

# SHRAPNEL

The background of the cover features a large, imposing BattleMech, likely a Super Heavy, standing in a forest. The scene is filled with a bright, orange and yellow glow, suggesting fire or a sunset. Several smaller BattleMechs are visible in the air around the central mech, some appearing to be in motion or combat. The overall aesthetic is gritty and action-oriented.

ISSUE #5 THE OFFICIAL BATTLETECH MAGAZINE

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# SHRAPNEL #5

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THE OFFICIAL BATTLETECH MAGAZINE



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## COMMANDER'S CALL

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK



At ease, MechWarriors! Let's get the good news out of the way first...

Oh, wait, it's *all* good news this time around! Firstly, to kick off the second year of *Shrapnel*, the long-awaited conclusion to Michael Stackpole's Kell Hounds serial is finally here, and is well worth the wait. I wouldn't blame you if you wanted to skip straight to it to see how the Kell brothers fare, but just know there's plenty of good stuff that comes before it.

Speaking of good stuff, the other major piece of good news: this is our biggest issue yet, and in more ways than one! Not only were we able to fit more stories, articles, and game features between these covers than ever before, but for those of you picking up the print version, you'll notice that we also made the text slightly bigger for ease of reading, which enlarged this already-big issue to an even greater size. I hope you all like this change.

Do you recognize the scene on the cover of this issue? Yet another wonderful piece by the talented Ken Coleman, this image, titled *Fire Burn and Cauldron Bubble*, breathes life into a specific event documented in the novel *Hour of the Wolf* and in the forthcoming *IlClan* sourcebook. If you haven't read *Hour of the Wolf* yet, what are you waiting for? It's a huge

book filled with plenty of 'Mech combat during the ultimate battle for Terra that wraps up the Dark Age and catapults us into the new ilClan era.

For short stories in this issue, we kick off with “Ghosts,” an espionage-filled offering from Lance Scarinci. (Can you guess who the protagonist of this story is?) We also have “The Fox Patrol,” a follow-up to Bryan Young’s “The Secret Fox,” which was featured in issue #3, and Craig Reed brings us another Tale from the Cracked Canopy, a long-awaited return to the series he spearheaded in issue #1. And lastly, we have a few more new short-story authors in this issue. Veteran *BattleTech* contributor Paul Sjardijn shares what happened on Outreach at the dawn of the Word of Blake Jihad in 3067; Matt Alexander shows us the true cost of a mercenary’s survival during the Third Succession War; and in “Breach,” Tom Leveen gives us a glimpse at a moment of peace threatened by outside forces.

Game-related offerings in this issue include a look at peculiarities plaguing Black Box “faxes” in the 3150s; an in-depth look at how to survive if you happen to find yourself in the Capellan Confederation’s servitor caste; a conspiracy theory about the true nature of Clan Sea Fox; a selection of submachine guns from all around the Inner Sphere; and a detailed overview of how anti-'Mech infantry operates. Also, we have a technical readout of the CRD-10S, the new Clan-tech *Crusader*, which holds a special place for me since I drove a CRD-3R in my very first game of *BattleTech* decades ago. Two other game features that deserve special mentions are a planet digest of the Lyran Commonwealth world of Kandersteg and a technical readout of the SM5, a new Kell Hounds toy; both of these offer tantalizing glimpses of the forthcoming *Tamar Rising* sourcebook, the first *BattleTech* sourcebook set in the new ilClan era.

As always, we thank you for your continuing support as we move into our second year of *Shrapnel*! Keep those submissions and fan art pieces ([fanart@catalystgamelabs.com](mailto:fanart@catalystgamelabs.com)) coming in!

**Philip A. Lee, Managing Editor**

# GHOSTS

LANCE SCARINCI



***MULE-CLASS DROPSHIP EL JEFE***  
**INBOUND TO TERRA**  
**REPUBLIC OF THE SPHERE**  
**3 SEPTEMBER 3090**

I don't know at what point I lost my faith in humanity. Maybe it was the Jihad, maybe the Civil War, maybe earlier. I just know that by the time I saw my son torn to pieces by one of those damn cybernetic Manei Domini monsters, I had so little left to give that I barely wept. By that time, death no longer affected me, not even that of my own flesh. It was just the latest wrong that I couldn't make right.

"Touchdown in fifteen, Major Roth." One of the bridge officers had a hand on my arm, guiding me to a seat. "Better strap yourself in." I wasn't a major, but some ships kept up the old tradition of brevetting guest captains; only one captain aboard ship. I wasn't a Roth either, but he didn't need to know that. I nodded my thanks and buckled up. He checked me and smiled approvingly, as if fastening a buckle was that much of a chore and I had



exceeded his expectations. He was blond, mid-twenties, and reminded me a bit of my boy. But then I saw Stephen in just about every lad these days.

Stephen had enlisted as soon as he started growing whiskers. He was good enough for the Avalon Hussars, and that made him better than me, which is all a father can ask for. It didn't make him better than a Wobbie Tau Zombie. Sheer luck had me on the same world, though the Dove would have said it was God's plan. Some god, making me siphon up what was left of my firstborn and deliver him back to his mother in a box. I couldn't even cry at the funeral. Not a tear. My wife never forgave me for that, and neither did her new husband, as this little scar on my lip can attest. His scar is a bit bigger, and my wife won't ever forgive me for that, either.

"Steady on course." The girl at the helm flipped a few switches. "Touchdown in five...four...three..." She was good. I barely felt the bump as our ship hit ferrocrete, and that's quite a feat for a loaded *Mule*. She was young, too. God, they were all so young, but that's what happens when all the veterans are dead. The girl let down her hair from its tight, spacefarer's bun and shook out a surprisingly long brown mane. I had a daughter once who had hair like that.

Strange the way my mind functions. I can keep perfect track of those around me, and still give audience to my guilt. No one sees the hell raging inside my skull. These people see only Captain Simon Roth of Republic Armed Forces Procurement and don't question a thing, and that's exactly why the Dove recruited me. I don't give them a reason to look under the surface. It takes a special kind of person to spot a ghost. Or a Ghost Knight.

"I can see the port authority coming already. Suppose I'd better go meet him." That was Captain Steen, the one member of this crew who looked anything over thirty. She sighed wearily, unstrapping herself from the captain's chair. "Lieutenant, you have the bridge. Try not to blow up my ship."

No, she didn't remind me of my wife. God only ever made one of her, thankfully. I suppose the way things turned out was my own fault. I thought I could have a normal life, with a normal house and normal family, and get up and go to work like a normal man. But I don't have a normal job, do I? I told my wife I was a safety inspector, which helped explain the long hours and the longer trips, but eventually she cottoned on that something was amiss. That sharp mind was one of the things I loved about her. At first she accused me of living a double life, but when the man she hired to tail me wound up "disappearing" for a few weeks when he started staking out the MHO safehouse I led him to, I had to come clean.

At first she was all right with it. No, that's not true, at first she was in denial, but eventually she had to accept the truth of it, if not the reality. She never could stomach the idea of my job being more important than hers. So I eventually had to leave it behind because it was too dangerous, that there were the children to think of, and how could I be so selfish, running off to play spy while she sat home and worried? So I retired. That lasted all of five months, because now I was a lazy, worthless bum who sat around all day while she slaved away. No matter. The Dove still needed me.

Captain Steen stepped forward to shake my hand. "Glad to have had you, Major. You want me to call you a car?"

"I can manage. Thanks for the ride. And now that I've experienced it firsthand, I'll see about bumping you up a few places for that new galley upgrade." I meant it, too. This wasn't the damn thirtieth century; no one should have to eat like it was.

A few more platitudes were shared, then I was off. Geneva was cool this time of year, the crisp air a welcome change from that stuffy DropShip. I never liked the taste of recycled air. I took a couple shuttle buses and a car on a circuitous route to the Hotel Duquesne. I didn't think I was being tailed, but old habits keep you alive.

I took a room, hauled up my luggage, and spent the next half hour stripping off Captain Simon Roth and storing him for later. The padding for his midsection went into one case, his thick glasses into another. The gray washed out of my hair easily enough, and the beard came off. I kept the mustache, though. I've always wanted to twist the ends into a handlebar, but that kind of thing sticks out. People remember handlebar mustaches, and no one should be remembering me. Ah, the sacrifices we make.

When I finally saw a new person in the mirror, I wiped down the room, packed everything up, and moved three floors up to the room I'd booked and paid for while inbound on the *El Jefe*. Marion Standish occupied that room, as far as anyone knew. Now the mustache came off, my hair changed to a graying auburn, and I practiced a limp until I remembered how to do it properly. And I waited.

**GENEVA, TERRA  
REPUBLIC OF THE SPHERE  
4 SEPTEMBER 3090**

The Dove was no spring chicken when I'd met him some thirty years ago, back when the Clans were the biggest threat the Inner Sphere had ever known. Things change. The old man was even older, but still sharp. Daggers don't lose their edge with time. Sage wisdom, proverbs deep and bold, often fell from his lips, and some of them even sounded true. "God does not judge," he liked to say. "Man judges, and sends other men to God in judgment, but God forgives. Free will is an illusion. Sin is an illusion. You cannot go against God. Everything we do, no matter how horrible, fits into his plan. If you are a monster, it is because God made you one." That was his first big lie. It wasn't God who had made me a monster.

He also told me that good and evil were points of view, which I've come to know is only half a lie. Good is subjective, but some deeds are evil no matter what side you're on. Evil is pure, evil is eternal. When a man lies to cause harm, that is evil; when a man steps aside and allows harm to occur, that is also evil; and when a man uses others to harm innocents, that is the worst form of evil. And that is why I am here.

This visit needed to be a surprise, and to that end I had dug my little friend out of storage. It still worked, thank God. As Star League *lostech* went, this was one of the apex items: an M-11J personal cloaking device. Rarer than a trustworthy Capellan, the number of remaining M-11J's could be counted on the digits of one hand, and when those are gone it'll be forever. We still don't know how it works, much less how to make new ones. I don't think even the Word of Blake ever figured it out. I'd gotten this one from the Dove a few years back, and reported it lost on a mission. Gibson was a dangerous place, so it wasn't unlikely I'd lose things. He took it in stride. "Jaime Wolf himself gave that to me," he'd griped on more than one occasion when he wanted me to feel guilty. I never was sure whether I'd gotten away with my little theft, or if he'd just allowed me to.

The M-11J slipped over my skin like a glove. It didn't make me invisible to the naked eye, but it fooled every known security device. This suit was a smuggler's dream, and just now I wanted to smuggle some frowned-on items into a very sensitive place. I acquired a paunch stuffing everything in, and the M-11J made it all look natural, like body fat. The beer gut goes back for millennia. One day I hope to grow one naturally, but my wife would probably disapprove.

The seat of the Republic government is a busy place, even without the tourists. Everyone entered through an unobtrusive scanner disguised as a pair of marble pillars, and guards waited on either side to pull anyone out of line if the scanner called them false. If my little M-11J friend had died in its time in storage, I'd find out now. I shuffled through between a group of

lower-level employees and a trio of Nova Cats still in awe at being on Mother Terra. The guards never gave me a second look.

The public areas bustled with harried employees and tour groups full of wide-eyed children and gullible fools who bought wholesale into the Republic's propaganda. One old Outback-looking type waved a miniature Republic flag, a look of beatific stupidity on his pudgy face. He smiled at me, showing off all seven teeth. I grinned back, letting that emotion into my eyes. That's where it tells. Most people can't feign emotion, and their hollow smiles betray them. I've been faking it every day for over a decade.

I went up a floor to get away from the crowds, to an area where I knew there to be a little-used head with private stalls. I stripped off my clothes and stuffed them into the trash. From my artificial gut I removed a custodian's uniform, a verigraphed name badge, and my pistol. I combed the false color from my hair, peeled the blue contact from my real eye, and readjusted my augmented eye to match, and now I was a dead ringer for that name badge. I looked at it and recalled who Antonin Dashhan was. It wasn't hard.

No one challenged me, even when I let myself into the restricted areas. People don't like to look at a janitor, especially one with the hopeless, hangdog expression that comes with realizing your life has failed and all you're good for is picking up after your betters. It makes people uncomfortable to see that, as it damn well should. The Dove's office lay behind one of dozens of identical doors, leading to dozens of identical offices. The differences lay underneath, in layers of soundproofing and white noise. He'd have armored the walls if he could do it inconspicuously.

The name on the door wasn't his, of course, but I knew it as a favorite alias. I let myself in without knocking. There was never a secretary, just him, seated behind an unostentatious desk. The dove motif prevailed in here, taking wing from holoportraits, statuettes, and the pattern of the carpeting. It wasn't a style choice but some sort of subliminal *feng shui*, the

ancient symbol of peace to put guests at ease. What a joke. He wore a dove pin on his lapel, the only rank insignia to be found. Without it he was just some old man in glasses, well-dressed and smelling of cologne a half-century out of style, and with a perpetually delighted grin, like some beloved old uncle. His trimmed eyebrows never even raised as I shut the door and locked it.

He frowned at my name tag. “A bit of a low blow.”

“Family is a liability, remember? Even long gone, they can be used against you.”

“Did I say that? I suppose so. Sounds like one of mine.”

I couldn't tell if he was feigning his nonchalance. I'll bet even he didn't know. When mastering your emotions is so ingrained that you can suppress the shock of seeing your own dead grandmother saunter into the room, how can you know? Yes, in case you were wondering, he did pull that trick on me during my training. I envied the cool he showed now, with my gun in his face and the intent to use it written all over mine.

He smiled all kindly and grandfatherly, like some benevolent Santa Claus. How could anyone hurt such a sweet old man? How could anyone expect that his heart was as black as his hair was white? “Well, sit down. Tell me how Lamon went. It seems to have left you none the worse for wear.”

I didn't sit. I walked around the side of his desk so I could see all of him. My gun never left his face. “Yes, none the worse for wear, despite having to extract myself.”

“And your target?”

“Have I ever failed to execute a mission?”

“No. No you haven't. It's one of the reasons why—”

“You *left* me there!” I punctuated this by grabbing his collar and yanking him out of his fluffy chair. My gun went under his chin. “LIC came

sniffing. Someone tipped them off. Tell me it wasn't you. You made me and left me to die!"

"Yet I am pleased that you didn't. Yes, I am. Not only because you are an asset, but because you are the closest thing I have to a friend."

"Am I supposed to feel special? Like I'm not one of your pawns? A friend until it's no longer convenient?"

"I never said you *were* a friend, just close to it." He smiled at his own humor. "You have something none of the others have. It's the reason you're here."

"A grudge?"

"A conscience."

I dropped him back into his seat. Such roughness wouldn't be good on his old back, but I didn't care. It didn't seem to bother him, the way he just kept going on in that damn grandfatherly tone. "You're not angry about being left out to dry. You've been aware of that risk since your first mission. It's the target you object to, isn't it?"

"Explain to me how they were a threat. Use small words."

"They weren't. Not yet. But they could have been in the future. Writing articles critical of our Republic's annexation of Lyran worlds is only the first step. Divisive words and rabble-rousing follow, and soon the path to anarchy is illuminated and awaiting its first traveler."

"And was there any particular threat posed by the children? And don't give me any nonsense about them growing up to avenge their parents."

He shrugged. "It had to be a tragedy to be believable."

I never wanted to kill a man as much as I did at that moment. The deaths didn't matter, but the injustice burned in my throat. "Who approves these things? Stone?"

"Even the Exarch doesn't ask me about everything I do. I have followed my own agenda since 3068. That so much of it coincided with Stone's was

serendipity. Today, I do things that must be done to maintain our Republic, and I do them so Stone doesn't have to."

"What about oversight? Someone to tell us when we've gone too far. We are not above the rule of law."

"Law?" He looked hurt, if you can believe that. "Laws are guidelines. Little more than suggestions, when you get right down to it. There has never been a government that didn't ignore its own laws when the situation called for it."

"That's the language that makes republics fall. When we stop being answerable to our people, we lose our right to exist as a government."

"Oh, don't be so dramatic. This is the way things have been done since people lived in huts beside a river."

I felt my lip curl. "We're at peace. The Jihad is over. When are you going to stop fighting it?"

"There will always be threats, external and internal. Blame the Chancellor, if you like, or one of the Captains-General. Loyalties shift, and in time your closest allies will turn to enemies. People from Prefectures Eight and Nine were once Lyran. It might take only a slanted article in a fringe publication to remind them, to make them pine for the old days. Our relocation programs helped alleviate some of the problem, but not all."

"You can't be that ignorant. Forced integration has never worked. It doesn't bring people together, only deepens tension and resentment."

"You think the purpose was integration?" He gave me his expectant look, the one he used when he thought he was teaching something. "Quite the opposite. It was about *separation*. Separation from one's own kind. Lear was practicing a lesson Kerensky failed to learn in the Pentagon Worlds. Old loyalties tore apart his brave new society before it was even properly born. Those same loyalties lie like weeds in our Republic. Let them grow, and they will strangle all we are trying to build here. But to grow, they need numbers, and we have taken that from them. When your family is of



Davion heritage, but your neighbors are Lyran and Capellan, you don't speak out. Resentment is everywhere, and it's much safer to resent your neighbor than your government."

"Safer for the government."

"In a Republic, the government and the people are the same thing."

That almost made me laugh. "Is anything you ever told me true?"

It was a rhetorical question, but he answered anyway. He's like that. "Of course there was truth. There is always truth sandwiched between the lies. It adds some necessary flavor, makes the lies easier to swallow. I don't need to tell you this. Lies come as easily to you as they do to me. If it pleases you, I gave you exactly what information you needed to do your job. What does it matter to you whether this bit or that was true?"

Why did it matter? Why did this assignment drop the last straw? I could still see that family, smiling, happy, unaware that their lives were at an end because the mother had dangerous opinions. Father, mother, son, daughter. "When was the last time you had a look at yourself? Not this grandfatherly mask you wear, but the real you? You don't do what you do for loyalty, or a better world. You're afraid of losing your power, of not getting your way! You are a scared old man living in a tower, hiding from the future. And in your fear you had me murder innocent people."

"Death sends a message. The death of innocents, a loud one."

That was that. So casual about all the collateral damage he'd caused, all the families he had ruined. I leveled my pistol at his wrinkled, spotted forehead. "And what message will your death send?"

"You're a strong man. I've known that for years. You adapt well, no matter what God throws at you." He turned away from me to look out the window. Not sudden, but casually, as if this were a normal conversation. Bad part was that now I couldn't see his hands. "But do you have the fortitude to shoot a friend in the back? To shoot *me* in the back?"

*POW!*

I should have scattered his mind right out the window, but it was only a warning shot, over his shoulder and into his bulletproof glass. Chips peppered his face, but he didn't cry out.

"How about this: I might not *not* shoot you in the back."

That rattled him; he'd finally realized there was no talking his way out. He slowly raised his hands. Good move. "So you have me, then. What do you plan to do now?"

"How does a trial before whatever court you answer to sound?"

"That would be the Council of Paladins, and the Exarch."

"Get on the line, then. You must have a direct link to the Exarch. Use it."

Chuckling, he turned back to face me. "One does not simply call Devlin Stone for a chat. Not even me. Besides, any accusations would be your word against mine, and who do you think Stone would believe? Devlin Stone goes with what he knows, and he does not know you."

"Does he go with evidence? A vid of this conversation, perhaps?" I peeled aside a small flap beside my eye, revealing that something more than what nature gave me lived inside my skull. "It's been recording since I entered the building. Buffered, so your white noise isn't even a tickle."

I'd never seen him surprised before. It made me smile a little. "A cybernetic eye? That was never on any of your medical checkups. Whenever did you do it?"

"After Gibson. You remember Gibson? The first place you left me to die? Prince Titus' SAFE picked up a few defecting Blakists who were happy to get into someone's good graces. Last place you'd ever look for them, Regular SAFE. I've got years of your secrets locked up in here." I pinched the flap shut.

"I think we can still work something out."

"The only thing left to work out is what prison—"

"Tyra's alive."

I nearly dropped my gun at that. If any one thing could have derailed my train of thought, that was it. “You—what?”

“Your daughter. She’s still alive.”

I stared at him with my mouth gaping like a fish, then I whacked him with the butt of my gun. Three times, four, five. He’d earned that, if not a bullet. When I was sure he’d gotten the point, I hauled him to his feet and threw him onto the desk. “Of all the lies you could have picked to save your life, that wasn’t one.”

“Yet it will work because it is not a lie.” Blood covered the left side of his face. He raised a shaking hand to straighten his bent glasses. “If you’ll be so kind as to help me sit up, I’ll show you.”

How long had he been saving this tidbit? I wanted to demand the answer, but I knew if I did then I’d shoot him, and anything he knew would be lost. The son of a bitch had found a weakness in me, the only thing that might save his ass, and he knew it. That didn’t mean I had to play it his way. With my gun pressed to the nape of his neck, he opened a drawer and removed a holodisk.

“This vid is less than three weeks old. It is a Capellan Confederation reeducation facility on Gei-Fu, what we might call a prisoner of war camp, only the inmates fought no war. Some are captured off-worlders like your daughter, but most are political prisoners. Capellans whose disapproval of the Celestial Throne grew too loud.”

“Why are they still alive?”

“Contrary to what you may think, Sun-Tzu truly does love his nation. These are his citizens, his wayward children. Not a burden but a responsibility. In that camp they receive a proper dose of Capellan nationalism, while their labor benefits the Confederation.”

“And their ideas can’t spread. I’m surprised you disapprove.”

“I never said I did.”

It wasn't much to look at. The holo was grainy and 2D, and bounced around a lot. Whoever took it did so clandestinely. It showed me a factory tour, led by a pretty, properly dressed woman who smiled a lot. She proudly touted typical Capellan working conditions, extolling the joys of the sixteen-hour shift and a strict diet, and finally gave a review of the laborers. The hidden cameraman went down a line of people in identical jumpsuits, all standing at attention. And there she was, between a pair of older Capellan women. I backed up the vid and paused.

Tyra, my daughter, named for that Rasalhagian pilot who'd stuck it to the ilKhan back in 3050. It was her all right, no mistaking it. My little girl. All of her mother's looks, but none of the attitude. But she'd died in the Jihad, when the Capellans destroyed my home and wrecked my family. Hadn't she? My heart told me yes, but my eyes were telling me something else. Everyone has their doppelgänger, but there were ways to tell. That scar over her left eye from when she'd leaned on our poor old dog's arthritic hip when she was six years old. He hadn't meant to hurt her, just acted out when she'd hurt him. One tooth caught her on the brow. Any lower and there would have been serious damage, but she only lost part of an eyebrow. Not noticeable to most people, but I could always see it. I loved that dog. Hardest bullet I ever spent.

"If that is Tyra, and you're not playing games with me..."

"No games." Blood was running into his rapidly swelling eye. "I'm an old man. I no longer have time for such things."

"I'll give you that lie for free. Just one more, and I'll kill you."

"Well then. I suppose if I said I was sorry, I'd be shot. I'll just ask you to forgive old habits. I'll help you get your daughter back, if you'll help me one last time."

He was the one who was bloody, but I was the one who was beaten. How could I refuse? Even if it was all some elaborate lie, I had to take the

chance. I looked at Tyra standing there, eyes lowered and blank. I *had* to. “Send out your orders. I’ll find my own way to Gei-Fu.”

“It will be done within the hour. When you return, we’ll talk about what you owe me for this.”

I leveled the gun at his face again. “Will I return? Will I really?”

“I sincerely hope so.”

With difficulty, I let go of the trigger. “Make your arrangements. When I get back, we will have our reckoning.”

**OUTSKIRTS OF GREEN MOUNTAIN  
GEI-FU  
CAPELLAN CONFEDERATION  
22 DECEMBER 3090**

No one would ever mistake me for Chinese, but I could pull off a fantastic Russian. I learned the language as a kid, and enough Tikonov nationals still harbor Capellan fantasies to make it a believable cover. The best lies are the ones you never have to tell. Today I was Dmitri Rostov, a man unexceptional in every way. Just the way I like me.

Even deep in the Confederation, the Dove had contacts. This truck, this uniform, the stuff I was hauling, all of it came from a dour little man who said almost nothing to me, just frowned as if I was unworthy to set foot on his world. Great thing about Capellans, they’re consistent. Whether it’s foreigners or an unpopular Chancellor, their disapproval is all the same. At least there were some who hadn’t bought into Sun-Tzu’s cult of personality. They may not strictly count as allies, but the enemy of my enemy and all that.

I always liked driving hovercraft. Such a smooth ride, even over the worst roads, like the dirt path that led to the camp. Two other hovercraft

were hidden below me in the river basin, and when I needed them they'd cruise right up this same road, only they wouldn't be stopping at the gate. It was well lit, which was unsurprising, and lightly manned, which was. I coasted up and disengaged, settling the truck down on its skirts. Men in the watchtowers eyed me but kept their guns down. Though it was nighttime, this was still a scheduled delivery. Capellans tended not to make a fuss about things if they were kept to a plan. Like I said, consistent.

A guard approached and squinted at me, *si-ben-bing* by his rank insignia. "Who are you?"

"Rostov." I handed him the ID the Dove's man had provided. I felt a fleeting moment of doubt, but the *si-ben-bing* just nodded at me and asked for the truck's manifest. Five minutes later, the gate opened and I coasted into the compound. It was easier than I thought, but that didn't worry me. Guards got lax when trouble was infrequent, and the Dove's information said there hadn't been so much as a hunger strike here for years.

The compound contained about two dozen buildings of various size and function, spread out over a fenced and guarded square kilometer. There was a factory building, some warehouses, and a few barracks. I eyed these as I sped toward the warehouse the guard had directed me to. I didn't really expect to see Tyra standing in the window like some display model, but coincidence has made fools of men for as long as there have been men.

"Nemo to Phantom," came a voice on my earpiece. "Welcome home."

That was my backup, breaking radio silence just to tweak me. "Where are you, Elim?"

"Why must I have a code name if you refuse to use it?" He chuckled over the comm. "I am close, watching over you from the inside."

"Inside?" My bowels clenched. "Don't do anything stupid!"

"Such language, Phantom. Fear not, the magic will wait for your call."

I'd recruited Elim and his team for their skills. Their inability to take the job seriously was something I had to get used to. If it were up to them, we'd

have gone in shooting and damn the consequences, and I couldn't risk that. Not with the stakes so personal.

I pulled to the back of the warehouse, where a man directed me to a loading bay. Procedure said they would unload my truck's supplies, then refill it with whatever they made here. That gave me about half an hour. I hopped out and asked one of the supervisors if I could hit their mess. He frowned but pointed me in the right direction. Didn't even assign me an escort. The base commander definitely had a lecture about laxity coming down the pike.

It took only a moment to mark the guards on the walls, and the few patrols zooming around the compound in little battery-powered carts. Easily predictable, easily avoidable. Elim would neutralize them seconds after I gave him the go ahead. Because I felt I was being watched, I actually did duck into the mess. There were only a few soldiers in here at this time of night, huddled over their meals. I ignored them and poured myself some coffee. God, I hate Capellan coffee. It tastes like failure.

"Where is your badge?"

I looked around, and found a woman sitting by herself staring at me. "I'm sorry?"

"Are you assigned to this camp?"

"No. Just making a delivery."

"Then you need to have a visitor badge to be in here." She was a young girl, might have been pretty if not for the incredible air of bitchiness that leaked from her like a miasma. I know I'm not supposed to let emotions get to me, but I felt a very visceral urge to shoot her. "The guard at the front gate should have given you a badge."

"Sorry, I guess he forgot. I'll be sure to grab it next time."

"You'll grab it now." She looked at me expectantly, so I saluted and left. The last thing I needed was to have everything fouled by some prissy idiot

obsessed with regulations. Besides, now I had an excuse to wander back toward the gate.

As I closed on one of the barracks, I slowed my pace. No patrols in sight, no one on the wall looking my way. I rang the buzzer, and a moment later the door slid open. I entered a large, mostly empty foyer. To my left, a guard sat behind a desk, and this one wasn't a fool. He squinted at me, hand on his hip, or on the pistol holstered there. "I thought you were Mira."

"No, Rostov. I brought you some coffee."

"I don't want—"

But he got it anyway. I threw it in his face, and let him taste the failure. Before he could do anything but sputter, I nailed his jaw and he went down. That's what he gets for being on point. He was the only one here, but there was a second desk nearby that didn't look unused. I rifled his pockets and found a key card to the prisoner's area. The door slid open, and I slid in.

I read an article not long ago on some of Stone's more controversial programs. The author compared Stone to some pretty vile historical dictators, and ended by calling him a fascist. I wanted that guy here right now, so he could see what a real fascist would have done to him for daring to publish his drivel. If he could see this, he'd be kissing Stone's foot.

There were about sixty people in a barracks built for twenty. Bunks were stacked three high, with the top bed only centimeters from the ceiling. Sheets hung like curtains around some bunks, and a few wide eyes peered out at me from behind these illusions of privacy. Though these people were effectively slaves, they weren't treated like dirt. Their government wanted to use them as long as possible, and that meant caring for the equipment. No one looked malnourished or beaten, but many did have the broken, haunted look of one who has given up. They'd resigned themselves to living out the last of their lives in this hell, their labor benefiting the very Confederation that hated them, that put them here for daring to think contrary to the Chancellor. Sun-frakking-Tzu. Great for his nation, terrible



for his people, and his son Daoshen was proving that the rotten apple hadn't fallen far.

Routine was the sole comfort these people had, and I had just shattered it. I needed to establish control. "You people have a leader among you?"

A few of them glanced around nervously, but most heads turned in the same direction. A lady with iron-gray hair and suspicious eyes rose to her feet. She stared at me hard, unblinking. Good. This one was unbroken. "We want no trouble here."

"Sad to say, ma'am, but trouble has wants all its own. Fortunately, it's not aiming at you. Stay out of my way and no one gets hurt, at least not by me. Help me, and your lot could improve mighty quickly."

The Iron Lady's poker face never wavered. She looked to a few of her fellows. These people had long ago developed their own forms of communication. A droopy eyelid here, some flared nostrils there, and she turned back to me. "What do you need?"

"Not what, who. A girl—a woman. Tyra DeMarco." She had taken her mother's maiden name. God, that still kills me. "Do you know her?"

"Of course we know her. What is she to you?"

There's a time for lies, and there's a time to keep them behind your teeth. "She's my daughter, and I've come to take her home. Help me out, and there's a spot on my ship for you and anyone else who wants to tag along."

"Tyra always said her father was MIIO." A man at the back looked at me expectantly. "She said he'd come for her one day. We never believed her. People make up all kinds of fantasies in here. It gets us through."

The Christians among them had been allowed to set up a tree of sorts. It was a mop wearing a green jacket, with a few bits of metal shavings for tinsel. I grabbed it up. "Well pinch yourself, because Santa's here and he brought you Kerensky as a present." I saw something dangerous in them then: hope. If they let it sink its claws in, it could kill them.

“Will you take us home?” A woman who looked prematurely gray lowered her eyes when I looked at her, ashamed she had spoken.

“I don’t know where home is, but I guarantee where I’m going is better than here.”

There was some excited muttering, but the Iron Lady silenced them. “We are Capellans. Our nation may hate us, but our love for it is no less. What place is there for us in the Federated Suns? Here we are dogs, but we are also dogs to the Davions, and the Haseks. Would life be better for us with the devil we don’t know?”

“I’m not taking anyone to the Federated Suns. I was MIIO once, but I serve a new nation now. A nation of acceptance.”

“Republic?” She whispered the word as if it were taboo. “We’ve heard rumors...”

“How long have you been in here?”

“The last Chancellor I saw in power was Romano. I owe Tsen Shang my gratitude for not following through on all of her paranoid execution orders. Most people here opposed the St. Ives absorption, or were loyal to the Sarna Supremacy or Saiph Triumvirate. Sun-Tzu deemed us all equally undesirable.”

“The Republic’s not going to judge you for any of that.” I even felt like that wasn’t a lie, like anyone I brought back wouldn’t go through weeks of debriefings to weed out any Maskirovka moles. Like they wouldn’t be “relocated.” “Anyone who wants to come with me can have a new start, a new life. But you’re going to have to fight for it. We still need to leave here, and your benefactors aren’t going to take kindly to that. There’s likely to be some shooting. If you’d rather not risk it, rather live out your days in here, then keep your head down and stay out of my way. That’s not a suggestion. Now, where is my little girl?”

Turns out Tyra was part of another group, on a different work shift. The people may sleep, but the factory never does. Her group was a day shift and

currently in their barracks. Workers with certain status had leeway, and it wasn't uncommon to see them out even at night. Being good little prisoners allowed them to roam the compound on tasks the guards deemed beneath Capellan soldiers. The Iron Lady and three others had such status, so I pulled them into the foyer for a briefing.

“This seems like a nice, orderly place. That’s too bad. Chaos is about to come ream it in the rear, and when it does we need to make sure the only people panicking are the guards. I want one of you to go to each of the other barracks and the factory. Warn the other inmates to be ready, but do it quietly. If any of you alerts the guards, even on accident, I’ll shoot you myself.”

A sagging stack of boxes leaned in a corner. I figured my charges would look better carrying something, so I thrust a box onto each of them. One split and spilled its contents, a pile of patterned shirts. I picked one up. Emblazoned on it was Daoshen Liao, looking noble and regal, just like he doesn't in real life. “What the hell is this?”

The Iron Lady smiled sardonically. “This is what we make here. Propaganda for the masses. Ironic, no?”

“No. Sickening.”

“The Maskirovka thinks exposure will bring us around to a proper Capellan mindset, but you are right. Familiarity brings contempt.” She spat on the shirt.

The outer door slid open. We all stared at the new arrival, and she stared at us. She recovered first. “Did you not get a badge? I told you to go get a badge. You will follow procedure, or I will have you removed.” Then she registered all of the prisoners out of their bunks, and her partner lying unconscious on the floor. Her hand went to her headset comm. “Security—”

If things were going to go pear-shaped, it would be on my terms. I drew my pistol and shot her in the face. Her eyes dulled as the laser bored through her head, and she fell with a satisfying *splat*. I dragged her corpse

by the heels into the barracks as my escorts stared wide eyed. “Welcome to the reality of a jailbreak. If you can’t handle what has to happen, go back inside.”

The Iron Lady shook her head. “Killing isn’t a problem. It’s just that...I have wanted to do that for a long time.” She was a woman of few words, but all of them were gold.

I relieved the guard of her sidearm. It was a tiny thing, more toy than weapon, but it was what we had to work with. “Who knows how to use this?”

One of the men raised his hand. “Two years with the St. Ives Janissaries. Small arms qualified.” I handed him the gun, and he checked the cartridge and popped one into the chamber. Good.

I flicked my comm. “Tabbies One and Two, time to bring the cats in. Nemo, count ten and do your thing.” A trio of acknowledgments, and my heart began to pump. It was time, and no matter the stakes I can never fully contain the excitement. Was this how Elim and his folk felt every time, or had it become blasé to them? I’d have to ask later.

I pointed to the other three barracks, still quiet for now. “One of you to each. Don’t run, don’t attract attention. You have ten minutes.” I looked at the Iron Lady. “Will you get Tyra for me?”

She nodded.

“Go.” I swept them all out the door, except the guy who had the gun. “Plan’s changed, you stay with me. Someone’s bound to come investigating this one’s call to security.” I nudged the girl’s corpse with my foot. “If anyone raises an alarm, we shoot first. We seize the initiative and we don’t let go, understand?”

I cut the lights and took up position by the door. My partner took the opposite side, and we watched our three messengers vanish. No alarms, no patrols. I checked the time. Only two minutes. “Ever notice how at times like these, each minute takes ten minutes?”

He smiled, wide and fake. I put it down to nerves.

“Is it safe?”

A woman from the inner barracks had poked her head out. I turned to usher her back inside, and that’s when the son of a bitch shot me. I don’t know if he was just a lousy shot, or if I got lucky and turned at the last second, but the slug took me in the shoulder and lodged somewhere behind the blade like a flesh-eating beetle. It lacked the power to reach my heart, though. Thank God for low-caliber rounds.

I went down like timber. Action vids want to tell you that getting shot is no big deal, that you can just shake it off and keep running. One day I’m gonna find a tri-vid producer and kneecap them just to laugh at their tears. When you get shot, you don’t want to run or turn around and punch the person who shot you: all you want to do is lay there and feel sorry for yourself until you die. But if I did, then I would, and I couldn’t go out knowing some jackass had gotten away with shooting me in the back.

He kicked my gun away. “The Mask is going to love you. You may finally be my ship off this hellhole.” He tripped an alarm on the wall, and sirens started to wail.

I was angry, but not surprised. There’s always a worm. No matter how badly they’re mistreated, there’s always a prisoner who sides with the guards. The best ones can play both sides without their fellow inmates ever suspecting. Maybe they think it will get them some kind of special treatment, but some lines can’t be crossed, and the one between oppressors and oppressed is a thick one. No one respects a traitor.

Ways to get out of this situation hadn’t even begun to form in my head, when the other inmates found one I’d not have considered in...ever. The woman who had stuck her head out a moment ago stabbed the traitor with their Christmas mop. It didn’t have a point on it, but it did the job. He cried out and his gun discharged, but the bullet ricocheted away. Biting the pain, I dove into him and slammed him against the wall. Grappling for the gun was

agony, but my disarmament training outmatched his grip, and the pistol clattered to the floor.

Normally I'd have wiped the floor with him, but you may recall that I had just been shot. He got a leg up and kicked me away. Then Daoshen Liao got me; I slipped on a wayward shirt and went down. He was on me immediately, rearranging my face with his fist, but he made one big mistake: he had quite forgotten that we were not alone. A dozen hands seized him, lifted him off of me, and dragged him away screaming. His screams turned to gags, then stopped. Looks like he picked the wrong side.

The girl with the tree-mop helped me to sit. "Now he doesn't have to worry about this hellhole any longer. Nor will any of us. I will leave this place or die trying." She inspected my shoulder, then made a quick bandage out of a few Daoshen shirts. "You'll need a doctor to remove the bullet, but at least you won't bleed to death."

"Thank you." Three muffled booms sounded, then the alarms really began to wail. I retrieved my gun. "There will be a hovercraft here in a moment. You make sure everyone gets aboard."

"Where are you going?"

"This place could use a little more havoc, and I'm feeling inclined."

The factory complex and several of the warehouses were already aflame; Elim's work, a distraction so the Tabbies could close. My shoulder screamed, and I couldn't breathe deep without feeling like someone was standing on my chest, but I ran to the warehouse where I'd left my truck. No one was there, and those efficient Capellan workers had completely unloaded it. Good, I needed the maneuverability. I was about to board when I felt the first rumblings of real trouble.

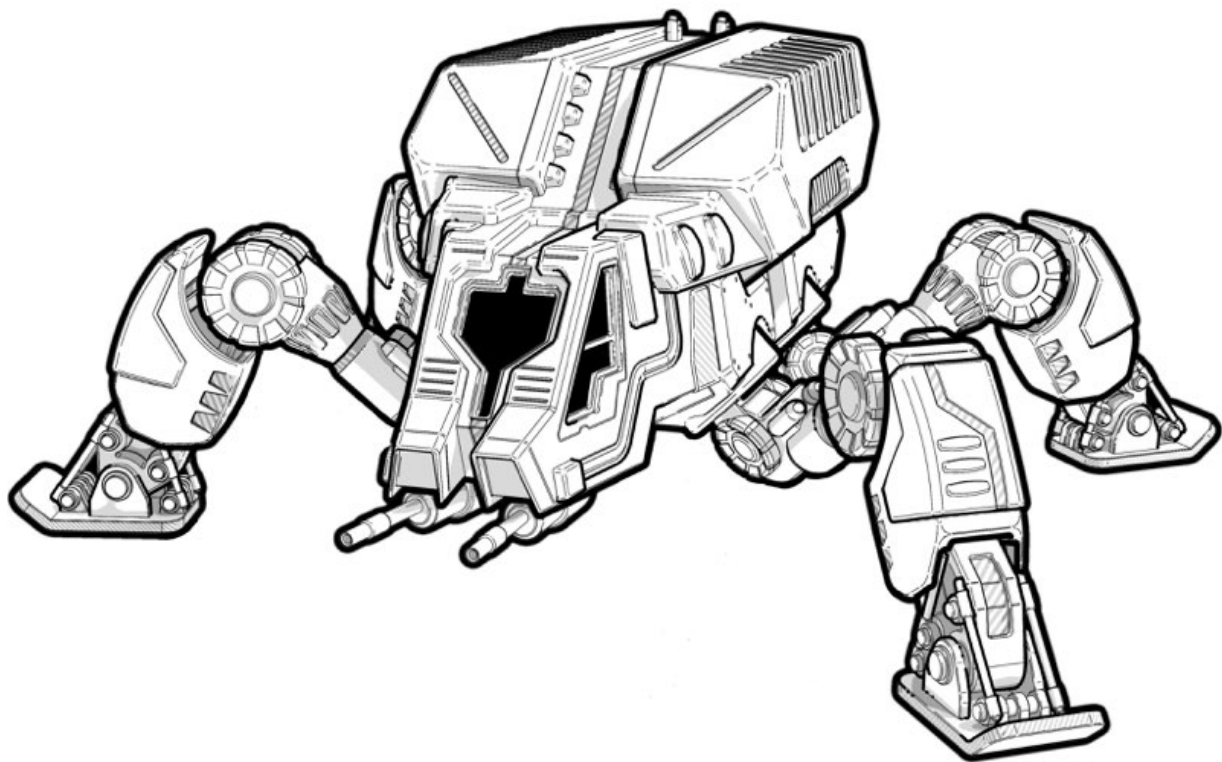
Footfalls, giant metal footfalls.

I looked out the door just in time to see it emerge from a garage. I was actually disappointed. To garrison this facility, the Chancellor had spared exactly one *Guard SecurityMech*, a big metal spider with 12.7mm-caliber

pincers. Nowadays any 'Mech was an extravagance, but that thing was a walking punchline. Its machine guns could cow unarmed inmates, but my truck probably outweighed it, outpaced it, and sported more armor. But I had no weaponry, and that made the *Guard* king.

“Nemo, we have a 'Mech!”

“Eh, technically. More of an insect, really.”



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“Well, we need to step on it before it reaches the Tabbies. Where are you?”

“Too far to help. ETA three minutes. Hold it for us!”

“Hold it. Right.”

The 'Mech turned toward the main gate, so I hopped in my truck and zipped around to the barracks. A great big honking hovertank sat in the middle of the road, its missile launcher swiveling in my direction.

“Hold your fire, Tabby One! That’s me you’re sighting on.”

“Aff, Phantom. Should we engage the 'Mech?”

Shapes were spilling from all of the barracks now, and Tabby Two was just rounding the corner. “Negative. You load the prisoners, but feel free to exercise your frustrations on any guards. Nemo and I will handle the 'Mech.”

The Tabbies were the latest model Maxim hovertanks, with an infantry capacity like a clown car. Their missiles would make short work of that stupid excuse for a 'Mech, but the *Guard* would get a few shots off, and its machine guns would not be kind to the inmates. The Dove had driven the concept of acceptable losses into my brain decades ago, but one of those fleeing shadows was not an acceptable loss, not again.

I raced toward the main gate. Shapes ran in the night, but whether inmate or guard, I couldn't tell. I turned a corner, and nearly ran headlong into the SecurityMech. The pilot had given up on the gate, and turned back to the barracks. They spotlighted me, and I raised a hand, my windscreen the only thing between me and those machine guns. Luck kissed me. The pilot saw a man in a Capellan uniform driving a Capellan truck and called it good. They waddled past me, back down the alley.

I didn't have much room to turn the truck around, but I managed it with only minor collateral damage. I had to stop that 'Mech. One more corner and the ugly metal spider would have a line of sight to Tabby One. I opened up the throttle and buckled my restraint. This was going to hurt.

The sound of the impact set my ears ringing. The *Guard* didn't fall, but it wobbled. Steam spewed from my engine, and the truck fought me as I tried to back away. The *Guard* turned toward me, machine guns buzzing. It worked. Now the problem was all mine.



I took off away from the barracks and flicked my comm. “Now would be a good time, Elim.”

“You seem to have the matter well in hand. I never like taking another man’s kill.”

Bullets pinged through the rear of the truck, and it listed slightly. “I am very willing to share the glory!”

“Ah, very well. You Spheroids...” I would have cursed him for laughing, but he’s bigger than me. “Turn left and lead it towards the factory.”

I hauled left. The truck sideslipped and slammed into the wall of a warehouse. I gunned the engine, but the fans whined like sad puppies and I went nowhere. The *Guard* wandered into view and began peppering me again. One bullet found the cab and shattered my windscreen.

“That piece of crap doesn’t get to end me! Move it!” I gunned it again, and slowly the truck began to slide—diagonally, but at least it was moving. It was like running on ice, but I steadily gained momentum and began to outpace the ’Mech again.

I had to lead it without looking like I was leading it, which meant taking a few hits for appearances. Every one of them felt like another nail, and eventually one of them had to seal my coffin lid.

I was alongside the burning factory now, weaving through smoke and running forms. The *Guard* sprayed indiscriminately, and some of those fleeing shadows went down. A Capellan soldier with more patriotism than brains stood in my path and shot at my cab. I guess he thought he could solve the problem with a well-placed bullet. He was wrong. Getting run over by a hovercraft isn’t always fatal, but with that ’Mech on my tail, I didn’t have the luxury of going back and trying a few more times.

The ’Mech finally scored a decent hit, and my truck nosed into the pavement. Well, I still had my laser pistol. This would be fun. I stepped out and prepared to face it.

The crack of Gauss rounds stung my ears, the *Guard's* knee exploded, and it nosedived just like my truck had done. Elim and one of his mates jumped off the factory roof to land on the 'Mech's back. I heard the sound of metal tearing, and the driver—I couldn't bear to call them MechWarrior—was dragged out of their cockpit in the claw of Elim's Void battle armor. They struggled like a newborn, kicking ineffectively and, I could see even from here, pissing themselves. Laughter came over the comm. Elim threw the pilot to the ground, and encouraged them to run with a spray of bullets. Elim's partner kept on encouraging the poor fool until they ducked into an outbuilding and refused to show their face again. Nova Cats. This was just an outing to them, these Capellans not even worth killing.

Small-arms fire sang in the night, and I couldn't forget that my daughter was out in it. "Tabby One, sitrep."

"Under control, Phantom. Many of the guards are dead or fled, the rest appear to be rallying to their commander. Some are suiting up in battle armor. The laborers are still loading, but a few are reluctant to go.

"Forget them. If they lag, they stay. Tyra DeMarco. Do you have her?"

There was a slight commotion on the other end. "I'm here! I'm here. Daddy, is that really you?"

For a moment I couldn't say anything. God had lit a fire in my belly that spread a warmth to every corner of me. After years of taking all I had, he had finally given something back. "Tabby One, I know you may not understand, but you get my girl to safety no matter what, you hear? No matter what."

"We hear you, Phantom. And we understand. Our bay is full. We can head for the rendezvous site immediately."

"Go. We'll be right behind you."

Elim's partner jetted away to ride shotgun on Tabby One. Elim sidled up to me and popped his visor. "Good little scrap. Not what I would call a battle, but fun. Why are you wearing Daoshen Liao on your shoulder?"

“I got shot.” I turned to show him. “Least I could do to bleed on the Chancellor’s heir.”

“Mosquito bite. We can—”

I don’t remember what happened next. I remember a flash and a whole lot of pain in my face, then waking up in the dark bouncing against something hard and cold. I couldn’t see, but I felt footfalls; Elim was carrying me over his shoulder. I slapped his back until he put me down.

“Good. I thought he got you.”

“What happened?” I coughed and dabbed at my face. Sight was returning, but only as a vague yellow blur.

“A sniper, but a poor one. Pinged my shoulder, and some armor fragments hit you.”

“Oh hell. Show me a light!”

“I am shining one in your face.”

I don’t know if Elim fully understood the string of obscenities that came from my mouth, but he got the gist. “That was my eye! My real eye! God damn it, Elim, tell me you got the bastard!”

