

# Episode Three:

## Salvage Yard

*“Resistance groups had many means of acquiring weapons. There still was quite a highly developed underground market, if the groups could establish contact. But often, such dealings left the groups exposed to the agents of Invid-sympathizing police states. Instead, many groups relied on the fine art of scavenging mecha parts, weapons, and other supplies from ancient battle sites to consolidate their firepower into a force worthy enough to challenge the Invid.”*

-Fleet Admiral Austin, as a guest lecturer for a course on modern history at the University at New Detroit.

1 October 2042

“I hope the resistance network in Neumünchen can help us,” Roger stated. He eased the hovertransport forward into the clearing, a campsite with a freshwater stream within earshot and with a natural protective canopy formed by the trees, and halted the vehicle.

As Roger walked through cargo hold of the transport, he heard Swift sarcastically growl back, “We’ll be lucky if we get the time of day from the locals.” Roger helped Michael and Jeanne unload the gear stowed away in the transport’s rear hold. Per Austin’s orders, Jeanne took off to scout the perimeter.

The camp was established in short order near enough to the village of Innsbruck, with Milo and Michael sharing one tent, Jeanne having one all to herself, and Roger occupying the transport. Milo volunteered his culinary skills for the evening, offering up a very spicy kind of stew, served over rice.

“What do you call it?” Michael said, in between gasps. He immediately took a few sips from his canteen.

“Fishhead Surprise,” Milo answered teasingly. He gave Jeanne a hearty helping of the meal.

“I hesitate to ask what the surprise is,” Jeanne said, trying to put it nicely.

“Looks like sort of a freshwater-fish gumbo to me,” Roger surmised. It seemed

that only he and Milo appreciated the culinary concoction.

Well into dinner, Michael looked up from his meal, and said solemnly, “Now would someone explain to me these mecha-mounted protoculture sensors. I know all about the hive sensors, but this must be something new.”

Roger nodded. “The first units built into the mecha seem to have gone on in around 2035. They got upgraded two years ago, and make it damned near impossible to use any moving or unauthorized protoculture source around here without the Invid sweeping down on you in a minute.”

“What are their capabilities?” Jeanne asked. “Range, sensitivity, that sort of thing.”

Roger cleared his throat, and thought for a moment. “With the newest sets, the Scouts seem to be able to detect a Veritech Fighter out to around twenty kilometers and a Hovertank out to half that. They’ll pick up a Cyclone as far as a kilometer, and a protoculture-powered handgun out to a hundred and fifty meters. The Troopers’ sets work out to only a third of these ranges, but they like to deploy a Scout among a group of Troopers. On top of that, up close, they can even use the sensors for targeting in the dark or behind cover. To top it all off, the hive sensors are a lot more sensitive than they used to be.”

“That complicates things. The Invid fighting for the Regent don’t have anything like this, and it’ll make it really difficult to operate around here,” Michael noted. The others nodded, and dinner continued in silence.

Jeanne handled the after-dinner detail, and Roger unraveled a folding chair next to the fire. He’d volunteered for the first watch that night. He sat down in the chair, stoked the angry coals of the fire, and began his watch.

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Michael opened his eyes and watched the stream’s tranquil water flow by, and felt a certain degree of envy. He rose, and started back to the battered tent he was sharing with Milo.

“You know, Austin, I’ve been giving it some thought,” Milo’s voice intoned. Austin could plainly see Milo’s dark form emerge from the shadows just as Swift lit up a cigarette.

“Just how long have you been watching me?” Austin inquired impassively.

“Ease up, boss. . . I’ve only been here for a few minutes. You must not have heard me over the sound of the water. By the way, what language was that. . . prayer in?”

Tibetan?”

“Sanskrit,” Michael replied. “It’s called the Heart Sutra. It helps me clear my mind.”

“I see. Just don’t ask me to sit like that. I’ll lose all the circulation to my legs. Anyway, back to the matter at hand. The Invid haven’t been in our neck of the woods for quite some time.”

“We’ve been patrolling.”

“I know. But if we head on up to that base you wanted to see, we’d best not do it on the Cyclones,” Milo advised, after letting out a steady stream of smoke from his nostrils.

“Yeah, it could be an ambush, which would explain why the Invid haven’t bothered us on our patrols. Your point is well taken. But we’ve got to reach it,” Austin reminded Milo.

“What is so damned important about this base? We can get all the supplies we need in Neumünchen,” Milo demanded, pointing his flaming cigarette at Austin.

“You don’t understand. Back during the Sentinels’ War, we realized that the Robotech Masters were on the way to Earth. We hadn’t heard from the *Hannibal* in a while, and then the distress call from Space Station Liberty got through, and we were afraid that the Southern Cross was in trouble. So the 3rd REF Planetary Corps set off with a fleet led by the *Marcus Antonius* to reinforce the Southern Cross.”

“Yeah; I remember watching that on TV when they arrived,” Milo added. “Just after that the Southern Cross and REF troops linked up for a massive attack on the Masters, and inserted the 15th ATAC into one of their Motherships. . .”

