

Alternate Law

Robby Montgomery

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A New Era of Warfare

The great pacification wars marked a turning point in the history of mankind, as the Star League Defense Forces (SLDF) fought to bring the outer sphere under their protective umbrella. As the outer sphere planets were founded following the discovery of the Benson-Finemen drive, the United Nations (later known as Star League) closely monitored these new colonies. Unfortunately, due to the distances involved and the limitations of subliminal communications, these planets fell into the hands of feudal monarchies.

Cultivating unified cultures on the outer rim proved difficult, as orders and data from the inner core could be centuries out of date by the time they reached the rim. This resulted in the development of diverse civilizations and people, making it harder for the Star League to bring them under its fold.

Following the unification of the inner core by the founding members of Star League, the SLDF set out to incorporate the outer rim planets. However, a total war approach was deemed inappropriate, as the planets needed to retain their capacity for life and production.

Initial peaceful efforts were met with overwhelming force, as the fiercely independent inhabitants of the outer rim resisted Star League's overtures. Lacking heavy weapons, they turned to their versatile construction mechs to fashion a new form of mobile artillery and frontline combat forces. Long dismissed as impractical by the inner core, these repurposed mechs were put to devastating use in hit-and-run attacks on SLDF armor columns.

Caught off guard by the effectiveness of these makeshift mechs, Star League found itself in an arms race, scrambling to match the outer rim's forces. In response, the SLDF initiated the GUNSLINGER (GNSLNGR) program, aimed at producing elite pilots capable of handling the advanced combat mechs designed by Star League.

The GNSLNGR program sought to create heavily augmented pilots who could withstand the intense forces generated by the refined SLDF mechs. These augmented pilots were expensive to produce, but their skills and prowess in battle were considered invaluable in the effort to pacify the outer rim.

As the war raged on, the GNSLNGR pilots became legends, their sacrifices and unmatched courage turning the tide in favor of the Star League. These men and women willingly gave everything in their quest to bring unity and stability to the outer sphere, ultimately playing a pivotal role in the resolution of the conflict.

Despite the heavy cost, the Star League's efforts to subdue the outer rim planets served as a catalyst for technological advancements that would shape the future of warfare. The integration of construction mechs into military operations paved the way for a new era of mechanized warfare, while the GNSLNGR program produced generations of skilled pilots who would go on to dominate the battlefield.

The events of the great pacification wars demonstrated the importance of adaptability and ingenuity in times of conflict. As Star League and the outer rim planets struggled to assert their dominance, both sides were forced to innovate and evolve their strategies, leading to the development of groundbreaking new technologies and tactics.

Ultimately, the hard-fought battles and sacrifices made during these wars served as a reminder of the strength and resilience of humanity in the face of adversity. As the dust settled, the outer rim planets and the Star League found themselves forever changed, forced to acknowledge the importance of cooperation and mutual understanding.

In the years that followed, the lessons learned from the great pacification wars would shape the course of human history. The once disparate outer rim planets were gradually incorporated into the Star League, forging a more unified and prosperous interstellar community. The legacy

of the GNSLNGR pilots lived on, inspiring new generations of warriors to push the boundaries of their potential in the name of peace and progress.

And so, the Star League, bolstered by the courage and dedication of its elite GNSLNGR pilots, continued to expand its reach and influence throughout the galaxy, ushering in an era of unprecedented exploration, discovery, and collaboration.

Chapter 1

Echoes of a Fractured Past

"Star League Above All" - the phrase on the faded poster stirred vivid memories within him. He recalled a pristine version of the poster hanging proudly outside the recruiter's office. A distant gunshot snapped him back to reality. Curiously, the poster had remained on this world despite the SLDF's loss. But then he remembered that this planet had only fallen under the Rim World League's control a mere week ago. SLDF forces still held pockets of resistance. Hopeful, they must have believed their distress signals would be heeded. His waypoint indicated the destination from his fixer was less than half a kilometer away.

Descending the stairs towards his waypoint, he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror along the angled ceiling. His two orange ocular gimbals stared back at him. The intense orange light masked the gentle curves of his helmet, styled after an old Stahlhelm. His face bore a resemblance to old Earth S.A.S. special forces gas masks, filtering out the tobacco-stained air before it reached his reprocessor. As he entered the bar, the sensation of breathing felt for-

eign to the superhuman.

The door creaked open, and his augmetics screamed. "Why does it always feel like a panic attack?" he mused. He ordered a whiskey, and the bartender's presence reminded him of another bartender from a different time. The clink of the glass against his graphene hand brought him back to the present. A shake of his head cleared his mind, and he focused on the task at hand.

The lower half of his faceplate whirred and clunked open, revealing skeletal teeth covered in a thin black membrane. He poured the drink into his transhuman mouth, which snapped shut once more. The familiar shakiness and tingling from his augmetics subsided for the moment. He activated the IFF frequency for a brief 0.2 seconds, a relatively long time considering the inferior tech the Rim World League had. A ping led him to a seat in the back left corner of the bar.

The waypoint hovered above a conventionally attractive woman sitting in the corner booth. Her round face and large eyes triggered the release of oxytocin in his brain, inducing feelings of arousal. However, the remaining nanomachines in his blood quickly initiated their programmed protocols, and the sensations dissipated. It was a cruel joke considering the modifications to his body had left him physically incapable of acting on those feelings. Thanks to the fiber optic replacements for most of his neurons and dendrites, these fleeting sensations lasted only a fraction of a second.

The woman's left eye flashed the handshake code in binary, and they established a secure communication channel. The data package she sent was instantly interpreted by his silicon substrate and integrated into his hard storage. Shocked by the contents, his lenses widened, and he nearly dropped the morphine needle from the port-a-cath in his arm. "A fucking SLDF research facility," he muttered under his breath, inadvertently broadcasting the word "CUNT" through his speakers. His malfunctioning

social scanners detected only a quarter of the eyes in the room staring at him, but in his experience, it should have been more. The woman in the corner shot him a displeased look. Shrugging in her direction, he sent the binary code to accept the contract.

No longer needing to impress, he ordered four of the cheapest and strongest grain alcohols before stumbling out of the bar. He recalled driving to the bar, but then remembered that was just his imagination - a side effect of the five everclears and gram of intravenous morphine coursing through his veins. The morphine, taken from a dead medic he had encountered earlier, combined with the alcohol to intoxicate him thoroughly.

He staggered up the stairs and collapsed onto the street. The job he just secured would provide enough nanomachine boosters to keep him going until he could repair his embedded nano-foundries, or so he hoped. The majority of his current ailments stemmed from the disrepair of his augmented body.

Having washed out of the GUNSLINGER program, they had disabled his nanomachine foundries and limited his augmetics to Star League civilian standards. If not for the desperate need for cannon fodder during the end of the first Unification War, he wouldn't have been able to fake his death when his world was nuked. With more than a day before the operation, he decided to sleep off the dangerous combination of narcotics and alcohol in his bloodstream. His broken toxin filters failed to purge the drug cocktail from his body. The nearest hotel with cyborg accommodations was too far for his liking. Instead, he chose to collapse on the street. It's not like he could feel the rain on his skin anyway.

As he drifted into unconsciousness, his mind wandered back to the violence of his past. The vivid dreams that followed were more like memories resurfacing. In his sleep, he relived a particularly brutal battle from years ago, when he was still part of the GUNSLINGER program.

The scene unfolded before him: a war-torn city, buildings reduced to rubble and smoke filling the air. He and his squad were pinned down by enemy fire, and the sound of bullets ricocheting off the debris was deafening. He could feel the adrenaline surging through him as it had on that fateful day.

