



COMMAND PERFORMANCE

By Alex Irvine



Ottmar Drenthe was watching reviews of his latest project and fuming at the idiocy of the Dominion's reviewing elites when his agent pinged him and suggested that maybe what they needed was something different.

"Different how?" Drenthe snapped. "I am Drenthe. I make the holovids that Drenthe makes."

"Sure, absolutely," his agent said. "But I've got an offer here that you might want to listen to. Two weeks' work, tops. And take a look at the credits."

An amount flashed on the screen below his agent's fat and avaricious face. It was indeed sufficient to make Drenthe ask the next question. "What is it this client wants from Drenthe?"

"It's an industrial, but don't hang up. You're going to stage a battle for Axiom Ordnance. They've built a new combat walker, and they want something great to pitch it to the Dominion purchasing authorities. They're huge fans of your work, Drenthe."

That set them apart from most holo reviewers. "An industrial," he sneered. "This is below Drenthe."

"Well, here's the other thing," his agent said. "There's a bit of a sticky problem with financing *Heroes of the Periphery*." This was the next holo Drenthe wanted to make, a grand war epic about an embittered ghost and her unlikely love for a protoss templar in the face of a new zerg invasion. He had been working on it for years.

"A problem?"

"As in, the credit's not coming together. But if you do this job for Axiom, you'd be a lot closer to shooting *Heroes*. See what I'm saying?"

Drenthe sighed. This was ever the plight of the auteur. "Drenthe will shoot this industrial if

you swear that *Heroes of the Periphery* will then be the next project," he said, not bothering to hide his disdain.

"Great. I'll get the contract to you, but you need to leave for Bukari V tomorrow morning. The shooting schedule's tight. AxO wants to pitch this unit in two weeks."

"Bukari V?" Drenthe did not even know where that planet might be.

"Don't worry about it," his agent said. "Just get to the spaceport."

* * *

The transport liner was less than eight hours out from Korhal when Drenthe, seated at the bar with a glass of Brontesian brandy, was approached by a stranger. "Ottmar Drenthe," the stranger said. "An unusual honor to meet such a prominent artist on a trip to the Bukari system. Not much art out there."

"That, Drenthe fears, will continue," Drenthe said. "Drenthe is abased, reduced to making holos for corporations. Advertisements." He was a little drunk, and a lot morose.

"Is that so? For Axiom?"

"Regrettably so."

The stranger extended his hand. Drenthe shook it. "You can call me Eli," he said. "I've got a little proposal for you."

Drenthe had long since grown wary of proposals offered by strangers in bars, but what else did he have to do but listen? "What proposal?"

"You're going to make a pitch piece for Axiom's new heavy walker, the Warhound." Eli said

this as if he were reciting it from memory.

Warhound, Drenthe thought. It was the first time he had heard the machine named. "How do you know this?"

"I work for Axiom. But also for other people. I hear things. I know things."

Drenthe found this suspicious.

"Here's the thing," Eli said. "There are some people who want the Warhound to go into production, and some people who don't. You've been offered a certain amount of credit to help Axiom. What if I offered you twice that to make a much more interesting project?"

Drenthe's eyes narrowed. He sipped his brandy. "What do you mean by 'interesting'?"

"Think of it as a formal exercise. Can you make a holo that seems to lionize the Warhound while actually pointing out its weaknesses? I've got some friends who would pay handsomely for that kind of project. But only if it was done by Drenthe."

"Your flattery is obvious," Drenthe said.

"That's fine. Tell you what," Eli said. "The credits aside, you know that AxO is a greedy, savage bunch of killers who are going to use this new Warhound to squash legitimate rebellions all over the sector."

"Or they might fight the zerg with it," Drenthe said.

"Keep telling yourself that. If the Warhounds ever deploy against the zerg, it'll only be if there are enough of them left after all of the anti-insurgent operations they'll be doing all over the sector. You haven't seen the unit. It's designed for close anti-vehicle and anti-armor work, with a little bit of anti-air capability. How useful is that against the zerg? Who the hell would design a unit to fight the zerg if it has to wade into the middle of them to be useful?"

Drenthe considered this. He was no tactician, and certainly knew nothing of military hardware manufacturing. Could Eli be so certain what these Warhound prototypes would do once they had gone through their full production cycle? Eli sounded persuasive, it was true. And the money was something to consider. But he had signed a contract.

Still, could he be held to a contract if his holo vid would ultimately be used for purposes contrary to his understanding? Drenthe was not an ethicist, either. He was a maker of great holos, reduced to grubbing after money.

