

SHRAPNEL

ISSUE #8 THE OFFICIAL BATTLETECH MAGAZINE

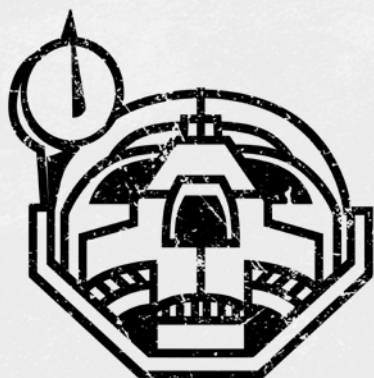


CRAIG A. REED, JR.
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JAMES BIXBY
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ISSUE #8

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THE OFFICIAL BATTLETECH MAGAZINE

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COMMANDER'S CALL

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

One of the many things I love about the *BattleTech* universe is it's filled with so much history. It's not just a cookie-cutter sci-fi setting that simply hands you some fun toys to smash together while only offering a minimum of context for what those toys mean and how to use them. *BattleTech*, however, gives you context in spades. From the Age of War to the Reunification War to the Clan Invasion and beyond, there's an incredibly rich history to mine. But the perennial favorite historical era of *BattleTech* is the Star League era, which we often see through the rose-colored lens of stories set in the contemporary eras of the late Succession Wars and beyond, featuring lost facilities that promise a potential mother lode of *lostech*. For example, you'll catch glimpses of this sort of thing in two stories in this very issue—but despite that surface similarity, these stories have wildly different approaches and outcomes, which is not only a testament to our authors' talent, but proof that the richness and depth of the universe can accommodate two wholly different takes to a similar concept.

That said, let's dive into this issue—our biggest yet!

For fiction, we're starting the assault with another story from John-David Karnitz (whose first *Shrapnel* offering was published back in issue #2); this tale shines a spotlight on an oft-neglected but vital asset on many battlefields. Other returning authors include Jason Hansa, who hasn't graced our pages since our very first issue; James Bixby, bringing us another tale of the hapless pink *Panther* pilot Ace Darwin; and Daniel Isberner, with our next tale from the Cracked Canopy. Dan's story, "Silent Roar," deserves a special callout: not only does it feature the Kickstarter-backer character Captain Andreas Büttner (from the backer of the same name), but it also serves as a follow-up to Dan's Silent Reapers Cycle, which was published in German as *Gejagt: Silent-Reapers-Zyklus*. (It's worth noting that Daniel is currently hard at work on the English translation of this novel, so be on the lookout for that down the road.) And as a special treat, on our download page (bg.battletech.com/shrapnel) we've included a record sheet of the custom Gray Death Scout battle armor that appears in the story. Craig A. Reed, Jr. then brings us the penultimate part of the *Vengeance Games* serial. If the end of this part doesn't make you want to fast-forward to our summer issue, I don't know what will! And from the BattleCorps archives, we're offering a tale from Keith R. A. DeCandido, Not only has Keith authored several novels for *Star Trek* and many other beloved sci-fi franchises, but he also penned "Three Sides to Every Story," which was featured in *BattleTech: 25*

Years of Art & Fiction. He loves playing in this universe and wants to dive right back in, so we decided to reintroduce him to readers who missed out on his work when it was originally published.

We also have a few new short-story authors for this issue. Longtime *BattleTech* contributor Eric Salzman's first foray into short fiction, "The Great UrbanMech Uprising," was hinted at back in *Shrapnel* #3. Douglas Carruthers' "Hollow Glory" follows the quest to end the menace of the notorious pirate Paula "Lady Death" Trevaline—and includes a stunning piece of art from Natán Meléndez. And last but certainly not least, Jeremy Ciccone closes out this issue with a heartfelt picture of a mercenary unit during the Fourth Succession War.

For game content, we have a few special treats. First off, if you've picked up a copy of *Tamar Rising* and are dying to learn more about the powers that arose in this region of the Inner Sphere, we've got you covered with an exclusive look at the shady Malthus Confederation. Next, we've got a full campaign on the Periphery world of Astrokaszy, a struggle between neighboring caliphs which requires only two things: the *A Game of Armored Combat* box set (available at many retailers) and some mapsheets (although *Map Pack: Deserts* is recommended if you want the full desert experience). And if you're as excited for the forthcoming *Empire Alone* sourcebook as I am, then you'll want to check out "Unit Digest: First Augustine Arquebusiers" and "SAFE Quarterly Threat Assessment" to see what's been going on in the Free Worlds League lately, and "A Fistful of Kerenskys: Trading in the Wolf Empire" gives a glimpse behind the Wolf Empire curtain. We also have a technical readout of Clan Burrock's original *Executioner* chassis; a look at various kinds of alien flora that can really wreck your day if you aren't paying attention; a retrospective on how House Steiner's Operation Hollywood fought the Clans without firing a single bullet; a peek into the seedy world of Canopian pleasure circuses; and a handy guide for helping new citizens of the Federated Suns find success with all their newfound freedom.

This issue marks the conclusion of *Shrapnel's* second year of publication, which means another tour of duty is complete, and it's time to reenlist! Whether you subscribe to our ebook version or pick up individual print issues as they come out, we're just happy to have you on board. In the meantime, keep on writing and submitting your stories!

Philip A. Lee, Managing Editor



BETTER DAYS

JOHN-DAVID KARNITZ

OUTSIDE KHORRAMSHAHR

ABADAN

MARIK COMMONWEALTH

FREE WORLDS LEAGUE

12 DECEMBER 3015

Grit rose in a pall as the treads of the 60-ton Long-Range Missile Carrier squealed to a halt.

From his position in the rightmost of the carrier's paired cupolas, Commander Adrien Orlonzo studied the scene with careful nonchalance. He was short and a little heavier than he liked to remember, with swarthy skin bestowed upon him by his Trinidadian mother that had been further darkened by too many alien suns, and curly hair he'd inherited from his father's side, a trader from Cajamarca.

Abadan's yellow-white sun glared down pitilessly on the soldiers laboring through the shimmering heat of the support-train laager, raising a cloud of dust from the tracks of too many armored vehicles abrading the coarse sand. Off in the blinding distance, thunder rolled above rocks too hot to touch with naked hands, over hills that hadn't seen rain in decades or more. The air smelled like tilled sand, rocket fumes, diesel exhaust, overheated lubricants, and burnt metal.

The air, too, was alive with the calls of troopers to each other and the tinny rasp of speakers tuned to the various communications nets of Kenski's Raiders. The Raiders were a brigade-sized mercenary armor group consisting of two medium-heavy armor regiments and a support regiment of armored-cavalry reconnaissance troops and fire-support formations. They'd been on Holt when the Fifth Regular Hussars arrived, bringing news that Anton bloody-Marik had declared

himself Captain-General...and that anybody not ready to swear fealty to him was a liability.

The fighting there had been violent and brief. The Free Worlds League Parliament was paying the Raiders, all right, but not to fight old Janos' kid brother without even a few kind words and a pat on the ass. They'd only fought long enough to load their gear aboard their DropShips and made for Marik itself, where they met up with the Stewart Home Guard.

That had been scarcely two months ago. The Raiders were looking to put paid to the bastards that had malfed up their stand-down on Holt, and it looked like this would be their chance. In particular, the troopers of Orlonzo's Rocket Artillery Support Company—a brigade-level asset of a dozen LRM Carriers—were getting at least their share of the action.

"Well, that was exciting," Specialist Asha Trask said from the depths of the fighting compartment as the command track came to a halt within the support-train laager. Powerful and as squat as the vehicle whose missiles she aimed, she was no one's choice for a beauty queen—just as no one would choose anybody else to put those missiles on target.

Sergeant Ander Korolevski, tall, thin, and sallow, smiled down at her from the portside cupola across from the commander. He reached for a cigarette. "Good job, crew," he said, purposefully including Senior Trooper Vitor Gorny up in the driver's hole forward. "Not too shabby, eh, sir?"

Commander Orlonzo paused from lifting himself clear of his hatch and grinned back. "Not bad at all, I'd say, but I'll stop short of saying our job's done for the day," he replied. "The next contract'll be smoother sailing; you wait and see."

The sergeant nodded as the three LRM Carriers from Third Platoon filtered back into the laager. The thin armor of platoon leader's track—Three-One—showed a few scars that hadn't been there forty minutes earlier, when they'd relieved First Platoon. The newly posted officer, Junior Lieutenant Rollins, was either taking his recently concluded training to lead from the front seriously, or else he was slower to order his driver to displace than he should have been.

"You takin' off, sir?" Korolevski asked the commander.

"Roger," Orlonzo replied as he slid down the vehicle's glacis. "Get in the queue to reload this bitch, and help out Sergeant Flowers—and Lieutenant Rollins, of course—in Third hurry things along. We got a section each from First and Second on the way back as well."

"Fantastic," the vehicle commander called out as Orlonzo stumped over to the nearby headquarters track, an old armored personnel carrier converted into a high-sided command vehicle. The legend *Old Bessie* was scrawled in faded, chipped paint along either side.

Before his own engagement, the company commander had told his firing platoon leaders to operate on a section-by-section basis. That

way a team of LRM Carriers would always be on-station with the line companies. He'd been surprised that Senior Lieutenant Panchard of Fighting First had emptied the launchers on his first section so quickly, but that only meant the Raiders were in it for real now.

Sergeant Kreuzz had ambled back to the relative safety of the supply train when the remainder of the RASC had deployed forward to relieve First Platoon. He had kept close to the ammo-resupply point because that seemed the most likely destination for any returning company vehicles. The lame-duck Three-Three was a bit farther off, the company and support echelon mechanics still working on it.

The operations NCO was standing in the top hatch as the commander approached. He waved to his superior and made as if to vacate the spot, but Orlonzo shook his head and curved his path to climb up the sloped front of the track, nodding to the driver—Marston—whose head stuck out of his own hatch.

"Made out pretty good, I hear, sir," Kreuzz said when the commander squatted beside him; he couldn't take a knee because the resting metal was too hot.

"Christ, it's not over yet," Orlonzo said tiredly while he took off his helmet and ran a grimy hand through equally gritty, sweat-matted hair. He accepted the junior man's offer of a canteen from a hook inside the hatch coaming.

The operations sergeant shrugged, pausing for a moment to wipe his own brow with the already-dampened cuff of a jumpsuit sleeve. He was just as short as his commanding officer but more sparsely built, not to mention being a decade and a half younger.

The sounds coming from the front barely six kilometers away were regular enough that they could almost be overlooked, much the way the sound of surf on a beach can be ignored until one pays attention to it.

"What's First and Second's status, Sergeant?" the commander asked.

"Still supporting, sir. Wilton's second section is due in any time now, though. First's section can't be too far behind them." Kreuzz paused. "Looks like the Regulans keep extending to the south to draw our forces out. Could be they're trying to retrograde."

Orlonzo sucked in his lips for a moment. "I'm not so sure about that, Sergeant," he replied. "The Three-Five is probably trying to find and turn our flank."

Kreuzz snorted. "Good luck with that, sir. We got a regiment of armor—and tinmen support of our own, besides."

The only problem with that, Orlonzo knew, was the Raiders had strength in their armored companies, and the Stewart light 'Mech battalion had speed and agility—but they didn't have both together. The Regulans in their medium and fast-heavy 'Mechs did, and the Loyalists were playing their game so far.

"Well, we'll see how it pans out in the next hour or so," the commander said absently, handing back the canteen and replacing his commo helmet while his eyes searched the rearming point.

The regimental support platoon had brought up several flatbeds loaded with munitions for the RASC, and the all-terrain forklift trucks were busy transferring the ammunition canisters to the waiting holds of Third Platoon's carriers. Orlonzo's own command track was next in the queue, sandwiched between Lieutenant Rollins' carrier and the one from Flowers' section.

He shook himself. "All right, Sergeant, keep up the good work. I'm headed back to my carrier."

"Take 'er easy, sir."

"Hell, Sergeant, I'll take her any way I can."

Orlonzo trotted back to Rollins' platoon as the command track eased forward to toe the line where the lift trucks operated. The compact machines were remarkably quiet, though their engines grunted as the drivers applied power to lift the one-ton cassettes from the truck beds and swing them over into the magazines of the waiting LRM Carriers.

Lieutenant Rollins detached himself from one of his carriers as he saw the commander approach. "We're almost ready, sir," he said. "Just my own carrier after yours."

Orlonzo waved his concern away. "The Regulans'll still be there by the time we get back, Alex." He indicated the rents in the armor of the broad-bodied carrier. "Have fun out there?"

Rollins grimaced before snorting into a smile. "Regular *Griffin* caught us trying to displace, sir," he admitted sheepishly. "But a platoon of tankers shook 'em off us."

The commander regarded the new officer tepidly for a split-second before he reached out to warmly shake his hand. "Well, I'm glad you made it through all right. Just remember those boys on the other side of the range are playing for keeps." He paused to break the train of thought. "Any word on Three-Three?"

The lieutenant shook his head. "Ah, negative, sir. Nothing good, at any rate. Still down with a final drive malfunction. Intermittent, comes and goes. The mechanics say..."

Off in the distance, across the expanse the Raiders' support section had marked off for their use, a clot of troopers dissolved and ran toward their various vehicles.

Rollins' voice trailed off, and Orlonzo stiffened when several vehicles across the temporary encampment gunned their engines in near simultaneity. The RASC's headquarters track was one of them, and it raised a thin cloud of dust as it lurched into motion toward the rearming point.

Orlonzo turned to see Kreuz waving frantically from the high-sided vehicle's top hatch.

"Lieutenant—" he began.

"Sir! *Sir!*" the ops sergeant shouted as the vehicle neared. "Regiment just called—some of the Regulars broke through and are headed toward the supply train. ETA ten minutes!"

"—forget Three-Three," Orlonzo said, "and get your carrier loaded as fast as you can. You've got *two* bloody minutes."



Orlonzo settled himself in his command hatch and plugged his commo helmet's radio lead into his carrier's radio system. The cacophony of the regimental comm net exploded in his ears.

"Golf Two-One, this is Yankee Two-One actual, over." Orlonzo swept his eyes over his tiny force; the carriers seemed to shift nervously around their staging area just off to the side of the rearming point, but the only real movement was the lift trucks frantically trying to reload the Third Platoon leader's carrier before they moved out.

"Yankee Two-One, Golf Two-One actual. What is your present location, over?" Second Regiment's commander seemed distracted, but that was only to be expected at a time like this.

Colonel Lutsiah was far forward, operating with his main effort presently assaulting the Regular BattleMech battalion. The regimental headquarters company was situated just across the encampment, currently alive with troopers busy putting their vehicles back into moving order from a place they had thought safe ninety seconds before.

More fools them, Orlonzo thought as he spoke again into his helmet mike. "Golf Two-One, Yankee Two-One. I'm at the trains with my Three element. Do you require assistance? Over?"

"Affirmative, Yankee. You have an estimated three bravo-mikes headed toward your location, crossing Phase Line Orange, vicinity Sierra Victor Three Niner Five Two gridline. They are expected to sidestep our backstop element just east of you. I need you to get out there and hold them up long enough for me to get a line unit in place." The colonel paused. "You'll provide the anvil, Yankee. My troopers'll be the hammer. How copy, over?"

Orlonzo blinked once, twice. "Lima Charlie, Golf Two-One."

"Good hunting, Yankee Two-One. Golf Two-One, out."

Drek.

Orlonzo switched his commo helmet to send on Third Platoon's net. "That's your last load, Three-Six. Rascals Third, this is the time... Follow me and conform to my movements; keep it slow until Three-Six

catches up." He switched to the company frequency. "Rascals First and Second, this is Rascal Six. The rear area is in for a rough time. Hold what you got and keep all your carriers close until you hear different. Six, out."

Tension and experience kept his body rigid when his command carrier lurched into motion while the two carriers from Third followed. Sergeant Kreuzz waved helplessly from the hatch of the headquarters track, and Orlonzo touched a finger from his right hand to his helmet's brow. The APC was to hold here and maneuver with the logistics vehicles because it had no place in what was about to come.

"Rascal Six, Three-Six. Whaddya want me to do with Three-Three, over?" the net blasted with the excited voice of Lieutenant Rollins.

"Three-Six, this is Six. Leave it behind and pay attention to the rest of your platoon; they can provide the backstop here," Orlonzo replied, mildly irritated at the sudden interruption—and having to repeat himself. It was quite clear that the broken carrier couldn't get anywhere quick enough to make a difference. But here it might distract the incoming Regulans long enough if the mobile carriers' mission failed.

Long enough, failing missions, Orlonzo thought quickly before keying his mike again. *Looks like the Devil is dealing the cards today...*

"An element of BattleMechs has broken through the front line and is headed this way. The company charged with catching stragglers is out of position, so we're it. We're headed toward Phase Line Orange to hold 'em up while the tankers get their asses over here where they belong. It's going to be tight, Rascals, but if they get past us, the jig's up. We'll be running on fumes and tossing paper clips for the rest of the operation."

He paused for a breath as his carrier clanged down the track toward an approaching force he knew little about, and had no particular desire to meet, especially under these circumstances. Orlonzo then thought of the scrambling rear-echelon troopers struggling to toss their distributed gear back aboard vehicles that were set up to work, not move. "Rascals, keep in mind that we got a whole bunch of fellow Raiders behind us, naked as a baby's bottom. It's us or nothing. Six out."

There was a heavy silence in the carrier as they moved onward.

He clicked back to the company frequency and gave the two outlying platoons a quick briefing. He had a feeling he'd miss having Lieutenant Panchard backing him up instead of the kid, and he could really use the extra carriers for what was about to come, but there was no sense crying over spilled milk now.

It wasn't long before he saw a flicker of movement over the hills to his front. His commo helmet was fitted snug to his head, so it wasn't a droplet of sweat.

"All units, full halt and grab some cover!" he ordered over the platoon net. Back at the supply area, Sergeant Kreuzz could handle whatever

company traffic was generated because Orlonzo would need all of his attention right here for the next however-long.

"Line abreast and good dispersion. Outside carriers, watch the flanks—they might try to skirt around us, but we don't know that for sure..."

The command carrier slammed to a halt behind a low hill composed chiefly of boulders, human-sized and smaller. Against an enemy ten or more meters tall, Orlonzo wasn't sure how much protection it afforded. Not that there was a whole hell of a lot of time for Gorny to be choosy about where he parked.

Orlonzo turned to his left and right to check on the dispositions of his task force—he hadn't relieved Lieutenant Rollins of his command for the present, but it went without saying that he was in charge of the current operation. Beside him, Sergeant Korolevski hovered uncertainly in his hatch, unwilling to disappear into the confines of the fighting compartment with his commander still topside, but clearly wishing to do so and clear the carrier for action.

"Target's up!" the gunner said, her voice a tad more shrill than Orlonzo was used to. "One—no, two—BattleMechs. Estimated range two thousand meters, bearing zero-one-zero mils relative..."

Orlonzo snatched his rangefinder binos to his face, though his training told him that his primary sight within the vehicle itself would have provided as much data as he required. He ignored the chiding voice because until the moment to fire came, he needed to be able to *see* with more than just his eyes alone.

The first object he focused on was a cluster of boulders. They were larger than the ones he was currently sheltered behind, obvious even with the intervening distance because of the way they came up to mid-leg on the BattleMech that suddenly appeared in his field of view. The bipedal machine had a boxy, rectangular torso balanced atop backward canted legs. It minced along in a peculiar birdlike gait, quite different from the one that traveled more confidently behind it.

Flea, Orlonzo's mind supplied. He tagged the approaching 'Mech by its name and nomenclature, but it took him another heartbeat to convert the data into any usable form. At this range he couldn't tell if it was packing a heavy laser in lieu of arms, but he hoped not.

"—one following is a G-R-F *Griffin*," Korolevski continued in a dull monotone, which it surprised the commander because he wasn't sure the NCO had been speaking at all.

Orlonzo felt his body still. At 20 tons, the *Flea* was no one's pick for a heavyweight. His carriers were too thin-skinned to last long in a direct-fire engagement, but the thin-legged BattleMech wasn't much better off, and it surrendered too much range to his missile tracks, besides.

A *Griffin* was another matter entirely. It packed missiles in a launch tube over its right shoulder, though it could only loose ten at a time, compared to his carriers' sixty per full salvo. The real threat was the particle cannon clenched in its human-like right fist. The weapon had comparable reach to the RASC's long-range missiles, but also had the power to open up one of the missile carriers nearly every time it hit.

Orlonzo watched the numbers at the bottom of his viewfinder spool ever downward. Regiment had said there would be a third...

"Approaching one-triple-zero meters," the gunner called out. "No sign of any more—wait! Third BattleMech inbound. Looks like a *Quickdraw*."

Christ, Orlonzo thought muzzily, *maybe we'll make it out after all*.

The *Quickdraw* was a heavy 'Mech, but it while popular and capable, it wasn't a heavy hitter like a *Thunderbolt* or *Marauder*. Still, four carriers versus three BattleMechs in a direct-fire engagement wasn't a great day, no matter which classes of 'Mechs they were.

He slipped into the fighting compartment and swung the hatch closed over him. Korolevski's clanged shut a millisecond later.

"All units, this is Six," Orlonzo said, still on the platoon net. "First Section, concentrate on the *Flea* with your opening salvo. Second Section will hit the *Griffin*. Full salvos, troopers. We only get one shot at this. Six out."

Orlonzo had slotted his command carrier into the Third Platoon organization by assuming the role of the dead-lined Three-Three. That placed him with the young lieutenant, against most protocol, but Sergeant Flowers, a ten-year veteran, was the one Orlonzo wanted taking charge of the other section if the company commander bought it.

The distant BattleMechs reacted suddenly, increasing their speed and breaking left and right in a scissor movement that gave the missile-carrier gunners maximum deflection as the two machines cruised into range. Orlonzo couldn't imagine his ungainly carriers had been hidden, but it was possible the MechWarriors piloting the approaching machines were operating on sensors that hadn't registered the quiescent vehicles until the last moment.

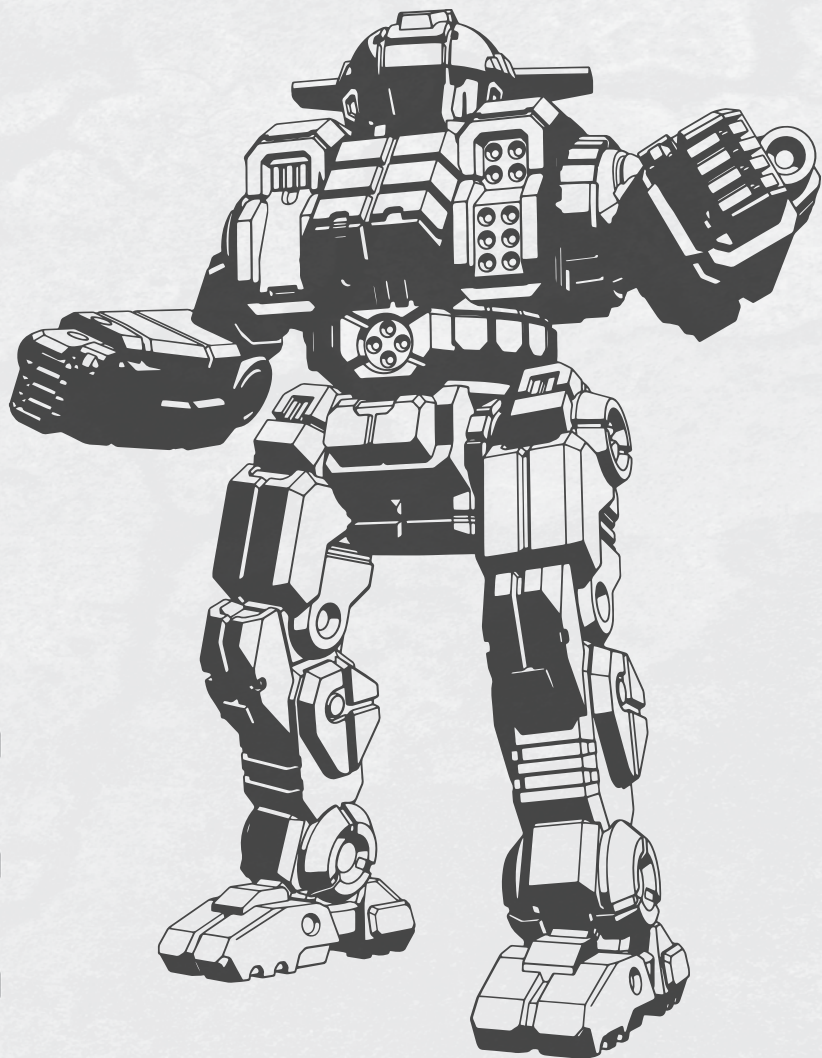
"Fire at my command," Orlonzo said as he waited for the sign from Trask.

"No—" the gunner muttered.

"Fire!"

"—w!"

The world shattered into a million tiny bits and re-formed itself as the inside of a sweltering missile carrier that jounced as sixty eight-kilo projectiles exploded from the racks. They shot toward their targets as tiny pinpricks of light, forming into a diffuse blur as they neared



their destinations. The echoing roar of the salvo's ignition had barely died away.

The tiny *Flea* was nominally faster than the larger *Griffin*, but the smaller machine either had a less-skilled pilot or found the going tougher on its thin legs because it stumbled repeatedly even before the salvo found it. Explosion after explosion merged into an incandescent flash, and when it cleared, the tumbling wreckage that had been a 20-ton BattleMech flew apart when it intersected the ground.

Someone cheered on the platoon net, but the celebration died quickly as the *Griffin* shrugged off the damage inflicted on it. The bulbous-headed BattleMech shook itself while it changed course toward the waiting line of missile carriers. The armored shoulder baffles that protected the missile launcher and cockpit twitched as the 'Mech's arms extended for balance when the machine changed its heading suddenly.

The rifle-like particle cannon leveled off and fired. Air slammed shut behind the bolt crackling towards Three-Two, the carrier on the platoon's left flank—Sergeant Flowers' vehicle. The bolt touched the boulders sheltering the hulking vehicle. Traces of moisture deep within the rocks flash-boiled, and the stones ruptured like an exploding steam engine. The carrier's driver panicked and threw the vehicle into reverse, but only for an instant before someone inside clamped down hard and it halted.

"Platoon!" Orlonzo ordered. "Split fire by section. Section One, take the *Quickdraw*. Section Two, hit the *Griffin*. Fire at will. Out."

In a cloud of dust, the *Griffin* disappeared from his primary sight—set to wide panoramic at the moment—followed by a distant boom from outside the command carrier. For a second, Orlonzo imagined someone had gotten off another salvo and scored a lucky hit, but then he realized the machine's pilot had engaged its rear-mounted jump jets and leaped away to a position of cover, if not concealment. A quick scan found it 100 meters away, behind an intervening hill, clearly willing to wait the few seconds for its heavier companion to enter the fray.

"*Quickdraw*, front, six-double-zero meters," Korolevski was murmuring to the gunner. "Full salvo; fire as you bear."

The carrier leaped again as the gunner mashed her triggers, sending another sixty missiles arcing downrange. The heavy BattleMech weighed as much as the RASC's own carriers, but it spent a lot of that weight on achieving speed instead of carrying a decent war load. It carried twice the armor of the missile vehicle, but that was spread over a much greater surface area, and its weaponry was less impressive than that of the *Griffin* it was moving to support.

The 'Mech was nimble for its size, though, and only half of Trask's missiles hit. A scattering of munitions from Rollins' vehicle caused further damage as well, but the machine didn't fall over, and it fired a flight of its own missiles in return. They fell well short of the command carrier, but they came enough in line for Orlonzo to wince.

The carriers of Second Section fired again as the *Griffin* showed itself to support its mate's charge. The particle beam flashed into the glaxis of the platoon's sergeant's vehicle, blowing off a section of the carrier's nose even as flight after flight of missiles pounded into the 'Mech and the rocks it still sheltered behind.

A moment later, the *Griffin's* pilot launched a salvo of their own missiles at the command carrier. The few that hit rocked the vehicle, but not hard. The missiles were lethal enough to an armored target, but usually only in bulk, like the RASC's carriers delivered.

"Three elements, this is Six!" Orlonzo said over the radio. "Second Section, displace in bounds to alternate positions. First Section will cover!"

Trask depressed her triggers, one after the other, so the command carrier rocked three times in quick succession as each rack emptied its current load of missiles. The *Quickdraw* dodged to the carrier's left to skirt around a boulder and launch its own salvo of missiles. They shot toward the platoon leader's carrier off to Orlonzo's right, and both machines were momentarily enveloped in flame.

When the smoke cleared, the 60-ton BattleMech stumbled to its knees, inertia driving it forward into a half-controlled skid. Orlonzo watched it struggle upright to the rhythmic *choonk-choonk-choonk* of the autoloader cycling new ammunition cassettes into the missile racks.

The *Griffin* closed the gap with frightening speed.

Gorny, responding to Sergeant Korolevski's urgent command, slewed the carrier to the left. Trask cursed as she tried to center the charging BattleMech in her sights. The sound of the minimal traversing gears that served the launch platform whined in a facsimile of frustration. The heavy missile carrier bucked hard, and the driver cursed over the intercom—the earlier attack must have damaged the running gear to some extent, but the gunner whooped in joy as the target slid into her sight.

There's no time or place to run anyway, Orlonzo thought calmly. Sergeant Flowers had figured that out well enough on his own, hadn't he?

Off to the right, the *Quickdraw* staggered to its feet, and the platoon leader's carrier pivot steered to bring itself in line with the heavier machine.

"NO!" Orlonzo yelled over the platoon frequency. "The *Griffin*! Get the *Grif*—!"

Trask salvaged all three racks at the same time the *Griffin* fired its own weapons. Sergeant Flowers must have been about to say something over the net because his scream echoed over the radio for a split second before the transceiver melted under the caress of an ion beam.

The *Griffin* lurched from its running gait when most of Trask's missiles arrowed into it at a distance of barely 400 meters. Momentum kept it moving forward, but for the moment it was as out-of-control as the rest of the situation.

Explosions danced around the still-distant *Quickdraw* while Rollins' gunner beat the surrounding terrain with his missiles. The 60-ton 'Mech triggered its own missile rack even as another salvo roared in from behind the command carrier. Sergeant Flowers' wingman had found his new defensive position and resumed firing.

The Regular 'Mech's missiles found their mark this time and splashed divots out of the upper plating of Rollins' carrier. An errant missile plunged in just low enough to impact on one of the left-side roadwheels, blowing it off and causing the track to sag.

The *Quickdraw* jerked when the follow-on missiles from the third carrier crashed into its chest and upper body. It fell onto its back and lay there for a moment before erupting in a blast whose overpressure raised a pall of dust for a hundred meters in every direction.

Someone—probably the commander of the third carrier—let out a muffled growl on the platoon net. The command carrier shifted again as Trask talked to the driver while she tried to realign her sights.

"Full salvo, gunner," Korolevski was saying with a kind of distracted urgency that a poor mother might have as she snatches up the last apple in a bucket for her starving child. "Hit it again..."

The *Griffin* stumbled forward and raised its right arm as it rotated its torso. Its pilot had to know they were doomed, caught 400 meters either way from significant cover and trapped by at least two LRM carriers.

Better punch out, boyo, the commander thought unbidden.

Off to Orlonzo's right, he could just make out Rollins' carrier try to shift as well, pivot steering to bring the *Griffin* into their line of sight. The left track twisted and snapped, binding in the remaining roadwheels as they tried to turn the vehicle. Immobilized, the carrier froze, and a second later the hatches popped open.

Orlonzo's mouth dried, and his eyes widened as he saw the platoon leader abandoning his damaged vehicle at precisely the wrong instant.

The Regular *Griffin* fired at the stricken missile carrier while the crew boiled out of the fighting compartment. The particle beam, nearly invisible in the harsh light of Abadan's sun, played over the hull even as missiles screamed in. The rubber rimming the remaining roadwheels on the left side sublimed as the beam's excited particles washed over them, and the crew member's bodies erupted at the hellish touch. The missiles swept in a second later to scour the area in fire. A stray finger of energy from the particle beam arced its way into the open fighting compartment, and something puffed into the air.

A hundred and twenty missiles from the remaining two carriers slammed into the tattered medium 'Mech, and it finally fell back to rest against a pile of boulders that shifted under the sudden weight.

"Target destroyed," Trask said, pulling her face away from her weapon sight for a moment before closing her eyes and leaning her head away from the sweat-slicked padding.

"All targets down," Sergeant Korolevski announced from behind his own independent sight.

Great rents in the *Griffin's* green armor glowed orange from the flames that had already begun to wrack the interior. It would only be a matter of time before the fire reached the 'Mech's ammunition magazines.

Orlonzo pounded the hatch release and swept up as the heavy cover bounded back on its spring mounts. He shoved it onto the locking-latch with more force than was required and turned around to face the *Griffin*.

The flames were beginning to lick from the rents in the thick hide of the machine, more clearly visible because it hadn't fallen onto its back when it shut down, but had remained partially upright, balanced on its shattered legs and a blasted left arm. The rounded cockpit had separated slightly from the torso, and Orlonzo thought he could see someone pounding on the polarized Perspex from the inside. Spider-webbed cracks around at least two holes in the tough material showed a couple missiles had found their mark. He supposed they must have damaged the ejection system, because he couldn't imagine any other reason the MechWarrior was still in their machine. If they were still alive.

Korolevski stood up beside his commander. "Mother of Christ, sir," the sergeant said in wonder as he stared at the burning 'Mech. "Should we try to help that poor bastard?" His voice caught, but it was likely just the fumes from the missile exhaust.

Orlonzo blinked; once, twice. "If you think you can get someone over there in time to help, Sergeant, go for it," he said in a low voice. His throat felt like someone had made him swallow steel wool. "They don't deserve to burn to death, after all."

Tomorrow's another day, he thought bleakly, and if the situation were reversed, he figured he'd want the pilot to give him a fair chance to see it...even if they had been trying to kill him a minute ago. And even if they had slaughtered half his troopers—

The *Griffin's* tortured frame shook as stored missile reloads burst open the chest, allowing yellow, orange, and red flames to burst forth momentarily. All movement, if there had indeed been any, in the cockpit stopped.

It'd probably been just smoke anyway, Orlonzo told himself.

After a frozen moment, he reached up and clicked the switch to Third Platoon's frequency and ordered the unit to withdraw to a holding point away from the firing lines. The lone carrier joined his, and they clanked back to another fold in the ground where they could still watch

over the engagement area. Hell, he'd have tried to save the 'Mech driver if he could've, but he still had a sector to watch over.

Orlonzo pursed his lips as he watched the surviving track pull into position beside him, and looked away. Korolevski carefully avoided his eyes while he spit over the side of the command track.

Third Platoon indeed, Orlonzo thought, but he let it go as quickly as it had come. There would be time for that later—in a few moments, maybe—but even that was good enough.

The clatter of tracks made them turn quickly.

Sergeant Kreuzz waved solemnly from the hatch of *Old Bessie* while it traveled with a tank-and-infantry company from one of the line units.

What he expected to do here was up for debate, but Orlonzo didn't figure he'd argue with the man right then.

The Bulldogs and Goblins of the armored company fanned out across the battlefield, and the two remaining missile carriers viewed them through the smoke caused by their dead fellows. Trask and Gorny dismounted to check out the damage to the left track, and Korolevski paused on the front slope to light a cigarette as the headquarters track clattered up.

"Lord, sir!" Kreuzz said, looking down from his hatch. "We thought you'd all bought it!"

Orlonzo looked up at his operations NCO. "Half of Third wasn't enough, Sergeant?"

Kreuzz jerked back as if slapped. "Sir! I, ah..."

Orlonzo's hands gripped the rim of his hatch coaming and squeezed for a moment before he made himself relax. Korolevski looked on in mild concern.

Orlonzo reached over and gripped one of the sergeant's hands in his. "Bloody hell, Kreuzz, I didn't mean that. Just...hell, just shook, is all."

The ops NCO nodded over pursed lips.

The surviving Third Platoon carrier—discounting the lame-duck Three-Three—sat a dozen meters away from the two command vehicles. Its commander, a young sergeant who'd been with the Raiders for three years, slammed an access cover closed on the side of the launching racks and dropped to the ground. He bent down and put his face in his hands while his two crew members sat on the front of the carrier in silence.

Orlonzo shook his head and grimaced as he gathered his legs beneath him and pulled himself out of the hatch. Kreuzz nodded silently behind him from atop the headquarters track as the commander headed over to the Third Platoon carrier.

The young carrier commander looked up suddenly as he heard boots approaching. He managed to wipe most of the tears from his face, but his deep red eyes were limned with newly repressed fear and

tension. His skin was gray underneath the sweat-streaked grime his dirty hands hadn't smeared already.

"How you doing, Sergeant Hollis?" Orlonzo asked, squatting down beside the man.

"Not so good, sir," he admitted. "Jus' gimme a minute."

Orlonzo patted him on the shoulder and then squeezed it in a fatherly fashion. "It's okay, Sergeant," he said. "Just look after your crew. We'll take care of the rest."

"R—Roger, sir," he snuffled, then shook his head angrily, clenching and unclenching a fist; his color was returning in stages. "I'll be fine, jus' kinda...*got* to me, you know?"

Orlonzo nodded. "S'okay, Sergeant," he repeated. "Any time you're ready."

Hollis stood up and shook himself. He smiled weakly, but the gesture became stronger and a sign of bravery every passing second he wore it.

"Better luck next time, huh, sir?" he said, wiping his left eye harshly as if it could erase the redness instead of redoubling it.

The commander swallowed the lump in his throat. "Roger that, Sergeant."

The young NCO took his leave and headed around to the front of his carrier. His crew.

Orlonzo returned to his command carrier, where his own crew and Kreuzs awaited him.

"How's Hollis doing, sir?" Korolevski asked as he approached. "Hanging in there?"

"Yeah."

"Can't be easy becoming the senior man in your platoon in eight seconds flat," Trask said from the side, but there was no bite in her tone this time around.

Orlonzo and the two NCOs looked at her speculatively, and then away again.

The ground at his feet was fresh and unstained from the brief firefight. Still, it was a more gray than ruddy tan, and it looked very odd for a moment until the commander realized the shadows the sun threw on the ground were muted as well. The smoke from all the nearby fires drifted across the sky in the still air, acting as clouds in an area that had seen none in decades.

The surviving carriers had pulled back several hundred meters from the initial and successive firing lines. Even at this distance there was some nominal danger from the burning vehicles, but nothing in comparison to what they'd survived already.

The commander looked up, more of a mental action than a physical one.

"It'll be better next time around, troopers..."

He let his voice trail off into the same infinity that encompassed the reddening horizon.

Behind him, ammo in one of his stricken carriers cooked off in a roar.





VOICES OF THE SPHERE: MIXED-TECH 'MECHS

JOEL STEVERSON

**Opinions and Commentary from around the Inner Sphere:
March 3152**

By the summer of 3050, the Inner Sphere had already lost dozens of worlds to the four invading Clans, who remained undefeated due to their state-of-the-art technology. Clan Jade Falcon's part in the invasion had been so successful that their warriors encountered difficulty garrisoning new holdings. They had plenty of salvaged Inner Sphere 'Mechs, but these were insultingly primitive by Clan standards.

To address this problem, Falcon warriors suggested refitting these salvaged 'Mechs with ClanTech weaponry. A *Shadow Hawk -2H* converted to a *Shadow Hawk C* by Falcon technicians was considered by many to be the first mixed-tech 'Mech of this batch. That fall, the Federated Commonwealth bested the Falcons on Twycross. The victorious force salvaged several front-line 'Mechs and a few of the Falcon's mixed-tech refits, including the *Shadow Hawk C*. These treasures were spirited off to the New Avalon Institute of Science, where the Federated Commonwealth's best engineers began trying to reverse-engineer ClanTech.

NAIS scientists described ClanTech as similar to Inner Sphere tech, but the two were not interchangeable. Tharkad University scientists built on this research in their analysis of the Battle of Twycross, and were the first to describe the Jade Falcon refits as "mixed-tech 'Mechs." Although such units had many advantages over pure Inner Sphere-tech units, mixed-tech 'Mechs relied on complex ClanTech weapons and components that, for Inner Sphere militaries, were rare and often difficult

to service. Conversely, Clan technicians had to deal with the difficulties of trying to incorporate advanced ClanTech components into what they considered “primitive” ‘Mechs. Even with these disadvantages, most expected the cutting edge would include mixed tech for decades.

At first, Inner Sphere techs were only able to copy refits the Jade Falcons had performed. Small numbers of old staples—such as *Archers*, *Warhammers*, *Marauders*, and *Atlases*—were upgraded with Clan weaponry on a case-by-case basis whenever salvaged Clan equipment was available. As the Clan invasion continued, both the Clans and Inner Sphere continued pairing ClanTech weaponry with Inner Sphere ‘Mechs. The Draconis Combine, with a significant amount of ClanTech salvage, led the effort to create new mixed-tech ‘Mechs and Inner Sphere-tech analogues of Clan ‘Mechs. By the late 3050s, the Combine had studied Clan OmniMechs long enough to introduce its own versions of these adaptable ‘Mechs. This breakthrough in ClanTech research allowed Combine techs to more easily integrate ClanTech weaponry by using OmniMech pod technology, which let units involved in Operation Bulldog in 3059 take advantage of salvage claimed while fighting the Smoke Jaguars.

Throughout the 3050s, the Clans continued refitting iconic Inner Sphere ‘Mechs with ClanTech components. In 3063 the Jade Falcons began experimenting in the opposite direction: adding Inner Sphere-tech components to Clan ‘Mechs. This resulted in the *Ostscout IIC*, which featured an Inner Sphere-tech gyro and a Bloodhound Active Probe. Clan Ghost Bear also dabbled in cross-pollinating the two technological approaches, notable examples being the incorporation of C3i systems on the *Ursus-PR* in 3074 and later the *Beowulf IIC-PR*.

During the rise of the Republic of the Sphere, both Clan and Inner Sphere manufacturers started to make less distinction between Clan and Inner Sphere tech, instead preferring to use the components and weapons that best fit their budget and design goals, regardless of technological origin. Because of this, from 3081 to Gray Monday in 3132, mixed-tech ‘Mech variants grew increasingly common. Despite the chaos since Gray Monday—or perhaps because of it—the last two decades have given us more reason to abandon the rapidly outdated concept of treating ClanTech and Inner Sphere tech as a rigid dichotomy.

Today there are a myriad of ‘Mech variants available to Clan and Inner Sphere forces, many of which feature mixed tech. Is the added complexity and expense of a mixed-tech ‘Mech worth it, or are these offerings nothing but a time sink for your support staff? Our panel of experts, quartermasters, technicians, and corporate leaders weigh in.

Colonel Addison Columbine (Retired), Eighth Avalon Hussars, Kathil (Federated Suns): As a quartermaster, keeping up with the needs of your force is always a challenge. Even the best-supplied units rarely have more than a few months of consumables on hand. You learn to get creative, or you wind up inventorying latrine goods on some backwater moon. Seventy years ago, the technology base might have made a difference, but there are so many pure-ClanTech 'Mechs in Inner Sphere forces that most technicians are familiar with them. Functionally, they're close enough to be considered the same at this point. Sure, techs will need to fabricate some adapters and other parts to successfully integrate components from a different tech base, but this skill set is nearly universal now. Give it another twenty years and we won't have separate tech categories: it will all be the same.

Kashira Billie Janson, Forty-Fifth New Samarkand Regulars, Bremond (Draconis Combine): My job is simple: take whatever limps back to base, patch it up, and get it combat ready. If it's an OmniMech, that'll include swapping out pods. If it's a standard 'Mech, then it's either repair or replace. Repair is pretty straightforward. Replace is actually where things get strange. Say I've got an old *Warhammer* -8K and I need to replace a heavy particle projector cannon. Some of the internal workings are going to be incompatible with every type of Clan PPC, and even after-market adapters aren't a guaranteed fix, so "standard" tech is my only option. Conversely, a -10K is already wired to accept any kind of PPC, regardless of where it comes from. If the ER PPC has to go, I'm in a much better position. I can swap in a number of Clan models or almost any standard PPC. It might take some extra time in the machine shop to fabricate all the brackets I'll need, but the flexibility is worth it.

Janson P. Wright, VP of Development, Arcturan Arms, Buena (Lyran Commonwealth): We've been investing in upgrades for our Buena facility for the last twenty years. I'm pleased to announce that we've ramped up our ClanTech refit lines over the past two years. It was an expensive upgrade, but we like to look at technology investments as preparing for the company's future. I do all our regional trade shows, and the number of people inquiring about ClanTech solutions for their standard hardware has more than tripled in the last two years.

Jenny Humphreys, Director of Training, Humphreys Training Academy, Andurien (Duchy of Andurien): What is all this undue fuss about mixed-tech 'Mechs? If you want something twice as complex and

three times more expensive than a reliable, standard BattleMech, then I have a planet in the Kerensky Cluster to sell you. I've not made it this far in life by overpaying for things, and I'm not about to start now. Since the collapse of the hyperpulse generator network, we've been in a bear economy, and you do not get ahead in these difficult times by making frivolous investments in experimental technology. Have you seen the operational readiness reports for mixed-tech 'Mechs? I've seen prison work details with better readiness numbers. The whole arms race with the Clans has been a waste of precious resources that would have been better spent elsewhere. Just how many different missile systems do you need? When you talk missiles nowadays, there are more than a dozen options, and the Clans are also adding to the list. It's overspending and grift, and I won't be a party to it.

Si-ben-bing Liang Zhang, Tau Ceti Lancers, Teng, (Capellan Confederation): In his estimable wisdom, the Chancellor has seen fit for some units in the Capellan Confederation Armed Forces to welcome mixed-tech 'Mechs into their ranks. While I wish we had more options, I am honored to be given the opportunity to learn about such complex systems and maintain them for the Lancers' use. I was first introduced to these 'Mechs when the Lancers captured New Syrtis. The mixed-tech 'Mechs the Chancellor bestowed on us were more than a match for the pitiful forces enslaving New Syrtis. Our honored MechWarriors chased the oppressive Federated Suns forces off-world, and the people of New Syrtis welcomed us as liberators and friends. I am certain if we were to obtain more mixed-tech units, it would only lead us to greater glory in the Chancellor's name.

ovKhan Fergus Sennet, Delta Aimag, Spina Khanate (Clan Sea Fox): Anyone familiar with our *ilClan Recognition Guide* series can see that BattleMechs with weapons and systems from various sources are rapidly becoming must-haves. Numerous manufacturers are churning out mixed-tech 'Mechs, refit kits, and other associated upgrades. It has long been the way of Delta Aimag to aggressively pursue the most lucrative deals, and the best way to position ourselves for success is to recognize that there is success in blending ClanTech and non-Clan technology. The sooner you recognize that, the sooner you will be in position to deliver what your customers need. The last fifty years have seen our engineers integrate many different non-Clan components into Clan BattleMechs and OmniMechs. By doing this, we are creating

'Mechs that will herald a new age where the best technology is always incorporated—regardless of who originally designed it.





HOLLOW GLORY

DOUGLAS CARRUTHERS

RAIDER'S ROOST
TORTUGA PRIME
TORTUGA DOMINIONS
15 APRIL 3042

Leftenant Ramon Brandenburg pulled back hard on both joysticks, stomping his feet down on the pedals inside the cockpit of his *Firestarter* BattleMech. His actions raised the 'Mech's arms and made the jump-jet exhaust ports flare and roar, pushing out superheated air to lift the 35-ton humanoid war machine off the ground.

His 'Mech arced up and back, and landed nearly 200 meters downhill. The touchdown was rough, shoving Ramon against the restraints holding him in his cockpit, clacking his teeth together sharply. The 'Mech's long legs flexed, and the torso-mounted gyro whirred and strained, working in concert with the bulky neurohelmet he wore to lend his own sense of balance to the walking war machine.

Ramon glanced across gauges and displays in his cockpit, registering a checklist drilled into him from a half-decade of academy training. Green armor—no breaches. Radar sweep was clear—no hard contacts, enemy tanks or other BattleMechs, for a kilometer. His lancemates were falling back on him—the other three BattleMechs under his command were adjusting formation without verbal prompting, their pilots recognizing his sudden action as a probable threat and moving to protect him.

The threat, now 300 meters uphill from him, was a cluster of people piling out of a rusted utility vehicle, lobbing grenades and carrying portable rocket launchers on their shoulders as they scurried for cover among flimsy buildings, junk cars, and garbage piles. People. Pirates, bloodthirsty criminals, bandits, murderous savages. But still people.

Ramon flipped a switch to key his 'Mech's exterior loudspeaker. "Citizens of Tortuga, we're here to liberate you from Paula Trevaline's oppression. Lay down your weapons and stay indoors. The Ninth Regimental Combat Team of the Armed Forces of the Federated Commonwealth is here to apprehend the leaders of her pirate organization. Do not fire on us, or we shall respond with deadly force."

Ramon stared intently, hoping to see a dropped rocket launcher or someone running from his lance of BattleMechs. He desperately hoped they could see the futility in firing on him. Nothing moved under the overcast, rust-red sky. He blew out the breath he'd been holding and started again. "Citizens—"

A pair of hand grenades popped impotently up the street from him, and four figures stood up from behind cover, launchers on their shoulders, and fired. Ten-kilogram short-range missiles left a trail of gray smoke as they streaked towards Ramon and his lancemates. Ramon registered that the one headed toward him would fall short. But it didn't. Sixty meters uphill, the missile popped once, arcing a spray of liquid around it.

Liquid which then ignited, erupting in a ball of flame that filled the street in front of Ramon's 'Mech.

"Infernos!" Ramon shouted, both too late and still on his loudspeaker—not the lance's comm channel.

A hundred meters ahead and to Ramon's left, First Sergeant Fife's *Jenner* took one of the hated missiles on its stubby winglike right arm. Another projectile whizzed impotently by Sergeant Brown's *Spider*, arcing away somewhere else in the toxic, shantytown trash heap which passed for Tortuga's capital.

Inferno missiles replaced the typical armor-penetrating warhead of a short-range missile with a dispersal unit for a gelatinous flammable concoction that would burn at high temperatures for an extended period. The effect was lethal against infantry and would roast a tank crew alive, but it was less dangerous for BattleMechs. 'Mechs were powered by a nuclear-fusion engine and environmentally sealed to be used in hard vacuum or underwater, so a MechWarrior had less to fear. But fear was rarely reasonable. Though intense heat often caused electronic systems to malfunction or occasionally triggered an overheat-shutdown of the fusion reactor, rendering the 'Mech combat-ineffective, or worse set off a chain-reaction ammunition explosion, the real danger was psychological. Strapped and sealed inside a box which already reached oven-like temperatures, a MechWarrior hearing and seeing flames roaring outside as the temperature continued to rise was extraordinarily unsettling and could induce a panic—a pilot usually survived such catastrophes in a properly maintained, sealed cockpit. Usually.

Sergeant Williams' 20-ton *Wasp* took one of the missiles directly in the chest, wreathing the 'Mech in curling tendrils of flame. The young pilot immediately triggered torso-mounted jump jets, rocketing his machine up and back toward Ramon. As the *Wasp's* spindly legs touched down, it crushed a junked utility vehicle underfoot. The vehicle exploded in a spray of white-hot sparks, severely damaging the *Wasp's* left foot and toppling the skinny 'Mech over on its right side—directly into the flaming street where the missile had ignited in front of Ramon.

"Oh God! I'm cooking! I'm gonna die!" Williams' panicked squeal came across the lance's radio channel. His 'Mech was facedown in the street, using its articulated hands to push up from the flaming ground to stand, but one foot kept sliding in the burning gel, while the mangled foot was still tangled in the sparking car wreckage. "I'm punching out!"

"Don't pani—"

"Do not—"

Ramon and Sergeant Fife talked over each other, trying to prevent the tragedy about to unfold.

The *Wasp* jerked, seizing as control lines were preemptively severed, and the wedge-shaped head housing the cockpit tore open along armored seams. Sergeant Williams, strapped and buckled to the ejection seat, was launched horizontally through the roaring blaze, and slammed headfirst into the sheet-metal wall of a flimsy lean-to just beyond the flames.

Without conscious thought, Ramon keyed his radio to a command channel "Ranger Four, inferno infantry, pilot down, going hot." He flipped the channel back to his lance without waiting for reply. "Weapons hot!"

Sergeant Fife's *Jenner* lined up a shot and stabbed twin laser beams into the utility vehicle the pirates had arrived in. The rusted exterior glowed yellow, then white hot before it exploded in a fountain of white sparks like the vehicle Williams' *Wasp* had stepped on a minute ago.

Sergeant Brown walked her *Spider* toward the infantry, firing a torso-mounted laser, and picked off a single pirate breaking from cover. The man was running at a sprint as the five-centimeter-wide laser beam caught him in the leg. The beam was only active for a split second, but long enough for him to pass his other leg through the intense light. Momentum carried him forward to cover, where he briefly writhed on the ground, clutching at smoking stumps before a compatriot dragged him away. His severed legs smoldered and burned in the street.

