

# Episode Eleven:

## Transmutation

*“At this point, a new factor came into play in the Third Robotech War, though it is doubtful that even the Regis could have foreseen the consequences of this far-reaching and fateful decision, consequences that have shaped the world to the present day and beyond. With Ariel and Sera, and later Corg, Kharoth, and most importantly Lihra, the Regis intended to introduce a formidable new weapon: the fully dexterous, creative, and independent soldier; the first of the species *Homo Sapiens invidis*. The new breed of hominid Invid was intended to crush the insurgents left on war-ravaged Earth, and ultimately to replace humankind as a species.*

*What the Regis failed to anticipate was the magnitude of the banal phenomenon popularly known as the ‘Max and Miriya Syndrome’.*”

“Unification and the Robotech Wars”, Volume XV of The Cambridge World History, 2150 edition, p 1524.

13 April 2043

Two searing beams of coherent light, red in color from the scattering off the dust they stirred up and evaporated, and around fifteen centimeters in diameter, scorched the air, missing Jeanne by mere inches.

*You can’t dodge the beam*, Jeanne thought to herself, *but you can dodge the aim*.

Milo lifted his newly-rejuvenated arm as his Cyclone’s target scope rose to take its position in front of his right eye. The camera in the launcher projected an image of the giant blue mecha to the scope, and sounded a tone then the target was acquired. Milo’s vocal command was answered as a rumbling hiss whistled from the launch tubes and the two warheads sped from his Cyclone Armor’s forearm launcher towards the Invid command unit.

The blue Goliath fried the missiles with its two heat cannons, mounted like wicked horns atop the Invid’s torso.

“What is that thing?” Milo yelled out in panic.

Two rows of explosions strafed by Milo; the Invid was now utilizing its secondary weaponry, a pair of plasma ejectors identical to those on the Armored Scout, but here placed below and to either side of its glowing, menacing, and malignant red eye.

“I don’t know,” shouted Jeanne. “It’s not in the Regent’s inventory!”

“Out of the way, Milo,” Blake radioed, launching a hail of returning fire from the hovertransport’s main plasma turret at the unidentifiable Invid mecha. The Invid responded by raking its double beams across the side and roof of the transport. Though the armor held, the plasma turret exploded, showering its remains all over the transport’s roof.

Roger swore at the thought of having to replace the turret; he was especially galled because of all the work he had put into repairing the fire control computer from its run-in with Milo’s forehead. Roger watched Blake emerge, coughing, from the smoking turret-control console and take his position in the passenger seat. “Where are Michael and Laurie when we need them?” Roger bellowed. The fighters had left on patrol several days earlier, and had kept strict radio silence ever since. “They keep throwing these new mecha at us, and we can’t fight them without the damned fighters!” Roger cursed himself for the slow rate at which he’d been overhauling the new planes; right now, they were at camp, in pieces. Roger had disassembled them to try to repair the inoperative secondary systems, and the process was taking longer than he’d thought.

Jeanne surveyed the situation; the new mecha was more than a match for the Cyclones and the now-useless hovertransport. “Everyone, we’re pulling back. Split up and hide; maybe we can shake this thing!” The others acknowledged her command, and began to speed off in various directions. Jeanne took a few more shots at the Invid war machine, missing the eye, but knocking out one of secondary guns. The mecha hesitated, and Jeanne took full advantage of the opportunity, and turned to flee into the surrounding forest. The others were already out of sight, and she only had a few hundred yards to go before the tree line.

The Invid recovered its senses and fired both cannons at Jeanne’s retreating Cyclone armor, striking it in the engine and burning a hole in the back of her mecha almost to her body armor. Jeanne yelped in pain as the hot metal blistered her back, and her jets failed, causing the Cyclone to crumple to the ground.

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Milo was already several miles from the battle site on the remains of an old dirt road in open country, driving his Cyclone hard. His mind began to wander, and he was worrying about how the others were doing. *I hope they’re all right. I hate bugging out of a fight like this*, he thought glumly. Suddenly, the ground in front of him lit up like fireworks. Clumps of sod flew up, obscuring his vision, bouncing off of his helmet’s face

plate. Milo looked over his shoulder to see several Shock troopers bearing down on him. *Damn. I just get away from that blue monster, and I get a mess of Purple People Eaters after me.* Milo was low on power and out of missiles, and he knew his only hope would be to outrun them. Milo gunned the engine, hoping to make it to cover before they got off a lucky shot. Milo looked ahead and gasped. The mysterious blue mecha had reappeared, and had cut off his escape. Milo changed the Cyclone to Battloid mode and turned around. *If I can't take the leader, I'll sure as hell get some of the Troopers!* Milo checked the power supply on his Gallant; only thirty-two shots remained in the battery. Milo aimed, and brought down a Shock trooper with a single shot to the sensor eye. The others recommenced their full barrage against him, with supporting fire from the lead unit. *Boy, Milo thought grimly, it'll take a miracle to pull me out of this one.*

Before he could complete the thought, the miracle he had requested arrived. Milo saw two cluster missiles spiral in from over the horizon towards the Invid mecha, breaking up into multiple warheads just before impact. The six Shock Troopers were instantly consumed in a bright red conflagration. "Holy shit," Milo exclaimed aloud as his savior, a huge bulky white jet-copter, flew into view. "It's a goddamn AJACS!"

The Southern Cross-era Veritech landed in Battloid mode, and pointed its right arm at the Invid command unit. The Invid's deadly heat cannons' nozzles began to glow, and they rotated to point at the new foe. Before it could fire, the AJACS' pilot found and locked onto his target. The veritech's main pulse laser fired in a controlled burst, easily perforating the thick shell of armor on the Invid lead unit. With practiced accuracy, the pilot's shot hit the mark, blasting through the armor and striking the vehicle's main power energizer, rendering it inoperative. The alien's war-machine collapsed, and thick black smoke poured out of the crumpled remains.

Milo changed his Cyclone out of Battloid mode and smiled. *I haven't seen an AJACS in years.* He noticed that the mecha looked well kept-up, right down to a fresh coat of paint, including, on the left side of the Battloid's torso, the heraldic symbol of the armies of Saxony.

The Battloid opened up, and its operator emerged. The pilot was small and lithe, and she climbed to the ground and walked up to Milo, pulling off her flight helmet when she came to a halt. Her hair was brunette, and her facial features quite delicate, though etched with determination. Milo guessed her to be around twenty years of age, give or take a few. She smiled, and extended her hand.

"Are you all right?" she asked in a Plattdeutsch dialect. *Definitely from Saxony. I didn't think they could field mecha anymore,* Milo thought.

“I’ve been better,” he replied in her dialect. “Nice piece of equipment you’ve got there. I didn’t know there were many AJACS left.”

“There aren’t, Mr. Swift.” Milo started; she knew who he was! She noticed his reaction immediately, and her expression became more grave. “Don’t be surprised. I’m sure that you’ve guessed where I’m from, if you don’t recognize me outright. We Saxons don’t forget our allies easily. Nor do we easily accept defeat.” She thought for a moment, and added, “I wonder if even your life was worth the cost of replacing those missiles,” she teased sardonically; Milo could only guess how valuable the powerful multi-warhead weapons must be.

Milo intended to ask her what she was doing in the area, but just as he opened his mouth, a signal flare went up from several miles away. “I’d love to chat with you, miss, but I think that’s one of my comrades.” Milo said hastily. The smoke trailing behind the flare was green; that was the color of the flare Jeanne was carrying. “You can follow me if you want.”

Milo hopped on to the Cyclone and sped off in the direction of the smoke column’s base, his new acquaintance still running for her cockpit. Milo quickly radioed Jeanne; no reply. He then radioed Roger.

“Roger, Swift here. You heard from Jeanne?”