His augmetics were in peak condition back then, and he moved with incredible speed and precision. He remembered leaping from cover, his graphene hands crushing the throat of an enemy soldier. The rush of combat was intoxicating, and he reveled in his role as a deadly weapon. He moved from one opponent to the next, dispatching them with ruthless efficiency.

But even in his dream, the brutality of war weighed heavily on him. As the battle raged on, the bodies of fallen comrades and enemies alike began to pile up around him. He saw the lifeless eyes of a fellow GUNSLINGER, a man who had once saved his life, staring back at him. The chaos and destruction were overwhelming, but there was no time for grief or reflection.

He pressed forward, his objective clear in his mind. The SLDF forces were on the brink of a significant victory, and he was a critical part of their strategy. But the cost of that victory haunted him, even in his unconscious state.

The dream shifted, and he found himself standing before the charred remains of a once-vibrant city. The smell of death and destruction hung thick in the air. The screams of the wounded and dying echoed through the ruins, punctuated by the distant sound of gunfire.

As he looked around, the faces of the people he had killed – both enemies and innocent civilians caught in the crossfire – stared accusingly back at him. He knew that each life he had taken left an indelible mark on his soul, and the weight of his actions weighed heavily.

Chapter 2

Awakening the Sleeping Giant

The transport truck jolted, its recoil rippling through the vehicle and shaking the slumbering passengers. As the conscript's vision cleared, he took in the array of personnel on board. While the non-augmented soldiers appeared equally startled, their cybernetic counterparts remained unfazed. Their mechanical calmness offered a semblance of stability amidst the chaos.

The conscript, a recent recruit in the Machine God's army, found himself awestruck by the advanced technology of the Greater Caliphate of the Machine, one of the five members of the Rim Worlds League. As descendants of the administrative staff on the worlds first conquered by the Star League, their mission was to spread the life-saving medical technology and advancements that the Star League had abandoned. Over time, they separated themselves from the main body of Star League, disillusioned by the increasingly violent and desperate subjugation of the Rim Worlds.

As the convoy rolled up to the marked waypoint, they found the mercenary they were supposed to pick up sprawled

on the sidewalk. The lorry's brakes squealed, and the seemingly lifeless figure began to right itself. The conscript's imagination had not prepared him for the sight of one of the Machine God's chosen, an alluring cyborg bristling with holy augmentics. It stirred something within him, a fascination rooted in the adult entertainment he had consumed as a youth, featuring actors with similar enhancements.

However, the cyborg's movements betrayed an uncharacteristic clumsiness, reminiscent of the intoxicated denizens of the conscript's hometown. The sloppy and wide gestures were unnerving, unlike the precise motions of the Machine God's chosen that he had come to admire. As the cyborg stumbled onto the transport, it slurred, "Just because they took my penis doesn't mean I can't be hungover." The bizarre statement bewildered everyone in the seating area. The post-human leaned over the edge of the truck and retched, the sound akin to emptying a gallon of milk onto concrete.

The merc extended his hand expectantly, and the conscript watched as the squad lieutenant dropped a booster into his palm. The cyborg wasted no time, jamming the booster into his left arm with fervor. A hiss emanated from the syringe as it emptied, and the mercenary tossed it aside with a metallic clink. Moments later, his entire body went limp, and the lights on his armor flickered off. The expressions of the onlookers shifted from confusion to concern.

The conscript couldn't help but notice the tattered appearance of the merc's augmentations, the neglect evident in every inch of his cybernetic enhancements. Suddenly, the cyborg's body entered a quick service mode, shutting off most systems to rapidly repair the most critical damage.

Despite his unkempt state, the conscript realized that this cyborg was a masterpiece of technology, far surpassing anything he had seen on the Rim. Even the highest-

ranking clergy members paled in comparison to this awe-inspiring specimen. To possess such augmentations, the cyborg must have belonged to the upper echelons of the caliphate, yet he had been found in a gutter. The conscript shook the baffling thoughts from his mind, focusing instead on the immense potential for destruction that lay dormant within the mercenary. This being was a god among men, capable of unleashing unparalleled violence.

As the journey continued, the conscript observed the cyborg with a mix of curiosity and reverence. The other passengers exchanged nervous glances, their unease palpable. The atmosphere in the transport grew tense, the air heavy with anticipation. They all knew that they were in the presence of something extraordinary, but the full extent of the cyborg's abilities remained shrouded in mystery.

The conscript couldn't shake the feeling that he was on the cusp of something monumental, a turning point in the ongoing conflict that would reshape the very fabric of their world. As the transport truck rumbled onwards, the sleeping giant at its core lay dormant, waiting for the moment to unleash its fury upon the unsuspecting enemies of the Machine God. The conscript could only hope that when that moment came, he would be ready to witness the true power of this god among men.

Chapter 3

Shattered Illusions

The repair suites had finished directing the new influx of nanites to mend the most compromised systems in the merc's body. Nanite boosters compatible with SLDF tech had become increasingly scarce as the RWL pushed deeper into Star League space. The damage inflicted on his augs was so extensive that the booster had depleted before all of his systems were repaired. The artificial parts of his brain initiated the wake-up sequence, and sensation gradually returned to his frontal lobe. Though still not functioning at full capacity, he felt better than he had in months. The display in his vision was no longer fuzzy or cluttered with broken HUD elements, and the toxin scrubbers had entirely eliminated his hangover.

His carbon nanotube muscle fibers still adhered to civilian standards, but the lag in command response was gone. Most wouldn't notice the sluggishness in his augment's responsiveness, but it was a world of difference for the post-human. If it hadn't been for the snapshot recorded by his hard storage, he would have had no idea where he was. The social analyzer now correctly registered the number of eyes watching him in the truck. The bewildered expressions on their faces concerned him more than he would have liked.

The waypoint pinged for the base they intended to raid.

The young conscript beside him spoke up, "Are you okay? You were passed out for three hours."

"Yeah, sorry about that. Deep repair can take some time," the merc replied. "So, how long has it been since your last service shot?" he asked the conscript.

The merc was impressed; not many people could spot the effects of withdrawal on someone with augments as advanced as his. "A bit," he murmured, knowing that his answer might not instill confidence in the kid, but hoping they weren't perceptive enough to pick up on that. The conscript continued to stare at him, dumbfounded.

"I'm just here for the paycheck, not to watch over all this meat. Don't expect any special treatment beyond the contract."

The disrepair had left him at 75% combat efficacy, even after the booster. While still a formidable force compared to the average cyborg, he was burdened enough not to guarantee the safety of everyone on this job. He didn't want his companions to feel safe or complacent because even with a small fortune's worth of enhancements packed into one body, he couldn't protect them all like he once could. The malfunctioning mono-crystalline carbon blade that failed to open served as a stark reminder.

"You know, my CO was pretty concerned when she saw you collapsed outside that bar," the conscript mentioned.

"Well, yeah," the merc responded, "it's cheaper than a hotel." The rest of the transport stared at him. "That's why I had my body mutilated – for the money! What about you guys?"

It probably wasn't the best idea to antagonize the people who would provide cover during a firefight. The groans and hushed whispers made the merc regret his candidness, and he could no longer blame it on the morphine, as his scrubbers had long since eliminated it. The ping on the

map representing their destination was rapidly approaching. The leader of the outfit he was attached to began to corral the troops. If he still had lungs, the sigh of relief would have been audible.