Ramon pushed his joysticks and stomped on his foot-pedals again, jumping his 35-ton 'Mech closer to the infantry while disengaging safety switches for his *Firestarter's* potent weaponry. Twin torso-mounted machine guns barked from below Ramon's cockpit, while a fusion-enhanced flamethrower poured crackling plasma out in a quasi-liquid stream. The arcing, superheated blue-white gas enveloped at least three

of the pirates, with more unseen casualties vaporized behind cover. As his anti-infantry 'Mech landed, he pushed out on the joysticks, spreading both arms wide to either side while flexing the knees, cushioning the impact and retaining balance.

As anticipated, the first group of infantry was provocateurs or fodder—likely both. The buildings around his *Firestarter* erupted with small-arms fire, rifles and light machine guns popping like fireworks as bullets ricocheted off his 'Mech's hardened armor. Again, Ramon registered briefly that these were *people* shooting at him from windows and doorways, but the vision of Sergeant Williams' lifeless corpse burning in his ejection seat pushed the thought to the back of his mind. Ramon slowly walked his 'Mech backward, his heads-up display giving some view of the open ground behind him. He held his paired machine gun's triggers down, sweeping hundreds of rounds side-to-side, from building to building.

To his left, he spotted a trio of infantry huddled behind a utility vehicle and working frantically to reload another portable rocket launcher. He swung the left-arm joystick, moving red crosshairs on his HUD to line up with the primitive ground vehicle. The crosshairs flashed from red to gold as his laser acquired a lock. He squeezed the trigger. An emerald beam lanced into the unarmored vehicle, triggering another cascading fountain of white sparks. Ramon triggered the arm-mounted flamer and washed the infantry away in a plume of hot plasma.

"Brown, don't get close to the utes," First Sergeant Fife warned. "Their fuel cells're booby-trapped with thermite."

Ramon noted the transmission was likely meant for him as well. Fresh from officer training and never seeing live combat before, he hadn't registered that the white-hot plumes weren't normal for an exploding civilian vehicle. But Fife was a professional, and wouldn't shake the confidence in his officers' ability to lead by exposing Ramon's ignorance to a subordinate.

A pair of grenades popped off outside Ramon's 'Mech. One detonated impotently against the *Firestarter's* foot. The other cooked off in the air just a meter from the cockpit, blackening the light-sensitive film for a moment, and leaving behind a star-shaped crack in the armored glass.

Ramon toggled back to the battalion command channel. "Civilian ground vees rigged with thermite IEDs," he cautioned, then flipped the channel back to his lance. "Fall back to Williams' *Wasp*. I don't want them trying to steal the body or the 'Mech for some sick publicity stunt."

Brown immediately triggered her jump jets, spinning her 30-ton *Spider* in the air to assess for threats before landing just uphill of the downed *Wasp*.

Fife strode his *Jenner* to stand abreast of Ramon's *Firestarter*. The *Jenner*'s shoulder was still burning, though the flames were a dull red-orange now. "After you, sir," Fife replied.

The two 35-ton 'Mechs walked backward, side-by-side down the hill. The gelatinous inferno-fuel cooking the *Jenner*'s outside badly taxed Fife's heat system, so he only fired his lasers sparingly. Ramon, on the other hand, had a good handle on his heat levels, and ran both machine guns constantly at anything that moved. Slow five-meter strides quickly brought them back to the scorched ground where the *Wasp* lay, though it seemed a long while in Ramon's adrenaline-rush excitement.

"Leutenant Brandenburg." The flat tone of Hauptmann Bush's nasal voice gave Ramon a shiver. "Your orders are to push forward until you encounter armored targets, then await heavier reinforcement. Paula Trevaline must not be allowed to escape the capital, or we'll have a hell of a time trying to hunt her down. Press on. She'll be where the 'Mechs and tanks are." The tone bordered on sarcastic, bringing crimson warmth to Ramon's cheeks for her countermanding the orders he'd just given his lance.

"Affirmative, Hauptmann. Ranger Four on the move."

Ramon pushed his *Firestarter* forward, finally letting off his machine guns. Swallowing down rising bile in the back of his throat, he glanced at Williams' downed *Wasp* in the rearview display, then prodded his 'Mech toward the objective uphill.

Another grenade popped in the street ahead. Without thought, Ramon swept machine guns and flamethrowers over every available piece of cover within thirty meters, shredding vehicles and sheet metal, scorching concrete, and setting wood and plastic on fire. Though the world was awash with sounds—the whoosh of missiles, exploding IEDs and grenades, buzzing machine guns, the hum of lasers, and the thudding footfalls of a hundred tons of BattleMechs walking through the slum of a city on a toxic-waste dump of a world—Ramon found an unnatural quiet as his body responded on autopilot to the deadly threats around him and colored flashes on his HUD.

He grinned as he heard Cadet Hruby-Steiner drunkenly slurring and butchering the song "O Tannenbaum" repeatedly, as they'd done a few months ago. There was a dissociative break in the flashing multicolored icons overlaying bloodied, dismembered bodies among the wreckage; people running with their clothes and hair on fire from buildings ablaze; a man standing in the street raising his fist at a 'Mech until it kicked him aside, leaving a crumpled body of unnaturally bent limbs against the wall of a building. Ramon couldn't hear even radio traffic in his helmet, just "*Oh-tan-end-bomb, go-down-and-bomb!*"

Ramon's unfeeling, ruthlessly efficient killing continued until Sergeant Fife's *Jenner* abruptly stepped in front of him and pulled to a dead stop. Ramon's first instinct was to pull the stick controlling his arm-mounted weaponry inward, targeting the obstructing BattleMech. He chided himself for getting lost in such a killer instinct that he might engage in friendly fire. Ramon stopped his *Firestarter* less than a meter from the *Jenner*, able to see First Sergeant Fife in his cockpit, gesturing wildly at the side of his neurohelmet.

Reengaging with the present, Ramon became painfully aware of sound again, hearing shouting in his neurohelmet's headset:

"—Leftenant Brandenburg! Answer! I think his comms went out. Ramon! Can you hear me? Respond! We've got a fix on her location! Turn around!"

Shocked to realize how far from reality he'd slipped, Ramon blinked his eyes repeatedly and twisted his 'Mech sideways at the waist, scanning his surroundings. He didn't recognize a single street. He was still facing north-northwest, but the shantytown now sprawled away from him, ahead and to the right, no longer uphill. He didn't see any friendlies on his radar except Sergeant Fife. How had he gone so far astray?

"Sorry, Sergeant," Ramon croaked into the lance channel. "I'm here, I hear you." He was surprised too at the rasp in his voice, the pain in his parched throat, and the sheets of sweat coating him, despite the coolant vest whirring to keep his core temperature in a healthy range.

"Saints be praised!" Sergeant Fife sounded both joyous and relieved. "We've gone two kilometers off course, overshot our objective by a half klick—"

Overshot. Realization and renewed confusion swept over Ramon. The city looked different because he'd wandered into a whole different sector. He was facing downhill because he'd passed the company's objective at the hilltop and had kept going. How'd he gone so far without knowing, or getting himself killed for that matter?

"Brown broke off with Hauptmann Bush at the new vector," Fife said. "It's just you and me, Leftenant. Are you able to proceed, or do we need to fall back to the depot for repairs?"

Ramon glanced over his status monitors in the cockpit. The function check was by rote, like in academy training. Both arm-mounted lasers? Check. All four flamers? Check. Machine guns down to less than a thousand rounds—almost empty, as machine guns go. One armor breach showed yellow damage indicators on the wire-frame display of the right leg. Coolant system badly overtaxed.

"I'm green, Sergeant," Ramon responded with a smirk. The phrase had been a joke in the academy, "green" meaning both good-to-go and inexperienced: all the cadets responded "I'm green" to their instructors.

Sergeant Fife blew out a breath slowly into the mic and muttered a barely audible, "You aren't kidding..." He seemed to realize the mic had caught what he'd said to himself. "Sorry, Lieutenant. Our new vector is west-northwest. Target was spotted making a break for the mountains. Our company is to pursue and see to it she doesn't double back. If you're done trying to win a medal for most enemy kills in this campaign, we can go due west on the double and rejoin the company's flank."

With deep appreciation, Ramon said, "Thank you, Sergeant," and turned his 'Mech to the heading Fife indicated.

The 'Mechs accelerated, running full speed, uphill once more, Ramon's cockpit temperature dropping back to manageable levels. He briefly twisted his *Firestarter's* torso to look down the path of wreckage he'd left behind on his detour. Dozens of buildings burned. Two military hovercraft were flipped on their sides. The legs of a *Locust* jutted up from a smoking crater. He didn't look long enough to see bodies, though he knew there must be many.

As he crested the hilltop, the pirate city of Raider's Roost sprawled before him. While the outskirts were a mix of slum and junkyard, the core of the city consisted of decommissioned DropShip hulls. Great metal structures which once belonged to spacecraft traveling between star systems, they now clustered like bizarre skyscrapers downhill to the northwest. The Caparazón de Tortuga mountain range curved to the west, with a muddy, toxic cesspit forming the northern boundary of the city.

Hauptmann Bush's company was on the outskirts of the space-junk city now, strung out in a line, with Sergeant Brown's *Spider* in the lead. The massive BattleMechs were dwarfed by the even larger wrecked hulls looming over them. Between six and twelve meters tall, BattleMechs were effectively walking tanks, styled more or less anthropomorphically. The massive DropShip hulls, on the other hand, resembled gargantuan eggs, some spherical, some ovoid, a few wing-shaped, but all capable of transporting multiple 'Mechs to JumpShips that could travel across the stars.

"And usually armed to the teeth," Ramon said under his breath. As cautious as Hauptmann Bush's company was being, they likely thought the same as they moved into the shadows of the massive spacecraft.

Back in line-of-sight range, Ramon heard the lance-level communications again, as the secure communications were relayed automatically.

"Ranger Two, watch those corners. You don't want to walk into a *Hunchback* at this range—"

"Copy. I've got zero active fusion engines or heat signatures."

"Won't stop you from walking into a *Hetzer* instead. Eyes sharp. Zoomies saw a company of 'Mechs moving north of the river."

An uneasy feeling gnawed at Ramon. Before the company could disappear completely from view, he felt obliged to offer a warning.

"Ranger One, Ranger Four, right flank rear," he said indicating his vantage point "Don't recommend pursuit. Likely to lose comms, better to go—"

"Leftenant Brandenburg," Hauptmann Bush's nasal voice interrupted, "when I need advice on how to go off-mission and get lost, I'll let you know. Right now I'd rather have fifteen 'Mechs than thirteen, so hustle over here and fall in."

Scolded publicly, Ramon felt his ears redden, though his cheeks couldn't get any more flushed than they already were due to the heat in the cockpit.

Still a kilometer behind the rest of the company, which was already increasing speed, Ramon and Sergeant Fife were slowly closing the distance when it happened. A ripple of flashes and a double shockwave from huge explosions. Two of the ruined DropShip hulls began leaning disastrously inward, toppling, colliding, and briefly forming a massive arch then sliding down one another to finally crash to the ground, sending out a billowing cloud of dust and another shockwave.

The lance channels all burst with static transmissions, due to the loss of line-of-sight communication but also from interference and the various MechWarriors transmitting over one another. Clearly there were survivors.

Switching to a command channel, Ramon caught the tail end of a transmission from Hauptmann Bush: "—intentional enemy structural collapse. None caught in the blast, but cut off from retreat." Her voice was several octaves higher than usual. "Vehicle contacts east and west, infantry dropping on us from above. Four 'Mechs powering up to the north!"

General Kimmel's voice cut in. "Copy, Ranger One. Sending immediate air support. Can you break out east or west?"

"Ranger Two, down two 'Mechs west," First Lieutenant Benedict, indicating half his lance was already gone. "Try east."

Ramon clicked over to the lance channel with Sergeant Fife, both already turning their 'Mechs northward. "You copy they're trying a breakout east?" Ramon asked.

"Affirmative," Fife replied with a grunt. He triggered his *Jenner's* jump jets to launch into the air, and landed atop the nearest large pieces of wreckage. The lance channel immediately burst back to life, as he'd established line of sight to at least one member of the company.

"Field guns under hard cover at ankle level!"

"Infantry rappelling! They're tossing grenades!"

"If they've hit you with infernos," Hauptmann Bush's shrill voice cut through, "hug close to the infantry, and take some of the bastards with you!"

After calculating the range, Ramon triggered his own jump jets to reach an elevated tangle of twisted pipes and massive girders. The heads-up display showed he was only 500 meters from the nearest friendlies now.

"Ranger Four, we're southeast of you," he announced, not wanting to be mistaken for a pirate and blasted.

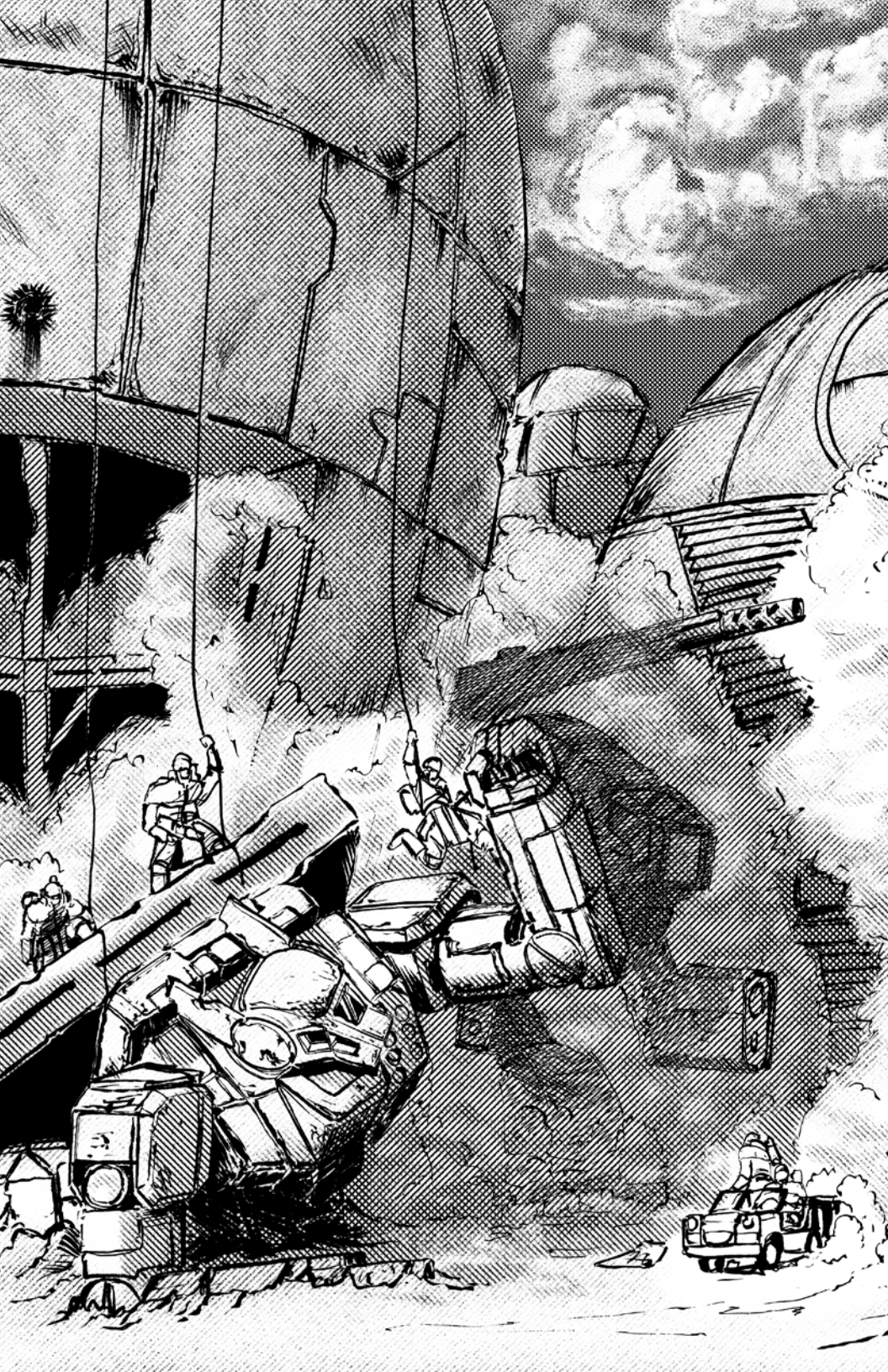
His heart skipped a beat as the targeting computer identified a Hetzer Wheeled Assault Gun between two warehouses 150 meters from him—ideal range if the 40-ton cannon-on-wheels wanted to put him down. But he recognized its fixed-position autocannon barrel was pointed away from him, to the northwest, making it a threat to any fleeing friendlies who would walk right into the 200-meter sweet spot of destruction.

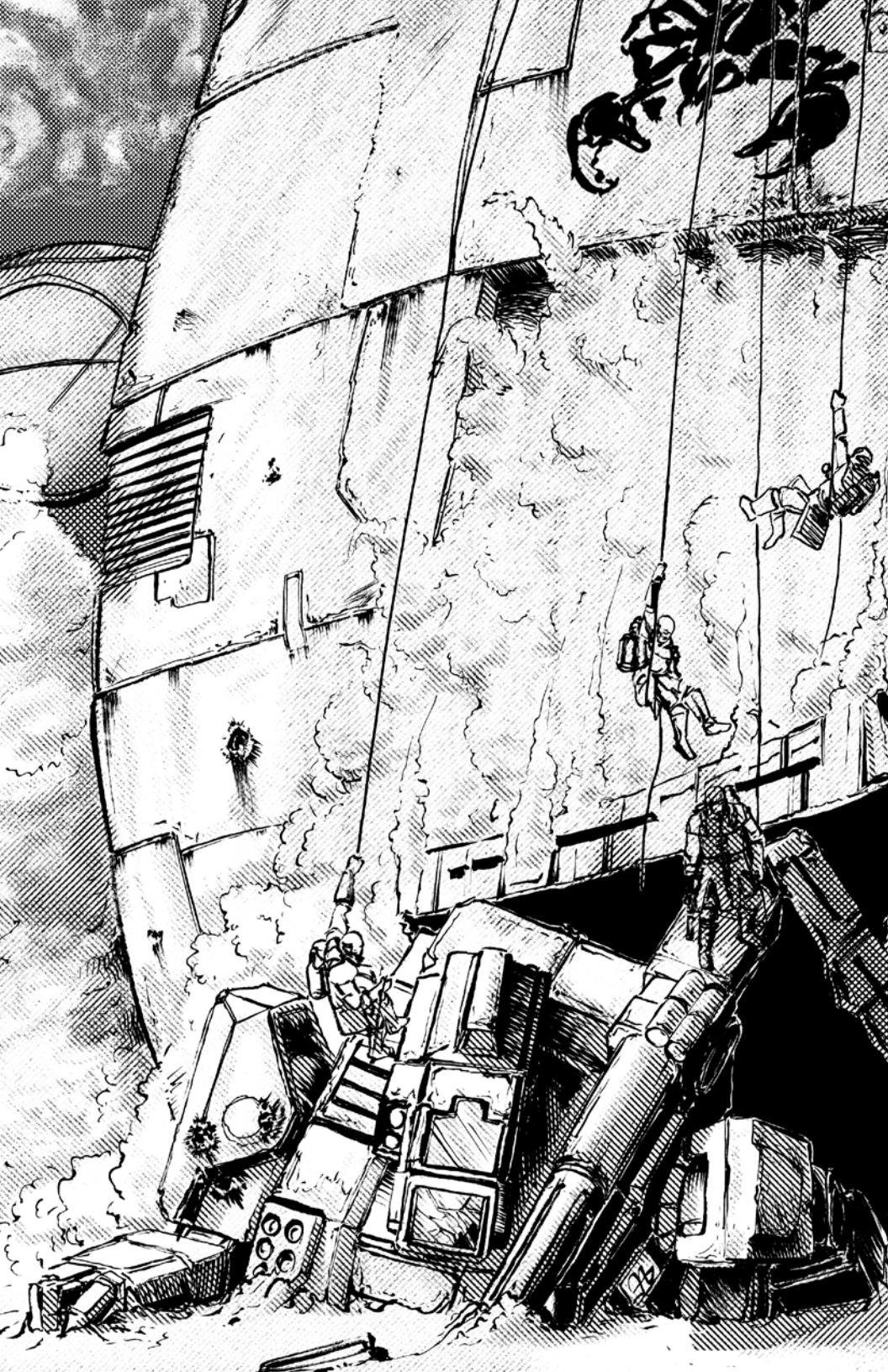
Immediately moving his crosshairs to target the enemy vehicle, Ramon didn't wait for a gold target lock before firing his laser, still moving the other arm into position to fire. The emerald beam scored a line across the Hetzer's back hatch. Had the hatch been open for ventilation, as they often were, the crew would have been seared, ending the fight for that vehicle immediately. Alas, the hatch was closed, though now likely laser-welded shut, the Hetzer crew alerted to his presence. The massive all-terrain tires began to turn and roll. It was going to come around on him.

Luckily, his second laser found its mark in one of those tires, melting rubber and steel until the tire blew out in a spray of rubber chunks and wire. The effort to turn the massive vehicle around was coming more slowly now. Jumping from his elevated vantage point, he'd be able to finish it off with plasma from his flamers in a few more seconds.

Instead, Hauptmann Bush's *Shadow Hawk* sprinted out of the dust cloud, closely followed by Lieutenant Benedict's flaming *Valkyrie*. The *Shadow Hawk* charged straight at the Hetzer, now turned halfway between ideal firing positions, and kicked it on the broad side. The 55-ton 'Mech was fast, and the synthetic myomers of its leg muscles were strong. The 40-ton vehicle, already listing in mid-turn from a blown-out tire, lifted halfway off the ground then slowly tipped over on its side, effectively out of the fight.

Leftenant Benedict was groaning on the channel, slowly building to a pained scream. Ramon saw cratering in the metal around the *Valkyrie*'s cockpit. Jagged pieces of armored glass and a dead infantryman wedged in the 'Mech's shoulder pauldron all indicated an attempt to breach the cockpit. If the pirates got inside, they could kill the pilot within and take the entire 'Mech—a gutsy move which rarely succeeded. Nevertheless,





flaming inferno gel from the opposite shoulder was spreading across the 'Mech's torso, the flames licking up at the exposed cockpit.

Sergeant Fife's voice broke in above the screaming: "Lean forward and eject! Land behind us for a medevac!" His *Jenner* planted its feet 100 meters from the *Valkyrie*, firing past it with lasers and short-range missiles.

The 30-ton *Valkyrie* pitched forward at the hips and seized, going rigid as the ejection process initiated. The cockpit hatch blew open, and the ejection seat rocketed the lieutenant upward. Horrifyingly—the process was incomplete. Whether the malfunction was caused by the pirates' breaching attempt or was a heat-related failure from the infernos, the top portion of the hatch didn't break away. The ejection seat launched up into shards of jagged, armored metal, impaled itself on a spiky remnant that shouldn't have been there, and then pinwheeled around as the rockets continued to fire. The sickening sight ended a moment later as momentum and imbalance toppled the *Valkyrie* forward to land head-down and face-first.

The *Shadow Hawk* turned to reveal a number of hitchhikers riding on the back of its torso. Long ropes dangled and twirled like a macabre cape as nearly a dozen men were near their summit—the 'Mech's cowl-covered cockpit.

"Hauptmann! Infantry swarm!" Ramon called, immediately opening up with his machine guns.

A half-dozen bodies, dead or wounded, dropped nearly ten meters to the ground. The *Shadow Hawk* had sufficient armor that Ramon's anti-personnel machine guns would pose little threat to his commander.

Before Ramon could finish off the infantry, Hauptmann Bush turned her 'Mech back around, flailing the arms and impotently swatting at enemies she couldn't possibly reach. Ramon shifted his aim higher, trying to catch the infantry as they crested the top to reach either the access hatch, or the front-facing armored glass. He buzzed another and two more. But two popped over the right shoulder, and swung across the *Shadow Hawk's* torso to throw satchel bombs toward the cockpit. Ramon buzzed one, severed the rope of the other, who tumbled to the ground. Though he still mashed the firing studs for the machine guns, they no longer fired. A flashing warning on his HUD ammunition counter indicated the problem succinctly. Empty.

The two bombs found their mark, one exploding to scorch and crack the armored glass, the second blasting it inward. Hauptmann Bush grunted loudly, then wheezed and gasped. Another pirate clambered over the *Shadow Hawk's* shoulder, grasped the armored cowl, and swung feet-first through the cockpit opening.

The 'Mech lurched to one side, staggered and swayed, and landed flat on its back. Hauptmann Bush grunted again, then gasped, a wet, choking sound.

Ramon was frozen. His commander was dying, and he was powerless to stop it. Worse, the pirate inside her cockpit would likely try to use the 55-ton *Shadow Hawk* against him and the remnants of her company.

Far slower than he should, but faster than he ever wanted to, he moved the crosshairs of his arm lasers over the opening in the BattleMechs' cockpit.

Once again, Sergeant Fife was faster. His *Jenner* sprinted to the downed *Shadow Hawk* and fired a spread of short-range missiles and two lasers into the darkened cockpit. The entire upper torso of the crippled 'Mech blew outward, leaving a crater of molten metal behind.

"Rangers, Eagles incoming—take cover." The transmission over the command channel alerted to incoming air-support.

Flashing by at over 1,000 kilometers per hour, just below the darkening cloud cover, a half-dozen supersonic aerospace fighters cracked by, dropping payloads of explosives and firing lasers and cannons comparable to what 'Mechs mounted. More of the ruined-DropShip skyscrapers toppled and crashed into one another, releasing a billowing storm of smoke, fine red dust, and debris. Fat droplets of rain began to fall, pelting the 'Mechs with ash and water, which ran in red-brown rivulets down the cockpit viewscreen.

"Good God..." Fife breathed into his mic, walking his 'Mech backward from the crashing, tumbling wreckage.

Ramon spotted a red blip on his HUD, which Sergeant Fife had likely seen a moment earlier. Something big was lumbering toward them from the smoke.

"Do we bug out, Lieutenant?" Fife squeaked over the lance channel.

Ramon had wholly forgotten he was now technically in command of the veteran warrior at his side, maybe the whole company, whatever was left of it. Swallowing hard, he steeled himself for an answer he dreaded to give. "Their sacrifices won't be in vain. If this is Trevaline herself, let's drag the bitch to hell if she won't surrender."

Fear made Ramon immediately regret his resolve. The targeting computer indicated the 'Mech lumbering toward them was a 75-ton *Marauder*—not Trevaline's *Banshee*, but still heavier and with more weaponry than the *Firestarter* and *Jenner* combined.

"Let's shoot, move, and keep it busy until support arrives then," Fife responded glumly.

The *Jenner* darted right, so Ramon pushed his *Firestarter* left. The *Marauder* tracked them both, splaying arms akimbo to fire lasers and particle projection cannons at each of them. Emerald light and azure

man-made lightning lashed out, catching Ramon's 'Mech on the right leg and arm. The impact and residual static of the PPC put a stutter in the *Firestarter's* step as the gyro compensated for the instant destruction of a ton of armor. Ramon glanced at the wire-frame damage indicator to see the leg was red, stripped of armor and with structural damage to the leg itself.

Ramon and Fife answered with a pair of lasers each, bathing the massive 'Mech in green light. Ramon saw that the huge cannon over the *Marauder's* right shoulder was badly bent, and pieces of DropShip and shrapnel were embedded in the upper surfaces of its armor. From one particular rent, a plume of steam rose as raindrops came in contact with the engine shielding.

Steam. Heat. *Marauders* ran notoriously hot to power all those weapons, and this one was bleeding heat from its fusion engine due to damage.

"Fife," Ramon said, "try to get their attention and keep it on you. I've got to get closer to turn that cockpit into hell."

"Roger." Fife grunted the reply through gritted teeth as the *Jenner* avoided a PPC target lock by firing jump jets to reverse course from the direction it had been running.

Ramon fired his own jump jets, bringing his 'Mech down outside the *Marauder's* forward firing arc, closing to a mere ten meters before triggering all three flamers. Hot plasma washed over the cooling vanes on the 'Mechs upper torso. The *Marauder* jerked and dipped into a turn faster than Ramon thought possible for such a big 'Mech. It swung one of its massive arms and clobbered his *Firestarter* before he could jump away. His cockpit rang like a gong as the club-like arm connected with his 'Mech's head.

The star-shaped crack in the *Firestarter's* cockpit glass spider-webbed, filing the entire width of the canopy, knocking out his HUD. A sudden rush of foul-smelling air told Ramon the cockpit's atmospheric integrity had been breached. Piloting by visuals only, Ramon held the triggers on the flamers, hoping he was still affecting the *Marauder*. He stumbled and tried to regain the *Firestarter's* balance, but the severely damaged right leg gave way under fire from the bigger 'Mech. Ramon felt a simultaneous sensation of swinging, swaying, and spinning, but never felt the jarring stop at the end. Everything just went black.



Ramon awoke, looking up at an elaborate spiderweb strung across a dirty brown ceiling, hearing the sound of raindrops on the metal roof.

A sizzling crackle of lightning flashed so close he could smell ozone as thunder rumbled on and on outside.

With a groan, he struggled to rise, but restraining straps held him tight to a chair tipped onto its back. A bucket-like metal helmet covered his head and immobilized his neck. A neurohelmet. And he was strapped to an ejection seat in the cockpit of a BattleMech. That was no spiderweb on the ceiling: it was a cracked cockpit canopy, and his 'Mech was flat on its back, faceup to the alien sky. The rumble was the footsteps of a pair of 'Mechs, and the crackling was from massive particle projector cannons creating man-made lightning bolts of terrible lethality and destruction.

Recalling the moments before he blacked out, Ramon ran a function check on his 'Mech. Both arms and their weaponry were operational. The leg which had showed red on the wire-frame damage indicator was now black from the knee down, while the cockpit and torso indicated red. His machine-gun ammunition bins were empty. The canopy and HUD were ruined; weapons targeting was impossible.

On secondary screens, Ramon was able to activate the arm-mounted gun cameras, giving him a clear view of what his weapons were aiming at, as well as the rear-view camera, which presently showed darkened mud and twisted metal.

Working the arms by feel and camera, Ramon pushed the *Firestarter* up to a sitting position, panning one arm around to survey the state of the battlefield. Sergeant Fife was in trouble. The *Jenner's* armor looked to have a tiger-stripe pattern, scarred and scorched by crisscrossed laser and PPC fire. One of the paddle-shaped arms was missing, and the way missiles kept dropping, rolling, and falling from the launcher in the torso, it was safe to say there was a critical malfunction. Against a *Marauder*, a *Jenner* with only one working laser stood no chance. Even punching, kicking, or ramming would be like a toddler attacking a teenager—brutally ineffective and totally outclassed if the enemy responded in kind.

But the *Marauder* was not in great shape either. The autocannon was already out of action, and the engine shielding was breached and bleeding heat. Where the armor was intact, it still glowed red from Ramon's flamethrower attacks, and a perpetual cloud of foggy steam shrouded the hot-running 'Mech as every drop of rain sizzled and evaporated upon contact.

Ramon rolled the *Firestarter* onto its belly, pushed up with the arms, and pulled the one remaining leg under it to stand. The stubby stump and metal foot slipped in the slick mud on the first try but found purchase in a tangle of steel cabling on the second. Ramon stood the 'Mech upright. "Hang on, Sarge," he announced on the lance channel. "I'm back in the fight!"

Fife's response of "No!" surprised him, but a ringing collision immediately followed, and the *Firestarter* tumbled back down onto its belly. While standing, Ramon had lost sight of the *Marauder* on camera, but saw it now straddling over him in the rear-view monitor. It must have approached from the side and kicked his leg out from under him. The wireframe display now showed both legs black.

Though the perspective of the camera was odd, Ramon watched Fife's *Jenner* leap to the sky and soar high on superheated jets, higher than safety tolerances allowed for. If he wasn't careful, he'd come down too hard, snapping the legs off his 'Mech. Ramon realized Fife wasn't thinking about landing—he was executing the infamous death from above attack, relying on mass, velocity, and gravity to inflict massive damage at the cost of the 'Mech's legs, and possibly the warrior's health while rattling around in the cockpit under forces the 'Mech wasn't designed for. It was a desperate maneuver, but probably the right call—the only call—for a badly damaged *Jenner* to bring down the *Marauder*.

The 35-ton 'Mech peaked nearly forty meters in the air when the jets cut out. It seemed to hang for just a moment before falling, plummeting fast toward the *Marauder* below. The fall took more than two seconds, time the *Marauder* used to take three steps backward. Sergeant Fife fired the *Jenner's* jump jets, trying to adjust his vector and compensate, but got only a brief puff of flame as the jets had not recycled yet.

The ground shook from the impact. The feet drove deep into the muddy earth, and the legs buckled and snapped at the knees and hips. The *Jenner's* shinbone impaled the right side of its torso, detonating the last remaining missiles stored there and catastrophically blasting the 'Mech to pieces. Glowing-hot armor plates rained down on the crippled *Firestarter* and victorious *Marauder* as residual heat from the exploding ammunition rippled out in waves.

Twisting at the waist, the *Marauder* swung its weapons to bear at Ramon's *Firestarter*. In his breached cockpit he could hear the capacitors of the enemy 'Mech's PPCs whining as they charged for the next shot. An amber light on the targeting console blinked, indicating a lock from one of his weapons. Panicked and half-blind, Ramon fired everything he had.

The *Firestarter* had an odd vestige of a weapon system—a rear-mounted flamer that was rarely used. Blue-white plasma washed over the *Marauder*, licking already hot armor with no apparent effect. The 'Mech loomed large and black in the monitor as Ramon accepted he was going to die with the rest of his company on this forsaken planet.

A sound like a rumbling chuckle echoed in the massive 'Mech, and the *Marauder* began to quake and shake. Then, like a bark of laughter,

an eruption inside the left-side torso burst through, scattering armor, launching the bent autocannon skyward, and sending the left arm spinning away out of view. High-explosive armor-piercing shells stored in the opposite shoulder cooked off in a building crescendo which climaxed with the left side of the damaged fusion reactor blowing outward, toppling the 'Mech onto its right side like cutting the strings of a marionette.

The last thing Ramon saw was the ruined *Marauder* falling in a lifeless heap atop him in his crippled 'Mech.

**SEEKER-CLASS DROPSHIP FCS VOLEUR
IN ORBIT, TORTUGA PRIME
TORTUGA DOMINIONS
18 APRIL 3042**

Ramon stirred in a hospital bed—bright white, sterile, and antiseptic in every describable way. His head hurt like an industrial vacuum was trying to suck out his brain through his forehead. The light felt like needles stabbing through his eyeballs.

A nurse, nondescript in an androgynous uniform, adjusted a machine hooked to an IV in his arm. "He should wake any moment, General."

"Can you hear me, son?"

Hauptmann General Kimmel.

"It's General Kimmel!"

I know.

"You've been under a few days, son. it's better that way to watch the head injury."

A pained pitiful moan escaped Ramon's throat. *Why can't I speak?* His eyes darted to the nurse, tears welling at the thought of being paralyzed.

"You've been intubated and restrained, Lieutenant," the nurse intoned calmly, correctly reading his panic. "Don't fight it."

"Yes, we always think of ourselves first when we wake up in the hospital after a battle. Been there, son. Seen a lot of other boys and girls there, too."

What about—

"Next is wondering about the other members of the unit. Lancemates, company, battalion—was the mission a success? It's all normal, son. But I've got bad news." The general paused, swallowed hard. "You're the only survivor from your company."

All of them? Gone. I saw Williams, Benedict, and Bush, probably Fife too, but no one else got out? A pained whimper escaped from within, and the tears flowed freely down Ramon's cheeks.

"It hurts, son, I know it does. But they died for their nation, for you, and your family and their families, so that we'll live free and safe from a psychopathic pirate bitch. I know it doesn't feel worth it, but that's the only way it's ever going to make sense. Your company did a bang-up job pinning down her most fanatical supporters long enough for arty and air support to smash them into scrap. Trevaline surrendered, of course. No remorse for the tens of thousands it took to bring her into custody. The RCT lost eleven hundred men. Eleven hundred letters home for me to write." The general's voice had taken on a distant, remorseful tone.

What do I do now?

"We watched the gun-camera footage from your 'Mech, son, some of the others from your company too. You put down two 'Mechs, a lance of combat vehicles, and more than a battalion's worth of infantry. Put up a hell of a fight. Real Gunslinger-level stuff. Hampered by a comms malfunction, you even saw the trap for what it was, tried to warn Hauptmann Bush, but she just wouldn't listen. Shame she died, or we'd have court-martialed her, too. Listen, son, they're shipping you back to New Avalon—best medical facilities in the galaxy and all that—and the Prince is going to pin a ton of medals on your chest. A damn metric ton."

Medals? Trial? For what? What was it all for? I slaughtered infantry and froze while my lance, my whole company got wiped out. So we caught a pirate? So what? There are always more. Some better, some worse, but always more...

"Sleep now, Lieutenant Brandenburg. One day—years from now, God willing—you can look me up, and we'll share a drink or two and talk about Tortuga Prime. Good job, son."

Though the words were meant to bring him some peace, the feeling behind them felt hollow and empty—said by rote and without meaning a hundred times over.

Ramon watched the general turn with stereotypical military precision and walk away without a glance back, the sharp cut of the uniform disappearing beyond Ramon's limited scope, the sight replaced by the nurse adjusting something on his IV drip. Inky darkness swam at the edges of his vision, growing until it seemed like he was looking at the world through a telescope. And then he closed his eyes.



EXECUTIONER-B (GLADIATOR-B)

Mass: 95 tons

Chassis: Clan Series Assault SXE

Power Plant: MechFusion 285 XL

Cruising Speed: 32 kph

Maximum Speed: 54 kph

Jump Jets: Pryzhok WM 10

Jump Capacity: 60 meters

Armor: Compound Alpha Ferro-Fibrous

Armament:

47 tons of pod space available

Manufacturer: Albion Armor Works Alpha

Primary Factory: Albion

Communications System: Consolidated BM3-CC

Targeting and Tracking System: Series III GB

The fearsome visage of the *Executioner*, the fastest of the assault 'Mechs, caused shock and awe on the Rasalhague front during Operation Revival. It had the same effect on rival Clans when the Ghost Bears first fielded it at the start of the 31st century, for they had added speed to a much older and more conventional OmniMech.

IIKhan Zenos Danforth presided over the OmniMech trials in the mid-29th century, and he made sure Clan Burrock, his Clan of origin, was among the first to acquire the technology. The Burrocks wanted to regain a strong presence of assault 'Mechs and went big, resulting in an OmniMech that eclipsed even Clan Coyote's *Warlock*. The first-generation *Executioner*—retroactively labeled with the suffix *-B*—had many flaws, but it yielded a payload unsurpassed at the time, and was generally eclipsed by the Ghost Bear's revised *Executioner*. Phelan Kell's description of his Trial of Position relayed information on the *Executioner-B* to the Inner Sphere.

Capabilities

Upon its introduction, the *Executioner-B* boasted a payload that looked wonderful on paper. Once in service, its overladen physical construction and fixed jump jets limited the versatility of the chassis. Few standard configurations exist, and most tend to overheat heavily.

Furthermore, the massive payloads had a huge energy consumption, and pushed the circuitry in this early OmniMech's fusion engine to its limits. For example, Phelan Kell related how his *Dire Wolf* was much more nimble than Vlad Ward's machine in their face-off during his Trial of Position. Between this lack of reliable power distribution and

its constant heat problems, the *Executioner-B* is an exceptionally sluggish OmniMech.

When the Ghost Bears reworked the chassis, they added a much larger, more reliable engine system, which solved both problems at the same time.

Battle History

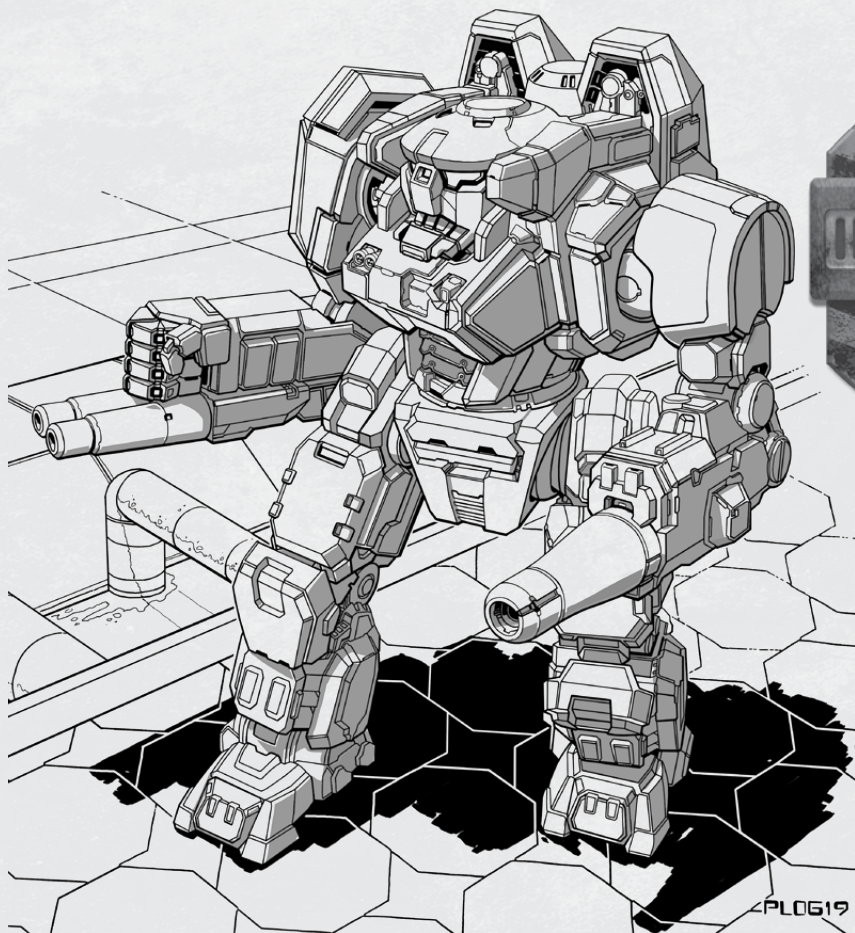
The Burrocks and Ghost Bears fielded the greatest concentration of *Executioner-Bs*, but its long service life meant most Clans possessed at least a few of them. After the absorption of the Burrocks, Clan Star Adder enthusiastically incorporated the older *Executioner-B* into its *touman*, as the Adders' own *Blood Asp* program was nearing completion, removing the need for the speedy, upgraded version.

When Phelan Kell entered his Trial of Position on Strana Mechty in 3051 to join Clan Wolf, the last opponent he faced was Vlad of the Wards in an *Executioner-B*. Phelan had limited experience with Clan equipment at the time, so he braced for the worst, which is exactly what he got. His rival—and later Crusader Khan—Vlad used the *Executioner-B* to catch Phelan's *Dire Wolf* off guard. The two assault 'Mechs ground each other into the dirt as Phelan tried to outmaneuver Vlad. Despite struggling against the poor power supply of his weapons, Vlad gained the upper hand against Phelan's damaged *Dire Wolf*, but just as he was about to finish Phelan off, Natasha Kerensky interfered and downed his *Executioner-B* with a barrage from the rear.

In 3058, during one of the rare documented Inner Sphere deployments of the *Executioner-B*, the Crusader Wolves of then-Khan Vlad Ward were on the receiving end of its ire. Elements of Clan Ghost Bear's 304th Assault Cluster struck the planet Thun while looking for raiders who had captured the genetic legacies of the Bears' founders. Their target was a system of underwater caves in Jagger Bay. To reach it, Star Commander Erick entered the waters in a modified *Executioner-B*. Advancing slowly and steadily, he employed the immense firepower of his PPCs and short-range torpedoes to brush aside a few lesser Wolf 'Mechs and submarines that had been hastily deployed in defense. Though the water's mass made the *Executioner-B* even more sluggish, Erick piloted it skillfully. He was able to sidestep incoming fire, and the 'Mech's heat sinks performed better in the cool surroundings, allowing for faster PPC firing cycles than usual. Once in the caves, Erick found additional 'Mechs frantically powering up in a futile attempt at resistance. After identifying them as the wanted raider machines, he destroyed them all with prejudice. The Ghost Bears had confirmation of the culprits, but no Wolf survivors reported back to Khan Ward that day.

Notable 'Mechs and MechWarriors

“Dog of War” Rusinov: Rusinov was a freeborn Star Captain in the Ninth Scale Cluster of Clan Burrock’s Omicron Galaxy, defending Albion during the Trial of Absorption in 3059. His *Executioner-B* staunchly anchored his Trinary against the assault of Clan Star Adder’s Eleventh Armored Cavalry Squadron. In the confusion of Clan Blood Spirit’s interference, he seemed to simply vanish. In 3073, Rusinov was suddenly reported on Santander V, disembarking a merchant DropShip from Thule. He left just as quickly, and in the following decade, his impressive OmniMech turned up in various hot zones of what became the Barrens. He offered his services as a one-man army for single-day contracts, never getting attached to any employer before vanishing back to the Havens in the early 3090s.



Type: **Executioner-B**

Inner Sphere Designation: **Gladiator-B**

Technology Base: Clan

Tonnage: 95

Role: Juggernaut

Battle Value: 2,721

Equipment

		Mass
Internal Structure:		9.5
Engine:	285 XL	8.5
Walking MP:	3	
Running MP:	5	
Jumping MP:	2	
Heat Sinks:	16 [32]	6
Gyro:		3
Cockpit:		3
Armor Factor (Ferro):	268	14

	<i>Internal Structure</i>	<i>Armor Value</i>
Head	3	9
Center Torso	30	38
Center Torso (rear)		9
R/L Torso	20	24
R/L Torso (rear)		10
R/L Arm	16	32
R/L Leg	20	40

Space Allocation

<i>Location</i>	<i>Fixed</i>	<i>Spaces Remaining</i>
Head	1 Ferro-Fibrous	0
Center Torso	1 Double Heat Sink	0
Right Torso	2 XL Engine	5
	2 Double Heat Sinks	
	1 Ferro-Fibrous	
Left Torso	2 XL Engine	5
	2 Double Heat Sinks	
	1 Ferro-Fibrous	
Right Arm	1 Ferro-Fibrous	7
Left Arm	1 Ferro-Fibrous	7
Right Leg	1 Jump Jet	0
	1 Ferro-Fibrous	
Left Leg	1 Jump Jet	0
	1 Ferro-Fibrous	

Notes: Features the following Design Quirks: Distracting, Poor Performance.

Fixed Equipment	Location	Critical	Tonnage
Jump Jet	RL	1	2
Jump Jet	LL	1	2

Weapons and Ammo

	Location	Critical	Tonnage
<i>Primary Weapons Configuration</i>			
2 Large Pulse Lasers	RA	4	12
Ammo (Ultra AC/2) 45	RA	1	1
Double Heat Sink	RA	2	1
2 Ultra AC/2	RT	4	10
Ammo (Ultra AC/2) 45	RT	1	1
ER PPC	LT	2	6
Ammo (Ultra AC/20) 15	LT	3	3
Ultra AC/20	LA	8	12
Ammo (Ultra AC/20) 5	LA	1	1

Alternate Configuration A

LB 10-X AC	RA	5	10
Ultra AC/10	RA	4	10
Ammo (Ultra) 20	RT	2	2
2 ER Small Lasers	RT	2	1
Ammo (Ultra) 20	LT	2	2
Ammo (LB-X) 20	LT	2	2
LB 10-X AC	LA	5	10
Ultra AC/10	LA	4	10

Battle Value: 2,194 Role: Juggernaut

Alternate Configuration B

Gauss Rifle	RA	6	12
Ammo (Gauss) 8	RA	1	1
Double Heat Sink	RA	2	1
ER Large Laser	RT	1	4
2 Medium Pulse Lasers	RT	2	4
Ammo (Gauss) 16	RT	2	2
ER Large Laser	LT	1	4
2 Medium Pulse Lasers	LT	2	4
Ammo (Gauss) 16	LT	2	2
Gauss Rifle	LA	6	12
Double Heat Sink	LA	2	1

Battle Value: 3,157 Role: Sniper

Weapons and Ammo

	Location	Critical	Tonnage
<i>Alternate Configuration C</i>			
2 ER PPC	RA	4	12
Ultra AC/5	RA	3	7
Double Heat Sink	RA	2	1
Ammo (Ultra) 20	RT	1	1
2 SRM 2	RT	2	1
Ammo (SRM) 100	RT	2	2
Ammo (Ultra) 20	LT	1	1
2 Double Heat Sinks	LT	4	2
2 ER PPC	LA	4	12
Ultra AC/5	LA	3	7
Double Heat Sink	LA	2	1

Battle Value: 2,979 Role: Sniper

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bg.battletech.com/shrapnel/





THE OLD RULES OF HIRE

JASON HANSA

**LAKE PEND
SENDALOR
SIAN COMMONALITY
CAPELLAN CONFEDERATION
27 NOVEMBER 3068**

Sang-shao Ariana “Rhi” Song pulled back her *Cataphract’s* throttle, slowing her approach toward the frozen lake. Her command lance slowed around her, and she took a moment to study her monitors.

Where are they? she thought. The three short battalions that remained of her regiment, the Fifth Confederation Reserve Cavalry, were spread out in company-sized elements, trying to flush out two Armed Forces of the Federated Suns regiments. Once she found them, her unit would consolidate and drive the enemy into the teeth of another Capellan Confederation regiment, the heavy Fifth regiment of McCarron’s Armored Cavalry.

As the expression went, “no plan survives contact,” and true to form, the AFFS wasn’t cooperating. She’d fought one of the House Davion regiments previously, on Imalda. Working alongside two companies of Death Commandos, they’d managed to break the Twenty-First Illician Lancers down to half-strength before they evacuated. Following them as they retreated to Sendalor, she’d expected they would shatter under a strong attack, leaving her and the Fifth MAC only one opponent. Upon arriving, though, the Twenty-First rallied alongside their AFFS ally and refused to yield.

“Battalion commanders, check in,” she ordered, then reached into a pocket alongside her command chair for a high-energy bar. Crunching into the pressed granola, she waited for their responses. “Thoughts, XO?”

There was a pause, and then he responded on their private lance channel. "Ma'am, we're not going to find them unless they want to be found." Another pause. "I am really, *really* beginning to hate these guys."

She couldn't help chuckling, mirroring his frustration. When the two Capellan regiments grounded the week prior, they'd expected a brawl from the get-go. Instead, they arrived to find the mayor of Moscow, the planetary capital, waiting for them, and nothing of the enemy except for sensor ghosts that would disappear when approached.

"No contacts, as expected, ma'am," her XO reported.

She paused to take in the surrounding territory before responding. Sendalor was dominated by two large continents, both of which were approximately bisected by the planetary equator. From the equator north were rugged mountain ranges, while from the equator south was mostly open farmland. The Succession Wars had mostly ignored the world, despite its proximity to important systems in both the Federated Suns and the Capellan Confederation, because there was simply nothing of value here.

On the other hand, a barely self-sustaining planet with a minimal population was an *ideal* location for two enemy regiments to go to ground almost indefinitely.

She narrowed her eyes, trying to gauge the thickness of the lake's ice and whether 'Mechs could cross it. From the tracks on the ice and the detritus near some half-meter holes, she could tell it was thick enough for ice fishing, but not for supporting 'Mechs of any size. As she focused in on a hole, trying to determine how deep the cut was, a pair of flashes flared near the upper edge of the tree line on a mountain across the lake.

"Incoming!" she shouted, pushing her 'Mech into motion.

