

WHERE I LEAD...

by Jason Schmetzer

Victorville
Rio
Former Prefecture IV
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Someone needs to talk to Bannson's intelligence people, Stahl thought. What should have been a nice little research facility in a cusp valley was instead a nice little security force garrison post. He sucked in a lungful of the hot air from his cockpit and waited two more heartbeats. The *Vulture IV*'s heat sinks labored to disperse the waste heat generated by the lasers, but they could only do so much.

"Mech down!" Abramov called. Stahl looked at his secondary monitors and saw his single squad of Cavalier battle armor pull down an autocannon-armed IndustrialMech MOD. The converted machine thrashed, belching black smoke into the sky, before succumbing.

"Any word from our scouts?" Stahl asked. He'd allowed only infantry to enter the valley. The jagged rock formations offered them cover that the tanks and 'Mechs couldn't afford themselves of. There was still the matter of the objective.

"There's no facility here that could be housing what we're after," Abramov said. "That's right from the insertion leader's mouth, Captain."

"Then we're out of here," Stahl said. He took up his controls and brought the *Vulture IV* around the edge of the cliff wall. An enemy *Sun Cobra* was trying to rush the mouth of the canyon, braving fire from the tanks Stahl had placed there to stop them. He brought his BattleMech's arms up and squeezed the triggers.

His PPC and cannon were joined by three crackling PPC streamers. A glance at his display showed the Scourge's DI Morgan behind him, targeting the same tank. His shots missed; the Morgan's did not.

The light 'Mech took all three PPCs in the torso. The crackling discharges scattered fingers of static across the *Sun Cobra*'s armor, but the miniscule ions accelerated to nearly the speed of light did all the damage, exploding through the *Sun Cobra*'s armor. Stahl watched a remnant of one of the streams eat entirely through the 'Mech before it collapsed.

"Just do that a couple more times," he said, panting in the new wave of heat rolling through his cockpit, "and we might just get out of here."

A Donar attack helicopter dropped out of the sun and drilled a star-bright laser lance through the Morgan's battered turret armor. The tank exploded.

"Or not," Stahl said.

#

Bannson Universal Unlimited Arcolgy
MacBeth, Tybalt
Former Prefecture IV
29 July 3136

The steady tap of steel-shod heels followed the click of the door closing. Stephen Wallace watched the lithe woman march around the table before settling at Colonel Roth's right hand. Meghann Tenclay made Roth uncomfortable. That suited Wallace just fine, but he was careful not to let it show. Anything to bring some modicum of combat to these "board meetings."

The former commander of the Scourge had remained with Jacob Bannson when he'd split his personal security off from the regiment. He couldn't keep sending the people assigned to protect him off on raids that brought fewer and fewer back; it was too expensive to find suitable replacements. Tenclay had broken her security force free of the regiment a year ago. She sat in on the Scourge's meetings for one simple reason: the more people the Scourge pissed off, the more there were people who wanted to hurt the Boss.

"I have some new directives from Mr. Bannson to cover," Colonel – *Director* - Roth said after a moment. "We're going to be ramping up operations soon, and we need to make sure the Raiders are ready to do it."

"All the Raiders, Colonel?" Tenclay asked. "Or just the Scourge?" She probably knew the answer already, Wallace knew, but she took every opportunity to make sure the other officers knew she supported Roth. Currying favor with the Chairman, Wallace knew, was the best way to keep him from checking up on you.

"All of us, Ms. Tenclay."

Wallace made a small notation on his noteputer. His participation at these meetings had been spelled out during his first week with the Scourge. He was to report on the First Raiders, his Scourge, and otherwise keep quiet. He didn't have the temperament necessary for "reasonable discussion." As if reason had anything to do with war.

"Is that where our salvage is going?" Wallace asked.

Every head at the table turned in his direction.

"What's that?" Captain Stefani Ehli asked.

Roth harrumphed and shuffled some papers. Wallace took that as his opening and leaned forward, over the polished mahogany of the table. "Captain Stahl's company was ordered to turn over its salvage after its last raid." He looked each of the company commanders in the eye. "It left Tybalt the same day, on a Confederation DropShip."

"Director?" Captain Bart Bradshaw asked, looking to Roth. "My people aren't going to like that." The young officer sounded like a good commander, but Wallace recognized the wanton lust in the man's voice. He fought to get his new toys, Wallace knew. *It's no wonder Roth likes him*, Wallace thought. *He's like a junior VP trying to catch the chairman's eye.*

"They're not required to like it," Roth said.