Most of his humanity was long gone, and conversations not carried out via tight beam were laborious, even Herculean tasks at times. As the transport vehicle neared its destination, the tension in the air thickened. The conscripts and the merc alike steeled themselves for the challenges that lay ahead. The looming SLDF research base held an air of mystery, its defenses unknown to them. It had been many years since the merc had access to Star League tight beams, and the uncertainty weighed heavily on his shoulders.

Chapter 4

Descent into Darkness

The merc knew they were less than 30 seconds from their destination. He broadcast a message in the direction of the young conscript sitting next to him. "What's your name?" the post-human asked.

"Therin," the conscript replied, his voice quivering slightly.

"If things get heavy, stick with me. I'll... do my best to make sure we get out of here." Therin was dumbfounded. Why would one of the Machine Gods' chosen protect him? What had he done to deserve such consideration?

The screech of the worn-out brakes announced their arrival at the destination. The merc was the first to disembark from the transport, leading the way as the squad knew he was responsible for navigating them past the defenses of the abandoned SLDF base. Their objective was approximately 2.4 kilometers down the main shaft of the base. The entire layout was designed around a central shaft that descended deep into the planet's strata. The team conducted systems checks on their equipment; Therin's system flashed green, signaling that the descent was about to

commence.

Part of the merc's contract included finding an efficient route down the main shaft of the facility. He was familiar with similar SLDF bases, where more volatile experiments were often housed at the base of the main shaft. The merc's internal systems automatically flagged and attempted to connect with the local network of the base.

Chapter 5

Unveiling Secrets

As the elevator descended into the depths of the mine shaft, the details of the assignment flickered across Therin's vision. Their main objective was referred to as Project B.B., an ambitious SLDF experiment that sought to house two separate consciousnesses within a single brain. This was the reason the merc was here. No other neural suite in the Rim Worlds League could harness such technology. They needed the merc's advanced augmetics to accommodate the secondary intelligence and consciousness.

Unbeknownst to the merc, the team carried anti-Borg weapons, prepared to subdue him and extract the SLDF's tech more easily if necessary. According to the research RWL had acquired on the project, it had been abandoned due to issues of stability within the subjects.

As the elevator brakes screeched to a halt, Therin could hear the hum of the nonlinear rifles loaded with anti-Borg munitions starting to spool up. Anxiety churned in his gut, and he couldn't help but feel a pang of guilt for the deception. He was the last of the group to leave the elevator, and his gaze lingered on the sign above the horizontal shaft that read 'Bicameral Research.'

The squad leader issued pings on the coordinates pro-

vided to the group. They proceeded in hushed communication, the merc taking point and leading them down the dimly lit, oppressive tunnel. The air grew colder and heavier as they ventured further, the weight of secrets and hidden agendas pressing down on them like a tangible force. The walls of the tunnel seemed to close in, as if the very structure of the base sought to conceal its dark experiments from the world above.

As they progressed, the merc's senses were on high alert, his advanced systems scanning for any signs of danger. His emotions were a mix of determination, anticipation, and wariness. Despite his outward confidence, he couldn't shake the feeling that something was amiss. The fact that the base had been so easily accessible gnawed at the edges of his mind. The merc's intuition told him that they were walking into a situation far more complex than a simple retrieval mission.

Therin, on the other hand, felt the weight of the impending deception bearing down on him. He was torn between his loyalty to the group and the respect he had developed for the merc during their short time together. The air seemed to grow thicker with each step, making it harder to breathe, as though the base itself was constricting around his conscience.

As they drew closer to their objective, the tunnels became more labyrinthine, and the sense of unease grew. The merc's suspicion and Therin's moral conflict threatened to suffocate them both, as they delved deeper into the bowels of the base, inching closer to the truth that lay hidden within its depths.

Chapter 6

Operation Second Chance

The echoes of McGillis's dreams clung to him like remnants of an old legend. They featured the fabled gunslingers of the Star League, the very heroes that had saved him from the suffocating, barely breathable atmosphere of Mars when the Northern Martian Emirates had collapsed. The memories of his rescue were a source of warmth and solace amid the harsh reality of his existence. The sudden blaring of alarms signaled the awakening of the gunslinger unit on the vessel, stirring them from the cold embrace of stasis. The world they were about to land on loomed ominously ahead.

For McGillis, the awakening process was akin to flipping a switch. With only a fraction of his organic form remaining, primarily his torso, face, and frontal cortex, the transition from stasis to full consciousness was almost seamless. The Star League could have entirely replaced the human body with cybernetic counterparts, but experience had taught them that retaining some semblance of humanity was crucial to preserving mental stability in their soldiers.

The mission objectives had been uploaded during their time in cryo. A Star League research base on this planet had been compromised, hastily abandoned as it fell into the hands of the RWL. The nuclear fail-safe had failed to trigger due to outdated Star League crypto keys. Now, McGillis and the rest of the expeditionary force were tasked with correcting this grave error. Isolated deep behind enemy lines, the team could rely only on the resources they had brought with them.

The gunslingers needed no verbal communication. Their augmentations allowed them to share a single consciousness, creating a hive mind that operated with perfect synchronicity. Information gathered by one soldier was instantly transmitted to the entire unit. This neural link provided the gunslingers with unparalleled coordination, making them nearly invincible in tactical combat.

As McGillis emerged from his cryo tube, the team was already synchronized and preparing for their drop onto the planet's surface. They would need to pilot their mechs during the descent, as a larger ship would alert the enemy to their presence. The primary objective was to secure the volatile research projects left behind in the abandoned base. If they failed to secure the projects, they were to detonate a new nuclear device to ensure the contents remained out of enemy hands.

The one-way drop had its risks, but the gunslingers relied on advanced magnetic field manipulation technology to guide their mechs safely through the atmosphere. The virtual intelligence system worked at breakneck speed, directing the plasma fields that formed around the mechs during reentry. The magnetic turbines, channeled through the plasma shields standard to most Star League mechs, provided more than enough power for a safe landing, without taxing the reactor.

As they descended, the world below seemed to grow larger and more daunting, but McGillis and his team were resolute. They were the best of the best, and they would

complete their mission, no matter the cost.

Chapter 7

Into the Heart of the Enemy

As the mercenary group ventured deeper into the mine shaft, the rough walls transformed into sleek metallic surfaces reminiscent of the old Star League research bases. They stopped before a door marked "Bi-Cameral Integration," a term that sounded familiar to the mercenary, but the depth they had reached made it impossible to check any database not stored within his own system. Surprisingly, his 40-year-old Star League codes still granted him access to the door.

Upon opening the door, the mercenary sent a tight-beam signal to give the all-clear to the rest of the squad. As each receiver registered the pulsed infrared laser, the squad fell into line. They followed the objective marker on his HUD, but the contract terms were ambiguous. The only clear instructions were to reach the room and then await further instructions from the operations director. The mercenary shrugged off the secrecy as he sliced through the last door before their destination.

The room revealed a mass of hanging cables and components, all converging on a seat that seemed tailor-made

for him. A sensation he hadn't felt in ages crept up from where his gut used to be, making him uneasy. The sound of railgun rounds being chambered behind him confirmed his suspicions: "Goddammit."

His memory was hazy, but he recalled the chair from long ago, where he had sacrificed most of his humanity. The augmentation process had required him to remain conscious and without pain relief so that each nerve fiber could be accurately mapped and traced for the augments to integrate properly. Every poke, prod, and snip had been amplified in intensity, absent the protective layers of skin that normally deadened pain. As the memory of the initial bite of pain resurfaced, he snapped back to the present, unwilling to relive the entire experience. The people who had hired him intended to force him into that chair and perform whatever outdated procedures they had in mind. Operating at only 75

Chapter 8

The Drop

As the ship maneuvered into a low orbit around the planet, Macgillis began running primary pre-drop diagnostics on his mech. The primary check returned green, so he initiated the secondary and tertiary checks automatically. The Bicameral link with his partner, Fareed, established, and the status light in his HUD turned green. This was a priority one task, and having two Gunslingers leading the operation provided a considerable force multiplier, given the advanced augments inside them. The remaining members of their team consisted of support staff, mechanics, and soldiers meant to deter enemy forces.

