occasion. As he approached, Roger got a better look at him. His hair was brown and curly, and he was tall, though not overly so, and wore round-framed glasses on his stern face. “And tell the kid to get out here in the open,” he added. “He’s not doing anyone any good by hiding back there.”

“Swift had to bail out on us to ensure that we got here safely. Who are you and what is your association with our Milo? And you better talk fast, or we’re in for trouble.”

“I am a smuggler, and thus used Swift for. . . shall we say. . . small favors. He’d know me if he saw me. As for my name, I don’t think I want to get that personal, especially with a couple of strangers.”

The story and its delivery had convinced Pike. Their contact reeked of the kind of seediness that Milo had once routinely dealt. Blake put away his gun and came out beside Roger.

“Do you need to taste it?” Blake asked.

“Taste it? This isn’t sipping booze, my friend; it’s special, and it’s going to earn me a pretty penny in barter, I can assure you.”

“Blake, get our package,” Roger ordered harshly.

Blake scurried to the back and complied with Pike's wishes. The packaged mecha hit the ground solidly and Blake dragged it away from the cart. The nameless smuggler shone a flashlight in Blake's direction and caught a glimpse of the Cyclone.

"So that's the crowd the Mountain Guardian is running with these days, is it? Did he make it out of town in one piece?" the smuggler continued. He was stroking the horses, admiring their build. Pike followed him, and watched the smuggler secure the lone barrel filled with mineral water.

"We don't know. . ." Roger said gravely.

"Well, if you're resistance and you left him near Arnhem, he's in big trouble. I'll have my people keep an eye out for him, just in case something turns up. And you're probably wanted as well. Don't go back in the way you came; the trail I came in on will serve your purposes. The jeep is expendable, and there are two fragmentation grenades under the seat and a pair of night-vision goggles in the glove compartment. I've also left a little something for Swift in the back seat. Damn shame to have missed him; it's been a long time. I'll find a way to contact the producer about the drop date for my next shipment myself. Now, get moving. This area is not that secure and this is the first place that the Baron's men will look."

Blake ran up to Roger and whispered in Pike's ear. Pike nodded and ordered Hammond to get the jeep. Pike looked up at the stranger, "While I'm here, do you know where I could get my hands on high-tech equipment: digital components for board fabrication?" Roger asked.

"In town, at the mortuary. . . and be ready to barter."

"Resistance front, eh?" Roger asked.

"Yes. But keep a low profile; they don't like people who might attract the Baron's attention."

"Right, thanks! Let's get the hell outta here," Roger yelled. The team of horses dragged the cart out of Pike's line of sight. Roger's last image of the smuggler was off his nearly regal cloak flapping wildly as the horses sped away. He could see why Swift found this way of life quite enticing, and he also began to wonder even more about Milo's shady past, that decade-long blank in Roger's knowledge of him beginning with the Invid invasion separated his squad from Roger's company.

The jeep slid to a stop only long enough for Roger to heave the Cyclone in, and hop in himself. Blake tore out of the forest, the jeep's engine humming quietly as it ferried them through the Dutch countryside. He cut the headlights once they cleared the forest and drove with only the aid of the night-vision goggles.

\* \* \*

Laurie looked at the luxuriant suds in the tub. Both women in the group had parlayed a few chores for their hostess into two hot baths. Laurie had let Jeanne go first, in order to have Michael to herself for an hour. Laurie had thoroughly enjoyed her roll in the hay with Austin; but she couldn't help but sense his trepidation when he was with her. The bath was too cool for her; she poured in a half bucket of sufficiently steaming water fresh off the stove, added a dollop of the raspberry-scented liquid bath soap, and stroked the water some more.

She shed her clothes, laying them on the back of chair and slid right in. The water felt good and cleansing. Laurie looked at her sud-lined reflection in the water. Her hazel eyes had been hardened by the last the few years, but she still had a soft vulnerable side; a side that she'd only revealed to Austin, for the little he seemed to care. The suds moved over the clear water and swallowed up her face. She cocked her head back and sponged her taut abdomen and legs. The warmth on her supple shoulders loosened them up. That, coupled with one of Michael's skillful back rubs had really helped the slight muscular tension that she'd had since they'd crossed the border into the Baron's domains.

She stroked the lather off her forearms, and slowly ran her open hands through the water. She couldn't leave the addictive warmth and lay listlessly for a good hour, dozing intermittently.

\* \* \*

The prisoner train consisted of an old dusty truck rolling lethargically on a dozen bald tires, the exhaust fumes stinging Milo's eyes as he was being dragged along the Arnhem thoroughfare. There were very nearly twenty others in shackles forming a long moaning line behind the lumbering cargo truck. Milo tried to wheedle a little information from the two men immediately in front and behind him. One prisoner was a gaunt wisp of a man, his eyes sunken well within the contours of his leathery face. He hadn't had a decent meal in a week and was caught pilfering from the Baron's poultry farm. He had fallen to his knees and was being dragged across the gravel. Milo slid back and helped him up. Milo's other chained companion was a boy who reminded Swift of the Hammond lad both in build and in deportment. His bare back had scores of lash marks from the damage inflicted by the Baron's conscription teams. The boy had refused to join Baron Snoek's militia, Milo discovered, opting to stay behind and tend to his ailing

mother. He had been on the road for days without a break. The boy's head was drooped over in exhaustion.

Milo's head was throbbing, both from the injury he'd suffered, the fruitless interrogation he'd been put through, and exposure to the increasingly warm March sun. *And what was that Laurie was saying about being in sunlight while on that antibiotic?* He could see his own clothes, his ripped shirt and jacket, in a heap on the back of the truck. A complement of over a dozen well-armed guards emerged from one of the buildings and fell in line with the convoy. A quartet of the Baron's men took to the truck, two in the cab and two in the rear, their rifle barrels pointing at the prisoners in their custody, while the rest flanked the prisoners, marching along with rifles slung. Milo noticed that some of the guards spoke among themselves in German, and everyone else seemed be commanded by these men, or were merely in fear of them.

