

. . .YOU WILL FOLLOW

by Jason Schmetzer

***Scourge Compound
MacBeth, Tybalt
Former Prefecture IV
06 August, 3136***

Stephan Wallace looked across his empty desk at the woman seated in the office's only other chair. Behind him, a storm swelled on the horizon. Already white-purple shafts of lightning could be seen behind the arcology. Ordinarily Wallace would have spun in his chair and watched the storm roll in, but not today.

"You haven't said anything," he said.

Captain Stefani Ehli watched him, deciding her words before she spoke. Wallace watched the play of emotions over her face. The signs were almost invisible, but they were there: the way her upper lip creased as she pondered something; the subtle widening of her eyes as she came to a realization; how her color heightened as she drew in a breath to speak.

"You're sure it can be done?" she asked.

No accusation. No anger. Just a simple question. Wallace wanted to smile. "I'm convinced," he said. "This isn't what I dedicated the last year of my life to." *I doubt its what you left the Invaders for.*

"The JumpShip is already in-system," Wallace said. "I've already spoken to the DropShip captains. Marquette and Haversham are already embarked." It had been easy enough to push through raid orders for two companies. Of the Scourge companies on Tybalt, only Ehli's and Bradshaw's were still on the ground.

If I convince her, it's only Bradshaw left. And he will be staying.

"And Stahl?"

"I need your help with part of it, but Stahl and his boys and girls will take care of the important parts," Wallace said.

Ehli looked past Wallace, out the window. He turned his chair enough so that he

could see the storm out of the corner of his eye. It would be a big one, a couple of centimeters of rain at the least.

"What would I have to do?" Ehli asked.

Wallace showed his smile to the storm.

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Gerhardt Stahl stood in the 'Mech bay, looking at his newly-repaired *Vulture IV*. The techs hadn't had time to even out the paint; it was a hodgepodge of primer-gray and the blue and tan of the Raiders.

And it was his. He had the title in a vault in MacBeth, safe even from Bannson's fingers.

A sheet of hardcopy fell from his fingers and fluttered to lay on the grease-stained, pockmarked floor. A single word was emblazoned in red across the top: *dismissal*.

The Colonel is right, Stahl thought. He reached into his pocket and removed a data wafer. The thin brown disc weighed so little it felt like candy. It was marked with the two-headed axe of Bannson's Raiders.

"When you realize I'm right, son," Wallace had said, placing the wafer in Stahl's hand, "it'll be time to read it."

Giving the *Vulture IV* one last look, Stahl clenched the data wafer in his fist and strode from the bay. Abramov would have the company drawn up, what was left of them.

His family.

#

"I don't care that you don't like the order," Wallace said. "Take this disc to the arcology and see that Ms. Tenclay gets it." He held the data wafer up before placing it on the desk.

Major Priam frowned. He was standing half-in the door. His uniform was rumpled and there were dark circles beneath his eyes. The recent tensions had been running him ragged. As the only officer Roth trusted to go between Tenclay's goons at the arcology and the regiment, Teddy Priam hadn't gotten a lot of sleep.

"The Boss has increased his security around the building," Priam said.

"I know that, Teddy," Wallace said patiently. He waited a double-heartbeat and then swept the data wafer back into his hand. "Fine. Can you at least give her a message for me?"

Priam's frown deepened, but he nodded. "A short one, sir."

Wallace leaned forward. "Just one word, Major: Chesterton."

"That's it?"

"That's it, Major." Wallace nodded once and spun his chair around. "Leave the door open, would you?"

Priam took his leave. Wallace waited until he saw the aide climb into a waiting Avanti hoverlimo. Priam bent against the freshening wind. The first fat drops of rain began to splatter on the sun-warmed parking lot, bursting into steam as the heat in the

ferrocrete burned them off. He turned back toward his door.

"Trooper Lund?" He called through the open door. "A moment of your time." Behind him, thunder crashed for the first time.

#

Stahl felt out of place in infantryman's garb. He clutched the assault rifle comfortably, holding it across his body, muzzle-down. Just like he'd held an identical rifle as part of Bannson's security detachment, so many years ago. The Boss liked his goons to look scary. It cowed the uncertain.

Professionals recognized the ready stance, abundantly-visible ammunition, and the lack of any credible suspects in the numerous assassination attempts on Jacob Bannson's life.

People who threatened the Boss disappeared. It was that simple.

"Right on schedule," Abramov said, handing over the binoculars. He and the captain were huddled half a kilometer away from the acrology, in the forest preserve that served as the megaplex's park. The glistening black shape of an Avanti hoverlimo spun into view, its lift fans blow-drying the pavement clear before the thickening rain soaked it.

"I wonder what'll happen?" Stahl asked. Wallace's plan had outlined only the broad strokes. Priam would draw Tenclay off. Without her, the security force would relax.

It would give them an edge. Stahl smiled at the thought, then lifted the binoculars again.

Priam climbed out of the limo and shuffled toward the waiting *Catapult*. Tenclay's 'Mech shifted its position slightly, bringing its cannons to bear on the man. Priam halted and raised a hand to shield himself from the rain.

"He's yelling something," Abramov said.