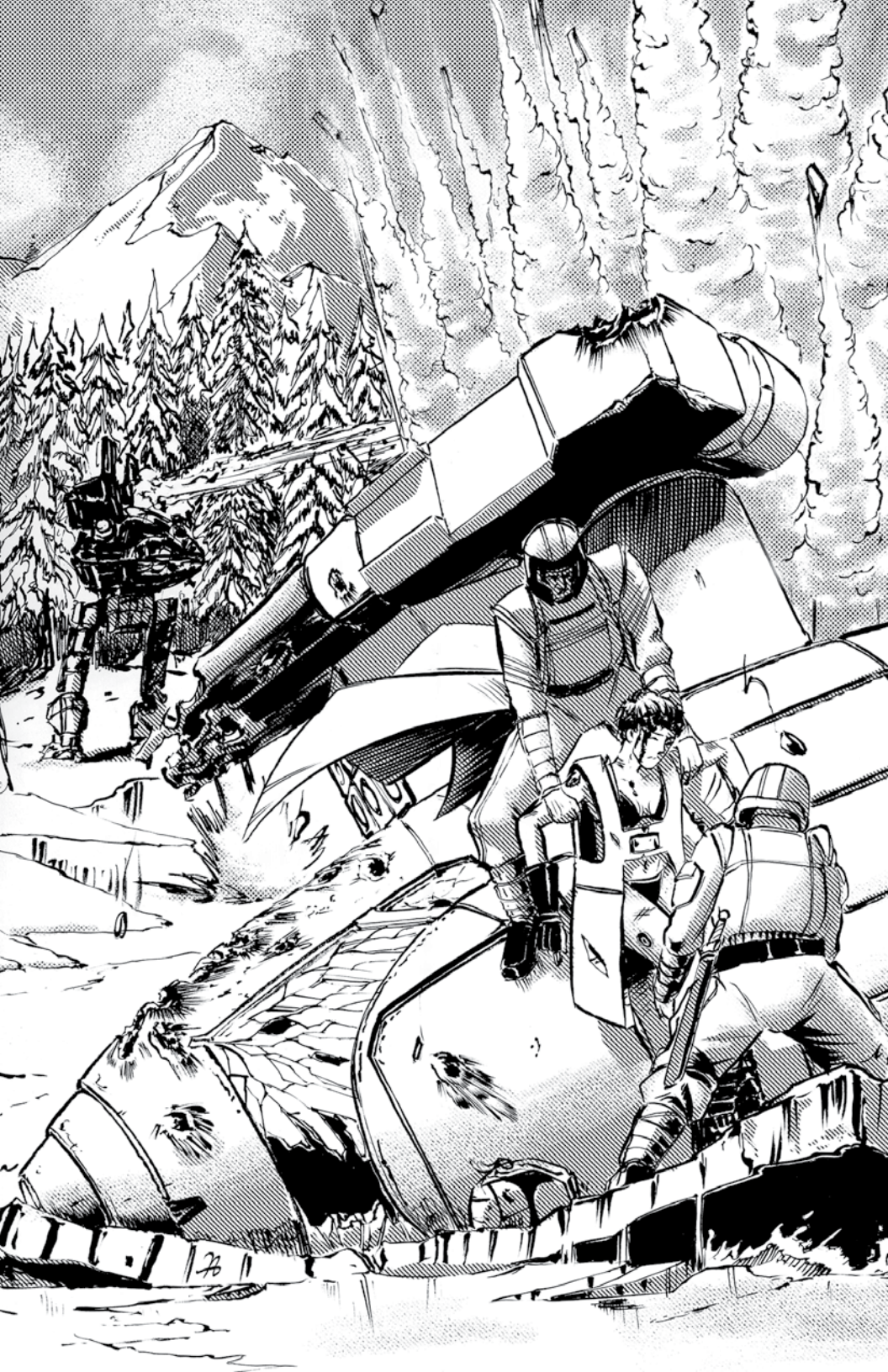
Her command lance swung west on the shoreline, paralleling the lake, and when another pair of flashes lit up the mountain ten seconds later, a chorus of voices yelled into their radios.

Twenty seconds and 200 meters away from where they had been standing, the *Raven* to her right rocked from an explosion and tripped, sending the BattleMech tumbling to the ground.

That's too accurate, she thought, the realization hitting her as the second round struck her XO's *Catapult*.

"They have spotters! Switch to infrared," she called into her commlink as she flipped her viewscreen through various settings. She couldn't identify a threat at first, but then a pair of beams pointed out from the lake toward the downed *Raven*. She noticed a slight heat difference under the ice, the spotting lasers spearing out of what had been disguised as fishing holes.

"Dammit!" she snarled. Pointing her *Cataphract's* right arm at the nearest hole, she fired her medium laser just as the last two rounds hit



the *Raven*. Her shot blasted into the ice, sending a geyser of steam and water into the air. She triggered an autocannon burst into the spray where the hole had been.

She turned to the *Raven*, where a pair of infantrymen were helping the MechWarrior out of the cockpit. She was about to key her microphone when the downed 'Mech's missile ammunition exploded, vaporizing the three instantaneously. She swore again.

"XO, get some troops into that lake. See if we can't catch the spotters," she said. As he acknowledged the order, she saw a blizzard arising from the distant mountain that slowly resolved into a pair of retreating Karnov transports with underslung artillery pieces.

"Artillery raid. Gutsy," the XO said, a note of grudging respect in his tone.

To the north, a pair of dots came sweeping in, her monitors identifying them as a pair of Cavalry VTOLs from the Fifth MAC.

She flicked her radio to an all-Capellan frequency. "This is *Sang-shao* Song, Fifth CRC. Wave off, MAC flight. They hold that mountain." When the VTOLs continued to close with the slow Karnovs, she triggered the radio again. "Back off, MAC flight, it's a trap!"

As she spoke, waves of missiles launched from the mountainside and struck the VTOLs in midair. Within seconds, the two Cavalrys were burning wrecks on the mountainside, and a third Karnov lifted off, presumably with anti-air infantry on board.

"How'd you know it was a trap, ma'am?" a quiet voice asked on the lance frequency. She glanced at the transmitter: *Sao-wei* Harnish, the newest and youngest member of her lance, assigned as her bodyguard for close-in fighting.

"Because leaving behind an anti-air security element is what I would have done—and so would you." She spun her 'Mech to face Harnish's *Pillager*. "That's the Second Cunningham's Commando regiment, and they trained the AFFS on our tactics for decades. They're using *our* doctrine against us."



Across the lake, the pair of binoculars watching Song's *Cataphract* were slowly lowered with care to ensure the lenses didn't catch sunlight and give away the camouflaged position. A thin, gray-bearded man three months before his sixty-fifth birthday and wearing a winter-weight AFFS jumpsuit considered the Capellan BattleMechs thoughtfully, then passed the glasses to a captain. Adjusting his gloves against the winter cold and shrugging his winter-camouflaged cloak back into position, Colone Henry Pope addressed the officer.

"Any word on the frogmen? How soon until we can expect them back?"

"They're on their way back now, Colonel," the young officer replied. "Third Squad reports they lost their TAG team, though. ETA is two hours."

The colonel glanced at his chronometer, calculating how much air the frogmen had carried. Because they'd used electric sleds to speed their underwater movement, they were able to take extra air tanks along. But the Capellans had taken their time getting to the ambush site—the divers would return just after nightfall with about thirty minutes of air left.

A young radio operator, braced behind a large tree to help break up her outline, passed the headset to the captain. Listening for a moment, the captain smiled and said, "Team Long-Fire reports all personnel and assets off the mountain, no losses, with two MAC VTOL kills. Looks like that ambush worked too, Colonel."

Pope frowned. "Yes, it did. But it won't work again. CCAF line units haven't fought against their own tactics since they invaded the St. Ives Compact—but it'll come back to them, far too soon." He paused, watching the distant BattleMechs, not much more than dots on the horizon. "Keep me informed," he said to the captain before exiting the hide location.

Moving slowly, ensuring he didn't catch on any brush that would sway and reveal the position, he headed to where a speckled, green-and-white-camouflaged Ibex command jeep was hidden in a shallow draw. Climbing in, Pope nodded to his driver as the gunner clambered behind the pintle-mounted Gauss rifles.

"Get us back to Headquarters, Toni. Don't raise up too much snow, though. They think we've left, and I'd hate to ruin their sense of security."



Sang-shao Rhi Song slowly brought her *Cataphract* to a halt inside the heated warehouse complex her unit had claimed as a 'Mech bay. A long stretch of abandoned warehouses, storage facilities, and apartments had become a makeshift headquarters, with separate repair areas for each battalion, room for her supporting conventional units, and even an apartment designated for her own use.

As she climbed down the heavy-class 'Mech, she saw two of her lancemates, intelligence officer *Sang-wei* Levy and her XO, *Zhong-shao* McAvery, waiting at the foot of the *Cataphract*.

"Sean, where the hell did they get frogmen and the AA platoon?" she demanded of her intelligence officer. "Let me guess—this would

be the Dothan brigade, which intel *specifically* told us had departed the planet?"

"What's a 'Dothan brigade,' ma'am?" *Sao-wei* Harnish asked, jumping down the final two meters from her *Pillager*.

Song felt a twinge of envy at the young blond woman. They were both wearing the traditional spandex top and bottom that MechWarriors across the Inner Sphere wore to keep cool in the sauna-like conditions of BattleMech cockpits. Song, despite her athleticism, had swallowed her pride and worn a wide sports bra for full support and a pair of biker shorts to help conceal stretch marks. Harnish, on the other hand, was twenty-two compared to Song's fifty-nine, and wore a bikini-styled set on her rail-thin frame.

If I'd made that leap down from my Cataphract, my knees would be complaining for a week, Song thought sourly. Not trusting her voice to conceal her momentary jealousy, she waved at Levy to answer.

"It's not a *what*, *Sao-wei*, Dothan's a *where*. It's a FedSuns world deep in their interior, with both crushing poverty and a tremendous birth rate. They contribute somewhere between one to two full regiments of infantry recruits *annually* to the AFFS, and there's entire separate infantry brigades manned solely by Dothan troops who do their time in the AFFS to retire elsewhere."

"And sources informed us they'd been seen boosting off-world as we'd arrived," put in *Zhong-shao* McAvery, a short, tired-looking, dark-skinned man. He rubbed his bald head, then looked at Levy. "Any chance those could have been Cunningham infantry? Or Lancers?"

Levy shook his head. "No, *Zhong-shao*. The Lancers could have pulled off the mountain ambush, but the Dothans were known to have a frogmen company. Half scuba infantry, the rest salvage divers, amphibious recon, et cetera. Specialized troops for just these types of ambushes."

They turned to Song, who looked over the dozens of BattleMechs and tanks inside the warehouse getting repaired, rearmed, and ready to once again hunt their AFFS opponents.

"We need to know exactly what we're up against in those mountains, or this will happen again and again."

LAKE PEND SENDALOR 14 DECEMBER 3069

Two weeks of constant pinpricks was starting to wear the regiment down, Song knew, despite them actually taking very few casualties.

An ambush here, a hit-and-run attack there—the Commandos were very good at strike-and-fades.

But what they were supremely good at was not being seen at all. She'd tried rotating her patrol schedules, timelines, and changing the type of units sent—and somehow the Commandos, in their impossibly psychic way, would only appear as distant sensor ghosts. Whispers in the forest around her infantrymen. She would have thought they'd departed Sendalor entirely except for the fact that, occasionally, they *would* attack.

Or, worse, Colonel Pope would leave behind sealed notes, addressed to her, politely providing after-action critiques of her regiment and offering suggestions on improvements. She didn't know whether to be furious at the audacity or chagrined at his valid points.

So she both accepted the suggestions and stayed frustrated. It seemed a logical compromise.

Her command lance was following the lead company of Second Battalion, sweeping through kilometers of forest en route to a small town that reported sighting enemy BattleMechs the day prior. The 'Mechs were gone, of course, but the two locals calling in the information were decorated veterans, able to report both models and numbers.

It was a solid lead, but Song had a sneaking suspicion the Commandos *wanted* to be seen. It gnawed at her, but lacking hard confirmation of an ambush, she ordered Second Battalion to cautiously head in.

The old-growth forest was both dense and light. The trees spanned up to twenty-five meters in diameter, and nearly a half-kilometer in height, yet due to the thick, near-impenetrable double canopy, there was little young growth. Other than moss and some shrubs, the forest floor was dark, flat, and empty, with dozens of meters—sometimes over a hundred—between the ancient monsters. Maneuverability was excellent for both 'Mechs and conventional forces, but visibility in the forest never seemed to reach past 200 meters before another tree blocked sightlines.

The lead company slowed, and then stopped at the edge of a vast plain. Checking a secondary monitor, Song saw that the middle of the plain had a small rise in it, which would be an excellent vantage point for spotters to hide and spot for artillery fire as the battalion crossed the open space.

Listening in on Second's battalion frequency, she heard the company commander request conventional support for the lance he was sending forward to recon. It was all routine enough, and the battalion commander had it all in hand—and yet she felt uneasy. She leaned back in her seat, took her hands off the controls, and stretched. Tried to clear her mind.

What am I missing? she thought. To occupy herself more than expecting any result, she flipped to infrared—and as earlier, the trees lit up her screen.

Something in the tree sap conducted heat, allowing it to maintain viscosity even in the freezing winter months—but that also meant the trees were effective at blocking BattleMech heat signatures, both friendly and enemy. Infantry and armor were easy to spot in the open regions between the trees, their signatures blooming against the frozen winter soil. But the canopy above appeared on her monitor like a stained-glass window, a constant shifting pattern as the leaves above soaked in sunlight and heated up, transferring the heat to the branches and down the massive trunks.

She frowned as the first artillery ranging shots struck the recon force, halfway to the hilltop. Only slight damage to one *Raven*, but close enough that there had to be Commando spotters watching their progress.

"As expected," she muttered.

"Taking fire," the *sang-wei* exclaimed over the channel. "Hovercraft on the lee side of the hill, and tanks on the far side of the plains! Engaging!"

Right where we expected them to be, she thought. *Like a doctrinal text.* Her stomach suddenly clenched. *We sent exactly what we always send—ice ran through her veins when she realized—while we wait where we always wait.*

"*Zhong-shao*, this is Warlock actual," Song said, using her callsign so the entire battalion knew it was her speaking. "Spread out the battalion and assume a defensive position. We're about to be ambushed."

Exclamations of alarm rang through the channel, and she could see BattleMechs shifting positions, even spinning in circles, trying to identify the threat she saw.

"*Sang-shao*, this is *Zhong-Shao* Yang. None of my company commanders have anything."

She bit her lip, studying her display. *Where would they be?* From the corner of her eye, she saw something move on a secondary monitor, set on infrared. She studied the display, waiting to see if it happened again, and was rewarded by seeing a warm spot shift among the brightly colored trees: *It's moving against the wind!*

She looked again and could see the large humanoid shape, the warm battle armor blending in on thermal imaging against the sun-warmed canopy.

"Above us! Enemy battle armor in the trees!" she shouted, swinging the large laser in her *Cataphract's* right arm toward the hidden enemy.

The enemy trooper moved at the last second as she squeezed the trigger. The shot blasted the top of the large tree into an explosion of colors on her screen.

The Commandos were quick in responding to the blown ambush, battle armor—and jump infantry, hiding among the leaves—leaping down among the BattleMechs to place shaped charges. Before her infantry could respond, however, cries of “Incoming!” rang out.

The rounds were a combination of impact and airburst, with many of the impact rounds hitting tree limbs or trunks before exploding, adding a lethal spray of wooden splinters flying among her dismounted infantry. Her external microphones picked up screams from the wounded as the rest quickly took shelter, leaving only her few battle-armored squads to assist in countering the Davion anti-Mech attack.

One of her light ‘Mechs activated its jumps jets, heading for a thick bough about a hundred meters up to try taking the fight to the enemy; instead, the limb broke, sending the *Stinger* tumbling back to the ground, a squad of Infiltrator battle armor riding it down. The *Stinger’s* right leg pinwheeled off, almost hitting Harnish, and the squad immediately jumped toward Harnish’s mighty *Pillager*.

“We have BattleMechs engaging us! Retreating,” called the scout *Raven*.

Song swore. “Negative, advance. *Zhong-shao* Yang, get your battalion moving forward, I’m sick of playing by their rules.” She fired at one of the troopers jumping toward Harnish. She hit one, slowing it, while Harnish fired at another. One of the *Pillager’s* Gauss rifles missed, but the second of her football-sized ferro-nickel slugs caught an Infiltrator in the chest and sent shards of armor and trooper flying in every direction.

The battalion commander started calling out orders to his company commanders, and as the first of the Capellan BattleMechs ran out of the woods toward the small hill, the Davion troops jumped back into the treetops and scattered. Song saw her infantry give chase, but suspected it would be futile. The Commandos weren’t running. This was a deliberate disengagement.

Her lance—mostly unscathed from the attack, thankfully—pushed forward into the plains, where she could gain a sense of the battle’s overall direction. The Commandos hadn’t expected her desperate ploy, but were quickly re-forming between the hill and their tanks, trading long-range fire and slowly withdrawing. She smiled for the first time in as long as she could remember.

Weren’t expecting that, were you? she thought. Toggling her microphone, she said, “Keep up the pressure! We have them out of their holes, and with an empty bag of tricks—hit them!”



Three hours later, Song sat on the foot of her *Cataphract*, wrapped in a CCAF-issued warming cloak while nursing a sports drink. The thick, green woolen cloak had a thin metallic liner, and MechWarriors wore them after exiting their cockpit in colder environments. A light snow had started falling during the battle, and there was enough on the ground to crunch under her MechWarrior booties. The hard-soled, mesh-topped leather shoes were ventilated for use in the cockpit's heat, but they let snow slide in and soak her toes, chilling her in the early evening twilight.

She took another sip as her XO approached, and felt the cold armor of her 'Mech seeping through her cloak, matching her mood. The thrice-damned Commandos *did* have another trick up their sleeve, a command-initiated minefield. Located on the far side of the hill, they'd activated it after her lead company was fully engaged, but before her main body had caught up. Outmassing the separated company by more than three to one, the Commandos had nearly destroyed them to the last BattleMech in the swirling, vicious fight before her engineers found a path through the mines. Then, as quickly as they'd appeared, the Commandos had vanished in a wall of white-phosphorus shells that set the forest on fire and provided a physical wall between the two units.

She took the casualty report from the XO, her mind lost in thought, frustration edged with professional disappointment. She'd spent her entire career leading the CCAF in combined-arms tactics, constantly learning, adapting, trying new techniques. She'd studied records and holovids of the St. Ives Military Command forces, and even of Davion units smuggled in from sources in the Draconis Combine, anything she could get her hands on.

And yet, she was now faced with an opponent that had spent decades studying and perfecting her own nation's tactics to use against *her*.

She wandered through her command lance's perimeter, the hustle and bustle of repairing and rearming continuing under the watchful eye of her regimental *yi-si-ben-bing*, the Warlocks' senior enlisted member. She walked up a small ripple in the land and shivered as she looked over the field that had cost her nearly a dozen MechWarriors and half as many crews.

"Ma'am?" she heard Harnish ask behind her. "*Zhong-shao* McAvery asks if you want him to conduct the twenty-hundred staff call."

Song started slightly before turning around. She hadn't realized it had gotten so late while her mind sought a new approach to the corner the Commandos were fighting her into.

She gratefully accepted the thermos of hot coffee Harnish extended, and poured herself a cup as Harnish, also in a warming cloak, stood next to her and looked across the field. Her eyebrow raised as the younger woman laughed.

"Sorry, ma'am," Harnish apologized. "But that hill, with the snow—the line from *Moby Dick* just popped in my head, we had to watch a tri-vid version of it when I was in high school." She flung her cloak open dramatically and pointed viciously at the hill. "There she blows!—there she blows! A hump like a snow-hill!"

Song laughed. "Odd choice for high-school viewing."

Harnish shrugged. "It's a small port town, ma'am," she replied, "dependent on the sea for fish, crabs, even some whaling. Nearly everything we ever studied dealt with the ocean in some way." She paused, then, looking across the field, quietly said, "I must go down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky..."

Song smiled, and as she listened to the young *sao-wei* reverently recite the ancient poem, she looked across the field and tried to imagine it as her lancemate saw it. The field of fresh-fallen snow as an ocean, the lonely APC trundling to the hilltop observation post instead a sailing ship heading to an island dockage.

Her mind froze.

The field is an ocean, and the hill is an island...

Song gasped, and the world spun. She dropped her coffee and staggered, bending over to grab her knees to keep herself upright.

"Ma'am!" Harnish shrieked, reaching for her.

Song waved her off. "No, I'm fine. Better than fine. Tell the XO to take the meeting. I'll be in my BattleMech, and I'm not to be disturbed."

Harnish frowned but nodded. "Are you sure you don't need a medic?" she asked cautiously.

Song shook her head, smiling widely. "No. But thank you, Tiffany, for everything. Now, go."

**LAKE PEND
SENDALOR
29 DECEMBER 3068**

Colonel Harry Pope stood in the center of the large canvas tent that made up Second Battalion's headquarters. Second Batt had carried much of the previous day's fighting, so he'd moved his regimental command lance to their location to confer. He looked over the holotable to his commanders, and saw a gaggle of tired, haggard faces staring at him.

A battalion from the obscenely competent Fifth CRC had managed to pin Second Battalion between a river and the Fifth MAC to try provoking an engagement. He'd had to commit the rest of the regiment to overwhelm the CRC battalion, which nimbly sideslipped and let the Commandos go.

After they'd settled into positions, he'd pulled in his all his regimental and battalion leadership for an afternoon conference. He took a sip of tepid coffee and looked around as the room quieted. Most of the officers present had served on Novaya Zemlya with him, training decades of AFFS officers year-round, executing tactics nearly daily for a quarter-century.

His intelligence officer stepped up—a woman in her late fifties, her gray hair contrasting with her mahogany skin. After some initial announcements, she keyed the holotable a few times to bring up some files, and then an annotated map that duplicated the table feed lit up on the giant monitor behind her.

"I'll lead off with some good news, of sorts," she said. "Some of you might have noticed how effective CCAF close-air support was yesterday." Nods and grumbles around the room. CCAF air had been unusually effective against First Batt, pounding their support elements and keeping them pinned down, leaving the BattleMechs to fend for themselves and scream for assistance.

"It seems the CCAF has increased the numbers of aircraft available for flexible ground-to-air assignment, and likely accelerated their emergency-tasking process."

Gasps filled the room, and only by force of will did Pope keep the shock off his face. CCAF commanders absolutely hated shifting aircraft from air-to-air defense to air-to-ground missions while enemies still had effective air forces of their own. The CCAF was gambling their reduced numbers of aircraft in the air could still hold back the AFFS fighters. Pope stroked his beard as the captain continued. *Might be an opportunity there.*

"Yes, this is not good news," the intelligence officer acknowledged, "except I don't think they were supposed to let us in on the secret yet. The fighters that attacked us initially were from the MAC, the CRC's were several hours later. We suspect they only attacked once they realized the cat was out of the bag, so to speak."

Pope nodded and understood what she was getting at. Had they coordinated across the front, the CCAF could have put his unit in a world of hurt, instead of just giving him a new point to plan around.

"The second piece of almost-good news: Davion agents have found the CRC's missing battalions. They sent us several short recordings of them maneuvering well behind their lines. We anticipate their remaining battalion will be pulled back soon for retraining."

She paused and sighed, running her hand through her gray hair. "Folks, I know that since they pulled those two battalions back, we've been able to stretch our supplies further and give some relief to the Twenty-First fighting the MAC. But the bill is coming due. The Warlocks will return to the fight, probably in the next week or so, and we haven't a clue about what they're doing." She clicked a key, and Pope saw a shaky recording start on the screen, with hovercraft and BattleMechs marching in lines across a field.

For a half-hour, they watched four short recordings of the new formations and tactics the Fifth's commander was putting her troops through over and over—lively discussion flowing between the unit's officers. There were simply none better at understanding the CCAF than the men and women of Cunningham's Commandos—and they had no idea what the Cappies were up to now.

As the ideas ran down, Pope nodded to the officer to turn off the recording, then walked to the front to take over the meeting. "Okay, first thing, Imelda, get those videos copied and to everyone in this room. Ladies and gents, it seems our favorite *sang-shao* has come up with something new, and I want ideas. Ask around: history buffs, football players—both standard and gridiron—anyone with a head for tactics. I respected the hell out of her *before* she decided to come up with something not in the playbook. So now we also need to whip up something new."

Nods all around.

"Second, Swarm Company is played out. Our company of *Grasshoppers* has served us well, but the CRC is onto them, and they barely made it out yesterday."

Frustrated mumbles came from the group: the dozen jump-capable heavy BattleMechs had broken enemy attacks time and again since they had first attacked the Confederation months ago, but yesterday the CRC had pulled back as they struck, leaving them exposed ahead of the rest of the regiment. The MAC hadn't exploited the position, but Pope had no doubt that had Song been there with another CRC battalion, Swarm Company would have been lost.

"Effective immediately, we're going to reconfigure into a two-battalion configuration. Folding in Swarm Company and most of Third Batt should bring both of you up to near full strength, and still leave us with one regimental reserve company." He turned to Third Battalion's commander, who was frowning. "Sorry, James, but I need you to lead the reserves more than I need another broken battalion on the line."

The major nodded. "I understand. You want me to re-form the Rakshasas, I take it?"

Pope shook his head. To provide the AFFS with the best training environment possible, the Commandos were able to seamlessly mix

and match units, even swapping out individual MechWarriors between companies to build tailor-made opponents. The Rakshasas, named after a mythological creature that could duplicate an enemy, would copy an opponent's mannerisms and attack them using their own tactics, down to spacings and timings.

"Not this time," he said, shaking his head. "Whatever *Sang-shao* Song has come up with, when she hits us with it, it'll likely be something we've never fought against. I thought we'd return the favor and hit her with Specter Company."

Amused whispers and muted laughs went across the room, and the major smiled. "Yes, sir. Oh, that'll knock them back a step, won't it?"

Pope smiled back. "That's the plan: counter her surprise with one of our own."



It was ten days later that the reformed Fifth CRC struck. The last battalion was pulled off the line the day after the intelligence briefing, and the Davion forces consolidated their positions along a ridge line, their backs to a thick forest and tied into large lakes to each side. The Fifth MAC harried them and conducted some probes, but without much determination behind them—though the two mercenary regiments doubted the stubborn and independently minded MAC wanted to wait on Song and her retrained regiment, they didn't have the force to push the Davions off-world on their own.

So both sides rested and rearmed. At night, the Dothan engineer vehicles came out to the ridge to dig fighting positions for the vehicles and berms for the Commando 'Mechs to stand behind while firing. It would give them a small advantage in the opening moments of a Capellan attack, and—as Pope had often taught junior officers—small advantages built on one another and eventually could lead to large victories. More importantly, the obvious actions of the engineers provided cover for their work in preparing the ground for Specter's surprise.

Behind Capellan lines, Davion spies confirmed the MAC was bringing their forces up to full strength, by returning wounded to duty and fully repairing damage across their force. Since the battle for Sendalor would probably be decided with the return of the Fifth CRC, both AFFS mercenary regiments did the same, breaking open their remaining caches of equipment and ammunition to ensure they were as ready as possible.

Pope returned almost a full company of BattleMechs to duty during the lull, giving each battalion a command lance and adding a second lance to his understrength command company. He hoped it'd be enough.

He'd gone to bed relatively early, enforcing a sleep rotation among his regiment to ensure that when the CRC returned, his troops would be fully rested. He didn't know what time it was when he was gently shaken awake, but he was already swinging his feet out of his cot while he yawned.

"Warlocks?" he asked while stretching.

"Yes, sir," came the reply from Imelda, his intelligence officer. "They're heading toward us in regimental strength, and the MAC is up and moving, too. Looks like today's the day."

He nodded. "Staff meeting in five, and get the Lancers on the horn, make sure they're tracking the same thing we are."

She nodded and departed the small tent.

Pope took a moment to gather his thoughts as he dressed in his MechWarrior togs and cloak, and then double-checked the charge on his pistol.

Today's the day.



Sang-shao Song slowed her *Cataphract*, nearly dead center in the middle of her line. As expected, the AFFS regiments were forced out from behind their berms and off the ridge line, starting to retreat south a full kilometer across an open plain to the heavy forest. They'd only had fast vehicles and 'Mechs on the ridge; presumably the heavy vehicles and Dothan infantry were entrenched in the woods, making it critical that they crush the two AFFS BattleMech regiments before they got there.

The Fifth MAC had nearly overwhelmed the Illician Lancers: focusing their strength into a small front, the MAC's three battalions had smacked into one short Lancers battalion, nearly overrunning the mercenaries in place. But the rest of the regiment had pulled back, regained cohesion, and were making the MAC work for every meter of ground.

But their retreat had pulled the Commandos off the ridge too, and forced them to cover nearly the entire remaining field as the Lancers consolidated against the MAC. It was what she'd been waiting for.

Between the Commandos and the Lancers ran a shallow river. In winter, it didn't even have enough water flowing through it to slow a tank, but the depression split the two regiments. The Lancers were slowly drifting east, her First and Second Battalions were slowly pulling the Commandos west, and down the shallow depression she ran Third Battalion.



"Well, there they are," the regimental sergeant major wryly commented to Pope over an internal command frequency.

"About time," Pope grunted. "Any longer, and the Specters would be out of position. Now, let's see what they do."

Up to this point, the two CRC battalions they'd faced had displayed none of the new tactics. In fact, they'd been ridiculously doctrinal, right down to the spacing between lances. Even without the leaked footage, that in itself was a clue something was off.

He checked his secondary monitors to scan his lines: his two battalions were falling back in order, with well over 600 meters between his regiment and the forest. There was about 500 meters between his right flank and the Lancers, and the CRC main body had just passed over the ridge onto the plain in pursuit. Nodding in approval, he turned his attention to the enemy battalion rising out of the riverbed as his Second Battalion turned a company toward them and refused the flank.

What the hell? The CRC battalion had formed into two straight lines, one trying to get behind Second Battalion, and the other one marching straight west toward the closest Commando company. Three hundred meters away, they *all* turned south simultaneously.

Turned wasn't the word for it. Pope search his memory and recognized the maneuver from boot camp: a left flank. *A left flank?*

The closest Commando company was bent in an arc: one lance faced north toward the ridge, one faced east toward the riverbank, and one turned south to face the Capellan flanking maneuver. The long Capellan line, now moving south, arced southwest, and Pope did some math in his head: they would cross nearly perpendicular to the southern corner of the refusing company, essentially forming on-line to all fire at that one point as they passed it.

"Sir, I know what they're doing!" came a call over the general frequency. "They're 'crossing the T!'"

"Identify yourself and the tactic!" he responded immediately, signaling his command lances to follow him. Whatever the tactic was, it was the key to Song's plan, so that was where he needed to take some extra firepower. His *Banshee* shambled into a run, the seven 'Mechs of his short command company forming up into a diamond around him.

"Sir, MechWarrior Ryan, down in First Batt. It's an old blue-water navy trick, lining up your ships so they can fire broadsides at a target that can only fire forward."

Old blue-water navy? Song dug deep for this one. "Countermeasures?"

"Uhh, submarines? Sir, I don't know. It's usually successful."

One by one, the Capellans started firing into the lance leader at the corner, a *Yu Huang* salvaged from a past battle. The assault 'Mech fired back, but staggered to a knee as the repeated blows took its toll. When the sixth Capellan 'Mech brought it down, the seventh one began firing at the next-heaviest 'Mech, a *Catapult*, even as the lead Capellan did an about-face and began leading the line south, behind the firing line, apparently on their way back to the end of the line to form a constant loop.

Pope checked the position of the CRC main body. The two battalions had accelerated into a trot and had started to spread out a little. Even with the increased speed, however, not all of them had crossed the ridge. There was a trail company lagging behind, presumably to watch for an ambush. But it would have to do.

"Specters, go!"



Song silently swore. Third Battalion had formed into the loop slightly ahead of schedule, and the Commandos were reacting better than she'd anticipated. They were falling back—*no*, they were only falling back on the front facing her First and Second Battalions, leaving the company facing Third Battalion's broadside by itself as they pulled the rest of her regiment away from that battle.

Why are they doing that? Are they sacrificing that company to save the rest of the regiment? she wondered. *That doesn't seem like them at all.* But before she could key her microphone to issue instructions, the hillside to her left seemed to explode.

It took her several seconds to piece together what was happening as cries of alarm rang out across the common frequency: a company of Draconis Combine BattleMechs were hiding in concealed positions on the lee side of the ridge, near the riverbed. The massive trapdoors that hid the 'Mechs from discovery were apparently rigged with explosives to fling them up out of the way, and the Combine troops had come rushing out, striking into Third Battalion's rear with unusual accuracy.

The Combine? The hell? Positioned in the forming gap between Third Battalion and the drifting other two, Song slowed her command lance. "Tim, talk to me," she ordered Third Battalion's commander.

"*Sang-shao*, we have a company of Combine 'Mechs attacking us," he dutifully replied. "Linking you to my feed...now."

A light above her secondary monitor to her left began blinking and then updated with telemetry from his *Emperor*.

"As you can see, they have no IFF beacons, but our computers recognize the paint scheme. It's the Seventh Ghost. They're hammering

us at long range while the company we were attacking is charging us. We're pinned!"

Song shook her head. "They're not the Combine, it's another trick," she responded while studying the display. The "Combine" company had a fast lance skirmishing with Third Battalion, while their two heavy and assault lances slowly approached. She read the BattleMech configurations and felt something *click* in her mind.

She narrowed her eyes. *I missed something. What was it?* She looked at the BattleMechs again, and they were all common Kurita designs. More than two-thirds were OmniMechs, and then she homed in on an assault 'Mech in the rear, probably the company commander. *That's a Sunder B! Twin C³ masters!*

"Tim, they have C³! They're using a C³ network against you! Get some ECM to block it as best you can!" she ordered.

"We had our ECM up, but who do you think they took down first?" he snapped. "Dammit, Ariana, we're taking rear shots no matter who we turn to fight. I'm pulling the battalion back toward you while I still have something of a numerical advantage."

She shook her head again and did a quick tally: eight lances against her ten. The Commandos were down almost two lances between their line company and the command lances that had joined them, but the "Combine" company had taken down about an even number from Third Battalion. By the numbers, she still had a slight edge—but battles weren't fought by unemotional robots, they were fought by people. Emotional, swayable people that reacted to events no matter what the numbers said.

Her people were rattled, and the Commandos had the momentum again. She swore, punched the command chair hard enough that her knuckles hurt, and then keyed her microphone.

"Understood. Get over here as quick as you can. If you pull back fast enough, maybe we can still run the gap."



"Sir, they're pulling back," the Commando company commander reported. "Good bet says they're heading for the hole between us and the rest of the battalion."

Pope nodded. "No bet, Skyler, that's the obvious move. We broke up their surprise, so now they're back to doctrine." He glanced at a secondary monitor: though roughly the same numbers of 'Mechs were down on both sides, he estimated his force was more heavily damaged—but he had better tactical positioning.

"Skylar, disengage from the Cappies and head toward the forest. Rearm and repair. You're now the regimental reserve. Jimmy, you and Specter Company are with me. We get back to the main fight and plug any holes the *sang-shao* puts into the line. Let's move, people! Song shifting her battalion has kicked off a race, one we need to win."



Four hours later, Song stood on the ridgeline, drinking water from a sports bottle and looking across the snowy, open plains toward the forest where the Commandos were hiding. The sun had nearly set, and BattleMechs littered the field, though her infantry and medical teams had already recovered all the MechWarriors from both sides.

At first, she'd believed she could smash the Commandos, but they'd unerringly seen her plan and reacted before she'd implemented it. They'd executed a flawless fighting withdrawal, returning their battalions to the safety of the forest while her regiment reconsolidated on the fly. They'd taken losses, but so had she, as they'd thrown that Combine company into battle against her First Battalion, shaking them as badly as they had the Third.

She grunted in amusement and respect. *Not only my battalions*, she thought wryly. Once into the forest, Pope had shifted his Combine company over to the Lancer front and counterattacked into the teeth of the Fifth MAC's assault. The MAC had nearly fallen apart at the sight of a Ghost Regiment attack, and had been less prepared for the C³ network than her troops had been. They'd destroyed a full company of MAC BattleMechs before retreating into the forest with the remnants of the Illician Lancers.

She swished water around in her mouth, then spit it out, the water sinking deep into the ankle-high snow. *We're going to lose a lot of good people rooting the Commandos out of that forest*, she thought. *But there's no way they'll willingly leave defensive ground that nice.*

"Ma'am?" *Sao-wei* Harnish walked up the ridge to stand next to her. "I thought you might like some coffee," she said, indicating a thermos. At Song's nod, Harnish unscrewed the lid and poured her a cup. While Song drank, Harnish looked over the fields.

"I bet they're over there, right now, looking at us." She paused, then turned quick. "Ma'am, they could snipe us at this distance!"

Song nodded. "They could. But they wouldn't—at least, *he* wouldn't. I don't know about the Lancers. But Pope fights by the old rules." She chuckled. "My father, *Mandrinn* Song, would tell me stories from the Third Succession War, about the rules of war and the chivalry between MechWarriors. I think he would have liked to meet Pope

across a battlefield. Hell, maybe he *did*. I'll have to send Dad a letter once this is done."

Harnish laughed. "Ma'am, I've met your father, and if he'd fought someone he respected that much, he would've hired them. Hell, *we* should hire them!"

Song started. "What?"

Harnish laughed gaily. "Hire them," she said, waving widely at the forest. "They're mercenaries, right? Can you imagine if they worked for us, taught *us* how to fight? Good lord, we'd be unstoppable! If I had a billion L-bills, you know what I'd do, I'd—"

"Shush," Song ordered, her mind racing.

"Ma'am?"

"Shut up for a second, Tiffany," Song replied tersely.

They stood in silence for about two seconds, and then Song keyed her handset and yelled, "*Yi-si-ben-bing!* You and the XO, up here, right now!"

"Ma'am, if I spoke out of turn—" Harnish said, trepidation in her voice.

Song held up a finger at her to remain quiet as she saw her XO, the *yi-si-ben-bing*, and a pair of security guards running toward her.

"*Sang-shao?* Is everything all right?" asked McAvery.

"Yes. XO, have the prisoners been treated humanely? No beatings, no overly aggressive interrogations?"

His eyebrows raised in surprise. "Yes, ma'am. We always treat them in accordance with regulations. But to be honest, with all that's gone on today, we really haven't started processing them yet." He looked at the scared Harnish, and then back at Song. "Has something happened? I wasn't informed of any incidents."

Song shook her head. "No, but confirm we're solid, and then call the MAC. Remind them that they *must*—and this is an order, they *must*—treat any prisoners in accordance with CCAF regulations: no beatings, no torture, no *nothing*, and I'll court-martial anyone that disobeys. Go."

As he ran down the hill, she turned to the *yi-si-ben-bing*. "Two things, Victor. First, have the guards bring the senior Commando prisoner to me. I need to talk to them."

"Yes ma'am. And the second?"

"File the appropriate paperwork to promote *Sao-wei* Harnish to *sang-wei*."

Song smiled as she heard a surprised gasp from Harnish off to her side. The *yi-si-ben-bing* smiled as well, and Song turned to Harnish. "Good work, Tiffany. Now, go with the *yi-si-ben-bing* and get more coffee on. We have a long night ahead of us."

**LAKE PEND
SENDALOR
9 JANUARY 3069**

"Clover Command, OP Three," came the call across the radio from Sergeant Major Rice, the regiment's senior enlisted member, and Pope frowned. He was in the headquarters tent, studying maps of the forest when the sergeant major had broken across the frequency with priority traffic.

"This is Clover actual, go ahead," Pope said.

"Sir, we have a jeep approaching with white flags."

Pope looked at the receiver in surprise. *White flags? A parley?*

"Should we meet them?" Rice asked.

"Absolutely. I'll be there shortly."

He was at the edge of the tree line within minutes, the sergeant major nodding to him—in lieu of saluting in the field—as he approached. He also saw a scruffy-looking captain in a mishmash of Commando field dress and what he assumed was a Capellan POW uniform, and a young blond captain—*not captain, a sang-wei*, he corrected himself—in Capellan field dress. To the side, a pair of medics fussed over a heavily bandaged person on a stretcher.

"Sergeant Major?" he asked.

The older man's voice turned formal. "Sir, may I introduce *Sang-wei* Tiffany Harnish, acting on behalf of *Sang-shao* Song. You know Captain Price, of course."

Captain Price stepped forward. "Sir, I have been asked to vouch for the Capellans' treatment of prisoners. I'm not officially released, though they sent MechWarrior Ryan back with me as a sign of good faith."

Pope nodded formally. "So noted. How may I help you, *Sang-wei*?"

Harnish pulled an official-looking parchment from a uniform pocket. "Colonel, I have been asked to bring this to you. My commander wishes to establish a cease-fire between our forces to provide you the opportunity to review this contract for employment with the Capellan Confederation."

The sergeant major's jaw dropped, and Price whipped his head around: the captured captain clearly hadn't known what Harnish's mission was.

Harnish took a step, extending the document. "My commander has asked for a meeting tomorrow afternoon, in accordance with the old rules of hire."

"We're not really available—" said the sergeant major, but Pope immediately silenced him with a glare.

Old rules? he thought.

Harnish pressed on. "She asked me to remain here, in accordance with the old rules of hire, and await your response."

Remain here in accordance with... And then he understood. *Song, you clever devil!*

He stepped forward to accept the document. "Of course. Does your commander speak for your entire force?" At Harnish's nod, he said, "Very well. I have overall operational command of our forces on world, so I can approve a cease-fire; but I must confer with the Lancers' commander to get his approval on contractual agreements. I'm assuming this extends to the Lancers regiment as well?"

Harnish nodded. "Yes, but I'm afraid I don't know all the contractual details."

He waved it off. "No apologies necessary. If you'll allow it, I'll send Captain Price to the rear to get cleaned up, but I will ensure that he accompanies you back to your lines."

He turned to the sergeant major. "Cameron, I need you to escort the *sang-wei* back to our command tent and introduce her to our staff and senior leaders, *as per the old rules of hire*," he emphasized, and the sergeant major's eyes finally lit up with understanding.

Out of the corner of his eye, Pope saw Price turn to Harnish and quietly ask, "What the *hell* are the 'old rules of hire'?"

It's what's going to save a lot of lives—on both sides, he thought as the young Capellan shrugged in response.



Sang-shao Song stood in front of a large tent in the middle of the field between the ridge and the forest. She'd ordered it heated and provisioned, to "present the best face of our nation to potential employees."

Not everyone had agreed with her course of action; *Sang-shao* Marloe of the MAC had appeared at the foot of her *Cataphract* and yelled at her in a volume that probably carried all the way to the Commandos' lines. But, in the end, the MAC acknowledged her right as commander to call a temporary cease-fire, while promising to file a formal grievance with High Command.

She saw a white-and-green Ibx leave the forest edge and approach her tent at an unhurried pace, a white flag waving from its whip antenna. She looked to her right, where *Sang-wei* Harnish and the Commando Captain Price stood. "Right on time, it would seem."

Price fidgeted, and said, "Forgive me, *Sang-shao*, but what's the deal here? We can't work for you."

She smiled. "'Can't' or 'won't,' Captain?" She held up a finger before he answered. "No, I'm not being facetious. Words have meanings, especially for older mercenaries. Your unit is a relatively young one, but it's commanded by older veterans. Trust me, you two young pups might not understand what's going on, but—" She nodded toward the jeep. "I've bet the planet your commander does." She looked at her aide. "I'll be inside, awaiting a formal introduction."

Within minutes, the two junior officers opened the tent flap, and Colonel Pope walked in. Song stood behind the field table centered in the middle of the tent, otherwise empty save for a pair of chairs, a small refrigerator, and a second table holding a coffee pot and a plate of pastries.

"*Sang-shao* Song, may I introduce my commander, Colonel Henry Pope," Captain Price said, and the colonel walked forward to shake her hand.

"It's nice to finally put a face to the name," Pope said.

Song smiled. "Likewise. Would you like some coffee, or a snack perhaps?"

"Coffee, please. Black," Pope clarified to Harnish as she moved to get him some.

Song waved him toward his seat, and they sat in silence as Harnish served them.

Pope took a sip and smiled. "This is very good. Terran?"

She shook her head as she smiled. "From Kasdach, my homeworld. One of the benefits of accepting the contract, I'm happy to say."

His eyebrows went up in surprise, and he took another sip. "It is a tasty bonus, I'll admit." He had a genuine smile on his face, but it disappeared as he put his cup down. "*Sang-shao*, at first I believed your invocation of the 'old rules of hire' was a clever inversion of the Clan's *hegira* custom, getting us to leave. But, after reviewing the contract, I must confirm: Is this a legitimate offer? It's very generous."

She sipped her coffee, and then put it down. "It is. I have a power of attorney from my father, the *Mandrinn* and *Diem* of Kasdach, allowing me to purchase material or contract units for the defense of our homeworld as I deem necessary. It's under that authority, not as a *sang-shao*, that the contract is written."

"Two mercenary regiments to defend a world I had to find on the map—no offense—seems excessive."

"None taken. I would agree, but—as the contract states—I want you to do for us what you've done for the AFFS. Be our OPFOR. Study our enemies, and train us to be better. We wouldn't ask you to train us to fight the FedSuns, of course."

"We'd never teach you to fight the AFFS," he noted.

She shrugged. "I'm hoping the Lancers might eventually pick up that mission. They did work for us in the Third Succession War."

He barked a laugh. "They hated working for you. That's why they're with the Suns now!"

She laughed too. "I can ask, right?" She took a sip of coffee, and again became serious. "Of course, I expected this, and I can add a clause in the contract to only train rotational forces to fight the League, the Alliance, and maybe the Clans."

He nodded, and then she added, "And the Combine, dammit!"

Pope laughed again. "They really did catch you by surprise, didn't they?"

She chuckled and shook her head in chagrin. "Yes, Harry—can I call you that?—they did. I thought I had you."

He saluted her with his coffee cup and said, "You nearly did." He took a large sip and then put it down. "*Sang-shao*—"

"Ariana, please," she interrupted.

"Ariana, as you probably already suspect, I'm unable to accept this offer for either my regiment or the Lancers. However, I did take a straw poll, and between the two regiments, we have about two and a half companies of MechWarriors—plus some support staff—that would like to accept this contract, generally for personal reasons. Some are retiring, some want to get their families away from the front—things of that nature. I don't know the Lancers, but I can vouch for the quality of my people. If you're willing to rewrite the contract for whoever's willing to sign on, then I think both your father and the Confederation will be pleased with Kasdach's newest defenders."

When she nodded, he stood. "I'll leave Captain Price with you as a liaison while we prep for departure. I should have the names of volunteers for your contract by this afternoon, and we'll coordinate a prisoner exchange."

Song nodded. "Thank you. When I send your prisoners back, I'll send Tiffany along with a case of coffee."

He smiled and saluted her with the cup one more time before finishing it.

"That's it?" Harnish asked.

The two senior officers turned.

Harnish turned beet red, but stammered out, "W-Why are they leaving if they didn't accept the contract?"

Song looked at Pope and said, "Hiring you was actually *her* idea. She said it as a joke, but..."

"But you knew how to phrase it," Pope finished for her, then turned to the junior officers. "When I was about your age, I commanded a lance in a no-name mercenary company. Back then, there was no Outreach,

no Dragoon ratings. All we had were codes of conduct between unit and employer, sometimes overseen by ComStar's Mercenary Review Board.

"Occasionally, a valid employer, such as the daughter of a *mandrinn*," he said, waving his hand toward Song, "would extend an offer for a unit to switch sides during battle. Any unit doing so would take an immediate hit to their reputation. But depending on the tactical situation, it was understood in that era that the mercenary business is, at the end of the day, *a business*. A cease-fire was often offered so the unit could review and discuss the potential contract."

Song stood up. "If the unit and the potential new employer couldn't come to terms, then the mercenary unit was often allowed to depart with no ill will on either side, for all parties understood it was simply business." She looked at Harnish. "What were our orders, Tiffany? To *destroy* the invaders, or to retake the planet?"

Harnish's jaw dropped, and then she closed it again.

Pope smiled at Harnish. "I'll be waiting for that case of coffee, *Sang-wei*," he said, then turned to Song. He studied her for a moment, then said, "Thank you for this, Ariana." He looked away, down at his empty coffee cup, and then back at her. "I don't have many years left in the cockpit, but I can still teach..."

"You know where to find me," she said quietly. "My father would love to meet you."

She saw a lot of emotions flicker across his face before he nodded, put his cup down, and turned to go. As he reached the tent flap, he turned and said, "It was an honor, *Sang-shao*," and then walked out into the snowy plains.





OPERATION HOLLYWOOD

MIKE MILLER

The Lyran Intelligence Corps' Loki division is infamous as a state-sponsored terrorist unit, but Loki has also accomplished some brilliant operations beyond unsolved assassinations. The long-running, obscurely named Operation Hollywood, launched in 3103, was one such Loki action that shook Clan control on dozens of worlds.¹

The operation undermined Clan propaganda on captured Inner Sphere populations by using the most innocuous of tools: sitcoms, romcoms, music, books, soap operas, games, and similar media. These gave civilians on occupied planets a glimpse of the Inner Sphere that contradicted official propaganda. Broadly speaking, worlds occupied by strict Crusader Clans proved more vulnerable to the operation than Warden Clans and moderate Crusader Clans because of differing planetary occupation techniques, particularly how they approached the economies of captive planets.

The Clan Homeworld economic system was a result of Nicholas Kerensky's philosophical choices to create a warrior-dominated society and address Homeworld labor shortages. By the launch of Operation Revival, the Homeworlds' 1.15 billion people (3062 estimate) were supporting *toumans* of seventeen Clans at Star League-level technology. This feat would conventionally have required an exponentially larger population, but the Clans accomplished it with a tightly controlled, centrally planned command economy. Clan civilians had spartan lives

1. Operation Hollywood was named for an ancient center of media production on Terra, a district of the North American city of Los Angeles. The region dominated video and music production from approximately 1910 to the late 2200s, when the Terran Alliance's restrictions on artists drove most of the media corporations off-world, generally to Rigel Kentarus and New Earth.

and little opportunity for individual innovation or entrepreneurial effort, but they were guaranteed food and housing if they met work quotas. The Homeworlds even had enough economic slack to implement one of Kerensky's more wasteful efforts to "curtail waste": withholding medical care from low-value workers, which the youth-oriented warrior caste interpreted as the elderly, regardless of their actual skill or value. The Homeworlds' civilian life expectancy was under 67.1 years at a time when the Inner Sphere's average life expectancy—from backward Annapolis to shining Terra—was 89.7 years, nearly twenty years shorter than the average during the peak of the Star League.

Each Clan varied in how thoroughly it implemented Homeworld economic and social systems on their Inner Sphere conquests. Clans Wolf, Wolf-in-Exile, Hell's Horses, Ghost Bear, Snow Raven, and Sea Fox/Diamond Shark were relatively light-handed in their occupations, addressing the proportionally huge populations of conquered worlds with a federal system that tended to leave domestic governance and industries alone if the populations were obedient and contributed goods required by Clan *toumans*. Further, censorship focused on blatantly subversive topics. Such captive populations not only had good standards of living—little different than non-Clan worlds—but also regular access to (somewhat filtered) foreign media and news sources. On these worlds, Operation Hollywood offered no eye-opening revelations or even good entertainment.

However, the Jade Falcons and Smoke Jaguars worked hard to remold their Inner Sphere conquests. (Of course, the Jaguars had relatively little time to remold societies, but they tried.) They shut down "wasteful" consumer-oriented portions of planetary industries, which often represented most of a developed world's economy. They also truncated medical services. Accordingly, life expectancies fell almost as fast standards of living. By 3100, most Jade Falcon planets had youthful populations that had only known Clan rule. Such low-information populations were very vulnerable to Operation Hollywood.

The operation had two components: the message and the messenger.

Loki scoured centuries of media to create a carefully engineered message. The vids, music, books, and games offered usually featured relatable characters, innocuous content that alarmed no Clan censors, and high entertainment value. The subversive aspect was background elements that hinted at the difference between Inner Sphere and Clan life, such as the following:

- Factory workers who supported a family in a fully furnished, multi-room house with a personal vehicle
- Laborers who spoke ill of leaders without suffering bloody reprisals

- Family dinners with diverse, quality ingredients
- Squatters who had personal communicators and changes of clothing
- Ranges of high-quality, fashionable clothing
- Children who went to school for at least twelve years
- Populations that were youthful at forty-five years of age and spry at ninety
- Cities with gleaming buildings, picturesque parks, and rich residents
- And, of course, the ease of getting rich from producing insipid music

Supporting that message was regular smuggling and even legal imports of high-demand Inner Sphere goods, like comfortable underwear, denim jeans, and Timbiqui Dark, which were generally unavailable on the strictest Clan worlds. While not actually part of Operation Hollywood, these goods provided tactile proof that the people of the Inner Sphere had better lives than those on Clan worlds.

The messenger was a simple, robust, handheld media player sold widely across Clan-occupied space. Despite the efforts of expensive consultants to develop an evocative name, Loki settled on giving their device the Clan-safe appellation “Media Player, Standard” (“MPS” or “Mips” to users). The MPS’s underlying electronics were based on Terran Alliance standards for prefabricated colonial electronic plants, which had seen an extensive revival while the Inner Sphere rebuilt from the Succession Wars and Jihad, and also was crude by even Western Alliance standards. The MPS was a chunky but surprisingly ergonomic 15 x 9 x 2.5 centimeters and had a ten-centimeter, 2D color screen in its upper half. An arrow pad and a handful of buttons decorated the remainder of the front. The MPS accepted ComStar-standard music, video, and game chips, which sharply limited its capacity, and had strong anti-copying features as yet another attempt to lower Inner Sphere technology.

