"Hey, Weddle, whatcha doin?"

Sigil strolled into the VXF lounge, plopping down on one of the couches. An old holovid movie about the 4th Succession War was on, little Crucis Lancers 'Mechs were blowing up little Tau Ceti Rangers 'Mechs on Tikonov.

Weddle chuckled. "Just brushing up on my military science, historical and tactical. Too bad The War of 3039 wasn't like the 4th Succession War. Man, the Capellan's got crushed. We barely managed to shift the border in '39. Anyway, what's up?"

"I gotta go into the city. I think I found a place that might have some electronics I need for Lizzie. Wanna go with me?"

"Sure, just give me a few minutes to pull some stuff together and get ready." Weddle laughed. "Going anywhere with you promises to be an adventure. Anything could happen, I better be prepared"

He got up, heading off to his quarters. "See you back here in 15."

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Sigil and Weddle were speeding into downtown Galatea City. The Hiring Hall, although not the largest building, was certainly the most impressive, and it dominated the view. Filled with simulators, meeting rooms, conference facilities, even restaurants and bars, the Hiring Hall was the center of activity on the Mercenary Star. It's where most of the wheeling and dealing went down. The Mercenary Review Board, overseen by ComStar, was headquartered there.

Hovercars, like their own, zipped everywhere, most of them hooked into the traffic management grid, running on auto-guidance.

There were a lot of helicopters too. Heliports, sometime more than one, were located on the rooftops of all the major buildings, and a few of the taller ones even had pads extending out of the sides of some of the lower floors as well. They should have gotten Kitten to give them a lift in her VTOL, then they could have arrived in style. Then again, their destination was on ground level, so it wouldn’t have worked anyway.

The other easily identifiable building was ComStar’s Class A HyperPulse Generator. It was instantly recognizable by its huge parabolic antenna dish and surrounding fortifications. Supposedly, it was guarded by a unit of the Com Guards, stationed there in Star League 'Mechs.

He'd already seen Star League 'Mechs before, though. During the Vega campaign, he'd seen the Rhonda's Irregulars 'Mechs. They were all Star League. He'd even seen Rhonda Snord's 90-ton Highlander. Now that was an awe-inspiring machine. And it was jump capable.

"What are you trying to find anyway, Sig?" Weddle asked.

"That piece of crap Ares-8a doesn't have a target identifier, or damage analysis. Seriously, I don't even
know why they bothered to make it."

Weddle grinned, saying, “Best targeting and tracking system I ever used was the Optical Mark I. Even my old T-bolt’s RCA Instatrac Mark X didn’t have target and damage ID. I’m not sure I’ve ever piloted a ‘Mech with those kinds of capabilities in combat. My Griffin certainly doesn’t have it.”

“The Optical Mark I? Never heard of it, who makes it? What’s it in?” Sigil looked excited.

Weddle cracked up. “Kerensky! Sometimes you’re really clueless, Sig.” He continued laughing as he pointed to his eyes. “Optical Mark I’s!”

Sigil rolled his eyes.

“I’m serious, Sig. I can make a visual ID of any ‘Mech in the Inner Sphere. I know their silhouettes like the back of my hand. Better than even money, I can make an ID off a thermal scan. Now magscan IDs, that’s a different story. Way hard, but I knew a guy back on Sanglamore who can identify a ‘Mech from a magscan about 75% of the time. He never would tell me his secret, though.” Weddle shrugged.

He continued on. “Besides, like you need a computer to tell you when you’ve blown off someone’s arm. Most damage is obvious. Swear to Kerensky, I can tell when I crit from the color and type of the sparks it throws off.”

Sigil rolled his eyes again.

Weddle snickered. “I like to keep my Optical Mark I’s on the target, not on the info displays.”

The hovercar slowed, stopped, then shifted laterally into a parking space.

Sigil opened the gull-wing door, getting out. Weddle followed.

A large chrome sign proclaimed “Dietrich Vinh - Custom System Integration and Advanced Electronics”.

Sigil pushed open the heavy glassteel plate double doors. Clean, cool, filtered air washed over him.

The interior was immaculate. Rich hardwood counters and glass display cases filled with antiquities lined three walls, all finished with real brass hardware. There was a door behind the counter in the far wall leading further back, probably into the work areas. Two small exotic wood tables surrounded with fully upholstered, natural leather chairs filled out the room.

A mild tone called out as Weddle and Sigil entered. Moments later, a balding, heavy set man emerged from the door behind the counter. He had monocle hanging from a golden chain around his neck and wore a tweed suit, with a vest underneath.

“Greetings, gentleman.” He had a thick Lyran accent. “I’m Dietrich Vinh. How may I help you today?”

Sigil strode up to the counter, as Weddle took a seat in one of the overstuffed leather chairs.

“I’m running a TharHes Ares-8a. I need a Target Identifier, Damage ID, and an Indirect Fire Support
expansion module for it.”

Vinh responded without hesitation. “The Ares-8a only has five available expansion slots. You cannot fit all of those modules into it. Target Identification fills three slots just by itself. In order to reach that level of capability, you would need to upgrade the entire targeting and tracking system to at least an Ares-80.”

“What about a TharHes Star Shark? I’ve got one in a Commando right now I could pull out.”