Milo heard Roger’s voice crackle in the speakers in his helmet. “Ah, that’s negative, Swift. She hasn’t radioed.”

“Where are you?” Milo demanded, watching the AJACS fly over his head, and disappear over the horizon in front of him.

“We’re fifteen miles due west of the campsite. Why?”

“I just saw Jeanne’s signal flare go up. I’m already on my way to her. Her radio’s dead, and she hasn’t activated her transponder. Follow my signal, and meet me as soon as you can. The Invid have been. . . taken care of. Swift out.”

Milo cleared a hill, and saw the new mecha on the ground. The pilot was attending to Jeanne, who was sitting up and cursing her luck. Milo got off of his Cyclone and walked towards the two women. “You all right, Jeanne?” he asked.

Jeanne grimaced. “Better than my Cyclone.” Milo looked at it. The rear section, including the engine, was little more than molten slag. “I managed to pop the armor before I got burned too badly; but I think the frame is damaged too.”

The young new pilot mused thoughtfully. “Looks like you’ve got some second-degree burns here; nothing life-threatening,” she said in accented English. “You were lucky. These Pincer Command Units are really too much for a Cyclone to handle.”

“So that’s what they’re called. . .” Milo said.

“That’s what we call them, anyway. I assume your friends are coming to pick you up?” she asked.

“Yeah. Hang on. . .” Milo radioed Roger again and informed him of the situation. “They’ll be here in around ten or fifteen minutes,” he added after conferring with Pike.

“Good,” the woman said, returning to her native tongue. “Take me to your camp. I need to speak with your leader; I believe his name is Commander Michael Thomas Austin.”

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“Ouch!” Jeanne cried. “You know, Laurie, this is precisely what I love so much about the spring,” Jeanne intoned sarcastically between exclamations of pain. She was lying on her stomach on a cot in her tent, back bared to Laurie, who was attending to her burn. Her skin, from the shoulders to the base of the spine, was burned, blistered, and as red as cooked lobster. Laurie sprayed an antibiotic and anesthetic burn foam on her back. “It’s the reminder of ‘rebirth and renewal’ we find so relevant to our daily lives. Doesn’t it just move you to warm fuzzies?”

“I’m positively a-quiver with the spirit of the season,” Laurie replied, echoing her patient’s sarcasm.

“How bad is it?” Jeanne asked.

“Not too bad. We need to apply this foam three times a day, and you need wear loose clothing. Also, sleep on your stomach for a while. I figure you’ll be back in battle armor in a week.”

“I feel so embarrassed. . . so useless!”

“Perhaps we could ask the Tirolians to bio-engineer you a skin-graft for your next birthday,” Laurie replied, smiling.

“Five whole months? I hope it would have healed on its own by then. . .”

Just as Jeanne had sat up and put on one of Roger’s more loose-fitting shirts, Michael walked in the tent. “Milo tells me you fought well today,” Michael said grinning. “Remind me to give you a pat on the back.”

“Ow! Just the thought hurts!” Jeanne replied. She stood up, grimacing from the pain, and gave Michael a hug. “Where the hell were you guys?” she asked. “I hadn’t heard from you in nearly a week!”

“We got pinned down in Burgundy. The Invid were swarming like locusts, and we were attacked by several large patrols before we could hide. Seems we really pissed

them off by taking out the Cologne hive and their buddy in Arnhem. It was days before it was safe for us to take to the air again.”

“Well, what did you find out?” Jeanne asked, as the two of them walked out of her tent. Laurie remained behind, packing her med-kit. Michael’s gaze turned back to her for a moment, and she nodded in recognition.

*I wonder how long we can keep this under wraps,* Michael thought soberly.

“Michael!” Jeanne insisted. He wasn’t paying attention to her, and she never liked it when he did that. “What did you find out?”

“The plague has spread all throughout Europe. Only Saxony and the Munich area have had the resources to fight it, and it hasn’t reached France or England yet. The locals think that the Invid are spreading it, but I doubt that. More like the refugees from the towns already hit. Nevertheless, a lot of people are either already dead or are going to die before this thing runs its course.”

Jeanne shook her head. *First the Zentraedi, then the Robotech Masters, and now the Invid and this damned plague. It’s a wonder anyone’s survived at all,* she thought glumly. “So who’s this new AJACS pilot?” she asked after a prolonged pause.

“I don’t know; I haven’t had a chance to talk to her yet. Roger’s getting her something to eat, and I’m on my way to go see her right now.”

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Michael took his seat across from the newcomer, who was just finishing another of Roger’s native state-side dishes; this time an odd concoction that he claimed was Cajun red beans and rice, or at least some reasonable facsimile thereof. The guest had been pleased with it, though she commented quietly about Roger’s overuse of pepper; a rare enough commodity these days anyway.

Milo had asked her about her aircraft, but she was deliberately vague on this point. During her dinner, she had been far more responsive to inquiries on matters of the intelligence she had on Invid outposts and troop strength, but again, she held back, often ending a topic with nothing more than, “I’ll go into more detail about that later”. Nevertheless, her vagueness hadn’t stopped her from peppering Milo and Roger with questions about their adventures; indeed, she seemed to know quite a bit about both of them, and knew, with some detail, all the exploits of Michael’s resistance group since they had arrived in New Munich.

When she finished her plate, she complimented Roger on his cooking, and turned to the newly-arrived Michael.

“I suppose from that uniform that you’re Commander Austin?” said the pretty young woman, rising to shake Michael’s hand.

“Call me Michael; we don’t stand on formality here. You seem to know quite a bit about us, Miss. . .” Michael replied.

“Louise-Marie von Schönberg, daughter of the late Duke Gottfried of Saxony, at your service.”

“Louise-Marie?” Jeanne interjected. “C’est un nom français, n’est-ce pas?” she asked, smiling.

“*Oui, Mademoiselle duCasse. Mon oncle maternel était comte de Languedoc, où ma mère est née,*” replied the young woman. French was clearly not her first language, but then again, neither was it Jeanne’s.

Louise-Marie turned again to Michael. “I’ve been following your progress for some months now. You have proved yourself quite an annoyance to the Invid command. I’m afraid that most of my success in recent weeks has been directly due to your actions, and I’m here in part to extend my gratitude.”

“How so?” asked Michael. “I heard some rumors over the resistance network about Saxony regaining some measure of power recently, but I didn’t know whom to believe. Weren’t your forces wiped out three years ago?”

“We suffered major setbacks in the Invid retaliation; my brother Bertholt, who commanded the abortive offensive, was killed. I was only fourteen at the time. But, to paraphrase an author from your homeland, reports of our demise were greatly exaggerated. Still, we had a bit of luck. For two months after our failed attack, the Invid sent tens of thousands of reserve mecha from Reflex Point and were swarming Europe, trying to root out all our surviving units-”

“I remember that,” Laurie, who had just arrived, exclaimed. “They were really combing the countryside for a while. My resistance group really had to lie low then. And then suddenly it stopped as quickly as it started, as if the Invid lost all interest in the continent for a while.”