“Getting you to safety seemed more important, but I can go back if you wish.”

“No time. Get us out of here.”

He carried me like a man taking his bride over the threshold. I could feel blood running down my face, but had no more Daoshens to bandage myself with. My augmented eye begged for a reboot. Between thought commands and a couple taps on the side of my head, I got it going. All the light fizzed out. Great. My natural eye was a total loss. A moment later the feed kicked back on, grainy and with a blank spot in center left, but I could see.

We reached Tabby Two, but instead of getting inside like a normal person, Elim bounded onto the roof and dropped me near the turret as the

hovercraft began to move. “The laborers are all aboard. Capellan battle armor incoming. Head down, Phantom!”

I ducked just as the Maxim’s missile launcher fired. Smoke and hot exhaust washed over me, and I screamed.

Elim’s MagShot cracked as the hovercraft gained speed. “Racking up an impressive array of scars, eh, Phantom?”

“Yeah. I think I’ll die now, if that’s okay with you.”

He just laughed again, the joyous bastard.

We zipped out the main gate, scattering the few remaining guards. Ineffectual fire pinged off Tabby One’s armor. A single high-caliber round whipped by, so close that its passage knocked me over. Elim checked on me, saw I hadn’t been hit, and shielded me with his body. The camp faded, a smoldering perdition glowing red in the night.

The comm squawked on an open frequency, and a cold voice leaked into my ear. “I will find you. Whoever you are, I promise I will find out, and you will suffer.”

Through my fritzed vision, I could make out a lone figure standing atop the fading wall, his long rifle held at rest. “Good luck. Hope you like chasing ghosts.” I flipped him a salute as the hovercraft sped away. Last I saw he was still standing there, watching his workforce vanish into freedom. With any luck, the Chancellor would soon find another camp for him. To work in.

**MERCHANT-CLASS JUMPSHIP OPHIDIAN  
ARBORIS  
REPUBLIC OF THE SPHERE  
2 FEBRUARY 3091**

My shoulder barely ached now. That was Clan medicine at work, just as it was Clan medicine that was regrowing my eye, and would replace my cybernetic one. I've never been completely comfortable with that eye, never 100 percent sure there wasn't a Blakist somewhere watching everything I do, seeing everything I see. I think I like having the Clans as allies.

We were still a few jumps from Republic space, but I'd arranged an unofficial rendezvous to transfer a couple passengers whose names managed to miss inclusion on the manifest. I escorted Tyra and Kim Jian to the hangar bay, where a shuttle waited for them. Kim Jian. Turns out I have a son again, if just in law. A Buddhist monk had officiated for them, and their bunkmates had witnessed. When they've settled, they'll be making it official, and Tyra DeMarco will become Kim Tyra. I'll have to get used to the idea of a Capellan in the family, but he seems like a good man. He kept my girl safe from frisky guards in that camp for years, and that's something. And I think I like the idea of one day being a grandfather.

"You're not coming with us?" Tyra looked so crestfallen it almost broke my heart all over again. I wished I could, but that bridge had been burned years ago.

"My mission doesn't end here, just your part in it. I'm sending you back to your mother. Tell her I'm sorry I could never give her what she wanted, but I can give her something back. Maybe she'll...she'll..."

I really had no idea what I was trying to say, but Tyra did. She wrapped her arms around my waist, and I held her tight, breathing in the smell of her hair. Eventually I had to let her go. My nose was beginning to drip. It wasn't much, but it was more than I thought I could ever give. The Dove had done this for me. Maybe to save his own life, but somehow I don't think that was the only reason. I kissed Tyra's brow and watched her go. She'd have a life now, a family of her own, and peace.

Kim Jian shook my hand. "I can only hope that one day I can be as great a father as you. You are always welcome in our lives."

“Don’t be melodramatic. Just make my daughter happy. You’ve seen what I can do if you fail.”

He smiled, but I could tell he wasn’t totally sure I was joking. Neither was I.

It was bittersweet to watch them go. I was losing my daughter again, but this time it wasn’t forever. I felt something inside that I hadn’t known for a long time. It took me a moment to identify it: hope. The stars outside looked a little brighter, and maybe, just maybe, I felt a little faith come back into my heart. I thought of Stephen, my son, and I felt my eyes burn. My God did they ever burn! You’re not supposed to lose control over your water in microgravity, but I didn’t care. I just didn’t care.

Over the remaining weeks, I tried to work out what the Dove had gained from all this. He knew what kind of people were in that camp, and he knew I could never extract Tyra and leave the others behind. What can I say, I have an overdeveloped sense of justice. Death doesn’t bother me, but slavery? That’s different. It came to me a bit at a time, while socializing with the Iron Lady and a few others. They were malcontents, vocal ones, and their dissatisfaction was directed at the Capellan Confederation. Seeded throughout the former Capellan worlds of Prefectures V and VI, they would spread anti-Liao sentiment, and those worlds would grow to love their Republic even more. I’ll bet the Dove already has journalism jobs lined up for them.

I saw them off for their debriefing on New Earth, then headed back to Terra for mine. I still had a pistol and a trigger finger with an itch, but in the end I had no reckoning with the Dove.

I read his obit on the journey in. A low-level government employee found asphyxiated in his bed, a plastic bag tied around his head and a handwritten note on the nightstand. It wasn’t so unbelievable. An old man alone in the world, getting on in years and with no family to remind him of the value of life. It was more common than people reckoned. But I had to

see the body to believe, so I went down to the morgue to ID him. “Loneliness does that,” the coroner told me, but he was a rube. The Dove wasn’t lonely. He merely left the game on his own terms.

He’d made arrangements for those of us he left behind, orders that took the form of requests and bequeaths. “*You are right,*” he admitted to me in a holo. “*The world Devlin Stone is building has no place for men like me. The idea of the Star League is dead at last, and the mindset that saw us through the Succession Wars will only keep those wars alive. The future needs you more than it needs me.*”

I have a meeting with the Exarch tonight. Just me and him, and Lear. Stone never does anything important without his little Capellan devil whispering in his ear. I’m to come in by the back door, the one that opens below ground and leads to a moving panel in Stone’s office. The Dove’s message told me how the meeting will go, the only question is the one I have to answer: yes or no. Seems an easy choice.

I am a ghost, and even ghosts need a Paladin of their own.





# **VOICES OF THE SPHERE: WHAT WOULD HAVE BEEN AND WHAT IS NOW**

**CHRIS HUSSEY**



## **OPINIONS AND COMMENTARY FROM AROUND THE INNER SPHERE: MAY 3151**

One hundred years ago, the Inner Sphere sat on the precipice of a new Golden Age. For some, anyway. The Federated Commonwealth was twenty years old, and with the exception of the debacle that was the War of 3039, it was well on its way to potentially dominating the entirety of the Inner Sphere, a feat not seen since the last days of Richard Cameron.

Of course, we're all well aware of what happened then. Kerensky's descendants returned as the Clans, and the Inner Sphere has not been the same since. You could argue that, had the Clans not returned, the Federated Commonwealth certainly would have tried conquest again. Success was far from guaranteed, but fracturing the Free Worlds League and a renewed push into the Capellan Confederation could have tipped the balance in such a way that even the tactical genius of Coordinator Theodore Kurita and the might of the Draconis Combine couldn't have stopped.

While what-ifs and playing Monday-morning general is a favorite pastime for many, today we are staring at an Inner Sphere that is almost unrecognizable, and certainly was inconceivable a century ago.

However, what is old is new again, and rumors swirl of the Clans' fabled prize of position known as the ilClan. It is the Clan above all Clans, the one meant to unite them all under a single banner for reestablishing the new Star League. Of course, this means conquering Terra. No small feat.

But what do people think of the state of the Inner Sphere a century after the Clan Invasion? We spoke to several individuals on worlds within 100 light years of Terra for their thoughts.

**Anuthat Somwan, Zosma (Wolf Empire):** “Considering what my grandparents had to endure when this world was under Toaster control, and then my parents when the Republic had it, I’m happy the Clans are here. The Wolves changed a lot of things, and for the better.”

**Knut Wiker, Alcor (Independent):** “The Clans have been nothing but a menace, and now people are talking about an ilClan. It’ll never happen. The Republic might be weaker, but the House Lords will never bend. And our world is free now. I’d love to see them try and conquer us.”

**Marie Saintil, Dromini VI (Rasalhague Dominion):** “Since 3030, our world has changed hands seven times. Seven! You know the old joke about the weather and not liking it, just to wait five minutes. Yeah, well here if you don’t like the flag that waves at the capital, wait ten years and you’ll have a new one.”

While this next quote came from a world farther away, we felt it was relevant:

**Dumisa Atieno, Vikindu (Independent):** “The Clans are no different than what was already here. They just *behaved* differently. They disrupted the paradigm and were the genesis for a change that swept throughout the Inner Sphere. Their presence emboldened the Word of Blake, which gave hope to the rise of the Republic. This ilClan may rise to supremacy, but it too will fall one day, either to something new, or crumble from within, like the Star League. Ultimately, the true power lies where it has always: with the people of the worlds these warlords so dearly covet.”

If the world of Vikindu sounds familiar, there’s a good reason. If you have ever visited or live within 250 light-years of Terra, Vikindu coffee is an ubiquitous feature on most breakfast tables. And if you don’t recognize Vikindu Coffee directly, it’s still very likely a fixture. Beans from the world are used in close to 50 percent of the coffee produced in that sphere. The planet’s rich soil and tropical temperatures made it a powerhouse for coffee production.

That coffee came with a price, however. The planet’s nobles kept prices low through brutal worker subjugation and exploitation—a practice that is sadly common on worlds deep in the interior of the Inner Sphere and not in the spotlight of the front lines of warfare.

All that changed in 3080, during the Word of Blake Jihad. The shakeup brought to the Free Worlds League affected Vikindu directly when the League garrison forces departed, never to return. The ruling class of the world used their personal garrisons to maintain control, but it only lasted so long. Sensing the power vacuum, the people, led by Jene Spencer-Lee, rose

up against their noble and oligarch masters, bringing about a revolution that transformed the world.

This story is not uncommon, but Vikindu proved different in the sense that Spencer-Lee's revolution brought about a new planetary republic and more decentralized distribution of power.

Which brings us back to Dumisa Atieno. Dumisa's parents and grandparents were generational coffee farmers. They "owned" a farm in the sense that their local lord allowed them to manage the property and run the equipment in exchange for a small stipend, along with room and board. With the revolution and the death of their lord, Dumisa's parents became the first in her family to take ownership of the farm and reap the profits. She credits her parents for instilling in her the practices that have kept the farm profitable and successful to this day, despite the HPG Blackout and being an independent world bereft of centralized support.

"When my parents took over," she said, "they never forgot what happened before or where they came from. Higher wages for the workers, better living conditions. Fair treatment. All of these things took time, of course, but they still happened."

Atieno admits her parents struggled, almost losing everything several times. "The nobles did not give up easily. Vikindu was at war with itself for years before things settled down."

And once that war was decided, Spencer-Lee's fledgling government had a new fight on three fronts: remaining independent, feeding its own people, and rebuilding the world and reestablishing trade with neighboring systems. It took almost two decades.

"Change never happens quickly enough for those who are directly affected," Atieno recalls sagely as we take a bumpy ride through one of her coffee fields in a massive and battle-scarred harvester. "When I was born, die-hard elements of the nobles were launching an attack on our homestead. They were assisted by elements of the very people they had subjugated.

People who couldn't place trust in the new way of things. People who couldn't wait."

Strangely, Atieno credits the arrival of the Clans for the better life she has now, as they proved to be an instrumental disruption to "the way things were."

"The Clans did not affect my world directly, but indirectly, I owe them much. Would the Jihad still have occurred without them? Possibly. Would the Federated Commonwealth have conquered the Free Worlds League? Also possible, but that likely would have changed nothing about the way the nobles treated my grandparents."

Atieno loves that her world is no longer beholden to a larger empire, and when pressed about the possibility of Vikindu coming under Clan rule in the future, how does she think her world will fare?

"If they rule us or not, I know we shall be fine, and me, my family, my children and my workers will survive."

Her confidence impresses me, and I ask why she feels that way.

"As I said, the Clans are no different, despite their behavior. At the core of it, they share a universal truth with the rest of us in the Inner Sphere."

My curiosity piqued, I ask what that "universal truth" is. Her smile is bright and contagious as she answers.

"They love coffee, too."

**—Ernest Wick, INN correspondent**



## **BLACK BOXES**

**DANIEL ISBERNER**



### **—Editorial, *Spacetime Discovery*, Issue #1, 3150**

Dear readers,

Research into actual hyperspace and spacetime is rare. While a lot of funds were funneled toward it right after the HPG Blackout and the erection of the Fortress Republic Wall, that yielded no real results and led to a drop in funding. Since then, only a few universities across the Inner Sphere continued researching into these areas.

Of course, the Great Houses have their own military scientists researching the Blackout and how to end it, but civilian research into it remains rare. One of the few professors still researching the subject is Dr. Melir Radis from Chapineria University.

In 3143, the Black Box he was studying suddenly received a message he could not account for. While the message was incomplete, he could clearly identify it as military information from none other than the Federated Suns, operating deep inside their own realm, sent only minutes earlier. It should have been impossible for him to receive such a message in less than a week and in an unencrypted state, but the message proved legitimate.

He reported the occurrence to the Draconis Combine military and the Internal Security Force immediately, which led to them increasing his funding. While they did not disclose an amount, the number of research assistants Radis hired and the volume of equipment shipped to Chapineria University makes it clear that the increase was quite substantial.

For the next couple years, his research was kept private, but he did hold lectures on hyperspace ripples. Then, last month, the bombshell hit.

He released a paper based on his research over the last seven years. Not only has he discovered a working theory about how his Black Box was able to receive a message that should have been impossible to receive, he also claim to have discovered the real reason why Black Boxes fell into disuse centuries ago. (The official reasons given, that Black Boxes would interfere with K-F Drive travel or disrupt the HPG network, have long since been disproven.)

Radis' theory, supported with a lot of data, claims that Black Boxes not only create a ripple effect throughout their limited hyperspace frequency, but if they are used too much, those ripples turned into waves, which got bigger the more the Black Boxes were used.

The effect worsened when he looked into modern Black Boxes with longer ranges. The hyperspace waves would not only get bigger, but would also interfere with each other, growing more chaotic over time and also causing new quantum waves responsible for the decryption effect his Black Box had encountered.

He could also verify that even messages sent at reduced range were getting increasingly garbled and sometimes impossible to decipher, or the messages ended up well outside the carefully set range of the test signal. This effect was meticulously documented over a four-year trial period. Had it only been something akin to the random incident that started his research in 3143, the effect had become a regular occurrence by 3147. Years of usage had turned the hyperspace frequency of the Black Boxes into



something akin to a stormy ocean, frustrating not only the Draconis Combine and Federated Suns, but other users of the technology as well.

In 3147, Radis also found Star League-era research that described the same effect, albeit at a smaller scale.

In the last eighteen months, the effect has further worsened, making it a gamble to receive an intact Black Box message while also increasing the risk of the wrong party receiving unencrypted military information.

The rediscovered Star League era research also points toward another problem: this effect might take a long time to subside, perhaps a century or more.

Now, are Dr. Radis' findings and theories correct? Starting on page 42, Dr. Beatrice Harper picks his paper apart and discusses what ramifications this might have for the future of hyperspace science.

This inaugural issue of *Spacetime Discovery* also includes a look into new research on Word of Blake super jump drives, the Blackout—which is unconnected to the problems Black Boxes face—and more.



# **PIECE BY PIECE**

**MATT ALEXANDER**



## **SOUTHWEST OF NACRE CRATER MANASSAS CRUCIS MARCH, FEDERATED SUNS 11 JUNE 3010**

Braxton Bishop stood glaring up at the BattleMech looming over him in the late-afternoon sun, a look on his face halfway between a sneer and a grimace. Sweat and grime covered the exposed parts of his arms and legs, those not covered by green shorts, a plain white T-shirt, and combat boots. The grime also clung to his dark hair, and much of his plain face and long nose. His stocky frame cast a long shadow to his left, across the bare, broken, and rocky ground that typified the land around the vast Nacre Crater, and his stance and the angle of the sun made his shadow look like a monster from a child's nightmare.

So lost was he in his distaste for the machine above him that he did not hear the crunch of gravel as a tall woman, also dressed in MechWarrior apparel and fresh from the cockpit, approached him from behind.

“Good god, what is that *stench*?”

Startled by the question, Bishop turned to see Sergeant Charlotte Webb taking several steps back from him, her hand over her nose. The wiry MechWarrior was unkempt as well, but not nearly as filthy as Bishop, though her shoulder-length brown hair was standing up crazily from its time spent packed into a neurohelmet.

Webb got a withering look from Bishop, like the one he had leveled at the 'Mech that towered above them both, and she flashed a childlike grin back at him, not engaging with his apparent bad humor.

“It’s not me. At least not really, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

Grin fading, Charlotte looked at Braxton, then at the 'Mech, “What is it then? You lose control of your functions in the cockpit?” Her grin returned as she needled her lancemate.

“No,” said Bishop, looking up toward the cockpit sadly. “It’s Sonia—or what’s left of her in there.”

Webb’s face went flat, and an expression of disgust twisted her sharp features. “You mean the idiot support staff didn’t clean out the cockpit properly?” She walked up to Bishop and placed her hand on his shoulder, despite the smell coming off him.

He sighed. “Yeah, they got her body out, wiped the controls down, but there was a lot of blood under the floor paneling, and when we got hit by that band of Zoners, I ran hot for too long...” His voice trailed off as he walked over to the BattleMech and sat on its large foot, resting his head back against the leg.

Webb came over to sit beside him. “And it all cooked. That’s ghastly.” Her face showed how the thought of sitting in an overheating BattleMech filled with cooking bodily fluids disgusted her. “Did they at least patch the hole where the armor spalled from?”

Bishop had closed his eyes as he leaned back on the 'Mech and responded by shaking his head slightly. “Nope. I can see right through the cockpit wall to this beautiful world outside.”

Webb chuckled as she leaned forward, placing her elbows on her knees. “So mercenary life just gets better and better for you?”

Braxton sighed, opened his eyes and looked at Charlotte. “Yeah. My family’s *Phoenix Hawk* is in the shack with a blown gyro; I smell like a butcher shop in summer; who knows if we can win the Manassas Run and get off this rock; our CO has the tactical acumen of a Lyran general; I’m running around in a cockpit open to the air on a planet where the environment is less than ideal; our benefactor has done little benefacting; and to top it off, I got saddled with this pig of a ’Mech.”

Charlotte grinned at him. “Wow, a whole sob story and you only mentioned losing your *P-Hawk* and getting stuck in that plodding old *Enforcer* once. I’m impressed. You’re either getting used to it or acclimating to the life of a hard-bitten merc.”

“Fair point. Still, I want my *Phoenix Hawk* back as soon as I can. It’s my ride and I am happiest there.”

“Probably smells better too,” came the deadpan reply.

A small snort escaped Braxton, conceding to Webb’s unrelenting humor in the face of his woes. She stood, stretching as she did so, and offered her hand to haul him to his feet. “This is mercenary life, my friend. Short of pay, short of luck, short of friends who live full lives, and short of people who will suffer your dark moods for long. You either accept that and let those parts of you that would otherwise care die, or you get out, one way or another. Look for the good in the bad, or the bad will just pile up and bury you, killing you a little piece at a time.”



“Kill what speaks to the better part of me? Little darkm isn’t it?”

Charlotte sighed at his maudlin mood and placed her hands on her hips. “This isn’t the Eridani Light Horse or the Fifteenth Dracon. We don’t live to high-minded ideals or distribute alms to the poor. We fight to eat, we take contracts to survive. Go back to the AFFS if you want, but you best remember how many atrocities the golden Princes of House Davion have committed in the last two hundred years. You chose to join Bence’s Vipers, and knew what we were when you did.”

Charlotte’s tone was neither accusatory nor harsh. It was matter-of-fact, and her words were delivered in a fashion meant to educate, not belittle.

Braxton shrugged and did not protest.

“Time we went and checked in with our illustrious leader,” Webb said. “Should be getting word from Count Duncan about what we can expect down in the crater. If another team has a prize, this Run will turn from search to hunt-and-kill pretty fast.”

Braxton looked up at the *Enforcer* one more time. “Yeah, probably time. Besides, I want to hear if they can fix my *Hawk* and if Leopoldo is out of hospital yet.”

“He’s seen worse. I’m sure he won’t care about a few stitches and a busted rib or two.”

Braxton turned and walked toward a *Rifleman* standing over a small khaki tent about 100 meters away. “All for the greater good, I suppose.”

Braxton and Charlotte clambered over the rocky, orange-brown terrain toward the small tent, earning an abrasion or two for their efforts, and both were breathing a little harder when they arrived.

“I hate this place,” said Braxton, looking at an oozing cut on the back of his forearm, gained when he’d slipped going over a large boulder.

“One day, Brax, you’ll say something sunny, then the Camerons will rise from the grave and Kerensky himself will drop out of the sky.”

With a slightly apprehensive look on his face, he snuck a look at the sky saying, “I like puppies. They make me giggle.” When nothing happened Braxton said, “What do you know? No dead Camerons.”

“You are the true peak of comedy,” was Charlotte’s response as she ducked into the tent, grinning.

Inside were two other MechWarriors, four camp chairs, and a small table with a comm unit and monitor. Sitting at the table’s head was Lieutenant Dobos “The Viper” Bence, a man who looked nothing like his nickname. Where a viper would be sleek and narrow eyed, Dobos was round-faced, dewy-eyed, and though fit, he appeared rotund due to his build. The man was simply a bit of a mess, and all together it did nothing

for his command presence. Sitting next to him was the plain featured and bald-headed Luna Alarcón, who smiled a greeting at the two late arrivals. Moments after entering, the stench coming off Braxton entered the tent in all its glory, and both Dobos and Luna gagged.

Before anything was said, Braxton backed out of the tent. “Sorry. I’ll stand out here.”

“What did you roll in, Brax?” asked a stunned Dobos.

Charlotte answered for him. “The count’s people didn’t clean the cockpit out properly after Sonia died. It got ripe after we had that run in with the Zoners.”

Both Dobos and Luna went a little pale, and before anything more could be said, the comm unit chimed. Before answering it, Dobos moved the screen so all four could see it, and hit the ANSWER key.

The image showed a wiry, bespectacled, dark-haired man seated in an office that started at opulent and got progressively more decadent the further Bishop examined it. The man himself was dressed in a striped shirt and a heavily embroidered dark-red waistcoat, with a cravat to match. The whole scene projected wealth and power.

“Good afternoon, Count Duncan,” said Dobos.

The voice that came from the man was cultured, with the slight drawl favored by some nobles of the Federated Sun’s Golden Five worlds. “Dobos. I trust you are close to Nacre now?”

“Yes, Count. We are twenty-five kilometers southwest of the crater’s rim, about fifty from the target location.”

“Good.”

Before the count could continue, Charlotte cut in. “How is our pilot, Count Duncan?”

The man’s eye’s flashed in irritation at being interrupted, but the annoyance faded quickly. “He is fine. Some broken ribs, a fractured arm, minor burns, and a few dozen stitches. He will recover quickly enough. His

'Mech will take some time to fix, I am told. The leg was torn away more than severed, so it requires extensive work to remodel then attach. Your *Phoenix Hawk* will be faster to fix." He picked up a piece of paper. "The PPC hit found a weak point in the chest armor and overloaded several elements of the gyro. They need replacement, but the gyro itself is intact."

Braxton exhaled heavily outside the tent. His *Phoenix Hawk* would be easily fixed! That was a massive relief. The 'Mech was over 130 years old, had served seven different members of his family, and due to that, was essentially a member of it.

"Now that you are up to speed, I would rather we talked about what you will be doing tomorrow. That is why I called." The count's voice held an edge to it.

"Of course, my lord," Dobos answered, nodding obsequiously. "My apologies."

An aerial image of the crater flashed up on the screen, taking up half as the image of the count's office shrank to fill the other half, before zooming into the central peak. "One of the advantages to managing the contract for near-space approach, control, and communications is that it provides one with many useful tools, including aerial imagery and secure communication when needed." The count's voice was smug, and there was a slight smile on his face. "As I noted last week, it would appear that my ever-conniving rival, Baron De Verley, has taken the bait I laid out for the team he has in the Manassas Run."

"What's the bait?" interjected Luna, who was leaning in toward the screen.

"If you must know," the count's said, his voice taking on an exasperated tone, "it is a small cache of technical specifications from one of the bio-ranches north of here. My people managed to uncover it a few months before the Run started. Now please, keep your interruptions to yourselves."





Luna shrugged and mouthed a “sorry” to Dobos as the count continued, “The baron’s team is digging for the cache near this small, sometimes-used ore-processing operation.” The image zoomed in to show an area of five hectares covered in ore piles, gantries, large silos or storage tanks, and perhaps a half-dozen buildings. “It is currently occupied, and will present some problems to your operations.”

“You don’t want any collateral damage, I suppose? That will limit our options in trying to root out the Baron’s forces?”

A hard tone came into the count’s voice. “Quite the opposite in fact, Dobos. I do not wish there to be any witnesses to what I require of you

tomorrow.”

There was total silence in the tent for several seconds before Dobos spoke. “I don’t follow you, my lord. We can just run off the baron’s team, secure the cache, and make a run for Sisattanak. We don’t need to hit the refinery.”

“Oh, but you do. The cache and winning the Manassas Run are of secondary concern to me. The baron’s son is in that lance, and I do not want the boy to leave the crater alive. I also wish there to be no witnesses, which means his entire lance dies there too, as do the Zoners at the facility.”

As two of his three MechWarriors looked on aghast, Dobos responded in a shaky tone. “My lord, I don’t want to kill in cold blood.”

The view of the count and his office replaced the aerial image on the screen. His face was calm, but fire blazed in his eyes. “But you will, Dobos, or you will never leave this world.”

“Are you threatening to kill us?” was the incredulous response.

“Of course not, my dear fellow. But as I control customs, and my fleet provides two-thirds of the interstellar traffic to this system, I can ensure that you stay here for the rest of your natural life. I can also see you stripped of your hardware for breach of contract and left out in the Dead Zones. I don’t have to kill you, Dobos, but I can guarantee that you live the rest of a short and ugly life here on Manassas if you don’t do as I require.”

Silence reigned in the small tent until Dobos spoke. “Our contract was for our unit to compete for you in the Thirty-Fifth Manassas Run, not to settle grudges, and not to kill noncombatants.”

“The contract, Dobos, is what I want it to be. However, since you seem to have such high moral values, I will make matters easier for you. I will double the value of your contract and make good any sustained damage at cost to me, with guaranteed transport off-world, all the way to the Capellan Confederation. No need to have you hanging around afterward, is there?”

Dobos stared hard at the monitor. “We’re not murderers for hire!”

“You are mercenaries. That’s exactly what you are. Take fifteen minutes to talk your futures over. I will call back then.”

The screen went blank. The tent was quiet for several moments. Braxton was standing at the tent’s opening with a stunned look on his face, while Luna stared at the tabletop, fidgeting with her hands under the table. Dobos was looking at the screen with a blank expression on his round face.

Only Charlotte seemed unperturbed, and she crossed the room to sit opposite Dobos at the table. She looked him the eye before speaking. “Math is simple, Lieutenant. We either take his offer and have a chance of getting off this rock, or we refuse and suffer the consequences.”

“We could expose him,” said Luna.

“How?” Dobos asked. “If he calls breach of contract for us not attacking the baron’s troops, he will bury us here. He’s a Golden Five noble. He can do what he likes on Manassas, and the local government will back him. This planet only survives via the good graces of the Golden Five, and no one here would take our side against the person who supplies their world.”

“It’s murder,” said Luna.

“It’s killing. You’ve killed before.”

“Not like this.” Luna hung her head.

Charlotte turned her gaze on Bishop. “What do you think, Brax?”

He shrugged, as in that moment, something faded inside him. “I don’t want to be here anymore.”

Charlotte’s eyes narrowed and she shot back, “That’s really helpful!”

Braxton raised his own voice. “That’s not what I meant, Webb. I don’t want to be on Manassas anymore. It’s been a shit show from the start. The longer we stay here, the worse it gets for us.”

Charlotte nodded. “Yeah, good point. We need off, and soon. If the count can pay us what he says he can, and we get that cache, we get an even bigger payout if we get back to the Green Zones with it. Then we get off this world and well away from the Golden Five.”

Luna looked up with an anguished expression. “We are still killing noncombatants and possibly surrendering troops.”

“Then sit the mission out.”

“But you need my *Dervish*.”

“You see my point then, don’t you?”

Luna looked back down again without saying anything.

“Dobos?” Charlotte asked her commander.

“I—I don’t...I don’t know. I just...” He trailed off.

“Get it all in writing,” Braxton said from the door. “Get the contract uploaded to the Mercenary Review Board, add the additional information, and make the contract nonfinalized until we set foot on a Capellan world of our choosing. That way we have some measure of safety against the count. If it’s in the MRB’s system, he can’t screw with it.”

“Exactly! Nice thinking, Brax.” Charlotte looked back to Dobos. “Lieutenant, he will be back soon. What do you think?”

“Do I have any choice?”

“Do I need to answer that for you?”

No one spoke until the chime of the comm system startled them back to life. A visibly paler Dobos answered the call. “My lord.”

“Dobos. You have an answer for me?” The count seemed, if possible, even more smug and self-assured than before.

The lieutenant took a deep breath before answering. “I do, but we have some conditions.”

The exasperated tone returned to the count’s voice as he leaned closer to the camera. “This is not a negotiation, Dobos.”

“I’m not negotiating, my lord. I am clarifying a few things is all.”

“By all means then,” the count said in a more conciliatory tone, waving his hand for Dobos to continue as he sat back.

“We want the contract updated now and countersigned by both parties. Three million, all support and repairs, and transport to the closest Capellan

world. Contract to be considered fulfilled only when we set foot on that world.”

The count pursed his lips. “HmMMM. Very well. However, it will also stipulate that a confidential verbal clause was included, and that full completion of that clause is required to consider the contract fulfilled from your end. That is, elimination of the baron’s forces and all witnesses. Additionally, should either party break silence on the contract at any time, they will forfeit all gains, and will pay restitution of ten times the contract value.”

“Fine” was all Dobos said.

“Wonderful doing business with you, old boy,” the count responded in a most condescending tone, and said something to someone off-screen that Bishop could not make out.

A moment later, the contract flashed up on the screen, next to Count Duncan’s face, and new text began to appear. While someone was typing off-screen, Braxton walked back into the tent, much to the visible disgust of his lancemates, who were again assaulted by the smell coming off him. “Count Duncan, why is it so important the baron’s son dies?”

The count’s voice was smooth as he answered, but fierce fire underlay it. “Revenge, dear boy, revenge. The good baron was responsible for the deaths of both my brother and eldest daughter, though evidence to hand has never been sufficient for either prosecution or for calling De Verley out for satisfaction in a duel. The latter is my preferred path of action anyway, far more personal, you understand, and I am the superior swordsman, hence why he would avoid a duel without sufficient evidence or motivation on his end. By baiting his boy out here for you to eliminate, I get one part of my revenge. In eighteen months, we will both be on New Avalon, where I will call him out publicly, advise him of how his son died, minus the sticky details, of course, and again demand satisfaction. He must either accept and

die, or refuse and lose any honor he has in the eyes of his peers, ruining him. I win either way.”

“You’re an unpleasant person,” said Braxton.

“That may be so, but by the end of tomorrow, you will be too, if you are not already.”

Nothing more was said as Braxton moved outside again, much to the relief of the others in the tent. The count’s digital signature appeared on the contract, then Dobos signed with his finger. They all watched as the updated contract was loaded onto the Mercenary Review Board’s system.

“There! Now be about your business, Dobos. I’ll send you this and other aerals for your planning, and I only expect to hear back from you once you have completed your task.” The comm unit went blank as the count cut the connection, then the aerial image returned and filled the screen.

“How long until dark?” asked Charlotte as she stretched her long legs out in front of herself.

“Two hours,” said Luna in a glum voice.

“Then we have time to plan, eat, sleep and be on the road well before daybreak. You agree, Dobos?”

“Sure, Webb,” was the resigned response. “What are you thinking?”

Braxton moved as close as he could without offending anyone. He was glad the lieutenant appeared little interested in the tactical nuances of the assault, which was best for all involved, as Dobos would likely want to attack from the front with little deception.

Charlotte dragged the screen toward her and tapped it so that it would zoom in. She pointed to three smaller objects that were a kilometer east of the ore-processing plant. “There, that’s them. Three ’Mechs... Looks like a *JagerMech*, could be a *Vulcan*, but the light is pretty bad, and a *Locust*.”

“Doesn’t that team have four ’Mechs?” asked Bishop, squinting to see from his position away from the table.

“I think they had a *Centurion* or a *Clint* as well, something like that,” Luna said. Now that they were talking tactics, there was more light in her eyes.

“Four on four,” Dobos said. “We have better range, so we should come right in on them from the southeast.”

Braxton stifled a groan. Straight in like always, with little subtlety.

Before he could respond, Charlotte answered for him. “That would risk the cache, and we need that if we want to make this little adventure a highly profitable one.” She paused, then indicated another spot on the map. “The cache is actually five hundred meters east of their position, according to the count’s information, and they are a klick east of the facility. Coming in from where we are, we’d be covered by the central peak of the crater, but that’s where I’d put a sentry, so their fourth ’Mech is probably here in these shadows.” She pointed to an area southwest of the plant.

Something caught Braxton’s eye as Charlotte moved the map. “Hold up! Go back. No, farther, a bit north. There.” Braxton had Charlotte center the image over the large object that looked like a silo or a storage tank. “Has the count given us any other angles on the site?”

There was a pause as Charlotte checked.

“What are you looking for, Brax?” asked Dobos, who became a little more interested when he heard Braxton’s tone.

“A simple way out of all of this, Lieutenant.”

A moment later Charlotte spoke. “Here we are, fifteen minutes later. Low oblique shot from the satellite as it headed south. You want the same location?”

“Yeah, I do.” Bishop watched as the sergeant played with the image. “There.” His voice was both satisfied and resigned. “I know what we have to do.”

“I don’t follow you, Brax.”

“See that symbol, Charlotte, the red one?”

She nodded.

“Flammable. We draw the baron’s forces through the facility, hit that tank from the other direction, and that whole area goes up. No need to wade in and kill folks one at a time, and we might take out a ’Mech or two as well.”

Luna gasped. “That’s barbaric!”

“You want to go in with missiles and guns, Luna? That won’t be clean at all. The shockwave and heat will take out most of the site, then we clean up the ’Mechs and secure what’s in the cache.”

“Then we need a draw card and a flanker,” said Charlotte as she carefully assessed the site and Brax’s idea. “Dobos, how about three ’Mechs loop north around the peak, come at them from the northwest, while one of us comes in from the southeast after the fighting starts and hits the tank? My *Valk* has the missiles and speed to pull off the flank attack.”

Dobos stared at the map. Braxton knew he was trying to work out better tactics, but failing. The man could grasp the frontal assault—it was his style, after all—and the rear strike would make sense to him, but the shocks of the day were clearly more than he was capable of handling, and he shook his head. “Brax’s idea. He goes for the tank, you stay with us and act as spotter for Luna.”

“Lieutenant, Brax can lead you two in and spot. I have a better chance of getting around the flank than he does. It’s a perfect role for a *Valkyrie*, and his *Enforcer* will make the frontal assault look a lot more convincing.”

Dobos’ face hardened. “No. His plan, he gets the key task. He lights the tank after we draw them off.”

Brax was uncomfortable with his own plan. Knowing his shot would kill several dozen people was not one to savor, but he could accept the role. He had to.

“But sir—” Charlotte protested.



Dobos cut her off. “But nothing, Webb. The plan looks good as is. You’re with me, and Brax is on the outside. Now, I’m going to warm some food up while you work out routes and times. Have them ready by sunset.

## **NACRE CRATER**

## **MANASSAS**

## **CRUCIS MARCH, FEDERATED SUNS**

**12 JUNE 3010**

Braxton Bishop had been in the *Enforcer*’s rank cockpit for three hours now, after he and the other members of Bence’s Vipers had left their camp before dawn. The four ’Mechs had moved together for the first hour, then Braxton had turned east after they had navigated down into the crater, via one of the large gullies that cut down through the impact site. From there he’d skirted the lower slopes of the central peak. He had moved to within five kilometers of the ore-processing facility and hunkered his ’Mech down in a depression that hid the *Enforcer* from direct observation and then banked his fusion engine.

The countdown timer on his display still had thirty minutes remaining, so while waiting for the assault to get underway, he had cracked the ’Mech’s canopy to both relieve the terrible smell and gain an unobscured view of the Pearls.

The Pearls were the shattered remnant of Manassas’ moon, which had been pulverized by a cometary impact a thousand years before humans had discovered this planet. The Nacre Crater was another artifact of that cataclysmic event, a mute testament to the force that had killed much of the native life of the world at the time. Despite the devastation wrought by the collision, the remains of the moon, which were slowly coalescing, made for

a beautiful site, as they glittered and poured across the sky like a river of small lights.

For a brief period, Braxton was able to forget all the troubles he had experienced in the last year. The disbandment of the Eleventh Syrtis Fusiliers, his loss of connection to the Armed Forces of the Federated Suns, and now his life as a mercenary that seemed to keep spiraling from one problem to the next, eating away at his confidence and hope. He could even forget for a moment that in the morning, another part of what he was would die, as the Vipers destroyed everything in the crater. It was all forgotten as he stood leaning on the hatch and staring at the parade of majestic light moving silently above him in the darkness before dawn.

A tone sounded from the cockpit, the five-minute warning. Braxton slid back down and pulled the hatch shut, again finding himself assaulted by the smell in the dark cockpit again. He grimaced, strapped himself in, and pulled his neurohelmet down. After reconnecting his coolant vest, he checked the *Enforcer's* systems, which were all green, except for a small point of red on his armor wireframe, which showed where the cockpit was open to the world on its right side. As the countdown hit zero, he brought the fusion reactor up to full power and awaited the signal to start his run. He had no telemetry from his allies as yet and had no inkling of what might be occurring only a few kilometers away.

The timer hit -2:13 and his speakers crackled to life. "Viper-Six, Viper-One. Execute Flanker." Dobos' tone was clipped and his breathing heavy, while Braxton could make out the sound of his commander's autocannon hammering at a target.

"Viper-One, Viper-Six," Bishop answered. "Executing Flanker now."

As he pushed the throttle full forward, the wind howled through the hole in the cockpit and mingled with the thrum of the engine and the thuds and cracks of the 'Mech's footfalls on the rock outside. Within seconds, the *Enforcer* staggered up to nearly sixty-five kilometers per hour, though to

Braxton, who was used to the more fluid acceleration of his *Phoenix Hawk* that could reach nearly 100 kilometers per hour, it felt sluggish and jolting. The upside was that his nose stopped registering the smell in the cockpit as he watched his heads-up display for the telltale signals of other 'Mechs while making his run for the mining facility, where his true target lay.

Though it was five kilometers in a straight line to the facility, the heavily broken terrain meant what should have been a ride of four and a half minutes became something closer to six, as he was forced to divert around obstacles and run up and over and through multiple gullies and ridges. On several occasions he considered using his jump jets, but stopped each time. He did not want to reveal himself to either the opposition force or the facility.

“Viper-Six, where the hell are you! Viper-One is down, and we are taking a beating.” Charlotte Webb’s tone was underscored by stress and tension, as the two extra minutes of combat were taking their toll on the small force.

“Viper-Two, target’s in sight, engaging in fifteen seconds,” Braxton responded as he finally swept around the last spur that concealed the facility and saw the tank that was his target. His HUD lit up with the icons of his allies and enemies, and the picture was not a good one. The commander’s *Rifleman* was down after having charged forward—recklessly no doubt—and struggled to get up. Charlotte was dancing her *Valkyrie* about, trading fire with the enemy *Centurion*, while Luna’s *Dervish* dodged a salvo of autocannon fire from the enemy *JagerMech* and *Vulcan*. The enemy battle line had moved to the very edge of the facility, and Braxton could waste no more time in hitting the tank.

As the range dropped below 600 meters—well beyond effective range in 'Mech combat, but close enough to hit the huge tank—he fired his autocannon, and the roar of the weapon was so much louder than would be the norm, as the sound pounded through the opening into the cockpit. The

tracers lit up the darkness as they streaked toward the tank and tore a series of gaping holes just below the top.

Nothing happened.

Braxton's heart skipped a beat as he continued to bear in on the target. *Is it empty?*

“Viper-Six, Viper-Two. They're turning toward you.”

Charlotte's warning was of little concern, as no enemy had a line of sight on him—at least not until a *Locust* came skidding around the tank and charged toward him. He waited until the range dropped to 450 meters, as the *Locust* got close enough to fire its laser at him, melting armor off the *Enforcer's* left leg. Adjusting slightly to compensate for the blow, Braxton dropped the targeting reticule to just above the tank's base and fired again, this time with his autocannon and large laser.

The beam struck first, scoring a deep line in the tank, and a bright glow began to erupt from the jagged line as the autocannon rounds smashed home. A moment later, the tank exploded.

The image of that moment would stay in Braxton's mind forever, as the tank erupted in a massive fireball. The *Locust*, which was much closer to the blast, was silhouetted for a moment before the shockwave hit, smashing the 'Mech to the ground, tearing a leg free and tumbling the rest end over end.

Then the blast hit the *Enforcer*, and the big machine reeled sideways as Braxton fought desperately to stay upright. What might have been possible in his *Phoenix Hawk*, with its delightfully responsive controls, proved impossible in the much clumsier *Enforcer*. Gravity and momentum won out, and he rode the 'Mech into the ground.

The impact was stunning, coming as it did after the equally brutal impact from the exploding tank. Then it began to rain fire as the contents of the tank, which had mushroomed into the sky, poured down all across the

mining operation, burning what had not already been shattered by the shockwave.

As the 'Mech lay on its side and the heat in the cockpit increased from the flammable liquid falling across it in burning rivers, Bishop struggled to make sense of what happened. When the *Enforcer* hit on its right shoulder, the force of the impact had thrown him sideways and stunned him. He stared out the cockpit window, which now had a single crack running up it, across a landscape of fire. The tank was gone. The gantries around it were twisted and broken. Farther away, the ore piles trailed fires down their sides like small volcanoes. As Braxton stared out at the ruins, his eyes were drawn to movement as people, covered in flames, tried to flee the burning compound buildings only to be exposed to the deadlier inferno outside.

“Six, Six, do you copy? Six, *SIX!* Brax, are you there?”

Braxton could not be sure how long Webb had been calling to him, but he eventually came back to himself and began the laborious process of getting his 'Mech on its feet while still groggy. He moved by rote, not totally conscious of what he was doing, but when reality snapped back properly, he had the *Enforcer* up on one knee.

“Viper-Six, status,” Webb called again.

“Two, Six. Was down after the blast. Intact, but heat is high.”

“Good, head north out of the fires. We lost sight of the *Locust*, and the *Vulcan* is down from the blast. One and Four are dueling with the *JagerMech*, and I need you to get behind the *Centurion*.”

Braxton dropped his eyes to the tactical display and picked a route around the ore piles to his front right. “I’ll head east, then north. Keep their attention, and I’ll come in from behind.”

“Roger, Six. The *Cent* took a heavy hit from the blast. Rear should be easy to breach. What’s the status of the facility?”

Bishop’s thoughts jumped back to the picture of the burning figures pouring from the buildings, and he responded in a flat voice. “It’s gone.

They're dead."

Nothing else was said as he got the *Enforcer* moving, but the 'Mech seemed off, out of kilter, though no apparent damage beyond some lost armor was registering on his readout. *Might be me*, he thought. *Still groggy maybe.*

Within thirty seconds he was up to full speed and rounding the ore piles, the 'Mech's heat dropping as he moved away from the fire. The burning fluids fell away from the *Enforcer* as it ran, making it seem like some god of the underworld as it strode through the darkness.

As he rounded the last pile, the *Centurion* hit Webb's *Valkyrie* as the smaller 'Mech was coming down off a jump. The medium laser tagged the right leg just as it was about to take the weight of the landing, and the autocannon hit home on the right torso. The two hammerblows threw Charlotte off balance, and her 'Mech twisted and plowed into the ground as it stumbled upon landing.

His reticule drifted over the savaged rear of the *Centurion*, and for the first time Brax was glad he was in an *Enforcer*. The steadiness of the 'Mech as a gun platform allowed him to line up his shot carefully before the *Centurion* could hit Webb again, whereas his *Phoenix Hawk's* pippet would have been dancing around far more. The large laser boiled through the already-damaged rear armor on the left side of the enemy BattleMech moments before his autocannon shells chewed into the *Centurion's* innards, where they found the long-range missile ammunition. A moment later, the missiles exploded in a sympathetic detonation, and the entire torso of the *Centurion* disintegrated in a fireball.

Braxton continued toward Webb's *Valkyrie*, which was righting itself. "Two, you good?"

"Yeah, Six."

Another voice came over the comm. "I surrender. Stand down, stand down." The voice was young and carried much urgency. A quick glance at

the tactical display showed that the *JagerMech* pilot was powering down.

Nothing was said. Webb and Braxton watched on from 500 meters off as Dobos marched his *Rifleman* up to the powered-down 'Mech, and while the young pilot was trying to talk to him, he unleashed both large lasers into the cockpit.



Two hours later, a miasma of smoke hung about the crater as Braxton leaned against the leg of his *Enforcer*. The rising sun had not crested the lip of the crater yet, and the area remained shrouded in smoky shadows.

Braxton was numb. Numb from the battle, numb from the concussion he had, and numb from the carnage they had wrought. He alone had killed at least fifty people, and there was a part of him inside that was numb in a way he was sure would not pass.

Webb walked over, haggard and bruised as well. “You okay?”

“Yeah. I took your advice.”

“What advice was that?”

“Kill the piece of me that cares.”

“Battle will do that.” Webb sat next to him and passed over a canteen of lukewarm water.

“No, not battle. In the tent last night. We could do this and live. Or not. Then we would have died one way or another.”

“That’s how you do it.” Webb nodded. “You die piece by piece, or it will happen all at once. Just gotta hope there is enough left when you retire to let you live some sort of life afterward. Problem is, we might die anyway. Looks like your pyrotechnic show last night attracted a bit of attention.”

“Huh?” Braxton said, confused.

“Three teams are heading in. We have to get our asses moving east and over the mountains, ASAP. We can then head for the coast and claim the

win and get the hell off Manassas for good. If we don't get cut off, that is."

Braxton sighed heavily and thunked his head back against the 'Mech's cold metal leg. "Figures."





# **CRD-10S CRUSADER**

**JOHANNES HEIDLER**



**Mass:** 65 tons

**Chassis:** Crucis-C Endo Steel

**Power Plant:** Defiance Exalto 325 XL

**Cruising Speed:** 54 kph

**Maximum Speed:** 86 kph

**Jump Jets:** None

**Jump Capacity:** None

**Armor:** Durallex Medium with CASE

## **Armament:**

2 Defiance Doom Bringer LRM 15 Racks

2 TharHes Maxi Elite Streak SRM 6s

2 TharHes Aetherbolt Extended-Range Medium Pulse Lasers

2 Series XIV Heavy Machine Guns

**Manufacturer:** TharHes Industries

**Primary Factory:** Tharkad

**Communications System:** TharHes Melpomene HM-33

**Targeting and Tracking System:** TharHes Ares-9 with Artemis IV FCS

The *Crusader* is an emblem of House Steiner's military might. Built at the Lyrans' capital, it has spearheaded every major action in the past century and a half. When the old *Griffins* were replaced as guardians of the Archon's throne, it was the *Crusader* that first represented the Steiner side of the Federated Commonwealth.