In effect, Drenthe realized, he was being asked to create a propaganda piece inside a propaganda piece, a holo that would say one thing while doing another. A propaganda documentary that fictionalized itself. At the moment he had this realization, he got interested. That was art. He was an artist.

Plus there was the matter of the credits. Double what Axiom had offered? And with no agent's commission? Visions of the first day's production on *Heroes of the Periphery* danced in Drenthe's head.

"I tell you what," he said, deliberately mimicking Eli's phrase. "Drenthe will do it."

What did he care about Axiom?

It was a game to Drenthe then, the game of putting together a holo that would satisfy both of his employers, and inside that, the thrill of being a part of an espionage plot! Already he was blocking out a new story in his head, his next project after *Heroes of the Periphery*. In it, a misunderstood holo director would find himself embroiled in corporate espionage, with the fates of entire systems at stake...

"Glad to hear it," Eli said. He produced a small machine and showed Drenthe a number on

its screen. "Half now, half when you have the finished product."

Drenthe raised his glass. "Allow Drenthe to buy you a drink," he said.

* * *

They emerged into orbit around Bukari V shortly after Drenthe had found his way to his stateroom and fallen into a brandy-aided sleep, broken by visions of the holos he had yet to make. He awoke when the shipboard AI alerted all passengers that disembarkation was commencing, and that the last orbital hop to the surface of Bukari V would be departing in one hour. Drenthe made it, but only just. An hour after that, he was meeting Dario Cerulli, his handler and Axiom's chosen PR flack. Cerulli led Drenthe to his room within the vast manufacturing and executive complex AxO had built on Bukari V, a world with little to recommend it save enormous deposits of vespene and other raw materials.

"Allow me to show you around a little," Dario said when Drenthe had stashed his gear in his room. He led Drenthe on a boring and perfunctory tour of the complex. Drenthe wished he had a drink.

Things got slightly more interesting when they emerged from the complex into an arid and windy afternoon. The sun was heavy and red in the sky; one of Bukari V's four moons hung in front of it like a mole on the face of a god. Another moon was low and crescent on the eastern horizon. Drenthe disliked warm weather. He began to sweat.

"This is going to be the proving ground. Well, I mean, it is the proving ground, but this is going to be your main location," Dario said, waving his arm at a broad expanse of broken and

rocky ground enclosed by heavy fences. "We'll also need shots of the production facilities, and we'll do some interviews with workers. I think we've selected a few who will fit the project well."

Already this person was rubbing Drenthe the wrong way. *I decide what I shoot and who I speak to*, he thought. *Not a flack for an arms manufacturer. I am Drenthe.*

But what he said was, "Yes."

"Great," Dario said. They walked along the edge of the proving ground. "I know you'll want to do a little scouting to figure out where to put your holocams. Soon as we... Oh, now this is a shame."

They had come to a slight rise in the terrain, with the vastness of the factory on their left and the proving ground to their right and behind them. Ahead was a collection of buildings that might, Drenthe supposed, be called a town. It was colorless and dingy, and along the road that traversed the half kilometer from it to the factory, several dozen people were shouting and waving signs. At the center of this group was a striking woman, long red hair catching the sun as she rallied the workers and called out the slogans that they all took up.

"What is this?" Drenthe asked. Unrest of any sort interested him. It made for compelling images.

"Those are the quarters for some of our workers. We won't need to go there. How about if we—" Dario broke off when four vehicles emerged from the factory complex and roared up to the demonstrating workers. Shortly after that, everything erupted into a riot. Drenthe saw uniformed AxO security using long electrified batons and sonic crowd-control devices.

Ambulances appeared. The noise that reached them mostly consisted of screams and shouts.

The woman managing the protesters was at the center of it, standing with her arms up and chanting something Drenthe couldn't make out.

Not just espionage, but labor strife! Drenthe was getting more from this trip than he had anticipated. One of the security guards struck her on the side of the head with a baton, and she disappeared into the melee.

"This is just not acceptable," Dario said. He opened up his handheld comm link and called someone. "Riley," he said. "I'm showing Drenthe around the grounds. Was this necessary right now?"

Drenthe could not hear the reply.

"No, that's what I'm saying. I was not consulted. Timing, Riley. Timing. We'll talk about this later. Right now, you bring them back in, and I mean now. No detentions. Get them the hell out of there."

Dario snapped the comm shut and said, "Sorry about this. You know how people get. Workers always think that we're sitting on piles of money that they should have."

