

# BATTLETECH™



# SILENT ASSETS



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# Prologue

**DEFIANCE INDUSTRIES  
MYOO MOUNTAINS  
HESPERUS II  
DONEGAL PROVINCE  
LYRAN COMMONWEALTH  
20 DECEMBER 3151**

General Kaiden McFaris watched as the guards moved on. It had been a long night, but he had expected it. Defiance Industries' guards held a tight perimeter, though not a perfect one. Perfect was impossible. And that was where the Silent Reapers came in.

Where most mercenary commands focused on 'Mechs and winning battles, the Silent Reapers did not. Their focus was battle armor and infiltration. Stealing the un-stealable, breaking into the impenetrable or extracting someone—with or without their consent. What the Silent Reapers didn't do were assassinations. Which didn't mean they were above killing someone shooting at them, but they preferred to avoid it. Not just because of the loss of life, but because killing someone meant leaving a trace.

*There shouldn't be a trace.*

Kaiden reminded himself of this as he stepped forward, moving slowly to avoid making any sound in his heavily modified Gray Death Scout suit. He continued for sixteen more steps, then hid behind a pillar, easing around it as the next guard shift passed.

He took another twenty steps and ducked into an office. There, he waited as another set of guards passed by. These were talking a lot, making it easy to keep track of them. The Reapers had watched Defiance Industries' video feeds for two weeks, and hacked into their

communications to be aware of any last-minute changes to the guards' schedule. Had anyone fallen sick, they would have cancelled today's infiltration and reevaluated their plan.

It took Kaiden another hour before he reached his target. The facility's central mainframe stored all the research data on their newest 'Mech designs, but he wasn't interested in those. He wanted Defiance Industries' financial data, also stored on the mainframe. That was worth so much more—at least to his employer.

If you knew who ordered what from Defiance Industries, and where it was going and when, you had a good grasp on when they were planning a military move. And with most of the company's output going to the Lyran Commonwealth, you could predict the Commonwealth's plans to a reasonable certainty.

When the Reapers first arrived, Kaiden had feared he would have to infiltrate the actual factory to get to the data, but they soon discovered that would not be necessary. If humanity was one thing, it was lazy. While Defiance Industries would never move their factory outside the mountain, much of their support staff and facilities operated in a sprawling surface complex around the undermountain's heavily defended main gates. From an investment standpoint, it made total sense. Personnel files, the IT department and many other things weren't necessary to keep the main facility running, and evacuating them during an attack wouldn't slow down production. As long as the factory systems couldn't be accessed through any of the systems on the outside, no one had seen a problem with it. To the contrary—with the civilian staff not having to enter the long, winding tunnel system, they could work more efficiently. Which meant Defiance Industries needed fewer of them, and probably led to some shareholders lining their pockets with the money saved on wages.

*It also makes stealing data a lot easier, so who am I to complain?* Kaiden smiled while he went through the steps Malina had told him to follow to get what they needed.

With the data dump finished, he ran the second program Malina had given him that would leave an encrypted message to a relative here. Once that was done, Kaiden prepared to leave. The lights flickered as he reached out to open the door.

**SILENT REAPERS BASE  
MYOO MOUNTAINS  
HESPERUS II  
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Malina Brantling sat at her computer station and watched the Defiance Industries guards make their rounds, every one following their usual pattern like clockwork. Those down the hall from the mainframe room were nearing the end of the corridor now, about to turn the corner and be gone. Then one of the guards halted, turned around, and hurried back.

For a moment, Malina panicked. Then she realized what was going on. There, on the floor right outside the mainframe room door, lay a key ring. The guard must have dropped it.

Malina did the only thing she could; she cut the power to the facility. Only for a second, just long enough to make the lights flicker as the emergency power turned on. The downside was that she lost her connection to the video feeds as they switched to internal. It would take personnel at Defiance Industries about five minutes to reestablish the outside connection.

*I still don't understand why it's there at all, she mused. It's a huge security risk, and for what? The convenience of some guys who like to keep watch from home instead of coming in? I'll never understand why people are this stupid.*

“But it makes my job a lot easier, so there is that.”

Toben looked at her quizzically, his green eyes almost shining and his short brown hair messy. He was hunting for his shirt, and she paused her work for a moment to admire his muscles, which he had built up over the last year from lifting heavy equipment. His shift in the “Mech bay” was about to start, and he hated being late.

She moved a few strands of jade-green hair away from her right eye and smiled at him. The hair on the left side of her head was cut short. “Your shirt is under the bed.”