Yet the *Crusader* can also be viewed as emblematic of the Lyran Commonwealth's trials and tribulations. Its production on Tharkad only started in the thirty-first century, it was rebuilt in Lyran Alliance days as a disfigured, overburdened monster, and its factory was almost destroyed in the Jihad. It had devolved into an also-ran by the time it was used to stem the tide of Blakist fanatics and to curb renewed Clan predations.

Deliberate symbolism is at the center of a current effort to refurbish this old has-been both visually and technologically. The new *Crusaders* are among the most advanced BattleMechs available in the Inner Sphere and proudly bear the banner of the iron gauntlet.

## **CAPABILITIES**

After the damage of the Jihad, TharHes focused on their quad 'Mechs, both in production and experimental research. Because these are not as high-profile as other BattleMechs, it made no splash when an *Ursa* variant appeared a few decades ago that was functionally equal to any Clan design. Through lessons learned in the *Ursa* program, many of its advanced Clan-grade components are now built onsite or acquired via secure trading routes from Defiance Industries. The new *Crusader* combines the capability of a

Clan heavy 'Mech with its traditional rugged construction, making the best of both worlds.

## **BATTLE HISTORY**

When the Wolf Hunters abandoned the defense of Cameron to its militia in June 3146, just as Clan Jade Falcon made its next predatory moves, the Fifth Lyran Guards stationed on Alma Alta started dispatching individual battalions for relief. Though the reinforcements were able to improve the militia's morale, they were wholly unprepared what followed in December 3147.

As they started massing on Upano, the Jade Falcons returned to Cameron. When the first DropShip landed, a company led by Hauptmann Gregory "Unlucky" Johnson, piloting one of the first CRD-10Ss, moved to intercept the raiders. They were approaching the LZ when a veritable flotilla of additional DropShips carrying at least a Galaxy of troops arrived in system. All Fifth Lyran Guard elements were immediately recalled for evacuation.

In the hurried retreat, Johnson secured the rear, screening his company with long-range missile fire. Halting whenever a secure firing position presented itself, he found himself overtaken by an *Eyrie*. As the avian 'Mech charged into melee range, curling its menacing talons, any other *Crusader* would have been doomed at such close ranges. In the new CRD-10S, whose missiles have no targeting issues at short range, he calmly raised the 'Mech's arms and let fly with more than forty long- and short-range missiles. The volley disintegrated the upper half of the *Eyrie*, and Johnson was the last to board the evacuation flight, with a story to tell that belied his nickname.

## **VARIANTS**

In the 3060s rush to implement an influx of new technologies across the Great Houses, the *Crusader* was saddled with a gigantic heavy Gauss rifle at the expense of its traditional weapons suite. Jump jets were also shoehorned onto the chassis to help deploy the immense weapon, resulting in lightened armor and extremely limited ammunition. After the Jihad's apocalyptic damage, the *Crusader* lines lay in ruins, though a large number of partially built chassis survived in storage. They were finished as improvised refits without jump jets and designated CRD-9S. Beginning the trend of utilizing technologies pioneered on TharHes quads, they mounted the *Barghest's* more refined "Annihilator" heavy Gauss rifle and additional ammunition.

## **NOTABLE 'MECHS AND MECHWARRIORS**

**Hauptmann Gregory "Unlucky" Johnson:** Johnson is known throughout Mündler's Battalion of the Fifth Lyran Guards for his devilishly bad luck. He is downed regularly by battle damage beyond his control, be it random gyro hits, cascading ammo explosions, or even the destruction of the 'Mech's head. Alternatively, he is considered supremely lucky for surviving it all, having elevated the timing of his life-saving ejections to an art form.

At any rate, he is popular for leading from the front while being an excellent fire magnet for his company. On Tamarind, his often-mended ancestral *Crusader* finally succumbed when the head and gyro were damaged beyond repair, while his replacement *Loki* was blown to smithereens on Niihau. This did not stop Johnson from serving Kommandant Mündler's command staff by providing reconnaissance data from the seat of his Hoodling HoverJeep, which was nimble enough to dodge his usual luck. Amazingly, this seems to have broken the curse: using

a new CRD-10S that combines the best aspects of his former rides, Johnson dodged all his rotten luck when leading his company off Cameron.



Type: **Crusader**  
 Technology Base: Clan  
 Tonnage: 65  
 Role: Missile Boat  
 Battle Value: 2,264

<b>Equipment</b>		<b>Mass</b>
Internal Structure:	Endo Steel	3.5
Engine:	325 XL	12
Walking MP:	5	
Running MP:	8	
Jumping MP:	0	
Heat Sinks:	14 [28]	4
Gyro:		4
Cockpit:		3
Armor Factor:	192	12
	<i>Internal Structure</i>	<i>Armor Value</i>
Head	3	9
Center Torso	21	33
Center Torso (rear)		8
R/L Torso	15	24
R/L Torso (rear)		6
R/L Arm	10	20
R/L Leg	15	21

<b>Weapons and Ammo</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Critical</b>	<b>Tonnage</b>
LRM 15	RA	2	3.5
Artemis IV FCS	RA	1	1
ER Medium Pulse Laser	RA	2	2
Heavy Machine Gun	RA	1	.5
Ammo (LRM) 16	RT	2	2
Ammo (Streak) 15	RT	1	1
Ammo (HMG) 50	RT	1	.5
Streak SRM 6	RL	2	3
Streak SRM 6	LL	2	3
Ammo (LRM) 16	LT	2	2
Ammo (Streak) 15	LT	1	1
LRM 15	LA	2	3.5
Artemis IV FCS	LA	1	1
ER Medium Pulse Laser	LA	2	2
Heavy Machine Gun	LA	1	.5

**Notes:** Features the following Design Quirks: Easy To Maintain, Rugged (1), Stabilized Weapon (Streak SRMs).

Download the free  
 record sheet for this 'Mech at:  
[bg.battletech.com/shrapnel/](http://bg.battletech.com/shrapnel/)



# THE FOX PATROL

BRYAN YOUNG



## OUTSKIRTS OF GOTHENBURG

### JERANGLE

### LYRAN COMMONWEALTH

22 MAY 3145

“Anything on your scopes?” Katie Ferraro asked her subordinates over the radio as she moved *Kagekitsune*, her *Kit Fox*, slowly around the dark perimeter of Gothenburg City. It was weird, ordering around a couple of adults way older than her, but she had founded the Fox Patrol and they were grateful for the work. A merc unit was the natural result of a teenager finding an abandoned 'Mech in Jerangle's backwater and having the skills to fix it up themselves. At least that's what Katie told herself while edging around the soaking farmland on the outskirts of the ninth largest city on Jerangle and trying to act older than her nineteen years implied.

“Nothing here,” Evan Huxley said. He did his sentry duty in a *Locust*, painted in the standard Fox Patrol colors of rust red and gray, running in wider circles around the city than Katie had, owing to its speed. Gothenburg was arranged in a circle, with four main quadrants and the old town in the

center. It was the biggest city Katie had ever seen, but she knew that was because she hadn't been much farther than her old home of Potsdam. Stretching from the edges of the city were farms to the east and west and rice paddies to the north, where they were more easily flooded by the river. As big as Katie found it, it was a quiet place, doubly so when everyone was on edge about another raid at any second.

"Quiet as a tomb on this front," Arkee Colorado said. He was Evan's boyfriend—the two of them came as a pair—and he piloted the heaviest 'Mech in the Fox Patrol: an ancient *Quickdraw* that had seen more battles than they would ever know. The two were both in their early twenties, though Katie never talked about age with them. Seemed like it would only cause her problems. To their credit, though, they never flinched at taking an order from her. At least not on account of her youth.

On one hand, Katie didn't like hearing it was quiet. Things went bad when the situation was quiet, and it had been a week of quiet nights. On the other, hand, they were being paid to protect Gothenburg from a trio of mercenaries calling themselves the Jerangle Raiders. True to their name, they'd been running night raids against the city. Gothenburg had a problem, and no one else could help them. The Fox Patrol had been hired to deal with the Raiders. If there was no problem, Katie's unit was still getting paid their retainer.

The profit margin of the Fox Patrol was razor thin. If they had a particularly damaging engagement, they might even end up losing on the deal. But Katie knew what she was getting into. The Jerangle Raiders were minor players. Ill-equipped. Their 'Mechs were barely armed, since ammunition was so hard to get on a remote planet like Jerangle.

*One day, we'll get to fly away from this place.*

"Wait," Arkee said. "I've got something weak coming through here."

"What is it?" Katie asked.



“I think it’s a ’Mech. It’s coming up hot on my scopes. Nothing around these parts that hot at all unless it’s a ’Mech, right?”

“Probably.” Katie wondered what the best course of action would be. If a ’Mech barreled toward them on the other side of Gothenburg, beyond the mid-rises, and she and Evan both came over to back Arkee up, that would leave the rest of the city exposed. As far as they’d been able to gather, the Jerangle Raiders only had three operable ’Mechs, so racing to fight one ’Mech would be a bad idea. “You think you can handle it?”

“Listen, Captain, I think I can handle anything.”

“I don’t need bravado, Sergeant. I want an honest answer.”

“I don’t even know what it is. Wait...”

The radio dropped, and a flash of light brightened the sky across the city. Then, a moment later, she picked up the sound of the explosion.

“Arkee? What’s happening?”

Katie zoomed out her radar display, hoping she’d be able to catch something—anything—of the situation Arkee found himself in.

“Orders, sir?” Evan asked through clearly clenched teeth. She knew he must be stressing. That was his best friend under attack.

“Do you have anything on your readouts?”

“Nothing, sir. But it sounds like he’s in trouble. I’d really like to help.”

Katie took in a breath and held it, wondering what she was going to do if it was a trap. “Do it. Move fast, stay far away. Scout the situation. Jump in if you can actually help, but if he’s gone, we can’t afford to lose you, too.”

“Affirmative, Cap’n.”

For Katie’s part, she would bide her time. She would make sure there wasn’t a second ’Mech waiting in the wings to leap out and finish raiding the city. The Jerangle Raiders were already upset enough that the denizens of Gothenburg had refused to give them protection money, but the city had also hired the Fox Patrol for *actual* protection duty. Katie could just

imagine the leader of the Raiders wondering how Gothenburg had been able to afford mercenaries.

He must have been pretty pissed off.

The Fox Patrol was doing everything they could to keep him from raiding any more towns or villages in the sleepy ruins of Jerangle.

Evan didn't say anything over the radio for a full minute. Another flash in the distance told Katie that *something* had happened.

"Arkee? Evan?" Glancing at her HUD and all of her other dials and displays, she tried gleaned anything she could about the situation. "What's going on down there?"

She scanned the area ahead of her, beyond the outskirts of Gothenburg, making sure she had no enemy signals of her own. When the readouts all came out clear, she began making a wide circle with her *Kit Fox* around the perimeter again.

Since she'd been able to slowly learn how to acquire the ammunition for her short-range missile launcher and was able to get both lasers working again, she was finally able to use her 'Mech like it had been designed. *Kit Foxes* were perfect for hammering foes at long range, and then coming in close for the kill. Her large laser would serve the farthest out, then, when she had the ammo, the missiles and autocannon would help finish the job at short range.

In the absence of information in the Jerangle night, she wasn't sure if she'd be seeing anything at *any* range for her to shoot at.

"I've got eyes on him, Cap." That was Evan's voice.

"Why isn't Arkee talking?"

"Unknown. He's not responding to me, either. But I'm not seeing anything else on the scopes or on visual."

"Where the hell is he then?"

"Looks like he got hit. Pretty good, too."

*That's just great. How much are we going to sink into replacing his 'Mech components if he's hit that bad?* she wanted to say, but didn't. "Is he okay?"

"Unknown." She could hear the worry in Evan's voice.

"I'm on my way." Katie willed the *Kit Fox* to move faster, coming close to its top speed as it sped around the perimeter of the city.

Katie hated cutting through cities. She was always convinced that she'd knock a building over and didn't want to be liable for it. That was the last thing she could afford, though with Arkee's life on the line, she was tempted.

But Evan was there.

He could take care of Arkee if she couldn't. She was just the backup.

They were smart.

And she was glad she'd found them.

Arkee and Evan had come as a package deal. Had sought her out, actually. They were a two-man merc unit, and they had just gotten so far into debt they couldn't fix their 'Mechs. She was able to bring them on to the Fox Patrol for a song, and in return she just had to keep the jobs coming in and their 'Mechs purring like kittens. Or foxes. Whichever. That was the advantage of her training to fix 'Mechs since she was just a kid, an advantage she figured she'd have in commanding a 'Mech unit.

She liked them and didn't want to lose them.

She got the impression they wouldn't have many other places to go anyway. For whatever reason, they found a home with Katie and the Fox Patrol, and she found she spent as much time fixing the 'Mechs as she did finding jobs.

Maybe being in charge was actually the worst idea because it yielded the most responsibility. The two boys could just go off and play while she had to see to the contracts and make the payroll and afford the repairs and then effect them herself.

Katie sighed. She'd grown up too fast, and they were content to let her.

"Evan, talk to me."

"There's no 'Mech around, and he's still out of communication. Maybe he got hit and his radio went dead?"

"Not likely. And if that's what happened, what were those lights in the sky and the bogey on his scope?"

"Fair."

"Maybe they're jamming him," Katie said.

"That seems unaffordable to an outfit this ragtag."

"Fair."

Katie had almost made it around the bend, doing her best to keep an eye out for any other bogies as well as listen for any other signs of hostile activity.

The radio crackled. "—do you copy?"

"Arkee?" Katie said.

"Captain, it's Arkee."

"What the hell happened?"

"Hit-and-run attack. Knocked me down and knocked me out. Blacked out for a minute."

"You okay?" Evan asked. Naturally, that was his primary concern.

"I think I am, but my *Quickdraw* is going to need some help. I've got damage on my torso and shoulders. Lost some armor. I think they were aiming for my missiles, maybe they'd hoped I'd just explode?"

"Great." Katie gritted her teeth.

If they were going to have a showdown, they'd need to fix the *Quickdraw* fast. And she didn't know where she'd get any replacement armor. Maybe she'd just have to weld sheet metal on the damn thing. Maybe Mayor Becker would know of something she could use and deduct it from their pay.

Or maybe Arkee went out into battle having taken the hit and he just needed to be careful.

“Aside from the armor, you’re functional, though?”

“I think so.”

“Good. It’s going to be dawn soon, and the patrol will be over. I can start work on repairs.”

“Affirmative.”



The damage to Arkee’s *Quickdraw* was superficial, but that didn’t make it any less obnoxious to repair.

Gothenburg’s municipal officials had given them a warehouse deep in the dirty industrial district on the south end of town as their base of operations. Grimy with rust and soot, it was tall enough to admit their ’Mechs, which was more than could be said for most of the other buildings in town. The warehouse hadn’t been outfitted with much, but the Fox Patrol had their own repair kit, and that included the scaffolding Katie would use to fix the heavy ’Mech. She stood high up on it, assessing the damage while Evan and Arkee stood close to each other below, looking up at her while she worked.

They both had their arms folded.

“You know, you two could help,” she said.

“You know I’m useless with repairs. I’m a MechWarrior, not a ’Mech tech.” Evan said with no hint of guilt or sarcasm in his voice.

“I know, I know.” He really *was* terrible with repairs. All thumbs. It was actually spectacular how much worse he made things when he tried to help. “What about you, Arkee? You’re the one who did all of this damage. Can you help?”

“I’m worse than him, and you know it. Don’t like heights, either.”

She shook her head.

What in the world was she going to do with these two?

They needed to score a job big enough that they'd be able to hire some techs and she wouldn't have to do all of this herself.

At this rate, she was already giving up sleep in order to work on the 'Mechs. If she couldn't get them to take less damage or if she couldn't find easier jobs, they were going to simply drown in repair costs. They wouldn't last long as a merc unit long enough to develop the reputation she wanted.

So she doubled her efforts and worked even harder.

She thought about what Scarecrow—the man who had trained her and adopted her after her parents died—would say. His voice echoed in her ear as though he were there: *“Just take it one task at a time. Break it down as best you can and just chew on the little bits. Soon enough, you'll be crossin' things off your list left and right, and then the 'Mech'll be done. In the blink of an eye.”*

She missed him.

It was hard enough losing her parents. Losing Scarecrow was like losing her folks all over again. He'd been so delighted when she brought home the *Kit Fox*, and he'd showed her how to fix it and tune it up in ways that had still been beyond her. He had done everything he could to pass on what he knew before he died, but cancer got him. That's what happened when you lived in one of the irradiated zones of the planet for an extended period of time. He hadn't made it to Potsdam soon enough, and then it just went downhill from there.

It wasn't fair.

She couldn't believe she'd only had the 'Mech for a little more than two years, and she'd lost Scarecrow right in the middle of that. It all felt like a different lifetime. A life she mourned as much as her parents, biological and adopted alike. She wished Evan and Arkee could have met him. They'd have liked him.

But, like she approached the BattleMechs she repaired, so too would she approach her grief. One small task at a time.

“Could you at least bring me the tools I need?” she called down to Evan and Arkee.

But they were already gone.

She had to remind herself that she liked them and that they were great MechWarriors and even good company. Because otherwise she was going to scream.

Wasn't she the captain?

After all, they had given themselves their titles. They'd all heard that the most storied merc units all had military ranks in their hierarchy and the captain was typically at the top, so since Katie seemed to know what she was doing, Evan and Arkee had decided that title should go to her.

Katie climbed down the scaffolding to collect the tools she needed, dreaming about what life would be like if she was an *actual* merc. Instead, she felt like all she'd done was play one. Like when she used to play MechWarrior as a kid, pretending to stomp around and actually pilot a 'Mech.

Mayor Becker had some scrap he could send over for her to make the *Quickdraw* structurally sound again. The repairs weren't going to be that bad.

And, like Scarecrow had always said: the sooner she got to work, the sooner she'd be finished.



It took six hours after the mayor's delivery before the *Quickdraw* was in enough fighting shape that it wouldn't be at any significant disadvantage if they had to run and fight. And after a night of patrol and then all those repairs, Katie needed to sleep.

Time in her bunk was precious.

They'd converted the warehouse's offices into sleeping quarters. It wasn't an elaborate setup, but it was the best they could do. It wasn't like they could afford other accommodations, and this came free with the gig, so she couldn't complain.

She blacked out the windows and did her best to crash.

Katie closed her eyes and felt like she'd only barely just blinked when there came a knock at the door.

"Wha...?" she said.

Why would someone be knocking on the door while she was sleeping?

"Is everything okay?"

The mystery person knocked on the door harder, as if in response to her question.

"Fine, fine." Katie blundered toward the door in the dark and unlocked it. As she opened it, the a sliver of blinding sunlight expanded and filled the room.

"What is it?" Through squinted, bleary eyes, she saw Arkee. He was the bigger of the two, and bearded. His jumpsuit was rust red, like all of their Fox Patrol gear.

"We just got a message."

"So?"

"It's from the Jerangle Raiders."

She was able to open her eyes a little bit more. "*What?*"

"They sent us a challenge."

"A challenge? Who do they think we are? The Jade Falcons?"

Arkee handed her a noteputer with the message on it, and when she got a look at it, she wondered if the Raiders really did think her outfit was a Clan of some sort.

"It's a challenge," she said, reading over it.

"That's what I said."



“They want us to meet them. They say they’ve only got three ’Mechs and want to meet the three of us on ‘the field of battle.’ At sundown.”

“That’s what it said.”

“Jesus.”

“Yup. What do you want to do?”

“I don’t know. Should we do it? What if it’s a trap?”

Arkee shrugged his shoulders. “I mean, don’t we go into everything thinking it’s a trap?”

“Generally.” She handed him back the noteputer and then rubbed the sleep from her eyes. “How long was I out?”

“Few hours.”

“How long till sundown?”

“Few hours.”

“You’re really helpful, Arkee, you know that?”

“I do my best.”

“Where’s Evan?”

“Sleeping still.”

“Wake him up. We’ve got a lot of prep to do if we’re going to be ready to meet them. But first, I’ll let them know we accept their challenge.”

“We do?”

“Yeah. We’re going to have to fight them anyway, right? They knocked you out last night and ran. You didn’t even see them.”

“But I did see them.”

“Okay, what ’Mech were they piloting?”

Arkee looked down, avoiding her gaze.

He’d forgotten, if he’d even looked. And he almost certainly hadn’t checked his ’Mech’s battleROM recording to go back and learn anything, like she had.

“It was a *Marauder*,” Katie said. “We’re going to lose this slowly, or we’re going to come out on top all at once. The Raiders don’t realize it, but

they just gave us the means to do it. We'll figure this out. We're smarter than them. We're better MechWarriors than they are. Even you, Arkee. They're sneak-attacking us because they know we have them dead to rights."

"Then it's a trap."

"I think so, yeah. They want to meet in the rice fields. That's a lot of wet and soggy land our 'Mechs can get caught in. And the Raiders know our fight may ruin this whole crop of rice, putting Gothenburg in an even worse position this year. To the point where maybe they'd be unable to afford keeping us on the payroll come harvest time."

"So we tell them to take a hike?"

"No. We spring the trap."

Arkee's face fell, and his eyes narrowed with suspicion. "That sounds like an absolutely terrible idea."

"Listen, if we know it's a trap, we'll be ready for them."

"But what trap are they springing? Is it just the battlefield? Do they have more 'Mechs than we do? Artillery? Infantry hiding in the rice fields? How do we know?"

"We don't. But we'll do our best."

"I mean, that's fine with me. It's your call. You're going to be the one fixing the 'Mechs."

"If we survive."

"You're not exactly inspiring me with confidence."

"Send them a note back. Tell them we accept."

"You're insane."

"I'm not. It'll work out."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Just go. Do it."

"If you insist." Arkee left, exasperated. He was more annoyed than she'd have liked him to be. She wanted him to be gung ho about the plan.

She just needed to figure out exactly what that plan was.

She glanced at her chronometer and realized she didn't have much time to figure it out.



As they approached the appointed rice fields for their challenge, Katie was sure she had a foolproof plan.

The Fox Patrol would play to the strengths of each of their 'Mechs. She would stay as far away from the center of conflict as possible, maximizing the damage she could do from long range until it was apparent she'd be able to close in and help make the kills.

Arkee would stay in a medium range and do his best to soak up damage and deal it to the best of his ability. His 'Mech was the heaviest and could take the most abuse, despite what the engagement the night previous had indicated. In a fight with opponents he expected, he would do okay.

Evan though, he was the secret weapon.

*Locusts* were some of the fastest 'Mechs ever built, but they were vulnerable. A couple of good hits and they were toast. It was really an awful 'Mech to round out their trio, to be honest, but they went to battle with the 'Mechs they had, not the 'Mechs they wanted. Evan had salvaged the *Locust* and done the best he could with it. Or at least tried to, which is why he needed Katie. But Evan would take his 'Mech and race through the battle, adding confusion with lightning-fast hit-and-run attacks.

Sure, the rice fields might be a little tricky for him to maneuver, but the rice and the water were bigger problems when the 'Mechs were standing still. Running along would work just fine. As long as he didn't get stuck in a fight, he could strafe them with his lasers and keep moving.

Aside from the *Marauder* she had seen on Arkee's battleROM footage, Katie didn't know exactly what assortment of 'Mechs they would be up

against, but in her experience, the sorts of 'Mechs operated by bandits on Jerangle weren't as well maintained as the 'Mechs of the Fox Patrol.

For Katie, that was the secret. A well-maintained 'Mech would always perform better than the usual scrap they saw around here.

Still, she couldn't help but be afraid of what the Raiders could field in this skirmish. For them to issue the challenge, they had to feel they had some upper hand. And they had knocked Arkee's *Quickdraw* to the ground pretty quick.

"You two locked in and ready?" she asked over the radio.

"Affirmative, Cap'n," Evan said.

"Locked and loaded, Cap," Arkee said.

"Be sure to stick to our formation. It's going to be hard enough to navigate this as it is, I don't need you two clowns breaking the formation or the plan. We've got one good chance at this."

"Sometimes," Evan said, his voice full of happy charm, "one good chance is all you need."

"Sounds like an old Kurita proverb," Arkee said.

"More like a fortune cookie," Katie said.

Evan was having none of it, though. "You really think a Kurita could be as pleasant or charming as I am?"

Katie rolled her eyes. "Let's cut the chatter and focus on the task at hand."

She really needed to work on their discipline. If they were going to be a genuine fighting unit with some sort of quasi-military cohesion indicative of a first-rate mercenary unit, they'd have cut down on the wisecracks over their closed channels.

What would someone listening in think?

It could turn into a nightmare.

In fact, on sleepless nights, one of her recurring nightmares was exactly that: being disrespected by other MechWarriors.

Evan and Arkee had kept silent, so they must have listened to her well enough.

“You in position, Evan?” she asked. He should have been. He had the closest distance to travel and the fastest ’Mech among them.

“Yessiree.” His cheer was pleasant enough when they were just hanging out. She could see why Arkee was attracted to him. He was very easy to be around. But on what could be a death march, it was just a little too much for her taste.

“Good.” She checked for any sign of the opposing ’Mechs and still couldn’t see anything. “And Arkee, you’re almost in place?”

“Almost.”

“You picking them up?”

“Nothing yet.

“When you catch a blip, send over your telemetry and scan data.”

“Affirmative, Cap’n.”

It wasn’t a minute longer before the bottom dropped out of the operation.

“Oh, man, you’re not going to like this, Captain.”

Arkee only ever pronounced all the syllables when it was trouble.

“What is it?”

“Looks like three heavies. Sending information now.”

*Three heavies?* “That’s just great.”

By the time she got the data, she could see the enemy ’Mechs standing as specks on the horizon. Her computer had already tagged them. The lead ’Mech was a *Marauder*. Standing behind them was a *Catapult* and a *Galahad*. Katie suddenly wondered how much of her plan was in jeopardy.

Unless the winds blew in their direction in just the right way and every hit they made was lucky, they were going to have a hell of a time.

There was no way one heavy ’Mech and two lights stood a chance against three heavies unless *everything* went their way.

Katie saw only the most narrow path to victory.

The *Catapult* was equipped with enough long-range missiles and lasers to bury all of them on its own. And the *Galahad* was a menace with not one, but *two* Gauss rifles. The *Marauder* boasted PPCs, lasers, and autocannons.

None of this was going to be pleasant.

*Maybe I should call a retreat.*

“Orders, Captain?” Arkee asked.

He was the one out there in the front, his 'Mech ankle deep in the reflective pools of the rice paddies. Waiting for them to arrive.

*How do we play this?*

“Patch me through to your externals.”

“Got it. Say the word and you're hot.”

“Go ahead.” Katie paused for a second, gathering her thoughts. “Jerangle Raiders. This is Captain Katie Ferraro, leader of the Fox Patrol. The city of Gothenburg is under our protection. We have come to meet you to hear your demands. Understand that we parley from a position of strength. Your 'Mechs do not intimidate us. Transmit your demands now and we will discuss further.”

She flipped the channel so only her compatriots could hear her. “Well, we'll see how they respond to that.”

She wondered how the local farmers, living in the sparse houses around the edges of the rice paddies would react to hearing the threat. Would they be scared of collateral damage or ruined crops? Or would they feel confident that the Fox Patrol would save them?

As she waited for a response from the Jerangle Raiders, Katie hoped they would feel the latter.

But the waiting went longer, and she catalogued the clouds in the mottled sky and the dwindling sunlight.

Katie's stomach twisted into a pretzel. Every second that ticked by, the knot tightened.

*What are they waiting for?*

Were they speaking among themselves?

Waiting for the time to strike?

Would their response come in the form of a salvo of missiles aimed right at Arkee?

Suddenly, she didn't trust her plan all that much. And she realized Arkee had no business following her into battle anywhere.

"Damn it," she said into the radio.

"No cause for alarm yet." But Arkee's voice had a quiver of fear in it.

"Easy for you to say. You're the one out there flapping in the wind for all to see."

"Hey, I agreed to this plan."

"You said, and I quote, 'This plan is terrible.'"

"Yeah, but just because a plan is terrible doesn't mean it's the worst option we've got. I think this is just a big show of force, and we'll be just fine."

"Love, those are three heavy 'Mechs," Evan said. "We are *not* negotiating from a position of strength here."

"Maybe they aren't either," Katie said. But she didn't believe it.

"How long do we give them to respond?" Arkee asked.

It was a fair question. Katie glanced down to her chronometer on the console. Almost two full minutes had elapsed. That must have been one hell of a conference they were having among themselves.

"Have they moved at all?" Katie squinted at the 'Mechs on her viewscreen, then zoomed in to get a better look at them. All painted in a swampy jungle camouflage. "I can't even tell if they've moved."

"Not for a tick," Arkee said. "Best believe I've been watching them right close."

“Hmmm.”

Katie found herself at a loss. There wasn't much she could do. The way she saw it, she had two options. First, she could wait for a response. Maybe this would all work itself out somehow without any more fighting. Maybe it wouldn't. Second, the Fox Patrol could simply begin their attack.

The Raiders certainly wouldn't be expecting it. They had the bigger, better 'Mechs. They had the choice of battlefield. They had all the cards.

But, maybe, with the element of surprise, the Fox Patrol could focus in on one and get the drop on them.

Katie exhaled deeply.

She didn't enjoy making these decisions, but she was the best person for the job. Evan and Arkee were much better at following orders than giving them. Still, she wanted everything to be very clear. Chess was not a game she often had the patience to play. She found herself making moves faster and faster until she heard someone say “Check.”

That was an impulse she would have to work on.

Recognizing that, she took in a deep breath. “We'll wait. But I can't imagine what's taking them so long.”

“Copy that, Cap'n,” Arkee said.

And that brought a smile to her face. If he was calling her “Cap'n” again, then he'd cooled off just a bit. Or at least the stress wasn't eating him so bad.

“Hold on there,” Arkee said. “Wait just a second.”

But she saw it, too.

The *Marauder*, mean and menacing up front, aimed its particle projector cannon right at Arkee. It looked like there was going to be a fight after all.

The PPC blasted Arkee, its bright light reflecting off the water of the rice field, making it look even brighter than normal.



Watching her readouts, Katie hoped Arkee would make it through okay. That patch job on his torso wasn't the best she'd ever done. It was a rush job through and through.

When the shot flew wide, she smiled. Her adrenaline spiked, and the rush of it coursed through her.

“Do it, boys! Fire at will! Focus in on the *Marauder* and stick to the plan!”

“Affirmative!” they both called out.

And that was that. The decision was made for her. Time for her to get into range and start blasting.

She wasn't far.

Katie locked in on the *Marauder* and fired her large laser. She could take potshots at the 'Mech all day and stay far enough way to be largely out of range of the Raider pilot's worst attacks.

Her lance of laser energy cut a thick chunk of torso armor from the 'Mech.

Arkee opened fire just as quick, his *Quickdraw* launching a salvo of long-range missiles. They peppered the *Marauder* across its entire body; some hit the legs, some the torso, some the cockpit itself. Chunks of armor blasted away from the 'Mech, and Katie had to do a double take to be sure. “That *Marauder* seems a lot softer than it looks.”

“Copy that,” Arkee said.

“I'm incoming,” Evan said. And from the left side of her view screen, she saw him there, a speedy spec of a BattleMech, racing across the rice fields. His aged *Locust* looked like a pair of rust-red streaks, as his reflection doubled in the still water of the paddies.

He lashed out with his medium lasers as soon as he found himself in range, ablating much of the armor on the *Marauder*'s right arm.

The *Marauder* pilot showed great discipline in keeping its target locked in on Arkee. It pulled back, behind the *Catapult* and *Galahad*, and planted

its feet in the water while firing its medium lasers.

Arkee took the hit in the torso, right over the patched armor.

“Arkee?” Katie shouted. The last thing she wanted was to lose her biggest 'Mech right at the beginning of the conflict.

Evan closed the distance between him and the *Marauder* by half and unleashed another barrage of lasers that lacerated the 'Mech's arm once more.

Katie fired her large laser again and furrowed her brow as it struck the *Marauder* squarely in the leg. “Wait... What are the other two 'Mechs doing? They haven't moved whatsoever.”

“They haven't fired a shot, either,” Arkee said.

“What's their game?” Evan asked. Something was definitely wrong. MechWarriors didn't just fall asleep at the switch like that. They should have been firing hell itself at them. By all rights, Arkee should have been toast instead of lightly toasted by a single PPC hit.

The *Marauder* opened fire again, and its PPC smashed through most of the *Quickdraw*'s torso.

“You okay, Arkee?”

“Can't take many more hits like that. But where are the other two 'Mechs?”

As far as Katie could tell, they hadn't moved a single centimeter the entire time. Zooming her visual sensors for a closer look on them, they looked barely able to stand. Most of their joints had been fused or damaged. The *Catapult*'s missile racks were empty. The ends of the *Galahad*'s Gauss-rifle arms were even sawed off and rusted.

“It's a ruse,” she said.

“Come again?” Evan replied.

“Think about it. We come out here, we see three heavies and decide to negotiate with them because we're not suicidal. It's a bluff. The *Marauder*'s the only target right now. The other two are statues. It's just a

con. They're empty shells with warm engines to make 'em look like targets."

"But what's the point?"

"A show of force. Only fools would attack a force that looked like that."

"I resemble that remark," Evan said, taking mock offense.

"She's right, though, Ev," Arkee said.

"Of course I'm right. Now hammer that *Marauder* and we'll be done with it."

"What if the other two are playing possum, though?" Evan asked.

It was an intriguing possibility, but Katie had her doubts. "Even if they were just out of ammo and acting as a screen, they could still do a lot of damage in a physical fight. They're just there to look scary."

But then her heart skipped a beat.

If they made it out of their jam, that *Catapult* and *Galahad* would make some great salvage. If they were anything close to workable, they would make the Fox Patrol able to punch a lot harder for their size.

Katie had to stop herself from daydreaming further as she circled back around to other possibilities.

She fired on the *Marauder* again, as did Arkee. Evan zoomed by once more, taking one last potshot. It was enough to take the *Marauder* down. The cockpit armor wasn't sound, and their shots were able to crack it open like an egg, dribbling steel all down the front. The *Marauder* crashed backward, and it put a smile on Katie's face.

They were going to come out of this okay.

And she was doubly glad she'd made Mayor Becker put a salvage clause in their contract.

"So, I guess that's it then," Evan said, bringing his 'Mech to a halt at the feet of the smoking wreckage of the *Marauder*.

"I guess," Katie said. "That was a lot easier than I thought it would be."

"Me too," Arkee said. "I'll be honest, I thought I was a goner."

“Do me a favor and knock those other two ’Mechs over, would you, just in case? Having them standing up and staring at us is just freaking me out.”

“Affirmative, Cap’n.” Arkee moved in and tried pushing over the *Galahad*. It didn’t fall, though. “You ever just try to knock a ’Mech over, Cap? It’s not as easy as you’d think.”

“Do whatever you need to. Just make sure it’s out of commission. I don’t want to risk anything.”

Indeed, something still set her teeth on edge. A creeping fear in her stomach crawled up to meet the panic in her chest. Something was wrong.

“There’s big tire tracks all over the place here,” Arkee said. “Deep ruts in the mud. The Raiders must have just drove these suckers in on flatbeds since they can’t move on their own.”

“Good to know, but that means something is up.” She turned on her frequency scanner, going through as much of the unencrypted civilian frequencies as she could find. The radio squelched and screeched as it scanned until it stopped on a channel and she heard what sounded like a scream.

“What?” she said to herself.

Then she waited for the situation to make itself known on the radio.

“It’s an attack!” came a voice.

“Where are they?” came another. “How many are there?”

“They’re on the south side! The industrial area.”

“Three of them.”

“Damn it.” Katie had heard all she needed to. She clicked her radio over to the Fox Patrol frequency as she started circling her ’Mech around to head back into Gothenburg. “Fox Patrol, this was all a ruse to lead us out of town. They’re attacking the south side as we speak.”

“*Damn it,*” Arkee and Evan both said.

“We need to get in there as fast as we can. If we lose too much of the city or the skirmish, we’re not going to be able to keep any of this salvage,

and that would make me unhappy. And you wouldn't like me when I'm unhappy."

"Sure thing, Cap'n."

"Evan, go scout ahead. See what we're up against. You'll get there first anyhow. I wonder how long ago the attack started."

She wanted to scream. This was not how things were supposed to go.

The Fox Patrol was a group of professionals. They didn't leave their flank—or their client—undefended. If they didn't turn this around fast, she worried it could be a black mark on their reputations forever. No one would ever hire them again.

"Arkee, you're the slowest and farthest. You'll just have to be the cavalry."

"I don't think I've got a choice."

"Likely not. But we can still win this, right? Early chatter on the city channels sounds like it's just three 'Mechs. We're good at range. Urban fights aren't so bad. The industrial section is mostly built high, but we can use that to our advantage. Hit and run. It sounds like a mix of weight classes. And as long as it's not three more heavies, I have every confidence in us."

"Don't jinx it, Cap'n."

"I would never."

Katie pushed her beloved *Kit Fox* even harder, wishing she could squeeze any more speed out of it at all, but it was already sprinting as fast as she could make it.

The heat in her cockpit was almost unbearable. Those laser shots threw her heat way up, and the forced march didn't help. She was grateful that her fighting uniform wasn't much more than a bathing suit and a cooling vest. If she had to be stifled by any more cloth, she'd scream about that, too.

Looking at the readouts, she wasn't going to be able to do much more if she didn't want to overheat. And there was nothing worse than a 'Mech

frozen in the heat. Only amateurs pulled that sort of stunt. Though, she had to admit there were probably some 'Mech pilots who ran really close to the edge and would no doubt shut their 'Mechs down to win a battle if it were close.

She was a fine 'Mech pilot, but she wasn't that good.

Not yet.

And if she didn't get to the conflict soon, she was never going to be a MechWarrior of that quality.

Navigating through the streets of Gothenburg inside her treasured *Kagekitsune*, Katie felt like a stranger. She'd never been here before taking the assignment, and she didn't know it like she did Potsdam. And this city was so much bigger. It was big enough that it had parks and fountains and museums, which were all things she'd only assumed cities had. Katie figured she'd feel like a stranger in any town she found herself defending.

Feeling like a stranger didn't mean she wouldn't fight and die for them if need be. That was the life of a mercenary. Of a MechWarrior. Of a person who made their money piloting 'Mechs for a living. Like bodyguards or samurai or anyone else in history willing to take bullets for others in exchange for cold, hard currency, she was just the latest in that long line.

Katie would die for the people of Gothenburg if she needed to.

Though she hoped she didn't.

Evan saw them first and reported in. "I've got visual."

"What are we looking at?"

"Looks like they're emptying a warehouse. There's some light infantry sorts loading up trucks. As for 'Mech resistance, we've got three. They're in a v-formation, but it looks like they're on different streets. Two are close to your location."

"Models?"

"Looks like we've got two *Commandos*, and those are on your side, and what my computer is telling me is an old *Night Hawk*. All light 'Mechs, all

painted in that same, terrible Jerangle Raiders camouflage.”

“They’re all old. Sounds like they’re even uglier.”

“Yeah, they’re old, but that *Night Hawk* is ancient.”

“Where did they even get this stuff?”

“We can wonder about that later, right?”

“If you insist.”

“You’re the captain, Captain. Should I engage? Or wait?”

“Engage on my mark. I want a visual of my own before we commit.”

Three light ’Mechs. That was certainly promising. They had a fighting chance, even if their heavy was a good five minutes out. If they could use the streets to their advantage, it was possible.

Those *Commandos* could be vicious, though. They were light, but standing up to their lasers and missiles wasn’t going to be easy. She would try to keep them at range, where their weapons would be ineffective and she’d be able to hit back, but the streets in the industrial district might not cooperate. Having two of them there doubled the threat. Her computer readout told her the *Night Hawk* was all laser-based. That meant they weren’t going to run out of ammo. At best, they would just overheat when the time came. But ’Mechs that light and limber, she didn’t see it happening in this engagement. If they fired enough to overheat, Katie Ferraro and her Fox Patrol were going to have far bigger problems than that.

She saw the boxy backs of the *Commandos*, and slowed to a stop. They were chasing down the city’s own defenders, who were firing at them with small arms. Sure, they were light ’Mechs, but not even pistol and rifle bullets were going to faze them.

Katie could only imagine how pissed the locals were at having to defend their city. What the hell did they pay the Fox Patrol for otherwise?

Beyond them and a few streets over stood the *Night Hawk*. That must have been where the infantry were loading their trucks. The *Commandos* were the sentries sent to harass while the *Night Hawk* did the guarding.

None of the Raiders' 'Mechs seemed to notice Evan's *Locust*. It was a shorter 'Mech and a little more difficult to see over the buildings. And the Raiders must have had their attention on something else entirely.

That was good news for the Fox Patrol.

"Evan, we're going to go in hard and focus on the *Commandos*. The *Night Hawk* looks like it's busy, but if its buddies are in trouble, it may break off. We don't want to harass all three until Arkee gets here."

"I'm a-coming, I'm a-coming," Arkee said.

"What's your ETA?"

"Still a few minutes out. This *Quickdraw* isn't made for sprinting like you two are."

"Just get here as soon as you can. Evan, you take a hard turn and get the *Commandos* and rush them head on. I'll see if I can flank them on the cross street. We'll pin them from two directions in the intersection."

"Sounds good to me."

"Let's do it."

Katie took a deep breath.

Using her console display, she tracked the distance between Evan's *Locust* and the *Commandos*, wanting to make absolutely sure the timing lined up to catch them in the crossfire. This would be the easiest way to deal with them.

Doing the calculus of speed in her head, she charged forward as soon as the *Locust* crossed that imaginary line, and put one of the *Commandos* within range of her lasers.

She fired, but the shots went wide, crossing in between both of the *Commandos* and sailing down the street until they hit the side of a nearby building.

The rear *Commando* definitely noticed her. It turned to face her while its compatriot faced off against Evan's *Locust*. It was going to be a showdown. The only advantage she had was she could hit the *Commando* from farther



away, meaning she had some time before it could close the distance and be in range to shoot back.

Evan wouldn't be so lucky. He had to get in close, hit, and run.

As the *Commando* charged her, Katie thought to back up. If she could keep her edge of range and reach for even a minute longer, it would help her in the long run. But she moved backward a lot more slowly than the *Commando* charged.

Still out of range, the Raider shot their laser, but missed by a wide margin.

Katie fired her large laser, taking care to aim more meticulously. The reticule turned gold over the *Commando* and she fired.

The shot hit the right side of the torso.

Damaged as the 'Mech was, it didn't stop.

*That thing is a lot better armored than it looks for a light 'Mech.*

It dawned on Katie why the *Commando* charged her so quickly. It was trying to ram her. She supposed the idea was for the laser and missiles to melt the hardest pieces of her armor off, and at that speed, it would just bowl her over like a tenpin.

If she didn't put it down before it closed the distance, she was a goner.

Backing up, she wished she could increase her speed, but moving backward in the *Kit Fox* was already a pain. And slow.

But all she had to do was buy herself time.

Just a little extra.

The *Commando* closed the gap even farther and fired its laser again. She wondered if it even had ammo for its SRM launchers. Even if the *Commando* would have been in range, the shot missed, flying wide from the *Kit Fox*, much to Katie's relief.

"Come on, go down you bastard."

She fired her large laser again, but the shot missed.

"Damn it!"

Hopefully Evan was faring better against his *Commando*, but somehow she doubted it. They both had to get in the same range. He was definitely faster than the *Commando*, but if the Raider hit him with their laser a few times and rammed him good, it would be all over for the little *Locust*.

She prayed Arkee would get here soon.

The *Commando* managed to get a shot off that hit her. The bulk of her 'Mech was torso, and that's where the laser hit. Not enough to put her down, but enough to be threatening. Her indicators lit up, flashing from green to yellow.

Then she hit the firing stud and felt the heat rise in her 'Mech as both of her lasers lanced toward the *Commando* in a flash. The medium laser went wide, and the large laser hit the same arm, searing it off at the elbow joint.

The only thing she could do was back up more and try to sidestep the 'Mech if it got close enough to ram her. But, being in the *Kit Fox*, her limited mobility didn't lend to such a risky maneuver. She was going to have to put it down before it reached her.

But with how fast it charged, she wasn't sure she'd get the chance.

The *Commando* fired again, its laser missing her.

The heat rose and sweat poured from Katie's brow.

There wasn't any choice.

She triggered both lasers again and hoped their piercing coherent light would end the fight once and for all.

The *Commando* bucked under the damage as the lasers sheared off the left side of its arm and torso.

Its front armor melted right off. She'd cracked the egg open. All she had to do was make the kill.

Though its momentum slowed, the *Commando* staggered and kept coming at her.

She hit it with the large laser, turning the center mass of its torso structure into slag. Keeping its momentum, the 'Mech tipped over and

skidded forward on the ferrocrete street. It came to a halt right in front of her.

Katie exhaled. She felt like she hadn't taken a breath in minutes, but she could finally breathe again.

There was no time to stop and celebrate, though. "Evan, do you copy? What's your situation?"

She tried to get a visual on the street where Evan's *Locust* was battling the other Jerangle Raiders *Commando*. Hopefully the one he dealt with was softer than the one she had taken care of.

"Evan? Do you copy?"

Then, through strained breath and a patchy radio signal, he spoke. "Little busy..."

She spotted smoke rising from a building on the cross street, but couldn't see the either of the 'Mechs. Had they both gone down? They could have been obscured by any number of taller buildings.

The only thing she could do was keep moving. She couldn't help if she wasn't there.

"Arkee," she called out, "What's your ETA?"

"I'm close."

"Define close."

"I'm coming."

*Damn it.*

They were all going to be slag before he got there.

Katie pushed *Kagekitsune* up the street as she double-checked the instrument panel and her damage gauge. Her midsection—which was effectively her entire cockpit—flashed yellow. As did the left arm.

She could take another few hits, but it wouldn't be good for her.

Then she checked her heat scale. The exertion of walking wasn't helping the heat come down very fast, but her 'Mech was cooling. She

shouldn't have pushed the lasers so hard, but what other choice did she have?

That Jerangle Raider would've been the one left standing if she hadn't pushed the heat. And they would be the one turning around to help *their* friend out of the jam they were in. No, she had made the right choice.

She'd decided she was going to be a MechWarrior at the age of nine, and back then she'd never realized that being a MechWarrior would involve so many life-or-death decisions.

*Every* battle was life or death.

And she had to force herself to remember that.

Rounding the corner, she had to take a wide arc.

That was the only thing she hated about her trusty 'Mech. She loved it. She loved the story of it. She loved the feel of it.

She loved everything but how hard it was to turn.

When she lined up at the street, the scene before her wasn't anything like she expected.

The *Commando* had crashed into a building and toppled over. That was the smoke, coming from the rubble and the resultant fire. Evan's *Locust* was crouched down, aiming its weapons right at the *Commando*. Since the *Locust* was closer to Katie than the *Commando* wreckage, she assumed the *Commando* had gone in to charge and missed. When it crashed, Evan must have circled back around to knock it out completely.

"Evan, you done?"

"I just wanted to make sure they didn't get back up."

"They're not. We've got more work to do."

"Affirmative, Cap."

The *Locust* ceased its assault and turned around to face Katie. "What's the plan?"

Katie brought Arkee back into the conversation. "What's your ETA?"

"Almost there."

She wished she could do something about the speed of his 'Mech. It didn't seem likely. Mass had as much to do with his speed as anything, and his 'Mech was 60 tons; they didn't classify it as a heavy for no reason.

"So, here's what I got," Katie said. "We take it from both sides."

"That's your plan?" Evan said. "We take it from both sides?"

"I mean, do you have something better?"

"Not... I mean... No. But that doesn't change the fact that we just—"

"Listen, Evan. We're in big stompy 'Mechs that go pew pew. Are there many more plans than just picking an angle and shooting at other big stompy 'Mechs from that vantage point?"

"Well, I..."