"It's always been that way in the Scourge," Ehli said. "You catch it, you clean it, and it's yours." She looked to her fellow captains for support.

“Times change,” Meghann Tenclay said. “You had directives, Colonel?”

Roth glared at her for a moment before speaking. Wallace stifled a chuckle. The politics of the table were so ridiculously simple he almost wondered if he were missing a master plan somewhere. *Greed drives them all*, he thought. *Pure, simple greed*. He felt a moment’s pity for them. Then he realized again something he’d known from his first week with the regiment.

That’s what makes them Scourge.

In an ordinary unit this meeting would be filled with majors or light colonels; battalion commanders. There were no battalions in the Scourge. Bannson ran the regiment like nine independent companies, which was why there were captains in staff meetings with colonels. Wallace’s one battalion-scale drill had been a disaster. Every company fought on its own, instead of as a team. *Like vultures*, Wallace thought.

Like Bannson.

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The DropShip was a *Union*, a reconditioned BUU cargo hauler that had been returned to its original military configuration. Its only nod to raiding was the lack of aerospace fighter bays – that space still held cargo.

“That’s all that’s coming,” Master Sergeant Abramov reported. “You’re it, sir.”

Stahl didn’t bother to reply. His *Vulture IV* limped at the rear of the column, hobbled by a destroyed knee actuator. He looked for Abramov’s Anat. It sported a nasty scorch mark where a PPC had nearly holed it. The rest of the company was in similar shape. One of the other APCs had already shed a track and was struggling along on its hubs.

“You think someone set the Boss up?” Abramov asked.

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“Losses to date have been unacceptable.” Roth said.

“That’s why we need to increase the training program,” Wallace told him. It was an argument they’d been having for months. Roth believed in stockpiling; Wallace in training. *You can’t use a stockpile if you’re dead*.

“Mr. Bannson feels as I do. Acceptable mission loss quotas will be implemented, and losses outside those parameters will result in fines.” Roth looked around the table, daring someone to challenge him.

“Fines,” Wallace said.

“Fines, Colonel,” Roth said. “We have a business to run.”

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Stahl took a deep breath before responding to Abramov’s question. “No, I think someone messed up.”

He ran another long-range scan. It came up clean, but Stahl couldn’t shake the uneasy feeling in his chest. “What’s the breakage, Sergeant?”

There was a pause. “Bad,” was all the man said. “Waite’s squad went down on the egress. Took an *Ocelot* with them.” The NCO’s voice was even, which was as good an indicator

of stress as anything. “Couple of others. Barry and her Morgan. Jacobs, Piretti, and Cohen.” All the other 'Mechs in his company. “We won't know for sure until we reach the rendezvous.”

Stahl squeezed his eyes closed and wished he could get his hand inside his neurohelmet to squeeze them. All that time and effort, wasted.

No, he realized. Not wasted. Squandered.
And for what?

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“You cannot do that!” Wallace shouted.

“I am director of this regiment, and I say we can!” Roth got to his feet. His ample belly spilled out of the uniform jacket he favored, showing the white undershirt he was sweating through. He waved his arms around. “I control the Scourge!”

Meghann Tenclay cleared her throat. “Jacob Bannson controls the Scourge, Colonel,” she said. Her eyes flicked to the other officers at the table. Unlike Wallace, all of them had served under her before Roth arrived.

Unlike Wallace, none of them knew her secret.

“I work for the Boss,” Bradshaw crowed. He was leaning back in his chair, fingers laced behind his head. “If he wants to spread the take around, I say fine. I got mine!”

“Your *Arbalest*?” Stefani Ehli said, disdain tainting her voice. “That little thing?”

Wallace watched the ex-mercenary closely. In his experience Ehli did nothing without first perceiving advantage. She'd only taken command of a raiding company because Bannson himself had offered her a larger cut. Her experience was invaluable to Wallace. He used her for an example in almost every training exercise he ran. She'd been a mercenary in Lyran space, but mercenaries fought for money. Bannson offered her a larger share of the profits.

And now he was taking that share back, Wallace realized.

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“Captain?”

Stahl didn't know where Lund was riding, but he opened the link anyway. “Lund?”

“We did everything right, didn't we?” he asked. His voice was near breaking. Stahl ran his scanners over the column, until he found the battered infantryman atop Abramov's Anat APC. “Like you showed us in training?”