The chaos was subsiding as the security forces withdrew. Several of the demonstrators were lying in the road, or near it. Drenthe could not tell if they were dead. The ambulances also withdrew. Other workers went to the injured parties and carried them into the company town. The woman Drenthe had spotted at first was now directing the recovery efforts despite rivulets of blood on her face. What a remarkable specimen she was, statuesque and fierce.

Savagery, thought Drenthe—and was glad that without Dario's knowledge, he had managed to capture some of it. He was Drenthe. He went nowhere without recorders absorbing his environment. He had his shirts and belts specially made to incorporate micro-recorders in

buttons and buckles. The ring he wore on his right hand was another tiny lens. When he was not telling any other story, he was telling the story of himself. An endless story, of course, because Drenthe could not imagine his own death.

"That was extremely irregular," Dario said. He looked at Drenthe, who saw tense lines around Dario's eyes and mouth. The AxO work site was more interesting than Drenthe had imagined—and much more interesting than Dario wanted. Drenthe loved to see things he was not supposed to see. "Axiom is careful to maintain good relationships with its workforce."

"Of course," Drenthe said. He wondered what the redheaded woman's name was and if she could be interviewed. Dario would, of course, not permit it, but were there ways...?

"Well. Yes. You've seen the area. Now maybe you'd like to rest up? We're going to need to start shooting as soon as you can get your recorders set up. Time is money."

Thinking of *Heroes of the Periphery*, Drenthe agreed. On the way back to the executive complex, which was set apart from the factory works and far away from the company town, they ran into Eli, who had apparently been waiting for them. "Dario," he said. "I see you've given Drenthe here the tour?"

"He got a little more than we'd expected," Dario said.

"So I hear," Eli said. "Too bad about that."

Dario shrugged. "We're all adults. Workers are never satisfied, and when they allow their dissatisfaction to become public unrest, Axiom has a duty to maintain a safe work environment for the vast majority of its employees who appreciate everything Axiom does for them. This happens from time to time. It's unpleasant, of course, but Axiom is very strict about keeping its responses both legal and humane. In any case, since you haven't been introduced—Eli,

Drenthe. Drenthe, Eli."

"We've met," Eli said, but he shook Drenthe's hand again.

"Oh, of course. On the ship. Eli's one of our consultants."

Eli winked at Drenthe. "We had a chance to talk on the trip. It was a great pleasure to meet such a famous artist."

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Early the next morning Drenthe met Eli again while Drenthe was scanning the wasteland terrain for advantageous spots to position fixed recorders. Much of the action work would be done with mobile lenses, but Drenthe believed that holo storytelling depended occasionally on the stillness of the viewpoint. In this he was old-fashioned, perhaps. But he was Drenthe.

"There's something you should know," Eli told him. "So you don't end up getting hurt out there."

"How am I going to get hurt? I thought you said these Warhounds were just SCVs with bigger torches."

"You're an artist, Drenthe. You understand a little exaggeration for effect, right?"

"I would prefer that I understood my exposure," Drenthe said, in a rare use of the first-person pronoun. He found it distasteful.

"The control system for the demonstration. It might be vulnerable."

Drenthe was in no mood for subtlety. "Speak plainly," he demanded.

"The dummy armor isn't going to fight like dummy armor," Eli said. "We have decided to

take steps to ensure that you get the story that both of us want you to get."

Both of us, Drenthe thought. "Is that so?" he said.

"The Warhounds aren't going to look good, is all I'm saying," Eli said. "I tell you this not just for your personal safety, but so you know it when you're doing your director thing. Put the holocapture stuff in the right place to catch a lot of Warhounds going up in smoke, you know?" He finished his drink and stood. "Nice to see you. Big day tomorrow."

He headed back toward the passenger compartment, and Drenthe was left to consider his options.

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Dario wanted to make sure of the schedule, so Drenthe met him early the next morning in the executive complex next to the main AxO factory works. They ran over Drenthe's requirements, which included places to mount at least ten remote holocams on the proving ground itself and a purpose-built director's platform with feeds from all the cams and a chair Drenthe had shipped from Korhal. He was never without it on a set. "Once this is built and the holocams are in place, we will be ready to proceed," he said.

"No problem," Dario said. "I'll get people pounding nails right now." He left Drenthe in his office for a minute. Drenthe took the opportunity to record everything about the office and the view from its window, from which he could see across one corner of the factory to the workers' town. The factory itself was magnificent in the way of factories: an immense expanse of gantries and smokestacks, cranes carrying tons of raw materials to the burning mouths of blast

furnaces, the scream of lathes and the machine-gun rattle of rivet guns. It almost never rained on this part of Bukari V, and so, much of the work took place in the open. Drenthe marveled.