"Not really. Yeah, there's a lot of strategy in picking that vantage point, but we're fighting in the streets. And that *Night Hawk* is right in the middle of the street. There's really two options for 'Mechs like ours without jump jets. We take it together from one side, or we corner it from both sides. No, we don't have a whole lot of options for plans. At least hitting it from both sides gives us a way to cut it off and force it to work harder to pick a target. Now I'm the captain here, and if you want to second-guess my orders, you just go ahead and do it, Evan. But I'm the captain, God damn it. And I'm doing my best to keep us all alive and fed and in 'Mechs that work. Do you have a problem with that?"

"Er, well, no."

"Then listen to me."

"Captain..." Evan's 'Mech backed up, aiming its gun right at her.

"What did I just say?"

"No, Captain, you don't get it."

And then suddenly she did.

The *Night Hawk*. Behind her.

Just rounding the corner at the edges of her viewscreen.

"Damn it, Evan! Shoot them!"

Katie negotiated her *Kit Fox* to start making that slow turn so she'd be able to get the *Night Hawk* in her firing arc.

*You really just love opening your mouth for nice, long diatribes only to put your big metal 'Mech feet inside of it, don't you, Ferraro?*

Her viewscreen flashed green with the *Locust's* laser hits. And Evan unloaded with his machine guns, too. Just for good measure. For all the good they'd do against the *Night Hawk*.

They were more meant for infantry.

And Katie didn't think he realized how expensive ammo for them was. Otherwise he'd have stuck to just his lasers.

No sense in arguing about it now.

That was what had got them in this part of the predicament in the first place.

Seeing a target in profile must have been too good for the *Night Hawk* to pass up. It tore into Katie's *Kit Fox* with its entire complement of lasers.

On her console's damage readout, her right arm flashed from green, to yellow, to red. The armor melted right off, exposing the inner workings of her 'Mech.

Katie continued her turn, hoping she'd be able to get the Raider into her firing arc before he destroyed her completely. "Evan, keep the pressure on."

"I'm doing everything I can." He changed directions, moving forward. He was going to strafe the *Night Hawk* on his way by. It was as good a plan as any since they—no, *she*—had botched their chance at catching this clown with their pants down.

"Do more. Just a little more," she said, working as fast as she could to get the *Night Hawk* in her sights.

By the time she came around, a barrage of missiles struck the *Night Hawk's* torso. They exploded around the pod-like cockpit and rent chunks of armor right off.

"Arkee!" she cried, delighted.

Evan blasted the *Night Hawk* once more with his lasers, and they seared right into the cockpit, punching through before she even got a chance to fire.

Arkee appeared down the street in his *Quickdraw*, looming over the smaller 'Mechs like the shadow of a skyscraper.

“Nice of you to show up,” Evan said.

“Well, I couldn't let you both take all the glory.”

“Glory?” Katie said. “This was more of a mess than anything. There are 'Mech parts everywhere. And I think the people of Gothenburg are going to be pissed we let the city take as much damage as it did.”

From the periphery of her viewscreen, she could still see the smoldering rubble around the *Commando* Evan had defeated quite successfully.

“Well, we'll see about that, won't we?” Arkee said.

Katie wished they'd been paid up front so they could just sneak out of the back of the city and never talk about any of this again. Maybe Mayor Becker and the people of Gothenburg could just forget the Fox Patrol had ever been there.

She took a deep breath, mortified.

How was she going to spin all of this?



Katie smiled, feeling like a fool for having worried.

Things could have gone a lot worse, but they went so well. Better than she could have ever hoped.

The people of Gothenburg assembled a first-rate celebration for them. The town hall was decorated in the Fox Patrol's colors, and the city's mayor, Reif Becker, a short, skinny man with a tangle of gray hair, gave a toast in front of all the city to hear. “We owe you dearly, Fox Patrol!”

The crowd erupted in shouts of “*Hear, hear!*”

They all raised mugs of ale and swayed and shouted, honoring their guests on the dais.

Katie and crew wore their cleanest mechanic's coveralls, as much the uniform of the Fox Patrol as anything.

"You've saved us from the Jerangle Raiders," Becker continued, waving his mug back and forth. "And you saved our city in the process!"

Katie felt uncomfortable, drinking the cityfolk's beer and accepting their cheers while their mayor spoke like he was in some cheap movie.

But if they wanted to celebrate the Fox Patrol, she wasn't going to stop them.

At the end of the toast, Arkee and Evan, arm in arm, turned to kiss each other jubilantly, and the crowd cheered even louder.

But Katie started doing the calculations in her head, and the sounds of the party dimmed in her mind. Since the Fox Patrol would be able to take all of the Jerangle Raiders' salvage, she'd be able to scrape together at least two or three more functioning—barely—BattleMechs to add to their forces.

But they would have no MechWarriors to pilot them. And with the time it would take her to repair all six 'Mechs, factoring in room and board and storage, she, Evan, and Arkee would be lucky if they could leave Gothenburg at all.

Maybe they'd be trapped here forever, looking for the next job that would give them enough of a down payment to send them to the next place.

Katie chewed her lip.

Evan, a bright smile on his face, wrapped his arm around her and took another long draught of his beer. "What do you look so concerned about, Cap?"

"I have no idea how we're going to survive on these margins, Evan."

Arkee wrapped his arm around her from the other side and smiled. "Don't worry, Cap'n. We'll find a way."



“I hope so, boys.” She looked out at all of those smiling faces in the crowd and hoped they’d tell the story far and wide. Maybe they’d get something good out of all of this. “I hope so.”



# **GLORIOUS LABOR FOR THE CELESTIAL WISDOM: A CAPELLAN SERVITOR'S GUIDE TO PROPER CONDUCT**

**ERIC SALZMAN**



*Zao*, servitor.

If you are reading these words, then your life is about to change. You have incurred a debt to the Capellan Confederation, and, now that the arm of the State has delivered you to your new station, you are in a position to begin making amends through labor in service to those you have harmed. Atone, serve well and willingly, and contribute to the Confederation's strength and prosperity, and you will be able to share in the resplendent bounty of Capellan society. Resist, and you will know only misery and misfortune for all your days. The choice is yours.

## **The Wheel of the Cosmos Brings Justice: Your Fall from Privilege**

You may be asking yourself "What debt?" and protesting that you have never committed any harm to the Capellan people. In this, you show the depth of your ignorance.

If you came to this place Capellan-born, then you must be well aware of your shame. As a youth, you have failed to demonstrate civic spirit, rejected your generously provided State education, abandoned your birthright, and demonstrated yourself unworthy of citizenship. As a capable adult, you may have taken State-provided food, housing, and medical care but provided no useful labor in return. Identified by your caste as a parasite on society, you have been sentenced to servitorhood by a communal court. Or perhaps you have committed treason, displayed cowardice under fire, or committed crimes against the State, and been cast down to the ranks of the servitors by the Chancellor's justice.

Those of you who, until recently, called yourselves citizens of the Republic of the Sphere, the Federated Suns, or other states that have opposed the Confederation's righteous campaign of justice and liberation, have entered servitor status due to your actions in support of those states. By ancient Capellan law, all inhabitants of any world taken by conquest immediately enter the servitor caste. Not just the military personnel who sought to kill our heroic soldiers of liberation, but the civilians who built their fortresses, grew their food, wove their uniforms, and supported the economic and political systems that stood in the path of Capellan destiny and, all too often, provided the launching point for attacks against Capellan worlds.

Following the reforms of the mighty and beneficent Chancellor Sun-Tzu Liao, servitorhood is not applied blindly to all residents of conquered worlds. Those citizens of historically Capellan worlds who were able to document their actions in support of the return of their rightful regime have been exempted, and will assume leading roles in the new order. Those of you who failed in your duty to bring the Celestial Wisdom's guiding hand to your worlds must relearn your obligations to a Greater Humanity under the Korvin Doctrine. The Maskirovka's keen eyes have witnessed your deeds and found them lacking. Those of you without Capellan heritage—

offworlders and their descendants seeking to dilute, corrupt, and displace our culture—are adjudged to have settled on these worlds illegally and will be required to show contrition thorough honest service to the State.

### **The Thousand Tasks of the Penitent: A Servitor's Duties**

Regardless of education, skills, or prior social status, servitors are assigned tasks based on the needs of the State, as determined by the planetary government and local officials. Menial, dirty, and monotonous labor is common. Many servitors work on tenant farms, process meat on high-speed production lines, perform janitorial and waste-processing duties, serve nobles in a variety of capacities on their estates, or perform any other work not suited for the talents of the citizen castes. While the State manages most servitor work assignments without input from the laborer, servitors in good standing have the right to volunteer for higher-risk work assignments, such as military service or medical experimentation, which offer a shortened term of servitor obligation, greater remuneration, or better living conditions.

### **The Generosity of the State: Your Care and Feeding**

Once you are assigned to a work-site, your overseer will be responsible for your housing and feeding. Thanks to the generosity of the Chancellor, you will receive a salary equivalent to 7 percent of the value of your labor, in addition to any food and lodging provided by your work-site. You will work as many hours as are required to meet your daily quota. If your work-site no longer requires your services, you will be reassigned by the planetary government to any other work-site in need of your labor.

### **The Promise of the Innocent: The Future of the Confederation**

If your children are under the age of sixteen, or if you have children during your time as a servitor, they will be placed into a Ministry of Social Education-approved instructional program from the age of five and given the chance to learn the virtues of citizenship through scholarship and service to their community. Should they prove worthy in the examinations, they will be granted citizenship. Should they fail, even after being given remedial training during a probationary period, they will join you in servitorhood.

The Confederation values all children as potential future citizens whom the Celestial Wisdom charges us to guide, shape, and shield from harm. The benevolent Chancellor has decreed that the children of servitors shall receive the full protection accorded to children of citizens, and that planetary diems and refractors are to prosecute any abuses of servitors' children to the full extent of the law.

If you are assigned to work-sites that have adequate servitor-designated housing and access to educational facilities, your children will be allowed to live with you. Should you be assigned to a work-site that lacks such accommodations, or should you fail to acquire a work-site and become homeless, the Ministry of Social Education will remove your children to a State-run boarding facility where they can continue their education without being forced to suffer for your inadequacies. Many children who matriculate from Ministry boarding facilities qualify for the Ranks of the Dedicated, so committed to the ideals of Capellan society that they are trusted to stand watch over others to prevent seditious deviation from service to the greater whole. Some even go on to serve and protect the Capellan people as agents of the Maskirovka.

## **The Nail That Stands Up Is Hammered Down: The Consequences of Disobedience**

Those who reject the opportunity to atone through labor will be made to suffer the consequences of their arrogance. Violent servitors are frequently assigned to the most unpleasant and dangerous tasks, often alongside penal gangs of hardened criminals, under the watchful eye of security control agents. Those who refuse to work will swiftly find themselves banned from work-sites, and without the salary, food, and shelter that come with labor. Such malcontents may be seen living on the streets, begging for scraps from indifferent citizens. The *barduc* nobility often use such wretches as fodder for public reprimands, subjecting them to beatings and other abuse. The murder of an indigent servitor is considered little more than a disposal of defective State resources, and will pass largely unremarked. Think on this if you consider the path of “passive resistance.”

## **The Journey’s End: The Rewards of Service**

Whatever your crimes or background, you owe the Confederation a debt, both material and karmic. Your labor will help rebuild what your prior life helped tear down, and the knowledge that you are building a society will instill in you the philosophical understanding that each of us has a duty to provide service to others; that through collective effort, our society can bring about the prosperity and glorification of the Greater Humanity. After a period of no less than ten years, or five if you enlist in the Capellan Confederation Armed Forces, your contributions will be assessed by a board drawn from the Ranks of the Dedicated, and the State will determine if your karmic balance has been righted.

Provide efficient, uncomplaining service. Strive to exceed your quotas and take pride in the quality of your work. Look beyond your petty and selfish concerns to see how your work contributes to the betterment of society as a whole. Should you master this philosophy and prove it every

day through the sweat of your brow, you will have demonstrated yourself worthy of Capellan citizenship and all the benefits accruing thereto.

## **Exemplars of Service: Paragons of Atonement and Redemption**

The road to your redemption will be difficult, but know that you follow the path of billions of servitors before you who proved their worth and achieved Capellan citizenship. Consider these outstanding examples as your role models for your own philosophical transformation:



**The Servitor Who Became a Gladiator:** Roberta Rujji was a misguided sellsword MechWarrior, a paid enforcer of the corrupt warlords ruling Pleione. When the Confederation crushed the rebel government in 3063, she was taken prisoner by the forces of liberation and made a servitor. She chose the military-service track for her servitorhood, and spent the next

five years in one of the CCAF's Glorious Redemption Detachments—loading ammunition, cleaning latrines, walking patrols, performing endless hours on KP duty and, under proper supervision, engaging in guerrilla warfare against Blakist-backed insurgent groups in the Chaos March. By 3068, her martial zeal had earned her a place among the Confederation's citizenry, and her MechWarrior skills led to her transfer to Hellespont Industrials' test-pilot cadre, where she won the honor of field-testing their *Assassin* prototype on Solaris VII. In the arenas, she brought glory to both Hellespont's engineers and the people of the Confederation by battling against other gladiators and the Word of Blake forces that later occupied that world. She named her BattleMech "*Servitor*" in memory of her service to the State and in honor of its role in proving her worthy of citizenship.

**The Penny Bag Reflector:** "Biànshi Dài" was the mocking nickname given to the disgraced reflector of Boardwalk, who had used his position as the people's elected representative to solicit bribes for his own personal enrichment. When word of his misdeeds reached the Chancellor, he was stripped of his name and exiled to the servitor caste. Snubbed by his former upper-caste associates and scorned by the citizenry, he took poorly to his new status at first, and spent months wandering the streets as a broken, starving wreck. Having hit bottom, he accepted his karmic debt and recommitted himself to serving the people he had betrayed. After fourteen years of sorting trash for recyclable content, his citizenship was restored. Based on his own experience with homelessness during the darkest days of his servitorhood, he became a tireless campaigner on behalf of the servitors, eventually funding and operating a counseling service to help other homeless servitors transition back to being productive work-site contributors.

**The Sang-shao:** An enforcer for the Rostakov Tong on Old Kentucky, David Harland's extortion of the shopkeepers and other members of the Commonality caste came to an end with his arrest and consignment to the



servitor caste. He had the temerity to strike a member of the *barduc* nobility who had been administering discipline to another servitor. Rather than waste a strong worker by executing him, as would have been his right and privilege, the *barduc* had Harland assigned to the work gangs clearing equatorial city ruins for resettlement. There, the heat and humidity caused as many worker fatalities as the local sasquatches that had taken up residence in the abandoned arcologies and hunted the interlopers as a welcome source of protein for their diet. Harland used his skills as a Tong enforcer to organize his work gang to meet their quotas, adapt to the heat, and fight off the sasquatches with improvised weapons. His team members began referring to him as their *sang-shao*, showing respect for his leadership. Through his efforts, the reclamation of New Paducah was achieved well ahead of schedule, and he gained a deep appreciation of the value of caring for something more than himself, and putting the community's needs ahead of his own.



**IF AULD ACQUAINTANCE BE FORGOT... (A KELL  
HOUNDS STORY)**

**MICHAEL A. STACKPOLE**



**PART 4 (OF 4)**

**I**

**VILLA VINO VERDE  
MOUNTAIN OAKS, DUBHE  
SILVER HAWKS COALITION  
FREE WORLDS LEAGUE  
16 MAY 3011, 2030 HOURS, CENTRAL TIME**

Patrick Kell stared at the computer's holographic display. They had established that Count Somokis had been acting in accord with orders he'd been given by the mastermind behind Veronica Matova's kidnapping. Thus, orders had to be coming in to Villa Vino Verde on Dubhe, but the computer records showed no communications in or out on Somokis' last day of life. And Patrick found no evidence of a mail delivery, a courier service, or a carrier pigeon. He'd have settled for Morse code flashed on a mirror from a

distant mountain, or something coded in the spinning of a pulsar, but he had nothing.

He scrubbed a hand over his forehead. If he could figure out how the mastermind was getting information to Somokis, then he could begin backtracking the route the message took. Granted he might hit a dead-end with ComStar, but he'd looted enough money from Somokis' estate that he could easily cover whatever hefty *security* fees some precentor would want to levy in exchange for information.

In fact, he hoped whatever money he spent would have been paid to Somokis by the Mastermind, letting their enemy finance his own demise.

*But nothing went in or out. They didn't stream any media, nothing.* Patrick squinted at the display. *Aside from downloading the update on that book, nothing...*

Patrick bounced the heel of his hand off his forehead. "You idiot. Open your damned eyes."

Morgan poked his head in from the other room. "Did you find something?"

"I don't know. Maybe." Patrick started shifting through screens on the display with the flick of a finger. "We tracked Somokis here because of *Twilight of the Ion Knights*. He downloaded the book's latest update that last morning, and Veronica said that's what set him off. I've assumed it was because of the vilification in the addendum but... Okay, here we go."

Morgan approached and hunched over Patrick's shoulder. "What have you got?"

"This is the account page for the service Somokis used to download books. And here, he has a study-group link set up for *Twilight*. He and whomever else is listed as part of the study group share comments on the book. It's annotation by mob, and it looks like he only has one other person in his study group."

"Who?"

Patrick shook his head. “Yourbookpal29081.lc.”

“So a made-up name. The LC designation at the end is Lyran Commonwealth, right?”

“Yeah, but that only means it’s where they first made up the name. They literally could be anywhere. Now...” Patrick turned away from the computer and rooted around until he found Somokis’ actual ebook reader. “In here, if we read through the commentary, we should be able to find orders going back and forth. Could be those are what set Somokis off more than anything written in the book itself.”

“You’ll need to check all the other books he has on there to see if there are more study groups, more identities.” Morgan straightened up. “If I wanted operational security, I’d use different books, a choice of which followed a pattern only Somokis and I knew.”

Patrick nodded. “Something in one message points to the next book.”

“They may not have been that sharp.” Morgan stroked a hand over his jaw. “What are the chances you can break the messages down and get useful information from how they are worded?”

“I’m not a linguist, but we ought to be able to tell where the sender received an education and their rough age because of the vocabulary.” Patrick tapped the reader. “If we keep Somokis’ death a secret—not a big stretch since the villa and everything else are under an assumed name—and if there’s enough from Somokis to get a pattern of how he communicated, we could keep the correspondence going. That can help us figure out who is pulling our strings.”

“Who is *trying* to pull our strings.” Morgan shook his head. “Whoever it is, they see Veronica as the key to keeping the Kell Hounds on a short lead. They’ve already directed us in one action, taking out Ivan Barovsky’s operation on Zavijava. Why they picked that target is less important than they got a hint about what we can do. We’re more than the *Ion Knights* ever

dreamed of being. Given what we showed them, why wouldn't they use us to stage a massive heist for them?"

Patrick's stomach slowly folded in on itself. "Worse yet, Morgan. They could wait until we are posted somewhere in a position of trust, then force us to stand down, or switch sides. They put us in a position to choose between the life of a single person or betraying those who have trusted us. That would ruin our reputation forever."

"*If* they still had Veronica, that would be true. And because they know how much of a hold they have over us because of her, neither she nor anyone related to us would ever be safe. This is why we have to get the mastermind before they realize they have no hold over us at all."

"Or..." Patrick shrugged. "We string them along, appearing to comply, then fail to execute their orders and allow the person who paid them to control us exact our revenge for us."

Morgan laughed and settled his hands heavily on his brother's shoulders. "Now that, Patrick, is an ending worthy of a holovid. Maybe we should get Constantine Fisk to play *you* in a holovid. A wig. A little makeup."

"Yeah. No." Patrick began to look at the various tomes on Count Somokis' ereader. "I'm afraid the kind of work I'm set up for is not going to be terribly exciting. I'll do the breakdowns and find a linguist if we need one. Luckily this is the sort of work I can do while we're floating back to the Commonwealth."

"I know you'll do your best, but we have to remember one thing. Even though we've got Veronica back, that doesn't make our enemy any less deadly."

"And probably makes them more determined."

"Yeah." Morgan exhaled slowly. "But we're *more* determined, and we're maybe a half a step ahead. I pray that is all the edge we need to finish this."

## II

**OUTBOUND OVERLORD-CLASS DROPSHIP ARGENT SABER  
DUBHE  
SILVER HAWKS COALITION  
FREE WORLDS LEAGUE  
22 MAY 3011, 2030 HOURS, CENTRAL TIME**

Morgan sat jammed into the lower berth in the cabin he shared with his brother. While Patrick was doing the analysis of Somokis' correspondence in the hope he could continue to dupe the count's puppet-master, ComStar delivered a priority packet from Tharkad.

Back on Galatea, the Kells' first action had involved suppressing a religious uprising in the hinterlands. The Church of Jesus Majificent had been a reactionary sect whose people believed that a simple life was a more godly life. Under the leadership of Bishop Arlington Poore, they had staged an uprising that threatened the food supply for the rest of the planet. The local militia, under Morgan's command, had eliminated the threat, but some very militant members of the sect had left Galatea and, apparently had traveled to Alioth II to a sister settlement. They'd begun to stir up trouble.

*And since we handled the Church the first time, and since bureaucrats have zero imagination, we're clearly the only folks who can handle this new iteration of the Church.* The information packet indicated that the people of Alioth II possessed, at best, jumped up AgroMechs and IndustrialMechs. Officials wanted a show of force to bring the Chosen to the negotiating table, presumably to get them to refrain from any hostilities.

That seemed reasonable to Morgan, but too much so. Alioth II had, once upon a time, been an incredibly fertile world producing a lot of food and, in

its verdant jungles, a lot of biomedical compounds. Then the incessant wars of the Inner Sphere had rolled over it, razing the cities, destroying industry, and deeply scarring the planet. This prompted the vast majority of the survivors to head for greener pastures—with the exception of the Chosen. They'd largely escaped the war's wrath because their antediluvian settlements had no real strategic value in the 30th century.

*Alioth II is largely self-sufficient, and the Chosen's ability to project power outside their settlements is extremely limited.* Morgan couldn't see why their disgruntlement was an issue at the moment, so he dug deeper into the files. The planetary governor had taken on a new deputy, one Sachi Treyford, whose family owned and operated the pharma-giant Wellway Systems. *The Chosen's holdings comprise some of the last virgin vegetation on Alioth II. If they've denied Wellway permission to survey their holdings for promising biologics, having us engage the Chosen could be a not-so-subtle way to push them to open access.*

The cabin's hatch slid open and Patrick squeezed into the room. "Good news or bad news first?"

Morgan arched an eyebrow. "Is any of what you need to tell me truly good news?"

"Okay, point to you." Patrick leaned back against the opposite bulkhead. "We're thirty klicks out from the JumpShip and it is fully charged. Plan is still to make a short jump to Wyatt and get cleared through Border Control there. Depending on what JumpShips are there waiting, we'll head out. It would be Alioth II, right?"

"Our masters have called the tune. Is that an issue?"

"Might be inconvenient. Not much traffic heads there this time of year. We may need to request LCAF assets if speed is an issue. There ought to be something available at Wyatt, right?"

"I'd think so, yes." Morgan set his noteputer aside. "So, give me the worst of it."

“ComStar sent us two packets. The first is a message from Thomas Ryan.”

A little acid bubbled up into Morgan’s throat. Ryan was a freelance operative and fixer who had kidnapped Veronica Matova on Zavijava and, since then, had relayed orders from the person who had ordered the kidnapping. “I guess that means his boss isn’t aware that Count Somokis is dead and that we have Veronica.”

“Tiny blessing.” Patrick shifted his noteputer and played the message back for his brother. The image of Ryan, a handsome man with white-blond hair and blue eyes, floated above the screen in holographic glory.

*“I do hope this finds you well, Colonel Kell. My employer apologizes for his silence, but expressed his pleasure at your success against Ivan Barovsky. So he has a new task for you, a prelude to the final task which will see Ms. Matova gain her freedom. He wishes for you to have a very public reunion with Prince Ian Davion, something the press will play up. It would please him if there was speculation that the Kell Hounds would soon be working with the Federated Suns. He leaves to you the method, but wishes this to be accomplished no later than September of this year.”*

Morgan rubbed a hand over his forehead. “Well, that’s a bold ask, but good that we have a deadline. Gives us four months to find his employer before he vanishes.”

“Yes, but you can’t be on Alioth II and meeting with Prince Ian at the same time.”

“True. Being in two places at one time is a bit of a trick. I’ll have to think on how to do that.” He shivered. “What else have you got?”

Patrick grinned. “The last thing in from ComStar was another book update. It was a new message directing Somokis to bring Veronica to Galatea as quickly as possible. It’s more proof that Ryan’s boss is still in the dark about the dear count.”

“Have you replied yet?”



“No. I think I should offer a time estimate, yes? I mean, if we hit the right sequence of JumpShips, she can be there inside a month. This request certainly implies that the mastermind of all this is on Galatea. August would make sense, and we should be done on Alioth by then, right?”

“Yeah, but I don’t think that matters.” Morgan’s eyes tightened. “If we wait, if we bring the Hounds, that’s really the expected play, isn’t it? I mean, we have a mercenary company. The mastermind has to figure that *if* we are to move against them, we’ll be making it a military action, right?”

“Sure.”

“And they’ve been one step ahead of us because their operations: the kidnapping, using us as surrogates against Barovsky. These are not strictly military operations. They’ve designed things so that our strength can’t be brought to bear on them.”

Patrick screwed his eyes closed for a second, then shook his head. “You’re right, Morgan, I should have seen that. What are we going to do?”

“Don’t beat yourself up over it. Our adversary has experience manipulating perceptions and exploiting weakness. Skills we should learn. So, what we’re going to do is figure out how to give them exactly what they need to still feel in control.” Morgan reached up, grabbed the edge of the upper bunk, and hauled himself to his feet. “But first, I need to ask Veronica if she wants to go home again.”

### III

**OUTBOUND OVERLORD-CLASS DROPSHIP ARGENT SABER  
DUBHE  
SILVER HAWKS COALITION  
FREE WORLDS LEAGUE  
22 MAY 3011, 2045 HOURS, CENTRAL TIME**

Veronica Matova pressed a finger to the thin page she was reading when she first heard the gentle knock at her cabin's hatch. *Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins...* She knew from the sound that Morgan stood on the other side of the hatch. He would only knock a second time were it urgent, and she almost decided to wait for that second knock.

She closed the Bible she'd been reading from. "Come."

Morgan slid the hatch open, but only set a foot on the lower lip. He made no effort to further enter the cabin. "I apologize for disturbing you."

Veronica glance up at him from her bunk. Tall and handsome, wide of shoulder and narrow of hip, he still had a tiny spark of innocence about him. *How long will it take for life to extinguish that?* He still desired her. She could see that in his dark, brown eyes; and it was not just physical desire. The emotions roiling inside him made it to his face in almost imperceptible micro-expressions.

*Which, if I did not know him so well, I would never notice.* "It must be important, Morgan." She'd almost addressed him as "Colonel," but she had no desire to hurt him wantonly. "What would you have of me?"

"A message came through from Count Somokis' associate. The count has been directed to take you to Galatea." Morgan opened his hands. "By separate means I've been ordered to be seen with Prince Ian, and the Hounds are going to have to deal with a situation on Alioth II. The question for you is, do you want to go?"

"A week ago, Morgan, you told me that until we caught the person who ordered my kidnapping, I would not be safe. I agreed to help you find him." She shifted on the bunk, still tender from the beating Count Somokis had given her. "Will this not get you closer to that goal?"

"I hope so."

"And you will stand by our bargain?"

Morgan glanced down. "I would preserve you from that."

“No. You tell yourself you would save me from it to save me from the trauma, but that’s not all, is it?” Veronica slowly shook her head. “You blame yourself for all of this, Morgan, but it is not your fault. If you had returned to the hotel on Zavijava a half hour earlier, the kidnapper would have just waited another day or week. We wouldn’t have noticed, either of us. It would have still happened. To *me*. And *I* stand by what I said. I want to carve the heart from that person. I will. If returning to Galatea hastens this end, then, yes, I shall go.”

“I understand. I’ll make arrangements—to get you there and to keep you safe.”

“Thank you.”

“Veronica...”

“Morgan, please...” She gave him the hint of a smile, then shook her head. “You have been so kind. I need time to think, to try to find out who I am.”

He nodded toward the Bible in her lap. “Starting at the beginning?”

She licked her lower lip, then nodded. She’d been born into a family which belonged to the Church of Jesus Majificent, and had grown up believing that all the knowledge and wisdom in the world could be found in the Bible. *How 31st century people could order their lives according to instructions written for shepherds and camel traders five millennia ago still baffles me.* Now, as she read from Scripture, she looked beyond the surface stories, finding more questions than answers.

“Back when I was a girl, when this book and interpretations of it made the world seem so simple, I knew who I was. What I didn’t know was how the world worked. To think back now, I see all the possibilities, all the things I missed. All the things I am missing.” She lowered her gaze. “Thank you for your concern, Morgan.”

“If you need anything...”

“Time, Morgan, just time...”

He nodded. "Very well. As we work out plans, I will keep you informed. We'll be jumping soon, just so you know."

"Thank you." She wanted to reach out a hand, just to let her fingers brush against him, to feel his hand in hers, just for a moment, but she held back. "Be well."

"And you." Morgan stepped back and the hatch slid shut with a *click*.

Veronica forced her hand open from where it had curled into a fist. She wanted to reach out to him, but she couldn't. She had betrayed him. She had lost faith in him. She had forgotten he existed all the while he was searching for her. *He invaded a planet to find me!* And what had she done to repay that devotion? Nothing but think of herself first, and give herself over to whatever her captor desired.

While Morgan would have argued that she had no choice, she knew full well she'd had every choice. She had bent men far stronger than Count Somokis to her will, but she had refrained. Life with him had not been painful or odious; it had been tolerable and often quite pleasant. Not until the end, when he had lost his temper and beaten her savagely, did she think him capable of such beastliness. Her surrender had left her open and vulnerable, and she had paid the appropriate price.

Somokis was dead, and she took pleasure in that fact. But the one who had set him off, the one who had put her in his power, that person still lived. All the pain, all the blame that should have fallen to Somokis, they owned it, and she would see their debt to her paid in full.

She opened the Bible again and paged her way to Psalms. "Though a host should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war should rise against me, in this will I be confident." Veronica smiled, feeling the cool paper against her fingertips. *I will be paid in full, absolutely, and the debt collected without remorse or regret.*

## IV

### **OUTBOUND OVERLORD-CLASS DROPSHIP ARGENT SABER NADIR RECHARGE POINT, WYATT LYRAN COMMONWEALTH 23 MAY 3011, 0030 HOURS**

Patrick Kell stared at his brother. “No, Morgan, this is insane. Look, we’re catching a fast ride to Alioth II, so we’re going to be there in plenty of time to clean that up and for you to still hit the September deadline for meeting Ian. You not traveling with us just doesn’t make any sense at all. You have to see that.”

His brother slumped back against the closed hatch of their cabin. “I’ve looked at it from all angles, Patrick. You’re probably right—hell, I’m betting fully that you are.”

“But...”

“But no plan survives contact with the enemy.” The older Kell brother looked down at his open hands. “There’s something out there, Patrick, something that is going to make all this go sideways. I know it. I *feel* it. I can’t control it, but if I’m down there fighting farmers, I’ll be too far away to make a difference.”

The pain in Morgan’s voice sparked dread in Patrick’s heart. “You said Veronica agreed to go to Galatea, but you think she’s not safe. You’re afraid she’s going to be hurt.”

“She’s already hurt, Patrick. And she wants to destroy the person behind this so badly it is eating her up. She’s been cut off from who she once was, and then Somokis broke her. Now she’s going back to Galatea. She’s putting pressure on herself, and thinks dealing with this invisible adversary will end her pain.”

Patrick nodded. “She’s betting her whole self-conception on being able to accomplish something she may never get a chance to accomplish. I get it. But, Morgan, is part of what’s driving you the fact that you’re taking responsibility for her plight now?”

Morgan’s head came up. “This is not about that situation at all.”

The younger Kell smiled. “Yeah. Sure. This is where you decide that we’re going to argue about your wanting to protect her and you denying it for about a half hour, in which time you’ll see I’m right. Let’s just default to that point and save the time.”

Morgan hung his head and deflated. “You’re right. You know it. So do I. But I also know you can lead the Hounds and clean up Alioth II in a heartbeat.”

“No, Morgan, really, I need you there.”

“You don’t, Patrick. You never have.” Morgan rested his hands on his brother’s shoulders. “You’re smarter than me, you always have been. Do you think I don’t know what you did at the Nagelring? How your scores for exercises never quite eclipsed mine, how you never broke any of my records? I’d have to have been a true idiot not to have seen that. I love you for it, but I know the true score. And you know it, too. You’re going to break down the data on Alioth II, you’ll see the same things I did, and you’ll see *more*. You’ll come up with a plan to resolve the situation—and it’s the same plan we’d be executing if I was there. You can do this, Patrick, without even breaking a sweat.”

“You could do it without firing a shot, Morgan.”

“As could you.” Morgan rested his forehead on his brother’s. “The difference between us has always been that you have the quiet confidence, whereas I play at being bold. People truly underestimate you, whereas they’re usually sure that they’ve underestimated me. They back off from me, and they never see you coming.”

Patrick pulled back and stared his brother in the eyes. “So why didn’t the person who kidnapped Veronica back off from you?”

“He wants to control me. That’s what this as all been about. Veronica. Somokis. Me. It’s all about control. And if I’m on Alioth II, it tells them I’m ignoring the order to go to Ian. But as long as they think they are winning, that they’re in control, that’s how we can surprise them.”

Patrick squeezed his eyes shut in a grimace. “I’ve just let you let me talk myself into going along with your plan, haven’t I?”

Morgan smiled broadly. “I told you that you were the smart one.”

“And you want to keep traveling so you can protect Veronica for as long as you can.”

“Yeah. In any way possible. That’s why I’ll also need Frost and Walter to stay with her all the way to Galatea and then some.”

“Walter because he knows Galatea, and Frost because he’s Frost.”

“Exactly.”

“And you’re not going to do anything stupid, right?”

“Not if I can help it, little brother.” Morgan gave him a nod. “I’m going to put some things into motion, and if they come together, this will all be over before I ever get eyeball to eyeball with Prince Ian.”

Patrick enfolded his brother in a hug. “I believe you. I trust you. And I trust you’ll leave a chronicle of everything for me in the unlikely event things go wrong. I’ll use it to finish the job.”

“Of course.” Morgan’s arms tightened around the smaller man. “Stay safe, Patrick. I know you’ll make me proud.”

## V

**LEOPARD-CLASS DROPSHIP QUEEN’S GAMBIT**  
**APEX RECHARGE POINT, COR CAROLI**

## LYRAN COMMONWEALTH

### 27 MAY 3011, 0430 HOURS

Veronica hesitated in the companionway outside the DropShip's lounge, keeping to the shadows. Morgan sat in a big leather chair bolted to the deck, staring at a holographic display of the Cor Caroli star system. The ship's sensors updated the data, tagging tiny sparks with the names of ships heading toward the JumpShip or down to the system's main planet. The smaller star in the binary system punched out enough electromagnetic radiation to interfere with sensor data, so ships and satellites seemingly winked in and out of existence at the whim of a grim god.

She studied him, the man she was certain she once loved. He had accepted her for who she was, neither desiring her to change nor wishing her past could be rewritten. That aspect of him had unsettled her, she now realized. She had spent her life being judged, often harshly, and when he withheld judgment, she waited for it to fall as heavy as an executioner's axe.

While she would have denied herself deserving of judgment, and resented those who judged her, at the same time she didn't feel worthy of Morgan's lack of judgment. She held herself responsible for her past life, and found that she had judged herself even more harshly than others did. She didn't deserve someone being as kind to her as he was, and even now she knew that her efforts to drive him away were truly efforts to induce judgment from him.

Veronica almost retreated back to her cabin, to her reading and studying. She had made the mistake of shifting from the Old Testament to the New, and found "Judge not, that ye be not judged" echoing in her mind. She had, through her fear, judged Morgan as holding himself superior enough that he would not judge her. *And that judgment was...*

She stepped through the hatch. "I don't mean to disturb you."



Morgan looked over and began to smile, then moderated his expression. “Please. Can I get you anything?”

“No, I am fine.” She crossed to the chair opposite him with the holographic display between them. “I owe you an apology, Morgan. No, wait, before you tell me I don’t. I’ve used you as a shield, Morgan. I let myself see me through your eyes. I let myself think I am the woman you believe me to be. And, yes, I know that when we look at others, we all see them at the best and their brightest. When we look at ourselves all we see are warts and scars and failures. The gap between those two visions makes us feel as if we are imposters, just masses of errors contained in an eggshell-thin vessel.”

She clasped her hands together in her lap and glanced down at them. “I took solace in the fact that I was valuable enough to you that someone else thought I could be used to control you. After all, if you were that concerned with my fate, then what you thought of me must be true or at least close to it. And then Somokis went off and shattered everything. All I thought of myself, it drowned in pain and humiliation and fear.”

Morgan sat forward, reaching a hand out toward her. “Veronica, you’re only human. Your reaction is human.”

“Yes, Morgan, I know. I had allowed myself to believe that I was more than human. That I was special. The fact is, no matter what you believe, or what others believe, I am still just a human.” She exhaled slowly. “Psalm 22. King David asks, ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ And in Matthew 27:46, Jesus, on the cross, asks why God has forsaken him. They both cry out from their humanity. Somokis beat me so savagely that he pushed me past that point. I could not even see myself as human, Morgan. I was nothing. I was less than nothing.”

She looked up at him, through the swirl of projected parabolas and winking icons. “I am slowly coming back, Morgan, but I do not know who I am. I know who I have been, and that is what got me to this point. I seek

wisdom. I seek to regain power and agency, but the person who took that from me has to be dealt with. After that, then I can look for myself and see who I have become.”

Morgan nodded. “Do you think that a part of who you have become is the woman I love?”

“I want that to be true, Morgan. Not for me, but because I believe you deserve someone you can love fully, and who will love you just as fiercely in return. But my life has moved me from one lie to another, and another. It allowed me to lie to Somokis and to myself, and I will not allow myself to lie to you, Morgan. I can’t. I can’t.”

Her eyes welled and the world blurred, and before the first tear had rolled down her cheek, Morgan had risen and gathered her gently into his arms. He held her close and firmly, pulling her back to the chair and into his lap. He stroked her hair and held her. Not as a lover, as a friend hoping to drain away the anguish.

Just for a moment, and then another moment, she let herself relax. She took refuge in the fortress of his arms, the steadiness of his heartbeat, and the warmth of his body. She drew her legs up, tucking herself into a fetal ball, and breathed in unison with him. *Just another moment. Just one.*

She shifted to free herself of his arms, but he hung on. “Not quite yet, Veronica. Please.”

“Another jump.” She nestled her face against his neck. “To Galatea, and then to truly find myself.”

## VI

**UNION-CLASS DROPSHIP ARGENT SPEAR  
CARTER’S POINT, HAYDENTON  
ALIOTH II**

## LYRAN COMMONWEALTH

### 29 MAY 3011, 1430 HOURS

While the *Argent Spear* could have used its onboard weaponry to drive off the half-dozen heavily modified AgroMechs and landed unmolested, Patrick Kell instead had it hover twenty meters above the landing zone. The drop bay doors snapped open and the Kell Hounds' First Company descended serenely. They touched down mere phantoms in the dust storm raised by the DropShip's retros, and emerged tall and strong, their black-and-red color scheme vibrant despite the thin coating of dust. The light Scout lance deployed to the north, and began to hook around toward the small Chosen formation, while the Striker lance, consisting of medium-weight 'Mechs, marched southwest toward the enemy.

That left Patrick's heavier Assault lance in the middle, anchored on his *Thunderbolt*. They spread out in a semicircle, but remained at the LZ.

The radio crackled through Patrick's neurohelmet. "Lead, Scout One here. Chosen are pulling back."

"One, Lead here." Patrick fiddled with a knob on his console to squelch a hiss on the frequency. "Are they trying to draw you in?"

"Not my impression, Lead. Here's visual."

Patrick's auxiliary monitor came alive with the image of a squat, broad *Mule* AgroMech—the standard workhorse that hauled equipment for plowing and harvest, little more than a tractor with hands. The Chosen had wrapped the 'Mech's arms with coils of barbed wire and had welded slab steel on as extra armor. They'd even built up some sort of tiny redoubt on the 'Mech's right shoulder.

"One, is there a *person* in that jumble of armor on the shoulder?"

"A parrot to a pirate. He seems to have a high-powered rifle in there, too."

*But nothing that will bother a 'Mech.* “Roger. Keep an eye on him. Our guests should be wary, too.”

“*Argent Spear* copies, and is touching down out of current range.”

“Thanks, *Spear.*” Half a klick back, the big ball of the *Argent Spear* touched down. That wasn't its first planetfall. That had come three hours previous and 200 klicks north, where they'd picked up a band of local observers who had flown along to watch the mercenaries in action.

The human-sized gangway descended, and a handful of people marched down. He'd met all but one of them—the five who now wore flak vests and helmets over their business clothes. The one he'd not been introduced to stood out because of her scarlet dress, her long, flowing hair, and lipstick to match. She raised binoculars to her eyes, surveyed the battlefield in a second and a half, then pointed fiercely toward the retreating enemy.

*She actually stamped her foot!*

The radio crackled. “Colonel Kell, Ms. Treyford is ordering you to pursue and destroy the Chosen.”

“Acknowledged, *Spear.* That's not going to be happening.”

The woman stamped her foot again, then thrust a finger at the *Thunderbolt.*

“Ah, Colonel, she's demanding you come down there and explain yourself to her.”

Patrick shook his head. “This is a combat zone. Jesus himself could descend with a host of angels and order me to leave the cockpit, and I wouldn't.”

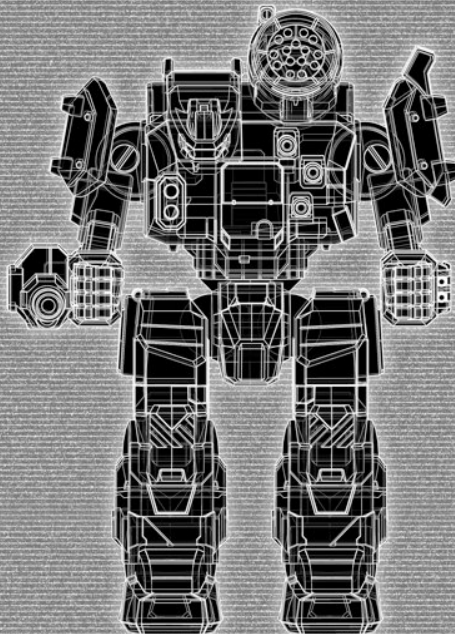
The *Argent Spear's* captain chuckled. “Roger that, Colonel. She will not be pleased.”

Patrick sighed. “I gather we can't have that. I'll meet her in the hangar in ten.”



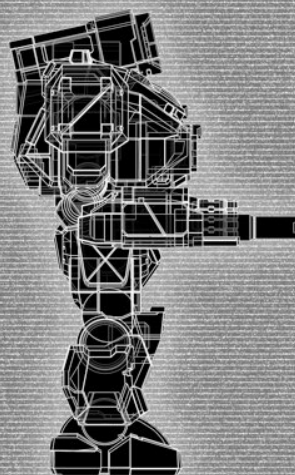
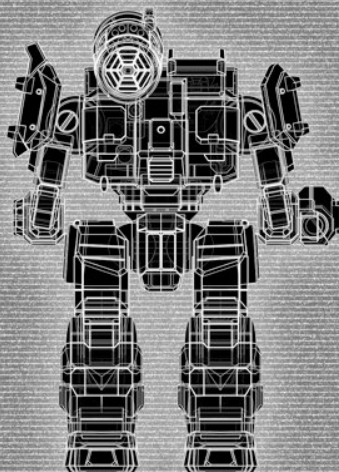
Even as furious as she clearly was, Sachi Treyford wasn't too hard on the eyes. Her blue eyes flashed easily, and she clearly hadn't heard the word *no* all that often in her relatively brief life. "When I give an order, Colonel Kell, I expect it to be followed."

## TOR-5S THUNDERBOLT



CLASS: HEAVY  
TONNAGE: 65

- DELTA DART  
• LONG RANGE MISSILE  
15-RACK
- SUNGLOW TYPE 2  
LARGE LASER
- DIVERSE OPTICS  
• TYPE 18  
MEDIUM LASER X3
- BICAL SHORT RANGE  
MISSILE TWIN-RACK
- VOELKERS 200  
MACHINE GUN X2



“I have no doubt, Miss. Problem is, you’re not in my chain of command. I’m here on orders from the LCAF to assess and assist the maintenance of public order and safety.”

“You *assist* by eliminating the threat to this world.”

Patrick folded his arms across his chest. “If you think a half-dozen farm boys driving *Mules* wrapped in barbed wire are a threat to the planet, you’ve seriously overestimated what they can get up to.”

The woman’s chin came up and her nostrils flared as she made an attempt to suck all the air out of the hangar. “Perhaps, Colonel, this will change your mind!” She spoke into a communicator. “Pipe the holo from the Chosen ultimatum we just received into Hangar Bay Nine.”

The holodisplay at the diagnostics station lit up, showing a dimly lit gathering of maybe three dozen people in what looked to be a barn—complete with hay bales as backdrop and seating. A woman stood at the front of the congregation, reedy thin and hatchet-faced, with her hair pulled back into a severe bun. Smoke wafted through the air, coming from nine or ten urns with slitted sides, reminding Patrick of censers he’d seen at many Catholic Masses and too many funerals.

The camera zoomed in on the woman, getting tight in on her face for a moment. The closeup revealed red rimming her eyes and her pupils dilated wide enough to be the barrel of an autocannon. The shot pulled back and focused, showing her with her arms spread, her face lifted toward Heaven, and her beginning to sway and bob in time with music no one else could hear.

*“He is coming for us, brothers and sisters. We saw Him carried bodily into Heaven, amid a host of angels who wept at my husband’s beauty. God welcomed Him in a booming voice. ‘Behold, Arlington Poore, of whom We are most proud. We are!’ And you know what that last means, my brethren, that God finally accepted Arlington back into His bosom, to once again to be one with Him. He is coming again, here, to Alioth, the New Eden. And He has a message for all of us.”*

The woman then began to spin and utter a repetitive string of syllables that rose and fell in a rhythm. The language she spoke made no sense and

didn't vary from the twenty-sound cycle. Patrick didn't recognize it as any language he'd ever heard, but caught enough of it that after the fourth pass he could have aped it with no problem. *And I'm not stoned out of my gourd as they clearly are.* The camera pulled back one more time, providing a clear view of the entire congregation standing, chanting and whirling with mindless abandon.

Treyford killed the sound, but the images kept going. "These people are insane. That woman has been identified as Arletta Poore, one of Arlington Poore's wives whom *you* let escape from Galatea. She has brought the Church of Jesus Majificent's toxic beliefs with her and poisoned what was a docile group before. They will destroy this world in their quest for Heaven. And you must wipe them out."

"It's generally been my experience, Ms. Treyford, that military campaigns where the goal is to exterminate a belief system never succeed."

"It will this time." She handed Patrick a thumb-drive. "On there are your new rules of engagement and your mission objectives. You will, by God, eliminate the Chosen or I assure you very sincerely, there will be Hell to pay."

## VII

**OVERLORD-CLASS DROPSHIP QUEEN'S GAMBIT  
GALAPORT  
GALATEA CITY, GALATEA  
LYRAN COMMONWEALTH  
22 JUNE 3011, 1430 HOURS**

Veronica Matova stepped off the gangway of the *Queen's Gambit*, a stained, gray-canvas duffel jammed with hastily folded clothes and Somokis' Bible



slung over her shoulder. She'd dyed her hair and brows black and wore some oversized castoff clothes she'd borrowed from the ship's lost and found. She did not at all look herself, and walked from the ship with a gait more suited to who she'd been when she first came to Galatea City than who she'd been when she departed with Morgan.