“Well, the plan was to set up a number of secluded bases around the world. Point F on the Alaskan coast, Point G in southern Florida, and Point H in the Texas panhandle were to be established by 11th REF Armored division, the ‘Wolfpack’. Point I in the Crimea, and the one I’m interested in - Point J in Southern Austria, in the mountains near Gries-am-Brenner - were to be built by the 27th Mechanized, the ‘Werewolves’. The 5th Air Force Division’s planes, pilots, and maintenance personnel would be divided among the bases. That comes to about 390 Veritech fighters, 140 Destroids, 1000 Cyclones and 2500 personnel per base.” A sly smile of comprehension made Milo’s visage appear diabolic as Austin went on explaining, “We were hoping to link up with them for our offensive, but we got no word from any of the bases, so we suspected that the Invid had successfully neutralized them all. It must have been some fight though, and I’d say that the Invid lost at least fifty thousand troopers destroying all the bases.”

As a Southern Cross soldier and a resistance fighter, Milo had heard of the five

major bases. But no hard details had made his way. The magnitude of what Austin had said became even more clear to him.

“Okay, I’ll get you there,” Milo promised. The cigarette tumbled from his lips, its smoldering butt falling on the ground. Milo squashed it thoroughly.

“How?” Michael said. He shuddered at the thought of a grueling hike to the base.

“Trust me,” Milo entreated as he urged his suspicious commander back to the confines of the camp.

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Milo staggered out of the tent into the streaming sunlight. He spent his first few moments of this day unsuccessfully trying to warm himself up. *Winter’s coming hard and early this year.* He poured some coffee into a large cup and made his way to the others who were already up and ready to carry out Austin’s orders, with one notable exception.

“Michael, I feel I should come along,” Jeanne reasoned. “The more people there, the more thoroughly we can search the place.”

“Sorry, honey, but Michael’s right this time. Because if we don’t make it back, you have to make it to Neumünchen and possibly join up with another group. Besides which, I already have watch out for his butt, I don’t think I could do the same for you,” Milo interjected coolly.

“What?!” Jeanne yelled back at Swift.

Roger’s face had shown a gentlemanly smile, but that quickly mutated into a snicker. He knew what came next.

“I rather think I’m the one whose going to be watching over your *wounded* shoulder, Swift,” Michael said, laughing lightly.

“And the next time you call me *honey*, you’ll end up back in Vienna - singing soprano in their boys’ choir!” Jeanne threatened in an icy tone. Milo gurgled in his coffee cup, as Jeanne excused herself from the trio of men.

“Uh, Swift, there remains one small problem, unless you came up with a brainstorm last night. Just how are we planning on getting there? There is the small issue of the mountains.”

“Very simple. We’ll ski there, if the weather ain’t too bad.”

“Ski? It’s been years since I’ve done that, and I never was much good; besides, we don’t have any skis or poles,” Austin protested. “And will there be any snow yet?”

“I’m sure Roger can rectify the former situation, can’t you, Rog?” Milo inquired. “I’m thinking of the cross-country sort of ski, of course.”

“Let’s see, yeah, I figure we can pick some up at one of the near-by villages. I can have everything by noon, eleven if all goes well,” said Roger, his estimate meeting Milo’s approval. The stalwart Captain hurried off to start his hovertransport to begin the search. Austin, however, still entertained his doubts.

“As for the snow,” Milo explained, “the glaciers have been growing ever since the Zentraedi Holocaust, what with all that dust in the upper atmosphere. That won’t be a problem. Besides, you’re a smart fellow. You’ll pick it right up like a pro.”

“Well, if you can do it, I’m sure I can handle it.”

“And you’re such a modest lad, too,” Milo quipped.

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Michael and Milo lowered their goggles, as they trudged up the icy trail to the peak of this smaller mountain. The winds screamed about their well protected heads with such force that only through shouting was communication possible. The lowering sun crowned the summit the party hoped to surmount, as the mountain now appeared to don a veil of gold.

“We’re making good time!” Austin observed, cupping his hands together and hoping his voice would reach Milo’s ears. Milo simply looked at the lagging Commander, and shrugged his massive shoulders, knowing that Austin had said something, but not knowing exactly what it was. He motioned Austin to take the point for the next stretch of the journey, and the slightly winded REF fighter pilot was more than happy to oblige.

The sun was swallowed up by a wave of clouds that scudded across the Alpine mountains and blended into their majestic snow-capped peaks, indicating nightfall was not far behind. The winds were whipping defiantly at their prey, luring the party to continue the dangerous ascent. With nightfall, came reduced visibility. Any mistake at this altitude, with such inclement conditions, could easily result in a quick but painful death. That same thought drove Michael to scan the environs for a cave to settle in for the night.

Around a treacherous bend of the trail that Austin was blazing, one could faintly discern the half mile remaining, and the outline of the jagged peak in the blackening night. Austin pulled Swift aside and they both ducked into a snow-lipped cave entrance, the winds howling loudly and angrily as the twosome retreated from them.

Michael dumped his pack on the hard ground, and his exhausted body soon followed as he let it collapse against the back wall of the newly found haven. Milo had a

fire alive in moments and the both of them quickly jockeyed for comfortable spots around its radius of heat. Michael unrolled his insulated sleeping bag, and flattened out the lumps from it.

The Commander dug into the survival rations he'd brought along, his mind brooding on a premonition that resurfaced from its depths. Milo was already bundling up for the night, he'd screwed shut the small canteen of sipping whiskey and set it aside.

"The storm is hitting us hard," Milo noted from his supine vantage point. The snow was piling up around the divot in the mountain side. "We'll have to dig our way out in the morning, if this keeps up."

"Didn't think I'd be this tired," Michael yawned. "But this thin air, it's really got to me."