With a relatively light contingent for such a high-priority task, Macgillis wasn't surprised, considering the Star League was beginning to feel the pressure from their enemies. As the mech's system checks completed, the mission clock indicated ten minutes until atmospheric insertion. Macgillis and Fareed would be the first on the planet, and if all went as planned, they would be all that was needed. Backup would consist of mechanics, recovery personnel, and a platoon of ground troops to support the deployed mechs if necessary. As this mission was supposed to be discreet, they had to operate with limited support from the Star

League Defense Force (SLDF) contingent they had brought with them.

The mission brief specified they were to recover an early prototype of the bi-cameral brain lance, currently employed by Gunslingers like Macgillis and Fareed. Macgillis pondered the numerous advantages the instantaneous link to his comrades' thoughts, senses, and feelings provided. If Star League's enemies gained access to this technology, the consequences would be dire. With a world to land on, Macgillis shook off the thought.

As the drop bays below whirled and clanked, servos began to dilate the bays. Beneath them lay a mostly barren red world, the crimson sand covering most of the landscape. The only visible signs of life were the dome-enclosed habitats, fit for those without augmented anatomy. It dawned on Macgillis that their presence here was not only to arm the failed nuke and recover the prototype but also to confront any potential threats. Decently modified cyborgs could pose a danger even to a platoon of regular troops. The cost of deploying two Gunslingers and their supporting equipment late in the war signaled the immense importance of this mission.

Chapter 9

Forced Revelation

Therein had a rough idea of what was expected of him based on the mission docket he had received back at base. Following the conquest of this world, the Machine Gods' Caliphate had discovered a hidden Star League Research base. Seismic sonar and ground-penetrating radar were the only means of detecting it, and no records in the recovered files of the planetary governor mentioned its existence. This was a black site, and the only related word they were able to uncover was "bi-cameral."

The mercenary rejected the squad leader's initial tight-beam contact. "FINE," the squad leader barked at the merc. "You, of all people, should appreciate the Machine God's elimination of babble with the one holy TOUNGE!" She finished the sentence with her arms outstretched. "Even if you reject His word, you will do His will." The voice left the underused speakers embedded in the squad leader, and her words lagged as the software struggled to translate the infrared pulses of tight beams into Star League Standard. "You will reveal to us what they have stolen." The order to raise weapons reached Therein via a tight beam, and they raised their railgun.

The mercenary scanned the room one last time, likely

searching for any somewhat survivable escape route. Therein knew it must not have been pleasant for the being before them, but this was the Machine God's will. Why did the mercenary hesitate? This was for the betterment of all, not just those in the room. Surely they knew the potential benefits the technology could bring to the world. Therein began to fantasize about the people they would save, his family no longer suffering, and...twhummp. Therein looked up as the mercenary's left leg was blown off completely by the blast of the nonlinear rifle.

The most robust member of the squad picked up the one-legged torso and threw it into the chair. "Those anti-borg rounds suck, don't they?" the squad leader mockingly addressed the mercenary as the strong men forced connections into the ports around his body. "Star League trash." As the last of the plugs were installed, the mercenary's head, which had been swinging wildly, suddenly locked eyes on Therein. The warm red glow of the circles representing the merc's eyes was emotionless behind the hard metal mask. The mercenary held Therein's gaze for an unsettling length of time.

BANG! "Shit, we got SLDF signatures two clicks down the shaft!" the rear guard shouted. The squad leader slammed the console next to the contraption the mercenary was hooked up to. The loud hum of electrical power filled the room as the dull roar of plasma thrusters approached them from down the shaft. "DIG IN!" were the last spoken words from the squad leader before they switched back to tight-beam communication.

Chapter 10

Unexpected Firepower

McGillis watched the distance to the waypoint shrink as he throttled the plasma thrusters propelling the mech down the shaft. The thermal cameras mounted on the hammer-head shark-like head detected heat signatures. A single mass in the center of the room was emitting an incredible amount of heat. The soft AI embedded in the mech automatically lowered the intensity to avoid blinding the pilot. The aero brakes engaged as the computer handled most of the complex aspects of the landing. McGillis felt the mech's feet touch the quarried rock below as if they were his own limbs. The heat signature sharpened enough to reveal about 20 individual heat signatures of varying intensity. As his embedded processor began cataloging the contacts, a railgun round tore through Farheed's cockpit.

The enhancement drugs took effect less than a millisecond after the soft AI registered the friendly KIA. McGillis' shields were unprimed—an unfortunate mistake. This was beyond the data he had been given. Man-portable firepower capable of punching clean through a Gunslinger-pattern mech was unheard of outside the Inner Sphere.

Reflexive combat protocols kicked in, forcing McGillis to dive into an adjacent mine shaft. It was a dead end, but the opponents' weapons wouldn't be able to penetrate the meters of marble.

The mech's chin-mounted anti-personnel cannon clanked out of its low-profile mounting. The boosters, directly connected to McGillis' cortex, doubled their infusion rate. The first round in the cannon was primed and ready as he rounded the corner into the line of fire.

Chapter 11

Invasive Presence

The first thing he could remember was static—like the snow on ancient television sets. Nothing but that incomprehensible snow, then the feeling in his body returned. The sensation was similar to the snow he saw in his eyes: every bit as random and cold, but translated into fire that ran along what still constituted his nerves. Screaming was futile, as whatever had been done to him had crippled his ability to communicate; the connections to the speakers embedded in his faceplate wouldn't comply with his transduced commands.

The feeling and control returned excruciatingly slowly; each millimeter of regained sensation felt like molten iron being poured into his nerves before solidifying. A normal human would black out from the unbearable pain he felt in that moment, but the artificial parts of his brain didn't allow for that. He had to feel every inch of his nervous system being rewritten. If he could speak, wailing cries and extended moans would be all he could produce, but whatever was tampering with his nerves had no intention of letting him scream his pain away. The world outside him was completely unknowable.

The entity inside his mind became clearer as the or-

ganic parts of his frontal lobes fought off the intrusive presence. The silicon substrate of his brain was being forcibly altered by whatever Star League augment suites had infected him. As his substrate was rewritten, the nature of what was boring through the merc's brain dawned on him. It wasn't a soft intelligence like the ones that would consolidate and monitor the systems on his mech. It was entirely different—an intelligent and conscious mind of its own, a separate being that had been shoved into the space between the merc's artificial neurons. It was difficult for him to maintain a strong sense of self, even on the best of days.

Chapter 12

Aftermath

The merc awoke in a completely silent room. The immediate area around him was just as pristine as he had remembered before he blacked out, but the rest of the room told a different story. Blood and bits of metal embedded in the wall indicated that he had woken up after one hell of a firefight.

As his head swiveled around the room, his embedded system cataloged all the dead bodies and bullet holes even before he consciously thought about it. The response was much faster than he was used to, up to half a second in some instances faster than his normal hardware. He no longer had to delegate certain equations to his embedded CPU. The solutions to the equations were instantly processed and integrated into his heads-up display with no effort on the merc's part.