It felt odd returning to Galatea incognito. She'd originally come from Majistan a shy and innocent girl, and had built an empire which she'd only left eight months previously. She'd had every intention of returning and resuming her role as the premier madam on Galatea, but so much had changed. To return to who she had been would inform her enemies that their plans to use her against Morgan Kell had failed. Not being stupid, they'd flee, and she would never have her vengeance.

She forced herself not to think of Galatea as she had known it, or even as she had experienced it once free of the Church. Instead, she forced herself to look at it as the Church Elders had, through a lens shaped by the book in her duffel. Granted that the world for which the Bible had been written had been much more simple—and so very far away. Even so, looking past the pulsing neon and shutting out the rumbling roar of hovercars and squawking advertisements—in fact, looking only at the people made connecting this world and the one from the book simple.

Men and women had desires. Some came from within—basic biology, the need for food and shelter and an intimate touch. Advertisements shaped others, or directed new avenues for the satisfaction of the basic needs. Hunger demanded food, but signs and scents and garishly lit shops reminded one of the myriad varieties of food that could satisfy that need.

The kaleidoscope of offerings interfered with perception and distracted people from simple truth. She could see that now. What one needed was food. But society told them they *deserved* more. They deserved satisfaction. They deserved a meal without parallels. They convinced people they were superior enough that only the best would do for them, which encouraged

arrogance and banished humility. *It encourages people to put themselves ahead of others and, eventually, to think themselves the equals of God.*

Veronica could feel that hyperreality tugging at her, but she refused to give in. Though she no longer ached from the beating she'd taken, and the bruises had all but faded away, she forced herself to remember the pain, the humiliation, the feeling of being utterly powerless and lost. She saw a grubby man huddled in an alleyway, buried in layers of filthy clothes, and reminded herself that as miserable as he was, he had been like a god compared to where she had been at that point.

That realization shook her, and she paused on the edge of a street, her face painted red, then yellow by the flashing of competing beer signs. Weakness ran through her and she reached out. Only when her fingers caught brick did she realize she'd been seeking Morgan's arm and Morgan's strength.

He'd left the *Queen's Gambit* for another DropShip when they hit the system. That ship would carry him off to the Federated Suns and his meeting with Prince Ian. He'd even showed her the holographic message from the Prince, wishing she could join them, and that she was fondly remembered. For a heartbeat she'd wanted to beg Morgan to let her go with him, but she held back. *He makes me think better of myself than I truly am.*

She'd had another moment of weakness when he'd exited the *Gambit*. If she had asked him, he'd have come down to Galatea. He would have been with her now. Not as a lover, but as a friend—not that he didn't love her still, but the night he had held her had changed the dynamics of their relationship. He would happily welcome her back into his life and bed, but only if she wanted to be there.

*I can't do that to him.* She crossed the street, heading toward the beggar. *I cannot do that to myself. Until I know who I am, I am fit for no one.*

She dug around in a pocket and came up with a handful of loose change. She dumped it into the battered tin can the man held out toward her.

He looked up, eyes wet and exhausted. “God bless.”

“And you.” She headed on down the street, bearing for the run-down hostels where she had looked for fresh-faced talent a lifetime ago. She had plucked the lucky from a sea of anonymity. Now she slumped her shoulders and cast her gaze down, sinking into that very same sea.

*It is time to see how much of me is left inside, and on Galatea. It is time to face who I truly am and, if Morgan is right, win my life back.*

## VIII

**KELL HOUNDS HEADQUARTERS, MALTHUS HAUS  
BOUNTIFUL, HAYDENTON  
ALIOTH II  
LYRAN COMMONWEALTH  
23 JUNE 3011, 1430 HOURS**

The intercom unit on the tech’s workbench in the ’Mech bay buzzed. Patrick Kell punched the blinking red button. “Kell. Go ahead.”

“Sir, that Treyford woman just cleared reception in the lobby. She’s got a hard lock on your ass and not in the good way.”

“A little too late for me to say ‘send her up,’ yeah?”

“She knows you’re in the hangar, sir. Do I send a detail to drag her back to the lobby?”

Hearing a loud voice from halfway across the bay, Patrick shook his head. “No, this day’s been coming for a while. Get Mission Control to send the lance out. I’ll catch up. Kell out.”

He barely had time to use a remote to flick the nearest holographic display over to the local news channel before Sachi Treyford shoved two techs out of her way. “I don’t know what you think you are playing at,

*Lieutenant* Colonel Kell, but the governor is sick and tired of your prevarications, hesitations, trepidations, and otherwise total reluctance to do your job.”

Patrick jerked a thumb at the *Thunderbolt* behind him. “You see I’m heading out with my lance, right?”

“Oh, yes, another one of your endless patrols in which you locate some Chosen ’Mechs and let them run away.”

Patrick grabbed a wheeled stool and pushed it her direction. “I can explain—”

She stopped the stool with a foot firmly planted on the seat. “No, I am *not* sitting down to discuss this with you. There is nothing to discuss.” She thrust a finger toward the ’Mech bay doors sliding open toward the north end of the building. “I will not have you briefing me when you should be out there hunting down the Chosen and dealing with them. As. Per. Your. Contract.”

He knitted his fingers together and let them hang at his belt. “Ms. Treyford, contrary to what you seem to believe, I *am* doing my job. The Kell Hounds came here to settle the difficulty with the Chosen. I have arranged patrols which have kept them contained in the Church lands. We’ve engaged them several times. We’ve beaten them back every time. I have ample drone- and gun-camera imagery to show you, proving that we are doing exactly what we are supposed to be doing.”

Fury contorted her features yet could not completely erase her attractiveness. Patrick put that down to same factors that made a child throwing a tantrum often seem more cute than malevolent. “What you are doing, Kell, is malingering during the easiest mission you will ever be given. Because the Chosen consider the Sabbath holy, and because they consider the Sabbath to be from sundown Friday to dawn on Monday, you and your people are fighting a nine-to-five war where they need be little more than mechanical scarecrows that get the weekend off. Another month

of this charade and you'll be exchanging notes with the Chosen, telling them what you'll do if they decide to harass people, and they'll agree that your tactics would work, so no one does anything!"

Patrick frowned. "So, we would have a bloodless cessation of hostilities where everyone is satisfied. Well, everyone but you."

"I speak for the governor, and he is not satisfied. Your upkeep comes out of his budget. Paying you means other projects, valuable projects, go uncompleted. This new status quo is unacceptable."

"Yes, I am aware of that." Patrick again waved her to the stool. "I've been looking into things and have prepared a report. If you don't mind..."

Sachi went to grab a clean shop cloth to drape over the stool, but couldn't help being distracted by the holodisplay. "Is that your brother?"

Patrick smiled. "Morgan, yes. He's visiting a friend. On Northwind."

She peered more closely. "That's Prince Ian Davion, ruler of the Federated Suns."

"That's what the chyron says. I've never met him, myself." Patrick reached over and killed the projected image, then tossed her a shop cloth. "Now I think you were expressing concerns that the Kell Hounds weren't doing the job we were assigned to do."

"Well, yes. Ever since I've been here..."

Patrick brought a smaller image up on the holodisplay and stared through glowing words at her. "You actually arrived on Alioth just about a year ago, yes?"

Sachi's eyes tightened. "What has that got to do with—"

"It's just that we didn't get rid of Arlington Poore and stop the rebellion on Galatea until the end of October. His wife couldn't have gotten here before the end of November, but you'd already been logging complaints and incident reports and lobbying for a mercenary presence here since the beginning of September."

"I knew there was going to be trouble."

“Prescient of you. I also notice that a State Botanical survey went into the area designated as New Eden by the Chosen last August. According to the report, their survey got cut short because the Chosen drove them out of the area.” Patrick hit a couple of keys and flipped to a new data sheet. “And here, in the rules of engagement you were so kind to provide me when I landed, you noted that we were to conduct no operations in the New Eden zone, despite the fact that this appears to be the point of contention between State forces and the Chosen.”

She squirmed just a little on the stool. “As the aborted survey pointed out, that is a very delicate ecosystem. A *virgin* ecosystem. Alioth II has suffered enough from the ravages of war.”

“*Ravages*, that’s your concern now? Your rules of engagement cleared the Kell Hounds to light up anything bigger than a baby buggy or faster than a three-legged dog.” He leaned against the tech’s workstation. “I did more digging. Turns out that in New Eden there’s a plant the Chosen call psalmweed. Very potent, chock full of cannabinoids. The smoke in that prayer meeting where Arletta Poore was speaking in tongues, that was from psalmweed. The Chosen consider using it a sacrament. Their Sabbath lasts so long because they’re all stoned for the whole time.”

Sachi stared at him. “This has no bearing—”

“Drop the act. Your family owns Wellway Systems, and does an incredible business in both medical and recreational botanicals. You want the Chosen gone so you can buy New Eden from the local government. I’m sure your boss will do well on the board of whatever company you form to make this work.”

She sat up straight, her blue eyes blazing. “That has nothing to do with the fact that the Chosen are a threat to everyone on this planet.”

“Save it. You’re not winning this one.” Patrick sat back. “Psalmweed, according to a memo from the office of the Archon of the Lyran Commonwealth—a memo which I received this morning—is now classified

as a Schedule 1A narcotic. The Hounds have been charged with going into New Eden and sterilizing the place. Once I saddle up, that's what I'm doing."

"No, no, you can't do that. It's not that sort of drug. They classified it incorrectly."

"They classified it based on your reports which indicate that habitual users become paranoid and hostile, prone to violence and antisocial behavior. The very reports that got me here just back that up. So it's over, and your family will be very disappointed in you, unless..."

She winced. "Unless?"

"Unless you happen to resign from your post here, rejoin the family firm, and we work out a deal with the Chosen to share the bounty God has given them with the rest of mankind." Patrick shrugged. "Your choice. You have fifteen minutes to decide."

"Would they do that?"

"I'm sure, if you decide to be charming, Ms. Treyford, you'll work something out. And I can assure you that the Archon will be most pleased to have a peaceful resolution to this situation, and more wealth created for her people." He smiled. "Now, are you resigning, or do I have to burn New Eden to the ground?"

## IX

**CRATER ROOM  
GALATEA CITY, GALATEA  
LYRAN COMMONWEALTH  
6 JULY 3011, 2230 HOURS**

Veronica Matova sipped a very dry martini from a frosted glass, marveling how her body's heat melted four holes in the frost layer, which then quickly returned to opacity. The liquor filled her head with juniper, and she let it linger on her tongue for just a bit longer before swallowing. She relished the burning tingle as it ran down her throat, and then enjoyed its cessation.

She had become a ghost in Galatea City, passing unseen, making no connections, wandering through a city of which she had been the Empress less than a year previous. On the surface all looked the same, even if specific details had changed. Luckless mercenaries hustled for any job they could find so they could pay for repairs on 'Mechs that would never see a battlefield again. Local police enforced the law save where people—people in positions she'd once held—paid them to look the other way. Fresh faces arrived in the city, from elsewhere on Galatea or off-world, and disappeared. Broken people huddled in alleys or queued up at rescue missions, and occasional hover buses arrived to cart a lot off to the hinterlands to join the Reformed Church of Jesus Majificent in rebuilding the domain that had so recently been crushed.

While all seemed to function the way it should in that urban ecosystem, Veronica quickly came to identify important differences. In her time, Haskell Blizzard had controlled the underworld with a brutal efficiency. Her escort service only functioned because she'd made an alliance with him, and paid him to protect her business. The Kell brothers had seen to his downfall, and now the remnants of Blizzard's organization faced opposition from smaller gangs, including a group referred to with disgust by locals as "the foreigners." While she hadn't identified where that particular group had come from, she wasted no tears over the fate of what Haskell Blizzard had once overseen.

Veronica had avoided becoming a creature of habit. While she existed almost exclusively in the lower societal strata, she moved around a great deal, assuming new identities with ease and regularity. Purchasing



fraudulent identification was only slightly less expensive than just bribing an officer or clerk to pay no attention to your identity. A student one day, a MechWarrior the next, it didn't matter. She moved around a lot, watched people more, and learned a great deal.

The only thing she did with any regularity was to pick up messages from ComStar. She used different facilities around the city, and visited at different times of the day. Usually ComStar had nothing for her, but a day previous she'd gotten a message from Patrick Kell reading, "*Book study group. Crater Room. 2300 hours, 6 July.*" The message arrived with two days' grace, giving her time to scout the location and, if necessary, reply to Patrick and set another time to meet.

She, out of caution, arrived early and had shed the nondescript clothes she generally wore for a dress and jacket more appropriate to the Crater Room. Slightly dingy, but in the deliberate and antiseptic way chain establishments affected to appear to be edgy, the bar exuded the atmosphere that would attract white-collar workers in the lowest salary tiers, and would welcome a gang of same for a compatriot's farewell party.

Veronica chose a booth in the back, beneath a large holodisplay showing the looped news bulletin featuring Morgan Kell visiting Prince Ian Davion. Her heart had raced after the first time she'd seen it a day ago, and now she sat happily below, shielded from having to watch it repeat twelve times an hour. In other markets it would have been a curiosity, but on Galatea it suggested that the need for mercenaries might be heating up and if war was in the offing, the mercenary business would be good.

She'd not specified the gin for her martini, but the bartender hadn't gone to the well for it. He'd noticed her the moment she'd walked in, and hoped, in turn, she would linger and tip well. She knew how the game went. She'd played it herself, and instructed her employees how to play all sides of it. It all had become incredibly transparent.

*And predictable. Just like so much of life.*

A large man in black, backed by two even larger women, approached her, eclipsing the bar. “Ms. Matova...”

“So predictable.” She sipped her martini. “You cannot possibly imagine I am going to get up and leave here with you.”

The man shifted, allowing his jacket to fall open and reveal the butt of a needler tucked in his waistband. “Ms. Matova, we don’t want any trouble.”

She ignored him, pulling the skewer out of her drink, drawing an olive from it with perfect white teeth, and chewed slowly to relish the combination of brine and gin. She sank the other olive back into the drink and stirred. “You have been told to bring me to your master unharmed. I suggest you tell him that *if* he remembers me at all accurately, I would accept such an invitation from his lips alone, and that the seat opposite me is empty.”

“Ms. Matova—”

She glanced up at him, her expression sharpening, and the person she’d been flooding back. “I have given you a command which your master will confirm. Relay it now, or the next thing I say to him is that I want your head found in a gutter with dogs fighting over what little you have for brains. Am I clear? Go.”

The man bowed his head and withdrew, but the Amazonian curtain remained to hem her in. Veronica did not deign to notice them and instead calmly sipped her drink. Relief washed through her with the man’s departure, because it confirmed what she had come to discern since her return to Galatea. *Something I should have seen from the very first. I could have shared it with Morgan and been done with this charade.*

Life, especially in a place like Galatea, is all about control. If you maintain control over yourself, you will succeed where others fail. Once you can extend your control over others, they act to your will and you continue to benefit. In her absence her old rivals had reasserted themselves. Her subordinates had split her empire between them, each handling what

they could. Blizzard's control had fractured, allowing the foreigners in, and their presence prevented anyone from rebuilding what he'd once had.

Her enemy had wanted to control her and Morgan Kell. While she had once been part of the Church of Jesus Majificent, she'd long before escaped the Church's control. And Church members had never made a play to extend power into Galatea City. Pushing control beyond their domain and working with Count Somokis would have been outside their ability.

Likewise, while General Volmer, late the leader of the Galatea Garrison, had ample reason to hate the Kells and desire to destroy them, would have been a viable candidate as the author of Veronica's troubles, he'd had his power broken as well, and had fled Galatea before she ever became linked with Morgan Kell. Moreover, she had only ever been a casual friend of the general, supplying talent to entertain official visitors. *And he never had any connection with Count Somokis.*

No, only one person had a reason to hate the Kells *and* Veronica, had known Somokis, and had an insatiable appetite for control. *A need for control that became a need for revenge.* And the resources to engineer her kidnapping.

Haskell Blizzard slid into the seat opposite her. "How lovely to see you again, my dear."

"Eight months have not been kind to you, Haskell." The man had once been corpulent, but had shed a good deal of weight. His flat, gray eyes remained the same, and he chewed his nails nearly halfway to the quick. He'd stopped shaving his head or his face, leaving him covered from Adam's apple to crown with an unkempt salt-and-pepper pelt. And his sartorial choices, while pedestrian before, did not elevate him much past the beggar Veronica had seen on her first night back on Galatea.

"No, I suppose not." He sat back, nipping at an errant spur of thumbnail. "The jackals came for me, tried to kill me and almost succeeded. As I convalesced, I considered what I would do to those who betrayed me. I

reached out to those who owed me, and to networks I could trust. Lo and behold, you were on Zavijava, along with Morgan Kell *and* Count Somokis. I had facilitated a plan or two of his which proved fruitful for the both of us. He wanted help getting off Zavijava, and I asked him to get you off the world for me. And here we are.”

Veronica canted her head. “And where exactly is that, do you think? You now take control of me from Somokis, and still use me to control the Kell Hounds?”

“That will do for the moment.” Blizzard looked up at the holoivid display above them. “I’d thought perhaps an Ion Knights raid done properly would recoup my losses and ruin the Kells’ reputations forever, but seeing Morgan with Ian Davion makes me think that controlling him might give me access to even greater levels of power.”

Veronica’s blue eyes brightened. “Oh, through him, control the Archon. Bold play. And it might have worked, except...”

“Except?”

“Except you’ve not been in control at all. Never once.”

Blizzard looked around the small bar, with his three companion dominating the space. “I assure you there are more outside.”

“I believe you think that will be enough, Haskell. But it won’t.” She shrugged. “You think I am the means to control Morgan Kell when, in fact, I’m simply here as bait.”

Blizzard blinked. “Bait?”

“Which you have swallowed whole.” She tucked herself into the booth’s corner. “Isn’t that true, Morgan.”

“Kell? Here?” Blizzard’s head whipped around, then he glanced up at the holoivid display. “But he’s on Northwind, with Ian Davion.”

“You would have only come out of hiding if you thought that.” Veronica consumed the second olive. “And Morgan so loves to make an entrance.”

The door to the left of the bar, the one labeled OFFICE, opened slowly and Morgan Kell filled the doorway. The bartender produced a needle carbine from beneath the bar, and half the patrons at the bar produced a lethal variety of small arms. Morgan slipped behind the bar, poured a short whisky, and threaded his way through the phalanx of Blizzard's guards. He set the whisky in front of Haskell Blizzard.

Veronica looked up at him and wanted to reach out, but she held herself back. "You truly didn't go to Ian."

Morgan shook his head. "That's Constantine Fisk. He kept going on about his once having been up to play me in some trideo project. When Ryan ordered me to do something highly visible, I sent him in my stead. And, Blizzard, you'll appreciate this. The guy at the far end of the bar, that's Ivan Barovsky, the man whose cartel you wanted me to destroy. The rest of these guys are with him. Likewise the ones outside dealing with your reinforcements. When you ordered Somokis to bring Veronica here, and I knew Barovsky had a link to Galatea, it decided what I had to do. I had Ivan bring his people here—they're all the 'foreigners' who've made it difficult for you to climb back to the top of the underworld."

She looked at him. "You've known since that message came through?"

"Yes."

Her heart pounded at her throat. "And you kept the truth from me?"

"I did."

"And used me as bait."

"I did."

"How could you?"

Morgan reached up his left sleeve and withdrew a slender vibroblade. "You told me that you had waited and hoped I'd find you. I failed you in that. And you told me you would stay with me as long as it would be your hand that wielded the blade with which we'd carve his heart out. Keeping

you in the dark, it was the only way I could both keep that promise to you—and have one last chance at saving you.”

“How can you save me?”

“You said Somokis broke you and, by extension, Blizzard broke you.” He extended the knife’s hilt toward her. “I don’t see you as broken. Doesn’t matter who you *are*, or who you *were*, Veronica; it only matters who you *want to be*. The choice is yours.”

*So slender, so deadly.* She stared at the blade. *Who do I want to be?*



# SUBMACHINE GUNS: SPRAY AND PRAY

CRAIG A. REED, JR.



A submachine gun is a fully automatic weapon that fires pistol-caliber ammunition. Normally carried by Special Forces, soldiers in support units, vehicle crews, and both civilian and military police, these weapons are known for their high rate of fire and shorter range. These weapons are generally heavily regulated, if not outright banned. Criminals and assassins use them, as some are easily concealable until they are needed. Due to their high rate of fire, such weapons have to be used with both hands for stable firing.

This article explores some common models that can be found throughout the Inner Sphere, but this is only a sample of the numerous submachine guns out there.

**Note:** All stats in this article are for *A Time of War (AToW)*.

## WOLF-BARRON A7 (FREE WORLDS LEAGUE)

The A7 is the latest addition to Free World League Military arsenal. A joint venture between Wolf Armaments and Barron industries, the A7 comes

from a line of reliable submachine guns that have been in use within the Free Worlds for the last seventy years. The newest model is only 35 cm long with its stock retracted, allowing it to be concealed under a jacket or coat. The magazine comes in two sizes: a thirty-round magazine that performs flawlessly and a fifty-round magazine that will jam on occasion if the weapon is fired continuously.

**Equipment Rating:** C/X-X-D-D/C

**AP/BD:** 3B/3B

**Range:** 5/25/50/75

**Shots:** 30 or 50

**Cost/Reload:** 450/10

**Mass/Reload:** 2.9kg/75g

**Notes:** Burst: 8, Recoil -1; if weapon fired three combat rounds in a row with a 50-round magazine, on the third turn, the gun will jam on a 5 or less; range modifiers: +1/+0/-1/-2

## **BLACKFIELD SCORPION MK 65 (FREE WORLDS LEAGUE)**

Looking more like a pistol than a submachine gun, The Mk 65 is common among Regular security forces, but an identical design has found its way into resistance movements all over the Inner Sphere. SAFE is looking for a connection between Blackfield and the new weapons, but nothing has been established. With a wire stock that folds over the compact frame, the weapon can be concealed easily. An experienced user can fire it with one hand, as long as it's in single-shot mode. However, firing it on full auto with one hand will make any shots extremely difficult.

**Equipment Rating:** C/X-D-D-D/C (Regular space: C/X-E-E-E/C)

**AP/BD:** 3B/3B (single shot: 3B/2)



**Range:** 10/25/45/65

**Shots:** 20

**Cost/Reload:** 420/10

**Mass/Reload:** 1.4kg/35g

**Notes:** Burst: 5, Recoil -1 (if fired one-handed with burst, Recoil -2); range modifiers: +0/-1/-2/-3

## **NAMBU TYPE S-124 (DRACONIS COMBINE)**

Common among the Combine's Noble guards, the S-124 has a polyurethane stock and a longer barrel, giving it better-than-average range, at the cost of concealability and weight. Standard magazines are limited to thirty rounds, though rumors of fifty-round magazines being available on the black market are common. Normally worn slung over one shoulder, the S-124 is as much for appearance as function, and most are kept in excellent condition.

**Equipment Rating:** C/X-E-E-E/C

**AP/BD:** 3B/3B

**Range:** 20/40/60/95

**Shots:** 30

**Cost/Reload:** 450/30

**Mass/Reload:** 3.9kg/60g

**Notes:** Burst: 7, Recoil -1; range modifiers: +1/-0/-1/-1

## **SUPEKUTA (DRACONIS COMBINE)**

One of the internal problems the Combine's Internal Security Force has been unable to eliminate for years is the Supekuta submachine gun. The Supekuta ("specter" in Japanese) is not built by any recognized Combine

industry, and is a common weapon among yakuza, other criminal gangs, and even revolutionary groups. The weapon is made from stamped parts and is easy to assemble with a few simple tools. While not very accurate, the Supekuta is cheap, easy to maintain, easy to conceal, and has an impressive rate of fire. A favorite of assassins, the weapon is easily discarded after use.

**Equipment Rating:** C/E-E-D-D/C

**AP/BD:** 3B/4B

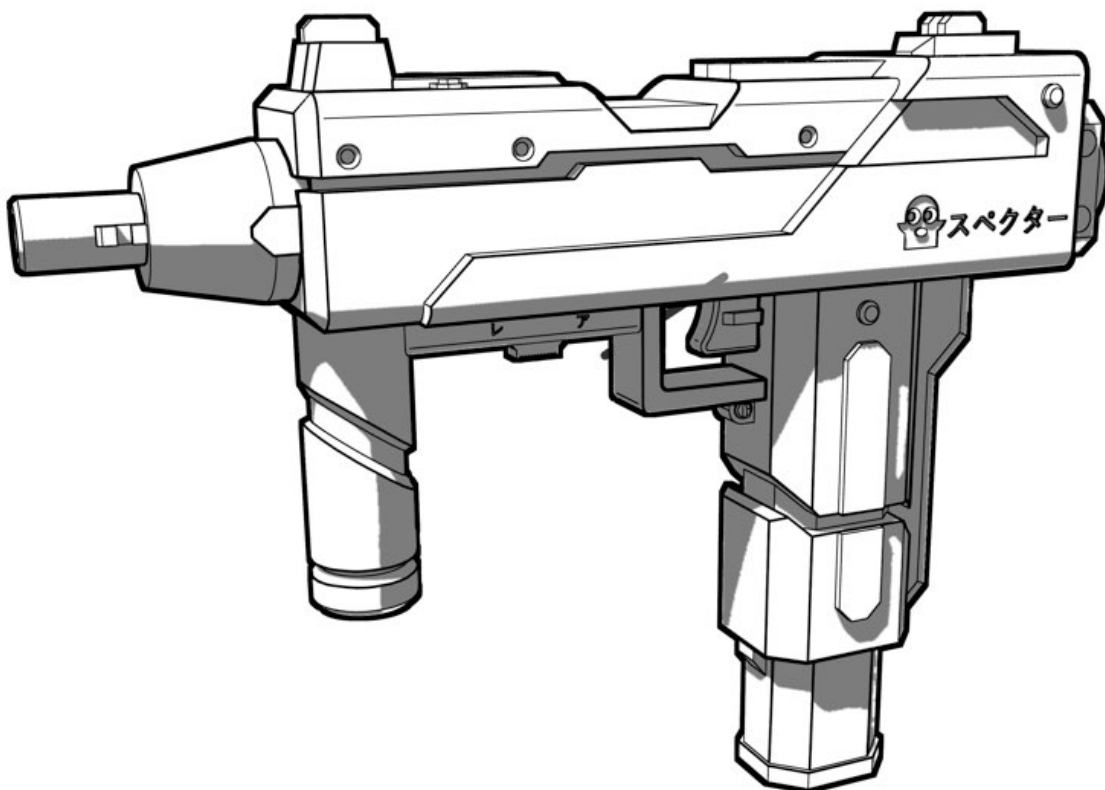
**Range:** 20/40/65/90

**Shots:** 30

**Cost/Reload:** 200/50

**Mass/Reload:** 2.5kg/70g

**Notes:** Burst: 10, Recoil -1; +1 to all repair rolls; +2 to Perception Checks (Concealment); range modifiers: 0/-1/-2/-3



## **STURM HORNET MK III (LYRAN COMMONWEALTH)**

The Hornet series of submachine guns are used by both the Lyran Commonwealth Armed Forces and major Lyran police forces. With a long barrel, fixed stock, laser sight, and recoil compensator, the Hornet Mk III has decent range and stopping power. The barrel is designed to accept a suppressor, making it a common choice for Special Forces and police SWAT teams. Rarely seen in civilian hands, the Hornet is prized for its reliability and ease of shooting.

**Equipment Rating:** C/X-X-D-D/C

**AP/BD:** 4B/3B

**Range:** 35/55/75/110

**Shots:** 30

**Cost/Reload:** 750/65

**Mass/Reload:** 3.4kg/60g

**Notes:** Burst: 6, Recoil 0; -2 to Perception Checks (Sound); range modifiers (including laser sight\*): +1/+1/+0/-1

\*Requires Micro-Power Pack to function: uses 0.1 points per hour of continuous use.

## **DSK LARGO SGA AND SGB (LYRAN COMMONWEALTH)**

A competitor of the Hornet, the Largo SGA is larger, heavier, and has a longer range. On the other hand, it isn't as reliable and has a tendency for muzzle rise if a long burst is fired. Another problem is the Largo's proprietary drum magazines, which are hard to come by within the

Commonwealth's borders and almost impossible to find outside. The SGB tries to address the SGA's shortcomings by making it lighter, rebuilding the magazine well so it will accept several common magazines, and reducing muzzle climb with some success.

### **SGA**

**Equipment Rating:** C/X-D-D-C/C

**AP/BD:** 4B/4B

**Range:** 45/65/85/120

**Shots:** 50

**Cost/Reload:** 600/85

**Mass/Reload:** 3.7kg/85g

**Notes:** **Burst:** 10, Recoil -2 (add -1 to recoil for every consecutive turn the weapon is fired); +1 to all repair rolls; range modifiers: +1/+0/-1/-2

### **SGB**

**Equipment Rating:** C/X-X-D-D/C

**AP/BD:** 4B/4B

**Range:** 45/65/85/120

**Shots:** 50

**Cost/Reload:** 700/85

**Mass/Reload:** 3.5kg/85g

**Notes:** **Burst:** 10, Recoil -1 (add -1 to Recoil modifier for every consecutive combat turn the weapon is fired); range modifiers: +1/+0/-1/-1

## **RFW BEDIVERE (FEDERATED SUNS)**

More of a submachine pistol than a submachine gun, the Bedivere is a compact weapon, easily concealed under a coat, and it has a high rate of fire. Most of the public recognizes the weapon from the Cal Freeman run on the *Immortal Warrior* series, where he used a pair of Bediveres, one in each hand, in numerous movie shootouts. Equipped with twenty- or thirty-round magazines, they are mostly used in the real world by bodyguards or undercover police officers on highly dangerous cases.

**Equipment Rating:** D/D-D-D-D/C

**AP/BD:** 3B/3B

**Range:** 15/30/45/60

**Shots:** 20 or 30

**Cost/Reload:** 560/75

**Mass/Reload:** 1.2kg/50g

**Notes:** Burst: 7, Recoil -1\*; -2 to Perception Checks (Concealment); +1 to Prestidigitation/Quickdraw Skill; range modifiers: +2/+1/0/-1

\*If a character has both the Ambidextrous Trait (p. 108, *AToW*) and the Small Arms Skill at 4+ (p. 153, *AToW*), they can wield two Bediveres—one in each hand—at the standard -1 Recoil penalty for each weapon. If the character lacks one of the requirements listed above, the recoil is -2 for each weapon; if the character has neither requirement, the recoil is -3 for each weapon.

## **AWA STARLING MK7 (FEDERATED SUNS)**

Based on a thousand-year-old design, the Starling is notable for a side-mounted magazine. This model comes in three variants. The basic MK7 is used by vehicle crews and some MechWarriors; it has a folding stock and can be carried in tight spots. The MK7-LB is carried by the average soldier,

and has a longer barrel and a fixed stock, increasing its range, at the cost of weight and size. The MK7-SF has a built-in silencer and a folding stock, and is used mostly by Special Forces in the Armed Forces of the Federated Suns. Evidence indicates the Federated Suns is sending thousands of MK7s to resistance groups on both the Capellan and Draconis borders.

### **MK7**

**Equipment Rating:** D/X-C-C-C/C

**AP/BD:** 3B/4B

**Range:** 25/45/75/110

**Shots:** 32

**Cost/Reload:** 300/15

**Mass/Reload:** 2.9kg/40g

**Notes:** Burst: 8, Recoil -1; -2 to Perception Checks (Concealment); range modifiers: +2/+1/0/-1

### **MK7-LB**

**Equipment Rating:** D/X-C-C-C/F

**AP/BD:** 3B/4B

**Range:** 40/60/90/140

**Shots:** 32

**Cost/Reload:** 400/15

**Mass/Reload:** 3.1kg/40g

**Notes:** Burst: 8, Recoil -1; range modifiers: +2/+2/+1/0

### **MK7-SF**

**Equipment Rating:** D/X-D-D-D/F

**AP/BD:** 3B/4B

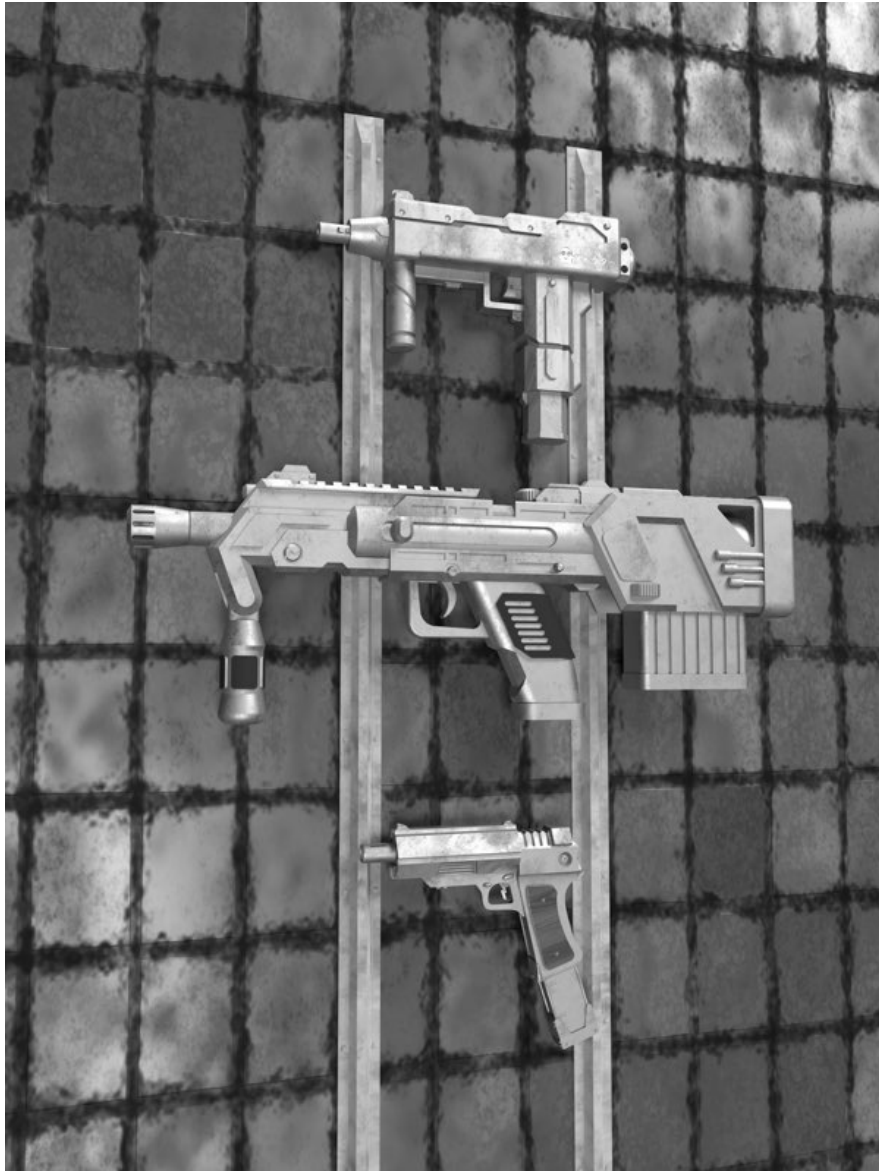
**Range:** 25/40/65/90

**Shots:** 32

**Cost/Reload:** 600/15

**Mass/Reload:** 3.4kg/40g

**Notes:** Burst: 8, Recoil -1; -4 to Perception Checks (Sound); range modifiers: +1/+0/-1/-2



**HÒUWÈI (CAPELLAN CONFEDERATION)**

The Hòuwèi (Guardian) is used by planetary militia and reserve Home Guard units. It is a mass-produced submachine gun, not very accurate, but rugged, reliable, and easy to maintain in the field. Millions have been produced over the centuries, and it has made its way into criminal hands and resistance groups everywhere. Made from stamped steel and wood, the Hòuwèi is rarely found in pristine condition, but it remains deadly.

**Equipment Rating:** D/D-D-D-D/E

**AP/BD:** 4B/4B

**Range:** 25/55/95/125

**Shots:** 30

**Cost/Reload:** 250/20

**Mass/Reload:** 3.5lg/75g

**Notes:** Burst: 6, Recoil -2; range modifiers: +0/-1/-2/-3

## **JĪNSÈ YǎNJÌNGSHÉ (CAPELLAN CONFEDERATION)**

The “Golden Cobra” is carried by elite Capellan infantry. It is equipped with a laser sight and designed to accept a sound suppressor. Made by a small factory on Sian, each *Jīnsè Yǎnjìngshé* is carefully assembled, tested, and inspected. It has decent range and superior accuracy. Unlike most weapons, the *Jīnsè Yǎnjìngshé* is commonly issued with armor-piercing ammo, trading penetration for slightly less lethality.

**Equipment Rating:** C/X-X-E-E/F

**AP/BD:** 5B/5B (AP ammo: 7B/4B)

**Range:** 35/60/100/150

**Shots:** 30

**Cost/Reload:** 675/60 (AP ammo: 180)

**Mass/Reload:** 3.1kg/60g



**Notes:** Burst: 5, Recoil -1; range modifiers (including laser sight\*): +3/+2/+2/+1

\*Requires Micro-Power Pack to function: uses 0.1 points per hour of continuous use.

## **J-15 AND J-17 HAGEL (WORD OF BLAKE/REPUBLIC OF THE SPHERE)**

The Hagel is an oddity. Used in the waning days of the Jihad, the Hagel was produced in a factory on Terra that Stone's Coalition captured relatively intact. The J-15 is a prototype that was rushed into production and has a few rough edges, including reliability and maintenance problems. The J-17, in use with Republic of the Sphere forces, is a more robust and improved version of the J-15, with a longer range, better accuracy, and a lighter construction. The J-17 comes with a built-in laser sight and a sound/flash suppressor. According to the factory's own records, several thousand J-15s are unaccounted for, and it is feared the weapons fell into criminal or insurgent hands.

### **J-15**

**Equipment Rating:** D/X-X-D-C/C

**AP/BD:** 3B/4B

**Range:** 20/40/70/110

**Shots:** 15 or 25

**Cost/Reload:** 400/20

**Mass/Reload:** 2.7kg/50g

**Notes:** Burst 10, Recoil -2; range modifiers: +1/+0/-1/-2

### **J-17**

**Equipment Rating:** D/X-X-D-D/C

**AP/BD:** 4B/5B

**Range:** 25/50/85/125

**Shots:** 15 or 25

**Cost/Reload:** 700/20

**Mass/Reload:** 2.3kg/50g

**Notes:** Burst 8, Recoil -1; Flash/Sound Suppressor: -2 to Perception Checks (Sound/Vision); range modifiers (including laser sight\*): +2/+1/+0/-1

\*Requires Micro-Power Pack to function: uses 0.1 points per hour of continuous use.

## **HUNKLE V (TAURIAN CONCORDANT)**

The Hunkle pushes the concept of the submachine gun to the limit. It is among the heaviest submachine guns, requiring some training and strength to use. On the other hand, the Hunkle's weight and recoil-compensation system makes it a stable and accurate firing platform and its longevity makes finding parts easy. With the option of a thirty-round stick magazine or a fifty- or 100-round drum magazine, the Hunkle can spit out a lot of rounds in a short amount of time.

**Equipment Rating:** C/X-B-B-B/C

**AP/BD:** 5B/4B

**Range:** 25/50/85/120

**Shots:** 30, 50, or 100

**Cost:** 600

**Reload Cost:** 35/45/90

**Mass:** 3.7kg

**Reload Mass:** 90g/150g/300g

**Notes:** Burst: 10, Recoil: 0; +2 to all repair rolls; range modifiers:  
+2/+1/+1/+0

## **BOUDICCA-4, -5, AND -7 (MAGISTRACY OF CANOPUS)**

Sleek, stylish, and deadly, the Boudicca-7 is as much a work of art as it is a weapon. While previous models of the Boudicca (mostly the -4 and -5) are common in the Magistracy Armed Forces, the newest model, the Boudicca-7, is restricted to the Magestrix's security detail. As such, the weapon is considered as important as the uniform, and thus requires daily cleaning to keep it immaculate. All models come with a built-in laser sight, adding to their accuracy.

### **Boudicca-4**

**Equipment Rating:** C/D-D-D-C/F

**AP/BD:** 3B/4B

**Range:** 20/45/75/100

**Shots:** 30

**Cost/Reload:** 300/20

**Mass/Reload:** 2.5kg/40g

**Notes:** Burst: 6, Recoil: -1; range modifiers (including laser sight\*):  
+2/+1/+1/+0

\*Requires Micro-Power Pack to function: uses 0.1 points per hour of continuous use.

### **Boudicca-5**

**Equipment Rating:** C/X-D-D-D/F

**AP/BD:** 5B/4B

**Range:** 30/50/80/110

**Shots:** 30

**Cost/Reload:** 500/20

**Mass/Reload:** 2.3kg/40g

**Notes:** Burst: 6, Recoil: -1; range modifiers (including laser sight\*):  
+2/+2/+1/+1

\*Requires Micro-Power Pack to function: uses 0.1 points per hour of continuous use.

### **Boudicca-7**

**Equipment Rating:** C/X-X-E-E/F

**AP/BD:** 5B/5B

**Range:** 35/55/85/120

**Shots:** 40

**Cost/Reload:** 700/20

**Mass/Reload:** 2.1kg/50g

**Notes:** Burst: 8, Recoil: -1; range modifiers (including laser sight\*):  
+3/+2/+1/+1

\*Requires Micro-Power Pack to function: uses 0.1 points per hour of continuous use.

## **TIBERIUS/SPARTACUS (MARIAN HEGEMONY/LOTHIAN LEAGUE)**

The Tiberius submachine gun is used by the Marian Hegemony Armed Forces as a force multiplier. Designed to fire as many bullets as fast as possible, the Tiberius sacrifices almost everything else to achieve this

requirement. The weapon is made from stamped parts, and requires the soldier to clean the weapon after continuous use.

When the Lothian League won its freedom from the Hegemony in 3128, a large stockpile of Tiberius submachine guns fell into the Lothians' possession. A few talented Lothian technicians took the Tiberius and reworked the design to make a more accurate and robust model, which they renamed the Spartacus, as a way to tweak the Hegemony.

### **Tiberius**

**Equipment Rating:** D/X-E-E-E/F

**AP/BD:** 5B/4B

**Range:** 30/55/95/110

**Shots:** 50

**Cost/Reload:** 600/50

**Mass/Reload:** 3.0kg/75g

**Notes:** Burst: 12, Recoil: -2; range modifiers: +1/+0/-1/-2

### **Spartacus**

**Equipment Rating:** D/X-X-X-D/F

**AP/BD:** 4B/4B

**Range:** 45/70/110/125

**Shots:** 50

**Cost/Reload:** 750/50

**Mass/Reload:** 2.8kg/75g

**Notes:** Burst: 8, Recoil: -1; range modifiers: +2/+1/0/-1



## **WC-2 AND WC-6 (STAR LEAGUE/CLAN)**

The WC-2 submachine gun saw extensive service with the Star League Defense Force in the last years of the Star League and the Amaris Civil War. Large numbers traveled with the Exodus Fleet, and were used during the Pentagon Civil War. During the next 200 years, the WC-2 underwent several redesigns, resulting in the WC-6 used by today's Clan garrison and paramilitary forces. Some MechWarriors carry the WC-6 with their survival equipment, to give them extra firepower in an emergency. The WC-2 is equipped with a sound suppressor, which is disdained by the warrior caste but highly prized by the Dark Caste. Both models have a flash suppressor and laser sight, which doesn't offend the warrior caste.

### **WC-2**

**Equipment Rating:** C/D-D-D-D/D

**AP/BD:** 3B/3B

**Range:** 25/50/75/100

**Shots:** 30

**Cost/Reload:** 700/20

**Mass/Reload:** 2.3kg/60g

**Notes:** Burst: 5, Recoil: -1; Sound and Flash Suppressor: -2 to Perception Checks (Sound/Vision); range modifiers (including laser sight\*): +2/+1/+1/+0

\*Requires Micro-Power Pack to function: uses 0.1 points per hour of continuous use.

## **WC-6**

**Equipment Rating:** C/X-D-E-E/E

**AP/BD:** 4B/3B

**Range:** 45/70/95/120

**Shots:** 30**Cost/Reload:** 800/20

**Mass/Reload:** 2.2kg/60g

**Notes:** Burst: 5, Recoil: -1; Flash Suppressor: -2 to Perception Checks (Vision); range modifiers (including laser sight\*): +2/+1/+1/+0

\*Requires Micro-Power Pack to function: uses 0.1 points per hour of continuous use.



# SECRETS OF THE SPHERE: THREE-CLAN MONTE

MICHAEL J. CIARAVELLA



**—Recorded at an Undisclosed Location, 2 September 3151**

Good evening, Ladies and Gentlemen! Welcome back to *Secrets of the Sphere*, your source for the true story on all that occurs in the Inner Sphere. As always, I am your host, Kyle DiNoto, *the Questioner*.

I know that you have not heard from me in a while, but that is only due to the fact that I have been on the trail of one of the most potentially shocking conspiracies of the modern age. (Rumors that my editors think I am “unbalanced” or “coming up with shocking stories to attempt to slip knowledge of the true conspiracies to my readers” are complete fabrications.)

For this update, however, my work has taken me from my usual classified location to the edge of Clan Space, and I think you will agree that this is one of the most important undertakings of my career.

Tonight’s topic: the mysterious disappearance—and reappearance—of Clan Sea Fox.

I know what you are thinking: “Clan Sea Fox didn’t really go anywhere. They just changed their name....rebranded, if you will...”



*That's what they WANTED you to think.*

We will start at the beginning. Everyone knows that the current incarnation of Clan Sea Fox is the rebirth of Clan Diamond Shark, a Clan that had originally been known as Clan Sea Fox.

If you are a little confused, don't worry: it's not just you.

Clan Sea Fox was the original name bestowed on the Clan by Nicholas Kerensky. The Clan was a bit of an anomaly among their brethren, known derisively in the Clan Worlds as the "Merchant Clan." While it is true that many of the other Clans looked with disdain on the more progressive nature of Clan Sea Fox, there is little doubt that they were one of the most wealthy and well-connected Clans in the Clan Homeworlds, and have taken great lengths to merge their martial and economic prowess as they moved back into the Inner Sphere.

When their Clan totem was pushed to the brink of extinction by an artificially created predator, the Clan voted to change their name to that of their totem's murderer, becoming Clan Diamond Shark. This rebranding allowed for some major changes in the Clan, and would lead to even greater progressive changes in the future.

Yet what if Clan Diamond Shark was not Clan Sea Fox at all, but rather an elaborate sleight of hand allowing for the creation of a second, *separate* Clan?

The evidence is there, if you have the will to find it.

While it is true that many of the *ristars* of the former Clan Sea Fox did work under the banner of Clan Diamond Shark, there were many lesser-known warriors who disappeared from the public eye completely, along with countless traders and workers. According to my own private research, nearly 40 percent of their strength was not apparent for the entirety of the Diamond Shark era, a shocking total in and of itself. While the Clans, with their focus on the military might of their enemies, would hardly notice the difference, that overlooks the powerful economic impact of the Clan Sea

Fox traders. Left to their own devices, what would such economic dynamos be able to accomplish, given several decades—generations in Clan reckonings—with their work being unobserved?

Even more telling is the fact that, despite the wealth and economic talent of the Merchant Clan, they never grew beyond the scale of the other Clans, as others such as the Jade Falcons and the Wolves attempted to do. Despite all of the advantages a Clan could ask for, they remained relatively modest, strong enough to protect their own interests and keep up the moderate expansion expected of any Clan, but the growth is far below what they should have been capable of.

The conjecture is obvious: Clan Sea Fox *never* merged into Clan Diamond Shark. Instead it split off and created an entirely *new* Clan as a distraction, to keep its fellow Clans from learning the truth of what it was doing, the goal every Clan holds closest to their hearts...

To become the ilClan of a new Star League.