"Yeah, I noticed that you lagged behind most all the way up here, 'cept when you took the lead," Milo said in a critical tone.

"Not all of us are blessed with all the constitution and charm of a mountain, um. . ." He hesitated; Earth's fauna were rather unfamiliar to him.

"Goat?" Milo prompted.

"Yes, a mountain **goat**," Michael said, his face easing into a casual smile. Michael slid into his bag, and set his Gallant H-90 on the ground. His eyes peered cautiously out of the cave entrance for the longest time, failing to discern anything from the cascade of snowflakes.

"Ain't anything out there, Austin. Give it a rest," Milo decided, as he'd already scanned the entrance. His slurring voice continued, "The Invid won't come and play, 'specially in this weather. They can barely shoot straight under perfect conditions. Anyway, betcha two rounds in the next bar we hit, that they're concentrating their mecha around that base."

"I have never let my guard down before, Milo. And I'm not about to start now," Michael said in a subdued murmur.

"Never give an inch, huh, Austin," Milo grumbled. "Can't wait to mix it up again with the Invid, though. Our last tangle with the Invid really got my blood flowing," he said excitedly.

"Your blood spewing on the ground is the last thing this outfit needs. So don't do anything stupid. Besides, I'm sure a troublemaker like you could find another way to get your juices flowing," Michael hinted.

"Like that redhead back at camp," Milo blurted out.

Michael's face crinkled into a hard stare as he rolled over to face Milo. "Don't you even think of-" Michael couldn't finish his threat.

“Is she spoken for, Commander? She’d mentioned there was a little history between you two, but now you were ‘just friends’.”

“We’re more than friends, but not lovers, Swift. All I know that she’s too good for a one-nighter. And if you so much as lay one finger on her without honorable intentions, You’ll wish you were never born,” Michael warned.

*Not quite lovers. With a reaction like that, I can’t help but wonder,* Milo thought as he shut his eyes and shifted in his bed roll.

“So, what’s Europe like? What can I expect to see around here?” Michael abruptly asked. “I need to know what I’m dealing with if I’m going to operate a resistance outfit here.”

“Not much anymore. The east’s all pretty much either wasteland, completely unorganized, or run by people who rule with the Invid’s blessing. The west was putting up a strong front against the Invid. Especially Saxony and the German Principalities. But that came to an end a few years ago. Saxony’s leadership were assassinated by agents working for the pro-Invid regime in the Netherlands, and its armies and those of its allies were routed by the Invid when the new leaders tried to launch an offensive they were completely unprepared for. If you’re looking for allies, try France, Provence-Languedoc, or maybe Catalonia. They were sympathetic to Saxony’s alliance, but didn’t commit heavily, and weren’t so severely punished by the Invid. I’ve heard that Saxony’s recovering, but I’ll bet a bottle of whiskey they won’t have enough of an army to beat a Boy Scout troop.” Milo stretched, and asked, “So what are your plans? What do you think we can really accomplish against the Invid?”

“In the short term, not a lot. All I can expect to do is harass them a little, and stay alive. But in about two years the full fleet will be up and ready for action. We’ve got six more cruisers, three more battlefortresses, and dozens of destroyers still in the shipyards, and the mecha factories are in full production of Alphas, Cyclones, and a new design or two. So in a little over a year, maybe sooner if they can step up the production schedule, we’ll have the bulk of the REF coming. And anything we can do on the ground to help them will be essential to their success, so we need to link up with other resistance groups so they’ll be able to do their part. We have to keep the Invid fighting on as many fronts as possible, so our cruisers can take up position unthreatened by their Armored Scouts and bombard the hives from orbit. Then they drop the troops and mop up.”

“Well, I guess that means we’ll have a busy day ahead of us tomorrow,” Milo snorted. “We wouldn’t want to let the fleet down, would we?”

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Jeanne had the camp all to herself. It was just after the sunrise now, and Roger was busy fixing the two of them breakfast. For her part, Jeanne offered to help, but Pike politely declined. It was just as well, she surmised, as it allowed her time to add an entry to her diary, saved from the *Valiant's* destruction by Michael's last-minute efforts.

She cleared away an inviting spot at the shaded base of a sturdy pine, and opened up the book that held her most private thoughts. Jeanne looked forward to this. After all, her last entry was several days before the doomed Mars Division invasion of the Earth, and her whole world had been uprooted since then.

*Dear diary,*

*Since our last conversation so much has happened. I remember being so optimistic about the offensive. Our assault against the Invid was a fiasco from the very beginning. I guess we can chalk that up to misinformation. I don't think anyone had a clue as to the actual numbers of the enemy stationed here on Earth. No one, except Michael. So many lives were destroyed in a matter of moments. No matter what we tried, nothing worked.*

*A few of us escaped. I have Michael to thank for being alive. I guess he still cares for me, no matter how fervently he tries to cast it in terms of fraternity or friendship. We've begun to put together a resistance group, with Michael leading, of course. They're not bad people, I guess. Roger is friendly enough, and quite a skilled bio-maintenance engineer to boot. His hovertransport is truly a gift from above. But, we're all hoping to find some Alphas soon. We've already run into Invid patrols, and are barely managing to fend them off with our two. . . working. . . Cyclones.*

