

WHEN THE NEWNESS WEARS OFF

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Lieutenant Colonel Stephen Wallace ignored the tiny red LED flashing twice a second on his desk. Priam would wait until he was done. Wallace looked back to the captain standing in front of his desk.

The office was an executive's office, a spacious room perched just off the corner of the former Archer Enterprises building. When the Scourge had taken over the complex, the colonel had taken the corner office. As executive officer, Wallace had taken the one next to it. Thick ferroglass floor-to-ceiling windows gave Wallace a commanding view of the parade field—such as it was. A year ago, it had been a parking lot.

"After the facility had been secured, Captain Stahl?" Wallace prompted. The officer was staring at the wall behind Wallace. His eyes were focused, but his mind was light-years away. *He's riding close to the edge.*

"We sent in the investigators," Stahl said. Wallace suppressed a grimace. He'd spent so much time turning these amateurs into soldiers that it irked him to hear the corporate euphemisms favored by Bannson's Raiders. "Two platoons, sir. The facility was abandoned, we thought."

"Ambush?" Wallace toyed with the data wafer containing Stahl's written report. He hadn't read it yet. He wanted to hear what the man said. He wanted to see Stahl's eyes.

"No, sir, not from inside." Stahl blinked. "From behind us, in the city. Two lances of corporate security forces. 'Mechs, tanks, battle armor."

"Corporate security?"

"If it makes the boss' list, sir," Stahl said, looking at Wallace for the first time. "They tore into us. I lost two 'Mechs and three tanks before we took them down."

"And the objective?"

"We got it," Stahl said. There was an edge to his voice, a defensive tone Wallace was glad to hear. The man cared for the mission as much as for his men. "Turned it over to the boss' men when we landed."

Wallace took a deep breath and exhaled sharply. He sat forward in his seat, put both his hands on his desk-top, and pushed the data wafer off to the side. "Then it sounds like a good op, Captain," he said.

Stahl frowned. "I shouldn't have gotten chewed up like that, sir."

"That's called friction, son," Wallace said. "Sometimes the other side knows you're coming. Maybe not by name, but they'll know they've got something that other people will want. They'll have their own plans for keeping it." Wallace pointed a finger at Stahl's chest. "It's what you do after they spring their trap that counts, Captain. You fought like a soldier and accomplished the mission."

Stahl didn't speak. Wallace watched him turn it over in his head, trying to meld the logic Wallace had given him with the common-sense guilt he felt. The colonel didn't speak, waiting for the captain to come around. Stahl didn't disappoint. *Good troop*, Wallace thought.

"I . . . I understand, sir."

Wallace slapped one hand on the polished hardwood of his desk and sat back in his chair. "Excellent. Now, let's look at tomorrow. What did you bring back with you?" He pointed Stahl into the steel-frame chair across the desk.

"We brought back three 'Mechs and two tanks that should be salvageable," Stahl said. He settled into the chair and immediately slouched forward. His elbows went onto his knees and he rubbed his hands together.

"Then you'll be back up to strength pretty quickly," Wallace said. He activated his computer and brought up the current supply stocks. "What else do you need?"

"They took the 'Mechs," Stahl said.

Wallace stopped typing. "What?"

"At the field, sir," Stahl said. He looked at his hands. "The boss' men, they took the salvage off the DropShip and hauled it away."

"To the repair depot?"

"To a Capellan DropShip," Stahl said, as if he were spitting the name. "Right up the ramp, no waiting."

Wallace kept his mouth closed by force of will. It was the one immutable law of the Scourge: you keep what you kill. The only way he kept these delinquents in line was the promise of the chance to capture their own 'Mechs. His mind was racing, trying to find a palatable reason for Bannson to break that law.

"Her," he spat.

"That was my thought as well, sir," Stahl said.

"Quiet," Wallace snapped. If Bannson was taking the salvage from the troops, morale would be taking a serious hit. "Who else knows about this?"

Stahl shrugged. "The whole crew saw it. I heard the cursing from across the 'Mech bay." The lanky officer leaned back in his chair, as if lifting a weight from his shoulders. "You didn't know about this, sir?"

"No," Wallace said. There was a long silence, until Stahl cleared his throat.

"What about my company?"

Wallace mentally shook himself and looked back at his computer. A quick glance at the screen showed him what was available. "A new shipment arrived yesterday, Captain," he said. "I'm giving you two new 'Mechs and six tanks." He looked up. "That enough?"

