

Starfire
Chapter Two: Back to Basics
by Havoc

“It is courage, courage, courage, that raises the blood of life to crimson splendor. Live bravely and present a brave front to adversity.”

- Horace

“M'raava, you look a little upset.”

With an annoyed sigh, M'raava looked across at her fiancé. “Really, now? What was your first clue?” She flicked her tail in irritation, looking around the passenger compartment of their shuttle. All throughout the trip from Earth, M'raava had been sulking. It wasn't enough that she'd had her first leave in months cut brutally short, now the military had shipped them both out to the very edges of the solar system. They'd spent a long day and a half on a transport ship, and she'd been in no mood to do much other than stare at the inside of their cabin. The fact that they hadn't even been given the details of the new assignment yet didn't help matters much.

About the only thing that they did know was that their ultimate destination was the dwarf planet of Eris, a sphere of gray rock currently beyond the orbit of Pluto. With frigid surface temperatures plummeting to two hundred degrees below zero and a thin atmosphere of methane, Eris had offered little of interest to Earth until the war. Despite the utter lack of viability for terraforming, the planet was now home to an extensive subterranean network of military installations. Likewise, the orbiting moon of Dysnomia hosted several communications stations and the supply depot for the planetside bases.

But despite its importance to the defenses of the solar system, Eris was still viewed by most in the military as a punishment detail. Being stationed there was about as far away as one could be while still being in direct communication range with Earth, and there was little in the way of entertainment to be had. Going stir-crazy was a real possibility on Eris, since any soldier based there would spend months at a time underground.

“It will not be that bad, M'raava,” Arpad assured her. “I spent nearly a year on Eris when I was fresh out of training.” He crossed his arms, leaning back in his jump seat. “And besides, you do not even know what your duties are going to be, yet. Save the moping for when you have something to mope about.”

“When I have something to mope about!?” M'raava felt a flash of anger at those words. “There's *plenty* to mope about!” She held up one hand, ticking off each item as she listed them. “Every movie in the library on base is *at least* twenty years old. All of the food is shipped in *freeze-dried*. There's no grass or trees. There's no sunlight. *And* the base commander doesn't believe in alcohol, so the whole

base is completely dry!” She thrust her arm forward, holding all five fingers up in front of Arpad's face.

“That last part is not true,” he said. “General Liam might be a stickler for regulations, but he does not forbid alcohol. That is just a rumor.”

Grudgingly, M'raava slowly put down one finger. “Fine. That still all adds up to a shit assignment! And you know it does!”

Arpad shrugged. “Well, complaining about it will not change anything. That is where we are now stationed, so that is that.” He closed his eyes, resting his head against the inner hull of the shuttle. “We will be planetside in thirty minutes, so use that time to resign yourself to the inevitable, alright?”

Huffing softly, the S'hestir female leaned back in her seat again. “I resigned myself to the inevitable when I had to leave my family after spending only two days with them. Resigning myself to the inevitable doesn't mean I have to enjoy the situation.” She smacked a fist down into the empty seat next to her in frustration, accomplishing little other than sending a shooting pain through her wrist.

“Good point, I suppose...”

When the shuttle came to a stop, M'raava and Arpad both walked out of the craft and into the bustle of a crowded military hangar. The subterranean facility was filled with ships; shuttles like the one they'd just arrived in, fighter craft optimized for the methane atmosphere of Eris, cargo barges offloading supplies, and a number of state-of-the-art mechs. M'raava recognized some of the unit insignia on the mechs. They were from units that were usually based on Titan and Europa, which she pointed out to Arpad.

“Those units are supposed to stay in closer to the colonies around Jupiter and Titan,” M'raava said. “I wonder why they'd be all the way out here.”

Arpad shrugged. “Maybe they have been reassigned, like us. Or maybe they are just passing through. There have been rumors of pirate activity out beyond the Kuiper belt.”

“Maybe...” M'raava gazed at some of the mechs with a nostalgic feeling, then she noticed several officers walking their way. One of their uniforms was adorned with the distinctive emblems that marked him as a general. The man was short and rather fat, but he had a confident look in his black eyes that suggested he wasn't as soft as he appeared. His head was topped with a covering of dark brown hair, visible underneath his hawk-billed uniform cap. M'raava and Arpad both snapped to attention, saluting as the group of officers stopped before them.