*Michael is on a mission in the very hopes of fulfilling that need. He and our other recruit, a Private Milo Swift, started off for the Alps, to scout out the base near Innsbruck. Maybe they'll find something useful. They've maintained radio silence, so I have no word on their status. I hope Mi-. . . I hope **they're** all right. I can only sit here and slowly go out of my mind.*

*I guess I'm still making my mind up about Milo Swift. Somewhere in those reflective green eyes, is a vulnerable man, just like any other. . . Just like Michael. But he's decided shut himself off from everybody. I know there is a girl in his past. But I don't have the nerve to ask him about it. Maybe he's talked to Michael about it? Anyway, because of this, Milo drinks constantly. I can see that it's taken its toll on him. But we can't help him if he doesn't want it. I just hope that he doesn't let it interfere with his responsibility to us. The cause comes first, and Michael won't have it any other way.*

*Michael still won't open up to me. I wish he would; things could be so much better between us. I know he still cares, but he keeps submerging those feelings behind a wall of military propriety. I can only hope.*

*I'll have to continue this entry at a later time; I think Roger's almost finished with breakfast. I can smell it already.*

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A mournful wailing was Milo's greeting to the crisp morning, his harmonica desolately echoing forever. It was well into Milo's third song of passionate blue notes before Michael dragged his head out of his sleeping bag.

"Stop playing, Milo," Michael requested, as the song struck a disturbing chord somewhere deep in Michael's soul. "Or pick something a little less depressing."

"I don't do requests," Milo replied, putting away the instrument.

Michael ignored the remark and stamped his boots as he began to clear the snow from the cave entrance. It took the Commander several minutes to break down all his belongings and pack up. When Michael was finally ready to push off, he noticed that Milo was already on the move, scampering up the remaining furlong to breach the summit.

Milo slid his boots onto the skis, latching them into place. He grimaced in annoyance when he stabbed the powdery snow with his poles. Roger had made them a little too short. But it was nothing an experienced skier such as Swift couldn't compensate for. He adjusted the goggles so that they fit snugly on his face, and he looked over his shoulder to make sure Austin was still on his way, which he was. Milo thrust his poles into the newly fallen snow and charged off down the slope.

They were able to ignore the pangs of hunger and fatigue, but Michael's spirits were low. The pair had found no sign of the military installation they sought, and they'd already traversed three mountain slopes. The sun had shone brightly all day, but a worried Austin watched it begin its decent into the west, while he wolfed down an energy bar. Milo made better use of his time, panning the valley below with Michael's pair of high-powered binoculars.

Michael noticed a sudden smile on Milo's face spill out, becoming wider. "Did you find something, Milo?" Michael asked.

Milo's only response was to bolt off down the hill, slamming his poles into the snow as he went. He cleared a snow bank and was well out of Austin's sight before Michael started out after him.

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“Breakfast! Come and get it!” Roger’s voice called from near the camp’s stove. Jeanne joined him, stepping away from the hovertransport into the pristine morning light. Pike continued, “After we eat, I’ll finish up the major repairs on your Cyclone. That should take all of today. We can do the adjustments tomorrow. Then I’ll show you how it operates, you know, how to activate the jets and target scope.” Roger smiled, and offered Jeanne a plate of fried eggs and smoked sausage. Jeanne sniffed it heartily, and began to eat.

“Sure beats survival rations,” she laughed as she sat in a camp stool, fork in one hand, plate in the other.

Roger sat next to her quietly, and, contemplating his own plate, commented, “This is nothing compared to what I used to get at home. Back in Texas, I remember, my grandmother used to fix us the most delicious meals. . . that was during the reconstruction.”

“Texas, huh? Michael’s father was raised there. He supposedly wandered into Houston a day or so after the Holocaust. Or so Michael tells me.”

“You mean Major Thomas Austin? The pilot. . .”

“-Who took out a Zentraedi Monitor with a single squadron of fighters. Michael worships him. He was a rare type of man, and Michael’s driving himself to the edge to imitate him,” Jeanne interrupted.

“He is a world-class hero, you know. Do you know what he was like?” Roger asked.

Jeanne sighed as she put aside her empty plate. “Michael doesn’t talk much about him, except in cryptic monologues from time to time. He’s most free late at night, if you can get him alone. . .” Jeanne stood up and stretched. “. . . and drunk,” she added teasingly. “All I know is that he fathered the man that I love, and that’s enough to earn my admiration.”

Roger smiled a little uncomfortably, owing to Jeanne’s admission, and set down his plate. “Well, I’d best get to work.”

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The snow-bitten pair arrived to a scene of utter carnage and devastation, which even the fury of last night’s snowstorm couldn’t camouflage. Many of the buildings had

been razed down to their concrete foundations, and often only a small section of wall signified that a building had once been erected on the very same spot. Twisted sculptures of blackened mecha and their components dominated the piles of rubble that loomed as monuments of war to all these forgotten warriors. The streets were strewn with sections of concrete slabs, contorted metal paneling, and a carpet of glass shards.

The cause of this atrocity was also well represented by the dormant husks of the malignant reddish *Iigaa* with their stiffened claws grasping at unseen prey. The purple *Gurab* stood frozen in a menacing stances, guardians of this icy tomb. For as far as Michael and Milo could see, all they beheld was death and devastation, because for every few Invid war machine accounted for, it was easy to spot dozens of frozen corpses, desiccated over the last decade by the icy cold of the mountains.