As with any Inner Sphere import, the MPS received scrutiny by Clan security personnel. However, even the most thorough inspection found nothing wrong. The internal electronics were appallingly simple, a collection of discrete, soldered processors, controls, and power-supply components on a motherboard rather than a single, integrated unit. Every inspection and dissection of components revealed they were exactly what they claimed, with no hidden ultra-miniature secondary processors, computer viruses, propaganda messages, or the like. The MPS even implemented the minimal required version of a Clan security system, a component that logged usage and verified that media files were approved.



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← BACK

THE SPHERE LIFE FOR ME

PLAYLIST RUNNING

- Ride of the Hellmares
S. Mantserrot (Long ver.)
- Battle Beyond the Planets
M. Turner
- How Green the Fields
galvin (Euphonium ver.)
- Candy For You and Me
Lizzie (feat. Sair)
- Everyone Equal is Awesome
G. Lucasarratz (Original)

However, as users found thanks to a very detailed, very readable user manual and some initial nudges by Loki agents, that crudity offered flexibility. With the correct software and easily fabricated peripherals users found novel, legitimate applications, turning the MPS into a scientific calculator, a fully fledged noteputer, a networked game console, or a data logger for industrial sensors. On many Clan worlds, the technician and scientist castes praised the MPS as an educational tool, which kept official scrutiny away from the devices.

Beyond legitimate uses, the rugged multipart case (not a conventional single-piece polymer molding) easily opened by removing a few screws, which allowed skilled users to perform all sorts of shenanigans. For example, shorting four leads on the security processor resulted in it logging every file played from the chip reader as authorized. Users learned to refit the primitive batteries with Clan micro power packs and used the hollowed-out battery casing to wire in multiple media chips, typically unauthorized ones.

On that note, while MPS was officially sold with innocuous media and games, it wasn't long before it turned into the cornerstone of samizdats (with and without Loki's help). However, the 3151 assessment by the LIC indicates that the greatest impact was from the legal content.

Supported by the hard proof of smuggled goods, Operation Hollywood helped Clan populations become aware that their lives were not the best, contrary to claims of their government. On worlds like Alyina and Sudeten, the populations created pressure on civilian-caste leadership for better living standards. The Mongol Doctrine and catastrophic destruction of Sudeten's capital by Khan Malvina Hazen put pressure on the Falcon population from another direction, making them question the leadership's policies and, indeed, sanity.

It is very likely that without Operation Hollywood, any planet in the grasp of the Falcons for more than a generation would have remained so after the decimation of the Falcon *touman*. Instead, they fragmented into numerous microstates willing to try completely new ideas, like the Alyina Mercantile League, which has a *de jure* merchant-caste government. Dustball accepted the Malthus crime syndicate. Even the Falcon's capital of Sudeten rejected Khan Hazen's policies and supported a return to traditional Falcon policies under Jiyi Chistu. Rejection of a powerful, charismatic Khan's policies is almost unique behavior in well-indoctrinated Clan civilian populations.

Operation Hollywood did not deliver as many Clan-occupied worlds directly to Lyran control as Loki had hoped in 3103, but it was critical in undermining the Falcons' heavy-handed memetic programming. For a project that cost less than a battalion of new 'Mechs, it did the work of many regimental combat teams.



ADAPT AND FLOURISH: A GREETING TO NEW CITIZENS OF THE FEDERATED SUNS

WUNJI LAU

Transcript of prerecorded audio chips distributed during the Victoria War, 3104

Welcome, new citizen! This world has been freed from the grip of tyranny and despotism. We know this has been a difficult time, and that you have understandable concerns about your future.

First, be assured that you have nothing to fear. You may have heard stories and propaganda about the Federated Suns, but they're not true, and we'll work hard to prove it to you.

No matter how you arrived on this world during the prior regime's occupation, be it as a civilian worker, corporate transplant, voluntary migrant, refugee, or family member of a foreign official, please know that you will be treated with fairness and full legal protections. Integrate into our society and adapt to our culture of freedom and compassionate liberty, and you will find life under the Sunburst Flag to be peaceful, rewarding, and fulfilling.

The Meaning of Citizenship

Everyone on this planet is now a citizen of the Federated Suns. There is no lengthy servitude or reduction in status, and you are granted citizenship regardless of your prior caste, occupation, or even (in many cases) criminal record. Although individual worlds have their own governments and cultures, certain rights are universal in our nation: freedom of expression and belief, the right to own property, a voice in government, and many more.

This newfound freedom may feel strange to you. There is no secret police to enforce your behavior, beliefs, or ways of thinking; this is a nation of trust. Also, you, as an individual, are valued here. You have the right to protect your life, and to expect the nation to protect it as well; our citizens are not fodder for the machine of state, but the lifeblood of our realm. Many worlds within our borders are not yet full members of the Suns, but regardless of the status of the soil you stand on, your sovereignty as an individual citizen is inviolable. You may find these beliefs naive, but we assure you that our way not only works, but thrives.

Your rights are protected, both by law and by the responsibilities borne by the entire population of the Suns. These responsibilities go hand in hand with your rights. Again, this is a matter of trust. Though the First Prince and government rule the realm, their main task is to create an environment of opportunity for the people, not to corral, enslave, or pamper them. Thus, the Suns puts faith in you to live up to the spirit of your citizenship. But, be assured, compared to other realms, the obligations are easy, and our burden is light.

Take Responsibility for Your Livelihood

Here in the Federated Suns, any individual can rise to great heights of wealth and prestige, free of class restrictions or excessive government control. However, such advancement requires commensurate drive. There is no managed economy here, no nanny state that holds your hand from cradle to grave. You need to be willing to use every resource at your disposal to strive for self-sufficient success, and make more resources out of nothing if necessary.

You will most likely need to earn a living by finding a job. This process may be new to you, but guidance is available in most major metropolitan areas. Opportunities vary widely depending on what world you're on, so you and/or your family members may need to travel or move to find the best employment for each of you.

Your skills and abilities will be matched to a role for which you're most suited, from those positions that are available (including possible military service, if you have the appropriate aptitudes). If you can read, you are already well prepared for professional employment and advancement. If you can't read, you can still find gainful employment.

During this transitional period, this planet will likely be administered by a military governor until resistance is peacefully resolved. At that point, publicly known civilian politicians or nobility will establish a long-term government. Be ready to adapt. Take advantage of policy changes, and make contacts who may be later sources of business or job prospects. While local governments are free to administer in whatever way is best for their world, they are limited by the sovereign

rights of the citizens. Because citizens are entitled to bring grievances to the ranks of nobility, be assured that corruption among nobles and officials is virtually unheard of in the Federated Suns.

You will also find yourself associating with people who, under the former regime, were of different castes or social classes. We do not impose such arbitrary assignments, and it is important to overcome any discomfort you may feel in living and working alongside people who are now and forevermore your social equals. We know change can be difficult, and all citizens of the Suns will be happy to help heal the wounds of the past and foster a new understanding among us all.

Advancement comes with achievement, and achievement comes with hard work. Exceed quotas. Invest in training. Take extra shifts. Avoid conflict. While your individuality and personal morality will always be respected in the Suns, your reciprocal responsibility as a citizen is to respect the freedom of others, including your employer. Minimizing objections and complaints, and instead focusing on doing a good job might be the best way to show that you're a team player and a good candidate for promotion.

Take Responsibility for Self-Improvement

Education is the cornerstone of success. Rather than a one-size-fits-all school system, education in the Federated Suns is designed to respect the freedom and needs of each locality, with schooling offered at a level appropriate to the locality's industries and population. Additional educational options, including the finest institutes of higher education in all of known space, are available to you and your family, with varying requirements for tuition, relocation, admission standards, and cultural fit. Note, however, that many citizens of the Suns have freely chosen to focus on successful careers instead of academic costs, building and expanding high-demand industries like agriculture, transportation, and infrastructure in young and developing markets where traditional literacy is not a barrier to prosperity.

Learning the workings of local and federal administration is another way to enrich your life as a citizen. Instead of automatic garnishments and bulk fees from dictatorial authorities, you now have the opportunity to control when and how you handle your interactions with administrative services. The layers of agencies and ministries can seem complicated and confusing at first glance, but be assured that the system is finely tuned and time tested. Once a citizen learns the basic details of day-to-day processes like requesting locality services, servicing loans, registering transports, subscribing to comms, filing complaints, signing up for civil emergency service, educational enrollment, accessing records, checking personal data, reserving medical

services, handling estate documents, renewing licenses, cataloging relevant expenditures, verifying inspection compliance, scheduling examinations, organizing tax documents, and submitting corrections or amendments to any of the above, they will find comfort, security, and most importantly, freedom of choice, in the Federated Suns.

Take Responsibility for Integrating

As this world heals from the wounds of regime change, some citizens and officials may have understandable difficulty accepting you as a new fellow citizen, making it harder for you to find work or access certain services. It's your responsibility to allay those fears by adapting fully to being a citizen. Voluntary and regular attendance in sporting events, holiday celebrations, government rallies, and majority religious services is enormously helpful in demonstrating your dedication to freedom and liberty. Speaking out against resistance and vocalizing your opposition to local dissidents and sympathizers also sends a positive message to your neighbors. Finally, although peaceful reconciliation is the best way to handle social friction, you do have the option of pursuing a complaint with law enforcement by filing a report with officers at the local station house, naming the offenders and providing full identification and location data for you and your family members; local or federal agencies will determine a solution to the situation.

Travel in the Suns is normally unrestricted, but please understand that new citizens integrating on liberated worlds do have movement limits until certain security checks are processed. Though this normally doesn't take long, specific timelines and requirements may vary based on a variety of factors, so be patient, and adapt.

Depending on how you came to this world (and your prior status under the previous regime), you may have owned personal assets or been granted existing assets or property upon arrival. In the event of disputes regarding ownership from before foreign occupation, these monetary and financial assets may be frozen for the good of all parties. If the dispute involves housing, appropriate temporary housing will be provided to you, and your family members may also apply for similar facilities by registering with the appropriate local agencies, ministries, and bureaus within a prescribed time period.

As the courts adjudicate the dispute, have patience, and be assured that your rights as a citizen will be respected. Justice is a core value of the Suns, and arriving at a proper final decision is not a task to be handled lightly or hastily. If a judicial review determines that your assets must be redistributed to claimants, you always have the right to appeal the decision by following appropriate local legal procedures. During the appeals process, you are free to pursue new endeavors and

professional achievements, and if the court finds in your favor, your assets (or equivalents) will be returned to you.

As in any society, obey all laws. Aside from conventional penalties, repeated misconduct, as determined by both local and federal standards, can result in revocation of citizenship; those who squander their rights cannot expect to retain them.

Freedom may be the right of all humans, but like all great things, it is valuable not because it is abundant and easily acquired, but because it is a rare, precious victory of human will. Freedom must be defended with vigilance, determination, and sacrifice. There will be times when the First Prince will call on citizens to forgo certain privileges and entitlements for the good of the nation. Know that the entire realm shares the burden of such sacrifices, and that they are not made lightly. By complying with all royal decrees, no matter the cost, you distinguish yourself as a defender of freedom, an example of model citizenship.

Take Responsibility, and Be Free

Our nation went through six cycles of incredible economic growth in the past twelve decades, building anew and revitalizing the spirit of liberty. It is now your turn to prosper in this great endeavor, flowing with a tide that raises all ships.

The time of strife on this world is at an end. Your cities will be rebuilt, your forests replanted, and you can be assured that this world and your rights will be defended to the death by all the people of the realm.

Welcome to a limitless future of peace, security, and opportunity, in the greatest nation in the history of humanity.

Welcome to the Federated Suns.





THE GREAT URBANMECH UPRISING

ERIC SALZMAN

SOLARIS GAMING COMMISSION HEADQUARTERS
SOLARIS CITY
SOLARIS VII
LYRAN COMMONWEALTH
3 JULY 3122

Atop the forty-fourth floor of the Solaris Gaming Commission building—one of the gleaming new towers to rise from the ruins of the International Zone in the decades after the Jihad—the office of the chief commissioner reverberated with explosions and flashes of laser light. The high-end holoprojection system put Commissioner Cyrus Matherwood IV right in the middle of the action, allowing him to keep an eye on how his games were being run.

The projector was currently displaying a match in Cathay's Jungle arena, pitting a Tandrek Stables *Tian-Zong* against a DiNapoli Stables *Doloire*, in its debut match on Solaris VII. The cutting-edge Republic OmniMech's ClanTech Gauss rifle and laser batteries gave it a serious edge, but the Capellan pilot was making excellent use of the home-field advantage, literally fading away into the arena's dense foliage with its stealth armor as it landed blow after blow with its own Gauss rifles.

Matherwood waved his hand to pull up floating displays on the pilots, the machines, and the betting spreads, then scrutinized the scrolling data feed. "Mute audio. Begin recording. Notes for next Commission meeting. Item one—have the imaging array at the Jungle checked again to screen out the EM interference from 'Mechs with stealth systems. Some static is still getting through. It's all well and

good for Tandrek if other duelists can't see their target, but 'Mechs that disrupt the camera feeds make rotten holoivid fodder."

Closing his fleshy hand into a fist, he minimized the battle and pulled up images of two more 'Mechs. One was a new Nova Cat design, while the other was a rare quadrupedal model with a feline appearance. They rotated slowly in midair as he resumed recording. "Item two—Zellbrigen Stables has petitioned for permission to import and field a *Cave Lion*. I recommend approval. New gear always brings out the eyeballs, and the claws might finally tempt those Clanners into some close-quarters action. Item three—same situation. Regulus Wrath Stables has requested permission to field a *Sarath*. They admit the Regular Hussars won't let anyone else have them yet, but the aesthetics are magnificent. I recommend approval. Tell the Wrath if they can get their hands on one, the Commission will arrange an exhibition match for the debut. End recording. Save to archive."

Tapping his earpiece, Matherwood opened a line to his office manager. "Lloyd, I'm wrapping up for today. Anything else on my schedule?"

"You're all set for tomorrow's planning meeting for the Republic Senate delegation. And you've got a Mr. Jansen still waiting in the reception area."

"Jansen? He's still here?" Matherwood sighed. "Send him in. He's got two minutes."

The thick Tall Trees-mahogany double doors swung slowly open, admitting the lanky form of Rufus Jansen. In contrast to Matherwood's conservative business suit—complete with an understated half cape and ear-height collar—Jansen wore a violently purple and yellow checkered sportscoat of a cut that had gone out of fashion with Amaris.

Matherwood attempted to summon a pleasant smile. "Ah, Mr. Jansen. Thank you for waiting." He gestured at the holodisplay. "As you can see, I've been immersed in my work. Now, to what do I owe the honor?"

Jansen glared at the commissioner, then pulled a crumpled piasheet from his coat pocket and shoved it forward. "Well, Commish, maybe you can start by explaining why this says my application to fight in the Grand Tournament qualifiers was rejected. I've got more wins under my belt than half the people who qualified last year!"

Matherwood made a show of glancing at the printout, though he knew very well what it said, having issued the denial personally. "The legal terms are clear, Mister Jansen. The Commission reserves the right to exclude any participant for any reason. We are committed to crafting the greatest spectacle in the Inner Sphere, and only those who are a proper fit may take part. And you, sir, may have a winning record, but your BattleMech is not suitable for the modern games. Based on your

record, should you acquire a more competitive machine, we can revisit the issue of your qualification.”

“What’s wrong with *Dark Angel*? She’s a fighter! I’ll sign any waiver you want if you think the Open Class is too risky for me.”

Matherwood noted the stress creeping into Jansen’s voice and the trembling of his hand. His own hand unconsciously crept toward the panic button in his pocket to summon security, if needed.

His cultured tones took on a harsher edge. “What’s wrong with your *Dark Angel*, sir, is that it is an *UrbanMech*. While such equipment has its place in Xolara and the lesser circuits, we must consider the aesthetics of the big game. Billions of fans watch our tournaments because the warriors and their equipment are the best of the best.” He gestured to the still-rotating *Sarath* hologram. “Our machines must present themselves as fierce, aggressive, and menacing. Tell me, Jansen, have you ever heard any of those words used to describe an *UrbanMech*? For Blake’s sake, they make plush *UrbanMechs* for children to cuddle! Above all, we are putting on a show, and I would as soon let someone field a *Yeoman* as your rotund little fire hydrant.”

Jansen withdrew the plassesheet and his expression settled into a sneer. “So that’s how it is, huh? Maybe I can make it worth your while? Kroner? Stones? Maybe some synthetic necrosia?”

Outrage colored Matherwood’s portly features as he jabbed the panic button to summon security. “Now get this straight, Jansen! This is 3122, not 3022, and we are not the Battle Commission of old. We do *not* fix matches for gangsters, we do *not* take bribes, and we do *not* tolerate scum like you in our sport!”

The double doors opened again to admit a pair of burly security officers, stun batons held at the ready.

“These gentlemen will see you out.” Matherwood waved Jansen dismissively toward the exit. “Our business is concluded. I trust that I need never hear your name again.”

THE SCRAPYARD

NORTH PIER, SOLARIS VII

LYRAN COMMONWEALTH

5 JULY 3122

“Not good enough for the big leagues, are you? We’ll show ‘em, baby! We’ll show this whole damn planet!”

Jansen’s left hand gripped the throttle and jet triggers while his right flew across the console, adjusting the sensors and target interlocks. Through the ferroglass viewports—his internal lighting switched to

a dull red to avoid glare—he could see towering stacks of metallic scrap laser-welded into thick walls looming over the uneven floor of an ancient junkyard. It was said that if you looked at the right part of the walls, you could find bone-white-painted wreckage dating from the Blakist Jihad. Some even said that if you dug deep enough, you could find some Manei Domini cyborgs welded into the walls and left to die.

Today's targets weren't Blakists, though—just other bottom-rungers in the Class 2 featherweight circuit—the only Commission-sanctioned matches where an *UrbanMech* could compete. The match was edging into its tenth minute and had already claimed at least a *Longshot* and a *Kabuto*, based on the wrecks Jansen had come across. Poor visibility was a key feature of the Scrapyard—the dense metal piles blocked electromagnetic sensor readings and active probes, and the night-fighting schedule hampered vislight. The powerful searchlights sweeping across the maze of twisted wreckage and industrial waste kept the thousands of spectators aware of what was going on, but a fighter down in the thick of it had to outthink their opponents and rely on superior reflexes.

Case in point, Jansen had configured his targeting system to pull data from the *UrbanMech's* seismic sensors—not so useful for aiming the guns, but perfectly capable of letting *Dark Angel* know when another 'Mech was moving nearby. Right now, his display showed 'Mech-sized movement on the far side of the scrap pile he was using for cover. When the blip on his screen moved into a chokepoint in his rough map overlay, Jansen thumbed the jet trigger to launch *Dark Angel* skyward on argent flares, just clearing the top of the wall (and narrowly missing a dome-mounted floodlight at its apex). The squat *UrbanMech*, painted coal black with metallic-red angel wings sweeping across the rear torso armor, landed with a solid *crunch* and found its target, a *Duan Gung*, shuffling sideways to clear the narrow alley. Unable to dodge, the light 'Mech was easy prey for *Dark Angel*.

Jansen's lasers melted away armor, exposing the myomer bundles inside, and his follow-up particle-cannon strike reduced the arm and a substantial section of the torso to a blackened crater. The other pilot panicked and tried to turn to face their attacker, but only succeeded in wedging their 'Mech tightly into the chokepoint. Seeing the blue glow of *Dark Angel's* PPC capacitor increasing in intensity, the pilot signaled surrender and powered down.

A loud *crump* from across the arena signaled the match was down to its final two combatants. Avoiding the narrows, Jansen feathered *Dark Angel's* jets to skim the tops of the twisted-metal walls and vector toward the heat flare showing on his thermal sensor readout. The electromagnetic scans just came back as solid "contact" readings while the external cameras showed only darkness—but his last opponent had

to be out there. Noting an anomaly picked up by the active probe, Jansen landed in the open area at the southern end of the arena and dialed up the magnification. What was left of a *Cossack* had been scattered across more than thirty meters, a fire still raging in the hollowed husk of its torso, where its missiles had apparently cooked off.

Seismic sensors showed something approaching swiftly from *Dark Angel's* rear. Crimson spears slashed at Jansen's Durallex armor, boring deep pits into the plating, but the armor—one of the *UrbanMech's* strongest aspects—held up to the laser barrage as Jansen turned to face the onrushing foe. The *Porcupine*—vanishingly rare, even on Solaris—was covered with sharpened spikes and specialized in ramming attacks. At this distance, and at this speed, there was no way to evade it—even with jump jets.

Of course, while *Dark Angel* didn't have any spikes, it did have its sophisticated sensors, which had detected the acid pit concealed under a thin sheet of metal plating, enabling Jansen to land with it covering his vulnerable rear approach. The sheet-metal cover gave way instantly as the onrushing BattleMech put its weight on it, sending the machine plunging into the seething pool of corrosive liquid. The *Porcupine* thrashed frantically, grabbing a bent girder at the pool's edge and trying to pull itself out of danger.

"Oh no you don't, boyo!" Jansen shuffled *Dark Angel* forward and planted its broad, flat foot on the *Porcupine's* face, shoving it back into the acid bath. Defeated, its pilot signaled surrender, ending the match.

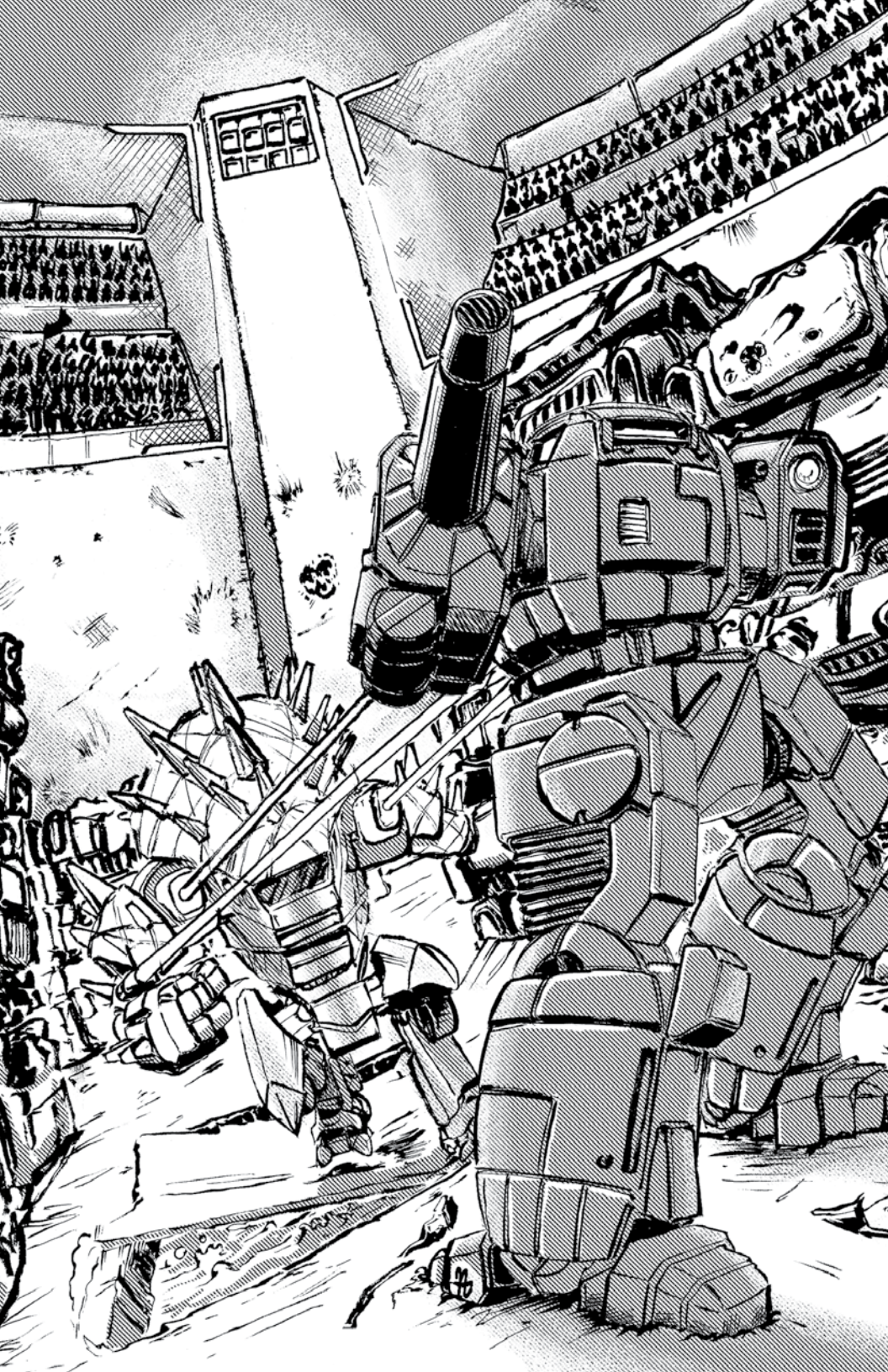
On *Dark Angel's* external pickups, the enthusiastic hooting of the crowd came through well enough, but still sounded thin and hollow compared to the kinds of audiences at the Grand Tournament.

Jansen patted his 'Mech's console. "That's step one, baby."

THE CABIN NORTH PIER, SOLARIS VII LYRAN COMMONWEALTH 6 JULY 3122

The scarred wooden table matched the rest of the dive bar, but at least the beer (brewed next door) was passable, Jansen thought. His companion at the table—a topknotted man whose tattoos proclaimed him to be a *yakuza teppodama* (and whose missing digits suggested he wasn't very good at it)—clearly disagreed, restricting his intake to his small *sake* flask.

"The way I see it, Nakamura-san, I not only won the match, but I covered the spread on who went down in what order. Just because the



first two took each other out doesn't change who hit the ground first. Pay up." Jansen proffered his noteputer, the screen set to transaction mode.

Scowling, Nakamura put his thumb on the scanner and authorized payment, then pushed back from the table and staggered toward the door, shouldering aside a burly blond man in a Solaris City Police Department major's uniform. Jansen waved the officer to his table and signaled a passing waiter for another round.

"Rufus—long time no see. You still scamming the bookies into letting you bet on your own matches?"

Jansen smirked. "It's not like I'm betting on someone else and throwing fights, Dermott. They see me betting on myself and hear '*UrbanMech*,' and they get greedy. Nakamura's gonna need a retinal scan to pay me next time, since his *oyabun*'ll probably take his thumbs for this payout."

Jansen took mugs of Solaran Dark from the waiter and passed one to Dermott, who cheerfully accepted it, raising it respectfully to Jansen before downing a quarter. He adjusted the controls on the noteputer to show the full account balance and handed it to Dermott, who whistled appreciatively.

"So, what now? You retire from the Urbie Derby to an estate on Grayland and live the good life?"

"Not quite. That's my intake from bets with every bookie in Xolara. I'm a persona non grata with them for at least a year, so this is my shot to make good on a family obligation."

Dermott grimaced. "Not that business with your great-grandfather again. He was crazy, and you're just as crazy for trying to do this."

Jansen tapped the noteputer screen. "This kind of nest egg should buy just enough crazy to let the old man rest in peace. You and the boys in the SCPD 'Mech corps still running mostly *Urbies*?"

"Not as many as when you and *Dark Angelle* left. Half are *Peacemakers* these days. All the veterans are sticking with the *BattleMechs* though. Rookies get the *IndustrialMechs*."

"Perfect. If the old crew is up for some creative overtime, this should cover expenses, some paint for plausible deniability, and a fair amount of looking the other way."

Dermott, his eyes still on the noteputer screen, waved for another Solaran Dark. "This is gonna buy a fair amount of silence, but I'm not signing off on anything until I know the plan."

Jansen smiled. With the police, just like with the mob, greed was all it took to get things going on Solaris VII. It might be 3122 and Devlin Stone's Pax Republica on the forty-fourth floor of the Gaming Commission, but here in Xolara, the 31st-century ways of doing things were still going strong. "First off, we'll need passenger manifests for inbound flights and access codes for the tunnel network..."

**MATHERWOOD ESTATE
BLACK HILLS, SOLARIS VII
LYRAN COMMONWEALTH
29 JULY 3122**

Stretching his bulk out on the sumptuously appointed branth-leather seats of his Avanti hover-limousine, Commissioner Matherwood signaled his driver to depart the grounds of his fortified estate in Solaris City's Black Hills district. The lift fans whirred into action, filling the plenum chambers with a steady flow of air, and sent the sleek black vehicle down the private lane and into the wealthy heights of the Davion-aligned neighborhood.

Never one to waste a minute of the day, Matherwood opened a channel to his office manager. "Lloyd, please confirm that the Republic senators are on schedule for arrival. I'm en route to the spaceport to meet their ship."

The reply crackled over the microcommunicator in his ear. "Confirmed—the senatorial DropShip is descending from high orbit. I've confirmed their bookings at the Solaris Hilton, and you'll be hosting a reception for them in the Coliseum's skybox tonight, followed by an exhibition match between warriors from DiNapoli and DeLon Stables. Biographies of the senators, your speech, and the vital stats on the fighters and their 'Mechs have been uploaded to your noteputer."

"Thank you, Lloyd. DiNapoli had better put up a good fight. I intend to get an extra two percent out of the Republic distribution deal when it comes up for renewal next year, and I want those senators in a good mood before I jack up the price."

The chauffeur interrupted. "Apologies, Commissioner. We may be late to the spaceport. Police are diverting traffic up ahead."

As the limousine crawled past the police roadblock, its lift fans humming, Matherwood could see a gaping hole in the street where the ferrocrete surface had collapsed into the service tunnels under the street. SCPD officers were keeping civilians back from the edge as a crane struggled to winch something out of the depths. "Blake's Blood! I will not be late for the Republic ship. Driver, see if you can find a faster route."

At the next police checkpoint, the chauffeur alerted the squad leader to the presence of his VIP passenger.

Matherwood lowered his window and addressed the officer directly. "Ma'am, are you quite aware of who I am? I must insist that you let my driver through so we can reach the spaceport. I have a vitally important meeting that cannot be delayed."

The officer nodded. "Yes, sir, Commissioner. Of course, sir." She signaled to her squad, who pulled their Charioteer squad car back

enough to let the limousine through. The chauffeur brought the fans up to maximum as he tried to make up lost time, racing through the slums of the Black Hills' central neighborhood.

In the rear of the limousine, Matherwood shook his head. "You just have to know how to talk to the little people, and they'll stand aside for the elites who run this city."

Resuming communications with Lloyd, Matherwood settled back and ignored the high-speed parade of burnt-out tenements, squatter camps, and panhandlers flashing by his heavily tinted window glass. "Sorry, Lloyd. As I was saying earlier, we should do something tied to the Kell Hounds. The newsvids are full of stories about Colonel Maria Allard's recent demise. What do you think if we use Boreal Reach to reenact the Hounds' battle against the Genyosha?"

"Very tasteful, sir. I—"

Lloyd's response was drowned out in a screeching torrent of static. The limousine turned sharply, bleeding off speed as the undercarriage scraped along the ferrocrete roadway, sending up a shower of sparks. Only the chauffeur's expert skill (a legacy of his earlier career racing in the Burlingrad Hoverdrome) kept the limo from flipping over.

"Blake's Blood! What the hell—" Matherwood exclaimed before a tremendous impact shook the vehicle.

The chauffeur screamed and dove out of the door onto the street as a crushing weight bore down on the car's hood and smashed the engine flat. The rear of the car went upward for a moment before it slammed it back down onto the roadway, shattering the remaining windowpanes.

Ears ringing, Matherwood crawled out of the empty rear window and stared in shock at the scene around them. The limo had come to a rest in the middle of an intersection in a long-abandoned portion of the slums, its front flattened beneath the foot of a white-and-blue *UrbanMech* with silver accents. Of the chauffeur, there was no sign.

The telltale roar of jump jets firing made him look up. Atop every intact roof stood an *UrbanMech*, the morning sunlight glinting off their cockpit canopies. Every few seconds, jets roared, and another *UrbanMech* sailed aloft to join those already there, their heavy cannons tracking Matherwood's every movement. A flock of birds, startled by the clamor, exploded upward in a thunder of flapping wings, leaving a small cloud of feathers in their wake.

Matherwood raced for one of the abandoned storefronts, seeking the comfort of its notional shelter. The roar of jump jets sounded above. The backwash from a landing *UrbanMech* buffeted him, bowled him over into the middle of the street, and tore his half-cape away, sending it whirling upward on the hot wind.

Seeing no way to escape on the roads, the commissioner crawled, bruised and sobbing, to a manhole in the middle of the intersection. His meaty fingers scabbled at the releases, tearing off two fingernails before it popped open to reveal a ladder descending into the darkness.

"They can't follow me down here! They can't follow..." Matherwood gasped as he threw himself into the hole and clambered down the ladder into the service tunnel.

Trying to orient himself in the dark passage, he peered into the pitch blackness. The tunnels were normally lit, but even the emergency lights were off. He wasn't terribly surprised—given the state of the neighborhood above, proper maintenance of this section probably hadn't been done since before the Jihad. He could hear and smell water running in the center of the tunnel—suggesting seepage from the Solaris River was an issue as well.

A *boom* reverberated through the tunnel—a 'Mech footstep.

Matherwood's breath caught in his throat. One of them was down here, too...in the dark. Another *boom*, and a wave of water sloshed up onto the siding, soaking the commissioner. The manhole, detecting no further movement on the ladder, automatically snapped closed, cutting off the lone ray of sunlight from above. Matherwood whimpered and pushed himself against the tunnel wall.

A row of dull-red lights flickered into being halfway to the tunnel ceiling, casting a hellish glow on the tunnel, and revealing the silhouette of a black-painted *UrbanMech* looming over him.

Matherwood screamed.

A voice boomed over the external speakers, echoing in the tunnel confines. "Hiya, Commish!"

"W-what? Jansen?!"

"None other. Enjoying the spectacle?"

"Spectacle! That's what you call attempted murder?"

"Murder? Blake forbid, Commish. We're just crafting the greatest spectacle you've ever seen, with plenty of ferocity, aggression, and menace."

"You're insane! I'll have you doing fifty years hard labor on a Hesperan penal moon!"

"Now, now, Commish. What would Solaris be without holocameras to record all the action?" A projector mounted in place of the *UrbanMech's* small laser showed holoimages Jansen had somehow recorded in Matherwood's office.

The commissioner listened to his own words echoed back at him: "*Our machines must present themselves as fierce, aggressive, and menacing. Tell me, Jansen, have you ever heard any of those words used to describe an UrbanMech?*"

The audio loop repeated, but now with tri-vid footage of Matherwood running, screaming, and crying in the face of the *UrbanMech* horde.

"Why, yes, Mister Commish," Jansen's booming voice said, "it would seem those exact words are a perfect description of *Dark Angel* and her sisters up above. So, you have a choice to make. Either you can continue to exclude some 'Mechs based on your personal aesthetic biases about what makes an arena-worthy competitor, or you let the best pilots compete for the championship, no matter what they're riding. Mind you, Commish, if you want to stick to your guns, this footage gets released to the Solaris Broadcasting Company."

The red lights faded, and Jansen's *UrbanMech* retreated down the tunnel, disappearing into the gloom. Matherwood sat in the dark, his heart pounding.

THE CABIN NORTH PIER, SOLARIS VII LYRAN COMMONWEALTH 4 AUGUST 3122

In one of the ramshackle bar's private back rooms, Jansen stood with Dermott, the SCPD's *UrbanMech* corps pilots, and the members of the Xolaran "Urbie Derby" Class 2 Pilots' Association as they awaited the SBC evening newscast. The chrono clicked over to 1800, and the busts of SBC's news anchors rose from the corner projector.

"Turn it up!" someone yelled.

The announcer, a former Miss Cathay, opened the broadcast. "*Dear viewers, we are pleased to bring you a special announcement to explain the wild events of the past week that some have been calling the Great UrbanMech Uprising.*" A montage of shaky footage rose above the projector—dozens of *UrbanMechs* emerging seemingly from nowhere to rampage through different neighborhoods of Solaris City—playing jump-jet leapfrog with each other as they maneuvered through street-level traffic, unfurling LET THEM FIGHT! banners, and then, in unison, jetting to the rooftops and bounding away just before SCPD officers could arrive on the scene.

"*It is still unknown who these 'Mech pilots are,*" the announcer continued. "*An SCPD spokesperson stated that they are investigating, but there is no indication these renegade 'Mechs had access to the city's tunnel network, and an audit of known UrbanMechs in the region shows them fully accounted for during the incursions.*"

Jansen raised his beer mug in toast to the SCPD officers present. "To the brave police inspectors! May your funds clear escrow in a timely fashion!"

Raucous laughter drowned out the tri-vid, but then the image shifted to Chief Commissioner Matherwood, and Jansen hushed the crowd.

"Thank you, Biyu. It's always a pleasure to come on your program."

"Chief Commissioner, you told us earlier that you would have a formal statement on the renegade 'Mechs. What can you tell us, and what will the Solaris Gaming Commission do about them?"

"Well, Biyu, the mandate of the Gaming Commission is to create an environment where the best pilots can rise through the ranks and create legends in the arenas, no matter their origins or equipment. Nobody expected Gray Noton to get out of his first match alive in a Rifleman, but today we still talk about Legend-Killer in hushed tones. We cannot predict where the next legend of the Games will come from. It could be a cutting-edge product of Clan technology, or it could be the often-disrespected UrbanMech. That is why I'm pleased to tell you and your viewers that the Great UrbanMech Uprising has been a special promotional campaign to raise awareness of the Commission's equal-access doctrine. Starting in the 3122 Grand Tournament, any pilot with the necessary qualifications may bring any equipment they like into Open Class events, without restriction."

Dermott slapped Jansen on the back. "Rufus, you crazy malfin' maniac, I can't believe you got the Commissioner to go along."

Jansen grinned. "All he's after is a good show, but he'd confused the outer shape with fighting spirit. We just reminded him that the pilot is the key, not the metal. That said, and I think Great-Grandpa Horvat would concur. Dominating your foes in the unique melding of precision engineering and character that is an *UrbanMech* is the true measure of a champion."

Dermott shook his head. "You know you and *Dark Angel* are going to be wiped out in the first round, right?"

"You betting against me?"

"I'm not *that* drunk. At least not yet."

"Then let's get to working on that. Gentlemen! To the Uprising!"

The cheers bursting from the private room drew startled looks from the Cabin's other patrons, not least for fear that the noise might drive the rickety structure into final collapse.





UNIT DIGEST: FIRST AUGUSTINE ARQUEBUSIERS

STEPHEN TOROPOV

Nickname: The Guns of August

Affiliation: Free Worlds League

CO: Lieutenant General Torov Mangan

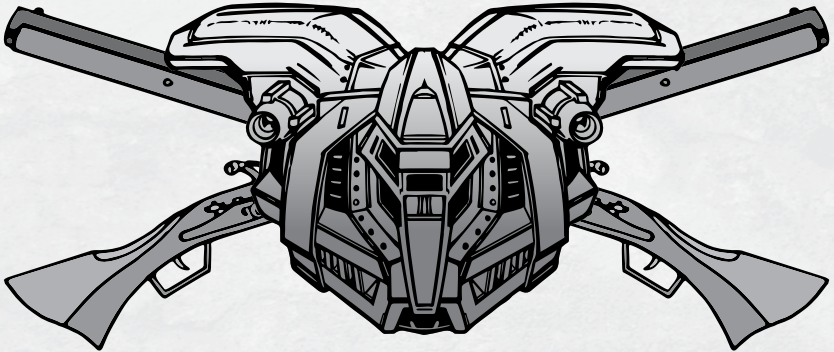
Force Composition: 1 heavy 'Mech regiment, 1 battle armor battalion, 1 aerospace fighter wing

Unit Abilities: When randomly determining equipment, the player must roll half of their 'Mech forces from the Republic of the Sphere Random Assignment Table from *Field Manual: 3145* at a +12 modifier and half on the appropriate Free Worlds League Random Assignment Table, and may substitute any one heavy 'Mech in their force for a PRF-1R *Prefect*. The Arquebusiers also have Tactical Specialization (Defense) (see p. 108, *Alpha Strike: Commander's Edition*, or p. 87, *Campaign Operations*).

Parade Scheme: A gradient of red on the upper body or forward section, fading to Marik purple on the legs or rear, with gold highlights throughout.

UNIT HISTORY

Though untested in combat, the newly formed Augustine Arquebusiers have already garnered attention and controversy from observers in the Free Worlds League. When the Senate Alliance was absorbed into the Free Worlds League in 3142 as the Augustine Alliance, a condition of the annexation was an agreement that the Alliance's defense would be provided "in part by troops furnished initially by the Alliance to the Free Worlds League Military." This provision primarily



meant the personnel of the battered Alliance Patriots would be offered postings in the re-formed Sixth Free Worlds Guards instead of being disbanded, and the Sixth then spent the next several years garrisoning the Alliance and nearby Irian. However, when word of the fighting on Terra began to filter into Marik space in 3151, the vague wording of the agreement precipitated a minor political crisis, which led to the creation of the Augustine Arquebusiers, a regiment that the League Central Coordination and Command does not want, but cannot dismiss.

In late July 3151, the LCCC ordered the Sixth Free Worlds Guards to leave their station on Talitha after spending several months monitoring and debriefing the disorganized former Republic Armed Forces personnel gathered there. After the departure of the Second Covenant Guards and Fourteenth Atrean Dragoons the year before, this left the Augustine Alliance with no regular troops stationed in or near its borders at a time of increasing instability on the border with the Wolf Empire. Alliance officials, including the retired but still highly influential former senator Michael Riktofven, decried this abandonment and insisted that the terms of their amalgamation into the League allowed them the right to raise their own troops "furnished initially by the Alliance" to rectify the lapse. While this interpretation was legally dubious, Riktofven and the Alliance provincial government were determined to follow through on the idea, and turned to another of Riktofven's former colleagues to do it.

Torov Mangan had been recently elected Senator of Bernardo when the original Senatorial Rebellion broke out, and he was drawn into the nascent Augustine Alliance as much by Bernardo's proximity to Augustine as by any ideological persuasion. Unlike former senator Riktofven, Mangan had some military experience, as they had served as a newly minted MechWarrior in the Fifth Hastati during the Capellan Crusades. After joining the rebellion, they mostly served the Senatorial cause as a recruiter and liaison to the vital Earthwerks and Kallon Industries factories on Bernardo. Mangan styled himself a lieutenant

general, and agreed to raise a new defense force for the Alliance; their first act was to rush to Talitha.

Arriving on 4 August, Mangan made a pitch to the same Republic troops who had so recently been under the Sixth Guards' eyes: with Terra likely irrecoverable, those who wished to continue to defend the spirit of the fallen Republic could find no truer vestige of that spirit than the Augustine Alliance. Though most rebuffed this offer to join the former splinter state, just over two battalions' worth of former RAF troops accepted the promised sense of purpose and generous compensation, and embarked with Mangan for Augustine. There, the new recruits met with enough local militia members and corporate-security forces to form up and begin training as a new regiment. So far, that training has been largely in defensive tactics and unit cohesion, with Lieutenant General Mangan working hard to forge a unified sense of identity among their motley band. Pointedly, while all of the unit's personnel have sworn an oath of loyalty to the League, General Mangan has been filing reports with the provincial government on Augustine rather than sending them on to Atreus.

Word of this rogue mustering caused consternation among the LCCC and Parliament, as the Captain-General's authority over the military is a cornerstone of the reformed League. Particularly concerning was the Augustine Alliance commissioning Mangan as a lieutenant general and dubbing their new troops the First Augustine Arquebusiers, implicitly threatening more such provincial units to come. Caught off guard by events on his homeworld, Speaker of Parliament Fletcher Grandin still managed to persuasively argue that these troops, filling an acknowledged gap in the border garrisons and raised without any need for federal funding, represented a lower priority for the League's attention than events in the Wolf Empire. This delay has amounted to tacit federal acknowledgment of the unit, but not official approval. It remains to be seen whether the League will tolerate a domestic military force whose chain of command is attached to a provincial government rather than the Captain-General directly.

COMPOSITION

The Arquebusiers formed with a somewhat mismatched complement of equipment. Many of the former RAF personnel who mustered in from Talitha brought their Republic-issued 'Mechs with them, while General Mangan has used their influence on Bernardo to purchase a number of 'Mechs on short notice from the planet's assembly lines. The regiment has also requisitioned supplies from nearby Irian Technologies, but so far the only shipments received have been several surplus *Prefects*, as the Fortress Wall around Terra rendered these RAF procurements undeliverable. Though the *Prefect* is shunned by

the office of the Quartermaster General due to its Republic associations, the Arquebusiers have taken pride in this chassis as a symbol of continuity with their past, and each company of the Arquebusiers features at least one *Prefect*.

Absorbing other RAF equipment has allowed the Arquebusiers to raise a supporting battle armor battalion and a wing of aerospace fighters, but their major issue is a lack of transport assets. While Riktofven bankrolled the transportation of the unit to their mustering point on Augustine through commercial shipping, the FWLM impounded all ex-Republic DropShips and JumpShips present at Talitha, and the LCCC has not assigned the Arquebusiers spaceborne assets. Until such assets can be requisitioned, the Arquebusiers will remain reliant on the Alliance government to charter transportation to their garrisons.





VENGEANCE GAMES

CRAIG A. REED, JR

PART 3 (OF 4)

XV

BLACK HILLS
SOLARIS CITY, SOLARIS VII
BOLAN PROVINCE
LYRAN COMMONWEALTH
30 NOVEMBER 3084

DeGea surveyed the upscale bar as he entered. Six patrons, a waitress, and a bartender were the only people in the place. It wasn't his first choice, but McQuayle's Bar was on the edge of the Davion sector, convenient for meeting someone from the International Sector.

It was past midnight now, and rain was coming down, the heavy raindrops striking the bar's front window with enough force to drown out conversation near it. A rumble of thunder echoed overhead, the sound fading slowly until it was lost in the rain's steady drumbeat.

DeGea strode over to where the bartender, a tall, gaunt man with glasses, was wiping the bar top with a rag. "A bottle of Golden Lion beer," he said, tossing a couple of pound notes on the bar. He turned to look around and spotted his contact at a corner booth. "Make that two Golden Lions." He added another pair of bills to the first two. Beers quickly replaced the bills. DeGea nodded his thanks, picked up the bottles, and sat down at the booth. He placed one of the bottles in front of Sniezak.

"Thanks."

"No problem." DeGea took out the white noise generator, turned it on, and placed it on the table. "You have the information?"

"Right here." Sniezak tapped an envelope on the table. "It wasn't easy."

"Good."

"Do you have Reskov's DNA?"

"Yes," DeGea replied, hoping the retired agent wouldn't notice the lie.

"I hear Wozniak's been out at the Arms Test Field, running around in a *Jenner*."

"I've heard the same thing. How has the betting been?"

"Heavy. Mallory's playing up the 'unnamed grudge' angle and Wozniak's war record. Hasek's been keeping Skiles up at Donner's Lake. Right now, it's five-to-three odds in favor of Wozniak."

"Where's the fight taking place?"

"The Factory."

DeGea nodded and sipped his beer. "Any rumblings I should know about?"

"Someone killed a suspected Maskirovka agent three nights ago. Word is the Mask is looking for answers."

"It wasn't MIIO."

"I don't think it was any of the intelligence operations. They're still understaffed and are just trying to maintain their network. The baby SAFEs are—" He stopped and looked at the holoivid monitor over the bar.

DeGea followed his gaze and saw some sort of crime scene.

Sniezak frowned, turned to a smaller holoivid on the booth's wall, and turned it on. The screen came to life, showing the same scene the one over the bar was showing. At the bottom, a banner said: WELL-KNOWN KOBE BUSINESS OWNER KILLED BY SNIPER.

"Hey, bartender!" a man sitting at the bar said. "Change the channel! Who cares if a Snake was smoked? That's all they deserve!"

Most of the other patrons murmured agreement, and the bartender changed the channel to a talk show.

On the booth's holoivid the image changed, showing a middle-aged Asian man with thinning hair and a smile. Under the image, the name YEHO IMIKOTO appeared.

Sniezak's frown deepened. "That's interesting."

"Who's he?" DeGea asked.

"Independent information broker. If you had the cash, he'd deal with you. Medium-quality information, somewhat useful."

"Trouble?"

"I'm not sure. I suggest you have the local MIIO boys be careful for the next few weeks. This could be an isolated incident, or it could be the start of something."

DeGea slid his hand across the table and pulled the envelope toward him. "I suggest you tell the LIC the same thing."

"I'll try, but no telling what that idiot in charge is going to do."

DeGea stood. "I need to go. Until next time."

"Until then."

As DeGea reached the front door, the bartender said, "Last call. Bar closing in ten minutes."

XVI

DONNER LAKE

SOLARIS VII

BOLAN PROVINCE

LYRAN COMMONWEALTH

2 DECEMBER 3084

Skiles crouched in the building's shadows and waited for the sentry to walk past. A scant few lights were on, as only a part of the facility was in use, leaving the rest in darkness. Stars filled the night sky, though the moon hadn't risen yet.

The sentry passed within two meters of Skiles' hiding spot, but the MechWarrior remained perfectly still, letting the guard continue on patrol. Once the coast was clear, Skiles darted across the path and into the woods on the other side.

Blackstar Stables' Donner Lake facility was the same austere complex as when Drew Hasek-Davion had owned the stable. Mather Hasek was content to leave the training facility alone for the time being, as it had suffered little in the last two decades. Skiles hated the place, as did most of the stable's warriors.

Hasek had sent Skiles to the Donner Lake facility, supposedly to train and keep him away from Wozniak. Facility security had been increased, using the excuse of keeping Mallory's spies away, but Skiles knew the real reason.

It became clear he had to get off Solaris before the match. He caught the suspicious looks Hasek gave him whenever they were in the same room. Skiles had been a winner in the arenas, and Hasek wouldn't get rid of him without evidence. But if Mallory's evidence convinced Hasek, Skiles' days would be numbered.

He had tried contacting a few people on his list of intel agents, people who could get him off-planet quickly and quietly. But several had not answered his comm calls, and the one call that did go through

was answered by a weeping woman whose husband had just been killed the day before. Fearing something wrong, he had scanned the news sites and discovered that several people he had tried to contact had either disappeared or been killed by an unknown sniper.

He continued through the woods, confident the dark clothing he wore would hide him. His light-amplification goggles allowed him to move quickly. Twice he had to stop as sentries crossed his path; each time, he glanced at his watch.

He'd finally contacted a small Word cell in the city and offered them 100,000 C-bills to get him off-world. The contact, Hobart, had replied with a place and time: five clicks east of Donner Lake, in three hours.

He intended on being there in two.



He made the rendezvous with forty-five minutes to spare. The spot was in a clearing near the road leading to Donner Lake. He carefully searched the area to make sure he was alone. Finding no one, he located a hiding place behind a boulder where he could see the road without exposing himself.

Ten minutes later, a mid-sized car slowed onto the shoulder and stopped. Three people got out, and he scowled. Two of them were carrying machine guns, and Hobart had said he was coming alone.

After a brief conference, the two with machine guns went in opposite directions, while the third walked through the woods toward the meeting site. Skiles tracked both gunners with his light-amplification goggles and saw them enter the woods on either side of the third man. Slowly, Skiles took out his perscomm and dialed Hobart's number. He heard a soft buzz from the direction of the leader.

Strike one.

"Yes?" Hobart replied when the connection completed.

"Nomad here," Skiles said in a low voice. "I'm twenty minutes from the rendezvous point. You there yet?"

"No, still ten minutes out. Any problems?"

Strike two.

"The guards are everywhere!" Skiles hissed. "Are you alone?"

"Yes. Just me and the car."

Strike three.

"I'll meet you there, but I'll be a little late." He broke the connection and waited.

He heard Hobart whistle as he came into the clearing. The man was heavyset and shorter than Skiles, wearing a hat and overcoat. The

two gunners entered the clearing from opposite sides and met Hobart. Slowly, Skiles drew his pistol.

"What?" one of the gunners snarled.

"Keep your voice down!" Hobart hissed softly. "Sounds carries at night!"

"Okay, what?" The first gunman's now-softer tone marred by irritation.

"Skiles is currently dodging Hasek's security. He'll be here in about twenty minutes. We stick to the plan."

"We should just kill him."

"We need that list!"

"He doesn't have it."

"We can't take that chance! That list has our names, and I don't want to spend the rest of my life in prison!"

Skiles had heard enough. He stood and stepped around the boulder. The three men were clustered just ten meters away. He fired, drilling the gunner facing him with a trio of shots in his center of mass. As the first gunner fell, he fired three more rounds into the second gunner's back. The pistol's integral sound suppressor made the shots sound like someone clapping. The man toppled onto his face.

Skiles aimed and put two bullets into Hobart's leg. The contact fell on his back, screaming loudly. Skiles exchanged his pistol's magazine for a full one as he walked toward the downed men. All three were still on the ground, and only Hobart was moving.