After an indeterminate span of time, the prisoner caravan had cleared the town and was bearing for the forested region north of it. The terror with which the townsfolk watched the truck depart had shaken Swift. He silently suspected that this trek would be coming to a halt somewhere too near a machine gun emplacement and a mass grave for his tastes. He was also ruminating on how he could get a message through to Austin and the others. He was contemplating an admittedly risky escape plan to be implemented once in the forest, but that was before the reinforcements had arrived.

*Just have to bide my time, and have a little faith in the others. I hope they can come up with something good to get me out of this one! Boy, it looks like I really got us into it this time.* Milo looked up, the convoy was slowing down even more as they entered the forest. He was thankful for the shade.

An instinct told him that something was about to happen, and Milo's eyes and ears perked up, hearing a soft "pop" far in the distance. The contingent of troops and other prisoners hadn't seemed to notice or comprehend the sound, and to the surprise of his captors, Milo suddenly shouted out, "INCOMING!" When the mortar round went off in front of the truck, he hit the ground hard, trying his best to avoid being hit by shrapnel and fragments. Automatic rifle-fire erupted all around him, crackling in the distance from the darkness of the forest, peppering the transport vehicle and cutting into the ranks of its armed escort. One of the Baron's men, the one who had played cricket with the oak baton on Milo's head, tumbled out of the rear of the stalled truck, and unleashed his rifle's magazine at a band of camouflaged men, alternatively charging forward and ducking for cover. Milo was on the militiaman in front of him in an instant and, with a elbow to the back of the head, easily had him unconscious. He searched the man, finding his own pistol and extra clip, as well as the magazines for the soldier's rifle. With his pistol, Milo

shot his chains off and worked on the restraints of the boy and the old man just as another mortar round went off nearby. Both men bolted for the safety of the forest once released. Milo then reloaded the rifle, not sure if the attackers were local resistance or wandering scavengers.

“Get down!” someone yelled.

The truck went up in an uncontrolled explosion. Fire caromed off in a multitude of directions, the pyrotechnics and the heat easily overwhelming Swift, who drifted into unconsciousness.

\* \* \*

“We’ve scoured the town, Michael. So far, no Milo. . .” Roger said dejectedly. He had sent Blake away, preferring to discuss the issue with Austin in private. “If he’s still alive, he’s in captivity, or on his way to his funeral.”

“You said he went down fighting; he might have broken free,” Austin countered, holding onto the last shred of optimism that the situation allowed. By Pike’s unenthusiastic nod, Austin knew the bio-maintenance expert didn’t share Michael’s point of view. “He is very capable. He’s also injured, so we can’t assume he’d make it back to us. He’d use a messenger to reach us.”

“And if he can’t?” Jeanne shot back, “We’re all well aware of the stranglehold that Invid-loving bastard has on the Netherlands. What if Milo can’t get anyone to track us down?”

“Then we set up a surveillance net. Jeanne, you take Mason and Hammond, and watch the fortress. Break radio silence only on a positive identification. And don’t try and break him out alone! Roger, you’ve got an appointment with that trader’s market at the funeral home. Get a good deal for us. I’ll provide support, making sure you’re not ambushed in there. I can possibly stake out the taverns and ask around Arnhem itself. Now, let’s move!” Austin snapped, venting out his unhappiness at the sudden turn of events.

*When do I give up on you, Swift? A day? Maybe two. . . If we don’t get results, I’ll have to move the group out of here. . . When can I confront the conclusion that Roger and the others have already made? That you’re already dead. . .*

\* \* \*

“An entire squad? How can we expect to put up a strong front against Saxony if we can’t get rid of the rebels in our own territory?!” Baron Snoek bellowed. His voice boomed throughout the courtyard, his eyes piercing through his assembled staff officers. “This open rebellion must be put down! Do what you think is necessary. Make examples of the rebels, and confiscate their families’ property! But mark my words, this situation will be resolved, or I’ll personally take immense pleasure in hanging each one of your incompetent necks!” He straightened up and glared at them from his position on the courtyard steps, his six foot tall frame looming over the formation of men.

The Baron turned to one of his generals. “General Kunenborg, what is the situation with the conscripts?”

“Many of the young men have gone into hiding, my lord,” the highly decorated man answered. “Just like the last time we called them up. Many are fleeing into Burgundy, France, and the German Principalities. Others are merely hidden. Without a proper census-”

“Damn it, man, we don’t have the resources for that. Find them. Conscript them from the Principalities if you have to. But do it! We can’t afford to pay as many mercenaries as we need to fill the ranks.” He turned his gaze to another man, slightly less decorated than the general. “Colonel Mast, what is the word from Mecklenburg?”

“My lord Baron, Count von KönigsLöw regrets that he can not at this time move on his southern front. He says he is still repairing the damage done to his army done in battle with Saxony over that REF dropship that crashed in Poland several months ago. He suggests we petition the Invid for-”

“I have already seen to that!” the Baron roared. “Get to your duties, and take care of our problems here quickly. The rebellion must not be allowed to interfere with the plan of attack!”

“Yes, my lord!” they roared in unison. And with that the men dissolved before him, and claimed their mode of transport to the city limits, returning to their various commands.

Snoek was appeased, his men were deployed, and his own position seemed secure. He held out his left arm and waited. Within minutes a stunningly beautiful and graceful falcon swooped in and deftly landed on his outstretched arm, screeching at him in acknowledgment. He undid the catch on the bird’s talon and removed the attached leather pouch. He read the communication, throwing the note into the winds when done.

“So my Invid liaison is on its way, is it? Well let it come, and I shall deal with it and send it on its merry way. But one day, and soon, my dear, we shall no longer need them. When I am satisfied with my own army’s ability, I shall train them to use the

mecha I've acquired, and with my army, we'll grind Saxony into the ground, and give the Invid something to think about. Until then, those engines of destruction will lie within their bunkers. Now, inside, your perch is waiting," the Baron commanded. His bird-of-prey leapt from his side and darted through the open castle door.

A detail of men was recalled to put down some landing lights for the approaching Invid mecha. His men set up a ring of electric lanterns, the landing area being at least twenty feet in diameter. When the Baron nodded his approval at their work, the detail resumed their watch atop one of the towers.