“Over there, Milo.” Michael stretched out his index finger, pointing to a building barely erect amidst its fallen neighbors. Milo’s eyes widened in surprise and in suspicion. “Let’s check it out.” Michael broke out into an eager trot; he was extremely anxious to examine the interior.

They entered the building through its creaking door. The structure’s frame rattled defiantly in the slight wind that presently caressed the abandoned base, and the floorboards moaned with Michael’s and Milo’s every footstep. Michael had stopped pacing about the small and empty munitions shed, and was tugging at something on the floor unseen by Swift. A massive ‘THUD’ erupted as a hatch door on the floor was thrown open.

“A scavenger’s paradise,” Michael assessed of the underground chamber. Swift warily followed him down the stairs. They gazed in wild wonder at the racks of missiles adorning one of the walls. A neatly arranged configuration of protoculture canisters was quickly moved up to the ground level of the munitions shed.

“Let’s see what we have here. . . Recluse RPGs, 35mm ammo for the GU-13 gun pod, and most importantly protoculture, nine canisters of it,” Michael said as he surveyed the newly-found booty. Milo was shifting his weight nervously as his green eyes darted about the abandoned base. “Crates of Hammerhead SRMs too.”

“This is too easy,” Milo decided, fondling a Wolff 9mm machine pistol he’d seen lying on the floor. “I bet all this stuff was planted here. But when will they come back?”

“I don’t recall ever having seen the Invid planting anything. Maybe they never found this stuff,” Austin offered.

“Or maybe they didn’t think anyone would make it here. It was a treacherous climb. That means that they’ll be patrolling the lowlands,” Milo reasoned.

“It also means one of their parties will find Jeanne and Roger very soon, Milo. So

we'd best forget about getting any sleep tonight and get to work. After all, it'd be a shame to let all this hardware go to waste." Michael scooped up a couple of grenades in one palm, and exited the shed to begin his search for other supplies. And so it went. Michael darted from pile to pile, evaluating what was salvageable, and what was merely high-tech junk. He cleared away the skeletons, charred metal plates, and destroyed Alpha components, and suspended his survey of the available resources well into the early morning hours of the cold, clear, star-filled night.

Austin could see his breath in front of his face as he trudged back to the munitions shed to get Milo's aid in the search. Milo was busy cleaning up the machine pistol that he'd lifted off of one of the dead inhabitants of this base. He raised his head when Austin rushed in.

"I'd really appreciate a little help out there," Michael said as angry wisps of hot breath escaped from his lips. "I've located an intact Alpha, except for most of the right arm, which is missing. I've pretty much cleared the debris from it, but I need your help."

"What we need are tools to patch the plane back together, and while you were so busy, I took care of that." Milo said hoarsely. Milo took hold of a small portable trolley, wheeling it out towards the fighter. Michael emerged from the munitions shed with two four-packs of protoculture canisters and a one-gallon jug of heavy water and led Swift to the derelict Alpha fighter.

To overcome the black shroud of the night, Michael placed a circle of flares about the damaged plane and that would have to serve as illumination for the few hours of darkness that remained before sunrise. The Alpha fighter lurked over the humans in its vulture-like Guardian mode; its cockpit was stained with a copious amount of dried human blood, and the pilot's spall-studded body clung to the HUD and the front console of the plane. The canopy showed many cracks, but was not shattered. Another noticeable fault of the mecha was that its right arm was blown off at the elbow servos. Structural damage was evident to the fuselage, but Michael wasn't worried about that problem.

"Sensor pod looks intact," Michael pointed out. "I've already found a canopy we can use, Milo. If you could attach it, I'll get started on everything else."

In the time it took for Milo to replace the old canopy, Michael cleaned up the cockpit, heaving the dead body over the side, and fastening on a new ejection seat. Austin had already inserted in the protoculture canisters into the Alpha and had poured the heavy water into the fusion reactors' fuel tanks. He then began to examine some fissures he'd noticed by the intakes, located on the plane's underside.

"All done up here, Commander," Milo cried as he put down the welder. Michael looked up at the cockpit, giving Milo the thumbs-up signal.

Milo clambered down and joined Austin. “Right, I’m going to fire it up, and get a list of all the malfunctions the Alpha’s computer can come up with,” said Michael. “I know we’ve been at this all night, but I doubt we’ve even scratched the surface.”

Milo cleared the area, preferring to watch Austin from a safe distance. Michael climbed up into the cockpit; the canopy jerked shut. After going through the preflight sequence, he ran a diagnostics check on all the systems of the plane, courtesy of the inboard combat computer. The circuitry of the front console crackled while obeying Austin’s preliminary commands. He frowned in dismay at the results of the damage report coming on line: the side hatch of the nose gear was damaged, two missile bays were non-operative, and life support was malfunctioning. This would be a massive undertaking, indeed.

*Well, at least the computer works,* Michael thought optimistically.

Austin converted the resurrected Alpha Guardian into its imposing Battloid mode. It issued forth a series of earsplitting creaks as it transformed, and towered above everything in sight as the first pink wave of dawn appeared on the eastern mountains. Through Michael’s use of the foot pedals, which he noted also needed to be looked into, the Battloid limped out of the illuminating ring of red flares and over to another mound of rubble. Michael could see Swift relocating all the heavy equipment to this new theater of operations. The servos in the Battloid’s legs whined as it bent down and reached into the rubble at its feet. The left arm of the Battloid grasped a large metal limb, a right arm from another Alpha that had been blown off with part of the shoulder and whose hand also held a gun pod.