In a walled-off yard at the edge of the complex stood finished prototype Warhounds; Drenthe counted forty-seven. They were seven meters tall and bipedal, with legs articulated to move fast over rough terrain. Missile racks were mounted on what would have been their shoulders had they been human, and their arms terminated in multiple cannon barrels. Drenthe was put in mind of Eli's comment about SCVs. It was true: the Warhound's chassis bore a family resemblance to that ubiquitous service unit. The Warhound, however, was much more massive. The operator of an SCV extended his arms and legs into the unit exoskeleton; a Warhound's operator was fully contained within its torso, with massively parallel neural interfaces controlling the limbs and armament systems. Drenthe found himself looking forward to seeing the Warhounds in action.

There was also a view of the proving ground, which Drenthe took in. He liked this angle, absorbing everything from behind the tinted glass of the executive offices. It would contrast nicely with the raw footage from the test itself.

Dario returned. "Your platform will be built by the end of the day," he said. "Monitors and all. I took the liberty of having someone bring your chair from your room."

Drenthe bristled inwardly at the assumption that his privacy could be so cavalierly breached, but he said nothing. Arrogance was quite a spice on camera.

"From the window I was looking down on the prototypes," he said. "They resemble SCVs, do they not?"

Dario laughed. "They do, as a matter of fact. There's a story there. The very first ancestor of

what is about to be the production-model Warhound was an SCV. It belonged to an engineer named Yakov Iliev, who was working for a small mining company on some backward, nowhere planet. I've forgotten which one, but I could look it up for you."

"No, please go on," Drenthe said.

"Are you recording this?" Dario said.

"You would see a holocam, would you not?" Drenthe asked. "When Drenthe shoots holo, the world knows."

"Right," Dario said. "Well, Iliev was working a mine that had some trouble with local bandits. He retooled a couple of SCVs with different armaments, and the next time the bandits came around, they got a big surprise. Company management didn't like it because they had subcontracted security out, and this made them look bad. So they were about to fire Iliev, if you can believe that—but right about then, Axiom bought the company. This was before my time here, but from what I understand, Iliev's plans and designs were included in the buy."

Drenthe decided he would like to meet this Yakov Iliev. "Where is the engineer now?" he asked.

"No idea," Dario said. "I think he retired someplace quiet. He was gifted; there's no question about it. But not the kind of personality suited to working in a large corporate environment. A tinker. Bit of a loner. Antisocial, really."

Reading between the lines, Drenthe guessed that Iliev had been forced out and his designs stolen under the pretext of some fine print in the acquisitions agreement. An old story. One could find versions of it throughout human history. It did not interest him.

The character of Iliev did, however. Drenthe would find him. So much was going on behind

the public face Dario put on Axiom, much more than Drenthe would have anticipated.

Interesting. In his hands it would become a film greater than Axiom deserved.

His only misgivings at that point had to do with what Eli had told him the night before.

Approaching the topic from an angle, he said, "I would prefer to be able to direct the actions of individual Warhounds."

"I'm afraid that's not possible," Dario said. "We're going to have live operators in them.

That's one of the things we still have to use people for. They're handpicked from our assembly techs."

Drenthe got a chill. Those operators, if the AI was corrupted... they would die. For the first time, Drenthe understood the full scope of what he had involved himself in. And immediately he resolved that he could not take part, knowing that he would allow innocent workers to be blown apart by tanks and vikings. No, he was no ethicist, but neither was he the kind of man who could stand by and witness atrocity.

What he was, above all else, was an artist. A storyteller. And in the midst of his initial reaction to the revelation that Eli planned to engineer the slaughter of two dozen Warhound operators, Drenthe was already starting to make his situation into a story. It began with the usurpation of Yakov Iliev, and it would end... how? That, he did not yet know. But he was no war correspondent, to dispassionately watch humans die while he did nothing.

Eli, realized Drenthe, was playing him exactly as Axiom had played Iliev. He was being made a patsy, his skills and art stolen and put to a purpose he found disgusting. Drenthe had enemies here on Bukari V.

He would fight them with the weapons natural to him: his director's eye and his holocams.

Drenthe's blood quickened at the thought.

"You can brief the operators if you'd like," Dario said. "I can gather them for you in the morning. They have certain maneuvers we need them to perform for potential clients, but within that framework Axiom is happy to make your job as easy as possible."

"No," Drenthe said. "If they cannot be directed, I will stand fully apart. Half measures make for poor storytelling."

"You're the artist," Dario said.