The only threat his sweep detected was on the other side of the room. As soon as the coarse radar pinged the active fusion core, fine detail cameras embedded in his ocular stalks instantly scanned the barcode on the contact's breastplate. A gunslinger. "Shit," accidentally escaped the merc's speakers. The quick movement of the contact's head drew all of the merc's focus immediately in the direc-

tion of the other SLDF cyborg.

The merc was completely outgunned. Even if he were at 100 percent, the odds would still be in his opponent's favor. The gunslinger before him was a few revisions ahead of the mercenary and had a full flush of nanites inside his augmetics, not working with four-year-old battlefield-scavenged emergency hypos. The hum of his opponent's sidearm was as clear as a jet taking off. An instinctual roll to the right behind a console saved him from the round that tore a trail through the air where his brain had just been. The merc pulled his old revolver with a coil accelerator, a magnetic accelerator retrofitted onto his old Smith and Wesson X-frame. His reaction time was an order of magnitude better than he had remembered before waking up.

He no longer had to waste energy on his plasma shields to disintegrate the incoming projectiles; he just dodged them. Whatever had been put into him allowed for the tiniest changes in heat across his opponents to reveal as much as reading their mind. What muscle bundles were activating, what lobes of the artificial brain were under heavy or light load, all were laid bare. The merc vaulted into his enemy's chest just as the last round in his foe's pistol went off, marking the wall to the left.

The kick launched his opponent a ways back. The merc sprinted over to the dazed figure in front of him. He noticed multiple wounds in his foe's chest plate, probably from all the merc's dead squadmates. The black ooze of Star League standard nanite-impregnated, improved O2 carrier leaked from its head down to the legs. The enemy gunslinger was laid flat on its back, clutching its chest. The figure's other hand went up reflexively as the merc fell onto them, pinning the raised gunslinger's arm to the ground with his knee. The mercenary jammed his revolver under the chin of the person he was pinning down, precisely aimed at the organic parts of its frontal lobe. "Waaai..." began to crackle across the speakers, blown out from the blast wave caused by a grenade. Before the word could

finish, three rounds tore through the frontal cortex of the figure pinned on the ground. The merc felt the arm he was fighting under his knee go limp. He got up with more effort than he would have liked; whatever had been done had taken its toll. The only vital signs in the room were already in shock and dead within a few minutes. The people who had stuck him in that damned chair were all dead, and he had no idea what had been forced on him or why he had to execute a gunslinger.

As he stood up, he had a realization: he stood up. As best he could remember, one of his legs had been blown off. As he looked down, he noticed the left leg had the rough look of rapid nanite forging. His internal reserves had been empty when he went in, so the chair must have pumped them in, as his internal foundries were still non-operational. The mercenary could only begin to think about what had been rewritten inside of him.

His internal systems tagged one of the still-living humans as Therin. The reality of what that meant dawned on him. The kid was laid flat on his back, the still-human and frothy blood leaking from a few sucking chest wounds. The kid wasn't even lucid; the latter stages of shock were taking hold. The mercenary could have given some of his blood to the suffering human, directed the nanomachines, once inside, to staunch the bleeding and block the nociceptors so they wouldn't need to feel the mind-shattering pain. But he couldn't. He was broken, he had none, and his own body was still reeling from the chair, and he could do nothing about that either.

A simulated sigh left his speakers. His revolver was brought up and fired in one swift motion. The round emptied Therin's brain pan onto the floor they were laying upon. He caught his reflection in the mirrored surface of the blood leaking from Therin's head. The merc stood there for a while, studying his own reflection, not thinking. He needed a new way off-world. He thought about the mechs the enemy gunslingers had ridden in on, maybe they had orbital exfil equipment. Then his internal systems

automatically outlined the wreckage of one in the corner.

Pockmarked with railgun fire, a hole was punched through a few inches to the right of the mech's internal fusion plant. The incredible velocity of the round caused the monocrystalline titanium-plating to shatter like it was glass. He and everyone in the room were lucky the reactor was just nicked instead of punched clean through. The plasma skipped the magnetic confinement, and the resultant flare slagged the back of the mech and most of the wall behind it. It had vented slowly enough as to not cause catastrophic structural failure to the mech's frame. Given that the internal pressure and heat of the plant were an order of magnitude hotter than the main sequence star in Earth's home system, the fact that the area wasn't covered with meter-long shrapnel and superheated plasma was a miracle.

The mercenary knew he needed to find another way out and quickly. Time was running out, and he had no idea what other surprises might be in store for him. With determination, he began his search for a way off this forsaken planet.

Chapter 13

Intelligent Design

The residual heat signature of a shut-off reactor alerted him to a mech halfway down the shaft to the main elevator. As he sprinted down the shaft, he noticed the amount of effort he needed to put into running was almost cut in half. His systems ran millions of floating-point operations per second to decide the most optimal foot placement on each step. This was completely new to him. Before, what had let him move was a copy of his motor cortex remade in silicon, and that inherited all the inefficiencies of flesh. This was different from the synaptic algorithms that normally governed his brain activity; they had been improved. The brute force of natural selection had been changed by intelligent design for the better.

As the merc came upon the powered-down mech, he began to catalog the damage. There was a hole clean through the cockpit, the black blood of a Star League cyborg leaked through the golf ball-sized hole. He climbed up onto the chest of the silent mech to peer through the railgun wound. As he pulled himself up, his first glance already made his gut sink. Everything from the waist up on the pilot of this mech was gone, rendered to chunky black marinara sauce. A noticeably larger hole let in light from the back of the

mech's superstructure, the reactor was fine, but the neural lance was another story. It wasn't there; the shell had completely removed most of the hardware necessary to pilot the mech. The merc kicked off the cockpit and landed with a clang that echoed down the shaft. The situation was becoming dire; two dead gunslingers meant the support staff would be here soon. Star League special forces timetables were notoriously tight. He had no idea when the gunslingers had arrived; he was out cold by then. Ten minutes was a generous amount of time and also a complete guess.

As anxiety began to settle in at the thought of being stuck in this shaft when a few dozen SLDF personnel came fast-roping down, a memory he had forgotten came to him. There was an experimental rig a few dozen floors down. The mercenary had never been here before; the only memories he had were of him coming in. Screwed either way, he decided to take his chances in the bowels of the facility. As he came to the rim of the main shaft, he noticed the elevator starting to retract towards the surface. "Damn it." Someone was on their way down.

The merc began his hasty climb down the elevator shaft to the floor he needed. Dropping as much as ten floors on some falls, the journey was quick. He found himself standing in the horizontal shaft towards his goal in less than a few minutes. The destination? A hangar about 0.7 kilometers away. His jog had become a full-out sprint; the more time he had to activate whatever he found, the better chance of getting out alive. The SLDF finding out they left a 3 billion credit asset outside of their control was heat the merc did not need.

Chapter 14

Dire Consequences

The elevator began its noisy descent into the fallen SLDF base, and it made sure not a single soul in the whole shaft didn't know they were coming. Contact with the special forces deployed on the planet ceased 40 minutes ago. This was to be expected; the kilometer marble shaft they were descending was not conducive to any type of communication.

The recovery team often worked in conditions worse than these, and it was nothing new to Jennifer. However, gunslingers were notorious for tight timetables. Being 20 minutes late on a check-in was not a good sign. The night vision on Jennifer's display activated as the elevator whirled and clanked, stopping on the floor keyed into its controls.

The shaft in front of them looked as if it stretched into infinity. Jenn's point man was the first off the lift. The point man's initial scan revealed nothing even with its enhanced sensors. The all-clear was tight beamed, and the contingent of engineers and soldiers moved down the shaft in a tight, cautious formation. The movement was excruciatingly slow as the area still needed to be swept for mines and explosives since no one had the faintest clue as to what

went on in this shaft.