However, we must consider that eventually the other Clans would have caught on to the subterfuge, especially as the Diamond Sharks were caught selling advanced Clan technology to the Great Houses of the Inner Sphere. Seeing an opportunity to come back into the light (as well as throwing off anyone who had already picked up on the ruse), the Diamond Sharks used the news of growing sea fox populations to announce that Clan Sea Fox was reborn, once again throwing the other Clans off the scent.

With the Diamond Shark cover now abandoned, the question falls on us to attempt to understand what the Sea Foxes did with their newfound strength and options. With their steady spread back into the Inner Sphere, it becomes incredibly difficult to track their strength. On at least two occasions, two identically named vessels were in wholly different star systems, making it apparent that the Sea Foxes—if we can even call them that—are attempting to hide their strength, ensuring that no one else knows what they have accomplished. With such freedom, they could be preparing

a major strike at one of the Great Houses or hiding near the Clan Homeworlds, just waiting for the moment to strike. The bite of the diamond shark—or sea fox—is deadly indeed...

However, there is a much darker aspect to this case that chills me to my core, considering the sheer amount of new data that my team is receiving. While watching the sleight of hand the Sea Foxes have already used, it is easy to miss the far more deadly illusion that they may be involved in.

Following the dissolution of the Republic of the Sphere, the last vestiges of ComStar have been cut loose. With the HPG network still hopelessly blinkered on many worlds, the former Star League Department of Communications was forced to find its own way in a cold universe, and many HPG stations came under the tacit control of whichever government watched over the region. However, on many worlds that were no longer under the sway of the Republic, a new master has come in to take up the shattered pieces of the secular ComStar: Clan Sea Fox.

Hoping to use their adeptness at interstellar communications for their own gain, the Foxes moved in with the resources and security that the former religious order had not been able to boast since the Battle of Tukayyid. While the Sea Foxes explained that supporting one of the few Star League-era entities still in existence was purely an economic investment, there are many who are secretly worried what an alliance between the two factions could bring forward. ComStar, equipped with the strength and support of the far-ranging Clan, could easily be on the cusp of rebuilding its military might. Even more concerning is the potential of a three-way alliance between ComStar, the Sea Foxes, and the Diamond Sharks. Such an alliance would be terrifying, especially with the well-known intelligence, communication, and military strength of the various entities, and their clear abilities at subterfuge.

While I have attempted to gather more information, the net I have cast is being unraveled by an unknown source. While I have received hints that

several other factions have been attempting to research the new Sea Foxes, there remains many questions as to who would have the resources to do so. Is this the ilKhan's first attempt to get to know how the new Clan could fit into his grand plans for the Inner Sphere?

More concerning, however, would be if this is the beginning of a new Fox-Shark-ComStar intelligence apparatus at work, attempting to track down its own trail to see if anyone recognizes what they are attempting to build. Could this all be just another ruse to keep the reality of their alliance a secret? Such a question will need to be answered before the true agenda of the Clan could be known, although the thought of a ROM agent equipped with the best technology that Clan Sea Fox could provide is a horrifying thought.

One last question: If the Sea Foxes have the ability to hide both their strength and their connection to ComStar, what would keep them from trying to reach out to entities like the Minnesota Tribe or the Dark Caste, or others who have thrived in the shadows? Given the opportunity to work with an actual Clan, either group would jump at the chance to join a new alliance that could threaten the existence of the nascent Star League.

That is all I can say for now, although I hope to have more at my next broadcast. As always, this is Kyle DiNoto, reminding you to keep ever vigilant, and *keep questioning!*



# TALES FROM THE CRACKED CANOPY: SHADOWS OF THE PAST

CRAIG A. REED, JR.



*At the Cracked Canopy, a MechWarrior bar on the gaming world of Solaris VII, a Memory Wall displays mementos of glorious victories and bitter defeats, of honorable loyalties and venomous betrayals, of lifelong friendships and lost loves. Each enshrined object ensures that the past will not be forgotten and the future is something worth fighting for.*

**INTERNATIONAL ZONE  
SOLARIS CITY, SOLARIS VII  
LYRAN COMMONWEALTH  
21 APRIL 3090**

The Canopy was busy tonight, on account of a major double-header in the arenas. Kora “Celtic” McQuinn was facing off against Stanfeld Dudar in the Jungle, while Abellona “Nightshade” Kroger was taking on the hot newcomer, Bahiti “Hitwoman” Shoop in the Davion Arena. They were still in the pregame show on the half-dozen large tri-vid screens scattered

around the bar, but the crowd was large, and it was keeping the Canopy's staff, including me, busy.

Sedge was manning the bar with me, while Chantel and Annike, the regular waitstaff, were working the room. Susan, my assistant manager and relief waitress, was also on the floor, serving drinks or fetching food orders. I could hear Mateo in the kitchen barking orders to his three-member staff.

I had just pulled a beer for Plato, a man so large he had to have been a Clan Elemental at one point in his life, when I saw movement out of the corner of my eye. I turned my head and snatched something glittering out of the air. I placed the mug in front of Plato without looking and opened my hand to find a red gem the size of my fingernail lying on my palm.

I glanced up and saw the battered face of Enno Mauser grinning at me. "For my bar tab!" he said in a loud voice.

I nodded and dropped the gem into the cash register. He walked over to the bar and slapped something on the counter. It took me several seconds to realize what the object was.

I reached down and carefully picked it up. It was the size of my palm, gold in color, with a capital *E*—the Greek letter epsilon—and the Roman numeral *XII* engraved on it.

"Is that what I think it is?" I said slowly.

"Look on the back," Enno said, his expression serious.

I picked it up and turned it over. On the back was a name: *Aaron Kutuzov*.

My stomach lurched. "You're sure?" I asked, surprised at how steady my voice was.

"I'm sure," Enno replied. "Took it off the body myself. DNA match confirmed."

I started to say something, but Chantel came over with an order from a table, and I handed it back to him. "Put that away for now," I said. "We'll talk later."

Enno nodded, and the medallion vanished. I glanced at Susan, but she was in the far corner, too far away to see Enno's prize. How was I going to break it to her?



Midnight came, and most of the crowd had cleared out for home and work the next day. McQuinn had beaten Dudar in a hide-and-seek type of match, but the Hitwoman and Nightshade had gotten involved in a slugfest that had kept the crowd on the edge of their seats for nearly half an hour. In the end, Kroger had managed to edge out Shoop for the win.

I looked around at the remaining customers and saw almost all regulars. Sedge, Chantel, and Annike had already gone home, and Mateo was getting ready to shut down the kitchen for the night. Susan had retreated to the office to start the daily paperwork. Plato was still in his chair in the corner, reading a book, his half-finished beer on the table next to him. Becca Voss was sitting in a booth with Renzo Austin, a fellow Solaris gladiator and stablemate. From the hushed conversation and their use of the salt and pepper shakers on the table, they were discussing tonight's fights. Lynette Wendig, sultry owner of Lynette's Lingerie, one of the businesses across the street from the Canopy, was sipping wine from a glass. Across from her was her latest boy toy, a young, handsome guy who looked fit, but struck me as being only slightly smarter than a brick wall.



And sitting at the bar, as he had done all night, was Enno Mauser. He wasn't quite a regular, but that was only because he spent most of the year off Solaris working. But whenever he was on-planet, he drank here. He and I go back better than twenty years, and he's the only customer I let run up a tab longer than one night.

The best way to describe Enno's face was that it had a lived-in look. He'd taken his share of punches, as the few scars attested. His reddish-blond hair was short, but had all the look of a self-administered haircut.



Mauser was in his late thirties, but he looked ten years older. He was lean, but not thin, and his leather jacket hid his pistol.

I made sure everything was all right, then walked over to him. “Been a while, Enno.”

“A lot of work, Leo,” he replied. “You know how it is.”

I nodded. Enno was a bounty hunter, not as good or as well-known as *the* Bounty Hunter, but better than most, with a reputation for honesty and tracking down whoever he was chasing. “You going to be around for any length of time?”

“A couple weeks,” he replied, then took a sip of beer. His eyes drifted to the Memory Wall, a wall where people left objects to be displayed. Most were framed photos, while others were anything from unit patches to pieces of armor to stranger things like the small statue of a cat carved from a black stone no one had been able to identify. “You still accepting items for your wall?”

“Always,” I replied. “But that medallion isn’t something I can display.”

The Memory Wall had only one rule: no Word of Blake objects. We have everything from weapons to patches to pieces of armor. All had been left by visitors willing to let go of something from their past. Each object had a story, and they were all treated with respect. It was our way of honoring the past.

“I know.” He pulled the medallion out again and placed it on the bar top.

I stared at it: a precentor’s medallion, engraved with the name of its owner.

I exhaled slowly. In that moment, twenty years of guilt and anger lifted off my shoulders. “I need to tell Susan.”

Enno nodded. “How is she? Still having nightmares?”

“Once in a while. Maybe she can finally put these ghosts to rest.”

“Which ghosts are they?”

I turned and looked at Plato, who had risen from his chair and walked quietly over to us. The giant was standing there, his head twenty or so centimeters short of the ceiling. His expression was mildly interested.

Enno looked up at Plato. “Why would you care?” he asked, his voice flat.

“I am a student in everything,” Plato said, his voice rich and mellow. His eyes fell on the medallion on the bar. “May I?”

I saw Enno tense, so I said, “Relax, Gopher. Plato’s good people.” He shot me a look at the use of his old nickname, but he did relax somewhat and nodded.

With surprising dexterity, Plato picked up the medallion. In his fingers, it looked like a coin. He held it up and examined it. “A precentor’s medallion,” he said. “Word of Blake.” He flipped it over. “The name is not familiar.”

“It won’t be,” Enno said. “Not unless you were here in ’68.”

“Friedrich Nietzsche wrote,” Plato said softly, “‘The knowledge of the past is desired only for the service of the future and the present.’” He placed the medallion on the bar top. His eyes went from Enno to me and back. “But I think the Persians said it best: ‘Blood does not wash away blood.’”

I saw something that might have been sadness in his eyes.

“Maybe not,” I said. “But sometimes blood’s needed by the ghosts who demand it.”

I felt a hand on my shoulder, and a soft voice asked, “What ghosts?”

I turned to see Susan, my partner in many things, looking up at me. Her dark hair was short and neat, and her heart-shaped face looked drawn. Her eyes, a deep blue that had always pulled me in, were bright and clear.

For a brief instant, I thought about lying to her. Instead, I said, “Scranton’s Mill.”

Susan’s eyes widened. “Why bring that up?” She spotted the medallion on the bar and froze. “Where did *that* come from?”

“Me, Sue,” Enno said. “It’s Kutuzov’s.”

Susan looked at him, her expression one of someone trying to hold strong emotions back but failing. “Is he...”

“Dead?” Enno replied. “Yes. I killed him myself.”

Susan pulled on her left sleeve unconsciously, revealing the first couple centimeters of burn scars that started above her wrist, and I knew they went all the way up to her elbow. Then, her knees buckled, as if she had been punched in the stomach. I caught her before her legs gave out completely. She grabbed my arms, and her fingers dug in hard enough to make me grimace. Muffled by her face buried in my chest, I felt more than heard her wail, a release of so much pent-up grief and terror.

“Mateo!” I bellowed. Everyone looked at me and the suddenly broken Susan when I shouted, but I didn’t care.

Mateo, a short, thin guy with a shaved head and a thick mustache, came running into the main room, kitchen knives in both hands, ready to attack. He glanced around for a threat, then at me, his expression asking the question.

“Call Doc Cato, now!” I said to him.

He glanced at the weeping Susan, then charged back into the kitchen to get on the phone.

Susan was leaning heavily against me, so I scooped her into my arms. To Plato I said, “When Doc Cato comes in, tell him to head for the office.”



Half an hour later, there were just three of us left in the bar: Enno, Plato, and myself.

Doc Cato had been there and gone, giving Susan a sedative and telling me to let her sleep on the office couch. I’d closed the bar up early, promised

each customer a drink on the house the next time they were in, and showed them out.

In deference to Plato's size, we'd adjoined to his table in the corner. The rest of the bar's lights were off, with the exception of the one over Plato's table. Mateo had left some sandwiches for us, and we'd eaten our fill. Each of us had our drink of choice on the table.

"Will you tell me the details?" the giant asked in a gentle tone.

"Why?" Enno demanded. The precentor's medallion was lying on the table in front of him.

"Because I respect Susan," Plato replied. "I consider her and Leo here friends. They both helped me when I first arrived here on Solaris. I wish to know what caused her such pain."

Enno looked at me. "You tell him," he said. "You were there for all of it."

I gazed into the bottom of my glass and brought the memories back.

## **LEO'S STORY**

Unlike most of the people in Solaris City, I was born and raised here. With the exception of six years I spent in the then-LAAF, I've lived all my life here on Solaris. I wasn't here for the riots in '62, but I finished my enlistment and arrived in early '63 to help with the cleanup and rebuild. For five years, life was normal.

Then the Word of Blake showed up and it all went to hell.

It was June of '68 when the Word invaded. I got out of Solaris City one step ahead of the fighting and made for the forest with the rest of the those fleeing the city. We'd thought that maybe the Leaguers had invaded. Took a month for us to realize it was the Word.

When historians talk about the battle for Solaris, they concentrate on the fighting in Solaris City, but life outside the city wasn't easy. The games, the lifeblood of the planet's economy, ceased to exist. The main spaceport was in the Word's hands, with enough aerospace forces to make it difficult for anyone to come to Solaris' aid. The HPG station was under the Word's control.

All this meant that the planet's civilian population was left to its own devices. With the planetary government trying to function without its major source of revenue, and the Word too busy trying to stamp out the Solaris Home Defense League inside the city, most of the outlying communities lived the best they could and tried to stay off the Word's radar. We had no 'Mechs beyond a few industrial types, no armor, and a few rifles, and we weren't about to start a fight against tanks and BattleMechs.

I said "we" because I was one of those refugees who managed to find a job tending bar in a town 120 kilometers west of Solaris City called Scranton's Mill. As the name implied, it was a lumber town located right on the Solaris River, in the heart of lumber country. The population was about 500 normally, but with the refugees, it was closer to 1,000 people living there at the time.

I was working as a bartender in a tavern called the Lumberjack's Axe in Scranton's Mill. A contact of mine put me in touch with Frazier Alderman, the Axe's owner. I knew the job, as I'd tended bar both in and out of the military, and he needed someone to help handle the influx of new customers. So, I end up as the Axe's day bartender, mostly for regular food and a roof over my head, with a little money thrown in every so often.

I'd been working there a month when Alderman showed up out of the blue one morning with a young woman. "This is Susan Smith," he said before I could say good morning to him. "She'll be working here as the day waitress."

I raised an eyebrow. There were only a dozen customers in the place right then, but I knew the place at night would be packed. Alderman already had three evening waitresses, but there wasn't enough business to warrant a day waitress.

Before I could say anything, Alderman continued, "Giselle will train her this week, but after that, I want you to keep an eye on her. She's the daughter of an old friend, and I want her treated well. Understood?"

I looked at Susan. She was in her late teens, maybe early twenties, at the time. Her eyes kept darting around, looking for danger, and her shoulders were hunched, both signs of someone scared. Her gray coat was draped on her body as an afterthought, but it did hide what she was wearing.

I looked at Alderman. One of the reasons he had hired me was because I was knowledgeable enough to do my job without being supervised. "Not a problem, sir."

For the next five months, Susan worked as my day waitress. She was quiet, shy, and had a nervousness about her that faded slowly over time. She was smart and quick to learn, rapidly picking up waitressing skills. She was friendly, polite, and cheerful to her customers, but I knew it was an act. I saw the burn scars on her arm once, but when I asked her about it, she shut up and didn't speak to me the rest of the day.

When times were slow, we would talk. I learned quickly not to ask about her past, the burn scars, or discuss the Word with her. Instead, we talked about the people around us, what we'd do after the war, and my past. While I learned nothing about her, I knew she had been physically abused and was running from something, and I had my suspicions who she was running from. Still, she grew comfortable with me, and we connected as friends, though neither one of us wanted to take it any further than that.

It was November of '68 when Enno and his father walked into the bar and everything changed. Enno's family were hunters and trackers, coming into town for supplies they couldn't hunt, catch, or trap. A couple times a

month, they'd come into town, barter furs and meat for supplies, stop by the Axe for a beer, then head out again.

But I knew this time was different as soon as I saw Abel Mauser walk in. Abel was a mountain of a man, hard as nails and rough as unfinished wood, but he was honest and blunt. If he didn't like you, he let you know it. Fortunately, he liked me. Enno was always in the shadow of his father, mainly because everyone was too busy staring at Abel. Abel always called him "Gopher," as in "Go for this," "Go for that." He was as good a hunter as his father, and I know Abel was proud of him.

"Leo!" Abel bellowed from the door. He was covered in furs, looking more like a time-traveling mountain man from centuries past. A huge sheathed knife was on his belt, his only visible weapon. Enno stood behind him, dressed much the same way. "Two beers!"

Abel fished into a pouch at his waist, pulled out a gemstone the size of my fingernail, and carefully placed it next to the beers I'd poured. I took it and dropped it into the cash drawer, not bothering to examine it. Abel and Enno didn't use money. Instead, part of their trade was with a couple of small gem mines in the rough lands west of us, trading meat and skins with the miners for a small selection of gemstones. When they couldn't get something by trading, they used the gems.

"How is it out there?" I asked.

"About what you'd expect," Abel rumbled. "Saw a few so-called 'resistance groups' in the back country. Most don't have the sense of squirrel-bats, and would fold at the sight of a BattleMech. Also saw a couple Wobbie patrols pushing out this way."

"How far out?"

"Fifty klicks from the city. Mostly soldiers and vehicles, but I saw a couple light 'Mechs. They were sweeping through settlements and refugee camps, looking for something or someone."

"They say it's really bad in Solaris City," Enno added.

I nodded. "We've heard the same thing."

Susan came by with an empty tray. "Three beers for table two."

I nodded and began pulling beers. Enno nodded to Susan. I could tell he had a crush on her but was too shy to do anything more. She smiled back and he flushed crimson.

Abel nodded to her. She wasn't scared of Abel, and Abel, despite his fearsome appearance, was polite and respectful to most people, especially women. "Everything all right?" he asked her.

"Fine. How's the hunting been?"

"Better in the past. Damn Wobbies and campers are scaring the local wildlife. We're having to push farther into the forest to find game."

"That's a shame."

Abel nodded. "Tell me about it. We're going to stay in town for a couple of days, making sure we're stocked up. Then me and Gopher plan to head up to Holsine Lake and operate out there for a month or two."

I nodded. "I'll give you fair warning. Supplies are tight around here. Don't expect to find a lot, or get it cheap."

Abel nodded. "Figured. We don't need that much, and I we have enough furs and salted meat to trade to make it worthwhile."

We made some more small talk before Abel and Enno left. I looked at Susan. "You okay?"

"Of course. Why do you ask?"

"Abel Mauser said the Word is searching through settlements and refugee camps, looking for someone."

She froze. "How close?" she asked after a few seconds.

"About seventy kilometers from here."

"I see," she said, her voice hollow.

As a bartender, I'd learned to read people; it's a necessity in my line of work. I saw tension around her eyes, and she was touching the sleeve that hid her scars.



She was scared.

“Weather’s supposed to get bad in the next couple of days,” I continued, changing the subject.

She nodded, but was still tense.

Frazier Alderman walked over to us. “Everything all right?” he asked Susan.

She shook her head. “I’m not feeling well.”

Alderman glanced at me, then back at Susan. “Why don’t you take a break? We’re not that busy, and Dara can cover you for a few minutes.”

Susan nodded and headed for the back. As soon as she was out of earshot, Alderman glared at me. “What did you say to her?”

“Abel and Enno Mauser were just in,” I replied. “He said the Word is sweeping through settlements and refugee camps near Solaris City.”

“Why?”

“Abel said they were looking for something or someone.”

Alderman scowled, but I saw something else in his eyes—worry. “How far from here?”

“Seventy kilometers.”

The bar owner’s expression changed to one of calculation, but the worry was still there. “I see. Thanks for letting me know. I’ll pass it along to the council. The last thing we need is some idiot taking a shot at a Word patrol because they were startled.” He glanced at his watch. “There still should be someone over at town hall. I’d better get over there. Thanks, Leo.”

He left, and I went back to bartending. I thought the matter was closed.

I had never been so wrong in my life...



Two nights later, I was roused from sleep by a forceful hand shaking me hard. I opened an eye and saw Alderman leaning over me.

“Get dressed warmly,” he growled. “And grab everything you don’t want to leave behind.” Then he was gone, and for a few seconds, I thought I was dreaming. “Now!” he bellowed from the doorway.

It took me all of five minutes to get dressed and stuff everything important into my old army pack. After a moment’s hesitation, I took out my LAAF-issued pistol and stuck it into my parka’s pocket.

When I made it downstairs, Alderman was deep in conversation with Abel, while Enno stood off to one side of the front windows, watching the outside. Both men were carrying rifles indoors, something they’d never done before. Susan, also dressed for the outdoors, was standing at the bar, her expression pure fear.

Alderman saw me out of the corner of his eye and turned his head to look at me. “Good. You and Susan are going with Abel and Enno.”

“What?” I asked.

“No time for a full explanation, but there’s a Word patrol headed this way—’Mechs and armor. They cannot find Susan here, understand?”

“But why—”

“You know her best, and we can’t let you fall into their hands either,” Alderman said, cutting through my question. “She’s your responsibility, understood?”

“Yes, but—”

“There’s no time for a debate. Abel and Enno will go with you. They’ll take you and Susan up into the mountains. Stay with her, Leo. It’s important she doesn’t fall into the Word’s hands.”

I nodded. What else was there to say? “I’ll stay with her.”

“Good. Get going.”

“Leo,” Abel said. “You know how to shoot a rifle?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. We have an extra on the sled outside. Grab it and use it if you have to.”

We went outside. It was dark and cold, and I could feel the snow in the air. Two dozen centimeters of snow already covered the ground, mostly hard-packed on the roads and side streets. A sled was out in front of the bar, pulled by a battered-looking snowmobile, while another one was parked a couple meters ahead.

“Get on the sled,” Abel said.

There was an open spot in the middle third of the sled. Abel snatched something off the sled and handed to me. It was an old comm headset. “Put this on and sit on the sled with your back to Susan, facing backwards. There’s plenty of furs and the rifle.”

I nodded, put on the headset, and helped Susan onto the sled. She was carrying a small backpack, which she put in front of her, while she was putting on another comm headset Enno gave her. I picked up the rifle and looked it over. A civilian hunting rifle—a detachable six-round magazine and a little longer than the assault rifle I’d been issued while in the military. I climbed on and with Susan’s help, covered both of us with furs, her all the all the way up to her neck, while I slung a fur over my shoulders, leaving my arms free in case I had to fire. The rifle was on my lap, clutched in my hands. I could feel the cold seeping through my exposed skin.

Abel used a couple of cargo straps to tie us in. “Can you two hear me all right?” he asked. It was then I noticed he was wearing a headset.

“Yeah,” I replied.

“Yes,” Susan said.

“Right. Leo, your job is to watch our backs. Gopher and I will watch everywhere else. See anything coming after us, let us know over the headset. Be aware, the blizzard will make it difficult to see anything, but it’ll cover our tracks.”

“Copy. How long before the blizzard comes in?”

“An hour, maybe less.” He slapped me on the shoulder. “Stay with her.”

A couple minutes later, I heard a pair of motors start up, and felt the sled begin to move. We picked up speed, and I watched my home for the last several months disappear from view, quickly followed by Scranton's Mill.



The blizzard started fifty minutes later. It was slow at first, some windblown snow, but it started getting heavier. Soon, I couldn't see more than five meters into the darkness and I was flinching at every shadow, every flash of light. There were times we slowed as Abel and Enno adjusted their course. The only noise I could hear was the muffled roar of the snowmobile engines. Conversations were nonexistent, as we were too busy for anything but important matters. Every so often, I asked Susan over the comm if she was all right. She always replied, but I could hear the fear and pain in her voice.

It felt like a dozen hours, but I thought I could see dawn breaking when Abel growled in my ear, "Leo, we're going to have to get to shelter."

I had been so intent in watching our backs that I had forgotten I was wearing the comm headset, and it took several seconds to refocus. "We are?"

"Yeah. We've passed the worst of it, but we're going to be exposed. Best to hole up and wait until nightfall."

"Where are we?"

"About a hundred klicks northeast of town. "There's a cave system about five klicks ahead we can use. Gopher and I've used them before. It's a good place."

"Understood. Susan?"

"That's fine." She sounded tired, and I prayed she wasn't overheating from the many furs covering her.

The snow began to taper off as we reached the caves. Abel drove into the dark entrance about a dozen meters before stopping. “We need to manhandle the snowmobiles and sled into this alcove,” he said. “After that, Enno, check the entrance to make sure our trail is covered. I’ll start a fire and get something to eat. Leo, stay with Susan. Frazier said she’s your responsibility.”

“But—”

“Susan is *your* responsibility,” Abel said in a tone that was final and absolute.

Muttering, I uncovered myself and took a couple attempts to stand, wincing as my legs protested. I finally stood and stepped off the sled. I immediately turned to help Susan. When I unwrapped her from the furs, her eyes were open, but she looked pale. I gave her a once-over. “Can you stand?”

“I d-d-don’t know,” she replied in a whisper.

I reached down and scooped her up, furs and all. I was use to slinging kegs of beer around, so it was no problem to lift her up and follow Abel into a tunnel.

Twenty meters in, we found ourselves in a cave the size of a large bedroom. Abel started pulling a few small dried branches from a pile to get a fire going. “Put Susan over there,” he said, “and help Gopher bring in everything.”

I did as directed, and by the time Enno and I had brought in everything we needed, a blazing fire was warming up the cave. “What’s happening?” I asked. “What’s going on?”

“You don’t want to know,” Abel said. He was cutting slices of meat off a slab with that knife of his.

“But—”

He shot me a glare that sent a spike of cold down my spine. “You don’t *need* to know.”

I backed off. Abel wasn't one to get mad easily, and I knew if it came to a fight, I wasn't going to win. I held up my hands in surrender. "All right. What do you want me to do?"

"There should be some veggies in one of those bags."

We didn't speak much while we prepared the meal, a simple stew. It wasn't what I would call a normal breakfast, but it was hot and filling. I checked on Susan to make sure she was okay, and fed her some stew before she went back to sleep. It was after sunrise, but there was no sign of it inside the cave.

"You'd better get some sleep," Abel said. "Me and Gopher will split the watch. Once the sun is down, we'll move on."

I just nodded, rolled myself up in some furs and went to sleep.



I didn't know how long I was asleep, but when something went over my mouth, I was instantly awake.

"Quiet!" Abel hissed in my ear.

I went still and opened my eyes. The fire barely lit the cave, and I could see Enno next to Susan. I looked up at Abel.

"Blakists near," he breathed in my ear.

I nodded and he released me. I sat up and glanced over to my rifle, then back to Abel.

He nodded and pointed to a tunnel opening I hadn't noticed before, half hidden by an outcropping, with a large rock off to one side. "You, Susan, in there," he hissed, tossing me a pack. "Flashlight's in there."

I caught it and scrambled out of my furs as Enno was helping Susan stand. I grabbed both sets of furs and the rifle and followed Susan toward the opening.

Before I could go in, Abel grabbed my arm. “There’s a tunnel that goes up and back about a hundred meters,” he hissed. “Go to the end and wait for the all-clear. If you hear fighting, use the side tunnel near the end. That’ll take you into the forest on the other side of this ridge. Otherwise, stay still and quiet, understood?”

I nodded and found Susan in the entryway, shivering. I dropped one of the larger furs over her shoulders and led her up the narrow, winding tunnel. I heard stone scraping, and looked back in time to see the large rock move in front of the opening.

I found the flashlight in the pack, and we scrambled up the tunnel. We had made it thirty meters before I heard someone shout: “Hands up!”

We froze, but then I heard Abel say, “What do you want?”

“Who’s here?” the new voice demanded.

I realized the tunnel was acting like a funnel, channeling the conversation below up to us. I wanted to listen in but decided the more space between us and what was going on behind us, the better. I leaned in and whispered to Susan, “Keep moving, but quietly.” She nodded and we continued up the tunnel.

“You’re looking at ’em,” Abel sounded annoyed. “I’m Abel Mauser. This is my son, Enno.”

“You resistance fighters?” the unknown voice asked.

“Do we look like resistance fighters? We’re hunters and trappers. The blizzard forced us to hole up here.”

“Where are you heading?”

“Scranton’s Mill.”

“Adept, enough,” said a new voice, and its tone sent a chill through me.

“Precentor—”

“Take your squad and sweep the outer cave. Let’s make sure they are indeed alone.”

“Yes, Precentor.”

“Now, Mr. Mauser,” the new voice said. “My name is Precentor Aaron Kutuzov, and I’m looking for an escaped prisoner.”

“Who?” Abel asked.

“A woman calling herself Susan Trierweiler.”

I felt Susan freeze in place, and I could feel her shaking. She was gripping the burned arm with her other hand, the look on her face pure terror. There was something inhuman in Kutuzov’s voice, a cold sharpness of an ice dagger, a voice I can still remember, and it still makes me shiver, even now.

“Why are you looking for this woman?” Abel asked.

“She has something that I want.”

“What?”

“That’s none of your business.” Kutuzov’s tone became even colder.

“There’s no one out here except me and Enno,” Abel said. “As for anyone out in the blizzard, if this woman you’re looking for was caught in it, chances are she didn’t survive.”

“Indeed?” Something in Kutuzov’s tone didn’t sound right. “Why don’t I believe you?”

I urged Susan up the tunnel, trying to put more distance between us and that voice. She came along without resistance, but the look in her eyes told me she was reliving something terrifying.

“Do I look like a liar?”

“No, you look like an ill-tempered buffoon with no redeeming values.”

I thought I heard Abel growl, but I was more concerned with getting Susan up the twisting tunnel to really listen. “I don’t like you,” Abel said.

“Then tell us where the woman is, and I’ll leave you alone.”

“What woman? Do you see a woman around here?”

“So, you’re going to claim ignorance?”

“Do you think I’m hiding her in my backpack?”



Kutuzov exhaled slowly. “Maybe if we give you a reason, Mr. Mauser, you will tell me the truth.”

“I can’t tell you what I don’t know.”

“I don’t believe you. Maybe you’ll talk to save your son.”

“Papa—” Enno began.

“Quiet!” Abel snarled. “You threaten a boy?”

“He’s old enough to fire a rifle,” Kutuzov replied in a flat tone. “That makes him a potential resistance fighter.”

“Against ’Mechs and armored vehicles?”

“There are many who have tried to attack my forces. Few succeed, but that doesn’t stop them from trying.”

We were sixty meters up the tunnel now. The tunnel floor was free of rocks, so we were making good time. But the conversation below was sending a spike of ice down my spine. I wanted to turn around and go back, if for no other reason than to put a bullet between Kutuzov’s eyes. But I couldn’t leave Susan, not even long enough to kill the precentor.

“Have you tried Scranton’s Mill?” Abel asked. The tunnel was starting to slightly distort the conversation.

“Oh, yes, we did. They didn’t know anything either, even after they were...encouraged to try to remember. We did get a vague description of a tavern waitress that matches our quarry, but no one knows what happened to her.”

“Maybe you should be down there and not up here.” Axel’s voice was sliding into a tone that clenched at my heart.

“Oh, my people are continuing the questioning, but—”

“Sir!” shouted a voice. “No sign of life in the outer caves!”

“Thank you Adept. Sweep the interior caves. Check everywhere. Also, I want a squad here for interrogation purposes.”

“Yes, Precentor!”

The end of the tunnel was coming into view, and I spotted the side tunnel branching off to the left. I guided Susan up to the intersection and we crouched there. I turned off the flashlight and unslung the rifle. Susan clung to me like a drowning woman clutching floating debris.

“I don’t like you, Precentor,” Axel said.

“I am not here to be *liked*,” Kutuzov replied. “I am here to bring order out of the chaos we have been living in the last three hundred years. One planet at a time, one person at a time.”

“Why are you looking for this woman?”

“As I said, she had something I want. What that is, you don’t need to know.”

“We could help you,” Abel said. “Me and Gopher know these forests, and we’re both expert trackers.”

“After the blizzard? You would be hard-pressed to find anything. Besides, I don’t trust you.”

“You sent for us, Precentor?” asked a new voice.

“Yes. First, you three cover the large, angry man there. If he moves, shoot him. You three, get the younger one and tie him up.”

“You’re a bastard,” Abel growled.

“And you’re a barbarian, one I have no sympathy for.”

“Papa—”

“Don’t resist, Gopher. Don’t give ’em a reason to hurt you.”

“Oh, I guarantee I’m going to hurt him,” Kutuzov said. “Unless you tell me where Susan Trierweiler is.”

“He’s tied up, sir,” someone said.

“Last chance, Mr. Mauser. Tell me where the woman is, or watch your son get beaten to a pulp. Your choice.”

“There’s another choice, you robed bastard.”

“Oh? And what is that?”

“This!” There was a roar, and for about fifteen seconds, screams, sounds of things breaking, and gunfire echoed all the way down the tunnel.

When people saw Abel Mauser, most wouldn’t think such a big man could move fast. But after watching him in a couple of bar fights—neither one his fault—I knew he could explode into action if the situation warranted it. And if Enno was in danger, all bets were off.

The sounds of combat suddenly ended, and I could hear a short conversation muted and distorted by the tunnel. I could only catch a few words: “go,” “protect,” “don’t let Kutuzov,” and “explosives.” After a few seconds, I heard scraping as the rock hiding the tunnel was moved, and we saw a light at the far end. As the light moved toward us, I heard the rock move back in place, along with a bellow of pain. In the distance, I could hear shouts and footsteps.

I pointed the rifle at the light, Susan clinging to me like a lost child. As the light neared, it was shaking and I could hear deep, shuddering breaths. The light played across my form, but I didn’t fire.

“Leo?” Enno said.

I lowered the rifle. “Yeah. Where’s Abel?”

I turned on my light and saw Enno’s pale face and tear-filled eyes. He was carrying two packs and a rifle. “H-he stayed behind,” he stammered. “T-to prevent the Word from following. We have to hurry.”

“Why? Isn’t Abel—”

“He’s not coming.” Enno’s tone was a deep, harsh growl and I saw fury in his eyes. “We need to get to the mouth of the tunnel, *now!*” He pushed past us and started up the side tunnel. I looked at Susan, and we followed.

We were ten meters from the tunnel mouth when an explosion from behind and below us ripped through the tunnels. The sound was loud enough to stun us and the vibrations strong enough to shake the tunnel and cover us with rock dust. Weaving like drunks, we staggered out of the

tunnel and onto a ledge several meters wide and twice as long. We all slumped to the ground, trying to regain our senses.

After a few minutes of breathing the cold, clear air, I looked over at Enno. “What was that?”

“Papa,” he replied woodenly. “We picked up about twenty kilos of explosives in town.”

“He set off the explosives?”

Enno nodded. “That SOB—Kutuzov—shot him several times before he ran away, calling for his men. I want to...” He shook his head. “He was spitting up blood, and couldn’t move quickly. He told me to get the gear but leave the explosives. I wanted to...help him, but he told me to go, to protect both of you. He pushed the rock aside to uncover the tunnel, then said he would remain behind and stop any pursuit.” He looked down. “He told me he was proud of me and would always be with me.”

Enno pulled something from his belt: Abel’s knife in its sheath. He pulled it out, and I saw the blade was covered in fresh blood. “He killed two soldiers with punches and stabbed several others with this knife. He told me to make sure Kutuzov was dead, and if he wasn’t, to kill him.”

He looked down at the knife. “I need to clean the blade,” he said in a small tone.



We spent the rest of the day and the night inside the tunnel. Among the supplies was a camp stove. It allowed us to have hot food and some warmth, and we huddled close to it until the next morning.

We spent most of the day climbing down and heading back to the caves where the snowmobiles were parked. They were still there, intact and covered with dust. Of the cave we had fled from, there was nothing but

piled rock and stone. Anyone wanting to go through that would need heavy equipment and a disregard for their safety.

After I got a twenty-minute lesson in driving a snowmobile, we left the caves and rode north. We managed to find an old mine two steps ahead of a heavy snowstorm and spent two days there. The third day, the snow stopped, and we saw clear skies for the first time in a week.

We also saw a pall of smoke to the south that hung there like a specter of death.

“That’s bad,” Enno said, handing his binoculars to me.

I looked through the lenses and saw the smoke was thick and low. “Scranton’s Mill?”

Enno nodded. He still looked pale, but he appeared to have recovered from the shock of his father’s sacrifice. “I think Kutuzov took his fury out on the town. If he did and he’s still alive, I’m going to hunt him down and kill him. No matter where, no matter how long it takes. I’m going to kill the son of a bitch.”

“Good.”

We both looked at Susan. She had said nothing the last two days and had been little more than a shell of herself. But for the first time since we’d left Scranton’s Mill, I saw a fire in her eyes. She pulled back her sleeve, revealing that her forearm was covered in burn scars. “Kutuzov did this to me,” she said, her voice wavering between anger and fear, anger taking over. “Made we watch as he ‘questioned’ my family. Mama, Papa, Vicky... Leo?”

“Yeah?”

“Can you teach me to shoot?”

“If you want to learn, yeah.”

“Good.” She pulled down her sleeve and went to the sled.

## THE PRESENT

“When we reached Tiff’s Point, about forty kilometers west of the cave, we found out the Word had razed Scranton’s Mill and executed most of the inhabitants, all under Kutuzov’s orders. A few weeks later, we drifted back to Solaris City and went to ground with a local resistance group. Susan learned how to shoot. and she killed her share of Word soldiers. When the Word left, we helped with the rebuilding, and along the way, we fell in love.”

“Did you ever find out what this Kutuzov wanted with Susan?” Plato asked.

I shook my head. “Not for certain. I know her father was a senior VP for one of the Solaris Banks, and when ComStar reestablished their control over the HPG station, Susan asked me to take her there. I waited outside, and two hours later, she came out and looked as if the world had been lifted off her shoulders. She never told me what she did in there, and I never asked.”

“But you suspect something?” Plato asked.

I nodded. “The next week, ComStar announced they were making low-interest loans available to anyone who needed them. They must have lent out five billion C-bills over three years. It did a lot to blunt local anger against them.”

“You think Susan had access to the money?”

“I think so, and the Word wanted it. But that’s Susan’s secret and I won’t pry.”

The large man nodded and looked at Enno. “Is Kutuzov why you became a bounty hunter?”

“In part,” Enno replied. “In the aftermath, the police were in shambles, and there were plenty of fugitives out there. It wasn’t hard to take my hunting skills and use them to hunt criminals.”

“You found this Kutuzov?”

Enno nodded. “I kept my word to Papa. I hunted the bastard down and killed him with Papa’s knife.” He pulled out Abel’s knife and placed it on the table. “He didn’t die easily or slowly, but I made sure he suffered for everyone he’d murdered in Scranton’s Mill and for killing my papa.” He looked at the knife, then at the Memory Wall. All sorts of objects were there, most in cases and all with stories to tell.

“Leo,” he said, looking at me. “I want you to add Papa’s knife to the wall.”

“Are you sure?” I asked.

He nodded. “He and those who died at Scranton’s Mill need something to remember them by.”

“There’s a small piece of the Lumberman’s Axe already on the wall.” After the Memory Wall had been established, I had gone out to Scranton’s Mill and retrieved a charred piece of the bar where me and Susan had worked. The entire town had been razed to the ground, and there was talk of a memorial on the site to remember the massacre. “Scranton’s Mill will be remembered.”

I reached out and took the knife. It was oddly enough, the first time I had ever touched it. “What I will do is make sure your papa will be remembered as a man who was willing to sacrifice his life so others could live. Susan and I still owe him our lives, and I will make sure this will be seen by everyone.”

“Thank you, Leo.” Enno looked at his watch. “I need to get some sleep.”

“Staying long?” I asked.

“A couple of weeks. I need to do some hunting, and to let Papa know I kept my promise.” He stood. “It was good seeing you Leo.” He looked at Plato. “Thank you for listening.”

“It was the least I could do.”

I escorted Enno to the front door and locked it behind him, then I walked back to Plato's table and sat. "It's been a long time since I told anyone that story."

"It is not an easy story to tell," Plato replied.

"No, it isn't." I looked down at the knife. "I think you would have liked Abel Mauser. He was a simple, honest man who looked at evil and didn't back away."

"What about Enno?"

"I think this lays a few ghosts to rest, and maybe he can find some peace."

"And Susan?"

"Her too."

Plato sighed. "I am not sure I will ever understand the concept of love as fully as you and Susan seem to do."

"I don't think anyone actually understands love, but it's at the heart of many decisions we make as human, both good and bad."

Plato nodded. "Love is all we have, the only way that each can help the other."

I raised an eyebrow. "Your namesake?"

He shook his massive head. "Euripides, some thirty-five hundred years ago."

I shrugged. "You finished for the night? I need to lock up."

"What about you?"

I shook my head. "I have some paperwork to do. Plus, I'm not leaving Susan alone tonight."

Plato nodded. "I will see you tomorrow, Leo."

As we went to the front door together, the giant said, "I would like to hear Enno's story about tracking down this Kutuzov."

"That's his story to tell, when he decides to tell it." I unlocked the door. "Good night, Plato."



“Good night, Leo.”



## PLANET DIGEST: KANDERSTEG

MIKE MILLER



**Star Type (Recharge Time):** A7V (168 hours)

**Position in System:** 3 (of 11)

**Time to Jump Point:** 27.98 days

**Number of Satellites:** 1 (Dundenhorn)

**Surface Gravity:** 0.90

**Atm. Pressure:** Standard (Breathable/Tainted)

**Equatorial Temperature:** 28°C (Temperate)

**Surface Water:** 85%

**Recharge Station:** Zenith, Matahari-Kandersteg L1

**HPG Class:** A (3107)

**Highest Native Life:** Plant

**Population:** 115,337,000 (as of 3150)

**Socio-Industrial Levels:** A-B-A-B-C (3150)

**Landmasses (Capital City):** Bali (Thun), Sulawesi Baru, Malacca, Gurun Besar, Jawa, Toba Baru

Kandersteg's primary, a brilliant and short-lived A7V star later dubbed Matahari, would not have been one of the first targets for Terran Alliance

surveys for habitable planets. However, the workhorse TERRAPIN (University of Maryland's TERRestriAl Planet Imaging iNterferometer, located on the far side of Terra's moon) had already focused on Matahari because other instruments had noted transiting planets. To the surprise of astronomers, the young star's planets included several rocky planets in the "Goldilocks" zone with modest temperatures, surface water, and nitrogen atmospheres. One even had chlorophyllic compounds and breathable levels of oxygen. The long trek to Kandersteg meant a Terran Alliance scout ship didn't reach the system until the 2140s. Overall, the system was judged to have potential, but there were better options closer to Terra.

Eventually, the system was auctioned to a European industrial group based in the Alliance's capital member-state of Switzerland. Many large business entities in the era were staking their spare funds on colonies, and the "Kandersteg Group" was no different. The third, habitable planet in the system was named Kandersteg after a town favored by the group's CEO. (A variety of Swiss names were originally applied to everything from the metal-rich, sun-skimming "vulcanoid" asteroid belt to the five outer gas giants, though they've since been renamed by colonists.) The Group had limited luck finding European colonists, who preferred to stay on Terra or head to better colonies, but the Group's Singapore subsidiary found numerous interested Malaysians and Indonesians.

The rebellion on Freedom and subsequent Demarcation Declaration left Kandersteg independent whether it wanted it or not. In fact, the Kandersteg Group was pleased (with qualifications) that the Alliance left their colony world. The metal-rich world had received extensive Alliance subsidies to develop its mines and local ore processing and lost those with the Alliance's departure. The departure also removed intransigent, often incompetent administrators from the Expansionist party who had riled the colonists.

After an economically rough half decade, Kandersteg bounced back and thrived on local growth. The colonists also found a way to help the

population grow: they wrote home to families on Terra trapped in the deepening madness of the late Alliance. The Kandersteg Group retained the colonists' goodwill (and future profits) by delivering vital industrial tooling, DropShuttle components, medicines, and otherwise supporting them during the rocky path to independence. The Group eventually fell prey to the Alliance's deepening dysfunction in 2283, leaving the colony truly independent.

With long preparation for independence, Kandersteg was not under significant pressure to join the Lyran Commonwealth. The ineffectual early government failed to impress Kandersteg's voters. However, Robert Marsden's populist coup changed Kandersteg's opinion. Far from being dissuaded by "The Crusher's" bloody campaign to recover Lyran worlds opposed to his coup, it convinced the Kandersteg voters that the Lyran Commonwealth was finally coming into its own and could supply a competent, swift-acting interstellar government. Kandersteg finally voted to join the Commonwealth in 2383. Subsequent generations have alternated between cheering and bemoaning this vote, but it was a popular decision at the time.

Kandersteg blossomed further in the Commonwealth. A number of Commonwealth industrial concerns settled on the world to exploit its heavy-metal riches. Mastery of the Brandt Recoil Effect in the 25th century allowed regular use of the Kandersteg-Matahari L1 jump point, at least when aided by navigational stations at the jump point and destination points, which sped trade. (Since 3090, this "pirate" point hosts a recharge station, replacing one lost in the Succession Wars.) Its minor repair station was soon replaced by a large JumpShip construction and repair station in the vulcanoid asteroid belt (dramatically named, "Shadow Station," for its position in the shade of the largest vulcanoid). During the Star League, the Commonwealth even started attempting to terraform Kandersteg II and IV with the vision of becoming a rare system, one with three habitable worlds.

Kandersteg's modest population wasn't a problem during the late Age of War and Star League, when interstellar trade could supply anything that was lacking locally, such as components to keep Shadow Station humming. However, the coldly rational, brutal targeting of strategic assets during the early Succession Wars took its toll. Direct attacks included the destruction of Shadow Station by nuclear weapons smuggled in by SAFE. Indirectly, the world's economic collapse due to the early Succession Wars was beyond any mortal "recession" or "depression." Like many planets around the Inner Sphere, Kandersteg was unable to sustain its advanced technology, and saw widespread failures in its industry and infrastructure. By the 2850s, nearly half of the population was without filtered water, clean food, or reliable electricity, which was a problem on a world with metal-rich soils and water.

However, Kandersteg was deep in the heart of the Lyran Commonwealth, and free from invasions or pirates. Education, infrastructure, and industrial stimulus plans helped Kandersteg recover during the 29th and 30th centuries. The planet had an abundance of energy, which helped during the Succession Wars' scarcity of fusion reactors. While its native ecology was not old enough to form coal, its young uranium-ore beds were rich in uranium-235 (over 30 percent), and its mammoth core was still cooling by "heat pipe" volcanism that produced large geothermal provinces. Abundant energy made water filtration and clean agriculture easier. As more of the population climbed out of a subsistence existence, the recovery accelerated. By the dawn of the 31st century, Kandersteg was thoroughly a middle-class world. Its population was too small to support advanced industry, like BattleMech or JumpShip production, but the standard of living was comfortable.

The prosperous future envisaged from the birth of the Federated Commonwealth and triumphant Fourth Succession War changed with the Clan Invasion. Kandersteg had the novel and unpleasant experience of the

front lines moving close to it. Clan Wolf-in-Exile took root around Kandersteg, and over the following century, the planet's novice militia was blooded by Jade Falcon raids.

While Kandersteg remained a loyal planet of the Lyran state rather than joining Clan Wolf-in-Exile, being within raiding distance of the Falcons led the planet's government to make a policy of improving its defenses. This took numerous approaches: courting additional Lyran Alliance Armed Forces assets, expanding its militia, and making diplomatic overtures to Clan Wolf-in-Exile. Kandersteg found that shaping its unique mineral and industrial assets to attract off-world military assets was particularly effective. From the 3080s onward, the planet's production of military components and materials were filling in a lot of blanks for the Exiled Wolves' advanced industry. At the height of cooperation, Clan Wolf-in-Exile even had a diplomatic enclave on Kandersteg, which hosted the birth of future Khan Patrik Fetladral. It currently hosts the Twenty-Sixth Arcturan Guards. Decades of LAAF/LCAF and Kell Hounds raids on Falcon-occupied territory has turned the world into an impromptu mercenary hiring hall. Extensive Lyran Armed Forces and Exiled Wolf presence merited an HPG upgrade to A-class in 3107. This unofficial hiring hall has become significantly more important since the loss of Arc-Royal to the Jade Falcons in 3146.