“There’s a reason for that. The Invid were forced to deal with problems closer to home. Our intelligence operatives in America have reported that the resistance movement over there had linked together with the troops that had survived on moonbase ALuCE-1 and launched a strike against Reflex Point. Apparently it caught the Invid by surprise, what with their forces working hard to finish off resistance here, and they panicked when the home hive came under fire. They pulled back everything but a minimal occupation force from Europe to deal with the more pressing threat, and thus we barely managed to avoid being exterminated. By the time they were able to turn their attention back to us,

we'd managed to move underground - figuratively and literally - what forces we had left. Nor did they ever really recommit nearly as many forces to Europe as they had before. It appears that the Invid think they finished the job here, and have been pretty *laissez-faire* since, so long as we don't get caught breaking the cardinal rule of not using protoculture-powered mecha. From what we've learned, however, the Invid thoroughly annihilated the resistance movement across the Atlantic, as well as the moonbase forces that were sent to help. To this day there is no viable anti-Invid movement in North or South America. As for us, we've been lying low for the last several years, rebuilding our armies. But after you took out the hive at Köln, the Invid sent many of their troops from the stilt-hive outside the ruins of Berlin to keep order in the Rhine area; when they left, we seized the opportunity to attack and destroy the Berlin hive. Furthermore, your action in the Netherlands allowed us to raid the Baron's mecha bunkers, with General de Vries' blessing of course; we got several dozen Veritechs and Destroids out of that, and just last week, the new Dutch Republic pledged an alliance with Saxony. The Baron out of the way, we attacked and conquered our old enemy, Mecklenburg, and captured even more equipment and supplies, though a good half of Mecklenburg's army, and the Count himself, seemed to have escaped to somewhere. North-central Europe is now free from both Invid occupation and Invid-sympathetic rulers. Now that Rimmmler's been taken care of, again thanks to your people, or so I hear, we hope to link up with 'The Lady' in Neumünchen and take on the hive near old Nürnberg. Once that hive is destroyed, we'll have all of Germany, Austria, and what's left of Poland free from the Invid and under our unified command."

She paused for a moment, and then continued. Her voice was strong and clear, and more so even than Michael at his best, she spoke with purpose. "We've sent out feelers to the French regions, and Catalonia; they are interested renewing the alliance of three years ago, but all but Federal France suffering terribly from the plague, and they are reluctant to join without certain territorial concessions, so I don't know how much help we can get from them in terms of real manpower. Nevertheless, there's really only one thing, in the long run at least, keeping us from freeing all of Europe."

"And that is?" Michael asked intently.

"The Atlantis Hive; it's a huge stilt hive on an artificial island in the Atlantic ocean; right over the mid-Atlantic ridge. As long as it exists, any setback the Invid may suffer is only temporary. They can always send more troops from Reflex Point, and, using the Atlantis hive as a staging area, retake Europe piece by piece. If Europe is to stay free, or is ever to contribute troops to a new attack on Reflex Point, that hive has to



be destroyed.” Louise-Marie stood up, and looked intently at Michael. “What is your long-range plan for fighting the Invid? Or do you even have one?”

Michael smiled. “To be honest, I never thought much further than the next raid. Until the Cologne hive, I was more worried about evading patrols and obtaining supplies and weapons than a coordinated campaign against the Invid. But since we took out the hive, and since the affair in Arnhem, I’m beginning to wonder if I shouldn’t do something a little more global. Did you have anything in mind?”

“Commander. . . Michael. . . I know how to fly an AJACS, and I have a lot of resources at my disposal, but, in my heart, I’m no leader. To be quite frank, I’d really rather be spending my time meeting eligible young bachelors like yourself,” she teased jovially, “than stockpiling munitions and ordering armies into battle. And my generals are mostly lower-ranking Southern Cross officers, with little formal field command experience, and none at all against the Invid. Our troops are well-trained, but most of them have had little or no regular army experience before we recruited them. We’re learning, but the Atlantis Hive is way over our heads. I’ve heard it’s the third biggest hive on the planet, next only to Reflex Point and the Australia Hive. Even if I could get the troops and equipment, we could never take out such a big target by ourselves.”

“So, Louise, what are you suggesting?” Michael asked, though he had already guessed the answer.

“I’m here to ask you to think about leading a united European force against the hive. I can’t be sure yet how many troops I can provide, but we’re looking at least a hundred Alphas and Logans, and more than four hundred Cyclones, plus infantry and support. Much more, and we’d leave the continent undefended; especially with the conquest of several neutral and pro-resistance territories in the southeast by the Invid-installed government in Hungary. I know it’s not much, but with a good plan. . . “

“Why me? Not that I’m refusing, but I don’t see where I come in,” Michael replied.

“You’re an REF Veritech group commander, presumably with extensive experience against the Invid. And from what I’ve heard about you, you’re the best person on the continent to take on a major Invid hive. You have a good reputation among all the resistance groups in Europe, whether you know it or not. Furthermore, you have no strong ties to any of the regional powers - so you would be a politically neutral asset, making it easier to convince the other countries to place troops under unified command.”

Michael scratched his chin for a moment, and said, “All right, I’m with you. What do you want us to do now?”

Louise smiled, and replied, "I don't think the time is right for us to operate openly yet. The Invid are still too strong. What I need you and your people to do is to stay low for the next few weeks and win us some allies. I'm sure you've heard of the Tirolian colony in Brittany and the Zentraedi settlement in England. Their help could be crucial, and any human resistance groups you can sign up along the way, especially in England, would be icing on the cake. I'll handle getting the continental resistance and national forces into the fold. If we can get enough troops, we can launch an enormous offensive and break the Invid power on the continent. And, a few months after that, we may be able to field a sizable army against Reflex Point."

Milo interjected at this point, saying, "Well, we can all talk big, honey, but unless you can get us a way to get people to the Atlantis Hive and to Reflex Point, all we've got is talk. You got a way to move large numbers of troops and mecha across an ocean without arousing Invid suspicions?"

"I'm afraid not, Mister Swift. At least, not for the attack on the Atlantis Hive. For Reflex Point, well, by then, I think we'll have come up with something. . ."

"And by that you mean?" Michael asked.

"You're familiar with the Prometheus-class submersible aircraft carriers from the First Robotech War?"

"Yeah, what about them?"

"We have one of them in our possession," she replied smugly.

"No kidding!" Michael was really excited now, as indeed were all the others. "Where did you find one of those?"

"My father had his mecha scavenger teams head off to the old Southern Cross naval base at Polyarnny; He'd heard there was an underground submersible facility that might have survived the war, and was abandoned when the Invid turned all of Russia into a wasteland. It was there, all right, and when divers found their way in, well, lo and behold, there it was, the CVS-109 *Demeter* sitting merrily in dry-dock, with enough supplies, ammunition, fuel, and mecha in the base to send it into action fully loaded. We've had our engineers working around the clock for five years now to repair it; and that's been our best-kept state secret, so you need to keep quiet about it, even to the others in the resistance. If the Invid got one whiff of that aircraft carrier before it's ready to launch, it's all over for us. And we still have several months more repair to do on the ship, so if we want to take on Atlantis Hive soon, we'll have to find another mode of transportation. But Reflex Point. . ."

"You can send the ship completely submerged and invisible for the whole trip!" Jeanne shouted. This idea was beginning to look really promising to everyone involved.

“Well, that’s a while in the future; you shouldn’t get your hopes up too soon, Lieutenant,” she told Jeanne. “For now, we need to focus on the Atlantis Hive. Michael, I’m going to keep a channel open for communications with your group, specifically 1090 kilohertz; and I’ve brought an encoder for your transmitter and a decoder for your receiver so we won’t have anyone nosing into our communications. If you’ll show me your radio, I’ll help you get these on; then I have to head home before I am presumed missing.”

Michael stood up and stretched out his arm, indicating the hovertransport. “Roger, show Miss von Schönberg the radio. I’ll be working on the planes; if I don’t catch you before you leave, then it was a pleasure, and I wish you the best with the work ahead of you.”

Louise-Marie smiled and nodded. “I think my work will be the easier; you have to convince the Zentraedi, Tirolians, and the English resistance to join in. I assure you that won’t be without its difficulties. Well, until then, keep in touch. And I hope to see all of you again before too long.”

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A single Pincer unit, flanked by a large guard of nearly thirty Invid Scout and Shock Troopers careened through the cloudy sky on route to a medium-sized hive, strategically situated high in the Swiss Alps. The patrol had been recalled by the hive brain, on the urgent command of the Regis. As the patrol returned, its leader noticed that security had been tightened considerably around the hive perimeter. With the loss of two hives in the north in the last few weeks, the Invid were edgy, even though this hive was safely sequestered in the mountains in the northern districts of one of the client states of the alien conquerors.

