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Stell stood by the window, hands clasped behind his back, a long, lean silhouette against the soft light of Arno's distant sun. His green eyes prowled restlessly over the makeshift drill ground below. It wasn't regulation by any means. In fact, until recently it had served as a parking lot for hover trucks. Of course, the troops marching back and forth across it couldn't care less. They hated marching no matter where they did it. The few veterans were bored and slightly insulted, and the raw recruits surrounding them were scared and all left feet. But they must learn to work together, to function as a team, to follow orders without question. Marching had been used to teach those things for thousands of years.

Stell ran a hand over his smooth scalp, still shaved clean in the manner of the elite Star Guard. As he watched the orderly ebb and flow of troops below, it occurred to him that the basics of war were eternal. The passage of time might change the tools of war, but not the principles by which it was fought, or the reasons behind it. Greed, hate, a lust for power; together, they had always guaranteed soldiers something to fight and die for.

"To serve with honor among the stars." That was the motto of the Marine Corps, the reason he'd gone to the Academy, and his father before him. For

years he'd believed it and lived it. Until the day they decided that "honor" had grown too expensive. Let the frontier defend itself. Let the Il Ronn and pirates keep each other in check. And let us have lower taxes. That's what those toward the center of the empire had decided. Stell's brigade was among those chosen for deactivation.

He and the two thousand other members of the brigade were offered a choice: Honorable discharge and free passage to their home planet, or continued service in an authorized mercenary army. "Authorized" meant agreement in advance to fight only those wars approved by the Imperial government. So if they agreed to become mercenaries, the Emperor would continue to benefit from, if not directly control, their activities. And all for free.

In any case, the brigade had put it to a vote. Almost everybody considered going home, but they'd been gone a long time, they didn't have civilian skills, and besides, for most of them the brigade *was* home. So most stayed, and Stell was no exception. Now they continued to fight and die, not for freedom or honor, but for money. And Stell didn't like it. Three months had passed since the final battle of New Covenant. It was a dirty little religious war between two rival factions of what had been a single church. The brigade was brought in by the weaker side. They managed to win the war, but at a terrible price. In the end, after the disastrous and unnecessary final battle caused by the incompetence of their clients, they'd used hand lasers to carve more than five hundred graves into the rocky ground, including one for Colonel "Bull" Strom, their commanding officer.

As a result, Mark Stell rose from Major to Colonel, from Executive Officer to Commanding Officer, and from enforcer of policy to architect of it. And the worst part was that he liked it. He liked the freedom, the responsibility, and the challenge of command. And yes, he liked the power, too. All of which made him feel guilty as hell sometimes. Bull Strom had been like his father, brother and best friend all rolled into one. But Bull had been wrong, damn it! Dead wrong. He couldn't see the future the way it must inevitably be. Couldn't understand things had changed. Couldn't see that over time his beloved brigade was dying what the ancient Chinese had called "The Death Of A Thousand Cuts." As each body was lowered into blood-soaked soil, a part of the brigade died too. And when the dying was done, they'd be asked to move along, to do it all over again, until finally none of them survived. And as they were replaced, one person at a time, the brigade was gradually changing and would eventually become something Strom wouldn't have recognized, much less loved. As Stell watched the raw recruits wheel, turn, and crash into each other, he knew that time was growing closer with each passing day. It had to be stopped . . . but how?

"It's time, sir." The voice was a familiar basso, and Stell turned with a smile.

"Good to see you, Zack. What's the body armor for? We're going to dinner, not war." Although, where clients are concerned, one often precedes the other, he thought to himself. Sergeant Major Zachariah Como made an impressive sight. Standing a full seven feet tall, his black skin was only a shade lighter than the dull matte finish on his body armor. Broad at the shoulder and narrow at the hip, he looked like a recruiting poster and he knew it. Although his brown eyes were filled with intelligence and humor, there was also a natural wariness there, a detachment, past which few were ever allowed. Stell was one of those few. The Sergeant Major wore two handguns at his waist and cradled a grenade launcher in his arms. Como replied with a familiarity reserved for times when they were alone. "You're a fine one to talk about appearances, Colonel; when's the last time you changed uniforms, anyway?" He indicated Stell's rumpled clothes with a grin.

Stell looked down at his uniform sheepishly. "You're right, Zack. It wouldn't do to let clients see what a slob I really am. But isn't body armor a bit much?" He began to strip off his dirty clothes.