Skiles reached the first gunner and took a quick look. The man was dead, blood covering his lips. Hobart was trying to extract something from inside a coat pocket, so Skiles put two more bullets into the man's arm before checking on the second gunner. After he determined this man was also dead, he walked back to Hobart and squatted next to him.

Hobart looked up at him with hate-filled eyes. "Traitor!" he spat.

"Survivor," Skiles replied.

"You can't run, you can't hide. You're a dead man—"

Skiles shot him twice in the chest and once in the head. "I've gotten enough of that from Wozniak," he muttered.

The sound of a car engine made him look up. Hobart's car was moving, accelerating back onto the road, and it sped out of sight.

He hissed a curse under his breath and quickly searched the dead men. His skintight gloves wouldn't leave any fingerprints, but he remained careful. He pocketed the cash they had but skipped the cards. Besides the two machine guns and the pistol in Hobart's pocket, the trio had nothing useful on them.

If Hobart and the others knew about the list, then so did the other Word cells on Solaris. Contacting them now would be even more dangerous, especially with the unknown witness in the car. He briefly

considered flagging down a car and hijacking it, but dismissed the idea. Traffic at night was nonexistent.

Without a vehicle, he wouldn't get far before Hasek's guards could find him, and any chance of escape would be eliminated. The only option was to sneak back into Donner Lake before they missed him.

He cleaned out Hobart's pockets, gathered up his brass, and headed back to the facility. He'd passed a ravine on his way out here, and he would throw the wallets in there. Hopefully, it would delay the police identifying the bodies.

He bundled his anger and disappointment away and got back to doing what he'd done since fleeing Terra—survive.



In the darkness, Skiles hadn't noticed the drone that hovered silently overhead, recording the entire incident and transmitting it to a small office back at Donner Lake. In the office, DeGea, Chou, and Baron Hasek watched Skiles creep off into the darkness.

"I'll get my men ready to take him when he gets back," the baron said. His expression was cold anger, his hands on the back of Chou's chair white with tension.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," DeGea replied.

Hasek turned to look at him. "Not a good idea? The bastard just murdered three men in front of us!"

"And any good lawyer could make a decent case for self-defense."

"I've seen enough to convince me Riordan's claims are valid."

DeGea nodded. "Yes, my lord. But I think we should let him think he got away with it, for now. I'm trying to build a case against Skiles or Reskov, separate from Mallory's evidence. Lee, have the drone follow Skiles back here. Let me know when he's a kilometer out. Also, see if you can trace that car. The driver's a witness."

"On it."

"I'm going to search his room. He may have left something we can use."

"I should go with you," Hasek said.

"No, stay here. The fewer in the room, the better. You can help me by delaying Skiles and giving me more time to look around. Don't tell him what we saw, just occupy him as long as you can without raising his suspicions."

XVII

BLACK HILLS
SOLARIS CITY, SOLARIS VII
BOLAN PROVINCE
LYRAN COMMONWEALTH
2 DECEMBER 3084

Jackson Davion Memorial Park was the newest feature in the Federated Suns' most affluent district. The park was a ribbon of trees, grass, and flowerbeds overlooking the lower sections of the district. From here, anyone could see as far as Kobe when the weather was clear.

DeGea sat on a park bench, his bored expression hiding his impatience. He had not slept in more than twenty-four hours. The search of Skiles' room had turned up several perscomms hidden in a floor vent. He'd downloaded the data on three of them before Chou alerted him to Skiles approaching the building. Hasek had intercepted Skiles long enough for DeGea to search the rest of the room, collect a few DNA samples, and leave.

A call to Sniezak had brought a team of crime-scene investigators out to where Skiles had killed the men. Moving quickly and surely, the scene was photographed, the evidence collected, the bodies carted away. It had taken two more hours to reclaim the IDs from the ravine. When the sun came up, the crime scene had been processed, and both DeGea and Chou had headed for Solaris City for this meeting.

Several people were out in the park, enjoying the rare sunny morning. A couple off to his left sat on a bench, their heads close together like lovers. Off to his right, a woman and two children were walking away from him, passing Chou reading a noteputer on a bench. A few individuals strolling along, walking in opposite directions. A couple, followed by a massive man, an Elemental—

DeGea focused on the trio walking toward him. "He's here," he hissed into his lapel microphone.

"Copy," Chou replied through the earpiece.

The trio walked past Chou, who just looked up when the Elemental walked by, then returned to his noteputer. The woman with Mallory stopped and stared at Chou. Chou looked up and returned the woman's stare until Mallory said, "Miss Yamaguchi, please leave him alone." The woman turned away and followed Mallory, but continued glancing back at Chou every few seconds.

Mallory put his hand up, signaling the others to stop, then sat down on the bench, placed his walking cane between his legs, and leaned

forward, resting his chin on his hands on top of the cane. He looked at DeGea, then back out over the Black Hills. "Lovely morning, isn't it?"

DeGea shrugged. "At least it's not raining."

"Why do you want to see me?"

"I have a copy of Skiles' DNA. I need Reskov's to make the comparison."

"I see." Mallory looked at DeGea, his cheek now resting on his hands. "I have what could be Viktor Reskov's DNA profile, but I'm not sure."

DeGea stared at him. "Could be?"

"Reskov's the type of man to leave a few copies of his records intact with a false DNA profile."

"The why the hell did you claim you have Reskov's profile?"

Mallory gazed out over the city again. "I wanted to force Reskov into that arena fight."

"Are you that sure Skiles and Reskov are the same person?"

"Aye, I'm sure. So is Wozniak."

"Wozniak isn't thinking straight. Anger and guilt warp a person's perceptions."

"You just described every person who experienced the Jihad firsthand." Mallory looked at DeGea. "The war scarred everyone in it—you, me, Wozniak, and billions of people. Too many graves, too many lives destroyed, too few people punished."

"You want vengeance."

"I want *justice*."

"There are people looking for war criminals, you know."

"Yes, and I've contributed to their cause. But sometimes, that isn't enough."

"What do you get out of Wozniak killing Reskov?" DeGea asked sarcastically. "The ending for your new book?"

"Peace, for both of us." Mallory rose and motioned to Yamaguchi, who walked over and gave him an envelope. He turned and handed it to DeGea. "The DNA profile on Reskov we currently have. I asked Director Cox to continue looking for Reskov's profile. If I receive a new one, I will pass it along."

DeGea took the envelope. "How did—"

"Educated guess."

"MIIO ordered me to warn you off Skiles. We need that list."

"Justice has been shortchanged enough already."

"We're talking about the difference between a several thousand lives and maybe saving millions."

"Someone was once quoted as saying, 'A single death is a tragedy, a million deaths a statistic.' He should know. He slaughtered tens of millions of his own people a thousand years ago. He never saw justice

in this world. We live in worlds of grays, Tyson, but sometimes the choices are black and white. Viktor Reskov is such a case."

DeGea stood. "You're interfering with state business."

"Tell me this, if we keep compromising our principles, where does it stop? How far must we fall before we're no better than Reskov and the Word?"

"You're naive."

"No, I'm taking a stand. Reskov will not escape justice. Goodbye."

Mallory walked away. DeGea watched him rejoin his bodyguard and aide and depart with a light step.

Chou waited until they had left sight before he joined DeGea. "Well?"

"We have Reskov's DNA profile," DeGea replied. "But I don't know if it's worth it."

XVIII

BLACK HILLS
SOLARIS CITY, SOLARIS VII
BOLAN PROVINCE
LYRAN COMMONWEALTH
5 DECEMBER 3084

The green room in the Federated Suns Broadcasting studio was actually painted a light blue, with photos of 'Mechs in arena combat lining three of the walls. Two couches, three chairs, three tables, and a tri-vid in the corner comprised the furniture.

A buffet was laid out on a table, but Gideon didn't feel like eating. Instead, he sat upright in a chair, wearing the same suit he'd worn to Hasek's party, and grasping the chair's arms tightly. The tri-vid was on, displaying the show being broadcast just a few meters away from where he sat.

He was tired. Tony had been merciless during their time at the old Solaris Arms Test Field, both inside and outside the cockpit. For five days straight, Gideon ate, exercised, piloted the *Rattlesnake*, studied Reskov's previous arena matches, and slept poorly. When they returned to the Sun and Sword, he had spent most of the day sleeping.

Then Mallory had announced they would be appearing on several talk shows. "It's spectacle," Mallory had told him. "Everything on Solaris is about spectacle. Several reporters have clamored for an interview. Can't ignore them, so we used them."

The Arnie Archer Show was, like most programming produced on Solaris, about the Games. Archer, a former competitor, had survived the '63 riots, the FedCom War, and the Jihad before climbing out of the cockpit and into the studio. "Arnie's an old Solaris hand, and knows what it's like to fight outside of the arenas," Mallory had told Gideon. "He'll give us a fair shake."

Gideon glanced at Mallory, who looked relaxed as he checked his pocket watch, then at Ami, who was silent, demure, and attentive to the baron.

Mallory pursed his lips in thought. "Nervous?"

Gideon took in a deep breath. "A little."

"A little?" Mallory pulled down his glasses to peer over them. "Any stiffer, and you could be used for 'Mech armor. Relax, Gideon. It's a ten-minute segment and we'll be done. I'll do most of the talking, you sit there and look like Stone's Hammer. Answer any questions he throws at you, but keep it brief. And let's avoid mentioning you want to kill Reskov. The Gaming Commission frowns on those types of declarations."

The green room door opened, and a gangly man with a short beard but no mustache entered. He was dressed in a dark suit that seemed slightly large for his frame. He gave Gideon and the others a quick smile. "Riordan!" he said cheerfully. "Archie managed to rope you into appearing on his show?"

Mallory shrugged and smiled. "You know how Arnie is. How are things, Sal?"

Sal shrugged. "Not bad, not bad. What about you?"

"Good." Mallory pointed his cane at Gideon. "Sal, the gentleman sitting there is Gideon Wozniak. You may have heard of him. Gideon, this is Salvatore Santelli, Stablemaster of the Star Sharks, the first Republic-backed stable on Solaris."

Santelli grinned and stuck out an overly large hand. "It's an honor to meet you, Gideon. Your reputation precedes you. Your match with Skiles is generating a lot of attention."

Hesitantly, Gideon took the offered hand, and the two shook. Santelli's grip was stronger than his frame indicated. "Thank you."

"No poaching," Mallory said with a mock growl.

Once they released hands, Santelli approached the buffet, picked up a plate, and loaded it with food before sitting down. "Sorry," he said, motioning to the plate. "I haven't had anything to eat all day."

"Go ahead," Mallory said, lazily waving a hand. "We're having dinner after we're done here."

Santelli nodded and began eating. After a couple of minutes, there was a knock at the door, and a woman wearing a headset peeked in. "My lord?" she said to Mallory. "Mr. Archer wants to speak to you for a moment. It's about the ground rules for the interview."

The baron stood up. "All right. Ami, come with me."

Yamaguchi frowned. "Is that a good idea, my lord? Leaving Gideon alone?"

"I promise not to eat him," Santelli said with a grin.

"It's all right, Ami," Mallory said. "Sal's okay. It'll just be a couple of minutes. Be right back, Gideon."

After Mallory and Ami left, Santelli set the plate on the table next to him. He leaned forward in his chair, his attention on Gideon. "Major," he said. "You would not believe how much trouble you are causing me right now."

Gideon frowned. "Oh?"

"Oh, yes. I've gotten messages from several high-ranking people in the Republic wanting to know what the hell is going on. You resigned and left in a hurry."

"I had my reasons."

"Reskov?"

"Why do you care?"

Santelli sighed. "Until you arrived, I only had to worry about the occasional message from the Sphere Intelligence Service—er, Terra. In the last two weeks, I've received messages from General McMasters, Director Cox, Commanding General Lee, Paladin Steiner-Davion, and Exarch Stone himself. All of them want to know what the hell you're doing. I'm not used to being yelled at by senior government officials. Sours my stomach."

"Let them be upset. They knew I would go after Reskov as soon as possible."

"Director Cox is unhappy you used his resources to track Reskov down."

"Then he should do a better job of protecting them."

Santelli sighed again. "There is an old Persian saying, 'Blood doesn't wash away blood! They're all worried about you, Gideon. They think you're on a suicide mission.'"

Gideon stared at Santelli. "If I don't go after Reskov, I might have as well died at Ash Ford. I've got too many ghosts looking over my shoulder to stop now, not when I'm this close." He stood. "I have to see it through."

"And what happens if you kill him? What will happen?"

"The souls of every person he murdered will have peace." Gideon walked toward the door. "You can't talk me out of it."

Santelli's expression was somber. "I wouldn't dare, even if I was ordered to. I just wanted to pass along the concerns of a few important people."

The door opened and Mallory walked in, followed by Ami. "We're on in five minutes."

Santelli looked up. "Good." He patted his suit's pockets. "Hold on, Riordan. I have something for you." He pulled out an envelope and presented it to Mallory. "From Cox. The message said to deliver this to you personally."

Mallory took the envelope and pocketed it. "Thank you, Sal. Gideon, let's go. We should be done in about twenty minutes."

"Good," Santelli said, picking up his plate again. "Gives me time for seconds."

Mallory raised an eyebrow. "They do have food elsewhere on the planet, you know."

"But not this good, and all I have to do is answer Arnie's questions."

Mallory waved toward the door. "Come on, Gideon. Time to make your first public appearance."

Gideon didn't look back at Santelli as he left.



At this time of night, most of the buildings surrounding the FSB headquarters were deserted. Rain was in the air, though it hadn't started yet.

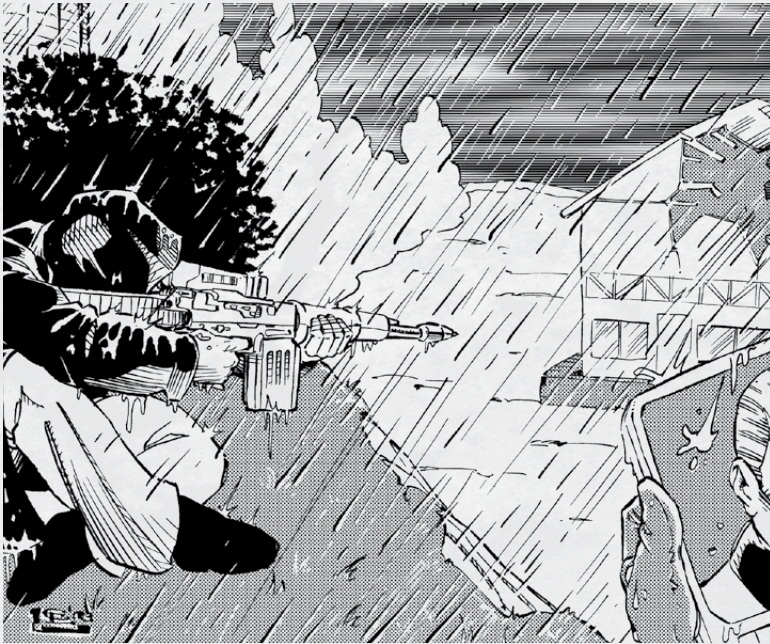
On the roof of a fifteen-story building, 300 meters from the network building, Terence Yang used a pair of binoculars to watch the main entrance. A League-made Starfire laser rifle was propped up against the wall. The rifle had the advantages of being silent and the target would never see the invisible beam, but Yang would have only one chance, as the Starfire wasn't designed for rapid fire.

Yang's orders were to locate and kill this Wozniak. It had taken the Hundred Swordsmen only two days to locate and follow the target after he had returned to the city. Yang had waited for his chance, and when the FSB announced the target would appear on one of their talk shows that night, his opportunity had arrived. All he had to do now was wait.



Amateur, Miller thought as he observed the man on the rooftop watching the front entrance of the FSB building. The Praetorian's scope clearly showed the target. *Been watching too many movies.*

He was located across the street, 150 meters away from the building and 400 meters from the other sniper. Miller was on the seventeenth floor, in a law firm's corner office. He sat a meter away from the open window, inside the dark office, behind the desk he had moved closer to the window. The Praetorian rested on the desk, its



biped deployed, its muzzle pointing toward the window. The sliding window was held open by an award he'd taken off an office shelf.

The message from his client had been unexpected, but the offer of another 30,000 C-bills had brought him here for a couple of hours of protection. He had picked up the enemy sniper almost immediately. His search for other possible snipers found none.

He saw the man stiffen, put the binoculars down, and pick up the laser rifle. Miller swung the Praetorian's sight down toward the street and spotted a group emerge from the broadcast building. A woman and three men, one of whom he recognized as Wozniak. He pivoted the rifle back up and reacquired the target just as the sniper shouldered the laser rifle.

The Praetorian's muffled *crack* echoed weirdly, but the suppressor and office walls contained most of the sound. Miller's round slammed into the amateur sniper with enough force to spin him and send the laser rifle flying over the roof's edge. The sniper continued spinning, lost his balance, and followed the rifle over the side. Miller followed the man's body down until just short of the impact. He refocused his attention on the group at the FSB building, only to find they had already started driving away.

He began cleaning up all traces of his presence in the office. He had a schedule to keep.

XIX

CATHAY
SOLARIS CITY, SOLARIS VII
BOLAN PROVINCE
LYRAN COMMONWEALTH
6 DECEMBER 3084

The phone call Xiang was expecting happened thirty minutes after seeing reports that a dead triad member was found near the FSB building in the Black Hills. The news of a damaged laser rifle near the body inflamed speculation, and the Federated Suns Police Department was under pressure to find out what happened.

He sat in his office, teacup in hand. He was taking a sip when the phone rang. "Yes?"

"The delivery went wrong," Lee Yen Wa said. He sounded angry. With all the intelligence activity on Solaris, there was a good possibility the phone conversation was being recorded.

"I know. Any details?"

"It appears a rival company made their delivery first."

Xiang thought for a few seconds. "How are you going to handle the next delivery?"

"We're putting extra people on it and moving operations closer to the customer. I think we'll see better results next time."

"We'll see. The sooner it's done, the better."

"We're working on it."

"See that you do. Goodbye."

There was a knock at the door. Xiang looked up to see Somes standing in the doorway, a folder in hand. "Autopsy on Harrison Fong."

"Give me the highlights," Xiang said.

Somes closed the door behind him. He placed the folder on Xiang's desk and sat. "Single round in the back of the head. From the angle, the shooter was off the ground, probably on a roof. Clean and quick."

"Weapon?"

"Can't tell. The bullet's too badly deformed. It's a heavy slug, somewhere between ten and twelve millimeters."

"Any evidence on the shooter?"

"No. The police think the sniper shot from a roof about two hundred meters away. Has to be a pro—they left nothing behind. One of the neighbors thought she saw a man she didn't know put something into a car trunk and drive off, but couldn't give any more detail than that."

Xiang put his teacup down and leaned back in his chair. "How are the others taking it?"

"Tan's angry, no change there. But Kolarova? Fong was like an uncle to her, took her under his wing where she was first assigned here. She's making a show, but she's hurting."

Xiang sighed. "We should send a representative to the funeral. She can go, but in disguise and with security. The sniper might stake out the ceremony, so she needs to be careful."

"You know Tan's going to complain that we should all attend, to pay our respects."

"If Tan's bluster matched his ability, he would be in charge."

Somes nodded. "What's the latest on the triads' efforts to kill Wozniak?"

"They failed last night."

"What happened?"

"Someone killed the triad shooter while he was waiting to kill Wozniak."

"You think the shootings of Fong and the triad sniper are connected?"

"I'd be surprised if they weren't. Work our contacts in the police and see if they can give us anything they're not releasing. Do we have anyone over in Kobe?"

"A couple of part-timers. No one of influence."

"See if you can get the autopsy report on that tea house owner killed last week, along with anything you can dig up on the dead man. I don't think this is a random killer. As for Wozniak, Lee assured me the next attempt is already underway."

Somes snorted. "I'll believe it when I see it."

XX

BLACK HILLS
SOLARIS CITY, SOLARIS VII
BOLAN PROVINCE
LYRAN COMMONWEALTH
11 DECEMBER 3084

It was early morning when Gideon entered Guzman Park, only half a block from the hotel. The sun was rising above the horizon, cutting through the thin clouds and driving away the night's last shadows. A few early risers were out and active, some jogging, while others were just enjoying the morning.

Gideon was dressed to run, and after fifteen minutes of warmups, he proceeded to do just that. It took several minutes to settle into an easy, steady pace as he jogged along the path.

He'd started running the day after the party, to get back some of the fitness and endurance he needed to pilot a BattleMech. He felt the freest when he ran, when the ghosts left him alone and he could think about other things.

While jogging, his thoughts settled on something he hadn't thought of for a while—the future. Gideon had never considered anything beyond killing Reskov. For too long, his future had been measured in minutes, if not seconds. There was no reason to think beyond the next battle, let alone after the war ended. Even on Solaris, his only future was concentrated on killing Reskov.

That line of thought led to another: *Who is Gideon Wozniak, now and for the last sixteen years?* Federated Suns soldier, Stone's man, Solaris gladiator, or something else? He wasn't sure he wanted to know.

He'd lost track of time when he felt a presence beside him. He glanced over and saw Ami, dressed in running clothes, keeping pace with him. Surprised, he stopped, but she jogged on for several more paces before also stopping.

Gideon stared at her. "What are you doing here?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?"

"How did you find me?"

"I followed you."

"How long have you been running with me?"

"The beginning of your second lap. Ten or fifteen minutes." She tilted her head slightly and put her hands on her hips. "What's wrong?"

"Who said anything's wrong?"

"Gideon, you are many things, but you're a lousy liar." She walked over to him. "What is it?"

He looked away to sort his thoughts. "The future."

"In what way?"

"In any way. What happens after I kill Reskov? What do I do then? For the last fifteen years I didn't have to think about the future because I was too busy fighting in the present."

Ami looked around, then fixed her gaze on Gideon. "What I see is someone who forgot what it was like to love and enjoy life. Further discussion will have to wait, because we are surrounded by people wanting to kill us."

Gideon glanced behind him and saw four men stalking toward them. He looked behind Ami and saw six more men approaching. He noticed they were in a small clearing, trees shielding them from the rest of the park, and no one else in sight. He cursed as he realized Ami was

right. He had been so wrapped up in thought that he had led them both into trouble.

"They're jamming my signal," Ami said, putting her perscomm back into her pocket. "This isn't a random attack."

"Get behind me," Gideon directed.

"Not happening," she replied, turning to face the thugs coming in from the right. Her expression turned cold and hard. She reached for something inside her sweatshirt sleeve, and Gideon heard metal scraping metal.

Their attackers wore rough clothing and the menacing look of predators. All of them were young, and as they neared, they spread out into a circle around Ami and Gideon.

"Can you handle four of them?" Gideon couldn't keep the skepticism out of his tone as he turned to face the others.

Ami's tone was businesslike. "Not a problem."

Two of Gideon's opponents revealed short metal pipes, while the others had knives. One of the knife men gave Gideon a smile that showed bad teeth. "That's him," he said in a thick accent. "Kill him."

The two pipe-wielding thugs attacked Gideon at the same time. He stepped to the right and threw a side kick into knee of the closer attacker. The knee joint audibly cracked, followed by the attacker's scream of intense pain. As the thug started to fall, Gideon shoved him into his partner coming in from the left. Both went down in a tangle of limbs.

Gideon stepped back as another thug attacked, the man's slash missing his throat by several centimeters. Before the man could recover, Gideon kicked him in the groin, then stepped forward, grabbed his head with both hands, and pulled it down. Knee met face with a loud *crunch*, and the now-unconscious goon dropped to the ground.

He had to quickly twist to the left to avoid the next thug's knife thrust. A burning pain along his right biceps told him he hadn't avoided the blade completely. Using the momentum, he slammed a forearm across the attacker's jaw while grabbing the man's knife hand at the wrist and digging his thumb into the soft flesh between thumb and index finger. As the hand opened and the knife fell, Gideon drove his elbow into the disarmed thug's face twice, breaking his nose and knocking him unconscious.

The fifth thug leaped over the fallen bodies of his companions. Gideon jerked back, but the would-be assassin's follow-up roundhouse kick slammed him in the ribs hard enough to make him gasp. Gideon blocked two more knife slashes and ducked a hook kick to his head, but a low kick smashed into his right thigh, staggering him. Seeing his chance, the thug moved in quickly, his knife flashing in the morning sun.

Gideon waited until the thug was in mid-thrust before twisting out of the knife's path and hitting him with a backfist to the nose that

snapped the man's head back. Gideon grabbed his attacker's wrist, yanked it straight, and slammed a palm strike into the back of the elbow. The arm bent the wrong way as the elbow joint shattered and the thug shouted in pain. A hard left hook cut off the scream.

The leader stood several meters away, his eyes wide with shock as he dropped his knife and reached for a pistol in his belt. Something whistled past Gideon's ear and sank into the thug's throat. Wild-eyed, the man grabbed at his neck, blood streaming around the metal spike buried there. He dropped to his knees, then onto his side and relaxed as death took him.

Gideon spun in time to see Ami kick the second pipe-wielding thug in the face. The man went down and didn't move. The other attackers remained down.

"We need to go!" Ami snapped. She reached down and removed the spike from the leader's throat and quickly wiped the blood off on his shirt.

"Right," Gideon said.

Ami moved past him and did the same with the bodies of the men she had been fighting: she stooped to remove a single spike from each body, wiped them clean on the dead men's clothes, and put them into her sweatshirt pocket.

Tony's words came back to him. *Yamaguchi reminds me of a mountain snowcat—beautiful, sleek, and deadly.*



They cut through the trees until they came to another path and started jogging again. Gideon's thigh and ribs ached, and the cut on his biceps flared with every step. Ami, on the other hand, didn't look injured or out of breath, though her eyes never stopped watching their surroundings.

Neither of them said anything until they passed through the park gate.

"Left," Ami said.

Gideon turned with her, and they jogged back to the hotel.

In the suite, Mallory looked up from a book, an expression of curiosity as they walked in. His eyes narrowed when he saw the blood on Gideon's running clothes, and he stood up. "Smithers!" he yelled. "First aid, kit, if you please!" He looked at Gideon. "Trouble?"

"Someone tried to kill us in the park," Ami said. "Triad enforcers, from the look of them. We left bodies behind." She pulled her sleeve back, and Gideon saw a leather sheath with several empty slots. Ami took the spikes from her pocket and resheathed them. *"Hannin o mitsukete hoshii no deshou ka, goshujin-sama?"*

"lie," Mallory replied. "*Dare ga warui to shitteru, to omou. Ato de te ni kakeru.*"

"*Hai, goshuijin-sama.*"

"What do you mean you'll take care of this?" Gideon demanded.

The butler came in with a large white case, and Mallory motioned to Gideon. "Check him, Smithers. I'll call the police."



The hot water felt good on Gideon's face. His ribs and thigh were bruised, but Smithers, who had served in the AFFS as a combat medic, had determined nothing was broken. As for the biceps, the cut was shallow, more painful than anything else.

The police had arrived ten minutes later, and both Gideon and Ami gave their statements. Gideon read the suspicion in the detectives' eyes, but the number of bodies and Gideon's injuries had gone a long way to making the incident a case of self-defense. After a brief conversation with the baron, the detectives left, and Mallory had declared the case closed.

The shower was just what Gideon needed after the run and the fight at the park. There was another talk-show interview scheduled for that afternoon, then another five days out at the old Solaris Arms Test Field, then the match.

Then what?

Deep in thought, with his head under the shower, he was startled when he felt hands run up his back. He spun and found himself staring into Ami's green eyes. She was nude, her skin already wet from the shower, and she smiled at him.

"I thought you'd need someone to wash your back," she said, then kissed him.

Gideon froze for an instant, then returned her kiss.

When they broke the kiss off, he said, "I don't think this is a good idea."

"I do."

Gideon felt his resolve harden. "No," he said. "Get the—"

Ami caressed his shoulders for a few seconds, then ran down his bare chest, over his scars. "You are no coward." She was only slightly shorter than him, he realized.

Her touch sent a shiver down his spine, and his certainty increased. "If you don't leave, I will—"

Ami pulled his head down to her level and kissed him again—hard. Gideon's resolve crumbled, and rational thought fled.

XXI

CATHAY
SOLARIS CITY, SOLARIS VII
BOLAN PROVINCE
LYRAN COMMONWEALTH
13 DECEMBER 3084

Xiang noticed the tension in the room as soon as he entered it.

The Hundred Swordsmen's leadership was seated at the table, their expressions unreadable masks, their eyes following Xiang as he approached. The enforcers were in place along the walls, but there was neither food nor serving girls present this time.

"Brothers," Xiang said, "I have come as you requested. How may I help you?"

"This Wozniak has cost us much face," Lee Yen Wa said slowly. "Six of ours are dead, and yet he lives."

"I did say he was a soldier."

"It was not only him," Kwan Lok said. "There was a woman with him, a ninja."

Xiang frowned. "Impossible. No *nekakami* would ally themselves with a non-Combine lord."

"Not all ninja are *nekakami*."

"Enough," Lee snapped. "The woman's skills are not to be denied, but we are not here to talk about her. Our next chance to kill Wozniak happens in four days, at the Factory."

Xiang frowned. "Is that wise? It is a very public place."

"The Hundred Swordsmen are not in the habit of failing," Lee's eyes held a dangerous gleam.

Xiang felt uneasy. "Security will be tight."

"We have a way in." Lee exchanged glances with the triad leaders, then said, "There is a feeling among us that our brothers in the Golden Lions have not shouldered their part of this operation. Therefore, we insist that you, Shen Xiang, accompany our people on this operation."

A chill went through Xiang. "Is that wise? I am not a young man."

"You will accompany the team."

Xiang sighed and bowed. "As you wish, my lord. I need to—"

"You will stay here until the strike team leaves," Lee continued, "as our honored guest. You will be supplied with everything you need during your stay."

"But I have a business to run!"

"The Solaris Sniper has been busy in the last two weeks."

Xiang frowned. The killer, called the Solaris Sniper in the press, had claimed five more victims since the Kobe businessman—including an assistant stablemaster in Silesia and a minor noble in the International Sector. The official body count stood at nine, not including the triad member in the Black Hills. “There is little chance I am a target.”

“Maybe, but we would be poor hosts if we allowed you to be killed while under our protection.”

Xiang repressed a sigh. “Very well. May I at least communicate with my associates to let them know I will be unavailable for a while?”

“You may use our phones. The connections are secure and untraceable, but keep it short. Dinner will be at seven, and we will discuss the operation in detail then.”

Xiang turned to find two triad enforcers standing behind him. “This way to the phone, sir,” one of them said.

The Maskirovka agent turned back and smiled at Lee. “Until this evening.”

XXII

THE FACTORY, MONTENEGRO
SOLARIS CITY, SOLARIS VII
BOLAN PROVINCE
LYRAN COMMONWEALTH
17 DECEMBER 3084

In the *Rattlesnake's* cockpit, Gideon brought the 'Mech online one switch at a time, making sure each system was running before moving onto the next one. The controls were now as familiar to him as the back of his hand. Even the small cockpit had lost its uniqueness.

The *Rattlesnake's* weapons came online. He studied the board for a few seconds until the readings stabilized, then activated the ECM unit and targeting computer.

“Confirm all systems are green,” Madson’s voice said over the radio.
“Copy, Doctor,” Gideon said.

The Factory’s 'Mech bays were located on opposite sides of the arena, designed to prevent competitors from starting a fight in them. Gideon’s match with Skiles was third of six matches in the Factory tonight. A *Thunderbolt* in the yellow and red of Tandrek Stables stood in the bay next to him, while a silver-and-green *Akuma* belonging to the Silver Dragons was berthed next to the *Thunderbolt*. Across from

Gideon, the blunt blue-and-gold nose of a Lynch Stables *Nightstar* sat, looking dangerous, even though its reactor was on standby.

"Factory Control to MechWarrior Wozniak." The voice was scratchy and washed out over the comm. "You have five minutes before you must move to your entry hatch."

"Wozniak to Stadium Control," Gideon replied. "Standing by." He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes.

The last week had been both the hardest and best time he'd had in recent memory. At the testing grounds, Tony was even harder on him than before, going so far as to arrange a two-on-one match in the urban center against a couple of the stable's new hires. The battle had been a long and close thing, but Gideon and the *Rattlesnake* had come out on top.

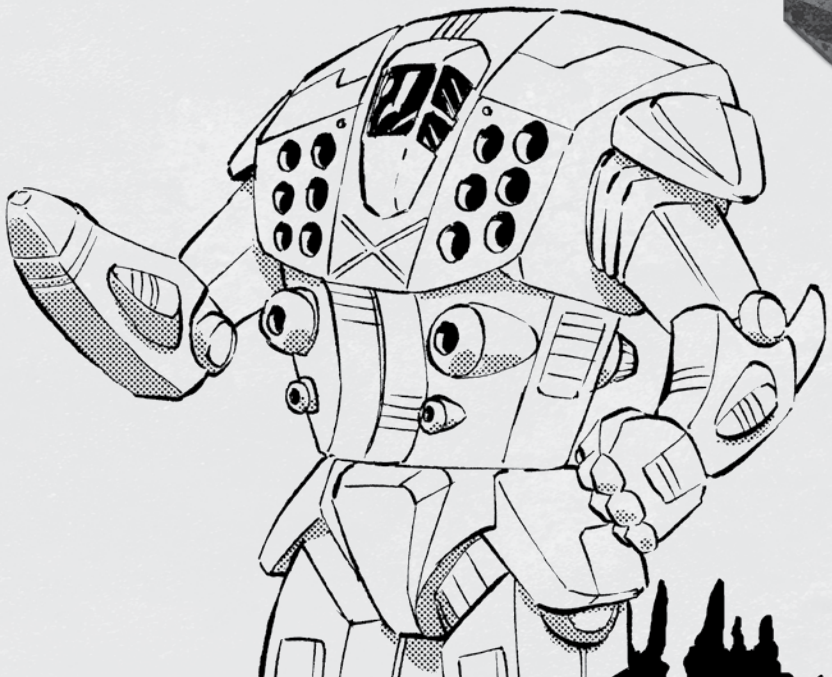
Ami came to him at night. They'd made love a couple more times, but just having her there was enough. During those times, the flashbacks and ghosts backed away, and he slept deeper than he had in years.

But now it was time to put that all aside and do what he had come all the way from Terra to do—kill Viktor Reskov.

"Factory Control to MechWarrior Wozniak. Move to the entry hatch."



In the other 'Mech bay, Skiles was going through his own checkout. His *Longshot* replaced the original weapons with Clan models, freeing



up enough mass for jump jets. He had racked up a string of victories in this machine, but win or lose, he knew this would be the last time he'd pilot it.

"Factory Control to MechWarrior Skiles. Five minutes until you must move to the entry hatch."

'Understood, Control. Skiles out.'

After killing Hobart and the others, he'd gotten back to the Donner Lake facility without alerting anyone. Over the next several days he'd tried to arrange passage off-planet, but his contacts either refused to help or failed to answer. The Solaris Sniper had killed a few of them, and the rest had gone into hiding. He was trapped, all his bridges burned, and he had no way out. All thanks to Wozniak and his insufferable sponsor. He had no choice now—either he or Wozniak was going to die tonight.

"Factory Control to MechWarrior Skiles. Move to the entry hatch."

It's time to bury you, Gideon, he thought. Bury you with the rest of the Ash Ford bodies.

XXIII

THE FACTORY, MONTENEGRO
SOLARIS CITY, SOLARIS VII
BOLAN PROVINCE
LYRAN COMMONWEALTH
17 DECEMBER 3084

DeGea and Chou traversed the corridor housing the Factory's upper-level box seats. All around came the faint roar of the stadium's crowd, and a loudspeaker made an announcement for the next match—Wozniak against Victor Skiles.

Mallory's aide had called two days ago, extending an invitation to watch the fight from the Stablemaster's boxes. DeGea was suspicious, even more so when the aide requested that he bring along the DNA samples and Skiles' DNA report.

Traffic had held them up, so DeGea, already in a sour mood, angrily strode along the corridor, ignoring the few other people around him, either stadium employees or spectators. Chou followed a step behind.

DeGea spotted the massive bulk of Mallory's bodyguard standing at the base of a flight of stairs leading up to one of the Factory's boxes. The giant Elemental watched DeGea storm toward him, and stepped in front of the stairs.

"I want to speak to Mallory!" DeGea snarled.

The bodyguard loomed over him the same way an adult loomed over a ten-year-old child. "Not until you calm down," he said in a deep voice.

DeGea glared up at the Elemental. "I *am* calm."

"You are doing a poor job of showing it."

"Sergei?" Mallory's voice came from up the stairs. "Who is it?"

"Your guests have arrived, but Mr. DeGea is upset."

"I am not upset!" DeGea yelled, startling several passersby.

"Let them up, Sergei," Mallory said. "He's not going to calm down until he's yelled at me for a while."

The giant stepped to the side. "You may pass," he said. "But do not disrespect the baron."

DeGea stormed up the short flight of stairs, followed by Chou. The top of the stairs opened up to a small chamber. A dozen chairs surrounded a holotank displaying the arena floor. The walls had several framed high-definition pictures of past fights in the Factory. Lights were low, and there a table with snacks ran along one wall. Across the room, three men were sitting at a table, hunched over computers.

There were a dozen other people in the room. Several sat around the holotank while others hovered near the food table. The conversation was soft, punctuated by a running commentary from the arena's broadcast team.

"Tyson," Mallory said. He had been standing off to one side of the staircase, with Ami nearby. He held a glass of liquor in one hand. "You're just in time."

"What's going on?" DeGea demanded.

"I take it the DNA profiles you had for Skiles and Reskov didn't match."

"No, they didn't."

The baron reached into a pocket inside his suit and handed DeGea an envelope. "Try this one. This one was part of an offline backup archive Cox's people located in the North American Rockies several months ago. It's different from the one I gave you. See if it matches."

DeGea took the envelope and frowned at it. "How long have you had this?"

"Less than a week."

"Why didn't you give this to me sooner?" Realization broke over DeGea's face. "You didn't want to do anything to stop the match between Wozniak and Skiles!"

"And if I did delay giving it to you?"

"Why are you doing this for Wozniak?"

"I have my reasons. One day, I might tell you. But for now, enjoy the match. We've plenty of food, and there's still a few unclaimed chairs around the holotank." He looked over his shoulder. "Cordelia! How long do we have?"

"Less than a minute!"

Mallory shifted to the trio at the table. "Tony?"

"*Rattlesnake* is green across all boards," Tony replied. "Dr. Madson says he's pleased with the telemetry he's getting."

Mallory closed his eyes. "*Alea jacta est*," he muttered just loud enough for DeGea to hear. "The die is cast."

Tony nodded. "I just hope your dice don't roll snake eyes."

XXIV

THE FACTORY, MONTENEGRO SOLARIS CITY, SOLARIS VII BOLAN PROVINCE LYRAN COMMONWEALTH 17 DECEMBER 3084

The Factory was the least secure of the big five arenas. Montenegro had been leveled during the Word's occupation, and the Free Worlds League's disintegration had crippled any recovery efforts, resulting in a hodgepodge of repaired and rebuilt blocks interspaced with ruins.

The Factory itself had been heavily damaged, and reconstruction was years behind schedule. Most arena repairs were done quickly and sloppily, if at all. Only half the lights in the 'Mech bays worked, forcing the stables to bring their own lighting when they had matches scheduled.

The damage and haphazard repairs extended to the 'Mech transportation tunnels under Montenegro, all of which had been damaged or destroyed during the Jihad. Since then, a couple of the collapsed tunnels had been cleared and repaired enough to allow 'Mechs to move to and from the Factory.

The arena's west 'Mech bay had suffered major damage to a wall, resulting in a meter-wide gap and an abscess in the stadium's foundation, a half-dozen meters away from a partially blocked access tunnel. Instead of filling in the entire length of the crude tunnel, the construction company had cut corners and laid a thick coat of ferrocrete over both entrances, but left the internal opening alone.

Hidden by a pair of support pillars in the darkest corner of the 'Mech bay, away from the lights and activity, a hole appeared in the ferrocrete patch. Over the next several minutes, the hole grew larger, pieces of ferrocrete falling to the hangar floor. Finally, the hole in the patch was large enough to allow a person to step through.

One by one, twelve men stepped through the hole into the 'Mech bay. Each was dressed in coveralls and a balaclava, and carried a machine gun and a pistol.

Xiang was the fifth one through the hole, following Lo Wang. He knelt in the shadow of a support pillar and watched the 'Mech bay activity. He still felt uneasy. The plan seemed wrong, too elaborate, something from an *Immortal Warrior* movie script. Only Wang and his two lieutenants were Hundred Swordsmen; the others were street thugs hired to supply muscle.

A battered-looking *Quickdraw* and *Vindicator* stood in the bays closest to the strike team. Farther on, technicians swarmed a badly mauled *Wolverine*. In the bay nearest the door leading into the arena, Xiang spotted the 'Mech they were after. He tapped Wong on the shoulder and pointed at it.

When the Red Pole stared back at Xiang, he whispered, "*Masakari*."

Wong's eyes lit up in recognition of the name. He turned and signaled his men to advance.

The takeover was swift and bloodless. The technicians were unarmed, and the guards, little more than hired thugs themselves, quickly surrendered. While the personnel were herded into an ammo bunker, Xiang, Wong, and a couple strike team members headed for the black-and-green Clan 'Mech.

"How long do we have before arena security responds?" Xiang asked as they climbed the gantry stairs.

"Ten minutes," Wong replied.

The *Masakari*'s cockpit hatch was unlocked. While one thug stripped off his coveralls, the other stepped into the cockpit. After a minute, he stuck his head outside. "Easy," he said. "Five minutes."

"Good," Wong replied. He looked at the other man, who was adjusting his coolant vest. "Can you pilot this?"

The MechWarrior gave Wong an annoyed look. "It's a 'Mech, isn't it?"

Xiang wasn't so sure. The man had the wasted look and the bright, burning eyes of an addict. He'd been assured that Lin Jung was an experienced MechWarrior, but drugs and an 85-ton killing machine were not a good mix.

Wong tossed Jung a cylinder the size of Xiang's hand. "Here."

Jung smiled when he snatched it out of the air. "Good stuff?"

"The best. It's KZ-X, fresh out of the lab."

Muffled by the thick walls, Xiang heard the sounds of 'Mech combat. "They've started," he said. "We're running out of time."

The security hacker stuck his head out of the cockpit. "I need Jung for the final steps."

Wong motioned Jung toward the cockpit. "Get going."

XXV

THE FACTORY, MONTENEGRO
SOLARIS CITY, SOLARIS VII
BOLAN PROVINCE
LYRAN COMMONWEALTH
17 DECEMBER 3084

The Factory had once been a manufacturing plant, but where IndustrialMechs once walked, BattleMechs now dueled. There were two multistory buildings in the arena, the remains of the original factory buildings connected by a bridge. The lighting was erratic, leaving shadow pools across the arena. The floor was littered with junked equipment and bits from years of matches, rendering sensors useless.

As soon as the siren went off, Gideon charged down the ramp from his starting point, cut hard right on the pockmarked ferrocrete, and put the *Rattlesnake* into a full run. As the *Longshot* stepped clear of the ruined storage tank, Gideon had already closed to 200 meters.

The *Longshot's* medium lasers missed Gideon's 'Mech by a couple meters, burning into the building wall behind the *Rattlesnake*. The structure, which had been hit countless times in the past, seemed to absorb the beams without effect.

Gideon's return fire fared better. Four lasers struck the *Longshot*, three melting armor across the torso, the fourth liquefying arm armor. Before Skiles could fire again, Gideon pressed down on the foot pedals to send the *Rattlesnake* up and onto the roof of the larger building.

"A good start," Tony said over the radio. "Keep an eye on your heat."

"On it," Gideon replied.

"Be careful, and keep moving."

"Yes, Mommy, I will." Gideon spun and raced for the bridge connecting the two buildings.



Skiles grounded his teeth in frustration. He'd only fought in the Factory once before, and that had been a straightforward fight. He had expected Wozniak to be cautious at first, but the *Jenner's* sudden appearance had caught him off guard, and his first shots had missed. The Streak missiles had refused to fire, unable to get a lock. *Bastard has ECM*, he thought, switching the short-range-missile racks to manual firing. The loss of armor was serious, and it galled him that Wozniak had drawn first blood.

Skiles considered his next move as he ran toward the smaller building. From the corner of the three-story building, he saw movement on the bridge. He twisted and fired both medium lasers and missiles. His lasers struck Wozniak's birdlike 'Mech, while a couple short-range missiles smacked into the *Jenner*. Wozniak fired just a beat later. Three of the lasers struck the wall of the smaller building, while the other two caught the *Longshot* in the torso and leg. The *Jenner* jumped to the roof and out of sight.

Viktor smiled slowly. One of the missiles had struck the *Jenner's* head, no doubt giving Wozniak a reminder of his own mortality. The smile faded as Skiles' armor screen indicated the armor over his torso was thin. He turned the corner and raced for the building's doorway.



Gideon's head was pounding, the result of a missile exploding only two meters from where he sat. There was a slight inward bulge in the cockpit's wall from where the warhead had struck, but he saw no damage to any systems.

"Gideon!" Tony shouted. "You all right?"

"Fine," he growled, moving away from the bridge. The roof was only two-thirds intact; the rest opened to the second floor below. "Bastard rang my bell, that's all!"

"He got the better of you in that exchange."

"I'm still ahead on style points."

"You're beginning to sound like your dad."

The sound of the elevator made Gideon glance in that direction. "Elevator's active."

"It may be a trick. He could be sending it up empty to get you moving."

"Maybe," Gideon agreed. "But if he is coming up, I'll hit him."

"Be careful."

"I will."

The platform rose into view, with nothing on it. Instinct told him to move left, and he did so. The *Longshot* rose on its jump jets, clearing the rooftop, all four lasers firing down on him. The lasers missed the *Rattlesnake* by a couple meters, scarring the roof instead.

Gideon immediately ignited his jump jets, sending his 'Mech across the arena to the other building. "Forgot he had jump jets," he muttered as he landed.

"Be careful—"

Sirens blared, and wall-mounted signal lights flashed. Gideon glanced around to see what had happened. "What the hell?"

"I don't know—"

"Factory Control to MechWarriors Skiles and Wozniak." The Factory's controller voice sounded distracted and annoyed. "There is an unauthorized BattleMech heading toward the arena from the west 'Mech bay. The pilot has refused all communications attempts. We are suspending the match until the situation is resolved. Please power down your weapons and move to the east bay entrance."

"This your doing, Viktor?" Gideon demanded.

"As if I need help to kill you," Skiles growled.

The sound of weapons fire striking steel made Gideon glance toward the arena's west 'Mech entrance. The heavy steel door was sagging, smoke rising from burnt metal. "Tony," he said. "What the hell is in the west 'Mech bay?"

"We're looking," Tony said, his tone brisk. "Cordelia! Anything?"

Cordelia's voice was too faint to hear, but Tony snarled a curse. "Gideon, there's supposed to be a—"

Something slammed into the already wrecked door, ripping it free of its frame and sent it bouncing off the raised platform before it crashed to the arena floor. Moving slowly, the hood-like body and the blunt nose of an assault 'Mech in green and black emerged from the tunnel's darkness.

"—*Masakari!*"

The hackles on the back of Gideon's neck rose. "Oh, crap."



"What the hell is happening?" DeGea demanded.

The Stabmaster's box was a disjointed symphony—people talking, shouting, all trying to make their voices heard.

"Quiet!"

Everyone turned to look at Riordan Mallory. His expression was cold fury. "Tony," he said, his voice like a cracking whip, "access the situation in the arena. Dr. Madson, we need your computer skills. Cordelia, please find out from arena control what the hell is going on. Everyone else, please remain silent."

Everyone not busy watched the Clan-built 'Mech walk out of the tunnel on the holoivid. Mallory planted his cane in front of him and glared at the image. "It appears someone is intent on playing their own game."

"Arena control says they've lost communications with the west 'Mech bay," Cordelia said. "I've demanded that the east 'Mech bay door be opened, but they're refusing to do so."

"Tell them to open it *now!*" Mallory snarled.

"Yelling at me won't help."

DeGea noticed the baron's knuckles were white from the grip on his cane.

"Tony," Mallory said, his voice tight, "what are we dealing with here?"

"A *Masakari* Prime, PPCs and an LRM rack, targeting computer. We nicknamed them '*Massacres*' because that's what they do to 'Mechs less than fifty tons in one volley."

"What is he after?" Mallory muttered.

The *Masakari* turned toward the *Rattlesnake* and fired.

TO BE CONCLUDED IN SHRAPNEL #9!



THE MALTHUS CONFEDERATION

ERIC SALZMAN

SEA FOX WATCH REPORT

1 AUGUST 3152

SUBJECT: THE MALTHUS CONFEDERATION

Many travelers in the Hinterlands have reported unsettling encounters with a group already well entrenched in the region and capable of exercising surprising strength if challenged. Though claiming little territory outright, aside from the abandoned pleasure domes of Dustball, the Malthus Confederation has proven to be the power behind many leaders on independent worlds, and has even established footholds within the power structures in several of the nascent proto-states in the region.

How did such an organization arise, seemingly from nowhere, and what is the source of its power? Our investigation has brought disturbing facts to light, and made it clear we can no longer trust the Free Guilds. Even more troubling, perhaps we never could.

The origins of the Confederation can be traced back to House Malthus, which first settled on Romulus in the 2100s, where its scions were described as "moderately rich, intelligent, and not above criminal activity." Success in shipping and mining enterprises enabled family heads to enter politics. In the 2300s, during the Commonwealth's Nine Archons era, Archon Treasurer Brandon Malthus flagrantly abused his position to enrich the family.

The Malthuses were already the heads of the largest criminal cartel in the Tamar Pact by the time they brought Malthus Gambling Unlimited to the failed mining colony of Dustball. Though the mineshafts had quickly played out, the Malthus Syndicate enjoyed enormous success with its New Monaco pleasure dome, quickly converting the planetary

By the 3130s, dozens of Free Guilds in the occupation zones counted a syndicate descendant as their guildmaster, including the powerful Golden Snapdragon, Indigo Summit, Blue Narcissus, Black Rose, Crimson Hellebore, and Orange Wind guilds. Under syndicate guidance during the long years of Pax Republica, these guilds had been working to amass not just wealth but weaponry. Smuggling routes were packed with Clan technology exchanged for Inner Sphere armaments, while some Clans' demand for exotic Spheroid goods gave the guilds access to second-line Clan equipment. The guilds carefully cached their prizes well away from the prying eyes of the Watch, training in secret to use them.

The Jade Falcons had been heavily raiding Dustball and other Lyran border worlds since the 3120s, keeping their *touman* battle ready by skirmishing with the Lyran garrisons. Free Guild transports often accompanied such raids, offering low rates for logistical support. In truth, these missions helped fill Dustball's abandoned mineshafts with several Clusters' worth of black-market military gear. When Malvina's Falcons conquered Dustball in 3142 and seemingly obliterated Malthus Gambling Unlimited, the captured family members were, in fact, warmly welcomed by their long-separated allies on the inside.

Following the disappearance of the Falcon *touman*, the guildmasters gathered in conclave on Dustball and resolved to come out of hiding, formally declaring themselves the Malthus Confederation under Orange Wind Guildmaster Romita Malthus. With the cached weapons, they reclaimed the five deserted habitat domes from the Falcon caretaker crews and established them as their administrative headquarters and central logistical hub. The guilds then set out into the Hinterlands to make their presence known. Many long-time Falcon worlds, feeling threatened without the Clan's garrisons, eagerly accepted the Confederation's offer of protection in exchange for resources and laborers—the same terms that brought the syndicate into the Free Guilds a century earlier.

Attempts to replicate this exchange on unassimilated Hinterlands worlds with Spheroid cultures were far less successful, and the Confederation made an early enemy of the Lyran Commonwealth when its actions on Guatavita were characterized as enslavement of the populace. To rectify this, advisors from partnered Malthus Syndicate operations in the Commonwealth were brought in to handle non-Clan client relations.

The Confederation has established a mutual understanding with the new Tamar Pact, providing intelligence in exchange for free passage in Pact space and permission to operate in the resort city of New Malibu on Kerensky's Vision. There, Malthus Gambling Unlimited has risen once more, bringing in revenue through hospitality while serving as a

legitimate facade for the Confederation's other lines of business. The Vesper Marches have proven welcoming, with Brewer's government offering to contract with the Confederation for the resources necessary to establish its own military industrial complex. Khan Jiyi Chistu's Falcons maintain an understandably dim view of their use of the Malthus name, while Syndic Marena of the Alyina Mercantile League has opted for a wait-and-see approach. Callandre Kell's Arc-Royal Liberty Coalition treats them simply as pirates to be eradicated. Unconfirmed rumors say the Hell's Horses have marked the Confederation for Annihilation in retaliation for Boss Malthus' murder and mutilation of former Khan Amirault's prized hell's horse mare as a warning to cancel Operation Stampede.

