

1: Maret

Gunfire cracked in the distance and bullets thudded in to the ground, spraying dirt into the air. Men and women screamed as artillery shells screamed down through the air.

Constance knelt in the mud outside her tent behind a table that had been overturned to provide cover. The wet earth soaked into her pants; that was going to take forever to get out. Beside her, back against the table, Leon was bandaging his left arm. Constance peered over the edge of the table, watching the muzzle flash in the treeline while her crew took cover all around her, occasionally taking pot shots into the trees.

"This is no happenstance patrol."

"Yes my lady," Leon grimaced, "It is likely they were expecting us."

"When the fighting is over, I want a thorough search of the crew. I expect someone on the gallows by nightfall."

"Yes my lady."

Constance stood. The sun was only just starting to rise, shifting the twilight haze to deep reds. The tents around her were already being torn to shreds by the gunfire, and a few of them were burning. Not far away she heard the sound of an automatic emplaced gun begin its methodical *thump thump thump*. She shook her head and turned her back to the gunfire, walking around her tent to the large open space beyond.

As her Mechanical Walker, a Mesa, came into view she felt the surge of emotions from the machine. The spirit of the Mesa was calling for blood. The Walker's four heavy legs were pulled up against its body like a dead spider, the massive rotary canon was drooping down, barrel nearly touching the mud. As she approached, the front of the Walker opened like a gigantic mouth. She put a hand on the side of the machine and paused a moment. As bullets whipped past her, pinging uselessly off the Walker's armour, she breathed deeply and felt the Walker shiver.

Above her an artillery shell screamed downwards, intent on turning her into a red mist. She leapt into the open Walker and it closed behind her like a warm hug. The shell hit just outside and threw her into the seat as mud and shrapnel peppered the metal around her. She grinned as she righted herself in the seat, feeling the machine come to life as the two of them became one. The rotary cannon spun to life and the massive Walker stood to its full height. The gunfire in the treeline stopped and she watched as small shapes began sprinting away through the trees. It wouldn't matter.

She pulled the trigger and removed the treeline.

She saw bodies fly through the air, limbs pinned beneath logs and people impaled by splintered wood.

She pulled the trigger again and buried the hillside.

Her left arm itched and she looked over to see Leon climbing up the leg of the Walker. He pulled himself close to the window and shouted at her,

"Shall I tell the crew to give chase?"

"No," she shook her head, "Let them scurry back to their masters. Laguerre will know fear."

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