Milo detached the damaged upper arm from the Alpha and removed the bit of shoulder from the new arm. They went about hooking up the shoulder servos to the torso, although it took them much longer than they expected. Nonetheless, the Alpha’s tactical computer persistently displayed a glitch in one of the electrical systems on the limb. Milo dragged Austin over to recheck the connections.

“I don’t know why the computer’s acknowledging a problem with your hook-up. I don’t see anything wrong with it.”

“Maybe the computer’s messed up,” Milo pondered.

“Great! That’s the one thing I thought was working on this junk heap. I guess Roger will attend to the computer when we get back,” Michael conceded. “Well, take a look at the missile bays after I convert the Alpha back into Guardian mode. I’ll be working on the landing gear hatch,” Michael said.

Michael and Milo toiled on the Alpha fighter through the sunrise, and worked non-stop through the afternoon. Milo struggled with the missile bays, and he had to

manually open the bay doors because the accompanying relay switch circuitry had shorted and burned out. Michael slaved on the hydraulics of the landing gear, a frustrating task that exhausted practically all of his reservoir of patience.

“Damn it! Why can’t I figure this out?” Michael cursed. He put his implements down and stepped away from the massive bulk of the fighter that loomed before him.

“I’m done with the missile bays, Commander.” Milo’s voice announced. Swift uneasily skittered off the Alpha’s massive engines, and plopped down in front of Austin. Milo wiped the rivulets of sweat from his rugged face, and lit up a cigarette.

“Right. Load up the missiles, and then start in on the life support. It looks like a broken pump; that should be easy enough,” Michael estimated. He snatched up the cigarette Milo held out for him.

“Let’s take a breather, boss,” Milo suggested. “This plane ain’t going anywhere.”

“Well,” Michael hesitated, pausing long enough to inhale, “you go ahead, Milo. Get a few a hours of sleep. I’ve made other plans,” he rasped.

Milo shrugged his shoulders, and skulked away; his eyes were already shut by the time he entered the munitions shed. His massive frame curled up on the spread out sleeping bag, and the rush of a haunting breeze was his only other companion as he drifted off into a deep slumber.

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“Jeanne!” Roger’s voice called out.

“Yes, Roger?” Jeanne finished dousing the breakfast fire, and turned her attentions to Pike, who was heaving a Cyclone out into the open, all the while grumbling about a bad back. He set it down before Jeanne, and awaited her approval, before continuing on.

“Is it ready?” Jeanne screeched joyfully. Her stretched smile went from ear to ear. Roger had worked all day yesterday and well into the night on the vehicle, and Jeanne appreciated the effort.

“Yes, I’ve almost finished. Could you put on the armor? I’ve got a few adjustments I need to make in Cyclone armor mode.”

Jeanne put on her battle armor, different from the male version in size, width, and the shape of the chest plate, all for obvious reasons. The shoulder armor on the Cyclone itself was different, being rounded instead of edged, and without the heavy pauldrons covering the upper arms that served as handle covers in motorbike mode. Jeanne looked at the Robotech Cyclone’s only armament: a powerful EP-40 particle beam cannon on the

right front wheel cover. She climbed on, charged it up, and changed it to the battlesuit form. She stood patiently as Roger repaired, modified and adjusted for what seemed like hours.

“How long will it be, Roger?” Jeanne impatiently asked.

“Almost done. I just have to realign the transfiguration systems. They’re running a bit slow. I’ll adjust the timing on the. . .”

“Spare me the details,” Jeanne joked. She hesitated, and found that she had to force herself to speak up. “Do you think Michael and Milo are okay? They’ve been gone a long time, and. . . do you think anything’s happened to them?”

Roger muttered something to himself, “. . . and then attach this jet booster to the wheel. . . darned thing’s jammed again. . . Okay, to the torso harness. . . Did you say something, Jeanne?”

“No. . . Nothing important.” Jeanne lost herself in thought. She couldn’t help but wonder how Michael and Milo were faring out there in the mountains. Then she began to perceive a low sound, far in the distance. Several seconds later, her ears perked up. “Roger. . .” she began.

“Now that I heard,” Roger shouted. The thumping of helicopter rotors over the tree-line was growing ever louder, ever closer. Soon several aircraft became distinct, sounding like a whole battle formation. “We don’t know if they’re friendly or not. Let’s get that camo net over the hovertransport and take cover!”

Jeanne complied quickly and shed her Cyclone armor. As soon as they had the moved the hovertransport closer to the trees and had camouflaged as well as could be expected considering its size, they took shelter under a tree, and waited. Soon, high overhead, five attack choppers flew in from the north-west. Roger held a rugged pair of Southern Cross issue binoculars to his eyes and swore. “Looks like a mix of Commancheros and old Mil-24 Hinds. And they’re armed to the teeth. Shit! I wonder what’s going down.”

“Let’s follow them,” Jeanne suggested.

“Are you crazy? Michael and Milo wanted us to wait here.”

“Look, Roger, you effectively out-rank me, so I can’t order you. But don’t you think this sort of thing is strange and deserves gathering some intelligence on?”

Roger paused briefly in thought, and then swore. “Damn it. Okay. I’ll take Milo’s Cyclone, you take yours; it’s as good as it’ll ever get. I keep a spare transformation chip calibrated for my height somewhere, so making Milo’s fit me shouldn’t be too much trouble.”