Como snorted in reply. "Have you been outside since we landed? Hell, no. That might involve taking some time off—something you fear like death itself, probably because you don't know how to have a good time. But if you'd been out there you'd know why I'm wearing armor."

Stell knew Como was right. He disliked free time because he didn't know what to do with it. "Trouble?" he asked, stepping into a pair of gray dress trousers.

"More like total insanity," the other man replied, shaking his head in wonderment. "They call it the Free Zone. I call it a free-for-all. We've been in some pretty wild places over the years, but this takes the cake. I've got a full section waiting outside to escort us to dinner, and I'm not sure it's enough. But I'm afraid to weaken the perimeter by taking more, especially with so many greenies in the ranks. So take my advice and suit up. Otherwise some Zonie may have you for dinner!" With a grin and a wave he was gone, leaving Stell to finish dressing.

As he buttoned the last gold button on the bright red coat, Stell wondered about medals, and then decided against them. They belonged to the past. He shrugged on the harness and tucked the slug gun into the holster under his left arm. If Zack was worried, there was good reason. And although he hadn't been outside, he knew what the Sergeant Major was talking about. As usual, their last clients had been eager to get rid of them once victory was assured. No one wants a mercenary army sitting around while they go through the delicate process of forming a new government. After all, the power the brigade granted, it could also take away.

So they lifted off-planet, taking their pay and leaving their dead. And they came here, to Arno, to rest, regroup, and wait for the next war. Arno was an

agricultural planet, settled by and organized around a single church. Kind of ironic in a way, considering they were on Arno to recover from a religious war on New Covenant. Anyway, the church Elders controlled all aspects of life on Arno, especially the economy. Early on, the Elders had realized it was the very same kinds of activity forbidden by their religion that earned the most foreign exchange. Which is to say that the sale of illicit drugs, sex, and weapons brought in more money from off-planet than did the sale of vegetables. So, eager to reap this much needed foreign exchange, yet afraid of a punitive god, they invented the Free Enterprise Zone, a wonderful device that would enable them to have their virtue and money too. And by confining all those from off-planet within the Zone, they could protect their flock from corrupting influences and still enjoy the benefits of interstellar commerce. And their invention served them very well indeed.

The Elders demanded and received what they called a ten-percent tithe on the value of all goods sold within the Zone. In return, those within the Zone were free to do as they pleased. Free of restrictive law and regulation, the Zone soon attracted all sorts of enterprise, most of which were quite illegal on other planets. This fact didn't trouble the Elders in the least. Following the ancient religious dictum that the end justifies the means, they reasoned that, since the revenues thus generated would be used to import agricultural equipment, which would eventually transform the planet into the Eden prophesied by the church's founder, Brother Esten Arno, then the Zone was, in the final analysis, moral. And from what Stell had seen coming down from orbit, they were well on the way toward their goal. Arno was a beautiful planet, much of it still wild, with large tracts of beautiful farm land that were broken here and there by the gentle flow of wide, slow-moving rivers. Arno was a nice place to live—if you weren't in the Zone.

The Free Zone was about twenty-five square miles in size. Because its boundaries were entirely artificial, it formed a perfect circle, a shape that the Elders' military advisors assured them would be vulnerable to attack, should those living within the Zone ever get out of hand. A shaped force field surrounded it, preventing entry or exit except through the one, closely guarded gate. Of course, that was rarely used, since citizens were not allowed into the Zone and Zonies were not allowed out. Most commerce arrived and departed via the spaceport located at the Zone's center. There was a second, smaller spaceport located on the other side of the planet, but it was dedicated to church-approved traffic and Arno's small navy.

Radiating out from the Free Zone's spaceport were concentric rings of activity. First came the dives and nightclubs catering to every imaginable taste in drugs and sex. Their clientele were mostly drawn from the ships touching down to load or unload cargo, but rumor had it that church Elders paid secret

visits to places like the "Super Nova" and "Bloody Mary's"—two of the Zone's more celebrated dives. Beyond those were the illegal factories, illicit research laboratories, and warehouses. And, finally, the outermost ring was a warren of dilapidated domes, tenements, and shanties. Here the majority of the Zone's population returned each night. Most eked out a marginal life working in some factory, selling themselves for illegal research, or being used by those who frequented the bars and nightclubs. Others were not so lucky. They had no jobs and existed by victimizing those who did, until they themselves fell prey to the endless cycle of poverty and misery. For within the Zone there was no law, except that imposed on the weak by the strong.