It came alone. The Baron analyzed it; it was a different style of mecha than he'd encountered before. It stood taller than a Shock Trooper, and the arms were less bulbous, more human. It bristled with weapons, a pair of ominous cannons were the most prominent features of the mecha. One heat cannon adorned each armored shoulder and made quite an impression on the feudal lord. It was definitely a more imposing sight than the Hive Guards he was used to. He went through a gracious bow, and waited to be addressed.

The pilot within the mecha was satisfied with the arrangements so far. This was a temporary assignment for the Regis-apparent, Lihra, and it took her away from her own agenda. But, intelligence reports didn't lie: use of protoculture was detected in the Baron's domains only days ago. And the Regis had made it Lihra's responsibility to inspect and analyze the situation and report back to her. Lihra had visited the site: evidence was inconclusive. So she came here in search of information.

*We have detected activity in this sector, human. Our sensors registered an explosion within this vicinity, one involving protoculture sources. What do you know about this?*

The Invid loudspeakers delivered the message in a harsh feminine voice - the same voice with which all Invid translators spoke. But he suspected that this Invid was more important than any he'd met to date, and knew that any mistake in dealing with the creature would be fatal. But he hid his emotions well. "Rival factions, possibly with ties to the resistance, were warring amongst themselves. Unfortunately, my resources were elsewhere, or I could have seen to the skirmish myself. If I had access to mecha-" Snoek explained vocally.

*That is forbidden. You know the terms of this affiliation!*

"I apologize. But I feel that I could serve you more efficiently if I had more potent weapons at my disposal. But rest assured, my men are scouring the countryside, searching for these renegades. They won't hide for long. As for their mecha, they were destroyed in battle, as you saw for yourself."

*Very well, keep us apprised of your progress. We will follow the usual procedure. . . next time. Farewell, human.* Lihra commanded her *Gamo* to rocket skyward. She was disappointed at all the questions left unresolved, but saw no need to intervene directly now; there was still too much uncertainty and chaos after the destruction of the hive to the south of the Baron's domains to pick new fights in the region.

The Baron sighed in relief. He hadn't completely lied; but his tale wasn't the whole truth. And he was lucky the keen intuition of the royal Invid hadn't detected his deception, and he knew it. Snoek turned about, and headed for the secret hangar in the center of his fortress and admired his possessions; two Alpha fighters, in good working condition. He'd captured them from a resistance group that included a Southern Cross Tactical Air Force officer, and a Mars Division REF pilot. The Baron's troops had managed to come upon the two unfortunates and the others in their band in the middle of the night, and the rebels lost their planes and their lives in their sleep.

He stroked the fuselage of the newer plane of the pair; it was sleek and awesome, and he couldn't wait to use it and its slightly older mate; but he didn't dare. The only reason he kept them here, instead of his bunkers, was in case of an attack on his fortress, by the Invid, by Saxony, or by the rebels. The Baron smiled, and returned with an uplifted spirit into his study.

\* \* \*

"Wake him up. . . gently," ordered the man wrapped from neck to toe in a black cloak. He looked at the patient lying restlessly on the field cot. He moved closer to examine Milo's unshaven face. Even in sleep, Swift found no peace, and tossed restlessly about. An attendant wiped Swift's forehead with a moist towel and used the same to wet the patient's lips. Milo stirred.

"He's been recovering very quickly since the transplant, sir. He hasn't shown any sign of side-effects from the healing drugs. The sedative should be wearing off soon," the attendant rambled.

"Leave us be, Pieter. I want to greet our visitor alone."

The attendant nodded and obeyed closing the wooden door behind him and leaving his master alone with Swift in the small bedchamber. He dimmed the lights and poured himself a glass of clear water, a rarity in these times. On the back of the chair positioned at the foot of the bed were the items found on Swift: a gun, clothing, and hunting knife, and hidden away in a false bottom of his left boot heel, a spare energy clip for the SAL-9 pistol he'd left at the hovertransport.

“No!” Milo reared up flailing away at air. The cot rocked with his exertions and the stranger moved to restrain him with all his might. The attendant burst in and attempted to assist, but Milo’s panic had already subsided. Milo lay back, his sides heaving, and his head aching. Again the medic was sent away.

Milo scanned his environs. He was lying in some sort of subterranean chamber, lined with brick walls that must have dated back to the late nineteenth century. The air was damp and old, and a subterranean scent permeated his nose. His eyes focused to find that a robed figure loomed over him.

“Welcome, old friend. Are you well?”

“Huh?!” Milo grunted. He blinked in confusion, all the while wondering where he was. He tried feebly to extricate himself from the cot, but in his weakened condition was doomed to fail. Finally able to focus his eyes, Milo turned them upon his savior, and they glimmered in recognition. “Damn! I can’t believe it. Willem de Vries! How the hell have you been, you stinking bastard?” Milo laughed weakly; that was the voice he had heard on the radio! “You still smuggling, or are you doing something useful with your life?” Milo asked dryly.

“Both, you old mercenary. I’m leading the ‘Geuzen’, the Dutch resistance in these parts. We’re the biggest group in the area, and we’re expanding. As for the smuggling, well, every army needs financing.”

“So it was you we were bringing that ‘shine to, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, we’ll trade in everything. Including body parts. Take a look at your arm.”

Milo seemed puzzled, and looked at his injured arm, but quickly realized it wasn’t injured anymore. The flesh was frightfully pale, almost bleached, up until his elbow where it returned to the normal color, and what little hair there was on it was colorless as well, but barring a significant bit of stiffness the forearm was otherwise in perfect condition, with no sign of the injury that had been plaguing him. “What the hell?” he gasped.