“Right. Let’s get the gear we’ll need and follow ‘em.”

Roger watched as Jeanne dashed back for the hovertransport. “Women. They’ll be the death of me, you know,” he told himself before rushing off to join her.

\* \* \*

A sudden stamping of tired feet awoke Swift from his rest, and in a dreary state, he instinctively yanked out his sidearm and focused in on what turned out to be Austin’s pensive face. Milo put the safety on his handgun, and stuffed it back into its holster. Michael sat down in lotus-style in front of the salvaged portable heater that was the centerpiece of these close quarters.

“Jumpy, aren’t you?” Michael asked.

“Only before my morning coffee. . . What time is it?” Milo demanded, his eyes squinting out into the twilight.

“Let’s see. . . Around nineteen hundred hours.” Michael fished through the various articles in his pack. His hands emerged with a sealed bag of photopasteurized food.

“I slept all day? Why didn’t you wake me up?” Milo groaned as he heard his spine pop back into place. Milo went for his almost empty canteen of liquor.

“No use in waking you up, when I could do the repair work myself. At least I finished up,” Austin said between mouthfuls of rations.

“Great, Commander. . . Here have some of this, it’ll make your meal go down smoother,” Milo offered politely. Austin stomached a few sips of the harsh-tasting alcohol before relinquishing the bottle. “So do we fire up the Alpha in the morning, and head on back to Roger and Jeanne?”

“I’ll worry about that later, Milo. Right now, I just want to bask in the glory of what was accomplished today. It’ll really make a big difference having an Alpha around, and more importantly a pilot like myself. Changes the whole scope of what we can take out. Instead of struggling to force an Invid patrol to retreat like before, now our unit will do away with a patrol strength party in five or ten minutes. Why, if we can come across another Alpha and a pilot for it, Milo, I’d even consider taking on a small hive,” Michael said grandiosely.

“Commander, you must be some kind of pilot,” Milo murmured.

“I’ve worked very hard to become so. Milo, I’m going to be perfectly honest here. From the first time I ever sat in a plane’s cockpit, I knew I was meant to be there. Flying came naturally; I never had to work too hard at it. I guess I inherited the talents, instinct, and sharp reflexes from my parents. . .”

“Parents. . .” Milo pondered. “As in Thomas Austin? **The** Thomas Austin?”

“My dad. Never knew him, though.”

“Impressive.”

“But anyway Milo, when I get in a cockpit, I get a feeling, a sensation of ultimate freedom. I get away from everyone, all the rules, my responsibilities, and when I look out, it’s like I have a universe all to my own,” Michael expounded. “What about you, Milo? Have you ever felt you were chosen to do something?”

“Nope. I’ve managed to do nothing in my life but destroy. Lives, property, souls, everything. All I can do is tear things down.”

“I always pitied destruction. It seems so empty. As a kid I loved to create things - I had this huge set of those toy plastic building blocks - but it always hurt to tear them down. So I never did. They just fell apart or were destroyed by others.”

“So then what’s a creative boy like you doing in the service?”

“I was born there. I had no choice. And everyone expects me to live up to my father, to be a great war hero like him. And just what do you have against the men and women of the military, anyway?” Michael challenged.

“Nothing, if you can let old men in sequestered conference rooms play God with your lives. . . I don’t know about the REF, but you wouldn’t believe how many times Supreme Commander Leonard and his idiot staff sent good men and women to die in hopeless gestures, without proper numbers, support, or resources. It’s like the man would bang his head against a wall, and when it started to really hurt, he took that as a sign to bang even harder. That’s how he ran the war against the Robotech Masters, and that’s why when the Invid came, there was nothing left to defend Earth with. Tell me something, Commander; if you’d had your way would you have gone through with the Mars Division offensive?” Milo asked openly.

“No,” Michael whispered softly. It was clear Milo had made his point. “I wanted to stop it, to keep a distance from Earth to harass the Invid and gain reconnaissance while the rest of the fleet could be made ready. I knew that the Invid were here in far greater numbers than top brass ever imagined. No one believed me. They were so eager for victory that they never really considered the possibility of defeat.”

“I have no problem with the backbone of the military: the soldiers and the field officers. It’s just that the military is the only thing more efficient at destruction than anything else to hit this planet. . . Other than the Zentraedi.”

“Your point is taken, Milo, but the military’s intent isn’t to destroy everything in it’s path. The REF was supposed to be a peace envoy, until the Invid attacked us. Thousands of soldiers lost their lives bringing liberty to dozens of occupied worlds, and

when we try to free our own planet, this is the thanks we get,” Michael said.

“Then maybe you shouldn’t have left Earth in the first place,” Milo chimed back. “If you hadn’t, maybe the Invid wouldn’t have the run of it.”

Michael shrugged, and looked away.

\* \* \*

Jeanne watched as Roger’s Cyclone disappeared over a small hill. Without much riding experience, she found herself often falling behind, and trying to negotiate the patches of scrub that littered their path didn’t make things any easier. The helicopters were long out of sight, but they were running with radar at full strength, and were easy to track with the Cyclones’ passive sensors. They had hovered in one place for several minutes, and then had moved off at full speed out of their mecha’s range.

Eventually Jeanne caught up to Roger, who had stopped near where their prey had tarried earlier, and looked over a grizzly scene. “Jeanne, close and seal your helmet and switch on the air filter,” she heard Roger say over the headset radio. “You can’t breathe the air down there.”