This, then, was the area into which the brigade had been forced to go. Oh, they could have stayed in space for a while, or sought out another planet, but Arno was close and therefore less expensive to reach; plus, Stell knew that in the end they'd be forced to accept something similar, or worse. No one rolled out the red carpet for a mercenary army between engagements.

So the brigade paid the Elders an exorbitant tithe, entered the Zone, and rented space in what had recently been a Yirl drug refinery, and an illegal weapons factory before that. The complex of buildings, plus the parking lot outside, now comprised brigade HQ. It wasn't as secure as he'd like, but so far the brigade's obvious firepower, aggressive patrols, and violent reputation had prevented raids by the criminal element—although Stell wasn't sure the word "criminal" served any useful function in the Zone. But such attacks weren't unheard of. When it seemed worthwhile, someone would recruit a temporary army and use it to attack a drug factory or some other profitable target. And, because of its weapons and equipment, the brigade would certainly qualify as "profitable."

So Stell slipped into the A-suit and sealed it. He checked the load on the short, ugly assault rifle he favored for street fighting, and opened the door. As he left his office, the two sentries outside snapped to attention. He nodded and they fell in behind as he marched down the hall toward the lift tube. Moments later he was outside, and almost gagging on the heavy odor of rotting garbage and backed up sewers. He swallowed and made a note to get the area cleaned up. Without any form of central control, utilities in the Zone were a haphazard affair.

As he walked to the street he noticed that the light had grown dim as Arno's sun neared the horizon, retaining barely enough strength to throw long shadows across the duracrete beneath his boots. Sergeant Major Como's convoy sat idling at the curb. It consisted of four vehicles: three open hover trucks of various makes and lineage, plus an ancient limo. There was something vaguely familiar about the rounded shape sitting in the rear of the open vehicle. For a moment Stell couldn't place it, but when he realized what it was

he laughed, and turned to find that Sergeant Major Como had materialized at his side. "Sorry about the vehicles, sir, but as you know, the bastards wouldn't let us bring any of our own stuff down."

Stell knew Como was referring to the Elders' refusal to allow them any armor. While they rode around in whatever they could dredge up, there were a couple of hundred perfectly good vehicles aboard the brigade's three transports, presently in orbit around Arno. If the thought of mercenaries made the Elders nervous, the thought of mercenaries riding around in tanks probably drove them crazy.

"But I see you found a way around that," Stell said, indicating the rounded shape in the back of the limo.

Como's face registered elaborate innocence. "You mean trooper Smith, sir? I agree he's tough, but certainly no match for armor."

Nodding in mock agreement, Stell said, "Now that I look again I see you're absolutely right, Sergeant Major. That is trooper Smith. Ugly bastard I must say. By the way, Sergeant Major, my compliments on our transportation," Stell said, eyeing the aging vehicles that made up the convoy. "I see that in addition to your other accomplishments you're able to raise the dead."

The joke got the predictable laugh from those near enough to hear it. Stell knew it would make the rounds of the barracks later, making him seem less remote and more human to the troops. As he climbed into the truck he felt guilty about how easily he could manipulate them. But leadership hadn't come as naturally to him as it did to some. Bull Strom had been a good example. He had that mysterious ability that allows some to walk into a room full of perfect strangers and effortlessly make each into a friend and admirer. Lacking that kind of charisma, Stell developed a more calculated style of leadership which, though quite effective, seemed somehow artificial and therefore less genuine.

Stell chinned his radio switch on. "Where's Major Malik?" he asked, looking around for his XO.

Fifty feet away, in his own vehicle, Como shrugged his shoulders. "He told Sergeant Wilkens he was planning a surprise inspection of the perimeter, sir."

Stell was annoyed that Malik hadn't seen fit to show up for final orders, but the surprise inspection was a good idea. It would keep the greenies on their toes. As the convoy jerked into motion, Stell's eyes began a systematic search of their surroundings. He was looking for the little things, clues which had often made the difference between life and death: the hint of motion in an upstairs window, the glint of reflected light off a weapon, the stalled vehicle that shouldn't be there. But finding nothing, he turned his attention to the convoy. The natural tendency to bunch up could be suicidal. A tightly grouped convoy could be destroyed with a single shoulder-launched missile,

or a well-placed bomb. But the vehicles stayed well separated under Como's watchful eye.