The general returned the salute. “At ease, colonels. Welcome to Eris, and thank you for getting out here so quickly on short notice.”

“Not like we had a choice...,” M'raava muttered. Arpad, standing to her right and slightly

behind, gave her a little kick in the ankle with his left boot.

The superior officer seemed not to have noticed, and continued. "I'm General Liam, base commander here on Eris." He gestured to one of the officers with him, a human male who was slightly shorter than Arpad, though he looked in just as good shape. "This is Colonel Reims. He's been my chief of base security for three years now, but he's due for rotation back to Earth in a week. Colonel Apaffy, you've been assigned here to take his job. If you'll accompany Reims to his office, he'll go over the information you'll need to get started."

"Yes, sir," Arpad said, nodding. He looked over at M'raava. "See you later tonight." He walked off, following Colonel Reims out of the hangar to parts unknown.

"Lieutenant Colonel Shigeshti," General Liam said, once the other two were gone. "No doubt you're wondering about what your new assignment might be." He got a nod from M'raava at this. "I think you're going to like it. Come with me to my office. I'll go over everything with you, and then we can get you settled in to your quarters."

In General Liam's office, M'raava took a seat in a chair in front of a large wooden desk. The office was luxurious, at least for a base out on the very fringes of the solar system. While the walls were bare, one of them being carved out of the very rocks that composed Eris, the floor was covered in a rich red carpet. Besides the wooden desk, General Liam also had several tall bookcases containing thick volumes and ornaments commemorating his long years of military service.

Closing his office door, the general sat down in his own high-backed chair and folded his hands on the top of his desk. "So, how was the journey?"

"Fine," M'raava said, crossing her arms in front of her breast. She was quite ready for the general to get to the point and tell her what she had been summoned for, but of course she couldn't say that out loud unless she wanted to be reprimanded.

"Good." The general leaned back in his chair. "I won't keep you long today. I know you're probably exhausted after your trip, and in any case I don't have a lot of time to spare." General Liam opened a drawer in his desk and pulled out a small data disk. He popped up a panel on the surface of the desk and slid the disk into a slot, activating a hidden projector which displayed a holographic image in the air above the desk. M'raava recognized it as a fairly detailed map of a sector of space on the fringes of the solar system, which currently included the dwarf planets of Eris, Pluto, Haumea, and Makemake. While none of the tiny planets were particularly habitable the region nonetheless contained a significant population of humans and S'hestir in both planetside habitations and space stations, supported by an extremely lucrative mining industry. Numbering in the tens of millions, the scattered

colonist population was far outside the effective sphere of protection of the Combined Military, though they did enjoy limited protection from private security forces augmented by government bases such as the one on Eris.

“This is the area that our base is currently assigned to,” General Liam said. “Of course because of the extremely large orbit path of Eris, that area is subject to change, although we'll remain in this relative area for the next fifty years or so.” Eris had a remarkably long orbital period, with one “year” on Eris being equivalent to about five hundred and sixty-one Earth years. “We also were responsible for the security and resupply of the research station on Sedna, no matter where that planet may be in relation to us, because of how remote the station is.”

“That makes sense...,” M'raava said slowly. Sedna, another of the solar system's dwarf planets, had an extremely irregular oblong orbital path that was far beyond Pluto's orbit at Sedna's *closest* point to the sun. And with an orbital period of over eleven thousand years, Sedna was almost always far, *far* away from the sun. Getting to Sedna usually required a hyperspace journey of over a week, and its only means of communication with Earth was through a fragile network of communications buoys, the signals from which had to be further routed through the relay station on Eris's moon, Dysnomia. Sedna was home to several facilities including some very powerful telescopes, many times more powerful than the Hubble telescope of old, which were used for observing the universe beyond the solar system. “Wait...General, you said 'were.' Why not 'are?'”