“A gift from our Tirolian friends to the west. Try it out, it should feel as if it was still the one that you were born with. Ever see a cloned body part get transplanted? Interesting operation. First they build a biodegradable scaffolding of all the major structural elements - bone, muscle, blood vessels, nerves, skin, the like - and seed each of the structures with pre-specialized cells from elsewhere in your body. They grow the thing in a protoclone cloning matrix until the plastic scaffolding has been replaced by the appropriate cells. Then they detached your natural arm at the elbow and attached the cloned arm on to the stub and did something they didn’t even try to explain to me so that it healed in hours. They still have your old arm in the freezer, somewhere, though I have

no idea what they're going to do with it. I guess you're not going to have time to take the usual melanin treatments, so you'll have to keep it somewhat protected from the sun until your arm gradually develops a tan." Willem seemed to be adding numbers in his head, and added, "It cost us a bundle in trade, too, Swift, so I suppose that makes us about even."

Milo felt an odd feeling in his gut; he was never big into the Tirolian biotechnology, and wasn't particularly partial to the Robotech Masters or their people either. But the new arm worked, and was as strong as the old. "How long have I been out?"

"Three days. In a few minutes, I'll show you the installation. But first, I'll have you brought something to eat." Willem summoned the attendant, and very soon a tray was brought out for the recuperating guest. After a hearty meal, Milo was in a better mood to get up and move around, and he felt his strength returning to him.

"Rumor has it that you killed Kane in Bonn-Remagen," Willem said smilingly. "I always knew you'd be the one to finish him; I get the feeling that the Baron would have sent him after me soon, so I'm as glad as anyone that he's gone."

"I can't take credit for that one," Milo said sadly. "My boss, Austin, was the one that finished him off. You'd have appreciated how he did it, too. Used a grenade launcher to bring a warehouse down on top of him." Milo laughed coarsely.

"I have to meet this Austin. He seems to have that artistic flare to killing that you could never master," de Vries replied, an odd smirk across his lips.

"Where am I?" Milo asked.

"You're at the Rijnauwen Waterline fortress, six kilometers east-south-east of the marshes and ruins of Utrecht. It's our organization's headquarters. Can you walk?"

"I think so. . . Yeah, I can walk."

"Well then, get dressed, and I'll give you a tour." Soon de Vries was showing Milo around the facility. Set into a low and now flooded plain, the fortress looked over the marshes like an ancient but watchful sentinel. All old installations were dug into meters-thick earthen walls, giving the impression of small hills, regularly dotting the landscape. With something of a citadel at its westmost extent, and a series of old gun batteries (now replaced by more modern minigun and anti-tank rocket emplacements) at the perimeter, and hardened barracks to the east, the installation looked very much like it might have a hundred and fifty years ago. However, the center of the facility sported a modern touch. A small but noticeable CIC trailer dating from the beginning of the twenty-first century had been set up, and was being powered by a small portable generator. Atop the trailer was an anti-aircraft missile battery and numerous radar and lidar suites, untiringly watching the sky for intruders. Milo could see quarters - of both

original and new construction - for very nearly two thousand young men, all of whom, as Willem told him, had joined his rebellion rather than be conscripted into the Baron's army. Milo smiled as the soldiers lined up against the wall and saluted as de Vries and he passed them through the structures' halls; it wasn't like Willem at all to be so, clean-cut, so respectable.

Milo was most impressed by the munitions bunkers. No mecha as such, but a huge number of Southern Cross energy rifles and conventional arms, rocket launchers, light mortars and shells, and several working heavy artillery pieces, the centerpiece being a single 155mm gun. Furthermore, there were more than a few amphibious fighting vehicles available, in various states of repair. "How did you get all of this shit?" Milo asked, stunned.

"We traded the alcohol with certain friendly neighbors who are more than anxious to help out in our little struggle with our Invid-installed despot. They take the - to use your word - 'shine, and we get the weapons,'" de Vries replied.

"Guns for booze? I don't get it."

"Not booze. Follow me," Willem insisted. He took Milo into a nearby room that consisted of an enormous advanced distillery, and hundreds of metal and wooden barrels. "Not liquor; ethanol! If there are oil rigs operating anywhere on the planet anymore, I sure don't know about them; but armies still need fuel, and only mecha can run on protoculture. So the Germans and Burgundians grow us grain, mostly corn that's supposed to be used for animal feed, and convert it to alcohol and trade it to us. That way, even if we're caught, it won't arouse too much suspicion. We take it, purify it even more here, and trade the pure ethanol in exchange for food, medicine, and weapons. If possible, at its destination it gets mixed with gasoline recovered from ruins, and distributed as our buyers see fit."

"Seems to me you've got a fine little revolution brewing here," Milo smiled admiringly. "I'm surprised you've been able to do it so easily."

"Easily, nothing, my friend," Willem replied. "Have you ever tried to rally a people whose motto is 'live and let live'? Only when the Baron started his conscriptions and confiscations, and when their relatives started disappearing, did people even begin to trickle to us; I mean no one ever liked the Baron, but they preferred passive resistance to sticking their necks out to fight him when he hadn't become too bad yet and there wasn't much hope of beating him and his blood-thirsty mercenaries. As it is now, we're almost ready to attack; we only need one thing."

"And that is?" Milo asked, even though he had guessed the answer.

"You."

\* \* \*

It was a strange arrangement, thought the pair: the basement ceiling was lined with an array of fluorescent rods, several of which flickered sporadically. The overall amount of light was quite adequate and Roger didn't have to strain his brown eyes often while he perused the whole affair. He and Michael had been ushered in by way of a spiraling stairwell and Michael was within earshot rummaging through a casket load of odds and ends. The room was littered with caskets and coffins full of merchandise. Each such container rested on a quartet of stone blocks, probably granite, with the lids held up by cables suspended from the ceiling. At the far end of the subterranean chamber was a ramp that rose to a set of darkly stained doors set in the ceiling. There were other interested parties going from casket to casket, poking through the booty that lay within each. Roger nodded Michael away and Austin took the stairs back to street level.

"Well, let's get started," he mumbled to himself. He started for the nearest one, pausing to note the craftsmanship of the wood and the handles. Then he wondered what had happened to all the bodies that had originally occupied them. The thought of it made him quiver slightly, but he shook it off and decided to begin scavenging. It would be a long search.