Throughout the Hinterlands, the Malthus Confederation can seemingly provide anything, no matter how rare or illegal, for a price, positioning them as our chief competitors in some markets. Their agents spread bribes, gather blackmail material on local leaders, and work to suborn military commands, but they rarely seek direct conflict, instead preferring influence and profit over open warfare. If one of their protectorates is threatened, however, they have been known to issue *batchalls* that cannot be refused.





ACE DARWIN AND THE BATTLE OF THE BEER FRIDGE

JAMES BIXBY

**INN STUDIOS
INTERNATIONAL ZONE
SOLARIS VII
29 AUGUST 3057**

"When I need to recharge after a long fight with my crew, I reach for the one and only Coolant Flush. It's the only sports drink you'll find in my cockpit's fridge!" Tri-dee lying at its absolute best.

"And CUT! Great job, Ace!" the director of this latest commercial for my sports drink endeavor slapped me on the back and issued orders to wrap production.

Behind him in my chair, sitting next to my business partner for more than a decade, was my lady-friend Tanya. She hopped out and gave me a very welcome embrace. "We got about thirty minutes before you have to meet that prospect at the stables. I'm sure she'll make the cut."

"Relax, Tanya," I told her. "I'll return your MechWarrior safe and sound. This is a garrison and training contract I'm taking, not hardcore combat."

Tanya scoffed.

"It could be worse. Getting that glorified beer fridge in my cockpit was a bloody mess, for a simple security job. I ever tell you about that?"

"Only about a hundred times." Tanya's eyes rolled, realizing she was about to hear number 101.

**BUREAU OF STAR LEAGUE AFFAIRS (BSLA) DIG SITE 7
ANYWHERE
LYRAN COMMONWEALTH
30 SEPTEMBER 3044**

I didn't mind keeping out of the War of 3039. Really, the whole thing felt like Hanse Davion's midlife crisis, and I felt the same way when he married Melissa Steiner. Still, the face of warfare seemed to be changing to large-unit actions, and while the Great Houses were sucking up contracts for large mercenary units left and right, it created a vacuum for independent contractors like myself who wanted to make some money as far away from the largest battlefronts since the Amaris Coup as possible.

And that's exactly what I did. Finding myself working for a seemingly minor archeological firm on a planet aptly named Anywhere, I spent most days sitting pretty in my neon-pink *Panther* and looking tough so locals knew to stay clear of the city they had abandoned more than two centuries ago.

Coming along for the ride was Mariza Frost, a Federated Suns-born indie, and Alejandro Cortez, a Free Worlder with a thick Spanish accent. I only knew the two as fellow lovers of liquor and poker in a Galatean tavern before scooping them up under the pretense of having nothing better to do. This would end up becoming a habit as the years went on and the responsibilities piled up. But my yet-to-be named mercenary lance only existed as a registry number at the time.

While most archeological digs pillaging Star League goods focused on military ventures, this operation was more academic in nature, and had had some success with sites related to the massive bureaucracy of the Star League. Even my technician, Andrew Sevrin, was taken in. When he wasn't making sure my *Panther's* coolant was deionized, he could be found pillaging sealed boxes of files for our employer.

"Ace, is your shift almost up?" Sevrin chimed in over my radio. "Got something to show you."

"I got about fifteen more minutes before Frost takes over," I replied. "What'cha got, Andy?"

"We hit an actual *lostech* cache! You gotta see this!"

Those fifteen minutes before Mariza's *Stinger* moved to replace me on the outer perimeter were some of the longest in my life. When the prospect of honest-to-god *lostech* comes up, even an old cynic like me turns romantic. This massive office complex, a relic of the Bureau of Star League Affairs, shouldn't contain any BattleMechs, or even top-of-the-line tanks. But even vintage office supplies with a Cameron Star would be invaluable to the right collector.

After parking my 'Mech in the outer campsite and locking it down, I ran into the building. Most of the rubble and the collapsed side of the building had been cleared away. The excavated room was a typical office park, though the desktop computer terminals looked reasonably intact, albeit dust-caked. Next to each computer was an empty chair and what was unmistakably a neurohelmet next to it.

"Ace!" Sevrin called out. "This looks like a Star League Defense Force recruitment station. These stations are for Hat Tests. The terminals and servers below are a goldmine for the eggheads!" He picked up one of the centuries-old neurohelmets. "It's funny, even this garbage used for testing MechWarrior potential is better than some of the garbage we use today." Sevrin tossed the helmet down on the desk, the *thud* alerting an academic who wailed about invaluable finds and taking damage out of our pay.

"Now for the best part!" Sevrin pointed to a machine in the corner, coated in dust and grime.

I wiped off the top of the cabinet with my sweat rag. The name COOLANT FLUSH was revealed in bright neon pink lettering. The entire fridge was checkerboarded in that pink-and-blue color that was a worse assault on the senses than my *Panther's* paint job.

"It's...a refrigerator," I replied to Sevrin's sense of glee.

"No, Ace!" Sevrin replied, slapping my shoulder like a big brother. "It is *THE* Refrigerator." Taking my blank expression as permission to continue, he said, "Coolant Flush was an insanely popular sports soft drink during the Star League days. Apparently, they got an official sponsorship from the SLDF. These machines were *everywhere* after the Reunification War. The company ceased to exist after the fall of the Star League."

Curiosity got the better of me, and I opened the refrigerator. Inside, I found several dozen glass bottles holding a greenish-yellow concoction vaguely reminiscent of BattleMech coolant. "What did this drek taste like?"

"Vaguely citrus, but mostly just raw sugar. What was really neat is the strontium-based additives that were supposed to enhance electrolyte absorption. It's what makes the liquid glow. Did the same to your piss."

"And people still drank it?" I said, gingerly replacing the bottle. I didn't want to admit it, but I'd been insanely curious about trying it until that last part.

"Are you kidding? You know MechWarriors. They'd hold drinking contests to see how luminescent they could make their urine!" Realizing I was looking at him with bafflement, he answered my unspoken question. "I've been collecting Coolant Flush memorabilia for years, but

to have bottles of the actual stuff in it...? It's better than the Lumire the Coolant Flush Lancelot action figure!"

"Hey, Doc!" I asked over the whine of tools and generators. "You guys interested in this?"

Sevrin's eyes lit up at the prospect of claiming the relic.

"We're here for Star League relics, not soda fountains," one of the academics shouted in between jackhammer bursts. "You figure out how to haul it out of here, you can have it!"

I left Sevrin to figure out how to get the refrigerator into our tiny personal cargo allotment on the DropShip.

BSLA DIG SITE 7 ANYWHERE LYRAN COMMONWEALTH 6 OCTOBER 3044

A week had passed in relative quiet, something that never bothered me. Once news of the *lostech* find got out, minor as it was, the dig site became a lot more popular with the locals. While wildcatters trying to carry off anything not bolted down were always a problem, it was the cottage industry of food trucks, newscasters, local academics, and country bumpkins looking for something exciting that was the real problem. Every day it seemed like our perimeter was getting tighter and tighter as locals wanted a closer look at the mysterious, life-changing artifacts that were bound to be unveiled.

Finally, some began pushing past the foot-security teams and sneaking into the building, or filing into the day-labor teams to have a look. Some of the latter surely had some spies from the political power *du jour* in them, but that was not my problem.

My problem was getting the unwashed masses to get the hell back on their side of the line. Without killing anyone. If a lack of concern over civilian casualties or property damage had been in effect...well I wouldn't have taken the job, 'cause I'm not a monster. But more to the point my *Panther*, with its particle projector cannon, would have been more than up to the task. Heck, Frost's *Stinger* or Cortez's *Vulcan* could have given the onlookers more than enough to think about.

As it stood, though, our three BattleMechs had to push back nearly a hundred people who were making the eggheads uncomfortable about the security of their find. That meant hot searchlights from our 'Mechs played over the crowd all day and night as the three of us stood vigil.

When the server farm was finally unearthed and needed to be transported, however, that meant we needed to push the poor, hapless

idiots back. For some reason, the other two MechWarriors decided I was the commander of the lance, so it fell on me to play police 'Mech.

"Attention, Anywhere citizens," I said into my helmet mic, which piped my voice to my *Panther's* booming external speakers. "Please disperse. We will be moving camp shortly and need space cleared for our equipment." It wasn't the complete truth, but it was simple enough that everyone could understand.

Several people stepped forward and began yelling directly at my 'Mech.

"I cannot hear you from there," I said, rolling my eyes. "Please make way for our heavy equipment!"

As if on cue, a diesel engine roared to life, and a heavy truck hauling several construction exoskeletons and dumpsters crawled toward the perimeter. Ten tons of flatbed truck, plus its trailer of literal garbage, made life a bit too real for most people, and they dispersed without pause. But some began holding up signs claiming the site belonged to the planet.

My life was suddenly going to become much more complicated.

**BSLA DIG SITE BASE CAMP
ANYWHERE
LYRAN COMMONWEALTH
7 OCTOBER 3044**

Things came to a head so fast after that small show of force that we were ordered to stop all work on the find. Some hipsters were so pissed off about it they tried to sue both the planetary government and our employers, who turned out to be the hyper-massive archaeological firm Interstellar Expeditions. I'm no lawyer, but the entire case seemed to hinge on those neurohelmets used for MechWarrior candidacy tests, and whether they constituted a civil or military find.

With express orders from the planetary governor to stand down until the issue was litigated, we three merry MechWarriors had nothing to do but sit in the base camp's lounge and watch daytime tri-dee. Unfortunately, every local station had been taken over by the news of the day—us.

"The fact of the matter is that this find, and the contents therein, are the property of the planet and its people," some stuffy looking academic, with the local university counsel, was saying at a podium in the courtroom. *"Our governor took for granted that there would be nothing of value and pocketed the C-bills of these off-worlders without a second thought! The University of Anywhere demands access to the*

site so we can at least establish what is there and renegotiate the dig contract." The crowd of bumpkins applauded as the professor placed her arms on her hips and enjoyed the limelight.

A representative from the dig team spoke next. "*Your Honors, representatives of ComStar, the dig contract was negotiated in good faith, and it included a list of what we expected to find. You will find the itinerary in lot 7b of the discovery. Furthermore, our contract stipulates that both the planetary government and the Lyran Commonwealth are entitled to copies of whatever computer data we can find. In addition to the one hundred thousand C-bills paid to the planetary government up front, we have upheld our contract to the letter, and will continue to do so.*"

"Well, this is gonna go pear-shaped fast," Frost said. She walked over to Sevrin's recently moved refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of 300-year-old soda. "Life always gets complicated when *lostech* is involved."

I held a hand on top of the soda bottle before she could unscrew it. "You really gonna drink that?"

She smiled. "Why not?"

"Cause it's older than all three of us put together and mildly radioactive?" Cortez chimed in.

"And probably flat and warm," I added.

"Give you five C-bills to do it!" Cortez continued. "Ten if you chase it with some habanero sauce from the MRE tins we found!"

Boredom was settling in hard among the staff, and a few archeologists turned their gaze at Frost. "At least that garbage is edible," one laborer shouted. "Couldn't pay me enough to drink that!"

Sevrin interrupted the conversation, snatching the bottle from Frost's hand. "I GOT PLANS FOR THIS STUFF!" he said, placing the bottle back in the fridge. "No one is sipping anything! What the hell's wrong with you?!"

"I thought we weren't allowed to take it with us anyway, with all the computers and whatnot," I said.

"I'm working on it! I got an idea. The problem is I'm not gonna transport this thing while it's still loaded with refrigerant."

"Why would that be an issue?" I asked.

"These things used a modified system like the one in your coolant vests," Sevrin said. "It even used BattleMech-grade coolant as a gimmick. Horribly expensive, but it lent an air of authenticity."

"And since 'Mech coolant is both moderately corrosive and toxic as hell, I assume just ripping out the heat sink below it is a bad idea?"

"Oh, yeah. Unless you're wearing a Teflon-coated rubber suit, you do *not* want this spraying all over you," said Sevrin.

"Oh, so *that's* all the slimy goop eating the concrete floor," one of the eggheads piped up from across the repurposed break room. "That tank's probably empty. You can sever the lines and move it wherever you want."

Sevrin waved in thanks and muttered, "Well, there's one less thing. All this time, I thought it just lacked power."

**BSLA DIG SITE BASE CAMP
ANYWHERE
LYRAN COMMONWEALTH
9 OCTOBER 3044**

"Fellow citizens of Anywhere," the governor began, "given the extreme importance of the find unearthed by Interstellar Expeditions, and their continued unwillingness to renegotiate the contract, I have elected to mobilize the Anywhere Militia and nationalize the site. The militia and law enforcement will be moving in to take over security for the dig site while Interstellar Expeditions continues their work under direct supervision of the governor's office. This mobilization began twenty-seven hours ago, and will be fully in place tonight."

I just stared at the tri-dee screen as the entire camp seemed to erupt in activity.

"Like I said," Frost muttered while wrapping her coolant vest around her torso. "Pear-shaped."

"No kidding," I replied. "Cortez, you and Frost get mobile and move out a half klick from the camp. I'll secure the camp itself. Be ready to reposition as the eggheads need it." Without waiting for an acknowledgment, I went over to the dig lead, a man whose name I'd never bothered to learn.

"We expected this to happen," he said to his team. "Fortunately, the data backups are done and secured. We can disconnect power to the servers at will. Unbolt as many as you can from the ground and load 'em up. Grab as many neurohelmets as you can carry."

The diggers and techs dispersed like ants on a mission, and the dig lead approached me. "We have no idea what will be thrown at us, Darwin. You and the other two MechWarriors are our only heavy equipment. Can you cover us?"

Truth be told, I had no idea, and given we could be going up against a combined battalion at worst, my answer should've been a resounding "no." But an employer never wants to hear that. "Keep to the evacuation plan," I told him. "Remember, these people want the treasure intact. Were it up to me, I'd leave some tidbits behind for them to chew on."

The professor nodded. "The terminals and onboard data should be enough to satisfy them. We'll be moving out southeast, away from the city and the local garrison. The DropShip will be waiting for us about thirty kilometers from here."

"Then we make it happen. If you'll excuse me..." I nodded and ran to my *Panther*. A lack of 'Mech bay meant it was standing in the open with joints locked and a chain ladder leading up to the cockpit. I grabbed the bottom and pressed a button on the side, which retracted the ladder without making me climb up. In less than five minutes I was strapped in and hot, the 'Mech responding to controls.

"Cortez, Frost, anything on scope?" I called out.

"Negative, Ace," Cortez replied. "Approach from the garrison is clear."

"I see one Sierra-Mike and several vehicles," Frost said. "Looks like law-enforcement trucks."

I let out a sigh of relief. If the governor was only sending out local police and a SecurityMech, it meant he wanted to avoid a firefight. A show of force like this was meant to get the eggheads to stand down and cooperate. But they didn't count on the likes of three BattleMechs willing to stand in their way.

"Hold fire. Frost, Cortez, swing 'round and make yourselves visible on the flank. I'll head to the highway entrance to the site. They don't pose a threat to the three of us, and they should know it."



In thirty minutes, the police force, complete with the bulbous SecurityMech, stopped on the road in front of our three BattleMechs. The SecurityMech pilot tried to be a hotshot and point their weapons at us. While the lasers might be a problem, we were well out of effective range for the machine gun in the SecurityMech's opposite arm. I also spotted a missile pod on the shoulder with doors open. While nothing so sophisticated as a target lock would come from that diesel-powered monstrosity, the pod was armed and ready to fire.

A diminutive police officer armed with a megaphone and a sour expression stood in front of the convoy. "Interstellar Expeditions MechWarriors, we are here to assume security duties for this dig site. Power down your BattleMechs and exit with your hands on top of your head!"

"Ace, is this guy serious?" asked Frost, choking back a laugh.

"Afraid so," I replied.

"How are we supposed to dismount without using our hands?" Cortez asked.

"If we were actually going to dismount, we'd have to figure that out," I said, and keyed my external speakers. "Officer...uh—sorry, I didn't get your name—my crew and I will be more than happy to escort you to the dig site in about, say, an hour? The IE crew are packing up and leaving as we speak. The dig will be all yours at that point. There's no need for violence."

"Unacceptable. We are here to account for the entire dig site. Stand aside *now*."

"I can't do that, sir. I am acting on a Mercenary Review Board-registered contract to secure this site for Interstellar Expeditions. If I let you in, I will be in breach."

Keeping this pencil neck talking worked, and I trusted my people to be absolutely professional.

What I did not count on was a pencil-pusher cop to have no patience.

"Graf. Fire!" he shouted through the megaphone.

The rounded SecurityMech belched a pair of missiles from its shoulder launcher, and at the same time Cortez and Frost immediately opened up on the helpless machine.

"Oh, hell!" I muttered.

I slammed my feet on the *Panther's* jump-jet petals and arced the 'Mech behind the police line. The SecurityMech crumpled under the weight of laser and autocannon fire; meanwhile, police officers were scrambling out of their vehicles, taking up position and firing their useless service pistols and shotguns at our BattleMechs. The impact of my *Panther's* 35 tons landing so close to the dismounted officers staggered most of them. I then pulled the *Panther's* leg back and delivered a swift kick to the SecurityMech, ensuring it was knocked down hard enough to not be shot at anymore.

"Cortez, Frost, *hold your fire, damn it!*" I shouted, just as a shotgun blast smeared lead across my cockpit canopy.

Frost objected. "They shot at us! That SecurityMech was fair game!"

I saw the yellow-green riot gas pouring from a dent in her *Stinger's* torso and realized how underprepared these Keystone Cops were to deal with full BattleMechs. They were still firing hollow-point bullets and double-aught buckshot from a seemingly unlimited supply.

"Why are they still shooting?" Cortez asked, calm as a morning breeze over the clangs and ricochets of incoming fire. "We pasted their riot 'Mech!"

As god is my witness, I think I heard the police captain screaming "Stop resisting!" through his megaphone.

"Relax," I told my lancemates. "I'll get the point across."

I lifted the *Panther's* leg and stomped hard on the SecurityMech's hip, crushing the commercial-grade armor plate and actuator to ensure it would be unable to get up again. I walked my 'Mech casually

among the police officers back to my original position, and the gunfire finally stopped.

"You done?" I asked over my external speakers. "Or are you going to charge BattleMechs with billy clubs next?"

The police captain raised his megaphone again. "This isn't over. The people of Anywhere do not respond well to thuggery."

"And we do not respond well to intimidation," I replied. Raising my PPC and pointing it at the SWAT van, I waited for the driver to run from the cab before slagging the cops' ride home. "I don't want to have this conversation again, Officer." The other two police trucks erupted as Cortez and Frost followed suit. With no heavy equipment or transportation, the police officers turned around and walked away.

"MechWarrior Darwin, respond please!"

"Go ahead, Doc."

"Things are more serious on our evac route. Spotters see armor and a large BattleMech. I don't know what type."

Running my *Panther* across the now-abandoned campsite took long enough that the planetary militia was able to interdict the convoy of trucks, at least by firing across their route. The platoon of light tanks was still half a click away, but that was more than close enough to destroy the server-laden movers if they wanted.

And to say nothing of that BattleMech. The 65-ton CDR-3R *Crusader* was dirt common in the Lyran Commonwealth. Missiles for days across its arms and hips meant it could plaster the entire convoy in a single volley, and its armor was denser than on some assault 'Mechs.

I reached out to the dig lead over the comms. "Sir, I honestly recommend surrender. That BattleMech alone is too big a threat."

"We paid you to protect us," he replied. "We got two clicks to the evac point, and they don't want to damage us, just stop us. Distract them, and we can make the pickup."

I bruised my palm slapping the bulkhead, I don't mind admitting. Sensors showed about a half-dozen light tanks, all tracked. I wouldn't be able to tell what type until I got closer.

"Frost, Cortez, shred those tank tracks and lock their turrets as best you can," I called out.

"What about you, boss?" Frost called out.

I have no idea why suddenly I got to be in charge at this point, but in a crisis someone had to give direction. "We've got to distract that *Crusader*, and I'm the only one who can realistically threaten it," I said, simultaneously raising the *Panther's* PPC arm and guiding the targeting reticle over the big 'Mech's chest. "GO!" I yelled, squeezing the trigger and unleashing an azure bolt of energy.

This was not the wisest fight I'd ever picked, and the pilot of that baby-blue heavy 'Mech agreed. The *Crusader's* arms belched fire as I

rammed my throttle forward to try getting ahead of the missiles raining down. Fortunately, like most militia-caliber MechWarriors, the *Crusader* pilot was inexperienced. If they were also under orders to interdict and not destroy their opposition, then all the better for me. Dirt and rock geysered around where my *Panther* used to be while I zigzagged and lined up another shot with the PPC. This time I missed, nearly clipping the *Crusader's* foot.

"Boss! Ace!" Sevrin called out through the radio. "I need your help!"

I answered in between missiles impacts pinging my *Panther's* left arm. "Doin' the best I can, Andy. You and the nerds will be home free—"

"I'm still at base camp, boss. The fridge—we NEED to get it out of here."

"What the actual hell?!" I shouted, as though I was berating him in person for his stupidity, which said nothing to the fact that Missile Volley Number Three was now raining down and peppering my legs.

"No time to explain it, boss! Just pick me and the fridge up! We NEED it!"

Cursing in a manner of sailors and comedians around the Sphere, I unleashed another PPC bolt that hit the *Crusader* just right on its side, and slammed my jump jets. I leaned my body to the left, hoping my neurohelmet and the gyroscope in the *Panther's* guts would adopt my overcompensating posture. Thirty-five tons of BattleMech landed on one foot and stumbled like a drunk who missed a step down the stairs. Fortunately, I was able to keep my balance, so I ran as fast as possible back to the campsite.

Luck or poor judgment was with me, as the *Crusader* broke from the passing convoy to pursue me. I could see on my multifunction display that the maneuver had given Cortez and Frost the opening to rush the light tanks and get the convoy moving.

Even with my half-kilometer head start, the *Crusader* still harassed me. Long-range missiles exploded around me as I sprinted as hard as the 'Mech could go, putting every ounce of energy into keeping the *Panther* moving. By the time I got to the camp, I saw Sevrin waving a flare right next to the accursed appliance. I had half a mind to crush it underfoot.

I didn't, of course. Instead I knelt, picked Sevrin up with the *Panther's* free hand and brought him up to the 'Mech's shoulder. As much as I wanted him in danger of being crushed for dragging me back, I wasted precious seconds to depressurize the cockpit and give him access to the rumble seat behind me.

"If you wanna be silly rich, we *need* that fridge," he said. "I crammed all sorts of blankets and paper and stuff to pad the bottles so your 'Mech can carry it. Just don't get your arm shot off!"

I liked the idea of being silly rich, but getting out of that *Crusader's* line of fire came first. The matter became more practical when some

short-range missiles struck my *Panther's* back and forced my still-kneeling 'Mech to stagger, the left hand nearly crushing the fridge.

"Well, since I'm here now..." I said, and grabbed the appliance, heedless of the pressure I might be putting on it. Viscous green coolant poured out of the torn conduit as I separated the refrigerator from its impractical cooling system.

Getting the *Panther* to its feet and turning around, I saw a gaping, smoldering hole in the *Crusader's* right side where I'd hit it previously. Lasers and machine-gun volleys were pouring from its arms, bracketing me on either side. Whether it wanted to intimidate me into stopping or just couldn't hit the broad side of a barn, I didn't care. I lined up the master target interlock circuit and jammed the trigger. Both the PPC and the yet-unused SRM rack filled that smoking hole with rage and fury.

The *Crusader* staggered forward as its right arm exploded, whatever ammunition stored there touched off from my assault. Not waiting to see how well that would stop the pilot, I rammed my throttle forward. If I kept the *Panther* going flat out, I could scratch about 70 kph, which meant I could catch up to the convoy in about five minutes.

**MULE-CLASS DROPSHIP GUGLIELMO MARCONI
ANYWHERE
LYRAN COMMONWEALTH
11 OCTOBER 3044**

Frost, Cortez, Sevrin, and I finally cracked open some bottles of what I was assured was well-sealed and completely safe Coolant Flush, after they had been properly refrigerated overnight.

"Here's to victory, kids," I told my lancemates. "Good job on those tanks!"

"Speak for yourself, boss," Cortez replied, blowing on the smoky, chilled air of his own bottle. "Both our 'Mechs lost an arm in the bargain!"

"And because we actually had to fight, we'll be indemnified for the damage," Frost countered. "Maybe you can even upgrade your *Vulcan* to that laser-boat version Hanse Davion loves so much! I know I want to get my hands on one of those *Wolfhounds!*"

"We didn't make *that* much money, Frost." I laughed, noticing we were all holding our bottles but no one had sipped yet. "So...who's going first? Thrust-induced gravity won't last forever!"

Almost at once, the four of us sipped, and almost at once we all spat the wretched stuff out.

"Battery acid, high fructose corn syrup, and piss!" I choked out.

"Oh, god, why is it chunky? Like gelatin!" Frost moaned.



Cortez was muttering something in Spanish that was both unrecognizable and hilarious sounding.

Even Sevrin was retching into a sick bag. "I guess the seal didn't keep it from aging poorly." After tying off his bag, he wiped his mouth and pulled a large ditty bag onto the lounge table in front of us. "I can still use the rest to re-create the recipe, maybe even perfect it. In the meantime, I have a present for you all. The real reason I needed you to come back for the fridge, Ace"

"Keep in mind that I came back for you. But continue."

Sevrin opened the bag and pulled out three pristine neurohelmets from the dig site. The one he handed to me had a stamp on it that looked like one of those funny racing dogs.

"Heh, a Whippet!" Cortez said. "Had one of those as a pet when I was a kid."

"So, I assume these are part of our personal cargo allotment?" I asked Sevrin.

"The dig team was focused on the computers, but I figured these things would be worth a mint. I crammed as many as I could in my bag and stashed a few more in the fridge. These three are for you, and I'll get 'em tuned up tomorrow. The rest... Well, I wanna see if I can reverse-engineer 'em and sell the tech. You can't tell me the MechWarriors of the Inner Sphere won't want lighter, better neurohelmets."

Frost raised her bottle of undrinkable soda. "I will certainly drink to that!"

UNION-CLASS DROPSHIP YU HUANG SHANGDI SOLARIS VII 29 AUGUST 3057

"So that's how I became a partner in my buddy's combination soda empire and tech conglomerate."

Tanya snorted at the old story, while the rest of my team gawked in disbelief.

"So, if you got all the money coming in from that, why do you still do mercenary work? Why take this new contract?" the recruit said.

"Well, it would be boring to just sit back and count the money. 'Sides, I tend to spend it as fast as I make it."

"Ain't that the truth," Tanya interjected. "He often relies on merc work and the friends he makes on the way to keep himself *out* of trouble."

"One thing I don't get," our recruit said. "You had a personal cargo limitation. How'd you get to keep the fridge?"

"Oh, that! Andy and I removed the emergency-rescue hatch and elbow-greased it to the space where the rumble seat, survival locker, and privy are. Damn near had to disassemble the cockpit to get it back out. I got a miniature one now serving as a beer fridge in the same spot."

Tanya rolled her eyes. "You are full of it, Ace. You know that?"

"Not the first time I've been told that," I replied with a smile on my face.





BAINBRIDGE'S GUIDE TO IMPACTFUL EXOFLORA

KEN' HORNER

As humanity took to the stars, it brought much of its plant life with it, and such flora is largely what people deal with on a day-to-day basis. Some worlds have their own unique flora, but while this had a great impact on local diet, it is not often a major factor in warfare. This serial is a practical guide to non-Terran flora that may affect the battlefield. Many of these entries have analogs that, while different to biologists, are not noticeably different on the battlefield.

(Note: Alpha Strike rules are in parentheses.)

Razor Bushes

A visit to Randar in the Capellan Confederation is often an aristocratic vacationer's dream, with plenty of sunny, sandy beaches. However, during Operation Sovereign Justice in 3068, Capellan March troops discovered why local travelers in the equatorial jungles stick to the rivers and existing roads. The jungles of Randar hide the dangerous Razor Bush, with thorns so sharp they can slice through modern body armor. The infantry forces of the Capellan March found their units losing soldiers left and right. Formations were often forced to creep through clumps of Razor Bush, which adversely affected the execution of operations. Platoons discovered that they could avoid injury by moving slowly through Razor Bush, but by the time strategic command adapted, the Federated forces had already felt the sting, both literally and figuratively.

Razor Bushes can be found in clear or forest terrain. Infantry forces move half speed into hexes containing Razor Bushes or suffer 1D3 damage from the terrain (AS: 1 point of damage). Infantry forces with



only 1 MP (AS: MV of 2"f) cannot fire if they also move into Razor Bush terrain. This also affects airborne troops, such as jump infantry, landing in terrain containing Razor Bush.

AquaTrees

The Draconis Combine's Outer Volta is mostly known for Clan warfare, both one of the quickest surrenders in the invasion and for a protracted fight to retake it. The First Jaguar Guards planned to separate the Eighth Sword of Light and the Izanagi Warriors with a burning forest and destroy each unit piecemeal. However, the Jaguars weren't familiar with the AquaTree found on Volta, despite occupying the planet for almost a decade.

The AquaTree pulls water out of the ground at three times the rate of typical Terran foliage. The extremely high water content of the AquaTree made the forest difficult to ignite, so the fire didn't spread as expected, allowing the two regiments to support each another. In addition, the Jaguars discovered that the water shed by AquaTrees helped cool the Combine forces emerging from the forest, allowing them to use more firepower than anticipated. The Jaguars quickly changed tactics and retreated to open terrain, which favored their advanced weaponry.

AquaTrees can only be found in forest or jungle terrain. All rolls to ignite a hex containing AquaTrees, whether intentional or unintentional, suffer a -2 penalty. In addition, when any unit that tracks heat ends its movement in terrain containing AquaTrees, that unit receives a -1 bonus to its heat scale during the Heat Phase (AS: Units ending movement in AquaTrees roll 2D6 at the end of the turn; a roll of 10+ lowers that unit's heat level by 1).

Giant Trees

Towering trees that dwarf the giant sequoia of Earth are the most renowned feature of multiple planets, such as often-contested Tall Trees, or Gaeri, way out in the Outworlds Alliance. These behemoths will throw a little wrench into plans that don't take the super-sized foliage into

account, not only from the increased height of cover but also their resiliency. In a 2838 attack on Rochelle, a company of *Shadow Hawks* found themselves unable to clear the treetops when using their jump jets, which allowed the *Enforcers* and *Blackjacks* they were confronting to outmaneuver them. In addition, combat vehicles often consider themselves immune to falling branches and trees, but the excessive size of these giant trees threaten even advanced modern armors when large branches come tumbling down.

Giant Trees are typically four levels high, though even taller groves exist and can modify any type of forest. Units with jump movement must be able to clear the height of the trees to avoid the movement penalty for moving through hexes containing Giant Trees. When clearing forest terrain containing Giant Trees, double the TF. When forest terrain containing Giant Trees is cleared, for determining damage to any unit in the hex when it is cleared, treat it as a destroyed building with a CF equal to its original TF, (AS: 1 point of damage).

Ferrovines

Vines have long been a bane of humanity. Poison ivy, for example, is almost impossible to wipe out, as its vines spread everywhere, while buildings in tropical locations need to be kept free of vines lest they destroy the structure over time. Lots of plants are problematic, but vines often create roots in multiple locations, making them tough to remove. Attackers on the Marian Hegemony world of Horatius often overestimate the power of their thirty-first-century equipment, and think little of the Ferrovines that have spread since the first settlers wiped out its main consumer, the Horatian Magnalizard. Treads and wheels get tangled up in the tough vines, and infantry need extra time to negotiate patches of Ferrovines that thrive even in Horatius' arid conditions.

Ferrovines are only found in clear hexes. Infantry, and tracked and wheeled vehicles pay 2 MP (AS: 4") to move into a hex containing Ferrovines. Infantry or vehicles with jump MP may ignore this cost if they use jump movement; BattleMechs, hovercraft, and airborne units also ignore this cost. When clearing a hex containing Ferrovines, treat it as a TF 30 forest hex (AS: TF of 5), though the vines will likely return within a few months.

Doom Mushrooms

The first settlers on Laureles in the Marik Commonwealth found excellent soil and a perfect environment for farming. After three years, the main planet was self-sufficient and could even provide for the

other two less-populated worlds in the system. A warm, wet spring surprised the farmers with a local mushroom analog, the Laureles Doom Mushroom. These fungi can grow more than three meters tall over a matter of days. Farmers tried to remove them, only to find out they would explode in a cloud of spores. Although the spores proved harmless, the resulting cloud greatly reduced visibility for a few minutes, and only exacerbated the problem among the crops. Farmers try to locate and destroy Doom Mushrooms before their spores can mature, but they thrive in the countryside, creating potential problems for combat operations.

Doom Mushrooms can be found in clear or crop hexes. If a unit moves through a hex with Doom Mushrooms, it creates a cloud of smoke (AS: 2" AoE template) in the hex, which will last 1–3 turns and can drift with wind. Roll 1D6: if the roll is equal or less than the number of times it has created smoke, then the hex has run out of spores and is inactive for the rest of combat. A Doom Mushroom hex can only create one cloud of spores per turn.

Nikotrees

The Nikotrees of Sodus in the Federated Suns aren't technically flora. They are a crystal that grows vertically to great heights, in part thanks to the crystals also growing into the Soduizian soil, and they can take centuries to reach their fullest height. They also reproduce, in a manner: as the Nikotrees are damaged, pieces five centimeters or larger can form a seed to create a new Nikotree, due to the unusually high level of silicon in the soil and the percentage of oxygen in the atmosphere. Nikotrees are protected by the Soduizian and Federated Suns governments, but parties in warfare tend to ignore ecological laws.

In 2792, the Draconis Combine attacked Sodus. The invasion went like many Combine invasions at the time, until a skirmish was fought among a large stand of Nikotrees. The Combine forces, heavily reliant on particle projection cannons, found their shots less accurate than their laser fire, and even when they struck their targets, the hits caused less damage than normal. The battalion pressed on until the Nikotrees started shooting back, in a sense. As this point, between the chaos caused by the trees and the Davion autocannons, the entire Combine battalion retreated in an unorganized manner, which quickly turned into a rout. In the long run, Sodus still fell, but the Combine warriors were shaken and wary of the trees during their brief occupation of the planet. In the twenty-ninth century, scientists studied this battle further and found that the electrical conduction of the Nikotrees allowed some of the energy to be grounded through their crystalline "roots." If enough charge built up, the Nikotrees could discharge this to

other electrical conductors, such as BattleMechs or combat vehicles. Additional research in the late thirty-first century discovered that the trees could create electromagnetic waves strong enough to affect the ferrous slugs fired by Gauss rifles.

Nikotrees act as a light forest in a hex. Any PPC weapon firing through or into a Nikotree hex receives a +1 penalty to hit and the damage of the weapon is reduced by 5 points (AS: -1 damage for units with the ENE special ability). Multiple Nikotree hexes will have a cumulative effect. Once a Nikotree hex has reduced a total of 25 points of damage (AS: 3 points of damage), it will begin discharging. Roll 2D6 for any unit moving through or adjacent to a charged Nikotree hex (AS: within 2"); a unit that fired a PPC weapon the previous turn (AS: a unit with the ENE special ability) adds +2 to the roll. On a result of 9+, the Nikotree hits the unit with a 3 point PPC attack to the front (AS: 1 point); roll randomly on the appropriate hit location table. When clearing Nikotree terrain, a Nikotree hex has TF 100 (AS: TF of 40).

Darkweed

The oceans of Kwangjong-Ni in the Lyran Commonwealth are wracked with seemingly constant storms, giving the appearance of a dark and foreboding place, but in reality, the oceans are teeming with life. The oceans of Kwangjong-Ni are vital for the populace, representing three-quarters of the food for the planet and its primary exports of luxury seafoods. Off the coast of Landry, the planet's capital, underwater forests of a type of seaweed harbor a wide array of life. This seaweed, Darkweed, can grow up to 100 meters tall and is rather hardy for an ocean plant. A few underwater battles in the Lost Sea during the Star League Civil War showed how Darkweed forests could very quickly separate formations, block sightlines, and entangle submarines and BattleMechs that tried to go through them.

Darkweed can be found in any water hex depth 10 or higher. Darkweed is up to three levels tall but never grows above the surface of the water. Treat a hex with Darkweed as a light forest. In addition, any unit moving into a Darkweed hex must make a Piloting Skill Roll with a -1 penalty (AS: 2D6 roll against unit's Skill Rating +1). Failure results in the unit being entangled in the Darkweed (AS: treat as bogged down; see p. 60, Alpha Strike: Commander's Edition).

Splatterfruit

Visitors to Westerstede, historically a Lyran world, often enjoy the Westerstede mango in various forms, though rarely fresh off the bush. In addition to the Westerstede mango having a typical length of

over one meter when ripe, the fruit is filled with a gelatinous, oily fluid. Natives of Westerstede usually refer to the fruit as Splatterfruit, and farmers make sure to drain the Splatterfruit before processing it for use.

Splatterfruit may be found in clear or crop hexes. Units with ground MP that enter terrain containing Splatterfruit must make a Piloting Skill Roll with a penalty of -1 per every 20 tons of the unit's mass. Failure results in crushing Splatterfruit and releasing its fluid; treat the terrain as if it was ice. All infantry types are small enough to negotiate Splatterfruit terrain without crushing any Splatterfruit. Airborne units or those using jump MP can also ignore Splatterfruit terrain unless they end their movement in Splatterfruit terrain.

(AS: For every 2" of Splatterfruit fields a non-infantry ground unit traverses, make a Control Roll against unit's Skill Rating + SZ; failure results in a skid).





A FISTFUL OF KERENSKYS: TRADING IN THE WOLF EMPIRE

TOM STANLEY

TRANSCRIPT OF COMMUNICATIONS LOG ALBERT FALLS, ZENITH JUMP POINT 3 MAY 3149

Durwood Floros, Captain of the Sunrise Mustang: As I live and breathe, it's the *Moldy Molly*! Tilly, you on bridge?

Victoria Tilly, Captain of the Saint Molari: Durwood? Stars and saints, I figured Smitty would've bought you out. And only my current crew can call this ship the *Moldy Molly*. It's the *Saint Molari* to you, sir. *[teasing laughter]*

Floros: Fair enough. Whereabouts you heading?

Tilly: Shasta. First time in Wolf country, now that they're flying flags. You been?

Floros: *[chuckling]* No, not yet. Been to Midkiff—or as far as they would let me on the spaceport. Keep your rowdy crew in line when you show up. We're guests, after all.

Tilly: Is it dangerous out there with Clanners? I hear they can take your ship for any reason. What kind of goods will Wolves like, anyway? Puppy chow?

Floros: *[crew laughing in background]* Don't say that to them, or you'll be subjected to one of their blasted hours-long speeches of their noble Clan history. Just don't expect too much haggling if there's a warrior present. Remember when Mr. Tulsa rode along with us back in '39 and complained every blasted light-year?

Tilly: Yeah, I remember. Crappy boss, standard pay. The Wolf warriors are that bad?

Floros: Worse. They could shoot you and *then* take your ship.

Tilly: Oh.

Floros: Exactly. Clan warriors, especially Wolves, resent having to babysit their merchants. Keep your voice down, mind your manners. Aside from that, trade with the Wolves' merchant should be smooth. They don't haggle too much, like I said, but the Wolf Empire consumes a lot of raw goods and materials. Don't think holovids; think ore samples. Call up some of your mining-guild buddies. They'll proclaim that your ship earned that "Saint" in its name soon enough.

Tilly: Thanks! Good to know. We'll see what else they'll pick up and sell us. Keep your butt safe out there, pal. I'll need your advice when I get back.

Courier message to *Sunrise Mustang*, 2 Feb 3150

Durwood,

Remember when you said, "Think ore samples"? Thanks for that tip, because we've been kept rather busy as a steady supplier. I have so many buy/sell offers from various systems I feel like a prom queen surrounded by suitors. I'm giving you a few good spots to buy; tell them I sent you. Also, I'm attaching some spreadsheets for Smitty to read over. That boy is good with numbers, so maybe he can figure out why the Wolves are asking for so many foodstuffs.

Another thing, talk to a few collectors we know, because anything simple and Star League-related can help grease the wheels lately. We bought an old collector's set of ancient Star League Defense Force badges and some of the freeborn guards let us have special favors. Don't try it on Niihau, though—bastards just declared them contraband for confiscation.

—Victoria

Courier message to *Saint Molari*, 22 May 3150

Victoria,

Thanks for the tip from last message. We're making money hand over fist with ores and foodstuffs. It's profitable, but something isn't right. Smitty crunched the numbers, and you're right, this doesn't add up—literally. The amount of food they're asking us for is way over the standard population estimates for where we're doing business. I worry they're heading for another war. I hope it's against the Falcons or the Lyrans, but anything is possible. So far the peace is holding up on our border. Be careful, friend.

—Durwood

Courier message to *Sunrise Mustang*, 12 Mar 3151

Durwood,

Let me apologize for the lapse in messages. It's been a busy and strange year, jumping from system to system. The money is still good, but it also feels quiet, if you look at the space traffic for a few worlds. Some of these worlds should be swarming with DropShips!

Smitty's spreadsheet you sent did connect some more dots, though. We landed on Corsicana, and Warrior Carnes was there—that freeborn I told you about who loved the badges? We had a few drinks, and he thanked me for the Star League badge I'd given him. With a sly grin, he said, "My Clan is out there now, making this a reality." And that's when it finally hit me: the loss of traffic, the people on these worlds clamoring for everything, even bits of news. Seems like most of the Clan either went to Terra or are off fighting the Falcons somewhere.

Regardless of what's truly going on, these people want everything in our holds, and then some! Had a technician actually barter for some of the armor plates off my ship! She was bloody insane to think I'd give those up. However, there's some worlds where the garrison leaders control the merchants on planet. Be careful there, because some will try to impound your ship on charges of spying for the League. I tried to explain how I'm like their Free Guilds, but one warrior sneered and told me to "Get your rust bucket off my port." When my chief tech Navarro heard that, I had to hold him back to keep from causing an incident.

Right now, this isn't just a case of buying extra rocks or food and selling them at a profit. These people are showing up at a port and asking for news from systems I've not even landed on yet. I'm going to branch out to more than mere raw materials, I think. I need to talk with Navarro about clearing out more storage drives on the ship for news files, or maybe I can just collect hard media from these people to transmit or hand deliver when I get to the next system on my itinerary. Of course, that's all dependent on whether I can find a JumpShip in a decent amount of time...

Which reminds me, how's business going for some of our JumpShip-crew friends? I'll let you chew on the idea of us pooling our strengths here for some mutual profit. I could certainly use a dependable ride.

—Victoria





MEIYO

KEITH R. A. DECANDIDO

The samurai stood in the field of battle, his katana gripped in his right fist and hanging down, angled toward the grass.

The clip-clop of horse hooves was barely audible at first, building to a crescendo as the four bandits rode toward him. The bandits shouted inarticulately, snarls of rage at this one man who dared to oppose them.

As they came within a few feet of the samurai, the bandits pulled up their reins. The steady beat of the horse hooves became a rapid-fire staccato as the mounts came to a halt, their breaths coming in snorts.

The samurai did not move, did not look up at the bandits, but continued to stare ahead. The katana remained in its downward slant.

For a moment there was silence, broken only by the snorting of the horses. Then one of the bandits demanded to know what his business was here.

Still, the samurai neither moved nor spoke.

Again, the bandits demanded to know why he came to this place. As if their regular pillaging of the village wasn't common knowledge. As if they could get away with coming here each year and stealing crops. As if their crippling of the town's ability to pay their taxes to the shogun would go unnoticed by Edo.

With a kick, the lead bandit started his horse toward the samurai, screaming at him that he would die.

At that, the samurai almost reacted with shock. Were these fools so base as to believe that death was any kind of threat? He lived his life by the code of bushido, fully prepared to die in service of his master. The reality of death was always with him, a robe he wore at all times. One did not live by the sword unless one expected to someday die by it.

The horse rode closer. Still, the samurai did not move, the katana still hanging down.



Raising his sword, the bandit cried as he came upon the samurai. Even as the bandit's sword started its downward slash, the samurai's katana finally moved, slicing up through the air and into the bandit's chest, continuing through his neck, sawing through the clavicle. Blood flew everywhere as the bandit screamed in pain and fell to the ground. The horse galloped onward even as its rider fell earthward, his death mere minutes away. Ignoring him, the samurai moved into a ready stance.

For several seconds, the remaining bandits sat atop their horses, dumbfounded. From what the samurai had been told, these bandits had been together for many years. No doubt they believed themselves to be invincible, immortal.

The samurai intended to prove them wrong on both counts.

Recovering, the three bandits rode as one toward the samurai, bellowing of revenge and destruction.

Again, the samurai did not move until it was required. When the second bandit—whose horse galloped at a greater rate than that of his fellows—was upon him, the samurai sliced off his leg at the thigh, the katana easily carving through meat and muscle and bone. His katana had been forged by a master sword crafter, and few were deemed worthy to carry one of his works of art. Fewer still had the skill to use them properly.

Even as the second bandit fell to the ground, screaming in agony as blood poured from the stump his right leg had become, the samurai whirled around and struck at the third bandit. This one managed to parry, but his blade was not forged by a master sword crafter—the katana sliced through it as easily as rice paper, the sound of metal shattering metal echoing off the trees.

While the third bandit stared dumbly at the remains of his weapon, the samurai turned to parry a strike by the fourth. Rotating his wrist around, his katana slid across the fourth bandit's blade and shoved it downward, forcing him to drop it. The samurai then thrust the katana into the fourth bandit's chest.

Turning, he saw the third bandit had decided to turn and flee rather than face the battle unarmed. The samurai was torn. On the one hand, the bandit was a coward, fleeing in the middle of a fight like that. On the other hand, he had shown his true face, for these bandits had already proven themselves to be cowards many times over. He was only being true to his nature.

Bending down, the samurai picked up the hilt of the third bandit's broken sword, abandoned in retreat. Rearing back his right arm, the samurai threw the hilt with all his might at the third bandit.

The edge of the broken blade penetrated the back of the bandit's neck. He slumped forward, even as the horse continued onward.

Looking around, the samurai nodded his approval. The first and fourth bandits were dead at his feet, and the second would be before long. His work was done.

He turned and started walking back toward the town. No doubt the villagers would offer him gifts, or at least a meal, but he would not accept. He was, after all, only doing his duty to the shogun, and to accept any recompense was unseemly and dishonorable. It was a long trip back to Edo, and he had a report to make.

As he strode, he thought he heard a strange voice in the back of his head saying something in a foreign tongue. "Another victory for *Vision of Judgment* over his enemies. This is Mariko Guardado, live from Silesia's Coliseum in Solaris City, wishing you good night."

SILESIA COLISEUM
SOLARIS CITY
SOLARIS VII
12 FEBRUARY 3071

The Word of Blake soldier in the booth with Mariko Guardado had a crew cut, broad shoulders, and no discernible neck. He also carried a huge gun, the size of which made Mariko wonder what he was compensating for.

The soldier, who carried the rank of acolyte, also had an expression on his face indicating that he wouldn't hesitate to use the gun if Mariko didn't do exactly what the Word of Blake wanted.

Not that there was any doubt she would. Mariko had seen what happened to people who went against the Word of Blake. She had announced several of their deaths.

Two more of them had just died, blown to smithereens by the man in the white *Vanquisher* called *Vision of Judgment*, with another two on their way out. Better still, it was all being filmed live and packaged for HPG distribution, to be sent out to anyone in the Inner Sphere who wanted to watch a massacre.

This isn't what I signed on for, she thought, even as she said, "*Vision of Judgment's* laser makes short work of Oliver's chest armor. Looks like Oliver won't live to regret that laser attack on *Vision's* flank. And now Branmet has turned and is running away."

Mariko spoke for the benefit of the audio receptors in the booth that transmitted her vocal commentary along with the visuals of the fight. She had no idea what the names that had been assigned to *Vision of Judgment's* foes were in reference to. They were four battered *Ti Ts'ang* 'Mechs with reduced weaponry, probably not even piloted by their original users. They were going up against a single state-of-the-

art *Vanquisher*, which some bright lad in the Word of Blake's marketing department had named *Vision of Judgment* to emphasize what was going on in the Coliseum these days.

It sure as hell wasn't a game anymore.

The *Vanquisher* had already blown off Sookdar's shoulder assembly and Bruner's leg, before it took out Oliver, and now it raised its right arm toward Branmet, not even giving chase. "*Vision of Judgment* is firing its Gauss gun." The *Vanquisher's* arm cannon blew a round into the *Ti Ts'ang's* back. "Branmet has also fallen." Mariko could hear cheers she knew were manufactured by the engineers downstairs. Certainly those noises of joy weren't coming from the desultory faces of the people forced to sit in the seats to give the illusion of a packed house of eager fans. The lighting was arranged in such a way that no one could see their faces anyway, just register that they were there and assume that the cheers came from them rather than a recording.

"The final tally," Mariko said, trying to sound excited, "is four kills. Another victory for *Vision of Judgment* over his enemies. This is Mariko Guardado, live from Silesia's Coliseum in Solaris City, wishing you good night."

There was a time when she had done this alongside a color commentator, a former MechWarrior named Patricia Bracken. Nerve damage during a campaign against some mercs about ten years back had left her incapable of piloting a 'Mech anymore, so she took a job in Solaris City, providing insight into the workings of the 'Mechs for the games.

It had been an excellent arrangement. Patricia wasn't the most charismatic person in the Inner Sphere, but she knew her stuff, and she and Mariko had developed a rapport over the past few years, with Mariko knowing just what questions to ask to get the best and most informative answers out of Patricia. Visually, they were a nice contrast as well. Mariko was beautiful; modesty didn't prevent her from thinking that, as she'd paid good money for her looks. Genetics helped, of course: she was born with soft Asian eyes and lovely olive skin. But the lustrous black hair, with just enough curl, the button nose, the warm lips, the enticing cleavage—all those had been bought and paid for.

Patricia, though, didn't bother with any of that. A middle-aged veteran of more combat than Mariko could imagine, her face looked like it was made of leather, her steel-gray hair like it was made of wire brush, her ice-blue eyes surrounded by bags. Her face was full of the very same lines Mariko had paid to remove, but for Patricia, they added character, showed she knew what she was talking about when she described why a MechWarrior did this or that in the ring.

Within a year of their being paired up, Mariko and Patricia's voices and faces were known all over the Inner Sphere. True, they weren't on

the same level as Julian Nero—no one was—but they had a following. Between gaming seasons, they often did tours together, as well as speaking engagements, interviews, and more. Patricia had even hired a writer to ghost her life story, and it had the second-highest read rate of any book downloaded out of Solaris. (The top spot, of course, was taken by Nero's wretched, fact-free autobiography *Circling the Ring*.)

Then the Word of Blake took over.

For a time, the Coliseum was shut down. But soon the Word of Blake, communications experts that they were, realized the value of good propaganda, and in turning Solaris' best export—the games—against them. What once were contests of skill now became executions, thinly disguised as the same old competitions.

At first they had been one-sided, several white *Vanquishers* fighting against some hapless gladiator who'd been captured in the fighting. Then, suddenly, things changed. *Vision of Judgment* showed up, and instead of four Word of Blake 'Mechs against one, it was the other way around.

Not that the results ever changed. The white 'Mechs always won, the other 'Mechs always lost—violently.

Mariko had no idea who was in the *Vision of Judgment* 'Mech. She didn't much care, either. If nothing else, whoever it was made for better tri-vid. Beating the odds was always more fun to watch than a foregone conclusion. Not that it wasn't foregone in any event, but at least the one-on-four numbers created the illusion.

And as went the propaganda war, so went the physical one. The Word of Blake had won a decisive upset victory near the city of Nowhere, where they had defeated a lance led by the legendary *Shihan* Giuseppe Kishi. Probably the most storied Combine MechWarrior on Solaris since the death of Theodore Gross, he was so well regarded that he was given the title of *shihan*—Japanese for “master”—rather than a military rank. He had won many victories against the Word of Blake—until Nowhere, where he had lost, and was officially listed as missing and presumed KIA.

Mariko had interviewed Kishi a few times in the past, before she got the Silesia gig, and he had always been taciturn and self-effacing. She'd always admired that quality, and had been devastated to learn of his defeat.

With the “game” ended, Mariko got up from her seat. The Word of Blake soldier pushed the button to open the door to the booth.

This acolyte wasn't her only escort—she had three, each of whom took an eight-hour shift. She had started thinking of them as Tail, Pail, and Mail, after a comedy trio that had been popular when she was a girl. This one was Mail, who distinguished himself by having gray in the

stubble of his crew cut. Tail had unusually wide brown eyes, and Pail was the only one who was dark-skinned.

Usually, after a game, she and Patricia would chat with the engineering staff for a bit, then go out to a tavern for drinks and a late dinner, sometimes chatting up their fans, sometimes sitting alone in their corner booth just talking about life. Sometimes they'd go back to either her place or Patricia's, though that had lessened in the last year or so, as Patricia was feeling more experimental than Mariko was willing to be in bed.