General Liam nodded gravely. “I was just getting to that, Lieutenant Colonel, and from this point on I'm going to have to inform you that under no circumstances are you to speak of anything we're about to discuss with anyone who is not stationed on this planet without my express permission.” He manipulated a control below the surface of his desk, and the floating holographic space map changed to a display of several grainy photos of a planetary surface. The photographs showed ruined buildings with smoldering methane fires. A few of the pictures showed what appeared to be humanoid corpses, but M'raava could not tell whether they were human or S'hestir. “Three weeks ago, the control complex on Sedna failed to transmit its daily status report two days in a row, and we received no response when we made our own inquiries. We dispatched a high-speed probe to Sedna, which transmitted the pictures you just viewed. When our emergency response team made it out there, they found most of the science facilities looted and destroyed.” The general advanced the screen again, showing clearer pictures that had been taken from ground level. “Almost everyone stationed on the planet had been killed, including most of the marines in the garrison there. A few of the science personnel and soldiers managed to hide and survive, and we evacuated them.”

The whole time General Liam had been talking, M'raava was sitting up straighter and straighter,

her heart beating a little faster and the fur on the back of her neck standing on end. “Any clues on who did it, sir?”

“Plenty, actually,” General Liam admitted. “We’ve known for some time that the Sasori Syndicate pirate group is active in the fringe regions of the solar system. Surveillance footage left behind on Sedna, as well as eyewitness accounts from the survivors, suggests that the pirates were responsible for the attack.”

M’raava frowned. “How many soldiers were stationed on Sedna?”

“We had a heavy company of two hundred marines there, augmented by a squadron of light mechs. Pretty standard compliment for a facility of Sedna’s size.” General Liam checked a notation in his files. “Seven of the marines, including the company commander, Captain Nixon, survived the attack. One of the pilots made it out, too, though his mech was heavily damaged. Four of the science personnel were found alive. They’re all here on Eris until their medical and debriefing processes are completed.”

“If you knew a pirate group was so active in the area, why the hell wasn’t that place more heavily protected?” M’raava exclaimed heatedly, her ears flattening back along her skull. “Sir,” she added, rather belatedly. The S’hestir female told herself, as she had many times before, that she needed to work on keeping her temper in check. *But really*, she thought to herself, *how careless can you be?*

General Liam shrugged, looking fairly distressed himself. “In hindsight, it wasn’t too smart to leave them with only the standard security compliment,” he acknowledged. He rubbed his eyes with one hand, suddenly appearing very tired. “Believe me, you’re not saying anything that Colonel Reims didn’t say when all this came to light. He’s been telling me for months now that we needed to beef up the protective force on Sedna, but at the time it didn’t look like we had either the need or the room in the budget for it. Up until now, the pirates have only bothered to hit mining facilities and merchant convoys to steal precious metals. If I’d thought they would have any reason to attack a scientific facility, I would have lobbied harder for the additional resources to protect Sedna a little better.” The general sighed heavily. “The pirates have upped the stakes, it would seem. Our current working theory is that the Syndicate might be making a power play, with control of the fringe regions being their ultimate goal. We don’t know if they have the forces to do that, but you can’t argue with their ability to obliterate a marine garrison with relative ease.”

M’raava rocked her chair back, leaning it against the wall. “I guess not. But I don’t see what any of this has to do with me, or why I’ve been transferred out here.”

“I’m getting to that,” the general said. He switched off the display, folding his hands back on his desktop again. “Needless to say, the attack on Sedna has drawn our attention a little more seriously than

before. We have been trying to track down the Syndicate's base of operations for years now, with limited success. For a while we were working on the assumption that they were based on a small planet, such as Quaoar or Orcus, but that search hasn't panned out. We've put out feelers to the extrasolar colonies, and we've had a little more success." General Liam rubbed his chin. "The Vega and Sirius regions have reported scattered activity, as well as Arcturus. They could be based somewhere there. They certainly don't appear to be focusing their operations in those sectors."

"So you think they're just interested in the solar system right now?" M'raava asked. She was wishing the general would get to the point, but she also couldn't deny that he'd grabbed her attention.

"Pretty much. All of the evidence so far points that way, anyway." General Liam placed his hands together, palm to palm, gesturing to M'raava with them. "That's really the reason why you're here. I understand you have some experience combating pirates."