\* \* \*

"Troop movement has been minimal ever since that initial redeployment of Snoek's people. He's hoping to maintain his defensive posture with only a quarter of his full complement. I can't believe that he didn't send anyone through here! We've been sitting here for a good six hours and nothing," Jeanne said in a cold, analytical tone that was becoming more and more her trademark. She lowered her binoculars and shifted her weight so that she would be more comfortable on the sturdy branch she was straddling.

"But that doesn't explain the lone Invid we saw here earlier!" Blake reminded her. He tossed up a canteen of water, waiting for her to drop it back down, but she consumed all of it before discarding the canteen. Hammond watched her from below, his eyes tracing out her attractive form on the limb, or imagining what the darkness concealed from his adolescent mind. He was caught in a flurry of impure thoughts: a hormone surge.

“And what makes it worse,” Laurie chimed in, deciding to have her say as well, “It’s a type I’ve never seen before. It was quite a sight, not the common sort of tin cans we’re used to fighting.” She left Milo’s Cyclone and moved to the others.

“I didn’t get a good look; but I’ll wager it’s piloted by one of the sub-Royalty caste. In the Invid hierarchy, they hold a very prominent place - they’re the only fertile Invid. The pilot would have earned the position through success on the battlefield and should not be taken lightly,” Jeanne informed the others; she wasn’t the tactical/intelligence officer because of her stunning looks.

“So the Regis **does** reward her subjects if they merit it,” Laurie concluded.

“Yes,” Jeanne agreed. “We also monitored it landing within the Baron’s castle, and leaving unharmed. The rumors are true. It would seem that he has a very amicable relationship with the Invid.”

“Do you think we’ll have to lay siege to his castle?” Laurie asked. She had retrieved the empty and discarded canteen and wiped it off with part of her shirt sleeve.

“In all likelihood, we’ll have to engage Snoek’s forces. How we do it and to what degree depends on Austin,” Jeanne evaluated, before motioning for Hammond to take up the watch.

\* \* \*

Michael had thoroughly explored the town of Arnhem, the largest urban center remaining in the Netherlands. After the Zentraedi Holocaust, the dikes had been damaged and left untended, and by now, most of the Randstad - Amsterdam, the Hague, Rotterdam, and Utrecht -was an area of lakes and mud and sand flats with water-runs in between, the abandoned remains of cities sticking like sickly tree-trunks out of the mire of a vast swamp. Twice a day, the sea would flood those cities built on higher land with nearly a meter of water; all those cities below sea level were perpetually drenched in two to six meters of water, insofar as Dolza’s attack had left anything remaining of them. Arnhem itself was around 50 kilometers east of the flood line, and, though it too had suffered horribly during the previous Robotech Wars, it had been rebuilt in some semblance of order, with large fortress at its center, built by and for the Baron and his army.

Michael had been working the nightspots and taverns, seeking out information as discretely as he could; but his lack of familiarity with the native tongue put him at a severe disadvantage, and most of the people he would have liked to have questioned merely avoided him altogether.

Austin was in the back of the bar at a table with his back to the wall and a hearty pint of beer in a mug before him. *If Milo could see me now*, he mused. It was minutes away from vanishing, and his thoughts were returning to Pike. He was about to get up and leave when, to his great surprise, he saw Swift stagger in through the front door. Milo found his way to Austin and slid in to the open chair at this table.

"You look awful, Milo," Austin commented.

"Thanks, if it's any comfort to you, I feel awful!" Milo quipped. "Why are you in town? The Baron's men are all over the place!"

"Looking for you, and getting things for Roger. Where were you?"

"I was helped out by an old friend, and learned quite a few things. Among them, the Baron's supposedly hoarding mecha; stuff that we might be interested in acquiring."

"Really! What? Never mind, tell me later. Let's move."

"Go ahead, and I'll be right behind you in a few minutes. It looks like we've got the locals scrutinizing us. Stand up, throw over the table, hit me in the gut, and take my gun. And please look like you mean it," Milo whispered conspiratorially. And indeed, Austin noted Milo had read the situation correctly. Two large-looking men were weaving their way over towards the resistance fighters' table.

Austin shot up and growled, "Du verdammtes Schweine!" He hurled the table in Swift's lap and punched Milo squarely on his exposed jaw. Swift performed the convincing flop and stayed down, moaning piteously. Austin relieved Milo of the firearm, and shouted in his best German, "Und jetzt gehst du raus, du Dreck!" The place was in a state of shock, and Austin stormed outside before Swift rose up.

*I said my gut, Michael*, Milo thought sourly. Milo rolled over and gingerly brought himself to an erect position. He had been left alone long enough to lick his wounds, but now could see more unfriendlies looking to add onto Austin's handiwork. A savage snarl and hostile glare kept them at bay. To drive the message home, Milo had also reached for one of the overturned chairs and was waving it menacingly in front of them. He hurled it at their feet and they eagerly dispersed. Milo calmly walked outside, doing an adequate job of masking his injured condition.

Milo started down the street and saw Austin outside a nondescript brick structure with people milling in and out, but with an edge of caution. Milo sidled up to Austin, pausing to bum a cigarette and light off a leggy redhead. He was within earshot of Austin and had taken up a position near the doorsteps.

"Next time you hit me like that, you could at least buy me a beer first," Milo snapped. "And what was that with the German, anyway?"

“English would have given me away, and I don’t know Dutch, so I improvised,” Michael replied, shrugging.

“Well, it may have worked better than you know. The locals probably figured you for one of the Baron’s German mercenaries; I’ve been told that they make up about a third of his army, the rest being unwilling conscripts. Everyone hates and fears them around here, and they’re the only reason the army obeys him. Seems most of them are wanted men in the Principalities or Saxony proper, so they came here looking for work.” He worked his cigarette down to the filter while Austin wondered aloud was keeping Pike.

When Roger finally appeared, Michael suggested, “Let’s round up everyone and head back to the barn. Roger, how are you doing?” He handed Milo back his Desert Eagle, while waiting for Captain Pike’s reply. Milo put it back in the holster and offered Michael a cigarette. Austin declined.

“I’ve found what I need,” Roger said, reaching into his pockets and producing two fistfuls of electronics components. “And spares, at that.”