Cautiously, the convoy wound its way through darkening streets, twisting and turning like some nocturnal snake gradually moving further away from the safety of its lair. And, as the sun dipped below the horizon, Stell felt a prickling in his scalp and knew they were not alone. The wash of their headlights was quickly lost in the darkness that had descended around them. People weren't seen, only sensed, as their dark, uncertain forms scurried to avoid the light and were tracked out of sight by infrared scanners.

Stell shivered in his armor, doing his best to ignore the ancient instincts pumping adrenaline through his system, urging him to run, to hide from the unknown things that stalked the night. Then darkness turned to day, as powerful flares went off. The intense light drove the filters in Stell's visor to the edge of burnout. Swearing, he switched to infrared just in time to see the attackers come swarming up out of the sewers like maggots fleeing a disturbed corpse. There were hundreds of them, all dressed in disposable white camouflage suits, which were gradually turning black as the flares burned down. They moved quickly to surround and isolate each vehicle in the convoy. Then they opened up with slug throwers and energy weapons that cut the night into a thousand streamers of light and dark.

Stell chinned his mic switch. "Automatic weapons, left and right flank, fire. Grenade launchers, left and right, fire. Snipers, pick targets ahead and fire. Clear a path for your vehicle but watch out for those in front of you, there's enough people shooting at us already." If the joke got a laugh, it was lost in the roar of sound as the troopers opened up. Thanks to Como, they were all hand-picked veterans. A quick glance told him casualties were light so far. Only one of the troopers in his truck was down. The others were cutting down Zonies in swaths like wheat at harvest. But as quickly as they died, more boiled up out of the sewers, dropped from rooftops, and surged out of dark passageways to join the fray. There was a burst of static, followed by Sergeant Como's calm voice. "Green four to green one."

"Go ahead, green four," Stell replied, squeezing the trigger on his assault rifle and stitching a line of white holes through one of the infrared blobs surging toward him.

"We have a prisoner, green one, and he's been egoed."

"Understood, green four," Stell replied, churning over the new information. Some, if not all, of the Zonies had been ego suppressed, probably through use of illegal drugs, and then memprinted with a hatred of the brigade, or all people wearing A-suits, or whatever. It really didn't matter. What mattered was that the Zonies wouldn't react the way they should. Instead of realizing they were being decimated and running or surrendering,

they would just keep coming until they won, or until they were all dead. Ego-suppression techniques were illegal everywhere—except, of course, in the Zone.

Sweeping his gaze over the convoy, Stell saw the greatest danger lay in being swarmed under. His troopers were better armed and trained, but the Zonies outnumbered them at least ten to one. Given that advantage, plus their suicidal frenzy, they couldn't lose. Unless . . . Suddenly a Zonie landed right in front of him. With a shock he realized she was just a teenager, her camouflage suit hanging in folds on her skinny frame, eyes enormously dilated, lips drawn back in a snarl. He watched, fascinated, as she brought up her cheap, disposable power gun, aware that some remote part of himself had reacted, wondering vaguely who would win. Then he felt himself pull the trigger and watched the side of her head disappear in a spray of blood and brains. Stell forced his eyes away from her crumpled form as he spoke. "Green one to green four."

"Go ahead, green one," Como replied.

"Stand by to drop trooper Smith on my command. Initiate program D with a ten-minute hold."

"That's affirmative, green one; trooper Smith on your command."

Peering over the truck's cab, Stell was cursing the darkness when a sudden flood of white light washed over him. Startled, he thought another flare had gone off. Then he realized the last truck in the convoy, the one just behind the limo, was on fire. The surviving troops bailed out and ran forward, trying desperately to catch up with the moving limo. As he watched, one stumbled and fell, then another, both quickly disappearing under a wave of advancing Zonies. Pounding the side of the truck in frustration, he issued new orders. "Green one to green four. Stop the limo, drop trooper Smith, and pick up survivors."

"Affirmative, green one," Como replied.

Raising his glasses, Stell saw the limo silhouetted against the burning truck. Trooper Smith stood, unfolding himself into vaguely human form, and stepped down onto the pavement. Meanwhile, the rearmost troops laid down covering fire as survivors from the burning truck caught up and piled into the limo.