M'raava blinked her blue eyes at that. "I do, but it's been a long time since I saw any combat action. I haven't even so much as seen the cockpit of a combat mech in over ten years, outside of a simulator." She lifted her left arm. "When I got shot down, they rated the recovery of my arm at only ninety-five percent. The medical board wouldn't clear me for combat flying."

"I understand that," General Liam said, nodding. "But the fact remains that you're one of the most experienced and skilled pilots serving right now. So I had you transferred out here for a special assignment." Reaching back, the human general retrieved another data disk, ejecting the first and putting in the second. A hologram popped up from the screen. "You know what this is, of course."

M'raava inclined her head in the affirmative, her eyes scanning over the image that was being presented to her. "That's an old Mark III, isn't it?" The hologram now hovering over the desk was of a combat mech, of a type that M'raava knew of but had never piloted before. Blockier and bulkier than current production Mark XIX mechs, the Mark III was a real throwback to the bad old days of the war. In those days, mechs had been focused on heavy armament and heavy armor, rather than the current priority of speed and maneuverability. Mark XIXs and the experimental Mark XXs that were in the works were small and nimble, capable of dancing circles around anything that known enemies were able to field. The only problem with them was that they were lacking in serious weaponry, though with a trained pilot that was of little concern since good targeting and application would override that problem. The last combat mech that M'raava had piloted, the Mark XVI, had been the first of the new breed of mechs, and she had always felt that it had been the wrong turn for the military to make.

At her assessment, General Liam looked pleased. "I see they still teach military history at the academy with their customary thoroughness. Good. But you're wrong." He tapped a key, replacing the image of the mech with a schematic view. "This is actually what we're terming the Mark 3-X. It's based

off of the Mark III design, but we've made some significant upgrades." He scrolled through a list of specifications so that M'raava could see them. "Our technicians have been working for the last few years on a new tungsten-diamond armor, inlaid with a carbon-fiber lattice. I'm not as up on the specifics as I should be, but it's lighter and stronger than anything we've put on a fighter before. They tell me that it gives your typical mech armor on par with a standard battle cruiser."

M'raava let out a long, slow whistle. "In a much smaller package, of course."

"Exactly. With the decreased weight, we've upgraded the engines with the same models they're fitting the new Mark XX with. We've kept the same weaponry that the Mark III was equipped with, and actually we've upgraded the power ratings on those as well." General Liam grinned. "So we've got the best of speed, weapons, and armor, all in one. We're not abandoning the Mark XX, exactly, but we'll be postponing the rollout in favor of the Mark 3-X."

Feeling her heart racing with excitement, M'raava rocked her chair back forward again. As the front legs came back down to the floor, she narrowly missed catching her tail underneath them. "So my assignment?"

"Finally I get to it, eh?" General Liam rearranged his face back into a neutral expression. "Currently the Navy possesses two complete squadrons of Mark 3-X mechs, all stationed here on Eris. We received the last of them only a few days ago, in fact. All we needed was someone to train up the pilots who'll be operating them." The general pointed a finger right at M'raava. "I need that someone to be you, Lieutenant Colonel Shigeshti. With the increased pirate activity we've been seeing, we need to get heavier firepower out into the field with as little delay as possible. We could be heading for a full-scale war if we don't act quickly. I've already seen one of those, Colonel, and I'd rather not see another one."

Her eyes widening, M'raava tried not to show her eagerness. She crossed her arms. "Say I agree to this assignment. Does it get me flying combat again?"

The general chewed his lower lip for a few moments, considering. "Depends."

"On what?"

"On how well you do your job. I know you can fly well, and your record from your posting at the academy tells me you're a good teacher. But teaching and fighting are two different things. Like you said, you haven't seen combat in a decade." General Liam switched off the holographic display. "You work with me, and I'll work with you. Show me you can get my pilots up to speed without delay, and I'll do what I can to get you cleared by the medical board. No promises, though."

M'raava rolled her eyes, letting out a quiet, huffing sigh. *Same old story*, she thought to herself. But she did have to admit that this was the best chance of getting back out into real work that she'd seen

in years. "I'll take it, general. When do I start?"

"Patience," General Liam said. He stood up, extending a hand over the desk, and M'raava shook it. "Next week should be soon enough. Until then, you familiarize yourself with our base and with the Mark 3-X. We'll have a simulator up and running by tomorrow morning. For now, I'll have a staff officer show you to your quarters; your personal effects should have been transferred by now." He threw a salute which M'raava returned. "I wish you all possible luck in your new assignment. Just let me know if there's anything you need."