In the aftermath of the incident at the live-fire range, the Colonel had claimed the Commando as salvage, nominally as compensation for the damage done to Lizzie Borden. Maybe it’d turn out to useful for something after all.

Vinh nodded. “The Star Shark has target identification built in. It is, in fact, the top of the line targeting and tracking system produced by TharHes Industries out of their manufacturing facility on Tharkad. However, it does not offer damage analysis, nor indirect fire support, although it has the capacity to accept those enhancements.”

“Perfect. I haven’t used the Star Shark before. How else does it differ from the Ares-8a?”

Vinh paused a moment, then looked down at the hardwood counter as he placed the monocle over his left eye.

“Assuming both systems are fully operational, the Star Shark accepts two additional primary targets and one additional secondary target as compared to the 8a. It has built-in target identification as we discussed before. Its lock-on range is approximately 120 meters greater than the Ares-8a, and it is mildly less sensitive to heat extremes.”

He looked back up at Sigil, the monocle dropping back down to hang at his chest. “However, it does not have a reset switch, and it is significantly more difficult to modify and repair due to its complexity. I will also point out that it lacks both the built-in aerospace targeting and anti-missile support your current Ares-8a has. Although, once again, I believe it has the capacity to accept those expansions.”

Sigil rubbed his chin. “Ok, so how about this then? I’ll swap out the Ares-8a for the Star Shark. And I’ll add target damage analysis, indirect fire support, a reset switch, and volley fire.”

Vinh nodded. “That is technically possible. However, you may find it prohibitively expensive. I estimate a project of that magnitude would cost in the neighborhood of 600,000 C-bills, and likely take a month to complete.”

Sigil whistled. “Sorry, Deitrich, I don’t have that kind of time or money. I’ll do the work myself, how much for just the parts?”

Vinh frowned, held the monocle up to his left eye again, and slowly looked Sigil up and down, before tucking it into his breast pocket.
“Would you allow me to examine your Sternsacht?”


He un-holstered the heavy pistol from his thigh, laying it on the counter, with a loud thunk.

Weddle, noticing Sigil pulling out the Sternsacht, tensed.  What the hell is Sig doing?  Is he handing that guy a loaded gun?  Blake’s Blood!  What!?  Is he completely devoid of common sense!?  No wonder shit hits the fan when he’s was around.  Weddle kept wary eye on the store owner.

Vinh picked up the heavy firearm, ejecting the magazine with a practiced click, catching it in his other hand.  He pulled the receiver back next, ejecting the shell in the chamber.  He placed the magazine and the round on the counter as he slowly turned the Sternsacht around in his hand.

“This is a beautiful weapon.  An antique.  I’d estimate it at 350 years old.  He examined the grip, as he slid his monocle over his left eye, looking at the bottom of the grip closely.

“As I suspected.  This weapon was originally a Star League officer’s sidearm, most likely belonged to at least a SLDF Captain.  A rare find, indeed, especially in such excellent condition.  Exquisite.”  He placed the pistol back on the counter, looking back up at Sigil.

“The parts alone will cost your over 200,000 C-bills.  In addition, the work is not like simply changing out a Martell medium laser.  It is very exacting, requiring an intimate knowledge of targeting systems, programming, and electronic engineering.  And a keen eye for detail, a single syntax error can render the entire system unusable.  These skills are very hard to find today.”

Sigil waved his hand away.  “Yea, yea.  I pulled out the Allet-C3087 and T11 and from my old Grasshopper a couple years back, and replaced them with a Tek Battlecom and TruTrak.  You just sell me the parts, I’ll take care of the data translation, field mapping, reprogramming and recalibration myself.”

Dietrich Vinh took another long, appraising look at Sigil.  “If I may inquire, where did you come by these skills?”

“Oh, I was on the Tech track at Sanglamore back on Skye.  I served a few years doing tech for the Skye Rangers before transferring to the Third Lyran Guard for a combat assignment.  My old Sergeant Major told me I was gifted.  He said I could make Electronics Engineer if I wanted.”  Sigil shrugged.  “I didn’t want it.  I wanted to take it to the Snakes instead.”  He grinned.

Vinh nodded.  “You saw action in The War of 3039, did you?  I was in Operation Götterdämmerung myself back in ’28 and ’29.  I was with the 8th Donegal Guards on Moritz.  We rolled up the 5th Sun Zhang Academy Cadre like an old carpet.”

Vinh smiled and continued on.  “The good ’ole days.  Things have changed considerably since then.  The Free Rasalhague Republic, the St. Ives Compact, the Com Guards, even the Federated Commonwealth itself didn’t even exist when I was serving in the LCAF.”
“Change means one thing for sure, plenty of work for us mercenaries.” Sigil grinned.

Dietrich Vinh frowned. “I will sell you parts only for 235,000 C-Bills. But I will not give you any performance guarantees. I only guarantee the work I do personally. If that’s agreeable, transfer the sum to this account and provide me an address to deliver the parts. I will deliver them myself. I’d like to watch some of your work. I am always looking for men and women of talent, and they are scarce, indeed.”

Sigil retrieved his Sternsacht from the counter. He reloaded the heavy pistol, and slid it back into his thigh holster.

“Thanks, Deitrich. I’ll transfer the funds by tomorrow evening. I’d like them delivered as soon as possible. My unit is deploying within the month.”

He took the contact memcard from Vinh. Then he and Weddle headed back out to the street.

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