Indeed, thought Drenthe. A third project began to reveal itself, incorporating and superseding both the initial job and the subversion he'd agreed to in the stateroom aboard the ship. There was a real documentary here, about oppressed workers being used as sacrifices to make a propaganda piece. (And he had been suborned into helping!) What if, instead, he could turn it into a propaganda piece about oppressed workers who discover that they were about to be sacrificed and instead turn the tables on their oppressors?

What could he do to make that happen?

* * *

Later that night, Drenthe emerged from his room and left the executive complex. "I am Drenthe," he said to the guard. He waved a holocam. "I am making a holo. Tonight I wish to gather some images of the complex and proving ground at night."

The guard looked him up and saw that he was listed as a visiting contractor with VIP privileges. He waved Drenthe through without comment. Drenthe passed, annoyed that the

guard had not mentioned seeing any of his other works. What did people do out here for culture?

Once he was beyond the sight of the gate guard, no one was watching him. He walked along the edge of the factory works and skirted the proving ground, carrying a pair of handheld holocams whose feeds he could tap and which he could drop along the road where they wouldn't stand out amid the rest of the flotsam and industrial junk. Or, he thought, he could give them to someone. When he reached the road, he saw that the factory gate was guarded but the way to the town itself was open. Axiom, it seemed, did not care what the workers did as long as the company's main asset was protected. No doubt Axiom had spies and informants among the workers to root out the most vocal rebels.

Drenthe looked up at the sky and did what he had told the guard he intended to do. He took establishing images and holos of the factory works, the landscape, and the night sky of Bukari V. There were three moons visible, one of them overlapping another. This was something Drenthe had never seen. He devoted several minutes to the sight, considering the idea of eclipse, of masking, of disappearance and renewal. He watched the two overlapping moons gradually diverge, rapt and amazed at the sights the universe had to offer. Then it was time to get back to work. He had a holo to make.

The company town was dark and miserable. There was a single main street lined by two- and three-story prefabricated buildings. There were several bars and a single holotheater showing a despicable piece of junk by a director Drenthe considered a moronic imitator of previous moronic imitators. People looked him up and down as he passed, but they did not speak to him, marking him out immediately as an interloper. Their fear and hostility were

palpable. For a moment Drenthe feared for his safety, but his curiosity overrode those fears. His miniature holocams drank it all in.

Down side streets Drenthe saw squalor. Trash lay in piles in front of buildings that bespoke deep poverty. Windows were broken, roofs sagging. Drenthe recorded it all. He walked the main street until he found two men coming out of one of the bars. He thought he recognized one of them from the demonstration—tall, bald, scarred as if he had once been in combat—and the other was working at a loose tooth with thumb and forefinger. "Excuse me," Drenthe said. "I am Drenthe. I saw the conflict."

"Go to hell," said the man with the loose tooth.

"There was a woman with red hair. Quite a beauty," Drenthe said.

Both of the men stopped and looked carefully at Drenthe. "You're the holo director," the bald one said. "Drenthe."

"I am," Drenthe said, pleased to be recognized.

"We heard about you. You're making a holo of the Warhound test. AxO PR wouldn't shut up about it."

"Yeah," said the man with the loose tooth. "That's why we had the demonstration. Thought nobody would do anything with you around. So much for that."

You do not know how much worse it could have been, thought Drenthe.

"You want to talk to Ayla?" the bald man said. "Tough. She's not going to talk to an Axiom stooge."

"Yes, she is," Drenthe said. "There is something she needs to know."

"Tell you what," the bald man said. "I'll take you to see her, but the minute I don't like what

you're saying I'm gonna kick your ass all the way back to Korhal. I've been in prison. I've seen war. I ate a fekking zergling once because I missed breakfast. Get what I'm saying?"

"Understood," Drenthe said. "Where is she?"

It turned out she was nearby in another bar, surrounded by loyalists who eyed Drenthe like he was something contagious. "I saw you in the disagreement yesterday," he said, approaching her.

"What about it?"

"What is your name?"

"Ayla."

"Ayla. I am Drenthe." He waited for her to recognize his name. When she didn't, Drenthe tamped down his irritation and went on. "We should speak candidly."

He told her the story, as much of it as he knew, while leaving out the part about how he was taking money both from AxO and from the spy within their ranks. "Do you have anyone on the technical staff inside who is, shall we say, sympathetic? I ask for no names, of course."

"What if I do?"

"You will perhaps want to tell this person that an attempt will be made to corrupt the control system tomorrow. The Warhounds, I understand, will face considerably more opposition than you have been led to understand."

"Goddammit," Ayla said, drawing each syllable out. "They're setting us up for a massacre. Eli. Nothing is beneath that guy. He's someone who would make the universe a better place by dying; know what I mean?"