A few hours later, Arpad entered the quarters to which he and M'raava had been assigned to find her lying on the bed. Her arms were crossed behind her head, her eyes closed as she was apparently asleep. She was unclothed except for a pair of panties, lying on top of the covers so that her body was free for the looking. With the barest of a grin to himself, Arpad closed and locked the door, crossing the room to a closet.

The quarters were spacious, as befitting senior officers on a significant military installation. Arpad and M'raava had been assigned to couples housing, even though they technically did not merit it since they weren't formally married yet. Since they were to be stationed in the same area of Eris, though, it made more sense than not for them to just live together. They had lucked out, because couples housing provided them with a few more luxuries that singles barracks would not, such as a kitchenette and private bathroom.

As Arpad started taking his uniform off and hanging it up, he heard a voice behind him. "How'd *your* meeting go?"

Arpad turned his head to look over his shoulder as he hung his uniform jacket up. M'raava had her eyes open, looking across the room at him from the bed. "It went fine," he said. "Colonel Reims has run a tight ship when it comes to base security. Just the way I prefer it. Much more tightly than I remember Eris being run from the last time I was here." He unclipped his shoulder holster from his belt, shrugging the straps off of his shoulders and hanging it from the closet doorknob. "I am looking forward to taking over for him when he leaves in a few days." He started unbuttoning his shirt.

"That's good," M'raava stretched her arms, feeling joints pop. "So what do you think of the shitty situation, hm?"

"You are referring to the pirates?" His pants joined his shirt and jacket on the rack. "I would agree that it is not a desirable state of affairs. But I have dealt with pirates before."

"Right." M'raava watched him undress, her tail tip twitching beside her. "Well, you're currently in the same room as the newest member of the combat pilot training staff. I'll be testing mechs and

training up a new crop of pilots on some experimental models.”

“I know. Colonel Reims told me.”

The S'hestir smirked, rolling her eyes. “You security types. So much for me getting to have a surprise every now and then.”

Arpad shrugged somewhat apologetically. Stripped down to his underwear now, he closed up the closet and walked over to the bed. “Sorry. But us security types are required to know all of the goings-on on base.” He got onto the bed, stretching out next to his fiancée. “You have my apologies.”

“I'll take that.” M'raava rolled to the side, draping her arm over his chest. “Maybe you can find some other way to make it up to me, though?”

Raising an eyebrow, Arpad looked at her face. She was grinning a little, a mischievous gleam in her eyes while her feline ears twitched forward. “You are not tired after the long trip?”

“Exhausted!” M'raava exclaimed. “But I don't see why that should keep you from giving me what I want.” She leaned in close, planting a firm, insistent kiss on his lips. “If you're a good boy, I might return the favor in the morning...”

The corner of Arpad's mouth twitched. “With an offer like that, how am I to refuse?” He placed a hand on M'raava's furred belly, rubbing his palm around in a slow, lazy circle. He felt a purr start up inside of her, and her eyes closed slowly as he stroked her stomach. She must have taken a bath before he came in. Her brown fur was perfectly silky and fluffy, unruffled from the long hours of travel wearing a tight-fitting uniform.

“Mm, that's nice,” she murmured, “but I was hoping for something more.” M'raava shifted onto her back, her tail swishing slowly from side to side beside her. She cracked one eye open, glancing sidelong at the human lying next to her.

“Patience, my lady,” Arpad said, just a hint of a chuckle to his voice. “Patience.” He slid his hand lower down her belly, his fingertips coming into contact with the waistband of her panties. Her hips raised up slightly from the bed, her purr increasing in volume as his fingers slipped underneath the fabric. The warmth of her body increased as he touched even lower. He curled his fingers down between her legs, and there he found the slick moisture of her sex.

“Right there...,” M'raava whispered, letting her head fall to one side. The S'hestir female spread her thighs apart, taking slow, deep breaths as Arpad teased a finger into her tight, wet warmth. She brought one hand down, gripping lightly around his wrist as her other hand clutched her breast. M'raava pinched her own nipple, twisting and squeezing while he slid his finger gently in and out of her. “Just like that, babe.”