The subordinates took up positions around the entrance to the hive, and the pilot urged her Pincer mecha inside, making directly for the central chamber. The hive brain was unusually active, and its cerebral folds were pulsating and throbbing with thoughts and calculations.

“Incoming message from Regis, my lady,” the brain informed the pilot telepathically. The top section of the mecha cracked open, and its pilot emerged from the hatch, timidly at first but quickly gaining her confidence. This pilot was of the highest caste; the *Malarosm*, the scientists, royalty, and generals of this race. Her body was tall and muscled, with a membranous ridge running down her back. She turned her snail-like head to a compatriot, who was now approaching in a full Enforcer battlesuit, and took the

robe he was carrying in her four-fingered hand. She drew the robe over her gray body and waited for the Regis' transmission.

The hive brain began to glow brightly, and was soon replaced in the pilot's sight by a red blaze, the figure of her queen flickering therein. The dancing lights glistened in the Invid's two black eyes, set into the sides of its rubbery head, and the pilot knelt reverently.

"Lihra, my daughter, child of our race, rise. . ." The Regis instructed. Lihra obeyed silently. It would not have been wise to interrupt the Queen-mother of the Invid nation.

"Too long has our race suffered by our betrayal at the hands of Zor and his Robotech Masters. Too long have we wandered the stars, searching for a world that will sustain us. Now, we have found that world, a world where our precious Flowers of Life grow in abundance, a world soon to be free of the Tirolian wickedness. Yet, to live in this world, we as a people must learn to adapt to it. For this purpose, I constructed the Genesis Pits, to study the course of life on this planet, in hopes of learning the route for our people to take on the path of enlightened evolution."

"I have concluded that the form of the race that dwells on this world is ideal for our new life here on our new homeworld. Nevertheless, I fear there are dangers with this form, and for the present I shall proceed with caution. I have begun by allowing Ariel to fall in the the hands of our enemies, and she will be our eyes and ears among them. My daughter, I have chosen you to be the next of us to evolve into the shape this world has produced; and you shall soon be followed by your siblings: Kharoth, Corg, Sera, and many others. You will be but the first of the new Invid."

"Lihra, I shall place you and Kharoth in command of our forces on this continent. Though it produces few flowers and is of little strategic importance, you must beware. Resistance on this continent is scattered, but you have seen with your own eyes that it is still a great threat to us. The humans are far more organized here than elsewhere; they maintain governments and secret away armies, more than the wretches elsewhere on this world can manage. And though we have tried to secure the obedience of those among them that rule their masses, few will obey, and those that do have been increasingly set upon by those who would oppose us. Two of the regions whose human rulers we controlled have recently fallen, and with the loss two of our hives in the north, we have not yet been able to reestablish control. You will command the troops here; prevent the loss of any more hives to the rebels. Kharoth will be stationed at the hive we have built on the ocean; from there we will concentrate our forces and when the time is right and our power sufficient, you will eliminate **all** human life on this continent. Their continued

presence has become a liability we can not afford, especially if we are to repel further invasions from space by other fleets of these people. Then we shall seed these lands with the Flower, and repeople them with our own kind.”

Lihra nodded; the high office her mother occupied would eventually be hers, and she did not long to make as grave decisions as were forced upon her mother.

“Lihra, it is time for you to take on your new form; prepare yourself for bio-mass reconstruction,” the Regis pronounced.

From the apparition of the Regis emerged an intense bolt of energy; the light consumed Lihra’s body, and melted it away, leaving only her purest essence intact, floating without form or substance. Soon, however, a new body began to materialize, and the essence was once again bound to a corporeal home. The light faded, and Lihra emerged, naked and rather cold, in the body of race she knew to be her enemy. She brushed her auburn hair out of her pale and delicate face and opened her green eyes, taking the black and green colored form-fitting raiment from the attendant Hive Guard. The new body was unusual, and its unfamiliarity made her feel awkward in every movement; but it was a graceful and dexterous body and soon she was feeling as if she had spent her entire life in this form.

“Lihra,” the Regis concluded. “Go now and work for the future of our people. And remember that though your body may seem alien, your blood is not. You are a child of the Invid!”

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Michael entered the tent cautiously; Laurie was asleep, and he didn’t want to wake her. Michael sat on the other cot and looked at the peaceful face of his lover, breathing the cool spring air as she took respite from the last few days, napping contentedly in the early evening hours. The patrol had been draining on both of them, and not wholly because of the Invid; they found plenty of time to be in each others’ arms while away from the others’ prying eyes.

*I can’t let it go on like this, Michael thought sadly. I spend half my time trying to be with you and spend the other half hiding this whole thing from Jeanne. Not that it’s any of her damned business, but I don’t know if the group could hold together if there were open warfare between us. I’ve got to cool it with you for a while, at least until after we’ve taken on the Atlantis hive.*

Laurie turned her head and opened her eyes. “How long have you been here?” she asked softly.

“A couple of minutes. I didn’t want to wake you. You’ve really been pushing it hard the last couple of weeks, and I wasn’t going to begrudge you your rest.”

“Climb aboard. I think we could squeeze two in here, and you could use the rest too. Besides, I’d really like you to keep me company.”

“Better not; I’ve. . . got to get to work.”

“It’s Jeanne, isn’t it?” Laurie asked. “I’m tired of tip-toeing around her. When are you going to tell her about us?”

“I don’t know if I’m going to, because we both know she’ll go ballistic when she hears, and I can’t afford to have her operating at anything less than one hundred per cent now that we’ve got a clearly defined mission. Let’s face it, Laurie, she’s the real brains of this outfit, and we need her.”

“Is that really it?” Laurie asked.

“What do you mean by that?” Michael had been through enough lovers to know that this conversation was a trap; and he resolved himself to remain dispassionate and calm however much she baited him.

“Well, it looks like to me that you’re trying to have your cake and eat it too.”

“I think I know where this is leading. . . “ Michael grumbled.

“Well, look at it from my perspective. As far as I can see, you want to keep her in the dark about us so that when you get ready for a real relationship, you can toss me aside and you’ll still have her waiting in the wings-”

Michael shook his head and stood up. “I’m disappointed that you think that of me. Sleep well,” he said, turning to leave the tent.

“That’s the only reason I can think of that you’re not taking this relationship seriously,” she called out after him. “If I’m wrong, then tell me. Why won’t you make commitment to me?”

Michael laughed, softly and coarsely. “So, it’s the old morality play again. Boy meets girl. Boy and girl fall in love. Boy is afraid of commitment. Girl gets left at altar. Is that how you see this thing?”

“That’s about right. That or you’re just using me for the sex.”

“I’m not a cliché, Miss Mason. Nor do I exploit people. For that matter, you can’t know what makes me tick. You can’t know what I’ve been through in my life; no more than I can know what you’ve been through in yours. To put it nicely, I’m no stranger to commitment, but the hand that gets burned tends to stay away from the fire; that’s all I plan on telling you for now. But I suggest you get to know me a bit better before you begin speculating on my motives.”

Laurie shook her head, and wondered how many times he had practiced this speech in his mind.

Michael stepped out of the tent; he'd made his point, feigned righteous indignation, and avoided an all-out fight, which was far more than he'd hoped for. He took a seat on the lawn chair across from the campfire, and watched the sun's descent, low in the western sky. In the distance, the last rays of the evening sun illuminated the Invid stilt hive in the distance, on Normandy's side of the English channel. The hive was miles off, but it stuck out like a giant high-rise in the wilderness; and he knew from the intelligence he'd gathered there was another just across the channel. The nearer hive stood near what was once Harfleur, and Michael amused himself with rather Shakespearean notions of attacking the hive with horse and knight and siege engine.