As the group of specialists worked their way down the hall, the point man's scanning equipment picked out the signature of a mech. The location was tagged on everyone's compass, and orders were given. Jennifer, one of the "civilian contractors" assigned by General Electrics, the company that produces this pattern of the SLDF's mech, was pushed to the front of the group and given an objective: salvage the downed mech. The waypoint in her helmet pinged 0.3 clicks away, and everyone started to jog toward the location.

The forward group was the first to discover the ruined frame. The leader of the team began the climb upwards to the cockpit. Jenn knew instantly that this was an electrician's job. The location of the entry hole told her pretty much all she needed to know about the situation. The report from the forward group began to filter its way across Jenn's screen. "That's screwed," "completely messed up," "God freaking dammit!" The mech sitting in front of her could technically walk its way out of here if it still had a brain. Whoever placed that round knew what they were doing. Even if the pilot survived, not having the main-frame in one single piece was catastrophic. All Jenn could think about was the call with her boss, telling them that one of the gunslingers had died and the mech needed to be written off.

She was technically the lead on this operation, so the orders for a few charges of thermite were tight beamed from her suit. Her and the rest of the group began the walk down the horizontal shaft towards, hopefully, a living gunslinger and a perfectly operative mech. The eerie quiet of their walk started to weigh more and more on Jenn as the LIDAR told them they were almost to the end of the current horizontal shaft. The blown-off doors, pock-marked with gunfire on the inside, made her stomach drop even lower than she thought possible. This was a different kind of fear; she ran forwards, shoving the point man aside as the burning need to know what was dead in the room

before her overrode any sense of self-preservation.

It was a worst-case scenario. The mech in this room was a total write-off, nothing from it could be salvaged, the same with the pilot. "Damn it!" Jennifer cursed repeatedly, the last one leaving her mouth so loud that the earpieces of the rest of the team crackled. Jenn fell to her knees, the feeling of absolute failure so strong she almost didn't notice the tears beginning to flow. "I'm so fucked," she muttered to herself, clear of any outside comms. She instructed her visor to polarize; her team seeing her breakdown wasn't going to do her any favors. After more than a minute of sitting on her knees in disbelief and fear, one of the soldiers had the courage to speak up. "Ma'am?" "I'm fine, I just tripped," a response she was used to using. She knew no one bought it, but that didn't matter. "Place the charges, salvage what you can from the stiff, let's just get the hell back as soon as we can." Just as the words left her mouth, she noticed the detritus on the floor begin to shake. A second later, a blinding flash of light burned from the direction of the shaft they came down on. "WHAT THE FUCK WAS THAT?"

Chapter 15

Unexpected Power

This power... he had never felt anything like it. The 15 G pushing the mech into his seat felt like the best roller-coaster he had ever been on, or the best drug trip. No mech he knew of could do this without supplemental boosters to exit a gravity well. This planet's well was not as deep as Earth or Mars, for that matter, but still. The fact that this reactor was barely at idle and still able to put them into geosync was no small feat, leaving the merc dumbfounded. All the people he knew who died on exfil, faulty orbital packs had rendered more than a few of the people he fought with to nothing more than dust. He felt mad for a second, "All of them, they really did die for nothing," the anger was replaced with gut-busting laughter. If he still had lacrimal ducts, tears would be rolling down his face, which he no longer had. Then, it was back to the nothing he was accustomed to.

Frustrated as he was, he called his partner in crime, Margaret. Another Star League defector and his confidant. Ring, ring, ring, ring... He was used to her teasing him. But with the current gravity of the situation, the rings weighed heavier. "Hey love, what's going on?" Her voice did much to quiet the growing tension in his artificial guts.

"Hey, um, Marge?" The question hung in the air longer than he had hoped. "YES," that word came through with enough disdain that it could be felt in his chest. "That last job kinda went sideways," the silence lasted an uncomfortable amount of time. "AND," she barked, "I got a worm making itself at home in my substrate..." "Don't tell me you've been jacking in at those backwater jerk domes again?" "No, it's not that," he then said in a much more hushed tone, "not this time." "Well, what the hell is it then?" she barked back. "Old... Star League." This silence was even more uncomfortable than the first. "Should've told me you were chasing the dragon, love... Sigh, how long till I'll see you?" "That's the thing," he replied. "I jacked a frame as well." "Are you fuuuucc—" he cut her off. "Experimental, integrated B.F. drive, and a bunch of other stuff. Look, I just need a deep read as soon as possible; I'm losing my mind here." "How long," she replied in an even more monotone voice than he thought possible. "Uh, 5 hours," the words left his mouth sheepishly. "Confirmed," were the last words he heard before the jump to his destination.

The destination was an old Neodyne mech dropship from the Unification Wars. The merc had looted the deed off one of his assassination contracts he did a few years back. Marge was one of the doctors that stole his humanity he unknowingly signed over all those decades ago. A full cyborg, just like the merc, she was over 200 years old. She still kept her human looks, long blonde hair and a figure that made the merc's crotch area tingle in a way he wished it wouldn't. Her current face wasn't her original; it was an amalgamation of all the female faces she found attractive over her long life. The face was printed onto a new ventral plate and installed in her head. The merc preferred how she looked when they first met, but he'd never voice that opinion. She messed up just as badly as him when the wife of the general in charge of the Gunslinger program found them in bed together. But thanks to her and the info she had, he was able to prepare for the nuke Star League was

about to hit the planet he was resigned to. After the fallout settled, they decided to stick together for a bit, and that bit had turned into around 70 years.

The merc and his new rig exited the rift a few hundred kilometers from his ship. He flashed the IFF codes to the ship, giddy that he would finally get to use the docking stations for the mechs. Marge's voice came through on his radio, "I hope that's you?" "Yeah, it's me. That thing looks different... I can't place my finger on it, but I remember... ah, whatever, love. Hey, can you open the bay doors, Marge? I don't remember how to from the pilot's seat." "Huh," she said, "you'd think that would just come over on the link." "Yeah, that's probably it being a prototype and all," he said curtly. And... she hung on the word for a bit, "open!" The first bay doors began to retract up and over the hull of the ship. The merc did know how to activate the auto-dock and closed his eyes as he felt the computer take over.

The merc had to hand guide the docking gantry in as the non-standard layout of the frame confused the computer. He heard Marge's voice again, but this time through the speakers in the bay, "Get your ass up to the med bay; I'm dying to see what you got in your head." The merc's boots landed on the gantry with a thud that made it oscillate a bit before it came to a rest. He made his way over to the elevator and keyed the med deck. The door popped open, and there stood Marge, wearing a tight-fitting red dress with black heels, her blond hair falling down her shoulders onto her breasts, and a white lab coat over it all. The merc's gaze lingered for long enough to know there was no way she didn't know he was staring at her chest. The thin black lines coming up from her breasts, tracing down her arms and legs, were telltale signs of her augmentations and the fact that no 200-year-old woman could still look anything remotely close to what was in front of him.

She beckoned him towards the scan chair with her finger. As he sat down, she pulled a plug from the console.

"Hey, try and be gentle," but just as the last of the words left his mouth, she jammed the plug in with considerable gusto. The merc began to scream, but his vocal box was disconnected from his brain; in fact, everything was, effectively making him her prisoner for the moment. She looked at the screens, "You look like you're locked in," she ended the sentence with a little laugh. "Now," she said in a much more forceful tone, "What the hell did you get up to out there?" The merc tried to speak, but he was still just a brain in a jar at the moment. She stared at his wildly darting eyes for a few seconds, "Hehe, oh, I know you know I don't need you to actually tell me." "I'm going to enjoy this," as the words left her ruby red lips, she twisted the plug with considerable gusto.