In response, Arpad leaned his head down, closing his lips around her other nip and suckling at

her breast. He began moving his finger faster inside of her, curling the digit along the top of her passage, where he knew she was the most sensitive. M'raava shuddered, a pleased shiver passing through her body at his practiced touch. Her purr was loud enough to fill the room now, her hips rolling up and down along with him. They could both feel the inside of her panties becoming damper with each passing second, as her slippery fluids leaked out around his invading digit.

Just as M'raava felt like she was about to cum, her human lover abruptly removed his hand from inside her panties. "Oh, god, I was so close!" she whined, her eyes drifting open to gaze at him with a betrayed expression. "Why the hell'd you stop?"

Instead of answering her with words, Arpad answered with actions. He sat up, shifting his position so that he was kneeling near the end of the bed. Lifting his eyes to M'raava's face, he eyed her carefully as he hooked either side of her underwear. As he started dragging the garment down over her hips, he saw her expression change from one of irritation to one of anticipation. Smiling to himself, Arpad dropped his eyes down to where his hands were. Her panties were peeling away, revealing her pussy to his eager gaze. The fur between her legs was matted, the moisture of her arousal reflecting the soft light of the bedroom. He slipped the scrap of fabric all the way down to her feet, balling it up and tossing it away to be forgotten.

At the barest urging, her legs spread wide for him, the pink petals of her sex opening up into a glistening flower. M'raava tossed her head, brushing a hand back through her blonde hair. Her soft whimpering mewl gave him all the encouragement he needed to continue. Arpad lowered himself to her stomach before her, slipping his palms underneath her and cupping her shapely rear as he dipped his head between her thighs.

"Oh, fuck...", M'raava hissed sharply, clenching her jaw as she felt his lips on her pussy. She gasped in pleasure as his tongue slid into her needy sex, bucking her hips up to his face. He played with the inside of her passage, slurping silently around, his mouth forming a perfect seal. Her tail whipped up and down next to his head, her back arching up. She reached a hand down to the back of his head, pressing him forcefully into her cunt.

With a quiet murmur, Arpad moved his hands around to the insides of her thighs. With both of his thumbs, he spread her sex apart, making her give a little shriek as he slipped his tongue even deeper. Her taste excited him like nothing else could. Her alien pussy was spicier than any human female he had ever been with in his earlier life, with a marvelous flavor that penetrated all of his senses. No matter how much he imbibed, he never had enough.

"Goddamn!" M'raava groaned, turning her head from side to side. "Fucking keep going. Don't'cha dare stop, not for anything...!" Little waves of delight were making their way up and down

her spine, and she was thrusting her pussy against his tongue even more insistently than before. Her fiancé was slurping his tongue loudly within her sex, his lips teasing her clit at the same time. M'raava was shaking, right on the verge of something so powerful that she worried for the integrity of the planet they were on.

All of a sudden, Arpad felt his lover's pussy clamp down tightly on his tongue. A loud mewling howl filled his ears as M'raava squeezed her thighs around his head, her legs hooking around his back. Her body jerked on the bed, the moisture between her legs slicking out around his mouth as she came. He slipped his tongue out of her, leaving his lips planted firmly over her cunt as she continued to cum, drinking in her essence as he rubbed her lower belly gently with one hand, coaxing her along. Just as he felt her starting to come down from her orgasm, he would dart his tongue back out into her tightening passage, starting it all over again until her body grew weak from the constant pleasure.

When he finally allowed her to stop, M'raava's body was limp on the bed. She panted heavily, ghostly ripples of pleasure still dancing through her. The only thing she could manage to do was to whisper disjointed phrases of delirious gratitude to her man, already half asleep from a combination of weary afterglow and physical exhaustion.

"Better?" Arpad asked, lifting his head up to look at her. He licked his lips, tasting the slippery wetness that still clung to them. He got no answer from M'raava, who was well on her way to a deep slumber. Smirking slightly, he slid back up beside her, laying his head on the pillows next to hers. Drawing the blankets up over both of them, he brought a strong arm around her body and pulled her close. "Sweet dreams, then. But I will hold you to our agreement when you wake."