*What say you? Will you yield, and this avoid,* he mused with a quixotic smile, *or guilty in defense, be thus destroy'd?* Michael laughed aloud at his thought.

"Something funny, Michael?" Jeanne asked from behind him. She grabbed another chair and sat beside him, careful not to lean too far back.

*Out of the frying pan,* Michael thought. "Nothing worth repeating." Michael looked at the young woman, smiling like a schoolgirl gazing into the eyes of her first and only love; indeed, Michael thought the analogy was not too far off the mark. *Is Laurie right about me? What do I really want?*

"Beautiful sunset," Jeanne added. "It would be more beautiful if that damned hive were out of the way."

Michael nodded. "What did Roger say about your Cyclone?"

"He said that the armor chassis is cracked, and the engine is melted and fused to it. In a word, the thing's totaled. We really don't have a chance of repairing it. Maybe we could combine it with parts from one we can salvage, but an intact chassis is damned near impossible to find on a wreck. And Roger's not too optimistic about being able to find a replacement for the plasma turret on the hovertransport, either."

"Well, you'll just have to stick to your fighter. And Blake to the secondary gun on the transport." Michael's attention wandered back to the sunset, and away from Jeanne.

"Michael, is anything bothering you?" she asked.

"I was just thinking. . ."

"It's Laurie, isn't it?" Jeanne insisted. "Michael, I've got to know where you stand with her - with me."

"Funny thing is, I don't know where I stand right now with anyone. I really haven't since Dahlori-4."

“The *Nous-gran’diel*? I thought you’d have forgot about that incident after we got rid of Kane.”

“It’s not that simple, Jeanne. The *Nous-gran’diel*; her name was Meliana Paarino. Before they stuck her in that protoculture chamber she was a Quadrano pilot from the same clone series as Miriya Sterling, and a damned good pilot at that.”

“What really happened down there, Michael? You’ve known me too long and too well not to trust me with this.” Jeanne reached across to him and tried to take his hand, but he withdrew his arm hurriedly; he didn’t want to be touched.

“We fought for days in the dense jungle; hunting and hiding. When it was all said and done, she had shot me twice, and I’d put three crossbow bolts into her. We were both in bad shape; but she was still more than able to finish me off. . . I was cleaning my wounds at a small stream, ready to give up and die, to be honest. Then suddenly there she is, stumbling toward me out of the shadows. I thought she would kill me, but she’d lost her gun. Then I realized; I was singing to myself. The choral part of Beethoven’s ninth, if I remember, you know, ‘An die Freude’ and all that. The music drew her out, like it does to all Zentraedi that have never seen anything of culture before.”

“You killed her?”

Michael shook his head. “She collapsed, and I pulled the arrows out of her and saved her life. Something happened to her when she had no choice but to leave her life in my hands. After that, she wouldn’t have anything to do with her mission anymore. I shamelessly exploited that newfound trust of hers, so she’d guide me to the edge of the Zentraedi base’s jamming range so I could contact the *Valiant* and escape that horrible place. Somewhere along the way, I fell in love with her. I mean, I’d had lovers before, but not like this. She was so innocent and naive, but she never lost the strength they cloned into her in the first place. Everything was new to her, and she was desperate to learn it all, to experience it all. It was the most intense feeling, the most intense love I’ve ever experienced, before or since. When all the Zentraedi conditioning fell away from her, she latched on to me as if I were the most important thing in the Galaxy. She was more than willing to give her life to save mine, and, God help me, it actually came to that. You can’t imagine what it’s like, to suddenly feel like that for someone, and to have it torn away from you without warning.”

Jeanne looked at him intently. She’d never seen Michael cry, but now, she could see tears welling up in his eyes, struggling to break free. There was more to this story, something Michael could never say aloud.

“I was rescued by a medic team just under a week after she died. The chief nurse was Vicki Richardson. Jeanne, my spirit was broken; I needed someone to turn to. About



this time, you tried your little stunt, and I couldn't deal with it. I had to get away. And Vikki was always there. I can't tell you how many nights I woke up from a nightmare about Dahlori-4, my only comfort being her soft words and her gentle arms. I was a basket case, putting myself back together piece by piece. It took six months before they let me fly combat missions again, before they were convinced, Hell, before **I** was convinced that I wouldn't crack in the middle of battle. It took the disaster at Pontis 4 to restore my confidence."

"And Vikki got pregnant?" Jeanne had heard part of the story from the rumor mill, but never from Michael's own mouth.

"I found out a couple of months before the fold to Earth-space. She didn't want to see me anymore; and she wouldn't say why. She just got her transfer to the military hospital in Tiresia, and she wouldn't return my letters. I have a son or daughter out there somewhere whom I've never seen, and another woman I loved vanished completely from my life. That's when I called you again; I really needed a friend. I may have treated you coolly, but you were just the person I needed then. . . and now. And I don't want to risk that."

Michael shook his head. "And, quite frankly, I'm scared. I don't think I could take falling in love with someone, only to go through the loss all over again. And with the mission, with the Invid everywhere, that's more likely than ever. I just can't let myself love anyone, until this damned war is all over."

Jeanne smiled. "I understand, and I'll keep out of your hair until you think you're ready. Just make sure I'm at the top of the waiting list when you are."

Michael smiled, though the smile was forced, and shook his head slowly. "You're impossible!"

Desperate to change the subject, Jeanne laughed, and said, "Well, I suppose it's time to talk shop. What's our next move?" The talk of Michael's previous lovers had made her feel rather uncomfortable, though she was surprised that he had opened up to her at all. It wasn't like him.

Michael closed his eyes, and let his breath out slowly. "We need to get across the channel, and get to Ohlfantoma. And we need to do it without attracting too much attention from the hives on either side."

\* \* \*

Lihra set her mecha down in a bowl-shaped depression far away from the nearest human village, though there were ruins of structures all about. The sun was new in the

morning sky, and the early spring air was crisp and cold, here in this valley amongst the Swiss Alps. Carefully, she climbed out of her mecha, leaping softly onto the grassy ground. The hollow was once natural, but Lihra could see that it had been shaped centuries ago by human hands. Rows of stone steps, rising in concentric circles from the center of the hollow, now covered in weeds and grasses, beckoned her to explore. She climbed halfway to the top, and examined the sight below her. The steps seemed the perfect height to sit upon, and she sat down, comfortably resting her legs on the level below the one on which she sat. Lihra looked down to the center of the hollow, and she suddenly realized the purpose for which this structure was created. At one end, there were the remains of a small building, and the center of the hollow was some sort of a stage on which some ancient ritual was performed, the onlookers sitting on the steps, watching the event taking place below. The purpose or nature of the gathering seemed to have passed away with the peoples that built and used this place. Yet it was ancient, even by her race's standards. Lihra tried to imagine what sort of occasion would gather these ancient humans to sit here; whether it was somber or joyous, whether it was to honor things sacred or to conduct business of state or to celebrate life itself.

A distant voice interrupted Lihra's musings. Two immature humans, a male and a female, children not yet half the size of their elders, emerged from the path that led to the hollow. They immediately spotted her Battloid, standing pilotless in the middle of the now-grassy stage, and approached it with caution. The children spoke among themselves in hushed titters, and began to look over the machine with a mixture of wonder and fear. Lihra watched their antics for a while, carefully studying their nuances, as they lost their trepidation, and chased each other around the mecha's legs like a pair of squirrels in a tree, oblivious to the fact that it was a machine of war, and not a playground.