Chapter 16

The Unseen Intruder

At least the room the merc entered was as he left it this time. He was getting very sick of blacking out. The carbon nanotube muscle fiber in his neck overcorrected before his software had time to even out the impulses. His head shot over way too fast and banged the tray table in front of him. His cameras still registered Marge's jump out of her seat as the tools clanged on the ground. After her initial fright, she began her walk over with much gumption.

She slapped his face so hard her hand broke into dozens of little pieces; the covering that was her skin shattered and tinkled off the floor as the momentum carried it. She brought it up and grasped her broken digits with her good hand. "WHAT THE HELL DID YOU PICK UP?" Through the incredible fogginess of the current situation, the merc was able to choke out, "So you know it wasn't the jerk domes..." The look on Marge's face somehow turned even angrier. Before he could think of a response, the heel of her shoe smashed into the side of his head/helmet. He was thrown from the chair with considerable force, as she was still a cyborg after all.

As the merc skidded to a stop on the floor, Marge yelled, "Why the hell is it talking to me?" As she finished the sentence, she slapped a monitor in the direction of the merc. A text message app sat on the screen with the message: "Hello, are you there?" The wave of thought hit him like a truck; "Uh... uh..." was all he was able to produce. The thoughts spinning in his substrate, "Did I bring this back? Was it me? How careless was I?" Before the next anxiety-heightened thought could be processed, Marge's hand made its way across his face with considerable force but not so much as to damage her good hand. His head impacted the wall in the direction of the slap and then bounced back to almost where it had been.

"Look," she said in a much more comforting voice, "there are huge portions of your deep scan I can't read." "BICAMERAL!" the merc shouted, "That's the last sign I saw before they forced me into the CHAIR!" The look on Marge's face morphed from a frown to a look of bewilderment. "Yes, it was just like the ones when... when..." "Yeah, I get it," she blurted out as her hand began to caress her chin. "You got incredibly unlucky." "Wh... what?" began to make its way out of the merc's mouth. "That chair could have fixed your foundries," the merc felt blindsided by the revelation. How close he had been, what a nightmare; his head fell into his palm. "Well, obviously it didn't. It installed whatever the hell is trying to talk to us," she pointed to the monitor with the still-open messaging app.

Chapter 17

A Moment of Solace

Two weeks... that was all Jenn had before she had to chase down a rogue ex-Star League special forces spook, and she had already burned a week doing nothing. At least her company had the decency to give her some paid time off before they sent her on a suicide mission. Jenn decided she was going to have a nice night out before she'd be trudging through backwater after backwater searching for some ghosts her bosses had forgotten about. She met some of her work friends at one of their favorite dives, where the drinks were cheap, and the atmosphere was amiable to corporate trash drinking their problems away. Neon lights flickered outside, casting an eerie glow on the faces of her colleagues.

As she approached the bar, she saw some of her coworkers outside. Dick greeted her before she even registered the rest of the crowd. "Ayyy, Jenn, glad you made it," he said, his voice slightly slurred. She knew Dick had a bit of a crush on her; she liked feeling like she wasn't the disgusting slob that could barely get up in the morning that she knew she was. "There's nothing better than some good Dick," she said as they embraced. She missed the warmth of a human and not the cold indifference of the

vac suit she normally wore. Dick began the small talk as he escorted her into the bar, where the dim lighting and low hum of conversation enveloped them.

Jenn was surprised; she had a good time for once. Perhaps the threat of looming death had loosened her up a bit, along with the booze. As the rest of their comrades cleared out, Jenn found herself alone with Dick. He was a bit tipsy, she could see it in his walk and the way his jaw took a few milliseconds to catch up to his thoughts. She shook her head; she wasn't going to let herself ruin this. She felt Dick's body gently connect with hers. The warmth of another person... she kissed him. The look on his face was a mix of bewilderment and contentment. Jenn hugged him tightly. As she let go, the words that left her mouth did so with a slight quiver. "Dick, look, I... the brass put me on a 25 percenter." The color in his face drained almost instantly. "If I get back... just don't wait for me. I don't want to let another person down; I'm sorry." The words in his throat got caught on one another. Before Dick could clear the stammer, Jenn placed her finger on his mouth. "Don't make me feel bad for wanting this." She gave him another kiss and disappeared into the streets.

Jenn's head was still spinning with thoughts of Dick. She still needed a release but didn't want to waste it on someone she actually liked. Her GPS made its way to her vision, and she selected one of her favorite jerk domes, placing a waypoint for Slippery Sam's Jerkaporium. The attendant knew her by name. "Jenn, welcome back! The usual?" "Of course," Jenn said with a bit of false gusto. The attendant giggled, and the floor lit up to show her the way to her private dome. As she sat down, a plug for her port dropped down from the ceiling through a biocide field. That's why she came here; the plugs were always sterilized. She took the jack and plugged it into her service stud on the back of her neck. The feeling was pleasant and cool. Her legs quivered a bit as the feeling made its way down her body. She had a multitude of partners to choose from, but somehow one stood out to her: a solemn black

figure, almost incorporeal, with eyes that burned a bright crimson through the thick dark smoke. She indicated her attraction, and to her chagrin, the person reciprocated.

Before she knew it, they were standing across from one another. "Um, hi," Jenn let out. The figure of swirling blackness turned in her direction, the two red dots that were probably his eyes looked at her, and the rest of the body formed around those eyes. The form they became was that of a beautiful SoCal surfer – long blond hair, chiseled body, but still those burning eyes. After the ice was broken, they began to speak about themselves. Jenn was pretty used to this spiel, so she began talking about her schooling and her current job. She broke protocol when she mentioned her previous assignment. Jenn became a bit concerned when she noticed her partner became a bit rigid when she mentioned her last job.

"Do you have a problem with Star League?" she asked. Her partner's silence hung like a guillotine in the air. "I'm... ex... Star League," he said with a flat tone. "Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to..." "It's fine, hehe," he said, "let's just enjoy tonight." Then he put his hand behind her head and kissed her. The world around them transformed into a dimly lit bedroom, complete with a queen-sized bed and a simulated LED bulb in the lamp. The next thing they knew, they were held tight in each other's embrace. Jenn shook her head. "No, here, now," she said to herself. "What was that?" her partner said with an inquisitive tone. "Just the jitters," she let out an obviously nervous laugh. Before she could finish, he was on top of her, kissing her neck. Jenn had her intensity sliders turned up, so each kiss on her neck was an orgasm in itself. Each time he touched her, she felt... good. Each touch was ecstasy, and that was before they really began. Before she had the thought, their clothes vanished, dissipating into white wisps that slowly dissolved in the air.

After they were finished, they laid in bed out of breath next to each other. Even though this was still a simulation on the extranet, the program still imposed human

limitations on them. Jenn could still feel the warmth of his release inside of her; she loved the feeling. "Can we cuddle?" She was a bit unnerved when she saw the slight look of shock on her partner's face. "Of course we can," he said without almost missing a beat. As he turned around, she felt the simulated warmth of his arms on her. In just this moment, Jenn felt content. If she was going to die on this mission she had to go on, couldn't they just kill her right now so she'd be able to die happy? "You know," her partner said, "the whole point of this is the anonymous sex, but I think I like you." Jenn blushed, the simulated dim light casting a rosy hue on her cheeks, as they continued to hold one another in the virtual world.