Kandersteg is geologically unique, holding title as the densest inhabited planet, with 6.2 times the density of water, thanks to a massive nickel-iron core. Even with just 58 percent of Terra's mass and 80 percent of its diameter, Kandersteg has a 0.9G surface gravity. The proportionally huge core is probably due to a massive, grazing impact that blew off much of its primordial mantle (also the source of Kandersteg's large, siliceous moon, Dundenhorn). A high surface-to-volume ratio and relatively conductive core has helped cool the planet quickly for a stable crust. There is also a strong planetary magnetic field, nearly eight times Terra's.

The small planet has six island-continent. The capital of Thun (retaining its original Swiss-themed name) is on the banana-shaped, cool northern continent of Bali, whose tall spine of mountains are awash in orographic rain from warm oceanic currents. (Thun's imported laurisilva cloud forests are a popular tourist destination.) Gurun Besar, a compact and round northern continent named for its arid interior, is the largest of the six at merely 14 million square kilometers. Tropical Jawa is the breadbasket of the planet, its mostly artificial soils being fairly metal-free and far from the worst volcanic regions. In the southern hemisphere, Sulawesi Baru and volcano-wracked Toba Baru host much of the planet's industry and mining industry. On the equator, antipodal to Jawa, is the long, string-like Malacca, an upthrust chain of mountains and volcanoes from colliding oceanic plates that is almost too riven with earthquakes to be habitable, but Kandersteg's mining companies keep trying.

At merely 1.1 billion years old, Kandersteg is a young planet but one with just 600 million years left before its massive primary sun turns into a system-wrecking red giant. Future tantrums aside, the brilliant white Matahari is a benevolent primary. The star has no convection zone and thus only a weak magnetic field, resulting in weak X-ray emissions and solar winds. The high UV output of the hot star creates a dense ozone layer on Kandersteg despite efforts by the world's volcanoes to degrade it. Kandersteg's two siblings and neighbors, New Austria (Kandersteg II) and Grand Geneva (Kandersteg IV), easily fit within Matahari's broad life zone (two to four astronomical units) and were temperate, water-rich, if anoxic worlds even before humanity's arrival. (Abandoned terraforming efforts added a few percent of oxygen, but the worlds are still uninhabitable.) The drawback of that large life zone is that Kandersteg's 3 AU orbit is four years long, giving the world long seasons.

Native life on Kandersteg has developed rapidly, with algae and the autumn-colored plants of the world churning out a breathable atmosphere in

one-quarter of the time required by Terra. Some of the fast-growing trees and shrubs do well against imported competitors, their reddish-brown chlorophyllic compounds better tuned to use Matahari's blue-leaning white light. Otherwise, one of Terra's more obnoxious evolutionary products has released species from numerous worlds onto Kandersteg; these species are expanding rapidly across the world, filling and creating niches lacking in the limited native ecosystem.

Despite centuries of work, the planet is imperfectly habitable for humans and many imported species. The beautiful blue-green oceans are still fairly rich in metals despite the oxygenation of the atmosphere, as are the native soils. The core is still cooling itself by "heat pipe" volcanism, producing giant volcanic hotspots with unusually hot lavas, plus a fair amount of volcanic gases. There are many areas of the planet that are beautiful, habitable, and rich in fresh water, but others that are dangerous, and volcanic fumes can reach even pleasant areas.

Visitors hoping to find an Austronesian cultural reserve would be disappointed. In the centuries since leaving Terra, Kandersteg's people have bathed in the media, fashions, religions, and trends of the Inner Sphere. There are Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, and Catholic temples offering homages to 22nd- and 23rd-century Terran practices, but most current residents are uncommitted agnostics leaning toward the Unfinished Book Movement, which was introduced during the Federated Commonwealth era. Clothing and architecture are also contemporary rather than unique. Only the languages "Kandersteg Malay" and "Kandersteg English" truly stand out. The latter, based on Star League Standard English with a hefty helping of Malay grammar and words, drives Exiled Wolf visitors to distraction.





## TERRAIN TABLES

To randomly determine the mapsheets for a battle set on this planet, choose the continent, then roll a D6 (for Bali) or 2D6 (for Toba and Malacca) and select the map matching the result. The maps in this list can be found in the noted map set (MS), map-compilation set (MC), or hexpack (HP).

### Bali

**Note:** Bali is a temperate, water-rich, heavily populated continent little different from some of the more pleasant regions of Terra. Woods and valley maps in Bali's mountains are often in near-perpetual clouds (see light and heavy fog, p. 55, *Tactical Operations: Advanced Rules*).

- 1: Lake Area (BT, MS2, MSC1)
- 2: River Valley (MS2, MSC1, HPLR)
- 3: City (Suburbs) (MS6, MSC2)
- 4: Scattered Woods (MS2, MSC1)
- 5: Wide River (BT, MS6, MSC2)
- 6: BattleForce (MS6)

## **Toba Baru and Malacca**

**Note:** While Toba Baru and Malacca certainly have normal terrain, fresh water, and oceanic coastlines, their tectonic activity produces small regions that exercise numerous exotic terrain options. Players may substitute magma for water hexes on the following maps (see p. 34, *TO:AR*) or geysers for rough terrain (p. 46, *TO:AR*). Players may also apply tainted atmospheres to entire maps (see radiological/poisonous tainted conditions, p. 54, *TO:AR*) or invoke earthquakes (roll 1D6-1 for strength; see p. 53, *TO:AR*).

- 2:** River Valley (MS2, MSC1)
- 3:** Rolling Hills #1 (MS3, MSC1)
- 4:** City Street Grid/Park #1 (MS4, MSC1)
- 5:** CityTech Map (MS2, MSC1)
- 6:** Open Terrain #1 (MS5, MSC2)
- 7:** Moonscape #1 (MS5, MSC2)
- 8:** BattleTech (MS3, MSC1)
- 9:** River Delta/Drainage #2 (MS4, MSC1)
- 10:** DropPort #2 (MS7, MSC2)
- 11:** Rolling Hills #2 (MS3, MSC1)
- 12:** Desert Sinkhole #2 (MS3, MSC1)



## SM5 FIELD COMMANDER (PROTOTYPE)

AARON CAHALL



**Mass:** 50 tons

**Movement Type:** Hover

**Power Plant:** Type 215 XL Fusion

**Cruising Speed:** 97 kph

**Maximum Speed:** 151 kph, 194 kph with Supercharger

**Armor:** Durallex Ballistic-Reinforced

**Armament:** 18 tons of pod space available (maximum of 5 tons in turret)

**Manufacturer:** Refit

**Primary Factory:** None

**Communications System:** Unit 2J2 “Basher”

**Targeting and Tracking System:** Able-Seven Sensor Suite

The Kell Hounds’ long years in exile gave the unit time to recruit new warriors, reconnect with those who successfully followed Colonel Callandre “Calamity” Kell’s breadcrumbs, and train relentlessly in the harsh environs of their new home. But the Hounds’ technicians, including the

handful of Wolf-in-Exile technician caste members who fled Arc-Royal with the mercenaries and chose to remain with the unit, also put the time to good use, designing a new vehicle which would better suit their colonel's current disposition.

## **CAPABILITIES**

Perhaps no Dark Age warrior was a better match for their machine than Calamity Kell and her iconic SM1 Tank Destroyer. Originally a Jihad-era Nova Cat design, the SM1 accompanied the Clan into Stone's Republic, where it was produced in substantial numbers but never reworked or adapted to new weapon systems. Callandre gravitated to the vehicle at an early age, falling in love with its high speed and brutal knockdown power, using both to great effect in the first years after the Blackout.

When now-Colonel Kell led the Arc-Royal survivors and remaining Hounds into exile in 3147, however, she accepted that her new role required her to fight differently—and required a different vehicle to fight in. Under her direction, Wolf-in-Exile and Kell Hounds techs tore her SM1 down to its frame and reengineered it as an OmniVehicle. After their first attempt, the SM4, failed to get off the drawing board, they dubbed their eventual breakthrough the SM5 Field Commander.

Though the SM5 retained most of the overall aesthetic elements of the original, including the dual cockpits and small turret, technicians upgraded the vehicle's engine to an XL model, achieving a more efficient top speed of 151 kph. At Callandre's urging, and over the loud concerns of Kell Hounds senior officers, the techs also equipped it with a supercharger for even greater maneuverability.

The SM5 mounts ballistic-reinforced armor, giving it added protection against the most destructive weapons though leaving it somewhat

vulnerable to heavy-grade lasers. As with the SM1, speed is the vehicle's best armor. The primary—and so far, only—configuration of the SM5 continues to mount the devastating Ultra-20 autocannon of the original SM1, along with an extended-range medium laser and a TAG system in the turret.

The four-person crew of the SM5 consists of Colonel Kell as the tank commander and primary driver/gunner; a “field gunner” in the left-hand cockpit, who operates the medium laser and coordinates the delivery of artillery on targets painted by the TAG; a communications officer tucked behind the right-hand cockpit; and a mechanic in a “mechanic's pit” for emergency battlefield repairs.

## **BATTLE HISTORY**

Initial testing of the SM5 during the Hounds' training maneuvers on Hood IV showed that the new vehicle could be devastating in the hands of an experienced driver like Calamity. In particular, the addition of TAG and a separate operator for the system proved surprisingly effective; sparring opponents eager to stay clear of the SM5's autocannon often found themselves in the path of accurate incoming artillery and indirect missile fire.

Callandre's SM5 deployed with her Hounds battalion on Santana in June 3151, but saw little action during the month the mercenaries spent on-world rooting out the few partisans and bandits present. The vehicle was not well-suited for chasing guerrillas through high mountain valleys, and Colonel Kell was busy monitoring negotiations for the formation of a new government. The SM5's first true combat tests came when Callandre turned her attention to Arc-Royal.

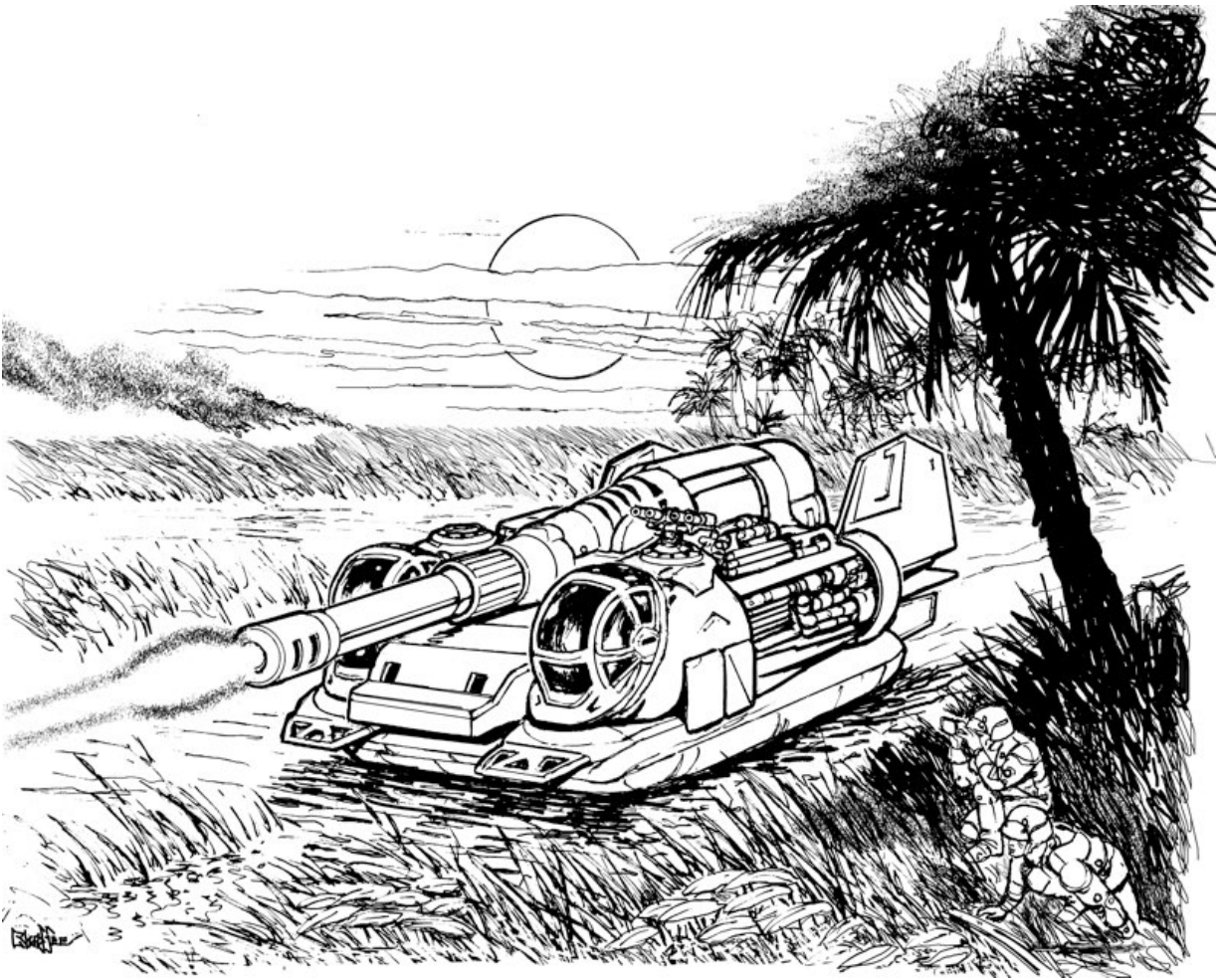
## VARIANTS

The SM5's proposed A configuration would swap out the autocannon for a Gauss rifle, turning the vehicle into a long-range jouster, though potentially at the expense of sufficient ammo for extended action. While the SM5 is rated for an LB 20-X autocannon, that weapon has yet to be tested on the vehicle—and may never be, given the continued success of the Ultra-class alternative.

The SM5 mounts sufficient pod space for changes to the vehicle's heat sink setup, but Hounds engineers have yet to develop an energy weapon-based configuration. Other turret options are possible, such as a C<sup>3</sup> slave for a BattleMech-mounted commander seeking to coordinate a wave of SM5 units—should more ever be built.

## NOTABLE PILOTS

**Colonel Callandre Kell:** Learning to interact with and protect three other crewmembers' lives in the heat of battle has been an adjustment for Callandre. While she still possesses the daring driving style of her younger years, it has been tempered by the understanding that she is no longer risking only her own life with each bold maneuver. This transition has been eased by the similar protective feeling she holds for all of her Hounds, who are now the only family she has left.





Type: **SM5 Field Commander**  
 Technology Base: Mixed Clan (Advanced)  
 Movement Type: Hover  
 Tonnage: 50  
 Battle Value: 2,147

<b>Equipment</b>		<b>Mass</b>
Internal Structure:		5
Engine:	215	10
Type:	XL Fusion	
Cruise MP:	9	
Flank MP:	14 (18)	
Heat Sinks:	10	0
Control Equipment:		2.5
Lift Equipment:		5
Turret:		.5
Armor Factor (Reinforced, IS):	96	8
	<i>Armor Value</i>	
Front	24	
R/L Side	19/19	
Rear	15	
Turret	19	

<b>Fixed Equipment</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Tonnage</b>
Supercollider	Body	1

<b>Weapons and Ammo</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Tonnage</b>
<i>Primary Weapons Configuration</i>		
ER Medium Laser	Turret	1
TAG Turret	1	
Ultra AC/20	Front	12
Ammo (Ultra) 20	Body	4

**Notes:** Features the following Design Quirk: Prototype.

Download the free  
 record sheet for this 'Mech at:  
[bg.battletech.com/shrapnel/](http://bg.battletech.com/shrapnel/)



## **AN ICE-COLD DISH**

**PAUL SJARDIJN**



**TEMPTOWN  
HARLECH, OUTREACH  
FEDERATED SUNS  
11 OCTOBER 3067**

The office of Colonel Wayne Waco, commander of the Waco Rangers, was poorly furnished. A rickety bookcase stood next to the door, its contents a mixture of the irrelevant and the uninteresting. The carpet was old and faded. Once red, now it mustered closer to gray. A cheap desk older than its ancient owner sat opposite the fourth-story window. Outside, a steady rain irrigated the dirty streets, slowly washing waste and refuse toward Lake Kearny. In the distance, he could see the Ridge. The sporadic tapping of the rain against the window had a calming effect on the room's occupant as he smoked a cigar in silence.

The door to the office opened, and a plain-looking man almost half Wayne's age entered. Colonel Waco's client sat down on a wooden chair without invitation. He leaned back, waiting for acknowledgment to speak.

Wayne obliged after placing his cigar in an ashtray. “Jenkins, won’t you sit down? Hang on a sec, I’ve got a present for you.”

He opened a desk drawer and rummaged through the contents. Several objects inside slammed together, and he cursed in frustration. “Dammit, where did I put it?”

Jenkins cleared his throat.

Wayne leaned back in his chair and sighed. “All right, so Hall’s a done deal, then?”

Jenkins shrugged. “Pretty much. The Third Dismal stepped in it good.”

Waco grunted. “Couldn’t happen to a nicer bunch of bootlickers.”

With that they both fell silent for a moment. Jenkins was still waiting.

“And the Crimson Crusaders?” Wayne asked.

“Definitely gone. I don’t know where to, but they’re not on this planet anymore.”

“Aww, your mighty resources haven’t told you where they went? Don’t feel bad. I’m sure they’ll tell you when they think you’re ready for such information.” Wayne chuckled, then laughed at Leopold Jenkins. The reaction was subtle, but Waco caught the tightening around the man’s eyes.

“Well, by my math, that leaves them, the Home Guard, and anything they’re hiding on the other side of the mountain.” Wayne leaned back in his chair. “And we’ve got my boys, and anyone who’ll muster up if we throw some cash at ’em. McCarthy reckons that’s a bit shy of two hundred MechWarriors. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Jenkins only shrugged.

“I’m so pleased to get yer vote of confidence. So, we’ve got that rabble, plus Smithson’s Chinese Bandits and the Tiger Sharks. And we’ve got a regiment of turncoats on speed dial. The Dragoons sure were smug when they pulled the Fifty-First Dark from the vile clutches of the Word of Blake, weren’t they, Jenkins?”

Jenkins opened his mouth to reply, but Waco interrupted him with a barking laugh. “Yer damn right they’re smug! But it’s not looking like that’ll be a long-term acquisition. And then there’s that ‘mystery force’ you keep hinting at. Still not going to give me that teenie-tiniest of clues, are ya?”

“Of course not.”

“Of course not! Well said. I know it’s the Broadsword Legion anyway, you dumb shit.”

There it was again, the tightening of the eyes. Waco barely avoided a guffaw as his bluff paid off. It wasn’t the first time his brazen behavior had yielded results. He didn’t even care that his own expression telegraphed his little victory to Jenkins, who glared at him.

“So, by my math...carry the company...we outnumber ’em ’bout two to one. None too shabby. And unless you’re about to tell me you dropped the ball on your way over, we’ve still got the element of surprise, don’t we?”

Jenkins nodded and sat up straighter. Waco thought Jenkins truly enjoyed any opportunity to prove how smart and useful he was. “As pervasive as Wolfnet is across the Inner Sphere, it amuses me to no end that they’ve failed to penetrate the slums in their own backyard.”

“Sounds like a yes to me. I’ll tell you my secret: don’t be important. Be a laughing stock. That way, they won’t have to send the Seventh Kommando ’round to fix the problems their local cops can’t fix. Just not worth it. I’ll give credit where it’s due: their failed hypocrisy when it comes to TempTown has been invaluable to me. Awful nice of them to provide a place for the downtrodden, even if it’s their own damn policies and ‘standards’ that put them there to begin with. Anyway, that’s where you lot went wrong, isn’t it? Had to make a fist, had to draw a line in the sand. Terra just wasn’t enough. Well, you do that to Wolf’s Dragoons, they push back. Now, forming the Allied Mercenary Command, that’s arrogant on a

level that surprises even me, but you certainly reaped what you sowed. Not that I'm complaining. It's what allowed us to get acquainted, after all."

Jenkins scowled. He'd never confirmed that he belonged to or answered to the Word of Blake, but Waco kept acting as if it was common knowledge. "Well, if there's nothing else, our meeting has been delightful, but I really must go."

"Let's attack today."

That got Jenkins' attention. Wayne knew the man had always looked at him as a loose cannon, and had always presumed he'd go rogue. Knowing a man's fears was quite useful.

"We've been over this already, Waco. You'll strike when the time is right, not before."

"The time seems awfully right to me. Way I see it, we wait any longer and Outreach might not be as understaffed as it is right now."

"We'd need several days to get the other players lined up properly, and I'm telling you, *now's not the time.*"

Waco tapped his desk a few times, and almost pouted. "Aww, all right, if you say so."

Jenkins sighed, then got up to leave.

"Hold up, Leo. I haven't given you your present yet." Waco rummaged through his desk drawer again.

Jenkins ignored Waco on his way to the door.

"Ah, here it is."

Jenkins turned, and his eyes widened at the revolver in Wayne's hand. He'd just opened his mouth when the first shot hit his chest. Two more struck him before he hit the ground, and a fourth penetrated the wall behind him.

Wayne walked over to Jenkins as he bled onto the gray carpet, his breathing ragged. Jenkins' face was a mixture of fear and surprise; Waco's was filled with anger and hatred.

“See, I knew you’d like it. Eleven millimeter. Made on Terra. Like you.” Wayne chuckled as he turned the revolver from side to side as if demonstrating the weapon. Jenkins tried to say something, but only a rasping sound escaped his lips.

“Oooh, guess I punctured a lung. Anyway. It’s been good working with you, Jenkins, but I think it’s time we went our separate ways.” Wayne pointed his gun at Jenkins’ face, who attempted to scream before the fifth slug hit him just above the nose.

Waco looked over at the door and noticed McCarthy standing in it, his own sidearm drawn. He dropped the revolver next to Jenkins’ body.

“Tell the lads to clean up this mess. Carpet, gun, ’n’ all. Jenkins is overdue for a visit to Lake Kearny.”

McCarthy nodded and holstered his weapon. He was some forty years Waco’s junior, and in substantially better shape. He leaned against the door frame. “So, we’re doing this then?”

Waco sighed loudly as he made his way back to his chair. The adrenaline was already fading from his system, and all the aches and pains in his nearly century-old body were returning in force, making up for lost time. McCarthy sat down in the chair Jenkins had recently vacated.

“Well, that all depends on you, Leon.” Wayne leaned back in the seat and relit the cigar. “I’ve known you your whole life. I trust you more than anyone else. So, answer me this: After Coventry, did you think I was crazy?”

“Of course?” McCarthy’s response came immediately, but still had a hint of hesitation in it.

Waco chuckled. “Well, you’d be wrong not to think that. Truth is, I was crazy. I definitely lost all perspective. I think it’s a mistake, running a unit as long as I have. You stop looking at your employees as soldiers, and can only think of them as people. I let my anger get the better of me, and it clouded my judgment. If I’d started a scheme like this then, you’d be a fool

for following me.” He paused there for a moment, and took a drag from his cigar. “Am I crazy *now*, Leon?”

“Damn straight you’re crazy! But it’s the good kind of crazy, the kind that makes the impossible possible.”

Waco laughed. “Well said. I like to think you’re right. But I’ll give you the call here, as the saner of us two. You tell me it’s off, and it’s off. We ditch Jenkins, and the damn Blakist plotting, and pull the plug on the Waco Rangers. Just like that, and no hard feelings.”

“I say we do this. I was born a Ranger, and I intend to die as one. The numbers pan out, and we’ll have more flocking to our banner once we get some wins in. Things will get bad when Beta and Epsilon show up, but with us holding Harlech, we even stand a small chance of winning. But only if we take the spaceport and ’Mech yards.”

Waco nodded, relief plain on his face. They’d talked about the plan many times before, and it was affirming to go over the same details again. It made him feel organized and in control. “Yeah, we’ll need all that hardware to cover losses and get others on our side, and we need to make sure the Dragoons don’t have any local airfields.”

McCarthy nodded, then calmly said, “We can’t win. You know that, right?”

Wayne’s expression changed back to the same degree of anger and hatred he’d projected at Jenkins, but now he directed it at a wall. “Oh, we can’t hold Outreach, that’s for sure. But we *can* win. All depends on how you define victory.”

He turned to face McCarthy.

“See, to me, success is hitting Wolf’s Dragoons where it really hurts. And if we can crush Zeta Battalion in this little shindig, all the better. Hell, who knows? I might have a shot at ol’ Jaime Wolf himself. And that’s just what we’ll get done ourselves. After that, when we’ve proven the Dragoons can still bleed badly, who knows who’ll come looking for more? And if

we're really lucky, they might do something stupid all by themselves, like retaliate against the Blakists. And those fanatics might decide we've given them a good enough head start and finish the job. If we actually drop Jaime, and this whole thing's been as much a cult of personality as I've been saying, then maybe everything falls apart. I don't mind being another Alpin Wolf, you know? I'll even settle for being another Anton Marik. This isn't just about them killing my son. This is about causing a wound they can't ignore. Regardless, I don't plan on being here for any of that. Let me walk through a burning Harlech with some dead Dragoons at my feet, and I consider that a century well spent."

McCarthy thought for a moment before nodding once. "Good enough for me."

Waco grinned viciously at his XO. "All right, then. Let's get moving."

**SOUTHWEST OF THE HIRING HALLS**  
**HARLECH, OUTREACH**  
**FEDERATED SUNS**  
**18 OCTOBER 3067**

The two batches of long-range missiles sped past Wayne Waco's *BattleMaster*, doing extensive damage to a building behind him. This section of Harlech had, so far, been largely untouched by recent events.

He barely had to dodge the LRMs. The medium laser mounted on each arm of the 'Mech shooting at him were more precise, blasting armor off his 'Mech. "It pays to not telegraph your moves so much, my dear." His voice, transmitted by external speakers, echoed off the walls of the buildings around them.

This MechWarrior he faced, in some 'Mech he did not recognize, really wasn't that bad. Hints of talent even poked through.



“Traitor!”

*Finally, a reply.*

“Ha-ha! That presumes some degree of fealty on my part. I assure you: there is none. Now be a good little mercenary and surrender. Without the rest of your lance, this fight’s already over.”

“I wi—”

Her response was cut short by the brace of lasers that blasted through her ’Mech’s torso, ending all functionality of the fusion engine inside. The humanoid machine crumpled much like a human would when shot in the brain stem. Without power to its myomers and gyro, nothing supported the constant insult to gravity that was bipedal motion.

Waco was already striding past the wreck. “Someone step on the head of that...what is that, anyway?”

“It’s a *Cobra*, sir,” said Marvin Jacobs over the lance net. He was one of Wayne’s bodyguards in the command lance. Jacobs’ *Banshee* ran past, taking point for a brief moment before “Muscles” Slocomb’s *Pillager* casually moved past, blasting a building with his lasers. The violence kept his triple-strength myomer at optimum operating temperature, and it lowered the property value. Bahn Nichols’ *Victor* stayed directly on Waco’s rear.

“Whatever that thing was, it slowed us down. And we’re running out of time.”

It had started so well. Exactly as planned. Ada Gruber’s fighters had done enormous damage to the Dragoons’ aerospace assets at the spaceport, and their subsequent bombing runs against the Home Guard had effectively crippled the unit. The Tiger Sharks and Smithson’s Chinese Bandits had converged to take and hold the spaceport from Battle Magic, while the Fifty-First Jaegers had joined up with the new Waco Rangers. McCarthy and Waco had counted themselves lucky to see a hundred new recruits join their banner, but even they had underestimated the amount of mercenaries

that had had their fill of Wolf Dragoons hypocrisy. Of the Dragoons deciding who got the job, and who won the disputes.

Wayne's boast of 200 had also been a bluff to Jenkins, but by the end of the first day more than that number of 'Mechs had joined up, hasty white W's on the blue-and-red star spray-painted over whatever paint scheme their prior unit bore. It had been the closest to happiness Waco had felt in a long time.

And then, as always, his life had returned to normal again. The element of surprise had been fully used up, and reality had returned in full force. Their enemy, Jaime Wolf, was one of the greatest mercenary commanders of the age, commanding some 300 BattleMechs still, piloted by some of the best soldiers in the Inner Sphere. And they were angry.

This was a solid measurement of success in Waco's book, but now the only tactical advantage they had left was that their enemy was reluctant to damage the city further. It *almost* made him regret some of the wanton destruction as a little premature, as the Dragoons made easier progress in the parts of Harlech that had already suffered the worst damage. The Bandits and Jaegers were both solid units, and the ranks of Waco's Renegade Rangers had actually swelled to nearly 300 by the end of the second day (assuming he ignored the several battalions' worth of casualties he'd suffered by that point). But it wasn't going to be enough to beat what Jaime Wolf had at his disposal.

Another disappointment was the Broadsword Legion. They did not respond to Waco's calls at all, so he got no chance to convince them that this was a Word of Blake sanctioned attack. He supposed that wasn't strange: they likely had their own line of communication with the Word, and it probably involved higher-ranking individuals than Jenkins. And if they intended to be a kingmaker in this attack, then clearly he had not succeeded in weakening the Dragoons enough to prompt them into action.

In fact, they had recently begun taking on some of the Renegades, losing a few of their own 'Mechs in the process.

All this made Waco decide to adjust his definition of victory again. Multi-pronged attacks by Renegade Rangers combined with targeted strikes by the Bandits, Jaegers, and Sharks, an unrelenting pattern of hit-and-run. It required little coordination, since he had little to actually hold beyond the spaceport, and he really didn't care to preserve the Renegades. Meanwhile, his forces under McCarthy's command converged on the Hiring Hall time and again, causing more and more damage.



Now, on this third day of the fighting, Waco's plan seemed to be working. With so many attacks and counterattacks to manage, Jaime Wolf had chosen to lead from the front. With the total destruction of the Hiring Hall now very much a threat, his scouts reported that Jaime himself was there, with no more than some Home Guard 'Mechs to assist his command lance. How any Home Guard had lived this long was a mystery to Waco, but now they must die next to Jaime Wolf. A company of the true Waco Rangers, one built for the express purpose of killing a ninety-year-old *Archer* pilot, was now rushing toward his position.

Waco noticed he felt real fear as he rushed his *BattleMaster* forward. He'd accomplished much, more than his Blakist handler had felt possible. More than he'd felt was realistic. But it wasn't enough. The damage done to the Dragoons...it wasn't enough. If Wolf escaped him now, all of this could be still for nothing. The *need* in him to see Jaime Wolf suffer by his hand burned and ached, leaving him hollow. Within his system coursed every combat drug known to man. When he told his company that time was running out, it was literal.

“*Archer* spotted.”

Relief washed over Wayne as Slocomb continued reporting. “Three companions. Blue and gold. Four Home Guards along with Wolf’s command lance.”

“We got him! Form up, and let’s go murder the son of a bitch!” Wayne felt actual glee, and he decided he didn’t care if the drugs were making him feel that way. His company surged past him. Even with Blakist resources, there were limits, and the other two lances were more modest medium and heavy ’Mechs. Still, it ought to be enough.

Waco’s *BattleMaster* was the last to turn the corner. The spires of the Hiring Hall were no more. The hall’s dome had crumpled under relentless artillery bombardment. Trees had long since stopped burning.

An all-too familiar voice greeted him over an open channel. “Waco. You’ve got to know you can’t win. Even if you hold the city, the other regiments will pry it from you.”

Waco laughed in his cockpit, the air kept temperate by top-of-the-line Clan double heatsinks. “You still don’t get it?” he replied over the same unencrypted airwaves. Suddenly the anger surged forward in the familiar wave of heat and focus. “You *still* don’t get it?!”

He punched a button on his communications console. It transmitted “Plan A” to the rest of his company. Slocomb’s *Pillager* and Barnes’ *No-Dachi* were to rush forward and pin Wolf’s *Archer* with their TSM-improved ’Mechs while the rest of the company busied themselves with killing the other enemy ’Mechs. Then Waco would stride forward and slowly execute Jaime Wolf, prying his body, dead or alive, from the cockpit, holding it aloft like Maeve Wolf had held Alpin. All recorded on holovid, and to be broadcasted to every HPG in the Inner Sphere. Only then—

Wayne’s brief reflection on his plan was cut short when a full salvo of LRMs from Wolf’s *Archer* impacted the torso and head of Slocomb’s *Pillager*. The ’Mech seemed to freeze in midstride, then it collapsed on the rubble-strewn pavement, skidding into the wreck of some Jaegers ’Mech

that had died here previously. Where the *Pillager's* head used to be, only missile craters remained.

“Waco, do try to explain yourself before we’re done killing you all.”

Wayne Waco cursed extensively. It was low quality invective, mostly repeating the same few words while he hammered the “Plan B” button: “Kill ’em all.”

He rushed his *BattleMaster* forward, but the rest of his unit had already begun to pour their enormous firepower into the Dragoons before he could get the first shot off.

Some laser fire and a Gauss-rifle slug from a *Gallowglas* rocked him mid-stride, and he stumbled. For a brief moment, Waco believed he could recover, but then some sort of misstep caused his ’Mech to collapse behind a pile of rubble. He laughed and realized the sound he made was an insane cackle. This was beyond absurd. He quickly got back to his feet, but several ’Mechs in his unit no longer showed as active. He hadn’t regained his feet as quickly as he thought: he must have been out of it for a few moments, somehow.

He trained his Jade Falcon-made particle projection cannons at Wolf and fired, benefitting more from the targeting computer than he wished. The bolts of charged particles sank deep into an armless wreck of a *Phoenix Hawk*, the Home Guard ’Mech jumping to shield the *Archer* even as Waco raised his ’Mech’s arm. The pilot need not have bothered: Jaime Wolf moved in an erratic, illogical pattern that made him difficult to target even with the benefit of light-speed weaponry.

Waco laughed again as he marched his ’Mech forward. This time he sounded saner. This moment was *great*. No more plotting, no more tactics. No more tomorrow, and that gave him relief and clarity. It was surprisingly calming. Here he was, dying.

But he was killing a great man. The man who had killed his boy. In truth, his memories had betrayed him years prior, and he could barely

remember any physical details of his son. Likewise Fiona: he remembered loving her, but so few specific details remained...any events fleeting, with her or John as faceless entities behind a fog. He hated this about himself. It made him hate Jaime more.

Jaime Wolf, who suddenly lurched his *Archer* forward, left fist curling up just as the *No-Dachi* raced toward its prey. The arm laser fired a fraction of a second before Wolf's fist connected with the heavy 'Mech's mask-like faceplate. The *No-Dachi* fell, striking the *Archer* on the hip, spinning it to its left. Wolf didn't seem to need time to recover from his sudden shift. Both missile racks fired immediately, striking Jacobs' distant *Banshee* square in the chest.

*No one is that good. No one.*

Nichols' *Victor* had rushed up with Barnes' *No-Dachi*, and now he was able to catch the *Archer* in the chest as well. Waco cheered as Wolf toppled, only to curse when several weapon strikes on the *Victor* set off ammo explosions. Its left arm jerked up toward the head, as if to ward something off, and then it crumpled. Nichols never regained consciousness; even Wolf laid in to the fallen 'Mech from the ground before regaining his feet.

Waco felt incredulous. The 'Mechs and MechWarriors he'd picked to kill Wolf were all being defeated, and the fighting had barely begun.

"What the hell are you all doing?! Kill him! KILL HIM! *KILL HIM!*" His own weapons fire against a *Centurion* was partially spoiled by a heavy autocannon fusillade tearing into his flank. Wolf had ducked behind some Hiring Hall rubble, forcing Waco to deal with an impudent *Hoplite*. It was stepping backward at an angle to maintain range with his *BattleMaster*.

Waco made as if to reciprocate the ranged duel, and both 'Mechs exchanged a salvo as they might have on a normal battlefield. Waco's chemically enhanced senses helped him land his shots while he ignored the incoming damage and the growing heat. *Should've taken these drugs years ago.*

The *Hoplite* continued to move perpendicular when Waco suddenly sprinted forward, closing the distance. The 'Mech stutter-stepped, as if taken aback by the sudden rush, but its apparent surprise did not decrease its accuracy. His *BattleMaster* paid the toll for its rush, as Waco grappled with the squat torso.

“Got you now, bitch!” he indulged himself by exclaiming over his external speakers before unloading all of his torso-mounted lasers into the *Hoplite*'s right torso.

He wasn't rewarded with a hoped-for ammunition explosion, but the BattleMech crumpled as if its gyro had failed. A part of him knew he should leave the crippled 'Mech and get back on task, but his rage was in full bloom, and he didn't care. This MechWarrior would die here and now; they deserved it.

As he pulled his *BattleMaster*'s armored foot from the wreckage of the *Hoplite*'s cockpit a moment later, he still felt no regret, though he knew valuable time had been lost.

His threat display had changed since the last time he had bothered to look. He was briefly pleased to see no Dragoons save one, but that lasted the fraction of a second it took him to acknowledge the absence of Rangers IFFs.

*What the hell happened?*

“Waco. Figures you wouldn't have died yet. Come then. Let us finish this here so we can throw you in the same pit as the rest of your unit.”

*Of course he's still alive.*

There was brief confusion and a flash of fear from having lost his situational awareness of what had happened to the rest of his unit. But it was quickly buried under a wave of rage and the chemicals oxidizing his organs.

“Not today, Clanner scum! This is the day you die, and I will piss on your corpse!”

His BattleMech was sluggish.

*Why?*

A casual glance across his damage displays indicated extensive armor damage. Several leg actuators reported as inactive. His engine shielding was cracked; many heat sinks were showing as destroyed or inoperable. It didn't matter. Wolf wasn't going to walk away.

"I don't get it, Wayne," Wolf said. "This isn't going to bring you victory. And it's not going to bring your kid back."

There it was again, that unforgivable ignorance.

"God damn you for that! I know! It doesn't matter! I just want you to *suffer!* You've lost as well! How can you not *understand* this?!"

The *Archer* was coming into view. It was just standing still.

"I'm not sure, Wayne. Guess I've figured out how to let go. But you can go ahead and die angry, you piece of garbage."

Waco let out an inarticulate scream. He wasn't sure if it got broadcasted, but he did know he would never get the satisfaction of hearing Jaime Wolf beg for his life. He would have to find comfort in merely ending him. His *BattleMaster* hobbled forward in a clumsy gait and the remains of that cursed *Archer* stood just ahead of him.

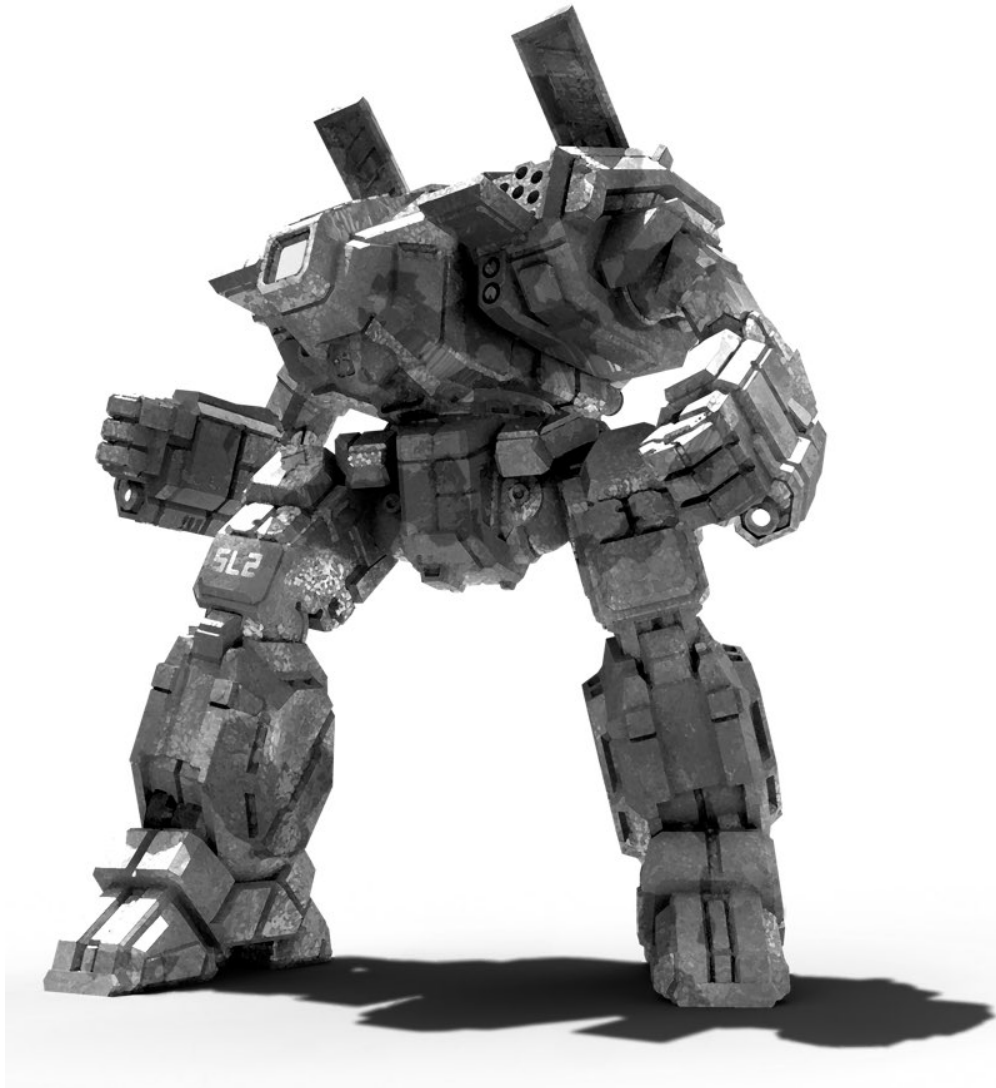
He volleyed his residual lasers and determined the PPC's status indicator lied. This would normally be a pretty big problem, but his enemy's response was only a pair of lasers, not a single missile. Stranger still was that the *Archer* was no longer moving erratically as it had. In fact, it wasn't moving at all, standing still among the wreckage of several Rangers 'Mechs, including a *Banshee*.

But then, none of it made sense. It should have been a one-sided, undignified slaughter, the execution of a legend that deserved an unmarked grave. Now it looked like the bastard might even get away with it. Wayne hated that he was adding to the myth of Jaime Wolf by literally stacking dead 'Mechs at the man's feet.



The first of his 'Mech's fists connected solidly near the *Archer's* cockpit.

*Looks like it got hit some!*



Before Waco could analyze what he caught in a glimpse, the *Archer's* left arm blocked his second fist while the right fired a laser into the *BattleMaster's* armpit. An alarm blared—no doubt a shoulder actuator just died to this *Solaris VII* shenanigan.

“Why won’t you just die?!”

His lasers gouged and raked at the internals of the *Archer*, whose armor had too many rents to keep out any attack. Wayne wound up for another punch with his only functional arm, then suddenly found himself teetering forward. His fist careened off the *Archer* on the way down.

The impact with the ground was brutal, worse than he remembered it. He felt it in every part of his body, and the restraints dug into him sharp enough to break skin. He had forgotten to let go of the left control on the way down, and he could feel that his wrist was broken. Worse than that pain was the migraine that shot through his brain like a jagged metal spike. Light was suddenly impossible to bear, and the sounds in his cockpit added to his agony.

*This isn’t happening!*

Waco could feel his heart beating hard, like someone was tapping him on the chest. He flailed with his right arm, hammering at the controls to find some kind of unknown relief. He heard his lasers fire one more time, exploding the ground outside the Hiring Hall, and striking the wretched ’Mech that he had tripped over. Soon all was unbearable, and all he could do was shield his eyes with his hand.

The reality of the moment hit him as hard as the spike behind his eyes. He had lost. Wayne Waco began to yell in fury and pain, louder and louder, until the cry suddenly stopped. His nearly century-old body slumped, suspended by the restraints.

Nearby stood a silent *Archer*. The last BattleMech still on its feet.



# **ALEKSEYEVKA ACADEMY'S ANTI-'MECH INFANTRY COURSE**

**JOEL STEVERSON**



## **—Recruitment brochure, 3151**

For years you've been fed the lie that BattleMechs are kings of the battlefield. At the Alekseyevka Academy's Anti-'Mech Infantry School, you'll learn the truth. Far from impregnable juggernauts, BattleMechs are actually quite vulnerable to specialized infantry attacks. MechWarriors are taught a target-prioritization system that puts other BattleMechs at the top and conventional infantry at the bottom, a step above unarmed, civilian mobs and a step below paramilitary vehicles. This overconfidence becomes a powerful weakness when you have the knowledge and skills to exploit it.

At AAAMIS, you'll train with combat-experienced instructors on practical, real-world drills and challenging scenarios that analyze battlefield theory. You'll learn to overcome the five fatal flaws that doom most anti-'Mech attacks to failure. You'll develop enhanced situational awareness and robust threat assessment skills along with intuitive target selection processes, empowering you to select and execute highly effective strikes and make an immediate difference on the battlefield. Maximize your

success rate as an AAAMIS graduate with the tools for an illustrious career in this demanding specialty.

Here's what you will learn:

## **Week 1: Anti-'Mech History and Organization**

In 2455, Jaffrey Du Leon became the father of anti-'Mech infantry when he scaled a Terran Hegemony *Mackie* and planted a satchel charge that destroyed its hip actuator and crippled the 'Mech. Anti-'Mech tactics have evolved considerably since then, but the basic premise remains the same: get in close, place charges, and get clear.

Foot, jump, and motorized conventional infantry forces are capable of anti-'Mech actions, but only highly trained units with specialized gear attempt it. Anything else is desperation and not a true anti-'Mech action. Of course, most battle armor units are also capable of anti-'Mech actions, but their tactics and techniques are unique to their capabilities and aren't applicable for conventional infantry.

Anti-'Mech infantry platoons are organized as a mixture of assault-team and fire-team squads. Assault teams place satchel charges on the 'Mech while fire teams provide overwatch. Soldiers are trained in both roles, allowing squads to operate in either capacity as dictated by the mission or necessitated by casualties.

Inner Sphere squads may vary in size. The most common composition is a squad leader plus six team members, with three assault teams and one fire team forming a platoon of twenty-eight soldiers. Another common formation is a squad leader plus three team members, with five assault teams and two fire teams making a platoon of twenty-eight. This composition is often found in platoons specializing in swarm attacks, where each assault team is dedicated to a specific BattleMech location: arms,

torso, and head. Clan squads always consist of five members with four assault teams and one fire team forming a Point of twenty-five soldiers.

Although conventional infantry occasionally operates on the battlefield in squads, a single squad never conducts anti-'Mech actions. At a minimum, this requires two squads and at least five soldiers.

## **Week 2: Shaped Charges**

Any idiot can blow something up, but doing it safely while damaging a 'Mech takes training and practice. The earliest armor-defeating shaped charges had a conical space at the forward end of the charge and 50/50 mix of TNT and RDX. Today's explosives have advanced considerably, but the principle remains the same: a solid cylinder of explosive (usually pentaglycerine or C8) with a metal-lined conical hollow at one end and a detonator at the other. Detonation generates an incredibly powerful pressure wave driving the liner to collapse inward, creating a high-velocity jet of shrapnel that travels at hypersonic speeds and penetrates armor in much the same way that a pressure washer penetrates paint. When placed correctly, these "satchel charges" are capable of causing extensive damage to a 'Mech's critical components, leading to functional and even catastrophic kills.