One of them noticed Lihra; she was surprised they hadn't noticed her sooner. The young female nudged the male, and pointed in Lihra's direction. She seemed to grow more agitated at the sight of the stranger; maybe it was her odd uniform, or the association with the Battloid, but she seemed to be urging her companion that it was time to leave. The young male looked at Lihra for some time, and opened up a satchel he had earlier set on the ground, and pulled out of it a palm-sized bundle and a container of some sort. He opened the container and poured some of its liquid contents into a tall cup, and carried the cup and the bundle to Lihra. She stood up as he approached, and he hesitated for a moment, but he regained his courage and walked to within arm's reach of her, and stretched out his arms, offering her the bundle and the cup. Steam was rising off the liquid in the cup, and she took it and sniffed the contents. Its smell was strong, but inviting. She took a sip; at first it burned her tongue, but the taste was agreeable, and its

warmth was a pleasant contrast to the cool air. She took the bundle from the youth and unwrapped it. It was a brown and flaky lump, with some sort of paste in the center and glaze on the top. She tasted it. It was sweet and filling, and she soon found herself consuming the entire thing, washing it down with the hot liquid.

The child smiled, and ran to rejoin his nervous companion, and the two of them turned to leave as they had arrived, but just as they were to disappear out of sight, the male turned back to Lihra, and waved his arm at her. She took this to be a sign of farewell.

Lihra took another sip from the cup, and sat down again, a slight smile on her lips. She thought about the children, and the generosity shown to her despite their fear, and suddenly she recalled the fateful words of the Regis: "When the time is right and our power is sufficient, you will eliminate all human life on this continent."

Despite the warmth in her stomach, Lihra now felt cold again.

\* \* \*

Michael pushed aside a pile of rubble and revealed a service entrance to the subway below this abandoned city. The group had arrived hours before in the hovertransport, on Roger's suggestion. Most of Coquelles was in ruins, being nothing more than burnt-out rubble, though a few old shops and stores remained.

Most of the valuables and merchandise had been looted long ago, but Blake's persistence had paid off; he had found a store where the roof had collapsed; with a little work, Michael and the others had removed the rubble and emerged with handfulls of canned food, bottled water, and other amenities of civilization. Milo had been especially pleased by the discovery of a large supply of toilet paper. The quality of life for this band of rebels was going to improve, for a while at least.

Concentrating on matters now at hand, Michael managed to pry the door to the subway open and shouted to his companions to follow. "I've found the way in!" he shouted.

Blake was next through the door, and he caught his jacket on a sharp piece of metal, tearing a small hole in it. "Damn! That was my favorite bloody jacket!" Roger, Laurie, and Milo followed in a close bunch, while Jeanne took the rear.

Jeanne negotiated the rubble that surrounded this entrance, shouting ahead of her to try to keep Michael's attention. "You know what bothers me about this city?" she asked, hoping he was listening. "There are no bodies. The place is in a ruin, but where did all the people go?"

Michael was too busy watching where his feet were going to answer her. The flashlight helped some, but the tunnel was still terribly dark, and with every step, the group kicked up clouds of dust that choked their lungs and gave poor Roger an allergy attack.

Michael reached the bottom, and announced, "I think this is it; that 'chunnel' you guys were talking about," referring to Laurie and Blake. "And Jeanne, I think I can answer your question too."

The rest of the group reached the bottom of the stairwell, and trained their flashlights on the vast chamber. There were three actual tunnels bored out: two large parallel tunnels with a smaller one for maintenance in between. Cross-passages connected the three every 1200 feet or so, and the service access-way emerged into one. The tunnels seemed to go on forever to the northwest and to the southeast, though they all knew that one end must emerge somewhere in the ruined town. Railroad tracks were the most prominent feature of the larger tunnels, for trains laden with automobiles going spanning the distance from France to England. That was what interested Roger; it was a possible means to get the hovertransport across the English channel.

Jeanne looked around, trying to figure out what Michael had meant by his last statement. She found her answer some fifty meters to the north in the tunnels; from this point onward, burnt and blasted skeletons wearing tattered and charred rags of clothing littered the tracks, as well as a few broken-down and burnt-out cars on a dilapidated rusty flatbed train. Before she stopped counting, Jeanne convinced herself that she had counted some ninety dead, and there looked to be thousands more, perhaps tens of thousands more, further ahead. Some seemed to have had the flesh burned off them, while others seemed crushed or torn apart by giant claws. Dozens of human-shaped lumps of charcoal huddled together by the old train, still cowering before the merciless enemy that had slain them so many years ago. The macabre scene went on for miles, it seemed. The cause of this destruction was evident as well. Further ahead the group found the wrecks of several Invid Scouts, blown to pieces by an old Garland transformable cycle, which was itself hit long ago, presumably by the comrades of the Invid scouts it destroyed. The three and a half meter tall Battloid lay crumpled in sort of a sitting position, gun at its side, its torso boasting a large hole through which the bones of the pilot were visible. Roger took one look at the machine's condition and ruled out the possibility of salvage; the damage was too extensive. Jeanne was disappointed; she liked the idea of piloting this more formidable mecha as a replacement for her ruined Cyclone.

Michael shook his head. "Looks like the locals tried to take shelter in the tunnel during the Invid invasion. . ."

“And the Invid dropped in for the party. Nice,” Milo interjected. He was on his knees, leaning over the skeleton of a little girl, still clutching the rotting remains of a doll in her bony dead fingers. “If there’s a reason for winning this damned war, this is it.”

Michael summoned his band together, and said, “Look, people, we can’t dwell on this. I’m as disgusted and unsettled as you are, but we need to keep our minds in the present, or we’ll never get across the channel. This is how I see it; we take the tunnel to its southeastern extreme, and locate where the vehicles would embark on these trains. Roger, after you drop the rest of us back at the planes, you and Blake will cross the channel in the transport - assuming it’ll fit.”

Roger nodded. “It’ll fit, just barely. It’ll be a hell of a drive, though.”

Michael continued, “The rest of us will take the fighters northeast to just over Denmark, and then turn back west towards England. That should keep us far enough away from the hives that we won’t stir up too much of a response. Radio us when you’re out, and we’ll home in on your signal. Anyone have any suggestions?”

Milo coughed; despite hours in the simulator, he still didn’t feel comfortable in the Alpha cockpit when it wasn’t in Battloid mode. But he couldn’t think of anything better, and neither could any of the others, so silence returned to the tunnel, only to be broken again by Michael.

“Well, let’s get to it!”

\* \* \*

Lihra had set the empty cup aside; the sun was already high in the sky, and the air around her had begun to warm somewhat, though the day was still unpleasantly cold. She had already grown used to this body, and enjoyed its agility and grace, and understood why her mother had chosen to take it so long ago.

A voice inside her head summoned her to return to her mecha. She climbed inside, and waited for the expected communiqué. It came soon enough, in the form of a mixed attack force of troopers, scouts, and pincer units that swooped over the hill and landed in front of her mecha.

“The Hive Brain has detected Robotech mecha to the north; they are four in number and aerial in mode of propulsion. The Regis commands us to reinforce the patrols from the local hive. Your orders are to observe and destroy these Robotech rebels.”

Lihra powered up the mecha, and telepathically told her subordinate, “I have understood. We will proceed at full speed to the coordinates and engage.”

\* \* \*

“How are you doing, Milo?” Michael asked, edging his plane somewhat closer to Milo’s. “Feel like you have the hang of it yet?”

Milo smirked. It wasn’t that hard, but he still didn’t like it; there was far too much empty air between him and the ground. “I’m managing. Still, I don’t want to try to land in fighter mode; VTOL or standard, there’s just too much margin for error. You think I should use Guardian mode?”

“Yeah, you should be able to handle that. It’s not unlike recovering from a booster-jump in a Hovertank.”

Michael looked over at the shores of the blessed isle of England, as they fast approached several miles ahead and ten thousand feet below. Several fishing boats navigated the waters beneath them, their crews presumably turning their heads skyward to watch the tight formation of four fighter planes pass overhead.