Stahl looked up and closed his eyes for a moment. “Everything a soldier should,” he said after a moment. “The Boss will be proud of us.”

Until he sees the empty larder.

###

“Fine.” Wallace slapped a hand against the table, not hard enough to sting but with enough force to ring a slap through the room. “How will we keep the men motivated?”

Roth collapsed into his seat. “They get paid, don't they?” He looked around the table. “We're all Bannson employees, after all.”

Tenclay chuckled. “This isn't the Jokers, Colonel. You can't buy my boys and girls off like that.” If she realized her mistake, she didn't show it.

Roth's head traversed toward her like a tank's turret. His pale cheeks were flushed, and a sheen of sweat rimed his forehead. Wallace smelled the musty tang of sweat as Roth settled his palms flat on the table.

"The Scourge," he said coldly, "is *mine*, Tenclay."

The subharmonic tremble of a DropShip braking from orbit shook the water glass in front of Wallace. He spun in his chair and looked across the landscape toward Archer. A telltale spark glittered in the sky.

"Here's some of them now," he murmured.

###

"Only a klick more," Stahl said.

Two APCs had fallen out during the march. The crews and the infantry they'd carried clung to the outside of the remaining vehicles. Abramov's Anat had an entire squad clustered on its roof. The vehicle's wheels were out of alignment, giving it a rolling oscillation that had several of the infantrymen vomiting off the sides.

Switching off his microphone, Stahl looked again at his communications board. The red telltale was dark, unlit. He stared at it for a moment. The DropShip's captain should have radioed by now. They were close enough that the more powerful transmitters on the *Union* could reach them, even this deep in the canyons that made Rio distinctive in the Sphere.

"Scouts out," Abramov ordered. A pair of troopers on hovercycles roared out ahead of the column, checking the bit of remaining space between the Scourge company and freedom. It was now that troops got most relaxed. Wallace had ground that lesson into his company commanders in exercise after exercise. When the end is in sight, the hindsight shuts down.

"It's not your fault," Abramov said. The indicator was for a discrete channel. The senior NCO had access to channels other didn't; another of Wallace's innovations.

"I should have trained them better," Stahl whispered. His mike was still off, but he spoke the words to himself.

"The Boss can't blame you for bad intel," Abramov said.

Stahl frowned. He saw Waite's face, the other troopers. He heard Barry's laugh. He listened as Piretti told another terrible joke in the 'Mech bay before the drop. He smelled Cohen's nasty sausage cooking the galley.

He triggered his microphone. "We failed them, Sarge."

"Sir?"

Stahl opened his mouth to speak, but an alarm ping interrupted him. His eyes dragged themselves to his long-range scans. The space behind them was empty. No sign of pursuit. His brow furrowed. He blinked. The red icons were in front of them. He looked up as an explosion echoed through the canyons around them. Icons flickered on his HUD. The hovercycles were under fire.

Between them and the DropShip.

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Every officer in the room stood at the window, waiting for the DropShip to unbutton. Even without the binoculars Bradshaw had produced – which insisted on whirring loudly every time they were focused – they could see the damage to the *Union's* thick armor.

“Is that Stahl’s company?” Ehli asked.

“Did you see them get out?” Bradshaw shot back.

Wallace ignored the byplay, concentrating instead on the DropShip. Steam hissed from vents as the ’Mech bay doors cracked and fell open. A wisp of smoke leaked from the top of the hatch. “Shit,” he whispered.

“What the hell is that?” Roth asked. Movement shimmered inside the bay, and then the battered form of a one-armed *Vulture IV* appeared. It limped from a shattered knee and a frozen hip, but it moved.

“Looks like he took a beating,” Bradshaw said. His voice was conversational, like he was discussing a lacrosse game. Wallace looked at him. The colonel chewed on his lower lip for a moment, then looked at the others. They all stood there, safe within the thick walls of the arcology, and watched as troopers limped or were carried from the DropShip. Wallace huffed and walked around the table.

“Where are you going? We’re not finished?” Roth demanded. He half-turned, the binoculars he’d confiscated from Tenclay’s fingers still raised.

Emergency vehicles flashed to life and charged the DropShip. The wail of the sirens didn’t penetrate the ferroglass window. Wallace took the door handle in one hand and turned to look at his commander.

“I’m going to see to my boys,” he said.