When the Word of Blake took over, though, Patricia had disappeared. To this day, Mariko had no idea if she was dead or alive. Dead seemed more likely: Solaris had a lot more corpses these days than ever before.

The tavern Mariko and Patricia used to frequent had been destroyed in the fighting—ironically, by a Combine 'Mech—and fraternization among the tri-vid staff was no longer permitted, so she went straight home, escorted by Mail. Her fame had given her a few perks, though Mariko hardly considered them such, including permission to keep her spacious apartment. Of course, Mail stayed posted outside the door at all times, to be relieved later by Pail and then Tail. They never came inside—another perk, a modicum of privacy—but she wasn't allowed to walk around outside unescorted by one of the three.

At no point during the ride from the Coliseum to her apartment did Mail speak. Mariko had never heard him or either of his comrades speak. They all grunted a lot, and gave instructions by gesturing. Mariko didn't want to think about what would happen if she misinterpreted a gesture.

Probably something involving the big gun.

Mariko kicked off her shoes as she entered her place, wandered into the kitchen, pulled a meal out of the cooler, and tossed it into the oven. The boxed meals all tasted like steamed mush, regardless of what it looked like—this particular one claimed to be teriyaki steak with mushrooms and roasted potatoes—but all food tasted like that to Mariko these days, so she didn't see the point in spending money on good food.

I wish Patricia had taken her with me. She snorted at that. *Right, like she'd be willing to be dragged down by me. Face it, she's a former soldier. She's trained for shit like this. Me? The only thing I'm trained in is how to not pop my p's. I'd be dead in an hour.*

Plus, of course, there was the very real possibility that Patricia was also dead.

That would probably be an improvement, she thought sadly as the cooker beeped. She took the meal out, sighed, and started shoveling the theoretical steak into her mouth, not even bothering to sit down at the table. She just wanted to eat and go to bed. And take

a dream suppressant first—it was the only way to get through the night anymore...



The samurai sat in wait.

The shogun had been fulsome with praise for his work against the bandits. Fulsome for the shogun, in any case—the leader of all Nippon was not one to gush. But he did allow as how the samurai had performed his duties with honor and with success, and that he remained worthy of his title.

The samurai was pleased with his lord's praise.

Now he waited in his home, the paper doors closed, kneeling in seiza position on the tatami mat. He was in a meditative trance.

He came out of the trance when he heard the front door slide open. The samurai was not expecting visitors. His katana lay sheathed at his side; his right hand moved toward the top of the scabbard, his thumb resting on the end of the hilt, prepared to flick the sword out at a moment's notice.

When the door slid open to reveal a young man also kneeling in seiza, the samurai removed his hand from the katana. This was the shogun's messenger. He carried the shogun's seal, but the samurai did not require it—he knew the boy by sight.

"Forgive my intrusion," the messenger said, "but I bring news from our lord, the shogun."

"Enter and deliver your message," the samurai said, his fists resting on his thighs.

The messenger rose, slid the door shut, and then knelt before the samurai. "The shogun has another task for you, my lord."

"I live to serve our lord, the shogun. Speak, and tell me his wishes."

In measured tones, the messenger spelled out for the samurai what his next task was to be. The enemies to be killed, the honor to be gained.

Nodding, the samurai said, "I hear the message, and I obey. Do you require refreshment before your journey back to the shogun's palace?"

Shaking his head, the messenger bowed and said, as he always did, "No, my lord. I must return forthwith." With that, he rose to his feet, went to the door, knelt, opened the door, went to the other side, knelt again, closed it, then took his leave.

The samurai returned to his meditation. It would be a long journey tomorrow, and he needed to be of clear mind.

**KOBE DISTRICT
SOLARIS CITY
SOLARIS VII
13 FEBRUARY 3071**

The next morning, after Mariko had slept past noon and tossed her breakfast mealbox into the oven—this claimed to be fish, muffins, and sopresatta rolls—she heard a sound she'd never heard before: her guard's voice.

Checking the clock on the oven, she saw it was one o'clock, which was a shift change. Her guard—it would've been Pail being relieved by Tail—was yelling at someone.

Curious as to what was going on—this was the most active any of her escorts had been—she went to the front door, ignoring the beeping of the cooker indicating that her breakfast was ready.

The door slid open to reveal an acolyte she didn't recognize. This one was female, stocky, with thick dark hair, several scars on her heavily lined face, green eyes, and a large nose. She carried a gun that was even bigger than the one Mail carried. (Pail and Tail had smaller weapons, which had led to Mariko's presumptions about Mail's need to compensate.) She was arguing with Pail.

"—I'm just going where I'm told, Acolyte."

Pail whirled around, his dark skin flushed with anger. "Inside," he snarled at her, which were the first two coherent syllables he'd ever uttered in her direction.

"What's going on?"

To Mariko, the new acolyte said, "This isn't your concern, ma'am." Then to Pail she said, "I got my orders, Acolyte. You wanna see 'em, knock yourself out." She reached into one of the many pouches that Word of Blake uniforms came equipped with and pulled out a small reader.

Snatching it angrily, Pail put his thumb on the side of the reader and then gazed over the words on the display. His face went from anger to disbelief to disappointment and back to anger again, all in about a second and a half. It was a wider range of expression than Mariko had thought the man capable of.

"Fine," Pail said as he practically shoved the reader back in the woman's face.

With a calm that was in direct contrast to Pail's irritation, the acolyte accepted the reader, put it back in the pouch, then stood at attention and saluted. "I relieve you."

Still slump-shouldered, Pail raised his right hand to his forehead. "I stand relieved," he said, and walked off.

As soon as Pail disappeared into the lift, the acolyte angrily turned on Mariko and pointed her gun right at her head. "Inside, bitch—*now!*"

Mariko swallowed and slowly backed into her apartment. "What's goi—?"

"Shut up!" The acolyte followed her in, the gun still pointed at her head. As soon as the door slid shut behind the acolyte—both were now standing in her living room—the latter reached into another pouch with her left hand, right hand still aiming the gun at Mariko.

To Mariko's abject confusion, the device the acolyte now held in her left hand was a white noise generator. Mariko used it on interviews sometimes, to prevent ambient noise and signals from interfering with the conversation. To her horror, she also realized that it could be used to mask the sound of Mariko being killed by the gun in the acolyte's right hand from the electronic eavesdroppers she knew were present in her rooms.

She activated the generator by pressing a control on it, causing a red light to go on. As soon as it did, she lowered the gun. "It's okay, M'iko, we can talk."

Mariko blinked, confused. Why was this soldier calling her by a nickname that had only been used by her parents, her brother, and—
"Patricia?"

Grinning, the acolyte grabbed her nose, and appeared to rip it off—but it was just a prosthetic. She then tore off the "scarring" on her face and removed her black wig to reveal a more familiar buzz cut. It was, indeed, Patricia Bracken, albeit now with green eyes. Mariko supposed it was part of the disguise.

"Oh my God—Patricia, what—how—why—?" Unable to complete a sentence—or even a thought—she instead leapt forward and grabbed Patricia in a tight hug.

"It's good to see you too, kiddo."

Still clutching Patricia as if for dear life, Mariko asked, "What happened?"

Pulling out of the embrace, Patricia said, "Long story, M'iko, and I'll be happy to tell you in a bit. But first, we got business to discuss. Mind if I sit?"

Mariko spurted out a laugh. "You're the one holding the gun."

"Oh, yeah." She looked down at the weapon as if noticing she was carrying it for the first time. "Sorry 'bout that. Had to stay in character, y'know?"

"What character? What the hell is *going on*, Patricia?"

"If you'd shut the hell up for a second, I'll tell you." She fell more than sat on Mariko's small couch. "I'd kill for a beer. You still keep some Sapporo in the house?"

Mariko nodded and moved toward the kitchen. "I've only got two cans left. The supply lines were cut a month ago, so there hasn't been any new beer." She opened the cooler, ignoring the display on the oven

that indicated that her breakfast was done, and pulled out the last two beers. Sapporo was an old Japanese beer that Mariko had introduced Patricia to—it had become the latter's favorite drink, and they often had it together. Mariko hadn't been able to bear the idea of drinking them without even knowing if Patricia was alive or dead.

Taking a seat on the easy chair perpendicular to the couch, Mariko handed Patricia one of the squat, silver, polymer cans, and pulled open the lid of hers. "So what's going on? Where've you been? Wh—"

Patricia held up a hand. "Hang on." She leaned her head back and took a very long drink of beer. "*God*, that hits the spot. I haven't had a good beer since the Weebs of Blake showed up." She set her beer down on the coffee table. "Okay, here's the deal. I need you to go to work within the next ten minutes or so."

Mariko frowned, still holding her beer can without drinking from it. "I'm not supposed to be at the studio for another two hours."

"What?" Patricia leaned forward. "But what about the pregame?"

"We don't do that anymore. We don't do *anything* anymore. I show up, I call the plays, I go home. No pregame, no interviews, no wrap-up, nothing. They only still use me because my voice is associated with Silesia, and they want to hew as close as they can to the old games."

"So why don't they do pregame?" Patricia knocked back some more beer. "All right, forget it. We'll come up with another excuse. I might be able to forge new orders on the reader. It's risky, though—Dubazana usually goes straight to the Farsi Club after his shift's over, but he might get all pissed about me replacing Osborne, so he *could* go back to HQ, in which case we're screwed."

Mariko assumed that Dubazana and Osborne were Pail and Tail. "Patricia..."

All of a sudden, Patricia bounded to her feet, the gun swinging around and hitting her in the side. Mariko had never seen her partner like this—in the booth she was always calm and a little snarky, but now she was a bundle of energy, looking ready to use that gun at a moment's notice. *I just hope she doesn't decide to use it on me.*

"We need to get Kishi out."

At that, Mariko almost dropped her beer. "Kishi—*Shihan* Kishi?"

"No, Private Kishi, the guy who cleans the latrines—of *course* *Shihan* Kishi!"

Mariko set her beer down on the coffee table and stood up. She was a half head taller than Patricia, and she felt the need to take advantage of that. "*Shihan* Kishi's dead."

Patricia blinked. "He was killed? Dammit, I thought his games were all rigged. When did this happen, last night?"

"He died when he lost at Nowhere. Patricia, you're not making any sense, I—"

"I'm not making any sense? M'iko, you see Kishi *every day* from the booth."

"What're you—?" Then, all of a sudden, Mariko realized what Patricia was talking about. "Oh, my God. *Vision of Judgment*—that's Kishi?"

"You didn't know?"

Throwing up her hands, Mariko said, "Of *course* I didn't know, they don't tell me a damn thing. I told you, I show up, I call—"

"—the plays, you go home, right. Shit." Patricia took a breath. "Well, *Vision of Judgment* is Kishi, and my job is to get him out—it'll be a shot in the arm to the Combine—and everyone else, too, I don't doubt—and it'll kick the Blakists' propaganda right in the balls."

Mariko said, "Let me guess—you escort me to work and then sneak down to the barracks and get him out?"

"Bingo."

"That's insane."

Now it was Patricia's turn to shrug. "Desperate times, and all that. Look, you're in the clear. It's 'Acolyte Yanotti' who'll take the heat."

"That's the ID you borrowed?" Mariko asked, to which Patricia nodded. "And you got that *where*, exactly?"

"From some people who want Kishi out and know I'm the one to do it. I know my way around Silesia, I've got combat experience, and the Blakists haven't captured me yet. Plus, I got an in with you."

Mariko grabbed her beer and gulped the rest of it down. "I haven't said yes yet, Patricia."

Grinning, she said, "Cah-*mon*, M'iko, how can you say no? This is a chance to reverse the biggest setback we've suffered! Not to mention getting in good with—with Kurita."

Having spent far too long choosing her words properly, not to mention over a decade of interviewing people, Mariko knew a hiccup when she heard it. It wasn't Kurita she would be getting in good with—or at least, not only them. "Who're you working for, Patricia?"

Looking down, Patricia muttered, "It doesn't matter."

"It for damn sure does. You only mutter like that when you're hiding something. Talk to me, Patricia, who're you working for? Someone had to give you those toys and a way to get rid of my escort." As she spoke, she saw it. "Shit, you're in bed with the yakuza."

"I am *not* in bed with the yakuza!"

"Oh, come *off* it, Patricia." Mariko stomped into the kitchen. "The yaks are helping the Solaris Home Defense League, too! There's nobody else on Solaris with the resources to pull this off who'd have anything to gain by springing Kishi. They'll turn him over to the Combine, and they'll be sitting pretty. Now tell me I'm wrong."

"You're wrong—I'm not 'in bed' with them, I'm just doing a job."

Mariko rolled her eyes. "Right, because mobsters are notorious for practicing the live-and-let-live philosophy."

Patricia walked up to Mariko, slung her gun behind her back, and put her hands on Mariko's shoulders. "I'm telling you, M'iko, it's just a job. They need me, and I need them."

That didn't sound right. "How do you need them?"

"Never mind."

Shrugging off Patricia's arms, Mariko said, "What do you *mean*, never mind—I want to know!"

"It's none'a your business."

"Like hell it isn't! Patricia, we've been partners for years, both in the booth and in the bedroom—what can't you tell me?"

"A lot. And this ain't your concern, all right? Just trust me."

"Trust you? You come in here out of nowhere after no word for *months*, ask me to smuggle you into the stronghold of the Word of Blake's propaganda machine to sneak out their greatest weapon on behalf of the damned *mob*, and you want me to *trust* you? I don't even want to go along with this! I could get killed!"

Snarling now, Patricia wagged her finger at Mariko. "Don't tell me about getting killed, M'iko. I spent twenty years riding a 'Mech on ten different worlds. I went up against the worst the—"

"—major Houses could throw at me and you're still here. I've heard the speech before, Patricia."

The two women stared at each other for several seconds. Mariko's arms were folded defiantly. The truth was, she wanted more than anything to help Patricia, to rescue *Shihan* Kishi, to feel like she was *doing* something. But she was also pissed at her for just assuming she'd go along with it—that Mariko would follow Patricia's lead. Without any information—no details, no plans.

"I need to do this, M'iko," Patricia finally said in a tight voice, "and I can't do it without you. Now will you help me—will you help the cause—or not?"

Mariko chuckled bitterly. *The only cause being served here is the yakuza's*. She knew that wasn't entirely true, but it certainly felt that way. She also had one final objection. "What if Kishi doesn't want to come?"

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard you say—and I've heard you say some seriously stupid shit, M'iko. He's a prisoner, why would—"

"He's *Vision of Judgment*! I sit there in that damned booth every night and I watch him blow prisoners into scrap metal! What if he's doing it willingly? What if he's gone over to the Word?"

"That's not possible." Patricia started pacing again. "He's—he's *Kishi*, for Christ's sake. We got intel that he's been brainwashed, and I've got a way to reverse it, if I can get close."

Mariko sat back down on her chair. "I hope to hell you're right, Patricia—'cause if he doesn't want to go, they're gonna need a DNA scanner to ID our bodies when he's done with us."

Eyes widening, Patricia sat on the sofa and stared at Mariko. "You'll do it?"

Letting out a long sigh, Mariko said, "Yeah. Let's do it."



The ronin had been given the option of how the duel was to be settled. Because the ronin was an honorable man once, the samurai granted him choice in the manner of his death.

To the samurai's surprise, the ronin had chosen to fight by hand. The samurai wondered if the ronin knew of the samurai's proficiency at karate. Perhaps the ronin thought his own skills to be equal to the task.

Either way, the samurai needed to prepare. He began by doing several stretching exercises to limber his muscles.

As he did so, he heard his name being called.

Or, rather, not his name. He responded instinctively, even though his name was not Giuseppe. It was—

"Giuseppe! Shihan Kishi, you have to come with me!"

Shihan? That didn't make any sense. The samurai was a senpai, a senior student, of karate, not a master. And what kind of name was Giuseppe?

Then he saw her.

Running only on instinct, the samurai attacked the intruder—who seemed to appear out of nowhere—with a shuto strike to the forehead.

But the intruder blocked the strike with an upper block—one that, oddly, gave the samurai a prick in his hand. "Shihan Kishi, I'm here to rescue you."

Suddenly, the samurai's head started to hurt. His house seemed to melt and change and shift. The ground hardened beneath his feet, and his gi started to grow heavy. And then...

...it all started...

...to come back to him.



My God.

Shihan Giuseppe Kishi sat in an unfamiliar 'Mech, a woman with steel-gray hair wearing a Word of Blake uniform kneeling next to him, leaning near from the 'Mech gantry. The last thing he remembered was being ambushed by Word of Blake near Nowhere—

—before fighting as a samurai in feudal Japan.

It was a fantasy of Giuseppe's, to live in that simpler time, before technology, before space travel, to serve in that earlier era the way he served House Kurita now.

The Word of Blake had given that to him—and then they had twisted it.

Looking around, he saw he was in the waiting area where they kept him before he was sent out to kill his fellow gladiators. At the 'Mech's feet were a squad of Blakist infantrymen.

They corrupted his dream. They dishonored him.

For that, they needed to be destroyed.

"Hey," one of the other Word of Blake soldiers shouted, "you ain't supposed to be movin' yet!"

Giuseppe raised the arm of the unfamiliar white 'Mech that they called *Vision of Judgment* and fired the Gauss gun, ripping the soldier to pieces.

The steel-gray-haired woman spoke with the voice of the intruder. "This way, *Shihan*—we can escape."

"No," Giuseppe said. "We will not run away. Honor must be served."

He activated all the armament in *Vision of Judgment*. The woman backed away from the 'Mech's cockpit.

Then he walked forward.



"I was barely able to make it a safe distance before the cessation of fighting inside the Silesia Coliseum, the work of its greatest fighter. Vision of Judgment—or, rather, Shihan Giuseppe Kishi of House Kurita—has battered the Coliseum, killing hundreds of Blakists and Blakist collaborators. I don't know who will see this report, but I, for one, am glad that it will be my last tournament. For the final time, this is Mariko Guardado."

Connor DeLon, *koman* of the yakuza, switched the tri-vid image of Mariko off.

The real Mariko sat trembling in the corner of the room.

Patricia sighed. She had hoped M'iko would have been able to handle this better, but she *was* only a civilian, and very few civilians—indeed, very few people—got to meet with someone as high-ranking as Connor was in the yakuza.

"You've done well," Connor said.

"I'm sorry we couldn't get the *shihan* out alive."

Shaking his head, Connor said, "It is better this way. He died a hero—he could have hoped for no better end, and no better way to reclaim his honor."

"And y-you have some nice footage," Mariko said hesitantly. "Even have my famous face. Nice job."

With no obvious sincerity, Connor said, "Thank you." He turned to Patricia. "Our business is concluded. You will be paid as agreed."

"There's one change—the passage applies to both of us."

Connor raised an eyebrow. "Our agreement was with you, Sergeant Bracken. Ms. Guardado is not your concern—nor ours."

"She damn well *is* my concern—this only went down the way it did because of her getting me in. Besides—I could use her help."

"And why should this matter to us?"

"Because," Mariko said, the tremor fading from her voice, "I can do you more good as a fugitive than as a corpse. You toss me out on my ear, then the Word of Blake finds me, kills me, and turns my death into restitution for Kishi. You let me go with Patricia, I can do more pirate broadcasts—and not that crap that Nero's doing, I mean *real* underground stuff. That'll help your cause."

"How do we know you have the capability of producing these broadcasts?" Connor asked with a small smile.

M'iko, bless her, gave him the same smile back. "Erik Gray gets on the holo, doesn't he? I've got my methods. Besides, you're already helping Patricia out—what's adding me, in the end?"

"Passage off-planet is difficult." Connor rubbed his chin; Patricia noted he was missing his pinky finger. "But not impossible. And removing *Vision of Judgment* under the cloud of betrayal has indeed been a fine victory for us, one that gives us leverage with others. Your request is granted."

Patricia breathed a sigh of relief.

Connor turned to Patricia. "If you go to Shostakovich Port in two hours, and meet with a man named Nakamura, he will lead you to your passage." He pressed a button. A door slid open, and the two no-necked thugs who had escorted them into Connor's office walked in. Patricia got the message right off, and after a second, so did M'iko. They followed the two thugs out.

"So," M'iko said, "you gonna tell me what the yakuza gave you in return?"

"It's good to see you too, kiddo."

"You're not answering my question, Patricia."

"Very observant."

They said nothing as they left the building. M'iko did not look happy.

Well, tough. We did the job, now we finally get off this dirtball. And we saved the big hero. Not bad for a day's work.



SHADOW AND SIN: SECRETS OF THE CANOPIAN PLEASURE CIRCUSES

ERIC SALZMAN

Captain-General,

The Canopian ambassador again requests approval for pleasure circuses to enter the Regular Fiefs. SAFE's analysis team has annotated her communiqué. The final decision is yours, but I personally consider them a security threat.

—AKHMAL RASHID, DEPUTY DIRECTOR, SAFE, 18 MARCH 3143

To: Captain-General Lester Cameron-Jones, Regular Fiefs
From: Syandene Kanumba, Ambassador Plenipotentiary and
Extraordinary of the Magistracy of Canopus
Date: 2 March 3143

The Embassy of the Magistracy of Canopus presents its compliments to His Excellency, the Honorable Captain-General Lester Cameron-Jones, and has the honor to request approval for three Canopian pleasure circus vessels (see enclosures) to transit the Regular Fiefs.

Canopian pleasure circuses have been a welcome sight in the Inner Sphere for centuries, bringing unmatched entertainments to humanity's far-flung colony worlds, including menageries of exotic lifeforms, games of skill and chance, live entertainment, fine dining, shopping, and companionship of the highest quality, professionally trained and health-certified by the Magistracy Medical Corps.

The Embassy of the Magistracy of Canopus awaits your decision on this mutually beneficial arrangement, and we thank you for your consideration.

[SAFE records the first Canopian pleasure circuses emerging from the Magistracy in 2563, shortly before the outbreak of the Reunification War. Though circuses operated freely under the Star League, the Star League Defense Force reported occasional social-disease outbreaks following visits. The Magistracy winkingly embraced persistent rumors that the circuses had a hidden agenda by bankrolling the Under Cover holoivid series in 2754, wherein a team of Magistracy Intelligence Ministry agents posing as circus employees focused on “taking down the Star League”—a particularly bold move, given that a circus had visited New Silesia in 2751, just seven weeks prior to the “accidental” death of First Lord Simon Cameron there. Even today, SAFE expects the circuses carry a substantial MIM contingent, serving as the Magistracy’s eyes and ears beyond their borders.]

The collapse of interstellar tourism during the Succession Wars greatly curtailed attendance, and dozens of vessels were impounded or destroyed, making visits by circuses a once-in-a-generation event by 2900. Magestrix Emma Centrella successfully negotiated with the major Inner Sphere powers (excluding Romano Liao’s Capellan Confederation, due to lingering animosity from the Andurien-Canopian invasion) for expanded access in the 3040s, working with Kamala Roy’s Mindstar Enterprises to refurbish and enlarge its fleet. Accordingly, many of these circuses found themselves caught up in the 3049 Clan invasion. The vessels are rumored to have intentionally sought out worlds in the path of Operation Revival to seed MIM operatives who could evaluate this new threat and acquire Clan technology.

Renewed ties with the Taurian Concordat and Capellan Confederation under the Trinity Alliance reopened those markets to the circuses in the 3060s, though the Capellans punitively taxed the vessels to extract “war reparations” and, under Chancellor Daoshen, have routinely harassed them with unscheduled inspections resembling vice-squad raids.

Canopian pleasure circuses can today be found throughout the Inner Sphere, running circuits of a dozen worlds each, and most middle- and upper-income worlds can expect an annual port call of two weeks, on average, channeling billions of C-bills into the Canopian treasury each year. The Regularan Fiefs, however, have not hosted a circus since the 3127 “Trinidad Three-Way” scandal that triggered the rajah’s resignation and the collapse of the planetary government.]



ENCLOSURES:

BACCHANAL

The *Behemoth*-class *Bacchanal* is a spaceborne pleasure palace, remaining in orbit while twenty luxurious shuttles provide complimentary transport to and from the surface. Upon arrival in orbit, the interior is reconfigured to accommodate centrifugal gravity for visitors' comfort, with the vessel's spin providing 1G along the outer hull, while compartments towards the core offer microgravity attractions. Themed bars, nightclubs, casinos, brothels, worship centers, and restaurants cater to a wide variety of tastes and budgets, giving patrons the authentic feel of anything from a grungy dive bar to a Polynesian beachside hideaway.

[*The Bacchanal is known to SAFE as a hotbed of intelligence service activity, with agents of regional powers frequently sighted aboard running operations against each other, while the MIM keeps tabs on them all. SAFE recommends restricting access to worlds without strategic facilities. We note there is no mention of the "mutant freakshow" the Bacchanal hosts when it visits the Periphery; Regular tastes are too sophisticated for such fare.*]

CRIMSON GARDENS

The *Mammoth*-class *Crimson Gardens* is one of the largest pleasure circuses outside of Canopian space. On landing, it becomes the centerpiece of a seven-hectare carnival pavilion featuring a menagerie of alien fauna (certified noninvasive), thrill rides, stunt spectacles, an exhibition of Magistracy medical advancements (with

the option to schedule procedures not currently available in the Fiefs), and showstopping center-ring acts: The Human Gauss-Slug; Yorgo, Strongest Man in the Sphere; the Branth Brothers Aerial Stunt Flyers; and the famed Canopian Contortionist Cadre.

[Crimson Gardens is a more traditional circus, with the skin palaces and gambling dens kept inside the ship so families and children can freely attend the pavilions and spend their rupees. The med-tech expo would not include its usual prosthetics, obeying Regular anti-bionics policies. SAFE believes Yorgo is of Elemental descent and may have additional enhancements, given his ability to deadlift a Savannah Master.]

SIREN'S SONG

The *Princess*-class *Siren's Song* will cater to the tastes and budgets of the Regular elites, offering carefully curated guests unmatched splendor aboard this luxury liner, newly constructed to Majesty Metals' exacting standards. During in-system round-trip cruises of up to a week, exquisitely trained companions offer a wide variety of immersive fantasy experiences to the discerning customer, including "Wrath of the Pirate Queen," "Escape from Brazen Heart," and "The Full Bondsman." Custom scenarios are also available, for additional fees.

[SAFE strongly recommends against allowing military personnel or government officials anywhere near this vessel. Being isolated, probably under the influence of multiple hallucinogens, and in "encounter rooms" for extended periods would be a perfect cover for MIM chemo-interrogation. Plus, our sources indicate that this vessel disappeared for six months after coming off Majesty Metals' slips. Unconfirmed reports suggest it may have spent time at an off-books MIM shipyard for a special refit.]





TALES FROM THE CRACKED CANOPY: SILENT ROAR

DANIEL ISBERNER

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
27 AUGUST 3084**

Dusk was settling outside, and Sedge, the Cracked Canopy's daytime bartender, was preparing for the shift switch to their replacement night bartender because Leo had called in sick earlier. Something about a stomach flu. Sedge really hoped no one else caught it or they would all spend the next couple days over the toilet.

"There's only so many guys you can call in to take over shifts." He spoke in a low voice, barely loud enough to reach his own ears, but the woman sitting on the edge of the bar still raised her glass.

"True."

He had never seen her before. She was tall for a woman, even for a man, well muscled, with long, blond hair and a face that almost made him fall in love with her on the spot. The only thing stopping him was the dead look in her eyes. She had seen too much, it said. Something had brutally murdered her soul, it said.

He had seen that look many times. The first part, at least. The latter... That was a different matter altogether. On Solaris VII, people who had seen too much were the norm. Quite a few of them ended up on this world as gladiators for exactly that reason. His gaze drifted over to the Memory Wall and stayed there for a while.

Far too many, if you ask me.

He almost expected the woman to raise her glass to his thought, but she didn't. Instead, she looked at him like she knew it anyway.

A cold shiver ran down his spine. Whoever—or whatever—had brutally murdered her soul must have taken quite a beating, he was sure of it.

The woman stood up and strode toward the restroom. Now he saw her at full height. The way she moved, the muscles on her body. They all told him she was a warrior. But not a MechWarrior. No, this woman had likely ran over the battlefield in battle armor. No doubt about it.

Another shiver ran down his spine when he thought about what a woman like this could do to a person who had done something to kill her soul.

Lou, the replacement bartender, arrived, and Sedge started going over everything she needed to know. He hated turning the Cracked Canopy over to someone who didn't know it, but it was his daughter's eighteenth birthday, and there was no chance in hell he would miss that party. Everyone else also had some prior engagement that couldn't be put on hold. So tonight, this gal would tend the bar.

At least she makes a competent impression, he thought after he'd told her everything there was to tell, and Lou had asked all the right questions. *If she's even half as good as her questions suggest, perhaps we could hire her as a regular.*

They'd been short a bartender for a few weeks now. They had managed without one so far, but tonight was a prime example.

He came out from behind the bar, grabbed his coat...and thought better of it. He was well within his schedule, with quite a buffer before he had to be home. He always planned with a buffer.

He sat down next to the woman with the dead soul. "C-bill for your thoughts?"

To his surprise, that made her laugh. "Make it a drink and you have a deal."

"Deal."

He got up and grabbed a bottle of good whisky from behind the bar, along with two glasses, then pointed toward a booth. The woman nodded and sat down in it, her haunted eyes pointed toward the door.

"What brings you here?" he asked after he had poured them both some whisky and smelled the flavor of it. Red berries, citrus, caramel, peach, and a hint of licorice.

She brushed her blond hair aside, and he could tell she wasn't ready yet. "Names first."

"Sedge."

"Anori."

Then she started talking in a voice that lacked even the slightest hint of emotion.

ANORI'S STORY

MAMMOTH-CLASS DROPSHIP TRAUMHÄNDLER
EN ROUTE TO L1 PIRATE POINT
LAURIESTON
SKYE PROVINCE
LYRAN ALLIANCE
18 JANUARY 3068

General Anori McFaris sat in the hangar of the DropShip that had staged her command's surprise rescue after they'd stolen chemical data from a factory for the Word of Blake, and remained deep in thought.

ComStar pulled us out! How the hell did that happen?

Of course, she knew *how* it had happened. The question was *why*. Why would ComStar save them? *The Silent Reapers are a black-ops command. Deniable assets.*

But they *had* needed rescue. Two years ago, the Word of Blake had hired them for a job targeting ComStar, but the Blakists betrayed them, ensuring the Silent Reapers were falsely accused of an act of terror. Since the unit was wanted for terrorism across the Inner Sphere, Anori and her team had to remain on the run, so only the Word of Blake would hire them.

When the mission to steal the chemical data had gone south, their infiltration specialist, Lucas Hammilton, had suddenly contacted Anori after being AWOL for months, and directed them to a pickup location. It was there that the ComStar DropShip had arrived above them and combat-dropped a whole company of all-black BattleMechs. The Silent Reapers' insignia—a Grim Reaper, raising his skeletal index finger to his lips—was emblazoned on each 'Mech's torso.

During their brief introduction when she came aboard, Demi-Precentor Lóorez had said all ComStar expected in return for the rescue was the Reapers' help fighting the Word of Blake. Anori didn't believe that would be all, and more importantly, ComStar had tried to blackmail them before: not only had they known the Reapers weren't terrorists, but

they'd kept feeding that lie to the whole Inner Sphere—and then tried to force the Reapers into service by threatening to reveal their location.

But we have no choice, and as long as we can hurt the Word of Blake, we will be along for the ride.

She sat a bit longer before she got up to take a shower, after which she would have to talk with the demi-precentor about how their new business arrangement would work.



An hour later, Anori left her room, freshly clothed in loose-fitting civilian clothes ComStar had provided her.

On her way to the ops room, she ran into a man in a captain's uniform that was clearly made for a bigger person. The name tag on his jacket was ripped off, instead the name "Büttner" was written where the original patch had been.

"Miss McFarris, I was hoping to meet you before your discussion with that creepy demi-precentor."

"Captain Büttner, I assume? Is the *Traumhändler* your ship?"

He was right: something about the demi-precentor was creepy. And she had known what from the moment she had met him: he was black ops, just like her.

"That's what I was going to talk to you about. It's not my ship, it's the crew's. Your Mr. Hamilton helped free the crew from slavers, and they hired me as their captain. And it's not the *Traumhändler* anymore: that was the name the slavers gave it. We decided to call it *Anja*, after the first free child born to the crew. The name gives them hope."

"I'm glad the Silent Reapers could help with something like that. What do you need from me, Captain?"

"Advice. We don't know where to go from here. The crew owns this *Mammoth* now, but funds are negligible, and I don't want to see them end up working for someone who will pretty much enslave them again. Do you know who would hire us?"

"Well, we are short a DropShip. So why not write up a proposal for a contract with the Silent Reapers? If things with ComStar go well, we might be in need of a ride."

"Büttner Trades will be at your disposal."

Something in her face must have made him laugh. It was a deep, happy laugh. She wasn't sure if she would ever be able to laugh like that again.

"The crew voted on the name," Büttner said. "I tossed it in the ring as a joke, but it seems they liked it."

With that, he went off, and Anori continued to the ops room and entered without knocking.

"We don't want the BattleMechs," she said before the man sitting at the table could say anything. "But we do want our OmniMech lance repaired, and we are short on MechWarriors."

"Agreed." The demi-precentor was actually smiling. "We never planned to give you the 'Mechs anyway. But we couldn't be seen rescuing you in ComStar colors." He shrugged. "As far as your MechWarrior situation goes, we have adepts willing to fill your ranks until you can find new recruits. Mr. Hamilton has already been using our facilities to make inquiries."

She nodded, despite her conviction that she wouldn't let any ComStar adepts into her ranks.

"One more thing," Anori said in a low voice. "If you ever betray us, like the Word of Blake did, I will kill you." She didn't mention that she knew about the blackmail. It was already a point against him.

"Do you really think threatening me on my own DropShip is a good idea?"

"Counter question: Do you really think being on your DropShip would save you? Also: this is not your DropShip. I talked to the captain."

Just to be sure, she would have to send a message to an old friend of her father's.

The demi-precentor could probably manage to have me killed, should he ever want to. But he wouldn't be able to get out of Kafka's sight.

She had found a coded dead man's switch-like message in her father's files. She would just have to fill out a few details and the computer would set her up with a decoded, harmless-sounding message and follow up messages to inform the assassin known as Kafka that she was still alive.

"All right, then," she finally said. "What is our first target?"

SILENT REAPERS HQ
CONTAMINATION ZONE
CAPH
WORD OF BLAKE PROTECTORATE
21 MARCH 3068

The *Anja* had set down the day before and transferred their equipment through customs unmolested, having it declared as "chemical and nuclear cleaning equipment." With most of Caph being a chemical and nuclear wasteland, small outfits coming in and trying to make money

cleaning those areas up were quite common, and most of them died out in the wastelands. So no one really cared what they brought on planet, as long as the right palms got greased.

The Reapers had then moved their equipment to the continent Steam (*What a silly name*) and set up their base in the jungle. Since the continent was heavily irradiated, half of the equipment they brought along was actually meant for the purposes noted on the transport cases.

Anori sat down with her heavily modified Gray Death Scout suit and inspected, not for the first time, the additional sealing ComStar had provided. Truth be told, there wasn't much to inspect. It was just an additional inner lining to the suit, making it fit a bit more tightly, but it added more radiation protection in case the outer armor got breached.

In theory, our suits should be able to protect us from the radiation all by themselves, but additional protection is always nice when you plan to go out in a nuclear wasteland.

But things could change rapidly once they got into a firefight, and the adept handing her the suit lining had said it would only last an hour after the suit got breached.

She looked around and saw her squad was already ready to go. *So much for leading by example today.* Then she finally put her suit on and went out into the wild.

Cassandra was already gone when the rest of the squad left the base on foot—they had decided to not use their jump jets, to stay hidden while scouting the target. Anori, Arjun, and Kari, who she had transferred to her squad from Beta for the time being, followed.

"Stop!" Cassandra shouted, sounded mystified and shocked at the same time.

Anori switched to a private channel. "What's going on?"

"You remember ComStar telling us about the so-called dinosaurs on this planet were wiped out during the Succession Wars and only rediscovered a few years ago? Far away from our operating theater in what locals called the Cretaceous Zone?"

"Yes. Why? Have you found a skeleton?"

"Well...probably? But there is skin and meat on top of it."

You are kidding me, right?

"Okay, Cassandra. Back away and get back to us."

"Roger that."

She switched to a channel for the whole squad. "Listen up! We have dinosaurs in front. Since we know nothing about this species, we will go around them. I don't want to get into a fight with them. Any damage to our battlesuits could lead to an armor breach, so be careful. I don't want to have to treat anyone for radiation sickness out here. If your suits get punctured by anything, you pull out. Is that clear?"

Everyone acknowledged her orders, and she switched back to her private channel with Cassandra. "I really hope you got pictures."



Five hours later, Anori sat down with her command staff and analyzed the information they'd gathered.

To cut down on transport weight and sheer volume, they hadn't brought a holotable. Instead, an unrolled paper map showing a satellite image of the area lay on a folding table they also used for eating.

Anori pointed at the image of the building that was their target. It was big, but still almost invisible on the satellite images. Back during the Star League era, Pfizzler Chemicals had gone out of its way to hide the facility.

Given what ComStar thought they were trying to do, it was probably a good idea.

"Our mission is simple: get in and make sure any data about an old bioweapon the Star League was researching on Laurieston is destroyed. By all accounts, the project was a failure and didn't yield anything that could be weaponized, but given the chemical research the Word of Blake had us steal on Laurieston, ComStar is no longer certain that holds true. So we will go in and provide them with plausible deniability should things go south."

She pointed to a few locations she had marked red on the map.

"These are dinosaur feeding grounds. We found a half-dozen between us and the base." She had expected surprised looks from her command staff, but the news about surviving dinosaurs had obviously traveled fast. "Right now we're assuming they do not move around too much. Markings on the trees and on the ground suggest they stick to their territories and only wander occasionally."

"That's a big assumption," Konstanze Kurz said in a teacher's voice. Anori's XO had built the Silent Reapers from the ground up, together with her father. Konstanze never went into combat, but she took care of the bureaucracy a mercenary unit required to work effectively.

"Yes, it is," Anori admitted. "But we cannot spend weeks to study those animals to find out how they move and when. Beta Squad is setting up monitoring equipment to keep an eye on the dinosaurs, but for now, we have to go with a lot of assumptions here—"

"Until a few hours ago, we had assumed the dinosaurs were extinct on this part of the continent," Lucas Hammilton interrupted. "I will tell my people to be extra careful while on duty."

Lucas commanded the Reapers' conventional infantry. For this mission, they had only taken a handful of people to run guard duty, which kept Anori from requesting they help with monitoring the big lizards.

"Good. I have ordered Yves to keep well rested and ready to jump into his 'Mech at any time."

Yves Dubois was the only MechWarrior they had taken along for the mission. His *Ryoken* was meant to cover them, should the need arise. Dinosaurs potentially ransacking their base counted as a critical need.

"How about the facility itself?" Konstanze asked.

"On the outside, it seems deserted, as ComStar suggested. But we did find a few tracks someone tried to obscure."

"Any idea how big a force we are talking about?" said Lucas.

"No. But anyone inside is a potential problem. ComStar wants us to get the data and destroy any on-site backups. If anyone has copied the data, we need to destroy those backups too. We have also no idea who is inside the facility. Depending on who it is and what kind of military assets they have with them, we might have to take out everyone. Especially if it is the Word of Blake."

They planned their assault on the facility for an hour, gave the computers they were after the codename "Egg," then everyone went to get some rest before the mission started.

CONTAMINATION ZONE

CAPH

WORD OF BLAKE PROTECTORATE

22 MARCH 3068

The Reapers' two battle-armor squads moved out and took the long route around the dinosaur feeding grounds. The animals were majestic, and although they had no real resemblance to the dinosaurs that roamed Terra hundreds of millions of years ago, Anori still felt like she was walking through Terra's distant past, apart from the radioactivity and the big craters where the nuclear bombs had struck the planet.

They were still trying to be stealthy, so jump jets were out of the question. Sneaking through the jungle took longer, though. It took them two hours to reach their target.

They took a position just a few hundred meters away from the facility. If their opponents had any early-warning systems set up, they hadn't found them, but that didn't mean there weren't any.

"Any sign of movement?"

"Negative," Kari said. She had transferred back to Beta Squad for the actual engagement.

"Okay, let's get the Eggs."

Her squad engaged their jump jets and landed on a fourth-floor balcony. A jar full of bottlecaps on an old, rusty table caught Anori's eye, and she had to grin.

Those bottlecaps must have been in this jar for hundreds of years.

Arjun opened the balcony door, and they moved in. Everything was quiet. Quiet—and dusty. So dusty that you could clearly see where someone had been walking around recently—and taken the computers Anori and her squad had come for.

"The Eggs are gone, moving for the next nest."

They had three more offices to check, but Anori didn't really think they would find anything, and she was right. The squad split up and met back at the stairwell down.

Somebody must have noticed we're here. They cannot be that sloppy.

As if someone had read her thoughts, the door to the second stairwell blew open and four infantry troopers poured through. They stopped midstride when they saw the Anori's battle-armored troopers and tried to turn. They never made it.

Cassandra had raised her right arm and sent a deadly stream of machine-gun fire down the hall. Blood splattered against the wall to all sides, and the four soldiers went down.

"We've been made," Anori radioed to Beta Squad.

"Shall we commence combat drop?" Kari replied. Combat drop was their backup plan.

"Not yet. But stay ready. Depending on what we face, you might have to move quickly. Alpha out!"

Without needing a command, Alpha Squad started down their chosen stairwell. They ignored the other top floors and went straight for the ground level, because that's where the tracks in the dust led them.

With the chance for stealth gone, they burst through the stairwell door, single file.

The first thing Anori saw was the bunch of white-robed civilians packing up computer equipment. The second thing she saw was the nearby air shimmering from six tall humanoid forms.

"Purifiers!" was all she could yell before a laser shot glanced off her suit's right arm and red warning lights appeared on her HUD. Her machine gun was out of action.

Instead she raised her left arm and answered with her flamer. Arjun and Cassandra did the same, focusing on her target, killing the Blakist battle-armored trooper with their first attack.

Anori's arm hurt, but her suit had started pumping painkillers into her blood, allowing her to keep functioning.

"Beta Squad," she shouted in her microphone while diving for cover, "commence combat drop!"

"Roger, Alpha!"

Arjun and Cassandra kept focusing their fire on the same target while Anori got back up and fired on another Word of Blake trooper.

In theory, the Purifier battlesuits were better armored than the Reapers', but they were bigger and bulkier, which made them less nimble in a close-quarters fight. Still, if Kari didn't hurry, they wouldn't survive this battle.

Anori engaged her jump jets and soared into the air, crashing down on one of the Purifiers shooting at her squad mates. Her unusual attack caught the trooper by surprise, and Anori had enough time to fire her flamer at a crack in the trooper's helmet before the laser of another Purifier missed her by millimeters.

They risk hitting their own people?

She rolled away, running for cover.

A second Level I of Purifiers emerged through a big doorway leading deeper into the facility the same moment Kari and the rest of Beta Squad blasted a big hole in the side of the building.

Kari's voice carried over an open frequency. "Have fun!" Then her whole squad tossed bags at the enemy Purifiers and ran the other way, without firing a single shot.

The Purifiers dove for cover, expecting an explosion, but nothing happened. The confusion gave the Silent Reapers enough time to take potshots at their opponents—

Then a loud, inhuman roar made the Purifiers and civilians turn toward the hole in the wall.

A quartet of four-meter-tall dinosaurs with four long arms, strong hind legs, two tails, and sharp teeth barged in through the hole.

All weapon fire ceased. The big lizards sniffed the air and turned toward the Purifiers. The angry roar repeated, and all four lizards charged the surprised Blakists. The Purifiers fired at the animals and managed to take two down before the beasts were upon them. Sharp claws and teeth ripped the battlesuits' mimetic armor to shreds while their tails threw the shocked troopers through the air. Then four more of the beasts entered through the wall.

Anori and her team backed away slowly, to not draw the dinosaurs' attention while they and the Blakists slaughtered each other.

When the dinosaurs were all dead, the two remaining Purifiers faced the Silent Reapers, and Alpha and Beta Squad mowed them down before they had time to decide whether to flee.

The bags with the dinosaur eggs in them remained surprisingly unharmed.

I think I will call them Salutaris rex, Anori thought. Though, given the secret nature of black-ops missions, she doubted the name would stick.





They had searched the facility for a half-hour, but found no more Word of Blake personnel inside. After the search, Anori and her two squads had packed up all the equipment the Word of Blake personnel had been nice enough to collect for them and transported it back to their headquarters.

Peter Brantling, their hacker, deciphered the old encryption on the files and made copies for the Silent Reapers, then he ran a virus through the original drives, corrupting the information on them. ComStar had said they weren't interested in the actual data, but Anori had her doubts. If ComStar was interested in anything, it was information.



Two days later, the Reapers were back on their DropShip, heading for a JumpShip at the zenith jump point. Anori's arm was bandaged for the burns caused by the laser hit, and she was undergoing radiation treatment. Peter had called her to his room and ushered her in. "Anori, we have a problem."

"The data we destroyed?"

"Yes. If the Word of Blake managed to send a copy of the files before we hit the base..."

She gave him time to finish his thought.

"If they combine it with the data we stole for them on Laurieston, then..." He sighed. "No point in not saying it, is there? ComStar was right. The Blakists have a very potent biological weapon."

Anori stared at him. "We didn't give them the data. I kept it."

"No, we *didn't* keep it." He looked down, clearly ashamed. "When the Blakists took my parents hostage, I gave them a copy as ransom. The data was encrypted, and I had installed more safeguards, but still... We *are* talking about the Word of Blake here. If anything, I only managed to slow them down."

INTERNATIONAL ZONE
SOLARIS CITY, SOLARIS VII
LYRAN COMMONWEALTH
27 AUGUST 3084

Sedge looked at Anori. Usually, people telling their story helped them cope. Let them look back and see it from a new perspective. But not

her. He had known it wouldn't do anything for her the moment she had started telling it in such a detached, dispassionate way.

The Silent Reapers... Is she telling the truth? If she was, he could collect the bounty on her and be a rich man. *But if she is telling the truth, ratting her out would be wrong.* The Cracked Canopy wasn't in the business of selling out their customers who shared their story.

He knew there was more to her tale. More from before, and more after. Things had happened to this woman. Bad things.

Bad things that aren't done yet. He saw it in her face when she suddenly stood up, left a few bills on the table, and went out.

"Sorry for the mess," he heard her say when she opened the door.

He started wondering what kind of mess she was talking about, and thought maybe she had thrown up all over their bathroom—or worse. Then he noticed the only other patron, a regular who never talked, just drank, was also gone. He must have left at the same time as her, because the seat of his barstool was still circling as it always did for a few seconds after he rotated out of it.

Outside, there was the unmistakable report of a revolver, then people started screaming.

Sedge went outside to look. The regular lay dead in the street, a big hole in his chest and a fresh Word of Blake logo scratched in his forehead, still bleeding.

He went back inside, shivering.

We had a Blakist among our regulars.

When he went to pick up the money Anori had left, he noticed an eggshell on her seat. It was big. Too big for any bird or other egg-laying animal he knew.

When he picked it up, a piece of paper fell to the floor.

"Salutaris rex" was written on it.

Seems like the name just might stick after all.





SAFE QUARTERLY THREAT ASSESSMENT

JOEL STEVERSON

Prepared By: LTC Bryce Banasiewicz, Director Analytic Production
Distribution and Safeguards

Audience: SAFE Director, SAFE Assistant Directors

Publication: 1 January 3152

Period: 3151

Scope: Minor adjacent realms

Classification: Secret

This abstract summarizes intelligence analyzed during the indicated period. The full report must be accessed from a SCIF. Detailed information for each domain may be found in the corresponding chapters. This is the most up-to-date information as of the publication date above.

DUCHY OF ANDURIEN

Duke Ari Humphreys has spent the last six months preparing for further military action—an assault on multiple planets is imminent. Following the failure of Operation Triumvir, relations between the Duchy and the Regular Fiefs have deteriorated.

In 3148, while the Free Worlds League was attacking the Regulans on its spinward and anti-spinward borders, Humphreys launched Operation Rebound, an assault against the thirty-some unaligned worlds that formed a buffer between the Regular and Andurien coreward-borders. This forced the Regulans to consider the possibility of a three-front war, and ultimately helped the Free Worlds League Military vanquish the Regulans. The Duchy annexed eleven new worlds before stopping its advance.

The Duchy's actions in the last six months are analogous to preparations for Rebound, but at a larger scale. Eighty-seven percent of mercenary contracts posted on Andurien job boards have been awarded, and units are inbound or already on-station. Through a collection of shell companies, Humphreys has posted contracts on Galatea and Herotitus. Prominent Anduriens Jake Wiesenthal and Maria Cunin have duplicated Humphreys' efforts and retained a dozen smaller merc outfits between them.

Humphreys has deployed his newly acquired mercenary forces on Furud, Shiro III, and Conquista. Combined with forces deployed on Deschenes and Hudelba, he has assembled four regiments—more than enough to settle old scores, namely losing several worlds to the Oriente Protectorate in 3145.

We anticipate that Humphreys will launch his assault no later than 8 February 3152. The most logical first move will be to reclaim Antipolo and Kwamash and invade Mansu-ri. Assuming success there, a second wave could begin by 1 March and target Dalton, Milnerton, and Ipswich. It's difficult to predict what will happen beyond those targets. Chancellor Daoshen Liao seems fixated on Terra, but were he to lend his support with a drive toward Oriente, it would put the FWLM in a difficult position.

Strangely, Humphreys used a different group of shell corporations to retain four merc commands previously employed by Daoshen Liao. All four are in the Capellan Confederation awaiting transport to the Duchy; three on Wallacia and one on Scarborough. Since Humphreys already has the numbers to invade the Oriente Protectorate, his rationale for hiring these mercs is unclear. Both worlds once belonged to the Duchy, but Humphreys likely wants to remain on Daoshen's good side.

WOLF EMPIRE

In early 3151, Clan Wolf launched a massive assault on Terra. The available data suggest the Wolf flotilla was comprised of more than 300 DropShips, dozens of JumpShips, and six WarShips—sufficient to transport their entire *touman*. How these forces penetrated the Wall remains a mystery. In mid-3151, Clan Wolf—having defeated the Republic and captured Terra—was recognized as ilClan. At the ceremony, ilKhan Alaric Ward announced the reestablishment of the Star League. Since then, we've had little word from the cradle of civilization.

Reports reaching Atreus in May 3151 indicated that Shasta, Trellisane, and Niihau had all been hit by raiders. A week later, similar raids struck Midkiff, Corsicana, and Ideyld. The raids were largely successful, with the attackers allegedly facing off against little more than *solahma* forces. Some reports claim only law enforcement

personnel defended the Wolf worlds. Given that the Wolves strongly defended these worlds for nine years, we can draw two conclusions: (1) they no longer have sufficient warriors to defend their territory, or (2) they no longer have the ability to transport their warriors. This has all the earmarks of a pyrrhic victory, and suggests the Wolf Empire is a paper tiger. If attacks of opportunity continue unabated, they'll provide a definitive answer.

Uncorroborated rumors from Gienah suggest an aged Star Colonel named Othar is now the de facto leader of the Wolf Empire. How this meshes with the Wolves on Terra is unknown. It seems highly improbable that they would entrust their holdings to a non-Bloodnamed warrior. These same sources also attribute the raids against the Wolf Empire to a highly placed commander within the FWLM who clearly believes this is the time to move against the Wolves. Duke Fontaine Marik has claimed responsibility for this, but we have yet to verify whether his forces were responsible for the attacks on the Wolves. These rumors clearly demonstrate the need to develop additional quality sources within Clan Wolf.

MAGISTRACY OF CANOPUS

The average citizen of the Magistracy is unhappy. Voices once whispered are now heard clearly challenging the leadership of Magistrix Ilsa Centrella. The Magistracy First Movement is one of several antiestablishment organizations decrying every decision the Magistrix makes as terrible for the Magistracy. After the disastrous death of Magistracy citizens following unrest on Joppa, the movement has grown dramatically. Centrella's frequent trips to her husband's realm (and to her brother's) have painted her as an absent ruler more concerned with the affairs of the Inner Sphere than of the Periphery.

Sadurni is a world near the rimward border of the Sian Commonality, roughly six jumps anti-spinward from Victoria. It has traded hands between the Capellan Confederation and Free Worlds League several times, most recently going back to the Capellans in 3104. Although nearly two generations have passed since it was an Andurien world, the population is still largely pro-Duchy. The Magistrix stopped there in October to personally deal with some sort of crisis. The Capellan propaganda machine claimed it was a scheduled appearance, but reports put the Second Andurien Guards on-world at the same time, which is curious. Whatever transpired there, her handling of the situation increased her popularity with citizens of the Duchy, but further aggravated her subjects. Her brother, Daoshen Liao, likely sees his sister's actions as a challenge to his authority, which could present opportunities in the near future.