“Seriously? How did it end up there?”

Malina laughed. “Do you really want me to explain? Okay. When we came in last night, you started kissing me and...”

She went on with a detailed description, and Toben let her. He knew her well enough to let her talk, and she loved him for it. Toben was sixteen, she was seventeen. They had started going out after a mission on Marik earlier this year.

Kaiden, who had pretty much taken on the role of father to her after her own father disappeared and Kaiden’s had been killed, had sat down with her when he noticed. Which was about five minutes after the relationship started, possibly before. To her surprise, he hadn’t expressed worry about her or explained how protection worked. Instead, he talked to her about Toben. Made sure she was serious about him, and not just using him to fill a hole in her heart. “Toben is far more fragile than you,” he had said to her.

While she was still in her talking stream, Toben kissed her on the mouth. She reciprocated as best she could. After he left, closing the door behind him, Malina kept talking. And smiling.

When she was done, she opened one of her last bottles of Tonga Green, a sparkly juice she loved. She had taken a whole crate of it with her when they left Marik. She loved the sweet,

fizzy drink so much she'd tried to hack into the servers of the company that produced it, but with no success. The servers had been completely offline, no external access for her to exploit.

In the comic books she read, she would have analyzed the drink herself and figured out what it was made of. *I'd be more than a genius hacker. I'd also be a microbiologist, neuroscientist, astrophysicist, theoretical physicist, experimental physicist, and engineer.* Since she didn't live in a comic book, her reserves were gone. Possibly forever.

As she enjoyed the drink, she thought about the advertising slogan: "*We make it, you drink it!*"

*Too true.*

As Malina finished that thought, the feeds came back online.

**DEFIANCE INDUSTRIES  
MYOO MOUNTAINS  
HESPERUS II**

It had taken Kaiden half an hour to reach the outer walls, which was still a lot faster than the time it had taken to get in. Looking at his suit's chronometer, he waited for the seconds to tick down, then when the time came, engaged his jump jets and jumped over the wall. He touched down on the opposite side and waited.

Five minutes later, he ran, using the short window where all the external cameras were pointing in another direction. He jumped down into a deep ravine, letting his jump jets feather the landing. The escape route through the mountains was the main reason he'd undertaken the mission in the armor, instead of sending an unarmored infiltrator on foot. They had enough people who could have sneaked in a lot more easily than him, but getting out would have been tricky. And they would have risked the fake papers being discovered. Which would be bad on

any mission, but Vedet Brewer had promised a nice bonus should the infiltration of his former facility remain unnoticed.

It took Kaiden thirty-three minutes to leave the communication blackout zone Malina had determined, where Defiance Industries could potentially pick up on any transmission and raise an alarm. From a concealed spot in the old rail tunnel, abandoned since the destruction of the maglev line in 3065, he opened a comm channel. “Parrot-billed Sparrow to Nest, I have the eggs.”

As he said it, he smirked at the bird name. He had no idea how or why, but the Silent Reapers had used this system for almost a century. Who was he to break with tradition?

He heard the response coming in, but ignored it. Something else had caught his attention, something that shouldn't have. Voices!

He triple-clicked, the signal to be quiet. Then he turned up the gain of his external microphones and listened.

“Why are we doing this?” A male voice, young and aggrieved.

A woman responded, “Because someone pissed off the captain yesterday by making fun of his son.”

The first voice again. “How was I supposed to know he'd hear, *and* punish us with a surprise training drill?”

Another man answered, loudly: “Because he was standing two meters away, you idiot!”

Kaiden suppressed a chuckle. *Given your shouting, I'd ask myself who the idiot is...*

The tunnel system made it difficult to get a fix on their position, but Kaiden was relatively certain the group was coming from the direction he'd planned to go. Judging from the sound of their movement, and the fact that they were talking out in the open, none of them was

wearing battle armor or a light power armor suit. Meaning they had to slog their equipment through the moist heat while the tunnel darkness played tricks on their eyes.

In theory, he could easily evade them, but if his guess was right, they were blocking the only way out where he didn't have to walk a few kilometers over a treacherous mountainside to get back to base. His escape plan had always hinged on that.

Kaiden checked his weapons. The machine gun in his right arm was operational and armed, as was the flamer in his left. Right now, he missed the active probe of the original Gray Death Scout armor, but the improved stealth armor and heavy weaponry had proven their worth often enough. The less powerful sensor suite of the modified suit would have to do today.