As trooper Smith disappeared in the direction of the advancing Zonies, Stell wondered if their drugged minds would recognize what they faced. Probably not. But they would soon experience what it could do. Standing eight feet tall, and weighing more than half a ton, the Auto Trooper was a machine designed for only one thing: killing. It did its job very well. A military derivative of the famous Autoguard, the robots had the destructive capability of an entire section of Imperial Marines. But

since Auto Troopers were incredibly expensive, they would never replace the cheaper flesh-and-blood humans who created them. At least we have job security, Stell thought wryly. Como had violated the spirit, if not the letter of their agreement with the Elders by bringing the robot down from orbit, but Stell didn't plan to point that out. They would probably lose the valuable machine, but they would save most of the section, a trade he'd happily make any day of the week.

With the survivors aboard, the limo's driver wasted no time catching up with the rest of the convoy. Turning his glasses slightly, Stell saw the Auto Trooper, backlit by the burning truck, waiting with limitless mechanical patience for the order to kill. Zonies swarmed around it, screaming their frustration as their slugs and beams bounced harmlessly off its armor and defensive screens. Then, somewhere deep inside its metal body relays closed, current surged, weapons were activated, and the mini-computer controlling it began picking targets of opportunity. With deceptive slowness, it lumbered forward into the Zonie horde. Then, without warning the robot began to spew slugs, grenades, flechettes and coherent energy in every direction. It was a sight Stell would never forget. In a lifetime of battles, he'd never seen such slaughter. The robot never missed. Each projectile hit its mark. Every beam of lethal energy found a target. Row after row of Zonies were cut to bloody shreds. Those to the rear pushed their way forward, slipping and sliding in the slush of flesh and blood under their feet, eager to take their turns in the hail of lead, steel, and deadly energy. Men, women and children all hurried forward to die. The worst part was the mindless, empty expression they wore. Somehow, they seemed more machinelike than the metal monster that destroyed them. They were, or had been, people. Loving, hating, happy, sad . . . people. Mercenaries in their own way, they were lured by promises of god knows what, betrayed, and chemically altered into cheap, disposable troops. There was no honor in killing them, only survival. Stell turned away. Sick at what someone had done to them, sick at what he was doing to them, yet allowing it to go on. To do otherwise would be a betrayal of those who trusted him. But he swore a silent oath to find those responsible and make them pay.

Glancing around, he saw most of the Zonies had turned away from the convoy to attack the robot. They were like moths drawn to a flame. Whether acting on their own or responding to some external direction, he couldn't tell. Whatever the reason, he was grateful. Calling for more speed, Stell held on tight as the convoy drew quickly away. Ahead he saw only darkness. Lowering the useless binoculars, he bit his lip in frustration. The Zonies had been used like a hammer to drive the convoy forward. Logically, therefore, an anvil waited somewhere up ahead. If they continued, they'd be smashed

against it. His mind searched desperately for an answer, a way out, and finding none, he felt the first stirrings of panic.

Forcing himself to breathe slowly, to relax, he made his mind a receptive blank. He could almost hear Bull Strom saying, "When things get toughest son, that's the time to let go. Otherwise your emotions will get you all jammed up. The answer's there . . . but you gotta be quiet to hear it. So let your mind go blank. That's when the answer will come." And when it did, Stell couldn't help but laugh out loud, causing the troopers nearest him to look at each other in surprise, shrug their shoulders, and laugh too. Another story for the barracks.

Moments later Sergeant Major Como laughed as well, a deep basso belly laugh, as the small tactical computer by his side confirmed the feasibility of Stell's plan. He admired the pure simplicity of it, and knew that because it was so simple, so obvious, most officers would have missed it. Bull would've loved it, Como thought as he chinned his mic open and delivered the good news. Minutes later the convoy came to a full stop. The troops jumped out, placed demolition charges, and formed a column of twos with the wounded to the rear. Fortunately, only two of the wounded had to be carried on improvised stretchers. They departed in double-time, with Stell in the lead and Como bringing up the rear. Even if the unit was cut in two during an ambush, both halves would have leadership.

As they jogged along, Stell occasionally referred to the map that Como's computer had printed out. Far behind, a series of muffled explosions signalled the convoy's destruction as the demolition charges went off. "Never leave 'em anything useful," that's what Bull had always said.