"Indeed," Drenthe said.

"You're telling me this why? Just out of the kindness of your heart?"

"Drenthe's motivations are only of interest to Drenthe. And there is perhaps something else you might consider. If this can be prevented, a squadron of Warhounds might be an extremely effective instrument of collective bargaining."

* * *

The next morning Axiom's workforce gathered to witness the demonstration. Drenthe had his recorders in place, and he had also given Ayla the two handhelds. When he left Bukari V, Drenthe would have a story he had not anticipated. In these past hours it had even pushed the specter of *Heroes of the Periphery* from his mind. His entire being was focused in the here and now. He felt alive.

The proving ground was five hundred meters across and roughly circular. It was bordered by rocky outcroppings that shaped it into a shallow bowl, its floor broken by more rock formations. On the edges of it were formations of siege tanks. Arranged around the northern edges of the floor of the bowl were clusters of old goliath models and viking air/ground hybrids.

Drenthe ascended the gantry and regarded the scene. He had a bank of monitors installed in an arc around his director's chair, each of them feeding him images from one of the remote holocams around the proving ground. He checked the time and contacted Dario. "Drenthe is ready," he said.

"Glad to hear it," Dario said.

At the near end of the factory works, two loading-bay doors opened. From each of them

emerged a column of a dozen Warhounds. Drenthe gathered from his briefing materials that there would be a series of scripted demonstrations, but he also knew that if Ayla succeeded in preventing the AI's corruption, there was no way to predict what would happen. Once the recording began, one had to be ready for anything. He set his notes on a monitor within easy reach and watched the feeds from his recorders that were covering the Warhounds' progress toward the proving ground.

Dario had also provided him with a voiceover extolling the virtues of the Warhound. Drenthe had decided to play it for the first time over his raw recordings as he got them, to give the initial material a feel of both spontaneity and preparation.

In one of the handheld feeds, Ayla appeared. "It worked," she said. "The AI is going to run like it was supposed to. But your friend Eli was one of the guys trying to corrupt the AI. He got the hell out when he saw us. You might want to keep an eye out for him."

He will come looking for me, Drenthe realized. Drenthe had become a character in the story Drenthe was trying to tell. But how could it be otherwise?

"We will worry about that later," he said. He was excited, as he always was at the beginning of a project when he didn't know how it would turn out, and this one was more uncertain than most. "Now it is time to make a holo."

Drenthe called Dario, who was hanging back by the factory entrance and watching on a monitor. "Everything is in place?" Drenthe asked.

"We're ready when you are."

Drenthe began the voiceover playback and said, "Action."

* * *

Hi, I'm Dario Cerulli of Axiom Ordnance, and I'm here to tell you about the Warhound.

The two groups of Warhounds entered the proving ground. The first group charged ahead to engage the tanks, with the second following closely to provide air support. This was all according to the script Drenthe had received from Dario. Right on schedule, a group of lightly armored drone flyers appeared over the proving ground, painted to resemble zerg mutalisks.

The Warhound is armed with batteries of Cyclone medium-range air-defense missiles, deployed automatically on detection of hostile enemy aircraft or organic flyers.

The walkers barraged the drones with missiles and blew them from the sky. Wreckage fell close to two of Drenthe's recorders. *Beautiful*, he thought. Over his comm, Dario said, "I love it. You getting this, Drenthe?"

"Of course Drenthe is getting it." *As if Drenthe would not "get it,"* thought Drenthe.

On another channel, Eli cut in. "Drenthe. What in the hell is going on? We had a deal!"

"The deal did not include a provision for Drenthe to be a party to mass murder, Eli," Drenthe said.

"You took money." Another missile barrage tore apart a drone-piloted viking hovering in place at the far end of the proving ground from where the other flyers had been. Smoke was already drifting and catching the sunlight. The optics were marvelous. Emotion, through light and smoke. Drenthe was in love.

"And you lied about what it was for," Drenthe said. "The moral high ground is not visible from Drenthe's perspective."

"You know what it wasn't for? It wasn't for starting a goddamn coup; that's what it wasn't for. And it wasn't for putting me in the crosshairs of a bunch of union nut jobs. You could have gotten me killed, you son of a bitch."

"Drenthe is busy, Eli."

"Drenthe is going to be fekking dead." Eli snapped the call off.

The lead group of Warhounds had reached the emplaced siege tanks, which were firing shells that sparked off the Warhounds' formation without detonating. "The AI would have armed those shells' detonators if you hadn't told us, Drenthe," Ayla said. "Start counting how many lives you saved."