"I can't make it out," Stahl said. The *Catapult* didn't move. Priam repeated himself.

Then he exploded as the paired autocannons shredded his body with bursts of submunitions.

"Jesus!" Abramov said. "What'd he say?"

The *Catapult* stalked forward, leaning its birdlike beak forward until it was staring at the rapidly-thinning puddle that used to be Teddy Priam. It straightened, twisting on its waist until it looked back toward the arcology.

Then it burst into motion, running toward MacBeth. Toward Wallace. It passed another shape, one that pulled off the road to allow it room. That shape burst into motion almost as soon as the BattleMech passed, headed toward the park.

"There's our ride," Stahl said, slinging the binoculars and stepping out to flag the fast-moving J-37 down.

#

Wallace watched the *Catapult* dash down the road from the lobby. He'd come down out of his office to listen to the rain fall. The freshwater scent of evaporating rain

filled the entryway. He'd blocked the automatic door open, but stepped back into the shadows as the *Catapult* approached. *Will she shoot first?* he wondered.

The *Catapult* stopped in front of the building and settled. Steam hissed from its joints, disappearing into the downfall. Cooling hatches popped open. It was shutting down.

Wallace smiled. "Send her to my office," he told the private at the desk.

He didn't have long to wait. Tenclay didn't bother to change from her MechWarrior garb. She had her cooling vest half-zipped. Wallace heard her heavy boots thumping on the thin carpet before she slammed the door open and stormed in.

"How?" she demanded. She leaned over the desk, invading his space, bracing herself on her hands. "How did you find out?"

Wallace smiled, a real smile, pleased to allow his satisfaction reign. "An old friend, Lady Felon," he said. "I've spent some time in Chesterton. I saw your holo, once."

Tenclay winced. "What will you do?"

"That depends on you."

"Blackmail?"

Wallace shrugged. "An accommodation. I need you to take a nap."

Her eyes narrowed. "What are you doing?" He stood up, her hand dropping toward the pistol she wore in a waist holster. "A nap?" Wallace just smiled. "What's so funny?"

"Lund?"

The scarred trooper, concealed from Tenclay's view by the door, squeezed the trigger on the sonic stunner. The high-pitched beam caught Tenclay just as she spun. She managed to get her pistol free before she collapsed.

Wallace grinned around the pounding headache he got from the stunner's backscatter. He looked to Lund and nodded.

"Get them ready," he said. The infantrymen stepped out of the room and started speaking tersely into his communicator. Wallace stood and looked down at the collapsed MechWarrior. *Such fire*, he thought. *It's a shame she wastes it on Jacob Bannson.*

#

Kozaka argued them though the barricade in front of the arcology with little trouble. He'd been a Raider longer than most of Tenclay's security troopers had been part of the team. They trusted him, despite his years in Bannson's disfavor. He was like a mascot.

"He's in his office," Kozaka said, after he let them out of the cargo container they'd hidden in. "You're sure about this?"

Stahl brought his rifle around from where the sling held it against the small of his back. "The Colonel thinks so," he said. Abramov climbed out and repeated Stahl's actions, except that he carried an autoloading shotgun instead of a rifle.

Kozaka smiled, his teeth bright-white against his dark skin. "That's good enough," he said. "See you back here." He started toward a doorway with a 'Mech icon painted on it.

"You're not waiting here?" Abramov asked.

Kozaka grinned again. "We'll need a better ride." He laughed and disappeared through the door.

#

Stefani Ehli's massive *Zeus* stood outside the administration building when Wallace stepped through the doors. The rain fell around the hulking 'Mech in sheets, falling across the buttoned-up tanks and infantry carriers. A full squad of Cavalier battle armor stood beside his *Avanti*. Wallace pulled his coat a little tighter and looked into the wind, toward the arcology. He couldn't see it through the downpour, but he knew where it was. It had been the center of his world for a little over a year.

"Things change," he whispered. He nodded to his driver and climbed into the back of his limo. "The port," he said. His *Kelswa* was already aboard.

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Abramov walked down the corridor, his shotgun held muzzle-down in a combat carry. Stahl walked two steps behind him, his rifle held the same way. He looked past his sergeant at the two guards outside Bannson's office. The Boss eschewed a secretary; anyone who made it this far into his building had an appointment, or the guards would deal with it.

Stahl didn't know either of the two men. He let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. He'd been surprised at how worried he'd been about knowing the guards.

"We're your backup," Abramov said.

"Backup for what?" the shorter guard asked. There was a rumble in the distance, deeper and more sustained than natural thunder.

"For that," Stahl said. He took a step forward and let his left knee collapse. The assault rifle came up, but it was unnecessary. Abramov's shotgun boomed twice.

The sound was lost in the roar of an assault-class autocannon letting go within the confines of the arcology.

#

Without Tenclay and her *Catapult* to stiffen them, the security troops outside the barricade became lax. They didn't react when a new 'Mech appeared on their scopes, flashing a priority transponder signal. There was only one *Cygnus* on Tybalt, and it belonged to Jacob Bannson. A few of the security 'Mechs stood a little straighter. The Boss like to play with his MechWarriors.