Stahl thought for a second and nodded. "It'll do. I'll have two without 'Mechs, but that will give them some incentive to capture one." He looked down. "What about troops?"

Wallace frowned. "All I can give you is a billet of new replacements." He pretended he didn't hear the soft curse Stahl muttered. "I'm cutting orders for training, Captain. Take them out to the proving grounds, run them through their paces." He let a frown slip onto his face. "Wear the newness off them, Captain. Better here than in the field."

"Sir," Stahl said. He stood and waited for Wallace to nod his dismissal. He didn't bother with a salute; Wallace had tried to institute one when he first came aboard, but that had been an abysmal failure from day one. Even the greenest Triarii could salute better than the best Scourge.

A Liao DropShip. Wallace waited until the door closed behind the captain before he allowed himself to swear. Why couldn't the boss be content just to have a military force? Why did he find it necessary to interfere with its operation every other week? Jacob Bannson was many things—things that Wallace admired—but he was no general.

The red LED was still blinking. Wallace closed his eyes and squeezed them, willing the burgeoning headache to fade back to a dull ache. When he opened them, he tapped the LED once, shutting it off. He swept the data wafer off his desk, clearing the wide space to immaculate emptiness again, and waited.

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The door opened again and an officer entered. Major Theodore Priam was Wallace's aide. In reality, he was Bannson's spy in the Scourge, a watchdog to make sure the real dogs didn't step out of line. Wallace tolerated him in the same way he had tolerated his former Republic aides: with as little respect as possible, and as little contact as possible. Fewer hands meant fewer mistakes, his mother had always said. Wallace didn't like to delegate.

"Colonel," Priam said. He stood smartly, the only officer to wear the uniform the Scourge had adopted. Bannson thought it looked nice on the holo. While Wallace knew a common uniform would really help with unit cohesion, he also knew that trying to force the disparate mercenaries and brigands that made up the Raiders to wear one would be pointless. He'd quietly dropped that directive along with the salutes.

"Major," Wallace said. His voice was always the same when he spoke to his aide: curt, as if he had little time for the man.

Which was true.

"The boss has issued a new directive."

"I can hardly wait," Wallace said.

"The director sent a memo."

"The *colonel*," Wallace said, "should have stepped into the next room and just told me." No other organization floated on so much paper as the Raiders. It was bad enough that so many of the senior officers of Bannson's regiments were white-collar workers with delusions of grandeur; that they refused to accept the value of simple military expediency was just galling. Wallace sighed, accustomed to the feeling of frustrated resignation.

"All returning investigation teams are to deposit their acquisitions into the general pool." Priam smiled and sat down, not waiting for Wallace's permission. "The rest of the regiments are getting low on supplies, and we need to share what we pick up."

"We're splitting our salvage."

"Acquisitions, Colonel," Priam said. "But yes. The Raiders are a growing organization, and our current logistics are struggling to support it."

"I see." Wallace sat upright in his chair and folded his hands on his desk. If he looked down, he could see a distorted reflection of Priam in the polished wood. "And House Liao?"

"What about them?"

"How much of our salvage are they to receive?"

Priam frowned. "Surely the Capellan Confederation can look after its own armed forces, Colonel."

"Then why," Wallace said, letting a tinge of anger slip into his voice—spy or not, Priam was a major and Wallace a colonel—"did part of Stahl's take go on a Liao DropShip this morning?" He pointed a hand out his wide windows. "That ship is on its way to a Capellan JumpShip right now."

Priam smiled easily. "Perhaps the Capellans are being kind enough to transport the materiel to our other units, Colonel."

Wallace snorted. "This is chickenshit, Major," he said.

"I don't pretend to know the boss' mind," Priam said.

"I'm trying to build a combat organization out of security troops and mercenaries. It's bad enough I have to associate with those psychopaths in the Jokers and the Band of Five. I don't have control over them. But I do control the Scourge." Wallace drove a finger into his desk. "This is a huge mistake, Major."

"The director signed off on it," Priam said.

"Of course he did," Wallace ground out. And there was the line. Colonel Hadrian Roth, titular commander of the Scourge, was Bannson's man through and through. Director of Operations, First Bannson's Raiders. Chairman of the Scourge. A host of other bureaucratic titles as well. Wallace saw hope in Bannson's vision; Roth

saw profit. He was a zealot, and Wallace did everything he could to keep the combat troops away from their colonel. Bannson's Raiders could be a beacon in the shattered Sphere, if only Wallace could make them that.