Drenthe was not interested in this. He was making a holo.

For close anti-vehicle work, the Warhound's primary armament system is a rail gun firing Axiom's new Directed Plasma Field-Charged slugs, or DPFs. This ordnance features a heavy slug accelerated to a discharge velocity of three thousand meters per second. The slug itself is charged with a plasma that disperses in a tightly focused cone from the point of impact. The DPF penetrates armor plating more effectively and more quickly than gauss weapons, and without the threat of collateral damage posed by explosive ordnance.

In a tight group, the Warhounds surrounded the siege tanks. Blue plasma discharge flared from the stubby barrels of their DPF systems and from the tanks themselves. They blew up one by one, each taking only seconds to come apart and burn. Behind them, half of the Warhounds engaged the vikings, which had been cued to respond when the first group of Warhounds engaged the siege tanks. Some of the vikings burned and melted in place. Three managed their own automated transition to flying mode, and were met with salvos of Warhound missiles from

three different directions. Drenthe watched it all from a dozen angles at once, filled with the exhilaration of seeing it come together. What would happen next? He did not know.

The Warhound is capable of near-instantaneous toggling between DPF and anti-air ordnance systems, to address quickly changing threats in battlefield situations.

Ayla's voice came from one of the speakers attached to Drenthe's monitors. "Eli's headed your way. He's got a gun."

"Drenthe is unarmed," Drenthe said.

"It's under control," Ayla said. "Keep recording."

Of course, thought Drenthe. From the loudspeakers mounted on the factory fence, an alarm klaxon blared. At first Drenthe thought it was just scene setting, a little improvisation on Dario's part. He would incorporate it. Then he realized something entirely different was happening when Eli's voice came over the speakers. "This is Eli Balfour. There is a security breach in Axiom information systems. Ottmar Drenthe is to be detained immediately. All techs operating Warhounds are to stand down immediately. The Warhound test is terminated. Repeat, the Warhound test is terminated."

"Your ass," Ayla said from the speaker in front of Drenthe.

Drenthe saw Eli then, coming around the corner of the factory works and carrying a rifle of some kind. Drenthe was no expert in personal weaponry. Eli fired a warning shot over Drenthe's gantry and pointed. "Detain him! This test is over! Lockdown as of now!"

Drenthe grew concerned. He had no experience of detention and no wish to gain any.

"Drenthe, we've got the situation under control," Ayla said. "Don't chicken out now."

The situation did not seem at all under control to Drenthe. Another warning shot whined

over his head, but he kept recording. The Warhounds were wreaking full-on havoc across the proving ground, destroying fresh drone-piloted vehicles and flyers. A pair of hellions exploded in pillars of fire with the blue crackle of DPFs still blasting through the wreckage. Spread in a loose arc over the proving ground, six Wraiths decloaked and were met with a hail of missiles. The sounds of launch and impact nearly overwhelmed Drenthe's sound equipment.

"LOCKDOWN," boomed Eli's voice over the loudspeakers. Security vehicles spilled from the gate facing the company town and roared in the direction of the proving ground. The watching workers threw rocks at them, which were momentarily ignored, but Drenthe had the uneasy feeling that his presence would no longer be any kind of protection for the workers. He hoped Ayla had planned for this contingency.

Part of Drenthe was exulting at the chaos. Another part was considering the possibility that he had gotten in over his head.

One of the Warhounds nearest to Drenthe's gantry skidded around and stomped up over the berm at the edge of the proving ground, cutting off Eli's approach. Eli held up a hand in a warning gesture. "One more step, and you will be sorry you were ever born, rivethead," he said. "This man is a criminal and a security threat."

The Warhound stopped. Eli climbed the ladder toward Drenthe's platform and leveled his rifle at Drenthe, with the Warhound looming over the platform to Drenthe's right. "You're a dead man, Drenthe," Eli said. "Corporate espionage is a capital crime."

"I am a director of holos," Drenthe said. "And I am working." While he spoke, Dario's voiceover kept going.

Even though it was designed for anti-vehicle purposes, the Warhound is more than ready to

deal with enemy infantry. Just because you're not wearing steel doesn't mean you can stand up against the DPF.

The Warhound fired its DPF from less than five meters away, and Eli's body simultaneously melted, burned, and blew apart. Drenthe dove away from the wash of heat, sound, and pieces of Eli. He covered his head and did not move until he realized Ayla was saying something over the speaker. After a moment he parsed it. "Like you said, Eli. Corporate espionage is a capital crime. Sorry we didn't have time for a full hearing."

Drenthe reflected that Eli would not be asking for a refund of the credit he had advanced Drenthe. Eli's employers, on the other hand... but that was a problem for another time.