He moved slowly, avoiding making unnecessary noise, while looking around for a hiding place. He probably could have run, given how loud the Defiance Industries guards were talking. By now they had moved on from assigning blame to planning what to do when they were done with their punishment drill. Kaiden felt disgusted, but also relieved. The Silent Reapers rarely followed established military protocol, but no one in their ranks would treat a training exercise the way these guards did. It made things a lot easier for him, though.

A large crack in the wall caught his eye. Not perfect, but it would do. He had to get down on his knees and bend himself in an awkward position to fit, but once wedged in, he was more or less out of sight. He made sure he could move his left arm, just in case they spotted him, and waited. In the close confines of the tunnels, even a brief burst from his flamer would make short work of conventional infantry.

The guards drew closer. Kaiden had to lower the pick-ups of his external microphones almost to zero to protect his eardrums from their loud conversation. He identified three men and two women by their voices, and was surprised when it turned out there were six guards instead of

five. The third woman, walking quietly in the rear, had never said a word. The first guard passed him without issue, the second too. The third one moved his light around and shone it directly at Kaiden.

He tensed for a split second, ready to let loose with a blast of his flamer, but the light passed over him and the guard moved on. The quiet woman bringing up the rear shone her light in the other direction, almost as if she was trying not to see him.

After they passed by, Kaiden moved out of the crack. His back hurt from the uncomfortable position he'd assumed and the armor plating pressing into him. The suit wasn't meant to be twisted that way. He stayed still for another few seconds, listening for anything else unexpected, then resumed his journey back to base.

**SILENT REAPERS BASE  
MYOO MOUNTAINS  
HESPERUS II**

Knowing Kaiden would arrive any minute, Malina waited at their base's entry. Or what was supposed to be the entry. They'd set up shop in an old, abandoned mining shaft, so the entrance was nothing more than what their strategists had called a choke point—roughly hewn stone walls that were tighter than the rest of the shaft. Still large enough to get their 'Mechs in, but Machu's *Nova Cat* had been a tight fit.

From where she stood, she could see the former Spirit Cat warrior supervising the repainting of the 'Mech. Some color had dripped into his short black hair, but he seemed to ignore it. He had tried to wipe away some paint from his face, but all that had accomplished was a smeared black line over his surprisingly few wrinkles, given his forty-six years. Kaiden had recently taken off the second string of his bondcord, and while Machu was not yet a full warrior,

the general had put him back into his cockpit. Machu had been their enemy only two missions ago, had fought hard to capture them after the Silent Reapers broke into the Spirit Cats' genetic repository. An infiltration only discovered because Machu had introduced security measures he hadn't shared with anyone else or noted on any plans. That alone was impressive, but the former Star Captain had also managed to stay on their heels, despite their every effort to get away. He had spoiled their first escape attempt, and only lost the last battle against the Silent Reapers when they had tricked him left and right. It had taken almost every trick in the book.

Most impressive was that he had managed to keep all of that a secret from the Spirit Cats as a whole. Which meant he would make a fine Reaper, but it also meant the Spirit Cats would see it as a failure and declare him *dezgra*. Realizing this, Kaiden had taken him as a bondsman.

*A decision that is not sitting well with everyone.*

Malina saw the looks Machu was getting, despite the fact that he had proven himself loyal. During their last mission, he provided valuable insight into their enemy, even though he hadn't yet taken any active part in things. He had simply read the reports and extrapolated from there. *Of course, he called it a vision, but it was just his subconscious mind putting the information together.*

The worst of the attitude problem was coming from members of Squad Three, who had a real hate-on for Machu. Two of them were near him now, one walking past him and bumping into him on purpose. A few seconds later, the second one did the same. Machu didn't react, though Malina guessed it was hard for him, given his Clan training had to demand an aggressive response. She could understand how the members of Squad Three felt. Their leader was Ramona Hanson, whose brother had died at Machu's hands on Marik.

Losing family members hurt.

*At least they know what happened to him...*

Heavy footsteps caught her attention. Kaiden was approaching. The sight of him pulled her out of her funk. “Did you get everything?” she asked as he walked in.

She saw the smirk on his face and his tendency to almost constantly smile made his almost two meter in height and strong muscles seem way less threatening than they did on other people. He was only thirty-six, but his short, white hair made him look older.