\* \* \*

The sun was beneath the horizon, and the transport was nestled in the barn, the targeting system on its main gun nearly repaired. A fire was burning inside; but with the barn doors were shut so that the blaze was well concealed from curious eyes. Austin’s clan had assembled within its radius of warmth plotting the downfall of Baron Snoek. Swift had regaled the others with his experiences over the last several days. They listened with interest, especially when Milo brought up the possibility of linking up with the Geuzen.

Austin stepped to the fore, ready to lay out his strategy. “Ducasse, Swift, I’m assigning you to continue the surveillance net for a twenty-hour period. Jeanne, you know what to do; I want tendencies for troop movement, deployment, armaments, and based on those parameters, formulate the best offensive you can with the resources at our disposal. Milo, you coordinate Jeanne’s plans with de Vries. During the fight, you two will be the forward observers for the mortars and the howitzer; the mortars will obviously have to be sneaked into town, but the big gun can be ten miles away, for all I care. Either way, try not to screw up. I don’t want the shells landing on our people, and equally important, I don’t want heavy civilian casualties in the city. The fortress is our target. Roger, you and Blake will stay behind until the attack itself, and then you’ll use the hovertransport’s guns to neutralize any armor or missile launchers the Baron might throw

at us. Make every shot count, and don't power up until you need to. No point in attracting the Invid, agreed? Roger, do you trust Blake enough to fix the targeting card for the computer?" Roger nodded in the affirmative. "Good, Hammond, here's your chance to show us all something! We need those guns working with no slip-ups. Get to it."

Michael paced around the fire for a moment, and continued. "Milo's briefed me that, according to de Vries, a deserter who was stationed in the fortress before he joined the resistance claims that the Baron keeps two fighter planes in a hangar, to use in case of an extreme emergency; the rest of his mecha are supposedly in hidden bunkers near the Saxon frontier. We're presuming these planes are either Alphas or Logans, but either way, we can't afford to have him using them against the Geuzen, and we can't take up our own fighters without risking bringing the Invid down on our heads. So these mecha have to be neutralized. De Vries doesn't care if we steal them or blow them up; I'd prefer the former, personally. So, Laurie and I will sneak into the fortress with cobalt mines and do whatever is necessary to get those fighters out of the picture. Laurie, you'll be packing a H&K MP5 with a silencer, and I'll take my crossbow. Let's get it done, folks! We'll link up with the Geuzen twelve hours before we attack. If I'm right and if those fighters are out of action, a few well-placed barrages, and we'll get the conscripts to turn against the mercenaries as soon as they see what they're up against, and it'll be all over for our good friend, the Baron."

\* \* \*

De Vries wandered into the forward observing post, hastily and secretly built in one of the shops in Arnhem with the best view of the fortress. A sympathetic resident had allowed them to set up their radios and observation teams, and they had moved in during the early hours of the night. It was now nearly three in the morning, and several men were at a table on the second floor with red filter-equipped flashlights, checking and rechecking the coordinates they were to relay to the artillery; trying to be as careful as possible not to have the mortar rounds fall on any civilian residences. The mortars were grouped in three batteries of five guns, on the fringes of town, with a forward observer assigned to each battery. The big gun was nine miles away, hidden in a wooded meadow, ready to rain its deadly artillery onto the Baron's troops.

Milo was waiting with the observers, a pair of night-vision glasses aimed at the fortress. He lowered them as Willem approached, and remarked, "You know, we're going to have to take care of the ranging and adjustment fire fast; otherwise the Baron might be

able to get those fighters in the air before Michael and Laurie have a chance to take them out.”

“Agreed, but I don’t want more than a few shells to fall on to the city. The word’s been passed around town for the people to go to their basements, without telling them why. I just hope no one’s informed the Baron, or he might be ready for us.”

“Doesn’t look like it. All’s quiet over there,” Jeanne insisted. “No report of increased activity from our lookouts and from our infantry’s holding positions either. One question though, General de Vries. What about the rest of the Baron’s army? What do you plan to do when they return to reinforce him?”

De Vries smiled. “That’s being taken care of; don’t you worry.”

One of the two radio operators, a lanky blond-haired man sporting the Geuzen’s makeshift uniform, approached the trio, and announced, “All calculations complete, General de Vries. We’re ready to fire the ranging shot for all batteries.”

“Do it, and proceed with adjustment fire as soon as the observers are ready to report,” Willem commanded.

“Yes, sir!” The man went to his radio, and he and his comrade began to contact the batteries. Soon, distant thunder could be heard, and in seconds three small explosions appeared in the city, in the near vicinity of the fortress. Minutes later, a huge explosion went off a quarter of a mile from the Baron’s headquarters; the 155mm howitzer had spoken, and its word had without effort brought down an aging, unsound building in the warehouse district. The radio operators were soon waiting to receive reports from the observers as they hastily estimated the shells’ locations and the necessary corrections from their topographic maps. Their calculations finished, “Battery one, adjustment fire, 210 meters to the left, and increase range by 125 meters!” and other such calls were quickly issued to the batteries, followed by the firing of the first adjustment shots, and the process was repeated in a hurried frenzy; everyone knew that every moment they delayed gave the Baron time to respond.

De Vries left the chaos momentarily to find his own radio, switched on the encoder, and began to broadcast. “Ladyknight, Ladyknight, this is Mole. Do you copy, over?” he inquired in a Plattdeutsch dialect.

The receiver crackled, and the voice of a young woman answered in reply. “Mole, this is Ladyknight; I copy. What’s your status?”

“Adjustment fire in progress; all infantry are in position and ready to move in. We need your support now!”

“Our attack beginning now, Mole. Our first wave is already underway. The Baron’s frontier army won’t be giving you any trouble, I promise you that. We’ll warn

you if any mecha are launched from the bunkers, but I doubt that will happen; my guess is we'll catch them completely by surprise. And even if they are ready for trouble, they won't be expecting five tank companies with a brigade of mechanized infantry for support," the feminine voice assured.