"Now, Warhounds," Ayla said. Drenthe realized that he was not the only one who was monitoring the whole situation.

The Warhounds turned en masse and roared up out of the proving ground, silhouetted by the burning tanks and vikings behind them. The demonstration had gone off perfectly, with the added thrill of Eli's unexpected immolation and the branding of Drenthe as a criminal menace. Drenthe had never seen anything like this. The firepower! The skullduggery! He felt fortunate to be part of it.

Axiom Ordnance was going to sell many Warhounds. But they were also going to have many problems.

The Warhound formation reached the perimeter of the executive complex. Along the way they put the DPFs to good use against the security vehicles. Drenthe counted eight of them burning before the rest of the security guards jumped out of the trucks and ran for it back into the factory works. None of them, Drenthe noted, made any move to defend the executive

complex.

In situations that call for reducing enemy structures, the Warhound's DPF systems are also highly effective.

The Warhounds stomped through the fence, snapping its steel posts off with almost casual waves of their arms. Drenthe saw Ayla come out of the factory works, leading a group of techs who looked both grim and excited. Checking his feeds, Drenthe saw that Ayla was recording everything and piping it to him. Drenthe nearly clapped with joy.

"We've got the AI locked down," she said from the monitor audio. "None of the civil-defense countermeasures are going to work, and AxO's security goons aren't going to come out and face down Warhounds. Things are going to be a little different around here from now on. Axiom might just be under new management."

The Warhounds were methodically destroying the buildings of the executive complex. The buildings' occupants came out at a run, and were welcomed by the workers the way the workers had been welcomed by AxO security two days before. Drenthe started to say something about restraint. Then he recalled that at least some of those managers and executives had been party to a plan that called for the killing of a number of workers. With that in mind, he exercised restraint on himself.

"Nice work, Drenthe," Ayla said. "Did you get your holo?"

"Drenthe has what Drenthe needs," he answered.

"Then Drenthe better get the hell out of here," Ayla answered. "The planet-hopper we talked about is waiting at the launchpad. How fast can you get there?"

"Fast," Drenthe said. He gathered his recordings and abandoned his equipment in place.

Holorecorders were cheap. Drenthe was not.

His one regret was leaving his chair. It had accompanied him across star systems and onto the set of every holo he had directed since his breakthrough with *Flight of the Mutalisk*. Yet there was a time to let all objects go. Perhaps that time was now, when Drenthe had a chance to avoid being embroiled in a small revolution that had already turned quite violent. Drenthe had the material for a great holo. Perhaps the loss of his chair was a necessary price. "Drenthe bids you farewell," he said to the chair. Then he climbed down off the platform, avoiding Eli's remains as best he could, and crossed the broken ground to where Ayla stood at the gate to the executive complex. As always, his micro-recorders took everything in.

There was one last thing he wanted. "Ayla," he said. "Come to Korhal. You could be a great star of the holos."

"Are you discovering me, Drenthe?" she said with a quirky smile.

"I am," he said. "Billions of people will see you. They will love you. Your boldness, your charisma."

"Uh-huh. I'll make you a deal," Ayla said. "You go find Yakov Iliev and tell him that Axiom wants to hire him. Do that, and maybe I'll pay a visit to Korhal."

"Your principles. They will love your principles," Drenthe said. He was smitten, the way any good director grew smitten with natural star power.

"Get out of here, Drenthe," she said.

When he boarded the planet-hopper, the pilot said, "We owe you one. You gonna make sure this gets out?"

"If you make sure Drenthe gets out, Drenthe will make sure this story gets out," said

Drenthe.

"Deal," the pilot said. The ship lifted away. Drenthe looked down at the factory works and the burning executive complex. He recorded it all as it receded and then disappeared behind a layer of clouds. Three days. All of it had happened in three days. Yet another version of the story occurred to him. Ayla, he thought. She had led the rebellion against the repression of Axiom Ordnance. He had enough holo of her to make it work. And if he could find Yakov Iliev... no matter. Either way he intended to make a star of Ayla, the fearless and magnificent new leader of Bukari V. She would soon be one of the most famous people in the Dominion, her renown born in the desolation of the company town, the smoky chaos of the factory, the courageous overthrow of Axiom's treachery. Yes!

It was not the story he had set out to direct. It was not even the story he had imagined when the Warhound test was beginning. But it was the story he intended to make. There was truth in it, even if it was not the exact truth of what had happened. From the material of reality, one could make a truth that was truer than the reality itself.

I direct this reality, he thought. I am Drenthe.