The next morning, M'raava walked into one of Eris's many hangar bays with a bounce in her step and a swish in her tail. The previous night's activities, along with the follow-up when she and Arpad had both awoken, had done wonders for improving her ill mood at being assigned to this frozen rock in the middle of nowhere. At the same time, she was excited to get into the cockpit of a real, actual combat mech for the first time in years.

The evening before, General Liam had told M'raava that a simulator would be ready for her use, so that she could familiarize herself with the Mark 3-X mech's controls. However, she had never enjoyed simulators much and really preferred the genuine article. So instead of going to the simulator facilities she had donned a proper flight suit, grabbed her helmet, and made her way to one of the hangars that housed the new mechs.

Now that she was looking at them in person, she had to admit that they were quite impressive. Standing nearly six meters tall, the frame of the mech was much larger than anything the S'hestir had

ever piloted before. Bipedal and with two arms, the mech was blocky and chunky-looking, a departure from the sleeker, slimlined mechs that she was used to. With a large central compartment, the “torso” and “head” of the unit, the mech projected an image of strength. Mounted on each shoulder were two massive boxy compartments that were recognizable as missile pods. In between each pod was a smaller pod that would open up to reveal a six-barreled rotary cannon. Both of the mechs arms ended in a five-fingered hand, and a large beam rifle visually similar to the hand weapons that soldiers would carry was clamped to the mech's back. The whole thing was painted in a mottled black-and-gray camouflage paint scheme, giving an intimidating military feeling. M'raava juggled her helmet under one arm and walked up to the mech, touching a hand to the armor and then rapping her knuckle against it. The material rang with a different tone than traditional armor, and seemed much lighter, just as General Liam had said.

“Hey, hold up there! This is a restricted area!”

M'raava turned her head to the source of the voice, her pointed ears pricking up. A human male was running her way, dressed in the drab green uniform of a maintenance tech. As he came up to her, she could see the rank insignia of a sergeant on his sleeves. The man had his arms down by his sides as he came to a halt in front of M'raava, and she noticed that his right hand was resting on the grip of a sidearm.

“Miss, this area is off-limits to unapproved personnel,” the sergeant said. He was fully a foot taller than the diminutive feline. “You're going to have to leave.”

Clearing her throat, M'raava turned fully to face the enlisted man. She saw his eyes drop to her uniform, and then the color drain from his face a little as he presumably saw her rank insignia. “I'm Lieutenant Colonel Shigeshti,” she announced to him. His face blanched even more, and she knew he had recognized her name. “These mechs are under my command, so I think I would qualify as 'approved personnel.' Would you agree, Sergeant?”

“Y-Yes, ma'am,” the sergeant stammered, belatedly giving a salute. “M-My apologies, Colonel, but I wasn't...General Liam said not to expect you in the hangar for a few more days, I just-”

“Well, there's been a change of plans,” M'raava said. She pulled on her helmet, strapping it securely to the collar of her flight suit. For now, she left the visor up so she could talk. “General Liam told me you've had these mechs for a few days now. I assume they're flight-ready?”

“Y-Yeah...I mean, yes, ma'am,” the sergeant said. “But they haven't had their official final check, yet. The techs haven't released them for service.” His eyes bugged out as M'raava turned away from him and started climbing up to the open cockpit. “Colonel Shigeshti, are you even checked out on this model?”

M'raava paused in her climb, looking back down at the sergeant. "I've been a mech pilot for almost fifteen years," she said. "I can figure it out." She finished the climb up and swung herself into the pilots' seat. Strapping herself in, she looked over the controls. They were virtually identical to the controls of her old Mark XVI, with a few minor differences that M'raava was already starting to figure out.

She flicked one switch, and the canopy swung down and locked into place, sealing airtight with a quiet hiss. As she flipped another series of switches, the mech began to thrum as the engine and control systems started activating. Lowering the visor on her helmet, she activated her radio system and heads-up display, watching the display screens as all systems went through their final automated check. Finally she fitted her arms and legs into the armored sleeves inside the cockpit, giving herself full control over the mech's arms and legs. With a thrill in her chest, she keyed up her radio.