Jeanne was flying the reconnaissance version of the Alpha, so the duty fell to her to keep tabs on Roger’s position, as well as the presence of enemy activity on her longer-ranged radar. “I’ve got a fix on Roger’s signal, now, Michael. He’s just emerged from the tunnel,” she spoke into the helmet microphone. “Looks like he’s thirty miles to the South-south-east of London, and is heading north at 80 k.p.h. Right on schedule.”

“Good. Maybe we can touch down without incident. Laurie, you and Milo land first, as soon as we reach Roger’s position. Jeanne, you and I will fan out and make a quick reconnoiter of the area,” Michael answered.

Jeanne checked her scope once more, disconcerted to find that the tactical display had just added several dozen new icons to the screen. “New radar contacts, three o’clock high. Much larger than patrol strength; looks like an assault force. Closing at 350 knots, range forty-five miles!”

“Change of plan, people. Climb to thirty thousand feet and prepare to engage. Milo, remember that if you have to dive sharply in the dogfight, or level off from a sudden climb, invert the plane and pull **back** on the stick, or you’ll red-out. Pull lead when you have acquired a target, and let him have it with the missiles. Be sparing with the missiles though; you all know our supply situation. Milo, most of all, don’t ever give them a predictable target-”

“If it’s all the same, Commander, I’d rather land in Battloid mode and see what I can do from the ground. I’m just not ready for aerial combat!” Milo insisted.

“Point taken. Get out of here, and see if you can’t get a few of them to follow you!”

Milo veered off sharply, and headed downwards for the tree-tops. Michael shouted after him one last time, "Inverted dive, Milo, you damned fool. . ." Michael watched Milo's plane roll, and perform the required maneuver. "Much better!" Michael lauded. "Well, let's hit them," he called out to the others, and yanked back on his stick while kicking in the boosters, propelling him in instants to over five miles in altitude. The two other Alphas followed suit, and emerged from the climb above and ahead of the Invid. "Break formation, pick your targets and fire, but let's keep each other covered!" Michael enjoined as each of them began designating targets on their tactical computers.

"Let's tango!" Mason challenged. Her red Alpha transformed into Battloid, and the sleek killing machine was immediately surrounded by a bevy of shock troopers. Her 35mm gun pod bristled in the sunlight as she brought it down to bear on her first victims. The hail of shells cut supersonic paths through the crisp air, puncturing a pair of shock troopers repeatedly in their heavily armored torsos. Mason checked her HUD, ignoring the brilliant display of the ensuing fiery eruption. She'd nicked the menacing claw of the lone survivor, and its pilot rushed the spirited Brit's mecha. Laurie ducked under its charge, spun around, and swung her metallic arm squarely into one of its shoulder-mounted cannons. The Shock Trooper listed suddenly, trying to recover its flight attitude. Laurie followed up by whipping her Battloid leg and sending it through the Shock's back. The sheer force of the kick punched through its armor; smoke shot out from the breach in its plating as it fell to the waters below. *It's all over here*, she thought as a self-satisfied grin crept across her face. *Let's see what the others are up to. . .*

Jeanne had done her job: steer the Pincer units towards Austin. In the interim, she'd cut into the ranks of the Scouts and Armored Scouts, peppering away at their numbers with alarming consistency. But the next front of pursuers sent Jeanne reeling, and she found herself in full retreat, leaving a cluster of Hammerheads yawning out of the Battloid's open shoulder plating. *I didn't want to have to rely on the missiles! But there are just too many of them!* The short range missiles sent the Invid scrambling, and brought Jeanne a respite from the action. She scanned her tactical display and from it she could tell Austin was having his way with the mecha she'd directed his way. Some of the Scouts pulled away, and from her estimates, Jeanne correctly deduced that Swift was their prey. Her HUD showed more contacts swarming to her; but at the same she smiled with a sigh; Mason mecha swung down in guardian and bailed out Ducasse with some impressive marksmanship.

Austin's barrel roll was tight and precise; it had to be, because he had Pincer Command Units hugging his contrails, not to mention the lead mecha, a more anthropomorphic design he'd never seen before. His canopy was aglow with the deadly

shine of annihilation discs and the fire left him little margin for error. The envelope of safety was enough for Michael, so he decelerated and dropped down into Guardian. Two swung by him; Austin reversed and took out the Pincer complement acting as the lead mecha's advance guard with a good fraction of his plane's missiles. However, the lead unit, still nestled amidst its Shock Trooper escort, was up to the task of briskly returning fire from the heavy plasma gun on its right forearm. Austin rolled instinctively, but the parabolic discharge of annihilation-discs clipped his mecha. A light went on in his cockpit; one of the leg servos was damaged, and the primary bottling system on one of the plane's main engines. *Damn! If I lose the back-up bottling, I'm a dead man!* Michael cursed his rotten luck. Either this pilot was better than its contemporaries or Austin was getting slower. He shuddered at the both thoughts.

"Mason, Ducasse! I'm hit! I've got three bogeys on my fumes: two shocks and some sort of command Battloid. One of you pull away and get up here; I don't need to be working this hard," he yelled across the tac-net. Austin's eyes narrowed; the nemesis in this new mecha, one which Austin had seen enough of to last him a lifetime, danced before him. His eyes focused on the smoky plate that covered the mecha's torso, and saw, with a mixture of surprise and disgust, the body of a young woman therein. "Jesus!" he shouted, mainly to himself. "There's a human pilot in that thing!" His HUD displayed the command unit as the computer acquired it as a target. Four missiles were away; Austin was sure they would find their mark.

The enemy Battloid went into a dodging frenzy. Lihra's humanoid form had taken some time for adjustment; and this was her first time in battle in this alien form. She had been holding her own against the resistance force's ace pilot, even scoring a hit. But the missiles snaking towards her would prove a sterner task. Her Royal Command Battloid was adequately armed; Lihra opted to respond in kind, launching twenty of her own missiles at Michael's ship. Michael kicked his plane back into fighter mode and sped away, powering up his countermeasures package and dropping off more than enough chaff and flares to save him from a fiery death, and Lihra's missiles quickly lost the lock on their target. Two of Michael's missiles, however, made it through the barrage; it was all Lihra could do to block the missiles from her vulnerable cockpit plate by bringing her armored left limb down to absorb the blast.

Her mecha shuddered solidly from the explosion. She had her optical sensors focus in on the damaged mecha limb. It was now a smoking stub, the forearm sheared clean off with power conduits exposed and crackling and shorting against one another. The missiles, she quickly surmised, must have hit her mecha square on the elbow joint.



The limb damage was wreaking havoc with her mecha's power outlay, particularly the propulsion systems. Most primary systems were dead; and Lihra was frantic.

This was the first time for the recently transmuted Invid to experience pain. It was a sensation she didn't wish to become too familiar with; the incessant throbbing in her upper torso grew with the loss in altitude. Shrapnel had dug deeply into her shoulder, and she was bleeding profusely, green ichor forming a pool at her seat. Finally, she managed to reroute power systems around the arm and her thrusters kicked in; but she had to come in at too steep an angle to avoid a collision. Her mecha's legs still ended up carving two deep gashes in the English soil. The human had won, for now.

Laurie's Alpha finally fell in beside Austin's, and together they turned their attentions to Austin's other pursuers.

"Mason! Watch your wing, they're coming in!" Austin warned. His radar indicated the swarming enemy; the Invid were regrouping for another charge.

"Michael! We can't let them get back into an attack posture. I'm barely managing as it is," Laurie said, seeming to be losing her composure.

Austin's voice steadied her. "We're okay, Mason. Scissor away and I'll mop up; nothing fancy." He checked his missile count; he didn't plan on using the Hammerheads anymore in this fray; he had already used far too many and they were too precious a commodity to waste.

Laurie saluted Michael from her cockpit and he watched as red and white guardian banked away, rolled into a dive, and headed away from the battle. Austin reentered the dogfight, and with hardly any effort, his unerring aim had finished the enemy off.