Jeanne complied, feeling the Cyclone helmet’s neck seal inflating, pressing tightly against her larynx. She spied down into the small valley they overlooked.

Almost two hundred recently dead corpses lay strewn in the field. They were surrounded by wagons and gear, as if the whole group were refugees of some sort. There were also signs of a panic, and Jeanne noticed a thin greenish haze clung tightly to the valley floor, floating over the bodies. She turned to Roger, but he anticipated her question.

“Chlorine. They saturated the whole valley with the stuff. Some son of a bitch gassed these poor people,” he said in disgust.

“The choppers?”

“Right. What I want to know is why. Come on, if you think you can take it.”

Roger led Jeanne down carefully down into the valley. Men and women of all ages lay about, contorted in utter agony, bloody tissue coughed from their lungs lying in pools in front of their faces. Even children lay there, their faces frozen in their last dying screams. Jeanne suddenly began to feel extremely ill.

“These people were going somewhere. Look; the whole village was fleeing something,” Roger said, examining some of the bodies more closely.

“I wonder what. And why would anyone want to kill them? And who’d want to do it?” Jeanne asked.

Roger looked at an open patch of skin on one of the victims. "I don't know who. But I think I know why. These people were dead already. Look," he said, pointing to an older man's arm.

Jeanne looked closely; several buboes were apparent on the man's flesh.

"Look around," Roger said. "Several of them have it."

"Plague carriers?"

"Plague carriers. I've heard it's made a comeback in some areas in the east, but I had no idea it had made it this far west; someone didn't want to risk their coming into town."

"Were they fleeing the plague?" Jeanne asked.

"I doubt it; if they were, they'd have left their sick behind. Maybe they were running **to** something, not away from it."

"Where?"

"Let's find out. Follow me."

\* \* \*

Austin had taken over from Milo, relieving Swift from a boring four-hour watch. Austin's six hour vigil was rolling along very slowly and very uneventfully. During the watch, the only sounds that disturbed the stillness of the night was Swift's dream-induced gibberish. Michael would frequently glance in the direction of the Alpha fighter to assure himself it was still present. The blackness of night cloaked the Alpha fighter so well that Michael actually paced the distance between the plane and the munitions shed to physically touch the plane.

"Just you and me, sweet thing," Michael promised. He lovingly stroked the Alpha's underbelly, and decided on continuing his watch from atop its wings.

Dawn was only a thousand rambling thoughts away for Michael. He pondered his predicament with Jeanne. He knew maintaining an veneer of professionalism in front of her and in front of the group would be quite a test of his character. On the ship, he could always isolate himself from Jeanne, and there were always other women. But now, the situation favored Jeanne because he would have to confront her every day. Every single day.

Morning spilled through the Alps, as the atmosphere absorbed nourishing sunlight and the veil of blackness withered away, yielding to the white-specked blue of another day. Michael slid off the Alpha and stretched his arms out before the burning orb that capped the most prominent mountain to the east.

“Well, I’d better rouse Swift,” Michael said. He ducked his head into the entrance, and scowled at the snoring mass at his feet, and at its accompanying uncorked canteen of liquor.

“Good morning, Private. I trust you slept well,” Michael said with exaggerated volume. “We’ve got work to do, so get moving.”

Milo reluctantly crawled out of the sleeping bag, and stretched his neck a few times, trying to work out the crick he’d put in it during the night. Austin took this time to quell the dissonant grumbling in his stomach by devouring another granola bar. Michael considered opening up some of his irradiated self-contained rations, but Milo was already heaving some of the supplies out of the shed.

\* \* \*

*Our most recent patrols failed to confirm the presence of the Robotech dissidents. Therefore, it is plausible that they have already reached the abandoned Robotech stronghold and are attempting to acquire mecha and weapons. Our duty is to vanquish the opposition at all costs. Show no regard for the existing structures or other potential humans on the premises. Serve the Regis well,* the leader of the raiding party telepathically relayed to her accompanying cluster of eighteen *Iigaa* and six *Gurab* mecha.

The raiding party streamed over the serene white slopes of the mountains, some skimming low enough to kick up a plume of snow as the mecha past over. The armored purplish Gurab in the lead locked onto the base and deployed its subordinates, all the while bearing down on the coordinates of faint protoculture emissions.

Points of lights winked to life from the cannon housing atop the leader’s mecha’s torso. The adolescent sub-queen in command found the scent of battle intoxicating; it had whipped the whole raiding party into a blind frenzy, and it was a major motivation behind the leader’s first strafing run.

\* \* \*

“Jesus, will you look at that!” Milo gasped in shock. The malignant swarm of Invid mecha had caught him by surprise, both from their numbers and strength. Michael was already up in the cockpit, yelling at Swift to find some cover. The Alpha fighter’s engines whined to life; Michael wasted no time in taking off, and rising up to meet the

oncoming wave of the enemy.

The ground shuddered with explosions, sending Swift sprawling toward the munitions shed. The world spun wildly for Milo, as a threesome of reddish Iigaa delighted in plastering the environs with a continuous stream of cannon fire.

*If I can just make it to the shed.* Milo desperately scrambled back to his feet. He still brandished his trusty guns, but the situation called for a little more firepower. Another upheaval ensued, raining debris all over the munitions shed. He judiciously glanced over his shoulder only to spy the trio bearing down hard and fast to deliver another devastating barrage.