"Control, this is..." A little late, M'raava checked the status readout on her heads-up display, searching for her mech's callsign. "...Echo-Mike-Foxtrot-Four-Eight-Nine, Lieutenant Colonel Shigeshti piloting. Requesting clearance for takeoff from bay seventy-two."

After a moment's pause, a voice came back over the radio, sounding a bit confused. "Foxtrot-Four-Eight-Nine, standby while the bay is cleared of personnel. Report your status."

M'raava swept her eyes over her control panels. "Fuel tanks are full. All systems are reading one hundred percent. Weapons fully loaded and powered. Comm system transmitting clean. Standing by."

"Roger, Foxtrot-Four-Eight-Nine. Clear bay seventy-two." Ahead, M'raava could see the hangar bay doors opening onto the flat, nearly featureless landscape of Eris. "You are cleared for immediate dustoff. Happy trails."

"Punching out. Back in ten, Control." With another flutter of her heart, M'raava moved her legs inside of the armored sleeves. Her mech responded smoothly to her movements, stepping forward towards the open bay doors. When she got to the doors, she hit the accelerators at her feet. She was pushed forcefully back into her seat as the powerful engines on the back of the mech lit up, rocketing her out of the hangar bay and into the thin atmosphere of Eris. Once there, M'raava angled up, accelerating to even greater speeds and punching out into space.

This is it! she shouted inside of her own head, turning her head from side to side and taking in the sight of the stars around her. She was in open space now, exactly where she belonged, at the controls of a fearsome war machine.

Flexing her hands around the flight controls, M'raava decided to see what this mech could do. She found it not all that different from operating a Mark XVI. Holding her throttle steady at a nice cruising speed, she began taking the mech through a series of acrobatics, looping around and slipping

from side to side. M'raava was impressed by the craft's maneuverability and speed, finding it much better than any of the mechs she had ever piloted before. All the while her heart was racing, thudding hard against the inside of her chest with the thrill of being in the pilot's seat again. She desperately wanted to give the weapons systems a try, but she had no practice targets to hit. And she had a feeling that General Liam would have something to say to her if she just started firing off missiles and cannon rounds at random.

Once M'raava had put the machine through its paces for about five blissful minutes, she decided to head back to the hangar bay. Looping around to head back towards the planet's surface, she oriented herself to bay seventy-two and dove for the ground. Activating her comm system, she hailed the base.

"Eris Control, this is Echo-Mike-Foxtrot-Four-Eight-Nine," she called out. "I'm RTB, inbound to bay seventy-two, how copy?"

The answer came back promptly. "Foxtrot-Four-Eight-Nine, affirmative. Bay is clear. You're go for approach."

"Roger, Control. Coming in." M'raava goosed her thrusters, accelerating towards the surface and the bay doors for hangar seventy-two. As she came within two kilometers of the bay, her computer started chirping at her, signaling for her to slow her approach. Dutifully, M'raava hit the foot control to decelerate. Troublesomely, nothing happened, and her mech continued at the same speed it had been going. Frowning, but not alarmed yet, M'raava let off the brake and then tried again. Again, the mech did not slow. "Four-Eight-Nine, Control, priority traffic. I have a failure of my brakes. Unable to decelerate. Breaking off my approach."

"Copy, Four-Eight-Nine. Standing by."

With a little over a kilometer to go before she reached the bay doors, M'raava eased her controls back to level out her mech in preparation to gain altitude again. A moment later, the beginnings of panic began to set in as she realized that her craft was not changing course. She was still headed directly for the planet's surface, at full cruising speed.

"Control, mayday mayday mayday," M'raava said rapidly. "Four-Eight-Nine has lost maneuvering. Unable to abort my approach, unable to decrease speed." She looked around frantically at her status displays, but was unable to find a reason for the loss of control. "No explanation, request instruction."

"Four-Eight-Nine, say again." The voice of the controller had a fearful tone to it, and he sounded like he was panicking a little himself.

"I'm going down!" M'raava shouted into her radio. Memories of the last time she had been shot down were flashing through her mind now, and she shook her head to try to clear them away. Now was

not the time. She fought with her controls, praying that her mech would respond. “Repeat, Echo-Mike-Foxtrot-Four-Eight-Nine is going down!”