Chapter 18

A Daring Intercept

As the merc's ceramic-lined coat fell upon his shoulders, he noticed the weight of the 90-kilogram garment. It had been a while since he had an orgasm that made his legs shake like that. He still felt a little unsteady as he left Guzzling Gus's Jerkorama, the weight of his coat heavier than he remembered. The neon lights of the pleasure dome flickered and reflected off the metallic surfaces of the surrounding buildings, casting an eerie glow on the streets below.

A text box popped up in the corner of his vision, "I detected elevated heart rate and increased endocrine system activation. Is everything okay?" "Yes, BB, I'm alright," the merc thought as a response. BB was the passenger the merc had picked up on his last job, so far, pretty helpful. It was an AI unlike any Marge or he had ever seen, computing had taken the turn towards efficiency over raw power in the last centuries. The hunt for a perfect replication of human thought was gone long ago when the cost of such a feat remained only in the realm of black book projects, that's what this was.

As BB became more comfortable in the merc's body, it began to rewrite some of the neural pathways that gov-

erned basic functions such as walking and aiming a weapon, improving on the old Star League paths that were in his head. The embedded foundries were still a mystery, even to the AI. Speaking of BB, the AI was able to text but was still learning to speak. It was basically a child when it was stuffed in the merc, a child left neglected for a few decades. The merc was surprised it was taking BB this long to learn to speak, but considering it was an AI decades older than the most advanced systems on the market and able to wipe the floor with them, the merc decided not to think too much about it. He still needed to learn why the Church of the Machine God wanted this thing in him, to begin with.

The best clue he had was the patch on the arms of the people that he went into the base with. He didn't notice it at first, but when Marge pulled his memories off the deep scan, she noticed the patch was different from standard church regalia. She had a feeling it was an offshoot sect of the church, more extremist in their actions given the frontal assault on a Star League base, but the two of them had no clue which one.

That's why he found himself on another world caught in the front line of the ongoing conflict. A Prison world, the current planet was pure chaos with prisoner transport ships desperately trying to make planetfall and get back to orbit as soon as possible. The skies above were a cacophony of streaking lights and roaring engines, a symphony of chaos and desperation. The orbital traffic was so congested the merc was able to slip in with the integrated stealth systems his new ride possessed, he looked like a meteor burning up on reentry to the scanners.

His plan was simple, after he threatened his last fixer with pictures of his children boarding their school bus, he obtained a tail number and schedule of a prisoner transport that contained a relatively important priest of the Church of the Machine God. A mech such as the one in his possession alone wouldn't be able to snatch a prisoner off a transport during an orbital insertion. That's where BB came in, even the fastest of current artificial intelligence

could not hope to process all of the streams of data and then do the calculations that ensure the plasma shielding interacts perfectly with the air impacting it at Mach 15. It would likely be roll-unstable, needing constant fine-tuning of the plasma envelope to form the optimal airfoil while spoofing the gen 10 quantum encryption on the military IFF codes the escort would be constantly listening for. It was all beautiful – he had seen thousands of sunsets on hundreds of worlds. But the raw beauty in this endeavor was something else entirely.

The merc's mind trailed off as he contemplated the risks, "That wasn't... I never thought that..." He wondered how much longer he could hold onto himself with this thing inside him, and who he was after so long. He had no time to panic, though – the launch was set for 20 minutes, and he needed around 5 to get back to the mech from the jerk dome. The entry ladder automatically began to extend down to allow the merc entry to the cockpit.

As he squirmed his way in, a sense of familiarity washed over him. How long had it been since he had his own mech? He had forgotten half of him was missing until he synced with this frame. He could already begin to feel the cool wash over him before the sync plug even found his service stud. His hand hovered over the sync switch, and as he contemplated his current situation, BB sent him a chat window. "Are we ready to begin?"

The response gave him a slight pause, the feeling that this thing was a Faustian bargain was starting to sink in no matter how hard he tried. The merc's response was to hit the sync button with more force than normal. After a few seconds of whirring and then a series of clicks, the anti-decapitation locks bolted his helmet to the seat with a bassy clunk that reverberated throughout the structure of the frame. Then a few more clicks, and the sync cable found its home, a sensation that would make his toes curl if he still had any.

The transorbital intercepts were being computed by the

mainframe of the mech. BB had free rein of the systems. From what he was able to gather from the junk code left in both BB and this frame, they were intended to work together. BB felt at home when it was working within the confines of the mainframe housed in this prototype. It was definitely a prototype – most basic quality-of-life features were not present in the base firmware of the frame. Things like the sync cable's auto-homing function had to be written from scratch, same with the calibration of the hardpoints responsible for securing him into the seat.

This world's gravity was heavier than Earth's, sitting at 1.5g. The frame accumulators would be needed for the intended intercept course. The reactor could put out a lot of power, but not enough to constantly pull the 15g of acceleration on a high-grav world to meet up with the transport ship in its orbital injection path. The dull hum soon gave way to a deafening buzz as the magnetic fields inside the accumulator tanks struggled to contain the 3000 bar of superheated helium gas. Another 5 seconds later and BB had finished all the calculations to give them an 85% chance of a successful intercept.

The merc had been taught orbital intercepts back at Gunslinger School. That was multiple lifetimes ago now, the equations were long gone from his mind, but he trusted BB to do this right – he had no other choice. The status light on the merc's HUD blinked a steady yellow, indicating BB was still finishing up. The merc was still on the fence about the name Marge had given the construct – it stood for Beauty Brain, and Marge was pleased with herself. The merc hated giving such a cute name to such a dangerous AI, but that's probably why she had done it.

As the merc pondered his thoughts, the status light changed to a solid green with a beep. Then, a millisecond later, the accumulators released the stored plasma, and the mech went from Mach zero to Mach 15 by way of Mach 5 in such a short time that the merc thought he'd have an aneurysm in the still organic parts of his brain, even with the filament-reinforced blood vessels. A lesser qual-

ity cyborg would probably have been killed outright, but the merc was made for such force – or at least he hoped, skimming off the upper atmosphere of planets produced a similar intensity of force, and he had done that a few times by mistake.

The world outside the cockpit became a blur of colors and shapes as they raced through the atmosphere, plasma flickering and dancing around the edges of the mech's shields. The pressure inside the cockpit remained stable, thanks to the meticulous calculations of BB, but the merc couldn't help but feel the weight of the intense acceleration on his chest.

As they closed in on the transport ship, the merc braced himself for the daring maneuver they were about to perform. The transport was a lumbering beast, slowly making its way through the atmosphere, surrounded by a cloud of escort ships. The merc's mech, in contrast, was like a sleek predator, cutting through the air with deadly precision.

The moment of truth arrived as they approached the transport. BB sent a series of commands to the mech's systems, spoofing the IFF codes and ensuring they wouldn't be instantly targeted by the escorts. With a final burst of speed, the mech closed the gap, and the merc reached out with the mech's manipulator arms, latching onto the transport's hull.

The merc's heart raced as they clung to the side of the transport, the plasma shielding flickering and dying away as they matched speed with the massive vessel. He knew that if they were discovered, it would be a short and brutal battle – one that he was unlikely to win.

With a deep breath, the merc began the delicate process of cutting through the transport's hull, BB providing guidance and support as they worked together to breach the ship without alerting its crew. As the final pieces of metal fell away, the merc slipped inside, his mech disappearing into the darkness of the transport's cargo bay.

Now, it was time to locate the priest and make their escape. The stakes were high, but the merc knew that the answers he sought were within reach – if he could just survive this daring heist. With BB at his side and the element of surprise on his side, he was ready to face whatever challenges lay ahead.