"Jeanne, what's Milo's status?" Austin demanded.

"He's engaged with three Shock Troopers on the ground! I'm on my way to provide aerial support."

"Roger that, Ducasse," Michael acknowledged. "On second thought, I'll go. You guys patrol the area for more Invid, and meet me there."

\* \* \*

Swift had been duking it out with a tenacious Shock Trooper who had inflicted superficial plate damage on his mecha's arm. Milo had gotten careless earlier in this confrontation by letting his gun pod get hammered by a coordinated swipe with the heavy, and quite deadly claw. Milo was hesitant to use it again for fear that it would

explode in his face, and it had served him well already. The two-toned purple nightmare had come with two other cohorts; but Milo's sharpshooting quickly reduced it to a duel.

Milo charged, lowered his left limb, and hoped to drive it into the Achilles' heel of the majority of Invid mecha: the eye. The Trooper pilot had guessed Swift's strategy and countered with a claw block. Metal-on-metal contact knocked both combatants off-stride. But Milo was the first to seize the initiative by lowering his Battloid's shoulder and slamming it into the smaller Trooper's torso. It tumbled down and lay sprawled out before Swift. He drove the Battloid's armored leg right through the exposed sensor housing and fired the afterburners of the main engine in that leg, just to be sure. Milo cast a glance at the partially roasted mecha; emerald-colored fluid geysered out, and its left claw twitched in the throes of death.

"You lose, bub," Milo said. He wanted to raise the others across the tac-net, but was distracted by a plummeting Invid craft, a more impressive-looking assault machine. "Looks damaged," he mumbled to himself.

"Swift! What's your status?" Austin chimed in over the radio. Milo had been uncommunicative during his solo escapade, and Austin was worried. In a way, Austin had been paying special attention to Milo's Alpha, mainly because it slightly older than the rest of the fleet. But Austin knew the limitations of his personnel; and he was well aware of Swift's discomfort in the cockpit. Swift had some progress to make, some more sessions to log with the simulator, before Austin could overcome his habit of baby-sitting for the weakest pilot in his group.

"I'm fine! A little scratched up. I've just made a contact: range one hundred meters. Sensor displays show extensive damage; I'm going in to mop up," Milo reported concisely.

"Exercise caution, Swift. Austin, out."

Milo increased the magnification of his tactical display. The Invid mecha was heavily armed; but noticeably damaged. It was an advanced mecha, probably something Austin should have put out of commission already.

"What do I make of you?" Milo pondered aloud. He checked out his tactical readouts. Seeing that his enemy was still reeling from the crash, Milo urged his Battloid forward, hurling up loose dirt as Swift moved in to confront the Invid Command Battloid. His Battloid was atop the prone mecha wrestling with its one functioning limb.

Lihra had no almost no time to react to her forced landing. Her thrusters shed the Terran mecha from her own, and waved her intact limb at the Battloid's head. Milo forced his Battloid into the mecha's torso at full bore; both mecha locked up in close confines.

*Strange, Lihra noted, this one resorts to physical attacks in his fighting style. With all the Robotech weaponry at its disposal, one wonders why we're reduced to flailing away at each other. I wonder if it could be. . .* Her main cannon was warming up, readying for the kill. The pilot of the Earth mecha closed the gap, and grabbed onto the first appendage Milo could find, the upper arm of the damaged limb.

*What the hell!* Milo thought in exasperation. Power conduits dangling from the pincer unit crackled with energy and sparked as they dangled free from the ruined stub. He struggled to jam the arm back into Lihra's torso. A scintillating discharge from the short across the torso of Lihra's mecha caused more damage to both craft. Milo's Battloid was flung away from the explosion, hurtling wildly through the air before solidly smacking the grassy slope. Milo was knocked unconscious with a deep gash in his forehead; his last thought was that smelled smoke.

Lihra's Battloid jolted from the energy delivered squarely on its torso. Her console was aflame and her mecha stumbled back; nothing responded to her commands. Another crackling explosion within her interior chamber caused her more injury. *Initiate shutdown sequence! The computer is malfunctioning; I will have to perform the shutdown manually.*

She emerged from her control center substantially worse for the wear. But the humans were waiting. Not the one she'd fought; but his companions. She stepped out of her vehicle's wreckage, and was immediately confronted the dark-haired leader's demands to surrender. His demands were punctuated with the menacing Gallant pistol targeted at her midsection. Lihra nodded; she'd been captured, and there was nothing she could do about it now. And the battle was over.

She fully expected to be executed here on the spot, never to fulfill her assigned role in the Regis's grand design for this lush world: a plan for which the creatures before her would have to be eradicated.

Their leader helped Lihra to her feet; and when she began to collapse from blood loss and the concussion from the crash and subsequent melee, he hoisted her into his arms, his nose turning up only slightly from the odor of her green alien blood.

"Get Milo out!" Austin barked to Jeanne and Laurie. "Jeanne, change in plans. The assigned rendez-vous is out. We've suffered more damage than any one of us anticipated. Get Pike up here, now; I want a status report on the planes' conditions in twenty minutes! Radio von Schönberg; I want to know if she's used to seeing this kind of Invid assault force, and this new kind of mecha. If she isn't, she'd better get ready for it. We're encountering a heavier contingent of the enemy every time we make a move.

Mason, after you're through with Swift; I want you to give this Invid humanoid a thorough physical; I'm going to take her get the medkit and try to staunch the wounds."

\* \* \*

Austin sat by the fire, watching it's weaving, hypnotic curtain of flame. This was one of few times Michael remembered ordering a fire built, instead of the usual portable fueled heater. His body ached; but that would fade overnight. His mind was exhausted, but he'd was the only one available for the night watch.

The captive had been bandaged, fed, nursed, and sedated with a heavy dosage. She'd struggled at first, thinking the worst, but when she saw the dazed Milo willingly submit to being poked in his brawny arm, she relented sensing that they weren't trying to kill her. The humans must have had their reasons for wanting her alive.

Austin turned those reasons over in his mind, one by one. First of all, she was human in every facet of appearance, except for the distinctive odor and color of her blood. She had working knowledge of English and had expressed herself vocally with some vehemence as Michael cleaned her wounds with antiseptic; he'd been under the impression that they were mostly a telepathic race, and even then only a minority of Invid could make such a claim. The mecha deployment was unusually strong; they were sent with a purpose. Could the Regis have sent this latest wave of mecha to turn Austin and his band away from the Zentraedi colony to the north? Every question begged even more mysteries that he'd have to solve in tomorrow's interrogation.

"Here you go, Michael." Jeanne's smile was a comfort to him now. She draped a shawl around him for the night, and offered Michael a sip of her steaming mug of cocoa.

"It's well past midnight already. You should be asleep, kiddo. You've got patrol duty this afternoon." Michael didn't meet her gaze. Instead he stared at the dark indistinct horizon.

"Let me worry about that, Commander. I couldn't let you freeze out here. What do we do with our newest traveling companion after tomorrow?"

"I don't know. I'm sure going to keep Milo away from her tomorrow. He almost went berserk on us when administered aid to her; it's the main reason I ordered heavy sedation for both of them. I wonder how he'd feel about dragging her along with us," Michael wondered aloud.

"He wouldn't like it, and I doubt he'll ever forgive you for it; but he'd comply if it were an order." Jeanne's assumption was probably correct: probably.

“It might have to be.” Austin thought back to the night on Dahlori-4; he couldn’t leave his enemy to die then, and that past incident painfully determined his course of action today.

Jeanne saw that his mind was elsewhere, somewhere in his past, completely absorbed with the decisions he had made and was making now, trying to work out how to deal with a world that had just gotten a bit more complicated. She hugged him softly and kissed him on the cheek, whispering gently in his ear, “Good night, Michael. Wherever you are.”