"We appreciate your assistance, Ladyknight. And remember the terms of our deal. All mecha in the bunkers to the west of Arnhem are to remain the property of the Dutch Republic," de Vries reminded his ally.

"We understand and will comply. Wait. . . our tanks have just engaged the enemy. We'll report back to you in thirty minutes. Ladyknight out." With that, the transmission ended.

De Vries smiled. *Years of work, almost finished. Good God, he thought bemusedly. If we win here, I hope they don't try to make me run for office!*

One of the forward observers approached him, and announced, "All adjustment fire complete, General. We're seeing considerable activity in the fortress, sir, and several mobile missile launchers are being brought on line. Awaiting your order to begin fire for effect, sir."

"At your soonest convenience, Private. Fire for effect, all guns!" de Vries replied hastily. "Lieutenant Ducasse, any sign of the fighters?"

"No, General. No sign either way."

"We can't wait forever. I hope Commander Austin and Miss Mason get out of the line of fire soon, because it's about to get quite unpleasant in there!"

\* \* \*

"Damn it, Laurie, hurry up!" Michael whispered hoarsely at the woman dangling on the rope beneath him, intensely frustrated with his companion's lack of celerity. "They're scheduled to begin firing the artillery in four minutes! Quit stalling and get your fat ass up here!"

With much effort, Laurie picked up the pace and finished her ascent up the fortress wall, and jabbed Michael hard in the ribs after regaining her footing. "That was for the remark about my figure, you stinking bastard!" she snarled, a little louder than Michael had wished. The guards were bound to hear if she kept it up.

"It got you moving faster, didn't it?" Michael snorted. "Now let's find that hangar-" Michael began when he heard the first three explosions in the distance, in rapid succession. "Oh, shit! They've already started!" Michael deftly unslung and cocked his

crossbow as Laurie loaded a clip into her submachine-gun and chambered the first round. There was bound to be more activity in the fortress, and sooner than they had hoped.

“De Vries’ contact said the hangar would be in this direction, Michael. Let’s hurry!” Laurie whispered back to him, and began to bolt off in the direction she had indicated with her arm.

“Wait!” Michael whispered and dragged her back into the shadows. Several men, one of whom was still putting on his uniform as he ran, dashed past the hidden pair of intruders, shouting among themselves vehemently, and sounding a general alarm as they went; apparently, the night shift had been caught slacking in its duties. Just after they passed, a deafening roar went off in the distance, knocking out the windows of some of the barracks. “The howitzer,” Michael said in reply to Laurie’s puzzled look. “The adjustment fire will be coming in minutes. If we don’t have those planes out of here when they begin to fire for effect, we’re really screwed. Now, let’s move, and don’t get us bogged down in a fire fight!”

Michael and Laurie began their dash for the hangar, darting amongst the shifting shadows. Soon the adjustment fire was coming in, the shells raining down at the rate of one per minute or so. The explosions were getting closer all the time, and already Michael and Laurie could hear the guards on the wall unloading their rifles into the night: panic fire, or so Michael guessed. The Geuzen infantry wouldn’t be attacking for a while now, not until all sixteen guns had pelted the fortress thoroughly and completely. The hangar itself was already abuzz when the two arrived, and staked out the building from behind the corner of a munitions dump. Two pilots had already suited up and were being followed by four technicians as they entered the rear of the building, hastily chattering about the pre-flight check-list.

“Let’s go; shoot to kill. We can’t have these people alerting anyone we’re in the hangar!” Michael ordered as the pair charged for the hangar’s back entrance. One of the technicians heard them coming and turned, shouting a warning, when a crossbow bolt pierced his throat, and he fell to the ground twitching and grasping his neck as the pool of blood in which he lay quickly grew. The others began to shout and scurry for cover, but Laurie cut all but one of the pilots down with a prolonged burst of silenced sub-machine gun fire. The pilot began to reach for his service pistol, but Michael quickly cocked his crossbow and fired again. The man jerked backwards and fell, a shaft of wood and iron imbedded in his brain.

“Hurry, Laurie, jam the rear door, and get into one of the spare flight suits. I’m going to pre-flight the planes!” Michael shouted hurriedly.

Michael turned on the hangar lights and examined the planes. "Holy Jesus, Laurie, look at this!" Before him were two Alpha fighters, one in dark ghost gray above and duck-egg blue underneath, bearing the insignia of the Tactical Air Force of the Southern Cross, the other in olive drab and white with the insignia of the REF's Mars Division. "Alphas?" Laurie asked as she climbed into her suit, and as Michael scurried into the green craft's cockpit to check its armament and protoculture and deuterium levels. The explosions from the mortars were getting closer and closer, and Michael was working as fast as the computer would allow him.

"This one's a VAF-6R, a recon/wild-weasel plane. It's Colonel Xue Xiopang's ship; she was one of the REF Air Force group commanders. Her squadrons were based aboard the cruiser *De Ruyter* for the attack on Earth; she was a good woman and an excellent pilot. I bet that bastard the Baron murdered her to get the plane. Everything checks out on it, though. Protoculture and fuel nearly full, cannon and missiles fully loaded, though I suppose Roger will want to do some maintenance on it. A lot of the secondary systems seem to be functioning below nominal, though the primaries are up and running."

Michael hopped out of the green plane, and began to examine the other of the pair. "Damn!" Michael exclaimed as he fondled its smooth surface before climbing into the cockpit and stowing his crossbow in the space behind the pilot's seat. "This one should be in a damned museum! It's twenty-five years old, if it's a day; it's an old Southern Cross VAF-6A - looks like one the first of the series," he commented as he went through the plane's pre-flight diagnostics. "Same story here with ordinance and fuel. I'll take this plane, and you take the other, since the green one is more like yours as far as the controls are concerned. We're ready to go."

"Here's a flightsuit and helmet for you, Michael," Laurie shouted, tossing one up to him. "I'm going to take care of the hangar doors-" she began when the rear door burst open, and several armed guards entered, firing away with assault rifles at the exposed Mason. Laurie dove for cover, and Michael pulled the Glock 17 out of his boot, chambered a round, and began looking for targets. He was relatively safe in the well-armored cockpit, but Laurie was in definite danger until she could get to her plane. "Hurry to the plane, Laurie; I'll cover you!" he shouted, firing from the cockpit at the guards, hitting one in the chest, while scanning for the hidden camera he assumed had given them away.