“Okay. Can you give it to me? I want to get started. This shaft is really freaking me out. It’s so cold and damp, I had to install extra air conditioning with better humidifiers in my ‘room’ to make sure the wet air won’t damage my electronics. So, if you’ll just hand it over...”

“Thank you, Malina. You can stop now.” Spoken in a fatherly tone, the words stopped her in her tracks. He handed her the data stick. “Here. Go. Have fun.”

With a grin, Malina took it and hurried off. Not quite running, just barely managing to keep her decorum and not look like fool to the rest of the unit.

Ten minutes later, she’d skimmed through everything. She made a copy and brought the data back to Kaiden, who would ensure it ended up in Vedet Brewer’s hands. Their own copy would remain with the Silent Reapers as a backup, should anything go wrong during transfer to the client, and for their own personal use.

Selling the data to anyone else was out of the question. While the Silent Reapers’ main work was black ops, and they usually worked outside common mercenary channels like Galatea or the Sea Foxes, who had recently started offering services as contract brokers and enforcers, they still had a reputation to maintain. Trustworthiness was the most important part of that, right up there with “getting the job done.”

“Anything missing?” Kaiden asked when she stepped into his office. Malina knew he was just double-checking, because that was his job as general, so she bit back the automatic snide remark that rose to mind, took a deep breath instead and nodded. “Yes, everything’s there. But...”

“But?”

“We got some additional data I didn’t expect. One of their financial officers must be really lazy or else has a bad memory. He stored multiple bank account passwords in his profile. They’re two weeks old, but it looks like he has a four-week password rotation schedule...”

Kaiden gave her a quizzical look. “Did you try them out?”

“Of course not.” Though she had to admit the question was justified. She’d broken into bank computers before, just for fun. She never took anything, just trained her skills.

“Delete them.”

She nodded. She’d expected that answer, but she still had to report the discovery. Just to be clear, she said: “The passwords aren’t part of the data I copied for the client.”

Kaiden nodded, a proud expression on his face. “Never expected anything else from you.”

Smiling, Malina left his office.

\* \* \*

Once Malina had gone, Kaiden inserted the data stick into his noteputer and started going through it. He knew Malina hadn’t done so yet. She always checked for anomalies first and handed him the data without fully looking into what they got. He liked that about her. Despite her age, she knew her priorities.

Knowing where their next job would take them, he looked into specific delivery locations first. To his relief, nothing out of the ordinary seemed to be shipping to their planned destination. Looking at everything else took him about three hours. Everything was in order.

Finished with that task, he reopened the files pertaining to their next job.

It was one of the odd ones out. Ever since the Blackout, it had been harder to line up jobs. When his father was still alive, he'd complained about it. Not because it was impossible, but because it meant paying off more people to find assignments and get them to Kaiden. Still, they had a system.

And then there were the "odd jobs," as his father had called them. Jobs that just showed up on their networks. Kaiden had no idea where they came from, but his father had told him to always—*always*—take them. They fell under the same category as anything pertaining to Kafka. If they ever came upon a job against the assassin, they were to reject it, then report it to Kafka. Kafka would do the same if there was a job against the Silent Reapers. How that system came to be, Kaiden didn't know. He only knew his great-grandfather had put it in place, and that Kafka had been instrumental in helping avenge and rebuild the Silent Reapers after Alarion.

This new job was interesting. The Lyran Intelligence Corps needed someone to find out what was happening to their assets in the Isle of Skye. They had lost contact with multiple Norm agents from different cells, which should be impossible—unless one of their own people was compromised. Not knowing who, and with their resources stretched thin, the LIC were clearly getting desperate. Kaiden felt certain the job offer was also on its way via the Silent Reapers' usual channels, but it had shown up as an "odd job" faster than he could have thought possible.

He'd feared the Lyrans would make things complicated by starting a military campaign alongside the Reapers' mission, but it didn't look like they were. Either their military had no idea

what was going on or, for once, the Lyrans weren't turning things into a total mess all by themselves.

The mission was also well defined: *Find the missing agents or verify their deaths. Get them out if possible, terminate if extraction is not possible.* Kaiden had seen many such contracts. If an asset fell into enemy hands and could not be recovered, a kill order was standard operating procedure, but he preferred not to.

*Find the leak and shut it down, by any means necessary.* The last part gave him a lot of leeway, and he was surprised by the Norns seeming willingness for collateral damage, which was more Loki's style.

Kaiden leaned back in his chair. *Let's just hope the Lyrans really didn't notice us. I'm sure the LIC won't be happy if they find out what we just stole.*