Numerous twistings and turnings brought them to a shabby duracrete building. It wore an equally grimy sign that read, "TRANSCAR TERMINAL." It was part of a Zone-wide system originally installed by the Elders to attract industry. Since then, the Zone's business tenants had maintained the system to move raw materials and finished products to and from the spaceport. And, since the Elders prohibited air travel within the Zone, most people had to use it too. In front of the terminal, fifteen or twenty Zonies had gathered around two trash fires, warming their hands and talking in low tones. For the most part they were dressed in rags and castoffs, though a few more recent recruits wore slightly better attire. A trickle of equally grubby passengers entered and left the terminal, each dropping something into a large bucket as they passed between the two fires, but otherwise giving the two groups a wide berth. Sighting the mercenaries, both groups quickly drifted together, a variety of weapons materializing in grimy hands, avarice gleaming from deeply shadowed eyes.

For a moment, Stell thought the ambushers had found them. But he quickly dismissed that idea, certain they faced a band of common thugs. The

ambushers would've been all over them by now. Motioning the troops to stay put, Stell carefully slung his assault rifle across his back, and stood with empty palms out. As he waited, his hard green eyes swept the mob, taking inventory one man at a time. Most eyes turned aside refusing to meet his, but here and there a few challenged him with open defiance. One of those, a big burly man standing toward the center of the crowd, drew Stell's attention. Here was their leader. Tiny, arrogant eyes peered out of a full, meaty face topped by a mass of greasy black hair. His voice whistled through a small, lipless mouth.

"Well, gentlemen, what have we here? Some customers what haven't paid their toll, that's what." As the man stepped toward the front of the crowd, the others quickly moved out of his way. "Now you wouldn't want to ride without payin', would you soldier boy?"

"How much?" Stell asked evenly. If possible, he'd rather pay than fight over some petty extortion.

The other man eyed Stell and his troops with a calculating stare, ran a filthy rag over his forehead and grinned a slow, insulting grin. "Every fourth weapon should do it, soldier boy. Normally it'd be more, but I'll give you a group rate. Just stack 'em next to me as you go by."

Stell nodded. Obviously the other man had no intention of being reasonable. Either that, or he'd severely underestimated the opposition. Stell sighed. Either way it didn't make much difference. He took two steps to the right. "Pay 'em, Corporal."

Stepping up from behind him, Corporal Flynn flamed the first rank of men with one long-practiced motion. Five of the would-be extortionists, plus their leader, died instantly. Only a few blackened chunks of flesh and a dusting of ashes marked where they had stood. At Stell's signal, Corporal Flynn released the trigger and her flamer returned to standby.

Without a word, the surviving members of the mob backed carefully away into the shadows and disappeared. Stell posted a rear guard, and led the rest of the section down a frozen escalator and out onto a filthy loading platform.

He placed Corporal Flynn in charge of twenty troops, with orders to escort the wounded back to base. They would catch a transcar headed in the other direction and be there in a few minutes. As Flynn turned to leave, Stell stopped her. "That was good work back there, Corporal. Thanks."

Flynn looked away self-consciously, her light skin flushing dark, accentuating the freckles sprinkled across her pug nose. "They were sure stupid sir, thinking' we'd just cave in like that. I reckon they won't make that mistake again."

Stell smiled. "At least not with you around, Corporal." His smile turned to a frown as he said, "Keep an eye out for Zonies on the way back, Corporal. And when you reach base, report to Major Malik. Tell him about the Zonie

ambush, and for god's sake, tell him to check the sewers under HQ. There might be more down there than a bad smell!"

Flynn laughed and replied formally, "I understand, sir, and will comply."

Stell nodded, returning her salute, and watched as she led her troops onto the overpass leading to the other tracks. He noted with satisfaction that she sent scouts across first, and had the wounded to the rear. She'd do just fine. Hopefully, Malik would get his message in the next half hour and do something about it. Once again he felt the distrust and disapproval his executive officer always elicited from him and pushed it aside. Even Malik couldn't screw this up. But he wished he knew why someone was jamming all the brigade's frequencies up and down the bands. Was it connected with the brigade, or just coincidence? Either way, he didn't like it. Moments later a transcar arrived and they all piled on, weapons at the ready, rear guard jumping on at the very last second. Tense troopers scanned nervous passengers for any sign of hostility. There was none. Just the usual looks of fear and resentment familiar to any mercenary soldier. The transcar gently accelerated and the walls of the tunnel became a blur. Stell slumped down into a seat and stared out through a grimy, scratched window. He felt sure they'd escaped the anvil. But someone had gone to a lot of trouble and expense to set that trap. Who? Why? Those questions occupied him for the rest of the journey.