"Post the order to the regiment," Wallace said.

"It's already on the nets," Priam said.

"Well, at least we heard about it first." He fought down the sigh that wanted to escape from his tightening chest. "I don't suppose the Five or the Jokers will be sending us equipment in return?"

Priam smiled. "Not equipment. Troops."

Wallace closed his eyes. "Oh, Christ."

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Archer Enterprises had been a fair-sized electronics firm when Bannson Universal Unlimited acquired them in 3127. After the HPG went down, Bannson wasted little time in converting their corporate headquarters into a military facility. The Scourge had moved in a little over a year ago, after Bannson's bodyguards and security unit were officially detached from the regiment. Wallace stood outside the building at the edge of the parade field and let his mind wander.

It would have to be presented to the captains in just the right way. Bannson's order would shatter morale, Wallace knew. Half the troopers in the conventional corps were only there to capture a BattleMech. Devlin Stone might have made war unpopular, but his knights and paladins had kept the mystique of the BattleMech alive throughout The Republic. Now that it was all gone, everyone wanted a 'Mech.

"Stupid," Wallace whispered.

"Sir?" Captain Stahl had appeared at his side. The tall man was wearing his usual, a brown jacket that hung open to his knees. A pistol rode a quick-draw holster on his thigh. Slender, wire-frame sunglasses hid his eyes from the world, but Wallace knew they were so darkly brown as to be almost black.

"New orders from the colonel," Wallace said. "It's about your salvage." Better that it come from Roth than Bannson. The Scourge could survive the loss of faith in a colonel. Losing faith in Bannson would shatter them. Wallace wished again that Meghann Tenclay was still the Scourge's CO. At least she'd been a shooter. Of course, there was that other thing He shook his head.

"It's going to Liao?"

"No, I'm told it's going to other Raiders." Wallace turned his head enough to watch Stahl's reaction. "The Capellans are just transporting it."

"Mrs. Bannson strikes again," Stahl said. He said it easily, without the vitriol Wallace had expected. He turned away from Wallace, looked west.

The Bannson Universal Unlimited corporate headquarters squatted on the horizon like a great beetle. The massive arcology was Jacob Bannson's crowning achievement on Tybalt. That building was one of the reasons Wallace had come out of retirement to join the Raiders. It was one of the reasons he fought to make the Scourge a real group of soldiers.

Building that arcology took vision. Jacob Bannson had vision, and Wallace was convinced that the worlds of the former Republic needed vision if they were to survive.

A shout brought both men around. A pair of infantrymen spilled out of the entryway. The larger of the two, a dark-skinned Sikh, fell to the pavement, his turban rolling free. The other, a small black man with a jagged scar disfiguring the left side of his face, leapt on him and pounded on the Sikh's head and shoulders with his fists.

"Hey!" Wallace shouted, and took a step. He dropped to his chest on the pavement a moment later as a gunshot rang out right behind him.

"That'll just about do it," Stahl said, holstering his pistol.

The two fighters had broken apart when the shot sounded. At the sight of a colonel getting up from the ground, both of them likewise leapt to their feet. The Sikh was bleeding from the nose and lower lip; the scarred man was trembling.

"What the hell is this?" Wallace demanded.

"A disagreement, sir," the Sikh said. He had a Northfield accent, nasal and clipped.

"That true, Lund?" Stahl asked. Wallace looked at him. "He's a trooper in my company, Colonel."

The black man nodded. His lower lip still trembled, but his fists were clenched at his sides.

"Over what?"

Lund blinked slowly. "He said the boss is right to steal my 'Mech, sir."

Wallace frowned. "Mr. Bannson didn't take your 'Mech, trooper."

Lund swallowed. A bead of sweat rolled down the scar on his face. "I took that *Ghost* fair and square, sir. It was my missile what did it in." He looked Wallace in the eye. "You keep what you kill, Colonel. I heard you say so."

Wallace bit back a curse. "Those are the colonel's orders, Mr. Lund," he said. "Not the boss'. He glanced at Stahl, jerked his head toward the two men.

"Get out of here, Lund," Stahl said. He looked at the Sikh. "You go the other direction, trooper." He patted the pistol on his thigh. "I mean it."

Stahl waited until they were out of sight. "It was Lund's 'Mech that went into that Liao DropShip, Colonel."

Wallace looked toward the arcology. "Chickenshit," he muttered. He swallowed and wiped at the dust on his trousers. "Keep the lid on, Captain," he said. "The enemy is out there."