"I can't make it," Laurie shouted from behind cover. Her sub-machine gun was hanging on the flight-suit rack fifteen feet away from her and in clear sight of the nearly ten guards in the doorway.

Michael took aim from the cover of his cockpit, and managed to hit one of the guards in the belly. The injured man fell backwards, moaning in unbearable pain, and was dragged to cover by two of his comrades. Michael's quick aim got one of the others in the back of the head. Michael reloaded his gun, and waited for some of the guards to move from behind cover.

"Laurie, do you hear that?" Michael shouted over the occasional pot-shot.

"I don't hear anything other than these idiots trying to kill us!"

"Precisely. The adjustment fire's finished, and they'll-" Before Michael could finish his sentence, an explosion rocked the hangar. Then another, seconds later, a little closer to the actual building. The guards hit the floor, realizing what was happening; and Laurie scrambled to her feet and dashed for the other plane. One tried to fire after her, but Michael pinned him down with his the remainder of the rounds in his last magazine. Laurie scurried into the cockpit and closed the canopy as the explosions from the shells resonated through the hangar more frequently, once every five seconds or so.

"So what do we do now? We can't get the hangar door open!" Laurie insisted over the tac-net.

"No problem," Michael assured as he locked sixteen of his Alpha's missiles on target and fired. The blast knocked down both hangar doors, and the two planes taxied out of the building on VTOL thrust, a shower of bullets ineffectively following them as they went. As soon as Michael cleared the building, he punched the throttle to maximum, and pulled back on the stick hard, Laurie following close behind him. Michael inverted the Alpha and leveled out the plane's climb, and took the opportunity to look at the fortress, precariously hovering, along with the city of Arnhem, above his canopy. Shells were going off every few seconds, and the big gun's shells struck the fortress very nearly every two minutes. The Baron's people were scurrying madly about, unable to form up or muster an effective response. An anti-artillery missile battery was wheeled out, and its radar began to try to home in on the shells' origins, but a swift blast from plasma turret on the hovertransport, hidden near the fortress' main gate, annihilated it in a brilliant flash of light.

"Let's head back to the barn, Laurie," Michael intoned, a satisfied grin on his face. "We're not needed here, and we don't want to stir up the Invid."

"Good-bye," Laurie called at the fortress as it receded from her sight. "And good riddance!"

\* \* \*

De Vries leaned forward as Milo lit his cigarette, took a couple of puffs on it, and continued his report to Michael. “Anyway, after we had been shelling them for a little more than half an hour, the Dutch conscripts had figured that they’d had enough, of the shelling, and of the Baron. They formed together in bands and started to turn their weapons on the Baron’s mercenaries, who were not in the least hesitant to fight back. There seems to have been a prolonged pitched battle between the camps, and a lot of men were lost on both sides, but one of the groups of conscripts finally opened the gates and invited in our infantry, and it was all over from there. Likewise, both of the Baron’s frontier armies were either destroyed or captured without much of a fight by other forces acting on our behalf.”

Willem took a few more drags on his cigarette, and shook his head sadly. “We were hoping to take the Baron alive, and make him stand trial. Our elite forces surrounded the entrance to his war room, and busted the door open, ready to arrest the bastard. It wasn’t meant to be, though. It seems one of the Baron’s generals had figured out which way the wind was blowing, and shot his lord down in cold blood. The Baron’s personal guard had returned the favor by killing the General, and they were in turn soon murdered by a lynch-mob of conscripts. My troops walked into a room that was drenched in blood, and littered with bodies. It’s an appropriately sad ending to a sad era of our history, and I think it’ll take a while before we get over the shock of it. But life moves on, and the mood in Arnhem is to reestablish a legitimate government, and to hold general elections in six months. I’ve been appointed one of the heads of the provisional council until then, on the condition that I not run for office in the upcoming election. Actually, I don’t mind. I have a distillery to run.” Willem smiled, though sardonically. “I can’t tell you how valuable your assistance was to us. If those fighters had gotten in the air. . . Well, let’s say that it’s well worth having lost them to you.”

Michael shook de Vries’ hand, and said, “We’re glad we could help. The Invid have lost an important ally in this area, and that helps our common cause come a little closer to its realization: a free Europe and a free Earth.”

“I have to get back to Arnhem, and you people ought to move before the Invid come looking for those fighters of yours,” de Vries enjoined. “And remember, all of you, you’re part of my country’s history now. You’re all national heroes, and if you decide to visit, I’ll arrange that you be treated accordingly.”

Michael saluted, and turned to his Alpha; they were getting ready to move, and Willem seemed to want to talk to Milo alone.

“So, Milo. It seems we’ve been prevented from reminiscing on old times again, thanks to the fickle fortunes of war.”

“I’d have liked to stay longer, but I’ve got to keep moving. You understand,” Milo replied.

“Indeed I do. Perhaps another time. But until then, if you meet Christine again in your dreams, tell her I send my best,” de Vries said, a hand on Milo’s shoulder.

Milo smiled as the man turned away and returned to his hover-limo. “Another time,” Milo whispered to himself, and returned to the hovertransport.

Blake was in a well-lit corner of the hovertransport, reading up on the manuals for the older Alpha’s electronic warfare systems, and Milo tapped him on the shoulder, asking, “Where did Roger put that package Willem left for me?”

“Oh, it’s in that trunk over there. We didn’t open it. . . “

Milo retrieved the small cardboard box and cut the packing tape from its lid, pulling out the old papers that cushioned its contents: two wine glasses and a bottle of the Burgundy Milo was partial to before the Invid had come. And lastly there was a letter: an old letter, apparently addressed to Willem from his American cousin barely thirteen years ago, telling him all about the wonderful new boyfriend she had just found.

“Milo?” Blake asked. “Are you okay?” The tear running down Milo’s cheek had not gone unnoticed by the boy.

“Never better,” Milo said softly. “Never better.”