## **Week 3: Attack Theory**

Anti-'Mech actions are not a one-shot kill; rather, each successful offensive degrades the BattleMech's combat efficacy, gradually weakening it until it succumbs to the cumulative effects. Crippling a 'Mech with a single action is technically possible and as likely as hitting a bull's-eye at 200 meters with a pistol.

Successful actions have five key elements:

1. Reduce the 'Mech's mobility advantage.
2. Lessen the 'Mech's range advantage.
3. Strike multiple 'Mechs simultaneously.
4. Conceal the attacker's starting position.
5. Expose the attacker to the least risk.

Achieving these objectives is easiest in close terrain that hinders line of sight and mobility, such as dense forests, rough ground, and urban areas, but properly planned and executed attacks can be successful in any terrain—even open ground.

There are two types of anti-'Mech actions: leg attacks and swarm attacks. Both begin when the infantry platoon is within thirty meters of the 'Mech. On the assault command, the soldiers sprint forward. Fire teams provide suppressing fire on the move, and then take positions on or around the 'Mech's feet while the assault teams ascend and place charges.

Leg attacks are faster and easier to execute while also safer for the attacker. Damaging the legs hobbles and destabilizes the target, making it slower and more vulnerable to follow-up actions. The fifi hook is a popular ascending tool for leg attacks. It consists of a metal hook with an attached loop of webbing material. The hook may be magnetized or treated with adhesive compounds to facilitate attachment. One soldier in each squad leads the climb, placing fifi hooks to form a makeshift ladder for the other squad members. Each team maneuvers toward their preassigned target, places their charges, and then drops to the ground, executing a parachute landing fall to avoid injury upon landing.

Swarm attacks strike at the 'Mech's upper body. These actions take longer to execute, but have a greater chance of inflicting crippling damage. They begin just like a leg attack, but assault teams use grapple rods or other types of powered ascenders. These devices fire an adhesive dart trailing ten meters of cable. A powered winch quickly hoists soldiers to the attachment

point, bypassing the 'Mech's legs entirely. Unlike with the fifi hook, each squad member uses their own grapple rod. Once aloft, the assault teams move to their assigned targets—often a 'Mech's head or lightly armored rear torso—place their charges, then move to safety before detonation.





Swarm attacks are considerably more difficult and riskier for the infantry unit. Even the most incompetent MechWarrior will take defensive action when swarmed. 'Mechs have multiple ways to dislodge swarming infantry, including dropping to the ground, entering water, firing jump jets, and even using the 'Mech's arms to physically remove the assault teams. Properly motivated—scared—MechWarriors have been quite inventive in employing these techniques. Nevertheless, swarm attacks continue until the assault teams have expended all of their charges, are forced off the 'Mech, or receive withdrawal orders, which generally follow a functional 'Mech kill or due to an external threat.

A common anti-'Mech strategy employs repeated leg attacks to topple the 'Mech, followed by swarm attacks once the target is prone. This is extremely effective as even the heaviest 'Mech will succumb to leg damage, and the loss of mobility makes dislodging the swarming unit exceptionally difficult.

#### **Week 4: Primary Targets**

The old standby targets are, of course, actuators. BattleMechs have four in each leg: foot, lower leg, upper leg/knee, and hip. These components are protected by one of three armor schemes, each presenting a unique weakness. In a sliding-armor actuator, one or more armor plates move as the joint moves. This provides full coverage for the joint, but damage to the moving plates can lock the joint in place or restrict its range of motion. The fixed-armor coverage strategy protects the joint through the majority of its range of motion, however at full flexion or extension, the actuator is exposed and vulnerable. The full-coverage configuration offers the best overall protection, but features thinner armor in lieu of gaps or sliding plates. Regardless of which weakness is exploited, a successful attack

usually won't take a 'Mech out of the fight, but it will slow it down, make it more difficult to control, and increase its chance of falling.

## **Week 5: Secondary Targets**

A 'Mech's heat sinks circulate coolant to draw waste heat away from one area and venting it outside the chassis. This requires opening a chink in the armor for the heat to exit. The outermost portion of the heat sink is the heat exchanger. Damaging it can prevent a heat sink from functioning. It still circulates coolant, but the coolant never actually cools, and the 'Mech is unable to shed waste heat. Damage to the heat exchanger can also cause coolant leaks, which present different problems for the MechWarrior. Although heat sinks are easily damaged, the effect varies widely depending on the 'Mech's heat curve.

Jump jets are another easily accessed target. By design, superheating plasma and venting exhaust to provide thrust and lift requires an opening in the 'Mech's armor. Damaging this opening reduces the efficacy of the jump jet, shortens the distance the BattleMech can jump, or makes it more difficult for the pilot to steer while airborne. All three results hinder the 'Mech.

## **Week 6: The Opportunity Target**

Reaching a 'Mech's head provides the assault team with many powerful options. 'Mechs make use of a variety of sensors, and while they are armored, this is mostly to protect them from collateral damage, as heavy armor would inhibit their function. A well-placed charge can effectively "blind" a 'Mech and take it out of the fight.

Reaching the cockpit is considered the *coup de grâce* for an assault team due to the likelihood of injuring or killing the MechWarrior. Although

the viewscreen is made of ferroglass or other transparent armor materials, the psychological impact of placing explosives here is staggering. Sometimes the mere threat is enough to make a MechWarrior surrender. The cockpit access hatch is another good target with similar psychological impact. The same systems that permit a rescue team to access a sealed cockpit can be exploited by an assault team.

Contrary to popular belief, life-support systems are poor targets because a good MechWarrior will simply switch to recirculating mode during combat. Damaging the exterior intakes is little more than an inconvenience, as the system can run for hours or days without external air.

## **Weeks 7–10: Other Vulnerabilities**

Any 'Mech component may be damaged by a successful attack—even heavily shielded fusion engines. The inherent vulnerabilities of several popular weapon systems and other components are covered during this section of the course. By the end of this period, students will be able to identify and prioritize targets on multiple 'Mech variants.

## **Weeks 11–16: Practical Application**

At the end of this six-week section, participants will have completed multiple attack scenarios, ranging from simple attacks using simulated explosives against static targets to complex attacks using real explosives against mobile targets. Graduation requires successful completion of at least four live-fire attack scenarios.

## **Additional Information**

Please contact the Alekseyevka Academy recruitment office.

**Do you have what it takes?  
Enroll in AAAMIS today!**



# BREACH

TOM LEVEEN



**SZEPES**

**FREE WORLDS LEAGUE**

**13 AUGUST 2814**

Stacks was drowning.

Wade Tobias Staczyk awoke gagging and coughing as brackish water mixed with gritty sediment and oil cascaded down his throat. Instinctively he shifted to a push-up position—one he was immensely familiar with after twenty-nine years of service—and raised himself out of the sludge. Blood from a head injury spilled down his face; it clung to his chin momentarily before splashing into the water beneath him.

*Water. Water inside a DropShip bay?*

“What the...” he croaked, mostly to test his powers of speech.

Stacks could only see via red emergency lights. One shaft of yellow punctured its smoky crimson glow somewhere above him, reminding him of his *Guillotine*'s Sunglow laser.

His memory returned in a shock of pain: their *Leopard* had been intercepted by Free Worlds League forces while en route to Zortman on a

clandestine raid. The FWL navy shot the JumpShip to pieces over Szepes, forcing the DropShip to launch and make for the planet's surface. The pilot ordered an emergency evac as the vessel withstood a withering barrage of fire from the Leaguers' aerospace fighters. Stacks and his brothers and sisters in the Fifth Lyran Regulars had scrambled for their BattleMechs when an explosion rocked them all off their feet. And then...

Darkness.

Most of the 'Mechs were secure in their cubicles, but two had unmoored and crashed into others. His pilots lay scattered around the bay like his daughter's broken dolls. Just a few meters in front of him, Sergeant Thompson's limp body rolled onto one shoulder, wide white eyes staring meaninglessly.

Stacks swore and swiveled his head, wincing at the pain. Butterfield; Dixon; Lange, the reliable tech...all of them, gone. Just tangles of limbs and blood and innards.

Thompson rolled again. Stacks whispered his name, but the dead man didn't answer. How the hell was he *moving*...?

Only it wasn't just Thompson's body. Everything in the bay shifted. As the water rose around Stacks, it streamed past his locked-out elbows, his limbs like boulders in a river.

The ship was sinking.

Cursing again, Stacks forced himself to his feet, bracing against the cold leg of a 'Mech. He wiped blood from his face and fought dizziness at the sudden motion of standing.

The door to the bridge had been hopelessly crushed by debris and one of the fallen 'Mechs. He tried the bay door controls. Nothing. No getting out that way, either. Stacks swung his head, fighting his body's need to collapse again. *Has to be a way out, has to be—*

His instincts seized on the shaft of laser-like yellow light above him. A crack in the hull let sunlight in. He tilted his head, looking up the length of

the 'Mech he was using to hold himself up.

Stacks almost grinned. It was his old *Guillotine*. Right; he'd almost made it to the 'Mech before the explosion. One of the falling BattleMechs had damaged the machine; massive metallic scrapes decorated the torso and had sheared the Lyran insignia clean off. The two medium lasers in its right arm were horribly mashed and useless. Otherwise, his *Guillotine* looked good. Maybe the old boy had somehow protected him.

If not, it would sure have to now. Gritting his teeth against the pain in his skull, Stacks climbed out of the thick water and up to the cockpit. It wasn't just water, his tired brain reported as he fell into the command chair. Not quite water, but not quite mud—some viscous semisolid in between.

Stacks surveyed the carnage on the flooding bay floor. His men floated to the surface of the muck. "I'm sorry, guys," he muttered, lying to himself that they weren't friends, only colleagues.

Stacks pulled on his neurohelmet. He strapped it tight, biting back a shout at the flare of pain in his scalp. The *Guillotine* fired up just fine; the old boy could fully submerge if it had to, so the rising water hadn't bothered it a bit. Not unless the cockpit had sustained damage he hadn't detected yet... Even if not, if he stayed here in the cockpit safe from drowning, he'd dehydrate eventually and enjoy a nice slow death in his war machine, submerged for eternity in this DropShip bay.

*Just stay, some ghastly part of his mind soothed. Just stay here with your guys. They're all gone. You should be too, old man. What's left for you out there anyway? More of the same. Full-body concussions, noise, pain, loss. The war...*

*Just stay here and let it all be over.*

He swung the left arm of the *Guillotine* up at the breach in the hull. "Just don't quit," he growled, quoting his drill instructor from days long past, and fired his Sun glow.

His 'Mech slid to the right as he shot the laser. The DropShip was definitely off its axis now, and the giant machine struggled to keep its footing.

“Come on, *come on!*” Stacks fired again at the breach. Again—again...

Chunks of hull melted and fell from the wall, splashing into the rising water. The hole was four meters wide now, narrow and jagged. Not enough for the wide-shouldered body of the *Guillotine* to climb through.

The DropShip shuddered and slid farther to Stacks' left. The water now lapped at his 'Mech's hips. The breach was almost directly above him.

“All right,” Stacks grunted, blinking blood from his eyes. “You got this, old boy.”

He slammed on the torso-mounted jump jets, thinking, *This is gonna hurt.*

It did.

The blast of the jets rocked him in his seat and sent bone-jarring shudders through his entire body as the shockwave reverberated in the bay. Despite the 'Mech's famous command-chair design, celebrated for its ability to protect pilots during jumps, Stacks nearly lost consciousness when the *Guillotine's* shoulders smashed into the hull. He'd heard—and felt—a lot of loud noises in his nearly three decades of service, but this sound nearly turned his teeth to powder. The *Guillotine's* lowered-head design likely saved him from a crushing death.

Then the 70-tonner was free and sailing high. Stacks piloted the 'Mech away from the DropShip and landed, hoping to God the ground beneath would be stable.

The 'Mech landed upright on solid ground. A peculiar silence filled the cockpit, layering on top of the usual soft beeps and whistles. A rolling grassy meadow stretched out in front of him, with thick clusters of tall green trees poking out of the earth.

Stacks turned the 'Mech around.



Several kilometers away, thick foliage formed a tree line before climbing a short mountain. Between here and there, a gently waving grassland.

About sixty meters away, the last visible bit of the *Leopard* sank into a bog. Green floating flora coated the surface of the water, disguising the nature of what lay beneath—a perfect trap of quicksand. The DropShip sank entirely within another minute, and a minute after that, the surface of the bog was smooth and undisturbed, like a carpet of trimmed grass. One enormous bubble burst from the flat plane like an obscene belch.

*That's it, Stacks thought. That's where they'll rest. My God.*

He tilted his head to look at the blue sky. Dammit, the League aerofighters might still be up there, circling, scanning. Maybe the Free Worlds League was searching for Lyran survivors right now, or maybe they weren't; either way, he had to get off the *X*.

Muttering a garbled soldier's prayer for his buddies, Stacks piloted his 'Mech away from the bog, hoping the ground would remain stable beneath him. He pushed the 'Mech until reckoning he was three kilometers from the DropShip's grave.

Stacks veered the *Guillotine* toward a taller stand of trees. He backed the big machine against a thick trunk, snapping lower branches as the twelve-meter tall 'Mech muscled its way under the canopy. He powered down and let the *Guillotine* cool as he took off his neurohelmet.

The old warrior gingerly explored the gash on his head with grimy fingers. *Ugh, yeah, that's a split in the scalp, all right.* He opened the emergency console and pulled out a medkit, then applied clotting agent and gauze to the wound.

*If he could just stop the damn bleeding...*

He elected to stay in the cockpit to dress the wound, which made for an uncomfortable chore, but he wasn't about to get caught out in the open in the event the Leaguers came sniffing for him. Stacks kept an eye on the sky,

looking for fighter contrails or DropShips, but the sky here reminded him of how bright and blue and clear it used to be over his daughter's home.

He missed his little Nassi. His Dolly-Doll, a name he used to tease her with due to her enormous stockpile of dolls. He'd never seen anyone or anything more beautiful than that child giggling and burying herself in an avalanche of stuffed toys. He'd tried to bring her one from every system he went to.

"You're slipping," Stacks said.

His own voice surprised him, and he sat up straighter in the chair. Damn—that was a perfect example of why it was time to hang up his neurohelmet. Too often lately, even on the battlefield, he'd let thoughts of Nassi get in the way of his job. More than once it had almost cost him his own life.

Stacks rubbed his bleary eyes and checked his bandage work on the cut. The blood hadn't yet seeped through the gauze.

"Sure, hang up your neurohelmet," he muttered. "And go where?"

*Either way, you're basically dead. Might as well die in a 'Mech.*



They were shooting at him.

Stacks awoke abruptly, his body wracked with tension. His hands flew automatically to the *Guillotine's* weapon controls as small-arms fire bounced off the 'Mech's armor.

*Wait—*

Peering through the cockpit window, he discovered his foes were not quite as well-armed as he'd feared: they were throwing rocks. Small ones, at that. They laughed as they sent the stones sailing through the air to ping harmlessly off the *Guillotine's* torso and legs.

Children.

The oldest of them looked maybe eight, the youngest the same age as Nassi had been the last time he saw her. Stacks counted five kids all together. They were now having trouble finding suitable stones in the grassy ground, and switched to making dirt-clod bombs, just as he'd done in the desert where he'd been born. They wore woven clothes—long brown pants and loose white blouses, punctuated with a knit hat here or a long scarf there.

“Cut it out!”

He spoke on reflex. They couldn't hear him through the sealed hatch. Stacks didn't care about their attacks; they were obviously playing a game and were no threat to him or his *Guillotine*. He didn't know how long he'd been unconscious, though, and it was too risky for them to be around in case his enemies were still hunting down survivors from the crash.

He almost thumbed the external speakers on, but grinned and changed his mind. *This'll get them moving*, he thought, and powered up the BattleMech.

The fusion engine spun up, and the walking tank shifted ever so slightly. Stacks raised the arms as if he were going to fire, and that was all the children needed. They scattered away to his left, screaming.

All but one.

Stacks lowered the 'Mech's arms and stared at the little girl left behind. She stood looking up at him, curious and unafraid.

Stacks swung the 'Mech's arms around, mimicking a great ape to scare her off.

The girl didn't move.

“Oh, what the hell? Get out of here!”

He tried again. The girl clenched her hands into fists, her only visible reaction.

“I'm trying to save your life,” Stacks muttered. He pulled on his neurohelmet—“Ow! Damn it!”—and took a step to the right, deciding that

if the girl was that foolish, then it was his responsibility to just get away from her quickly before some long-range missiles rained down and blew them both apart.

The girl sidestepped to stand in his way.

Stacks pulled the *Guillotine* back. “*What?* Come on!”

He turned left. The girl zipped that direction, still staring up at the cockpit. She was not going to let him escape.

Sighing, Stacks popped the hatch and stood on the command chair. “Okay, what’s the problem? Huh? You want me to crush you, is that it?”

“I prayed for you to come!” she shouted.

Stacks squinted at her. “Say what?”

The little girl took a few steps backward and pointed west, in the direction the other children had run. “We live that way. Come on, I’ll show you.”

“Wait, wait, *wait*. Look, kid, I’ve got who-knows-how-many angry lances looking for me. I got to clear out of here and get a signal to my own unit, and that should be as far from where you live as possible. And for that matter, where the hell am I?”

“Zamarun, on Szepes.”

“*Where?*”

She said the name again like it should be the most obvious thing. Stacks squeezed his brain. Szepes was an out-of-the-way system with no tactical value to any of the Houses during this long war. Zamarun could be any one of a thousand big cities he learned and forgotten as a schoolboy.

Maybe that was a good thing, maybe bad. Maybe that meant the Free Worlds League wasn’t going to bother scouring the surface for him, but maybe it also meant he’d never get a signal to the Fifth...assuming any of them were still alive.

“Are you hungry?” she said.

His stomach growled audibly. “Yeah, I suppose.”

“Then come on. I’ll show you the village.”

He glanced west. *Village?* “How big is Zamarun?”

She looked at him like that was the most inane question ever posed.

“Big enough for us.”

*Well, that doesn’t sound like a city at all.* “How far?”

“Five or six kilometers.”

“You wander around five or six kilometers from home? Your mom and dad let you do that?”

“The Foxhounds don’t care as long as they get their tribute.”

Stacks didn’t like the sound of that. But a meal sounded good. Maybe even a proper medic.

“You got a doctor there? Healer, something?”

“Reeta can help.”

Stacks considered, but not long. He had no real plan, after all. Waiting a day or two might be the smartest move—give the Free Worlds time to clear out of the airspace before setting out for the nearest hyperpulse generator, wherever that might be. Assuming this planet even had an HPG...

“Okay, splendid. But look, I’m not leaving my ’Mech here, and you can’t walk next me, I’ll step right on you. Can you climb up here?”

The girl did not hesitate. She hiked up the chain ladder like an old pro and tossed herself into the small cargo area behind the command chair, smiling the whole way.

Stacks settled into the chair and closed the hatch. “You got a name?”

“Alice! Who are you?”

“Just...call me Stacks.” He got the *Guillotine* moving.

“Why?”

“It’s just a nickname.”

“Why?”

“Because I like to stack my cookies before I eat ’em, all right?”

To his surprise, the girl asked him no further questions. Nassi had been a chatterbox, and being the only little girl he'd been familiar with, he assumed Alice would be no different after her opening salvo. Instead the girl went silent, though he could sense her visual exploration of the cockpit controls.

He didn't like the quiet. "Who are these Foxhounds?"

"Meanies!"

Stacks hadn't heard the term before. Maybe she meant mercenaries. "What are meanies?"

"You know. Bad guys."

"Oh. They're...mean. They're mean to you. How are they mean to you?"

"We must work for them."

Stacks tensed. "Must? Or what?"

"Or they come in their 'Mechs and hurt us."

Cursing, Stacks brought the *Guillotine* to a stop. Far ahead, he saw the other four children scaling trees to get out of his way. He turned in the seat to look at the little girl.

"Let's just walk through this real quick. There are people with BattleMechs forcing your village to work for them or else they hurt you. That's the size of it?"

Alice nodded.

"And they're there right now?" The last damn thing he needed was to get into a scrap with a bunch of "meanies" in 'Mechs.

"No. It takes some time for them to get here, so they only come once a week, from an old town south along the beach. They came yesterday, so we won't see them for a while. We don't make alcohol, so they don't stick around once they're done."

Stacks blew out a breath. He pushed the *Guillotine* forward again, saluting the hiding kids with the 'Mech's busted right arm as he passed.

“They killed my mom and dad.”

A pain unrelated to his concussive near-drowning in the DropShip twisted in Stacks’ gut. “Yeah, well. I’m sorry to hear that.”

“I don’t remember it. I was little.”

“These meanies, they been around for a while, huh?”

“Forever. As long as I can remember.”

“Why don’t you all just leave?”

“And go where?”

Fair enough. He didn’t answer.



A kilometer later, the *Guillotine* crested a hill. Below, two things caught his attention, and he slowed the BattleMech to focus on each in turn.

The first were columns of smoke, too many to count, but rising perpendicular to the ground before blending together into a haze.

And beyond that—

“Is that water?”

“Uh-huh,” Alice said. “The ocean.”

“Why is it that color?”

“*What* color?”

Of course. She probably hadn’t anything to compare it to. “Is that where you live? The smoke?”

“Yes. It’s how we preserve fish and sea vegetables.”

Stacks piloted the *Guillotine* down the side of the hill, and a bit south to avoid the village. It was clear that Zamarun was no more than that.

“Where are you going?” Alice asked.

“I just want to see this beach real quick. We’ll still go to the village, okay?”

“Okay.”

He skirted the village by a healthy kilometer or more and stopped the BattleMech at the intersection of soil and sand, facing the water. Stacks popped the hatch and stood, jaw hanging wide as he took in a breath of sea-scented air that ballooned in his chest.

He'd never seen blue like the waters stretching into infinity before him. The gently rolling waves were almost transparent, tinted with sapphire that twinkled and winked at him. He felt his heartbeat slow and his face tingle from the warm air and cool breeze massaging his toughened skin.

Stacks inhaled as deeply as he could. "That smell!"

"I don't smell anything." Alice hadn't left the cargo space.

"You lived here your whole life?"

"Yes."

"That's why. Spend a few decades driving one of these 'Mechs around, you'll appreciate coming home to it."

He inhaled again, deep and full, to the very limit his lungs could take. The clean salt air nearly brought tears to his eyes. He told himself it was purely a physiological reaction.

Then he saw the breach.

Two hundred meters or so distant, straight ahead from his position as if it were a beacon, a massive creature broke the surface of the water. Stacks involuntarily sucked in a breath at its majesty.

The great white fish was as long as two *Guillotines* laid end to end, and it leaped high enough into the air that its splayed tail was visible momentarily above the waves. It turned in midair and crashed on its back into the water, throwing a minor tidal wave toward the beach.

Stacks wanted to speak and found he couldn't.

Alice read his silence. "Never seen a whale before? Well, it's not *really* a whale, but that's what everyone calls them. That's what they're called on Terra, right?"



He barely heard the girl. As the waves rippled away from where the whale had submerged, Stacks regressed instantly to his first encounter with a BattleMech. His hometown had had smaller versions of the great machines; urban SecurityMechs and 'Mechs built for industrial purposes. When an *Atlas* marched past his small town, leading a unit of smaller 'Mechs toward a distant battle elsewhere, he'd stood frozen with a half-dozen other kids, watching in stupefied horror and enchantment. The *Atlas*, moving as if in slow motion, had turned its domed death's-head cockpit assembly toward him—*him*, Stacks was sure, with the simple certainty of a child, and *not* everyone else—and saluted him as they passed. The ground trembled, tickling his bladder. Dust rose, choking him...

And he knew his future. At seven years old, he knew it as deeply as he knew his own name: Wade Tobias Staczyk, MechWarrior.

“Stacks?”

“Huh? Yeah. Yeah, okay.”

Stacks turned the *Guillotine* toward Alice's village, following the shoreline north.

He kept a peripheral eye on the ocean, hoping to again see the magnificent whale breach.



They were met with screams, which didn't surprise him. The people of Alice's village stopped everything they were doing and ran in the opposite direction as the *Guillotine* lumbered toward them. Stacks walked the 'Mech past the first several mud-brick structures before stopping, then popped the hatch.

“It's all right!” Alice called. “It's me!”

Running villagers slid to a halt. Those in hiding peeked out of doorways and from behind buildings.

Stacks removed his neurohelmet and stood. From this height he commanded a good view of perhaps half the village. The community was constructed simply, but with an admirable elegance of layout and function. While the buildings were made of the same adobe-like baked bricks, they were smooth and chiseled, not slopped together. They'd used beach sand to line the paths between the buildings, reminding Stacks of meditation gardens he'd once seen in a battle deep in the Draconis Combine.

Raised sheets of cloth fluttered on top of tall frames, and Stacks assumed they were decorative until he saw townspeople with clay buckets near them, and realized they were primitive desalinators. Simple boats, hewn from the trunks of the green trees he'd passed on their way here, lay on the beach. Fluffy white bovines meandered carelessly among the buildings, some of them recently shorn.

It was nothing like his hometown, which consisted of little more than concrete, circuitry, and grease. The sense of community here was palpable. There were few resources, but they'd made the most of them.

A short woman in the same brown pants and pale blouse as most of the others marched toward the *Guillotine*. No trace of fear etched her face. Stacks guessed she was his age, maybe older.

"Alice! Get down from that thing. Now!"

"Reeta—" the girl said.

"*Alice! Now!*"

Alice frowned and hustled down the side of the 'Mech. Stacks followed her.

Villagers gathered behind the old woman. Their faces showed hate and suspicion, but not anger or the insanity of a mob. None of them carried anything resembling a weapon.

They didn't like him, but they weren't going to attack him. Not yet, anyway.

Stacks addressed the old woman. “I found her a few kilometers that way. She was with some kids throwing rocks at my ’Mech.”

She glared at him and at the silver scrapes across the *Guillotine*’s torso. “What’s your name? What House?”

The ’Mech’s insignia had been ripped off, he recalled, resisting an urge to double-check behind him. No reason to go blabbing his affiliation. “You can call me Stacks.”

Reeta snorted. “Mercenary.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“I know a merc when I see one.”

“Really. How’s that?”

Reeta looked him up and down. “Doesn’t matter. Why are you here? There’s nothing on this planet of any military value.”

Their world was in the FWL, but while this woman didn’t talk like they did, there was no reason to betray his original mission, so he lied. “My DropShip was en route to Timbuktu. We got attacked by somebody’s mercenaries and lost our escort. Our Dropper went down not far from here, landed in some kind of quicksand that sucked it straight down. I’m the only one who got out.”

She scanned his face. If she detected the lie, she hid it. “Very well. You’re bleeding.”

He touched his face. His fingers came away with fresh blood. Not much, but his impromptu bandaging hadn’t been the best.

Reeta continued. “It will be dark soon. We are a people of faith. You may stay the night. You’ll have good food, rest, and medical attention. Then tomorrow, unless you wish to work, you’ll be on your way. Phenki is the biggest nearby town, a two week’s walk. You can contact your...*people* from there, I’m sure.”

She turned and froze as if just noticing the entire village stood at her back. “What are you all standing around for? Back to work.”

It was an order, but she spoke it with muted kindness. The villagers murmured and slowly dispersed.

Stacks looked west. The planet's single sun turned red as it descended toward the ocean, which was an endless strip of ultramarine in the distance.

“What kind of work?”

Reeta stopped. She kept her back to him for a long moment, as if trying to decide if she'd heard him correctly. Then she spun on one heel. “I beg your pardon?”

He faced her. “You said, ‘unless you wish to work.’ What kind of work? Fishing? Shearing sheep? What?”

Reeta tilted her head to gaze up at the *Guillotine*. Stacks saw a flash in her eyes that he was sure she'd rather have kept secret. He recognized it instantly: Reeta was still a MechWarrior at heart, and she'd have given anything to hike into the old BattleMech and go a few rounds with any bastard who had the guts to go toe-to-toe with her.

Then the moment passed like it had never happened. She met his eyes. “Come with me.”

She walked down what passed for the main street of the village. Alice smiled at him, waved, and ran off with a group of children who'd strayed to the fringe of the crowd.

Stacks followed Reeta to a semispherical building half again as big as most of the structures in the village. Sweeping aside a woven reed door, she escorted him in.

It had the look of a meeting hall. A clay fireplace stood in the middle of the one-room building, its chimney extending through the roof. A sculpted bench circumscribed the curved walls. Reeta sat near the doorway beside a clay bowl of water, unpacking rolls of cloth and thin, sharpened sticks that looked like weaving needles.

“Sit.”

Stacks sat near her. Reeta removed his dressing and cleaned the wound. Having been patched up more than once by medics in the field, Stacks recognized the deft hands of a trained healer. “Ow.”

“Oh, hush.”

Stacks grinned. Yes, she was an old pro at emergency medicine. “So what’re you, refugees?”

“Of a sort. After Sendai, I grew tired of war. Many of us did. After we...*finished* the job there, those who agreed with me gathered like-minded families, chartered a jump, and came here.”

Stacks knew Sendai’s history. “Eridani Light Horse?”

She nodded once, hard and brisk.

“I’m very sorry. You’ve been here since then?”

“Sixteen years and counting.”

“So Alice was born here?”

“Yes. This place is all she’s ever known.”

“She told me about some, uh...*meanies*.”

Reeta finished his bandaging. The materials were primitive, but her workmanship excelled compared to his hurried job.

“Foxhounds.” Reeta spat the word. “They come here with their BattleMechs and demand supplies. They’ve impoverished us. We don’t have the manpower to increase our fishing and farming to create excess to meet their demand. There’s no law on this world. They take our food, our water, our clothes, our tools. And sometimes they take *people*...”

Stacks easily read the rage in her eyes.

He said quietly, “Who are they?”

She met his gaze. “I believe they were once part of a Capellan force, but I don’t know. How they ended up here is anyone’s guess. Deserters, maybe. Cowards who found an easy mark.”

“Why haven’t you fought back?”

“I founded this community to get away from violence. Perhaps that was a mistake, but it’s far too late for recrimination now. We have no weapons apart from slings and bows with which to hunt. They pilot four *Locusts*. How does that arithmetic sound to you?”

She swept together the unused pieces of her medical kit. “While we’re on the topic, let’s discuss your assignment.”

“My what?”

“You asked what kind of work you could do for the community, MechWarrior.”

The implication drove Stacks to his feet. “Whoa, hold on a second. I’m not taking my old boy out there up against a lance of BattleMechs. I’m down two lasers, my torso’s mangled—”

“Their raids will continue unless they are destroyed.”

“You should’ve thought of that before deciding to not bring a couple Light Horse ’Mechs with you to your little nonviolent community.”

Reeta gathered her kit and rose. “Soon Alice will be old enough for these marauders to...*take interest*. So will the rest of the children. And I am powerless to stop them. That sin is on my head. Give me your *Guillotine*, and I’ll handle them myself.”

“You know I’m not doing that.”

“I saw the look in your eyes as the sun set. I see it even now. You and I are much the same. You’re tired. Worn out. Wondering how many more days you can possibly go on in these endless wars. I now offer you sanctuary, Mr. Stacks. For as long as you wish. Protect us, from now until your death, and all we have is yours.”

“Maybe I’m just like them.”

“You’re not.”

“Oh, yeah? How do you know? Because Alice prayed for me to come?”

Reeta’s mouth twitched. “Yes. So stay and help, or else leave, and do so quickly.”

She pushed the door aside.

“Be sure you let Alice know of your decision. *Warrior.*”

Reeta exited, leaving Stacks standing alone in the room as it grew dark with the sunset.

*Stacks, old buddy, how the hell did you get yourself into this stuff?*

He left the meeting hut and stood outside, scanning the village from right to left. Villagers gave him mostly blank looks, but a few offered grim, faint smiles. The rich smell of smoking fish wafted into his nose, and he realized how hungry he was. Nearby, a man walked past with a flat basket of blackened meat on thin skewers, and Stacks waved him over. The man came.

“May I?” he asked the villager.

The man, thin and pale, proudly raised the plate. Stacks took a skewer and popped the first morsel into his mouth. Instantly his eyelids flew open and an involuntary moan came from his lips.

Impulsively he grabbed another skewer even as he shoved a second bite into his mouth. The villager looked pleased. He nodded at Stacks and went on down the path.

Stacks wandered between buildings, heading west. When he cleared the village proper, he went to the beach and stood near the water’s edge. The setting sun turned the ocean violet.

He sat in the sand and munched his fish. If he’d had better meat at any point in his life, he couldn’t recall it. Surely there’d been a juicy steak on some wealthy world, some celebratory meal after routing an enemy force...

“My God,” he said, and belched. Nothing, not a single meal came to mind. He’d become a MechWarrior as soon as physically able, then service with the Fifth. MREs had been the order of the day for years. Decades.

When Alice plopped down beside him, Stacks almost yelped. He’d been so enamored of his meal and the ocean view he hadn’t heard her small footsteps approaching in the sand.

“Hi, Stacks!”

“Hey, Alice. This fish you all make—it’s amazing.”

“I know! What’re you doing out here?”

“Just thinking, Dolly.”

That same sharp twist in his guts he’d felt earlier as they approached the grassy hill hit him again.

*Dolly.* His nickname for Nassi, from all the dolls that had guarded her tiny bed.

He glanced over his shoulder. The *Guillotine* was a spot in the distance, standing sentinel over the village.

“What’re you thinking *about?*” Alice pressed.

Stacks sighed, jamming the skewers into the ground. He let himself fall back slowly against the sand and rubbed his eyes. His fingers smelled of the delicious meal.

*Your unit thinks you’re dead. You’re an old-man merc whose reflexes aren’t what they used to be.*

*Truth is, you’ve been waiting to die for a long time now. As far back as*

—

“Stacks?” Alice’s chirping little voice interrupted his silent argument.

He opened his eyes and inhaled deeply through his nose. The salt air massaged his lungs with warm, delicate fingers.

“Let’s go see Reeta.”



Stacks felt stupid and vulnerable and weak and—

*Alive.*

By God, for better or worse, being in the cockpit of a BattleMech waiting for the first volley to be fired...

He lived for it.



And, he reckoned as he ran over the plan for the one hundredth time, he was glad this was his last fight.

Victory or death, he ended his career today.

“So be it,” he muttered in the darkness of the cockpit. With his 'Mech concealed behind a stand of thick green-barked trees, he felt more like a MechWarrior right now than he had in years. Even if he lost, if the plan went awry—as plans always did—then he'd at least reduce the effectiveness of these Foxhounds. It might be enough for the village to take matters into their own hands. He knew from experience a populace witnessing a BattleMech fighting on their behalf had an inspirational effect.

He'd give them—he'd give Alice—the best fight he had left.

Out in the grassland, the villagers screamed. Stacks took and held a deep breath, wishing it was ocean air and not recycled cockpit stink.

“Okay. Here we go, old boy.”

The plan he'd orchestrated with Reeta was in effect: most of the adults of the village sprinted across the open, grassy field carrying baskets on their backs and in their hands. It was meant to look like an evacuation had started earlier, bringing the people kilometers away from the village.

The lance of *Locusts* pursued them, as he'd hoped. From everything he'd questioned Reeta about in the past week, he believed the marauders would be too stupid to ask themselves why the village hadn't packed up earlier and avoided their weekly visit. So far that theory seemed to be working. Reeta had also believed the Foxhounds wouldn't open fire on the villagers: they were needed for work, after all. That theory was working too.

Stacks raced out of the trees, having stood there cold and still since morning, trusting the density of the thick trees to offer enough camouflage from the *Locusts'* sensors. The crowd of villagers rushed past his position, and the *Locusts* came into range.

Their reaction to this sudden appearance of a heavy BattleMech was almost comical: one *Locust* came to a halt so quickly it nearly fell over, while its three teammates split off north and south and spun in tight circles. Trying to coordinate against this new threat, Stacks figured.

Now the tricky part.

He fired a full salvo of everything the *Guillotine* could offer against the *Locust* that had hesitated. It was already on the move again, but the pilot's moment of hesitation cost them.

Six short-range missiles flared from the *Guillotine's* torso. They shot across the battlefield with plumes of smoke in their wake and slammed into the smaller 'Mech. The Sunglow laser missed entirely, but his two remaining medium lasers hit home even as the *Locust* rocked to one side, tilted, then found its feet. By then it was over. The 'Mech stood motionless, smoke rising from the chassis.

*One down.*

The *Guillotine* jerked as bright laser fire slammed into its shoulders.

Stacks checked the crowd of villagers. Yes, they'd split up and were racing north now, getting out of the line of fire, baskets abandoned. Two of the *Locusts* quickly circled him, firing, while the third attempted to herd the crowd west, back toward the village.

More laser fire shuddered into the *Guillotine*. Stacks resisted the urge to return fire on the two *Locusts* hitting him. He instead popped off two lasers at the third *Locust* dealing with the crowd to get the pilot's attention. He needed all three enemy 'Mechs to give chase. In a fully operational *Guillotine*, he'd have a good shot against the lance, but with two busted lasers and damage to his torso, Stacks needed something different than a toe-to-toe slugfest.

His shot nailed the third 'Mech perfectly square. The *Locust*, with a thick, melted black spot now smoking on one side, pivoted and returned fire.

The shots went wide. But the other two 'Mechs closed in, flanking him.

Stacks fired his jump jets and leaped eastward. Everything now depended on their arrogance and his acting ability.

He walked the *Guillotine* backward, firing only his medium lasers to conserve heat. The three *Locusts* darted and skipped per their namesake, making it nearly impossible for his shots to land.

Stacks grunted as his 'Mech tipped onto its right foot. The *Guillotine's* left arm evaporated in a shower of flame and smoke.

Cursing, he risked showing his back to the *Locusts* and fired his jets again. The old 'Mech lifted off, landing more than 100 meters away.

The three Foxhounds took the bait. They sprinted at the *Guillotine*, lasers shining bright in the sunlight.

Closer.

Closer...

Alarms sounded in his ears as the Foxhounds' punishing laser fire shredded the armor on his rear torso. Stacks imagined the skin on his own back burning as the *Guillotine's* armor melted off.

He twisted the 'Mech's torso and fired a salvo of missiles. Two of the six landed but caused minimal damage, and Stacks pictured savage grins creasing the faces of his opponents. Reacting to what must have looked like panic from the *Guillotine* pilot, they dared to close the gap between them.

*Idiots*, Stack thought.

Something exploded in his 'Mech's right leg. He saw the pale remnants of a heat sink spinning through the air.

*No, no!* He couldn't lose the legs.

*Who's the idiot here, old boy?*

He jumped his 'Mech, then again. The *Locusts* kept up easily, casually firing their lasers at his back. The last of his external rear armor fell, exposing the *Guillotine's* endo-steel internal structure.

*Boy, you better time this just right...*

Ahead, he saw the bright beach sand he and the villagers had spread in a long, thin line. It was completely out of place against the grassy plain, but he banked on the Foxhounds not noticing or caring.

“They always come from the south?” Stacks had asked Reeta as they’d made plans in the meeting hut.

“Always.”

“They’ve never been east of the village?”

“No. It’s why the children play out that way.”

“Then they don’t know about that big bog I almost drowned in.”

Reeta, for the first time since they’d met, had smiled.

Stacks pulled the *Guillotine* to a halt at the line of sand and spun his torso again. He fired his lasers madly toward the *Locusts*, landing a weak shot on one of them by sheer luck. The *Locust* shook it off, and all three raced toward him.

“That’s right. Keep coming.”

They pounded the *Guillotine* mercilessly as they closed in. White smoke floated into the cockpit.

*Keep coming, keep coming...*

Lasers shot the *Guillotine*’s right arm off the torso, and the limb fell useless to the ground. The *Locusts* came at him full-tilt, firing everything.

*Now.*

Stacks sent the *Guillotine* high into the air. The old ’Mech went nearly vertical with only a slight angle forward. The *Locusts* fired more lasers at him, like a skeet target.

Stacks turned the ’Mech in midair, shooting and missing with one more volley of short-range missiles to tempt them closer.

He landed sixty meters into the bog at the same moment as the three ignorant *Locusts* rushed full-speed straight into it. Instantly, the ’Mechs scrambled for balance.

Stacks had enough time to let out one raucous shout of victory at the *Locusts*' plight before the *Guillotine* itself hit the surface of the bog.

"Do you understand the type of timing you're talking about pulling off?" Reeta had asked in the meeting hut.

"Yes, I do."

"And that you're likely to die in that bog if your timing is off by so much as a second?"

He'd sighed. "Yes..."

Stacks felt the splash as he hit the mire. The unforgiving muck flowed over the 'Mech's legs, swallowing it.

Stacks slammed on the torso-mounted jump jets a second before the 'Mech sank low enough for them to submerge in the bog. The armless *Guillotine* shook and tried to rise. He could feel the bog pulling at the 'Mech's feet as if they were his own legs.

"Come on, come on!" he screeched.

The BattleMech roared as it spent its energy in the single most important jump of its long career.

"Goddammit, *GO!*"

It went.

With an explosive burst, the *Guillotine* rocketed out of the bog. Stacks laughed and cried, maneuvering the 'Mech toward the solid ground he and the villagers had marked off.

The *Guillotine* landed, not quite clear of the bog, but not sinking quickly either. Breathing hard, Stacks gave the 'Mech one more jump, and found solid ground beneath his feet.

He turned.

Having run unwittingly into the bog from its edge, the three *Locusts* weren't in as deep as he had been. But as he'd hoped, the sludge was still too much for the lighter 'Mechs. They sank up to their torsos, struggling mightily. They reminded Stacks of panicked animals.

Catching his breath, Stacks aimed his remaining weapons carefully. He fired his two lasers at the floundering 'Mechs until they exploded, then he watched their metallic carcasses sink into the bog.

“Way to go, old boy,” he said softly to his BattleMech—or, thought it was to the 'Mech, anyway. “Way to go.”



Stacks sat on the beach as the sun set over the ocean, savoring bites of blackened fish and sipping cold, desalinated water.

Beside him, Alice dug her bare toes into the sand. “Do you have kids, Stacks?”

“I did.”

“Not anymore?”

“No.”

“Do you miss them?”

“Her. Nassi. I do. A lot.”

“Did she die? Was she a warrior?”

He didn't know whether to be impressed or appalled by her innocent bluntness. He decided it was refreshing. Then his emotions soured at the fact that such a little one should know enough about the brutality of endless war that it would naturally occur to her that a loved one perished in combat.

Stacks patted her foot. “She died, but she wasn't a warrior. She was just a little girl. Like you.”

“I'm sorry.”

He tousled her hair. “Thanks.”

Alice lifted her chin. “I'm gonna be a warrior!”

Stacks glanced back at the armless but not yet useless *Guillotine*, standing watch over the village, its back to the beach.

“I bet you are. But let's wait awhile on that, okay?” He winked at her.

“Well...all right.”

“All right. Thanks, Dolly.”

Guileless, Alice leaned her small body against his shoulder. Salt not from the ocean air collected in the back of his throat, and Stacks hurried to swallow it with a little smile.

Far out in the ocean, a great whale breached.



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## BATTLETECH ERAS

The *BattleTech* universe is a living, vibrant entity that grows each year as more sourcebooks and fiction are published. A dynamic universe, its setting and characters evolve over time within a highly detailed continuity framework, bringing everything to life in a way a static game universe cannot match.

To help quickly and easily convey the timeline of the universe—and to allow a player to easily “plug in” a given novel or sourcebook—we’ve divided *BattleTech* into six major eras.



## **STAR LEAGUE (Present–2780)**

Ian Cameron, ruler of the Terran Hegemony, concludes decades of tireless effort with the creation of the Star League, a political and military alliance between all Great Houses and the Hegemony. Star League armed forces immediately launch the Reunification War, forcing the Periphery realms to join. For the next two centuries, humanity experiences a golden age across the thousand light-years of human-occupied space known as the Inner Sphere. It also sees the creation of the most powerful military in human history.

(This era also covers the centuries before the founding of the Star League in 2571, most notably the Age of War.)



## **SUCCESSION WARS (2781–3049)**

Every last member of First Lord Richard Cameron's family is killed during a coup launched by Stefan Amaris. Following the thirteen-year war to unseat him, the rulers of each of the five Great Houses disband the Star League. General Aleksandr Kerensky departs with eighty percent of the Star League Defense Force beyond known space and the Inner Sphere collapses into centuries of warfare known as the Succession Wars that will eventually result in a massive loss of technology across most worlds.



## **CLAN INVASION (3050–3061)**

A mysterious invading force strikes the coreward region of the Inner Sphere. The invaders, called the Clans, are descendants of Kerensky's SLDF troops, forged into a society dedicated to becoming the greatest fighting force in history. With vastly superior technology and warriors, the Clans conquer world after world. Eventually this outside threat will forge a new Star League, something hundreds of years of warfare failed to

accomplish. In addition, the Clans will act as a catalyst for a technological renaissance.



**CIVIL WAR  
(3062–3067)**

The Clan threat is eventually lessened with the complete destruction of a Clan. With that massive external threat apparently neutralized, internal conflicts explode around the Inner Sphere. House Liao conquers its former Commonality, the St. Ives Compact; a rebellion of military units belonging to House Kurita sparks a war with their powerful border enemy, Clan Ghost Bear; the fabulously powerful Federated Commonwealth of House Steiner and House Davion collapses into five long years of bitter civil war.



## **JIHAD**

**(3067–3080)**

Following the Federated Commonwealth Civil War, the leaders of the Great Houses meet and disband the new Star League, declaring it a sham. The pseudo-religious Word of Blake—a splinter group of ComStar, the protectors and controllers of interstellar communication—launch the Jihad: an interstellar war that pits every faction against each other and even against themselves, as weapons of mass destruction are used for the first time in centuries while new and frightening technologies are also unleashed.



## **DARK AGE**

**(3081-3150)**

Under the guidance of Devlin Stone, the Republic of the Sphere is born at the heart of the Inner Sphere following the Jihad. One of the more extensive periods of peace begins to break out as the 32nd century dawns. The factions, to one degree or another, embrace disarmament, and the massive armies of the Succession Wars begin to fade. However, in 3132 eighty percent of interstellar communications collapses, throwing the

universe into chaos. Wars erupt almost immediately, and the factions begin rebuilding their armies.



**ILCLAN**  
**(3151–present)**

The once-Invulnerable Republic of the Sphere lies in ruins, torn apart by the Great Houses and the Clans as they wage war against each other on a scale not seen in nearly a century. Mercenaries flourish once more, selling their might to the highest bidder. As Fortress Republic collapses, the Clans race toward Terra to claim their long-denied birthright and create a supreme authority that will fulfill the dream of Aleksandr Kerensky and rule the Inner Sphere by any means necessary: The ilClan.



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*Shrapnel* is the market for official short fiction set in the *BattleTech* universe.

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- Stories containing gratuitous sex, gore, or profanity. Keep it PG-13, and you should be fine.
- Stories under 3,000 words or over 6,000 words. We don't publish flash fiction, and although we do publish works longer than 6,000 words, these are reserved for established *BattleTech* authors.
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## **MANUSCRIPT FORMAT**

- .rtf, .doc, .docx formats ONLY
- 12-point Times New Roman, Cambria, or Palatino fonts ONLY
- 1" margins all around
- Double-spaced lines
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- Filename: "Submission Title by Jane Q. Writer"

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3. *The Price of Glory* (*The Gray Death Legion Saga, Book 3*) by William H. Keith, Jr.
4. *Warrior: En Garde* (*The Warrior Trilogy, Book 1*) by Michael A. Stackpole
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6. *Warrior: Coupé* (*The Warrior Trilogy, Book 3*) by Michael A. Stackpole
7. *Wolves on the Border* by Robert N. Charrette
8. *Heir to the Dragon* by Robert N. Charrette
9. *Lethal Heritage* (*Blood of Kerensky Trilogy, Book One*) by Michael A. Stackpole
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2. *Shrapnel Issue #2*
3. *Shrapnel Issue #3*

#### 4. Shrapnel Issue #4



## **SHRAPNEL: THE OFFICIAL BATTLETECH MAGAZINE**

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