The *Cygnus* stopped just inside the entryway, where it was still dry. It paused, shifting slightly. The security 'Mechs waited for Bannson to say something.

The *Cygnus* opened fire.

#

"Get back, you malfing bastards!" Abramov shouted. He fired a couple of bursts

down the empty hallway, shattering a glass sculpture. Stahl crackled a three-round burst from his rifle in reply.

"Look out!" Stahl called. "Stop him!"

Abramov cracked the door to Bannson's office just enough to toss a flash-bang grenade into the officer. A pair of pistol shots tore into the thick metal-reinforced wood doors, but they were high. Abramov rolled away, keep his head tilted so one ear was covered by his shoulder.

The grenade cracked and pushed a puff of smoke out of the still-open door. Stahl slung his rifle and drew a long-barreled pistol. He crouched down and shouldered his way through the door. Bannson's working office, unlike his public one, was small enough that the grenade's concussion had filled the room. Jacob Bannson was just pulling himself to his feet. He clutched a small silver-chased pistol in his hand.

"Stahl!" he said. "What's going on?" There was a trickle of blood leading from his left nostril, staining his reddish moustache.

Stahl brought up the tranq pistol and fired.

#

"What's going on, Colonel?" Bart Bradshaw asked. His company was drawn up next to Stefani Ehli's. Ehli remained out of the rain in her *Zeus*, but Bradshaw had parked his *Arbalest* and climbed down to join Wallace on the DropShip deck. He looked around, scowling. "That loser Stahl not have the balls to show up?"

Wallace ignored him. Lund stood at his shoulder, listening to a communicator. "Reports of fighting at the arcology," Lund said. "Bannson's *Cygnus* just shot up the security troops guarding the main barricade. The guards are calling for Tenclay."

Bradshaw's jaw dropped open. "What are you talking about?"

Wallace glared at him for a moment, but didn't speak. When he did, it was to Lund. "Anything from Stahl?"

Lund listened a moment longer, and then smiled. "One word, Colonel: Package."

Wallace smiled and turned to Bradshaw. "I'm taking the regiment, Captain," he said. He waited.

"Taking it where?"

Wallace just laughed.

#

"You'll never get away with this," Bannson said. He was in restraints, locked into a trooper position in the back of Abramov's Anat APC. They were moving toward the port, where the Colonel should have the rest of the troops drawn up.

His skin was deathly pale, a reaction to the light tranquilizer Stahl had hit him with. Right now the man called "The Bear" looked more like a cub, soaking wet and bleeding. They needed him lucid at the DropShip, but to get out of the arcology had required help.

Which was why the remnants of Stahl's company had captured the barricade as soon as the *Cygnus* had driven off the security troopers. They were in column now, heading for the Port as quickly as their tracks would carry them.

“Mr. Bannson,” Stahl said. “Please shut up.”

“Or what?” Bannson shook himself, making his chains jingle. “You’ll kill me?”

A rhythmic thumping penetrated the grinding hum of the APC’s motor. One of the vision slits darkened as a ‘Mech came alongside. Bannson leaned enough to see out. His mouth worked, but no sounds came out.

“That’s my ‘Mech,” he said, after a moment.

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“That’s the deal,” Wallace said. His words were being rebroadcast on the general Scourge frequency so every infantryman or tank crew could hear him. The massive bulk of the *Excalibur*-class DropShip behind him was awash in light spilling from its bays. Stefani Ehli’s *Zeus* stood at the base of one ramp, watching her company march past as they boarded the DropShip. “I’ve sent word to the other companies; they’ll join us if they can.” He stopped talking for a moment and let the rain fall in silence.

“You’re better soldiers than this,” he said. “We’ve all fought and bled for too long to be wasted any longer.” He pointed down. “Not for people like him.”

Bradshaw sputtered from the decking. Two of Lund’s squad had taken the captain captive when he’d tried to run for his ‘Mech. Half of his company cowered under Ehli’s guns.

The other half – the better half - had already boarded the DropShip.

A small column of armored vehicles appeared out of the rain, escorted by a *Cygnus*. The Scourge – former Scourge, Wallace corrected himself – still outside turned and watched them approach.

“That’s the Boss’s ‘Mech,” someone called. An Anat APC buzzed right past the soldiers and into the DropShip’s hold. The *Cygnus* stopped on the tarmac, next to Bradshaw’s *Arbalest*. After a moment the hatch popped and a dark-skinned man who was obviously not Jacob Bannson climbed half-out, brandishing a sword.

“Kozaka!” a voice said from behind Wallace. He turned to see Captain Stahl and Master Sergeant Abramov dragging a shackled Jacob Bannson onto the deck.

Bradshaw squirmed and kicked, trying to get free, but the two troopers kept him down.

“I trusted you, Wallace,” Bannson said. “Where’s all that honor and loyalty you told me about now?”

Wallace regarded his former boss. After a moment he waived at the assembled troops. “Right there, Mr. Bannson.” He inclined his head toward the DropShip. “Let’s go. There are some people who’d like a word with you.”

The DropShip climbed past the storm-laden clouds a short time later and kept going, clawing its way for space.