It's imperative we continue recruiting efforts within the Magstrix's retinue to improve information gathering and better predict her actions. We continue to work with our asset—code name Prometheus—but she has been unable to rise in station to the level of access needed. If this is still the status quo in six months, we recommend staging one or more events as discussed previously.

CLAN JADE FALCON

The final update for this briefing is provided courtesy of an information-sharing agreement with our counterparts in Lyran Intelligence. They confirmed the rumors regarding the Kell Hounds skirting Jade Falcon Territory in early 3151. This provisionally validates some reports of more questionable veracity that indicate the Jade Falcons are on the move. We are only able to sketch out some details at this point, but it appears the Falcons also dispatched the majority of their forces to contest the Wolves on Terra. While the Wolves appear to have won the day, we do not know the disposition of any Jade Falcon survivors. It is possible that they may retreat into our territory if only to regroup for another assault on the Wolves. If anything, the Clans seem to regard no matter ever so settled that it cannot be subject to renewed martial litigation. If the Falcons were defeated, they may still challenge the Wolves at a later date. The Jade Falcon Occupation Zone may well be poorly defended for an extended period of time. If that turns out to be accurate, the Archon will certainly green light actions to reclaim worlds for the Commonwealth. This could provide opportunities to work with (or against) the Lyrans in the near future.





CAMPAIGN: A SHORT STOP IN ASTROKASZY

JOSHUA FRANKLIN

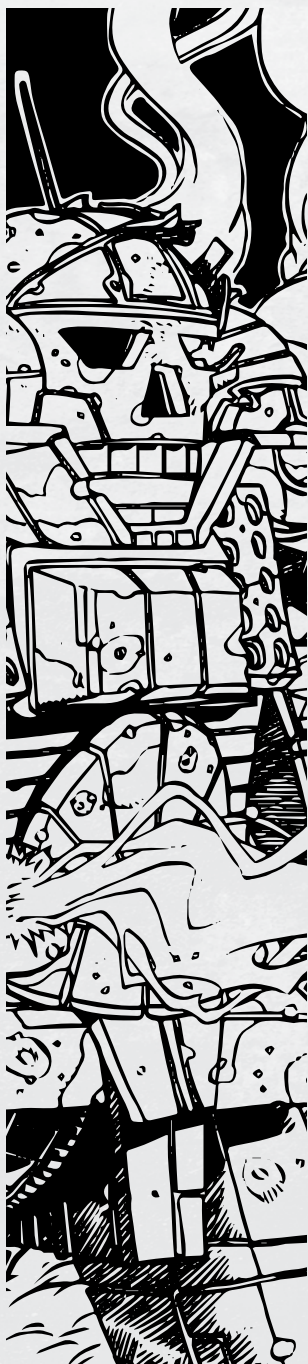
Astrokaszy III is the sort of place you never thought you'd find yourself in. It's in the Periphery, for one thing, and not one of the "almost home" parts, but the "nothing good has happened here since before the fall of the Star League" parts. Squabbling city-states huddle around the polar seas, offering the only shelter from the planet's blazing deserts. The battered remnants of the proud mercenaries that first landed here continue their eternal feud as the caliph's of these fragile city-states.

You find yourself here in desperation. Your former boss let the promise of a "too good to be true" offer lure them and their band into piracy. Your boss' greed led them to cut you out of the deal, and fortunately out of the jail cell. Unfortunately, you had to leave the system on the first berth you could find, and it ended here in the middle of the burning wastes. Desperate for work, you get a single offer that gives you hope.

"My husband, the caliph, has disappeared. I fear our enemies have moved against us. I must serve as Regent to secure the city for my young nephew.

"I don't care what misfortune brought you here. But here you are, and you want out, back to your Inner Sphere with a restored reputation that will make sure you never again end up in a place like this. Serve me well, and together our dreams shall prosper."

—JOSEPHINE AL-SAHRAOUI, NAIB US SULTANAT



ASTROKASZY III

Ruler: None, various Caliphate city-states
Star Type (Recharge Time): G4V (185 hours)
Position in System: 3
Time to Jump Point: 7.98 days
Number of Satellites: 1 (Ghada)
Surface Gravity: 1.03
Atm. Pressure: Standard (Breathable)
Equatorial Temperature: 62°C (Desert)
Surface Water: 36 percent
Recharging Station: None
HPG Class Type: B
Highest Native Life: Mammals
Population: 565,000
Socio-Industrial Levels: F-F-C-D-C

Astrokaszy is hot, dry, and wind-swept. Dominated by a single, mammoth landmass, the world has two oceans that cling to the poles, while inland seas are too few and far between to support a thriving native agriculture. Although its limited ecosystem supports native animal life, and the world boasts generous deposits of precious stones, little else recommends this world to settlers.

Still adhering to the philosophies and traditions of their ancestors, today's Astrokaszi is a fearless fighter and equestrian. Blood sports—one of the few diversions available on this barren planet—are a common pastime here, and serve as the favored means for the various caliphs and pashas to keep their respective subjects in line.

Astrokaszy is a dangerous climate for the new mercenary seeking work, as the planet lacks any rule of law beyond the will of the local caliphate rulers.

—EXCERPTED FROM THE
INN INNER SPHERE ATLAS, 3045 EDITION

ASTROKASZY MERCENARY CAMPAIGN

This is a campaign intended for use with *A Game of Armored Combat* box set and *Map Pack: Deserts* (but see the *Mapsheets* section for alternatives).

CAMPAIGN OBJECTIVE

Defeat your enemies in battle, improve your reputation, and earn a contract somewhere outside this forsaken system.

STARTING FORCES

The player starts with four BattleMechs:

- COM-2D *Commando*
- SHD-2H *Shadow Hawk*
- WVR-6R *Wolverine*
- **Choose one:** CPLT-C1 *Catapult*, CPLT-K2 *Catapult*, or TDR-5S *Thunderbolt*

Three MechWarriors have Gunnery 4 and Piloting 5. Choose one 'Mech for the commander: that MechWarrior has Gunnery 3 and Piloting 4.

Alternate Starting Forces: Using the Battle Value rules, choose up to 4,250 BV for your starting force.

PLAYING THE CAMPAIGN

Each month, you will receive one Mission from the Regent, Josephine al-Sahraoui. If you successfully complete each Mission, you improve the Regent's position on Astrokaszy and your own reputation. Earn enough reputation, and one of the off-world representatives might take an interest in you. Impress them, and you'll earn yourself a trip back to civilization.

The Missions are based on the Regent's position, starting at Position 1. As the Regent's position improves, other caliphs will take notice, and eventually outside forces will intervene.

MISSIONS

A Mission ends at the end of the turn when any victory condition is met. Unless otherwise stated, enemy units have Gunnery 4 and Piloting 5.

Successfully completing a Mission will improve the Regent's Position by 1; failure will decrease the Position by 1. A draw will force a repeat of the same Position's Mission. If the player fails the Position 0 Mission, the Regent's Caliphate falls to her enemies, and the player

will never make it off Astrokaszy without selling their 'Mechs and becoming Dispossessed.

Each successfully completed Mission will also improve a MechWarrior's skill. After a successful Mission, randomly select one MechWarrior, and improve one skill (Gunnery or Piloting) by one point.

Time: The length of the campaign is also an enemy. Another party is interested in Astrokaszy, funneling aid to their own chosen Caliph Shervanis. The month of the campaign may increase the opposing forces. Consult the *Time* section to see how this affects the campaign.

POSITION

- 0 Hold the Line.** The army of Caliph Shervanis has pushed your forces back to a final position. An enemy force consisting of a TDR-5S *Thunderbolt*, GRF-1N *Griffin*, and LCT-1V *Locust* attacks the Caliph's city. You must rout (destroy or send into forced withdrawal) the enemy 'Mechs, or your campaign ends here. You may setup anywhere on your home mapsheet. The enemy enters from the opposite map edge. Mapsheets: Desert Runway, Badlands #1
- 1 Meeting Engagement.** The enemy Caliph sends a pair of 'Mechs to investigate the rumors of Josephine's reinforcements. Send the enemy WVR-6M *Wolverine* and COM-3A *Commando* in to forced withdrawal (or destroy them). Both forces enter from their home edges. Mapsheets: Badlands #1, Badlands #3
- 2 Recon.** Regent al-Sahraoui needs information on her neighbor's plans. Select one of your 'Mechs as your recon 'Mech. Your other 'Mechs start on your home mapsheet. The recon 'Mech starts on the enemy mapsheet, within 5 hexes of the enemy's home edge. The enemy, a CPLT-C1 *Catapult*, SHD-2H *Shadow Hawk*, and LCT-1V *Locust*, enters from their home edge. Successfully get your recon 'Mech home via your home edge. Mapsheets: Washout #1, Washout #2
- 3 Strike.** Intel reports a stockpile of ammunition has been moved to resupply the enemy. The destruction of this depot will imperil their attack. You enter from your home edge. Place two counters 6 hexes from each other, within 10 hexes of the enemy's home edge. These two buildings can take 25 damage. Destroy the two buildings to complete this Mission. The enemy starts on their home mapsheet, within 4 hexes of a building. They start with a BLR-1G *BattleMaster*, TDR-5S *Thunderbolt*, COM-2D *Commando*, and LCT-1E *Locust*; all enemy MechWarriors have Gunnery 3 and

Piloting 4. At the beginning of Turn 5 and every two turns after that, add another enemy LCT-1V *Locust*. Mapsheets: Sand Drift #2, Aerobase #1.

Event: If you are successful at Strike, an off-world visitor asks if you are interested in evaluating advanced equipment for them. Roll 2D6 to see who the visitor is and what equipment they offer. The visitor offers to swap one piece of equipment with a prototype (or ancient Star League) system they want evaluated. The player can only accept one offer. If the player wants to hold for a different offer, they can refuse that offer and reroll after the next successful Mission at Position 3 or higher. until they accept an offer. Once an offer is accepted, no other offers will be made even if the Position 3 Mission is replayed successfully during the campaign.

Note: These may "break" construction rules; use them as listed.

1D6 Offer

- 1 No visitor, better luck next time.
 - 2 **Federated Suns:** Upgrade an AC/5 to an Ultra AC/5. The Ultra AC/5 fires two shots when fired. Roll on the "2" column of the Cluster Hits Table to see how many shots from the Ultra AC/5 hit. If both shots hit, roll a separate hit location for each 5-point shot.
 - 3 **Free Worlds League:** Upgrade an LRM 15 with an Artemis IV Fire Control System (ignore the extra tonnage). When rolling on the Cluster Hits Table for this LRM 15, add 2 to the result.
 - 4 **Capellan Confederation:** Upgrade one 'Mech with experimental Triple-Strength Myomer. All of this 'Mech's physical attacks do double damage when its heat scale is 9+.
 - 5 **Lyran Commonwealth:** Upgrade one 'Mech's fusion engine to an extra-light (XL) engine. Increase the 'Mech's walking MP by 1 and recalculate the running MP accordingly. Add three Engine critical-hit slots to each side-torso location. Suffering any three engine critical hits still destroys the 'Mech.
 - 6 **Draconis Combine:** Upgrade a PPC to an Extended-Range PPC (range 7/14/23, 15 heat) OR upgrade a Large Laser to an Extended-Range Large Laser (range 7/14/19, 12 heat).
- 4 **Breakthrough.** Having expected an easy victory, Caliph Shervanis' army has fallen back in confusion. Push them hard and keep them falling back. The player must exit two 'Mechs off the enemy's home edge and destroy at least one enemy 'Mech within 10 turns. The

enemy has a TDR-5SE *Thunderbolt*, BLR-1G *BattleMaster*, and WVR-6R *Wolverine*; all enemy MechWarriors have Gunnery 3 and Piloting 4. Both sides enter via their home edge. Mapsheets: Oasis, Sand Drift #1

- 5 Assault.** Having pushed the enemy back to their palace, it is time to put an end to their threat. Destroy their defenses and end this war. The enemy has an AWS-8Q *Awesome*, BLR-1G *BattleMaster*, WVR-6R *Wolverine*, and GRF-1S *Griffin*; all enemy MechWarriors have Gunnery 3 and Piloting 4. Mapsheets: Sand Drift #2

Betrayal!: Roll 2D6 the first time you play this Mission. On a roll of 8+, play the Mission as normal. On a roll of 7 or less, Regent al-Sahraoui has made a deal with Caliph Shervanis. They marry, and rule both cities together. All the Regent must do is aid Shervanis in taking revenge on you. Roll a critical hit on each player 'Mech from sabotage. If an ammo or other explosive location is rolled, the bay is empty of ammo and/or inoperable (but no ammo explosion).

End of Campaign: If this Mission succeeds, the campaign is concluded, and the player finds a way off the planet. If the Mission fails *and* there was a Betrayal (roll of 7 or less), the campaign is lost, since the mercenaries have nowhere to turn.

GENERAL CAMPAIGN NOTES

Repairs: The Regent's technicians will replace any armor and internal structure damage and resupply ammunition after each battle. For each enemy 'Mech salvaged (destroyed in a successful Mission), the Regent's technicians can repair all damage, including 'Mech destruction, on one player 'Mech. As you salvage enemy 'Mechs, keep a count of how many have been salvaged, and subtract how many player 'Mechs have been repaired. If a 'Mech is not repaired, it goes to the next Mission with all critical hits from the previous Mission still in effect.

Extending the Campaign: If the players prefer a longer campaign, you can repeat Positions 2-5 for another caliph on Astrokasz. The time-scale effects (see the *Time* section) should be extended by the number of caliphs to fight. For example, two caliphs would double the time before each time-scale effect happened. The Betrayal option on the Mission for Position 5 would not be checked until the final caliph. Repeated Missions should use the random mapsheets table.

MAPSHEETS

Each Mission lists two mapsheets to use for that Mission. The first map listed is the home map for the player, and the second is the

home map for the enemy. If the players prefer, especially on repeats of Missions, they may randomly determine the mapsheets instead from those in *Map Pack: Deserts*. Roll twice, once for player's home mapsheet, and once for enemy's home mapsheet. Align along a long edge, player may choose which long edges to join.

2D6	Mapsheet
2	Aerobase #1
3	Badlands #1
4	Badlands #2
5	Sand Drift #1
6	Sand Drift #2
7	Oasis
8	Mines #1
9	Mines #2
10	Washout #1
11	Washout #2
12	Aerobase #2

Note: If you cannot use *Map Pack: Deserts*, you can use any available mapsheet. To simulate Astrokaszy's terrain, treat all forest and water hexes on the mapsheet as clear hexes.

TIME

After six months: Add a COM-2D *Commando* (Gunnery 3, Piloting 4) to the enemy forces.

After nine months: Add a WVR-6R *Wolverine* (Gunnery 3, Piloting 4) to the enemy forces instead of the *Commando* above.

After twelve months: It's too late. The opportunity is gone as Astrokaszy falls apart into anarchy once again and off-world visitors avoid the system. You settle in as the commander of the caliph's forces, and fight the constant war over water and pride. Perhaps the next decade will bring you another opportunity to escape this desert.

VICTORY (OR "HOW I LEFT ASTROKASZY TO NEVER, EVER RETURN")

To win the Astrokaszy campaign, you must reach Position 5, have accepted an off-world visitor's offer, and successfully complete the Position 5 Mission. This will ensure you survive with an excellent reputation. You found a mercenary liaison officer from a Great House who has offered you a contract along with a ride home. Just like you planned it.



FAREWELL SONG

JEREMY CICCONE

The old man sat alone on the stage, absently strumming some nameless tune on his guitar, adrift in memory. Though the bar was open, only a few early regulars sat scattered around, so he took time to play and reminisce.

**UNION-CLASS DROPSHIP JINXING
INBOUND TO HARLECH
OUTREACH
CAPELLAN CONFEDERATION
23 JUNE 3028**

"So that's Outreach, huh?" the infantry sergeant asked, peering over his shoulder out the observation window at the approaching planet—a dark blue orb of deep oceans with two large continents of green and brown just a day of flight away. "Don't look like much."

"Do you *have* to eat onions with every meal, Docherty?" Dr. Thomas "T. S." Schneider sighed, moving away from the observation port to allow the noncom the chance to get a glimpse of their new home, just now coming into visual range after three days of travel from the jump point. Well, the Black Hole Battalion's home for the two-year garrison contract, at least.

Depending on how things worked out over the next few months or so, he might just be there to stay. Not that he'd told anyone that yet.

"Yer the one what's told me they were good for me, Doc," Docherty replied with a wide grin. He pulled one out of his cargo pocket and bit into the pale-yellow skin like an apple.

Doc Schneider flinched and turned away, heading back down the corridor toward the med bay, afraid his churning stomach would make

his Transit Disorientation Syndrome flare up again. It usually took more than a few days after a jump before he could handle solid food again.

"Just remember to brush your teeth, Sergeant," he called back over his shoulder. "If you try to kiss Esmerelda with onion mouth, she's going to bust your lip open. Again."

He walked in the "just a touch under standard" gravity of a DropShip under moderate thrust. How long had he tended to the ill-disciplined children of the Black Hole Battalion? Consulting his chrono and doing a little quick math—damn near twenty-three years to the day since he'd driven into that camp on Galatea as a volunteer with Medics United on a rumor of casualties and found a job offer.

Not only did he stay, he'd invested his whole savings into buying medical supplies and gear for the then ill-equipped little mercenary company, under the vague promise that he'd be compensated. At least he'd insisted on a profit-sharing percentage on top of a modest salary. That alone allowed him to continue his own outside investments and build up a nice little portfolio for his eventual retirement.

If only he hadn't stepped on so many toes getting out of the wrong beds back in the Magistracy of Canopus, he'd either be taking surgical patients from his mother or running a clinic with his father, not bouncing around the Inner Sphere playing nursemaid to this group of ruffians.

And, as if on cue, a trio of the few remaining "ruffian children" he still gave a damn about appeared around the far corner, also heading to the med bay. Lance Commander Celesta Janovsek supported her wife and lancemate Kseniya Dusk, who cradled her left arm and kept blinking back tears. Behind his oldest friends tottered their two-year-old daughter, Rebecca. He smiled at his little goddaughter and her lighter-than-air curly brown hair while taking her wounded mother's arm in his hands.

"Did Momma Kay forget how gravity works again?" he chided, aiming the question more toward the little girl than her mother while probing the wounded limb with skilled fingers, searching for telltale signs of injury.

"Bite me, Tommy," Kseniya growled through gritted teeth.

He chuckled softly. He could detect no broken bones or broken skin at least, though saw the beginnings of a really nice bruise. "Sorry, but if I start showing that kind of favoritism now, I'll be biting everyone who comes to the med bay, and that's just gonna get icky." He made a mock-disgusted face at the little girl, turning his goddaughter's concern into a wide smile. "Nothing seems broken, but let's get you checked out. You probably just pinched a nerve and should sport a wonderful bruise, so I'm going to recommend a nice sporty sling for the next few days."

**OFFICE OF MAJOR BRUCE DARIOUS
HARLECH, OUTREACH
CAPELLAN CONFEDERATION
30 JULY 3028**

"Are you sure you want to do this?" asked the stunned officer behind the desk. He took the proffered datapad, keeping it apart from the dozens of forms and files littering his desktop. "*Here?* On Outreach, of all places?"

"Yes, Bruce," Thom replied before shooting a quick glance toward the open door, which he nudged shut before taking a seat. "Sorry—Major Darius—but I'm tired of bouncing around the universe. I can cash out now and start setting up a home that doesn't lose gravity during breakfast or leave me with dry heaves for days."

The major grimaced. "Ugh, don't bring that up. I swear I'm still not straight from arrival, and that was over a month ago. But what would you *do* here? Retire? In the Confederation?" The Black Hole Battalion's unit commander opened the pad and started skimming the contents. His eyes grew wide at one particular line item. "We owe you *that much* in unclaimed back pay and investments? Are you sure I can't interest you in a nice used *Centurion* instead? One owner. Only used it on light gravity worlds."

"Nice try, but no. Don't worry, I've already put out a few feelers. There's a public clinic not too far from here that could use a trained doctor. I'd offer my services there as part of the 'Compulsory Community Service' the Confederation demands, and then see if the University of Harlech needs an associate professor for pharmacology or trauma medicine. I've also got enough connections through my other investments that I could start a small business importing medical supplies, so I've got some options."

"You think Doc Yani's up to it? Taking over for you, that is?"

"Dave's acted as your field medic for the last five years, Bruce. He's sewn up enough holes in the unit to knit a sweater for an *Overlord*. Pretty sure he and the rest of the medical staff can handle it." Thom paused, licking his lips and rubbing the palm of his right hand. "I...I just can't do it anymore, Bruce. You know how close I got. I need to be grounded or I'm going to completely crack. And you can take that as my medical diagnosis, if it helps."

"I know, Tommy, I know," Major Darius responded sadly after a long pause.

Just three years earlier, following a particularly disastrous mission for the Lyran Commonwealth, where the battalion lost fully half its strength in a single day, Thom had come into Darius' office to turn in his personal sidearm and the keys to the pharmacy stores, in genuine

fear that he would kill himself. He spent several months away, returning only when Kseniya had announced her pregnancy and expected him to deliver the baby. He never reclaimed his sidearm.

"We'll miss you, obviously," Darius said. "Will you serve out the rest of the contract here with us at least? No field duty. Only clinic work?"

"Clinic only," Thom agreed. "The contract is what, two years? I'll stay on as 'Detached, Pending Separation' for the next three months, then check in once a month as time permits for the rest of the contract, like a reservist. That way you don't have to keep me on the payroll for more than a few days a month unless there's some sort of local threat, which seems unlikely. That should give me plenty of time to get things sorted out here. And if things don't work out? Well...we'll cross that bridge when it comes to it."

"Are the girls okay with this?" Darius hesitated, then signed the various spots that required his attention.

"They aren't, truth be told. But I can't continue to make myself sick because of what makes them happy. I think I'm past due to worry about what I need and making a future for myself." Thom shrugged, still nervously rubbing his hands together. "Besides, by the time the contract ends and you all leave for greener pastures, Rebecca will be five and a bit more capable of dealing with the separation."

"Will you?" Both men laughed.

"Oh no, I suspect I'll be a total wreck for the first few months or so, and then run up hefty HPG charges keeping tabs on her. And the rest of you, of course."

"Oh, I'm sure you will. Perhaps you should join ComStar to keep the bill low." They both laughed again.

"I just might have to! I should start practicing my prayers now. 'O Mighty Toaster, by the Word of the Blessed Blake, please don't burn my bagel again...'"

This time the two men laughed long and loud enough to catch the attention of the clerk outside the door, who simply smiled and continued with her own paperwork.

**MINISTRY OF PLANETARY DEVELOPMENT
HARLECH, OUTREACH
CAPELLAN CONFEDERATION
14 AUGUST 3028**

Lesser Minister Evgenia Muscatovic's desk appeared, by comparison to Major Darius', neat, orderly, and frankly rather barren. A single older-model monitor sat in one corner, turned away from Thom's seat

so its owner would be the only one able to view the data displayed, the keyboard tucked out of sight under the desk. Nothing else sat on top of the flat surface save the blotter with the sword-arm insignia of the Capellan Confederation and a single sheet of paper, no doubt the barest minimum information on what brought him to this particular office on this particular day. Undoubtedly more information showed on the screen.

Thom sat opposite the Capellan official, trying not to fidget in his newly tailored suit, doing his best to assume the air of “a serious individual preparing to settle on this world and perhaps start a business” instead of just “a retiring mercenary preparing to rent an apartment by the waterfront and raise a little local hell.” He enjoyed wearing a tailored suit again instead of his usual jumpsuit fatigues, and this suit from a native tailor helped him assume the part of someone trying to become a local.

“I don’t understand, ma’am,” he admitted with a questioning arch of an eyebrow. “All of my papers are in order. I’ve kept current medical *and* teaching accreditations in the Lyran Commonwealth, Federated Suns, and the Free Worlds League for the last ten years. I’m already making the necessary steps to gain entry to, and employment as a member of your Entitled Class as a physician. I’ll be volunteering at a clinic as my Community Service for the next year. I even expect my paperwork and transcripts back from the Magistracy any day now, so I am confused. How exactly am I not able to practice or teach medicine here on Outreach?”

“All those so-called accreditations come from enemies—or former enemies—of the Confederation,” Mustcatovic replied with a condescending, wolfish smile while sitting back to fold her hands over her rather round belly. “Before we issue you this teaching license, we must first verify your credentials, and that takes time. I’m sure you agree?”

Here we go, Thom thought with an outward nod. For the last month he’d faced this need to “grease the wheels” with every official he’d met. He’d certainly expected this wouldn’t go any differently, and had prepared accordingly before he even walked in.

“Oh, certainly. One must always work at the, as they say, ‘speed of government.’ The same everywhere you go really.” He reached into his suit and took out a very plain but thick envelope, which he set on the desk between them. Right on the House Liao insignia. Here came the gamble: Would Mustcatovic respond to a well-delivered advance in pay and help him, or would she immediately turn him in for attempting to bribe an official and still pocket the money? He could only hope for only listening devices in the room, no hidden cameras. He left his fingers on the envelope until he saw her lick her lips hungrily. “I certainly hope

these five additional certificates from a neutral third party are sufficiently well thought of to perhaps move my application through the system with some additional speed?"

"Well, when put that way, I certainly agree it would be in everyone's best interests to get an experienced medical professional settled in as quickly and as easily as possible, what with the new term starting soon and all." Despite her soft office hands and overall bulk, the money disappeared very quickly, but then she tapped the same spot the envelope had briefly occupied, indicating she expected more money to speed things along. "I have an opening in my schedule tomorrow morning at ten."

Dr. Schneider tried not to let his surprise show. On top of the 5,000 C-bills she'd just pocketed sight unseen, according to the system he was becoming all too familiar with, this vile little toad had just asked for another 10,000 to make things happen by tomorrow. While not impossible given his current assets, there would certainly be other payoffs to make later. Nor was he in that much of a hurry. He made a show of taking a datapad from his well-worn medic's satchel and consulting it.

"That's unfortunate. I have another appointment then that I just can't move. Would three in the afternoon ten days from now work for you?"

Mustcatovic twisted a little in her chair. In his experience, a bureaucrat having a secret nest egg fell into the realm of probability and 3,000 C-bills for filing paperwork must pad that nicely, but a well-dressed ex-mercenary could be worth more if he planned to open a medical-supply business. Perhaps the new suit wasn't the best choice he could have made.

She turned his attention to her own screen. "It's a bit early for office hours, but would seven in the morning on Thursday work better?"

"Three days?" Thom countered, making a face. "I'm semiretired and trying to learn how to sleep in. I could fit you in at four in the afternoon in...eight days, though the rest of that day is busy." He arched his eyebrows, trying to appear hopeful.

"That's the date of the Royal Wedding on Terra. The office will be closed, so most people may enjoy mandated family time and observe the festivities. Since Terra is so close, we expect news of the event to reach us quickly. The Celestial Wisdom commands us to think on the gross, selfish opulence of the Davions and Steiners, and contemplate what it truly means to be Capellan."

"So you say." Tom shrugged off the narrow Capellan view, having visited the other side of the borders firsthand. Plus, the Celestial Palace on Sian wasn't exactly what one would call *plain*. "It's a little late in the business day, but five on Saturday?"

"We do not observe the decadent nine-to-five workday as they do in other states," Mustcatovic reminded him, glowering.

"Quite right," he agreed with a shrug. "But I am, as I said 'semiretired'. How about we make it six on Saturday, and I'll buy dinner for my first friend in the Capellan Confederation?"

"Is that some sort of bribe?" Mustcatovic smirked, cocking one eyebrow.

"Well, I suppose that depends on what restaurant you choose." They both laughed, then rose to shake hands. "Where do you recommend?"

**UNIVERSITY OF HARLECH
HARLECH, OUTREACH
CAPELLAN CONFEDERATION
29 AUGUST 3028**

"Over there is the medical library, with books carefully selected and screened by a 'select committee' to make sure they don't spread too much knowl—I mean 'propaganda.'"

Thom pointed an elbow at a largish building off in the near distance while balancing Rebecca on his shoulders. Though the university had been established by Welsh and English settlers during the early expansion of humans out into the universe, later Chinese influences gave the buildings a varied style. Somewhere along the way, a high brick wall surrounded the campus to separate the students from the nearby neighborhoods and, though not yet discovering the reasons, Thom suspected some Capellan historian would tell him some nonsense about the symbolic transition from citizen to Entitled or Servitor castes instead of the more likely attempt to keep the "town and gown" disruptions to a minimum. "And that building right there, with the ivy growing all over the wall, is where Uncle Tommy has his new office."

He enjoyed showing the little girl and her two mothers around the University of Harlech campus. In the days since the Royal Wedding and the declaration of war, he had secured the proper licenses and arranged a teaching position, submitted his proposed curriculum, and—with a few modifications—received approval, all purchased with more bribes. Now he simply needed to familiarize himself with the campus a bit more.

"Are you sure you still want to do this, Tommy?" Kseniya asked, her eyes wide with concern. She glanced to her wife for approval, then pressed on. "I mean, it's a beautiful campus and all, but...in the Confederation?"

"Everyone keeps asking me that! Honestly, I've considered heading back to Royal Foxx to try teaching there, but since my parents passed,

there's no real incentive to head all the way back to the Magistracy," he admitted with a shrug and then a bounce that elicited delighted squeals from his small passenger. "Galatea's obviously an option. Or someplace in one of the other Great Houses, but with the war on, nonmilitary travel will be extremely limited, and with my TDS acting up lately, I'd have to find someplace that would accept my application before I went, especially if I tried to leave the Confederation for the Commonwealth or the Suns. Since my contract with the company isn't officially up until your contract with the Confederation ends in 3031, this seems the best of both worlds. And hey, I get my very own Maskirovka monitor who will sit in on my classes and make sure I don't spread any Evil Foreign Notions, so I've got a built-in 'friend'!"

"Do you think you'll be happy here?" Kay asked. "Among strangers?"

"We talked about this," he replied tiredly, taking the time to lower Rebecca from his shoulders so she could run through the grass and trees of the quad around them, away from the boring adult conversation. "I can't stay in the Black Hole Battalion any longer. I don't know the names that go with any of the new faces. I don't *want* to get to know them and then fill out death notifications for *more* friends when things go bad. I'm tired of death notices...because one day it will be you two, or Bruce or—God forbid—Rebecca's, and I'll be done. I will have lost everything while I just sat and waited for it to happen."

All three knew losses happened when you lived the mercenary life. As soldiers, the two women long expected a quick, violent end in combat. As a doctor, Thom regularly fought a different sort of battle, one that left those he called friends struggling to breathe until they stopped, or turning pale and cold as they bled out while he raced time, or even screaming in terrifying agony while missing the parts of their brains that allowed them to scream at all. He died a little bit with each loss, but instead of getting hard and fatalistic, he'd danced on the edge of madness.

"Tommy—" Celesta tried, but he cut her off.

"Celesta, please. I care about the two of you more than I've ever cared to admit to. From the *day* I met you two, I lost who I'd thought I was and started on this path. I broke the first rule of being a doctor before I even knew your name—I killed someone for you. 'Do no harm,' and I shot him right in the face. I can still remember how stunned he looked when I popped around that corner and fired. The same for you, Kseniya. And I know all their names—everyone who died under my care or by my hand. All I ever wanted to be was a doctor like my parents. Not someone who shot people."

"It wasn't *all* bad," Kseniya interjected. "I remember when you sat up all night long with us, helping plan our wedding. And when we found out I was pregnant? And what about when we took care of you during

that run from New Earth to Hesperus and got all those priority jumps? You called us 'the best-looking nurses you'd ever had the chance to throw up on.'"

"I'm proud I got to know the two of you and to be a part of your lives. I'll forever be grateful for the time we spent together, in good times and bad. And I'm glad you found happiness with each other. Your wedding will forever remain one of the best days of my life.

"But I think it also killed something inside me at the same time. And when you figured out Kseniya was pregnant, I was overjoyed for both of you, but it also felt like I'd just been stabbed. I *need* to leave now, while I still can. I love you both, but I need to start working on my own life and stop trying to be a part of yours, or I'll lose my mind."

"But, Tommy," Kseniya began again, her big brown eyes bright and sincere. "We do lo—"

"Don't say it!" he protested. "Please. Don't ever say it because I'll never know if you really mean it or if you're just saying so because you're trying to keep me from going."

"Okay, Tommy," Kseniya agreed.

The two women gathered him into a three-way embrace while they all tried to keep from crying. They teetered on the verge of failure until a small, giggling comet in a robot-covered dress crashed into Thom's legs and held on tightly, nearly bowling the group over.

"Hey, did I mention the munchkin can attend the school's preschool program?" He gave them both a look that practically begged to change the topic. "Good news—they don't start political indoctrination until age five, so that shouldn't be an issue. She'll get a chance to play with other kids her age, start picking up some Mandarin that isn't filtered through a soldier's mouth, and it's paid for by the State for family members of the faculty. Bad news—I told them she's my niece, so..."

"So one of us has to pretend to be your sister?" Celesta protested, screwing up her face and sticking out her tongue to her daughter. They started making faces at each other and giggling. "Ewww!"

"That *is* an appropriate response, actually. Now, who wants to go get some lunch at the cafeteria?"



The old man sat alone and played for the waitresses and the early regulars. They knew when he'd be ready to talk with them. Until then, they quietly enjoyed the music.

**UNIVERSITY OF HARLECH
HARLECH, OUTREACH
CAPELLAN CONFEDERATION
5 MARCH 3029**

"Dr. Schneider's office," Thom responded reflexively to the personal communicator on his disaster area of a desk, still attending to the list of patients.

Seven months into the conflict already known as the Fourth Succession War, Outreach served as a hospital and recovery world. The wounded from the Tikonov Commonality worlds in the path of the Federated Suns juggernaut had flooded the medical school, placing them out of the war's immediate reach. As the newest teacher and the one with the most recent experience with wartime injuries, the medical school gave Thom the responsibility for evaluating if and when a patient had healed sufficiently to return to duty. Today he would visit the ones on his list to determine whether to send them back into the meat grinder this week or next, or decide if they would be put out of the service entirely.

"Doc, it's Bruce. Code Agony. Get out now." Major Darius' rushed voice and the distinctive *thud-thud* of a Mech's heavy footsteps—probably his *Centurion*—chewed up ground in great meters-long strides in the background of the transmission.

"What's that, Bruce? What's going on?"

"The Cappies have gone completely nuts. We just got the news that Ridzik is taking the Tikonov region out of the Confederation, and the Outreach Home Guard responded by issuing orders to hunt down and kill anyone considered 'disloyal to the Chancellor.' They've attacked the militia and issued orders to the infantry battalion to—and I'm quoting here—'purge all dissonant elements from the corrupt Tikonov units' from your wards."

"Holy hell..." Thom muttered, flashing to the hundreds of helpless patients and the medical students attending them. They needed to evacuate the hospital and campus if possible. "Where are you, Bruce?"

"I gave orders to mount up when I got the briefing, figuring we might be getting invaded, so the unit's already on the move. Since the Guard's busy with the militia right now, we're trying to put ourselves between you and them, but you've got to get out. We won't hold them for long once their attention turns, so I'm sending Dave Yani with the medical and support staff to help you out."

"Sending them to do *what*, exactly?" he asked, shucking off his suitcoat in exchange for the old, armored vest that hung in the corner. The dusty, beat-up vest with the ill-repaired bullet holes and old bloodstains—mostly not his—tended to unnerve the undergrads, but

lent weight to his assertions that he had the experience to back up the anecdotes he told them.

The man on the other end chuckled ruefully. "I know you, Tommy. This isn't the first time we've had this discussion. You're not going to run and lie low like you should be doing. You're going to try and save as many people as possible, and this time we're going to help you do it. Give us a heads-up where you're going, and we'll provide the wall. If we're going to break our contract with Liao, we're going to do it saving lives, not letting war crimes happen on our watch."



The old man sat alone, his fingers faltering a little, causing him to pause and flex his scarred hands before taking the soft tune back up.



While the Black Hole 'Mechs, armor, and infantry spread out over several dozen blocks to blunt the Capellan advance as it swung in their direction, the support troops arrived on campus to find the evacuation of the hospital and medical school already progressing in good order.

University President Mumford had flexed his local authority to start a flotilla of small boats ferrying every piece of portable medical equipment, supplies, patients, and students from the nearby marina north to the two large islands just offshore at the mouth of the Garrett River. He then went on ahead with the first boats to coordinate the arrivals and sort out other needs. With that knowledge, the mercenary battalion deployed to control the western ends of the two bridgeheads, neither of which could support BattleMechs.

Unfortunately, with the battle beginning in the city streets and the arrival of mercenary troops at the university, word of the evacuation spread, and civilians also flooded through the gates of the school, now waiting their turn for the growing number of boats taking people off. Though a precious few soldiers guarded the gates and directed the citizens toward safety, many of the armed troops were diverted to the docks and islands to keep the terrified crowd from swamping the boats in a panic every time something exploded in the near distance. Luckily the Capellans, well-versed in obedience and patience, helped the evacuation run relatively smoothly.

With the soldiers and the refugees from the nearby neighborhoods came the wounded. Bumps and bruises and broken limbs at first, then the burns and bullet holes as combat drew closer and factional fighting broke out among the citizens.

Thom and Dr. Yani set up a triage and rough MASH in one of the quads, supervising a medical team of volunteer doctors and students to deal with what they could before sending the stable patients to the escape boats and the medical teams waiting on the other end.

This was frontier medicine at its finest—no MASH beds with robotic surgeons, no artificial organ replacements, no powered surgical instruments, just surgical-steel scalpels, derma-plast skin sealants to staunch the bleeding, and quick shots of pain meds to get the wounded stabilized and on their way. Barely a step above first aid.

It all felt raw, familiar, and strangely good to Thom. He already caught more than one teacher trying to take advantage of the opportunity and teach impromptu classes.

Dr. Schneider had barely stabilized a patient for immediate transport when his comm unit crackled to life in his ear. Though not expecting anyone to contact him once he relayed the evacuation plan to the major, he still wore it out of habit.

"Tommy, are you there?"

"I'm a little busy with the wounded you keep sending me, Celesta. Can this wait?" He moved among the remaining patients, peering over the shoulders of interns and teachers to offer assistance. "Jinn, get some more plasma over to Dr. Hashim, please. And remind him that now is not the time for an anatomy lesson."

"Tommy, where's Rebecca? Is she safe?" Celesta asked raggedly—probably running her VND-1R *Vindicator* hot. Again.

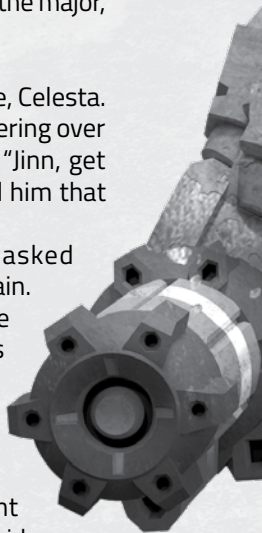
"I sent her and a bunch of other children off in the first wave of boats." Thom's gaze flicked down to where an intern was working on a wounded soldier. "Clamp that bleeder there, do the immediate now, worry about the pretty later." He watched the young woman seal the bleeding artery while still talking to Celesta. "They're safe on the southern island, under the care of a group of early-childhood-development students. Sherry and Greg from the Black Hole admin staff said they'd check for her as soon as they got there. Why?"

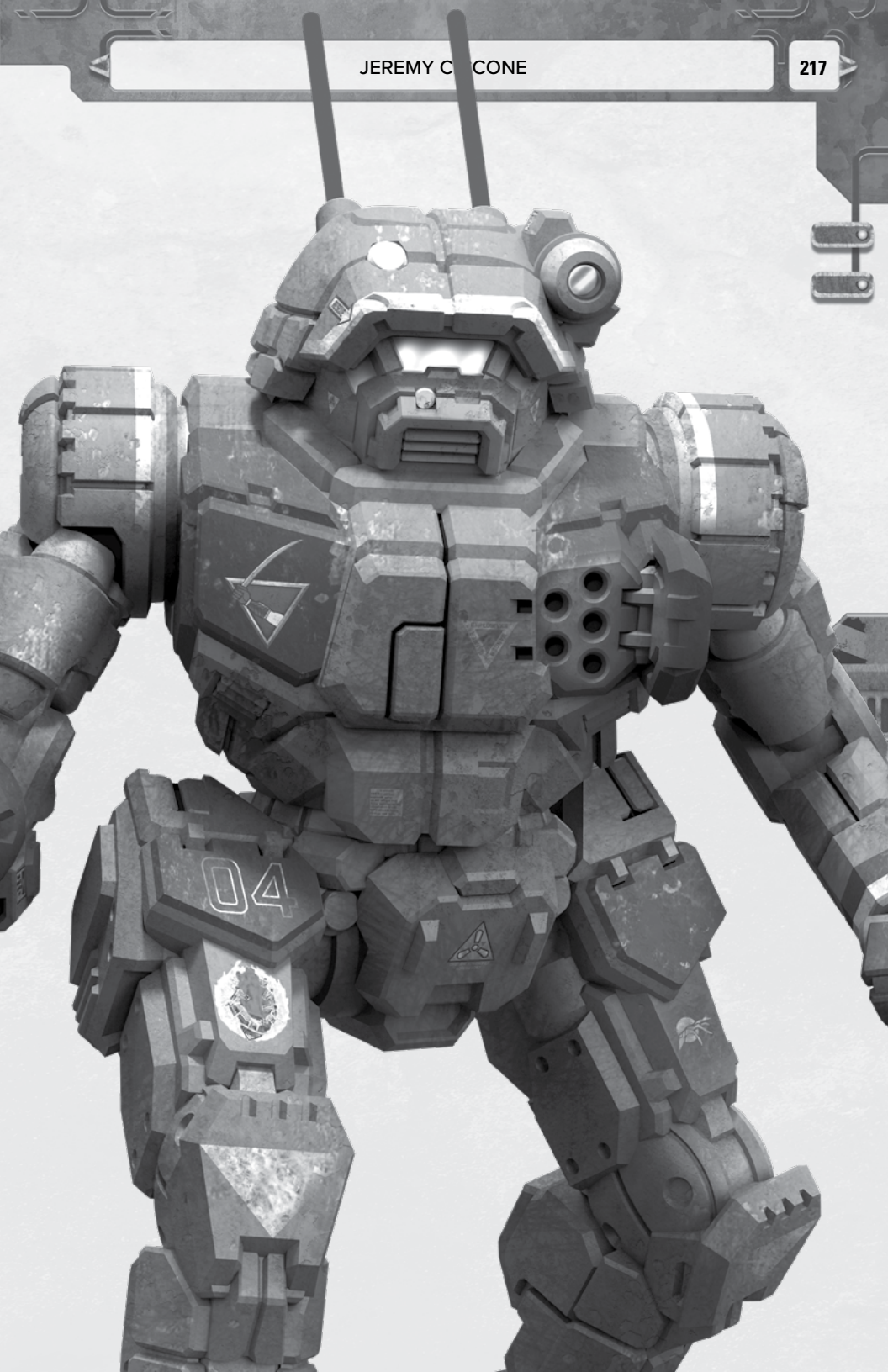
"Tell her Momma Cel loved her very much. Tell her we both did."

That got his attention. He froze in place, reaching for his earpiece and jamming it tighter against his ear, as if that would make him hear her better. "What? Where's Kseniya?"

"One of the Liao 'Mechs, a *Thunderbolt*, came out of nowhere, right through a building behind her. I don't think she even knew it was there before it crushed her cockpit. She's dead, Tommy."

"No... Cel... Get out of there. Fall back." Unconsciously, he started walking away from the safety of the waterfront evacuation point, back through the campus, toward the fighting deeper in the city, to





get to her even though there was nothing he could do in the middle of a BattleMech fight except make himself a liability.

"I'm not leaving her. The *T-Bolt*—they're hunting me now. I've hurt 'em pretty bad, but they've got me cornered, too. I'm going to kill them for what they did to Kay. Tell her, Tommy! Tell her her mommies loved her right to the very end."

"Cel! Where are you? Tell me!" He started running.

She gasped for breath in the awful heat of the cockpit. "There you are, you murderous Capellan bastard!" She ground her teeth before the radio fizzed with static from her *Vindicator's* Ceres Arms Smasher PPC lashing lightning out at some enemy target, followed by the rumble of running 'Mech feet.

"And Tommy—we always loved you too."

Before he could respond, the commline erupted with a primal scream and the shrieks of tearing metal on metal, followed by dreadful silence. His frantic calls went unanswered.



The advancing Capellan infantry platoon, having bypassed the mercenary infantry and armor and approaching the lightly defended southern gate of the walled campus, found themselves thrown into chaos when their subcommander suddenly dropped, a bullet snapping his glasses neatly in two before piercing his brain.

Screaming at them his rage and loss, Thom stood in the open gate, in a ballistic vest soaked with fresh blood over old stains, holding an unfamiliar pistol in a two-handed firing grip, squeezing off round after round at the infantry to little effect, pausing only to drop an empty magazine and reload the weapon.

Perhaps the tears streaming down his cheeks blurred his vision or the heavy pistol threw his aim off, but the ridiculous cosmic game of his life maintained his streak of killing the first person he fired at with a shot to the head, but failing to so much as graze anyone else.

He could picture them all—the thug holding Celesta captive who had bounced down the stairs with a neat hole in his forehead; the Taurian guard who almost shot Kseniya during the covert raid; the pirate who tried to kidnap both women out of the infirmary... All fourteen of the people he'd killed protecting himself and his loved ones over the last twenty-three years were etched forever in his mind. Right down to the unfortunate young man with the glasses he had just killed while walking through the gate. Each life extinguished while he continued to loathe himself for the necessity and the reputation it gave him in

the unit. He fired more rounds in anger and despair than he'd fired in self-defense over the last twenty years.

And all for nothing. Bubbly Kseniya lay dead somewhere out in the city, her daughter probably scared and lost among strangers. Beautiful Celesta, who could not escape the constant nightmares of growing up in the Combine until she found her own family in the Black Hole Battalion, also dead. And where was Bruce Darius just now? Familiar faces and names to a number he didn't care to think about any more kept appearing in his mind's eye every time the pistol's hammer dropped, the gun bucking in his hands while he screamed himself hoarse.

When the weapon finally ran out of ammo, he futilely threw it at the infantry, fully expecting to die after buying the evacuation just a little more time, even if only a few extra minutes. That was all it came down to now.

Everything else stripped away, it always came down to the awful commerce of combat medicine. Pills, bandages, medicines, skills, and soldiers—all spent to buy minutes. Minutes meant lives. Now he'd spent every last thing he could—except himself. The Black Hole Battalion had paid the price of the evacuation, and he could only hope their lives had bought enough time. That enough of the evacuees had escaped on every available boat to the temporary safety of the islands to make this sacrifice—*his* sacrifice—worth it. Any second now, the Capellan soldiers would kill him, only to sweep into an empty campus.

The Capellan rush ran into a wall of automatic weapons fire tearing through the platoon just as they moved on him, the last unarmed defender. Walking wounded, mercenaries, and students ambushed the infantry from behind the wall, killing or scattering the platoon back down the streets and alleys. The university would hold them off just a little while longer. More minutes meant more lives.

Three students pulled Thom back to safety, tending his unnoticed wounds. He'd been hit twice. He allowed it, drained of emotion and energy. They brought up a stretcher, ready to put him on it, when the volume of fire from the Capellans increased, and a grenade landed nearby. He pushed his students away, grabbed a discarded helmet, and fell on it before the grenade exploded.



The old man sat alone, letting the echoes of the last notes fade into the growing noise of the now-filling bar. His hand fell to caress the lettering of the name painted on the body of the guitar: CELESTA.



"By 9 March 3029, reinforcements from the new Tikonov Free Republic, supported by forces from the Federated Suns, arrived in-system via pirate point to relieve the defenders of the Outreach Militia, who still held the eastern side of town and the DropPort after four days of fighting. They fell on the battered remains of the Home Guard with a vengeance, and within the week, the Guard surrendered and disbanded, their equipment absorbed into other broken units much the way the remains of the militia would be over the coming months.

"Though destroyed, the Black Hole Battalion succeeded in holding the line. By midnight on the first day, Major Bruce Darius moved his few remaining 'Mechs and armor to the western side of the bridge leading to South Island and fought a desperate holding action through the streets and buildings nearby. Finally, with no ammo left and no way to get resupplied, he backed his battered and armor-less CN9-A *Centurion* onto the bridge to the island, sniping with his sole remaining medium laser as though daring the Third Liao attackers to take the bridge from him. Two *Catapults* from the Third's Second Battalion rained missiles down on his 'Mech, which breached his engine shielding and caused a significant explosion that destroyed the end of the bridge in the process. While Darius was the last member of his command to fall, he had covered his remaining infantry during their efforts to place demolition charges on the bridge. This final act of defiance denied the Home Guard access to the refugees long enough for 'Mechs from the Outreach Militia to take Darius' place.

"Near the University of Harlech's main gate stands a plinth carved out of local black marble, with the names of those who fell defending the school, its students, faculty, and patients. His name is at the top.

"MechWarriors Kseniya Dusk and Celesta Janovsek were found together before a salvage team could capture their damaged 'Mechs. Though Celesta's *Vindicator* lay crushed through a wall, she had died defending her wife's fallen *Phoenix Hawk*. A Home Guard *Thunderbolt* lay against her, the barrel of her *Vindicator's* PPC rammed through its cockpit like a sword.

"The remains of the Black Hole Battalion have since scattered, joining other mercenary units, the Outreach Police Department, or various civilian organizations.

"Evacuated from the campus on one of the last boats to South Island, his arms wrapped in bandages to protect injuries to his hands from a concussion grenade, Dr. Thomas Schneider continued to work as best he could—triaging wounded still

coming in on infrequent boats along the coastline. After receiving news of Major Darios' death on Day Three, he suffered a breakdown, and had to be sedated.

"He later received surgery and myomer implants to repair his hands, which he continues to claim aren't as sensitive to touch or as finely skilled as they once were. To restore his manual dexterity, he took up playing the guitar again, an activity he rarely enjoyed since leaving Royal Foxx over a quarter century before.

"Given a citation for the defense and evacuation of the wounded by the interim Ridzik government, then awarded a Silver Starburst by the Federated Suns when Arden Sortek took over the region later that year, Dr. Schneider politely declined a request to join the planetary militia, but was awarded the rank of major (retired) in the medical corps of the Armed Forces of the Federated Suns. As Major Thomas Schneider and a full-time professor, he formally represented the university when Wolf's Dragoons landed to take official possession of the planet less than a year later.

"When not teaching or overseeing Dusk Medical Supplies, Dr. Schneider—my dad—plays guitar at a bar not too far from our apartment in Harlech City."

—EXCERPT FROM *"THE FALL OF THE BLACK HOLE BATTALION AND THE RISE OF OUTREACH: AN EYEWITNESS TO HISTORY,"* NEW AVALON INSTITUTE OF SCIENCE ADMITTANCE ESSAY BY REBECCA SCHNEIDER, 3036

**THE EJECTION SEAT BAR
HARLECH, OUTREACH
FEDERATED SUNS
27 FEBRUARY 3042**

Dr. Thomas Schneider sat alone on the stage. Better here than rattling around the empty apartment he nominally called "home." A few members of a newly arrived unit billeted nearby had expressed interest in playing with the band tonight, not that he amounted to much of a "band." But they would undoubtedly be bringing their friends, and it would feel good to be among soldiers for a night.

In a few months he would make one last interstellar trip, all the way to New Avalon to watch his adopted daughter graduate with honors from the prestigious NAIS College of Biology/Medicine and become an official doctor specializing in bionic limbs and limb-replacement

research. He would stay there a month, maybe two, before coming home to Outreach and its constantly changing sea of "ruffian children." His stomach flopped at the very thought of all those jumps, but he started noodling a new song and wondered what a new suit on New Avalon would cost him.



SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

Shrapnel is the market for official short fiction set in the *BattleTech* universe.

WHAT WE WANT

We are looking for stories of **3,000–5,000 words** that are character-oriented, meaning the characters, rather than the technology, provide the main focus of the action. Stories can be set in any established *BattleTech* era, and although we prefer stories where BattleMechs are featured, this is by no means a mandatory element.

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- .rtf, .doc, .docx formats ONLY
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- DO NOT put an extra space between each paragraph
- Filename: "Submission Title by Jane Q. Writer"

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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 seven 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.



CLAN HOMEWORLDS
(2786–present)

In 2784, General Aleksandr Kerensky launched Operation Exodus, and led most of the Star League Defense Force out of the Inner Sphere in a search for a new world, far away from the strife of the Great Houses. After more than two years and thousands of light years, they arrived at the Pentagon Worlds. Over the next two-and-a-half centuries, internal dissent and civil war led to the creation of a brutal new society—the Clans. And in 3049, they returned to the Inner Sphere with one goal—the complete conquest of the Great Houses.

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